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Rapping Honestly: NaS, Nietzsche, and the Moral Prejudices of Truth

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ABSTRACT: This article explores a modern manifestation of the will to truth, the artistry of rap music, and their controversial convergence in America. All too often rap lyrics are interpreted as the celebration and even permissible testimony of the presumed criminal lifestyles of black people in America. In particular, the aggressive lyrics expressed in the subgenre “gangsta rap” have been used as confirmation for a singular truth narrative perpetuated by the media that blacks are inherently criminal and violent. However, Friedrich Nietzsche offers a thorough critique of the singular self-sustaining conception of truth and in its place suggests a healthier, more accurate, conception of honesty that embraces the fluctuating and interactive nature of identity, narrative, and life. Using Nietzsche’s critique of truth, I argue that traditional interpretations of gangsta rap are buttressed by a singular narrative of truth that aims to perpetuate antiblack racial sentiments and consequently they overlook the nuanced critique of these sentiments that is achieved through alternative narration. Focusing on the rap artist NaS, I argue that the lyrical prowess he displays in his songs ultimately troubles the singular truth narrative in a way that expresses the type of honesty that Nietzsche champions.

KEYWORDS: Nietzsche, rap, antiblack, truth, critique

Yo, I'm hot like 95 Fahrenheit
 On a summer night, tight spot where bodies rot
 Rats drink from water drops, in the streets, niggas
 Little kids, scared cops with red dots
 Philosophical gangsta, with violent priors

—NAS, "Thief's Theme"

I. Introduction

Do these lyrics ring true to you? When truth rings, when it oscillates, it reverberates in one's soul and imagination. These lyrics confer a feeling of sincerity that does not translate without a certain context: the rhythm, rawness, and rhyme open the ear of the listener to retrieve this depiction of an almost unimaginable world expressed from an equally difficult-to-imagine perspective. For some, while the veracity of this description is beyond the pale of their reality, the significance, the proverbial weight of these lyrics, resonates in a different register of truth that follows from a sense of their honesty.

Yet, for other listeners these lyrics cannot be heard in this register. They instead must be a literal, admissible testament of a bleak social existence where death and sociopathy are the singular reality of black America. In a January 2014 *New York Times* article entitled "Rap Lyrics on Trial," Erik Nielson and Charis Kubrin call attention to a case presented to the Supreme Court of New Jersey where a prosecutor leaned heavily on the rap lyrics of a black man, Vonte Skinner, as evidence of his involvement in a 2005 shooting.¹ Nielson and Kubrin explain how the particular lyrics submitted as evidence in no way appear to describe the crime on trial. Nevertheless, following a trend—which they describe as occurring with alarming regularity—the submission of these rap lyrics was interpreted as a truthful representation of Mr. Skinner's identity, which Nielson and Kubrin suggest led to his conviction for attempted murder.²

There is a tendency to pigeonhole black life and identity, especially as portrayed in mainstream American media, within the confines of a decrepit, immoral, destitute, criminal underworld. For many this imagery can only be affirmed as definitive truth, consequently overlooking the complexity and aesthetic quality of rap's descriptions of black life³—particularly in the genre of "gangsta rap," which is characterized by its raw and aggressive

lyrics. However, rap lyrics cannot and should not be reduced to a simple singular objective truth narrative. For an emcee such as NaS one could very easily find lyrics that describe and seemingly endorse a criminal lifestyle inasmuch as he is the first-person narrator of these lyrics. But to read his lyrics simply as confession and profession dismisses the manner in which a lyricist such as NaS undertakes the narrative position, not with an attunement to report “the truth” per se, that is, a singular objective narrative of his opinion and occupation, but, rather, with an attunement to self-expression that also plays on untruths and lies. This latter attunement of observation and expression, I would like to argue, fits surprisingly well under the rubric of honesty as we find Nietzsche articulates and employs the term in his infamous critique of the singular-perspective objective truth.

Nietzsche conceives honesty (*Redlichkeit*) as a virtue that acknowledges and embraces the multiplicity of, often contradictory, perspectives a person may undertake in his or her experience of the world at any given moment. When championing honesty Nietzsche does not speak of providing a singular objective “truth”⁴ but, rather, of recognizing and adopting certain appearances and untruths as necessary, critical, and even life-affirming when describing oneself or one’s experience. Melissa Lane succinctly describes the Nietzschean honest person as one who “speaks frankly (that is, without lying) about the whole content of what they perceive, even when the content consists of untruth and lies.”⁵ I contend that a rapper such as NaS—who is a sophisticated and prudent narrator of black life—often raps honestly in this Nietzschean sense about his experiences in an anti-black world, that is, rapping “frankly” about the conditions of life as a black person, even when the entire content of the lyrics, for example, particular events or self-descriptions, may be untruthful or lies.

NaS is an exemplary illustration of the manner in which rappers, especially those who give measured aesthetic nuance to the grit and grime of black life, do not pretend to offer a singular self-enclosed objective truthful narrative but, instead, negotiate sometimes fictitious, illusory, and even contradictory narrative perspectives that nevertheless remain honest to the experience of black folk in an antiblack America. Most importantly, rapping honestly provides a critical, extramoral edge for interpreting and understanding the life-denying and morally depraved circumstances of black life that the purportedly objective truth narratives created in the media do not.⁶ In a peculiar friendship, both Nietzsche and NaS problematize and challenge the forcibly imposed construct of the reliable, straightforward,

consistent narrator, by embracing perspectives that transcend the moral binary of a singular truth and falsity in the name of an honesty that does not propose a solution but opens up the possibility of seeing life differently.

2. The Will to Truth and Re-presentation of Black Life

Nietzsche's interpretation of truth is undoubtedly one of the most popular and contentious areas of his thought, with commentators old and new engaged in enthusiastic debate over his final position on the issue.⁷ I would say that if one wants to engage any dimension of Nietzsche's work rigorously, it is almost impossible to avoid dealing with his radical and measured critique of the employment of truth. He reflects on the uses and abuses of truth in almost all of his published texts, and an important issue in these reflections regards truth's value in terms of morality, health, and life in general. What value does the commitment to an objective, unwavering, one-dimensional conception of truth have for us?

To speak of truth in terms of valuation and not simply as something necessary in itself already destabilizes our everyday orientation toward the world as consisting of an objective reality easily accessible through a universal perspective. In an early essay entitled "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-moral Sense," Nietzsche offers a critique of truth and knowledge in a concise genealogy of truth's development through different forms of anthropomorphisms and metaphors. He argues that for humans, objective standardized truth was not always a guiding principle to reality but over time developed as such. "What, then, is truth?" Nietzsche asks, and he answers: "A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms . . . truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins."⁸ Access to an objective reality as unrelated to a particular perspective or experience has never been a possibility. Instead, humans are confined to reduce a number of different experiences and observations under different names or concepts to make social and individual experience coherent and bearable. These "metaphors" and "anthropomorphisms" are a powerful force in our lives; they are "mobilized" in pretty much all experience, although we often forget that these claims to truth in the objective singular sense come from a perspectival creation.

