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Black Masculinity and Hip-Hop: A Case Study of “Superheroes” (2020) and “Just Like You” (2017)

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Abstract

Hip-hop is a music genre frequently categorized as violent, obscene and a glorification of gang criminality and drug consumption. But why is this so and is this in direct correlation with the fact that many artists occupying these genres are male and black. This is precisely the question that this paper will answer, making use of the concept of black masculinity to do so. Several aspects encompassing gender performativity and acculturation will be analyzed under the scope of theoretical framework surrounding the concept of black masculinity. To make the analysis more practical, the study will focus on two cultural products: —Superheroes— by Stormzy and —Just Like You— by Joyner Lucas. —Just Like You— shows the audience what it means to be growing up under the influence of ideas of black masculinity exposing many of the pejorative associations that come with this form of performing gender. —Superheroes— offers alternatives to provide new interpretations of what it really means to be black and how there are no boundaries when it comes to authentic self-expression. Both cultural products are an immense resource to extract evidence as to prove just how much black masculinity plays a role in hip-hop. This research is significant due to hip-hop undergoing constant change in relation to the cultural expression it is tied to. In other words, since the genre is used to express ideas of individuals, these ideas can then be applied to theoretical framework to understand the inner working of cultural phenomenon, black masculinity being the one in question. Furthermore, since our world is so globalized, these products have a far-reaching impact that they cannot be ignored on from a scholarly standpoint. All things considered, this essay attempt to prove that black masculinity is clearly represented in both music videos, although they might express different versions of the phenomenon.

Key words:

Black masculinity, hip-hop, gender performativity, father figure, athletes

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1. Introduction

Our world is constantly reshaped by the growing globalization of all sorts of different environments. The music scene, more specifically hip-hop, is not an exception to this rule. Hip-hop has come a long way, from its first huge mainstream success with the release of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" on MTV in November of 1982 to its current state filled with an array of hugely successful cultural products gathering millions of views all around the globe. This global success comes with an immense opportunity for analysis surrounding many distinct themes. The one that this essay aims to develop is the representation and evolution of black masculinity within the hip-hop genre. While there is abundant research within Social and Cultural Studies encompassing this topic, there is a lack of investigation when it comes to applying these ideas to modern hip-hop production. To fill this gap, two similar but not identical cultural products were chosen and examined according to previous literature surrounding the theoretical framework of Jasmine S. Greene's "Beyond, Money, Cars, and Women, Examining Black Masculinity in Hip-hop Culture".

The first music video is —Superheroes— (SH) by Michael Ebenezer Kwadjo Omari Owuo Jr., a British hip-hop artist known more commonly under his rap alias Stormzy. The second video under analysis is —Just Like You— (JYL) by the American rapper Gary Maurice Lucas JR. who is more familiarly known as Joyner Lucas. Notably, both cultural products are not only lyrical but also interpreted in the form of a music video which, after the huge success of "Thriller", has become a necessary staple to achieve a far-reaching impact within the music industry. Both songs come with differences and similarities in the way they express what it means to be male and black and how this representation is shaped and reproduced according to influential mechanisms of systematic acculturation. With such a powerful message there are many questions to be answered such as how this pejorative vision is reproduced and if there are means to reshape it into something positive.

Keeping this in mind, the final aim of this paper is to prove that black masculinity is vividly represented in both products and that contemporary hip-hop is moving towards a more understanding and open relationship with its controversial history surrounding hypermasculine expression. To achieve this goal, the paper will discuss several aspects surrounding the videos and black masculinity which will make up the four main sectors of the research: gender performativity, the father role, colonial aspects found in hip-hop and finally an explanation of the image of the black athlete. Needless to say, all themes will stay connected to the cultural products and black masculinity at all times. Since the thematic of the essay is very broad, the

scope will be limited to those themes most prevalent in the music videos. Before diving into it, it is crucial to stress the immense possibility for further research regarding hip-hop and the huge repertoire of themes and products it offers.

2. Gender Performativity and Black Masculinity

Departing from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity it is evident that this performance extends to black masculinity. But what does it mean to perform gender and is this performance manufactured in any way by outer mechanisms? Fortunately, Butler offers some answers regarding these questions in a quote from *Gender Troubles*:

In this sense, gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. (Butler 1999, 33).

