"Hood Politics": Racial Transformation in Hip-Hop
Richard Spradlin

Abstract: This paper explores the possibility of music to transform the way we understand each other. In particular, it looks at the genre of hip-hop and the ways in which it can serve as a vehicle for understanding black experience. I argue that hip-hop's structural elements allow artists to convey their living narrative in a way that recognizes, challenges, and changes our conceptual understanding of the black body. Using the works of Darby English and Harry Nethery, I examine hip-hop and apply their arguments to two specific rappers in order to illustrate my argument.

Introduction

Although music has been a relevant topic of philosophical conversation for centuries, rarely afforded this same privilege is the genre of hip-hop. The rough, aggressive sounds and lyrical content can turn many would-be listeners away. It is often critiqued for its sexism, misogyny, violence, and generally hedonist attitudes. It is fundamentally "different." I'm interested in the location and identification of difference, as I believe hip-hop can reveal a larger cultural and social compartmentalization and confinement of the differently identified. These larger systems can shape our experience and influence our understandings of others–particularly black bodies.[1] I argue that hip-hop has the ability to inspire a reconstruction of the narrative of self. It challenges how we understand the capturing and appropriation of black experience through the musical articulation of that experience. Using the language of conceptual terrain, inherited from Darby English, I argue that hip-hop can deconstruct and rebuild our larger schematic relationships with black art, and thereby our relationship with black bodies. My analysis is supplemented and enriched by Harry Nethery's comments in *Jay-Z, Phenomenology, and Hip-Hop*, which demonstrates hip-hop's possibilities for the construction of individual narrative and identity.[2] Finally, I introduce two examples of rappers actively working with this project in mind and address some pertinent concerns.

---

[1] Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

[2] Harry Nethery IV, "Jay-Z, Phenomenology, and Hip-Hop," *Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 11, no. 1 (2011).

D'Evils: Forced Black Identity

In *How to See A Work of Art in Total Darkness*, English describes "black representational space" as a terrain occupied by works of art and representational messages from artists who identify or are identified as being black.[3] Following the Civil War, during the period of Reconstruction and racially martial-laws of the Jim Crow era, this terrain was born from a struggle for black identity wherein cultural representation became a survival tactic against the onslaught of socio-political systems of racial domination. However, the horrifically oppressive intimacy of black bodies and white America solidified this place as a region of "otherness," or a white construction of a black space, where all action is subsequently oriented towards the observatory fulfillment of the desires of the dominant. The systems of power at work transformed the form, conduct, and meaning of existence for black bodies by normalizing difference, resulting in the need for harmonious consensus on the importance and meaning of that difference. English explains,

> In its determination to manage the divisive texture of American culture, rather than be modified by it, the rhetoric of consensus tactically reproduced cultural and social limits … consensus's indifference to difference in fact reserves a special place for it, eliding difference in the social terrain and thus constituting dissent as enemy to harmony.[4]

This appears to be a revival of the logic of "separate-but-equal," because identity politics which seek to include all racial identities (and require consensus on their distinct characteristics) do not protect from or acknowledge the racial biases which follow that inclusion. In other words, consensus on identity markers solidifies the asymmetrically juridical power that taints and limits any vacuous, superficial notion of true equality.

These markers define the boundaries of a "cultural territory" and "conceptual terrain," which are historically shaped and individually received cultural signifiers and concepts which define and govern black experience.[5] Because this territory was birthed from a larger, racially dominated system, it exists as separate from the identities and values of its progenitor while remaining governed

---

[3] English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, 34.
[4] Ibid., 52.
[5] Ibid., 29–30.

by them—tightly tethered on a restrictive and socially (re)-enforced leash. The space is monitored, limited, and reined in by those who reap the racial benefits of consuming and appropriating the products of the racially schematic terrain. This formation of definitive racial politics establishes a narrative of black personhood as an identity against the opposition of historically grounded and evolving mechanisms of racial exclusion. As a result, a cultural as well as conceptual terrain is created which defines what constitutes acceptable action and movement. The subject of this space is forced to produce works to be evaluated in a racialized way, and this racialization is internalized and opposed to the core of one's identity.

