
Black Language, Black Rhetoric, and Multimodal Storytelling in J. Cole's Music

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1.0 Introduction

When it comes to the languages and cultures of the next generation, music is central to their communication and connection with each other. Specifically, hip-hop music has become a defining piece of this young generation. The now multibillion-dollar industry that is hip-hop has evolved into the most popular genre in the entire music industry. C. Keith Harrison and Jay Coakley in "Hip-Hop and Sport: An Introduction: Reflections on Culture, Language, and Identity" point out that "in 2017, hip-hop music was the most prominent genre in the music industry according to Nielson Media, accounting for 24.5% of all music consumed" (166). Artists within the genre have developed a form of art and storytelling through lyrical and musical production that appeals to so many Americans, especially the Black community, as many rappers have African American and/or Caribbean roots. The music and culture created through hip-hop has been accepted by a large population of young white Americans, too. Cecilia Cutler's article "Yorkville Crossing: White teens, Hip-hop and African American English" highlights this idea. Cutler's research follows the life of a young white teenager who has adopted a "cultural allegiance" with the Black community. Cutler observes that, "white appropriation of Black cultural forms is certainly not a new phenomenon, and the language, the music and fashions of Black culture have long provided a source of inspiration for whites and others in the US and around the world" (439). The popularity of rap music across all walks of life is quite evident, and Black language is at the heart of this popular entertainment and culture. Many scholars have already considered what exactly constitutes Black language and its relationship with hip-hop and rap music. The next section of my research project will provide some additional background research and highlight the scholarly conversation on this topic of the use of Black language in hip-hop. Using the research of those who have come before me, I will continue the analysis of the language of hip-hop through the music of one of today's greatest names in the industry: J. Cole.

1.1 Background of Hip-Hop

The connection and community that hip-hop music provides can be traced back to its language roots. Hip-hop music originated as an artistic form of expression by African Americans, and

therefore, the language of Black America goes hand in hand with the language and culture of hip-hop music. African American Language (AAL) also known as Ebonics, African American Vernacular English, and Black language among other names, has evolved into many different dialects. One of them is “Hip-Hop Nation Language” (HHNL), the language of Hip-hop Nation—“the ‘borderless’ composite of hip-hop communities worldwide” (Alim, “Hip-Hop Nation Language” 74). The Hip-Hop Nation is comprised of hip-hop artists, fans, and anyone who participates and consumes the culture. HHNL was coined by professor H. Samy Alim in his article “Hip-Hop Nation Language.” In this article he describes the close connection between African American culture and hip-hop culture. Alim derives the name of HHNL from “Nation Language.” He builds on Kamau Brathwaite who defines “Nation language” as “the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model. English it may be in terms, of terms of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm, and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English” (qtd. in Alim 74). Building on this definition, Alim shows the relationship between HHNL and AAL. He also develops ten tenets of HHNL, which I have paraphrased in Table 1 below.

HHNL finds its roots in AAL.
HHNL is only one of the many languages African Americans speak.
HHNL is widely spoken, used, and transformed across America.
HHNL has its own unique grammatical and phonological characteristics.
HHNL is best described as a synthesis of verbal, artistic, and musical expressions.
HHNL includes attitudes about language and its use.
HHNL is central to the identity of the Hip-Hop Nation (HHN).
HHNL has regional variations throughout America.
HHNL’s fundamental aspect is its centrality to the lives of its members.
HHNL is connected to the sociopolitical circumstances that affect the Hip-Hop Nation.

Table 1: Paraphrased Tenets of Hip-Hop Nation Language (“Hip-Hop Nation” 76-78)

HHNL differs from Standard American English (SAE) because it is shaped by the social norms and cultural aspects of predominantly Black communities. Alim refers to this as the “sociopolitical matrix” of HHNL, which has to do with the social and political life of urban America, home to many African Americans characterized by poverty, police brutality and mass incarceration of Black people. This link reveals how much “HHNL is rooted in African American Language (AAL) and communicative practices” (76) instead of SAE. This divergence from language norms is a key theme of hip-hop that will continue to be elaborated on throughout this essay. Alim touches on these ideas even further in his article “Street Conscious Copula Variation in the Hip-Hop Nation.” Alim stresses awareness of street culture and its inclusion in many rappers’ music because it highlights one of the key purposes rappers have in creating their music, and that is to represent the broader experiences of the African American community. Author Enver Kazić stresses this as well in his article “A Sociolinguistic Study of Hip-Hop. AAVE Features in Songs by Tupac Shakur and Eminem.” Kazić writes that “what has also been a crucial part of African-American identity in the past few decades is the public discourse in Hip-hop music, comprising major historical and social events that have been fundamental to the

shaping of African-American nationhood, identity, and citizenship". Just like Alim, Kazić emphasizes the synthesis of social and political events that make up the sociopolitical matrix of HHNL.

