

As I'm Flowing I'm Getting Strong and Carrying On / What About the Stories and Storytellers Inside You?:

Will Power's *Flow* and the Radicalization of Identification

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I know it sounds corny, but [when] I'm onstage, I don't feel like I'm by myself. There are so many energies onstage...its like a channeling thing. These stories want to be told. -Will Power

Will Power is a storyteller, a griot for a new age of theatre. He at once looks forward to what theatre can be while looking deep in its history for what it has always been; for all his innovation, Power in fact returns theatre to its storytelling roots. Power functions as what Jack Zipes calls the genuine storyteller, a tale-spinning language master whose embrace of the hip hop theatrical modality enables constructive and productive dialogue across lines of difference. Hip hop both forms and informs the theatre Power creates. Drawing from elements of hip hop, especially DJing and MCing, he weaves together polylogues – the multiple stories of different characters channeled through the performer (and his storyteller character Will) and united by the cipher – through which he is able to explore different social issues and articulate the differing perspectives of his characters. In my close read of excerpts from Power's solo performance piece *Flow*, I will track his use of the hip hop form as I highlight specific issues he addresses through the content of the piece. Secondly, I will interrogate how his hip hop theatre activates the audience members by daring them to adopt the processual form of identification he models in his performance, giving the stories to them and asking them to become storytellers in their own right. Through its use of the subversive storytelling language brought to life through hip hop theatre, Power's *Flow* enacts a radicalized conception of identification that moves outward from the self, potentially taking down the racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic status quo.

Before launching into the hip hop how of Power's theatrical storytelling, it is useful to pause to examine the what of it. What constitutes genuine storytelling? As Jack Zipes asserts in "Storytelling as Spectacle in the Globalized World," an essay he delivered in Cardiff, "it is impossible to discuss the nature of storytelling today without talking about the global neglect of truth and authenticity," (4). Or, to borrow from Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller," Western society is awash in information which is easily consumed and just as easily forgotten, but it lacks "experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth [that] is the source from which all storytellers have drawn," (84). The whys for this lack of truth and authenticity, all of which render the public passive, are many: the homogenizing stories put out by the culture industry, the use of narratives and representations by the mass media and advertisers to sell brand

images and lifestyles that lock identity into something fixed and stable and available for purchase, the use of identity politics to effect mass movements of social change, the precession of spectacle that overwhelms and stupefies. Genuine storytelling, then, opposes these forces. It is magical and transformative, taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary. It is inherently subversive and anti-authoritarian, offering to its audience communal experiences in a form that can be told and retold, with each telling changing the story, the storyteller, and the audience alike. States Zipes, “genuine storytelling is the frank presentation and articulation of experience and knowledge through different narrative modalities in order to provide a listener with strategies for survival and pleasure and to heighten one’s awareness of the sensual pleasures and dangers of life,” (2001, 127). Genuine storytelling is the sharing of wisdom; by communicating truth, it seeks to pierce through these myriad normativizing myths that dominate.

Language is a key element around which Power’s hip hop modality is constructed; he heightens everyday language through his use of rhyme, making the words themselves magical. From the moment Power enters the theatre, he transforms the space through language. The pre-show music spun by DJ Reborn suddenly cuts out as Power takes the stage declaring, “There was only seven, y’all / Only seven storytellers in the neighborhood, y’all,”¹ launching into the stylized language of verse that he uses throughout the piece. Indeed, his language transports, moving the audience away from quotidian realism and into a realm where the power of the word is sacred. Power’s use of language taps into the playful and stylized orality of the MC tradition as he constructs his tales through the use of surprising correlations, exceptional wordplay, and intricate and innovative rhythms, but he is quick to note that his hip hop rhyme is not rap, nor is it poetry; “It’s not spoken word developed into shows. It’s not Def Poetry Jam...Poetry is different than theatre. Theatre is a story,” (Personal Interview); thus the story remains central. In fact, Power favors rhymed verse because it concentrates the story into its most powerful form; he notes, “every word is precious, every line is precious, it needs to be there...In a shorter period of time it has to be more potent,” (Personal Interview). It imbues his stories with a force and energy that impress upon the audience the urgent necessity of their telling. Power’s potency of language reflects the African American oral sensibility, not surprising as Power places great importance on pulling from his own experiences and reflecting

