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## Mythology of the Angry Black Man: an Analysis of Cornelius Eady's Brutal Imagination as a Rhetorical Counter-Narrative

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MYTHOLOGY OF THE ANGRY BLACK MAN: AN ANALYSIS OF CORNELIUS EADY'S  
*BRUTAL IMAGINATION* AS A RHETORICAL COUNTER-NARRATIVE

Junior Ocasio

57 Pages

This thesis examines how Cornelius Eady's book of poetry, *Brutal Imagination*, rhetorically serves as a counter-narrative to the fictional construction of Black characters blamed for committing crimes. *Brutal Imagination* gives voice to Mr. Zero, Eady's name for the fictional character Susan Smith created in 1994, whom Smith blamed for kidnapping her children. Thus, by using a counter-narrative lens, this thesis analyzes how fictional creations can alter the socially constructed identity of the "angry" Black man.

KEYWORDS: Counter-narrative, Master Narrative, Race, Critical Race Theory, Identity

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*BRUTAL IMAGINATION* AS A RHETORICAL COUNTER-NARRATIVE

JUNIOR OCASIO

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

School of Communication

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2017

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MYTHOLOGY OF THE ANGRY BLACK MAN: AN ANALYSIS OF CORNELIUS EADY'S  
*BRUTAL IMAGINATION* AS A RHETORICAL COUNTER-NARRATIVE

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Dan, Michael, Melody, Ken, Tanya, Jackson and Megan— thank you for always believing in me and always having my back.

Felix— someday you will be old enough to read this, and I hope you accomplish your goals in life. I'll be there for you in whatever you set your heart to.

This thesis is dedicated to my mom. Years ago, while raising three children, working a minimum wage factory job full-time, she impressed upon me the importance of education and doing something meaningful with my life. She gave me the tools and opportunities necessary to make this thesis possible. Thank you for your sacrifices and being the best mother anyone could hope for.

Finally, to those suffering from a crippling mental illness, don't give up. Remember no matter how dark, there is always light at the end of the tunnel. Some days are certainly easier

than others and some days getting out of bed will seem impossible. On those days, remember that it is not supposed to be easy, it's just supposed to be worth it.

“In the midst of these prescribed storylines, there exist counter-narratives, stories rendered marginal and inaudible by the normative din of stock stories”

- Amelia Kraehe

J.O.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1994, Susan Smith walked into the national spotlight when her story of her missing sons circulated on national television (Bragg, 1994a). She claimed as she was driving her two sons, Michael (age 3) and Alexander (age 14 months) in her Mazda, an armed Black man violently forced her out of the driver's seat before taking off with her children (Bragg, 1994b). The story sparked a national outcry that resulted in a national search for Michael, Alexander, and the alleged perpetrator whom eye-witnesses claimed to have seen; the search "became a national psychodrama with Smith pleading into the television cameras for the kidnapper to return Michael and Alex unharmed" (Bragg, 1994a pg. 2). It did not take long for a polygraph test to reveal that Smith had fabricated the entire story; she was instead covering up the fact that she had placed a brick on the gas pedal of her vehicle and ran the car down a hill into a lake with her children on board (Bragg, 1995).

I first came to know of this story as an undergraduate student at Bradley University. I was always compelled by how Susan Smith was able to rally enough support for a national search. Was she that great of an actress? Were Michael and Alexander of wealthy descent? Was it because the alleged assailant was a Black man? I considered all of these as possibilities but given the context of time and place, it made more sense that Smith's ability to garner support had more to do with who supposedly committed the crime than anything else.

During my senior year as an undergraduate student, I was introduced to Cornelius Eady's seventh collection of poetry titled *Brutal Imagination*. The book of verse is written completely from a unique perspective. Susan claimed a Black man kidnapped her children, and although that man never existed, Eady found it important to give the imaginary Black man Susan Smith created to cover up her own crime a voice. Thus, he wrote poetic narrative from the perspective

of that man whom he called Mr. Zero. I was instantly drawn to his writing. I was enthralled to hear the story from such a unique perspective. I realized the book was more than just a fictional, poetic retelling of a real life event. It is Eady's poignantly-expressed frustration with the status quo and our societal construction of the Black man as a deviant, criminal, and low-life; it is a counter-narrative to fight an oppressive system that marginalizes the Black community built on stereotypes.

For years, communication scholars have discussed the importance of narratives as a means of making sense of people's realities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); however, Milner and Howard (2013) argue that much less discussed is the narrative of people of color by people of color. That is to say, narratives hold power to construct "truth," a luxury rarely afforded to people of color, specifically as it pertains to the construction of their identity. In essence, for centuries people of color, specifically Blacks, have been stripped of their voice and the ability to control their own narrative which has maintained the Black community as the subversive-subaltern. As such, it is imperative to further examine the level to which a counter-narrative presented by the marginalized can contribute to their liberation. As Milner and Howard implore:

Such narratives need to be told but often have been dismissed, trivialized, or misrepresented... A counter-narrative provides space for researchers to *reinterpret*, *disrupt*, or to *interrupt* pervasive discourses that may paint communities and people, particularly communities and people of color, in grim, dismal ways. These narratives represent non-mainstream stories which represent truths, and other experiences that directly refute hegemony. (2013, 542)

Contributing to Milner and Howard's call to action, this scholarship also serves to diversify the methods of counter-narrative being circulated and analyzed. Specifically, Carrasco (1996) offers

that racial inequality is multi-faceted in manifestation; therefore, it is paramount that scholarship make use of interdisciplinary perspectives such as counter-narratives to uncover the persistence of racial inequality.

### **Key Terms**

Before analyzing Eady's text, *Brutal Imagination*, it is important to first define the key terms that are employed and crucial to understanding this thesis. Given the complexity and the varying ways in which communication scholars wield these terms, clear definitions of how they are operationalized in this scholarship will be useful.

Initially, Kraehe (2015) posits the narrative process is the key to identity construction. As such, the community who serves as the subject in this scholarship should be self-identifying, free of an imposed label. For this reason, I do not engage in appeasing the politically correct-minded in regards to using African-American as a term over Black. Rather, I have chosen to identify this community as the Black community, a decision informed by the self-imposed label many Black scholars have advocated. Kraehe (2015) posits that the word Black encompasses the community affected by blackness, whereas African American is an assumed politically correct term which falsely labels people into a category with which they may not identify. Although, I myself am not a Black person, rather I am Puerto Rican, much of the modern literature on this discussion authored by people of the Black community has chosen to pen their own identities as Black. For this reason, I have chosen to also follow suit. As Byers (2013) suggests, we should not be bound to identities we have not authored ourselves.

Additionally, this thesis will implement counter-narratives as a rhetorical method in order to explore Eady's work. Counter-narratives are stories that disrupt or complicate master narratives, or stories society has been repeatedly told and believe. Master narratives are often

written by groups of power that prey on stereotypes to maintain disempowered outgroups, and counter-narratives seek to take the oppressive power away. Counter-narrative as a method is an analytic tool employed by Critical Race Theory (CRT) developed by Derrick Bell (Milner & Howard, 2013). CRT is generally concerned with critiquing and destroying social power structures by changing laws and policies that disenfranchise groups in society (Tate, 1994). Milner and Howard (2013) speak to the centrality of experiential knowledge, arguing that “CRT explicitly solicits, analyzes, and listens to the lived experiences of People of Color through counterstorytelling methods...” (p. 539) as a means of altering commonly held beliefs about racial subalterns, or groups of marginalized minorities, created by dominant groups. As such, this thesis will often refer to research on CRT as it works in tandem with counter-narratives to give voice to the disenfranchised.

Next, as master narratives and counter-narratives are concerned with disparities and surpluses of power, it is important to have a working understanding of the Gramscian term, hegemony. Translated from the Italian Marxist’s prison notebooks, hegemony refers to the successful domination of power by the dominant class. Gramsci (1971) argues hegemony is successful because it ensures domination by having the marginalized accept the political, social, and cultural views of the dominant group through what he called common sense. Gramsci’s theoretical foundation states that by engraining subalterns in the same cultural beliefs of the majority through private organizations they will submit to the hegemony (Zompetti, 1997). In this way, “the subaltern feel they are included in the superstructure” (p.73). Hegemony manifests itself by enticing and seducing the marginalized to be complicit in their oppression by having them believe they are a part of the in-group.

Finally, communication scholars have struggled for a uniform definition with which to articulate race. Omi and Winant (1994) explain the difficulty in providing a definition lies in the word's invocation of both biological and ideological demarcations. On the one hand, race can be defined simply as the distinctions of human physiognomy; however, this definition negates the function it serves in creating a hierarchy based on an ideological sense of supremacy. This is to suggest, speaking of race as a purely biological distinction would seem to be a mere half-truth. Therefore, we must also consider the *why* a need for the classification exists which allows for the concept of race. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) explain in their ethnographic research of whiteness as rhetoric, for some white people, their race is explained by what they are not. They detail responses about those asked of their own race to meet responses of white meaning not being Black, Hispanic, or Asian. Considering historical context, this highlights the silent implication that whiteness is somehow pure and otherness is impure (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Thus, it would seem, race, for the purposes of this thesis, is not merely a biological distinction but rather an ideological construct used to marginalize people of color using biology as a rationale. Further, as Milner and Howard (2015) posit, "race and racism are endemic to and permanent in US society and that racism intersects with forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexuality, language, culture, and immigrant status" (p. 539). In essence, race is a discursive formation that differentiates people of color and relegates their status as less than.

