The Latino Underground: Decolonizing Knowledge Through a Hip-Hop Testimonio Project

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This dissertation is not a dissertation, at least not by the traditional white-normed academic standards. Let’s call it a project.

This project aims to capture the lived experiences of Latinos navigating a whitestream educational system while using Hip-Hop culture as a form of empowerment. Whitestream schooling is causing cultural genocide that can damage a student’s ability to develop their cultural identity and ability to resist an oppressive system. This project explores how Hip-Hop can influence identity development and resistance against an unjust American educational system of schooling for Latino students. Furthermore, it challenges the accessibility of knowledge creation and explores how the work we produce can be accessible to our communities. With the central belief that there is power in our stories and there is strength in our ways of knowing, I aim to use our testimonios as a roadmap to navigate an oppressive educational system with Hip-Hop in their toolbox.

The process of sharing one’s story can be both liberating and empowering. Stories or testimonios in our Latino culture allow us to bring our communal narratives and ideologies to the forefront.

Therein lies the fundamental goal of this project: to shift research; to shift perspectives on who is traditionally considered the knowledge holder and expert in academia. To this end, the
goal is to learn the stories of Latinos who have been impacted positively by their exposure/interaction with Hip-Hop, and to make those stories accessible to the community.

Through this project, I aim to capture testimonios and develop a product that is accessible to my community. Additionally, by inaugurating a podcast I aim to capture the collective experience of our youth and community members. Through this process, I argue that identity as a form of resistance needs to be awakened in Latino youth at a much earlier age to understand how the schooling system has colonized Latinos. The resulting project is a collection of testimonios that will form a limited-series podcast accessible to the community.

KEYWORDS: Hip-Hop, podcast, colonization, testimonios, knowledge
THE LATINO UNDERGROUND: DECOLONIZING KNOWLEDGE
THROUGH A HIP-HOP TESTIMONIO PROJECT

JORGE J. SÁNCHEZ

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
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THE LATINO UNDERGROUND: DECOLONIZING KNOWLEDGE
THROUGH A HIP-HOP TESTIMONIO PROJECT

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I have looked for sophisticated examples on how to write this. None have done justice to what I have to say. To my committee, mil gracias. Dra. Hatt, fuck, where do I begin? Un abrazos inmenso, your belief in me was unwavering. Words cannot express my gratitude to you. Beyond the academy, I have learned so much from you. Your kindness has no limits. Dra. Otto, mil gracias; early on we clicked and you have been an inspiration ever since. Dr. Mendez, yo, real recognize real. Thank you for the freedom you allowed me to have with the process. Mil gracias, señor.

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J.J.S.
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FIRST ELEMENT: MUST WE REALLY STILL JUSTIFY?

I don’t give a fuck about the industry, man. What you need to understand is when I do this album, it’s going to be the realest shit you ever heard because if I fucking brick, I can still eat I can make a way for my family. So, I’m gonna do my album. I’ll do it the way I fucking want to do it, you know what I’m saying. And with the backing that I got, I don’t think there is a way that I can really… Im not going to say there’s no way I could fail but hopefully with Gods blessing and I have Chicago on my side, there shouldn’t be no way for me to lose really. –Kanye West (Coodie & Chike, 2022)

We now know Kanye as a polarizing figure; however, when he said those words he was a hungry producer ready to make it as an MC. In retrospect, wish I would have had his “I don’t give a fuck” attitude about the industry (academia) mentality. Truth be told, I gave a fuck, I gave a huge fuck. As I reflect on my academic journey I am reminded of that scene from

Knockaround Guys:

500 fights, that's the number I figured when I was a kid. 500 street fights and you could consider yourself a legitimate tough guy. You need them for experience. To develop leather skin. So, I got started. Of course, along the way you stop thinking about being tough and all that. It stops being the point. You get past the silliness of it all. But then, after, you realize that’s what you are. –Vin Diesel (Koppelman & Levien, 2001).

When I first transitioned into the field of education, I would attend conferences eager to learn. I admired the presenters with the fancy letters behind their names. During that time, I felt I had a lot to say, but no right/authority to say it. I would often think, “If I had the letters, I would speak about this and improve on that.” I admired the way the “scholars” would command a room. So, I got started, first with one master’s degree, then two, and eventually four. As I started
acquiring the letters, I started presenting, started looking for things to speak about even if I no longer had something to say. When I started my doctoral journey, there was a pressure to get your work out, a pressure to publish and present. A slow killing of one’s soul.

How is it that a young and courageous boy with a massive thirst for knowledge reaches the pinnacle of his intellectual mind map and then realizes: I should have never taken this route? How do I deal with my discontents? In search of truth and deliverance I ended up enslaved by my own theories. I am disowned by the proletariat and at odds with the bourgeoisie. -Carrillo (2016)

I posted Carrillo’s words on Instagram during the second year of my doctoral program. During that time I had such a desire to quit—shit, I wanted to quit every single semester, always registered late. Carrillo’s word were dope. They spoke to me: that was what I was feeling.

That’s when I stopped presenting. For the first time I started noticing the audience at conferences, something I had not done before. It tripped me out. I stopped thinking about the letters and all that. It stops being the point. My fullest academic self, the Kanye “I don’t give a fuck about the industry” self, emerged. I “understood” that the conversations surrounding race and racism, police brutality, whitestream schooling, assimilation and poverty had been taking place for most of my life in my own backyard. My own reality and everyday experiences, in fact, spoke to the issues that many academics at these conferences were merely beginning to understand. I realized if I would have taken my “newly found knowledge” back to the ’hood I would have been laughed at. More importantly, I realized my audience did not consist of the people I wanted to reach. I also realized that while we as Brown people had normalized an oppressive system, we had also developed a coping mechanism, a way to survive, a form of expression that would serve as a life line: Hip-Hop. I thought about Ares, my high school best friend, and our experience and the experience of everyone in my crew. I thought about our Hip-Hop and how our Hip-Hop had to exist on the outside, not allowed inside the school walls. We
had to check ourselves at the doors. The metal detectors took our dignity while the whiteness of my teachers took my identity; my Hip-Hop was checked at the door.

Whitestream schooling is causing cultural genocide that can damage a student’s ability to develop their cultural identity and ability to resist an oppressive system. My project aims to explore how Hip-Hop can influence the development of identity and resistance against whitestream schooling for Latino students. Furthermore, I aim to explore how the work we produce can be accessible to our communities. There is power in our stories and there is strength in our ways of knowing, in our knowledge. How can we use our testimonios as a roadmap to navigate an oppressive educational system with Hip-Hop in our tool box? Using Hip-Hop as a cultural broker, I aim to explore identity and challenge educational systems of oppression.

Through this project I aimed to gather testimonios and develop something that is accessible to my community: The development of a podcast capturing the collective experience of our youth and community members. Through this process I argue that identity as a form of resistance needs to be awakened in Latino youth at a much earlier age, as a means to understanding how the schooling system has colonized Latinos.

**Structure of the Project**

In the 1970s, poverty, corruption, gang violence, drug abuse, school dropout rates, police brutality, homelessness, crime, and the gap in education achievement increased in the inner cities of the five boroughs in New York (Chang, 2005). Hip-Hop for some Black and Brown students is home. In its early and formative years, Hip-Hop represented an alternate form of social recognition and status for Black and Latino youth and was seen as a vehicle for collective uplift and social critique of policies that often disadvantaged minoritized groups (Petchauer, 2011). Originating from the post-industrial urban downfall in New York, Hip-Hop has grown into an
international cultural entity representing the voices of those that reside in? the social gutters: the stigmatized, the oppressed, and the silenced (Sulé, 2016). Hip-Hop culture is typically broken down into four elements: emceeing, breaking, DJing and graffiti. Knowledge, which many consider the fifth element, is the glue that holds the artistic elements within the context of Hip-Hop¹.

Knowledge as an element tackles oppression head on and empowers the Hip-Hop community because it centers culture and identity. It is heart and brain combined. This project is arranged like the four elements of Hip-Hop, with the reader or listener of the podcast becoming the fifth element, knowledge. (See Figure 1.) Knowledge is an important part of life and a powerful acquisition which, when given to someone, does not decrease and cannot be taken away. Thus, when someone listens to one of these testimonios, the dissemination of knowledge begins and our ancestral oral storytelling traditions continue.

The project is broken down into four elements:

- First element: Must we really still justify?
- Second element: Nuestros maestros
- Third element: We are Hip-Hop
- Fourth element: Step-up time

Like the Hip-Hop culture, all elements work together to create the element of knowledge. In this case they are working together to sustain cultural ancestral ways of knowing. The four-element project format allows for an integrated discussion of a larger topic. The purpose is to contribute to the discourse around resistance against whitestream schooling for Latino

¹ Hip-Hop is a culture that is interconnected; therefore, the elements are interconnected. However, the Hip-Hop culture expands beyond four elements. The culture is more than just a practice of the elements, it is lived experiences that inspire the expression, the elements.
students. The first element discusses the need to challenge the historical dissertation format/process and provides validation and justification for doing so. The second element explores the many teachers Latino students have through the exploration of my personal counter-narrative testimonio. Through this journey, I have come to realize that Hip-Hop has in fact served as a teacher in my life and the lives of those who participated in the project. The third element is one of testimonios, in which Hip-Hop is born and ancestral knowledge practiced through the story telling process. The fourth element is an element of reflection wherein I explore the process of undertaking this task.

Figure 1. The four elements of Hip-Hop.
Reflection

Introduction

I was sitting at my desk on a random fall morning listening to Nas, getting ready for the day. Alexus, one of my students, approached me and asked what I was doing. Like me, he did not feel comfortable around wealthy white folks and got to school extra early to avoid superficial interactions. We had established a routine; I turned on the classroom lights and started making coffee; he would select the morning tunes, usually a good selection of Hip-Hop with your random ranchera. Like parents, as teachers, we claim to like all our students equally; that is simply not true. Alexus was a kid that held a special place in my heart. He had recently transferred in from Farragut. I knew Farragut; I attended it freshman year as a teen. Farragut was a neighborhood school at the heart of Little Village, a neighborhood in Chicago known for gang violence and poverty. The school was no different. Alexus had recently moved in with his father after being displaced by his mother’s boyfriend. He was having trouble adapting to his new school. Unlike Farragut, Lyons Township was well funded and located in a wealthy suburban neighborhood. Eighty percent of the students attending Lyons Township were affluent and white.

Alexus was facing cultural and socio-economic shock. The kid was resilient and carried a sense of self that I could not have imagined having at his age. I answered his question and told him a professor had presented an opportunity, a study-abroad program allowing me to spend several weeks in Mexico learning about our culture and indigenous ancestry. His eyes widened with excitement; he yelled, "You gonna jump on that, right, Mr. S?" to which I replied, "Nah, youngster, I don’t think so; I just want to chill this summer.” His facial expression changed; he looked at me with disappointment and said, "Man, Mr. S, so that's what it's like to be privileged."
Those words struck me at my core. Alexus was an undocumented young man; this meant he was unable to travel outside the U.S.

I share the above narrative to draw attention to a system that consistently “others” Brown bodies and makes us feel isolated in educational spaces. In the following sections, I will first discuss the problems that frame the need for Latino\(^2\) students’ educational opportunities, their need to explore identity and develop a critical voice. Through testimonies, Hip-Hop will serve as the space that facilitates where Latino students can feel affirmed in their identities as Latinos. I will also examine how white settler colonialism drives internalized oppression in Latino students’ educational experiences. Finally, I will discuss my research purpose and questions.

**Testimonio of Oppression**

As the son of undocumented parents, I thought I understood the migrant experience. My transition into a career in education, after all, started with my desire to help undocumented students matriculate into higher education. At the time, I worked at a local high school as a paraeducator and noticed undocumented students not being supported. Students were navigating the transition into college independently; a group of students and I formed an organization, and together, we navigated the process and raised money for scholarships. I always considered myself a member of the migrant community, at the very least an ally/accomplice. Alexus’s words “othered” me and reminded me of my privilege; they reminded me that I did not fully grasp what it meant to be undocumented.

My conversation with Alexus convinced me to apply and ultimately go on the study-abroad trip, which involved spending four weeks in Oaxaca, Mexico, purposefully immersed in Mexican culture. We lived with local host families, spent time with indigenous communities, and

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\(^2\) My choice in using the term “Latino” vs. “Latinx” will be discussed in detail later in the dissertation.
took classes, learning the indigenous Zapeteco language. While on the trip, I realized how disconnected I had become from my history, culture, and ancestry. As we visited historical sites, I witnessed young Mexican children walking among old Aztec ruins. I had an epiphany; these children were centering their identity from a very early age; they were purposefully being immersed in their culture. I envied that. It took me back to my own childhood that lacked the cultural infusion I was witnessing. Our school trips were often to Brookfield Zoo, framed within a colonizing approach to education. I tried to look for cultural reinforcement examples within my educational trajectory, and sadly, I could not find any. However, I found many scars, memories I had tucked away, example after example of educational experiences designed to encourage my deculturalization, a cultural genocide (Spring, 2001).

Like Alexus, I never felt I belonged in the American educational system. Educators did not look like me, did not teach me about Brown people, and often blamed my parents for not meeting white schooling norms. I didn’t realize it at the time, but these experiences were designed to deculturalize, as in the educational process of destroying a people’s culture (cultural genocide) and replacing it with a new culture (Spring, 2001). For example, in the first grade, while dropping me off at school, I vividly remember my mother being scolded by my teacher for packing pozole for lunch instead of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. The process of systemic deculturalization experienced by Latino students and other BIPOC students attending schools in the U.S. can be described as whitestream schooling (Urrieta, 2010). Building on the notion of the mainstream, whitestream can be interpreted as the process of taking white ideologies and activities as the “norms” within society (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018). Urrieta (2010) describes whitestream schooling as uncritical assimilation, a cultural genocide. Whitestream schooling is experienced by Latino children across schools daily through imposed white history, morals,
language, customs, and traditions as the norm within U.S. schooling/society (Urrieta, 2009, 2010).

During those four weeks, I realized my education had served as a tool of deculturalization, a colonizing weapon (Urrieta, 2005). I listened to Rage Against the Machine (RATM) as I walked the streets of Oaxaca.

*You jam your culture down my throat*

*Say I’m inferior when upon it I choke*

*You fill my mind with a false sense of history*

*And then you wonder why I have no identity* —Rage Against the Machine (1991)

RATM (1991) spoke to my experience; still, I had an identity that had been systemically deculturalized; it made me recognize the depth of my colonization. I had listened to that song as a sophomore in high school. I knew back then something was wrong, but I did not have the vocabulary or knowledge to name it.

I had been colonized through formal Western education; this process also compromised my *educación*. *Educación* in Mexican culture has a much deeper meaning than the English cognate. It is primarily a foundational cultural construct for Mexican children that provides instructions on how one should live in the world (Valenzuela, 1999). It refers to their ancestral knowledge, the family's role in developing a child's sense of right and wrong, the transference of morals, values, and character (Valenzuela, 1999). *Educación* is generational knowledge that centers community and respectful relationships. My *educación* had yielded to the white ideology promoted at school; I had served as a weapon of colonization, promoting white norms (Gonzalez, 2015). As I reflect on my academic journey, I remember “othering” the English Language Learners (ELL). My parents were undocumented, yet I was often unfriendly to the newly arrived
migrant students. I was behaving like a *mal educado*. Angela Valenzuela (1999) argued in her book, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*, that Mexican youth in western education and schools learn to devalue the Spanish language, Mexico, Mexican culture, and things Mexican. The process of shaming and attempting to serve as “miniature” colonizer did not stop at school.

Growing up, I was ashamed of my culture and my parents. My memories are unforgiving reminders of my attempts to accelerate my parents’ deculturation, a desire to turn them into “true” Americans, wanting them to practice white norms and stop speaking Spanish. The need to disassociate with your culture is a survival mechanism resulting from the negative stigma associated with being a Latino in a whitestreamed educational system. According to Gonzales (2015), this stigma intensifies if you are a Mexican who speaks Spanish. Latino students become terrified of the social condemnation the stigma might bring, causing them to rebel against their cultural identity and against any familial display of what is perceived to be cultural (Gonzalez, 2015).

The study-abroad trip made me realize the deep roots of colonization in education; it allowed me to experience the richness of my culture in ways I had never done before. It awakened memories of educational colonization, discrimination and disparities I had experienced throughout my educational journey. The memories had been tucked away, purposefully done as a survival mechanism. I normalized them and dealt with the PAIN privately. I could not share my feelings with my parents because they simply wouldn’t understand; they sacrificed so much and to them formal education was the American dream, even if it required assimilation. My teachers could not relate to me: none of them looked like me. I found my escape in Hip-Hop. I took refuge in two of the elements, graffiti and emceeing. The
lyrics of Mos Def, Nas, and Common represented a form of therapy, a shared consciousness and a shared experience. Graffiti was an outlet; it was my megaphone for a voice that had been marginalized in the classroom.

In the film Get Out (Peele, 2018), the “Sunken Place” is a trance-like, otherworld state Black victims of hypnosis are trapped in when their bodies are taken over by white hosts. For Brown students, whitestream schooling represents the Sunken Place, a constant and purposeful takeover of Brown bodies and minds by white ideologies. In the next section I will describe in more detail the “Sunken Place” for Brown students stemming from the practice of deculturalization. Throughout the conversation, I will embed interlocking systems of oppression to drive attention to a more significant systemic problem. Interlocking systems of oppression can best be thought of as the structural anchors, entities that are alone oppressive now interlocking as social identities to form a “more” oppressive structure. These oppressive systems are working synergistically, contributing to Latino youths’ repressive experiences, further creating obstacles that prevent them from gaining academic success (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). While naming issues is essential, we must be mindful of recognizing that inequities exist to sustain power, and thus oppressive systems are being maintained purposefully (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

The migrant experience is a journey filled with pain and sacrifice; however, it is also full of hope and resilience. The journey does not end with the migrant; it transcends the individual and has lasting effects on future generations. As the son of Mexican immigrants, I have experienced the complexity of planting roots in foreign soil. It is a loss of identity, never genuinely belonging, longing for cultural knowledge, and enduring attempted deculturalization within a school.
For migrants, one can argue the blind transaction they enter into when coming to the United States is an exchange of their labor for the “opportunity” of a better life. Based upon my experience as the child of immigrants, I wonder if they, migrants, realize the transaction’s hidden cost. The hidden cost is a loss of culture and ancestry, a lack of identity due to systemic deculturalization. Tragically, this invisible transaction is generational, and in this case, not charged to the migrants but their kin. Children of Latino migrants grow up in an American schooling system designed to eliminate their culture (Flores-González, 2017). It is a system designed to sustain racial disparity and promote white dominance above all. Ultimately, education becomes the first barrier for Latino students. As the son of migrant parents, I grew up oblivious to the hidden cost, yet I have been paying it since my first day in kindergarten.

As children, we do not understand the complexity of oppression and racial structures; we aim for acceptance. We strive to be part of a school system that will lead us out of poverty. Little do we know that these systems are designed to reinforce whiteness and power inequalities. As children, we blindly believe we are part of these systems; we think we are part of whiteness. For us it is about acceptance; Brown kids are socialized to believe that if we conform, then we will be “accepted.” It comes as a great shock for many of us to learn that after years in academia, the country/system we have taken pride in calling our own and for which we have developed an identity has, in turn, not created space for us.

Conversely, a white-centered educational agenda has worked tirelessly to shape the systemic structure of disparity, inequity, and oppression. Interlocking systems of oppression are the intentional mechanism that preserves inequities in the U.S. Latino students’ educational experience has historically been troubled within the intersections of racial, sociopolitical, and economic barriers (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Valencia, 1997). In education, colonization
occurs through the lengthy course of a child’s educational experience and has lasting effects. It creates a missing puzzle piece in the jigsaw that is our lives.

I suspect my experience is not unique; educators who work with Latino students do it under the premise of incompetence. An unchallenged discourse often guides educators fueled with deficit language such as: “incapable of learning,” “not college material,” “speaking with accents,” “disadvantaged,” “underprepared,” or “culturally deprived” (Rendón et al., 2014). Valenzuela (1999) refers to these practices as “subtractive” from the educational experience of Latino students. Subtractive schooling devalues the funds of knowledge that students acquire from ancestral learnings; generational knowledge is either dismissed and/or diminished. I will discuss these topics in greater detail in the literature review.

Participating in the trip forced me to reflect on my educational experience, made me realize that without Hip-Hop, I would have been kept locked in my colonized mind. It made me wonder about the educational experiences of first-generation Latinos in the United States. How do they/we navigate their/our experience? With eighty-two percent of public-school teachers identifying as white (Department of Education, 2016), did the Latino educational experience truly reflect mine? I understood there was an opportunity to empower students through the reclamation of an identity, an identity they might not realize is missing. At the end of our journey, I recognized a chispa had awakened. It worked to strengthen the compromiso that I have carried as a first-generation Latino student. I also realized my epistemological perspective had shifted; I now placed? a more profound and more purposeful emphasis on ancestral teachings and funds of knowledge as ways of learning and gaining knowledge. Furthermore, I realized that this exploration had begun long ago; Hip-Hop had been my light leading me out of the “Sunken
Place.” As a result, I decided for my dissertation to study the effects Hip-Hop can have on developing a Latino identity of resistance against whitestream schooling.

**Anti-Dissertation Project**

Historically, universities have largely functioned as a part of white settler colonialism to establish positional superiority of Western knowledge (Said, 1978; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). The development of statistics and research methods occurred in direct relationship with the colonial project by claiming “positional superiority” as white supremacy through the eugenics movement (Said, 1978; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) refer to this as “white logic.” Trying to write within whitestream expectations of “valid” speaking and “valid” writing has had me feeling like a sellout. I was exposed to Hip-Hop when I was a teenager. Like most teenagers, at the age of fifteen I was entering a phase of self-discovery. I was finding myself, and Hip-Hop served as a compass during that time in my life. Things came full circle during this dissertation process, I turn to Hip-Hop yet again. I have struggled between using a voice and style that is my own or “keepin it real” versus an imposed “voice” or “writing like a sell-out” that is deemed as more legitimate in the academy through “white logic.” This matters to me because what I write and how I write can either be inviting or alienating to my community. So my project (dissertation) reflects this struggle. I can’t help but wonder how much I need to “sell out” to be able to create a dissertation that allows me to bring my whole, authentic self.

**Voces Perdidas**

Before I begin, I would like to add some context to word usage. Through this research, I will frequently use “we” when discussing the collective experience of first-generation Latino students. As a researcher, I counter traditional notions of research that state researchers must be removed from their research to maximize an objective lens. I purposefully embed myself within
the conversation as part of the collective “we,” for I, too, am a first-generation Latino student and will use my experience to ground my research.

While many scholars have moved past the term “Hispanic” and are now using the trendier term “Latinx,” I will use the term “Latino” through this paper’s discourse. My rationale is to be purposeful in language and not perpetuate colonizing behavior in my work. The term “Latinx” allows for scholars to be intentionally inclusive of the LGBTQ community. The X in Latinx eliminates the gender binaries encoded in the Spanish language (Martínez-Prieto, 2019; Salinas 2020). “Latinx” is a term developed by academics for academics, a word originated from an imposing position of privilege. Academics have changed a language without accounting for the masses who do not fall into the elite category of “scholar.” Furthermore, it can be argued that using the “Latinx” term as a U.S.-based academic self-index can be confusing for those who are not familiar with U.S academic literature; it can prevent the understanding of those who can potentially benefit from the ideas of U.S.-based Latino scholars (Martínez-Prieto, 2019). As I develop my academic identity, I understand that historically academia has not accepted Brown people. In creating a voice for myself, I must do so without becoming a voz de poder. Research conducted by Salinas (2020) introduces the concept of the voces perdidas and voces de poder. Voices of privilege assert power and control, thus causing the marginalized voices to be lost in the process. I argue that by using “Latinx,” scholars have adapted a voz de poder, coined a new term, and through this process created voces perdidas. I argue that the introduction and forceful adaption of “Latinx” as a term are done in the image and reproduction of privilege. In short, if my work centers on the reclamation of identity, it seems counterproductive to use a term that mi familia and many like them cannot even pronounce in their own language and that has been imposed by an institution founded in white supremacy.
Rationale

*Hip-Hop is revolutionary movement, Hip-Hop is a movement that is made to disrupt, so why are we accepting the rules that they set up for us. At this time, it is time to be disruptive again.*  –Yasiin Bey (Kweli, 2021)

I come to this research with certain assumptions about the nature of being, truth, and knowledge. These assumptions provide a way of seeing and inquiring into my world. The purpose of a dissertation project is to test the independent research skills a student has acquired during their time at their institution. The student must prove their ability to create new knowledge; they must show that they have read, by paying homage to those who did the work before them. I get it, I understand, it makes sense, but why is this the only way? This project will have limited citations; however, it will center the voice of the participants as experts. My goal is not to ignore those who came before me; I have a great deal of respect for them and have learned a great deal from Bell, Woodson, Anzaldúa, Valencia, Fanon, Freire, hooks, etc. My choosing to have limited citations is not done out of ignorance or disrespect, it is my way of not accepting the rules of the masters. I intend to challenge the rules that have been set up for us, to create something fluid that centers youth and my community as experts.

Within my desire to push back on formal academic requirements, particularly as these pertain to the dissertation, I seek to create a non-traditional project, one that will be accessible to my community. Ironically, I find myself having to support my reason for doing so through the same academic constraints that I am looking to shed. In short, I will provide within the following section an argument (through traditional research) to support my rationale for not conducting a conventional dissertation. Ironic.
According to Wilson (2008), research paradigms are labels that are used to identify sets of underlying beliefs or assumptions upon which research is based. These sets of beliefs go together to guide researchers’ actions. For the purpose of this community project, I have used testimonios as my methodology, incorporating an indigenous research paradigm.

For the historically marginalized, existing in academic spaces can be isolating and uncomfortable. Our notions of knowing and theory conflict with what many in the academy consider “good theory” (McKinley & Brayboy, 2005). The greatest knowledge I have acquired has been received through a storytelling process which my community and my ancestors have disseminated: valuable knowledge outside of the classroom. I learned about Hip-Hop not from a scholarly article, but from my crew, the guys I painted with. The process was not coincidental; if you joined a crew, you got schooled on the history. It was a ritual of sorts, a way of teaching a new member the history. Similarly, my goal is to present the information in this project in a way that is both authentic and culturally appropriate. I aim to decenter the researcher’s voice and conversely focus the voice of the community. I am to take the role of storyteller rather than researcher/author (Wilson, 2008). Archibald (2008) states that stories can “take on their own life” and “become the teacher.” Stories, as described by Archibald, become fluid, a constant evolution in which the storyteller/listener adds their flavor/interpretation each time he/she experiences it. Stories have the power to educate and heal the heart, mind, body, and spirit (Archibald, 2008).

In working with indigenous populations, McKinley and Brayboy (2005) point to the value of testimony as ways in which marginalized peoples can tell of sometimes painful events and memories in a protected environment so that the collective group may benefit. Within this type of research, the researcher allows the storyteller to take the lead so that both the researcher
and the speaker can make sense of the information. However, academia very rarely recognizes these efforts as being theoretically sound. Instead, our accounts of community stories and personal narratives are simply viewed and categorized as “good stories,” thus eliminating their theoretical value (McKinley & Brayboy, 2005). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) state that for Latinos, methodology is the nexus of theory and method in the way praxis is to theory and practice. In other words, methodology is the place where theory and method meet. Critical race methodology is an approach to research grounded in critical race theory (Darder & Torres, 2004). Critical race methodology pushes us to humanize quantitative data and to recognize silenced voices in qualitative data (Trucios-Haynes, 2000).

Stories or testimonios in our Latino culture allow us to bring our narrative and knowledge to the forefront. Our stories are also often called counter-narratives because they bring to light stories which may have been previously neglected because they run “counter” to those of the majoritarian (Aléman, 2012). Solózano and Yosso (2001) explain the purposes of counter-narratives this way: “While a narrative can support the majoritarian story, a counter-narrative or counter-story, by its very nature, challenges the majoritarian story.” In education, that majoritarian story repeats itself several times over, through textbooks, deficit perspectives of people of color, a lack of appreciation for non-white cultural norms, and pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Implicitly centering whiteness, traditional methods of analysis subsume race and obscure the experiences of communities of color. Critical Race Theory tenets in educational research can be utilized as methodology, raising questions surrounding conservative educational research practices that aim to silence practical issues which center Black and Brown bodies. It is important to note that it is done purposefully. Decisions get made in the research process:
decisions on power relations between researcher and participants, decisions about what narratives get told, and a focus on deficiencies rather than strengths within particular groups.

Delgado Bernal's (2002) work brings epistemology to the forefront as she examines her own Chicana feminist position. In doing so, her work highlights the relationship between researcher and participant as that of “conversational partners,” as she and her participants share similar cultural understandings. Similarly, through this project, I do not approach the process from a positional hierarchy in which I take on the role of the objective researcher.

Counter-storytelling also provides a way to build community in otherwise isolating spaces and constructs alternative perspectives to policy makers who might otherwise not know these experiences (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Our counter-stories are often overlooked because they challenge white norms and make the majoritarian feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, academia is structured in a way to discourage these methodologies from existing. In Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), testimonios form the basis of one of the theory’s tenets: the experiences of people of color as told by people of color (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solózano & Yosso, 2001). After all, people are experts on their own lives (Delpit, 1988).

Therein lies the fundamental goal of this project: to shift research, to shift perspectives on who in academia is traditionally considered an expert and knowledge holder, to learn the stories of Latinos who have been impacted positively by their exposure/interaction with Hip-Hop and to make those stories accessible to the community.

A Call For Change

We Are Adam

We are Adam. The homie, Mateo, wrote an op-ed piece in the Chicago Tribune which ended with those three words, “We Are Adam.” I started my dissertation writing about a study-
abroad trip. This experience shifted my perspective on culture and made me question things I still grapple with and have yet to answer. Due to the impact the trip had on me, I made it my dissertation topic. I finished my comprehensive exam last year. I wrote about study-abroad programming and the creation of identity within the lives of first-generation Latino students.

I received a text from my advisor asking to chat; I owed her pages, and I knew I was behind. She asked me to call her and so I did. She asked how I was doing and then got to the point; she inquired about my interest and passion concerning my dissertation topic and further asked if I wanted to switch back to my original Hip-Hop topic. Imposter syndrome kicked in: was my work that shitty? Maybe I was not meant to finish this Ph.D.; had I finally been discovered as an imposter not belonging in this space, did she finally realize I was not “smart” enough? I assured her I was on track with my study-abroad topic and did not want to switch. Realistically, I was going through the motions; I had committed time and was not about to change my topic; I wanted to finish. Before ending the conversation, she asked me a question, “Are you okay with not being known as a Hip-Hop scholar?” I immediately said yes, totally fine with it.

A few days after the conversation with my advisor, the video of Adam’s murder was released to the public. A bodycam video of the fatal shooting of a boy. Adam Toledo, a thirteen-year-old boy from Little Village, was shot and killed by a police officer. Another one. I watched the video at work after a meeting. I sat in my office, not knowing what I was about to watch and experience. I watched and cried. The image of Adam’s life disappearing before my eyes while the cop who just shot him asked if he was okay. I put my head down, hiding my tears, and immediately left work. So much pain. I have a little nephew, Pablo, who is the same age, thirteen years old. I grew up in Little Village, lived a block away from where Adam was shot. The
following days after the video was released, I received calls from former students asking to
process the situation. I reached out to my people, too. I had a conversation with Mateo; we were
in the same crew and had painted and run away from cops on several occasions, usually with
aerosol in our hands. A metal can that could have easily been mistaken for a gun.

Mateo had taken it upon himself to visually document the voices of our people. When the
pandemic hit, he focused on documenting the lives of our essential workers who did not have the
luxury of taking time off. Visuals capturing the strength in our Black and Brown community. It
was the community that came together in support of each other, with little to no assistance from
city officials, who at the time were ignoring our most vulnerable population. Mateo captured the
WE GOT US youth-led Covid-19 community response initiative, that responded to the 'hood’s
needs by providing food, masks and sanitizer when the city would not. Mateo documented Black
Lives Matters protests as Black and Brown communities came together, purposefully countering
the media coverage of color conflicts amidst citywide protests. When we first heard of Adam’s
fatal shooting, the media was once again victim blaming, accusing Adam’s mother of being
negligent. Why was he out at 2 a.m.? Mateo wrote an op-ed piece in the Chicago Tribune that
came out in the hours prior to the video being released. Not knowing yet what the video would
show, he, like many of us, understood this story was far too common and that the narrative
needed to change.

Adam Toledo is not a martyr. Adam’s life is the reflection of a reality experienced by
Black and Brown youth throughout our city every day. It’s a reality that conditions us to
internalize stigmas, glorify trauma and normalize violence instead of challenging the
systemic design of American oppression in our communities.

–Mateo (2021, TDM crew)
Over the past year, I have been consistently reminded of racial injustice in the U.S. It is a disease for which there is no vaccine. I feel outraged, frustrated, and sickened over the recent killings of Daunte Wright and Adam Toledo. I am also filled with the anxiety and fear that is felt across our communities. I hurt knowing that Adam will not fill out a college application, write a college essay, or walk across a graduating stage. Yet I must maintain and write, the complexity of knowing your community is hurting and you are producing work that is irrelevant.

*I ask myself, ‘am I making a difference for the community I come from? Do students where I grew up, have any better chance of graduating today than they did ten years ago? ‘I paused before going on, thinking about my family members and friends who never made it past high school and whether or not my work was widening and increasing the flow through the Chicana/o education pipeline. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001)*

Like Solorzano and Yosso, I realize now more than ever that I want my research to go beyond theory, to not sit in a database. I want it to be accessible to my community. The exploration of identity, education, and agency within the lives of Black and Brown students is research that can have a tremendous impact on our youth. However, it must first reach them. Between the black lines of literature and theory shines the possibility of a practical application of it all.

*I do not intend to sound condescending; I am not knocking professors or the profession. I am, however, rejecting the process which one has to go through to become a scholar, an academic. I am rejecting the white-prescribed process of this final test, the dissertation and what comes with it, a need to publish, present at conferences to talk about the dope work you do as a scholar. Yet the shorties in the neighborhood never hear about this research; it never impacts their lives, and the thing is that the research is often about them, the kids in our neighborhoods.*
As I was grinding, putting pen to paper, paying homage to the old scholars, citing them as best I could, I stopped and asked myself a simple question: “How am I different from a white anthropologist?”

As I engage in this dissertation process, am I not too exploiting my people through these pages, writing about their experience and testimonios, yet none would get to see it? At the end of the process, I would be finessing a job based on their lived experience. I realize that if we are to stop the cycle of oppression, we must make our voices/stories heard, and not in academic spaces but in our communities. We must look inward; by doing so, we are validating our cultural funds of knowledge. I debated continuing this journey, as what was the purpose of it all? I knew if I was to move forward, I needed to do it in way that honored my ancestors and centered my community. I decided to switch my topic and attempt to decolonize within my work the dissertation process. Aguilar (2018) states that the stories/narratives belong to people who have experienced them, and I agree. Yet very rarely do we hear those stories from the owners; we read about them from a scholar who has in one way or another colonized them and benefited from them. Through our project I aspire to have the reader/listener hear the testimonies directly from the source. Furthermore, I aim for the stories to be accessible beyond the walls of academia.

What I Am Not

“Are you ok with not being known as a Hip-Hop scholar?” The question lingered, reminded me of how far I had strayed from my community. It took me back to 2017, when I was on a mural tour with students. I had a white teacher ask if I “Hip-Hopped.” At the time I was working at a highly affluent school with only a seventeen percent Latino population. After covering a migration unit in History, a few white teachers thought it would be a good idea to go into the ’hood with eighty kids, out of which only twelve were Brown. They hired a company to
coordinate the trip to Pilsen, a predominantly Latino neighborhood. Pilsen was struggling, facing gentrification and the displacement of its Brown residents. This was not a good idea. A few Brown students asked me to tag along; from the jump I knew it was a bad idea; I said no, but after a couple more students approached me, I agreed. I knew my Brown students were feeling anxious about the trip. On the day of the trip, we were met outside the Mexican Museum of Fine Arts by a white guy who looked like he was going on an African expedition; the tour guide next to him was covering his face with sunscreen. That entire day was a mess.

I had just started my Ph.D. program and, in an attempt to connect with the white teacher who coordinated the trip, I had mentioned I was interested in doing research on students’ experiences with Hip-Hop. She replied by asking, “Do you Hip-Hop?” I was legit confused. I went through the process of explaining how I viewed Hip-Hop, what Hip-Hop represented and the impact it can have on Black and Brown students. I further explained what I wanted to do in terms of research. My words fell on deaf ears: at the end of our conversation she asked me to teach her class how to Hip-Hop dance.

Let’s not get it twisted; I am not a scholar, nor am I aiming to be one. My association with scholarship/academia and whiteness has left only a white logic definition of what it means to be a scholar. This is something I have yet to come to terms with. Why can’t a Brown man from Little Village take on the idea of being a scholar but not within white logic and white standards—is this not what I am aiming to do? Taking on the term despite my attempt to reframe it makes me uneasy. The term is oppressive, it carries the weight of educational inequities that have historically and systemically worked against Black and Brown bodies.

This statement is not an attempt to be “counter or anti”; truth be told, I admire most of my professors and the dope work I have read. But I am not them: I struggle with writing, not just
the process of citing dope scholars and forming a sophisticated argument based on theories, etc. I struggle with the mechanics of writing, simple things one learns in high school if one were to attend a school that teaches that stuff. Grammarly knows my struggles: passive voice, passive voice, passive voice. I still do not know what that is. Writing does not come naturally to me; combine that with my everlasting imposter syndrome, and you have a recipe for disaster.

The idea of a scholar as a label makes me cringe; “Hip-Hop scholar” is even less appealing. Nope, I am not an academic, and I am not a Hip-Hop scholar. As a matter of fact, I am not a good representation of Hip-Hop and the Hip-Hop culture—that is, if one is defining Hip-Hop through the narrow academic lens: the commodified version in which one must produce or take part in an element. I am no longer practicing any of the elements of Hip-Hop that every dissertation, book, and article reference when they generically start the discourse on the history and birth of Hip-Hop.

Writing aside, my struggle with the scholar label stems from what it means to be a scholar. Scholars, intellectuals, academics speak from a position of privilege, a powerful vantage point that is designed to “Other” those who do not have access to that privilege. I am not that. It is a contradiction, I know; after all, these words are written for a dissertation, and after all, I am privileged, I am pursuing a Ph.D., writing about Hip-Hop, and within this process, I am Columbusing Hip-Hop, taking on colonizing behavior following colonizing practices. But I refuse to write about Hip-Hop through the masters design.

I have struggled with academia over the last few months/years. I struggle with the idea of spending time in front of a computer writing my truth, things that have happened, that are currently happening in my community, things I have experienced. Writing about events and my
culture for the intellectuals seems futile; they are, after all, partially responsible for maintaining the disparities in education.

The so-called elite, the scholars, the academics, my soon-to-be peers, and gatekeepers who will soon judge my work, judge my culture through an irrelevant colonizing academic lens. Is Jorge’s “Hip-Hop” voice worthy of existing in our academic space? Did Chapter One clearly state the problem? Did his theoretical frame make sense? Did his literature review cite the right scholars? What is his contribution to the academy?

So, I ask myself, do I want to contribute to academia, or do I want to contribute to my community? I struggle with this process. Why explain it? Just like I struggle with who I frame as expert in this process of becoming an expert myself. Do I want to uphold the traditional white-logic assumption that you have to read traditional research scholars to become the expert? NO, I aim to reframe the process by which on becomes an “expert.” I aim to challenge the idea that knowledge found in research articles should take priority over elder knowledge and funds of knowledge. I seek not to help academics understand the problem but to assist in developing solutions for my community and in relation to improving the educational experience for Black and Brown children. Centering POSITIVITY and positive BROWN voices and testimonios, Hip-Hop is a culture that is not based on theoretical concepts as defined through white logic; it is a theory that is lived, it is storytelling as theorizing about the world. It was developed as a counter to colonization and oppression.

Hip-Hop is fluid. Hip-Hop is a reflection of self and one’s life. My Hip-Hop is community; it did not start in 1977 and it doesn’t require me to cite Chang, the go-to Hip-Hop “scholar” every Hip-Hop scholar cites in their dissertation. In the words of Mos Def:
People talk about Hip-Hop like it's some giant livin in the hillside

Comin down to visit the townspeople

We are Hip-Hop

Me, you, everybody, we are Hip-Hop

So Hip-Hop is going where we going

So the next time you ask yourself where Hip-Hop is going

Ask yourself: where am I going? How am I doing?

‘til you get a clear idea

So if Hip-Hop is about the people

And the Hip-Hop won’t get better until the people get better

Then how do people get better?

—Mos Def (1999, “Fear Not of Man”)

Mos Def’s quote centers Hip-Hop as a lived experience. Hip-Hop is not a mythical, out-of-reach ideology, Hip-Hop is experience. Citing scholars that write about Hip-Hop translates to a colonizing way of centering experts who finesse a story. Let us do things a bit differently and break away from the masters’ design. Let us rethink who the experts truly are in our Hip-Hop conversation. Let us center theory that is lived.

**What I Aim to Accomplish**

Disruption in the academy. Healing in my community. Stories for our community told not by me but by them. The U.S educational system is not designed to serve students of color. It is often left up to first-generation Latino students to navigate their education on their own. This means dealing with whitestream schooling, racist ideologies and an oppressive system all on their own. For first-generation Latino students of Mexican heritage, Hip-Hop can serve as a light
leading them out of the “Sunken Place,” a shield in resisting the aforementioned educational barriers. Hip-Hop aims to decolonize and reconnect students to ancestral knowledge and can serve as a form of awakening to a knowledge base they did not know they were missing. It can counter oppressive colonized educational experiences.

Through this study I aim to capture their testimonios and develop a product of their experience through the development of a podcast that aims to capture the collective experience of our youth and community members. Through this process I argue that identity as a form of resistance needs to be awakened in Latino youth at a much earlier age, as a means of understanding how the schooling system has colonized Latinos.

**Scan and Listen**

Accessibility is at the core of this project: knowledge being accessible to youth and community. Quick Response (QR) codes within the pages allow for accessing information quickly and easily; just scan-and-listen to each podcast (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Prelude to podcast.
The purposes of this project include:

1. "Our" Hip-Hop History: Testimonios on how we come to experience/understand/live our Hip-Hop culture.
   - Capture testimonios as my lit review: History of Hip-Hop as a lived experience told by those experiencing it

2. Hear “ME” talk: Testimonios—youths’ educational experience told by them.
   - Flip the script. While many scholars have written about the educational experiences of Latino youth, few have given them agency to tell their stories first-hand. Exploration of their educational experience

3. Dichos y Consejos: Testimonios on positivity.
   - Hip-Hop positivity: Testimonios told by those who have incorporated the Hip-Hip culture as way to navigate an oppressive educational system, knowledge holders who can share their learnings with our youth

I am Hip-Hop

I told you what I am not. Let me tell you what I am. I am Hip-Hop; and therefore, my history of Hip-Hop begins on December 22, 1981, the day I was born.

If the meek shall inherit the earth
And not the weak
Let me inherit the street, fuck it
I mean I love life man, you know what I mean
Life is beautiful, it’s just the shit in it that's fucked up
It's rough but it's fair
People gotta go out there and bust they, bust they ass for a job
I mean, my dad's got five kids, man and I mean you know

He hates drivin' a bus but he loves five kids

You feel me? -De La Soul (2009)

This track always reminds me of my pops and his sacrifice. He jumps out of the back of a truck and is dropped off in a foreign land. Lost and scared, he works tirelessly every day for eighteen months, saving all he can to bring his wife and two girls across the border. He has entered into a contract with the United States of America, his labor in exchange for the possibility of upward mobility. The grind surpasses any dream he might have had as a shorty; he dreams no longer for himself but for his kin, for his children. He is only twenty years old; he is my father.

I hop on the vehicle that is academia. I realize I am on this road because of his sacrifice. After completing each degree, I look back in my rearview mirror; my ancestors and their experiences seem to be fading. Their image and traditions keep getting smaller and smaller. After several miles on the road, I am close to reaching my destination, a terminal degree, a Ph.D. I look back once again; they, my ancestors, have all but vanished. This dissertation is a mile away, if I do it traditionally, I will reach my destination. However, I fear if I do, upon checking my mirror, I will no longer see my people. I stop, and I turn around. Let’s hop on this journey, fam. How can I honor you through this process? How can I serve my community? The only way I know how, by creating a work for the community and not academia.

In The Margin

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it
has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am author, I am authority, I am colonizer. (hooks, 1990)

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body (hooks, 1990). I could enter that world but I could not live there, in the center. Living in the center means no longer seeing the entire picture, no longer resisting. As I conclude my argument for seeking to counter conventional academic expectations, I turn to hooks. Marginality as hooks (1990) describes it is not a space of deprivation, it is a space of site, of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It is easy to become complacent in a space in which you are not meant to exist and one you have been able to infiltrate and shine in. Academia allows you to do that, join the masters, do as they have done in the past and join the ranks of intellectuals, the academics. Stop resisting.

As I look at the road that has gotten me to this space of utter contention, I am reminded of the past four years of my graduate program. Ten individuals with similar goals, a full Latino doctoral cohort. I have noticed these scholars, most especially those who named themselves radical critical thinkers, becoming complacent (hooks, 1990). They, my cohort, were willing, moving into the center and losing their margin, asking for permission to resist.

I recall a situation during the second year of my doctoral program. I was heavily penalized for missing a class to attend an event at Illinois State University, my institution. That semester, the professor whose course I skipped had within her syllabus a mandated assignment that required us to write our testimonio as a chapter in a book she would publish. She pitched the idea as a favor to us, a way for us to get published, and to sweeten the deal she selected our eldest senior cohort member as a co-author. It was during this incident that I realized some of them were no longer willing to meet me in that space, in the margin. They met me at the
center. I was shocked and disappointed by their willingness to publish a book and be taken advantage of, used, whored for academia. A blind vote was taken, to decide whether to publish or not. I did not participate. I openly stated I would not write the chapter. The professor, despite my notifying her I would be missing class, penalized me for resisting, and gave me a final grade of D. I turned to the department chair, only to be told that I needed to play the game. To my regret, I took his advice, emailed the professor, and was given an additional assignment. I submitted a forty-page paper and earned a humiliating B.

I lost myself for a letter grade, a turning point in my academic career. It fucked me up. I promised myself I would do things differently. I stopped seeking to fit the mold of academia, purposefully not presenting at or attending conferences and isolating myself from my cohort.

hooks (1990) asserts that marginality is something that we, the oppressed, should not lose or give up but cling to because it nourishes our capacity to resist. This marginality comes from lived experiences; those experiences follow us and inform the way we see the world.

I understand that I have chosen a path that places me at the center; a doctoral degree, education, administration. However, my identity is one that will forever remain in the margins. While my formal education has allowed me to exist in the center, my lived experience and the experience of my ancestors, which I carry with me, will keep me grounded in the margins and remind me of the whole. I listened to a podcast recently in which a Latino teacher described his inability to feel accepted and often feeling uncomfortable in his school. He described lacking the bravado and sense of ownership and belonging that his white colleagues carried so lightly as they entered a space. Those words resonate with me. During this process I am choosing to write from the margins and to stay
there, purposefully not wanting to feel like I belong in this center of academia. Marginality as a site of resistance, enter the space, meet me there (hooks, 1990).
SECOND ELEMENT: NUESTROS MAESTROS

Throughout the process of developing this project and recording testimonios, I have come to learn that I am not the sole proprietor of a complicated educational journey. Our education as first-generation Latino students is vast and in fact complicated, but it is also unique and beautiful. It was not until I revisited the testimonios that I saw a correlation between my testimonio and the testimonios that were shared via The Latino Underground. I realized we have four sets of teachers—our parents, formal education, our ’hood, and Hip-Hop—each working in its own way to shape or in some cases eliminate our identity (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 illustrates how all four experiences contribute to the educational development of a Latino student. I learned very early in my life that schools are sites of power and privilege. What I did not realize is that formal education could be countered by other educators in life. My parents were my first and greatest teachers. I remember falling in love with the idea of education from the conversations I had with my mother. It was she who made sure we did not lose our native tongue. Despite her desire to want me to learn English, once she noticed the assimilation kicking in, she took action. En la casa se habla espanol, y en la casa yo soy su maestra (Amada 1985). She taught me how to read and write in Spanish; she would give me weekly vocabulary quizzes and would not allow me to play until I reached ninety percent mastery. My father, in my eyes, developed the concept of growth mindset so commonly talked about as a “new” idea in education. Nothing was ever impossible for him; things just took longer to figure out. Jorge (1997) would consistently say, “Todo tiene solucion, menos la muerte.” For a child to be comfortable with making mistakes at an early age is golden. As children we learn from what we see, and my parents showed me what it means to be educado and what it means to be culturally grounded.
Figure 3. The four teachers of Latino students.
**Mi Testimonio**

Formal education has afforded me economic stability, but it has also generated trauma. Existing in academic spaces was often isolating and uncomfortable. Little Village, my ’hood, taught me kindness, it taught me about the value in community. It taught me what it means to belong to a place, to have a home. Hip-Hop was the conduit to bring all my educators together in forming a critical lens; it was an educator liberator. The next sections will focus on my *testimonio* as a road map to identify all four sets of educators in the life of a first-generation Latino student.

**Part 1: Ancestral Knowledge**

*Soy una raya en el mar*
*Fantasma en la ciudad*
*Mi vida va prohibida*
*Dice la autoridad*
*Solo voy con mi pena*…

-Manu Chao

As I jam to Manu Chao’s “Clandestino,” a few things come to mind: my father’s sacrifice, his decision to migrate, his experience in a new country, and how different life would be for me had he not migrated. The migrant journey is filled with pain and sacrifice, hope and resilience. This experience transcends the individual and has lasting effects on future generations. As the son of Mexican immigrants, I have experienced the complexity of planting roots in foreign soil. A loss of identity, never genuinely belonging, longing for cultural knowledge, and enduring forceful assimilation.

My father, Jorge, emigrated from Mexico during the mid 70’s. He left my mom and two sisters behind. He was only nineteen years of age. Wait, is that the first thing I want the reader to know about my father? While he did emigrate, that is just a small part of his journey, and
probably a less important one. Why start here; is it my inability to go deeper and stay on this academic track, thus positioning myself in a familiar category of “first-generation”? Or am I just scared of being vulnerable? Scratch that; let me try again. My dad, Jorge, did not have a father to model fatherhood after and yet he was always there for his kids. He was raised by Elija and Amado, his aunt and her husband. My dad fucked up more times than I can remember but did a great job with his kids overall; we were never hungry and always had a roof over our head. This is better, but I am still not doing him justice. Let’s try this instead.

Actualmente soy decano de estudiantes en una secundaria; después de las clases, cuando la mayoría de los estudiantes han abandonado el edificio, me dirijo a mi despacho. Casi todos los días me encuentro con Mario, nuestro custodio nocturno, y cada vez que me lo encuentro, me detengo y digo: "Como estamos, Mario", seguido de un apretón de manos y una pequeña conversación. Mario me recuerda a mi viejo, a mi padre, es un hombre mayor mexicano de compleción oscura. De vez en cuando, nos encortáramos con un profesor blanco en el pasillo, me ven de lejos y al acercarse me dicen: "¿Qué tal?". O dan esa sonrisa apretada.

A pesar de que Mario esta a mi lado y tiene una fuerte presencia física, el es ignorado, en realidad es invisible para mis compañeros blancos, es transparente para ellos.

Esto me retrotrae a mi infancia. Mis padres me golpeaban en la nuca por ser un maleducado. Durante este proceso de "educación", mi padre o mi madre corrigan mi incapacidad de saludar a nuestros invitados, a lo que seguía una llamada de atención: "¡Jorge! Saluda!".

Hace poco le conté a mi padre lo de Mario, a lo que mi padre respondió: "¡Salúdelos, mijo siempre salúdelos!".
Así que cada tarde, a la salida del colegio, le digo: "Buenas tardes Mario, como estamos ahora". Me di cuenta de lo que realmente quería decir mi padre. Muchas de las lecciones de mis padres tenían que ser analizadas más allá de las palabras que decían.

Recordé haber aprendido nuestra tradición mexicana de saludar a la gente cuando uno entra en una habitación. En mi familia mexicana, mis padres me enseñaron a ser "bien educado" saludando a las personas que ya estaban en una habitación cuando uno entra. La tradición pone la responsabilidad de la persona que llega a saludar a los que ya están allí. Si no seguía la corrección de norma para los niños, una palmada en la espalda y la no tan sutil pablabras: "¡Saluda!".

Sin embargo, muchos de mis colegas blancos a lo largo de los años siguieron una tradición de ignorancia diferente. "Maleducados", como los llamaba mi abuela. En este caso, mi padre quiso decir mucho más cuando afirmó "¡Salúdelos, mijo siempre salúdelos!", al utilizar una versión plural de saludar, supe que se refería a algo más que a mi situación con Mario (Sanchez, 1987). Era verdadera "educación", mi padre hablaba del reconocimiento de nuestra gente y del trabajo de nuestros pueblos, hablaba de humildad. Quería que los reconociera, no sólo a Mario, sino a toda mi gente, que siempre reconociera a nuestra gente.

Yes this feel right.

Mi lengua natal es Español. Mi madre y padre hablan Español, como hijo de inmigrantes de la tierra de Puebla México, mi historia comienza con mi lengua natal. El Ingles fue fruto de el sistema educativo estadounidense. Mi primera escuela fue una de cariño y ternura. Mis maestros no tenía diplomas universitarios ni tenía noción de pedología educativa. No avían leído libros de
temas sobre navegar una clase. Mis primeros maestros fueron mis padres. Mi papá con una educación formal de sexto año y mi madre con educación de prepa. Mi historia comienza con ellos. Y mi educación fue uno de cuentos, dichos, y ejemplos.

Hay veces que el pato nada y a veces que ni agua bebe.

Significado:
Este dicho significa que hay momentos en la vida que te puedes encontrar en situaciones de mucha abundancia y en otros momentos en situaciones de mucha escasez.

Mi padre se crió prácticamente solo. Su padre biológico era un hombre rico, tenía muchas tierras en Puebla. Estaba casado en el momento de dejar embarazada a mi abuela. Mi abuela trabajaba para él en el campo de mi abuelo, era su empleada. El embarazo no fue previsto, mi abuela era simplemente “la otra.” Mi papá fue criado por su tía y su esposo, él se refería a ellos como mamá y papá, su madre biológica trabajaba y murió en un incendio cuando mi papá tenía ocho años. Aunque vivía con su tía, era bastante independiente. No tuvo una vida fácil, fue criado por un tío alcohólico y una tía estricta, sin hijos a su alrededor. Mi padre anhelaba tener una relación con su padre biológico, anhelaba tener relaciones con sus hermanos. Emigró a Estados Unidos a los 19 años dejando a mi madre y a su hija de un año. Tuvo dos trabajos y pudo traerlas a estados unidos un año después. Mis valores proceden de su lucha. Fue un modelo de trabajo duro, nunca faltó al trabajo, siempre con dos empleos. Mi padre padecía de dolor en sus rodillas por muchos años y prolongó las cirugías porque no podía permitirse el lujo de tener tiempo libre. A pesar de estar cansado, siempre encontraba tiempo para ayudar a la gente.

Yo fui criado en Chicago, en el barrio de La Villita, una comunidad de inmigrantes mexicanos. No había privilegios, no había vergüenza en vender chicles. El elotero y el tamalero
eran ejemplos de trabajo duro y recordatorios de por qué nuestra gente vino a esta tierra. El vecino que caminaba con seis niños, incluyéndome a mí, era un ejemplo de una comunidad que se cuidaba mutuamente. Estábamos todos juntos en la lucha y todos entendíamos que teníamos que cuidarnos unos a otros. Como los emigrantes suelen dejar atrás a su familia, su comunidad se convierte en su sistema de apoyo.

A pesar de haber crecido en la pobreza, yo no era pobre siempre tenía amor comida y un techo. Mi padre tenía dos trabajos y vivíamos de semana a semana, el siempre ayudaba y enviaba dinero a México.

Recuerdo que un día fui a comprar zapatos como premio por haber sacado buenas calificaciones. Mi papá me había prometido un par de zapatos de marca si sacaba buenas calificaciones. Todos los zapatos que yo tenía eran bartos de la tienda Venture, así que me aseguré de sacar calificaciones sobresalientes ese trimestre. Antes de irnos a la tienda, un amigo de mi padre vino a verlo. Su Amigo había perdido su trabajo y necesitaba dinero. Mi padre le prestó a su amigo algo de dinero. Yo estaba muy enfadado; sabía que no iba a recibir mis zapatos de marca. Mi padre vio lo enfadado que estaba, me apartó y me dijo: "Hay veces que nada el pato, y ay veces que ni agua bebe." Mi padre trabajo un turno extra para poder pagar la renta ese mes, su amigo nunca le pagó y eso no impidió que mi padre ayudara al siguiente. Cuando se ha luchado y se ha vivido en la pobreza se entiende la necesidad de los vecinos, nuestra comunidad entendió la lucha. Hay una línea muy fina entre tener y no tener, lo entiendo y es por él que no puedo encarnar la fanfarronería de mis compañeros blancos. Mi padre me ha encollando a ser humilde.

Mi madre, a diferencia de mi padre, creció en un hogar con mucho ambiente. Era una de once hijos, uno murió a los nueve meses. Y mi tía murió hace dos semanas. Descansa en el poder.
Tía Emilia. Mi abuela creó a sus hijos sola. Mi madre siempre tuvo responsabilidades de adulto, a los ocho años ella se levantaba a las cinco de la mañana para hacer el jamonsillo. Era un trabajo duro para una niña de ocho años pero todos tenían que coperar para que la familia subresaliera. Su hermana menor tenía que cocinar, la hermana mayor tenía que limpiar, todos tenían un trabajo, otros tenían que ir a vender agua fresca. Mi madre nunca tuvo la oportunidad de jugar cuando era niña.

Mi madre tiene una muñeca que me asusta. Se parece a Annabelle de las películas de horror. Le encanta esa muñeca, fue la única muñeca que ella tuvo durante su infancia. Su hermano mayor se fue a Ciudad de México a los catorce años, allí trabajó en la cocina y acabó ascendiendo a chef. Fue una migración que le permitió ayudar a mi abuela y finalmente regalarle a mi mamá su única muñeca. A una edad muy temprana mi madre ya contribuía a los ingresos del hogar. Mi abuela era una madre soltera con diez hijos que alimentar. Todas las historias que me contaba mi madre de su juventud consistían en trabajar. Ella nunca pudo salir con mi padre en forma de una cita. Cuando conocí a tu padre yo vendía agua fresca (Sanchez, 1989). Cada vez que llegaba un circo a la ciudad era nuestra mayor temporada de ventas, así que teníamos que estar allí desde las cinco de la mañana hasta que cerraban todas las atracciones, muchas veces pasada la medianoche. Lo más duro que se puede imaginar es ver a otros jóvenes divertirse, querer unirse a ellos y divertirse uno mismo y no poder hacerlo (Sanchez, 1989). Esta fue la infancia y adolescencia de mi madre, año tras año. Cuando conoció a mi padre le contaba la historia de cómo él se pasaba por su puesto, "una vez estaba tan desesperado por querer pasar el rato conmigo que me dijo que te compraría toda el agua y lo hizo y cuando mi madre pasó por allí vio que mi agua se había acabado en su mayor parte, ella preparó más agua para que yo la vendiera, así era mi madre, siempre estaba trabajando". Mi
madre siempre tuvo un fuerte deseo de ir a la escuela. La posibilidad de una carrera en México no era una opción para ella. Si naces en una familia pobre en México debes empezar a trabajar desde muy joven; tu familia dependía de ello. La carrera de mi madre fue la de Agua Fresquera.

Algunas de mis mayores lecciones vinieron por la historia. Cuando era pequeño, antes de empezar la escuela, acompañaba a mi madre a dejar a mis hermanas en la escuela, no en el autobús, sino en una caminata de cinco kilómetros o treinta minutos. Mientras acompañaba a mi hermana a la escuela, ella me hablaba de su deseo de estudiar y de sus sueños de convertirse en enfermera. Las presiones económicas y las responsabilidades familiares no le permitían cumplir su sueño personal. Se desarrolló un nuevo sueño, quería que sus hijos tuvieran las oportunidades que ella no pudo tener, la posibilidad de ir a la escuela. "no seas un burro como yo mio" palabras que ella constantemente me decía. No sabía que ella y sus historias se convertirían en mi mayor inspiración e mi base para el amor al aprendizaje.

Part 2: Formal Schooling

I dozed off while reading and told myself, I’ll settle for a B or a C. I needed sleep. But did mother or father choose sleep over a better future for you?
I kept reading. Kept on writing. Kept on reading. Kept on writing. Sleep can wait. Sleep can wait. Doing it for them is doing it for myself.
–Child of Immigrants, 2017

I read these words a few years back; it hit home. The quote defines my educational journey in some ways. Despite feeling no connection to the educational system, the academic commitment and grind were always about my parents, a way to honor their struggle.

While my parents were my first teachers who instilled the fundamental cultural knowledge passed from generation to generation, my formal education would have a different impact on my life. For children of migrant parents, education is considered the only way out of poverty—upward social mobility; this was the case in my household. While formal education
affords better opportunities, there is also the cost of assimilation and cultural genocide. In addition, education can often be traumatic for students growing up in an urban setting. While recording the podcast, I started each segment with one initial question: When did you become aware of the inequities within our educational system? I believe that for a Latino experiencing American schooling, it is not a matter of IF they will face education oppression/racism but a matter of WHEN and to what extreme. All of the participants had an incident they quickly defined, and it typically happened in elementary school. For me, two particular situations marked my educational trajectory, and both were negatively impactful in my life. The first experience happened in elementary school during the first grade: I did not speak English and was placed in a monolingual class. The second was an educator’s deficit mindset: I was told I was not college material. Both traumatizing events in my educational trajectory and life.

Growing up in an urban setting has many obstacles; the complexity is magnified when you do not speak the dominating language. My parents were straight from the motherland, Mexico; they did not speak English, neither did I.

I saw my parents constantly struggle, my father with burns on his hands from the hot melt of a recent weld, my mother waking up at three a.m. to work day after day. Her soft feminine hands quickly turned into rough, scabbed instruments of labor. Working hard day after day, making daily scarifies without a single complaint. My educational journey started in a bilingual class with Ms. Vera, a kind Cuban teacher who would be great for us with a "Buenos dias, amigos."

In the United States the Spanish language is often commonly associated with a demonized Mexican national identity (Pimentel, 2011). Pimentel (2011) argues that since Mexican American parents have experienced this racism and linguicism themselves, they often
do not want their children to relive these experiences—thus choosing not to teach their children Spanish or, in my case, to learn English as quickly as possible.

My mother’s strong desire to shield me from facing discrimination compelled her to have me learn "el ingles" as soon as possible. She did not want her kids to face the barriers and limitations she did to language. I recall her often being scared of venturing beyond our local neighborhood. Her fear stemmed from getting lost on the bus and not being able to find her way home. She would spend her days within walking distance of our apartment. When she did have to venture and navigate a long trip, she always cross-referenced the bus routes with the comadre, tia, and vecina. My mother’s desire to have me learn English would incite my first academic challenge.

Negative educational experience number one: I was placed in a monolingual class in first grade; I didn’t know one single word of English. My teacher, Ms. Patrick, was a tall young white woman. She quickly grew flustered with me and often ignored me. I was given a coloring book in the second week of school, and for what seemed like an entire year, I was put in the corner and told to color only, participating in minimal events. The teacher saw my inability to speak her language as a deficit; I was soon forgotten in class, often ignored, and labeled the slow kid. My first encounter with my oppression had occurred without me knowing. For a shorty, being segregated does a job on one’s self-esteem. I was the dumb kid—the kid who couldn’t speak English and thus could not participate in the class. I blamed my native tongue, Spanish; consequently, the assimilation process began. Kids who made fun of me ostracized me; others took pity and gave me instruction, translating a few words here and there. Somehow, I adapted. The damage was done; Ms. Patrick had made me fear school, have no friends, dislike education and hate my native tongue. Good looking out, Ms. Patrick.
I learned the language and academically figured things out. However, I often felt out of place in school; I didn’t see teachers of color. I couldn’t relate to my teachers. My grades were excellent throughout eighth grade, yet I settled for the local high school and did not bother applying to better schools; I did not know-how. Farragut was the neighborhood high school; it was overcrowded, plagued with violence, and lacked educational resources. As you entered the school you were greeted by metal detectors and backpack scanners. The long lines resembled an airport gate, but we weren’t traveling, we were entering what felt like a detention center. Upon passing the metal detectors you encountered police officers and hall monitors both telling you to move. It is my fundamental belief that a school should be the pillar of the community it serves; Farragut was not that.

It was straight out of a scene from Dangerous Minds. You know, that corny-ass movie with Michelle Pfeiffer teaching while wearing a leather jacket, reaching the troubled kids, convincing them to change their ways, saving their lives all in a two-hour span. That was Farragut, except no white savior was taking on a mission of saving the poor Brown kids. Teachers did not give a fuck. I did not care either; I was a tough young kid trying to mimic the characters of Blood In Blood Out; glorified gangbangers were turning into my idols. During my first day of school, a rumble erupted in the lunchroom, plastic trays used as weapons; my mind was racing, and I knew I had made a mistake. I never ate lunch in the lunchroom again; instead, I would go to the library and play chess, which I had learned to play the previous year. I was scared of getting jumped; no longer was I worried about popularity; I was trying to survive. I traded in my Dickies for some slacks; I grew my hair out and would purposely not comb it. I did everything possible to be seen as a weirdo, I figured if I was a weirdo, I couldn’t be confused as a gangbanger. That shit did not work; I got jumped on December 20th. I remember that date
because it was two days before my birthday. My father never said anything to me, but he noticed I was unhappy and plotted quietly. Finally, after freshman year, my dad pulled some strings and got me into Curie. My life changed; Curie was my salvation; my father had come through once again.

Growing up in the ’hood limited my options. You cannot be neutral on a moving train; you either join a gang for protection or get jumped for riding solo. I would soon discover a third option, Hip-Hop. Hip-Hop saved my life; it allowed me to have a different outlet. Gangbangers didn’t fuck with Hip-Hop heads. They did not see us a threat and often asked writers for paint or help with their gang-related tags. On a deeper level, Hip-Hop magnified my voice and provided a way to express the frustration of urban poverty and a lack of representation within the school environment.

Negative educational experience number two: I was a good student but not the traditional “model student” during my time at Curie. I owed my parents good grades, and I kept a consistent 3.7 GPA. Hip-Hop, however was my passion; it was my identity, I became SNAP and joined the TDM crew. The Too Dam Much crew, the Toys Don’t Matter crew. I chose the name SNAP because it stood for someone who was doing dope work; also, those were the only letters I knew how to write. TDM as a crew had been around since the mid-80s. After most of the original members entered adulthood, the crew died down. In the mid-90s, my friend Cheeba’s uncle was the last member of the crew; he gave Cheeba permission to take over the crew. I was one of the first four new members tasked with bringing TDM back to its glory days. TDM and Hip-Hop gave me a sense of belonging and became my vehicle of expression. I cut class and started painting consistently.
My demeanor was not appealing to counselors. It was the late 90s; I was wearing Timbs and Wu-wear; they were not fucking with my drip. College was never mentioned to me. I saw my friends applying. I mustered enough courage to go to the counselor’s office and ask for help. When I inquired, I was asked if I had a job. I had two jobs, as I was saving up for a car; I worked at Checkers and Taco Bell. The white counselor looked at me and said, ”You might want to consider making that your career; YOU ARE NOT COLLEGE MATERIAL.” To the counselors and teachers, I was a statistic, another Latino teen that was not going to college. I believed her; after all, she was the subject-matter expert. Having no notion of how the higher education system worked and having an expert tell you that you are not college material, then the only viable choice was the military. The Army sucked. Good looking out, Ms. Jerblanski.

**Part 3: Little Village**

*La Villita,* Little Village, home. The old saying goes, home is where the heart is, and my heart never left my ’hood. My ’hood serves as my third teacher. Little Village is part of the South Lawndale community area that demographically is comprised of Black and Brown. Chicago is a segregated city. The Little Village neighborhood is no different and is predominantly Brown and is full with Mexican culture. Before it was known as “La Villita,” Little Village saw an influx of German, Czech, and Polish immigrants following the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. At that time, many people worked in the nearby factories, and it has been a working-class community ever since.

Carrillo (2016) introduces the concept of “home” as further affirmation of the value of culture and identity; he states that home is not only a physical space connected to a student’s working-class roots but also a psychic, emotional, spiritual, and cultural metaphor that serves as a life-orientation connection. My neighborhood is filled with contradictions. While the violence
was a product of gang activity, the gangbangers also looked out for the children, often playing the role of big brother. Aesthetically, Little Village is vibrant with bright colors and murals. However, Little Village is also home to the Cook County Jail, one of the largest jails in the United States. It is within those contradictions that I was able to learn life lessons on kindness and survival.

As a child, I moved around a lot. When I was in third grade, my parents purchased a property, causing us to move during a snowy winter. They bought the property directly behind my school. I would leave my house through my alley, and I would be at school in a matter of minutes.

When I was in fourth grade, my older sister, who was a junior in high school at the time, ran away. She left with her boyfriend. I got home after school and found a letter outside our door; I opened it and read. She stated she could no longer be home; she wrote me a few sentences stating that she would miss me dearly. She was my homie, my first friend. It was mid-March; I know this because it was report card pickup. My dad was supposed to get out of work early, and I went with him to school to pick up my report card. I was to come home, shower, and change. I had to go because I served as his interpreter; in the past, I hated this task, but this time I was excited because I knew I had done well in school, and I knew my teachers would say good shit about me. He arrived an hour after I did. I gave him the note. He read it in front of me; he walked away once he was done. I followed and asked if he still wanted to get my report card. He looked at me with confusion and asked if I had read the letter and if I knew the context of the letter. I said yes. He sighed and told me to get my jacket. We got my report card but spoke to no teachers; when we returned home, he immediately poured himself a glass of *tequila* and lit a cigar. He was getting ready to tell my mom the news. She would soon be home; he instructed me
to play outside. I have not thought or talked about this moment in a long time; as I write about it, I am tearing up. Shit. The pain is still there. I would not see my sister for a month. She ran away and was not looking to be found. My house was a mess; my mom was depressed and blamed my father. I felt alone.

What I remember is going to my playground. That playground was our football field, baseball field, basketball court, and boxing ring. I cried there, got punched for the first time, and escaped there when things got tough. That day, the day my sister ran away, it was my playground that consoled me. It was my community that fed me, and it was they who would check in on us during the following days. I would spend endless hours in the place I called my playground in the weeks after. Figure 4 illustrates this special, beautiful place that is filled with countless memories and lessons.