1 All quotes from the play *Flow* were transcribed from notes and from the CD recording.

his own cultural upbringing. Indeed, he adopts and adapts the African figure of the griot to his theatrical modality, bringing the ancient characteristics of this traditional storyteller to the modern stage. The term griot, perhaps first inserted into the USAmerican consciousness by Alex Haley in *Roots*,² currently gets bandied about with increasing regularity and decreasing specificity, often somewhat indiscriminately applied to African American artists or elders who “know” their history. Yet Power deeply engages with the griot tradition, effectively bridging history, geography, and cultural difference as he translates this figure through his performance. Griots and griottes, as Thomas A. Hale notes in his comprehensive study *Griots and Griottes*, are first and foremost wordsmiths, individuals skilled in harnessing the power of the past, present, and future through the spoken word. Through their verbal artistry, they perform a multitude of important social roles serving as genealogists, historians, advisers, spokespersons, diplomats, mediators, interpreters, translators, musicians, composers, teachers, exhorters, warriors, witnesses, praise-singers, and ceremony participants (18-58). Accordingly, Power and his character Will perform many of these roles in *Flow*, tracing the roots of the storytelling crew, singing and rhyming their multiple messages, standing witness to their demise, recognizing and calling attention to the social value of their insights, and offering to the audience their counsel.

Power’s harnessing of the griot figure marries important aspects of the African conception of the word to the field of storytelling in general as well as to the specificity of the African American oral tradition. Griots³, notes Hale, exercise considerable control over *nyama*, a Mande term that can be loosely translated as a sort of energy or life force that adds meaning and potency to their speech. *Nyama*, Hale suggests, allows the words of the griot to “take on special value in the present by serving as buffers in human relations,” (115), linking individuals to the past and the future in order to tap into the universal. The word in motion allows these links to manifest in the audience; the spoken word penetrates the listeners to create meaning deep within them. Thus storytelling for the griot is not simply an intellectual sharing

2 In *Roots*, Haley describes his encounter with a griot when traveling in Africa. The griot traced Haley’s genealogy, informing him of the life and history of Kunta Kinte, who was traded into slavery; Haley then reconstructs Kunta Kinte’s enslaved life in the United States, tracing his ancestry forward to the present day.

3 Because Power is male, I will use the masculine version of the word in my analysis, but it should be noted that both men and women serve as griots and griottes (the feminized version of the French term) in Africa.

of experience, but rather both an emotional and spiritual event through which deep wisdom is shared. Indeed, a griot's story derives such timelessness through the pure orality of the telling, often containing words or sounds that are untranslatable, such as Power's repetition of the sounds "Zuu" and "be- dee-ka" in *Flow*; Sufi brother Mohamed Abdoulaye Maïga asserts:

There are certain sounds that exist, pure sounds that have been passed down through the centuries. These sounds have no real meaning in themselves. They are devoid of sense...If such a person utters these sounds, he can gain access to the archive wherein the totality of human history resides. This archive contains everything that had ever happened and that will happen in history, the past as well as the future. (qtd. in Wise 33)

Both sound and sense create meaning. Hale further notes that the griot's facility with nyama saturates the texts that they craft, such that the words, "carry far more meaning than the simple definitions that we may or may not be able to find for them in the dictionaries," (144), an idea which links to the double-voicedness of black vernacular that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discusses in *The Signifying Monkey*.