A few passages before the one cited above, Nietzsche uses the example of language creation to anchor his claim that generally accepted truth claims are in fact metaphors. We use language as if the words that designate certain objects are self-explanatory and correspond to some true “thing in itself.” But the process of language use, which begins with physical stimulation and moves to the expression of a name, takes place through leaps of logic connected by metaphor. He explains, “A nerve stimulus, first transposed into an image—first metaphor. The image, in turn, imitated by a sound—second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an entirely new and different one.”⁹ The transformation of the physical sensation to a visual image does not necessitate that we connect the two phenomena in any necessary, singular way. You and I may have the same nerve stimuli as the result of looking at the chalkboard, but you may see a two-dimensional ring, and I may see the letter *o*. The possibility of this discrepancy attests to the metaphorical leap from nerve stimuli to visual. If a third party intervenes and says, “I was using this chalkboard earlier; that is a racetrack,” we are convinced that there is an objective reality of that original nerve stimulus that is captured in the word *racetrack*; but even this audio transmission is just a different instantiation of another logical leap where the visual is equated with the totally different realm of the audial, all the while conferring an objective reality of the phenomenon.

For Nietzsche, metaphor is a technique of comparison, for example, between nerve stimuli and image, that over time has become identity. To be clear, strong metaphors are often useful; one could imagine the metaphorical interpretation of a stove as “hot” to be useful and even responsible in certain situations. In this sense there is undoubtedly a certain value to interpreting this metaphor as truthful. However, “hot stove” is just a metaphor, a perspectival interpretation particular to creating a safe environment or cooking food, but we will see below that some attempts to capture truth through a singular perspective can be more pernicious than helpful. Humans have internalized objective truth-telling not only as possible but as the most desirable access point to the world and as the morally correct grounds for action. We have developed an insatiable will to truth, and for Nietzsche this is a problem: the value of truth should not leave such a strong impression upon us, and yet humans still tote old truth coins with the utmost regard in the hopes of cashing in big.

The insatiable will to truth, the desire for a self-identical universal reality and objective grounds for human interaction, denies the movement of life in general as it is essentially constituted through an amalgamation of differential relations and multiple perspectives that are not “true” in any singular objective sense and are thus “untrue” when regarding general or customary interpretations of certain experiences. Nietzsche proclaims this reality in *Beyond Good and Evil*: “To renounce false judgment [i.e., in the name of truth] would be to renounce life, would be to deny life. To recognize untruth as a condition of life: that, to be sure, means to resist customary value-sentiments in a dangerous fashion: and a philosophy which ventures to do so places itself, by that act alone, beyond good and evil.”¹⁰ In effect, the will to truth is a prejudice that denies the reality, promotion, and preservation of life—inasmuch as life is constitutively resistant to firm determination and functions on the use of metaphor and illusions to accommodate different perspectives—in its “renouncement” of false judgment.¹¹ There is no way around false judgments or perspectives in the sense that there are no objective judgments or perspectives, and therefore to deny acknowledging the worth and pervasiveness of false judgments in the name of “the truth” turns away from the reality of life as a mixture of multiple perspectives. In the second sentence there is a more local conception of life in Nietzsche’s endorsement of resisting “customary value-sentiments in a dangerous fashion.” Recognizing untruth by resisting certain customary value sentiments that have settled in or are reported to be objective—for example, black lives are worthless—in a dangerous way—for example, claiming to participate in particular criminal activity that one has not to highlight certain moral claims—ventures beyond “truth.” An allegiance to any singular truth stunts creative uses of metaphor by denying “false judgments” and “untruth” as the condition of dealing with reality, and often this allegiance is strongest when understood in terms of morality.

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche connects the will to truth to morality through his reflections on the ascetic ideal shared by Judeo-Christian morality and scientific inquiry. He contends that Judeo-Christian moral practices were created by a class of ascetic priests to “medicate” the suffering they experienced at the hands of the noble class and, more generally, an unstable fluctuating existence. These priests were relatively impotent in respect to their ability to thrive and express themselves while subject to the rule and morality of the healthy noble class.¹² Consequently, out of vengefulness, they created a reactive morality that endorsed their

own suffering as embodied in “decay, pain, mischance, ugliness, voluntary deprivation, self-mortification, self-flagellation, self-sacrifice.”¹³ These ascetic practices were embraced and even created by the priests and then preached and prescribed to their people, that is, “the herd” of people that constitutes the slave class, and in their adoption became the criterion of the morally good and worthy life.¹⁴

The good is in the one and only God and requires allegiance to its singular narrative of self-deprecation and suffering. The singularity of this moral narrative is key; Nietzsche writes, “[I]t permits no other interpretation . . . and [is] sanctioned solely from the point of view of *its* interpretation.”¹⁵ The power of the priests over life was finally harnessed in their reactive morality, and it was secured through a psychology that embraced a singular deeply rooted truth in the name of the morally good. Judeo-Christian asceticism is the only true good and must be remembered as the good, especially when juxtaposed to the evil practices and principles that transgress the rules of its ideology.

In this stubborn fidelity to “its interpretation” Nietzsche finds affinities between Judeo-Christian morality and modern science and its will to truth. Just as the Judeo-Christian faith has its good and its God in the singular reality of its asceticism, the modern scientists deny the world of change and untruth with a stubborn faith in an objective truth found through certain methods, principles, and observations.¹⁶ By the nineteenth century in Europe, there was a strong contingency of people who believed scientific truth to be antithetical and even superior to the foolish faith in God and the otherworldly. However, Nietzsche points out that the scientists also bolstered an ascetic ideal, often on moral grounds, so that “even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the fire of the flame lit by the thousand year old faith, the Christian faith, which was also Plato’s faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine.”¹⁷ The true and the good come together for Nietzsche in modern science, but in no less an insidious manner than the ascetic practices of Christianity. Scientists, in their bold proclamations of goodness in the name of their relentless will to truth, have not transcended the realm of Christian faith and morality but found themselves in a similar self-undermining, life-denying binary of truth and falsity, good and evil.

The moral allegiance to a stubborn unconditional truth that Nietzsche convincingly articulates as pervasive at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe holds sway in America today. However, there are some notable

differences that I would like to call attention to. First, we see the will to truth manifest not only in the natural and human sciences but also—bolstered by a faith in the legitimacy and moral goodness of scientific truth—in the general media. Second, the ascetic moralization of the true and good takes place in a racially stratified social order. One good and hearty truth of American reality believed by the majority of its people and secured by the media insists that the black community exists as a devastating inescapable dystopia riddled with crime. As Eddie Glaude aptly describes: “[African American] lives are often *reduced to sociology*—the fact of the plantation, the reality of sharecropping, the difficulties of the city, the devastation of the drug economy and so on. Every gesture, *artistic or otherwise*, becomes a window to that reality, and we become flat, one-dimensional characters in a sordid tale about social misery.”¹⁸ In other words, the truth of blacks becomes the devastating reality of their social existence as poor, violent, and hopeless—even in their artistic endeavors. History has shown how blacks in America have come to be framed in this perspective as barbaric, slow-witted, uncivilized, and predisposed to violence and crime, first in the justification of their enslavement; then, after the abolition of chattel slavery, as a justification of their lynching, exclusion from voting, and integration within white America through the enforcement of Jim Crow laws; and more recently in the disproportionate murders and incarceration of blacks, particularly black males, compared with the rest of the American population. These practices are all justified by this truth, this sociological reality of a hard knock life, highlighted by Glaude above, that is reified and substantiated by an American media that—as many of us have surely observed—often cannot get beyond the image of the black community as a lawless dystopia and which often offers scientific statistics or experts to support its representations of black life. Consequently, we are not totally shocked when we read about court cases such as Vonte Skinner’s mentioned above, where a black artist’s expression cannot be imagined as fictional because it runs so close to the truth we receive and rely on provided by media outlets.

