

Out of the closet: Homophobia and homoeroticism in hip-hop

In the video for his teleplay, “Trapped in the Closet,” hip-hop artist R. Kelly tells a story of love and betrayal. It begins when Kelly leaves a nightclub with a young woman, Kathy. Kelly wakes up the next morning surprised that he slept the night away and searches for his possessions. He is in a hurry to return home to his wife. Just as he reaches the bedroom door, Kathy realizes her husband is coming up the steps. Finding no other alternative, she hides Kelly in her bedroom closet. Kathy’s husband, Rufus, enters the apartment and greets his wife with smiles and kisses. His display of affection is interrupted, however, when he hears Kelly’s cell phone ringing from his hiding place. After a quick search of his abode, Rufus finds Kelly. He turns to his wife with disgust and contempt in his eyes. Sobbing and begging for forgiveness, Kathy attempts to explain the obvious: she is having an affair.

“Well, since we’re all comin’ out the closet,” says Rufus, “I’m not the only one that’s gonna be broken hearted.” He reaches for his cell phone and calls the person who recently dropped him off. Apparently, he too has been living a double-life. Soon there is a knock on the door. Rufus opens it to reveal his secret lover, Chuck, standing in the foyer. A shocked Kathy stands speechless. Perhaps speaking for both of them, Kelly yells out in disbelief, “I can’t believe it’s a man!”

I open with this example, in part, because later—by way of another R. Kelly song—I will address the relationship between homophobia and the homoerotic contexts some rap songs help to construct. The point of this intervention, however, is not to discuss rappers who are secretly gay. Undoubtedly, there must be more than a few, and using R. Kelly’s work to discuss this issue would be appropriate since it was his 1996

smash hit, “Down Low” (“Keep it on the down low...nobody has to know”), which became the anthem for infidelity. But making the issue of “down low” brothers the primary focus of this discussion would not only contribute to social paranoias which incorrectly target homosexuality as the principal source of death and disease in African American lived spaces, it would unduly reduce homoeroticism to homosexuality. But since male rappers are increasingly marketed as sex symbols for both men and women, and since some of the social contexts rappers draw from (such as prison) are widely known for homosexual practices, there is sufficient evidence to consider whether (apart from the issue of homosexual practices) male rappers generate ideas about male intimacy. In the song, “I’m a Flirt,” for instance, the claim that one man has the ability to steal another man’s girlfriend is precisely that which generates a homoerotic episode—a narrative in which those activities that a man finds to be sexually exciting become central to this dialogue with other men.

Homophobia in Hip Hop

“...Homophobia does not originate in our lack of full civil equality. Rather, homophobia arises from the nature and construction of the political, legal, economic, sexual, racial and family systems within which we live.”

-Urvashi Vaid (as cited in Cohen 2005)

Scholars of hip-hop often consider, as one focal point of the music’s legacy, the way artists give voice to marginalized populations (Rose 1994, Keyes 2002, Perry 2004). But while many artists have engaged race and class in their narrations about America’s inner-cities, few have used this genre as a sounding box for ideas about homosexuality and heteronormativity (Boykin 2003, Perry 2004). Hip-hop’s most political lyricists

continue to integrate an analysis of oppression and exploitation, but persist in placing black heterosexuality and masculinity at the center of their messages.

Despite the emergence of a few openly gay hip-hop artists on the underground rap scene in recent years (Boykin 2003), questions loom large about whether or not people—especially black youth—will support a homosexual artist whose lifestyle they may not identify or agree with. Cathy Cohen recently engineered a research project which surveyed the thoughts and opinions of youth, ages 15 to 25, with regards to the topic of homosexuality. Her national survey of over 16,000 young people found that the majority of black youth (55%) think that homosexuality is “always wrong” and (58%) disagree with the notion that same sex marriages should be legal (Cohen 2007).¹ This is not to say that black youth would promote discrimination against homosexuals, or that they enjoy hearing homophobic lyrics. These statistics do suggest, however, that they may be less willing to mobilize politically around these issues and thus may not recognize the presence of homophobic lyrics as a serious problem.²

In his article on homophobia and hip-hop, Keith Boykin (2003) listed a range of rap artists (from battlerapper, Canibus, and conscious emcee, Common, to gangsta rappers, Eminem and Eazy E) that have recorded homophobic lyrics during the course of their careers. Though Boykin does not, in this article, discuss the content of these homophobic jabs, it would be hard for a listener of hip-hop not to notice the kinds of ideas and images about homosexuality that recur in rap songs.