### **Outline**

Having outlined key terms with which to understand this rhetorical analysis, In Chapter 1 I will review the literature concerned with CRT and counter-narratives and how they function to complicate identity constructions. To begin, the literature review will focus on the underpinnings of narrative construction as a means of subordinating the Black community. Next, I will discuss

research supporting counter-narratives as a function of CRT to subvert hegemonic narrative identity constructions. Then, I will discuss using counter-narratives as a method with which to conduct this rhetorical criticism.

Chapter Two will discuss how counter-narratives function as a rhetorical method and conclude with an exploration of *Brutal Imagination* as an individual text. Upon examining the current literature on this topic, I will justify the rationale for this thesis.

In Chapter Three, I will provide an explanation for the utility in using counter-narratives as a rhetorical method with which to analyze Eady's work. I will also support the chosen passages from his collection of poetry, why they are significant as an effective, fictional counter-narrative, and why I have chosen to investigate the passages to support my claims.

With Chapter Four, I will analyze Eady's work using the concept of counter-narratives as a rhetorical lens. Further, this chapter will include a more in-depth explanation of the 1994 Susan Smith case to provide context for the narrative she constructed and the counter-narrative Eady employs to disrupt the accepted hegemonic social construction of identity.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I will expound on my analysis of the previous chapter and explain how the analysis supports my arguments for this rhetorical thesis. I will also provide potential avenues to further explore this topic in the future as well as provide commentary on how this can be furthered in future explorations of counter-narratives.

Having explored the background of the Susan Smith case and conceptually defining the key terms surrounding narrative, master narrative, and counter narrative, I have outlined the format to understand the structure this thesis will follow. Armed with this understanding, Chapter 2 will now delve into the relevant literature in narratology.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

While not suggesting that human beings have only recently begun to communicate with stories, the study of narratives in communication is still in its infancy. In fact, while records of storytelling trace back to the dawn of communication, it was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Walter Fisher, introduced a paradigmatic shift with his seminal work, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (1989), that we began to examine stories as arguments. As such, it is vital to understand the foundations of what he calls, the “narrative paradigm.”

I will review Fisher’s important work and the subsequent evolution of this theoretical framework. Then, I will discuss the introduction of master or grand narratives before reviewing the literature on counter-narratives. Finally, I will examine the literature surrounding CRT, as many scholars view counter-narratives as the analytical foundation of CRT (Milner & Howard, 2013). This comprehensive review will serve to aid my analysis of Eady’s collection of poetry as it sets up an understanding of narrative as a communicative, albeit rhetorical, methodology.

### **Narrative as a Paradigm**

Under the assumption that all human beings are storytellers, in 1978 Walter Fisher first proposed a paradigmatic shift in interpreting human communication. Building off of works by influential scholars such as Stephen Toulmin, Wayne Brockriede, and Kenneth Burke, Fisher posited that our method of assessing, interpreting, and evaluating discourse was missing a narrative logic. Essentially, Fisher (1989) argued that human beings are reasoning animals who do not only communicate in the traditional sense of reason, with warrants and claims as Toulmin may have suggested, but rather in the telling of events. Although his call for a new paradigm was reasonably met with criticism, Fisher (1989) preemptively countered,



My assumption does not seriously disturb the customary view of rhetoric as practical reasoning, but my conception of good reasons maintains that reasoning need not be bound to argumentative prose or be expressed in clear-cut inferential or implicative structures. I contend that reasoning can be discovered in all sorts of symbolic actions—nondiscursive as well as discursive. (57)

Wishing to move beyond the “rational world paradigm,” Fisher (1989) provided support for his paradigmatic shift by suggesting humans do not always reason with “prescribed rules of calculation or inference making” (1978, p. 66) — that is to say, reasoning and rhetoric occur in communication that is descriptive, narrative, non-linear, non-chronological, etc. To assume the traditionalist point of view would imply all reasoning to be rational, whereas the narrative perspective opens reasoning to also include accounts which are persuasive without intentionality; however, Fisher’s purpose was not to argue his perspective over the traditional approach, but rather to show the limits of the traditional perspective by providing an exigence for the co-existence of two paradigms. Ultimately, this call for a paradigmatic shift for evaluating discourse provided new insight on evaluating arguments outside the common Aristotelian lens so often utilized in rhetoric and argumentation studies.

### **Basic Assumptions**

With his introduction of the narrative paradigm, Fisher (1978; 1989) argued humans, as *homo narrans*, make sense of the world around them by the stories they tell, and, as such, stories are symbolic actions that aid in the construction of our social reality. Fisher thus outlined criteria that has proven useful in interpreting narrative communication by way of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity (Fisher 1978). As a central tenet of narrative theory, narrative coherence is concerned with the construction of the story and the degree to which the story is structurally

logical (Fisher, 1989). In other words, when evaluating a story, a critic must consider the construction of the narrative based on its congruity to all the elements present. Fisher (1978; 1989) also conceives the notion of narrative fidelity, which is concerned with the credibility and believability of the story. Because this thesis is concerned with behavior modeled after a belief system built on stories, Fisher's work is apt for review. This principle of Fisher's theory delves into the laden values of a narrative or the logic of good reasons and the implications of accepting the values communicated through the story. Essentially, Fisher's paradigm sheds light on the nature of stories as a form of persuasive communication linked to values and experiences that expose others to suggestive and argumentative feelings and experiences.

### **Master Narratives**

Shortly after Fisher proposed the narrative paradigm, Jean-François Lyotard introduced the field of communication with the term *grand récit*, or what we know today as a master narrative. In his 1984 seminal work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard suggested that behind "localized" or individual stories is an overarching narrative that guides the behavior of how the particular stories unfold. In essence, the term referred to Lyotard's suggested theory that explains how history and cultural phenomena aid in the search of universal values and truths. "Meta-Narratives are created and reinforced by power structures and are therefore untrustworthy" (Sadalge, 2013, 71). With his analysis of postmodernism, Lyotard (1984) argued that master narratives have lost power overtime, and now our world operates under "*petits récits*" or localized and individual stories that offer their own version of the truth as opposed to an all-encompassing universal one. Peters (2004) offers that Lyotard, like many postmodernists, believed that by understanding localized stories that are premised on a diversity

of experiences would move the philosophical desire for a universal truth toward a multiplicity of theoretical standpoints.

While scholars mostly accepted the notion that such master narratives do exist, the notion that such narratives were becoming extinct, as Lyotard (1984) suggested, was met with heavy criticism. Notably, Habermas (1981) and Callinicos (1989) both refuted this notion arguing that Lyotard's criticism of universal rules was null and void as his work suggested a universal skepticism. Essentially, Habermas (1981) and Callinicos (1989) make the claim that such thinking in and of itself functioned as a master narrative and thus makes Lyotard's claim a self-refuting one.

As scholars have engaged in the democratic and constantly self-correcting practices of research, the field has offered varying definitions and interpretations of master narratives. Bamberg (2005) argues that the variety of definitions can be attributed to the wide application of master narratives when he writes,

in late-modern and post-modern social and literary analyses the term "master narrative" has been extended to all sorts of legitimization strategies for the preservation of status quo with regard to power relations and difference in general. (p.287)

The theoretical foundation of master narratives has allowed for the broad usage of the term which has, for at least some narrotologists, caused frustration (Ryan, 2005; Tammi, 2006).

Lindemann (2001) theorizes that the concept is broad in nature because it strays from our traditional understanding of a story. As such,

In many instances [a master narrative] doesn't designate any single narrative with a specific plot and a fixed cast of characters [...] But most master narratives aren't so much stories than as ensembles of repeated themes that take on a life of their own. (p. 158)

Hyvärinen (2007), defending the variety in application and definitions for master narratives, suggests it is detrimental and dangerous to systematically theorize the entire field of master narratives. Essentially, the variety of approaches and definitions has allowed this study to probe theoretical underpinnings that translate to a better understanding of how to critically approach the dismantling of a hegemonic force, such as a meta-narrative. Thus, I will examine key studies that aim to better understand the construction of master narratives from a variety of theoretical approaches before synthesizing an overarching theme that has resulted in the most influential scholarship on master narratives today.

