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“WHAT IS MEANT TO BE, WILL BE”: HIP-HOP AND THE CONTINUUM OF GENDER POLITICS

Ryan Harris

The mainstream Hip-hop narrative positions itself as hypermasculine, violent, greed obsessed and overtly misogynistic. Even in spite of this, those at the margins (historically women), have arisen to appear a cut above the stereotypical rap discourse. Women like MC Lyte, Salt-N-Pepa and Queen Latifah have made their stamps within Hip-hop culture. This is in contrast to the image of the “video girls”, conventionally attractive models placed in music videos, commonly found in mainstream Hip-hop. Into the present day, other artists have continued that trend. Namely, one of the biggest artists in Hip-hop, Nicki Minaj, sits as one of Hip-hop’s most prominent figures in the past decade. On the other hand, women have not been the only ones to carve a path within the culture. Cropping up in the mid to early 1990’s, Queer Hip-hop (LGBT Hip-hop) embodies what the name implies: Hip-hop from the perspective of LGBTQIA identified people.

This strain of Hip-hop offers a particular eye into the culture of Hip-hop as a whole. A musical genre that has had its fair share of homophobia both blatant and covert. Use of the terms bitch and even “faggot,” point to an inherent disdain for queer identified people. Even just an insinuation of “weakness” or “femininity” feed into fear of being “different”. Songs such as infamous “*Georgie Porgie*” by A Tribe Called Quest has the members (including featuring act Brand Nubian) proudly exclaiming their disapproval of queer lifestyles. One of the more egregious couplet being spoken by Tribe member Q-Tip stating:

“Call me homophobic but I know it and you know it
You’re filthy and funny to the upmost exponent”

Presently, the worst thing you can be, as a man, in mainstream Hip-hop boils down to two things: Being fake and being gay. All this taken

into account, many artists embrace their identity and have it be the focal of their image.

My research hopes to tackle three inquiries: “How has Hip-hop as a whole responded to differing forms of gender and sexuality identity representation”; “How are these artists responding/subverting the dominant Hip-hop narratives?” and “What are these artists writing about and how does this compare to mainstream Hip-hop narratives?” The purpose of this paper is to argue that the expressions of “otherness” point to a continuum of fighting to overcome the “traditional” Hip-hop framework. For research examples I intend to look into the stylings of artists Lauryn Hill and Mykki Blanco. Throughout this paper I will utilize the methodologies of cultural studies, performance studies and lyrical analysis to help support my hypothesis.

Literature Review

One of the seminal works of general Hip-hop studies is Tricia Rose’s 1994 book, “*Black Noise*.” Rose’s book entered Hip-hop music and culture within the academic sphere by detailing the cultural birth of Hip-hop. This spanned from examining the socio-economic situation in New York, to exploring the medium of rapping within Black culture and even the politics within Rap music at the time. As well, Rose was one of the first to talk about female emcees within Hip-hop music from an academic perspective. Given that, the landscape of Hip-hop, in some ways has greatly shifted following the publication of “*Black Noise*.” For instance, the location marker of New York to Hip-hop just is not the case any more in present-day. Hip-hop has expanded not only across state-borders but also international borders as well. In terms of gender, the politics surrounding it have as well

greatly shifted. That is where the work of José Esteban Muñoz comes in. His 1999 piece *"Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics"* centered the experiences of queer people of color as they function within the margins of the identity politics. Muñoz explored this process through of ways queer people of color exhibit performance, be that in photography or drag shows. Much like Rose, Muñoz's *"Disidentifications"* proved to be a seminal work in the field of queer/LGBT studies.

Methods

I will utilize several different methodologies within my research. A main aspect of my research will center around in-depth literary/lyrical analysis through the context of musical albums. This will include looking into the specific lyrics of artists, their cadences as well the choice of beatwork and sampling (where applicable). I hope to gain an understanding of the specific ways that these artists utilize the Hip-hop framework. Next, I will also use the framework of performance with regards to the artists and the personas they portray both in visual and audio forms. The performance studies framework allows me to analyze not just the vocal performance but their choice(s) of dress, way of speaking, etc. Furthermore, the method of cultural studies allows me to explore the aspects of representation and identity with respect to how they function within the culture. Finally, I want to explore the concepts of both feminist and queer theory. Scholarship from scholars like Muñoz will provide necessary terminology and theoretical framework. In addition, I can pull certain experiences from their original sources and be able to place them within my research. Without looking into the theory of gender and feminism, my analysis will be severely lacking and difficult to properly articulate.

