

THE CORNER

DAVID EPSTON

SPITTING TRUTH FROM MY SOUL: A CASE STORY OF RAPPING, PROBATION, AND THE NARRATIVE PRACTICES PART I

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“This kid really doesn’t get it,” a clearly frustrated voice blared so loudly that I (T.H.) moved the phone’s speaker a couple of inches from my ear to avoid any future hearing loss. “He just won’t take any responsibility for his actions, and he doesn’t give a s**t . . . and he has 16 more months until he’s off probation! I just don’t think he’s going to make it. I don’t even think you want this one!” I recognized this voice as that of a probation supervisor I had worked with a number of times over the years, but never had I heard frustration get the better of him in such an obvious way. “I’d be happy to see him,” I said. “Send him my way.” When I put the phone down, I wondered if my enthusiasm might have been misplaced and I would have been wiser to tell him I was overloaded and couldn’t take on any more work at this moment. No more than 24 hours later I received a phone call from Ray, a 24-year-old young man who told me his probation officer had passed on my phone number to him. I was intrigued by

This case story represents a composite story with elements from a number of therapeutic conversations from multiple clients. The goal was to provide an accurate illustration of the author’s work while also maintaining confidentiality and anonymity.

The rhymes used in this text are stand-ins for the originals, written by co-author Paulo Arroyo. Address correspondence to Travis Heath, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Campus Box 54, P. O. Box 173362, Denver, CO 80217-3362. E-mail: heatht@msudenver.edu

how polite and soft-spoken he sounded over the phone, and we set up an appointment for later in the week.

My work with people involved with the justice system, whether on probation or otherwise, began nearly 13 years ago when I was just a 22-year-old graduate student in Los Angeles, California. After years of agency work, I now operate a small private practice where probation officers, schools, and word of mouth drive young people like Ray to my door. In community agencies where I had worked in the past, I met with people twice a week as mandated by their sentences. More recently, I have started getting short-term referrals, which often allow for between four and eight meetings with people. In the case of Ray, we ended up seeing each other nine times. Probation services assumed responsibility for payment for five meetings only. After that, our time was up. However, Ray indicated that he wanted to continue to attend on his own volition. This is something that happens with a surprising number of cases. I have learned that if we call the probation officer on the case, the Department of Justice will usually pick up at least half of the cost for the remaining number of sessions, something it was willing to do for Ray.

Three days after first talking to Ray on the phone, he walked into the office wearing blue jeans and a red hoodie, with headphones dangling around his neck. As he sat down across from me, I had an intuition that he was not a stranger to this process often called "therapy," a fact he would confirm as we began talking. It was as if he was bracing himself for what was to come. He sat back in his chair, both of his hands tightly grabbing onto the arms, almost as if he were at the mercy of a neophyte airline pilot preparing to practice landing a massive 747 for the first time. Perhaps he was expecting a barrage of advice disguised as "psychoeducation." Or was he steeling himself for inquiries about what might be neurochemically "wrong" with him? Everything about how he was composing himself suggested to me that this young man had heard it all before.

My first query was clearly not one he was expecting. "Do you mind if I ask what you are listening to?" I asked, gesturing to his headphones. Ray raised his head up to look me in the eyes for the first time since walking into the room, his gaze a blend of skepticism and curiosity. "Styles P and Pharoahe Monch," he replied. "How old are you again?" I said as a smile crept on to my face. "Why?" he inquired. "It's just that most 24-year-olds I have spoken with aren't keen to the ways of Styles P and Pharoahe Monch," I said still smiling, knowing the album he was referencing was over a decade old and not one many young men of his age were typically in step with. "A lot of this new s**t ain't real. I can feel what Styles and Pharoahe are saying," Ray declared.