Although master narratives have been broadly applied, there is a common theme in exploring the complexities of master narratives: that of its function as a hegemonic force which oppresses the story's characters and the related subject identities in society writ large (Bamberg & Budwig, 1992; Habermas, 1981). Consequently, such an understanding prompted Rimmon-Kenan (2006) to ask,

Who, for example, narrates the ideological construct in question? The hegemony, some would say, but the hegemony only narrates in a metaphoric and necessarily implicit way (otherwise it would not be an effective disguise). (p. 12)

Bamberg (2004) explains that this sort of questioning has seemingly produced two different interpretations of Lyotard's master narratives. Esteban-Guitart (2012), citing Hammock (2011), argues that master narratives are "collective stories that govern the existence of a collective subject, or group, in such a way that they shape the 'personal' identities and narratives" (p. 175). Falling in line with Fisher's (1989) assertion that narratives shape reality, this interpretation suggests a master narrative is a widespread systemic narrative that alters the social condition for a particular group or groups of people. On the other hand, there are scholars

who claim that master narratives “delineate how narrators position themselves with their story” (Bamberg, 2004 p. 359). Bamberg (2004) argued the difference in these interpretations is not primarily concerned with whether or not the master narrative is hegemonic, as there has been an overwhelming consensus that this is the case; it is concerned with *how* the master narrative acts as a hegemonic force. For example, Bamberg and Andrews (2004) suggest master narratives are surrounded by oppressive forces but argue the dominant narratives “are not automatically hegemonic,” (p. 360) but rather the practice of the social condition predicated on the master narrative creates the oppression. Essentially, Bamberg and Andrews (2004) called for a much more complex understanding of a master narrative as there must be a delineation to account for the degree to which actors in the story are complicit in their participation of a master narrative. Bamberg (2004) argues,

Master narratives are setting up sequences of actions and events as routines and as such have a tendency to “normalize” and “naturalize”— with the consequence that the more we as subjects become engaged in these routines, the more we become subjected to them. In this sense, master narratives surely constrain and delineate the agency of subjects, seemingly reducing the range of their actions. At the same time, however, it should not be forgotten that these master narratives also give guidance and direction to the everyday actions of the subject; without this guidance and sense of direction, we would be lost. (p. 360)

Hyvärinen (2007) adds to the conversation on the complexity of master narratives by supporting Bamberg’s assertion and offers that when individuals employ the master narrative in behavioral day-to-day activities, they contribute to its existence. As such, the delineation between our daily actions guided by the cultural expectations of a master narrative do not exist separately from

theory but rather are interwoven as one; however, Bamberg (2004) asserts cultural acts which give credence to master narratives can be viewed as frames which are often,

fragmented and come in ways that make it easy to set them up as problematic and not at all conclusive or consistent. Thus, one possible strategy to counter these frames is by way of appealing to other frames that are contradictory, and to presenting one's own experience along those lines. (p. 360)

It is this purposeful break or disruption of the master narratives effectiveness that separates the cultural acts that support it from the hegemonic expectation of what we believe to be true. In essence, the presentation of localized stories and cultural acts that seemingly contradict the themes presented by the master narrative creates the critical force to counter the hegemony—counter-narratives.

### **Counter-Narratives**

Although narratives allow us to communicate in stories that inform “others of who we are, where we come from, where we are going, and what our purpose may be” (Rolling, 2010, p. 6), Kraehe (2015) warns us that narratives come with constraints— namely our narratives are often laced with stories we did not choose or pen ourselves. She continues that these pre-scripted storylines guide and construct every aspect of our identity. As such, drawing from narratology, scholars have theorized about narrative functions that have led to the modern understanding of counter-narratives. Bamberg (2004) asserts that studying and employing counter-narratives “gives excellent grounds to do rhetorical work of convincing others of one's own point of orientation, and why one sees things this way” (p. 357). Therefore, from a critical perspective, there is a dire need for inserting autonomy by scripting self-written identities into counter-narratives that break oppressed individuals from their pre-scripted lives. Providing a useful

definition, Mutua (2008) explains that counter-narratives are “stories/narratives that splinter widely accepted truths about people, cultures, and institutions as well as the value of those institutions and the knowledge produced by and within those cultural institutions” (p. 132). Alternatively, Kraehe (2015) adds, “Counter-narratives are imbued with transformative potential as they generate spaces of rupture from/within oppressive structures” (p. 201).

Rogers and Brefeld (2014) explain, on a basic level, that counter-narratives are empowered by privileging the perspectives of those who have been marginalized and who are often rendered inaudible. Solórazano and Yosso (2002) detail, emerging from critical race theory (CRT), that counter-narratives have a multiplicity of functions: (a) they offer the socially marginalized the potential to build a sense of community through theory and practice, (b) they have the potential to challenge perceived truths held by socially dominant groups by providing perspective incongruent with widely held beliefs, (c) they empower subalterns who may feel isolated, and (d) they can draw parallels from stories and current reality to educate disempowered groups such that, “one can construct another world that is richer than the story or the reality alone” (p. 37).

Although counter-narratives are rooted in the social psychology discipline, Bamberg and Andrews (2004) have extrapolated the principle in a broader sense. They articulate that counter-narratives act interactively with master narratives by deconstructing the ways that make master narratives oppressive while, to an extent, also maintaining them through culturally prescribed behaviors. Rogers and Brefeld (2014), supporting Bamberg and Andrews, suggest:

[Narratives] are vehicles through which people make assertions about identities across space and time. People depict their lives in interaction with others with whom they may

have conflicts or alliances, and the telling of this interaction might vary according to whom the person is telling their story. (p. 47)

While counter-narrative discussions are still in their infancy, studying, examining, and probing these stories has gained popularity over the last 25 years. Researchers have finally begun privileging traditionally marginalized groups and producing scholarship that gives them voice. For example, Rolón-Dow (2005) examines the stories of Puerto Rican adolescents who share their point of view on the intersectionality between ethnicity and care in education. Rolón-Dow examines the narratives voiced by Puerto Rican girls, who counter the dominant notion that education was not of importance to Puerto Ricans. This scholarship used counter-narratives to create intimacy and “caring connections” between Latino students and teachers in areas where the two work. Other scholars have also examined narratives that function as counters to the master narrative, such as Harper (2009) whose work presents narratives of Black male undergraduate students at predominately white institutions of higher education, and Delgado (1995) and Villenas (2001) whose works have highlighted the perspective of teachers in predominately urban areas.

As work with counter-narratives has progressed, scholars have further probed into the nuances of how they function (Fisher & Goodley, 2007). Fisher and Goodley (2007) studied the narratives of three different mothers with disabled children. They found all the narratives were considerably different from each other and, to varying degrees and ways, countered the culturally accepted mythology of motherhood. Fisher and Goodley (2007) conclude that counter-narratives do not simply resist the master narrative, but rather present an alternative. This finding suggests that counter-narratives are not only emerging as a means of deconstructing a hegemonic force, but rather they may also occur to provide catharsis and an understanding of self. Since the master



narrative often requires those whom suffer from the construction of their story to be complicit in their demise, catharsis and self-understanding allow them to understand just how the master narrative has functioned as a tool of oppression and giving them the knowledge to combat it. Further, along with Fisher's (1978) assertion that narratives are often non-linear and pull from a multiplicity of experiences, Rolón-Dow's (2005) and Fisher and Goodey's (2007) analyses confirm that narratives often contain competing ideas that do not fit a rational plot— meaning, the narrative may contain portions of plots that both counter and feed the master narratives. Perhaps, this too gives credence to Bamberg's (2004) critique of counter-narratives as partially complicit in the existence of a master narrative.

Finally, in reviewing the pertinent literature on counter-narratives as rhetorical method, disruption and complication, two primary tenets of counter-narrative methodology, are not well defined. As a result, I have defined complication in counter-narratives as the method of describing what the master narrative says and then arguing that there is more than what the master narrative is alleging. Conversely, I have defined disruption as the method in which a counter-narrative makes it's audience question why something is true, particularly in a way that the master narrative directs us in a way that is not true.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Emerging from legal studies, Derrek Bell first developed CRT as a means of challenging dominant ideology surrounding race, racism, and power (Milner & Howard, 2013). Disillusioned with the outcomes of the civil rights movement, Bell along with fellow theorists Kimberlé Crenshaw, Mari Matsuda, and Charles Lawrence developed Critical Race Theory as a means of overthrowing the established White system, which had legally given more autonomy to Black Americans but still maintained social inequality (Oremus, 2012); however, CRT is not intended

to be used as the foundation for radical political acts, or spewing inflammatory rhetoric but rather a call to action through impassioned, academic writing that challenges society to explore the intersection of race and the legal system. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) explain that after the monumental strides in civil rights during the 1960s, racism seemingly became more diversified and started to operate in more subtle ways. As such, theoretical advances were necessary to understand these developments and combat civil injustices. Thus, with his articles, “Serving two masters: Integration ideals and client interests in school desegregation litigation” (1976) and “*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest Convergence Dilemma” (1980), Bell established the foundation for CRT which relies on an “open and activist agenda, with an emphasis on storytelling and personal experience. It’s about righting wrongs, not just questing after knowledge” (Oremus, 2012, p. 1).

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) provide a useful definition of Critical Race Theory, describing it as,

[a] collection of activists and scholars interested in studying transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group— and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious [...] critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitution law. (p. 3)

Essentially, while CRT seeks to understand relationships and incongruities with hegemonic power structures and marginalized groups, it further seeks to rectify and redistribute power that maintains the marginalized in order to improve their quality of life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012;

Kraehe, 2015; Milner & Howard, 2013; Tate, 1994). Unique to a few critical studies, CRT advocates activism to tackle social injustice and disrupt the status quo. Given this thesis explores counter-narratives, which is a central tenet of CRT, it is important to review the existing literature that has formulated the key concepts held by CRT.

Initially, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) clarify CRT's first central premise by explaining how both race and racism place members of society in their expected roles. In essence, race and racism shape identity categories that interpellate members of society to behave in normalized ways (Althusser, 1970). These categories allow for order in how a society functions culturally (Sue, 2010). Bonilla-Silva (2010) argues that the decline in overt and conscious manifestations of racist acts has led to ignorance about how racism functions, including the suggestion that racism is a relic of the past; however, racism is quite prevalent but is manifested in new forms. Kraehe (2015) adds that racism and racist behavior have morphed in response to history and circumstances of the political, but this is not to suggest a decline in its prevalence. Kraehe (2015), citing Delgado and Stefancic (2001), articulate, "Racism is deeply ingrained within American institutional policies and cultural practices such that the existing social order appears natural and inevitable. Racism is not much a deviation from the norm as it is an ordinary part of life" (p. 201). This is to say that racism continues to rear its ugly head in different forms overtime, but its prevalence is still just as common.

