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the he/art and experience of Tim'm T. West

Hip Hop Literati: An Artistic Personal Statement

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I almost never describe myself as a writer. I don't have that luxury. Some statistics seem to suggest that Americans, generally, are reading less literature these days anyhow; and I have no doubt that the same is true, perhaps to a greater extent, in the African-American community. In 2004 the call for high standards of achievement among black youth has been echoed by everyone, from Senator-elect Barack Obama to Bill Cosby. They have both quite candidly referred to the responsibility we must shoulder to reinvigorate literacy. But I know many of the youth they are talking about, because I have taught them. And perhaps before my experience teaching and doing youth advocacy in urban communities across the United States, I could have held some black utopian investment in colored children, from West Oakland to Bed-Stuy, holding literary circles and reciting the works from the great black canon: Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Jean Toomer, Randall Keenan, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, June Jordan - the list would be almost infinite. Black Americans have an extraordinary literary legacy, even if only a few of our texts qualify as American classics and are considered "the bomb" by the scholars shooting the canon.

I, for one, am fascinated by the energetic movement black youth put into that Harlem shake dance they do while being Ushered to Confessions. I think there's something brilliant in the way popular music can make youth feel so high even when the mantra is Lil Jon's "Get Low"; even if I consider much of the music garbage that is saturated with misogynist, capitalist, homophobic "bling bling." I honestly don't believe black youth will read anything more than they are force-fed until the colored folk critiquing their seemingly senseless attachments to this "hip-pop-crazy" - and the senseless violence and negativity that, unfortunately, seem to complement it - find ways of making it more relevant to their experience. The inspiration to value literacy would need to be as seductive as an Outkast hook.

I also believe that "Tim'm West" will never be as famous as Kanye or Cornell West. I'll likely remain some mediating fixture between the two that people will someday reference when discussing the Hip-Hop Literati of which I am a part. I am not unlike a large number of others who are descendants of the likes of Paul Robeson or Ntozake Shange. We are multi-disciplinary black writers who do more than just write, namely because most of us found our voices and our pens in the overarching cultural renaissance called hip-hop. As hip-hop has become a dominant aspect of culture at the turn of the 21st century, it has necessarily changed the face of literature. Still, for all the recognition many of us have received in the critical media, the average black American kid probably doesn't know what Carl Hancock-Rux, Lynne Johnson, Greg Tate, Toure, Jessica Care Moore, Venus Opal Reese, Saul Williams, Tricia Rose or Aya de Leon does. But they should! Slam culture and Def Poetry may provide some connection, but they capture neither all we do nor all of us.

We are the vital generation of black writers who cannot afford to be all write. We find our way collaborating with everyone from Urban Bush Women to George Clinton. We create budding movements like hip-hop theater or "Raptivism." Our performance spaces are likely to integrate visual art, film, poetry, a DJ, political commentary and dance. Most of us don't even have the desire to just write; we understand that in a culture so heavily inundated with Internet technology and cable television, public interest in literature will continue to be less seductive than the quick f

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fixes provided by MTV or Instant Messenger. Therefore, many black writers today are multi-disciplinary in a way that is not unique to this generation but that connotes different motivations than our predecessors'. The writers whom I know and appreciate do not see their product as art for the sake of art. Not that those before us necessarily believed any differently, but the Hip-Hop Literati are a community of writers vastly interested in affecting change and uplifting black people, even when their subject matter is not saturated with overt political content. There is a constant need to reinvent our notions of what it means to be a black writer, and much of this is beyond the scope of what is traditionally thought to be write. Dig?

Consider the Harlem Renaissance and, particularly, the work of Paul Robeson. Athlete, singer, actor and civil rights advocate, he is a quintessential multidisciplinary figure in American history. Motivated largely by the racist segregation of the United States, and afforded the privilege to attend several prestigious universities, Robeson was able to effect social change in a way that may have been unavailable to those of his time who were just writers or athletes or politicians. But it was this same motivation that eventually led to his being "blackmailed" by a white public threatened by his political convictions. While Robeson is sometimes not mentioned alongside Harlem Renaissance figures known principally for their writing or art, it is certain that he had as profound an impact on the social consciousness of our people.

