

**“Let it been known that God's penmanship has been
signed with a language called love
That's why my breath is felt by the deaf
And why my words are heard and confined to the ears of
the blind
I, too, dream in color and in rhyme”**

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Spit Left on the Mic: Derridean Idiomatic

Jacques Derrida concludes *Monolingualism of the Other* with the emphasis that the idiom is impossible. He warns that in some way or another, words will always be reappropriated and that this singular, improvisational language (the idiom, the aporia) would be untranslatable and inadmissible. The idiom is described as “inventing a language different enough to disallow its own reappropriation within the norms, the body, and the law of the given language...” (*Monolingualism* pg.66)

The idiom is endowed with a fleetingness and a firstness that allows for a distinguishability to the speaker. The idiom, though, must operate within the realms of the 'given' language. It is not meaningless psychobabble but rather irreplaceable and irreplicable and irreproachable language. Spoken word poetry, with its spontaneity, authentic distortion of language, and verbal presence that creates for the listener effects of real-time, arrives closer than all other art forms to being the pure Derridean idiom. In his poem “Duality Dual,” poet Daniel Beatty outlines his personal struggle with being a black man operating in majorly white and prestigious spaces and the tension such a position creates in his internal self, which

urges him to embrace his 'blackness' and to reject the assimilation oriented behavior that Beatty has prioritized. The spoken word piece acts as the speaker's performed deconstruction of himself in order to reveal and commit to the trace of the 'nigga' that lives turbulently within him. This poem highlights the capabilities of spoken word and reaffirms that it is the closest form of artistic expression to reach the Derridean idiomatic.

Although impossible, Derrida stresses that the idiom is what people must strive for within the boundaries of language. *Monolingualism* critiques how language is used to motivate and perpetuate "national aggressions...or monoculturalist homo-hegemony" (*Monolingualism* pg.64) The idiom is endowed with a fleetingness and a firstness that allows for a distinguishability to the speaker. The idiom, though, must operate within the realms of the 'given' language. It is not meaningless psychobabble but rather irreplaceable and irreplicable and irreproachable language. Spoken word is not simply the oral recitation of written poetry. Neither is it simply an oratory stream of consciousness. It can be both and/or neither. Spoken word is that which it is crafted (whether improvisational or not) in its unpredictability and simultaneous transparency. There is a rawness to spoken word that is undoubtedly idiomatic. The poet's words reach each audience member with resonance but with an undeniable inability to translate. Or rather the inability for the audience member to completely grasp the material immediately. Spoken

word gives presence to not only the performer but the audience as well. Spoken word does not, though, escape the 'promise of language' described by Derrida. The idiom "makes things happen" (pg.66) and it produces events. The Derridean event is that which is unexpected even if known to happen. (*Deconstruction of Actuality*)

Derrida describes the event as inhabiting a messianic space because it is promised but never given. If events are promised and language is a promise, then language is inevitably expected unlike events. This expectancy is what keeps all text from ever being pure idiom. However, the spontaneity in spoken word that best captures the potential of unexpectedness in language is within the reaction from the audience.

Presence is promised with spoken word, and language is promised with spoken word, but the language received is not expected. Audience members when listening to spoken word cannot even hold in their taken-aback-ness when poets project striking language. What makes spoken word different than plays or movies in this regard? With a play or movie or television series, there exists a prompt on which the audience relies to understand the material. There is also a sequential aspect in such mediums in which real time is fabricated or promised that removes its temporal authenticity. The audience member must suspend his disbelief. These media promise that which cannot be given. Spoken word does not promise other than language and presence and it is an unexpected language and presence. An unforeseen plateau of variances and possibilities, spoken word operates in real time

and it requires no suspension of disbelief. The other media in these short comings, *remove* the other. Derrida stresses that the idiom must include the other. Spoken word, in its uniqueness gathers differences *with language* and is thus a promise of various forms of 'a language' that exist together. Spoken word is "for the other, coming from the other, *the coming of the other*" (*Monolingualism* pg.68) The audience, the performer and the poem itself all embody the otherness and idiomatic of language.