Geneva Smitherman discusses this unique connection between language and community in her article "'The Chain Remain the Same': Communicative Practices in the Hip-Hop Nation," noting that "rap music is rooted in the Black oral tradition of tonal semantics, narrativizing. . . and other communicative practices" (4). Smitherman dives into the culture of the African language that rap originated from. She focuses on the oral communicative practices of rap and how they are rooted in surviving African traditions. She writes that, "the rapper is a postmodern African griot, the verbally gifted storyteller and cultural historian in traditional African society" (4). This continuity in tradition connects the language and rhetoric of modern music. It is with this connection that both Smitherman and Alim emphasize the community and culture behind the rap genre and how it's much more than just a popular form of entertainment. Through this connection, Black language in hip-hop includes the grammatical features of African American Vernacular English. Madeleine Magnusson in her research article "'Not Perfect Grammar, Always Perfect Timing': African American Vernacular English in Black and White Rap Lyrics," identifies several grammatical features of AAL like the "invariant *be*" (or habitual *be*), the omission of third person singular, "-s", and "copula deletion." Similarly, in their articles, Alim and Smitherman note that these grammatical features carry over from AAL to hip-hop. These numerous grammatical features—habitual *be*, zero copula, omission of plural "-s" in third person singular, and alternate forms of expressing future tense using "gon"—will be analyzed in this article using J. Cole's music.

1.2 The Mission

According to Smitherman, the mission of rap music is to "disturb the peace" (5). Smitherman addresses how a large part of rap music is its responsiveness to real world problems in communities throughout the world, specifically referring to the "conditions of joblessness, poverty, and disempowerment" (5) of most African Americans. Rap music is also characterized as a rebellion against the power of white America over Black people, which includes the long history of enslavement and oppression that continues to this day, just in new forms. Similarly, Marcyliena Morgan and Dionne Bennett write about this modern role of rap in their research article "Hip-Hop & the Global Imprint of a Black Cultural Form," noting that, "as hip-hop has grown in global popularity, its defiant and self-defining voices have been both multiplied and amplified as they challenge conventional concepts of identity and nationhood" (177). Morgan and Bennett reinforce the idea of challenging and disturbing the conventional ideas of English and American culture. Rap music has a moral message of finding peace and direction in the chaos of the surrounding world, and it's this message that inspires the Black youth of America to improve the lives of those in their communities. As Smitherman writes, "for contemporary Blacks. . . the chain remains the same as in enslavement" (6), so while the oppression may not appear to be the same as slavery, the Black community still experiences inequality and oppression in today's world. Therefore, it is in the pain and suffering in the face of oppression that the Black community finds common ground and community in hip-hop and rap culture.

Alim also reinforces this idea of rap music disturbing the peace. Alim first hits on the fact that many hip-hop and rap artists "are insightful examiners of the sociopolitical matrix within which HHNL operates" ("Hip-Hop Nation" 78). He highlights that HHNL is a form of communication that

African American rappers find identity in. The words “communication” and “community” both have the same roots and meaning “to come together,” and that’s exactly what rap music allows the Black community and family to do. They unify in strength against the oppression they have faced and continue to face. Alim marvels at how there is so much that happens with the sociolinguistics in rap, describing how “the HHN continues to ‘flip the script’ (reverse the power of the dominant culture)” (78), just like how Smitherman points out the mission is to disturb the “peace,” referring to the dominant power of white America and their attempts to censor both the language and culture of African Americans. This rhetoric of challenging the status quo is a crucial part of hip-hop and rap music, especially with the current young generation, and it will be explored in detail in this essay.

Overall, there is evidently a large amount of research that has already been conducted on the language of Hip-hop in relation to Black language, but there isn’t as much focus on the specific tracks and music of modern hip-hop artists. Much research has been conducted on the language and linguistics of older rappers, but the hip-hop music industry has just recently become the most popular genre of music, with 2017 being the year it debuted at number one. Additionally, social media and new technology have transformed the way artists present their music, creating new ways that listeners experience the stories told through their music. Hip-hop artists and producers like J. Cole have developed a new standard of music presentation with the use of music videos to further their artistic expression and the messages in their songs. This multimodal aspect of the presentation of their music adds a whole new niche to the conversation about the use of language in hip-hop music, and that is because language isn’t just defined by words. Language includes the visual, auditory, gestural, oral, and textual features that all make up the newer musical productions of our time. Therefore, my research will be conducted to focus on a rapper of this time period and to show how he uses Black language and rhetoric in his own music and presentation, including both his song lyrics and his music videos. I put a good amount of thought into which artist to study, taking into consideration both the lyrical talent and masterful production of multiple artists. Important criteria for my selection included popularity, lyrical mastery, and genuine creativity in musical production. My top three choices included J. Cole, Drake, and Kendrick Lamar, who were all worthy of the selection. What it ultimately came down to was which artist best represents street awareness through music video production. This is why I chose J. Cole.