Rappers usually only reference homosexual relationships in the context of sexually charged or violent male fantasies. For example, while courting a woman, Jay-Z, slyly suggests, “You can bring your friend and we can make this a tandem.” And, when referencing homosexual men, many rappers employ derogatory terms associated with

gay men or conjure scenes in which they perpetrate violence against an alleged homosexual as a means to emasculate an enemy. In the song “Nobody Move,” for instance, Eazy E, along with two of his friends, decide to rob a bank. The narrative ends in a shootout with police, after which, Eazy is carted off to jail. Before this climactic gun battle, though, Eazy takes a break from his crime spree to satiate his sexual appetite, and brings a beautiful captive into the bank’s hidden quarters:

*I said: “Lay down, and unbutton your bra!”
There was the biggest titties that a nigga ever saw
I said: “Damn,” then the air got thinner
Only thought in my mind, was goin' up in her
The suspense was makin' me sick
She took her panties down and the bitch had a dick!
I said: "Damn", dropped the gat from my hand
[What I thought was a bitch, was nothing but a man]
Put the gat to his legs, all the way up his skirt
Because this is one faggot that I had to hurt...*

In the larger context of this song, Eazy E is an outlaw who defies the police officers hot on his trail. But this hyper-masculine street tale is not merely about out-smarting authority figures. From another angle, his status as a criminal figure is indexed through another crime: rape. Here, Eazy holds a gun to his hostage in anticipation of penetrating her. If holding the gun to the hostage’s head is a phallic symbol, the fact that he drops it upon finding out that the hostage is a transgender individual marks the shift from desire to disgust. Eazy ends this episode by castrating his hostage with a gun blast.

For many people, it is troubling to think that rap listeners are likely to listen to and recite misogynistic and violent lyrics. Still, the problem of homophobia is more well known and more frequently discussed than homoeroticism—another aspect of male sexuality it is often confused with, but should be distinguished from.

Homoeroticism and Homophobia in Rap

As James Baldwin has instructively suggested, the production of the aggressive (heterosexual) male subject in America is predicated on “an abysmal romanticism and the most implacable distrust” of women and anxiety of male homosexual activity (Baldwin as cited in Henderson 2005). And whether or not rappers reject “homosexual activity,” some offer scenes that are homoerotic, which suggests that although these two dynamics might occur in the same context, they are not the same thing.

Byron Hurt’s (2006) documentary, “Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes,” finds homoerotic coding in the way rap artists are marketed. In his view, the fact that we now so frequently see male rappers on CD covers and magazine advertisements with their shirts off, displaying chiseled upper bodies, suggests these images appeal to men as well as women. Citing hip-hop’s proximity to “jail culture”—or styles that have been traced back to ways incarcerated black males in prison dress—the film discusses the erotic appeal of hip-hop styles, such as baggy jeans worn just below his buttocks so that one’s underwear is exposed.

Building on this commentary, Professor Michael Eric Dyson, recites (what one writer³ has called an ode to gang rape) Snopp Dogg’s infamous refrain, “it ain’t no fun if my homies can’t have none.” Finding it curious that so many intimate moments include a rapper’s “homies,” Dyson reads the exposure to other men during this sexual episode, and the excitement derived from it, (the “fun”) as homoerotic.

What distinguishes the homoerotic scene in songs like Snopp’s (and the one soon to follow) from the thousands of rap videos where women accessorize a rapper and index his heroic masculinity is that, here, the woman mediates an erotic scene between men. Because the topic of homosexuality is tabled in such performances, men feel

comfortable enough to expose themselves to—or flirt with—each other, even (or especially) within hyper-masculine spaces. A compelling example of this is R. Kelly’s song, “I’m a flirt,” where, the charm that emerges from a performer’s sexual narrative inspires the devotion of other men.

Just a Flirt

Flirt. *v.* 1. to court triflingly or act amorously without serious intentions.
n. 2. Also, **flirt**, a person who is given to flirting.

