

Checking black nationalists and rainbow coalitions

by Katharina Morawek

Sixteen years have passed since Jamaican dancehall artist Buju Banton re-released *Boom Bye Bye* - an anti-homosexuality song penned when he was fifteen-years old, which lyrically promotes the killing of gay men.

This and other so-called "Murder Music" triggered protest campaigns by international gay and lesbian rights organisations in the 1990s and 2000s, leading to pickets, the cancellation of concerts, and the *Reggae Compassionate Act*. In 2004, the year Banton found his concerts banned in Germany, the founder member and speaker of *J-Flag* (Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays), Brian Williamson, was discovered brutally murdered in his home in New Kingston.

Incidents like this weave together in popular consciousness to form a history of homophobic Dancehall and Reggae music that is inherently violent. This tendency discharges itself further into the witch-hunt for "sexist and homophobic Hip Hop". The field of "gender", "sexuality" and "race" within Hip Hop culture has become a terrain of fierce contestation.

Battle Culture and Male Visibility

A projection of Hip Hop music exists which fetishises black, male, heterosexual bodies (a paradigm that New York-based sociologist and cultural critic Tricia Rose characterises as "highly visible commercial rap").

It is hard to find a social field where the performativity of black masculinity is as prevalent as within Hip Hop, being at the same time a place where obvious forms of homophobia can be located. In music videos, black Hip Hop artists perform images of

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masculinity attached to gangster figures or connected to revolutionary narratives of Black Nationalism. In Rap music, homophobia is embedded in the element of battle culture.

The lyrics and image-policies of these music videos suggest that a "faggot" could never be part of the hood: "for he is not a man". The organisation GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) continuously fight against homophobic expressions in Hip Hop - such as white rapper Eminem at the time of being nominated for the Grammy. "Eminem has the right to say and express himself anyway he wishes," argues Scott Seomin of *GLAAD*. "But the first amendment in this country does not guarantee anyone the right to a record contract."¹

Homophobia in Hip Hop also extends to lesbians, especially those un-interested in displaying lesbian desire for the male gaze. "A woman 'not wanting dick' in a nation where black dick is the only tangible power symbol for black men is seen as just plain crazy", suggests Kenyon Farrow, the editor of New York's *Clamor Magazine*. Is homosexuality really a threat to "black" male identity? In Marlon Riggs' film *Black Is, Black Ain't*, theoretician bell hooks formulates it like this: "If a black thing is really a dick thing in disguise, we're in serious trouble."

The White Matrix and "Black Solidarity"

Industry has a strong hold on the narrow representation of black masculinity in popular culture: a white-dominated music business controls the representation economy, as images of black masculinity and black bodies are distributed and consumed mostly by and to white people. Tricia Rose asks the associated question, "why are white middle-class kids so keen on 'black cool', but would not find it so cool to be considered black themselves?" The social matrix that builds up the backdrop for the described scenario is one of unquestioned whiteness.

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Non-white theoreticians and intellectuals criticise white supremacy not only for determining visual representations of black gender expression but also for shaping the self-image of those who do not define as white (as explored more broadly in Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*).

At the same time, black queer activists stand accused of selling themselves for white gay, lesbian and transgender people and not giving a shit about "black solidarity". For some members of the Nation of Islam, queerness disturbs the imagination of an essential black experience and the architecture of a black community. While Afro-American LGBTIQ people are held responsible for the "destruction" of black families, or the "weakening" of black communities, white queers do not have to deal with their whiteness (and its accompanying privileges). Being queer and being black is twice as difficult for some.

Explicitly queer

The 1997 article "Confessions of a Gay Rapper" - written by an unknown major artist under the pseudonym Jamal X - made it clear that Hip Hop was also queer. "Shock Jock" Wendy Williams was the first to respond to the revelation: she read the text out loud in her gossip-radio show *The Wendy Williams Experience* on WBLS and insisted that Hip Hop was "95% gay". Many rappers asked not to be connected with this statement - Williams ignored the requests but did not pull anyone out of the "closet" against their will.

A public queer Hip Hop history rests on visibility. After the publication of "Confessions of a Gay Rapper", more Hip Hop artists, including Wendy Williams herself, came out about their sexual orientation. Queer Hip Hop crews and labels also emerged; Queercorps, Rainbow Flava Crew, San Francisco's Sugartruck Recordings, and Money Talks Records in New York, all questioned the close interconnections of race, gender and sexuality whilst pushing forward the representation struggle of "blackness".

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The mid 1990s saw mainstream gay clubs re-integrate Hip Hop. No matter how many black divas' voices were mixed over beats and baselines, however, what remained was the appropriation of so-called black music. The intracultural dynamics of LGTB communities is complex and overlapping: DJs who play heterosexual-connoted Hip Hop in gay or queer clubs; queer consumers of mainstream Hip Hop; and explicitly queer Hip Hop scenes are just a few examples where boundaries and scenes blur. "This often involves our incapability to question our relation to heteronormative hegemony and how it shapes our desires", says Juba Kalamka, queer Hip Hop artist and co-founder of the *PeaceOUT* music festival.

Friends and allies?

For a long time, being out and queer in the USA meant to be white and male. There is a deep gulf between the histories and political agendas of the LGBTIQ movements and those of the Black Civil Rights movement - highlighted in the debates around homosexual marriages. For example, the mayor of New Paltz, Jason West, announced in 2004 that he would perform same-sex weddings - despite a state law barring them - by invoking the Civil Rights Movement: "The people who would forbid gays from marrying in this country are those who would have made Rosa Parks sit in the back of the bus."² That same year, San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom compared the act of issuing 4,000 same-sex marriage licenses to the actions of Parks.

"It's these comparisons that piss black people off", replies queer activist Kenyon Farrow in his much-read article "Is Gay Marriage Anti-Black?":

While the anger of black heteros is sometimes expressed in ways that are in fact homophobic, the truth of the matter is that black folks are tired of seeing other people hijack their shit for their own gains, and getting nothing in return. Black

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non-heteros share this anger of having our blackness and black political rhetoric and struggle stolen for other people's gains. The hijacking of Rosa Parks for their campaigns clearly ignores the fact that white gays and lesbians who lived in Montgomery [Alabama] and elsewhere probably gladly made many a black person go to the back of the bus.³

Such mainstreaming policies conceal the fact that whiteness is connected with privileges that, especially in the United States of America, are built upon racist injustice.

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Notes

The text is a revised version of an article originally published in *MALMOE* magazine (2006:29).

¹ Scott Seomin quoted in "Eminem's Grammy Glory", *BBC News*, 22nd February 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/1183589.stm>

² Ross Van Metzke, "USA gay groups mourn death of Rosa Parks", *Pink News*, 25th October 2005, <http://gay.pinknews.co.uk/news/articles/2005-143.html>

³ Kenyon Farrow, "Is Gay Marriage Anti-Black?", Personal Website, 5th March 2004, <http://kenyonfarrow.com/2005/06/14/is-gay-marriage-anti-black/>