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“My only weapon is force”: Rap as ‘Post-Literate Orality’

Cultures possessing a deeply rooted oral tradition are hardly a new phenomenon. While “orality” describes a multitude of civilizations, previous manifestations of orality did not develop within a literary culture. This is precisely where rap departs from them: Rap developed as an oral trend embedded *within* a literate society. Hitherto, rap has been limited by the dominant tendency to force it into the category of orality, which by its very definition it does not belong; it is not simply an oral tradition in the sense that it is not pre-literate. It has been introduced to literacy and has yet resisted total incorporation into such a system. Walter Ong distinguishes between “primary orality,” a term which describes a culture that has not been introduced to writing, and “residual orality,” which refers to a culture that has not fully incorporated literacy. This is an important distinction to make in light of hip-hop, which more or less falls into the latter category, but not entirely. What, for instance, should be made of rappers who are fully literate and *employ* literary techniques within an otherwise oral art form? The aims and effects of such a third genre are difficult to imagine precisely because it lacks historical precedence. However, to begin to examine the genre requires an understanding of the nature of orality versus that of literacy.

Modes of communication, whether oral or literate, determine the ways in which we conceive of ourselves and others. Western thought since Descartes informs us that to be a self is to be a conscious being—“I think, therefore I am” (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*). Before modernity came to this conclusion, however, ancient civilizations had

different understandings of the self. The ancient Greeks believed that to the ability to affect (or disrupt) the constituents of the world accounted for being (Stocking). In the *Iliad*, Phoenix tutors Achilles to become a “speaker of words and a doer of deeds” (Homer, 9.338-444). Embedded in such an endeavor is the assumption that the effectuality of words is equivalent to the effectuality of action. Words are tools to physically change the world—they belong to the speaker and thus denote subjectivity.

The cultural differences exemplified by Homer and Descartes may be ascribed to the distinct modes of communication each inherited—literacy and orality. To borrow from Damian Stocking, oral cultures (including rap), belong to what we may call a “subject-metaphysics.” Literacy, on the other hand, belongs to an “object-metaphysics.” In a subject-based metaphysics, the word is a literal thing wielded as a tool. It is, in fact, the ability to fuse his “speaking” and “doing” which accounts for Achilles’ greatness. In such a metaphysical posture, words belong to a Subject and are used to shape things.

In the modern Western world, however, words are ideal Objects existing beyond all subjects. That is to say that we submit ourselves to words and to the universal conventions of language: standard spelling, correct grammar, and so forth. This is known as “literacy.” When the mode of communication changes from verbal to written, the “I”—formerly the Subject that moved things—is now moved by an exterior Object. We conform to the ideal-stable object: Literacy. A book is an object to which we conform our thought. To be literate is to be sensitive to and moved by the object. In love, we tell the so-called ‘object of our affection,’ “I am nothing without you;” the loved one literally defines our existence. That is essentially to say, “I am affected therefore I am” (Stocking, lecture).

Rap, then, is the contraliterate rebellion against the ideologies of “object

metaphysics” in which literacy implicates us. To be contraliterate (and not simply pre-literate) is to consciously return to the metaphysics of the subject. It is a disposition of determination to move the world that manifests itself with a verbal dexterity employed to undermine the other (which can be the “hater,” the opposing rapper in a battle, or really any other object) with the purpose of self-affirmation.

However, before I can qualify these enormous claims and apply them to hip-hop, it will be necessary to set a theoretical framework by which to understand orality. Writing is not ancillary or even secondary to orality; it is another form of language altogether. We tend to think of literacy as the record of the oral and therefore belated. Temporally speaking this is true, but the oral and the literate are in fact distinctive forms of expression. To suggest that one is dependent upon or a transformation of the other is to disregard the fact that they are simply aside from one another, and each implies a different metaphysical proclivity. Orality suggests an external posturing because speech is necessarily shared—it cannot exist without people to use it.

Furthermore, speech has an immediacy without a mediary (Near, lecture). In Ong’s view, writing is the reification of the word in the visual and its distancing as an independent mediating force. This stands in opposition to speech, which can be defined as an immediate and direct exchange that subsequently disappears entirely. (Generally, speech cannot be preserved in the same way that writing naturally is.) An oral relationship is thus not a mediated relationship; it is instantaneous, as a person’s utterances are immediately apprehended by the receiver. This is a very different kind of psychological order that creates a social order much different from that of literate culture. The human community in an oral culture is entirely tied up with an intimate sense of interdependency. Speech does not mediate relationships, and “to think of it as a *tercium*

quid is to reify it” (Near, lecture). It lacks substance aside from its immediate exchange in oral culture.

