

Diversifying Syllabi 2017 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (1-2 pages max.)

Article/Essay Title: On The Question of Who's Out in Hip Hop

Author: CR Snorton

Readability: Easy/Moderate/**Difficult**

This piece is really intricately written and, I would image, challenging for readers at the undergraduate level. However, the use of examples helps make the piece more concrete.

Thesis:

The question “Who is out in hip hop?” is symptomatic of a larger move to simultaneously confine and make visible black gender and sexuality. To resist being put in the “glass closet,” some black hip hop artists navigate media encounters by engaging in tactics of “plasticity”—not conforming to dominant respectability politics or norms. This preserves “black private geographies and interiorities” (299).

Key Definitions:

Glass Closet: A metaphor that captures the way in which black gender and sexuality is “subject to hypervisability and confinement.” This state “characterizes the viscerally public experience of black life” (293).

Plasticity: Snorton uses the metaphor of plasticity to explain the ways in which black celebrities negotiate and evade being pinned with regard to sexual orientation. Moving from “glass to plastic” captures how some black celebrities are able to dodge being placed in the “glass closet.” This move engenders space for black private life.

Brief Summary:

We should read the question “who is out in hip hop?” as symptomatic and an expression of ideology. It helps reinforce both the stereotype that black people are (1) homophobic, meaning regressive, pre-modern, or anti-modern and (2) “So lascivious as to be unable to constrain any imaginable sexual proclivities” (284). The question also carries with it an implicit “solution” to the problem which is that “Black people just need to come out” (284). This masks a “more insidious problem: the calling for greater surveillance and regulation of black bodies” (284).

The question “who’s out in hip hop?” gets media coverage. The question represents a fixation on black artists’ which can be thought of as a need to “display” or “surveil” black public figures, “particularly along the lines of interrogation about sex” (289). In other words, this question seeks to place black celebrities in “the glass closet.”

The question “who’s out in hip hop” and the media coverage that goes with it also carries with it a politics of lgbtq pride, which can be understood as respectability politics: norms about how to behave in public. The application of these respectability norms to black celebrities represents yet another way that black bodies are regulated. The question implies a need to abide by these norms of visibility and respectability.

The media coverage of Sydney Bennett AKA Syd the Kid exemplifies this phenomenon well:

“In an interview with Bennett, published on LA Weekly’s blog, she explains, “I decided to do it because I wish I had someone like that [an openly gay female artist] while I was coming up. . . . I put myself out there because I’m sick of people asking. . . . Do I look straight to you? Shit, you got your answer—go watch ‘Cocaine.’”²⁰ The use of brackets in the first part of Bennett’s explanation syntactically represents the media’s figuring of Syd’s public image. The sentence does not require the addition to make sense, but the supplementary phrase, “an openly gay female artist,” allows Bennett’s comments to cohere with a popular understanding of the politics of queer visibility.” (288)

Through an analysis of additional case studies (examples of artists) Snorton suggests that one way to avoid the glass closet—that is, to defy the demand to be both (1) hypervisible and (2) confined—is to adopt a “blackness-as-plastic tactic.”

Examples of this tactic are Brandon McCartney/LilB who seems to suggest “I’m very gay, but I love women. I’m not attracted to men in any way. I’ve never been attracted to a man in my life. But yes I am gay, I’m so happy. . . . I’m a gay, heterosexual male”(53) “Gay and heterosexual, black and queer, Lil B draws on the signficatory potentialities of hip hop to think through the coupling of (pan) optics and (pan)sexualities that subtend the representational field of blackness” (295).

Nicki Minaj’s alter egos also can be read as a version of this “plastic” tactic. These alter egos “complicate any readings of the Minaj’s sexual identity, each alter ego presumably has his/her/hir own set of gender and sexual identifications” (295).

Plasticity tactics of this sort can therefore aid in the “cultivation of black private geographies and interiorities” and challenge the surveillance of black bodies (299).

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

Article/Essay Title: “On The Question of Who’s Out in Hip Hop”

Author: CR Snorton

Possible Applications:

Philosophy of Race Class

Philosophy of Feminism Class

Philosophy of Sexuality Class

Also useful in the following contexts:

- Oppression
- Power
- Stereotypes
- Double consciousness
- Identity
- Interpellation
- Critical theory
- Foucault

Complementary Texts/Resources:

- First 10 pages of: Kukla, Rebecca. “Talking back: Monstrosity, Mundanity, and Cynicism in Television Talk Shows.”
- Lindemann Nelson, Hilde. “Identity and Free Agency.”
- MacLachlan, Alice. “Closet Doors and Stage Lights.”
- Spade, Dean. “Mutilating Gender.”
- Collins, Patricia Hill. “Controlling Images and Black Women’s Oppression.”
- Curry, Tommy. “Hyper-Masculinity, the Buck, and the Impossibility of Physical Disability in the Black Male Body.”
- Ladelle, McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization*.
- Bettcher, Talia Mae. “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion.”
- Foucault
- Interviews by Nicki Minaj, etc.
- Insurgent Agency
- Strategic Ignorance

Possible Class Activities:

- Watching interviews in class and discussing

- Consider respectability politics and visibility politics by watching content put out by LGBTQ+ organizations on coming out; talk about what those organizations are promoting
- Rick Rant video on coming out and calling others to do the same
- Harvey Milk campaign; “You owe it to others to come out”
- Have students Google “Who’s out in hip hop?” and discuss results
- Think about how posing questions in different ways puts expectations on people to behave differently. Watch videos that illustrate this. (Example: BuzzFeed video on if straight people had to come out like gay people). What kinds of narratives do the questions bring out?