Chapter 9: Hip-Hop Discourse and Artifact Analysis II (Illmatic tracks 4-5)


*The World is Yours 4:50* and The American Dream (Come-Up Narrative)

Using samples from “I Love Music” by the Ahmad Jamal Trio “The World is Yours” personifies the come-up narrative rampant in hip-hop and often deployed within dominant discourse as the American Dream. The title is a direct quote from Brian De Palma’s 1983 cult classic remake of *Scarface*. As a young Nas watches the film his lyrics connect disparate scenes of reality and imagination. His lyrics flow from the blimp in *Scarface* as the protagonist/antagonist Tony Montana watches it fly by. Along with the blimp so go Montana’s dreams perhaps this is the second installment of *Scarface* with an alternative ending. The song written by a twenty year-old resident of the projects with an eight-grade education exemplifies the complex desires and challenges of the hip-hop generation. Chang notes that “the come-up experience produces narratives that inspire others to follow nontraditional paths, so that dispossessed folk know that there is a path for them when all mainstream opportunities are closed” (76). Many have used this narrative in hip-hop discourse such as Notorious B.I.G., Juicy J, Rick Ross, Jay-Z’s “Can't Knock the Hustle,” and Outkast’s “Elevators.” Can you name another one in hip-hop? Can you name a song from another genre or movie that utilizes this theme?
Ahmad Jamal Trio, *I Love Music* 1970

The turning of the one-sided statement in the film, “the world is yours” into a dialogic call and response in the song represents a postmodern complexity in terms of opportunity. Perhaps the world that is yours is actually owned by others, perhaps the world that we come to own ceases to be owned by others? “It’s mine,” in the song is juxtaposed with “it’s yours,” while the world remains there for the taking. Producer Pete Rock sets up the dialog between competing identities framed within a come-up narrative.

*P: Whose world is this?*

*N: The world is yours, the world is yours*

*P: It's mine, it's mine, it's mine. Whose world is this?*

*N: "It's yours!"

*P: It's mine, it's mine, it's mine. Whose world is this?*

*N: The world is yours, the world is yours*

The dialog continues to grow in intensity. A sense of urgency is issued by a youthful voice that declares through tone that there is little time to waste. “It’s Yours!” is shouted by Nas as a hook and a call to the disenfranchised that despite conditions, “the world is yours.” The call and response becomes more complex like a Socratic dialog as Nas’s perspectives seem to take on the voice of reason, of the middle ground reminiscent of Aristotle’s perspective.

The lyrics throughout the album remain dialogic despite coming from a singular emcee, Nas. This fragmented identity encourages dialog by presenting an either
metaphorical or literal other that Nas’s lyrics come into dialog with. This is similar to call and response aspects contained in Jazz. This hip-hop track often possesses morose scenes of hope similar to the blues tradition as well. Self-reflexive and aware of his own performance this emcees alludes to his own construction through political and social forces. While Nas functions as a public intellectual, which might be true in broader sense; his rhetoric can also be seen as ethnographic, demonstrating a sociological dimension in hip-hop largely unrecognized or misconstrued. As Nas states, he ultimately wishes for representation by the government, but audiences encumbered by a come-up narrative can only understand an attenuated version of the same goal, to make money.

"I'm out for presidents to represent me (Say what?)
I'm out for presidents to represent me (Say what?)
I'm out for dead presidents to represent me"

Often hip-hop lyrics are enjoyed, critiqued, and even used in court as testimony for the transparent reporting of literal events. While songs often depict a reality experienced firsthand and emcees constantly strive to maintain a discourse of keeping it real they also actively employ and acknowledge a large amount of artistic license. Emcees also often acknowledge that once they become rappers, they can no longer keep it real exhibited in T.I.’s line “I’m too fly to fight, a got a body guard to do that.” Hip-hop discourse is neither direct speech nor embellished fantasy, but a postmodern embodied account of both conditions fueled by a context of exploitive power and economic gain.

Ultimately, emcees occupy a space in society that is both reflective of realistic conditions and an extension of those conditions. The discourse contained in hip-hop reflects real life and holds genuine truth as a sociological voice. It is also a global market that partially depends on said conditions for profit while sustaining a textual discourse that at times perpetuates said conditions. As Sohail Daulatzai states, hip-hop discourse is representative of local and global urban conditions. It is a product of the postindustrial condition: the movement of industry and capital away from urban centers across America’s borders, a process that devastated urban communities in the United States, that, when combined
with white flight, political scapegoating, and repression created these grimy conditions and pockets of poverty that birthed this thing called hip-hop… It’s important to understand how these geographies of violence are connected and related in the global economy because for far too long many have believed that what happens here, be it in Detroit, New York, or L.A., has little or no bearing on what occurs in other cities like Kingston, Lagos, Delhi, or even Baghdad. (Daulatzai 42)

The history of hip-hop is intertwined with the history of globalized industrialization and the advent of a world market of which America becomes the engine. Nas, sitting in Queensbridge, is a product of global forces as well as a producer of public discourse concerning these forces; he is a commentator of everyday life. He recites on the dichotomy in *Illmatic*

