

An Open Letter to Oprah by Hip Hop Generation Poet Saul Williams

Written by Saul Williams ID3610
Thursday, 19 April 2007 03:47 -

An open letter to Oprah 4/18/7: From Saul Wiliams

Dear Ms. Winfrey,

It is with the greatest respect and adoration of your loving spirit that I write you. As a young child, I would sit beside my mother everyday and watch your program. As a young adult, with children of my own, I spend much less time in front of the television, but I am ever thankful for the positive effect that you continue to have on our nation, history and culture. The example that you have set as someone unafraid to answer their calling, even when the reality of that calling insists that one self-actualize beyond the point of any given example, is humbling, and serves as the cornerstone of the greatest faith. You, love, are a pioneer.

I am a poet.

Growing up in Newburgh, NY, with a father as a minister and a mother as a school teacher, at a time when we fought for our heroes to be nationally recognized, I certainly was exposed to the great names and voices of our past. I took great pride in competing in my churches Black History Quiz Bowl and the countless events my mother organized in hopes of fostering a generation of youth well versed in the greatness as well as the horrors of our history. Yet, even in a household where I had the privilege of personally interacting with some of the most outspoken and courageous luminaries of our times, I must admit that the voices that resonated the most within me and made me want to speak up were those of my peers, and these peers were emcees. Rappers.

Yes, Ms. Winfrey, I am what my generation would call “a Hip Hop head.” Hip Hop has served as one of the greatest aspects of my self-definition. Lucky for me, I grew up in the 80’s when groups like Public Enemy, Rakim, The jungle Brothers, Queen Latifah, and many more realized the power of their voices within the artform and chose to create music aimed at the upliftment of our generation.

As a student at Morehouse College where I studied Philosophy and Drama I was forced to venture across the street to Spelman College for all of my Drama classes, since Morehouse had

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no theater department of its own. I had few complaints. The performing arts scholarship awarded me by Michael Jackson had promised me a practically free ride to my dream school, which now had opened the doors to another campus that could make even the most focused of young boys dreamy, Spelman. One of my first theater professors, Pearle Cleage, shook me from my adolescent dream state. It was the year that Dr. Dre's "The Chronic" was released and our introduction to Snoop Dogg as he sang catchy hooks like "Bitches ain't shit but hoes and tricks..." Although, it was a playwriting class, what seemed to take precedence was Ms. Cleages political ideology, which had recently been pressed and bound in her 1st book, Mad at Miles. As, you know, in this book she spoke of how she could not listen to the music of Miles Davis and his muted trumpet without hearing the muted screams of the women that he was outspoken about "man-handling". It was my first exposure to the idea of an artist being held accountable for their actions outside of their art. It was the first time I had ever heard the word, "misogyny". And as Ms. Cleage would walk into the classroom fuming over the women she would pass on campus, blasting those Snoop lyrics from their cars and jeeps, we, her students, would be privy to many freestyle rants and raves on the dangers of nodding our heads to a music that could serve as our own demise.

Her words, coupled with the words of the young women I found myself interacting with forever changed how I listened to Hip Hop and quite frankly ruined what would have been a number of good songs for me. I had now been burdened with a level of awareness that made it impossible for me to enjoy what the growing masses were ushering into the mainstream. I was now becoming what many Hip Hop heads would call "a Backpacker", a person who chooses to associate themselves with the more "conscious" or politically astute artists of the Hip Hop community. What we termed as "conscious" Hip Hop became our preference for dance and booming systems. Groups like X-Clan, A Tribe Called Quest, Brand Nubian, Arrested Development, Gangstarr and others became the prevailing music of our circle. We also enjoyed the more playful Hip Hop of De La Soul, Heiroglyphics, Das FX, Organized Konfusion, Digable Planets, The Fugees, and more. We had more than enough positivity to fixate on. Hip Hop was diverse.

