

Contextualizing Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose in Late Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Rap Music

Regina N. Bradley

“Cool is so individual that one man’s cool won’t work for other men”
—Guthrie Ramsey

“You might think we all beats and rhymes . . . but you don’t hear me”
—Lil’ Flip, “Game Over”

In considering the cultural significance of rap music in (mis)conceptualizations of American identity, it is important to point out commercialized rap’s attachment to notions of blackness that are presumed irrefutable. Likewise, constructions of racial discourse in popular culture cannot be divorced from the effects of capitalism and enterprise on the framework of a twenty-first century black American experience. While it would be overly simplistic to dismiss commercial rap music as socially and ethically bankrupt due to the mass consumption and (over)production of corporatized black narratives, it is important to identify rap’s corporatization as a mutual investment by both record labels and artists themselves. Employing regurgitated and thus normalized scripts of blackness and black manhood is rewarded by monetary gain and popularity. The artists’ investment in such scripts sustains public visibility and thus relevance. The commercialization of rap music simultaneously enables rap to become a gauge of the post-Civil Rights experience while it becomes commodified and stereotyped. Thus, hip hop is important in providing alternative forms of negotiating the manifestations—visual, sonic, and political—of blackness that are mass consumed by a multi-ethnic audience. One way we can complicate our understanding of the impetus behind rappers’ performance and identity politics is to examine their negotiations of “black cool.” Of particular interest to this essay are the intersections of enterprise and sonic manifestations of black masculine cool in commercial rap music.

Arguably, the most visible script of popular black masculine performance is *cool pose*. Cool pose, the performance and positioning of the black male body as a symbol of coolness, in its present form leans heavily upon stereotypical and often uncontested expectations of black masculinity. A litany of scholarship has theorized how black cool establishes the visible significance and presence of black men in American popular culture. Richard

Majors and Janet Bilson's seminal study *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (1992) broke ground for teasing out manifestations of cool pose in a post-Civil Rights American cultural landscape. Todd Boyd (1997) reads cool pose as a survival mechanism and the antithesis of white masculinity, opining that "cool is about a detached, removed, nonchalant sense of being. An aloofness that suggests one is above it all. A pride, an arrogance even, that is at once laid back, unconcerned, perceived to be highly sexual, and potentially violent" (118). Bell hooks asserts in *We Real Cool* that black cool "was defined by the ways in which black men confronted the hardships of life without their spirits being ravaged . . . it was defined by black male willingness to confront reality, to face the truth, and bear it . . . it was defined by individual black males daring to self-define rather than be defined by others" (138). Donna Britt renegotiates cool as a collective response of black men within this contemporary moment of history, coining the term "brothercool." "Brothercool is demonstrating black men's increasing diversity in income, interest, and attitude. The 'new cool' that black men are forging could be more like the old: deriving its edge from the risks that accompany growth, expansion, the embrace of other culture, the hot breath that signifies *life*" (author's original emphasis). Rebecca Walker, editor of *1000 Streams of Black Cool*, situates black cool as both a gauge and limitation to understanding a contemporary African-American experience: "black cool can be emulated, co-opted, and appropriated, but its ownership can't be denied . . . it's our language of survival. It's our genius . . . Black cool is forever."

Still, composing a working definition of cool pose as it has presented itself in rap music of the last twenty years proves to be an arduous and complex task, considering the numerous, often conflicting intersections of blackness, masculinity, and enterprise that frame commercial rap music. Greg Tate points out the complexities of hip hop, while acknowledging that the convergence of enterprise and hip hop culture construes it as a "hip-hop marketplace":

The omnipresence and omnipotence of hip-hop, artistically, economically, and socially, have forced all within Black America and beyond to find a rapprochement with at least some aspect of its essence. Within hip-hop, however, as in American entrepreneurship generally, competing ideologies exist to be exploited rather than expunged and expelled—if only because hip-hop culture and the hip-hop marketplace, like a quantum paradox, provide space to all black ideologies, from the most antiwhite [*sic*] to the most pro-capitalist, without ever having to account for the contradiction. (7)

The lack of accountability in commercial rap that Tate points out is interpreted through a gender-dominant lens in hooks' discussion, where she argues that "[in] hip-hop packaged for mainstream consumption, many of its primary themes—the embrace of capitalism, the support of patriarchal violence, the conservative approach to gender roles, the call to liberal individualism—all reflect the ruling values of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, albeit in black face" (142).

Similarly, John L. Jackson observes the conflicting and blurred lines of reality and relevance in rap, noting how "hip-hop is considered a rendition of performative blackness with roots in everyday urban struggles against marginalization" (177). If we read Jackson's discussion of authenticity and blackness as a demonstration of black male cool, it appears that commercial rap music situates black men's coolness in a vacuum of violence, materialism, and apathy. The lack of discourse and space available to complicate black men's experiences creates a limited range of experiences by which to "stay black" and "stay real." In keeping with Tate's observations about the hip-hop marketplace, it is important to note that male rappers' and consumers' mutual investment in coolness and black manhood pivots upon restricted access to experiences believed to occur within the black working class.

In a scene from Paul Beatty's novel *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), a satiric coming of age story about a black boy growing up in 1990s California, a fictitious rap group named Stoic Undertakers records a music video to accompany their album, *Closed Casket Eulogies in F Major*. Beatty's narrator Gunnar observes the video shoot:

Carloads of sybaritic rappers and hired concubines cruised down the street in ghetto palanquins, mint condition 1964 Impala lowriders, reciting their lyrics and leaning into the camera with gnarled intimidating scowls.

