

Hypermasculinity, Heterosexism, and Hip-Hop

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Abstract

Hip-hop is a culture in its own right. Creating a space for artists to voice their frustrations, their opinions, and their experiences. Hip-hop, however, opens the door to an ever so prevalent idea about femininity, masculinity, and its larger societal structure. Masculinity and manhood, for men, create a cycle of what it means to be a man, and how that notion is challenged in the eyes of other men. Intersectionality aims to disrupt that ideal static definition of masculinity in an effort to expose, explore, and highlight the ways in which masculinity can become more dynamic. This investigation relies on finding out how intersectionality challenges hypermasculinity and urges its reification.

Hip-hop, as we have watched it evolve over the years, from its early N.W.A “Straight Outta Compton” era to a more poetic “To Pimp a Butterfly,” has shown to obscure the meaning of hypermasculinity. In what way you might ask? Kendrick Lamar and his take on hip-hop has proved to be a compilation of revolution, recollection, and raw reality. Artists like Lamar and groups like N.W.A, as an example, may help us explore the world of masculinity. We might find that more examples from other artists reinterpret and reify hip-hop in their own way and challenge notions of hip-hop altogether.

N.W.A, to start, with their well-known song, “Straight Outta Compton,” treads on the hardcore, rough, and abrasive side of hip-hop. Eazy-E’s verse in the song:

“Straight Outta Compton is a brother that’ll smother your mother
And make your sister think I love her
Dangerous motherfucker raising hell
And if I ever get caught, I make bail
See, I don’t give a fuck, that’s the problem”
(N.W.A, 1988, track 1)

We might say that his verse, in shorthand, is masculine in a way that shows his dominance over women and allows his masculinity to speak for itself. Eazy-E plays on the stereotype that black men are dangerous, live without fear, and assume a position of no regret. How Lamar presents his music, it can be said to be ‘conscious rap.’ It is conscious of the institutional, structural, and societal disparities black individuals face today. His ethos of rap is present mostly in his discussion of the black man and their masculinity. Lamar’s song

“The Black the Berry” upholds the idea of blackness and presents it in a fashion that some would say is racially fueled. Lamar challenges the perceptions of white people, and how they might view the black man. Lamar’s lyrics in “The Blacker the Berry” expresses his experiences as a black man.

“You hate me, don’t you?
 You hate my people, your plan is to
 terminate my culture.
 You’re fucking evil, I want to recognize that
 I’m a proud monkey.
 You vandalize my perception, but can’t take
 style from me”
 (Lamar, 2015, track 13).

He asks, in a way, how does the world see him—how does America see him? How has Lamar played on the idea of hypermasculinity and race with this song? Although these questions will not be answered, it still gives us a bigger question to ask and answer: How has hypermasculinity intersected the essence of race, gender, and class? For a moment, let us pull away from Lamar and Eazy-E, and focus on the value of intersectionality. If we are to account for intersectionality, we have to account for an intersectional framework, and for that, we need to account for the black woman. Kimberlé Crenshaw, the woman who coined the term intersectionality, uses the following as an analogy:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is an intersection, her injury

could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (as cited in Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149)

Crenshaw has asked us to see the societal world in a different way— seeing the way race, gender, sex, and class all fit into the larger social structure. She does urge us to be weary of the social overlap we might incur whilst looking at multiple intersections. This idea can roughly translate into hip-hop and the realm in which black women experience the intersection. Black women, in the eye of the intersection, encounter how the social world and the hip-hop community has challenged and empowered their womanhood. Whether a black woman is bombarded with the sexism in rap music or racism on the street— highlighting those experiences are important. Insofar as sexism in rap music goes, men have often used rap music to oppress women. It can very well be due to the overwhelming notion of hypermasculinity. Hip-hop and hypermasculinity can often times go together like peanut butter and jelly. Hip-hop is a musical hub for expression, passion, personal life, and the like. What we, as consumers, might imagine is that for the majority of hip-hop, the pivotal message can be negative, if not more so offensive to its listeners. What we might not imagine is the small space hip hop creates for men to live by a standard other than the supposed gender norm. First and foremost, how would we define manhood? It can be argued that manhood has been defined by society, by the omnipresent alpha male, or made interpretable by even women. Or, manhood can be defined with the question posed prior: How has hypermasculinity intersected the essence of race, gender, and class? Michael S. Kimmel, an American sociologist in gender studies, in his essay “Masculinity as Homophobia” ascribes to

