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HIP HOP AND MONUMENTALITY: LUPE FIASCO'S RE-NARRATIVIZATION OF THE LORRAINE MOTEL

ANTHONY BALLAS

This paper employs Mario Gooden's diagnoses of African American museums, Henri Lefebvre's critique of monumental architecture, and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s notion of Signifyin(g) toward the examination of American rap artist Lupe Fiasco's re-narrativization of architectural space, specifically the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. The Lorraine Motel has since been transformed into the Civil Rights Museum, and poses an architectural and aesthetic problem according to Gooden, who is critical of the spatial strategies implemented at the site, using the museum as an example of what he refers to as the "problem with African American museums," calling for a re-imagination of monumental spaces paying tribute to the Civil Rights movement and black identity. Fiasco's lyrical constructions in his songs *Brave Heart* and *Audubon Ballroom*, refer generally to architectural space, and particularly to the Lorraine Motel, emphasizing the materiality of the signifier while modulating the meaning of these spaces through metaphor and chiasmus, which Gates Jr. identifies as the unique proclivity belonging to black vernacular. This paper concludes that Fiasco's lyrical narrative of the Lorraine Motel demonstrates the potential of Signifyin(g) to modulate perception of the static architecture of the site which keeps black identity mired to the past.

Keywords: African American, Henri Lefebvre, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Hip Hop, Mario Gooden

In his book *Dark Space: Architecture, Representation, Black Identity* Mario Gooden diagnoses what he considers to be the problem with African American museums, identifying "the current preoccupation with the *image* of architecture and its superficial aesthetics – its surfaces, skins, symbols, and skin color", serving primarily as "form[s] of remediation for the past injustices of exclusion"¹ perpetrated against black Americans both historically and in contemporary society. For Gooden, sites such as the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee (formerly the Lorraine Motel, the site of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968) pose a problem for black identity; the museum is designed around two contradicting principles, simultaneously caught between its function as a future-oriented propaganda vehicle, "to create more soldiers and generals to carry on our fight for equality"², and its function as a historical monument, or shrine memorializing the legacy of the King. Furthermore, Gooden comments on the architecture's skin which features an array of photographic images meant "to signify collective identity", serving consequently

¹ M. Gooden, *Dark Space: Architecture, Representation, Black Identity*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016, pp. 101-102.

² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

to, “challenge the architecture’s ability to come to terms with the profundity of [King’s assassination]”³. For Gooden, this kind of photo-realism tends to entrap black identity in a long-lost history, placing an apparitional facade at the forefront of the architecture, and therefore offering little in the way of future-oriented reconstructions or reconsiderations of collective black identity.

In what follows, I examine this architectural problematic via the Hip Hop music and lyricism of black American rap artist Lupe Fiasco through the theoretical triad of Gooden, Henri Lefebvre and Henry Louis Gates Jr. By triangulating the function of Fiasco’s lyrical constructions between Gooden’s diagnosis of African American museums, Lefebvre’s critique of monumentality, and Gates’ notion of Signifyin(g), I hope to demonstrate how Fiasco’s music re-narrativizes the architectural space of the Lorraine Motel, and therefore harnesses the potential to reorient the listening subject to contested sites of collective trauma, offering a lyrical praxis through which the deadlock of that Gooden identifies can be superseded.

The Lorraine Motel/Civil Rights Museum is an architecture very much at odds with itself, attempting to rectify the historical trauma of King’s assassination via a pathos-laden array of images and historical artefacts; the room where King slept the night before his death is perfectly preserved behind a pane of glass, enabling museumgoers a frozen slice of history, ostensibly replacing “a brutal reality with a materiality realized appearance”⁴, while also “transmut[ing] the fear of the passage of time, and anxiety about death, into splendour”⁵. Commenting on the narrative of the Lorraine Motel, Gooden stresses how the emotional climax on the balcony where King was shot, and the historical climax in room 307 where King slept, entrench the monument in contradiction, stating that,

[t]he design of the museum should be challenged to construct a cultural discourse that probes deeper than the emotions that resonate on the imagistic surfaces like the photos of the fallen Dr. King on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel⁶.

