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PWR 2WM: The Rhetoric of Kanye West

"Bearing witness" the idea that people can come forward with their eyewitness accounts on what happens. This concept has been commonly associated with survivor accounts, interviews, and eyewitness testimonies in the legal system. However, that shouldn't end there. Another underlooked method of "bearing witness" is found within the hip-hop industry, which has seen a transition in its display of bearing witness. Hip hop began taking the world by storm in the late 20th century with gangsta rap being at the forefront of that. Gangsta rap could do a lot, show the problems in the black community including police brutality, incarceration, and poverty. But there was one thing that gangsta rap couldn't do: show vulnerability and weakness. This was, until Kanye West began using his vulnerability within his music in the early 21st century as a tool for bearing witness. Throughout his initial albums Kanye emphasized his emotions when creating music while still displaying external social problems throughout his music. Hip-hop's use of bearing witness has been an outlet for the African American community to share their social issues, however through his embrace of vulnerability and emotional transparency, Kanye catalyzes a shift by expanding the genre's tone from outward masculinity to inward reflection and introspection, therefore forever changing hip hop by inspiring a new generation of artists by redefining hip hop masculinity, vocality, and storytelling

Traditional forms of bearing witness have been studied extensively, and the scientific findings are translatable to the hip-hop industry. Professor Sue Tait in *Bearing witness,*

journalism and moral responsibility argues, “Bearing witness exceeds seeing, and this excess lies in what it means to perform responsibility” (Tait, 2011). Tait argues that bearing witness goes beyond just retelling stories, it is meant to catalyze and cause people to think about what’s being said and then respond to it. Tait’s analysis of bearing witness is about turning the audience into a responsive force, a theme that is seen throughout hip-hop from its beginning to current day. According to Nursing Director Rahel Naef, “Bearing witness happens face to face, but also through rituals, testimonies, documentation, literature, story-telling, and art” (Naef, 2006). Naef brings up the idea that bearing witness goes beyond traditional eyewitness accounts and what people commonly associate with bearing witness, it goes into the media and into the realm of art which is where hip-hop resides. Furthermore, Naef implies that bearing witness doesn’t belong to figures of authority, it can be used by anyone in their respective field, whether it’s a writer, artist, or even a rapper. Scholars have described bearing witness beyond what most would immediately jump to, it is a moral responsibility and a call for action that can be found in many diverse outlets.

The bearing witness Tait and Naef describe is what the majority of hip-hop has been since its introduction. At its core, hip-hop has always been about bearing witness. Stanford University Hoefer Prize winner Becky Blanchard once asserted that rap music’s, “...roots in the African oral tradition, its function as the voice of an otherwise underrepresented group…” (Blanchard, 1999). Blanchard asserts that hip-hop has been the voice of the African American community, and as a result hip-hop music tends to come from their witness accounts of the struggles of being an underrepresented community. Blanchard also credits the West African word nommo as a root for the beginning of hip-hop stating, “The significance of nommo in the African oral tradition has given power to rappers and rap music within many African-American

communities" (Blanchard, 1999). Nommo is a word describing the power of spoken words, which is reflective of the African American community in America. In the late 80s and 90s, hip-hop artists witnessed police brutality, systemic poverty, and mass incarceration. Nommo is the power of their lyricism and words, and how they brought invisible issues into public consciousness through powerful testimony under the umbrella of gangsta rap. What makes hip-hop unique in witnessing is that it brings the African American community together, using nommo and lyricism to display the problems artists saw. One hip-hop group, N.W.A., released the song, "Fuck Tha Police" which served as a testimony to police brutality that the group both witnessed and underwent as young African American men in Compton. Furthermore, artist Tupac released the song "Life Goes On" highlighting the deaths of his friends in street life, while maintaining a "tough guy" tone and persona. However, gangsta rap would begin to draw massive criticism from some individuals, and one was Anthony Giovacchini. Giovacchini wrote *The Negative Influence of Gangster Rap And What Can Be Done About It* where he argued, "...gangster rap still tends to send negative messages to its listeners…" (Giovacchini, 1999). Giovacchini discusses the negative messaging of these songs, pushing violent agendas onto the listeners from these artists' witnessing testimonies. What made gangsta rap unique was its bluntness and power when it came to showing artists' eyewitness testimonies. What separates it from other forms of witnessing is that it's participatory, it either is from a first person perspective or forces the audience into the artists' shoes by being graphic and realistic. When N.W.A. raps about police brutality, they allow the audience to see and feel the crushing feeling of systemic racism. While gangsta rap presented the African American community's eyewitness testimonies in one way, it left out the other half of its community: the ones who resonate with vulnerability. Showing vulnerability was dangerous. You could witness the system's violence, but you couldn't

admit your own emotions or mental health struggles. Gangsta rap was a subgenre for some aspiring African American artists, but what about the others? For years, it seemed as if gangsta rap was the only way for aspiring African American hip-hop artists to use their witnessing within music, but a catalyst would come that would forever change the hip-hop genre.

