

**FROM HOMER TO HIP HOP:  
ORATURE AND *GRIOTS*, ANCIENT AND PRESENT**

**ABSTRACT:** *Contemporary re-mixes of classic texts and narratives such as The Seven Against Thebes and Cain and Abel are prominent in the young canon of Hip Hop Theatre. In addition, Hip Hop Theatre's cultural and performative relationship to orality link it to the African diasporic performance aesthetic of Orature, while also connecting it to certain scholars' understanding of the role that oral composition plays in Homer and other Greek classics. The function of Hip Hop Theatre within a Hip Hop cultural context thus mirrors certain aspects of the sociological function of epic poetry and Athenian tragedy in classical Greek society.*

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. . . we griots are the depositories of the knowledge of the past. But whoever knows the history of a country can read its future.  
—Djeli Mamadou Kouyaté<sup>1</sup>

I'm certain that any country, any given country in Africa, you will find an ancient form of Hip Hop. It's just natural for someone from Africa to recite something over a drum and to recite it in a talking blues fashion, and then it become this thing called Hip Hop.

—K'Naan, Somali Hip Hop artist<sup>2</sup>

In preparation for my role as program consultant for the Aquila Theatre Company's "Page and Stage: Theater, Tradition and Culture in America" program, I had many conversations with Aquila Artistic Director Peter Meineck about the role of orality in classical literature, as well as the sociological function of tragedy in ancient Athens. Of particular interest to me as a director of Hip Hop Theatre, as well as other world drama, is that Athenian tragic dramatists may have "composed live and taught dialogue and song to their casts."<sup>3</sup> While there is a lengthy debate on both sides of the orality/literacy issue, my intention here is not to defend or disprove either of these arguments but, rather, to draw a connection between ancient and contemporary performance practices that engage orality.

In the groundbreaking and controversial book *The Singer of Tales*, based on his fieldwork with Harvard classicist Milman Parry, Albert Lord deduces that the epic works of Homer were "oral compositions":<sup>4</sup>

My Homeric studies have from the beginning shown me that Homeric poetry, and indeed all early Greek poetry, is oral, and so can be properly understood, criticized, and edited only when we have a complete knowledge of the processes of oral poetry. . . .<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D. T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. (Harlow, Essex, 2001) 41

<sup>2</sup> A. Pennycook and T. Mitchell, "Hip Hop as Dusty Foot Philosophy: Engaging Locality," in H. S. Alim, A. Ibrahim, and A. Pennycook, eds. *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language* (New York 2009) 34.

<sup>3</sup> Personal email communication with Peter Meineck, November 18, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, ed. S. Mitchell and G. Nagy, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 2000) 3.

<sup>5</sup> Lord (above, n.4) ix.

By comparing Homer's work to that of oral artists in the former Yugoslavia in the first half of the twentieth century, Parry and Lord identified certain features of both genres that led them to conclude that Homer's work was composed and preserved in much the same way as these Balkan "singers of tales." Moreover, Lord's insight into the ontology of an oral based system of performance is a key element in understanding the cross-cultural continuum from Homer to Hip Hop: "For the oral poet, the moment of composition is the performance. . . . An oral poem is not composed *for* but *in* performance."<sup>6</sup> This statement not only references the simultaneous and improvisatory dramaturgy that may have been, as discussed above, a key element of Homer's work and Athenian tragedy, but it also suggests that the presence of an audience is a crucial part of the creation process—that the audience is necessary for the completion of the composition. This distinction, then, invites an inquiry into the cultural function of such performances.

#### African Orature

In the fields of African and African-diasporic performance, the term "Orature" is used to foreground the unique skills and production of the oral artist, and to give this means of communication and documentation equal legitimacy next to written texts.<sup>7</sup> Orature preserves the history and culture of individual peoples through performance, using such elements as storytelling, proverbs, riddles, chants, call-and-response, songs, gesture/mime, as well as other presentational techniques. In Orature, important cultural information is passed down from generation to generation. It is a living, spontaneous, and responsive art and the oral artist relies on both memory and improvisation. Orature, thus, has its own logic systems, literacies, and skill sets that are employed to keep cultures alive.

