Written by HipHopLinguistics ID3337 Friday, 16 February 2007 22:37 -

Hip-Hop Love Songs and the Construction of Socially-Acceptable Urban Identities.

Hip-Hop has historically existed as a male-dominated industry. Being a reflection of urban life and struggle, past Hip-Hop artists have been forced to maintain a certain level of masculinity in order to be accepted by their urban communities. Old school rappers who talked about love were often viewed as soft or corny.

Hip Hop Love

Because of this perception, the existence of love in Hip-Hop is a fairly new concept. As the movement has gained support and recognition throughout the world, love has become an increasingly common theme in Hip-Hop music and poetry.

However, the taboo still exists. Even today, Hip-Hop artists and poets present their love stories in a manner that allows them to maintain socially acceptable identities. Hip-Hop stories about love must still meet the masculine ideology in which the movement is rooted in order to be perceived as real and true.

The purpose of this study is to analyze Hip-Hop love narratives and how artists present these love stories in order to construct socially acceptable identities. I believe personal narratives are closely tied to the construction of identities. It is through personal narratives that people can recount life-changing events, realize socially acceptable behavior and create individual identities.

I have researched and studied several Hip-Hop love songs and analyzed the lyrics as text and poetry. In my research, I have found five common narrative forms used by Hip-Hop poets to tell their love stories: contrasting, perceptual, spiritual, conversational and metaphoric. These five narrative forms are used not only to present the story correctly, but also to maintain positive perception among a society that might view this sensitivity as weak or disrespectable. I plan to demonstrate each of these narrative forms and show how the poets use them to tell their love stories while establishing acceptable identities.

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Contrasting Narrative

One of the most common forms of Hip-Hop love stories is the contrasting narrative. Many artists use Hip-Hop music and poetry to tell stories about the negativity surrounding their urban environments. The contrasting narrative allows the poet to express his or her love story as a contrast to this negativity while constructing an acceptable identity because that negativity is real and understood in urban communities. A great introductory example to the contrasting narrative would be the following passage from Method Man's "All I Need":

Back when I was nothin"

You made a brother feel like he was somethin"

That's why I"m with you to this day boo no frontin"

Even when the skies were gray

You would rub me on my back and say "Baby it"II be okay"

In this song, the poet uses the contrasting narrative to show his love for someone who stood by

In this song, the poet uses the contrasting narrative to show his love for someone who stood by him when "skies were gray." He speaks of his love interest as someone who helped him get through troubled times, thus providing a positive contrast to his negative surroundings.

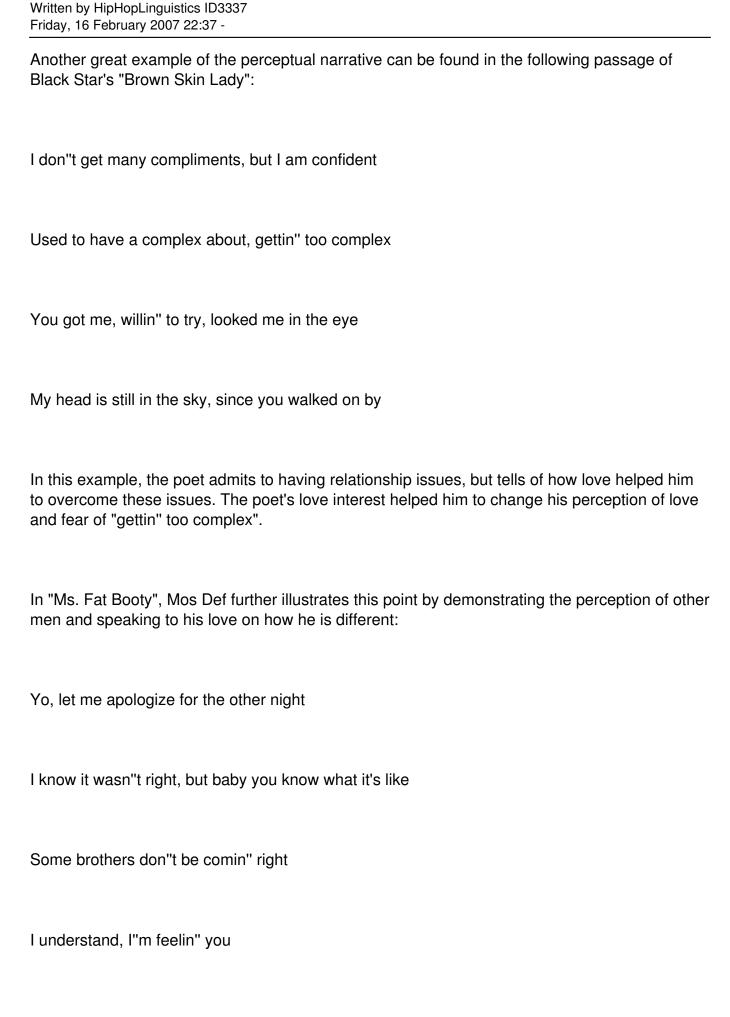
Another example of the contrasting love narrative can be seen in this passage from Guru's "All I Said":



