AFROPESSIMISM VS. RHYME AS BLACKNESS PRAXIS

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EDITORS' NOTE: Cross's original rap, linked here, is followed by a discussion of key themes and analysis of Earl Sweatshirt's poetics.

Afropessimism is, as Frank B. Wilderson writes, "less of a theory and more of a metatheory" that argues "Blacks are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props." It is a theory about theory that identifies anti-Black violence at the core of all Western theoretical frameworks, and furthermore, identifies the central pillar of what we know as civil society, constituting an ontological or "social death" of Blackness. For Wilderson, this death cannot be cured by liberative strategies built within a world of apriori anti-Blackness, and this includes Black artistic performance which obscures Black reality.

But, as Kevin Eubanks explains, "Hip Hop exposes these structures [of violence], effectively mapping the edge of a claustrophobic boundary that separates black social life from white civil society." Eubanks responds to Wilderson by reframing hip hop as a sort of counter-performance or Blackness in practice, and "in voicing the limits of its own performance, Hip Hop's awareness generates a threatening and viable counter-position over and against those relations of domination in which it knows it is caught up." Through this turn toward self knowledge and direct reflection, Eubanks argues, Blackness resurrects itself from social death and reconfigures afro-pessimism into optimism through "radical affirmation of a blackened world."

To reclaim their Blackness and agency in an anti-Black world, rappers employ various poetic techniques, simultaneously displaying and reimagining the limits of structure. In his verse in his song "Mo(u)rning", Earl Sweatshirt exemplifies this Blackness as praxis, stoically spitting:

I learned to adapt way better than I could plan
She was eager to leave but it ain't me with my eyes damp
Feet stampeding through mine shafts, canaries singing the wires tapped
Offerings on the shrine, reclaiming my time like Aunt Max.

Here, Earl confronts his boundedness within structure, directly voicing his difficulty "planning" or creating structure, as he is "adapting" to structures already in place. He has realized his confinement within this mercurial and painful reality to be inescapable, mirroring the afropessimistic inescapability of Blackness. Further, the rhyming techniques he uses are themselves representations of this structural boundedness within the conventions of rhyme in hip hop. He uses internal rhymes throughout the bars, packing in assonance such as "she", "eager", "leave", "me", "feet", "stampede", "canaries", "singing" and displays his submersion *into* the structural confinement of rhyme, making it hyper-visible while simultaneously disguising it in bent pronunciations of other words such as "aunt" and "time". And the opacity of his lyrics' meaning and his rhyme patterns displays his "affirmation of a blackened world" as he creates a new structure of communication that subverts white civil society's typical modes of comprehensibility, and conjures a new world of expression out of nothingness. As Eubanks writes, there is "something indecipherable, untranslatable in what is given, something invisible and inaudible to the non-black spectator that calls into being a uniquely black subjectivity forcefully positioned against a dominant language and reality." Earl is deliberately veiling his meaning behind a lens that can only be peered through by Blackness in practice, akin to the methods of codification Elaine Richardson claims are central to AAVE in hip hop. And in doing so, Earl creates new dominant language and reality through the existing ones. Therefore, he embodies Eubanks' response to Wilderson's afropessimism, finding a way out of Blackness by diving into it. So I found it most fitting to cite Earl in *his* language: rhyme. Borrowing Earl's powerful line, I called this piece "Learned to Adapt".

Works Cited

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