

Theorizing Power, Identity and Hip Hop: Towards a Queer, Intersectional Approach

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Power and identity are central themes in hip hop scholarship, whether it is race and class that are in focus, or gender and sexuality, or a combination. Yet power and identity are contested concepts that are used with varying theoretical outlooks. This article seeks to outline some key differences between different understandings of power and identity, and their consequences for the study of hip hop. Four models are identified. In the expression model, hip hop is understood as the cultural expression of a specific group. In contrast, the catalogization model and the two-plane model both acknowledge the existence of different dimensions of power and identity, but treat these either in a list-like manner or according to a base-superstructure dichotomy. The limitations of these two models can be overcome, it is suggested, by turning to the complexity model, which builds on contemporary feminist, intersectionality and queer theory.

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Introduction

In the last few decades, hip hop has grown into a popular subculture and genre of popular music worldwide. Consequently, *hip hop studies* are no longer limited to the U.S. (Forman & Neal, 2012). Instead, they now address hip hop culture and related aspects in many different contexts. This international and transdisciplinary area of research includes not only analysis of hip hop aesthetics – whether in the form of rap, dj:ing, graffiti or breakdance – but significantly, also addresses aspects such as linguistics (Alim, Ibrahim, & Pennycook, 2009; Terkourafi, 2010) and pedagogy (Porfilio & Viola, 2012). Many scholars of hip hop would agree that hip hop is, at least in some important ways, about power and identity. This can entail possibilities of empowerment for groups that are disadvantaged in terms of race, ethnicity or class, as well as the often contradictory politics of gender and sexuality within hip hop. Yet, power and identity are contested concepts that defy any self-evident definitions, and whose use varies with the disciplinary and theoretical attachments of scholars. In this text, I want to consider some of the most widely circulated models of theorizing power and identity, and their consequences for the study of hip hop. Conversely, the richness of rap lyrics, in terms of discursive statements about identities such as race, class, gender and sexuality, renders the hip hop genre a useful case for illuminating some of the benefits and shortcomings of available theoretical repertoires about power structures and related identity formations.

I identify four different models of theorizing power and identity. *The expression model* treats hip hop as the cultural expression of one specific group such as blacks or youth, and is often used in hip hop studies. *The catalogization model* recognizes different identities and distinguishes between them in a list-like manner, and is often used in masculinity studies. *The two-plane model*, often used in critical social theory, also recognizes different identities, but divides these into more structural and enduring forms on the one hand, and more fluid ones on the other. Finally, *the complexity model* of feminist, queer and intersectional scholarship treats power and identity as performed, negotiated, and intersecting. It is the theoretical resources of this model tradition that I have found most helpful and convincing in theorizing power and identity within and beyond hip hop.

The expression model

The first model I want to consider is what I call *the expression model*. The basic assumption here is that hip hop can be usefully understood as the cultural expression of one specific cultural group. This model is widespread in hip hop studies, and the view is typically manifested in book titles such as “Black noise” (Rose, 1994) or “The vinyl ain’t final – Hip hop and the globalization of Black popular culture” (Basu & Lemelle, 2006). Here, hip hop is designated as black music and culture. What does it mean to say that hip hop is black? Describing hip hop as the cultural expression of a group – black Americans – has the merit of situating hip hop in a tradition of black cultural expression in the U.S., an important move which hip hop scholars such as Michael Eric Dyson have emphasized:

Rap expresses the ongoing preoccupation with literacy and orality that has characterized African-American communities since the inception of legally coerced illiteracy during slavery. Rap artists explore grammatical creativity, verbal wizardry, and linguistic innovation in refining the art of oral communication. (Dyson, 2004, p. 66)

The discussion on ‘black music’ is complex and revolves in different ways around the importance of naming race on the one hand, and the theoretical perspectives associated with anti-essentialism, creolization and hybridity on the other (Gilroy 1993, Radano 2003). While situating hip hop in a history of racial politics is important, I would argue that there is a drawback to the idea of describing hip hop as the cultural expression of one group – the need to delineate this very group. In fact, in the U.S. there have always been a variety of participants involved in hip hop music and culture (McFarland 2008). From this perspective, describing hip hop as black could render a variety of other participants invisible. However, this conclusion is not inevitable, and as Imani Perry points out, to say that hip hop is black is not necessarily to say that it does not have multiracial origins and influences. For Perry, hip hop is black music because

