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AN IMPERFECT AND INCOMPLETE QUEST FOR FREEDOM:
AN EXTENDED CASE STUDY OF BLACK AMERICAN COUNTER-FRAMING AND RESISTANCE
STRATEGIES

by

ANGELA LUVARA

Under the Direction of Rosalind Chou, PhD

ABSTRACT

Through this study, I aim to expand the body of knowledge related to Black counter-framing strategies employed in the United States. In this extended case study, I examine the ways in which young Black cis-hetero male creators living in Atlanta, Georgia employ the use of counter-frames to navigate and resist the dominant white racial frame. Specifically, I analyze their use of double consciousness, freedom, and alchemical capitalism as counter-frames as resistance. I advocate for a nuanced approach to examining resistance strategies that includes embracing imperfect and incomplete acts of resistance. By examining these resistance

strategies, despite their faults, perhaps we can continue working toward a more complete eradication of oppression.

INDEX WORDS: White racial frame, Spirit murder, Systemic racism, Black resistance, double consciousness

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ANGELA LUVARA

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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Angela Luvara
2016

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STRATEGIES

by

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Georgia State University

December 2016

DEDICATION

To anyone on the journey to discover their authentic self, and anyone who has been afraid to take that first step. I know that fear all too well. It was a liar.

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I would like to extend a sincere thanks to Dr. Rosalind Chou for all of her help throughout this process, and for anticipating the types of encouragement I needed to complete this project. Thanks to both Dr. Chou and Dr. Wendy Simonds for exposing me to countless pieces of critical scholarship that fed my radical soul and let me know there is space for me in academia. I owe thanks to Dr. Chou, Dr. Simonds, and Dr. Jonathan Gayles for being a small handful of professors who allow me to be myself. Thank you for helping me work toward the best version of myself as opposed to forcing me into a mold that I want no parts of. Thank you for your support, comments, and questions. They have made this project better than it ever could have been had I worked alone.

My thanks cannot end without going far back in time to cover the many sources of my knowledge production that exist outside academia. First, I must thank my parents for crafting what could possibly be the most diverse experiences two children growing up in West Virginia could have—especially for a family of four on two schoolteachers' incomes. I thank my mother for showing me—with example after example—the importance of recognizing inequality and giving all that you can to mediate its effects. I thank my father for letting me follow him around every football season, and for showing me that family extends far beyond blood relatives. I thank each and every Potomac State football player from 1983 through the last season of PSC football in 1999. Each and every one of you shared pieces of your life with me that sculpted me in ways that are so integral to who I am. You offered me the foundation for my understanding of structural oppression and this is an invaluable gift.

Words could never truly encompass the vast gratefulness that I hold for the next people that I wish to thank, but I will try anyway. My most profound and intense gratitude goes to every young person that I have shared space with, especially in my years of field work. I could never list them all but I would like to name a few: Ke'Sean, Bri'ana, Tiffany, Dee Dee, Larry, Brandon, Helen, James, Gem, Cecily, Trishanda, and more recently Alma, Raheem, Willie, and Julien. Each of you, and the many more not listed here, have taught me more about the impacts of structural oppression than any textbook or professor ever could. You have graciously shared your lives and experiences with me in very personal ways, though I did nothing to deserve this generosity. The knowledge that I hold because of your generosity allowed me to complete this project, allows me to impact others through teaching, and allows me to live a life in genuine pursuit of spreading radical love. None of this would be possible without the things I learned from you, and though I do not say it often enough out loud, I acknowledge that to myself every single day.

I hold such a deep gratitude for each of the men who agreed to participate in this study. Each of you not only allow this project to exist but also inspire me to strive to welcome my most authentic self into my life every single day. That is a gift that I could never repay. Finally, I want to end my acknowledgements by recognizing the women who support and enable these men to pursue their passions in so many ways, and often go unnoticed. Bianca, Tayla, Annisah, Debbie, Sienna, Mia, Tasha, Barb, Viv, Neesha, and many others: I recognize you and value you. Each of you provides invaluable support to these influential men, while also engaging in your own freedom walk and influencing and healing others through your own work. You are truly amazing and inspiring, and without you, none of this would be possible.

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1 CHAPTER 1: THEORY AND METHODS

1.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

I moved to Atlanta from Durham, North Carolina in 2011 for one reason: to obtain a Ph.D. I left behind friends that had become family, a community of activists and organizers that served as my mentors, and a thriving arts and music community full of creators that had welcomed me with open arms. I arrived in Atlanta alone—lacking both community and a clue about the stresses of the doctoral process. I quickly learned that I would not make it through this Ph.D. program without an outlet. Graciously, my creator-friends in North Carolina saw this need and connected me with fellow creators here in Atlanta. Thus was born not only my respite from academia, but also the catalyst for this project.

My new friends inspired me with their dedication to their respective crafts. They were painters, musicians, tattoo artists, writers, photographers...the list goes on and on. Many of them did not just engage in one craft, but mastered multiple creative endeavors with apparent ease. They didn't just engage in a creative act, they curated every aspect of their lives—from the artistic creations they put on display in shows and at concerts, to their outfits, right down to their social media feeds. This is why I refer to them as creators. They possess an incredible gift, driven by a desire to invent and reinvent, to make beautiful, to destroy, and to rebuild. I was surrounded by their passion while I embarked on the journey to mentally adjust to my doctoral coursework. Inspired by my creator-friends, I discovered the importance of finding or making time for my photography. Always a documentarian at heart, I began capturing my new Atlanta-based creator-friends in film (and digitally) any time I needed respite from my overbearing academic workload. Just as my community in North Carolina had done, my new creator-friends

welcomed me into their lives here in Atlanta. They shared, and continue to share, pieces of themselves with me, entrusted me with capturing their spirit, and made me comfortable to share both myself and my creations with them. Ultimately, a number of them have now entrusted me with their story through this project.

This coping skill—this method I developed to try and retain some sense of my own humanity in the midst of academia, where you are often expected to detach from yourself and your research in an effort to promote a false sense of objectivity—quickly became so much more than a hiding place from my assignments. In an effort to remind myself that I am a human, not a knowledge-machine that chews up books and journal articles and spits out papers, I wound up uncovering new layers of my personhood. However, I did not discover these new pieces of myself on my own. In large part, this path of self-discovery was inspired and facilitated by my creator-friends. They were unapologetically themselves. They adorned themselves—both in dress and body modifications—in any way they pleased, they removed themselves from any situation—job, school, or otherwise—that drained their spirits, and they created the most personal, vulnerable, raw works of art I had ever witnessed. They were who I always wanted to be. Ultimately, they not only inspired me to bridge the gap between who I was and who I wanted to be, they helped me do so.

The more time I spent around my creator-friends, the more I noticed how intentional their decisions and actions were. They moved through life very purposefully, uncovering and preserving their authentic selves—the people they aspired to be in spite of, and possibly in reaction to, who social constructs deemed that they should be. They carefully curated their jobs, opportunities, and relationships with regard to this self-preservation. It was completely

contradictory to any and everything I had been taught about my life choices. I was under the impression that I had to sacrifice parts of myself to conform to societal standards to have the career and life that I desired. On the contrary, my creator-friends seemed to understand that the more they embraced their authentic selves, the more they were rewarded with their desires. Spending time with these amazing, brave, new creator-friends helped me shed the masks I had been wearing to appease potential employers, family members, and friends and embark on a journey to find my most authentic self. Without them, I very literally would not be who I am today.



Figure 1-1. City of Ink: Edgewood.

PaperFrank tattoos a client as Chris and another tattoo artist look on.

Of course, I cannot give credit and thanks to my amazing creator-friends without also discussing our vastly different social positions. As a white woman from a middle-class

background, I have significantly much less to lose in pursuit of my authentic self than some of the people who modeled the way for me. I can have my nose piercing and tattoos largely without my intelligence being questioned—and certainly without being seen as a threat—because of my white femininity. The growling tiger tattooed on my throat, the skull tattoo on my hand—these adornments are interpreted as “cute” more often than not. Surely this can be largely, if not completely, attributed to my social position as a white woman.

Conversely, many of my brave creator-friends are young and Black¹, and thus face challenges larger in both quantity and size when choosing to be their true self in a society built on stripping Black people of their authentic personhood. For those creator-friends who graciously participated in this project—all young, Black men residing in Atlanta—their experiences with the structural oppression designed to detach them from themselves is not only unique, but also very complex (Crenshaw et al. 1995). These experiences are most certainly not specific to the creator-friends in my project. Many young Black men residing in urban locations across the U.S. likely experience similar connections to structural oppression.

For many young Black men and women across the U.S., contact with institutional racism starts very early. Often, inner-city neighborhoods populated by primarily Black residents lack adequate social services and sufficient schools (Kozol 1991; Noguera 1996; Collins 2005). Aside from their lacking resources and underpaid teachers, the schools that are present in these

¹ Throughout this dissertation, I capitalize Black, and keep white lowercase. In doing so, I follow the footsteps of many Critical Race Theorists, who argue that Black is a signifier of something more than just a racial category—there is a heritage, a culture, and a social meaning attached to it much like many ethnic groups. Conversely, whiteness has no such connections. See Barrie Thorne, Cheris Kramarae, and Nancy Hedley, eds., *Language, Gender, and Society* [Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1983] (Laymon, 2013) (Brown, 2010); Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law,” *Harvard Law Review* 101 [1988]: 1331-2; and Karma R. Chavez and Cindy L. Griffin, eds., *Standing in the Intersection: Feminist Voices, Feminist Practices in Communication Studies* [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012].

neighborhoods are also more likely to foster punitive, surveillance-based environments (Ferguson 2001; Brown 2003; Lipman 2003; Noguera 1997) that specifically target Black students for discipline and exclusion at disproportionate levels (Ferguson 2001; Advancement Project 2005). The impact of these disproportionate levels of school discipline on the young Black students who are targeted extends beyond the education system. Interactions with school disciplinary systems then increase the likelihood of contact with the legal system (Casella 2003; Sweeten 2006; Price 2009). The same neighborhoods that house these punitive schools that foster the school-to-prison pipeline (Hyman and Perone 1998; Fuentes 2011) are also locations of heightened police surveillance outside the school environment (Collins 2005; Cammarota 2011), which serves as another form of increased contact with the legal system. Targeting the neighborhoods and schools where young Black people live, play, and study in this way leads to increased likelihood of arrest and subsequent punishment, doled out by our legal system. These very same neighborhoods that are targeted by these oppressive systems also lack significant opportunities for participation in the traditional labor market (Wilson 1997; Collins 2005; Cammarota 2011). By making a business of incarceration—a highly profitable one—our society has effectively overcome the impact of the loss of low-wage, low-skill work to corporations who moved their production processes from these very same neighborhoods overseas (Collins 2005, Alexander 2010).

As I learned about the depths and intricacies of structural oppression in the early stages of my Ph.D. pursuit, I struggled to find some academic literature that took a more hopeful viewpoint—both to represent the truth that was in front of me showcased by my creator friends, and also to combat the intense sadness that was building inside me as the knowledge

of the pervasive, calculated nature of structural oppression revealed itself. However, as racism permeates all social fibers of the United States, this means white supremacy is entrenched in our social structures (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Feagin 2010; Delgado and Stefancic 2012), and academia is no exception (Williams 1997; Chomsky 2003; Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi 2008; Moore 2008). Thus, the white racial frame (Feagin 2010) that is rooted in our ideologies, language, and emotions is reproduced in much academic scholarship. While the unique interactions that young Black men have with structural oppression in our society have led to a significant amount of research on their experiences, much of this prior research focuses largely on individuals and ignores the structural roots impacting their experiences (Ginwright 2001, 2006). This research typically focuses on problems associated with these youth (e.g. Jessor and Jessor 1977; Glasgow 1981; Dryfoos 1990; Ayman-Nolley and Taira 2000) or the possibilities that they hold (e.g. Pittman and Cahill 1991; Zeldin 2000). Even research that focuses on the unique forms of structural oppression that young Black men face most often use these structural causes to explain what are constructed as negative behaviors presented by young Black men living in urban areas (Noguera 1996; Ginwright 2001,2006) or to offer solutions for the development of positive counter-frames that require formal outside interventions from community organizations (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002, Cammarota 2011). While Joe Feagin (2010)—after thoroughly developing his theory on the White racial frame—offers examples of counter-frames that originate within marginalized groups, his exploration of counter-frames is admittedly underdeveloped. While many Black scholars have written on various forms of resistance within the Black community here in the U.S., Feagin includes relatively few in his counter-framing analysis. It is particularly harmful to provide such a deep and thorough analysis

of structural oppression and pair it with such a shallow understanding of resistance. It diminishes the agency, intelligence, and humanity of all of those suffering oppression at the hands of the white racial frame. Of course, Feagin is not the sole source of this diminishment. Many Black scholars, including those who focus on Black resistance, are often excluded from mainstream academia (Kelley 1997; Collins 2000), and this exclusion facilitates the gap between the academic knowledge regarding the impact the white racial frame has on our society and the tangible ways in which Black people in the U.S. maneuver around and against this dominant white supremacist ideology.

This gap in the sociological research on the ways in which young Black people not only navigate but thrive in the face of social structures designed for their exploitation and spiritual and bodily demise has been glaringly evident to me through the majority of my Ph.D. pursuit. I owe this awareness largely if not completely to the creator-friends who surround me and bless me with their unwavering, authentic presence routinely. They are defying the intricate and complex structural oppression that pervades their lives, and living more full and complete lives than anyone I have ever met. This dissertation is my homage to these creator-friends, who have inspired and encouraged me to live a full and complete life of my own, and I hope that others find similar inspiration in their brave and perseverant stories.

In this dissertation research, I examine the methods of counter-framing utilized by young Black cis-heterosexual (cis-het) men in Atlanta in an effort to combat the dominant white racial frame that seeks to limit their life chances in a myriad of ways. For the purposes of this research, I focus solely on young Black cis-het men for several reasons. First and foremost, Black people experience unique forms of oppression at the intersections of their race, gender,

and sexual identities (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000; Collins 2005). The differences in the oppression experienced by Black people of different genders and sexual identities are vast, as are the ways in which they resist these systems of oppression—much too vast to give full attention to them all in the confines of one dissertation. Furthermore, a major component of these young Black cis-het men resisting the white racial frame appears to be the ability to withdraw from wage labor. For many reasons which I explain throughout my analysis and connect largely with the patriarchy that goes hand-in-hand with our white supremacist society, the young Black cis-het men in my study have been able to do that earlier in life and with more economic success than queer young Black men and all sexualities of young Black women in the creative community in Atlanta, as well as those young Black people who do not identify within the confines of the gender binary. That is not to say that these groups are not also actively and successfully resisting the white racial frame, as quite the opposite is true. Rather, their methods vary too widely to cover within the scope of this project in a way that gives them all the proper attention and analysis.

Situating this project in the creative community in Atlanta is a decision rooted in much more than simple proximity. Much of the Black cultural production within the U.S., both currently and historically, is rooted in Black Southern cultural production (Laymon 2013). Given that Black cultural production has such a vast impact on all U.S. cultural production (Laymon 2013), the specific artistic creations of Black Southerners are of significant importance to us all. Not surprisingly, the creator-friends I have come to love here in Atlanta not only act as influencers in their respective creative fields on a nationwide and even global level, they also influence how many of us resist the various forms of oppression present in our lives. Art and

artists very often are at the core of any resistance movement, and the creative community in Atlanta is no different.

Although this study is made up largely of my creator-friends, I still recognize that my social position as a white woman makes me an outsider. In an effort to privilege the voices of my participants, I engage in dialogical research, which promotes the construction of knowledge as a community effort (Collins 2000). I employ the use of dialogue both through my theoretical frameworks as well as my methodology. I couch this research within theories of critical race and systemic racism, and pay specific attention to knowledge produced by Black American scholars. I employ the use of Extended Case Methodology (ECM) to utilize a combination of in-depth interviews and multi-site ethnography to capture an understanding of this under-examined facet of social life.

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

1.2.1 CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Critical Race Theory (CRT), formulated by legal scholars of color, is based on the belief that racism is embedded in our societal structure in an effort to maintain White supremacy (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2012). This belief is a key tenet of CRT, and informs the way in which critical researchers approach their work. For CRT researchers, it is crucial to situate research within the White supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchal (hooks 1994) context of our contemporary and historical society (Williams 1991). CRT researchers also believe that capitalism in the U.S. is directly connected to White supremacy (Bell 1989; Smith 2010). Finally, CR theorists privilege research done with an intersectional approach (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Kelley 1997; Delgado & Stefancic 2012), stressing that it is imperative to privilege

the voices of people of color, as their voices have historically been subordinated and their unique perspective has been left out of the dominant narrative as a result (Crenshaw et al. 1995, Kelley 1997; Delgado & Stefancic 2012).

Thinking intersectionally, Black feminist scholars argue that the different forms of oppression present in our society, based on a wide variety of personal characteristics, do not occur independently of one another (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000, 2005). Instead, these various forms of oppression intersect as “mutually constructing systems of power” (Collins 2005:11) to create unique experiences with oppression based on individual positionality. Thus, the study of White space and White habitus cannot occur in a vacuum. Chou et al. (2012:3) argue that the socialization that creates White space “is not only a racialized process, but also an intersectional one that shapes racial, gendered, and sexualized thoughts, feelings, and attitudes.” For the young Black men who participated in my research, age intersects with race and gender to compound the gender-specific racism they experience on a daily basis (Collins 2005). Geographic location must also be considered with these intersecting oppressions, as the experiences of young Black men living in urban areas that are economically deprived, environmentally toxic, subjected to targeted policing, and lacking social services and adequate schools (Noguera 1996; Collins 2005) further add to their unique interactions with oppression. As these various forms of oppression intersect and overlap for young Black men, they are difficult to explain individually (Collins 2000), making intersectional theory imperative to developing an understanding of the unique situation of the young Black men whose life experiences I wish to understand (Chou et al. 2012).

Following the tenets of CRT, I utilize a structural focus and an intersectional perspective to explore the ways in which young Black men react to and resist the structural oppression they face in our society. I not only focus on power dynamics as they currently stand in our society, but I also contextualize this with a thorough discussion of the history of oppression in our country, as this history is integral to understanding race dynamics in the United States. As I am not a person of color, I employ Extended Case Methodology (ECM) to privilege the voices of my participants. By conducting both in-depth interviews as well as multi-site ethnography, I have a vast amount of data that encapsulates the voices of these young men. It is my hope that my research will provide a space for the voices of the young Black men who participate in my study to enter the dominant academic discourse, so that their unique experiences may be understood in new and deeper ways.

1.2.2 SYSTEMIC RACISM AND THE WHITE RACIAL FRAME

Joe R. Feagin (2001, 2006, 2010), following in the footsteps of many scholars of color and following many tenets of CRT, focuses on the structural roots of racism in the United States in his theory of systemic racism. Feagin (2001, 2006, 2010) argues that white supremacy has been a central principle of the economic, political, and social systems in the U. S. dating back to slavery. Feagin (2010) extends this theory of systemic racism by claiming that the U. S. is dominated by a white racial frame. This theory broadens the idea of systemic racism beyond our physical systems to the abstract. Rather than viewing racism as a problem facing our society, Feagin (2010) claims that white supremacist ideologies have been embedded in the very fibers of our society—permeating our beliefs, thoughts, language, and emotions. Thus,

racism is not a problem we face, but a central component of our society extending far beyond the individual level (Feagin 2010).

1.2.2.1 White Institutional Space

Wendy Leo Moore (2008) applies the theory of the white racial frame (Feagin 2010), arguing that this frame permeates our institutions, resulting in an atmosphere that she refers to as white institutional space. While Moore (2008) focuses specifically on law schools, her theory of white institutional space can easily extend to all social institutions present under this pervasive white racial frame. Moore (2008) argues that these spaces violently uphold white supremacist ideologies, and suppress students of color who challenge them. As a result, these institutions serve to reproduce and reify racial inequality throughout our society.

1.2.2.2 White Social Space

Extending beyond just the institutional, the white racial frame is present in all facets of our society (Feagin 2010). Feagin explains the pervasiveness of the white racial frame through the concept of white social space. White supremacy permeates all aspects of our society, thus the majority of social spaces in the U.S. operate as white social space. The few exceptions to this are spaces dominated by people of color, sometimes specifically constructed as respite from which supremacy.

1.2.2.3 Internalized White Habitus

Focusing specifically on white Americans, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues that the normalization of whiteness in our society occurs through the socialization process of white habitus. Through white habitus, white Americans are conditioned to believe that whiteness and the cultural beliefs, tastes, and preferences of white people are the standard or default in our

society, and to judge everything else against this standard (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Rosalind Chou et al. (2012) extend this theory of white habitus by arguing that people of color in the U.S. can also internalize the beliefs that the ideologies and cultural aspects of whiteness are the societal norm.

1.2.2.4 Legible Black Masculinity

The persistent existence of the white racial frame facilitates the production of various controlling images (Collins 2005) that serve to promote white supremacy by problematizing people of color in varied ways. These controlling images paint young Black men as criminal, violent, and hypersexual (Collins 2005). Largely, the widespread individual belief in these controlling images contributes to the existence of what Mark Anthony Neal calls a “legible Black masculinity” (Neal 2013). That is, the only type of Black masculinity that is seen as true—or legitimate—is the one that promotes and upholds these ideas of Black men as criminal, violent, and hypersexual (Collins 2005; Neal 2013).

The existence of a legible Black masculinity serves to legitimate the forms of oppression enacted upon Black men without question (Collins 2000; Neal 2013). If Black men are believed to be inherently violent or criminal, then subjecting them to extreme forms of policing and incarcerating them at astronomical rates can go on relatively unquestioned by the majority of U.S. citizens, particularly those invested in the perpetuation of white supremacy. In fact, and in an irony typical of white supremacy, images that uphold this legible Black masculinity are usually met with feelings of comfort from white people and people of color who have internalized white supremacy (Neal 2013). It is when these controlling images are challenged that widespread discomfort and resistance occur (Williams 1991; Collins 2000; Neal 2013),

rendering any other representation of Black masculinity “illegitimate” (Williams 1991; Neal 2013).

1.2.2.5 *The Violent Personal Impact of Systemic Racism*

Systemic racism and the all-encompassing white racial frame are very abstract concepts, however they have very tangible affects on the lives of individuals in our society—both currently and throughout our history. From the moment colonization began, Black people were denied their very personhood (DuBois 1903; Fanon 1952; Williams 1991). This denial of humanity resulted in myriad forms of physical violence exacted upon Black people that continue to this day. The atrocities associated with the forced labor that occurred during our period of legalized chattel slavery included harsh labor conditions as well as violent punishments for challenging the systems of control that included, but were not limited to, whippings and murders. There is also a long and grotesque history of sexual violence against Black women dating all the way back to our period of legalized chattel slavery (Roberts 1997).

This history of physical violence imparted on Black people in the U.S. did not end when chattel slavery ended. The presence of the white racial frame upholds the denial of personhood to Black people though the government formally extended those rights long ago. Lynchings and other forms of mob violence imparted on Black Americans occurred well after the passing of the 13th Amendment. These extremely violent events were often attended by many whites in the community, including prominent members of local government (Equal Justice Initiative 2015). They were treated as social gatherings, and souvenirs and photographs were purchased or taken to commemorate the event (Equal Justice Initiative 2015). Many of these events took place in prominent locations in their communities, and few were stopped by local law

enforcement officials. In fact, less than 1% of lynch mob participants were ever convicted of their violent crimes (Equal Justice Initiative 2015).

Today, this pattern of violence continues in the form of police brutality, vigilante acts, and extrajudicial murders committed by police officers. The continuing denial of personhood occurs over and over again as Black Americans are beaten, stripped publicly, raped, and murdered by both vigilantes and police officers, and our social systems validate these actions as warranted and just time and time again. The physical violence enacted on Black people here in the U.S. has changed very little through the course of our history.

In our capitalistic society, financial standing is directly connected to personhood. Many of us deny those with limited financial resources the rights to basic human needs like food, shelter, and healthcare, or uphold rhetoric and ideologies that allow this denial to occur. Given that economic opportunity is also constructed in differential ways based on race, among other factors, these economic forms of oppression are also inherently violent and white supremacist. Early in our history, white slave owners overtly exploited the labor of Black people in America through chattel slavery. When this period of our history ended, many white people continued to exploit the labor of Black people for economic gain through the use of convict leasing programs (Blackmon 2008) and limit the economic opportunities for Black people, particularly in the South, through the use of Jim Crow laws (Wingfield 2008). Today, economic opportunities continue to be constricted for Black people in a variety of ways, including upholding discriminatory hiring practices in the workplace (Pager 2003), limiting entrepreneurial opportunities (Wingfield 2008), and again exploiting labor through mass incarceration and the Prison-Industrial Complex (Alexander 2010).

The pervasiveness of the white racial frame not only allows for violence enacted against the body, but it enables violence against the spirit—what Patricia Williams (1991) calls “spirit murder.” Williams (1991) claims that spirit murder can begin at a young age, and is directly linked to the existence of the white racial frame. Because this frame is standardized as the norm, Williams (1991) claims that Black people are conditioned to see themselves through the eyes of their oppressor. This, Williams (1991) argues, denies Black people who internalize white supremacy the ability to see their true self, as they are constantly evaluating themselves through the distortions of the white racial frame. As a result of this disconnect, Black people who internalize white habitus are taught not to trust their own true feelings, their own experiences, and even their very being (Williams 1991). This, Williams (1991:78) states, is spirit murder, and it is not to be taken lightly:

I think we need to elevate spirit murder to the conceptual—if not punitive—level of a capital moral offense. We need to see it for the cultural cancer it is, for the spiritual genocide it is wreaking on blacks, in whites, and to the abandoned and abused of all races and ages. We need to eradicate its numbing pathology before it wipes out what precious little humanity we have left.

Because of the severe damage that results from spirit murder, Williams (1991) advocates addressing it in a serious manner. Unfortunately, just as our social institutions uphold physical violence against Black people, they uphold acts of spirit murder. In fact, these are often diminished and dismissed even more than instances of physical violence. Without visible scars, these diminishing and dismissive acts are even more effective at erasing the harm enacted by acts of spirit murder. Survivors of spirit murder attempts who do speak out against this more nuanced violence are often told they are overly-sensitive (Williams 1991).

1.2.3 COUNTER-FRAMING AND THE HISTORY OF BLACK AMERICAN RESISTANCE

While the aforementioned theories on structural racism are well-developed and thorough, discussions on individual and group responses to this oppression are lacking, particularly in Feagin’s analysis. Feagin (2001:15) claims that our society is a “White social space” where people of color have to “submit to whatever exploitative and oppressive actions privileged Whites might wish to impose on them.” Feagin’s bold and inaccurate statement erases the agency of those experiencing this oppression. Later, Feagin (2010) briefly examines ways in which people of color employ counter-frames—frames that challenge or counter the dominant White racial frame—and resistant actions to combat their oppression. Feagin (2010:179) claims that important dimensions of Black American counter-framing are:

...a strong critique of white oppression and its operations; an understanding and countering of negative framing of African Americans; a positive assertion of the full humanity of African Americans, and often of all people; a strong accent on real freedom, justice, and equality; and a recognition of gendered racism faced by Black women (and men). The counter-frame also typically includes honed perspectives on how to deal with white discriminators, including passive and active strategies.

However, his exploration of these counter-frames is severely underdeveloped, and, he admits, outside the main goal of this particular book. Feagin (2010) does fleetingly identify an “anti-oppression” counter-frame used by Black people in the United States. Although he briefly discusses contributions of Black feminist scholars and notions of “gendered racism,” he does not account for the unique and different oppressions faced by differently-positioned Black Americans in his explorations of the counter-frames they may employ. Even more lacking is his investigation of acts of resistance of Black Americans, which is limited to slave revolts and the

Civil Rights Movement (Feagin 2010). As the use of counter-frames is the most developed among Black Americans (Chou et al. 2012), Feagin's shallow examination is inexcusable.

While Feagin's analysis of counter-frames is significantly underdeveloped, this is not indicative of a lack of examination of resistance efforts by Black Americans. It is, rather, indicative of what types of scholarship, done by whom, are promoted as legitimate within academia (Kelley 1997; Collins 2000). Feagin (2010:183) argues that counter-framing occurs on a continuum, with Black people who express strong anti-white-supremacist views on one side and Black people who "make little or no use of...critical and anti-racist ideas, especially in public" on the other side. In contrast, Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) argues that Black American resistance often occurs in very nuanced ways that may go unrecognized as acts of resistance by many scholars and activists alike. Given the violent response to overt forms of Black resistance throughout U.S. history, it makes sense that many resistance efforts enacted by Black Americans would be covert in nature, so as to preserve safety and security for those involved. Feagin's counter-framing continuum makes no room for these understandably covert forms of resistance. In fact, he goes so far as to label those who he claims make no use of counter-frames "weaker" (Feagin 2010:183). This particular label is especially thoughtless, given the myriad harm that could result from using more overt forms of counter-framing. Feagin (2010:184) does explain that Black people may have to be "practical" about their interactions with white people because of the presence of the white racial frame, but he states that this may cause Black people to have to "defer to whites and white framing," which does not take into account the nuanced and covert forms of resistance that Kelley (2002) discusses.