Black art, as a complex web of interpersonal artistic relationships, becomes sets of pre-formed understandings and associations that force a work of art to be seen and *felt* as specifically, uniquely, and differently black. This reduction "presupposes a correlation between the work's significations and a set of race concepts, it attaches the object's denotators to a predetermined range of possible connotators," which causes us to "devise 'relevant' external correspondences, which ground a more decisive third move that establishes equivalences with what we are considering and have already considered, suspected, or perhaps just wondered."[6] Our everyday usage of these concepts erodes our connection to what they are meant to represent, aggregating vague, inaccurate understandings and representations of black experiences into an object to be witnessed and understood as different. In terms of black art and black representational space, the identity of the subjects confined by that space must confront the contradictions of the expectations of socio-racial conceptions, evaluated by those who perpetuate and use the concepts to reify their ontological limitations. As an answer to this question, English posits that "We need a more concerted attention to the difficulty we seem to have in imagining the work of 'artists whose skins are black' apart from the notion of racial art," because "what has been impossible is not the conception of a black artist who doesn't make black art but rather a substantial basis upon which to advance, defend, and/or demonstrate such a claim."[7] In order to tear down the walls of black representational space, works from black artists must challenge the limitations of identity through expression of the experience of those limits, recapturing, deconstructing, and reconstructing the concepts, as

---

[6] Ibid., 34–35.
[7] Ibid.

discursively prescriptive tools for identity construction. In the next section, I explore the ability of hip-hop to perform this function.

Represent: Contradiction, Narrative, and Identity

Music exists as a unique communicative opportunity where the interplay of different structural, musical elements is affective on our being as a result of being a subversive, experiential, communicative vessel of identity. This vessel is thrust into a milieu of contradiction, always rubbing against it as it moves through and beyond it, armored by the musical bracketing of shared narrative experience. Beyond the restrictive and juridical muck lies an opportunity for breaking beyond the identity politics of black representational space, re-creating conceptual and representational terrain that allow us to see works of art outside of and without their being surrounded in *darkness*. Harry Nethery notes that this is clearly at work in hip-hop, in that experiential expression has the "ability to conjoin oppositions, rather than treating them as mere disjunctions … it also has a unique ability to *communicate* them in a way that is *not* a so-called rational argument … through inducing the listener to *feel* the experience itself, or perhaps to experience-with the artist."[8] Where standard structural impediments might prove to be overwhelmingly obtrusive in terms of physical, legal, or economic means of representation, hip-hop is a ubiquitously available means of self-expression, much less subject to physically confining, racially schematic discourses of "rationality," that exclude and limit black voices.

For example: well-decorated Compton rapper Kendrick Lamar's latest album, *To Pimp A Butterfly*, speaks to a culture of fetishizing and racial commodification of black experience. By clearly providing examples of contradiction in his lived experience, he aims to pull in his listeners and force them to realize their situatedness within a structure of racial violence in the hopes that they will recognize and adjust their individual, social, and systemic behavior. The entire album is produced utilizing jazz instrumentation and soulful music to create a hip-hop sound designed to really *move* the listener, physically, emotionally, and consciously. At the same time that the bass, drum, and accompanying elements of the songs invite the listener to tune in for its entirety, the album's consistently disjointed and syncopated elements work to create a cohesive musical

---

[8] Nethery IV, "Jay-Z, Phenomenology, and Hip-Hop," 23.

sound which conveys the experience of conflict and contradiction, paralleled beautifully by Lamar's voice, lyrics, and rhymes.

What enables this expression to be effective at circumventing black representational space (both for the individual artist and their audience) is the structure and its ability to cause a perceived *expansion* of time, opening up a vacuum for a new perceptive space to take hold. Hip-hop, according to Nethery, is comprised of four elements which intersect unique, disparate, and melodic elements to produce this transformative sound that connects the listener to the artist: *beat, flow, music, and rhyme*. The beat and music comprise the foundational elements of the song, just as concrete slabs and erected walls create the foundation for a space to be filled in, situated, and incorporated into one's being. They are a three-four minute bracketed moment in time meant to redefine terrain by recreating a space for the creation and mobilization of artistic and representational images. Mechanistically, the beat and music enact an "affective pull" on our consciousness, forming a rhythmic structure of expectation which keeps us constantly in tune with the musical elements, and what occupies this new conceptual soundscape.[9] In Kendrick Lamar's song *The Blacker the Berry*, the beat is composed of dark sounding melody and drums reminiscent of a battle march, designed to put the listener in a particular headspace to process what follows. This works as "a kind of motivational allure on consciousness," in which "the percussive sounds that constitute a beat pull our attention into the song itself … due to the structure of internal time consciousness— when we hear the sounds or phrases repeated ... this expectation draws us into the song through the focusing of attention."[10] The melodies and forms of noise in our daily lives structure certain attitudes and behaviors, and hip-hop (at the foundational level) pulls the listener into the experientially protective vessel and blocks all this noise from coloring their conceptual perceptions.

