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### Picasso Baby: Hearing JAY-Z through the Ears of Gramsci or How Language has the Power to Effect Change

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Picasso Baby: Hearing JAY-Z through the Ears of Gramsci, or

How Language has the Power to Effect Change

by

Jon Cotner

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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**PARENTAL  
ADVISORY  
EXPLICIT LYRICS**

### Abstract

Language was a pivotal element in the life of Italian Antonio Gramsci and his ability to harness its power made him one of the foremost cultural theorists and Marxist thinkers; likewise, American rapper JAY-Z also employed language to transcend childhood boundaries and become one of the most influential and wealthy entertainers of the twenty-first century. This study examines the lyrics of several albums that span the artistic career of JAY-Z and teases out the hegemonic clues that they contain. American hegemony is populated by one-percenters, an exclusive club that now counts JAY-Z as a member, but his membership was not always assured. The premise of this work is that JAY-Z, as documented in his studio albums, passes through three stages of hegemonic proximity: he recognizes his hegemonic exclusion, he struggles to find hegemonic inclusion, and in the end he manages to not only find inclusion, but also to rise to the top of that rarified group. Evidence that language has the power to effect actual change in the world, if wielded by a skillful enough practitioner, is abundant in the lives of Antonio Gramsci and JAY-Z and a portion of their stories are documented here.

**[Hook]**

It ain't hard to tell, I'm the new Jean Michel  
Surrounded by Warhol, my whole team ball  
Twin Bugattis outside the Art Basel  
I just wanna live life colossal  
Leonardo Da Vinci flows  
Riccardo Tisci Givenchy clothes  
See me throning at the Met  
Vogueing on these niggas, champagne on my breath, yes  
House like the Louvre or the Tate Modern  
Cause I be going ape at the auction  
Oh what a feeling, aw, fuck it, I want a trillion  
Sleeping every night next to Mona Lisa  
The modern-day version with better features  
Yellow Basquiat in my kitchen corner  
Go 'head, lean on that shit Blue, you own it  
...  
No sympathy for the king, huh?  
Niggas even talk about your baby crazy  
Eventually the pendulum swings  
Don't forget America this how you made me  
Come through with the 'Ye mask on  
Spray everything like SAMO, I won't scratch the Lambo  
What's it gon take for me to go  
For you to see, I'm the modern-day Pablo, Picasso baby

~ JAY-Z, excerpts from "Picasso Baby"  
on *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* (2013)

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### [Intro]

This paper is concerned with the ability of language, in the hands of gifted masters, to create tangible and effective change in their worlds. To this end, the analysis will cover the use of language in both written and spoken form. Forgoing the standard monikers of academic research paper organization, this work will use standards of organization native to rap music (see “Tom Ford” lyrics, Appendix A, below, for a representative example of rap music organization). Within the written arena, the first two [Verses] of this production will establish language as the initial and primary foundation of Gramsci’s thought, demonstrate that for Gramsci language can only be seen within the wider context of its surrounding culture, and show how the Gramscian concept of hegemony sprang from his insight into the dynamics of these two elements: language and culture. Within the spoken arena, the final two [Verses] of this work will establish the primacy of the spoken word for African American culture, and show, through the examination of a selection of studio albums, JAY-Z’s progression through three stages of hegemony: recognizing his hegemonic otherness, battling to overcome that hegemonic otherness, and finally crossing the hegemonic chasm to become privileged within the dominant hegemony. Given the importance of cultural context to understand the two players in this study, a [Chorus] precedes each set of two [Verses] which provides pertinent biographical content for that set, the first for Gramsci and the second for JAY-Z.<sup>1</sup>

**[Chorus 1: Gramsci (Sard of Turi Prison), Master of the Written Word]**

Gramsci was born in Ales, a town on the island of Sardinia, in 1891, to an Albanian father and Sardinian mother. His father was a civil servant in the town of Ghilarza, who was discharged from his position under trumped-up charges, leading to financial issues from which the family never recovered. His childhood was also plagued by poor health, a dark complexion, and a diminutive stature made more acute by a pronounced hunchback (Carley 210n15). As a Sard(inian) Gramsci attended, and graduated from, secondary school on the island. He was awarded a scholarship and attended the University of Turin in 1912, studying linguistics.

Arriving in Turin, “terrified as he must have been ‘not just by traffic and trams and noise, but by the realization that he did not understand a single word the natives were saying.’ The Piedmontese dialects, so different from both the Sardinian dialects and the national Italian language...” (Carlucci 34). He passed exams in several fields, including Greek and Latin grammar (he later gave lessons in Greek and Latin), Greek literature, linguistics (cum laude), literatures of the Romance languages, and Italian literature (Carlucci 33). Health problems lead to the loss of his scholarship, and he took his last exam in 1915 without graduating (Buttigieg 66-68). Journalism became his fallback plan.

Remaining in Turin, which notably was the government seat of the Kingdom of Italy until the reunification of Rome in 1871, he initially wrote reviews of theater performances and provided commentary on current social and political issues. He began immersing himself more deeply into factory workers’ rights, eventually co-founding *L’Ordine Nuovo* (*The New Order*), a socialist newspaper. The masthead of the weekly newspaper included: “Educate yourselves because we’ll

need all your intelligence. Rouse yourself because we'll need all your enthusiasm. Organize yourselves because we'll need all your strength" (Buttigieg 71). Instrumental in the formation of the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista d'Italia: PCd'I*), by 1924 he was acknowledged as its head.

Attending several Communist Internationals (*Cominterns*) in Moscow, Gramsci quickly became the face of Italian Communism. The brilliant Communist strategist Trotsky was fond of Gramsci, requested a monograph from him to accompany his *Literature and Revolution* (1923) book, and noted, "[a]t that time, as Trotsky recalled in 1932, no one in the party 'except for Gramsci' thought that a Fascist dictatorship was possible" (Buttigieg 78). Gramsci also correctly predicted the fallout of Bolshevik disunity between Stalin over Trotsky with the passing of Lenin: "...you risk destroying your own handiwork, you are degrading and may even annul completely the leading position which the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] acquired under Lenin's leadership" (Buttigieg 85). Having secured such a notable presence in the Communist world, when assassination attempts on Mussolini became more common, all elements contrary the fascist cause were rounded up and imprisoned, including Gramsci in November 1926.

His time in Turi Prison, located at the top of the heel on the Italian boot, was his own private hell, even ostracized by fellow Communist prisoners over his view that Italy needed to proceed through a democratic phase before a solid Communist regime could be established (Buttigieg 90). He was a driven and gifted intellectual, while in prison he taught himself German and Russian, and produced twenty-nine notebooks containing more than 3,000 pages of critical analysis and commentary. But before he could write one word while imprisoned, Gramsci had to



obtain a pen and paper, and apply for and submit a formal petition to write in his cell (which was denied several times) (Buttigieg 12). Challenged health-wise his entire life, he persevered in a hostile prison environment to a degree that remains a statement to his strength, a strength and perseverance beyond the ability of the fascist regime to silence him, an insightful and contrary critic. He was assisted in his resistance by two individuals particularly: Pietro Sraffa, an eminent Italian economist that lectured at Cambridge University, and Tatiana Schucht, a close relative that kept him connected to the outside world and corresponded and visited regularly with him.

These two individuals alone ensured that the work of Antonio Gramsci would be informed and well-researched, and that it would actually see the light of day. Sraffa, a renowned academic in his own right, recognized the value of Gramsci's work and provided, in addition to regular visits to the prison, an unlimited account at a bookstore in Milan so that Gramsci could purchase books. Schucht, Gramsci's sister-in-law, was the beacon of hope that his time in prison required, as well as being a very accomplished smuggler that managed, with the help of Sraffa, to slip his notes past the censors of both Mussolini and Stalin and secure the *Prison Notebooks* for readers worldwide. Through letters and conversation, she was also a valuable conduit of philosophical thought between Sraffa and Gramsci (Lo Piparo *Il Professor Gramsci e Wittgenstein* 29-30). These two are the wizards behind the curtain that make it even possible to discuss the reemergence of Gramsci today as a revolutionary force. Gramsci died less than a week after he was released from prison in 1937.

### [Verse 1: Singing the Importance of Language]

In twenty-first century America, the number of non-native English speakers has grown exponentially, and in many of their communities the privilege of English language competence remains absolute. Working, playing, and shopping all require that a person have knowledge of, and ability with, English to survive and hopefully flourish. To individuals and families with little English language skills, language is not a given, but is a tangible force to be considered and reckoned with on a daily basis. This was also the case with the Italian language in early twentieth century Italy; the young Gramsci had to learn, and eventually master, the recently legislated 'Italian' language.

Gramsci was a Sard and spoke Sardinian natively: it was his mother tongue. A mother tongue is literally the language that one learns at their mother's knee, the language that one spoke growing up, with one's family, with one's friends perhaps, but definitely at their mother's knee (Davies 16). Within that linguistic environment, as we grow up, it is the songs and the stories that define our native speech. If you try to sell yourself as a native American English speaker and do not know the ABC song, or the Birthday Song, or even 100 Bottles of Beer on the Wall, then English is not your mother tongue. It is as simple as that: if you are fluent but lack knowledge of the rudimentary choirs of the infantile masses, you are not a native speaker (Davies 67). Gramsci's mother often sang to her children in Sardinian and used it when talking with them; her husband, from the mainland peninsula, spoke Italian in the house. Gramsci and his brother also spoke Sardinian when they were playing (Carlucci 31-32). The young Gramsci could communicate in Italian, but Sardinian was his primary language growing up.

Gramsci, whose mother was a native Sardinian, was a full member of the prominent linguistic community in Sardinia, but his father taught him Italian from the ‘continent.’ Unfortunately, Sardinian, while predominant, was not the privileged language on the island. Gramsci learned Italian as his second language. In the words of Ives, “Gramsci grappled with a complex tension between his mother tongue, Sardinian, and his second language, Italian. His position was far from simple. He argued for a national ‘standard’ Italian but did not want speakers to relinquish their dialects” (33). Although he became fluent in ‘Italian,’ he did not allow this prudent move to dull his resentment of how the ‘official’ language was decided.

### *The Risorgimento (resurgence, rebirth)*

As Gramsci was growing up, although Italian was the official language of the 30-year old Kingdom of Italy, of which Sardinia was a part, the designation of Italian as ‘official language’ was a recent development and was still being actively contested; it remained contested “well into the twentieth century (Ives 38). Ives relates that, “[i]t is estimated that in 1861, only somewhere between two and a half and twelve percent of the new Italian population spoke anything that could be called ‘standard’ Italian” (36). By the time Gramsci became an adult, he was at the forefront of this battle over linguistic privilege. The Italian peninsula had just become unified (the *Risorgimento*) for the first time in 1861 (Venetia was returned by Austria in 1866; Rome was returned by the Pope in 1870; and the northeastern ‘unredeemed lands’ were regrouped after World War I), just three decades before Gramsci was born (Knopf Guide: Italy 47-48). Massimo d’Azeglio, a popular politician at the time quipped, “We have made Italy. Now we must make

Italians.”<sup>2</sup> The most contentious point of making those Italians would become what language will they speak.

Before unification, the Italian peninsula was a fragmented collection of Italian city-states, each with its own Latin dialect, with other dialects used in each of their surrounding rural areas. According to Ives, “[t]he spoken languages of ‘Italian’ were more like a family of Latin dialects with greater and lesser influences from other languages such as pre-Roman Etruscan, French, Spanish and German” (36). Since the fifteenth century, the city-states of the peninsula had been warring with each other, and by the late nineteenth century several had been conquered by other European powers. It is this fractious and feuding world that the *Risorgimento* had the difficult task of uniting.

The *Risorgimento* unification was successful in a political sense, but Gramsci viewed it primarily as a negative event, a ‘passive revolution’ or ‘revolution without a revolution,’ that ushered in fascism (Forgacs 247, 263-267; Thomas 146-147, 409-410, 422).<sup>3</sup> This topic is discussed at length in the *Prison Notebooks*, and one element of the unification process that he devotes substantial ink to is what should constitute the ‘Italian’ language. Gramsci recognized the need for a national language: “...it is rational to collaborate practically and willingly to welcome everything that may serve to create a common national language, the non-existence of which creates friction particularly in the popular masses...it is a question of stepping up the struggle against illiteracy” (Gramsci in Forgacs 355). Literacy for the masses was a vital goal for Gramsci, and a national language was a necessary catalyst for that to happen. Filippini concurs, “[t]he opportunity to master a national language, in fact, is in Gramsci’s view an essential prerequisite for the emancipation of

the subalterns [the ‘masses’]” (111). Gramsci knew that with language and literacy came power, and he wanted the masses to be able to share some of that power.

For Gramsci, it was not a question of whether there should be an Italian national language, it was instead a question of how that language should be created; a question to which he gave much thought and many pages in the *Prison Notebooks*. And this thought and these pages were not the ruminations and jottings of unschooled and curious observer. At the University of Turin, Gramsci was “interested primarily in the study of linguistics under Professor Matteo Bartoli” (Buttigieg 67). They “developed a rather warm friendship that extended beyond the classroom, as Gramsci spoke Sardinian, which supported Bartoli’s research on Latin vernaculars (Ives 42). Gramsci’s linguistics thesis, which went unfinished, was centered on historical linguistics (Forgacs 417n11). Although De Mauro is being hyperbolic, he provides an indication of the importance of language study to Gramsci: “A Marxist? Gramsci was not a Marxist at all. Gramsci was not a politician at all. Gramsci was a linguist” (cited in Carlucci 177). Gramsci had a penchant for the power and importance of language, a passion that he carried to the grave as the entire content of his final *Prison Notebook* (the twenty-ninth) is focused exclusively on language (Gramsci, *Quaterni del Carcere* vol3 2339-2351).

Gramsci considered that a new national language “can only happen spontaneously and from the bottom up,” according to Ives (57). Both Gramsci and his mentor Bartoli had an organic view of language that “changes and develops not due to its own internal laws or the physiology or psychology of its users, but when different languages (dialects or phases of a language) come into contact with each other” (Ives 55). Ives finds that for Gramsci, creating a national language

“...would involve combining existing spontaneous grammars into a single, normative grammar. As he [Gramsci] states, ‘What this [unified national language] will be, one cannot foresee or establish’ (Ives 100). It is this dynamic that Gramsci felt should drive the Italian ‘national language’ movement, instead of a directive that legislated a particular dialect as the anointed one for the entire country, “created outside of its use in people’s daily lives, [which] is bound to neglect and pass over their experiences, feelings and especially their participation in the very creation of language and meaning” (Ives 59). As is often the norm, ‘the people’ were passed over in the national language debate in order that the elite would remain dominant.