I emphasize the suffix of the word *representation* to turn attention to how commonplace—and I am thinking of language here specifically—it has become to ignore the perspectival reality of communication and the potential pejorative nature of offering a perspective that one contends to be the one and only truth. The narrative of black life in America is not offered the common courtesy of any nuanced interpretation or reflection.

Instead, an avalanche of data on incarceration and mortality rates muffles the screams for fairness and an open mind. Accordingly, while Skinner's conviction was overturned, the *Times* article still contends that the tendency to use rap lyrics as evidence is not unique to a black man such as Skinner but may be unique to rap music as a black mode of expression. Look at how Nielson and Kubrin describe the prosecutors' technique: "Even when defendants use a stage name to signal their creation of a fictional first-person narrator, rap about exploits that are exaggerated to the point of absurdity, and make use of figurative language, prosecutors will insist that the lyrics are effectively rhymed confessions. *No other form of fictional expression is exploited this way in the courts. . . . Nobody believes that Johnny Cash shot a man in Reno.*"¹⁹ What allows prosecutors to insist upon the veracity and truth-value of such lyrics that interestingly does not seem to hold with other artists, such as the all-too-wholesome Johnny Cash? It is the persistent bombardment of blacks portrayed in the dark light of criminality and decadence by a media imbued with the power of objective truth-telling in an antiblack America.²⁰ Mary Beth Oliver, Narissra M. Punyanunt-Carter, and Helán E. Page describe ways in which media bombardment arrests any thinking of blacks outside these dimensions. All significations of black identity in hostile and depraved circumstances are ingested as authoritative dogmatic moral truths, and this will to truth is reified by a moral conviction that these truths are *good*, ultimately refusing to acknowledge the way in which a rapper's lyrics may be using different techniques to reflect on these circumstances.

Helán Page argues in his article "'Black Male' Images and Media Containment of African American Men" that the portrayal of blacks in these morally reprehensible images encourages the viewing public to reduce all black males to the presented perspective and also to contain blacks in prison or in their own segregated community in fear of them wreaking havoc in the public domain. He explains, "Portrayed as incompetents of violent nature, unembraceable black males are featured in media images that seem to threaten the body politic, including the visible and often invisible bureaucratic and corporate arenas of cultural manipulation which I call white public space."²¹ Page's "white public space" remains an idealized constructed image, a truth, that attempts to arrest any deviation or contestations of its perspective. This space as truth and reality is supported by an antiblack racist worldview that we can find described succinctly by Lewis Gordon.

In *Her Majesty's Other Children*, specifically in the chapters "Sex, Race, and Matrices of Desire in an Antiblack World" and "Race, Biraciality, and Mixed Race—in Theory," Gordon describes his conception of antiblack racism.²² Antiblack racism is a perspective constituted through a binary logic of oppositional values particular to the West. He explains: "Since the Western valuative system has historically placed positivity and its self-identity on the value of whites, that means, then, that it structures its primary opposition on the level of the black. To speak of racial opposition, then, is to speak of white and black."²³ While it may be tempting to conceive black and white as two equal but different sides of a racial coin, this racial matrix does not work with equal offsets. For Gordon, the positive side of the binary, that is, white, is the objective standard of humanity and thus lacks race altogether. Blackness is the other side of the binary, and it occupies the ideal raced position from which all other people of color are tinged darker and less desirable as they approach it. In evaluative terms, Gordon explains, "to be racialized is to be pushed 'down' toward blackness, and to be deracialized is to be pushed 'up' toward whiteness."²⁴ In this world there is a libidinal economy of desire where the desirability of white (and masculinity) is on the highest end of the spectrum, whereas blackness (and femininity) is to be avoided at all costs.²⁵ In an antiblack world, Page's "white public space" reflects how the image of the criminal and deviant black male ultimately renders this group as undesirable constituents of society. Black life is portrayed by the media in a singular narrative of criminality and violence whereby this truth is morally advantageous to believe and support since it reifies the racial binary of whites as human and blacks as criminal, violent, barbaric, and thus ultimately subhuman threats that need to be disciplined by the state.

Nietzsche's account of the genealogy of morality ended with the Judeo-Christian/scientific worldview that had conscripted truth as good for the masses, and it still resonates today. However, when coupled with these "unembraceable" images of the inherently criminal and reprehensible, an internal antagonism within the herd has developed that aims the ascetic will to truth perniciously and disproportionately toward blacks to reify a racial hierarchy split not only by the criterion of the human and the subhuman but also by good and evil.²⁶ Page argues, "In white public space, things of racial significance are made to seem fair, just, legitimate, and simplistically obvious when the embodied experiences of racial targets scream that they clearly are not."²⁷ In the antiblack world, black undesirability and

criminality is understood to be “just” because this image has become an ossified invariable advantageous truth, and this sort of objective truth is good for the moral and racial world order, just as objective truth and ascetic practices were good for the priests and their reactive morality. Even in the aesthetic register, the will to truth in the antiblack world requires that blacks be portrayed singularly as hostile, criminal, and nonreflective recipients of their pathologies even though the “racial targets [are] scream[ing] that they are not.”

One may wonder, in what register can these “racial targets” scream and be heard? Protesting the condemnation of black life as inherently bad and beyond hope of repair in America has taken many forms and continues to evolve. Rap, as a form of black aesthetic, offers a unique response to racial oppression and its re-presentation in the media. In NaS it takes the form of a life-affirming honesty that I believe Nietzsche himself articulates and would endorse. Nietzsche says, “The fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is the *faith in antithetical values*”;²⁸ however, in his *honest* performance—placing particular weight on lyricism—NaS goes beyond the metaphysical opposition of the singular truth and falsity that supports the antithetical values inherent in black criminality and white civility—he goes beyond good and evil.

3. Nietzsche’s Honesty

Colloquially speaking, honesty is intimately tied to truth-telling. To speak honestly of one’s upbringing would be to tell the truth of what one experienced: what school you went to, where you grew up, why did you play sports, who you hung out with, what you did to get by, when did your parents meet, where did they meet, how did you get along. Nietzsche recognizes that the will to truth often reduces a person’s identity or experience to a singular narrative that is complete, “truthful,” and rid of certain categorical contradictions. However, Nietzsche is wary of the will to truth, particularly as an ascetic ideal that continues the life-denying practices of the ascetic priest. Life in its affirmation and joy embraces and proliferates the multiplicity of perspectives that are constitutive of life and thus always available. This affirmation sometimes employs perspectivalism and lies to expose the way certain prejudices of truth aim to deny this reality and consequently stifle the reality of flux and change; thus Nietzsche will say, “It is no more than

a moral prejudice that truth is worth more than mere appearance” and “There would be no life at all if not on the basis of perspective estimates and appearances.”²⁹ Amid this contestation of the valuation of the will to truth, Nietzsche offers his readers the virtue of honesty. Honesty is a mode of interpreting one’s situation with a critical edge by confronting the ossified contexts in which one is restricted to understand, identify, and affirm the possibilities of one’s reality as a singularly objective position.

