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Language: The bridge over the barrier

*“We have come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now...Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood”*(King 2). Paralleled by; *“Change is slow, always has been, always will be, But f\*\*\* that, I'ma bust back 'til they kill me, Change is slow, always has been, always will be, But f\*\*\* that, I'ma bust back until they kill me—feel me?”*(Cole V2). You know that feeling of goosebumps you get when you read or listen to something that really impacts you. I get that from this. These two similar passages were taken from Martin Luther King's *I Have A Dream Speech* and J. Cole's single *High for Hours*. This is what I think of when I read or hear a message that uses language to transfer emotion and passion to a listener or reader. It also displays the parallel between King's orations and Cole's music. Language is described by writer Edward Sapir as, “It seems as natural to man as walking, and only less so than breathing” (Sapir 1). It's so interesting how something so simple and ordinary can become so impactful. When you listen to this powerful oration and heartfelt song, the things they say aren't just words. They hold weight, a weight that hits you like a vivid experience. They hold truth. The landmark speech that took place on August 28, 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial is one of the most influential and impactful displays of the power of language in history. It and other demonstrations lead to the changing of many laws and the introduction of legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 along with the change in attitudes of many Americans. This is

described in Eric J. Sundquist's book *King's Dream*, where in his introduction he states why King is so influential, "King's greatness, as well as the greatness of his speech, lay in his ability to elevate the cause of civil rights and the cause of America at the same time"(Sundquist 5). To put this into the time that I can better relate to, I believe J. Cole is doing something similar with his music, but more specifically his single, *High for Hours*, in which he talks about racism throughout America's history. No coincidence that he dropped this song on MLK day in 2017.

Language is so important because we can all relate to it. It is more often than not, our common connection. A way to reach other people who maybe don't see eye to eye with us along with the ones that do. Some of the most influential songs and speeches such as these, use credibility, logic, and emotion. Through these devices, King and Cole are able to create extremely powerful language and messages.

Before King even says a word concerning what is at hand, his credibility elevates him and puts meaning behind his words. He is someone who was born in the South. Someone who has seen and experienced the wrath of vicious racists. That he has been to jail for this cause, he has been in the trenches. He has spoke with fiery tongue many times to rally others behind him. King states that "In a sense we have come to the nation's capital to cash a check" (King). This essentially shows how King and his followers have been through a process and have come to reap what they have sown. That he has been through and with them for every part of the journey and he has come to be the first to walk up the stairs and knock on the door. These traits have allowed for him to speak from his soul, and people can really believe what he says. They feel his strength through his language. Cole's credibility comes from his many awards and nominations from the BET's, Billboards, and Grammys. Along with his notoriety within Hip-hop and the experiences in his life as well as his community where they have faced racial injustice and

biases. This is the point where people transform into symbols and these icons use their language to transform culture and society. They are figures, symbols, icons.

When King puts the logic behind his words it allows him to preach to the people who may not necessarily be swayed through credibility or emotion. For example when he points to the founding documents of this nation. That all men are created equal. He only simply displays that we should live up to this self professed creed. Cole also shows this American paradox saying, “American hypocrisy, oh, let me count the ways, They came here seekin' freedom, Then they end up ownin' slaves”(Cole line 5). Showing how the colonists came here to be free from prosecution but then end up owning slaves themselves. King transitions to pointing to all of the things Blacks have done for the country especially in spite of how they have been treated. For example, how through their toil, America became an economic superpower and during times of conflict they have shown nothing less of allegiance to their nation. He asks southern leaders to not give preference but equal rights, the rights that belong to all Americans, to Black Americans. This is only fair, only natural. A simple request that pertains to simple changes.

The most impactful part of the speech and the song are their appeals to emotion. Sundquist once again reiterated this fact, “There is no substitute for hearing King or, better, watching and listening to him”(Sundquist 9). His ability as an orator is unmatched. The fiery passion in which he speaks makes it seem that he is talking to everyone in the country but at the same time talking to you as an individual. Calling upon you and the country to make a choice. Going side by side with that is his connection and references to the bible. Which often connects him to Blacks and Whites alike. As we know, Christianity holds a very important position in the Black community, going back to slavery and how our faith gave us hope. To also connect with the masses, he includes his children in his speech. With his famous words of “I have a dream that

my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (King 5). This is powerful because a lot of people can relate to having children. That wouldn't they want for their children to be looked at equally? Another appeal of this is to the innocence of children. That they have done nothing bad in the world. However, because these children are Black, they seem to have done something wrong because of the color of their skin. Cole uses the example of police brutality to also display the emotion behind the movement, “But police still lettin' off on n\*\*\*\*\* in the Ville, Claimin' that he reached for a gun, They really think we dumb and got a death wish, Now somebody's son is layin' breathless”(Cole V1). Through the rhetorical skills of credibility, logic and emotion that Dr. King and J. Cole both similarly display, they use these to speak to us as a whole, as well as individually and motivate us to seek change for the betterment of our nation. In the way they orate, it truly gets the message to the audience. Using language as the bridge over a barrier.

Work Cited

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