2.0 Methods

Jermaine Lamarr Cole, commonly known as J. Cole, was raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Throughout the course of his musical career, which began around 2007, he has won 8 BET Hip-Hop Awards, a *Billboard* Music Award for Top Rap Album (2014 *Forrest Hills Drive*), and a Grammy Award for Best Rap Song (“A Lot”). Cole is loved by many for his genuine style of rapping. In this essay, I will dive into how exactly he uses Black language and Black rhetoric in his music. I also analyze how he uses multimodal rhetoric to amass such a popularity among the young adults of America. To understand how he uses Black language in his song lyrics, I analyze grammatical features specific to the African American Language. In terms of Black rhetorical strategies, I focus on storytelling (or narrativizing). Smitherman explains how “*Narrativizing* is a characteristic feature of general Black discursive practices” and that “everyday conversational talk may be rendered as a ‘story’” (12). J. Cole uses storytelling throughout much of his music.

My analysis of Cole's use of AAL grammatical features and rhetorical strategies shows how he continues the tradition of representing hip-hop culture and artistic production using Black rhetorical practices. Cole's multimodal presentation and rhetoric is analyzed in two of his famous music videos to demonstrate how he realizes the themes of street-consciousness, Black authenticity and cultural appropriation. This is the new and important part of my research because it expands on what has already been researched and focuses on the current multimodal lens that we all see the world through, especially during this time period in which we have all been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This perspective of music videos and digital media shapes the way the younger generation perceives the world. Therefore, understanding the use of Black language in the Hip-hop music industry means understanding its impact on those that watch and listen to it.

Specifically, I will be conducting a rhetorical analysis of his songs and music videos, analyzing how the popular rapper uses Black language and rhetoric in his work. Much of the impact Cole has had on the young adult generation comes from his both unique and traditional use of language and Black rhetoric in his music that attracts classical rap lovers along with new age hip-hop fanatics. Therefore, breaking down how Cole goes about this artistic process will show how he is continuing the culture of Hip-hop, making a name for himself in the industry, and impacting the lives of his listeners.

While previous research has focused on the lyrical styles of older generations of rappers, this essay will focus on the newer multimodal style used by J. Cole and many other rappers. This newer style incorporates storytelling rhetoric specific to the current problems or concerns in society, reflecting the street conscious attitude most rappers use in their music, especially Cole, who has prided himself on staying genuine in his work. These newer artistic styles of expression are evident throughout many pieces of Cole's music, so for the purpose of keeping this essay concise, I will only be analyzing lyrics from two of his songs and conducting a multimodal analysis of two of his music videos. The lyrics have been analyzed based on the framework set out by Alim and Smitherman on the common features of AAL and tenets of HHNL. The grammatical features of Black language discussed include habitual be, zero copula, omission of "-s" plural in third person singular, and expression of future tense using "gon." The rhetorical strategy of storytelling, or narrativizing, discussed by Smitherman will govern my multimodal analysis of Cole's visual and auditory presentation. Lyrics from the songs in the music videos will also be included to provide a better perspective of the larger themes that are explored.

My results show that Cole's music includes many of these same features and communicative strategies that have been outlined, so there is most definitely a continuity in the motivations for this new era of rap. To reflect this continuity, I have selected "Change" from his fourth studio album *4 Your Eyes Only* (2016) along with his recent single "Snow on tha Bluff," released in June of 2020, as the songs to analyze. Both of these tracks, though from different time periods in J. Cole's career, highlight his attention to detail that he is so well known for. This self-awareness has remained a key part of the rapper's mindset, and that's because rappers like Cole are staying true to their roots, rapping about what is on their minds, much of which has to do with the struggles they've experienced as a part of the Black community. Adversity is something they can all rally around, so it's a key theme in the hip-hop community.

