KEEP IT SIMPLE MAKE IT FAST!

AN APPROACH TO UNDERGROUND MUSIC SCENES (VOL. 4)
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9.1 Hypermasculinity in Los Angeles gangsta rap: An intersectional approach

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A b s t r a c t

Accused of encouraging crime, misogyny and homophobia, gangsta rap rapidly created a moral panic in the United States. Reducing it to mere criminal narratives of Black youth, mainstream media confined the genre's reception in a reproving interpretative framework. By contextualizing gangsta rap within African American expressive culture and the socio-economic conditions of postindustrial Los Angeles inner cities this paper shows how the genre can be understood in relation to systemic inequality and the history of oppression of African Americans in the USA. Focusing on the performance of hypermasculinity in gangsta rap, it studies it in context and differentiates it from hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, it does so by taking an intersectional approach where hypermasculinity is understood at the intersections of gender with class and race. The paper addresses gangsta rap's problematic expression of machismo in relation to the negotiation of masculine identities and the challenge to authority.

Keywords: *Gangsta rap, Los Angeles, intersectionality, hypermasculinity, African American.*

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1. Overview

Gangsta rap is a subgenre of rap music that emerged in the middle of the 1980s. Dealing with themes of social criticism and graphic violence, songs from East-coast artists like *The Message* by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (1982) and *P.S.K. What does that mean?* by Schoolly D (1985) can be viewed as direct influences on the development of gangsta rap. Despite those early influences, gangsta rap mainly remains understood as emerging from predominantly Black South Los Angeles inner cities. This association is mostly due to the tremendous commercial success of N.W.A's debut album *Straight Outta Compton* (1988), which was central in promoting the genre to wider audiences. If the impact of this album must be acknowledged, we also have to take into consideration the local development of hip-hop in Los Angeles and the various local worlds (Becker, 1982) that predated gangsta rap and from which the genre arose. In particular, the mobile DJ crew world (Williams, 2015), the electro-rap world of the early 1980s (Jiménez, 2011), and the early gangsta rap artists such as Mix Master Spade, Toddy Tee and Ice-T (Cross, 1993; Diallo, 2010). Because of its popularity and its violent graphic content, gangsta rap rapidly drew harsh criticism from politicians, and diverse organizations such as the Parents Music Center Resource and the National Congress of Black Women (Keyes, 2004). Blamed for advocating violence, drug use, crime, homophobia and misogyny as well as for perverting the youth, a highly mediated moral panic (Thompson, 1998) was launched against gangsta rap, which formatted its mainstream reception within a disapproving framework.

This paper aims at discussing hypermasculinity in gangsta rap. It intends to pay particular attention to the intersection of the gender, class and race dimensions at work in gangsta rap's hypermasculinity. Although the racial dimension often tends to predominate in rap studies, we will be arguing in favor of an intersectional approach of gangsta rap's hypermasculinity where those three categories are thought of as mutually constituted and constitutive (Browne & Misra, 2003). As a man dominated genre, gangsta rap features narratives of young African American men from Los Angeles inner cities. For this reason, the genre has largely been regarded as providing a window into how these young men articulate their experiences as residents of the inner city (Kelley, 1994). Additionally, we'll examine how the hypermasculinity found in gangsta rappers' lyrics, body postures, attitudes, language, and clothing styles can't be understood as an example of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). Indeed, if they might benefit from their gender as men, they are disadvantaged as young underclass Blacks (Randolph, 2006). The intersectional dimension of the hypermasculinity found in gangsta rap renders necessary its contextualization within African American culture and history as well as in the socio-economic conditions of South Los Angeles of the 1980s. In this text, hypermasculinity in gangsta rap doesn't only refer to the lyrics, but also to the sonic and visual aspects of the rappers' performances.

2. Hypermasculinity, gangsta rap and African American culture

Understood as gendered social constructs, masculinities are a whole of social roles, behaviors and meanings associated with men (Whitehead, 2002). Hypermasculinity refers to an exaggerated adherence to a stereotypic masculine gender role (Murnen *et al*., 2015). Hypermasculinity

has been characterized as the exaltation of "virility in speech, action, dress, [as] virility expressed by bravado, courage, ruthlessness" (Horowitz, 1967, p. 9). Further, it was described by a "conception of violence as manly", a "view of danger as exciting", and "calloused sex attitudes toward women" (Mosher and Sirkin, 1984, p. 151).

