

JOY STORIES: A CRITICAL RACE, HIP-HOP, COUNTER NARRATIVE OF HOW  
BLACK MEN WHO GRADUATED FROM HWIs FOUND BELONGING AND JOY  
THROUGH BEATS AND RHYMES

by

LAWRENCE NEAL YOUNG III

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN EDUCATION: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

2025

Oakland University  
Rochester, Michigan

Doctoral Advisory Committee:

V. Thandi Sulé, Ph.D., Chair  
Jana Nidiffer, Ed.D  
Omar Brown-El

© Copyright by Lawrence Neal Young III, 2025  
All rights reserved

*To my entire tribe*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am taking this opportunity to express my sincere love and gratitude to my community.

To my wifey, **Kendre Daniels-Young**. You have been right here through every step of this journey. You've seen me defeated and helped me see the lessons in the losses to keep pushing forward. You have been here for the triumphs and celebrated them as my most fervent supporter. You have been here for everything in between, and I can't imagine it being any other way. You invited me into your family, and they have always treated me like I was always one of theirs, much love to the **Daniels, the Johnsons, and the Whitakers**. All the things they say are too good to be true are manifest in you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I love you.

**Nejla Darcelle Moorner**, I am so thankful that you loved me into existence and that I have had the privilege of navigating life with you as my mother. Thank you for creating a home steeped in joy and an appreciation of education, art, and music, where we celebrated Blackness daily. Thank you for the constant affirmation of my worth and potential. You played Build an Ark's Peace with Every Step for me and told me, "Don't ever give up, you've come now so far, you are the stars, you are", and I have carried that with me as a personal affirmation ever since. Thank you, Mama, I love you.

**Jerry Moorner**, thank you for being precisely the father I needed, and the coolest human being ever. I appreciate every bit of the sage wisdom you have shared with me. Thank you for always being there with encouragement, kind words, and unconditional love. I love you, Pops!

To the Mayor, **Lawrence Neal Young Jr.**, thank you for giving me my name, these corners on the back of my head, my laugh, the hilarious nicknames, and the knowledge that you can always bounce back. I miss you dearly and can't wait to catch you up on some of the cool stuff that's happened since you got free. Love you, Dad, miss you. Sleep well.

To my big sister and big bro, **Tauri and Darrow Harden**, thank you for all of the guidance and encouragement, and for being some of the most impressive people I have ever met. I have had no shortage of role models, mentors, and heroes, and you are both a part of that group. I'm glad y'all found each other, and I'm grateful that I was privileged to be your annoying little brother. Thank you for making me an uncle, and giving me a brilliant niece, and two brilliant nephews. **Foster, Aidan, and Rowan**, I love y'all, you all make your uncle so proud.

To **Dorian Young**, one of my first heroes, my big brother who introduced me to Hip-Hop and was the first emcee I knew personally. Thank you for introducing me to the craft of emceeing, putting me in spaces to learn from legends, and being the first person who believed I could actually be an emcee. I am grateful to you, and I love you. Thank you for giving me wonderful nephews and nieces. Emil, Sam, Tammy, I love you. Uncle is proud of all of you. To **Jennifer and Walter Malone**, thank you for the inspiration and motivation. I'm proud of your journey and all that you have accomplished, and also extremely grateful for my niece and nephew. **Joel and Jaisa**, your uncle loves you and will forever be proud of you. Thank you to all of **the Moorer family**, you always made me feel welcomed and loved, which is not to be taken for granted.

To my soul sibling, **Lashawn "Phoenix" Kotoran**, you know who you are to me. Thank you for being a space where I can be my authentic self, for keeping me grounded, and for keeping me connected to the art. Thank you for allowing me to have this space in your world. You don't know how much I look forward to our sibling dinners and check-ins. I can't wait to get back to creating with you. To my brother **James Thomas**, the first friend I made in undergrad, who is still rocking with me almost thirty years later.

To all my **Aunties, Linda, Inga, Jill, and Javin, and all of the cousins** y'all blessed me with, thank you for always taking care of your nephew. Thank you for every expression of love and every memory we created together. Now that this process is finished, I will be seeing all of

you a lot more. Sorry for being so absent. Honor and love to the ancestors, Grandma Verna, Grandad Josh, Uncle Kevie and Auntie Tiki. Sleep well.

To my dissertation committee, thank you. **Mr. Omar Brown-El**, thank you for being the example that you are. Thank you for being my first professional role model in higher education. Thank you for giving me my first full-time job in higher education. Thank you for helping me find discipline. Thank you for reminding me that champions find a way. **Dr. Jana Nidiffer**, thank you for helping me see that this was possible. Thank you for your patient guidance, words of encouragement and affirmation, sharing your time and expertise, being brilliant, and being so empathetic to your students.

To my chair and mentor, **Dr. V. Thandi Sule**, I always tell people that being your mentee/student is like being a novice guitar player and having Prince, Hendrix, or Gary Clark Junior volunteer to teach you to play. Thank you for showing me that Hip-Hop is viable as a research interest within education, and for introducing me to the Hip-Hop education community. Thank you for introducing me to **Dr. Stevie Johnson aka Dr. View** and **Dr. Emery Petchauer**. It's so dope when your super hero mentor introduces you to other scholars that are also on your short list of heroes. You really opened the world up for me, and I don't take it for granted. Thank you for showing me that I didn't need to hide my Hip-Hop identity to be taken seriously, and for giving me opportunities to mix my passion and practice. Thank you for getting me through this process.

While not members of my formal committee, I want to acknowledge other faculty who profoundly influenced my doctoral experience. **Dr. Dan Arnold**, thank you for being the first to plant the seed of doctoral studies in my mind during my master's program. **Dr. Julia Smith**, thank you for all of your guidance and wisdom about the doctoral process and for hosting the doctoral student support group every month. That space and your guidance were invaluable to any success I have had in this program. **Dr. Tiffany Steele**, thank you for coordinating the Black

Grad space and helping the Melanated Cohort get our first publication together! You are a legit superhero. **Dr. Robert Martin**, thank you for your constant words of encouragement and for the time you and your wife spent with me at AERA in San Diego. I will always appreciate your intentional kindness. **Dr. Eileen Johnson**, thank you for your feedback and encouragement while I was completing my coursework and trying to identify a dissertation topic that I could be excited about. Your feedback on my first attempt at a qualitative research study on Hip-Hop and Black men's HWI experiences gave me confidence and reassurance that I was on the right path. Thank you for inviting me back to present that research paper to your class.

To my study participants, you made this a transformational experience and helped me cross the finish line. I could not have realized this goal without you. Thank you for your time and your stories. To the Wholesome House Crew, having you all as students/mentees has been one of the great joys of my career. Thank you, **Gicentroy Henry, Benjamin Lane, Sean King, Matsimela Miller, John Randle, and Zach Laury**. I'm a legit fan of all of your content, and I watch every video and listen to the podcast with so much pride. Y'all created something special, which doesn't surprise me at all, but I'm still proud of your growth, the lives and careers you are building, and the men that you have become.

To my **Oakland University Center for Multicultural Initiatives family, past and present**, please know that you are just that—my family. My time working in the office is the standard by which I measure every other professional experience, and honestly, I have to stop doing that. Thank you all for being who you are, **Omar Brown-El, Sarah Bodnar, Bianca Bryant (honorary CMI), Anthony Clark, Brittany Golston, Catera Greer, Janice Houston, Christopher Hunter, Amy Joa, Denise Thompkins-Jones, Myshia Liles-Moultrie, Nicole Lucio, Sara Nguyen, Dr. VaNessa Thompson, Vester Waters, and Michael Williams**. I try to represent you to the best of my ability in all that I do. It's now and always CMI for life.

To the **Melanated Cohort, Dr. VaNessa Thompson, Dr. Raenece Johnson, and Dr. Mackenzie Millet**, my classmates, my colleagues, and my family. I'm so proud of y'all and so excited to see all that you will accomplish. y'all are already legends to me, and I'm honored to be a part of the Melanated Cohort with you brilliant scholars and just overall wonderful humans. We are published, y'all! #BlackDocs. To my fellow emcee, and Hip-Hop Education scholar **Dr. Rod Wallace**, thank you for all of the advice, and collaboration. I appreciate you, and I'm excited for what we can build collectively.

To my brothers since 1993, **Rodney Cushingberry, Leonard Hill, Domarius Raines, Anthony Singleton, Dr. Deandre Shepard, and Terrence Warren**. I've always been fortunate enough to have a whole crew of friends that I looked up to, and not just because I'm short. I admire each one of you, and I'm honored to have you as my lifelong friends. To my brothers in rhyme, **Cold Men Young. Brent Smith, Miles Stewart, Malcolm Stewart**. Y'all are a part of so many of my life's best moments. I love y'all, and I can't wait to get back to creating with y'all and hanging out with all the God babies.

To my **University of Michigan Library family** and my broader U of M community, thank you all for being wonderful. My **Dean's Office and Strategic Planning Team family, Jeff Witt, Craig Smith, Denise Leyton, and Meaghan Musolff**, working with you, was the kind of professional experience you can only hope for. To my **Safe Space Crew, Natasha Allen, Laura Burnham, Jamillah Coleman, Kate Haines, Alex Herrera, Debbie Jackson, Shannon Moreno, Tal Ness, Ariel Ojibway, Chuck Ransom, and Larry Wentzel**, thank you for all of the conversations, vent sessions, strategy meetings, lunches, and happy hours. I am grateful that you all became my community at U of M. To my **Library Diversity Council (LDC) family**, you all are the ideal of what doing the work collectively is supposed to look and feel like. I hope you all know that you have been claimed as my friends for life, and now you can't get rid of me.



Finally, much love to all the brilliant creatives in the Detroit and Pontiac Hip-Hop and creative communities. Special thanks and shout out to **Omari “Hir-O” Hall** for opening up your space to us and providing the soundscape, and to **Mark Cooper, Khary “Rufio Jones” Hobbs, Brent “Black” Smith, Jahshua Smith, Darrion “True Speech” Thompson**, for sharing your lyrical talents in compiling a Hip-Hop composite story in the Black Joy Cypher. I will forever be inspired by you and grateful to you for making space for me.

## ABSTRACT

### JOY STORIES: A CRITICAL RACE, HIP-HOP, COUNTER NARRATIVE OF HOW BLACK MEN WHO GRADUATED FROM HWIs FOUND BELONGING AND JOY THROUGH BEATS AND RHYMES

by

Lawrence Neal Young III

Adviser: V. Thandi Sulé, Ph.D.

This study is a Critical Race and Hip-Hop counter-narrative examining the experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from historically White institutions (HWIs). Grounded in a theoretical framework drawing upon Critical Race Theory (CRT), Hip-Hop Pedagogy (HHP), and Black Joy, this research explores the ways in which Hip-Hop cultural aesthetics may inform culturally relevant counter spaces that foster a sense of belonging and joy among Black men. By centering the lived experiences of fifteen Black men who graduated from midwestern HWIs, the study reveals how Hip-Hop culture offers a powerful tool for navigating racialized educational spaces and resisting systemic barriers by challenging deficit-based narratives and centering the cultural capital, creativity, and joy Black men bring to their collegiate experiences.

Through a combination of semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, and composite stories told in the form of a Hip-Hop Rap Cypher created in collaboration between the researcher and participants, this study centers the voices and lived

experiences of Black men who identify as Hip-Hop practitioners or observers and have successfully persisted to degree completion at HWIs by centering their experiences of joy and resilience, rather than echoing oft repeated deficit based narratives. This study will contribute to the growing body of research on culturally relevant counter spaces and programming informed by Hip-Hop culture and emphasize the urgent need for HWIs to adopt practices that affirm Black men's identities while fostering a sense of belonging and providing opportunities for joy.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                  |       |
|----------------------------------|-------|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS                  | iv    |
| ABSTRACT                         | x     |
| LIST OF TABLES                   | xvii  |
| LIST OF FIGURES                  | xviii |
| CHAPTER ONE<br>OVERVIEW          | 1     |
| INTRODUCTION                     | 1     |
| PROBLEM STATEMENT                | 3     |
| PURPOSE STATEMENT                | 6     |
| SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTION       | 7     |
| SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY            | 8     |
| DEFINITION OF TERMS              | 9     |
| CONCLUSION                       | 10    |
| CHAPTER TWO<br>LITERATURE REVIEW | 12    |
| SENSE OF BELONGING               | 12    |
| RESILIENCE                       | 13    |
| BLACK JOY                        | 14    |
| CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY     | 17    |
| COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH        | 19    |
| HIP-HOP CULTURE                  | 20    |
| HIP-HOP IN HIGHER EDUCATION      | 22    |

## TABLE OF CONTENTS—CONTINUED

|                                           |    |
|-------------------------------------------|----|
| HIP-HOP PEDAGOGY                          | 30 |
| LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY                 | 34 |
| THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK                     | 35 |
| CHAPTER 3<br>METHODOLOGY                  | 39 |
| CRITICAL RACE METHODOLOGY                 | 40 |
| COUNTER NARRATION                         | 42 |
| CRITICAL RACE METHODOLOGY DATA COLLECTION | 44 |
| HIP-HOP METHODOLOGY                       | 44 |
| HIP-HOP METHODOLOGY DATA COLLECTION       | 47 |
| RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY                  | 48 |
| STUDY CONTEXT AND METHODS                 | 51 |
| POPULATION, SAMPLING, AND RECRUITMENT     | 51 |
| PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION                   | 53 |
| DATA COLLECTION PROCESS                   | 55 |
| INTERVIEWS AND TRANSCRIPTS                | 55 |
| DATA ANALYSIS                             | 56 |
| THE SIX PHASES OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS       | 57 |
| CONCLUSION                                | 63 |
| CHAPTER 4<br>FINDINGS                     | 65 |
| PARTICIPANT INTRODUCTIONS                 | 66 |

## TABLE OF CONTENTS—CONTINUED

|                                   |     |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| THUDS WHETLEY                     | 66  |
| ARI CHERRYBLOSSOM                 | 68  |
| DONALD GLOVER                     | 69  |
| MARK ANTHONY SPEARS               | 70  |
| ZEKE WHITMORE                     | 72  |
| JOHNSON BARNES                    | 73  |
| KHALID WESLEY                     | 74  |
| JESSE WASHINGTON                  | 75  |
| PRODIGY JOHNSON                   | 77  |
| MIKE EAGLE                        | 80  |
| DANIEL DUMILE                     | 83  |
| GLEN BOOTHE                       | 86  |
| TOURE                             | 88  |
| CADE ICEWOOD                      | 89  |
| KWESI                             | 94  |
| THEMES                            | 95  |
| BELONGINGNESS                     | 96  |
| COUNTERSPACES AS SAFE HAVENS      | 102 |
| CREATIVE EXPRESSION AS RESISTANCE | 113 |
| RESILIENCE                        | 118 |
| JOY AND CELEBRATION               | 127 |

## TABLE OF CONTENTS—CONTINUED

|                                                                                 |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| SUMMARY                                                                         | 133 |
| CHAPTER 5                                                                       |     |
| DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS<br>SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS | 135 |
| THEME ONE                                                                       | 136 |
| THEME TWO                                                                       | 137 |
| THEME THREE                                                                     | 138 |
| THEME FOUR                                                                      | 139 |
| THEME FIVE                                                                      | 140 |
| IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE                                                       | 141 |
| RECOMMENDATION ONE                                                              | 143 |
| RECOMMENDATION TWO                                                              | 144 |
| RECOMMENDATION THREE                                                            | 144 |
| RECOMMENDATION FOUR                                                             | 145 |
| RECOMMENDATION FIVE                                                             | 149 |
| RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH                                             | 151 |
| RECOMMENDATION ONE                                                              | 151 |
| RECOMMENDATION TWO                                                              | 152 |
| RECOMMENDATION THREE                                                            | 152 |
| RECOMMENDATION FOUR                                                             | 153 |
| RECOMMENDATION FIVE                                                             | 153 |
| SUMMARY                                                                         | 154 |

## TABLE OF CONTENTS—CONTINUED

|                                                 |     |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----|
| REFERENCES                                      | 157 |
| APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER                 | 168 |
| APPENDIX B: RESEARCH RECRUITMENT FLIER          | 170 |
| APPENDIX C: INFORMATION SHEET                   | 172 |
| APPENDIX D: ELIGIBILITY SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE | 175 |
| APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE           | 181 |



## LIST OF TABLES

|           |                          |    |
|-----------|--------------------------|----|
| Table 3.1 | Demographic Information  | 49 |
| Table 3.2 | Named and Defined Themes | 56 |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|                                                                             |   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| Figure 1 Black men and White counterparts six-year graduation rates at HWIs | 3 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|

## CHAPTER ONE

### OVERVIEW

#### **Introduction**

*“Sometimes, I wouldn't have made it if it wasn't for you, Hip-hop, you're the love of my life, and that's true (And that's true). When I was handlin' the shit I had to do, It was all for you” - (The Roots, 1999)*

Tariq “Black Thought” Trotter, a renowned Hip-Hop artist and frontman of The Roots, articulated Hip-Hop culture’s positive influence on his resilience during the challenging phases of his upbringing in the Point Breeze neighborhood of North Philadelphia. This is exemplified in his lyrics from the song “Act Too,” featured in the Grammy Award-winning album *Things Fall Apart*, where Trotter’s bars highlight Hip-Hop as a critical factor in his resilience and express his profound affection for the culture. Acclaimed rapper and distinguished visiting professor Wasalu Muhammad Jaco, perhaps better known as Hip-Hop artist Lupe Fiasco, also championed how Hip-Hop culture can function to bolster persistence in the song “Hip-Hop Saved My Life”:

*“One you never heard of I, push it harder, further the, grind might feel like murder but, Hip-Hop, you saved me. One you never heard of I, push it harder, further the, grind might feel like murder but, Hip-Hop, you saved my life” - (Lupe Fiasco, 2007)*

I have been a Hip-Hop practitioner actively writing, recording, performing, and curating events as an emcee for over thirty years. Within the creative communities and Hip-Hop spaces I have been involved in, I have frequently encountered the idea that Hip-

Hop culture can serve as a mechanism to help Black men persist through challenging circumstances. Since the early days of Hip-Hop, Black and Latinx youths leveraged the culture's five elements as mechanisms for resistance and self-determination through creative expression and to provide a counter-narrative to the majoritarian narrative of White supremacy and minority inferiority (Banks, 2010; Chang, 2005). Within the higher education context, attending historically White institutions (HWIs) often presents Black men with difficult circumstances that serve as impediments to their desired outcomes. Black men's experiences attending HWIs are shaped by racially hostile campus climates where they may encounter a range of systemic and structural barriers that impact their sense of belonging and persistence (Allen, 2020; Dancy & Edwards, 2018; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Harper, 2012; Solorzano et al., 2000; Strayhorn, 2012). In this study, I explored how Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from HWIs found a sense of belonging and joy through Hip-Hop spaces.

Petchauer (2012) coined the term Hip-Hop collegians as college students who integrate their participation in Hip-Hop within the context of their entire educational experience. Hip-Hop collegians integrate Hip-Hop into every aspect of their lives, including their organizations, events, routines, and habits. Sulé (2016) found that Hip-Hop can serve as an emotional support resource for students, leading to positive outcomes for their well-being and sense of belonging. Tichavakunda (2021) identified that centering the joy, creativity, and agency of Black students can act as a form of resistance and self-preservation within racially hostile climates. I chose to examine the experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities or who identify as practitioners of Hip-Hop's creative forms of expression. Black men with Hip-Hop identities meet the

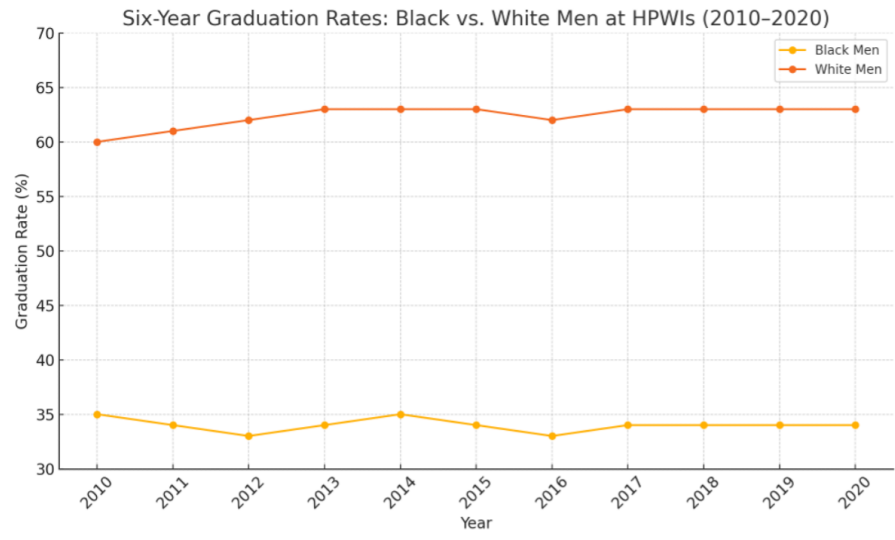
criteria to be considered Hip-Hop collegians who integrate their cultural practices into every aspect of their lives, and may find both joy and a sense of belonging when given access to spaces to practice Hip-Hop creative forms of expression. For this study, I opted out of rehashing deficit-based narratives of Black men's experiences attending HWIs, and instead chose to center their narratives of joy, resilience, and belonging while participating in Hip-Hop counter spaces on HWI campuses.

### **Problem Statement**

Black men graduate at a significantly lower rate than their White counterparts at historically White institutions (HWIs). Over the past two decades, the retention rate for Black men has been declining, with no clear indication that the trend will reverse in the immediate future (Lucas, 2018). Less than 34% of Black men who enter college graduate within six years compared to 63% of their White counterparts. That 29-percentage point gap is not merely statistical; it represents real lives, deferred dreams, and systemic failure of vulnerable populations. Of the approximately 15 million undergraduates enrolled in post-secondary institutions in the United States, less than 5% are Black men. Statistics also revealed that enrollment rates for Black men have remained stagnant since the 1970s. Without a college education, Black men will have less access to social capital, less earning potential, and decreased occupational attainment (Farmer & Hope, 2015, p. 4).

**Figure 1.**

*Black men and White counterparts six-year graduation rates at HPWIs*



In an ideal world, higher education should serve as a path to upward mobility for Black men, but for many Black male collegians, the sobering reality is that it functions as an unlevel playing field, marred by racialized barriers and hostile climates. Low retention and graduation rates are a direct outcome of poor campus climate and systemic inequities that play a significant role in the educational challenges faced by Black men (Strayhorn et al., 2015). Common factors impacting the on-campus experience of many Black men include but are not limited to, historically entrenched White supremacy culture and anti-Black sentiment, frequent occurrences of racial microaggressions, hyper surveillance by police and other authority figures, and a lack of culturally relevant counter-spaces where students might experience a critical mass of same-race peers and support staff (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Even when Black men enter college with strong academic records, the pressures of racial stereotype threat, hyper surveillance, and a lack of community

contribute to feelings of alienation and fatigue (McClain et al., 2016). These stressors which are rarely acknowledged in institutional data, even less so in our current political climate, may diminish Black men's chances of persisting to degree completion.

The lack of representation for Black faculty, staff members, and peer mentors exacerbates the adverse impact of persisting anti-Black sentiment and the absence of culturally relevant interventions. Black men tend to model their behaviors after trusted family or community members (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012). These role models are typically other Black men who are underrepresented in the overall student populations, student support staff, and faculty positions on HWI campuses. This lack of representation or critical mass has been identified as a contributing factor in reports of adverse experiences for Black collegians (Lucas, 2018). Black students' experiences with race-related stressors, such as lack of representation and racial discrimination on campus, may negatively influence their self-esteem, mental health, physical health, sense of belonging at their institution, and retention (Griffith et al., 2019). Despite a demonstrated academic achievement history, many Black collegians report unrelenting pressure to prove their intellectual ability (Lucas, 2018).

Research by Dancy and Edwards (2018) emphasizes that HWIs often replicate plantation logic through policies and cultures that normalize anti-Black sentiment and encourage assimilation with dominant cultural norms. Black collegians may cope with race-related stressors differently than other stressors. While race-related stressors have been found to affect academic performance negatively, research indicates that Black students cope with race-related stress by working harder to disprove or circumvent stereotypes (McClain et al., 2016). Seeking social support from same-race peers and

mentors is often leveraged as an intervention or support resource for race-related stress. The lack of a Black critical mass means this type of social support is inaccessible to many students who would benefit from it.

My literature review indicated that Hip-Hop activities and spaces on and around campus can be meaningful parts of students' educational lives, similar to cultural or ethnic student organizations. Studies conducted by Hip-Hop education scholars illustrated how students leveraged Hip-Hop as an approach to education by transferring concepts and practices from Hip-Hop into education. Overall, the literature indicated that Hip-Hop collegians make meaningful connections between Hip-Hop and their educational lives. The connections Black male collegians develop between Hip-Hop culture and their academic lives could increase the likelihood of positive outcomes such as a sense of belonging, increased retention, and persistence to graduation for Hip-Hop collegians (Petchauer, 2011).

### **Purpose Statement**

My dissertation focuses on exploring and capturing the lived experiences of Black men who graduated from HWIs and identify as practitioners of Hip-Hop cultural aesthetics. I propose that Black men who identify as Hip-Hop practitioners and have access to alternative spaces on campus that provide opportunities for engagement with Hip-Hop cultural aesthetics and creative practices may experience a stronger sense of belonging. Engaging in culturally relevant counter-spaces informed by Hip-Hop culture may increase opportunities for Black men to experience Black joy, which may support their likelihood of experiencing a sense of belonging and graduating from HWIs (Tichavakunda, 2021). The participants of my study all identify as Black men with Hip-



Hop identities who graduated from HWIs. The Black men in this study have Hip-Hop identities including: emcee, rapper, musician, poet, spoken word artist, DJ, turn tablelist, producer, content creator, journalist, scholar, and historian. Each participant considers themselves to be active in their Hip-Hop practice. Some participants work full-time jobs in the public or private sector that are mostly unrelated to their Hip-Hop practice, while others work a full-time position informed by their Hip-Hop practice. Participants who identified as emcees, rappers, musicians, poets, spoken word artists, DJs, turntablists, producers, and content creators were all invited to participate in the creation and recording of an original Hip-Hop song informed by themes derived from semi-structured interviews. The Hip-Hop song is meant to serve as an arts-based composite story of Black men's experiences of joy in Hip-Hop spaces at HWIs.

### **Specific Research Questions**

My dissertation aimed to investigate the impact Black men's Hip-Hop identities and access to culturally relevant counter spaces may have had on the sense of belonging, resilience, and joy for those who graduated from HWIs. My study will begin with the following research question:

What impact did access to Hip-Hop counter spaces have on the sense of belonging and feelings of joy for Black men with Hip-Hop identities that matriculated at HWIs?

Studies conducted by Hip-Hop education scholars demonstrated how students conceptualized Hip-Hop as an approach to education by transferring concepts and practices from Hip-Hop into education. The connections Black men develop between Hip-Hop culture and their academic lives could increase the likelihood of positive

outcomes, such as a sense of belonging and feelings of joy (Tichavakunda, 2022; Johnson, 2015). By leveraging Hip-Hop counter spaces, whether through student organizations, campus programming, or informal gatherings, Black men may be able to cultivate a crucial support system that mitigates the burden of racially hostile climates on HWI campuses where assimilation to dominant cultural norms might be encouraged (Emdin, 2016; Love, 2019). These counter spaces provide platforms to challenge dominant narratives that seek to demean Blackness, instead offering a site of community-building, belonging, and joy.

### **Significance of Study**

This study holds significant implications for advancing the understanding of how culturally relevant interventions can enhance the educational experiences of Black men attending HWIs. By focusing on the intersection of Hip-Hop culture and education, the research highlights the transformative potential of culturally relevant counter-spaces in fostering belonging, joy, and resilience. The study challenges deficit-based perspectives that view Black male collegians through a lens of inadequacy, offering instead an asset-based counter narrative that celebrates their creativity, identity, and cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005; Johnson, 2015).

The study findings may inform institutional practices, advocating for integrating HHP and CRP within higher education contexts. These approaches can serve as critical tools for addressing inequities, improving retention rates, and fostering inclusive campus climates. The study may also contribute to the growing scholarship on Hip-Hop pedagogy within higher education contexts by demonstrating how this framework can be operationalized to disrupt systemic barriers and promote equity for Black men.

## Definition of Terms

This section provides an explanation of terms that were frequently used throughout this study.

**Black men with Hip-Hop Identities** are individuals who actively engage with Hip-Hop culture as a core part of their personal identity, artistic expression, and social navigation. They may use Hip-Hop as a framework for making sense of their experiences, particularly in predominantly White spaces, where they may rely on Hip-Hop as a tool for affirmation and resistance (Alim, 2006). **Black Joy** is defined as a form of resistance that celebrates Black existence despite historical and ongoing oppression. Within educational spaces, Black joy manifests through community building, artistic expression, and the creation of affirming environments where Black students can thrive (Tichavakunda, 2022).

**Hip-Hop Culture** is a cultural movement that originated in the Bronx, New York in the 1970s involving five core elements, rapping, DJing, graffiti art, breakdancing, and self-knowledge (Chang, 2005; Emdin, 2016; Hill, 2009; Love, 2016). **Hip-Hop Practitioners** are individuals who actively engage with Hip-Hop as an artist, educator, activist, or scholar.

**Hip-Hop Collegians** are college students who integrate Hip-Hop culture into their academic, social, and creative identities. These students use Hip-Hop as a framework for self-expression, learning, and community building (Petchauer, 2009).

**Hip-Hop Cultural Aesthetics** are defined as forms of creative expression including rapping, DJing, breakdancing, graffiti art, spoken word, beat boxing, producing/beat making. The artistic and stylistic elements that define Hip-Hop expression (Chang, 2005;

Hill, 2009; Emdin, 2016). **Hip-Hop Counter Spaces** are culturally affirming environments where Black students engage with Hip-Hop as a tool for academic and social empowerment. These spaces challenge dominant educational norms and foster a sense of belonging by validating Black cultural knowledge (Love, 2016).

**Historically White Institutions (HWIs)** are institutions of higher education that were originally established to serve White students and continue to be predominantly White in their student, faculty, and administrative demographics (Harper, 2012).

**Persistence** refers to a student's ability to continue their academic journey despite challenges, often measured by retention and graduation rates. Persistence can be influenced by institutional support, cultural validation, and community engagement (Strayhorn, 2012) **Resilience** refers to the ability to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity and navigate systemic barriers while maintaining academic and personal success (Masten, 2001). **Sense of Belonging** is defined as an individual's perception of being valued and included within a community or institution. For Black students, often fostered through counter-spaces and culturally relevant engagements (Strayhorn, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

The six-year graduation rate for Black men at HWIs reflects more than struggles informed by academic rigor, it reflects a lack of institutional imagination. Closing the gap requires a transformation in how HWIs understand and serve Black male collegians. This study emerges from both personal and communal lived experiences that affirm the transformative power of Hip-Hop culture as a mechanism for resistance, belonging, and joy for Black men navigating racially hostile educational environments. By eschewing deficit-based narratives in favor of centering Black men's joy, resilience, and belonging,

this study advocates for the legitimacy and vitality of culturally affirming spaces grounded in Hip-Hop culture. Chapter 1 establishes the critical context for this research: Black men continue to face systemic barriers at HWIs, including low retention and graduation rates, underrepresentation, and racialized campus climates (Harper, 2012; Lucas, 2018). By amplifying the narratives of Black men who persisted to graduation while maintaining active Hip-Hop identities, this research highlights the cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) these students bring to their campus communities, and centers the importance of joy in mitigating the adverse outcomes associated with chilly campus climates (Tichavakunda, 2022)..

Hip-Hop spaces, whether formal or informal, function as sites of resilience and community, allowing Black men to cultivate belonging, push back against majoritarian narratives that cast them as intellectually inferior to their White counterparts, and experience moments of joy despite having to persist in environments where their needs are not always prioritized (Love, 2019; Sule, 2016).

