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Me, We: an unconventional, non-linear and sometimes nonsensical journey into the literacy experiences of a wandering mind

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ABSTRACT The opposite of concrete. This article is partly an autobiographical reflection on the cultural, educational and linguistic influences that have shaped the author's understanding of literacy development and the ability of language to create normative ways of seeing the world. 'How do words influence our ways of seeing, thinking and being?' is a guiding question throughout the piece. Drawing from the work of Ivan Illich, Erving Goffman and Edgar Friedenberg, this article suggests that schools are more concerned with institutionalizing knowledge and reproducing the power structures that govern our social exchanges than they are with education. The writing style and tone differ in structure and timbre from what is considered to be traditional in most academic forums – and all that jazz.

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Book I: (h)ornitology

I would never deprive Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie of their due recognition but my entry into jazz was ushered in by the tenor tunes of John Coltrane. Despite being over four decades old, I still consider *A Love Supreme* to be the greatest audio recording to date; a virtuoso performance that speaks to the soul as much as it does the ear. Before branching out as leader of his own ensemble, Coltrane was part of the Miles Davis Quintet, responsible for one of the most acclaimed albums in jazz history: Columbia Records' *Kind of Blue*. Ashley Khan's (2007) book, which borrows its title from Davis's record, shares anecdotes whose recounting strengthened my connection to the jazz milestone and helped me appreciate its historicity. The fact that it was recorded in a church undoubtedly adds to the album's mysticism and mystique, if for nothing more than the sound reverberations made possible by the venue's architecture.

In the summer of 2010, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts curated 'We Want Miles', an exhibit that included, among other things, some of the trumpeter's music transcripts, original artwork by artists who designed his album covers and an impressive photographic array of Davis spanning over 30 years. The highlight of the exposition was a six-by-nine-foot enclave called the 'Blue Room', a dimly lit musical haven that played a constant loop of *Kind of Blue*. As evocative as tunes like 'So What' and 'Flamenco Sketches' are, few experiences are as stilling as standing in front of a glass case displaying Davis's trumpet and Coltrane's tenor sax – which overshadowed an equally impressive sepia-toned photograph of Davis, Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley taken during the recording of the album. I managed to snap a couple of pictures before a security guard threatened to confiscate my camera. 'Well worth the risk', I heard someone whisper. Unsure who comment was directed at, I looked over my shoulder to find a smiling gentleman who I estimated was in his late sixties. During our ensuing chat, he brought my attention to the abundance of nicks on the Selmer saxophone, explaining that the dents enhanced the quality of the sound for reasons I am hard-pressed to recall. Musicians almost literally broke their instruments in by purposely dinging them around.

Considering the social value we place on most all that glitters, I found it telling that the horns' shine would be a detriment to their expressive capacities. I had admired the brass as vessels for what I thought was a boundless creativity, but now began to wonder what other restrictions the trumpet and the saxophone may have placed on Davis's and Coltrane's musical genius. In awe of the range of notes the instruments produced, I ignored the spectrum of sounds stifled by the physical limitations they imposed. Though the analogy now seems obvious, I had never likened the horns to words or to language. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1978, p. 329) explains that 'grammar is the shadow of possibility cast by language on phenomena', implying that grammar and language restrict our range of thinking and our expressive capabilities. He relays this idea in more accessible fashion in *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* when he suggests that the limits of his language are the limits of his world (Wittgenstein, 1974). For Davis and Coltrane, the limits of their horns are the limits of their sound.

Book II: ... in the hour of chaos

This article is concerned with the capacity of words to shape our ability to engage the world. Of particular interest is the use of language to reinforce nomothetic ways of seeing, thinking and being. I will also explore the mechanisms through which discourse reinforces and reproduces existing power structures in society. As a doctoral student, a lecturer and a trainer of teachers, I grapple with how I can, to quote Public Enemy's Chuck D, 'fight the power' (Ridenhour et al, 1989) when I am the power. I preach the importance of critical thinking but do so from a podium at an institution that binds thought. I speak of the failure of organizations but earn my keep from academic establishments whose redemptive qualities are scant. In short, I am part hypocrite, part contradiction. Despite the human impulse to classify people, objects and ideas into discrete groups, few things in life fit into neatly prescribed categories.