Conversely, literate communication is necessarily mediated; writing itself is a mediary. We can discuss it as a third thing because it *is* a third thing; it is aside from the two subjects, author and reader, and is an object unto itself. We exist in a literate culture and within all of the byproducts of literacy, such as the singularity of truth, which is essentially the reification of truth is the “letter.” ?(This is not to make the reification secondary; it is simply another gesture.) If language isn’t objectified through writing, then what language produces as communication cannot be seen as isolated from the act of communication itself. The ‘truth’ is immediate within an exchange, not externally to it.

"By separating the knower from the known," Ong theorizes, "writing makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world quite distinct from itself, but also the interior self against whom the objective world is set. Writing makes possible the introspective religious traditions such as Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam" (Ong, 105).

Indeed, literacy suggests an internally-directed state of consciousness—reading and writing are deeply private acts. Texts inform and ossify modes of thinking and viewing the world; they are the foundational texts upon which culture is continually developed.

Oral cultures, by definition, have no foundational texts, only common themes, characters, archetypes, or tales that can be shaped to meet the specific needs of the teller. Consequently, communication is always in flux; nothing previously thought or said is extant. Products of oral traditions are thus regarded as terrible unknowns; they do not speak to those of us in literate cultures, which is in part why rap is so unsettling (Near, lecture). In *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, Ong describes the temporal

nature of orality; language exists only in the moment of its utterance and then disappears. We operate on a literate model, so it is difficult for us to imagine language as simply temporal; that means there is no source or orthodoxy.

There exists in literate cultures the inattentive presumption that orality and literacy are mutually exclusive, that literacy is the point toward which cultures make a natural, linear progression. Is this so? However, the endurance of orality within broader literate cultures makes such a distinction unsuitable. The two modes of communication do not necessarily function only in the absence of the other:

Orality and literacy are not two separate and independent things; nor...are oral and written modes two mutually exclusive and opposed processes for representing and communicating information. On the contrary, they take diverse forms in differing cultures and periods, are used differently in different social contexts and, insofar as they can be distinguished at all as separate modes rather than a continuum, they mutually interact and affect each other, and the relations between them are problematic rather than self-evident.

(Finnegan, 175)

Indeed, oral and literate traditions very commonly mingle with one another in our post-modern society—the *Māhabāratha* served as the basis for the eponymous 1989 film by Peter Brooks, and the *Rāmāyana* was translated into its animated version for Cartoon Network India in 1995. These pop-cultural references to products of orality in a literate culture abound, but the very fact that either of these Sankrit epics has been written is basis for some understanding of the curious intersections between the literary and the oral. In the process of being transcribed into physical texts that we can refer to, the epics are rendered “literature,” a designation which would hitherto be inappropriate. The *Māhabāratha* and the *Rāmāyana* are in fact products of a strong oral tradition, but in

their transcription they underwent a transmutation—an induction into literacy that ossified the tales that had, until then, been in somewhat of a state of flux. The process of transcription renders the product of orality a different thing.

Now that I have given a general overview on the distinction between these two modes of communication, I will turn my attention to what it means that rap is an “oral” culture within a heavily literate one. In his chapter “Radio and the Rediscovery of Rhetoric,” Havelock discusses a radio speech as a “work of improvisation [that was] genuinely oral” (Havelocke, 33). But little within rap, aside from freestyle, is “genuinely” oral. Now that hip-hop has outgrown its modest roots to become a mega-culture unto itself, its lyrics are generally written (sometimes by someone other than the rapper), refined, and recorded, unlike most oral artifacts. Perhaps rap proposes itself as non-literate in its refusal to submit to standards of literacy (for instance, its use of vernacular language), but this is only part of the picture. I do not wish to suggest that rap is somehow disingenuous; rather, I feel that the genre is separate from both literacy and pre-literate orality. Havelock suggests that

...the technology itself which [broadcasts is] the child of the alphabet, of literacy, of documented definitions, of printed manuals of procedure.
/ What had happened [in the speech] was not a reversion to a primeval past, but a forced marriage, or remarriage, between the resources of the written word and of the spoken, a marriage of a sort which has reinforced the latent energies of both parties (Havelock, 33).

