

## **Part 2: Sex and Sexuality**

### ***There's no b'ness like ho b'ness (50 Cent, P.I.M.P.): deconstructing the hip-hop 'ho'***

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Fashion has long been used to differentiate between prostitutes and 'respectable' members of society. Whether through state enforced sumptuary laws or less formally imposed but equally codified visual markers, the identity category of 'prostitute' has been constructed in such a way as to annul all others, defining the bearer of the title according to their illegality, sexuality and perceived immorality. Nowadays, however, from the mainstreaming of the thong – a garment devised to censor the bodies of 'exotic' dancers – to the street walker chic of wet-look leggings, few areas of Western popular culture today remain impervious to the power of the aesthetics of the sex industry.

Nowhere is this influence more acutely apparent than in the products of contemporary hip-hop culture, wherein the hegemonic hyper-sexualised caricature of woman as 'ho' belies the early emancipatory messages of female artists such as Salt-N-Pepa, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, *et al.* Hip-hop is a multi-million dollar global phenomenon and - when the combined revenues of music sales, fashion labels, films, TV series, advertising endorsements, video games, cars, jewellery and other 'lifestyle' accessories are factored in - it generates more money annually than the GDP of a small country.<sup>1</sup> Its influence can be felt world-wide, with distinct hip-hop cultures evolving on nearly every continent and with the dichotomous gender roles that it endorses embedded in all its various manifestations.

The 'ho', as one of the dominant representations of womanhood discussed by male hip-hop artists, presents a paradoxical image that is both threatening and

desirable; 'hoes' are needed in order to effect a 'pimp' identity and display the 'pimp's' business and sexual prowess, but the seeming avaricious nature of the 'ho' threatens the 'pimp's' financial and social status if not perpetually kept in check. The 'ho's' complex contemporary signification, from the 'pimp's' reliance on her as a defining status symbol to her implied mastery of both male and female sexuality will be examined here. Further, the ambivalent role that high end fashion labels play in indicating both her 'keptness' and her acquisitive autonomy will be explored; for as 50 Cent states in his 2003 single *P.I.M.P.*, 'She got a thing for that Gucci, that Fendi, that Prada, That BCBG, Burberry, Dolce and Gabbana, She feed them foolish fantasies, they pay her cause they wanna'.

### **The 'ho'**

The 'ho' remains a staple component of the mise-en-scène of the mainstream<sup>2</sup> rap video. She is a young, full-figured woman who is to be found gyrating alongside of or draped across men, expensive cars, boats and bikes, sporting scanty but expensive outfits and accessories (see for a classic example Snoop Dogg's 2004 *Drop it like it's hot* featuring Pharrell Williams). For the vast majority of the audience, the 'ho's' symbolism is disconnected from the realities of the sex trade and her specific roots in American urban prostitution and criminality. To an audience not versed in the histories and subtexts of hip-hop culture she is read as one more exotic, ideal 'thing' to be desired along with the diamonds, cars and mansions similarly presented.

The 'ho' is a fantasy figure: a pneumatic, adolescent imagining of an ideal woman; beautiful, predictable and constantly ready to put out. She is an assemblage of desirable body parts that can be gazed upon and symbolically dismembered by the viewer's proxy, the camera, without fear of retaliation. Her personal history,

identity and voice are irrelevant to her function; she is denied individuality or agency as her sole purpose is to serve as constant iteration of the male star's virility and heterosexuality. The beauty and physicality that in another context would make her stand out, here are unremarkable and result in her being positioned as uniform, interchangeable and ultimately disposable. She is presented as an object whose function it is to be displayed, consumed, and discarded as and when her symbolic value starts to wane, i.e. when she starts to age or to otherwise become undesirable.<sup>3</sup>