The government formed by the unification selected Tuscan to be the national language for the new Kingdom of Italy (Ives 35). Tuscan was the language spoken by the ruling families and upper classes (the bourgeoisie) in Florence, and in 1868 the author Alessandro Manzoni was selected to oversee the linguistic unification initiative in the new Kingdom (Ives 37-38). Manzoni’s proposal was for the nation to use one dialect as the national language, which would be designated ‘Italian.’ The dialect that he chose was “entirely based on the ‘living’ language of Florence free of any trace of other dialects or literary Italian not used in Florentine speech” (Ives 37). This proposal, accepted and adopted, is not unlike those used by European explorers from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries as they colonized widely in their ‘Age of Exploration.’

As the language that the government imposed on the people, “[l]iterary Italian was primarily a written language of the elite” (Ives 36). To Gramsci and Bartoli this seemed a poor decision, especially since in Sardinia alone illiteracy hovered around 90%. The majority of the Italian population at the time had never seen, let alone read, a work by the Florentine Dante Alighieri,

but the fact that Dante spoke and wrote in Tuscan contributed to the decision (Ives 109). It is ironic that one of Dante's minor, but apropos, essays, *De vulgari eloquentia* (*On the Eloquence of the Vernacular*) speaks to this language issue. Written in Latin, the literary language during Dante's time, this short work spells out the value of the non-literary tongues to Dante: "I call 'vernacular language' that which infants acquire from those around them when they first begin to distinguish sounds; or to put it more succinctly, I declare that vernacular language is that which we learn without any formal instruction, by imitating our nurses" (1). This is Dante's definition of 'mother tongue.'

Dante's praise for the Latin dialects of the various regions of Italy is not absolute, he is not fond of several: "...another vernacular, as I said, so hirsute and shaggy in its vocabulary and accent..." (9), or "...what the Romans speak is not so much a vernacular as a vile jargon...[and]...I reject all languages spoken in the mountains and countryside...whose pronounced accent is always at such odds with that of city-dwellers" (7). Although his praise is reserved for the dialects that were spoken within the direct confines of the city-states, during his time "the Sicilian vernacular seems to hold itself in higher regard than any other, first because all poetry written by Italians is called 'Sicilian.'" Having just been exiled, this Latin essay does not neglect his hometown, "there is no more agreeable place on earth than Florence" (Dante 3), and the essay is seen today as a treatise on why he would eschew literary Latin and write his masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, in the Tuscan vernacular.

Fast-forward six centuries and the Latin vernaculars spoken of by Dante are vying for prominence in the Italian peninsula, and at least partially because of his work, his mother tongue

Tuscan would reign supreme. As would be expected of a devoted Marxist and trained linguist, Gramsci fought resolutely against this top-down decision to impose basically a foreign language on almost 90% of the Italian population, but effects of this experience will reappear later. Having been unsuccessful in his battle with Manzoni over the official 'Italian' language, in the next event in his life where language plays a pivotal role, Gramsci finds success.

*“War is hell,”<sup>4</sup> and then things really get bad*

As the Kingdom of Italy was struggling to actually unite the Italian peninsula, Franz Ferdinand (the Archduke, not the musical group<sup>5</sup>) was assassinated in Sarajevo which led to war in Europe. Initially, Italy sided with Germany and Austria-Hungary in a purely defensive role, but in 1915 officially entered the war along with the Allied Powers. World War I came at an unfortunate time for the young Kingdom, and the populace were strongly opposed to the war (Verdicchio 31n24). For Italy, the war was fought primarily in the Alps, in northern Italy (Trudell). This proved to only exacerbate further the struggle for unification in an already fractionalized nation.

Much like the rift that has existed between north and south in the United States since its foundation, Italy too has a north-south polarity that was further deepened by the war. Similar to the situation in the early US, southern Italy is primarily agricultural, while northern Italy is largely industrial. Participating in WWI required Italy to ramp up their production of war materiel, and those factories were in the north. Increased production demanded a large increase in the number of workers, and many of those workers that responded to the need were southerners that emigrated from the farms to the factories in the north. With the war in northern Italy, southerners that were conscripted to serve in the military, also emigrated north. Following the US Civil War,



this form of emigration was also prevalent. As is the case with racism, geographical movement does not bridge the polarity of difference.

Just prior to his imprisonment, Gramsci wrote an essay entitled *The Southern Question*, also known as *Notes on the Southern Problem*, [Aside: The thoughts of Buttigieg should be noted here: “Some Aspects of the Southern Question’ contains embryonically the most crucial elements of Gramsci’s thought which he later developed in the prison writings and for which he is best known, most notably...his concept of hegemony” (21).] with a goal creating an alliance between northern factory workers and southern farmers in order to “promote peace between the city and the country, between the North and the South” (Gramsci in Verdicchio 17). While the essay covers the subject in detail, by someone intimately aware of its issues, his translator Verdicchio, in his Introduction, distills the pertinent points succinctly. The crux of the Southern Question in Italy is, as it is in the US, that “...the North/South binarism, oppositions such as First World/Third World, Black/White, etc., are similarly limited in scope because they are based on, and therefore tend to validate conditions predicated by, the backwardness of one of the elements vis-à-vis the superiority of the other” (12). The backwardness of a group is often seen as class-based, but at this time in Italy most of the masses were largely of the same class: all were poor.

Tragically, Verdicchio relates that “[t]oday’s Southern Question, though no longer easily classified by the parameters of city/countryside or peasant/industrial worker, nevertheless persists in the conditions that influence civil life...many of the problematics regarding the relationship of the South to the North remain unsolved” (6). These continuing discrimination issues that Italy shares with the US are frighteningly similar, a point that does not escape Verdicchio, and they

show signs of waning any time soon in either country. [Aside: At the time of this writing, the events of the last two weeks, following the murder of George Floyd by police, provide a stark reminder of just how little progress has been made on this front in the US.] For Gramsci, in his time, he envisioned a solution that would serve both parties well. In his *Workers and Peasants* essay, Gramsci forwards, in Marxist terminology, what is required: "...the solidarity of the industrial proletariat who need, in turn, the solidarity of the peasantry...the workers will break all the chains that hold the peasants to their poverty and desperation" (Gramsci in Verdicchio 48-49). Through his gifted use of language and organization, Gramsci was on the front line in the northern city of Turin trying to bring workers and peasants together for the good of both groups.

Gramsci moved to Turin to attend university under a scholarship in 1911 and remained there after he was forced to abandon his formal academic career because of health and financial considerations. As his university plans withered, his revolutionary plans began to blossom. He was a skilled and insightful contributor to socialist newspapers including *Il Grido del Popolo* and *Avanti!*, and co-founded the socialist journal *L'Ordine Nuovo* in 1919, which developed into a daily newspaper. Initially the journal was intended as a "journal of abstract culture, abstract information, with a strong leaning towards horror stories and well-meaning woodcuts...a mess" (Trudell). Within a month of its founding, *L'Ordine Nuovo* was already advocating the need for workers' councils, groups that he equated with Communist workers' soviets.

His mastery of the written word was on full display in his *L'Ordine Nuovo*, the primary voice for Italian Socialists in Turin and the Piedmont. In his work for the publication he put his linguistic skills to revolutionary use, "[h]e translated documents and reports on factory life and

workers' councils from Russian, French, British and other pro-labor publications" (Buttigieg 71). Although his skill as a journalist and revolutionary propelled the *L'Ordine Nuovo* to wide-spread distribution, his most tangible and remarkable success through language played out on the streets of Turin.

With Europe at war, and prior to the launching of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Gramsci employed his skillful use of language to defuse almost certain fatal encounters between striking factory workers and soldiers of the Sassari Brigade. Gramsci had been an active champion of workers' rights in Turin since 1916, and makes a brief passing reference to the events in *The Southern Question*: "[t]he Brigade was welcomed by a crowd of ladies and gentlemen who offered the soldiers flowers, cigars and fruit" (Gramsci in Verdicchio 25). Gramsci goes on to add that the events turned out favorably when the Brigade was shipped out of Turin, but he fails to mention the pivotal role that he played in that incident.

In early 1919, just months into the *Biennio Rosso* (According to Wikipedia, the Two Red Years was a period of "intense social conflict in Italy, following the First World War...[which was] followed by the violent reaction of the Fascist blackshirts militia and eventually by the March on Rome of Benito Mussolini in 1922."), the Sassari Brigade (*Brigata Sassari*) arrived in Turin to contain the worker strikes. The Sassari Brigade was composed primarily of Sardinians (a force of peasants and shepherds that originated in the Sardinian city of Sassari), and had been brought in previously to successfully squelch other worker rebellions (Verdicchio 25n16; Carley 60, 154).

Before discussing the episode involving the Sassari Brigade, Carley makes pertinent and enlightened points on the effect of the war on peasants and shepherds such as were found in the

Sassari Brigade. Prior to the war, according to Gramsci, “the peasant was left completely at the mercy of the landowners and of their sycophants and corrupt public officials...[and] has always lived outside the domain of the law, without a legal personality, without moral individuality” (Gramsci in Carley 61), powerless and without recourse to action. Gramsci speaks of the peasant after the war: “the peasants have conceived the state in its complex greatness, in its unmeasured power, in its complicated construction. They have conceived the world” (Gramsci in Carley 61). With these widened horizons and enlightenment to political dynamics, peasants and shepherds began to experience a sense of their own power, a result that Gramsci hoped to harness into a proletariat revolution. According to Carley, “[i]n short, the peasant now possessed the prerequisites for political mobilization” (61), a mobilization that Gramsci was keen to latch onto and propel.

Gramsci was tireless in forming workers’ councils (akin to a workers’ soviet in Russia under Lenin) in Turin and Milan. He also was respectful of workers, as a supporter communicated: “[i]n this ceaseless contact with the workers and in the mutual exchange of education, lay the secret of Gramsci’s success...’never taking action without first sounding out the opinion of the worker in various ways’” (Carley 59). Carley sums up the impact of Gramsci’s effort, “he had been in constant contact with the Italian laborers in Turin for four years and had organizational experiences that were affirmative, significant, and resonated broadly among the working population” (59). While this preliminary work was necessary to any hope of wider success, it is his deft engagement of the Sassari Brigade that speaks to this study.

The aim of the Turin Socialists and the *L'Ordine Nuovo* crew, led by Gramsci, was “to construct connections between the Turin workers and the soldiers; to communicate the solidarity of social class in the face of a contrarian elite rhetoric of both regional differences and the privileged status of industrial workers” (Carley 62). The difficulty of getting one person to walk in the shoes of another is legion, but that was the goal that Gramsci envisioned. It was a goal that he reached through effective use of a vernacular, his mother tongue, both in speech and through writing.

Carley acknowledges Alessandro Carlucci for his discovery and coverage in English of this episode with the Sassari Brigade, and the crucial importance that language played in the scenario: “Carlucci demonstrates how Gramsci was able to link the demands of the workers and the Sassari Brigade...by switching cultural codes and paying attention to regional differentiation (linguistic markers) within dialect” (63). Continuing, “Gramsci uses language and culture to unearth expressions of class forces that have been absent from the national discourse...and canalizes and advances these forces through the careful tactical use of language” (Carley 64). As an experienced worker motivator, Gramsci knew what he needed to accomplish. In the words of Carley,

Gramsci needed to make the desires of the Sassari Brigade consonant with the demands of the workers (while at the same time driving a wedge between the Sassari Brigade and the military and industrial elites in Turin) but, more importantly, he needed to demonstrate that these desires (and their bearers) had a place in reality—a reality not at all dissimilar to the workers’ demands, which the Sassari Brigade had been sent to quash. He did this with a carefully chosen, single word...‘commune’ (63).

‘Commune’ is “a word with broad and multifaceted ethno-religious, traditional-experiential, and modern revolutionary significance...more importantly, it was a Sardinian word that contained a deep spiritual resonance” (Carley 63). From a long-censored article, Gramsci’s words still ring:

“The word ‘commune’ is one of the most widely used in the Sardinian dialect...for the fraternal cooperation of all of the men who work and suffer, to get rid of the parasites, the fat cats who steal the bread of the poor man...” Gramsci in Carlucci 39). The use of the Sardinian word for ‘commune’ in one article and another article, written entirely in Sardinian, about the Brigade’s poor treatment by a military general saw “the word ‘commune’ developed into a slogan [‘Long live the Sardinian commune of peasants, miners, shepherds, and working men!’ (Carlucci 41)] linking workers to Sardinians in a broad and contemporary rendering of a political community” (Carley 64). Gramsci manages to accomplish his goal in this episode, conflating the desires of the workers and the Sassari Brigade which results in the demobilization of the Brigade.

In the words of Carlucci, Gramsci “emphasized the common demands of peasants in southern Italy and the working-class population of the North; and he used Sardinian words in a manner that was functional to the achievement of this inclusive goal” (cited in Carley 63). Gramsci was a linguist who had the skill and temerity to use it well in life and death situations. Verdicchio relates the event in brief: “the soldiers...underwent a change of heart and became educated as to the conditions of the workers and the situation” (5). Gramsci’s successful use of the power of language to effect change in the Sassari Brigade was soon forgotten in the widespread worker unrest across the country which gave rise to fascism and Mussolini, but it did solidify in Gramsci’s mind the symbiotic relationship between language and culture.

### *Language intertwined with Culture*

Language, for Gramsci, is the common denominator, the essential element, the power through which change can be created and that language is a result, a reflection, of the culture from

which it emanates. Gramsci was a man torn between cultures and languages, a Sardinian first, an Italian second, but perhaps a Marxist above all. In Gramsci's words, "[c]ulture is something quite different. It is organization, discipline of one's inner self, a coming to terms with one's own personality; it is the attainment of a higher awareness" (Gramsci in Forgas 57). In the words of Buttigieg, "Gramsci was also largely responsible for making the emphasis on culture and education one of the salient characteristics of the 'Ordine Nuovo' (New Order) group," a group named after his periodical *L'Ordine Nuovo* (19). Gramsci was not the only philosopher that found it impossible to consider language without considering culture.

For Gramsci, as for Wittgenstein, language could not be seen outside of the context of usage and culture. While we will not scurry down the rabbit hole that is the philosophy of language, we must at least recognize that Gramsci knows that the hole exists, probably knows where it is located, and has most likely been inside. As was mentioned in the brief biography of Gramsci above, Piero Sraffa was a frequent visitor of Gramsci in prison, and ensured that Gramsci had access to any books or published materials that were available. What is lesser known is that this same Piero Sraffa was also a friend and close confidant of one Ludwig Wittgenstein (Ayer 12; Monk 261, 274, 343, 392-394, 487), "[c]onsidered by some to be the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Sraffa and Wittgenstein both lectured at Cambridge University while Gramsci was in prison, and maintained close, but at times contentious, relations, according to Lo Piparo (*Il Professor Gramsci e Wittgenstein* 22-27). The philosophical and linguistic parallels between the thoughts of Gramsci and Wittgenstein on language would seem to support the possibility of some sort of exchange of ideas on language and culture between the two, albeit

second-hand through Sraffa; if substantiated, this would elevate the importance of Gramsci's work on language in particular and would be worthy of further scrutiny. While the direct link between Gramsci and Wittgenstein through their mutual friend Sraffa is intriguing, it is beyond the scope of this work.