Ironically, failing to recognize these acts as counter-frames could be a result of viewing them through the lens of the white racial frame. For example, Feagin (2010:184) claims that giving a child a “non-traditional name” is an act of counter-framing in resistance to the dominant white racial frame. However, referring to these names as “non-traditional” invokes the white racial frame, as it establishes white, Eurocentric names as the standard, or tradition. Defining acts of resistance through the dominant discourse, not through the meanings ascribed to them by the people who engage in them, has led to serious oversight on the part of Feagin and many other sociologists studying counter-frames.

The dominant discourse surrounding both counter-frames and the study of social movements revolves around the actions of formalized organizations. However, much of the history of Black resistance in the U.S. lies outside the confines of formal organizations dedicated to social justice (Kelley 1994). These evasive acts of resistance often occur behind a mask (Fanon 1952) of happiness and contentment. James C. Scott (1990) argues that behind the façade of satisfaction and gratitude lies a “hidden transcript,” where the rebellious feelings of those experiencing oppression exist in cultural practices that are kept from the dominant group. Given that these practices are so covert, it is no wonder that mainstream white sociologists have failed to recognize them and give them proper credit. Furthermore, Kelley (1994:9-10) argues it is quite myopic for resistance researchers to dichotomize individual actions into the political and the mundane:

Politics is not separate from lived experience or the imaginary world of what is possible; to the contrary, politics is about these things. Politics comprises the many battles to roll back constraints and exercise some power over, or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominate our lives.

It is this very myopia, facilitated by the white racial frame, which has led researchers and other individuals alike to misinterpret acts of resistance throughout our history. During chattel slavery, many observers concluded that the enslaved Black people were lazy, slow, and wasteful. They attributed these qualities to cultural or racial deficiency, though it is documented through writings and stories passed down through families that often enslaved Black people purposefully sabotaged their labor exploitation by refusing to give their all in their work (DuBois 1935; Kelley 1997). There are many examples of these misinterpretations that occur all the way up to the present, where researchers, teachers, media, and others interpret acts of Black youth as lazy or nihilistic when, to the youth themselves, they are acts of resistance through disengagement in a system or systems constructed for their exploitation and demise.



Figure 1-2. Pick One.

PaperFrank reaches for a can of spray paint while painting an outdoor mural.

Viewing these acts through the white racial frame has led to the erasure of countless acts of counter-framing enacted by Black Americans. It is important to privilege the meanings that cultural producers attach to their own words and actions to avoid misinterpreting and erasing acts of resistance. Robin D. G. Kelley (1994:231) argues, “we need to always acknowledge the fact that certain forms of resistance create their own limits—limits that can be understood only in specific historical and spatial context.” My whiteness itself may keep me from a full understanding of these acts of resistance, but by privileging the works of scholars of color regarding acts of resistance, and acting in dialogue not only with these works but also with my participants, I hope to overcome the myopia of the white racial frame.

1.3 METHODS

Critical Race Theorists assert, and I agree, that research does not occur in a neutral environment (Crenshaw et al. 1995, Kelley 1997; Delgado & Stefancic 2012). All researchers are positioned, based on characteristics like race, gender, and even personal experiences and life history (Chiseri-Strater 1996; Duneier 1999). Just as all research does not occur in a neutral environment, feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding 1987, 1991; Hartstock 1997) argues all knowledge is not produced in a neutral environment. In contrast, all knowledge is positioned, and knowledge associated with whiteness and men is privileged above knowledge associated with people of color and women (Harding 1987, 1991; Collins 2000).

As a white woman, I obviously have an outsider status when conducting a research study involving Black men as participants. It is extremely important for researchers with an outsider position like myself to not only be cognizant of their outsider status, but to openly reflect on ways in which this outsider status may impact their research findings (Milner 2007).

As a qualitative researcher with an outsider position, it is imperative that I remain reflexive about the impact and limitations that my positionality has on both the data I collect and my interpretation and analysis of that data (Cook and Fonow 1986; Harding 1987; Cancian 1992). The methodology I engage in for this project, detailed below, is reflexive in nature (Burawoy 1998) making it integral to my project given my outsider status.

1.3.1 EXTENDED CASE METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods are utilized to explore societal occurrences at a micro-level, while connecting these individual and group experiences with the institutional level (Burawoy 1998). Specifically, extended case method (ECM) allows for individual experiences to be viewed within the context of related structural and historical phenomena. ECM is a reflexive methodology, abandoning positivistic claims of objectivity and instead privileging dialogue between participant and observer as well as knowledge and context (Burawoy 1998). Rather than distancing self (researcher) from other (participants), ECM deepens existing theory by favoring connection and dialogue over distancing and detachment (Burawoy 1998). The dialogical nature of ECM promotes several tenets of Critical Race Theory, and allows researchers to explore the nuances and complexities of micro level social phenomena while avoiding assumptions of shared experience or failure to account for social and historical context, resulting in a deepened theoretical understanding (Samuels 2009). As a positioned outsider, using ECM allows me space to set aside my own assumptions and contexts and privilege the voices of my participants to arrive at a deeper theoretical understanding of the lived experiences of cis-het young Black men in the United States, in the context of systemic oppression they have experienced at the intersection of their race, gender, age, and sexuality.

1.3.1.1 Sampling

As ECM is employed to deepen existing theory, samples are chosen based on theoretical salience (Burawoy 1998, Mitchell 2006). As I am interested in extending theories of counterframing and resistance specifically for young Black men, my sample reflects this theoretical interest. My interest in this research blossomed after reading Feagin's (2010) theory of counter-framing, specifically because his shallow theoretical examination of counter-framing seemed to fail to capture the acts of resistance practiced by many of the young Black men I have come to know since moving to Atlanta—young Black men who strategically avoid interactions with oppressive structures in their daily lives, both in their work and leisure time.

I chose my initial sample of participants from the young Black men with whom I was already acquainted in hopes to mediate the effects of my outsider position as a white woman. Choosing participants with whom I was already acquainted aids in the dialogical nature of ECM (Burawoy 1998), as well as mediates issues of reluctance among participants (Adler and Adler 2003). These participants meet the criteria necessary for my research: young, Black men between the ages of 20 and 29 (Pew Center for the States 2009), who self-identify as Black and also self-identify as actively resisting White social and/or economic space in their professional and personal lives. After conducting twelve interviews with young Black men meeting this criteria—all of whom I already knew—I reached theoretical saturation. It is not uncommon to reach theoretical saturation with such a small sample size (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2009), especially given the fact that I not only conducted in-depth interviews with the participants, but also conducted multi-site ethnographic observations with them as well.

As a Critical Race Theorist, I privilege the voices and experiences of my participants. It is very important to me to convey the fullness of my participants' humanity, and not just utilize the pieces of themselves that fit the scope of my research. Below I provide a brief description of each of my participants in hopes to offer a more full understanding of their complex personhood. These descriptions are in no particular order, and they certainly do not encapsulate my participants completely. They simply provide a small glimpse of their humanity.

Stevo is a 25-year-old founder and CEO of a music management company called the Gloriam Group. Anyone who spends more than a few moments around him knows that he was born and raised in Atlanta—as he exudes pride in his hometown. Stevo split time in his childhood between his mother's house in the suburbs of Henry County and his father's house inside the perimeter. He is the father of a beautiful little girl who was born while he was still in high school, and his love and admiration for her radiates from his pores. He attended a local university for several years and withdrew with only a year left to pursue his true passion. Stevo wears a hoodie nearly every day—no matter how hot it gets in Atlanta's summer months, and I routinely (lovingly) joke with him that he “matches too hard.” It is not uncommon for him to match the color of his hoodie to the color of a bracelet to the color of his shoes. He is known across the city for falling asleep in clubs and bars, yet another thing that many of us routinely joke about with him. He has an extremely light-hearted spirit and never takes any of our jokes too seriously. Finally, Stevo is one of the most supportive people I have ever met. Everyone that knows him is enriched by his presence. He makes note of everyone's true passion—whether they have made it their career or not—and encourages and supports them as often as he can.

Doctor Dot (Doc) is a 25-year-old music artist, and one half of the music group Earthgang. He also was born and raised in Atlanta—particularly on the southwestern side of the city known affectionately as the SWATS (Southwest Atlanta Too Strong). He, like Stevo, exudes Atlanta pride. Doc stands out everywhere he goes. He stands tall, radiates confidence, and dresses in an eclectic manner reminiscent of—but not mimicking—early Andre 3000. Doc has a gentle, calm spirit that puts people instantly at ease. This calm nature is often contrasted with a hilarious dry humor that leaves everyone around him doubled over in laughter. Doc is the oldest of his siblings and takes his responsibility as the eldest very seriously. He is very cognizant that his younger siblings look to him as a role model. He also has a long-term girlfriend who is a yoga instructor. He is a graduate of Hampton University and, upon graduation, returned to the SWATS to continue pursuing his career in music.

Johnny Venus (Venus) is a 26-year-old music artist, and the other half of the music group Earthgang. He, too, was born and raised in the SWATS. For a large portion of his childhood, he was raised in a communal setting with other Black families and their children. Venus exudes a wisdom that is far beyond his years—and it is evident to anyone who spends any time with him. Venus emits a beautiful attitude of unapologetic Blackness from deep within his soul. He too dresses in an eclectic manner, perhaps not ironically reminiscent of—but again, not mimicking—early Big Boi. Venus too graduated from Hampton University, with Doc, and lives in the same house in the SWATS as they pursue their music career.

J.I.D. is also a 26-year-old music artist born and raised in Atlanta; however, he grew up on Atlanta's east side. Small in stature but with a large voice, J.I.D. is a member, along with Earthgang, of a creative collective known as Spillage Village. Together, the three of them, along

with other members of Spillage Village and their friends, routinely volunteer to feed the homeless and care for urban gardens, among other acts of service. They are very deliberate in maintaining their connections to their communities, and find joy in helping others. J.I.D. met Doc and Venus while attending Hampton University, and he also now lives with them in the SWATS.

Jace is a 26-year-old music artist and member of the group Two9. Jace was born in New York City, but moved to Atlanta when he was in elementary school. Jace too is small in stature, but his personality is larger than life. He is loud and animated and deeply cares for others. He treats everyone around him like family. Jace holds a wealth of knowledge regarding anything anime- or comic-related. Though he is pretty well-known for his musical creations, he prefers to avoid the fame that he has garnered. He hates having his photo taken and prefers quiet evenings hanging out with friends over bars and clubs. Jace has toured all over the country through his music and recorded with some of the biggest artists in the U.S., but many would never know because he exudes such a humility. Jace attended several different local colleges and universities but ultimately withdrew to pursue his music career. He has a twin sister to whom he is deeply connected, and a long-term girlfriend who is an amazing visual and tattoo artist.

PaperFrank is a 24-year-old visual and tattoo artist. He was born and raised here in Atlanta—bouncing between the east and south sides. He spent the last three years of high school in Asheville, North Carolina when his mother moved there for work, and he returned immediately to Atlanta upon graduating. He spent a large portion of his childhood caring for himself and his younger sister while his mother battled substance abuse. He took to art early on

as a method of escape—a way to create an alternate reality for himself. He knew that he was going to become an artist and had no interest in furthering his education after high school. He began his tattoo career at the well-known Black-owned shop City of Ink. PaperFrank has a commanding physical presence paired with a quiet, observant spirit. He has garnered a significant amount of fame through his career, yet most often remains a silent observer in nearly every setting. He is wholly an introvert, yet possesses a deep understanding of the people around him—even if he has said only a few words to them. In his relatively short career, he has had two solo art shows that brought out over 3,000 people on the opening night, painted murals in over 10 cities across the country, and tattooed thousands.

Morbid James is a 27-year-old visual and tattoo artist, born and raised in Atlanta. He, too, has a commanding physical presence, paired with a quiet spirit. He is almost always dressed in all black. This somber exterior houses a person full of humor—with excellent impersonation skills. He, too, routinely has those around him doubled over in laughter. Morbid James withdrew from formal education when he was in 8th grade. He apprenticed and now works at City of Ink tattoo shop. For years, he and PaperFrank were roommates.

Chris is a 29-year-old visual and tattoo artist, born in Wisconsin. He moved to Atlanta in elementary school and, except for a brief period in college in Pennsylvania, has been here ever since. Chris exudes a tough exterior to those he doesn't know well, but is truly a warm and caring spirit. He is incredibly animated, high-spirited, and hilarious. He lifts the mood in any room that he sets foot in. He is the proud father of four beautiful children. He is also a resident tattoo artist at City of Ink.

FRKO (pronounced “freak-o”) is a 26-year-old visual artist, born and raised on Atlanta’s east side. His presence dominates any space he enters. He is boistrous and bold, passionate and unapologetic. He attended Howard Univeristy on a full scholarship and withdrew just one semester prior to graduating, because he had fulfilled all the requirements for his art degree and had no interest in completing his core classes. FRKO is very blunt, and his creations are often very crass, and simultaneously he cares very deeply for people. He informally mentors many young people throughout Atlanta’s creative community. He knows each and every homeless person who frequents Edgewood Avenue by name, and routinely cleans out his closet to bring them clothes that he doesn’t wear anymore. He has an amazing long-term girlfriend who is a seamstress, fashion designer, and artist as well. Together, they care for their two miniature poodles.

Nuri is a 26-year-old visual artist. He was born in Chicago but moved here at age four. He is quiet, reserved, and incredibly passionate about his craft. He dedicates himself to perfecting his techniques and offers advice freely to any other artists that inquire. He truly possesses a teaching spirit. He attended several local colleges and, like FRKO, withdrew after completing the coursework necessary for his art major. He was also uninterested in completing his core classes. Nuri’s artwork is very well-known, yet he himself is very personal and withdrawn. He prefers solitude. He doesn’t drink or smoke. He is the father of a beautiful new baby girl and boyfriend to her mother.

Sage is a 24-year-old visual artist, born in Louisiana and raised in Atlanta. Like PaperFrank, he spent a brief period during his high school years out of state—in Florida—completing his education. Also like PaperFrank, he utilized art as a way to cope from a very

young age and never had an interest in pursuing anything else as a career. He did not have a desire to further his education after high school, and instead returned to Atlanta and continued working on his art. Sage bears an uncanny likeness to the late artist Jean-Michel Basquiat—both in appearance and mannerisms. Many of us joke that he is Basquiat reincarnated, as he was born after Basquiat's unfortunate death. He stands tall and thin, with an abundance of free-form dreadlocks cascading from the top of his head like a wondrous fountain. He is quiet, yet not shy. He is not care-free, but he often operates in a manner that would suggest he is. He moves through life with a strong belief that he should follow the desires of his heart. He creates amazing works of art that are vulnerable and moving, as well as technically sound.

Finally, Lawrence is a 27-year-old founder and CEO of Full Chair Digital, a growth marketing company that provides graphic design, photography, videography, and website-design services to local companies. He was born and raised in Chicago, and came to Atlanta to attend and play basketball at Emory University when he was 18. He withdrew from Emory a few years into his program to follow his passions. He is a master of many skills—photography, videography, photo and video editing, music production, graphic design, teaching, sales...the list goes on and on. Lawrence gets up at 6am daily, completes a workout, and sits down at his home office to begin his workday. He is very disciplined and structured—traits that I admire in him and wish I possessed. At the same time, he is very caring, kind, and compassionate.

These participants allowed me to interview and observe them throughout the course of this project. Of course, extended case methodology utilizes more techniques of data collection than just in-depth interviewing and observations (Samuels 2009). My sample not only includes these participants, but the spaces they occupy—both physical and virtual, their location in

space and time (Burawoy 1998), their social media presence, and the art (visual, music, etc.) that many of my participants produce.

1.3.1.2 Data Collection

As stated above, I conducted both in-depth interviews as well as multi-site ethnography to gather data. Although interviews have historically been utilized in oppressive formats, perpetuating the hierarchy between researcher and participant (Gubrium and Holstein 2003), interviews can also be dialogical (Burawoy 1998), allowing researchers to privilege respondents' voices and experiences over the researcher's own preconceived notions (Mishler 1986). By utilizing open-ended questions, minimizing interruptions of participants' responses, encouraging elaboration, and privileging respondents' linguistic formations (Mishler 1984), I enabled my respondents to be more equal partners in the interview process (Gubrium and Holstein 2003). I conducted these in-depth interviews with participants in a semi-structured format, allowing for dialogue with a flexible interview guide (Burawoy 1998).

ECM, as a reflexive methodology, "commands the observer ...to mov[e] with the participants through their space and time" (Burawoy 1998:14). To achieve this goal, which ultimately provided me with situational and historical context and resulted in richer data (Burawoy 1998), I utilized multi-sited ethnographic methods (Marcus 1998; Duneier 1999) as a source of data collection in addition to the in-depth interviews I conducted with my participants. Although I am an outsider because of my position as a white woman, my prior relationships with my participants lead me to conduct my ethnography as a participant-observer (Singleton and Straits 2010). I conducted my participant-observations in a variety of settings in an effort to increase the validity of my data as well as to get a well-rounded view of

the lives of the young men participating in my study (Duneier 1999). While the majority of my field sites were physical spaces, I also utilized more abstract spaces in my multi-sited ethnographic research. Online field research (Dicks et al. 2005, Bird and Barber 2007, Kosinets 2010) was utilized to examine the social media sites of the participants. Combining digital ethnography with other forms of qualitative research provides researchers with a larger and more balanced amount of data to analyze (Dicks et al. 2006; Murthy 2008), but it also enables researchers to privilege the voices of their participants (Murthy 2008).

To gain a complete understanding of the context in which my participants live their daily lives, I also include other sources of data, as many ECM researchers do. I treated theoretically salient policy, media, and historical documents as data to bring a fuller understanding to my work (Samuels 2009). Further, I treated the works of art created by some of my participants, including but not limited to music and visual art, as another field site rich with data. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues that Black intellectuals have historically, and currently, been excluded from traditional forms of knowledge production. As a result, individuals who have been excluded from traditional academic settings produce knowledge in varying formats, including but not limited to traditional academic formats (West 1991; Perry 1995; Collins 2000). These works of art are often valuable forms of knowledge production that should not be overlooked.

In the spirit of recognizing and privileging alternative forms of knowledge production (Collins 2000), I also collected visual data through photography of my participants, all of whom were willing to be photographed. Not only are photographs now an integral part of our culture (Jenks 1995; Burri 2012), they communicate in a more universal visual language (Sontag 2003), and often evoke a more visceral reaction than simply words alone (Bell 2002). These

photographs will offer another form of narrative (Bell 2002) which is often regarded by viewers as more truthful than verbal claims (Bell 2002; Sontag 2003). Including this narrative form, which has been used by ethnographers since the technology has been available (Ruby 2000; Pink 2006; Burri 2012), alongside verbal and written data, broadens and enhances my research findings (Bell 2002). This allowed me to develop and deepen counterframing and resistance theories even further.

1.3.1.3 Data Analysis

As ECM is a reflexive methodology, this reflexivity does not occur during a detached analysis phase after all data has been collected. With ECM, analysis occurs simultaneously throughout the data collection phase, and continues after collection is complete (Burawoy 1998). As theoretical salience is prioritized in extended case method, I routinely coded my data from interviews and observations as I collected it, connecting it both to existing theory and institutional influences (Burawoy 1998). The patterns that I found during coding then informed which participants I chose to interview or observe next, which spaces I chose to conduct observations in, and which policy, media, historical documents, and works of art I chose to include in analysis as well (Burawoy 1998). I continued to gather these varied forms of data until I reached theoretical saturation.

As dialogue is a key foundation of ECM (Burawoy 1998), I included this as a component of my data analysis, as well. This dialogical analysis practice democratizes knowledge (Sohng 1996) and prioritizes the understanding of my participants over my own (Duneier 1999, Singleton & Straits 2010). The frequency of this dialogue varied based on the needs of theory building, with more dialogue occurring in the early stages of my analysis. Subsequently, after I

developed an understanding through this dialogue, conversations took place less frequently—only when new theoretical or situational occurrences take place. During the final editing phase of my dissertation, this dialogue increased again. I allowed my participants the opportunity to review the portions of my writing that were inspired by their own interviews and/or observations (Sohng 1996, Duneier 1999) and engage in dialogue about the accuracy of my representation of their words and experiences (Burawoy 1998).

In reporting the story that emerges from my data, I offered my participants the opportunity to utilize their own names in my research as opposed to ascribing pseudonyms. Of course, the opportunity to be ascribed a pseudonym was an option for them to choose, although all of them chose to ascribe either their given name or their popular artist pseudonym for the purposes of this study. Both feminist and critical race theorists advocate for using true names of participants with their permission, especially when the participants are members of a people group—a group of people that share a common identity (Jenkins 2000)—that has historically been marginalized within academia (Delgado 1984; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Collins 2000).

1.4 CONCLUSION

Below, I examine in detail the ways in which my participants employ counter-frames as acts of resistance designed to combat the white racial frame. Their quotes are all direct quotes from our interviews. I have added my own emphasis occasionally by marking some text in italics. I also describe many of my observations in my own words. In order to preserve their knowledge production, I only directly quote their words that I recorded and transcribed from our interviews. Anything observed is paraphrased.

In Chapter 2, I examine ways in which my participants resist spirit murder through double consciousness. Double consciousness is an integral counter-frame employed in opposition to the dominant white racial frame. I explore ways in which my participants develop their own sense of double consciousness both through lessons passed down from Black elders and by processing their own experiences and interactions with oppression under the white racial frame. I argue the development of stable double consciousness is integral to resistance, as it not only operates as a counter-frame but also facilitates the development and utilization of other counter-frames.

In Chapter 3, I demonstrate the ways in which my participants conceptualize freedom and use freedom-oriented counter-framing to resist spirit murder. The meaning that my participants attach to freedom is not at all connected to the notions of freedom associated with the white racial frame. My participants associate freedom with happiness, authenticity, and detachment from oppressive social structures. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which they utilize these conceptualizations of freedom as counter-frames to resist the oppression facilitated by the white racial frame.

In Chapter 4, I explore the ways in which my participants engage in an alchemical form of capitalism. They utilize this alchemical capitalism counter-frame in resistance to the exploitative capitalism present in the United States. I examine the reasons my participants choose to utilize capitalism to resist structural oppression in a society where capitalism is intertwined with all other forms of oppression. I argue that these methods are complex and worthy of investigation despite the problematic elements inherent to any form of capitalism. I explore both the positives and the negative aspects of the alchemical capitalism counter-frame.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I offer final thoughts on this project. I review the complex nature of the quest for freedom in a society permeated by the white racial frame. The imperfect and incomplete freedoms garnered are often criticized for their failures, but it is important to celebrate their successes as well. I conclude by offering implications for future research.

2 CHAPTER 2: RESISTING SPIRIT MURDER THROUGH DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but their inhumanity.

-James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1962:8)

The overarching, infectious nature of the white racial frame contributes largely to what Patricia Williams (1991) identifies as spirit murder. Negative controlling images of marginalized people are routinely promoted in our society (Collins 2000). This constant barrage of stereotypical imagery is both facilitated by and perpetuated through the white racial frame. Controlling images serve to uphold white supremacist, imperialist, capitalistic heteropatriarchy in our society (hooks 1981; Collins 2000). These controlling images not only affect the ideologies of those in power, but they can lead marginalized people to internalize their own oppression (Chou et al 2012). This internalized hegemonic oppression serves the function of spirit murder as it disrupts a person's true sense of self (Williams 1991). Instead, marginalized people in our society are often forced to view themselves through the eyes of their oppressors (Dubois 1903; Fanon 1952; Williams 1991).

Williams (1991) claims that acts of spirit murder should be taken very seriously—possibly even treated with the same punitive response to physical acts of violence and murder. While this may seem outlandish to many Western thinkers, this response itself is the white

racial frame at work. Many non-Western ideologies promote an understanding that the spirit and body are not inherently connected. People who ascribe to these ideologies contend that the body can die while the spirit remains, and/or the spirit can die long before the body (Williams 1991; Trask 1992). Understanding this ideology, the claim that acts designed to kill the spirit should be met with the same concern and disgust as acts designed to kill the body isn't outlandish at all. The propensity to minimize the damage done by acts of spirit murder is also a dismissal of these non-Western ideologies. This dismissal is facilitated directly by the white racial frame, which prioritizes western thought above all else.

Furthermore, these hegemonic forms of oppression that take place in our ideologies, language, and beliefs—although more nuanced and often covert—hold great power in our society. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues that the varying forms of oppression present in U.S. society—what she calls the matrix of domination—are maintained through four intersecting domains of power. The hegemonic domain, which closely mirrors the concept of the white racial frame, is the location of the abstracted oppression that permeates our thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and symbols. This hegemonic domain is not only the epicenter of spirit murder, but it also legitimates all other forms of oppression present in our society (Collins 2000). A properly functioning hegemonic domain of oppression allows more tangible, visible forms of oppression to exist openly without being questioned by the majority of the public. For example, hegemonic beliefs surrounding Black male criminality legitimate mass incarceration that disproportionately targets Black men in the minds of an overwhelming majority of U.S. citizens. Because many individuals have internalized the controlling image of the Black man as criminal, they view the mass incarceration of Black men as valid, as understandable, and as necessary (Neal 2013).

The true power of structural oppression lies in the hegemonic domain. Without the pervasiveness of this hegemonic oppression, the more palpable forms of oppression present in our society wouldn't be possible. In turn, without first resisting this form of oppression, no other forms of resistance would be possible. Without first recognizing the white racial frame and resisting the accompanying spirit murder, it would be impossible to understand the need to protest police brutality, stand against workplace discrimination, or protect land from state-sponsored environmental racism. So often, the choice to live and to resist the spirit murder imparted by the white racial frame goes unnoticed and/or undervalued, particularly by researchers studying resistance. This is particularly true of researchers who are not members of the marginalized groups they study. However, this does not diminish the importance of these radical acts. Darnell Moore explains:

I cannot help but think that this performance called 'living' is the most radical act that we black men can commit ourselves to...precisely because it is a command for us to counteract the very processes of annihilation that structural racism and patriarchy have taught us to love and replicate. We are experts in the art of killing because we know what it is like to be killed, maligned, have our spirits deadened, our bodies pillaged.... I am a black man and I am still alive. And yes, I am a revolutionary, because I daily choose to live! (Laymon 2013:74-75)

It is important to note that not everyone diminishes these more nuanced acts of resistance. It is precisely because of the Black artists, writers, and scholars who celebrate, highlight, and analyze these actions that I am able to produce this knowledge; and I hope to pay homage to them and their work by including their thoughts and voices throughout this piece. However, access to academia has been historically restricted to those who are members of dominant groups (Collins 2000), and to this day, hierarchies exist within academia that privilege the scholarship of those in power while diminishing the work of marginalized scholars (Williams

1991; Moore 2008). Largely, the knowledge produced around these nuanced yet valuable forms of resistance have been left out of the conceptualization of the white racial frame and counter-framing. This is a significant part of why the conceptualization of counter-framing has remained so underdeveloped. For that reason, I dedicate the focus of this chapter to a particular form of resistance that enables the fight against spirit murder.

2.2 DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

Developed by W.E.B. DuBois (1903), the concept of double consciousness is integral to both discussions of counter-framing as well as the development of counter-frames. Feagin (2010) very briefly mentions DuBois' (1903) concept of double consciousness in his underdeveloped conceptualization of counter-frames, but does not seem to understand its importance. He includes its mention in a section on resistance to slavery and legal segregation, dedicates just a few lines to an explanation of the concept, and then immediately moves on to a discussion of how this concept of double consciousness informed DuBois' personal and political actions. Feagin's (2010) failure to give proper attention to the importance of double consciousness on a conceptual level is truly unfortunate. The white racial frame exists on a conceptual plane, and very important resistance work employed in opposition to spirit murder also occurs on that plane. Feagin's (2010) focus on DuBois' more tangible actions shows that he overlooks acts of resistance aimed to resist spirit murder.