The 'ho' is fashioned to appear perpetually in oestrus and receptive to male advances. This effect is achieved through a combination of make-up contrived to mimic the signs of sexual excitement - flushed cheeks, moist lips, darkened eyes; hair – a traditional symbol of female sexuality - typically left long and loose to suggest a similar sexual abandon; revealing and/or skin-tight clothing that draws attention to the most erotically coded areas of the body; similarly messaged 'fuck me' heels; and deportment derived from lap dancing moves and designed to stimulate male sexual arousal. Within the narrative of the video the 'ho's' function as a passive, scopophilic spectacle there to be visually consumed while the action goes on around her or to her, but not because of her, is nothing new: what makes the 'ho' stand out amongst myriad other such objectifying images is that she does not just connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. The 'ho' is embedded in visual and aural narratives that consistently impress upon the audience that her sole worth is based in her physical availability; she is presented as the ultimate object of the male gaze, coded to connote repercussion-free *to-be-fucked-at-will-ness*. Even when compared to mainstream pornography, wherein the majority of narratives are constructed to (weakly) suggest that a woman might have a life outside of sex - albeit as housewife,

schoolgirl, secretary, teacher, or nurse, for never let it be said that the porn industry has moved beyond the 1970s in terms of its definition of acceptable female occupations – the hip-hop rap video's representation of the 'ho' is painfully one-dimensional.

The 'ho' embodies a willing, ever-ready, in potentia conquest; however her value lies not in her sexuality but in her docile receptiveness. It is her role as reification of a limited form of male heterosexual desire that defines her, not her own sexual drives or desires. While she might present a facsimile of liberated sexuality, she is, rather, sexualised and, as a result, poses none of the complex negotiations necessary to an equitable inter-subjective meeting of individuals and hence none of the rewards.<sup>4</sup>

For the 'ho', however, sex is framed as a means of social ascension, a tool to be deployed strategically to achieve material ends, and stripped of any promise of intimacy or bonding. In turn, her body is conceived of as social equipment whose principle value is determined according to what it can get rather than the experiences it can have. The 'ho' is encouraged to assess her body against an ideologically defined schema which determines the body's usefulness according to its appearance, i.e. form is its function. This focus upon what the body looks like rather than what it can do, can disrupt an individual's stream of consciousness to the point that it limits their ability to fully engage in other activities (Fredrickson and Harrison 2005). Sex is the obvious example of an activity that is negatively affected by an over-abundance of body consciousness; an individual can either 'live' embodiment or be conscious of being embodied but cannot do both at the same time, and to attempt to do so is to invite dysfunction (Orbach 2009: 116). Therefore the emphasis that is placed upon the appearance of the 'ho's' body means that those who repeatedly

enact the persona can no longer fully experience their own body in action no matter how much sex is performed. The process of vigilantly monitoring her external appearances arguably leads to unstable self-objectification, as the image smothers the real and the 'ho' becomes an unsustainable caricature periodically inhabited by different women.

### **The 'pimp'**

Within the 'ho's' cultural matrix, a facsimile of male heterosexual desire is taken as the benchmark of normality and the 'pimp' is this virile masculinity personified: dominant, violent, self-assured, and volitive, the 'pimp' is the polar opposite of the 'ho's' mute, submissive vacancy. The one-dimensionality of the 'ho' is due largely to her function as avatar of the 'pimp', inasmuch as she is a mannequin on which his values and tastes are displayed and through whom much of his power and material wealth is projected.

The brands that the 'pimp' sports himself and in which he dresses his 'hoes'<sup>5</sup> are often those associated with a specific cultural capital that has previously and, arguably, actively excluded urban black consumers. Gucci, Fendi, Burberry, Tommy Hilfiger, Dolce and Gabbana, Prada, the list goes on, are all brands primarily associated with upper class, white money. Such strategic consumption by the 'pimp' is not limited solely to clothing but extends to the appropriation of other luxury branded items such as Bentley cars, Tiffany diamonds, Cristal champagne, and Courvoisier brandy. This expansion of their consumer base has not always been well received by the brands in question: comments from Cristal's MD, Frederic Rouzaud, in *The Economist* in 2006 led to accusations of racism and the boycotting of the champagne by powerful figures within hip-hop. When asked if Cristal's

association with hip-hop's 'bling' lifestyle could be detrimental to the 230 year-old brand's image Rouzaud replied: 'That is a good question but what can we do? We can't forbid people from buying it. I'm sure Dom Perignon or Krug would be delighted to have the business.' (Harlow 2006). Similarly, and despite its promotion in song lyrics (such as in Foxy Brown's 2002 *Stylin'*), Burberry has largely failed to embrace its popularity within this unanticipated demographic.<sup>6</sup> Burberry's Spring/Summer 2011 campaign featured Jourdan Dunn and Sacha M'Baye as part of what Christopher Bailey, Burberry's Chief Officer, described as an 'evolving campaign that reflects the diversity of [the brand's] broad global consumer' (Casadei 2011); however, they were the first black models to be used in such a prominent position since Naomi Campbell in 2001 and the models used to display its products on the brand's website remained overwhelmingly white.

