

“Yeah I Said It”: Rihanna, the Real Rap and the Parable of the Trickster

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Abstract

The location of culture where diaspora meets in hip hop is only thematically defined by a narrow set of artists, that can incorporate the polyrhythmic sound and communal dissonance of black people in today’s increasingly collapsing “global society.” Because hip hop and digital culture grew contemporaneously, greater access to mainstream communication modes has been facilitated by the more democratic voice of social media and greater control for formally marginalized groups has been advanced, most prominently by black women in hip hop, rising to the top of the bottom, if you will, as they are still frequently challenged by the historic wealth of their white male peers. The most exceptional of this lot, singer/model/fashion icon/entrepreneur, Rhianna, has a unique “small island” migrant narrative into U.S. corporate mogul. Well poised to challenge the legacy of Jamaica’s Bob Marley around the diaspora, her narrative of assent is steeped in the importance of flight for Western blacks and voice, within a specific black feminist context, that speaks truth to power in new ways and with extraordinary reach.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Feminist critical thinking, Hip hop, Instagram, Language, Culture.

Introduction

On August 24, 2012 Robyn “Rihanna” Fenty directed her “Devotion Navy” to “control [their] speech.” Excerpting James 3: 2, Rihanna highlighted the power of language to direct the body, as well as

bodies of people, in particular, her growing fan base. The irony of one of the least “respectable” black women in the public sphere advising others to “control” their mouth as a means of disciplining their life is only apropos in admission that Rihanna generally evokes a jaw drop. It is clear in this and the entirety of Rihanna’s “#dn” series that submission is but one of Rihanna’s tongues. Heaf has said of Rihanna’s voice, “when she talks she purrs, a thick Barbadian accent, curving and stretching her vowels like bowed palms in a sea breeze. She’s a siren” (n.p.). Real rap, Rihanna is the new millennium’s quintessential trickster figure. “Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18). Black women, who sow out loud, and in the tradition of hip hop and related industries, frame a different narrative altogether.

This study is deeply indebted to the tradition, methodology and arguments illustrated by Ashon Crawley’s *Black Pentecostal Breath*, principally because of the way Crawley’s text advances Anthea Butler’s historicization of the policing of the act of speaking in tongues in the black Pentecostal church to an aural location of tongues as black breath. The sounding of the tongues in the black feminist hip hop tradition are perpetually ascendant noise. Breath is but a point of departure. And it is a better one than the Bronx. Crawley’s hears here:

There is a vibration, a sonic event, a sound I want to talk about, but it’s ongoing movement makes its apprehension both illusionary and provisional. Illusionary because the thing itself is both given and withheld from view, from earshot. Provisional because it - the vibration, the sonic event, the sound - is not and cannot ever be stilled absolutely. It keeps going, it keeps moving, it is open-ended. (2)

Crawley’s breath is far more silent than my tongue. It is arrested perpetually, not latent and resistant.

Using Silence for Collective Speech

An early, commanding bar of Rihanna’s single, “Yeah I Said It,” is “I want you to homicide it.” It couldn’t be a more peculiar juxtaposition to Crawley’s epilogue: 2012 Staten Island NYPD police brutality victim, Eric Garner’s final lament and the companion activist organization, Justice League, NYC clarion call, “I Can’t Breathe.”

The former, a provocative appeal to a casual sex partner, the latter is the redundant result of state-sanctioned violence against black innocents, and repurposed call to action. The same lament, reverberated as we witnessed the videotaped murder of George Floyd, also at the hands of police, this time in 2020, an echo of the same dying words voiced in the police stranglehold of Eric Garner. All three are preoccupied where Crawley rightfully designates the flesh; however, it is because of the black female blues tradition of the heart and later the soul, or the rhythm, that black women further complicate the sound. Heterosexual women who love black men and queer women and men, who have done the same within a quadruple-bind, are the forever future of these tongues.

Furthermore, in the author's documentary film, *That Crack In The Concrete*, rapper and cultural critic Chuck D, emphatically outlines the continuum of contemporary emcees as "[no different] than Billie Holiday, singing out about "Strange Fruit." He makes the point to illustrate the historicization of hip hop as the "culture of black people," going back thousands of years." His framework challenges the oft-cited masculinist versioning of Hip-Hop history, replicated from other Western framings, as the history of great men and great events. It should be noted that Chuck D's versioning is particularly convincing because it is relayed orally, within a speech delivered at the First Annual Hip Hop Political Convention. Set against the loose recognitions of the multi-sensory artistic parallels between graffiti and Egyptian hieroglyphics, DJing and Art Tatum on piano, break dancing and Brazilian capoeira, along with Holiday, Chuck D articulates the polyrhythmic styling of hip hop cultural production that Rihanna most certainly resonates within.