Nietzsche explored and endorsed the virtue of honesty (*Redlichkeit*) throughout his corpus. In his 1881 text on the prejudices of morality, *Daybreak*, he describes honesty as the newest virtue, still in the “process of becoming,” and in the 1886 *Beyond Good and Evil* he identifies it as the virtue of free spirits.³⁰ In fact, in *Beyond Good and Evil* he dedicates an entire section to the free spirit, which follows the section “On the Prejudices of Philosophers.” In this latter section Nietzsche contended that the existence of truth is a prejudice of the philosophers and questions its validity and value. Then in the section “The Free Spirit” he bypasses questioning truth’s value and instead heads straight into the realm of honesty by calling for “the will to non-knowledge, to the uncertain, to the untrue”!³¹

At first glance, this inspiring call to arms sounds simple and intuitive. Throwing truth, and thus caution, to the wind would allot one the freedom to say anything and renounce everything one wants. This would be one possible conception of the free spirit. However, one may also be immediately inclined to recall Nietzsche’s short and incisive history of Western metaphysics from *Twilight of the Idols* entitled “How the ‘Real World’ at Last Became a Myth,” where a call similar to that of untruth is expressed in the fifth bullet point: “The ‘real world’—an idea no longer of any use, not even a duty any longer—an idea grown useless, superfluous, *consequently* a refuted idea: let us abolish it! . . . [A]ll free spirits run riot.”³² With the real world exposed as the “real world,” running riot amid one’s new freedom would be the intuitive reaction. However, in the subsequent, and concluding, bullet point Nietzsche notes, “*With the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!* . . . INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA.”³³ With the end of the real world, just as with the critique of truth, one cannot embrace either the real world or its *apparent* opposite. These two perspectives are singular truths in binary opposition, and with honesty one goes beyond those dichotomies.

Returning to “The Free Spirit” section of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche explores some other specters of truth that haunt its renunciation

and can creep in if the free spirit is not careful.³⁴ In paragraph 31 Nietzsche describes the youthful spirit who had once been committed to the binaries of yes and no and to truth but comes to reject them. However, the spirit does so with such unified insistency that it attempts to falsify everything absolutely, and eventually the spirit turns diametrically against itself: “as though a good conscience is a danger, as though a good conscience were a screening of oneself and a sign that one’s subtler honesty had grown weary; above all one takes sides on principle, *against* ‘youth’—a decade later: and one grasps that all this too—was still youth.”³⁵ The youthful spirit turns “Truth” on its head and, logically, ends up with just another “Truth.” It rejects its inherent “subtler honesty” for another brand of “brute reality,” another instantiation of its lack of maturity in its assuming the *still* youthful position of an opposition diametrically against its youth. The mature free spirit needs to be “subtle” and “honest” and yet have a “malicious conscience”³⁶—not a “bad conscience” that is full of *ressentiment* toward the past but a malicious conscience that is “good” inasmuch as it contests the rigid binary of good and evil.³⁷ The honest free spirit would not contest truth, in the name of another opposing truth, but would “probably” be “friends of ‘truth,’” as Nietzsche describes the philosopher *without* prejudices, that is, the philosopher of the future.³⁸

Jacques Derrida takes up Nietzsche’s discussion of the friends of truth and the philosophers of the future in his *Politics of Friendship*. He suggests that Nietzsche uses the description of friendship similarly to his use of “perhaps” (*vielleicht*), where to be a friend of truth does not entail truth’s wholehearted affirmation but, rather, a relation that displaces its singularity. He says, “The friends of the truth are without the truth, even if friends cannot function without the truth. The truth—that of the thinkers to come—it is impossible to *be it*, to *be there*, to *have it*; one must only be its friend.”³⁹ The friends of truth, that is, the philosophers of the future, do not reside in any singular truth narrative, only in its semblance, which is another way of saying that they are honest. The impossibility of the truth opens up the possibility of honesty and a multiplicity of perspectives that all resemble the “truth” proper. Outside of the binary of truth and falsity is a future, a future that is often denied by resentment toward one’s youthful past. There is no *singular* youthful past to be resentful against or to tell the truth about; this is what the honest free spirit realizes.

With this in mind, Nietzsche tells us in section 40, “Everything profound loves masks.”⁴⁰ An interpretation of the mask is “constantly false,”

and this deception for Nietzsche is a “sign of life.”⁴¹ If worn honestly, the mask is inherently performative and thus a kind of deceptive device intended to be seen by others. Nietzsche uses the figure of masks to highlight the indecisive openness of the self and the ability to embrace the multiplicity of one’s current constitution and subsequently leave oneself open for an indeterminate future in the face of oneself and one’s audience. If we understand ourselves as donning masks, then truth in any singular sense goes out the window, or as Karl Jaspers insightfully claims in his meditations on honesty in Nietzsche, “When all determinate forms of truth seem to disappear, honesty remains our last resort.”⁴²

In the *Genealogy*, at the convergence of truth and morality, Nietzsche gives us another hint of what the honest person may look like. Morally good and truthful people are not honest, and therefore, they do not tell lies. He says, “Our educated people of today, our ‘good people,’ do not tell lies—that is true; but that is not to their credit! A real lie, a genuine, resolute, ‘honest’ lie . . . would be something far too severe and potent to them, it would demand of them what one may not demand of them, that they should open their eyes to themselves, that they should know how to distinguish ‘truth’ and ‘false’ in themselves.”⁴³ This is a rich passage. Nietzsche’s subtle uses of scare quotes, dashes, and other punctuation all function to negotiate the dangerous terrain beyond truth and falsity. Beginning with the first sentence, he refers to the educated people of his day, and in this portion of *On the Genealogy of Morals* he is discussing scientists and scholars specifically. They have a penchant for the truth and, as we saw above, are also on the good side of the moral spectrum. However, the scare quotes lift their goodness into abeyance because their aversion to lies is not to “their credit”—in other words, it does not benefit them; it says no to the life of illusion and multiplicity. To say yes to this world of flux and perspectives would be to recognize it as such by providing a perspective that acknowledges this reality. This sort of perspective is the “honest” lie; it shows untruth not as the absolute truth but as a spectrum of many truths. This is not traditional “honesty,” hence the scare quotes, but, rather, is Nietzschean honesty, which can entail lies. The honest lie is too “severe” and too “potent” for the good and truthful because they can only accept *one* truthful perspective. Nietzsche contends that “one *may* not demand” that they take this step, implying that it would be impolite in the context of their moral/world order. And last, it would be too much for them to distinguish “‘truth’ and ‘false’ in themselves” because a genuine false conception of oneself would

be completely antithetical to the idea of having a true self. One cannot hold both a true and a false conception of oneself truthfully, since truth in its colloquial metaphysical sense is singular. However, one can embrace this discordance honestly through the aesthetic or art, “in which precisely the lie is sanctified and the will to deception has a good conscience.”⁴⁴