(1) its primary language is African American Vernacular English (AAVE);

(2) it has a political location in society distinctly ascribed to black people, music, and cultural forms; (3) it is derived from black American oral culture; and (4) it is derived from black American musical traditions. (Perry, 2004, p. 10)

Even if this argument were accepted for the U.S. case – to what extent is this view valid regarding hip hop in its myriad expressions around the world? While few would deny that hip hop in important respects stems from black American cultural traditions, it would be reductive to describe hip hop outside the U.S. as merely derived from its American counterpart. Tony Mitchell, for instance, suggested almost 15 years ago that hip hop is

just as ‘rooted in the local’ in Naples, Marseilles, Amsterdam, the Basque region, Berlin, Sofia, Sydney, Auckland, or the Shibuya district of Tokyo as it ever was in Compton, South Central Los Angeles, or the South Bronx. (Mitchell, 2001, p. 10)

John Hutnyk, on the other hand, argues that the discussion on American origins vs. European originality is unproductive, and should give way to different sorts of questions:

Conventional discussions of hip hop in Europe begin with ritual acknowledgement of the derivation of the form from the United States, soon followed by equally ritual insistence that local versionings of hip hop have their own character and autonomy. [...] it may be that a more interesting analysis would address something other than provenance or autonomy (Hutnyk, 2006, pp. 119-120)

Thus, hip hop across the world draws on influences from local *and* American traditions. In many contexts, hip hop is not dominated by black participants, and its language is not primarily English at all, whether vernacular or not, and so does not fulfill Perry’s abovementioned criteria for being black music.

Moreover, since hip hop participants differ not only in their racial positions, but also in terms of other identities such as class, gender, sexuality and age, describing hip hop as black gives racial identity a centrality over other identities, which may or may not be the case empirically. Similarly, labeling hip hop as a “youth culture” follows

the same expression model. In this case, it is an age segment which is foregrounded, which renders invisible participants from other cohorts, as well as the many different and intersecting identities which members of a particular age group also occupy.

In sum, the expression model takes as its fundamental assumption that hip hop is the cultural expression of one particular group. While this strategy is useful in highlighting important emphases among participants, it is also reductive in casting *a significant minority* of hip hop participants as representative of the whole genre/subculture. This is why Nira Yuval-Davis, in her analysis of social justice movements, argues that the notion of the representative should give way to that of the advocate (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Since any one group or category consists of asymmetrically positioned members, the idea of representatives runs the risk of reinforcing intragroup power hierarchies by promoting some bodies more than others. In my view, hip hop scholars should therefore be wary of buying into the expression model, in order not to construct other participants as marginal. The Swedish white female rapper Heli, for instance, engages in her lyrics with the somatic norm for a proper hip hop subject:

Hip hop is made by black guys in the USA, fuck that
Being a paradox, a rapping white mom
(Heli, “1:stå”, 2002, my translation)

The catalogization model

We have seen that expression models are important for highlighting the history and context in which hip hop takes place, but also that the need to specify the group of which hip hop culture is taken to be the expression and property, involves the risk of reducing the complexity of identity formations within hip hop to a single master category. I now want to turn to another model, which is often found in research on men and masculinity, and which I call *the catalogization model*.

Critical studies on men and masculinity have developed as a transdisciplinary branch of gender studies since the 1980s. Previously, questions about men and masculinity had primarily been theorized in terms of a “male sex role” (David & Brannon 1976). The publication of Raewyn Connell’s work, and in particular *Masculinities*, entailed

a shift of perspectives and terminology (Connell 1995). One of the central features of Connell's work is the recognition that there is not only one male sex role, but rather different masculinities, in the plural. Connell's theory distinguished between "hegemonic masculinity" as the dominant patriarchal form of masculinity, "complicit masculinity" as a less explicit form of masculinity that nevertheless has most of the advantages of gender inequality, "subordinated masculinity" which refers to non-heterosexual configurations of masculinity, and "marginalized masculinity" denoting unprivileged forms of masculinity in terms of race, ethnicity and/or class. This fourfold division of masculinities has been widely popular, and in addition, the idea of "masculinities" in the plural has led researchers to invent a series of varying masculinities in different contexts. I call this idea of differences in the plural *the catalogization model*.