In addition to the lyrics from those two songs, I have selected two music videos to analyze because of their reflection of Cole's "street conscious" rapping style. J. Cole is well known for

producing authentic and meaningful videos for many of his songs that reflect either real stories or his thoughts about problems he and the Black community have faced. First, I have selected Cole's music video with TLC for his song "Crooked Smile" from his second studio album, *Born Sinner* (2013), and second, I've selected his music video for his famous 2019 single "MIDDLE CHILD", which was featured on Dreamville Records's compilation album, *Revenge of the Dreamers III*. Both videos show the genuine nature of Cole's music, with "Crooked Smile" dedicated to an incident of police brutality, and "MIDDLE CHILD" showcasing Cole's true feelings about his place in the world of hip-hop. Between the lyrics and the videos, the overall goal of this essay is to decipher exactly how J. Cole is presenting his music using Black language and how he uses multimodal Black rhetoric to tell his story, connect with the Black community, and inspire his listeners.

3.0 Results & Analysis

3.1 Grammatical and Linguistic Features

The first key aspect of J. Cole's music is the linguistic style he uses, which mirrors that of the many rappers that have come before him, many of which are mentioned in H. Samy Alim's "Hip-hop Nation Language" (2015) and Geneva Smitherman's "The Chain Remain the Same': Communicative Practices in the Hip-hop Nation" (1997). These two sources from the literature review serve as the framework for my own analysis of Cole's music, just as the two authors have done to analyze the rhetorical strategies and linguistic practices of older rappers. One key grammatical feature found in Cole's music is "habitual be" (also referred to as the *aspectual be*), which is used to indicate some type of state or action that is still continuous or happening. This grammatical form, which is commonly used by those in the African American community, can be seen in J. Cole's "Change":

As we speak I'm in peace, no longer scared to die
Most n***** don't believe in God and so they terrified
It's either that or they be fearing they gon' go to Hell
Asking the father for forgiveness, God, I'm overwhelmed
("Change," 2016, by J. Cole, Dreamville Records)

In the third line of this stanza Cole uses the "habitual be," when he raps "they be fearing." This feature of AAL is used for recurring actions, and it's found throughout much of the artists and speakers of HHNL. This stanza showcases another common grammatical feature in HHNL and AAL: *zero copula*, or copula absence. Zero copula refers to the absence of the verb "to be," commonly taking the forms of "is" and "are." In the first line of the stanza from "Change" Cole raps "they terrified," which when looked at from a grammatically correct perspective, is missing the verb "are" after the pronoun "they." This, however, is a key feature of the linguistics of AAL, and so its use in HHNL connects rap to the Black community. Another grammatical example of AAL found in this stanza of Cole's music is the style of future tense in AAL and HHNL. This feature serves as a replacement for the phrase "going to" and, as Smitherman explains, is pronounced as "go" with a vowel sound closer to the pronunciation of "gone." Smitherman makes it clear that "in AAL, future tense is often indicated with *go*, a nasalized vowel sound close to, but not identical with, [Edited American Language] EAL's 'gone,' and not the same as colloquial EAL's 'gonna'" (10). It's usually spelled as "gon" in rap lyrics,

and that is the case for this instance in Cole's music. In the third line Cole raps, "... they gon go to Hell," which also employs phonological feature of AAL's future tense pronunciation.

Again, we see continuity in the use of common features between AAL and HHNL that communicate rap lyrics in the same way African American communities communicate with one another. These features all reflect the idea of resistance that the Black community finds common ground in. Notice that those words, "community" and "communicate," have the same root word "commune", which means come together, and that's the common goal of hip-hop music. Cole rejects the domination of the higher power and prefers to associate himself with those that are less fortunate and in the communities that aren't as well off. This connection is key because it enables him to speak personally with his listeners by connecting with them on an emotional level.

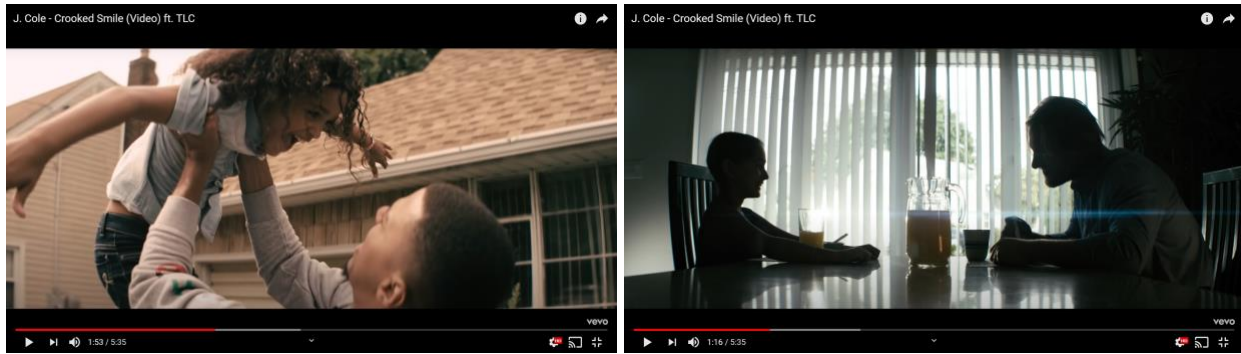
Another syntactical feature found in Cole's music that reflects the studies of AAL syntax and phonology in hip-hop music is the absence of the plural suffix "-s" in third person singular expressions. In this case the suffix "-s" is dropped, as seen in J. Cole's "Snow on tha Bluff":