*Soon as I see her walk up in the club, I'ma flirt
Winkin' eyes at me when I roll up on them dubs, I'm a flirt
Sometimes when I'm with my chick on the low, I'ma flirt
And when she's with her man lookin at me damn right, I'm a flirt
So homies: don't bring your girl to meet me, cause I'ma flirt
And ladies: don't bring your girlfriend to eat, cause I'm a flirt...*

Kelly’s smash single, “I’m a flirt,” relies on the phonetic resonance between two phrases. One conveys an intention: “I’ma flirt” as in “I will flirt.” The other? An existential location: “I’m a flirt,” meaning, “I am a flirt.” Ostensibly, in a song about male prowess in securing female admirers, the flirt’s claim that he has the ability steal another man’s girlfriend generates a dialogue where he describes the activities he finds most exciting, sexually.

Anyone familiar with R. Kelly’s body of work will recognize his penchant for drama. The traditional love ballot, in Kelly’s clutches, is turned into a dialogue where he and his interlocutors take turns talking (or arguing) melodically, over an instrumental. In a song entitled, “I’m a flirt,” then, one might imagine that (following the formula of Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell or Rick James and Teena Marie) R. Kelly would attempt to woo a famous female singer who might respond to his advances. Instead, Kelly’s guests on this track are other male artists: rapper T.I and, R&B singer, T-Pain.

This combination is appropriate, as we learn almost immediately (from the introductory chorus) this song is not really about flirting with women—it is about demonstrating one’s flirting abilities to other men. R. Kelly and his friends, in other words, are warning other men: “unless” they are extremely secure in their relationships (“unless your game is tight and you trust her”), they should not to bring their women around Kells & Co.

In fact, out of the four verses in the song, T-Pain is the only artist that engages an imagined female listener for any amount of time:

*I’m feelin’ your vibe and I hoping you feel the same
I’m a wink my eye and let you know I got the game
When I pass by I know exactly what you say
‘He’s so fly, and yes, he’s so cool’...*

We witness the act of flirting here, when T-Pain winks at his next victim. The listener is led to believe that his “game” pays off as he receives the attention and admiration of the young woman who thinks to herself, “he’s so fly.” Yet, T-Pain rewards her enthusiasm by shifting the conversation to an internal dialogue where he speculates about what her boyfriend must be thinking: “*He mad cause I’m looking [at his girl], but I already touched her/ I got your boyfriend mad cause I’m a flirt.*” As the last lines of T-Pain’s verse, these words emphasize his ultimate aim. What evidences T-Pain’s flirting ability, then, is not merely the fact that he gets the attention of a woman. More importantly, by sleeping with this woman (“I already touched her”)⁴ he gets the attention of her boyfriend, and is able to make him jealous (“I got your boyfriend mad”).

Jealousy is a recurrent trope in this song. This anxiety connects with the idea that the flirt has the ability to procure the affection of someone else’s girlfriend. Following T-Pain, rapper, T.I., makes this clear: “*If you love your girl and wanna keep your girl/ Don’t be walking up and asking me to meet your girl.*” Apart from signifying

male bravado or one-upmanship, what is significant about the flirt's ability to steal another man's girlfriend is that it foregrounds and facilitates a homoerotic scene. This is because the flirt's claim that he has the ability to persuade another man's girl to leave him is accompanied by a chronology of events in which he explains, to the boyfriend, what will happen to his girl once she is in possession. It is through this claim that the kind of ménage-a-trios (that Snopp Dogg and Michael Eric Dyson were speaking of) becomes acceptable wherein another man is invited into the bedroom to witness the sexual encounter between his girlfriend and the skilled flirt:

*...And if I get that tonight, bet I hit that twice
I can even make her mine if I hit that right
You know smack that thang
Sit that right upon that dresser, yeah that's right
Pulling on her hair like we getting in a fight...*

Here, T.I. articulates a sexual encounter in which he describes, in graphic detail, exactly how many times he would have sex in a given night, the kinds of things he enjoys doing while having sex, and even the kinds of sexual positions he imagines using. In addition to the sexually explicit content of T.I.'s lyrics (and the fact that he is in a dialogue with another man), what makes this narrative homoerotic is the way in which he constructs the message. In line with the formal definition of a flirt I use in this paper, there is a "trifling" or "playful" nature to these dialogues of courtship.