I had not yet begun writing poetry. Most of my friends hardly knew that I had been an emcee in high school. I no longer cared to identify myself as an emcee and my love of oratory seemed misplaced at Morehouse where most orators were actually preachers in training, speaking with the Southern drawl of Dr. King although they were 19 and from the North. I spent my time doing countless plays and school performances. I was in line to become what I thought would be the next Robeson, Sidney, Ossie, Denzel, Snipes... It wasn't until I was in graduate school for acting at NYU that I was invited to a poetry reading in Manhattan where I heard Asha Bandele, Sapphire, Carl Hancock Rux, Reggie Gaines, Jessica Care Moore, and many others read poems that sometimes felt like monologues that my newly acquired journal started taking the form of a young poets'. Yet, I still noticed that I was a bit different from these poets who listed names like: Audrey Lourde, June Jordan, Sekou Sundiata etc, when asked why they began to write poetry. I knew that I had been inspired to write because of emcees like Rakim, Chuck D,

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LL, Run DMC... Hip Hop had informed my love of poetry as much or even more than my theater background which had exposed me to Shakespeare, Baraka, Fugard, Genet, Hansberry and countless others. In those days, just a mere decade ago, I started writing to fill the void between what I was hearing and what I wished I was hearing. It was not enough for me to critique the voices I heard blasting through the walls of my Brooklyn brownstone. I needed to create examples of where Hip Hop, particularly its lyricism, could go. I ventured to poetry readings with my friends and neighbors, Dante Smith (now Mos Def), Talib Kwele, Erycka Badu, Jessica Care Moore, Mums the Schemer, Beau Sia, Suheir Hammad...all poets that frequented the open mics and poetry slams that we commonly saw as "the other direction" when Hip hop reached that fork in the road as you discussed on your show this past week. On your show you asked the question, "Are all rappers poets?" Nice. I wanted to take the opportunity to answer this question for you.

The genius, as far as the marketability, of Hip Hop is in its competitiveness. Its roots are as much in the dignified aspects of our oral tradition as it is in the tradition of "the dozens" or "signifying". In Hip Hop, every emcee is automatically pitted against every other emcee, sort of like characters with super powers in comic books. No one wants to listen to a rapper unless they claim to be the best or the greatest. This sort of braggadocio leads to all sorts of tirades, showdowns, battles, and sometimes even deaths. In all cases, confidence is the ruling card. Because of the competitive stance that all emcees are prone to take, they, like soldiers begin to believe that they can show no sign of vulnerability. Thus, the most popular emcees of our age are often those that claim to be heartless or show no feelings or signs of emotion. The poet, on the other hand, is the one who realizes that their vulnerability is their power. Like you, unafraid to shed tears on countless shows, the poet finds strength in exposing their humanity, their vulnerability, thus making it possible for us to find connection and strength through their work. Many emcees have been poets. But, no, Ms. Winfrey, not all emcees are poets. Many choose gangsterism and business over the emotional terrain through which true artistry will lead. But they are not to blame. I would now like to address your question of leadership.

You may recall that in immediate response to the attacks of September 11th, our president took the national stage to say to the American public and the world that we would "...show no sign of vulnerability". Here is the same word that distinguishes poets from rappers, but in its history, more accurately, women from men. To make such a statement is to align oneself with the ideology that instills in us a sense of vulnerability meaning "weakness". And these meanings all take their place under the heading of what we consciously or subconsciously characterize as traits of the feminine. The weapon of mass destruction is the one that asserts that a holy trinity would be a father, a male child, and a ghost when common sense tells us that the holiest of trinities would be a mother, a father, and a child: Family. The vulnerability that we see as weakness is the saving grace of the drunken driver who because of their drunken/vulnerable state survives the fatal accident that kills the passengers in the approaching vehicle who tighten their grip and show no physical vulnerability in the face of their fear. Vulnerability is also the saving grace of the skateboarder who attempts a trick and remembers to stay loose and not

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tense during their fall. Likewise, vulnerability has been the saving grace of the African American struggle as we have been whipped, jailed, spat upon, called names, and killed, yet continue to strive forward mostly non-violently towards our highest goals. But today we are at a crossroads, because the institutions that have sold us the crosses we wear around our necks are the most overt in the denigration of women and thus humanity. That is why I write you today, Ms. Winfrey. We cannot address the root of what plagues Hip Hop without addressing the root of what plagues today's society and the world.