**Part 4: Hip-Hop**

That's why when you talk the tough talk I never feel ya
You sound real good and you play the part well
But the energy you givin off is so unfamiliar
I don’t feel ya! (We need something realer! Ohh!)
–Jay Electronica

Jay Electronica speaks on MCs being generic and unoriginal; to me, however, his words are applicable to academia, to teachers. His words illustrate my feelings through a K-12 public education journey. I have come to realize that Hip-Hop did in fact save my life; that is a fact. What I didn’t know is that it also served as a teacher in my life. Hip-Hop was the conduit to bring all my educators together in forming a critical lens, it was liberatory education. Hip-Hop was therapy for us who needed it after fucked-up educational experiences but couldn’t afford it. I found Hip-Hop early in my high school days. Nope, scratch that: Hip-Hop found me long before that. I read my first poem at the playground.
Figure 4. My playground.
In the land of Confusion:
Pushers lie
Junkies cry
Cops try
Suckers die
–Riddle BTB

I found out not too long ago that the mural shown in Figure 5 was commissioned by the school’s principal, Mr. Crow. It would remain unbuffed for twenty years. Riddle was a respected writer. In Little Village, he was mentor to a lot of writers and was the leader of the BTB crew (Born to Bomb). BTB was the biggest crew in our neighborhood, and Riddle’s piece behind the school was the first to be anywhere near a school building. That carried a certain level of respect. In the ’hood, this was our artwork and we roamed our museum on a daily basis. High school was difficult, not in the academic sense but in the identity sense. I found my way in form of a crew, TDM. My best friend and I joined the crew, both of us choosing our writer’s name. I would become SNAP and he would become ARES. We share a Hip-Hop story.

Figure 5. BTB reaper by Riddle, Rowski.
Sophomore year of high school I met Alex or Ares, the god of war, the name chosen by a sixteen-year-old kid from the South Side of Chicago. Alex (Ares) was a first-in-family college-bound student. The dude was smart, and I recall him having all honors classes. His family reflected most of the families I grew up around—they were migrants from Mexico looking for a better life in America. Like most of the people I grew up with, we struggled economically; like my parents, both of his parents worked. However, his parents were never around. In the ’hood there are levels of poverty and Ares’s family always struggled to pay rent and buy food. His parents worked long hours, which often meant he was on his own. His dad was a factory worker; his mom worked at a laundromat.

Like me, Alex hit the books hard and did well in school. During senior year of high school, his old man lost his job, and Ares had to get a job to help his family. His grades started dropping. He was stressing; he needed cash for the light bill, college applications, food, and the occasional blunt to help him maintain. He could not talk to counselors, so instead he spit his thoughts to the cat next to him, the cat looking out for him while he painted a wall, train, or water tower. Like me, Ares could not relate to or get help from his teachers; they were often the cause of his stress. However, his crew, and the cat who helped him cut the barbwire fence, always had his back. Like me, his inner balance came from an aerosol can, a can full of pressure, just like him; the release came in the form of resistance, illegal art, or a cry of desperation.

Ares never attended college and never even applied. His identity was never validated inside the walls of school. Despite us finding Hip-Hop as a voice of expression, it only existed on the outside, on the margins. I too did not apply to college; however, our lives took different paths. Whereas I enlisted in the military, he started hustling, first selling dimes (weed) and soon moving to weight (cocaine). Ares eventually got caught and ended up serving time in prison.
While he was in prison, I was in school. I never visited or wrote him. My best friend, I had forgotten about him. Life moved on; I landed my first job in advertising then transitioned to education. He got out during my first year as a teacher, called me up, and stated he wanted to go to school and become an architect. We agreed to meet up but never did; he died a few months later—his mother found him on their kitchen floor with a needle in his arm. How different would life have been for Ares if his Hip-Hop identity would have been validated.

During my time in high school, ninety percent of the time I painted, I painted with Ares. You have to trust the guy next to you; your life depends on it. Before going on a mission Ares and I had a ritual. We would get to our spot, park our car, play Wu-Tang’s “Liquid Swords” and listen to it fully; we would gather our gear and throw our black hoodies on. It was a way of mustering up some strength as we knew we would be approaching a dangerous situation. I still find myself listening to “Liquid Swords” before a job interview or a big presentation, and somehow, I know Ares has my back. I no longer paint as much, but Ares gets up with me every time I get up, whether it be paint, scribe, or labels. Hip-Hop allowed me to survive. It was not a high-school phase; I am forty years old and still putting up labels, resisting, and still wanting my voice to be heard (see Figures 6 and 7).

Writers are often motivated by fame and ego, the pleasure of leaving behind a tag, or the excitement of doing something dangerous and illegal. While those things are part of writing, they do not capture the complete picture. There are risks involved when practicing the graffiti element; after all, we are painting at night, breaking into properties, and climbing things that are not meant to be climbed. There is a real danger in painting: falling from high ledges, being chased by the police, and crossing gang territories. However, there is an accepted level of risk because our need is to be heard, our voice is important, and we must resist. I share my testimonio
Figure 6. ARES/SNAP decal.
Figure 7. Getting up with Ares.
as a universal story and a reflection of our educational system. My testimonio is a representation of the testimonios of many Brown kids in urban areas, kids who are attending shitty schools with shitty teachers. Our parents instill our cultural/ancestral knowledge; formal education works hard to rip it away and assimilate us. Our ’hood allows us to escape and provides the space to exist. Hip-Hop enables us to resist and express our frustrations.
THIRD ELEMENT: WE ARE HIP-HOP

In order to effective, with your words you must be selective
Cause showin and provin is the Prime Directive
Movin those who are outdated with vernaculated thought, so
Every time I take a turn MC's take a loss
My point across, I gotta get to where I want to be
As the wickedest public speaker since '73
Or '74, which was the year I first touched ground
As the physical manifestation of sight and sound
So gather 'round, to hear the profound brown vomiter
Absorb the sonic energy manifestin through your monitor
The livin proof, I make the truth sound clear…
–Mr. Man, 1997

As a writer style is everything; one’s style must be unique so as to not be considered a toy (bad artist). An MC’s flows have to be tight, they have to be “effective” and purposeful. Mr. Man (1997) spits bars on this, stating that he wishes to be purposeful in thought, evolving oneself, and eliminating outdated thought. In that sense this is what I, in a small way, wish to do: rethink and reevaluate the outdated dissertation process.

A traditional dissertation has five chapters: Chapter I: Introduction, Chapter II: Review of Literature, Chapter III: Methodology, Chapter IV: Results, Chapter V: Summary, Implications, Discussion. Before I continue, I want to address the elephant in the room. It is imperative to recognize that qualitative research has a reputation for being less reliable and/or trustworthy; add to the mix, a cat doing a podcast, pushing against the traditional written monograph. Yo, if as a reader, that is what you are looking for, I’ll save you the trouble, fam, you will not find it here, at least not in the traditional sense. That is the whole point of this project. But if that’s really what you need to make sense of my work, maybe this isn’t for you.

What is the purpose of a dissertation? Some might argue it is an assessment. A way to assess writing competencies, assess the researcher’s ability to write academically. I have failed, I seek not to write academically. Can I write academically? I sure hope so, but why must I cater
my knowledge to white logic? The process is colonizing, centering research articles as acceptable knowledge and dismissing ancestral/communal knowledge. Colonizing in that I must be objective in my role as a researcher. I must learn from my community, take their stories, write about them in my academic voice and then feed it back to the academic circle in a nice little publication. Why must this colonizing assessment be upheld?

Another component of the dissertation is the literature review. Allow me to attempt to explain via metaphor. A literature review can be thought of as a conversation that is happening that you as the researcher are entering. Imagine, if you may, there is a set (party) happening to which you arrive late; the guests have for hours been talking about carrots (that is what wealthy white people talk about at parties). You come in, join the conversation and state, “Carrots are orange.” No, my dude, that conversation has been had, in addition to which John Johnson made that point earlier. Give John his credit for making that remarkable discovery. However, what if, when joining the conversation, you are like, “I recognize you have been talking about carrots for a minute and appreciate all you have contributed to allow others to understand carrots, but have y’all ever actually eaten a carrot? And not just a carrot by itself but a carrot that’s been mixed with some caldo de res (Mexican specialty) or chiles en vinager (Carrots with pickled jalapeños)? Some carrots cannot be talked about, because to truly understand them, they have to be experienced and it is within that experience that a new discourse exists. Beyond that, it is also about the carrots cooked in that caldo de res or chiles en vinager–’cause it’s the culture and flavor that make all the difference. It is a totally different discourse that does not connect by simply talking about carrots by themselves. Moreover, it is the person who is experiencing the carrot who can best explain it.” Carrot = Hip-Hop.
Analysis is another component of the dissertation. Chapter Four in a dissertation is typically the analysis chapter where one discusses and summarizes a mass of information to answer the research questions, tests the hypotheses, examines the foreshadowed problems, and explores the conjectures. This is typically the part of the project where I would start coding the interviews with a purpose to come up with developing themes as a way of looking at similarities across stories. I would analyze the themes through theoretical frames and write my truth based on the lived experience of others. I would cite the shit out of scholars because my lens would not be good enough; it has to be validated by those who came before me despite the fact that most of them looked nothing like me or understood culturally the experience as a collective. So, I am doing things differently.

As the podcast segments were created, the analysis was taking place; I had to make sense of how the stories were to be represented. Every testimonio has a different flow and every storyteller is unique. They all have different ways of disclosing information. During the editing process I had to make sure their story was understood and that their voice was never lost. This at times meant the shifting of conversation to fit a chronological order so that the listener could follow. I was a passionate collaborator in the process. I would argue the analysis process originated from the inception of the first conversation when the participant was asked if they wanted to share their Hip-Hop story. As the conversations developed, I made organic decisions that positioned the conversations in a manner that would garner future learnings for our youth. These podcast counter-stories are special in that they are directly represented and heard from the storyteller. Together, we brought forth knowledge that would otherwise not be shared. What follows is nine stories, each with its own lit review fully analyzed. Table 1 outlines the stories and their release dates.
### Podcast Information

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<td>Introduction to Project</td>
<td>10/11/21</td>
<td>18 min</td>
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<td>10/20/21</td>
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The Return

Figure 8. The Return QR code.

Figure 9. The Return cover.
INTRO: Bienvenidos, welcome to The Latino Underground, a podcast dedicated to the reclamation and exploration of Latino identity through counter-narrative stories. We hope to give you tools by which to navigate in a passive system. Stay tuned.

JS: Hey, what’s good, good people? It’s Jorge. First and foremost, I want to start off by thanking you for tuning back in. I know it’s been quite some time since I released any content or information regarding the podcast. I start[ed] the podcast back in February earlier this year, February … 2021. And I have really not done much since early March and there’s a reason for that. And in all honesty, I have really struggled to start it back up again. Not really knowing how to go about it. But I think the best way to do it is to just talk about what’s happened since and why it is that I took such a long hiatus in terms of starting back up again. So let’s go ahead and begin.

I’m currently in the last phase of my Ph.D. doctoral program. All I have to do is finish my dissertation, which is a pretty big piece, I guess, but a traditional Ph.D. program consists of taking about three or four years’ worth of courses, classes, then you have what is called a comprehensive exam, which is basically a way to test whether or not you have been able to retain the knowledge if you read, if you’ve done the work and then after that, you go into what is called a proposal. Presenting a proposal is essentially writing the first two to three chapters of your dissertation. Where you have to research a problem. You have to find the gaps in the literature and you have to present an argument. You have to present a question that you can explore. There has to be some logic behind it. It has to be something new. It has to be something that hasn’t been talked about. It’s your way of bringing contribution into creating new knowledge. So it’s kind of a big deal. It’s definitely stressful. And for me, I think I’ve talked about this before.
I’ve always struggled with academia, right, at any level of school, like, whether your high school, college, master’s graduate degree, school is a commitment and it’s a commitment of your time. When you’re doing this type of research and you’re trying to create knowledge, it’s grueling and you’re consistently on the grind, and you’re consistently writing about these things and reading and questioning. So for me, it was always time away from the community, right—time away from what I view as meaningful work, especially given the last year, two years that we’ve gone through. I’ve always struggled with questions. What is it I’m doing? What do the letters mean? And what the bigger purpose of it all is? Because it’s time away from friends. It's time away from family. It’s time away from the community. All to write this, this research, right, and ultimately how is it going to affect or contribute to a bigger purpose of what I’m trying to do here?

So, it's January 2021 and after speaking to my research chair, we came up with a deadline of defending my proposal in mid-May. Now, my original research was about study-abroad programming and how study-abroad programming can ignite and reintroduce culture within Latino students, particularly focusing on Latino males, and they all stem from this study-abroad experience that I had a few years back. In which I was traveling and seeing, like, really dope sites as the grounds or whatnot. And then everywhere I would go, I would come across shorties like young age kids, five years old, six years old experiencing the same thing. So then I just read, made me think, like, shit, when I was a little kid. All I experienced was Brookfield Zoo or Lincoln Park Zoo. Those are my trips. So then I realized that I’ve missed the whole aspect of my ancestry. Because of [the] migration process, like, all that shit was gone and I grew up not really knowing my history. My Latino. my Mexican history, so that was what my research was centered on.
So that was essentially my first topic. Like, how does the study-abroad programming allow Latinos to develop an identity that they might have lost through the migration process, but in all honesty I wasn’t doing much. I was just struggling [with] Academia. I’ve always had this internal struggle with Academia, what it represents, and how it’s a reproduction of privilege. But that’s kind of where I was operating from. I was kind of in this jaded place of like, shit. I have to do this because I’ve invested so much time into this degree, but I don’t really believe what a degree stood for, if that makes sense. Legit is just a hard realization to come to, … right, because you can’t lie to yourself. If you subscribe to the idea that knowledge is power. Then you have to realize that the institutions which we attend, the high schools to colleges, the universities are gatekeepers to that power. And if you’re critical, you understand that those institutions don’t value our traditional ways of learning. The way Black and Brown people learn. They don’t value our oral histories. If you got through an educational system in the U.S. and you’re Black or Brown and your parents are migrants from Mexico, for example. Their experiences aren’t valid within the classrooms. So then it also almost becomes a reproduction of privilege because only certain individuals’ experiences are valued, mostly white. And their type of knowledge is valued so then all this system is done in the image of whiteness. So for me, understanding that I was part of the system and contributing to the system by getting this Ph.D. was a mindfuck.

So therefore, the creation of the podcast was done as a counter to what I was doing in Academia. Think of it as a breath of fresh air. The academic scene was fucking killing my vibe and the podcast was coming up for fresh air. It was a way to pay homage to our traditional ways of learning. Just going back to storytelling and community building and at least I get twisted. I recognize my privilege and being able to get these degrees and participate in Academia. I recognize that and I also recognize that it is hypocritical for me to, on one end, criticize it. But on
the other end, participate in it. I recognize that. So, I had to find a way to consolidate all that and
the only way at the time that I could think of doing that was through counter-storytelling, which
is why I started the podcast originally.

So fast forward, it’s mid-March, actually, and I get a call from my dissertation chair, and
around this time, writing the proposal essentially is you writing the first three chapters of your
dissertation. So, you have to say the problem, you have to do a lit review and you have to do … a
lot of other shit and typically, the way it works is you [write] the chapter, you give it to your
chair, she reviews it, gives you feedback, you go back, correct it. I haven’t done it yet. I think I
gave her maybe about twenty-five, thirty pages at most. So mid-March, my chair calls me up and
she said, “Hey, we need to talk” and I was like, fuck. It’s almost like, going to the principal’s
office when you know you’re in trouble. And she’s like, “Hey, man, what's going on? Are you
passionate about the topic you’re researching?” and of course, I was like, “Yeah, yeah. 100%.”
Because behind all this proposal and writing, all this shit is a lot of time. It’s a lot of reading. It’s
a lot of identifying gaps. It’s very time-consuming. So, changing the topic at this point would
pretty much set you back a good amount of time, but she has a question. She’s like, “Is this
something you’re passionate about? Or do you want to go back to where you’re researching
initially?” Which is something around Hip-Hop. I mean, in my mind I was like, “Fuck, no.” I
want to get done with this even if I wasn’t passionate. I just want to finish. And I was like, “You
know, Doctor Hatt, don’t worry about it. I’ll get you pages soon, my bad, you know; I’ve been
dragging on this, we’re going to stick to that, you know, late May proposal defense.” And then
some fucked-up shit happened. The murder of a thirteen-year-old boy, Adam Toledo. And for
someone who grew up in the ’hood, that shit fucked me up and it hit home.
So I had heard about, it was on the news. So initially it was fucking devastating, like, shit. Here’s a young kid, thirteen-year-old. I have a thirteen-year-old nephew. I grew up two blocks from there. That’s my neighborhood, like, it resonated. That could have been me. That could have been any of my friends. So that added a whole another layer of the fucked-up-ness. I remember seeing the video at work. Closing the door and legit just fucking crying and wanting to get out of there. Because I don’t want any of the white peers around me asking me what was wrong or giving an opinion and what the video represented. And I remember just getting off work and just going straight to a fucking local pub and having a couple of beers. Just ’cause I don’t know how the fuck to deal with it. But what I did know is that what I was doing wasn’t sitting well with me.

My dissertation was not for the community and then my homie Mateo released an op-ed piece where he was talking about Adam and the community response towards the shooting. And looking at it from a very systemic manner, like, talking about the educational system and criticizing it. It was a dope, dope piece. So, in Mateo’s piece, he alludes to systemic issues that contribute to the tragedy, to the killing of Adam Toledo. He points the blame at a faulty educational system. And Mateo was a cat that I’d known for a minute. And throughout the last two years, Mateo has been a dude who has been capturing the struggle of our community. He has been documenting the central workers. He has been active. So, I admire that but then on the flip side, I criticize myself for not being active, as I once was, and for prioritizing this dissertation, which is essentially a reproduction of what is wrong with the system. Not spending so much time writing. Dissecting, reproducing what has been essentially established by whiteness. As a form of reaching this pinnacle of Ph.D.-ness of a terminal degree. Also, that this fucking work can sit
on the shelf or be read by other individuals who don’t understand where I come from, who don’t understand my people, who don’t understand Brown youth.

So at that point, I decided that if I wasn’t finished the degree, it was going to be under my terms, and it was going to be something that was at least going to contribute to the community. So, I decided to talk to my chair and essentially come up with a non-traditional form of doing this dissertation. I guess the biggest question that came about is questioning myself. How was I different from the white anthropologist who goes into the ’hood? Observe[s] the Brown kids, interviews individuals, owns their story, write[s] about it and then use[s] all that shit to finesse a job. How was I different from that, just because I was Brown? So I knew I needed to do something different and that’s where this idea of incorporating the podcast as part of my dissertation came about. I did want to capture the voice of our community, but I didn’t want to finesse it and I didn’t want to change it in telling the stories. I want them to be straight from the individuals’ true storytelling. I wasn’t going to edit it, I wasn’t going to change it, I wasn’t going to put it into my words, and I wanted it to be accessible to the community. I don’t want my work to sit on a fucking shelf for some white professor to read. Get some fucking grand idea off of it and then fucking go do his own research. If I was going to contribute something [it] was going to be something that was in before community. So that’s kind of where I’m at now.

The project, my dissertation, is essentially deeply intertwined with the podcast throughout the next few weeks. I’ll be interviewing fifteen individuals around the idea of hip-hop as a tool by which to navigate oppressive systems. And this is all coming from personal experience. As a shorty, I never had a voice in school. I never felt as if, do I belong? And Hip-Hop to me was a savior. It was what gave me stability: painting, doing graffiti was an outlet for me to really just fucking express myself in a system that didn’t allow it. Taking that experience
and really flushing it out. I want to be able to interview young individuals who have just graduated from high school and capture their experience. And capture their introduction to Hip-Hop. Then I want to interview individuals who are active within the Hip-Hop elements. I want to be able to capture their stories, capture their introduction to Hip-Hop and get some learnings. And then lastly, I want to interview professors, people who are currently in Academia, who claim to be Hip-Hop scholars. And I want to get their learnings as well, like, have them tell us their stories. And throughout this collection of narratives of counter-stories, hopefully get some learnings that our youth can benefit from because when you’re growing up as a Latino kid that’s getting shit on your own, you oftentimes think that you are alone and that you’re the only one experiencing this. So if some shorties can listen to this and know that others before them have experienced this and there are tools by which to navigate this oppressive system, then hey, that’s a fucking win.

So that’s where I’m at. Thank you for listening. I'll be dropping some content pretty soon. I appreciate you. Thank you for your time.

[END]
Figure 10. Adali QR code.

Figure 11. Adali cover.
INTRO: Bienvenidos, welcome to The Latino Underground, a podcast dedicated to the reclamation and exploration of Latino identity through counter-narrative stories. We hope to give you tools by which to navigate in a passive system. Stay tuned.

JS: What’s up good, good people, my name is Jorge. Thank you for tuning in. In today’s session, we will have a conversation with Adali. I met Adali about four years ago, well, she just told me. When I was working at a very affluent high school and Adali was a kid that stood out because she was probably one of the more creative students that I’ve run across. I distinctly remember Adali showing me this book that she had turned into, like, this dope piece of artwork. Do you remember that, Adali? You actually carve.

AG: Yes! I think so, I mean, I was just inspired to do that and I completely remember what book you are talking about. It sucks because I held on to it for about two years after I graduated and I tossed it. It was just like, damn, you know, I will make a better one someday, like, come back every visit.

JS: Yes, I mean it was dope that checked it out. I actually used your idea and I think I told you that I use[d] your idea for a project that I did in my program.

AG: I think you even showed me when you were in the beginning stages of it; I don’t think I ever saw it finished. But, I do remember you told me to come to check it out and you want[ed] to show what I like about that idea.

JS: Yes, it was dope. I am here with Adali and she has been gracious enough to share her story in a counter-narrative. So, first and foremost thank you, Adali. I like to begin the sessions with one common question. And that is, when did you first realize there was inequity within our
educational system? And I said this before, I think it’s a good place to start just to set the tone for
the conversation, so I will turn it over to you, Adali.

AG: Yes, I agree completely. I think the earliest memory, I had a white teacher, I think this was
about in my sixth grade. So, I just had started middle school that year and you know, at that time,
I was listening to music. I didn’t find my own way yet, my own style. I was listening to whatever
my parents were listening to; both of my parents grew up in the city. My mom is in K-Town and
my dad is just across town from there, a near little village type area. So, you will kind of really
get the idea, what type of studying environment they grew up in and type of music. It was a lot of
houses, a lot of Hip-Hop, R&B, and things like that. So when I went to school, teachers always
ask you, especially on the first day, share some information about yourself, tell me about
yourself, because the teacher essentially wants to get to know you and your background. I was so
excited that [I] was in middle school and I cannot wait for my teacher to understand me because I
felt like I had always been misunderstood in elementary school. In elementary school, I had a
really hard time. Like, I always had beef with teachers. Teachers had beef with me and I never
understood that at all. To cut the story short, going back to
middle school, my teacher told us to
make a project. And in that project, they want us to write our name in the middle and to write our
favorite color, favorite type of music like bands, artists that we like, and a cool fact about you or
something. Well, me being who I was … I picked up a lot from my parents. My mom kind of
knew how to do the bubble letters type thing. My dad had a music taste …. My mom knew how
to tag; she showed me how to do it. So there I was; I wanted to show this cool art thing and I
started tagging my name, bubble letters, and everything, background looking like, I spray-
painted. But, you know, I drew it. So I turned it in, and I was like, this is my project, this is who I
am, that is my favorite color. That is my name; as soon as I listened to that, I said a fun fact
about myself. She was just an older white woman who just gave me this look and as a little kid, that is not the look you want to see when you are excited to show somebody something. She’s like, “What is this? Why would you write your name like this, redo this? It looks gang-affiliated. You are a lady, you are a young lady.”

**JS:** No shit!

**AG:** Act like it. So I was like, “What? How? That’s what I like to do.” Do you know what I mean? Like, I found something cool. This is how I like to write my name,; this is what I like to do for fun at home. Like, damn! That sucks. So I already, like, she was putting me in this box and I don’t like being put in this box and I think that was my, it’s always been my issue growing up and, you know, going to school and getting an education. Is that some teachers don’t want to take the time to get to know you. Teachers I have in mind what type of student they want. It’s easier to handle and try to more feel, you know, especially when you’re young because you don’t realize that you’re just listening to your teacher and trust your teacher, thinking that they know what’s best for you and your education, but they’re just putting you in this damn box. So, you’re just like the person next to you, the person next to them, it’s just like, you’re just a bunch of fucking workers in a factory just doing the same thing, producing the same thing. There’s no creativity to it. So I was like, my first memory of being told, “That’s you? That’s not okay. That’s not acceptable. Toss it! Let’s start over. Do something more appropriate.” As if that was inappropriate. Do you know what I mean? Like, I had no bunnies and I have no crowns. No, nothing like that. Like, it was just my name in harmless bubble letters. I never claimed I was anything or anything like that. So it was just like, damn, she took it the wrong way. That sucks. Alright, won’t do it again, you know.
JS: Damn, that’s crazy. Right? Because if you think about it, like, there are so many things that are wrapped up in there. Like, one she said, “Act like a lady”; like that’s nuts right there, right?

AG: Yeah.

JS: That was you, that was your flavor and you’re excited, Adali was excited about this assignment in showing what you could do. Right?

AG: Yup! To have someone tell you that, that’s you, that’s not okay. You know, and, like, I just stood there, and I felt stupid; like, I turned red and I did that walk of shame back to my desk. It was like, shit, I got to start over, like, these are wrong answers. Like, how did I, like, how could I fuck this up about myself? You know, like, how did I get that wrong?

JS: This is about me.

AG: Right?

JS: That’s crazy. And this is in the sixth grade, you said?

AG: Yeah, this was sixth grade.

JS: And she did this in front of the class?

AG: Yeah, because the point, the assignment was like, for everybody [sit at] their desk and to do it and when you are done, you had to go and show her and she would check for, like, spelling errors and she like,d that. She was an English, like, a language arts teacher. So she was checking for grammar. And if you messed up, like, oh, go back and fix that, you know? So I showed her, I even think I—so I had like, Jay-Z, Linkin Park, and 50 Cent written on the favorite artist I had at the bottom. And I wrote Linkin Park and you know, obviously, Linkin Park, if you know Linkin Park, it’s not spelled correctly. Do you know what I mean?

JS: Yeah.
AG: So she was like, “What is this?” Like, now, you’re abbreviating things. Blah-blah-blah-blah. And I was like, that’s how it’s spelled. Like, if you take the time like that’s how it’s spelled. So she didn’t believe me. Like, she did not believe me at all: “Go back and fix it. That’s a bunch of baloney.” Until, like, a couple of the kids overheard that and was like, no that’s exactly what it’s, that’s exactly how it’s spelled. That’s the band’s name and then she felt stupid and you could tell because, you know, then she started to lower her voice and then she was like, “Oh, that’s the stupidest thing ever.”

JS: OMG.

AG: Why would you spell it like that? Like, I don’t know, like, I’m not the—you know. This is what it is. I’m trying to show you. That’s my band. So, like, right away this lady. Well, now that I’m older and I see it. There was never any interest in who I was. She did, she never gave like, two shits about who I was, what I like. She never wanted to get to know me. She wasn’t even open to the things that were on that, and the things that were on that was essentially me, you know, so I think that was kind of like that first, like she’s here to torment us kids, and make our lives hell and, and not want to get to know you. She’s just that old white teacher, that everybody got beef with.

JS: She hit you with “That's a bunch of baloney.”

AG: Yeah, like, it was ridiculous. So I was like, damn, all right. I’m going to struggle already. Look, that’s cool. I did struggle. She gave me a really hard time, but that was, like, the first time like, damn, like, teachers, like, just don’t give a shit. Like, if a teacher really wanted to, they sit down and be like, oh, that’s cool. Oh, really? Tell me more about this. Like, there was never no follow-up questions. There was not that spark of interest. The rappers I had, loud music, like,
why—I mean, I like loud music, but that’s, like, the first word to describe them? Loud. It wasn’t cool, man. Was that cool?

JS: Yeah. Yeah, man, it sucks because those experiences are the experiences that ultimately shape our views on education. Adali, can you go ahead and tell me about yourself? Who's Adali?

Who is this person we’re chatting with?

AG: Let’s see. I am 21 years old now. I am currently putting a hold on my education because I’m still trying to figure out what I really want to do with my life. I’m currently working at a school in West Chicago. It’s a lot of minorities, a lot of Hispanic. And in the lower income side of West Chicago. I’m a secretary there and, you know, I like what I do. I like being able to—I have that combination of being involved with kids and also being involved with, like, the adult things, the grown-ups, understanding parent situations and where they’re coming from, helping parents, helping kids. Just helping everybody. So that’s what I do for my job right now.

I went to Lyons Township High School about four years ago. From there, I wanted to pursue and I was thinking about it, you know, and the Arts Photography was a main thing. I also wanted to—What’s it called? I wanted to videograph as well. If it’s not, like, photos and videos. I love spending my time. I get my inspiration from being in the city, which was that project that I showed you that book. That’s where it originally started from. It was from just taking that tour. I think it was at [a] field trip that you took us on to that one college and then we kind of took a tour and we walked around a little bit to see some cool art and it just kind of like, sparked it from there, you know. I love art. I love music, all types of genres and things. I love all types of art. I don’t do too much art these days. I’m very busy and I’m very tired after work. But yeah, I think that’s, like, a little bit about me. I never know quite what to say when people ask things about
me. I think what’s important that people know is it’s those types of things. What I’m really passionate about, photography and art, music, things like that.

**JS:** Tell me about you as a kid, Adali. How are you as a shorty?

**AG:** Misunderstood, and I say that, because you know, just, and it’s crazy that it made such a big impact. But when you think about it, like, as a shorty, most of your days are in school, most of your days are with a stranger who’s teaching you, who’s watching over you and you’re surrounded by a bunch of other kids. And I felt like nobody actually understood me growing up because I don’t think anybody wanted to take the time to get to know me. I always get told from people, you know, “Oh, I’m hesitant to approach you, you know, you have this like, resting bitch face on or you always have headphones in. It looks like you don’t want to be bothered.” And it’s not that, like, oh, it’s keep away from me, but it’s because I enjoy the sound of music. I can’t go a day without music. It’s hard to. It’s hard to function that way. I’m always up to learn and things like that, but I felt like that wasn’t enough for kids. Like, I was the black sheep growing up compared to other kids. Other kids were cool and hip with it, all of the cool things. Like, they were growing up with the times, but I was still stuck in my old ways with my old man.

Like, I was right there with him. So it’s funny because when I go to work and people want to test like, my age, or my knowledge on things, I’m like, I know exactly what you’re talking about. I know exactly that band. Exactly that music; I listen to House. I know that reference from like, the ’80s, you know, like, like, you can’t tell me I’m a young git, like, I am young, but like, I’m an old soul too, and a lot of people, I feel like, once they get to know me, they see that in me. And I think that’s what makes me stand out a little bit, is that although I am young, I’m also, like, a very old soul and a lot of kids at that time just were kids. Like, I was forced to grow up a little quicker than others. And that kind of made me who I am now. So I
understand I matured a lot quicker than the others and I think that’s why there was always that—
How can I say it? That, like, gap, that wall between me and my peers.

But hey, you know, like, not everybody can and it’s not even, I wish people did it. I wish I didn’t grow up so fast, but it is what it is. So those who I kind of figured, you can tell when you mature quicker, who’s right there with you. Like, who’s right on the same level with you and who isn’t. And there wasn’t too many people on the same level as me because everybody’s just being kids.

And I look at it now. It’s not a bad thing. It made me who I am now, very strong. I’m very independent. You know, I got myself. At the end of the day, like, I got myself and I’ll always figure out a way, which is, which is tight. Because not a lot of people have had that, like, street-smart, that common sense to do it.

**JS:** Where did that come from? That street-smartness?

**AG:** My parents, I struggled with book smart. I struggled a lot with book smart, and it’s crazy because, I mean, you could, you could open a book. You could flip through, brief scan, whatever, and you could hold that information in your head for a little bit. But if you don’t use it and apply it, it goes away. But with street smart, you’re constantly using it. You know what I mean? Like, it’s common sense, is like that’s what street smart is. It’s common sense. And if you have no common sense, like you’re not going to make it very far, you know what I mean? But book-smart, I mean, it’s like, a bonus to your learning things. You’re educated. You become well-educated [th] at way, but common sense came straight from my parents.

And that was like, push, you know, it was implemented, like, hey, don’t be stupid, you know, think twice before you speak, before you do, think about how that’s gonna look on you in a couple of years from now, think about how others are going to view you and I was big, you
know, being a little Brown girl and although, like, I am what my dad calls a suburbanite and I grew up in a very nice neighborhood where I don’t have to worry about a lot of the shit other people do in worse neighborhoods because I am Hispanic and my parents are Hispanic. That’s already like, a stamp, like, bam, Brown, you know what I mean? And that’s a minority. So, you are already at a disadvantage. So I had a lot to prove that I’m not, like, what some of these people see me as.

JS: Adali, where were you raised? Where did you grow up around?

AG: Let’s see. So I … moved to Brookfield when I was five and ever since then, I stayed in Brookfield. I was born in Berwyn and kind of from there in my earlier years, it was a little rocky. It was a little rough; my parents were on and off. So my mom would kind of like, pack up all our shit and was like, deuces, we’re out. So we would go to my grandma’s, who kind of lives by Midway out there, live with my aunt. She’s out there. I lived with my dad’s grandpa. She’s in, like, Berwyn-Cicero area. So I was kind of like, juggling around for a little bit until I was five and then be settled in Brookfield which is, like, why I can’t complain, you know what I mean? I am very fortunate that my parents decided that, to get up to make that move and be like, hey, I want better for my kids. So I’m blessed that I grew up in a very privileged place, but just because it’s privilege[d] doesn’t mean that I had privilege.

JS: Explain that, elaborate on that.

AG: So, a good example, let’s take like, Lyons Township. You and I are very familiar with old Lyons Township. It’s safe to say that it’s predominantly white rich people who got it like that, which is why I never felt comfortable going because I don’t got it like that. I’m Brown, and I’m, like, middle-low class. You know, we struggled financially a lot, like, close to homelessness. I wouldn’t even, like, eat sometimes. It was, you know, that was me. So rich white folks growing
up in Western Springs, Indian Head Park. Around those areas around that school, like, they’re privileged to do that, you know, like, they’re able to say “I’m white, my dad’s important. I’m important. I’m able to afford this, I’m able to do this” and that makes sense, you know, but if I say, “I’m from Brookfield” and people who live in, like, inner cities take a tour and they look at my town, you know, they’re like, “Oh my God, it’s so nice” because I’ve had someone do that before, I’ve had someone live in the city, come out to see me and they’re like, “What? There’s people, a lot of people walking in the streets, just fine like that, you know, headphones in, just fine, like that.” And I’m like, yeah, you know, and then I was like, oh shit. You’re right, you grew up different than I did. That makes sense, but I wasn’t privileged. I struggled because I’m Brown and you know, my parents don’t have the best education. They came from inner city. My mom had me when she was 17.

My parents were just kids having kids so there wasn’t too much to, you know, like, we were all figuring it out together and compared to some of these others, like that’s mommy and daddy’s money,” you know, they were set from the start. That’s that whole generational wealth and all that bullshit. They were set, we didn’t. We struggled. We struggled a lot. And just because … my neighbors are nice and white neighborhoods, grasses, super green, cut all the time. Like, I don’t mean shit, you know what I mean? So that’s how I would describe it.

**JS:** So Adali, it’s you and your mom’s, and what’s the makeup of your family?

**AG:** Like, who do I live with currently? I live with, well, shit—Ever since I was 13, it’s just been me and my dad and my brother. My sister, she goes back and forth. My parents had split around that time. So in middle school, they had split so my mom left, she left, like, with my dad and I was nothing, like that’s what I was talking about, like that homelessness was there. It’s crazy going to school and looking at that clock and you’re thinking: 3:05, shit, am I gonna have,
like, a roof over my head tonight? Am I going to have food to eat when I get home? Probably not. Do you know what I mean? So you just gotta brace yourself for that. So it was just me and my dad for a while. My brother and my sister went to go live with my mom because she was able to financially afford them, with her husband at the time. And I struggled, I stay[ed] and I struggled with my dad because I chose that.

**JS:** Lead me through that chronologically. So here’s Adali at five years old moving through Brookfield, then what happens?

**AG:** Five years old, taking shit is really really sweet, loves life. Spoiled little-ass kid thinking like, shit couldn’t get any better. It wasn’t until the recession hit in 2009, I believe. Right? Around 2008, 2009. We lost a lot. My dad lost his job. My mom had to go back to work. She was a stay-at-home mom. She[‘d] just had my sister. So we just had a newborn at that time. And we’re living in, like, a shitty-ass apartment, a two-bedroom, and there’s five of us. Power constantly going out because of whatever reason, you know. My mom is only making like minimum wage trying to raise, there’s five of us, you know, so it just kind of went down from there. My mom kind of struggled, like, job to job trying to find something. My dad just decided he was just going to stay at home and watch the kids, raise the kids. And then, I guess like that pressure of one parent just doing it all kind of got to her. So that’s when she was like, it isn’t working. So it was until 13 I was where she decided that she no longer wanted to live there, live with us, and she found somebody else.

So she moved out. She took my brother and my sister, I had chose[n] to stay with my dad. Like I said, and then it was me and my dad for a couple of months. Just trying to figure things out. It was like, you know, I was doing people’s homework, like, at school. I was asking, like, my friends from money, like, hey, I’ll pay you back, you know, type thing. I’ll do your
homework for 5, 10 bucks; at the end of the week I’ve made enough to order pizza on Friday and I brought home dinner. Do you know what I mean? Like that was...

**JS:** It was a grind.

**AG:** I’ve been grinding, you know what I mean? And I even went as far as to like, like, I’m not too proud of it. But, like, I sold like, a couple like, dime bags, you know, in middle school because just, my friends are doing it, you know, that’s how they grinded. And I’m like, shit, you know, that’s how you’re doing it. Put me on to game. So they put me on to game. My dad had no clue until the day I graduated eighth grade. He caught my little stash and that was the end of it. He was like, nope. Can’t have you do this. I gotta step up now and figure out what to do for the both of us. So that’s kind of where that shift … went where I could stop being an adult. At 13, 14 and calming it down and trying to be that teenager, but I was already going to, like, high school, you know what I mean, you really have that pressure to like, grow up, you’re expected more. So yeah, so now, we’re in high school, not selling weed anymore. I’m not asking people for money. He gets a job. It’s him, my brother and my sister. Now, we can’t, you know, my dad was working third-shift jobs. He was gone by 3 o’clock in the afternoon. So by the time I was getting out of school, he was gone. I didn’t see him until, like, the weekend basically; you know, you live with somebody, but you’re not seeing them. Like that was really weird.

And at that time, I was trying to raise my sister. Like, he put her on the bus and everything; he would bring her home. But I was feeding her, giving her baths, doing her homework, like, trying to help her learn. At the same time, I’m trying to figure my own shit out. You know, I’m a freshman. Like, I gotta?— Oh, shit, college applications now, like, what? This is, I didn’t really have time to slow down and be that kid. It was a lot of like, grind, hustle, hustle, figure it out. You got it. Quit complaining. Other people have it worse. This will [be a]
walk in the park for you. So that’s when my mom made that decision of taking my sister. So now it's just been, like, the three of us. Me, my father, and my brother. My brother is 20. We’re like 14 months apart. Our dad is like 46.

**JS:** Your brother? I didn’t know you had a sister.

**AG:** Yeah, I have one sister with, like, same parents and then I have, now I have two half-sisters, same mom, different dad.

**JS:** But Adali, what's your earliest memory of school?

**AG:** Kindergarten, I might not have the best memory but I think I have some pretty good memory. I can remember shit from like when I was 3, school-wise, yet that was full-time Kindergarten, 5 years old. At four, I was bouncing around like, preschool to preschool to preschool because I never got along with the kids. Like, you know, my mom always had to come pick me up early. Oh, your daughter’s doing this, your daughter won’t share. You know, she got into a fight with some other kids and they won’t share their toys with her. Now, I’m upset. So it's like, a lot of bouncing around when I was four; I was full-time, but I was getting picked on. I never had a good education experience at all.

There might have been like, a year or so before I bumped into that really good teacher. But shit; that’s like, once in a blue moon. I agree, I understood what you said by, when you look back at it, you never really had a teacher that you could relate to because, like, you know, teachers, it’s so sad to say, but some teachers are there just for, like, a chug. Just do your shit. Leave me alone. Come to me when you have questions, I guess, but I’m only going to help you like half-ass and that’s not fair. Do you know what I mean? Like, that’s not fair at all. And it sucks that I did get the short end of the stick. I probably was like, a little bit of a hard-ass. I wasn’t the easiest student. I could tell you that. Which made me grow and appreciate the teachers
who did take their time with me and did show me, wanted to get to know me and understand where I was coming from.

**JS:** Yeah, man, I feel you for sure. So Adali, if you had to describe your educational experience, right? Overall, how would you describe it? What would that look like?

**AG:** Shitty. Shitty, unfortunately. It’s just like that’s just the way it was, like, kids just pick on me because I was different. Like I said, I wasn’t an easy student. I had a really hard time, like, sitting down and learning. To obtain information was really hard. I’m not a listener. I’m more of like, paint me a picture and talk me [through] step by step and I’ll get it. That’s the type of student I was, but not a lot of teachers are willing to go that extra mile and switch up their learning style for students. So then you get placed in still special classes with less kids, more one-on-one with teachers and a different curriculum. And unfortunately, at that time, I felt stupid because I was in those classes and I saw all my friends and they’re in Accel[erated] classes but realistically it helped a lot having one-on-one, having a teacher who didn’t give up on me, you know, and I found it to be in those smaller classes with kids who are just like me. A lot more easier than kids in full-size classes and you know, who aren’t like me. They never understood me. Teachers didn’t give a shit. Like I said, once in a blue moon, I came across a really good teacher. You were one of, like, the teachers, I was like, oh shit. Like, he gets it, you know, he’s like, I don’t have to explain. He gets it.

I had a history teacher in middle school. She got it. She took the time to get to know me. I was like, a star student of hers. Very nice. Like, after school hours, I’d stay around and we talked and, you know, like, she never made me feel this small. She never made me feel dumb for the questions I’d ask or sharing my thoughts. Her name—Oh, she's married now. I don’t even know
how to say her last name. Stephanie Pika, it was how I remember it. She was a history teacher, George Washington Middle School.

**JS:** Shout out to Ms. Pika.

**AG:** Yeah, shoutout to Ms. Pika. She’s very nice. Her last name sounds like a K or something, but she’s great. Like, she was an amazing teacher, and she made learning so much fun. She was a really good teacher. She taught those who were like me who were visual-audio learners. And damn, what’s that other learning style? There’s like, three learning styles. Well, she was just like, she was good at what she did. She was really, really good.

And then I had a—In high school, I had Ms. Ray, shoutout to Ms. Ray, that photography teacher. She got it. My pictures, when I would tell the story, the arts that I did, the projects I did, she understood. I struggled a lot with my mental health in high school and she saw it. She saw right through it and she was never on my ass. “If you really want this, you do it. I’m not here to force you. Because then, you know, then that’s not the point of it. Do what you need to do. Show me, you know, tell me that story. What do you want to tell me? What is it that you’re not telling others?” You’re right, you know, like, she gets it, she gets it. So, it made me comfortable, started showing her my true work, and she’s like that’s what I’m talking about. Yeah, that’s you right there. And you’ve been hiding that for some reason; you’ve been hiding that.”

So I’ve like, you know, shit; you go from middle school, eighth grade, having one good teacher and then you hit sophomore year. I get a good photography teacher. Junior year comes around, I get one good English teacher. Mrs. Campbell. She retired that same year, too. Super and amazing English teacher, and then senior year came around and it was you, because I had you in my class helping other kids like me figure out this whole college application shit. The first gens not knowing all that pressure from students who parents were alumni at the school we were
attending who got this shit figured out. Do you know what I mean? It was like a kid was born. They figured out what school they were going to go to and it was already paid. Us first-gen, we were going to figure that shit out. Like, damn, how am I going to pay for this? How do I even start? What college is good for me? And you were there, you know, you [talked us] through, through it all and I was like, he gets it.

Like, I don’t have to say shit. He gets it, I don’t have to try to make him explain, try to open his eyes. He’s already woke. Do you know what I mean?

**JS:** Man, I wish the listeners could see, you know, visually see how much like, your face lit up when you talked about those teachers, Miss Pika, Miss Ray, you know?

**AG:** Yeah.

**JS:** It just goes to show, like, the impact, like, the conversation, like, has thus far been about, like, some pretty, like, intense experiences, right? Educationally, but as soon as you hit those memories of those teachers, you just lit up, you know?

**AG:** Because they’re good memories, you know, and in a way, those teachers inspired me to take on, going into the educational field because like I said, like, there are shitty teachers out there and I hated those shitty teachers. And I’ve always wanted to work with kids. You know, I wanted to take psych, I was taking psych for two years at community college because I thought that’s what I truly wanted to do. And I was like, why do that? I can be hands-on if I’m a teacher, but I’m going to be the best damn teacher. I’m going to take from what those good teachers were and apply that because I was a kid once in their shoes meeting a teacher like them. Some help me to guide me to make me feel comfortable in the classroom and not make me feel isolated or the odd one out for whatever reason. Like, they’re really good teachers and not a lot of credit goes out to the teachers.
They do a lot man, like, shoutout to all the teachers out there. They work hard. They bust their asses to be, like, for those kids. And it shows.

JS: Adali, you talk about the influence teachers have on students. What was the influence that your parents had on you? What was the role of education in your household?

AG: My mom graduated high school after I think she had my brother. So she had me at 17. She have my brother at 18 so it took her a while. She already had those obstacles, you’re in the city. You’re a pregnant teenager. Your parents are pissed at you. They want you out of the house. Like, that typical stereotypical shit for, like, teen pregnancy. My dad, he graduated high school and I was about it. You know, my mom tried going to community college, but she had two kids already; I was going with her to school. I remember being in those classes with her and I wanted her attention so bad and she’s looking at me. She’s like, not right now. Don’t do this. Like, I’m trying to learn and I didn’t understand it. I was like, no, I want to play, let’s play. But that’s as far as it went. I believe she went back to school for her business. She has like, a certificate or something in business but shit, like, I mean, I’m not saying it took her long because there’s really no time for education. You go at your pace that you need to but she's like, 39 now. She got the schooling when she was 37, 38, five kids later. Do you know what I mean?

Hey, she did it, which is truly inspiring because I feel like, I’m 21 and I stopped going to school. I’m behind. But I look at her and I’m like, she’s young, I got time, you know what I mean? Like, as I go through life, I’m going to experience life, and then I don’t know, maybe something will click and that passion will come back to me and I’ll go to school for it and I’ll get a degree. I mean, that’s my, that’s what my parents want. They want me to get that degree. I want a degree, you know, like, I want to see my name on it, on a big-ass-like, diploma, or whatever. So, education wasn’t, like, a big thing for my parents, but every parent wants their kid
not to be like them, to be better, to succeed. That’s what my parents are trying to do. Trying to push us to become a better them, a better us.

**JS:** So then who or how was support provided throughout your education?

**AG:** I don’t really have support. And it sounds weird to say that when I just said my parents pushed for that, but that’s all it was. You know, it was like, the cheering on the sidelines but nobody wants to practice with me like, typing, you know what I mean? It was like, there was no guidance. They didn’t do it. Like, my mom didn’t go to university. I went to a community college just as far as she helped me. She helped me. She was there for me signing up to community college because that’s what she knew. My dad couldn’t do shit. He’s like, “Ask your mom.” … Like, “What are you looking at me for? I only got a high school diploma.” Do you know what I mean? And I’m like, shit. You’re right. Like, what am I asking you for? It’s the blind leading the blind right now. We’re not going anywhere. So I had my mom’s support, just for the beginning, but after that, they’re like, you’re 19 now. You graduated; figure that shit out and I’m like, yeah, I got to figure this shit out on my own and that’s hard. You know, they can’t support me. I got accepted into art school. I need a parent to co-sign. My mom didn’t want to co-sign. She had good credit but, you know, she’s like, you ain’t gonna be shit if you continue this route and that’s for photography and I was like, damn, my own mom told me, like, you’re going to waste my time and you’re going to waste yours. Like, I ain’t doing it. Like, I’m not going to help you. That fucked me up a little bit. I was like, damn.

All right. My dad doesn’t have … good credit. He couldn’t co-sign for me so I couldn’t go to art school. Like, I just couldn’t and financially, it wasn’t there. Even now, financially, they can’t do shit for my education, but they’re quick to push me and criticize that I’m not doing it. But she’s like, I have to do this. Those are the loans. Those are the debts that I have to carry and
I have to pay and that’s like, hard as it is. Anybody who is pursuing or thinking about pursuing a higher education knows how expensive. Like, that’s an investment, five years, more. If it takes you that long, four, if you’re good, you know, if you graduate on time, [inaudible] five, six, so on, it’s just more money. What the fuck am I going to do? Like, I worked at a minimum-wage job for about two of those years, like, I couldn’t even pay. Like, I couldn’t even pay for gas to get [to] school. There was just no way. There were all those obstacles, all that financial shit really setting me back and I was like, I’m just going to have to revisit this when I’m in a better place financially, you know, and maybe mentally.

JS: So after high school, you went to college for how many years?

AG: I went to community college for two years, but I had stopped because my financial aid didn’t want to or I didn’t qualify because of, like, when you get financial aid, you have to meet a certain, like, attendance quota, you have to have a certain GPA and hold that GPA, weighted and unweighted certain amount of classes you have to take and all that little shit. Well, I suffer from depression; I have bipolar disorder. And I did that untreated. I wasn’t getting help for it. I wasn’t, like, having a therapist. Like, I was just, you know, just trying my best by myself, cope with it. And like, I wasn’t—I was in a very bad place. I was then placed on medication, but then I used it. Like, I tried to OD off of the medication they gave me. I suffered really bad insomnia and, you know, just like, shit happens. And unfortunately, I stopped going to school, you know, like, I’m tired. I’m up for like, 48 hours now and I’m going crazy and I have to go to work, you know.

Damn. Like, I just missed school and I have to catch up but I’m at work from three to eight. By the time I get home, I want to go to sleep, but I can’t sleep. So it was just like, a whole bunch of craziness. And it put like, a [inaudible] and I had medical notes and everything. And I had one chance to redeem myself and that’s when the pandemic hit and then everything went
online. Learning was a whole different thing. I’m not an online learner. I’m not, that’s just not
who I am. I like to be present. I like to work with my peers. I love listening to teachers. I love
raising my hand when I have a question and getting answered that same day. That’s just how I
learned.

So having that one last chance during the pandemic, I fucking blew it. And because of
that, financial aid wasn’t paying for my classes. Now I didn’t have, like, a grand laying around
for a class. I didn’t have a grand, you know. I was only making, like, barely [$]200 for two
weeks, you know, how the fuck am I gonna live like that? Like, I can’t. So I didn’t go to school.
I took it easy for a couple of months and then I found a job in West Chicago. And I make good
money now. I actually went back to school for a little bit at Grand Canyon University. It’s a
private Christian University. It’s not for me, though. The curriculum and what’s expected isn’t
for me. It’s actually a lot; I burned out within like, four months. The class structure, the way it
was up, it was all online. It was—I had seven-week courses, and in those seven weeks was a lot
of workload and at the same time, I just got a full-time job. Now, I have to go to school full-time.
Like, there was just, after those seven weeks, after that Sunday, your last assignment was due.
Bam! Monday came around, it was like, new course load, all these textbooks, get to it. Tuesday
an assignment is due and I’m like, “Shit. How am I gonna have my own life?” And I didn’t. I
was stressed out all the time, like, nobody wanted to be around me constantly complaining, just
so depressed, cry all the time because of how overwhelmed I was. So I had to, you know, figure
out, like, this is bad for my mental [health].

Do I really want to continue down this route and get bad again? Because it’s too much
and I’m burned out, or should I stop? Because I have too much on my plate. Come back with a
different game plan and tackle it differently. So that’s what I’m doing. I’m making that game
plan and I’m not ready quite yet to go back to finish, but hey, I’m at my own pace and I’m not discouraged.

**JS:** That’s dope, man. I mean, do it at your own pace. That’s all it’s about, you know: you have a plan, just work on it.

**AG:** It’s not a bad thing too, like, you don’t have to go to school fresh out of high school. Like, if you want that break, go travel, like, go live life, gain that life experience because even then, like that’s knowledge. That’s where you get those street smarts. You know, that’s to even kick it like, the book smarts depending, like, where you go, what you want to learn, you know, life has so much to teach you. And it’s just out there. You gotta go and that’s what I’m trying to do. I’m trying to go try to live my life a little bit.

**JS:** So we talked a little bit about your school LT. And for the listeners, LT is a high school that’s approximately 70% affluent Caucasian and about 16% Latino with about 8% of those Latinos being the third-generation Latinos who are essentially far removed from the culture and are behaving and performing very similar to their Caucasian counterparts there. They’re essentially assimilated Latinos. So for me, I always, as an educator there, looking in, I was reflected on that situation. Right? And I always thought like, man, as a shorty, there’s no way I would have been able to exist here because there are two major obstacles that students are facing there. One is a socio-economic shock. And the second is a cultural shock.

**AG:** Huge. I went from a little school who, who whites were minorities, you know, like, I was cool with all the other shorties. I was cool with all the BIPOCs; I was cool with like, you know, … my African American friends and all that shit, but like, even, like, the white people too, like, we were tight. They weren’t like, wealthy, you know, we can’t, like, our little school, we were all like, middle class, you could tell nobody was above anybody else. So then going to LT, that was
culture shock and I never would have liked it’s so crazy to say that because it’s just a different school. Holy shit. Like, it was such a hard time to adapt. What was even trippier was during freshman orientation, the white kids already knew, like, you didn’t go to Highland Park. You didn’t go to, you know, like, the middle school I went to. You’re a city kid, huh? You’re from GW, huh? Those GW kids.

Like, I already had like, an image to these kids that I was less and I was teased and picked on. I was so embarrassed to even say where I was from at one point. I would lie to some kids and [say] I’m somewhere from the city. You don’t even know, you know, if like that’s all you need to know. I’m not from around here, like, don’t associate me with that middle school, it’s not like that. The truth comes out and it’s like, shit. Yep. I lied. Nope. That boat. You know, like, I’m just like them because I have finally accepted it.. Like, I didn’t give a shit what people were saying. That’s where I came from. My friends went to Morton, and to hear them, like, talk shit about Morton, it’s insane, you know, more than so low class or low standards academically and horrible people and it’s not; I mean, not everybody’s like that but I already was, like, getting associated. It was a huge fucking difference and until, like, my dad went to visit because it’s not that bad. Like, it’s high school. Do you know what I mean?

Everybody’s high school experiences like this and it’s not, it’s like this because we’re different. We’re standing out. We’re a target. It’s the majority that makes you feel that way and it’s shitty. It is so shitty because you’re just trying to survive. The next what? For three years of your life, right? Trying to figure out who you are and what you want to do. But at the same time, everybody, it’s like, in a way everybody already figured that out for you. If that makes sense.

JS: Yeah, no, I feel you. So here’s kind of a stupid question. Did your identity ever feel validated in high school?
AG: What do you mean by, like, validated?

JS: Like, you as a person, your identity, right? Like, however you identify like,—Well, how do you identify? What’s your identity? Let’s go there.

AG: I’m a proud Hispanic and Guatemalan female. I don’t, you know, like, I’m not shy anymore of where I come from, who my parents are, my situation, like, I use it as like, a fucking flex in a way. Like, yeah, I went through all this shit. Look where I’m at now, you know what I mean? Like, shit, I would have never thought, but I’m here, I’m proving a ton of people who doubted me, a ton of teachers who said I wasn’t even going to graduate on time. Like, I wasn’t going to be shit. I’m not saying, like, I’m hot shit, like, I had the best career out there, but I hook for, like, the things I went through, like, I’m pretty, like, good, 21. Like, I’m pretty good right now. I could only go up from here and that’s how I identify myself. If that makes sense.

JS: No, yeah, it does. It does. So that identity that you just mentioned, right? You as a person, was that ever validated at LT during your high school career?

AG: No, not a lot of people saw me the way I ever saw myself and it sucked because like I said, you could tell the doubt in teachers; they’ll give up on you. I’ve had teachers give up on me and it’s like, shit. Like, you can’t even help me. Like, I can’t even help myself right now. Like, you can’t help me. Damn, like that’s shitty. It made me feel the complete opposite. It wasn’t until after high school where I was like, all right, I’m out. I don’t have to see these kids ever again. I don’t have to see these teachers ever again. I could finally start doing me and be proud of who I am and be proud of what I do and not get shit on for it or criticized for it. I mean, these kids are like me and teachers aren’t—not every teacher is a good one. And you don’t have that support, like, as a student, you’re already, like, you start falling behind. You start not giving a shit about school.
So at one point, I’d walk into class late. I walk into the class on my first day with headphones in, do it for the whole week to let the teacher know this is what’s up. I walk into class. I have headphones in, like, “Don’t bother me.” Do you know what I mean? Like, one headphone in, the other ear, I’m listening to you, you know, if it’s important, I’ll listen, if it’s not, I don’t think it’s important. Like, you know, like, I became that kid, I didn’t give a shit. And I didn’t want to become that kid, but I did, and I grew out of it a little bit towards the end and I was like, damn, like, I have to start giving this shit because nobody gives a shit about me like, someone has to and it’s me.

**JS:** Yeah. No, I feel you. I can relate to that. Like that’s how my high school experience was as well, you know, but for me, you know, like, the one out that I had was Hip-Hop. It was graffiti. Do you know what I mean?

**AG:** Yes.

**JS:** So, let’s go back to—How would you define Hip-Hop?

**AG:** How would I define? Like a form of expression. And I don’t think—and it’s funny because I Googled it. I Googled the definition of Hip-Hop because I saw that question and I was like, damn, how would you actually define Hip-Hop? How? Are we talking about the type of melody it is? Is that how you would define it? Like, how would you? And on Google, it says, what? Hip-Hop is the U.S. Black and Hispanic origin of, like, music and culture and shit. And I was like, oh, that’s interesting. We’re throwing race in there. Like, I’ve never, I wouldn’t right away categorize hip hop into like, the Black and Hispanic community. Like, I’m thinking Hip-Hop, I’m thinking shit. It’s, like, for everybody. Anybody who’s interested, anybody who’s ever invested into that culture.
I find Hip-Hop as a way of expression because, like, we had talked about these five elements of it. There's the DJing, there was the dancing, the art of it, the knowledge, and then the [unintelligible], the rapping, right? All of that is [a] way to express. And it’s an outlet for some and then to have someone tell you that your outlet is bad, it’s seen as, like, in a different light, then it’s like, oh shit, like, am I choosing the wrong outlet, you know. But you’re not. It’s just people have this idea of this stereotype of what it is already and they hear that you associate yourself and, you know, there goes that title, that stereotype with you.

So Hip-Hop is just a form of expression. It doesn’t matter if you’re Black, Hispanic, white, Asian, purple, you know, it doesn’t matter. If you could breakdance, you want to DJ, you want to MC, you want to tag, you know, you got knowledge of it, cool, like, that’s your way of expression. For a while, tagging was mine because it’s not just letters. It’s not just words, but you could also like pictures and shit. Like your graffiti and pictures and that’s how I liked it.

I’d write. It was a thing that I learned from, like, a social worker in middle school. You write, like, the word you’re feeling big on the page and then you can write other little feelings like synonyms of it. And then on the back, you just write the opposites of it. And then how can you, you’re sad, right? That’d be, like, the front page. What’s the opposite of sad? You’re happy. How can I be happy? So now you’re writing and you’re drawing things of how to be happy. I think even you had a book in class about the Hip-Hop culture in New York where I want to say that it originally had started because, I mean, nobody was doing it like they were doing out in New York, the tagging on the subways. Like, that’s all right, that is insane. The cardboard boxes, all that braid that I see, Biggie Smalls driving, like, on the corner of the street and have it like, that’s where it started.
In my opinion, like, that’s all expression. Like, why was that bad? Like, that shit was dope. Like, if I could be, like, I would want to be like Biggie too, I want to spit some bars too, you know, like, I want a graffiti on those trains too, you know. Just the way of getting your feelings out there, showing people who you are, which you can do, and it’s not a bad thing. And I hate that it is considered a bad thing to some people. And they want to start tearing you down and dising on you because of it. Like, no one’s giving you shit, Karen, because your form of expression is like knitting or you like walks, like, nobody, you know, like, nobody’s calling you lame or whatever. Like, leave me alone, you’re lonely as shit.

JS: So what’s your earliest memory of experience in Hip-Hop? Like, how did you get into it?

AG: Backseat of my dad’s—it’s not, whose car was it? It was, he had an old-ass car. I’m talking about ashtrays in the back of the seats. You like ashtrays in the backs, seat belts going across your waist. None of this bullshit. Big roomy car blasting Eminem. And, like, four-year-old me is just like a sponge. I’m absorbing what Eminem is trying to say and I’m spitting it. 50 Cent like I brush the dirt off my shoulders. Like, for me, it didn’t apply to me back then, but that’s like, my earliest memories, like, bump in those tunes in the backseat on my dad drives around driving us to school, to Grandma’s, to the store. Like that was it. And just growing up from there like 50 Cent, Eminem, Lil’ Wayne when he started popping off. A Tribe Called Quest. Tupac, Biggie, Wu-Tang. Wu-Tang was like that’s my earliest memory is bumping that shit because my dad was bumping it.

JS: So then, how do Hip-Hop and school intersect?

AG: In a way, it didn’t because of what I was being told like that doesn’t make sense. That’s bad. You’re young. Why are you listening to profanity? Oh now, it’s the way you’re being raised. You know, it didn’t intersect. It didn’t intersect until I got to high school and then I was
listening to what, you know, I was still in high school, kids were bumping like that new shit, like, they were going with it. I was still stuck in the past, like, yeah, I was still bumping, like, that old head music. It’s shitty to say “old head” but I think that’s like how my generation can describe it. It’s that old head music, but that’s where I got, like, my “I don’t give a fuck” [anymore attitude]. Blasting NWA in the halls like, yeah, what’s like, what’s good? Do you know what I mean? Like Appetite for Destruction right now, nobody mess with me. I’m here just to do me and that’s where it kind of crossed over.

It was just that attitude from, like that Hip-Hop, that form of expression. I was like yeah, like I could do the same shit and like, you know, these guys aren’t to something like, like, you know, fuck everybody else who got some shit to say it. And I like that, I like that a lot. And it has stuck with me, like my boyfriend, he listens to all that modern shit. While he’s in the car with me, I bump nothing but, like that old shit and I’m rapping word [for] word and he’s like, “Why so aggressive?” I’m like, “What? These guys, that’s their expression.” We think about that music, that Hip-Hop old head, right? Hip-Hop old head music like they were and it’s like predominantly Blacks and Hispanics. Like, you’re already being oppressed. So to make like, NWA is a really good example, like a bunch of, like, Black men, you know, rapping about guns, drugs, like, “F--- the police” and shit like, that. Horrible, horrible role models.

You know, are we getting shitted on? That was just their way of lashing out, like, standing up for themselves and that’s how I took it. I was like, fuck it. Like, I’m gonna stand up for myself too. And that’s how I just kind of came to be. It didn’t intersect at first and I really wish it did. But just due to, like, people giving you, like, people whispering shit in your ear, telling you how bad it is, it didn’t work until you stop blocking it. So you block out the haters and start doing you. And I was like, ah, it makes sense now, there was that connection.
JS: It’s kind of crazy. It almost seems like it came at the right time, you know. For you like that empowerment that you found with this, right? [crosstalk] Because during the time, I mean, you’re at LT, which was essentially like, whiteness at its fucking form and shit.

AG: Oh, yeah, no, like, yeah, it was hard. You know, I couldn’t even, like,—I like my music loud. So when somebody would have to tap me on the shoulder and be like, hey, your music’s too loud and it’s like, “Why the fuck do you care? Go listen to Taylor Swift. Fuck off and leave me alone. I want to listen to what I want to listen to. I’m not bumping, I’m not tappin’ you on your shoulder and like, ‘Hey, you’re playing Taylor Swift too loud.’ It’s a distraction like, what? No, like, oh God. Leave me alone.” Yeah. It came at the right time.

JS: So they would do it to you? They would tap you?

AG: Yeah, like in study halls and stuff. If the teacher could hear it and couldn’t get my attention, [which] was a lot of the time because my face was down into my paper. Either I was doing homework trying to do it so I won’t have to go home and do homework or I was doodling because that’s just, like, I have a lot in my mind and I have to put it down’somewhere and that’s how I expressed it. So I would have kids tap me and they’re like, you’re playing music way too loud and it’s, like, chill. I’m like, bro, I’m not telling you shit. Like, leave me alone, you know, like, look at the teacher and I’m like, I’m sorry, I'll lower it but for, like, a student, like, go out of their way and be like, can you put that down? Can you mind your business? Like, why I’m not bothering you, you know. Like I don’t know, it just blew me how much kids had to say because kids were bold enough to say some shit.

And if they didn’t say some shit, it was that look on their face as you were both leaving that classroom. Like, that said enough, like, ignorant, you know what I mean? [crosstalk]

They’re just like, oh.
JS: All right, Adali, we’re coming to an end, almost. But before we head out, what’s your top five?

AG: Okay, this is where I get a little confused. If they cross over, rap and Hip-Hop, my top five are Lauryn Hill. Lauryn Hill is on there for sure. She has Hip-Hop and she had a little bit of slow jams in her too, but she Hip-Hop and that’s because she was like, the first female artist to speak up about women empowerment. So I was like, yeah, like, fuck it. Like, that makes sense. Like, I don’t have to listen to guys rap about guy shit. This is a girl rapping about girl shit. Like, that make sense.

Ice cube. Ice Cube was a big one. I don’t know if you consider like, NWA Hip-Hop. I think that’s kind of, like, more like rap a little bit. So, so yeah, so Ice Cube, Lauryn Hill, NWA for sure. Kanye West is a big one. I know there’s hella controversy with them. But controversy aside, that man seems like a musical genius, and I fuck with his music very heavily. Big, big important person in my life. And then my last one would have to be Lutin.

JS: So, Kanye, his old soul or his new shit? Have you listened to Donda?

AG: I have listened to Donda but it’s like, it’s weird. Because I’m getting some, like, “Jesus is king” vibes. I was not expecting him to take it that route. I really thought we were going to get old Kanye back a little bit like that ignorant Kanye, but now, like, we did we got, like, so “Jesus is king” type shit, but it’s still hard, like, I still bump it. Like, I have songs that I listen to him on the way to work. I fuck with this, like, old stuff heavily. Him and Jay-Z in Watch The Throne is one of, like, my top albums. I mean, Jay-Z’s the go-to, like, put some respect on Jay-Z’s name.

JS: I’m going to put you on some old shit, too. Since you like some of that old head, as you call it. As we’re talking about this and you can sit, you keep on talking about old heads. Man, now I
feel old because that's all my shit that I listen to. You know, so it’s like, yeah, I guess I am though. But...

**AG:** Just know that, like, I personally wouldn’t call it old head because, like, I listen to it and it doesn’t make sense to call it old head. I’m not old, you know, like I’m not old, but I know that’s, like, the best way to describe it because of, like, the younger generation. The younger generation is cool with, like, kinda Young Thug, Little Tecca, shit like that, but I fuck with like the old songs, like, and that’s just the only way to describe it to these young kids. It’s just old head music. Is there something wrong with it?

**JS:** No. Good. You know what’s crazy, though, like for a long time, I was just kind of stuck on, like, the ’90s Hip-Hop, right? Like, the Talib, the Mos Def, like, all the Ruckus, all the stuff that came out of Ruckus record. Right? Like that was my shit including Wu-Tang and like, you know, NWA and like, that shit was cool actually; do you know Ulysses?

**AG:** Ulysses? No.

**JS:** So he’s a Hip-Hopper too. And he started putting me out to some new catch, you know, like, yeah. He’s out putting out to like, dude. It was him, the first one that played bass in the J. Cole track and I was like,...

**AG:** Oh, that’s a good combo right there. [Inaudible]

**JS:** Yeah. Yeah. So I was like, okay. There’s something to be said about these youngsters but he refer to it as a backpack rap or something like that. That’s how you know you’re an old head. He’s like, oh, this is backpack rapping. And I was like, okay, I guess even more like, a more lyrical, you know, with those. And I think that, I mean, I don’t know. This is like a whole another, like, subject, right? But like, Hip-Hop is in its beginnings, right? And its inception was really about, like, for movement and like,—
AG: It was that lyrical, you know, and that’s the thing too. A lot of like, this younger generation don’t—I’m sorry to cut you off. But like, no, I agree completely like, a lot of the younger generation missed that part. Overlook that part completely. Nobody cares what the artist is truly saying. If you listen to Drake shit, future shit, like those new artists, I promise you, I could tell you a couple of songs wherein some of their lines, like, it just don’t make sense. Like, how? How do people like it? How can you relate to that? You can’t. That’s just gibberish. Like, that doesn’t make sense. But that old shit back then, like the way my dad said it, there’s nothing like what used to be playing on the radio back then.

There was a damn song for every single feeling you had. Your heart was broken, bam, song right there. You love, you’re young, you don’t know what’s good for you, bam, song right there. Do you know what I mean? There were lyrics and lyrics were like the main thing. Now it’s just like, you know, it’s kind of catchy. You have a catchy beat. All right, I’ll save it. Do you know what I mean? People don’t look deeper into it. Like, I’m on Genius looking up lyrics and shit, you know, like,...

JS: Yup, all the time, all the time.

AG: And I’m like, oh my God, I could break down this song right now. You know, like, oh, nobody caught that reference? They just overlooked past it and it’s so sad, like, it’s so sad to see less people care about that. It’s more about the noise. But, you know, sometimes you have to block, like, drown out that noise and really tune in and pay attention to what the actual message is because the message is there, it’s deeper than you actually think.

JS: That is true, man. And that’s why I like,—Hip-Hop is such a dope culture, right? I don’t know, like I think that’s partly why I decided to go back to this original topic, because I honestly believe that Hip-Hop, as a culture, has the ability to empower students, right? And really like,
provide a sense of identity that they, that’s missing from [our] schooling system. And you’ll like, on that note, you know, like I appreciate you being here and sharing your story. Legit, you know, is there anything else that you want to say that we haven’t covered?

AG: Thank you so much for reaching out and letting me know about this. I was excited. Yeah, I was really excited. I was looking forward to today. Thank you so much for having me out here and letting me express and share a little bit about it. And what my thoughts are about that, not too many people have interest, but I appreciate that out of everybody, you had reached out to me.

JS: Yeah, no doubt, dude. And you know what, you know what’s cool about this, like, all bullshit aside, like, hopefully, this is something that shorty’s gonna listen to, right? And like people to gravitate to, and throughout this, like, just pick out those, like, nuggets of knowledge that you’re dropping because you are dropping knowledge, right? And I think, you more so than, like, I or some other catch that are older could relate to those young kids. I was talking to one of my friends who’s an educator too and she was—Because I had done, so, this podcast, I had started when I was just like, kind of, I don’t want to do a school thing. So it was a way to avoid it. So I had started already and then my friend is like, I’m going to use this in class for my kids. When are you gonna start up again? And that’s kind of like, all those things kind of blend it together. And I was like all right, cool. Let me put something that’s going to have substance, something that’s going to be beneficial to those kids.

Because my experience was like, well over, like, 20, 25 years ago, right? Like, when I—What is it? I look about 20 years ago, I’m not even [inaudible]. [Laughter] And it’s sad but like, shit really hasn’t changed that much, you know, kids are still fucking like, getting shitted on by teachers, you know, and it’s usually Black and Brown kids.
AG: That was so unfortunate. I hoped shorties do listen to this as well and just to like, you know, they’re not the only ones out there they can relate you’re like, you’re not the only one out there, you know what I mean? Like, I’ve been through it. I’m still a shorty myself, you know what I mean? Like, I was there not too long ago trying to figure this shit out, but it has played like, a huge part and it doesn’t matter. If you’re considered the minority, you ain’t alone. We hear you, we understand you, we see where you’re coming from.

JS: Yeah, dude, and it was like, for me, it was like, extra special to see, like, these kids, like, last year, just coming out and saying, we’re done with this life, systemic, like, bullshit. We’re going to come out here. We’re going to present.