CRT's second premise challenges any notion of racial essentialism, which may suggest biological inferiority (Milner & Howard, 2013). Kraehe (2015) explains that CRT views race as a social construction. It is a product of using race as a form of classification identified through pointless physical attributes that, "society continues to imbue [...] with meaning, recycling and discarding them in different contexts as needed, giving each racial category a distinct history"

(Kraehe, 2015, p. 201). Overtime, society has had to adjust to a more liberal ideology and in efforts for privileged members to maintain power, society has disguised how these physical attributes on people of color are less than.

Next, CRT has a third premise which suggests that race is constituted by and through the intersectional relations of race, sex, gender, and class (Kraehe, 2015). This shows how CRT is concerned with the formation of identity, which Solórazano and Yosso (2002) explain is too complex to be understood by a single oppressive force. In essence, these scholars are unwrapping what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) coined as intersectionality, or “the various ways in which race and gender interact,” to form identity (p.1224). Thus, while oppression is constructed by intersectional identity categories, oppression also formulates notions of identity and we must “sustain a vision of social justice that recognizes the ways racism, sexism and other inequalities work together to undermine us all” (Crenshaw, 2015 p. 1). As such, CRT argues that understanding identity requires an intersectional perspective.

Finally, CRT presents the concept of “voice.” In this context, voice is recognized as a tool to fight hegemony by presenting a mechanism for muted stories to be heard (Chapman, 2007; Delgado, 1989; Solórazano & Yosso, 2002). This concept of voice is where counter-narratives exist as a mechanism to challenge exploitation. The counter-narrative becomes a form of activism to counter the hegemony that guides social and cultural entrapment of the muted.

Starting with Fisher’s basic assumptions of Narrative Theory, scholars have continued to research and further understand how narratives shape, construct, and explain the world we live in. Further, we have come to understand how these narratives also play a role in oppressing minority individuals and how they can be used to fight the power structures that maintain their

oppression. After reviewing the relevant literature in narratology, Chapter 3 will now review the methodology that will be used in analyzing Eady's text.

### CHAPTER III: METHOD

Having reviewed the relevant literature on counter-narratives, I argue that counter-narratives need not depend on their status as non-fiction because the underlying principles to function as an argument against the claims of the master narrative are still present in fiction. To further support my claim, I will use Milner and Howard's (2013) methodology to analyze a fictional counter-narrative. Building on Bell's teachings of CRT, Milner and Howard (2013) provide a useful model for probing the degrees to which counter-narratives function. This methodology is particularly apt for the analysis of this thesis as it synthesizes the components that explain *how* a counter-narrative functions effectively. Milner and Howard (2013) suggest there are two components that mobilize a counter-narrative: presenting the marginalized voice and disrupting and complicating the narrative. As Milner and Howard's (2013) methodology is grounded in the theoretical foundation of CRT and the evolution of the narrative paradigm, I will also use the framework built from works by Cochran-Smith (1995), Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005), Ladson-Billings (1996), Milner (2008), Parsons-Johnston (2007), and Tate (1994) to more clearly establish how each tenet differs and functions in the rhetorical method of counter-narratives. Milner and Howard (2013) speak to the state of infancy of CRT as a method and application. As such, it is my hope that this thesis adds to the body of work produced in this field and that it expands the ways in which this method can be used to analyze artifacts. Ultimately, this thesis serves to diversify the analysis of counter-narratives, specifically in fiction, that speaks to real world injustices induced by master narratives. Although this thesis concerns itself with a small fraction of the struggle faced by the Black community, it is one of thousands of building blocks needed to provide voice to marginalized bodies.

In this Chapter, I will first define rhetoric and the rhetoric of counter-narratives. Following these definitions, I will then describe the text I will be analyzing through a counter-narrative lens. Finally, I will define Milner and Howard's (2013) tenets for investigating a counter-narrative and how I will apply this framework to this text.

### **Rhetoric**

Although scholars may never agree on a universal definition of rhetoric, Keith and Lundberg (2008) explain that in communication studies most definitions show some sort of a relationship between persuasion and language. For the purposes of this thesis, I define rhetoric as a mechanism by which a rhetor (a person communicating) espouses a message that can be perceived to be persuasive in nature by an audience. Thus, when speaking about rhetorical communication, one seeks to understand how messages are received by audiences, and through studying this form of communication, learn to alter said communication with the intent to more effectively persuade. As for the rhetoric of counter-narratives, Bamberg and Andrews (2004) explain that when studying the rhetoric of counter-narratives, one is primarily concerned with studying how and to what degree a counter-narrative is responsible and counters an agency-depriving master narrative. Further building on this notion, Kraehe (2015) and Milner and Howard (2013) argue that when studying the rhetoric of counter-narratives, from a critical perspective, scholars not only have an obligation to analyze the methods by which the counter-narrative functions, but also to become an activist that promotes the countering of power structures.

### **Master Narrative of Race**

Before analyzing ways in which Eady counters the master narrative of race, it is first necessary to understand the discourse I will be analyzing. That is to say, Susan Smith's accounts

of what happened in 1994 alone do not make the master narrative, but rather her story is a collection of words constructed by frames of a cultural understanding. In other words, race has for as long as we know served as a classification system for the purposes of privilege and marginalization by the construction of belief of superiority and inferiority. More importantly, these beliefs are instilled through the passing of words strung together to make stories which guide our actions. Fulford (2000) states, “A master narrative that we find convincing and persuasive differs from other stories in an important way: it swallows us. It is not a play we can see performed, or a painting we can view, or a city we can visit. A master narrative is a dwelling place. We are intended to live in it” (p. 32). The master narrative of race is the overarching story, comprised of many stories, that tell us that some races are inferior to others and guides our actions to make it a reality. Susan Smith’s story did not have to do too much convincing to make people believe her; Americans were already predisposed to believe a Black man is equivalent to a criminal.

### **Description of Text**

Originally published in 2001, Cornelius Eady’s collection of poetry, *Brutal Imagination*, presents narrative in the form of verse. The book is published with two cycles of poetry, the first which bears the name of the book. Although both cycles of poetry share thematically similar content, for the purpose of this thesis, I will only be analyzing one story holistically as Eady’s approach to each collection of poetry are too rhetorically different to analyze simultaneously. As such, this thesis will focus on Eady’s first collection of poetry, which tells the story of the 1994 Susan Smith case primarily through the perspective of Mr. Zero, a fictional representation of the Black man Susan Smith said had kidnapped her children. Eady’s first collection of poetry has



multiple chapters written as a story that progresses in tandem with the events of the 1994 case, therefore providing a rich base to analyze.

Given that Eady's collection was nominated as a finalist for the National Book Award in Poetry and Eady's work in academia and activism has garnered national media attention and a wide-circulation of his book, this text is worthy of analysis. Further, this collection of poetry is unique as it is written from a historical, albeit fictional, perspective. This novelty allows Eady to champion his message by giving a Black person blamed for crimes he did not commit a voice that serves as a metaphorical representation of giving voice to a marginalized community who is otherwise systematically silenced.

### **Rhetoric of Counter-Narratives**

While tackling pervasive master-narratives surrounding race, policy, and teacher education, Milner and Howard (2013) have outlined two prominent tenets for analyzing counter-narratives tackling issues of race: presenting the marginalized voice, and disrupting and complicating the narrative. These tenets are especially important to this thesis as they will serve as a blueprint to understand how Eady's poetry functions as a counter-narrative.

In reviewing pertinent literature, the concept of voice repeatedly surfaced as a common theme in the works of several scholars (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic 1993; Kraehe, 2015). Milner and Howard (2013) explain that one of the central purposes of counter-narratives is to provide voice to the muted marginalized; however, as a tenet to analyze counter-narratives, presenting the marginalized voice is more than simply providing the possibility for a counter-narrative to emerge, but rather is concerned with the authenticity of the voice espousing the narrative. Essentially, Milner and Howard (2013) contend that a counter-narrative's ability to combat racist ideologies hinges on its ability to originate from a marginalized person. Kraehe

(2015) adds to this notion by arguing, “[...] counter-narratives are stories told from the vantage point of those who have been subjected, disparaged, and forgotten” (p. 202). Kraehe (2015) and Milner and Howard (2013) chastise that the master narrative is cohesive in its ability to speak for the marginalized and writing stories for people whose experience is not a dominant one. Thus, the effectiveness of the counter narrative is highly dependent on who articulates it.

