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Linguistic creativity and the production of cisheteropatriarchy: A comparative analysis of improvised rap battles in Los Angeles and Cape Town

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a comparative analysis of the creative, improvised linguistic performances of gender, race and ethnicity by young men in freestyle rap battles in Los Angeles and Cape Town. Employing a long-term ethnographic, discourse analytic approach, we explore how these improvised verbal duels are both constitutive and transformative of social realities. In particular, we illustrate how Hip Hop emcees creatively perform and are performed into gendered and racialized identities in freestyle rap battles in strikingly similar ways across the Atlantic. While these youth, across both contexts, temporarily transform social meanings attached to race and ethnicity in these verbal duels, a more nuanced examination suggests that they challenge some forms of dominance while (re) producing others. Specifically, it is not simply the case that 'Blackness' or 'Colouredness' is dominant in these improvised interactions, but it is a particular kind of Blackness/Colouredness (masculine, working-class, local, street-affiliated and heterosexual) that both challenges White domination as it marginalizes other classed, gendered and sexualized identities. We conclude by making the link between everyday linguistic creativity and the maintenance/subversion of social categories.

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1. Introduction

Recent literature on the globalization of Hip Hop Culture explores how youth around the world have creatively employed global and local linguistic resources to forge local Hip Hop Cultures that speak to their specific contexts and life experiences (Pennycook, 2007; Haupt, 2008; Alim et al., 2009; Terkourafi, 2010; Williams, 2016, 2017). For us, Hip Hop is an important site of creative language practice. By engaging critically with key concepts in sociolinguistics and social theory, we offer an analysis of Hip Hop performances that gives us a valuable, sociolinguistically-informed understanding of linguistic creativity more broadly. In doing so, we present the first comparative analysis of the creative, improvised linguistic performances of gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality by young men in freestyle rap battles and ciphers in Los Angeles (United States) and Cape Town (South Africa). In particular, we illustrate how Hip Hop emcees creatively perform, and are performed, into gendered and racialized identities in freestyle rap ciphers in strikingly similar ways across the Atlantic.

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While these youth, across both contexts, use language and the body to temporarily transform social meanings attached to racial identity, our comparative interactional analysis suggests that they challenge some forms of dominance while (re) producing others. Specifically, it is not simply the case that these youth de-center ‘Whiteness’ while centering ‘Blackness’ or ‘Colouredness’, though this alone is a notable discursive achievement. This creative, progressive disruption of White supremacist ideologies, however, also provides a window into the discursive production of oppressive forms of cisheteropatriarchy—an ideological system that naturalizes normative views of what it means to ‘look’ and ‘act’ like a ‘straight’ man and marginalizes women, femininity, and all gender non-conforming bodies that challenge the gender binary, i.e., how cisheteropatriarchal structures are formed and maintained. Building upon and extending bell hooks’ (2004) analysis of ‘white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’, we argue that while youth in both contexts challenge the dominance of Whiteness, they simultaneously celebrate and reify particular kinds of Blackness/Colouredness at the expense of already marginalized gendered and sexualized bodies.

In line with the goals of this special issue, we conclude by problematizing straightforward links made between linguistic creativity and progressive politics, and emphasizing the role of linguistic creativity in both the disruption *and* maintenance of forms of social oppression. In doing so, we seek to check purely celebratory views of linguistic creativity by exploring how verbal creativity in Hip Hop ciphers can present challenges for any uncomplicated readings of creativity as wholly counterhegemonic or liberatory. Our cross-cultural, cross-generational perspective not only positions freestyle rap battles (which have been so maligned in popular discourse) within the field of human verbal experience, but it also allows us to explore empirically how these verbal genres sometimes set the stage for the production of oppressive forms of creative languaging.