As its subtitle suggests, this article is unconventional in both form and process. I will use the following pages to reflect on my own literacy development, which has predominantly been shaped by the process of schooling and my exposure to Hip Hop music. While I recognize that literacy spans a gamut of skills, I have chosen to concern myself with the acquisition and the use of words,

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in both oral and written capacities. Consider this project a poor man's version of Jean-Paul Sartre's (1964) *Les Mots*, if you will. It strays from traditional academic structure and remains a personal work that informs my understanding of literacy and helps situate my life experiences within the larger political enterprise that is literacy development.

The article's title is inspired by an incident that occurred at the Harvard University Commencement Ceremony when former heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali was invited to address the graduating class of 2000. Ali, known for his wordplay, was dyslexic and favored succinctness. He gave a speech about the responsibility the graduates had to effect change in the world as they had been afforded educational opportunities that a racist society had denied him. As he concluded, a member of the audience shouted a request for a poem. Ali stared into the microphone and blurted 'Me ... we' before walking off the stage. Journalist George Plimpton, who recounts this story in the Ali documentary *When We Were Kings* (1996), explains that Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* lists 'On the Antiquity of Microbes' as the shortest poem in the English language. It reads 'Adam had 'em'. Plimpton suggests that Ali's poem displaces 'On the Antiquity of Microbes' in brevity and, more significantly, in meaning.

Ali's rhyme has the word count beat but it stands for something more. It was recited spontaneously at one of the most prestigious academic institutions, yet came from the mind of an unschooled, though highly educated, athlete. Literacy is sometimes used as a separator between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', those who enjoy a wealth of intellectual capital and those who are deprived of it through mechanisms of social reproduction that include schooling. Me, we: it defies linguistic structural norms and brings attention to the relationship the individual maintains with the greater social whole and the people in it. It also shows that one's expression of thought need not be confined by speech and writing conventions, even at the most prominent of universities.

The spirit of Ali's poem galvanizes this article. The amount of insight that is drawn from two simple words is a far cry from academic productions of knowledge that rely on wordiness to mask deficiencies in thought; from articles that speak *at* you, instead of *to* you; from so-called professors whose research and credentials keep them divorced from the practical applications their work may have. My hope is that this piece will engage its readers, and invite them to reflect on their own experiences and to question their preconceptions on the relationship between language, schooling and education. At times, my thinking reaches impasses beyond which I have struggled to navigate; at others, I pose questions to which I have no answers. To the former of these two critiques, I concede that some of my ideas and philosophies remain in their formative stages, but do not think this makes them any less worthy of being voiced. To the latter, I reply by drawing on Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2004) likening of self to a poor physician, someone who is more concerned with diagnoses than with finding cures. In time, this stance may change.

Book III: words and things

I am unable to tell you, with any measure of certainty, what word I spoke first. Common wisdom suggests it would have been 'mom' or 'dad', in one of the many variations children use to call out to their parental figures. Mix in the fact that I was raised in a household that valued Arabic, our native tongue, as much as it did French, our colonizers' language, and you are left with twice the number of possibilities. This is all speculation, of course. I did spend my formative years in Lebanon, amidst Phalangist coups, Israeli raids and Palestinian uprisings. I was there when Hezbollah was formed. For all intents and purposes, my first utterance could have been 'boom', the universal sound for bomb explosions.

In my earliest childhood memories, I am already a talking head. Not yet the wise mouth I would grow to be, I flaunted my newly acquired literacy skills by deciphering street signs, billboards and store names as we drove by them. If this annoyed my parents in any way, I was oblivious to it. I suspect it wore thin on them after a while, especially when stuck in traffic. With our vehicle at a standstill, I tended to recycle material, reading the same signs over and over. At times, the repetitiveness got dull, but I was indifferent. I could turn letters into sounds; morph the physical into the audible. This verbal aptitude, along with the ability to make the moon follow me, was my most cherished superpower. I was unaware that I shared the former with the majority of the free world and that the latter was an illusory manifestation of toddler's egocentrism.