In section 107 of the *Gay Science*, “Our Ultimate Gratitude to Art,” Nietzsche champions art in its ability to embrace deception. He describes art as “the cult of the untrue,” and in good and honest form he befuddlingly credits science as providing access to the untruth—at least as a condition for “cognitive and sensate existence.”⁴⁵ And, perhaps more surprisingly, even honesty is employed in an alternative narrative than the one just described. He tells us: “As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* to us. . . . [W]e need exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish and blissful art lest we lose that *freedom over things*. . . . [I]t would be a *relapse* for us, without irritable honesty, to get completely caught up in morality and, for the sake of the overly severe demands that we there make on ourselves.”⁴⁶ These “severe demands” of our “honesty” are nothing less than the ascetic ideals that endorse singularity and regularity. We cannot “get completely caught up in morality” but should become extramoral by going beyond good and evil. The aesthetic challenges the will to truth through perspectives and metaphors that decenter the singular narrative, whether this occurs in a less intuitive break from mimesis as depicted in realist painting or in the radical metaphorical transformation that takes place in music. An artist’s *particular and situated* attunement to deception and multiplicity, when turned toward oneself, embodies—as we must now say after this passage—a certain type of Nietzschean honesty that opens up life to a fuller embrace of its multiplicity.⁴⁷

The artist creates a new world and new values through illusions, deceptions, and untruths. Art is a creative act that ultimately aims to produce new values through appearances to go beyond the traditional moral dichotomy of good and evil that values truth. Without art, Nietzsche says, “we would be nothing but foreground, and would live entirely under the spell of that perspective which makes the nearest and most vulgar appear tremendously big as reality itself.”⁴⁸ Art, in its creative activity, takes the foregrounded truth that can come to be considered objective and “reality itself” and distorts it by different procedures to unveil the great nonvulgar multiplicity of the world and experience. Nietzsche exclaims, “Only as creators can we destroy,”⁴⁹ and it is through his artistic creations that I contend NaS aims

to destroy, or at the very least disrupt, the racial injustices perpetuated by a certain will to the sociological conditions of an antiblack racism.

One may be compelled to ask at this point, Wasn't the depiction of the media presented in the former section of this article truthful? Haven't you instituted your own pernicious and singular narrative of the media? No, it was not a "truthful perspective" but a particular perspective that highlighted a certain motivation within the logic of an antiblack world that irresponsibly attempts to enforce objectivity. This description of the media is not a simple and singular truth; rather, it highlights the way certain narratives described by the media are faithful to the will to truth and motivated by securing it toward antiblack ends.

Honesty is never secure as the will to truth demands but, rather, entails a strategic interpretation of one's context that aims to expose the flux of perspectives. Nietzsche always employs this strategy using titles, punctuation, rhythm, and the placement of aphorisms. His use of honesty in section 107 cited above does not take place in its "true" Nietzschean sense, but the concept of honesty aims to unsettle all terms, allowing them to be read in contradiction with themselves. In this particular championing of art, he unsettles the understanding of honesty that he often employed, forcing the reader to acknowledge his many masks and his openness to multiple interpretations. We should not think of honesty in a simple way; it is subtle yet vast and reverberates differently beneath a multiplicity of masks.

4. Rapping Honestly

With this sense of honesty in mind, let us finally turn to NaS. NaS kicked in the door to the hip-hop scene in 1991 via a few verses on the Main Source's single "Live at the Barbeque." After an accumulation of quite a lot of fanfare and hype due to his witty, inventive, and vivid lyricism, NaS released his first album, *Illmatic*, in 1994 to universal critical acclaim. *Illmatic* undoubtedly brought the focus of hip-hop culture back to New York, after rappers from California—for example, N.W.A, Ice-T, and Snoop Doggy Dogg—had received much of the hip-hop fanfare in the late 1980s and early 1990s through the genre of hip-hop that was becoming known as "gangsta rap."

As mentioned above, gangsta rap is a genre that is characterized by lyrics that paint images of criminality, violence, disregard for the law, and

oftentimes disregard for life. Within mainstream commentary and critical literature on hip-hop it is not uncommon to deny critical reflectiveness to this genre and instead contend that it is simply perpetuating negative stereotypes about black life, pandering to the commercialism of American consumer culture, and ultimately surpassed by the more pure, socially conscious, and inventive forms of hip-hop that are attentive to its cultural roots of protest found in a group such as Public Enemy.⁵⁰ However, considering the argument of this essay, it should be noted that within the critical literature no one contends that the events and crimes described in these lyrics *actually* take place or intimates that they should be used in a court of law. Rap, at the end of the day, is a form of art.

Nevertheless, this contention that gangsta rap *simply* perpetuates stereotypes or, more insidiously, is *legally* admissible testimony of the bleak reality of the black rapper and his or her black life (for example, Vonte Skinner) should not be the only way to interpret rap lyrics that portray firsthand narratives of violence or criminality. I would, rather, agree with Imani Perry, who argues, "Hip hop embraces the outlaw. Outlaw status is conferred only metaphorically through lawbreaking, but on a deeper, more symbolic level, it is achieved through a position of resistance to the confines of status quo."⁵¹ Black rappers should not be tried as criminals because of their lyrics but, instead, seen from this outlaw perspective, which forces the listener to rethink the sociological status quo of the pathologically criminal and undesirable black American. NaS often occupies the position of the outlaw in his rhymes; however, he is also a prudent and incisive lyricist who demands an equally prudent ear if one is not to confuse the honesty portrayed in his lyrics as a singular expression of the truth.

Starting with the song "Thief's Theme" I would like to consider what is an exemplary instantiation of what Nietzsche would call an "honest lie." Of course, NaS does not claim to be lying or even to be "rapping honestly"; however, once certain claims and tropes are identified and heard with an honest ear, it will be clear that he does indeed rap in a gesture that challenges the will to truth of white supremacy in the antiblack world he lives in. This form of critique is not academic, or scientific, but aesthetic, and thus one must pay attention to certain cues, for example, lies, that the aesthetic embraces in "good conscience."⁵²

As in many of his songs, in "Thief's Theme" NaS assumes the first-person narrative position. There are declarative assertions about his

proWess intertwined with a descriptive account of the landscape and the events that take place one night in an unnamed neighborhood:

Yo, I'm hot like 95 Fahrenheit
 On a summer night, tight spot where bodies rot
 Rats drink from water drops, in the streets, niggas
 Little kids, scared cops with red dots⁵³

This verse utilizes parlance and familiar imagery of decrepit black existence, giving life to the atmosphere of an unruly night where criminals roam and rule:

My peeps, tie balloons up and swallow em
 And the P now got goons, lots of em
 Cops see them and run, don't want no drama
 Certain parts of the streets, the beast don't want a part of⁵⁴

Five bars into NaS's anthem for underworld criminality he offers a self-description, placing him explicitly within this story; he rhymes: "Philosophical gangsta, with violent priors." Within the flow of the verse, this description seems apt and may not immediately serve as cause for reflection. However, biographically speaking it is simply inaccurate: NaS contends that he has been convicted of violent offences, but this is a fabrication. Now why would he assume this morally condemnable identity that is not true? Is this false description justified or simply dishonest? To the former, Nietzsche would respond with a loud, life-affirming yes.

The first significant attribute of his description in these lyrics is marking him as a "gangsta." While the gangster is often seen as valorized in the black community because of the prosperous Italian mafioso, it is also well known as a maligned character type in modern American society, which deems black males as always already violent criminals. NaS's proactive assumption of this identity suggests recognition of the social place of the black male as outlaw, dangerous, and threatening. And yet, the gangsta is qualified by the adjective *philosophical*. The philosopher is a social occupation traditionally reserved to those privileged with the time to reflect and who have access to truth through education: in other words, a social occupation and type not reserved for blacks—to this day, I may add, blacks professionally make up only 1.32 percent of philosophers.⁵⁵ Therefore, in this first proclamation NaS engenders a certain kind of contradiction in type.

