

ABSTRACT

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Art

I see my work as an expression of a young man growing up in a household of music, books, and highly influential people. During the crack era that becomes prevalent under the tenure of President Reagan. The influences of the past will be the guides to surviving in a time when many friends parish as victims from the abundance of violence. The influences and tragedies are translated into motifs that are metaphors combined to create forms of communication. The hardwood floors, record jackets, tape, and railroad tracks provide a catalyst. These motifs are combined and isolated to tell an intense story that is layered with the history of the Civil Rights Movement, hip hop culture, drugs and music. The work is a conduit to release years of pain dealing with loss and oppression. It is also a vehicle to celebrate the philosophy that joy and pain are synonymous with life.

UNDERNEATH THE MUSIC

By

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Preface

The smell of the coffee bean aroma surrounded by the books and music, the phone rings.

“Good afternoon, thank you for calling Borders Books and Music, how can I help you?”

“El! What’s up man, I have some bad news.”

This is an all too familiar greeting. Like a boxer whose abdominals involuntarily clench to brace a body blow.

A year before, a month after 9/11, at this very location around the music bar is where a Nigerian friend named Palo and I are discussing the Jay-Z and Nas beef, well before the public knew the reason. His gregarious demeanor that exudes from his person is anchored in expensive luxury brand sneakers and sweat suit accessorized with his platinum chain with a diamond encrusted cross and sparkling complimentary pinky ring. I had spent five years in college and here I was in my mundane threads at Borders Books, behind the desk serving cds and books and here he is buying a stack of DVDs and them some. The image could be the illustration of the scene in “A Bronx Tale” where the mobster Sunny tells his heir apparent, Calogero “that the working man is a sucker.”¹ It is right before Howard’s homecoming 2002, and he is speaking on all the New York dudes who would be down in their “whips” (cars) and he was going to flaunt his 5 series BMW. I tell him to be careful. We attend the same

¹ A Bronx Tale. Dir. Robert De Nero. Perf. Chazz Palmenteri, Lillo Brancato. Prod. Tribeca Films in assoc. with Savoy Pictures. 1993.

public junior high together, hang a smatter in high school, and he attends my graduation party from college in Atlanta with that same \$50,000 chain.

Dedication

For my family, friends and lost ones.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my family, professors and fellow artist.

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Figure 1: *We're in this Fight Together, "88"*, 2008 and details
Records, speed bag, foam, records, latex, acrylic
96" X 96" x 108"



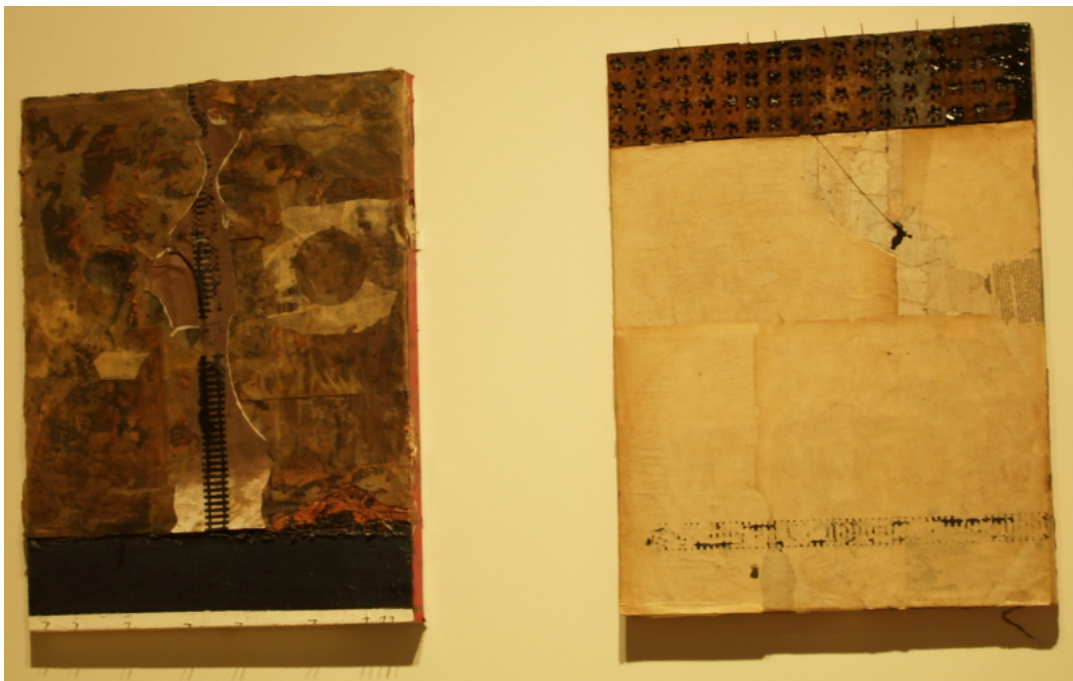


Figure 2: *Larry Love and Sweet Dreams*, 2008
Metal, polyurethane, acrylic, ink and collage on canvas
24" X 40"



Figure 3: *33 1/3 of Soul*, 2007
Collage, polyurethane, latex, and acrylic on canvas
60 X 48



Figure 4: *Funky*, “*Don’t You Ever Quit on Yourself*”, 2008
Cassette tape, collage, polyurethane, and acrylic on canvas
60 X 48



Figure 5: *Follow the Leader*, 2008
Collage, polyurethane, acrylic on wood
22 ½ X 43



Figure 6: *Pain and Joy; We Roll with It (Diptych)*, 2008
Polyurethane, acrylic, and collage on spools
35" X 23 ½



Figure 7: *Handle*, 2008
Collage and metal on wood
24" X 24"



Figure 8: *Heavy*, 2008
Wood and Collage
33" X 23 1/2



Figure 9: *The Stone that the Building Refused*, 2008
Polyurethane, charcoal on paper
50" X 50"

Chapter 1: Influences and Interiors

A large Leroi Leclair painting hangs in our basement. A scene of a car ridden by white males that are patronizing the prostitutes as the pimps look on underneath crossing street signs indicating 14th and T St. This piece represents the times and many of the people I would come to know. The anger with the murder of Martin Luther King and the atrocities of the Vietnam War are still apparent. Like other cities that are scarred from the venerating of King's assassination, D.C., east of Rock Creek Park, has many dilapidated neighborhoods that are comprised of destroyed buildings from the 1968 riots; and many communities abandoned by the middle class for the suburbs. I was born into a sociable household with parents, four siblings, and an open door policy that invites people from all walks of life into the household. Within the enclave, they gather daily and voluminously on Sundays, think collectively on issues of the race moving forward, post Vietnam War, music, arts, dance.... Thus, colloquiums are common at our home on 18th and Webster. Musicians, such as Nina Simone, stay with us for two weeks; Johnny Hartman comes for brunch; members of the art group Afri-Cobra, like Frank Smith and Jeff Donaldson, also visit. In addition the house is frequented by many other painters, African art dealers, writers like Toni Morrison, CLR James, Dr. Richard Long and Charlie Cobb, politicians, Howard University professors, civil rights activists, Courtlan Cox, Dr. Rudi Lombard and Lolus Eli, and members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) that M.L.K. started. African Freedom fighters and Pan African activists have meetings in the home as well. There are book opening parties and art shows.

The piano stands in the living room where most congregate; my four other siblings and myself take lessons here and visiting musicians often sprinkle a taste of their magic on these 88keys. African art adorns the walls; a zebra rug is laid underneath from when my family lived in Tanzania in the late sixties. A lot of prominent American artist's works are home on the walls; such as, Charles White, James Porter, Skunder, Romeare Bearden, and James Wells paintings. As a curious youngster, these images reinforced our heritage of the middle passage, jazz music, African culture, and etc. Jazz, soul, and gospel is played constantly; Motown, Miles, Coltrane, Hugh Masekela, Roberta Flack, Minnie Ripleton, etc. In the library, the records can wrap around Saturn; the infinite sounds can span the universe. My older brother, William, plays most of these albums at our father's request and I can not wait till one day when I could do the same. A reel to reel is also located in the library, and these would be the source of music as well. My older siblings are playing Earth Wind and Fire, Rufus and Chaka Khan, Fazo, Chic, Tom Brown, Rose Royce, Chuck Brown et al. We have two Wurlitzer juke boxes; one in the basement that plays 45's and one in my parent's room that plays 78's. My siblings and I play the 45's all day long, sometimes fighting over the next record. As a matter of fact, I never stop being astonished by the mechanics and lights of the machines. Especially, with the 45 jukebox, because the phonograph moves on tracks and pulls the records from a parallel rack. I can still here Chuck Brown's *Bustin' Loose*, and see that record spinning.

