

2013

The Critical Vocabulary of Rap: A Feminine Voice

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Recommended Citation

Lindsay, Drew. "The Critical Vocabulary of Rap: A Feminine Voice." *Teaching Media Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2013).
<http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq/vol1/iss3/2>

Teaching Media Quarterly is published by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

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Summary of “The Critical Vocabulary of Rap: the Feminine Voice”

One of the goals of this course (“the Critical Vocabulary of Rap”) is to examine whether the genres we use to classify rap are useful distinctions. For example, if a genre such as “gangster rap” is classified by subject matter (violence, crime), we will find that genre to contain a relatively varied group of artists (N.W.A., Outkast, Kendrick Lamar, Black Moon, etc.) The question, then, is whether the genre term is too sprawling to be useful. With this in mind, one thing we try to do throughout this course is examine the genre distinctions of hip-hop that currently exist; we refine them when necessary, and we dispose of them when necessary and create new ones.

Criticisms of hip-hop frequently center on its explicit content. Because themes like gang violence and misogyny are some of the more intractable problems in our society today, it is understandable that critics might have a low tolerance for anything that might be depicted as perpetuating these attitudes. It is for this reason that we must pay careful attention to *how* (and to what end) each artist is dealing with these themes. For example, while it is undeniably true that there are a number of rap artists who seem to thoughtlessly glorify murder and crime, we notice a wide variety of others who manipulate these themes toward a variety of creative ends. We spend some time in class correlating these manipulations with various literary modes: memoir/autobiography, realist short fiction, and (importantly) parody (to name a few.) Through this process students will identify artists who seem to “glorify” these themes, artists who tell cautionary narratives (anti-glorification,) artists who tell “realist” narratives (neither,) and artists who parody and deconstruct the male “gangster” persona.

Which brings us to “the feminine” in hip-hop. Feminist critic Tricia Rose has suggested that popular music has (d)evolved to the point where women are essentially confined to two roles: that of the vixen, or that of the female-gangster.¹ She further suggests that the “empowered” archetype, embodied by artists such as Queen Latifah and Monie Love, has disappeared from mainstream rap music. We spend the latter third of our course exploring “the feminine” in rap. First, we attempt to define misogyny, and explore different male rapper’s relationship toward women. Then we examine the relatively short historical list of female rappers to determine whether Tricia Rose’s contention is true.

We also add one additional criterion to our examination of women’s roles in rap. Even the “empowered” archetypal artists have historically been decidedly *literal*. One question is whether female rappers are able to (or have) engaged in the parody and performance and deconstructive attitudes men have taken toward the gangster persona. One way we can explore this supposed lack of “diversity” in female rap is through the lens of “deconstruction.” Recent years have shown a rise in rap music that aims to deconstruct the aggressive, masculine archetype. We should examine mainstream female rappers to see whether they have achieved the same deconstruction (and resultant

¹ "Hip-Hop's Herstory." Interview by Farah Chideya. *Hip-Hop's Herstory*. NPR, 11 June 2007. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.npr.org/2007/06/11/10948084/hip-hops-herstory>>.

diversification) of the “feminine” in rap. We should explore whether female rappers have the chance to be “weird” in the same way that men do.

Unit 1: Defining “Gangster Rap”

(note: I am including two weeks of work that lead in to our discussion of the feminine. In my course, we usually examine how the masculine, gangster persona has been effectively deconstructed by various artists, which will enable our final question of whether that sort of deconstruction has occurred for a feminine persona.

Scroll down to Unit 2 for the)

FOR EACH WEEK THE STUDENTS ARE ASSIGNED READING, LISTENING, AND SOMETIMES VIDEOS/FILM. IN THE FOLLOWING FORMAT I HAVE ASKED THE STUDENTS TO “JOURNAL” ANSWERS TO THE ATTACHED QUESTIONS. IN ALTERNATE VERSIONS OF THIS COURSE I REQUIRE A TWO-PAGE FORMAL RESPONSE EACH WEEK TO ONE OF THE QUESTIONS (THE STUDENTS CAN CHOOSE.)

ALSO – I REQUIRE EACH OF MY STUDENTS TO SIGN UP FOR SPOTIFY PREMIUM IN ORDER TO LISTEN TO THE ASSIGNMENT MATERIAL.

Week 1:

Read: "The Cultural Assassins - Ch. 14" from *Can't Stop Won't Stop* by Jeff Chang

Watch: *Bastards of the Party*, Cle Shaheed Sloan (director)

Required Listening:

(Album) *Straight Out of Compton* – N.W.A.