Conspicuous consumption – the active and overt display of social power through the acquisition of prestige items – is part and parcel of the 'pimp' lifestyle. Likewise conspicuous leisure is reserved for him and him alone, for the 'playa' who's got 'game' and who's not being played by anyone; whose wealth is achieved through playing others and exploiting their weaknesses, whether through drug dealing, the sex trade, or general hustling. Real (i.e. legal) work is presented as being the preserve of 'suckas', which is somewhat ironic given that breaking into the music industry is incredibly hard work, and once there involves working long hours, lots of responsibilities, pressures, and deadlines, and generally working for the 'Man'. This type of contradiction lies at the heart of the 'pimp's' existence: he must work hard, but without being seen to; he must appear borderline sociopathic, rejecting many dominant social mores and sticking it to the 'Man' who's trying to keep him down, while all the time abiding by the restrictive contractual obligations that ensure that his

work reaches his audience. The material wealth thus acquired must be constantly on display but in bragging of his financial worth he identifies himself as a potential target for gold-diggers; yet his sense of self-worth is so constructed around the notion of financial power being the sole means of determining personal value (a construct normalised by the 'Man'), that he cannot conceive of a relationship that is not grounded in some way on an attempt to benefit from his money and influence:

There they go again, one of my lil friends

They don't give a damn how a nigga been

All they wanna know is what I got to give

How much did I spend? What I got to lend?

What I did and what I didn't do for them. (Kevin Gates 2016 *2 Phones*)

So the 'pimp' must constantly appear at the centre of an entourage of men who respect him, as without the perpetual circling of other 'pimps' and 'playas' trying to muscle in on his act, his status as someone to envy would be undefined. Likewise, he must be surrounded by women who desire him, and that must be done explicitly, lest his hyper-muscled, carefully groomed body be seen as inviting a scopophilic reading by the male audience. Therefore the 'pimp' can never be at ease, even when at leisure, as he must always be guarding against those people trying to play him, i.e. everyone.

The 'pimp's' isolation and alienation is concealed beneath a facade of aggressive bravado and barely concealed contempt for anyone not engaged in the 'pimp' lifestyle that he understands:

Need y'all to know that I never needed none of y'all niggas

Fuck bein' all buddy buddy with the opposition

It's like the front of the plane, nigga, it's all business

But I haven't flown with y'all boys in a minute (Drake 2016 *Views*)

and yet he is utterly dependent on the ongoing approval of his law-abiding fans – and their legal purchasing of his product(s) – for his continued power. His utter dependency on people outside of his immediate control and realm of experience makes for an unstable world in which any drop in music and product sales would equate to the ultimate emasculating rejection.

To militate against this threat, the 'pimp' speaks to his audience. The narrative fiction of the music video is like no other, the audience is frequently addressed directly and consistently, eye contact is made and maintained with the audience, and the fourth wall deliberately shattered. Via the direct address, the viewer is positioned as known and knowing interlocutor and as such is invited to attest to the reality of the image presented, a collusive tactic most frequently encountered in news reportage or documentaries. By making the 'invisible guest' (Mulvey 1975, p.844) visible, their otherwise voyeuristic gaze is both normalised and exalted as part of a shared experience. The (male) viewer is repositioned, moved from having to project his repressed desires onto his surrogate, the male performer, into the role of confidant and confederate. In some cases this relationship is equitable, with the artist manifestly seeking the approbation of their audience, but in mainstream rap videos featuring male artists the audience is often actively characterised as inferior and envious, with the low camera angle forcing the viewer into the role of supplicant. However, even in these instances there is a clear presupposition of shared value systems and desires, and in positioning the (male) audience as both threatened and threatening their agency (and hence masculinity) is acknowledged and their fundamental equality established. The 'ho' plays a key role in defusing any tensions that this hierarchical structure might cause inasmuch she is positioned as inferior to



and less powerful than both the 'pimp' and his (male and female) audience; she unites them in their superiority. She is the symbolic whipping-boy on whom all frustrations and fears are enacted: she can never be at leisure.