DuBois (1903:4) asks, "how does it feel to be a problem?" This question is jarring alone, but his (1903:4) follow up adds to the weight of this sentiment: "Being a problem is a strange experience—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else." Here, DuBois claims that the presence of white supremacy that permeates U.S. society labels Black people as

“problems.” The connections between DuBois’ (1903) concept of double consciousness and Williams’ (1991) concept of spirit murder are glaring. DuBois (1903:5) likens the feelings Black people experience, conjured by living in a white supremacist society to feeling like “a stranger in mine own house.” Similarly, Williams (1991:62) claims “Blacks in a white society are conditioned from infancy to see in themselves only what others, who despise them, see.” However, unlike Williams, DuBois (1903:5) speaks of a “twoness” that develops in Black people living in a white supremacist society. He (DuBois 1903:5) describes this double consciousness as “two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” This internal war DuBois (1903) speaks of highlights the struggle to retain self-awareness in the face of spirit murder attempts. Double consciousness is present in all Black Americans to some degree (Stewart 1983). While double consciousness can result in internalized white supremacy and spirit murder, it can also result in what DuBois (1903:5) calls a “self-conscious manhood” where that twoness merges “into a better and truer self.” James B. Stewart (1983:102) argues that finding a stable equilibrium in double consciousness can lead to “psychic liberation,” which “allows effective maneuvering within an oppressive system in a way that preserves belief in the capacity to control one’s own destiny.” Thus, it is integral to study the role that double consciousness—particularly a stable double consciousness—plays in resisting the dominant white racial frame.

2.2.1 THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS

In order to understand the role of double consciousness as a counter-frame, it is important to first look at the ways in which stable double consciousness develops. When I asked questions about their childhood experiences, all of my participants explained ways in

which they developed a stable sense of double consciousness. This development occurred in two distinct ways that worked in dialogue to foster a stable sense of double consciousness within: it was fostered through examples and messages received from other Black people in Black social spaces, and learned through experiences in white social and institutional spaces. For my participants, the development of stable double consciousness appears to be specifically designed to combat the spirit murder attempts they were and are subjected to through the white racial frame.

2.2.1.1 *The Intentional Development of Double Consciousness in Black Social Spaces*

My mother taught us that the Marvelous was free.... She wanted us to visualize a more expansive, fluid, 'cosmos-politan' definition of blackness, to teach us that we are not merely inheritors of a culture but its makers.

-Robin D.G. Kelley (2002: 2)

Many of my participants describe instances where family members, peers, teachers, or community members deliberately worked to instill in them a stable sense of double consciousness, often from a very young age. These lessons, much like the one that Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) explains above, often serve to combat the negative images and ideologies ascribed to Blackness by the white racial frame. These instances are not solitary events—they are received frequently throughout the course of their lives from various sources. These messages serve to foster an understanding of “twoness” (DuBois 1903) necessary for survival in a society dominated by a white racial frame. Venus, who grew up in a Black communal environment connected with his childhood church, describes:

Growing up, I was always taught that you are in a lower position, like you were just born oppressed basically, you know what I'm sayin', you have to fight harder than a lot of people in order to get the same things.... So I was brought up with that awareness.

Venus explains he was “always” taught this message, indicating that he received this message many times from many different sources. This message served to facilitate his double consciousness by making him aware of the structural racism present in our society and encouraging him to adjust his actions accordingly to achieve his goals.



Figure 2-1. After the Show.

(Left to Right) Doc, Venus, and J.I.D. relax with several friends backstage after a performance.

Nuri received similar messages from his mother throughout his childhood, directed at both him and his brother:

Well, my mom always taught us—me and my brother—that you are born with two strikes against you because you’re male and you’re Black, and you know, as soon as you walk out the door, that’s the first thing that anyone will notice about you.

Though he describes the message as being delivered primarily by one source—his mother—Nuri still indicates that this was a message he “always” received just as Venus did. For both of these participants, this signifies that the messages they received regarding the existence of structural racism and the impact it has on their lives were both frequent and consistent. Jace describes similar conversations with his father:

My dad just, he tells me just to be safe, and that stuff is gonna happen to you just because of what people think you are already before knowing you, and you just have to be conscious of that.

Jace uses the word “tells” here, again denoting a lesson that he hears often from his father. Again, similar to the messages received by both Venus and Nuri, Jace’s father instructs him specifically to develop a double consciousness—to be aware of the ways that others may view him through the dominant white racial frame because he is a young Black man. Jace’s father delivers this message out of concern for his safety. He understands the threat the white racial frame poses to his Black son and sees the protection that stable double consciousness can afford him.

FRKO also grew up hearing similar messages from both of his parents, as well as football coaches at his high school:

[Our coaches told us] as a Black man you gotta work a little harder, you know what I’m sayin? You gotta work a little harder and you gotta work smarter. You gotta fight with your mind. That’s what they told us all the time, because that’s what it was in sports. You fightin’ with your mind and your body’s gonna follow that.

The message that FRKO received from his football coaches not only made him aware of structural racism, but also promoted the ideology that he could mediate some of the effects of the white racial frame through his work ethic. This echoes the sentiments that Venus described

above. The message imparted on Black children to work smarter and harder because of the pervasiveness of white supremacy is not something exclusive to my participants. Often, it is stigmatized as respectability politics, or criticized for placing the onus of responsibility on those experiencing oppression. However, those criticisms don't represent the full and complete messages my participants receive. The messages they receive first acknowledge the existence of structural racism, and then instruct them on how to respond to the oppression they face. This message not only serves enable their stable development of double consciousness, but also encourages them to use their agency. It highlights the problems they face in our society while also fostering hope that they can navigate these systems of oppression in successful ways. This is a powerful and complex message that extends far beyond its shallow criticisms.

Stevo explains the importance of receiving these double consciousness-inducing messages, which he received from professors and through curriculum at the HBCU (Historically Black College/University) he attended:

They teach from a perspective, like...this is what you should do as a Black man...and I always appreciated that because a lot of people don't prepare you for what you're gonna walk into outside of the realms of school and...they just were like honest. Like, look, this is what's gonna happen when you get out here. Like of course you're going to do everything to fight against being presented like that, but this is the reality.

Stevo argues that it's important for marginalized people to understand the realities of the oppression that they face, and is grateful that his professors at his HBCU were intentional about facilitating this understanding. The understanding of the realities of structural racism is precisely what DuBois (1903) described with his conceptualization of stable double consciousness. All of my participants describe experiences in which they received messages explaining the inner-workings of the white racial frame to some degree. These lessons are

imparted in various Black social spaces with the intention of developing stable double consciousness from a very young age, as a method of survival in this white supremacist society.



Figure 2-2. Tattoo Session.

Steveo (left) sits for a tattoo session with PaperFrank (right).

The structural racism that leads to residential and educational segregation often aids the development of the Black social spaces where these double consciousness lessons are shared. Many of my participants lived, for at least some period of time growing up, in a predominantly Black neighborhood and/or attended predominantly Black schools. Jace describes the possibility that his parents chose their predominantly Black neighborhood because of the cultural connections:

In my neighborhood, [on] the East Side, [it] is all Black. It's primarily Black. And another thing, I think, I don't know if this drew my parents to the east side but it has a very large Jamaican population.

His parents have never admitted outright that they chose their specific neighborhood because of the cultural ties, but Jace wonders if this is the case, as his family is Jamaican as well. Having moved here from New York City, it seems likely that there was a degree of intentionality in the choice to again reside in a Black neighborhood with a high number of Jamaican people. Both Venus and FRKO also describe growing up in predominantly Black neighborhoods. For Venus, who grew up in a Black communal space, this was definitely an intentional decision on the part of his parents. Further, FRKO, Sage, and Doc describe their schools functioning as Black space as well. Doc explains the expanse of the community ties within the Black social space that extends from his segregated elementary school:

I went to school with all Black people...in elementary school I went to school with Black folks... everybody I would see at school, I would see at summer camp, see playing pee wee ball, see at church, like I would see everybody everywhere. A lot of these niggas, I know as adults today.

For my participants, it was in these Black schools and in these Black communities where the intentional development of stable double consciousness took place. Even though the white racial frame permeates our society, and facilitates these racially isolated schools and communities, this racial isolation allows for race-specific lessons to be facilitated. This Black space is utilized for passing down lessons regarding Blackness. The absence of white people allows for more raw conversations to take place about the pervasiveness of the white racial frame that may be challenged or questioned in white space.

Utilizing spaces created to serve oppressive purposes under white supremacy to develop Black resistance strategies is a beautiful, subversive example of resistance through alchemy. Alchemy is the practice of turning regular metals into gold. Alchemy is a staple in

Black American cultural tradition and has been throughout the history of the United States (Bailey 2013). Tricia Rose (2008:264-5) writes, “The genius of Black creativity has often involved making something good out of the scraps—creating a delicacy out of undesirable, discarded parts.” This creativity extends to Black resistance as well. Black people in the U.S. have always invoked alchemy in their resistance strategies. bell hooks (2012:73-4) writes,

Once upon a time Black male ‘cool’ was defined by the ways in which Black men confronted the hardships of life without allowing their spirits to be ravaged. They took the pain of it and used it alchemically to turn the pain into gold. That burning process required high heat. Black male cool was defined by the ability to withstand the heat and remain centered. It was defined by Black male willingness to confront reality, to face the truth, and bear it not by adopting a false pose of cool while feeding on fantasy; not by Black male denial, but by individual Black males daring to self-define rather than be defined by others.

This practice of alchemy—the ability to take something traumatic or neglectful and create beauty, style, and freedom from it—this extends far beyond the self-definition of Black men that hooks (2012) speaks of above. Alchemy is Black women whose labor options were often restricted to domestic work in the Jim Crow south utilizing their employer’s laundry facilities to do their family’s laundry and purposefully preparing too much food in order to have leftovers to take home to their family. Alchemy is Black youth reclaiming words intended to stigmatize them and transforming them into words with positive connotations. And here, alchemy is the Black families and communities of my participants utilizing the Black social spaces created by various forms of structural oppression in an effort to isolate Black people and deny them resources as undisrupted spaces to share and develop resistance strategies to mitigate the effects of the dominant white racial frame.

Although some instances of the development of stable double consciousness occur within spaces originally intended to oppress, it is important to note that not all of the Black

spaces where double consciousness is fostered are created by and for the purposes of facilitating structural racism. Black people are very intentional about creating Black social spaces for a variety of reasons, and have been throughout U.S. history. Black people have curated their own social space as respite from the white racial frame, from other Black people who have internalized white supremacy, and simply purely for pleasure (Kelley 1994). Several of my participants describe instances in which their parents deliberately crafted experiences in Black social space for them at a young age. They also seek out their own experiences in Black social space for myriad reasons. Lawrence's parents sent him to a nearly all-white Christian school through the 8th grade, but deliberately enrolled him in after-school programs situated in Black space:

...after school I was back in the city, I was downtown, I was on the west side, like all my friends were still in inner-city Chicago. So I would spend Monday through Friday 8-3 with these [rich, white, suburban] kids but then I was enrolled in a Boys and Girls Club in one of the worst neighborhoods in Chicago. Like, I was a member of the Boys and Girls club there. So I would leave school and my dad would drive me 30 minutes into the city just to hang out at the Boys and Girls club around those kids.... Both my parents grew up or lived in the projects at some point in their life, so they were not gonna have a son that was not connected to Black culture very deeply.

Lawrence's parents deliberately sought out this Black social space for their son. His parents valued this Black space so much that they drove him 30 minutes from his primary school into a different part of the city for this experience. It is important to note that this space was not something that was exacted directly on them through structural oppression—although its existence may be the result of structural oppression—it is rather a space that they sought out for their son. They saw value in this Black social space and went to significant lengths to ensure that their son experienced it.

Many of my participants, inspired by the value their parents placed on these spaces, describe making similar decisions to seek out Black social spaces for themselves as they got older and garnered increased autonomy. FRKO claims that his experience in racially-segregated schools from elementary through high school influenced his decision to attend an HBCU. He says, “It was easy, it was a no brainer, like oh yeah I’ll go to a Black school...I’ve been to Black schools my whole life. I know Black people. It’s nothing.” For FRKO, the racially segregated schools he experienced due to structural racism served a positive function as they provided him a Black social space. Above, he spoke of the ways his football coaches used this Black social space to develop double consciousness in their student athletes. Thus, when offered a choice of where to continue his education after high school, he chose another source of Black social space—an HBCU.

Stevo, who split time between Atlanta (with his father) and a suburb about 45 minutes south of the city (with his mother) as a child, claims that his experiences in Black social spaces in Atlanta—combined with the contrast of the white spaces of the suburbs—influenced his desire to move into the city when he graduated high school:

So when I came to Atlanta...on the weekends to see my dad...I saw successful Black people. I saw Black people who didn’t have to...conform. They didn’t have to tuck they shirts in. It was always just like a break when we went to Atlanta. So that’s what made me be able to get a outside perspective and then come back and live in it.

Stevo describes the Black social space he experienced as valuable because it allowed him to see the variances in Blackness. He calls this a “break,” as if it were a relief from life in the predominantly white suburbs where he lived with his mother. The white racial frame often paints Blackness as a monolith through negative controlling images. The observations Stevo

made in the Black social space that Atlanta offered allowed him to understand the depths and variances Black people possess. These experiences were so meaningful to him that he chose to live permanently in this Black social space as soon as he had the autonomy to do so.



Figure 2-3. Waiting.

Stevo takes a break from preparing food in Stankonia Studios before feeding the homeless.

The families and communities of my participants utilized Black social spaces to facilitate the development of their double consciousness throughout their childhood. Many—though not all—of these spaces exist due to structural racism, designed to isolate Black people and deny them of rights and resources. However, in a beautiful, courageous, and inventive act of alchemy, their families and communities transform the meaning and function of these spaces and utilize it to their advantage. The absence of whiteness allows for a safe space to foster

strategies to combat spirit murder. These intent of these supposedly oppressive spaces is so transformed that my participants continue to seek them out well into adulthood. For my participants, Black social spaces are a source of comfort and familiarity. It is a testament to the strong and astute nature of Black resistance to transform a space designed for deprivation and harm into a wellspring of self-preservation. These acts deserve proper recognition for their bravery and genius.

2.2.1.2 *The Development of Double Consciousness through Experience in White Space*

DuBois (1903) describes the first moment that he felt a twinge of double consciousness as being spurred by an interaction with a white classmate in his majority-white elementary school, in which he was the only Black student. All of the students had begun exchanging small cards with each other, and a white classmate refused to accept one that he attempted to give her. He (DuBois 1903:4) explains, “It dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.” Similarly, my participants have experienced moments of clarity regarding the presence of the white racial frame through interactions that occurred in white spaces. Nuri connects his experiences with interpersonal racism in his predominantly white neighborhood directly with knowledge of the presence of structural racism and the white racial frame:

We had to deal with people riding by in pickup trucks saying ‘nigger’ and uh, just, white people in general being real bold in terms of how they acted towards Black people.... Some people, they grow up in this bubble where they feel like oh, you know, it’s a post-racial society, and people don’t really think this way anymore, but we knew, like, that’s not true. We grew up, and we deal with this stuff every day. Especially living in the South.... We were always made aware of this.... If you just watch what’s going on around you, you can see it. Every day. As a black person, you experience it every day on some level, in one form or another.

For Nuri, these racist interactions and experiences that occur in white social space reify the lessons his mother imparted on him as a young child. They confirm the existence of racism that she warned him and his brother about. These experiences work in tandem with the messages received in Black social spaces to foster the development of stable double consciousness.

Similarly, Doc describes an experience that occurred in white institutional space when his mother decided to send him to a majority-white middle school after he attended a majority-Black elementary school:

They wasn't really, to be honest, fuckin' with the Black students there that much. All the Black kids [that] was getting put in the gifted class was having problems with the teacher...by the time we finished 6th grade, half the kids that came in—the Black kids—just got out the gifted program altogether.

Doc goes on to explain that not only did he return to a majority Black school for high school, but his parents chose to enroll all his younger siblings in majority Black schools for middle school to avoid the racialized experiences that he had in white institutional space. He credits many of the racist experiences he had in middle school with fostering an understanding of the pervasiveness of white supremacy in our society. These instances brought to life the lessons he learned from his parents regarding the white racial frame.

Sage, Lawrence, and Nuri all describe similar experiences in schools that represented white institutional space, and all three of them made the decision—with their parents—to attend more inclusive, less oppressive schools after their negative experiences. For Sage and Lawrence, this happened later, in high school. For Nuri, this happened much earlier, after changing elementary schools:

It was a lot of instances where we were treated differently because of our being Black, so I didn't like it, you know, it wasn't something I was used to. I liked to be around more people that was like me because I felt more comfortable.... I

remember during lunchtime...each day, one kid was responsible for cleaning the tables after [lunch]. But I would always notice that it was Black kids that were being asked to clean the tables, more so than it was anybody else. And it would happen like every day.

Nuri and his siblings entered this school after their family moved from Atlanta to a suburb of the city. Their previous school had a student population that was majority Black. Their new school served a majority-white student body. Nuri was immediately aware of the differences in treatment from the school employees, and describes above the discomfort that manifested for him in this white institutional space. He continues on, expounding on the difficulties he encountered in this white space:

Not only that, but like the white kids were kinda like bullies, and they would try to bully us, but you know, comin' from the community we came from, you wasn't gonna tolerate that. We were there for a couple weeks and we was like, "mama, we can't do this school because if we stay here, we gonna be fighting every day. And you don't want that either." So, we ended up going back to our old school.

Not only did Nuri experience acts of spirit murder in this white institutional space, but he and his siblings were also subjected to increased physical violence from white students. Even at this young age, Nuri and his siblings utilized the double consciousness their mother had fostered within them to advocate for a different, less oppressive school environment. These experiences made tangible the lessons their mother had taught them about white supremacy, and their prior experiences in predominantly Black schools devoid of these traumas allowed them to understand that there was an alternative option.

Both Lawrence and Sage also described getting into several fights in their majority white schools as a result of an act/acts of interpersonal racism. Often, these instances led them to be punished by their school. Stevo also attended a majority white school through high school and,

while he does not describe getting in any fights himself, he observes the differences in punishment for different students based on their race:

I remember these two white guys got into a fight or something like that and they got like 3 days ISS—in school suspension. And these two Black girls got into a fight and they were suspended for a week. Like. From school. And I'm just like, what?... Blood wasn't drawn in either fight, like it was identical except [it was] two Black women [and] two white guys.

Even if the instances did not impact them personally, these observations of institutional racism served to foster the development of stable double consciousness in my participants. Stevo recognized the differences in punishment and knew that these discrepancies were racialized.

These observations and personal experiences do not only occur within a school setting. Morbid James describes an experience with a police officer in a shopping center when he was a teenager. He and a friend were stopped and questioned after allegedly displaying suspicious behavior in a store. The police officers asked them to review the security camera footage recorded in the store:

So we're watching the tape, and [the officer] is like voicing us over? In these mock, like, Black voices. And he just kept saying all this shit, and like, and like, quoting like, rap lyrics, and he was just being a dick. [He] was like, 'I love when y'all wear y'all pants like that, cause y'all can't fucking run nowhere' and saying like, 'How you feel about your thug life now?' And all this other stupid shit.

This experience offered Morbid James a clear view into the ways in which the white racial frame permeates ideologies regarding Black individuals in the U.S. Although this occurred when he was a teenager, these experiences followed him and the rest of my participants well into adulthood. They've been racially profiled while shopping in high-end stores, had many negative interactions with police officers, and had their professional credibility questioned, just to name a few of these experiences. These interactions, facilitated by the white racial frame in both

white social and institutional space, often prompted critical thinking in the minds of my participants, which further stabilized the development of their double consciousness. Each racist interaction or observation served as another example in their minds of the pervasiveness of the white racial frame, and a clear indicator of how the white racial frame impacts the ways in which others perceive and interact with them.

2.2.1.3 *The Dialogical Nature of the Development of Double Consciousness*

The stabilization of double consciousness does not occur in two separate planes functioning independently of one another. The lessons passed down through families and communities within Black social space and the awareness garnered through personal experiences that occur in white spaces work in dialogue with each other. Often, family members, friends, and other Black people with whom my participants are in community with either warn them of experiences that may occur in white space in advance, or process events that did occur in white space after the fact. This dialogical form of knowledge production has occurred in Black spaces throughout U.S. history and also has roots in African traditions (Collins 2000). Thus, it is no surprise that dialogue is used in the development of double consciousness in Black people in the U.S. as a counter-frame to the white racial frame. It is particularly glorious to note that Black resistance strategies may have roots far older than white supremacy itself.

Jace describes an instance when, after experiencing a racist interaction with his family in a white social space, his mother then processed the situation with him, highlighting the ways in which the white racial frame functions:

I think I might have been like 12 or 13, and something happened...I think I was going to see Phantom of the Opera for our [he and his twin sister's] 13th birthday. It was me, my aunt, my grandma, and my mom and there was a mix-up

with the tickets. I think, I dunno if the lady said like a racial slur but she said something that was, like, kinda crazy. And my aunt just kinda lost it, and I didn't really get it. And I realized something disrespectful was said, but I kinda didn't really grasp it. I remember my mom just kinda taking me, you know, after the whole night, and she was like, you know, there are certain people in this world who look at you and think something automatically. And, you know, most of the time, especially in your case, it's gonna be negative.

For Jace, his parents purposefully did not instill knowledge about the operations of the white racial frame until faced with an experience like this, or if he came to them with a related question. Jace felt as though his parents wanted to preserve his innocence for as long as possible, and protect him from the burdens associated with having a sense of double consciousness. On the other hand, they also knew that helping him develop a stable double consciousness was necessary for his spiritual and physical survival, so they couldn't protect him from this knowledge forever. They took time to have these discussions after incidents like the one he described above, to give him the tools necessary to combat the damage the white racial frame aims to impart on Black Americans. Stevo also claims that his father only engaged in these discussions as they were made necessary, usually when he prompted them:

Once I showed interest or we were watching the news, or he saw how I felt about certain things he would go okay well, then he would use examples of how he grew up to face that.

Like Jace, Stevo's father felt a desire to preserve his innocence and therefore only engaged in these discussions after Stevo showed an interest. To his father, that signified that he was ready to have the conversation. On the other hand, some of my participants had parents and communities that preferred a more proactive development of double consciousness. They instead chose to begin this dialogue, so that they could warn my participants of potential

harms. Morbid James, whose family has a lengthy history of involvement with more formal civil rights organizations, received these lessons early and often without any initial trigger event:

[My mom] brought me up with a very, like, angsty Black attitude, and she never really pulled punches with things. Like, she didn't really protect me from things? When I say that, like she didn't withhold, like knowledge.... So, I grew up conscientious [sic] of racism and honestly grew up understanding why things were the way they were for Black people because my mom was really on that shit.

James' mother preferred to instill these messages in his mind first, before he had any negative experiences facilitated by the white racial frame. Regardless of the order received, the development of double consciousness is something that occurs over time from many sources, including both lessons given within Black space as well as from experiences either personally felt or observed within white space. These lessons and experiences worked together in a dialogical fashion to foster the development of stable double consciousness in my participants throughout their life, and continue to do so to this day. Parents often sought out Black spaces for their children to stabilize their double consciousness, enjoy respite from the toxic nature of white social and institutional space, and also simply for pleasure; but they also occasionally purposefully crafted experiences for their children in white social space so that they would develop the skills necessary to understand the pervasive white racial frame, and learn to navigate white social and institutional spaces in a successful way.

2.2.1.4 Spirit Strengthening through the Development of Double Consciousness

The development of stable double consciousness that occurs through this continual, dialogical process enables my participants to combat the spirit murder that accompanies the pervasiveness of the white racial frame. The understanding that the perceptions others hold of

them are rooted in white supremacy and not in any way related to their true selves allows my participants to protect themselves from internalizing this white habitus and succumbing to this type of spirit murder. Venus explains the impact that growing up in a Black community has on him:

I feel like I got crazy, crazy roots. I feel like I have a sense of pride.... I walk around like I'm a gift from God, and not like arrogantly or anything.... I was taught that...God created you for a purpose—you, singularly for a purpose—so be proud of that and go throughout your life doing that. That's a certain worthiness or a certain value that you have about yourself. And I mean, certain people that don't grow up in Black neighborhoods, they get that anyways, but I've heard people tell me that, that they didn't get that until they went to college and started reading books, and started reading literature about themselves.... I feel like I'm lucky to have had that growing up, not as something I've had to catch up on or whatever.

Venus argues that growing up in Black social space fostered self-worth and feelings of pride regarding his Blackness from a very young age. He attributes these gifts directly to teachings he received from his family and community throughout his childhood. While it is sometimes argued that teaching children about structural racism at a young age may foster feelings of nihilism, Venus' experience was quite the opposite.

Similarly, Stevo specifically credits the overarching pride in Blackness present in Atlanta with fostering his sense of pride in his own Blackness:

It's just this pride in being Black in Atlanta that I just, I haven't seen anywhere else across the country. It's not like it's on purpose either, it's just that...they take a certain pride in being from here. Like it's a reason why these rappers are screaming their zone on they track, like they love it here, and...that passion that they have, I don't even think people do it on purpose. Like, I'm from here, you can tell by how I walk, talk, that's what makes me love it. And they're so unapologetic about it. And that's what I love most about Atlanta.

For Stevo, the meaning attached to the places that house these Black social spaces not only fosters a pride in Blackness but also a pride in the particular Black neighborhoods across the

city—and even Atlanta as a whole. This pride, Stevo says, facilitates the widespread impact that Black cultural production in Atlanta has across the United States:

Regardless if you've been in the west side, Bankhead, all your life, you know the influence Atlanta has put on, but you also know outside of Atlanta, or outside of the perimeter, it's not like this. You have so much influence over the state and country...[and] you know your power too. You see when people dancing like you on TV, and that makes you feel like, dang, I'm from Atlanta, and if I go 2 hours south I might get killed but somebody in California fuckin' with what I'm doing here. Like that means, that's special to us.

Here, Stevo claims that the harm created by the awareness of interpersonal racism situated in the South is mitigated by the knowledge of the power of Black cultural production that takes place in Atlanta. This pride served to protect the spirit from being overburdened by the knowledge of the physical and spiritual violence made possible by the overarching white racial frame. Simply put, experiencing interpersonal racism stings just a little less when overshadowed by the sheer power of Black cultural production occurring in Atlanta. This is stable double consciousness at work—Stevo knows that racism is a real and present facet of his life, and he also knows the power that he and other Black people hold in our society in spite of that.

Similarly, Lawrence recognizes the power in being able to understand and interact comfortably in both Black and white social space:

[In Black social spaces] there were places I had no business being, and they were the ones who would be like nah, nah Lawrence you're cool, like just hang wit us or, we'll make sure you're looked out for, so don't ever feel like you're uncomfortable here because this is the crib. And that was what felt most important to me. In those situations I always embrace that part of myself...because I felt like that was always a little bit more me, you know? But, at the same time I realized being smart or being able to exist in those [white] places like, the people I'm able to talk to now and hold a conversation with, it's just—I feel like I could talk to Barack Obama and be chill, and I feel like I could talk to Larry Hoover and be chill, you know what I'm sayin'?

Interestingly, though Lawrence was discussing Black and white social spaces, he ended this thought with two examples of Black men who represent very different social spaces. As President of the United States, Barack Obama not only occupies white social spaces very often due to his position of power, but also represents and upholds the white racial frame in many ways—for example, upholding U.S. imperialism abroad and invoking absentee Black fathers to excuse many social problems present in inner-city Black neighborhoods. For Lawrence, the stable double consciousness his parents deliberately instilled in him from a young age gives him this ability to function well in both Black and white social space. This allows him to navigate the white racial frame in an informed way and take respite in Black social spaces as needed.



Figure 2-4. Crowd Pleasers.

Venus (left) and Doc (right) perform while on tour with a major music artist.

The stabilization of double consciousness can serve to mitigate the impact of acts of violence designed to murder the spirit. For my participants, a stable double consciousness fosters a sense of pride in Blackness which counters the messages spread through the white racial frame that categorize Blackness as deficient, pathological, and otherwise problematic. Instead, this stable double consciousness allows my participants to see these messages as exactly what they are—tools developed under the white racial frame to preserve and promote white supremacy. To my participants, their Blackness is varied and complex and resilient and powerful. Furthermore, the ability to master interactions in both Black and white social spaces gained through stable double consciousness offered some of my participants a deeper sense of pride because they understand that few people across the U.S., particularly few white people, have the ability to master both realms.

2.2.1.5 *The Omnipresent Spirit Murder*

While the stabilization of double consciousness aids in mitigating the effects that spirit murder has on a person, this does not erase the universal, violent presence of the white racial frame. The very necessity to develop double consciousness to protect one's spirit is, in fact, a form of spirit murder. In order to protect yourself from the damaging effects of white supremacy, you must understand that white supremacy exists and aims to damage you. This understanding—so necessary for self-preservation—is harmful nonetheless. Jace paints a portrait of the double-edged sword of double consciousness:

When I was 14 and 15, my dad was like, 'yo man, they're killin' niggas. They'll kill you for not, for just being you.'... And he let me know that there's no telling that whether I respond accordingly or not, that they won't kill me. I remember he told me that, and that kind of stuck to me. It's like, I could follow all the rules, and I could speak respectfully, and I could follow all their instructions and they

still could shoot your ass. And I remember that was one of the first times he cursed in front of me.... It was a shock because he cursed when he said it and then it was a shock because it was just like, you know, up until that point, I hadn't had any run-ins with the law.... I was real privy to a lot of things, you know, that had happened racially in the country, but...at that age, you just kind of think like, it wouldn't happen to me. But I could tell, like, the way he was saying it was just like, you don't, you don't have any say so in it. It's not like, oh it couldn't happen to me. It's just like, nah, anybody can get it. It could be you too.

