

Performing gender: The construction of black males in the hip-hop industry

Nayo Sasaki-Picou

Undergraduate student | York University, Toronto, Ontario



Contingent Horizons: The York University Student Journal of Anthropology. 2014. 1(1):103-107.

First published online April 30, 2014.

Contingent Horizons is available online at www.contingenthorizons.com.

Contingent Horizons is an annual open-access student journal informed by an ethos of social justice. It seeks to expand anthropological discussions by publishing students' outstanding scholarly works, and remaining open to a variety of alternative formats. It is published by the department of anthropology at York University, Toronto, Canada.

ISSN 2292-7514 (Print) ISSN 2292-6739 (Online)

EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE Parinaz Adib, Julien Cossette, Kathe Gray, Andrea Vitopoulos

COVER PHOTOGRAPHY Parinaz Adib of works by unknown graffiti artists

Performing gender

The construction of black males in the hip-hop industry

NAYO SASAKI-PICOU

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, YORK UNIVERSITY

In 2011, a hip-hop artist by the name of Frank Ocean challenged the world of hip-hop in North America, announcing news about his sexual orientation. Many people have suggested that his announcement has created a new outlet for black male hip-hop artists to be able to express themselves beyond heteronormative behaviour. However, there exists a historically informed cultural norm of black male behaviour that continues to be deeply ingrained in American society. This paper will examine the hip-hop industry in North America and suggest that Ocean's announcement did not have any transformative effect in the hip-hop industry.

KEY WORDS hip-hop, gender performance, masculinity

Amongst African Americans in the hip-hop industry, artists have come to understand masculinity as a natural aspect of their performance. Artists regard their performance of gender as having an essence of “hardness” that is inherent to all male rappers. However, the construction of black masculinity in hip-hop has been culturally, psychologically, and historically informed. Since the 1980s, hip-hop music has evolved into a potent form of musical expression. This potency has led to the construction of a particular masculine image amongst African Americans. This essay will further explore the way gender has been constructed and performed amongst black Americans in hip-hop. In addition, I suggest that despite Frank Ocean's “coming out”, which challenged the dominance of the constructed hegemonic masculinity in hip-hop, the dominant notion of heteronormativity continues to exist as the most pervasive in the hip-hop industry.

Engaging in the notion of gender as a performance enables us to challenge essentialist explanations of sex and sexuality that assume male or female social existence is “derived from some fact of their physiology” (Butler 1988:520). In Judith Butler's *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, she problematizes the assumption that a human's biological sex dictates and determines the way a person should behave in society. Butler argues that, “the body is an historical idea that gains its meaning through a concrete and historically mediated expression in the world” (1988:521). Therefore, the body cannot be assumed to possess a natural and predetermined interior essence but rather, it is culturally and historically informed. Butler's argument regarding the culturally and historically informed nature of constructions of gender will be used as a

framework to analyse the cultural environment and historical events that have contributed to the construction of the dominant black masculinity in hip-hop. This challenges the assumption that heteronormative gendered behaviour amongst hip-hop artists is a natural essence based on their sex.

Contextualizing the construction of gender through a historical analysis reveals the central role that race occupies in the construction of black identity in the United States. The United States, despite being a country that promotes ideals of 'American Exceptionalism' has historically been deeply entrenched with racially informed hierarchies. African Americans continue to experience what Tricia Rose terms a system of "racial capitalism" that exploits and oppresses the black populations (1994). This system of racial capitalism has placed African Americans at the bottom of the economic social formation. Additionally, institutionalized racial oppression, which has explicitly informed systems of racial capitalism, continues to exist in American societies. In the 1970s, as a result of the frustration of many African American experiences of state violence, failed government promises, and an oppressive system, hip-hop emerged as a form of expression. Hip-hop, specifically rap, emerged decisively as "a cultural force of creativity, unity and social protest within the black community" (Rose 1994:102). Within an expanding hip-hop community, through cultural expressions of the black community, a particular identity of black males was cultivated and adopted into hip-hop culture.