Through a Critical Race and Hip-Hop counter narrative, this study seeks to contribute to the extant literature on Hip-Hop within higher education contexts. By examining the lived experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities, this dissertation seeks to build a deeper understanding of how joy derived from cultural forms of creative expression might inform persistence to degree completion. It is here, in the cadence of their Hip-Hop counternarratives, against a backdrop of drum loops, open mic nights, and rhyme cyphers, that their joy stories can be told.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Sense of Belonging**

Due to historically entrenched patterns of discrimination and anti-Black sentiment (Kakrouti, 2016), many Black students remain underrepresented at the majority of public colleges and universities in the United States. Black student enrollment has been in a steady state of decline at many HWIs (Nichols, 2019). Despite improvement in high school completion and admission rates, Black students still face lower retention and completion rates (Espinosa, et al., 2019). Black students persistently report having to navigate challenges at HWIs, including frequent microaggressions, discriminatory treatment from faculty and staff, a lack of Black critical mass and representation of same-race peers and support staff, hyper surveillance by campus police, and pressure to assimilate to dominant cultural norms (Grier-Reid, et al., 2008; Farmer & Hope, 2015; Griffith et al., 2019). An increase in reports of campus hate crimes and racially motivated incivilities targeting Black and Brown students since the 2016 presidential election indicates that issues adversely impacting desired outcomes of retention and completion persist and may be intensifying (Bauman, 2018). The aforementioned concerns highlight the importance of fostering a sense of belonging for Black men attending HWIs to mitigate barriers to retention and degree attainment.

Strayhorn (2012) defined a sense of belonging as the degree to which students feel connected, safe, valued, welcome, and supported on campus. Sense of belonging is a

fundamental element of student success and is strongly influenced by campus climate (Strayhorn, 2015). Sense of belonging is especially important for the success, persistence, and retention of underrepresented minority students such as Black males. Another critical element of persistence and retention for Black male students is well-being. Black men striving to persist on HWI campuses with poor climates are less likely to experience belonging and experience a higher risk of stopping out (Lucas, 2018). Strayhorn et al. (2015) conducted an exploratory study to investigate the connection between well-being, sense of belonging, and success for Black male college students. The study identified and documented common factors impacting the on-campus experience of many Black male collegians. Among these factors were frequent occurrences of racial microaggressions, hyper surveillance by police and other authority figures, and lack of culturally relevant support resources.

### **Resilience**

Resilience is a multifaceted concept that encompasses individual and collective efforts to overcome adversity. Resilience is defined as the ability to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity; resilience is shaped by internal factors such as cultural identity and self-efficacy, as well as external factors such as support networks and institutional resources (Masten, 2001). For Black men attending HWIs, resilience is not only informed by individual determination, but also by the experiences of navigating systemic barriers, such as racially hostile environments, societal stereotypes that frame Black men as academically inferior, underrepresentation, and cultural isolation (Harper, 2012; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Strayhorn, 2018). Resilience in this context requires Black men to navigate feelings of isolation and alienation often by seeking spaces to participate in

identity affirming spaces such as Black student organizations, mentoring programs, and multicultural support centers to find community and validation (Brooms, 2018).

One key factor that shapes resilience for Black men is a strong sense of cultural identity, which helps students to navigate racially hostile environments with a sense of pride and purpose (Cross, 1991). Additionally, social support networks, including family, peers, and mentors, play a crucial role in fostering resilience. These networks may provide emotional support, practical guidance, and a sense of belonging, all of which are essential for sustaining academic and personal well-being (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Another key factor that contributes to fostering resilience is institutional support in the form of culturally relevant counter spaces. These spaces can enhance Black men's resilience by validating their experiences and addressing systemic inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). For Black men attending HWIs, resilience often takes the form of resistance. This process of resistance involves redefining success on their own terms, engaging in acts of self-care, and building counter-spaces that affirm their identities and experiences (Brooms, 2018).

### **Black Joy**

The concept of Black joy is a theoretical framework introduced by Tichavakunda (2021) which emphasizes the resilience, creativity and joy of Black students navigating life on HWI campuses. Tichavakunda developed Black joy as a response to the dominant narratives that focus almost exclusively on the challenges, deficits, and pain experienced by Black students pursuing post-secondary education. Black joy reframes the conversation to center the ways in which Black students cultivate and experience joy, agency, and community within higher education spaces. Black joy is built on the



understanding that Black students at HWIs are not merely passive recipients of racialized experiences; instead, they actively create and seek out moments of joy and affirmation as acts of resistance and self-preservation (Tichavakunda, 2021). Black joy is defined as an intentional pursuit of happiness, community, and validation in the face of adversity. This joy is not a denial of the reality of White supremacy or racial discrimination, but instead functions as a deliberate reclamation of humanity and agency in an environment that is often hostile to Black existence.

One of the central tenets of Black joy is the idea of cultural validation. Cultural validation refers to the recognition and celebration of Black cultural expressions, traditions, and identities within the institutional context. Tichavakunda (2021) argues that Black students attending HWIs find joy in spaces where their cultural identities are affirmed and embraced, whether through campus organizations, peer networks, or culturally relevant counter spaces. These moments of cultural validation serve as affirmations of self-worth and counters to the frequent microaggressions and marginalizations Black students are subjected to at HWIs (Harper, 2012; Grier-Reed, 2010). Another tenant is the concept of resistance through joy. For Tichavakunda (2021), Black joy is not merely a fleeting emotion but an intentional act of resistance against structures that seek to dehumanize or marginalize Black students; joy becomes a radical expression of defiance and a means to counter narratives of deficit and social death. By centering joy, Tichavakunda challenges educators and researchers to recognize Black students' resilience and agency in navigating the hostility of predominantly White spaces.

## **Black Joy and Black Men's Collegian Experiences at HWIs**

Tichavakunda's theory of Black joy offers a critical lens through which to understand the experiences of Black men attending HWI's. Historically, research on Black men attending HWIs has focused on the challenges and barriers they face, such as racial microaggression, isolation, hyper surveillance, biased faculty, and lower retention and graduation rates (Harper 2012). Tichavaukunda's (2021) framework shifts the focus to explore how Black men actively cultivate and experience joy as a form of resistance and resilience. One way that Black joy manifests for Black men is through access to culturally relevant counter-spaces. Tichavakunda highlights the importance of counter-spaces that affirm Black identities and provide opportunities for community building and cultural expression. For Black men, these spaces offer reprieve from the pressures of navigating a predominantly White environment and facilitate a sense of belonging and affirmation. Black student organizations, Greek-letter fraternities, and cultural support centers may serve as vital spaces where Black men can celebrate their cultural heritage, find community, and experience joy in solidarity with peers (Grier-Reed, 2010; Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2019). By centering joy as a form of resistance, resilience, and cultural affirmation, Tichavakunda's (2021) framework challenges deficit-based narratives and centers the creativity of Black students within the context of HWIs. This framework emphasizes the importance of creating culturally relevant-counter spaces, promoting peer networks, and fostering environments where Black men can experience joy and validation.

## **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

The term culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is defined as a “pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 18). Culturally relevant pedagogy is a framework that views the process of student learning and success as a direct outcome of educators’ understanding or lack thereof of students’ cultural backgrounds to facilitate belonging (Kim & Pulido, 2015). Additionally, Ladson-Billings identified that CRP is anchored by three criteria: “(a) that students experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). Leveraged correctly, CRP repositions marginalized students into spaces of cultural familiarity that eschew assimilation to dominant norms. Culturally relevant counter spaces are defined as “sites where deficit notions of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established or maintained” (Solorzano et al., 2000). Culturally relevant counter spaces are identity-affirming spaces where students are empowered to exist and thrive in their unique cultural identity. Without access to culturally relevant interventions and spaces, Black men attending HWIs are less likely to experience genuine belonging that may help them to navigate life on HWI campuses with less than welcoming climates (Brooms et al., 2020).

Exacerbating the adverse impact resulting from the absence of culturally relevant interventions and spaces is the lack of representation of Black faculty, staff members, and peer mentors. Black male collegians tend to model their behaviors after trusted members

in their families or communities. These valued role models are typically other Black men who are underrepresented in the overall student populations, student support staff, and faculty positions on HWI campuses. While many existing support interventions for Black male collegians focus their efforts on academic success skills like time management and study techniques, there is a gap in research and application of interventions that seek to bolster the belonging and well-being of Black male collegians (Strayhorn et al., 2015, pp. 130-131). Grier-Reed, Madyn, & Buckley (2008) stated that the large discrepancy in retention and 6-year graduation rates between Black and White is informed by common stressors faced by Black students at HWI's, including as "lack of knowledge about the college process, institutional racism, poor health and energy, social isolation ... and economic problems" (2008, p. 476).

Successful interventions designed to address the challenges faced by Black students need to provide spaces and opportunities to learn strategies to cope with stressors. Students have reported that support resources and interventions they have benefited from provided them with access to a home base that functions as an empowering safe space, opportunities to experience intellectual stimulation, connectedness, validation, and opportunities to develop resilience, and environment that is free of racial microaggressions, anti-Black sentiments, stigma, and stereotype threat where they were able to "relax ... freely express themselves, laugh, have fun, get beyond labels, and be a whole person" (Grier-Reed, Madyn, & Buckley, 2008, p. 480). Culturally relevant interventions informed by Hip-Hop culture may provide students with identity-affirming spaces where they can exist as their authentic selves and experience a sense of belonging (Emdin, 2016).

## **Community Cultural Wealth**

Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) offers a transformative lens for understanding the cultural assets and resources that marginalized communities bring to educational and social spaces. Developed by Tara Yosso (2005) CCW challenges deficit-based perspectives that view students of color through the lens of what they lack rather than recognizing the rich array of knowledge, skills, and social capital they possess. CCW draws from CRT and centers the experiences and strengths of communities of color and affirms that these communities possess valuable forms of capital that are often overlooked or devalued within mainstream institutions (Yosso, 2005).

Yosso (2005) identified six forms of cultural capital that make up CCW: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. Each form represents a set of assets and skills that communities of color leverage to navigate and resist structural inequalities. These forms of capital challenge the traditional notion of cultural capital as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), which often aligns with dominant cultural norms and values of White, middle-class society. By redefining cultural capital to include the strengths of marginalized communities, Yosso's CCW shifts the focus from what students of color lack to what they contribute.

### **Six Forms of Community Cultural Wealth Defined**

Yosso (2005) described aspirational capital as the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of real and perceived barriers. For communities of color, aspirational capital is often cultivated through familial and community narratives that emphasize resilience and perseverance despite systemic obstacles. Linguistic capital

encompasses the social and intellectual skills that individuals develop through communication in multiple languages or styles. For many students of color, bilingualism and code-switching serve as resources for navigating complex social and institutional contexts (Yosso, 2005). Familial capital refers to the cultural knowledge and sense of community nurtured within families and extended familial networks. Familial capital emphasizes the importance of emotional and moral support, which can help build resilience and a strong sense of personal identity (Yosso, 2005). Social capital involves networks of people and community resources that provide support and access to information and opportunities. For students of color, social capital often emerges from connections with family, friends, mentors, and community organizations (Yosso, 2005).

Navigational capital is the ability to navigate social institutions, such as educational and bureaucratic structures that may be unfamiliar or hostile to communities of color. Navigational capital highlights the resilience and strategic agency that marginalized individuals employ to overcome institutional barriers (Yosso, 2005).

Resistant capital refers to the knowledge and skill that individuals develop through challenging and resisting oppression. Resistant capital is reflected in social movements and critical consciousness that communities of color passed down generationally (Yosso, 2005).

### **Hip-Hop Culture**

The Hip-Hop cultural movement celebrated 50 years of innovation in the year 2023. The movement was originated by Black and Latinx youth living in the socioeconomically distressed New York borough known as the South Bronx in the early 1970s (Chang, 2007; Dyson, 2004; Reese, 2017). Hip-Hop's five elements or cultural

aesthetics include MCing or rapping, break dancing or B-Boying/B-Girling, turntablism or DJing, graffiti, and self-knowledge. In the early days of Hip-Hop, Black, and Latinx youths leveraged the five elements as a mechanism for resistance and self-determination through creative expression and to provide a counter-narrative to the majoritarian narrative of White supremacy and minority inferiority (Banks, 2010; Chang, 2005).

The Hip-Hop element of emceeing or rapping continues the West African griot tradition of conveying oral history (Banks, 2010). Emcees/rappers use rhythm and rhyme to express themselves or tell stories, either over a musical production/beat or acapella. Emcees use their lyrics to convey narratives of shared experiences, their life challenges, their goals and ambitions, and their accomplishments. The primary role of the emcee is that of a storyteller and messenger (Morris, 2018). The element of emceeing can function as an impactful tool to deliver counter stories to persistent narratives of Black inferiority. The Hip-Hop element of breaking, break dancing or B-Boying/B-Girling is a form of dance that incorporates acrobatics and footwork performed by break dance practitioners, or B-Boys and B-Girls (Hazzard-Donald, 2004; Schloss, 2009).

The Hip-Hop element of turntablism or DJing was innovated by DJ Kool Herc during Hip-Hop block parties he hosted in the Bronx during the early 1970s. Similar to how emceeing finds its origins in the griot tradition, the predecessor of DJing is the Jamaican dancehall practice of toasting, a method of speaking while the music plays to encourage crowd participation. Early Hip-Hop DJing also incorporated the innovative technique of mixing and extending the musical percussion breakdown in songs on vinyl records. This technique was frequently used during Hip-Hop block parties to provide

emcees and B-Boys and B-Girls with opportunities to showcase their abilities, as well as provide the soundtrack for the overall event.

The Hip-Hop element of graffiti is a visual style of street art practiced in Hip-Hop communities and spaces. Graffiti artists use spray paint to create large murals and “tags” or artist identifying marks on streets, subway cars, buildings, overpasses, bridges, and other structures. Like many of Hip-Hop’s early practitioners, many graffiti artists were Black or Latinx, and their artwork often contained images and phrases that were relevant to their lived experiences (Price, 2006). The final Hip-Hop element, knowledge, refers to awareness of self and of Hip-Hop culture. This element encourages Hip-Hop practitioners and fans to seek intentional learning opportunities or “do the knowledge” to fill any gaps in understanding to become informed ambassadors able to communicate the historical significance and value of Hip-Hop cultural aesthetics (Chang, 2005). Hip-Hop’s elements and cultural aesthetics have been leveraged to create spaces for intergroup dialogue and environments for cultural engagement (Price, 2006; Sulé, 2016). Over time, Hip-Hop culture has gained a diverse fan base and body of practitioners, many of whom are transitioning into post-secondary education. In the next section I will discuss the implications of Hip-Hop culture and cultural aesthetics for students within the higher education landscape.

### **Hip-Hop in Higher Education**

In recent years, the intersection of Hip-Hop culture and higher education has gained increasing scholarly attention as researchers and educators explore how college students integrate their connection to Hip-Hop culture into their academic lives. The significance of emerging research on pedagogical approaches informed by Hip-Hop



culture cannot be overstated. Higher education institutions continue to navigate issues of equity, inclusion, and accessibility that dim the prospects for Black students. Hip-Hop culture's history of resilience, resistance, and cultural affirmation offers a promising foundation for innovative educational practices that may serve as a mechanism to foster a sense of belonging. In this section, I will review literature that highlights how embedding elements of Hip-Hop culture into higher education settings might transform the postsecondary experience for Black men attending HWIs.

Petchauer (2012) defined the term Hip-Hop collegians as college students who integrate their participation in Hip-Hop within the context of their entire educational experience. A Hip-Hop collegian is not merely a consumer of rap music as a casual listener. A Hip-Hop collegian possesses a more sophisticated understanding and knowledge of the culture and its connection to their educational experience. These students integrate Hip-Hop into every aspect of their lives. Petchauer (2009) noted that higher education institutions in North America are increasingly engaging Hip-Hop in an academically rigorous manner through courses, research, and conferences. Petchauer observed how participation in Hip-Hop at and around three different higher education institutions impacted students' educational experiences and approaches. Participants included students who identified as Filipino/a, Dominican, Caucasian, and African American as well as Hip-Hoppers who occupied overlapping roles of emcees, DJs, graffiti writers, event promoters, music producers, activists, and educators. The study illustrated how some Hip-Hop collegians navigated educational institutions that they saw as part of a hegemonic system that threatened to compromise some of their Hip-Hop ideals.

Wessel and Wallaert (2011) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study of students who self-identified as Hip-Hop collegians. The purpose of this study was to determine how identification and engagement with Hip-Hop culture influenced the educational experiences of undergraduates at a Midwestern, predominantly White university. Although problematic expressions have been acknowledged (materialism, offensive language, stereotypes, misogyny), the Hip-Hop subculture uses creative cultural expression to provide context for contemporary politics, history, and race (Dyson, 2007). Hip-Hop impacts the daily lives of college students, including their organizations, events, routines, and habits (Petchauer, 2010).

Wessel and Wallaert asked the question: How has identification with Hip-Hop culture influenced the educational experiences of undergraduate students at a Midwestern, predominantly White university? For the purpose of this study Hip-Hop was defined as a culture one lives or experiences, often demonstrated as the stylized appearance, language, and gestures often associated with urban street culture. Rap music is considered to be a subgenre of Hip-Hop culture. The study's participants consisted of eleven undergraduates who self-identified as immersed in the Hip-Hop culture at a Midwestern HWI. The participants consisted of six female and five male traditional undergraduates. These students, ages 17 to 23, self-identified as being immersed in the Hip-Hop culture at this university. Data analysis of the eleven interviews resulted in the identification of four themes: socialization, personal expression through language and clothing, goals, and cultural appreciation. Participants reported that association with the Hip-Hop culture influenced their transition to college and their interpersonal relationships

on campus. Expressions of the Hip-Hop culture helped students identify other individuals on campus associated with the Hip-Hop culture (Wessel and Wallaert, 2011).

Wessel and Wallaert's study found that Hip-Hop culture has the potential to positively influence undergraduates, specifically as it relates to socialization and personal expression. Students' academic goals have the potential to be positively influenced by Hip-Hop culture. Many of the messages sent through Hip-Hop music emphasize the importance of education, especially for underrepresented minorities. Stories of resilience and of rising out of difficult circumstances to achieve goals hold positive motivational messages for students. The stories and messages of the Hip-Hop culture are strong motivators for students to succeed in the collegiate experience. A limitation of the study is the small sample size, so the data only reflects the perceptions of the influence of Hip-Hop at one institution. The author further recommended that Student affairs professionals could benefit from seeking understanding and cultural competence to help college students achieve their educational goals. (Wessel and Wallaert, 2011).

Sulé (2016) identified a sense of belonging as a recognized factor contributing to persistence to graduation. Sulé also acknowledged the lack of higher education research on the role of Hip-Hop culture within the context of higher education. Sulé suggested that higher education needs to reaffirm its commitment to the mission of creating diverse campus environments that must accommodate many cultures, social identities, and interests. Sulé proposed that "Hip-Hop represents a culture, identity, and interest that may be associated with diversity goals and student sense of belonging" (Sulé, 2016, p. 182). Sulé further identified Hip-Hop's historical function as a vehicle for self-affirmation for marginalized youth. Hip-Hop serves as a genre of opposition reflected in language (e.g.,

rap), art, dance, fashion, music/rhythm, and activism. Though Hip-Hop transcends race, ethnic, class, and geographic boundaries, it remains a culture deeply associated with poor Black Americans and serves as a vehicle for counter-narratives that are necessary to challenge and critique prevailing the majoritarian narratives of prescribed unworthiness of people of color and other marginalized social identities.

Sulé conducted a qualitative phenomenological study designed to gain an understanding of how college students experience Hip-Hop culture. The study is based on in-depth interviews with participants from two Midwest HWIs. Sulé observed students in the cultural context of campus events, including a poetry slam, two rap performances, two dance battles, and a Hip-Hop symposium. Sulé selected nineteen participants with connections to campus Hip-Hop organizations or events. The study found that Hip-Hop served as an emotional support resource for the participants with positive impacts on student well-being and sense of belonging. Sulé identified three themes in the findings:

1. Belongingness through self-expression,
2. Belongingness through empathetic mattering,
3. Belongingness through counter-spaces (Sulé, 2016, p. 187)

Sulé stated that belongingness through self-expression represented how Hip-Hop serves as a vehicle for discovering a sense of purpose beyond material acquisition or consumerism. Several participants viewed Hip-Hop as a vehicle for contesting the status quo in regard to race and oppression, a theme that is consistent with the CRT and Black Crit counternarrative theme. Participants also stated that Hip-Hop served as a point of emotional release and stress management. Sulé stated that belongingness through empathetic mattering is associated with a sense of feeling connected to others. To

illustrate this theme, participants discussed Hip-Hop's ability to engage people around the shared experiences of marginalized groups, sometimes with the outcome of ally creation by allowing opportunities for intergroup dialog and creating social awareness in peers with privileged identities. Finally, Sulé suggested that students viewed Hip-Hop as a source of belongingness through counter spaces.

Sulé's findings indicated that Hip-Hop is viable as a cultural artifact in higher education that can be used to inform interventions and support resources for Hip-Hop collegians. Most participants stated that Hip-Hop programming and counter spaces had a minimal presence at their institutions. The study also found that Hip-Hop can be a catalyst for intergroup dialog and empathic scaffolding (Bauer & Clancy, 2018; Zuniga, Mildred, Varghese, Dejong, & Keehn, 2012). Perhaps the most promising finding is Hip-Hop's ability to curate and promote diverse counter spaces that can impact a campus climate favorably.

Hip-Hop centered frameworks can inform the development of innovative strategies and interventions that can be used to help students manage mental health concerns. Adjapong and Levy (2021) identified that BIPOC students are more likely to experience mental health challenges that may be triggered by racism, discrimination, poverty, and other adverse impacts of biased or culturally incompetent environments. BIPOC students in urban schools are also more likely to experience institutional racism while attending schools that develop programming lacking multicultural competence that fails to meet the needs of BIPOC students. Even in environments where institutions prioritize mental health services and have the resources to secure and provide them, the

professionals and services rendered are developed with Eurocentric approaches to counseling that are not informed by the lived experiences of BIPOC students.

Adjapong and Levy (2021) suggested two Hip-Hop-informed frameworks to address mental health concerns in teaching and counseling settings for BIPOC students. The first framework is Hip-Hop pedagogy framework; a teaching approach anchored in hip-hop culture. The Hip-Hop pedagogy framework suggests that educators leverage pedagogical approaches based on the five creative elements of hip-hop to facilitate knowledge acquisition and support mental health outcomes for BIPOC students. The second framework is Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Therapy, a culturally responsive school counseling framework that allows students to participate in mental health support programming and interventions in the form of writing, recording, and performing hip-hop music. This framework suggests that lyric writing can function as cognitive and emotional journaling to document, express, and process their thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Another example of an innovative strategy for addressing mental health through Hip-Hop aesthetics is the practice of creating a student-curated mixtape where students identify songs they like that allow them intentional time and space to reflect on positive experiences (Levy & Travis, 2020). Another option includes facilitating group cyphers as a strategy that allows students to engage in interactive discussions about mental health and increase the development of coping skills to respond to persistent environmental stressors associated with non-inclusive campus climates (Levy, 2019).

Culturally relevant counter spaces that center Black students' voices and lived experiences to facilitate belonging are necessary to combat institutional challenges of unstable admission and retention statistics. Counter spaces that center Hip-Hop may also

increase the likelihood for Black men to experience Black Joy. Black joy is defined as “a positive racialized emotion related to Black collegian’s opportunities for celebration and recreation” (Tichavakunda, 2021). Culturally relevant counter spaces informed by Hip-Hop culture may provide opportunities for Black men to experience Black joy by engaging in Hip-Hop creative practices as outlets for celebration and recreation on PWI campuses. The phrase Hip-Hop creative practices refers to artistic expressions informed by the five elements of Hip-Hop Culture: turntablism or DJing, emceeing or rapping, graffiti art, and self-knowledge (Love, 2016). For this study, a sense of belonging and Black Joy are positioned as intertwined desired outcomes that can be facilitated by engagement with Hip-Hop artistic self-expression in culturally relevant counter spaces informed by Hip-Hop culture.

Counter spaces informed by Hip-Hop can provide learners with alternative places of inclusion and access to “creative educators who can work their magic so that these learners are truly engaged and included” (Jenkins, Endsley, Jaksch, & Keith, 2017, p. 53). Engagement with Hip-Hop informed counter spaces and interventions may help students to develop:

1. an understanding of cultural self,
2. a use of culture as a leadership tool,
3. a value for servitude,
4. a sense of community, love, and connection, and;
5. a critical lens (Jenkins, Endsley, Jaksch, & Keith, 2017, p. 57).

In addition to adhering to these tenets for culturally relevant programming, Hip-Hop informed spaces should also be informed by Hip-Hop pedagogy. Hip-Hop pedagogy

(HHP)/Hip-Hop education pushes back on the notion that students of color need to assimilate to the dominant culture or demographic (Banks, 2015; Allen, 2024). HHP advocates for students to have some ownership and autonomy in regard to shaping their educational experiences. Scholars argue that implementing Hip-Hop pedagogies in higher education provides students with access to culturally relevant engagement opportunities to foster a sense of belonging. HHP emphasizes creating supportive environments within educational institutions and aims to support students who may identify as Hip-Hop collegians. HHP seeks to inform meaningful strategies and opportunities to support students who use Hip-Hop as their cultural language. Banks (2015) suggested that centering spaces and programming for students in HHP allow for the activation of students' cultural competence and provide a frame of reference for creating participant-centered practices to facilitate student engagement.

### **Hip-Hop Pedagogy**

Hip-Hop Pedagogy is an educational framework that leverages the cultural practices, experiences, and aesthetics of Hip-Hop to engage and empower students, particularly those from marginalized communities. Emerging in response to the disconnect between traditional educational practices and the lived realities of Black and Brown youth, Hip-Hop Pedagogy centers Hip-Hop culture as a legitimate and valuable form of knowledge production (Emdin, 2016). This approach draws from CRP, aiming to validate and incorporate students' cultural identities into the learning process. Hip-Hop Pedagogy is built on the acknowledgement that Hip-Hop culture is not merely an art form, but a dynamic and complex cultural movement that encompasses music, language, style, and social consciousness (Akom, 2009; Chang, 2007; Love, 2015). As a



pedagogical framework, it uses the elements of Hip-Hop, such as rap/emceeing, graffiti, DJing, breakdancing, and self-knowledge, to engage students and foster critical consciousness and social critique. Hip-Hop Pedagogy is focused on addressing issues of power, identity, and resistance, providing a platform for students to express themselves in their own cultural language while challenging dominant narratives (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Akom, 2016).

Akom (2009) introduced the concept of Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy (CHHP) as an alternative instructional strategy to create counter spaces in prospective teacher education programs to examine how Hip-Hop can be leveraged as a tool for social justice and challenging majoritarian narratives of Black inferiority. Hip-Hop is a growing presence in academic settings, even while being historically dismissed in broader academic contexts. Hip-Hop can be a channel for students, faculty, and staff to share their narratives and experiences and serves as a critical asset in the “Black freedom struggle” that can facilitate the pursuit of self-determination for marginalized populations (Akom, 2016). The Hip-Hop aesthetic practice of emceeing has been leveraged to highlight social inequity and systemic bias and there is an opportunity to leverage the culture’s creative forms of expression in academic institutions more frequently and to greater impact. Implementing CHHP in higher education contexts may empower students, faculty, and staff of color to act as disruptors of problematic social norms.

CHHP is anchored in elements of CRT, Friere’s Critical Praxis, and youth participatory action research (YPAR) to challenge the prevailing majoritarian narrative of White supremacy. Akom shared his experience implementing CHHP through a university-based African Studies program, where he and his colleagues created a media

justice course activity called “Inside the Hip-Hop Studio” that functioned as a counter space where social constructs and systems of subordination could be critically examined. The activity provided an example of CHHP in action and demonstrated the importance of centering race and racism, challenging majoritarian narratives used to explain the experiences of students of color, centering the narratives and experiences of students of color, emphasizing a commitment to social justice, and encouraging a transdisciplinary approach. Akom suggested that CHHP challenges the fallacy of White Supremacy by providing counter spaces where marginalized students can reflect and share their own experiences in their cultural language while unlearning the prescribed narratives about their social identities.

Many higher education institutions have failed to provide culturally relevant interventions and programming; this failure functions as a barrier to desired outcomes for African-American students. Hall (2013) conducted a study to examine the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy leveraging Hip-Hop on the retention and engagement of African-American students. Hall suggested that Hip-Hop pedagogy can be leveraged to challenge current pedagogies informed by the majoritarian narrative and help students find their voice in the classroom. Hall and Martin (2013) posited that establishing minority-focused departments and diversity offices in Historically White Institutions (HWIs) may enhance the recruitment and retention of students of color. Additionally, they advocated for continuous recognition and appreciation of diverse cultures beyond designated days or months to foster a sense of belonging among students of color. Pedagogy leveraging various aesthetics of Hip-Hop culture empowers educators to teach foundational skills and knowledge creatively using a culturally informed delivery method

that Black students can identify with. The storytelling aspect of Hip-Hop empowers students to critique inequitable social constructs and share their experiences and narratives without being forced to assimilate to the dominant demographic's narrative that may not be historically accurate or paints unflattering images of people of color. Hall's study suggested that student participants were effectively engaged through a pedagogy that was culturally and socially relevant, interdisciplinary, and academically rigorous, further indicating that Hip-Hop has educational value and can be leveraged to engage African-American students in historically White spaces.

Alim (2007) discussed the value of Critical Hip-Hop Language Pedagogies (CHHLPs) as an innovative approach that empowers students to speak the language of their culture. Alim identified the trend of teachers and administrators opting out of implementing such approaches to the detriment of linguistically marginalized students. Alim defined linguistically marginalized students as those who are "speakers of non-dominant languages" such as Black Language, who find themselves being forced to assimilate to White cultural and linguistic norms in social contexts that are widely accepted as critical to upward mobility (Alim, 2009, p. 162). There is a cultural tension that Black students, faculty, and professionals find themselves mired in as they pursue academic achievement in spaces that are hostile to their existence. This tension is exacerbated by administrators' and teachers' lack of interest in or willful opposition to critical language pedagogies that may benefit minority students. Alim outlined a process for developing CHHLPs that centered the need for educators to demonstrate cultural competence by learning to speak the cultural language of their students rather than dismissing it or deeming it inferior.

## **Literature Review Summary**

The literature reviewed provides a comprehensive exploration of the key frameworks relevant to understanding the experiences of Black men attending HWIs. CRT highlights the persistence of systemic racism in higher education and emphasizes the importance of counter-narratives in challenging majoritarian perspectives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Sense of Belonging theory underscores the necessity for institutions to create inclusive environments that affirm students' identities, noting that Black male students are more likely to thrive when they feel a sense of connection and validation within their academic communities (Strayhorn, 2012; Grier-Reed, 2010). The literature on resilience outlines the ways in which Black men navigate racialized campus environments, drawing on internal strengths, social networks, and culturally relevant spaces to persist in higher education (Harper, 2012; Masten, 2001). Black Joy theory reframes the discussion to center the joy, creativity, and agency of Black students as acts of resistance and self-preservation within racially hostile educational settings (Tichavakunda, 2021; Johnson, 2015). Community Cultural Wealth shifts the narrative from deficit-based perspectives to recognizing the diverse forms of capital that marginalized students bring to their educational experiences (Yoss, 2005).

The literature on Hip-Hop culture highlights a powerful tool for fostering resilience, identity affirmation, and belonging among Black men attending HWIs. The literature on Hip-Hop pedagogy illustrates how integrating Hip-Hop elements into educational spaces can create culturally relevant counter-spaces that promote engagement, critical consciousness, and self-expression (Emdin, 2016; Petchauer, 2012). These counter-spaces serve as sites of resistance against the dominant narratives that seek

to marginalize Black identities in higher education. The intersection of Hip-Hop culture and educational practices has significant potential to enhance the collegiate experience for Black men, providing them with the tools to navigate systemic barriers while fostering a sense of community and joy (Hill, 2009; Sulé, 2016). In conclusion, the literature affirms the importance of culturally relevant interventions and counter-spaces in mitigating the challenges faced by Black men at HWIs. By leveraging frameworks like CRT, SOB, CCW, and HHP, educators and institutions may be able to foster identity-affirming environments that validate the experiences of Black men and promote resilience and experiences of joy.