Always considering himself a Sardinian first and an Italian second, Gramsci's dialect and culture were dear to his heart. Gramsci poses this question: "If it is true that every language contains elements of a conception of the world and of a culture, it could also be true that from anyone's language one can assess the greater or lesser complexity of his conception of the world" (Gramsci in Forgas 326). For Gramsci this appears to be a rhetorical question. Nonetheless, Carley answers, "[t]hat is, people spoke different dialects from one another, they saw the world differently" (84). In the early twentieth century, this was a rather novel concept in the field of linguistics. Up until that point, language was seen as a static body of concrete rules that speakers followed in order to be considered fluent speakers of that language. In fact, Gramsci does go on to answer his own question in his cultural writings: "every language is an integral conception of the world and not simply a piece of clothing than [sic] can fit indifferently as form over any content" (Gramsci in Crehan 86). In attempting to solve problems, Gramsci looks toward language and culture and how their relations can be coaxed to achieve the desired result.

Seeing language and culture so tightly linked, change in the language happens in conjunction with cultural change. It must be remembered that Gramsci was first and foremost a Marxist revolutionary. Everything that he wrote, and there is much, had the sole purpose of overthrowing the oppression of the bourgeoisie and establishing a nation for the masses. Toward



that end, Gramsci conceived of language, culture, and hegemony linked: “[l]anguage is transformed with the transformation of the whole civilization, through the acquisition of culture by new classes and through the hegemony exercised by one national language over others” (Gramsci in Carlucci 76). We saw Gramsci’s fight over the Italian national language, as he realized the power that language has to effect change, but turning our attention to the concept of hegemony will allow us to explore the terms that Gramsci used to explain the interactions between these three components, language, culture, and hegemony.

## [Verse 2: Hegemony as Recognition of Power Differentials in Culture]

Thus far, the discussion has moved from the vital role that language plays in the thought of Gramsci to how he sees language tightly intertwined with culture, which brings us to the reason that Gramsci remains relevant today: his granular and multi-faceted examination of how languages and cultures compete for power and reach hegemony. Gramsci was seen as an active and creative Marxist activist in the street, as well as a valuable voice, both on newsprint and in labor relations, but his work on hegemony is his greatest gift to thought. It should be remembered, in the words of Carlucci, “hegemony as a concept developed by a ‘fighter’—that is, by Gramsci as someone whose writings were not, as he himself put it, those of an academic who loves ‘studying for study’s sake.’ They were the writings of a revolutionary” (18). Although Gramsci was trained as an academic, his feet were always on a path to revolution, on a path for a better life for workers and peasants.

The events in Gramsci’s life that bear especially heavily in his development of the concept of hegemony have been included in some detail in this study, including his involvement in the fight against Tuscan as the official ‘Italian’ language, his extensive activist efforts on behalf of workers (both in the streets and with a pen), and his successful demobilization of the Sassari Brigade. Having provided broader context for these activities above, the next sections will discuss the undercurrent of power that was present in these events, unpack the role that language and culture played in those power relations, and examine the dynamics of power using the terms that Gramsci purposed to interpret the inner workings of hegemony. The final section will briefly cover the purported origins of the term ‘hegemony’ for Gramsci.

### *The Power Dynamics in Gramscian Events*

In our examination of the long-running conflict over instituting an Italian national language, we saw that the selection of Tuscan, the literary language of the elite in Florence, immediately provided those who spoke and/or wrote in that dialect a vast advantage over most of the population. That move ensured that the elite remained in power, effectively excluding the majority of the country from serving national interests and lessened the value of all non-Tuscan dialects. The domination over the masses that this provided was one of the key reasons that Gramsci advocated for combining existing dialects instead of selecting one.

Gramsci found Tuscan to be an inadequate solution, partly because he found the dialect to be lacking for its primary purpose. Carlucci states that “the local languages had a force and efficacy which Gramsci used throughout his life and which he repeatedly recognized in his writings. The Italian language was inadequate in many communicative situations” (63). Gramsci was a strong advocate of individuals knowing at least two languages, and relates, “[i]n reality there are many ‘popular’ languages in Italy and they are the regional dialects that are usually spoken in private conversation in which the most common and diffused feelings and emotions are expressed. The literary language is still largely a cosmopolitan language...limited to the expression of partial notions and feelings” (Gramsci in Carlucci 63). Gramsci also states that “the literary language needs an internal translation that dampens the spontaneity of imaginative reactions and the freshness of understanding” (Gramsci in Carlucci 34). It cannot be denied that there may be at least a degree of naïve wishfulness for Gramsci in this position, and by the end of his life, the new Italian language had been largely accepted by the population.

As has been shown, language has power to effect change, as well as the power to limit change. By selecting the literary language of the Florentine, the learned and elite reinforced their domination over the masses of the peninsula and ensured that they would remain in power. Ives posits that “for Gramsci language is both an element in the exercise of power and a metaphor for how power operates” (Ives 101). In the way that the Italian language was created, power was exercised not only by fiat by the elite, but also by the northerners which reversed progress made on the Southern Question.

Gramsci’s ability to motivate workers through his written word was abundantly clear during his activist work in Turin and Milan, and his *L’Ordine Nuovo* became the voice of millions of workers. He was able to articulate in a register that the working man could not only understand, but also identify with. While Marx was a philosopher and theoretician that operated from the reading room of the British Museum, Gramsci was a Marxist philosopher and tactician that operated in the streets, shoulder to shoulder with the factory workers whom he gave a voice to. In the words of Carlucci, “[f]or Gramsci—a thinker who was also a man of action, and whose thought and praxis are inseparable—the fundamental theoretical problem necessarily derived from his activities as a revolutionary” (179). Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* are an academic wonder, especially in light of his poor health and strict imprisonment, and they are in an academic register; but in articles, posters, and pamphlets for workers’ eyes, his writing was of an informal register that was motivational, informative, and spoke to the man on the street.

Although the factory workers, without the opportunity for education, largely saw themselves as powerless in the face of the corporate and governmental forces that directed their lives,

Gramsci's goal was to communicate and demonstrate to workers that they did in fact have power. Toward this end, Gramsci in his articles and speeches educated on history and theory, as well as the tactics of revolution. Despite the workers eventual defeat, this time was considered the zenith of the workers movement during the *Biennio Rosso*, largely through Gramsci's efforts in Turin (Forgacs 76-77). His language of the working man, both written and spoken, was instrumental in getting factory workers to realize the power that they possessed, and instructing them on how to exert that power most effectively.

Not only was Gramsci able to deftly adjust his language register for his audience, he was also able to employ different dialects to appeal to different factions and shift the power dynamic. The power imbued to the Sassari Brigade in northern Turin by the military must have been intoxicating for these former peasants and shepherds from the south. They had been brought in in previous years to quell worker rebellions, and their experience must have heightened their resolve to be successful again. Gramsci used articles and spoken communications with the Sassari Brigade in their southern mother tongue to sway these former peasants and shepherds into siding with the plight of the northern factory worker.

The reality that the Sassari Brigade abandoned Turin to preserve the struggle of the workers speaks highly of Gramsci's skills as a communicator; his show of respect for not only the Brigade, but their native dialect and culture as well, is recognized as the reason for that success. It should also not be missed that Gramsci's skills as a mediator, with insight that prompted him to attempt to turn a common southern language and culture into a victory for the northern workers that he

fought so diligently for, were inspired. It was propitious that Gramsci, a Sard, was the devoted and brilliant Marxist activist working his craft in Turin during the *Biennio Rosso*.

### *Unwrapping the Concept of Hegemony through Gramscian Events*

When hegemony is spoken of, it is usually used to signify domination of one party over another, often in a binary sense. This is the classical definition, but Gramsci's innovation was to not only move it away from the binary, but to also give it nuance, to show how the effect can have deep granularity where both parties may even participate in having hegemony over the other in different arenas. The most insightful and complete examination of Gramscian hegemony was done by Stuart Hall, who remains in the literature the pre-eminent and most quoted commentator on the subject. To begin, in Hall's words, "Gramsci's conception of hegemony radically challenges any such simple notion of domination...he was suggesting a much more open and enlarged notion of the nature of rule, of politics, and of domination...his analysis centered on the real circumstances and conditions of politics as we know them in advanced mass industrial societies" (168). In this section, we will tease out, using the events in Gramsci's life that have been discussed, the primary terms that Gramsci employs to flesh out his concept of hegemony.

'Real circumstances and conditions' would include the Gramscian events we have been examining, which we will now analyze to get a clearer sense of how hegemony plays out in a real life setting. The first Gramscian event, the act of the new Kingdom of Italy establishing a national language brings us face to face with the concept of State, which "...is frequently what Gramsci would call the instance which organizes the terrain of civil society" (Hall 163). The relationship between the State and society is always complex but Gramsci provides terms and a framework with

which to sort out those relations. For Gramsci, the role of the State is not only coercive, but also includes education (which is a less direct form of coercion).

State coercion in order to attain hegemony is not necessarily negative for Gramsci, when the population feel that they are participating to some extent in the process. Hall finds that for Gramsci, “Hegemony is about leadership and not only about domination....of course hegemony is never without coercion...But the moment of hegemony is never a moment of pure coercion...The moments of coercion and consent are always complementary, interwoven and interdependent, rather than separated elements” (171). The State has the potential to either put citizens on an equal playing field, as the national language proposal that Gramsci advocated would have done, or to elevate one segment of the society above all the others. Gramsci looked to the French Revolution (the Jacobins) for hope “against the negative example of the Italian *Risorgimento*—of how hegemony works in societies where the dominant groups look beyond their own immediate interests and manage to include the demands of large sections of the population into their own political programmes” (Carlucci 171). The Jacobins during the French Revolution acknowledged and respected their responsibilities to their people for fair representation.

The Kingdom of Italy, on the other hand, chose to neglect their responsibilities to their people, in Gramsci’s opinion, and committed an act of hegemonic domination.

Every time that the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish more intimate and secure relationships between the governing groups and the national-popular mass, in other words to recognize the cultural hegemony (Gramsci in Ives 82).

In one fell swoop the Kingdom of Italy bestowed on the learned and elite hegemony over the majority of the country. In the words of Ives, “[w]hat is ‘living’ for the Florentine bourgeoisie is

imposed like a dead language on the rest of Italy, especially the southern peasantry” (58). This, as Filippini posits, “...constitute[s] the means by which the dominant, ruling classes exercise their hegemony” (46). Hegemony in its most blatant usurpation is colonization, and colonization is what the upper classes effectively did to the majority population of Italy by instantiating Tuscan as the national language.

In the Gramscian system, every battle for hegemony includes two separate, but related wars. Using the requisite (for a revolutionary) war metaphor, according to Gramsci, “[t]he war of maneuver must be considered as reduced to more of a tactical than a strategic function; that it must be considered as occupying the same position as siege warfare” (Gramsci in Forgas 227). On the other hand, Gramsci states that the war of position includes “...the whole organizational and industrial system of a territory which lies to the rear of the army in the field,” which includes the quality, caliber, and number of cannons and rifles, as well as how well they are stocked (and how rapidly they can be restocked), not to mention the troops, their number and quality (Gramsci in Forgas 226). Gramsci mounted a frontal war of maneuver over the Italian language question, but the battle he was fighting had been determined years prior and he had no way to back it up with a substantial war of position, which may have included articles, speeches, and perhaps posters. He was unsuccessful in this endeavor.

Although Gramsci was adamantly against the selection of Tuscan for the Italian national language, the State provided leadership that by the time of his death had become what he would have termed a ‘historical bloc,’ and according to Hall, “...the formation of a historical bloc...provides the political, social, and economic underpinnings of a period of hegemony” (169).



The historical/dominant bloc is a central component in the Gramscian system of hegemony; the State is an actor or agent in the interplay between the civil and social spaces, but hegemony is based on a bloc, which includes both civil and social/cultural components. “A historical bloc is genuinely hegemonic...when it can reshape the social formation and bring it into line” (Hall 172-173). By legislating a national language and coercing the entire country to acquiesce, the State used the power of language to create a valid historical bloc, albeit a short-lived one.

In the Gramscian world, flux is continuous, and reaching hegemony is the goal, but “[i]t means continually exercising the mastery of a situation. It entails forms of domination...Hegemony is difficult work. It always has to be won. A dominant bloc has to constantly work for the establishment and continuation of its hegemony” (Hall 172). The Kingdom began to unravel as the worker unrest and rebellion grew in the northern industrial region, reaching a crescendo with the *Biennio Rosso*. The historical bloc of the Kingdom was overcome temporarily by the workers’ strikes and rebellion in their war of maneuver, but the workers’ bloc lacked coercive power, largely due to the failure of their political parties to engage in a war of maneuver against the State, and were unsuccessful in reaching hegemony.

During his work as an activist for workers in Turin (and Milan), Gramsci fleshed out one of his most important innovations on the concept of hegemony, namely that all parties have power and can (and often, do) assert hegemony over other parties. As Forgacs posts, “it presupposes an active and practical involvement of the hegemonized groups, quite unlike the static, totalizing and subordination implied by the dominant ideology theory” (424). Hegemony is seldom absolute in a

practical vein, as there is usually at least some power in the hands of all parties. How those parties apply their power to the situation at hand is where hegemonial effects are played out.

The direct confrontation between these two forces, the oppressed and the oppressors, constitutes a model Gramscian war of maneuver. Ives states that “[a] way of manoeuvre is a frontal attack on one’s enemies, in this case on state power” (107). In order for there to be a war of maneuver there must a fracture in the societal unit with two oppositional forces vying for control. One of the critical details in the Gramscian concept of hegemony is the balance of power, and the war of maneuver will never result in complete domination for one party. For Gramsci, the battle is never a zero-sum game: “...victory is not the great battle which ends with the final collapse of the enemy. Victory is the seizing of the balance of power on each of those fronts of struggle” (Hall 178). Even when one group overcomes the other group, the group that has been overcome does not disappear, but remains in the tension, albeit in a lessened position.