AG: Because it is bullshit and it’s crazy because I hope that in the future, more and more wake up and realize you don’t got to be part of this bullshit anymore. You can stand up; you got a voice, learn how to use it. It takes a while because you have all those people trying to oppress you and to silence you and put you in this category in this box, but it ain’t even like that. Like, once you break out, you realize like, shit ain’t sweet, like, there’s no turning back and you know, that’s just how it is.

[END]
Figure 12. Jerne QR code.

Figure 13. Jerne cover.
INTRO: Bienvenidos, welcome to The Latino Underground, a podcast dedicated to the reclamation and exploration of Latino identity through counter-narrative stories. We hope to give you tools by which to navigate in a passive system. Stay tuned.

JS: Hey, what's up mi gente, it’s Jorge. Thank you for tuning in. In today’s session, we’re going to have a conversation with the homie, Jerne, and we’re going to go ahead and stick with his Graff name because Jerne’s still active. So, we got to do our best to protect his identity, right? So the best way I could introduce Jerne is through this way. So, yeah, that line right there to me, is kind of describing Jerne. Jerne is a cat from Little Village, [a] Graff artist who’s been dedicated to the art for a good minute. We talked about knowledge; when we talked about the dissemination of knowledge and non-traditional ways by which individuals learn, right? Jerne is a “cat” that through his art form has disseminated that knowledge. He’s a cat who has been influential to many graffiti artists, which is why I was really looking forward to having a conversation with him. He’s a cat straight from Little Village. He’s a cat who has been influential to Hip-Hop in Chicago. So without further ado, here’s our conversation. So, hey man, first and foremost, thanks for agreeing to do this, man. I know you’re a busy cat.

JER: Yeah, no. Thank you for taking the time to want to listen in. Yeah, I’m pretty busy with work. And I’m also a father and stuff. So [I] kind of have to gamble all that stuff and try to find time for myself at the same time. But yeah, thank you for having me. Sure.

JS: So what is it that you do, man? What do you work at?

JER: Yeah, so I work in the maritime industry. I work on boats. Oh, cheers. I’m having a beer, too.

JS: Yeah, man. It’s been a rough day. So you work on boats, bro?
**JER:** Yeah, I look up boats on the lake and river. I drive boats out there. I’ve been in the maritime industry for 20 years, that’s what I do on my day job.

**JS:** So, that’s like, a year-round thing, dude?

**JER:** No, it’s not. It’s usually from March to November and then I actually bartend at the Lyric Opera in the wintertime. That’s where I work through the winter. It’s seasonal so after that’s done, the boat start-up in early March and I hop on that.

**JS:** That’s dope, bro. The grind never fucking stops, huh? So I start the podcast with a common question, right? And that’s, when did you first realize that there were inequities within our educational system? Was there an experience that you might have had that alluded to that?

**JER:** Oh, wow, so I went to Farragut High School in Little Village. I don’t know if you went there, but I could see what you mean by that. I really don’t remember exactly how they came up with me. But yeah, I mean society, that’s the way it’s been built right now for us and it’s always been a struggle for us Latinos in Little Village in itself and how they teach. And what they want is to know, what they expect from us even though we come from a different culture and different background. And yeah, I mean, I don’t know. It’s kind of a tough question for me, to be honest with you.

**JS:** Yeah, I hear you, bro. Hey, we could get back to that one. But yeah, I had something to Farragut, my freshman year, dude.

**JER:** Oh, wow. Okay.

**JS:** Yeah. That was my freshman year. I had some very good and then afterward I went to Curry but, for the listeners, man, if you could paint the picture of what Little Village is, as you know, as vivid as you can, how would you describe it? How would you make someone who’s never been to Little Village imagine Little Village?
**JER:** Oh, wow. Like, how it is now or where I was when I grew up there?

**JS:** Your take on it, bro, like, either or?

**JER:** Oh, wow. I’ll tell you from the beginning. My dad had a printing shop there early on, like, two blocks away from the high school. And this was what I’m going to say like, [1988], something like that. And I mean, my parents didn’t know what type of neighborhood that was. They just saw it. It’s just like, just the city. That’s just what we live and didn’t, was not aware of the fact that there was a lot of violence to life by the gangs, drug dealing, a lot of drug use and stuff like that. So, for someone who’s never been there before, it’s got to say it’s like, it’s a culture shock if you’ve never been there. You know, there’s a lot of good things there and there’s obviously a lot of bad things, you could actually see it. You can smell it. I personally experienced violence. I’ve seen a lot of crazy shit. I’m sorry for my language. I’ve seen a lot of...

**JS:** No, it’s cool, bro. You curse.

**JER:** A lot of that scene heard was a victim of, you know, got beat up multiple times and said, you know, got into multiple fights. But that’s just our world. That’s just what it was. We didn’t know anything other than that, you know what I’m saying? So, my parents thought that that’s just the way it is here in Chicago, you know what I’m saying? But, it’s very rich in culture. It’s a beautiful neighborhood, very rich. And you can see it just walking down 26th Street or the small streets and stuff like that. You can see a lot of ladies and the pilot areas. It’s rich. It’s so rich. it’s overwhelming sometimes. You love it, but at the same time, it’s a love and hate type of thing there. And that’s kind of what it is, you know, a lot of good food. Great people. Very, very nice people aside from the fact that there are a lot of gangs. It’s gangland. That’s pretty much what it is: it’s gangland. When you walk around, people look at you. You don’t want to look at their eyes, they keep standing on the corner. You know, you got to follow a certain code when you
live there. I’m sure a lot of people can relate to that. You can’t wear certain colors, you know. It has its own rules and not a lot of neighborhoods are like that anymore. I’m going to bring it up to today and present time—a lot of neighborhoods nowadays, they don’t, it’s not like that but over there, I don’t live there anymore, but it’s almost still kind of stuck in time through my eyes. I feel it’s still kind of the same, man, it hasn’t changed. You know, the music that was around. I’m sure you can relate to this with me. The music that was banging around and the cars and all that. To this day, they still use the same music, it’s just culture. Yes, you know, I’m saying, it’s just the way it is. That’s how you grow up there. Either you’re with it or you’re not, you know? And as a kid being grown up there, you have choices and they’re very limited on choices. As you know, I’m sure you can relate to that. Either you’re a gangbanger, you sell drugs. And there’s a few of us who are, you know, until rock and roll ghettos or whatnot and then there’s a small patch of woods that are into writing and graffiti. And it’s very hard to do that because the gangs there, they’re just the surrounding areas as well. You know, they’re kind of against that, you know, it’s, they don’t understand it. So, it’s even harder to try and pick one of those things. For me, I’d pick graffiti and art and that was difficult on yourself to try to fit in in a neighborhood because, you know, the gangs were, you know, “What are you doing? Like that’s, “That doesn’t go well here,” you know. But that’s kind of a nutshell, that’s kind of how it is there. You know, I mean, it’s a beautiful place but you know, you have to be very careful and just follow the rules, pretty much.

**JS:** Yeah, dude. I mean, there’s a lot to unpack there, right? Let’s start with your parents, man. Did your parents migrate here at a later age or...?

**JER:** Oh, they did. Yeah, I came here. I think I was maybe 3 or 4, something like that. I was born in Mexico—Durango. And my mom came here first. My grandmother came here first and she had family up in Lake Forest or something like that. And then my mom came and my dad
came along with us, but he got stuck at the border. We flew in as a matter of fact, contrary to what other people say. So yeah, we flew in obviously, you know, it doesn’t matter how we flew in, but we got here. You might be right. So, peace out to Roberto, whoever that is, he let me get in here. But, that was my name on the plane. I mean, honestly, so...

**JS:** That’s dope, bro.

**JER:** Oh, yeah, dude. I remember my mom. It was really funny. My mom was like, she’s like, “Remember your name is Roberto.” I know this. I was like, “All right. Cool. This is like, a child.” It’s like, well, what the hell is my name? Like, what the fuck. So, yeah, my dad got caught. I mean, I’ve got caught. He got held by security and wasn’t able to board the plane to come over here. So I had to wait for him. I think a year or so, a year and a half, but he made it out, you know, we’d stood at by my aunt’s place for a couple of years until my dad got back on his feet and stuff like that. So that’s pretty much how that happened. But he ended up having his own business. So he’s a success to my eyes.

**JS:** Of course.

**JER:** He struggled and stuff like that, but he made it through and he gave me the opportunity to grow as a kid and to this day as an adult.

**JS:** So, family-structure-wise, dude. Like, it’s, it’s you, your parents, other siblings are just, you’re the only kid?

**JER:** Yeah. So, I’m the only kid for my parents. Personally, I have a half-brother on my mom’s side. He’s like, 3 or 4 years older than I am. He lived with us for a short period of time when I was young. He had mental health issues that we were not aware of. That’s another thing that we don’t know. It’s ignorance, you know, not recognizing if someone has mental health issues, but my brother was suffering through that. We didn’t know, my parents didn’t know, and he fell into
drug use. He was not a gangbanger, anything like that, but he fell into some drugs, heavy drug use, and that[‘s how] we lost him, dude; I mean, he didn’t pass away, but we lost him to the streets. He was homeless for a few months. I couldn’t find him. So I mean that’s Little Village, too, you know. It’s kind of fell in the bad hole and that was a big struggle for us growing up, when I was growing up, and it caused a lot of issues within the family. You know, again, it’s just part of living in it, in that environment, you know, and trying to move forward and make some sense out of it. And to this day, we’re still getting out of it, honestly. He’s doing a lot better, but it totally jacked shit up, you know, so...

JS: And you know what’s crazy about it, man? It sucks, right? Because, as we’re talking, you’re saying, that’s part of it, right? And we normalize this shit. We normalize these little things because that’s the way we rationalize and survive, right? But this shit isn’t normal. It’s our struggles. Do you [know] what I mean?

JER: Yeah.

JS: It’s our fucking badges of honor to be able to overcome this shit.

JER: Yeah, it’s not easy at all. I mean, it’s like, you said, it just seems like, that’s just normal for us, but it’s not. And how do you deal with that growing up, you’re having your own growing pains as a kid. Being a teenager and stuff like that. And then having to put that on top of you. It’s like, whoa, is this really how it is? Gang violence and drug use? So it was very confusing. I had some issues as well with that. Not that bad. But, I mean I fell into some trouble[d] times myself, and almost—I hung around with a lot of gangbangers and, you know, obviously mess[ed] around with some drugs here and there, but never got into that. Sadly, a lot of those friends of mine were into gangs, a lot of them; I’m going to say about 30% of them died. I’m sure a lot of you can relate to this. I lost a lot of friends, they were gangbangers—really good friends, actually really
good people. Just genuine, good folks, super cool guys. I mean, man, really cool people and they were just a product of the environment sadly and they weren’t able to get out, though. They didn’t have the support. Do you know what I’m saying? And luckily for me, I have my parents. They had their own issues as well, you know, a lot of alcoholism issues like that. But they were very supportive. My dad was very tough on me, very strict, and I’m just glad that I was able to have a solid, some sort of stable mind because I was working in my dad’s printing shop and I just had to be there and I had to work. So, he built me to be strong and I appreciate that. You need that in that neighborhood. You got to be mentally strong as well.

JS: Yeah, man. Yeah. Damn! You said a bunch of little nuggets of knowledge that I want to fucking tap into, but like, it’s crazy. In all honesty, I was looking forward to chatting with you for quite some time because your cat grew up in Little Village. And for me, this podcast and this dissertation, all this shifted with what happened with Adam Toledo, you know, the shorty.

JER: Oh, yeah.

JS: Who grew up in Little Village, who got killed by cops, right?

JER: Oh, absolutely. I mean, dude, I grew up half a block away from what had happened. Like, literally half a block, I know exactly the same location because there’s like, a gas station right there. There’s a church and around the corner—it was my dad’s printing shop. So, I know exactly. I used to hang out right there with my friend and he’s with our dogs and stuff. But yeah, I mean that’s sad and again, looking back on it, I don’t take sides. I never take sides on anything like that. But as a parent now, as well as a parent now, I’m just like, man, like, you know, like, what were you doing out there so late, you know. So it’s a lack of support from the parents and all that. But again, it’s a sad situation, but also it hopefully opens up a lot of people’s minds in the neighborhood. About how bad and how bad things can get there, and we need help, as a lot of
kids need help. They need attention. They need … after-school programs, they need counselors and just a whole bunch of stuff like that. Just for me, it was, like, I said BTB—born to bomb. Like, that was my first big family, and … Riddle. And then he was actually my mentor for a long [time]. He taught me how to paint. He taught me a lot of cool techniques. And to this day, he’s been my mentor and he was my second father almost, you know, and it saved my life. So you need that support, you know, somehow somewhere.

JS: So Jerne, talk to me about that, man. Let’s think about your education from a chronological aspect, right? Like, think about education from the time you were fucking in … kindergarten to the time. You got fucking to Farragut, right? And then...

JER: Yeah.

JS: About that fucking development like, how it was and then how you fucking just got into a Graff as a whole.

JER: Oh, wow. Yeah. I went to actually talk about somebody else not too long ago. So initially when we got here, I was in Pilsen and I went to Cooper, which is right. There was a laundromat right there. Right by the post office. I went there for preschool and stuff. I remember that, and that was uneventful besides being chased by some Doberman in the alley. I don’t know. But yeah, my brother’s, yeah anyway, but then we went over to Little Village and then went to … Spry right there across the street from where, on the Boulevard by an associate. And that was good. I loved being at Spry. I really got a lot of support there from a lot of my teachers. That’s what I started realizing that Graff existed. Initially, it started for me when in Pilsen [inaudible] British Knights. I don’t know if anybody remembers those shoes or sneakers, those BK’s, right? Yeah, so I used to, I don’t know why but I used to just grab a marker. My dad used to have these markers from the printing shop and I used to write BK on people’s cars for some reason. I don’t
know why. Yeah, for sure. And it’s like, at arcades, I would write BK and then people were like, oh, what do you write, as it goes with my shoes because I wear them, but I had no idea that Graff existed. I was a very young kid, not until later on when I went to grammar school. Like, I started seeing these magazines and it was like, what? Like, there are other people like me. It was like, I thought it was just me, but no, it’s like, other people like, to write on shit too and I was like, whoa, like, there’s a bigger thing here. I was like, I kind of wants to be friends with them, like, we kind of think alike. So that’s kind of like, how we began. And then from there graduated grammar school. I started bombing very early, like, 7th grade... 6th grade...

**JS:** No shit, it was only 7th grade?

**JER:** Yeah. Just kind of like, writing, really, I don’t know if I’d call it bombing. I mean, you know, I just started writing, dude. I don’t know. Just writing on them and it starts in the neighborhood, you know, it starts in your fucking alley and like, you know, the little *candita* on the corner and just writing in a neighborhood and then from there it was like....

**JS:** And then you get that high, right?

**JER:** Well, yeah, the adrenaline, you know.

**JS:** What it was like, bro, explain it to someone who has never fucking tagged or nothing, bombed. What is that like?

**JER:** What is that like? That’s a great question. I don’t know. You got to go out there and try it, bro, but it’s sublime. It’s just wow, you just kind of like, it’s almost as if you’re finding, you just have this adrenaline and like, just rush of life. It’s really hard to describe to someone how that feels. It’s almost like, seeing something that, that is it there, but it’s invisible. And then finally seeing you like, oh, wow, I like that. I like the way that looks. I want to do it some more, you know, and it wasn’t just to get up, per se, or to be cool because for me it was never about being
cool. It was always, I would always do it just for myself because it made me feel good. It’s almost as if eating a good meal or like, taking a vacation or it just feels like, that satisfaction of seeing it and feeling it, you know, I mean, it’s really hard to describe honestly. I can’t find the words for it.

**JS:** No, dude. I get it, you know, like, I’ve struggled with it as well, you know, and it...

**JER:** Oh, yeah, okay.

**JS:** That should never go away, right? Like, I haven’t bombed or something. So I know I haven’t bombed in like, [inaudible] over fucking 20 years.

**JER:** Oh wow. Yeah. I know it does not go away. I still feel it. So I still get down every once in a while; not as much as before when I said try to squeeze it in. And now, I feel it but it’s more so of a lifestyle, so I guess you could say I’m kind of numb to it, but I still I get that satisfaction of it being me because now I’m 40 years old and … it’s the only thing that is still there from when I was really young and that’s a very rare thing to feel, is like, imagine doing something when you’re a little kid. And then when you’re older, you’re parent, you’re an adult, you have a career and still having something that, that’s been there your whole life and you still do it and you still feel it. It’s a beautiful thing and I love it, it’s a lifestyle. I think about, which is now why we have a, I was a co-founder of Graffholics and now we have chapters in different states and western. It’s a lifestyle where that’s just what we live and breathe aside from the fact from our jobs and careers and being a parent but it’s something that it’s never going to go away. It’s if I stop doing it, I would literally be lying to myself about who I am, you know, so it’s one of those things that can musician, you know what I mean, or it’s the same thing you drop that guitar or the violin, it’s your life. You know, somebody once told me, a good friend of mine named Raw Damage O’Row who introduced me into like, hardcore, graffiti in early high school.
JS: Dude I don’t even know you know Damage O.

JER: Oh yeah, Damage O for sure. How it’s my buddy dude. We share the same birthday. I was HQ at you all day. And yeah, he was mural briefly, I believe.

JS: I thought he goes active.

JER: Nah, I don’t know. I don’t know. He’s a great artist right now. As a matter of fact, he does great canvases. Super dope guy. He’s literally like, the closest thing to a brother for me, when I was growing up, introduce me to the like, real hardcore Graff, like, just like, bombing, you know, and being real. And I remember, I remember him telling me one day. I think I had somebody’s book or somebody’s black book. And I was like, oh, I forgot to give it to him. It’s been like, a few months. He’s like, hey man, for some people. That’s all they have, it’s that black book, dude? Like, you should give it back and I was like, man, you know, you’re right? Like, that’s true. It started as it hit me and I was like, you’re right, dude, like, some people that’s all they have and you have to respect that whether it’s being a musician or graffiter or an artist or whatever like, you have to respect that and let them be and give them, give it back to him, whatever you have from them. But yeah, I mean real, super cool man, one of my guys for sure.

JS: All right, bro. So going back, your shorty fucking seventh grade. You start exploring graffiti.

JER: Yup.

JS: Part of the show I like exploring is non-traditional knowledge. For example, like, your dad, bro. He’s a printmaker, right?

JER: Yeah. He was. Yup, he was a printer.

JS: Printing right? That’s a whole body of knowledge. And it doesn’t require a degree or shit. Just like, … Riddle can be considered a fucking educator.

JER: Oh, for sure. Absolutely. Oh my God! Yeah.
JS: That cat did so much for the community and … taught so many youngsters and shit. So let’s go to that shit, bro.

JER: Yeah, 7th grade. Yeah. Just, my dad. I pretty much grew up in a printing shop. Like, you know, my dad had tons of paper everywhere, dude, like, just boxes and boxes of paper. He was … I see his nickname there was Maestro, translation of the Maestro, the master. So he was just like, super, he was a super genius with the ink and getting the right colors and he’s a perfectionist, you know. And I was a little kid. I used to watch him the whole time and he’s educated me on the machines and like, what each part there. In other words, the way I took it my mind. Well, the way I feel like, he was trying to tell me it was like, you know, every part in this machine has a job to do to create this, this image, this piece of art. And if something I remember clearly, it’s funny you mention, that he tells me that if this part breaks, it depends on how long it’s broken, we won’t have any money so you have to take care of each little part, right? Because it’s very crucial for the machine and I take that into, like, being one of them, one of the senior members in Graphaholics was like, you got to take part, you got to take care of each piece, because, you know, it’s a big part of the product will be pumped out at the end of the day, right? So that’s kind of where I was when I was a kid. I was just being educated by my dad and at the same time, I met Riddle because riddle used to go in that printing shop and my dad used to print out his comic books.

JS: So comics?

JER: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh my God. Yeah. I mean, he used to call himself the blond bomber. He saw a Riddle. The blonde bomber. He says, blind. I don’t know if you remember him. He’s had blonde hair. He’s a, he’s like, half white, half Puerto Rican and Mexican complete, just wild dude in the ’hood.
JS: So yeah, bro, Riddle. Describe him to us, who is Riddle?

JER: Who is read Riddle? That would never be able to answer that question. Visually he was just like, this. Oh, man, I need another beer. Who is this? Who is this man?

JS: Well, get it, bro. I’ll wait for you, man.

JER: All right, dude, for real? All right. Call Matt Riddle. Jeez, he was just like, this. I just. Well, first of all, I just started seeing drawings pages of his comic books at my dad’s and he would bring home like, some clips or like, some, some messed-up prints that he had, he would just bring him in, he’d be like, oh no miyo, here. Check them out. Like, you like to draw. Look at this stuff and I was like, whoa, like, what the fuck is this? Who did this? And then I would hang out. He’s like, he comes almost every Friday or some shit. Every Saturday to pick some stuff up. And I was like, oh well, then you mind if I go there and kind of see if I could get a glimpse of him, and he was there, and he would just be like, hey, what’s up, kid, blah, blah, blah. He always wearing a leather jacket, always wears black. Nothing else. Fucking … super cool dude, huge personality, like, always cracking jokes, very outgoing, almost impossible to hate. Like, you would just be drawn to him. You know what? I mean, like, super cool, dude, super artistic, had blonde—long, blonde hair, like fucking Fabio. Whoever remembers Fabio and I was like, what the fuck is it, like? What the hell is this dude? You know, like, as a kid, I was like, hell, completely out of place in a neighborhood, tells like, may[be] I kind of like him, he’s different. So, and to this day, I’m always a lot of writers. I’m going to say, artists. We like, different, shit. We like things that are not normal. That’s what inspires us. And that’s who Riddle was and that’s how I kind of met him. And he would come by, give me like, books and stuff, and not until high school. When I went to Farragut, that I met, like, I met Damage O, I met Stare Caesar. He’s a really famous tattoo artist nowadays and he was BTB, DCU and he was like, hey, you want to
come through? And I was like, yeah, I know Riddle when I was a kid. And so that’s kind of how they came up man, have that, it’s like, history.

**JS:** So what was the age difference between you and Riddle?

**JER:** Oh, wow, when I met him, he was like, 32 to 35. Yeah. He was like, in his early 30s and I was like, I don’t know. No, wait—I’m sorry; when I met him I was a kid. I’m sure he was in his mid-20s.

**JS:** Okay.

**JER:** Yeah, I’m referring to, like, when I actually started hanging out with him.

**JS:** So mid-twenties, you’re what? 8th grade? 7th grade?

**JER:** Yeah, something like that. Yeah. Something like, I don’t remember clearly but yeah, something around there. That’s kind of like, when I started, when I met him. When I see him around on his bike, he was on his bike to this day, still on his bike. Yeah. He’s still on his bike. Lives on the South Side now, I believe. He loves that KFC. That’s for sure. But uh, because I see his bike out there and I’m like, yo, what’s up really? So I still go. I know where he goes and crashes the restaurant sometimes and we have a little chat but that’s kind of how they came up, you know?

**JS:** All right, so then you’re [at] the print shop. You are exposed to this cat Riddle who’s doing comics and engaged to the shit, right? So when you go to … high school, freshman year, boom, what happens there?

**JER:** Yeah. I met Damage O freshman year, boom, in English class.

**JS:** And he was already writing?
**JER:** Oh, yeah. He was already writing big time. Like, he was, he was, I remember walking by his desk. I was passing out, like, some sheets, or whatever, for the teacher. And, uh, and I was like, yo, what up, like, what are you doing there?

**JS:** My dude’s like, what you doing there?

**JER:** Yeah, I was just like, what you doing, dude? And he was like, oh, what’s up? And I said I like to draw—I didn’t say I write, I was just like, oh, I like to draw. I didn’t know how to approach him because he’s like, like, what I saw on paper what he was doing. It just seemed very advanced for me. I was like, whoa, that’s pretty dope. Like, how do you get into that? How do you do that? You know, and he was … “Guy, come on. You should come by; we’re going to hang out.” So that’s how I met him, and Caesar was there. He was already breakdancing. He was way advanced. He was like, way up there. In other words, I came in with them and they were way advanced, way more advanced than I was. And I was playing catch-up, right away. I was like, yo, I want to be a part of this. This is like, super fucking cool shit and I feel like, it was a part like, I belong there. Not again, not to be cool. But just to, just because that’s why I felt like, there was a calling. I was like, dude, it’s just like, calling me, so throughout whole high school. I screwed up during high school, sadly because of that too, you know, back just going out there at night and just being a knucklehead, being that and they just open up the door for a lot of different things. I started really getting into art, went to a lot of, like, UIC workshops and I had a really supportive teacher there, Maverick Snowden. She recognized the fact that I was into graphs and in Farragut, you know, people and teachers are going to look down or frown upon if you doing graffiti; they don’t understand that. That’s an outlet for us and in a different neighborhood. Just because we’re not using, like, oil on canvas or acrylic, or chalk, or whatever, it doesn’t mean that we’re not artists, you know, so, but she recognized the fact that it was important in my life and
she understood the fact, she understood where she wore that school was in Little Village and that it was important for me and she hooked me up with a lot of different people in school, like, some people who were doing all these art projects on walls. Like, I was already piecing when I was in freshman, like, sophomore year, I mean junior or sophomore year. I was already doing, getting into production because of Riddle, like, right away. He got me, like, he got me in quick. It was overwhelming because I was like, what are we gonna do today? He’s like, all, we’re going to paint his giant walls. Like, whoa! What? You know, so because of that I had experienced very early on and so I was like, actually in charge of, like, a lot of art groups within Farragut to go do neighborhood murals around 26th Street, and I was like, the … head leader. The head planner for a lot of these walls because of that. And I got to give it up to that teacher, Miss Snowden. She hooked it up, you know, and she gave me that support that I needed crucial. So crucial. A lot of obviously other teachers, well, they’re very supportive and stuff, and my friends and my parents recognized that, and they just kind of like, they follow through. They came, they gave me the support that I needed when it was necessary. So that’s kind of, like, how high school was.

**JS:** So that’s like, your formal education/informal education?

**JER:** Oh, for sure. Yep. That’s it.

**JS:** So now let’s talk about this graph knowledge. This Hip-Hop knowledge comes into fruition. Right? And how Riddle has a role in it. He plays a part in this. How did that come to be, bro?

**JER:** Wow, how does he do that? How did he do that? Wow, I don’t know. I really don’t know how he did that. I just, he would with Rahu, with Damage O, we would mostly partying honestly in high school, you know the party, get drunk and high. And then once we got high and drunk when it was late enough, we go out bombing, hit up by docks and stuff; you know, have some fucking outlines, you know, just hit up some freights, do some tagging out some freights and
street bombing, but with Riddle, that’s when it really became serious. Because of, he just kind of like, he was like, “Hey, listen, I see a lot of potential in you and I see what you’re doing. Why don’t you want to come over?” And again, it was kind of weird because that was such a young kid. He was an older man. So, and I would, yeah, so I remember my mom asking, where are you going? I was like, well, I’m going to go with that guy with the leather jacket, and the blond hair; my mom’s like, “What the fuck are you doing, dude?” My dad was like, “That guy’s cool.” So, you know, I would hang out with him and stuff, and he would show me his drawings and he would educate me on just a bunch of super cool things. He was showing me his work and it literally blew my mind and I was like, man, I want to be like, him, I want to draw like him, I want to be like him, but you know, I like, I want to paint big walls, you know, and, but that’s kind of like, how that happened, you know, just with him, it became a lot more serious. I know [inaudible]. Yeah, it’s kind of hard. Also Menace Men Sal Ski, you know, Sal was a big influence in my life too when I … started writing. With his concepts of like, pink concepts, like, coloring concepts and what letters are and what they can be and what you want them to be. So he gave me this weird abstract idea of what letter because graffiti’s letters, right? Without letters, it’s not a graff. So with Sal Ski taught me that what style, you know, and all that. Needs to be educated, now is my education right there, was in BTB. And that was like, my college years you can say for graff. That’s when higher learning came into play of graffiti and stuff. That was it right there. So yeah. That’s it.

JS: So Jerne Man, you know, what’s crazy? As you’re talking, man, the one thing I keep on thinking about is academia and this whole dissertation process and how, well, part of the dissertation process, man, you have to do what is called a lit review, which is basically looking at previous writings and the topic like, all those scholars that came before you, what have they said
about the topic, and as I was reading, as I was doing the research, like, it’s all done in a very fucking inorganic way, right? And I was going to fall into that shit, too, and the way it’s written about it’s almost like, if these scholars, right, these quote-unquote fucking, you know, experts in the field. They write about it as if, though Hip-Hop was planted, you know, and there were magic beanstalks, you know, Hip-Hop magic beanstalks and then one day in fucking, in the 60s, late sixties, whatever, Hip-Hop was born. And the elements were born and graffiti was born. And DJing was born, right? And fucking, you know, like, Hip-Hop came to be and it’s not like that. Hip-Hop is organic. Hip-Hop is experienced, right? Hip-Hop is taught in a nontraditional manner. It’s what you’re talking about.

**JER:** Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely.

**JS:** You know what?

**JER:** You have to go through it. You have to, it’s like boot camp. Do you know what I’m saying? You have to go through it every fuckin’ obstacle. You know, you have to go through it in order to see it and know what Hip-Hop is and that’s really what I, what I’m, that might the whole story what I’m telling you. It’s like, yes graff. Yeah, graffiti, but it’s Hip-Hop. It’s under the umbrella of Hip-Hop and that’s really what it’s all about. It’s understanding what Hip-Hop means and what it means, what I thought it meant back in the day when I was a kid, and what it means now, to me now. Hip-Hop is like, it’s not everything for me, but it’s definitely it and I have to take care of it. Nowadays, it’s my responsibility to take care of it, on whatever I can do to take care of it. Whatever I can do. I might be half, you know, but yeah, like, you said it’s something we have to go through.

**JS:** Yeah, man, I agree 100%, you know. So Jerne, shifting gears a little, bro. I know it’s hard. But how would you define Hip-Hop?
**JER:** Oh, wow. What is Hip-Hop? Hip-Hop is...

**JS:** To you.

**JER:** To me. Hip-Hop is being you and being truthful to yourself and Hip-Hop is also loving yourself. Loving who you are. And if you like, something you enjoy it and you put effort into it and you’re satisfied with it. It’s regarding music, art, dancing, obviously, the floor of all the elements and, but Hip-Hop, in general, is whatever makes you feel happy and it needs to be shared, if it’s not shared, then it’s not Hip-Hop because Hip-Hop was designed—it wasn’t designed, but it flourished into something that it is supposed to consume everyone and yet it needs to be shared. Like, again, it’s like, music, dance, art, and all that stuff. It needs to be shared, practiced, and in this need to be loved, to [be] read. That’s what Hip-Hop is, it’s sharing it and having a good time with it. I grew up, when I was in BTB, I was Zulu and I still believe in the Zulu Nation. And that’s actually the raw definition of what the Zulu nation is. Is having a good time and sharing it. So for me, Hip-Hop is sharing the love. Sharing what you do with others. That’s Hip-Hop in my book and loving what you’re doing.

**JS:** Jerne, you mentioned Zulu, right? To understand Zulu. How does that intersect with Hip-Hop? And how does that come into your life?

**JER:** Oh, wow. Yeah, that’s a very old concept when I was growing up. I didn’t understand it. It’s just like, … it’s an organization. It’s … it’s a group of. It’s an idea. It’s a philosophy of, man, it’s kind of hard to describe; honestly, I haven’t talked about this in a long time. Sorry about that. It’s a, it’s a, it’s a way of thinking of what Hip-Hop is. It’s an idea. It’s just an idea of how to carry yourself and how, it’s almost as if it’s a part of me. A compass shows you the way of how to carry yourself when you’re in that world, in that stuff, culture, in Hip-Hop, in the underground, like, you need direction, Okay? You do. I mean, yeah, you could be a writer and
sure you could do all this Nat, go bomb and you can hit trains, you go all this. But yeah, but it’s like, what are you doing? You know, you need to have a purpose. What is the purpose? What is the direction? Where are you going? It’s almost, like, a set of rules. Almost, you know, but it’s just an idea you have to have, an idea of where it’s going to go. What is the point of this? Is it to make you feel good? Is it together? Is it to help people? Is it to help people? It is, honestly like, that’s kind of like, what it is. You look, you know, I’m saying, I mean, I know it stems back for, like, with Afrika Bambaataa and all that stuff. That’s a whole different book, but that’s kind of where I came from. From what I know when I was a kid. I was briefly in it with Riddles and stuff like that. I attended a couple of meetings. It’s just about helping. It’s like, helping each other in the culture and spreading the word out and supporting it and making it stronger, and also spreading it out all over the world. It’s more of like, hey, let’s mold this shit up. It’s a community, you know what I’m saying? So that’s my understanding at this point. You could take it either way. I don’t know. That’s just what I felt. What it was. It’s subjective. It has its own base, but it’s somewhat subjective as well. Take it, what to think what it is, you know?

**JS:** No, that’s a great explanation, bro. That’s a great way to break it down. So Jerne, man, when you look at a lot of Graff artists, sometimes right? Like, a lot of us are singular, we’re good at one thing. How do you go and become this artist who’s well versed? How is that happening?

**JER:** So in other words, in B2B there were, like, a lot of cats that were in two different things that you had, like, your piecing guys and you have your bombing guys and you had your breakers, we had DJ. So, like, we literally had all the elements in the crew. We had some Emcees. So when we would go to parties and stuff like that, we were stacked, we had, we had a little bit of everything. So when I would hang out with Riddle, it was like, okay, you’re going to be educated on like, the art, the piecing, the inking of drawing and been doing that. I would hang
out with Bats back in the day, Bats BTB. He was a bomber. I would hang out with him and go bombing with him. I would hang out with Sal. Sal would tell me about just like, these, like, theories of how to color and how to think outside the box, stuff like that, you know, and then I would hang out with Menace. He was, like, a break-dancer, an old-school break-dancer and he was a bomber. So I would hang out with him, party with him, and stuff. So I got my education … from all these different cats; it wasn’t just one person, but Riddle took me mostly under his wing just to be a good artist, but he didn’t want me to just be that guy where was like, one-hit wonder like, oh, yeah, it comes in bombs pieces. He’s done. He’s like, no I could tell that you’re really into it and he was like, he was taking care of us, he was nourishing that relationship and he carried it on, for a long time with me. He would give me like, all these really cool pants and, you know, teach me about lagging work. I didn’t go to college, anything like that, but I did go to a lot of, like, workshop stuff, but he would teach me way like, super-cool advanced shit. So he taught me just a lot of linework, like inking, which to this day, my biggest strength is inking because of Riddle. And because of that, in my work on the wall too, it’s BTB in the back of my head painting, that it’s my arm doing that. Obviously, a little bit of me being modern, and making my own way, but that’s kind of how that was, you know.

**JS:** Yeah. No, bro. I got you. So Jerne, it’s not uncommon for a graffiti artist to switch crews. Were you always with BTB or did you end up switching? How did that work out?

**JER:** Pretty much. Yeah. I mean, my whole high school I was BTB, and until Riddle was kind of like, phasing off because whatever reason was going on. We had a bunch of new members from other crews that were joining in. We had some issues with that. That’s a whole different story. I don’t want to get into that. But during my senior year, shortly after I came, I created Graffholics.

**JS:** What’s the year? High school?
**JER:** Yeah, something like that. I graduated high school in ‘99. And so, somewhere around there. It was ‘96, ‘97 that I started, like, Graffholics, or can I, why started the name, or can I join them. It was, like, a sub-crew for BTB because DCU was kind of like, it was not there anymore, which I’m pretty sad about because I wanted to take over that and kind of like run it but so it was just Graffholics. That’s kind of like, how it came about and that was the beginning of where we’re at now. Honestly, I just wanted to make my own crew, you know, and not to say I didn’t want to be B2B, I love B2B. I mean, once you are BTB you will always be BTB. I’m [inaudible] till I die, but that's kind of how it came out, you know, just like, I wanted to keep it going and I always wanted to make my own thing. I [was] always, like, making my own things, always been pretty creative and stuff like that and I was, like, making even for like, Halloween, making my own Halloween costumes, you know, but that’s kind of how it came out. Like, just make my own crew and kind of like, have it within BTB and then Riddle kind of phased out. And then he gave the crew to me and Stare to run it. Yeah, so we’re running it. I was running that BK Wall and Stare was like, running, like, the bombing. We are all doing our own jobs there.

**JS:** You guys have a lot of walls, right?

**JER:** Yeah. We had several walls. We lost a lot into the city, the problem, you know, the problem before, they say. But yeah, we’re running it for a couple of years and we’re short run. And then we had some issues along the way. And then, you know, a lot of us decided to drop out for whatever reason. That’s a whole different story. And then now we just kind of like, ran with, that was like, the end of by the BTB era for in my life personally and kind of like, just ran with, like, Graffholics.

**JS:** So that was … post-high school.
JER: Yeah, post-high school. That’s, yeah. So you can say high school was like, B2B and in post-high school was like, B2B/Graffholics, the beginning of it. And then completely just grab. You know, we had like, another crew before actually having the ground politics crew officially after BTB. We went through a few little phases there but ultimately went back to Graffholics.

JS: So Jerne, think about school, man. Was there an intersection between Hip-Hop and school? And if so, what was it? Meaning, did Hip-Hop have an influence on your schooling?

JER: Oh, wow. I got to say, it definitely screw me up a little bit because I wasn’t able to manage it. That was my fault. Everybody has their own deficiencies in that, you know, whether they command is a lot of things at the same time for me, you know, I was never into school. You know, I’m saying. I didn’t like school. At the end of the day when I graduated, I had straight As. So I realized that I was actually a pretty smart guy. I didn’t know that. I would cut school to go bomb. I would cut school to go paint. My parents didn’t know I’d sneak out at night, fucking go paint and, you know how it goes. So just being a knucklehead and I didn’t care for school, I wasn’t even into girls and shit, you know, I didn’t care about girls, like, if I do it I like to paint, you know, unless you’re a girl likes to paint let’s go paint, but I wasn’t even into it, so it jacked me up a little bit just because I wasn’t able to handle it. That was my fault. But later on, I realized that I was a pretty smart dude. And Hip-Hop actually, because of the amount of work that I was doing with Riddle and the amount of attention that I was putting into, like, paying attention to Riddle regarding art and the philosophy of Hip-Hop. And what a crew is. I was like, man, if I was to apply this to school, I’d be fucking okay. Then I’m saying right. So my attention was going elsewhere instead of school. So I wasn’t able to, you know, kind of like, dance that out but interfere with school for sure, I mean, but it all depends on who you are and how you handle it. I’d handle it very poorly, [on my] behalf but I was able to graduate on time. They’re
my thing, but the discipline that I’ve learned with Riddle, and being in that crew, helped me
finish school. And so it actually helped me, you know, because I was doing some pretty
advanced stuff and it was hard shit, you know, and when I started applying myself in school,
after that, was like, man, I got to get my shit together here. I want to graduate. It kicked in and I
was like, wow shit, you know, it’s working out and now in retrospect. I realize that it was just
because of the amount of work that I was putting in with BTBs. That work ethic that my dad
taught me first of all, and also what I learned with Riddle and the crew of how to get shit done, in
other words.

**JS:** And it is still interesting, right? Because part of what it means to live in poverty or to live in
the ’hood is a lack of resources. Right? Like, we don’t have the community centers. We don’t
have the ability to enroll in special classes, you know. We don’t have that. So then what it means
is that you’re left with limited options in terms of socializing, right? So for kids, for Latino males
growing up options are really limited, right, you know, you have games, right? And you have
graffing, I guess Hip-Hop. So for me, Hip-Hop was my savior. And that sounds good because it
was an alternative to gang life.

**JER:** Oh, for sure. It’s definitely saved my life too. I remember. Luckily, a lot of my friends are
Kings. After a while, they respected what I did because I dress differently. But they were my
friends because I knew them before they were like, in their groups. So I was like, I don’t care if
you’re gangbanger. I’m still want to hang out with you because you’re my friend. So after a
while, they actually started asking me questions. I’m like, hey, what kind of cans should we get
or what kind of cap should we get? And I would recommend caps like, yo, you guys need this,
you know, you got to make your shit look good. You don’t want to be whack. You know, so it’s
not that I wasn’t on their side, okay? but it was just like, they’re … just asking me questions and
I was able to just supply them with some things that … were needed for them. Do you know what I’m saying? But, um, it was hard man, it’s not easy. That’s for sure.

**JS:** You know? And what was true about it all is like, dude, you know what’s all this, right? Like, the ability, and the knowledge, like, the caps, like that such fucking like, nuances that people see a fucking piece or they see like, the throw-up, but they see a fucking tag and I like, whatever, you know, but there’s so much that goes into it and that’s all knowledge. That’s emanating. Like, you learned it from someone else. Like, I learned it from someone else, like, there’s like, generational teachings of this.

**JER:** Oh, yeah. Absolutely. I remember he used to get up. I remember, I mean, we didn’t have caps back in the day. We just use stock caps and right? And in BTB, Riddle was like, you need piece with stock caps and/or go bombing with stock caps? That’s it. Or, you know, I’m saying, that’s what you do. So that when you actually get down with real good caps, you’re going to be a fucking master. So that was the teacher that he, that was his philosophy with me was using that. And then with Menace, they said, teachers like, in BTB. They used to teach us how to make our own caps. You know, I’m sure a lot of people out there know what’s up with that. With hot needles and he would just grab out sticks off the ground from *paletas* sticks and plug them in on these Brussels Caps or, and just like, make these really thin lines. Like, we would just make our own caps to make shit happen; you know, a hot needle was a big thing, just manipulating the nozzle and that’s something that I didn’t know until I until I was with them and then later on a few years after that. Not too long, like, German allies came out. I’m sure. I don’t know if you remember those 31. And there was a dude. What the fuck? Like, they are actually making these pearls now, so that was a game-changer. They’re a very important tool in our toolbox for us, like, big time. I mean, it makes things easier for us. It makes it look better, right? But it’s just like any
other job. It’s like, you need your proper tools to get the job done, right? You know, I mean, so if you want to make it look good, you got to have the right tools, you know, like, I mean, sure. You could, like, make your own caps for someone so much time. But, I mean, it’s cool. It’s nice to have a little bit of help regarding caps, because it makes your job a little bit, a little bit easier. Yeah, I mean, you have to take that into consideration, the planning of a wall or bombing got to have the right cans, right paint, you know, just all of that.

**JS:** It’s knowledge.

**JER:** Yeah, Oh, knowledge … for sure. It’s a trip. I mean, you have to plan it. Or else it ain’t going to happen. It’s not gonna happen every time you do it right. You’re going to have faster. You’re going to be whack. No, you’re going to be, you’re going to be a toy like, you know. So that’s the last thing you want to be, you know, but I mean we’re all toys when we started. I was a toy. I still think I’m a toy every once in a while when I fuck up, but, you know, everything, everything has to come together somehow. One way. To make the product look good. And I, like, my dad said, you know, you got to take care of all those little parts of the machine to make it look good somehow.

**JS:** So, Carnal we talked about your education, your upbringing, your philosophy and Hip-Hop, and how much it has meant to you, essentially, right? Yeah. Going to behold, you just host a pretty huge event a couple of weeks ago. Talk to us about that.

**JER:** Yeah, so Grand Chill Chicago happened September 24th, 25th, 26th. It happened on multiple walls. I’ll start from the beginning. This started off, we have chapters. We got the following chapters in Phoenix, LA, Seattle, and Texas. So we’re about 65 deep now, I think. Yeah, I think so. That’s the last roll call that we took and so Nervic from Phoenix, he’s one of the heads out there Graffholics members, super dope guy, bomber, piecer, all-around super cool
dude. He and Spock, his brother Spock who actually becomes in Chicago and painted. He started Grill and Chill and Phoenix. It was a small local just-paint Jam. So the reason they call it Grill and Chill. First of all, is because we are under the umbrella, we’re Graffholics but it’s GA, Graffholics. We put GAK, GAC. But, in this case, it’s GAC—Grill and Chill, that’s kind of like what it was. And so they started that thing and he invited me out. So I flew out there to Phoenix and painted and then I was like, dude, he has like, over 100 writers from like, all over the country like, vague. I was just all over and I was … damn, dude, this is big. He’s like, yeah, we’re trying to make this bigger and I was like, you mind if I do this in Chicago one day, he’s like, no, run with it. Cool. So then I came back and then they had it in Seattle. A chapter in Seattle with Hyper and beds in them. Super cool cats. A lot of awesome people up there in Seattle. We had it in Everett, Washington, a super nice town, really nice. They had it out there and then I think they had a small one in LA. I don’t remember if they did and then they had another one in Phoenix. So then I was like, you know if Chicago’s turned, like, we have to, we have to host it and we did, and we, we somehow put it together here in Chicago. We didn’t have it. We wanted to make it bigger. Where are they have, about 100 people? But since it was our first event, I never had anything like that. So, we had about, I think about 50, 45 to 50 artists. Some of them were local, but the majority of them are out of town. We have, like, a lot of people from Texas. I mean shit, I didn’t know there was such a big graff scene in Texas. I mean, tons of people from El Paso, Houston—man, all over. We had LA, Phoenix, Seattle. Oh my God. I can’t even recall, but a lot of people, a lot of Heavy Hitters from LA, too. Like, Lord Screw came out, we had Siz, tons of, I mean, I can’t even name all, Snook and Lace from Texas. Peace out to them, super-cool guys. It wasn’t easy putting them all together. I had a lot of help from my crewmates. They helped out a lot. Personally, I never had to put anything like that together. So I struggled, but I was on top of
it. I was on top of it. I try to be on top of it. We had a couple of little mishaps there but it was successful and it was really good. A really good learning experience for myself, and I’m glad that it worked out and my whole job or my priority, my idea was to make Chicago look good. Do you know what I’m saying? As a crew and as a city, I wanted to showcase Chicago, that we are a friendly town and we’re willing to open up our arms here to all outside writers and stuff like that because a lot of them, the majority or 90% of them have never been here before. So I really wanted to show them a good time and take care of them. We fed them. Didn’t have to go anywhere to buy paint. I think they went to a couple of shops to buy some paint. But the point was to take care of them and let them know that they could come back at any time and, you know, again, having a good time and spreading the love, and make it even bigger because of that, I have a lot more friends and they have a lot more friends here in Chicago. And, you know, we just wanted to crack it back up, you know, we wanted to crack it open so, and it worked out. I mean, luckily, the weather was great; it was beautiful. It was, like, 72 degrees all weekend. No cops, no gangbangers. That was really concerned with, like, their safety, their biggest concern. When I was taking notes, I spoke to every single artist, personally. It was, like, their safety because of what they saw on the news and stuff, you know, and so we made sure that we took care of them and everything worked out, luckily. So it was an honor to have all of them here in town and make some good friends, man, along the way, which you can’t beat that, right? That’s, that’s really the best thing about it was making new friends.

**JS:** How’s that funded, bro?

**JER:** That was all on the ground. Dude. That was all us, man. That was out of pocket, you know; the crew members helped out. Yeah. It was all just out of pocket. I mean, [a] few of the crew members, I know, donated paint or he is one of our new crew members. Super cool guy. Super
talented. He’s an Entertainer as well, but he was able to supply people with paint, but it was funded. It was all just out of pocket, man. You know, I mean, we, we wanted to break even, but that didn’t happen, but we made it happen, you know.

**JS:** So did you guys cover hotels and where people were staying as well?

**JER:** Oh, no, they took care of their own things. We just took care of the walls, and food, and shirts and the paint. We’re going to make sure that they were being taken care of. So they didn’t have to travel far, in other words because they didn’t know that we don’t have shops here for paint. Didn’t know that it was illegal to sell spray paint here. But it’s—I know, right? It blew their mind. They’re like, what? Like, you can’t, you can’t buy spray paint in Chicago. It was like, no, you can’t do it. Like, it doesn’t happen. You need to, we have on-the-ground shops, you know, you know that, you know, people selling paint in their basement and shit like that or attic. All you got to go out to the burbs, but it was all funded by our crew that we put that together ourselves and I’m very proud of that. I’m very proud of our group for supporting the event and everyone else also who flew in. All Rain from Lord Screw: a big UPS to her. She, she came in and like, I barely had mattered that day and that weekend and she was able to help me out during the event, on the main wall, just like, communicating with the other artists and stuff like that. She’s also having—she’s going to have a big Jam called Bizarre Art Festival in January in Northern California. She has, like, 90 artists come out on one giant wall. So I’m looking forward to that. I’ll be out there in January to go paint there. But yeah, I mean it was all about just bringing people together, man.

**JS:** So where was the main wall at?

**JER:** The main wall was at 19th and Fairfield in Little Village or Pilsen. I call it Pillage. It’s like, a Little Village and Pilsen kind of thing. It’s like, right in the middle, right by Lola Anita’s
about Brewery was a big-ass wall right there. We fit about 24 artists on that wall, the main wall, and then we have walls on. We use our own walls on 26 neighbors, 26 in Ridgeway, we had a wall with the main wall was actually a KCM wall, Big UPS to KCM, and Muzzle and Bell and Fina. They helped out a lot for sure. Also CWB with Ben, Maddie, and Crazed. Super cool cats. They sponsored their own wall on Pulaski. Pulaski and Fullerton had a big wall there where they allowed us to use that wall for the event as well. We all kind of, they all have, they all helped out, you know, I reached out to see they wanted to help out. So it was a collaboration of crews and it worked out. You know, I’m happy about it.

**JS:** So, dude, it’s almost coming full circle. Right? Like, you started in … Little Village. That’s where you live. That’s where your dad had his print shop. And now, here you are giving back to the community. Essentially, right? You have this huge event where you’re bringing artists from a bunch of different cities and you’re painting in the ’hood, you represent the city. How does it feel, man? What does that mean to you?

**JER:** Oh, wow. It was amazing. Yeah, it started to hit me just recently, honestly, because I try not to think about it. It was amazing. It was, I felt like, I was just like, giving back. You know, I remember painting just a few blocks from there when I was a kid. And then now I was like, I was hosting one of the pretty large events with, like, serious artists. Like, some really legit artists were famous. It was really cool. It was a really cool feeling and I was humbled by it. To be honest with you. You know, I was just like, wow, like, they trusted me to come out here and I was, and I was, it felt really good to give back and I love that it was in the neighborhood that I grew up in. It was … beautiful, man. I had a really good time and I can’t even put it into words. It was awesome. It’s beautiful.
JS: So as you’re talking, dude, what I keep on thinking about is like, inviting someone over to your house, right? And you take such pride in showing it off and making such a good impression, you know.

JER: I know; we all know about 26th Street, right? And whatnot. Out of was not everyone, but the people who are listening might relate, or I know you relate, but I was like, placing people in certain spots on the wall on purpose. Like, people from LA or Seattle. I was, I was specifically putting them … on the walls on 26th Street because I was, I wanted them to experience, like, that neighborhood, you know, like, the people, you know, I’m saying, like, for a reason, I put them there for a reason and it actually worked out because they were able to give me this feedback. I wanted to show off our Little Village.

JS: Yeah. I get it.

JER: And I’m saying, like, I always liked me. I want them to see this. They need to see this and experience and smell it and see the people and, you know, that guy who fucking who’s on the bike singing all the time at 26th Street for sure. And you, Lopez, and like, your shops that dollar stores, like [maybe] even your occasional gangbanger walking by smoking a blunt. You know.

JS: That’s the ’hood.

JER: That’s the ’hood and the guys from LA and from Texas, I put them all together and some other people as well. I got some feedback from them. I was like, “Hey, how was it? How was it? I wasn’t at that wall.” I had my biker; he was overseeing that wall and they were like, “Dude. This is amazing. Like, the neighborhood was fucking so cool. I never experienced this before.” I was like, “Dude. This is like, where I grew up.” This is like, our neighborhood and I wanted to show off the neighborhood. You know, I really wanted to show it off because I’m proud of it even though how it can be a little shitty at times or whatnot. But hey, it was home for me, you
know, and I wanted them to see it and experience it because when you did, they just had to, man. I just had to give it to ‘em, you know, they had to see it and [have] a good time. So I’m very proud of a little bit each day. They were a good six-man. You can say. They did back it up.

JS: Carnal, I love that. You know, I love the way you described the ’hood, our ’hood, Little Village. It being the six-man and it holding up its part, right? Like, it being, and it represents what it means to us. Like that’s such a dope description because if you’re from a Little Village, if you come from a neighborhood that has its troubles. And you know, that them that makes you grind. There’s a certain level of love that’s developed, right? And to want to showcase, it is so fucking dope. So moving forward, bro. Where are you going from here? Where does Graffholics go from here?

JER: Oh my God. Yeah, good question. Where is Graffholics going? Man, lately, we’ve been on a hide, dude, like, the pass. I’m going to say, I know COVID-19 was a big thing all over the world but at the same time it brought a lot of people together, but I know it sounds kind of weird but it was, it was good for us that, you know, it was, it was good for us. It brought a lot of people together. We have a lot because of the event that we had. We have a lot of people interested in joining Graffholics. So it’s actually going to get even bigger and larger. A lot of Heavy Hitters there were talking to me and other people. They’re like, yo, we’re interested in the movement. It’s a pretty big movement right now. So we want to just keep the momentum going on. Is there a plan or some sort of route that it's going to go? I don’t know. We didn’t have one before. So does it really need one? Maybe? But I like how it’s so raw. It’s always Graffholics and our crew has always been a very raw thing. It is what it is. It’s an art and it’s gold. And keep the momentum going, and we have to keep it going. We’re trying to our idea. Our idea is to hit New York. Hit the East Coast. I think we would all be satisfied if we hit New York one day or somewhere out
west or Florida or somewhere out there. Make the event over there, but that’s kind of like, what we’re thinking. Just keep expanding, keep having fun, and whatever comes along, dude. Just like, it’s a ride and I know things come to an end sometimes, but I do want to keep going with it, man. It’s a lot of fun, dude, and it’s exciting to know. It’s almost exciting not to know what’s around the corner regarding where the crew is going for the organization.

JS: Oh, for sure, man. It makes perfect sense, man. It’s like, the sky is the limit. So, looking back, dude. We’ve talked quite a bit about, like, you know, the process of you getting involved in Hip-Hop, looking back. What influence has Hip-Hop had on your life.

JER: Oh, everything. It just made me stronger. It gave me a really good work ethic. It helped me build that strength within me and myself in the confidence. Honestly, confidence was a big, huge thing. You know, I’m saying? Like, yeah, I was there. I was a really shy kid. Super shy when I was growing up and I’m still a shy guy. Like, I’m still if I was to meet you and then people in person, I’m a pretty quiet dude. Pretty—very reserved guy, you know, but when it comes down to getting down stuff like that and like, being involved with like, graffiti and crews and meeting new crews, it’s like, I’m all in it. It’s because Hip-Hop builds confidence. You know, I’m saying it gave, it’s giving me an outlet and a door for me to go through and it keeps opening doors for me constantly, you know, it’s always opening doors for me. That’s because I’ve been put—I put a lot of work into it, a lot of work into, a lot of thought into it. And a lot of love, you got to put a lot of love in it, and it will give it back, and it shoots it back even faster than you. And then you, then you would think, and you got to be ready to accept it because it just keeps opening doors for me, man, and I’m overwhelmed by it. Sometimes, like, right now after the event was super important for us. I got to say again the event was super important but Hip-Hop made it happen. It’s what united all of us, and it saved my life, man. Honestly, dude, like, I don’t know where I—
who I would be here, where I would be if it wasn’t for Hip-Hop. I don’t know if I would be doing my career, you know or be as strong to do a lot of things. It just gave me a lot of confidence in general. It’s like going to the gym; you know, you build all that, you know, you’re strong, you feel strong and stuff. But for me, as I’ve been part of Hip-Hop as be, it’s in my blood. It’s in my thoughts, every day and it just gives me the confidence every day to move forward and live. So it totally changed my life completely. Absolutely.

JS: Yeah, that's love, dude. I feel the exact same way, which leads me to the next question, right? For shorties, what do you think Hip-Hop could do for shorties? Or what advice do you have for shorties for getting involved in Hip-Hop?

JER: Wow.

JS: Or how do you even school shorties, right?

JER: That's nowadays, right?

JS: I mean legit. Now, you’re a cat who’s, like, established in Hip-Hop, right. Now, you’re a cat, who’s a fucking, like, legit artist and like, look like, you know, he’s your fucking you there in Hip-Hop. You’re there in, fucking, like, you feel, right. So, how do you mentor? How do you teach, how do you fucking, like, involve kids in this fucking subculture that is so valuable to us?

JER: Wow. Thank you for that. I appreciate that. Well, yeah, again, I could answer that in multiple ways. The first thing I’m going to say is, how do you do that in today’s world, right? So a lot of the influence now comes from social media. So personally, if I was to encounter myself when I was younger nowadays, that’s how I’m going to take that question. Is like, almost as if how Riddle took me in, like, hey, I see it in you and stick with it. In other words, don’t have fear, man. Don’t be scared. Don’t have because fear is the biggest enemy in every one of us, so don’t be scared. If you feel stuff like, you feel like, you want to do something like that. Don’t be
scared, like, give it a shot. You don’t know if you’re going to be good at it or not. Just give it a shot. Lose that fear. Also, if you’re into art, music, dance, if I can whatever. Keep at it; just keep working. It doesn’t even have to be related to Hip-Hop in general. Just be a strong person and be real to yourself: know what you want. And go and get it. Don’t be scared because it’s going to reward you. You know what I’m saying. So, in other words, that would be my, like, my advice for them is like, okay. Yeah, I paint install if you want to be a painter. But first, you need to figure out what you like. What do you want? And what drives you, what makes you happy? So, be happy. Do what makes you happy and Hip-Hop will find you, believe me. I wasn’t looking for Hip-Hop or graffiti. You’re like that. You know, I’m saying, it’ll find you. They will find you if you’re in it. And you love it. It will love you back. So just stay real to yourself, man. Be real and don’t be, don’t be scared. Have no fear, bro. No fear, my brother, and you’ll be okay.

JS: That’s fucking dope, dude. I—you know what, like, you said it and like, you said it and automatically fucking click, you know, like, because that’s one of those things where I, like, Hip-Hop will find you and, shit, like, it—

JER: Oh, yeah!

JS: I’m not going to fucking look … for it. Like, I’m gonna look for fucking hip hop and I got to be...

JER: No. No.

JS: It’s organic as fuck.

JER: Once it gets you, dude. You are so high on it. I feel it all the time. Just like, I ride my bike everywhere. I’m, you know, and I feel it all the time on my bike. I feel it. It’s just like me. You’re riding around looking at the neighborhoods when I, when I commute; it’s like, it’s I see it everywhere [inaudible] when I ride by my bike. I see all this Graff and I see the people. I see the
kids on the train, you know, it’s like, it’s all over, it’s around us and you could easily tap into it if you want to, you know, I’m saying so it’s more than just Graff and music and all that. It’s just life in general. It’s a way of life. It’s a way of thinking, it’s a way of life; you know, it’s a perspective that you could take every day.

[END]
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**INTRO: Bienvenidos**, welcome to The Latino Underground, a podcast dedicated to the reclamation and exploration of Latino identity through counter-narrative stories. We hope to give you tools by which to navigate in a passive system. Stay tuned.

**JS:** Hey, what’s good, good people? It’s Jorge. First and foremost, thank you for tuning in. In today’s session, I have the privilege of having a conversation with Jason. So I met Jason when I was teaching at UIC. Jason was a student of mine at that time I was teaching a course in Latinos in Higher Ed. It was the first time I had taught this course.

The homie Kendy Olámez had developed a pretty dope program. It was a program that focused on recruiting high school students within CPS, within Chicago Public Schools, to come
into a higher education institution. She focused on recruiting students who are interested in the field of medicine. And the idea behind this program was basically to remove any barriers that students could possibly have during their time in high school in reaching their goal of becoming a doctor.

So I really gravitated to the program because it did things a little different. First and foremost, it brought parents in. So on Saturdays, not only were students, young scholars coming in and learning about the field of medicine and higher education as a whole, their parents were coming in, right?

And Kendy did something really dope. She provided each student with a set of scrubs. So as students were coming in on day one, there were already playing the role. They already envisioned themselves as future doctors wearing scrubs.

So when I walked in on day one, I saw all these young students in scrubs, and it really kind of tripped me out. So I remember day one, I’m walking to UIC, I’m kind of, just zoning out of my thoughts, thinking about how I’m going to present the lesson or whatnot. I get to the door, and it’s locked. I realized later that they lock the door because there’s research going on in this particular building, right? So, we have access to medicine and things of that nature. As I get to the door, I’m greeted by two students, young cats, young students dressed in scrubs. So when I go upstairs, I’m following them. I get there a little bit early so I don’t even know what to expect, and I walk into a room, and it’s a room [of] about twenty-five to thirty kids, young students, all in scrubs. At the time, I believe they were dissecting a heart or a pig. They were working on something. All I remember is them and me walking around, kind of, getting set up. And then being extremely engaged in what they were doing, and I recall them using medical terminology. I just thought to myself, this is legit, this is dope. Here are these kids on a Saturday in scrubs
working towards their dream. So it just challenged me to really push them in terms of the content that I was going to deliver.

The reason why I really wanted to interview Jason was because Jason was a student who was very comfortable with his identity and he had a very critical mindset. He was talking about things that students at that age typically don’t talk about in a critical manner. Right? And he was engaged in activities outside of the classroom that really spoke to his knowledge and comfort with his identity. So, I remember thinking to myself, “Where did this kid get his confidence from?” Then it made me think about me, as a high school student and how I lack[ed] the confidence and the ability to be comfortable, critical, and vocal about it. Around the time this course was being taught, about 50 schools closed in Chicago.

I remember Jason telling me that he would go into these empty buildings and do some photography to document what was happening. I found that to be very interesting, and just conversations that Jason would bring up. Jason was involved in some research that went beyond the contents of the classroom where he was really looking at things from a systemic perspective. Like, why are schools in different areas behaving very differently and providing resources for students in a different manner? So, yeah, he was really dissecting the system, and I always wonder, “What made you want to do this? And what gave you the knowledge base at such an early age and the passion to really speak up?”

So when I started thinking about this project, Jason was one of the first individuals that I knew I had to interview. So, I hit him up; I was, I’m extremely happy that he agreed to join us today. So, without further ado, here’s the homie, Jason.
First and foremost, Jason, thank you for agreeing to do this. I think telling one’s story and being vulnerable is valuable, right? So thank you, I genuinely appreciate it, and welcome to what I call The Latino Underground, man.

**JI:** Yeah. I’m happy to be there, anything to help you out, anything to help out cause.

**JS:** Appreciate that, man. So I like starting with an initial question with all guests because it’s my belief that for Latino students, for Brown people, and for Black people, it’s not a matter if they are going to face oppression within the educational system, it’s a matter of *when*, right? So let’s start off with that man. When did you first realize there was inequity within our educational system?

**JI:** Second grade. I remember this vividly partially because my mom freaked out so much but I’ve been going to this elementary school [for] kindergarten, first grade called McPherson Northwest side. They were having gangs outside. And so my parents got really worried so they put all the money there and together and sent me off to Catholic school for a year. And that’s why I went for second grade; I hated every second of it. I walk into the classroom, this Catholic school over by Welles Park, so it’s on the North Side. I walk in and first thing, I was the only Brown kid in the entire classroom, right? Everyone else there is white. They are all sitting, I remember everyone was sitting in groups of four. Right? You got these little desks, four groups of four, and I’m looking around, and I’m thinking: “Well, which one am I going to join? Which group am I going to join?” and the teacher sort of directs me towards her desk. And I see this lone desk that’s sitting right next to hers, right? And that’s my seat. So I’m not going to sit next to any of these groups. I’m not going to mingle with any of these kids. My seat first day of school is right next to the teacher’s desk and the other thing I noticed is this is not a chair—
they’re a stack of dictionaries. [crosstalk] Yup. They made me sit on a stack of dictionaries, and I sat right next to the teacher, and that went on.

The thing is, I was young, so I thought this, “I don’t know. I don’t know what’s going on.” I thought this was normal. So I never told my parents about it. And I remember, I think I brought it up to them relatively recently maybe like, six months ago, and they started flipping out, “Why didn’t you tell us this?” And at the time, I thought it was normal.

But the reason why I would end up leaving is because one time my mom was dropping me off and the gym teacher was on a bike. And I think my mom opened her door and almost hit the gym teacher, and the gym teacher came by and spat on my mom’s car. And so, she flipped out, and so she dragged me to the principal’s office. And the principal took the side of the gym teacher and gave me the runaround, those old white ladies. And that was the final straw, which I was thankful for it. So I want to get the hell out of here, I hated it. I hated it so much. But, yeah, second grade, that was probably my first experience with that kind of thing.

JS: No, sir. That’s crazy, man. Stack of dictionaries; I’ve heard that one before and not surprised, man. Jason, go ahead and tell me about yourself, man. Who is Jason?

JI: Yeah, man. I’m a student, I go to Northwestern. I’m third year now, got a little sister, who I love very much back at home. I’m from Chicago, born and raised. Mom and Dad too, study E-con. I’m really into music in my free time, hanging out with my friends, that kind of thing. Am I covering all the bases?

JS: Yeah, man. There is no “bases.” That’s what is excellent about this. The way I see this conversation, it’s like, what you would have late at night with a pound. You’re going out, having a beer, and just talking. But Jason, I met you back in—Man, when was it? It was about five or four years ago.
JI: Yeah. It was my sophomore year of high school, junior, so about five years ago.

JS: Sophomore year in high school, okay. You were in a program, Medicinal Scholars, which is the UIC-based program. That’s a pipeline program for students who want to be in the medical field, correct? [crosstalk] And I distinctly remember you. Because you, along with three or four of your other peers, were mature beyond their years, right? You had a distinct awareness of educational inequities but more so, you wanted to learn more about it. You gravitated towards those inequities. At that time, I wish I would have been like that when I was younger. So it was very refreshing because I was at the time, teaching at a place where you didn’t see that that much, so it’s dope. So where were your parents from?

JI: Yeah. They are both from Honduras. My mom came over a little later than my Dad, probably late high school around there. That’s when they arrived in the USA. They moved to Houston, Texas. That’s where all my extended family is: aunts, uncles, grandparents. They met there, and then my mom kind of—she was young, they were both really young. She kind of had a “run away from the family” moment, beg[ged] my dad to take her to Chicago. And then I happen. So that’s how we got here.

JS: Okay. Now, we talked about the second grade, man. But what’s your earliest memory of school in general?

JI: I probably have a snapshot memory of kindergarten. I still remember my teacher’s name, Ms. Lorna. She’s a real loving lady. I remember my mom—both my parents have worked all my life. And so I had to go to before- and aftercare, except the before care, which wouldn’t open up early enough before my mom had to go to work. And so my kindergarten teacher got there really early at school, at 6 am. And so she offered my mom to just drop me off at the classroom. This was under the table; if the school found out about [it] this would be a bunch of bullshit red flags, but
she was so nice. I still remember playing in her classroom before school started. Me and another
girl, another girl, had the same setup.

**JS:** What did your mom do for a living?

**JI:** My mom started out at the time as a receptionist for an apartment management company, and
then she moved up to be a manager; that’s what she does now. For an apartment company; she
takes care of tenants and rent. My dad’s an ironworker, he’s thankfully in a union. He basically
builds high-rises, which I always thought was cool growing up. He’s got his whole sleeve
tattooed on them of this Grim Reaper that’s on the skyscraper. I always thought that was sick.

That’s what they do.

**JS:** That’s dope. Does he ever take you on the job?

**JI:** Yeah. That was the best. I remember one of my birthdays. As I mentioned earlier, my
birthday’s on New Year’s. He, funnily enough, was one of the foremen on Trump Tower when I
[was] growing up. I will tell the story about that in a second. But so, right when it’s at the 80th
floor going up, my dad takes me there for New Year’s, and we watch the Navy Pier Fireworks
from there. And it was sick because there was no glass, there was just concrete and steel. So
wind’s blowing in your face because you’re really high up, and I’m just sitting there with my dad
and my mom, and we’re watching, and some of the other ironworkers are watching the
fireworks. That was, that was really cool.

And the funny story I have about that is Donald Trump would go to the job site visit—
this is for all the presidential bullshit—and he signed this concrete slab, but he did something
wrong with it. It wasn’t the final one that they used, so they left it at the job site and my dad had
it. So this thing, this concrete slab with his hands and signed is worth a lot of money, especially
after [that] year and [the] present. So my dad had it for a while, and I’m like, “Dad, you should
just make some money off of this.” and he said “No.” He got so angry once the president’s stuff came out that he took a sledgehammer to it and broke it into a bunch of pieces. And I’m just sitting here thinking that thing was probably worth a lot of money. I don’t care if you sell it to some racist dude. You could have made some money off of that. But now he felt too strongly about that, which I admire.

**JS:** I think, as kids, we look up to our parents and those actions. Those model actions speak volumes in terms of becoming who we are, which now your retrospect makes sense.

**JI:** Yeah. Yeah. No, I love them both. I always say every time I bring [my mom] up, she’s the strongest person I know. She puts up with a lot of my dad’s bullshit, which there is a lot of. He’s had a couple of drinks and stuff in the past, but she’s always been there for me—loving, supportive—and I’ll never forget that.

My dad was good because he always wanted to work in the morning no matter what happens; if he’ll come home, you know, 4 a.m. all fucked up from the night before, doing God knows what, but he still went to work in the morning. That I’ll always appreciate and on top of that neither of my parents went to college, but he always stressed the importance of education, as … sort of that socio-economic ladder. He always said, “You got to stay in school. You got to do that because that’s going to work. That’s what’s going to unlock doors.” He sort of said he didn’t want to see me doing what he did, which was blowing his knees out, blowing his back out on the job site, and that kind of thing. So very big academic support from my dad in terms of just, “This is what you got to do,” encouraging me their financial support. My mom, the love came from my mom. I’m very thankful for both of them: ups and downs, those are the parents.

**JS:** How did your Pops get into ironworking?
**JI:** Since he started down in Texas just as labor, because the unions aren’t that strong down in Texas. When he met this old guy, this is old head named Rusty, I still remember him. Just this old white guy but for some reason, he really liked my dad, and Rusty was an ironworker. And he said, “You know, come up to Chicago, and I’ll try to get you into the union” because the thing about unions is personally I love [them to] death. They’re the reason why I had health insurance growing up. But they can also be very filled with nepotism, and in terms of getting into them, you got to know someone. They’re also vast[ly] the majority white. My dad… to this day was the only Latino in the union. But Rusty really helped him get in it. So that was—my mom had me when she was 21, so my dad probably got into ironworking maybe four years after that when we move[d] up to Chicago.

**JS:** You know, your time with your dad, man, and like, it’s interesting. I always get into it with my sister. We got into it maybe a couple of weeks ago. And when I mean get into it, we always have small discussions regarding perceptions of, like, parents, right? So my dad, to me, is very similar to yours, right? Some drinking shit that to me is like, “Well, fuck it, like, he still woke up.” And he went to work, and he provided the best he could, right. That was, that’s the thing.

With my sister, she’s that much harder [on] him. She’s like, that’s such a small threshold standard for you to hold like that too; just because he provided, is that enough? And I always kind of … go back and forth but you touched on something that’s … very interesting, man, because my dad was a welder for 25-30 years, but never part of the union. Right? It was almost, like, a second-tier welder, and he was good at his craft. He was just never, whether was, he doesn’t have a navigated system, to get into the union. Or getting into a union is actually a complex task. I don’t know how it was back then but now, like, you have to take a test and you have to squirt a certain amount of points. And you have to know math and, like, certain things,
right? It’s a process; it’s almost very similar to getting to college, man. Would you say that’s accurate?