Jace claims he already had a general understanding of structural racism, but this message personalized this abstract issue in a way he hadn't thought about before. The message that his father imparted to him—that Jace himself is in personal danger living under the white racial frame—is a hurtful message to receive. Jace goes on to explain the compounded pain he experienced through this important and necessary message from his father:

I also understood that I didn't feel right that I had to be any more aware of it than my white friends had to be or than my Asian friends had to be, but, you know, I understood that my parents wanted me to be alive and it doesn't matter if I, you know, if I necessarily get it. It's just the way it is. And you know, I remember thinking that. I remember thinking, I don't wanna say that it was unjust, but I was sitting there with these hearty emotions like, it's not fair. I remember being like, what!?! Like, you can't shoot me if I'm following directions! If I'm being peaceful! But like, I mean especially in light of the stuff that's happening now, and stuff that's been happening since I was 15, it's just like, nah bro, [laughs] it don't really matter. It's just like a wake up call. It's just like an extension into adulthood and young Black male-hood.

While Jace acknowledges the importance of the lessons his father delivered to him about existing in white space, he also wrestles with the idea that not everyone has to receive these lessons. He knows that they are unique to the Black experience here in the U.S.—particularly, he claims, the young Black male experience; he simultaneously acknowledges the unfairness. It is a form of spirit murder to live in a society that does not value your humanity, and it is an

additional form of spirit murder to have to be aware that you live in a society that does not value your humanity in order to survive.

Doc further explains how the knowledge that accompanies double consciousness can also serve as a form of spirit murder:

Because the world, like the world don't really give a fuck about Black dudes at all...so you gotta really be on your sink or swim shit, like at all times, like it's like, you always gotta be ready to...you gotta be adaptable as a Black man. You gotta be ready to think on your feet. So I, you know what I'm sayin', we was raised like that.

Just like Jace, Doc understands the necessity of this message. But understanding that the world you live in does not care about you does harm the spirit. My participants understand the necessity of developing a stable double consciousness as Black men living in a society plagued by the white racial frame—not only to combat spirit murder, but also to garner basic physical safety and to achieve relative success in the white spaces that dominate our society. However, my participants also express the knowledge that comes with the stabilization of double consciousness—the awareness that they are viewed as less than, that they live in a society that doesn't recognize their own humanity. This knowledge, though integral to their survival, is also a form of spirit murder. Jace explains the hardships associated with employing double consciousness:

Why can't I just be treated like a person? ...You just have to be conscious of it at all times. But even that, you know, telling someone like, you should be conscious! Because you're young, Black, and a rapper! It's just like FUCK! I can't just live!? I have to be thinking, that I'm young, and Black, and I have a dick, and I have a job that people don't already kinda like? I have to think about that all the time? I can't just be a person and be in my emotions and my convictions? It's lame. But that's just what my dad told me at 16. It's like, no. you can't. YOU can't. If you wanna stay alive in this country, and have kids, and grandkids, and do what you say you're trying to do, you can't. And so, it's a struggle.

Again, Jace clearly understands the necessity of possessing stable double consciousness, but he also points out the trauma that this knowledge carries with it. The development of double consciousness is fostered, as an intentional effort, through interactions in Black social space in dialogue with experiences that occur in white social space. This important counter-frame both serves to mitigate the effects of acts of spirit murder, while simultaneously acting as an act of spirit murder itself. Despite the pain that accompanies the knowledge gained through the stabilization of double consciousness, as long as the white racial frame dominates U.S. society, this pain is a unfortunately necessary one. As I discuss next, double consciousness must be present in order to develop further counter-frames to combat oppression under the white racial frame.

2.3 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I demonstrate the ways in which my participants utilize stable double consciousness as a counter-frame to resist the spirit murder imparted upon Black Americans through the dominant white racial frame. Double consciousness serves as a counter-frame to combat the white racial frame. Achieving stable double consciousness allows Black individuals to recognize the existence of the white racial frame and enables them to resist, to varying degrees, internalizing the hegemonic oppression that accompanies the white racial frame. My participants developed a stabilized double consciousness through a dialogue between lessons learned and examples given in Black social spaces, as well as first-hand experiences with the white racial frame in white social and institutional spaces.

Their stable double consciousness development was aided by elders in their community—from family members to teachers to coaches. These Black elders are well aware of

the affects that structural racism can have on the spirit and deliberately crafted their stable double consciousness through both lessons and experiences in an effort to offer them spirit protection. While the development of double consciousness does afford this protection, it does not completely remove the presence of spirit murder attempts. The existence of stable double consciousness offers protection from spirit murder, yet the very fact that this protection is needed is, in itself, an act of spirit murder.

Double consciousness not only operates as a counter-frame, but it also facilitates the development of other counter-frames. Stable double consciousness carries with it an understanding that the white racial frame exists, is problematic, and needs to be resisted. Without that understanding, resistance is impossible. Thus, double-consciousness is an incredibly valuable counter-frame. In the next chapter, I discuss several freedom-based counter-frames that are made possible through double consciousness.

3 CHAPTER 3: BLACK AMERICAN NOTIONS OF FREEDOM AS A COUNTER-FRAME

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout my interviews and observations, the concept of “freedom” comes up repeatedly. Feagin (2010) argues that Black people sometimes employ the use of the white-crafted “liberty-and-justice” frame in their counter-framing efforts. He includes Black American discussions of freedom in his examples of ways in which the liberty-and-justice frame is also employed as a counter-frame. However, he fails to account for the meaning Black people in the U.S. ascribe to notions of freedom when employing this as a counter-frame in a white supremacist society. Robin D.G. Kelley (2002:12) highlights the failures of academics who attempt to understand notions of freedom within the context of Black American resistance:

Freedom and love may be the most revolutionary ideas available to us, and yet as intellectuals we have failed miserably to grapple with their political and analytical importance.... I have come to realize that once we strip radical social movements down to their bare essence and understand the collective desires of people in motion, freedom and love lay at the very heart of the matter.

Kelley (2002) goes on to argue that the concept of freedom has no tie to U.S. nationality in the context of Black American resistance. Instead, the use of the concept of freedom as a counter-frame represents detachment from the confines of structural oppression (Kelley 2002). “Free was a verb, an act, a wish, a militant demand” (Kelley 2002:14). Patricia Williams (1991:29) claims, “what we call ‘freedom’ is either contradictory or meaningless.” In contrast, Kelley (2002:11) argues that the concept of freedom employed as a counter-frame is “about self-transformation, changing the way we think, live, love, and handle pain.” Failing to recognize the meaning of freedom when Black people in the U.S. employ it as a counter-frame is yet another example of the pervasiveness of the white racial frame that even impedes academic research. In order to fully understand the use of notions of freedom as a counter-frame, we must understand how Black people define freedom for themselves.

3.2 FREEDOM-AS-HAPPINESS

For my participants, the concept of freedom is very often associated with achieving happiness. Just as with double consciousness, the pursuit of happiness occurs in dialogue with the white racial frame that seeks to deny happiness to Black Americans. Under the white racial frame, Black people are denied their full humanity—including the right to experience positive emotions like happiness. My participants engage in counter-framing by actively seeking out happiness. Jace states:

I'm doing exactly what I would be doing if I, if I didn't have to do anything. And that's like the best feeling in the world. I feel like if everyone could do that, we'd all just be happy.

He went on to state that he was very happy, specifically because he gets to do what he loves for a living. For Jace, if money were not a necessity, he would still be making the same music he does today. He finds happiness in his creations. Morbid James, who is still developing economic stability with his artistic endeavors, claims that the financial and emotional struggles are worth it because of the happiness he has achieved:

If I go back to the work force, if I just go get like a good job, and just work that shit until I'm fifty and my body's broken—you know my body's already broken from the last job—I will probably jump off a fucking building. Like, I will not be happy.

While Morbid James knows that he could go back to working a job with a more stable income, but he admits he would be sacrificing the happiness he finds in his creative work. For him, that sacrifice is not worth the financial stability.

Much like Morbid James, Nuri feels happier navigating the economic struggles that come with being a self-employed creator. He claims that his true period of struggle was when he was still looking for employment through wage labor:

I was just tryna find a job. And, but I realized like, I'm tryna find a job just for the sake of like having money but I'm not thinking about, will I be happy doing this job?

Nuri corrected me when I referred to the period just after an artist decides to pursue creating as a full-time job as the "struggle period," claiming that even though that time period was financially more difficult, it was not a struggle. For Nuri, the true struggle was engaging in wage labor. The happiness that comes with creating for a living far outweighs any financial struggles Nuri faces. For Sage, the very act of creating increases his happiness by soothing his anxiety:

When I draw it's like, it's literally like everything else disappears...Nothing else around me exists anymore. It's just, I'm drawing and I feel comfortable in this nervous ass environment I'm in. So I would do it a lot in school, all the time, and like I would try to take long, long drawings to um, basically to keep focus so I could ignore what's going on.

Sage finds comfort and happiness in drawing. The pressures of the world fall away when he's engaged in this act—he finds freedom. For the young men in my study, happiness operates as a counter-frame, operating in tandem with notions of freedom. The meaning of happiness ascribed to notions of freedom is far removed from the white liberty-and-justice frame Feagin (2010) describes.



Figure 3-1. Joy in Performing.

Jace (2nd from left) performs with members of his music group Two9.

Just as with most Black American knowledge production (Collins 2000), the production of the freedom-as-happiness counter-frame occurs in dialogue with several aspects of the

white racial frame. As is exemplified above, the notion of happiness counters the spirit murder that occurs within the white racial frame. Under the white racial frame, marginalized groups are not afforded the luxury of happiness. They are not viewed as full humans, and therefore those in power do not care if they can experience the fullness of humanity. Under the white racial frame, their spirit is to be murdered so that white spirits can be full and complete. A murdered spirit cannot feel happiness. A murdered spirit should not feel happiness. According to our systems of oppression, a murdered spirit does not deserve happiness. Despite living under a white racial frame that attempts to deny them their full humanity, my participants seek out happiness as a form of freedom from the violence imparted by the dominant white racial frame. They know they are not meant to have this form of freedom in our society, yet they fight for it anyway—and achieve it.

This freedom-as-happiness counter-frame also occurs in dialogue with the legible Black masculinity (Neal 2013) that is constructed by the white racial frame. According to the controlling images that pervade our ideologies, Black men are criminal, violent and hypersexual (Collins 2005). A violent, hypersexual criminal is not happy. A violent, hypersexual criminal should not be happy. A violent, hypersexual criminal is either causing harm to others, or the subject of warranted state harm (arrest, police brutality, incarceration) to protect the public from the harm he causes. Again, according to these controlling images, these men do not deserve happiness. However, the young men in my study actively resist these controlling images by pursuing happiness as a life goal. They routinely assert that they do deserve happiness—a revolutionary assertion in itself—and mold their life choices in pursuit of this particular freedom.



Figure 3-2. Break Time.

FRKO takes a break from painting during a mural festival.

Finally, as is very evident in several of the interview excerpts above, the freedom-as-happiness counter-frame occurs in dialogue with the capitalistic notion that labor is, and likely should be, alienating. Many of my participants express direct opposition to this notion, and refuse to engage in work that alienates them from themselves. Instead, they actively pursue labors of love, and connect this practice with their own personal happiness. It is especially important to frame this in a historical context. Throughout the history of the U.S., the Black body has been a source of labor (Gilroy 1990:48). Thus, reclaiming one's Black body as a source of pleasure, deserving of happiness and freedom, is a profound act of resistance and should be

recognized as such. The actions taken by my participants in an effort to pursue freedom through happiness are beautiful forms of resistance. These acts of resistance have been left out of any discussions of counter-framing, and it is imperative that they be recognized for their beauty and bravery in the face of oppression.

3.3 FREEDOM-AS-AUTHENTICITY

To be nobody-but-yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody but yourself—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight—and never stop fighting.

-E. E. Cummings (1965)

Much like happiness, the white racial frame attempts to strip Black people of their authenticity. Both DuBois (1903) and Williams (1991) argue that Black people living in a white supremacist society can suffer a detachment from their true selves. DuBois (1903:5) claims “the history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, —this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.” This self-conscious manhood is similar to the authenticity my participants pursue. Lawrence explains:

We have this version of ourselves, right? This perfect version of ourselves that we interact with in our minds, but we only experience in varying degrees. Like, sometimes you are that person embodied. You are walking and you are the best version of yourself in that moment. And the other times—when you are so far away from that person—and it’s just like you’re looking at that person, and you’re reaching for them, and you’re like, ‘where are you?’

Black men living in a white supremacist society are routinely subjected to attempts at spirit murder, which can lead to a detachment from oneself. My participants’ pursuit of freedom through authenticity is an attempt to reconcile the damage done to their spirits while living in a society permeated by the white racial frame. DuBois (1903) argues that this pursuit is lifelong, and my participants make similar claims. As Lawrence explains, authenticity is something

people experience “in varying degrees.” It exists on a continuum—sometimes a person may be closer to embodying their authentic self, and other times they may be far removed.

Lawrence explains finally resolving to leave a stable corporate job and start his own business. After pondering this for quite a while, he made the decision just after receiving news that his employer was entering a busy season and employee requests for time off would not be approved for a period of time. As a result of his brave decision, Lawrence says:

For the first time in a long time, probably since high school, I actually feel free to be myself, you know? And I don't feel like I have to mold myself to anybody else. So even in building my company, I'm learning how to not defer to other people, and just be like this is who I am, this is what I do. I can help you. I'm confident in that, but I'm not like, putting on the voices anymore that I used to put on... Like that's, that's me being my most authentic self, so, it's just a constant s—not struggle, constant something to focus on and be aware of for me is like, am I being myself in this moment, because then I feel good. And if I don't feel good, why? Usually it's because I'm doing something I don't wanna do, or I'm somewhere I don't care to be.”

Lawrence explicitly states that he is constantly working toward being his “most authentic self.”

He goes on to state that in the moments when he achieves this level of authenticity, he feels truly happy. There is a distinct connection between the freedom-as-authenticity and the freedom-as happiness counter-frames.

While Lawrence explains that he was able to pursue authenticity after leaving his corporate job, Venus draws a connection between authenticity and career aspirations—specifically within the confines of the white racial frame:

I remember a lot of times when I was telling [my mom] that I'm finna do music full time, I'm creating music full time...she'd be like, but what's the color of your skin? I'd be like, I'm about to get a full arm tattoo, she'd be like...like, they white ma. You know what I'm sayin', I wanna do this, that, whatever, but they white ma. But I'm like ma, like, *white kids get to dream, you know?*² They get to do

² Italics used in participant quotes throughout to add emphasis.

whatever they wanna do...their parents don't tell them you have to live your life this way because society is going to treat you this certain way, you know? So I wanna do whatever I wanna do. I don't wanna have to be confined to like this role that Black people think that they kids have to grow up to be in order to be successful, in order to do anything in this country. So that was like basically what I was telling her, like ma, for real for real, fuck all that.

For Venus, freedom comes as authenticity in his life choices—whether that be his career pursuits or his body modifications—in spite of the white racial frame. He recognizes that white people aren't subjected to the same pressures to deny their authentic desires, and he understands the white supremacist root of this discrepancy. Though he has been taught these decisions could have tangible implications for his life, Venus chooses to pursue authenticity by pursuing his passions.



Figure 3-3. Authentic Venus.

Venus performs, as part of Earthgang, as the opening act for a major music artist.

Stevo also employs the freedom-as-authenticity counter-frame with regard to his career pursuits:

...to have a job where I don't have to conform on anything, like I can go to a meeting with my grill in my mouth. I don't have to do anything I don't want to...I can do what I want, and that's almost more proud than making the money (laughs). That I'm really, I can live exactly how I want to without being, not saying critiqued because people are going to judge, but, it doesn't affect whether I get this opportunity or not. It has almost nothing to do with it. So, that's almost, I'm more proud of that than being able to make good money. Like I said, I've been broke before. But, I ain't trippin' about that. But yeah, being able to completely be myself, walking into meetings like what I got on—hoodie everyday—that's...like these people are going to accept you for you and you're gonna get what you want.

Stevo puts authenticity over financial success. He explains the pride he feels in being free from the pressures of conformity and assimilation. The pressures for Black Americans to assimilate and conform are manifested through the white racial frame. White supremacy devalues any and all cultural markers ascribed to Black American culture. Under white supremacy, to embrace and utilize those cultural markers is to devalue oneself. Black Americans are often pressured to assimilate to mainstream white culture as a means to gain value and significance. My participants, and many Black Americans, recognize the role white supremacy plays in devaluing attributes of Black American culture and reject those standards. This proclamation—that their authentic selves hold value whether or not those who ascribe to the white racial frame choose to acknowledge it—is a radical act of resistance.

It is worth noting that in each of the quotes above, the notion of freedom-as-authenticity occurs in dialogue with the capitalistic notion of labor as alienation. Many of my participants feel as though they had to stifle parts of themselves to succeed in wage labor positions and achieve this freedom through authenticity in part by leaving these positions. The

alienating labor performed by the vast majority of workers in a capitalistic system requires a detachment from self (Marx 1867). Capitalistic, alienating labor is definitely not designed to fulfill spirits. Thus, it is extremely difficult to pursue a connection to one's true self while engaging in wage labor. For this reason, many of my participants chose to disengage in wage labor to pursue the freedom that comes through authenticity.

However, detaching from the labor force is not the only way in which my participants pursue freedom through authenticity. It is very important to them to create authentic works of art as well. Jace explains:

Do you want to lie to yourself every day or do you wanna be you? And I just, you know, I like what the fuck I like. And I try to put that in my music. I try to express that as much as I can on my twitter, like I like what the fuck I like. I watch what the fuck I want to watch. And I'm going to support it and I'm gonna enjoy it because that's me. Like I was talking to my dad...I was like, 'well before the show I was watching *Snapped*,' and he was like, 'wait you're talking about the thing on *Oxygen*?' And I was like 'yeah,' and he just laughed. He was like, 'make sure not to let too many of your gangster rap buddies know that you're watching *Snapped* in your off time.' And I thought it was just interesting he said that because it was like, me personally, I don't give a fuck! Like, it entertains me. I like it. You know what I'm saying?

Here, the freedom-as-authenticity frame works in dialogue with the controlling images associated with Black masculinity. The legible Black masculinity present within the white racial frame is hardened—hyper-masculine. The fact that Jace is a rapper only feeds into the constraints of legible Black masculinity, so his desire to watch television shows on a network that is focused on women viewers, as well as his penchant for comics and anime, challenge the confines of legible Black masculinity. Jace discusses his varying interests in his music and even on his social media in an effort to remain authentic and challenge the boundaries and confines of the constructions of Black masculinity.



Figure 3-4. Masked Muralist.

PaperFrank clears the nozzle of his spray paint can while working on a mural.

Above, Venus mentioned, “white kids get to dream.” This alludes to the dialogue that is present between the development of the freedom-as-authenticity counter-frame and spirit murder. Acts of spirit murder aim to detach Black people from themselves in yet another attempt to deny Black Americans of their full humanity. Denial of authentic personhood facilitates oppression. If that vast majority of people in a society don’t recognize the full humanity of those being oppressed, they won’t feel the need to question or resist this oppression. Many of my participants’ commitment to authenticity stands in direct opposition to spirit murder attempts. For Stevo, the ability to remain authentic in his career mediates the effects of attempted spirit murder he experiences:

The satisfaction of doing what you [love], to me, exceeds all that...so I don't care how you feel about me. I'm so happy to not have to wear a suit in this motherfucker, I don't even care if you hate us or [you're] like 'ew this rapper...'

Stevo claims that he is unfazed by racism and stereotyping as long as he can remain true to himself. In dialogue with both legible Black masculinity and spirit murder, my participants often employ the freedom-as-authenticity frame to advocate for their own personhood. An authentic, complex human cannot be constrained by the confines of the white racial frame, which seeks to subordinate Black people to mere bodies available for consumption and exploitation. My participants seek to “elevate [their] status from human body to social being” (Williams 1991:153) through both claiming and portraying the fullness of their authentic humanity.

This reclamation of personhood not only happens through attire, through language, and through their creations. Occasionally, this reclamation is a very literal one. Lawrence says:

I wanna speak to you like a person. I want people to speak to me like a person. I've never had [an] anger issue in my life but the only times where I've really lost it is when people don't speak to me like I'm a human being.

The language Lawrence uses here shows that he recognizes interpersonal interactions in which the other parties deny him his full humanity. By defying controlling images and dedicating themselves to living an authentic life, my participants seek to gain the personhood that is stripped from them through the pervasive white racial frame. Jace advocates for similar treatment when, after explaining an incident in which he and his music group members were kicked out of a hotel room in a rather rude manner, he asks, “why can't I just be treated like a person?”

The intentional pursuit of freedom through authenticity, in a society plagued by white supremacist capitalism, is brave and commendable and often goes unrecognized. Brene Brown (2010:126) writes, “choosing authenticity and worthiness is an absolute act of resistance. Choosing to live and love with our whole hearts is an act of defiance. You’re going to confuse, piss off, and terrify lots of people—including yourself.” For Black people in a society rooted in white supremacy, these acts are infinitely more defiant—and therefore courageous. The freedom-as-authenticity frame is an integral counter-frame employed in active resistance to the white racial frame.

3.4 FREEDOM-AS-DETACHMENT

All of my participants connect their ability to pursue both happiness and authenticity, in part, with their choice to detach from white institutions such as the education system, the traditional labor force, or both. As I’ve stated, they have a keen awareness that capitalistic work is alienating work, and they recognize that engaging in this type of labor hinders both personal happiness and authenticity. Similarly, many of them also carry an awareness of the harms associated with interacting with white institutional spaces within the education system. When interpreting these choices through the white racial frame, researchers, media, and individuals often grossly misunderstand these actions. It is important to look at the meaning these individuals ascribe to their own actions to unveil their use as a counter-frame.

3.4.1 DETACHMENT FROM THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Many of my participants made a conscious decision to withdraw from the white institutional space of educational systems because they recognize the harms that these institutions impart on Black people. When these actions are viewed through the white racial

frame, scholars, members of the media, and other individuals often portray these actions as “dropping out.” The connotation associated with dropping out of school is negative, and suggests a failure on the part of the individual. Much academic scholarship is dedicated to discovering risk factors that make a young person more likely to drop out of school (Ginwright 2006; Brown 2008) and much activism and community work is dedicated to mediating the effects of these risk factors to keep young people in school. Conversely, very little scholarship (see Fine 1991; Moore 2008; and Chou et al. 2012) and even less community work focuses on the impact that white institutional space has on students of color and works to reform these spaces. It is clear through my interviews and observations that my participants ascribe a very different meaning to their choices to detach from formal education systems—and this is far from a reflection of their educational aspirations. All but one of my twelve participants graduated from high school. Both Sage and PaperFrank moved to entirely different states in the middle of their high school career in hopes to find a more suitable educational environment to ensure their scholastic success. Nine of my twelve participants attended some college, and three graduated from college. However, no matter their educational attainment level, all twelve participants expressed an understanding that formal education systems do not operate in their best interest.

Many educational facilities in the U.S. are white institutional spaces, saturated by the white racial frame. These white institutional spaces are sources of spirit murder, or attempts at spirit murder, for many students of color. Patricia Williams (1991:87), critiquing the wording in various law school test questions, writes, “most of these problems require Blacks, women who have been raped, gays and lesbians, to not just re-experience their oppression, but to write

against their personal knowledge...It requires them to devalue their own and others' humanity for the sake of a grade." For the young Black men in my study, their early lessons in double consciousness allow them to interpret these attempts at spirit murder in white educational spaces much differently. J.I.D. explains:

To this day like I kinda don't care about the educational system, off of what they're teaching. They don't—you only show people what you want them to see or whatever, and that's how I feel the educational system is.

For J.I.D., this white institutional space promotes ideas associated with the white racial frame, and that facilitates within him the desire to detach from this system. He understands the confines of the school curriculum and is disinterested in what it has to offer. Chris expresses similar feelings:

I, school, I just felt like when I, as I got older, the information that they were teaching me, the shit that I was getting out of school, and how I was already viewing life, it didn't match up.

The lessons Chris received in school differed vastly from the lessons he was receiving in Black social space both in his home and in his community. Ultimately, these conflicting messages spurred his detachment in white educational structures.

On top of the spirit murder imparted through white educational spaces, many of my participants describe school curriculum as irrelevant to their life and career aspirations. This, too, contributes to their detachment in these white educational spaces. J.I.D. sums this up succinctly: "all these classes that we learned bro! But I need to learn how to do my taxes!" Sage explains more thoroughly:

I didn't do my work either. Because I just felt like my, I didn't know what I was gonna do—end up doing—but I always felt like school wasn't about to have a hand in it, so like, I just couldn't focus doing my work and I—like it wasn't even on purpose really. Somebody would give me my test sheet to fill in the bubbles,

and then by the time the test time is up I've drawn all over the sheet and not notice I did it, and then when I do finish I'm like, ah shit like, damn, welp, there goes another zero.

For Sage, despite not having concrete career goals, he knew that the education he was receiving in school was not relevant to his life. This knowledge thus spurred his detachment. Without a clear and relevant purpose for school curriculum, my participants disengaged.

Morbid James, who dropped out of school in 8th grade, argued that his own aptitude is proof of the ineptitude of the educational system:

As far as education is concerned I'm surprised that I'm as smart as I am or as functional as I am, cause if you wanna go on paper I have like, uh, on paper I have like a fucking 8th grade education. But like I'm pretty functional, pretty much know everything I need to know. It kinda makes me look at like, the educational system as like . . . I don't know. It's weird.

For Morbid James, the fact that he can function so well in society despite having only an 8th grade education is indicative of the sheer uselessness of much school curriculum. Conversely, both Nuri and FRKO attended mainstream universities in pursuit of art degrees and dropped out after completing all the courses required for their major. They both viewed the knowledge attained in their art courses as valuable, but had no interest in completing the core requirements necessary for graduation. Nuri explains:

I was still going, but it was more so to kind of finish what I started. But towards the end, I was like, I'm wasting my time, and I'm wasting money. Because...at Georgia State I was also an art major. And I was taking classes about art history and anything that was art-related, because I had already taken all the drawing classes. That was done. I had nothing left but the boring classes. And that's where I started to struggle, because it's hard for that stuff to keep my attention. If I'm in class and nobody's gonna make me do work, I'm probably gonna end up drawing in class. And that's what ended up happening a lot.

Nuri was very interested and engaged in his education when it was relevant to his interests, but he lost his desire when he was subjected to the courses that were irrelevant to his interests and

life goals. Similarly, FRKO stopped attending Howard University with around 12 credit hours needed to meet the requirements to graduate. Having already completed the requirements for his art major, he decided paying for a full semester of education out of pocket just to fulfill core requirements was not cost-effective. He had attained the knowledge he needed to continue in pursuit of his career goals and chose not to go into debt to complete irrelevant courses despite the fact that they were necessary to complete his degree.

Many of my participants who started college claim they did so solely because of family pressures. Stevo explains that if he had a valid career option directly after high school, his parents wouldn't have pushed him to go to college. As his dreams of playing basketball got put on hold after his daughter was born, attending college was the only option:

There wasn't anything I was interested in that could do right after high school. Had, if I knew something that was, almost for sure, they probably woulda supported it. But if it wasn't basketball they knew, okay you gotta go to college, do something afterwards. So they were basically like yeah, you gotta go to school.

Stevo's family painted college as his only option after high school, and he didn't question them initially. Nuri describes a similar sentiment that his mother imparted on him:

College was kind of a thing that I was forced into doing because my mom was like, well, you can't just stay here and do anything, you have to go to school or you have to go into the military, but you can't just do nothing.

Faced with the decision between college and the military, Nuri chose to attend college. He preferred to attend an art school, but the cost of attendance was significantly higher than the more traditional in-state schools, so he opted to start at a junior college and then transfer to a local university. Eventually, for many of my participants who attended college largely because of familial pressures, their desire to please their parents wore off the more they were pressured

to take classes that were irrelevant to their life plans. As I said, all but three of my participants eventually withdrew from their respective universities. The three participants who did complete their Bachelors degrees—Doc, Venus, and J.I.D.—all graduated from Hampton University together, but insist they learned little to nothing from the institution. Below is an excerpt of dialogue in which they discuss their college experiences:

Doc: I didn't really care about college. It was a waste of time, for real....I didn't learn nothing in college.

J.I.D.: I learned more about people...I didn't care about nothing!