Compared to the expression models with their mono-categorical orientation, the catalogization model has the advantage of recognizing multiplicity. There is not just one form of masculinity, since there are variations associated with the identities of sexuality, race and class. However, how effective is this model in accounting for the ways these identities intersect? According to C.J. Pascoe, while such models acknowledge diversity, they have also

spawned an industry of cataloguing "types" of masculinity: gay, black, Chicano, working class, middle class, Asian, gay black, gay Chicano, white working class, militarized, transnational business, New Man, negotiated, versatile, healthy, toxic, counter, and cool masculinities, among others. (Pascoe, 2007, p. 8)

In a study of rap lyrics in Sweden, it was found that a catalogization model can lead to an unfortunate reification of differences (Berggren, 2013). The study showed that rap lyrics by male artists often contain a radical critique of class and racial inequalities in Swedish society, but simultaneously tend to reinforce normative notions of gender and sexuality. The use of a catalogization model here would have implied conceptualizing this phenomenon in terms of a marginalized masculinity, or possibly an urban masculinity, given the stress on geographical belonging in many lyrics. However, the analysis revealed that the normative notions of gender and sexuality were circulated

widely among white male rappers as well. While there were important differences in terms of class and race positions and experiences, norms of gender and sexuality seemed in the study to a large extent to be shared across such differences. Against this backdrop, the idea of different *masculinities* appears less helpful. I would argue that the catalogization model here under-communicates how gender norms can be shared across other identities, and that this is not a very productive theoretical resource for thinking about how different forms of power and identity are intertwined in complex ways.

In sum, a catalogization model takes as its fundamental assumption that different identities can be understood in terms of a catalogue of different forms. While this idea has the overall merit of recognizing the existence of different identities, it is also reductive in slotting complex intersections into a neat catalogue of entries that are assumed to be mutually exclusive.

The two-plane model

Having considered the expression model of hip hop studies as well as the catalogization model from masculinity studies, I now turn to a model of understanding power and identity often associated with critical social theory. I refer to this way of thinking as *the two-plane model*. The popularity of this model stems in part from Karl Marx's influential distinction between base and superstructure. The core idea is that different forms of power and identity exist, and that these are best understood in terms of a binary division between the structural and enduring forms of power on the one hand, and the more fluid and secondary ones on the other. For Marx, it is class which is the primary and structural identity, located in the economic base of a society. Other identities and power dimensions are not necessarily non-existent or unimportant, but are understood to be superstructural, that is not primarily related to the economic base of society.

The strict distinction between the economic base on the one hand and the social, political and cultural sphere on the other has been criticized for a long time. Max Weber argued that social and cultural norms are not ephemeral to the economy, but are instead prominent factors in shaping economic activity (Weber, 1992); the Social

Democratic “revisionism” of Marxism was essentially directed against the assumption that politics cannot transform economic arrangements (e.g. Berman, 2006); and the rise of post-Marxism similarly rejects the idea that the ‘economic’ can constitute a ‘base’ unaffected in the last instance by social, cultural and political forces (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001).