Additionally, Milner and Howard (2013) suggest that disrupting and complicating the narrative is another tenet for analyzing counter-narratives. Expressing their frustrations with under-theorized, under-researched, and one-sided narratives surrounding teachers, students, and parents of color, Milner and Howard (2013) argue that counter-narratives must take on the role of disruption by posing questions to what is already firmly believed and presenting narratives inconsistent with traditional pre-scripted plots. They provide the example of a widely-circulated narrative that contributes to the master narratives:

Teacher education programs (such as Teach for America) should select and recruit the ‘best and brightest’ students from the most ‘prestigious’ institutions into teaching [and] it is appropriate to recruit teachers into teaching for a short period of time to teach in high poverty, ‘high need’ environments. (Milner & Howard, 2013, p. 537)

Thus, Milner and Howard (2013) call for scholarship to act as a counter-narrative that disrupts the notion that students must be the best and brightest, according to some predetermined set of static criteria, to teach effectively [and] challenge a short term investment and the minimal number of years that the ‘best and the brightest’ are encouraged or committed to teaching in high poverty, ‘high-need’ contexts. (p. 543-545)

When analyzing counter-narratives, creating an alternative narrative inconsistent with social expectations creates dissonance for those consuming the counter-narratives. Milner and Howard

(2013) suggest this dissonance probes those consuming the counter-narrative to ask the following:

- 1) Who decides what is meant by the ‘best and brightest?’
- 2) What role does race play in who gets to be considered the best and the brightest?
- 3) In what ways might concentrating solely on the ‘best and brightest’ prevent potential teachers of color from applying and being accepted into TFA and other teaching programs?
- 4) What are the long-term effects of the short-term commitments of these teachers?
- 5) What are the racial demography patterns of students in high need schools where teachers are expected to teach for only two years? (p. 543-545)

Milner and Howard (2013) suggest that it is in the ability to create this dissonance that maximizes the counter-narrative to be persuasive as the incongruity lowers the audience’s resistance to be persuaded and decreases the master narrative’s coherence.

### **Procedure for Analysis**

Using Milner and Howard’s (2013) methodology for analyzing counter-narratives, I will analyze Eady’s collection by reviewing the poetry and providing support for how Eady’s collection rhetorically functions as a counter-narrative. Because Eady’s collection is written in a story that happens simultaneously with Susan Smith’s narrative from the opposite perspective, I will look for instances in which Eady’s “truth” directly counters the master narrative to which Susan Smith contributed. In other words, I will be analyzing instances in which Mr. Zero’s perspective deviates from his expected social constructs by investigating individual narratives that highlight a presence of voice and reviewing the narrative’s tendencies to disrupt and complicate.

Although the collection is written in verse, it is constructed as a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. Thus, I will analyze each chapter individually to better understand the progression and development of the counter-narrative. Then, I will investigate the text

through a close textual analysis, which Sillars and Gronbeck (2001) articulate is the process of carefully combing through the text to extract emerging themes. In other words, I will be looking for themes that frequent Eady's pages often or in unusual ways and delve into what he is rhetorically communicating with these themes. By avoiding a face-value approach to examining the text, a deep historical and cultural approach can exhume deeper meanings from the text as a whole that can illuminate certain intricacies within this text. Lastly, Eady's collection of poetry uniquely has historical accounts of the margins of pages throughout his book. Although the accounts are not related specifically to the Susan Smith case, they do provide insight into Eady's message. Thus, I would be remiss if I did not apply the counter-narrative method to these historical accounts that may reveal the power behind counter-narratives to dismantle master narratives.

Ultimately, upon finishing this analysis, I will discuss the collection as a whole by heeding the advice of Bamberg and Andrews (2004) to look for any parts of the counter-narrative in which the narrative is empowering marginalized groups. Bamberg and Andrews (2004) suggest this sort of assessment may help to explain how counter-narratives can be altered to more effectively rupture and transform the master narratives and the hegemonic systems at play.

Armed with an understanding of this methodology, I will now apply this framework to Eady's work to better understand how it functions as a counter-narrative against a master narrative that for centuries has maintained the oppression of the Black community.

## CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

By examining the lyrical arguments made by Eady in *Brutal Imagination*, a story aimed at American society, I present this collection of poetry as the beginning of a counter-narrative forming in opposition to the master narrative that has been used for centuries to oppress the Black community. In order to understand how this poetry specifically functions as a counter narrative, I have analyzed each of the chapters comprised of individual poems in *Brutal Imagination* separately, as these poems have been arranged in narrative form. I acknowledge that poetry is imbued with many meanings and certainly many interpretations exist, but for the purposes of this thesis, I provide my personal interpretation of Eady's work. Then, having examined these poems, I closely examine the collection holistically to deduce its meaning. The chapters are as follows:

- Chapter 1 (Eady, 2001)
  - “How I Got Born”
  - “My Heart”
  - “Who Am I?”
  - “Sightings”
  - “My Face”
  - “Susan Smith’s Police Report”
  - “Where Am I?”
  - “The Lake”
  - “The Law”
  - “Why I Am Not a Woman”
  - “One True Thing”
  - “Composite”
  - “Charles Stuart in the Hospital”
  
- Chapter 2 (Eady, 2001)
  - “Uncle Tom in Heaven”
  - “Uncle Ben Watches the Local News”
  - “Jemima’s Do-Rag”
  - “Buckwheat’s Lament”

- “Stepin Fetchit Reads the Paper”
- Chapter 3 (Eady, 2001)
  - “The Unsigned Confession of Mr. Zero”
  - “What I’m Made Of”
  - “What the Sherriff Suspects”
  - “Next of Kin”
  - “What Is Known About the Abductor”
  - “Interrogation”
  - “My Eyes”
  - “What Isn’t Known About the Abductor”
  - “Press Conference”
  - “Sympathy”
  - “Confession”
- Chapter 4 (Eady, 2001)
  - Birthing

In exploring these four chapters, I am initially searching for the presence of a marginalized voice. Although Eady, as a Black man in society, would fit the description of being marginalized, his choice to write the collection specifically from Mr. Zero’s perspective, rather than his own, allows this story to resonate with a wider audience as he is able to speak on experiences of Black men in general and not just one Black man. This collection could have very well been written by Eady as Eady, but I argue that his choice to write this story through the lens of Mr. Zero suggests that the experience of marginalization Eady portrays is the plight of the Black man in America rather than his own personal experience as a Black man. For this reason, as I examine the presence of voice, the voice being privileged is that of Mr. Zero, a fictional but painfully real voice of the Black community. Following this examination, I will then analyze the text for moments in which the literature disrupts and complicates the master narrative surrounding the angry Black man and criminality. Finally, in synthesizing the poetic arguments

of these four chapters, I have deduced two major themes which I have conceptualized as resisting pre-scripted identity and exposing shared experience. Summating these individual components will ultimately lead to my conclusion that Cornelius Eady's *Brutal Imagination* serves as a fictional counter-narrative that unravels the Black man as a criminal; a master narrative that has been constructed for the marginalization of the Black body.

### **Voice**

Employed to combat the hegemonic force of master narratives, counter-narratives are concerned with privileging the voice of the often inaudible and muted populations the master narrative seeks to silence. As such, it is vital to seek, understand, and make these voices heard for a counter-narrative to serve its purpose in countering. In essence, establishing voice serves as evidence in sharing experiential knowledge that can deconstruct the master narrative (Watts, 2001). Thus, I will explore how Eady privileges the voice of Mr. Zero, a representation of the Black man that has been painted as an angry, aggressive criminal. In privileging the minority voice, Eady does not merely suggest that telling the story through the lens of the disenfranchised is enough, but rather he explores several facets of using the minority voice to show their truth.

### **Establishing Voice**

There is no doubt Eady intended for the readers of *Brutal Imagination* to know right from the beginning that Mr. Zero is the narrator of this story. Eady (2001) writes, "The speaker is the young black man/Susan Smith claimed/kidnapped her children." Safeguarding from our tendency as readers to transitively associate a book's narrator to its author, Eady sets the stage by instantly communicating with his readers that after the initial commentary, Mr. Zero would be voicing the narrative. Eady (2001) privileges the marginalized voice in Chapter 1 and opens the first poem by writing

Though it's common belief/ That Susan Smith willed me alive/At that moment/ Her babies sank into the lake/ When called, I come. My job is to get things done./ I am piecemeal.

This opening passage suggests that Mr. Zero's voice is not only his own or one that pertains solely to this story, but rather that the voice of this narrative was reflexive of many Black identities that have been used as scapegoats throughout history. Eady uses this chapter to argue that Mr. Zero's identity, a representation of the angry Black criminal, has been created for him by others without his consent. This argument is solidified when Eady (2001) writes, "So now a mother needs me clothed/ In hand-me-downs/ In a knit cap./ Whatever./ We arrive, bereaved/ On a stranger's step. *Baby*, they weep, *Poor Child*." Mr. Zero's use of "We" further cements that his voice is not only his own but rather that of an entire group of people. Simultaneously, his use of "now a mother needs me clothed" suggests Mr. Zero has chosen to speak after being aware his purpose in life is not for self-actualization or satisfaction; his creation is only for the benefit of another, more privileged person than him. For the purposes of this narrative, Mr. Zero's existence is solely for the benefit of Susan Smith. Eady also makes use of irony by italicizing and drawing emphasis to "*Baby*" and "*Poor Child*," which I interpret to mean that Mr. Zero wishes to use his voice in the story to directly counter the master narrative and saying the real victims are not Susan and her children but rather him.

### **Silenced Voice**

Although establishing the voice of the marginalized is necessary for the purposes of authenticity, in Chapter 1 Eady utilizes the concept of voice to rhetorically draw empathy from readers by highlighting the ways in which Mr. Zero has been muted. Eady also uses this rhetorical strategy to argue that muting a marginalized voice deprives readers and listeners from



understanding the truth. In the case of this narrative, had Mr. Zero had the opportunity to speak, others would have known Susan Smith was lying to them. By using empathy and a platform for truth-seeking, we are not only willing but want to listen to those whom have been kept silent. In Eady's (2001) "The Lake" Mr. Zero asks, "Ever try to say/ Something,/ And know what you said/ Slid past an ear?" Mr. Zero asks this question as if to say he has been trying to tell the truth, but Susan's contribution to the master narrative has made his story fall on deaf ears. Eady cements this notion of being silenced by using his story as a platform to speak and argue that Susan's story kept Mr. Zero from being seen or heard when he writes "Ever look someone, You know, Straight in the eye/ And have them look/ Right through you? That's been/ Our fugitive lives." Again, Mr. Zero employs "Our" to signify that that this silencing is not unique to his case; it is the case for all Black men in history who have been marginalized.