2. Language, race, and masculinity in Hip Hop ciphers

Over the past two decades, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have been re-framing race as a central, theoretical concern (Alim and Reyes, 2011; Bailey, 2000; Bucholtz, 2011; Chun and Lo, 2015; Reyes and Lo, 2009; Roth-Gordon, 2016). This shift in focus has given rise to the field of *raciolinguistics*—‘an emerging field dedicated to bringing to bear the diverse methods of linguistic analysis—discourse analysis, ethnographic linguistic anthropological studies, quantitative variationist sociolinguistics, applied linguistics and language educational analyses, etc. – to ask and answer critical questions about the relations between language, race, and power across diverse ethnoracial contexts and societies.’ (Alim et al., 2016: 27; see Rosa, 2017). Following Makoni et al. (2003), we join a critical mass of scholars committed to theorizing language and race together, paying particular attention to how both social processes mediate and mutually constitute each other.

Importantly for this article, the emerging focus in *raciolinguistics* foregrounds ‘intersectional approaches that understand race as always produced in conjunction with class, gender, sexuality, religion, (trans)national, and other axes of social differentiation’ (Alim et al., 2016: 6). While much of our previous work has examined Hip Hop ciphers specifically with respect to race, our more recent research takes a more intersectional approach, drawing from the well-established research traditions on the articulation of gender (Hall and Bucholtz, 1995) and feminist linguistics (Eckert and McConnell-Genet, 2003), as well as Johnson and Meinhof’s (1997) landmark volume on language and masculinity.

Writing two decades ago, Johnson (1997: 25) called for increased focus and attention to the language of men: ‘What we really need is to know more about the complex role played by “difference” in the construction of “dominance”.’ Johnson concluded that, ‘[t]he study of language and masculinities is not simply one way of exploring such a role’ but that ‘...it [is] difficult to envisage how this can be done *without* looking at men’ (Johnson, 1997: 25; italics in original). Today we live in globalized societies where heterosexual men, in particular, their ideas of being men, and their practices are placed under the spotlight and studied with intense scrutiny (see Shire, 1994; Bourdieu, 2001; McConnell-Genet, 2011; Atanga et al., 2013; Milani and Shaikjee, 2013, etc.). As Milani (2011: 183–4) argues, ‘it is imperative to develop a critical focus on heterosexual men not only in order to grasp the plurality of masculinities, but also to constantly question how, why, and with what linguistic and semiotic means do men produce *cisheteropatriarchy*’.

In this article, we focus on the joint production of race, gender and sexuality in freestyle rap ciphers and battles to highlight the role that these creative verbal duels play in creating, and possibly disrupting, social categories. In these battles, or verbal duels, which often occur in improvisational rhyme ciphers, constituted by and within highly-charged, communal, yet intensely competitive circular arrangements of improvisational rhymers (Norfleet, 1997), participants come together to display their lyrical inventiveness and to share their views of the world. Through these intensely competitive verbal displays, they construct social organization and identities through rhyming practices (Spady et al., 2006; Lee, 2016; Williams, 2017). As pioneer poet-rhymer Abiodun Oyewole of the Last Poets explains: ‘You weave your words in such a way that it’s somewhere in between song and speech, but it’s not a speech and it’s not a song. It’s – you become *you* in your poetry.’ (Fitzgerald, 2005).

Focusing on linguistic creativity, the rap battle and cipher can be productively viewed in terms of the large, cross-cultural and cross-generational literature on verbal duels, such as playing the dozens (Abrahams, 1964), ritual insults (Labov, 1972) and signifying (Mitchell-Kernan, 1974; Smitherman, 1977)—all collected from Black speech communities in the United States nearly half a century ago—and the verbal dueling of the Chamula Indians of Chiapas, Mexico (Gossen, 1976), Italian Sardinian shepherds (Mathias, 1976) and Italian *contrasto* (Pagliai, 2000), the Bono of Central Ghana (Warren and Brempong, 1977), the Guyanese *tantalisin* (Edwards, 1979), the Maltese *spirtu pront* (Herndon and McLeod, 1980), and others discussed in the cross-cultural review by McDowell (1985) and Pagliai (2009).

In this article, we view freestyle rap battles as an extension of the tradition of verbal dueling in Black American speech communities, much the same way that the Turkish boys’ verbal dueling rhymes explored in Dundes et al. (1970) have been

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