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My transition into literacy is just as hazy as my entry into the world of speech. I have not the slightest idea when I started writing, but I do recall endless hours of mechanical repetition, mastering the art of crossing 't's two-thirds of the way up the stem. The French curricular system of which I was a participant for the first 11 years of my schooling places a high premium on the aesthetics of student calligraphy. An improperly dotted 'i' (lower case, of course) may cost a mark or two on writing tests. Forgoing incursive for print form was met with a ruler slap to an extended hand – usually facing upwards, so as to smack the palm, though I generally found a hit on the knuckles to be more painful. When asked why my scrawl is so meticulous, I explain that the habit was beaten into me, quite literally. Forsaking the French educational system for the British, and eventually the American, my pen struggled to abandon run-on sentence structures favored at the *lycée*. At a later stage, I learned to invert the 'e' and 'r' at the end of words, drop some 'u's and spell grey with an 'a'. This was around the time that 'rubbers' became 'erasers'.

While it has proven a luxury and a helpful capability, negotiating the use of three languages can be a taxing task. Frantz Fanon (1952, p. 13) tells us that 'un homme qui possède le langage possède par contrecoup le monde exprimé et impliqué par ce langage'.[1] If languages contain embedded value systems, and words influence our expressive, emotive and cognitive capacities, then there are inevitable tensions involved in reconciling multiple linguistic identities, each presenting its own epistemologies and world views. I had often thought of myself as an Arab man whose ego spoke a foreign tongue, sometimes French, but mostly English. I realize now that this conception feeds into what has become an empty and somewhat unhelpful conceit: the illusion that identity reduces to a primary, formative and fixed core with scattered linguistic, cultural and historical appendages. I had, however, developed compartmentalized personas, divided along linguistic lines. Only recently have I begun to resolve these inherent discords.

Book IV: was it all so simple then?

My grandmother passed away when I was 11 years old. Despite her strength, she lost a three-year bout with lung cancer and acquainted me with death for the first time. Though her last few months were spent at home, hooked to a respirator, she managed to outlive her doctor's most optimistic of projections. Her name was Tamem, Arabic for 'good', as in 'all is well'. Depending on whose version of the story you believe – my father's or my uncle's – she had somewhere between seven and nine years of formal schooling, her life providing thorough enough a curriculum to compensate for the gap in institutional learning. A widow with insufficient credentials to secure gainful employment, she instilled the value of education in her three children at a young age. My father would be the first to grace the graduation stage. He completed a degree in Law, joined the diplomatic corps and supported his younger brother, emotionally and financially, as his sibling obtained a Bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering.

As a family, we had made a considerable generational leap. My grandfather was functionally literate, but enjoyed reading sports and the odds-makers more than he did books; my father completed his post-secondary education; and I was expected to parlay this educational momentum into some sort of gradate degree, preferably in matters of science or finance. No one wagered that I would develop an institutional dependence to the university, hoarding diplomas with nary a venture into the professional realm some refer to as the 'real world'. Over time, I have come to believe individual success should be gauged by contributions made to society relative to intellectual capital gained. Regardless of this conviction, I have somehow remained focused on the first half of Ali's stanza – the 'me' – divorcing the knowledge I have acquired from its pragmatic utility in the larger context hinted at by Ali's 'we'.

Despite my family's emphasis on schooling, one of my defining literacy experiences occurred outside of school, when I visited a shopping mall in Bethesda, Maryland. A resourceful four-year-old, I escaped parental supervision, in part because my father was being fitted for a shirt and my mother was busy caring for my younger sister. While wandering in search of a candy store, a security guard stopped me to ask where I was going. I explained that I was looking to satisfy my sweet tooth but struggled to specify my parents' whereabouts. Assuming that I was lost – and rightly so – the uniform asked my name. 'Habib Siam', I replied. Seemingly confused, he instructed me to spell it out for him. I started to recite the string of letters, in the correct order, before

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beginning to falter. 'H-A-I ... No. H-B-A...', I apologized and reached for his notepad, in hopes that writing would aid recollection. When I realized this was of little help, I began to cry.