According to Gooden, the narrative arch of the museum mires the Civil Rights project in its historical past, preserving the space in which the trauma of King’s death occurred by highlighting the emotional impact of the space, rather than redirecting the inertia of the trauma toward future-oriented, social praxes. With regard to this problematic, Gooden raises the following questions, asking both “[h]ow can the museum respectfully honor Dr. King’s memory and at the same time translate the memories of the Civil Rights movement into action”⁷, and “how should the [Lorraine] motel be transformed to expose future potentialities and overcome the site’s incredible weight of emotion and sentiment?”⁸.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, Oxford 1991, p. 221.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ M. Gooden, *Dark Space*, p.109.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

In his classic work, *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre makes the following observation apropos of monumental architecture, social practice, and language, stating that, “[a] monumental work, like a musical one, does not have a ‘signified’ (or ‘signifieds’); rather, it has a *horizon of meaning*”⁹. We should read Lefebvre’s notion that monumental architectures contain a “horizon of meaning” in tandem with Gooden’s diagnosis of the Lorraine Motel, insofar as the museum’s monumentalism as well produces a static horizon of meaning. Lefebvre continues, describing how monumental architecture elides antagonisms in social practice, replacing them with a “tranquil power”¹⁰, providing the “experience [of] a total being in a total space”¹¹. Monumental architectures are thus always contested sites, existing in the deadlock between trauma and memory, and future-oriented social action held together by a tranquil power, leading Lefebvre to ask a similar question as the one posed by Gooden, namely “[h]ow could the contradiction between building and monument be overcome and surpassed?”¹².

The way the Lorraine Motel in particular combines monumentality with a call-to-action results in the obfuscation of the underlying antagonism still present in the architecture itself; the perpetual oscillation between shrine and call-to-action functions as a self-enclosed and self-perpetuating circuit which reinforces the horizon of meaning which in turn sustains the Civil Rights movement solely as an ‘ancient’ artefact of American history, rather than a continuum of historical praxes from diverse aesthetic, social, political, and cultural fronts continuing today. In this way, the historical trauma of the King’s assassination is not transformed adequately into praxis claims Gooden, but rather the dual function creates a kind of static unity in the museum space. This contradiction runs parallel to Slavoj Žižek’s observation that “[w]hat the official ideology cannot openly talk about can be shown in the mute signs of a building”¹³. According to this formulation, although the ideological condition of black representation is often left unspoken, the repressed, traumatic content of King’s assassination is itself embedded in the architectural disposition of space. Along these lines, the proper question to ask is: how might the repressed content be made manifest?

The ideological import of the preserved site of King’s assassination tends to reproduce what Gooden describes as the “naturalization of blackness into American culture”¹⁴, through which black subjectivity is simultaneously at the center of cultural production and marked as Other in society. This ideological and social ‘inbetweenness’ or what W.E.B. Du Bois called “double consciousness” is precisely what Gooden and others seek to dismantle architecturally, focusing on alternative modes of praxis and representation in architectural space in order to disinter black subjectivity from its static historical representation in

⁹ H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 222.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹³ S. Žižek, *Lacan.com*, “Architectural Parallax: Spandrels and Other Phenomena of Class Struggle,” http://www.lacan.com/essays/?page_id=218, 2009, Last accessed January, 29 2018.

¹⁴ M. Gooden, *Dark Space*, p. 100.

monumental architecture. For Gooden, double consciousness “continues to exist as a condition of being that is communicated in the work and translated through language, meter, syncopation, manner, and self-consciousness”¹⁵, demonstrating how black aesthetics, literature, and music often function as radical modes of creation which reinterpret and alter the congealed horizon of meaning which keeps representational and spatial manifestations of black identity historically static, and therefore harbor the potential to make the repressed content of the site manifest.