And with this, we were off. I had been granted the great privilege of riding shotgun on Ray's lyrical journey. For the next 45 minutes we listened to music on his phone and critically examined the verses he found most meaningful. What follows is an example of one such verse:

I Supreme Lord And Master (ISLAM)
But at times,
The words ring empty
When I see another homie blood splattered
Dreams get shattered
Family fractured
Ugly reputations is what give television ratings
Problem story plastered
Learn the science of our plight
These depictions keep penitentiaries packed tight
But only God can judge me
Once I fade away from life.

Yet another example:

How many Super Bowls passed
My mind's eye showing possibility so I grasp
Of a hood block,
With no patrolling cops
No empty baggies once holding rocks
Shells from a glock
But the wisdom I've acquired allows us to question what was taught
Pause in the moment
The impulse can be stopped.

During the conversation that followed I learned that not only did Ray have an affinity for rap music, but he also wrote some rhymes of his own.

* **TRAVIS:** Listening to you today, Ray, I have a hunch that you and rap music have been homeboys for a long time and you both share a long and storied history together. Am I right or wrong?

RAY: Yeah, I mean, I can't remember my life without rap. It's like it was with me from the moment I came out of the womb. You know, I'm sure that's not true, but that's what it feels like.

T: Wow! Are you telling me that no one has been a friend to you longer than rap has? (He nods his assent) This seems like a really important relationship. Would it be okay with you if I tried to understand the relationship you and rap share a bit better?

R: Sure, go for it.

T: I'm curious to know if anyone has ever asked you about your relationship with rap before?

R: (pauses 10 seconds or so) I mean, not really. My homies and I cypher back-and-forth about it, but . . . you know . . . I haven't really broken down my relationship with it if that makes any sense.

T: It does make sense. Thank you. Other than your homies, does anyone else ask you about your relationship with rap?

R: No, except for like teachers and probation and other adults throughout my whole life trying to tell me it's violent and the music of the devil (takes his index fingers and makes horns over his head) and s**t like that (laughs).

T: So if I'm hearing you correctly, Ray, those adults don't really ask you about your relationship with rap, but rather tell you the sort of relationship you *should* have with it?

R: *Exactly!* It's like they don't know s**t about it but want to tell you it's the root of all evil.

T: This is really remarkable to me, Ray! Would it be okay if I asked you a few more questions about it?

R: Oh, yeah, no problem.

T: If it gets boring to you or you would rather go in another direction just tell me, okay?

R: Word (a hip-hop phrase that in this context verbalizes agreement).

T: What do you think the adults you just mentioned, like former teachers or people involved with probation, could stand to learn from your relationship with rap?

R: They would never learn anything because they won't listen. Their minds are already done made up.

T: Do you mind if I ask what kind of headphones those are, Ray? (pointing to his neck).

R: These? Oh, man, these are Beats (a popular brand of headphones).

T: Now I heard you say that those folks wouldn't listen, and I want you to know that I absolutely believe you. Even still, I want to invite you to imagine for a second that we could take a pair of Beats, maybe even magic Beats, and slip them on the people that can't or won't hear while they were sleeping, and the message would sneak through their ears and permeate their minds whether they wanted it to or not. Imagine now that they have woken up. What education would rap have given them?

R: Man, I wish you could pick me up some of *those* headphones! (said laughing)

T: That would be pretty cool, right? Maybe that's a project we can work on later (both of us laughing).

R: For real! What I think they would learn is that there are a lot of people in the world who don't have a voice. If you are someone in the world who does have a

voice, you know, that's great. Good for you. And by voice I mean, you know, we all have like a voice box that works. What I mean when I say voice is a voice that others can hear or will really listen to. My whole life I've never really had that voice because I'm poor and black . . . except when I rap. This is true, you know, for like pretty much my whole crew in my neighborhood, too. Rap is our voice.

T: Are you of the opinion that the people who won't listen that you referenced earlier would learn from the "magic Beats" that rap could serve as a voice for the voiceless?

