

The Literary Review Poet and the Rapper Are Two Halves of the Same Muse

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Due to the growing neoliberal antipathy towards the First Amendment American poetry finds itself in a conundrum, as all who submit their work to literary reviews are straitjacketed by the same censorship constraints as those who write for the mainstream press. Consequently, those who regularly contribute to these publications have long since abandoned any effort at saying something meaningful about the world in which we live. As poetry is as old as humanity and cannot be extinguished without the destruction of human life, the art form has found new ways to survive, and to a somewhat unusual and albeit limited extent, this void has been filled by rappers.

Implausibly, this oldest of art forms has devolved into a strange place where it sees itself largely divided between MFAs with degrees from reputable schools that compete for a minuscule number of places in literary reviews which hardly anyone reads and which publish poetry which is either unintelligible or anchored in neoliberal cult ideology, and rappers who often have something to say (granted, not always something moral), yet typically lack the education with which to express themselves in a nuanced and intellectually substantive manner.

Undoubtedly, there are notable exceptions to this, such as Mike Shinoda ("[Kenji](#)"), Meth U ("[Mensch Bleibt Mensch](#)"), and Sage Francis ("[Conspiracy to Riot](#)," "[Makeshift Patriot](#)," and "[Slow Down Gandhi](#)"), but in general rappers are illiterate poets. This cataclysmic divide between the soulless literate and the passionate illiterate is deeply emblematic of the alienation, dehumanization, and uniquely destructive powers of neoliberalism.

Image: Lil Kim (Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0)



Let's begin our discussion of this peculiar poetic form with Lil' Kim's "[Lighters up](#)," which draws the listener into the violent underbelly of inner city Brooklyn, specifically in this case Bedford-Stuyvesant, also known to New Yorkers as Bed-Stuy. (Difficult slang words have been translated and are bracketed). The song opens by immediately drawing the listener into a harrowing, tribal, and lawless world:

"I come from Bed-Stuy, niggas either do or they gon' die
Gotta keep the ratchet close by
Someone murdered, nobody seen, nobody heard it
Just another funeral service
Niggas will get at you, come through shinin' they yap [rob] you
In broad day light kidnap you
Feds get clapped [shot] too, police stay on us like tattoos
Niggas only grind cause we have to
Money is power, sling crack, weed and powder
Fiends [drug addicts] come through every hour
S'all about that dollar and we nuh deal with cowards
Weak lambs get devoured by the lion
In the concrete jungle, the strong stand and rumble
The weak fold and crumble, it's the land of trouble"

The reference to murders where no one is willing to testify or talk to the police lest they be deemed a "snitch" is indicative of a breakdown in the rule of law, allowing violent criminals to commit serious crimes unimpeded. The authorities also frequently look the other way in

the face of black on black violence, which further endangers the peaceful residents of these communities. This de facto empowerment of nefarious inner city elements by the ruling establishment is not unrelated to what Washington has long done to debase and humiliate people in foreign countries.

“Lighters up” raises a motif, which rappers are seldom intellectually conscious of but which is present in virtually all music of this genre, which is the tragedy of post-New Deal and post-civil rights America, a deindustrialized and ghettoized wasteland, where in order to maintain a decent standard of living Americans are increasingly coerced into becoming yes-men for corporations, and where a once robust middle class has been reduced to a distant memory.

Lil’ Kim portrays the police as oppressors but also as victims who can likewise be assaulted without warning. “Lighters up” emphasizes the problems of substance abuse, gambling, and prostitution that plague, not only inner city Brooklyn, but ghettos across the country:

“Some are boostin [boasting] 12 year olds prostitutin’

Hitmen hired for execution there’s no solution

Niggas still piss in the hallways

Fiends get high in ‘em all day”

Another motif in “Lighters up,” and which is common in many rap songs such as Eminem’s [“Like Toy Soldiers,”](#) is how tribalism, illiteracy, and the destruction of the middle class have given birth to a new Wild West mired in systemic violence and bloody vendettas:

“For a pound leave your face on the wall

R.I.P in memory of

Never show thy enemies love”

Is this not the same attitude that Biden has towards Putin? And is NATO not a gang, albeit one armed with F-35s, Black Hawk helicopters, and nuclear weapons? If Russia followed suit with the same infantile and thuggish behavior would we even be sitting here having this conversation?

Furthermore, what is the motivation for the oligarchy to rein in this culture of gang wars when it serves the convenient purpose of deflecting anger and rage away from the ruling establishment and on to one’s fellow workers and countrymen?

This hellscape devoid of security, education, and lawful employment is inextricably linked with a society that has been hijacked by corporations which are really nothing more than organized crime syndicates, and of which the inner city gangs are mere minnows in comparison. Her line that “Niggas only grind cause we have to” acknowledges the bleak reality that in the hyper-privatized “concrete jungle” the poor are forced to do everything in their power to survive. The final lines of the introduction (“S’all about that dollar and we nuh deal with cowards...”) could be emblazoned over the entrance to the headquarters of such august and civic-minded institutions as the CIA, Goldman Sachs, Lockheed Martin or Pfizer. Undoubtedly, many inner city drug dealers are conscious of the fact that they are preying on

their own people but know of no other way to earn a living.