However, the self-contradictory position of a philosophical gangsta also offers a nuanced understanding of the secondary quality we find in the second half of the line. NaS in fact does not have “violent priors”—this claim is not true—but I would like to suggest that claiming to have these convictions highlights two things:

1. In one respect, it acknowledges the presumed condemnation of all black men as always already violent criminals in the eyes of America. Like Skinner, NaS is guilty of violent crimes by virtue of his blackness. He highlights the reality of black men as threats and predisposed to violence, and yet, in the same instance, by virtue of the biographical falsity of his claims to violent priors, there is also a critical register in which they resonate. The always already criminality is brought to the fore.
2. With his bitterly honest embrace of the social condition of black criminality through his passive recognition of “his” violent priors, another NaS violently interrupts the legitimacy of this condemnation simply by calling attention to its absurdity. NaS’s philosophical prowess allows him to exact his own violence on this preconception, and he does this by providing an *honest* portrayal of the representation of a black man in America. Those who listen carefully, and recognize the contradiction and untruth of this self-description, also could contend that it remains *honest* to NaS’s life as a black man amid their pathologization in the antiblack world. The typological contradiction of the philosophical gangsta sheds light on the absurd intersection of the biographical—the NaS without convictions—and the always already socially determined type—NaS the black man, the violent convict. Here, again, I would like to make an appeal to Perry’s concept of the outlaw. She argues that “outlawry” can be literal as in first-person personification and also can be manifest in the manner in which it opposes “norms that unfairly punish black communities or discount the complexity of choices faced by those black and poor in the United States.”⁵⁶ With NaS’s lyrical dexterity we see both take place: not only does he assume the outlaw, but in this assumption he challenges norms of self-sufficiency, nonviolence, and law-abidance by calling into question their almost impossible imposition onto a black community that has had very few other choices—recall the neighborhood he describes in the first verse. He does all of this through an honest lie about his past that in a certain sense is already his present and his future.⁵⁷

By bringing the listener to bear the weight of his lie and identity contradictions, NaS opens the black man to a new future and present. This is the work that the honest lie can do. The black man as always already convicted, this real untruth, reflects not only the singular re-presentation of the sociological determinations offered by the media but also the unimaginable and yet necessary means to survival in the decrepit environment NaS too-vividly describes. The media and the majority of its consumers miss this reflection in their stern will to truth. The perspectivalism that is initiated by NaS's lyricism vivifies the antiblack world with a critical edge to undermine its racist and ultimately life-denying will to truth and white supremacy.

Now, let us look at just one more moment where NaS toys with the truth. In his 1991 rap record debut on Main Source's "Live at the Barbeque," NaS unleashes nothing short of a lyrical onslaught. The eighteen-year-old at the time was going by the name Nasty Nas, and he opens the first verse with a rapid-fire delivery of lyrics that once again profess his lyrical prowess; however, the metaphors employed almost univocally evoke violence. He describes his lyrics as slugs shot from a rifle, analogizing their profundity and cleverness to the hard hits of gunshots. Just a few bars later, listen:

Verbal assassin, my architect pleases
 When I was twelve I went to Hell for snuffing Jesus
 Nasty Nas is a rebel to America
 Police murderer, I'm causing hysteria⁵⁸

While clearly a metaphor, the image of the violent black man is reaffirmed in his description of himself as an assassin. In the next line, there are more allusions to violence; in this respect, however, NaS describes a physical altercation with the easily identifiable moral figure of the Christian Western world. We know this claim of punching Jesus at age twelve to be fallacious in a way much more obvious than the "violent priors" discussed above; however, metaphorically there remains some honesty in this lie.

Black boys age a lot quicker than other boys in America. By twelve years old a black boy already bears some of the marks of his very quick march into manhood. For NaS, as a black boy, this march entails a transgression against the moral authority of the antiblack world of the West and America specifically—which is confirmed in the next line, where he describes himself as "a rebel to America"—and as a result of this transgression NaS is

banished from the life of the living and striving to the life of the damned and dead. The black boy becomes a black man in this transformation into the always already dead, into the disposable black person marked by death.⁵⁹ It may be argued that perhaps NaS brought this condemnation upon himself, that here, in these lyrics, the violent predisposition of black boys and men is confirmed. Perhaps, but as the description of the actions of a child, it more likely expresses the observed logic of a corrupted youth, where one plays out the script that is always already laid out. The transcendental figure of moral authority that is Jesus confirms the ubiquity of this passage for any young black boy, where it is only through this imagined physical altercation with God that the black boy is deemed figuratively dead.

In the following line NaS resorts to violence and lying again, describing himself as a police murderer and causing hysteria. Here he is touting defiance to an authority more local to the black man. The always already violent and now dead black man is causing hysteria in (white) America through the act of killing police. The hysteria that would ensue is easy enough to understand considering the role of police as the bearers of social order. However, the relation of blacks to police has a very specific significance for Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton.⁶⁰ In their essay "The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy" they describe the violent policing of blacks as a very mundane standard that is constitutive of white civil society; it is not the extraordinary spectacle we often come to see in the news with individual events. They argue: "In events such as the shooting of Amadou Diallo, the true excessiveness is not in the massiveness of the shooting, but in the fact that these cops were there on the street looking for this event in the first place, as a matter of routine business. This spectacular evil is encased in a more inarticulable evil of banality, namely, that the state assigns certain individuals to (well-paying) jobs as hunters of human beings, a furtive protocol for which this shooting is simply the effect."⁶¹ Violent policing of blacks takes place as an ordinary protocol for civil obedience. In a logic similar to Page's white public space discussed above, Martinot and Sexton argue that spectacular police violence is in fact the condition of possibility for white society; whites can orient their ethical responsibilities in a white supremacist order only inasmuch as the backdrop of police actively keeping the evil black people at bay via their termination persists.⁶² The hysteria of NaS's police slaying would not be the contestation of an equal social order, but it would be the undoing of the white supremacist social order as the most frightening all-American rebel. The primary function of police is

not to protect white citizens from each other; they secure white civil society through brute violence toward blacks, reifying through media the safety of whites through the death of blacks. In this false identification, once again, NaS sheds light on the circumstances of the antiblack world that he lived in and wanted to explode into hysteria. The binary of criminal and hero cannot be rationally distinguished in the white supremacist order of subjugation.

NaS's multidimensional re-presentation of himself as rapper, thief, criminal, black man, cop killer, dead, and alive does what the media and that jury that convicted Vonte Skinner could not: transcend the moral binary of good and evil, true and falsity, hero and criminal. By affirming that he is always already convicted and violent or dead and alive, NaS's aesthetic representation leaves the listener to ponder whether his life, black life, really needs to be as it is. What is the future of a man who wears the black masks of the criminal? Is anybody listening? Will there be justice? These are the questions NaS's lyrics ask the media re-presentation of black life. The antiblack world cannot simply be reduced to the sociological facts of black life that aim to reify a racial hierarchy. Rather, these "truths" can be exposed and reinterpreted through an honesty that opens up a life-affirming critique and visions of something new by providing different perspectives that are sometimes formed through lies, illusions, or metaphors and yet, as such, undermine the will to truth of white supremacy and anti-black racism.