Simultaneous to the expansion and growing popularity of hip-hop and rap, African Americans continued experiencing systematic racism and oppression in America. Black male Americans have historically adopted certain patriarchal ideals into the construction of a normative black male gender. Dating back to the 19th century, people of visible African descent experienced slavery in America in a white patriarchal environment. As slaves, men were granted privileged positions over women and thus, embraced their responsibility of enhancing the survival of the slave community. Thus, black male slaves behaved with the interest of "the maintenance of their own personal dignity under the most degrading of circumstances" (Rose 1994:45). Consequently, in the context of a white dominated society, particular hyper masculine narratives of the ideal male were developed.

This narrative of African male patriarchy has evolved and continues to be present in contemporary rap music. Throughout the last two decades, as America has continued to intensify its capitalist and white dominated context, African Americans continue to predominantly occupy marginal roles within society. The displays of violence and black masculine power in hip-hop give us insight into the "reality of the pressures of economically disenfranchised black Americans and is a conscious unveiling of what these rappers see as hypocrisies of the capitalist, patriarchal values of the mainstream American dream" (Sadikk 2003:114). Hip-hop functions as a weapon of resistance with the intention of reinforcing male power.

In rap music, artists demand agency while expressing their frustration and hatred towards an oppressive American society. This aggressive attitude towards American society has been codified as being a 'natural' attitude of all black males in society. Consequently, a main performative and evolving characteristic of black masculinity through rap music became the display of aggressiveness and resistance in society.

The expression of sexual desire is another important feature of the performance of masculinity in hip-hop. Murray highlights the importance of a masculine identity being performed in order to maintain respect and one's reputation as a man (1996), one of the most straightforward ways of asserting this masculinity is through displaying hypersexual behaviour towards women. In hip-hop music, what is revealed is the productive dependence on women, "specifically their sexualized bodies by black men in authenticating their claims and representations of manhood" (Miller-Young 2008:263–264). This accessibility of particularly black women's bodies through hip-hop music has become a way of asserting artists' masculinity in the industry. bell hooks effectively notes that hip-hop and rap express the realities of the cultural experiences and environment of black males in American society. Thus, "sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and believing that are glorified in hip-hop and rap are a reflection of the prevailing values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks in Sadikk 2003:115). This is an essential point of examination and can serve as a response to common assumptions of the patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes of black males being an inherent and natural aspect of their physiology. An understanding of the cultural context of African American men allows for a genuine analysis of the construction of maleness in hip-hop. When black males do not perform what is constructed to be heterosexual behaviour, their identity as a real hip-hop artist is questioned.

In 2011, a well-known performer in the hip-hop industry, Frank Ocean, shared with the public a letter that he wrote which exposed that his first love was a man. To date, there has never been a hip-hop artist who has publicly "come out" as a gay man. In American societies, institutions and the media exercise disciplinary powers that contribute to enforcing normative gender behaviour. It is this discipline that "makes" individuals, allowing people in societies across culture and race to internalize the expected behaviour attributed to a gender (Foucault 1972). As discussed earlier, the image of an ideal black male hip-hop artist has been constructed and informed by a particular history of African Americans in a patriarchal context. Having an ideal image constantly promoted in society, artists have disciplined themselves to perform characteristically according to the normalized behaviour. This internalization of gendered behaviour is displayed through Ocean's continued performance of what has been normalized to reflect a black male hip-hop artists' behaviour despite the fact that he revealed that he does not fit this schema.

In contradiction to his announcement, through his lyrics and the content of his music videos, Frank Ocean embodies the behaviour of a heteronormative male in hip-hop. A few of his most popular songs: "Pyramids," "Novacane," and "Swim Good" are re-imagined visually through music videos that display women in strip clubs or women as the objects of his conquest. Therefore, despite his announcement that suggests he does not only desire women sexually, he has continued to perform the hegemonic masculinity that has been constructed in the hip-hop industry. These contradictions in behaviour can be termed as excessive semiosis, where in the media, Ocean's gender performance does not clearly reflect one single gendered category. His performance of gender produces several different meanings regarding masculinity, and simultaneously challenges the two-gender–two-sex model framework that informs the construction of masculinity in hip-hop.

In an interview conducted after Frank Ocean's letter was made public he responds to a question as follows:

GQ: So do you consider yourself bisexual?

