Black CNN: A Review of Lester K. Spence's Stare in the Darkness: The Limits of Hip Hop and Black Politics

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/aaron_shuler/29/
Lester Spence’s *Stare in the Darkness* constructs a dichotomous lens to view neo-liberalism at work in informative, “descriptive rap” and “vibrant alternatives” to neo-liberalism in critical, normative “argumentative” rap. The binary concept is useful as a general device for a superficial categorization of rap but proves to be a construction with too many inconsistencies to hold up to closer scrutiny.

Spence is at his best exploring neo-liberalism in a parallel black public. Contrary to stereotypes of lazy black youth, descriptive rap details the busy, arduous game of hustling explained by examples such as Underground Kings and Mobb Deep. Anthems to neo-liberalism depicted by Wu-Tang Clan’s C.R.E.A.M. articulate a singular pursuit of profit parallel to the straight world, drugs as product and police and snitches as burdensome regulation standing in profit’s way. Spence also does well to show how parallel worlds exist but players can navigate both, the specific rules being different but the dictates of the market being the same. Thus we can understand why Stringer Bell from *The Wire* takes business classes at community college to employ on West Bodymore streets, and how mastering hustling can translate into success in the straight game, best illustrated by former drug dealers like Jay-Z that now thrive as business moguls.
Where Spence’s model breaks down is in the distinctions and classifications he makes between descriptive and argumentative rap, and the examples he uses to demonstrate them. He conceives of descriptive rap as informative articulations of neo-liberal forces at work in a dangerous, unequal parallel black public whereas argumentative rap is a normative criticism of the structures of inequality and a culture that perpetuates it. However, his examples illustrating descriptive rappers are cherry-picked; the particular lyrics he cites out of context demonstrate his concept but ignore others lyrics by the same rapper in different and sometimes even the same songs being best categorized as argumentative under his own rubric. In his section on descriptive rappers he cites Scarface’s willingness to murder in self-defense of his reputation as an example of a descriptive “the way it is on the streets” study of gangstas protecting the currency of their reputations.\(^5\) However, Scarface addressed not just the results of oppression as Spence’s conception of the limitations of descriptive rap would have it but its causes, rapping:

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\begin{align*}
They \ claim \ we \ threats \ to \ society \\
And \ now \ they \ callin’ \ on \ the \ government \ to \ get \ somebody \ to \ quiet \ me \\
For \ the \ bullshit \ they \ done \ to \ me \\
Gangsta \ Nip, \ 2Pac \ and \ Spice \ I \ neva \ gave \ a \ gun \ to \ me \\
So \ gangsta \ rap \ ain’t \ done \ shit \ for \ that \\
I’ve \ even \ seen \ white \ folks \ from \ River \ Oaks \ go \ get \ the \ gat \\
So \ why \ you \ tryin’ \ to \ kick \ some \ dust \ up \\
America’s \ always \ been \ known \ for \ blamin’ \ us \ niggas \ for \ they \ fuck-ups
\end{align*}
\]

Similarly, MC Eiht is held as an example of descriptive rap for his ‘just the way it is’ murderous response to a would-be robber,\(^7\) but Compton’s Most Wanted’s most

\(^5\) Spence at 35.
\(^6\) Hand of the Dead Body from The Diary.
\(^7\) Spence at 36.
famous song is not only a strictly descriptive reporting of survival in perilous South Central L.A., but an attack on the system that has made it thus so. Eiht raps:

\emph{At school slappin' on the girls' asses}  
\emph{Fuck the white education system so I skip a lot of classes}  
\emph{Cause ain't no teachin' a nigga while reality}  
\emph{Teach me the muthafuckin' gang mentality}^{8}

Moreover, while Spence persuasively describes descriptive rap as “Black CNN,”^{9} he sometimes deems the celebration of the authenticity that comes from selling drugs and murdering rivals as lauding instead of merely reporting.\textsuperscript{10} It is a dangerous conflation—imputing the opinions and feelings of a character in a song to the rapper—that overlooks how depicting the rush that comes from murdering a rival can be an indictment of the conditions that result in murder as a source of elation and not a celebration of murder as a source of excitement. This is the central problem with Spence’s method: lyrics—or any text for that matter—out of context can be construed to serve any thesis. It behooves him to make a clearer distinction between who is lauding what.

The problem is further illustrated when Spence asserts that rappers earn personal credibility by rapping in the first person: rappers are authentic “bad men” if they themselves have engaged in the bad behavior that the streets require for survival, but this again confuses the first person as actor and the first person as witness.\textsuperscript{11} There are few better examples of this than the multiple roles that Ice Cube inhabits in \emph{Death Certificate} in perhaps the most incisive social criticism of any rap album.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Hood Done Took Me Under from \textit{Music to Driveby}}
\footnote{Spence at 3, quoting Chuck D.}
\footnote{Spence at 31, describing Uncle Howie’s “selling C-4, weapons, blowguns, every mothafucking thing. What a rush!” comment as “markers of realness and authenticity [to laud].”}
\footnote{Spence at 34-35.}
\end{footnotes}
Cube starts in the first person as—under Spence’s rubric—argumentative rapper, lamenting police racism and brutality, but also threatens to kill police chief Daryl Gates if Cube catches him in traffic. While using the first person in *The Wrong Nigga to Fuck Wit*, Cube is nevertheless not speaking personally, but empathizing by embodying brutalized black youth that justifiably feel this way. Cube’s “human capital” is generated not by convincing his audience that he is an authentically bad man; his records should be purchased instead because he is an authentic reporter of bad men, or more accurately, the bad conditions that create them.\(^{12}\)