Although the corporate bosses seemed to have the upper hand during the *Biennio Rosso*, the workers rose up for themselves and made a stand against the corporate oppression being lorded over them. Factory workers, and especially peasants and shepherds from the southern agricultural regions of the country, seldom thought of themselves as having any tangible power. Gramsci fought a valiant war of position through his articles, both political and educational, and his public speeches energized the workers of Turin to find a voice and bring their taskmasters to task. At the height of the workers’ power, they conducted an admirable war of maneuver against their corporate oppressors, backed by a well-organized and fervent war of position, largely thanks to Gramsci.

The effort was hugely successful in swinging power towards the workers, but the organized 'revolutionary' political parties feared the State and establishment and provided no backing to the striking workers' bloc. The hegemony held by the established corporate interests was feared by the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) more than their desire to overthrow that dominion and deliver for workers a better life. For two years (during the *Biennio Rosso*) the workers effectively established a hegemony, but they were not supported by their 'leaders' and their revolt was quashed. The violent and dynamic events of the *Biennio Rosso* in Turin illustrate how the failure of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) to back and support the workers led Gramsci to co-found a separate Italian Communist Party (PCd'I) in 1921 (Ives 115; Buttigieg 76). The workers were able to shift the balance of power (Ives 121) to the extent that the established power was forced to exert excessive force to defeat the workers' rebellion and thus return to a 'status quo.' The State managed to reclaim its dominion, but in such a weakened state that it was no longer a viable historical bloc. With Mussolini's March on Rome in 1922, a new, fascist state apparatus came to the fore and managed to conduct a successful war of maneuver and gain a position of hegemony in Italy.

The incident between the Sassari Brigade and the striking Turin workers provides a more nuanced example of a battle for hegemony. Not only can there be two (or more) parties vying for hegemonic dominance, but in some cases one party can attempt to swing another group over to their version of hegemony. The soldiers of the Sassari Brigade were unaware of any details in the plight of the workers and were told by their commanders that the workers were responsible for the Brigades' 'postponed demobilization,' thereby creating animosity against the workers (Carlucci 45). The southern soldiers dismissed the workers as well-paid ne'er-do-wells.

In the Gramscian 'common sense' of the soldiers, the workers were not worthy of respect. Hall describes the Gramscian concept of common sense: "...the practical everyday consciousness of the masses...Common sense is not coherent; it is usually 'disjointed and episodic,' fragmentary and contradictory...the terrain of conceptions and categories on which the practical consciousness of the masses of the people is actually formed" (165). Gramsci does not provide a succinct description of common sense (except calling it analogous to the "'popular-national' character of French culture"), but does contribute broad parameters: "...common sense is an ambiguous, contradictory and multiform concept, and to refer to common sense as a confirmation of truth is a nonsense" (Gramsci in Forgas 346). The common sense of the soldiers of the Sassari Brigade labeled the striking workers, relative to their position in the military, as men that did not merit either respect or mercy.

In order to successfully change the common sense of the Brigade, to effectively adjust their 'practical everyday consciousness,' Gramsci fought a multifaceted and wide-ranging war of position. In order to sway the soldiers, Gramsci wrote articles, spoke personally with soldiers, and gave public speeches, but he also created leaflets and small posters that reinforced the common interests that both the soldiers and workers shared, and demonstrated "that they all fundamentally belonged to the same social class" (Carlucci 45). The soldiers of the Brigade had a hegemonic advantage as a military unit, but Gramsci worked ceaselessly to help the soldiers respect, and perhaps accept, the common sense of the workers.

Gramsci and his comrades in their war of position drank with the soldiers, walked with them, talked with them and "...would also let some brief, straightforward and persuasive flyers slip

into their hands. These had been written especially for them by Antonio Gramsci himself, not in Italian, but in the dialect of their own island” (Carlucci 46). Between his skilled use of rhetoric and his use of their common native tongue, Gramsci managed to get the Sassari Brigade to see that the plight of the workers was a cause that they should not crush. The soldiers came to share the common sense of the workers and this particular incident of unrest was dispelled: the war of position was so well implemented that a war of maneuver never materialized.

Gramsci’s life and work also illustrates one of the crucial innovations of the Gramscian concept of hegemony: it is dynamic, complex, and never belies a stronger power dominating a weaker power absolutely. Even the State is seldom absolute in its hegemony. Both Mussolini and Stalin were ruthless and far-reaching in their quest for absolute power, but Gramsci himself, exerted a certain hegemony from his prison cell. He had no power to speak of, yet while under their oppression he produced writings that spoke to their despotism, and all of his work escaped their censors. Today, Mussolini and Stalin are seen as historical anomalies, but “a Gramscian notion of hegemony is currently used ‘in virtually every discussion of language policy and power’” (Carlucci 223). Power comes in many forms and can affect any area of life, but Gramsci’s work provides the discourse necessary to understand its dynamics in practice.

### *The Origin(s) of ‘Hegemony’*

This is principally another aside, but with a concept of such import at least being aware of the controversy over the origin of the concept seems prudent. According to the *Encyclopedia of Marxism*, “[t]he term comes from the ancient Greek; [sic] *hegemonika symmachia* was an alliance of a number of city-states under the direction of one dominant state called the *hegemon*. The term

entered common usage in English in the 1840s in connection with European power struggles – ‘Macedonia exercised hegemony over Greece.’” This usage would still be understood as loosely appropriate today, but in a simplified sense, non-Gramscian way.

In current literature, the source of the term ‘hegemony’ for Gramsci is thought by many to be Lenin, or one of his cadre of Russian Social Democrats. It must be assumed, given Gramsci’s vast reading knowledge and embrace of the Russian Revolution of 1917, that he would be familiar with the writings of Lenin, and ‘hegemony’ does occur: “...at the present moment all Marxist circles are interested in the question of liquidationism and in assessing the problem of hegemony of the proletariat” (1). In this article that disses the magazine *Nasha Zarya*, the word ‘hegemony’ appears 14 times. Lenin used the term in his writings, not often, but often enough that Gramsci would undoubtedly have seen his usage.

Some recent scholarship has raised the possibility that Gramsci developed the concept from his study of linguistics at the University of Turin. Ives forwards Lo Piparo’s contention that “...Gramsci initially became familiar with a well-developed and complex concept of ‘hegemony’ as it was being used in linguistics. This point has been overlooked by many Gramsci scholars who routinely point to the roots of hegemony in the Russian Social Democrats, Plekhanov or Lenin” (43). Ives goes on to state that “Gramsci was familiar with the term ‘hegemony’ as used by linguists as a synonym for the terms ‘prestige’ and ‘attraction’ to describe how certain populations adopt and adapt the linguistic forms of other social groups (61).

Forgacs also supports Lo Piparo’s position that “Gramsci’s conception of hegemony also appears to have been influenced by historical linguistics in its accounts of the influence or

‘prestige’ exerted by one form of language over another” (423). According to Carlucci, “...Gramsci continued to work on linguistic subjects after he stopped attending university. Although he never graduated, early in 1918 he was still working on what should have been his thesis” (207). These concepts from historical linguistics, and their pragmatic meanings in the lives of languages, would have been familiar to Gramsci, and he applies them beyond linguistics:

These terms designated the process by which the speakers of one form of a language exert an influence over others, changing the way the latter speak, either by simple everyday contact or through the mediation of the education system and other channels of cultural communication. Gramsci extends this process from language to other relations of political and cultural influence of an ‘active’, ‘expansive’ and consensual rather than a passive, mechanical or merely coercive kind (Forgacs 324).

Forgacs further illuminates the point at length in a footnote on the innovations that Bartoli contributed to the science of language:

Matteo Guilio Bartoli (1873-1946) taught linguistics at the University of Turin and had supervised Gramsci’s unfinished thesis on historical linguistics. He founded a movement known as ‘neolinguistics’ (later special linguistics) in which language change was seen as a process whereby a dominant speech community spread its influence over contiguous subordinate communities: the city over the surrounding countryside, the ‘standard’ language over the dialect, the dominant socio-cultural group over the subordinate one. Bartoli developed a set of ‘areal norms’ according to which the older of two given linguistic forms would be found in more isolated areas, in peripheries rather than centres. Using these norms, the linguist could reconstruct the direction in which innovations (new linguistic forms) had spread. It has been argued [Franco Lo Piparo, *Lingua intellettuale egemonia in Gramsci (Language, Intellectuals, and Hegemony in Gramsci)*, Rome-Bari, 1979] that Gramsci’s conception of hegemony, insofar as it deals with relations of cultural and ideological influence between social groups, was influenced by this and related conceptions (417).

The scholarship of Lo Piparo pushes the boundaries of what is conceived of as the established circle of influence for Gramsci. It is unfortunate that his 1979 book (*Lingua intellettuale egemonia in Gramsci*) is no longer available [anywhere], but his recent Gramsci book (*Il Professor*

*Gramsci e Wittgenstein: Il linguaggio e il potere*, 2014) is as well researched as it is revelatory on the direct academic connection between Gramsci and Wittgenstein.

Concerning the origin(s) of the term ‘hegemony,’ my contention is that the term was appropriated from Lenin and the Russian Social Democrats, but then repurposed by Gramsci into a concept that he developed from the linguistics concepts brought to light by Lo Piparo, shown above. Ives himself includes, “Gramsci rarely invents new terms or concepts but instead works with previously existing terminology that his readers would be familiar with from other authors or contexts” (65). Among the terms that Gramsci repurposes in his literary legacy include ‘intellectuals,’ ‘passive revolution,’ and ‘subaltern,’ terms that he has molded to his use “by stretching and altering them” (Ives 65). I believe that Gramsci lifted the term ‘hegemony’ from Lenin’s work, which he knew well, and adapted it to his own purpose, stretching it to allow a more in-depth and complete analysis of the condition of domination and altering the term to make it adaptable beyond the strict confines of Marxist theory. I consider Gramsci’s appropriation of the term ‘hegemony’ from Lenin and his redevelopment of the concept of hegemony to be applicable beyond the political realm to be Gramsci’s mic drop.



### [Bridge: Orality vs. Literacy]

Gramsci was familiar with the Western academic tradition from his time at the University of Turin, but he was also raised by a mother who was culturally Sardinian with its rich oral tradition. Gramsci was a skilled speaker of several languages and was linguistically aware of the power of language, especially a vernacular, to create social and/or cultural change. The incident with the Sassari Brigade in Turin during the *Biennio Rosso* was a testament to his skill in an oral setting with the former peasant and shepherd soldiers, as well a testament to his wisdom to leverage their vernacular to sway their leanings. But Gramsci is known primarily for the written word, particularly his *Prison Notebooks*, which reflect his skill in the Western literacy tradition, a tradition which remains an academic institution today.

The twenty-first century Western academic tradition is singularly a literacy culture, the written word holds primacy as the accepted form of fact—this study is an example of the tradition. Those of us raised in this tradition accept it as a given, accept it with little thought or consideration. The facts that we accept are written, and when we make a bank deposit, we examine the receipt to ensure that the numbers match the money that we deposited. We depend on seeing the thing in question on paper; we demand written proof. Currently we are grappling with how to trust legal documents that are digital. For this culmination project, all of the preparatory digital documents had to be printed, signed in ink, and sent to the university via the US mail (or FedEx); even though the document is provided by the university digitally, the ability to ‘sign it’ in a legally binding way is absent; electronic signatures are not yet widely accepted. This technology is possible in some industries and fields, but the technology has yet to filter down to the masses.

In Ong's treatise "Orality and Writing," he allows us to peek behind the curtain on the rise of literacy. The early Western tradition in fifth century BCE Greece witnessed the arrival of the written word, a paradigmatic advancement in our minds, but one that was not seen as progress by many of those contemporary Greeks, including Plato. Ong summarizes the four objections that Plato voices against writing in his *Phaedrus*: writing 1) "is inhuman, pretending to establish outside the mind what in reality can only be in the mind"; 2) "writing destroys memory. Those who use writing will become forgetful...Writing weakens the mind"; 3) "a written text is basically unresponsive...if you ask a text, you get back nothing but the same, often stupid, words"; and 4) "Writing is passive, out of it, in an unreal, unnatural world" (79). As Ong so aptly notes, these were also arguments leveled against the use of computers at their arrival in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

The irony that Plato embedded his argument against writing within an oral medium, the dialog, and then put it in writing to preserve it should not be missed as this marks the birth of our Western tradition of literacy. Havelock points out that writing creates a separation, a divorce of the writer from the written, "of the personality which thinks and knows, and that of the body of knowledge which is thought about and known" (201). Ong recognizes the crucial element that his division makes possible: "Writing, as has earlier been seen, serves to separate and distance the knower and the known and thus to establish objectivity" (113-114). This concept is sought and coveted by the modern world, "the book relays an utterance from a source...There is no way directly to refute a text...This is the reason why 'the book says' is popularly tantamount to 'it is true.' It is also the reason books have been burnt" (Ong 79). By mythologizing objectivity, the spoken form of language, the most 'real' form of language, is discounted, is found deficient.

By placing such a high value on objectivity, the deeper and more contextual subjectivity is often minimized. Ong spells out the unique space that orality creates:

The word in its natural, oral habitat is a part of a real, existential present. Spoken utterance is addressed by a real, living person to another real, living person or real, living persons, at a specific time in a real setting which always includes much more than real words (101).

Recording the utterance removes some these components, but the utterance remains far more expressive than the written word, “written words are isolated from the fuller context in which spoken words come into being” (Ong 101). An objective meaning may be gleaned from a written text, but this is highly dependent on the skill of the writer, and subjective bias can be couched in this ‘objective’ meaning. ‘Objectivity’ is a myth of the modern world.

The fraught relationship between objective and subjective is evident in our daily communication with friends and colleagues. While text can be written that contains simple statements of fact, with little risk of being misunderstood, or little risk of any misunderstanding being problematic, such as, “Version 2.0 incorporates several advancements in keyboard usability, including...” But often written discourse is deficient precisely because context, information about the emotional state of the writer, their manner of speaking, and even their comfort with the language of communication are lacking. Email quickly became a brood of miscommunication because of these factors, among others, and finding a solution became necessary. That solution, which grow in number with each new operating system update, are emojis. Emojis help us bridge the gap, sometimes the abyss, between written and oral.

While written discourse is an amazing and wonderful development in human technology, providing for permanence and perfect repetition, it can be stilted and lacks, strictly by its form of

delivery, the spontaneity and depth of verbal communication.<sup>7</sup> The development of the written word has led to incredible advances in literature, science, and culture, but recognizing that it is not without limitations is meaningful. By examining orality critically, which is transitory and immediate, full of expression through intonation, gesture, volume, and the like, we also gain a more nuanced perspective on literacy and its limitations.