Hip-hop is a somewhat parallel situation—it uses the technology made possible by literacy to the ends of continuing an oral tradition. Ong describes such a culture as “an orality which functions in a literate context, as a ‘secondary’ form of orality” (Edwards,

6). The technology of radio (and equally importantly, television) is primarily a tool of dissemination.

The aim of this contemporary form of “secondary orality” is difficult to examine and understand precisely because it is aside from its historical precedents. To examine the genre requires an understanding of the metaphysical nature of orality, of which I have already given an overview. Briefly again, oral poetics, including rap, imply a power dynamic; word is a literal thing wielded as an instrument used to shape the world. Where there is little or no literacy, people relate to each other in patterned, rhythmic speech; more linguistic stylization occurs and a great deal of emphasis is placed on verbal dexterity and a brand of wit that is highly memorable. This is necessary in an oral culture since ideas cannot be referred to beyond their vocalization. Thus to have influence, a “speaker of words and a doer of deeds” must express himself in a way that will be remembered—hence the stylization of language, rhythmic patterning, and rhyming. Rap clearly fits this description, as audience members come out of freestyle battles recalling impressive rhymes and clever turns of phrase.

But equally, auditors remember the most penetrating “disses” of the evening. While not all of hip-hop deals in pistol-packing or misogynistic violence, there is an inherent agonism to hip-hop that finds its roots in the “rap battle.” I feel that this agonism is a conflation of the object and its subject, but more importantly a deep hostility toward objectification. In his 1981 *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness*, Walter Ong describes the male tendency toward agonism within oral traditions. “Western intellectual life, from Aristotelian logic to modern jurisprudence, grew out of reflection on verbal combat” (Toolan, p. 13). Ong describes an “extrafamilial, sex-linked, distinctively male language that carried with it the old agonistic mind-set and thought

forms" of an oral culture, which describes well the combative rhetorical style of hip-hop (Toolan, 13). Here, Ong is referring to the Catholic Church's use of Latin, but the agonistic quality of rap language is indeed parallel. We can examine Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's lyrics in their song "Mo' Murda"¹ as evidence:

Gotta kill, get 'em nowhere to run
Can't get away from my shotgun
Leavin' them bodies fucked up,
Pump pump to the ground better leave it alone,
Nigga wanna die when fuckin' wid,
Mo' Thug nigga we killed this bitch,
Now you wanna catch some bang bang
Nigga wanna die when I let my nuts hang,
What is it in me makes me feel like I gots ta murda' ya?

What happens when there is a form that is simultaneously intensely linguistic and agonistic in quality? Michael Near has theorized that its aim is to totally destroy the object (Near, lecture). The shotgun, the mangled bodies, and the "bitch," in "Mo' Murda" are a series of objects. While the song is clearly degrading, it also distances the subject from the object. It is, in fact, a rejection of objectification—a rejection of object-metaphysics. (This appears to be contrary to many critiques of rap for its ostensible "objectification of women," but this is not in fact the case, as I shall shortly discuss.) Violence is necessarily against "things." Psychological or physical violence can be done, but not to an idea, only to a *thing*, especially a person. The agonism of this song is directed at the object-metaphysics. This hostility to objectification establishes the subject, which presents itself as the rapper. To degrade the other in contest is to authenticate the

¹ It is notable to add that this song was produced by Ruthless Records, and is on an album that also contains the tracks "Land of the Heartless," "Me Killa," "Shotz to Tha Double Glock," and "Die Die Die."

self.

This is not merely a metaphor, but a very literal phenomenon. There is a certain expectation of “street credibility” within the hip-hop community, a curious requisite for being taken seriously as an artist. 50 Cent, for instance, was a relatively minor rapper until he was shot several times, after which he almost immediately signed by Eminem and Dr. Dre. Ironically, the bullet he took to the jaw actually impaired his speech, greatly decreasing his verbal skill. Still, the rapper refers to this shooting in several songs as a testament to his potency:

I been shot nine times my nigga
That's why I walk funny
Hit in the jaw once,
Why I talk funny...
How dare these niggas take me lightly?
I ain't come to make friends
And niggas ain't gotta like me
(50 Cent, “Fuck You.”)

In the verse, 50 Cent sets up an explanation his impairments that actually lend him a hard-edged mystique. The rhetorical question (“How dare these niggas take me lightly?”) suggests that his handicaps are in fact additional reason for reverence; that he could survive nine bullets is a confirmation of his prowess. The affirmation of his own violence, and the ability to eschew violence inflicted upon him, is a declaration of his being in the world as an agent who can violently disrupt his surroundings. No external object—no bullet—has the power to disrupt him, however. In the context of his song, he triumphs as the supreme subject.