### **Theoretical Framework: CRT and Black Joy**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical and methodological framework developed by legal scholars in order to effectively account for the experiences of those who endure systemic and institutional racism. As stated by Derrick Bell (1980), one of the legal scholars who is credited with its development, CRT is applied to highlight the inequitable distribution of power and privilege as well as racism and racial disadvantages within organizations. CRT examines the role of race and systemic racism in perpetuating systems of subordination. CRT challenges the majoritarian narratives that sustain systemic racism by centering the voices and experiences of groups targeted by institutional oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT scholars argue that systemic racism is often normalized through majoritarian narratives and ideologies that lean into color-blind philosophies and meritocracy, which serve to minimize the experiences, narratives, and self-advocacy of racial minorities.

To push back against the prevailing narrative of persistent institutional racism and White supremacy, CRT theorists asserted that storytelling and counter-narrating are essential to interject minority cultural viewpoints. CRT theorists have labeled this practice of counter-narratives as “naming your reality” (Ladson-Billing, 1998, p. 13). The CRT practice of counter-narrating or “naming your reality” centers the narratives of racial minorities and positions their experiences as valuable illustrations of oppression. Where colorblind racist ideology is anchored by the necessity to maintain the dominant group’s privilege by denying the existence of White supremacy, White privilege, racial microaggressions, discrimination, harassment, and other incivilities, CRT counter-narratives highlight the lived experiences of the oppressed to document and confirm that the systemic challenges and injustices they endure are real and prevalent (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

As educational research frameworks, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Black Joy each provide lenses through which to examine the lived experiences of Black men attending HWIs. These theories share several foundational principles, including the importance of cultural affirmation, the pervasiveness and permanence of systemic oppression, and the validation of marginalized identities and narratives. Examining the key components and intersections between these theories reveals a comprehensive approach to understanding and supporting Black men within educational contexts where they often encounter institutional barriers to success and belonging. One critical component represented across these theories is the emphasis on affirming and centering the lived experiences of Black individuals. CRT highlights the enduring impact of systemic racism in various societal contexts, including education (Ladson-Billings,

1998). Another shared component across these frameworks is the recognition of counter-narratives as essential tools for challenging majoritarian ideologies and reclaiming agency for marginalized identity groups. CRT, for instance, uses storytelling and counter-narrative as a method to center the voices of those typically excluded from dominant narratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Collectively, these frameworks emphasize the importance of validating and amplifying marginalized voices to facilitate resilience and self-empowerment. Each framework challenges majoritarian narratives of Black inferiority by focusing on anti-deficit approaches that view Black students through a strengths-based lens that appreciates their unique cultural wealth and ability to innovate pathways to success.

Lastly, these frameworks all emphasize community and relational support as necessary elements to Black students' persistence and resilience. Black joy suggests that students who feel valued and connected within their educational environment and are supported by access to communal spaces where they can connect with peers and mentors who affirm their identities may have a better chance of achieving their desired educational outcomes (Emdin, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Strayhorn, 2018; Yosso, 2005). An integrated approach combining CRT, and Black Joy provides a multidimensional framework for understanding the experiences of Black men attending HWIs. By addressing structural barriers, emphasizing cultural affirmation, and celebrating the strengths and contributions Black men can bring to educational settings, this combined approach may offer valuable insights into creating supportive and equitable environments where Black men can show up in the fullness of their cultural identities.

This integrated framework is appropriate for a qualitative study to explore the experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities at HWIs. I plan to use counter narration as one of the central components of my methodology for this study; counter narration prioritizes the lived experiences and voices of participants, aligning with the emphasis on counter-narratives found in CRT (Clandinin, 2013; Delgado & Stefaniec, 2012). Black joy is appropriate in combination with counter narration because it provides a framework for examining how Black men experience and cultivate joy as a form of resistance and analyze how they see themselves within the broader context of an HWI community (Tichavakunda, 2021).



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

This research study examined the narratives and lived experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from HWIs and had access to Hip-Hop counter spaces. Specifically, this study explores Black male collegians' stories and experiences of belonging and joy as informed by their Hip-Hop identities, creative practices, and participation in Hip-Hop counterspaces. While there is a substantial body of research literature that centers deficit-based narratives of Black male collegians' experiences at HWIs, this study recognizes that there is little research that reaffirms the impact that experiences of joy can have on the belonging and persistence of Black male collegians (Tichavakunda, 2022). This study proposes that there is value in Black male collegians' stories of joy that might help inform approaches to enhancing institutional efforts to support Black male collegians' persistence to degree completion. This study opens with the following research question:

What impact did access to Hip-Hop counter spaces have on the sense of belonging and feelings of joy for Black men with Hip-Hop identities that matriculated at HWIs?

Capturing the narratives and lived experiences of joy and belonging for Black men with Hip-Hop identities requires a methodological framework that allows researchers to generate a deeper understanding of the participants' narratives and perspectives (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2017). In this section I will

provide an overview of my methodological approach, which combines Critical Race Methodology (CRM), and Hip-Hop Methodology (HHM), focusing specifically on why these combined methodologies are appropriate for capturing and conveying how Black men with Hip-Hop identities leveraged their creative practices to facilitate joy and community building to increase their likelihood of persistence while attending HWIs.

### **Critical Race Methodology**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical and methodological framework that examines the role of race and systemic racism in perpetuating systems of subordination. CRT challenges the majoritarian narratives that sustain systemic racism by centering the voices and experiences of groups targeted by institutional oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Seven tenets inform CRT scholarship and methodology:

1. CRT posits that racism is a normal part of American life. CRT provides a lens through which racism is revealed despite the lack of genuine organizational efforts to realize racial equity and justice;
2. CRT rejects the notion of colorblind ideology, which seeks to silence necessary discourse on how race informs our experiences in very different ways;
3. CRT gives voice to the unique narratives and lived experiences of people of color. CRT provides counter-narratives to challenge the majoritarian narratives of the dominant demographic and highlight discrimination and contest assumptions made about people of color;

4. CRT recognizes interest convergence, a process by which the agents of the system of subordination will accept or advocate racial advances for Blacks only when it is mutually beneficial for Whites;
5. CRT recognizes revisionist history as a tactic used to reexamine the historical account as presented in majoritarian narratives and replace those inaccurate interpretations of events with accounts that are more consistent with the lived experience of racial minorities;
6. CRT also relies on “Racial Realists,” or individuals who recognize race as a social construct and acknowledge racism is but also realize that racism is not only a social phenomenon but also a system of subordination which allocates privilege and status in American society; and
7. CRT continuously critiques claims of meritocracy that sustain white supremacy by challenging colorblind ideologies. CRT also states that one cannot fight against racism without also fighting against sexism, homophobia, poverty, and other systems of subordination (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009, pp. 391-392).

CRT scholars argue that systemic racism is often normalized through majoritarian narratives and ideologies that lean into color-blind philosophies and meritocracy, which serve to minimize the experiences, narratives, and self-advocacy of racial minorities. To push back against the prevailing narrative of persistent institutional racism and White supremacy, CRT theorists asserted that storytelling and counter-narrating are essential to interject minority cultural viewpoints. CRT theorists have labeled this practice of counter-narration as “naming your reality” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 13).

## **Counter Narration/Storytelling and Composite Stories**

The CRT practice of counter-narrating or “naming your reality” centers the narratives of racial minorities and positions their experiences as valuable illustrations of oppression. Where colorblind racist ideology is anchored by the necessity to maintain the dominant group’s privilege by denying the existence of White supremacy, White privilege, racial microaggressions, discrimination, harassment, and other incivilities, CRT counter-narratives highlight the lived experiences of the oppressed to document and confirm that the systemic challenges and injustices they endure are real and prevalent (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

One of the primary strengths of CRT is that it can be leveraged as a methodological tool to amplify the voices of those who are disadvantaged by the maintenance of the status quo and to explore how racial inequalities are maintained and experienced in a variety of social contexts, including higher education. CRT prioritizes the lived experiences of people of color and transmits them via counter-narrating. Counter-narration functions by decentering Whiteness and exposing the mechanism of systemic racism and White supremacy culture embedded in educational institutions, policies, and discourse (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In systems where majoritarian narratives distort the lived realities of Black and Brown communities, counter-narration pushes back against the tendency to erase, minimize, or censor these experiences.

Composite stories are strategically constructed by blending the narratives of multiple individuals who share common experiences of racial oppression and discrimination (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Composite stories aggregate multiple voices to provide a collective narrative that reflects the shared realities of those living in the

oppressive system of racism. By synthesizing these experiences, composite stories can communicate the systemic nature of racial inequity in a way that resonates with those who have experienced it, while providing empathic scaffolding for those who are part of the privileged demographic immune to its impact.

In addition to their role in challenging dominant narratives, CRT composite stories may also serve as tools of empowerment, validation, and affirmation. In mainstream discourse, racism is often framed as the result of isolated incidents of prejudice or individual character flaws rather than deeply entrenched systemic efforts to sustain racial subordination. Composite stories conveying the lived experiences of people of color validate their realities of being marginalized and silenced by systemic racism. Using CRT as a research methodology challenges the denial of racism in mainstream discourse and majoritarian narratives by centering the experiences of Black and Brown students who attended HWIs (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For instance, counter-narratives and composite stories can reveal how Black men attending HWIs resist and challenge the stereotypes imposed upon them by both peers and faculty. Black men attending HWIs can also use counter-narrating and composite storytelling to share how they create and sustain supportive communities within campus environments where anti-Black sentiment is prevalent. Studies conducted using a CRT methodological approach might uncover the implicit biases embedded in academic advising, campus policing, and student support services, providing a foundation for advocating for policy change and investment in culturally relevant programs and interventions to support the retention and success of Black male students (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Strayhorn, 2012).

## **Critical Race Methodology Data Collection**

One of the primary data collection methods aligned with CRT is in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2017). These interviews gave participants with the space to articulate their experiences in their own words, providing opportunities for deeper exploration of how race and racism have impacted their lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited because they enable the researcher to probe further into topics that emerge organically during the conversation or interview (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Another valuable CRT data collection method is focus groups. Focus groups provide a collective space where participants can discuss shared experiences of racism and racial discrimination. The group dynamic of the collective engagement fosters an open exchange of ideas and allows participants to build on each other's stories. The collective storytelling that is sourced from focus groups can reaffirm the commonalities among participants, providing further validation that racism is not an isolated or individual phenomenon, but rather a shared experience.

## **Hip-Hop Methodology**

Hip-Hop as a qualitative methodology is informed by the cultural aesthetics of Hip-Hop culture. The Hip-Hop cultural movement was originated by Black and Latinx youth living in the socioeconomically distressed New York borough known as the South Bronx in the early 1970s (Chang, 2007; Dyson, 2004; Reese, 2017). Hip-Hop's five elements or cultural aesthetics include MCing or rapping, break dancing or B-Boying/B-Girling, turntablism or DJing, graffiti, and self-knowledge (Love, 2016). In the early days of Hip-Hop, Black and Latinx youths leveraged the five elements as a mechanism for

resistance and self-determination through creative expression and to provide a counter-narrative to the majoritarian narrative of White supremacy and minority inferiority (Banks, 2010; Change, 2005).

As a methodological approach, Hip-Hop allows researchers to engage with participants using culturally relevant tools, capturing their lived experiences through creative forms of expression. Hip-Hop methodology prioritizes the voices of those who have historically been excluded from mainstream discourse, providing a platform for self-representation, critique, and resistance (Adjapong & Levy, 2021). One of the key strengths of Hip-Hop Methodology is its emphasis on counter-narratives. Hip-Hop has long served as a space where marginalized communities have voiced their struggles and resisted majoritarian narratives of power and oppression (Emdin, 2016). By integrating emceeing, lyric writing, and spoken word poetry into the research process, Hip-Hop methodology enables participants to tell their stories in their own cultural language. Hip-Hop as a methodology empowers participants to speak back to systems of oppression, using the tools of Hip-Hop to articulate their experiences.

Hip-Hop methodology shares a common thread with Critical Race Methodology's mutual emphasis on counter-narratives. Marsh (2012) explored the role Hip-Hop can play in challenging majoritarian narratives when leveraged as community-based arts projects that facilitate developing a sense of place, connections to a global community, and a powerful form of expression that can lead to desirable outcomes for marginalized youth. Hip-Hop programs have the potential to challenge the dominant White supremacist narratives by leveraging the storytelling elements of Hip-Hop lyric writing to center the narratives and experiences of BIPOC youth. Marsh produced workshops using themes

including but not limited to storytelling, bullying, arts, athleticism, and health. During the workshops, students learned how to write raps and produce beats using sequencing and sampling hardware. Students also participated in other hip-hop aesthetics such as graffiti and breakdancing. Students and participants in the workshop engaged in dialogue about the world they inhabited and discussed the environmental challenges or barriers they faced. Culturally responsive Hip-Hop storytelling workshops provided students with a framework to build relationships, develop community, and to have some agency in determining how the community will evolve.

Hip-Hop methodology offers unique advantages as a qualitative research approach. One of its primary strengths is rooted in its cultural relevance, particularly for marginalized communities. By leveraging the language, art forms, and lived experiences of these communities, Hip-Hop methodology allows for authentic engagement with participants, fostering deeper trust and connection (Emdin, 2016). Another strength of Hip-Hop methodology is its emphasis on creative expression as forms of inquiry and output. Hip-Hop cultural aesthetics such as emceeing, graffiti, and spoken word allow participants to communicate emotions, experiences, and critiques of social circumstances in ways not easily accessible to traditional research methods (Love, 2016). The use of creative expression in research allows for the exploration of themes connected to racialized experiences that may not emerge through more structured, formal methodologies.

Hip-Hop methodology aligns with principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), positioning participants as co-researchers who contribute to the creation and interpretation of knowledge (Adjapong & Levy). PAR is a qualitative research



methodology that centers collaboration, reflection, and action between researchers and participants. PAR rejects the traditional researcher-participant power dynamic and fosters a co-learning process where participants play an active role in identifying problems (Freire, 1970; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). This participatory dynamic makes Hip-Hop methodology particularly well-suited for exploring the experiences of Black men who have matriculated at HWIs/ Hip-Hop, as a cultural and methodological framework, offers a space for Black men to articulate their experiences in ways that are true to their cultural identities. By centering the cultural knowledge and lived experiences of participants and giving them participatory equity in the creation of knowledge, Hip-Hop methodology allows for research that is grounded in the realities of those being studied, making it more impactful.

### **Hip-Hop Methodology Data Collection**

To fully leverage the potential of Hip-Hop methodology, I implemented data collection methods that include the participatory and creative elements of the culture. One of the primary data collection methods in Hip-Hop methodology is oral storytelling through cultural aesthetics of emceeing/rapping and spoken word poetry. Emceeing, a central element of Hip-Hop, involves the lyrical expression of personal and communal experiences through the use of rhythm, rhyme, and metaphor (Love, 2016). By inviting participants to share their stories and lived experiences through emceeing or spoken word, researchers can capture personal narratives that reflect the realities of oppression and resistance (Adjapong & Levy, 2021). The use of emceeing as a data collection method allows for the integration of counter-narrating. Rap and spoken word lyrics can serve as vehicles for social critique and challenges to majoritarian narratives.

Creative journaling is another effective data collection tool in Hip-Hop methodology. Participants can be encouraged to document their thoughts and daily experiences through a mix of written text, visual art, and lyrics. This method allows participants to express themselves in meaningful ways within the context of Hip-Hop culture while providing dynamic data outputs not possible with more traditional methods (Emdin, 2016). Focus groups, infused with Hip-Hop elements, are also an effective data-gathering tool. Hip-Hop focus groups might allow participants to engage in activities like collaborative lyric writing, beat-making, or group discussions about Hip-Hop's role in their lives (Love, 2016). Focus groups may also provide a space for participants to critique social inequity while using the language and values of Hip-Hop, making the research process participatory and reflective of the circumstances and phenomena being studied. These methods may effectively capture participants' lived experiences while empowering them to critique and challenge systems of subordination, majoritarian narratives, and social structures that help inform their realities.

### **Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity**

I continually examined my social positioning, assumptions, experiences, and biases influence in every aspect of the inquiry, from the formulation of the questions to the interpretation of data, a practice known as reflexivity (Berger, 2015; Creswell, 2013). Reflexivity is more than a moment of simple self-reflection; it is an ongoing commitment to transparency and self-scrutiny. Reflexivity means acknowledging that my lens is shaped by my lived experiences as a Black man with a Hip-Hop identity who graduated from a midwestern HWI, with several commonalities with my participants. I identify as a practitioner of Hip-Hop cultural aesthetics as an emcee or rapper, and I began practicing

these forms of expression during my undergraduate experience. After living in predominantly Black areas and graduating from a predominantly Black high school, I experienced minority status stress for the first time as a first-year college student who was the only person of color residing on my floor of the residence hall. I was also frequently among only a few Black faces in my classes. I did not know how to navigate the campus social environment and initially did not know where to find spaces where people who shared my social identity or lived experiences gathered. I also struggled with undiagnosed major depressive disorder and social anxiety, which were barriers to establishing connections with the few Black peers I did meet. A shared love of Hip-Hop music helped me to build connections with peers and informed some of my most cherished memories from my undergraduate experience.

My identity as a practitioner of Hip-Hop aesthetics informed my attempts to find spaces and peers that celebrated the creative forms of expression that I identified with. Hip-Hop also served as a therapeutic outlet for me during my undergraduate studies. I often assuaged my anxiety spirals and stress reactions by listening to rap music, writing rap lyrics, and performing at poetry open mic events. In moments where I may have been struggling during my undergraduate experiences with feelings of being isolated, tokenized, or othered, it was my Hip-Hop identity that helped me find a community that understood my narrative and lived experiences.

Lastly, many of my participants drew parallels between their undergraduate experiences and themes shared in lyrics from their favorite Hip-Hop songs, as I have. For example, during my undergraduate experience, I found the motivation to persist toward completing my degree in lyrics from some of my favorite Hip-Hop artists. When I was

facing hardships like battling a particularly persistent depressive episode that made it hard to get out of bed and make it to my early classes or commit the necessary time to studying and completing assignments, I could repeat a mantra given to me by Tariq “Black Thought” Trotter of the legendary Roots Crew, as I recited the hook from their 1994 single “Proceed” while starting my day. At any given time and in any space, peers could walk by and hear me repeating, “I shall, proceed, and continue, to rock the mic” (The Roots, 1994) for extended periods of time to encourage myself to see my tasks through to completion. While Trotter was conveying that he would not abandon his commitment to the craft of being an emcee, I was focused on “proceeding and continuing” to work toward my goal of earning a degree despite the intermittent urge to give up. If I was not reciting the hook to “Proceed,” I was motivating myself with words of encouragement from the song “Git Up, Get Out” by the iconic Hip-Hop duo Outkast, assisted by their contemporaries Goodie Mob:

*You need to git up, get out and get something, don't let the days of your life pass by. You need to git up, get out, and get something, don't spend all your time trying to get high. You need to git up, get out, and get something. How will you make it if you never even try? You need to git up, get out, and get something, 'cause you and I got do for you and I. (Outkast, 1994)*

Another of my all-time favorite artists provided me with self-affirming lyrics that helped me battle imposter syndrome and resist the pressure to adhere to dominant social norms inconsistent with my identity during my undergraduate studies. When Chicago emcee Wasalu Muhammad Jaco, who performs under the name Lupe Fiasco (2007),

released the song “Gold Watch,” he gifted me with an affirmation that I still lean on to this day:

*My most coveted thing is a high self-esteem and a low tolerance for them telling me how to lean. See, the most important parts are the ones that are unseen, the wings don't make you fly, and the crown don't make you king*  
(Lupe Fiasco, 2007)

As a participant-researcher, I understand that I am not just sharing my participants' experiences; I am sharing mine as well. The shared themes in our narratives do not compromise objectivity; instead, they offer a more nuanced interpretation grounded in shared cultural observances and relational trust (Milner, 2007).

## **Study Context and Methods**

### **Population, Sampling, and Recruitment**

I used purposive criterion sampling. Purposive criterion sampling is a strategy used to intentionally select participants who possess specific characteristics or lived experiences aligned with the purpose and focus of a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). This deliberate recruitment strategy ensures that the narratives gathered are directly aligned with the aims of the study, enabling the researcher to center the narratives of those most intimately connected to the research focus. This research study consists of 15 Black or African American men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from HWIs, requiring participants to be 18 years of age or older. The purpose of my study is to explore and capture the lived experiences of Black men who identify as Hip-Hop practitioners and had access to formal or informal Hip-Hop counterspaces spaces on campus that provided opportunities for engagement with Hip-Hop cultural aesthetics and

creative practices that may have helped them to experience a stronger sense of belonging and increase their likelihood of experiencing joy. Purposive sampling allowed me to focus my recruiting efforts on the Michigan Hip-Hop community and identify participants who met all of the identified criteria.

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I identified a group of twenty potential participants who I knew met my minimum eligibility criteria of identifying as Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from HWIs. I initially reached out to each participant by sharing my recruitment flyer and information sheet with them via individual emails, mobile text messages, and direct messages on the Facebook social media platform. Once participants completed the screening survey, I sent them a link with my calendar availability through the application Calendly so they could schedule their Zoom interviews at the most convenient time.

I created the screening survey on Qualtrics to confirm participant eligibility. The screening survey contained the following questions: 1) How does the participant describe their race/ethnicity? 2) Did the participant graduate from a 4-year college or university? 3) Was the 4-year college or university you graduated from a Historically or Predominantly White Institution (HWI)? HWI means the predominant student population is White, and the socio-cultural norms perpetuate whiteness. 4) Do you have a Hip-Hop identity or practice Hip-Hop creative forms of expression? 5) Please select your specific Hip-Hop identity or creative practice (choices included emcee/rapper, spoken word artist/poet, disc jockey/DJ/turntable-ist, producer/beat maker, event curator/promotor, scholar, journalist, historian, blogger/vlogger, content creator, videographer, My Hip-Hop identity or practice not listed, type response below). 6) Did you have access to spaces

(classes, student organizations, student support programs, performance opportunities on or near campus) where you could engage in Hip-Hop creative forms of expression while attending your institution? Recruitment efforts yielded a list of 15 eligible participants who completed the entire study, including the screening survey, demographic questionnaire, and the semi-structured virtual Zoom interview.

### **Participant Description**

All screened and eligible participants then completed a demographic questionnaire, which I also created on Qualtrics. The information gathered in this questionnaire allowed me to better familiarize myself with each participant's experiences and backgrounds. The participant sample for this study consisted of individuals who met predetermined eligibility criteria detailed in the screening survey. The age breakdown revealed five participants aged 25 - 34, eight participants aged 35 - 44, and two aged 45 - 54. Participants also identified their various Hip-Hop identities in the demographic questionnaire. Participants identified themselves as emcees or rappers, spoken word artist or poets, disc jockeys/DJs/Turntable-ists, producers/beat-makers, event curators/promoters, scholars, journalists, historians, bloggers/vloggers, content creators, videographers, and educators. The most common identity represented amongst the participants was emcee/rapper.

**Table 3.1***Demographic Information*

| <i>Category</i>                                                                     | <i>No.</i> | <i>Category</i>                                                                                                 | <i>No.</i> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <i>Participant Age</i>                                                              |            | <i>What is your highest level of educational attainment?</i>                                                    |            |
| <i>25 - 34</i>                                                                      | <i>5</i>   | <i>Bachelor's</i>                                                                                               | <i>1</i>   |
| <i>35 - 44</i>                                                                      | <i>8</i>   | <i>Master's</i>                                                                                                 | <i>2</i>   |
| <i>45 - 54</i>                                                                      | <i>2</i>   | <i>Were you raised primarily in:</i>                                                                            |            |
| <i>Estimated Household income growing up</i>                                        |            | <i>Urban Area</i>                                                                                               | <i>9</i>   |
| <i>\$25,000 - \$49,000</i>                                                          | <i>4</i>   | <i>Suburban Area</i>                                                                                            | <i>6</i>   |
| <i>\$50,000 - \$74,999</i>                                                          | <i>4</i>   | <i>What was your major or academic program?</i>                                                                 |            |
| <i>\$75,000 - \$99,999</i>                                                          | <i>3</i>   | <i>African American Studies</i>                                                                                 | <i>1</i>   |
| <i>\$100,000 - \$149,999</i>                                                        | <i>2</i>   | <i>Health Sciences</i>                                                                                          | <i>1</i>   |
| <i>\$150,000 or more</i>                                                            | <i>1</i>   | <i>Business Administration</i>                                                                                  | <i>3</i>   |
| <i>Prefer not to answer</i>                                                         | <i>1</i>   | <i>Electrical Engineering</i>                                                                                   | <i>1</i>   |
| <i>The highest level of education attained by parents or guardians</i>              |            | <i>General Studies</i>                                                                                          | <i>1</i>   |
| <i>Some college</i>                                                                 | <i>2</i>   | <i>Communications/Journalism</i>                                                                                | <i>6</i>   |
| <i>Associate's Degree</i>                                                           | <i>1</i>   | <i>History</i>                                                                                                  | <i>1</i>   |
| <i>Bachelor's</i>                                                                   | <i>7</i>   | <i>Political Science</i>                                                                                        | <i>1</i>   |
| <i>Master's</i>                                                                     | <i>5</i>   | <i>How often did you participate in Hip-Hop spaces, clubs, courses, programs, or activities during college?</i> |            |
| <i>How would you describe the racial diversity of the high school you attended?</i> |            | <i>1 - 2 times per semester</i>                                                                                 | <i>3</i>   |
| <i>Mostly Black</i>                                                                 | <i>6</i>   | <i>3 - 5 times per semester</i>                                                                                 | <i>3</i>   |
| <i>Mostly non-Black</i>                                                             | <i>5</i>   | <i>10 times or more per semester</i>                                                                            | <i>9</i>   |
| <i>A mix of Black and non-Black peers</i>                                           | <i>4</i>   | <i>Please select your specific Hip-Hop identity or creative practice.</i>                                       |            |
| <i>What is your employment status?</i>                                              |            | <i>Emcee/Rapper</i>                                                                                             | <i>8</i>   |
| <i>Full-Time</i>                                                                    | <i>13</i>  | <i>Spoken Word Artist/Poet</i>                                                                                  | <i>1</i>   |
| <i>Seeking opportunities currently</i>                                              | <i>2</i>   | <i>Disc Jockey/DJ/Turntable-ist</i>                                                                             | <i>4</i>   |
| <i>What is your current profession?</i>                                             |            | <i>Producer/Beat-maker</i>                                                                                      | <i>5</i>   |
| <i>Student (Part-time)</i>                                                          | <i>1</i>   | <i>Event Curator/Promoter</i>                                                                                   | <i>4</i>   |
| <i>Higher Education Faculty/Academic Staff</i>                                      | <i>2</i>   | <i>Scholar</i>                                                                                                  | <i>4</i>   |
| <i>Engineer</i>                                                                     | <i>1</i>   | <i>Journalist</i>                                                                                               | <i>3</i>   |
| <i>Business Professional</i>                                                        | <i>2</i>   | <i>Historian</i>                                                                                                | <i>2</i>   |
| <i>Education Professional (K-12)</i>                                                | <i>1</i>   | <i>Blogger/Vlogger</i>                                                                                          | <i>3</i>   |
| <i>Government Employee</i>                                                          | <i>1</i>   | <i>Content Creator</i>                                                                                          | <i>5</i>   |
| <i>Creative Professional</i>                                                        | <i>2</i>   | <i>Videographer</i>                                                                                             | <i>1</i>   |
| <i>Nonprofit Employee</i>                                                           | <i>2</i>   | <i>Educator</i>                                                                                                 | <i>1</i>   |



## **Data Collection Procedures**

My data collection procedures included the eligibility screening survey, demographic questionnaire, semi-structured Zoom interview, and transcription. This study is a counter-narrative grounded in Critical Race and Hip-Hop methodologies that aims to gather Black men's counternarratives of joy and belonging through Hip-Hop spaces. Critical Race Methodology uses counter-narrating or counter-storytelling and composite stories to challenge the majoritarian narratives that sustain White supremacy culture. Composite stories, or composite counter-stories, are a methodological tool that serves to highlight the lived experiences of marginalized individuals in a way that challenges majoritarian narratives. Composite stories are strategically constructed by blending the narratives of multiple individuals who share common experiences of racial oppression and discrimination (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

## **Interviews and Transcripts**

Participant narrative data was collected using semi-structured interviews, video, and audio recorded via Zoom to capture their lived experiences. To ensure I collected substantive data, I implemented an interview protocol that included giving each participant a detailed introduction to the study, reviewing measures to protect participant identity, risks, and rights of participants, and the security of the interview data. I read the introduction from my research study information sheet at the beginning of each participant interview. I conducted semi-structured interviews informed by the literature on Hip-Hop in higher education, sense of belonging, and Black Joy. After conducting the interviews on Zoom, I sent each participant a copy of their raw interview transcript

captured by Zoom. I also sent each participant a \$20 Amazon gift card for completing the study. I uploaded the Zoom interview audio files into the AI transcribing tool on Rev.com to generate a more accurate transcript for data analysis. All data for this study were collected over two weeks and four days, or a total of eighteen days.

### **Data Analysis**

Upon completion of data collection and interview transcription, I started the data analysis and coding process of the interview transcripts. Every participant's interview was initially transcribed using the video conferencing application Zoom. I then used the online transcription service Rev.com to edit the transcripts and make the content more coherent. After generating the transcripts from Rev.com, I copied each one into its own Google Doc file, and then created a separate Google Doc file where I could make preliminary notes of key phrases that referenced information relevant to my research question. Following the transcription process, I began data analysis using the six-phase thematic analysis coding process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a method for recognizing patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to a research question. Because thematic analysis isn't tied to a specific theoretical framework, it is an adaptable and appropriate tool for turning complex narrative data into coherent themes. I believe that this was the best approach for analyzing over 250 pages of data collected from 15 participants.

## **The Six Phases of Thematic Analysis**

### **Phase 1: Familiarization with the data.**

This initial phase involves the researcher meticulously rereading transcripts, listening to interview recordings, and reviewing other data collected closely. During this phase, researchers may note preliminary ideas or potential patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I started to develop familiarity with the narrative data by listening to the audio of each interview twice while also reading the text transcriptions and noting themes, patterns, or common experiences that were communicated by participants. During this stage, I recorded preliminary notes in the Google Doc files I created to accompany each of the participant transcripts and documented key phrases that referenced identity, affirmation, resistance, and joy. Some phrases immediately stood out, such as when a participant described his rap performances as “therapy” or another referring to a rap cypher as “fellowship”. These key words and phrases were my first glimpses of developing themes. Replaying the audio and reviewing the transcripts twice allowed me to internalize the interview data holistically before attempting to break it down into codes.

### **Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes**

In the second phase, researchers code interesting or relevant features of that data across the entire data set. Codes are brief labels identifying central features relevant to the research question (Braun et al., 2019). Once I became familiar with the data, I moved into generating initial codes. I generated codes by taking notes in a Google Doc file while reviewing the interview transcripts and listening to the audio. Using a manual coding

process, I assigned short phrases to segments of text that reflected patterns relevant to the research question. Some examples of the code phrases I documented include:

- Creative Expression as Joy;
- Joy through Peer Collaboration;
- Creative Resistance Space;
- Building Counter Spaces;
- Group Performance as Affirmation;
- Cyphers as Self-Development;
- Creative Practice as Outlet;
- Identity Expression through Performance;
- Resistance to Assimilation
- Cultural Immersion

After two rounds of audio and transcript review, I compiled my coded phrases and a brief description of each code into a Google Sheets document. I then used the Google sheets filter and sort feature to organize the codes to begin grouping them and searching for themes.