Muñoz's Disidentification Theory

This basis through which I will be exploring the concepts of identity are informed from Muñoz's writing. Disidentification can be described as the process of not conforming to or against the culture(s) which exclude an individual but also transforming said culture(s) to fit the individual's own identity/cultural purposes. In *"Disidentifications,"* Muñoz's ideals are centered around queer people of color and how they utilize historically contested space to make powerful claims of their own identity. These contested spaces are born out the divisive nature in which collectives around identity are formed.

For queer people of color, the issue can be broken down twofold. Either they must fully embrace their queerness or minority status. Queer Performances allows queer people who can't fully be themselves witness a space where "queer lives, politics, and possibilities are representable in their complexity."¹ Muñoz invokes law scholar Kimberle Crenshaw and her work of intersectionality. The idea of intersectionality speaks to the all encompassing aspects of identity. Too often, when individuals are in these spaces of identity (race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status) there is an impending need to prioritize aspect of themselves over another.

This leads to what Muñoz's calls "counterpublics" which he defines as "communities and relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public sphere"² Frequently when queers of color enter LGBTQIA spaces, they are incredibly white. While yes, Queers of color (QOC) may feel safe in a space validating of that aspect of their identity, those same spaces all too often do not take into account the multitudes of ways oppression takes place. At the same time, they are bombarded with a public narrative that also conceptualizes "queerness" as looking white.

¹ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications*. Pg. 1

² Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications*. Pg. 146

This twofold assault is further compounded as they face homophobia from the general public and racism from the predominately white queer spaces. This leaves the QOC in an identity quagmire. They embark on a journey to disrupt the narrative of queerness being white and cultivate their own identity formation. Counterpublics provide the potential for a space of marginalized populations to more targeted forms of cultural production amidst dominant narratives of bigotry and discrimination. They do this by embracing aspects of the various cultures they inhabit, but instead of leaving them separate, amalgamate them. Muñoz highlights how the formations around identity often overshadow the very complexities held within it.

Ultimately, Muñoz and theory of disidentification deals with one's conception of their "otherness". Queers of color found the dominant narratives surrounding LGBT liberation to be limiting and oftentimes spaces of even further marginalization. The narratives almost exclusively centered and prioritized cisgender white gay men over all else. This is similar to the foundations of Black Feminism. The reasons Black women sought to depart from the mainstream feminist movements was because their forms of resistance and activism centered cisgender white women. These movements led to spaces of contention, as gay men and white women fought for their equality and visibility, others who did not fit the mold were not accounted for.

"Bomb Graffiti on The Tombs of Nefertiti": Lauryn Hill

To the Hip-hop community, the personality of Ms. Lauryn Hill needs no introduction. Her original group, The Fugees, and their 2nd album, *"The Score"* represented her first foray

into the mainstream Hip-hop landscape. Selling over 6 million units, going 6x Platinum, cemented Hill and The Fugees as staples in classic 90's Hip-hop.¹ However it wouldn't be until the release of her solo album *"The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill,"* that Lauryn Hill would be forever cemented as one of the most well-known faces ever to grace the mic. This was due in part to the very presence that Hill portrayed whenever she appeared on a verse.

Hill was similar to her fellow female contemporaries in the ways in which she functioned within the Hip-hop sphere. As Tricia Rose describes it, for the black male rapper, thematic focus is given towards larger social criticism and the "policing" of the black man. Whereas for black females, thematic focus is centered almost exclusively in the realm of sexual politics. Because of this, the three central themes of the black female rapper are: heterosexual courtship, the importance of the female voice, and mastery in women's rap and black female displays of physical and sexual freedom."² For black women in the world of Hip-hop, there's central conundrum: the constant portrayals of women as sexual objects via "video vixens" and the fear of contestation amongst black males. The video vixen points to a legacy of belief in black women being always sexual available, sex-crazed and not in control of their own bodies.