Doc: We was wild boys in college. We met J.I.D. in college.

Venus: We wasn't in college at all.

J.I.D.: At all! We weren't!

Venus: I was in college first semester, when I was an architecture major. That was the only time I was in college. After that, I was no longer in college.

Doc: I wasn't never in college.

As they all graduated from this institution, they all were very clearly enrolled in college. Their rhetoric, claiming that they were not in college, instead suggests their detachment occurred while still enrolled in the institution. Their ability to finish their respective degrees is not indicative of their level of attachment to this white institutional space. In fact, it is indicative of their masterful counter-framing skills. The ability to obtain a degree from an institution—which gives them additional value in our society—while remaining detached throughout their educational process should be recognized as extremely skillful.

When their stories are given merit over the values and stereotypes created by the white racial frame, actions that would stereotypically be defined as dropping out or having low

educational aspirations appear much more complex. My participants actively chose to disengage from a system they recognized to be worthless at best, and violent at worst. Assata Shakur (Shakur 1987:136) sums up these incongruities:

And when I think back to some of those kids who were labeled ‘troublemakers’ and ‘problem students,’ I realize that many of them were unsung heroes who fought to maintain some sense of dignity and self-worth.

Here, freedom is found through a counter-frame of detachment from a system they are well aware does not have their best interests at heart. My participants know the value placed on education in our society. They also know they are devalued simply because they are young Black men. Instead of choosing to adhere to the value system created by the white racial frame and increase their value based on these standards, they choose instead to preserve their spirits. In doing so, they reject the notion that they need to engage in particular acts to increase their value. By detaching from these systems, they are advocating their self-worth. They are saying—to themselves and anyone watching—I am valuable as I am. They are placing their health—body, mind, and spirit—above social standards. Yet again, this is a valiant, radical act of resistance.

3.4.2 DETACHMENT FROM WAGE LABOR

Similar to their decisions to withdraw from the formal education system, all of my participants made the intentional decision to withdraw from alienating wage labor at some point in their lives. They recognize this work to be alienating and understand that engaging in such work at length can impede their ability to achieve freedom through happiness and authenticity. Interpreting the decision to withdraw from wage labor through the white racial frame can lead to misunderstandings that label those Black people who make this decision as

lazy or inferior (Kelley 1994). By taking into account the white supremacist framework that engulfs the entire history of wage labor in the U.S., there is room for a very different understanding of this decision. As always, it's important to understand these actions through the meanings that those who engage in them attach to them. Robin D.G. Kelley (1994:22) writes, "if we regard most work as alienating, especially work performed in a context of racist and sexist oppression, then we should expect Black working people to minimize labor with as little economic loss as possible." Black people in the U.S. have a long history of resisting exploitative, alienating labor. Doc explains that he understands he will never fully be free from the confines of these systems of oppression, but frames this decision through a rhetoric of freedom: "The system gonna come find you wherever you at. But as far as the workin'—going to work every day—nah. I'm glad. That was my main thing, to *liberate* myself from that." Doc knows that he will always be subjected to systemic racism, but states that he has found liberation by disengaging from wage labor. This is an aspect of systemic racism that he can control his contact with, and by disengaging from this particular system he has minimized his exposure to the harmful white racial frame. His decision to withdraw from wage labor is indicative of an understanding of the oppressive nature of capitalistic, exploitative labor and the connection between capitalism and white supremacy.

Sage expresses that he has never maintained a wage labor position for any length of time, specifically because of the exploitative and alienating nature of the work:

I literally hate, with every bone in my body, someone telling me what I should do and where I should be...I can't have somebody being like, no you can't go hang out with yourself in a park you need to come to work, and you need to work for this company and make their livelihood better and you're gonna get paid a certain rate so that you can pay bills and be broke to end up back there. And it's just a cycle and I don't fuck with it. I just rebuked all that shit. I'm never working

again and if I die of starvation that's cool but I'm pretty sure if I believe in my art enough and myself enough that everything will work out and that's what happened. So that's it. That's why I don't fuck with jobs. I hate that shit. My—literally—my physical body will not go to that shit. Like I've quit so many, or I've just not showed up indefinitely to so many jobs. I'm pretty sure a lot of my old employers would just be like yeah he never showed up again.

Sage offers a Marxist understanding of capitalistic labor exploitation—the working class has their labor exploited for meager pay while the companies they work for garner wealth. When Sage says his body simply “will not go to that shit,” he alludes to connections to spirit murder. His seemingly subconscious bodily response to this exploitation could very well be his spirit refusing to be murdered.

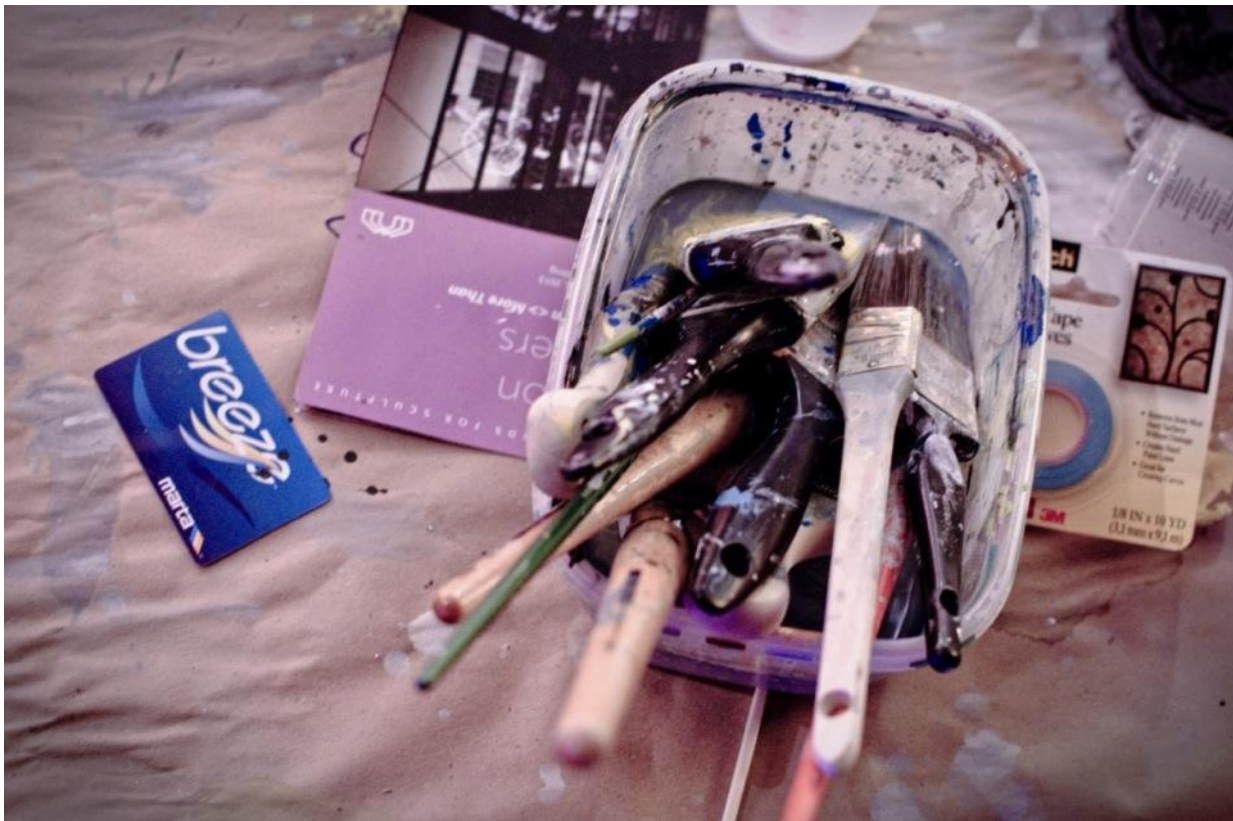


Figure 3-5. Clean Up.

Paintbrushes wait to be cleaned during an exhibit installation.

Lawrence also discusses the exploitative cycle that Sage speaks of, and specifically links it to happiness:

My friends who I went to college and high school with, who are workin' in like 60, 70,000, 80,000 dollar a year jobs, but they're slaves—or they're not, most of them are not happy. You know? They're happy enough, which is what a job will do, it'll make you happy enough, you know, to keep coming back. But it's like, they're not gonna make you totally happy because then you would just quit, and then you wouldn't need them anymore. So even the ones who are making a decent salary and can do stuff, I talk to them and they're like ah, so much work I gotta do, I gotta fly to all these cities and do this. I can't hang out with you guys this weekend. Or, I need all these people to take care of my dog, I shouldn't have got a dog, like fuck. It's like, if I was in your position I feel like I would be so happy because I wouldn't have to worry about half the shit I'm worrying about now, but that's not the case.

Lawrence describes the perception that increased income brings increased happiness because it alleviates the anxiety around affording basic necessities. By observing his friends with higher incomes, he sees the fallacy of this perception. For Lawrence, the security of a steady paycheck is not worth more than the freedom that comes through happiness. He sees a very clear connection between engaging in alienating labor and the inability to achieve happiness, and he is not willing to make that sacrifice in his life again.

Many of my participants also feel as though engaging in wage labor restricts them from being their fully authentic selves. Nuri describes his issues with being subjected to corporate rules regarding attire, facial hair, and other personal grooming standards while working as a caricature artist:

I never liked not being able to control how I made my money. Because I always felt like, I'm being confined to this person's set of rules, this person's set of ideas, and they don't even like me, you know. It's kinda like they could care less about who I am or what I'm doing. It's kinda like I'm just here to work for them. And at any moment that could end.

For Nuri, the feeling of being quickly replaceable, a fundamental attribute of wage labor, made it difficult for him to accept the sacrifices the corporation wanted him to make to his own authenticity. Lawrence echoes this sentiment when he describes his time spent engaging in wage labor as sacrificial:

[I spent] a lot of time not being myself. A lot of time. Like I said, I'm 27. [The] last time I really felt comfortable being who I was, was high school. Senior year. Because I didn't have all those pressures and stresses yet.

Lawrence sees this time period as a sacrifice to his personal authenticity. He connects his ability to achieve this sense of freedom through authenticity directly to his choice to disengage from alienating wage labor. Patricia Williams (1991:23) links this sacrifice to spirit murder imparted by our capitalistic economy:

If both rich and poor are giving up life itself and yet both are deeply dissatisfied, even suffering, they will never feel paid enough for their lot in life: what has gone on is not a trade or exchange, but a sacrifice. They have been victimized by a social construction that locks money into an impossible equation with "pricelessness," uniqueness. They have been locked into a socially constructed life-disappointment by the carrot of hope that somewhere, just ahead, there is satisfaction of sufficiency of payment.

Many of my participants are very aware of the spirit murder that accompanies this sacrificial type of labor. They also have a keen understanding that the history of wage labor in the U.S. is inherently rooted in white supremacy. This history began with chattel slavery, moved through the Jim Crow period of legalized discrimination and systemically uncontested violence that not only restricted wage labor opportunities for Black workers but also hindered and destroyed Black-owned businesses, and continues to the present day where Black workers are overrepresented in low-wage work with little opportunity for upward mobility (Wingfield 2008). This awareness led them to disengage from this type of labor entirely.

This disengagement did not happen in the same manner for all of my participants. Some, like Sage, felt compelled to leave these jobs early. However, often my participants saw the sacrifice of engaging in wage labor as necessary for a short period of time, but grew increasingly intolerant as time went on—especially if performing this exploitative wage labor for the same company for an extended period of time. In contrast to Sage, Chris once quit a job specifically because he felt like he had worked there too long:

It was gon' be my two year anniversary there. That scared the shit out of me because I felt like, maybe I'm getting complacent or something. I've never been at a job for this long, and this is a *job*. I don't run nothing, I'm not controlling, it's a *job*. I can't, I can't be nowhere that long, I can't, I can't even let that begin to happen, so that was...that just helped me to quit.

Perhaps what contributed to the fear that Chris experienced when he realized he had worked in the same alienating position for two years was the feeling that he had wasted his time. Many of my participants regard their time spent in wage labor as wasted time, specifically because they see that it did not benefit them in any long-term manner. As their language illustrates, they view this type of labor as exploitative in that it provides access to wealth and advancement for the companies while denying those same perks to them. Chris explains:

I wasted about a good seven to ten years probably. Working. Like, just doing nothing but just working, earning a paycheck, living paycheck to paycheck. That shit was bullshit...I just wasted my life after I got out of college.

Several of my participants view this time as wasteful because it drained them of their creative energy. They complain of not being able to create after coming home from a shift of alienating labor. FRKO explains one particular year in which he worked a very time-consuming job as a production assistant on a television show: "It was a drought for a whole year. Like the whole year of 2013 I didn't do any art. Not none." Nuri describes that, while he would spend much of

his down time at work sketching, he had no energy left to work on more in-depth art projects by the time he got home from an alienating shift:

I have a hard time dealing with people in service [industries] because people can get on your nerves when you're workin' a retail job or anything like that. When I was at work, I did nothing but draw at the register because it was very slow. And when I got home, I would be too tired to do anything. So I was like, I wanna do some art but I'm always tired because I'm always sitting here at work dealing with these crazy people.

Often, this battle between alienating wage labor and engaging in the labor of their true passion is what led my participants to detach from the wage labor. Ultimately, they believe that if they took the time to invest in the work that they are passionate about, it would not only allow them to escape their own labor exploitation and enable them to better achieve both happiness and authenticity, but it would also benefit them financially over time in a way that continuing to pursue alienating, exploitative wage labor would not.

The decision to disengage from wage labor, contrary to the interpretation manifested by viewing this action through the white racial frame, is not indicative of a lack of career aspirations. As options for wage labor have decreased in our postindustrial economy, creative labor has become a feasible economic alternative (Kelly 1997). Robin D.G. Kelley (1997) calls these economic alternatives "play-labor," while contrastingly noting that they often require significant amounts of hard work to achieve. For this reason, paired with the fact that my participants engage in the creative labor that fulfills their soul, I choose to refer to this type of labor as passion-labor. Sage illustrates how visual art has always been fulfilling for him:

I've been drawing since I was like, since I could move really. I was always at restaurants with a pen and a napkin. My family always knew me as the artist or whatever because I was always doing something art-related. But mostly drawing.

The fact that Sage has been drawing nearly his entire life shows that this is a true labor of love and passion, as he continues it into adulthood. Nuri echoes this sentiment:

Since I was about maybe 4 or 5, I always had an interest in art, and so I would do that all day. I would spend all my time drawing...Everybody I knew as a kid liked to draw. And none of those people draw anymore... But for me, I never really saw myself doing anything but my art...Now when I see my friends from my childhood, they're like, you still drawing? And I'm like, yeah this is what I like to do. This is all I ever liked to do. *I couldn't do anything else.*

Many of my participants frequently talk about feeling as though they couldn't engage in any other form of labor for an extended period of time. Their passion-labor provides a sense of freedom for them, in contrast to the exploitative wage labor rampant in our society that strips them—and many of us—of our feelings of freedom. Chris explains the freedom that comes from engaging in passion-labor:

Like I said, that one job I had, I was almost there for two years—scared the shit out of me. I been with City of Ink for almost three. *It doesn't scare me.* I don't feel the same thing at all.

The freedom that Chris achieves through pursuing his passion-labor is indicated by his fearlessness. He describes a very different feeling about tattooing at City of Ink for almost three years—nothing like the fear that overcame him after working the same exploitative wage labor position for two years.

All of my participants chose, at varying points in their lives, to disengage from wage labor specifically to pursue their passion-labor. They take on this time-consuming, difficult labor of love because of the freedom that comes with it. They no longer feel as though their labor is being exploited for the benefit of a corporation. They no longer feel as though they are being denied happiness or forced to suppress their full authentic selves. They are happy to dedicate significant amounts of time, money, and energy to their passion-labor because they reap both

the spiritual and financial rewards. In a society where the vast majority of individuals engage in exploitative labor, choosing to reject this labor exploitation is stigmatized. For young Black men who are already stigmatized, disengaging from this form of labor exploitation is absolutely an act of resistance. My participants reject the notion that has been perpetuated through the white racial frame for over 400 years in the U.S.—that their Black bodies are here solely for consumption and exploitation. Through this act of resistance, they boldly declare their full humanity and reclaim their right to engage in fulfilling passion-labor.

3.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I demonstrate many ways in which my participants utilize freedom-oriented counter-framing to resist the spirit murder imparted through the white racial frame. These freedom frames do not carry the same meaning as the notion of freedom associated with the white racial frame. In exploring the meaning of freedom to my participants, I discover they use three different counter-frames attached to this notion: freedom-as-happiness, freedom-as-authenticity, and freedom-as-detachment. My participants understand that, as Black men living in a society permeated by the white racial frame, they are expected to be unhappy, to subdue parts of themselves, and to serve systems that only want to exploit them for their benefit. They employ these freedom-based counter-frames to liberate themselves from the spiritual confines of the white racial frame. They choose to pursue happiness though they know our societal systems of oppression resolve to deny it to them. They strive to live life as their most authentic selves despite understanding that the white racial frame strives to keep them from doing so. They detach from the education system and refuse to engage in wage labor because they have experienced the ways in which these systems lie to, cheat, and steal from them for profit. They

pursue their own passion-labor in the face of a white racial frame that constructs their bodies, like the bodies of their ancestors, to be objects of labor solely designed for exploitation.

These counter-framing actions, often viewed through the lens of white supremacy, are typically deeply misunderstood and/or purposefully mislabeled. When viewed through the white racial frame, these acts of resistance are often constructed as nihilism, fatalism, laziness, possessing a lack of motivation, and/or many other negative qualities that place blame squarely on these young men. This mislabeling not only erases any of the harm experienced by people of color while living in a society which possesses a dominant white racial frame, but it also fails to see these acts for the complex, brilliant counter-frames that they are. Discussing these actions with the individuals employing them allows me to investigate the meanings that they attach to these actions. My participants graciously offer me an understanding of the clever ways in which they preserve their spirits in a society determined to destroy them at all costs. However, this understanding is not yet complete. In the next chapter, I examine ways in which my participants monetize their passion-labor in an effort to further preserve their spirits and bodies while living under the structural oppression ever-present here in the U.S.

4 CHAPTER 4: COUNTER-FRAMING THROUGH ACTION: ALCHEMICAL CAPITALISM

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Many of the counter-frames I outline in the previous chapter are more abstract in nature. As they pertain to resistance acts directed at attempts at spirit murder, they operate more on the spiritual realm. Even the concrete tasks of withdrawing from specific institutions are inherently connected with the spiritual. They not only revolve around maintaining happiness and authenticity, they also occur in tandem with pursuit of the labor of the heart.

Furthermore, often the spiritual disengagement happens long before the tangible, bodily disengagement from these institutions. My participants' hearts often left those spaces long before their bodies.

Often, resistance must begin internally. However, the counter-framing battle is not fought in the spirit realm alone. For my participants, these rather abstract counter-frames work hand-in-hand with more tangible counter-frames. Just as the spirit-centered counter-frames are developed through dialogue with aspects and functions of the white racial frame, so are the action-based counter-frames working to facilitate resistance to the white racial frame. Largely, these action-based counter-frames are in dialogue with capitalism. My participants have a complicated relationship with capitalism, and they are not alone. Robin D.G. Kelley (1997:77) argues that "in the struggles of urban youths for survival and pleasure inside capitalism, capitalism has become both their greatest friend and greatest foe." While capitalism facilitates the alienation my participants experienced through wage labor, it is also capitalism that allows them to monetize their passion-labor and make a living doing what they love.

Capitalism has always been racialized in the United States (hooks 1981). The white racial frame is intertwined with capitalism. Countless violent acts of terrorism have been committed against Black people in the U.S. throughout our history by both the state and individuals in the interest of capitalism (hooks 2001). The oppression that young Black men face in the U.S. today is still facilitated by white supremacist capitalism. On the other hand, it is capitalism that allows the young Black men in my study to monetize their passion-labor (Kelley 1997). Through capitalism, my participants can withdraw from wage labor and generate income through their passion-labor that allows them to meet their own basic needs, support each other financially,

afford to participate in consumption and leisure activities, and in some cases, provide for their families as well.

It is counterintuitive to examine capitalistic endeavors as counter-framing strategies. However, it is important to remember the pervasiveness of capitalism within our society (Kelley 1997). There is a reason that bell hooks (1981) refers to our society as an “imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchy.” All of these factors are interwoven—built into the fibers of our society. Many argue that it is impossible to disentangle them, and save one while eradicating the rest (e.g. Lorde 1984). Numerous people doing anti-oppression work advocate for a total eradication of capitalism as the only path to freedom. Robin D. G. Kelley (1997:45), writing about the commodification of what he calls “play-labor,” explicitly states, “I am in no way suggesting that this kind of self-commodification of play is emancipatory, revolutionary, or even resistive.” Kelley (1997) defends his stance by explaining that these acts further capitalism. However, Mark Anthony Neal (2013:74) argues “the pursuit of wealth isn’t antithetical to the pursuit of social justice.” Seeking total societal revolution that would eradicate all of these issues—and capitalism with it—is a lofty goal that, if possible, would require a significant number of people to act in a self-sacrificial manner and subject themselves to extreme forms of violence. In a society that already meets those it oppresses with extreme violence, it is understandable that many of those engaging in acts of resistance choose to focus on achieving personal comfort rather than exposing themselves to more harm.

The connection between capitalism and resistance work is more nuanced than many of us care to admit, and it’s time to stop ignoring these relationships and start examining them. For example, the existence of social media and the prevalence of smart phones not only enable

formal acts of protest to be organized in accessible ways, they also allow for the easy documentation of state violence that was often not possible in the past. However, these tools are only available to us through capitalism and often come to us at the expense of unethical, exploitative, and sometimes violent labor practices (Marx 1867). The complicated nature of this relationship warrants further investigation—not avoidance or denial. The ways in which capitalism can be used to achieve some degree of freedom should be interrogated. Mark Anthony Neal (2013:171) touches on this with his discussion of the “Danny Glover effect.” He (Neal 2013:171) argues “Glover has often chosen roles in high-revenue-generating films such as the *Lethal Weapon* franchise in order to earn the financial flexibility to produce politically minded films such as *Bopha!* or *The Black Power Mixtape.*” This is yet another example of alchemy being utilized in Black American resistance. As Black American culture is not a monolith, it is also important to note that the alchemical processes applied to capitalism vary widely (Kelley 1994). In this chapter, I examine several of the ways in which alchemy is utilized in resistance to capitalism.

4.2 ALCHEMICAL CAPITALISM: MAINTAINING AUTHENTICITY IN LABOR

All of my participants practice a form of alchemical capitalism that centers around their freedom-through-authenticity counter-frame. The desire to find freedom by connecting with their true selves is inherently linked with their decision to detach from wage labor. Because we live in a capitalistic society, they cannot detach from wage labor for an extended period of time without manifesting a new source of income. This fact led each of them to find various ways to monetize their passion-labor. The act of monetizing passion-labor is complex, and the perks and downfalls of capitalism are interwoven within those complexities. Robin D.G. Kelley (1994:201),

speaking of rappers in the music industry, notes, “they understand better than their audiences that music is a business and rapping is a job. At the same time, being paid for their work does not mean they accept the current economic arrangements or think their music lacks integrity.” Kelley’s (1994) points can also be extended to my participants. While they engage in capitalism by monetizing their passion-labor, they do so with the goal of maintaining their authenticity and integrity as much as possible. This goal is not unique to my participants—it can be seen throughout the history of Black American resistance. Writing of the hustlers connected with Malcolm X during his time spent engaging in the illicit economy in Boston, Robin D.G. Kelley (1994:174-5) writes:

[U]nlike mainstream entrepreneurs, most of the hustlers with whom Malcolm was associated believed in an antiwork, anti-accumulation ethic. Possessing ‘capital’ was not the ultimate goal; rather, money was primarily a means by which hustlers could avoid wage work and negotiate status through the purchase of prestigious commodities. Moreover, it seems that many hustlers of the 1940s shared a very limited culture of mutuality that militated against accumulation. On more than one occasion, Malcolm gave away or loaned money to friends when he himself was short of cash.

Generations later, similarities exist in the alchemical capitalism practiced by my participants. In the next section, I examine the inner-workings of this alchemical capitalism.

4.2.1 ALCHEMICAL CAPITALISM AS A COUNTER-FRAME

Just as my participants center authenticity in their decision to withdraw from wage labor, they also center authenticity in their choice to engage in alchemical capitalism. It was very important to them to remain genuine in their passion-labor. For Doc, this message was imparted from his parents:

[T]hey never told us, like, be a doctor or a lawyer because that shit is lame. My parents [are] not really that lame. But they always said, figure out something

that you gonna wanna keep doing for a long time so you gonna wanna do it...and go hard with that shit. So, when I first started doing music, my parents was cool, you know, they was thrilled! They was never like, 'Ah shit, we failed! This nigga's a rapper!' They was like—my mom was like, she bought the first EarthGang shirt, she was like, do that shit. Go for it.

Doc's parents encouraged him to pursue a labor of love from a very young age. This message that Doc received from his parents translates into how he approaches his music career:

We really just wanna have our *freedom*.... A lot of these artists, they make they music so that somebody will pat em on they back. I really don't give a fuck about that. Like we, I make something that I wanna—I always wanna challenge myself and I always wanna make something that was like, that's gonna make a person be like 'wow.' For me, it's about a wow factor more than a 'oh that's cool.' A lot of people just wanna be cool, and bein' cool is a lot of fun, but like I want people to be like 'wow,' you know? When people be like 'wow,' that's the shit that puts you on. That's the shit that immortalizes you. You not immortal if you just cool...but like, people who are amazing are immortal.



Figure 4-1. Doc's Passion-Labor.

Doc poses with a copy of Earthgang's latest album, Strays with Rabies.

Doc's connection between passion-labor, and freedom-through-authenticity is clear. He is concerned with creating the music that he wants to create, not the music he knows that listeners want to hear. This is how he conceptualizes freedom—the ability to engage in his passion-labor in an authentic way. Jace echoes a similar sentiment:

I'm not gonna not be myself to make some other motherfucker comfortable...I wouldn't do that for anyone. I don't do that for people now...The day someone tries to tell me I gotta do something or I can't say that—nah, I'm out. I'll quit before I do that. I'll go back to working at [his previous corporate job] before I gotta hide me. I'll go back to workin' at fuckin' anywhere...before people are like nah, you can't rap like that, no one will get that...I'm not doing this for attention. I'm not doing this to troll so more of you will buy my music. Like, this is me, this is my life. Whether or not y'all are paying attention, this is what I would be doing or would want to do. So, if you choose to identify with it, that's cool, and if you don't, equally as cool.

Maintaining authenticity in his passion-labor is so important to Jace that he would rather return to exploitative wage labor than sacrifice his artistic authenticity.

Nuri also expresses similar feelings. He engaged in his passion-labor because it fulfilled him, and never considered monetizing his passion-labor until his fans prompted him:

I had the realization that I could sell my art. What really made me realize that I could sell my art was that the people who follow what I do online, they, they really wanted to buy it.... So I just decided one day like, ima just put this stuff out here and see if they wanted to buy it. And people started to buy it, and started to buy it a lot. And then I had like realized like, this could actually work. People will pay for what I do if they actually like it...And that's what gave me the confidence to like...live off my art. And, that was when things started to take a turn for the better.

Nuri never even considered sacrificing his authenticity to garner income through his passion-labor. The realization that he could monetize his passion-labor came directly through his fans expressing an interest in purchasing his authentic art, created through his labors of love.

Both Morbid James and Chris, who garner the majority of their income through their work as tattoo artists, express a desire to follow a path similar to Nuri's when it comes to monetizing their own visual art creations. Morbid James says "I just wanna figure out what works, so I can make money off of it...without like, completely selling out." He hopes to successfully monetize his visual art while staying true to himself as a creator. Chris similarly explains:

Right now the goal is just, figuring out the different little aspects that I can do...that would be different from what somebody else has done to set me apart...'cause I can probably do some shit that somebody has did and get a lil' notoriety from it out right now, but that shit is not going to last. I wanna make sure that my shit is set up at my own pace, so that it goes with me.

At first, it appears that Chris may be interested in sacrificing authenticity for capital, however as he continues on, it's clear that he is describing his journey to finding his authentic passion-labor. This journey echoes the sentiment expressed in the often-quoted statement by Miles Davis (1989), "sometimes, you have to play a long time to be able to play like yourself." Chris continues:

A lot of the stuff that I create, art-wise—the different images that I paint or that I draw—I don't try to come up with that shit. It comes to me. So, I don't like to force nothing. Like, all of my shit, I know it's gonna come.

Chris, therefore, expresses that he is striving to find his own authentic personal style in his artwork. He has faith that the authenticity in his work will afford him a more lasting, impactful career though he knows it will elongate the journey. In one of my observations, Doc and J.I.D. express similar understandings. Doc claims that they are working to build a relevance based on quality and both Doc and J.I.D. understand that this is fundamentally a longer process. For my participants, this sacrifice of time is well worth the authenticity it affords.

