

Views from the Bricks: Notes on Reading and Protest

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In reflecting on the African American protest tradition and the outsized role of storytelling as one of its most profound tools for reasoning through social unrest and social injustice, I believe our ability to understand Hip Hop music's complicated messaging will be essential to examining critical responses to legal and social victimization. For me, Hip Hop remains vital to discussions of the African American protest tradition and to the critical work of reflection, healing, and organizing. The recent rise of Hip Hop songs, such as Kendrick Lamar's "We Gon Be Alright," as popular protest songs are testament to Hip Hop music's function with the lives of marginalized people (Limpong). Moreover, Hip Hop artists' skillful manipulation of multimedia resources across several digital and print platforms represents a bridge between tradition and social change. The podcasts, music videos, film clips, memoirs, interviews, and even tweets from these artists represent textual compositions that move seamlessly across genres, reading communities, and institutions. Thus, Hip Hop protest songs produce a type of literature designed for careful rereading, yet the processes of reading and method provide new and rich entanglements between texts, authors, genres, and platforms.

I am reminded here of Todd Boyd's measured observation in *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the Hood and Beyond* that "rap can be used to analyze the mutually illuminating yet divergent categories of race, class, and gender in African American society. [Because] [m]ore often than not, questions of race dominate both popular and critical discussions about rap music" (39). Yet, rap and its broader cultural practice of Hip Hop music remain largely on the outskirts of cultural, literary, and rhetorical studies—a side dish often served up alongside the main course. I often wonder: what can Hip Hop's visual and verbal compositions provide our understanding of racism, police brutality, or youth cultural activism? Although Hip Hop-based education and Hip Hop scholarship continue to increase and grow, Hip Hop's role within African American Literature, for example, demands a change in approach to its conception and relevance (Jennings and Petchauer 220). In their essay "Teaching in the Mix: Turntablism, DJ Aesthetics and African American Literature," Kyesha Jennings and Emery Petchauer make an intriguing case for reimagining how conversations between older and newer Black writers can occur. For them, the DJ's approach of simply introducing new songs thematically or sonically linked to earlier songs of different genres models a type of skillful reimagining of African American literature as discussion occurring across time and taste (221-222). This method is called a "drop," literally the

dropping in of a new song on top of the previous, which symbolizes the creative ways DJs use reading and research to bring together texts that share unrecognized commonalities. What might we gain from rethinking the juxtaposition of Hip Hop music and older literary texts within the African American writing tradition as a series of synchronous and asynchronous conversations occurring across time?

Ralph Ellison's response to writer Irving Howe's essay, "Black Boys and Native Sons," is instructive here (Gates and McKay 1361). While I will not go into the substance of Howe's criticism or Ellison's rebuttal, paraphrasing Ellison's distinction between ancestors and relatives adds to this discussion of Hip Hop and the African American literary tradition. As Ellison explains, Black writers *do not* choose their relatives—those associated with them because of ethnic and discursive commonalities—but they *do* choose their ancestors—those who shape their thinking, voice, and dispositions (1361). My question then becomes, what writers might we consider ancestors and what writers might we consider relatives? I asked this question as I rewatched some of the more spirited protest performances presented at the 2020 BET Awards and songs released in response to Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd. What conversations or strategizing might erupt from placing James Baldwin's essay "Notes of a Native Son" in conversation with rapper Da Baby's remixed performance of "Rockstar" at the 2020 BET Awards? How might readers benefit from a complex discussion of Hip Hop R&B artist H.E.R.'s "I Can't Breathe" in relation to Audre Lorde's "A Litany for Survival"?

These multimedia Hip Hop compositions come to represent a type of mobile Black literature that is both symbolic and explicit in its criticisms of the state-sanctioned police violence and the repression of Black voices and identities. H.E.R.'s "I Can't Breathe" video represents an obvious homage to the *suppressed* voices of Eric Garner and George Floyd, who both uttered the tragic phrase prior to their murders at the hands of police officers, in 2014 and 2020 respectively. The impassioned song serves in many ways as a call-to-reflection and a call-to-arms. H.E.R. uses slow methodical drumming to highlight the unstated tension bubbling throughout the song. The video is peppered with clips of modern protesters marching at various sites and under varying conditions. The names of Black victims are shown throughout the video slowly filling up the screen.

In many ways, the slow pace of the song, the impassioned chorus, and the crafted spoken word poetry for the third verse of the song all capture and mimic the painful witnessing of George Floyd's protracted death that viewers of the recorded scene and live witnesses had to bear (I must take time to say her name, Darnella Frazier, the young woman who recorded Floyd's last moments and played a crucial role to our bearing witness to his unjust death). I am reminded of Karla Holloway's discussion of the complex intermingling of law and literature

in understanding both Black life and the white supremacy guiding many of the more arcane legal practices of the U.S. in her work *Legal Fictions: Constituting Race, Composing Literature*. Holloway notes, “If law can make a man, it can unmake them. Not unlike a critically ungendered (but fully sexualized) reading of Frederick Douglass’s struggle with his slave master Covey, legal boundedness is always a storied and contestatory struggle with the potential of the fully human” (53-54). As she goes on to express later in the book, Black bodies provide a contradiction of sorts to the American legal system, a reminder of the illegality of its historic actions toward Black people and its persistent struggle to address the legacies of promoting a people as property and evidence (77-79). This is embedded in the ways the legal system fails to effectively judge the differences between inhumane treatment and the protection of property. These contradictions abound and maintain a tenuous and painful relationship that is both instructive and devastating. Protest songs such as H.E.R.’s “I Can’t Breathe” capture the struggle of negotiating a contingent humanity within a deadly, racialized policing system, and they press us to rethink our collective beliefs about “order” and “institutions.”