Simultaneously, the Bronx is booming with Hip Hop culture as an underground movement that had been going on in New York since 1972, and is starting to see the

light everywhere else. William gets Sugar Hill's *Rappers Delight* and this new sound is something that we never heard before. This music takes the reigns of influence from the previous sounds of disco. I would later learn that Caz of the Cold Crush Brothers wrote the lyrics. Hip Hop now and for the next several years is not played on radio, and videos are not aired. Simultaneously, the music begins to flourish and our sister Paula attends Howard University. Fortunately, we began to hear the latest sounds that her fellow students from New Yorker are bringing down to school. Kurtis Blow's *Christmas Rap*, Spoonie Gee's, *Love Rap*, Grand Master Flash's, *Freedom*, and Sugar Hill's, *8th Wonder* are infectious. Of course, Go-Go is strong with Chuck Brown, Trouble Funk and Redds and the Boys.

The neighborhood is made up of middle and upper middle class African Americans. There is a deep sense of community. Stars Wars and Empire Strikes Back are spectacles at the time and they are mythology that enters our youthful innocent lives. My neighborhood friends go over to each others houses playing with the franchise's Hasbro figures. In addition, we love to play tackle football with about fifteen persons on each team. The older boys toughen us up by hitting us hard. Sometimes they make us slap box with them and each other to keep us sharp. A bell rings and Pavlov's law is confirmed every time; the ice cream truck comes up the street and kids start flying from their houses; and we get in line to make our selection of pop sickles, quarter waters, push up pops, and rockets. We dwell in the alleys with the older brass and make bomb fires out of leaves. Houses are also tryst for sports so we can marvel at Dr. J, Roger Staubach, Tony Dorsett, Magic and Bird. Sugar Ray and his son

advertise the 7 Up commercials and we get excited every time. Ali, Frazier, Spinks, Hagler, Hearns and Sugar Ray are the premiere boxers at the time and they are the talk of boxing fanatics. Thus, the community is an extension of the house.

The house appears to be huge and the hard wood floors seem to run for miles on every floor. Rising from these floors, my parents host gatherings where the perspicacious minds of the intellectuals are exchanged. The premises of artists and physicians mix with those of activist. My older siblings have their friends over and everyone participates in activities of their ages. All of these people tower over me like sky scrapers; not representing capitalism, but a possession of social consciousness and a sense of rooting.

The motif of the hardwood floors is threaded throughout several of the paintings, such as, *Pain and Joy*, and *We Roll with It* (Figure 6), and *We're in this Fight Together* (Figure 1). These works are reminders of the first five years of life that have been the most influential. Similarly, the Dogon Doors that protect the granaries are carved from the Dogon people of Mali, Africa. The people live among the Niger and in the epicenter of Bandiagara Cliffs.² Thus, the doors have carved vertical figures that are aligned horizontally, and represent the dancers and ancestors. The vertical streaks on human fingers are also an inspiration for the patterns. Thus, not only does each board or strip in my work represent the influential people in and out the household, but the motif's visual slippage has extended its metaphor to people throughout my life. So

² Dogon doors from Mali. Ethnic Effects 1 May, 2008
www.ethniceffects.co.uk/cat8_1.htm - 38k

when I think of the late Alden Lawson: art director, jazz enthusiast, friend of the family, he is a fragment of the floor or ground. These floors have become the anchor in the journey through my life. They humble me by their metaphor and the tedious process of painting them. In addition, as a youngster, I am attracted to the smell of the house, I do not know what the scent is at the time; but, I have come to know that scent of the polyurethane. Thus the process has evolved from painting the representation of the wood floors to using the actual stainer of wood floors.

Michael Jackson's *Off the Wall* album is out and amongst all the excitement, unexpectedly, my mother one day moves out of the house and we are told that my parents are getting a divorce. There is no warning or gradation to the break up, she just left. My siblings and I enjoy going to see her at her apartment and she come over to see us and for special events. On Webster, the parties continue and my parents never show any visual animosity, but the household for my siblings and I will never be the same.

Chapter 2: Secluded but Not Lonely

July 2, 1981 our father, his lady, Heather, Will and I move to St. Croix on a six acre sugar plantation called Estate Diamond Ruby. This land is positioned right in the middle of the island, between the towns of Frederiksted and Christiansted. We live in a stone house that is built around 1740 and owned at the time by the slave master Peter Ox Holm. The slave quarters are ruins positioned far back in the North side of yard. I walk through them among the tall grass and weeds and think that a family once lived here, centuries ago. The stone sugar mill is erected adjacent to the house, and one can climb the ladder to the top and see the industrial view of Hess Oil factory's chimneys, flames and lights of out to the south. The tomb in the rear north eastern section of the yard is of a 5 year old child by the name of Thomas Blake who died in the late 1800's. Nobody knows his history. There is a well that stands erected about four stories high and, at sunset, thousands of bats fly out of the open top. The land's flora contains beautiful mahogany and fruit trees. One can walk and have different fruits of their choice: ginnups, tamarind, sugar apple, pomegranate, watermelon, ugli, Persian lime, great fruit, banana and etc. Our father believes in being independent from consuming vegetation; so with his lead we proceed to dig out a large mass of land to create a large garden. We make five 4 ft X 90 ft beds, and plant collards, mustard, beef steak turnips, lettuce, carrots and etc. We maintain the fertilization with compost and cow manure. These beds are a similar form to the elongated hard wood floors that appear in my work.

Underneath the triangular shape ceiling that hovers spaciouly, the family has dinner every night. The open room contains the dining area, two living room areas and a music section that housed an abundance of records. Now I am old enough to spin the records at dinner along with my brother. A lot of Reggae and Soft Rock join the Jazz and Soul. We listen to Bob Marley and Steele Pulse, along with Junior Walker and the All Stars, Gary Bartz, and Stevie Wonder. Sometimes we have company over or we go to our friends' houses. Over the music, and across the dining room table, many political debates took place on the fiasco in Granada, the Shah of Iran, the civil war in Beirut and President Reagan and his "Reaganomics".

Heather is from St. Kitts, and I am raised by her and her family in the strict West Indian rearing children. A long way from the D.C. status quo, the quietness and solitude of St. Croix, forces me as a youth to become introspective, and socially independent. I miss the sidewalks, my friends and all the people who came through 18th and Webster. There are not any kids in the neighborhood playing football and no mother, no cousins, and grandparents or big parties, no sidewalks. The television and radio cease at midnight. If I am not at a school friends' house, for adventures, I go on excursions throughout the yard. One learns to coexist with the jack spaniel, red ants, termites, wild goats and wild horses. I wake up every morning at six to feed the four dogs, and the horse and there is something spiritually powerful about the isolation with nature.

The 32 acres it is founded on borders the Caribbean Sea and it is a cotton plantation during the 1700's. A hotel is established there before being converted into a Pre- K-12 institution. The school is multicultural and the method of academics allows my creativity to soar. Blacks, Whites, and Puerto Ricans get along and, for the first time, I make friends with children of other races.

The Virgin Islands is first populated by the Arawak Indians, who are replaced by the Carib Indians in the 15 century. Christopher Columbus in 1493 on his second journey to the New World; thinking the island of is Spain, names it Santa Cruz; subsequently, the French name it St. Croix. Thereafter, sailing north to the other small islands, Christopher Columbus names this small land cluster the Virgin Islands, after St. Ursula and her martyred virgins. The Spanish, English, Dutch, and French fight over control of St. Croix for the next two centuries. Consequently, Spain, England, Holland, France, the Knights of Malta, Denmark, and finally, the United States would all be colonist to Virgin Islands. However, the Danish had the most influence, as evident in the architecture, the names of towns and streets of the buildings today. The Danes use the island as a component in the triangular trade route, which connects Europe, Africa and the Caribbean, in the trade of human cargo, sugar, cotton, and rum. In 1917, on March 31, the United States would buy the Virgin Islands for \$25 million in gold from Denmark. The strategy was to use the V.I. platform to protect the Panama Canal in World War I. By the 1950's tourism began to flourish and the corporations would start planting their feet. ³

³ Wikipedia. St. Croix Virgin Islands. 29 March, 2008

I never feel blatant racism or a hierarchy of race in St. Croix. The music is as diverse as its populace: Kool and the Gang, Aswad, and Culture Club. Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five are the force in Hip Hop at the time. As years go by, MTV is playing all the soft rock videos and, once in a while, Salt N Pepa DMC's, *Rock Box*. Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album is released. The movie *Beat Street* comes out and provides a visual to the life of breakers and graffiti artists in the Bronx where the culture originated. This culture echoes in St. Croix, as like in New York, Puerto Ricans make up a large percentage of the culture. William has a flowing connection with getting tapes made; he buys packs of Maxell metal tapes that had the best sound quality and give them to certain DJs to work their talents. Between my siblings in the states and staying the summers in D.C., we are getting the latest music. Hip Hop is not played on the radio, so we depended upon this new triangular trade for our listening pleasure.