### **Phase 3: Searching for Themes**

The third phase involved grouping my initial codes into potential themes by identifying broader patterns of meaning. A theme captures something significant about the data in relation to the research question and helps to identify response patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this stage, I began mapping out the relationships between the codes. I started the mapping process by trying to determine which codes reflect similar

participant outcomes and experiences. I observed that several codes could be grouped under larger thematic umbrellas such as:

- Identity and Belonging;
- Cultural Identity and Representation;
- Sense of Community;
- Mentorship and Support;
- Creative and Expressive Practices;
- Counter Spaces;
- Resilience;
- Joy and Creative Expression;
- Joy and Achievement
- Cultural Resistance;
- Institutional Barriers;
- Formal vs Informal Counter Spaces (DIY Infrastructure).

Once this initial list of themes was compiled, I began the process of consolidating similar themes for a more in-depth review.

#### **Phase 4: Reviewing Themes**

This phase involves refining themes by checking them against the dataset. Some themes may coalesce, while others may be discarded (Braun & Clarke, 2021). After identifying preliminary themes in Phase 3, I returned to the full dataset to begin reviewing, refining, and consolidating them into more consistent and coherent themes. For instance, “Counter Spaces” and “Formal vs Informal Counter Spaces/DIY

Infrastructure” were consolidated into “Counter Spaces and Safe Havens”, and “Creative and Expressive Practices” and “Cultural Resistance” were consolidated into “Creative Expression as Resistance.” Other themes that initially seemed promising were discarded due to lack of sufficient supporting data from the interview transcripts.

Next, I revisited individual transcripts and audio for a third round to confirm that themes were representative across multiple participants and not overly reliant on a single participant’s experiences or narrative. The goal here was not to simply trim content, but to ensure that the themes retained the complexity and nuances conveyed in the participant’s original stories (Braun et al., 2019). After discarding themes with insufficient data, I moved into defining and labeling the themes.

#### **Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes**

In this phase, researchers identify the essence of each theme and determine what aspect of the data it captures. Themes are then named to reflect their core meaning. Clear definitions are vital for coherent narrative construction (Braun et al., 2019). I started this process with a self-directed question: What does each theme reveal about the intersection of Black identity, Hip-Hop creative practices, belonging, and joy in higher education? With this guiding question, I proceeded to further identify related codes and patterns from the dataset and consolidated my preliminary themes into five revised or final themes. The final themes I identified were:

1. Belongingness;
2. Counterspaces as Safe Havens;
3. Creative Expression as Resistance;

4. Resilience Through Hip-Hop Spaces and Hip-Hop Creative Practice;
5. Joy and Celebration Through Hip-Hop Spaces and Hip-Hop Creative Practice.

**Table 3.2**

*Named and Defined Themes*

| Theme                        | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Belongingness                | This theme captures how Hip-Hop counterspaces allowed participants to express and affirm their cultural identities, particularly in environments that lack Black critical mass. Participants communicated that these spaces, whether formal or informal, validated their lived experiences and identities, offering community, enhancing their sense of belonging, and joy in otherwise isolating campus environments. The intersection between cultural identity and a sense of belonging was central to participants' persistence and resilience at HWIs. This theme echoes Tichavakunda's (2022) finding that identity-affirming spaces increase belonging and mitigate the impacts of racial tension on campus. |
| Counterspaces as Safe Havens | Hip-Hop spaces often function as counterspaces, intentional sites of belonging, community, and psychological safety where Black men could gather, collaborate, and support one another away from pressures to assimilate to dominant cultural and social norms. Whether student organizations, open mic events and venues, or informal cypher sessions, these spaces allowed for intellectual and creative freedom. They counteracted dominant narratives and oppressive institutional norms by creating room for authenticity and resistance (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).                                                                                                                                            |

**Table 3.2 - Continued**

*Named and Defined Themes*

| Theme                                                                    | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Creative Expression as Resistance                                        | Many participants viewed creative expression, especially emceeing, beat-making, poetry, curation, and journalism, as forms of active resistance against cultural marginalization or assimilation. They used Hip-Hop to challenge deficit narratives and assert their identities. This theme demonstrates how leveraging Hip-Hop aesthetics functions as both resistance and cultural production (Love, 2016; Emdin, 2016).         |
| Resilience Through Hip-Hop Spaces and Hip-Hop Creative Practice          | Participants used their creative practices as emotional outlets, therapeutic tools, and sources of motivation. Through lyricism, performance, and storytelling, they built resilience in response to isolation, academic stress, and mental health challenges. Hip-Hop allowed them to transform trauma into testimony and find strength through storytelling and culturally informed creative expression (Adjapong & Levy, 2021). |
| Joy and Celebration Through Hip-Hop Spaces and Hip-Hop Creative Practice | Participants described experiencing moments of unfiltered joy through performance, collaboration, peer recognition, and cultural celebration. These spaces helped to create affirming environments where joy was not incidental, but central. Joy, for these men, was a reclamation of space and identity in HWI spaces that often render them invisible (Love, 2019; Tichavakunda, 2022).                                         |



## **Phase 6: Write Up/Narrative Weaving**

This final phase involves weaving together the narrative data to tell a compelling story to share findings about the data within the context of the relevant literature and the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I integrated participant voices through carefully chosen quotations to ensure that their lived experiences remained at the center of the analysis. Ultimately, this process allowed me to construct an overall narrative of my participants' experiences to offer a multi-dimensional understanding of Black men's joy, identity, belonging, and resilience as informed by their Hip-Hop identities and creative practices.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented my strategy for exploring the narratives of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from HWIs and engaged with Hip-Hop counterspaces as a means of cultivating belonging and joy. The combination of Critical Race and Hip-Hop methodology creates a framework that honors the complexity and nuance of the participants' lived experiences. These frameworks are appropriate for capturing stories of affirmation, resistance, and joy through cultural creative expression that are often dismissed or unrecognized in the dominant narratives in higher education research.

By centering narrative as both method and data, I was able to co-construct meaning from participant experiences in a manner that supports deeper understanding. CRM's emphasis on counter-storytelling and composite stories offers a lens to critique racial inequities and to amplify the stories of Black men whose experiences are often overlooked or misrepresented in the academy (Delgado & Stefaniec, 2017). Hip-Hop methodology added yet another layer, engaging the cultural tools, language, and

aesthetics of Hip-Hop as a legitimate form of scholarly inquiry (Adjapong & Levy, 2021; Emdin, 2016; Love, 2016).

Reflexivity was a constant consideration throughout this research process. As a practitioner of Hip-Hop creative forms of expression, and a graduate of an HWI, my own lived experiences were inextricably linked to this study. Rather than position myself as a cultural novice or outsider extracting data, I operated as a participant-researcher whose voice and interpretive lens were shaped by the same cultural frameworks that informed the narratives my participants shared. This insider positionality created opportunities for building relational trust and affirming shared cultural understanding, enhancing the authenticity and rigor of the data collection and analysis process (Milner, 2007).

Ultimately, the methodological choices outlined in this chapter were deliberate acts of resistance against deficit-based frameworks that inform the prevailing narratives of Black male achievement. This study's methods center joy, creativity, and belonging, concepts that warrant more exploration in higher education discourse about Black men. The narratives gathered through this study reflect the potential Hip-Hop counterspaces to challenge structural barriers, but also to cultivate joy, affirm identity, and support persistence toward degree completion.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of my study, which explored the narratives of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from Historically White Institutions (HWIs) and engaged in Hip-Hop counterspaces and creative practices as sites of joy, belonging, and resilience. These findings are the product of narrative data generated through semi-structured interviews with 15 participants whose experiences reflect some of the affirming possibilities of navigating HWIs as culturally grounded Black men.

Using the six-phase thematic analysis model developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), I engaged in a process of familiarization, manual coding, and thematic development to identify deeper meanings embedded in participant's narratives. This process was rooted in a commitment to counter-narration and informed by a Critical Race and Hip-Hop methodological framework. Rather than treating participants' stories as isolated data points, I approached them as culturally informed testimonies shaped by the intersections of racial identity and cultural creative forms of expression. The themes that emerged reflect a compilation of lived experiences grounded in a shared cultural framework. These narratives convey how participants used Hip-Hop to make meaning of their educational journeys, navigated the racialized terrain of HWIs, built community, and facilitated experiences of joy and belonging. This study does not center Black men's trauma or deficit-based narratives about our experiences, rather it seeks to document and center our experiences of joy, creativity, and resilience.

## **Participant Introductions**

In this section, I will provide a brief introduction to each participant. Fifteen participants consented to contribute to his study and share their lived experiences with me. Each participant provided general demographic information that was conveyed in chapter three, table 3.1. Some participants self-selected pseudonyms for the study, while others preferred that I select one for them. Establishing a clear understanding of who these participants are is essential for contextualizing their counter-narratives and thematic contributions. CRM reminds us that participant voice is not merely anecdotal, it is epistemologically significant (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Their stories, backgrounds, and cultural practices are not incidental: they are foundational to understanding how Black men experience HWIs through the lens of their Hip-Hop identities. These profiles serve not only as introductions but as narrative bridges between individual stories and collective or composite narratives. This section affirms that every participant brought more than just data, they brought their own vision, voice, and cultural knowledge (Yosso, 2005).

### **Thuds Whetley**

Thuds Whetley (pseudonym) is a 42-year-old Black man born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. Thuds attended predominantly Black K-12 institutions before attending a four-year public HWI in Michigan, where he majored in communications. Thuds identifies as an emcee/rapper, producer/beat maker, and a content creator, as his Hip-Hop identities and creative practices. Thuds began his Hip-Hop practice during high school:

So I can say specifically high school junior year is when we really started doing things. Now, I was always somebody that enjoyed rap, but I didn't ever think of doing it until I was around the folks at lunch when we would all gather at lunch. And then there were all these people that knew how to rap, how to freestyle. And again, at least I understood how to make a beat. So I was allowed to make the beat for everybody else to freestyle. I'm like, wow, I wonder if I could do this?

Thuds attributed his aptitude for emceeing to routinely watching the trivia game show Jeopardy with his mother while growing up:

I would also randomly thank my mom for my abilities on watching Jeopardy. Every day, my mother and I, 7:30 PM without fail, Jeopardy was must see tv. So because of that, I had a very large vocabulary. I learned a whole lot of words because of that show. So even though I wasn't a rapper yet, I was a person that knew rhythm and I was a person that knew words.

Thuds entered his HWI with a profound sense of self-assurance. His confidence was neither performative or reactive; rather it was cultivated by a family and community that affirmed his identity and encouraged intellectual curiosity. At his HWI, he did not recall experiences of overt discrimination, harassment, or anti-Black racism, though he acknowledged subtle microaggressions, like people crossing the street or scanning him with suspicions, that hinted at underlying racial tensions on campus. Still, Thuds was undeterred, "I came in knowing who I was, and I was not planning on changing that person".

## **Ari Cherryblossom**

Ari Cherryblossom (pseudonym) is a 42-year-old Black man born and raised in Detroit, Michigan that grew up and attended high school with Thuds Whetley. Ari attended a Michigan HWI that is actually the in-state rival to the institution that Thuds attended, where he majored in electrical engineering. Ari identifies as an emcee or rapper, and recalled being introduced to Hip-Hop culture and music by his older brother, and began his Hip-Hop practice in high school alongside Thuds:

So my older brother had Raekwon's Only Built for Cuban Links and I swiped his tape, man, and when I listened to it, let me tell you, it was like the matrix door opened, dude. It was like the whole Matrix thing, red pill or blue pill, and of course I had to take the red pill. And man, it opened up a whole new world with how descriptive it was. Then I caught on to Illmatic by Nas, and that just blew the door open even more wide. From that moment I kind of knew that, yo, I could do this. I could take it to that level, or that's the level that you could take it to. And I think at that moment I realized that Hip-Hop is a fine art. So I started rapping in high school with Thuds and a couple other people, and we just started to freestyle at the lunch table when we all had lunch together. So yeah, we caused a ruckus in the lunchroom and did that for a while. So yeah, that's how we started.

Ari entered his HWI prepared to find himself in the minority for the first time in his academic career, but was still alarmed at being one of just a few Black students in his classes:

The real stuff started at welcome week, when everyone gets there, and you're like, oh yeah, I see what this is. When you first step into class and you're like, oh yeah,

I'm one of 300, and maybe seven or eight of us look like me. And those seven or eight, we kind of knew what it was, and we banded together.

### **Donald Glover**

Donald Glover is a 26-year-old Black man from a suburb just northeast of Detroit, Michigan, where he attended a fairly diverse, but still predominantly White, high school. Donald's Hip-Hop identities and creative practices include producer/beatmaker, spoken word artist, and podcaster/content creator. Donald recalls developing an interest in making beats during middle school:

I want to say I was in maybe the seventh grade, and I would just use this app that was on my iPad, it was called Tabletop at the time. It was just something that made noise when I pressed the buttons that were emulations of different, I guess, keyboards, and drum machines. It was free and allowed me to make stuff.

Donald attended a four-year Michigan HWI where he majored in political science, and made lifelong connections with three other study participants who will be introduced later in this section. Even though Donald attended a predominantly White high school and felt prepared to navigate his HWI experience, he recalled that on election night of his first year, he gained an awareness of the racial tensions that a divisive candidate may have exacerbated:

I just remember being in the student center watching the election with some friends, and as the night went along and it was clear Trump was going to win, there was a table of White guys laughing and chanting "Build the wall!" That just kind of let me know what was up, and was kind of a wake-up call about where I was.

## **Mark Anthony Spears**

Mark Anthony Spears is a 26-year-old Black man who attended the same high school and HWI as Donald Glover, where he majored in communications. Mark's Hip-Hop identities include emcee/rapper and podcaster/content creator. Mark grew up in what he described as a "more conservative" household, where both his parents were pastors. Mark and his siblings weren't permitted to consume secular media. Mark got his first major exposure with secular Hip-Hop culture and music while attending a sleepover at a friend's house, where he obtained a mix CD created by his friend's older sibling:

He actually made these little mix tapes to put in goodie bags. First time I've ever seen anybody do that. It was really sweet, but it was a cd and it was just this random combination of music. It wasn't like all just this one artist or all this specific album. It was just, you could burn stuff onto CDs back then from LimeWire, wherever you get it from. And so on this tape, it had Paper Planes by MIA on there, it had that song Looking Boy, I can't remember the group. But it had just like this, again, just a weird mixture of just different types of Hip-Hop music. And so I brought that home and I remember playing it once and being like, okay, this is contraband. Thankfully I had access to my own personal CD player because I was learning guitar at the time. But yeah, I was like, okay, I know when and where I can play this. And so that CD was my entrance to the diversity and variety of Hip-Hop. And so from there, I knew that I couldn't really ask my parents to buy a certain CD or ask about this artist or just search those things out. And so then I started getting into Christian rap naturally.



As Mark continued to explore both Christian and secular Hip-Hop music with his friends, he started to become curious about participating in the artform:

At that time we were listening to like Roscoe Dash and Soulja Boy and that kind of era at that point. Some of my friends were a couple grades ahead and I looked up to them. So I'm looking at them like, oh wow, they're so cool because hearing them rap the lyrics and I'm like, wow, they actually are able to listen to the music enough to really learn the lyrics and know the dances and all that kind of stuff. So I think those kind of couple of years is when I started getting more into just being like, I want to be a part of what felt like a movement to me, obviously, just because it was a change for me and what I was allowed to listen to and participate in.

Like Donald, Mark felt prepared to attend an HWI because he attended a predominantly White high school, and had a fairly diverse friend group. Mark was present with Donald in the student center when they heard a group of their White classmates chanting “build the wall”:

So I think given the results of that election, it was very, very prevalent during that specific time that it does very well mean something to be a Black student here right now. It means something to not be a White student, I guess maybe is even a better way to explain that. And so especially given in that particular time, I feel like we, I think a lot of us were shocked by that result. I think a lot of us were like, that's really, that can't actually happen though. And then when it did happen, everyone was like, wait, okay, wait, look, now we have to figure out what is this

actually going to mean in real time in the real world? And it just definitely had a little bit of a haze around campus.

### **Zeke Whitmore**

Zeke Whitmore is a 26-year-old Black man from Detroit, Michigan who attended the same HWI as Donald Glover and Mark Anthony Spears where he majored in Communications. Zeke's Hip-Hop identities and creative practices include emceeing/rapping and podcaster/content creator, and he recalls listening to artists like Ludacris and Outkast with his father. Zeke stated as he entered high school, his admiration for the music and culture as an observer grew into a desire to participate in Hip-Hop creative practices:

It probably wasn't until I got to high school when I really started thinking, okay, I could probably you know, I can probably do this, I could probably make something like this, know what I'm saying? I would listen to certain beats and stuff and just write a whole lot and then recite it to people. When I got to college, I got a Snowball mic. and a friend of mine who was there probably just for a semester who I went to high school with and previously had been recording, he had FL Studio on his computer. I had a microphone and we was like, man, let's just start working on some music. So that was probably the first time I really was recording myself and actually putting stuff down. And I feel like from that point I was just recording.

Zeke stated that even though he attended a predominantly Black high school, he didn't have any difficulties navigating the racial dynamics of an HWI, and that thanks to having participated in a summer bridge program hosted by his institution's office of multicultural

initiatives, he was able to find his community and representation of peers, staff, and faculty that shared his identity and background.

### **Johnson Barnes**

Johnson Barnes is a 26-year-old Black man who attended the same HWI as Donald Glover, Mark Anthony Spears, and Zeke Whitmore where he majored in Health Sciences. Johnson's Hip-Hop identities include producer/beat maker, emcee/rapper, and content creator/podcaster who began to explore his creative practice during high school after attending an event at a Detroit Hip-Hop based community center:

Well, I didn't really participate in Hip-Hop as a practitioner in any facet until maybe, well, when I was 15. I got exposed to this cultural collective called the Five E Gallery, which was a collective of youth who did activism inside the community, and then some of them didn't. And then usually after the fact, or when they're coalescing after the activism or planning for it, they would go into the basement in a building near Wayne State University where this guy named DJ Sicari, he would create beats and mentor the upcoming talent. He would just expose the kids to so many different facets of Hip-Hop and what it really meant. So when I was 15, I started making beats inside that basement.

Johnson attended a predominantly Black high school, and had considered attending an HBCU initially before choosing the HWI he graduated from because they offered the best financial aid package. Johnson felt well prepared for the shift from a predominantly Black high school to attending an HWI:

I don't know, it wasn't jarring at all. I feel like just kind of living in America, you know what I'm saying? You're going to be exposed to and you're going to face

times where you're inside of a crowd where you're not going to see too many other people who look like you. So it wasn't jarring at all. It was just kind of matter of fact.

### **Khalid Wesley**

Khalid Wesley is a 40-year-old Black man born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. Khalid's Hip-Hop identities include emcee/rapper, DJ/turntable-ist, scholar, and journalist. Khalid attended a four-year HWI that is considered to be one of Michigan's flagship state universities where he majored in Broadcast Journalism. Khalid is also currently a higher education student affairs practitioner working at his alma mater. Khalid was introduced to Hip-Hop music and culture by his older sister, and he began experimenting with writing rap lyrics in middle school.

I remember her having Raekwon's Only Built for Cuban Links tape, Biggie's Ready to Die, Jay-Z's reasonable doubt. I remember thinking Jay-Z was some local Detroit rapper because the album cover looked so low quality to me. Now, the first time I attempted a rap of my own was seventh grade. Real simple. I'm the beast from the east got the most not the least type stuff. And I think it was when I hit college that my approach to my own music, like that multi syllabic kind of rhyme skiing and actually rapping about things with purpose is when that started to formulate.

Khalid attended a predominantly Black high school before choosing to attend the in-state HWI that offered him the best financial aid package. Khalid clearly recalled the moment he knew what it meant to be Black in a predominantly White space upon entering college:

I will never forget it. So it was academic orientation and funny enough, I want to say I think it was the hall that I work in now, the dorm that I work in now. And I walked in and I looked to see how many students were around and I counted five people who looked like me. And I tell this story all the time. In my mind at the moment, it was four and a half because there was someone I couldn't identify and then that person became my friend and I said, oh, that's an actual half, right? They're biracial. But that's when it's funny because that's how those instincts start to form. Like, okay, this person looks Black, are they Black? We're going to claim them as Black. And of course I think going into college, all of the politics around race, things like the one drop rule and so forth, you have a baseline understanding of, but you don't really understand the systems yet. So I was really going off the instinct, but I remember some weird arrogance coming over me earlier that day when I was like, man, I'm about to go be with Black folks and hang with Black folks all the time. And I got there and I got humbled so fast. I was like, well, I'm going to make friends with everybody no matter who they are and where they come from. I got to be cool with them. And that was the moment, it was my very first orientation with other students on campus. I'll never forget it.

### **Jesse Washington**

Jesse Washington is a 40-year-old Black man born and raised in Lansing, Michigan. Jesse's Hip-Hop identities and creative practices include emcee/rapper and journalist. Jesse was first introduced to Hip-Hop as a fan during a time of grief:

A friend of mine introduced me to Puff and Mase during the shiny suit era. I was a kid, and that No Way Out album really resonated with me. Specifically, that

album had this combination of joy and grief because Biggie had died, and my mother had passed away not too long before that, when I was 10 years old. That album sort of encapsulated both the grief I had and the joy that I wanted. So in my adolescence, it was shiny suit rap for me, and then when I got to high school, it was Black on Both Sides by Mos Def. That album was the first sign to me of what I could really be capable of, and it sort of spoke to me in a way that I understood, and it sort of spoke about the real world in a way that I could understand.

Jesse's first experience as a Hip-Hop practitioner began with him writing lyrics during high school while listening to his favorite rap artists. Those early writing sessions informed forays into spoken word poetry and reading his work at open mics on and near his college campus. Jesse attended a predominantly Black high school before enrolling at the same HWI as Khalid Wesley, where he majored in journalism. Jesse and Khalid would become close friends, going to local open mics and other Hip-Hop events together, and eventually form a regionally well-known Hip-Hop collective together with other friends. Jesse recalls when his poetry writing and love of Hip-Hop culture and music led him to a new way to celebrate it in the form of professional journalism:

In terms of the practice that would end up being my calling, I knew I wanted to be a music journalist very early on. I had to be a good writer as a kid because my dad is an English professor at a community college in my hometown. So it's like no matter what, my papers had to be straight, you know what I'm saying? My school papers had to be fire, and I was reading Hip-Hop magazines when I could. When I started my freshman year at college, I reached out to this website that I used to read all the time, called Rap Reviews.com. I had written a couple of music-related

stories for my high school newspaper, and I used those as clips to basically show this editor at the website what I was capable of. Then he just started sending CDs in the mail. So he started sending CDs to my dorm room. I began writing all these album reviews in my dorm, and one day, he scheduled an interview for me that was with Drag-On from Ruff Ryders. That was my first professional interview. And from there, I just kept going.

Jesse recalled living in a primarily White residence hall during his freshman year, and feeling the lack of a Black critical mass, but not having any overt experiences of being othered:

The dorm that I stayed in was primarily White. There were dorms that were known as the Black dorms, but I wasn't in one of those. There were Black students in my dorm, but it was a much lower percentage than the all Black dorms. You know what I mean? But I didn't feel there were enough Black students that I felt like camaraderie or community. But I didn't feel othered by the larger student body either.

### **Prodigy Johnson**

Prodigy Johnson is a 38-year-old Black man from Detroit, Michigan. His hip-Hop identities include emcee/rapper, blogger/vlogger, and content creator. Prodigy attended a predominantly Black high school before enrolling in a four-year HWI in the heart of Detroit proper. Prodigy could not recall the precise moment in his timeline when he became connected to Hip-Hop culture and music, because it has always been a part of his life:

I will say as far back as I can remember, I've been connected to Hip-Hop. I come from a very musical family. A lot of my cousins and my uncles were DJs back in the day. A lot of 'em had huge record collections. My grandmother was a singer from the time she was a child, she was in singing groups. My aunts were all in singing groups. So every time we had a family function, barbecue, family reunion party, everybody was always spinning music. It was always music, music, music. It was always music-oriented. I remember a lot of times riding with my uncles, my older cousins, when I got a chance to ride with them and they'd be playing different songs in the background. I really got an affinity for old school Hip-Hop and stuff like that, because like I said, my uncles, I ride with them. They'd be banging, Run DMC, Kool Moe D, Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five, stuff like that. That's the music that they would play, and my cousins would always be with them. So I would just pick up on Hip-Hop from then and there, I had to be maybe three or four years old, and it was always music around. I remember a lot of times, especially with my older cousins, we had the giant house speakers and the receiver set up back in the day where you turn it up, you could hear it down the block, man, I just remember them banging UGK and EightBall and MJG and No Limit Master P, all type of stuff. And I was exposed to that very early on.

Prodigy identified his older cousin as his inspiration to begin his Hip-Hop practice of emceeing:

My older cousin, Corey, dude was a super genius. He was a super genius from when I was a kid, I was like seven years old.. He's a doctor now, an engineer.

When I tell you, this is one of the smartest people I've ever known in my life, but



to this day, one of the coldest emcees I've ever seen, dude, he's so smart, and the way he arranges his raps and his words, he infuses so much higher level thinking into it, man, it's crazy. He's one of those people where I watched him rhyme and freestyle at parties and stuff as a kid, and I was mesmerized. So I think at seven years old, I asked him, I said, cuz you gotta teach me how to rap. I want to do what you do. He was like, alright, come on, cuz I'll show you how to do it. The first thing he said was, well, have you tried to do it? I was like, I mean, I got a little something. So I spit a couple bars, just seven, eight-year-old kid, just rhyming, thinking of rhymes and stuff like that. And then he looked at me, he was like, you got it. I was like, whatcha talking about? He was like, that's rapping yo. You realize you've been doing this for two minutes, and you've just been coming up with rhymes off the top of your head. I was like, but I thought everybody could do that. He was like, no, everybody can't do that. So then he showed me how to arrange my thoughts and make it more coherent, and he taught me the concept of freestyling and putting bars together and how to make this syllable rhyme with this syllable.

He taught it to me in a way that I understood because I was always a nerdy kid. Anyway, he broke it down into a pattern and a rhythm, and it was at that moment, at seven, bro, he taught me how to rhyme, and then I really fell in love with Hip-Hop. After that, I started to listen to music differently. I wasn't just listening like, oh man, this beat is cold. I like the hook. I started to understand the lyrics and pay attention to how MCs put syllables together, metaphors, and similes.

Prodigy attended a predominantly Black high school and selected the HWI he graduated from because of its location in the heart of Detroit, a city with one of the highest Black populations in the United States. Prodigy thought he would be continue to experience a critical mass due to his HWIs geographic location, but he described being shocked to learn that the reality was different than what he'd imagined:

So going into college, man, I ain't going to lie, the school I graduated from was high on my list. It was number two. I thought because it was right in the center of Detroit, I would see more Black faces. I'm not going to say it was all the way White, but it was definitely fewer people that looked like me than I anticipated.

### **Mike Eagle**

Mike Eagle is a 38-year-old Black man who grew up in a Detroit suburb and attended the same four-year HWI as his friend and creative collaborator Prodigy Johnson, where he majored in Business Administration. Mike's hip-Hop identities include emcee/rapper, producer/beatmaker, event curator/promoter, and content creator. Mike recalled being sheltered from what his parents identified as inappropriate media during elementary school, and coming into awareness of Hip-Hop music and culture during middle school:

I mean, just listening to radio stuff, watching the JukeBox channel, nostalgic kinds of things, and just really enjoying it a lot. My mom usually would shield me away from a lot of the gangster rap stuff like that because as a kid, our parents had certain morals. So certain things like, Hey, this is not something you should be listening to at this age. So I kind of dove into Hip-Hop later on, towards my middle school days kind of thing. I got into a little bit of poetry and writing, those

kinds of things. And when I got into it I was like, this is a great way I could be able to express because I like to rhyme words, and that was just something I really enjoyed. For me, a lot of artists, like Biggie, Pac, and Jay-Z, and all those, will help you understand the stringing of words and how that works. I mean, I'm also a producer as well, so a lot of the beats and things like that, I was really inspired by the soundtracks and stuff. For me, I was one of those kids that really enjoyed the music that was in films, games, and things like that as well.

Mike grew up in a suburb of Detroit and attended a predominantly White high school before enrolling in the HWI where he graduated from, so he entered college already experienced in some of the adverse experiences associated with being a Black face in a predominantly White space:

The high school I went to was in Birmingham, a wealthy, mostly White suburb. Me and Mike Posner (recording artist) went to the same school. I was originally in more urban schools in Southfield before that. But when I was in fifth grade, my dad got a better job and we got blessed, definitely blessings to be able to be in a better school system, which is great. There were a lot of different diversity clashes because it's something like you're from a completely different world than somebody else. And when you get in there in the last year of elementary school or something like that, everybody's got their friends. They've already seen everybody for years, they've already made their alliances, things like that. And when you're just a new kid, you're just trying to figure out the culture, trying to figure out who these people are, what they can be, are they good people, are they bad people? You know what I mean? You'd think of all the different stuff that you did to

protect yourself in an urban community versus going into more of a suburban community of certain things. You're like, I feel on edge, but I shouldn't feel on edge kind of thing. You know what I mean? It's like a personal protection guard that you put up when you go to different schools. You don't know who's who when it comes to that. There was a lot of White classmates, of course, but there was also a good amount of diversity from Asian Americans to Indians to Chaldeans.

You'll feel that shift when you realize the academic requirements are different from Southfield schools. I was doing relatively well in Southfield. My parents were strict with school stuff, so I made sure I did homework, made sure I was on top of it when it came to that. But when I switched to Birmingham Public Schools, there were certain things that were already taught that I should have known by then. So it was one of those first times where you just kind of like, I don't know what you're talking about, I felt behind. You know what I mean? And not because I don't understand it. I just never had that structure in the beginning. So, because of that, and I also had adenoids as a kid. So when I got it removed, I used to have partial hearing issues. So then they put me on an IEP (individualized education program), and that puts you in special education classes. And then because of that, it changes the dynamic of how you're seen in the world. So it's not just being an African-American, now I'm getting double whammied for it because not only am I considered African-American, a minority in a big massive school, but now I'm in a category as in he's not only that, but he's also part of the

circle of the special education kids. So whatever they say, I have to work twice as hard. I had to work four times as hard just for the stigmas alone.

Mike chose the HWI he graduated from for similar reasons as Prodigy, Hoping to find a critical mass of Black peers and culturally relevant experiences, but initially, endured similar marginalizing experiences to his time in high school:

I wanted to find more individuals that were like-minded, like me, had characteristics like me. Just kind of one of those cultural feelings for it. You're getting into music, getting into rap, you're kind of getting in touch more with it. You want to be able to relate with other individuals based on experiences that you weren't able to get from a suburban environment. So part of the choice of doing Wayne State was that, and it was something that I had to almost backdoor into. I had to take an extra test to be able to get in because of the special needs IEP label, of course I was able to get through that with flying colors because the stuff was just simple. And then they asked me to do three or four college-qualifying classes, finish those during the first semester, and then that's when I was able to get into my actual major. So it was just one of those things.

### **Daniel Dumile**

Daniel Dumile is a 39-year-old Black man who graduated from the same four-year HWI as Prodigy Johnson and Mike Eagle, where he majored in African American studies. Daniel's Hip-Hop identities and practices include, emcee/rapper, spoken word artist/poet, event curator/promoter, scholar, and content creator. Daniel recalled his first exposure to Hip-Hop culture and music and when he started his creative practice:

I just recall being in my parents' either bedroom or the foyer area. And then I just recall watching either BET or MTV and it being Janet Jackson or Mind's Playing Tricks on me or Diddy and Mase. This would be more like 95, 96, but just the shiny suit era. And then I had cousins. I had older cousins who would have Hip-Hop music around me or teach me a dance move, or in some cases, tell me that I looked like Jay-Z and put me up on the Blueprint album, or even earlier, Reasonable Doubt. So those were my introductions to Hip-Hop. I was introduced to poetry books of Shel Silverstein, Where the Sidewalk Ends, and just rhyming and patterns beyond Dr. Seuss, which I think are the early patterns. And so my thing was, oh, I can do a book report or a song. I'm going to choose a song every time, and I'll write a rap. And so that just became my little schtick, where if it was something that I had to present, and then there was an option to create a song, I would write the song. And that extended all the way to, I remember my dad having a business, and I was writing raps for the business just as a hype person, I'm like six, seven years old. So those things were really motivating to me to be able to express myself in that way.