R: Exactly. I mean, if everyone listens to everything you say anyway, then fine, you don't need something like rap. (Begins rapping):

The more I wild out
 Allows me to achieve that street clout
 While lives are turned into tools
 Did dominant narratives actually raise a bunch of fools?
 Our escape from a jumpshot or a hip-hop plate?
 While theirs is school?
 But either one of us can lose
 Trying to chase what Lupe articulated as The Cool,
 White men in suits don't have to jump
 Still a thousand and one ways to lose with his shoes.

R: You know, that line, "White men in suits don't have to jump," that's what I'm talking about.

T: Right, there's that old saying, "White men can't jump," when it comes to basketball. Did those lyrics do something clever with it?

R: For sure. White men don't have to jump to make money and white men don't *have* to rap to be heard. Don't get me wrong, I write rhymes because I love to. Sometimes when I write it's just about partying or females or something light. But I also write because it allows me to have a voice. You know, it's like rap says to the world I'm going to say s**t how it is whether you like it or not.

It was becoming increasingly clear that Ray's relationship with rap, and the hip-hop culture in which it resided, was one of protest, freedom, and inspiration. As our conversation continued to traverse the electrifying and winding roads of rap music, we alternated between listening to songs on Ray's phone and discussing, almost philosophizing, at the conclusion of each. That served as inspiration for the following exchange:

T: Do you think rappers are philosophers?

R: No doubt. Rap is philosophy but without all the old white cats (said laughing).

T: Socrates is not the father or first philosopher of rap?

R: No! (Laughs harder)

T: Who do you think is?

R: Probably KRS-One.

T: What in your opinion is the job of a philosopher?

R: To make people think, like hold a mirror up to the world so they can see how foolish they are. (Begins rapping):

Peep the crucifix
 Comes across mysterious
 With I(j)ehova hanging from the partisan nails of politics
 The origins
 Governing men of Romans
 Did agree to its means justifying capital punishment
 For the minds
 They despised
 To keep all the sheep in line
 While revolution sparked divine
 Christ
 But check the rhyme
 What if they lynched him hanging from the branch of a tree
 Then burned him half alive
 Peep manipulation B
 We would pray to a tree
 Then human torching eventually
 Fire associated with hell
 Overstand irony
 When a bullet burns its way into your brother's physical
 Laid to rest in a wooden casket
 Damned it's cyclical.

T: What do you hear in these rhymes?

R: It's like it exposes hypocrisy, you know what I mean? People believe things about God or religion or whatever without even opening up a book or thinking. They just accept a history they like or feel comfortable about or that some cat on TV tells them is right.

T: Are you of the opinion that there are multiple histories?

R: Oh, yeah, no doubt. The history that you get in history books is the only one most people read, though.

T: Where do these histories come from?

R: Usually from your teacher and books in school.

T: Where does the information in those books come from?

R: I mean, that mostly comes from white people and their ancestors. You know, I took a philosophy class in college like 4 years ago and I don't think we talked about one brother the whole time. That's part of the reason I never fit in there.

T: And the fact that the only history that was discussed was from a white perspective, what does that mean for the other histories?

R: You see them in like *Roots* (a television miniseries from the 1970s depicting the life of an enslaved Black in the United States) and s**t (laughing). We had to watch that in high school. That s**t is so weak.

T: What would be a stronger portrayal?

R: You just heard one (in the previous rap). But it's like I told you earlier, people don't want to listen to those.

T: Do you believe you are a philosopher?

R: I never really thought about it like that. I know I'm a writer. But I guess that means I am a philosopher.

T: Do you mind if I tap into your own philosophical expertise?

R: Sure. I know what you're go to say next (said with a wry smile). You are going to ask me about my philosophy on s**t.

T: You know me too well already, Ray!

R: My philosophy is simple. It's to see the truth even when they try and obscure it. It's to go deeper. If you don't, you'll believe a lie.

T: How do you see deeper?

R: You have to do what my grandmother says: ignore the noise. You can't believe everything you hear. You can't even believe everything you think you see.

T: Is your grandmother a wise philosopher, too?

R: She's the wisest person I know.

T: What has her philosophy taught you about the person you want to be?