Frank Ocean: You can move to the next question. I'll respectfully say that life is dynamic and comes along with dynamic experiences, and the same sentiment that I have towards genres of music, I have towards a lot of labels and boxes and [sh--]. I'm in this business to be creative—I'll even diminish it and say to be a content provider. [Wallace, 2012:25]

Although he justifies his firm refusal to place a label on his sexuality, I suggest that his choice to continue to perform hegemonic masculinity is influenced by the cultural reality surrounding black males in hip-hop. Terms such as 'gay' and 'homo' are used amongst rappers to offend and belittle other artists. Being gay is associated with being feminine; implying a lack of dominance, and a reproduction of the ideals of black masculinity that have historically been ingrained in American society. Exemplifying the intolerance of non-heteronormative behaviour is a lyric recently used by hip-hop artist Lil' Wayne: "Tell her I skate/I ain't got no worries/No Frank Ocean, I'm straight." This lyric, although not explicitly directing hatred towards Frank Ocean, displays Lil' Wayne's need to assert and reinforce the acceptable black masculinity in hip-hop. He addresses all women, reaffirming that normative black masculine behaviour entails no confusion regarding sexuality. The statements embedded in Lil' Wayne's lyrics display the importance of the way sexuality and sexual desire are performed by an artist.

Additionally, attitudes towards sexuality in the hip-hop industry suggest that constructions of gender have been informed by a gender binary. The implication is that there is no room for gendered behaviour outside of restricted male or female categories. If a rap artist does not embody the behaviour and performative nature of what has been constructed to reflect masculinity, then he is accused of being feminine and thus, gay. This gender dichotomy influences artists, such as Frank Ocean, who feel the need to protect their image by performing heteronormative and what is constructed as being 'masculine' behaviour.

Hip-hop in the last decade has gone through a significantly transformative phase in North America. From the influence of America's capitalist ideals, hip-hop has increasingly become a commercialized and consumer-based industry (Hunter 2011). Consequently, the performance of gender has become essential to attracting bigger audiences and expanding fan bases. The culture of capitalism has placed pressure on many artists to perform specific constructions of gender that will appeal to North American audiences where heterosexuality remains the dominant norm. Amongst black male hip-hop artists, a reproduction of hegemonic masculinity continues to exist as the most accepted and publicly received gender performance. This cultural reality in American society has placed further emphasis on a need for artists to fit into the normalized gender dichotomy.

In conclusion, it is necessary to acknowledge that culture has a dynamic nature and is continuously changing. A direct reflection of this dynamism is the way gender does not function as a static category; rather, it is always being influenced by cultural changes. Above, I have shown the ways in which the historical experience of African Americans,

as well as the changing cultural environment in the United States, has constructed black masculinity in hip-hop. In this context, I argued that Frank Ocean's public performance of hegemonic masculinity suggests that this constructed version of black masculinity remains as the socially acceptable norm, despite his 'coming out'. Thus, gender is not "scripted on the body" (Butler 1988); it is culturally constructed and normalized by the circumstances of its cultural environment. It is evident then, that amongst black males in the hip-hop industry, the performance of a particular hegemonic masculinity demonstrates worthiness and legitimacy of an artist. Artists make a conscious choice to reflect the ideal image and behaviour of the culturally normalized identity to be an accepted and ultimately successful hip-hop artist.

References

- Butler, Judith
 1988 *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. *Theatre Journal* 40(4):519–531.
- Foucault, Michel
 2002 [1969] *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Routledge.
- Hunter, Margaret
 2011 Shake It, Baby, Shake It: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip-Hop. *Sociological Perspectives* 54(1):15–36.
- Miller-Young, Mireille
 2008 Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography. *Medians, Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*. 8(1): 261-292
- Murray, David A.B.
 1996 Laws of Desire? Race, Sexuality, and Power in Male Martinican Sexual Narratives. *American Ethnologist* 26(1):160–172.
- Rose, Tricia
 1994 *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Saddik, Annette J.
 2003 Rap's Unruly Body: The Postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity on the American Stage. *The Drama Review* 47(4):110–127.
- Wallace, Amy
 2012 Ocean-Ography. *GQ Magazine*, December.