Daniel grew up in a suburb of Detroit and attended predominantly White schools from elementary through high school. Daniel recalled his parents being intentional about finding opportunities for him to engage with same-race peers, and experiences of being othered by his high school faculty and staff:

I was in predominantly White schools all from first grade through high school. I did preschool, kindergarten in Detroit. But then I went on to attend school in Rochester from first grade all the way until I graduated. And I think my parents

made it very clear that they wanted me to have pockets of Black friends. So, although I was going to these White schools, I would know all the Black kids. I would know their parents, I would know what classes they have and some of those classes we would share. And so that was my experience from first grade to senior year. And some of those relationships I still have. I had a couple incidents where I got suspended for wearing a durag because they thought it was associated with a gang, but I was really just wearing a durag. I had oil in my hair, and I didn't want people to touch my hair. And I was trying to make sure my waves was tight. And I just remember it was a Black principal who suspended me. This was at Rochester High School, but she suspended a group of us. It wasn't even really a suspension, it was more of just, just go home and just don't wear that durag. So those were signs that things were changing. I was a little bit taller, playing sports, voice getting deeper. And then I did start to notice some different perceptions or when people are judging you.

I remember I would get triggered by when people use, when my White counterparts would use the word ghetto. This would be in an AP English class, and I'd be like, why are we using that word? I would pick those types of fights. I would pick the affirmative action fights on why I felt that affirmative action was necessary in debate classes. So yeah, I guess I didn't recognize at the time what I was doing, but to some parents, teachers, and students, or a basketball coach that I played for, he referred to me as cancerous. And I don't know if it was because I would have something to say or my response to certain things as a varsity basketball player, but he referred to me as cancerous and benched me. And it was

just one of those things where, yeah, I had to watch what I say and how I said it, just being a young Black man.

Similar to college classmates Prodigy Johnson and Mike Eagle, Daniel enrolled in his HWI located in the center of Detroit, anticipating a more Black experience:

It was easier to navigate in college, my school at the time was predominantly White, but a very multiracial university, and they promoted that. And so my first roommate voted for George Bush in that election over John Kerry. That was my first year that I was able to vote in 2004, fall of 2004. And so yeah, he played baseball. He listened to country music. I think if I had a different raised experience, I think we weren't best of friends, but I don't know if it would've worked, but I was open to it. I grew up around White kids like him, and so I had already navigated it.

### **Glen Boothe**

Glen Boothe is a 30-year-old Black man who graduated from a four-year HWI where he majored in Marketing and Business Management. Glen is the younger brother of Daniel Dumile, and his Hip-Hop identities include producer/beat maker, DJ/turntable-ist, and event curator/promoter. Glen discovered his Hip-Hop identity and creative practices primarily through his brother Daniel:

Having my older brother being a pretty well-known rapper in the city, I was able to get inspired by Hip-Hop, very young, watching him do shows and just in general, just being at the crib and whatever he's listening to, I'm on. So that definitely got me into probably my start with Hip-Hop, and then just watching certain anime, like Samurai Champloo, that just opened my eyes to Hip-Hop as



well. And I would say that was two main things that really got my origin story with Hip-Hop, essentially. Yeah, so I never wanted to be a rapper, even though he was a rapper, I never thought of rapping. That wasn't just my thing, but I was always into the actual music. I would say probably when I got into college, I started finally dabbling with beats. It was something I wanted to do when I was in middle school, high school, but just you gotta think back in 2006, 2008, information about learning music production wasn't as readily available as it is today.. So I never thought I could just even enter that space. So, probably around college is when I started dabbling. I had a keyboard, started just learning how to play keys, and making beats on my keyboard in college. And then I eventually got a Maschine, a midi production controller, and I would just make beats. It's hard to describe. I was in college, so I would just get home from a party sometimes and just try to make beats.

Similar to his older brother Daniel, Glen attended a predominantly White high school. Glen stated that he didn't encounter the same racialized interactions as his older brother, and had a fairly incident-free experience navigating predominantly White spaces because his parents were so intentional about giving him a sense of assuredness in his Black identity:

I think it was still drilled in me that I was Black and still very in touch with my Black family. Even though I would see mostly White people at school, I'm hanging out in Flint, Michigan on the weekends or at one of my brother Daniel's shows in Detroit. So it is something that I always knew, but it never really phased me like that to be real, just because I was so rooted still with Black people.

## **Toure**

Toure is a 49-year-old Black man who was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, and graduated from a four-year HWI, where he majored in Communications. Toure's hip-Hop identities include emcee/rapper, poet, scholar, journalist, historian, and blogger/vlogger. Toure recalled discovering Hip-Hop culture and music during his pre-teen years:

I remember seeing Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, and I went and got a denim jacket and a Sharpie and tried to recreate the Public Enemy logo on the back of it. I just knew it was for me. You know what I mean? You're seeing an extension of Black culture that even at the age of 10, 11, 12. So I couldn't tell you why I identified with it, but I knew that was where I belonged. I started writing poems at an early age, like seventh or eighth grade. I bought various things, and then that led to me writing raps probably by the time I was 15. Any kind of allowance money I got, I would run to Detroit Audio and buy music. But I bought a lot of singles because singles always came with an instrumental on the flip side. And I had my little Radio Shack mic and a little cheap Radio Shack mixer, and I figured out how to record myself, and I never did nothing with it.

Toure attended a predominantly Black high school in Detroit and then a two-year community college before transferring to his HWI. Toure does not recall any overt experiences of feeling othered in predominantly White spaces, mainly because he was a commuter student who primarily came to campus just to attend class and then went back home without engaging in social life or other activities:

Shit, I was trying to figure out, trying to get in where I fit in, because I spent three years at community college and changed majors about seven times, CIS, business administration, business management, psych. I went through all of 'em trying to figure it out. And so I actually transferred as an English major, but I went to a job fair man, it wasn't no love for an English major. It wasn't no love. So I was like, all right, lemme try this. I was like, lemme go to communications. I didn't need math to graduate. So that was a plus. And I seemed to always be good at all that stuff, whether it was public speaking, whether it was group work, whether it was papers, everything in that major, we had to do TV and radio demos. I was good at all that. So I kind of found something, I kind of like, okay, I'm good at this. But I was a commuter kid, so I just went to school, made very few friends because I just came back home. I went back to the hood, went back to work wherever I had to go.

### **Cade Icewood**

Cade Icewood is a 37-year-old Black man born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. He graduated from a four-year private midwestern HWI, where he majored in History. Cade's Hip-Hop identities and practice include producer/beatmaker, DJ/turntablist, and historian. Cade discovered Hip-Hop music and culture through the intellectual and musical influences of his older sister and his late father:

I remember a conversation that my dad had with me where he referenced a conversation that he had with my mom where she pointed out I was probably two, three years old, and they were listening to whatever Hip-Hop song was playing. This was in the early nineties, probably 1990, literally. My dad told my mom that

this music would be the voice of his generation. For context, my dad was a professor of Black history at the University of North Carolina and Wayne State, and used a lot of his research and music as the vessel that sort of encapsulates the movement of Black people through this country. Later in his career, he started to branch out into global Blackness a little bit more, and the musical lens was attached to that as well. A lot of that centered on how Hip-Hop was becoming global and sort of a common anchor point for Black youth, regardless of location. So that's one piece. And then separately, my own experience. I actually remember I was a bit of a contrarian and a little bit of just sort of a weird kid that kind of stayed to myself. My mom used to say, be your own person. That was one of her tenets. And I used to take that super literally, maybe too much, so that for anything that people were saying that was popular, I was kind of like, eh, I'm skeptical of it. And to that end, I was not a Hip-Hop fan early on.

I don't remember what music I liked. I think I resonated with the music that I listened to with my dad. He listened to everything, but a lot of it was Detroit, Motown, soul type stuff, a lot of jazz, a lot of folk. My dad was a hippie, so a lot of folk stuff from the sixties, but I knew that none of that was really my music for real. Oh, and Michael Jackson, every kid that age loved Michael Jackson. So when I got interested in Hip-Hop, I think I started flirting with it when somebody got me an MC Hammer tape, I forget which one I think it was, please Hammer Don't Hurt Him. Was that one of his first joints? I had that cassette, and I remember listening to that, and I was intrigued by it, but it didn't really capture me just yet. But I was definitely intrigued by it. It wasn't until

maybe 2000, it was actually, when did the Blueprint come out? That was, 2001, I believe. Because of my connection with my older sister, I would stay borrowing her CDs. And one of the other CDs that I borrowed from her was Q-Tip, and I forget which record, but whatever Q-Tips first breakthrough solo record was, it was that. It was Q-Tip, Common's Like Water for Chocolate. So I would go through the leaflet, I'd go through the book to look at all the production credits. And this one name kept popping up in all these records, the Q-tip joint, the lock water for chocolate joint, some of the LA Soul stuff, James Yancy. I kept seeing that over and over again, and I was like, dog, I wonder who that is? I wonder who that guy is. And then that was kind of it for a while. This was early high school.

It wasn't until I got to college where I started to put the pieces together. I discovered this other group from Detroit called Slum Village, and I'm like, dog, these niggas sound like that same sound from that other side of Hip-Hop that the doors have been opening to. And then I look at the list of the people in the group, and I see this other name Jay Dilla. And this is going to sound crazy in retrospect because we all know, but at the time I wasn't sure. I didn't know for sure. I started to suspect because there were a few different converging factors. There was this sound that sounded really consistent. And there was this emcee by the name Jay Dee, and the production was by this other cat, this other cat, Jay Dilla, and then there was an engineer named James Yancey. I kind of discovered through old fashioned research that J Dilla and Jay Dee and James Yancy were all the same person, and he was responsible for this sound that really kind of blew the doors off of what I thought Hip-Hop was.

After being inspired by the work of his hometown hero and global Hip-Hop legend, the late James “J Dilla” Yancey, Cade became what he described as obsessed with learning how to produce Hip-Hop music:

I happened upon a free version of Fruity Loops and I was like, damn, this is way easier than that piano or that keyboard. And it was the combination of that obsession then with the access that was now granted with this new technology where I started to think I might be able to make some of my own shit. I wonder what that would look like. So I started by trying to recreate some of my favorite beats produced by like Timbaland, Dilla, and a couple other guys. As I got better with that, I started making my own stuff, sampling some of that musical library my dad collected, and sharing it with my friends and they would go crazy over it.

Cade attended a nationally renowned private college prep boarding school located in a suburb of Detroit. While he is grateful for the opportunity to attend such a prestigious and well-resourced institution, he was acutely aware of what it meant to be Black in a predominantly White space:

When I went to prep school, however, that was my first experience in a truly PWI situation. I was saved by the fact that the Black kids that came in together, we were super tight. I'm still friends with a lot of those guys to this day. But boy, it was different. That was what was crazy. I mean, I had classmates who were legitimate billionaires, legitimately. Some absolutely brilliant kids there, but it's a lot of just rich regular ass niggas to go there too.

So me and my friends all went and got North Carolina Tarheel varsity jackets because we thought it was cool. And so we started walking around school

with 'em. The principal stopped me because again, junior year at this point, I got a nice reputation, everybody knows I'm a good kid, good basketball player, pretty good grades, all good. Never been in no trouble. So the principal loved me, or the Dean of Boys is what he was called. But same thing, he pulled me to the side and was like, Hey Cade, I could tell he was so nervous to ask me this question. And I think it was because he was probably getting shit from other people. And he knew that it was a crazy question he was about to ask me, but he brought me to the side. He was like, Cade, I noticed that you and your friends are wearing these blue coats. Are you guys in a gang? And I'm like, nigga, what the fuck? I swear to God, this shit is a true story, bro. This shit happened.

Having endured these marginalizing experiences in high school, Cade felt prepared to navigate the climate and culture of a private midwestern HWI:

My [college experience] was a little bit different because my institution was definitely a PWI, but it was a liberal arts school. It was not like the flagship school in Michigan. It was like the liberal hippie dippy parts of each of those schools without the beer. I mean, they drank plenty of beer at my college. I shouldn't say that, but you know what I'm saying. The typical frat White guy, frat shit, you didn't really see that at my institution that much. And I had the ability to choose how I interacted with the Whiteness that was there as opposed to at my high school where I was a fly in the milk, as they say, right? I didn't have no choice but to be confronted with it every day. It was easier for me to avoid that at my institution, even though my classes were mostly White, that's where you engaged with the Whiteness was in school or in the actual class part. But many of

the White people there were aligned at least on the surface level with some of the stuff that I believed in. But it was through this experience where I started to realize how problematic liberal White folks can be. That was a whole different journey that I didn't even know was coming for me until I got to my institution.

## **Kwesi**

Kwesi is a 45-year-old Black man born and raised in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He graduated from a four-year private midwestern HWI in his hometown where he majored in Liberal Studies. Kwesi Hip-Hop identities and practice include emcee/rapper, educator, DJ/turntablist, and event curator/promoter. Kwesi discovered Hip-Hop culture on attending art-fairs and festivals with his father in his hometown:

I guess my first involvement with the culture was definitely through dance, break dancing when I was really young, so like 8, 9, 10 years old. My dad would actually take me up to campus with the cardboard busking essentially. I would go out there with the boombox and just break dance and people would throw money in the hat or the can or whatever. And so that was my true first experience with Hip-Hop. I got kind of tired of trying to spin on my head and stuff, and I was like, all right, so how else can I be musically involved? And yeah, I just kind of started gravitating towards rapping to the music I was dancing to.

Kwesi grew up in Ann Arbor, a predominantly White city that has been commonly referred to as a “college town”, and attended a predominantly White high school, and felt well prepared to navigate the social environment of his HWI campus. Kwesi also noted that he feels fortunate to not have had many tense racialized interactions with White peers:



Ann Arbor for sure definitely would fall into the suburban category, but all the neighborhoods I lived in were predominantly Black, like low income housing. I just bought my first house about two years ago, a condo. I grew up in apartments my whole life and usually section eight. So it was mostly Black people in the neighborhood that I lived in, but they were like, you know how they do us?

Fortunately the White people that I did grow up around, there wasn't a lot of racial tension. I had a lot of White friends and I enjoyed learning about their culture and their music. I listened to a lot of rock music growing up, but we listened to everything, know what I'm saying? And especially in the Midwest, we get access to everything. So I can't speak to a lot of bad experiences growing up around White people, thankfully, knock on wood. But I knew there was a difference for sure.

## **Themes**

These findings amplify the voices and lived experiences of Black men who navigated the racialized landscapes of HWIs through the affirming cadence of Hip-Hop culture. Drawing on a Critical Race and Hip-Hop methodological framework, the themes presented here reflect more than emergent patterns from data, they are the spoken truths composed from the cultural, emotional, and intellectual labor of Black men who created their own joy and belonging in spaces not designed for their thriving.

Rather than centering their trauma or reproducing deficit narratives, this study prioritizes stories of self-definition, artistic resistance, and communal resilience. Each theme represents not just an analytical category, but as narrative cipher where identity affirmation, resilience, and joy converge. As Solorzano and Yosso(2002) remind us,

counter stories are not marginal anecdotes, they are lessons learned through lived experience that challenge dominant discourses. The study's themes emerged through a reflective process informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model for thematic analysis. In honoring participant voice, I approached each transcript as collective cultural productions, layers shaped by shared experience.

The themes explored in this chapter are grounded in the cultural aesthetics and laboratory practices of Hip-Hop. These themes do not exist in isolation, but are deeply intertwined, much like the five elements of Hip-Hop. In these narratives, joy is not incidental, it is insurgent (Tichavakunda, 2021), and belonging is not something that occurs on its own, and it may be produced through beats and rhymes. These findings are a reflection of what Love (2019) describes as the radical possibilities of culturally relevant counterspaces, where Black men with Hip-Hop identities are not required to check their cultural identities as they enter campus spaces, but instead are invited to strive and thrive in the fullness of their authentic selves.

### **Theme One: Belongingness**

Black men attending HWIs often find themselves navigating academic spaces shaped by anti-Blackness, racial isolation, and coerced cultural assimilation (Dancy & Edwards, 2018; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Harper, 2012; Solorzano et al., 2000; Strayhorn, 2012). Within this context, Hip-Hop counterspaces emerge not merely as extracurricular outlets, but as sites of identity formation, community construction, and cultural affirmation (Emdin, 2016.; Sule, 2016; Love 2019). Several participants shared that they felt assured in the intersections of their racial and cultural identities upon entering their HWIs and never felt the pressure to assimilate to dominant cultural norms. Thuds

Whetley, attributed his self-assurance in his racial and cultural identities to constant affirmation from his mother while growing up and having been able to experience a Black critical mass by attending predominantly Black K-12 schools:

All of my school experiences before college were predominantly Black. This is all about my mother. She made sure that all of that stuff was ingrained in me by the time I was ready to go to college. So I didn't really consider going to a predominantly White institution and having it change anything about me. For instance, what I distinctly remember is that when I started college, I had a very large afro and was walking around with an actual Black Power Afro pick in my head. You can ask me about it if you want. You know what I'm saying? But other than that, it was just, this is what you're getting. So, I guess I didn't spend much time thinking about it, which was cool. I went in that place knowing who I was and not planning on changing that person. So for me it was like, this is who y'all going to get when I walk in there. You know what I mean?

Cade Icewood shared a similar experience of having been conditioned to be proud of his racial identity and having confidence while navigating predominantly White spaces due to the intentional efforts of his parents:

I think I was more sensitive to it than most kids my age because of who my father was. Like my bro used to say, we was raised by a pack of militant Blacks. So my dad was on that shit and my mom was too, to keep it a buck. So I was sensitive to what I would be facing.

These experiences affirm what Yosso (2005) describes as familial cultural capital, or the cultural knowledge and sense of community nurtured within families and extended

networks. Some participants described how they found belonging or created community via Hip-Hop practices, and what belonging meant to them:

I guess what I think of when I think about belonging, is I'm in a place and I feel okay about being there. There was a point in time where I was growing up that I didn't feel like I should be in certain suburbs, or even now, I feel like even though people there are places that I'm just not supposed to go. So when it comes to a sense of belonging for me, it means being able to go somewhere and not have to feel like you're not supposed to be there. I think it was made clear to everyone with my large echo shirts and durags and whatnot, that this is what I'm about. I exuded Hip-Hop and anyone that saw me, it was clear that I enjoy that genre of not just music, but art, clothing and other things that are part of the culture. Look, man, again, specifically at that time, Ecko gear spoke to me in ways because it's like, oh man, I don't know how to do graffiti, but this shirt gets it, so let me put this on. And maybe I can feel like I can do graffiti through it, but at the same time, somebody's going to look at me and be like, oh, well, he definitely likes the core parts of Hip-Hop because his shirt has some weird lines on it. You know what I mean? So yeah, anybody that saw me knew what was up, and ideally they didn't take any offense to it or anything like that.

This visibility, of being seen and recognized through Hip-Hop style, offered more than self-expression; it served as a mode of identity affirmation and unapologetic cultural authenticity. While Thuds emphasized outward representation as a way to communicate that he was creating his own belonging, his friend and collaborator Ari shared a reflection

that highlight how Hip-Hop practices fostered internal affirmation and helped him develop community:

Yeah, we actually had a Hip-Hop slash poetry group that was started on campus and we got a chance to perform and do different things around campus and help and organize and have a bunch of different events. So yeah, I felt really comfortable and empowered in that group. We weren't a super, super big group, but we were known. So I think we definitely got a chance to express ourselves and to be celebrated in that space because when they had certain events, they had Black history month events or these events, kind of those types of events, they called on us to say, Hey, do you want to get down? Are you going to perform at this?

Ari's experience reflects how spaces rooted in Hip-Hop offered not just opportunities for performance, but also validation and visibility. For some, these affirming campus-based communities grew into something even deeper, lasting networks of friendship and solidarity grounded in shared experiences and creative passion:

A lot of the people that I went to school with, man, honestly are still my partners to this day because I found my tribe, I was able to express myself. I'm like, these are fellow MCs, these are producers, these are people who are artistic. A lot of 'em come from the same background I do. And I didn't know him until I stepped on campus and now we all co-mingling. And I'm like, damn, he kind of cold. What's your name, bro? What's going on man? So it was things like that where it helped me move through that space of college because not only do I have somebody that has a shared interest in Hip-Hop, emceeing, the whole realm of the

Hip-Hop arts, but they also understand what it's like being a fellow Black person in college. So when I found other people that were like-minded who could help me through it and they were going through it at the same time and able to understand the hardships as well as the challenges and still have somebody that I can kick it with about, Hey man, Pharoah Monch just dropped a new album. Did you hear this new MF DOOM? You know what I mean? Oh, Jeezy got something new. Things like that could break up the monotony of going to school every day, classes, finals papers and all of that. And still being able to support each other and lean on each other. And it meant a lot to me because realistically it made me feel not alone in that space. You know what I mean? And I didn't realize how big that space was until I got down there, man.

For Prodigy, the campus Hip-Hop community became a foundation of artistic kinship and emotional support. Similarly, others found that Hip-Hop served as a powerful point of connection from the very start of their college journey. Mark's story illustrates how shared cultural affinities opened doors to meaningful relationships and sustained collaboration:

I think right out the gate, 100%., my orientation group leader...was very much so a patron of the Hip-Hop arts, I should shout out his rap alias and poetry alias. He was my OGL, and that's one way that we connected right out the gate was his love for Hip-Hop. So I'll say that was a space where I felt I belonged right out the gate...it was definitely through my hip hop identity and my connection to Hip-Hop. Then not long after orientation I met Donald, Zeke, and Johnson through CMI, and we became friends because we were all either making beats, doing

poetry, rapping, dropping projects. We're all still friends today, we do the podcast thing, go to conferences, but yeah the first connective thread I guess that helped me find my folks there, was how we all connected to Hip-Hop.

Mark's reflections highlight how Hip-Hop served as a social and creative bridge, laying the groundwork for enduring friendships. This sense of connection was echoed by others who found solidarity not only among peers, but also through supportive staff who shared their cultural references. As Johnson Barnes describes, that shared appreciation for Hip-Hop extended beyond student circles and helped solidify a collective sense of belonging.

I connected with Mark, Zeke, and Donald primarily through CMI programs, and at the time the program coordinator we all met with was big into NWA. So even though that was a little, well a more than a little bit before our time, we still recognized that there was at least somebody on the pro-staff we could talk about that stuff with. We all felt like that was our place, we all connected off of music, off of Hip-Hop, and then working on stuff together when we could, and having pro-staff that knew what was up helped it feel like it was our space.

In summary, these narratives reflect how Hip-Hop serves as a site of cultural memory and identity formation (Love, 2016; Emdin, 2016). They also highlight how participants construct belonging through expressive practices that mainstream academia frequently ignores or devalues. Participants described Hip-Hop more than a mere extracurricular interest, but as an active representation of their Blackness. Through this cultural lens, they found belonging, not in the institutional framework of the HWIs they graduated from, but in the communities they built with fellow creatives and peers who understood the double consciousness of being Black in HWI spaces. Belonging became

less about fitting in and more about standing firm in their cultural identities, exuding pride unapologetically through durags and Ecko gear, and creative practices that speak to their cultural authenticity. The stories told reflect a shared mantra: to belong is to be affirmed, to feel safe in one's own skin, and to build alongside others who see you fully. In this way, Hip-Hop becomes both sanctuary and platform, a site where cultural knowledge is not only validated, but passed on.

### **Theme Two: Counterspaces as Safe Havens**

While navigating the racialized terrain of HWIs, many Black men seek out or create culturally grounded spaces that serve as counterspaces, zones of affirmation, resistance, and safety. This theme builds upon Solorzano and Yosso's (2002) idea of counterspaces, in which marginalized students construct environments where they can resist racial stereotypes, affirm their identity, experience critical mass of peers with similar identities and experiences, and engage in cultural practices that may facilitate experiences of joy and healing (Sule, 2016; Tichavakunda, 2021). Participants shared the varied ways they found and built their counterspaces:

My roommate for the first few years was my best friend from elementary school. So just like off the top, I already had somebody that I knew and kicked it with. There was also a Black student union in whatever dorm you were in. They made themselves known. And honestly, I don't remember if they came and found us at any point, but I know they had flyers in whatever the dorm room was, so you know where you can go to talk to 'em, which was cool. And then finding friends ended up being relatively easy...at a certain point, me, my roommate, we started kicking it with two other Black dudes. They were fun...on top of that, there was



always some event going on. So there was always a clear presence and clear action to make sure that the Black folks don't feel like they can't find each other...there might not have been that many of us, but all of us in that place, we made sure that we were connected somehow.

Thuds' experience highlights the importance of informal, culturally affirming relationships that extend beyond formal institutional interventions. These narratives illustrate how cultural familiarity and culturally relevant peer interactions can serve as grounding counterspaces. These organic networks disrupt the often isolating social landscapes of HWIs by enabling Black men to recreate home within institutional walls (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Some participants shared how their Black Greek Letter organizations (BGLO) and even campus support centers functioned as counterspaces that allowed them to engage in their Hip-Hop creative practices:

I think because a lot of ways that people get interested in BGLOs like that is more of those expressive outwardly showcases, whether it's a probate or yard show or something along those lines. And so I think having those moments where you're at the yard show at the very beginning of the year and you're hearing the hottest Hip-Hop song, or even just at the barbecue where a lot of the organizations will come out and stroll and things like that. I think it just, I don't know what the word is, something, I don't know, it just kind of drills it in that much more that it's, especially again at the barbecue seeing this happen, this is the center of campus, anybody can walk by and it's showcasing something that we already identify with as far as just the music as far as we feel comfortable and confident that we want to show you that this is the music that we're relating to the most. This is what we

like, this is what we appreciate and value. And so then to get the chance to be a part of it and having a whole yard show where you're remixing songs, having probate, where you're remixing songs, it's just an opportunity to just connect and feel at home and feel comfortable. And honestly, now that you bring that up, I feel like that was one of the things that I think music is naturally just a big part of the African American culture, but it's also something that I think maybe I personally am very conscious of. So I remember when I first met my Line Brothers, one of the things that we just talked about was music.

Mark's reflection underscores how BGLO events and traditions infused with Hip-Hop create a sense of visibility and affirmation in HWI campus spaces. Building on this, Donald emphasizes how music, particularly Hip-Hop and R&B, serves as the soundtrack to communal bonding within these organizations.

When we're doing a lot of the more fun activities, such as strolling or even if it's the word I'm looking for an event...we always do have music, and it is always more often than not going to be R&B or Hip-Hop, to be honest. It is never going to be country, it's never going to be alternative. It's never going to be like any other kind of type of music. Hip-Hop probably, like I said before, opened the door. I feel like for a lot of, at least these friendships or relationships that I still have now to this day, it always would start, or at least eventually would get to a point of, Hey, what are you listening to? What do you like? Just because at least I know music is that important to me.

While Donald illustrates how Hip-Hop naturally facilitated interpersonal connections within his BGLO, Whitmore expands on this by highlighting how campus organizations

and multicultural programs provided platforms for performance, creativity, artistic growth, and community building rooted in Hip-Hop expression:

Through the Center for Multicultural Initiatives. For sure, I was able to perform at Taste of Africa. I had done open mics outside of CMI, certain ones held by just residence life, some Greek ones thrown by the Alphas, and the AKAs, they had a joint one that I did kind of my first year. What else? Grammys. I performed at our campus Grammy's before through our Association of Black Students. I did it twice. The first year was with some of my friends. My cousin came from Wayne State who was like a frequent collaborator. I always had fun being able to do that stuff. There was a show for Residence Life and I wrote a verse right before and then went to perform, stuff like that. I used to always really enjoy doing stuff like that at college. When I was joining my D9 organization, we would remix popular rap songs as part of our probate or ceremony when we reveal who was crossing. When I was in the process of joining, I came up with all of my songs, certain things like that. I did all those myself, and I remember them being like, you know what I'm saying? You already do music and stuff, so it should definitely come easy too. So yeah, no, I definitely remember coming out to Hip-Hop and my organization being a space to practice my Hip-Hop and certain things.

In these narratives, the role of Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) emerges not merely as social clubs but as essential sites of cultural performance and affirmation.

These organizations often serve dual roles: as structured support systems and fluid counterspaces where Black cultural expression, particularly through music and performance, flourishes (Harper, 2012). The consistent presence of Hip-Hop at these

events reveals how cultural creative expressions provide affirmation. Within these specific contexts, Hip-Hop functions as a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges the social isolation and erasure imposed on Black men in many HWI settings (Emdin, 2016; Love, 2019). This interplay between cultural expression and community-building becomes even more apparent in how participants recall their first moments of connection on campus. For some, spaces like multicultural support centers became immediate entry points into affirming networks where Hip-Hop and shared identity laid the foundation for belonging. Johnson reflects on how those early experiences shaped his sense of community from the moment he stepped foot on campus:

I found community upon my first visit because it was through the Center for Multicultural Initiatives (CMI). So I went there with Donald, Zeke, and Mark Anthony. So I don't know, it was kind of crazy. I mean, from that first day, my first visit, I kind of met some of the people who I'll be closest to for the next, what, eight years. But yeah, so another friend introduced me to it because he was set to go there and I felt the familiarity, I felt comfortable, and I knew that they had my program through health sciences. I was like, yeah, I think this is the one.

Johnson's experience reflects the critical role of institutional support centers in shaping counterspaces. These venues do not just facilitate creative performance, they validate identity. When Black men are invited to engage in their cultural creative expressions at events and programs hosted by culturally aligned formal organizations within the HWI environment, they experience a shift in power dynamics where their experiences and cultural identities are centered, fostering identity affirmation, belonging, and psychological safety (Brooms, 2018; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Druery & Brooms, 2019).

Some participants built or discovered specific Hip-Hop counterspaces and performance venues on or near campus that allowed them to engage in their Hip-Hop practices:

Going to shows, going to Hip-Hop, like symposiums, going to just other type of events, and isn't even just in person social media too, connecting with sharing albums back and forth, getting on message boards and realizing that you may live by somebody that's on a message board that you visit. You know what I mean? Yeah, man. I mean, Hip-Hop just provided a community in a very palpable way. There were a few Hip-Hop communities on campus. I mean, there were times where my Hip-Hop communities and my Black communities had sparse intersections, but Hip-Hop was a huge part of my identity, and it helped me connect with other people who valued it in their identity as well.

Washington's reflections highlight how Hip-Hop communities, virtual and physical, offered critical spaces for connection, especially when traditional campus structures feel culturally tone deaf. For others, these Hip-Hop centered counterspaces emerged organically in highly visible campus locations, offering impromptu, unscripted opportunities for Hip-Hop cultural expression and community-building. Prodigy recalls one such moment early in his college experience:

I want to say it was freshman year, man, it was in the fall semester. So you know how the campus is hot in the fall. Everybody's doing different organizations, they're recruiting, they're just doing stuff showing people how the campus is. One day coming out of the student center, I was on my way to class and I just seen a bunch of cats in the cypher and I'm like, oh, wait a minute, hold on. This was probably my second, third week there. I'm just thinking, man, it's just school. I'm

just going to class and all of that. And I was just trying to find my tribe. Once I seen cats freestyling in the front of the student center, I'm like, oh, this is it. This is it. You know how it is. You jump in the cypher, you look around for a minute, you kind of check the skill level of everybody... then just start rapping and rapping and rapping.