**JI:** Now, yeah. 100%. Because my dad always tries to get Latinos into the union. So, we moved around a lot, and we’re still moving around, or my parents are, at least. For example, the last place that my parents lived, we had a Latino neighbor, and my dad got him into the union. So, that’s what it is now. But my dad told me that when he got into it, it was way different. I think maybe it has something to do with the fact that trades... I feel like, dad is growing up or maybe a little after college was like, end-all-be-all. So now that trades are being pushed, it might get a little more competitive. But when he was getting into it, it was pretty much as who you knew. There wasn’t any, like, test or a book or anything like that, which definitely would have stopped him, probably. But yeah, I’ve always been incredibly thankful for that.

**JS:** Yeah, unions are dope. I have a couple of friends who were in the unions, but you mentioned something else that was interesting: mostly white.

**JI:** Absolutely. Back on that drinking thing, my dad always would bring his buddies from around work around the house and [they] did drank inside; I[‘d] meet them all the time, and the vast majority of them were white. The funny thing is, it’s such a generational thing where the head of the union will have, like, all his kids and all his grandkids, they’ll also be in the union. Do you know what I mean? My dad always tried to pursue later when he was older. Try to pursue administrative positions in the union. So you got your BAs—your business administrator something—but there are just, like, the people who give jobs at pretty much, and he was always stonewalled. And, whether or not it was because he wasn’t white, I don’t know, but he did try to sort of work his way up [and] that never really happened. Yeah, it’s a very white space. But the thing is, I was always conflicted about it because I feel like, the plight of poor people, it’s
definitely different, and there are some nuances there compared to the plight of people of color. But I guess because unions really helped out a lot around the house when I was growing up, I just have [inaudible]. Not that it shouldn’t change at all but it definitely influences the way that I sort of perceived them and think about them.

**JS:** Go into that a little bit deeper. What do you mean “help out on the house”?

**JI:** Well, I mean, think about it. Like, I wouldn’t have health insurance if it wasn’t for the union. My dad has somewhere a pension because of that. So now he’s got something to lean back on when he gets old. I mean, unemployment, for that matter. For example, after 2008, the recession, my dad wasn’t working for a really long time, the same thing with my mom. But the union helped out so that’s why I’ll always be thankful for them because in the ways that my dad did as well kept a roof over our heads. I definitely wouldn’t be where I am today without them. It’s just this to me seems like, I’m just propaganda for unions; that’s not what I’m trying to say. There are a lot of problems with them, but I owe a lot to that, I guess, that is what I’m doing.

**JS:** Okay, Jason, talk to me about your educational trajectory, man. What has been your experience? So, you mentioned kindergarten, you had that dope teacher, who... you know, and it’s crazy, right? Like, there are those individuals, teachers like that, that whenever you talk about resistance and whenever you talk about being an ally and being an accomplice to the community, I think a lot of times you have to make those decisions of going above and beyond and against, like, policies that don’t make sense, right? I remember when I was a young teacher, I would drive to work, man. I would see kids talking or walking in the snow, right? And what a big thing was that you’re not supposed to give kids rides, right? But you see kids dropping their little brothers and sisters off and then walking to school in the snow. That’s just being human, right?
So you mentioned that the teacher essentially risked her job to have a space for you, and you call it your friend so that your mom would be able to go to work. And then you mention this drastic change in second grade when you’re made to sit [on] some dictionaries, right? What happens thereafter, man? What’s your experience of school thereafter?

JI: Well, I’d say the story of my education is the story of those mentors that you just mentioned, of those teachers that are willing and sort of putting their necks out … there because they are genuine, be there for their students, and then for the success of their students. So after I only stayed in Catholic school for one year, [I] went back to the school I was at originally. Mom wasn’t happy about that but then this opportunity sort of came by to get into a magnet school sort of. So the way the magnet schools work in Chicago is it’s a lottery. And if you don’t make the lottery, you’re put on a waiting list. So I didn’t make the lottery. I was put on a waiting list. The other way to get to the school is if you live in the area. And so I was on this waiting list for a while, and I got lucky, and I sort of got off of it, and I was able to go to the school called Hawthorne. Hawthorne is on the North Side, it’s on School Linked-In, I think. Some northeast side, sort of Lakeview area is also very far from where we live. So I went there probably, like, fifth grade all the way to eighth grade. But that was about an hour commute every time because I didn’t live in the area.

Now, that situation, that elementary school was just pure culture shock. It was predominantly white because, like I said, the way you get in the schools, you either get in by the lottery or you live in the area. The people who know about the lottery are well-educated, happen to be white. The people who live in the area are affluent [and] also happen to be white. So for their, you know, I don’t have a bad experience and the education was amazing. But it was a lot of little things, like, I can’t hang out with friends after school and play soccer because I have this
hour commute ahead of me. Right? I can’t go over to a friend’s household. So, that really prevented me from building a sense of community there and that really added to the culture shock. All of my teachers were white, but the one thing I can’t deny is the education is great. I think there is when I really learned how to stay on top of things.

So after that, I went to Lincoln Park High School, which was fantastic because it was a lot more diverse. So I went there, also didn’t live in the area—Lincoln Park, pretty affluent. About a third of the students there lived in the area, but everyone else sort of commuted and that was great because it meant it had a really diverse body. The one thing I’ll always say, though. Is there a sort of two tracks in Lincoln Park? There was the honors track, and then there was the AP track. And so it was almost like you had two schools in one, where if you looked at the demographics of the school, it’s only a third white; therefore the classes should be a third white. But if you look at the AP-track classes, it was majority white. But because I had come from Hawthorne, I learned a thing or two [and] I was on that AP track, and that was isolating in ways, but that’s where those mentors came up. I’ll never forget him; I still talk to him to this day—my chemistry teacher, Mr. McGuire. He was a huge influence on my life and just on sort of, I guess, my life trajectory.

When I first started high school, I sort of had a little rebellion phase; you know a little bit about this. I was doing graffiti, I was running around the city. School is fine but honestly, I was just trying to keep myself occupied with other stuff, and Mr. McGuire had this really good way of, it’s not stopping what I was doing but just making sure that I was also doing other stuff. So [he] would say, “It’s great that you’re going out there, being an idiot out there and across the city but also do your homework.” And that’s how it started; eventually, it would turn into, you know, he had this the chem office, which is where he worked but turned into a safe space for me.
“Maybe if you’re ever into some shit, you can just come by; I’m always there, and we can talk about stuff.” You know, a lot of family issues [were] going on around that time with my dad and so he was a great mentor during that, too. And so, I owe him a lot and he was also the one that really sort of put higher education on me and said, “Yeah, you go to college, and I’m going to help you out in everything,” and that’s a big part of why I got into Northwestern; I think he helped a lot with everything. You know, him and other mentors across that trajectory including in college really just guided my path, I’d say. I don’t think I had a lot to do with it.

**JS:** So paint a picture first, man: who is Mr. McGuire?

**JI:** He’s my chemistry teacher—or was my chemistry teacher. He was huge, sort of, in the school as a student advocate. He sort of established this thing called the Student Voice Council, which sort of introduced real influence with the school administration from students to [give] us a voice. I think he’s actually getting his Ph.D. now. He was great; I mean, the way that I would describe him [was] he didn’t look at you as a kid, he really looked at you as a young adult who was capable of making their own decisions. Whereas some of the other teachers say all that ages and crap, they think they own the block because they’re an old head, which … there’s some wisdom that comes along with that, but you can’t talk down someone like that; he never did. But he also wasn’t afraid to put you in your place if you were acting like an idiot. But yeah, I think he’s great; he still checks up on me.

**JS:** So, shout out to Mr. McGuire first and foremost. And here’s how I’m in as you’re talking about Mr. McGuire. I’m envisioning this young cat, right? Who maybe wear[s] a dress-up shirt or a vest, some gym shoes, rights of the money rule, and just greet students at the door and therefore like, a solid conversation after class. That’s kind of what I’m envisioning Mr. McGuire.
JI: Yeah, definitely took a personal interest in his students; he comes from the Roosevelt and his parents were both blue-collar and so he wears more, like, flannels and Timberlands. He’s a big guy, I love him to death and that part that you mentioned staying after school, that part was essential. Because there’s only so much that you can sort of help with a student within this, classroom space. But then you take a moment, everyone’s gone, a student comes up to you after class or says, “Hey, this is actually what’s going on at home.” That to me is one of the most, I guess influential or most important things that you can do as a mentor as an educator. It’s teaching them the content, but it’s also, you also got to teach them about life because they might not be getting that at home. And for me, I love my parents to death and they supported me in every which way they could, but there were aspects that they couldn’t help me out with. And that came from Mr. McGuire, especially when it came to things like, higher education. So, yeah.

JS: You also mentioned something that was interesting and I think extremely important, like, treating young people—students—as young individuals and not talking down. So I think that’s important, right? The ability to hear them out and give them the respect that they deserve. I think a lot of teachers forget that these individuals have thoughts and perspectives, right?

JI: I think when you’re a little older and you’re a little wiser, you sort of realized that the perspectives that you had when you were younger, were flawed because you’re a kid and that’s just how it is. And so, it’s easy as an older person to sort of talk down to someone and be like, “You’re being an idiot.” But in reality, as a kid, your perspective seems very real to you. It’s the way that you view the world at that moment based on your previous experiences and you don’t have a lot of previous experiences, which is why a lot of the times it can be flawed, but it seemed real to you. And so to have someone older than you talk down, even say, “Your experience doesn’t mean shit,” then that’s not a good relationship to have, really.
**JS:** So you kind of answered this question already, Jason, this idea of the importance of education within the household, right? And the importance of education that your parents emphasized for you within your household, right? Like, the ability for them to move from one place to another or get you in a school, despite the fact that it was pricey, right?

**JI:** Yeah. I know that. I owe the world to them for that. They didn’t, you know, they went to high school back in Honduras, like, they didn’t have the full sort of understanding of what it was like, but the one thing that they understood was the value and that right there is invaluable, really. Because if you can just tell a kid, “This is valuable, this is something that you should do,” which it really is; I mean, education is the ladder which to move up and down in society, then that’s all you need to do. And that was something that I’m forever thankful for that for. Even if it meant me having to take an hour commute, they told me to suck it up, like, this, the school you’re going to go to because it’s going to afford you better opportunities. And I really do think I owe everything that because even looking back at what happened early high school, before I met this Mr. McGuire, I was already starting to trail off a little bit. It took my mentors, took my parents sort of telling me, “You can trail off, but you still gotta focus on school.” And that’s really how, where I am today, how I got here, really.

**JS:** So shifting into ... you gain a 12 experience, right? Aside from the content and from the academics, was your identity ever validated within your school experience?

**JI:** Different kinds, you know: elementary school, hell no. That was the magnet school, that was the one I was commuting to second grade, hell no. High school, yes; Lincoln Park was diverse like I said; I was in a community that even if they weren’t in the same class as me, we could still hang out after school. I was a little older, too, which means I can stay out later; even though I had this hour commute, I could go and hang out after school. So they were people that look like
me, there are people that eat the same foods, listen to the same music. I think that one was incredibly important and so I’d say high school is probably the time when I found my community.

**JS:** What about high school was, I guess, key in finding a community?

**JI:** Well, the high school that [I] went to … is more diverse. So I was able to see more people that look like me, but also I just feel like, in high school you have more agency. I was taking the L [elevated train] and through that, I was taking that a little bit earlier than that but I could sort of get away with going up to my friends’ neighborhoods and then hanging out with them. So I think just being a little older you can exercise a little more agency, you might have a job, have some cash so you can go hang out.

I also think my mom sort of let off a little bit…. I don’t know. It feels bad to say this, but she’s sort of, is unsatisfied, unless she’s, I guess… She has some very preconceived notions about what it means to be successful and what stays herein. So me going to an all-white school in like, elementary school, for example, it was amazing, right? That’s why they put me in Catholic school for that year because she thought it was going to be a great opportunity, which the school was great. It was a great opportunity, but she never understood how culture-polarizing it to us. And so I think when I was in high school, I have a little more agency to choose my friends, choose where I’m going. I sort of found the space I liked and it didn’t necessarily align with what she had envisioned for me, but there wasn’t a lot. She could do a bad.

**JS:** If I’m hearing this correctly, Jason, and correct me if I’m wrong. In your mom’s eyes, like, whiteness equated, like, success.

**JI:** My dad not so much but my mom, she was happy as when we lived in a house or an apartment with white neighbors. In the times that we lived in Latino neighborhoods, she did not
get along. Wait, it’s funny. My dad and I always make fun of that because we’re all Latinos. I don’t know. I don’t know what she’s thinking, but….

**JS:** Well, you know what, man? I think it makes sense. It makes complete sense because society, right? Whiteness is a norm, it’s the standard, right? So to be able to be around it means you’re normalized and you’ve achieved a certain level of assimilation. And if you look, assimilation often leads to success, right? Like, you’re part of us now, you’re part of this bigger normalized community. So something must be going right. So it makes sense, it’s just like, within school language, right? The whole assimilation process to assimilate and to be non-different and to lose a language, for example, in the L means that you’re now part of this larger normalized, whitestream community. I mean shooting, right, but it makes sense, right? Like, assimilation should never be the goal but if you’re thinking retrospectively it essentially is survival for our parents.

**JI:** Yeah, what’s funny about that is that experience became really clear to me once I got to college. That sort of whiteness is the norm type experience because in Lincoln Park, as I said, it was really diverse. And so, we were—the friends that I hang out with, we didn’t necessarily subscribe to all of that completely, but when I got to college, you know, Northwestern’s a very light space. I mean, we’re talking, like, six to seven percent Latino, you know, out of the entire student body. And so, here assimilating, really to that white norm, or whether it’s with the way that you speak, the music that you listen to, although that’s changing. And I can talk about that because I have some gripes about that, but the things that you do like, dancing, for example, my mom had a very like, since I was a kid, taught me how to dance, and she said dancing is incredibly important because that’s how you’re going to find a wife. I don’t know where that’s coming from.
JS: But hey, there’s wisdom there, man. There’s wisdom there.

JI: I’ll take it because I loved it, I absolutely love it. To be blunt, here on campus, you know, there’s not a lot of dancing. It’s just a different vibe, it’s different, I don’t know if I’m crazy about this, but I’ve talked to some of my friends about this. I just feel like, there’s a different cultural relationship with different things, right, between white people and Brown people. I feel like, for me, and for my Brown friends, when we’re dancing on, we’re listening to music I just feel like, there’s a deeper connection there and I again I think I’m crazy about this, … for thinking this but I think, you know, like, white people, I just feel like, sometimes they just don’t have that connection with things. They don’t interfere or maybe, like, I don’t know; I’m not one of them, but maybe they just like to restrain themselves. I feel like they don’t let out and express themselves as much as a little more restrained and there’s blowback when you do express yourself in certain matters. And so I think for me, going back to Northwestern being this big white space and there being a lot of white norms, you have to subscribe yourself to a lot of the ways that I was expressing myself, whether, you know, dancing at a party. Something, as simple as that, you know, it’s looked at in a very different light.

JS: How. So how was the look that?

JI: It depends on the person, depends on the crowd party in question, but a lot of it is just kind of like, you’re the only one there doing that and that’s kind of weird. You know, no one else is joining you in dancing like that. And so, I don’t know. I’m really trying to hold back here. It just, it’s the whole idea of, like, you walk into like, I’ll never for you, like, walking into a party and like, everyone’s like, holding like, the Red Solo Cup pool, seen that in a million movies, but no one’s moving. And like, the music is really quiet and everyone just standing there really stiffly and even something as small as that is so weird to me that first, that was just that what a party
was to me and I don’t care, I still don’t care to this day, like, my friends will tell me, like, I will be there in the middle dancing because that’s just who I am and, you know, you get weird looks. You get like, “Dude, what are you doing?” I don’t know, that’s what I mean by that, white normal campus.

**JS:** So you went from UIC or your experience at UIC being UIC Medicinal Scholars and you were there all four years. [crosstalk] Again, what’s the, what’s the proper name for it?

**JI:** Yeah. The Medicine Academy of Apprenticeship Program.

**JS:** Okay. So it’s a four-year pipeline program. UIC essentially recruits students across the CPS and some suburban areas to be part of this program, a pipeline program, and then it cohorts them, and they learn the program for four years. High school students, which is cool about this is that they enter a college setting early on and then, throughout their experience here they have different lessons and I found this particularly impressive of Kendy to bring this into play, having students wear scrubs at their attending classes, and these are Saturday classes. So kids—students—go to the regular, Monday-through-Friday class. And then on Saturdays twice a month, attend a lecture from 8 a.m. until 3, is it, typically with the idea or the concept or the hopes of entering a space of medicine and pursuing the career. So you initially wanted to go into medicine, right, Jason? [crosstalk] Talk to people?

**JI:** Yeah. You are going to put me in the hot seat here.

**JS:** No, not at all, man. Not all because here’s why am inquiring about this one; I’ve been talking to Kendy about recreating that program outside of UIC, obviously across different fields, not limiting it to just medicine but just different fields.

**JI:** Well, first, I want to talk about the program a little bit. Especially something you mentioned about being on campus that, you know, we learned so much, high-level stuff there, whether it
was about higher education, disparities, or medicine, or a number of things, but that was, that was incredibly important. But equally as important in my opinion, is just the space that we were brought into. I had never even been on a college campus before that program; that is incredibly empowering, especially when you know, like, back at Lincoln Park when I’m talking to some of my white peers and I have an experience that they haven’t had, you know, like, how often does that happen, and so that in itself is incredibly empowering because it also makes things incredibly tangible because if you think about it at home, neither of my parents went to college and so they don’t know anything about what the experience is like, and so the conversations around the dinner table are not anything remotely related to that because that’s just not an experience they can share. And so being in that space makes it tangible and it puts a face to the name, and it also makes it seem like it’s something that’s doable, that’s within reach. And that was incredibly important, the scrub wearing, that was incredibly empowering.

I’m no longer going into medicine, but that at the time was just, you know, this is something I’m wearing, I’m already halfway there. You know, this is something that I can do; I never had sort of a crisis of confidence because of that program and so, it’s—it was very empowering. So that’s what I say about the program; now your question was about me, going into medicine.

**JS:** Yeah, what [made] the change happen?

**JI:** Yeah, so I mean, it was a number of things. I was on the path, I changed around halfway through my sophomore year. So I’m a junior and going into my junior year now.

**JS:** So you got into Northwestern as a medical, like, intending to go into medicine.

**JI:** Yeah. I was a bio major; my application was about medicine. So, I been doing well in the class—it wasn’t sort of like, a weed-out kind of thing. Although the price of doing well in those
classes was incredible. I mean, I was always missing out on time at home, I had to tell my parents “no” a lot, which is not something I’ve ever done before in my life. And that’s still something I struggle with because they need me for a lot of things. And so, doing well on the pre-med track had a high cost and in addition to that, I just wasn’t happy. I became really disillusioned, I became really exposed to the world of academia.

So I’ve worked in three labs now, and the third one I’m still working in but the third one’s an economics lab, but the first two had really crazy experiences. I learned a lot; the first one was a cell biology lab or rather a genetics lab, cancer genetics lab. And I learned a lot from the person I was working under, why there was a lot of politics within the lab, there was a lot of just, it was my previous experience of academia was through medicine, right? And that was a very welcoming space. It was a collaborative space: it’s filled with people that look like me. No one told me that’s not what academia actually was; I just became really disillusioned with the whole thing. You know, I just, I don’t know. I [was] also missing out at home, I sort of began to ask myself, you know, “Is this something that I really want to do because there’s a high cost associated with it, I’ve got another 10 years on this trajectory if I’m going to continue on going down.” Medicines and on top of that, things are getting rough at home with my dad and my mom.

He was sort of going off the deep end and so now, I really wanted to sort of get my mom out of there and get my little sister outta there and everything so I’m, like, “What else do I like?” Well, I like numbers, I like solving problems, I like human behavior. So someone was like, “Oh, you should look at … economics.” So I took a class, really liked it, talked to my advisor. Yeah, I wouldn’t be behind that much. So I decided to do it and I’ll say I’m a lot happier now, mental
health-wise but also I maybe will help the family out a lot more, and also, the future outlook is better.

So, coming out of college. I’m either going to go work at a bank or go into consulting and that sort of thing allows me the ability to help out my family. And on another level, I do also enjoy it, you know, enjoy the problem-solving aspect of the numbers aspect gives me greater agency, I suppose, this whole thing drives my dad insane, I mean, he was the one even as a kid that like, really young, it was sort of pushed the idea of me becoming a doctor and so he is still coming to terms with the fact that that’s not even half. But yeah, that’s I guess that adds a little bit of context.

**JS**: You mentioned something while you were talking about telling your parents no and that kind of weighed heavy on you—talk about that.

**JI**: Yeah, you know, it’s still something that I’m grappling with, but there’s sort of this line where you’re going off to college. And so you have a lot of your own responsibilities as a student; I also had a job, so I had my own responsibilities to take care of and I was still very much needed at home. I helped a lot out at home, whether it was watching my little sister or doing taxes. I mean, it’s just like, there are a billion things at home that I did before I came to college I tried my best to sort of prepare my parents for and I think it did help a little. But I mean, there are still things that if they need me for, you know; we don’t have extended family here in Chicago, which is another big problem and so sometimes my mom still brings my little sister up if they find it and watch it, you know, which by the way is an experience that no one I know on this campus. It really goes through because I mean, I think only 10% of those campuses [are] Pell Grant eligible, which is an indicator of financial need, and so the thing is growing up you never said no to when your family needs, why would you? They help you out and you love them
with that, we never say no. And so the thing is being pre-med, you gotta grind. It is a real
growling, and I do not miss that and so there were times when, you know, my family needed me
that really need to come home, take care of some stuff for them and I had to say no because I had
an exam. It was midterm season; if I miss this exam that’s 30% of my grade out to wonder, you
know what I mean? So, that was really tough. And I guess I realized that I don’t think the cost is
worth it. They supported me for so long, so I’m not trying to walk out on them, I suppose.

**JS:** Yeah, man, I hear you. It’s almost like, not that it’s something you didn’t want to do but it’s
almost like, an unfair, like, a decision that comes about, right, because of the commitment we
have to throw family which isn’t bad necessarily, but it’s something that our white peers
typically don’t have to deal with.

**JI:** I 100% agree; that’s something that I’ve grappled with. To me, it’s not the stuff that I hear on
campus It really gets to me from my white peers, I’m talking about, like, the comments that
you’ll hear about, like, affirmative action, like, right now we’re going through some sort of
recruitment thing with banks and things like that and that this is the season for it. And some, and
a lot of my friends are practicing together, interviewing, that kind of thing, and every now and
then, you’ll get a comment about, like, “Oh, there’s like, a diversity, oh, my presentation that this
bank is doing right.” So we can’t go right I can but they can’t, right? The funny thing is that off-
the-cuff stuff is not what gets to me. It’s this stuff where you know, “Oh, like, let’s go do this”; ‘
“Oh, I can’t cuz I got it like, walking little sister.” Do you know what I mean? It’s that stuff they
don’t really realize that really gets to me. You know, that’s just the reality of the situation.

**JS:** Privileged man: that’s what that’s called. The privilege that they have to be able to be right
without these other added responsibilities, right?
JI: Right. And that, I mean, it just, it pisses me off because when they say things like, you know from your back should know that this puts me at a disadvantage. Well, it’s because you don’t know what you didn’t have, even when I was a kid, like, not being able to grow that community in elementary school because I had an hour to get to go home. Like, the simple act of being able to hang out at the playground after school was something that I couldn’t even do; that might sound trivial and perhaps it is trivial but that it’s that little stuff.

JS: Yeah, it’s … big, man, it’s big because it’s shit that’s, like, systemic and that’s like, embedded in the thought process and it’s taken for granted by individuals, right? But when you grind and you struggle and you notice those inequities, like, they’re very apparent. And it’s sacrifices that you make that they don’t have two choices that you have to take that they don’t have to and then to undermine your struggle by simply putting it, you know, make a comment about affirmative action, like, now you have an advantage because of affirmative action that I can take advantage of. It’s like, “Yo, your whole life has been disadvantaged. What are you talking about, Homie?” [crosstalk]

Talk about this idea of smartness, man, and think about smartness in a three-tiered layered way, right? Smartness in elementary, smartness in high school, and then smartness in college. Did you feel smart in elementary and high school and college, and how was smart to define each of those junctures of education, right?

JI: Exactly. Yeah. So at home, smartness was defined as something I was innate, right. This is not what I understand smart looks to be now, but it was very much not a growth mindset. My dad was very much, “You’re smart, you were born that way.” Some people are not born that way; that was especially jarring when I went to that magnet school in elementary school because when I was there my first couple of years, I started there in fifth grade [and] I was not doing well. I
was performing poor really, and it’s crazy because I had come from my neighborhood elementary school performing really well at the top of my class to going to this magnet school being thrown to the very bottom. And add in this polarizing environment and so his whole thing about sharpness being innate and then that not happening for me anymore. I was like, what the hell is going on, you know, and then within the school environment smartness there because all of these magnet-school kids started there at kindergarten; they all work. They had gotten the tools early on, to succeed in a classroom set—in that classroom setting. And so they’re like, the school had these expectations that everyone there was smart, and so I didn’t fit that, I didn’t fit that at-home definition item for the elementary school definition and it sucked, but when it did do it sort of lit a fire under me. That sort of gave me what I really think smartness is, which now is some way more growth mindset: it’s the grind that’s knowing the techniques that work for you. And it’s something, like, [that] can be changed, manipulated. You know, it’s something that can grow and so from that fire being lit under the elementary school, I got to figure something out; that’s when I sort of came to realize in high school and in college that this is something that’s dynamic and that changes that is different from everyone, and really is about the work that you put in. Yeah, does that answer your question?

**JS:** Yeah, it does. It does; there’s really no way of answering it. Right? Like, it’s a different experience for most in terms of how smartness comes across in the classroom, right? And whether or do yourself identify with those aspects that are being portrayed by whoever has control of the classroom, right?

So here’s an example: certain individuals equate smartness to what a teacher typically gives off in terms of cues of being smart, right? In kindergarten a kid who ties his shoes and is able to follow directions, you know, it’s more than nine times out of ten that those types of
actions are reinforced by teachers, right? So then the kid is smart because the teacher praises them, like, “Oh good job, you’re so young. You already know how to tie your shoes, you’re smart, right?” while a kid who doesn’t might not get the reinforcement. I might consider himself smart, right? But what we’re failing to realize is that those inequities within the system are being counted for the fact that this kid is tying his shoe might be due to the fact that his mom taught him who doesn’t need to work, right? Who has the time to do that, whereas this other kid who doesn’t know how to tie his shoe might have a mom who was working from 6:00 to whatever time who doesn’t have the time to teach the kid. [inaudible]

So this comes from my professor, Beth Hatt. She actually did work around this idea of smartness and smart as a social construct and will kids get within the classrooms in terms of cues of what’s smart and what’s not and typically what’s reinforced by teachers 80%-85% of all teachers being white is what comes across as smartness, right? So that being cultural as well. Do you feel me?

**JI:** Yeah. I got you. I can see that prevalent sort of in elementary school. I had this math teacher named Miss Conway. And so this is where I’m struggling. You know, it’s new magnet school. Miss Conway was a very loud woman, but she had this very unique thing in your classroom where she would publicly announce grades and that was not great for me. There was a lot of sort of social pressure, I suppose, [on] you to perform well then because you knew that it was going to be announced, and she [had a big] habit of pounding on desks and she was a very embarrassing person, which is probably why I still remember. Yeah, I don’t like her at all.

You know what’s funny about that? One of my classmates out of all of my elementary school classmates, one of them actually did come to college with me. He was a white student, son of an old woman. Very affluent, really nice guy in middle school. He always treated me
really nicely, but I always thought of that as some sort of poetic justice, I don’t know, because he was Miss Conway’s favorite. By the way, this is not to diss on the guy. I love this guy; like, he’s still a good friend of mine, he’s always kind but that’s just more of a [inaudible].

**JS:** Legit though, that could go, it could light a fire under your ass. Like, “Hey, I’m gonna try that much harder and could pressure,” you know, like, it could because they’re going to read those grades, like, shit I want to be I point or it could also be traumatizing and humiliating and even if you are trending, you’re not getting those grades, like, it could fuck you up as a student as a kid.

**JI:** I have that thought in my mind a billion times; mainly it’s with my dad, sort of, in his issues with drinking in the family. I sort of think about the effect like, children of alcoholics is, like, a thing I’ve done a lot of research into and, like, the effects that has on people. And so, I’m constantly thinking, you know, thanking just being gracious that I was able to access the opportunities that I did because these things can go the other way so easily, I feel like a lot of people don’t realize that. That’s why I’m always counting my blessings because there’s a lot of forks that I’ve identified in my life. Hopefully, I’ve made the right decision, but we’ll see.

**JS:** Let’s switch gears a little bit, man. Hip-Hop: when I met you you were graffing a little and you were breaking into a school that had been abandoned and taking pictures of them. Right? So, I mean, I’ve always been into, like, graffiti and stuff. So I was like, “Oh, shit, this is kind of cool.” You know what, guy, you into Hip-Hop? And how would you define Hip-Hop?

**JI:** Hip-Hop, for me, was always this manner of pulling back the curtain, that’s how I define it, pulling back the curtain. In the house, we didn’t listen to because my mom didn’t like it; again, this whole white norm thing and the funny thing is my dad is [a] huge Hip-Hop old hag—he talks a lot about, like, Run DMC, Tupac, Biggie, NWA. We grew up listening to those, and
things we never listen to it in the house and my mom was she still hates Hip-Hop and rap, all of that.

But the reason why I referred to [it] as pulling back the curtain is because my mom shielded me from that; I never listened to it growing up until like, high school and when I did start listening to it, I was like, wow they’re talking about stuff that is not discussed in the music I was listening to; you know, she kept me from listening to Hip-Hop. I liked alternative because my dad also like[d] alternative. And so, there wasn’t a lot of it. It is not a lot of issues discussed in alternative music, at least as opposed to Hip-Hop. And so, when I first started listening to it was probably when I really got into … probably freshman year of high school and J. Cole was probably my first introduction to it. Also Kendrick, really Kendrick because To Pimp a Butterfly, it came out my freshman year of high school and I had this friend back then, his name was Jay. Jay paint a picture, Jay is really tall Black dude, whose parents, single mom. Dude was one of the smartest guys that I know, probably ended up dropping out of high school, sort of got involved with the wrong crowd, I still check up on them every once in a while but anyway, he introduced me to Kendrick Lamar. He introduced me to To Pimp a Butterfly—more specifically the song “Alright.” And the influence … that song had on me growing up this crazy really, because here’s an artist that’s talking about issues that I’ve never heard reflected in the music and he’s pulling back the curtain, right?

So before then, music was all lovey-dovey, you know, “I fell in love with the girl,” blah blah blah, you know, not this. This guy was pulling back the curtain aside and saying no this is real life, and to this day I’ve got this playlist I made on my phone, just music. I call it Shy/Chi kids like, Chicago kids, and it’s just music that I was listening to at that time growing up. And “Alright” is the first song on there. Yeah, that was the long-winded way of saying, the way I
define Hip-Hop is pulling back the curtain and my first introduction was because of Jay and that was Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole.

**JS:** It’s dope and I remember, like, a similar album for me was Mos Def *Black on Both Sides*. It was the same thing for me, the way described is exactly the way I think about my introduction to Hip-Hop and it was more so because that shit wasn’t being talked about in school, you know, like, I was living it, like, I grew up in Little Village. So I was living, like, what they were talking about, but the school wasn’t acknowledging it, right? And I knew that. So to me, it was almost this inability to really articulate what I was feeling in the school setting and then listening to music it was like, “Oh shit, that’s my voice” like, that’s what I’ve been trying to say, you know, and they said it such a poetic way. You know what I mean,

“Alright” Kendrick’s track. I remember after Trump got elected feeling so fucking down, you know, just like, so defeated because of all the politics and everything had happened and just kind of like, let down by America as a [inaudible], like, if you could imagine that because despite the facts and despite this man[‘s] like, racist rhetoric, like, he was the chosen one, right? And then Lebron, who I’m not a big fan of Lebron, but this moment I was like, “Oh shit, he just died,” he just tweeted that out, he tweeted Kendrick’s song up, and I was like, “Oh shit, like, this is dope, man. You’re right.” Like, “We got each other’s back and we gonna be alright”; that was deep. But yeah, Kendrick is dope and that’s a hell of a way to get introduced into Hip-Hop.

**JI:** Yeah, Jay knew what he was doing. It’s funny that you talk about the election like that because someone finally put words to excite the same exact feeling. I remember going to school the next day and just being fucking devastated, you know, head down all of that. And you know because growing up, sure you deal with racism, but you have this prevailing hope that it’s not everybody but then it turns out it’s kind of a majority of the country and them fucked.
JS: So it’s scary dude, and it’s—you know in retrospect, in my humble opinion it’s almost something that we needed. Right? Because I think for a long time that we’re operating on this false notion of racism being kind of gone, you know, like, it was there.

JI: We got a Black president, you know, like, “Oh, it’s over. We conquered it; we can go home now. We don’t have to talk about this, you know, as long as there’s a Black in the room we’re all good.” But that’s not the case.

JS: Yeah, it was almost like, like, here’s a slap to the face, like, wake the fuck up, like, shit, still out there and shit’s real, and shit’s fucking probably worse than it’s been if not equal to how it’s been in such a long time. Now, it’s just more systemic but then you have, like, you know, shit going on [in] Charleston and like, all these, like, tweaky protesters and it’s like, “Oh shit, like, that’s what you’ve been thinking.” Like, I’ve been sitting next to you at lunch and, like, I haven’t known this but now it’s out their type suit, you know, I mean and I think that was the ingredients to what happened thereafter with the protest and the social fucking movements that are so powerful right now, you know that our youth led, man. I think with alcohol, shit, like, I don’t know if we would have had that.

JI: Yeah. I was just going to say, we’ll see what happens is that I don’t know, man. I’m scared about it; I just felt like, extremists that are coming out of the woodwork, they’re being in involved and more than ever and really gotta ask yourself at least, maybe it’s because I’m older, I’m paying attention, but to me, this seems like, the most wired that it’s ever been, the most on the edge. That’s a scary thought.

JS: Yeah, and that man did a lot of damage, man, you know, before [he] left, like, he appointed, like, the most judges in a president’s tenure that in itself has long-lasting effects, like, those are lifetime appointments, right?
JI: Right. I mean, the Supreme Court, I mean Texas effectively banning abortions, like, these things and that.

JS: Yeah, dude, so going back to Hip-Hop in a school setting. How is Hip-Hop a tool for you? If it was? Or was it or maybe it wasn’t? I don’t know.

JI: Yeah, absolutely. So high school is when I started listening to Hip-Hop; it definitely became a tool for building community for starters, you know, everybody hanging out. We had this place behind the school and we called it the garden. So everyone would go there after school and bring a speaker and we’d all just listen to music back there. And then I have I’m the greatest memories of the start of the summer, when Kanye … dropped *The Life of Pablo*. I think I was a sophomore, but I have such happiness—serotonin, really—that’s just associated with that album because you’d go outside. It’s hot, the sun’s out, and there’s just a group of people blasting that album in the garden, and we would go and go hang out. So that right there is a sense of community real, you know, people bonding over their shared music. Outside of, you know, it creating a community, like, we mentioned before it put a name to a lot of things that we were going through, especially J. Cole *For Your Eyes Only* it comes out, especially the song “Neighbors Think I’m Selling Dope”; that one is specifically for us. And I remember talking to my boy, Jay about that, it’s just the idea that you sort of villainized because you don’t subscribe to the white norm, and that was a feeling that Jay and I had a lot, sort of growing up and finally, we had a name to it after listening to that. And so just an outlet for your feelings, a way to put a name to it, which, by the way, is incredibly powerful because when you’re experiencing something and you don’t know what the hell it is, that’s very confusing, and so for that curtain to be pulled back and to finally have a name for it, that’s incredibly empowering and then just the community and happiness that I can also bring, you know, Chance the Rapper *Coloring Book*— that’s it—went
viral and everybody loves that album but Chance is from Chicago, you know, and his brother would sometimes come around LP and hang around. So that was always cool to say that. Yeah, it seems something [inaudible], but he would come around and hang out sometimes; he’s a little younger.

Yeah, so in the school setting, it was two parts. It was pure happiness, you know, Kanye, Chance the Rapper, but it was also putting a name and building a community to a lot of the stuff that we were feeling at the time, that was more J. Cole, Kendrick. And I think both parts are important, you got to feel happy sometimes. And you also got to reflect on your struggle and I think in a nutshell, that’s what Hip-Hop at least in high school brought for me.

**JS:** You know, what’s crazy, man. Like, I think about the early, like, the introduction the hip-hop in high school and to me, it’s very synonymous with riding the L. You know what I mean? Because it’s very... it almost like, I could listen to a song. And I was like, the playlist and I knew, like, at this song I was going to get off, you know, and it was just, like, a visual thing.

**JI:** This is what I was trying to articulate earlier about the relationship in the way that Black and Brown people interface with the world and their experiences and their expressions; you and I both have associated music and memories and experience, and we felt that and we’ve connected to that, and I just feel like people don’t do that. You know, maybe I’m being too short, but I love that. There are so many musics and songs, and feelings and experiences like that on the L that I’ve had. And that’s just truly a beautiful thing in my experience. There’s—I believe it’s off of *Life [of Pablo]*, probably; I think it’s “Famous” but there’s a beat, it’s a harmonic beat at the start that was a sample that Kanye use. And for me, that we were blasting that we were at the Damen silos. So, Damen silos is this place sort of near Midway; it’s on the Southwest Side. It’s an old industrial corner that’s abandoned. But there’s just these gigantic grain silos and I think they got
popped out. The cops are, like, around there now but before that, we would go there and we would climb up then and that was crazy. Well, we would sit there and we would play that song. So, that is like, a song, a memory that I have associated with that, you know, middle of the summer, just being out there. It’s good times, man.

**JS:** You know what, into your appointment, I always wonder if, like, for me, I don’t know other genres of music. They can do that for me; I don’t know if it’s just because of what you spoke about, like, the lyrics behind it, intertwining with, like, the aesthetics around the city and then the experiences that we’re having and to your point like, how can someone who hasn’t gone through Brown, we, you and I, like, have gone through experience something similar. I don’t know, it could be possible. I see shorties, especially when I was working at … LT like, for lack of a better word trying to be like, rappers or whatever, you know, like, little white kids and should have say “Hmm.”

**JI:** I mentioned that earlier about my gripes with the genre the industry now, I don’t know what happened, but talking to my dad about this, my dad loves music. He is actually a big Mos Def fan, but he also is very much—and I don’t know where it came from—he’s also very much into heavy metal and rock and stuff and so, he used to go to the music festival, to Lollapalooza. When it first started out, it was really small, and it was like, rage against, right? It was like, really hard rock bands. But the thing is now, if you look at the lineup, half of the lineup is, like, rappers and so at first, I was like, all right, this is great. Like, this is a great thing to have happened but then my dad was like, “No, it’s because white people started listening to rap” and I was like, wow, I never thought about it that way and now, I don’t know, I should be the last person that gatekeeps anything I really know like, gatekeeping things but I think it doesn’t have the taboos that it used
to have even before my day, you know, all of my friends, all of my peers, all of my white friends here on campus, and I listen to rap and Hip-Hop, you know.

The funny thing is, I still see it in my mom who still despised it because it doesn’t fit, like, a white norm. That’s how I know that; that’s sort of like, how it used to be because she has not caught up with that whereas all my young white friends. They blast that stuff but it’s always funny to me because they’re all coming from affluent places, listening to music about an experience they can’t really connect with. And that’s not to say they can’t enjoy it but I always wondered about the relationship they have with it because it’s definitely not the one that I have with it.

**JS:** Dude. One last question: In your opinion, can Hip-Hop be a tool for Latino students to navigate what we know is an oppressive educational system, right, for Black and Brown students?

**JI:** Absolutely. I mean, just coming off of my own experience it gave me and my peers something to bond over, a sense of community. And more importantly, it just goes back to that pulling back the curtain idea, if you’re growing up as a Latino and going into white spaces, right? If you’re going into higher education, if you just go in white spaces in general. You’re not seeing your struggle illustrated, right? You’re not seeing it in a tangible way, you’re not seeing it put into words and that is not a good thing. And so Hip-Hop serves as a platform to see your struggle or your, not even your struggle, your experience in general, illustrated and put into words and like, you said so poetically. And that’s a very powerful thing because, to be blunt: We’re living in a white world and to have something, that now is the most popular genre of music, to have that, not only have that but putting your experience on display. I mean, that’s a very powerful thing. I’m hoping that it has some sort of effect culturally, maybe it has because
you always hear that thing. Or like, they love the culture, they hate the people, you know, so I’m hoping that it made people, warm-up multicultural I suppose. But at the very bottom line, what it does for us, it puts everything into words and it really gives you the sense that you’re not alone as well, you know? And so, yeah, I mean that’s Hip-Hop for me as it is.

[END]

Ulysses

Figure 16. Ulysses QR code.
INTRO: Latinos, welcome to The Latino underground, a podcast dedicated to the reclamation and exploration of Latino identity. Through counter-narrative stories, we hope to give you tools by which to navigate an oppressive system. Stay tuned.

JS: Hey, what’s [up.] good people? It’s Jorge. In today’s session, we have the pleasure of having a conversation with the homie, Ulysses. Ulysses is a former student of mine. And, I really wanted to capture his story because Ulysses has a unique perspective of attending school in a highly affluent setting. And Ulysses was a student who was very aware of the setting and who was very aware of the disparities within the educational system. So, without further ado, here is the conversation with the homie, Ulysses.
JS: Hey, what’s good, Uly? Buenas tardes. First and foremost, I want to thank you for agreeing to share your story, brother.

UL: Thank you for having me, dude.

JS: Cool, bro. So, we’ll go ahead and kick it off with the same question I ask all guests. When was the first time you realized there was … oppression or disparities within our educational system?

UL: I know this, like, … popped up in my head right away. Fifth grade. I remember being in the lunchroom, being on the line to get lunch. I was with my friend, Eddie. I was with Pamie, too. We’re just there chilling, and like, there’s this, I remember we go get in the line, get our lunch, boom. It’s a normal day, right? Next thing you know, all three of us get called into the office. And let’s go where we were told that, like, what—we were bullying some kid in the lunch line. I was like, what? And I’m like, you probably got the wrong people because I know it because I had a good report. The principal knew my family very well. Like, they … knew me, I knew them. They know that I wasn’t the type of kid to just go out and do that type of thing. And, and we’re like, what do you mean? Like, where is this all coming from? Like, well, this kid, some small kid. He’s like, a year below us. So, that you guys punch them and cut in line and I was like, that didn’t happen. And he’s like, “Well, he says that someone saw that you guys do it.” And I’m like, wait, but like, I’m pretty sure we can all have, like, people that were there in the line with us that [they] like, didn’t see us do it, right? And then I thought it was just going to be some misunderstanding and next thing, you know, he’s like, “No no, no, no.” Next you know, I find out that his mom is on the board at the school. Them like, being like, white and stuff and they just in a school that’s like, pretty half and half, right? Instantly, they tell us, like, “Shut up.” Like, “You did this.” Like, you guys don’t have a chance to defend yourself like, this, like, you guys,
we’re guilty, you know, before proven innocent, you know I’m saying. And I remember that day, like, really struck a chord [in] me because I got like, a four-day suspension in school. Suspension and my mom. I remember going home and crying to my mom for, like, this is happening. And my mom just kind of looked me in the face, “You didn’t do this?” I’m like, “No.” And then she’s like, well, “Mijo.”? Like, “I can’t believe I’m telling you this, but you just going to have to take the punishment because they’re not going to believe you.” And I was like, and that really struck me. I remember that vividly; I’m like, I just had to take the punishment, just because some kid, Paul, like, Aaron, I don’t know, just being hateful, you know, like, I remember that so vividly. And they’re like, kind of like, started in my distress in like, the people, the authority, I guess, [crosstalk] because people are supposed to help me, you know, people are supposed to help me, supposed to hear me out. And next you know, they just do that to me because he stabbed me in the back. And like, I don’t know. Like, do that, you know.

**JS:** That’s just [inaudible]. That’s just insane, dude. So, it was …the same punishment for, for all three, you guys?

**UL:** Yes, all three of us, like, as if all three of us punched him one by one and cut them in line. You know, like, I was like, this is crazy, like, and nothing ever happened. I just don’t understand to this day.

**JS:** Yes, man, it’s kind of sad, right? Because those situations really affect us. And they kind of fucked us up, right? But they also shape us, which kind of gets me to the next question, man. Since I’ve known you, you’ve been interested in, like, social justice and politics. Like, where did that interest come from?

**UL:** Yes, that’s actually a good question because I— to really pinpoint it, I guess, like, I always knew about it, especially after the 2016 election. After like, such disappointment I had like,
because before the 2016 election, like, I’d be the kid that’s a like, like, bro, I did I say I’d be like, I’m like, dude, fuck politics. Like, why do you even waste your time with that shit like, it’s boring. You guys just argue for no reason and he goes, you’re gonna, like, change your mind like, yes. I remember vividly the day after the election, like, I got to school, I broke down first period to my teacher, Furgoso. What’s called then, like, he pulled me because he saw how upset I was and I usually talk during class. You know, I’m usually always talking, I’m like, upbeat, energetic. They saw that like, how disturbed I was. He pulled me out to the outside, like, in the hallway. He’s like, “How you feeling?” I was like, I’m like, bad dude, like, I did not know like, this is the type of like, country, this is the type of school.

I was in, you know, especially like, I remember, you probably remember the incident that like, me and my friends were walking down the hallway and what’s called some kid in a border patrol hat, like, walks past and say, I feel bad for these kids, you know I’m saying? And he’s just like, rubbing salt in the wound. And I was like, the entire day I did not talk in any of my classes at all. I was just so upset. No, and after that, I didn’t like, stand for like, the Pledge of Allegiance, other than like, for like, more your day or something like that. But because and I was, like, in my philosophy class, my teacher asked me, like, why I did that is it, was it to, like, disrespect the flag, was it? It was just questions. He wasn’t, like, trying to, like, impose anything on me. I’m like, no, I was just disappointment. Like, I was just disappointed in what the state of America was. And what’s called that day really resonated with me. And after that day, like, I started looking at myself, and I grew up in a really religious household, like, LGBTQ, everything, all that was like, I had things I didn’t know, things that I was supposed to just be like, no, this isn’t good and stuff like that. I start looking at myself in my own beliefs. I’m like, wait, if I’m so upset about being a minority and how people treat us, then how am I gonna go then, and treat other
minorities the exact same way that I dislike being treated. It’s kind of like, the “treat others, like, the way you want to be treated” type of mentality. And that really did it for me, you know.

**JS:** Yes, dude. It’s crazy like, like, you touch on something that’s kind of fucking. I wrote a while ago, you know, and that like, it resonated with me as well. It was a piece by Malcolm Gladwell and he talks about like, the Black struggle, right? And the Black Agenda, and how, like, within Hip-Hop even like, there’s, there’s homophobia. Oh, that’s very like, you know, prevalent within that but then, he dissects it and says, you know, like, exactly what you were saying. The Black struggle is interlocked with the LGBTQ struggle with the Brown struggle, because we’re all struggling. So we have to struggle together. So like, it… tips that mentality of like, hey, if one of your brother’s going through shit, like, you’re going through it as well. And I mean, it’s real, right? Because we’re all a community and we’re all, you know, here facing similar struggles, which kind of leads me into the next question, man. Since I’ve known you, like I said, you’ve been very aware of like, injustices and inequities within our educational system. But more so, you’ve been into … Hip-Hop, and Hip-Hop that’s conscious. You know, where did that come from?

**UL:** Hip-Hop. I remember the first artists I listened to were Akon and Chris Brown. Because they’d always be on the radio and like, my older brothers would always be playing them. I remember those are the first ones, but although I listen to some, I was a big Chris Brown fan. Then, that thing with Rihanna happened and then like, obviously I was a kid, so I didn’t know what’s going on. Like, you know, why they stopped playing his music on the radio. I’m like, this sucks. But it was up until, and then, when I really got into the pop actually was, I think sixth or seventh grade. I remember the news just broke out that they were making an NWA movie, or that it was going to start filming. So I’m like, NWA, I’ve listened to some of their music, let me
get into it, you know, let me, oh, and also I was listening to like, P. Diddy, you know, it’s kind of the basics. And then once I discovered J. Cole, that’s when I really like, dove in deep, and I actually, like, started listening and like, to whole albums. Throw this in the Kendrick Lamar, and then during that, back then I was just listening to Hip-Hop, just listen to Hip-Hop. Well, with like, J. Cole and Kendrick, I started learning about like, the Black man’s play, and like, all that stuff. I started actually like, learning about the struggles and like, and then I would also like, draw, like, similarities between like, the struggles that they would say, they would heckle their community goes through in their songs. And then like, the struggles that I see around me back when I was like, living in Lenzi, or like, back, when I would just be like, observing my parents, you know, and so that really also got me like, really deep into it. But because there’s not only was it … good music, in my opinion, it was also music that I could connect to in a sense, you know.

**JS:** Can you elaborate on the connections you speak of?

**UL:** The first is of police, the [inaudible] of police, you know, it’s like, the apartment complex. There’s a park and then literally across the street is the police station. I remember, I was thinking like, 13, 13 and 14, and it was like, a regular like, summer night in Lindsey. There’s like, 70 kids in the park, everyone’s playing, some kids are in the playground, some kids are playing soccer, some kids are playing basketball. It was around, it’s pretty late actually. It was maybe like, 9:00, 9:00 or 10:00. But that was like, something common, you know? Because we’re all right there and … a lot of parents are just, they’re watching us in the playground.

**JS:** Hey, Uly, sorry to interrupt, bro. Can you do me a favor. Can you describe what Lenzi is? What is Lenzi? You know, it happens to me all the time and we talked about a neighborhood or a place that we’re so familiar with, we tend to forget sometimes. Like, not everybody might know
about the beautiful place, right? So if you could do me a favor, man, if you could describe what Lenzi is, and what it meant to you. I think that would be a good way to paint the picture.

**UL:** Alright, so Lenzi is an apartment complex in the town of Hodgkins. It’s the town of Hodgkins; it’s kind of divided into—or at least back then, it was kind of divided into two areas. There is Lenzi which was up a hill, and then, there is down Hodgkins, that’s what we’d call it. And Lenzi was a apartment complex and in down the hill, was just a whole bunch of houses. It’s like, the, the library was there, the park district was there. And the one thing that divided them was that down Hodgkins was majority white people. And up in the apartment complex was all like, 99.99% Mexicans, you know, a lot of them being undocumented. Lenzi was unfortunately a small base also for the Latin Kings, you know. But as a kid that grew up there and someone that I guess has a lot of fond memories to go along with some bad memories, they never really bothered us, you know. And I would like, if you lived in Lenzi and you wanted your friend from down Hodgkins to come and visit you, and come play with you, instantly be a no, you know, like, the parents from Down Hodgkins said, “Where does he live?” Like, he lives in Lenzi, he’s like, “No, oh, you can’t go over there.” Like, even though we have 70 kids in the park playing all at once, you know, it was such a tight and actually like, loving community. Everyone knew each other. All the parents knew each other. But because we are all Mexican, because we’re all of lower income, you know, we were just kind of seen as a different community, and not just as a part of Hodgkins, you know: it was Lenzi, and then there’s Down Hodgkins. It wasn’t that Lenzi was a part of Hodgkins, it was Lenzi. We had our own identity, you know, and we kind of took pride in that, to be honest, you know. We’d say like, even to this day I meet people that are from Lenzi and maybe I didn’t really know him back then, they’ve seen me and asked me like, yo, like, weren’t you from Lenzi and instantly, it’s like that bond, you know. Because, like, we both
grew up in, like, a pretty shitty place that we can disagree. But the memories that community made together was honestly pretty great.

**JS:** You mentioned the Lenzi identity, how would you define that?

**UL:** Lenzi identity, let’s see. Lenzi identity is late-night cops and robbers, games stretching from like, 10:00 to 12:00 before our parents literally came out and like, grab you by the ear and take you home. The Lenzi identity is cherry cherry freeze tag, jumping the fence onto the soccer field that wasn’t even done just to play that. Lenzi identity was living, literally ten feet away from the police but feeling like, goes miles apart because of how much they didn’t care about us. It was kind of, the Lenzi identity was kind of like, being on … a stranded island with a whole bunch of families. Because you were there alone, but at least you got each other, you know.

**JS:** Yes, yes.

**UL:** That’s what the Lenzi identity was for me.

**JS:** For individuals who don’t understand what it means to grow up in a neighborhood like that, right, where there are games, right? And it is that like, the bad reputation to it. I think a lot of times they see that as its identity and they failed to realize what it is, which is what you just mentioned, right? Like, it’s a community, like, growing up in a little village like, it was I mean, Little Villager’s village, right? It’s mad, like, gangs all around. But when I describe it, dude, and even till this day, I was, I had a meeting on small, go, we’re talking about where you grew up, right? And I brought up, I grew up in … Little Village and I could see this cat like, this, dude, he kind of like, to sit back, like, oh, was a rough, but wasn’t bad, and I was like, you know what, man? Like, yes, yes, there was violence, there was games, right? But there was also a community, and there was also like, a certain level of protection, right? Because the games themselves, always kind of looked out for the kids that were playing around, right? If that makes
sense. And whenever like, a stranger would come in, like, they wouldn’t be able to come in so easily. Like, they would always check by like, those individuals who were there, right? So as bad as it was, quote unquote, like, there was a sense of community and belonging, and like you’ve mentioned, there was a sense of pride, right? Sorry, I deviate, dude, you were talking about the correlation between a Hip-Hop and Lenzi or...

UL: Yes. So, like, what you just described right now, like, they the gang, like, the gangsters, the game in my community, the Latin Kings, they kind of protected us in a way. They never bother us, you know; I could walk down the sidewalk like, you know, at the park late at night, but they weren’t going to come up to me like, you know, and cause me any trouble. But back to us and was like, with the distress of police which also connects. Like, one thing that I kind of, like, resonated with Hip-Hop was that on a summer night I was at the park with my two younger brothers, Hugo and Emilio; they were about 13, one of them was 11 and the other one was, he was 9. And there’s a bunch of kids there, right? It was a normal night. Actually, now we see a car down the street that literally divides the park from the police station, come speeding in and then they all come out like, guessing I kind of like, put two and two together because and then the Latin Kings came out and they also in, just get in a big brawl, you know, I’m talking about like, pipes, bricks. Thank God, there were no guns because I’m telling you there were 70 kids at the park. And because, I don’t know, we were just there, we can just, with none of us really thought of the idea to run away. We were all just there on the fence watching the fight as it goes on. And I remember vividly seen one of the Latin Kings, the other game was leaving, throw a brick through the window of the car and I remember seeing the guy’s like, head like, kind of like, snap in the back and I kid you not, that whole thing happened in probably lasted like, five minutes, the fight probably lasted. I kid you not, the cops didn’t come till like, 10 minutes after it was all
done. And we had, like, kids that were old enough to have a phone, like, calling the police like, saying like, you know, something’s happening right here, right next to the park. I’m like, dude, there is like, someone was fighting at your front doorstep. [crosstalk] And he didn’t bother to even, like, come out even though there’s a whole bunch of kids that could have easily gotten hurt. If one of them had a piece on them and shot, like, the probability of them hitting a kid was so high. Like, it was insane to me like that really opened my eyes, too. So when I in Hip-Hop and out hear about like, while Kendrick Lamar’s, “It’s going to be all right,” you know, like, I’m like, yes, like, to me that makes sense. You know, I don’t know what kid a white kid from, I don’t know what’s in strings? Somebody’s name? thought of when he’d listen to that song. But to me, it made sense every single word that came out of his mouth. Because I’m like, yes, I’ve seen that, I’ve kind of been in that. Maybe not to the full extent, maybe not to say that I know exactly what Black people go through. But like, I know certain parts of it, you know, so yes.

JS: Yes. Yes, and it’s crazy you leave because like, you said it very well, right, it’s almost like, having a fight in front of your doorstep because the proximity that this police station was in terms of the community was like, less than half a block away, like, it was footsteps.

UL: Literally across the street from the park.

JS: Yes. You brought up something interesting earlier, man. The difference in relating to Hip-Hop, right? You as a Brown kid who’s experienced stuff as opposed to a white kid from an affluent neighborhood such as Western Springs, as you put it. Can you elaborate on that, please?

UL: I don’t know. I might think about that a little bit because I would like to say the first thing that comes into my mind is open-mindedness, I think, you know, compassion. You know, they might not have gone through, maybe some of them have gone through, maybe some of them have like, you know, lived in rough areas like that, you know. I think it shows exactly what I just
said, like, compassion and open-mindedness, you know, they, it’s like, when you hear a good book, like, you get invested, you know. But this isn’t, but these aren’t stories though. These are real-life events and a lot of white people I think would like, to say like, no, you guys are exaggerating it, you know, this stuff doesn’t really happen. Because it makes America look bad, you know? And God forbid, America is bad, you know, in their eyes. But I think the white people that actually do get into like, backpack rap or conscientious rap like, they kind of like, I think, step outside of themselves, and saw this, and listen to it. And first of all, they probably got into it for the artistry and then the word play. But then, once he started getting into the lyrics, I think they kind of like, realize like, oh there’s a lot more than just music. And here, there’s a message, you know, and they were, I don’t know. Luckily for a lot of people, they actually, like, listen to it and like, sympathize with them in a sense, you know.

JS: Yes, yes. You said something right now that kind of stood out, man, a term that actually you taught me as well. Which is kind of cool. And that’s partly why I love Hip-Hop so much because it’s such a fluid culture, right? Where like, it’s doing what I strive to do in terms of like, dismantling what traditional knowledge holders look like, right? Because in Hip-Hop, like, I learned consistently from youth. Hip-Hop was essentially developed by youth, right? So I can consistently learn from students around me. I remember going on a trip and you being there, and you using that term “backpack rappers.” At the time I don’t know what it was because to me it was only like that’s all I listen to, right? It was like, it was a Hip-Hop and then there was like, the Trap, right? But I don’t understand what that tune was. And so, you brought it up, right? What would you say was your, well, here; let me go back. How would you define Hip-Hop?

UL: That’s a hard question, nowadays. I think more than ever because hip hop has transcended itself. In a sense, it’s become America’s most digested, like, genre of music. It’s even overcame
like, rock, you know, in all history. It’s overcame rock because there’s like, a lot of facets of Hip-Hop now. There’s pop Hip-Hop, there’s, I don’t know, there is the conscientious there’s a kind of regional regionalism of Hip-Hop is gone out the window. I think that’s a really hard question that I don’t think I have an answer to. Especially nowadays to describe the Hip-Hop we are now in.

**JS:** All right, let me rephrase the question then. What does Hip-Hop mean to you?

**UL:** For me, it was kind of like, what we just talked about. It opened my eyes. It was [a] person that wasn’t that much of a fan of reading books in the day. It was my form of gathering knowledge and kind of like, experiencing the world before I actually went out there and did it myself. You know, it’s like, no one can deny the amount of skill it takes to rap, to do poetry, you know, tell stories with the B, you know, and actually, like, make, get the listener to be in that moment and actually feel the way the artist feels. For me it was, Hip-Hop was an eye-opener for lack of a better term, you know.

**JS:** Okay. Yes, it makes sense, man. I think that’s, that’s what it was for me, as well. For you, was there an intersection between Hip-Hop and education in your life?

**UL:** Yes, yes. When it came to English class, I remember whenever we had the opportunity to like, choose a subject or like, choose like, a video to write about, you know, it always be like, about Lenzi. It always be about J. Cole and this message that he says in this song, or this lyric, you know. It always be something about that because the songs and Hip-Hop would inspire me so much and like that I would love that. It just like, it was super easy for me to write about. I could go on for pages and pages talking about this one verse, you know, this one song like, Hip-Hop really help me like, realize that if I’m really interested in something, then I’m going to put the effort and I’m like, give 110% and it’s not going to feel like work. And to this day, like, I
love writing. Like, if it’s a topic that I really like, then I can go on and on and I can do like, the best work that I can, you know. And that’s what I kept [open] to me.

**JS:** Let’s take it step back and kind of move away from Hip-Hop and talk about you, you as a person, man. Who’s Ulysses, man? Talk to me about you, your family, your upbringing, your ancestry, right?

**UL:** So, my name’s Ulysses Lopez. I was the third boy out of seven. Well, we had one girl. I had an older brother Oscar. Another older brother Louis. Then there was me, Lorena, Diego, Emilio, then it was our first sister Mariana, now we have a little brother. Big, big household. Small area living in a two-bedroom apartment in Lenzi. Bunch of athletes. All of us play sports. Back then, I was a middle child, so I was kind of like, since forgotten, you know, I heard that like, middle child syndrome. As I started coming into my own, I found art, you know, I started getting into art and like drawing and painting. The more I grew and the more I started learning, I guess, I probably became most different out of my entire family. Like, as you can see right now, I bleached hair. I piercings, you know. I’m also the first one that we know of right now my family a part of the LGBTQ community, you know, being bisexual. Also the first one to like, I don’t know, kind of like, actually say something about these things, you know, actually asked my parents like, what’s wrong with like, being gay or like, all that stuff. I’m like, I remember once asked my dad, like, if my little sister brought a Black guy home as her boyfriend, like, how would you react? I was always asking questions on the kid, that ask questions in my philosophy class my teacher stops calling on me after so long because I keep on raising my hand, you know, to give input. I’m a person that questions everything and that has led me to become what I like, to what I call myself nowadays is a Democratic Socialist, you know. Get into politics and not trusting either the left or the right, because frankly, I don’t see anything being done, you know.
don’t know, I guess, I’m my own person and I don’t like other people thinking for me. I like thinking for myself and also being very compassionate for other people. That’s a big thing. Also for me, being able to understand what another person is going through, you know, and knowing that it isn’t just red vs. blue when it comes to politics. There are some people need to believe in these things because if they believe that, it’s going to get them the money to feed their family. Some people believe in these things. Although I may not agree with them, it’s because ultimately it’s going to benefit them and their life, you know.

JS: Yes, for sure, dude. I hear you. Talk to me about your parents, Uly. Where are your parents from?

UL: My parents are both from Calvillo, Aguascalientes, small town. My dad came over the border illegally at around at the age of, like, I think eight. And what’s called, then he went, he like, came over here found work, you know, do the whole thing, went back. Fell in love with my mom and what’s called, and like, … while he was here, he got his papers and stuff. So he was able to go back, got my mom and him, brought it over here. And instantly, I think my mom was probably 20 or like, 21, somewhere around that age when they had my first brother, And my dad, man, probably the most hard-working man I’ve ever seen. You know, I go, he like, told me he like, I need to go help him out for like, a job. He’s a landscaper. He owns his own company now, actually. Yes, and dude, he’s like, he’s so successful now. But I see he still goes out and does the work that, like, I see whenever I do go out with them. I see the beads of sweat drop. I see all the knowledge he know. He has like, in his head and like, how he can see things before they even there. My dad had, like, inspires me so much and he’s the driving force of why I know I just can’t slack off and not do anything, you know. And then on the other hand, my mom, the biggest heart ever, you know, actually both of them. Like, they could have, my mom is always been at
home, you know being like, just kind of like, a normal thing in Mexican household. Always took
care of us. I can’t complain one single bit about the way I was raised. My mom like, biggest
heart always took care of me and my brothers, was always there, you know, I can’t complain
about a single way that they raised us. And also my dad also the biggest heart too, you know,
because like, it’s no secret that Mexico or Mexican men have a machismo problem. And yes,
like, they both showed how much they really cared about me and my brothers and especially me
when I came to them and came out to them, you know, being Mexican Catholics, being very
conservative. We used to always go to church. I used to be an altar boy. I remember they’re like,
I was like, crying. I was like, because I knew in my mind, I’m like, one of two things is going to
happen, but mainly one thing is probably going to happen. I’m like, I’m probably gonna have to
leave, you know. I was ready for it. It took me, I realized I was by, like, in late 2017 early 2018. I
didn’t come out to them till maybe late 2019. And what’s called it took all those years for me to
finally be like, this is it, you know, I’m going to tell them. And if I had to pack up my bags and I
might have to do that, you know. But luckily, my parents are who they are and they supported
me, who welcomed me with like, with open arms and told me that they were going to love me no
matter what. And so did the rest of my family too, thankfully…. Yes.

**JS:** Dude, I understand you don’t want to talk about this but same time, like, I feel that this type
of thing is what when shorties who are going through the same thing and they listen to like, your
story could benefit from, right? So if you’re open to it, what was that process like, man, paint the
picture, like, what was going through your head? What made you decide it? And then how did it
play out?

**UL:** No, yes, it’s fine. I’m really open about it nowadays. So, when I realized that it was my kind
of like, my junior year and I think you remember this, like, my junior year was a mess. It was the
lowest I’ve ever been. Like, in terms of mental health, I missed, I think it was like, close to 100
days of school. You know, every single day that I went to school felt like a week. And like, I was
just in the worst state of mind and I remember like, really digging deep into myself because I
was asking myself. I’m like, why am I feeling like this? Why am I feeling like this? And I came
up to a bunch of conclusions. But also, I don’t know, it’s kind of miraculous in a way that I’m
like, am I really myself, like, are there things that I’m hiding? And I remember this actually kind
of funny story, High School Musical comes up on my TV. And I remember as a kid, like, I got
this flashback. Like, I’m, are you watching it? And I’ll see you all was into it because it was like,
the whole like, high school like, experience and blah, blah, blah, and just music and stuff. And
also obviously I was in for, like, Vanessa Hudgens, but what’s called I remember once like,
watching it like, in one like, Zac Efron, Troy Bolton will come up on the screen and like, my
heart would start racing. I remember being a church boy back in the day. I would like, kind of
like, punch myself. I’m like, no you’re not supposed to feel this way. Just like, like, why are you
doing like, I’ve closed my eyes and like, and I stopped. I’ve stopped watching a movie. Like, I’m
like, this is like, I’m not gay, like, what the fuck am I doing like, blah, blah, blah. And so, when I
finally realized it and I went to my therapist, you know, like, they told me this is going to be
tough because I explained to them what type of household I was in. But he’s like, but as long as
you know who you are and as long as you love yourself, then that’s all that really matters. So the
first person I ever came out to was Nayeli. The coming out process is weird, because obviously,
you want to tell the people that are closest to you, but not right away. Like, Nayeli was a close
friend, but she wasn’t one of my closest friends. So she was like, a nice distance away to. So,
whatever she says, I can kind of brush off if she were to reject me, you know, and if she would
accept me then it was like, a plus. Then, the second person I told...
**JS:** Uly, was it almost like, a survival thing? Like, you don’t tell your closest friends because you’re afraid that they might react a certain way and then you’ll lose them. It, was that accurate?

**UL:** Yes, because the last person that the last ones at my friends, before I told my family, that I told was Samuel. They’re the best friend of all time, my brother. He was the last one that I told. Because like, I couldn’t really keep it from them anymore. You know, like, everybody else knew. Everybody would have to keep hush-hush about it when he was around. But like, I looked at him like, this is my brother, like, I can’t keep this secret from him. But at the same time, it was so scary. Because, it’s so close to home. You know, if I lose them, then that’s a really big hit, you know.

**JS:** Yes, for sure.

**UL:** Samuel was my best friend for life, you know. So, yes.....

**JS:** How was his reaction to that?

**UL:** Good. It was great. I couldn’t ask for anything better, to be honest, you know, and I feel like, I’m so lucky, dude. I’m so, so lucky because I scared myself a lot with all like, the horror stories that you can read online and stuff like that. But the fact that like, I basically went ten for ten, you know. It was crazy. No, and noon today like, I got it, like, I can just have a casual conversation … with them like, yes. I was talking to this guy the other day and then they’d actually be like, as if I was just saying, I was attracted to this girl, they’d be like, yes, what’s up, like, how did it go? You know, like, being invested as a friend should be and being supportive is, oh no, dude. it’s great. I couldn’t ask for anything better.

    There’s always this neutrality that you have to have as an educator. I think it was very apparent with, with me, you know, like that there was certain kids that I got really fucking have vibe with, you know.
JS: Yes.

UL: And you were one of them and like, Sam was one of them, and I, Nayeli was one of them, you know, Carlo was one of them, like, just genuinely like, nice individuals, right?

JS: Yes.

UL: And it’s one of those things, man, they were like, and Sam was like, legit, like, such a nice kid, you know, told you I called him up and I, “Yo, Sam, how’s it going?” You know, just to check out how...

JS: The kid’s great.

UL: Yes, amazing.

JS: I think he’s great.

UL: Yes, so, shout out to Nayeli and Sam.

JS: Yes, of course.

UL: Yes, definitely shout out to them. So, okay. So, back to this thing for like, people, kids that were in my shoes. Do a lot of thinking to yourself. Honestly, if you think that you are gay or if you don’t want to put labels on yourself, you kind of got to, it’s sad and it sucks. But it’s something you have to explore by yourself. First and foremost, because it’s in today, maybe not in 2021. Maybe it wasn’t even that big deal back in 2018 when I was going through it. But to them that’s like, the end of the world. Basically, like, it can either go one way or the other. I’m finding it hard to find the words, but just know that as long as you do love yourself and accept yourself, and you can find people that also love yourself, which there are a lot of people that will support you. That’s all that matters at the end of the day because being in Mexican household, being in a conservative household, you had to be ready for both. You got to be ready to be abandoned as much as you’re ready to be accepted, sadly. So, it’s kind of grim. It’s kind of,
probably not what a lot of kids need to hear. But I think it’s important to know because life isn’t always as good as seems to be, but we can’t control what happens in life. We can only control how we react to it. So, as long as you’re ready and you react to it well, I think that you’ll pull through. And you’ll end up being happy.

**JS:** Dude, that’s like, mad deep, right? Like, if you think about it, like, what you just said right there. You have to be ready to be accepted. We also have to be ready to like, [inaudible] and that’s a crazy choice that most people don’t have to make.

**UL:** Yes.

**JS:** So, Uly, from the time you told Sam to the time you told your parents, how long was it? And what was the process that made you actually, like, go ahead and do it. You mentioned, right? Like, telling Sam was one of the hardest things because he was like, your best friend. But I think telling your parents is another layer to it, no? Or am I wrong?

**UL:** No. Yes, it is. And I’m not gonna lie to you; I’m going to tell you exactly what happened. It’s, I’m not very proud about happen. I think it was like, probably like, a year difference from telling Samuel to the telling my parents. My brothers were having a party. Like, I think we’re watching like, [inaudible] or something in the garage. And I was there, I was drinking with my friends and stuff and I end up drinking a little bit too much. I tell one of my other closest friends Costa and then what’s called it, like, he accepts me like, it was great, right? I was a bit drunk and we go back in the garage and he’s talking to my brother and he accidentally, let it slip, you know. And he tells me he’s like, “Bro, I’m so sorry, this is what happened.” I’m like, it’s all good. So I’m like, I kind of have no choice now. I go, I ask my brother if you can step outside and what’s called, I like, drunk and also scared. I kind of break down some minutes on. He said, “No, Ulysses, it’s ok.” And then my other older brother Oscar comes, he said, “What’s going on?”
And then Louis kind of like, he doesn’t want to say it for me; he’s like, “Ulysses, what are you going to tell him?” And I tell Oscar, and I started crying. And then, Ronnie said like, “Ah, it’s okay, Ulysses, okay?” And my brother Oscar which does like, he was probably in shock. And also, I don’t know what was going through his mind, but now he fully supports me, you know. But he said like, “No, it’s not okay,” you know. And that really broke me and and I end up like, my friend, Diego left like, a couple minutes ago and I end up saying, like, “Yo, can you pick me up? Like, I need to like, I need to get out of here somewhere. I need to get out of here.” And we go and like, I’m like, at that point I’m really drunk and I’m just crying. I’m really silent like, it kind of felt like, I felt numb because the exact fear that I was expecting came true. And I just kind of felt empty inside. But I know that, I know I left without telling my brothers that I left, you know.