The young men walk around with boom boxes playing the latest sounds. In the years to come, I would listen to a radio program named Rap It Up that airs out of Philly, hosted by Glenn Ford and Tony Devon, and they tell you to get your tapes ready before they played the latest B sides and hits in Hip Hop. This would be followed by tapes that I would acquire from friends who got tapes from New York D.J.s: Red Alert, Chuck Chill Out and Mr. Magic on 105.7 WBLS. In high school my clothing drawers underneath my bed are the cassette storages. This is the impetus in creating *Funky (Never Quit on Yourself)* (Figure 4). The work is made with wrapping tapes

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Croix%2C_U.S._Virgin_Islands

from my old collection around the canvas to create a dark tonal foundation. This process is followed by using a wire brush to paint the deep strokes or grooves in a circular form and then by application of dark polyurethane colors which mimic the patterns and colors of a record respectively.

Marvin Gaye gets killed in on April 1, 1984, and it feels like someone in the family dies. It is a morose night at dinner and we play his albums in tribute. It is hard for me to fathom someone that I listened to all my life dying by assassination. King and Malcolm have always been in theory. But this is a distant sting. It only gradually prepares me for my own losses.

One day, Heather and I go by her friend Donna's house on our way back from the airport. Her husband, nick-named, Help Out, has a two man hauling outfit that transports with a truck, big loads of rubbish to the dump. Sometimes I play with their daughters. Nonetheless, we pull up in front of her fence and she walks to the car singing Stevie Wonder's, *I Just Called to Say I Love You*. She is all conservative with her smiles and jokes. Not long thereafter, I wake up one morning to feed the animals by the cistern in front of the windmill. Heather is walking and is looking extremely dejected. I ask her what was wrong and she said Donna has been killed. The news freaks me out because this is the first person I know personally to be murdered. Her husband, Help Out, had put a shot gun through the louvers at their house and "blew her head off." I remember those exact words. Till this day the song reminds me of her and I never care to listen to it in its entirety.

The styles of the day of the V.I. are similar to those in New York. The stylish hipsters wear Pumas and Adidas sneakers with the fat colored laces or Bally boots. Many people wear Kangols. The Rastafarians are wearing the Wallabies and they congregate on a wall right outside of entrance gate of the land. Polo, Le Tigre and Lacoste shirts are popular and people iron their Levi's, and pin stripe Lee jeans until the creases have the stiffness of a stone ledge. A name plated belt that states a name or Playboy. A fist sculpted plastic handle of a pick stuck in the hair might be a finial.

The summertime trips to D.C. increase my anxiety to move back to be closer to family. At camp my friends play the latest music of the time. Joe Ski Love, Supreme Team. In the summer of 83, my mother and sister move to North Capital Street, N.E. right across from Rock Creek Cemetery. My older siblings feel like we became poor over night. This neighborhood is a far different environment than the Crestwood middle class scenario. The house we move into is surrounded by low income apartments while a block away on either side the houses are manicured and clean. This is the summer that my cousin Bernard Lancaster and I attend the D.C. Police Boys Club, Camp Brown. A 168-acre, Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Washington (BGCGW) facility located along the Potomac River in Scotland, Maryland near Point Lookout in St. Mary's County. Cabins competed by fights and break dancing at parties in the mess hall, where the latest hip hop and Go-Go sounds invaded. Starting in the seventies, two essential aspects of D.C. urban culture are boxing and go-go. The majority of Go-Go tapes that feature Junk Yard Band, North East Groovers, Back Yard Band, et al., have a pause in the flow of the music because a fight sparked. You can hear a lead singer like Gingus from Back Yard call out, "Security to front,

Security to the front”. By High School, friends and I started to attend these functions and sure enough I witness fights at almost every gig. The aggression of the culture leads many kids to Box, fight in the Golden Gloves, and admire Sugar Ray, Mohammed Ali and others.

Black Entertainment Television is prevalent and the culture comes to life. The first video I recall seeing is Salt N Pepa D.M.C.’s *Rock Box*. In addition, there are videos from *Beat Street*, *Breakin’*, *Return of the Dragon* and the *Warriors* and even though the music is about five years old at the time, it brought Hip Hop culture visually to the table. My friends and I also watch a lot of Kung Fu movies at the time and my brother and I are enrolled in karate classes at the house. Wu Tang comes out in 93’ to bring the martial arts segment back to the culture.

Even though, I am in elementary I go to school parties and those of friends older siblings. Gregory Isaac, Nu Shooz, or Madonna plays and then the D.J. makes an announcement for all breakers to come to the dance floor. All of a sudden the DJ would put on Afrikaa Bambatta, Melle Mel. The second the first beat comes on, I run to front of the opening circle to be an up close witness to the highlight of the night. A breaker enters the circle, shuffles, works his way down to the floor into a windmill, uses the momentum to elevate his body into a head spin, and then freezes in a B-boy stance. The next breaker comes in and tries to top the previous moves: back flip, shuffle, donkey, wind mill with his hands on his crotch. The other breaker might come in and suicide, which is when you front flip and land on your back on the floor.

I go home that night mesmerized; the following day I try to mimic what I saw, but I do not have the athleticism to match it.

When the Fat Boys concert takes place the show opens with St Croix's own Wind Breakers dancing in black and blue Puma sweat suits to Nolan Thomas's *Yo Little Brother*. During and post concert, they film a video for Kurtis Blow produced, *Can You Feel It*. It is amazing because they roll tape in Christiansted and Fredericksted and two girls that attend Good Hope are in the video.

The Georgetown Hoyas are winning and, with players Patrick Ewing and the Coach John Thompson, they are like stars in our household just as they are on the continental U.S. Not only are they representing DC, but they are representing Black America.

The gregariousness of the household in St. Croix carried over from Webster Street in D.C. The house was a beacon for many local artists and musicians and friends of mine, my brother and parents. Family and friends from the Caribbean and the continental United States visited frequently. Sometimes the house was filled to capacity and we loved these times. The household, like the one on Webster, celebrates life with all age groups. Sometimes, we pile in the flat bed truck with a cooler of drinks and food in tow and cruise the island going to the rain forest in the north, or Davis Bay beach, Cramer's Park beach or Point Udall, the most eastern part of the Caribbean. Our Carnival is a highlight every year; it happens following New Year's Day and it is a colorful time of African culture; i.e., music, dancing, costumes,

and parades. Max Robinson, the first African American broadcast news anchor in the United States, is a repeated guest. For carnival of 1985, he would invite our hero to the house, Muhammad Ali. Ali was funny, charming and humble. This day I cherish for the rest of my life and it would push me to take up boxing later in life.

The layering of album cover jackets that span different time periods is found throughout my work and serves as a metaphor for the different age groups that ebb and flow through our doors over the years. The papers' varying degrees of maturity is evident by the effects of the oxidation. The older the record, the more aged the paper; therefore, the lower the value of the white. Thus, the collaging of the various jackets creates a mid to high tonal range. This is evident in works such as ***33 and a 1/3 of Soul*** (Figure 3), ***Handle*** (Figure 7) and ***Heavy*** (Figure 8). This idea is realized as my father is exchanging his old record jackets for new ones to preserve the collection. So the initial collages done with this paper are from the collection that existed during the Webster street times, St. Croix years, and beyond.

This summer in D.C., my cousins Ray, and Pat and I watch *Krush Groove* where all our rap heroes come to life on the screen like Salt N Pepa D.M.C., Fat Boys and L.L Cool J made his premier before his *Rock the Bells* hit with its Go-Go influence. The movie is an open to see how Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons create Def Jam; the record label where many of my favorite MCs at the time are housed. Moreover, having seen the Fat Boys in concert, it is hard to believe that I am looking at them in a movie. Lisa Lisa and Cult Jam's, *I Wonder if I Take You Home*, is the hit. This is the

summer I learn that we are leaving St. Croix to move to St. Thomas and when we return from the continental United States for the school, the “Roc” is where my brother and I go. I do not even get a chance to say good bye to St. Croix and my friends.