In this quote, gender is clearly pictured as something that goes beyond the simple equative association of gender to sex. Going even further, Butler highlights the existence of “regulatory practices” that normalize gender performance. Based on this framework, this section will use evidence the music video JYL to prove that black masculinity is another manifestation of gender performance that comes with its own presuppositions which are influenced by high forces of acculturation. To provide evidence for these connections, this section will be using some ideas from a YouTube video (“Your behaviour creates gender”) published on the Big Think channel in 2011 in which Judith Butler answers some questions surrounding the performance of gender.

The first question be answered is what this performance entails, and it is best described by Butler herself: “When we say that gender is performed, we usually mean that we’ve taken on a role or we’re acting in some way and that our acting or our role playing is crucial to the gender that we are and the gender that we present to the world” (Butler 2011, 0:07-0:23). This “role” is clearly represented in the first scenes of JYL when the opener shows three black males and one young child in the same room. What makes this scene special is that all are wearing the same white top symbolizing a sort of connection between their behaviors or, in other words, their enactment. In addition, the color white could reference a *tabula rasa* to show the audience how identities can be easily shaped by outer influence: “So there are institutional powers like psychiatric normalization and there are informal kinds of practices like bullying which try to keep us in our gendered space” (Butler 2011, 2:03-2:20). This enactment is represented through

showing all three adults drinking and smoking while the child exclaims: “Look, I don't wanna be no fuck nigga, I don't wanna sell drugs, nigga. I don't wanna fuck mad hoes and then claim I can't find love with 'em, I don't wanna be no super thug” (Lucas 2017, 0:57-1:05). These lines carry an immense meaning since they list some stereotypical behavior associated with being black such as drug-dealing and sleeping around. This is especially evident in the term “super thug” which characterizes the black male as a dominant figure of hypermasculine expression. Judith Butler also takes about this, describing how masculinity is socially constructed and imposed over individuals: “Think about how difficult it is for sissy boys or how difficult it is for tomboys to function socially” (Butler 2011, 1:40-1:52). This is a very important quote since black masculinity is based precisely on the opposite of being a “sissy boy”: “Bulging muscles gleaming with oil. Loose fitting jeans slung low around the knees. A never-ending canvas of tattoos starting at the neck and stopping at the wrist. A baseball cap worn low over the eyes. Two diamond studs adorning the ears” (Greene 2008, 1). Besides this description being spot on with the depiction of the characters in the video it also shows that black masculinity is just another form of performing gender that is shaped by both internal and external mechanisms.

3. The Role of Fatherhood

An external factor of uttermost importance when it comes to shaping identities is family, more precisely the father figure in this unit. Both videos transmit a clear message of what it means to be growing up with a negative influence, in the case of —Just Like You— and how a positive influence, as seen in —Superheroes— can help shape and transform the pejorative representation associated with black masculinity into something greater. Jasmine S Greene states: “For many young African American males who grow up in urban communities, with no father figures, there are not many accessible ways for them to rise above and get out” (Greene 2008, 62). This is not only supported by the scenery in JYL being a small and somewhat bare apartment, showing this rather hopeful situation, but also the lyrics spoken by the young adolescent: “I don't wanna ever go to jail and shit”, “I don't wanna be jobless” and “And I ain't into what you're into” (Lucas 2017, 1:11-1:30) are just a few lines that demonstrate resistance towards the adoption of pejorative attributes associated with black masculinity. Joyner Lucas explains his inspiration for this topic in a Genius interview: “I got locked up you know? Got caught with shit. I've lived that life before and that's something that, again, a fear of mine— having a child and then having to go through that” (Lucas 2017, 1:50-2:05). This shows the immense pressure of a father that knows very well how influential he can be in the life of his

children growing up. It exposes the dangerous consequences that a criminal life, inspired by distorted visions of masculinity, can lead to. Especially when it comes to influencing a child which cannot fully comprehend the repercussions that come with such a lifestyle.