However, despite this well-known critique, the two-plane model remains influential. While the base-superstructure dichotomy may today be less popular in itself, the very idea of two different planes keeps returning in influential theories of power and identity. The cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, distinguishes between class position and cultural meanings in his influential work *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984). Cultural meanings become the means through which the end of class distinction operates, and the content of cultural expressions is thus rendered secondary to struggles between groups having different forms of capital. This is particularly unfortunate in relation to hip hop, where rap lyrics are often rife with statements about power structures and formations of identity, not least concerning class, race, gender and sexuality. In addition, Bourdieu characterizes music as a cultural form which, compared to drama or theatre, appears as ‘purer’ from its social embeddedness (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 19). This is a view which is arguably less appealing for hip hop scholars engaged with the connections between music, power and identity. In contrast, Jeffrey Alexander has developed a “strong program” of cultural sociology (Alexander, 2003). He insists that cultural meanings be taken seriously on their own terms, and not reduced to a simple derivative of an underlying social structure. However, while being at pains to stake out cultural meanings as a legitimate object of sociological inquiry, Alexander maintains the strict distinction between structure and culture. While these authors may thus be seen as adversaries on one level, Bourdieu and Alexander nevertheless share a fundamental commitment to the two-plane model: it is either “power, not culture”, or “culture, not power”, and never culture and power, or power in and through culture.

In political philosophy, on the other hand, Nancy Fraser has developed a theory of justice which differentiates between

redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 1995). Class is understood to be about redistribution, and sexuality about recognition, whereas gender and race occupy a more ambiguous and bivalent position. Thinking about different dimensions of power, justice and oppression can be an important and fruitful exercise, although often relatively inconclusive, and Iris Marion Young, for instance, distinguishes between five “faces” of oppression (Young, 1990). However, employing a binary distinction between redistribution and recognition reinforces a two-plane model which in effect distinguishes between base and superstructure and relies on speculation about how different identities can be distributed onto this scheme. In popular debate, this model recurs in numerous shapes, for instance by Marxist feminists who situate class and gender as structural but treat race and transgender issues as superstructural “identity politics”.

Judith Butler has been perhaps the most important critic of some of the modern day base-superstructure incarnations. Where Bourdieu maintains a distinction between social positions (class) on the one hand and cultural expressions on the other, Butler argues that Bourdieu “fails to take account of the way in which social positions are themselves constructed through [...] performativity” (Butler, 1997, p. 156). And where Fraser distinguishes between the two planes of redistribution and recognition, that is between economy and culture, Butler contends that the economic is always already infused with that which is taken to be cultural, or to put it more precisely, that it is not possible to draw a stable line of demarcation between the two (Butler, 1998).

Similarly to Butler’s arguments, the version of cultural studies developed by Stuart Hall in *Representation* offers a much more productive way of handling questions of power and identity, where we are not asked to choose between one or the other (Hall, 1997). Hall draws on Foucault’s ideas on discourse, and applies them to the arenas of popular culture – such as hip hop – which allows us to investigate how power and identity are constructed, sustained, but also subverted and challenged discursively. How this can be done will be considered next as *the complexity model*.

The complexity model

To recapitulate the argument so far, the expression model presumes an already constituted group of which hip hop is the cultural expression, a group which is often described in terms of a single category such as “black” or “youth”. The catalogization model and the two-plane model mark a shift in that they recognize the existence of plural dimensions of power, of different identities and positions. However, this recognition is in both cases too speedily coded into a conceptual scheme. Either it is in the form of a list of different “masculinities” or it is in the form of a reinvented base-superstructure dichotomy, both of which are unnecessarily rigid. At this point, one may add that the expression model could also be considered as a form of two-plane model, where the group is constituted on one plane and its expressions operate on another.

What could a better model look like? It would a) treat cultural groups and identities not as always already in place, but rather as socially and culturally accomplished in an open-ended process, and b) recognize that social positions are multiple and affect one another in complex ways that cannot always be reduced to either a list of differences, or to a simple economy–culture dichotomy. These are the key assumptions of *queer theory* and *intersectionality*, the fusion of which I will refer to here as *the complexity model*.

Intersectionality and queer theory have become two of the most important features of feminist theory in the last fifteen years, although they both have longer histories. They both involve a critique of the sorts of feminist theory which neglects consideration of the power dimensions of race and class (intersectionality) and sexuality (queer theory). They are also both used in what could be called a primary as well as an extended sense. The concept of intersectionality was developed within black feminism in the USA in order to highlight the structural location of black women as marginalized in relation to both a white-dominated feminist movement and a male-dominated anti-racist movement (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990). The primary sense of intersectionality, then, refers to critical analysis foregrounding the lived experience of non-white women in different settings, and theorizes the interrelated nature of primarily gender, race and class (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Davis, 1981). In recent years, intersectionality has also acquired an

extended sense, and is often used to denote critical analyses which take into account the intersections of two, three or more power structures or identity categories. The use of intersectionality in the extended sense has both been cherished as “the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far” (McCall, 2005, p. 1771), and criticized for once again marginalizing the group of black women which the very concept of intersectionality was designed to foreground (Crenshaw, 2011).