Instead of an all encompassing tolerance for the other, Derrida notes in *Monolingualism* that language upholds hierarchies and develops interdictions that mark and marginalize each other. Language begins to dominate man and man uses language to dominate others. Spoken word is almost a usurpation of imprisoning language. The spoken word artist uses language to rebel against linguistic hierarchies and interdictions and in an attempt to free himself, the poet captures and holds hostage the listener. The hostage situation is neither negative nor static but rather fluid and necessary in order for spoken word to be effective. There is an exchange between the performer, the listener, and the piece. The audience member's monolanguage, the poet's presence (in itself a uniqueness), his intonation and idiomatic piece all engage and swirl around each other. At any point in a poem, an audience member can be moved by a striking aspect to the piece. The poet's performance becomes a hyperbole of his experience while resonating universally to the audience. No person's encounter with language is the

exact same which is why a piece can manifest itself differently for each person. Not only is spoken word idiomatic from the performer's end, it is also idiomatic from the end of the listener. Also, the hyperbole existent in spoken word is attached to a poet's intended usurpation. When referring to his accent or intonation, Derrida reveals that years of schooling led him to his concern for masking it which resulted in his textual hyperbolism. The continual concern to speak good French that was "more French than the french," more "purely French" than was demanded by the purity of purists even while I am from the very beginning attacking purity and purification in general, and of course the "ultras" of Algeria."(pg.48) Spoken word artists use their intonations and accents as a way to further implode the implications of general language and to dismiss their perceived positions in the margins in which language has placed them. What Derrida does with his writings, poets do with their pieces. Spoken word artists use the very language that disparages them and they subvert it.

In 'Duality Dual,' Daniel Beatty's disparagement is tied to racial disenfranchisement not only because he is black but because of the turmoil that arises from his position in the 'black elite.' Beatty, the speaker describes his inner conflict between the assimilating and seemingly well-spoken Ivy League graduate he is externally, and the coarse, strong and resilient 'nigga' that lives within him. The piece provides a weighty insight into the ways in which many

college educated black people in America (the nerd) reconcile their backgrounds in low-income black neighborhoods (the nigga). The poem is the personified struggle that many blacks encounter when trying to climb elite social and academic ladders. The struggle in not being able to completely come to terms with a background that is seemingly incompatible with the spaces of success leads many blacks to suppress and consequently strangle the ties that they once held to struggling black communities and experiences in America. Language is embedded within this dichotomy and what arises is the common, angry and hostile black man who is from the ghetto and embraces it versus the uppity, disengaged, assimilationist black man who turns his back on the ghetto. Black people internalize the language that one man cannot positively and productively be both, a sentiment that Beatty alludes to internalizing himself. His inner blackness though, will not allow him to forget that his strength is what has allowed Beatty to endure the exhausting life as a black man in the Ivy League. Beatty's nerd persona comments that the nigga's hostility will prevent him from entering white elitist circles or being on the cover of the New York Times to which the nigga replies "not if you shoot a mothafucka" (*Duality Duel*). The nigga's comment though quick and used to add a comedic glare makes a very political statement about the language that is wrapped around black men in America. Firstly, the nerd feels as if he must hide his blackness in order to succeed which arises from the sentiment that blackness (or nigga-ness) is not compatible

with mostly white spaces. If he embraces that side of him, then he will be blocked out of the impermeable membrane known as white America. Secondly, a further issue is that white America is seen as the pentacle of success and that whiteness is the only behavior congruous with prestige. This is another sentiment that many Americans internalize and what leads to the upholding of a dangerous linguistic hierarchy. Returning to the comment about the New York Times, Beatty wittingly alludes to the constant fame that black men receive on the news for gun violence. Beatty is more likely to make the news for a crime than for his success. Derrida would describe this tactic as silencing:

“The silence of places where one has become too used to expecting it. The silence of those who read, listen, or see the news and also analyze it, is not as silent, it would seem, as the silence coming from the other side, the side from which the news appears, becomes, or makes one deaf to everything that does not speak according to its law.” (*Deconstruction of Actuality* pg.90)

The silencing of black voices is what gives rise to the hardness and outspokenness of the nigga persona in Beatty. The poet's marginalization as a black man (internal marginalization and external but both linguistic) is but one form of marginalization. Every person is marginalized by language due to the impossibility of idiom and the antinomy that you speak a language that is not your own. Spoken, word allows performers to use the language that marginalizes in order to make peace with that

antinomy. Beatty's poetry allows him to take the reins on these two opposing identities and subvert the language (from Beatty himself as well as societal language) that suppresses the nigga. The intent behind spoken word is very reminiscent of the intent behind *Monolingualism of the Other*. The range of pieces and material that are available in spoken word is immense. The other is an infinity of variations and possibilities as is the performer of spoken word. Each piece is the arrivant of indefinite other. An other who is unlike the last who seeks to unload the language which has convicted him. Spoken word in its entirety reveals that the language upon which mankind stands is wonky and debased. The other is able to express his frustration with being otherized as spoken word allows artists to break down walls of presumed identity. Beatty urges himself in 'Duality Duel' to smash his assimilationist persona as it "will surely beat you down" in the sense that it will not only uphold a dangerous interdiction but will also eat away at an integral essence of Beatty himself. 'Duality Duel' in its subversion, then acts as a deconstruction of the speaker. Such a bold claim to assert that one can deconstruct himself. Is a self-deconstruction even possible in the eyes of Derrida? A self-deconstruction would have to imply a wholeness to the subject—a subject that is subject enough to be deconstructed seems to go against Derrida's denial of sole identity. On the contrary, deconstruction is tearing a part a concept and revealing that it is of non-absolute presence and thus disrupts the linguistic fallacies and hierarchies of absolute

presence. This deconstruction is not concerning subjectivity but rather dismantling a well-crafted identity that deceives as absolute. Beatty is not a subject standing on his own in the poem because he represents a very real process that creates a threatening binary amongst black men in America. Beatty, then exemplifies all black men. The piece deconstructs Beatty's forged identity as it disassembles his fabricated character and his supposed assimilation into elite, predominantly white academic culture and reveals the trace of the nigga which seeks to resolve the speaker's denial of the struggling black experience of which he was/is a part. The plea is for Beatty to "journey to the nigga" within in order to free himself from his destructive future posing as an elite who has no inner conflict. He must use the outspoken voice that the nigga gives him in order to give a voice to the disenfranchisement and "nightmares of the ghetto" that were very present in Beatty's life and that are still occurring. Beatty, in order to help, must recognize that people will not respond to his fake self. The nerd is not an absolute identity or presence because it does not exist without the nigga. Beatty has lived a life trying to overcome the nigga and even feeds into the language that labels the nigga angry and loveless. His performed deconstruction displays the importance of intersectionality and affirms that when Beatty can reveal the trace of nigga in himself then he will be better equipped to challenge the interdictions that flood perceptions of being black in America. Instead of assimilating and self-suppression, With his access to circles in

the Ivy League, Beatty's journey to his inner nigga will better help him challenge the dichotomies that reject his blackness. His self deconstruction can be looked at as a further commentary on the language that binds his identity in the first place.

Not only does 'Duality Duel exhibit the deconstructive and subversive capabilities that spoken word conjures up, it also affirms spoken word as the art form that best resembles the idiom. The engagement that occurs on stage and in/within the audience, spoken word is a realm in which the other is always in the air and its language is always promised. The variation of indefinite arrivances of the other is encapsulated in the sheer vastness of pieces and voices and physical presences. Spoken word is presence and is performed as presence in the presence of the audience. The speaker captures the audience and the audience receives the piece in real time with each listener capable of being move by the entire piece and by aspects of it. The atmosphere is spontaneous and is a welcoming of each other who seeks to reject linguistic marginalization and usurps the very language that threatens them. The voice of the speaker is entirely other and makes idiomatic language rise to new heights of idiomatic. A problem arises! In its very