You see, Ms. Winfrey, at it's worse; Hip Hop is simply a reflection of the society that birthed it. Our love affair with gangsterism and the denigration of women is not rooted in Hip Hop; rather it is rooted in the very core of our personal faith and religions. The gangsters that rule Hip Hop are the same gangsters that rule our nation. 50 Cent and George Bush have the same birthday (July 6th). For a Hip Hop artist to say "I do what I wanna do/Don't care if I get caught/The DA could play this mothaf@kin tape in court/I'll kill you/ I ain't playin'" epitomizes the confidence and braggadocio we expect an admire from a rapper who claims to represent the lowest denominator. When a world leader with the spirit of a cowboy (the true original gangster of the West: raping, stealing land, and pillaging, as we clapped and cheered.) takes the position of doing what he wants to do, regardless of whether the UN or American public would take him to court, then we have witnessed true gangsterism and violent negligence. Yet, there is nothing more negligent than attempting to address a problem one finds on a branch by censoring the leaves.

Name calling, racist generalizations, sexist perceptions, are all rooted in something much deeper than an uncensored music. Like the rest of the world, I watched footage on AOL of you dancing mindlessly to 50 Cent on your fiftieth birthday as he proclaimed, "I got the ex/if you're into taking drugs/ I'm into having sex/ I ain't into making love" and you looked like you were having a great time. No judgment. I like that song too. Just as I do, James Brown's Sex Machine or Grand Master Flashes "White Lines". Sex, drugs, and rock and roll is how the story goes. Censorship will never solve our problems. It will only foster the sub-cultures of the underground, which inevitably inhabit the mainstream. There is nothing more mainstream than the denigration of women as projected through religious doctrine. Please understand, I am by no means opposing the teachings of Jesus, by example (he wasn't Christian), but rather the men that have used his teachings to control and manipulate the masses. Hip Hop, like Rock and Roll, like the media, and the government, all reflect an idea of power that labels vulnerability as weakness. I can only imagine the non-emotive hardness that you have had to show in order to secure your empire from the grips of those that once stood in your way: the old guard. You reflect our changing times. As time progresses we sometimes outgrow what may have served us along the way. This time, what we have outgrown, is not hip hop, rather it is the festering remnants of a God depicted as an angry and jealous male, by men who were angry and jealous over the minute role that they played in the everyday story of creation. I am sure that you have covered ideas such as these on your show, but we must make a connection before our disconnect proves fatal.

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We are a nation at war. What we fail to see is that we are fighting ourselves. There is no true hatred of women in Hip Hop. At the root of our nature we inherently worship the feminine. Our overall attention to the nurturing guidance of our mothers and grandmothers as well as our ideas of what is sexy and beautiful all support this. But when the idea of the feminine is taken out of the idea of what is divine or sacred then that worship becomes objectification. When our governed morality asserts that a woman is either a virgin or a whore, then our understanding of sexuality becomes warped. Note the dangling platinum crosses over the bare asses being smacked in the videos. The emcees of my generation are the ministers of my father's generation. They too had a warped perspective of the feminine. Censoring songs, sermons, or the tirades of radio personalities will change nothing except the format of our discussion. If we are to sincerely address the change we are praying for then we must first address to whom we are praying.

Thank you, Ms. Winfrey, for your forum, your heart, and your vision. May you find the strength and support to bring about the changes you wish to see in ways that do more than perpetuate the myth of enmity.

In loving kindness,

Saul Williams