Image: Marley in 2010 (Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0)



Just as America is endowed with a plethora of literate and illiterate poets, there is likewise no shortage of literate and illiterate drug dealers, with the former being permitted to don a white coat, carry a stethoscope, and create drug addicts with impunity.

While addressing the systemic poverty in Jamaica, Junior Gong's "[Welcome to Jamrock](#)" bemoans a similar scenario where youths trapped in poverty are chewed up by an avaricious machine devoid of education, jobs, the rule of law, and where elections are a rigged charade:

"Welcome to Jamdown

Poor people a dead at random

Political violence, can't done

Bare ghost and Phantom

The youth dem get blind by stardom

Now the king of kings ah call

Old man to pickney, so wave unno hand if you with me

To see the sufferation sick me

Dem suit nuh fit me

To win election dem trick we"

At the end of the [music video](#) Damian Marley (the youngest son of Bob Marley) departs Jamrock in his BMW revealing that he too is enslaved to consumerism and the same economic system which places profits and possessions over human lives.

Tupac Shakur's touching "[Dear Mama](#)" acknowledges that his own mother struggled with a crack addiction, but the song humanizes her and reminds the listener that drug addicts are suffering human beings in need of compassion:

"And even as a crack fiend, Mama
You always was a black queen, Mama
I finally understand
For a woman, it ain't easy tryin' to raise a man
You always was committed
A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how you did it
There's no way I can pay you back
But the plan is to show you that I understand
You are appreciated"

Wu-Tang Clan, whose members hail from Staten Island and Brooklyn, created the hip-hop song "[C.R.E.A.M.](#)," which stands for "cash rules everything around me," and which relentlessly and almost hypnotically drives home the stark reality of America's money-obsessed culture where the ghetto serves as a microcosm to a wider America in the throes of unfettered capitalism. Here the gangsters don Timberland boots and baggy pants rather than Brooks Brothers suits and Allen Edmonds shoes, and unlike their more bourgeois counterparts, have had the misfortune of being born into a prison whose walls are forged not out of concrete but with segregation, illiteracy, an illicit black market economy and virtually nonexistent checks and balances. Inspectah Deck gives a glimpse in "C.R.E.A.M." of the horrors he experienced growing up in a city where the cards are stacked against the descendants of slavery, and even minors are frequently devoured by the insatiable prison beast:

"I went to jail at the age of fifteen
A young buck sellin' drugs and such, who never had much
Tryin' to get a clutch at what I could not—
The court played me short, now I face incarceration
Pacin', goin' upstate's my destination
Handcuffed in the back of a bus, forty of us
Life as a shorty shouldn't be so rough
But as the world turned, I learned life is hell
Livin' in the world no different from a cell"

In Nas' "[N.Y. State of Mind](#)" the rapper describes life in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, as "each block is like a maze full of black rats trapped." However, instead of supporting a progressive position rooted in unionization, checks and balances, and good public health care and education for all Americans, he laments, albeit in his inimitable and ironic way, that he is unable to engage in gangsterism in a more respectable and law-abiding fashion:

"I dream I can sit back

And lamp [relax] like Capone, with drug scripts sewn

Or the legal luxury life, rings flooded with stones, homes

I got so many rhymes, I don't think I'm too sane

Life is parallel to Hell, but I must maintain

And be prosperous, though we live dangerous

Cops could just arrest me, blamin' us; we're held like hostages"

As is invariably the case with the most talented rappers, Nas exhibits real poetic gifts such as his masterful line from "N.Y. State of Mind" that, "I never sleep, 'cause sleep is the cousin of death." One can only imagine what he could have accomplished had he gotten a good education.

While it is easy for "educated Americans" (a euphemism for morons with expensive degrees) to thumb their nose at the gangsters of the ghetto, the latter are in fact imitating the behavior of their "successful" countrymen. Indeed, do we not have countless doctors, professors, journalists, politicians, Wall Street jihadists, armaments industry executives, intelligence agents, career officers in the military, lawyers, employees of the prison-industrial complex and the medical-industrial complex, etc., that will do literally anything for money?

The scourge of bullying in America's public schools is the subject of Eminem and Lil Wayne's "[No Love](#)," a problem spawned by the demise of social democracy and a post-apocalyptic wasteland whose denizens can increasingly be broken down between the tormented and the tormentor. As with "N.Y. State of Mind," "No Love" has lines of striking poetry:

"I'm rollin' Sweets, I'm smokin' sour

Married to the game, but she broke her vows

That's why my bars are full of broken bottles

And my nightstands are full of open Bibles"

A disturbing element to "No Love" is the clarion call, not merely for the right to self-defense, but for a revenge rooted in extreme forms of violence:

"Money outweighin' problems on a triple beam

I'm stickin' to the script, you niggas skippin' scenes

Uh, be good or be good at it

Fuckin' right, I got my gun, semi-Cartermatic [semi-automatic]...