(Tracks)

"9mm Go Bang" - KRS-One, *Criminal Minded*

"6 In The Morning" - Ice T, *O.G. Original Gangster*

“PSK” – Schooly D (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4478SMac2qM>)

Suggested listening:

Wu-Tang Clan - *Enter the 36 Chambers*

Mobb Deep - *the Infamous*

JOURNAL ASSIGNMENT

QUESTION 1: Based on the reading and the listening, how would you define Gangster Rap? Please reference both the required reading AND the required listening in your journal for full credit.

QUESTION 2: Explore the thematic switch identified by Chang as “the aesthetics of the local.”

WEEK 2

Read: “Ch. 15 – “The Cultural Riot of Ice Cube’s *Death Certificate*” by Jeffrey Chang

Listen: Album: *Death Certificate* by Ice Cube

One additional artist of YOUR CHOICE

JOURNAL ASSIGNMENT:

QUESTION 1: How do you classify Ice Cube’s album (based on the categories we have analyzed thus far)?

QUESTION 2: Which of the following “thematic” concerns raised by the Chang article do you see as relevant to the discussion of this album:

-The Aesthetic of the LOCAL (tying hip-hop to PLACE)

-The Aesthetic of EXCESS (the competition to say the craziest thing possible)

QUESTION 3: How does the album that you chose compare to *Death Certificate*, and/or how does it fit the term “Gangster Rap?”

QUESTION 4: In what ways can *Death Certificate* be seen as a departure from his work with N.W.A.?

STUDENT REACTION

I have pretty defined goals in this section, and in the three times I have taught this course the class discussion has effortlessly arrived at the desired end. The first goal is that we establish a set of specific themes that we will use to define Gangster Rap. We usually agree upon: gun violence, profit through crime (frequently drug dealing,) and “place-specific” narratives. There are more options but those discussions are more complicated than I will go into here.

In the second week, the debate that usually arises is whether or not Cube is “glorifying” the gangsta lifestyle. At times this has been a heated debate. This is a good album to use to attempt to make that distinction. While there are some tracks that seem to glorify the gangsta lifestyle, there are an equal number of tracks that do something different; as an example, some might be seen as cautionary tales, and some might be simply realist depictions. So this is a good introduction to how artists can manipulate themes toward a variety of creative ends.

Also – students occasionally suggest that they see Cube as “glorifying” violence because he is not offering a *solution* to the situations he is depicting. I don’t necessarily agree with this, first of all. But this leads to a very important discussion of whether artists (particularly minority artists) have some requirement to be “positive.”

Required Readings/Films

Chang, Jeff. *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-hop Generation*. New York: St. Martin's, 2005. Print

Bastards of the Party. Dir. Cle S. Sloan. Perf. Cle Sloan. Fuqua Films, 2005. Netflix.

Supplementary Readings

Ro, Ronin. *Gangsta*. 1st ed. N.p.: St. Martin's, 1996. Print.

Paper Assignment

Write a 3-4 page response to the following prompt:

Read: “Deconstruction” by Jack Balkin

Listen: “4 Better Or 4 Worse” – the Pharcyde, *Bizarre Ride 2 The Pharcyde*

“Cereal Killer” – Method Man and Redman, *Blackout*

“Earl” – Earl Sweatshirt http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78_loMbmKJ8

“Yonkers” – Tyler the Creator, *Goblin*

“Tron Cat” (video) – Tyler the Creator artist, dir. Wolf Haley

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2hexqs1qyA&feature=related>

Question: In what ways do the following artists “deconstruct” the masculine gangster persona?

Student Reaction

Students seem pretty prepared for this discussion. They might not have connected the dots themselves yet, but they are accustomed to pop artists of recent years who have been decidedly “performative.”

Students recognize the “exaggerated” nature of most of the songs above, and are able to see that in some way as a comment on gangster rap. This normally leads to a productive conversation about the definitions of parody and satire.

Unit 2: “The Feminine” in Hip-Hop

Week 1: Defining Misogyny

Note: by this point in our course, we have already encountered numerous albums and hundreds of tracks that have portrayed some sort of misogynistic attitude. We haven't yet discussed misogyny in detail, saving it for this unit, but the following assignment definitely builds off of the knowledge of the hundreds of songs we have already listened to.

Watch: *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, dir. Byron Hurt

Listen: *Aquemini*, by Outkast

Watch: “Tip Drill,” by Nelly (artist,) dir. Solomite

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r67xcDqKQYo>

QUESTION 1.) How would you define “misogyny” in rap music? Is there a distinction that should be made between songs about “sex” and songs that “objectify” women? If so, how could we make that distinction?

QUESTION 2: Explain the different attitudes toward women expressed by Andre and Big Boi in *Aquemini*. Explain how each artist relates to your definition of misogyny. Also – argue whether their attitudes should be taken separately, or combined and discussed as one group.

QUESTION 3: Based on the music you've listened to this semester, is Byron Hurt's analysis of rap a fair depiction, or is he cherry-picking “pop” artists who represent the worst of the worst when it comes to misogynistic attitudes? Quite simply: is hip-hop as bad as the film makes it out to be?