Singifyin(g), Gates theorizes, is a rhetorical system that arose when the African sense of the word came into contact with Western conceptions of language under the unequal, racially based power hierarchy of the United States with the forced importation of slaves. Signifyin(g) marks "the profound confrontation between two parallel discursive universes: the black American linguistic circle and the white... manifested at the level of the signified," (45). In short, black people brought their own vernacular traditions into play through their use of language, opening up the signifier to a multiplicity of meaning(s). Signifyin(g) valorizes indirection and circumlocution, so that meaning "is deferred because the relationship between intent and meaning, between speech act and its comprehension, is skewed by the figures of rhetoric or signification," (53). That is to say, there is an intended gap between the apparent, or literal, meaning and the actual meaning of a story, which arises because of the African American facility with both discursive forms; due to the fragmentation and split-subjecthood that marks any oppressed community, black folks are able to speak two languages – the language of power that upholds Western configurations of language, and the language of the oppressed that reflects African sensibilities of the word – and

signifyin(g) plays with the relation between these two systems. Gates further notes that “the play of black language games is a mode of formal revision, it depends for its effects on troping, it is often characterized by pastiche, and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures and their differences,” (52). Indeed, signifyin(g) allows African Americans to resist and revise the tropes of identity that have put upon them by dominant white culture and exacerbated by the past political necessity of identity politics.

Signifyin(g) asserts that dictionary definitions for words are not always sufficient; it requires its audience to be an active participant, decoding the literal to unearth the latent meaning of words through the recognition of shared knowledge. Part of the joy of signifyin(g), then, comes through the celebration of the communal bonds that give language its meaning and the shared experiences that make such deciphering possible. Yet the pleasure inherent to signifyin(g) is based not only in the meanings transmitted through language play, but also in the virtuosity of the construction of the language play itself. The clever use of indirection, metaphor and image, humor and irony, rhythm and sound, rhyme, reference to the audience, teaching that resists lapsing into didactic preaching, aural puns and wordplay, and the inclusion of semantic or logical surprise mark the skill of the speaker as much, if not more than, the meaning he or she constructs through signifyin(g) (Gates 94). Thus, in the practice of signifyin(g) there is a recognition of the constructedness of language and of the artistry of the speaker who signifies by concocting a skillful text. Indeed, signifyin(g) is a rhetorical strategy particularly well suited to the storyteller, for as Zipes notes:

The genuine storyteller is a skeptic, a doubter, whose wisdom is conveyed by the realization that there may be no wisdom or ethic to be passed on. It is by challenging the truth value of the very words that the storyteller speaks that she becomes genuine and that wisdom may be conveyed. (2001, 135)

Because signifyin(g) foregrounds the innovation of the speaker to construct a grand tale and to play imaginatively with language, it self-reflexively acknowledges the folly of such endeavors; moreover, through this acknowledgement, signifyin(g) allows the audience members to surrender themselves to the conceptual power of the storyteller, to be cast in his spell while constantly being reminded that this spell is put upon them.

Power's use of the polylogue melds the multiplicity of magical language to the form of hip hop, bringing the elements of MCing and DJing to the theatrical context. Indeed, these multiple interrupted and interrupting monologues function by pulling together disparate perspectives and positionalities into a cohesive whole. Notes Power, "it's very hip hop, it's almost like a sample. It's almost like there's this one actor playing these different characters and ... it's almost like you inhabit all of them, you can kind of sample them all, as opposed to just one monologue," (Personal Interview). The technology of sampling stems from the hip hop element of DJing, and it, too, picks up on many of the tropes of signifyin(g). Most notably, the sample uses the practice of repetition and revision (rep and rev) to create a cyclic structure in which pieces of music are removed from their original context and looped, merging the end with the beginning, each time with difference as other samples are layered into the piece. The looped sample not only repeats and revises within the new piece of music, but also performs a further rep and rev on the original source(s) from which the discrete elements are pulled; as hip hop musicologist Joseph G. Schloss notes, "In order to appreciate the music, a listener must hear both the original interactions and how they have been organized into new relationships with each other," (159). Power's performance of polylogues in *Flow* creates a similar effect; each polylogic performance informs the others, opening up both resonance and dissonance between the characters that culminates in the finale, during which the character Will samples key phrases and movements from these preceding storytellers, performing his acquisition of their knowledge while simultaneously recasting this knowledge into a new piece of his own.