Scholar and dramatist J. P. Clark-Bekederemo transcribed and published the *Ozidi Saga*, an epic tale belonging to the Ijo people in Nigeria performed by a solo actor in a seven-night festival of storytelling which is similar to Homeric epic in its narrative style, mythology, and playful oratory. Clark-Bekederemo describes the oral artist as a "composer-poet-performer, all rolled up into one person, working in the multiple mediums of words, music, dance, drama, and ritual." He adds that the "nearest European form to this" might be the Wagnerian Opera.<sup>8</sup>

More than just a disciplinary distinction between written and oral art, Orature is, as Kenyan theorist, novelist, and playwright Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes, "a total aesthetic system with performance and integration of art forms as two of its defining qualities."<sup>9</sup> South African sculptor and poet Pitika Ntuli further explains:

Orature is more than the fusion of all art forms. It is the conception and reality of a total view of life. It is a capsule of feeling, thinking, imagination, taste and hearing. It is the flow of a creative spirit. . . . Orature is the universe of expression and appreciation and a fusion of both within one individual, a group, a community. It is a weapon against the

<sup>6</sup> See Lord (above, n.4) 13 (italics in original).

<sup>7</sup> See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o for the origins of the term, in *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture, and Politics* (New York 1972); and *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa* (Oxford 1998).

<sup>8</sup> J. P. Clark-Bekederemo, *The Ozidi Saga* (Washington, D.C., 1977) xxix.

<sup>9</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Penpoints* (above, n.7) 111.

encroaching atomisation of life. It is the beginning come full circle on a higher plane. It is a gem, an idea, a reality that beckons us to be a part of it.<sup>10</sup>

Orature fully integrates all elements of creativity and live performance. In Orature, the verbal and vocal are preeminent and emanate from the body, as well as from a body of history, lore, and traditional thought. In other words, the performer's body is one with the body of her culture and, in this way, connects to the bodies of her audiences. As Ntuli describes, it is more than just individual elements—it is a philosophical system that defies the separation of art and spirit into over-determined categories or genres.

#### Orature and Hip Hop

Hip Hop began as a culture of resistance. It was a way for marginalized young people in the United States in the early to mid-1970s to transform their circumstances in urban areas where 1) governmental policies such as redlining and planned shrinkage were limiting their options and 2) gang violence, in the wake of this systemic neglect and oppression, was diminishing their numbers. These young artists also began using their bodies, voices, and visual and musical skills to express themselves, share their frustration and pain with each other, and create a platform for their own healing. Hip Hop is linked to African Orature through form, function, and the cultural memory of its founders. Like Orature, Hip Hop culture has its own set of aesthetics—the performative elements of Hip Hop include DJing, Emceeing/rapping, Writing/aerosol art, B-boying/girling (dance), and Beatboxing (making rhythmic sounds and imitating DJing with the mouth).

The emcee (or MC) in Hip Hop culture functions in much the same way as the West African *djeli* (the Mande word for oral artist) or *griot* (a more commonly known term in the West). Like these oral artists, the emcee also tells of his community's issues, its values, its ancestors, its heroes and heroines, its triumphs, and its struggles—"imparting lessons of social and political history," as scholar Isidor Okpewho writes of the *griot*.<sup>11</sup> Within Hip Hop culture, the emcee and rapper are different, however. Emcee'ing refers to a process of improvisation—rhyming that is done "off the dome," in the moment, in the presence of an audience's witnessing and critical eye (i.e., as Lord writes, "composed . . . in performance"), while a rapper's words are pre-scripted.

In terms of content, a distinction is often made between an emcee, someone who has a role in motivating and interacting with the community, and a commercial rapper, who produces music in the context of a multinational industry that often dictates the content of the music (see Byron Hurt's excellent film *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* [2006] for direct testimony of how this happens). KRS-One is an emcee and a "conscious" rapper; 50 Cent is a commercial rapper.<sup>12</sup> They may both be *griots*, on some level, however, in that each speaks to the state of the culture—KRS-One in terms of Hip Hop's ethos of inclusivity and social justice; 50 Cent as the product of an industry that more often than not exploits men and women of color, markets

<sup>10</sup> P. Ntuli, "Orature: A Self Portrait," in K. Owusu, ed., *Storms of the Heart: An Anthology of Black Arts and Culture* (London 1988) 215.

<sup>11</sup> I. Okpewho, *African Oral Literature* (Bloomington, Ind., 1992) 55. There are social, historical, and geographic politics around these terms. See T. Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988) for a complete description.

<sup>12</sup> See also the documentary *The MC: Why We Do It* (2005), directed by P. Spirer, produced by J. Krause and P. Spirer.

a “cool pose” of masculinity and sexuality, and sells violence, misogyny, and rampant consumerism, while appropriating and tarnishing the culture’s name.