### [Verse 3: Oral Tradition and the Black Experience]

When I was in elementary school, I spent a year in the African country of Liberia. As an awkward teenager in a very foreign land, I was met with both curiosity and deserved ambivalence. As the only white kid in a local African school,<sup>8</sup> I was treated as just another kid by my peers. The cement block walls provided a much warmer learning environment than I expected, although the equatorial climate provided little respite except rain, six months of rain. During the rainy season we went through as many umbrellas as pineapples. My schoolmates were vivacious and vocal, always in song or demonstrating their percussion chops with pencils between classes. When I was in Liberia in the 1970s, the women wore lappas, a long, wrap-around skirt, of the most exquisite patterns and vibrant colors. The women often coupled their lappa with a bubba, a loosely fitting top, and a full head wrap of the same effervescent material. Men wore western-style pants with a brilliantly colored and patterned, loose fitting top with a deep V-neck that was completely adorned with a two-inch wide strip of intricate embroidery. When meeting local men, the handshake ritual was rich, and it took me two weeks to learn the staccato snap that meant the conclusion of the handshaking ritual. We school kids wore the universal private school wear: long dark blue slacks and a light blue button-down Oxford shirt. From my bedroom at home I could hear the incessant slap of the Atlantic Ocean on the west coast of Africa; two years later a violent and decades-long coup plunged the country into a morass of chaos and seemingly unending death.

Such an experience teaches many things, among them is that 'culture' is more than what I wear to the market. Gates in his *The Signifying Monkey* captures more of the minutiae concerning how African-based experience has informed the modern African American and their unique

culture. Although the African American culture is a vast, complex, and evolving, miasma of point, counterpoint, and the abyss that lies between, for this study we will limit our attention to the importance of orality and its close cousin the act of Signifyin(g).

### *The Primacy of Orality in the African American culture*

Although no written documentation exists, Gates states, “[t]here can be little doubt that certain fundamental terms for order that the black enslaved brought with them from Africa, and maintained through the mnemonic devices peculiar to oral literature, continued to function both as meaningful units of New World belief systems and as traces of their origins” (5). The value of memorization that Plato spoke fondly of 2500 years ago was the means by which enslaved Africans could maintain and perpetuate their culture in the New World. Analogous to the Homeric tradition in Greece, through spoken and sung word the belief systems, value priorities, and cultural legacies of Africa were preserved in the US.

An enslaved people in a new continent, illiterate in the literal sense only, managed through the oral tradition to transmit their being to the next generations, serving

as a sign of the disrupted wholeness of an African system of meaning and belief that black slaves recreated from memory, preserved by oral narration, improvised upon in ritual—especially in the rituals of the repeated oral narrative—and willed to their own subsequent generations, as hermetically sealed and encoded charts of cultural descent (Gates 5).

With the extreme value placed on literacy in the US, a culture that transmits its core orally is usually seen as deficient, somehow inferior. The Hmong experienced this discrimination as well, with a two-thousand-year-old language that did not find literacy until the 1950s. Oral language contains levels of complexity that a flat digital file requires encryption to try and replicate, and

often fails. In the days of wide-spread cyber threats and rampant digital forgery, orality may yet return as a savior.

The African American culture remains centered in an oral tradition, a tradition that engenders unity, and an important carrier of this ethic is the church. As Brummett posits, "...a gospel music service is not fully understood as the words and music on paper, not even as the singer's voice alone, but rather as the singer's voice together with the ways in which the audience joins in verbally and nonverbally" (155). While outsiders may see the congregation participation present in a traditional Black church as disruptive or even disrespectful, the "[c]all-response serves to create unity and harmony between the preacher and congregation; instead of a series of interruptions of an individual sermon, it is part of an entire church service that is being created on the spot" (Brummett 154). The orality-centric behavior seen in the church is not native to the church, but represents a window on the African American culture, and that orality is not without purpose.

### *The Rhetorical act of Signifyin(g)*

A classically Black rhetorical strategy that Gates refers to as 'signifying,' although more appropriately it is 'signifyin(g)' where "[t]he absent g is a figure for the Signifyin(g) black difference" (51). According to Abrahams, "Signifyin(g) is a *technique* of indirect argument or persuasion,' 'a language of implication,' 'to imply, goad, beg, boast, by *indirect* verbal or gestural means'...one does not signify something; rather, one signifies in *some way*" (cited in Gates 59). Inherent to the act of Signifyin(g) is the necessity of feigning, or making indirect communication with wit and verbal skill; it is "the term for black rhetoric, the obscuring of apparent meaning" (Gates 59). Adroit

verbal repartee is often interpreted by the unknowing as play, silliness, but that is far from the truth.

The Signifyin(g) act is dynamic. One of the elements is the ‘semantic appropriation’ “described by Mikhail Bakhtin as a double-voiced word, that is, a word or utterance, in this context, decolonized for the black’s purposes ‘by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which has—and retains—its own orientation’” (Gates 55). The act of usurping the meaning of a word used by a rival for your own purposes, namely to take their words and use them against them, is verbal warfare.<sup>9</sup> In Gates’ estimation, “Signifyin(g) is black double-voicedness; because it always entails formal revision and an intertextual relation...Repetition, with a signal difference, is fundamental to the nature of Signifyin(g)” (56). The semantic component of Signifyin(g) is crucial to its oral delivery, but there are other components that also contribute to the power of this rhetorical device.

According to Gates, “[t]he black rhetorical tropes, subsumed under Signifyin(g), would include marking, loud-talking, testifying, calling out (of one’s name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozens, and so on” (57). Although some of these terms are familiar, ‘playing the dozens’ is most likely not and bears further exegesis to come to terms with the entire concept of Signifyin(g). Gates relates a definition of ‘playing the dozens,’ as “a very elaborate game traditionally played by black boys, in which the participants insult each other’s relatives, especially their mothers. The object of the game is to test emotional strength. The first person to give up in anger is the loser...to Signify is to be engaged in a highly motivated rhetorical act, aimed at figurative, ritual insult” (75). In another inscribed definition, the game is centered around “making derogatory, often obscene,



remarks about another's mother, parents, or family members. ('Yo' mama' is an expression used as retribution for previous vituperation.)" (Gates 75). Examining the concept of Signifyin(g) allows us to gather a more complete understanding of this distinctively Black rhetorical tradition.

"[W]hat the white folks call verbal skills" (Gates 81) are actually well beyond that simple dismissive; Signifyin(g) carries the rhetorical into the real world. Two components of Signifyin(g) that are especially appropriate to the topic of this study are that, according to Kochman, it "implies an aggressive mode of rhetoric, a form of symbolic action that yields catharsis" and as Mitchell-Kernan intuits, it is "a tactic employed in game activity—verbal dueling—which is engaged in as an end in itself" (cited in Gates 87). Signifyin(g) is unique to Black culture, and by often being placed within the 'game' category, it is inherently competitive. Domination is the object of most games and the act/game of Signifyin(g) is no different.

Signifyin(g) is not a common term in popular culture, but the descriptions provided above should seem familiar. To anyone who has turned the radio to a popular music station, these concepts will not be foreign. JAY-Z, Beyoncé, 50 Cent, and Eminem are commonly heard (usually censored appropriately for public consumption) and their lyrics mirror the elements that define Signifyin(g). JAY-Z is a student of language, "I'd spend free time reading the dictionary, building my vocabulary for battles...[toward] your desire to be the best poet on the block" (7). "Poets and hustlers play with language, because for them simple clarity can mean failure. They bend language, improvise, and invent new ways of speaking the truth" (JAY-Z 56).s These are the techniques of someone successful in Signifyin(g), someone with verbal ability. While Gramsci used written and oral language separately to achieve his goals, JAY-Z found hegemonic inclusion through oral

language exclusively, but with a musical accompaniment; JAY-Z achieved his goal by mastering the Signifyin(g) rhetorical form to reach the hegemonic inner circle.

**[Chorus 2: JAY-Z (Bard of Marcy Projects), Master of the Spoken Word]**

Shawn Corey Carter sounds like a pretty unassuming name, at least less assuming than names like Curtis James Jackson III or Marshall Bruce Mathers III, but such is the rap life. JAY-Z was conceived by Gloria Carter and Adnis Reeves, who made love under the sycamore tree, and he was subsequently born on December 4, 1969, weighing in at 10 pounds, 8 ounces in Brooklyn, New York (*Black Album*, “December 4<sup>th</sup>”). He was raised in the Marcy Projects, located in the Bed-Stuy (Bedford-Stuyvesant) neighborhood of the Brooklyn borough of New York City (JAY-Z 4). As JAY-Z sees it, “Housing projects are a great metaphor for the government’s relationship to poor folks: these huge islands built mostly in the middle of nowhere, designed to warehouse lives. People are still people, though, so we turned the projects into real communities, poor or not. We played in fire hydrants and had cookouts and partied, music bouncing off concrete walls” (155). JAY-Z is an inspiring example of a person that was born to a life in the Projects, but flourished and rose to the top of his game and the world.

JAY-Z witnessed a cipher in the neighborhood, the guy “was rhyming, throwing out couplet after couplet, like he was in a trance, for a crazy long time—thirty minutes straight off the top of his head, never losing the beat, riding the handclaps. He rhymed about nothing—the sidewalk, the benches...I was dazzled. *That’s some cool shit* was the first thing I thought. Then: *I could do that*” (5). And JAY-Z did do that. To this day,

He doesn’t write down any of his lyrics before he records a song. It’s a feat of memorization that came from necessity. ‘I used to get ideas and I used to be running around, I used to be outside. I wasn’t nowhere where I could write,’ he says. ‘Sometimes I used to run in the store, write ‘em on a paper bag, put it in my pocket. But you only can put so many paper bags in your pocket, you know - and so I had to start memorizing’ (Kohn).

Plato must be amused, for JAY-Z writing lyrics on paper bags proved inefficient and he found it necessary to resort to the pre-literacy method: memorization.

When JAY-Z was 11 his father left, leaving his mother alone to tend to him and his brother. While he reconciled with his father as an adult, the scar remained. In *Decoded*, he reflects on that reality, “One of the things we corrected was the absentfather karma our fathers’ generation’s created. We made it some real bitch shit to bounce on your kids...Our fathers were gone, usually because they just bounced, but we took their old records and used them to build something fresh” (205, 255). Although his father had fled the Projects (and his family), the vinyl records that he left behind provided a legacy, a foundation upon which JAY-Z built an empire.

The high-tempo elements of his life are often placed front and center for effect, but he lived a ‘normal’ life in the Projects of Brooklyn. JAY-Z was a good student but dropped out of high school, “[s]chool was always easy for me; I never once remember feeling challenged. I have a photographic memory, so if I glanced at something once, I could recall it for a test. I was reading on a twelfth-grade level in the sixth, I could do math in my head, but I had no interest in sitting in a classroom” (190). JAY-Z left school to hustle crack, in the Projects you either used or sold (Kohn), and eventually had crews in New Jersey and Maryland. Walking away from school proved to be wise, “[w]hen you step outside of school and have to teach yourself about life, you develop a different relationship to information” (JAY-Z 190). He pursued this vocation for 13 years, and he attributes this effort to his success in running a business and creating an empire. In his words, “...the way to redeem your past is not to run from it, but to try to understand it, and use it as a

foundation to grow” (31n15). To say that JAY-Z grew that foundation is an enormous understatement.

Once JAY-Z completed his debut album, he attempted to lure a label into covering it, but the existing labels were afraid of the violence in his lyrics. Moving on, JAY-Z and two partners established the Roc-A-Fella label in 1994; listening to JAY-Z rap the label name it is a homophone for ‘Rockefeller,’ a fact corroborated by Greenburg (“Empire State of Mind” 33-34). On the newly established Roc-A-Fella label, JAY-Z released his first album, *Reasonable Doubt*, in 1996. According to *Forbes* in 2019, “...he’s amassed 14 No. 1 albums, 22 Grammy awards and over \$500 million in pretax earnings in a decade” and “has accumulated a fortune that conservatively totals \$1 billion, making him one of only a handful of entertainers to become a billionaire—and the first hip-hop artist to do so” (Greenburg, “Artist, Icon, Billionaire”). In 2008 JAY-Z and Beyoncé were married; they currently have three children and live in Los Angeles.

From a musical, high-level perspective, Ezra Koenig (of the alternative group *Vampire Weekend*) provided a 2010 analysis of JAY-Z for *Rolling Stone* magazine in their “100 Greatest Artists” feature. Koenig considered JAY-Z “an exceedingly rare combination of intelligence, weirdness, seriousness and pop appeal... the lyrics of a dude who, supposedly, was describing a world that at least 50 percent of his fans ‘couldn't relate to” (*Rolling Stone*). Koenig goes on to describe JAY-Z’s commercial appeal as “the most artful and exciting musician to consistently make hits, and I mean real hits – Top 10 singles deep into his career, like ‘Empire State of Mind.’ How many artists make it 15 years without embarrassing themselves, let alone while maintaining their relevancy?”

At JAY-Z's Coachella performance, Koenig says that JAY-Z was "offering each individual brain in that crowd the opportunity to think critically about language and the state of the world today... His lyrics are deep enough to demand exegesis" (*Rolling Stone*). While being asked to comment on an artist that you value may not result in an entirely 'unbiased' analysis, if the commentary emanates from an artist out of a very different genre ('indie rock,' and a group with a song entitled "Oxford Comma"!)) the analysis may actually be somewhat 'objective,' if not a little fawning. In the words of Dyson, "[a]s a hip hop writer, JAY-Z epitomizes black orality in the twenty-first century...Jay has made high art of low culture" (84).

**[Verse 4: Overcoming Hegemony through the Power of Language]**

The United States is the most consumer-driven country in the world, and I contend that cultural hegemony in the United States is determined largely by economic hegemony: those that hold the purse strings of the country determine how cultural hegemony will become manifest. The economic purse strings in the US are held by those known as the ‘one-percenters.’ Wikipedia defines a one-percenter as “[a] member of the top one percent of a population by wealth, ability, etc. (same as the ninety-ninth percentile); especially in a society with high wealth inequality.” The US is (clearly) a wealthy capitalist country where wealth inequality is discussed in the news almost daily, yet the disparity continues unabated. People within the one-percenter group control and/or own every company that supplies the nation with news, entertainment, food, drink, and services—this group controls everything that the population consumes. Everything. With enormous wealth comes enormous power.

To be considered a one-percenter, the common metric is earned wage, data which is available from the Social Security Administration. Although this data represents taxable work income, it does not include income from investments, which for most of those in the top earner category is where they ‘make’ the majority of their yearly income. The one-percenter threshold varies from state to state, in New Mexico the yearly wage figure (the lowest) is \$256,168 whereas in Connecticut the figure (the highest) is \$663,009; the median yearly income for these states are \$25,346 and \$43,490 respectively (Suneson). The discrepancy in one-percenter wage between these two states is striking, but real discrepancy of note is that between what the one-percenters bring home yearly relative to what the ‘normal’ family brings home yearly.