Through his use of the polylogue, Power disrupts, but does not discard, the stability of the Western well-formed story in favor of a more dynamic storytelling tradition. Indeed, in Aristotelian terms, the plot of the piece is fairly straightforward: Will walks down the street, joins the storyteller crew by hearing their stories, and finally stands witness to the metaphoric storm that destroys the storytelling circle and the other six storytellers. Yet the telling of this plot is far more complex than a simple city stroll; Power uses the polylogues to spiral out from a linear narrative into the cyclic, presenting each of his characters first as storytellers with their own idiosyncrasies and then sharing their unique wisdom with the audience. What coheres these multiple perspectives also transports them from the everyday to the magical: the cipher. The cipher, manifested in the set design as a ring of sand, functions metaphorically in the piece on several different levels as Power draws meaning from the multiple

definitions of the term. Perhaps most importantly, the cipher marks the storytelling ring, and by extension the theatre itself, as a mystical, spiritual space, a gathering place for the free exchange of wisdom. Truths are revealed around the cipher, and the gathering of community sages is a sacred practice. Moreover, the cipher reflects the practice of storytelling itself; a cipher is a secret or disguised way of writing or speaking, a code – as is signifyin(g) and storytelling. A cipher is also the key to a code, much like storytelling, which can be used to unlock the dominant myths of a culture, to break them open to free wisdom and truth.

The cipher also provides an important link to hip hop culture; the cipher is the rhyme or dance circle around which MCs and breakers battle in ritualized competition. It, too, is a charged space, one wherein individuals showcase their skills. This competitive aspect of the cipher, however, at once allows for individual recognition and communal bonding; one flaunts his or her verbal innovation and unique style, but the group together shares in the experience of rhyming. While each MC attempts to win the respect of the others and to be named the champion, the competitive process uplifts all of the members of the cipher as a whole. More importantly, though, the rhyme circle of hip hop culture functions as a space in which MCs are able to orally rewrite history from their perspective and in their vernacular. Alternate, often subversive, narratives arise that may not be authorized elsewhere in society.

In its verb form, to cipher is to cast in mind, to express by characters of any kind, to express or make manifest in any outward signs. Through performance, Power ciphers his fellow griots and griottes to the stage such that they seem to embody him more than he embodies them. The polylogue acts as a performative vehicle for tapping into the truth of these figures; they spring forth from him with the authenticity afforded a genuine storyteller. Though they are not real, they read differently from characters within a fictive world of a play, in part because the audience must actively participate in their decoding. Notes Power, “you have to use your imagination [in] wanting to see these other people” contained within the figure of one performer (Personal Interview). Moreover, the mode of performance in his hip hop theatre differs greatly than in a traditional play. Most notably, it is exceedingly dynamic; because polylogues interrupt each other and fracture linearity, they require the actor to insert specificity into his or her performance through language and vocalization, physicality, and the space of the stage. Indeed, each of his characters employ unique phrasings,

often making use nonsensical sounds such as the “Ba-Ba-Dee-Da” incantation voiced by New Groun and Swea P.’s “Umm, Okay Okay Umm, Right, Okay Okay” which loop back on each other throughout their stories. They each speak with a different rhythm and rhyme scheme, and Power uses his full vocal range so that they have recognizably distinct voices. Power visually marks their difference as well, granting each character a unique carriage and specific gestures that distinguish him or her from the other figures; Ole Cheezy shakes his tip jar as he hustles for change, Besombee glides across the stage in a choreographed dance-poem. Power links each character to specific stage locations, so that they become grounded to their locality. While they each move all over the stage through the course of their stories, they begin and end in specific places, their own position around the cipher. This specificity and dexterity of performance is necessary, states Power, because the polylogues require “using your body and using your voice and spirit to work like costumes,” (Personal Interview). That body, voice, and spirit construct the characters is enhanced by Power’s own costuming. His simple sleeveless T-shirt and pants with their muted tones integrate his visually with the neighborhood setting that surrounds him. Power and his character Will are a part of the scene, not outside of it. Absent are the bright colors and bling-bling normally associated with hip hop; in effect, Power constructs a world in which hip hop is stripped down to its “purest” elements – the rhyme, the sample, the movement, and the untold and unauthorized narratives that are written through hip hop.

