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English 403

Getsi

Talkin' 'Bout: The Oral Poetics of Hip Hop

It seems overly simplistic and obvious to say that sound is an important part of human existence. It also seems a safe assumption to say that oral poetic forms have existed since humans began to communicate with more complex sounds than grunts. And as cultures and civilizations grew and developed we can find many examples of how these poetic forms have been put to use. It was largely through oral storytelling (mostly poetic) that a people's identity was sustained; history, beliefs, myths, and much more were passed along in this oral poetry. We need only look to the Greek and Latin epics, *Beowulf*, and many other similar poems as support for this claim. While there seems to have been some significant changes in oral poetics, as we have shifted from an oral culture to a print-oriented culture, contemporary oral poetry (specifically in the form of hip hop lyrics) continues to serve many of the same purposes that it has historically. Oral poetics never disappeared completely through the shift from oral to print; rather oral forms seem to have changed along with the shifting emphasis to print and visual poetry. We have gone from epic, and all of the conventions that come with that form, to lyric forms in hip hop that serve many of the purposes historically served by much longer oral forms. Here I would like to look at hip hop, a genre rarely treated seriously as a poetic form, as being one of the best examples we have of contemporary oral poetry.

Why Sound Matters

Before moving into how and to what purposes oral poetics have and do function it seems important first to understand why oral poetry matters, that is, why sound matters. Let's look at a rather whimsical example to start this discussion. Before doing anything else, when I wake in the morning I turn on some music. Regardless of what the actual music is, the sounds filling the room help me to refine myself after a night of silence. In other words, the sound of the music "situates me in the midst of a world" (Ong 29). Not only does the music make me conscious of a world around me, it also helps to make me aware that I am a part of that world. Walter Ong would say of my morning ritual that "[s]ound situates man in the middle of actuality, and in simultaneity, whereas vision situates man in front of things and in sequentiality" (28). This seems especially true for my mornings, where, after waking, my vision renders the world around me (even in front of me) blurry, but my hearing immediately gives me a clear sense of the world around me. But Ong's statement of the power of sound goes well beyond my attempts to orient myself in the morning.

What is immediately striking about Ong's argument in "Auditory Synthesis: Word as Event" is how it runs contrary to the visually-oriented culture of contemporary times. In today's visual culture knowledge is validated when we "see it in a book" and even to some extent when we "see it on TV." But knowledge is questioned (sometimes to the point of being labeled gossip or hearsay) when its source is purely oral. If in responding to the question "how do you know" I remark that I "heard it somewhere" the knowledge that I proclaim is immediately questioned. Whereas if in responding to the same question I reply that I "read it somewhere" my knowledge is given some validity. Contemporary culture seems to imply (and to some extent reinforce) the idea that real knowledge is found in some visually recorded form (typically in books) and that

anything oral/aural is not to be trusted. And while Ong seems to agree with this to some extent (he is writing a book after all), he is arguing that the true power of the word, and therefore the true knowledge contained in that word, can only be found in the oral/aural form of that word. That is, we cannot truly understand any word until we speak or hear spoken that word.

Part of the power of the spoken word seems to be the ability for speech to not only contain the meaning, but also the context surrounding that meaning. At least this is the case when the speaker and listener inhabit the same time and place. In cases of recording played back later it could be less true, though not entirely false, and I would argue that in cases where listening to a recording does not transmit the context that recording should be viewed more as a written text than as pure spoken word. Being present at the time of utterance allows a listener the opportunity to identify aspects of the meaning that are largely lost in printed form, such as clues into what in the text is ironic, what is serious, what is comedic, etc. The written word is devoid of these contextual clues (e.g. inflection, intonation, body language, etc.) that allow a reader/listener a complete interpretation of the text. Certainly conventions have arisen in printed works that attempt to help the reader detect such things as irony, but none come close to the effectiveness of the contextual clues found in speech. To reinforce this idea we need only look to ironic texts, such as Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, which are often misinterpreted by readers. While authors writing in this mode make certain stylistic choices (tone and others) to help the reader detect the intended irony, many readers are not able to detect or comprehend these clues. Those same readers typically do not have any trouble detecting the irony when listening to the same text vocalized.