Focusing on the relationship between architecture, music, and black identity, Craig Wilkins observes how “[h]ip hop architecture is palimpsestic in the fact that it is engaged in reclaiming the subject from the object”, stating that, “the foundations of hip hop’s flow, layering, and rupture” rewrite and redefine contested spaces¹⁶. Wilkins continues, writing that, “[a] principle purpose of hip hop architecture is to create a ‘homeplace’ [...] a space that engages and employs similar identity (re)construction strategies”¹⁷. This tendency of hip hop music to reimagine spatial relations is especially pronounced in the music of black American rapper Lupe Fiasco, whose radical linguistic and semantic constellations attempt to break through the seemingly immutable horizon of meaning embedded specifically in the Lorraine Motel as a site of historical trauma. Fiasco’s song, *Audubon Ballroom* from his 2012 album *Food & Liquor II: The Great American Rap Album Pt. 1*, creatively endeavors to modulate the static relationship between the Lorraine Motel and black subjectivity turned toward future-oriented projects of social praxis, using architectural metaphors and chiasmus to redefine the spatiality of the museum itself. Fiasco’s *Audubon Ballroom* – named after the site in which Malcolm X was assassinated in Manhattan in 1965 – functions metonymically, indexing the historical trauma embedded in architectural sites such as the Lorraine Motel, as Fiasco cries out repeatedly before the chorus “Audubon Ballroom, Motel Lorraine!”¹⁸ emphasizing the traumatic intensity that these sites hold in the memories of black Americans.

Rather than merely describing the physical spaces, or architectural features of the Lorraine Motel, Fiasco focuses on reinterpreting the traumatic inertia part and parcel of the space itself, cutting through the ‘tranquil power’ of the architecture by reorienting and reorganizing how the traumatic energy can itself be utilized by the subject for future ends without resorting to the teleological ends of monumentality diagnosed by Lefebvre, and the pathos of photo-realism described by Gooden. Fiasco’s language is neither descriptive nor prescriptive in terms of space, but rather the rapper makes use of what Henry Louis Gates Jr. defined as “Signifyin(g)” – the African American or black vernacular tradition of wordplay. For Gates Jr., the chiasmic quality of Signifyin(g) serves a potent semantic function to redefine the subject matter of black vernacular, which Gates Jr. claims has a perpendicular relationship with white English. In *Audubon Ballroom*, Fiasco’s chorus can

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ C. Wilkins, *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on Race, Space, Architecture, and Music*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2007, pp. 188-189.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.189.

¹⁸ W.M. Jaco, *Food & Liquor II: The Great American Rap Album Pt. 1*, Atlantic Records 2012.

be interpreted as a radical instance of Signifyin(g), as he sings, “white people, you can’t say nigga, so I gotta’ take it back / black people, we’re not niggas, God made us better than that”¹⁹. According to Gates Jr, “Signifyin(g) [...] always entails formal revision and an intertextual relation”²⁰, which is clearly legible in Fiasco’s chorus: by repeating and reinterpreting the derogatory term “nigga”, Fiasco inserts “a new semantic orientation into [the] word which already has – and retains – Its own orientation”²¹. In this way, Fiasco attempts to dislodge the word from its habitual usage in the horizon of meaning, or syntagmatic space, it exists in, demonstrating what Gates Jr. means when he claims that “[r]epetition, with a signal difference, is fundamental to the nature of Signifyin(g)”²².

This chiasmic tendency of Signifyin(g) has a long history in black literature and aesthetics: from Frederick Douglass’s “[y]ou have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man”²³, to Sun Ra’s Afrofuturist mantra from the 1960’s, “[s]uppose we came not *from* Africa but *to* Africa”²⁴. As Gates Jr. asserts, “[t]he motivated troping effect of the disruption of the semantic signification by the black vernacular depends on the homonymic relation of the white term to the black”²⁵. In this way, it is not the conceptual content of the related terms, but the very signifier itself which is placed in opposition between the white and black utterances thereof, as Gates Jr. observes how, “Signifyin(g) turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendental signified [...] draw[ing] attention to the force of the signifier”²⁶. Gates Jr.’s materialist reading of the signifier, following both Bakhtin and Lacan, demonstrates both the way in which the signifier itself exists as a contested, polysemic object between different cultural and social utterances, as well as the way in which the black vernacular tradition of Signifyin(g) in particular serves to short-circuit the hegemonic, syntagmatic chain of signification. This is why, for Gates Jr., “meaning is devalued while the signifier is valorized”²⁷, focalizing “[t]he daydream of the black Other” via “chiasmic fantasies of reversal of power relationships”²⁸, by staging the upheaval of the hegemonic horizon of meaning in language itself. In this way, the “materiality of the signifier [...] ceases to be disguised but comes to bear prominently as the dominant mode of discourse”²⁹, as though the paradigmatic signifier of black verna-

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ H.L. Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988, p. 51.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50. Gates Jr. here reiterates a sentence from M. Bakhtin, which speaks of “inserting a new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own” (M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984, p. 189).