name, spoken word implies the orating of word—of writing. In *Plato's Pharmakon*, Derrida claims that writing, as a supplement to speech, undoubtedly intercepts the speaking process and that speech inevitably comes to resemble the written word. As such, it is less authentic and deceives as presence. Derrida also offers a critique of

logocentrism, and the dangers of valuing speech. How can one privilege spoken word without feeding into logocentrism? Logocentrism privileges speech as what asserts human presence. Julie Elaine Goodspeed-Chadwick states in the article *Derrida's Deconstruction of Logocentrism: Implications for Trauma Studies* that

“What Derrida is primarily interested in here is the control and power immanent in logocentrism because this ethnocentric way of understanding the world necessarily shapes how one understands people, places, and concepts. In effect, logocentrism privileges not only a certain type of communication, but it privileges above all else the falsehood (for Derrida) of origins and presence.”

Spoken word does not act in the way Derrida accuses logocentrism to act. Ethnocentrism is not upheld by spoken word as each piece is perfectly capable of standing in opposition with the next piece. An opposition that is not violent but necessary for the poet to form his idiom. Spoken word, like Derrida, exists as an antithesis to ethnocentrism as it lives to reject embracing of dichotomies. Spoken word is presence, though Derrida might disagree using difference to show that signs are constantly deferred. Spoken word, though, is presence for both the audience and the performer in the simple definition of the word—in its flightiness and nowness. Poets are present in their performances in the presence of the

audience which is never static. The audience's presence is never the same for any performance. When a poet performs spoken word, he leaves his presence (which will never repeat itself) on stage and the audience's presence moves with it. Differance may apply to the text in the piece but it does not apply to the spontaneous and variable presence in each spoken word piece. As far as spoken word resembling the written word, it combats the notions of proper speech etiquette. Much of the language used disagrees with standardized verbal patterns and allows the poet to bask in a speech that rejects formal writing.

Spoken makes noise. Derrida would agree with the problem of silence and that more people should strive to not only be heard but should strive to be heard in a language the speaker seizes that cannot be seized again. Spoken word poets flaunt their otherness and embrace their idiomatic language to make things happen. Derrida would also stress the necessity to hear other and to receive their otherness. 'Louder Than A Bomb' a spoken word competition for high school students recognizes the tolerance building qualities of spoken word poetry. The website describes the style of its competition saying that:

“Rather than emphasize individual poets and performances, the structure of Louder Than a Bomb demands that kids work collaboratively with their peers, presenting, critiquing, and rewriting their pieces. To succeed, teams have to create an environment of

mutual trust and support. For many kids, being a part of such an environment—in an academic context—is life-changing.”

Spoken word poetry allows people and their idiomatic language to collaborate and accept. Spoken word artists appreciate the talent of the other, the ability of the other to craft his story is his words. While Derrida might not agree that one has his own words, spoken word certainly allows one to bring life, irreplaceability and uncanniness to a language that seeks unity. Each poet speaks 'a language' but spoken word allows a space for each person's idiomatic language to vibrate and harmonize with the other's.

I've included some youtube links to some pieces for points of reference, each being insanely different than the other (they're fabulous)

Sistah Queen: Try Being a Lady [http://www.youtube.com/watch?](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cx0HKvWOBis)

[v=cx0HKvWOBis](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cx0HKvWOBis)

Dufflyn: Single Life <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjfZ5oq4fPw>

Adam Gottlieb: Poet Breathe Now [http://www.youtube.com/watch?](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXIjF0ERvYY)

[v=IXIjF0ERvYY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXIjF0ERvYY)

Megan Falley: Fat Girl <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxgpCfPqQpk>

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"Louder Than A Bomb The Film." N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.louderthanabombfilm.com/about-the-film.php>>.

Beatty, Daniel. "Duality Duel." N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1INMYz0AMSI>>.