Johnson's encounter with an on-campus rap cypher became a catalyst for connection and belonging, revealing how spontaneous Hip-Hop gatherings could create opportunities for cultural affirmation. Building on that spirit of improvisation and intention, Ari describes how these moments evolved into traditions that not only fostered creativity, but also nurtured a deeper sense of community and emotional refuge amid the isolating demands of his academic program:

We started another group...we just called it Freestyle Fridays, and we would get on the diag and we would just freestyle for hours every Friday. And that was another opportunity for us to assemble. And I guess it was kind of a two-part thing. We would assemble and practice our art, and then it was the friendship aspect of it. We had similar interests, we had similar backgrounds, and there was something a little bit more than just, hey, these are the classes that we're taking. It was like, no, this is the art that we appreciate and love and that kind of connects us to each other.

And because school in and of itself, and especially engineering where there are so few of us and I'm able to connect with the other students in my engineering program that aren't Black, cool, we got to do that all the time. But just to be able to have that home base to come back to really, really grounds, I don't

know, it just provides that grounding and that safe space that you go out to, even though the people that weren't Black that I dealt with were cool as hell...it still wasn't necessarily that safe space for me. So I definitely think that safe space kind of kept me going all those years, even when it gets really tough and you really can't talk to the people in your class about it, you can go home to your safe space and the people who know you and kind of know what you're going through and connect and ground with that.

While Ari found community and refuge through peer-led freestyle sessions and an informal shared cultural space, others extended their Hip-Hop practices into more formal platforms. For Donald, the college radio station became a meaningful outlet, not only for personal expression, but also for curating and sharing the Hip-Hop music that shaped his identity and relationship:

Me and Mark Anthony doing our whole radio show, which was completely about music. That was just something that we were like, this is important to us. We want to keep up with this. And also be able to play stuff that we like on the radio too.

So I guess that definitely counts as a safe space, like the college radio station.

Donald's reflection highlights how the college radio station became a curated space for cultural expression and connection through Hip-Hop. Building on that, his friend, collaborator, and radio show co-host Mark, offers a closer look at how the radio show itself became a dynamic form of storytelling, blending personal narrative, musical analysis, and social commentary in ways that deepened both their friendship and their engagement with the culture.

The fact that we had the freedom to, it was censored, but whatever, we had the freedom to play whatever music that we wanted to within a couple minor guidelines, the censorship, only a couple songs per album per artist, so we just had to switch it up. But a lot of what made up the show that we were running live at that point on WXOU was music based. So we choose albums of the week and we would pick three songs. He would pick three songs. I would pick three songs and we would show him and just talk about what basically why we chose 'em, whether it was just it related to how we were feeling that week or it related to something that was going on in the real world.

While Mark and Donald used their radio platform to reflect on personal experiences and share the music that resonated with them culturally, others found similar spaces as opportunities to uplift a broader community of student artists. Khalid's experience with both live performance and radio broadcasting illustrates a deep commitment to community building and helping others find their safe havens. In this way, Hip-Hop evolved from a personal outlet, to a shared platform to celebrate culture and community:

I started performing at this monthly Hip-Hop showcase called Respiration on campus. And in fact when we did the final show, me and one of my collaborators, and they kind of had us go last to be the last acts at the very last show, it was because we had spent so much time working our way up through the open mics. So sometimes I forget that even though that's not necessarily an official venue owned by my institution, it was a space dominated by students from my institution. And that was when I started to really have people notice what I was doing with rap. But even with the Cultural Vibe, which was the radio show I



hosted with Jesse at our college radio station, we wanted to make sure we were welcoming others into that space and not only featuring what we were making...I'd never played a single second of my music on air because I wanted that to be a space for all of us and not just be about me.

Khalid's efforts to amplify the artistic contributions of his peers from the campus Hip-Hop community via the college radio station demonstrates one way that Black men with Hip-Hop identities have curated inclusive spaces and refuges on HWI campuses. Khalid's collaborator and radio show co-host Jesse, found other ways to immerse himself in the campus Hip-Hop scene:

I was in a group called Black Boy Society, as I said before. So this was a group of poets that were all Black, and their poems weren't necessarily raps, but mine were, you know what I mean? So I used to write poetry to sort of process what was going on in my life and how I felt about things. So that was one of, I was writing, I was performing at Poetry Slams, and that was part of it. I was going to shows as much as I could, whether they were on campus or off. Also had the Cultural Vibe radio show I co-hosted and co-produced with Khalid. I found as many ways as I could to be active in our Hip-Hop scene.

Similar to Khalid and Jesse, Kwesi found a homebase of community and belonging as a part of his campus Hip-Hop culture:

I was [living] off campus and I didn't like going to campus. I just didn't like it. So I was barely on campus...so yeah, but just so happened like the Hip-Hop community was home for me. So we started to build that culture and that

network...my group, [ended up becoming] one of the pioneering Hip-Hop groups in Ann Arbor. So we started to kind of create the scene.

These narratives demonstrate how informal performance spaces function as counterspaces and refuges, physical gatherings where Black cultural expression is not only normalized but revered and celebrated. These Hip-Hop centered distractions serve as vital tools for self-discovery and kinship (Love, 2019). These decentralized, informal spaces exemplify the essence of counter narration, where students challenge institutional narratives by cultivating alternative sites of empowerment and belonging that serve as a mechanism where joy, creative practice, and communal affirmation converge to mitigate the coerced cultural assimilation and tokenization that are common experiences for Black men at HWIs (Harper, 2012).

The voices captured in this theme highlight the reality that Hip-Hop counterspaces are not a luxury for Black men with Hip-Hop identities, they're a necessity. These culturally informed safe havens offer not only affirmation, but opportunities for healing, and joy. Whether in dorm rooms over video games, cyphers, open mic performances, or student run college radio shows, these spaces provide a space for critical mass, and a refuge from experiences of othering or tokenization. In these counterspaces, participants didn't just survive the challenges of navigating HWIs, they created, connected, and celebrated. These spaces fostered a shared cultural language rooted in Hip-Hop that became a medium of both expression and resistance (Tichavakunda, 2021). The spaces were not always officially sanctioned by their institutions, but they were made real and valuable through creativity, consistency, and care. Participants also highlighted how campus centers like multicultural support centers

and BGLOs became critical in facilitating these cultural sanctuaries. Through these networks, what emerged were not just friend groups or performance circles, but full-fledged communities of care (Williams, 2021).

### **Theme Three: Creative Expression as Resistance**

Creative expression, especially within Hip-Hop culture, has long served as a mechanism for political resistance. For Black men with Hip-Hop identities navigating the often isolating racialized terrain of HWIs, their creative practices become a space of reclamation and affirmation of their cultural identities, their narratives, and right to exist unapologetically within academic spaces that often attempt to suppress or sanitize Black expression (Yosso, 2005; Love, 2019; Allen, 2024) . In this section , participants reveal how emceeing, lyricism, and other forms of creative expression functioned as acts of resistance against erasure and assimilation. Jesse Washington shared an interaction where he felt that the dean of the journalism school was dismissive of his notable accomplishments, and the pride and comfort he felt in his creative practice despite the dean's disposition:

So I was in this organization called Community, which was an organization that was like a student org oriented around getting professional and academic resources for students of color in the Comm Arts programs. Journalism was one of those, right? And in my senior year, my fourth or fifth year, our organization was being honored by the journalism school,...Remember, I had been freelancing since my freshman year of college. So I had already sort of built up a decent portfolio for my age. And I had done so for the most part without support from the school. A lot of journalism students at my school were either working with the

State News, which was the campus newspaper. They were working with different news stations or radio stations or TV stations in the area. That wasn't my path because Hip-Hop journalism, it wasn't really something that the school offered like that...But anyway, so I had already been writing for prominent Hip-Hop publications. By then I interviewed 50 cent from my dorm room. You know what I mean? I was already doing a lot of this work and at this event where they were honoring the students, the dean of the journalism school, she read my bio with, she was misreading some of what I wrote in the bio, which felt passive aggressive to me. And she had a little bit of snark, I guess, in her voice. And then she walked to each of us to hand us these little certificates, and she walked up to me and she said, Hip-Hop, but she whispered it and it felt like it was a mocking tone. You know what I mean? And I remember thinking like, yo, this is supposed to be a thing where I'm being honored with other students and I feel like I'm being mocked just because my career isn't the same as everybody else's. I'm in nationally syndicated publications. My work is literally on newsstands. I'm interviewing multi-platinum recording artists. But you don't respect me as much because it's not with the State News because it's not a Lansing publication that I'm writing for...I felt othered, where the dean of the school walked up to me and said Hip-Hop, as if it felt like a slur or something almost. It was really, really hurtful at the time. I remember feeling, I don't know if embarrassed would be the word, but it was close. You know what I mean? It was really, really upsetting, but to leave that and kind of just review the body of professional journalism gigs that I just absolutely smashed, got all this acclaim for, it definitely made that sting less. I

had done a lot to be proud of even if the dean didn't see the same value in it that I did.

Jessie's experience illustrates the subtle forms of racialized gatekeeping that occur within HWIs, what CRT scholars describe as microaggressions and institutional disregard for culturally relevant approaches to supporting students (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Jesse's Hip-Hop journalism was not just a creative pursuit, but a form of counter-storytelling that disrupted dominant norms of knowledge creation and legitimacy in academia. In this context, creative expression becomes a resistance strategy against curricular Whiteness and dismissal of the intellectual capacity and contributions of Black students (Harper, 2012). Jesse's work reflects what Yosso (2005) calls navigational capital, demonstrated by his ability to thrive and innovate despite institutional constraints. Cade Icewood shared how the confidence and boldness he learned from his Hip-Hop practice primed him to engage in sustained resistance to any dominant narratives critiquing his ability:

My first gut reaction is that all of the best parts of my personality get to be on display in Hip-Hop. And maybe some of the worst as well, right? Because if ever there's a space for men to proudly put their egos on display and that be valued, it's Hip-Hop, right? That's kind of what it's for. The battling, that's what it's for. Ego and braggadocio is a huge part of the Hip-Hop dialogue. And I think generally speaking, it's one of the more healthy outlets for that in men and women too. But I can only speak to my experience as a man. So with that said, I think that my ego has always has always been a thing that has been my greatest strength while also being my greatest weakness at the same time. And Hip-Hop is a space where it gets to be a strength, and it gets to be something that I don't have to put in a box

or I don't have to quiet it down. Being able to be truly fearlessly creative in a way that might be scary in other spaces. There's free reign to do it in Hip-Hop. And I think folks like you and I who have neither there of us are super famous, but niggas know who we are, which is a blessing. You know what I mean? I think we've earned enough goodwill to take risks that people will respect...it's just freedom. There's real creative freedom.

Cade's description positions Hip-Hop as a unique counterspace in which Black bravado, emotion, creativity, and authenticity are not policed but celebrated. His reflections push back against expectations of assimilation and conformity found in HWI settings. Cade's rejection of stylistic conformity also reflects a broader theme in CRT: resistance to dominant cultural norms as a form of self-preservation and identity assertion (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Love, 2019).

Daniel Dumile shared how he resisted the notion that Hip-Hop is monolithic by seeking out opportunities for cross disciplinary collaboration with peers who were practicing different forms of creative expression:

I would also say I was always motivated by my peers, and that included these rappers like yourself, but it also included other artists who did different mediums of art. And so I went on this journey in dance of all genres or all mediums, but I went on a journey at Wayne State where I wrote a poem with a dancer and she choreographed the work of my poem and then had me do a few choreographed steps while doing the poetry. And so that routine ended up taking us to New York for the American College Dance Festival and just kind of recognized in the dance world off of that piece, just motivated off of how brilliant the dancer was and just

how she thought. And she asked me, Daniel, do you think you can write a poem and we can collaborate in that way? And so my collaborations, I think, stand out the most to me. And that one, it just put me in a different category as far as what kind of art I was willing to do.

Daniel's narrative broadens the understanding of resistance by illustrating the creative possibilities of cross-disciplinary collaboration. By co-constructing a performance with a dancer, Daniel entered a space of mutual respect and cultural exchange, fostering an environment that not only affirmed his identity, but expanded the boundaries of what counts as valid artistic and intellectual labor. Donald Glover recalled leaning into a popular and well known song by the late Nipsey Hustle that encapsulated his political leanings following the 2016 presidential election:

I'm thinking about artists like Nipsey, where it's grind, hustle, motivate, literally, and at least when it comes to college. For me, college really all of education was like, okay, you're going and you just got to figure out how to do the best you can because education is really important in my family. My family has this mandate that Black men and Black women need to be educated, just to be able to build the kind of life you want and to speak intelligently about maybe some of the more racially charged things. I do remember my first year was when Donald Trump had got elected, and I'm not trying to say FDT by Nip was my favorite song or anything, but if we were to do a recap, it was definitely up there.

Donald's recollection of politically charged music in the wake of the 2016 presidential election highlights Hip-Hop's ability to help its practitioners make sense of the world around them via socio-political critique. In the spirit of counter-narration, artists like

Nipsey Hussle embedded resistance in rhythm. For students navigating HWIs steeped in the history of sustained racial subordination, aligning with this music is a form of solidarity. The narratives within this theme reflect the transformative power of Hip-Hop forms of creative expression as a vehicle of resistance and affirmation. Through emceeing, poetry, journalism, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and politically charged music, these men rejected assimilation and affirmed their right to be seen, heard, and valued on their own terms (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Harper, 2012; Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2019; Love, 2019).

Participants such as Jesse and Cade illustrated how Hip-Hop creative practices enabled them to reclaim self-worth and speak back to systems that questioned their legitimacy. Their creative acts were lived counter-narratives that challenged dominant cultural norms and institutional standards. This theme affirms what CRT and counterspace scholarship argue: that marginalized students often thrive by constructing alternative spaces of freedom, pride, and resistance, often in the face of academic gatekeeping and cultural dismissal (Harper, 2012; Tichavakunda, 2021). For these participants, Hip-Hop provided not only an artistic outlet, but served as an unapologetic declaration of who they are and what they represent.

#### **Theme Four: Resilience Through Hip-Hop Spaces and Hip-Hop Creative Practice**

The emotional and cognitive labor required for Black men to persist in HWIs is significant. Yet, embedded within the expressive culture of Hip-Hop, many participants found a sustainable strategy for developing resilience. By engaging in a creative, therapeutic outlet that allowed them to process, endure, and respond to institutional and interpersonal challenges.



All my niggas graduated, all of us. I think we knew what we were there for. And I also think there was a lot of intentionality at my school to go into making us feel at home. The African heritage house was super, super fire. It was one of those places where we were unapologetically us. I think that helped us to not have to worry about whatever anti-Blackness was happening, because we had spaces that were legit for us. It was because we had each other. I mean, I think you just can't stress that enough. We had each other, and I think enough of us were serious about it, that we by osmosis kind of pulled the folks that were less serious up with us (C. Icewood, personal communication, May 8, 2025).

Cade's reflection illustrated the core function of Hip-Hop counterspaces: creating culturally affirming environments where Black students can find psychological safety, representation through community and creative culture. These spaces serve as sanctuaries for resilience and identity affirmation (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The African Heritage House served as a site where cultural expression through Hip-Hop aesthetics were celebrated rather than critiqued or dismissed, an example of what Yosso (2005) referred to as resistant capital. Resistant capital consists of the knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that disrupts dominant narratives. For Black men with Hip-Hop identities at HWIs, this could include the ways they use cultural expression, language, style, and community-based knowledge to push back against dominant discourse that devalues and dehumanizes them. Cade recalled the African Heritage House as a place where he could resist the pressure to assimilate or adhere to respectability; instead he found a space where he could practice and thrive in the fullness of his

authentic cultural identity, which gave him confidence to be his authentic self in less-hospitable circumstances and spaces.

For Jesse, participating in his Hip-Hop practice was an intellectual exercise and a coping mechanism. His narrative reveals how he used Hip-Hop as a tool for self-reflection, helping him process personal adversity while refining his voice as a writer:

I learned that I can make an argument. I argued about Hip-Hop so much, bro. I have debated, I've debated both sides of who won a battle, but I've debated both sides as if I actually believe in them. I've debated what makes one ever better than the other, what makes one album better than the other. So I learned that I can make an argument, and I also learned that I have a lot of perseverance in me between my mother passing, between me working so much on my career in college. I've had to weather a lot, and I've had to be consistent a lot, and I was writing, it really tripped me out to really think in terms of writing very well. I have really done my ten-thousand hours but I have written a lot. I started my journalism, professional journalism career in 2003, I wrote before that for my high school paper. And even though that was always my goal for a career, it does kind of trip me out that I've done it for that long. I am at the point where I can write a story and I can reference my own work as a reference. You know what I mean? So if I'm interviewing Lupe, if I were to interview Lupe tomorrow, Lupe Fiasco, I could be like, yeah, according to our third conversation, he said this. That shit's crazy. That shit's crazy. So I think that those are the main things that I can think about that I've learned about myself through Hip-Hop, is that I can make an argument and that I can't focus on something for a long time. I think I often

have difficulty focusing on things for a long time, and Hip-Hop is proof that I can focus on things for a long time, and I think I need to tap into that more honestly, because I think I forget it a lot.

Jesse's journey to a sustained journalism career demonstrates the intellectual and affective labor embedded in cultural practice. His perseverance through grief, labor, and creative production is an example of navigational capital (Yosso, 2005), where Jesse's Hip-Hop journalism craft became a mechanism for mastery and professional growth.

While Jesse's story reflects how Hip-Hop can serve as a vehicle for intellectual growth and professional mastery, Kwesi's journey reveals how pursuing Hip-Hop professionally became a source of entrepreneurial learning. For Kwesi, the challenge wasn't just surviving the rigors of the classroom, but navigating life beyond campus:

The toughest part about my undergrad college experience was getting through college. That was the toughest part. And that brief stand of living in New York, we were just trying to survive, pay bills. Sometimes we didn't even have energy to go out on the weekends just because we was working our little temp jobs here and there. We was six deep in a three bedroom apartment. We had bunk beds in Jersey City, and the trap dudes was trapping right outside our door. We went out there to rap, but we really just grew up. That's the main thing that happened when we was out there. So our first album was about a lot about our time living in Jersey City and being in New York. How the album sounds is a direct result of our time living out in New York and us saying, all right, we thought we wanted to be a part of this, but we really don't. Like New York has a sound, it has a feel. We tried to be a part of it. We didn't fit in. Let's just do us. And so our first album, which came

out in 2002, most of us were still in college. Half of us were at the same college together. And it was really a therapeutic release from our time in New York. And it not being the experience that we wanted, it didn't go how we wanted. And so we came back home, to Michigan with our tail tucked and it was like, all right, it's cool, but we got this album. As a result, our first album Sweats and Kicks was the antithesis to Timbs and fatigues. That was our whole thing. It was like, all right, we tried that. It's not us. Let's just be us. So yeah, thankfully, I'll say it again, thankfully I didn't have to deal with too much craziness during that time. But the hardest part was literally getting that degree during our time in New York that didn't go how we wanted to.

I mean, it gave me a lot of confidence. I knew I was good at it. People told me I was good. They were reaffirming and confirming that I was good at it. So that helps with any self-confidence in any regard. Not that I struggle with self-confidence at all. I didn't really grow up playing basketball, and so I was pretty good from a young age. So that was, I would hear that People knew I could play around Ann Arbor, so I got support and confirmation in that regard. But then when I started rapping, like I said, really it wasn't a cool thing when we were rap, when we first started rapping, it wasn't that cool. So for people to be into it, it was like, oh, okay. Our first little tapes, we hand them out and people would be like, yeah, y'all pretty good. So that was a good feeling. So I just learned that it was something I could do potentially as a career, even though we learned how to be entrepreneurs, we learned how to be businessmen. We 18, 19, pressing our own music, creating our own flyers, promoting our own shows, putting 'em up around

town, booking ourselves, booking people from out of town. We bringing Slum Village to the Blind Pig, we bring Little Brother into Alvin's in Detroit. We learned how to, because we couldn't get in the industry, we had to learn how to create our own business model. So those are things that we learned, for sure

Kwesi's recollection bridges creative expression with strategic resilience. His rap group's experience in New York, and subsequent return to Michigan, demonstrates how Black cultural work can foster professional innovation and self-reliance in spaces that seek to stifle them. While Kwesi's Hip-Hop practice equipped him with valuable entrepreneurial experience, Ari's practice provided him confidence and enhanced capacity to balance the rigid demands of his engineering program:

Basically for me, rap was not only a practice, but I guess a mental game or a mental outlet. And when you're dealing with engineering, you kind of set up your brain to think a certain way and very procedurally, very this, very that. And I am a real proponent of, I guess, cross-functional thinking of cross-training things. I definitely think that all engineers should do things like take dance classes or take art classes or take history classes or art history. Just the mental exercise of being able to get out there and just wrap and freestyle. I learned that I had a lot more capacity than I thought. Again, I was studying and doing this however many hours a week, a bunch of different times, but I was still able to make time to go after what I was really passionate about, what I really loved. So yeah, I learned greater capacity from that, and that's still something that I carry on to this day. You make the capacity for the things that you want and need to do.

Ari connecting his practice of freestyling to the kind of problem solving skills developed and honed in engineering coursework is another showcase of community cultural wealth; using Hip-Hop craftwork as a mental exercise that builds creative flexibility in a way that facilitates technical problem solving, helping Ari to feel more confident and capable in his studies. Similarly, Johnson leveraged his Hip-Hop creative practice to enhance study sessions and manage stress:

I would listen to my beats or beat playlists when I was studying, and that would kind of help put my mind in a quiet, zenful place. They helped me really just really focus on whatever the task was at hand. And I was definitely a consistent crammer, and I would need any method that I could use that would assist me in focusing that would be very helpful. So definitely on the stress management and for focus, I mean, just once again, as a vehicle to create community, I think that I found a lot of help inside my academics through the people that I met, through what you could say is within the Hip-Hop community. So I don't think that can be understated

Johnson's story highlights the role Hip-Hop creative practice can play in stress management and therapeutic release (Sule, 2016). His use of lo-fi beat making and participation in Hip-Hop spaces and social circles embody strategies appropriate for the counterspace model, where cultural practices not only support academic persistence, but also provide wellness and emotional stability in environments that can be hostile or alienating for Black men (Brooms, et al., 2020; Druery & Brooms, 2019; Griffith, et al., 2019). While Johnson's creative practice served as a form of therapeutic release and study aid, Daniel leveraged his Hip-Hop creative practice of emceeing to confront border socio-

political realities beyond his campus. While touring with his rap group during the time of another instance of an unarmed Black man dying following an encounter with law enforcement officers, Daniel discovered how Hip-Hop could become a conduit for processing grief, rage, and solidarity in real time, in response to systemic injustice:

I think about traveling the country and touring, and then the state of the country while being on tour and thinking about, for example, Freddie Gray we're coming up on the 10 year, or the 10 year event of Freddie Gray being murdered in Baltimore just happened. And so in 2015, my rap group went on a tour with Baltimore artists. And so we started the tour in Baltimore. Freddie Gray had just happened, but then we traveled down through South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and we traveled west and then hit Texas and California. And then I think around the time we were on the West coast, Freddie Gray was murdered. And while traveling with Baltimore artists, it was really interesting because this was their city on TV going up in flames while they were performing music across the country at dive bars.

And so I just remember at that time, while on tour, everybody has their thing that they do while you're driving from city to city. And my thing at that time was reading, I was reading Octavia Butler, the Parable of the Sour and the ideas that were in that book that I was seeing in real time in this resistance in Baltimore, or this resistance that I was feeling while going to these cities where oftentimes these were predominantly white spaces where we were delivering Hip-Hop. And so I would even go out of my way to be like, fuck the police in different cities where I probably shouldn't have been doing that. I wasn't in my city saying, fuck

the police. I was in Seattle saying, fuck the police, and that could have not went well. So Hip-Hop allowed that expression to be okay. So by the time we ended up back in Baltimore, I was really on my fuck the police shit. And everybody was like, in Baltimore, yeah, fuck the police. That was 10 years ago. And fast forward, things have not changed, so fuck the police. And so I think when it comes to just a level of strategy, Hip-Hop is excellent for that because I can go hard in the paint or I can eloquently poetically make a statement, and I don't know another genre of music that you can do that.

Daniel's reflection is an assertion of Hip-Hop as both catharsis and protest. His narrative underscores how musical performance can critique systemic violence while simultaneously navigating racially hostile environments. Overall, this theme highlights the deep resilience that Black men cultivate through their engagement with Hip-Hop culture, spaces, and creative practice. For the participants in this study, resilience was not solely about persistence through adversity, it was a culturally grounded intentional practice to affirm identity in spaces that are designed to disadvantage them. Through creative work, the men in this study effectively leverage their Hip-Hop practices as a coping mechanism and as a counter-narrative strategy. Whether freestyling as mental training, curating music as therapy, or affirming themselves by celebrating artistic and professional milestones, they transformed challenging circumstances into stories of perseverance and overcoming. These stories remind us that resilience is not just about survival, it is about reimagining the terms of success. Through Hip-Hop creative practices, participants cultivated spaces where they could thrive without compromising their identities.



## **Theme Five: Joy and Celebration Through Hip-Hop Spaces and Creative Practice**

While much of the scholarly attention on Black men in higher education emphasizes deficit narratives or coping mechanisms and interventions, this theme centers joy as a transformative and celebratory force cultivated through Hip-Hop creative practices. Informed by Love (2019) and Tichavakunda's (2021) literature on Black Joy as resistance, and drawing on Solorzano and Yosso's (2002) counter storytelling framework, participants shared how their engagement in Hip-Hop spaces and creative practices brought not only cultural affirmation, but joy, personal fulfillment, motivation, and pride. Glen's joy from his Hip-Hop practice first surfaced during a moment of curating sound at a small gathering and realizing the power his practice had to shape atmosphere. His experience captures how even low-tech, improvised engagements with Hip-Hop can create sustainable joy:

I think one of the times during college I DJ'd a little house party at my own apartment, and so I'm able to play my music. I think that was one of my first experiences of joy connected to me actually practicing Hip-Hop, of like, oh, even if you don't know the track, people still want to listen because, and this was push button DJing. I'm just playing songs, two windows open off YouTube and moving the volume down. So I think that was one of the experiences where I threw a kickback, played good music, had a good time, and I'm like, I want to get better at that. I remember that feeling

Glen and Cade's reflections highlight how participation in creative expression generates joy rooted in agency and cultural expression. This connects with Yosso's (2005) concept of aspirational capital wherein Black men with Hip-Hop identities engage in acts of

joyful expression as methods for owning their own narratives and to imagine new futures. These micro-celebrations of culture challenge dominant deficit narratives that frame Black men in terms of struggle, reframing joy as a radical affirmation of presence and creativity (Love, 2019; Tichavakunda, 2021).

Participants consistently connected their participation in their Hip-Hop creative practices to what joy looks like for them, and it frequently affirmed that there is substantial joy and affirmation derived from executing their creative ideas and performing. This is consistent with a sentiment shared lyrically by Tariq “Black Thought” Trotter (2004) on the transformative power of performance:

"Yeah, it ain't nothin' like the rush I get in front of the band / On stage, wit' the planet in the palm of my hand / When a brother transform from anonymous man / To the force, crush whoever might've thought I was playing" - (Black Thought, The Roots, 2004).

Daniel echoed the legendary emcee’s sentiment in his own experiences:

So I don't think there's a better feeling of having a crowd rock with you or those funny moments that exist in a show that is unique to you or your audience. Yeah. Yeah. So just as a performer, that's where I was going. Just as a performer. I do love being on stage or I love getting a reaction out of people, or I love seeing other people experiencing joy. That's what I'm getting at. So I've experienced that or I've hit those highs. And as some people would say, as a performer, where you have an audience in your hand, and so you get to a point where you want to experience that again, you want to see other people experience that. So that's how

I would define joy directly tied to Hip-Hop music. In my experience, music, my most joyful experience is music is mostly a part of it.

Daniel's reflection captures the joy derived from live performance, the unmistakable energy of connecting with a crowd and the fulfillment that comes from moving others through your sonic creations. That desire to create, perform, and relive those emotional high points is echoed by other participants who found fulfillment not only on stage, but also in the process of making music with their community. Zeke recalls one such moment early in college that continues to resonate as a joyful experience in his journey:

I think it was freshman year I had this idea that we should record this whole mixtape in a night. We should just stay up and just record. I was with Donald and Johnson, and I was like, we should just record a bunch of music and just put something even on SoundCloud or something, we weren't even really into the Distro Kid stuff, you know what I'm saying, like the major distribution. I was just like, let's just put it out. I feel like I had way more energy than everybody else when it came to that, but I still have all the songs that we recorded from that time. Every time I mention one or something, my friends would be like, oh, you should send that to me. And I'd be like, you know what I'm saying? I told you guys we should definitely record 'em songs. So that was definitely, I could say other performances or doing Grammys and Taste of Africa and stuff, but that one just kind of sticks out in my mind. That was for sure a time when I was really locked in saying I just wanted to write all the time at that point.

Zeke's memory of that spontaneous recording project reflects how joy can be deeply rooted in the act of creating with close friends, moments where community and creativity

converge in meaningful ways. Ari expands on this sentiment, recalling the thrill of performance and artistic execution, but also the bonds built through collective effort and collaboration:

Every moment that I was emceeing, it was joyous for me as I perceived it back then. And even now when I look back on it, I feel fondness and the feelings of joy well up when I think of, yeah, we actually got to perform with Saul Williams, or not perform with him, but perform open up for him, me and Thuds and the rest of our crew. We released two CDs as a big collective and how tough of an undertaking that was, but still some of the best moments of my life doing that. And then through those relationships, just being there for another person in their moment of whatever they might need or experiencing the same joy with these other people that ultimately you get to know and love you, get to know about their background and understand how either similar or different, their backgrounds are different to yours. Yeah, those are those moments of joy.

Ari's account highlights how his Hip-Hop creative practice became a pathway to experiencing peak joy and building meaningful relationships with people from diverse backgrounds. His friend and collaborator Thuds picks up that thread, recalling a formative performance experience that reaffirmed his love for the craft of emceeing. For Thuds, the process, practice, and execution, culminated in a moment of joy and affirmation that his Hip-Hop practice would be a lifelong journey:

There was a point where the group that I'm a part of was part of a much larger collective, and so we were still figuring ourselves out. But there was one point where I guess we got enough notoriety in this large group to do an underground

show at, I believe it was the student union at U of M. Now, although I'm not the biggest Wolverine fan, you couldn't tell me that this was not the greatest opportunity of all time. You know what I'm saying? So leading up to it, we're practicing. We're making sure everybody's where they're supposed to be, so when the show comes up, everything goes right. And I'm like, honestly, that was the point where I'm like, I could do this forever because the glee that all that work and all that practicing and all of the stress that goes along with that, to see it through and to see that it was for a reason when people are clapping and showing you that they enjoy what you did. Yeah, man, feed me that. You know what I mean? Yeah. So that's when I knew, and again, I think that was one of our first real opportunities and real performances where I'm like, this is it. I love it.

While Thuds reflects on the joy of that breakthrough performance moment, Kwesi's story shows that performing is more than an outlet, it was a declaration of self-worth, and a celebration of realizing the rewards of persistence in practice:

Being on stage is the greatest feeling in the world to me. It's where I believe I am most truly myself, is when I'm on stage, that's when I feel the most joy. Yeah. So every time I got a chance to be on stage, I love writing. I used to love recording. I don't really enjoy recording much anymore. If I'm being real, I don't enjoy it. I used to when it was all new, and being in that space and environment was really cool. But yeah, I don't really enjoy recording anymore, but still love writing. I still love being on stage. I get on stage now maybe once or twice a year, and really I don't think about it much, but then when I get on stage, it hits me like, oh yeah,

this is what it feels like. This is what I love. This is me. So any chance I got to be on stage, I was there.

When we went to New York, we got a whole lot of humble pie. We didn't get to get on many stages. We would sign up for open mics, get passed up, wouldn't even get our name called. I think we got on stage in New York maybe twice in the year or so that we were there. We were at a lot of events, but we wasn't getting on stage. So coming back home, getting on stage around that time was definite joy. So we had developed a reputation of being one of the best, some of the best. And so we would get opportunities. So all the Martin Luther King Day events, we got the opening slot wherever the big artists that was coming in, whether it be Mos Def or Slum Village. So those were great experiences being on campus, opening up for some of our favorite artists. So getting those opportunities was definitely great. And getting paid for it. Getting paid well. Some of my biggest checks I've ever got from performing happened on the U of M campus. So those are great experiences.