While the media often present capitalism as clicking along just fine for most citizens, that is not actually the case. According to an analysis from the Economic Policy Institute, “[t]he bottom 90 percent earned 69.8 percent of all earnings in 1979 but just 60.9 in 2017. In contrast, the top 1.0 percent increased its share of earnings from 7.3 percent in 1979 to 13.4 percent in 2017, a near doubling” (Kagan). The real tell is that the same study found that wages for the top 0.1% tripled over the same period, not including investments. Wages for most of the population are not keeping pace with inflation, but for those in the dominant hegemonic group, capitalism is working out very well.

True to a Gramscian analysis (being done mid-global pandemic), it is noted that this hegemony of the one-percenters is not absolute. The 99% do hold some sway over what is consumed, where it is consumed, and to what extent it is consumed, but this does not constitute a great deal of control overall. Despite such staggering wage and wealth disparity, a shrinking take in the wage equation, and an increasing dearth of middle-income jobs, the American Dream is as alive and well as ever.

From *People* magazine to the Grammy’s and the nightly news, it is difficult to avoid a glimpse of the lives of the rich and famous. And that recognition is followed immediately by, either verbally or silently, the thought, “That could be ME!” This is the American Dream: anything is possible in the land of opportunity. Such is the optimistic human spirit that recognizes opportunity in a land where the rich only get richer, and the poor often only get poorer. And yet, “It could happen to ME.”



The rap music landscape is filled with cases of “See! It happened to ME!” although they are termed more down the lines of “LOOK! I did it MYSELF!” And that latter exclamation is indeed the correct one. In JAY-Z’s words, “[t]he kid on the streets is getting a shot at a dream. The dream is that he will be the one to make this hustling thing pay off in a big way. He sees the guy who gets rich and drives the nice car and thinks, yep, that’ll be me” (75). The majority of the successful rappers rose like phoenixes from pyres of broken homes in poverty-stricken neighborhoods. There have been influential rappers from the middle class (e.g., Beastie Boys, Drake, and Kanye West), but for many, rap was an avenue to escape the oppression of inner-city life. That inner-city life also provided an experience, a story worth telling, that became the story line of rap: the violence and unpredictability of the urban street became the rap message.

Few communicate that message musically as well as JAY-Z. Through his skill with the mic, his discipline in the studio, and his acumen for business, he is the very embodiment of the American Dream. From selling crack in the Brooklyn Projects to dining with the President of the United States, it would be difficult to envision a more persuasive rags-to-riches trajectory. Kohn concurs, “he’s living the 21<sup>st</sup> Century version of the American dream, straight out of the ‘hood” (CBS News). This trajectory is documented in *Living Color* through his music, an opus that has few equals in the annals of music history.

### *Hegemonic Triggers in the music of JAY-Z*

With its dawn, rap music opened up a war of maneuver on the existing dominant hegemony in the US. As JAY-Z relates, “[r]ap started off so lawless, not giving a fuck about any rules or limits, that it was like a new frontier. We knew we were opening up new territory even if we left behind a

whole country, or sometimes our own families. But we struck oil” (255). This new musical component was brash and modern, whereas the lyrical component was violent, crude to an extreme, heavily drug-laden, and occasionally misogynistic. Its arrival frightened the State as well as the hegemonic forces in control, but it captured the attention and enthusiasm of the many, “[i]t wasn’t just another youth culture; it was something new and transcendent, the kind of art that changes the paths of people’s lives. I know that sounds overblown, but ask any kid of my generation—and this applies to black kids and white kids...” (JAY-Z 255). Even more abrupt than the slow genesis of rock in the 1950s, rap was an unabashed frontal assault, a siege, on the existing order.

Gramsci’s war metaphor for the dissemination of hegemonic forces is as apt today as it was in his time, “[b]lack in the eighties and early nineties cities in this country were literally battlegrounds. Kids were as well armed as a paramilitary outfit in a small country...Guns were easier to get in the hood than public assistance. There were times when the violence just seemed like background music, like we’d all gone numb” (JAY-Z 158). Rappers were on the front lines of this war of maneuver, many were killed, many more were incarcerated, but some survived. For JAY-Z “[t]here was a real tension between the power of the story we wanted to tell and just how desperately some powerful people didn’t want to hear it” (158). Censorship and police overreach were the rule, but rap music managed to create a historical bloc that persists today.

This historical bloc battled to have its voice heard, “[h]ardcore rap wasn’t political in an explicit way, but its volume and urgency kept a story alive that a lot of people would have preferred to disappear. Our story. It scared a lot of people” (JAY-Z 158-159). That rap story reflected a

Gramscian common sense, a view of the world that was real for the rappers that lived it, as well as a view that their listeners could identify with. JAY-Z says, “Hip-hop, of course, was hugely influential in finally making our slice of America visible through our own lens—not through the lens of outsiders” (155). Rap, like all worthy artforms, is multilayered and complex; JAY-Z describes it as such:

The music is meant to be provocative—which doesn’t mean it’s necessarily obnoxious, but it is (mostly) confrontational, and more than that, it’s dense with multiple meanings. Great rap should have all kinds of unresolved layers that you don’t necessarily figure out the first time you listen to it. Instead it plants dissonance in your head. You can enjoy a song that knocks in the club or has witty punch lines the first time you hear it. But great rap retains mystery. It leaves shit rattling around in your head that won’t make sense till the fifth or sixth time through. It challenges you (54).

This common sense in lyrics was too not shy to exclude governmental abuses of power, lack of viable work opportunities, and the obvious reality that its constituents were not included in the dominant hegemonic circle.

In support of the rappers’ war of maneuver, JAY-Z waged a war of position through his music and this study contends that an analysis of the commodities referenced in his musical lyrics reveal a progression in his relationship with hegemony in America. In his studio work, JAY-Z initially attempts to break into the ranks of successful rappers and, like all notable rappers, his lyrics are laden with comments on his relations with commodities that are valued within the rap community. As JAY-Z becomes both more successful as a musician and more notable as a celebrity, his lyrics belie a notable change in both his interactions with the commodities and the value and type of those commodities.

JAY-Z speaks to the relationship between rap, language, and commodities at length, including,

Everything that hip-hop touches is transformed by the encounter, especially things like language and brands, which leave themselves open to constant redefinition. With language, rappers have raided the dictionary and written in new entries to every definition—words with one or two meanings now have twelve. The same thing happens with brands—Cristal meant one thing, but hip-hop gave its definition some new entries. The same goes for other brands: Timberland and Courvoisier, Versace and Maybach. We gave those brands a narrative, which is one of the reasons anyone buys anything: to own not just a product, but to become part of a story (84).

Although the philosophic repertoire of JAY-Z appears to be rather extensive (judging by the familiarity with philosophic movements that he raps), the concept of Gramscian hegemony is most likely not part of that repertoire. However, the commodity-related references in the lyrics of his works indicate a continuum of development relative to the hegemonic dominance that is prevalent in American culture, evidenced on several levels. On the most overt level, the use of both commercial brands and non-brand cultural artifacts reveal an increasing comfort with, and participation in, the dominance that makes up American hegemony.

This study interprets the JAY-Z rags-to-riches story as the power of language, when wielded by a gifted practitioner, to make a hegemonic breakthrough in America, “[r]ap is language art” (Morris). Commercial brand names and revered cultural artifacts that are dropped in the lyrics of JAY-Z songs provide an indicator of the progression and development of his relationship with American hegemony. In examining his studio music, JAY-Z passes through three hegemonic stages: 1) as an enterprising youth in the Brooklyn Projects, he recognizes that he is not within the circle of hegemonic inclusion; 2) as a successful rapper, he battles to achieve hegemonic inclusion; and 3) as an empire, he finds that he has breached the threshold of hegemonic inclusion, and has even risen to its pinnacle.

### *JAY-Z as a Hegemonic Outsider*

The metrics for hegemony in this study revolve around the threshold of the one-percenter, and a Black kid from the Projects of Brooklyn at the bottom of the crack pyramid is definitely an outsider. As JAY-Z moved up in the industry to have his own crews, he elevated his standing and influence, but it also made him aware that he wanted more: “I was the kid from public housing whose whole hood would rubberneck when an expensive car drove down the block” (9). As a kid, and even as an early rapper, JAY-Z was a hegemonic outsider, but knew that he had every intention of rising above his station.

The first studio work of JAY-Z, *Reasonable Doubt* (1996), was well-received, which Morris describes as a “clever, brash, kaleidoscopically grim 1996 debut,” In this album, the brands that JAY-Z calls out reference automobiles, clothes, and alcohol brands that are well within the reach of most. While these marques are not the common Ford and Hyundai brands, they are also not the brands that are associated with musicians of renown. In this album, most references are to the Lexus marque, “From chips to chicks to strippin' a Lexus” (“Dead Presidents II”), “By D'evils in the form of diamonds and Lexuses” (“D'Evils”), and “Like a Lexus, if driven wrong it's sure to hurt you” (“Can I Live”). The Mercedes Benz marque is mentioned, “Now all your mens is up in your Benz's,” “And E classes with Mo in the glasses” (“Ain't No Nigga”), and “Convoys of Benzes like we fouling in the U.N” (Bring It On”). Fast cars also make an appearance, “Notice the child swift like a Lotus” (“Cashmere Thoughts”), “Pushing Vettes through the 'jects” (“Can I Live”) and “The NSX rental, don't be fooled, my game is mental” (“Can I Live”). It should be noted that the most

exclusive car mentioned in this first album, the Acura NSX, is referred to as a rental; that is a significant sign of not being a hegemonic insider.

Clothing brands get even more play in the lyrics of JAY-Z's *Reasonable Doubt* and show his hegemonic reality. The song "Ain't No Nigga" is especially rich in sartorial references, "From Dolce Gabbana to H Bendel, I'm ringin' bells," "And keep your ass tight up in Versace, that's why," and "Fuck them Reebok broads, you made it known who your wife was / I got you frontin' in Armani sweaters." Although the brands are high-end, they are store-bought brands that are readily accessible to the person in the street. Shoe brands also take a shine in this song, "Shows in Cali with all the flavor suede Bally's" and "Surroundin' your feet in Joan & David and Charles Jourdan." Again, the brands are up-scale, but they are not exclusive brands. JAY-Z wants to be seen as having made it, even on this first album, "I see myself in his eyes, I moved from Levi's / To Guess to Versace, now it's diamonds like Liberace / That's just the natural cycle" ("Coming of Age"). Rappers are, in the words of JAY-Z, "...essentially a conceit, a first-person literary creation... The best rappers use their imaginations to take their own core stories and emotions and feed them to characters who can be even more dramatic or epic or provocative" (292). Like with the persona of Liberace, clothes are important for flash in the rap culture, and these brands are desirable, but they are not the clothes of a one-percenter.

In addition to automotive and clothing brands, alcohol brands and food also find voice in *Reasonable Doubt*. Cristal champagne appears often in his early work, including "Waddle off the champagne, Cristals by the bottle" ("Can't Knock the Hustle"), "Maybe this Cristals'll change your life, huh? Roll with the winners," ("Dead Presidents II"), and "Cristal's on ice, I like to toast, I keep

on spilling it” and “The Cristals they keep me wet like Baywatch” (“Feelin’ It”). Champagne is a favorite JAY-Z drink, commonly associated with wealth in the national image, and he is not exclusive to Cristal, “I’m feeling it, fill the glass to the top with Moët” (“Feelin’ It”) and “The Don, smell of Dom on my breath” (“Cashmere Thoughts”), the latter making a *The Godfather* connection. Food makes a more restrained appearance, primarily in “Cashmere Thoughts,” but the desired image is always wealth: “Caviar and silk dreams, my voice is linen” and “Words worth a million like I’m rapping them through platinum teeth / I got the Grey Poupon, you been warned.” In the album, there is no mention of beer, and only one of Hennessy, “Can I live, to all my niggas who drink Hennessy straight” (“Can I Live”), making all of the alcohol and food references up-scale references, but attainable for 99% of the population; these are not one-percenter references.

On *Reasonable Doubt*, there are several songs about working the streets for crack, and the deep-seated ambition to move up the food chain is evident. Street thug movie references are common through his catalog, *The Godfather* (“Politics as Usual”), Robert DeNiro, Al Pacino and Nino Brown (“Bring it On”), such as “My portfolio reads: leads to Don Corleone.” Even on his first album, JAY-Z looking well beyond, “Thank you, he’s out of here now, now like I was sayin’... we gotta build our own businesses, we gotta get our own record companies goin’ like Roc-A-Fella Records, we got this, put our own money in our businesses...” (“22 Two’s”). JAY-Z would like his listeners to think that he has arrived, “when people hear me telling my stories, or boasting in my songs, or whatever, they don’t hear some rapper telling them how much better than them he is. They hear it as their own voice” (295). JAY-Z is intimately familiar the American Dream, and with the direct connection between money and power, “Money is power, I’m energetic with facial credit

/ Pure platinum fetish for cheddars [money] / Spread lettuce heroes get deadish / I make moves that remove pebbles out of shoes” (“Bring it On”). But he is equally aware of the risks that are inherent in the quest: “Funny thing happens when years of chasing money unfolds / And the only thing worse than getting old is not getting old.” (“Can’t Knock the Hustle”). Mortality does not feature much in early JAY-Z works, but there are glimpses.

The next two JAY-Z albums, *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1* (1997) and *Vol 2...Hard Knock Life* (1998) reflect similar use of clothes and alcohol brands, but the automotive marques begin to move into more rarefied arenas. Mercedes Benz references remain, but they begin to represent a lower end commodity within his work, “Marble faucets and matching Rolls Royces / In the driveway from Monday to Friday...Let 'em make their way through the Benzes and the Rovers / Before they reach the door” (*In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*, “I Know What Girls Like”) “I go to sleep with a picture of a Porsche on my wall” (*In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*, “Intro - Hand It Down”), and the chorus of “Money Ain’t a Thang” (*Vol 2...Hard Knock Life*) opens with “In the Ferrari or Jaguar, switchin' four lanes / With the top down screamin out, money ain't a thang.” Cars remain a constant in the JAY-Z opus, but their progression provides a peek behind the curtain.