The 'ho' can never be seen to be at rest for that would imply that she had free time, time where she wasn't concerned with the 'pimp's' interests. None of what she displays belongs to her; everything, including her body, is a symbol of her obligation to the 'pimp', and to be seen to be at leisure would imply that she was no longer in his thrall. The 'ho' also has to be carefully coded so that the 'pimp' isn't seen to be 'keeping' her, for to be seen to be supporting a woman with no financial return would be to suggest that he was being taken advantage of or, worse still, it could suggest an emotional attachment on his part, a point of vulnerability, of weakness, one that could undermine his whole persona. The idea that the 'pimp' might form an emotional, rather than transactional, relationship with a woman is hugely problematic for the style of aggressive machismo that he promotes. Typically this type of bond is reserved for 'baby mommas', women who have had the good fortune of bearing him a child and with whom he is obliged to maintain some form of civil relationship so that he might retain contact with his progeny, who in turn act as constant symbols of his virility and heterosexuality. This type of relationship with the 'pimp' is forever denied the 'ho' for once thus labelled a woman's social utility and cultural capital is capped and, in the words of Ludacris (1999), 'once a ho always'.

And yet despite the emotional distance that he endeavours to maintain, the 'ho' necessarily violates the 'pimp's' self-containment and much lauded independence: she is the means by which he is able to prove his heterosexuality and uphold the affluent lifestyle on which his power and position depend. In this she is both violator and victim, for without the 'ho' or his stable of 'hoes' the 'pimp' is

rendered powerless and so he lives in fear of their abandoning him: 'I holla at a hoe til I got a bitch confused' (50 Cent 2003), because if she were to have time to get her head straight she'd realise that 'Ho make a pimp rich' (ibid), while she gets nothing in return except a physical and psychological battering only to be cast aside when she can't work anymore, 'Man this ho you can have her, when I'm done I ain't gon keep her' (ibid).

To many adult viewers the pimp-ho dynamic and identities that are presented via mainstream hip-hop music videos might appear somewhat crude and unappealing; the gendered performances that they present are so exaggeratedly one-dimensional that their fantastical natures are both obvious and compelling – in the same way that performances offered up by the porn industry are. However, it is worth noting that many of the viewers of these videos are not adults: market researchers identified Young Urban Consumers (YUCs), 'trendsetters and influencers who affiliate with hip-hop culture [and] exercise a powerful impact on the direction of the fashion, media, entertainment and other key consumer-focused industries' (Packaged Facts 2008), as being aged between 12 and 34. The type of music videos that these YUCs watch were singled-out by UK parents as being a negative influence on 'their sons' behaviour towards and perceptions of women and girls' (Bailey 2011: 32), for even as they ape the styles and language of their idols so they endorse their value systems.

While acknowledging that interest in these issues is 'fanned by a sometimes prurient press' (ibid: 41), the same report identified 'sexualised and gender-stereotyped clothing' (ibid: 41) as also being a major source of parental concern. Hip-hop is by no means alone in its promotion of such modes of dress, but its videos do include 'topless lap dancing; strip tease routines; other sexualized breast nudity;

and sexualized violence' (BBFC cited in *ibid*: 34), and in the 'pimp' and 'ho' personas it presents it glamorises and normalises what is effectively a criminal subculture. In a very real sense, in this context '[f]ashion is entirely on the side of violence, the violence of conformity, of adhering to models, the violence of social consensus and the contempt it conceals within it' (Perec 1999:160).

### **The pimp-ho paradigm**

The pimp-ho paradigm is coded as a masculine-feminine binary performance; one that promotes an artificially exaggerated gender-dimorphism via the hard, disciplined, muscled form of the 'pimp' and the soft, seductive body of the 'ho'; and one that continues to equate masculinity with the active subject and femininity with the passive object. Its influence resides in its on-going enactment, rather than in biologically determined roles, and the 'ho' identity is problematic in that it both continues the role historically cast for the prostitute as someone who exists on the periphery of society - an outsider, denied individuality or voice – as well as becoming a normalised and desirable performance of femininity. The sexualised image that the 'ho' presents is an example of consumerism's institutionalised desublimation of desires, wherein a limited male fantasy is given form and in doing so promotes an unhealthy process of self-objectification and sublimation of female sexuality in those who would ape her performance.