Two examples of the role and power of the emcee/rapper: Hip Hop activist and pop culture icon Wanita Woods, a.k.a. D. Woods, who sang with Sean “Diddy” Combs’ girl group Dannity Kane, states, “Every rap song is a history lesson.”<sup>13</sup> This statement is true on several levels. The content of the lyrics tells the story of the community from which they come. In addition, the style of the rhymes, the beats used, and the production of tracks all point to how the form has grown and evolved musically, and how rap has pushed technology and changed the music industry. This innovation is also part of the history of Hip Hop as a movement and culture.

Similarly, in 1998, legendary political rapper Chuck D from Public Enemy wrote what would become a clarion call within Hip Hop circles: “Rap is the black CNN.”<sup>14</sup> This statement indicates that rap music, at least in its first fifteen years, kept the community abreast of “what’s going on,” placing the rapper/emcee in the role of the *griot*, the historian and carrier of the culture and source of crucial information. This Hip Hop *griot* is thus understandably a central figure in the day-to-day survival of the culture.

#### Hip Hop and Hip Hop Theatre

Hip Hop Theatre, which began to emerge in the U.K. in the early 1990s and in the U.S. in the late ’90s, integrates all the performance elements of Hip Hop for the explicit purpose of storytelling. It relates the concerns, history, and cultural questions of the now global youth activist movement of Hip Hop, while using the language and modes of performance of Hip Hop culture itself. Much of Hip Hop Theatre employs an emcee/*griot* figure, a narrator who uses rap or poetic diction in direct address to the audience in order to comment on the action, interpret it, or create a connection to the ancestors/gods. While much—if not most—of Hip Hop Theatre is, in fact, either pre-scripted or devised by an ensemble and then written down, this narrator/trickster character usually has room for some improvisation in the form of ad libs and stylistic flows. What links Hip Hop Theatre to Orature is the shared form of poetic diction and the function this emcee/*griot* serves within the culture.

Several seminal Hip Hop Theatre pieces use the emcee/*griot* device in adapting—or “flipping”—Western classical texts: Hip Hop Theatre Junction’s *Rhyme Deferred* (1998), one of the earliest documented Hip Hop Theatre pieces in the U.S., reworks the Cain and Abel story, setting it in the context of the music industry. Rickerby Hinds also uses the rap record industry as the setting for *Keep Hedz Ringin’* (1999), his Hip Hop Theatre versioning of Wagner’s *Das Rheingold*. *Bombitty of Errors* (1999) is a rap adaptation of *Comedy of Errors* and often provokes debate as to whether or not it is Hip Hop Theatre. The performance uses rap as its central diction, but critics question if the work addresses Hip Hop culture, tells its story, or ask questions of its members.<sup>15</sup>

These crucial questions discussed among theater practitioners—Hip Hop and not—reveal that, within Hip Hop Theatre, the question of function is indeed as important as form and content. This critical stance also reveals the concerns within Hip Hop Theatre that the form will be appropriated in ways that other elements of Hip Hop have been, including rap, Writing (aerosol art), and Hip

<sup>13</sup> W. Woodgett, “Carriers of Culture: The Hip Hop Artist as *Griot*,” Colloquium Rationale, Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York University (New York 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Chuck D, *Fight the Power: Rap, Race, and Reality* (New York 1998) 256.

<sup>15</sup> See D. Hoch, “Here We Go, Yo’: A Manifesto for a New Hip Hop Arts Movement,” *American Theatre* 21 (2004) 70.

Hop dance, which is now taught as such in every dance studio around the globe, but is, more often than not, a commercialized, MTV version (called by some B-boys and B-girls “videography” to designate that it is the dance found in videos, but not one of the actual forms of Hip Hop dance that have a thirty-year history with roots in African and South and Latin American dance forms).

Poet, performer, and playwright Will Power took the notion of the *griot* and created *Flow* (2003), a modern-day tale of a “known rapper-slash-actor round the way/makin’ up rhymes, writing lines, for my plays, every day” seeking his own voice and being invited to join the “*Griot crew*,” a group of six storytellers from other generations and backgrounds.<sup>16</sup> Within the context of the solo performance, Power plays all the *griots* and narrates his own coming-of-age as he accepts the responsibility of passing on this art to the next generation. The performance is a virtuosic ninety minutes of non-stop rhyming, movement, storytelling, and invoking the ancestors of Orature, while a DJ spins the ever-changing beats and music under his poetry.

Power’s next piece was *The Seven* (2006), a Hip Hop adaptation of Aeschylus’s *The Seven against Thebes*. The DJ in this play also serves as a narrator/*griot*, as seen in the play’s prologue:

And hey, don’t be afraid  
If you’ve never heard a’ B.I.G.