Eventually, my mother emerged from a crowd of passers-by, her eyes welled with tears but looking relieved to have found me. She used the incident to highlight the importance of school and of reading and writing. I nodded in agreement but was still perturbed. How could I struggle so valiantly and so imperfectly with my name's orthography; the two words I scribed on a daily basis; the nine letters I answered 'present' to at every roll-call? Years later, when one of my teachers explained that we would score a 400 on our Scholastic Aptitude Test just for spelling our names correctly, I joked that I was not guaranteed those marks. I fell 10 points shy of a perfect score on the mathematics portion but ranked in the sixtieth percentile on the linguistic section. This means that either my English skills are middle of the pack or that standardized examinations may not measure what they claim to measure – which, by definition, implies poor levels of statistical validity. Considering the extent to which test scores affect educational paths, career opportunities and social mobility, I hope my verbal aptitude is, indeed, just average.

Book V: weird places, you know ...

When I was 14, my family relocated from Beirut to Abu Dhabi. The move brought on an important decision: should I pursue my schooling in French or attend the International School of Choueifat, a Lebanese-based institution that followed the British curriculum? Since the language barrier would pose no impediment, I thought the switch would facilitate my entry into American universities sometime down the road. Choueifat was unlike any of the previous three schools I had attended. Describing the atmosphere as prison-*like* understates the levels of obedience, discipline and conformity demanded of students. To say that the school *was* a prison would be more accurate a statement. Our uniforms consisted of gray pants and a white shirt. During the winter months, we were allowed to don navy-blue sweaters for warmth. The exam halls were equipped with surveillance cameras and the campus walls topped with barbed wire – whose purpose, more likely than not, was to keep us sequestered rather than to protect us from outside intrusion. Given the school's excellent academic reputation, my parents chalked up discontent with my academic environment to a natural process of adaptating to new surroundings. What they failed to consider was that they were George and Golda in the social circles in which they spent the entirety of their day. I was 'student 15357' for eight hours out of mine – weekends excluded.

Later in life, Ivan Illich's (1970) work introduced me to the nuances between education and schooling – the first involving the acquisition of knowledge, the second marked by compulsory presence in an institution of learning. Though Marshall McLuhan (1977) once encouraged us to use the city as our classroom, we are conditioned to persistently dismiss instruction that occurs outside the institutional confines of the school, which is seen as the primary site of consumption for an increasingly industrialized educational product. Despite its purported mandate to teach, a number of intellectuals (Freire, 1970; Illich, 1970; Gatto, 1992) have suggested that the school is more concerned with the creation, management and administration of populations than it is with the education of its students. It seems well beyond doubt that schools play a bigger role in sustaining and reproducing existing power structures than they do in offering opportunities for social mobility and for building the resources needed to instill meaningful change within communities. I emphasize 'meaningful' because we seem to have bought into the dangerously misleading notion that any change, all change, is good.

Brazilian critical theorist Paulo Freire (1970) maintains that it takes an individual approximately 100 hours of instruction to master basic literacy skills. Assuming we would require an extra few hundred, even a thousand or two, to learn relevant scientific knowledge and mathematical formulae, why, then, are we schooled for over a dozen years? So that we can, as Bob Dylan (1965) points out in 'Subterranean Homesick Blues', end up on the day shift? To answer these questions we may be better served by conceptualizing the student populace as a type of 'conscript clientele' – a term Edgar Friedenberg (1976) used to describe social groups that cannot refuse the services administered to them. This process of conscription becomes problematic because the students are often funneled through a bureaucratic system that treats them 'as raw material that the service organization needs to perform its social function' (Friedenberg, 1976, p. 2). Pupils ensure the

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school's institutional sustenance; they are there for the sake of the school, not the other way around.