The 'pimp's' treatment of his 'hoes' is not simply tolerated, it is implicitly lionised: Any woman who is seen to trade upon her sexuality is considered to have tacitly rescinded her right to freedom from objectification and abuse; the 'pimp' is simply helping to realise the consequences of her actions. This attitude is not restricted to the seemingly exaggerated fantasy world of the music video; a poll

carried out by Amnesty International in 2005 in the UK found that 26% of respondents 'thought a woman was partially or totally responsible for being raped if she was wearing sexy or revealing clothing' (AIUK 2005). The normalising and mainstreaming of the 'ho's' performative identity can be seen to have real-world consequences: young women who mimic the modes of dress and dance on display in hip-hop videos can be seen in clubs and bars around the world and in doing so they are viewed as actively inviting objectification by presenting an image that – in the infamous words of UK High Court Judge James Pickles – is 'asking for it' (Thomas 2007), effectively signalling that they waive their right to say no.

By comparison the 'pimp' identity appears an empowering one with its associated wealth, luxury and personal agency; however in many ways it is as limiting as that of the 'ho', promoting a similarly disrupted relationship with sex and the body and a similarly limiting, prescriptive form of masculinity. Likewise embedded within it is the perpetual threat of violence, not the sexual violence that threatens the 'ho', but the gun and knife crime that is glorified within gangsta and thug rap. Also, where the 'ho's' ongoing value is determined by the 'pimp', the 'pimp' is similarly dependent upon the recognition of his performance by others – his 'hoes', his fellow 'pimps', his audience – for without their acceptance his identity would cease to exist. His audience in particular contribute to the instability of his sense of self: in a variation of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, the 'pimp' doesn't know whether he will continue to exist until he is observed; his persona is neither alive nor dead until it is witnessed, judged and purchased. Despite of all its swagger, the 'pimp' persona is defined by its fearfulness; he understands himself relationally and negatively, according to what and who he's not, rather than what he is, so that when those boundaries are removed his catastrophic isolation is revealed.

The pimp-ho paradigm could arguably be seen as indicative of an endemic and unhealthy neoliberal romanticism present in contemporary mass culture; one that equates personal happiness with the acquisition of material things and mature relationships with romantic infatuation. In a culture that presents self-gratification as a fundamental right and in which the dominant relationship narrative is that of romantic love and perpetual romance, when faced with the realities of an equitable inter-subjective relationship that necessitates compromise and deferment, it is perhaps unsurprising that the brutal simplicity of the pimp-ho dynamic could seem appealing.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to IFPI (2016), in 2016 global recorded music sales generated US\$15 billion and, in the U.S. at least, R&B/Hip-Hop increasingly dominates on-demand audio streams (Nielsen 2017) and is consistently one of the top three biggest selling music genres (Ingham 2015; Caruso 2016).

<sup>2</sup> 'Mainstream' is here taken to refer to the form(s) of hip-hop presented via MTV and other mass-media, non-specialist outlets.

<sup>3</sup> Which is not to suggest that the viewer actively sets out to deny the humanity of the woman cast in the 'ho' role, but the repudiation of her individuality is a defining aspect of the persona and part of what makes her so beguiling, so the focus herein will be on the 'ho's' socio-cultural symbolic function, rather than the agency of the individuals found framed in this manner.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase 'bros before hoes' presents a pithy précis of the problematic and gendered divisions caused by the type of relationship that such empty encounters create, with women positioned as usurpers who threaten the fraternal bond that exists between equals.

<sup>5</sup> The 'ho's' youth is of significance here in offsetting the power implicit in the expensive accessories that she sports: it is taken as read that there is no way for a young woman to achieve material success without utilizing her body to secure some type of influential male sponsor, and part of what makes age 'unappealing' in women is that it starts to disrupt the ownership of these symbols of power.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed Burberry took rapper/producer 'Burberry Perry' to court for trademark infringement over his use of the name and logo (Berrington 2016).

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