The Ideas Of George Orwell As A Lens To Examine Rap Culture

George Orwell's exploration of power, nationalism and politics through language can be used to explain current persisting systemic racial inequality and rising nationalism in the United States as expressed in popular culture of music (Orwell, 2000). Kanye West's 'Ye vs the People' (West, Holland, Holland & Dozier, 2018) and Joey Bada$$'s 'Land of the Free' are songs that discuss the nationalist political atmosphere and oppression of blacks in contemporary America (Bada$$, Knight & Pallin, 2017). Kanye West is one of the most controversial artists in the rap industry and has actively challenged constructed black stereotypes and systematic racial discrimination (Bailey, 2014). Joey Bada$$ is another prominent artist whose songs have made strong political statements and directly challenge institutional structures like actions of the police and presidential administrations. The political significance of these texts will be examined through the lens of Orwell's conceptions of power, political language and nationalism as seen in Shooting an Elephant, Politics of the English Language and Notes on Nationalism (Orwell, 2000).

Abuse of Power in Shooting an Elephant

Orwell’s Shooting an Elephant is an allegory and memoir of his time as a police officer for Empire in colonial Burma. The detriments of imperialism are explored by Orwell through an incident where the narrator kills an elephant in an attempt to maintain his façade of power in the face of the Burmese people. Orwell calls the naturality of white privilege into question and challenges the power imbalance inherent in colonial society (Tyner, 2005). This view of abuse of power can explain West and Bada$$’s songs which address racism inherent within American institutional and political structures. Bada$$’s lyric “Trickery in the system, put my niggas in prison” (Bada$$, Knight & Pallin, 2017) and TI’s lyric (featured rapper) in Ye vs The People, “If your election ain’t gon’ stop police from murderin’ niggas, then shit,” link controversial police brutality against blacks in the United States to the corruption of imperialist policeman in Burma such as the narrator in Shooting an Elephant (West, Holland, Holland & Dozier, 2018). Indeed, in his later work, The Road to Wigan Pier, Orwell admitted to abusing his power as an imperial policeman by striking Burmese ‘coolies’ when angry (Newsinger, 1999). This abuse of power and exercise of white privilege explains the racial struggles that Bada$$’s and West express in their songs. They claim to give a voice to the African American people who fear police authorities due to the prejudice inherent in American institutions. This idea of dominant whiteness is reinforced by Tyner (2005) who argues that the narrator in Shooting an Elephant performs his whiteness in a space where he is juxtaposed to the Other. The idea of a society defined and divided by colour is reinforced in West and Bada$$’s lyrics above. Therefore, the struggle of how to prevent abuse of power in Shooting an Elephant, which is prominent through much of Orwell’s other works like 1984, effectively explains the racial struggle inherent in West and Bada$$’s lyrics (Carr, 2012).

The power that ordinary people possess in a corrupt system as demonstrated in Shooting an Elephant is a view shared by both West and Bada$$ in their songs. Orwell highlights how the Burmese people very much dictated his actions in Burma,

“Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd—seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind,” (Orwell, 2000, p. 273).

Thus, it is the Burmese who hold the power and operate Orwell like a puppet, using his fear of public humiliation as a control mechanism. This demonstrates that even in a corrupt system of power imbalance such as colonial Burma, the people still hold power and are the ones who can enact change. Bada$$ shares this view in his repeated line, “Can’t change the world unless we change ourselves,” and “The first step in the change is to take notice” (Bada$$, Knight & Pallin, 2017). He sees that the inherent bias in American social structures can only be rectified starting with individual change. West too, sees power as invested in the people as it is the people which dictate politics, “You gotta see the vantage point of the people,” and “Why don’t we just cut the beat off and let the people talk?” (West, Holland, Holland & Dozier, 2018). Not only does West perpetuate this view in Ye vs The People, but also through his past discography and actions such as calling out the discrimination inherent in the Bush administration’s response to Hurricane Katrina (Cohen, 2012). West uses his position of influence to work toward his purpose of liberating people from the oppressive social structures and systems that mark today’s world (Bailey, 2014). In this sense, West and Bada$$ are a voice for the people, attempting to enact change. Indeed, Cohen (2012) provided evidence that West’s views represent that of millions of young black people in the United States, views that young black people face discrimination to the extent where it is difficult for them to get ahead. Therefore, Orwell’s view that the people still possess power in a corrupt system depicts a vision of hope that can be used to explain the hope Bada$$ and West display through their music which attempts to advocate and bring about change.

Critique of West and Bada$$’s writing against Politics and the English Language

Orwell’s Politics and the English Language sees language as a political instrument that can be manipulated by poor thought and execution of writers. Ye vs The People and Land of the Free are both examples of political writing that can be subject to Orwell’s critique in Politics and the English Language. While these songs are not academic prose, they nevertheless constitute political writing as Orwell recognises that politics was everywhere in his age. In today’s world this is increasingly so. Politics is present in meme culture, songs, art, graffiti and many other casual expressions beyond formal writing. Thus, these songs bear much political significance as “rap is both the symptom and the most powerful weapon for radical thought,” according to Ciccariello-Maher (2009, p. 394). Orwell’s focus in this essay upon how people write and speak politically is crucial to analyse the politics inherent in West and Bada$$’s lyrics. Indeed, Goodheart (1999) argues that Orwell’s essays are unsurpassed and are still very much relevant to writers and speakers today as they owe a duty to their audience to communicate truthfully and clearly.

Orwell would likely deem Ye vs The People and Land of the Free as bad political writing, as he stated,

“In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions, and not a ‘party line.” (Orwell, 2000, p. 255).