Hip hop culture gives voice to the invisible and unheard, the zeroes of society also represented through the cipher. Indeed, the mathematical definition of a cipher is a zero, a number which has no value, but which increases or decreases the value of other figures depending on its position (1 becomes 10 becomes 100 with the inclusion of a zero). Power picks up on this meaning by comprising his cipher of characters who are deemed to be of little value – a drunk who is the original griot; a school teacher who works with young girls in the ‘hood; a grocery store bagger who preaches a New Age spirituality; a peripatetic, rap-loving indigenous man; a dancer who advocates for personal, societal, and environmental health; a freestyling teenaged girl; and Will, a young man strolling the scene, who is quick to make note that “Knowledge is knowledge wherever it comes from.” He asks us to listen to the wisdom of all of those who make up our community, not to discount individuals who have valuable experiences and insights to share. This subversive message carries through *Flow* as a whole, as each story imparts wisdom from the unexpected and the overlooked, and further

empowers the audience to find and cast their own surprising stories.

After introducing the idea of the cipher that Will joins, he raises the stakes of the stories about to be told by having Ole Cheezy, the original griot, mention that a previous cipher once existed. Cheezy is the last of this old crew, and his mission – which he passes on to Will – it to make the crew new. He seeks out the wisdom carriers of his community and assembles them together to warn them of an impending storm that will “blow through” and to impress upon them the importance that the stories “pass through.” Thus the stories are vital – they must be told and must be told now. Each of the polylogues that form the characters use distinct narrative strategies. Appropriately, it is Cheezy, now situated on the street with his tip cup in hand, who begins the storytelling sessions with an animal fable, the story of a Fred the Roach. Through this fable, Power presents the complex reality of the disempowered, whose hand-to-mouth existence disallows the critical interrogation of the institutionalized systems that render them powerless. While the other roaches “would scurry out for a piece of pie / They didn’t understand or comprehend why. / Zuu! / Fred would wait. / Then that roach would investigate.” Fred recognizes that the community is in crisis and that “we got to bring this genocide to an end.” Power draws parallels to the black community throughout this story, critiquing the system of racism that vilifies African Americans while also chastising those individuals who are complicit in their own destruction by perpetuating such social ills as drug addiction and gang violence; as Fred says:

Look, we gonna be around forever, so look.
Use tact.
You got to freeze in the light and walk in the black
And these chemical’s worse than crack!
Don’t eat it, my fellow roaches!
No, no. Take it back to the lab so we can adapt!
Now, now look, I don’t care how good the shit tastes
It’s gonna leave you on your back
And this Zuu! roach-on-roach crime is wack!
The toilet gang against the kitchen counter crew – that’s wack!
Now look, look. We all roaches!
We all roaches, baby,
We gotta start using some different approaches!

The fable ends with this call to unity – “We all roaches, baby” – as the roaches join

forces to take down the system seeks to destroy them, and it offers a warning to those in power, signaling that through a unified battle against injustice, change will occur. As Ole Cheezy says, he has refrained from killing roaches at all, “Because you can win the battle, but you can’t win the war.” Thus the fable urges its audience to critically examine the social systems of the United States, to join together to effect change.

The most complex critique of racism and honest evaluation of each of our complicity in the perpetuation of injustice comes through the story told by indigenuous griot New Groun. His piece begins as an incantation, as he chants “Ba-ba-dee-da-dabba-do-dee-da” while performing ritualized movements that lead him into his storytelling. Lest we fall prey to misconceptions that Native peoples exist somehow out of time, however, Power presents New Groun as a man fully invested in pop culture. Each of his vignettes begin with the reference to a popular rap artist that both grounds the stories in their social and geographic locale and disrupts the notion that New Groun’s wisdom is an ahistorical and nostalgic fantasy projected on the character. New Groun’s first vignette iterates a common formulation of racism-in-action – the white man against the hostile other – yet, because it is spoken to a Native American, it adds a new layer of complexity; here racism is clothed in the contemporary political discourse of nationalism and security, masking itself as a call to unity that includes such traditionally oppressed groups as Native American citizens. New Groun states:

I had my headphones Jay-Z was playing
I was walking down the street listening to what he’s saying.
Something about getting paid -
It don’t mean nothing cause they just brought down the World Trade.
Then I came across a man he was in a ZONE!
.....
He say, “Let’s kill all the Arabs, man!
He say, “All the motherfucking Arabs, man!
He say, “Or at least get ‘em out this land!”
He say, “Every American must take a stand!”
I say, “I don’t recall making your folks pay.
When that building got blown by that man McVeigh
Plus your people aren’t native in this here land, bro.
If somebody kicked you out, now where would you go?”