Week 2: The Female MC

Note: For this week the students are required to watch all of the videos below and do all of the reading, but I ask them to respond to only one of the questions with a formal two-page response complete with an introduction and thesis statement.

QUESTION 1: Discuss the evolution of the feminine in rap music as seen through this chronological group of videos.

Required reading and listening:

“Hip-Hop’s Herstory” (NPR interview with Tricia Rose:)
<http://www.npr.org/2007/06/11/10948084/hip-hops-herstory>

“Tramp,” Salt-N-Pepa: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvC3Ee5IAvk>

“Paper Thin,” MC Lyte <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WH5CmB44TaY>

“Ladies First,” Queen Latifah https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_RFh8pjtdQo

“Afro Puffs,” Lady of Rage <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNqIJ3e0Jw&feature=related>

“You Can’t Play With My Yo-Yo,” Yo-Yo https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rJe2tOS90E

“Doo-Wop” Lauryn Hill <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6QKqFPRZSA>

“Suck My D#ck” (WARNING: EXPLICIT!!!) Lil
Kim <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zCGZ4hG8ng>

“I’ll Be” (WARNING: EXPLICIT) Foxy
Brown http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mm_T1I29bhs

Question 2: Lauryn Hill and Missy Elliot do not seem to readily conform to either the “gangster” or the “vixen” – since they are two of the highest selling recording artists of all time, how do they relate to Tricia Rose’s argument?

Question 3: In our gangsta rap discussion, we hypothesized how gangsta rap might achieve some of the same goals as the Black Nationalism movement (even if we ultimately judged gangsta rap to be a perversion of the overall intent of B.N.) Discuss any parallels between this idea and the rise of Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown.

Read: “Lil’ Kim’s Personal Feminism” by Micky Hess, pages 445-453

Listen:

“Suck My D#ck” Lil’ Kim <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zCGZ4hG8ng>

“I’ll Be” Foxy Brown http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mm_T1I29bhs

Question 4: Julianne Escobedo Sheperd loves Nikki Minaj, but still suggests that she has a “retroactive feminism.” Essentially she’s saying that she’s not doing anything new, that she’s recycling old ideas. Judge that claim based on the following videos (feel free to watch more if you like.) Is she recycling ideas? Is she “new” in any important (feminist) way?

Read: “Nicki Minaj’s Retroactive Feminism,” by Julianne Escobedo Sheperd

Listen:

“The Boys,” Nikki Minaj feat. Cassie <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-5B7p1QD-Q>

“Stupid Hoe” (warning: explicit!) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6j4f8cHBIM>

Question 5: Examine these three contemporary artists and discuss whether they repeat old narratives, break new ground, etc.

Related (required) listening:

“Pu\$\$y,” Iggy Azalea <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2GCga7YLCU>

“1991,” Azalea Banks https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oM_9ca8hxE

“War Talk,” Dominique Young Unique <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2y7SCw0VTw>

“Werkin Girls,” Angel Haze, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szj7efHG-00>

Student Reaction

The general consensus among students is that the view of women in hip-hop is markedly uncomplicated. Coming back to our question about whether women are allowed to be “weird” in the way that men are, it would seem that Nicki Minaj would in many ways fit that description. Students generally tend to think that she uses her sexuality in ways that are un-interesting, however. Azalea Banks is frequently cited by my students as the female artists they think of as the most deconstructionist.

Note: I have taught this course to everyone from freshmen to seniors (undergrad.) Depending on the sophistication of the students, more complicated texts can be integrated. As an example, this final week can be discussed in terms of 2nd and 3rd wave feminism, and students can be given anything from a basic primer definition of these terms to a more complicated scholarly article.

REQUIRED READINGS/FILMS:

Hip-Hop Beyond Beats and Rhymes:. Dir. Byron Hurt. Perf. Byron Hurt. God Bless the Child Productions, 2006. DVD.

"Hip-Hop's Herstory." Interview by Farah Chideya. *Hip-Hop's Herstory*. NPR, 11 June 2007. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.npr.org/2007/06/11/10948084/hip-hops-herstory>>.

Hess, Micky. "Lil' Kim's Personal Feminism." *Icons of Hip Hop Volume Two*. N.p.: Greenwood, 2007. 445-53. Print.

Sheperd, Julianne E. "Nicki Minaj's Retroactive Feminism." *Salon*. N.p., 12 July 2012. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <http://www.salon.com/2012/07/31/nicki_minajs_retroactive_feminism_salpart/>.

SUPPLEMENTAL READINGS

Rose, Tricia M. "Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Music." *Black Noise*. Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1994. 146-82. Print.

Fleetwood, Nicole *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (2011)