Interestingly, this text's first chapter shows how difficult it can be for the powerless to find a voice amongst a sea of powerful voices. Eady sprinkles lines throughout his poetry to suggest that for so long someone else spoke for him. In "Susan Smith's Police Report," Mr. Zero goes through a step by step recollection of the things Susan Smith said he did and said. Eady (2001) writes, "[I] Barked the unlocked door open... This, she swore, was the sound/ Of my voice." With this line, he highlights the muting process the marginalized undergo. This use of narrative to dominate the conversation and speak for the marginalized is often used as a strategy of the hegemony (Alcoff, 1991-1992). Even when the Other speaks, it is often filtered through those in power; however, as the chapters progress, Mr. Zero becomes more comfortable using his voice to explain his own feelings and frustrations. This progression in using voice is best seen in Eady's (2001) "Confession," when Mr. Zero proclaims,

There have been days I've almost/Spilled/ From her, nearly taken a breath./ Yanked/  
Myself clean. I've/ Trembled/ Her coffee cup. I well/ Under/ Her eyelids. I've been/  
Gravel/ On her mattress. I am/ Not/ Gone. I am going to/ Worm/ My way out. I have/  
Not/ Disappeared. I half/ Slide./ Between her teeth,/ Double/ Her over as she tries/ Not/  
To blurt me out. The/ Closer/ Susan itches me/ Toward/ This, the/ Louder/ The sheriff/  
Hears/ Me bitch.

This poem marks Mr. Zero's finding of voice and although he has, up until this point, been using it to tell his narrative, in this poem, he realizes that remaining quiet only maintains his own entrapment. Eady's use of "I am going to/ Worm/ My way out" shows Mr. Zero's desire to break free from Smith's narrative so that he may be able to express his own voice.

Although presenting the marginalized voice is best seen in Chapter 1 of Eady's work, his final poem "Birthing," the only poem in Chapter 4, makes a final call to voice in which he argues this narrative is only one of many needed to make a difference. Essentially, Eady's final poem suggests the voices of the marginalized have their success gauged through both frequency and potency. He writes

Later, a black woman will say:/ "We knew exactly who she was describing."/ At this  
point, I have no language,/ No tongue, no mouth. I am not me, yet./ I am just an  
understanding.

With this line, Eady rhetorically argues that privileging the voice of the marginalized helps share experiential knowledge as well as points to how every narrative contributes to understanding of identity. Essentially, when Mr. Zero claims he will again be voiceless at the betrayal of a Black woman who supported Smith's story, he is saying that it is that much more difficult for his truth to be known because people's "understanding" of him is shaped by the master narrative, In this

case, the authentic voice of the Black woman aligns itself with the voice of the master narrative only adding to its power and shaping his identity as a criminal. When another person of color uses their authenticity to share their truth, Eady argues there is a responsibility to use that voice in a way that is liberating. Not doing so consequently supports the master narrative and reinforces the enslavement of Black bodies to its effects. In short, the master narrative is only powerful because it is a summation of different versions of the same story told for decades. Through repetition, it gains legitimacy. Thus, Eady argues that in order for counter-narratives to change the public understanding of the marginalized, they must be persuasively told often and by many as it is the way a master narrative has been able to permeate the minds of societies.

### **Disruption and Complication**

When Fisher (1978) first introduced the narrative paradigm, he argued that stories held persuasive power by shaping our understanding of the world. Thus, he posited that the key to unlocking that power is to share narratives with fidelity and coherence or appeals to consistency and reasonableness. So as critical scholars study ways of deconstructing master narratives, it would seem logical that many agree that the best method to do so is to unravel the source of power (Milner & Howard, 2013). Eady's *Brutal Imagination* counters the master narrative by disrupting and complicating the fidelity and coherence that made people believe Susan Smith to begin with. On a larger scale, his narrative poems serve to question the pre-scripted storylines of the angry, Black criminal.

Each of Eady's chapters play a significant role in undoing the fidelity and coherence of Susan's narrative through disruption and complication. Although these two methods work together and scholarship has not provided concrete definitions to outline how they conceptually differ, in analyzing and reflecting on how the chapters rhetorically function, I have come to

understand disruption and complication to be two separate rhetorical strategies. In efforts of providing future scholarship with more concrete definitions of these terms, I have defined complication as the ways in which a counter-narrative argue the master narrative is only alleging a part of the story and disruption in the ways counter-narratives force us to question why something is true, particularly in ways that highlight why something the master narrative alleges is not true. For example, in Eady's Chapters 1 and 2 both make use of disruption or portions of a counter narrative that attack the structure of the master narrative, the authenticity of the characters or events transpired, and overall coherence. Disruption in a counter-narrative also weakens the persuasiveness of the master narrative by decreasing its believability and overall credibility. This is achieved in highlighting the ways in which the master narrative has been distorted from reality and showing how the reasoning in the story is flawed. Conversely, in Chapters 3 and 4, Eady makes use of complication – or adding meaning to what has already been explained in the master narrative – in efforts to show that the truth is complex and that facts should not be taken at face value. Bamberg (2004) hypothesizes that counter-narratives act interactively with the master narrative, often telling portions of the story that do not always deviate from its hegemonic expectation. In this way, he argues counter-narratives are complicit in marginalizing the people it seeks to liberate; however, Eady's use of complication paves the way to narrate a story that agrees, in part, with the master narrative while simultaneously providing a more holistic view of the truth. Using disruption and complication as a lens of analysis, I will examine how Eady resists and combats the master narrative of the Black man.

Offering his poems to combat Mr. Zero's pre-scripted storyline, Cornelius Eady attacks several aspects of this decades-old trope. Chapters 1 and 2 make use of disruption by examining the questioning events transpired and disrupting pre-scripted identity.

## Questioning the Plot

Initially, Eady's writing plants seeds of doubt to disrupt Susan's version of the story and, by association, the master narrative. In his poem "Sightings" about the people who claimed to have seen Mr. Zero, Eady (2001) exemplifies disruption by mixing Mr. Zero's story with questions readers have to digest. For example, Eady (2001) writes, "Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ saw a glint of us/ On which highway?/ On the street that's close/ To what landmark?" In order for the story to resonate as authentic and truthful, Eady does not simply state, Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ claims she saw us, but I wasn't with the children since they were already submerged under water. Rather, he challenges us to question everything and not merely accept the events as they were first articulated. By lyrically suggesting that the stories by people who claimed to have seen Mr. Zero with the children lacked cohesion, he adds cohesion to his own narrative and simultaneously increases his authenticity. These lines serve to disrupt the narrative Susan and the people of South Carolina espoused when they claimed to have seen Mr. Zero, yet their stories were incomplete, void of information they would have had if they actually did see him. In this way, Eady argues that these events posed by Susan and the people of South Carolina are flawed, thus the master narrative of the angry Black criminal is also flawed.

Later, we see a disruption of the master narrative that birthed Mr. Zero in Eady's (2001) poem "Interrogation" when Mr. Zero asks, "How can a black man drive/ An old, beat-up Mazda/ In a southern town/ With two white kids/ In the back seat,/ and never be seen?" Mr. Zero knows how strange it would look to people of a southern town for a Black man and two White children to be seen together. Eady capitalizes on the dissonance that would be created by this sight. He makes a valid point in saying that inherently racist attitudes at the sight of Mr. Zero with White children would have drawn too much attention for him to have escaped unseen. While strides

have certainly been made in social equality, even today, this sight would be considered conspicuous and draw attention. This would only be exacerbated even more in 1994 when these events occurred, and the public perception of Black men in America was less than favorable by Southern White communities.

Eady's (2001) "One True Thing" disrupts Susan's contribution to the master narrative when Mr. Zero directly challenges Susan's character, which Fisher (1989) posits is a key factor in establishing a story's coherence. Mr. Zero speaks, "I was made to be a driver, but the truth is, I was, from the/ Beginning, Susan's admiral." By telling us that Susan commissioned Mr. Zero to do her dirty work, he directly erodes her credibility and thus her version of the story. Knowing her motivation for telling her story the way she did makes us weary of her character and plants doubt when trying to believe her narrative. Further attacking her character, Mr. Zero says in "Uncle Ben Watches the Local News," "She's as sad and crazy as the smile/ They've quilled under my nose." In this statement, Mr. Zero implies Susan, her story, and her description of him are fake. In essence, he argues that she has created this elaborate ruse, which is far-fetched and insane at best. As readers and listeners of narratives, we do not trust what we do not perceive to be true and as a result lose faith in Susan's narrative.