Cube continues to embody voiceless black youth in the first person in descriptive songs about the drug trade and gang violence (*My Summer Vacation*), licentiousness (*Givin’ Up the Nappy Dugout, Look Who’s Burnin’*) and argumentative songs bemoaning unequal social services (*Alive on Arrival*), education and employment opportunities (*A Bird in Hand*) and exploitation in the armed forces (*I Wanna Kill Sam*). If there were any confusion as to how he really felt or whether he was a descriptive rapper because of the strictly journalistic role he fulfilled in many of the album’s songs—understandable if any one song or certainly any one lyric were considered out of context—Cube steps out of the third person in the concluding song\(^{13}\) *Us* to erase the line between descriptive and argumentative rap, yet at the same time illustrate both the structural and cultural critiques\(^{14}\) that comprise Spence’s conception of argumentative rap. Cube takes aim at the community’s culture in the first verse:

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\(^{12}\) Spence at 34–35.

\(^{13}\) The N.W.A. score-settling *No Vaseline* was later tacked on to *Death Certificate*.

\(^{14}\) Spence at 50.
Could you tell me who unleashed our animal instinct?
And the white man’s sittin’ there tickled pink
Laughin’ at us on the avenue
Bustin’ caps at each other after havin’ brew
We can’t enjoy ourselves
Too busy jealous of each other’s wealth
But comin’ up’s just in me
But the black community is full of envy

But segues to structural criticism after more cultural by linking the two in the second:

And all you dope dealers
You’re as bad as the police, cause ya kill us
You got rich when you started slangin’ dope
But you ain’t built us a supermarket
So we can spend our money with the blacks
Too busy buyin’ gold and cadillacs
That’s what you’re doin’ with the money that you’re raisin’
Exploitin’ us like the Caucasians did
For 400 years, I got 400 tears for 400 peers
That died last year from gang-related crimes
That’s why I got gang-related rhymes

Not only does Cube engage in both structural and cultural criticism, but he also clarifies that his role in *My Summer Vacation* was journalist not participant despite his use of the first person. His rhymes are gang and drug-related not because he condones the behavior or participates in it but because he is a first-hand witness and deplores it.

His exclamations of excitement within *My Summer Vacation* about how much more money he (his character) can make in Missouri before the police (regulatory impediments in the drug market) get wind of his operation and native Missourians start shooting back taken out of context like Spence’s Uncle Howie quote suggests that Cube is lauding if not partaking in the behavior.
Took they corners the next day, set up shop
And it’s better than slanging in the valley,
Triple the profit, makin’ more than I did in Cali,
My homie got shot, he’s a goner, black,
St. Louis niggas want they corners back
Shootin’ in snowy weather, it’s illegal business, niggas still can’t stick together
Fuckin’ police got the 411 that L.A. ain’t all surf and sun

In the greater context of Death Certificate, and as clearly conveyed in Us,
however, the lyric is a condemnation of not just that character Cube is portraying, but the structure and attendant culture that result in satisfaction from violence and drug-trafficking. The line then, between descriptive and argumentative rappers is a blurry one, if extant at all. Spence’s selective use of lyrics outside of their contexts gives a misleading portrayal of their meanings, the characters in the songs that they are attributed to and the nature of the rappers responsible for them. It also casts doubt on the viability of the distinction. Some rappers may only be descriptive—choosing to describe only—but rappers are unlikely to be strictly argumentative, using seemingly descriptive lines at the beginning of a song or album to later explain or rebut with argumentative lyrics. The relationship may be akin to scotch: all scotch is whisky, not all whisky is scotch.

What do these distinctions mean, if anything, for hip hop’s role in politics? The limitations of rap in politics can be found in its paradoxical relationship with white listeners: rap is profitable because the majority of its audience is white, yet it has very little effect on white people. This is because argumentative rap is either dismissed by white listeners and thus not commercially-viable, or consumed for its pleasing beats while its messages are ignored. Descriptive rap makes this selective hearing as opposed to listening distinction even easier: the beats are pleasing to consume while descriptive lyrics are not weighed down by uncomfortable preaching. White listeners can safely live
vicariously in dangerous black lives without overt argumentation about fault spoiling the fun. If Spence deems braggadocios lyrics as lauding murder and drug-trafficking, it is easy to understand how suburban white kids can dismiss the plight of the young black male by pointing to the seeming excitement with which they rap about the hustle, or view familiar stereotypes as being accurate if reënacted by the very subjects of the stereotypes.

These superficial understandings explain Spence’s statistic that 53% of white people think disparities in black achievement are attributable to black failure and not racism.\(^\text{15}\) It also addresses Spence’s opening question about why Lauren Hill’s awards had no effect on poverty and prison rates for black Americans: her sound is appealing to white ears; her messages too often fall on deaf ones.

\(^{15}\) Spence at 3.