This catalyst would come in the form of the small-time Chicago rapper known as Kanye West. Instead of neglecting the vulnerability gangsta rap tried to conceal, Kanye embraced it. Kanye began this in his very first album, *The College Dropout* in 2004. David Opie in his article, "The College Dropout: How Kanye West Changed Hip-Hop Forever With His Debut Album" specifically mentions, "Guns, knives, crime... Kanye pushed these issues aside on his debut in favor of middle class themes like education, family, and religion, changing the rules of hip-hop by encouraging listeners to identify with him, rather than simply observe his life from afar" (Opie, 2019). When Kanye raps about materialism in "All Falls Down," he doesn't just critique society, he admits, "We all self-conscious, I'm just the first to admit it." He wasn't observing problems from a distance; he was implicating himself and the audience. On "Spaceship," he witnessed the soul-crushing reality of working retail, making listeners feel the desperation of dead-end jobs. On "Through the Wire," recorded with his jaw wired shut after a car accident, he made us witness his physical trauma in real-time. This was new. He was vulnerable while still maintaining the confidence and masculinity that hip-hop required. By *Late Registration* in 2005, he pushed further. "Roses" made listeners witness his grandmother's hospitalization and healthcare disparities through raw emotion. "Hey Mama" was a tender tribute to his mother that broke from hip-hop's typical maternal references—it was deeply personal, almost uncomfortably intimate. Graduation in 2007 further explores societal issues in a victorious tone. "Good Morning" discussed the problems with the school system, how even valedictorians aren't ready

for the real world. The album as a whole is a homage to his sacrifices to pursue his dreams, a love letter to what's propelled him to where he is today. These three albums were his breakthrough albums known as the "Higher Education Trilogy" telling the world that being a tough gangsta wasn't the only route for a young African American male. They can embrace their emotions and vulnerability to pursue a better job, return to college after a break, or even pursue music in a new way. While Kanye's first three albums brought a mix of vulnerability and gangsta rap's strength, his next album would differ greatly.

In late 2007, Kanye's mother Donda West passed away, thus changing his trajectory forever. Kanye was very close to Donda, and he initially had prepared a fourth album for the higher education story titled *Good Ass Job*. Instead, he threw that out and instead pursued a new project, *808s and Heartbreaks*. This album differs from his others, it emphasizes a cold and distant tone which would become the turning point in the hip-hop genre. His engagement ended. And instead of maintaining the emotional armor that hip-hop—and especially African American male artists—were expected to keep, he shattered it entirely. He abandoned rapping. He sang through auto-tune about grief, loneliness, and heartbreak. The album sounded cold, mechanical, distant—but paradoxically made listeners feel closer to his pain. This was the turning point. Where his earlier albums balanced vulnerability with strength, *808s* was *only* vulnerability. And it changed everything. Kanye didn't just suddenly become vulnerable on *808s*—he'd been building toward it across four albums, slowly expanding what was acceptable to witness in hip-hop. Each album tested boundaries a little more. But *808s* broke them completely, and that rupture created space for other artists to share their own eyewitness accounts. Rappers who may have felt "isolated" due to their desire to be introspective now had a mainstream artist telling

them it's okay to be emotional. Kanye's influence is rooted in honesty and introspection, which would become the turning point in the evolution of hip-hop.