And they started worrying. And next you know the entire party, like, starts worrying like, where does Ulysses go? He wasn’t in a good state of mind, he’s drunk. And I start getting phone calls from my mom, and my mom starts crying because of my history with depression and what’s called, so I end up getting picked up by my parents, by my mom, and my brother comes out to me like, he says, “Sorry, Ulysses. I have to tell him what was going on and and they kind of like, I could barely walk straight. If I could I still remember it vividly. I was in my bed. My mom and dad came up to me and my mom is crying. Like, they probably just more relieved that I was actually safe and that I didn’t go do something stupid and my mom told me that like, no matter what I am, who I like, you know, that she’s always going to love me. And my dad comes in sobbing, just glad to see that I’m okay, comes and gives me the biggest hug I’ve ever gotten. And he tells me how much he loves me and how much none of that matters to him, that he’ll
love me regardless of who I am and all that stuff. So, I’m not proud of the way that it happen, but I was lucky to have parents like that and supported me, you know.

**JS:** Dude, so legit. Like, that’s, I don’t even know, man. That’s emotional as hell. No, I just mean, yes, I have no words for that, Uly.

**UL:** Yes, it was a roller coaster.

**JS:** Yes, I could imagine, you know. And what I keep on thinking about Ulysses is so you’re out of high school when this happened, right?

**UL:** Yes.

**JS:** Yes, so I consistently talked about working at LT and how if I were a student there like, there’s no way I would survive. That’s why I had such like, passion and admiration working with you guys. As you guys were facing two major hurdles, you were facing a cultural hurdle, right? It cultural fucking existing in that cultural fucking vacuum, right?

**UL:** Yes. Ultra shock.

**JS:** Big time. And then for facing a socio-economic one too, right? Which are two huge dividers. But then like, with what you’re saying, you know, and your identity and the way, you know, in your sexuality, like, that’s whole another layer, dude.

**UL:** Yes.

**JS:** Also that’s like, three fucking huge things to be facing in this type of institution, you know, talk to me about that, man. Talk to me about, like, your high school experience.

**UL:** My high school experience was pretty good, you know. I honestly look back at high school pretty fondly, but I think a big, big reason why that is, is because I was in sports, you know, instantly freshman year. I made the soccer team and instantly made friends with kids that if I didn’t do, if I didn’t play soccer, no way in hell I would ever like, talk to them. Or I guess the
reverse would be with sure that they would ever talk to me. You know, I was the only one, the only Hispanic kids on the Freshman A team. And he was kind of more who I think it was like, he was like, more generations and to be an American his family was and I was first generation, right? You know, like, you can see I’m Mexican with the peach fuzz mustache I had freshman year, you know. And I think that honestly, that was a big part of why I had it pretty good, you know, and because I instantly broke that mold of being in the Hispanic clique or being in the white clique, you know. I had my Hispanic friends from day one and after school, I’d go join my team and make new friends over like that so that honestly, I had it pretty good like that, but it was still like, mind boggling because like, we’d go to one or like, one of my teammate’s houses for a pasta party. Actually, no, I see I walk in and they have like, three stories or like that three stories but like, three floors, I’d see that they had like, a whole game room. I see like, you know, I did see these types of things an’ like, I grew up in a two, two-bedroom apartment where the kitchen and the, and the living room were right there. We’re living together. Yes, I’m like, this is crazy. And by now, I honestly never let that get into my head. No, I think I was, thankfully, mature enough to know that the things I have are things I think to my parents and that I could have it a lot worse. You know, I was so thankful I have a roof over my head, to finally have a house because when I was in high school, we moved into this house. Yes, but like, when it came to, like, the sexuality type thing, like, not only was like, be it being like, Mexican versus not being Mexican. It was like, a manhood thing, you know, because I’m an athlete. Like, if I were to tell my teammates or if my teammates were to find out that I am this way and we’re in the locker room, getting ready for a game. Like, how is that going to be? You know.

Because like, it’s kind of like, a joke, to act gay with the homies. You know, I’m saying just kind of like, make like, suspect jokes just all in good fun. Like, if they were to find out are
they all … going to stop talking to me because they think that I’m into them, you know? And are girls going to stop talking to me like, being interested in me because they think that because they don’t like the fact that I might like a guy as well, you know, like, it felt like, I had, I could lose everything. I could lose my friends, I can lose my camaraderie with my sports teammates. I can lose chances of girls. I can lose chances with guys, because now they see me as like, someone that everybody like, dislikes, you know. [JS: Yes.] It’s very alienated, you know.

**JS:** And damn, that’s crazy, right. Throughout this time for the most part, you were going through that on your own. Did, did you ever feel your identity validated within the institution, within high school?

**UL:** Sexuality, no, because I was like, still trying to figure it out. But my Brown is yes. You know, what I’d see you. And I see the, all this great success that you’re having. I’m not gonna lie to, Mr. Sanchez, like, me and my friends all look very fondly of you. I’d tell them now like, you know, Mr. Sanchez is a principal and has his own school now. You know, like, this dude is making big moves. Like, I saw you as like that could be me, you know, I could be out there and you did inspire me to write these papers. You’d like, put me on to this great music. I’m like, that could be me. I could be doing the exact same thing and letting these kids hearts up in a school that like, would be so easy to drop out and just be super, what’s the word, intimidated by, you know, walking around people with the new iPhone the day after it comes out complain about like, I don’t know, talking about the new car that their parents just bought them, you know. Like, it’s still super daunting but to see someone like you in that same building with so much authority, you know, it was really inspiring. And Mr. Furgoso, too. Like, that dude was by side to especially in the Spanish class when we were in there. Like, I remember the most comfortable, I ever was in high school in his classes because I could connect to him, we could talk being tuck
our Spanglish, you know, we can crack jokes. You know, we can just relate on a different level than me to Miss Whatever, or Mister Whatever, you know, where I just go in there do my work and leave like, now, these are actual people, I can actually have conversation with. And I want to thank you personally for giving me that, you know.

**JS:** Thanks, man. I appreciate that and it’s weird, right? Because Furgoso’s was like that too, but I think to a certain extent he was like, I was in that institution and we almost like, had our guard up and we were like, more in tune with like, you know, helping our students and our kids, and our classroom was like, our safe haven, right? There’s like, no, because that space was it was hard dude, like, working in space. Like, that is interesting, right? I remember the first month I was there. I mean, you think about it in that institution itself that houses about 350 educators, only a handful are Latino, right? And then out of those are Latino who talk Spanish. So, when that come on board, like, the first week, I would walk into the hall and there would be a white person across the hall. You know, how there’s that point where you a kind of meet and you say like, what’s up? What would happen frequently and I would say, hey, how you doing? Good morning, and I will get no response back, right? It happened so many times with one individual, like, it happened, like, twice. The third time, I was like, just why and I said, fuck it. Like, you know. That type of thing. So, then afterwards like, I would talk to Furgoso once a while. But I think we were both like, very guarded like, okay, cool like, I’m going to go in there and I’m going to work with the kids and I’m going to dip, like, I’m not gonna have too much interaction with these people, you know. Which might not have been the best way in retrospect. But like, for me, like, and I will talk to this with my girl, too. I’ll be like, man, after the first year I was there. I was like, dude, I’m gonna dip like, I can’t. And she’s like, well, realize that kids probably need
more help there than somewhere else you would go because like, it’s such a small population that could easily fall through the cracks, right?

UL: Yes. Is this right?

JS: And I was like, that’s a different way looking in. And then year after year, man, even when like, transitioning, I developed [inaudible] Academy, like, working with those kids like, in summer, and then like, following afterwards, like, that was, it was a lifeline for me and I loved working with you guys. It was dope, you know, so like, that love is reciprocated for sure.

All right, Uly, I don’t want to take too much more of your time, bro. We think about lyrics when we think about the influence Hip-Hop has on individuals. Is there a particular lyric that sticks out for you?

UL: Lyric that sticks out? Oh, yes. Nipsey. Hussle armor. Let me look it up. It’s something Nipsey Hussle. It was in the DJ Khaleb song. He had told higher. Let me listen to it. Oh, he said he’s starting to see this life shit from a bird’s view, you know, seeing the grand picture, the bigger picture and like, it was like, this was like, shortly after he passed. It just got, it made me kind of like, choke up a little bit and kind of like, reflect on myself. I’m like, sometimes you’re so in the moment, you’re so stressed out, you kind of just have to step back and just relax and look at everything. And also like, having your mind like, this is a journey, you know. Not everything you want is going to be here right away. You’re gonna have to go through some stuff to get to find that happiness, you know, so that line, like, instantly pops in my head when you asked me that. Seeing life from a bird view, that’s great.

[END]
Figure 18. Ramiro QR code.

Figure 19. Ramiro cover.
INTRO: Latinos, welcome to The Latino underground, a podcast dedicated to the reclamation and exploration of Latino identity. Through counter-narrative stories, we hope to give you tools by which to navigate an oppressive system. Stay tuned.

JS: Hey, what’s good, good people? Thank you for tuning in. In today’s session, we have the pleasure of having a conversation with Ramiro, aka Lime. Ramiro is a product of CPS and a native of Little Village. I want to talk to Ramiro because he is the epitome of what it means to grow up in Little Village and have to navigate school on your own. So, without further Ado, here’s a conversation with Ramiro.

JS: Hey Ramiro! First and foremost, thank you for agreeing to share your story and thank you for joining us.

RL: No problem! Thanks for having me.

JS: Ramiro. I like to start the session with one question. Alright. Because in my opinion, it’s not a matter of if but a matter of when. As Latinos, we face inequities within our system, right?

RL: Alright!

JS: Well, that question is, when did you first realize there was an inequity within our educational system?

RL: I got to say first-hand is when I was at school when I grew up going to public schools then sometimes even being an artist I would get judged by teachers. Honestly, the first time was when this one teacher stopped me, said that I had drawings in my notebooks and they were actually like, little Rambo characters with spiky hair, you know what I’m saying? But this teacher said that these guys were Latin Kings. That’s what the teacher said and I was in fifth grade, I didn’t even know.
I wasn’t fully aware of the gang-banging culture because honestly, fourth grade was the first year that I came to school in Chicago. I grew up in Mexico. So when I arrived here, I didn’t know much English. I just spoke Spanish for the most part and I arrived at something that was already here, like, the biases against Latinos thinking that we’re bangers.

**JS:** I’ve been interviewing quite a few people. Yes! as I’m doing it. I’m noticing more commonality in terms of educators, labeling, misunderstanding, misrepresenting who we are as Latinos. Another guest I had in here two young ladies were talking about how the writing got classified as gambling writing and they got in trouble for [it], right? So it’s interesting. It’s a common narrative.

**RL:** Sure happens a lot.

**JS:** Yeah it does!. Statistically, 82% of all educators across the nation are white women, right?

**RL:** Wow! It’s crazy.

**JS:** Yeah. So, it’s one of those things that we’re not represented within the classroom. So then logically somewhere along the line, I would go up the side like this.

**RL:** Yeah. I think it’s very important also for men and Latino men to represent in the Educational Systems because the majority of kids in public schools here in the city are Latino and Black and when we compare the numbers of Latinos to the teachers, it doesn’t reflect. As you said, it’s a lot of white women and it’s healthy for kids to feel represented, even in that field.

**JS:** Yeah, dude, it’s this idea of like, mirrors and windows, right? Children should be able to see themselves represented in front of you, in front of the classroom, right? And it should be mirrored, not windows. They shouldn’t be looking out to see like, this is desert where I am tucked in.

**RL:** Totally!
JS: So Ramiro, man, will start off with a very simple question. Tell me about yourself? Who is Ramiro?

RL: I’m a DJ and a graffiti artist. My name is Ramiro; originally I’m from Michoacan. So both of my parents are from Michoacan. I was born here in Chicago, but when I was five years old, I moved to Mexico and I was there for almost five years; when I was nine years old I came back to Chicago with all my siblings and we started from there. And I’ve been here since; like I said, I’m a graffiti artist. I discovered it early on in my life, graffiti and Hip-Hop, and they just like, went hand in hand with each other and then later on, in my life. I discovered DJ because graffiti was getting to the point where it was dangerous. It’s dangerous to be out all the time and what better way to express myself when I found DJing.

JS: So Ramiro, let’s go back to your family makeup; you said you were … born here but then move[d] back to Mexico.

RL: My family. So, my parents, they’re both from Michoacan. My dad emigrated to the USA when he was eighteen. He came to Chicago when he was 18 years old, he wanted a better life for himself and when he was in his 20s, he went back to Mexico. He met my mom and they came back to Chicago. Do you know what I’m saying? Another story that probably a lot of us have and then, I’m the oldest of my siblings. So I have three siblings. Most of us were born here in Chicago, but the last one was born in Mexico. So, when I was nine years old, we all moved to Chicago, and we started from the ground up. I didn’t even know any English at all; I had forgotten English. So, I was in the ESL class and that’s the night I really felt like: so the Spanish class is this one, and the English one is that, you know what I’m saying?

JS: Yeah, unfortunately, like, the way our educational system works, ESL classes are made, they’re designed to make us lose our language right? It’s almost, like, an assimilation process. So
here let’s have you learn English while eliminating like, Spanish the back end. It’s interesting. 

Pero este, how was that transition, Ramiro, from Mexico education to the US, and ultimately what led to that happening?

**RL:** I’m always been good with transitions. I’m always like, in-[the]-moment type of person but it really just happen because my parents fixed whatever was going on with paperwork, with like, documents and stuff and that’s how we got back here to Chicago. Really just regarding my parents’ paperwork.

**JS:** Oh, so the idea was always to come back to the US?

**RL:** Yeah, definitely.

**JS:** So you come back here; how was school like, once you got here? Describe that?

**RL:** It was tough. I haven’t really faced some discrimination regarding my language. I realized that, even though it’s sad to say, but your own Latinos, your own homies, our Chicanos discriminate against you just because you don’t speak English really, you know what I’m saying? And we got to change that, and I think we gotta educate people through that.

**JS:** So what kind of things were you facing, bro?

**RL:** All like, teasing you for not speaking English. Make fun of the way you say “turtle” because for a long time it takes a while to say the TRL, right? So it was really just minor discrimination but I would say peers, like, your friends and then and in reality it’s society, cuz they really are just part of society.

**JS:** Yeah. For sure, man, once he came back here, dude, like, where did you grow up around?

**RL:** I’m from Little Village; I would say the first years of my life were around 24th and Harding.

**JS:** Okay.
RL: So I grew up around there and then around 8th grade moved to 32nd, 31st, and Ridgeway. Those are really my stomping grounds. For most of my youth, definitely.

JS: So for a kid being in Mexico and then coming into a Chicago, grow[in] up in Little Village, man, describe that how was, how was that like?

RL: It was tough! You arrive at a society that’s already molded and puts you into a box and I honestly feel like, in Mexico is. I’m not from the city in Mexico. Do you know what I’m saying? I grew up in a pueblito, see, I’m the one that got el Michoacan and I got freedom over there, it’s a lot of freedom, it’s a lot of nature and when you arrive here it’s something different, but I adapted with culture.

I had that there when I saw graffiti on the street; that’s when I was like, someone’s doing this. Like, it’s not really their name, who knows who this person is, but then I started realizing the kids doing that graffiti, like, we knew them, like, this kid’s older brother. Do you know what I’m saying? Like, this guy has got older brothers, it was kind of like, the older brother’s friends because I was probably like, 12 years old when I discovered it.

JS: Yeah.

RL: At those 12 years old, you know, you’re starting up. You’re like, what is this?

JS: Yeah, no. I feel you, bro. So for the listeners who don’t know what Little Village is or where Little Village is, man. Paint the picture for us. What is Little Village? This ’hood that we speak of, man.

RL: It’s a neighborhood in the, I would say South Side of Chicago. Kind of Southwest. The neighborhood is divided more so by gangs. You see the two sides but there’s a really famous street called 26th Street and in that street, there’s a lot of comers, a lot of stores and from what I heard, it honestly makes more money than Michigan Avenue so for a street to have in our
neighborhood it’s a good thing. I would say it’s full of culture, 26 streets, full of culture. It’s tough, but it’s full of culture.

**JS:** Yeah, that’s a very good description. It’s a street that is there for me like, no matter where I’m at. It’s always home. If you think about a game of board game, there’s always a home-like, starting point. That’s how I see Little Village. That home button, I guess. *Este,* so let me through if you think about education in a chronological manner, like, kindergarten through high school. What was an education for Ramiro?

**RJ:** I started my education in Mexico. So I started *Kinder[garten in]* Mexico and I was there till third grade and I was never good at math. I always remember struggling with that concept as a kid. I was always drawn to literature or the arts, definitely art, like, my art is a wave then I arrived in Chicago. I was always good at reading, I always felt like, I never liked in other fields other than math. Really, and I feel like, I’m more of a right-brain user type of person, but when I graduated from a school called Little Village Academy right here on 26 and Lawndale. So, I was class of ’08, and right after grammar school. I didn’t want to go to my home school Farragut because I heard a lot of bad things about it. Just generally, you want to go to another school that is better than what you heard about Farragut.

So I heard about this magnet school. It was called the city as a classroom and it was in Pilsen. And it was actually just a school that was only open for one semester because they lacked funds, you can even do some research regarding it. But it was a school called city as a classroom and it was a magnet school and I was excited going there, like, a lot of other kids from the neighborhood got to go to that school who I became friends with.

**JS:** Hmm. So, how did you find out about this other school? How did you find out about having an option to go to another school? Other than Farragut?
**RL:** I would say, friends that were really involved in the arts, that’s really how I found a way out because I would say, one of my friends called F. Raychem; his graffiti name is Dose. But he had friends who like, there was this art graffiti writer called Kane. He was a teacher in that school. Growing up we looked up to graffiti writers and we’re like, you can get to have teachers that are artists, you know what I’m saying so what better way to just give that a try.

**JS:** So you transition to high school and you transition based on recommendations from your guys that you’re hanging around, right? What role did education play in your household?

**RL:** It was very important. My mom always stressed that you either got to do one thing and she didn’t really see us working as an option. I mean, we’re kids. My parents always wanted what was best for us. They always pushed us. I really just feel like, our drive really is from our parents. Our parents always wanted something good for us.

They never let us stray the wrong way, like, I would see a lot of the gangbang culture and we would ask ourselves, what [do] his parents do? Don’t their parents do something about it? Don’t their parents know, but I mean the reality sometimes is the parents do know about like, the culture is, it’s tough to get away from.

**JS:** So describe your parents to me, man.

**RL:** My parents, well, mom, she’s a hard worker. She’s a lunch lady at CPS. So she’s been working for a while and my dad like, they always pushed us to do what makes us happy and try to make money off of it. They don’t want us to just work at McDonald’s even though some people can see some future in there, but my parents never wanted us to sway on the wrong path.

**JS:** Does your dad work for us, CPS, as well?

**RL:** No, but my dad was actually, he was a bust for a long time at Marriott Hotel. So he worked around at O’Hare and you know, like, every day, my dad will wake up at 4 a.m. To go to work
and we would be like, you’re waking up at this time as kids we’re like, this is crazy but now as an adult, I see how much work my parents have put into our lives but as a kid, you don’t know that much but it’s good to realize this.

**JS:** Yeah, I’ll present once in a while to places, whatever, and like, I start off with that, right? Like, with a picture of my mom working when she was 28 and she’s young as hell, right? and a picture of her now. She’s like, 64 and she’s been that she’s been at the same factory all that time, waking up at 4:00 a.m. Like, Thursday, making a little bit above minimum wage. So like, that’s a struggle that’s kind of like, where we come from and I think it’s important for the shorties to realize it and like, be proud of our parents’ struggle. I mean, if you think about it we’re here and our successes are based on their backs, on their hard work, seems like, they can point back, that’s always including it.

**RL:** Yeah! I did, yeah!

It was cool. I have gotta say it was a very progressive school; there’s a lot to this story, but that school is just open one semester because they lacked funds, like, whoever was a principal they weren’t doing things by the book, so there were missing funds and someone had to [account for] it. Do you know what I’m saying?

**JS:** Hmm.

**RL:** And the next semester, I have to look for another school, so just think about that. So I was, I was doing one semester at the city as a classroom; I had an internship at a print shop. So that was dope. That was really dope, like, working with a printmaker. I remember he liked helping me print; I did a set of tags. I did like, a hundred tags with just nothing but tags printed and how I wish I could have one of those; that will be dope, but it was tough. Transitioning was tough.
JS: So you were there one semester. And yeah, you said it was progressive? What do you mean by that? Like, how was it?

RL: Yeah! What we had at an internship. one day a week, we would go to our internship as freshmen. So, that was interesting for me to like, for example, to take my own bus really, just commute to the internship, kind of like, a little job, so that was fun, I feel like, as a freshman.

JS: And how were the teachers?

RL: Who does that?

The teachers were cool. They taught us, you know, many different things. We had one teacher who was a graffiti writer. So that was, that was very interesting to have him as a teacher and just teach us what he knows about graffiti, really the origins of it and the technique. I learned a lot, like, we learned a lot from having a teacher who is like, right there. His name is Kane DC5. So dude.

JS: Shoutout to Kane, man.

RL: Yeah.

JS: So dude, there’s a lot of little nuggets there. Right? You’re in this and I’m trying to think about it as a kid and transitions are always hard and you’ve already talked about like, two big ones and a third one coming up, right? Because now you’re in this school that it seems like, you like, right? Because it’s different. It’s like, it’s different from your traditional school because you know the teacher talking about graffiti; that shit doesn’t happen.

RL: Right.

JS: But now how did you find out that you had to get another school to go to?

RL: It was it was word of mouth. Really, it was like, because the first semester in the fall semester, so just imagine you’re like, in the middle of winter finding out that your school is not
going to open up for the next semester. So we got to go like, yo! I don’t want to go to Farragut.

What other school can the principal “I have connections. I can get you into other magnet schools” and I was like, man, you took us here and now you’re like, you know, but guess what? I ended up in Kenwood Academy.

**JS:** Where’s Kenwood Academy?

**RL:** It’s on 55th and Stony Island.

**JS:** Oh, shit!

**RL:** It was by Hyde Park. So just imagine the commute from little Village to Hyde Park.

**JS:** And how did you end up there?

**RL:** Because another student, his parents will give him a ride. So I’ll walk it to the student’s house and we’ll just all ride from here, Little Village, to Hyde Park.

**JS:** Oh, shit.

**RL:** It’s always, it’s been a mission. It’s been a mission.

**JS:** So you see, pretty much have to be nice to that kid for the remainder of that year, bro. You couldn’t get into a fight with that kid. [Crossover]

**RL:** Yeah, he was a little grouchy.

**JS:** You gotta give me a ride every day. Sorry, man.

**RL:** A lot of transitions, man, but I mean. I feel like, the way I do with transitioning, honestly was pen and paper. Through drawing art, that’s how I deal with all my transitions and I would say with music—all those things just to soothe me. All this transitioning felt okay because I had all these other things going on. I feel like, when you learn things in your teenage years, that’s when you’re like, brewing, that’s when you’re in taking all this, all this information. Do you know what I’m saying?
Hopefully to become an artist, right? A lot of cultures, when people intake culture, we’re in taking it, you can intake and just look at it, right? like, looking at art, or you could intake the art and do something with it, getting influenced by art and doing art yourself.

JS: So let’s talk about that, bro; let’s switch the topic. When did you start noticing and taking these elements?

RL: I got to say honestly when I got serious was in high school. I was in freshman year when I started listening to a lot of Hip-Hop, doing a lot of graffiti on sketchbooks and from sketchbooks really goes to the wall. A lot of people just do sketchbook graffiti, you know, but they never touched a wall or never did a tag somewhere where you might get caught and I think it’s important to the aspect, don’t forget that graffiti is in the street, I would say.

JS: Yeah! And what caught your eye or why did you start putting pen to paper, as you say it?

RL: Honestly, I gotta say at first It was cartoon-like, I mentioned earlier. I used to draw Rambos. These are Rambo characters with guns. I didn’t mean anything bad by it. Do you know what I’m saying? I wasn’t planning on shooting somebody as we made it seem, it was just Rambo with guns and I honestly feel like, it was fate that I kept doing graffiti because that teacher made me.

I remember being a kid. It was like, fourth grade. I felt bad for drawing these characters. So imagine if I would have kept going with that gut, like, I’m not gonna do art. I’m not gonna do anything because look, it’s bad, right? So I’m glad I didn’t stop.

JS: What made you not stop?

RL: I would say you just, identity. This is how I identify myself. Honestly, like, I started feeling my identity was one with graffiti with the nickname that I write, I will say was developing an identity.
JS: And that was early on that was as a kid, right? I mean, in [the] fourth grade, you try these characters, and then you have this experience where this teacher says, “Hey, like, makes you feel bad.” Like, something there, like, made you stick with it, right?

RL: I would say when I started really it was around, like, my late grammar school years. Fifth, six, seven. But I honestly, what data, see that the internet also helped me a lot in developing this intake of culture; we didn’t know too many graffiti writers or what we did it, you know, music, but I found all that through the internet, I would say the internet is a big part of the culture.

JS: So your name you write Lime?

RL: Yeah.

JS: Where did that come from?

RL: It came from LimeWire, that app that you can download music from. That’s how I got it. I had plenty of nicknames before [but] none of them really stuck. I had one before Lime. It was Ayir. One of my friends gave it to me, but I was like, you gave me that nickname.

I want to make my own nickname and I remember I was downloading music as a kid and I was like, man, I need a new name and then I was like, “Lime” fuck it, it’s a little lime, you know Mexicans we like all the time. So I stuck with Lime and that’s been since high school.

JS: I love hearing about this stuff as you could tell, bro, like, these interviews for me are not linear, you know, like, you take it. We’re gonna take it wherever you take it, right?

RL: Yes.

JS: I pick up on some of these things that you’re saying bro and pretty dope. One of the things that that I guess let’s touch on, is this gaining of knowledge? Right? So like, I’ll add it. As part of the reason I’m doing this to is for our people, whenever scholars talk about Hip-Hop, they make it seem as if though is the like, Hip-Hop is learned from a book and shit and the kids just like,
pick up a book and hey, let me study Hip-Hop the way I would study fucking math and it’s not like that. Hip-Hop is organic, right? That’s always cool but how was that education process for you in terms of gaining knowledge on Hip-Hop?

**RL:** Man, let me see! I feel like, most of it was self-taught, you know, most of it a just self-taught, I feel like you said; Hip-Hop is organic and we all got different influences, and just like, Hip-Hop is sample beats, right? But, they sample funk, they sample disco, they sample all these different types of music and then they call the Hip-Hop.

**JS:** Uhmm, Uhmm.

**RL:** You know what I’m saying? And Hip-Hop is a lot of things, is art. Hip-Hop is the streets. I feel like hip-hop really is learned through culture, through people, it really is like, a people’s culture. Do you know what I’m saying? You can’t just learn that … behind a computer screen. Do you know what I’m saying? You can try, But it’s learned through people, through socializing with these people. You know, it’s not something that’s like, it’s not an antisocial culture. It’s a culture that you learn with your homies. It’s a bonding moment. Do you know what I’m saying? That’s what I would do.

**JS:** Yeah, bro. That’s actually a very good definition of it. Right?

**RL:** Yeah, but they were always, so, to me, they were the older cats and we’ve still hung out with them. They were the next generation above us. But, you know what I’m saying [crossover] fiberfill.

**JS:** And for me, that’s how I learned is from the older generation and like, see how they were moving and then you try to move in a similar way. But then switching it up. Do you know what I mean?

**RL:** Right! finding yourself. Yeah, your identity. Finally...
**JS:** Talk to me about them and the development of your identity?

**RL:** I feel like it took a while, it takes a while for you to, like, what’s the word, learn the ropes and just trust yourself. I will see this trust in the process of being an artist, not questioning labels. Should I do this? Should I not do this? It really is just trusting yourself for a while and I was like, I’m not a realist artist; I don’t draw things as I see them.

Do you know what I’m saying? I used to think that as I said, but a couple of years ago I was like, you know what, I’m just gonna try to do it even though I’m not a fine artist in that sense. I’m gonna draw it because I can, cuz imma try to, that’s really it, I feel like, it’s trusting yourself it really is.

**JS:** Alright, let’s take it back a little then, bro. So you’re in high school. You’ve lost. The first semester you went to a school that you like. Now you’re at this new school, Kenwood Academy; talk to me from second semester freshman year through the time you graduated, bro, what was that like?

**RL:** Another curveball. I was only there one semester.

**JS:** Oh, shit.

**RL:** So just imagine freshman year. It’s two different schools, then the last three years of my high school was all Farragut. So yes, it was two different school freshmen and so that was an all-Black school, you know, Kenwood Academy, and there’s an example of, like, what’s the word? You know, they were discriminating against me too; Black folks were discriminating against me and as a kid, I didn’t understand it.

I was mad and I didn’t understand it and then, later on, I gotta like, now I’m 31, I look back. And I’m like, damn. I don’t know because I understand that Black people get discriminated against here. I understand that in Little Village we saw that, so putting yourself in that
perspective as a kid I didn’t understand it but as an adult, I realized that I was just a
representative, it wasn’t me personally. It was just that I was lucky.

**JS:** You talked about being discriminated against at that school, man. How did that manifest?

What did that look like?

**RL:** Oh, man, I remember they said to go back. To go jump that border back. That’s what I
remember and I wanted to say, I wanted to say mean shit, but guess what—the entire classroom
was looking at me waiting for me to say something and I was like, hmm. Yeah, I don’t play my
cards right? Yeah, but uh, that’s me. It was blunt. Yeah, it was blunt like, that it only happen
once or twice, but you know, it was blunt. And then, after that semester, I was like, it’s tough. I
went back to Farragut, sadly.

**JS:** So then throughout these transitions man, are you making decisions or your parents making
the decisions? Like, how does that work?

**RL:** It was my decision, really. Like, I decided to go to Kenwood because I was trying to do
something better for myself, which was not going to my home school cuz I heard they don’t have
a good education, right? I ended up in Farragut and I mean like, a lot of stuff was no brainer,
like, all the education isn’t that tough and I excelled in a lot of my classes in Farragut. I even …,
like, we were in the arts, we were in the art studio all the time. Develop friendships with other
graffiti writers but it was tough, though, it was tough.

**JS:** So you’re in high school, you finish high school, then what happens, bro?

**RL:** And then I go to Harold Washington, right away. I just go to community college. I got some
stories for you. I jump in headfirst, you know, taking full classes only to realize that I’m not
equipped to write these papers. Do you know what I’m saying? I’m over here thinking that I’m
fine here.
This is the story. You’re going through high school, thinking you’re getting equipped for college. But once you get to college your paper-writing skills are just not up to par. You’re like, okay, give me an essay, give me an MLA format essay, etc. I wasn’t equipped. Man, I adapted, I just really just taught myself all this shit through trial and error through getting, maybe through getting C’s and D’s and having to excel at this. Do you know what I’m saying? Probably work twice as hard to catch up on some stuff that I should have been ready for, but it was no big deal. It was minor things; it wasn’t major.

**JS**: So, was the intersection between … the graffiti and school, man, like, how did graffiti and school, like, intersect, collide for you?

**RL**: I mean, at first. So here’s the thing, like, when I was at my grammar school we had, I will stay for an after-school program, that was encouraging you to do graffiti. It’s like, here’s some paper let’s do some art. If graffiti on a piece of paper is art. Then when I went to high school, I will do graffiti on my notebooks. I got in trouble for that. According … to the security guards, you cannot do graffiti on your notebooks. I just found that totally illogical cuz for one, it’s my notebook; it’s not even ganging graffiti. It didn’t make sense. I was so mad. It’s like, how can I not do graffiti or art, be it a letter. It’s a letter. How can I not do that on a piece of paper? So it collided about, you know, like, my parents, they hated it. I’m sure they hated it for a while, you know like, they will see my name they’ll know it’s me.

So, you know what I’m saying? Like, … for a while I didn’t like graffiti because it was, it was a burnup. I got burned up kind of like, in my high school years and that’s when I turned to music, that’s when I discovered the other elements of Hip-Hop. I always do, as a graffiti writer, you still listen to Hip-Hop. You’re like, yo, this is a DJ involved, why don’t I want to be a DJ?
So, I discovered that and I was like, that seems doable, so I started just doing matter research DJing but then I realize that house music was from Chicago and that also blew my mind.

I was like, what! So this music is from here and I was blown away, like, it was another thing that I discovered was DJing and I just I went crazy in there. I still did my graffiti thing on the side, but I wasn’t that active on the streets and I just did a lot of DJing, throw a lot of parties. Still DJing to this day and I still try to do graffiti and still do other stuff. So, where my time off I just juggle between doing my arts, graffiti, or all that stuff, like, I love to do this stuff. So, don’t do something that you don’t love to do, cuz you’re going to do it forever, you know [crossover] he’s gonna go think about.

**JS:** No, I hated it, bro. So at what age did you start DJing?

**RL:** I would say like, 17 or 18. Yeah, it was senior year. That’s when I was free enough to party. I was like, all right. I’m graduating, hanging out with the homies or skipping school. Skipping, you know some of your days that, you know, closer to the end of the semester you got these skip. Skip school, hang out with friends. The first time I started, you want to know how I started DJing was through YouTube videos, ridiculous.

**JS:** What?

**RL:** So we had the laptop on, Wi-Fi had two YouTube videos when the song would end “boom” got the transition; that’s when I couldn’t afford anything else. That was the stars, that was started, man.

**JS:** So then when did you buy your equipment … and then, how did you start learning?

**RL:** It was when I started, I was 18 when I started working and trying to save some money for these CDs and once we like, CD players were super expensive when I was like, 2004 it was super expensive. So I was seeing a man and the first thing I got was like, this used stub, cd’s,
CDs, like, that the oldest version of the Pioneer, it was like, the black box. The oldest version of the Pioneer and then honestly, I got really influenced when I used to go to Harold Washington because there was Reckless Records downtown.

So if you know, every time after going to class, I’ll be like, I’m gonna go to a record shop and see what they got and even before I bought a turntable I bought … records cuz that was the plan. I was like, I can’t afford to buy a turntable yet, but I can afford some records. So, I was buying records before I even had any turntables and then, slowly, I just bought some turntables and bought all the other little things.

**JS:** Essentially like, DJ became your element. How did you learn the actual process of DJing?

**RL:** Man, it was a lot of trial and error, and listening to other people’s DJing like, other people’s mixes and watching videos of them mix and also, like, friends that I will hang out with. They also became DJs and I will learn through them, you know, tips, just tips through them and it’s a lot of, like, my peers, you know, it was my friends who learned with me as we went along. I gotta say it practiced, man. Just practice, practice, you know, I learned that through graffiti. I learned that too, through my schedule. So, you know, I see, I tags from years ago, even a year or two ago and I was like, my tag is better than that now.

So I feel like, you always got, every time you do something, you always got to give you your best shot because you’re always as best as the last thing you did. So, I always try to just practice, practice, practice like that. Have you ever heard that one concept, where like, it’s a Japanese concept, where it really takes almost 10,000 hours for you to master something; like, it’s that many hours and I honestly feel like, at this point I’m ten years in, longer than ten years in, I feel like I’m at that point where I probably mastered my tag, I mastered, you know what I’m saying? Like, some concepts, you know what I’m saying?
JS: Yeah.

RL: To really just about practice.

JS: It helps [to] go hand-in-hand, right? You think about graffiti, you think about DJing and I think the creativity that you get from graffiti helps your creativity with your mixes, with blending, with DJing; it’s like, that added creativity to it.

RL: Yeah, I think so. I think they go hand in hand. Like, sometimes I feel like DJing is audio graffiti. When you do a tag you’re doing a visual representation, you know what I’m saying? And when you mix, you present it for one hour, you know what I’m saying? You!—mixing this track with this one and then with that one, that was the flavor that you gave. You know what I’m saying. When you mix one track with another one, like, you’re giving it that flavor, you know what I’m saying? Like, you’re the selector.

JS: So that’s you essentially like, audiology tagging shit, you know, like.

RL: I think so. Yeah. I definitely think so, when you see people go up to you and you’re DJing and they’re like, “Man, I like that one, bro.” It’s the same as graffiti. You see graffiti. Okay, you see it. You like it. That’s a visual representation. You hear a track you like, it’s the same concept.

JS: So for someone who’s never DJ’d, bro, what does that feel like?

RL: Man, I think it feels ecstatic. It really just feels ecstatic sometimes even, like, going over your set or when people go up to you telling you how much they loved it. Some of you feel ecstatic because they’re vibing off where you’re vibing from. Do you know what I’m saying? It’s like, this feeling of, like, togetherness like, “Bro, you’re feeling what I’m feeling, hell yeah!” Do you know what I’m saying?
[You] feel like, it’s an ecstatic feeling. You know, like, when I DJ, when one track goes into another one and they somehow sound very similar and you don’t even know how they even mix, like, you’re mixing such as it feels ecstatic.

JS: Alright, that’s good, bro, that’s good. That’s, yeah, that’s a good way of a way of describing it. So, Ramiro, you go as we talk to this, right? We’ve talked about a lot in terms of like, your education, how they came about, you growing up in the ’hood, essentially. Think about Hip-Hop in that sense. And what role did it play in developing who you are as an individual?

RL: I feel like it develops a lot of awareness. Do you know what I’m saying? Like, who I am in the USA, in American society and sometimes Hip-Hop should strike, like, against ignorance you [know] what I’m saying, like, Hip-Hop really is just a bit like, a big sign that says, you got to gain awareness. I feel like, Hip-Hop, it really is about awareness and about I would say, cuz a lot of people that listen to Hip-Hop really are people that struggle because, you know, Hip-Hop speaks a lot of truths and in society, a lot of people struggling, a lot of people don’t get what they deserve, not what they deserve but a lot of people, what I’m saying, like, a lot of people, you know, aren’t treated fairly in the US and I feel like those people that aren’t treated fairly.

They’re the ones that Hip-Hop speaks for, those people. Hip-Hop speaks for the homeless, man, who just wants some food, or, you know what I’m saying? This graffiti writer who, not only is graffiti what he likes, but he got other shit in his mind, you know what I’m saying, there’s a lot of things that come into play with, you know what I’m saying, with the streetlight and I feel like, graffiti, it really spoke to that, it brought the light to people in the street, people who need it to hear this: that they’re not alone, Hip-Hop brought that.
**JS:** I feel like, in Hip-Hop you make this public, you make the situation public, where music like, Immortal Technique—the music that he used to bring you to know I’m saying? Like, it’s real shit and there’s, you know, there’s different.

**RL:** I feel like, like I said, Hip-Hop is defined by that person because within Hip-Hop, you have a lot of people who preach peace. But even in that same area, Hip-Hop, you have people that are like, fuck, no, like, I got guns. So it’s tough. Do you know what I’m saying? That tough.

**JS:** Yeah.

**RL:** It’s a very encompassing umbrella.

**JS:** If you had to give shorties, like, some advice regarding Hip-Hop and how they could use it to manage school? Like, what would that look like?

**RL:** I would say, definitely artwork, definitely use … art to your advantage cuz people say that graffiti is just graffiti, but graffiti is art; graffiti is just a type of expression and we can use expression and kind of like, teaching these kids these skills, not the skill set of artwork but of using other ways to ease themselves.

Do you know what I’m saying? I feel like a lot of people suffer from anxiety and if we can kind of just calm that down with art within the school system that be great or we can be accepting of graffiti as an art form. I think that’s very important because if you just see some scribble scrabble, you just see that as just nothing, you know I’m saying, but if we can, we can get these teachers, even, to understand and see that graffiti is an expression, you know, identity.

[END]
Figure 20. Mateo QR code.

Figure 21. Mateo cover.
INTRO: Bienvenidos, welcome to The Latino Underground, a podcast dedicated to the reclamation and exploration of Latino identity through counter-narrative stories. We hope to give you tools by which to navigate in a passive system. Stay tuned.

JS: Hey, what’s good, good people? Thank you for tuning in. In today’s session, we have the pleasure of speaking with Mateo Zapata. Mateo is a cat that I’ve known since I was in high school when I first started writing, so it’s cool to come full circle a few years later and be able to have a conversation with this cat. So, without further ado, here’s my conversation with Mateo.

MZ: How’s it going man?

JS: Dude, cansado. How you doing?

MZ: It’s too much. It’s a lot going on, man. I’m trying to balance. Yeah, G. How are you? How’s everything with you? How are the interviews coming along?

JS: Dude, it’s good, man. It’s fucking... it’s love, you know, I mean, that’s what it is and shit. It’s people really taking the time to share their stories, and be vulnerable, which is more than I could ask for. I think for me in all honesty, it’s a fucking grind. And it’s just a matter of finding the time to get these stories out, and then do them justice because they are sharing their stories. So for me, it’s time, dude, because there’s work, there’s life, and then within all that you have me trying to finish this degree. You feel me? So yeah, bro, I don’t want to take too much of your time. I know you’re a busy cat. So let’s go ahead and get started, brother.

MZ: No, dude. I feel super excited about it, man. I think it’s refreshing to have run back into you and for you to have pursued your career to the length that you have. And I think it’s super crazy that you used to be in marketing because I was in marketing too. Yeah, it’s just refreshing to see, man, because, at the end of the day, you’re Brown, you come from where you come from, and I
personally don’t run into that that often and it’s refreshing to see that. It’s good, man. So no, I’m here, man. Don’t even trip. I got this. I left the evening open, man, just to work with you on this. I’m happy for you, man. This is a huge accomplishment that very, very few people, man, very few people from where we’re at get to where you’re going. You can’t do anything but support that and applaud that. So thanks for reaching out, man. I appreciate it.

**JS:** Yeah, bro, no doubt. I mean, we’ve known each other since we were youngsters.

**MZ:** Exactly. That’s my point. We’re over here listening to Dead Prez and we’re questioning, we’re challenging society through Hip-Hop, graffiti, and rapping without realizing that’s what we’re doing. But then we grow older and we’re still challenging but in different impactful ways. It’s crazy, man. It’s a trip, it really is, man.

**JS:** But you think about it, bro, like, if you ran into your younger self, and you told them, “Yo, Mateo, I’m you and fucking whatever you [inaudible].” It’ll be like, “Get the fuck out of here.” No way you would believe that. [crosstalk] We have what we have, bro, like, I was that kid that wasn’t supposed to go to college. Like, that was it.

**MZ:** Yeah.

**JS:** I mean, it’s dope but at the same time, it’s bittersweet. But we talked about losing some good cats along the way.

**MZ:** Facts, man. Big facts.

**JS:** So I’d like to kick it off with this question, bro. When did you first realize there was inequities within our educational system?

**MZ:** Oh, man. I think I realized there was an inequity in the country and in the society overall before realizing it that I was going to have to deal with that inequity within the classroom as a student. I think the first time... and it’s a very significant moment, I think for myself, I think that
I had to revisit as I got older, but I think the moment that I realized there was inequity period in this country was when I had an ID card that I needed to have for school and for like, “Hey, you’re going to get your lunch ticket, you got to bring an ID, bring this whatever, you know, the cases.” I had a green card, which is technically a resident alien card. I remember looking at the card and my face on the card was the face of a child, right? I think I was literally, maybe—fuck. I don’t know, man, 7 years old or 8 when I took that photo. I saw my face on this card and it said I was an alien. So for me, I didn’t understand why I was being categorized as an alien. If I’m a human being, if I’m a person, I’m a child. The fact that I was put in a box and being referred to as “alien” was hard for me to grasp.

To answer your question specifically when I realized it in the classroom. I think it was when I was being marginalized from the rest of the students in my school because I was bilingual and they were putting me in what they referred to back then as ESL classes. But these weren’t really ESL classes because back then I don’t think ESL was that well developed as a curriculum or for programming in schools. So they would literally grab me, a foreign exchange student, and then some other student from some other country and they would put us in a closet. They had a table. I remember the room, it was between two floors. So you would go up one flight of staircases, the little room was there and then you would go up the other flight and then you were on the second floor of the school. And in that little room, that’s where we would go.

**JS:** Literally like, the janitor’s closet?

**MZ:** Something like that. Yeah. It was really small. And I remember there wasn’t too much space in there. It was pretty small. And it wasn’t for the entire school day. It was just for, I think, like, two periods or something like that. Then one day, I don’t remember the circumstance, but I told my mother I was like, “Oh, yeah, you know,” and she—yeah, I made a reference to it. I
think I had barely been marginalized for maybe like, a month or something, or three weeks. And I made a reference to the class, and my mother was like, “Wait, what you’re in what? Wait, wait. With who? For how long? Okay.” And the next day she came up to the school. My mother’s from Chile. She’s an exile from Pinochet’s dictatorship. She went up to the school and she was just like, “Excuse me, my son is extremely functionally bilingual. He is intelligent. He is bilingual, bicultural. He speaks English and Spanish very well. So there is absolutely no reason for you to be taking him out of his classes.” And then they just put me back and they never brought up ESL again.

I think that experience was very telling in terms of, like, my mother had to come confront the administration and say, “Hey, what are you doing to my child?” Obviously, God bless her and much love to her for doing that but let’s be real, not every kid in that situation is going to have a mother that’s going to do that for whatever reason, right? Some may just accept the marginalization as, oh this is just the way it is, but obviously my roots are built a little differently. I think that was probably the first time that it kind of hit me. Aside from that, it was strange when I was in college. And I had a... not the professor for the course, but the professors like, other assistants.

**JS:** The TAs?

**MZ:** The TA. There you go. I’m sorry. The TA, she tried calling me Matt in front of the whole classroom. And I was like, I’m in college. I already went through this in grammar school. I went through this in high school. I’ve gone through this for most of my life in this country and I’m in college and you still want to do that? I already told you my name is Mateo. You can’t pronounce that, just give it your best shot. Mateo. And the way she said it too was very like, “Oh, we’re just going to call you Matt.” And then I was just like, you know. And I think I was the only Latino
male in the room when it happened, too. And I was just like, “No, that’s not my name.” Don’t anglicize me to make yourself feel more comfortable and you don’t have that privilege to tell me what my name and my identity is. You don’t. So don’t act like you do. And if you think you do, I have to remind you in front of all these people that you don’t and you’re not going to do that. And yeah, I’m a student and you’re a TA, but that’s what it is. And the temperature in the room changed real quick. I would say those specifically are the instances in which I realized that.

And then one more. Hold on. You’re making me reflect now. I was in class and... I think back sometimes the things I would say and do, it’s crazy. I was in German class and I had, my best friend is this young Black kid from Belize.

**JS:** Belize?

**MZ:** Belize, yes. So he was Belizian. But he identified as Black, but he was Belizean. He was my best friend at the time. I didn’t even know he was Belizian until we were already like, 14 or whatever. My German teacher—he was leaning back in his chair, so he had the chair balanced on the back two legs of the chair. So he was leaning back in the chair. He wasn’t making noise, wasn’t being disrespectful, he was just leaning back in the chair and the teacher said, “You can’t sit like that. This is not the ghetto.”

**JS:** No fucking way.

**MZ:** And the minute she said that my friend who was Black, he just had this look on his face where he was just like, “What?” And everyone in the classroom turned, looked at him, and then respond—like, right at that moment I was like, “Stop being a Nazi.” And it was a thing. She ended up apologizing to him, and then she was like, “I resent that you called me a Nazi,” and she called my parents, and was like, “Mateo called me a Nazi.” And then, my parents were like, “Why’d you call her Nazi?” And I’m like, “Well, ’cause she said this, she said my friend wasn’t
in the ghetto. Just because he was his sitting in his chair a certain way.” So, I would say all of those things, and all of these things happened at a very young age. I’m talking about first grade, third grade, and then fourth grade. So I think having to process these things and also learning I think from when my mom went to the school and told them to take me out of ESL at the .... Because obviously, I’m not learning in the classroom with everyone else, right? There’s a risk of me falling behind. I think seeing her do that at such a young age showed me that if there’s something that isn’t right, if there’s something in which you’re being treated a little differently because of how you look or where you’re from, you have to say something like, you just have to. Because if you don’t, they’re gonna keep treating you that way. And you’re going to normalize other people that look like you or that may be from where you’re from to also be treated that way.

I think that experience at such a young age gave me the lesson of learning to value my voice, learning to value my existence as being equal to everyone else around me regardless of the fact that I wasn’t born here, regardless of the fact that ethnically I’m mixed. I’m of African descent, indigenous descent, European descent. This is the background that a lot of Latinos have. And so, we don’t fit within the dichotomy of race in the United States, of things being the Black and white. I think that that’s a very common situation with Latinos, especially after Latinos or indigenous Latinos is that you have to sort of come to this crossroad where you reassert your identity, and where you allow yourself to exist as you see yourself and not as you’re being told that you are.

**JS:** Yeah, dude, there’s a lot of truth, a lot of little nuggets there, bro. And I like starting with this question because those pivotal moments, they shape you, right? They shaped who you are
educationally as a student trying to navigate what education is in America, and it could either fucking traumatic as a kid, right? Or it could empower you.

**MZ:** It can traumatize you or it can empower you. And that’s a great observation because it’s a very thin line, man. Very thin line, dude.

**JS:** As children, we’re so fucking vulnerable, right? And so you are susceptible to criticism and we take that shit hard on something like that. Like, you said it was traumatic. Mateo, tell me about yourself. Who is Mateo?

**MZ:** My name is Mateo Zapata; [I] was born in Colombia. My mother is from Chile. She was an exile as I said earlier. My father was Black and Indigenous Colombian. His father, my grandfather, and their entire family dedicated their lives to the preservation and representation of Black culture in Colombia. That’s literally their life legacy is that. The Zapata Oliveias de Columbia, they’re known for having done that. And on my mother’s side my grandfather, her father, he was the union leader for the copper mine workers in Chile. And Chile has the largest copper mines on the planet. So it’s a very powerful union in Chile. I don’t know if you remember how the miners were stuck in the mine.

So he was the leader of that union during Salvador Allende’s presidency. And when the military dictatorship occurred that was financially sponsored, military-sponsored by the United States, he got my mom and her siblings and her mom out of the country immediately to Colombia, which is right next door, and he stayed. He went back because he wanted to be a part of, like, outside and helping other people because they were torturing people, they were killing people, a lot of people disappeared, Victor Jara’s hands were chopped off in a stadium in front of everyone.

**JS:** Oh, shit.
MZ: It was an extremely violent, cruel, and fascist dictatorship. Probably the most fascist in all of Latin America historically to ever have existed. He stayed and his whole role was he would help other people exile. So if the government was looking for someone or they were trying to hunt people down, he would help people get out of Chile. I think the hardest part from what I was told from my mom and her family was that they couldn’t hear from him. So they didn’t know if he was—they didn’t know what was going on. And my grandfather, he was detained in a detention center and tortured to snitch on his friends and the people he knew. I think that the combination of both of those backgrounds for me personally, I’ve always resonated in regards to who I am, especially when you think about the fact that I was brought to a country that not only helped a fascist military dictatorship in Chile that caused my mom to leave, but that also destabilized Columbia during the 70s, during the 80s, during the 90s. Which was the reason that both of my parents after I was born in Columbia, like, “We gotta go. This is not the place to be.” I think that background for sure has a lot to do with who I am.

I would say that I’m independent, creative from the South Side of Chicago. I’ve done everything from throw events that bring over 10,000 people together to selling t-shirts and snapbacks to being a photojournalist, working in media production. I’ve been on tour with Molotov. I’ve photographed and filmed what we’ve seen in Yandell. I have shot commercials for television. I just did something three months ago for HBO Max and In the Heights, for the release of the In the Heights musical. So these are things and capacities that I still exercise and practice. It’s not necessarily, I don’t look at it as something that was temporary as far as my skill set. I think that in this country in the society, you’re taught that you can only be good at one thing at a time and that’s it. And if you’re going to be good at something [then] that’s all you can do, because that’s the way we view you and your capacity and your labor and your potential.
And for me, if I’ve ever learned to do anything, I tried to maintain that skill whether it’s creative or not and still exercise it. In my case, I think a lot of my skill set is based in creativity and in art.

JS: I want to go back to something you said. As I hear your history and as you’re talking about the richness of, for lack of [a] better word, “activism” within your roots. From your grandfather to your grandfather to the other side.

MZ: Yeah.

JS: There’s a lot there. So your parents—mom from Chile, dad from Colombia. How did they end up linking up?

MZ: Well, after my mom was exiled to Colombia, which is very close to Chile, she met my father in Bogotá. My father’s family is from the Caribbean, from Cartagena. They met in Bogotá. I was born there and they left immediately. They left when I was like, I think [a] year old. They were like, “No, we’re getting out of here,” and they came straight to Chicago.

JS: So this knowledge that you have of your grandparents and their ability to fight and be active. How was the game, bro? Was that something that parents passed on?

MZ: I mean, it’s interesting you say that because that entire family has, I would say probably close to 20 grandkids. And I’m the only grandkid that isn’t a Trump supporter and that isn’t...

No, I mean, I don’t know. It’s a great question, but I think I’m probably the only one that values that background from my father’s side. I’m the only grandkid from my mother’s side, to be honest with you, which is interesting. You just reminded me of that. As far as like ... it’s a lot to take in, I think, as a child. These were all conversations and things that I had to understand as a child, as a third-grader, as a fourth-grader. Like, “Why does my Chilean family live in Bogotá?” “Oh, because your grandfather was this and he had to leave because if not, they were going to kill him.” Like, “Wait, what?” “Because they assassinated the president.” “Wait, what? What do
you mean?” And then you look into that story the one with a soldier’s helmet on and a rifle and a radio transmitter giving a speech to everyone before he gets killed. Because there’s tanks outside and the Chilean military, they’re with US military, is attempting to get in there and kill him because he won’t surrender.

And so I think they were just a lot of things that I had to accept at a very young age in regards to what the United States has done throughout Latin America. So I think there was always some understanding of the fact that my presence here was one of resistance. My grandfather resisted in Chile, they went to Colombia, my Colombian family tried resisting what was happening there, and so they came to Chicago. And so here I am as a product of resistance, as a product of just trying to survive. Like, I said, we just want peace. That’s it. But we can’t even have that where we’re from because of your financial and political interests. So that’s why I’m here. I think for a young person and for a child to grasp that, it could be a little challenging in terms of trying to understand what is the role then, right? What is the position? What is the purpose? What am I doing here? I don’t agree with the system that caused me to arrive here.

So I think that the one thing that I did I think agree on with myself in terms of how to adapt, fit into this country having that background and having that understanding of oppression, and of violent intervention that the United States has had throughout Latin America. Because it wasn’t just Chile. They did the same thing in Brazil, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Colombia, Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic. They set up dictatorships everywhere. So then it’s like, “Wow, it wasn’t just me then. It was almost half the Western hemisphere went through this.” I think if there was anything that I got from that and from understanding that, and acknowledging the background is that, the one thing that they can’t and they couldn’t take away from me or that they couldn’t challenge me on, was my intelligence. That’s it. If there was anything that was
gonna allow me to have freedom, to exercise freedom, to understand how to exercise freedom, to understand how to reassert my sense of being equal, to my sense of my own civil rights as a person, it was going to be my intelligence because that wasn’t expected of me.

Throughout my life, whether it was grammar school, high school, college, or within professional career experiences, it’s been common for people, especially white people and being sometimes in predominantly white spaces, to be surprised at the way that I speak, the way I express myself, the words that I use, the things that I say. And that, I never liked that and never sat well with me, whether it was people being shocked that I was trying to be the spelling bee champion and that I made it to the finals in the school and like, “Who is this Brown kid? Everyone here is supposed to be white and Asian. What are you doing here? You weren’t even born here. You trying to be the spelling bee? Look at you.” You know what I mean?

**JS:** Yo, fuck the spelling bee, by the way. I wanted to be a spelling bee champ and I couldn’t fucking spell “sandwich.” That was the word, bro. The cliché word “sandwich.” I got kicked out first round, bro.

**MZ:** So for me, it was realizing that. It was like, you’re already telling me I’m an alien. You’re already telling me that I don’t fit into your dichotomy of Black and white. And so, it’s on top of all that. You’re telling me that I’m not supposed to be smart? Like, you want me to be dumb? You want me to not be able to read at a comprehension level that I should for my age and for my school level?

So I think realizing that, it was just like, “Okay if this is the game, they don’t even play by the rules. They go to other countries and kill presidents and they finance narco-terrorism in Colombia and then they want to give me an ID that says I’m an alien, you’re really trying very hard. You really don’t want me to come up. Okay, damn. All right. If that’s what you’re going to
do, then I’m going to arm myself with something that you can’t take away from me and something I can be undefeated. I can remain undefeated within the context of intelligence or in the context of being able to express myself in a way that you wouldn’t expect me to because of where I’m from or how I look.”

**JS:** So you coming in with this knowledge, what was your educational experience like? Having this knowledge, this strong base of identity already coming into an educational system that factually is designed to not support that?

**MZ:** Yeah. I mean, I think initially I had a really good experience in my grammar school. I loved math. I loved reading. I was good at it. And when the teacher wanted to be like, “Hey, who wants to read?” I was the only person that looked like me that would raise their hand and be like, “Oh, yeah, we could read too. Uh-huh. Yeah, we could read. You see us in the back? I know how to read. What’s up?” That was me. I was proud of that. It was like, no, we could do this and I took pride in that. I took pride in being able to not be the stereotype, to defy the stereotype. That made me feel like I could achieve whatever I wanted because I was expected to be a stereotype. And then you’re also, at times, surrounded by other people of color that associate intelligence with whiteness. And that in itself is probably one of the most toxic things that I think children of color could ever fall in the trap of believing, I witnessed that firsthand. Completely. Being looked at by other Black or Brown kids as I’m not being Black or Brown enough because I’m fucking smart. Because I can read, I can read *The Iliad* unabridged out loud and not miss a beat and not stutter and not mispronounce a word.

It was definitely challenging, I think, at the time to consciously make a decision to not be a stereotype when being a stereotype is cool by my peers and then expected of me by my
oppressors. It’s a crazy intersection to be at if you think about it as a child, you know what I mean? It’s like, “Whoa, okay.”

**JS:** You’re going against too many tidal waves and shit.

**MZ:** All the way. My parents got divorced my freshman year in high school. My high school, I really didn’t feel ... the curriculum wasn’t engaging to me. I was bored, man. I took calculus in eighth grade. I walk into math freshman year and we’re talking about long multiplication, and how to make fractions. And I’m just like, “Bro, what? What are we doing here?” So I think the lack of being challenged academically, that competitive edge that I had, I think I kind of just threw in the towel because I was like, what for? I didn’t see the value in it, unfortunately, and I think I lost the interest of wanting to continue to challenge my own empowerment and asserting some self-determination due to my parents getting divorced. Because then after that, me, and my mom, we were homeless for a while. I would crash at her job after her co-workers would leave; that’s where I was sleeping for I think two weeks. And then we moved in with my best friend at the time because his mom found out because I told my friend what was happening and his mom was like, “No, you guys are going to come with us,” and so that happened.

There was some instability there I think that was hard to process. Because I also felt like I had been through so much already, and then I got to go through another struggle with this divorce now and that has to do with instability. My mom was working two jobs and I had a little brother; we were 13 years apart. So when I was 14, 15, he’s wanting one and two years old. And so, obviously, the bandwidth of my mother’s, like, she’s got to do what she’s got to do and she’s got to take care of the toddler. There’s nothing wrong with that. But I think in that regard, that’s when I started to resist in ways that weren’t constructive, in ways that were maybe destructive to myself at the time without me realizing it. I still tried to read. I still read, I still try to not
necessarily lose my passion for being creative, or for being intelligent. I just think that high
school was just... it wasn’t that great of an experience. I ended up getting kicked out of Lane
Tech. I went to Latino Youth in … Little Village to an alternative school there, which was a
great experience. It was a very positive environment. All my teachers cared about me even
though I was surrounded by a lot of gang-affiliated students and students that were also facing
the same kind of instability with housing that I had faced during high school. It was good. It was
a great learning environment, and it worked. The classes were smaller, teachers get to know who
you are. The encouragement was there. I remember I had two of my teachers were kind of like,
“What are you doing here man? What are you doing here, like, serious[ly]?”

I remember when I graduated from Latino Youth, the UIC had partnered up with Latino
Youth to give them like, five all-tuition-waived scholarships for four kids graduating, and I did
great academically the year I was there and I did everything I had to do. I didn’t have any
behavior problems or anything like that in the school, showed up, my attendance was great. And
I remember, I told the principal, I was like, “Yo, what did I do to not deserve one of those
scholarships, man?” And then the principal looked at me and he was like, “You’re gonna be
okay. You’re going to get to where you need to go and going to get into college. You’re going to
be fine. Those other five people I gave the scholarship to, if I don’t give it to them, they’re not
going to be okay and they’re not going to figure it out.” And I was like, “Damn.” So at that
moment, it was also kind of one of those, like, okay, why did I ask him why I didn’t qualify for
that? Why is my self-image so distorted that I couldn’t realize that on my own? You know what I
mean?

I worked for a while after high school. I went to city colleges, got a scholarship to UIC,
ironically enough. Graduated from there. UIC was interesting. I did very well there. I got along
with all my professors probably except one. I still keep in touch with some of my professors actually, to be honest with you. So it was a great experience. I had some really good professors that acknowledged my writing and that valued my voice within the lectures, within the classrooms, and that they definitely—I had at least two professors pull me to the side and be like, “Hey, you should really consider going to grad school. I really think that you—" Actually three, my bad. Yeah, three professors told me that. It was kind of like, that was the first time, I think, I ever felt any kind of encouragement from an educator in the classroom. “Hey, you need to seriously consider furthering your education. How can I help you? I’ll give you a recommendation.” I think that was where it kind of clicked for me.

I think that part of that experience and being able to understand and to view and witness myself having gone through everything that I did, and making it to being inside of a college environment, which I knew I wasn’t expected to be at either. Especially not with everything I went through in high school. I got arrested a lot, getting kicked out, the instability, I started hanging out with people that were gang-affiliated at the time too. This one guy from my block where I used to hang out at every day and stand on the corner every night from head to toe wearing colors I shouldn’t have been wearing, he killed a police officer. He was 16 years old. I was in high school at the time. He was 16. I think I was 16 or 17. I think that was also—I don’t mean to backtrack.

**JS:** No, this is good.

**MZ:** High school out of nowhere, but I think that was a huge moment for me to, in terms of realizing that I couldn’t keep going in the direction I was going in. And yeah, there was a police officer. Officer Strauss was killed on 18th and Throop. My friend’s name is Hector Delgado. We used to call him He-Man. The crazy thing about him is that he was a graffiti writer, bro. We were
all in the Hip-Hop, all of us. He was in a crew called KU. I used to hang out with KU because they were always out there on my block. Even though I was very cool with the gang-affiliated people, I also hung out with them too because obviously, I was still very much involved with Hip-Hop in one way or another. I think when that whole situation happened with him getting arrested, him getting snitched on, we were 16, 17, that’s when I kind of also, I think I stopped doing certain things that I was doing at the time because I was scared. I mean, I’ll say that now. I don’t think I would have said that then, but I was terrified. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in prison. I didn’t want to be in a situation around some people have a certain thing happen, and then have them snitch on me for being involved, and then that’s it. I’m popped. Because it’s that simple. That’s how quickly you can give up your freedom. That all these forefathers and people in my life sacrificed so much for me to have, and here I am on the cusp of maybe giving it all up. Over what? You know what I mean?

JS: There’s a lot there, right? There’s a lot to unpack, like, the way, as a child, you’re involved in these things not necessarily knowing the repercussions of the actions, right? But then realizing it, it’s like, a fucking snap, right? You’re like, “Oh, shit. This is what’s happening. This is what can happen,” right?

MZ: Facts.

JS: So you mentioned Hip-Hop, bro. How did you come to discover Hip-Hop?

MZ: I think Hip-Hop is the only aspect of American culture that I ever identified with.

JS: Elaborate on that.

MZ: I never felt like I belonged here growing up. I didn’t like anything that was here. I grew up with immigrant parents, so I didn’t go to the baseball games and eat corn dogs. That was not me. I didn’t understand or know what that was so I didn’t think that... I didn’t really fit in. So the
definition of being American was at least from what I saw at a young age. And even the kids at school were into watching wrestling. I never did that. I don’t know what that was. When I found out it was fake I was like, “What?” No, I’m really confused. Like, you’re watching a *novela* with people in tights fucking each other. It was weird, man. But Hip-Hop, I understood. And Hip-Hop I was like, yeah, that’s... if there’s anything in this country that I’m going to learn and that I’m going to be a part of, it’s Hip-Hop and that’s it. I think I made that decision in high school. My first exposure to Hip-Hop was rap music for sure. The rhythm... I was familiar with poetry already because of my mother. She made me read Pablo Neruda at a very young age and Walt Whitman and Hermann Hesse. She was very intentional about also teaching me things at home. So when I found rap music, I was like, “Damn. Okay, this is like, poetry, but it’s like, we’re taking it up a notch here.” Obviously, I grew up listening to Tupac, Nas, and Wu-Tang. I think one of the biggest kind of shifts for me in terms of really wanting to be Hip-Hop, right? Because you are Hip-Hop. You’re not a part of it or whatever. It’s something you are.

Hip-Hop, in my opinion, it’s a culture and it’s sometimes it’s not viewed as a culture. It’s viewed as a commodity. It’s viewed as something that’s marketable. I view Hip-Hop as a culture. I view Hip-Hop as I would view telling someone that they’re Navajo, like, “Oh, that’s your culture?” like, “Oh, yeah. I’m Colombian and Chilean. But yeah, I’m Hip-Hop too.” Because I think that, if you look at the aspects of a culture, how do you identify a culture, right? By the language it speaks, the music it makes, the aesthetic and appearance of how it presents itself, and folklore, which typically is represented by a folkloric dance in different parts of the world. And for me, Hip-Hop had all of that. The language was rap. The aesthetic of how it presented itself. It’s the fashion, man. Fashion is huge in Hip-Hop. We were wearing hoodies and we were wearing ski masks before it was cool and sold to you by the Gap. Before it was cool and sold to
you by Nautica, Tommy Hilfiger, DKNY. We were wearing gym shoes with the laces however we wanted to before a pair of sneakers decided to be valued and sold at $500. Why did we wear sneakers? Because they sold them at Payless, because they sold them at Woolworths. Why did we wear oversized clothes? Why did we wear Dickies? Who wears Dickies, right? Who wears Dickies? Custodians wear Dickies, bro. Factory workers wear Dickies. You look at the clothes being sold in California on Fairfax in Los Angeles, they’re selling you clothes that looks like Dickies for like, $200 a button-down shirt.

**JS:** Yep.

**MZ:** Obviously, that gets into appropriation and all that, but to answer your question, I see Hip-Hop as a culture. The movement to me is the b-boy, the b-girl. That’s the folkloric dance. The language is rap. And I think that graffiti is in itself, not just the art form or visual art form, but I think it’s the part of the culture that resists because it’s literally illegal to practice. It’s not illegal to rap. It’s not illegal to break dance. It kind of used to be illegal to skateboard. But because white people started doing it, now it’s okay. They got parks where you could do it at. But graffiti is still illegal. So as a culture, you look at breakdancing. They’re talking about putting it in the Olympics. We’re not considered a subculture anymore. We’re not considered to be criminals or to be poor because we are Hip-Hop, because we dress this way, we talk this way. Now, it’s achieved this sort of level of respectability because of its power, which was only acknowledged given to the fact that it’s something that could be extremely marketed, sold, and consumed.

**JS:** Economic power, man.

**MZ:** Yeah. I think it’s, you are Hip-Hop. That’s something that you just—it’s a part of who you are. I think it’s a part of who I am. When I write, I think I write the way I do because of Hip-Hop. I think I film what I film behind a camera because of Hip-Hop. I think that my photography
is incredibly influenced by Hip-Hop. Because it’s all about innovation and it’s about being original. If you’re going to be in a cypher and you’re kicking a beatbox for people to rap, you can’t kick the same beatbox every time that you’re in a cypher around the same people, and even when you’re in a cypher, you have to switch up the beatbox a few times. Ares used to have, I think, about four in the stash that he could do in one cypher. What does that teach you? That teaches you to be innovative, to be original, to be prepared, to be ready, and to stand out and to do what you do well. And I think that that’s been a huge influence in my photography and in all of my skill sets. Even the way that I would curate events and do you the things that I’ve done. I would say that I’m definitely Hip-Hop.

I think for me that the shift in really wanting to engage and learn more about the culture, I was always fascinated by it as a child. Recite the lyrics, and listen in the Walkman, and the headphones, trying to piece in a notebook. But I think the shift for me got serious after hearing Rage Against the Machine’s album *Evil Empire*. I had already been heavy into like, Busta Rhymes for me was a huge artist in terms of listening to him and how he rapped. A lot of rappers tend to have a style and stick with it. They have a certain delivery. They have a staccato. They have a tone. With Busta, man, every song on his album sounded different. You listen to “Extinction Level Event,” you listen to “When Disaster Strikes” ... He was singing, he was harmonizing, he was doing great before Drake was born. You know what I mean? Yeah, I always like,d Busta Rhymes. He’s actually the first concert that I ever went to. He was there.

But I think when I realized that I could participate in it and I can be it too, was definitely listening to Zack de la Rocha’s song, specifically his song “People of the Sun,” which is on the *Evil Empire* record. And even the fact that he was rapping over the background of heavy rock that he was rapping over, but he was still rapping. He was going hard. If you were to listen to
those verses over rap beats, they would go as hard without the rock music. But why did I finally decide that I could participate and that I could be Hip-Hop was because Zack de la Rocha was a Latino. And what was he rapping about? He was rapping about being Brown, being an immigrant. And so I think for me, it was finally one of those moments where I realized I could participate in. Then shortly after that, I started freestyling, I was really heavy into the battle scene; I performed at the Logan Square Amphitheater in front of, I don’t know, 500 people when I was a sophomore in high school. We did shows at the Royale when we were in high school. It was something that I actively was like, “No, I’m do this,” Because I can, and I did, and it was great.

**JS**: That right there, dude. That right there. That’s it. The empowerment that it provides.

Whatever element it may be, whether it’s b-boying, DJing, like you, rapping or graffiti, writing. It’s a certain level of empowerment that people who don’t practice it can’t understand. And aside from that, it’s also therapeutic for youth who can’t access those services, who rarely have access to services like that. It’s our peace.

**MZ**: It’s therapy. It’s just therapy. That’s it. For me, rap was therapy. For graffiti fighters, going on missions is therapy. It’s therapy because we don’t come from cultures that believe in therapy. So, I think as young people, we had to figure something out. Because no one else was telling us how to decompress, how to process, how to heal. So we found ways to do that and I think that a lot of us chose Hip-Hop.

**JS**: Yeah. It’s funny you mentioned that because I’ve never spoke about this. But you mentioned therapy and I was painting a lot when I was like, junior-senior year and I was playing a lot with Ares specifically. And the reason we both painted was that, during that time, we’re both going through some like, real hard shit. I wasn’t getting along with my dad, like, it was just fucking
trivial. Every time I get into a fight with my dad, I’ll be like, “Yo, Ares, let’s go paint.” He kind of really knew. I would drive his house and shit, whatever, get our fucking gear, and go out and paint. And it was almost like, silence and then he’s like, “Yo, bro, you’re all right?” and I was like, “Dude, it’s a struggle right now, bro. Let’s just go paint,” and that was it. That was my therapy. You hit it on point, bro. And I think for many kids, it’s an outlet, right? It’s an outlet. It’s something that I think isn’t ... I don’t know, man. I think a lot of times it’s giving a negative vibe, by like, let’s say, fucking education and shit. They don’t give you the respect that it deserves.