*I sip the Dom P, watchin Gandhi til I'm charged*

*Then writin in my book of rhymes, all the words pass the margin*

*To hold the mic I'm throbbin, mechanical movement*

*Understandable smooth shit that murderers move wit*

*The thief's theme, play me at night, they won't act right*

Watching the 1982 film *Ghandi* staring a white actor, Ben Kingsley, painted in brown face, Nas notes how his discourse will exacerbate violence on the street. The contradiction is that he is watching a film on non-violence, more specifically the rhetorical discourse of non-violent protest, the Civil Rights movement and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He is self-reflexive of his own role within the global struggle of representation. He is also in a peculiar postmodern position where he can sip expensive champagne while living in the projects amidst senseless violence watching a film about non-violence. These contradictions both familiarize and defamiliarize words while illuminating differing realities. Hip-hop lyrics often represent a highly communicative dialogic discourse that invites the listener to do the work Derrida describes as deconstruction, to decipher what is being said by recognizing the inherent contradictions within.
Halftime 4:20 and the Public Intellectual

Hip-hop lyrics tell stories while breaking conventional rules of narrative description. It depicts the world through its own postmodern lens, which constantly reinvents its own conventions. Tropes such as personification, metonymy, simile, and metaphor enable hip-hop to alter narrative prose. Outkasts’ line, “I’m cooler than a polar bear’s toe nails” is an excellent example of a simile in hip-hop discourse. Likewise Shakespeare heavily employs similes, “Like as the waves make toward the pebbled shore/so do our minutes hasten to their end” (Bradley 93).

Average White Band, Schoolboy Crush 1975

Midway through Illmatic we are taken back to an earlier moment in Nas’s career with the song “Halftime,” which appears on the soundtrack for the movie Zebrahead. This is the only song that had already been heard on the album and utilizes a break sampled from Average White Band’s Schoolboy Crush. This track harks back to the vivid fragmented storytelling that established Nas as an upcoming emcee. It is the oldest work on the album and one that speaks directly to hip-hop culture. On the track, Marc Hill states

Through a clever mix of braggadocio and sharp lyricism, the artist still officially known as ‘Nasty Nas’ created an underground hit and national buzz. “Halftime” was so well received that it was also placed on Illmatic in order to secure sales as well as please loyal underground fans. Although
the musical value of “Halftime” is significant, it is dwarfed by the larger implications of the song and the Illmatic album within the public sphere. (97-8)

Interestingly, after Nas drops out of school in the eight-grade he effectively grinds to become a public intellectual. He transforms an out-of-school educational process into a street pedagogy noting how much we actually learn from popular discourse. Scholars often present a narrow view of intellectual work that does not adequately capture potentially insightful and liberating discourses. This narrow view also often ignores potential pedagogical voices. Like other public intellectuals, Nas uses the public sphere as a space for critically engaging in pressing social issues of the day. As Nas raps in “Halftime”

You couldn’t catch me in the streets without a ton of reefer
that’s like Malcom X, catchin the Jungle Fever
King poetic, too much flavor, I’m major
Atlanta ain’t braver, I’ll pull a number like a pager

Using simile he compares his illegal presence on the street with the separationist philosophy of Malcolm X while slightly dissing the movie soundtrack on which the song is featured. Jungle Fever was a movie on a similar theme that was out at the same time as Zebrahead. He also equates his style to Martin Luther King, Jr. and notes Atlanta’s importance in the civil rights movement. Nas continues

And in the darkness, I’m heartless like when narcs hit
Word to Marcus Garvey I hardly sparked it

Furthering Black intellectual thought Nas comments on Garvey’s philosophy while forming his own. He also subtly notes the more dominant discourse of American exceptionalism with Joseph Conrad’s novel The Heart of Darkness while remaining on the down low in the face of such discourse. Nas uses simile and metaphor to compare
competing discourses within the civil rights struggle and also comments on the larger context in which these discourses are situated.

Nas later extends a metaphor over an entire song. In “I gave you power” he raps from the first person perspective of a gun. When this is done it is considered a conceit or an extended metaphor comprising an entire poem. This trope extends the similarities to better explore the nuances of the comparison bringing into context history and background that further ground the comparison. Here Nas also employs personification by projecting human thoughts and emotion onto objects. Nas consistently employs what the ancient Greeks call prosopopeia a rhetorical device in which the poem writes from the perspective of another person or object (Bradley 106-7).

Yo, I can hear somebody comin in, open the shelf
His eyes bubblin, he said, “It was on”
I felt his palm troubled him shakin
Somebody stomped him out, his dome was achin
He placed me on his waist, the moment I’ve been waitin
My creation was for blacks to kill blacks

This message has an added sense of credibility and objectivity as the gun delivers the message on gun violence that is also upbeat, a marker of Nas’s poetry. “He pulled the trigger but I held on, it felt wrong/He squeezed harder, I didn’t budge, sick of the blood.”

At the conclusion of the song and the metaphor the gun jams and the owner dies. The gun is then picked up and the story of crime continues despite Nas’s efforts to alter the narrative with the telling of his own. Again Nas is self-reflexive of his own role as narrator, but also aware that his intellectual discourse is marginalized.