### **Disrupting Identity**

While certainly a prevailing theme of this work, Mr. Zero's narrative does not only seek to disrupt Susan's narrative of events transpired, it also serves to disrupt the narrative she painted of his identity— one of which Mr. Zero is well aware. Łobodziec (2014) explains that the master narrative of the Black man can be traced back to slavery when Black men were painted as primitive and aggressive sub-humans. She further articulates that for centuries we have come to view Black men as having a violent nature that threatens the White social order (Łobodziec,

2014). As such, Mr. Zero represents this identity. Eady (2001) in “My Heart” writes, “Like a bad lover, she has given me a poisoned heart./ It pounds both our ribs, black, angry, nothing but business.” Susan Smith’s story resonated with people, which led to a nationwide search for a Black man because her story fell in line with how our country tends to identify Black men in the larger master narrative: angry, criminal, dehumanized people who are up to no good. Clearly establishing how Mr. Zero has been portrayed by Susan and consequently the master narrative, Eady lays the groundwork for his following poem, “Who Am I,” to challenge the master narrative’s prescription of who he is supposed to be.

Eady (2001) writes,

*Who are you, mister?/ One of the boys ask/ From the eternal backseat/ And here is the one good thing:/ If I am alive, then so, briefly, are they,/ Two boys returned, three and one./ Quiet and scared, bunched together/ Breathing like small beasts./ They can’t place me, yet there’s something familiar (...) maybe it’s the way I drive/ Or occasionally glance back/ With concern,/ Maybe it’s the mixed blessing/ Someone, perhaps circumstance,/ Has given us,*

In this passage, Eady portrays Mr. Zero as someone concerned for the wellbeing of Michael and Alex rather than an angry criminal who would perhaps yell at the children to be quiet as he plots his escape. Further, it paints Mr. Zero as an innocent bystander who is in the driver’s seat only because Smith imagined it, and his choice of the word “eternal” means this is not the first or last time that metaphorical backseat was created to falsely accuse a Black man of a crime he did not commit. Specifically, when Mr. Zero says, “here is one good thing:/ If I am alive, then so, briefly, are they,” he argues his existence is mythical but wishes he was real because that would counterfactually mean the children would not have been dead. This reimagined portrayal of Mr.

Zero, and as a result a Black man, presents an alternative to the Black man stereotype as someone who is caring. In this way, Eady disrupts the master narrative by rewriting his identity which our culture has for a long time come to fear.

Jones (2005) argues that the identity of Black men is often relegated to a criminal and a villain. In analyzing Eady's work, I have found instances in which Mr. Zero makes reference to being aware of this identity, and in that self-awareness stands in opposition to the master narrative's construction of his identity. For example, in "Charles Stuart in the Hospital," Mr. Zero articulates, "*How tall was I? the police asked Charles,/ And ask Susan, But I vary; I seem smaller and taller/ after dusk./ What was the tone of my voice?/ Did I growl like a hound as I waved the pistol in their face?*" Self-aware of what others think of him, Mr. Zero plays along with the master narrative's construction of his identity before inserting his truth when he says, "Here's what I told Susan:/ "I won't harm your kids."/ But if the moment was mine,/ Why would I say that?" Again exercising this method of espousing the master narrative before inserting a disrupting truth, Eady uses "My Face" to separate Mr. Zero's pre-scripted identity from his self-written one. He writes,

But rules are rules,/ And when you were/ Of a certain age/ Someone pointed/ A finger/  
In the wrong direction/ And said: All they do/ Is fuck and drink/ All they they're good  
for/ Ain't worth shit./ You recall me now/ to the police artist./ It wasn't really my face/  
That stared back that day,/ But it was that look.

In this portion of his poem, Eady speaks to Mr. Zero's identity as one devalued by society because he is a Black man; however, when Mr. Zero says the face the artist drew was not his own only, the look was the only real thing about the description since it showed how feared his face had become. Using this self-awareness, Mr. Zero chips away at the master narrative of the



Black man by telling a counter-narrative that argues that who he is and who he is presumed to be are not the same person.

Perhaps the most eloquent way in which Eady attack's this pre-scripted identity is in his poem "Uncle Tom in Heaven." Eady uses this poem to articulate a struggle between a self-scripted identity, and the identity assigned to Black men. Eady (2001) writes, "I watch another black man pour from a/ White woman's head. I fear/ He'll live the way I did, a brute,/ A flimsy ghost of an idea." In saying another Black man will live as a brute the way Mr. Zero did, Eady does not talk about his character being brute-like but rather perceived as one. In telling his narrative, Mr. Zero has never displayed actions of a brute but knows that in spite of what he does or says he is viewed that way, which poses the question—why? As readers of this story, we question why it is that Mr. Zero has come to be labeled something he has never exhibited, and we come to the realization that the master narrative has wrongfully painted a false identity. Further, when Eady (2001) explains this false identity is "A flimsy ghost of an idea," he humanizes Mr. Zero as a person, not a half-baked assumption of who he ought to be. As the poem continues, Eady provides his readers with evidence that opens the master narrative up for judgment. He writes, "I am well aware/ Of what I've become; a name/ Children use to separate themselves/ On a playground. It doesn't matter/ To know I'm someone else's lie." Eady argues that the master narrative has lied about the identity of Black men to keep them separate and inferior. This counter-narrative is disruptive to the oppression of the master narrative by showing the purpose the master narrative serves— to systematically maintain racial superiority of the Black man.

## Complicating the Master Narrative

Having analyzed the ways in which Cornelius Eady's work is disruptive to the master narrative of Black men, I will now analyze the ways in which *Brutal Imagination* seeks to complicate it.

Chapter 3, while extremely short, reveals a turning point in Mr. Zero's narrative. It is in this Chapter that Eady's poetry shifts from language meant to highlight incongruities to specific word choice that is meant to uncover the complexity of the narrative form. Perhaps this is most evident in "Confession" where Eady writes,

There have been days I've almost/ Spilled/ From her, nearly taken a breath./ Yanked/  
Myself clean. I've/ Trembled/ Her coffee cup. I will/ Under/ Her eye lids. I've been  
gravel/ On her mattress. I am not/ Gone. I am going to/ Worm/ My way out. I have/ Not/  
Disappeared. I half/ Slide/ Between her teeth,/ Double/ Her over as she tries/ not/ To blurt  
me out. The/ Closer/ Susan inches me/ Toward/ This, the louder/ The sheriff/ Hears/ Me  
bitch.(2001, p. 48-49)

Creating a sense of impatience and anxiousness to reveal the truth about Smith's version of the story, Mr. Zero seemingly loses his temper and calls Smith a "bitch." In a way, Mr. Zero's actions are reflective of the master narrative's suggestion that Black men are angry.

Enthemematically, this proposes the argument that if he is angry, then he is also a criminal. To clarify, Aristotle (1926) explains that an enthymeme is a tool of reasoning similar to a syllogism with a missing premise presented by a rhetor to have an audience infer a conclusion. In this situation, the master narrative espouses the major premise that those who are Black are angry and Susan, contributing to the master narrative, provided the minor premise that her children's captor was a criminal. Therefore, we as an audience often infer the false conclusion that Black men are

criminals. Bamberg and Andrews (2004) argue that we often act in ways prescribed by the master narrative and are thus complicit in our own dominance; however, context is important and motive in this passage is clear. For much of Eady's book, Mr. Zero has almost been pleading for someone to hear his voice and in knowing that he is not being heard has angered him to the point of an outburst. Yet, Mr. Zero complicates the narrative by providing us with a motive that does not match what the master narrative would suggest; he is not angry because he is a Black criminal, he is angered by frustration and hurt— feelings and actions based on human traits, not just traits of a Black man. Complication takes portions of what the master narrative has circulated to be true and adds meaning to challenge us as an audience to a counter-narrative that questions why it is true.

Finally, perhaps the best example of complication is in Eady's chapter 4, which contains only the poem "Birthing." This final poem comes with a memo from Eady on the top right corner, which reads, "*The italicized language is from Susan Smith's handwritten confession.*" In this poem, Mr. Zero and Smith's words and feeling are interwoven. He splices her words with his own to create a poetic message — that the master narrative controls what we believe with grave implications. Eady writes,

*I felt I couldn't be a good mom anymore, but I didn't want my children to grow up  
without a mom./ I am not me yet. At the bridge,/ One of Susan's kids cries,/ So she  
drives to the lake,/ To the boat dock./ I am not yet opportunity./ I have never felt so  
lonely/ And so sad./ Who shall be a witness? Bullfrogs, water fowl./ When I was at John  
D. Long Lake/ I had never felt so scared/ So alone.*

By borrowing Smith's own words to tell his story and convey his emotions, Mr. Zero shows how words can be easily used to create our own narrative. In doing so, he complicates the master

narrative's strong hold about what is true by illustrating how the master narrative is created and how manipulative it is.