²² H.L. Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 51.

²³ F. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, I. Dworkin ed., Penguin, London 2014, p. 77.

²⁴ N.M. Crawford, *Trouble with Post-Blackness*, H.A. Baker – M. Simmons ed., Columbia University Press, New York 2015, p. 38.

²⁵ H.L. Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 56.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

cular vertically strikes the horizontal, syntagmatic instance of the signifier, vertiginously disrupting the seemingly stable space of white English.

What is notable about Fiasco's lyricism is the unique way in which his employment of Signifyin(g) is so often entangled with architectural metaphors, as though – especially in *Audubon Ballroom* – he is reinterpreting the stale horizon of meaning that traumatic sites like the Motel Lorraine exist within. There is a specific way in which Fiasco's lyrics function not only to punctuate the materiality of the signifier, reinterpreting it via Signifyin(g), but as well redefine architectural objects in the process. In the following line from Lupe Fiasco's *Brave Heart*, we can see how the rapper employs “coincident rhyme”³⁰ in order to foreground the role of the signifier, while also entangling architectural objects into his linguistic construction: “took the wood from the slave ships and furnished my abode / Now that boat is now my bed, desk, dressers and my drawers / Now that's a house of pain!”³¹. Fiasco's lyrics serve to emphasise the unique capability of black vernacular to redirect the traumatic inertia embedded in the objects themselves into a new form, cutting through the ideological deadlock under which the architectural elements remain static, and exposing the social antagonisms embedded in the architectural objects themselves. As Gates Jr. asserts, “it is this redirection that allows us to bring the repressed meanings of a word, the meanings that lie in wait on the paradigmatic axis of discourse, to bear upon the syntagmatic axis”³². In this way, Fiasco not only makes the repressed content manifest linguistically, but as well exposes the antagonism residing in the architectural objects as observed by Žižek, in a sense articulating the “mute signs” that Žižek refers to. However, far from merely achieving this redirection in language, Fiasco modulates our perceptions of the signifiers which themselves evoke real architectural objects, breaking through the historically static horizon of meaning they exist within.

In one strikingly potent lyric from *Audubon Ballroom*, Fiasco redirects the traumatic intensities embedded specifically in the Lorraine Motel and Audubon Ballroom by directly alluding to the transformation of oppressive architectural objects into liberating ones, rapping:

Especially when your past is Martin [Luther King], [James] Baldwin, Audubon Ballroom / turn a glass ceiling to a glass floor, make a trampoline outa' trap door / [...] / loudly crafting out my dream underneath a tap floor³³.

Fiasco's metaphorical lyrics transform stubborn and oppressive architectural forms into playful objects, redefining their meanings while emphasising the material qualities of the signifier. Again, we see Fiasco employ the sophisticated strategy of Signifyin(g) following

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

³¹ W.M. Jaco, *Food & Liquor II*. The line continues, “plus I use nooses when I hang up all my clothes / couldn't change up if I chose / that's me”.

³² H.L. Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 64.

³³ W.M. Jaco, *Food & Liquor II*. Elsewhere Fiasco raps, “Bojangles was tappin' in morse code”, alluding to the black vernacular embedded in song and dance that eludes white audiences. See: W.M. Jaco, “Body of Work” from *Tetsuo and Youth*, Atlantic Records 2015.

Gates' formulation, illustrating "the creative (re)placement of [...] expected or anticipated formulaic phrases and formulaic events, rendered anew in unexpected ways"³⁴. In this way, Fiasco's lyrics give a new twist to the static architectural narrative of Motel Lorraine; the historical and emotional climaxes that Gooden critiques are opened up anew, and the traumatic inertias belonging thereto are redirected toward new and unexpected ends.