New Groun’s response reveals the gaps in this nationalist logic and deflates the notion that the with-us / against-us binary can be enforced purely by simplistic racialized

categories. He not only shows how nationalism has been used as a stand-in for racism, but he rejects the underlying conception of nation by reminding the man of the United States's immigrant roots. New Groun's second vignette demonstrates that racism is not simply perpetrated on the other by white society, but that intolerance in fact infects all sociopolitical groupings. Traveling in the South (while listening to Outkast), New Groun finds himself on an overly air conditioned bus. He situates this story by bringing up the region's history of racial oppression, noting, "So I hopped on a bus and I started to roll / Through towns where the people used to be bought and sold / Those folks were in the heat and even the cold / Then they fought Jim Crow let the story be told," relating the legacy of civil disobedience to the particular setting of this vignette: the ice-cold bus. When a Mexican mother of two politely asks the driver to turn down the air conditioner, he lashes out, "Shoot I like the cold, it keep my gherri-curl soft." This line, which in performance is extremely humorous, identifies the driver as a black man while dissipating the stakes of the exchange. Thus when the woman asks for help a second time, his vitriolic, racist response is all the more shocking:

So the woman asks the driver again, "Too cold, sir, help!"
And the driver stops the bus
He says, "Alright, da's it! I'm tired of y'all Mexicans always asking for shit!
Now this is my bus! Tired of you people!"
I [New Groun] say, "But sir, didn't your ancestors die so you could be equal?"
He say, "Why don't half of y'all mind your bidness? Hmmh."
I say ... Nothing.

New Groun's "Nothing" lingers in the air as it breaks the both the rhyme and the rhythm of his incantation. Revealing the difficulty of opposing oppression in its most intimate incarnation of individual interchange, this "Nothing" serves as an admission of New Groun's failure to speak further when faced with the immediacy of racial conflict.

The full power of the polylogue explodes in Swea P's freestyle session, as the rhymes expand outward to reveal the complicated background that informs these young MCs. Once again, hip hop provides a necessary outlet and the cipher the space in which these characters can be free to express themselves. As Swea P says, "The cipher is like a party / A therapy session / And a jam session all in one!" These words

become more poignant when the audience is given a glimpse into their personal lives that inform their rhymes. The polylogue begins by giving Swea P, June, and Joe their own identifying phrases, the playful “Umm, okay okay, umm, right, okay, okay” that along with a sort of hopscotch skip marks Swea P; the deeply guttural “Uh, yeah, yeah, yeah” of June, and Joe’s nasally “It’s like it’s like it’s like it’s like it’s lickity like like lickity like like like.” Each character is also rooted to a position in the cipher with Swea P, the queen MC front and center, June upstage on her right, and Joe upstage on her left. As he jumps between these three characters, Power moves with speed and precision to make clear who is speaking at all times. Although Swea P is the griotte and her conversation with DJ Old School frames her story about the cipher, June in fact starts the cipher session within the story, noting that he is “straight ferocious / New York Mack-a-docious / Make MCs nervous / Like if they had neurosis.” Evident in his rap, filled as it is with defiant imagery and taunts and boasts, is the competition associated with the cipher. As his rhyme breaks out into a conversation between June and his mother, however, another impulse for this attitude becomes clear; he raps hard to mask the pain he endures living with a junkie mother who pressures him into buying drugs for her. This short conversation immediately transforms back into his rap, where June declares “I’m all alone in this world, but I / Won’t cry / And a nigga won’t die, cause I’m / Strong,” but having been given this insight into his home life, the audience rightly views his calls to strength as a heartfelt wish rather than a reality. June’s rap leads directly into Joe’s, who, like his colleague, boasts that he is “the top MC / Make all you suckers freeze / About to be Chinese / Straight stepping on fools like the Han Dynasty.” This imagery carries the audience directly into Joe’s conversation with his father. A traditional Chinese man who has no tolerance for his son’s dreams of being an MC, he belittles his son’s assertion that rapping gains him respect, laughing at the “nursery rhymes” he so loves and commanding that he stay in school, “graduate with honors in biology and...make your family proud.” As Joe answers with a meek “Yes, sir,” we leap back into his rhyme where he demands of his audience the respect he cannot gain from his father. The end cycles back to Swea P, who further extols the sanctuary of the cipher, noting “When I had problems I would never deal with it, okay / But then I found a cipher, it looked at me / I did a 360, that’s evolution, y’all / From the inside.” Swea P’s story, with its fracturing polylogues, illuminates the dynamic display of truth through identification that Power’s hip hop theatrical modality makes possible.