She mad at these crackers, she mad at these capitalists, mad at these murder police
She mad at my n*****, she mad at our ignorance, she wear her heart on her sleeve
She mad at the celebrities, lowkey I be thinkin' she talkin' 'bout me
(“Snow on tha Bluff,” 2020, by J. Cole, Dreamville Records)

In the second line of this excerpt from the song lyrics, Cole raps, "... she wear her heart on her sleeve," which wouldn't be grammatically correct in SAE because of how "wear" should have the "-s" prefix to cooperate with the singular pronoun "she." This is another example of an AAL feature used in HHNL which bridges these two communities and their languages. This excerpt also reiterates the already mentioned "habitual be" and *zero copula* patterns. The repetitive use of "She mad" in this song is another example of the copula absence pattern used in the Black and hip-hop community, and the "habitual be" feature is found when Cole raps, "... I be thinkin' she talkin' 'bout me." Overall, these grammatical and linguistic features highlight the ongoing use of key AAL features within the world of rap and reinforce the continued connection between HHNL and AAL as well as older and newer music.

3.2 Multimodal Storytelling

The first J. Cole music video I selected is that of his 2013 track "Crooked Smile," featuring TLC. The video depicts the lives of two families, one of which J. Cole himself plays the role of father. Towards the beginning, we see Cole and the father figure of the other family performing their morning routines, which are very similar. This similarity between their lives is developed and highlighted multiple times throughout the video. Below, I include screenshots from the video that highlight another similarity. Both fathers are shown smiling and joyful in the presence of their daughters, emphasizing the equality between each of their lives that changes and serves as a theme in the story (Figures 1 & 2).



Figures 1 & 2: “J. Cole - Crooked Smile (Video) ft. TLC.” *Youtube*, uploaded by J. Cole, 18 Sep. 2013, <https://youtu.be/fzzMOMkjm8A>

Before his daughter arrives, Cole is seen mowing the lawn while the words “ANYWHERE IN AMERICA” appear on the screen. This text is included as an appeal to all of America, showing that this life and story is relatable for so many people. This connection is also developed throughout the course of the story that is told through the video. Though the lyrics of the song don’t exactly match up with the visual story we get in the video, there is one line that resonates with the message of the story. At the beginning of the video, the song is muffled, but the lyrics become clearer when we hear Cole say “We ain’t picture perfect, but we worth the picture still.” This line connects the name of the song to the deeper meaning of the video in that a crooked smile isn’t perfect and the lives of African Americans aren’t perfect, but we are still worth the picture because our imperfections do not define us. Our true colors and peace of mind are what define us. This first clearly spoken line subtly bridges the gap between the unrelated song and music video, and it furthers the trend of Cole’s genuine style.

The crucial part of the story told through the video is revealed when we see the father figure played by Cole hiding marijuana in his shoes, while at the same time the other father figure, a white DEA agent, prepares for his day of work. We realize that Cole is a drug-dealer, and that the DEA agent is planning to crack down on the dealing. Cole uses this scenario to illustrate the reality for many low-income communities across America, as selling drugs is a common way to make easy money but is also a very dangerous business. He beautifully depicts the reality behind this urban American lifestyle that stems from a father simply wanting to provide for his family. The danger we all fear in this situation is ultimately what we see unfold in the video’s story, as the DEA agent and his police crew infiltrate Cole’s home having heard of his drug stash, and then accidentally shoot and kill his daughter in the dark when an officer mistakes her for a hostile.

The tragedy depicted in this music video plays with the emotions of nearly everyone who watches, but it especially hits home with the African American communities across America ridden with crime and violence. Just as Smitherman describes “the United States Ghetto (USG) [as] a hotbed of unrest, dispossession, and powerlessness”—a hotbed for African Americans in which “there is no ‘peace’” (“The Chain” 4)—Cole captures the struggle for true equality in the Black community. Those that have lost family members to the gun violence by citizens and police in Black communities are reminded of that hurt when they see Cole in custody mourning the loss of his daughter as they carry her dead body out of the house, depicted in the background of the screenshot below (Figure 3). The DEA agent is also seen in the middle ground, devastated by the tragedy.