And yet, Angela Yvonne Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* reminds us of this "imagined women's community," (59) including Holiday, Getrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith as relatable ancestors. She notes that their refusal to be "economically subordinate to men," (59) advances black female sustainability. As Rihanna eloquently encapsulates in "Yeah I Said It:" "Fuck a title." Although, as Davis reminds us, the attitude may be resultant from the destabilization of the black male as primary earner, Rihanna is a less than 1% millennial, at the opposing end of former slaves turned black female independents. The Parable of Her Talents is overwhelmingly exceptional. But the tradition is still latent resistance.

Farah Jasmine Griffin illustrates that with Holiday, “we need not look to her most overtly political song (“Strange Fruit”) to claim her genius or her political consciousness. The genius of Lady Day lay also in her ability to express the broadest range of experience and emotion and therefore the humanity of our lives as black people and as women” (132). Similarly with Rihanna, I am struck by the polyrhythm of her voice. For Rihanna, even more than any single other blues woman, her ability to sow across song, fashion, film and entrepreneurship is unmatched. It is because of this that her navy devotes considerable attention to the black female protagonist, and deviant, “@badgalriri” on Instagram. It is within this context of her communal following, that the closest parallels to Butlerian protagonists can be drawn.

Creating a Public in Private

Rihanna, Lauren Olamina, the protagonist from Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, and the blues women outlined herein are all notably empowered by hyper empathy. While seldom framed as a weakness, it is the basis for their relating them to others, despite their otherwise exceptionalism. It is an extremely difficult and remarkable feat to commit wholly to expressions of worry and concern for suffering and still be identified as powerful. “The miserable will be made even more miserable,” Olamina contends in *Parable of the Sower* (61). Part of the agency of hip hop women, as new blues/new black women, is to empathize with misery but yet rise above it. Rising above the context of the environment is key to how these women triumph. Devotion is one of the most salient strategies to propel this movement. On the recent occasion of Rihanna’s announcement of her Fenty line she celebrated her mobility as a once “little girl from the left side of the Island,” and gave God the glory. Migration and devotion inform these crossroad moments.

Rihanna has her navy and Olamina has Earthseed, an alternative religion where God is represented as change, the later is a radical departure Olamina made from Christianity as a teen.

God is Change, and in the end, God prevails. But God exists to be shaped. It isn’t enough for us to just survive, limping along, playing business as usual while things get worse and worse. If that’s the shape we give to God, than someday we must become too weak

- too poor, too hungry, too sick - to defend ourselves. Then we'll be wiped out. There has to be more that we can do, a better destiny that we can shape. Another place. Another way. Something! (85-86)

If breath is the point of departure, movement and change is the natural progression towards the sustainability of these women. For Olamina, "going North," (96) to escape the violence of Los Angeles more closely resembled the Great Migrations of blacks from the Jim Crow South. The promise of work opportunities in these contexts is also relevant to Rihanna's pursuit of a recording career outside of her native Barbados at New York's Def Jam Recordings.

When Olamina determines, "I am going to go North," (96) she begins immediately shaping the genesis of the Earthseed movement, "I wonder if there are people outside who will pay me to teach them reading and writing - basic stuff - or people who will pay me to read and write for them," (133) she wonders. Just as freed or escaped slaves used literacy to advance the abolitionist movement, Olamina uses the Bible to sermonize the flock; referencing Luke 18:1-8 to preach persistence to her followers, and those of her missing father. "Persisting isn't always safe, but it's often necessary" (143). This "parable of the importunate widow" is a prequel to her sowing. It was a steadfast revolution of place. "But also like the widow, it persists, *we persist*. This is our place, no matter what" (143).