4.2.1.1 Alchemical Capitalism in Dialogue with the White Racial Frame

This authentic, alchemical capitalism practiced by my participants is not solely rooted in the interest of accumulating capital. They often prolong their ability to garner income in the interest of staying authentic to their craft. They know that, under the white racial frame, they could produce a particular type of art and garner rapid success—particularly if they promoted legible Black masculinity. However, they choose to stay true to themselves knowing that this will prolong their ability to achieve financial stability. Lawrence, like all of my participants, expresses similar connections between the freedom-as-authenticity counter-frame and the alchemical capitalism counter-frame. He explains:

The whole thing for me is the freedom...and not pandering to other people about what they feel like I should be. Because I know—in my heart, I know who I am as a person, and so I'm not gonna try to fit in your box so that you get who I am...You have to protect that space that allows you to be yourself.

Here, Lawrence is not talking about his life in general. He is specifically talking about his work.

He prioritizes his authenticity and connects that directly with his conceptualization of freedom.

He goes on to explain exactly why this alchemical capitalism should be viewed as an act of resistance:

Words like 'bae,' or stuff that's been [Black] household culture for so long and then somebody gets ahold of it and now it's a thing. You know? So, let's leverage that, own that, and then sell that back to them? If you're going to take it anyway—if I'm gonna get fucked, I might as well be the one filming it, you know what I'm saying? Like...let me become a thought leader in that and at least show you how to do it respectfully, you know?

Lawrence understands the pervasiveness of cultural appropriation that exists under white supremacist capitalism. To him, monetizing his passion-labor enables him to profit off the exploitation that occurs routinely as white institutions capitalize on appropriating Black

American cultural productions. My participants would engage in their passion-labor whether or not they generated income from doing so, and corporations would continue their cultural exploitation through appropriation. Thus, monetizing their passion-labor, in part, is an act of reclamation and resistance to appropriative exploitation.

Chris also connects his chosen career path to his understanding of the oppression he faces under the white racial frame:

But, to be real, we deal with—we face different adversities that some people don't have to go through. So the fact of me being my own boss, or being an entrepreneur spirit, it would just help out with the fact of me being black and having to deal with the certain dynamics of the way that the world is you know what I'm saying? *I don't have to ask a white man for a job, I can create my own.*

Chris highlights the connection between disengaging from wage labor and distancing oneself from certain forms of racism. He goes on to explain that he persisted in his attempts to be hired by City of Ink, a Black-owned tattoo shop, for over two years specifically because he wanted to work in a Black space:

It was a Black shop—a Black, successful shop. And I was like, I need to be in there. It was—something just in me was like, this is a good feel, or a good fit for me...So, I guess it was what they represented, and what I saw myself doing if I made it there, that's what I guess just kept me going.

Chris understands that much wage labor takes place in white space rife with racism. It is important to him not only to disengage from wage labor and pursue his passion-labor, but also to engage in this pursuit in Black space. He expresses a sense of belonging when talking about City of Ink, which he and many of the other artists there call their “home.”

Nuri, like Chris, also makes connections between Black entrepreneurship and the oppression faced under the white racial frame:

Being a Black man, you gonna encounter racism every day, in one form or another. [But] I won't encounter [corporate racism] again because I don't wanna work for somebody else ever again in my life. I think that Black people, it's important for us to not only build our own jobs, but also support each other's jobs. Because nobody else is gonna do it for us. And it's no sense in going to them, looking for them to help us, when the system is put in place to keep us under their foot—to keep us in a position where we can't really do much but service them. So that's the, I mean, I haven't had that type of experience since, simply because, I haven't worked there since.

Nuri understands that his choice to disengage from wage labor does not exempt him from structural racism. However, he does acknowledge that this decision minimizes the experiences he has with a particular form of racism. I ask Nuri to explain some of his experiences with what he calls “corporate racism” and he elaborates:

Racism in a corporate setting, you know, so to speak. Like, even going, even applying to jobs, stuff like that. Getting looked at a certain way, getting treated a certain way, you know, here come this Black guy with this beard, you know they look at you like ‘ahh that's not happening, we won't be having you here.’ And you know immediately because you see it on their face. Or even working at Staples, sometimes you deal with racist customers. Even in subtle ways, whether they say something to you or they give you some change—because they have to make a purchase—they give you a couple dollars and some change and they don't wanna hand it to you in your hand, they throw it on the counter...I would deal with that type of stuff, and that was always a reminder to me like yeah I can't really see myself doing this too much longer because it's only so much I can take before I snap. So, I believe in working for myself now, I believe in making my own job, forging my own path in life.

For Nuri, the decision to leave wage labor and monetize his passion-labor was in direct dialogue with his understanding of the oppression facilitated by the white racial frame. Under the white racial frame, Black people are mere bodies available for consumption and exploitation. They must appeal to the white gaze in appearance and they must pander to white expectations. The examples that Nuri offers speak to expectations about Black laborers that have been present throughout U.S. history. He is expected to manipulate his appearance to be acceptable to white

people in order to secure employment, as well as to accept dehumanizing treatment from supervisors and customers alike. Many of my participants endured similar experiences while engaging in dehumanizing labor, just like their ancestors have for the past 400 years.

While successfully monetizing passion-labor is a complex process, finding freedom through detaching from the particular type of racism associated with wage labor is a goal that often can be achieved in a relatively short period of time. When compared with the time, sacrifices, and violence that are necessary to overthrow capitalism, manipulating capitalism in an alchemical manner is an understandable choice. Adia Harvey Wingfield (2008:25) argues:

For [Booker T.] Washington, entrepreneurship was key to Black economic mobility and achieving civil rights...It is important to acknowledge that his embrace of entrepreneurship is a function of his assessment of the realities of a capitalist society.

This alchemical capitalism is not new or unique to my participants—it has been in practice as long as workers have experienced exploitation at the hands of capitalism itself. Yet despite this long history, relatively little scholarship engages with the nuance of this particular form of resistance. The decision to pursue an easier, faster path to freedom, even if that freedom is not full and complete, should not be erased from discussions of resistance or quickly dismissed because it appears to use “the master’s tools” (Lorde 1984). Any act of achieving freedom under a system designed to deny said freedom is an act of resistance worthy of examination and recognition.

In fact, while my participants certainly are capitalistic in their endeavors to monetize their passion, their goals are often very different than the goals of many entrepreneurs. Jace’s attitude toward labor has developed from lessons his father expressed to him when he was young:

It was a sentiment that was echoed a lot throughout my childhood. It was like, ‘man, *the dream shouldn’t really be for you to be rich, son.* You should always aspire for greatness in whatever field you lookin’ at, but *you shouldn’t need to be rich.*’ He said, ‘what you need to do is find what you love to do—that you would do for free—and do that, and get really good at it, and then find a way to get paid for it.

The message Jace received from his father is clear—figure out a way to monetize your passion.

This message, though, is paired with another: wealth should not be a part of your career goals.

This does not mean that Jace’s father does not want him to achieve wealth. Rather, his father wants Jace to follow his heart to a spiritually fulfilling career rather than sacrifice his spirit for the goal of attaining wealth. This sentiment is not characteristic of traditional capitalism, for traditional capitalism prioritizes the accumulation of wealth above all else. In contrast, this alchemical capitalism promotes utilizing capitalistic endeavors to sustain a fulfilling life through passion-labor.

Stevo also promotes this alchemical form of capitalism. When discussing his financial success, he relates this directly to the freedom-as-happiness counter-frame: “financially, it’s just satisfying to be able to be happy—and *I’m not saying rich*, but to be cool. Bills taken care of, everybody taken care of, off doing something you love.” Not only does Stevo connect his financial success with happiness, but he specifies that he does not equate happiness with wealth. Instead, he explains that he finds true satisfaction in sustaining his lifestyle through his passion-labor. FRKO mirrors Stevo’s point of view:

I don’t care about bein’ wealthy or rich. I just wanna be able to pay my rent, you know, ride my bike. I don’t care about buyin’ shoes and shit...I’m not crazy about clothes and stuff...I just wanna shoot my cameras and make enough money to pay my rent...Keep my dogs fed and groomed, keep my girlfriend happy...*I’m not trying to be greedy though*...I wanna just keep doing my little thing.

Like many of my participants, FRKO explicitly states that he prioritizes engaging in fulfilling passion-labor over garnering wealth. He admits he is not interested in riches, and connects this with greed. However, greed is a cultural facet of white supremacist, heteropatriarchal capitalism (hooks 2001). Many of my participants, including FRKO, choose to reject greed even in their pursuit to monetize their passion-labor. This decision is yet another indicator that the capitalism they practice is alchemical.

bell hooks (2001) argues that greed impedes our capacity for empathy, erodes our compassion for others, and hinders our ability to love fully. Greed is a staple of U.S. capitalism. We, as a society, suffer from the effects of widespread greed. An alchemical capitalism that rejects greed, therefore, has the ability to offer individuals the income to sustain their livelihoods while also preserving empathy, compassion, and love. It is ludicrous to simply discard this complex counter-frame because it employs the “master’s tools” (Lorde 1984). In fact, doing so allows for a shallow interpretation of an intricate counter-frame that deserves understanding. I do not argue that this type of alchemical capitalism is perfect, nor do I argue that it will lead us to a full and complete revolution. There has never been a perfect act of resistance, and as long as humans remain imperfect beings, there never will be. I question those who claim to be committed to social justice, yet dismiss each and every act of resistance for its imperfections. On this journey to cultivate a society detached from domination, it is imperative that we recognize and embrace all of the actions that individuals take to garner freedom for themselves. If we do not acknowledge and appreciate these imperfect acts of resistance, we cannot work to mold them into something even better—something more inclusive, more perfect, more free. By dismissing these counter-frames, we erase the power

they do hold, negate the freedoms they do allow individuals to attain, and eliminate the possibility for growth—and that is fundamentally not revolutionary.

4.2.1.2 *Alchemical Capitalism and Alchemical Consumption*

What happens to Black boys with too much swagger? Emmett Till is not here to answer on his own behalf.

-Dawoud Bey (2012:149)

Earlier, FRKO expresses an anti-consumerist attitude. While some of my other participants have similar feelings about consumerism, others often celebrate acts of conspicuous consumption. While the attitudes towards consumerism range greatly for my participants, it is important to explore the meanings behind conspicuous consumption for those that often practice it. In the same piece where he writes the striking line included above, Dawoud Bey (2012:149) explains why it is important to interpret the consumerism practiced by Black men with an understanding of the ways in which the white racial frame impacts their lives:

Swagger, then, is a clear act of reclamation, a way to both reclaim and celebrate viscerally an aspect of self that has historically been eroded. Certainly the history of the Black presence in America is a traumatic one: Basic ownership of oneself was painfully and forcefully transferred. Merely looking a white person in the eye was for a long time cause for the worst sort of retribution—at worst, death. So swagger can be seen as a way to reclaim and celebrate that which was forcefully suppressed, even as the deeper swagger—that inner sense of cool and self-assurance that is the deeper swagger—was never completely eliminated from our racial DNA.

Of course, swagger is exemplified by so much more than consumerism. It is something utterly indescribable, especially by someone white like me. Michaela Angela Davis (2012:59) writes:

You cannot have our cool-ass Black style. You cannot determine its existence. You cannot define it. You cannot be the primary source of the validation of its creation, nor give the expert explanation to penetrate the collective cultural

imagination. You can't have credit for discovering its brilliance, because if you do, it ain't cool no more, ya dig? White cold examination kills Black cool. So step the fuck back, okay, baby?

My whiteness alone means it is not my place to define swagger in this section—nor is that my intent—though consumerism is inherently connected with Black cool. Consumerism plays a role in achieving Black cool and consumerism plays a role in the appropriative attempts made to steal and market Black cool. However, I do not attempt to examine that further in an effort to preserve the sanctity of Black cool. Rather, it is my intention to bring attention to the meanings that some of my participants ascribe to their consumerism.

Through the white racial frame, the dominant ideology present in the U.S. constructs Black people as bodies to be exploited for labor—and this has been present throughout our history (Kelley 1994). This construction creates a very different relationship with both capital and consumption for Black Americans. However, the white racial frame functions to erase this history and dissuade interpretations that allow for an understanding of this vastly different relationship. This allows Black people to be problematized for their consumptive habits and furthers white supremacy. The meanings Black people ascribe to consumerism have often been misconstrued or completely ignored. Many, operating under the gaze of the white racial frame, point to Black consumerism as a sign of defunct cultural values while simultaneously willfully ignoring white consumerism completely.

In a capitalist society, we all purchase our images (Williams 1991). However, these acts must be examined through a historical framework to recognize that the history behind them and subsequently the meaning attached to them may be vastly dissimilar for different people groups. For Black Americans, who have been inundated with messages imparted by the white

racial for over 400 years that strip them of their full humanity and relegate them to a mere body relegated to labor for others, consumption takes on a very different meaning:

Seeing oneself and others 'dressed up' was enormously important in terms of constructing a collective identity based on something other than wage work, presenting a public challenge to the dominant stereotypes of the black body, and reinforcing a sense of dignity that was perpetually being assaulted (Kelley 1994:169).

When the dominant ideologies utilize only negative stereotypes to paint images of a people group, those who are members of that people group often consider those negative portraits when purchasing and constructing their own personal images. In contrast, many white people engaging in image-building through consumption have the privilege of beginning with a clean slate, especially those of a higher social class. Everyone in the U.S. is not afforded that same benefit, including my participants. As a result, some of my participants resist these controlling images through their acts of consumerism.

PaperFrank often posts images on his social media accounts of stacks of money, expensive clothes and shoes, and lavish travel accommodations. On several occasions during my observations, I witnessed PaperFrank discuss his choices to post these types of photos to his social media accounts. Often, friends and business associates warn PaperFrank of either making himself a target for a robbery—when posting photos of large amounts of cash—or coming across as arrogant to his followers. PaperFrank's often-brash responses usually consist of something along the lines of "I don't give a fuck." He routinely expresses recognition of the fact that as a young Black man in the U.S., these images contradict the negative controlling images constructed through the white racial frame. For PaperFrank, posting these extravagant images

is an effort to counter the pervasive images present in our society that associate Blackness with poverty and labor exploitation. This alludes to the presence of alchemy, yet again.



Figure 4-2. PaperFrank's Swagger.

PaperFrank poses in his studio/apartment in front of several of his paintings.

Jace also expresses utilizing alchemical consumerism as a counter-frame. He tells a story of having a very negative experience in a high-end department store in New York City:

I got a wad full of cash, I just got lunch with one of my bros, I'm feeling good, I'm like, 'you know what, Jace, go treat ya'self to something!' So, I went to the [high-end department] store...off 5th avenue. So I walked into the [high-end department] store, and I'm in there, and you know, I was lookin pretty...I dunno I thought I looked pretty cool...I was just swaggin! And then, I was walking around, and I noticed two ladies like behind the jewelry spot, and they were just kinda lookin like—like I looked out of place. And I'm just kinda lookin back like 'hey girls! What's good? Like, are yall gonna help me?' And I'm workin' in retail [at the time] so I know someone's like at least supposed to greet you and ask you do you need any help. And they didn't...So I wanted to look at some shades or some shit and I had to get an attendant, so I was kinda waiting...so I waved at someone

like, ‘yo, could I get some help,’ and straight up just did not come over. Like she nodded and was like, cool, so I’m thinkin she’s gonna send like another sales representative or something over, did not come over. So I waited for a while, and I slick got distracted. Forgot I even asked! That’s how long had passed...And I was just like, for real? Like, alright, if no one’s gonna help me, like, ima just be out.

Having left the department store after being ignored by sales associates, Jace processes the situation:

I just realized, like, they didn’t think I could afford nothing in there. They didn’t think like I was even supposed to be in there...I just left. I went back to [a high-end streetwear store] actually. I just bossed up on them folks...I went back to the [high-end streetwear] store and I think I spent like another 600. I’m still embarrassed to this day because I came home with so many bags I had to hide ‘em from my mom.

For Jace, the realization that sales representatives in a high-end department store did not think he could afford to shop in the store led him to go immediately to a high-end streetwear brand embedded in the Black community in the U.S., and spurred him to spend more money. This alchemical consumerism serves as a reclaiming action—sending the message, if you think I cannot afford anything here I will go spend even more money elsewhere. There is no question that this is an act of consumerism. This is without a doubt an act of conspicuous consumption. But there is certainly a transformative aspect to these actions—this is alchemical consumption. This alchemical consumption is fundamentally different than rich white people spending hundreds and thousands of dollars in the same high-end department stores that routinely treat Black customers the way Jace was treated. These acts of consumption occur in direct dialogue with notions of legible Black masculinity present under the white racial frame. In our white supremacist society, Blackness’ only connections with capitalism are to be labor exploitation, deprivation (poverty), and criminality. An alchemical consumption that counters these

controlling images with self-portraits of ownership, abundance, and legitimate means of consumption is a powerful rejection of the white racial frame and an act of reclamation and declaration of one's full humanity.

4.2.1.3 *Alchemical Capitalism and the White Racial Frame: The Delegitimization of Passion-Labor*

“There are no Black men in museums...
This is another white man's cotton plantation.”
-Jean-Michel Basquiat (Clement 2000:37)

The counter-frame of alchemical capitalism operates within a society permeated by the white racial frame. This dominant, white supremacist frame determines the ways in which many people and institutions interpret my participants' passion-labor. The capitalism inherent in the white racial frame leads others to devalue their passion-labor as labor itself. Because their passion-labor is not as alienating as wage-labor, and because capitalistic labor is alienating, others often do not conceptualize this as true work. Further, white supremacy functions to privilege white knowledge and cultural production as superior. As my participants are Black, not only is their passion-labor devalued, but the products of their passion-labor—their very creations—are devalued as well.

My participants conceptualize their passion-labor as a career, but recognize that it is fundamentally different than exploitative wage labor. This conceptualization is highlighted in the linguistic distinctions they make between the two. When Jace describes his early attempts at passion-labor, before he was able to generate enough income from it to support himself, he claims, “I still had to get *jobs*.” Similarly, Chris describes his last engagement in wage-labor before becoming a full-time tattoo artist as his “last job.” When pondering his ability to

monetize his passion-labor, Morbid James uses the language “if I go back to the work force...” Sage claims that he is “never working again.” In numerous observations, many of my participants made similar linguistic distinctions between wage labor and their passion-labor. These distinctions do not mean that they do not interpret their passion-labor as labor. Rather, this is indicative of the associations that they make with work and alienation. They know wage labor to be an alienating form of labor. They also know, for many, “job” or “work” is used to describe some form of wage labor. They do not associate their passion-labor with alienation in that way, and so they do not refer to it as a job. Their passion-labor is fulfilling, and wage labor is not. With this linguistic distinction, they provide recognition that the capitalistic wage labor present under the white racial frame is designed to harm their spirits, and their passion-labor does quite the opposite.

While my participants make this distinction a positive one, many others also make a distinction between their passion-labor and notions of legitimate work with very different meanings attached. Sage explains:

People act like if you're not working for somebody, you're not working. Like if you're working on your own shit...they'll be like, 'yo what you doin'?' 'Oh, I'm workin' man, I can't hang out right now.' 'Whatchu mean you workin'? *You ain't got no job.*' Like people feel like if you're not workin' for someone then you're not workin', and you're wasting time.

Sage describes these experiences as estranging. He claims many people who work wage labor positions misunderstand his engagement in passion-labor. The white racial frame, constructed hand-in-hand with a capitalistic economy, leads many to interpret passion-labor as a less legitimate form of work. Legitimate work, under capitalism, is not enjoyable labor. It is widely accepted that legitimate forms of work are alienating, often miserable, and follow some sort of

set schedule that allows for a distinction between work hours and the hours spent recovering from the misery of wage labor. So, while he has been able to free himself from the alienation that comes with engaging in wage labor, Sage still experiences alienation from others who view passion-labor as illegitimate. Nuri expresses a similar experience in a barber shop:

[Another] guy who was waiting to get his hair cut...was like, 'what do you do for a living?' And I was like, you know, 'I do my art for a living.' And he kind of laughed at it like, 'what do you mean you do your art for a living? *That ain't no job!* Ain't no money in doing that, like what do you mean?'...I guess he was trying to offer me a job doing something he did, or working for some company. I forget what he did exactly, but he was basically trying to insinuate um, when you ready to make some real money you can talk to me and you can leave that stuff alone, because that's not going anywhere.

This man not only deems Nuri's passion-labor as illegitimate, he goes so far as to offer him a "real job." Both Nuri and Sage, who work very hard on their craft, experience individuals interpreting their passion-labor through the capitalistic white racial frame and thus deeming it illegitimate.

While it is occasionally strangers or acquaintances who render their passion-labor illegitimate, many of my participants' loved ones also engage in this delegitimizing process. Lawrence explains, "my girlfriend's dad, one time, basically called me a barista. He...was just like, if you're not a doctor, a lawyer, an industrial engineer—you're a barista." To him, any occupation outside the three he deems worthy of recognition is equated with what he views as low-level service industry work. Similarly, FRKO's parents routinely delegitimize his career:

I argue with my mom and dad every day. But I think they knew I was gonna be an artist, but they don't know who artists are though...And so, my mom and my dad...they talk to each other on the phone about me a lot. And it's like, even now, even with what I've done, even how I've gotten this far with art...they still don't know it...Like my dad used to be like, 'man when are you finally gonna get out here in this art world and make some money, and like he still doesn't realize I'm already doin' it now.

FRKO's parents don't recognize and validate the gains that he has made in his career despite knowing that he financially supports himself and seeing his media coverage and inclusion in art shows.

Comparably, Stevo explains one of the biggest struggles he faces with his career is "my family not understanding how time consuming it is, and the money not matching how [much] time it took [to get to this point]." That struggle has lessened since he began to make more money through his passion-labor, but early on his father routinely questioned him and suggested that he go get another low-wage job instead. This way, his father said, he would come home with money in his pocket. Chris, too, explains that his family did not understand his pursuit of passion-labor early on when it wasn't bringing in any income: "they didn't discourage me...my mama raised me [to be] entrepreneurial...so it's like, 'how you gon' be doing all this and you ain't getting no pay?'...But they get it now 'cause I'm paying all the bills in my house." For Chris, his family only ceded legitimacy to his passion-labor after he garnered financial success through it.

My participants do not simply experience the devaluing of their passion-labor in dialogue with capitalistic notions of alienating work. This delegitimization occurs at the intersection of capitalism and white supremacy. Not only do they refuse to engage in alienating wage labor—they are Black and refusing to engage in alienating wage labor. By doing so, they are directly defying their place under the white racial frame. Furthermore, they are Black and producing knowledge and cultural products in a white supremacist society that deems them unfit to produce anything of value. This creates unique experiences with oppression under the white racial frame.

Those of my participants whose passion-labor is connected to hip-hop experience unique interactions specifically because of hip-hop's association with Blackness. Jace explains the compounded experience he has being both Black and a rapper in a society dominated by the white racial frame:

Being a young Black male already has the stigma attached to it. That's already there. And then, just being a rapper...already has a stigma attached to it...But you combine the two? It makes the other one bigger. It's like, alright young Black male [simulates picking up a large piece of something with one hand and putting it into a bowl] ...and then you're a rapper [simulates picking something else up with the other hand and putting it into the same bowl] so you're adding to it [makes explosion noise]...I'm young and Black. They already don't give a fuck about niggas out here...and then you wanna be a rapper? It's like, oh Lord! No! That's not gonna work at all!

Jace understands that being a young Black man renders him a member of a marginalized group in our society. He goes on to explain that, under the white racial frame, a prevalent stereotype about Black men is that they all want to be rappers. So, by choosing to pursue his passion-labor, rapping, many interpret him as exemplifying that stereotype. This is, in part, why his family still does not fully support his pursuit of his passion-labor:

[My parents] never tried to stop me from being a rapper. They never were like, 'no, you can't do that' or 'no, we'll disown you if you do that.' They expressed their distaste for it. Like I said, my dad cut me off financially, but they never told me that I couldn't or shouldn't. They were just like, 'hey man that's a rough road, and we would probably prefer if you finished school and got a job, but if that's what you wanna do, little kid, go ahead and do it.' ...But it is really stereotypical. I think that's part of the reason my mom didn't like it at first. She didn't wanna have to tell...you know, you're talking to your girlfriends and they're like, 'oh, well James is graduating college,' 'oh, Derrick is going to get his doctorate, what is Jaison doing?' 'He's rappin' with his friends.' Like, no mom wants to have to do that at church.

Jace's family recognizes the challenges that he will face because rapping is subjected to negative stigma under white supremacy, and doesn't want him to be subjected to those

additional challenges. Jace also recognizes the stigma associated with rapping and, to avoid being stereotyped, he rarely tells people his occupation in casual conversation:

Knowing that I'm a rapper is on a need to know basis...it is very personal for me so I don't like to talk about it, and then a lot of people don't like to treat it like it is [legitimate] because it is such a stereotype, so I don't even want to feed into that. I don't want you lookin' at me like a stereotype...that's like the one portion of my life I ever do that with...because I just want to be treated like a person.

Jace recognizes that those who view him through the lens of controlling images do not afford him the full complexity of his humanity—instead, they strip him of his personhood. Because of that, he refrains from sharing his passion-labor with many, as it is regarded as a stereotype and thus weaponized through the white racial frame to deny his humanity. Doc and Venus also hesitate to tell people they are rappers in many conversations:

Anybody who rhymes today is a rapper. So you don't wanna say that. I remember it was a long time, we just never—I just would hate like if I met a girl and met her parents and they're like, 'so what do you do?' 'I'm a rapper.' Off top, parents [are like] 'okay, okay, she got another one of these.' So you deal with that kind of shit.

Doc, Venus, and J.I.D. explained that they often told people “I do music,” or “I'm a writer,” instead of specifying that they are a rapper. This removes the racialized stigma attached to hip-hop because of its proximity to Blackness. Under the white racial frame, anything associated with Blackness is stigmatized and devalued. By reframing their passion-labor to dissociate it with hip-hop, they remove the ability for others to delegitimize their passion-labor.

While my participants whose passion-labor is connected with hip-hop seemingly adhere to notions of legible Black masculinity and controlling images, those who are visual artists challenge it. It is very important to note that my participants whose passion-labor is related to hip-hop do not exemplify these controlling images, but rather, that controlling images and

notions of legible Black masculinity are so shallow and purposefully underdeveloped that a person's engagement with hip-hop alone leads many to then deny their humanity and ascribe meaning to their life based on these tools of the white racial frame. In contrast, this dehumanization plays out in very different ways for my participants who are visual artists. Because the white racial frame permeates our society, the visual art world also functions as white space.



Figure 4-3. Autographs.

Doc (far right) and Venus sign autographs for fans after a performance.

The white institutional space of the visual art world not only views the creations of Black artists as illegitimate, but it also holds varying degrees of control over their career success. Seth Price (2015:52) argues:

A painting is manifestly art, whether on the wall or in the street, but avant-garde work is often illegible without institutional framing and the work of the curator or historian. More than anyone else, artists of the last hundred years have wrestled with this trauma of context, but theirs is a struggle that necessarily takes place within the art system. However radical the work, it amounts to a proposal enacted within an arena of peer-review, in dialogue with the community and its history.

The institutional framing of the visual art world is done through white institutional space and often peer-reviewed by white elites. If Black artists are allowed in these spaces, it is often due to their persona rather than their creations. Robin D.G. Kelley (1997:64) argues that within white institutional space, Black art is seen as “a spectacle of performing bodies.” Kelley (1997:65) continues:

When the creative product is the body itself rather than a painting, a sculpture, a book, or even a musical score, it is rendered as less cerebral or cognitive and thus, inadvertently, devalued. It is not ironic, for example, that the media paid as much attention to Jean-Michel Basquiat’s physical appearance as to his paintings.

The gatekeepers of white institutions view many of the visual artists in my study as a spectacle. They have vast social media presences, they exemplify Black cool in their style, and they are not afraid to say, do, or create things that are incredibly provocative. Because of this, they have been allowed access into these white institutional spaces, but not because of their artistic talent—though they do not lack it in the least—but rather because they are seen as a spectacle. While they are allowed access into these spaces, their access is limited and problematic in nature. These institutions often exploit their bodies while simultaneously devaluing their artistic creations.

I routinely observe my participants whose passion-labor is visual art tell someone that they are an artist, only to be met with the response: “Oh, so you do graffiti?” This response is

steeped in white supremacy. It is rooted in ideologies of legible Black masculinity and controlling images that denote Black men as criminal and therefore must engage in illegal forms of art that are often accompanied by trespassing and property destruction. Further, it suggests that legitimate artistic creations, displayed in legitimate institutional settings such as art galleries, are relegated to white artists. The very concept of a Black artist creating this so-called traditional art and displaying it in so-called traditional spaces is indecipherable for those who adhere to white supremacy.