R: She always says, "I didn't raise no fool."

T: Would you say that your grandmother's philosophy and the philosophy of KRS-One are similar?

R: Hmm . . . (pauses for 10–15 seconds) That's crazy, bro. I never thought of it like that, but I guess so.

T: In what ways would you say they are similar?

R: Both of them are encouraging me to think in my own way. To be my own person. Basically, just be wise to the ways of the world.

T: Do you think that it would be helpful in our work to call on the ideas of great philosophers like your grandmother and also KRS-One as we try to navigate the situation that brought you to see me?

R: Yeah, it's just crazy though because my grandmother hates rap. Like she thinks it "corrupts the youth" (fingers on both hands raised to make air quotes).

T: If only we had those "Magic Beats." Do you think she would be more open to it then?

R: (Smiles and then laughs) Yeah, and maybe she would see that I'm rapping about like the same s**t she's saying but in my own way.

T: Have you ever thought that maybe the spirit of your ancestors and their struggles can be channeled through your raps? Maybe rap is like your history book?

R: I mean . . . that's deep! I ain't never thought of it quite like that, but yeah, my raps are about me, where I came from, and where my people came from.

T: Would it be okay if we cracked open your rap's history book in our work together?

R: Yeah.

T: Do you think it might provide us with some stories that the regular history books miss?

R: Oh, no question! Stories that regular history books wouldn't even touch!

So engrossed did we both become in the progression of this conversation that time itself seemed to melt away. Ray continued writing his own history through various rhymes and interpretations of them.

At one point Ray could not conceal his enthusiasm for a verse he located on his phone. He said he had been listening to it for a few weeks with a great deal of frequency. It moved him so much that he immediately stopped the music after it had played and rapped the verse himself again.

With these I see
 Crimson stains on this project concrete
 Yellow tape barricade
 Homie wrapped in white sheets
 It's a struggle just to eat
 So how the f**k do they rationalize judging me or my deeds
 Grab a pen
 Clear the phlegm
 Then commence to bless the beat
 Give ya'll a tour of my life
 Without walking on my streets
 It's my life!
 Being scribbled on they college ruled pages

Escape when we cipher up
That type of freedom is amazing
My life!

I watched him intently and took a few deep breaths before breaking the silence we had both fallen into by my first query.

T: Ray, I noticed that you listened to this verse and then stopped the music and rapped it. Were you, by any chance, deepening your relationship with the lyrics by rapping it yourself?

R: I do this all the time. What I like to do is take a verse that someone else wrote and then just add my own flavor, kind of like sampling (a hip-hop term for taking an older song and mixing it with a new one) or remixing.

T: Do you mean that you take the original rhyme and add your own story?

R: Exactly.

Ray was so engaged that by the end of our conversation it was as if he were a different person than the one who walked through the door an hour before. Certainly he was a poor match for the description of the detached and uncaring young man who lacked any semblance of motivation that the probation officer had provided for me earlier in the week.

The fact there wasn't much sand left in the hourglass of our first meeting had sneaked up on both of us. My mind was left spinning with possibilities for where our future conversations could go. With just 5 minutes remaining, I invited Ray to reflect with me on what had transpired that broke us both out of our enthrallment.

T: Would it be all right if I asked you a little bit about how our meeting today is going?

R: That's cool.

T: Thank you, as I know I have asked you a lot of questions today. I appreciate you hanging in there with me. I've noticed that it's very different when we are just speaking as opposed to when we invite rap to the party. Have you noticed this?

R: Yeah, for sure.

T: How do you understand this?

R: It's like when I rhyme . . . I spit truth from my soul.

T: How is rapping with your soul different than talking with your mouth?

R: When I talk, I think. I thought that's what we're supposed to do in therapy, anyway. That's what all those other f**king shrinks did.

T: Would it be all right if we made up our own therapy and put aside other kinds of therapy you have been through or heard about?

R: Yeah (said with a chuckle and skeptical eyes).

T: What can your soul rhyme that your mouth sometimes might have trouble saying?