Self Sustainability

In the fluidity of genre transversed by Rihanna we see breath become movement become revolution of self. What becomes true about Rihanna is that she is a progenitor of a generation of black women that make the most progress adorning the black body with entrepreneurship that advances our understanding of the black women in categories as abstract as Leroi Jones/ Amiri Baraka's *Blues People*. Forward and reverse migrants identified by cyphers and a hip hop blues, and in the case of Rihanna, reggae repertoire. By breadth, not breath, the design for soul is formed. Like Kendra Ross, Vinia Monica, and Tekitha, Rihanna has troubled the waters of the Rhythm and Blues label. Hence the need for Chuck D's continuum. Identifying the parallels between the Olamina and Fenty female leadership, we use the two women to investigate the tradition of black women and sustainability.

Tracing a hip hop continuum is essential for understanding this complexity. The migration of Africana people and the natural and supernatural *flow* of their bodies is at the core of this sustainability. When Tricia Rose identifies flow, layering and rupture as the signal aesthetics of Black Noise, particularly with respect to hip hop culture, she uses them as the basis for understanding rhythm. Similar to Crawley's theorization of breath, this explains for us the how for black movement. It connects the interrelatedness between body and environment, understanding that the arrival of hip hop pioneer families, often immigrants from places in the Caribbean and Latin America frequently produced a radical new American citizenry, divorced from generations of capitalism and privilege, hungry and hustling for their slice of the American pie, up through or until the moment someone eats it in their face. The music made herein is noisy because it's ruptured, punctuated by these various successive breaks. This is a natural flow of order, disorder, generally contributing to the hierarchies of gender, race and class that we are accustomed to for black people. Africana exceptionalism, demonstrated by Rihanna (and Olamina) evidences a natural and supernatural flow. "God will shape us all every day of our lives. Best to understand that and return the effort: Shape God" (227).

Speaking in Tongues and the Hip Hop Voice

Speaking in tongues is less about our ability to communicate with God, in some otherwise unintelligible language to be merely witnessed or discredited (as it was in the case of early black Pentecostalism). It is a dialogue, a conversation. As folk moving through the Diaspora, joined and presented their voice in a variety of different languages, speaking their tongue, while praising and changing, some among us exceeded our normal flow and created new routes, above and beyond the "business as usual," of the black labored body.

Hip hop is the latest manifestation of this type of flight. For Toni Morrison, writing in 1977, at the dawn of the cultural phenomenon, black flight was manifested in the cut through the day behind the wheel of a Packard, the aftershock of a dismembered body hoisted five feet in the air by a shotgun, superhuman Sugarman's "cut across the sky," (Morrison 6) a peacock's strut, an airplane ride, and chiefly, a slaves return home to Africa. The last

line of *Song of Solomon* reads "If you surrender to the air, you could ride it" (337). With all of the anchoring of Hip-Hop in reality, historians often mistake the potential of the genre, to connect with the capacity of the spirit. "Without ever leaving the ground she could fly," Milkman notes of Sugargirl, "'There must be another one like you,'" he whispers to her, "'There's got to be at least one more woman like you'" (336). Flow, by itself, without noise, without layering, without rupture, is the essence of hip hop. The Song of Solomon is a blues refrain:

*O Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home ... (49)*

Above the environment of chaos that has enveloped black people in the 600 years of Western history, all of the engagement with colonizers and their descendants, in various manifestations, the ability to sing (or flow) is its own form of triumph. Breath is not movement, neither is speech, but speech over, just breath, gives you a greater proximity to flight. Flow, sweetens the pot in the favor of flight. Of a male peacock it is said in *Song of Solomon*, "the male is the only one got that tail full of jewelry, can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (178-179). We celebrate Rihanna's success in the Fashion and Beauty industries, because we acknowledge her visibility as a scalable model for black sustainability.

Conclusion

This is hip hop, so the delineation of aristocratic models of development, to the most diversified and collective engagement of wealth, is still being unfairly buttressed by the most staunchly conservative and racist government we have seen since slavery. The herein identified systems include the prison industrial complex, gentrification, and of course, the hip hop industry. However; it is only within the latter industry, that we see the closest replications of socialist economies among hip hop "crews." The most influential black billionaire within the hip hop recording industry is now Jay Z. Rihanna and Beyoncé both have been significant collaborators for Jay Z, along with Kanye West. As Morrison contends, "truly

landlocked people know they are." (162) Wealth is equated with Freedom in *Song of Solomon*. However, that wealth, best exemplified by Rihanna, must move towards home.

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