An example of this comes later when R. Kelly, albeit in less detail than T.I., describes to another man a sexual liaison with his girlfriend:

*She looking at you when I walk by
You turn your head, she winks her eye
I can't help it if she checking for a platinum kind of guy
She be calling me daddy, and I be calling her mommy,
She be calling you Kelly, when your name is Tommy...*

R. Kelly's potential prey, in this scene, becomes engrossed in the platinum-selling artist as soon as her boyfriend turns his head. The exchange must have ultimately resulted in a sexual encounter because, as Kelly reveals, when she climaxes, she calls him, "Daddy." He, in turn, calls her, "Mommy." Kelly is apparently only seeing her on the side, though, because when she engages intimacies with her boyfriend, she mistakenly calls him "Kelly," in the moment of truth, although his name is "Tommy."

These lines do not merely evidence the flirt's sexual prowess, but his wit and charm. Crucially, the charisma that emanates from these highly masculine stories of sexual lore⁵ is chiefly aimed at impressing other men. In other words, in this homoerotic assertion of masculinity—as dialogue with women are largely absent from this text—men are actually flirting with each other.

Conclusion: Fantasies Devoid of Vulnerability

...The most popular emcees of our age are often those that claim to be heartless or show no feelings or signs of emotion. The poet, on the other hand, is the one who realizes that their vulnerability is their power...

-Saul Williams, "An Open Letter to Oprah"

*When I met you I admit my first thoughts was to trick⁶
You look so good, uh, I'd suck on your daddy's dick...*

-The Notorious B.I.G (Biggie), "Me and My Bitch"

Given that the issues of same-sex marriage and homosexuality in prison are, by now, discourses frequently referenced in popular culture, it seems surprising that a genre rooted in reflecting reality turns a blind eye to such topics. After all, the idea that rappers have the ability to represent social realities through song is their major defense (when, for instance, faced with attacks from dissenters who call for an end of the use of

offensive language). But, apart from the goings-on of their own environments, rappers draw upon notions of strength and virility that occur in desperate (and disparate) social arenas.

Noting a similarity between current rap artists and (of all people) the previous President, says Saul Williams (2007), who announced after the September 11th attacks that America would " ... show no sign of vulnerability," Saul Williams argues that the model of masculinity followed by many rappers is ostensibly devoid of any weaknesses. For Williams, this is what distinguishes rappers from poets. The latter realizes the power in expressing one's vulnerability, but the former does not. It is in this regard that I reference the song, "Me and My Bitch," wherein Biggie confesses to his beloved that he would kiss the loins from which she came. The point is not whether or not Saul Williams would consider Biggie a poet, but that he displays, here, a kind of vulnerability not often exhibited in the aforementioned tales of male fantasy. I would argue, moreover, that even though Biggie explicitly references fellatio between men, his message is no less embedded with homoerotic subtexts than Kelly's—after all, at least he seeks the adoration of a girl as opposed to the companionship of other males at a woman's expense. Though I do not mean to suggest that any particular hip-hop artists are secretly gay, I do contend that their refusal to be sexually vulnerable is precisely what perpetuates the lifestyles of rappers who feel their only recourse is to remain "trapped in the closet."

Notes

¹ When compared to other racial groups in the same age bracket Cohen finds that: 36% of Hispanic youth and 35% of white youth think “homosexuality is always wrong;” and 43% of Hispanic youth and 42% of white youth disagree with the statement that “the government should make it legal for same sex couples to get married.”

² Compare this to the portrayal of black women in music videos, which black youth do recognize as a problem. Cohen’s study found that the majority of young black males (61%) and females (66%) agree with the statement that “Rap music videos portray Black women in bad and offensive ways.”

³ Klein, Naomi. “Patriarchy Gets Funky: The Triumph of Identity Marketing.” In *NO LOGO: Taking Aim at Brand Bullies*. Canada: Knopf, 2000.

⁴ If there was any doubt to what exactly it means to “touch” a girl, T-Pain elucidates the uncertainty in the explicit version of the song when he says, “I already fucked her.”

⁵ In a general sense, this is not a particularly new phenomenon. This song is linked to a greater lineage of Afro-Atlantic oral traditions, such as “toasting,” “signifying,” and “playing the dozens,” where performers attempt to up stage each other in sometimes highly masculine stories of sexual conquest (Abrahams 1970, Roberts 1989, Kelley 1997).

⁶ To ‘trick,’ in this context, means to spend money on someone. Usually ‘trickin’ refers to a man spending money on a woman.

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