Consider also the Black Arts Movement and the work of Ntozake Shange. While she commonly thinks of herself as a poet first and playwright second, it is well known that she is also a dancer, actor, author, director and black feminist. Represented by her adopted name, Ntozake, which signifies "she who comes into her own things," Shange is quoted in a 1990 interview with Neal A. Lester as saying, "I'm a firm believer that language and how we use language determines how we act, and how we act then determines our lives and other people's lives." Consider that Shange, one of many multidisciplinary figures of the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s and '70s, is defining what Robeson knew as well: The connection between what we write and the resulting (re)actions have the ability to affect lives. Burdened by both race and gender oppression, Shange's idea of writing for social change extends the very legacy of Robeson and those before him. It is this legacy that members of the Hip-Hop Literati honor through our work.

In 1990 I left Taylor, Ark., for Duke University without any knowledge of Robeson or Shange, but having already participated in theater, dance, athletics, writing and leadership as a high school student. My multidisciplinary attachment was fueled not by any sincere connection to a legacy but merely as an escape from the harsh realities of growing up black, poor and queer in rural Arkansas. When I discovered there were some rewards associated with good grades, I knew enough to use it as an escape from whatever limitations Arkansas had placed on black boys like me. I was regarded as an exceptional anomaly who quoted Langston Hughes and Walt Whitman and who asked strange questions. I developed a love for house music, British soul and reggae because no one else in Arkansas seemed to be listening to them. I wrote poetry on front porches and at ponds where others there relaxed or killed time. I wanted more time. I wanted a different kind of world. And similar to Robeson and Shange, my own personal struggles with various "isms" became the impetus for the fight for social justice, not necessarily "by any means necessary," but through every talent bestowed upon me.

College in the early 1990s was a time when cultural studies, feminism and sexual identity created a sometimes contentious battleground at universities like Duke. From affirmative action debates to Anita Hill or Magic Johnson and HIV, those of us who were the generation of writers

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following the legacies of the Harlem Renaissance or Black Arts Movement were compelled to engage multiple struggles through multiple means. I, not unlike many writers of the Hip-Hop Literati, would indulge this philosophy with great optimism. At Duke, I would become president of Black Student Alliance, a lead actor of the black theater troupe Karamu and a lead vocalist in the Modern Black Mass Choir. I would also declare a philosophy major; if KRS One, the emcee who inspired my own rap lyricism, called himself "the Philosopher," then why couldn't I?

Some years later, the high ideas and language I would develop while a graduate student at New School University in New York City gave me a new language for describing things I'd known and felt since I was a kid: intersectionality, subjectivity, nihilism, deterritorialization, interpellation and other theoretical words that don't register in spell check. These became internalized master tools for a new way of not just seeing the world but describing it. But at some point on New York's A train, somewhere between the West 4th Street station in Greenwich Village and the Utica Avenue station in Bed-Stuy, it became painfully apparent that the audiences lauding my theoretical interventions would largely be white audiences who, sometimes with the best intentions, had never gone hungry or been evicted like I had as a child.

It was in 1997, after my first year in New York City, that I would look to the black arts scene in New York for something more rooted in the struggles of my peoples: Brooklyn Moon, Sunday T dances at the Y, shows at Nuyorican, somebody's Sunday brunch. The scenes I found were bohemian circles that seemed to recycle the same artists; and with relative consistency, most of the black folk in attendance had been to grad school. Becoming a black intellectual - trying to mediate a hip-hop, theater and blues crooning past with scholastic pretense gained by too many theoretical deconstructions - I felt I would have something unique to add to the mix. Though I had written for years, I didn't perform until I was ready to leave New York in 1998 for grad school at Stanford. An amazing presence by the name of Carl Hancock-Rux befriended me and hinted that I lacked the courage to fill whatever voids I believed were absent in a scene thriving off its self-defeating obsession with originality. Carl quickly became the first example of a writer whom I wanted to be (something) like. Not because we both had no problems with talking about Jean-Paul Sartre and Busta Rhymes in the same context. Not because we both engaged multiple arts. Carl was real in that he comfortably embraced all the ways in which he had managed becoming, and doing all the things he hadn't yet tried. He had one of the most voracious curiosities I had experienced for someone so accomplished.