It seems problematic then that our culture has largely moved away from orality/aurality to a dependence or perhaps even a reliance on the visual, specifically the printed word. The

proliferation of the written word, first with the invention and spread of the printing press and later with the rapid spread of the Internet, has made information dissemination much easier and has also put more information within the immediate reach of more people than ever before. But there seems to be some separation between reading a text and actually having a complete understanding of that text. Much of the information we have access to in print seems to be what Ong would call explanation, that is, information that allows us to "know more and more about less and less," a brilliant description of the Internet if I've ever heard one (28). Expanding upon this idea Ong states that explanation "provides of its very nature an extremely limited participation in actuality" (28). This is a return to his earlier idea that the spoken word holds more power and is closer to reality than the written word.

It is at this point that Ong's argument becomes somewhat frightening. If he is correct, that orality offers something more than print, which does seem to be the case, then large portions of our culture and society would seem to be missing out on at least part of the real meaning of the words they are reading. For Ong, reading is largely a visual act, much like looking at the landscape around us (29). When we look at the landscape we are only able to see what is directly in front of us, if we want to see what is behind or on either side we must change our point of view by turning our head or body (Ong 29). In other words, while all of the landscape exists around us at all times, our vision of that world is limited by our ability to only focus on one small portion at any time. It is impossible for vision (at least human vision) to give us a complete picture of the world around us at one time. Sight, for Ong, is a sequential sense concerned only with surface (29). By extension then, reading (at least in its most basic form) is concerned only with what is immediately available at the surface of the text. This is especially worrisome because we know that printed texts contain more than what we see at the surface;

however, it seems that many readers today are unable to move beyond this very basic surface reading.

Ong positions sounds as a partial solution to this dilemma (29). In contrast to sight, hearing is a sense that is able to experience the entirety of our surroundings (29). And while sound may be presented sequentially (as sight presents the world to us) it is largely a nonsequential stimulus. Birds chirp at the same time as a car honks all while children yell, and I am able to hear and comprehend all of these things as happening at the same time rather than in some sequential order. Also, while sounds and hearing have the ability to present surfaces (e.g. the RADAR and SONAR like use of sound by some animals), it goes beyond the surface level to present us the interior of objects. If sound were not able to present interiors a porpoise (using sound as a type of sight) would interpret each object as the same, instead because of the nature of sound that porpoise is able to distinguish a fish from a wooden decoy (Ong 24-25).

Ong takes this idea of sound presenting interiors further though. He posits the spoken word as the main and best way that humans can connect on anything more than a surface level (26). For Ong, the spoken word (voice), while in some sense very much exterior, is born of and housed in the interior (26-27). Speaking requires us to turn inward before we make part of that interior an exterior. But the voice does not stop there; it is taken up by a listener and moves into her interior causing a turning inward from the exterior (Ong 26-27). Thus, a complete connection is born which is not as readily possible with the written word. So it would seem that if we truly want to connect with one another we must rely on sound our voices to do that for us.

A Brief History of Oral Poetics

It is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss any poem as being purely oral since we live in such a print-oriented culture; however, it seems plausible to say that much of the ancient poetry that we

read, though written originally, was likely never intended to be read on the page. It does not seem very likely that a poet like Pindar would have intended his odes, with their rather complex, polyphonic strophe/antistrophe/epode form, to be read from the page. While it is not impossible to read Pindar's odes from the page, the poems seem to lose some of their meaning when read from the page, even when read aloud by one voice from the page. The odes seem almost like a dramatic script for performance by a chorus rather than any type of written poetry. The idea of the polyphonic chorus is an interesting concept that seems diminish as people move from tribal societies to much larger, more organized societies (e.g. city-states, republics, etc.), it would seem that as societies become more complex there is less of a need for a polyphonic voice to speak for the whole. And the choric voice is one that also seems largely to disappear with the shift from oral to print culture; however, we will see examples of something close to a choric voice in contemporary hip hop later.

Other lyric forms that developed in Greece provide added insight into how oral poetics in Greek and Roman poetry (and likely oral poetry of earlier periods) differed from oral poetry that would come later. When we examine the personal lyrics of Sappho and Catullus we see that there is much more emphasis placed on hearing in these poems than there is placed on seeing. Ong might say that the speakers in Sappho's and Catullus's poems are attempting to connect on a more personal level than the lyric writers who would come later (Sydney, Spenser, Shakespeare, etc.). We can see this emphasis on sound and orality especially well in this excerpt from one of Catullus's poems:

That man is seen by me as a God's equal
Or (if it may be said) the Gods' superior,
Who sitting opposite again and again

Watches and hears *you*

Sweetly laughing— which dispossesses poor me

Of all my senses, for no sooner, Lesbia,

Do I look at you than there's no power left me

(Of speech in my mouth,)

But my tongue's paralysed, invisible flame

Courses down through my limbs, with din of their own

My ears are ringing and twin darkness covers

The light of my eyes. (1012)

We can see that even when vision is brought into the poem it usually evokes some oral or auditory event, such as the speaker being struck silent at the sight of Lesbia. This emphasis on sound is not unique to this specific poem; however, it does seem to be unique to this particular time period. By the Italian and English Renaissances, and certainly after the widespread adoption of the printing press, there is a shift to emphasizing the seeing of the beloved rather than the hearing of the beloved.