MZ: Yeah. I mean, I don’t know what it’s going to take. But I think that Hip-Hop needs to definitely be considered as a very real tool to empower youth and especially inner-city youth. I don’t think that there should be any doubt of that at this point. Because I think people like you and me are living proof of that.

JS: Yeah, bro. No doubt. So for you, how much, and you touched on this already, but how important has Hip-Hop been not only a professional career but in life?

MZ: I mean, Hip-Hop was something that I practiced on a daily basis when I was a teenager. That whole experience in high school where I was going through, my parents got divorced and all that. I mean, for me, there wasn’t a day that I wouldn’t wake up and not put my headphones on with my Discman and a CD was inside of it playing rap music. Not a single day. I had my headphones on religiously, you know what I mean? It was huge. It was a part of who I definitely was everyday as a young person. I think that ... it’s something that helped me a lot and I think I discovered self-expression. I discovered the beauty of my own identity through Hip-Hop again. When I was 17, around the time after Hector got locked up, I started going to this radio station in my neighborhood and I would play Hip-Hop. I would close the doors as a teenager and be in a
radio station by myself, in front of a console just playing rap music. That felt great. I didn’t have to deal with the drama on my block. I didn’t have to be at home surrounded by poverty at the time. I could just be there. And it was great. It was peaceful.

I used to do open mic events at this radio station as a 17-year-old. Running around 18th Street, putting up flyers for an open mic event on a Friday night, and then, 40 people walk in the door because they want to express themselves. I think Hip-Hop taught me a lot. It taught me to value my voice and the voice of other people. Taught me that it’s okay not to fit in. Because what do you do when you’re Hip-Hop? What’s the first thing you do when you are Hip-Hop? What do you do? You create an identity, right? That’s the first thing you do.

**JS:** A hundred percent, bro.

**MZ:** So what does that tell you then? You’re creating an identity because the other one outside of this isn’t doing everything for you. Because of everything that identity has to withstand, therefore, you create one with Hip-Hop because that one can be invincible. You know what I’m saying? It’s invincible on a wall. It’s invincible on a mic. It’s invincible on two turntables.

**JS:** Yes, about that shit, as you mentioned that, I never thought about it in that context, bro. But then, as your identity starts becoming stronger and you start being recognized by that identity, it’s almost like a breath of fresh air because now, your two identities are becoming one and that identity create, for example, when I started painting a lot and I started fucking really experiencing Hip-Hop to the fullest, like, being SNAP, that was like, “Yo, what’s up, SNAP?” I was like, “Oh shit, this feels good.” Not because of the notoriety or whatever, but because my expression was [inaudible].

**MZ:** It’s because you created that, man.

**JS:** Yeah.
MZ: You created that; you created something and it’s real and people are acknowledging it. It’s not about the notoriety, they’re just acknowledging your existence. And they’re acknowledging the existence of something that you created from your sheer imagination. That’s power, man. You know what I mean? I used to go by Reason, that was, like, my battle rap name. So I would go into cyphers and be like, “Oh, Reason.” I would go to this place on the North Side and go battle where it was like, 200 people in the room and people knew me. Like, I’d walk away from a battle I won and people that I didn’t know would come up to me and be like, “Man, bro, that was dope.” I think Hip-Hop was really empowering more than anything. I think that it was very empowering.

JS: The way you talk about Hip-Hop, bro, and what you mentioned earlier in terms of Hip-Hop and your lens for photography, that takes me into the last couple of years and what our country has been through. Our home, our society has faced. And then you had the protests happen. At the heart of the pandemic, I think this is so close in history, but it’s so easily forgotten. The pandemic was still in its full effect [crosstalk] when the protests started happening. Those who were active and who gave a shit really put their safety aside and said, “No, we’re going to protest because this shit matters.” How did all that come to be, bro? Like, what was the process of you decided to say, “Hey, you know what? Let me pick up my camera and let me give these people amplify their voice. Give them agency, where agency hasn’t existed.”

MZ: Before getting into that all the way, Hip-Hop is, in my opinion, about resistance. You’re resisting with rap, you’re resisting with graffiti, you’re resisting by DJing and mixing two records together that aren’t supposed to be together because they’re not together until you put them together. Your piece isn’t supposed to be up on the wall until your spray paint hits the wall because you decided to, you know what I mean? And so I think that with Hip-Hop, it’s the
resistance is creative. So it’s always challenging you to see like, “Okay, what are you going to come up with next?” What’s the next verse, the next bar, the next wall, the next move, the next scratch. And if you look at Hip-Hop historically, Black and Brown people utilized Hip-Hop to have their voices heard and to become visible. And I think that still, Black and Brown people are not visible within the landscape of American identity. And when you saw the news during the pandemic, stay home, don’t touch your face, wear a mask, don’t go outside. Every single one of my friends had to work during the pandemic. And I was concerned that the narrative being broadcasted throughout the country from a predominantly white audience to a predominantly white audience was to quarantine and not risk your life and not touch your face.

And I think at that moment when I realized that a lot of my friends who aren’t white had to work, I kind of had this moment where if you look at the history of Black and Brown people, it’s typically either erased, not in the history books, or it’s distorted or altered. If you look at the women’s rights movement, for instance, almost a century ago. No one ever speaks about Sojourner Truth. No one talks about her going into a meeting of women who were predominantly white discussing women’s rights, and she write a letter saying, “Don’t forget about Black women because we’re women too.” I didn’t know Sojourner Truth wrote that letter until I was in college. How empowering would it be for Black women if they knew that Sojourner wrote that letter and they learned about it in grammar school or in high school. I didn’t know that there was a journalist called Ruben Salazar who was killed by LAPD because of him covering narratives about what was happening in Chicano communities throughout LA until I was in college. There’s a school in Chicago named after him. So I just used those examples, I guess, and there’s so many other, obviously. But I use those examples to say that I had this epiphany, if you want to call it that, during the pandemic where I was scared of what was happening in my community.
Never being acknowledged by history or by the people that write history or by the people that claim to have the authority to tell our history.

And I just had this feeling. I really don’t know how to describe it other than maybe an epiphany. But I just had this feeling that if I don’t go outside, and if I don’t take photos of what is happening, literally within a seven-block radius of where I live, not only is no one else going to do it, but it’s going to disappear and it’s going to go down in history as never having occurred. And that didn’t sit well with me. And at that moment, it was strange, but I honestly did think about like, my grandparents. I was kind of like, ’cause we’re in a pandemic, that’s a very volatile situation. A military dictatorship is a volatile situation. Colombia during the 60s, 50s 40s, all the way back up to the 90s was a volatile situation. And here I am, fast forward to 2020, and I’m in an extremely volatile situation. What should I do? Would my grandfather stay home, quarantined, and worry about not touching his face? I don’t think so. And so, I had to ask myself in that same moment, “What is my grandchild going to say about me?” when he’s like, “Hey, man, there was a pandemic in the year 2020; what did you do?” and I really wanted to be able to make him or her proud. I wasn’t going to be able to do that by staying at home and worrying about not touching my face with my hands as they said on the news every day.

So it was a few things, but the immediate concern of why I put my mask on, my gloves on, and went outside and started taking photos was because they weren’t going to acknowledge our experience during the pandemic. I knew that. I mean, yeah, it’s 2020. Yeah, we had a Black president. Whatever you want to use as markers that can possibly signify that we’re at a further proximity of inequality than what we were ten years ago, go ahead. Go down the list if you want, but I knew—

**JS:** Fucking yellow tokens of achievement, right? Like, progress.
MZ: Yeah, they’re little gold stars on the wall that’s on the side that you get to see when you walk in and out of your class every day. I just knew that they weren’t going to acknowledge us. I already knew that. We were dealing with probably one of the most, if not the most, racist presidential administrations in modern history. We’re living in a community that was heavily criminalized by the president of the United States by an entire political party, which is unprecedented, right? It never happened. I mean, if you look at the father of the GOP, which is Ronald Reagan, he gave immigrants an amnesty. He gave them citizenship. The same political party that gave amnesty to undocumented immigrants decided to vilify them on a national platform. And that’s what my community consists of, is immigrants. And so, I just had a very strong feeling that our stories were not going to be told and I didn’t want to allow that to happen. Did I ever expect to single-handedly help that not to happen? Of course not. I just knew that I had to do something. Photographers aren’t necessarily seen as essential, but I do think that the work that was done there was incredibly essential because our story had to be told, and there’s so many things that happened throughout Black and Brown communities during the pandemic that I don’t think we’re even going to read or know about for years to come. But I did feel like, I had to do something and I decided to use my camera.

[END]
Raul

Figure 22. Raul QR code.

Figure 23. Raul cover.
INTRO: Bienvenidos, welcome to The Latino Underground, a podcast dedicated to the reclamation and exploration of Latino identity through counter-narrative stories. We hope to give you tools by which to navigate in a passive system. Stay tuned.

JS: Hey, what’s good, good people? Thank you for tuning in. In today’s session, I have the pleasure of having a conversation with Raul. Raul is a cat that I’ve known for quite a minute. We both grew up in Little Village and we both had our first job at a local video store, Richards. What I remember about Raul as a kid... A few years’ difference is a long time. Typically as a kid, as a shorty, when you’re trying to hang out with the older crowd, there are always dudes who make it a point to make you feel shitty about it. “Dude, you’re not cool enough.” “You’re not old enough.” “You’re still a little kid.” “Stick to your crowd.” They make it a point to make you feel shitty, and Raul was never that cat. He was never that dude. He was always that dude that made you feel welcome. He was that dude who was just a solid cool cat. Throughout, growing up as a teenager, we always somehow kept on running into each other. Most recently, when I interviewed Journey, Raul came up. So, it just seemed like, perfect timing, so I hit him up. Raul being who Raul is, agreed to have a conversation with us. So without further ado, here’s our conversation with Raul.

JS: How have you been man? It’s been how long?

RM: It’s been a long time. It’s been a while. I’ve been good. Working, maintaining...

JS: What are you doing now?

RM: I’m a clinic supervisor for one clinic. Eventually, it’ll be two clinics this Monday.

JS: Congrats, bro.
RM: We’re opening up a new clinic. It’s already open. We’re just not seeing patients until tomorrow, but...

JS: It’s cool, bro. You’re keeping busy. It’s funny how shit works out, man. I was interviewing Journey and you came up, and I was like, “Oh shit,” He’s like, “You know him?” “Yeah, that’s the closest thing I got to a brother,” and I was like, “Okay, cool.” Then, he started talking about the process of how he started getting involved in rap and he named you in terms of being influential, right? You being one of them, so I was like, “Okay, let me see if you will. He’s up for chatting and shit.”

RM: That was an awesome interview. I enjoyed the podcast.

JS: Oh! Thanks, man, I appreciate it. Like, I don’t want to do a dissertation about Hip-Hop that was going to be traditional because everything that’s been written, a lot of things that have been written, has been in the traditional colonizing way. Like, someone goes out and does our research, reads books and shit and then writes about Hip-Hop in a very linear way, like, Hip-Hop was developed on this day, and then from this stem the four elements, or five elements with knowledge. Then, they go out and they look at kids, Brown-Black kids and they write about their experiences and then finish a job based on it without ever giving anything back to the community, I guess.

This is important knowledge, bro. For me and, honestly, for a lot of people I have been interviewing, Hip-Hop was a savior …. It was a lifeline when we don’t have one. So for me, it’s important for one to pay homage to Hip-Hop in general, but do it in a way that’s organic. And in a way that shorties can possibly listen to this and say, hey, you know what? Like, we’re not the only ones and, like, cats have gone through this and they’ve benefited from them and they’ve been successful. They’ve been doing their thing and, it’s all right.
RM: Yes, definitely. I know it’s saved a lot of lives. I know it’s changed my life. My life would be in a far worse position had I not opened my eyes to that world, to that culture.

JS: Yes, we’ll do it. First and foremost, thank you for being honest. Truly appreciate it. Truly appreciate your time. What do you do usually on Saturday mornings?

RM: Thank you for having me. Saturday mornings? I just chill with my little girl. I try to convince her to paint. She just sits on one end of the table and I sit on the other end and we just talk and paint.

JS: Jam out. That’s cool, bro. So I guess the first question I have is, when did you first realize there was inequity within our educational system? Was there an experience or how did that come about?

RM: Definitely an experience. With me, I’ve always been involved in all kinds of stuff, art being one of them. Also big for me, when I was younger, was sports. I was hard into basketball. This is like, back in grade school when I was in fourth or fifth grade, I was with the basketball team and we would travel to nicer schools. Some of these were religious schools, like, Catholic schools and you would see a big difference. You would see big differences, like, how the kids were treated and what they have around them to make them better students. The environment was a lot wholesome, happier, inviting, and hospitable. Then, we would come back to hear words every day, in every ’hood. In school-related extracurricular activities, they had to sell those Finest Chocolates for uniforms and simple things like an extra baseball bat. Something like that. You see that in communities like ours.

Whereas, if you venture off into these nice neighborhoods, you don’t have to worry about that. That’s completely covered and there’s no “chocolates finest” out there. That’s my good example of that. When I was in grade-school basketball team, we would just go to these
tournaments and it would be nicer schools and just the whole process is completely different. I was able to tell right off the [bat].

JS: It is interesting you mentioned sports in your example. I didn’t realize how divisive sports could be in terms of equity. I have two examples that I very quickly remember in terms of that happening. One summer, I was working at a local grammar school, Hammond, over on... What is it? Cermak and Cali[ifornia]. Small school, predominantly Latino, and it just so happened that the kids needed a coach, a soccer coach. Now, I don’t know anything about soccer despite clichés. So what was crazy is that there was nobody else. There was literally one other Latino male who was remotely willing or considering this. And then something came up and he couldn’t do it. So the kids had nobody so he approached me and it’s like, “Can you help us out? Because if not, we’re not going to be able to play.” I was like, “Hey, man, I don’t know anything about soccer. But yes, no doubt. I’ll show up.” He said, “Cool. Don’t worry about it. We got this; just make sure to take the bag.” I was like, “What bag?” “The bag that I give you. Go to the gym teacher’s office. There’s a bag there; just make sure you bring it.” They gave me the time and I showed up. I showed up about thirty minutes early. It was on a Saturday. I think the game started at eight. I got there at 7:30 am. So then, slowly but surely, kids are showing up, parents are dropping them off. So, as they’re showing up, I was like a *pendejo* but I was like, let me be cool. Let me buy these kids some tamales, not even thinking that they’re about to play.

So, I treat them to some tamales and as I recall it, bro, we did not even have a full team. It ends up being that the little brother of one of the kids that showed up ended up having to play. And this kid wasn’t of age to play, but he ended up playing. And when it’s time to get started, the ref is like, “Okay, where’s the uniform? They need the uniform.” Then, the kid is like, “Hey, did you bring the bag?” And I was like, “Yeah, dude. Yeah”, so I pulled the bag and [inaudible],
all those shirts from like, the sixties. Old shirts, I mean, bad oversized. These were fifth-graders so they were small kids. These shirts must belong to adults, adult large. These kids were playing and they were enjoying themselves but I felt so bad. So yes, that was one experience.

The second experience was, I used to work at a high school that was fairly affluent. It was largely white, about 30% white and in that particular case, what ended up happening was that kids wanted to join sports. They would join sports, and again, soccer. They wanted to join soccer, the Latino kids. It just came to a point where they would join and then quickly were dropped because they didn’t have the experience that other kids had, like, they hadn’t been playing in travel teams. They didn’t have coaching. So they were already coming into the tryouts with such a huge disadvantage because their parents couldn’t afford to have them on these teams and to get them coached and to take them to these faraway travel team meets or whatever. So those are two things that right away clicked when you mentioned sports being part of your experience, bro. That is crazy.

RM: But it’s crazy with coaches. You’ve been there. Right, there was already enough. Some of these kids, they just want to be outside of their house and part of something. Some of these kids, they have no idea. They had, like, a beat-up old jersey. Some of the balls are just out. It’s just about being a part of that. Just being out there, having fun, playing soccer. They probably didn’t know. You didn’t know anything about soccer. It didn’t matter. You took them out there. You just, like, talked to them and, you know, that’s my coach, my first basketball coach, huge mentor of mine. He was the science teacher and 80% of the conversation was not about basketball. It was more about making me a better man. It’s crazy because that was back then and it meant so much to me.

JS: What’s his name?
RM: Schumer, Randy Schumer.

JS: Randy Schumer. Shout out to Mr. Schumer.

RM: Yes. Shout out to Randy Schumer and Paul Johannes.

JS: Johannes. Were they old at the time or were they younger cats?

RM: No. Schumer, when I was in grade school, was probably, like, in his thirties. Johannes, while I was in high school, was probably like, in his late thirties, too. They were, like, grilled down the earth and they dropped a lot of gems on me. Like, made me a better man. It wasn’t even just about sports.

JS: Yes, the little one.

RM: Yes, she’s right here. She’s like, what’s up? Who are you talking to?

JS: Raul, tell me about yourself, bro.

RM: Yes, right now, I am in the medical field. I have been in the medical field for probably more than fifteen years now. I have two beautiful daughters. Family is very big to me. I have always been proud of where I am from. Art is a huge part of me. It is a good destressor for me. It is a good way to express myself. The Hip-Hop culture, the lifestyle, have done so much for me that right now I only hope to inspire someone younger to better their lives, too. Right now, I am at a point like, I am just painting. It is not even about selling the artwork or it’s not about getting likes on Instagram. It’s not about impressing the person next to me. It is just me sitting down, hanging out with my daughter, and enjoying it. That is where I am at this point in my life, and I am appreciative for the people who taught me those values to just enjoy, just express yourself and enjoy it. Yes, that is where I am, right now.
**JS:** You mentioned family being a big part of who you are. So, I have known you for... I met you a minute ago, and I also know your sister. I went to school with your sister. Let’s talk to me about your family.

**RM:** Both my parents migrated from Durango. I have five brothers and five sisters, so there are eleven of us. There are actually thirteen of us but one of my sisters had a twin who passed away. I have an older brother who I never met in my life. He ran away when he was a teenager, and my parents were never able to get in contact with him ever again. It’s pretty crazy. Yes, I have five brothers and five sisters. The youngest in the family is my sister, the one you went to school with. Then I’m the second youngest. I’m the youngest among the males but the second youngest in the entire family. I grew up ... Going to school, it was like, ten of us getting ready to go to school. Taking a shower, you got ten minutes, get your ass out. You got ten minutes, get in and get out. I do not know how they managed to feed all of us, but they fed all of us. My brothers and my sisters still have strong values like, be yourself. We are always going to have your back and, know what is out there. At a young age, I knew what was out there and I knew what I wanted to be a part of and what I needed to stay away from.

With us, kids are kids. Sometimes, we are going to make our mistakes and we are going to learn from them. But I was happy to have my elder siblings tell me, like, “Do not get too close to that. It is hot.” So, I grew up in a gang environment, but thankfully, I can honestly say I was never a part of it. I was just around it, but never a part of it.

**JS:** So, your parents, you said they are from Durango?

**RM:** Yes.

**JS:** When did they migrate to the U.S. and how did they land in Chicago, specifically in Little Village?
RM: My father was good out there. I don’t know why he came out here. He was good out there. He had a nice chunk of land. He had a little corner store and I guess it was getting difficult for him for some reason, but he was just like, we are going to get everyone out of here. So, at that moment it was five siblings. Yes, like, five or six siblings and he paid the coyote; a form of coyote still exists this day.

JS: Yes, they sure do. It turned into more of an organized industry. Whenever there is money to be made, money will be made.

RM: Yes, so he paid to get my mom and the kids out here. He actually got caught and he was deported and so he chose [inaudible] for a little bit. My mom was out here and it is crazy because at that moment, being with such a huge family, my mom could not afford to have us all. I was not born at that moment. It was my siblings. So my mom was not able to have all of her kids staying in one roof. So, basically, the family had to separate a little bit for that moment. Once my father got here, he right away started working. My father is a crazy stereotype because not all Mexicans are hard workers, but my father was a hard worker. I saw that from day one, he worked his butt off. He did drink; he was an alcoholic but he worked hard. He worked his ass off and my mother never worked in her life. Her job was just basically taking care of the kids, making sure that we were fed, had a roof over our head, and she made sure we went to school. I appreciate my parents for that.

As for my brothers, only three of us were born here in the United States. So by the time I was five or seven years old, I already had brothers and sisters who were already working and out of school, and trying to instill the very same values that my parents were doing on us. So, I had my parents, but on top of that, I have my older siblings, like, you are going to get your shit together.
JS: Yes, that’s cool. There are a lot of nuggets right there that you are dropping. The first one I want to explore a little more is this idea of the sacrifices we have to make sometimes as inmigrantes. Having to separate, that example you just mentioned. It is crazy because I remember my mom talking about this when she had to cross; she had two little kids, my older sisters. She had to cross a different way and give her child to someone, a stranger, to cross. Then, she tells a story about her getting to their side, to this house where they are supposed to meet and waiting for my sister, my sister not showing up for a minute, and her panicking. Do you know what I mean? What do you do? So, this idea that you just mentioned, this huge sacrifice that your mom had to make them tambien. Bringing her kids and not being able to stay in the same roof just for survival, that’s just crazy.

RM: Yes, it is. A lot of our younger generation of Latinos, I don’t think they’re aware of certain things like that. With me, I talk to my daughters about certain things that we never had growing up. Right now, kids cannot live without a tablet or a smartphone. And to me, like, you have no idea, I was outside from day to night. The only time I came inside the house or I wanted to come inside the house was probably to eat and sleep. My father worked real hard for me to just have a decent pair of shoes on. He came out here and it was just like, the whole American dream and words like, working hard and being able to provide for your family. I can honestly say that my father accomplished that. He bought his own house and all of his kids made it through school. Not everyone completed school, but we walked a good line. He set good values. God rest his soul. But I think he made me see things for what they should be. Work and enjoy the fruits of your labor.

JS: What did your old man do for a living?
RM: He was in a welding company. He wasn’t necessarily a welder, but it was like, a steel manufacturer. Yes.

JS: That’s tough work, working with steel and shit.

RM: Yes. Back then, right away, I start thinking about FDA, OSHA and all these other entities. But at that moment, it was that black paint that they would apply to the steel. It was intoxicating. Even now, I always think about chemicals like that, that you have to apply to steel or even like, varnish. With varnish, if you stick around it for a certain amount of time, you are just like, whoa, it starts like, messing with your head a little bit. I think it did affect him. After fifteen or twenty years of being exposed to that, it did mess with him. It is crazy because this is back when there were no regulations at that moment. It was pretty crazy.

JS: You mentioned something, ninos, that was interesting. I am going to bring it up because I just took care of my little niece and nephew. My nephew turned two years old last week and after I took care of that kid for three hours, I was dead. He had so much energy. You mentioned your dad being a hard worker, but your mom was grinding, too. That has to be a grind.

RM: Yes, a good example is just going to the laundromat. Going to the laundromat three costales. You think of, my father is working and all the kids are in school, she has to prepare a Thanksgiving meal every single day. Every day because there are like, twenty of us. Yes, she had it hard.

JS: Then you think about it, too. Like, the budgeting, too.

RM: As you get older, you start noticing certain things. They say that you used to always look at your parents and ask them “Why?” Then you used to question them. Then, it starts to make sense to you as you get older. So, to me right now, obviously, I still go out to restaurants and bars, hit up a few spots and it is crazy because I can go to a bar or restaurant and waste somewhere
between $50 to $150. Then you come home, you wake up the next day you just like, “Damn. It was a good time but $150?” Then you go to the grocery store and with $120, you got all week’s groceries covered. That is when you decide, “Why do we even go out? Why?” The amount of money you spend on food out there, that will cover up your grocery list for the week. That’s when you find yourself thinking like, your parents. You are like, “Now, it makes sense.”

**JS:** Yes, but it is crazy, too. Because if you think about it, Raul, it’s a privilege to be able to do that. We have the privilege of being able to go out and treat ourselves to a nice dinner. I know my parents couldn’t take a family of five to go out to eat or even to a theater. I love going to the movies now and the reason I love going is that as a kid, I never had the ability to do it. Do you know what I mean? It was like, we were so broke and my dad was undocumented. There were times when there were raids and then he would end up losing his gig because there was a raid. Do you know what I mean? So, things like that. Now it is like, a privilege that we have.

**RM:** Yes. I remember being in high school working for Dominic’s grocery store. With my paycheck, on the weekends I would just take two buses to Ford City and just treat myself to a movie and that was it. It was just like, it would do so much, just like, sitting back and watching the movie and that’s all I wanted. I was happy with that. I was content with that.

**JS:** Yes. I could definitely relate. So your family is currently in Little Village. Have you always lived in Little Village?

**RM:** No, we actually ended up here on a tragic event in our family. So, I grew up and I was pretty much born in what is considered now Ukrainian Village over there on the North Side. It is a lot nicer than it was back then. Back then it was a hellhole. Since I was six or seven years old, I already knew about drug sales. That early, down the corner, heroin was being sold and cocaine and all that stuff. Out there, on the North Side, one of my older brothers was shot real bad. God
was looking out for him because he survived. Bullets went through one side of his rib cage and came out the other. It somehow managed to avoid all organs. How? I don’t know. Right to this day, I still think about that whole anatomy and the bullet piercing through I don’t know how.

But, yes, that happened. So my brother got shot.

So, in the neighborhood that we were in, the gang that was there, basically wanted two of my brothers again died yesterday. So every day, as soon as my brother got home, there was a group of cats out there, like, “Yo, man, what’s up? You need to get the fuck out of here.” My brothers had no choice. This is my parents’ house. I’m a teenager. I cannot just get my stuff and leave. Financially, obviously, we did not have that type of money where we can just get up and go. But my brother was shot. It was real bad. Thank God, he survived. But once that happened, we were just like, we are leaving. I don’t care if we go to a worse living environment. If the seven of us have to share a bed, we are just not going to stay here anymore. Right there, we moved. We left and we never looked back.

We went from Ukrainian Village. We moved to Little Village. We actually moved to Little Village on the day of my birthday and I remember this like it was yesterday. Yes, we were here, and in my mind, I was like, “It looks like a nicer neighborhood.” I thought we had moved up. I was in fourth grade at this moment. So, two of my brothers had to go to Farragut, and Farragut was twenty times worse than what it was when I went there. If it was pretty bad when I went there, it was bad; it was like a jail beforehand.

So, my brother, on the first day as soon as he went in there, they were already approaching him. They were like, ready to kill him and he was like, I’m not going to school. He dropped out right there. He was like, I’m not going to school.

**JS:** Was that the same brother who got shot?
RM: No, the brother that got shot never went back to school and he just started working. He was a DJ in the beginning stages of my life. He was a local DJ. He was working full-time and part-time DJ. But the other brother went to Farragut. It was gang issues all over again. So, it was a vicious cycle. It was like, beginning all over again. It was like, I’m not going to school. So, that brother also started just working. Yes, here we are [in] Little Village.

My first memory of funny is again going back to gangs. This is fourth grade. I walk in my first day of school. I got this little Arizona shirt. The Arizona shirt has the little cactus and little young kids right away started coming up to me and talking all this gang stuff. I was already exposed to gangs over there, so I already knew when they were approaching me about gangs. We were fourth grade and it was serious, though. I managed to talk my way out of it and it’s crazy because to this day, the four individuals who approached me then became real good friends of mine now at the present time. That’s the one memory that I have that I will forever remember.

Even as a little kid, they come up to me because there’s a cactus on my shirt.

JS: It’s hilarious, the cactus representing the fork for those who don’t know.

RM: It’s crazy. The environments that we live in, like, sports logo, a certain color, insignias, or some sort of a number. Someone will talk to you about it like, “Hey, man. What’s up? Why don’t you fix your head a little bit? You got it … slightly tilted.” That’s the environment that I’ve always grown up in.

JS: But it is all those bits of knowledge that you have to develop and the knowledge you have to carry in order to survive in these neighborhoods.

RM: Yes, you slowly learn what colors not to wear, what sports logos not to put on, how to talk, what numbers are out here, which is crazy but you learn at a very young age that that is a part of life, code of the streets.
JS: Fourth-grade experiences said, “Don’t wear an Arizona shirt.” So, let’s say I’m from—I don’t know: Cali—and I don’t understand what Little Village is. Paint that picture for us. Paint that visual. How would you describe … Little Village?

RM: I think I will start off by saying that it is like Little Mexico. I think Mexicans migrate from their motherland, come out here for a better life. This is one of the communities where they come to feel at home, to feel welcome, and not necessarily experience a lot of the racism that is out here because racism still exists. So you want to go somewhere where you can feel comfortable and welcome. It’s a Mexican community, primarily. I’m not going to deny that there are gangs out there. There are drugs being sold out here. There is the whole violence aspect, but on top of that, it is a beautiful community. I most certainly love it. I’m proud to be from Little Village. I think I’ve learned a lot about my heritage and about the foods that are out there. I tell people, if you want to try some real Mexican food, you come to Little Village.

I will mention Pilsen, I’m not going to deny it. There’s this thing that Pilsen and Little Village that people just don’t get along with, and I can honestly say I got respect for Pilsen. I’ll say, come to Little Village and try some Mexican food, but if not, go by Pilsen. Get a part of our soul. I think food is one way you have that understanding of a community, of a culture, of a people. So that is one way. Whenever you want to experience someone else’s life and their food. I love it out here. It is one of those communities. In Chicago, there are so many different cultural communities out here and I am one who honestly believes that there are gangs, drugs sales, and violence in every single part of Chicago. I don’t care where you live, man. You can live in River North and be paying $4000 a month. There’s violence out there. There were two people shot just yesterday. And if you think there are no drug dealers in your neighborhood, you are mistaken. It is everywhere. It is everywhere. In the nice neighborhoods, in the bad neighborhoods. In this
neighborhood, you might see the gangbangers out there, whereas in some other neighborhoods, you might not, but it’s everywhere in Chicago. There’s no escaping it and you move on from that, especially if you don’t involve yourself in it. It’s a beautiful Mexican community filled with a lot of our culture.

**JS:** Yes, do that. That is a great description, man. I agree with all of that, especially the food. Let’s switch gears. Talk to me about education. If you think about it chronologically, you moved when you were in fourth grade. Where were you prior to that and then how was the transition?

**RM:** Yes, I went to Talcott. It is a school in the north side. Public school. It is pretty poor[?]. It is located in Erie and Walcott. Then we moved out here. I got here to Robert Burns, which is in Central Park and 25th, another Chicago public school. In my honest opinion, both are not fairly funded, which is unfortunate because that seems to be going on out here in cities like this. I want to say New York is another. Chicago City public schools don’t get the attention that they should. I ended up at Robert Burns.

I was into school. I got some pretty good grades being in sports. It helped me out. I was drawing since I was a little kid, as far back as I can remember. It was just drawing. Being a student of drawing and sports, I think, helped me better educate myself because I think with education, you need to take what is bestowed on you, what they throw at you: your teachers, professors, principal, whoever it may be, but then you yourself have to run out there and research yourself. See what you can find. American history that is taught in our public schools, it is cool. Take it in. Chew on it a little bit, but you yourself need to go out there and educate yourself. Find what else is out there because it’s not just that. The math that is taught in our classrooms, it is cool. It is good. You will need it somewhere down in life. But then, there are also other maths
that you yourself should ... If you want to educate yourself more, you got to go out there and look for it.

**JS:** Where did that come from? That mentality of seeking your own knowledge.

**RM:** I think that goes back with Hip-Hop being a philosophy and that conscience rap. Where we feel like we are in a prison and there is racism, police brutality, lack of attention in our schools. When we, as kids, just go out to the streets, to look for the streets to hug us because we are so lost. From listening to good music, I think it taught me to be a better fighter, to seek better enlightenment in myself, and be aware of what is going on around you. One thing is to know what is going on around you, what can you do about it, and then there are people who get affected by it. Where they are just stuck. I think when you are growing up in neighborhoods like Little Village, you are aware of what is going on around you. Are you going to be a part of that? Are you going to make changes? Are you going to better yourself? Whereas, I am going to accept it. My uncle was a gang member. He is in jail right now facing twenty-five years. That is just the life that I am in. That is all I know. So you either accept it or you educate yourself and seek a better life regardless whether you are still in the neighborhood or not. I think it is just that mentality where it is like, can I actually go to Pilsen and not feel like that gang out there is a rival? I should not think like that because then we become prisoners of what was created out here in society.

**JS:** When did you first start noticing that? Like, school is dope, but there’s this whole other knowledge. When did that consciousness start coming out?

**RM:** I want to say somewhere between sixth and seventh grade. Like I said, just reading and listening to music. Again, I had the advantage of having those older siblings. There were four of us sharing a mattress. Now, I’m older and I’m working and I’m making money. So if I made it
you should be able to make it out of here. Do not see yourself as stuck. Do not be upset with what your parents were not able to give you. Appreciate what was given to you and just work hard for what you were given. What is it that you want? What are your needs? I have always been surrounded by people who I think inspired me and empowered me. On top of that, I always looked for it, whether it’s in a book or in music, in a message in a movie. I think we all need that more so now than ever, man, with this pandemic. I think there are a lot of people falling victim to the mass hysteria that is out there. I think there is so much anxiety and just feeling powerless because we are under a pandemic right now, and it is not all necessarily true. But I can see some of us just falling victims to that, and we just need to educate ourselves and just push ourselves like we are going to get through this. We are going to get out of this.

JS: Yes. What role did education play in your household? You mentioned your brothers being a huge advocate of motivating. And think about education, not necessarily in the traditional sense—what we consider education here in America—but also in the concept of educación.

RM: Yes, I got a good one; it is religion. With religion, my parents ... My mother was very religious. She is to this day and my father was religious but not as much. We are a family where it is like, we did not have to go to church every Sunday. We did not go to church every Sunday. For my parents, it was like, we are going to show you this much of religion. But then after a while, it is your choice, whether you want to further [your] education in religion or you do not. It is your choice to be as religious as you want to be. They did not necessarily force me to be into religion, but they did not tell me not to be. It was just, like, they just threw enough for me to decide whether I was going to be praying every night or going to church every Sunday or I was just going to be an atheist. It was that freedom they gave me and because they gave me that freedom, it gave me the space to decide whether I want to research it some more, which I did.
This is crazy because they were not so pushy and me being into religion, I felt the need to ask, “Who is Joseph? Who is Abraham? Who is the wife? Where is the mother in this?” We got Jesus, we got God, where is the female aspect of it? Why do we pray? What do these prayers signify? It made me look for it more. Another huge example is my older brother who has been a mechanic for thirty years and it’s crazy because auto mechanics, they are never going to go away. Someone is always going to have to physically fix them. I don’t think there is a robot right now who can do a tune-up to your car, change the brake pads, and things like that. I don’t see technology taking over that. You are always going to have to go to your little mechanic right there, like, a compa, I need an oil filter. Early in life, he knew cars were his thing, so he went to community college and he was hard into it. It’s crazy because I remember he had his books on the auto industry, obviously, but then he had notebooks. He had notebooks on top of notebooks, on top of notebooks. He had more notebooks of his own writing than he had books and I remember this so clearly. He used to just lay down and used to just flip through his notebooks and look at his own writing, not even after a while. He just neglected the institutional books. He took upon his own writing. That is just from his research. I think that is a great example right there, my brother Doug, a mechanic.

JS: So he would do research on his own on mechanics and he would just [inaudible]?

RM: Yes, [he] had notebooks. Like, oh my God. He had notebooks on top of notebooks. I wish I had one of my siblings right here to be a witness to that. It was just incredible. The time and effort he took to just write down stuff in notebooks as opposed to just reading through the books. Anyone can grab a book and just underline and highlight stuff. To me, when you read a book, it is your perception. Let’s go to art. I can paint something and I can see something in that painting and you will see something completely different. It is how we take it and how it relates to us.
Going back to the auto industry, the car is like a body. It is like a human being. It has its heart, its brain or its veins. That is the way I see the car, and it is just how you take it, how you perceive it.

**JS:** So taking it back to your seventh or eighth grade. You already started to expose yourself to the music. You started exposing yourself to Hip-Hop. How did that come about?

**RM:** So, going back to my brother, the one that actually was shot, he was, like, a hardcore DJ man. This is back with the turntables, the records, and the mixers. It was five of us in a room and there was the bed, the drawer for our clothes, and then the turntables over there in the other corner. He would be just mixing, jamming out to music. We are that family that has Saturday morning music was like, high crazy, high volume. So he exposed me to a lot of good music and then my other brothers too. So the music aspect was there. It is just from sitting there and just drawing. I became a huge fan of comic books early in life, and that kind of opened up, I guess, my skill in drawing some more. Then as I got older it was just looking at stuff and pushing myself to see if I can actually draw what I’m looking at. Yes, that is how it all started. I started writing when I was in sixth grade going into seventh grade. It was in seventh grade when I met an amazing friend of mine. He was into graffiti as much as I was. And just for that one summer, we were just, like, hardcore seventh graders just writing and destroying the neighborhood. So he really taught me to take it to the next level. God rest his soul, man. He died at a very young age.

**JS:** Sorry to hear that.

**RM:** Yes, as far as the music goes from my brothers, they have always been fans of a hardcore gang rap, but also the conscience, the uplifting rap. That was good to know because once I started getting to my own, I began to be able to dissect the meanings behind it, the message. Sometimes when a rapper is talking about what is going on in their neighborhood, they are not trying to inspire you to do that. They are basically just trying to tell you this is what is out here.
This is what I was exposed to and it is how you take it, how you perceive it. That can either tell me I need to get out of this and try to escape this, or I can just accept it and be a part of that. Drug dealers do not have a long shelf life, so to speak. So, you have to tell yourself: Is that what I’m going to be into or can I just listen to this music and be entertained by it. Like, Spanish music, the Narcocorridos, not everyone is listening to it and be like, oh, I need to get some, plant fields over here and start growing stuff. You can take it as entertainment and get a positive message off of it, or in your head, you can start thinking you are this person and sometimes that doesn’t go good with you. It is just music. We need to inspire you, too.

JS: You are right. It’s like, the way you receive the message. So, there is a choice that is made when you start writing. You started doing that at seventh grade. That’s pretty early. How did that choice come about?

RM: It was started off just messing around with the pencil and the pen. To me, graffiti has been forever in human life. Forever. This goes back to ... You can go to a laundromat. You will see a little heart right there. Maria loves Jose forever. That is graffiti. That is graffiti. The military people, when they’re out there, they write on the missiles, man, and put their names on it or coming from North Carolina before they drop that shit in another part of the world. So, there are so many aspects to graffiti alone. Going to the styles of writing, just the languages, there are so many different languages out there. It is just about you having that curiosity to go out there and do it only I was doing my name and I was trying to do it in so our own. So like, with me, it started off in a piece of paper and I was doing my name. I was trying to do it in so many different ways and I was just picking up the markers. With the markers, obviously, since I was already drawing and coloring my drawings, I started drawing it up on schoolbooks, lunch, library, bathroom. Then I started taking it to the streets and it felt good. I think when you are out there
doing graffiti, like, writing illegally and like, bombing, you are just trying to deliver a message, an expression. I know it is your name, but it is not just your name. It is a message. It is an expression. That’s how I have always seen it. I have always been hard on expressing myself and graffiti was one of those words, like, I felt great just expressing myself. Just going out there and just doing my thing.

**JS:** So, in seventh grade, you started off with markers. Did you ever get caught in seventh grade or, like, in grammar school?

**RM:** In grammar school? I got caught in the street during grammar school. So I was in eighth grade and I got caught in the California line. It is not the pink line but back in those days, it was the blue line. You used to be able to climb one of the pillars so that you do not have to pay in the front. So, obviously, I was with my guy and we would climb it so that we did not have to pay but also because we had a backpack full of gear to go all bombing. Yes, that was in a California station, just ripping it up and just putting my name all over the place. Yes, they just walked up to us and grabbed me and I went to the police station. So, I was in eighth grade in the police station and my mom had to pick me up because I was tagging up the California station. So, it was not even in school. It was in the street and that was my first time getting caught up.

**JS:** Oh, shit! So you were already “painting” painting?

**RM:** Yes, I was a little mad. It was hard. In seventh grade, I used to grab spray cans and we used to come to Farragut. Farragut was a high school, I just come to vandalize it big time. Not even, it was more like, just having that wall to practice on because obviously, you got little tags here and there but when you have a huge wall, with that canvas you can actually do something bigger, a bigger project. You start seeing bigger, and you start thinking bigger.
So, I got caught before I went to high school. I already had that record in there. My parents weren’t too happy about it. My father, just a Mexican, was like, what the fuck you mean writing? What are you writing for? You got paper right here. Where’s my mom? My mom was just like, you are going to end up like your older brother, and it was just tough. It was a hot mess.

**JS:** I could definitely imagine, bro. There is not that distinction between what is gang graffiti and graffiti, right?

**RM:** Yes!

**JS:** Well, it’s just all in there together.

**RM:** Yes, shout out to some gang members out there. Some gang members out there have their lettering down [pat], nice. Not even just the lettering. Their signs, some of them you can tell... I know this is crazy. It is like, jumping off subject a little bit. Some gang members out there, you can tell, they go home and they study their craft. Their writing is just, like, real nice. I have seen some real crappies. This is graffiti, period, whether it is gang-related or not, or you want to put up your girlfriend’s name. You are not even the tagger. You can tell who actually appreciates it and studies it and practices it compared to someone who is just doing like, bleh, I am just going to throw something up there. Yes, I’ve seen some real nice gang graffiti where it was just like, “Damn! That is real nice.” Also with graffiti, there are writers who really practice. They really want to come out as original as they can be and that’s what I respect right there. Don’t just do it to do it. Practice it, study it and get your own lingo going.

**JS:** Go behind Farragut and shit.

**RM:** Yes. Go behind Farragut and play. It is a playground. It is a canvas.

**JS:** How did your name come about? How did you choose your name?
RM: So it started off, like, Damage. Then it was shortened to Dam, D-A-M but it has always been Damager, just because it just damaging. Just having that mentality of just tearing up something. It came about having that mentality of like, in the basketball court, in breakdancing, in graffiti. I just always had that mentality of like, whatever you do, make a dent in it and let it be known. This is you. Stand out from the rest, and so I think that is where that name came from, Damager.

JS: It is crazy. That is early to start writing. So let’s talk about that. You are in Farragut. You transition from eighth grade. You already started writing. You go to high school. How is that like? How was high school like, and what were the intersections between high school and Hip-Hop?

RM: So when I was in high school, I was hard into drawing and just my pencil and my ink. Going back to my brother having notebooks on top of notebooks, I had notebooks on top of notebooks of just writing, drawings, my lettering. There is, like, bubble letters or, like, wild style. So I was a hardcore sketcher, day in day out, you know. I think it was either freshman or sophomore year. I met him in English class. maybe. I was just sitting there and just sketching. I was one of those kids where it’s like, I was paying attention in class. I was listening, but I was also just drawing. He just passed by him and he’s like, what’s going on? I was just like, what’s up? With me and drawing, it has always been, like, just normal. So I was just like, nothing. I am just sketching. He was just like, what the fuck. Because at that time I already had in high school ... I was already getting the comic-book look. I had, like, storylines in my notebook. It wasn’t just like, little doodles and shit. It was just like, comic-book type of stuff. Then he started talking to me about his side, his life and we just clicked right away. We clicked and with me, it is never about you being better than me, I am better than you. Your stuff does not have to look like mine.
I do not have to look like yours. It was just about letting us better ourselves. Then I think that is what it was. I think that is why we clicked. We were able to basically sit in either his room or my room, put some music on and just sit down and draw and have a conversation. Just fully immerse in drawing, like, all right, that looks tight. That looks really cool. Just basically critiquing each other but helping each other better our craft. I think that is one of the things that I clicked with him about where it’s like I was not trying to be you, you were not trying to be me and let us grow together and that’s exactly what happened.

**JS:** So up until that point, you were painting in eighth grade. You were obviously still painting in high school. Did this knowledge of how to paint and how to develop the style, did, it come organically? Did you just develop it on your own or were there cats that helped you along the way?

**RM:** In grade school? There was really no one that pushed me. I grew up with Caesar. We basically grew up together. Our good friend, [inaudible], rest in peace. He was another board. We were just growing together. There was no one really that we were able to look up to during grade school. In high school, I started meeting graffiti artist[s]. Just being all into the Hip-Hop scene, because you will be in the train stations, and you can look at another person and be like, this motherfucker is vandalizing as much as I am, and so you just like, what’s up, man? You just start a conversation and you meet other graffiti writers.

I was also breakdancing, and so from being into breakdancing, you meet other little Hip-Hop heads and, you get to see different styles. Back then there was plenty of graffiti magazines that you were able to look at. Just being a student of it, I was able to, like, okay, look at the New York style, look at the Los Angeles style, Germany and even the tag itself. At a young age, I was able to look at tags and be like, this guy is from the North Side or this guy is from the South
Side. Just being a student of it, so I did not really have anyone like a mentor at that young age. I think I started meeting cats that became mentors of mine as I got older. I think that was more so when we jumped into B2B with Riddle. He was a very strong mentor of mine. Also with MUL. MUL had some graffiti kings. They have graffiti kings, should I say, that became mentors of mine. Yes, at a young age we were basically just students, students trying to better our stuff.

**JS:** You mentioned something interesting that I had not really thought of in a minute—this idea of just being on the train and looking at somebody or seeing somebody, essentially identifying with them and say, all right, either you are writing as well, you are a writer. So you ask the question. “Hey, what do you write?” Or you need to start to strike up a conversation or you know they are Hip-Hop, right? And it’s just being by the way they move, something about them. Like, you are part of the subculture.

**RM:** Definitely.

**JS:** When did Hip-Hop become more than just writing? When did all the elements start kind of mixing with you?

**RM:** I think just being surrounded by fans, students of the Hip-Hop world, we just were just curious, as far as studying the lyrics, like, the message behind them, being fans of the music itself, the production, and then, like, the breakdancing. The breakdancing, I think it just started off with one person and then started off with another and then next thing you know, it was just like, five kids, man, with a piece of cardboard on the floor, man, and just practicing with that and trying to get better at that. That was an awesome experience of trying to learn that element of Hip-Hop. I think it definitely took me out of the streets. It was an exercise. It was definitely like, physical exercise. Also, it was a way for me to just bond with other cats. So that was very powerful for me, breakdancing.
JS: Talk to us about the elements of Hip-Hop.

RM: So for me myself, I have messed around with the lyrics. I have always been a fan of lyrics. I am a huge fan of breakdancing, obviously the graffiti, the be-bopping and producing. I have always been a fan of producing since I was in high school. I already had, like, little beat machines and like, just sampling records and just make your own rap songs, basically since high school.

JS: So you were like, in all four elements?

RM: Pretty much. Yes.

JS: Then you came from it, all of it.

RM: Yes, that was awesome. The high school, I am like, in my forties. So during high school, to the world, it is what is considered the golden era of Hip-Hop. So to me, some of the best music in the rap world came out when I was in high school, and it was just like, the lyrical content and just the whole production of a producer grabbing a record of James Brown and then just grabbing a little piece of it, looping it, and then putting a crazy-ass boom bag to it. It was just like, mind-blowing. I was just like, whoa, man, you know we can do this and that’s what it was. To this day, if I can go to a record store, shoutout to Reckless Records, picking up a few records, just coming home, listening to him, looping a little bit of him, and then just adding my own beat, my own beat. I’m not taking anybody else’s beat, man. I’m just creating my own beat to it and adding a little piano to it. It is so relaxing. It is all relaxing. I am not here to tell you I got my own mixtape about but I am here to tell you, I enjoy doing that. I am just a fan, a student of Hip-Hop and just finding peace of mind in that.

JS: I hear you, bro, I think more so, this is probably one of the reasons why I decided to do this in this format también was because to me, like, everybody, Hip-Hop is not, like, generic. It
cannot be generically defined. It is experienced by individuals and each one of us has our own definition of what Hip-Hop is. So, let us go there, bro. How would you define Hip-Hop?

RM: I think Hip-Hop is just a way of life. It is something that is definitely supposed to be positive. It is supposed to be inspiring and uplifting. Sometimes that can be misperceived but for me [it] is just about ... It is almost, like, a religion. It is something that was there before me and it was brought to my attention. It made me feel good. It motivated me to be better and because of that, I like to immerse myself more into it and I am thankful that I did because I think I found a better path to more peaceful mindfulness because of it. So, when I look at it with all the elements, there’s some good education. There is a lot of beauty in it. With rap right now, we have us, elders. We look at the trap music now, and it’s just like, what the hell. They are not saying anything. They are just mumbling. And then it’s just basis. It is not music. This is just my opinion.

JS: Oh, you’re right.

RM: This is just my opinion, but that is the movement that it went to. When I was younger and I was listening to NWA, my parents were like, what the fuck are you listening to, but that’s where it was at that moment and this is where it’s at right now. So, it’s constantly evolving. It’s always changing. But change is good. And if you don’t like that change, what are you doing about it? That’s what Hip-Hop is to me. Like, you don’t like this, what are you doing about it? Express yourself. Be a pillar to your community and be a good example and that’s what that is me.

JS: Yes. You talked about expression and when you were talking about this earlier, I meant to bring it up. You talked about expression, you talked about writing your name, and writing your name is just not being about your name, but it having so much more. And I think you hit the mark with that because I could see a picture of like, a feeling I did when I was younger and I
could remember what state of mind I was in when I was doing it and what I was going through and that being an outlet for me at that particular moment. Whatever colors I used, it was also, like, a reflection of how I was feeling. That picture brings that back for some odd reason. It’s weird. Do you know what I mean?

RM: Yes. Definitely. You hit it right there. You know your colors will bring out a certain vibrance, we like to mention it, like, those are happy colors. Sometimes you can see someone’s drawing and it is just like, damn, there is a lot of anger behind that right there. But you feel that. It’s just not one thing. It’s not singular. You see the whole expression as far as you’re supposed to; I know with me, if I was to look at your tag, you can feel something. You should feel something. That’s where that whole expression comes. It’s not just a name. You are not putting up a name. You’re basically stating, like, “I am here, this is where I’m at, this is what I want to present to you, and hopefully, it inspires you.”

JS: So, Raul, you’re in high school, you’re writing, you meet friends that are doing it as well. At this point, are you writing by yourself or are you with a crew, yet?

RM: I started off in grade school. We started a crew based on the name of my guy that passed away early on and so it was RTC. And so then jumping into high school, we moved up to be B2B. It was, like, the crew in Little Village. They’ve always been, like, one of the elite crews. Along with my friends, we became a huge part of that and I still consider them family. During high school we are B2B. This is where we start going to Hip-Hop parties to compete in breakdancing. And so then while out there in one of the Hip-Hop breakdancing competitions, I met this guy. We clicked, man, and he was just like, come by my house, man. Practice with us, and this goes back to just two people from different parts of the world. Just meeting each other because of Hip-Hop. I started going to this guy’s house, and he was the leader of the
breakdancing element in the MUL crew at this, at this time. I was still with DCU B2B. We were having trouble as a group. I think there was a lot of miscommunication. There were those people going one side and people going to the other side and you can tell that it was slowly falling apart. The breakdancing aspect to me was still very beautiful. We would go to one of my guys’ garage and then just practice. Put the music on and just practice and so that was still beautiful to me. So when I met Oliver, he was just like, yeah man, come through. And then eventually he started inviting the rest of my friends, my crew. Little did I know his intention was to recruit all of us as a crew. So I was just like, oh, shit. I didn’t see that coming. That was so surprising. And so then, it was just about coming back home with my guys and having that conversation, like, do you guys want to jump over, cross over to MUL, because at this point DCU B2B was just, like, separating already. We were going in different directions. I want to say some of us were just growing apart. Some of us were just, like, letting go already and some of us just didn’t want to be a part of that anymore.

So that was happening. So I think that is where I ended up letting go of DCU B2B and then I jumped into MUL. Then, with MUL, it was just like, Hip-Hop as a life to another level.

**JS:** In retrospect, when you look at your high school experience and you look at Hip-Hop, what would you say was the effect of it? Was it positive or negative?

**RM:** It was definitely a positive. I did steer in the wrong direction, but it was just my choice. I cannot necessarily blame it on any of the Hip-Hop influences. It definitely took me on a positive note. Definitely, I am a stronger individual because of it. It made me want to educate people about it and the positive note of it. There’s a lot of negativity that’s put on it when it should not be. It’s a form of expression and it’s just how you want to perceive it. There are certain things that you’re not going to agree with your president and that’s okay. He or she has that right to
express those thoughts and those decisions and you have the right to accept it and agree with them or not. So I think that’s what Hip-Hop is. I think Hip-Hop to me has made a powerful, positive impact on my life. To others, they view it as a negative entity, but it has always been positive for me and I always try to educate that to the world. It is a positive thing. You just have to see that.

[END]

Figure 24. Carlos QR code.
INTRO: Bienvenidos, welcome to The Latino Underground, a podcast dedicated to the reclamation and exploration of Latino identity through counter-narrative stories. We hope to give you tools by which to navigate in a passive system. Stay tuned.

JS: Yo, what’s good, good people? In today’s session, I have the pleasure of having a conversation with the homie Carlos, Carlos Ballinas. I met Carlos back in 2011-2012 when we were both going through the process of obtaining a master’s in higher education through the ENLACE program at NEIU. So throughout those programs, it was cohorted. Carlos was one of
the cats that were part of it, and it was just a really, really dope experience. We ended up going to Cuba together as a study-abroad component to the program. And throughout this program, like, we just, you know, we did a little bonding. One of the emphases of the program was building community. We would have Saturday sessions where one of the professors … Rich Richmond, would incorporate a lot of Native American practices, right? So we do circles and we just unpack the shit that we’re going through and what we’re learning. So throughout the years, Carlos and I had kept in touch and he’s one of those cats. He’s from Puebla, I’m from Puebla and we’ll stop talking for months at a time, years at a time, and then it would just pick up right where we left off. Carlos is also currently in the process of obtaining his doctoral degree, his Ph.D., from Loyola University. So he’s going through this craziness, and very grateful for my brother to have taken the time to share his story. Carlos’s story will be broken down into two segments. This will be the first one. So without further ado, here’s Carlos’s story. First and foremost, Carlos, thank you so much for taking the time to be a part of this little project, this shit, mad appreciate it. You’re one of the cats I really wanted to interview because, one, you’re going through the process of achieving this similar goal of becoming like, a Ph.D., which not a lot of people, Latinos within the U.S. have had the opportunity to accomplish, right? And I want to say … opportunity because it’s not a matter of wants or will, it’s more so a matter of access to a certain extent, right? And I think, what are we at? We’re at 0.3% of the Latino population in the U.S. holding [a] Ph.D. Right? So, yeah, you’re going through the process, bro, so like, one, I want to pick your lens on that, man. Like, I’ve known you for a hot minute now. I think you, more so than a lot of people in the cohort, like, have had, we have like, a similar perspective on shit.

CB: Yeah.
**JS:** In terms of family, academia, and stuff like that. Bro, I was looking forward to this. So, mad appreciate your time, bro.

**CB:** Yeah, likewise. I’m grateful to do it, but don’t have a conversation.

**JS:** I like to start the session with an assumption, I guess, to a certain extent, but also I think a very important question. So, in my perspective, it’s not a matter of if, but a matter of when Latino students are gonna face oppression or racism within the classroom. Because that’s the first question, bro, like, when did you realize that education in America was a sense of oppressive?

**CB:** That’s a good question, bro. I am currently in the process of developing the methodology section for my project, right? Again. And I’m doing the interview protocol for my project. So my hope is to interview students or people who are no longer students who have engaged in the ethnic studies curriculum. As I’m trying to develop the part of the protocol, I also amassed a similar kind of question. But I think, when did you realize you were Latino? When did the identity of Latin [inaudible], as you understood it, become aware to you, right? Like, I remember when I was a kid. I didn’t know I was Latino or maybe [inaudible]. I didn’t know I spoke Spanish into something other than that told me that it was different. Do you know what I’m saying? And that normally happens in school, right? I think. I grew up in a Puerto Rican neighborhood as well. Right? When did you find out that the homie Quan was Puerto Rican, and you remain sitting. And then one day. Well, was there any tension at all? So, I think in some way I learned that early on in like, I don’t... they need to take the first or second grade. To be honest with you, you know, like, discrimination in this. In this sense, there are tensions right from the identity. That not so much you possess because it is imposed upon you and it because it’s imposed and you develop a possession over in my opinion, you know.
And there’s like, there’s not, I don’t know if there’s any sort of like, major moment, that this was the moment that I knew as discrimination happens, but it takes all of this kind of micro-moments. Right? Well, like, back in May 2015. He was able to call microaggression sensitive like that, you know, like, it happened in my experience with like, the tension that I think is systemic that kind of created, Latinos against Latinos, like, you and Blacks, right? Like, you had. I grew up in a Puerto Rican Mexican and also the Black neighborhood. Right? And I remember being called beaner. I remember people [calling] my parents “wetbacks” and I remember people of my kind of like, identity also saying horrible stuff about other people as well, right? I think the way I understand discrimination now, it’s, I think at least a lot of conversation about discrimination now is in relation to white systems against people of color, right? I didn’t really interact with my people at all. It’s so like college in some way, because I was also in, like, an insulated community, which I think is to the benefit of me, which is when I think about my upbringing is horrible, as it could have been because of the systems that [are] in place, as you know, just challenges to the community is also do.

But yeah, I think when I first engaged in discrimination was, during that time when I was like, started when I was at, I might go right into high school into the tensions that happened between people of the same community. I think, like, the bigger structure that is like, systemic oppression, that is … trying to uphold a value of whiteness, is what really made us off have intentions with each other, right? It’s like, if my mom’s a general, right? And when I was a kid, my mom was fighting for that janitor job of other people of oppressed communities, right? And that janitor is working for a white organization, that’s cleaning up white shit for white people. Do you know what I’m saying? So like, this white organization, I’m gonna give you all a job that pays six-fifty an hour, but I’m only going to get five for this community and where we get to. It’s
going to create contention. I just, like, a capitalistic per variable that it comes into play with the way discrimination happened that day. I don’t know what makes sense, but like, that, that’s in some way how I started to experience discrimination, not so much for my body. But like, the things that I would see in my community, as well, right?

JC: It’s a different lens too, which is dope, you know.

CB: You know, also, I think about, like, I started experiencing discrimination when I watch movies, bro. I watched *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid*. I watched this movie called *3 Ninjas* and I remember watching these movies, and I remember thinking, man, I wanna be white, and this was me like, as a six-year-old, right? I want to be coached in *3 Ninjas*. I want to be that kid that has those clothes, and it has that they eat waffles from that movie because we didn’t eat waffles. And then we ate fucking *frijoles* every day, all for all meals [it] felt like, you know. So I think I experienced an internalized hate, maybe, that was systemic from outside structures early on in my life, I feel, you know. And then I think that, whenever I wouldn’t interact with white people, it was in school, some teachers, or administrators, things like that, and I remember, seeing them as bigger than me, saying them as better than me and them not deconstructing that, so they kind of played into it. Right? Like, it was hard for me to look white people in the eyes, it was like, oh, no, I mean, I never really, I never really investigated that. I never thought much about it, but it was just, like, a matter of fact, being that I did, they didn’t really think about it until I got into college and I don’t use it.

So, yeah, that’s the thing the way I experienced discrimination early on. In high school, I remember, really into eighth grade being in the bus stop, trying to take the X47 bus to go home, from Clemente. Cops would routinely stop a group of kids that would go to the bus stop. But I also, when the cops will stop us and they were like, help us kind of get down and search us. I
also didn’t perceive it as a bad thing, because it was just normal, you know what I’m saying? If we didn’t have the tools to see this as an abnormal thing, because it was just a matter of fact, you know. I remember seeing them do that to other kids, and when they happen to see me, I’m at all. This is just the way it goes here. And I’m all right, do your thing, don’t talk shit. They’ll say horrible things to us. You kind of laugh it off, right? And then you hope to not miss the buses coming in two minutes because you can see it in [front] of you, right? That was discrimination. So, I didn’t understand the discrimination at that very moment. Do you know what I’m saying? No. Yeah.

Discrimination is a trip I think because it’s the type of Freire about the oppressed. They don’t have to make the process of understating. We don’t really have the tools to understand our oppression until somebody gives them to us in some way. You know, I didn’t have the tools to understand that discrimination I was kinda being given from, like, a bigger structure. And so I really learned it, later on, right? But I was also a really good tool for, like, these things because like, yeah, I would play into that internal hate among the communities. Do you know what I’m saying? I’m like, I don’t even fucking know white people. The problem is, you know, other Mexicanos or, you know, not in like, the ratio with like, to hit people in my community, the tension in my community. The fact that Nor’easter is asked for by the, you know, the kitchen back over there because he, we were like, celebrating Mexican Independence Day on September 16th in the Puerto Rican neighborhood, right? Those were the tents that were prevalent in my upbringing. Anyway, I’m just kind of going on ten.

JS: Yeah, bro, you’re definitely dropping some nuggets of knowledge, right. You talk about these tensions and for me, when I think of these tensions, now, I always think back, to me as a child and how much of a tool of colonization I was as a child, and how much the system
purposely, I guess, made me become that way, right? Because we think of the world we played in the assimilation process for parents. We were vital within that role, right? We were the ones that we’re introducing new things into the household. We were the ones that were trying to change what our parents knew and how they behaved, right? I think back to the second grade, third grade, right? When in school, they were celebrating Thanksgiving. And early on my parents wanted to give us that celebration as well. So my mom would cook the *malice*, slowly but surely, like, she changed that, you know that aspect of us and what she ended up doing. She ended up cooking turkey, you know, not knowing how to cook turkey, sooner cooking some dried fucking turkey because that’s what we wanted, that’s what we were looking for. Right? And where did we get this from? Where do we get these ideas of the turkey coming from, you know, Mexican households? We got to shift from school, bro. We got it from, you know, seeing these things in books, seeing these things in the media, and then seeing these things reinforced by our white teachers. Right? Because if we went to school as a little kid, at Thanksgiving, the teacher would ask, hey what do you have for Thanksgiving dinner? And you’re at says, I had the *malice* and *pozole*, fucking kids will look at you weird, right?

**CB:** Yeah.

**JS:** If you give the correct answer and said I had fucking turkey and gravy, and fucking, you know mashed potatoes and all that shit. Then, all right you were, you’re fucking the norm, right? And as a kid, that’s what you strive to be, striving to be the norm. So, do I vividly remember fucking lying about that a few times, right? Growing up? So yeah, man, those things now like, come from behind, right, these fucking tensions that you have with yourself, right? The moment before she asks, like, yo, do I want to tell the truth about having *pozole*, or do I want to save face
and say I had turkey, right? You know, I remember early on and not wanting my parents to go to school, like, it got to a point where I was ashamed of my parents, right?

CB: Yeah. Yeah.

JS: My dad will come from work, like, fucking dirty. He would work at a factory as well. There he was, he came home dirty and he would rush home to go pick up my report card, and I would be embarrassed. I’ll be like, yo, are you going to change? Yeah, and you know, like that’s some bullshit, like, I was embarrassed [by] my parents because they didn’t have that fucking white-collar job, you know, they didn’t meet the norm, you know, that was portrayed within our institutions. So all those things now that come to mind, man, you know, and those tensions you speak of, like, having those few jobs and positions that we all have to grind for creating those, like, tensions within our communities against interesting, bro, like, all that shit, like, really fucking is mind-blowing.

CB: Yeah. So yeah, exactly. The tension is not so much. It’s not natural. It’s kind of structured by, like, a lot of structure to make us, like, you know, living in Chicago, like, the red line shit. It affects all of these communities, right? It’s like, yeah, it’s almost, like, a horrible experiment by Vice people that are in the control structure. So this is how we’re going to set this up. What’s going to happen to these communities in this longitudinal wave feels just horrible, right? And sometimes when I think living in Chicago is to travel, it is so isolated. And so, you know, segregated, as I could honestly tell you, bro, like, up until really from high school. I’ve never really interacted outside of the zone that was like, Logan Square Humboldt Park in Bucktown, right? Like, it was, like, just this area right: Western Avenue from Fullerton. And then to, like, Division, right? This is really the area. That was Chicago. That was kind of a world to me, except when I went to Mexico, or Rolling Meadows, to visit family. You know what I’m saying? … So
in summary, I’m like, yeah. I don’t know why I like these for me. Like, I never even thought to venture out, sometimes, you know, and it’s like, some of just now that I’m older, I’m like, why didn’t I remember wanting to venture out. Why was that never even the desire, the excellent, fascinating things to mean? Anyway, but yeah, so then I don’t have an answer but then I, like, my question is, like, this is not natural every day, many things are socially constructed. So how were I and my peers in my communities? Matter of fact, activity is always only constrained to this area. I don’t know, but that’s a good question for me to consider, you know.

JS: I mean, yeah. Yeah, that’s fucking good as a question. Right? And I think the one certainty within that question is that that shit doesn’t happen by chance. Their structures that are in place cause [us] to behave in that manner, right? Just like, [there are] structures in place that allow white kids to [wanna venture out] and to wanna explore. Like, what limitations are set by our educators in lower-income or inner-city schools, you know. Educators that can’t necessarily relate to, you know, Black and Brown kids. But yeah, it’s a fucking dope question to ponder, bro. Yeah, and I like starting with that question, you know, because, like, those early interactions that we have, or those early experiences that we have, like, really fucking shape and pave the way for our perception of education thereafter. So they could either fuck you up or they can …

CB: Yeah.

JS: Or they can have a pretty good impact on you.

CB: Yeah, I agree. I agree, I think it’s a trip. I don’t know. Like, it’s hard and it’s hard for me to remember the specificity of my childhood as a shit. Whether but I think about, like, living in the day we live today. There is people who try to engage in ambition to use quicker, right? Which I think is dope, in some ways. It’s like, we learn from the sins of our fathers like, the same, right? So which I think—I don’t have children but in the shout out to, to the youth and to the other
nieces and nephews and just the community. You see the trends of people, my peers trying to, like, it’s like a [inaudible] that how we were raised, to have our people trying to raise kids.

Right? And it’s always curious, like, the kind of things that we value, right? I don’t know, yeah, it’s—I’m always curious about, like, this is more of a capitalistic critique but like, consideration. Like, it’s how do you make more money? Right? And I always wonder how we associate wealth with culture or with things that represent what we are as Latinos or Chicanos or Mexicanos. Everybody or whatever you are Black or Brown whatever, you know what I’m saying? They are trying to leave the third thing, you know, they grew up this way. We don’t want that for you and I’m always like, the initial my yeah, I get it. But then they, we that’s kind of, you know, like, the ideal world, we would kind of try to stay in these spaces and uplift them. Do you know what I’m saying? Through the ways we want our kids to, we try to plant these ideas in the youth. Do you know what I’m saying?

**JS:** Yeah. No, it doesn’t. So here’s my perspective on that. Right? It’s a little loaded, bro, because I think for individuals who have gained an understanding and appreciation for culture and value.

You know, ancestral knowledge and non-traditional ways of learning, right, meaning like, put a value on experience versus fucking paper diploma, right? Put a value on, like, and culture overall. It’s a trip, bro, like, because you usually don’t gain that, you don’t have a solid understanding of cultural identity, through traditional schooling, especially K to 12, like, you never fight in the classroom and you all. Like I said, I came to a certain extent you almost become this tool of colonization, right? So you’ve worked for 12 years essentially to develop this very Americanized assimilated identity, right? Of what it means to be an American, especially within the schooling system. Right? And now you’ve taken it home and for 12 years, you’ve
granted your parents, right, your family. Yeah, and this structure of, like, how you want to be and how you want your family dynamics to change now that they’re in America, right? This is, this is here. And this is how people operate; let me teach you as well. Right? So now you’re colonizing that as well. And then you come to this position and this, like, this understanding of who you are throughout, you know, through the realization of what the system really is, right? Because I think that’s when it happened, that’s when this appreciation for like, culture ultimately takes place, right? Like, a true understanding of what the system has done, come with knowledge, right? Understanding, like, the justices, the oppression, aren’t you?

CB: Yeah.

JS: And now you always got to go backward, right? And it’s retro acculturation that has to happen because now you have to reintroduce these things. And you know, you have to [know] exactly what you’re talking about, you have to, almost convinced, you know like, hey, you don’t need to move out of the ’hood to like, be successful. Like, you could be successful within the [’hood] that’s probably more success, right? Like, in certain, certain level, like, to be able to give back to the community, you know, so it’s almost like, working that much harder because you’re going through these fucking crazy phases of like, reintroducing, your identity is just taken so many fucking, it’s like, a roller coaster, so many shifts.

CB: Yeah. Anyway, you know what’s a trip, bro, I think about, obviously, my perspective is very limited because it’s limited in my geographical understanding which is Chicago, right? So and I think about how the monster of gentrification has really largely, I feel, displaced what we consider traditional Mexican communities, or at least process of ravaging, right? The machine is big: I consider Peoria or Aurora in some ways equally Mexican as I would Pilsen other kind of like what … was for me, once a tradition of Mexican neighborhood, right? Like, going through
Pilsen. It’s wild for me, right? Cause it’s really largely white and you know, how like, the identity of an artist, the artist can move into these neighborhoods because they’re artists and they are they say they’ve co-opted in the aesthetic of, like, a party or whatever it is. It’s cool, you know, I buy $100 shirts at themselves. Obviously, aren’t me and I can fit in, but then them artists become 29, and they get, like, a better job and then they’re the ones they found to pay for the deconstruction of that craven, buy and build that ugly as a condo or that ugly as the house, but I think through that process, I think about this. You know, like, people I was having a conversation with somebody about my neighborhood.

They don’t really—the physical structure exists. But my neighborhood only exists in the memories of my brain, you know, because the people don’t live there anymore. The cornerstone is not there anymore. Even the tensions that I don’t wanna, like, condemned, even tension among communities, it’s not there anymore. Right? The tension is about, like, Sunday night’s farmers’ markets and you know who belongs where? So I think about, like, I’m also trying to learn how to place, a the higher value and the way I internally own who I am or who, where I come from because I think displacement is historic, you know, in some way and we will continue to fight it like, Immortal Technique’s in that one song, then go over revolutionary is not to win but to agitate or something like that, right? As the goal, the goal of one person, I don’t know if my goal should be, I’m going to construct the entire system because I’m 38, you know, I’m overweight. I’m not going to live to be 100. What is the point of what I’m trying to do? What am I trying to do? But I am also learning to value, like, when I go to Franklin Park with my pop to put money into that Familia Mexico. I’m like, Oh, snap, this is new community of gente that is not as sexy as that Pilsen. But it’s just as valuable because gente live here, you know, so like, resources and like, what’s her name? Yosso’s community, cultural wealth concept. Community cultural wealth is
alive in which in this trip of Franklin Park, you know what I’m saying? So then I think, yeah, maybe that’s dope, right? And so like, I say I’m like, this like, there’s a train here and there’s no development. Here is kind of nasty here, but there’s a shitload of people that live here, you know, there’s a bakery there and I’m always fascinated by, like, the way that jente can always rebuild in some way. Do you know what I’m saying? I don’t know why I’m sharing that but like that, I think like, I wonder since I did ask myself that question about the inability of educational systems because they’re always funded and booted by, like, a system.

That’s historic and big to really help us out, you know, so then in my head, I think about how the wealth has already been in the community. So then I think we should just get done with schooling and then that makes no sense. I know that makes no sense. Right? My thoughts are not clear, but I don’t know. I think, I think my mom and dad had been the greatest college in my life and a lot of it, you know, and I think school but you said teaches me that, that’s not true. And as I’m getting older I’m like no, that is true. There are some of the greatest, most brilliant minds in my life, because what does it mean to be Latino? What does it mean to be Mexicano? Chicano or whatever, they live it out in their own way. And then when it comes to my niece and nephew when they’re like that, I don’t speak that language. I’m like, this is the crux for me, you know: how do you learn to appreciate not for the purpose of, like, a diversity industrial complex vibe, but just to, like, honor this, you know what I’m saying? I don’t know if I’m making a sensible plan.