As many theorists have roughly described, “...oral language...is pre-eminently

interactive; that is, an oral performance operates by means of a critical bond between performer and audience, a bond which Ong (1982: 43-5) describes as ‘agonistically toned.’ All members of the oral community are drawn into this interactive performance by linguistic exchanges, such as praise and blame, boasts and self-blame, and verbal abuse” (Edwards, 12). David Toolan examines the basis of the agonistic tendency of language within oral cultures:

Unlike the literate person who may react to anxiety by withdrawal, the oral personality usually takes his anxieties into the marketplace. As Ong puts it, ‘the individual is psychologically faced outward ... he directs his anxieties and hostilities outward toward the material world around him and chiefly ... to his fellow man’ (*The Presence of the Word*). / [In some instances] the ‘fellow woman’ is the target. For in almost all oral cultures, as the constraints of a rigidly hierarchical and conserving society break down under the democratizing impact of literacy, one finds men reacting to adversity with either passive aggression or the violence of out-of-control machismo. (Toolan, 15)

The hostility described is indeed often directed at women in hip-hop, whether the rapper directly discusses the feminine or simply uses the rhetoric of femininity to degrade some sort of opponent. In this first example, Eminem describes his urge to physically beat a pregnant woman:

Now I don't wanna hit no women when this chick's got it coming
Someone better get this bitch before she gets kicked in the stomach
And she's pregnant, but she's egging me on, begging me to throw
her
Off the steps on this porch, **my only weapon is force**”
(Eminem, “Drips.” Emphasis added.)

This is a very literalized example of the brutalization of women of hip-hop, a point of deep concern within the feminist community, and rightly so. It is therefore necessary to

account for the inherent violence of rap before venturing into a specific examination of the place of women in hip-hop. My primary concern at the moment is to discuss the emphasis that rappers place on their own Subjecthood. In this excerpt from Eminem's "Drips," the speaker claims that his "only weapon is force," a point which very neatly sums up the psychology underlying a subject-metaphysics.

In this second example, however, the rapper Slug of the duo Atmosphere describes a male object of address in feminine terms to degrade him and ultimately affirm his own superiority as a rapper:

You should have stuck with the original plan: To be a little man □
Should have kept it simple, before the shit hit the fan
Give the kid a nipple cause he sucks
Take the microphone from his fist he doesn't know how to clutch
You wanna treat it like a playground?
Well we can joke about your take down
And let your pride get hurt when I tug on your skirt
Like 'Shut the fuck up! Professionals are tryin' to work.'
And to the people that don't feel us: Fuck em'
Don't need em', can't see em', never leave em', never loved em'
Stuff em' full of dick till the hole rips
And let em' know that's what they get for that ho shit.
(Atmosphere, "The Bass and the Movement.")

The specific references to the feminine, as such, are all clearly demeaning to women. To begin with, the suggestion that a poor rapper is like a woman in that he metaphorically wears a skirt is to suggest that women have no place as rappers. This is a dual pronged attack, dependent, as it is, on a combination of infantilization and effeminization, which creates a hermeneutically sealed system of masculinity that by definition must always exclude the feminine.

This is a common critique of male rappers, and a valid one; hip-hop is often flouted for its hyper-masculine and misogynistic tendencies. However, the degradation of the object in hip-hop is not confined to men doing damage to women. Male and female rappers alike use language that is harmful to women, and are equally violent and degrading to whatever their object of address is. The voice of the rapper, regardless of gender, is not entirely gendered. The main purpose of rap is thus to destroy its object—the Other—which is often the female, not necessarily so. Here is an excerpt from Jean Grae’s “Hater’s Anthem”:

I’ll battle rap you until your gullet starts to leak
Gnash your teeth, smash you, then bond your feet...
That’s Jean, the definitive minister
The sarcastic wit boss, your spitter competitor
The un-cosmeticked-up, shit-on-your-pedestal
The sanitorium released the most unforgettable
Most of dirt, I’mma tear off your face and
Lock you in the box and watch you burn in a closed space
Big face, get your shit taken and replaced with a tickin’ case
That’s strapped to your waist...
I’ll drop you out a window
Make you literally drop dead
(*Fuck you* x 24)
(Jean Grae, “Hater’s Anthem”)

While the voice is in the second person, the addressee is not directly referred to, it is simply “you.” Although the object of address is left entirely ambiguous, Jean Grae declares what she “is” (a “spitter² competitor,” and so forth) and the violence she intends to inflict upon her object. The lyrical content is obsessed with defining the self as the

² To “spit” in this context means to rap. “Spitter competitor” thus refers to the opponent in a rap battle.

actor in the world, an aim that requires the total annihilation of the other in contest. In doing so, the speaker becomes the supreme subject. Grae is primarily concerned with announcing her subjectivity, which means destroying the “you,” whether it is male or female. The point is ultimately to overcome the other.