The irreverence, misogyny, homophobia, violence and nihilism found in gangsta rappers' lyrics, attitudes, body postures, clothing styles, and facial expressions can be said to be characteristic of hypermasculinity. The diverse hypermasculine elements in gangsta rap served as a basis for the mainstream moral panic to develop. However, rather than condemn the hypermasculine dimension of gangsta rap, it seems necessary to understand it within African American history and culture. Indeed, hypermasculinity has been part of African American expressive culture for over a century. We can find examples of this in trickster and badman tales (Roberts, 1989), in vernacular practices such as toasting and signifying, in diverse musical styles such as jazz and blues, as well as in Blaxploitation cinema and pimp narratives of the 1970s (Kelley, 1994). As many scholars have shown, the irreverence, misogyny, violence and other elements that we have identified as participating to hypermasculinity are an essential part of those expressive forms and practices, and are directly concerned with power. Such figures as the trickster, the badman, the pimp, and the gangsta "embody a challenge to virtually all authority (which makes sense to people for whom justice is a rare thing), creates an imaginary upside-down world where the oppressed are the powerful" (Kelley, 1994, p. 187). We can therefore understand hypermasculinity in African American culture as a strategic way to reclaim a sense of power by negotiating systemic oppression and its various manifestations across history. Although gangsta rap's hypermasculinity can be understood within a long history of hypermasculinity in African American culture and its relation to systemic oppression, it has to be contextualized within the specific conditions of postindustrial Los Angeles.

3. Macro social forces in South Los Angeles

In the 1980s, living conditions in South Los Angeles tremendously worsened. A lot of it can be attributed to the neo-liberal policies passed by the Reagan administration, which intended to reinvigorate the economy by reducing the involvement of the government in regulating industries and private enterprise (Vargas, 2006), and by tax cuts for the rich (Johnson, 2013). Such policies were supposed to encourage investment, which in turn would create opportunities for the working-class (Johnson, 2013). Instead, they reinforced systemic inequality and division along lines of race and class.

More policies were directly targeting welfare and affirmative action programs as well as civil right laws, which caused an increase in poverty rates (Vargas, 2006). Behind the assault on social programs was a reasoning that linked them to poverty by assuming that, as Secretary Richard Schweiker of Health and Human Services put it, "[they] ha[d] been rewarding dependency instead of self-reliance" (N/A, 1981). The most affected by this shift in policymaking were working-class African Americans in the inner city. Such policies reflect the mainstream discourse, which rather than identifying the system and its discriminative patterns as the root of poverty, held African American inner city dwellers as responsible for it (Vargas, 2006). Furthermore, it denies the racial

dimension of this systemic inequality and ignores the historical patterns of oppression from which the "ghetto" results.

Hitting Los Angeles in the late 1970s and 1980s, deindustrialization resulted in the closure of most factories in the automobile, rubber, steel and aircraft industry – a steady source of jobs for African American men in South Los Angeles. The deindustrialization process caused unemployment to reach its peak. 50 percent of African American youth was unemployed in South L.A. (Kelley, 1994). It is important to note that the rise of poverty in South L.A. was taking place at the same time as an overall economic growth for the city of L.A., in particular thanks to the development of high-tech firms whose high-skilled jobs excluded residents of the inner city (Kelley, 1994). Economic restructuring and deindustrialization increased suburban capital flight and the systemic pauperization of the inner city.

The arrival of crack cocaine and the formation of an informal economic market around it happened during the same period and was linked to street gangs in the inner city (Davis, 1990). This would lead to Reagan's War on Drugs and the passing of a series of punitive policies and laws. By coining the phrase "drug crisis", Clarence Lusane (1991) intends to distance his analysis from the political rhetoric of the War on Drugs and the sensationalistic use of the phrase "crack epidemic" in the media. Instead he perceives the "crack epidemic" as a set of "state-sponsored and moral panic-driven" discourses unfolded to rationalize the War on Drugs (Murch, 2015, p. 162).

The outcome of such a political campaign against crack cocaine was the criminalization of African American youth and the militarization of the inner city. The deployment of elite police units, tank-like vehicle known as the batteram, the creation of the Gang Reporting Evaluation and Tracking system, a computerized list with the names of 47% of African American men in L.A. county between the age of twenty-one and twenty-four are common examples of the over-policing of young Black men and of the reduction of the drug problem to a gang problem (Murch, 2015). The War on Drugs is directly linked to the phenomenon of mass incarceration, understood by Donna Murch as the "largest state-building enterprises of the late twentieth century" (2015, p. 163). "Starting in the 1980s, the incarceration rate of drug offenders increased by an astonishing 1,100% over the next two decades, resulting in just under a half million drug-war inmates by 2003" (Tucker *et al.*, 2010, p. 171).