Finally, Eady's last stanza reads, "*I have no answers/ To these questions./ She only has me,/ After she removes our hands/ From our ears.*" Perhaps as Mr. Zero's last act of defiance to the master narrative, he complicates the master narrative by forcing the audience to accept the reality that Smith was only caught because of her own confession. In doing so, Mr. Zero argues that while we accept the master narrative as true, we would not have known the truth of what actually happened if it were not for her removing "our hands from our ears." The reality is that master narratives are not truth; they are riddled with falsehoods and racist attitudes to maintain the oppression of subaltern groups. The master narrative is unapologetically at the forefront of the racist subconscious and consciousness that guide our racist behaviors and attitudes. Even in this case, Smith is at fault; she is the one who killed her children. Yet, the master narrative she supported continues to manipulate the truth, which led to a nationwide search for a Black man that did not exist. Further, even in deconstructing the master narrative, Mr. Zero had to borrow Smith's confession to begin to untangle Black men from the identity of a criminal. This forces us to question whether a counter-narrative can ever be free to speak on its own terms without having to oblige to the "truth" of the master narrative. In this case, even in a counter to what she helped construct, Smith still speaks through Mr. Zero, which is a catch twenty-two.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Using poetry to retell a story that garnered national news, Eady defies a prominent narrative that has permeated our cultural fabric and has for centuries been used as an oppressive tool against the Black community—the story of the Black man as a criminal. In reading Eady’s poetry, we can hear the story of a Black man, Mr. Zero, trying desperately, at times pleading with us, to know the truth about his identity and character. In hearing this story, we are reminded that what we believe about Mr. Zero and conversely all Black men has real world implications. Eady reminds us that stories like Smith’s are believable, because collectively over time, stories like hers have banded together to create a manipulative precedent that a Black man is biologically a criminal.

In this thesis, I have examined how a narrative of oppression can support an overarching master narrative of racism. Additionally, I have detailed the ways in which a master narrative functions as a product of hegemonic oppression, but perhaps more importantly, ways in which a counter-narrative can begin to unravel the stories that guide our beliefs and actions which make the master narrative oppressive.

### **Fiction as Rhetoric**

Traditionally, stories have been a mark of cultural identities and historical occurrences for centuries, cutting across cultures in order to establish and maintain social hierarchies. Rhetorical investigations need to take time to understand the persuasive aspect fictional stories wield to a culture. Since they are naturally entertaining, they lend themselves to memorability and retelling, thus encouraging audiences and listeners to further spread the message simply through their reiteration of what the story told them.

Often, real-world events seem distant because they are not happening to us at that moment. While fictional stories also do not happen directly to us, audiences are more likely to be able to identify with a fictional character. This means, even though we now receive information through means of technological retrieval rather than oral-storytelling, this mode of rhetoric still proves useful in reaching a wider audience than face-to-face orations.

The difficulty with stories is that, often, their re-tellers create alterations in the fabric of the narrative, thus contributing to a wider problem of not hitting on the true ideas of the original authors. While stories hold power, they are also easily manipulated by those who hold more power, thus subjecting the narrative to an endlessly changing cycle. The maintaining of the narrative and the fictional story falls on those who identify and understand the morals of the tale they have heard. Those individuals use their seat of privilege to continue the truth of the narrative, rather than rewrite it in a way as to appease those at the bottom, but holding onto their own power.

### **Courtrooms**

A disproportionate amount of those convicted of crimes within our justice system are men and women of color, specifically those who are Black. Nellis (2016) explains that in America, people of color are on average incarcerated more than five times more frequently than their White counter-parts. As a result, the Federal Bureau of Prison (2016) reports that 72,394 of our nations prison population is Black. This is because individuals believe the master narrative, which is in and of itself, White, thus distancing themselves from the narratives of individuals of color. By practicing what Goldberg (2009) calls “sociopolitical distancing,” members of the majority culture often do not question or understand the complex dynamics of racial discourse because the racial narrative is “out of sight, out of mind.”

Since the population of jurors, are mostly White, then Black voices tend to be stifled in the court room due to a lack of similarity between the narratives. White people subconsciously and constantly commit racist acts, in large part because they are more willing to accept the master narrative. It may make sense to them, since they are directly profit from it, creating a distorted interpretation of the Black counter narrative.

Therefore, Black individuals are given an important place when they are put on the stand to speak to a jury not of peers, but of rhetorical shapers. They must use counter narratives to demonstrate how the whole system is problematic, and how they are wrongfully being punished due to their race. Since they are Black, they are already physically different than the protagonists of the master narrative, and those testifying in court must espouse this dissimilarity as a mechanism of complicating and disrupting the master narrative. In this process, members of the Black community must allow their personal counter narrative to be heard. A White jury will not believe them unless they fundamentally demonstrate flaws in the system itself.

At the same time, by pointing out the flaws in the narrative, juries often believe, just as the populace did with Mr. Zero, that they are trying to save their own hide by lying and avoiding the truth. White people are more willing to accept the master narrative as truth since it was constructed, largely, by a hegemon that looks like them. Many people will be offended by a Black person launching a counter-narrative as White individuals may feel personally attacked. They benefit from the system and face a cognitive dissonance as to how other people are unable to benefit from that same system (Festinger, 1957). Additionally, those in power may grow uncomfortable at someone pointing out how the power that they obtained came at the expense of others.

With this, Black men and women are not in an easy position in the courtroom, and seem to be in a sort of balancing act between espousing their innocence and not offending the White man (Festinger, 1957). This racism in courts is of the utmost importance, as a judicial system shaped by a racist narrative cannot be considered objective, and thus must be fixed in a way as to demonstrate equality and equity, rather than privilege. Our courts are grounds for turning CRT into practice by using activism to make a difference. Understanding how master narratives work is the foundation, and putting that knowledge to use in everyday proceedings is a central tenet to Critical Race Theory.

### **Black Lives Matter Movement**

The Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM) is a foundational example of a counter-narrative. Its very existence belies how the current narrative does not believe Black lives matter within the scope of society, and thus the movement began to push against this master narrative with a counter that the life of the average Black individual is in fact important.

Often, a counter-narrative can be seen as angry since the individual constructing the narrative could be seen as someone bitter of the system, and trying to further profit for themselves. This is inherently untrue, as the BLMM's goal is equality. Their mantra is not that Black lives matter more, just that they are equally as important as the life of a White individual. Regardless, the BLMM must be cautious as to not be too disruptive. By acting in too violent of a manner, such as seen with major protests and destruction of property in areas such as Ferguson, MO, they re-entrench aspects of the master narrative. For example, Mr. Zero worked against the idea that all Black men were violent, thus constructing an effective counter narrative. If the BLMM does become violent, others may react viscerally and disregard all other ideas of the movement just because of this one adherence to the master narrative.



This unfairly places a heavy burden upon the BLMM, as they can have a voice, legally, within this country; but, if this voice becomes too extreme, they may set themselves even further back. Creating this balance is the axis of any movement, as progress occurs incrementally rather than suddenly. They cannot destroy the master narrative, rather they must chip away at it piece-by-piece. In the wake of police brutality, the Black community has taken a stance towards changing the *status quo*. Eady's work serves as a reminder that the Black community has been framed as unequal and criminals; but, he lays the groundwork to change the power structures that allow unfair and deplorable treatment. Launching counter-narratives against the establishment of the master narrative is necessary if we someday hope to truly be equal.

### **Limitations**

Within this study, there are two limitations that come to the forefront: my personal experiences with oppression and the finite number of voices actually researched. As Puerto-Rican male, I have faced oppression as a result of the color of my skin. It would make sense that my subconscious and at time consciousness cater to the voices of minorities and attempt to absolve them of fault, and be much more critical of White individuals, such as Susan Smith.

Simultaneously, I faulted by not including a variety of marginalized voices. This study focuses on one voiceless voice, Mr. Zero, as an example of a counter narrative. Future research should focus on a wide variety of counter-narratives by the community as a whole, rather than just one, fictional voice. This would be a marked improvement, as future social movements would be better capable of wielding counter-narratives as a rhetorical tool to usurp the oppressor, but, since this study does not emphasize counter-narratives on a small-group or even large-group scale, it is somewhat limited in scope. However, one thing this study does advance is the power of an individual voice, as well as the rhetorical power of poetry. Future examinations into

counter-narratives should not ignore the important voices of the marginalized, which is often uncovered in poetic rhetoric.

### **Finis**

Armed with an understanding of a literature review covering the pertinent research in this study, the method, application, and implications, it is my hope this work not only adds to the field in understanding how counter-narratives work, but also motivating others to chip away at the oppressive forces that occur in master narratives. I know for me, the death of Eric Garner really made me care deeply about racial issues in America. Thus, having researched CRT and counter-narratives and reading Eady's perspective, I wish to end with a poem I wrote that will hopefully inspire someone else to act on this issue:

During the summer of 2014, Eric Garner was stopped by NYPD for suspicion of selling loose cigarettes. He was then put into a chokehold, despite claiming his innocence and not physically fighting arrest. Medical examiners ruled his death a homicide, but the officer who murdered him, Daniel Pantaleo, was never indicted. It is important to note, chokeholds are strictly forbidden by NYPD policy.

#### He Can't Breathe (For Eric)

"We" rolls off my tongue— the biggest lie I've ever told  
So I'll say he.

He can't breathe, America.  
Hurry, 11 times he'll say it, "I can't breathe."

A father can't breathe, America.  
A father will be absent for Christmas,  
"No need to question Santa's existence, son"—there will be definitive proof of his death.

A husband can't breathe, America.  
A husband will leave a widow to leak a lifetime of tears,  
Liquid salt you will force her to rub into wounds  
When you wash clean the hands and arms causing his cries, "I can't breathe."

"We" rolls off my tongue— the biggest lie I've ever told  
So I'll say you.

You can sleep easy tonight, America.  
You can remove the glass ceiling he will not try to reach  
Because HE CAN'T BREATHE//  
You made sure he never will.

"We" rolls off my tongue— the biggest lie I've ever told  
So I'll say I.

I can breathe, America.  
I will breathe, America.  
I will fill my lungs to the brim and exhale incendiary screams, America  
Because you took him out of the equation,  
So I will never get to say, "We"

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