Chapter 3: Moving onto the Rock

I attend Lutheran Parish School which is built in 1793, and like many of the buildings in Charlotte For the first two months, my brother and I stay with Heather's mother, Auntie Ron, who is like a grandmother to us and her brother Jean in a neighborhood called, Anna's Retreat of "Tutu". Hundreds of colorful small houses blanket an undulant topography. Every yard has a dog and many mutts wonder about the neighborhood. Roosters crow in the morning. The aroma of cooking of plantain, rice and salt fish can be smelled throughout the house from the kitchen. This is where domestic conversations can be heard from the friendly neighbors. This is where I would here rap tapes from Travis, the son of our next door neighbor. He would play Slick Rick's and Doug E. Fresh's *La-di-da-di*, and Dana Dane's, *Nightmares*, repetitively and I still listen in awe. This house is where I am eager to watch the movie Brian De Palma's *Scarface*, for the first time on HBO with Jean. I am sent to my room during the viewing in St. Croix and I understand because it goriness makes the drug trade look gruesome. Thus, it works as a deterrent, later in life.

I attend Lutheran Parish School which is built in 1793, and like many of the buildings in Charlotte Amalie, named after the Queen of Denmark in 1691, it is created in a combination of Danish and English via Georgian style architecture. This includes the brick walls, windows with louvers and outer shutters that also cover the doors. These

shutters come in all colors and they protect the interior structures from hurricanes. Moreover, cast iron is used as gates and railings.⁴

Amongst these antique building, the culture for young men at this time appears to be set in machismo and using aggression to prove our pubescent stature. Most of the guys there are from the rough areas, the projects, Savan, Bordeaux, and “Ghettoes”, and many of us have several fights throughout my two years. This is a totally different environment than that of the school I was in on St. Croix.

The island thrives off of tourism and it has been a counter point for trade dating back to 1754 when the island became a free port, colonized by the Danish. St. Thomas’s economy is still based on the international influx of people. The most common methods of transportation used by tourists are the gargantuan cruise ships that pull into the harbor of Havensight and the plethora of yachts that dock in the harbor. Main Street is the focal point of town, and you can see the colorful shutters that align the store fronts along the strip. During this time, many of the luxury clothing stores and jewelry stores are located on this street and the waterfront.

Because of the international culture, the Club and House music are the dominating pop forms in St. Thomas amongst the club scene. Acts like Joyce Sims, Debbie Deb, and Shannon are frequently spun at clubs like Jimmy’s Studio 54 and the latest

⁴ Woods, Edith deJongh. *The Royal 3 Quarters of The Town of Charlotte Amalie*. Tortola, Rome, St. Thomas: MAPes MONDs Editore, 1992

dances like the Wop and Cabbage Patch are en vogue. I enjoy these vicariously through my older siblings, their friends and the cars that blasted the music.

The house that we live in is a concrete, stone and wood structure in which the bedrooms are indoors and the rest of the house is exposed to the outside. The dining room, living room, kitchen have only three walls. The fourth transparent side consists of the view of Crown Mountain soaring over town, and the surrounding hills that surround the harbor that engulfs the boats. The masses look like lamp post piercing the sky from the crafts. On a rainy day, the view is hazy and the water partially comes in the house on splashes the brown wooden planks that make up the floor. The view of the mountainous landscape is appropriated in the triangular forms of the collage painted under and on top of the wrapped cassette tape in ***Funky (Don't Ever Quit On Yourself)*** Figure 4. The brown color of the tape also captures the same tones of the brown planks of the floor.

The records, tapes, books and magazines are still as prevalent as they always have been. Warhol's "Interview", "Architectural Digest", "The New Yorker", "Harpers" are accessible reading material and the household's intellectual culture and the open door policy remains and is now extended to the various birds like our Macaw, dogs, iguanas, lizards, and many insects that share the space.

St. Thomas is the home to the Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro and a museum that makes his work accessible to the public is open in the Fort in Charlotte Amalie.

Across the street from the fort is a park named Emancipation Garden, and many students gather there, after school. You can identify one's school by his or her uniform as all private and public schools had distinct ones. The Garden is where gentlemen met the ladies. The older guys would dress to impress and sit on top of the back of park benches playing their boom boxes. Cars circle the park blasting Reggae, Calypso, and R&B. The amalgamation of the music and the Danish architecture of the Fort and surrounding buildings provide a surreal fusion of cultures. It is in this park that I receive my first dose of witnessing violence. I see fights involving bats and name plated belts and kids getting jumped. One afternoon, as I stand across the street from the post office, I witness a man getting sliced several times with a knife across his chest and as he spread his arms to expose his chest he simultaneously cursed a slew of bad words at his assailant.

“You want to cut me! Come!”

His white shirt is torn and soaked in blood, and the man with knife just walks off. This is in broad daylight. I keep that incident to myself for twenty one years and when I open up, a source tells me they remember that situation and that it included a leading member of a crew of dope boys. Psychologically, I felt for the first time a deep sense of fear and anxiety. This incident takes a bite out of the innocence that I once possessed. This feeling only metastasizes as life continues. This feeling becomes part of the nascent mind set that allows me to approach the canvas viscerally.

Unlike the flatness of St. Croix, St. Thomas consists of gorgeous green serpentine hills that overlook the Caribbean ocean on all sides. Out to the west one can see Puerto Rico, to the south St. Croix, to the east St. John and Tortola and to the north other small islands. On a windy day the ocean one can see white along the surface you know that the waves are having a rough day. On a calm day the ocean reflects the sky. My attraction to texture in many of the paintings is influenced by growing up with this textured landscape.

The people in St. Thomas for the most part are communal, friendly and reserve. The city is melting pot of people from all over the world, but mostly the Caribbean, India and the States. In the 17th century, there are 11 categories of whites, mostly Dutch, and English. The Black population is made up of tribes from Senegal to Gabon.⁵ This is evident every year during Carnival time when the Calypso is blasting from the bands and the Floats in the parade and j'ouvert. Thousands of beautiful people and the back drops of the vivid colors is a sight to see. At this time the local groups 17 Plus, and Eddie and the Movements lead the calypso sounds with force. Whether, rain or shine, people dance and laugh off the life's stresses. The culture of the local music scene is similar to that of the Go-Go scene in D.C. People go every weekend

⁵ Woods, Edith deJongh. *The Royal 3 Quarters of The Town of Charlotte Amalie. Tortola, Rome, St. Thomas: MAPes MONDs Editore*, 1992

to hear these bands that have similar rhythms, and dances that are very African in nature.

The summer of 1996, things began to change and the evidence of what is brewing in D.C. and other urban cities in the U.S. came to a tipping point. People are whopping (dance) to: Doug E. Fresh and the Get Fresh Crew releases their tune, *All the Way to Heaven*, M.C. Shan releases *The Bridge*, and Joe Ski Love's, *Pee Wee Herman*, Salt N Pepa D.M.C, My Addidas. June 19th, the world is shocked Len Bias's sudden death to a drug overdose. Drug king pin, Rayful Edmonds, has D.C. strung out on crack and cocaine. My brothers and I get our haircuts at Freeman's Barbershop on Kennedy Street; now that corridor is filled with dozens of guys on the corners in the latest fashions slinging dope. Adjacent is Georgia Avenue, and the same thing is taken place. The markets are open all over residential areas of town. In response, Chuck Brown releases, *Run Joe*, in which he speaks of the drug lifestyle and the beginning of his demise as he runs from the police. Run Joe sweatshirts and t-shirts are the rage; thus, illustrating Snoopy dressed as a characteristic drug dealer: different designer sweatsuits, gold chain, and pager, running from the police. DC Scorpio comes out with *Hustler*, which spoke in specific details of the fashion and shopping locations of the drug dealer. Georgetown is a respite for the dope boys that eat at the restaurant Houston's and shop at the clothing and jewelry stores. I start to see guys that are sixteen, seventeen driving Nissan Z's, Pathfinders, Volks Wagon Jetta's and 3 Series BMW's. My sister, Paula, and her friends take me to go see the movie produced by the famous producer Chris Blackwell, *Good to Go*, which is

filmed in D.C. and it would reveal the use of the drug “Boat”, “Love Boat”, or (PCP) which is used frequently amongst inner city males at the time. The neighborhood on North Capital St., N.E. where my mother and sister, Candi, live changes as well.