**JS:** You are, man, and it goes back to mentioning his nephews, right, it goes back to structures of education, that’s really where it starts from, right? Because education is still thought of as a top-down fucking process where there are experts and there are individuals who need to learn from these experts, right? And these experts, you know, have different values essentially. And if
education has for a long time remained static, the same, right? Like, it’s been operating in a similar manner while its population and its constituents have truly changed, right?

CB: Yeah.

JS: The way we learn is not necessarily the way white kids learn, right? This idea of like, community and apprenticeship and like, learning from seeing others move, right? Is a lot more prevalent within our communities, right? So that’s reflected in the classroom. How do we get that in the classroom? How do we flip the idea of having an expert to the idea of having funds of knowledge truly come into the classroom? How do we create those partnerships with the moms, right? Who like, fucking in-home, ed or culinary class can probably fucking throw down a lot better than, you know, like, and whatever they make pasta. Well, like, I think that’s where we need to head in that sense. In terms of education. We need to break down what education, what it means to be an educator for some foremost, right? Yeah, like, a holder of knowledge, like, break that shit down and I realized that there’s different and I think that’s, I mean, we get into the biggest philosophical shit, right? Because then we get into like, what’s the value of a degree? Why is it a degree? So important as opposed to working, you know, like, a trade, you know, why is college? So fucking likewise college, the only choice, you know, it’s a trip rope.

CB: That is good. Yeah, that’s a trip. You know, my nephew’s—he’s gonna be 18. He’s a senior in high school and about to hate school. He’s a [inaudible], he’s never been a fan of school. I remember since he was four and having to go to preschool, whatever. He’s like, I hate school and you haven’t even gone, bro, consistent in his positioning of hating school, you know, and, you know, I worry about him and my father’s you to get it together and get school college, you know. And this artillery no community college, you know, and I also don’t want to assume how he thinks. I’m sure he thinks about more complexity than I consider him to be. But the last time I
had a conversation with [him] I was just like, a matter of fact like, if you don’t like, school, I respect that, you know, the person you should consider a trade. Yeah. I said I think I don’t want you to feel if you read this like, the process of schooling even though I think all schooling is a beautiful opportunity for you to avoid having to work a job for 45 years. Yeah, and learn and grow your mind and I think, and disrupt things, and shuffle things.

I said, you should consider [a] trade and I think, and if you consider a trade, that’s okay too, sweetheart. You know, like, I think it really is. I really hope he goes to school, not for the institutional aspect of it. But like, I think. I graduated from Elementary High School with a 1.6 GPA. Well, I was a decent student and then I wasn’t. I don’t know if I was smart, but I didn’t have the tools to learn well and I went to community college and I did three years of remedial education. I learned how to write and read and do math in college, but it was through that process that I was able to have tension in my thoughts, you know, and even now I’m 38, I’m still barely getting the fruit of that tension. Because now, I’m really starting to think about things and I think it would be beautiful for every human to have that opportunity. Right? I think the problem with schooling is it often just teaches us how to be good followers in a way. And there’s nothing wrong with following, right? Like, I followed the leaders, my parents when I was a kid. I follow the lead of people that [I] really think are brilliant in the world, could that I do? Yeah. I’m following it so I don’t think that’s a condemnation of the term, but it teaches to be specific followers. I think, you know, and I think for Latinos when you look at the intersection of where we live, these resources are there. The kind of education we have access to teaches us to be a specific kind of flower, you know. Yeah. I don’t know. Just, you know things.

JS: Yeah, dude, and I think I’m having a chat with one of my professors. My chair actually, dope dope lady, right? And her work is on the idea of smartness as the social contract, right and like,
oh, yeah. So we’re talking about this, right? And she posed a question. Very simple question. She’s like, well, what do you think the purpose of education is? Right? And you know, like, I’m like, at what level do you, like, doesn’t matter any level, what’s the purpose of education? And I was like, for me, it was like, oh, shit. Well like, you know, the ability to like, you know, move socially up the ladder—like, gain knowledge, but like, for someone who grew up poor, it’s a, it’s a fucking a lifeline, right? A token like, you, you’re able to fuck and access this and now you have a choice.

CB: Yeah.

JS: Yeah, that’s part of it. Right. But shouldn’t the goal be to create critical thinkers? Right? Yeah. Because right now like you said, bro, like, it’s the matter of life; this is how you behave, this is what we do and this is, becomes .. and I think a lot of schools aren’t doing that, bro, like, they’re not. They’re creating complacency versus … and not that that’s wrong. But it is just an extent, you know, versus critical thought, right?

CB: You know, like, it’s a, this is, we’re also kind of a struggle with the, there’s a current wave of education, paradigms, and systems that are trying to not bring in the value of culture. And do the work, that was the invisibility of people, right? But one thing that I think is a struggle that I noticed is sometimes the conversations that are abroad about race or ethnicity or the attention of violence in those scenes are very, like, how do you say? There’s a lot of words thrown around in the zeitgeist, or a lot of concepts? And I wonder if people really understand them because I think I only say that because I’m guilty of this, right. I’ve been engaged in conversations about things and I understand them on a hazy, superficial level, but then I work my talking about and I feel like, a lot of times when I work in the University, right, and I work with brilliant kid students, right. And it seems that there have been moments where I’m like, you using a lot of really heavy
theory, but I wonder if it’s like, you are connecting it with reality, you know, or like, it’s like, something we become very quick. I think there’s like, you know how they talk about the prison industrial complex. I really believe that there’s a diverse industrial complex to write about. It’s like, the murder of George would have been, right, last year and I think people were demanding that Chase Bank and McDonald’s give out a statement against condemning it and then my thought is why are we so quick to want Chase Bank and McDonald’s and Nike to make statements about this? Because I’m, I don’t know, maybe I had tension with Dex. I’m like, I don’t care if my tears, you know, because [inaudible] is inherently a horrible year institution.

So, like, they, so but the Nike is hip to the game, right? They have marketing geniuses that we’re going to bring this out. And now we’re going to make Black Lives Matter shoes. And then we’re going to do all of this kind of like, advertisements that are inclusive. So there’s like, a facade of exclusivity all the while. The machine is still the same, you know, and I think it’s so quick for me to get the [inaudible], while the machine is still the same and nothing’s really changed, you know, but Nike, their … stock prices soared when they took out their shoes and when the ad came out and when it’s, they tweeted that thing out, you know, and I think, I don’t know. It’s not the biggest deal, but I also think, like, the way [inaudible] so you said, I know, it moves by like, just like, in general pop culture, you know what I’m saying? And I think the good intention of the good it was supposed to can do more harm in the end, you know, because it’s kind of like, just wanting us is that eating fast food, you know, I should desire more healthy food. But like, if you’re giving me fast food, it will satisfy my palate quicker and they said my life is just like, all these little micro-moments of like, being satisfied by these diversity statements, you know what I’m saying? And then I’m like, is there ever really a fuller conversation about things that are deeper? Do you know what I mean? I don’t know. I’m kind of talking very generous.
JS: Yeah. No, man, you’re making perfect sense, right? I mean, if you think about it, Fred Hampton said it best: theory without practice ain’t shit and it is true, right, there has to be an application to, to the theory. But at the same time application without an understanding or knowledge can also be harmful. And that’s kind of what I’m grappling with now. Right, in the current context of education. And as a response to current social unrest, a lot of school districts are implementing equity initiatives, right? And I mean, that’s fucking great, right? Like, [I] mean that’s what should be happening, you know, schools, districts, education as a whole should be wanting to implement these initiatives that create, you know, like, diversity awareness within their buildings, right? However, dude, what I’m struggling with is the idea of rushing to implement these initiatives without doing the work and without gaining that knowledge? And that understanding of why, one, this work is important and two, how to actually implement it without causing harm to your constituents, to the youth, right? And I think a lot of districts are doing this in a manner which is rushed, just to, like you said, you know, just to fucking like, react and I don’t necessarily understand the value behind that.

CB: Yeah. Yeah, you know what I think about even as I’m sharing? I think, like, growth is painful, you know what I’m saying? And maybe these are just birth pains of growth. You know what I mean? Like, yeah, sometimes I think about that too and I get, I get too lost in my own sauce and like, know for sure that was because the reality is in these initiatives. Actually being, bro, you have interacted with in your school that has grown or benefited greatly from the syllabus or a curriculum or program or one night of something. Do you know what I’m saying? Yeah, like, those things greatly matter because a metaphor human being, you know what I mean? I think being engaged in this kind of work for such a long time, I am just kind of used to seeing the mechanism behind how these things are actually more ugly and messy. Maybe, and they’re
supposed to be, I don’t mean ugly in a negative way, you see, but, you know, yeah, I guess it’s hard to be an expert in diversity when school, like, what is an expert, right? But then, I think, because these horrible things happen, and then there’s a call for action. And then like, these institutions acquiesce. Then people are like, wow, I’m an expert. Let me engage the expertise moving forward. But whatever Carlos like, I—bro I ate a fucking chicken sandwich yesterday, you know, like, I’m part of the problem too.

JS: Oh, shit. Is that the new reintroduced chicken sandwich, didn’t they come up with a new one?

CB: Yeah, it’s fire. Yeah.

JS: Is it good?

CB: Yeah it’s fun, that was just horrible. But they’re consistent everywhere you go.

JS: Where you go.

CB: They have figured out how to appeal to my palate.

JS: There you go. Alright, bro. Let’s take a back a little. Carlos?

CB: Yeah?

JS: Tell me about yourself, bro.

CB: So you know, born and raised in Chicago, where—in the Northwest Side. Yeah, Northwest Side in Chicago. Mexican, I don’t know how I identify, bro. Latino? Mexican? Chicano? I thought I was Puerto Rican for two years when I was a kid. Just ’cause of the neighborhood I grew up in. I work … as an academic administrator for an ethnic [studies?] program in [a] university here in Chicagoland. I’m a Ph.D. student; I’m old but I’m still a Ph.D. student. I’m currently in the process of, I hope to defend my proposal in January …. My last submission on Thursday. If they, I’m looking at a project that is interested in the impact that ethnic studies
The curriculum has on Latino students. Post their Latino college experience. You know, how does, how does the engagement of ethnic studies affect the development of an identity for a person that’s no longer in the college setting. I’m yeah, so I’m working on that if the, yeah, that, that’s the gist of me, I guess, you know. Yeah, I love food. I’m a White Sox even though I’m a sailor and a person of faith. Yeah, I’m intentionally shy and anxious. That’s, that’s the gist.

**JS:** It’s a hard question to answer, right?

**CB:** Yeah. I don’t know how to answer. That makes me think that I’m asking that question in my interview protocol. I’m, yeah, it’s kinda hard, I’m like, damn [inaudible]. That is a hard question to answer, so thank you for asking that, because I think I just need to be considerate.

**JS:** Yeah, my prof, she’s like, always like, always start with this one because it’s very telling in terms of like, where you want to take the interview, or like, where you want to… like, people share what they wanna share, right?

**CB:** Yeah.

**JS:** In terms of like, identity and identifying themselves. Like, it’s a dope question, dude. It is hard and I struggle with it consistently. Because I inherently do not like to talk about myself, you know.

**CB:** Yeah.

**JS:** Yeah, so keep up on that sit, bro. Tell me about your *familia*. Like, what’s … how did you come to be in the U.S.?

**CB:** Yeah, My OG. My mom and dad are both from Puebla, Mexico. They both migrated here, right? My dad in 1974. He crossed into the United States with a bunch of other people. He ended up in Brooklyn and New York for two years. He worked at a dry cleaner that was owned by Chinese migrants and he lived there for two years and he got deported, got, went back to, was
sent back to Mexico, you know; they would drop them off at the border. I think, right? Really close to it and he has to make his way back to Puebla. He came to be the financial resource for a family of, like, seven. So then he kind of had to come back up, so enough money. Cross back, cross back to Chicago because my grandpa was here at that time and he was going to go back to Brooklyn.

But [inaudible]—my mom’s here and then they met here. And then that’s why I’m here. My mom’s similar, my mom’s, my mom’s crossed when she was, I think 15, this did, same reason, the financial need, like many people. She crossed—she was gonna cross either way, but then, my grandma made my grandpa, but with my mom, so they cross together. It’s—they landed in Chicago and she started working immediately. It’s the different times I guess, right. But yeah, so that’s how, you know, they’re my parents. They did Chicago and I was born in Chicago, right? So they live mostly. I want to say that in the North Side or like, also the West Side, right at that goes to that person area, right? I don’t know where the South Side begins. Those people are things like, 26 and beyond, I don’t know. But yeah, they live here. They had me in ’83, and yeah, so I grew up around my fully familiar environment, right?

My dad ended up crossing most of my mom’s siblings taking [inaudible] to cross people across some of his own siblings. So growing up that home was kind of like, of truckers rest stop for people, you know, and then from that we could community-develop, right? Yeah, so like, where I come from … so I grew up in them, in a neighborhood. That was Puerto Rican-Mexicano, from what I remember and also African-American, right? And I remember my childhood being dope to, you know, like, paying for playing with it, playing with garbage was dope. I’m not like, a nasty way but I pick up plastic bottles and make stuff with them and stuff like that. We grew up close to the Armitage and Kedzie area until I was four or five and then my
parents moved closer to that other channel, the Western area by the global score above the town. And then I went to high school in Humboldt Park. And yeah, it also family was like, scattered all throughout that area, you know. Yeah, that’s, that’s kind of like, a quick synopsis of my upbringing.

JS: That’s, that’s interesting. But you mentioned, you mentioned your mom coming F-15, right?

CB: Yeah.

JS: Working right away.

CB: Yeah.

JS: And then what the other thing that I’m thinking of when you’re talking about that, bro, is like, this was all pretty fucking immediate access of knowledge at the palm of your hands. That’s what, mad navigational, right? Like, yeah, how do you know where to move? How to move at that age? Even with their—your grandpa? Right? But like, from Matamoros or … Puebla coming all the way to Chicago, bro. Like that Journey?

CB: Yeah, Dolly like, so at my dad. One of his journeys is right crossing the desert quality left him in the desert, bro. So, you know, he doesn’t talk about it much but I just assumed this anticipation of not making it because you’re in the desert alone and it’s like, how do you make it from [inaudible] to the desert? And then the thing is supposed to guide you, aborted and left your ass. And then I think, I always think about that moment for him, for me, you know, and this is one of those things where, like, I, maybe I have a problem of romanticizing or elevating this moment, but he said, I don’t want to think about that. Either one of these is the binary between the seeds of immigrant parents, but I think he got some by the grace of God. He was found by another group, and they were able to take him to his stuff in San Diego. And there, he regrouped with the same people he had left. And then they flew, he was in San Diego for a week or two, he
said, and then he flew him to Brooklyn to drop him off [inaudible] they were supposed to be into the ghettos, you know, and somehow he makes it to the apartment with 14 other people that are living there. He talks to the person and the person that you need to find a job this week. Yeah. It’s like a, it’s a trip, you know, and I think, I don’t know how I got lost in a while even sharing this but uh, yeah, I don’t know. It’s a fascinating thing and like, something, I don’t consider it.

Right, and I think my mom and dad were deported multiple times. I think the last time I was supposed to be deported, she was working in a factory and it was raided and she was eight months pregnant with me for sure. And then I remember here my dad says that she and my dad were having tension that she was still working because she still wanted to work and my dad was like, work to deport you. I’m not going to get you this time. Because it happened before. And then I think she said that the ICE agents had a conversation with her. They had a conversation among themselves and then they just told her to just go home because she was eight months pregnant. So at that moment, all of the people that she was with she had to take notes of who they were how to tell the relatives that she had been deported, you know, but it’s interesting because when they share these stories with me, they just share them very matter-of-fact in these remembrances, you know. Though I laugh about the little quirks of the moment and then I’m and then I’m like, you know, there’s a rumor Tyler Quality once said, you have to laugh to keep from crying, one of his songs. Like, that’s like, the process of trauma in a lot of ways, right? I feel quite like, a lot of comedians are horribly depressed. People are hilarious. We have to laugh to keep from crying. So, I think my parents share these stories, they find humor in horrible shit, you know, like, and that’s a trip that I think to me and then I, from that I’m born in ’83 and I’m like, mad that I can get a Happy Meal at seven years old because I saw it in a commercial.

JS: That’s what I want. Yeah, dude. It’s…
CB: Yeah.

JS: It’s, it’s true. It’s … traumas that we grow up with, right, but it’s also, like, the pain them that fucking the filters into us, you know, this is the ability to want to succeed. Hey, have you documented those stories?

CB: Yes, you know, when I was an undergrad? Actually, I documented my, like, I did a graphic thing with my dad, you know, and I recorded it and I transcribed it … and I still have that. But you know what? Every time we have just conversations, new things come up, right? And it’s like, yeah, it’s like, the process of remembering is hard to order, you get, right, but then you remember certain things, right? Like, I’m learning more about my grandmother, my mom’s mom, and then like, just kind of like, I remember my grandma used to be [this] mean lady to me, you know, but then like, I start to learn the horrible violence in general, that women face historically, but as like, as articulated to my grandma’s experience, you know, and I’m like, damn, you know, I’m like, how are you not more mad is my thought after I learn about a lot of the things that, you know not just women and like, the general way but like, the women that I know kind of experience[d], you know, so what I do now is when I write, I try to have intent for conversations. I make note of a lot of things that I do remember and I try to just chop them. I don’t know for what, but when I just for me, you know what I mean?

JS: Yeah, it’s, I don’t know, man, I think as I think about it more, I think of almost for me, it’s almost coming like, … from a fearful place, like, the fear of like, we always talked about early, the fear of, yeah, my parents, right? And the fear if I ever have kids, of them not knowing, and being able to hear these stories, right?

CB: Yeah.
JS: When I was younger, I did the same thing. I interviewed them. But as I’m going through this process like, more and more like, I’m like, I need to get back. You know, with them in front of a camera and just like, like, the aesthetics of like, if I ever have kids and they’re not around for them to see their grandparent got some … talking about this and that. Yeah, me. But hear from them, I keep on thinking about that more and more for some odd reason. I find myself like, at that moment.

CB: No, I read to, you know, when my mom was sick with covid who she was past the hospital to get her out of a rhythm. I would take her for a drive. You know, one time, we went for a drive, and then she recollected a person she knew that gave her weekend work to clean houses. And then I just, I learned about this whole experience of my mom with, like, this lady in how these rich people will give these clothes. And how to like, these clothes will somehow make it down to Mexico and Central America, you know, and it was like, the scene that was a consistent stream of clothing and I was like, damn, that’s a wild story and I was like, I never would have known that. I wouldn’t know to ask that question, but at this moment because we were just loosely driving and I think we drove by a big house in the lake and it reminded her of that house. And she has told me the story and the person’s name and then how the person passed and I’m like, yeah, I’m like, damn, this is so—I remember it intently, you know, and I kind of keep it. I documented it for myself just to remember this really wide experience in my mom’s head, you know, and it’s like, yeah, there’s so much rich, just there’s so much data or terabytes of things that he had everybody and it….

JS: And for me, it’s almost time being in all honesty like, … I can’t help but feel guilt, you know, whenever I think about this stuff for a long time. I simplified my parents’ experience, you
know, and acknowledge like, because it sustains me, you know, it’s almost like, oh, like, simple people like, know, Savin, you know.

CB: Yeah. Yeah, bro, Savin.

JS: And that’s kind of like, a guilt that like, it’s consistently. Oh, shit, like, incredibly intelligent individuals.

CB: Yeah. Amy was a triple. Yeah. I had the same experience and I’ve had the same. I’ve done that. I’ve been getting similar and trauma like that with my parents was like, I thought the same way about them and I hate when I think about it, I’m so mad at my former self and [inaudible]. But then I think, I think my parents also have this impostor syndrome thing. You know, like, I think the impostor syndrome is often identified with, as students, and things of that nature, but I think, like, my parents in their older age are still mad really and then, like, they don’t recognize how vital and rich and wealthy they are in terms of therapy, humanity, you know what I’m saying? And sometimes I really, I’ll tell them. I know you’re smart. You know, that when they were there because there’s always in the data or whatever, right. And like, it’s like, I think because … that term has been so used. As I can—you just embody this that you are in also a—you know, but I might not shout out to Anita, whatever. That is fucking brilliant, you know, like, don’t like, anyway. Yeah, and I try to do it without making them be like, shut up, you know, like, let me just be.

JS: Yeah.

CB: You know, I mean.

JS: Courtney is like, yeah.
CB: Yeah. I just kind of reflect now and sometimes I don’t want to rob you of how you feel about yourself right now, and I don’t really have the world without digging that in a good way. But I do get mad at that, you know.

JS: Or like, the idea, I used to get this a lot, you know, but then I scroll up. I cannot enter his drama here, come over. Oh, yeah. Yeah, no like that, you know? And it’s like, dude, like, yeah, you’re putting my ability to succeed is based on your efforts and your work.

CB: Yeah.

JS: Like that.

CB: That’s so true. You know, for the—I remember we would hang out and I would always say stuff like that in front of my brother and my dad. I’m like, my dad is working so hard so we don’t have to work like him, as a slave. I will say shit like that. Not knowing that it hurts my dad and my brother Markus is, I love him to death. My brother works for Finco steel. It’s a steel company and, as a foreman, one of the harder jobs I think any human being can have is working in the steel mill and my brother Markus is one of the hardest-working human beings. I know, you know, said Martha, but I’m incredibly proud of him because of how hard-working he is. And he said, my parents, are the most in that way. But when I look back in the house, say that to him about, you know, you need to go to school, thinking to become, like my dad, I get here. I mean, I get mad at myself and say hurtful things to remember something. No, one of the people I’m most proud of is my brother Markus was, you know, because of, I know we shouldn’t romanticize resilience, but I also say fuck that because I think people who are resilient need to be not made of continuously aware of that oppression of the resilience, you know what I’m saying? Like, I want to honor him, you know, because like, he’s kind of putting, he’s just doing this. My dad was the same way, you know, so I guess I feel the same way about a guy. There’s a lot of wealth even
though my [inaudible] you know, my cousin and he works hard as hell. Hard job. He deals a lot of hard things, but I think, you know, he’s stronger than anyway. I’ll ever be strong, you know, and yeah, it’s my honor that, you know.

**JS**: Yeah, dude. It’s actually kind of a good segue. So, I used to hold these parent conferences for BPAC. Every school is mandated to have these things, right? In every population of these English learners. It was called the Bilingual Parent Advisory Committee. Dude, I used to love starting off with like, “How are you? How can you contribute to your son’s, daughter’s college growing experience?”

**CB**: Yeah. Yeah.

**JS**: It would be a tricky question to ask parents, *como es que usteds ayuda a sus hijos*, they would answer, I don’t know, I would say, nine times out of ten, Right? And I knew that they felt they couldn’t contribute shit. Or some of it would be very monetary. But it’s those things that we don’t talk about like resiliency, like your brother, for example. That hard work probably directly correlated with what he learned from your dad. How you saw your dad move, right?

**CB**: A hundred percent.

**JS**: Those intangibles, parents don’t put stock in because they’re just doing it. That’s the way they move. That is all valuable, the ability to be resilient, as you know, it’s a valuable thing to navigate, right? And those are things that are probably worth more long-term than providing tuition, I guess. So, in that sense, bro, what role did education play in your household?

**CB**: I think it played two different roles. Education was like, growing up in a household that has parents that are immigrants, right? It’s like, this is why we’re here, for you to get educated. I think education was always a way for us to have a better life. And what does it mean to have a better life? When you think about it, it really means having a better financial outcome. So, I think
that’s what, in my household growing up, that’s what it did for me. Education was like, I don’t know, that’s a good question. What was an education for me? I hated education. I was like my nephew.

I just don’t want to be pressured with my friends, is what they said. This is just my own experience, I guess. I’ve always had a lot of anxiety. I used the word “anxiety” now, though I didn’t know how to categorize it back then. So, for me, education was like a space where I would have what I consider now a lot of panic attacks, all that stuff, you know. Especially, I remember going to—what do you call it?—preschool, with my mom. And then she’s about—I’m at work going on this one, you drop off my clothes. Like, I’m not going to stay here. And she took me to Miss Niño’s class in [inaudible] Elementary. And then she said, “Go to the bathroom and I’ll be right here.” When I came out, she was gone. And bro, never do that, as parents, to your children. And I cried my ass off, I screamed to the top of my lungs until I got tired, I guess. And then I had to stay the whole—what was? four hours. I was so mad at my [inaudible], bro. And then she did the same thing with my brother Robin, and then my brother Robin escaped school. They found him in the middle of—what’s that? I figure what street that is, Rockwell. Tío had to go get him, I think.

But I think that was the first interaction with school, which is a space of education. And it was not good. I remember always struggling with school, not wanting to be there. I remember not being good at math from Jump Street. I remember already having interacted with a math teacher, but I just don’t get it, so she would just go on to somebody else. And looking back, I don’t hate on her, right? Because she was one person with 35 kids, and I’m sitting there not getting it. But there’s Rogelio that’s two seats away from me; he can probably get a little bit better. I get why she would want to feel the satisfaction of him getting it. And I was still getting
mad at her for not helping me get it. But then I think, I will go home with these books. I don’t know what these books do. I don’t know what they say. And I remember sometimes my mom and dad would try to help me with class, especially with math, but they will get mad at me. And I realized they got mad at me because they didn’t know how to do it. They didn’t know how to help me. And I will cry and then I would scream, and then overall, just frustrated together, huh? Because we’re all a bunch of people that don’t know how to do long division.

I think I floated through education because even when I finish grammar school, I didn’t apply the high school. As a matter of fact, I went to Clemente because Clemente was my neighborhood high school. In Clemente, I was not a good student. Freshman year, I cut a lot, I coasted. Again, I was a D-average student by the end of my high-school career. I wasn’t going to go to college. But the last week of school, I was in the cafeteria and there was a recruiter from Wright College who was giving out applications and making people sign them. And I was there, I filled it out. And then she’s like, “You’re in college now.” And I, “My dear boy, I’m a college student.” You know, “I’m going to Wright College.” I was like, “Hi bro, I’m going to Wright College.” And I go to Wright College and maybe take a placement exam, and then take remedial education because you don’t really know how to read or write, do math well. I don’t know. I don’t know if this is answering your question. I think that your question was what did education—

JS: What role did education play in your household? I mean, yeah, it wasn’t a wrong answer, you know.

CB: It was a matter of fact, bro. It was a thing that it was done. I read something about poverty of ambition. I didn’t have a poverty of ambition, but I wasn’t also guided to have ambition. My parents worked; my dad worked [a] 60-hour-a-week job, plus a part-time job, delivering pizzas
on his day off, some turn. My mom, she always worked. I think my parents really relied on the educational system to help us be educated in some capacity, and I would too if I was them. I think there is nothing harder than being the first person to do something, like, being maybe the first sibling, the first people to leave the whole cosmic world that is your homeland, and then coming to a foreign land with a different language, having kids. How can you help your kid go through school. We are the first fruits of that frustration, you know what I’m saying?

So yeah, the college, like, I knew I’m supposed to do it. I know my parents wanted me to do well; I don’t know how to do well, so I’m just going to feel like a loser through it. That was the role that education had in my life until I read in Macho and I think really that book had changed my life. It is funny because that book is a book that he was not part of writing at school. But in the same way that I kind of was sitting on the diversity industrial complex and I’m like, “No, it still matters for people who still do good work in some way” really tell me to consider it. It planted the seed? the critical thinking and praying, which I don’t think I hadn’t until that point.

**JS:** And what age was that? When did you read it?

**CB:** I was 19, bro. The more I think about it... Hip-Hop music was a greater educator than Miss Helene’s class during my junior year, or insert any other teacher. Because I also remember listening to Black Star when I was—Listening to DJ Honda’s mixtape and listening to Mos Def’s “Travellin Man” when I was 14. And I remember listening to the words, and I was like, “Words are so cool.” And I would stop the tape and, “What did he say?” and I would try to write it down and I would try to figure out the rhythm pattern of it all. And I’m like, “This is dope. Words are dope.” It was just like, very creative in my head, though I didn’t know how to call it creative at that time. And then I remember listening to Black Star and listening to, like, KRS, like, the whole album, right? And everybody listened to “Brown Skinned Lady.” And I remember
“Brown Skinned Lady” was so instrumental. It’s like, “Brown Skinned Lady, where you go, and I love the way you move,” and it was like, a beautiful song, like, honoring Brown skin when my whole life I learned that wasn’t the thing that you’re supposed to do. So you’re supposed to try to engage whiteness without explicitly being told to engage whiteness. Do you know what I’m saying?

JS: Yeah. Yeah.

CB: And it’s talking about, like, I’m a growing young man or whatever in an age where it’s very critical, the way that you experience opposite sex at that time and my gender identities, and it was [a] really pivotal moment where, you know. And then, my [inaudible], I don’t know if that whole era of music was a bigger, better teacher for me, Dead Prez—and then Rage Against the Machine as well. I remember learning about—not in school, but I learned about who Nom Chomsky was through a Rage Against the Machine Song, without really knowing who he was, you know what I’m saying?

JS: Hm-hmm.

CB: But these are only also seeds that then when I read Galliano when I was 19, I connected all to them. Do you know what I’m saying? My brain makes connections. Yeah, so I think that worked in these, like, pop culture moments where, like, bigger in my head, you know. Oh, and also, what is it called? Blood In Blood Out, that movie, but I don’t know, like, that movie made me be a happy Mexican for the first time in my life.

JS: Yeah. Dude, legit, if you grew up, I mean, at least in Little Village, right? You grew up in … Little Village and didn’t watch Blood In Blood Out, Boyz n the Hood, Menace to Society, [and, American Me], those were like, you’re like, “Why am I talking to you if you don’t watch those types of things?”
CB: Yeah. Yeah.

JS: Right? But you mentioned education and Hip-Hop. Here I am, fucking, listening to Talib, right? But here I am, graduates level. And the first time I read Derrick Bell is in my Ph.D. fucking program. This is K to 12, this is bachelor’s, this is four masters’ later, Ph.D. program. And for the first time, I read Derrick Bell, and then I go ahead and listen to Black Star astronomy, fucking dropping Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. Like, yow, this is nuts, you know? How did you become exposed to Hip-Hop? How did you engage with Hip-Hop?

CB: I don’t remember the exact moment; I think there are different kinds of variations of the kinds of Hip-Hop I was exposed to. But I remember my brother Mike was bringing a Cypress Hill tape with like, the skull in, like, the wheat dreadlocks, and my dad has taken them away from him. And my brother was mad, and I didn’t know why but I was mad, so I’m like, “Damn, took away our cassette.” And I didn’t know what the cassette was really [inaudible]. But we’re like, “We got to get this cassette back.” And then he will play it when they were leaving home, and then it feels like, it was textual in a vision of, like, smoke. Do you know what I’m saying?

And then I remember also, there was a movie called *CB4*, which if I watch it now, it’s a parody kind of movie. That’s also very smart in a lot of ways. But I remember there was a song in that movie, it was a crazy song called “Sweat From My Balls” that we thought was hilarious. And we would imitate that song. We would kind of watch whenever we wanted it because it will tell my mom, “Take the students into this video store.” And we would just pick whatever we want. we would just watch it, you know, buying Congress Pizza. Starting at like, the age of eight on Friday night.
So in summary, it exposed me to Hip-Hop without really knowing, and it’s supposed to be [inaudible]. But I also remember listening to Nas for the first time. I think maybe close to ’96-’97. I listen to Nas because of like, popular culture elevated the whole West Coast, East Coast thing.

I remember listening to the tape. It was only like, ten songs and it felt like—I remember a feeling in my brain, like, it was chewy. It was gummy. It wasn’t rigid. I remember like, “Oh, this guy is like, a soft pillow, the way he said words.” And I remember being so impressed by that. And then I remember starting to, like, and he would say “Gandhi” and I would like, pick out the word “Gandhi” and I will pick up the way he would match words and then like, the more I would go into it, I would just pick up like, the nuances of it and then just select stories of it. And then the story is kind of, in some way, related to who was seen in the neighborhood. And then I remember at that point I still didn’t see rap in like, a racial context, you know what I’m saying? Because like, I grew up.

In some way, like, the segregation of Chicago made it to where we grew up around that Black and Brown people inherently, so it was also not like … I don’t know. I didn’t realize the big deal it was until later, I guess I would say. You know what? So yeah, I think that those kinds of tidbits. And I remember like, Digital Underground as well. I also remember watching boys in the third and going to [the] Janet Jackson movie that he met Poetic Justice and Higher Learning Menace II Society, watching these movies when I was like, ten, you know what I’m saying? And everything, like, the soundtrack to the end of the movie, and my brother, Michael, will get the tapes.

And I remember also like, living in Chicago, DJ Eddie B. The sounds are always so similar, you know what I mean? So they can be, like, interchange themselves. And then you
learn stuff from the kids in your class, the people in your community. And the people hold their siblings of the community and “Yo, I got my brother’s, I don’t know, Biggie tape so we’re going to listen to it. Not knowing what it is, but we would listen to it.” And a lot of it is imitating culture because then we would try to dress that crisscross when I was like, in the fifth grade, try to put on my clothes back then—

JS: Trying to tie the buttons in the back and shit.

CB: Yeah, that bro, we would. And then I read it was a Mexican [inaudible]. I figured the name of the band, bro. But I remember we were in a lowrider club when I was like, Colombians, they were called low life, Low Rider Club. Yeah, it was wild. And then I remember my brother Michael said, “We didn’t have a lowrider bike store.” And through that, I was just exposed to a lot of different things, but I never considered these things educational. And when I think about now, these were more educational than the educational construct that is school, you know what I’m saying? But because they were always outside of school, I never considered them learning. So I still consider myself stupid because, within the concert to school, I wasn’t learning what. Do you know what I’m saying?

JS: Yeah, completely. Completely. So let’s touch on that, bro. What has been the intersection between Hip-Hop and education?

CB: I think it’s vi—I mean, I think it’s vital even today, books, I think—you know what music has the ability to do? Introduce ideas in a tangible way. Even now, it’s easier to critique Talib Kweli as a superficial thinker, and all that, but I think to a 14-year-old person was like, the greatest scholar because he just introduced me to names and to books and to ideas. And then I remember the Quality album. There was a lyric there where he talked about his son admiring cops, and he just posed these questions about what do I do when he gets to size. And he realizes
that the cops are going to size him up. I remember listening to that and I’m like, “Damn, that’s a
good—.” So I would have these little existential crisis scenes because he doesn’t give you the
answer, but he poses a question and I’m not Black, but I see Black violence in the context of
cops. I see Brown violence in the context of cops. And I’m “Yes, that’s fucked up.”

So it made me think a lot about these kinds of things. I think somebody’s music is vitally
important. I remember liking Rage Against the Machine a lot because I learned about our
culture. I didn’t know if maybe the place, but I’m learning from that. They took out a DVD
collection when they went to Mexico as well when Zach and Noam Chomsky went [inaudible],
and they stayed there for a month. And I’m like, “That is vital.” You know what I’m saying?
That is an intersection of all the things that I cared about and then maybe care about different
things at that point and because of it, right?

Same thing with, like, Heavy D, right? Not Heavy D; I’m sorry, Public Enemy. Like, the
fight, the power, and then I remember watching Do The Right Thing when I was at UIC and then
I [inaudible]. I wish I would have watched this when it came out. That’s one of my favorite
movies today. I think it was a movie as he, it is a natural intersection of pretty cool ideas in
music, in film, in art, and like, scholarship, without being bourgeoisie about it, without being
performative in a way, even though it’s a performance piece. Do you know what I’m saying? I
think it’s underplayed how important of a role it is, even though I know there’s scholarship
around Hip-Hop—early music, including hip hop, and how it’s important for education. I think
it’s more important. It is even more important, I think.

JS: Yeah. I don’t think, to point off, it gets valued as much as [crosstalk], right? Yeah, dude,
what you’re talking about is like, legit, like, my experience as well, like, I learned about the
Zapatista movement through Rage Against the Machine. The video montages that they would
have, you know what I mean? And for me, my identity was never reflected in the classroom and it was never talked about. So, Hip-Hop, in that sense, provided that validation, I guess, that I needed as a shorty, you know what I mean?

CB: Yeah, for sure.

JS: So, it was one of those things where like, I talked about this—and that’s [gonna]?

romanticize it but growing up in … Little Village, it was either like, gangs or like, this other thing, graffiti. I think about it like, retrospectively and for me, Hip-Hop truly did save my life because if not, it would have been [the Latin] Kings. But then I think about the process of learning and wanting to gain more knowledge. So it’s like, fucking pulling a string or peeling an onion. You’re exposed to it from the music aspect of it, and then you start learning more about it and about it and about it. And then you start getting into like, the nuances, the knowledge about the mathematics. And what they’re talking about because you don’t know it, so you’re trying to understand it. How was that learning process for you as it pertains to Hip-Hop?

CB: So I’ll catch up with what you said about learning about it; that would be knowing about it. I think that’s something that’s important, right? I resonate with it because I learned a lot about, like, concepts for people or ideas through music that had no idea what they were talking about. But there is a word association to my brain because of them. And even beyond like, the people that I consider, like, were my scholars as a high school student, I even think about, like, some of the music today. I don’t really—it’s hard for me to listen too much to like, a lot of like, today’s Hip-Hop music, and that’s generation as me being washed. Even when I do think about trap music or things like that. These are stories that are really just telling people’s perspectives, you know what I’m saying? And it is an ethnography. People don’t value that because, you know. Violence is part of life in some way and when you hear some other songs that are more like, a
tour, like, like, a trap, can it sound like this is just what the violence is, bro. But this is what it is. I don’t understand it too well because I’m 38 and I’m older in some ways that I have a disconnection from it also from like, the neighborhood, kind of way. I just listen and observe and not like, in an ethnographical horrible way to say, let me not dishonor the perspective, you know what I’m saying? So I think, in some way, Hip-Hop also does that. If ethnography does an educational setting, it provides an experience to us. Do you know what I mean? Yeah. I don’t know if that answers your question but—

JS: Yeah. No, man. Yeah. No, I got what you’re saying because it’s a lens, right? For me, it’s a lens that it provided, right? or the ability to dance through. It’s almost like, as shorties, you learn a lot of times by seeing or like, by those who model. You’re learning from the way others move, right? and those who you admire. Yeah, I get where you’re coming from, bro, in that sense of shit. If we think about Hip-Hop and the role it’s played in your life, man, how do you speak to that?

CB: You know, I think, to pose a question is a good thing because I think, sometimes—I don’t even consider how it’s available in my life. Right? I think I am a great consumer of Hip-Hop music. I’m a great consumer of the different cultures as of Hip-Hop, not just music but Hip-Hop culture. But it happens to be so matter-of-fact. Sometimes, I don’t realize that a lot of ways, I think, are really influenced by a lot of different things. And I think Hip-Hop is a big influencer of a lot of even my thought process, even to the ways, I mean, even on his other ways, right? to the way I can appreciate graffiti when somebody else can see it as like, vandalism. Do you know what I’m saying? To the way that I can appreciate a specific kind of dance or that expression of a human being, and somebody can just diminish it. Do you know what I’m saying? I think about it from a musical sound perspective. I was listening to a podcast and like, one of the people said
that the 808 Beat is spiritual. And again, the 808 Beat is probably like a lot of Hip-Hop music, at least the one that I grew up in, now is like, more bending in terms of genre. But I think, in that way, Hip-Hop music has a foundation of spirituality that maybe is not really accredited. It has shaped me.

**JS:** Has it? I guess, is the question, right?

**CB:** Yeah. I think it has. It’s one of the many shapers of who I am, I would say. And I think for you to pose a question makes me acknowledge that, to be honest with you. I think from even the things that we don’t realize about the way we want to dress, you know? I go back to when Hip-Hop was most influential to my life was when I was a youth, from the fifth grade to the way at least I will listen to crisscross and I want to dress like them to the fact that I still buy Timberlands and still keep them as part of my clothing or whatever. When I think about Hip-Hop—you’re a graffiti artist, right? So I think it’s very prevalent in the way you consider Hip-Hop. I consider it like, the art, like, audible sense, you know? I love to think, I love to— not I love to think, that sounds bad. But I think a lot, which is a negative for me sometimes. But I like to write a lot for myself. That comes from my desire to be like Nas. Do you know what I’m saying? Nas is a billionaire now, who invested in all sorts of things. But I want to be like 18-year-old Nas, writing words with the Pendergraft, the script, right? I think the fact that I’m in the Ph.D. program, bro, the fact that I want to write stuff is in some way because of Nasir Jones. If that makes any sense.

**JS:** Yeah.

**CB:** Bro, do you listen to him? I’m sure you do. He talks about people romanticizing the process of writing and thinking and considering, and what is a Ph.D. program and not trying to—and then maybe a more pure sense, trying to seek new knowledge. And you can hear that about though seeking knowledge in that. And throwing knowledge, seeking knowledge is like, having a
thought that encourages another thought; it inspires another thought. That is the process of education now for me. It is what that album did with that, the music does. What the words do even without the beat, the 808.

**JS:** Here’s a little tidbit, bro, and this is a trip and shit. It’s kind of also fucking aged me in that sense. You talk about Nas and you talk about *Illmatic.* At the beginning of the school year, I started a new school—I deal with discipline, right? I’m a Dean and shit. They’re bringing this kid in for smelling like, weed or some shit. So I’m talking to this kid and it’s me and this other is the Dean shit. And the Dean, like, very fucking a hard stance in the kid, right? And then I read the kid’s name and he calls it over the radio like, yeah, whatever. Whatever. Can you get Nas from the classroom? And I’m like, “The fuck.” [laughing] So, whatever, we talk to the kid, like, whatever. And then, he calls back, like, “Security, please take Nas to the—” And I said, “No, I’ll take him. I’ll take him.” I want to take a walk with this kid.

So talking to us already know that all without having said, no talking so, sorry. And I was like, “Yo, bro, Nas, that’s your real name?” And he’s like, “Yeah, my dad, he liked his old rap guy.” [laughing] “Really, bro? Like, Nas-Nas?” He’s like, “Yeah, bro.” I was like, “Bro, your name is gold. You’re named after Nas, bro.” You know, like, smaller tidbits but what is bad.

So, the probable reason why I really wanted to talk to you is because, one, I value your opinion to the utmost. Right? I don’t think you know this, but I may be doing shit. We had a conversation last year, two years ago, I forget, bro. It was a conversation where I was really at this crossroads and I was really having this internal struggle that I’ve had for a long time, but more so, it was more apparent at that particular moment with education, with what the Ph.D. program was, what it stood for. And in all honesty, I was just kind of ready to say, “Hey, you know how to fuck this like? What’s the point of it?” I could be doing community in other ways,
right? And we had this whole conversation regarding what—you know, just chatting about what the Ph.D. … process was, what it stood for, what knowledge was.

And then as the—I kind of left that conversation feeling better, motivated to a certain extent to like, finish, right? And that conversation clashing with what happened with the shorty really ultimately drove me to say, “Hey, you know what? I’m going to do this project, this dissertation, in this manner. And if they don’t sign off on it, the scholarly gods that be, well then, the sharing for me, right?” But it was a true intersection of those two things happening.

So, one, I wanted to thank you for that. I wanted to speak on that, man, in terms of academia, right? You’re going through this Ph.D. program. I guess, let’s start from the beginning, man. What motivated you to actually want to pursue this degree, and then what has been your experience thus far in the space. That is scholarship, right? Academia.

**CB:** Yeah. The thing, brother, honestly, a lot of it has been met my educational lifeline, or timeline has been, a matter of fact. Like, I told you, I fumbled through high school in an educational setting, I did remedial education at Wright College, but then because I read that [inaudible], I want to study Latino history. And then I went to your UIC because somebody told me you got to go somewhere else and they’re like, “You should have UIC.” And that person helped me to fill out my application. Shout out to Alejandro. And I did it because he really just was there guiding me. Because if he doesn’t do that, I don’t even know if I go to UIC. And I went to the history major. And I was there. I don’t really like history. I don’t care about some of the stuff that—it just doesn’t have a personage in my life. But then I took Latino history more and more, and I’m “Oh, I like this.” So I guess I’m going to be a Latin American, Latino Studies, major [at] UIC.
And through that, I was able to—I also wanted to minor in African-American studies because, you know, I was just taking courses in that as well. And I was having a lot of great conversations. So I think the conversation was dope and I didn’t care about the professionalization of my education at that point, but then I graduate. I know—what the hell do I do with the Latin American studies Latino studies degree. I immediately was helped by a friend of mine who was working at Wright College as a transfer assistant. And she said, “I can get you a part-time job here.” And I started working there, part-time. Then met the dean there, took a liking to me and she was like, trying to help me and she would just call me booty to do better. In the middle, “Okay, what do I do?” you know. And she helped me get a full-time job, and then she’s told me, you need to go to get a master’s degree. So she helped me, she helped me write everything. She gave me a letter of recommendation. And I got it in on the last day, as a matter of fact.

It was dope. But also, for me, because of the way that I have maybe an inability to learn well, I don’t know what I learn. I can tell you tangible things of what I meant for my undergrad because I remember the history lessons for the tensions, but I think my higher education degree is from Northeastern, it’s a lot of like—it’s really rooted in the professionalization of La Trinidad. And then in some way, as a matter of fact, I did get that because I graduated from a position open in my current employer in the Latino Studies program, and I’m like, “Oh, snap.” The thing that I studied in undergrad with the team[?] I studied in my master’s [in] higher education, my team studies, boom. And bro, I’ve been here since 2013, so now I work for Canto of Ethnic Studies in this space in a different position.

But then, anyway, after I finished the master’s, I remember, I’m “Well, I guess this is it. I’m going to work at Wright College for the rest of my life.” Again, I didn’t have a specific
ambition. And then one of the professors, Angel, our good friend Angel, he was at—we need to go to get a PCS because of the statistics that only 2% is hinted identify as Latino get a Ph.D., right? But he’s like, “You should do it.” Nobody had ever told something like that to me. “You should be a doctor.” Nobody had an expectation of that for me. It was more of like … would either be a major, like, how they tell Latino kids when they’re five, “You could be the first Latino President.” That’s how I guess I would consider a doctorate thing. But this is also said in the more of like, an expectation way, “You should do it. You need to do it.” And it came from a person who was a professor, and I’m like, “Damn, okay, I should do it.” And then he, along with Angel, he kind of involved me in a research project group. The first time post-master’s degree that I really did any sort of research project. And then we presented in these different conferences or whatever. We went to the National Association of Chicano/Chicana studies to present; we went to Harvard.

So in some ways, it was still vibing off of, like, this model minority thing, which I kind of hate on now. But still, it was like, it was inspiring to write something. “Yeah, I want to do this.” So then they won’t let me apply to a program. And I applied, and that’s how I got into a higher NPC. But yeah, you know, I wish I had a more impactful story of how I got here, but no, I was really a lost person. As a lost person, in some way, I found myself here.

Bro, when I was in high school, I would have never told you, I want to get a Ph.D. in higher education, you know what I’m saying? I want to be a professor of higher education. Like, these are just things that I never thought of. And I think we had that conversation. I also really struggled with being in a space like this because I’m like, it’s still there, the novelty of being a doctor and all that in my mother, it’s completely gone for me. I don’t care about any of that stuff, you know?
When I get a Ph.D., bro, never call me back, and everyone that engaged to hire you. I think I almost—I don’t dislike it for others; I am also happy for others that do that. But for me, I just don’t care about performativity. Another is performative for other people; for me, I don’t want it. But then I thought, somewhere around a year or two years ago, I’m like, this base provides me a great place to have ideas and I am very privileged to be able to consider a space that gives me a chance to have a [inaudible]. And then I really had to reintroduce myself to the Ph.D. process, you know what I’m saying? And I thought, “Okay. I don’t care about it in this way, but it helps me to better understand my humanity and the humanity of the people that I care about.”

So that’s where I’m in now, bro. Like, before, I was, “Oh, no, I’m 38 and I haven’t finished yet.” But also, I don’t really care. One of the dopest [inaudible] ruined my job up in Northwestern. It took her 10 years to finish her Ph.D. and she’s taking her beyond her forties now. But she’s one of the dopest thinkers I know and she does great work, and I’m like, “Yeah, the deconstruction of the professionalization of it all is happening for me, which I’m so grateful for.” Because now, it’s just giving me a chance to try to emulate Nas. And, you know, code words depend on a structured way. And hopefully, that can have a tangible outcome in the way that I interact with my community. And I think the way that maybe I can help the small part of the world that I live in, maybe interact with the community at large, you know what I’m saying? And that’s how I think of it now, you know what I mean?

JS: Yeah. There are a couple of things I want to touch on there, bro. One, the novelty of it and like, how that’s washed away. I can relate to that 100%. I’ve said it too. Whenever this does happen, I don’t want to be called it, right? But then, the other side of it is, like, part of it is not for me, it’s for the community, right?
CB: Yeah, part of it.

JS: In my ancestors’ wildest dreams, like, to a certain extent, right? Not to seem fucking like, but like, the first thing, like, the lineage of my family to ever be a doc, right? When I get—if I get there, right? So in that sense, I almost have to fuckin’ to a certain extent, like, allow myself to be in that space. Not for me, but for the pride that—my mom doesn’t, still doesn’t understand what I’m doing for a Ph.D., right? Always, she brags about it, like, “Oh, yeah, mi hijo va ser doctor!” Yeah, whatever. So that’s a certain level of pride, right? So, like, in that sense, right? But like, I’m with you in terms of like, then I will tear like, not wanting to be called, like, “Nah, that’s not for me.” Or I’ll see people sign their names with like, fucking like,—like, even that may or like, fucking a, what’s the term now? Or the term that they use... anything but dissertation—

CB: ABD.

JS: ABD. Yeah. And it’s like, “I can buy with any of that shit.” I’ve never used the letters. I don’t think I’ll ever do it. So there’s that aspect of it, right? But then, there’s the other one too, man, where like, in the beginning, it was, to some extent, about getting those—like, that was part of like, the intrigue. And then, going through the process, it almost becomes—for me, it almost becomes like ... I don’t know, man, like, that goes away and then you start really getting into the nuts and bolts of what creating new knowledge is and what this has been. It almost becomes a love-hate relationship, right? And you talk about the... what’s the term used?

CB: The professionalization. [crosstalk]

JS: Yeah. That’s interesting, bro. Like, I had never thought about it in those terms. But it was applied in my mind in those terms. Like, there’s a certain level of like, procedure comes along with being a Ph.D. fucking individual. But then as you really develop this critical way of thinking and you’re developing this knowledge, now you’re able to see this as another system.

JS: And that’s where I was at, that’s where the hate comes in. I’m actually being schooled to be part of this fucking greater system.

CB: Yeah. Oh, yeah, it could be, yeah. Sorry.

JS: Well, take it away, bro, take it away.

CB: Yeah. We become the thing that we desired not to be. We become the systems that we’re critiquing in the pieces that we write. The system is big, bro. You become the villain in some way. Nothing you do, but we are compromised. I was having an argument with my girlfriend last night because she says, “You always do this.” I’m like, “It’s not something that I want to or that I want to have some sort of ideological positioning.” But I really do see that at the forefront, I am complicit. And I think whenever people—I think so. She gets frustrated that I always—She says, “I watch my words when I say things. It’s not that I watch my words, [it’s] that my brain always reminds me of my complicity in the thing that I’m about to critique.” And I don’t know how to—I move forward clumsily when I say almost everything now, you know what I’m saying? It is an internal thing. I try to keep it internal because that can also become performative in the way that people that I am aware of my, like, there’s in the same way that there are positionality statements all over the place now. But they also just become positionality statements, right?

Okay, I got that shit away. Let me be my problem at itself without any sort of [inaudible], you know? And I’m just saying way too, I also do it too. I am the thing I criticize. But the same thing with like, the Ph.D., I think—I noticed that for a long time; I would be the. “Oh, with the janitors at my job.” You know, look at me. And I mean, why do I say that? Why do I highlight that? the IE with the help? Why do I position them as a help? Like, they’re different from me.
And there’s a lot. It does happen, you know, like, look at us in this newsletter, we help these people.

In the same way that we could take white kids for going to like, immersion trips in Ecuador or whatever. Everybody does the same thing in some capacity, right? Whether it’s not racialized, it’s also, like, in a capitalistic hierarchical way. And that’s also where I think, you know. And I say that understanding that I need to not always see in the monolithic way where I critique everybody that does it. I shouldn’t critique anybody who does it, but I try to critique myself when I didn’t do it. Yeah, I don’t know if I’m making sense—

JS: Yeah, you are, completely.

CB: I think when we had that conversation last time, I think my resolution is, I’m grateful for the tension, bro. I never want to lose the tension I have with any of that interaction because once I lose it, I’ve developed a comfortability with it, and I think I feel another, “I lost the tension,” and I guess I’m like, “I got it. It was not a big deal.” No. The goal is to flatten, not to keep a hierarchy, you know?

I also agree with you too. I think when I get a Ph.D., I want to give my diploma to my parents and like, I can’t give ‘em the experience but I wish I could. I want them to engage in the pride of it and however the fuck they want, you know what I’m saying? And if my community is proud of me, let it be a lesson for you. Yeah, I agree with what you say, I think because it’s like, as a prison that works in an institution with a lot of [inaudible], I never had the normalization of having Latinx people as my peers. I forgot how that felt like. And because working in the ethnic studies space, I largely only deal with people that think like me. I forget how it’s like, to not be in that space anymore.
So, if you’re like, an educator in a space like a high school with that, it is the causality of you being there that should be important because historically, it’s never been there. So, Dr. Sanchez. That is important because it needs to be commonplace and needs to be generically normal because it’s currently not, right? So, my privilege maybe diminishes it, but right now, I need to make the like that, that’s a privilege and we need to check that privilege. And then no, most people still don’t have that. That’s one thing that sucks about Higher Ed Latino Educators; we all just finesse ourselves in a small circle and we all forget that this is still a whole world that—we don’t make these articles public to jente. They’re not even legible to jente because of so many big words. And I think that’s the hope to deconstruct. So when you can engage youth every day, that means that you have the possibility to give them all of these things that we pay thousands of dollars to do in the class. You can do it there, free of charge. Do you know what I’m saying? And that’s dope.

JS: Yeah. Honestly, bro, that whole tension and that conversation, that mindset that we’re even re-engaging now, right? like, dissecting what Higher Ed is. And like, this tension between being part of it but also trying to deconstruct is [what] ultimately will lead to this, right? And you mentally like, hate making accessible to you, like, you’re right, like, this dope research that I don’t have access to, which was written well before fuckin’ like, you know, I entered into this space of academia, academic scholar, whatever, and was exposed to articles. You know, like, knowledge, like, all that shit that has been written like, years ago, but has never reached, like, our Brown communities, right? Because of, one, the lack of interest that those who were teaching us had in those things, right? First and foremost, right? 83% of our educators are white, like, that’s a thing, right? And two, just the inability for access to be deconstructed in a manner which is acceptable to youth. Do you know what I mean?
And like you, man, I think I have tension with it. I have to consolidate and also have to realize that it is a little bit hypocritical on my end to a certain extent, right? Because I am criticizing that, which I don’t want to become, but almost all existing within that space and still doing this even, right? as a requirement to fulfill becoming that. Do you know what I mean? I mean, it is what it is. I still don’t know how to come to terms with it because I’m not a perfect human being at the end of the day.

**CB:** But you know, I think what you just said now is so important, bro. The acknowledgment that we still don’t know how to come to terms with it, because coming to terms with it is a lifelong process. And that is pivotal for me because I’m not getting a gloom and doom space, and I’m like, “No, I can’t do that either.” Just recognize that the tension is always going to be there. The proletariat with the bourgeoisie, the tension[‘s] always going to be there, right? Yeah. So that’s an important thing to just acknowledge that. Yeah, but I still don’t know, I still don’t know, bro. Another whatsoever doing.

**JS:** It’s everywhere. So for example, I went to a conference last weekend, right? And I went just like—however, you know, one of those things I had committed to but like, I stopped going to conferences, I stop presenting and I stopped wanting to publish because that’s what you’re supposed to do when you’re in the space, right? I don’t know what your program is, but for us, we’re consistent be like, “Yow, you got to—By the time you graduate, you have to have published like, x amount of articles and presentations.” And that to me, it’s like, don’t ever force me to speak until I say, and I don’t think until I have something to say. So just to present for the sake of presenting. It didn’t even make sense to me. So I just kind of shied away from all that shit, dude. And it might not be the right thing to do, you know? Because even now, I went to this conference and there were like, dope presentations. And I was like, because of my inability to
engage in these spaces and my—you know, like, to share an extent of privilege to not want to engage, right? Because it’s a privilege to say, “Hey, I want to do it.” Well, I’ve essentially closed myself off to like, learning and seeing how other people are doing things, right? Bringing their knowledge to shorties or community, whatever.

**CB:** Yeah. I experienced a similar thing in the exact same way, but I think I had a moment where I—because of the way it’s often instructed in these kinds of spaces for people that are administering programs that you have to do it. So, what do you do when you have to? You regurgitate things, you engage the same topic and you have five different presentations out of it to fill, to pad the thing that you’re supposed to do. Again, professionalization. You become a process-oriented person. Where not so much even the scholarship matters. Do you know how hard it is to come up with an idea, bro? But to consider it well, five years is not a normal, natural structure that is conducive to that. You have to bend towards the structure, not that structure bends toward, like, the natural process of thinking about something. Do you know what I’m saying?

But I agree. So I think I would hate on it a lot. But a lot of it was also my only security, right? Now that in for me, stands for my own social anxiety, to be honest. But right now, I think regardless of the thing I’m missing too is this person’s seventh iteration of the same topic? Because I’ve seen them at other conferences, do the same thing with a different title. But the CV is padded. I can learn something from just the work itself. But I think when you are a presenter, at least because this happened to me in the past, I don’t think about it, is I’m going to present this dope knowledge of most other people even to present the knowledge, I think, “Oh, who’s presenting? Well, how many things are they have? What is the job market looking like?” That is also a thing that is maybe attention that has to be dealt with in these things like that. I think. But
a lot of it is individual work, right? So for me, I need to shush my brain from that critique and just appreciate the knowledge that is there. I think when people say that was a dope [inaudible], that was dope about it, and all we had to have drinks with this person and then all at all, we didn’t have to present so early because we do get home early and make it. A lot of times, that’s how these things go, right? So then, I’m like, “What was the purpose of a conference?” Right?

**JS:** Yeah.

**CB:** It’s another capitalistic system to create a value market for ideas, not for ideas’ sake but for them to produce an economic means. And even though that’s real, bro, I still can gain all the beautiful knowledge that is there from the actual idea, you know what I’m saying? But that’s individual work.

**JS:** That’s trivial and ironic, bro. As you’re talking, like, this should just kind of hit me, it’s almost like, this fucking epiphany that I had. When I was younger, when I was like, fucking, I don’t know, just finished my bachelor’s, starting my master’s program, whatever, I remember thinking about presentations and I really having, like, a need to want to speak on certain issues that I was, like, seeing. Essentially, I felt the need to want to share this knowledge that I felt like others weren’t talking about, right? But not having the confidence to do it because I didn’t have the letters behind the name, right? I didn’t have the degrees, the expertise to be looked at as a knowledgeable person in the space, right? And the irony behind all that is that now that I’m getting there, I have no desire to do it, nor do I feel I have like, the interesting—or the work or the knowledge that needs to be out there yet, you know? And it’s true, bro, because like, that should never be the case. Like, knowledge should never be withheld because of titles.

**CB:** A hundred percent. Yeah, agree.
JS: I mean, how dope would it be to see fucking, like, I don’t know, man, at these conferences, like, non-Ph.D.-bearing, fucking individuals, non-M.A.-bearing individuals and dropping knowledge, right? I have a jock fucking 30 scholars to be able to say, “Hey, your work is not valid. You’ve name-dropped 30 motherfuckers, who...” I don’t know. [chuckles]

CB: Or even, I remember when I first started my Ph.D. program, I remember the first class I had, I’m like, “Damn, I’m going to fail.” Because I remember it was, like, a gladiator sport. Everybody came to, say, people already have locked and loaded the seven scholars we have … mentioned in the conversation. And I had nothing. I was low-key. I don’t know what to say. I became transformed into a fear—not a fearful person, just a body of fear. Because I’m like, “Oh no, I don’t know these names.” And everybody’s shaking their head because they know the names. And I don’t even know what we’re talking about. But looking back at it now, I’m like, “Man, these fools know any of these names either.” And then I’m like, “This is the structure of schooling that has prepared people for the first day of class to perform. It’s aesthetic.” The aesthetic gets in the way of the tension of learning.

So, [I] agree the same way that you think. The aesthetic and tension of—aesthetic kind of like, made it hard stuff for you to really share your idea, right? When you were like, what are the benefit of you being a Ph.D., right? Somebody that has the economy of the letters because you can interject that moment for the first thing you interact with, that it was your age, and be like, “No, fuck that unbelief.” Believe and do it. Get them into the website and have them apply to be presented so that they present with others who have the letters. And there’s a rejection, maybe they can be like, a seed of growing, unsettling their system, right? Why can’t they present? If the idea is dope, what the letters are? Do you know what I mean?

JS: Hm-hmm.
CB: That’s it for the better dope tangible way that, you know, us being in these spaces and the value that, whatever it might have—like, the burden of responsibility, is that which is dope, right? I’m kind of figuring it right now, you know?

JS: Yeah, dude. Because of—

CB: I don’t know if I’m making any sense, bro.

JS: You are. You are, man. So, this kind of sidetracking, like, I stepped into a space, like, a couple of days, I talk to you about, like, the school wanting to like, engage more in diversity conversations. So, one of the individuals that developed the Student Equity Board, right? and I had done something similar to this. At the other school, I was that, because to me, it was like, we always talk about, like, again, educate from the top down even with diversity issues, but like, the people who are actually in this shit in the trenches are the kids, man. You know, the shorties, and nobody’s really talking to them. Nobody’s allowing them to engage in these conversations, right? Agency, we talked about agency, like, kids, there should be no need to give anybody. Kids should be able to take that shit, right? but they should be able to—The confidence and the knowledge, all that has to be built, right?

So then, for me, it was always like, what do we do? Like, how do we get this? How do we get the knowledge to them in a way that’s fucking, like, non-traditional, right? The thing I keep on going back to is like, having this fucking mini-conference for them like, on a Saturday. Having them engage in that space because as a high-school kid, how many times do you go to an actual conference that is very similarly aligned to a professional conference, right? Where you get to choose what knowledge you want to take in, right? Recession. So that’s going to happen. I want to work on that shit to bring it to life next semester, I think. That is dope, and that’s a little fucking project.
CB: Yeah, that would be dope, bro.

JS: It’s a different thing. Hey Bro, I appreciate your time, man. I truly, truly appreciate your time. It’s probably more than you had allotted for. But is there anything that you didn’t share that you wanted to share, man?

CB: No, but I am thinking—I forgot we were recording this. I think one of my stuff critiques is, I think, I get lost in the sauce of my own thoughts, sometimes. I hope some of this is even legible. But yeah, I think, the one thing I think, I would just want to share about my perspective is that I want to honor that the world wants to think monolithically, but we are not monolithic. All right? The intersection of us is so complex. I think when I share things, I really wanted to consider that because I think sometimes when we have to meet certain criteria for people to think of it as valid. But I think also that just robs us of thinking up things more deeply.

I hope I make sense—because I don’t even know if I make sense to myself sometimes. I think something I told my partner is like, “When I share things, I’m also still trying to figure out what I think.” And I think I want to acknowledge that too. Sometimes, our thoughts evolve and change over time. I think, if you and I, bro, had this conversation when we were in Cuba back in 2011, we might have had a completely different conversation because our life perspective has also changed. I think if I ever get to a time where I can listen to this in 20 years if I still have life in my lungs, I wonder how my perspective would be then. So yeah, but I’m grateful for the opportunity to talk.

JS: Hey brother, and at the end of the day, I mean, at least for me, personally, right? Like, it’s never about the answer nor the question, in that sense, right? More so the process of exploring it and the exploration of it all because the way we engage and whoever’s going to listen to this, right? Like, they’re going to think about it. And as you’re listening to it, dissect it in a different
manner, but it’s all a process of creating thought in whatever way that may be. So, to me, that’s dope, bro. I think, throughout this conversation, I’ve been challenged to think about things that I haven’t thought about and deal with certain things in a manner that’s going to make me think that much more about them after we’re done with this conversation.

CB: Yes, same, likewise. I’m grateful for the opportunity to thank you for your thoughts as well.

JS: No, no doubt, Carlos. I appreciate you, man. [music]

[END]

Daniel

Figure 26. Daniel QR code.
INTRO: Bienvenidos, welcome to The Latino Underground, a podcast dedicated to the reclamation and exploration of Latino identity through counter-narrative stories. We hope to give you tools by which to navigate in a passive system. Stay tuned.

JS: Hey, what’s good, good people? First and foremost, thank you for tuning in. In today’s session, we have the privilege of having a conversation with Daniel, aka SMEER. I met Danny back in the day. We both worked at Checkers, and we both started writing around the same time.
So when I started thinking about this project, he was one of the first cats that came to mind. But Daniel is somewhat of a private guy, so I was hesitant to initially ask.

Oddly enough, this is the last interview for the dissertation edition of the project. So I figured I’d ask. Danny, being who he is, agreed to do it. Much thanks to Danny for agreeing to do this and sharing his story. I really wanted to capture Danny’s story because Danny’s a cat that really exemplifies this idea of taking Hip-Hop, learning from it, and then using it to move a certain way. Hopefully, this comes out in his story. So, without further ado, here’s my conversation with Danny.

So, dude, I started doing this shit because I’ve been in this cool thing for minute and it’s weird because it’s one of those organic things. Like, working at Checkers and shit. I was never the one to go to college. I wasn’t supposed to go to college. I never felt validated in high school. Fucking art form or our way of growing up was relatable to fucking the educational system. Because of that, it was always something that existed outside of academia. So, for me, one is to listen to what you’re doing or what Journey is doing and empower all of us and say, “Hey, you know what? This shit actually matters and people did it and they’ve had success with it, so I could do that shit too.” It’s a common story, really into it. That’s essentially what the project is about, dude.

DM: That’s dope, man. Actually, aside from this, super props, man, for meeting you. Got to give you credit, got to give you flowers, man. From meeting you at, what, age sixteen. For me, that was my first job. I don’t know if that was yours. But from us flipping burgers, as the stereotype goes, and then painting in the street. Just hanging out, man, to where you’ve taken it. I’ve got to give you nothing but respect, nothing but props, and my hat goes off to you. I’ve got to give you
these props and salute to you, brother. Keep moving. Keep it moving. It’s really, really dope. I love what you guys are doing and the fact that you guys are involved in the community with this.

Education is obviously key. Each one, teach one. I love that, bro. The fact that you’re doing it with education, with the stuff you grew up around, and presented it to either younger generations or just people that are interested, for that matter. They could take whatever they want from it. I think it’s amazing. So kudos, bro. That’s so dope.

**JS:** Damn, bro, much appreciated. Much appreciated. That’s why I wanted to have you on as well because, to me, you’ve elevated Hip-Hop to another level in the city. You’ve done your thing, man, and you’ve done it so it’s influential to other cats.

So I like to start this podcast with one question because, to me, it’s not a matter of “if,” but a matter of “when” Latinos are going to face oppression within the educational system. Let’s start with that. When was your first experience with education oppression, as you know it, if you think about your educational trajectory from kindergarten through high school?

**DM:** With the educational system, it probably relatively goes all the way back to the beginning of grade school. I remember it almost felt weird, being labeled, as you had to be a bilingual student ever since kindergarten to possibly third. At least for me, my story. I remember us, even when we have recess, we’d be in the playground and everybody’s separated in that stance. If you were a bilingual kid, you were just playing with your group, which I get. That’s who you’re used to being around. So on and so forth. But you started seeing the differences, even as a little kid. Then you were like, “Man. What are they learning that’s so different from ours?” or “Why do these kids got to go to ESL?”

Then by third grade, they gave me the news on something like, “Okay, you’re fourth grade, you’re going to start at Warner Park Cicero School.” No more bilingual. You’re pretty
much done with that. Like, “You’ve got to go now.” I was like, “What?” because my brother, straight up from kindergarten, started off not even being in a bilingual class. That was always kind of weird to me, but whatever, bro, I don’t know. From there, you started seeing the differences and started feeling excluded to a certain point and certain things. But once I was in it, it was weird. I felt like I was losing my friends, too. The ones I actually came up with, for the first three or four years, whatever you want to call it, including kindergarten. I was no longer tight friends with them anymore, in a sense. Now, I had to figure out certain ways I had to make new friends, so on and so forth, and how to fit in. That’s always kind of rough when you’re trying to fit in with these kids, especially at that age. That almost tripped me out a little bit, but I guess it stemmed a little bit from there.

JS: Yeah, it’s crazy how that works out, bro, because I really like[n] the whole language acquisition to poverty, to six cents. Growing up in the ’hood, you’re broke. But there are always similar levels of broke. Always someone who is poorer than you are and it’s noticeable. In education, there are always those levels too, like, “Yeah, everybody’s Latino,” like, if you grow up in a neighborhood. But then there are always those kids who have it worse or who are, typically, the ESL kids, man. It’s fucked up. It still happens.

DM: Yes, and that would trip me out because I felt like, even at that point, I would still look at people like, “He’s smarter than me. She’s smarter than me,” so on and so forth. I’ll be like, “Why are they in ESL?” I thought they were taking out certain tasks a lot better than I was. I don’t know what the reasons really were behind it. I don’t know, man, but it’s something that would trip me out.

You could feel that they were embarrassed, too, because when they pull people for that extra ESL class, it was always a minimum group. So it was either a handful of students, and they
just yank them out at a certain time and [inaudible]. You could tell it on their faces. They didn’t even feel comfortable. Then they came back at a certain time or came back ready for lunchtime, or whatever the case might have been. That was always tripped out to me, man. I get it was to help out, but I don’t know if that was the right way of going about it. It’s how I felt about it.

**JS:** Yeah, bro. I like starting with that question because it’s those early moments in education that either fuck us up or pave the way for us loving school or whatnot. So it’s interesting that, as Latinos, we have to go through some tribulations and some moments that our mainstream counterparts wouldn’t have to experience. Danny, tell me about yourself, bro. Who is Danny?

**DM:** Well, I’m what? Going on 40, man. I’ve been working for the Cook County Sheriff’s Department going on 16 years in January now. Very blessed to have a job. It’s a very unique job. Glad I was able to leave the correction side a few years ago. Now, I’m working for the courtside, which is, now I’m a Court Deputy. I’m a father of two beautiful boys, a ten- and an eleven-year-old. Cicero resident, still. I’ve been here since I was about seven years old. I started second grade here, still reside here. A lot has changed since.

What else can I tell you, man? I’m a big fan of the art world. I love what we’ve done, how we came up here in Chicago. I think we came a long way, to be honest. I think this is a city full of talent. A lot of pride, which sucks. I think that hurts us a lot. But there’s so much talent all the way around. From music to dance to things we even pioneered, certain styles. Then that goes in all art forms, not just graffiti, not just B-Boy-ing, not just rap. We should be proud of Hip-Hop. The whole Hip-Hop movement is pretty dope. It’s pretty cool, man. Now, being a little older, more mature, and understanding that more, it’s like, “Wow. This guy really did this or this guy really did that.” If you even look back at old magazines or sketchbooks, whatever the case might be, it’s actually very impressive.
Maybe I’m digressing a little bit, but we’re influencers, for me, coming up. I was probably my oldest son’s age when we kept driving. We came from Little Village. I grew up on 24th and Trumbull. Basically, close to where you were mentioning earlier, right down the street. We moved here at the age of seven, but we would still go there for *carnitas*, groceries, or whatever the case might have been, just because it was the go-to spots. It’s what my father preferred, like, “The meat’s better from here. Let’s get the veggies from here,” so on and so forth. That was always kind of cool.