The music and flow (the stylistic vocalizations of the rapper) dilate the new, bracketed, conceptual terrain: they fill in and "*widen*" the percussive and rhythmic gaps of the beat, "[augmenting] how this beat is experienced … specifically as an articulation motivated through how the rapper *lives* the music and the beat taken together."[11] The listening translates to a *feeling* by embracing the spatially expansive and transformative elements of the music, allowing the blurring of the experience of self and other to occur

---

[9] Ibid., 26.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.

so that the mutually constitutive relationship shifts away from the ontologically confining concepts of black representational space. It is the subsequent entrance of the lyrics— the rhyme and experience of the artist— that completes this process through the reconciliation of expected lived experience (constructed and oriented pre-reflectively by black representational space) with the contradiction of actually living that experience. The poetic articulation and connection of *concepts* is at the heart of flow and rhyme: rhyming in hip-hop allows (1) "for the listener to *hear* these two concepts as *belonging together*" and (2) "one to *experience* a connection between disparate elements that circumvents or bypasses logical argumentation," which ultimately results in the listeners being "motivated to take-up the contradictory experiences related by the artist through their connection in rhyme."[12]

One of the most important moments of this type conceptual engagement for Lamar, *The Blacker the Berry* is a testament to individual and social hypocrisy, targeted specifically at relationships between music, lyrics, and interpersonal personhood. The music is composed of a dark sounding melody and an atmosphere of anger is quickly established with a heavy hitting beat and Kendrick's heated flow and aggressive lyricism. He writes:

> Pardon my residence / Came from the bottom of mankind / My hair is nappy, my d★★k is big, my nose is round and wide / You hate me don't you? / You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture / You're f★★★★n' evil I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey / You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me."[13]

This song is defined by contradiction, in that it reveals the experience of white expectations of behavior and the confinement felt from socio-racial schemas. Engaging with the conceptual terrain of black representational space, Lamar engages with and directly challenges the *concepts* which impose on and construct his (and other black bodies') existence, utilizing music as a way to communicate the aesthetically parasitic relationship black bodies have with the rest of the world. He asks a chilling question which makes this painfully clear: "So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in

---

[12] Ibid., 27.

[13] Kendrick Lamar, *The Blacker the Berry*, by Jeffrey Campbell, Matthew Samuels, Brent Kolatalo, Kendrick Lamar, Ken Lewis, Stephen Kozmeniuk, Alexander Izquierdo, and Zale Epstein, © 2015 by Top Dawg Entertainment.

the street / When gangbangin' make me kill a n★★★a blacker than me? Hypocrite!"[14] This is the result of the conceptual sovereignty of black representational space and its schematic domination of black art. We determine what makes a black male, a rapper, and what to expect in his/her music, their culture, and their interactions. It is a sociological reconstruction that begins at the level of representational identity politics. Lamar calls listeners to act as advocates beyond their headphones, to go beyond what is heard and to really listen and *feel* the affective pull of his music.

Other hip-hop artists are advancing similar afro-centric and racially transformative messages in their music, recognizing the music's potential for liberating themselves and others through the expression of existence. Marlanna Evans, known as Rapsody, is a female emcee from North Carolina who shares in Lamar's vision for an artistic liberation of hip-hop. She is motivated by the effervescent masculinity inherent to the music industry to challenge people's perceptions of a female artist. Similar to the ways in which Darby English seeks to explore and remove the confines of black representational space, Evans wants to challenge the musical and aesthetic differences assigned to females (particularly black females) in hip-hop. She doesn't create revolutionary sounds *per se*, but she uses the *beat*, *rhyme*, *music*, and *flow* to out these elements as being not limited to the masculinity that she's experienced as a dominating force in the industry and in her life as a woman. Rather than highlighting herself uniquely as a woman in hip-hop, she attempts to move away from rhetoric of difference, emphasizing the level playing field afforded to all of us in our words and in our musical possibilities. Her message is especially powerful when conveyed through the sound of her predecessors: when she chooses to remix a song by Shawn Carter ("Jay-Z"), or uses an instrumental from James Yancey ("J-Dilla"), she's embodying the Netheryian elements of male artist's songs, using them as a means of expression to engage the precise conceptual terrain she aims toward. She does so not to divide listeners along racial or sexual lines, but to unite all people with a love for the music regardless of any differences that may divide them. Knowing that a patriarchal world works to silence voices of all shapes and sizes, she tackles such a contradictory and oppressive experience head on, and as loudly as she can.