While the lyric and ode forms were important to ancient oral poetry, the form that is perhaps most often associated with oral poetry is the epic (at least classical epics like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, etc.). It seems safe to say that while the Homeric epics seem to be written by a single poet their origins are much older and stem from an oral storytelling tradition (Newman 362). Even after Homer finished his versions of the two poems it seems likely that they were most often shared orally since most people at that time would not have had access to written

texts or the skills to read those texts. In this way we can think of the classical epic as largely an oral form, thus it is the epic that epitomizes what we view now as the major purpose of oral poetry: to communicate important aspects of a culture from generation to generation.

Most of the extant classical epics we have serve, among other things, to pass tradition, history, myths, and customs along from one generation to the next, therefore keeping the culture alive. And it seems that this is largely the purpose in most oral poetry that we still have examples of, as well as much of the oral poetry that we see throughout history and into the contemporary period.

A Brief History of Hip Hop

Hip hop, known to most as rap, got its start in 1970s New York City, although the roots of hip hop quite possibly extend back much farther. As Nelson George says in the introduction to his book, *Hip Hop America*:

At its most elemental level hip hop is a product of post-civil rights era America, a set of cultural forms originally nurtured by African-American, Caribbean-American, and Latin American youth in and around New York [City] in the '70s. Its most popular vehicle for expression has been music, though dance, painting, fashion, video, crime, and commerce are also its playing fields. It's a postmodern art in that it shamelessly raids older forms of pop culture—kung fu movies, chitlin' circuit comedy, '70s funk, and other equally disparate sources—and reshapes the material to fit the personality of an individual artist and the taste of the times. (viii)

While, as George mentions, hip hop is not limited to music it is hip hop as a musical genre that has been the most popular and widespread aspect of the culture. According to the *Oxford*

English Reference Dictionary, rap is "a style of black popular music with a pronounced beat and words rhythmically recited rather than sung" ("Rap"). This rhythmic recitation over a "pronounced beat" sounds a great deal like descriptions of how Greek lyrics and epics would have been recited.

Hip hop, in its relative short history (only now approaching 30 years), has experienced a number of changes. What started as a craze at New York City dance clubs quickly spread to clubs around the country. From there, hip hop has gone on to reach almost every corner of the United States. Like every other musical genre, hip hop has also seen changes in the music being produced at any given time. The music has gone from upbeat, positive dance anthems like the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" in 1979, to the even more whimsical "Parents Just Don't Understand" from Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince in 1988; from Arrested Development's incredibly political "Tennessee" in 1992 to the wildly publicized gangster rap of Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dogg, and others in the early '90s (George 60-64). It should not be assumed from this brief list, though, that hip hop has followed any sort of chronological transition between these different forms of the music. Even in all of its different forms, hip hop is at its heart an oral poetry, relying heavily on rhythm, metaphor, and rhyme for its effect.

The Oral Poetics of Hip Hop

It may seem strange to talk about hip hop as being a poetic form, for most of us, our knowledge of hip hop is based mainly on the bad publicity surrounding gangster rap and other incidents that reflect poorly on the hip hop community. However, for every incident of this nature in hip hop there exists a positive aspect to the community and to hip hop as poetry (even some of the music to come out of the gangster rap movement and similar movements is at times poetic). And like classical oral poetry, much hip hop seems to perform many of the same purposes; hip hop seems

to convey a cultural history, the shared beliefs of the hip hop culture, the language of the time, and the list continues. As an example of how hip hop can function like other oral poetics, let's look at Jurassic5's "Remember His Name," a song that attempts to personify death as a shadier member of the community.

The song begins as a phone conversation between two speakers discussing the television coverage of a recent murder and the identity of a certain person seen in the background of the scene:

SOUP. It's me Daakir

And I was sitting at the television feelin' disturbed

Yo I just got the word of Denker and 83rd

Some cat that got clapped

AKIL. (Gangsta rapper?)

SOUP. Perhaps

But I was looking at the face of one particular cat

Now I done seen him before

AKIL. (Can you remember where at?)