I was always like, mind blown. They’ve got the beautiful murals that were displayed. I think around that time was a lot of BTB stuff in that area. Props, kudos to BTB. That was really dope to see all those kinds of murals, like, on [inaudible] and Cermak, if I recall, on both sides. Then we’d keep driving then we’d start seeing the walls of style, the SB stuff, so on and so forth. Kudos to them, kudos to every crew, graffiti artists, and artists I’m about to mention. You guys are amazing. It took bits and pieces from everyone to put this together, then that’ll keep the culture alive. Once you’re able to translate that same mindset, I guess, how you even started doing that with a certain crib, by having a vision. “No, I’m not an interior designer. No, I’m not this,” but I even started doing that with build-outs. Like, “Man, this will look pretty cool, we did this. This and that.” Follow the traditional routes but add your own twist to it, and then it starts coming together.

I’ve been having fun with it. It’s crazy because now I’m translating that to my shorties, in a sense. They’re not seeing it yet, and I’m not expecting them to understand it, but it’s funny when they take a step back. They’re starting, at least, to see the whole, “Oh, man, I was really bad and I’m improving.” I’m like, “Good, bro,” because this is what it’s going to be about. That’s what the journey is going to be about. Now, it’s going to become how bad you really want
it or how hard are you going to work for it. You’re going to be living proof and I can no longer hold you guys by the hand. That’s kind of where we’re at, at the moment.

JS: Bro, you’re dropping a lot of little gems there. You talk about this “mindset,” right?

Typically, there are individuals who influence us, who we look up to, who essentially shape, to a certain extent, our mindset and the way we move. So that’s my question, man. Who do you attribute that to?

DM: It’s kind of shitty to say and I always say it a lot. I learned off of my brother’s mistakes. I guess he was the guinea pig because he was the oldest, the first one. Just seeing him grow up and how my parents would disapprove on certain things or how he would have instant regret towards certain things, it would just be embedded in me. I’ll be like, “No, we’re not doing this.” As easy as it looked, or like, the quick way out of things, I was like, “No, that’s not it.” So I took a different route, man. He was, like, my best friend at one point. I was more of a pest. It’s just the little brother, Bob, and the older brother.

Then he leaves for the Marine Corps. I’m barely in eighth grade. So, it just led into me trying to figure this shit out. Those four years, I had to figure it all out on my own. I think those are very crucial years because it was the phase where it’s time for us to man up a little bit. Then going to high school, peer pressure and the reassurance that “Your brother is so-and-so.” “Yeah, but he’s not here.” “Yeah. Your brother is so-and-so.” “Yeah.” “You’re Danny, right?” “Yeah.” “Carlos’s little brother?” “Yeah, yeah,” but again, he’s not there. He’s not there to defend me no more. All of that stuff. It’s tripped out, man.

From having several gangs just in, what, two-, three-block radius where I grew up in, it was pretty bad around here. It was pretty bad, which I’m sure a lot of people you probably interviewed have the same stories and shit. I always kept it cool with them, to the fact where we
would play ball. Again, I would bike ride, but when shit would get real, or the invites would start, after 10:00 p.m. or 11:00 p.m. “Hey, come on, bro, what else?” I knew when to like, “No, bro. I’m cool.” “I’m going back to the crib,” that kind of shit. It was a really crucial time, but again, it was the time too to learn a lot.

From something that I really didn’t know wasn’t taught, I had to take it upon myself. Some of this shit was self-taught. I made a lot of mistakes, but I’m glad I chose things that, you can make tons of mistakes, keep going and you start seeing improvement. Or you found it as an outlet, man, and it was actually pretty fun to do. Hence, graffiti, breakdancing, so on and so forth. It’s not something you needed to go to school for, not something that you needed money for. Well, maybe the paint shit, but you know how that went at the beginning. We’re like, racking shit. But it didn’t cost you anything to sketch. It didn’t cost you anything to pick up a notepad that you already have from school and try to develop your own shit. That was always kind of fun, man. It definitely didn’t cost me anything to move my mom’s furniture around and breakdance, trying to learn moves and shit.

**JS:** Let’s take it back a little, bro. You mentioned your brother. Then you mentioned your Pops living in Little Village. Talk to me about that, bro. What’s the family like? You’re first-generation here in the U.S., correct?

**DM:** Correct. My old man’s story, he gets here at about age 23. He had a job offer, just broke. Legit, my uncle was a coyote, his brother. This stems from my mother’s father who was also a coyote. When my father got together with my mom, he offered that to my daddy. “You want to make some quick money, man?” All he had to do is basically post up on the Tijuana border, that will help him make money. It just wasn’t my dad’s lane, though. So he’s like, “No.” He comes more from the campo upbringing, like, the farm life, growing crops and animals. For him, it was,
“I’m all for working, but that’s not what I’m trying to do. I’m not trying to get into trouble,” especially because I believe my brother was already born. My brother was born in Mexico.

**JS:** What part of Mexico?

**DM:** Morelos. Celestale, Morelos. So my dad was trying to figure out. He’s like, “Alright, I’m going to try to get this family over. There’s really nothing for me in Mexico, as far as pay. I didn’t finish school,” because he had to take care of his siblings. A typical story. Because grandfather worked out of state. My grandfather was lowkey a pimp. Starts another family where he’s at. So my dad, being the oldest, was the man of the house, bro. He’s super young but my grandpa always had his back in whatever decisions he made. This was one of them, obviously. When he called my grandfather back. He’s like, “Hey man, maybe I could scrape up a few dollars to go back.” My grandfather had to hit him with the reality check, which God bless him, and God bless his soul, he just passed away, not too long ago.

**JS:** Sorry to hear that, bro.

**DM:** Yeah. Thank you, man. That was cool. He’s like, “There’s really nothing for you here. Even people with professions are not making much here. If that’s something you ought to reconsider, now you got a wife and a kid. Believe me, I’m all for helping you guys. There’s somewhere to sleep, somewhere to eat. But it only goes thus far.” I think that’s when my dad had to reprogram himself. As much as he didn’t like, it, he did what he did. He did work. We lived all around that neighborhood, from Christiana to Homan, so on and so forth.

**JS:** Your dad stayed here in the U.S.?

**DM:** Yes.

**JS:** How long before he brought your mom?
DM: Carlos is five years older than me. I think he even did preschool over there. Basically, four? Four and a half? Five? I think my brother was going on. Then I was coming about. She was already pregnant with me. Hence, I was born here. So, at this point, I think we’re living on Spaulding and we moved around. But obviously, I don’t start remembering shit until we’re living in Trumbull now. We lived in Trumbull and 24th for a little bit. So from when I was born to about six, seven years old.

Then, Little Village. That, itself, was a story of its own. It was gang-infested. Crazy, Latin Kings and shit. It was nuts, man. Even, at one point, to where my dad used to drive this little hatchback, Chevette, that wasn’t shit, but that was our car. Eventually, he traded that motherfucker and sold it. Then he gets the station wagon. It happens to be beige in color. Then, he gets attention because that was the coolest shit. Bogus-ass cheats too though, as it looked purple if you look at it. Anyhow, he gets those and bro, they brick his car. All the windows go. Them, knowing my dad, that’s the thing that I didn’t understand until I was older. I was like, “Damn, Dad. What happened?” At that point, he had to stock radios, not like, they were trying to steal the stereo or anything like that. That shit wasn’t even in like that, yet. It was messed up. It was stuff like that, dude.

Then casting, like, graffiti, gang, graffiti, gang, graffiti, gang, graffiti. It looked bogus. I’ll be honest, but it was nothing. It was far from appealing. That was always what we were renting from. That garage is always getting hit up, man. The park was always fucked up. They would mess with the swings. The slides were always messed up, but there was a park right down the street. I thought it was the shit, obviously. A playground, but it used to suck, bro. When we’d be excited to go, now, “Oh, we got to go, man.” Certain things are cut up. They are the kind with
the knives. They’re fucked. The swings are all jacked up or whatever. It was bogus after a while too.

It was rough, even my dad, when he went to have little drinking sessions and Mom was at work, I remember she was working second shift a while too, bro. He would just take me with his buddies. I would just go with his buddies, and I’d be kicking it in the couch all day. He’s drinking and shit. Bro, I even remember going to bars. Then, I’ll be sleepy, they put chairs together. “Hey, go to sleep.” That shit was crazy, when you could actually walk in with your shorty. I was at a bar with him where they shoot pool. That was a little bit of my upbringing. Obviously, my brother was able to keep an eye on me. Now, we just hang out. We watch movies or whatnot.

JS: Dude, I learned to drive when I was fucking eleven or twelve. I legit think my dad taught me how to drive, just so I could drive him when he was getting juiced. Because I owe him going tambien with those boys and shit. They saw nobody. He would go, he would drink, he would take long. Then, he would get blasted. He’d be like, “Can you please [inaudible]?” Bro, I couldn’t even see a good view when I’m driving.

DM: Damn, that’s tripped out. It’s funny that you say that because I look at my son, Jacob, my oldest, and I’m like, “Bro, my mission is to teach you how to drive when you turn twelve.” His birthday will be in February. He’s like, “For real?” So he’s starting to get gas too but it’s funny. I get that idea. Same as your story.

I have a cousin at that school. My uncle is a doctor, a medic. He’s like, a medical doctor. He taught his kid how to drive because he loved to get fucked up too. That’s why that dude’s obese. In driving at that school, you got to be there to see it. It’s insane. That dude, at age twelve, they were driving back to our hometown over there in Morelos, which is roughly a good two,
three hours, bro. This shorty was driving it all. He’d be like, thirteen, fourteen, taking the whole ride sometimes, just because he loved it. Once he learned how to drive a stick shift and a little buggy, and all that shit, he just loved it. Then, it would always be him. I don’t know. It’s tripped out but that stayed in my head always and I was like, “Hey, Jacob. I’m going to teach [you] young, bro, just in case of any emergency,” but no, I’m not going to use the me drinking shit as an excuse.

**JS:** On another tip, it’s crazy, right? We think about the idea. How old was your dad when he migrated here? He must have been young.

**DM:** Yeah. Twenty-three. He was fairly, fairly young.

**JS:** Think about you, at twenty-three, migrating into a new country, not knowing shit. Having to live there and come up, be away from your loved ones.

**DM:** Right.

**JS:** That shit’s a trip to me, dude. Fast forward, them being where they are now. The success, essentially, that he had out of nothing.

**DM:** Peanuts, bro. Peanuts because it was legit our minimum wage. *En documentados,* you already know that, so Dad going already to sweatshops is hard.

**JS:** Yeah. Fuck yeah, dude. For sure. It was a fucking grind. So you’re in Little Village; what is your earliest memory of education? How was education promoted in your household?

**DM:** Okay, education has always been promoted. My dad’s extremely smart. He’s so smart. He’s intelligent, very educated. He loves to read. That’s one thing he hasn’t stopped. I’m actually angered that he didn’t finish school. It was crazy because I didn’t bring this shit up till maybe ten years ago, probably. I was like, “Honestly, Dad, what would you have done if you would have continued school? If you legit had that opportunity?” He’s like, “I would have been a lawyer.” I
think he would have been great at it. I think he would have been phenomenal at it. The dude’s extremely educated and it’s mind-blowing. Again, it’s crazy how you said, yeah, he had to give up everything, in a sense. To not complete school, to almost listening to Grandpa, and at such a young age, that’s got to be scary. For you to not show that and try to move forward for your family, that is now becoming a family. Your lady just had one, I’m on the way, now you got to look for a place to live, in a new country. You don’t know how to speak English. It’s wild, man. So he promoted that pretty tough, even just going into it.

However, he always talked highly of my grandpa, which is awesome, but it wasn’t really who they were raised with. They were raised with my uncle, who was my grandma’s brother. All he knew was that ... Mama said she got an early life. Straight up, let’s go to work and that’s it. Hearing that shit and actually going there and trying to picture it, it was nuts.

From carretillas to whatever it was they had to get on to transport that shit. Food. The way they had to milk the cows and have certain things ready. That’s what they were taught, and still had to go to school. It was crazy to me. He still had to play the big-brother role, the man of the house role. There was a lot of pressure but, obviously, a lot of that traditional machismo shit kicks in too. That comes from my uncle. So my dad—that’s the only formula, I feel like, he knew with my older brother and myself. We had a lot of that shit. Straight up, like, “I’m going to give you orders, you guys do as I say,” kind of shit. “If you guys fuck this up, I’m cracking down on you guys.” That was our upbringing, opposed to my younger sister. She went through some of it, but by that point, with our time here in the States, and seeing how we were coming up, he laid off a lot of that shit. That was our upbringing. It was more like, “You guys better get good grades, or this,” or “You guys better not fuck up, or this.” Legit ass-whooping, I’m not going to lie. That was rough. That was a lot of pressure on us too.
But, also, I’m very proud. He wasn’t much of an emotional dude. Like, “Here, Dad, we got good grades.” “Oh, couldn’t you do that shit from the beginning?” He was more of that guy. He was that dude. Of course, if we fucked up, here comes the ass-whooping, the groundings, or whatever. They were real, brother. Pretty damn real. So we’re getting whooped by a belt, then for him to graduate from the belt to the extension cord, that’s more like, “No, no, no.” That motherfucker stings. We knew, bro. We would try but, at the same time, because he wasn’t good at promoting when we were doing good, we just kind of...

That goes [with] my brother too, another very intelligent dude that I wish would have done more with it. “Could have, would have, should have.” He didn’t. It’s never too late, man. He’s doing well for himself now. I think me and him kind of just like, “Heh.” Well, he isn’t really too proud of his shit, so let’s just leave it at that. We get the bare minimum and sometimes he knows it. Instead of him figuring out the other angles, we can push this in. We knew he knew it; we knew he needed materials. Sometimes, he’d get my graded homework, be super pissed off. I’d get checked about it, but then he’d break it down to me, and I’m like, “Fuck, bro. Where was this prior to you checking me?” Exactly that shit would have helped a lot. He didn’t care much about PTA meetings. He didn’t give a fuck about that. He barely made parent-teacher conferences. That was more like, me getting punked. Like, “He’s fucking up.” “Oh, what?” Now I’m like, “Fuck, now, it’s my dad and the teacher, or the counselor,” or whatever it was. I dreaded that shit, but you couldn’t be mad at him. Their expectations, for sure, are always high, yet you couldn’t be mad. That’s one thing you always translate. Your job is school; make sure you guys kick ass.

JS: As you’re talking, bro, I’m thinking of all this knowledge you’re dropping. The distinction between educación and education and how you talk about your dad. Talking about el campo and
gusto, he would tell you and then seeing them. I remember también growing up, being in the garage, and my dad consistently talking about these things that he would do. Then me looking forward to these stories and then actually seeing them and being like, “Oh shit, that’s where you’re coming from and that’s what you mean,” and that resonating. Not only that, being the basis and foundation.... Dude, this shit did not click until maybe older. I’m like, “Oh shit, all the basis of who I am, as an individual, like, stems from that.” Me trying to problem-solve, and all that shit, stems from those stories, stems from seeing you do it in the garage. That stems from you hustling in the rancho. The way I see it, it’s almost two educations that you’re getting. School education and then you’re getting that core education.

DM: Correct. That’s exactly what it is. That’s where the hustler side comes in. I would give anything to have that. I was almost envious of a lot of people that had the brains. Not that I didn’t have them, but I just always looked at shit differently. I always looked at everything differently; as opposed to 90% of people looking at it this way, I always had to look the opposite way, check it out from that angle. That was always my thing, but that was always as the shorty. Again, I guess my dad couldn’t even understand this shit.

Growing up, my biggest thing was always cartoon. Animation would just call my eyes. I loved it. From G.I. Joes, that was on at that time, Transformers, Voltron. Him actually coming through, bro. As broke as we were, as hard as it was for him to provide and put his own, he killed it, man. When it would be Christmas, we had those little toys. To be amazed by that shit, it went so far. The fact that my brother and I were never bogus, as far as sharing these things, it was cool. When he wasn’t around, I’m like, “Alright, cool, let me grab his shit and play with it.” But then you’re analyzing everything. That was more of my doing, as opposed to people. Normal people would just grab it and play it, but I was like, “Man, this is badass.” Like, the colors, how
vibrant the shit was, the way they were made. That was always my M.O. That was always my angle. I guess that’s where I started feeling a little different, looking at [the] more artistic side of things. You never knew you had that in you. I wasn’t even going to school looking for it. I wasn’t. It wasn’t my thing. I didn’t look forward to coloring. It was more like, I don’t know, just shoot it and grab it all. It was more of that stuff. But yeah, man, it’s Little Village, but again, it was such a tripped-out neighborhood that my dad chose.

He allowed us to play outside. Of course, as soon as the lights came on, we try and go inside because it got very real. Luckily, we had families who live in the corner. There were three houses down at that time. A lot of great memories from there too. From the bogus-ass. The Halloweens are crazy. They’re all down 26th Street, man, and that’s when the gangs actually had a truce. That was actually pretty cool, kudos to them for that, where they would allow, at least, kids to go trick-or-treating. That’s when we had those crazy-ass plastic masks. Back in the 80s, Halloween costumes were hilarious, man. Everybody with the puffy jackets if it was cold. I remember all the storefronts giving us shit. It was really cool. Going to a laundromat with Mom, as much as I hate it, was actually entertaining, in a sense, to go. That shit was right in the corner. A lot of these worked in our favor, that they weren’t too far. But, yes, it was one of those where we always had to prep shit because we had to step out of the cradle. I can’t say it wasn’t the convenience of the house, but it was very close by. So it was kind of cool.

**JS:** That’s crazy, bro. You mentioned a couple of things. The toy thing, your Pops giving you toys for Christmas. You mentioned G.I. Joe. I have this bittersweet relationship with G.I. Joe; I loved it as a kid. The $3.00 toys, $3.00, $2.99, every time my dad would get paid every two weeks, if I got good grades, he would give me one. So, I loved that shit, but then that shit, because I grew up with it, influenced me into going [into] the military. I was like, “Fuck.”
DM: Oh, shit. Okay. That’s cool, bro.

JS: I wanted to be Sgt. Slaughter Moreira. That shit, bro.

DM: Yeah. You’ve ever seen that Sgt. Slaughter, then he got into wrestling. I was like, “Wait, what?” It was tripped out, bro. It was so dope. Thundercats, we had He-mans. It was really cool. We had Mold trans. Kudos to my Pops, as much as the hard-ass he was. I was having certain things that made the childhood for us. It was actually pretty fun.

JS: Danny, talk to me about your transition to Cicero. Moving from Little Village to Cicero. How did that come about?

DM: It was weird, man. Let me just take it back a little bit. I know I digress, a lot. Sorry for that. Thoughts are all over the place.

JS: No, you’re good, bro.

DM: It was weird, man. I was in first grade, still. Cardinal School. My brother was, at that time, was called Rapper Burns. My mom was out for having us not complete the year. We were already living in Cicero. We moved there. I remember because we were celebrating—my little sister was born—her first birthday in the house in Cicero in March. My mom was like, “No, you guys are going to finish school where you started.” I was like, “Fuck.” “At least this year. Next year, we’re going to get you guys started here in Cicero.” We were looking forward to the new school, but she’s like, “No, we’re going to wait, which is good when you start second grade.” We were taking the bus from Cicero to Cermak.

JS: Oh, shit. By yourself?

DM: Yeah, bro. Go picture that shit. I was six. My brother was eleven. That shit’s crazy, bro. By ourselves. No grownups. My brother’s job was to learn the route down Cermak, and not for us to get lost. If not, we’re going to get our asses handed to us when we get home again. The Fear
Factor was always the key. It always works. We figured it out, man. We would take the bus. We had [to] catch the bus on Central Park and Cermak. Now, you know how segregated we were. Being shorties walking around, under segregation, at that point, people were yelling left and right to us. “Hey, motherfucker!” We were like, “Damn, bro.” Of course, I get shook. I was six years old. My only go-to guy, at that time, was my brother. Hence, it was a relief whenever we saw the bus or the bus drivers. Like, “Alright. Cool, bro.” I remember, one time, we even missed the bus. My fear was I was going to get my ass whooped for being late at the crib. Bro, we walked all the way from Cardinal to all the way here to the crib. I grew up right here by Cicero and Cermak. My side started hurting because I was a shorty. I gave up on my brother by Pulaski Road. We’re hogged in another intersection. I was like, “I can’t anymore, Carlos.” I was begging him. “Let’s wait for the next bus,” but we had it wrong too, being young. “I don’t think the next one shows up for another hour.” "Fuck." I was all mad. So, those things, it’s crazy.

So, anyhow, when we finished that year, we come into Cicero.

**JS:** Carlos was eleven when this was taking place?

**DM:** Yes, bro.

**JS:** So he was your shorty’s age now?

**DM:** Correct.

**JS:** Essentially.

**DM:** And we were taking the bus already.

**JS:** Could you imagine your shorty doing that?

**DM:** That’s what I said, bro. When we told my kids that, they don’t believe us. Bro, I was getting the sense of the story at five, six already to go get shit. I dropped a couple of gallons of milk, I had my ass handed because of that. I hated it, bro. Then we moved to Cicero and I had to
do that shit here. I always hated to cross … Cicero Avenue because it was such a busy avenue and I wasn’t used to that. That’s how I learned.

That’s when street smart started to kick in. “Go get the *carnitas* for Sunday.” “Go get the *tomates* and *jitomates.*” I’d fuck that up and get in trouble. So you live and learn. “Go get the *epazote* not the fucking *cilantro.*” I always fuck something up, but you learn from this shit.

**JS:** But it’s a skill, bro. Now, you know how to pick a fucking *jitomates, tomates,* and shit.

**DM:** But that’s fucked up. You’re not supposed to be learning this shit at six, seven years old. Who does that? It was shit like that. But not even moving to Cicero, in a sense, it was fresh air. It was pretty dope. It was like a breath of fresh air. It was cool. There was actually parking, something I wasn’t used to. I will see five cars at that time. To me, that was a lot. I was like, “This is tripped out.” Specifically my block, that shit was full of two-flats. I wasn’t used to seeing buildings like that. There was a whole lot of them. I was like, “Where’s everybody at?” I was so used to 24th of everybody being out. Everybody. I was like, “Nobody’s here.” The few kids that I started seeing … We were the third or fourth Mexican family, at that time. There were a lot of Italians, a lot of Polish, I think it was. It was so weird to me because, again, we were one of the few families that was just so …

The dude next door, they owned a *paletería* at this point. The only *paletería* that was existing … in Cicero and Cermak. The dude was cool but they always had him on a short leash because his Pop was very strict. Not what I was used to. I was already used being a vago]. I was already six, seven. Already, I was like, “No, man. I like to eat in the street” kind of thing. It’s what I was used to over there, after we were doing at the home where we grew up. That was summer. You got to remember this is summer now. The school was done, we got over there to Cicero.
Then I became friends with people across the street, then we were family. That’s when the cool shit started to happen. Like, tossing the softball around, learning how to catch, learning how play football. Your parents were more at ease here, you felt it. They never told you that. It was very different from like, Little Village, but you almost see how at ease they were too. They didn’t mind that shit. Granted, they could just yell out the window and we’d be in there, opposed to them. You would not even be able to hear that shit. It was pretty damn cool, man.

I started second grade here. Here we go again, trying to meet everybody. I don’t know anybody except the dudes from across the street. Luckily, one of them was in the same grade, but we were not in the same class. That shit always sucked. That was my homie, Mario. That shit always sucked. But it was cool, at least, I could walk with him to school. That shit was always pretty cool. That was probably about five blocks down. Then my brother was stepping into seventh, eighth grade, at that time. He liked it. I guess he started getting into the chicks, and all that shit.

Same shit, sports. We were big into just tossing the football around. That was always fun, and softball. That was such a big thing to us, coming up. My friend Mario had older brothers and they all hung out with my brother. It was pretty cool. That’s where the whole Cicero experience started.

**JS:** In Cicero, you go through grammar school there. When did you start getting into the elements or like, Hip-Hop? Was it in high school?

**DM:** It was weird. A lot of this shit connects with my brother. It’s funny because he’s not into it like, I am. It’s just the fact that he always was into music. Some of this depend on... Like, on Sunday morning, Los Angeles Negros, Leo Dan, and all that. We grew up on that stuff. Alright, this is your parents’ music. It went from my brother making bootleg mixtapes. He recorded shit
from B96, Friday nights, or whatever, when it was the shit. Julian Jumpin Perez. You hated when the commercials came up because they fucked up your mix. It was that. It all came from that. But it’s just the fact that house music was so powerful. It was so impactful. I remember even the Kings, at this point, were breakdancing to house music or hip house. Remember that Eddie B. House just came out trying to wrap his shit. It sounded corny as fuck. I think he’s kind of corny, but whatever. He isn’t my cup of tea. But the fact that I was like, “Okay, this dude’s rapping. That’s pretty tripped out.” Then these dudes were breakdancing. Back then, they used to call it as a lost sport. The shit that they did in the ’80s. Nobody does that shit no more. Nobody does that shit. You will almost get clown. I remember how the goofy-ass ’90s dances started too. Do you remember? They had the show on Channel 26? Anyway, it stems from house. Then I was seventh to eighth grade now. I’m thinking, I’m going to grow up to be a DJ.

We used to have the school dances. When you were in junior high, when you’re touching seventh grade, you are now getting invited to these dances. To get live DJs that were coming from radio stations was a big deal to us. The school’s actually paying for that shit. To see that, I thought it was the coolest shit ever, aside from school or be, you know, everybody thought they were going to go to the NBA. Everybody thought. You always thought you’re going to be an athlete. You thought you were going to figure it out of the ’hood by becoming an athlete. Aside from all that shit, I thought that was the coolest thing. I was like, “Wow, man, the way these dudes scratch.” Just the scratching element, itself, blew my mind. The way the music would be thumping. It was this badass. “I have to learn how to do this shit.”

At this point, my dad had that old Fisher set up. Fisher radios with the big-ass 15-inch speakers. I was at seventh or eighth; my brother was already stealing these things in high school. Putting them in his car as fake sounds. The way he used to bootleg, I think he’s putting them in
the trunk, that was funny. And you’d bring them back. We’d always play with this shit. We messed up so many of his records, trying to play DJ. I scratched the fuck out of his Bee Gees records, his Beatles. To this day, I’m still trying to put all the collection that I fucked up for him. He’s like, “Hey, you have to stop,” but I’m like, “Bro, I feel so guilty for fucking up this shit.” Because I love music now. So I was like, “No, bro, I get it. You worked hard for this shit.” I lowkey try to surprise him every time with some vinyl. I love when they’re original copies, but that’s a whole different story. But, yeah, we’ve fucked up so much of his shit. Tapes, too. Like, when they would wind up, remember? Then you’d had your butch trimmed up with tape. A lot of that shit started from there.

We go to Mexico and then this is when El General and Vanilla Ice were a big deal. But, obviously, here, bootleggers are now big into that shit. They’re Mexico, their little markets had everything. So you’re buying these tapes full of music. I’m blasting this shit. I thought General was a fucking G. Dude was rapping in Spanish, but then there’s reggae sound and all this other shit. It was amazing to me.

**JS:** I remember what I sound and shit.

**DM:** Here I am, getting clowned. I come back over here. I start getting clowned by everybody. “Damn, you listen to all this shit?” But I didn’t know any better, I’m not into Hip-Hop. I’m not into LA. “Bro, that’s pretty cool.” Everybody was listening to just house and freestyle. I always hated freestyle, for the record. To me, they were always whining. It just sounded like grown men whining. That was more my brother’s shit, but whatever. I get fucked for saying that shit, so I got to be careful who I say that around. There are maybe five songs I can fuck with, but aside from that, shit’s a little too much for me. It just gets so repetitive.
But I always thought house is cool. When I kept hearing that we’re one of the major cities that put it on the map, it was always so dope to me. Again, I don’t think it ever got its credit even at that time like it was supposed to. I know it’s way more recognized now. Anyway, I got off of that shit.

My brother leaves. By this point, he had his own little collection of CDs and a few tapes. He leaves the rap shit behind. What are these rap albums? It was Cypress Hill and it was House of Pain. That’s when they jumped around songs. It was huge. I think he only bought it because of that. My brother was more like, whatever was hitting, he would buy. But I had nothing. I had nothing. I was young. If I’d asked for money, it wouldn’t happen. I wasn’t working yet. Again, he left during the time when I was about to start high school, so it’s like, “Dude, who was I going to ask for [inaudible]?” It’s funny because my cousins, the ones I was following around at this time, listen to more, like, to [inaudible] stuff. I wasn’t mad at it. It just wasn’t my thing though. I couldn’t get into it. But they were going out dancing. Again, I’m not that age neither. I couldn’t really understand why they were into this so heavy. They play it and I was cool with it. I even started fucking into something like, Tigre del Norte. I messed up this song, they’re pretty dope.

So, it was like, Cypress too. I think it was Temples of Boom that I played. To listen to that production that Mugs did on that shit to the way they were composing their stuff. Eventually, it just led me to the Fugees album; honestly, it changed the way I view music ever since and the way I viewed rap. That was pretty much it. When my brother was gone, like, I told you, I was so New York influence. I was just so appalled and I was mind blown by their movement. That wasn’t Chicago’s. I’m like, “Man, why do I only see graffiti in Little Village, but not here in Cicero?” It was kind of startling. Don’t get me wrong. Some of the best writers were coming from here, but they just weren’t doing their damage in the city.
That was crazy to finally start meeting them. I started meeting people that know my brother. This is where I meet Dios. Now, his brother and my brother get along. They’re in the party crew at this point. He’s already doing graffiti. He’s been doing it since he was in sixth grade.

**JS:** Oh, shit. Dios started doing...?

**DM:** He started super young. Super, super young. But everybody looked at him as a troublemaker. He’s a troublemaker because a troublemaker, he was already doing graffiti. He was already catching hands. We just tripped. He was always walking around the street. I remember, in sixth grade, this motherfucker always had streaks on him already. He met older cats because he was such a little kid. It’s relating. It’s like, me throwing my oldest just to those writers. Like, “Yeah, go ahead and hang out with them.” It’s weird and that’s how we learn, but that’s why he was so goddamn good too, I think. But he was always an amazing artist. Shoutout to Dios because all the graffiti aspect I got into it, I was just scared to fuck with it because I was like, “Man, I don’t want to get locked up.” You start thinking jail at sixth grade, it’s just not something I was trying to do.

So, I would hang with this dude. We played a lot of ball. The fact that his brother chilled out with my brother, they partied a lot. It was pretty dope. So we’d listen to the same music. When the Bulls era was the shit, we’re all into the basketball cards. We’re all into the comic book shit. Here he goes duplicating all this shit like it’s nothing bro. No light tables, no tracing. This guy is crazy.

Then here comes the breakdancing shit. We found an old video. Man, I don’t know how that even came about. Might have been his brother. No, it came from Little Man, that I met from down the block. I get his attention because I was also having it to lowriding. Prior to any of this
shit, lowriding was my thing. I had already built a lowrider bike closer. That’s what got Little Man’s attention because he was working on one and he’s like, “Damn, that’s dope.” That’s, basically, the icebreaker. Then we started hooping shortly after that. Then he brought, out of nowhere, I don’t know how we started getting into the breakdancing conversation. He told me he’s trying to learn how to dance, but then he had to leave. At this point, he’s already hitting windmills and shit like that. It was mind-blowing to me.

Then Arthur had just moved in. Arthur was living four or five houses down and he was on the same shit. He was learning a few steps and was getting really good fast. We will see Little Man get busy. Beat Street, we learned on their bedroom, where the dude start scratching and the brother is just doing back spins on the floor right there. That’s the exact same setup he had in his attic. I was like, “This is crazy. It’s just like Beat Street.” That was the advantage of his crib having an attic. Ours didn’t. We had a flat roof; this dude had the pointy roof. His parents gave him access to that whole attic. That was raw as fuck. Little by little, that became our hangout spot.

So here we are, middle of summer. We’re idiots. We’re sweating bullets up there, but it was just something to do. That’s where we got our practice in. Obviously, the graduating stage is we left the cardboard; we’re buying linoleum, then taking that shit on the alley. On our own, we all did it at the crib. “Your parents called.” “Yeah, they left with my little brothers or whatever.” “All right, cool.” So that’s when carpeting was in, so there was a little bit of cushion. That felt good. Move the coffee tables around, let’s get busy, let’s not mess up the TV. Let’s not hit the radio. Let’s not hit Mom’s ceramic figures. We had to be careful with all this stuff. Hence, I fucked up a lot of my mom’s shit. That’s what it was.
From lowriding, I went to hooping. So lowriding, hooping, and B-boying is where it all stemmed from. Truthfully, was everything else around already? Yes. The music out there, probably the most impactful shit for me was Cypress Hill and the Fugees. The dancing shit was just seeing Little Man. Here, we come up on the tape that teaches you moves. It was one of those where, I think, Vin Diesel gets clowned on. There’s a tutorial tape where he’s teaching moves. It was something like that. We were mind blown. Video was so bad. Somebody put house music over it, but it didn’t like, coincide with the dance. It was corny, but it helped us. To us, that was our tutorial. Our big brother. We couldn’t get it. We couldn’t get it. We couldn’t get it. Here I am being left-handed while Little Man’s right-handed. He was starting to explain while I’m trying it. It was tripped out, but that’s what it was. Eventually, "Hey, man, do you all want to try this graffiti shit?" It was already there, as I said, but now it’s like, "Let’s fuck with it too." So we just started doing it.

**JS:** So the breakdancing was more like, freshman year? Because when I met you that was my sophomore year. It must have been your sophomore year as well, or I was finished. You’re already writing by then.

**DM:** Yeah. So when I met you, I was already writing, but fairly new to it. Very, very new to it. What I always thought was cool, I dissected. The fact that MU Walls were already heavy hitters then and that shit came from here, I was just mind blown. Who are these guys? Then from the little peeps with the isms, which I’m super cool, all of them, I was tripped out. Kudos to all these cats again. It’s tripped out. All this shit we went through to them running the shots. Then chopping it up with them, and just burying the hatchet. Honestly, I started burying the hatchet prior to that. House parties and shit like that. Chicago’s so big but yet so small. How we end up in the same shit. I guess, when you’re into similar things, you’re going to bump into people.
It’s tripped out. Just seeing some of that, I was always intrigued by the art. The more we started writing lines, even though we weren’t doing it, it was just cool to always look at this shit. How do they do it? How do they fuck the can control? How do they do these 3Ds? Ernie, he was chilling out because I think he’s gotten in trouble by law, so many times already. We’re fairly young. When I’m trying to persuade him to paint, he’s like, “No, no, no. I don’t want to get in trouble, man. I’m actually trying to step away from this shit.” But you’ve seen how eager we were to get into it. I think that brought him back into it, but he improved himself. That’s when he started flexing with the can control. Boom, started legit fucking everything he was thinking about. It was portrayed in the wall. It was amazing. That shit was always dope to see. It was that dude. At this point, Little Man was such a good breakdancer, Samuels picked him up. They picked him up to be a B-boy for their crew.

JS: [inaudible]

DM: He was heavily influenced by their black books, sketch, photo albums and shit. So, he’s like, “Hey bro. Let’s start writing,” then that’s when I came across you guys. I was like, “Cool, man.” I’m already learning. Do this, do that, but I was like, “We’re going to do our own shit. We’re not going to follow no crew shit; we’ll just try our own shit.” And that’s how this started. I followed the TOC stuff around with you and then that house cool for a minute. So we’d really just chill like, average. “Let’s go back to what we were going to do. Let’s do our own shit with this GAO thing,” which has already been a thought for a long time. We’re just more influenced by B-boy and his shit.

Finally, “Let’s just try everything.” Here we go, bro. Out of trying nothing, we started meeting emcees, DJs. It was weird. Now, we got a full functional, like ... It’s the biggest clown, alright. Some people call it corny, but now we have all the elements going and shit. That was
tripped out. That was crazy to see when you go to Little Man’s attic. Like, MP’s spinning scratching. One more fucker freestyling in the corner. Here we are working on breaking moves. If you don’t want to do that, you go sit down with other motherfuckers. You’re sketching. It was tripped out. Or you’re sharing flicks or “Check this set out,” whatever. That shit was nuts.

We knew something was happening when Nora said, “Crews are coming.” When established crews are actually coming to chill. We’ll be in a party, it’ll be a random-ass Thursday, here we are at Little Man’s attic. Almost an obsession. It was weird. People still bring that up. “Man, I don’t know. We used to go to Cicero. Kicking with you all. Practicing with you all.” “Oh, shit. Yeah, legit. Real shit,” and that’s what it was.

For me, that’s where a lot of networking started. Good ole Chicago. Egos, and all the bullshit. “Oh, you’re swinging on his nuts.” No, it wasn’t that. I always saw room for opportunity. Then once we started doing that, that’s when we started getting them. By then, we’re driving [inaudible]. We’re sophomores. I had that minivan that my pops gave me. I’d flood that bitch with all the crew. That was fun. We’d go to sets that we were allowed to go in. They were all-ages shows to whatever.

For an hour, we’re going to take to the North Side. We’re so Southside-influenced, at this point. We’re so Cicero- and Southside-influenced. That’s all we thought we knew. Well, we thought we knew with the blue line, pink line, and orange line. Now, we meet Northsiders. How they crushed the Northside blue line. All their line. The red line. The styles start looking very different. I’m like, “Wow, bro. That’s enough, but this is tripped out.” Just come to find out, we just didn’t really have our history. Then when you start meeting more and more heads or certain crews, honestly, they’re all over the place. North Side and South Side, but they all merge when
they have to. It was just dope. Again, you’re onstage writing shit. I thought it was one of the dopiest things.

There’s a lot to learn more, but you wanted to absorb more. So that was my thing. It’s crazy. Unfortunately, that got me out of B-boy. I was so like, “Man, this graffiti shit’s pretty dope.” Then we just stopped B-boying. I was glad that we were taking a few shorties and they cut that out for a while, but then they’d tap out too.

It’s a trip. I do this with the kids now because, again, legit I’d say, a little over twenty years, of being out of that B-boy scene, and seeing that. We’re far from dope, dude. So I’m not trying to say here, like, I was one of the fuckers killing it. I’m far from any of that shit. I’m just a big fan. Me trying to learn it, that’s all it was. I loved all that shit, though. Going to those sets for life is fucked. Again, seeing the development from everybody, to see where they’re at now. Some even retired that were damn good, but we all grew up. We all have to do shit, so I get it. I get why I tapped out. I could only understand other people’s situations.

**JS:** Yeah. So, for you, the knowledge came from networking, essentially. It didn’t come from a mentor or someone schooling you. It was more like, “Hey, I’m B-boying, but now, all these people are coming into the mix, were having sets and shit.” I imagine it being something the university Hip-Hop where it’s just all the elements coming together type of shit, and everybody backs the thing.

That was, essentially, your knowledge. You tapping, networking, and talking to other people. It wasn’t necessarily, like, this old cat taking you out how to be like, or to paint, this is the style.

**DM:** Right. I was begging for that. I was praying that was my upbringing. So when I met a person like Ernie, and then he tells me, “Bro, how do you make paint?” when he was ten or
eleven. He’s like, “Bro, I remember you can’t have long hair.” I was like, “What?” I’d met him way later.

**JS:** Bold as fuck.

**DM:** Yeah. Then I was like, “What?” I met Kane after high school. But again, Ernie was always more, like, the shy cat. He’s not going to want a part of that. I was like, “Bro, go reintroduce yourself. They’ll remember you.” Even then, he was even apprehensive or hesitant. I was like, “Bro, just say who you are, motherfucker. They’re going to remember you. Plus, your skills, it’s not like, they’re going to be like, ‘Oh, you’re whack in skills.’” It just wasn’t his thing. You had to respect that. That’s why I was tripped out.

I was always, I guess, the manager for a lot of this shit. Like they say, you always need that, even, in this kind of shit. I never signed up to be that, but it just came with such ease. Then, as you know, I started scouting walls. I started to get a lot of hate for scouting walls, but I scouted shit. Why? Because, again, the Chicago Eagles. We weren’t going to beg a crew to be down with them. At [the] same time, we’re not going to keep sweating or painting on your walls. But what I had started doing, I started prescribing shit myself.

**JS:** What year was that?

**DM:** That was probably, shit bro, 2001, 2002. Yeah, I started scouting walls starting college. Then I got good at that. I got good at that. So, now, all these Cermak walls that are popping up, because if Cali and Cermak were already loud with the BTB stuff and we’re all right across the street. I said, “Fuck it. Let me go into the ’hoods,” so I took it a little further. Closer to us, even, we think it’s smarter. I won’t have to drive this far. And I started getting them. Then it got to a point where they’re like, “Hey, people are talking about you, bro. You guys are popping up too much walls.”
Here we are with 2022 damn near and street art is now. Now, everything is painted. Now everybody knows it’s a painting. I’m like, “This is insane, dude. This is insane.” So it went from me, like, I’m doing too much to look where it’s at now. But I’m not mad. Good. That was the plan. I’m not saying I’m responsible for any of it, but I’m glad I, at least, contributed for the homies that I love doing this shit with. The fact that we had our own walls, the fact that we were able to do it whenever we wanted. If we wanted to switch them up, we did. Eventually, it’s enough to leave them alone. Bang them out one time. Let’s get another one. Let’s get another one. It became that.

That became such a hustle that, eventually, I started scouting walls for these people that started painting ads on them. You know, Mountain Dew ads and Coca-Cola ads, alcohol ads, so on and so forth. Then I started to make a little money doing that shit. Why? Because I got this job. You really can’t buy them anymore with this kind of shit. Then, I just wasn’t really finding excitement with the P walls anymore. It was to cool to hang out, don’t get me wrong. I still love going, shooting the shit with people, talking shit but, for me, personally, it wasn’t there anymore. The spark wasn’t there anymore. I let it go. I was still managing walls. It gets ugly, every now and again, people started taking walls from each other. If I ever did that circle, it’s my bad, man. It all gets lost in translation up there with the owners and shit, but it’s never intentional or this, but it’s happened to us. Sometimes, it’s not even worth it. You’ve just got to let it go. You’ve done so many. Sometimes other people are coming up too. You got to think about that shit, when you were trying to come up with, you were hungry. Or say shit, you just let other people get down with you. “Here, bro. Just take care of your shit.” That’s what it became after a while.
**JS:** Danny, we talked about your educational trajectory. We talked about you getting started within the elements. Talk to me about what Hip-Hop represented in high school. How was it as an influence? Was it good? Was it bad? Negative? Positive?

**DM:** Aside from the little beef that was there because, basically, I was not accepted. I was like, the toy, I guess. Rightfully so. But, again, I guess I was always looking because I was so used to always following my brother around. I was always looking for that brotherly figure, or somebody to take me under their wing, and I just couldn’t because the ego was very intense. Now, I was still scared to go up to people and ask questions: “Who are you?”

A couple of homies that really showed me love are the ones that I would legit kick it with a lot during lunchtime. At that point, it was more niche, it was very lowkey. There were no clubs because eventually, clubs came about this shit and all that. “Let’s teach these elements.” It was none of that shit. We created that word, treated it like the skateboarders that are skateboarding downtown. Same shit, bro. We would run to the auditorium in the back because it was always dark. They had the slickest floor back then. It wasn’t like the gym floor. Of course, we all preferred the gym floor, but that was never a go. The teachers used to get pissed off.

We even used to breakdance on passing periods, just to try to show off your skills. That was crazy. So you had a five-minute little break and then, “Let’s get busy, bro.” Motherfuckers start rocking windmills. Somebody will start with the top rock and you already know a big circle just starts forming. It was either a fight or somebody was about to dance. But, again, not a lot of people were doing it. That’s what made that shit so exclusive to me. I think it made it so cool. I’m not about to get drifted off in this whole underground talk, but it was small. But, again, some of the people actually doing it were raw as fuck. I never knew that, but it was them pushing themselves to try to be better. So, when they perform with cats in the city or battle cats, they
already had skill. Here we are, toying as fuck. “Time to learn this shit.” or again to embarrass so we wouldn’t.

Eventually, you lose that fear and just start getting involved. That’s what it was. That’s what made it really special, I think. It was cool that it was so small, yet the handful of people that did it, you rolled out with them. Then, you went to 54th. Because 54 is pretty head of the water towers. It used to be head of a lot. That’s before the buff was initially taking over all crazy and shit. You still see shit up. It was cool to see that man. You were trying to look at their color schemes or the letter styles or whatever. That was pretty raw. Or same shit, “Hey, bro, this is going to change. Who do you have up?” That’s when you start seeing the high school. You all went to the writers that got up over there, or whoever’s closest to the Southside schools.

TNS was crazy at that time. Konami was crushing shit. 3XD was around, Amuel was around. Aerocrew was around. Kudos to all the cats. Then you would see the Northside crew sitters [inaudible]. It was a big deal too. Like, “What the fuck? What are these crews doing, painting out here?” That shit was dope. Again, it was just shit to do. It’s what kept us, I guess, the other shits were getting us in trouble. So more like, just riding the line and peeping this shit. That’s how basic it was for us, but at the same time, it sounds nerdy as fuck, but it was honestly really cool. Our challenge was to learn how to get on the train without paying. So you learn certain ways on how to get out of certain platforms and shit. It’s how you do it on Western. It’s how you do right here on Cicero Avenue. That’s how you do it there.

JS: Cool, man.

DM: That’s how you take transfers to go to the red line. We were bored, one time, we rode every line, I think, just to see who was up the most. It was shit like that. Here you go. You’re Evanston. It was just goofy shit. It was stuff like that. I wouldn’t change it for the world, to be honest. It
kept us away from trouble. It went from being so dope and being able to play freely to eventually being congested. The gang activity was crazy here to a bone. Eventually, all that should follow too. At least where we were from, Grant works every two blocks. It’s a different gang radius. That was whack because we didn’t grow up that way. Eventually, it’s free to become that and being very limited was whack.

Hence, why that pushed me to get the fuck away from the Cicero lifestyle, in a sense, and get more into graffiti, get more into Hip-Hop, because nobody was doing that shit like that here. If there was, it was a handful of people, but in a weird way, you’re still somewhat connected to it. Your cousin was still fucking with it. Somebody who’s either gangbanging still, whatever. It’s what it was. They looked at you like, “Yeah, whatever, you weird motherfuckers.” You didn’t know what they were doing. Honestly, it’s probably what kept us away from that shit. So it was kind of raw.

**JS:** You took this shit to another level, bro, because you opened up a store. You had a brand that revolved around Hip-Hop and shit. I have to ask one question: how would you define Hip-Hop? And what role has Hip-Hop played in your life?

**DM:** You see, it’s weird. You know, a lot of people are like, “Hip-Hop saved my life, this and that.” Rightfully so. I could be saying something along those lines, but I really don’t. I think it just helped me open up my eyes to a lot of shit. It made me appreciate artwork more. My parents are very close-minded. Maybe it was generations prior that we learn that eventually, people were doing shit with clothing, and so on and so forth within my family. But these are generation patterns to my dad or my mom.

It’s fucked up because they [were] never supportive of it. Like, “Turn that shit off,” was their shit for the music. From house to rap. Popular music doesn’t make sense. It just sounds like
this, sounds like that. The graffiti shit: “What is that? That’s not art. Stop wasting your time with that shit.” Boom. So you can’t be doing that shit in front of them. Even the breakdancing. I laugh because that was the thing. *Apaga esa chingadera.* They throw jabs at everything you did. It was weird. In a sense, you don’t want to show your shit. You don’t want to show your parents shit. I can’t tell you that I came from a supportive background; I didn’t.

My brother thought I was weird. I was weird. That’s when I grew up with him gone. He was in [the] Marine Corps. I was like, “No, bro, you’ve really got to check this shit out.” That’s when I put him onto Wu-Tang, and he couldn’t get it. He’s like, “Well, there’s too much.” I get it; it’s a lot of rap, but eventually, he fucks with it. But, again, he’s always been more open-minded in music than I was at one point. I give everything a chance because I take example from everything. It’s so dope. Have I learned a lot of shits from it? Yes, including my hustle sky. It’s taught me a lot.

I like taking risks and I like figuring shit out, as I told you. I always like the process. I’m always up for certain challenges. If I feel like they’re going to make sense or officially intriguing where they caught my attention, cool. I’m on board. It was that kind of stuff that I owe Hip-Hop because if you take all those key elements from the dancing, to the sketching, to anything, people are really passionate or serious about it or just enjoy doing it. The more you do it, like, the better you get at it, obviously. Or same shit, like, you learn how to be skillful. Where you were stuck in this lane, but you got outside of the box a little bit and boom, that was the answer you’ve been looking for x amount of months, years, or whatever. That’s what’s dope about all this shit.

Sometimes when you’re stuck in the same spot, it’s cool to take a step back. I think Hip-Hop has helped me a lot with that gun because I became more open-minded. Actually listening to people, not always just talking over them. Actually looking from their perspectives. The shop
helped me with a lot of that. Even these little spurts that I give it, like, I’ll take off for a bit and come back to it. I even did that with the shop. As I told you, I stopped painting because of my county job, but then you lose yourself too. I really felt like I lost myself. I’m not dancing anymore, I’m not sketching anymore, I’m not painting anymore. It was boring. It just can’t be work, work, work and really not having outlets. I’m not just going to run on alcohol, get fucked up all the time. That shit gets played after. At least, for me, it did. For some people, it works, then that’s cool. I’m not mad at you. It just started becoming whack for me.

There’s only so many Hip-Hop that I could do anymore. Venues started closing. As you know, Chicago venues is like, what’s their max? Three years tops for a lot of these spots, then it’s the new management, new owners. That’s whack because there were some pretty dope establishments once upon a time too. But yes, bro. I take a lot from it. It helps me grow. The fact that people could figure this shit out, and you can make a living out of it, I think is amazing. I don’t do that anymore. I got a taste of it and I loved it, but I feel like, I translate a lot of that formula to what I currently do. I do that shit.

Now I’m more into building projects and shit. I love the colors that I picked for this shit. I love the things that I choose. I love the way we’re going to do certain layouts, or whatever. I’m far from being good at any of that shit, but I like that it’s my ideas coming to life. That in itself is pretty dope. We’re not really reinventing the wheel. You just play with what you got, but how could we either make this better or make it your own? I’m cool with that.

The fact that I could teach that to my kids means the world to me too. That’s my mission in life right now. I’m going to teach them as much as I can. I always told them flat out: school is number one, and if there’s not much I can teach you there, thank the Lord your mom is super smart. She keeps schooling them as one of their best mentors. I have that agreement with her.
Like, “You’ve got them on this, I’ve got them on everything else.” So I expose them to a lot of stuff. I expose them to a lot of music. I expose them to a lot of art, a lot of graffiti art. A lot of everything. Mixed media, museums, you name it, we try it.

This B-boyin’ is the same shit. It’s so weird. How are these kids so good? No, bro, they’re a million times better than I am already. And these kids are only ten and eleven. The fact that I can sit there and coach them, I can’t say mold them because no, I’m not molding them to be me, they’re not going to be. They’re way better than me. One already has power. His power moves are pretty dope, while the other one’s learning styles. Do I wish they both had…? Yeah, I wish I could put both in one, but it’s not the case. This is their individual selves, their own style. That’s what all this shit is. Not every rapper sounds the same, not every graffiti writer paints the same, There’s the abstract art, there’s the straight letters, there’s a wild style. There’s all this shit. It just goes back to all of that.

Am I happy? Yes. Am I content? No, because there I go wanting more. But I want more for my kids. I know they’re little. Truthfully, I know they’re going to kill it. So I’m not trying to be cocky either, but they’re already at a point where they’re getting it. I just can’t wait until it really just comes out of them. I’m going to miss it. I’m going to miss that part too where everyone would no longer be sitting at practices. You want none of that shit. I know that’s about to happen soon, if they continue with it. Even if they don’t, I could at least say that was a dope chapter in our lives and shit, but I know that I introduced it to them and to a whole bunch of other stuff. Why? Because I’m sure you surround yourself with a lot of people that probably started off as a graffiti writer who are now some of the best people in the industry, in music, movies, or filming. It’s weird. It’s tripped out with this shit.
That’s what I love about arts, man. It just opens the doors for so many other things. Even some of my crewmates, they became phenomenal graphic designers, fine artists. Even at that shit. It’s tripped out. Then when you’re actually sitting with them, some people actually recognize them or recognize … their work, it’s insane. One of my other homies became a billionaire from video gaming. I know him through graffiti. From props to hex. Fucking hex, killing it out there. Almonds too. It’s crazy, I still have a lot of communication with these people. Everybody took different routes. We all used to chill once upon a time. I almost felt like I was becoming close-minded because I was away from all this lifestyle because I was not painting. “Oh, I’m not getting rich off of this shit.” When it becomes that, it’s all for the wrong reasons. That’s not it, man.

Once the spark that I thought was gone, I know it was time to take a step back. As much as I was trying to force it, I was trying really hard, I just couldn’t anymore. I will come and still help people fill in their piece, but my hands, me, losing, me not speaking up on it, or me not acting on it, I wasn’t improving. “I’ll probably be stuck at the same spot.” “No, I’ll probably even get worse.” I was like, “That’s not fair. Why am I taking up a spot too?” Just to say that I did something. That’s when I knew it wasn’t it anymore. That’s not everybody’s reason, but that was my reason.

And my babies are growing up too. So I stepped away from it for a while, bro. Then only with an opportunity to be like, “Hey, man, you want to be in the mix again, but not really doing it?” “Huh?” They’re like, “Yeah, but the business aspect of it.” I’m like, “What are you all talking about?” So they came to me, I’m meeting new people that were selling paint. I was like, “Well, I can’t do this shit here.” It started from me selling from the crib. So either I trusted you enough, you can come to my basement, pick your colors, and write out. Or I will meet you at
Walgreens. Just tell me. This is what I got in stock; let me know what you need, and I will meet you at the Walgreens down the street. That’s what I was doing. It got so huge.

At the same time, I was selling vintage stuff. The vintage stuff was pretty cool at that time. There was not a lot of starter hats, a lot of throwback shit, a lot of sports jackets. It’s Bears jackets, Bulls jackets. It was actually pretty cool. That, I enjoyed doing. It was kind of fun. It’s tripped out, bro. People will pay top dollar for me, doing a little bit of thrifting, whatever you want to call it or meeting people that sold to a lot of institutions. The way I would explain it is social media was fairly blowing up at that time, and it helped. Long story short, I decided to step into the shop. He’s going crazy. “I’m at the verge of losing the shop,” and I’m like, “What? Hey, dude, honestly, do you think I could rent out a space?” I’m looking at it in a barbershop perspective, where they rent their own chairs. I’m like, “Can you just drop me a glass case?” Now, he’s “forever grateful” and “I’ll hit you up.” I’ll just call my hours and lock my shit up when I leave and that’s it. I’ll just tell people to beep me. I’m tired of standing out of the crib, man, especially when my babies are there. Those were more of my team. I didn’t want sketchy people around. The old lady wasn’t really comfortable with that shit, either, too much. You have to respect that, too. You have to respect all.

So, I’m already working full-time. I’m working overnight. Then, I got two bins. They’re back-to-back, as you know. She’s going to school and it was me just trying to figure out life. And here I go, I just bought my new crib, so you’re paying a mortgage now. I have a family to feed. She’s no way approving this shit. She’s like, “How is this going to be, like, successful?” So it was one of those where you shut up. Kind of like, my parents throwing jabs at me every rip, everything that I will try to be proud of. It was back to the ashes. That’s just was like, “Fuck, bro. What are you doing?” It’s almost weird when you don’t have that support, you can go harder.
sometimes. Not so much that, “No. I told you so, I was going to show you,” but just to be like, “Look man, keep it quiet for a little bit. Look, it’s working. It’s working. Be cool.” It was more of that kind of shit.

Kane, he crossed the mat. At that point, he heard me out and he’s like, “Here, let’s just give it a shot. But basically, we’re not guaranteeing shit. If we go out of business, we are going out of business.” Someway, somehow, the building gets sold. Now, we got to move out of this shit. Here’s the real kicker: obviously, I couldn’t sell paint in Cicero. I couldn’t sell paint in Chicago because it’s bad. In Cicero, they’re allowing it, but you needed to ID people. It’s just something I couldn’t catch myself doing. I’m not going to ID these people. Eighteen questions, I totally get it, but the whole I-have-to-ID-you-for-everything, it was too much. I feel like it was too personal.

So, we moved it to Forest Park. We had an opportunity to go to Forest Park and I was scared. I was scared because, at this point, I was already doing orders. I was doing my little inventory. I was already figuring out how to shoot with working with the paint. Here, I am linking up with a guy that’s running the skateboard shop. I never skateboarded a day in my life. I always respected it, I never did it. Again, a very strong culture and I’m like, “Fuck, bro.” I’ve been out of the loop with the graffiti writers and the scene, here I am going into this shit. I don’t even know what it is right now. I’m basically going into this shit blind. I’m rolling the dice, but it was one of those where I had a good feeling about it. I’ve been selling paint and I’ve started communicating with a lot of people.

It’s tripped out because here comes the networking shit again. Little by little. It started working on the phone and it was pretty raw.
Then, here comes the kicker. Like, “Hey, man, let’s empower the brand or the name of the shop.” So Modest. He had already done a few ribs, don’t get me wrong. He had already dropped a few designs, but he was always like, “Hey, man.” The whole “It takes money to make money.” So we got to gather a little money; we could make some shirts, hoodies, so on and so forth. We got into the shop probably right when summer started. We didn’t open that shit until December.

**JS:** Oh, shit.

**DM:** Yeah. So we were paying rent, we’re like, “That’s [inaudible]. This is a disaster.” Then here we go. We opened the doors, and honestly, it went great. Then we sold a lot of our shirts. Started selling a lot of paint. We’re carrying vintagey shit. Eventually, a lot of streetwear brands. We started purchasing some other stuff and selling it. They were flying [off] the racks, man. It was dope. It was a hell of an experience. I got more educated on shit, more paint brands. Eventually started selling a lot of the accessories. It was really cool. That’s where I got to mingle with a lot of people. Even just seeing the passion behind the skate world, which I never had anything to do with, but I learned how to put skateboards together. The grip tape and the hardware and the wheels. It was crazy, learning what was what. It was really, really dope.

So, I’m forever grateful for that. Until this day, I still think about it. Every day. It was really dope. I met a lot of people there doing music. A lot of younger generations. You want to con them, but you can’t, because you have to hear ‘em out. You have to see what they’re thinking about, what their interests are. There are instances where they’re there for hours. They came up different. Now, I’m speaking to kids from Oak Park, River Forest, and all that shit’s. You have to understand their lingo.

But even some of that, we met some NBA players. Iman Shumpert went in there once.
JS: No shit?

DM: Yeah. Dudes from Do-or-Die went in there once. Those kinds of things are always like, “What the fuck?” I never liked limelight; I never wanted that shit. I love pumping everything that was for sale, but I couldn’t be, like, the one posting for travel shit. I let my partner do that or some of the homies, like the skaters. They had a little skate team going, I even started sponsoring some of the writers, that shit. No, it wasn’t my crew members. It was DC5, at that time. It was dope. Just because I always admired them, their history and all that.

It worked. It got to a point where people wanted to throw it up on their own. It was weird. It’s just the shop, it was just a name. Me seeing the Montana shop, the way it was me communicating with Lewis at that time, and the people that work there. I actually kept in touch with them. I admired them so much. Thank goodness for this job at the County. It opened the doors for me to know how to put money to the side and try to do some of this shit. Truth be told, I’m thankful for a lot of that stuff. It was really dope. It’s been a hell of an experience. Self-taught. I can’t tell you again, one of these things, I wasn’t held by the hand. Nobody pushed me to do [it]. It was just when and if I was going to do it, and I did. I learned a lot. Could have been extremely successful, but at [the] same time, life gets in the way. And we got to keep on truckin’.

My kids started growing up. Obviously, overhead is always a factor in business. My partner’s kids started growing up. It was a little hard. We couldn’t be the hardbodies at the shop anymore. Then you have to come back to the crib and have that be, if you haven’t been home all day. Kids and all those [things] that I was supposed to do. It’s hard. I get it, but I don’t even know how I was doing it. I was just sleeping four to five hours sometimes, tops. And just doing it all over. I did that shit for years, but I don’t regret any bit of it. It brought so many writers. We brought Ewok down, DZ down. We brought Alain. You name it, they were down here.
Obviously, networking. Some of these people are actually making a name for themselves in the game too. I’m super thankful for this opportunity. Thanks to Poz, thanks to Omens. ... There are a lot of people that I might forget. I’m forever thankful for all these opportunities because it takes a team sometimes. They don’t even know they’re contributing sometimes, but the fact that you could pick their brain a little bit, so on and so forth. Or fresh ideas come about, and it did, but that’s what I would do. I would contribute walls when I was no longer painting. When I got the shop, I started getting more walls. It brought that spark back. I already knew how to do it for these gigs, as I had told you. That was tripped out. It’s amazing to see how much it’s blown up.

Do I miss it at times? Absolutely, man. It’s cool how much it’s grown. It’s so awesome. All the way around, I think it’s been dope. Now, back to the drawing board with my kids. It’s funny that we’re getting to be one because we’re already talking Brandi. I can’t wait until they get into their own little style, but it’s already there. So that comes next. If they wanted, of course. I’m not going to force them into this. It’s not what I’m trying to do either where, “Damn, Dad, I hate you,” or be the drill instructor. I’m not trying to do that. I’m hoping they have the heart for it. If not, cool, man, but at least I know I can introduce them to it.

[END]
FOURTH ELEMENT: STEP-UP TIME

Every time I open a book now, I feel like, my innocence has been lost. I have climaxed in some ways. I am about to graduate with a PhD in hand, But I do not want to be a university professor anymore. You see, I am not a deadline writer or in the mood to shake a few dirty hands for the sake of upward mobility.
–Carrillo (2016)

The academic journey is a roller coaster. I appreciate academia because it has afforded me the possibility of upward mobility and peace of mind. I recently met with my methodologist, Dr. Mendez; he started by asking me a simple question, “What will you do with your Ph.D.? What is next?” Like Carrillo, I am faced with uncertainty upon reaching the finish line.

According to white logic, the purpose of a dissertation is to prove to the academy that as a doctoral student I can conduct research or produce new knowledge. While the project conducted is not traditional in the way the academy has come to think of research, it is in fact research and a production of new knowledge that centers my community. The focus of this qualitative project was an exploration of the formal and informal educational experiences of Latino students. We cannot study the experiences of Latino students without acknowledging the political and social structures that impact those experiences. At the intersection of gender and race, the lessons that Latino students learn from our cultural community—be it ancestry, community, neighborhood, etc.—have external impact as evidenced by the testimonios.

From the day I walked into first grade I can say I was not expected to be in this space. I was the dumb kid, given a coloring book, not worth the time or effort to educate. The reason I have been able to defy system expectations is because of my four teachers.

I work at a high school as an administrator; part of the job requires me to evaluate teachers both formally and informally. Yesterday, I walked into the classroom of Ms. Ramirez. It was an informal, unannounced visit. I was in there for fifteen minutes. I walked in and sat in the
back. It was Friday; students were getting ready to take an exam. During those fifteen minutes, I saw the possibility of education, identity fulfilled in the classroom. The class was a mixed classed composed of twenty-six students; eight were Latino, eleven white, the rest Asian and Black. Students were asking questions in Spanish and the teacher would answer, and then address the class repeating the question in English. The flow was organic, second nature. The test started and a student got up and stated, “Yo, Ms. Ramirez, [it’s] my turn, correct?” Ms. Ramirez replied with, “Yes, make sure you keep it clean.” Students as part of their classroom norm were allowed to play music while they took a test. They rotated choosing their music. I noticed kids bopping their head while jamming out. Identity reinforced within the school walls. This was not a bilingual classroom; it was not a music class. It was Geometry, regular-ass Geometry. I thought back on Ares, I thought back on my high school experience. I was hopeful. While my upbringing required all four teachers to create a certain balance, ancestral knowledge, my ’hood and Hip-Hop working to counter formal education to sustain and maintain my cultural identity, I wonder how dope it would be if the other teachers in my life did not have to work to counter to formal education. What if our Black and Brown kids felt their identity reinforced in educational spaces. What if. What if.

I used this entire album as my rehabilitation.
I made songs that inspired songs that gave me life.
I feel like, this album was kinda like, my angel that help heal me.
It revived my spirits.
–Kanye West (Coodie & Chike, 2022)

This process has been a trip. Doing something without a roadmap has proven to be extremely challenging; however, it has been such a privilege to be able to speak my truth in a non-colonizing manner. Like Kanye, this project has been a rehabilitation for me.
About a month ago, I did a friend a favor. He taught a course to graduate students embarking on the Ph.D. journey; he asked that I present my research. I was hesitant, but he was my boy. So, I put a presentation together. It was well-received; however, towards the end, I had a question that I was struggling to answer, not because it was a complex question but because it was such common knowledge to me. The question asked was, “What happens when Hip-Hop stops trending, when it fades away and ends, just like rock 'n' roll or disco before it did?” A white lady asked the question; I struggled to answer it for several reasons. Mainly because it was a stupid-ass question; think that to understand Hip-Hop’s impact, you have to experience it. Hip-Hop is not one-dimensional; the music does not simply define it. Hip-Hop is a culture; the most significant difference is that Hip-Hop originates with consciousness and deals with identity. In retrospect, I would have answered as follows: Hip-Hop is not a trend. It is not the latest top ten on the radio; Hip-Hop is not based on fashion. Unlike disco or rock, Hip-Hop is people’s consciousness, and people’s consciousness can never go away; it will never disappear. We are Hip-Hop.

3 It is important to note that there will be one last episode to this project. The epilogue. The last episode will aim to capture my journey in becoming a Dr. Sanchez, it will discuss the obstacles of creating a non-traditional dissertation.
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APPENDIX A: PRELUDE

[START] Jorge: Bienvenidos, welcome to The Latino Underground Podcast dedicated to the reclamation and exploration of Latino identity. Through counter-narrative stories, we hope to give you tools in which to navigate an oppressive system. Stay tuned.

What’s good, people? My name is Jorge and I want to start the podcast by giving you insight, some context in terms of why it is I decided to start this podcast, who I am, and I guess, why you should fuck with this, right? And essentially, just provide some transparency and some trust between you, the listener, and I, this can’t behind the microphone, right? I guess, I’ll give you an insight in terms of my positionality, where I’m coming from, who I am, and why it is I decided to embark on creating a podcast.

So, I’ll start off by telling a little bit about myself fast forward, in case you don’t want to get bored or whatnot. But yeah, I’m essentially a product of CPS, Chicago Public Schools of my group parents, both, my parents were migrants from Puebla, Mexcio. My dad came here in the late ’70s. And, you know, he came here, I think, like, many Latinos, many Mexicanos, right? Just come here for a couple of years, make a couple of bucks and then go back to Mexico and open un taller de mecanica. After a year, he grinded and he brought my mom and my two sisters. They stayed for about five years and my dad gathered, saved enough money to go back and open up his taller. You know, they packed everything they owned in Chicago and made their way back to Abuela. After being with Abuela, it was my mom’s decision to come back to Chicago with the sole purpose of having her kids learn English, and ultimately get a good education.

As I sit here, this shit kind of trips me out, in all honesty, because I’m currently in the dissertation phase of my Ph.D. I’m trying to become point three of the Latino population within the U.S. that holds the terminal degree. So, yeah, I’m just fucking grinding, trying to make it
happen and it just makes me reflect on the sacrifice of our parents, right? That kind of takes me into my work and why I decided to embark on creating a podcast.

My dissertation actually focuses on centering identity for Latino students and the reclamation of identity within the lives of Latino youth and how that identity is so important in terms of navigating oppressive systems. Let’s think about it like this. When we get into education, as Latinos, I have yet to come across a kid who isn’t excited about starting school. And somewhere down the line, that excitement is lost. And it’s my belief that part of that … loss of excitement is due to our systems wanting to assimilate us, essentially, taking our culture away.

We come in with certain values. We come in with certain traditions that are just not reflected within our classrooms. It’s logical, if you think about it. Eighty-three percent of all educators within the U.S. are white women, right? So if you come into the classroom as a kindergarten kid and Johnny or Susie comes into the classroom, whose experiences are going to be reinforced, yours or Johnny and Susie’s? It’s … no fault of the educator, it’s just the way it’s working right now and it’s f*cked up. And which is why I decided to create a podcast that will essentially talk about these things, right? And through it, hopefully, help some youngsters navigate this oppressive system and provide tools that I didn’t have growing up, right? That a lot of us probably didn’t have because we’re kind of out there on our own trying to figure this shit out.

So I guess my thought process behind all this is that if, through these conversations, we could reach a couple of students, a couple of youngsters trying to grind out there, then cool. So yeah, so while I will be talking to educators and scholars, Latinos who have experienced and who have navigated education, and who have some knowledge to share. Also, we’ll be talking to allies, Latinos. I also want to tap into a population that has traditionally been left out of the
conversation. And in my opinion, it’s a population that holds a great deal of knowledge, but for some odd reason, has not been given agency. If it’s something we’ve seen and we’ve learned over the summers it’s that this population does not want to stand idle and wait for agency to be given. It’s a population that takes agency. The population I’m speaking about is youth.

I want to tap into the knowledge base, see what’s going on in the classroom, see what’s going on inside the walls, what they’re experiencing. I think it’s important that we learn from them. Ultimately, I just want to have conversations that are going to empower our community. They’re going to move our culture forward. These conversations have not been seen as valuable from the lens of Western education. Latino conversation, Latino stories have not been looked at as valuable and thus, have not had a place to exist, that it’s over and done with. We’re here, you know, we hold a great deal of knowledge, so I want to make sure that I’m able to capture that. And again, this is through my lens, right?

So growing up, one of the things that really centered my identity and basically gave me some fucking stability was Hip-Hop, and graffiti was an outlet. It was a way for me to really have a voice in a school system that didn’t allow me to have one. So, when I was feeling shitty because of the fucking teacher that has been an asshole to me, I went out and painted.

I think it’s important to touch on those things, to talk about those outlets that allow us to maintain, right? Because whether we like it or not, we developed these outlets organically. They’re a way for us to maintain, to survive in a society, in a U.S.-based society that has purposefully upheld racism and used whiteness as a weapon against marginalized communities. I mean, if we’re keeping it real, privilege has been sustained through purposeful systemic programming. That’s meant to benefit whiteness and suppress Black and Brown.
So yeah, I think having these conversations is extremely important. It’s important to be able to name and dismantle these oppressive systems. So having the conversations, I think, will help a larger community. Bueno, thank you for listening. I truly appreciate it. My plan is to drop one segment a week so stay tuned and stay safe.

[END]
APPENDIX B: QUESTIONS

**Topic: Counter-Narrative Story / Hip-Hop**

**Intro:**
When did you first realize there were inequities within our educational system?

**Counter-Narrative:**
- Tell me about yourself?
- What is your earliest memory of school?
  - Describe your overall educational experience
- What role did education play in your household?
- Who and how was support provided during your educational trajectory?
- How was smartness defined?
  - Did you consider yourself smart... why/why not?
- Did your identity ever feel validated in school?

**Hip-Hop**
- How would you define Hip Hop?
- Can you give me a brief history of your discovery of Hip-Hop?
- Please share your experiences with Hip Hop within a school setting
- Please share when and how you became aware of Hip-Hop along with what it has meant to you overtime.
- How did hip hop help you in school?
- Top 5 Hip Hop artists
- Is there anything you want to share that I did not cover?