The commodity tell that JAY-Z is making inroads to the rap star life appears first in *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*, “Who You Wit II”: “Sexin' in a Lexus car Sexin' in a Lexus car...You can love me or hate me, either or I'ma stay winnin', rock the custom drop Bentleys.” When *Vol 2...Hard Knock Life* appears on shelves, the album cover has JAY-Z relaxing with his hand on a deep green Bentley convertible [drop top] (see Appendix B, below), the car referenced in the previous album only once. With this third album, the song “Coming of Age (Da Sequel)” makes references to a Bentley



convertible, but strikingly does not use the ultra-exclusive marque name, “Cause the last time they seen me hopping out the Coupe, I hopped out in a suit” and “While he drive around town in brand new Coupes and stuff...Nigga, we Lex movers, V-12 pushers.” This song sequel, the original appears on his first album, *Reasonable Doubt*, indicates through commodity callouts that JAY-Z has begun his ascension of the rap pyramid.

References to money are laced throughout his early album, and in his autobiography, JAY-Z reflects on this life on the street,

No one’s going to help us. So we went for self, for family, for block, for crew— which sounds selfish; it’s one of the criticisms hustlers and rappers both get, that we’re hypercapitalists, concerned only with the bottom line and enriching ourselves. But it’s just a rational response to the reality we faced. No one was going to help us. Not even our fathers stuck around...The competition wasn’t about greed—or not just about greed. It was about survival (86).

This was an active and conscious choice for a kid in the Projects, use or sell, and the risks were painfully evident each day. The choice is made, but an end-goal is in mind as well: “the one who gets rich and gets out before he gets got, that’s the key to a hustler’s motivation” (JAY-Z 76). JAY-Z’s war of position employed, commodity-laden lyrics, among others, to paint a common-sense vision of real life and, hopefully, a glimpse into a future life. The lyrics of *Reasonable Doubt* telegraph JAY-Z’s quest for money and recognition, but the references of this early period in his recording career signal that he is still outside of the hegemonic circle.

### *JAY-Z Battling for Hegemonic Inclusion*

With the release of his sixth studio album, *The Blueprint* (2011), JAY-Z starts to establish himself as the premier rapper, the leader of the crew. According to genius.com, “*The Blueprint* [which] was a movement as much as an album – the album that began to turn Jay Z from a rapper

into *the* rapper.” A rousing example of this confidence is heard on “Hola’ Hovito” when he equates himself with the solar eminence: “Yeah you shining, but the only thing you're leaving out / You're a candle in the sun - that shit don't even out.” This album marks the point where JAY-Z, as a successful rapper, battles to leverage his skill with a mic and success in business to achieve hegemonic inclusion on a wider stage. Having five well-received albums in the bag, JAY-Z used the sixth, *The Blueprint*, to solidify his position as the king of rap.

While the previous album, *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia* (2000), retained the methodology and delivery of JAY-Z’s earlier albums, including callouts to specific automotive marques, upper-level clothing brands, and alcohol labels, *The Blueprint* was substantially more confrontational. There are two primary themes on this album: JAY-Z as the pre-eminent rapper and his aggression toward all of those that would dispute the assertion that JAY-Z was at the top of the game. Although we have considered a musician’s lyrics as a war of position within the larger war of maneuver for the rap mantle, on *The Blueprint* JAY-Z places himself at the pinnacle of rap pantheon and aggressively supports that assertion.

Automotive marques and clothing brands held a favored place in the early lyrics of JAY-Z, but by the release of *The Blueprint* they are rare. The majority of the automotive references are not marques, but simply mention big rims, dubs, and sweet tires, “Slim with the tilted brim on twenty-inch rims” (“Jigga that Nigga”) and “Then I showed up in that dubbed out buggy / And then they got fuzzy / And they don't remember that, and I don't remember you” (“Song Cry”). As for clothes brands, it almost seems retro, “The Izod bucket on, I'm so old school / Yellow wrist watch, Gucci flip flops / Six top model chicks - who is this hot?” (“Jigga that Nigga”). The themes and topics

that were woven through JAY-Z's early works are virtually absent five years later, although references to the Hamptons, "Lampin' in the Hamptons" ("Jigga that Nigga"), will resurface in his later works with much more authenticity.

The aggression present in *The Blueprint* outstrips that in JAY-Z's earlier works. There is confrontation and Signifyin(g), but the demeanor of the entire album has an edge. The aggression is most pronounced in the second track, "Takeover": "It's like bringin' a knife to a gunfight, pen to a test / Your chest in the line of fire with your thin-ass vest / You bringin' them boys to men, how them boys gonna win?..., We bring knife to fistfight, kill your drama / We kill you motherfuckin' ants with a sledgehammer," "No, you're not on my level, get your brakes tweaked / I sold what your whole album sold in my first week," and "Had a spark when you started, but now you're just garbage / Fell from top 10 to not mentioned at all." This sort of aggression appears elsewhere in the album, "The coke prices up and down like it's Wall Street, holmes / But this is worse than the Dow Jones, your brains are now blown / All over that brown Brougham, one slip, you are now gone" ("U Don't Know"). While the lyrics do not engage in a Gramscian war of maneuver, in their war of position they indicate that JAY-Z is prepared for that assault. Aggressive stances are prominent throughout this mid-career album, but it is the self-aggrandizing taunts that set *The Blueprint* apart from the earlier works.

The JAY-Z-focused lyrics in *The Blueprint*'s war of position serve two purposes: these Signifyin(g) skills establish his street cred and they name JAY-Z as the king of rap. The aggression and these two elements are common in rap delivery, and JAY-Z employs them to demonstrate that he will fight bitterly to be dominant in the field, which he hopes will translate to joining the

hegemonic inner circle. In the song “Renegade,” JAY-Z (accompanied by Eminem) gives a glimpse of the hustler’s life: “I had to hustle, my back to the wall, ashy knuckles / Pockets filled with a lotta lint, not a cent / Gotta vent, lotta innocent lives lost on the project bench” and “See, I’m influenced by the ghetto you ruined / The same dude you gave nothin’, I made somethin’ doin’ / What I do, through and through and / I give you the news with a twist, it’s just his ghetto point of view.” Most rappers try to claim hustler legitimacy, and JAY-Z uses his experience in the street to detail the life, even crediting mentors that guided him and helped him succeed, “Old heads taught me, youngin, walk softly / Carry a big clip, that’ll get niggas off me / Keep coke in coffee, keep money smellin’ mothy / Chains is cool to cop but more important is lawyer fees” (“Never Change”). The connection between the delivery of these lyrics and ‘playing the dozens’ is clear; this is a battle of wits and JAY-Z is prepared to do battle.

Rapping credentials of a street life is a hallmark of the genre, but hooks that assert a domination, or at least ascendance, in the field is rife. This is the mark of a rapper: claiming pre-eminence in a field of pre-eminent players. In *The Blueprint*, JAY-Z follows that pattern, “Can’t step in my pants, can’t walk in my shoes / Bet everything you worth, you’ll lose your tie and your shirt” (“Renegade”) and “And I pack heat like I’m the oven door? / Niggas pray and pray on my downfall / But every time I hit the ground I bounce up like roundball” (“Heart of the City (Ain’t no Love)). The metaphor of war is present in most every song, and to the victory will go the spoils: “I sell ice in the winter, I sell fire in hell / I am a hustler, baby, I’ll sell water to a well / I was born to get cake, move on and switch states / Cop the coupe with the roof gone and switch plates / Was born

to dictate, never follow orders” (“U Don’t Know”). By the debut of this album, JAY-Z has reached well into the rap ether, but maintaining that trajectory is vital.

The crescendo of this assault on dominance arrives on the third track, “Izzo (H.O.V.A.),” “Welcome ladies and gentlemen, To the eighth wonder of the world! / The flow of the century, always timeless: HOV! / Thanks for coming out tonight / You could've been anywhere in the world / But you're here with me, I appreciate that.” In terms of self-aggrandizement, JAY-Z’s moniker ‘Hov’ is difficult to best. ‘Hov,’ and often ‘Hova’ are used by JAY-Z as a pseudonym for God; when prefixed with Jay (or simply J), Hova becomes ‘Jehovah,’ the word in Hebrew for God. In his battle to achieve hegemonic inclusion, JAY-Z is irreverent, innovative, and daring and the war of position that he wages with his music and lyrics prove pivotal in his war of maneuver over rap and the dominant hegemony in the US.

### *JAY-Z as a Hegemonic Insider*

*Magna Carta...Holy Grail* (2013) marks the arrival of JAY-Z into the hegemonic circle of influence—he is on the inside, and this album describes beautifully just how far on the inside he is. The imagery that this album presents is his curriculum vitae (“course of life”), and it demonstrates that his war of position has enabled him to be successful in his war of maneuver on the dominant hegemony in the US. He was not successful in mounting a group revolution, but he was immensely successful individually, which provides a path for others, if they have the necessary skill, discipline, and drive. *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* is a delightful summation of the extent to which JAY-Z has become a dominant force in American hegemony: “I crash through glass ceilings, I break through closed doors / I'm on the ocean, I'm in heaven / Yachting, Ocean 11” (“Oceans”).

Gone are the references to food, and the alcohol mentions are minimal and surprisingly not focused on appearing 'wealthy' as was seen in *Reasonable Doubt*. Of the four alcohol references, half are generic and the other two call out a liquor that is inexpensive, "Piss Bordeaux and Burgundies, flush out a Riesling" ("Tom Ford"), "Mixed me with Jamaican (Rum and whiskey, what a set off) / And I know I'm not perfect baby" ("Jay Z Blue"), and "Sipping D'USSE [a brand that he is co-owner in] boy this ain't your daddy yak / He in a Cadillac; me? I'm in the Maybach" ("F.U.T.W."). Alcohol has largely disappeared from his lyrics, which supports his reflection, and probably his current choice, "Champagne and the occasional Malibu rum were my thing back then, but mostly I liked to stay sober, the better to stay focused on making money" (JAY-Z 256). As the alcohol and food lyrics have slipped away, the automotive marque mentions have moved substantially up-scale.

This album includes three Mercedes Benz references, one of which is "Mercedes in a row winding down the road / I hope my black skin don't dirt this white tuxedo before the Basquiat show" ("Oceans"), a callout to his "[w]hite Lexus before I had a deal" ("Somewhereinamerica"), and an extended inventory in "BBC" of the cars he has acquired for his crew, "Bought my sidekicks Suzuki Jeeps and Cherokees / Hoop earrings, coupes with the rear cameras / Put that bitch in a cherry M3, I'm not your average dope dealer." The marques mentioned on this album are not normal fare: Bugatti (there are two): "Twin Bugattis outside the Art Basel / I just wanna live life colossal" ("Picasso Baby") and "He's 6'2", how the fuck he fit in a new Bugatti?" ("Heaven"); Maybach (there are three): "Y'all religion creates division like my Maybach partition / And God is my chauffeur, boy they love Hova" ("Heaven"); and Lamborghini: "Peel off in a Lamborghini Countach, 200 in the dash, we gonna rev it (skirt)" ("Fuckwithmeyouknowigotit").

While there can be hyperbole in rap lyrics, that is not the case anymore with JAY-Z, he has reached a point where money is irrelevant, he is a one-percenter.

In their garage, JAY-Z and his wife Beyoncé have a collection of vehicles that includes among many enviable vehicles including a Maybach Exelero, “Jay-Z is the richest rapper of all time and the Maybach Exelero is one of the most expensive cars of all time, with a price tag of \$8 million” (Nazari). Reading this makes thinking of the marque references in *Reasonable Doubt* almost silly. A stunning, gorgeous car notwithstanding, owning a car that costs eight million dollars is absurd in most any world, except the world of the dominant hegemony. *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* also jumps beyond land-bound vehicles, “I don't pop molly, I rock Tom Ford / International bring back the Concorde / Numbers don't lie, check the scoreboard” (“Tom Ford”). Making a callout to returning the supersonic passenger airliner Concorde to service is fodder only for the ultra-wealthy, the true one-percenters.

As the references that JAY-Z cultivates move further afield in *Magna Carta...Holy Grail*, the first striking callout, on the first track, is to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), not a common rap moniker, “Niggas dying back where I was birthed / Fuck your iris and the IRS / Get the hell up off your high horse” (“Holy Grail”). Mentioning the IRS in a rap lyric is absurd, unless the writer has caught their notice; this is something that hustlers and 99%ers seldom experience. Examining the content of *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* with an eye glancing back on *Reasonable Doubt* is enlightening we witness the rise of a rap icon.

The provincial, almost nostalgic, callouts of *Reasonable Doubt*, “Got matchin' VCR's, a huge Magnavox / Ten inch, green like spinach, pop wines that's vintage” (“Politics as Usual”), are

replaced with blatant, direct links with the very good life, a life that 99% of the population will never experience. The images that are predominant in the *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* album revolve around family, art, and especially locale, foreign locale. The family and art references are more personal, whereas the callouts on places he has visited (and is familiar with) seem to inhabit the in-your-face motif of rap. References to houses that the artist owns are also present, “After that government cheese, we eating steak / After the projects, now we on estates” (“F.U.T.W.”), “Knock I’m at your neighbor house / Straight cash I bought ya neighbor out / You should come to the housewarming / Come and see what your new neighbor 'bout (SKIRRRRR!) / Yellow Lambo in the driveway” (Somewhereinamerica”). At this point in his career, these lyrics are no longer boasts of how sweet life will be; these are lyrics about how sweet life is.

The art references in the *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* album are beyond the rational, an entire song just calls out the fashion designer Tom Ford. It should be noted that an ‘off the rack’ men’s suit from Tom Ford starts at \$4K—to answer the obvious question, No, Tom Ford apparel is not available in Minnesota. The eponymous song waits until the final line to sing praises to Tom’s art form, “I don’t pop molly, I rock Tom Ford.” There is some debate on the meaning of the line, but HipHopDX quotes an interview on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* that Ford had to consult a rap translator to get the meaning which he reports to be, “My favorite line is ‘I don’t pop molly, I rock Tom Ford’ (Balfour). I love that he gets a ‘high’ from my clothes. I have been dressing him for years now, and I have to say I think he looks great in my clothes. [He] is one of our biggest customers.”<sup>10</sup> Other clothes labels are mentioned on the album, but at this point in his ascension, they are not even ear candy, but fond remembrances of what he used to wear.



While Tom Ford might be thought of as an artist in the fashion world, there are copious references to art in this album. There are no fewer than 22 references to the art world on this album, and the topics of these references are worthy of coverage by Sister Wendy. JAY-Z's taste for art seems to be voracious, and he has the deep pockets to support that passion. As can only be imagined, "Surrounded by Warhols, my whole team ball...House like the Louvre or the Tate Modern / Cause I be going ape at the auction / Oh what a feeling, aw, fuck it, I want a trillion... Yellow Basquiat in my kitchen corner / Go 'head, lean on that shit Blue, you own it" ("Picasso Baby"). The art works that are called out on this album are well-funded, according to Forbes, "JAY-Z's 12th studio album, *Magna Carta...Holy Grail*, is his most artistically inclined, overflowing with references to artwork - around \$493 million worth, according to top auction prices for the masters Jay-Z name-checks" ("JAY-Z's Magna Carta Lyrics"). In 2018, JAY-Z and Beyoncé rented out the Louvre to make a music video for the song "APESHIT," from the album EVERYTHING IS LOVE (2018), a joint venture by the Carters: Beyoncé and JAY-Z; seeing the two of them alone in the room with the Mona Lisa alone is worth the watch.<sup>11</sup> JAY-Z is an art aficionado extraordinaire, with the wallet to back up his interest—JAY-Z is definitely a one-percenter.