Figure 3: “J. Cole - Crooked Smile (Video) ft. TLC.” *Youtube*, uploaded by J. Cole, 18 Sep. 2013, <https://youtu.be/fzzMOMkjm8A>

During this scene we hear the “Star-Spangled Banner” playing slowly in the background, showing that this truly is America. For white America, the anthem is a symbol of triumph and freedom, whereas for Black America, it stirs up a dark past of enslavement and suffering, much like the contrast between the white family and Black family we see in the video. This is the reality for many African American families subject to gun violence. The beginning of the video shows the ideal America with the mirrored images of both families bright and happy, but the end of the video showcases the dark reality of America and its lack of equality and freedom for the African American family, hence the irony of the “Star-Spangled Banner,” which is supposed to represent freedom for all Americans. The music plays until we see a flashback of Cole’s daughter and the DEA agent’s daughter sitting in school together as friends (Figure 4), another hint towards the should-be equal life of the two families that is instead marred by police brutality and the fragility of Black lives in America. The music and visual flashbacks memorialize the life of the daughter and represent the modern-day street consciousness that Black lives are not guaranteed in this America.

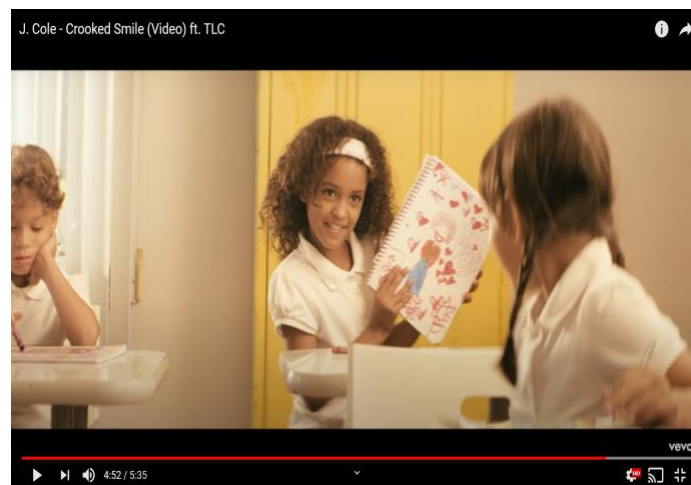


Figure 4: “J. Cole - Crooked Smile (Video) ft. TLC.” *Youtube*, uploaded by J. Cole, 18 Sep. 2013, <https://youtu.be/fzzMOMkjm8A>

The video finishes with a dedication to Aiyana Stanley Jones, showing that this video was based on a real story of a young African American girl killed by police. The last frame reads, “AND PLEASE RECONSIDER YOUR WAR ON DRUGS,” calling out the American government’s reckless handling of law enforcement on drug-dealing. Overall, the video showcases the violence in the communities of America that has risen out of the dangerous lives many African Americans are forced to live because of the structural racism of the dominant culture in America. Researchers refer to this dominance when discussing the overarching role of rap music in the black ghetto, for example, when Smitherman refers to rap music as “a resisting discourse, a set of communicative practices that constitute a text of resistance against White America’s racism and its Euro-centric cultural dominance” (“The Chain” 7). The video also showcases Cole’s street conscious attitude in his multimodal presentation of music. He uses his platform as a means of making others woke to the reality of police brutality and calls for change of the cultural dominance.

The second video I selected for analysis is Cole’s music video for his 2019 hit single “MIDDLE CHILD”. The video and song lyrics depict Cole as being caught in between two generations: old rap and new rap. He uses visual rhetoric to emphasize this feeling of being the middle child, hence the name of the track. Cole is centered on the screen in most of the scenes to further this idea, as shown in the screenshots below. Figure 5 shows Cole standing in between two groups of people. The people to the left are younger, representing the newer generation of rap, and the people to the right are older, representing the older generation of rap. The fact that Cole feels stuck in between these two groups shows his love for and loyalty to the classical style of older hip-hop and rap while also trying to pave a new path for and inspire the newer generation of artists.



Figures 5: Scene from “Middle Child” music video (Retrieved from “J. Cole – MIDDLE CHILD” YouTube Video)

After that scene, the video transitions to an eerie scene with Cole between the same groups of people in a morgue (see Figure 6) on top of red clay, which covers their shoes, creating what appears to be fake red bottoms. The shot also shows a tattoo on one of the dead bodies that reads “Loyalty,” ironically symbolizing how their loyalty is now dead because it was fake, just like the red bottoms, alluding to the popular and expensive shoes. This theme of Cole’s creativity vs. the ingenuity of others is central to the message of the video and is developed using visual rhetoric.