The final story is Will’s, which is a story of loss. He describes the metaphoric

storm that Ole Cheezy foretold, cataloging the forces that gathered to destroy each of his fellow griots and griottes – Cheezy’s addiction to a new drink that renders him zombie-like before causing his liver to explode, Jacoba’s broken neck due to the “jealousy stew” that swirled around her, Preacha Man’s gang-style shooting by the “First Baptist Niggas” of the organized black church whom he so threatened, New Groun’s self-sacrifice to save Mother Earth, Besombree’s demise due to the toxic sludge that contaminated the earth below his house, and Swea P’s accidental shooting when she was caught in the crossfire of an incident of gang violence. With each death, he kicks the pristine circle of the cipher until it is erased, the sand littering the entire stage. The knowledge that Will has gained comes at a cost; it marks him as a man outside of his storytelling community, yet it also issues to him the challenge to make a new crew, to keep these stories alive. He screams his calling:

Seven Storytellers!

Zuu!

And I go
Pass the burning blocks
And all the looted spots
Brothers shootin’ glocks
Yeah, I might get got
But as I’m flowin’ I’m getting strong
And carrying on
You know the storm blew through
And my crew is gone
But they’re still inside me
Cheezy and my crew
And all the old Cheezies
And crews before them, too
And they help me get through
Martinson 17
And all the old Fred the Roaches
And Blind Betties before them, too
And you got it, too
And now you got it, too
What about the stories and storyteller that’s inside you?
What about the stories and storyteller that’s inside you?
What about the stories and storyteller that’s inside you?

The ending of the piece picks up on a final aspect of the cipher: the notion of completion, its 360 degrees representing the full revolution of the cycle, or the idea

of coming full circle in thought. After Will's story, we return to the beginning with a key difference: the destruction of the cipher. At this moment it becomes clear that all of these stories in fact have been Will's story, he exists to cipher his former crew into being through a dynamic mode of recollection. Indeed, this gesture makes his storytelling all the more powerful. As Benjamin notes, "traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of a potter cling to the clay vessel. Storytellers tend to begin their story with the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow," (92). Power upturns this equation, of course, only revealing at the end how he came to be "Only One," thus the audience is able to experience these stories through the embodied performance of the original storytellers through the character Will. And though the storm destroyed the cipher on a literal level, it continues to exist. Will has acquired these stories and these characters live on; as he launches into a the entirely movement-based finale, Will incorporates all of the gestures of the storytellers into his dance, refiguring them into a new whole that embodies just how he has changed through his encounter with these figures and their wisdom. Most importantly, he gives the stories to the audience members and challenges them to become storytellers in their own right. Wisdom does not exist to be hoarded, it gains power as it spreads. Though the representational community of the cipher, the gathering of storytellers, is laid waste in the performance of *Flow*, a new community replaces it, the community that has formed in the theatre space and has shared these stories together.