Using the elements of hip-hop Nethery describes to place listeners alongside them, Lamar and Evans break through the

---

[14] Ibid.

confines of black representational space, forcing people to confront contradiction in their own lives related to structures of oppression, and creating an impetus for examination and change. They recognize that the expression of experience must always take into account the affective nature of that expression, especially when that expression is musical. The content and effects of hip-hop very much control the discursive circulation of the *concepts* that define the ontologically restrictive space for "black art," and so it very much matters that the message, the questions, and the implications of the music advance the restructuring possibilities present in each bar, each verse, and each successive, percussive, rhythmic indentation.

Trap Queen: Challenges and Considerations

In light of all this, it's crucial to consider whether or not all hip-hop is created equally in terms of its communicative and transformative possibilities. In the context of Lamar, Evans, and the framework provided by Nethery, it might be easy to accept that *some* hip-hop can be successful in this way, but it remains an open question for some. For instance, Kathy SaeNgian with the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette cites researcher Carolyn West of the University of Washington, who feels that hip-hop exploits the lives of black girls as a result of its sexualization and resulting financial incentive to sell sexually provocative media. Her claim is that "when young black women listen to lyrics and watch images that promote sexual conduct, they take on the persona that is illustrated in the music and treat themselves as sexual objects," and that it "sets the foundation for future victimization and causes teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases."[15] Beyond the lyrical circulation of *concepts*, West's argument targets the visual reproduction of and preference for certain sexual characteristics which exist outside of and juxtaposed to the elements which make up hip-hop. Whether it is different elements of storytelling in some songs, heavily sexualized music videos in others, or outright misogyny and sexual violence in others still, West claims that hip-hop has created different conceptual personae for black girls who consume hip-hop to aspire to be, all of which end in consensual sexual objectification. By extension, other themes which are more or less prevalent in hip-hop could be indicted for their potential emulation, i.e. drug use and

---

[15] Kathy SaeNgian, "Researcher Cites Negative Influences of Hip-hop," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (June 13, 2008), accessed March 15, 2016, http://www.post-gazette.com/life/lifestyle/2008/06/13/Researcher-cites-negative-influences-of-hiphop/stories/200806130124.

violence. This means certain thematic components of hip-hop as a genre, may make difficult, and even halt, the transformation of black representational space.

Hip-hop appears to exist in a state of tension with what it aims to practically produce, insofar as its aims and actual products are not as clearly beneficial or harmful as they seemed at first glance. However, what I think is important to note in these concerns is whether things like sexual objectification, materialism, and drug use exist as an essential component of hip-hop, because if they are not then we may have renewed faith in hip-hop's transformative possibilities. Alternatively, if the existence and circulation of these concepts can be seen to be necessary or valuable, we may have the same result. Firstly, because artists like Lamar and Evans are actively working to challenge the overtly oppressive circulation of concepts in this way, it seems plausible that hip-hop can adapt and respond positively, insofar as the emulation of their content is meant to challenge social and racial norms. Without diminishing the potential consequences West cites, I think we are also capable of moderating the media we ourselves consume, meaning problems of production and emulation seem to exist outside of what is inherently called for by hip-hop. Secondarily, we ought to be wary at a certain point to resist thematic expression, because if they are indeed a reality of experience then to deny them legitimacy on the grounds of potential emulation is to hide ourselves from the realities that we exist alongside and are called to hear by the voices of the otherwise silent. While we should not promote (self-)destructive behavior, we should promote active authentic expression, as well as active listening and engagement.

Conclusion

As a vehicle that informs and shapes experiential structures, music contains the possibilities for radical transformation of self and society. Though it welcomes and transports authentic experience, hip-hop music in particular stands as an oft-overlooked opportunity for the exploration of identity and the ways in which music can reconstruct a conceptual space. The historically codified, socially reinforced racial images, symbols, and *concepts* that arose out of a historical necessity to protect the existence of identity have created such a space worthy of challenge, fluidly inserting themselves into banal, benign mechanics of social, physical, and structural power which constantly reinforce the politics of difference, and establishes a

separate, "black" zone of representation. The structured expression of hip-hop challenges the confines of this realm by fostering the articulation of authentic experience, challenging and breaking down the symbolic and linguistic symbols that construct the notion, identity, and cultural significance of "blackness." As Kendrick Lamar and Marlanna Evans demonstrate with the purpose, content, and goal of their music, we are called to experience the contradiction of those notions and concepts, interrogating ourselves in relation to them, understanding their mechanisms and functions, and tearing down the conceptual terrain they have built for us, rebuilding it by scratch with the assistance of sound.