And now don’t be afraid  
If you ain’t heard a’ Sophocles

’Cause we welcome all y’all here to this Hip Hop Greek  
tragedy, oh yeah

Now let me tell ya who I be  
The one who make Shakespeare jam with James Brown  
Put Snoopy and Snoop in the same dog pound

I can transform a scratch  
Into more than an itch  
There are no two worlds  
That I can’t mix

I am  
The DJ.<sup>17</sup>

As in any ritual theater, Hip Hop Theatre instructs. It instructs people who consider themselves part of the global culture of Hip Hop as to their shared history and values. Hip Hop Theatre also invites people from outside the culture to understand something deeper about Hip Hop, the struggles of youth from historically marginalized populations, and their victories in expressing themselves through the creative elements of Hip Hop culture. As evidenced by Power’s text, Hip Hop is deeply intertextual, drawing on the many traditions of art and self-expression that come before it, from the religious and cosmological worlds of the Bible, Yoruba, ancient Khemet, and other African traditions, to European classics, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and ’70s. Power is especially talented in “mixing” worlds, as the DJ boasts, bringing Hip Hop arts and ways to non-members and introducing texts from other cultural canons to Hip Hop culture.

<sup>16</sup> W. Power, *Flow*, unpub. manuscript (2003) 2.

<sup>17</sup> W. Power, *The Seven*, unpub. manuscript (2006) 2.

Similarly, in *Low* (2005) by the Hip Hop recording artist and internationally known poet and activist Rha Goddess, the audience hears the story of a young homeless woman who is deemed by society to be mentally ill. Lowqusha tells her own story through poetry, autobiography, and rap—a story of physical and emotional abuse at home, racism in school, sexual exploitation, and a sister's attempts at upward class mobility that leaves Low behind. During the performance, the spectator can begin to understand the *tragedy*—how this unique and talented human being has fallen—at a particular moment in U.S. social and economic history. Low has a voice—an individual story—and is brought back from the margins into the center of the audience's attention and consciousness.

When this piece had its U.S. premiere at the Humana Festival at the Actors Theatre of Louisville in 2006, tears flowed and people stayed in their seats long after it was over. Rha Goddess has used this work to launch the Hip Hop Mental Health Project that hosts dialogue after performances around the United States. The audience witnessing Low's journey has the opportunity to release any misunderstanding of who this young, homeless rapper is and to appreciate her struggle and her humanity—a purging, perhaps, of “pity and fear.”

#### Was Homer Hip Hop?

In his article “There Are Men Whose Minds the Dead Have Ravished,” Peter Meineck discusses the role of Greek tragedy in society, citing Josiah Ober's notion of “inward-facing circles.” Meineck explains, “Knowledge flowed back and forth and information was affected by the responses of those watching.”<sup>18</sup> Citing Jonathan Shay, he describes Athenian tragedy as offering a form of “cultural therapy” for an audience made of up “combat veterans.”

Hip Hop Theatre lives inside similar circumstances. It speaks to an audience of youth, many of whom have experienced the same level of trauma in inner-cities, having lost friends and family to violence either from within the community or at the hands of the police.<sup>19</sup> Other youth born under the sign of Hip Hop but not from the same urban landscape experience the daily micro-aggressions of capitalism, are bombarded by disturbing and violent images in the media, and witness the hypersexualization and exploitation of young people in advertising. Within a Hip Hop Theatre audience, there is a spectrum of trauma, oppression, and marginalization, and Hip Hop Theatre, perhaps like Athenian tragedy, is a safe space in which to express concerns, rehearse empowerment, and imagine solutions.

Hip Hop Theatre is also a space in which a Hip Hop audience can safely avow its allegiance to a culture that is still consistently misunderstood, misrepresented, and criminalized. As I have written elsewhere, Hip Hop culture is inherently inclusive, a democracy-building practice concerned with peace and social justice.<sup>20</sup> It is a space where people of color and people of mixed

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<sup>18</sup> P. Meineck, “‘These Are Men Whose Minds the Dead Have Ravished’: Theater of War/The Philoctetes Project,” *Arion* 17 (2009) 174.

<sup>19</sup> See *Dreamscape* by R. Hinds and *Deep Azure* by C. Boseman in the anthology *Say Word!: Voices from Hip Hop Theatre*, ed. D. Banks (Ann Arbor, forthcoming).