Its summer of 1987 and I’m with my Dad in New York, staying at the writer Trey Ellis’s apartment on Riverside Drive. He and his father and use to be constant visitors in St. Croix and by this time his father, Dr. Ellis, has passed. This apartment is where my brother and I have been staying for the several years that have been coming to New York. This is where we listen to Douge E Fresh’s and Slick Rick’s *The Show* for the first time on WBLS in 85” and watched Ralph Mc Daniel’s *Video Music Box*, which locally aired the hip hop scene in New York. Tower Records is not to far on 66th and Broadway and this is where much of the rap collection is obtained. Nonetheless, Trey has two tapes that he put me onto that changed my life forever. One is Public Enemy’s *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* and the other is a mix tape with a few Eric B and Rakim cuts. I play these tapes over and over again absorbing the music. L.L. Cool J, *Bigger and Deffer* is the hot album that summer. These albums along with the yellow Tower Record bags are used as collage on the speed bag in *We’re in This Fight Together* (Figure 1).

I return to St. Thomas with a new swagger and a new school; but, Heather and my father separate for good and my little brother Frank and she had already left the household. All Saints, my new school, is kindergarten through 12th grade multicultural bodied school with the majority students being Indian and Black. I link

up with friends who are fans of hip hop as well. Four of us started a rap group call Time Bomb; this is when I write lyrics all the time. Fortunately, there is a record store called Parrot Fish a block from school. This is the “Golden Era” of Hip Hop, because so much great music is coming out of the culture. EPMD’s, *Strictly Business*; Ice T’s, Rhyme Pays; Boogie Down Production’s, *Criminal Minded* and plenty more. Eric B. and Rakim’s *I Ain’t Know Joke* plays at all the school parties; as soon as that base line drops, people hit the dance floor doing the cabbage patch, James Brown. My friend David and I go half and half on the *Paid in Full* when it comes out in October. This group of albums covers have made their way into *Funky (Don’t Ever Quit on Yourself)* (Figure 4) and *We are in This Fight Together* (Figure 1). They serve as metaphors of the lives of the youth in the inner city. The materialism on the album covers, e.g. the gold rope chains, the Fila and the tailor, Dapper Dan’s faux Gucci and Louis Vuitton sweat suits. The high top fades, and partially the departure from St. Thomas and into the world where the music is created.

I finally hear music that speaks to the small doses of anxiety that I am feeling. This comes from the culture that is a result of the successes and failures of the Civil Rights movement and the Black Panthers. This is the appropriation of jazz, gospel and soul music of my parents and eldest siblings’ generation. It is the adrenaline rush of Carnival. It speaks to the emotions of my parents’ divorce and Heather leaving the house for good. This new sound is visceral, energetic, cool, hostile, edgy, and soulful. This music is James Brown taken to a new contemporary level. It numbs the psychological consequences of the stabbing that I witnessed. The music makes me curious of the American urban streets from which it comes. I feel Camp Brown all

over again, and those North East and South East peers who could break dance and had great hands, and the heart to fight. I feel the voice of the working class people from my mother's neighborhood back in D.C. The gold chains are familiar because everyone in St. Thomas and St. Croix has them; though not as gaudy. The gold named plates, four finger rings, bamboo and door knocker earrings, Nefertiti and Mercedes Benz pendants or "pieces" as they are called in the Hip Hop vernacular. All the jewelry seems like royalty and African chieftom, in essence; the bigger the better. The hair styles: flat tops, and fades with multiple parts. The images are visual eye candy. The images seemed to fit what I was seeing in Georgetown the previous summer. Everything about the music feels real and not industry driven; the stories are synonymous with the news starting with Len Bias and the talk amongst the communities. The music is not only a conduit of the stories from New York and D.C. but it becomes the arena where the musicians are victims.

The news of the killing of Boogie Down Production's D.J., Scott La Rock in August 1987, makes me feel queasy, because at the age of 12, I cannot believe that someone who can exude this energy can be murdered. A few months later 1988 Spring arrives and I attend RUN D.M.C.'s concert to promote their current album *Tougher Than Leather*. In 1998 I meet Jam Master Jay through a mutual friend at a club in Atlanta, and I am hurt when he gets killed. Like others, I grew up with Run D.M.C through all the vicissitudes of life. The tragic assassinations of D.J.s, Scott La Rock in 1987 and Jam Master Jay in 2002 are the reason I pay homage to them both in the assemblage, *Requiem for Scott and Jay*. The rough application of the record jackets collaged on a

found drawer, and then sanded and overlaid with broken records is a metaphor for the torn lives and spirits of both victims. The hollow tip bullets that are placed in the arms, symbolizes the violent nature of the crime. Scott is shot in the neck from the roof top of an apartment building in the South Bronx when helps fellow BDP member D Nice out of a quagmire, and Jay is shot at point blank range at a studio in Queens.

Chapter 4: The Golden Era

Eric B and Rakim's second release, *Follow the Leader*, and Boogie Down Production's, *My Philosophy* are pounding the eardrums. Guy's, *Groove Me*; Rob Base and DJ Eazy Roc's, *It Takes Two* are reining the airwaves. D.C. and New York collaborate with Salt N Pepa's and E.U.'s *Shake Your Thing* and Spike Lee's *School Daze* will put D.C. on the map with E.U.'s *Doin' the Butt*. Besides the summers, I have not lived with my mother since 1979. Now I'm back to family's and friends' cookouts in back yards and Rock Creek Park, eating crabs, fire flies, staying with cousins, going to Kings Dominion, tackle football games, and snow. ***Follow the Leader*** (Figure 5) is named after the first single and track on the same titled album by Eric B. and Rakim. The painting appropriates the cover of the single, *The R*, which is from the same album. Eric B. appropriates or samples the original harmony from Donald Bird and the Blackbird's 1975's hit, *Rock Creek Park*. The original song refers evidently, to romancing in District of Columbia's own Rock Creek Park. This original sound in the sample triggers memories of life in D.C. before moving to St. Croix. The darkness of the red and earth colors is the irony in what is to come a year down the road. The circles formally mimic the two turntables of the Hip Hop d.j., maintaining the influence of the music during these times.

There is a reggae festival going on at the mall and I bump into a friend of mine, Ken who I have not seen since I lived in St. Croix. He and his sister, Katrina, are hanging out with some friends. It turns out they are cousins with my girlfriend at the time who I attended All Saints with in St. Thomas. Ken lives in the Yorkshire apartment

building on 16th between Monroe and Newton with his mother and sister. We hang in his neighborhood of Mount Pleasant and go up to Lincoln's play ground to play basketball. He gets into an argument with one guy and they get in each others faces as the other taunts him with words. Knowing Ken's temperament, I am surprise he is passive, but he is firm and just looks at the guy. I will understand once school starts.

When my lady at the time comes for a week, she stays with her cousins and their mom. I go over their apartment everyday and the four of us hang out. Three years later in the summer of 1991, I receive a phone call from Katrina's cousin notifying me that Katrina was killed by her boyfriend that she been living with back in St. Croix.

Big Daddy Kane's, *Long Live the Kane* drops and it is the soundtrack in my head for starting the school season at Alice Deal Junior High; my first enrollment in public school. Most kids are from the Mount Pleasant, Adams Morgan attend the school. The population is huge compared to the small schools I attended in the Virgin Islands. My homeroom is the forum for neighborhood stories, and the dozens. In addition to what I see, I learn the hierarchy at the institution from people in the homeroom. The dealers wear Gucci, Polo and Sergio Techini outfits. Ropes and herring Bone dangle from necks, and a few have cars. Many have pagers and you can see the black clip protruding from their pockets. The girls who date the hustlers have the latest in luxury bags. In addition to the materialism, the family structures are unique to me as well. Many of the male friends that I make are without fathers and some of the females are

already pregnant. The pathologies that plague our inner city communities are accepted by my peers as the status quo.

Andea, a girl in homeroom tells us that her brother works for Rayful Edmunds, who is not only the infamous dealer responsible for the distribution of cocaine in the metropolitan area, but popular amongst urban youngsters as well. He is treated like a hero. I retort by saying what does your brother make? \$500 a week, and she responds as if I am out of the loop, “how about \$5000”. Seventeen years old and making that kind of money, boggles my mind. Everyone else appears to be in the know, and me coming from St. Thomas, I have no idea. I have my stories of seeing fights, the one stabbing, and a friend of my brother being lock up for distributing narcotics, and the elements of real life stories in the music. But my peers are knee deep in their direct and indirect experiences with crime, and they have no conscience of the plight of times. Everything is a matter of fact, like this lifestyle is normal everywhere.