Acknowledging the macro social forces that produce the inner city and its living conditions is a first step to understanding how they shape the experiences of young African American men along modes of marginalization and criminalization. Among the diverse macro social forces that I have introduced, the following should also be considered: "residential segregation, employment discrimination, educational inequality, police brutality, environmental racism, and the disproportionate effects of economic restructuring and deindustrialization" (Vargas, 1996, p. 35).

Because they have directly addressed those issues in a critical way, gangsta rappers have been understood by many scholars as politically commenting on those realities, their systemic production, and the mainstream discourse perception of them (Cross, 1993; Kelley, 1994; Chang, 2005). This explicit political dimension of gangsta rap is resonating with hypermasculinity and its implicit political meaning that we discussed above. However, essentially focusing on the diverse hypermasculine elements of gangsta rap, the attention of mainstream media and the moral panic that it triggered, failed to recognize the

genre's political dimensions. In line with this mainstream perception, gangsta rap served as an argument for claims that poverty and living conditions in the inner city had roots in African American culture rather than in systemic inequality (Queeley, 2003).

4. Hypermasculinity and Hegemonic masculinity

It is necessary to distinguish hypermasculinity from the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Theorized by Raewyn Connell, the concept refers to practices among men that legitimize patriarchy and perpetuate the domination of men over women as well as subordinate men, who, because of their race, class, sexuality or social role are unable to conform to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). Largely criticized by scholars over the years, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has become understood as a "culturally idealized form" (Donaldson, 1993, p. 645) thought of as dynamic, constantly evolving, and to some extent, must be considered as situational. Therefore, hypermasculinty is not necessarily an example of hegemonic masculinity. If they appear to be directly linked, neither one of them can be equated to the other. In addition, an intersectional approach can't afford to take this association for granted and requires contextualizing hypermasculinity in its intersections with class and race.

The intersectional approach we have chosen here allows us to take a careful look at gangsta rap's hypermasculinity. In the particular case of gangsta rap, hypermasculinity should be understood in relation to young African American men's lack of political and economic power and specific conditions of marginalization in the inner city. Here, although hypermasculinity appears as a way to negotiate subordinate masculinities by reinstating a sense of legitimacy and power, it does so by adopting patriarchal values (Hall, 1997). Therefore, we can't afford to ignore its subordinating qualities that reproduce domination over women, other masculinities and gender non-conforming people (Crenshaw, 1991).

5. Conclusion and openings

This paper has tried to study hypermasculinity in gangsta rap by locating the conditions of its production within the systemic inequality of postindustrial of South L.A. and the historical oppression of African Americans in the United States. It has done so by taking an intersectional approach where hypermasculinity is understood at the intersections of gender with class and race. It hopes to participate to a more complex treatment of social hierarchy. As it has focused in particular on men, it carries an obvious flaw: not taking enough into account women's agency in the production of masculinities (Connell, 2005). Additionally, by focusing on hypermasculinity, it contributes to take it for granted in gangsta rap and fails to discuss less visible/audible aspects of the genre and its diversity, which sometimes can be in opposition with hypermasculinity (Oware, 2011). Furthermore, by focusing on the conditions of production of hypermasculinity it neglects to study the representations in which Black underclass masculinities are involved and how gangsta rappers negotiate them. As representations of African American men have been an essential part of popular American culture for centuries, it should be placed at

the center of the reflection. Especially given the huge investment of the music industry in gangsta rap and the majority of its consumers being white middle-class teenagers (Keyes, 2004). Then, we should ask, how does gangsta rap carry reductive and objectified representations of African American inner-city men? How these representations play along the criminalization of young African American men by mediating their bodies as sites of fear (White, 2011)? How representations of Black hypermasculinity, appropriated by young white suburban men serve as a way to shape their own masculinities? How these representations play with age-old stereotypes of Black men as brutes? As noted by Stuart Hall, "the problem is that Blacks are trapped by the binary structure of the stereotype, which is split between two extreme opposites" (Hall, 1997, p. 262). With that in mind it is crucial to see how such representations and their performance in a genre such as gangsta rap are rooted in American white hegemony and patriarchy. This emphasis reveals the importance of taking a relational approach to race and racial representations.

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