"Cut!"

The curled lips snapped back into watermelon grins like fleshy rubber bands. "How was that massa? Menacing enough fo' ya?" (77)

Aside from the tensions between black youth and the "just the way it is" mentality Beatty addresses as a problematic gangsta rap aesthetic, even more problematic is the commodification and consumption of such an aesthetic as an uncontested reality in one's daily life. Beatty subverts Mark Anthony Neal's observations about hip hop's initial purposes—that it "allowed [African American youth] to counter the iconography of fear, menace and spectacle that dominated mass-mediated perceptions of contemporary black life" (138). This passage highlights the romanticized inner city aesthetic within

mainstream American popular culture, which creates a fetishistic bubble of black poverty within which African Americans and, specifically, black men are forced to exist. Removal from that commercial bubble of poverty voids one's blackness and manhood, to which Tupac Shakur retorts "they ask me if I'm still down/I move up out the ghetto so I ain't real now?" Gunnar, with his actual experience of residing in the same 'hood where the video was being produced, was dismissed by the video's casting director as "too studious." His lack of a "menacing and despondent" appearance strips him of his visibility, blackness, and, ultimately, masculinity. Because Gunnar does not satisfy expected performance scripts of black masculinity, relevance is forcefully taken from him. This passage not only highlights the pathological implications of gangsta rap, but shows that such pathological performances are, in fact, performances. The rappers' exaggerated "minstrel" response, though satiric, forces the reader to confront his investment in the exaggerated realities of black cultural consumption, and their own investment in such pathological peculiarities. Gunnar, aware of the awkwardness of the video shoot's fetishizing of 'hood life and its parlaying of "hood cool" masculinity, is still invested in the Stoic Undertakers performance.

In part, this is because of the *sound* of the music video itself, the instrumentals inducing Gunnar to "reflexively" vibe to the song: "eyes closed halfway, my shoulders hunched toward the ground, my right foot tapped softly on the stair, and my head began a faintly perceptible bob" (78). At play here is not only the projection of black male coolness by the Stoic Undertakers, but Gunnar's responding cool pose, in which he demonstrates a grimacing authentic black masculinity that is left unavailable to him. Gunnar renegotiates Boyd's definition of cool, detaching himself from his lived experiences in order to sustain the arrogance and menace needed to survive. The disjunctive and peculiar reading of black masculinity Gunnar attempts to negotiate is embodied in his response to sound. His angst about the dismissal of his manhood and the blackness attached to it is lessened through Gunnar's head bobbing to the music. While the rappers' lyrics and bodies may not speak to Gunnar's experiences or anxieties, the sound itself provides him an alternative reading of his blackness, as he falls in rhythm with the music and becomes aware of the commodified worth of his manhood.

Both Gunnar and the Stoic Undertakers' anxieties reflect a dilemma that successful commercial rappers face in balancing lived experiences with expected performance. Jackson argues that such angst is an example of how "hip-hop artists attempt, however fleetingly and unsuccessfully, to challenge external categories of social authentication (2006:177)." He acknowledges a complex and often unarticulated angst that simultaneously fosters and

resists popular conceptions of black manhood. A dearth of traditional race and gender scholarship addressing such anxieties points towards a need for a more unorthodox method of analysis. One pivotal and underutilized approach to such analysis is through sound.

Theorizing Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose

While numerous studies of cool pose have relied on visual and (popular) cultural interpretations of black manhood, there is a paucity of scholarship that addresses the sonic implications of black masculinity. Considering black male coolness as a fulcrum of realness and performance, this article furthers discussion of black male performance by positing a concept of “Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose,” (hereafter HHSCP)—a sonic redressing of black masculine performance in the hypercommodified and commercial space of rap music. HHSCP is the relentless grappling and maneuvering of the type of hip hop Richard Schur (2009) defines as “the world of sounds, images, texts, and commodities through which African Americans and others experience contemporary life” (47). Building upon Schur’s definition of hip hop, HHSCP negotiates complexities of black masculinity through presenting sonic signifiers of black manhood, experiences, and coolness. The crux of my theorizing HHSCP lies in an understanding of sound as musical and nonmusical, and posits a sonically manifested space to interpret and explore aspects of black identity unavailable in other mediums. Framing black men’s narratives through a combination of instrumentals, vocals, and other relevant sounds like grunts, laughter, and wails—HHSCP negotiates signifiers of black male life through a sonic framework. It is the improvisation of black masculinity through sound, making space for the performance of otherwise silenced, supposedly non–normative feelings and expressions. Take, for example, the laugh of Tupac Shakur. Throughout the track “I Ain’t Mad at Cha” Shakur frequently chuckles, at times forcefully. While the expectations of his youth and black manhood at the beginning of the song—“heard ya’ll tearing up shit out there/kicking up dust/giving a mutha fuck”—Shakur gives a subtle but powerful laugh. It embodies the conflicts of Shakur’s reality, pathological impositions, and static performances of his manhood. Because Shakur grappled with and was frequently engulfed in the West Coast gangsta rapper mentality milieu during his career in the early and mid 1990s, he frequently used laughter as a signifier of the peculiarities of commercial black masculinity. Shakur’s laugh simultaneous marked his imposed cool and inability to fully articulate his angst as a black man.

A sonic cool pose framework makes room for teasing out conflicting and peculiar dimensions in which black men exist in the United States.