These narratives show that joy emerges through the performative energy exchange with an audience. These self-created spaces and opportunities serve as sites where Black identity is visible and celebrated. These narratives also affirm that joy exists not only in performance but in process. The participants' commitment to creative work, regardless of financial return, demonstrates what Yosso (2005) refers to as resistant capital, a refusal to measure self-worth or creative value by dominant capitalist standards. Participants surfaced critical insights about how Black men choose to seek support or process trauma

and other mental health crises. In this way joy functions as a deliberate act of survival when traditional support systems are absent or inaccessible (Tichavakunda, 2021; 2022).

These narratives underscore that joy is not frivolous or secondary; it can be a mechanism for survival and pathway to thriving. In a context where institutional belonging might be elusive, creative mastery becomes a site of self-validation and pride. This theme reveals that for Black men with Hip-Hop identities at HWIs, joy is a critical form of resistance, healing, and identity affirmation. Participants described joy as peace, flow, affirmation, and catharsis. This joy was deeply personal yet powerfully collective, emerging through moments of collaboration, performance, and storytelling. As Love posits, Black joy is an abolitionist act, it reclaims space and imagines possibilities for Black men that dominant narratives deem out of reach. In a context where Black men are frequently deemed less than without cause or reduced to data points on retention reports, joy becomes a declaration of creativity and worth.

## **Summary**

The narratives shared by the participants in this study highlight the layered, intersectional experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who successfully navigated the social landscape and graduated from HWIs. Across the five themes, a consistent thread emerged: Hip-Hop served as both a mirror, and a map. It reflected participant's realities and helped chart pathways of joy, community, resilience, celebration, affirmation, and belonging. Participants described their Hip-Hop practices as powerful vehicles for affirming identity in environments where they may have felt invisible, misunderstood, misrepresented, or hyper-surveilled. Whether it was through cypher sessions in dorm rooms, performances on campus, or sharing music that resonated

with their lived experiences, they built micro-communities that affirmed Blackness, creativity, and agency (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Love, 2019). These counterspaces and safe havens served as sites where dominant narratives that miscast our value and ability as limited are interrupted, and cultural authenticity is preserved.

Themes of joy and celebration, far from being superficial, reflected profound emotional and psychological liberation. As participants recounted moments of laughter, performance, and shared appreciation, they highlighted what Love (2019) refers to as Black joy as resistance, a declaration of presence and pride within systems designed to disadvantage them. Hip-Hop practice was not only expressive, but therapeutic. It provided mechanisms of release during periods of academic hardship, political unrest, and non-inclusive racialized interactions such as microaggressions or microinsults. Creative practice became the mechanism for self-sustenance and achievement.

These findings underscore that Hip-Hop shaped how participants saw themselves, how they processed their experiences, and how they made sense of the realities and institutional barriers around them. For some, it meant remixing traditional education with culturally relevant practices and pedagogy, for others it meant finding emotional clarity and security through beat-making, lyric writing and rapping, or journalistic story crafting. Chapter five will discuss the implications of these findings for future considerations within the context of educational policy and institutional reform.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Summary and Discussion of Findings**

*"I gotta, I gotta shake this jail shit off me/ He ain't gon' never sell, he gon' fail shit off me, huh/ I gotta shake this weak shit off me, and keep shit off me/ And leave it in the streets like, Bih, get off me! 1977, July 5th Conceived immaculately was me, my mom's gift/ Unwrapped right there in the room, like Christmas/ My mind has been designed to do, like, distance/ Run whole laps around y'all with my thoughts/ You ain't hold back on yours, nah, that's my fault" - (Royce Da 5'9', 2008)*

Legendary Detroit emcee Ryan "Royce Da 5 '9" Montgomery wrote these self-affirming bars celebrating his cognitive and intellectual capacity and declaring his rejection of dominant narratives about the limitations of men who share his background and experiences. These lyrics are an example of the kind of ownership participants in this study have taken over their narratives and how they celebrate and affirm their worth through Hip-Hop creative practices. This study set out to explore the lived experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from HWIs and engaged in Hip-Hop counterspaces that fostered a sense of belonging and joy. This chapter will present a synthesis of the findings, situating them within the contexts of my original research question and theoretical framework. Specifically, this chapter revisits the central themes that emerge from the counter-narratives of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from HWIs. Rather than echoing the oft-repeated deficit-based narratives of

Black men's experiences at HWIs, which are too often the default framing of Black men in higher education research, this study intentionally foregrounded stories of joy, creativity, community, and resilience.

This chapter will also outline implications for practice and future research, advocating for intentional institutional interventions that center culturally relevant pedagogy, support cultural creative expression, and recognize the epistemic validity of joy as a catalyst for student sense of belonging that should be considered in developing student support initiatives. By centering the lived experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities, this study affirms the necessity of cultural and artistic practice to facilitate joy and belonging. The composite counter-narrative compiled here of these Black men's experiences declares that Black joy is essential, and there is an opportunity for institutions to match these students' innovative efforts to create culturally relevant counter-spaces and safe havens that foster belonging and joy. My research began with the following question:

What impact did access to Hip-Hop counterspaces have on the sense of belonging and feelings of joy for Black men with Hip-Hop identities that matriculated at HWIs? The themes and recommendations in this chapter answered this question through participant counter-narratives, summarized in the following sections.

### **Theme One: Belongingness**

Participants consistently described Hip-Hop not as a hobby or extracurricular activity, but as an integral part of their identity, a culturally informed lens through which they process the world around them, including the often racially hostile landscape of HWIs. Their creative forms of expression, emceeing, beat-making, content creation,

journalism, and curation, were not only sources of personal affirmation but also vehicles for resisting marginalization. As Petchauer (2011) asserts, Hip-Hop collegians embed cultural aesthetics into their academic lives, resisting pressure to assimilate to majoritarian cultural norms and asserting agency. Participants' narratives aligned with this concept, underscoring Hip-Hop's potential to function as a site of resistance and a source of identity affirmation.

Whether through impromptu cyphers in dorm rooms or outside the student center, open mic nights hosted by student orgs and campus cultural centers, or collaborative studio sessions in off-campus apartments, these men cultivated relational networks rooted in shared cultural values. These were not just artistic collaborations; they were acts of communal care, affirming spaces where participants could exist in the fullness of their authentic selves without the need to code-switch or conform to dominant social norms, and allowed them to build communities where they could experience belonging. Strayhorn (2012) emphasizes that a sense of belonging is tied to feeling safe, valued, seen, and welcome. For participants in this study, Hip-Hop became the vehicle through which that sense of being valued and seen was realized.

### **Theme Two: Counterspaces as Safe Havens**

Participants described engaging in both formal and informal Hip-Hop counterspaces, cyphers, open mics, studio sessions, student-led events, and off-campus performance venues. These creative environments, both on and off campus, served as critical zones of affirmation, safety, and solidarity for Black men with Hip-Hop identities. As Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) assert, counterspaces are "sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial

climate can be established or maintained” (p. 70). For these participants, that meant finding or creating spaces where Black cultural knowledge was not only validated but celebrated.

These counterspaces allowed participants to push back against the isolating impact of what Harper (2012) describes as chilly campus climates. For instance, Ari Cherryblossom shared, “those seven or eight of us, we kind of knew what it was, and we banded together.” This act of banding together through creative and cultural practices reflects what Strayhorn (2012) refers to as the relational dimension of belonging, or the impact of being in meaningful connection with others who affirm one’s identity and lived experience. Participants also referenced key institutional interventions, such as bridge programs and multicultural resource centers, as critical safe havens that led to a sustained community beyond graduation. Zeke Whitmore noted that participation in a summer bridge program hosted by his institution’s multicultural center introduced him to a group of what would become lifelong friends and collaborators in Donald Glover, Johnson Barnes, and Mark Anthony Spears. To this day, the quartet still collaborates on new music and hosts a growing podcast. In sum, creating and maintaining Hip-Hop-informed counterspaces were essential to participants’ sense of belonging. These spaces celebrated their creativity and provided a critical mass of culturally resonant community.

### **Theme Three: Creative Expression as Resistance**

Across the narratives shared by participants, a central theme emerged: creative expression functioned as both a cultural practice and resistance to dominant institutional narratives that devalue Black men. Participants engaged in creative acts such as emceeing, beat production, spoken word, podcasting, and journalism as tools for

affirming themselves in HWI spaces. Consistent with CRT's concept of counter-narration, participants used their Hip-Hop creative practices to reject institutional expectations of conformity. For instance, Jesse Washington's recollection of writing album reviews as a professional journalist for some of the most influential Hip-Hop publications from his college dorm room, demonstrated that he was participating in Hip-Hop culture as a professional archivist within an institution where high-ranking faculty did not recognize his talent or the reach of his work.

These counter narratives reveal that for Black men with Hip-Hop identities at HWIs, creative expression is not an escape from challenging circumstances; rather, it is the foundation that supports their resistance. The theme of creative expression is not an abstract ideal; it is a lived strategy. These Black men, situated within HWI climates, turned to Hip-Hop not only as a refuge, but as a mitigation strategy to claim ownership of their narratives, and take agency to author their own desired outcomes.

#### **Theme Four: Resilience Through Hip-Hop Spaces and Hip-Hop Creative Practice**

Participants in this study demonstrated resilience cultivated and sustained through their engagement with Hip-Hop spaces and creative practices. Resilience in this context was not merely having the grit to endure adversity; it was about actively asserting identity and building self-sustaining support systems rooted in culture, creativity, and community. For the Black men who shared their stories in this study, resilience was not an individual trait but a collective practice shaped by participation in Hip-Hop counterspaces that affirmed their existence and intellectual capacity. These spaces, whether formal student organizations, local community centers, DIY home recording studios, or impromptu

unofficial gatherings in the student center, functioned as emotional refuges and incubators of self-worth.

Participants also expressed how routine engagement with creative practice served as a method of self-regulation, stress management, and emotional balance. Even when there was a lack of institutionally supported, culturally affirming resources, participants created their own support infrastructures. Ultimately, this theme reveals that resilience for Black men with Hip-Hop identities is not passive but an active process of thriving despite institutional apathy.

#### **Theme Five: Joy and Celebration Through Hip-Hop Spaces and Hip-Hop Creative Practice**

The fifth theme that emerged from this study reveals how Hip-Hop spaces and creative practices function as a vital arena for joy, celebration, community, and affirmation in the lives of Black men with Hip-Hop identities at HWIs. Participants' narratives demonstrated that joy, when cultivated in culturally affirming spaces, is not merely emotional release; it is an act of defiance, community building, and cultural wealth building. Hip-Hop spaces are not only sites of political resistance or intellectual exploration, they are sanctuaries of joy where participants feel most free and most celebrated. Their joy was joined to community and expression in the form of open mic nights, freestyling with friends, and taking their talents on the road as professional artists and archivists all while still striving toward degree completion in climates where they are often little more than an afterthought or a few more units of tuition revenue.

Antar Tichavakunda (2021) conceptualizes Black joy as “more than fleeting happiness” and instead frames it as a strategy of care, reclamation, and self-definition.

This was evident in participants' descriptions of joy as intentional, not incidental. Their joy was constructed in community, rooted in their creativity, and shared through Hip-Hop cultural forms of expression. The performative and participatory aspects of Hip-Hop provided embodied experiences of joy. Performing on stage, hearing the crowd respond, or marveling at the craft of beat making, and how there is often so much beauty in the mistakes, like when the drums are just a fraction of a second off the expected cadence. These moments served as affirmations of creative ability, identity, and worth. These moments represented liberation from dominant norms of decorum or respectability politics. In sum, this theme highlights the centrality of joy and celebration in sustaining Black men's presence and success at HWIs. Hip-Hop spaces and creative practices offered participants a space where they could thrive emotionally and communally. In celebrating themselves and each other through Hip-Hop creative forms of expression, these men transformed survival tactics into celebration and curated their own conditions to thrive.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study offer critical insights for higher education practitioners seeking to foster affirming environments for Black men attending HWIs. Through the narratives of Black men who navigate HWI spaces while deeply rooted in Hip-Hop identities and creative practices, this research highlights several transformative possibilities. The implications suggest an opportunity to lean further into culturally relevant practices, during a time when our geopolitical climate grows increasingly antagonistic toward ideologies and practices deemed "woke" as part of the strategic

attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion practices geared towards creating better experiences for Black men and other historically marginalized identity groups.

Higher education has never been a neutral ground (Harper, 2012). For decades, marginalized students, especially Black, Brown, queer, students with disabilities, indigenous, and first-gen students among others, have always faced resistance carving out safe spaces in institutions never designed for our inclusion. Yet the past few years have made one thing disturbingly clear, anti-social justice efforts have been fully activated, and they are well-funded, well-coordinated, and exceedingly hostile (Rooks, 2024). Under the current federal administration, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts have not only been interrogated and challenged as illegal, they've been actively dismantled (Stahl, 2025). From legal restrictions to rhetorical warfare, this moment represents a historic rollback of hard-fought progress in higher education, and it's important to name what's happening for what it is: an attack on our right to belong.

At the heart of this political offensive on DEI and social justice work, is the trumpeting of colorblind ideologies and anti-CRT rhetoric. CRT has been weaponized and demonized for anything that dares to examine race, power dynamics, or systemic inequity in education contexts. These are not just philosophical disagreements. These structural interventions are designed to erase cultural spaces, shrink support systems, and punish universities for acknowledging the persistence of systems of subordination and unlevel playing fields (Amesbury, 2025). College presidents and boards are increasingly silent or complicit, fearing political retaliation, budget cuts, or outright firings. The message is being sent loud and clear, institutions can survive politically or support marginalized students, but not both. Faculty are being surveilled for teaching about



slavery, students are being forbidden from organizing cultural events, and entire departments such as gender studies, and African American studies, are being scrutinized for political bias (Alonso, 2025; Quinn, 2025; Smith, 2025; Stahl, 2025). The end result is erasure, not diversity of thought as if often posited by anti-DEI factions.

DEI initiatives, while not beyond critique, have been essential to retention, mentorship, and identity affirmation for students historically excluded or discriminated against within higher education contexts (Park, 2025; Weissman, 2025). If institutions are able to resist these coercive efforts from our current federal administration to abandon culturally sustaining practices that affirm Blackness, creativity, and communal joy as essential to student success, the following recommendations may help institutions remove barriers and enhance the experiences of populations most vulnerable to historical systems of subordination in higher education.

### **Recommendation One: Recognize Hip-Hop as a Legitimate Cultural and Intellectual Practice**

One of the most urgent implications is the need for institutions to validate Hip-Hop not as extracurricular, but as epistemological and pedagogical. Participants in this study used Hip-Hop to make sense of their academic and social realities, develop community, and resist cultural erasure and assimilation. Institutions must shift from viewing Hip-Hop expression as simply a student hobby to understanding it as a form of knowledge production and cultural identity (Jenkins, et.al, 2017). This can take the form of interdisciplinary Hip-Hop studies programs, partnerships with local artists collectives, and recognition of student-led creative work as scholarly engagement.

Institutions need to embrace reality pedagogy, which Emdin (2016) describes as rooted in the acknowledgement that students bring their cultural identities with them into academic spaces and that educators should develop cultural competence and humility to engage with them on their own cultural terms. Educators and administrators must honor Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy (CHHP) and Critical Hip-Hop Language Pedagogy (CHHLP) as alternative and innovative instructional strategies to create counterspaces and empower students to speak the language of their culture (Alim, 2007; Akom, 2016).

### **Recommendation Two: Invest in Counterspaces Rooted in Cultural Relevance**

Findings consistently showed that participants relied on informal or student-initiated counterspaces such as open mic nights, cyphers, and DIY recording sessions as sources of affirmation and belonging. Institutions should position themselves to move beyond simply permitting, but supporting the development of culturally grounded spaces where Black students can connect, create, and build community. This involves more than designating physical space; it requires institutional investment in Black cultural expression including funding for events, access to creative technology and recording gear, and staff who understand and respect the cultural practices taking place. As Solorzano et al. (2000) affirm, counterspaces should be sites where dominant narratives are challenged and a positive climate can be established and maintained. Institutional policy and resource allocation should reflect this understanding.

### **Recommendation Three: Center Joy and Celebration in Student Engagement Models**

Too often, student affairs strategic approaches center trauma, struggle, and crisis in how they engage Black students. This study reveals that centering joy can facilitate

equity and retention work. Institutions must reimagine programming and support systems that center joy as a mode of resistance, well-being, and intellectual engagement. Love (2019) and Tichavakunda (2021) affirm that spaces promoting Black joy on campus are essential in supporting Black students' persistence navigating HWI climates.

Programming that uplifts Black art, music, performance, and cultural celebration should be embedded into institutional planning, not as a one-time celebration during Black History Month programming, but as an ongoing affirmation of Black experiences and excellence.

#### **Recommendation Four: Support Mentorship and Peer Networks Around Shared Cultural Practices**

Several participants pointed to peer relationships and informal peer mentorship, often centered around shared creative interests, as foundational to their resilience and sense of belonging. Institutions should intentionally cultivate opportunities for peer mentorship rooted in cultural expression. Programs that connect incoming students with upperclassmen based on artistic and cultural affinities could bridge academic and social gaps in meaningful ways. Examples of such programs include the Oakland University Trustees Academic Success (OUTAS) scholarship program, that pairs first and second year students from historically marginalized communities with a peer mentor that they meet with weekly. The OUTAS program also requires that scholars meet biweekly with a professional staff member or retention coordinator to provide additional support and be connected to vital resources. While the program is not exclusively marketed to Black men, the program is managed by Oakland University's Center for Multicultural Initiatives (CMI), where the staff collaborates with University Admissions to recruit

students who fall within the threshold of lower socio-economic status, a group in which Black men are represented at a disproportionately higher rate than their White counterparts. The peer mentors hired and trained by the CMI office are often alumni of the program, and are typically representative of incoming OUTAS scholar student demographics. I previously served as a Retention Coordinator supporting students in this role at Oakland University, and included Hip-Hop lyric writing workshops and discussion groups as part of our annual men's retreat and Circle of Brotherhood peer support group. On average, the first year retention rate for students in the OUTAS program is 88% - 90% compared to 72 - 74% of the overall student body (Oakland University, n.d.).

Another program that connects incoming students with peer mentors based on cultural affinities is the Men of Color Initiative at Syracuse University, which is designed to support, empower and explore issues unique to the experience of men of color in higher education. Through mentorship by peers, faculty and staff, students are exposed to programs, interventions and initiatives that align with their social identities and cultural background, including Hip-Hop-informed programming. While MCI aims to support the needs of men of color in particular, the program and all related activities are open to all eligible students without regard to race, gender, national origin or other characteristics (Syracuse University, n.d.). The University of Michigan's Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives (OAMI) hosts the Men of Color Leading & Investing in Community (M-CLIC) program to engage and foster a stronger sense of community and support for students who identify as men of color. One of their flagship initiatives is the CLIC-N-CUTZ Barbershop Series, which is a monthly space for students to experience community and engage in barbershop style discussion groups on trending topics and

critical issues affecting men of color, and share methods for stress management and other mental health coping skills, all while having access to peer mentorship and guidance. The program is so well received, that it has thus far survived the recent dismantling of OAMI's parent office at Michigan, the Office of Diversity Equity and Inclusion (ODEI) which was targeted by an unbalanced critique in the New York times, which led to intense national scrutiny of Michigan's investment in DEI initiatives.

My final example of an impactful and culturally relevant intervention is the African American Student Network (AFAM) developed at a HWI in the Midwest by a graduate research assistant, who was a doctoral student at the PWI and is now an assistant professor at a Midwestern university who co-facilitated AFAM meetings from 2014 to 2016 (Grier-Reed, et al., 2008; 2013) . The network was created to address the challenge of increasing the persistence-to-graduation rate of Black students at HWIs by providing them "space to address, understand, and cope with stressors" (2008, p. 478).

The intervention is facilitated as a network of students, faculty, and staff that partners first and second-year students with more experienced mentors in a series of weekly networking mixers held during the lunch hour. The facilitators used the lunch to provide the need for basic sustenance and to build a sense of community and sense of belonging for Black students. The networking lunches also provided an opportunity to emphasize the importance of well-being. Content was structured to teach mentors to help mentees "understand and improve their relationship to self, others, community, and the university" (2008, p. 477).

The networking lunches largely took on the form of group discussions facilitated by peer mentors, graduate assistants, faculty, and staff. Five mentees were interviewed

for the case study on this intervention, and from the data revealed seven themes expressed in student recaps of their experiences with the intervention:

- access to a safe space;
- connectedness;
- validation;
- resilience;
- intellectual stimulation;
- empowerment; and
- a home base.

Study participants identified the meetings as a safe space, an environment free of racial microaggressions, anti-Black sentiments, stigma, and stereotype threat where they were able to “relax ... freely express themselves, laugh, have fun, get beyond labels, and be a whole person” (Grier-Reed, Madyn, & Buckley, 2008, p. 480). The safe space allowed students to feel connected with peers with similar backgrounds and lived experiences that allowed them to share feelings that they may not feel comfortable expressing in contexts that lacked a Black critical mass. The group meetings also provided students with a sense of validation and “cultural affirmation, where the Black student experience is central” (2008, p. 481). Study participants also reported that the group discussions helped them to develop resilience by giving them opportunities to regroup from a stressful week in an affirming environment. The participants also expressed that the meetings provided a home base where they were exempt from the hostilities of a less than ideal campus climate. This environment fostered intellectual stimulation through exposure to positive same-race role models who have achieved

success that participants could model in their academic pursuits. Successful implementation of these types of programs, requires institutions to develop more strategies to hire, train, and retain culturally competent staff and faculty that reflect the diversity of their student bodies. Representation in advising, counseling, and leadership roles can further affirm students' cultural agency and sense of affirmation (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012 Griffith, et. al, 2019).

### **Recommendation Five: Move Beyond Representation to Cultural Transformation**

Finally, while recruitment and representation matter, institutions must evolve beyond symbolic diversity to actual cultural transformation. This means taking a strategic systems analysis approach to interrogate policies, norms, and curricula that dismiss or devalue Black cultural expression (Kezar, et al., 2025). It also requires institutions to listen to, learn from, and follow the lead of Black students, particularly those who aren't waiting for institutional approval or support, and are building their own affirming spaces through Hip-Hop. Black men should not always have to bear the burden of building their own refuges and safe havens to survive and thrive at HWIs; institutions must prioritize taking strategic partnerships with students to create spaces where resistance, creativity, and celebration are institutionally supported and resourced.

A case study by Petersen and Bartel (2020) examined the complex dynamics of cultural transformation within a higher education institution as it attempted to implement systemic enrollment management. The authors described the friction that arises when new strategic initiatives encounter deeply entrenched institutional norms. One of the primary insights from Petersen and Bartel's case study is the importance of understanding and mapping institutional culture before implementing large-scale change. One potential

solution to facilitate this task is to implement a change management framework like the Barrett Values Model (BVM). The BVM is a framework that analyzes organizational culture based on seven levels of organizational consciousness:

1. Survival: Focuses on basic needs, physical safety, and security within the organization.
2. Relationships: Centers on belonging, teamwork, and positive social interactions.
3. Self-Esteem: Emphasizes individual achievement, competence, and recognition.
4. Transformation: Promotes personal and organizational growth, learning, and development.
5. Internal Cohesion: Focuses on collaboration, communication, and shared purpose.
6. Making a Difference: Highlights the organization's impact on society and its contribution to the greater good.
7. Service: Emphasizes altruism, service to others, and leaving a positive legacy (Barrett, 2006)

Implementation of change efforts using the Barrett model would necessitate inclusive dialogue to gather feedback from Black students to inform a culture shift that improves their lived experiences. The BVM encourages leadership to foster values-based conversation and create psychologically safe spaces, where individuals can share their concerns, grievances, and aspirations. This is crucial in higher education institutions where change is more likely to be accepted if it aligns with already established values



that need to be reevaluated and communicated more effectively to avoid being nothing more than performative window dressing (Kezar, et al., 2025). The BVM's emphasis on basic needs, physical safety, belonging, organizational growth, collaboration, societal impact and altruism make it a suitable change management framework to offer a more nuanced and human centered approach to cultural change within higher education contexts. This strategic approach may allow institutions to center culture change in the expressed values of their community, mitigate resistance to needed change, and foster sustainable growth that honors the experiences of Black students.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study contributes to a growing body of literature at the intersections of Hip-Hop culture, Black student experiences, and critical educational frameworks. However, as with all qualitative inquiry, it opens new possibilities for future research to deepen our understanding of Black life within higher education contexts. The following recommendations reflect key gaps and opportunities made visible through this study.

#### **Recommendation One: Expand Research Beyond Black Men at HWIs**

While this study centers the voices of Black men attending HWIs, future research should explore how Hip-hop identities and practices support Black women, non-binary, queer, and trans students across diverse institutional contexts. Understanding how gender and sexuality intersect with cultural resistance and creative expression in higher education remains an underexplored but necessary area of inquiry (Love, 2019; Kelly, 2024). Additionally, future studies might examine the experience of Hip-Hop-identified students or Hip-Hop collegians at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and

community colleges. This comparative approach could highlight institutional and cultural differences in how Hip-Hop spaces are built and experienced across intersecting identity groups.

### **Recommendation Two: Increase Research into the Impact of Institutional Hip-Hop Pedagogy**

There is a growing need for empirical research on how Hip-Hop pedagogy impacts student engagement, identity development, and academic persistence in both curricular and co-curricular contexts. While scholars like Johnson (2019), Emdin (2016), Alim (2007), Akom (2009, 2016), Adjapong (2021) Levy (2021), Sule (2016), Petchauer (2012), and others have laid the theoretical groundwork and given examples of practical application, few studies examine institutional implementation of Hip-Hop centered programming, courses, and spaces in higher education settings. There is an opportunity for future researchers to explore further:

- Faculty perceptions of using Hip-Hop in classroom teaching
- Student outcomes in courses utilizing Hip-Hop pedagogy
- Campus programs that integrate creative expression and cultural identity

These studies could inform professional development and curriculum design across multiple academic disciplines.

### **Recommendation Three: Center Intergenerational and Community-Based Perspectives**

Participants in this study frequently credited family members, local mentors, and community-based Hip-Hop spaces as central to their development. Future research should expand beyond campus boundaries to examine how community-based Hip-Hop

organizations and intergenerational mentorship contribute to college readiness, resilience, and identity formation. This aligns with Yosso's (2005) concept of community cultural wealth, emphasizing the assets found in familial and cultural networks that are often overlooked by dominant educational frameworks.

#### **Recommendation Four: Increased Investment in Longitudinal Studies of Hip-Hop Collegians**

Given the developmental nature of identity and belonging, longitudinal studies following Hip-Hop-identified students through their college journeys and even into post-graduation life could offer valuable insights into the enduring impact of cultural affirmation on persistence, career choice, and well-being. This kind of study could also explore how students continue to engage in creative practices professionally and personally after graduation.

#### **Recommendation Five: Show and Prove**

As a Black man with a Hip-Hop identity who graduated from an HWI, who now works as a higher education administrator and researcher, I am uniquely positioned to take immediate action on this recommendation. In keeping with CRT's methodological practice of counter-narration, I coordinated a voluntary creative exercise with study participants to produce, create, and record a composite counter-narrative of Black men's experiences of joy, belonging, affirmation, kinship, community, achievement, resilience, persistence, and celebration. This creative exercise resulted in the creation of the Black Joy Cypher, a Hip-Hop music recording that conveys our counter-narratives of joy and celebration. A Hip-Hop Cypher is a collaborative, performance where emcees, poets, or dancers take turns showcasing their skills in freestyle or prepared verses. More than a

performance, the cypher is a communal ritual where participants engage in call-and-response, peer validation, and storytelling (Alim, 2006; Dimitriadis, 2009; Petchauer, 2015).

To inform the creation of this musical recording, I shared the themes and codes with study participants who identified as emcees/rappers and beat makers/producers and invited them to collaborate in the composition and recording. This recording will be used to expand on this research study with an arts-based analysis of the composite counter-narrative of the experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from HWIs and will hopefully serve as a reference point for leveraging Hip-Hop creative practices to communicate composite-counter narratives. You can listen to the recording here: <https://shorturl.at/JYcFq>

### **Summary**

This study explored the lived experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from HWIs. Through a Black Joy, Hip-Hop, and Critical Race theoretical framework and methodology, this study repositions black male collegians not as deficit-riddled subjects, but as cultural architects, community builders, and resilient creators who leveraged their Hip-Hop identities and creative practices to build spaces of affirmation, resistance, kinship, and well-being. The participants' counter-narratives illustrated how Hip-Hop is more than music or entertainment; it functioned as a resource for them to affirm their brilliance and build their own platforms and safe havens of cultural authenticity. Each theme that emerged, cultural identity and belonging, counterspaces and safe havens, creative resistance, resilience, and joy, demonstrated the centrality of Hip-Hop in supporting these students' development and pursuit of desired educational

outcomes. These findings challenge higher education to recognize Hip-Hop as not only culturally relevant, but also epistemologically valid and pedagogically potent.

The creative spaces these men cultivated were not simply artistic enclaves; they were needed sanctuaries where their full humanity could be acknowledged, affirmed, and celebrated. These were spaces of strategic cultural affirmation that allowed Black men to persist in climates that often rendered them invisible or hyper-visible in damaging ways (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019). They used these spaces to cultivate joy through cyphers, performances, interdisciplinary collaboration, and professional expertise. This research offers several implications encouraging institutions to move beyond performative solutions toward structural investment in culturally sustaining practices. Institutions must take the position of culturally competent and enthusiastic collaborators, working in partnership with students to provide funding, space, recognition, and critical mass in staffing to support this vital cultural work.

Ultimately, this study affirms that Black men are not in crisis; we are creating. We are building counterspaces, disrupting deficit narratives that diminish our value, and cultivating joy through Hip-Hop creative practices. Higher education as an industry and vocation must keep pace with this student innovation. As institutions confront persistent, organized, and well-resourced attacks on policies that advocate for diversity, equity, inclusion, cultural competence, social awareness, belonging, and justice, this work serves as a reminder that Black creative resistance is already influencing the next phase, iteration, or evolution of this work. It is our responsibility to protect, resource, and celebrate this work by continuing to center their counter narratives to push back on

dominant discourse aimed at sustaining White supremacy and maintaining historical systems of oppression and subordination.

## REFERENCES

- Adjapong, E. S., & Emdin, C. (2015). Rethinking pedagogy in urban spaces: Implementing Hip-Hop pedagogy in the urban science classroom. *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research*, 11, 66-77.
- Adjapong, E., & Levy, I. (2021). Hip-Hop pedagogy and spoken word therapy: Innovative approaches for addressing mental health in urban schools. *Urban Education Journal*.
- Akom, A. A. (2009). Critical Hip-Hop pedagogy as a form of liberatory praxis. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 42(1), 52–66.
- Akom, A. A. (2016). The role of Hip-Hop in the Black freedom struggle. *Journal of Urban Education*, 14(3), 45–62.
- Alim, S.H. (2007). Critical Hip-Hop Language Pedagogies: Combat, Consciousness, and the Cultural Politics of Communication. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 6(2), 161–176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348450701341378>
- Allen, K. (2024). An overview of pedagogies and perspectives on hip-hop education. In L. L. Kelly & D. Graves (Eds.), *The Bloomsbury handbook of hip-hop pedagogy* (pp. 63-73). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Alonso, J. (2024, December 16). How the battle over DEI shook out in 2024 — and what's to come. *Inside Higher Ed*.
- Alonso, J. (2025, March 25). A Historical View of Trump’s Anti-DEI Crusade. *Inside Higher Ed*.