Kanye's unique twist on hip-hop sparked a revolutionary change from gangsta rap to a new generation. *Sampling and Storytelling: Kanye West's Vocal and Sonic Narratives* by Professors Lori Burns, Marc Lafrance, and Alyssa Woods argues that, "...West portrays intimate personal experiences in the context of broader commentaries on largescale social issues" (Burns, Lafrance, Woods, 11). This was one of the first times this was being done in the hip-hop genre, and therefore leads to the social issues he dips into throughout his music. The same authors go onto write *Doing Hip-Hop Masculinity Differently Exploring Kanye West's 808s & Heartbreak through word, sound, and image* where they argue, "Kanye West's challenge to the conventions of contemporary hip-hop is nowhere more apparent than on his fourth album *808s & Heartbreak*" (Burns, Lafrance, Woods, 1). Instead of masculinity being in the form of yelling, "Fuck Tha Police" it's instead in the form of vulnerability, and in-touch with depressive thoughts. Whereas former artists had only focused on the external forces pushing down on the African American community, Kanye shifts the focus to internal forces pressuring him throughout his life. He shifts the witnessing onto the audience, forcing us to understand what he's going through even though all we see is his fame and success from an outsider perspective. His introspectiveness didn't abandon the social commentary, but instead added a new facet for it. He turned vulnerability within hip-hop into a new form of expression, and this shift would open the door for a new generation of artists who didn't only focus on what happened on the streets, but also internally in their mind and heart. *808s and Heartbreak* as an album is often credited as being the catalyzing shift for hip-hop, but what other authors and writers disregard is the lyricism within the album. The main themes of the album are often what are analyzed to show how Kanye

changed hip-hop, but the songs itself are what inspired new artists. While, “Kanye West’s challenge to the conventions of contemporary hip-hop is nowhere more apparent than on his fourth album 808s & Heartbreak” (Burns, Lafrance, Woods, 1) it’s the impact his songs had on future artists that redefined hip-hop and evolved it into more than a gangsta rap filled genre. Bearing witness evolved beyond eyewitness accounts of police brutality and street life, it became metaphorical and introspective into one's emotions, feelings, and personal identity. Through his shift of outward masculinity to inward reflection and introspection, Kanye redefines storytelling, vocality, and masculinity within hip-hop inspiring a new generation of artists.

Kanye’s entire trajectory since the “Higher Education Trilogy” has been shifting witnessing from external forces to internal introspection and *808s and Heartbreak* was no exception. The difference here was the tone that came alongside *808s and Heartbreak*. “Pinocchio Story” in specific was a song about Kanye, his feelings that the relationships around him were fake and he isn’t “real” similar to how Pinocchio wants to be a “real” boy. This shifted the storytelling of hip-hop from communal to autobiographical storytelling, paving the way for Drake’s “So Far Gone,” where rap officially becomes his personal diary. *808s and Heartbreak* was revolutionary in this aspect, but the reason why is that Kanye showed that witnessing one’s internal and psychological hardships was just as “real” as external issues in society. He created a space where artists could talk about themselves internally and show vulnerability to the max, something that Kanye was building to throughout the “Higher Education Trilogy" but in *808s and Heartbreak* this became the forefront of the album. Kanye’s storytelling would go on to impact other artists, one being Kendrick Lamar. Dan Stubbs covers Kanye’s influence on Kendrick, stating that he, “learned to always stay as creative as possible and never have any boundaries” (Stubbs, 2014). Kendrick uses this creativity within his song “Alright” mimicking

the idea of external pressures while using his own demons and resentment to empower himself. Kendrick uses this autobiographical storytelling, just like Kanye, to not only show the very prevalent police brutality acts but also his "real" emotions of feeling weak in the past. Instead of focusing only on external pressures, Kendrick uses Kanye's shift of inward reflection to create a song that is both strong in tone, but also looks internally at the artist. This is the area that Kanye unlocked through his music, a chance for rappers to be multidimensional with their witnessing, using both external and internal aspects through their music. Kanye's shift to internal reflection redefined hip-hop in the 21st century, allowing artists to look inside themselves for conflicts and storytelling.

Instead of masculinity being a soldier archetype, Kanye dismantles this by showing masculinity can be internal and vulnerable. During the gangsta rap era, artists such as N.W.A. celebrated masculinity as being an aggressive soldier with invincible armor in songs such as "Straight Outta Compton". However, Kanye broke this during *808s and Heartbreak*, and more specifically in "Coldest Winter" where masculinity is no longer defined by external conquest, but by the ability to bear witness to internal loss and grief. Kanye asks a rhetorical question of, "...will I ever love again" (West, 2008) which was a showcase of masculinity beyond seeming like a powerful gangsta. Kanye's breakthrough of the "invincible armor" of gangsta rappers was a pivotal change for new artists to use their vulnerability within their music. Instead of being defensive against the problems of society, Kanye shifts into exploratory witnessing by bringing the audience into his internal thoughts. Kid Cudi once credited Kanye as the reason he could be himself in his music, and Kid Cudi took this to the max. Kid Cudi's "Mr. Rager" brings vulnerability into the spotlight through addiction to cocaine and the vulnerability that follows. While other authors focus on the innovations of *808s and Heartbreak*, the album goes beyond