Visually, the complex pairing of critical lyrics with stimulating visuals adds another dimension to contemporary social protest compositions. The rapper DaBaby’s remixed performance of his song “Rockstar” as well as Anderson Paak’s recorded performance of his single “Lockdown” for the 2020 BET Awards both stop to reimagine and articulate—through simulated violence—the kind of “contestatory struggle” (Holloway 53-54) over one’s humanity that appears in much of African American literature. While I appreciate what such performances by these two “mainstream” artists suggest about the direction of Hip Hop protest writings, I think what scholars of Hip Hop might provide for many of our angry and hurting communities is a way of processing these complex verbal, visual, and sonic elements. This dynamic manifests itself within Hip Hop music prior to these artists’ performances. For example, Pharoahe Monch’s intriguing short film “Clap (One Day)” represents the kind of politically charged compositions that anticipate the digitally circulated deaths of Black persons at the hand of police officers.¹ “Clap” begins with a white plainclothes police officer asking a Black informant about the whereabouts of a suspected criminal. Under duress, the informant provides the officer with the address of the unnamed suspect’s family and would repeat for viewers the apartment number of 1D, shown visually in the plainclothes officer’s notebook. A team of police officers dressed in riot gear and black wool face masks are then shown aggressively approaching apartment 1B (in obvious error),

¹ The song appears on Monch’s W.A.R album (*We Are Renegades*), which was released in March of 2011 to much critical acclaim. The short film is directed by Terence Nance and written by Nance and Kevin Nelson.

the home of a Black mother and her young son, shown readying themselves for their day. Next the mother is forcefully pulled from the apartment and silenced with a hand over her mouth as the officers search the apartment, and the young son is shown with headphones on entering the bathroom. Seconds later, the son is shot dead by an unnamed Black officer played by actor Gbenga Akinnagbe. The horrified officer is haunted by this tragic mistake throughout the rest of the film, and in a state of extreme guilt, he begins to see a silent Black audience of mourners applauding his mistake everywhere that he turns. The film reaches its climax when the unnamed officer experiences a psychotic break in a local cemetery and is himself shot, while wearing civilian attire, by another unnamed Black officer in uniform.

In the Black signifying tradition, the “clapback” functions as a derisive response to an unwarranted provocation. A speaker, attacked verbally, uses wit and clever timing to respond with equal or greater derision than their adversary’s initial insult. However, the clapback moves beyond the realm of the dozens and signifying, as its redress to a perceived slight, especially racially tinged slight, bypasses any consideration of playfulness unique to signifying and exerts a type of linguistic force on its target. Monch’s reference to this verbal practice takes on greater symbolic meaning, as the clapback has also become a reference for individuals returning to fire to an assailant shooting at them (“I had to clapback at those fools shooting at us”). Cleverly, Monch adds another layer to this term, suggesting that a clapback can also be a type of witnessing that both shames and questions those who participate in procedural police violence. I come back to Monch’s video in part because it highlights the possibilities of Hip Hop music in challenging viewers and readers to rethink how particular artists participate in Black rhetorical and literary protest traditions. Keith Gilyard and Adam J. Banks illustrate the numerous ways African American writers such as Monch, H.E.R., and DaBaby have strategically employed tropes, symbols, and coded language to reframe for readers and listeners the numerous perspectives that inform the collective dispositions of Black people (5). As they also note, these writings often present a narrative quest for freedom that has been instructive and enduring.

I won’t pretend that any analysis alone will significantly change the way police brutality or anti-black racism is discussed. Yet, the sweeping views of each video illustrate the need for further discussion of these texts by language and culture scholars. To develop an integrative view of Hip Hop within the Black Protest tradition requires a vivid reimagining of that tradition for an audience that moves seamlessly between tweets, podcasts, film clips, and reading selections. English and Cultural Studies curriculums have always remained sensitive to the value of historical events and influential social movements. The next phase of inquiry should include interrogation of the multimodal presentations of texts that speak

to the broad emancipatory interests of Black and marginalized people. To blend such work into conversations about past writing and writers presses the tradition forward in ways that mimic the fluid movement between rupture and flow that Hip Hop DJs use to work their magic on the 1s and 2s. Moreover, such an approach asks readers, critics, and scholars alike to begin to expand the ways Black writers are discussed, presented, heard, read, and reconsidered. If African American protest literature arises out of a need to respond to varying unjust social phenomena, then it is never absent of emotion or politics, and it is always a reflection of our collective beliefs about a people's humanity and their evolving understanding of what freedom should look like.

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