- Amesbury, R. (2025, May 13). What is replacing DEI? Racism. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Anthym, M., & Tuitt, F., (2019) When the levees break: the cost of vicarious trauma, microaggressions and emotional labor for Black administrators and faculty engaging in race work at traditionally White institutions, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32:9, 1072-1093, DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2019.1645907
- Baker, C. N., & Robnett, B. (2012). Race, social support and college student retention: A case study. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53(2), 325–335. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2012.0025>
- Banks, D. (2010). From homer to hip hop: Orature and griots, ancient and present. *Classical World*, 103(2), 238–245. <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.0.0159>
- Bauman, D. (2018). Hate crimes on college campuses on the rise post-2016 elections. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Brooms, D. R. (2018). “Building us up”: Supporting Black male college students in a Black male initiative program. *Critical Sociology*, 44(1), 141–155.
- Brooms, D. R., Davis, A. R., & Briscoe, K. (2020). Being Black, male, and successful at predominantly White institutions: A motivational model of student success. *Urban Education*, 55(3), 31–52.
- Barrett, R. (2006). *Building a values-driven organization: A whole system approach to cultural transformation*. Routledge



- Bauer, K., & Clancy, K. (2018). Teaching race and social justice at a predominantly white institution. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 14(1), 72-85.
- Chang, J. (2005). *Can't stop won't stop: A history of the Hip-Hop generation*. St. Martin's Press.
- Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Routledge.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Huber, J. (2010). Narrative inquiry. In B. McGaw, E. Baker, & P. P. Peterson (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education* (3rd ed., pp. 436-441). Elsevier.
- Cross, W. E. (1991). *Shades of Black: Diversity in African-American identity*. Temple University Press.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). NYU Press.
- Dumas, M. J., & Ross, K. M. (2016). "Be real Black for me": Imagining BlackCrit in education. *Urban Education*, 51(4), 415–442.
- Druery, J.E., & Brooms, D.R. (2019). "It lit up the campus": Engaging Black males in culturally enriching environments. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 12(4), 330–340.
- Dyson, M. E. (2007). *Know what I mean? Reflections on Hip-Hop*. Basic Civitas Books.
- Emdin, C. (2016). *For White folks who teach in the hood ... and the rest of y'all too: Reality pedagogy and urban education*. Beacon Press.

- Farmer, T. D., & Hope, A. (2015). Exploring race and retention: Understanding the challenges facing Black male collegians. *Journal of Educational Research*, 29(1), 33–50.
- Grier-Reed, T. L., Madyn, N. H., & Buckley, C. G. (2008). Low Black student retention on a predominantly White campus: Two faculty respond with the African American student network. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(5), 476–485.
- Grier-Reed, T. (2013). The African American student network: An informal networking group as a therapeutic intervention for Black college students on a predominantly White campus. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 39(2), 169–184.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798413478696>
- Grier-Reed, T., & Wilson, R. J. (2015). The African American Student Network: An Exploration of Black Students' Ego Networks at a Predominantly White Institution. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 42(4), 374-386.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798415591661>
- Griffith, A. N., Hurd, N. M., & Hussain, S. B. (2019). "I didn't come to school for this": A qualitative examination of experiences with race-related stressors and coping responses among Black students attending a predominantly White institution. *Journal of adolescent research*, 34(2), 115-139.
- Guiffrida, D. A., & Douthit, K. Z. (2010). The Black student experience at predominantly White colleges: Implications for school and college counselors. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 88(3), 311–318.

- Hall, T. & Martin, B. (2013). Engagement of African-American college students through the use of hip hop pedagogy. *International Journal of Pedagogies & Learning*, 8(2), 93–105. <https://doi.org/10.5172/ijpl.2013.8.2.93>
- Harper, S. R. (2012). Black male student success in higher education: A report from the National Black Male College Achievement Study. *Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education*.
- Harper, S. R. (2012). Race without racism: How higher education researchers minimize racist institutional norms. *The Review of Higher Education*, 36(1S), 9-29.
- Harper, S. R., & Kuykendall, J. A. (2012). Institutional Efforts to Improve Black Male Student Achievement: A Standards-Based Approach. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 44(2), 23–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2012.655234>
- Hazzard-Donald, K. (2004). Dance in hip-hop culture. In M. Forman and M. A. Neal (Eds.) *That's the joint: The hip-hop studies reader* (pp. 505-516). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hill, M. L. (2009). *Beats, rhymes, and classroom life: Hip-Hop pedagogy and the politics of identity*. Teachers College Press.
- Hurtado, S., Alvarado, A. R., & Guillermo-Wann, C. (2015). Thinking about Race: The Salience of Racial Identity at Two- and Four-Year Colleges and the Climate for Diversity. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 86(1), 127–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2015.11777359>
- Jenkins, T., Jaksch, M., Endsley, C., & Keith, A. (Eds.). (2017). *The open mic night: Campus programs that champion college student voice and engagement*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

- Karkouti, I. M. (2016). Black students' educational experiences in predominantly white universities: A review of the related literature. *College Student Journal*, 50(1), 59-70.
- Kezar, A., Hallett, R.E., Corwin, Z.B. (2025) Moving Toward Institutional Culture Change in Higher Education: An Exploration into Cross-functional Professional Learning Communities. *Innov High Educ* 50, 687–714 (2025).  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-024-09753-1>
- Kim, J., & Pulido, I. (2015). Examining Hip-Hop as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 12(1), 17–35.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2015.1008077>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 7–24.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: aka the remix. *Harvard educational review*, 84(1), 74-84.
- Levy, I.P., (2019). Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Therapy in Urban School Counseling. *Professional School Counseling*, 22(1b), 2156759–.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X19834436>
- Levy, I.P, (2020). “Real Recognize Real”: Hip-Hop Spoken Word Therapy and Humanistic Practice. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling*, 59(1), 38–53.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/johc.12128>

- Levy, I.P., & Adjapong, E. S. (2020). Toward Culturally Competent School Counseling Environments: Hip-Hop Studio Construction. *The Professional Counselor* (Greensboro, N.C.), 10(2), 266–284. <https://doi.org/10.15241/ipl.10.2.266>
- Levy, I.P., Cook, A. L., & Emdin, C. (2018). Remixing the School Counselor’s Tool Kit: Hip-Hop Spoken Word Therapy and YPAR. *Professional School Counseling*, 22(1), 2156759–. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X18800285>
- Levy, I.P., Emdin, C., & Adjapong, E. S. (2018). Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work. *Social Work with Groups* (New York. 1978), 41(1-2), 103–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2016.1275265>
- Levy, I.P., & Travis, R. (2020). The Critical Cycle of Mixtape Creation: Reducing Stress via Three Different Group Counseling Styles. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 45(4), 307–330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2020.1826614>
- Love, B. (2016). Complex Personhood of Hip Hop & the Sensibilities of the Culture that Fosters Knowledge of Self & Self-Determination. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 49(4), 414-427.
- Lucas, Y. (2018). Support structures: Challenges and potential solutions toward persistence in earning a baccalaureate degree for Black male students attending predominantly White institutions. *The Journal of Business Diversity*, 18(1), 68–78.
- Lupe Fiasco. (2007). *Gold Watch*. On *The Cool* [Song]. 1st & 15th Entertainment; Atlantic Records.
- Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 227–238.

McClain, S., Beasley, S. T., Jones, B., Awosogba, O., Jackson, S., & Cokley, K. (2016).

An examination of the impact of racial and ethnic identity, impostor feelings, and minority status stress on the mental health of Black college students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 44(2), 101–117.

McClain, S., et al. (2016). Navigating race-related stress: Strategies for African American students at predominantly White institutions. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 44(4), 273–288.

Mintz, S. (2024, January 3). Changing campus cultures at elite universities. *Inside Higher Ed*.

Morris, M. R. (2018). The art of teaching using hip-hop. In C. Emdin & E. Adjapong (Eds.), #HipHopEd: The compilation on hip-hop education (pp.89-96). Boston, MA: Brill Sense.

Nichols, A. H. (2019, November 30). ‘Segregation forever’?: *The continued underrepresentation of Black and Latino undergraduates at the nation’s 101 most selective public colleges and universities*. Education Trust. Retrieved June 4, 2024, from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED607325>

Oakland University. (n.d.). *The Oakland University Trustee Academic Success (OUTAS) Program*. <https://www.oakland.edu/cmi/OUTAS/>

Outkast. (1994). *Git Up, Git Out*. On *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik* [Song]. LaFace Records.

Park, J. J. (2025, April 14). Some DEI programs are vulnerable, not illegal. *Inside Higher Ed*.

- Petchauer, E. (2009). Framing and counter-framing academic success and failure: A case for Hip-Hop collegians. *Urban Education*, 44(4), 369–396.
- Petchauer, E. (2010). Sampling practices and social spaces: Exploring a hip-hop approach to higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51, 359-372.
- Petchauer, E. (2011). Knowing what's up and learning what you're not supposed to: Hip-hop collegians, *higher education, and the limits of critical consciousness*. *Journal of Black Studies*, 42(5), 768-790.
- Petchauer, E. (2012). *Hip-Hop culture in college students' lives: Elements, embodiment, and higher edutainment*. Routledge.
- Petersen, Steven A. and Bartel, Susan M. (2020) "When Culture and Change Collide In Higher Education: A Case Study at One University," *Administrative Issues Journal*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 2.
- Price, E. G., III. (2006). *Hip hop culture*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Quinn, R. (2025, February 27). Trump is targeting DEI in higher ed—but what does he mean? *Inside Higher Ed*.
- Reese, E. (2019). *The History of Hip Hop* (Vol. 2). Eric Reese.
- Rooks, N. (2024, May 2). The pendulum has swung away from social justice. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Schloss, J. G. (2009). *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York*. Oxford University Press.
- Sexton, J. (2015). Unbearable Blackness. *Cultural Critique*, 90, 159–178.  
<https://doi.org/10.5749/culturalcritique.90.2015.0159>

- Smith, J. (2025, April 17). Trump just made it even more difficult to accuse colleges of systemic sexism and racism. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Smith, W. A., Allen, W. R., & Danley, L. L. (2007). “Assume the position ... you fit the description”: Psychosocial experiences and racial battle fatigue among African American male college students. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(4), 551–578.
- Smith, W. A., Hung, M., & Franklin, J. D. (2011). Racial battle fatigue and the miseducation of Black men: Racial microaggressions, societal problems, and environmental stress. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 80(1), 63-82.
- Solórzano, D. G., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. J. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 60-73.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23–44.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students’ sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge.
- Strayhorn, T. L., Lo, M., Travers, C. S., & Tillman-Kelly, D. L (2015). Assessing the relationship between well-being, sense of belonging, and confidence in the transition to college for Black male collegians. *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men*, 4(1), 127–138.
- Stahl, M. (2025, April 22). Colleges must eliminate DEI programs to receive research funding, NIH says. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.



- Stahl, M. (2025, April 3). Trump demands Harvard eradicate DEI to preserve its federal funding. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Sulé, V. T. (2016). Hip-Hop Is the Healer: Sense of Belonging and Diversity among Hip-Hop Collegians. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(2), 181–196.
- Syracuse University. (n.d.). Men of Color Initiative (MCI). Belonging and Student Success.
- Tichavakunda, A. A. (2021). Black joy: Examining the relationship between joy and collegiate success. *Journal of African American Studies*, 25(2), 98–117.
- Tichavakunda, A. A. (2022). Taking Black Joy Seriously in Higher Education. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 54(5), 52–56.
- The Roots. (1994). *Proceed*. On *Do You Want More?!!??!* [Song]. Geffen Records.
- The Roots. (2004). *Boom!* [Song]. On *The Tipping Point*. Geffen Records.
- Weissman, S. (2025, February 25). What DEI kills is higher ed willing to die on? *Inside Higher Ed*.
- Wessel, R., & Wallaert, K. (2011). Student perceptions of hip-hop culture's influence on the undergraduate experience. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52, 167-179.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.
- Zúñiga, X., Mildred, J., Varghese, R., Dejong, K., & Keehn, M. (2012). Engaged listening in race/ethnicity and gender intergroup dialogue courses. *Equity & Excellence in Education: Intergroup Dialogue: Engaging Difference, Social Identities, and Social Justice*, 45(1), 80–99.

APPENDIX A  
IRB APPROVAL LETTER



**Institutional Review Board**

**Date:** April 22, 2025

**Study #:** IRB-FY2025-324

**Study Title:** JOY STORIES: A CRITICAL RACE, HIP-HOP, NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO HOW BLACK MEN WHO GRADUATED FROM HPWIs FOUND BELONGING AND JOY THROUGH BEATS AND RHYMES.

**Submission Type:** Initial

**IRB Decision:** Exempt

**Research Team:**

Lawrence Young  
Venice Sule

Based on applicable federal regulations, the above referenced study has been determined to be Exempt, with the following categories:

Category 2. (ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

**Notes for Researcher(s):**

This submission includes the following approved documents:

- Research Recruitment/Advertisement
- Information Sheet V 4/22/2025
- Data collection tools - Survey Questionnaires

**Letter and Consent Document:**

This letter along with the IRB approved (date-stamped) consent document can be found in Cayuse in the Submission Details page under Letters and Attachments, respectively. Please make sure to use the most recent IRB approved version of the consent form in consenting participants.

**Permission from Research Site(s):**

Please note the following:

- This IRB exemption determination letter means that this research has met one or more of the federal criteria for exemption per 45 CFR 46.104- Exempt Research.
- Before the research is initiated, permission to conduct research at a given site must be obtained from all research locations listed in the IRB submission. You must keep copies of all such permission letters for your files.
- It is the responsibility of each researcher to follow all applicable policies and procedures of any outside institution where the research will be conducted.

**Modifications:**

Any changes to this exempt project must be reviewed by the IRB prior to initiation by submitting a MODIFICATION request. Do not collect data while the changes are being reviewed. Data collected during this time cannot be used in research.

**Record Retention:**

Exempt projects will be retained by the IRB office for three years after the last action on the project.

You are approved to start the research. Please retain a copy of this notification for your records.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office.

Thank you.

The Oakland University IRB

## APPENDIX B

### RESEARCH RECRUITMENT/ADVERTISEMENT

I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Educational Leadership program at Oakland University, working under the direction of Dr. V. Thandi Sulé, professor and coordinator of the Higher Education Degree Programs at Oakland University. I am conducting a research study to explore the experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from a 4-year historically or predominantly White institution (HPWI).

#### **I am recruiting individuals who are:**

- 18 years or older
- Identify as a Black/African American man or male
- Graduates from a four-year historically or predominantly White institution (HPWI)
- Identify as a practitioner of Hip-Hop creative forms of expression or cultural aesthetics. (Emceeing, rapping, spoken word poetry, turntablism, djing, producing, beat making, blogging, content creator, journalist, historian, breakdancer, graffiti artist)
- Had access to and participated in Hip-Hop spaces on or around campus

#### **What you are asked to do:**

- Participants will be asked to complete a screening questionnaire online via Qualtrics, which will take approximately 5 minutes.
- After completing the screening questionnaire, participants may be selected for the study.
- If selected, participants will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, which will take approximately 5 minutes online via Qualtrics before the interview.
- After completing the demographic questionnaire, a 60 to 75-minute interview will be scheduled, which will take place via Zoom at a convenient time for the participant.
- Each Zoom interview will be recorded.
- After each interview is completed, the researcher will email the participants a copy of their interview transcript to ensure that what the researcher has captured accurately reflects the participants' words and perspectives.
- Follow-up meeting: Following the completion of interviews and coding of transcript data, willing participants will have the opportunity to collaborate with

the researcher to create an original Hip-Hop music recording informed by themes derived from anonymized participant interview data. This recording will serve as an arts-based method that may be used to convey composite stories of Black men's experiences finding joy and belonging through Hip-Hop creative practices while attending HPWIs. Willing participants will be able to record their contributions to the song using their personal or home recording equipment, or at a recording studio selected by the researcher. The researcher anticipates that the follow-up meeting will take place virtually via Zoom. If any participants do not have the capacity to self-record, the researcher has selected the following site for recording:

- Star Heaven Studios, 3411 Cambridge, Detroit, MI 48221
- The researcher will cover any recording costs or service fees incurred by participants. The researcher anticipates the entire meeting and recording to be completed in one session of 2 - 4 hours with willing participants.

**Your participation in this study is voluntary.** Upon completing the research study, which includes a screening and demographic questionnaire, as well as a one-hour Zoom interview, the participant will receive a \$20 Amazon e-gift card via email. Participation in the Hip-Hop song recording follow-up meeting is not required to receive the \$20 Amazon e-gift card.

The screening and demographic questionnaires will be conducted online through Qualtrics, and the interview and interview follow-up will be conducted via Zoom.

To participate in this study, please complete the screening questionnaire [here](#). If you are selected to participate, we will contact you to have you complete a demographic questionnaire and schedule an interview at a convenient time for you.

**[Click here for the screening questionnaire.](#)**

If you have any questions about the research, please contact me at [lawrenceyoung@oakland.edu](mailto:lawrenceyoung@oakland.edu) or 313-236-1758 (cell) or Dr. V. Thandi Sulé, [sule@oakland.edu](mailto:sule@oakland.edu), (248) 370-4339, the faculty advisor for this project.

## APPENDIX C

### INFORMATION SHEET

#### FOR EXEMPT SURVEY RESEARCH ONLY

##### Information Sheet for Exempt Survey Research

*Joy Stories: A Critical Race, Hip-Hop, Narrative Inquiry Into How Black Men Who Graduated From HPWIs Found Belonging and Joy Through Beats and Rhymes*

#### **Introduction**

You are being asked to participate in a research study being conducted by Lawrence Young under the direction of Dr. V. Thandi Sulé, a Professor of higher education and the Coordinator of the Masters in Higher Education Program at Oakland University, the faculty advisor for this project.

Your decision to participate in this study is voluntary. You can elect to end your participation at any time or skip any part of the study if you are uncomfortable. Your decision will not affect your present or future relationship with Oakland University, the researcher, or the Department of Organizational Leadership. If you are a student or employee at Oakland University, your decision about participation will not affect your grades or employment status.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this study is to capture the narratives and lived experiences of Black men who graduated from HPWIs and who identify as practitioners of Hip-Hop cultural aesthetics (creative forms of expression).

#### **Who can participate in this study?**

You are being asked to participate in the study because you are 18 years or older, identify as a Black/African American man or male, who identifies as a practitioner of Hip-Hop cultural aesthetics or creative forms of expression, and graduated from a four-year historically or predominantly White institution (HPWI), and had access to or participated in Hip-Hop spaces on or around campus.

#### **What do I have to do?**

You will be asked to complete a brief **screening questionnaire** to determine eligibility for the study. If selected for the study, participants will then be asked to complete a **demographic questionnaire**, which will take approximately 5 minutes online via Qualtrics before the interview. After completing the demographic questionnaire, a 60 to 75-minute interview will be scheduled, which will take place via Zoom at a convenient time for the participant. All Zoom interviews will be recorded. After each interview is completed, the researcher will email the participants a copy of their interview transcript to ensure that what the researcher has captured accurately reflects the participants' words and perspectives.

- Follow-up meeting: Following the completion of interviews and coding of transcript data, willing participants will have the opportunity to collaborate with the researcher to create an original Hip-Hop music recording informed by themes derived from anonymized participant interview data. This recording will serve as an arts-based method that may be used to convey composite stories of Black men's experiences finding joy and belonging through Hip-Hop creative practices while attending HPWIs. Willing participants will be able to record their contributions to the song using their personal or home recording equipment, or at a recording studio selected by the researcher. The researcher anticipates that the follow-up meeting will take place virtually via Zoom. If any participants do not have the capacity to self-record, the researcher has selected the following site for recording:
  - Star Heaven Studios, 3411 Cambridge, Detroit, MI 48221
- The researcher will cover any recording costs or service fees incurred by participants. The researcher anticipates the entire meeting and recording to be completed in one session of 2 - 4 hours with willing participants.

### **Are there any risks to me?**

There may be a risk that someone who is not part of this research may accidentally see your personal information. We will try to ensure this does not happen by keeping your research records as confidential as possible. When the results of this research are published or presented at conferences, no information that personally identifies you will be included.

While the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from HPWIs, some interview questions may prompt reflections on challenging or emotionally charged moments related to identity, discrimination, or marginalization. Revisiting such experiences may evoke feelings of discomfort, sadness, or frustration. Participants are encouraged to share only what they feel comfortable

disclosing and may skip any question or stop the interview at any time without penalty. Resources for emotional support and counseling services will be provided at the beginning of the interview, should any participant wish to access them.

**Are there any benefits to me?**

Participating in the research study may allow you to experience the benefits of sharing your own narrative and lived experiences. By sharing your experiences, you may gain a sense of control and ownership over your journey and potentially uncover new insights and perspectives that can help you navigate future challenges. Additionally, your input may contribute to our understanding of how Black men find and build community, and experience joy and a sense of belonging while attending HPWIs.

**Will I receive anything for participating?**

Upon completing the research study, which includes a screening and demographic questionnaire, as well as a one-hour Zoom interview, the participant will receive a \$20 Amazon e-gift card via email. Participation in the Hip-Hop song recording follow-up meeting is not required to receive the \$20 Amazon e-gift card.

**What if I want to stop participating in this study?**

If you want to stop participating you may do so at any time. You may choose to withdraw participation during the eligibility screening, demographic questionnaire, or Zoom interview. If you wish to stop participating during any phase of the study, you may inform the researcher of your desire and intention to withdraw verbally before, during, or after the interview. If you wish to withdraw your participation during the screening or questionnaire, close your browser before completing and submitting the questionnaire. If you wish to stop participating after submitting the survey, please contact the researchers.

**Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?**

Lawrence Young, [lawrenceyoung@oakland.edu](mailto:lawrenceyoung@oakland.edu), (313) 236-1758, or Dr. V. Thandi Sulé, [sule@oakland.edu](mailto:sule@oakland.edu), (248) 370-4339, the faculty advisor for this project.

**For questions regarding your rights as a participant in human subject research, you may contact the Oakland University Institutional Review Board, 248-370-4898.**



## APPENDIX D

### PARTICIPANT ELIGIBILITY SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

Q1 I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Educational Leadership program working under the direction of Dr. V. Thandi Sulé, Professor of Higher Education and the Coordinator of the Masters in Higher Education Program at Oakland University, the faculty advisor for this project. I am conducting a research study to explore the experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from 4-year historically or predominantly White institutions (HPWI). HPWI "means the predominant student population is White and the socio-cultural norms perpetuate whiteness."

I am recruiting individuals who are 18 years or older, identify as Black or African-American men, and who have Hip-Hop identities or identify as practitioners of Hip-Hop creative forms of expression (Emcee/Rapper, Spoken Word Artist/Poet, B-Boy/Breakdancer, Disc Jockey/DJ/Turntable-ist, Event Curator/Promoter, Producer/Beat-maker, Scholar, Journalist, Historian, Blogger, Content Creator, Videographer). After completing the screening questionnaire, you may be selected to participate in the study. Participation in the research study includes completing an online demographic questionnaire, and an interview over Zoom.

The screening questionnaire will take approximately 5 minutes. If selected to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire before your interview, which will take approximately 5 minutes. After completing the demographic

questionnaire, a Zoom interview and follow-up meeting will be scheduled to review the interview transcript, which will take approximately 60 to 75 minutes each.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you want to stop participating in the survey, close your browser before completing and submitting the survey. If you wish to stop your participation after submitting the survey please contact Lawrence Young, [lawrenceyoung@oakland.edu](mailto:lawrenceyoung@oakland.edu), 313-236-1758 or Dr. V. Thandi Sulé, [sule@oakland.edu](mailto:sule@oakland.edu), (248) 370-4339, the faculty advisor for this project.

For questions regarding your rights as a participant in human subject research, you may contact the Oakland University Institutional Review Board, 248-370-4898.

Are you willing to take part in this survey?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Q2 Which of the following best describes you? Please select one answer.

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
  - ☐ Asian
  - ☐ Black or African American
  - ☐ Hispanic or Latinx/a/o
  - ☐ Multiracial or Biracial
  - ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - ☐ White
  - ☐ My race/ethnicity not listed (please type response below)
- 
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Q3 Did you graduate from a 4-year college or university?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Q4 Was the 4-year college or university you graduated from a Historically or Predominantly White Institution (HPWI)? HPWI means the predominant student population is White, and the socio-cultural norms perpetuate whiteness.

☐ Yes

☐ No

Q5 Do you have a Hip-Hop identity or practice Hip-Hop creative forms of expression?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Q6 Please select your specific Hip-Hop identity or creative practice (select all that apply).

- ☐ Emcee/Rapper
- ☐ Spoken Word Artist/Poet
- ☐ Disc Jockey/DJ/Turntable-ist
- ☐ Producer/Beat-maker
- ☐ Event Curator/Promoter
- ☐ Scholar
- ☐ Journalist
- ☐ Historian
- ☐ Blogger/Vlogger
- ☐ Content Creator
- ☐ Videographer

☐

My Hip-Hop identity or creative practice not listed (please type response below) \_\_\_\_\_

Q7 Did you have access to spaces (classes, student organizations, student support programs, performance opportunities on or near campus) where you could engage in Hip-Hop creative forms of expression while you were attending your institution?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Q8 Please share your email address:

---

---

---

---

---

## APPENDIX E

### **PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

Q1 You are being asked to participate in a research study being conducted by Lawrence Young under the direction of Dr. V. Thandi Sulé, a Professor of higher education and the Coordinator of the Master's in Higher Education Program at Oakland University, the faculty advisor for this project. Your decision to participate in this study is voluntary. You can elect to end your participation at any time or skip any part of the study if you are uncomfortable. Your decision will not affect your present or future relationship with Oakland University, the researcher, or the Department of Organizational Leadership. If you are a student or employee at Oakland University, your decision about participation will not affect your grades or employment status.

The purpose of this study is to capture the narratives and lived experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities (practitioners of Hip-Hop creative forms of expression) who graduated from historically and predominantly White institutions. The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from 4-year historically and predominantly White institutions. You are being asked to participate in the study because you are 18 years or older, identify as a Black/African American man or male, and identify as a practitioner of Hip-Hop creative forms of expression or cultural aesthetics (Emceeing, rapping, spoken word poetry, turntableism, djing, producing, beat making, blogging, content creator, journalist, historian, breakdancer, graffiti artist), and had access to and participated in Hip-Hop

spaces on or around campus. Participants will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, which will take approximately 5 minutes online via Qualtrics before the interview.

After completing the demographic questionnaire, a 60 to 75-minute interview will be scheduled, which will take place via Zoom at a convenient time for the participant. After the interview, a 60-75-minute follow-up meeting via Zoom will be scheduled at a convenient time for the participant. There may be a risk that someone who is not part of this research may accidentally see your personal information. We will try to make sure that this does not happen by keeping your research records as confidential as possible. When the results of this research are published or presented at conferences, no information that personally identifies you will be included. To minimize these risks, participants will be provided with state and national resources such as 988, the National Hotline for Mental Health Crises and Suicide Prevention.

Participating in the research study may allow you to experience the empowering benefits of sharing your personal narrative and lived experiences. By sharing your experiences, you can gain a sense of control and ownership over your journey and uncover new insights and perspectives that can help you navigate challenging circumstances in the future. Additionally, your input will contribute to our understanding of how Black men find/build community, and experience joy and a sense of belonging while attending HPWIs. After completing the study (screening questionnaire, demographic questionnaire, Zoom interview, and follow-up meeting via Zoom), participants will



receive a \$20 Amazon e-gift card. If you want to stop participating, close your browser before completing and submitting the questionnaire. If you wish to stop participating after submitting the survey, please contact Lawrence Young, [lawrenceyoung@oakland.edu](mailto:lawrenceyoung@oakland.edu), (313) 236-1758, or Dr. V. Thandi Sulé, [sule@oakland.edu](mailto:sule@oakland.edu), (248) 370-4339, the faculty advisor for this project.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in human subject research, you may contact the Oakland University Institutional Review Board at 248-370-4898. The next step in this research study is a demographic questionnaire to assess the transfer experiences of Black men with Hip-Hop identities who graduated from historically and predominantly White institutions. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact Lawrence Young, [lawrenceyoung@oakland.edu](mailto:lawrenceyoung@oakland.edu), (313) 236-1758, or Dr. V. Thandi Sulé, [sule@oakland.edu](mailto:sule@oakland.edu), (248) 370-4339, the faculty advisor for this project. Do you wish to participate in this study?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Q2 What is your age?

- ☐ 18 - 24
- ☐ 25 - 34
- ☐ 35 - 44
- ☐ 45 -54
- ☐ 55 - 64
- ☐ 65 - 74
- ☐ 75 - 84
- ☐ 85 or older
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Q3 What was your estimated household income growing up?

- ☐ Less than \$25, 000
- ☐ \$25,000 - \$49,000
- ☐ \$50,000 - \$74,999
- ☐ \$75,000 - \$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000 - \$149,999
- ☐ \$150,000 or more
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Q4 What is the highest level of education attained by your parents or guardians? (Select the highest level)

- ☐ Less than high school
- ☐ High school diploma or GED
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Associate's (2 year degree)
- ☐ Bachelor's (4 year degree)
- ☐ Master's (Graduate or professional degree)
- ☐ Doctorate
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Q5 Were you raised primarily in:

- ☐ Urban Area
- ☐ Suburban Area
- ☐ Rural Area (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Q6 How would you describe the racial diversity of the high school you attended?

- ☐ Mostly Black
- ☐ Mostly non-Black
- ☐ A mix of Black and non-Black peers
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Q7 What is your employment status?

- ☐ Full-Time
- ☐ Part-Time
- ☐ Seeking opportunities currently
- ☐ Retired
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Q8 What is your current profession?

- ☐ Student (Full-time)
- ☐ Student (Part-time)
- ☐ Faculty/Academic Staff

- ☐ Administrative Staff (University/College)
- ☐ Researcher
- ☐ Healthcare Professional (e.g., Nurse, Doctor, Therapist)
- ☐ Engineer (e.g., Biomedical, Civil, Mechanical, Electrical, Software)
- ☐ Information Technology Professional (e.g., Developer, Programmer, Data Scientist)
- ☐ Business Professional (Finance, Marketing, HR)
- ☐ Entrepreneur/Self-employed
- ☐ Education Professional (e.g., K-12 Teacher, Principal, Superintendent, Counselor)
- ☐ Government Employee (e.g., Public Service, Policy, Emergency Response)
- ☐ Legal Professional (e.g., Lawyer, Paralegal)
- ☐ Creative Professional (e.g., Artist, Designer, Writer)
- ☐ Skilled Trades (e.g., Electrician, Plumber, Mechanic)
- ☐ Sales/Customer Service Representative
- ☐ Nonprofit/NGO Employee

☐ Social Services Professional (e.g., Social Worker, Case Manager)

☐ Retired

☐ Seeking opportunities currently

☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Prefer not to answer

Q9 What is your highest level of educational attainment?

☐ Bachelor's

☐ Master's

☐ Doctoral

☐ Prefer not to answer

Q10 What was your major or academic program?

\_\_\_\_\_

Q11 Were you involved in any of the following campus organizations or activities?

(Check all the apply)

☐ Black Student Union (BSU) or similar organizations

☐ Greek Life (fraternities/sororities)

☐ Athletics (varsity, club, or intramural)

☐ Student Government

☐ Cultural Centers

☐ None

☐ Other (please specify below)

---

☐ Prefer not to answer



Q12 Please select your specific Hip-Hop identity or creative practice (select all that apply).

- ☐ Emcee/Rapper
- ☐ Spoken Word Artist/Poet
- ☐ Disc Jockey/DJ/Turntable-ist
- ☐ Producer/Beat-maker
- ☐ Event Curator/Promoter
- ☐ Scholar
- ☐ Journalist
- ☐ Historian
- ☐ Blogger/Vlogger
- ☐ Content Creator
- ☐ Videographer

☐

My Hip-Hop identity or creative practice not listed (please type response below) \_\_\_\_\_

☐

Prefer not to answer

Q13 How often did you participate in Hip-Hop spaces, clubs, courses, programs, or activities during your collegiate experience?

☐ Never

☐ 1 - 2 times per semester

☐ 3- 5 times per semester

☐ 6 - 9 times per semester

☐ 10 times or more per semester

☐ Prefer not to answer

Q14 Please share the best way to contact you (i.e. phone/email)