The closing track to NaS's second album, *It Was Written*, entitled "If I Ruled the World," begins with the vision of a new life: "Imagine smoking weed in the street without cops harassin / Imagine going to court with no trial."⁶³ This future may seem simple and mundane and may lack the ambitions of the forefathers of the civil rights movement, but if we have an ear for NaS's temperament, we can find in this simplicity a very radical overturning of the antiblack/white supremacist worldview. As we are familiar with the radical discrepancy between white and black offenders in drug-related crimes, his contention that one may smoke weed in peace or go to court and not necessarily be on trial presents a life where being black has been decriminalized. Imagine that.

This is not motivated by a will to truth but, rather, the expression of his desire to touch those dreams and welcome the good life. It is difficult to see the radical nature of these dreams without the backdrop of the honesty we can faithfully rely on NaS to express in reflections on an antiblack world where blacks start from the bottom. But unfortunately *that* world of

decriminalization is still just of the imagination; in this world “you could have all the chips, be poor or rich / Still nobody wants a nigga having shit.”⁶⁴ Instead they want them incarcerated or dead.

Speaking to his fellow free spirit Nietzsche proclaims, “Our supreme insights must—and should!—sound like follies, in certain cases like crimes, when they come impermissibly to the ears of those who are not predisposed and predestined for them.”⁶⁵ Those who are not predisposed to NaS’s supreme insights will hear at best follies and at worst crimes, that is, those who write and listen to the general media and put people like Vonte Skinner behind bars. These are neither Nietzsche’s nor NaS’s true listeners. Nietzsche speaks to the immoralist of today and the philosopher of tomorrow, while NaS speaks to “everybody in New York living the real fucking life and every project all over.”⁶⁶

5. Conclusion

In a now infamous *XXL* interview NaS says boldly, “I’m totally contradictory . . . cause in essence, it means I’m human. . . . Say what you want—I love being a contradiction. I might get that shit tattooed on me.”⁶⁷ As we find in his lyrics, it is not hard to tell that NaS is a contradiction of many kinds and degrees, and thus it is not hard to recognize how this insight resonates with the resolutely honest Nietzsche. However, in this instance I would like to call attention specifically to his autobiographical work *Ecce Homo*, at the beginning of the section entitled “Why I Am So Wise,” where he proposes to the reader, in the form of a riddle, “the good fortune of his existence.” He says: “Already dead as my father, while as my mother I am still living and becoming old.”⁶⁸ This play of life and death, of contradiction, of fiction and truth, is precisely the life-affirming yes amid illusion and occlusion that I want to contend Nietzsche and NaS share through their honesty. NaS is also always already dead, like the criminal black father,⁶⁹ and yet still living, like the resilient single black mother. He can describe the reality of black life as acknowledging, embracing, and yet always questioning its criminal status.⁷⁰

In the end, I am suggesting that Nietzsche’s psychological prescriptions, his intention to look beyond good and evil through honesty, deconstructs binary thinking in a way similar to how certain rap music upsets

the social binarism in America between black and white, delinquency and intelligence, criminal and hero—all the while saying yes to life. What is at stake is forgoing a superficial and debilitating morality by being honest with the multiple forces always already at play that determine reality and identity, which can be embraced in a life-affirming way that opens up indeterminacy. Thus, Nietzsche will say, “The overcoming of morality, in a certain sense even the self-overcoming of morality—let this be the name for that long . . . work which has been saved up for the finest and most *honest*, also the most malicious, consciences of today, as living touchstones of the soul.”⁷¹ In the dishonest world of America that circumscribes black life through the media, NaS, as a fine and malicious conscience, attempts the almost impossible task of self-overcoming by offering an honest dose of reality.

NOTES

1. See Erik Nielson and Charis Kubrin, “Rap Lyrics on Trial,” *New York Times*, January 2014. I would like to also note that the issue concerning how courts should consider rap lyrics returned to the news in winter 2015 with a submitted amicus brief supported by rappers including T.I., Big Boi, and Killer Mike and written by Erik Nielson of the above-cited *New York Times* article. The brief was submitted on behalf of the case of Taylor Bell, a Mississippi student who sued his school district over his First Amendment rights after he was punished for a rap he wrote that appeared to threaten two gym teachers from Itawamba Agricultural High School. The brief, according to Gilad Edelman of the *New Yorker*, argues that the lyrics must be understood as figurative language that is part of the tradition of rap. See Gilad Edelman, “Killer Mike’s Supreme Court Brief,” *New Yorker*, December 2015.

2. According to Nielson and Kubrin, the conviction was eventually overturned in 2012 by an appellate court, which in the majority opinion wrote, “We have a significant doubt about whether the jurors would have found defendant guilty if they had not been required to listen to the extended reading of these disturbing and highly prejudicial lyrics” (“Rap Lyrics on Trial”).

3. It should be noted that the aesthetic status of rap music has not gone unchallenged. See Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 114.

4. In this respect, I would have to disagree with Holger Zaborowski, who seems to find the will to truth and “intellectual honesty” (*Redlichkeit*) to go hand in hand. Rather, I agree with Melissa Lane, who argues that for Nietzsche honesty (*Redlichkeit*) should not simply be reduced to truthfulness (*Wahrhaftigkeit*) but, instead, is in critical tension. Cf. Holger Zaborowski, “From Modesty to Dynamite,

from Socrates to Dionysus: Friedrich Nietzsche on 'Intellectual Honesty,'" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 84 (2010): 337–56; and Melissa Lane, "Honesty as the Best Policy: Nietzsche on *Redlichkeit* and the Contrast Between Stoic and Epicurean Strategies of Self," in *Histories of Postmodernism*, ed. Mark Bevir, Jill Hargis, and Sara Rushing (New York: Routledge, 2007), 25–52.

5. Lane, "Honesty as the Best Policy," 31.

6. The contention that "rap music" can serve as social critique in its aesthetic form is not new. There are a number of different works dedicated to this discussion, including Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness (Music in American Life)* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Tayannah Lee McQuillar, *When Rap Music Had a Conscience: The Artists, Organizations, and Historic Events that Inspired and Influenced the "Golden Age" of Hip-Hop from 1987 to 1996* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2009); Derrick Darby and Tommy Shelby, *Hip-Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005); Justin A. Williams, *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai, eds., *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's "Illmatic"* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

7. The list of these commentators is practically endless, but some noteworthy considerations include Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*, trans. Charles F. Wallraff and Frederick J. Schmitz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Sara Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, trans. Duncan Large (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); and more recently Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-moral Sense," in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, ed. and trans. Sander L. Gilman, Carol Blair, and David J. Parent (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 250.

9. *Ibid.*, 249.

10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2003), 36.

11. In section 344 of *The Gay Science* Nietzsche goes so far as to say explicitly, "Will to truth"—that could be a hidden will to death." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 201.

12. The first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* discusses the transition of the life-affirming active morality of good and bad created by the nobles to the life-denying reactive morality of good and evil that evolved from the priestly caste's *ressentiment* toward the noble, stronger, ruling class. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

13. *Ibid.*, 120.