In *Deschooling Society* and the work that followed, Illich (1970) suggests a model of education that promotes community involvement through mentorship programs and apprenticeships. Literacy, Illich (1970) and Freire (1970) believe, is a tool that alters an individual's relationship with the world, allowing him or her to carve a niche in what can be perceived as a hostile and unwelcoming sphere. To name the world in one's own words is the first step in becoming a constructor of reality, rather than a passive recipient of a predetermined fate. Literacy education is a political tool whose end goal is the expansion of consciousness, while schooling appears to perpetuate intellectual, political and cultural subjugation. John Taylor Gatto (1992, p. 2), a former New York State Teacher of the Year, admits that as an instructor of English language and English literature, he often taught confusion, the 'un-relating of everything', and unwittingly promoted intellectual and emotional dependency on the institution of schooling.

As a doctoral candidate in education, I am often asked what 'we' can do to improve our schools. The skeptic in me responds that schools function precisely as they are meant to and produce very intended consequences. Preserving the present social order is predicated on maintaining a certain amount of failure. Dropout rates weed out those we deem extraneous; those whose graduation only ensures a surplus of qualified individuals competing for scarce employment opportunities and resources. It is to our benefit to create a class of people fit for menial and demeaning positions. Who else would be coaxed into flipping burgers, mowing lawns or collecting garbage? Certainly not *me* and undoubtedly not *we*, for those are tasks generally reserved for *them*. Meanwhile, the myth of meritocracy cloaks us with a moral superiority that allows us to overlook our complicit participation in a power structure predicated on access to cultural, intellectual and financial capital; in a system designed to keep people in their place, hamsters on a wheel. The French have an expression, 'il n'y a pas de sous-metier' [2], which implies that all work is to be valued and honored. It is a noble saying, but I wonder how many are willing to trade in their monogrammed leather briefcase for a dirty toolbox.

In a way, the education promoted in institutions of formal schooling is a kind of anti-literacy. That we perceive education as something we receive rather than something we must make points to the passivity of spectatorship as a mode of being, which poses an existential, a moral and a social hazard that we may want to rethink. Schools are what I like to call 'conformative' places, a portmanteau that combines 'conformity' and 'normative'. Our generation prides itself in its extended engagement with institutions of higher learning. We spend more time pursuing degrees than generations past and assume this makes us more educated when we are simply more schooled. We forget that the word 'credential' is shaped by the Latinate root *credere* which means 'to believe', and that the belief which once endorsed the value of our credentials is fast eroding.

Book VI: same dude, different name, is all

'Fuck the police.' The words did not blare out of speakers, but were pronounced in a muted hush, the stereo's volume nearing the lowest setting. My friend had pulled the compact disc out from under his bed and pointed to the 'Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics' sticker on the cover's bottom-right corner. Tipper Gore had lobbied hard to get the warning stamped on albums whose content was deemed offensive, but David's father had not noticed or simply not cared. Either way, here we were, in a District of Columbia suburb; a couple of 11-year-olds, ears glued to the sound system, listening to NWA's debut record *Straight outta Compton*.

The tales of street life, drug deals and harassment by law enforcement were far removed from my lived experiences, but something in the music spoke to me. The rhythmic delivery, thumping beats and melodic bass lines moved me in a way no other genre had. I convinced David to cede the compact disc, arguing that I was leaving for Lebanon in a few days and that he could easily secure himself another copy. I was proud of my musical discovery and refused to play the songs in hiding. My parents were not overly concerned and often repeated the Sufi proverb to convince themselves that my infatuation with rap was just a phase: 'This too shall pass. This too shall pass. This too shall …' It never did, but while I was busy chanting choruses cursing law enforcement and other

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branches of the establishment, I neglected to reflect on the implications of my own membership in that very same order. Ironically, I *am* the police.