In final line of the second verse of *Audubon Ballroom*, Fiasco highlights the historical import of his lyrical strategy, saying: "I rap black history, you can only see my past when you fast forward"³⁵. This radical view of the future is precisely what Gooden claims to be lacking in African American museums such as the Lorraine Motel, running parallel to Bernard Tschumi's idea that "architecture only survives where it negates the form that society expects of it. Where it negates itself by transgressing the limits that history has set for it"³⁶. Fiasco negates the expected societal forms of the Motel Lorraine by delving deeper than the architecture itself is able to. In the outro to *Audubon Ballroom*, Fiasco identifies and names the often disavowed dynamism of black identity, which, just like the static horizon of meaning monumental architectures exist within, is so often concealed behind the various labels which have been used historically to describe black Americans, "'negro,' 'colored,' 'black' and now 'African American'"³⁷. Fiasco celebrates the depth and breadth of blackness hidden behind these labels – just as the photo-realism of the Lorraine Motel keeps the traumatic intensity of King's assassination concealed – putting them lyrically and rhythmically on display as he raps:

Black Panthers, black anthems, black blues / with black answers for black stanzas,
Langston Hughes / breaking rules, ain't it cool? / took it old, and made it new /
black painters, musical black anger / black mothers, beautiful black anchors / so
let's hear it for 'em! Let's hear it for 'em! / Let's hear it for 'em! Let's hear it for 'em!³⁸

Just as Gates Jr. describes how Signifyin(g) imparts a vertical, paradigmatic axis onto the horizontal, syntagmatic axis of language, so too Lupe's chiasmic encounter with architectural elements creatively breaks through and renarrativizes the horizon of meaning which keeps the Lorraine Motel/Civil Rights Museum, and the black identity represented thereby, historically static. Fiasco's lyricism thus enables listeners the chance to reconsider the spatial contradictions that Gooden identifies in African American museums, imagining new ways of understanding and dealing with historical traumas, while also demonstrating how aesthetic practices such as hip hop can provide unexpected answers to Gooden's questions about the Lorraine Motel/Civil Rights Museum; not only do Fiasco's lyrics "honor Dr. King's memory and at the same time translate the memories of the Civil Rights movement into action"³⁹, but as well "expose future potentialities and overcome the site's incredible

³⁴ H.L. Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 67.

³⁵ W.M. Jaco, *Food & Liquor II*.

³⁶ M. Gooden, *Dark Space*, p. 56.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁸ W.M. Jaco, *Food & Liquor II*.

³⁹ M. Gooden, *Dark Space*, p. 108.

weight of emotion and sentiment”⁴⁰. In this way, Fiasco’s lyricism pays homage to the sentimental and emotional function of the Lorraine Motel as a site of collective trauma, but as well functions as a practical aesthetic mode capable of re-narrativizing the monumentality of this site.

In the book *The Black Skyscraper*, Adrienne Brown identifies how the “*lived* experience” of race and its “*material* grounding” are two “discrete phenomena”, concluding that race operates “more like a ghost – something immaterial yet present, intangible yet visceral”, providing an extraordinary account of the complex entanglement of identity, embodiment and architectural space⁴¹. Gooden similarly concludes that spaces like the Lorraine Motel/ Civil Rights Museum sustain a ghostly presence of race, claiming that “we in the field of architecture refuse to look beyond these ghostly reflections in our own pupils”, and asserting that “‘the visual void’ in black discourse [...] ironically perpetuates black American visibility⁴². In a similar vein, Lefebvre describes how “[t]he ‘mental’ is ‘realized’ in a chain of ‘social’ activities because, in the temple, in the city, in monuments and palaces, the imaginary is transformed into the real”⁴³. In this way, the imaginary or ghostly appearance of black identity embedded in the Lorraine Motel becomes real, and it isn’t until praxes like Fiasco’s lyricism that reconsiderations of the imaginary can be reconsidered and potentially modulated toward new ends.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

⁴¹ A.R. Brown, *The Black Skyscraper: Architecture and the Perception of Race*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2017, p. 118.

⁴² M. Gooden, *Dark Space*, p. 116.

⁴³ H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 251.



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