R: Freedom. It's like when I'm rapping I can feel the words come through my body. It's natural, like I don't have to think about it.

T: By that do you mean to say that rhymes remove the shackles that are attached to your soul?

R: Right (said turning his head to one side as if in deliberation and then nodding).

T: I saw your face light up. I wonder if inspiration is brewing in your soul this very moment? I know I am guessing so I could very well be wrong.

R: No, it's just that I thought of a verse. (Begins rapping):

It's like we being played
 When they say
 Strive for a slice
 Of they cake
 They filthy hands holding hate
 Choke out fate
 But the rhyme melts the shackles
 Oppression disintegrates
 Even just for one moment
 When we flowing on stage
 It goes on and on and on . . .

T: Have you had shackles on your soul that rap music helps you break free from?

R: Yeah, sometimes it feels like rap is my only way to break free.

T: I notice when you rap that your whole body changes. For example, when we were just talking earlier you were kind of slumped down in your chair. But when you rap your back straightens up, your face lights up, and your hands are active. It's almost like I can see you breaking free right in front of me. What do you think would happen if rap made more frequent visits to your life?

R: I would feel more alive and like I have a voice, you know what I mean? Like being on probation it feels like I have no voice. I just get told what to do, and it's like they tell everyone the same thing and don't really care what really makes someone tick. It's like we are cattle just being pushed through the gates.

T: Do you think rap music could be a great way for us to understand what makes you tick?

R: The best way!

T: I get the sense you have many important stories to rap about. Would you be willing to write a song between now and next time that paints the part of the picture that probation and maybe other people in your life don't get about you?

R: (Nods affirmatively)

T: Do you know what I mean?

R: Oh, yeah, for sure. I already feel a couple of ideas (pointing to his head). Like people automatically assume I'm stupid and like I'm some kind of bad person or criminal or something. They don't even know me.

T: Might writing a rhyme about the parts they don't know release the shackles from your soul?

R: Yeah, but not all the way.

T: It might take more than one rhyme to release them all the way?

R: Yeah.

T: Do you have many stories to tell?

R: Oh, yeah!

T: I want you to know that I will support you in writing as many rhymes as it takes.

R: You're the weirdest shrink they have ever sent me to. Not weird like bad, not bad at all, but does probation know you do this?

T: Do what? Ask people to rap?

R: Yeah!

T: They know I help people find the kinds of therapies that best work for them. Do you think this one we've come up with today might work for you?

R: Oh yeah, but I don't even know if this is really therapy.

T: What would you call it?

R: It's like a studio session where I'm making beats with my homies or something.

T: Should we have a studio session once a week together?

R: (Smiles and laughs) For sure.

Ray returned for our second conversation with his black New York Yankees hat turned to the side looking somewhat but perhaps not yet completely relaxed as he sat down. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper as his right leg bounced up and down. He quickly unfolded it and scanned over its content. "Here are a few lyrics," he said quietly but with conviction as he handed the document to me. I was feeling a bit caught off guard that Ray had picked up so quickly where we left off in our last conversation.

T: Ray, I have to be honest, I feel so privileged to hold this in my hand right now. I wonder if I am holding a gift from your soul?

R: You could say that (kindly smiling at me).

T: I just had an idea and I'm curious if it would be okay if I shared it with you? (Ray nodded in the affirmative). Last week you told me that rhymes come from your soul when they are rapped. I could be wrong here, but I'm just wondering if I read the rhyme on the paper if it might lose some of its soulfulness? And the last thing I want to do is strip the rhyme of its soulfulness.

R: I've got a baseline for this (pointing to his phone). It's dope (a hip-hop term that means good or of high quality) You want to hear it?

T: I would be honored, Ray.