Female artists such as Salt-N-Pepa, Lil Kim and Foxy Brown help set the stage of displaying the idea of black female autonomy, but this comes with a price. Tara Jabbaar-Gyambrah explains: "Lil Kim challenged the notion that African-American women did not have control over their bodies. On the other hand, her crass but explicit lyrics, fed into patriarchal illusion and fantasies of men about Black women's bodies and sexuality."³ While the presence of black women as a primary vocalist does well

¹ The Fugees. *The Score*. Rec. 13 Feb. 1995. Fugees, Jerry Duplessis, Salaam Remi, John Forté, Diamond D, Shawn King, 1996. RIAA.

² Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise : Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Pg. 167

³ Jabbaar-Gyambrah, Tara. "Gender Politics Of Hip-Hop And Hip-Life Music In New York And Ghana." pg. 22

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for representation of black women in the mainstream, the repercussions are the reaffirmations of the Jezebel. For many black female rappers, the primary point of persona centered around their sexuality. Even today that trend strikingly continues among several female rappers. This thematic focus of sex/sexuality (especially in relation to men) served to pigeon-hole the black female rapper, limiting her artistic image and thematic development in the mainstream. I believe *"The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill"* is a prime example of challenging this narrative and an instance of Hill performing disidentification. Instead of being centered around a man-woman sexual relationship, a driving force of *"Miseducation"* is love. Not just romantic love, but also maternal love (*"To Zion"*), the pains of love (*"Ex-Factor," "When It Hurts So Bad," "I Used To Love Him"*) and even love for oneself in the title track. I argue her album expands the scope of the female artist and separates the black female emcee from the realm of purely talking about sexuality.

One particular instance of Hill addressing this conundrum comes in the form of *"Doo Wop (That Thing)"*, a single off of *"Miseducation."* Well known for its commentary on sexual politics in Black America, the song stands out particularly for its critiques on both men and women. The first verse portrays a young girl disillusioned by the treatment she's receiving from the men in her life:

*"It's been three weeks since you were looking for your friend
The one you let hit it and never called you again
'Member when he told you he was 'bout the Benjamins?
You act like you ain't hear him, then give him a little trim
To begin, how you think you're really gon' pretend
Like you wasn't down and you called him again?
Plus, when you give it up so easy you ain't even foolin' him
If you did it then, then you'd probably fuck again"⁴*

⁴ Hill, Lauryn. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse Records/Columbia Records, 1998.

⁵ Hill, Lauryn. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse Records/Columbia Records, 1998.

Hill positions herself as in conversation with this young black female to point the contradictions of her actions. She refers to the man in question as the girl's "friend", coupled with him not being seen in three weeks, points to the black girl clinging to a man who obviously does not care for her. In addition, the allusion of the man's obsession with money combined with the girl's need to "give it up so easy" points to a girl whose only relation to men is her sexual relations to them. This indicates to the listener this girl who potentially has a history of being in manipulative relationships. Later in the first verse, Hill strives to have the girl to value her own self over the judgement of others:

*"You know I only say it because I'm truly genuine
Don't be a hard rock, when you really are a gem
Baby girl! Respect is just the minimum
Nigga's creepin' and you still defending him
Now -- Lauryn is only human
Don't think I haven't been through the same predicament"⁵*

Here, Hill is pleading with the girl to demand more respect from the men in her life. Embodying a more quasi-maternal role, she expresses her disdain for the practice of many black women to stay in toxic abusive relationships. She takes it another level showing the girl she herself has fallen victim to this way of being. Much in the ways that parents teach their children not to repeat their mistakes. She acknowledges to the girl that it is no easy feat to get out of this. In the second verse, Hill takes aim at black men. She exposes the rampant hyper masculine, "tough guy" attitude apparent black males:

*"Let's stop pretend, the ones that pack pistol by they waist men
Cristal by the case men, still living in his Mother's basement
The pretty face men claiming that they be the "big men"⁶*

Here we see the tenements of most mainstream Hip-hop. The implications of "packing pistols" and "cristal by the case" demonstrates the black male's (and by

⁶ Hill, Lauryn. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse Records/Columbia Records, 1998.

extension Hip-hop's) requirement to center perspectives around violence and affluence. Hill satirizes this narrative with challenging the black male's claim to authenticity. She continues this satire in the later part as well:

*"Need to take care of their three and four kids
But they face a court case when the child support's late
Money taking and heart breaking
Now you wonder why women hate men
The sleepy silent men
The punk domestic violence men
Quick to shoot the scene, stop acting like boys and be men!"⁷*

This is blatant call-out to the much of the males of the Black community. She points out their contradictions by demonstrating that the black male braggadocio exists in spite of their acts of child neglect, manipulation and toxicity in relationships. Once again filling a motherly position, Hill demonstrates the childish actions of black males calls for time of accountability and responsibility.

"Doo Wop (That Thing)" illustrates how Hill was able to interrogate the issues found in both genders. In one part, she plays the classical part of the black female emcee, calling the black male on their negative actions against black women. Of course, this came with natural opposition of black males. However, on the other hand, Hill pulls no punches to direct criticism at black women as well. This dual criticism creates a situation in which Hill cannot sit squarely in either party. *"Miseducation"* represents a critique of Hip-hop, which encompasses a critique of Black America. Whilst Hill herself is a rapper and delivers several rap verses, *"Miseducation"* also includes overt aspects of R&B, reggae and soul music. It is a testament of the opposition towards mainstream Hip-hop narratives. She exposes how the male dominated discourse of early Hip-hop only proved to be a negative experience for those who didn't identify as such. Hill proves mastery over beats and rhymes can take feminine form.

"Welcome To Hell Bitches. This is Mykki Blanco": Michael Quattlebaum (Mykki Blanco)

Nextly, I wish to shift focus to the persona of Mykki Blanco. Birthed from the mind of Michael David Quattlebaum Jr., Mykki Blanco is positioned as one of the most well-known faces in the burgeoning Queer hip-hop landscape. Being someone who identifies as genderqueer and femme, Blanco expands her identity to the persona of young teenage girl; complete with Blanco in drag. Mykki Blanco allows her to thoroughly deconstruct the very fabric of Hip-hop culture. Firstly, Blanco embodies everything that mainstream Hip-hop vehemently opposes. As a genderqueer and femme person, the very identities that she hold have been at the cornerstone of ridicule and contempt within mainstream Hip-hop.

Her gender-nonconforming persona can be viewed as an individual satirizing the very tenements of Hip-hop culture. Normally, when Mykki Blanco is performing, she is often seen wearing a wig and usually dressed in feminine underwear. This evokes a common tradition found within gay communities: drag. However, Blanco's drag is a far cry from the extravagant and vibrant norm. Whereas some drag costumes embody colorful motifs, adorned with accessories, Blanco embodies the opposite. Her attire consists usually of muted colors, black wigs and other dark clothing. Where traditionally drag queens would wear fake breasts, Blanco chooses not to. This attire is also coupled with her rapping style. Influenced by the work of female rapper artists like Lil' Kim and Lauryn Hill (the name Mykki Blanco is derived from Lil' Kim's alter ego, "Kimmy Blanco") a lot of Blanco's lyrics are centered around sexual politics. However, Blanco further complicates this ideal by also integrating the traditional black male

⁷ Hill, Lauryn. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse Records/Columbia Records, 1998.

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braggadocio. One example can be found in his song "Wavvy" off of her 2012 mixtape release *"Cosmic Angel: The Illuminati Prince/ss."* The first verse starts off as such:

"Welcome to Hell bitches, this is Mykki Blanco
New World Order motherfucker, follow pronto
Get in line nigga
Your soul is mine nigga
You scaredy cat pussy mothafuckers can't deliver"

An opening like this is not too dissimilar from a mainstream Hip-hop song. Blanco is invoking aspects of superiority over others, in this case other rappers presumably. But the message is delivered through the persona of a teenage girl, which only further complicates the image and message. These series of intersections (or even contradictions) indicate Blanco use of disidentification.