Figure 4-4. Pink Lemonade.

PaperFrank poses in the gallery that housed his second solo show, Pink Lemonade. Over 3,000 people attended the opening of this exhibit.

One particular instance that occurred during my observations further illustrates the ways in which Black visual artists are delegitimized. I was observing and documenting—through

photos—PaperFrank as he participated in an annual mural festival here in Atlanta. There were four artists working together on a mural on one large wall. At one point, before the actual event began and the observers came out in large numbers, PaperFrank walked up the street to visit some of the other artists working on different murals in other parts of the neighborhood. I was sitting at his mural site, taking a break from photography and looking through the photos I had taken thus far. An older white man approached me and began talking about the mural festival. He named seven of the twelve artists participating in the event in that particular year—all of whom were white. He talked in depth about their styles and previous exhibits in which they had shown, making it very clear to me that he was incredibly familiar with them and their work. He then stated that he was unfamiliar with the remaining five artists—all of whom were Black men. Of course, he did not make that race-based observation out loud to me. As I am familiar with all five of those artists and their work, I began listing their names to him and describing their styles. He was visibly uninterested in this information. He cut me off routinely to ask questions about their credentials, such as: where have they exhibited before, whom have they worked with, and where are they from. Each of these questions felt like a covert way to say he felt as though he knew of all the artists of importance in Atlanta, and if he did not know of them then they couldn't be worthy enough to participate in the event.

Wendy Leo Moore (2008) discusses the invisibility and hypervisibility that occurs when Black people are present in white institutional space, and this is a prime example. This man rendered each of the artists of color who were participating in this event simultaneously invisible and hypervisible. Despite knowing each of the white artists by name, he made no effort to learn and retain the names of the five Black artists with whom he was unfamiliar. This

act delineates these artists invisible to this white man, who likely has some stake in the white space that makes up the art world based on his knowledge of the white artists' work. In cutting me off as I was naming these artists to ask me questions pertaining to their credibility, he simultaneously rendered these Black men hypervisible. Recognizing them as different, noting that he knew nothing of their work, and operating on an assumption that they may not be qualified to work beside the white artists he was so familiar with exemplifies this notion of hypervisibility. These acts, which designate Black visual artists as simultaneously invisible and hypervisible, contribute to rendering their passion-labor illegitimate.

Many art galleries in Atlanta have white curators who capitalize on the wide fan bases of Black artists in this city, which render them hypervisible. These curators selectively offer Atlanta-based Black artists opportunities only when it benefits them to do so. I have observed countless times that different Black visual artists in my study, and many who are not a part of my study, were offered an opportunity to work with a particular local gallery in Atlanta. This white-owned gallery frequently hosts many works by artists of color in its space in Atlanta, which allows access to their fan bases and the money that those fans spend to support these artists. However, when the owner of the gallery was afforded the opportunity to curate a large space at an international art fair in another city, he did not include any of the Black Atlanta artists who regularly exhibit in his gallery. As their fan bases are less concentrated outside of Atlanta, the owner would not be able to capitalize off these artists during this event to the degree that he does in Atlanta, so they were of no use to him. This event was much larger and more significant in the high art world than events that occur in Atlanta. It is worth noting that he took several white Atlanta-based artists along with him for this event—artists who also do

not have a wide fan base outside the city of Atlanta. By offering the opportunity to participate in the event to white artists, many of whom have significantly smaller fan bases than the Black artists here in Atlanta, this owner provided them with a potentially significant career-enhancing opportunity at the expense of the Black artists he routinely capitalizes on at home in Atlanta.



Figure 4-5. Hold On.

PaperFrank takes his first subway ride to meet with corporate sponsors in NYC.

Another such example of this delegitimization occurred just after PaperFrank had a piece acquired by a prestigious museum—making him the youngest artist with work in its permanent collection. The particular piece that was acquired was a recreation of a rather famous Norman Rockwell piece—in which he illustrates the traumatic nature of school desegregation by portraying Ruby Bridges being escorted into her newly integrated school by Federal Marshals, while tomatoes whiz by her from displeased whites. PaperFrank recreated

this piece in his signature illustrative style, and incorporated several of his iconic characters in his rendition. This remixed piece is a nod to the lack of social change that the U.S. has truly experienced since the Civil Rights Movement. In a review of the opening of the show that featured this piece, Catherine Fox (2015), a local art critic, called this piece “particularly puzzling,” claiming that, “rendering the image like a Saturday morning cartoon — where over-the-top violence is clearly fantasy and usually victimless — defangs the image and trivializes the subject.” This critique not only falsely describes PaperFrank’s illustrative style as cartooning, but it also devalues the credibility of cartoonists. According to this critic, illustrative styles of art cannot portray serious subjects without trivializing them. This claim is steeped in both white supremacy. Many non-Western styles of art are more illustrative in nature, yet manage to convey serious messages without trivialization. This critic is acting as a gatekeeper to white institutional space, and making a very clear argument that PaperFrank does not belong.

It is not just the high art world that delegitimizes the passion-labor of Black artists. FRKO often takes on commission work from music artists, some of whom are independent and some of whom are signed to one of the major record labels. He describes experiencing delegitimization from record labels:

Right now I’m just doin’ a lot of commission work for a lot of random people...a lot of rappers. Lots of rappers, like every day...They pay well though, especially if they’re independent. They respect you and they give you the money. Labels don’t like paying me that much. I got independent rappers paying me more than damn labels.

While record labels have significantly more capital than independent rappers; they do not value FRKO’s artwork in the same manner. This is evident in the literal dollar value they assign to his work, especially compared with that of independent artists. Though these independent artists

have much less access to capital, they are creators themselves and understand the value of FRKO's creative works. In contrast, these white institutions hope to do what they have done throughout U.S. history—capitalize off the labor exploitation of Black bodies.

PaperFrank also experiences delegitimization through corporations. As his social media presence began to rise, PaperFrank and his artwork became increasingly hypervisible to many corporations. White-owned corporations began reaching out to him to provide artwork for their offices, participate in events they were throwing, and promote their products on his social media. Initially, PaperFrank and his former manager were both very excited, thinking that because corporations have significant financial capital they would have no problem paying his asking price. However, he quickly learned that this was not the case. In one particular instance, a major magazine asked him to fly to New York City within two-weeks—meaning plane tickets would be expensive to garner—and paint a mural that would take approximately 5-6 days to complete. PaperFrank graciously offered to paint the large mural in their offices at no cost, with his travel, lodging, food, and supplies covered for the week. The magazine then returned an offer to pay only for PaperFrank's supplies, stating that was all they had a budget for at the time. The expectation that PaperFrank provide not only free labor but also cover the travel and lodging costs associated with a 5-6 day trip to one of the most expensive cities in the country on short notice was one that this institution presented without hesitation. The invisibility of Black visual artists causes white people and white-owned organizations to devalue the hypervisible work of Black artists, sometimes to the point in which they expect the artist to create for them for free—or worse—to lose money doing so.

In the interest of capitalizing on the large fan bases of the artists of color, these institutions do provide certain opportunities to artists of color. Occasionally, they do offer pay or other perks for those services, but it always ultimately benefits the white institutions. I observed as Sage and PaperFrank participated in a contest thrown by a mobile phone company to award an up-and-coming artist a \$10,000 cash prize. Each week, Sage, PaperFrank, and other visual artists were responsible for posting directed posts about the company on all of their various social media platforms. Their large fan bases were exposed to this company through an artist that they adore. Ultimately, Sage won the contest, and he and his career benefitted significantly from the \$10,000 reward. However, this does not take away from the fact that the company garnered lots of product placement and free advertising from all of the artists involved.

It is not just the visual artists who experience corporate delegitimization either. Just after Jace and many other members of his music group lost the bulk of their belongings in an apartment fire, an Atlanta representative of a national sportswear company sent them boxes of new clothes to help with their loss. Later, Jace told me that the Atlanta representative then expected them to perform a concert for free, sponsored by the same national brand, as repayment for their seemingly good deed. They turned this request for free labor down, and were shamed by the company for doing so. This large, wealthy company offered unsolicited goods to a group of young men and women who lost nearly all of their belongings, and later expected them to perform free labor in return. This shows a lack of care for their humanity that is so typical of institutions that exist within white supremacist capitalism.

The opportunities and assistance provided by white institutions often comes with an ulterior motive, as exemplified in the previous example. Derrick Bell (2004) calls this phenomenon “interest convergence”—when social change truly occurs in the interest of upholding existing oppressive social systems. Bell (2004) explains two facets of interest convergence: first, white interest-convergence always occurs in policies disguised as promoting racial equality. Second, “even when interest-convergence results in an effective racial remedy, that remedy will be abrogated at the point that policymakers fear the remedial policy is threatening the superior societal status of whites.” (Bell 2004:69). While Bell (2004) is speaking of policy-makers, white-owned corporations engage in interest convergence in the same manner. These white institutions extend opportunities to Black creators only when they stand to capitalize off them in some way.

Bell (2004:77) argues, “the symbols change and the society sometimes even accepts standards such as ‘equal opportunity’ that civil rights advocates have urged on it, but somehow in practice such standards serve to strengthen not weaken the subordinate status of African Americans.” Even in the creative world, these practices of interest convergence serve to strengthen the subordinate status of Black creators. The businesses that invest in Black artists do so in an effort to exploit what Michaela Angela Davis (2012:59) calls their “cool-ass Black style.” Although this opportunities may seem beneficial to the artists, they also solidify their subordinate status as Black artists. They are always seen as Black artists, and expected to produce that “Black cool” when given the chance. This limits their artistic freedom in a way that white artists never experience.

Employing the counter-frame of alchemical capitalism simultaneously affords my participants protection from alienating wage labor while subjecting them to alienation through the delegitimatization of their passion-labor. They are fully aware that they are not free from the confines of the white racial frame, and they are reminded of this each and every time their passion-labor is delegitimized. Nonetheless, they find this a worthy sacrifice to endure to gain freedom and financial security through monetizing their passion-labor.

4.2.2 SELF-COMMODIFICATION IN WHITE INSTITUTIONAL SPACE

Each of my participants describes an internal struggle that occurs when these white, exploitative institutions express interest in their work. Each time, they have to decide whether or not to self-commodify and allow their creations to be exploited by white institutions in exchange for capital. Sometimes, much-needed money, product, and/or exposure comes with these institutional exploits, but often at some sort of spiritual cost. Morbid James asks “you’re making money making art, but are you making money making the art that you want to make?” For Morbid James, simply garnering income through creating is not enough—he hopes to do so making art that fulfills his soul.

Because race, wealth, and social capital are inherently connected under the white racial frame, artists of color often have less access to financial and social privilege than their white counterparts. Those with less financial privilege are then more likely to need to these accept offers from white-owned corporations who are looking to serve their own capitalistic interests by exploiting these artists for their fan bases. Artists who are financially secure don’t feel the pressure to take on opportunities solely for the monetary incentive. Artists who have strong social networks don’t feel the pressure to take on opportunities solely for the networking

incentive. Again, under white supremacist capitalism, artists with financial and social capital are most often white artists. Furthermore, white artists who don't have the financial and social capital of the wealthy still are not subjected to the limiting confines of the expectations placed on Black artists. This places Black artists at a unique intersection of oppression as it relates to self-commodification—agreeing to a commission or opportunity that requires an artist to sacrifice their artistic integrity to varying degrees in exchange for much-needed money or exposure.

The choice to self-commodify does not come easily. My participants engage in an internal struggle each time they are faced with an opportunity that would require them to self-commodify. FRKO explains an experience with this internal struggle. A large streetwear brand wanted to collaborate with him on a t-shirt design. While the brand has a large following and would surely sell a large number of shirts, they only offer a small percentage (10%) of the profits to FRKO as payment for both the design and social media promotion that is involved. Ultimately, he turned this opportunity down because he decided the brand image was not in line with his own image. He says, "I wasn't really amped. I don't wear that stuff, man." However, he had the financial stability to do so at that point in time. Had he not, he may have had to take on that low-paying opportunity to meet his financial needs. FRKO compares this offer with another offer from a different streetwear brand, one that he did accept. He explains that this particular streetwear brand is a brand he has loved since he was a child. They are a white-owned streetwear company that sponsors BMX riders, many of whom are Black and Latino men. They approached FRKO and offered him a fair percentage (50%) of the profits create a t-shirt design and promote the sales on his social media. Because this was a company

he felt very connected to, and because their commission percentage was fair and exploitative, he took on the project. This is obviously still commodification in the sense that FRKO garnered income from his creation, however he does not conceptualize it in that way because his artistic integrity remained intact.

Often, early in their careers, my participants felt more pressure to take each and every opportunity that was afforded to them, in order to meet their financial needs. This does require some level of spiritual sacrifice. Sage explains working on one particular taxing corporate commission:

I've never gotten to a point where I couldn't draw no more, but like it got to the point where I couldn't even...draw a person. I couldn't draw a circle no more. I dunno what happened but I just couldn't do it no more. And I've never been burnt out. And that really scared me because I thought like, what if I can never draw again?

Sage touches on the alienation that comes with self-commodification. Taking on commissions and projects that require these creators to create pieces they otherwise would not produces a feeling similar to the alienation they experience through wage labor. Their goal is always to minimize the amount of these spiritually draining projects that they have to engage in.

Despite some similarities, Nuri explains that there is still a difference between self-commodification in passion-labor and alienation through wage labor:

I know that I'ma still encounter some racism in the art world, because that's a very real thing too—and it don't matter which direction I take with it—because it's all there. Whether it be trying to get my stuff in some museum, or whether it be with comic book art.... It's a thing that you're gonna deal with it one way or another, but at least with your art, you can control how much of that you have to deal with.

Unlike when he engaged in wage labor, Nuri can now decide when and how he engages with this type of alienating labor. The control he now has affords him a vastly different experience.

Stevo echoes similar sentiments. First, he explains that he and the hip hop artist he manages turned down offers to sign with major record labels and instead chose to sign with a smaller, Black-owned, Atlanta-based record label so that they could retain creative control of the artist's works. For the two of them, the ability to retain creative control matters more than the deep pockets of the white-owned major record labels. The ability to preserve authenticity is more important than attaining higher income. Stevo carries similar beliefs into his decisions about what corporate brands to align his artist with, "All in all I love brand partnerships when it makes sense...If you really want this to work it has to be genuine on both sides. Because it's not gonna work otherwise." Stevo hopes to preserve his artist's authenticity throughout every aspect of their career.

I observed PaperFrank agree to a brand partnership that did not, as Stevo said, make sense. At first, it seemed like a great offer. A high-end men's clothing company wanted to send PaperFrank about \$3,000 worth of products, and pay him \$1500 for three posts on his social media accounts over the course of two months. The brand is a brand that PaperFrank enjoys, and three posts over the course of two months is not too invasive, so he agreed. He picked out three products from their catalog and received the products in the mail. He was told to start having photos taken with the products and given a list of guidelines to follow for the social media posts, which were to start soon. A short time later, the company contacted PaperFrank and expressed concerns about his social media presence—the same presence that made them contact him about this partnership in the first place. They asked him if he would stop posting photos of himself smoking, and stop using "the n-word" in all of his captions and posts on all of his social media accounts for the entire two-month duration of the partnership. PaperFrank

asked to have some time to think about their request and talked it over with several friends and members of his management team. It is important to PaperFrank to be authentic in all aspects of his life—including his social media. He smokes routinely and uses “the n-word” in his speech, and he does not hesitate to do so in his social media posts as well. After talking it over with his friends and management team, PaperFrank decided that his authenticity mattered more than this brand partnership and he communicated that he was not comfortable with those terms specifically because he wanted to retain his authenticity. As a result, the brand terminated the partnership, allowing him to keep the products they sent.

My participants value their authenticity over generating excessive amounts of income, again indicating that their monetized passion-labor is a rather alchemical capitalism. Again, they absolutely are engaging in capitalistic practices, however they are very different than typical capitalistic entrepreneurial activities. They take on labor that requires them to sacrifice parts of themselves only when they have a significant financial need. As they grow in their abilities to monetize their passion-labor, they engage in self-commodification less and less. This shows that they engage in a capitalism that is somewhat disengaged from greed—an alchemical capitalism. However, it is important to note that this does not free them from the confines of the white racial frame.

Earlier, I explain how a white curator who frequently works with Black artists in Atlanta did not select any of those Black artists for his showcase in the prestigious art event located in another city. In response, a group of Atlanta artists, including several of my participants, came together and rented a gallery space in that city so that they could be included in this respected event. However, unlike the white artists chosen by the white curator, these artists had to

sacrifice a significant amount of money for the rental of their own gallery space. Sadly, even in this admirable act of resistance, the self-curated show exhibiting many works by Black artists was not attended by the same crowds as many other shows during this esteemed event. The white racial frame facilitates disparate social capital. Thus, the financially-privileged art buyers—whom are typically white—attend white-curated events featuring work by white artists. As a result, many of the artists of color lose money by participating in the event, while their white counterparts at least break even, and likely come away from the event with money in their already-privileged pockets. Situated in a society permeated by the white racial frame that places my participants at a disadvantage, this alchemical capitalism is not free from constraints.

4.2.3 THE CREATIVE SUPPORT COMMUNITY: FACILITATING ALCHEMICAL CAPITALISM

My participants engage in what I call a “creative support community.” The creative support community occurs in direct dialogue with the confines the white racial frame places on my participants’ passion-labor. This community is a form of Black social space designed to aid in the pursuit of a more authentic monetized passion-labor—one in which my participants would not have to rely on self-commodification to provide for themselves. Throughout my many observations, I witnessed my participants and others involved in this creative support community assist each other financially, support each other emotionally, share networks with each other, and inspire each other creatively. This support is integral in their pursuit of passion-labor. The existence of the creative support community has facilitated many of my participants’ detachment from wage labor by providing financial, emotional, and housing support. It allows my participants the freedom to reject some opportunities that would require self-

commodification in exchange for money or exposure by providing those necessary benefits through the creative support community instead. The creative support community is integral to the career success of my participants.

The existence of this creative support community is exemplified in the interviews with my participants. Doc explains that he feels the presence of this creative support community has a significant impact on Atlanta's cultural power in the U.S.:

I think that's why Atlanta booms the way it does, because like Atlanta—of course you have cliques and you have disagreements or whatever, conflict—but in general, we do tend to help each other out. Somebody will tell somebody somebody else's name real fast, like 'oh, I was just working with this dude, you should hear such and such.' People have their egos but it's not to the point where you won't put another person on. So...I think that's why like to the nation it looks like we have so much going on here. It's really just because *it is a community thing here*. Everybody creative knows somebody else who's gonna help somebody do this, go here or there.

Doc speaks to the network sharing that happens frequently within the creative support community. Sharing important contacts and spreading the work of fellow creators is incredibly valuable to their careers. Stevo has similar thoughts about the strength of the creative support community here in Atlanta:

Go anywhere else, their [radio] is just playing top—like there's nobody local. I couldn't be like, 'what's this?' Atlanta plays the shit out of local people. Like my homegirl at [a major record label], she like, 'I can't break an artist in Atlanta because all y'all wanna do is play each other [on the radio]. She's like, it's the hardest market to break a new artist not from Atlanta because *we love us so much....* Atlanta is the king—reign supreme—of supporting our own.

This type of hometown support that Stevo describes is almost unheard of, particularly in the music industry. The existence of such a strong creative support community here in Atlanta lends itself to the successes of many of my participants.

Lawrence describes his business goals in a manner that exemplifies the very notion of the creative support community:

So with this business, I'm just trying to set up a situation for myself and also *for my friends who are creative and don't wanna sell [out]*, to just feel comfortable and be valued. I have so many creative friends who are graphic designers, web designers who, people are looking at them like...they don't know what they're doing, because they might not know how to speak that language, but they're actually doing better work than the people you're paying \$15,000 to do your site. So like, let me just let you know that I know what I'm talking about, and then let me hire these people to go and do it.... Now we can have fun doing this instead of it being like, shit, I gotta finish this website by Friday so I can make this check so I can pay rent, you know? That's, all I wanna do is help myself and my friends get away from that mindset.

Inherent in the design of Lawrence's business is garnering opportunities not only for himself, but for his creative friends as well. While this type of alchemical capitalism is not geared toward a full-scale economic revolution, it certainly is not selfish. Given the fact that his family does not support his career path, Jace gives his creative support community credit for making him feel comfortable to withdraw from wage labor and pursue monetizing his passion-labor:

The only thing that...made me feel okay pursuing it was that I had Two9. *I had a family*. It's not really music with us. I mean, it is, we've monetized that, and that's cool...[But] when I wasn't talking to my dad, or just through all different parts of my life, they were just my support system.... We've always held each other down, we always do...because we all kinda had like the same goal, and we all wanted to reach it together.

Jace explains that there were numerous times where he wasn't bringing in enough income to pay rent, and one of his fictive family members offered him a place to stay. Conversely, he also says that there are plenty of times where he has a more stable income and let some of his fictive family stay with him while they were financially struggling. However, for Jace, the support is so much more than just financial. He explains how crucial the emotional support provided by people who share similar goals is to enduring the hard times that accompany

detaching from white institutional spaces. The bond between Jace and his group members is so tight that when one of them was offered a substantial label deal, he refused to sign as a solo artist and waited over a year and a half to convince the label to sign them all as a group. This financial sacrifice on his part was done so that the entire group could thrive together. This is decidedly alchemical capitalism at work.



Figure 4-6. Family Gathering.

Jace (far left) shares the stage with members of his music group, Two9, and other Atlanta-based music artists in an energetic performance.

Sage describes receiving housing assistance from several of his friends during financially difficult times after detaching from wage labor—usually in the form of a friend offering a couch to sleep on for an indefinite period of time. PaperFrank describes receiving similar housing assistance during his unpaid apprenticeship while he learned to tattoo. Stevo also received

housing assistance from another member of his creative support community after withdrawing from wage labor. As housing is such a costly basic need, this assistance is crucial in determining their ability to detach from alienating wage labor.

Many of my participants support each other in their creative endeavors. Chris, Morbid James, and PaperFrank often help each other develop their art techniques and plan their personal branding strategies. Chris explains:

I like being around all these niggas 'cause I get different aspects and different advice and tips on how they do it.... I don't ask a lot of questions, I more so just watch and pick up like that...If I really need to ask something, then I'll ask it.

Sage, FRKO, and PaperFrank often design album covers for music artists who are also a part of the creative support community here in Atlanta. Sage explains that the first time his artwork was seen by a large number of people was when he did an album cover for single that features J.I.D. along with several other Atlanta-based rappers. Sage, FRKO, and PaperFrank often paint live at music festivals—some orchestrated in part by Stevo—while artists like Doc, Venus, and J.I.D. perform beside them.

PaperFrank routinely shares the connections in his career network with many people in the creative support community, including Nuri. Nuri states:

When I met [Paper]Frank, he was probably the first real person that I saw like in real life—up close and personal—that was like, not only is this person like living off his art but he's doing it well, and he's been doing it longer than me. Being around him and people like him, they gave me that additional confidence to keep going, but they also would try to introduce me to people, just to put my name out there.

Doc and Venus are in a music group—EarthGang—and they are also part of a music collective—Spillage Village—with J.I.D. and several other artists. Doc explains Spillage Village as follows:

Spillage Village is like, we started off as just like a bunch of guys at school that used to listen to records and make records together. Now it's essentially our indie imprint. It's what we go by; it's a collective. We do—music is our main focus. We make records, we help each other come up with ideas, we produce records, [and] we listen to each other's stuff. But then also we do stuff in the community. We feed the homeless and stuff like that uh, just 'cause...it's good to get people involved...it feels better on your soul, and it's just the right thing to do.



Figure 4-7. Drawing Session.

(Left to right) PaperFrank, Nuri, and a friend get together to share tips on marker technique.

J.I.D. explained that operating as a collective not only saves them money on studio time when they record, but it also provides them with creative support. They bounce ideas off each other and brainstorm together while recording. The three of them—along with several other members of Spillage Village—also live in a large house together, which cuts down on rent and

food costs. They now have a recording space in their house so they no longer have to pay for studio time to record their creations.

Many of my participants also financially support each other's monetized passion-labor. Many rappers, both in my study and in the larger creative support community, have paid Sage, FRKO, and PaperFrank to design album covers. PaperFrank and FRKO have hired DJs within the local support community to provide sound for their art shows. Stevo has gotten tattoos from just about every Black tattoo artist in the city, including PaperFrank. PaperFrank has purchased art from Morbid James, Chris, and Nuri, along with countless other Atlanta artists. Doc, Venus, and J.I.D. have worked with artists that Stevo manages. Jace and PaperFrank have collaborated on creative concepts. And finally, upon receiving his first substantial check after he and his artist signed with a label—after a long period of financial struggle—Stevo came directly to PaperFrank and bought two large original paintings. For years, Stevo told PaperFrank he was going to purchase some of his original works as soon as he was financially stable, and he made good on that promise as soon as he was able. I brought this up in an interview with Stevo and he explains:

We all did kinda come up together...and we all weren't in the best financial position, so we had to support people in other ways. Like, if I like your music, first of all you might not even be sellin' it, so I can't buy it. I can buy tickets to your show though. And then, me being in the business...sometimes my presence or a tweet would be enough to my show my support...So I had to support you in other ways that weren't financial. But I always knew if I had the money to support somebody—if I get it, I'm gonna do it...So I told [Paper]Frank, when I get straight I'm gonna buy one. Period. I already got tattoos—not saying I didn't want one, but it was mostly because I couldn't afford a painting at the time, so I'm gonna get something PaperFrank.... We have to start putting back—like outside of the social and emotional support—we do have to start investing in our friends because even though all that other kind of support is good, to keep it going and to raise quality, financial has to be involved.... But it is a common theme. Our support is pretty good.... Every time somebody does something, it's

usually their friends...supporting in some kind of way even if it's not financial. And that is a testament to how close and proud we are of each other.

This creative support community is far from communal in nature. It is capitalistic, but the varied and widely reciprocated forms of support are indicative of a more alchemical capitalism. While it appears similar to the ways in which middle- and upper-class white people share social and financial networks, my participants engage in the creative support community specifically because they understand the system is set up to hinder them from success through structural racism. They assist each other because they know that in the U.S., capitalism and white supremacy are intertwined, therefore working together strengthens their ability to resist the white racial frame.



Figure 4-8. Group Effort.

Stevo (far left) and others help hang PaperFrank's Pink Lemonade exhibit.

It is very important to note that, unfortunately, their alchemical capitalism is largely patriarchal. Women and queer men routinely support my participants' monetized passion-labor, and they graciously accept and even exploit this support, but typically reciprocate most often to the other cis-heterosexual men in the creative support community. Many of the people working behind the scenes to aid in my participants' careers are women—their girlfriends, friends, mothers, and sisters all play a key role in helping them monetize their passion labor. I became well aware of this through my observations. However, in my interviews, my participants rarely name these women when I asked about their support systems. It was not until I would specifically ask about them that they would credit these women with some of the [often unpaid] labor that they perform to aid in the success of their monetized passion labor. Lawrence did specifically mention his girlfriend first when I asked about his support system. Also, FRKO routinely creates works of art with his girlfriend, a fellow creator. He also co-curated an art show consisting of all women artists, and he frequently hires women to DJ at his art shows and events. These acts are admirable, but they are an anomaly in this creative support community. For many of the men in my study, women and queer men are at best excluded from the myriad forms of support exchanged through the creative support community, and at worst exploited for their labor and financial and emotional support. This is another reason why it is clear that my participants' goal is not total revolution—they do not seek to dismantle patriarchy in their pursuits of freedom. In this way, their pursuit of alchemical capitalism is somewhat selfish. They share various forms of sacrificial support—they just do so between cis-heterosexual Black men involved in the creative support community.

4.2.4 TRUST THE PROCESS: THE SPIRITUALITY BEHIND PURSUING ALCHEMICAL CAPITALISM

“When you want something,
all the universe conspires in helping you achieve it.”
-Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist* (1995:22)

As the interviews with and observations of my participants show, the process of monetizing passion-labor is not an easy task. Robin D. G. Kelley (2002:198) writes, “struggle is par for the course when our dreams go into action.” To aid in enduring their periods of struggle throughout the journey of monetizing their passion-labor, many of my participants invoke a trust-the-process counter-frame. This counter-frame indicates a belief in a higher meaning behind their passion-labor—they believe they are meant to be doing the work that fulfills their spirit. In turn, they believe that pursuing their passion-labor in an authentic way will ultimately lead to success. Relying on belief in a higher power is not exclusive to my participants; it is consistent throughout Black American resistance (DuBois 1903, 1935; Harding 1981; Lehman 1991; Kelley 1993; Feagin 2010). Appealing to a higher power for relief was a large component of resistance to enslavement in the United States (DuBois 1903, 1935; Harding 1981; Kelley 1993). In *Black Reconstruction*, DuBois (1935:123) draws a parallel to explain what the end of chattel slavery felt like for Black Americans:

Suppose on some gray day, as you plod down Wall Street, you should see God sitting on the Treasury steps, in His Glory, with the thunders curved about him? Suppose on Michigan Avenue, between the lakes and hills of stone, and in the midst of hastening automobiles and jostling crowds, suddenly you see living and walking toward you, the Christ, with sorrow and sunshine in his face?