SOUP. Well it was either at the liquor store or laundromat

Or at a party n' shit

A drive thru of the Quick 'n' Split but

The fellas he ran with they no longer exist (Jurassic5 1-13, sic)

Immediately the main speaker of this section, Soup, has identified with his audience (both Akil, the other speaker, and the audience at large) by putting himself in a familiar position to many.

While this is not unique to hip hop or any other oral poetry, it is an important part of storytelling,

especially in a culture as saturated with competing information/entertainment sources as our own.

The poem then moves on to a long passage from Akil where he describes the person Soup is trying to identify. Akil's description starts with his own experiences with the mystery person:

I've been knowin him all my life
 Ever since I was young
 I used to see them shooting dice
 On occasions I would see him once or twice
 With all types, many different walks of life
 He tried to keep in touch
 But I knew what was up
 Every time he came around and showed his face
 I duck (Jurassic5 16-24, sic)

Again, Akil is trying to identify with his audience with this passage since many of his intended audience will have similar life experiences as the one he portrays here. In this way Akil is also transcribing a shared history within the hip hop community, much like classical oral poets would have done with the epics and lyrics that they wrote. Just as when a new character is introduced in classical epics with a brief history of the character that is also an encapsulation of the common history of the culture, Akil introduces himself in a way that echoes a shared history and constructs his persona as a credible source on the topic at hand. Akil then continues his historical look at the mystery man (Death) by discussing others' interactions with Death in the hip hop community, eventually connecting this personification of Death to the drug trade so

often associated with hip hop: "My homeboy Johnny kicked it with him in a jail cell / A lot of people met him with a female / Doing real well, connected with the drug sale" (Jurassic5 33-35, sic).

In addition to setting up the history for his audience, Akil also introduces the metaphor of Death as a drug dealer/gang member:

The rich and the poor

For better for worse

The last and the first

Walk the earth but can't avoid his turf (Jurassic5 36-39, sic)

While this is a common trope in poetry, Death as the great equalizer, it remains a powerful image. And Jurassic5's attempt to associate Death with an illicit member of the hip hop community is an interesting twist on this image.

The song continues with Soup turning to the two other voices of Jurassic5, Chali and Marc 7, to see if they can identify the mystery man at the murder scene in the opening of the song. Chali and Marc 7 then relate the story of an encounter they had with Soup's mystery man:

CHALI. They wanted to make us more than play dead

Flashing his heat

MARC 7. Two cars were moving fast in the street

CHALI. That's when I meet that dude

Was in his back passenger seat (Jurassic5 76-80, sic)

The description that Chali and Marc 7 provide further connects Death to the underworld of hip hop, to drug dealers and gang members. Chali and Marc 7 also repeat Soup's and Akil's inability to identify the mystery man: "But still I can't remember his name" (Jurassic5 82).

The song ends with some refrains of earlier lyrics and earlier descriptions of Death personified and then with Soup realizing whom he has seen on the television:

O, yo
 you know what?
 Now I know who homie is
 His name is
 Death (Jurassic5)

This seems to echo the repetition and explication we see in classic oral poetry that both helps the poet to remember the poem and helps to allow the audience to recall the characters, plots, themes, etc. from the poem. Further, the layering of description upon description to build the image of Death as an illicit member of the hip hop community strikes me as similar to the layering and repetition of characters' descriptions in classic epics.

But is it really poetry?

It is very likely that we will continue to view hip hop as being outside of poetics, but I would argue that this is a rather short-sighted look at the importance of the poetry at work in hip hop. While I have tried to show the ways that classic oral poetry and hip hop share similar purposes in their efforts to convey histories and beliefs from generation to generation, there are many other connections that can be made between hip hop and classic oral poetry that are too complex to detail here. Briefly these other connections include the style of composition for each form. Albert Lord says of formulaic oral poetry (i.e. oral poetry based around a set of formula or themes that is more or less composed anew during each recitation) that "[b]ecause poems composed in the formulaic style have no fixed text, they are not, and cannot be, memorized, for the text is never the same even in performances by the same singer" (Lord 864). We see this

often in hip hop performances, where a rapper's skill and prestige is often determined on how well he or she is able to improvise (known as free styling) around a certain topic or theme.

Viewing hip hop as a form of oral poetics also raises questions regarding a potential return to something like the polyphonic choric voice. These questions are foregrounded by groups like Jurassic5 where the members of the group take turns speaking and from time to time speak in a polyphonic, unified voice. While this paper does not fully explore the idea of hip hop as a poetic form, I hope that I have at least opened a discussion about what is potentially the most important form of oral poetry at work today.

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