Figure 5: Scene from “Middle Child” music video (Retrieved from “J. Cole – MIDDLE CHILD” *YouTube* Video)

Later in the video, Cole is seen sitting on a shopping cart moving down the middle of an aisle in a grocery store. At the beginning of this scene, Cole raps, “I’m dead in the middle of two generations; I’m little bro and big bro all at once,” which refers to the title of the song. Just as Cole sits in the middle of the aisle, he sits in the middle of the newer and older generations of the rap game. In the grocery store, Cole doesn’t buy anything, but in the first scene (see Figure 6), a woman in camouflage is seen picking up a container of juice from the aisle to buy. Juice doesn’t have to be just a physical item – it can also be defined as energy or power, which one would use to measure influence or clout. Therefore, the young woman in camo purchasing the juice symbolically shows how many wrongfully try to exploit the hard work and mimic the hunting of others for their own clout. This visual depicts Cole’s view of the false hunting nature of the younger generation of artists trying to make a name for themselves.



Figure 6: “J. Cole - MIDDLE CHILD.” *Youtube*, uploaded by J. Cole, 25 Feb. 2019, <https://youtu.be/WILNIXZr2oc>

The woman in this scene is on the left side of Cole, which happens to be the side he points to when he says the words “little bro” in the second line of the verse. Just like the young and old generations on the red carpet, the items in the aisle reflect the generational contrast on each side of Cole. On the right side of the aisle – which we can infer represents the older generation, as Cole points

at this side of the aisle when he says the words “big bro” – we see a variety of products, including toppings, sauces, and coffee. Opposed to the pre-made and short-lived nature of juice, these store items symbolize the older generation because of their more creative, enhancing, and longer-lasting characteristics. In this image, Cole’s characterization of the younger generation of rappers being more exploitive of power and less creative contrasts with his view of the older generation being less concerned about popularity and more stylistically creative. The symbolism of this scene furthers both the theme of creative vs. ingenuine that Cole is calling out and the story he tells of his position and purpose in life, specifically within the rap game.

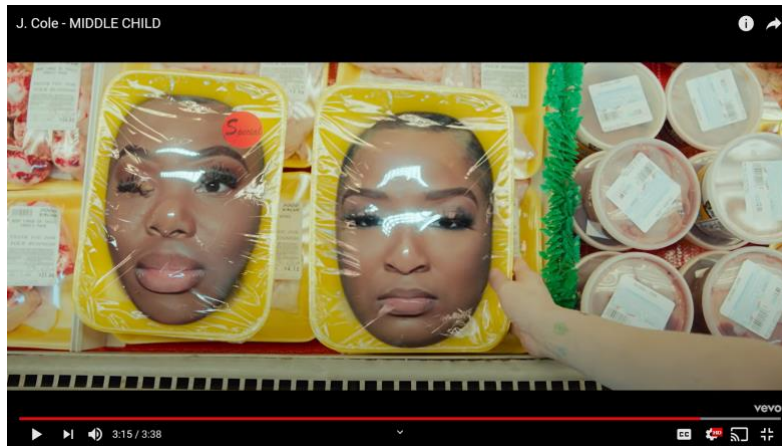


Figure 7: “J. Cole - MIDDLE CHILD.” *Youtube*, uploaded by J. Cole, 25 Feb. 2019, <https://youtu.be/WILNIXZr2oc>

Lastly, the video ends with a white woman purchasing the face of a Black woman from the grocery store (see Figure 7) after having seen the baby hairs on a Black woman earlier in the video. The white woman admires the features of the Black woman’s appearance but doesn’t appreciate them on the Black woman and instead wants them for herself. As she picks up the face with baby hairs at the store, the song lyrics fade away, and we hear Cole say, “Money in your palm don’t make you real,” which is part of the chorus of the song and again points out the concept of what is fake vs. what is real. This specific scene reflects the appropriation of African American features by white America and the damage this appropriation has on the authenticity of Black culture, much like the appropriation of hip-hop culture discussed in Cutler’s study. Cutler writes, “Hip-hop is increasingly claimed to be a multicultural lifestyle rather than a symbol of ethnic group identity, particularly by white adolescents. . . it seems to allow whites access to a commodified, ephemeral Black experience at various moments of phases of their lives without requiring overt claims of Black ethnicity” (“Yorkville Crossing” 435). Much like the attempt by the white woman to access the Black experience, many young adults and adolescents have adopted the culture of hip-hop in a way that undermines the true ethnic identity of Black culture in hip-hop. The repeated lyrics found in the chorus and at the end of the song, “Money in your palm don’t make you real” and “Pistol in your hand don’t make you real,” symbolize Cole’s criticism of people like the white woman in the video who attempt to embody the real life of the African American through cultural appropriation. These lyrics emphasize that the tangibles don’t change who you truly are, and they reveal Cole’s preaching of authenticity which is so important in this song. Overall, the video highlights both Cole’s reflections on his role in the rap game

and the underappreciation of authentic Black feminine styles. Not only does Cole use the music as a way of showcasing his own thoughts on his role in the rap industry, but he uses the video to shed light on another problem in American society, revealing the attention he has to the suppression of Black culture.