But what if this notion is contested and transformed into something different. Fortunately, hip-hop has an answer to this question. SH offers an alternative representation far distant from this idea of “black family life being characterized by the absence of a father, drug addictions and gang affiliations” (Greene 2008, 62). The protagonist and father figure in this video retains physical attributes of black masculinity such as the “bulging muscles” mentioned before but instead of association this with aggressivity it is converted a tool of respect based on more openness and care. This idea is also touched upon in Greene’s theory:

African American relationships are suffering, that is a given. African Americans must stop disrespecting one another and start treating each other with care. Intimacy is necessary for our lives, and intimacy does not just include making love over having sex. Intimacy includes closeness, acceptance, companionship, and understanding. It includes having conversations with one another. It is inclusive of caring about how that person feels or is treated. (Greene 2008, 112).

Perhaps one of the best examples to show this need to improve understanding within the black community is found in the chorus of the song: “You my brother, you my keeper, I need you to keep an eye on me. And no more fightin' on the streets Walking 'round with all this pride on me. Well, shit, shit's tough for us already, know that you can still rely on me” (Omari 2020, 0:19-0:29). These lyrics clearly show an evolution towards this intimacy and the need to normalize it within the community. This is concisely where hip-hop can leave a mark by showing that being a black father comes with many responsibilities and that, by showing love and care, it is possible to deconstruct this image of having to be cold-blooded and tough to make it in the streets. Through this process of deconstruction, it is possible to provide a better example as to how one can gain respect without falling victim to any dangers that too often lead to tragedies associated with gun violence, homicide, and jail time, just to name a few.

While there are certainly countless tragedies that show a grim picture, there are still positive messages that show an evolution towards a more intimate connection with the father role. A moving example showing just how much it can mean for a father to be praised for his role comes from an interview between Jack Harlow, a hip-hop artist, and Big Boy, a radio host, who has had a huge impact on hip-hop with his BigBoyTV YouTube channel. In this interview, Jack praised BigBoy over his success but more importantly he says this: “it’s not just the career stuff though, bro everyone talks about what a great father you are too man” (Harlow 2022, 20:50). After hearing this, BigBoy becomes very emotional, nearly breaking into tears. This is

a huge step for hip-hop, showing an evolution towards a more intimate movement becoming accepting of showing emotions, opposing against the stereotypical tropes of black masculinity. In addition, hip-hop is starting to acknowledge the severe importance of being a good father as to shield their children from what they might learn if they are forced to search for guidance outside their homes.

4. Postcolonialism and the Shaping of Hip-Hop

Hip-hop seems to be evolving into a direction that is much more thematically complex and diverse. In addition, there is a clear message of resistance towards the systematic implementation of pejorative characteristics associated to blackness. Still the question remains of where this negative characterization might originate from. Therefore, this section of the paper will discuss some theoretical framework surrounding the marks that colonialism left on modern hip-hop, finding evidence in both music videos that expose traces of this colonial past. Colonialisms is perhaps best defined as “a form of domination —the control by individuals or groups over the territory and/or behavior of other individuals or groups” (Horvath 1972, 46). The following statement by Greene is a great starting way of showing just how much colonialism is still playing a role in modern media production which hip-hop is not an exception for: “The media is forcing us to identify with the streets and with negative images that destroy us and in effect keep blacks mentally enslaved” (Greene 2008, 32). The keyword here being “enslaved” as it symbolizes a tie between the practice of slavery and the modern-day version it transforms into. This is by no means a new phenomenon, for instance, the concept of Necropolitics coined by Mbembe shows just how far racial abuse can be modernized, even to the extent of deciding over who lives or dies: “In the economy of biopower, the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state. It is, he says, ‘the condition for the acceptability of putting to death’” (Mbembe 2003, 8). SH reflects this grim idea of institutionalized death in the opening line of the song:” Don't die on me I said Young black king, don't die on me” (Omari 2020, 0:09-0:16). These lines reference an inhumane treatment that goes to the extremes of appropriating death to blackness while expressing the fear that comes with having death looming over your shoulder at any moment.

While these are disturbing traces left by colonialism, hip-hop acknowledges them and reimagines concepts to create a more hopeful narrative. Take for instance a quote from one of the leading scholars in postcolonialism, Frantz Fanon: “The town belonging to the colonized

people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute” (Fanon 1963, 38-39). This describes an environment designated to be hopeless and inescapable by those unfortunate enough to be classified as “Negro” by skin color. Stormzy resists this vision by providing an alternative narrative, offering different possibilities to thrive which do not necessarily involve confirming to stereotypical image of black masculinity. This is best exemplified by a character in the video, an Afro-American kid with the superpower of knowledge. This is a major confrontation with the image of the successful hood boss, a romanticized version of the dangers that come with becoming a respected member in the streets.