I'm high as a bitch, up, up and away, man, I'll come down in a couple of days

Okay, you want me up in the cage? Then I'll come out in beast mode

I got this world stuck in the safe, combination is the G code

It's Weezy, motherfucker, Blood gang, and I'm in bleed mode

All about my dough, but I don't even check the peephole

So you can keep knockin', but won't knock me down

No love lost, no love found"

How many bullied kids have watched this [music video](#) (which has over 675 million views) and been inculcated with this very mentality? What does it do to a child's psyche when all they see around them are sadistic predators and defenseless prey – those who are “up in the cage?” Is it surprising that with so many humiliated people and a country that has [more guns than human beings](#) that a certain percentage will seek to “come out in beast mode?” And what could be more tragically American than the notion that life without money is a living death, a Tartarean chasm, and that camaraderie and solidarity are but an elusive ephemeral dream?

In order to understand the demonic nature of the American ruling establishment one must acknowledge the horrors unleashed on Vietnam, Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Ukraine, Gaza, etc., but it is also necessary to understand the terrible suffering inflicted on the weakest and most vulnerable who reside within the Stygian bowels of empire. One example of this is the many American children who grow up in poverty, in broken homes and communities, and who are exposed to egregious acts of violence at an early age, something Lil Wayne hauntingly intimates in “No Love:”

“Yeah, my life a bitch, but you know nothing 'bout her

Been to hell and back, I can show you vouchers”

Harlem's Immortal Technique unnerved the hip-hop world in 2001 with his controversial “[Dance with the Devil](#),” a gruesome tale of an alienated and ambitious hoodlum whose brain has been warped by materialism and the egregious inequality of “the new economy,” who yearns to join a gang, yet is told he must participate in a sexual assault of a random woman at night as an initiation rite. Upon seeing this through, he ends up inadvertently raping his own mother:

“I once knew a nigga whose real name was William

His primary concern was makin' a million

Bein' the illest [toughest] hustler that the world ever seen

He used to fuck movie stars and sniff coke in his dreams

A corrupted young mind at the age of 13”

Once the protagonist realizes what he has done he commits suicide by jumping off the roof where the assault has taken place:

“And so he jumped off the roof and died with no soul

They say death takes you to a better place, but I doubt it”

Unlike in *Crime and Punishment*, the crime is too heinous. There can be no absolution.

Image: Jay-Z in 2011 (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0)



In “[Empire State Of Mind](#)” Jay-Z raps about the magic, mystery, and awesome power of New York City, but also cautions his listeners regarding the false gods of materialism and celebrity worship which have slain countless souls:

“Lights is blinding, girls need blinders

Or they could step out of bounds quick, the side lines is

Lined with casualties who sip the life casually

Then gradually become worse—don’t bite the apple Eve

Caught up in the in-crowd, now you’re in-style

Into the winter gets cold, en vogue with your skin out

City of sin is a pity on a whim

Good girls gone bad, the city’s filled with them

Mami took a bus trip, now she got her bust out

Everybody ride her, just like a bus route
'Hail Mary' to the city, you're a virgin
And Jesus can't save you, life starts when the church end
Came here for school, graduated to the high life
Ball players, rap stars, addicted to the limelight"

As is extremely common in rap music, Jay-Z holds it to be inevitable that we live in a ruthless Darwinian world where one is either rich or poor, and where it is only natural that New Yorkers are perpetually locked in a brutal war of all against all:

"Eight million stories, out there in the naked
City is a pity, half of y'all won't make it"

In a country where public health and education lie in ruins, and millions of lives have been destroyed due to mass unemployment, a catastrophic substance abuse epidemic, unprecedented forms of sectarianism, mass incarceration, and trillions of dollars of household debt Jay-Z boasts a net worth of [2.5 billion USD](#). Is this "democracy?"

Undoubtedly, there is a lot of shameful rap music that glorifies banditry, conspicuous consumption, anti-intellectualism, black nationalism and misogyny. However, unlike literary review poets who have no other ambition than to see their gibberish in print and acquire tenure, good rappers have something to say, yet due to a lack of education typically struggle to see serious socio-economic problems through any prism other than that of race and tribalism. However, unlike their insipid brethren who speak in the abstruse language of academia and extreme specialization, rappers frequently "fight the power" (to quote Public Enemy), and in so doing, connect with the masses. Alas, the poet is cleft in twain.

Dubious erudition aside, these passages demonstrate that gifted rappers can be poets and prophets in their own right; and like Tiresias, poets don't always tell us what we'd like to hear. Indeed, in their own way they are trying to alert us to the terrible abyss which we are frenetically galloping towards. It would be wise to heed their warnings.

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