The rapper Bo\$\$ uses a similar tactic of violence to affirm the self:

I was born to start trouble so they labelled me a gravedigger
And if the five-oh step, that's when I blast another
Twenty question-askin' punk cop motherfucker (yeah)
Don't make your move before you think
And fuck the judge, the jury and the god damn precinct
So you can see the total picture
Watch your back cause the fact is that Bo\$\$ is like comin' to getcha
(Bo\$\$, “Comin' to Getcha”)

Again, the rapper uses the second person point of view to refer to a vague and anonymous addressee, who is used as the register by which to measure the subjectivity of the speaker (Stocking). The objects that are actually referred to, the “punk cop motherfucker,” and the judge, jury, and precinct, are verbally trampled upon, glorifying its own opposition to the powers that be. Even the rapper’s pseudonym, Bo\$\$, posits the self as inherently possessing control.³

In her essay “Playing the Other,” Froma T. Zeitlin discusses the phenomenon in Greek tragedy of female characters being used as the Other by which to define the masculine self:

³ Ironically, though, the double dollar sign used in lieu of S’s suggests that there are some objects that rap does have –money is one of them. Rap is strangely partakes in the simultaneous degradation and valorization of the object—a topic I will have to take up at a later date.

Even when female characters struggle with the conflicts generated by the particularities of their subordinate social position, their demands for identity and self-esteem are nevertheless designed primarily for exploring the male project of self-hood in the larger world; these demands impinge on men's claims to knowledge, power, freedom, and self-sufficiency...*Functionally* women are never an end in themselves...When elaborately represented, they may serve as antimodels [for the masculine self]. (Zeitlin, 69)

This is a feminized version of my own thoughts—Zeitlin suggests that the object aside from the self has one clear function: to serve as what she calls “the anti-model... for exploring the project of self-hood in the larger world.” In rap, this anti-model is often the female, but not always. It is, however, always an object to be iconoclastically destroyed. Lil' Kim's song “Suck My Dick” is a total defiling the male to the ends of describing her own subjectivity:

Bum bitches know better than to start shit
Niggas love a hard bitch
One that get up in a nigga's ass quicker than an enema
Make a cat bleed then sprinkle it with vinegar
Kidnap the senator
Make him call his wife and say he never coming home
Kim got him in a zone beating they dicks
Even got some of these straight chicks rubbing their tits
[laughs]
...Imagine if I was dude and hittin' cats from the back
With no strings attached
Yeah nigga, picture that!
I treat y'all niggas like y'all treat us
No Doubt! Ay yo, yo
Come here so I can bust⁴ in ya mouth
(Lil' Kim, “Suck My Dick”)

⁴ “Bust” here is used to mean “ejaculate.”

Unlike the previous songs I discussed, Lil Kim's actually addresses men ("niggas") rather pointedly, defiling them by suggesting that she wants to ejaculate in their mouths.

However, she equally debases all the other objects in the verse—the "bitches" at the beginning, the senator, his wife, and the men she is sleeping with. There are two female objects (the bitches and the senator's wife) and two male objects (the senator and the "niggas")—all of which experience similar humiliation. The rhetoric Lil Kim uses is masculine to a great degree (the song is called "Suck My Dick"), and so power is implicitly aligned with masculinity. However, this language is used only insofar as it intends to bespeak force, and not for to the ends of degrading the feminine in *particular*. No object is spared defacement.

It is difficult to account for hip-hop's third way. There is much to consider when discussing its curious status between the oral and the literate, including the lack of access to literacy in places where rap has developed, and the growth of hip-hop in a culture saturated in sound recordings that change the essence of oral tradition. But perhaps the post-literate orality of hip-hop is a contemporary re-establishment of a certain way of conceiving the world, one that resists the dominant mode of being in modern literate cultures. The hostility to object-metaphysics means the upholding of the self as supreme over the static and objectified institutions held dear in literate cultures—love, law, and religious piety. In its rejection of these ideal-stable objects, hip-hop develops a violence that spares nothing, for nothing is sacred.

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