As the music percolated through the small speakers on his phone I noticed I couldn't help but bob my head. I looked up and Ray was doing the same. Our eyes caught and Ray smiled slightly with the left side of his mouth. In this moment I pondered whether or not I should invite him to rap, but I hesitated, not wanting to make him feel uncomfortable in our second conversation. A few seconds later, Ray reached his hand out indicating he wanted the document with the lyrics on it back from me. I obliged. Ray bobbed his head a few more times and said, "This still needs a little more time in the lab, but. . ."

What happened next as Ray began to "spit truth" was almost like a detonation. The words rhythmically rolled off his tongue with an intensity that made me suspect something important was transpiring. I didn't just listen to what he said, I felt it. Ray's passion was palpable and I could feel its infusion through my body. We now bobbed our heads in unison and for a brief time it was as if the world had shrunk and we were the only two people that now could fit in it. It was the kind of attunement and connection with another person that was equal parts mysterious and exhilarating.

Grandma said I should reconsider law school
 That means I wear a suit and bend the truth and feel awful
 Hell no, got a degree but what that cost you
 You make a good salary just to pay Sallie Mae
 That's real as ever
 Ducking bill collectors like a Jehovah's Witness
 When they showed up at your door at Christmas

Praise God it's hard to stay spiritual
 How they got these people on the TV selling miracles
 You mean to tell me everything gonna be fine
 If I call your hotline and pay 29.99
 Well damn, why didn't you say so
 Take this check and ask God to multiply all my pesos.

T: I am so captivated by what just happened, Ray! Would it be all right if I tried to understand your rhyming genius a little better?

R: For sure.

T: May I ask what is it about this rhyme that reveals a part of yourself that other people often fail to get?

R: People think that because I don't have a college degree I'm stupid. They make that judgment up front. Now I'm not trying to say that college is always a bad thing (said looking at me knowing that I'm also a college professor), but, you know, sometimes it's like a scam. Like, I'm a poor kid. Think about how much debt I would rack up by going to college. Dude, it's astronomical. I tried community college for a year. Is that even a good investment? You know, I think a really good rhyme exposes the way people think. So that first part is just like a challenge. You know, just because these are the rules you play the game by doesn't mean they are the only rules.

T: Do you think rhyming helps you create your own rules while also challenging the rules people tell you that you *should* follow?

R: No doubt. And sometimes you challenge rules in rhymes just to make people think.

T: Is that like what you were saying last week about rap as a philosophy (I asked Ray this very much hoping the conversation meant as much to him as it had to me).

R: Exactly, like KRS-One!

T: (Feeling relieved that we seemed to be catching up right where we left off last week, I continued) Can I tap a bit further into your rhyming knowledge here, Ray?

R: Sure.

T: Are you of the opinion that challenging rules is a good thing? (Ray nods in the affirmative) And why do you think it's a good thing to challenge rules?

R: If no one challenges rules, s**t gets stale. You know what I mean? Like people start to take things for granted. Sometimes a good rhyme is just like grabbing someone and going (pretends like he's physically shaking someone). It's like, "Wake up, yo!"

T: Do you believe there are different ways to challenge rules?

R: A lot of different ways.

T: Are some ways of challenging rules more effective than others in your experience?

R: Yeah, I mean, look how I ended up here on probation.

T: How do you mean?

R: Ever since I was a kid I would find myself in certain situations where I would get angry and step (a hip-hop term that means to challenge someone physically, often to a fight) to someone. Yeah, and it's stupid, I know. I've been getting that lecture my whole life.

T: How do you understand the relationship between rap and anger?

R: When I would write rhymes, they would keep me out of trouble. Like if someone was pissing me off, I would just go home and make a beat about it. It's like my anger would leave my mouth through my rhymes.

T: Let me see if I'm hearing you correctly, Ray, because I don't want to get this wrong. Are you saying that rap is able to put anger in its place?

R: Yeah, I don't end up doing something stupid.

T: Maybe this is a long shot, Ray, but do any rhymes come to mind that capture what we are talking about here?

R: No, not really . . . (pauses in a pensive fashion for 30 seconds or so) . . . actually, yeah, one does (he composes himself and then begins rapping):

To be continued. . . .

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