Granted, I have never shot anyone and, barring unforeseen circumstances, my career path will never put me in the line of fire. Here, I quote Christopher Wallace in saying that 'my mind's my nine; my pen, my Mac 10' (Wallace et al, 1994). I practice a different form of control, one whose tools are insidious and far less brash than the crude weapons wielded by officers on the beat. Faculties of education are thinly veiled in their objectives to shape others to conform and comply with social norms. Our students may not see the inside of a cell, but our classrooms share a close enough likeness. I conduct lectures in a Goffmanesque auditorium, void of windows and stripped of any piece of technology that may indicate time. Once inside, students are effectively divorced from the outside world, save for the Facebook addicts who are prisoners to the virtual.

For those who remain confused as to how or why I would compare a profession that is respected for its assumed ability to educate and enlighten with one that has been associated with murderous brutality, allow me to conjure a scene from the second season of HBO's television series *The Wire*. Omar Little, a stick-up artist who robs drug dealers, is being cross-examined by criminal defense attorney Maury Levy. Levy questions Little's credibility as a witness, accusing him of being a parasite who leaches off the culture of drugs. Little interjects, claiming that he and the lawyer are no different from one another. 'I got the shotgun, you got the briefcase', he continues. 'It's all in the game, though, right?' ('One Arrest', 2002). Convinced of the redemptive qualities of our social, personal and professional roles, we are apt at deceiving ourselves, at praising the emperor's new clothing. Few acknowledge the emptiness of liberal rhetoric of change and inclusiveness. Fewer even recognize that mechanisms of power and social control render us mutually dependent on one another; that we need others to justify the importance of the part we play.

I entered my doctoral program intent on writing a thesis that explored the ways in which rap music and Hip Hop culture could be used to promote literacy skills among disenfranchised adolescents. Hip Hop, as a social movement, is a way of being, a philosophy that challenges convention and disrupts the comfort of the status quo, with the aim of increasing awareness and raising consciousness – themes that resonate through the work of critical theorists across all fields of study. In the hope of impressing the admissions committee and perhaps masking some of my work's theoretical deficiencies, my research proposal was littered with catchphrases like 'youth empowerment' and 'inclusive education'. I had not realized how short-sighted and contradictory my ideas were. Conveniently ignoring my opposition to compulsory schooling and my contempt for educational systems as apparatuses for social reproduction, I lobbied for the curricular adoption of an art form that had already been transplanted from its street origins into a recording booth. Is this institutional co-optation not the type of repressive tolerance that strengthens what Herbert Marcuse (1969) once called the tyranny of the majority?

Book VII: the painter with a felt pen who drew Ali

Academics have built careers on the study of rap music and its linguistics. Hip Hop is treated as a tool for literacy instruction more likely to grasp students' attention than a traditional curriculum that may be less relevant to their lived realities. As a cultural form, Hip Hop articulates a voice that is projected without the imposing and formative constraints of dominant mainstream grammar which governs much of what is seen, said and done. It must conversely be noted that Hip Hop remains bound to its own nomos, which can be no less dominant, limiting or distorting. I state this not to devalue the contributions the music has made to my educational, intellectual and emotional maturation, but to iterate that is one of many truths; a reality pieced together by a multiplicity of views, opinions and philosophies that range from the misogynistic to the socially conscious. Hip Hop is an interpretation of the world – storied and complex.

A considerable portion of the literature on literacy education through Hip Hop is void of any mention of the Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE), an offshoot of the Nation of Islam, which is also referred to as the Five Percenters. The omission seems dubious, in part because of the contributions the NGE has made to the development of Hip Hop vernacular. Founded by Minister Clarence 13X in 1964, the NGE is a Harlem-based movement whose philosophy is premised on the

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belief that the black man is the original man, the supreme being, God (Knight, 2008). Women are considered to be Earths who receive the God-body's seed (the child). The alternate name for the NGE derives from the notion that only 5% of the population are enlightened, while 10% are devils who conspire to keep the remaining 85% deaf, dumb and blind. The NGE is, to say the least, a controversial organization. Federal Bureau of Investigation (1965) surveillance records describe Clarence as 'a fascist and a racist [and a] gang leader'. John Lindsay, the mayor at the time, publicly supported the NGE's educational initiatives.