This must mean then that there has been an evolution in hip-hop: “from the romanticization of the original gangsta (OG) and neo-nationalist in contemporary rap to the celebrations of the middle class in civil rights discourse” (Gray 1995, 402). This quote states this development of hip-hop towards becoming a more resistant movement which feels a need to deviate itself from being characterized as a mechanism to maintain the black community in its place: “Just because one grows up in the hood does not mean they have to grow up and perpetuate the violence that takes place there” (Greene 2008, 48). Greene furthers her argument by expressing this need to escape the misery: “Undoubtedly, there are individuals who would like to leave ‘the hood’. I believe that many in the black community would like to get a great career that makes a lot of money, but really as a whole we are afraid to try for that dream” (Greene 2008, 12). But how can this vision be achieved if success in the hood is only associated to criminality while the black community is quote on quote “afraid to dream”. Well, Stormzy’s lyrics express that what it means to be a man can be redefined from something dangerous to something admirable even if it does not conform with the established norm within the community. A necessary step as to address a very grim situation: “Young children are learning that it just is not cool or respected to be smart. They do not care to go to school and learn. At school they hide their good grades, books, and home work achievements from their peers. In the worst parts of the hip- hop generation, street smarts are the only kind of intelligence that is respected” (Greene 2008, 33). This is precisely why hip-hop plays an immense part in shaping the future of many generations to come and how there is a need for more cultural products to contest this stereotypical perception of black masculinity by creating alternatives that lead away from the ghetto. This is where music can offer guidance by showing that success can be achieved by following new role models, helping those that hear it to stop being afraid to dream: “Because of you, I've got a clearer conscience. Because of you, I'm not scared of monsters. Because of you, I'm not afraid of failure” (Lucas 2017, 3:52-3:57). Lyrics that inspire hope and

encourage to try something even if it seems unachievable. A message far from condoning the idea of certain failure that comes with growing up in black neighborhoods.

5. “Superathletes” and Acculturation

The image of athletes as role-models is an idea present in both videos but is this a good thing or are there problems with this idea. This portion of the study will look at why athletes can have an impact on the impression of younger generations and how its effects impact black youth. In JYL the young kid escapes into his room as to distance himself from what he is seeing in the household. His room has a wall filled with posters of athletes including Stephen Curry, a basketball player or Rob Gronkowski, and American football player. This is where the scene fades, reveling that the juvenile is now an adult. The scene continues as he directs his worlds to the wall of posters: “Look, I love how you handle your own. Glad you are the king to your own castle. You handle life when it's thrown at you. Never curl up, never 'fo fragile, I need you to be here, regardless. Teach me how to be there for my kids. Show me how to be fearless often, I need real guidance, I am scared of options” (Lucas 2017, 3:37-3:51). Joyner Lucas talks about these lyrics in the Genius Interview which gives us a deeper insight into what it is they really reflect: “Mentally being a king to your castle. Just being the man of the house. Doing what you have to do. Being a king. You know, not being a fuck nigga. Being a man and taking care of your responsibilities and that’s what a king to me is. (Lucas 2017, 4:36- 4:50). These lines are interesting since they correlate “responsibilities” with being a man. These responsibilities could be attributed to those of the father figure which has already been discussed but also to athletes. This assumption is made since the words are directed towards the posters. This shows that through the absence of a father, a child is likely to turn his attention towards a different mechanism of acculturation. This lack of fatherly influence is a problem discussed by Greene: “the black family system is matriarchal and often lacking a father figure in the household, African American boys have had to deal with a male role model void” (Greene 2008, 33). Then, how is this “void” filled and are there problematic aspects revolving around athleticism and stardom as being used as a model of guidance. The answer is that there are certainly issues with the representation of black masculinity in sports:

Jewelle Taylor Gibbs writes that ‘Even the presumably positive images of blacks as athletes and entertainers project them as animal-like or childlike in their aggressiveness, sensuality, ‘natural rhythm’ and uninhibited expressiveness’ (Gibbs 1988). The images

of blacks portrayed in the media are that blacks are not taken as serious men and women. (Greene 2008, 64).