However, for them it is what they have known of their world. Many of them make enough money for new sneakers and expensive wardrobes, and a few hundred dollar bills rolled in a rubber band in their pockets to flaunt their wealth. This is the values and custom of the environment.

There are two people in class from Newton Street and I learn that the strip is run by Markis. This would be the older brother of the guy, Barry who Ken got in an argument with on the court at Lincoln. Another brother of that family is Todd, and he is 17 in the ninth grade. Within school, Todd is the leader of the guys from that area

and he gets much respect from everyone. He always has the gear and the fat gold chains. Tequan, a resident of Newton, always has a story about what is happening the night before class on the block. Police jump outs and dealers dropping their crack and running from police. Crack heads and stick up boys feuding with the hustlers. In '92, the FBI will raid Newton and incarcerate several of the students in addition to those of the organization for life; including Todd. There were connections to duck tape murders and many other felonies. This is why Ken maintained his composure that day, because he knew the consequences if he fought. I ran into a friend in Home Depot two years ago and I asked her about Tequan. She told me he had gotten killed a few years ago over drugs.

Every night the news reports a killing over drugs and the stories in class are confirming the violent atmosphere will swallow D.C. If one minds one's business and stay away from the trouble, everything is fine, and that is exactly what I do. The music is my focus and the releases in '88 continue to enhance my affection: Public Enemy, De La Soul, Slick Rick, Ultramagnetic, Sweet Tee, Casanova Rud and Super Lover Cee, Queen Latifah are great albums during this time. My friends and I ride the train after school all over. We go downtown to the record stores to find out what is new. Even if the money is not there, we look at the album covers. Or we just ride the train to a line's final stop and play the dozens the whole way and back.

Thereafter, I come home and make that 15 minute trek from Fort Totten Station to do my homework. I listen to the hip hop hour on WOL with DJ Conan and make tapes of the latest sounds. The FM station rarely play rap during this time, and R&B

dominates the stations. Thus, D.C. never has been and is not at this time a hip hop city, Go-Go reign supreme. On that note, Chapter III, Eastside, Black Hole, and Ibex are some of the clubs many go to hear Rare Essence play. My friends and I would attend once we are old enough; in the mean time, we settle for the p.a. tapes and it is always a treat to hear one of DC's handful of rappers, Fat Rodney performing over Go-Go Mickey's congas.

During the Christmas break, Max Robinson dies of A.I.D.S and he would be the first of several friends of the family to pass from this disease. Memories of a kite he gave as a gift, his wealth of information and his joy of sharing that knowledge pervade my thoughts. However, it is a good Christmas Break and all the siblings and my mother and father would spend it together for the first time in D.C. since the divorce.

Spring '89, Yo MTV Raps airs with Fab Five Freddy hosting; at last there is a television program finally dedicated to Hip Hop. Video tapes are becoming as utilized as cassettes. All the interviews of my favorite MC's can be watched over and over again. I can see Kane free styling and I rewind the tape to learn his lyrics. I can see Slick Rick flowing acappella with his excessive gold chains that are germane to Mr. T's. We go see Salt N Pepa with Kid N Play, Guy and Kwame at the Capitol Center. On wax, Special Ed comes out with his album *Youngest in Charge* with the hit *I Got it Made*. The British group, Soul to Soul is making R&B a strong kin to hip hop. Rayful Edmond and his Orleans crew are raided in a drug bust, and this is the talk of homeroom as well as the town.

After a good year of my first year of public school, Fat Rodney is killed at Crystal Skate in Temple Hills by a drive by shooting; the same rink where I visited with my camp three years prior and we skated to Run DMC's *Peter Piper*. Every one knew Fat Rodney was a hustler in addition to being a rapper, but no one expected this to happen. D.C. is definitely changing and the violence is not limited to those involved in drugs.

Chapter 5: Murder Capitol

I return to St. Thomas to spend the summer and work for my Dad as his receptionist. Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* is out at theaters, Chubb Rock's, *Ya Bad Chubb's* and Jaz's, *Hawaiian Sophie* featuring a young Jay Z and NWA's controversial *Straight Out of Compton* is released. I link with old friends and make new ones. Jerome, a cousin of my friend moves down to escape a life threatening scenario in his home of Flatbush, Brooklyn. Musically, Brooklyn encompasses most of the talent in hip hop with the forerunner being Big Daddy Kane, so we could speak extensively on the music. We all have a great summer going to the beach, movies, and rapping. Jerome can not stay out of trouble in St. Thomas and a year later he would move back to Brooklyn. Several years later, his mother came home one day and found him dead, hanging from the shower curtain rod. He had committed suicide. Not only is this a shock but I never heard of this act within our community. Suicide is always been projected on to Rock stars.

Returning to the Capitol city feels different to me because my mom moved us from North Capitol Street to a two bedroom apartment on 16th Street. The neighborhood is quieter and she feels safer than living in Lamond Riggs. But the irony is that D.C. does not feel safer to me. There is a thick tension in the air, a feeling that I never felt here before. The city has become Murder capital and the summer had brought about a significant amount of the body count. Moreover, my brother, Robin, and sister, Candi, no longer live with us. This is the first time in my life I do not live with one of my siblings. Their every day friendship is missed so the music becomes even more of

a daily companion. Big Daddy Kane keeps me company with Smooth Operator, Cool C, who is now doing life in prison with fellow Philly rapper Steady B for robbing a bank, release *Glamorous Life*. I make associate relations with two best friends with BJ and Palo. I always saw them the previous year at school. However, we would share mutual friends and we would hang out in the years to come.

School starts and the year goes by with classes and the homeroom stories as usual. By this time a female friend of mine, Tanese, is from Monroe, a block over from the Newton Street crew. She would call from pay phones all the time where she and her friends hang out on Fourteenth Street. There are the older boys out there hustling and they would grab the phone from her and make threats to me. Now, I never crossed anyone, I am not in the drug game but for whatever reason, they choose to be petty. I take the higher road and leave it alone. However, one of my friends, Jay, who has now transferred to another school, tells me over the summer and again that some guy name Carver and his boys want to hurt me because Carver likes my girl, Tanese. I chose to ignore it because it sound ludicrous, I do not know these guys and that is really all I could do anyway.

Howard's Homecoming is great this year because they compete against my brother's school, Morehouse College. His friends come up and they bring the brotherly camaraderie that is much needed. There are so many people on the campus that it looks like the 1963 March on Washington. The group Guy performs with the Howard Marching Band during halftime and it is quite a spectacle. Under all the excitement I

can not shake that bug in my gut. My intuition is talking and I try to block it out with all my might.

Monday morning, a normal school day occurs and my friends and I walk among the commotion to the Tenley Train Station. I'm approached by this guy about a half foot shorter than me and he approaches me aggressively.

"You Ellington?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Don't play on my cousin's phone no mo'."

"What are you talking about? Who is your cousin?"

"Carver!" Don't play on his phone no mo'."

The culprit walks off but I go after him and my friend holds my arm but the urge to try to mend this misunderstanding is too strong.

"Who the hell is Carver?"

"My cousin and don't play on his phone no more!"

He walks off and I am dumb founded by this craziness. We continue walking and there are about ten people around from school. We walk through the alley behind Hechinger's and all of a sudden I feel this thump on my head. I assume that it is an accident but it is this violator trying to take my head off. So I drop my bags and I throw my combinations on the defense and he is throwing his simultaneously. A worker from Hechinger's separates us both but I have this ravisher with a slightly

bloody bottom lip in sight like a bull's eye of a target. He is at perfect distance for me to throw a front kick in his face. The inner conflict proceeds. Both, years of martial arts in St. Thomas and St. Croix and the masters saying only use violence when necessary; and the family rearing and deep instilled manners and being a respectful citizen are taking over my senses; and on the other hand, the animal instincts of wanting to push his nose to the clouds is a strong denominator. But what takes place next would be a page out of Gandhi's playbook and I would beat myself up for years over this.

"If you all want to fight, go over there."

We walk over to the T in the alley and the opponent is taking off his shirt. He gives the cloth to his friend to hold. He squares up facing me with his fist in a fighting position. I walk up to him and genuflect.

"I have no problems with you, man. I don't know what we fighting over."

He looks at me perplexed and slaps my hand and walks away offended.

I go to the liquor store to get some ice and a few minutes later I look through the window and see Tanese and her friends walking by and laughing. I know right now, that this is a set up and no marginal matter.