4.0 Discussion

J. Cole's use of Black linguistic features ultimately serves the purpose of both honoring Black musical traditions and connecting Black language with the hip-hop community. Cole's use of the language and rhetoric of traditional African American life draws from his respect for the historical names of rap and his allegiance to those that have lived the same life as him. Cole knows the struggles of being Black in America, so using the language to reach out to other Black Americans through music continues the tradition of AAL's use in HHNL and gives him an identity in the Black community as a leader. Cole's loyalty to the African American and hip-hop family is a major indication of his genuine presentation of music, and his realness will continue to impact the lives of young African Americans for years to come.

As I reiterated throughout the analysis, one of the most important characteristics of J. Cole's music and even rap music in general is attention to reality. One of the things Cole is so well known and praised for is his acknowledgement of real-world situations and the state of life in Black America, as he grew up in a community in Fayetteville, North Carolina. This area is comparable to many other disenfranchised Black communities. In "Change," Cole raps about the changes he is experiencing in his life as he grows, and in the latter part of the song, he dedicates it to the murder of his friend James, who was just 22 years old. The end of the song includes a reenactment of James' funeral, a uniquely orchestrated expression of emotion and pain—pain that so many African Americans know too well. Over the course of this song, Cole raps about change, and so the ending of this song fits in with the idea of change because that change needed to take place in order for the continued pain and suffering of the Black community to come to an end. Not only is this song a reflection by Cole on the change within himself, but it's a call for change in the communities of America, too. This is a prime example of the street conscious attitude Cole has in so much of his music, and it mirrors the street conscious patterns seen throughout the history of rap music as highlighted in Alim's article (See "Street Conscious")

Fast forward from 2016 to 2020, and J. Cole's street consciousness is even more evident. In "Snow on tha Bluff," Cole raps in what is more of a conversation than a song, which reflects the personal and authentic nature of his music style. This track is also set up as a reflection by Cole on the current state of Black America. Cole starts by talking about how an unnamed woman is mad at the unrest and injustice brought about by the killing of George Floyd and other people of color by police in America. He understands that she has reason to be mad but thinks that her criticism of celebrities that aren't speaking out as much is unwarranted because it lacks the love and care that Cole thinks should be taken when educating and influencing those in the Black community to speak out and make moves forward for change. This song ultimately reflects the love and care J. Cole shows for his community, which includes his home in the Ville along with African American communities across the country. Cole's respectful awareness is put on full display with the timeliness of this song. He knows there is more to be done and more for himself to do in order for there to be constructive and powerful change for the betterment of the lives of his people.

As we've seen, street conscious rapping is central to much of Cole's music, and it's emphasized even more in his music videos. The first music video I selected goes hand in hand with the themes in "Change" and "Snow on tha Bluff" because it's dedicated to a young Black girl who was a victim of police brutality. J. Cole's music video for "Crooked Smile," reenacts the shooting of Aiyana Stanley-Jones, a seven-year-old African American girl, on May 16, 2010 in Detroit, Michigan. During a raid by Detroit Police, Aiyana was shot in the head and killed. The music video, though the song lyrics don't have much to do with the visuals, is dedicated to this shooting, which is just one of the many police shootings of African Americans that take place in America much too often. Just like "Change," this piece of work by Cole is a call for change in society and a plea for the killing to stop. The pain that Cole shows in this video, as he plays the father of the girl in the video, is felt by the many Black Americans who have lost loved ones in the same way. It is through the use of emotional appeal that Cole communicates with his listeners and presents his message of love so powerfully.

And lastly, Cole's music video for "MIDDLE CHILD" reflects his consciousness of his position in the rap industry, portraying how he is both loyal to the greats of the older generation of rap and paving a path for the newer generation. Cole also uses the video to bring light to yet another key problem for African Americans in the appropriation of Black culture and features by white America, which diminishes the significance of those features in the lives of so many in Black communities around the country. His continuity in purpose is what makes Cole such a respected name in the world of hip-hop, and that purpose is to embody loyalty and love through a genuine and intimate presentation of art. Through analysis of J. Cole's music, I hope I have made a valuable contribution to understanding the complexity of Black language in hip-hop, particularly how younger generations of rappers are continuing the tradition of using Black language and Black rhetorical practices like storytelling in their music.

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