This is a worrying statement because it shows that there is a powerful mechanism behind both the sports and music industry capable of imposing a racist agenda: “the cool guise or cool posing central to hip-hop’s core is seized upon and shaped by media, professional sports leagues, and leading sports apparel companies to construct the negative stereotype of bad black men” (Lewis 2008, 1). It seems as if there is a lot of evidence portraying an industry contaminated by pejorative representations even if the black individual is achieving success according to normalized standards. How can it be that black masculinity is still associated to savageness and aggressivity? One could argue that it simply has to do with the physicality of certain sports that passively lead to these associations but that cannot be fully correct. Even the biggest and most world-wide known sports associations such as the NBA have a history of more than questionable intentions. Take, for instance this interesting example regarding a 2005 Dress Code:

The dress policy restricted players from wearing shorts, T-shirts, throwback jerseys, trainers, sneakers, work boots, do-rags, chains, pendants, and medallions. The players were required to wear collared dress shirts or turtlenecks, dress slacks or dress jeans, sport coats, and presentable shoes with socks when attending league events and not in uniform. According to Stern, ‘we decided that the reputation of our players was not as good as our players are, and we could do small things to improve that’. (Calafell 2011, 126).

Here we see a clear example of how black cultural expression is inhibited by banning certain items (“do-rags, chains, sneakers”, etc.) to substitute them for something more civil (“turtlenecks, presentable shoes, dress jeans”, etc.). This is a clear example how big institutions instead of embracing black culture, instead attempt to ban it or to reshape into something more acceptable to the general audience. This is clearly terrifying, but SH offers an inspiring message to what it means to succeed as a black athlete outside the boundaries of white supremacy. This is done by showing a black female football player embracing her role in an authentic manner. This image is strengthened through the lyrics accompanying the scene: “All I see is innovators and a bag of icons. You can go and ask the whole world where they got their style from. That's you, that's us, God's time and He never gets the time wrong. I guess we're just some ticking time bombs.” (Omari 2020, 3:00-3:15). Truly beautiful lyrics, showing that through hard work and dedication any individual can make their dreams come true if even they need to go against the standards. This can be applied to black masculinity as well since the message is all about reinforcing authenticity by endorsing cultural expression, removing any boundaries that keep the black male or female in their unfairly designated place.

6. Conclusion

A powerful message needs a powerful medium and hip-hop seems to be the perfect fit. After having discussed the complexity to which black masculinity is represented in both music videos this becomes even more evident. This paper discussed how gender is performed, how the father role is a crucial element of acculturation, how colonialism and pejorative representation plague not only the black hip-hop artist but also the black sports player. All these elements were discussed under the common objective to present hip-hop in a better light while stressing the importance of cultural products as powerful instruments to deliver a message across the world. A message full of inspiration that can help shape future generations in a much more empowering fashion. This is especially important when addressing the youth as they could be considered the most impressionable in society. Growing up in a bad environment filled with ideas of hate and violence projected by outer and inner mechanism of acculturation leads to a disastrous situation. A situation that victimizes those who already had it tough and those who are repressed from speaking up. This is where hip-hop can offers a voice to those so long silenced by otherness. The cultural capital of Stormzy and Joyner Lucas is precisely what allowed them to speak to those inside and outside of the system they attempt to resist. In the process, they establish a new form of black masculinity. It is impressive to think about the impact that a pen and a paper can have. Even more, music videos have increased this potential as they can visually appeal to those who mind find it easier to understand what they see rather what they hear. It is precisely this what this essay is trying to accomplish, using pen and paper to deliver a statement. While it does certainly help to have a wide audience to make an impact, it is not only possible to make a difference through mass popularity. There are countless studies, essays, theories that spring up daily which contribute to giving a clearer picture to those things happening around us. There is also the possibility for further research on these same cultural products. Take for instance, femininity which is also tackled by the music video, but which was excluded to avoid excessive divergence. Nevertheless, these are still just grains of sand on the vast beach that is hip-hop and its musical production All that being said, what does it mean to be a black man? The answer is perhaps best symbolized in a simple and rememberable statement: “I am young, black, beautiful and brave” (Omari 2020, 0:19-0:29).

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