That night as usual my mother and I have a quiet dinner and the normal questions are asked. How was school today? [sic] What did you do? [sic]

I never say a word about the incident. I felt inner pain, numb and extremely frustrated, and violated. There are no written formulas or guidance to navigate this turbulent sea. It must have been also frustrating to my mom that I cannot express myself. There are mixed emotions, because I am thinking that this is what everyone goes through. This is the life of urban America according to years of hearing lyrics of Marvin Gaye on *What's Going On*, or Donny Hathaway's *Someday We'll All Be Free*; and listening to my parents and their friends converse the politics of the times. On the other hand, I thought this is the life exclusive to drug dealers and indigent persons, listening to Kool G Rap's *Road to the Riches* and NWA's *Straight Out of Compton*. But this situation and many more to come would prove the latter wrong; this is America's problem and many homes with scruples are feeling the aftermath of the drug trade. Moving back to St. Thomas is out of the question for me because that would be quitting, in my mind.

The next day, I do not go to school. My intuition was warning me that this situation was coming and I would not ignore them again. People actually call me from the pay phone during lunch at school to ask me if I am alright. That afternoon, I receive several phone calls that the antagonist has become a predator and came after school with about ten of his goons looking for me. P.a. tapes and homeroom stories reveal the reputations of street crews' in the city; in addition to the papers and the news. I am told he is from 7th and P Street, and everyone knows their infamous status. Those

guys are “no joke”. In addition, he’s several years older and I’m not even his peer; but, this is the least of the erroneous rules of a game that I find myself unwillingly being a player. I trace my steps and was thinking what I have done for someone to try to make me a victim and all the reasons point to Tanese.

I miss St. Croix and the quietness of the plantation. I miss the relationship with the animals and all the guest and friends that came around. The simple days of being on the Dolphin’s swimming team, floating on the Caribbean ocean are missed. But the fortitude of being with nature and animals seem like light years away. What happened to D.C. with all the intellectuals, artist and musicians that use to come by the house on Webster? Here I am by myself, and my siblings are exempt from the biggest struggle of my life because I can not bring myself to tell them nor my parents. This is a result of the decisions I made for myself, ever since Heather had left, and I am determined to handle it myself.

This is the impetus behind the painting, *Handle* (Figure 7). Giving up is not an option; so one has to deal with the issue at hand. The decisions that are made thus far make up the rail road tracks that are a time line. Thus each sleeper or cross tie is a turning point. The tracks are positioned as straps on either side of a handle on top of a suitcase, tote or trunk. This positioning is to indicate baggage or weight; albeit, the pain and anxiety of feeling like your life is at the hands of a predator leads one’s instincts, every thought and gesture to function as a means of survival. For the first time in my life I feel like my life is in danger. My intuition was confirmed yesterday

and I would not neglect them now. The culprit sends messages that he is going to kill me through Andea, in my homeroom and some other girls at school. Therefore, I call my cousin whose friends are in the game and told him I need his assistance in acquiring a gun for me. I called another source and thank God none of my requests conclude. In survival mode, I take my mother's steam pot cover and a small Louisville Slugger that I won at a game at Kings Dominion with Tanese and stow them in my school bag. Paranoid, I became extremely distant; my eyes start to oscillate frequently and I watch over my back habitually. I keep my book bag unzipped and the handle of the steam pot handle and the mini base ball bat positioned for an easy draw.

The abyss of my gut, a deep fear made itself a home. I began to pray at night, practice my abandoned martial arts and read the Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Thus, his purpose is to kill my spirit, but the regiment that I am now practicing is making my spirit and body stronger. Thus, I **Handle** the situation.

I choose a new and easier route and I start to catch the charter bus to and from school. This is where I make a good friend, Rico Neal. He is a grade behind me, but a funny guy. We play the dozens and flirt with girls on the bus. After school, we commence to doing the same thing five days a week. He helps in boosting back my socialization and trust in people. However, the episode leaves a psychological scar because now I believe that bad things can happen for no apparent reason.

The Berlin Wall comes down this November and it does nothing to entice because my own life feels like it is surrounded by barriers. According to The Disaster Center's Rothstein Catalogue for Disaster Planning, DC's murder rate in 1989 reached 434. That January of 1990, our mayor is caught smoking crack and the morale of the DC is in a debacle. Spring, Tribe Called Quest releases their first album, *People Distinctive Travels and Paths of Rhythm*, this sound is new, peaceful and refreshing. But once the summer came around, St. Thomas is where I go and thereafter, I enter Gonzaga College High School.

My cousin Bernard who last I seen at our great grandmother, Gi Gi's funeral in 1989 is in his second year at Gonzaga. It is good to see him because we have not spent good time together since we were in Camp Brown. Now we meet to get fresh cuts at Jakes Barber Shop on Benning Road which is in his neighborhood and 10 minutes from school. Everyone who came in there knows him and he is a shy warm hearted person. He does not talk much but his coyness never feels distant. We talk about family here and there. I also meet a good friend by the name of kip in French class. Kip is gifted in playing basketball and starts on the junior varsity team with my good friend Jay from Deal. Kip and I are like the blind leading the blind in French class and we sit and carry on with jokes. After two years at Gonzaga we will attend Wilson High School together as well. Two other good friends who I rapped with from Deal came the prior year to Gonzaga. Most of the African American's in this all boy, Catholic edifice attend for sports, in addition to an education of course; and many are from crime inflated neighborhoods in D.C.

I assume Gonzaga is place to focus on the education and I am happy to be away from the fiasco I experience almost a year before. Nonetheless, Gonzaga has its own issues on top of the sickness taking place in the city. In Pat Conroy's "My Losing Season", he writes in details of the same anxieties that I experience dealing with some of the out of touch Jesuits, and blatant racism. The irony is that Deal is a public school located in an Upper Middle Class White neighborhood in upper North West, and Gonzaga is surrounded by a crime infested circumference: North Capitol Street, Sursum Corda Housing Development and other section 8 residences. Correspondingly, there are several incidences with some White students getting robbed outside the gates of the school on their way to the train station.

Rap is not integrated at the time like it is now; thus, the largest percentage of rap music consumers presently are White suburban kids. Similarly, Blacks do not listen to rock. Hall and Oates and Toto are the integrated music of the past. Nirvana's Teen spirit has a slippage, because no one can deny the energy it brings about at the Football prep rallies. The white kids constantly call the rappers Vanilla and Third Base "Wiggers", because they are white guys performing Black culture. Lunch time, the African Americans sit at the same two tables while the rest of the cafeteria is populated by Whites. The only time the two races talk is when a sport is the subject. Gonzaga is at the other end of the spectrum of race relations than Good Hope. In St. Croix, this segregation would have appeared to be senseless. Senators Dan Quail's son sits in front of me in English class, and many wore luxury watches as freshman,

and those of age drove SUV's to school with Virginia Tags. This is materialism that appears effortless, unlike the ropes and expensive clothing the drug dealers put their lives on the line to obtain at school the previous year. Therefore, a realization comes to me that material lust and hierarchies of power exist on both sides of the race lines.

The crime in D.C. only escalates and many think it is do to the cocaine shortage after Rayful Edmond was pulled off of the streets. The prices go up and many hustlers have to fight over scraps. Thus the wars over street turfs and robberies increase. The mentality affected us within the gates, because as soon as many left the school, many had to go back to our neighborhoods that did not give out special passes for being at a college prep school. Many of my peers hustle and about three are expelled for having guns on the school premises. The stories do not stop, and D.C. really becomes a city under siege.

I come back from St. Thomas for Christmas, I get a call that my friend from the charter bus Rico Neal was killed; someone robbed him for his Starter coat. My friend BJ is shot in his stomach and survives. My cousin's friend Roach, who I spend, time with during several summers is shot at a gas station and survives. He never left the house without carrying a gun in each of his front pockets thereafter. By the end of 1990 the murder rate has jumped to 472 and in 1991 the all time high of 482.⁶ Many of these murders are caused by the dealer from New York, Alpo and his hit man, Wayne Perry who attended Wilson High School. By 1990, my friend Seith, and I

⁶ District of Columbia Crime Rates 1960-2006. The Disaster Center. 29 March, 2008 <http://www.disastercenter.com/crime/dccrime.htm>

attend Howard's Homecoming and as we exit the campus via Georgia Avenue, we get caught in a shoot out. The hammer is pounding loudly, bullets are flying and simultaneously, the crowd quickly grabs the pavement for cover.