innovating and impacts many artists who go onto developing the hip-hop genre. “Mr. Rager” is just the beginning. In gangsta rap, the enemy is the system, but after “Coldest Winter” the enemy becomes internal. This would go on to impact other artists, including Travis Scott and Lil Nas X in their own ways. Scott’s “90210” begins his accounts about fame, and the isolation that follows. Rhetorically, he doesn’t witness “triumph” with his fame, but rather the emptiness that fame brings, which is a descendant of “Coldest Winter”. Masculinity for Lil Nas X is his struggle with being queer in a genre where his community has been underrepresented, and this masculinity comes with coming out and being an inspiration to others who may feel like they can’t come out. Kanye proved to hip-hop that masculinity doesn’t have to be soldier-like, and someone can use their internal witnessing to be strong and show the struggles they’ve endured.

Kanye also reshaped vocality within the hip-hop industry. Before Kanye, vocals for hip-hop artists were meant to be “strong” which was especially prevalent in artists such as Eric B. & Rakim. In their “Paid In Full” the duo uses an authoritative voice meant to show that they were in control and in power. Once again, Kanye reshapes this by using autotune within an emotional tone—a first in hip-hop. Kanye’s cold, mechanical, and distant sound within *808s and Heartbreak* and more specifically within songs such as, “Love Lockdown” are what inspired a new group of artists. Instead of trying to demand authority, Kanye uses autotone to show weakness, allowing his true witnessing to come to the forefront of his music. “Lucid Dreams” by Juice WRLD in 2018 utilizes autotune to sound distant but also heartbroken. The late rapper once talked about 808s and Heartbreak stating, “Yeah, I think I kind of live with that record on my shoulder” (Higgins, 2018). Inspired by Kanye, Juice WRLD uses autotune as a metaphor for a broken heart. *808s and Heartbreak* was revolutionary, but the reason why it was so groundbreaking was that it brought out new voices into the hip-hop industry, a fact often

overlooked. New voices, new ideas, and new witnessing accounts that would all tell stories currently underlooked and underexplored. Future took this further in his “Codeine Crazy” where he used autotune to sound not only distant but also slurred. This autotone is designed to diverge from the strong authority of gangsta rappers, and Future does this so the audience can witness his cycles of addiction, almost making the audience feel uncomfortable watching someone getting consumed by drugs. In the gangsta rap era, drug addiction was shown as empowering and strong, but Future found the strength to show that being addicted was deteriorating to both his physical and mental health. He does this through autotune, derived from Kanye’s use of autotune years earlier. Kanye’s use of autotune allowed him to give a weakened and cold tone to his witnessing of emotional trauma, resulting in future hip-hop artists using autotune to help tell their own testimonies.

As artists continue to make music into the 21st century, their musical influences are unexplored because research hasn’t been done on the most current hip-hop songs. While *808s and Heartbreak* has always been idolized as a shift for hip-hop, the “how” has always been the question that’s been avoided alongside the “who” of it as well. Scholars can argue the importance of *808s and Heartbreak* thematically, but the songs within the album are what inspired the next generation through their breakthroughs on storytelling, masculinity, and vocality. Furthermore, the artists it impacts are often forgotten when talking about *808s and Heartbreak*. While the album is the turning point, the artists who it inspires are the ones who continue to show the importance of the album in the history of hip-hop. Although the album is 18 years old, its impacts continue to live on not just through its lyricism, but within the artists it's inspired since.

Hip-hop has always been a means of storytelling for the African American community, derived from the meaning of nommo. From the gangsta rap testimonies of police brutality and

violence to Kanye's testimonies of inner struggle it's seen an evolution that has forever changed the future of hip-hop. By embracing vulnerability instead of hiding it, Kanye unlocked artists who may not have felt they had a place in the gangsta rap community, but now had an opportunity to shine in their own unique ways. Kanye showed what nommo was designed to be: words that are powerful and for Kanye the power of his words lead to the most transformational change in hip-hop. *808s and Heartbreak* was the culmination of what Kanye built towards using nommo, the power of his spoken word and how he was able to use this power to rewrite hip-hop cultural norms and in turn created space for rising artists to enter the spotlight. When society tried to box hip-hop into a singular tone, Kanye broke the formula and showed the world there's more than one way to succeed as a hip-hop artist, and it isn't just about what's going on around a person, but also what's going on inside.

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