Therefore, according to Orwell, Ye vs The People and Land of the Free would constitute bad writing considering its vague and clumsy colloquial language riddled with profanities, indication of a clear bias in expressing private opinions, and ideas that align with a party. This bias can be seen in Bada$$'s line "And Donald Trump is not equipped to take this country over" and West's line "I know Obama was heaven sent". These lyrics exemplify Orwell's critique that any political writing that adheres to common figures of speech depicts lack of thought and following of common party lines. Views of Trump as being unfit to be president and praise of Obama indicate a clear and common party line view held by majority groups. On the other hand, perhaps Orwell would praise the simplicity of language in these songs and West and Bada$$'s refrain from use of pretentious diction (Orwell, 2000).

The vagueness of language in the lyrics of both songs would further be subject to Orwell's critique. Orwell's warning that abstract political language is "…designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind," (Orwell, 2000, p. 258) can be used to critique the language used in West and Bada$$'s songs. Meaningless words, an example of a habit that writers should avoid according to Orwell, are evident in Ye vs The People. This is seen in the line by TI, the featured rapper on the track starring as 'the People', who counters West's nationalist views, saying "You wore a dusty-ass hat to represent the same views as white supremacy, man we expect better from you." The direct inference of Trump as a white supremacist is an example a 'meaningless word' as it is a term which, much like Orwell's examples of democracy and fascism, has become used as a general and casual term for something bad. While Trump does in fact have some policies and beliefs in line with white supremacy and white nationalist ideology, by applying white supremacy as a category to someone where there is no universal agreement as to the definition of the term, would be an abuse of political words according to Orwell's line of thinking in his essay. Orwell stated that "Words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way", thus these lyrics reflect a simplification of political words such as white supremacy to the extent where these words are rendered meaningless (Orwell, 2000, p. 262). Vague language such as this serves a political agenda by removing reality from their justification, according to Orwell. In this light, Orwell's essay provides useful insights into evaluating the quality of a political work in even contemporary society where politics has become so widely proliferated.

Notes on Nationalism as a Lens for Both Nationalist Critique and Support in Ye vs The People and Land of the Free

In Notes on Nationalism, Orwell defines and explores the dangers of nationalism, identifying its types and principal characteristics. These ideas can be used to explain West's nationalist views in Ye vs The People and Bada$$'s critique of American nationalism in Land of the Free, both of which stimulate black nationalistic loyalties. Bailey (2014) sees Black Nationalism as inherent in West's actions and values as he was raised with reference to key black figures such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Marcus Garvey. These revolutionaries, along with Umar Johnson, also influenced Bada$$'s Land of the Free as he explained that he wrote the song after 'binge watching' their lectures and speeches ('Joey Bada$$ – LAND OF THE FREE', 2017). Orwell may have perceived the Black Nationalism evident in West and Bada$$'s songs as an example of 'Negative Nationalism' toward white America as they highlight a divide between the two race groups in the United States. Bada$$'s lyric "Three K's, Two A's in Amerikka" shows a strong opposition to White America, depicting them as oppressors and white supremacists. West's line"…man, we ain't even made it off the plantation," also displays

strong feeling that blacks in America are still being socially exploited and seen as inferior to White America.

If West and Bada$$'s lyrics can be taken to constitute views of 'negative nationalists', Orwell would argue that the artists are likely to judge truth against the standard of their nationalist belief. Furthermore, he would perhaps critique the fact that these songs are politically dangerous in that facts are secondary to feeling and relatability. This is evident in claims such as Bada$$'s lyric, "They disorganised my people, made us all loners" which provides no evidence to back it up. Thus, even if what was written was in fact based on truth, the listener has no way of knowing. Simultaneously, Bada$$'s critical take on American nationalism as disillusioned, "In the land of the free, it's for the freeloaders," may also be seen by Orwell as rebelling against the dominant 'Positive Nationalism' (nationalism for one's own country) that is rising in the United States and around the world as seen by Trump's ascendancy and Brexit. The bias in these lyrics is evident, which points to Orwell's key message in Notes of Nationalism— for all to question their own prejudices before questioning those of others.

However, the desire for power and inherent superiority which Orwell saw as determinative of nationalistic thought is not evident in Bada$$'s lyrics in Land of the Free. Instead, there is more emphasis placed upon how American nationalism is unjustified as the nation is corrupted and is permeated by unequal race structures, as seen in the line "Another family evicted, another black man a victim". West's lyrics, on the other hand, imply nationalistic thought by his clear support for Trump, who is well known to be a prominent and outspoken American nationalist. This is seen in the lyric "Actually, wearin' the hat'lll show people that we equal", the hat referring to the 'Make America Great Again' hat which West controversially wore publicly. When challenged on his support of Trump by T.I. in the song, West responded with "The greater good of the people is first", implying that Trump's nationalist policies place this greater good first. In these lines we see what Orwell would call an 'indifference to reality' as West seems to be more interested in feeling than facts and is blind to any wrongs of that his own side may possess (Orwell, 2000, p.258). This is evident of the trait of instability that Orwell sees as inherent to nationalists, being constrained to one side of thinking. Therefore, Orwell's types of nationalism can effectively explain the views held in rap culture both in support of and opposing nationalism in the United States.

Through this application of Orwell's ideas of power, language and nationalism as a means to explain the nature of rap culture today which challenges systemic racism, it appears that the notions conceptualised in Orwell's essays transcend time and state boundaries. Power as explored through Shooting an Elephant, and critique of both political writing and nationalism is perhaps even more relevant today where political writing has become so widely proliferated that its quality has declined further, and where nationalism is once again on the rise. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Orwell's ideas in the modernist period are still very much relevant today and can be used as a vehicle to examine political expressions such as the songs by West and Bada$$ which are just a few of many songs challenging America's racially charged political landscape.