Chapter 3

Political Repertoires: Tellability and Subj ectivation in Gil Scott-Heron

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ABSTRACT

Songwriting, whether creative or unoriginal, can challenge or promote the values of the dominant discourses in a particular society. Within the context of popular music, Gil Scott-Heron wrote songs that problematize official discourses about family life, the African-American experience, the government, and rappers, among other topics. Through discourse analysis, in this chapter the authors explore how songs written by Scott-Heron deal with the narrations and definitions others ascribe to the self, questioning a diversity of accounts and explanations regarding social and personal experience. Gathering ideas from Michel Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s notion of “subj ectivation,” Kathy Popkin’s considerations on “tellability,” and Enrique Pichón-Rivi ère’s conceptualization of bonds, the authors discuss political repertoires articulated through music.

INTRODUCTION

Music is a kaleidoscope of personal, cultural, social, and political expressions. A song can be viewed as a powerful human production intertwined with individual and social experiences (Turino, 2008). These experiences, through music, are represented not only by the compositional elements of a melody, but also by stories, tales, and descriptions encompassing complex socio-historic productions. The lyrics of a song engage with society at large, sometimes promoting the dominant values of a particular culture, but other times problematizing what is taken for granted. Literary and musical productions of a particular culture can be viewed as a cosmosvision, a multiplicity of stories conjunctionally connected to understand the discourses and social practices embedded in a given time.

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The production of music is embedded in the personal and social experiences that constitute an author’s context shaping their cosmovision. Gil Scott-Heron’s music and ideas dealt with the events, politics, and popular culture that characterized the 1960s, 1970s, and mid-1980s, including social forces such as the civil rights movements. Through his poetic and musical writings, Scott-Heron provides a repertoire of African American experiences in the 20th century. His lyrics problematized official discourses and provided alternative meanings to the state of affairs, aiding in the understanding of the individual and collective cosmovisions of certain space-time coordinates. These political repertoires allude to a diverse range of cultural and social conditions that provide meaning to life and arts of a certain period.

In this chapter, the authors analyze some of Gil Scott-Heron’s songs through Michel Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s notion of “subjectivation”, Kathy Popkin’s reflections on “tellability,” and Enrique Pichón-Riviere’s perspective of bonds. These concepts converge with Ian Parker’s discourse analysis. The authors adapted Parker’s methodological approach to analyze how Scott-Heron’s songs engage with the dominant discourses of his time, while promoting alternative ways of understanding social reality. By analyzing Scott-Heron’s songs, the authors propose the poet constructs a discourse about the self and society framed in African American experiences that foster skepticism towards dominant discourses. The main objective of the chapter is to explore how Scott-Heron problematizes dominant discourses and proposes alternative accounts of the world in which he lived.

BACKGROUND

Gil Scott-Heron was an African American novelist, poet, singer, and political activist. Some called him the “godfather of rap” although he was not completely comfortable with that title (Baram, 2014). He was born on April 1, 1949, in Chicago but grew up in Jackson, Tennessee with his grandmother. In 1962 his mother took him to New York where he attended high school. They lived in a small apartment for a while, but later they had to move to the projects. Thanks to a scholarship, he was able to attend the prestigious Fieldstone High School (Scott-Heron, 2012). After high school, he studied at Lincoln University. A few years later he completed a master’s degree in creative literature at John Hopkins University. According to his autobiography, he attended John Hopkins on a scholarship because he had already written two novels, a poetry book, and had a few recordings (Scott-Heron, 2012). Considered by many a predecessor of rap music, various artists mourned his death on May 27, 2011 (Baram, 2012).

Two book-length biographies analyze the life of Gil Scott-Heron. Published in 2012, Leslie Gordon Goffe’s Gil Scott-Heron: A Father and Son Story provides an account of Scott-Heron’s parents, particularly his father, Gilbert St. Elmo Heron. Goffe’s book is written in a compelling style using Scott-Heron’s lyrics to construct arguments about his life. Marcus Baram’s (2014) biography, Gil Scott-Heron: Pieces of a Man is concerned with Scott-Heron’s life story, his musical inter-influences, and his context. Both books are good sources for understanding the personal life of Scott-Heron. However, both Baram and Goffe interpret his songs mostly as a reflection of Scott-Heron’s internal struggles with his family and drugs.

Besides these biographies, Dorian Lynskey (2011) in his book 33 Revolutions per Minute dedicates a chapter about one of Scott-Heron’s most recognized songs, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.” Lynskey analyzes the influences of the spoken words group The Last Poets in Scott-Heron’s song and the political context against which African Americans who sang political songs strived. Gil Scott-Heron’s (2012) autobiography The Last Holiday, published posthumously, also provides insight into his philosophy towards music, society, life, language, and the context in which he lived. In this chapter,
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