14. Ibid., 126.
15. Ibid., 146.
16. Ibid., 150.
17. Ibid., 201.
18. Eddie S. Glaude Jr., “‘Represent,’ Queensbridge, and the Art of Living,” in *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas’s “Illmatic,”* ed. Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 187; my emphasis.
19. Nielson and Kubrin, “Rap Lyrics on Trial”; emphasis added.
20. What I identify here as a will to truth of the media to describe black life as singularly depraved, hostile, and criminal belongs to a larger logic of antiblack racism that has been discussed and challenged in a very rich tradition of thinkers, from twentieth-century pioneers such as sociologist and philosopher W. E. B. DuBois, pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey, and Black Panther Huey Newton to the more recent thought of black existentialist Lewis Gordon, Afro-pessimist Frank Wilderson III, and many others belonging to the canon of African American political thought and black studies.
21. Helán E. Page, “‘Black Male’ Imagery and Media Containment of African American Men,” *American Anthropologist* 99 (1997): 100.
22. Gordon explains that “antiblack world” is an ideal type that can strain the identities and logic described and that there are many ideal types. Therefore, while they are good for modeling certain situations, all social significance should not be reduced to this type. Lewis Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 84–85.
23. Ibid., 76.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 76–77.
26. With this point, I do not want to produce an entirely new genealogy of morality, including the issues of race, or the antiblack worldview, in America, that follows Nietzsche’s original project. I do not think that is necessary for this article. Instead, I want only to highlight how the will to truth has been employed strategically to render blacks in America in a particular immoral light.
27. Page, “‘Black Male’ Imagery and Media Containment of African American Men,” 108.
28. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 33.
29. Ibid., 65.
30. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 191; Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 156.
31. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 55.
32. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in “*Twilight of the Idols*” and “*The Anti-Christ*,” trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 50. Note both the evaluative and the moral connotations held by the terms *use* and *duty*.

33. Ibid., 52.
34. Paul Kirkland also takes up the honesty of free spirits juxtaposed to the prejudicial “myth of objectivity” in *Beyond Good and Evil*. He contends that Nietzsche is donning an honest mask to jostle the reader out of the Enlightenment prejudice that truth is good to consider untruth on the way to self-overcoming and a new morality beyond good and evil as ossified poles; however, he ultimately concludes that Nietzsche aims at instilling a political responsibility for the noble type, leaving the free spirit ultimately tied to the will to truth, which I disagree with. Paul Kirkland, “Nietzsche’s Honest Masks: From Truth to Nobility Beyond Good and Evil,” *Review of Politics* 66 (2004): 575–604.
35. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 62.
36. Ibid., 64.
37. See essays 2 and 3 of Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, for an extensive recounting of the creation of bad conscience as a pathology of the past.
38. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 71.
39. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 2006), 43.
40. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 69.
41. Ibid., 70.
42. Jaspers, *Nietzsche*, 201.
43. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 137.
44. Ibid., 153.
45. Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 104.
46. Ibid.
47. R. Lanier Anderson argues that there is a tension between honesty and artistry in his essay “Nietzsche on Truth, Illusion, and Redemption.” While he erroneously wraps the will to truth and honesty in Nietzsche too tightly together—considering them synonyms—I do agree that in the artistry that Nietzsche would embrace there needs to be practices that incorporate and distort particular perspectives and affirm life by acknowledging the extramoral tension—and for Anderson the redemptive possibility—of considering multiple perspectives and even creating illusions. See R. Lanier Anderson, “Nietzsche on Truth, Illusion, and Redemption,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 13 (2005): 185–225.
48. Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 79.
49. Ibid., 70.
50. See Benjamin P. Bowser, *Gangster Rap and Its Social Cost: Exploiting Hip-Hop and Using Racial Stereotypes to Entertain America* (Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2012); Julius Bailey, *Philosophy and Hip-Hop: Ruminations on Postmodern Cultural Form* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
51. Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 102.
52. In this section I focus on the way in which NaS assumes fallacious identities to emphasize the possibilities of being honest through perspectivalism; however,

I believe that there are other techniques that do not rest simply on this form of the “honest lie”—techniques of different narrative approaches, such as writing letters to his imprisoned friends in “One Love,” where the honesty does not rest in assuming metaphorical identities but, rather, in these letters, where the listener has no way of knowing whether they are real or fallacious.

53. NaS, “Thief’s Theme,” on *Street’s Disciple*, comp. Nasir Jones, 2004.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Tina Fernandes Botts, Liam Kofi Bright, Myisha Cherry, Guntur Mallarangeng, and Quayshawn Spencer, “What Is the State of Blacks in Philosophy?” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 2 (2014): 237.

56. Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 103.

57. Perry calls this phenomenon of rappers endorsing stereotypical characters “thug mimicry,” as a repositioning of Homi Bhabha’s colonial mimicry. She argues that the stereotypes act as a mode of subversion by giving voice to the reality of these figures as necessary choices in their own deprived circumstances in a white supremacist world. While I agree with this interpretation and find the concept of thug mimicry enticing, I would like to retain the conception of honesty, as it connotes the sincerity of the rappers’ struggle more vividly and also, when placed in the context of truth and lies, calls more attention to the lyrics themselves as the main focus, instead of the more rigid personas that I believe are entailed in mimicking. *Ibid.*, 109.

58. Main Source, featuring NaS, “Live at the Barbeque,” on *Breaking Atoms*, comp. Main Source, 1991.

59. The exploration of the relation of blackness to death, sometimes “black death,” belongs to a current discourse in black studies that employs the concept of social death, or socially dead, as the default position of blacks in an antiblack postslavery America, and it entails the loss of cultural roots, humanity, and dignity. The concept of social death is attributed to Orlando Patterson and his 1982 book *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). Patterson describes social death as the severance from natality, intentionality, and connectivity under captivity. See also Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Saidya Hartman, *Scene of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions* 5 (2011): 1–47; and Tommy J. Curry, “You Can’t Stand the Nigger I See! Kanye West’s Analysis of Anti-black Death,” in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, ed. Julius Bailey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 127–45.

60. Songs that entail the killing of police are not unique to NaS, from N.W.A.’s “Fuck tha Police” to Ice-T’s “Cop Killer,” written when he was lead vocalist for the band Body Count.

61. Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton, "The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy," *Social Identities* 9 (2003): 171.
62. *Ibid.*, 176.
63. NaS, featuring Lauryn Hill, "If I Ruled the World (Imagine That)," on *It Was Written*, comp. Nasir Jones, Jean-Claude Olivier, Kurtis Walker, and Samuel Barnes, 1996.
64. *Ibid.*
65. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 61.
66. NaS, "Represent," on *Illmatic*, comp. Nasir Jones and C. Martin, 1994.
67. See "Nas: Let It Go," *XXL Magazine*, December 6, 2006.
68. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in "On the Genealogy of Morals" and "Ecce Homo," trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 222.
69. Cf. Justin Wolfers, David Leonhardt, and Kevin Quealy, "1.5 Million Missing Black Men," *New York Times*, April 20, 2015.
70. It may be objected that in the personification of this particular lifestyle NaS and any other gangsta rapper need not believe in being "honest" but, rather, in endorsing a marketable and profitable brand of music. While this may be the case, I do not think that the interpretation of NaS's lyrics as honest and a profitable style of rhyming are mutually exclusive or contradictory.
71. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 32.