The movies like *Boyz in the Hood*, and *Juice* come to theaters and they let us know that D.C. is not exclusive to this violent mentality; Los Angeles and New York are on the same path. Ice Cube's roll as a gangster, a son, a brother, a neighbor. Finally, Tupac's roll of a son, friend and student turned lunatic. Both characters resemble the pathological mind state of many of the youths involved in crime.

Spike Lee's, *Malcolm X* is in theaters. Dr. Dre drops the West Coast sensation that changes hip hop, *The Chronic*. The L.A. gangster movie, *Menace to Society* confirms the urban pathologies that are prevalent nation wide. The weight of the racial and conservative issues at Gonzaga on top of the hostility of the city becomes too heavy for me to handle.

The painting ***Heavy*** (Figure 8) exudes this feeling with the white upper portion of a painting that is collaged with the white paper on top of a wood panel that conveys an ethereal two- dimensional image. Hanging below the wood panel, and juxtaposing the collage, is a thick rectangular broken wood beam that is drawn into with charcoal that communicates mass, and volume.

The drawing, ***The Stone that the building Refused*** (Figure 9), both speaks to the scowls that many African American males wear on their faces because of the

hardships of the times; even inside of the gates at Gonzaga. It also speaks to not only the disenfranchisement of the system but Gonzaga as a microcosm of the system.

While many African Americans struggle with tuition and are enrolled because of their athleticism, Whites use the institution to propel them to the Ivy League schools.

While the Whites went home to their mansions in warm communal neighborhoods of Mc Lean and Bethesda, Blacks went home to gun fire and the crack infested neighborhoods of Washington. The footprints that set the tone of the paper are also imprinted on top of the face, indicating the oppression of the times. The eyes of the face appropriate the two turntables of a Hip Hop D.J. They also refer to the circular eyes of a African Dan mask. This relation to Africa is the influence of the mask that covered the walls within the family's households. This is a anchor of remembering the my heritage.

Chapter 6: They Have Changed

I return to the Public School system and attend Wilson where I reconnect with old friends from Deal. However, the plague of the city affects them in ominous ways, because they no longer are the joyous people I once knew. By now, they are cliquish and they wear the scowls on their faces. Thus, many have become products and victims of the environment. My old friend Jay stays the night by the apartment but now this is at a time when our friendship goes astray. He pulls out of his bag a Nintendo video cartridge and he physically opens the game to reveal a cluster of crack rocks. He has connected with people in the South West quadrant to make money and he is from Prince Georges County. He now totes a gun and has stories of his own of being shot at by assailants. His friend, Bungy, who is from his neighborhood, whose house I spent time at in junior high school, and who now hustles Jay, ends up getting his car riddled with bullets while driving. He spends time in and out of prison and he meets his fate with suicide before graduating from high school.

The movie, *Above the Rim*, is out and Tupac is up to one of the pathological rolls again. I start to get my hair cut by Kip at his cousin's house which is a ten minute walk from my home. I no longer will go to way across town to Jakes. Kip is cutting me a Caesar in the dining room and pauses to check his pager. He makes the phone call and tells the other side of the line to come by the house. He returns to cutting me for the next five minutes until there is a knock at the door. Kip opens the door and tells a shaggy looking man standing behind the screen door to wait. He walks his

way over to the kitchen and pulls out a yellowish boulder wrapped in plastic wrap, sets it on a cutting board, unfolds the package, takes a razor blade and shaves off a stone of crack.

Graduation is here and Morehouse will be the ticket out of heaven and hell. The summer starts off with Stacks, Palo's and I watching Scarface at Palo's girlfriend's condo. He and BJ just promote the rapper Nas at the Ibex and he graduates a year before us from Coolidge. He comes to some of the family cookouts and we attend a few small rap concerts and parties together. He is with us as we are leaving for college and he comes to Atlanta when we graduate from college.

After spending a summer for the pre freshman program in Atlanta, I return to D.C. for a few days before going to St Thomas. I want to call Kip, but time gets in the way of this option. A week later, the phone rings seven in the morning and my father calls me to answer. I know something is not right because it is too early.

“Hello .“

It's my girlfriend with a whimper.

“Hey what's wrong?”

“It's Kip. He is dead.”

“What! How!”

“He was stabbed in his chest last night at a party.”

A few weeks later, Fall semester starts and I am in my cousins Ray's room listening to Biggie's new album, *Ready to Die*. My phone is not connected yet, so I use my Ray's phone to call home.

“Hey Ma”

“Hey Elli, I have something to tell you”

“What?”

“Your cousin Bernard has been killed. They found him and his friend in a car. They had been beaten with bats, stabbed and then shot.”

The pain cuts through the stomach and the tears come. The memories of camp, being at our great grandmother, Gi Gi's, and our Uncle Charlie's home, the barbershop, school.

A few days later the article comes in the mail.

Chapter 7: The Nation Out of Control

Through the first few years of school Tupac and Biggie get the heaviest rotation in stereos and all my peers can rap all their lyrics. I receive similar phone calls of these rappers deaths. By 2006 Pac gets killed. 2007 I sit in the stadium style seating top row of the Jazz theory class as I eagerly take note on the music of my childhood. The lecture is interrupted by a sudden ringing of the phone. The teacher excuses himself to his adjacent office and comes back one minute later.

“I have some bad news”.

The class responds attentively.

“Ennis Cosby has been killed.”

The class goes quite. My stomach drops, I cannot believe it, this is dream. The vibration on my hip goes off and I know the feeling of the machine confirms that it is true. I ignore it because I am in shock, but the vibrate keeps going off; it feels more like a pinch than a buzz. I look at the screen of my pager and my cousin Ray is paging me (911). This confirms the bite of reality. A fellow Morehouse man, son, brother, friend, and student. A person I was communicating with a few days before via phone while he was out in L.A. celebrating after submitting his final paper at Columbia's Teacher's College in New York and now he is gone. The graphic images on t.v. of the body just worsen the morose feelings.

A few months later, I receive a call saying Biggie meets his fate last night after a party, in Los Angeles as well. Three years prior, my good friend Bink and I just happened to be standing right beside him against a wall at Club Velvets in Atlanta.

So here I am at Borders Books five years later and my cousin Ray is on the other end of the phone, and my stomach is prepared for the blow.

“It’s Palo. They found his body in the woods in Virginia. He had been missing for a few days. Something was wrong when he did not pick up his daughter from school.”

“I just spoke with him a few weeks ago.”

“He was just over here the other day.”

The diptych *Pain and Joy, We Roll with It* (Figure 6) is about the memory of good times with these late people; signified by the metaphor of the hardwood floors. The collage on the left disc is designed in a way that is inspired by the radial of an old telephone, and its circles are morphed into dancing curvilinear shapes. This motif deals with the subject of the numerous telephone calls that reveal friends’ deaths. The other disc (right) is focused on the motif of the grooves and the dark red color that indicates the blood spilled over the years from these violent deaths, but on the contrary the grooves also represent the basement parties and the music we shared together.

The other diptych is *Larry Love and Sugar Dreams* (Figure 2). The on the Larry love side are symbols for heroin tracks throughout the flesh and the brown color tone is the color of the liquid once it is heated in a spoon over a flame. The work also serves as the grim repercussions of the wrong roads that so many had taken. Sugar Dreams is a pun of the American Dream and the rusted metal plates on the top represent the stars of the American flag. The tracks on the bottom are for all of those friends that think drugs are the answer to their dreams of success. Formally, the cross ties of the tracks become implied lines leading the eyes to the plates; thus alluding to the stripes on a flag. These implied lines become actual lines again in the vertical sentences of the collaged Washington Post article of Palo's murder.

Tapes and records or music as we hear it as a consumer are recordings of a moment, a time of action, performance, life, and expression. Similarly, the paintings are recordings or evidence of memory, facts, and my perspective. All the murders that occurred, and drug bust are public information; although, many names have been changed to protect individuals. Many African-Americans from all classes, fell victim to the violent time directly or in directly. From the middle class to upper middle class neighborhood of Crestwood, where the setting of this thesis begins, Cobi who we used play football with as kids is killed in South East. Jay Jay, one of the friends who I played Stars Wars with, does 10 years for arm robbery. In addition, several other friends who I attend high school or college with are killed, wounded by bullets or been the missed target of the trajectory. The hardships of growing up in the inner city: the fights, witness of violence, losing loved ones and etc. affected the

community. As for myself, growing up in a warm household raised me to embrace everyone, made me vulnerable to the violence. The humility and the humbleness veils a turbulent dark storm within. Thus, my paintings revisit these emotions through expression.

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