Another topic that stands out on this album is place. In previous releases his world was primarily the east coast drive-through, but on *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* his horizons have widened substantially beyond the haunts of his early albums, "Daddy need at least three weeks in the Hamptons" ("Jay Z Blue"). Our fashion favorite, "Tom Ford," provides nuggets of overseas travel, "Paris where we been, pard' my Parisian / It's Hov time in no time, it's fuck-all-y'all season... Spent all my euros on tuxes and weird clothes / I party with weirdos, yeah Hov, yeah Hov." JAY-Z does

Europe, “Hov just landed in Rome, nigga / All hail, Caesar's home, niggas... El Padrino, in the villa in Venice, sippin' vino” (“Fuckwithmeyouknowigotit”), “Out in Paris on a terrace watching the Eiffel Tower / And a Ferris wheel yet and still, nothing could prepare us,” (“Jay Z Blue”), but also goes further afield, “Meanwhile this heretic, I be out in Marrakesh / Morocco smoking hashish with my fellowship” (“Heaven”) and “I'm in Cuba, I love Cubans / This communist talk is so confusing” (“Open Letter”). On his early albums JAY-Z's world was the east coast of the US, but by the release of *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* JAY-Z was, to usurp Pitbull's mantra, truly Mr. Worldwide.

One of the most striking aspects of *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* is his tender, loving ode to fatherhood, having a family, and his daughter Blue Ivy in “Jay Z Blue.” He laments coming from a single-parent home, “Father never taught me how to be a father, treat a mother / I don't wanna have to just repeat another leave another / Baby with no daddy want no momma drama” and “Teach me on how to treat a lady, open doors on the 'Cedes / This relationship shit is complicated.” Recognition of his own mortality without the rap tempting-fate attitude that it is usually coupled with it is sobering, “Now I got my own daughter, taught her how to take her first steps / Cut the cord watch her take her first breath / And I'm trying and I'm lying if I said I wasn't scared / But in life and death if I ain't here.” To hear a hard-core, former crack mover waxing poetic about his family, wife, and daughter is unexpected; with his latest work his war of position has taken on an attitude that describes in no uncertain terms that he has arrived.

When JAY-Z and Beyoncé were married in 2008, it rocked the world. The two, both world's best-selling musicians, were named a ‘power couple’ as early as 2006 (*Sydney Morning Herald*), and

currently are introduced as the ‘royal couple of hip-hop’ (Jacobs). In his recent music, his wife Beyoncé is the subject of his respect and adoration, and often joins in on tracks, “Boy meets girl, girl perfect woman...She fell in love with the bad guy, the bad guy / What you doing with them rap guys, them rap guys / They ain't see potential in me girl, but you see it / If it's me and you against the world, then so be it” (“Part II (On the Run)”) and “Sleeping every night next to Mona Lisa / The modern day version with better features” (“Picasso Baby”). On *Watch the Throne* (2011), a joint venture with Kanye West, JAY-Z is eloquent as only a rapper could be praising his wife, a twenty-first century sonnet that John Donne would appreciate:

Go harder than a nigga for a nigga, go figure  
 Told me keep my own money if we ever did split up  
 How could somethin' so gangsta be so pretty in pictures?  
 Ripped jeans and a blazer and some Louboutin slippers  
 Uh, Picasso was alive he woulda made her  
 That's right, nigga, Mona Lisa can't fade her  
 I mean Marilyn Monroe, she is quite nice  
 But why all the pretty icons always all white?  
 Put some colored girls in the MoMA  
 Half these broads ain't got nothing on Willona  
 Don't make me bring Thelma in it  
 Bring Halle, bring Penélope and Salma in it, uh  
 Back to my Beyoncé's  
 You deserve three stacks, word to André  
 Call Larry Gagosian, you belong in museums  
 You belong in vintage clothes crushing the whole building  
 You belong with niggas who used to be known for dope dealing  
 You too dope for any of those civilians  
 Now shoo, children, stop looking at her tits  
 Get ya own dog, ya heard? That's my bitch (from “That's My Bitch”)

Any commentary on that rap sonnet to Beyoncé would be superfluous, and would dilute its beauty. There is only one reality, beyond his marrying his equal in the music hierarchy, that would come close to revealing JAY-Z's arrival into the hegemonic high ground: “Boy from the hood but

got White House clearance / Sorry y'all, I don't agree with y'all parents / Politicians never did shit for me / Except lie to me, distort history" ("Open Letter"). JAY-Z and former President Obama are tight friends, and access to that power cannot be downplayed; JAY-Z is at the very pinnacle of hegemonic dominance in the US. Seated next to the President is a coup for anyone, but this is the JAY-Z life, "Black excellence, opulence, decadence / Tuxes next to the president, I'm present / I dress in Dries, and other boutique stores in Paris...Success never smelled so sweet, I stink of success, the new black elite / They say my Black Card bears the mark of the beast" (*Watch the Throne*, "Murder to Excellence"). From Greenburg's perspective, "[a]fter seeing Jay Z being interviewed by Charlie Rose, or suited up next to Buffett on the cover of *Forbes*, or profiled in the *Wall Street Journal*, observers had no choice but to concede that he'd completed the transition to tycoon" ("Empire State of Mind" 212). Through his disciplined and astute use of language in a spoken and musical vein, JAY-Z harnessed that power to create change in his life: he moved from selling crack in the Projects of Brooklyn to sharing a table with the last noble President of the United States—JAY-Z has completed the transition to hegemonic insider.

**[Outro]**

JAY-Z harnessed the power of oral language to create change in his life, a progression that he hopes can be used by others. Kasseem ‘Swizz Beatz’ Dean (a super-producer for Roc-A-Fella Records) “looks at JAY-Z as something others can model: ‘It’s bigger than hip-hop...it’s the blueprint for our culture. A guy that looks like us, sounds like us, loves us, made it to something that we always felt that above us” (Greenburg, “Artist, Icon, Billionaire”). On *Watch the Throne*, JAY-Z provides perspective: “I tried to teach niggas how to be kings / And all they ever wanted to be was soldiers” (“Why I Love You”). JAY-Z is a student of language, like Gramsci, and used that knowledge and experience to find personal success. For JAY-Z, language delivered immense success, both financially and in influence, and the trajectory of that success through the stages of hegemony can be gleaned from his studio work. Referred to as a “maturing hegemon” (Kuntz), JAY-Z rapped himself into stardom, a very visible and outspoken example of the continuing viability of the American Dream: “I’m not a businessman; I’m a business, man!” (Dyson 25).

Although Gramsci never knew tangible success during his lifetime, he did manage to accomplish his only real worldly desire, discussed in a letter to his sister-in-law, “he announced his desire to produce something ‘für ewig’ (‘for eternity’)” (Buttigieg 9; Gramsci, *Lettere dal Carcere* 20-21). Gramsci produced, from a dank and unhealthy prison cell, a written body of erudite scholarship that was recognized as important, and upon being published has only increased in its influence. He is the poster child of Neo-Marxism, credited with rescuing the theoretical and overly staid Marxism of Karl’s dusty library and delivering a pragmatic and dynamic Marxism that can be applied successfully in the real streets of Turin, as well as the streets of Bogota or Marseilles. While

his revival of Marxism was pivotal for the Marxist community, his developments and innovations with the concept of hegemony remain his legacy.

Another quality that both Gramsci and JAY-Z share is that they are revolutionaries. Through Gramsci's use of both written and spoken language, in many registers, dialects, and foreign tongues, he made Marxism relevant to the fighters in the street, the activists that actually fight for the rights of the proletariat, the workers. JAY-Z does not present himself as an activist for the 'common man' per se, but through his use of well-crafted and thoughtful language over a sick beat, he is fighting a battle on the higher levels of social inclusion, advocating acceptance for those that ordinarily have been excluded. As JAY-Z illuminates us, "I'm like Che Guevara with bling on, I'm complex, as a response to the journalist. When someone asked me...why it was that I wore the Che T-shirt, I think I said something glib like, 'I consider myself a revolutionary because I'm a self-made millionaire in a racist society.' But it was really that it just felt right to me...I also wasn't a Marxist like Che—the platinum Jesus piece made that pretty clear" (JAY-Z 26). JAY-Z is a cultural revolutionary who drove the power of oral language to overcome long odds, but he is not a political revolutionary in the likeness of Gramsci (or Che).

JAY-Z occasionally intimates that he is fighting for the good of his wider community, such as "Over here we measure success by how many people successful next to you / Here we say you broke if everybody is broke except for you Boss!" ("BOSS" on *EVERYTHING IS LOVE*), but his music has benefited primarily his own commercial and cultural worth. There may be peripheral advantage to the community at-large when a new-comer, especially a Black one, reaches the zenith of hegemonic power, but in the case of JAY-Z it is delivered as an isolated prop to validate the

continued existence of the American Dream, or perhaps as an isolated instance of racial equality in practice. Gramsci and Che were true warriors for entire classes of people: they were men who made the interests of these groups their primary concern, and fought to their deaths without considering their own commercial or cultural interests. JAY-Z may be the modern-day Pablo, but Gramsci would not consider him a force for good, let alone a revolutionary. Gramsci would identify JAY-Z by the same moniker that JAY-Z prefers for himself: "I'm a business, man." To Gramsci, the Marxist revolutionary, JAY-Z would be seen as a singular embodiment of the very enemy that he waged war against for his entire life; for JAY-Z, vast success has made him an entrenched member of the hegemonic bourgeoisie, but a member that used his music of rebellion and exclusion to eventually control means of production and oppress the very people that propelled him to enormous success. To Gramsci's ears, the music of JAY-Z would have been particularly dissonant: while the force and ribald nature of the lyrics would have amused him, the use of their power for purely personal gain would have disappointed him greatly.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “It was Gramsci himself who...pointed to the study of political thinker’s lives as key elements for understanding their thought” (Carlucci 8).

<sup>2</sup> “L'Italia è fatta. Restano da fare gli italiani” (Wikipedia: Massimo d'Azeglio).

<sup>3</sup> According to Hall, “[i]t is important to notice that Gramsci arrived at the conception of hegemony because he thought it had never been achieved in Italy...due to failure to work on the terrain of the common sense of ordinary people, outside of the direct imposition of State restraint” (173), but he later states that “later in his work, Gramsci ...suggests that it is at least a strategy of all ruling classes, that it applied to the formation of all leading historical blocs” (175).

<sup>4</sup> Attributed to a speech by William Tecumseh Sherman, a general in the Union Army during the American Civil War (Wikipedia: War is hell). We will see more scorched earth policies in the second half of this study.

<sup>5</sup> "Mainly we just liked the way it sounded," says Bob Hardy (bass guitar). "We liked the alliteration." "He was an incredible figure as well," continues Alex Kapranos (lead vocals and guitar, keyboard). "His life, or at least the ending of it, was the catalyst for the complete transformation of the world and that is what we want our music to be. But I don't want to over-intellectualize the name thing. Basically a name should just sound good ... like music." Paul Thomson (drums, percussion and backing vocals) offered. (Wikipedia: Franz Ferdinand [band]).

<sup>6</sup> I worked for IBM Corporation during this time and witnessed the arrival of the ‘personal computer’ while working as a typewriter ‘technician’ AKA mechanic; the PC launch was not a ballyhooed affair from IBM, but one filled with corporate trepidation and fear: Will people buy it?.



<sup>7</sup> A current and moving example of the power of orality is the eulogy for George Floyd given by the Rev. Al Sharpton: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zjlAixki1M>.

<sup>8</sup> For a description of the school and its notable alumni (of which I am not one), see: Wikipedia: College of West Africa.

<sup>9</sup> It should be remembered that this was a ploy employed by Gramsci as well; see “The Origin(s) of ‘Hegemony’” above.

<sup>10</sup> An article on the interview of Tom Ford on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*:  
<https://hiphopdx.com/news/id.27729/title.tom-ford-says-he-went-on-rap-translator-to-understand-jay-zs-tom-ford>.

<sup>11</sup> The music video for “APESHIT” filmed at the Louvre:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbMqWXnpXcA&feature=youtu.be>.

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**Appendix A: “Tom Ford” lyrics (from *Magna Carta...Holy Grail*, 2013)**

[The lyrics of this song were gathered from genius.com and are presented here as an example of the structure of a ‘typical’ JAY-Z song within his studio catalog. As was discussed in the *Intro*, this paper is presented in a structure that pays homage to this musical genre.]

[Intro]

Clap for a nigga with his rapping ass  
Blow a stack for your niggas with your trapping ass

[Hook]

Tom Ford, Tom Ford, Tom Ford

[Bridge]

Coming up, coming down  
Riding clean fix your hair in my Crown  
Bad bitch, H town  
Keep it trill, y'all know y'all can't fuck around

[Verse 1]

Paris where we been, pard' my Parisian  
It's Hov time in no time, it's fuck-all-y'all season  
Piss Bordeaux and Burgundies, flush out a Riesling  
When Hov's out, them hoes out, y'all put y'all weaves in, and  
Clap for a nigga with his rapping ass  
Blow a stack for your niggas with your trapping ass  
Spent all my euros on tuxes and weird clothes  
I party with weirdos, yeah Hov, yeah Hov

[Hook]

I don't pop molly, I rock Tom Ford  
International bring back the Concorde  
Numbers don't lie, check the scoreboard

Tom Ford, Tom Ford, Tom Ford

[Verse 2]

Hands down got the best flow, sound I'm so special  
Sound boy burial, this my Wayne Perry flow  
Y'all know nothing 'bout Wayne Perry though  
District of Columbia, guns on y'all Tumblrs  
Fuck hashtags and retweets, nigga

140 characters in these streets, nigga  
Pardon my laughing, y'all only flagging on beats, nigga  
Pardon my laughing, I happen to think you sweet

[Hook]

I don't pop molly, I rock Tom Ford  
International bring back the Concorde  
Numbers don't lie, check the scoreboard

Tom Ford, Tom Ford, Tom Ford

[Interlude]

Oh, man, so throwed

[Bridge]

[Outro]

Hold up (I don't pop molly, I rock Tom Ford)



Appendix B: Cover Art of *Vol. 2...Hard Knock Life*, 1998