The cipher, and the polylogues that are told around it, like sampling and signifyin(g), should be understood as the embrace and celebration of the processual model of identification. If stable identity is best encapsulated by the well-formed linearity of the traditional Western narrative, identification finds a corollary in the polylogue, through the cohesive whole that is paradoxically formed by competing narratives that arise through interruption, overlap, fragmentation, and dissonance. In short, the cipher, and the polylogues that it enables, allows dynamic identification to become manifest on the stage, creating webs of connections between disparate characters. Difference within *Flow* is productive; the many characters join together around the cipher to formulate what Chela Sandoval describes as a coalitional consciousness. Sandoval notes that "Social actors committed to egalitarian social relations, who are seeking the basis for a shared vision, an oppositional and coalitional politics...must self-consciously recognize, develop, and harness a...methodology of the oppressed,

which is composed of the technologies that make possible differential social movements,” (71). I submit that Power’s embodiment of these seven storytellers does just that; by dramatizing a multiplicity of being out of which these characters emerge, he in fact presents both the internal fragmentation of the contemporary citizen-subject as he simultaneously models how that fragmentation can be organized into Sandoval’s methodology of the oppressed.

To continue with Sandoval’s terminology, the cipher thus functions as a what she calls the non-hierarchical horizontal social space; it is a node of power through which the individual characters are able to speak and to be heard, to exchange wisdom and knowledge “from spatially differing geographic, class, age, race, or gender locations,” (73). That is to say, each of these characters retains his or her specificity and is in fact empowered by them; difference is not elided – it is asserted, it informs. Indeed, in the social space of the cipher, Sandoval’s “late-capitalist retranslation of difference allows hierarchical and material differences in power between people to be erased from consciousness, even while these same economic and social privileges are bolstered,” (74). *Flow* factors the storyteller ring first and foremost as a community of equals, a group whose voices construct a communal wisdom that benefits all. As they tell their stories, however, each voice becomes specific, carrying individual qualities informed by their unique position along this social web. Thus they are a unified community comprised of diverse, unique individuals; they are both the whole and its pieces.

The cipher roots each of the characters to his or her positionality, or using Donna J. Haraway’s terminology, it situates each of these subjects in his or her own knowledge. As a result, the audience cannot help but understand these stories as unique articulations spoken from limited, yet valuable, perspectives. Thus *Flow* activates the ethics of engagement across lines of difference, breathing life into Haraway’s theoretical model, constructing these characters and stitching them together with their incompleteness intact. That all of these stories are told through the character of Will and the performance of Power only heightens the value of Haraway’s model of situated knowledge, for it makes evident how a single individual – both Will as storyteller and Power as artist – can ethically engage with and present otherness without erasing difference. *Flow* does not claim the dominating authority of objectivity, rather it constructs a web of interconnectedness between these different characters, ultimately

revealing how resonances and commonalities bridge different subject locations in an respectful and active process.

Will Power is a pioneer of hip hop theatre who uses the form of hip hop as a new theatrical modality that enacts a progressive form of identification while re-instilling theatre's genuine storytelling roots to the medium. In both its form and its content, *Flow* is magical and transformative. Especially key is Power's use of language, with its rhythm and rhyme, that pulls the audience out of the quotidian and constructs the fantastic world of the cipher. Power's playful signifyin(g) opens up language to a multiplicity of meanings while allowing him access to the griot tradition. His use of polylogues further radicalizes language by disrupting the stabilizing narrative of the Western tradition in favor of a fragmented sample that coheres through the processual identification that it performs; notes Power, "basically it moves," (Personal Interview). The cipher is the center that holds, the crossroads of ambiguity around which identification exists in motion and coalitional consciousness is raised. Significantly, the stories that have been told are given to the audience members, empowering them to retell and remake these narratives, to become storytellers in their own right.

I asked Will Power if audiences – especially more traditional theatre-going audiences – had any difficulty understanding, interpreting, and enjoying his work, wondering if the innovative form of hip hop theatre was only accessible to those familiar, however superficially, with hip hop culture. His answer was a resounding no; "No, they got it. You know why? Because what we're doing is based on ancient principles. Entirely based on ancient principles. And if you can bring that to the forefront within a theatrical context, people will get it. Young people get it, old people get it. Because they understand it...That's never really been a problem," (Personal Interview). It is Power's facility with the ancient art of storytelling that makes his work so meaningful, so exciting, and most importantly, so genuine.

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