DuBois (1935:124) goes on to challenge future critics who dismiss the spiritual components of resistance or reduce them to cultural or ideology:

Foolish talk, all of this, you say, of course; and that is because no American now believes in his religion. Its facts are mere symbolism; its revelation vague

generalities; its ethics a matter of carefully balanced gain. But to most of the four million Black folk emancipated by civil war, God was real. They knew Him. They had met Him personally in many a wild orgy of religious frenzy, or in the black stillness of the night. His plan for them was clear; they were to suffer and be degraded, and then afterwards by Divine edict, raised to manhood and power; and so on January 1, 1863, He made them free.

Robin D.G. Kelley (1993:88) advocates allowing space for these spiritual components in scholarly discussions without reducing them:

Despite the almost axiomatic way the church becomes central to Black working-class culture and politics, religion is almost always treated simply as culture, ideology, and organization. We need to recognize that the sacred and the spirit world were also often understood and invoked by African Americans as weapons to protect themselves or to attack others. How do historians make sense of, say, conjure as a strategy of resistance, retaliation, or defense in the daily lives of some working-class African Americans? How do we interpret divine intervention, especially when one's prayers are *answered*?.... Most of the oral narratives and memoirs of southern Black workers speak of such events or moments as having enormous material consequences.

Kelley (1993:88) goes on to clarify that invoking spiritual beliefs is not, and has never been, utilized alone in resistance efforts:

Of course, reliance on the divine or on the netherworlds of conjure was rarely, if ever, the only resistance or defense strategy used by black working people, but in their minds, bodies, and social relationships this was real power—power of which neither the CIO, the Populists, nor the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) could boast.

Like their ancestors, my participants invoke many counter-frames in their acts of resistance, and spiritual beliefs are one component.

Earlier, I mentioned that Jace's group-mate held out on signing an individual label deal in hopes that their entire group could get signed together. I asked if this was an easy financial sacrifice for them to make, and he replies:

Nah, we was fucked! Niggas was broke. Niggas was down bad. I had just quit my [last corporate] job...me and [another group member] had just got evicted...Nah during that whole time, niggas was struggling. It was just—sleeping at the studio,

I was at my sister's house a lot, just bouncing around. But like every other week someone was like, 'Alright! We got this part of the deal done! Alright! We right here now!' And that took a year and a half. It took like 18 months. And then, even longer for us to see any money once we did sign.

For Jace and the other members of his group, this sacrifice was difficult, but facilitated through a belief that it would work out in their best interest. Stevo expresses a similar belief:

Everything was struggle mode...it was bad. But we were all doing what we loved so we didn't care. I always tell people now...when you know you good at something...it's like, I'll be okay, I promise...it's going to be okay.

Both Jace and Stevo are right—their sacrifices and decisions did pan out in their best interest.

They are both currently living comfortably while pursuing their passion-labor.

Sage explains that often, he would reach a point where he didn't know how he was going to pay an important bill or afford an important trip or necessary supplies, only to have the situation magically resolve itself:

I remember it just got to a point, like I was talking to my girlfriend and I was like, you I've struggled so much bruh, and I really pay attention to the universe. I pay attention to everything, and I know what I wanna do, I know how I wanna do it, and I feel like I got a drive for it, so the universe about to give me what I want. I'm about to get blessed. And the next morning, I woke up and [the major cell phone provider] emailed me and told me I won their weekly contest...and I'd be entered to win \$10,000 and I was like, oh shit. And then a little while later, they were like, yeah, you won.... And then me and [my friend] did this logo for this person and we got paid like \$600 and we split it. And we all drove to Vegas and then I had like 10 cents in my account again, and I was like, fuck, and then when we came back the check was there.

Each time that Sage reaches a dire point, money or assistance materializes right on time.

Through my observations, I witnessed PaperFrank have many similar experiences. There were countless times that his rent was almost due or a big bill needed to be paid, and he had no money and no prospects of money coming in. No sooner than he told me he was concerned about being able to pay the bill, or I witnessed him telling a friend a similar concern, did he get

an email with a commission request, job offer, or purchase request. Sage explains these uncanny occurrences:

I dunno what it's like for everybody, but the universe will not let me fall on my face, yo. Like, I can put my arms behind my back and just fall forward and something will just grab me. I've never just been—I've never been all the way out here. I've been super close, but I've never just been all the way out here, in the streets.

Sage feels taken care of and supported by some otherworldly force, and his experiences certainly are not unique. Because of similar experiences, Doc explains that he learned to trust the process: "as far as what we doin' career-wise, we ain't scared of nothing out here.... I think, you be good to people, it goes further than you could imagine.... Just be good to people and that shit comes back." Stevo's trust in the process makes it easy for him to endure severe periods of struggle:

I was managing [my artist] for like, it was only like 2 or 3 weeks but my phone was off. So I had to walk to [the fast food restaurant] to use Wi-Fi to make sure I could text people from my laptop. So, me and [my artist] used to always tell people about resilience...that's how much we knew we was gonna make it, like we didn't care about the odds.

Stevo didn't mind enduring those extremely difficult times because he believed they would pay off in the end—and they did. Lawrence explains similar experiences with being taken care of by some higher power in the pursuit of his passion-labor:

It's a lot of times where I look back like, how did I make it out of that time? Like times where I'm—there have been times where I'm literally, it's the 29th and I'm like, I don't have money to pay rent next month, but I don't wanna move back in with my parents. I'm gonna figure this shit out. I have until the 3rd. And like, that shit has worked out, somehow. I'm literally freaking out and then a week later I wouldn't even remember that time.

Lawrence's experiences echo so many of my other participants' experiences with being supported by an intangible source while pursuing his passion-labor.

The universe does conspire to help my participants monetize their respective passion-labors. As a result, they continue to trust in this otherworldly protection. My participants have made many significant decisions based on the trust that the process would work out in the end. They left financially-stable wage labor positions to pursue their passion-labor, they traveled with very little means to pursue opportunities related to their passion labor, and they even turned down financial opportunities that would require them to sacrifice authenticity knowing that they needed the money that would have come from them. But so far, they were right—they have been taken care of.

My participants employ this trust-the-process counter-frame not only in pursuit of their own passion-labor, but they also use it as a message to encourage others to do the same. They use the care the universe doles out in response to their acts of courage as proof that many more of us should follow suit. Jace and PaperFrank, along with several others in my study, routinely post inspiring messages on their social media encouraging others to pursue the labor of their hearts. PaperFrank, FRKO, and many others provide direct support to younger artists in the city who are trying to monetize their passion-labor as well.

Brené Brown (2010:15) writes, “courage has a ripple effect. Every time we choose courage, we make everyone around us a little better and the world a little braver.” The courage I observe in my participants, and in many of the people in the creative community here in Atlanta, certainly inspires me to be more courageous. Their courage inspired me to finally get the tattoos I had been wanting, despite my fears of how it would impact my future job prospects. They inspire me to pursue more deeply, and share more widely, my own creations. It

is also their courage that inspired me to create this project. I am certain that I am not the only one inspired by the brave choices my participants made in pursuit of their passion-labor.

4.3 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I present ways in which my participants employ a counter-frame of alchemical capitalism in resistance to the exploitative white supremacist capitalism present in the United States. The fact that U.S. capitalism is inherently connected with white supremacy (hooks 1981) and therefore woven into the fibers of our society operates as a double-edged sword for my participants. They cannot engage with capitalism without also navigating through and around the white racial frame. They also cannot work to eradicate white supremacy without also pursuing an economic revolution—something that would be a daunting, likely violent, task to undertake. In an effort to attain the greatest amount of freedom possible without substantial suffering and the potential loss of life, they choose instead to engage in this alchemical capitalism. Many (e.g. Lorde 1984) argue that any form of capitalism cannot be viewed as an act of resistance, because of its inherent connection to white supremacy, patriarchy, and imperialism. However, these acts are most definitely performed in resistance to the dominant white racial frame, and their impact should be ignored or erased.

The alchemical capitalism practiced by my participants is certainly not fully detached from harm and oppression, but no act of resistance ever has been and no act of resistance ever will be. Imperfection is not a reason to dismiss these acts of resistance altogether. Yes, these acts ultimately uphold capitalism, which is an inherently exploitative practice. For my participants, they also are largely patriarchal. They exploit and exclude women and queer men in many ways. However, they also practice a capitalism that is more authentic, less greedy, and

more community-oriented. U.S. capitalism is highly individualistic, greedy, and inauthentic. Challenging the current form of capitalism promoted by the white racial frame through alchemical capitalism, if nothing else, is certainly a step in the right direction.

This alchemical capitalism is not practiced without resistance. My participants routinely have their passion-labor delegitimized by strangers, friends, family, and institutions. They fight to have their creations deemed valuable and worthy, and to some degree they have succeeded. Each of them monetized their passion-labor enough that they can sustain a comfortable lifestyle through their passion-work, without having to engage in exploitative wage labor to supplement and/or provide their income. In a society that relegates Black people as bodies available for labor exploitation, this is an incredible feat worthy of recognition and praise. My participants reclaim their bodies from the dominance of the white racial frame. They recover their labor from this exploitative, white supremacist capitalism and reap the benefits of their hard work. They refuse to be exploited by a system that only sees their value through their exploitation. They demand their personhood. They are brave. They are fearless. They are inspiring.

5 CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

5.1 NOT FREE, BUT FREEer

I have examined the many ways the young Black men in my study employ various counter-frames to resist the dominant white racial frame that threatens their life every day. In employing these frames, all of my participants successfully withdrew from wage labor and monetized their passion-labor. They all discuss feeling more free, happy, and true to themselves by practicing their alchemical capitalism. However, they also all know that they are

not free from the confines of the interlocking systems of oppression present in the United States. Tricia Rose (2008:265) points out the harm that underlies much Black American creativity through the example of chitterlings:

What makes the case of chitterlings as an African-American soul-food tradition unique is the fact that slaves were given *only* what were considered scraps—food that slave owners and their families would not eat.... [T]he context for African-Americans' use of chitterlings—or chitlins as they are affectionately called—symbolizes not just Black people's resilience, tradition, and creativity but also their mistreatment.... Making decent chitterlings out of pig guts took deft culinary skill. It required expert cleaning, preparation, and seasoning—especially given African-Americans' limited access to a wide range of cooking materials at the time. Making them edible was truly an art. But the artistry of making chitterlings out of pig guts under stress and mistreatment is only really appreciated when we understand the context. Having pig intestines to serve as the basis for a meal was a clear symbol of the deep disregard and dehumanization that Black people experienced under slavery. African-Americans' ability to make a delicacy out of discarded trash, to make nourishment out of the nearly indigestible—all the while knowing that it was a part of the larger system of dehumanization—should be lauded and honored. But this should be a somber honoring because it also represents the duress under which such creative culinary genius evolved.

All of the amazing accomplishments of my participants should be celebrated—but those celebrations should not erase or detract from the fact that their lives are heavily impacted by structural racism. Rose (2008:266) goes on to warn against this erasure:

This is a warning not to forget the mistreatment and the debilitating context in which so much Black creativity must operate. It's a call to remember what is amazing about chitterlings and what isn't. It's a call to strive for optimum circumstances, to reject limiting conditions, and to avoid getting so caught up in celebrating the ability to create under limiting and destructive conditions that this context becomes an acceptable norm, a Black badge of honor.... What would the genius of Black creativity produce with normal levels of social resources, with less social starvation, and without high levels of violence and incarceration? Shouldn't we demand more than the intestines of society, no matter how creative we have been with them?

I pursued this project to celebrate the strength and resilience of my creator-friends, but it is imperative that their strength and resilience not be utilized as what Rose calls a “Black badge of honor” or to facilitate an argument that minimizes the damage done by the white racial frame. Often, the individual successes of marginalized people are invoked to make a claim that “things aren’t that bad.” Let me make myself very clear: things are that bad. Structural racism has very real and lasting implications in the lives of my participants and all people of color across the United States. The anti-Blackness that is the foundation of that structural racism very seriously impacts the life course of every Black person in this country. My participants have not magically removed themselves from the harm that this oppression imparts on individuals. They have found a way to garner little bits of freedom here and there in their everyday lives, and their brave and complex efforts still do not mean that they don’t experience the impacts of structural racism. I dream of the world Tricia Rose alludes to in her questions. Until my creator-friends can let the genius of their Black creativity flourish without being subjected to the confines of structural oppression, their successes must never be interpreted as signs of true and lasting freedom from oppression.

My participants do say that they feel more free in the lives they have crafted for themselves, but they openly acknowledge that racism is still a large force present in their lives. Venus, Doc, J.I.D., and Jace all discuss various ways they were stereotyped and stigmatized while touring across the country for music performances. Venus explains,

That’s the thing about being on tour, like we don’t realize that [in] some of these areas we really are sore thumbs—six Black dudes coming out of some car...in a small city. You don’t know where you at. You don’t know what they used to seeing every day. You gotta be mindful of that.

Even while pursuing their passion-labor, and being paid to travel around the country to do so, they are still hyper-aware of the existence of the white racial frame and the potential harm it could bring them at any moment.



Figure 5-1. Yellow.

PaperFrank dips his paintbrush in a bucket of paint while working on an indoor mural.

In my observations, I witnessed PaperFrank have issues cashing a large check at his bank on more than one occasion. On one particular instance, he had just received a check from a prominent museum. This museum had acquired one of his pieces for their permanent collection, making him—a young Black man—the youngest artist in the museum's collection. I remember how proud and happy he was the day he received this check. At the bank, the teller took several extra precautions before cashing the check. It was clear she believed the check to be fake. It was only after calling over her boss, who recognized PaperFrank, that she deposited

the check. This experience put a damper on PaperFrank's rightfully prideful feelings that day. Sage describes a similar experience when he received the \$10,000 check for the contest he won: "they was like, man, where you get this money from?.... I had to show them [the company's] social media posts [about the contest] so they wouldn't call the police." This common experience serves as an immediate reminder that, no matter how successful you are, white supremacy still reigns.

In an interview, I ask Doc if he felt as though he operates outside the system since he made the choice to disengage from wage labor. At first, he says yes, and after a period of silence, he explains:

It don't matter how big I get, we still gotta deal with cops being cops. We still gotta deal with the same things we just deal with anyway. Like we said, I ain't worked a job in forever—a regular people job—but, I get pulled over. I got pulled over by the police on Moreland [Avenue] like a month ago, and got searched, and got, like, raided through my car and they pulled me out and all that for no reason. Yeah, still gotta deal with the same stuff all the time.... So we deal with stuff like that. So you not really out of the system. The system gonna come find you wherever you at. But as far as going to work every day, nah. I'm glad. That was my main thing—to liberate myself from that.

For Doc, freedom from wage labor is a much more attainable goal than freedom from police brutality, racial profiling, and other pervasive aspects of structural racism. That is not to say that he does not also want to achieve those goals. Many of my participants, including Doc, participate in more organized protests and create art specifically addressing issues of police brutality. But they understand that type of change is something that will take much longer than their journey to freedom from wage labor. The use of counter-frames as a method to detach from wage labor and practice alchemical capitalism is something that my participants all achieved in a relatively short period of time. They were all under 30 by the time they had

monetized their passion labor as their sole source of income—and most were well under 30 at that time. There is no way they could have eradicated structural racism in the same time frame—Black Americans have been fighting to do just that for over 400 years. The freedom my participants achieve is also a rather individualized process. It’s not selfish—they do assist each other—but much of the work comes from within and doesn’t rely on collective action the way a full scale economic and/or legal system revolution would.



Figure 5-2. Spotlight.

Doc pauses to look at the ground during a performance.

Just as this freedom does not absolve my participants of the oppression they face living in a society permeated by the white racial frame, this freedom also does not absolve them of the many fears and sacrifices that come with monetizing passion-labor. Lawrence’s biggest fear is connected with his pursuit of authenticity:

We have this version of ourselves, right? This perfect version of ourselves that we interact with in our minds, but we only experience in varying degrees. Like, sometimes you are that person embodied. You are walking and you are the best version of yourself in that moment. And the other times—when you are so far away from that person—and it’s just like you’re looking at that person, and you’re reaching for them, and you’re like, ‘where are you?’...That’s definitely the fear. It’s like that gap that everyone has between who they are and who they wanna be? [My biggest fear is] that I never close that gap.

Lawrence explains that he has very publicly proclaimed that he believes he can be his truest self and succeed in his career, and he’s concerned that if he fails to be his most authentic self he will also fail in proving to others that you can be true to yourself and succeed in your career. Many of my participants have similar fears about career failures. Because they have taken such risks and been doubted by so many people, they feel that it is their duty to succeed. Jace explains:

I feel like I can’t—because I am young and I am Black and I am pursuing a career that’s already shrouded in so many stigmas, I have to succeed.... Not necessarily that I’m trying to prove anyone wrong. But I don’t want to prove them right.

Jace feels the pressure to defy the stereotypes associated with young Black men and rappers. Many equate his choice to pursue rapping with a choice to embody a stereotype, and he does not want to prove them right.

There is another, very noteworthy, pressure that my participants express. Because they are creators, and rely heavily on their fan bases for the success of their careers, many of them are very concerned with “staying relevant.” Their income is not guaranteed. Their entire career can disappear at any moment. Nuri explains:

I’m always constantly thinking about if I’m good enough, if my art is good enough.... You want to be able to remain relevant as an artist, no matter what type of art that you do. And you want to be able to continue to support yourself doing the type of art that you like to do. So I’m always like in the back of my mind thinking about if my work is good enough. Am I growing in my art, you

know, am I doing enough to improve myself?... It's something I think about all the time. But I try to find a way to make my art enjoyable nonetheless.

Nuri constantly feels the pressure of maintaining a career that is supported by individuals—he knows he must stay relevant and please his fans to continue to sustain himself through his passion-labor. Stevo also talks about the pressure to stay relevant when pursuing passion-labor: “In hip hop, a lot of money is coming from shows and clubs and if you can't stay relevant with a hit, it's hard to go get that money.” Similarly, Chris explains that his biggest fear is that “this shit will just go away and our ass will be out on the motherfucking street.... I don't ever wanna go back.” Yes, wage labor is alienating in many ways. However, it does afford some comforts, and these comforts are what keep so many people coming back to positions that exploit their labor and drain their soul—the guaranteed income that usually just barely covers their expenses.

When I ask about the sacrifices he has made, Doc says, “we could be actually working at somebody's desk earning a steady wage.” He knows that he sacrifices comforts in pursuit of his passion-labor. My participants bravely choose to leave these comforts behind to engage in their passion-labor, and they gain many freedoms by doing so—but at the expense of several rather large burdens that should not be ignored. Furthermore, my participants are not fully free within their pursuit of passion-labor. They carry a significant burden to remain relevant to consumers. They must produce creations—and make them available for consumption—frequently, and those creations must be vulnerable enough to garner connections with many individual supporters. While they have the control to decide when and how to do so, they do have to rely on being constantly consumed by others to remain relevant. This constant consumption is not unlike the experiences of their ancestors whose bodies and labor have been exploited for centuries.

Doc details a rather large sacrifice that comes with pursuing passion-labor, which could allude to why many of my participants feel such pressure to stay relevant and garner long-term success in their careers:

I think at this point I sacrificed any chance of ever getting a regular job. Or, I'm gonna have to start from a really low point. Because for one, I got like a huge gap on my resume at this point. So even if I try to go back they gon' be like, 'so what was you doin' at this time?' 'Well, I was being a rapper.' 'Uh, we'll call you back.'

Doc understands that this time spent pursuing his passion-labor exists outside of traditional capitalistic career endeavors. He knows that detaching from wage labor for this extended period of time hinders him from ever returning to this system of labor in a successful way. Jace echoes Doc's thought:

It's not even that I didn't want to finish school. I liked college way more than high school and I learned a lot. There were a lot of things that I enjoyed about college, and I just realized that I couldn't do both.... I couldn't spend time doing that and not devoting more time to the other thing to make it fruitful.... I realized that was gonna have to be a sacrifice, which is also a sacrifice to an alternate future where this doesn't work out and then I'm ass out of a post-secondary education.

Like Doc, Jace recognizes that his pursuit of passion-labor exists in direct opposition to his engagement in the traditional labor market. These sacrifices further exemplify the reasons why these acts of resistance deserve recognition. They certainly do not come without consequences, and they have no safety net.

Another burden that my participants take on in pursuit of passion-labor is the sacrifice of time. With wage labor, you clock in, work a set number of hours, and clock out. Because the success of monetizing their passion-labor rests largely on the work that they put into it, my participants work far more than most wage laborers. Sage explains:

You work harder. You work way harder.... Other people, they go to work like 8 hours a day.... They come home, and they turn their brain off and watch [television] or something, until it's time to go to work the next day. And on the weekend, they don't work. They just do whatever they wanna do. They have time to do whatever they wanna do.... But I work every day, all day. Even when I'm not drawing some shit, I'm thinking about some shit, or I'm stressin' because I'm not doing something I should be doing. It's just constant pressure on yourself because you know...if you workin' for yourself you have to do all the shit you're supposed to do or you're not gonna get paid. It's just a sacrifice of security, if anything.

For Sage, and the rest of my participants, it is extremely hard to set a boundary between work and play/rest. They understand that their success rests largely in the sheer amount of work hours they engage in, and they have a very hard time taking time off. Many of my participants explain how this sacrifice of time has detrimental effects on their relationships with family, friends, and significant others. Stevo claims that a big sacrifice is how the increased demands of his time, especially early on, impact how much time he can spend with his daughter:

I knew those were understandable sacrifices—if I wanna do this, I gotta sacrifice not seeing my daughter today...[That] was the worst for me. I didn't care about dropping out of school. I ain't care my cell phone was off. All that, I could deal with.

The sacrifice of time with his daughter was far greater than any other sacrifice Stevo made throughout the process of monetizing his passion-labor. He knows that he cannot get those moments back, but ultimately feels that his sacrifices will provide his daughter with a brighter future.

These fears and sacrifices, paired with the awareness that they are still subjected to the myriad systems of oppression present in our society, show that in no way do my participants feel as though they have fully achieved freedom. Rather, it appears that they strive to achieve the fullest sense of freedom available to them under these systems—and they will continue to

work little by little to garner tiny bits of freedom for their bodies and spirits. Often, revolution is painted as a collective, violent uprising. Perhaps there is a different path to freedom. Perhaps the path to freedom is akin to picking flowers one at a time during a long walk through a sparse, dry field. The beauty of the bouquet you're amassing doesn't negate the sun beating down on you, the dust in your nose, or the tingle of thirst in your throat—but it does make it worth enduring those things.

5.2 A MOST IMPERFECT FREEDOM

Not only are my participants limited in the scope of the freedom they can garner by employing these counter-frames, they also limit and restrict the freedoms of others as they pursue their own freedom. The hardest thing for me to reconcile in this entire project—being a white woman who is a creator, and having many friends who are Black women creators here in Atlanta—is the claim that something so heteropatriarchal and capitalistic could and should be viewed as an act of resistance. However, it is important to note the origin of these problems—for they most certainly did not come from within the creative community here in Atlanta.

Capitalism has always been white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, and imperialist (hooks 1981)—these facets are solidified in the white racial frame. Just as my participants do not seek to dismantle capitalism in their acts of resistance, they also do not seek to dismantle heteropatriarchy. In fact, they do not seek to dismantle white supremacy either—they simply wish to remove themselves from its grasp as much as possible. They do the same with capitalism—in their efforts to detach from wage labor and pursue a more genuine, alchemical capitalism through the monetization of their passion-labor, they attempt to distance

themselves from the confines of capitalism as much as possible while still living within a capitalistic economy.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of my participants do not take that same stance with heteropatriarchy. While their careers are significantly aided by the labor and support of women and queer men, they often do not reciprocate that same labor and support to the women and queer men in the creative community who are also in pursuit of monetizing their passion labor. They accept assistance from women and queer men freely—in many forms. They sleep on their couches, benefit from their often-unpaid labor, are fulfilled by their emotional support, and even grow their fan-base by creating artistic works inspired by their spiritual and physical beauty. Largely—not exclusively—my participants do not reciprocate this support. The women and queer men in the Atlanta arts community are doing amazing work, but it occurs almost entirely while simultaneously being excluded by many of the men. As bell hooks (2012:72) explains, “the males, no matter their color, saw the world of cool as masculine. In the world of cool, females were mere backup singers.” The fact that my participants’ pursuit of freedom has many problems may lead some to hesitate to even refer to them as acts of liberation. However, there has never been an act of resistance that was not, in some capacity, problematic. Robin D.G. Kelley (2002:xi) writes:

Communists, black nationalists, Third World liberation movements—all left us stimulating and even visionary sketches of what the future could be, but they have also been complicit in acts of violence and oppression, through either their actions or their silence. No one’s hands are completely clean.

Few would dare say that the Civil Rights Movement was completely useless because it often centered heterosexual Black men, or promoted respectability politics—and rightfully so. While we should recognize the successes of imperfect acts of resistance, we should not accept

this as the standard. By critically examining these acts of resistance in all their truth, perhaps we can find new, more inclusive paths to freedom.

5.3 A NEW LOOK AT COUNTER-FRAMING

In his brief discussion of counter-framing, Joe Feagin (2010) paints these acts as a unidirectional response to the white racial frame. Ironically, this shows that Feagin himself views these acts through the white racial frame. As I examined the meaning of the counter-framing acts employed by my participants, I found them to be much more nuanced. Like many forms of Black cultural and knowledge productions (Collins 2000), these counter-frames are employed as a dialogical conversation with the white racial frame. They are spontaneous, adaptable, sometimes reactionary and others anticipatory. Stevo speaks of Atlanta's Black cultural resilience, but his words can be extended to my participants' resilience in their counter-framing efforts as well:

The way we are able to reinvent and still stay true is so crazy to me...Like, okay, y'all gonna take this? We'll just do something else... When something is taken from you and you're still able to do you through that and be more successful...that is what I would say is cultural resilience...[Black cultural production in] Atlanta is...probably the most copied, so the fact that we're still relevant and being that copied, is resilient. They way we've been copied, we should be over with. There shouldn't be any Atlanta...but the fact that we're still the front force...that's the prime example of resilience...We just create something new...Time and time again we either prove that we're the best ones doin' it or, if you prove that you're better, we go do something else that forces you to switch, or that you can't compete with. And like I said, that's just another shout out to our resilience and our bravery in *being able to be true to ourselves and constantly innovate over and over again.*

The acts of counter-framing and resistance employed by my participants are much more complex than the understanding of counter-framing Feagin (2010) presents. My very small, very homogenous sample likely represents a water droplet in the ocean of acts of resistance

employed by Black Americans. These acts are a threat to the established systems of oppression and they are not taken lightly. As scholars, we owe them awareness, deference, and thoughtful examination. Perhaps by doing so we might enable and inspire others to start picking their own freedom flowers—or even, as in my case, find some freedom ourselves.

5.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The acts of counter-framing that are highlighted throughout this project are but a tiny portion of the vast amount of counter-framing practiced by Black people across the United States. Future research should examine the acts of counter-framing performed by different groups of Black people across the United States and around the globe. As there are many cultural similarities across the diaspora (Collins 2000), it is my guess that there will also be many similarities in the counter-framing strategies throughout the diaspora as well. There are also many people writing on the ways in which Black people navigate the oppressions they face without using the language of the white racial frame. Much of this work could exist already, without utilizing the language of “counter-framing.” It is important that we, as academics, not attempt to reinvent the wheel. Instead, we should focus on including the knowledge production that is already done—perhaps by people who have historically been excluded from these white academic spaces—and insist that this work has academic value.

As counter-framing occurs as a conversation with the white racial frame, further research should be done to determine the ways in which the white racial frame is impacted, changed, and damaged by counter-framing attacks. Further, it would be interesting to examine the ways in which the white racial frame resists and reacts to acts of counter-framing. The

dialogical nature of these two competing overarching frames absolutely needs further examination.

Personally, I am very interested in the ways in which the young Black women and queer Black men in Atlanta employ counter-frames. Many of these people are also my creator-friends, and I know that they engage in acts of resistance daily in a similar effort to protect their spirits and bodies from the oppression imparted by the white racial frame. I also see how they are excluded from receiving many of the supports offered by the creative community here, yet often continue to pour support into all creators here in this community. I have a feeling there is an even more nuanced, brilliant, beautiful form of resistance manifesting itself in these individuals and I would love to explore that further.

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