Queer theory developed out of an encounter between lesbian- and gay studies and poststructuralist theory (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1985). Central here is the critique of compulsory heterosexuality as a system of power operating both in society at large and within feminist thought. Furthermore, queer theory insists that gender and sexuality categories are not given, stable and universal, but on the contrary, are socially constructed, performatively accomplished and permanently contested. The primary sense of queer theory, then, refers to a critical analysis which reveals how the taken for granted nature of gender and sexuality categories are in fact unstable and accomplished. In a study of rap lyrics in Sweden, queer theory was used to interpret the use of expressions such as “no homo” (Berggren, 2012). It was found that male rappers often expressed much more love for their male peers than for women, while simultaneously constructing themselves as not homosexual. This was interpreted as an ideological dilemma, which had to be managed through repeated boundary work. It is in response to this that we can see the point of expressions such as “no homo” – they operate as a *straight inoculation* which places a subject within the boundaries of heterosexuality despite the prevalent expression of same-sex desire.

In an extended sense, to queer something has also come to mean the troubling of binary categories in general, by showing how they are always already blurred and unstable. For instance, “queering ethnicity” may refer not only to analysis of how ethnicity intersects with sexuality, but also to a critical analysis which calls into question the presumed stable nature of ethno-racial identities (El-Tayeb, 2011). There are different opinions on the pros and cons of using the word ‘queer’ in its primary and extended senses, but both uses are by now fairly well-established.

Sometimes, intersectionality is presented as an analysis of race, gender and class, whereas queer theory is presented as an analysis of gender and sexuality. In these instances, one could say that intersectionality is given a straight genealogy, and queer theory a white one. However, this division has become increasingly obsolete. Important contemporary theorists such as Sara Ahmed and Fatima El-Tayeb incorporate both strands of thinking, and have developed approaches that are both queer and intersectional (Ahmed, 2006; El-Tayeb, 2011) – and their work also points to earlier work that had similar engagements (Lorde, 1984). I thus refer to the combination of queer theory and intersectionality as *the complexity model*.

How does the complexity model of feminist, queer and intersectional theory relate to hip hop? These are by no means unrelated. In fact, Kimberle Crenshaw's groundbreaking article on intersectionality from 1991 featured analysis of the obscenity charges against black male U.S. rap group 2 Live Crew (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw took issue with those who in the surrounding debate focused only on gender and failed to see the racism involved in pinpointing a specific black group for their sexism – but made equal criticism of those who were critical of the racism but failed to take the sexism into account. An intersectional approach was called for which could address the complexity of these intersecting power dimensions. Similarly, other prominent intersectional and queer scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Fatima El-Tayeb have written about hip hop (El-Tayeb, 2011; Hill Collins, 2006). There is also a significant amount of hip hop feminist research in the U.S. which makes use of various forms of intersectional analysis (Durham, 2013; Pough, Richardson, Durham, & Raimist, 2007; Rose, 1994). Queer theory has been less prominent, but Andreana Clay, for instance, develops an instructive analysis of how queer women of color make use of black masculinity on the queer dance floor (Clay, 2007). This is a complex way of analyzing power and identity as involving several different dimensions that cannot be reduced to simplistic models – as would be the case with the expression, catalogization and two-plane models. On the one hand, I believe that this more complex, feminist, queer and intersectional approach deserves wider appreciation in hip hop research, not least outside the U.S.A. On the other hand, I would also argue that the complex intersections within the hip hop genre/

culture show us the limitations of some of the most widely circulated models of theorizing power and identity, and thus demonstrate the benefits of a queer, intersectional approach to power and identity in general.

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