<sup>20</sup> See my introduction to *Say Word!* (above, n.19) and “Youth Leading Youth: Hip Hop and Hiplife Theatre in Ghana and South Africa,” in *Acting Together on the World Stage: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict*, a project of Theatre Without Borders, Coexistence International, and The Alan B. Slifka Program in Intercommunal Coexistence at Brandeis University (forthcoming).

heritage are in the majority, but is by no means exclusive to these groups (viz. the DJ's invitation above in *The Seven's* prologue). In fact, a Hip Hop space lives on the interstices of cultural and ethnic mixing and resists the binary social structuring rooted in Western dialectical thought.

The energy and freedom of an integrated performance form such as Orature, which requires room be made for improvisation, versioning, audience contact, and spiritual deference, is the same kind of ritual space Meineck describes in ancient Greece where audiences could see and experience themselves while witnessing the stories of their own communities and struggles. Hip Hop Theatre puts the culture of Hip Hop, with its language, music, history, and strength, on stage. Like Homeric epic and Athenian tragedy, it serves a function universally found within human cultures—people are strengthened when they hear their own stories told, hear familiar melodies and rhythms, and see themselves or people like them on stage. It is contemporary Orature in that it carries on an historical line of theater that is essential to the well-being of community, that fills a vital need, and whose existence foregrounds how other systems have failed its members. It is the voice of now, today's radical and avant-garde theater, as well as the ritual theater of a worldwide culture of youth solidarity and activism.

#### Postscript/B-Side

In the introduction to the second edition of *Singer of Tales*, Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy describe the innovation Milman Parry made in the 1930s so he could record epic tales uninterrupted:

. . . Parry commissioned Sound Specialties Company of Waterbury, Connecticut, to prepare a recording device for him consisting of two turntables connected by a toggle switch. The careful back-and-forth alternation of the turntable allowed the normal time limit of several minutes of recording on a twelve-inch disk to be expanded virtually infinitely.<sup>21</sup>

Some forty years later, eighty miles southwest of Waterbury in the West Bronx, DJs Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash introduced the same technology to reverse the process. They used a cross-fader, also known as a mixer, to thwart time. They could create a seamless mix between tracks, overlapping songs and fading them in and out so that the night was one long oneiric dance. In addition, they perfected extending “break-beats”—they identified a rhythmic break on a track and, by placing an identical LP on each turntable, would back-spin one side while playing the other. This could be done ad infinitum and from this technique was born the term breakdancers—the dancers who challenged the laws of gravity in response to the DJs' experiments in unearthing time. Together, DJs and dancers took the so-called laws of the universe into their own hands, extending them, manipulating them, and creating a momentary rhythmic Utopia to transform the devastation of the environment in which they lived. How appropriate that the technology that Parry used to research Balkan oral artists, thereby linking the compositional techniques of Homer to Orature, were discovered by the oral artists of the twentieth century who inherited their form and function from the *djelis* and *griots* of ancient Africa. From Africa to Homer to Hip Hop and back.

So here is my own “mix,” sampling and versioning these histories: in the context of a circular, rather than linear, understanding of history found in *griot* tales and other African and indigenous narratives, this coincidence can

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<sup>21</sup> Lord (above, n.4) x.

be appreciated as something other than mere chance. As described above, similar forms and functions may, in fact, be shared by Homeric texts, Athenian tragedy, and African Orature. Like many other types of storytelling and theater, they serve to help members of a given culture gain self-knowledge and attain self-efficacy. Echoed in the words of Djeli Kouyaté in the epigraph to this essay is the West African notion of *Sankofa*. Commonly cited in Hip Hop and Black Arts, the Adinkra symbol represents a bird flying forward, looking back. The ideogram has come to mean:

We must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward; so we understand why and how we came to be who we are today.<sup>22</sup>

The “From Homer to Hip Hop: Reinventing the Classics” unit of the “Page and Stage” program engages audiences of students, teachers, scholars, and artists in this simultaneous dramaturgy of past, present, and future. It invites participants to consider relationships across disciplines, generations, and cultures, focusing on the art and cultural production held dear by different groups. As the shared connections and functions of Homer and Hip Hop become clearer, it is my hope that the results of this program will continue to radiate out from the libraries where it currently resides and bring people closer together through an understanding of our cross-cultural commonalities.

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DANIEL BANKS  
daniel.banks@nyu.edu

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<sup>22</sup> A. Shakur, <http://www.assatashakur.org/forum/rbg-tube/26203-rbg-street-scholars-think-tank-first-post-date-ona-move.html> (retrieved November 29, 2009).

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