understanding masculinity and its intersected essence within these three categories – “Manhood is not the manifestation of an inner essence; it is socially constructed. Manhood does not bubble up to consciousness from our biological makeup; it is created in culture. Manhood means different things at different times to different people.” (Kimmel, 2013, p. 329) Kimmel helps us see that manhood is more than what men think it is — he sees it as a gateway to discussing homophobia. Kimmel argues that homophobia stems from fear — a fear that largely emasculates other men and perpetuates a cloud of judgment over one another. I would have to say that manhood, largely in part, is tested when a man is threatened by someone like himself. Often times, the silhouette of manhood can be static or dynamic, depending how comfortable a man is with being himself.

Men will often see another man as more successful, more handsome, more likeable than themselves — competition is the only alternative. Men will often use women as a scapegoat to improve their masculinity, only to separate themselves from the reality of fear. Men will also criticize other men to assume a more dominant albeit socially inept persona for the world to see. The largest criticism men have about one another is if they are gay, or live a lifestyle that does not agree with the social construction of man. Going back to Kimmel, “Gay men have historically played the role of the consummate sissy in the American popular mind because homosexuality is seen as an inversion of normal gender development.” (Kimmel, 2013, p. 332). Now, we have to ask ourselves this role that gay men play, is it any way related to hip-hop? I would say yes — hip-hop, for its raw, rough, and rigid ways, seems to demonize homosexuality as it if

were a plague to the creative process. It also seems that if gay men take on the role that is ‘sissy,’ the challenge would be equating men as female figures. In hip-hop, you have songs that oppress women, mainly black women—targeting them and creating a falsehood of their femininity and their identity as a whole. That extends then too, to men who find themselves gay, or just plainly stated ‘vulnerable.’ That being said, let us ask this question: how has the voice of the ‘hardcore’ black man overshadowed the ‘intersectional’ black man? To answer this question, I argue that when the voice of hip-hop is overly saturated with songs about money, women, power, and sex, it is easy to be dissuaded by any opposition. For example, Nicki Minaj’s song “Only” with Lil Wayne, Drake, and Chris Brown view two perspectives. While Minaj uses her feminism to make the men lust after her, it is uncanny not to notice Lil Wayne’s pervasive lyrics. Lil Wayne’s lyrics subscribe to the idea that Minaj needs a man in her life, or a better man more suitable.

“I never fucked Nick’ and that’s fucked up
If I did fuck, she’d be fucked up
Whoever is hittin’ ain’t hittin’ it right
‘Cause she act like she need dick in her life”
(Nicki Minaj, 2014, track 6).

Lil Wayne’s perpetuation of hypermasculinity has him showcasing his dominance as the male he is — confident enough to use sex as power. On the other hand, artists like Lamar, going back to the earlier point, uses a conscious style of rap to convey a sense of openness to reality. Lamar’s lyrics see a need for vulnerability into the male essence, compelling us to align with the intersectional black man. Hip-hop with artists like Lamar, J. Cole, and even Chance the Rapper, to name a few, are openly using their vulnerability to their advantage. Artists like these use a method of

intersectionality to embrace multiple withstanding oppressions they may have faced within their lives. Hip-hop is starting to see a counter narrative that does not see the intersectional black man as gay, but vulnerable—aiming to overthrow the idea of hypermasculinity and even heterosexism. “How Hip-Hop Is Confronting Toxic Masculinity,” an article by Ioan Marc Jones, helps us see how hip-hop is transformative, presently speaking, but still has some lasting effects from the past. From the article, “It is nonetheless important that a culture once so entrenched in the hyper-masculine is rejecting one of the most damaging aspects of masculinity. Traditional masculinity dictates that men either reject vulnerability or hide vulnerability with bravado.” (Jones, 2016) Looking toward the future of hip-hop is worth the lament. While we do have a longstanding past with hip-hop being the epicenter for vulgar lyrics and overstressed masculinity, there is a change. This change definitely helps not only the images of men, but women also, who can find comfort in the men challenging the narrative. But also knowing that they themselves have found an intersectional framework to promote their feminism. I would have to say that now the question of whether or not the intersectional black man is overshadowed, should be inverted. We now can say, for some portion of the hip-hop culture, the intersectional black man, or the vulnerable black man, has a space to express himself. He enters hip-hop culture knowing that there can be a successful counter narrative.

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