In 1994, Hancock-Rux was named "One of the Thirty Artists Under the Age of Thirty Most Likely to Influence Culture Over the Next Thirty Years" by The New York Times Magazine, and in 1998, The Village Voice featured him on its cover as one of "Eight Writers on the Verge of Impacting the Literary Landscape." But when we met I was not aware that he was among the most critically acclaimed embodiments of poetry, theater, music and literary fiction of my generation. Our meeting was mediated through people who felt that he was doing what I aspired to do, and who sought to provide me a guide. We eventually met without their help when his feature in VIBE magazine's Next section prompted me to introduce myself to him in 1997. But not long after I met and got to know Carl, I left New York, concerned that the weight of my admiration for him and others I'd watched develop, would prevent me from doing anything more with writing and theories than mapping trajectories of power. I wanted to seize power, dance with it, form it into poetry and have people experience the winded vulnerability of my breaths. So I took the chance of seeking the only kind of newness that some who feel stuck in New York slip into. The San Francisco Bay Area became a place I imagined would best nurture the impact I wanted to have on the world - and particularly on black folk.

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In 1998, I arrived in Palo Alto and Stanford University, a place decidedly more scripted than San Francisco or Oakland, and an entirely different universe from Bed-Stuy, where I'd lived while in New York. That lasted for just a few months before I visited the Ashby Flea Market, met some writers, went to slams at the Justice League, and made a substantial enough impression that I would open for poets like Ursula Rucker and secure regular features at the Spoken Word hot spots. I moved to Oakland. It was cool for the moment, but I was still working toward a dissertation down at Stanford, so I became a bit torn about what I had come to Bay to do. I came to California to get a doctorate and discovered something wrong inside of me, something so threatening that only it would give me courage to do what I felt would be the balance between my mama back home and the scholars I'd hoped to impress with my work. I finally found myself through the dis/ease so crudely manifesting in my body.

Writing began to represent something different for me. It was all the more important that it have an effect in the world. And what better a place to discover such a path than through living through dis/ease in the Bay Area. This activist terrain, the political left of the West Coast, the home of beat poets, Black Panthers, and Queer Nation, represented the confluence of movements that I believed would nurture my writing. I came to the Bay with a thesis on black masculine hip-hop performance as a lens through which to examine black subjectivity in general. But my "Gaze on Mandingo" quickly became a critical look at myself - an artist who found that it was easier to critique black male performers than become the very subject of critique. The literary and arts scene I discovered in the Bay Area, both its legacy and its present musings, would eventually take precedence over re-reads of Foucault, Lyotard or Marcuse. It's difficult to focus on subjectivity when the startling homicide rates in Oakland streets represent the death of so many of the subjects. So words become action. And in just a few years, I had formed the notorious hip-hop group Deep Dickollective, published the critically reviewed memoir "Red Dirt Revival," and completed its musical complement, "Songs from Red Dirt" (Cellular Records). In 2002, I left Stanford with a terminal master's degree, in part because of what I considered a terminal illness. I discovered that I had AIDS. Still, through the writing created and inspired by me, from collaborations with Youth Speaks to directing an English department at the Oakland School for the Arts, I discovered that I not only had power to help heal others, but myself as well.

In 2004, shortly after my 32nd birthday, I prepared to heal one such writer with my words. She, a celebrated cultural warrior, poet, activist, mother and playwright, would call me to schedule a time to meet, as if I was someone especially significant. I became excited about the possibility of sharing across generations with such an icon. My "Red Dirt Revival" apparently made a deep enough impression on San Francisco avant-garde poet Nicole Henares that she would tell this woman, whose work I'd admired for half of my life, that I was someone in the Bay Area she should know. We would propose a trip from Oakland, where I lived and where she had returned, across the bridge to San Francisco to join a celebration of Neruda at 100. But she, who is known to carry the stories of many women, was too tired to manage the trip across the bridge on that day. While she is the referential index for postmodern colored boys and girls, she is reliant on my presence to offer a source of support beyond what she has already written or read.