Many of the phrases and idioms used in rap music derive from Five Percenters expressions, some of which have seeped into larger spheres of popular culture (Miyakawa, 2005). For example, referring to something as 'the bomb', in order to emphasize its positive attributes, derives from an NGE expression that equated 'dropping a bomb' with imparting someone with valuable knowledge that has the potential to shatter that individual's world view. This nugget of information invited the person to reassess his or her preconceptions, a revaluation of values that was seen as an integral part of learning. The greeting 'What up G?' originally served as a salutation from one God to another, and not, as is often assumed, from one gangster to the next. 'Dog', a term used to refer to a close friend, is possibly 'God' spelled backwards [3] – a slang custom mirrored in French *verlan*, the practice of inverting the order of syllables to create a new word.

A disproportionate number of professors who support the inclusion of Hip Hop in school curricula seem unaware of the Gods and Earths and of their place in Hip Hop history. It is as though certain words and expressions need to be extirpated from their historical contexts, sanitized and defanged before they are invited into the classroom. This is indicative of a dehistoricization of education in general, and of literacy in particular. Some scholars believe that because they have conducted research on a topic, they *know* it, when, at best, they only know *of* it. It is this conceit that led the anthropologist in Paul Bowles' (2002) *A Distant Episode* to venture to places he did not belong, to speak in a language that was not his, and to meet a rather desolate fate. It comes as little surprise that the work we produce is described as 'academic' in nature, a term which the *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* defines as 'scholarly', but also as being 'of no practical relevance' (Thompson, 1998, p. 5). Sometimes words tell us more than we care to acknowledge.

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Epilogue: ... with words beautifully written like Arabic

The crime scene is clean. Letters do not bleed. The yellow tape reads, 'Do not kill our language', but the deed is done. Suspects abound but my instinct says the butler did it, aided by globalization and the so-called Arab world's dying interest in preserving its linguistic heritage. The victim, pictured above, has no counterpart in the Roman alphabet. The English alliteration of Arabic words replaces the murdered letter with the number 3, which is tantamount to a calligraphic inversion. QWERTY keyboards, text messaging and the sense of agency that accompanies the ability to recreate language are all partly responsible for the increased use of Latin letters to communicate in Arabic. I realize that language is dynamic; that the medium dictates the process and the content of communicative practices; that some see the malleability of language as a creative tool that expands our expressive pallets. Despite this, the growing trend of phonetically penning Arabic words makes me uneasy. Any excitement sparked by the discovery of new ways of writing is dampened by the perceived loss of a mother tongue and the feelings of erasure catalyzed by cultural takeovers.

Throughout this article, I have spoken at length, or perhaps not enough, about my literacy development, my relationship with language and my belief in the ability of words to shape how we perceive the world and our place in it. I would like to conclude with a parting anecdote that further illustrates the extent to which language taints our interpretive lens. A few years ago, an acquaintance asked me how many letters there are in the Arabic alphabet. 'Twenty-eight', I answered, to which he replied with an inquiry about what the two extra letters were. Unsure of what he meant, I hesitated momentarily before grasping the implications of his follow-up question. 'You assume we have 26 letters in common to begin with.' This exchange shows the extent to which language influences the way in which we engage other people, their cultures and their stories. Were this conversation to occur today, I may have explained, half cynically, that the Arabic alphabet consists of 21 Latin letters and 7 numbers. On the bright side, that still adds up to 28.

Notes

[1] A near literal translation of this quote would read: 'a man who possesses a language also possesses the world expressed and implied by this language'.

[2] 'There are no under-jobs', meaning that all work holds respectable value.

[3] This has been suggested by a number of members of the Five Percenters I have encountered. It should be noted that I have not been able to document verification of this information, in part because the NGE relies on an oral tradition to transmit its lessons.

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