Blanco is not too different from a particular artist Muñoz himself detailed: Vaginal Creme Davis. Both are queer people of color existing in musical genres which failed to recognize their intersectional identities in the mainstream (Davis in punk rock, Blanco in hip-hop). One pivotal thing Muñoz coined when describing Davis' function within the punk rock scene is the term "terrorist drag." In essence, Muñoz describes it as "about creating an uneasiness, which works to confound and subvert the social fabric."⁸ Much like Blanco, Davis did not conform to the traditions of drag culture. This created a great divide among the queer communities who felt that she was not representing queer culture correctly. As such, she found herself on the margins of an already marginalized community. For Blanco, the sentiment is the same. Someone like her and the aesthetic she chooses can never exist within the mainstream dominant culture. Yet, at the same time, they may not even want to exist in the mainstream.

But, instead of persisting in their marginal status, they use their positions as satire of

mainstream culture. As Muñoz states: "Her (Davis') drag is terrorist send-up of masculinity and white supremacy. Its focus and pitch are parody and critique".⁹ To me, Blanco embodies a modern-day Vaginal Davis. This nowhere greater than how both individuals are attempting to break down the very constructions of gender. When audiences see either Blanco or Davis perform must come to terms with not only their own internalized notions of homophobia and transphobia, but also racism. As Muñoz expands on, "The question is no longer to know whether one will play feminine against masculine or the reverse, but to make bodies, all bodies, break away from the representations and restraints on the 'social body'"¹⁰. In their own ways, they seeking to normalize different expressions of being within people. Their "terrorist drag" acts as affront to prevailing forms of discrimination found in both racial and queer spaces. The "social body" is something that must fit a distinct binary or category. But rather a place that should be free of expectations and limitations.

A Call To Action: Greater Implications

One may ask to themselves: why is something like intersectionality so important to highlight? Within the last recent years, we have seen an even greater degree of visibility among marginalized communities but also a wider acceptance. As a society, if we are to progress in any significant manner, we must come to terms with the wholeness of the people around us. We must look outside ourselves and re-examine. Re-examine that ways in which our ideologies affect those around us and strive for a greater degree of inclusivity. Hip-hop culture, as a whole, is already in process of doing this. Particularly, within the realm of public education is where a larger push toward

⁸ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications*. Pg. 100

⁹ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications*. Pg. 103

¹⁰ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications*. Pg. 100

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inclusivity is necessary. America is experiencing a time where its current reforms of equity and equality have only further expanded the gap between communities. Policies such as Race to The Top and No Child Left Behind have failed our student populations, most of whom affect being from marginalized backgrounds.

Policies centered around neoliberal ideals, direct funding from failing schools and widen the both opportunity and achievement gap. Between 2012-2013, Black and Hispanic students were attending high-poverty schools at a rate of 45% of the time. Which contrasted against their White counterparts how attending the same kind of schools at 8% percent of the time¹¹. Furthermore, where LGBT students are finding themselves outright avoiding schools spaces like Bathrooms, Locker Rooms and Cafeterias for fear of bullying and violence¹². Environments like these are fostering a generation of students who feel as though education, and society as whole, do not value their existence. In addition, only sustains the issues of difference across populations. If education truly is the "great equalizer" many uphold it to be, something needs to change. While implementing policy is always a struggle, there are other ways. The discourse of Hip-hop allows us, and more specifically educators, that alternative framework. It allows a space for students to interrogate the systems of oppression which surround them and build new forms of thinking to combat them. As well, students are viewed as whole individuals and all their aspects of being are taken in and accounted for. This is not just a problem for teachers and parents, but a call to action for everybody. If the students are failed, we all are failed.

¹¹ Whitehurst et al., See Fig 6

¹² Kosciw et al. 2015, see Fig 1.2

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