I humbly extended the invitation to close friends and colleagues to offer gifts and alter items and welcome home this icon who had returned to the Bay Area for care and healing: the FiveHead EP from Hanifah Walidah, a world-renowned social performance artist and activist who is known for her work with Brooklyn Funk Essentials and her one-woman show, "Black Folks Guide to Black Folks;" something from Juba Kalamka, the self-proclaimed bisexual, polyamorous, lyricist,

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playwright and essayist of Deep Dickollective; Marvin White, the author of "Last Rights" and "Nothing Ugly Fly," and the co-founder of Black Gay Letters and Arts Movement; and Bamuthi, National Poetry Slam champion, Broadway veteran, Def Poet, dancer and educator. There would be gifts from others: feminist scholar Bahiyyih Watson, eclectic soul newcomer Valerie Troutt, documentary maker Ayanna U'Dongo and graphic designer and DJ Mai-Lei Pecorari. I would offer their tokens of friendship, and my own, humbly to my new friend: Ntozake Shange. Sharing this introduction to Shange with friends and colleagues is tantamount to understanding the power vested in the Hip-Hop Literati I had connected with in the Bay Area. We are change-makers, even if the popular media doesn't change to better acknowledge it.

What would explain my awe that Ntozake Shange would have an interest in my work if not some disingenuous gesture of modesty? It is the see-saw between humility and exceptionality that those of us who are chosen to lead the write way often struggle with. Once Du Boisian and now Henry Louis Gates n-em', I have always found something terribly wrong with the notion of a talented 10th leading a poor, oblivious 90 percent of blacks out of their misery. Still the Hip-Hop Literati is by no means your run of the mill collective. We were all movers and shakers, despite our desires to remain rooted and connected to the communities from which we came.

In New York, we were colored kids sitting in a Brooklyn loft admiring graffiti on a wall outside while listening to Bjork and talking about the most recent Angela Davis speech. We would have these ridiculously circular conversations bridging Nas and Judith Butler as Gil Scott Heron ascends through Tricky's Trip Hop blues to seduce a more rac(e)y dialogue. We would discuss the pedagogical black hole of making a change in society through studying performativity at NYU or History of Consciousness at the University of California at Santa Cruz. We especially ignored our own small fames, making no mention that we are not only each other's greatest fans, but also that the incestuous recycling of our cultural products is as discomfited as a badly matched orgy. And still, we are all awaiting our big break, aware that our moments of arrival and of relative fame, will be considered less noble than the self-sacrificing, underground life we romanticize in the shadows of the very pop-culture movements keeping us in the dark.

In Oakland 2004 and about to embark on the next phase of my journey in Washington, D.C., I try to consider that I was called to walk with "Zake" at this moment in my journey for a reason. I struggle with thoughts that, given my reality of living with AIDS, that I might be best remembered posthumously - a breath that at some point or another shared space with better known literati of my generation. And then I remember, as Ntozake offers me a Diet Pepsi fresh out of the fridge, that ain't nothing especially special about the degrees of separation between the black intelligentsia. A subway car on the A train to Clinton-Washington or a two-minutes-delayed arrival at Oakland's Jahva House can measure the distance between right place and right time. But more than this, I had to believe that there is no coincidence in arty black boys and girls hustling for next dreams and finding one another. It just takes it happening a few times over before you realize that a Tim'm and Ntozake, while more than a generation apart, are cut from the same country cloth. The wisdom and experience she will impart on me is the deliberate work of the ancestors. I am still convincing myself that I am worthy of the friendship she so graciously offers.

And who else will write of these bizarre, multidisciplinary existences if not we? Who will keep alive the index marking the remarkable impress of Lorde, Riggs, Kaufman, Fanon, Baldwin and so many more, if not we? We are the children of the black literati who cannot return home to the ghettos from which we came - if we, indeed, came from them at all. Home is the foreclosed longing of poet-politicians like Cesaire, not these spaces where the nerdy jazz "cats" collectively

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relish the smells and sounds of home-cooked meals or black laughter. When we realize that we cannot return home after the academy, after the dive into the seas of Basquiat, Bearden, Baraka and bell hooks, that is when the write way can illuminate our path.

Home describes the spaces we create when we leave home and are forced to accept that we don't quite fit in with many of those we wish to save - even with our references to Mary J. or Tupac - and that we are forging something with greater magnitude than we are able to grasp in the now. Chicago-raised rapper Common said, "Someday it'll all make sense." And at 32, thinking about my moments with Ntozake, hoping that my offering of friendship will nurture not just the healing of our community but our bodies as well, I am thinking that I may just be on track for doing something the write way... and then some.