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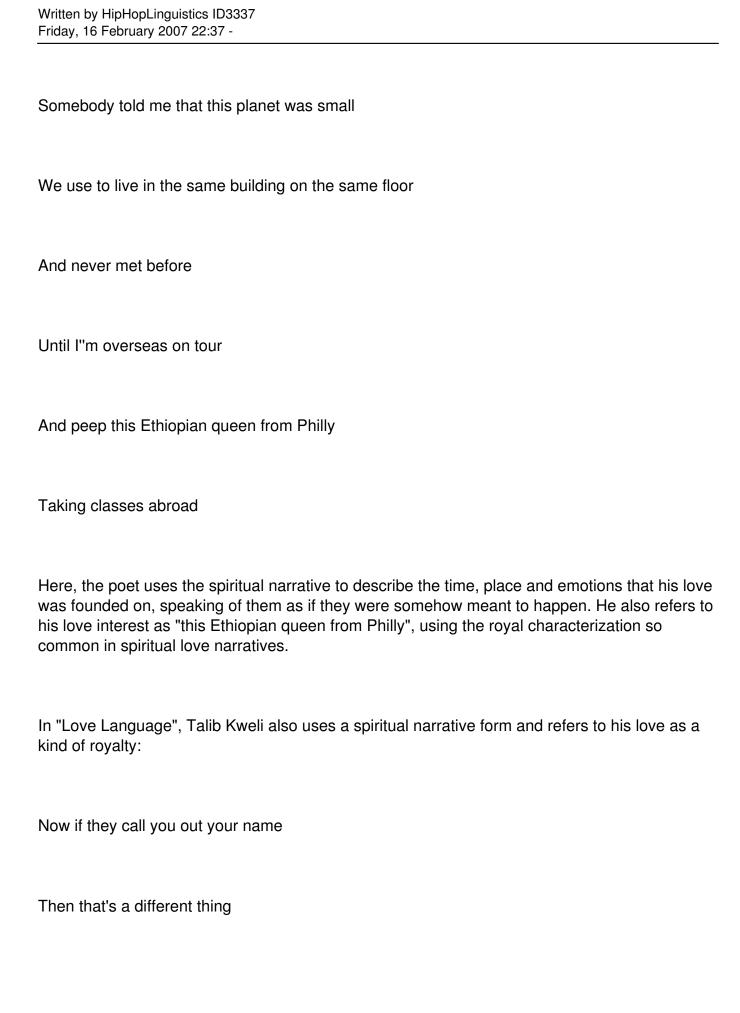
Another common narrative form of Hip-Hop love stories is the perceptual narrative. Like the contrasting narrative, the perceptual narrative is based around the negativity that surrounds the poet's life. But instead of presenting this love as a contrast to that negativity, the poet uses this narrative to explain how that love changed his or her previously negative perceptions. This narrative form also allows the poet to construct a socially acceptable identity due to the acknowledgement of the negativity of urban life. In "Jazzy Belle", Andre of Outkast uses the perceptual narrative to tell of how his love changed his former perception of women:

perception continue to the con
Went from yellin" crickets and crows, bitches and hoes to queen thangs
Over the years I been up on my toes and yes I seen thangs
Now I'm willin to go the extra kilo-
Meter just to see my senorita get her pillow
On the side of my bed where no girl ever stay
House and doctor was the games we used to play
But now it's real Jazzy Belle
In this song, Andre talks about a personal change of perception caused by love. He admits that at one time he thought of women as "bitches and hoes." But "now it's real", and he has a new perception of women as "queen thangs."



Written by HipHopLinguistics ID3337 Friday, 16 February 2007 22:37 -Besides, "Can I have a dance?" ain"t really that original In this song, the poet uses the perceptual narrative to acknowledge that some men "don"t be comin" right", but that he has a different perception of women than these other men. In "Come Close", Common uses the perceptual narrative to express how love has made him change from his old ways: I want to build a tribe wit you Protect and provide for you Truth is I can"t hide from you The pimp in me May have to die with you Although the poet used to be a "pimp", an urban term for a man who romances a large number of women, he tells of how his love interest has changed his actions and perceptions. Spiritual Narrative

A third common form of Hip-Hop love stories is what I like to refer to as the spiritual narrative. The spiritual narrative relies on the poet's characterization of love as a kind of godly being, spiritual force or royalty, often with the feeling that the story teller has to protect that force. The spiritual narrative allows the storyteller to construct an acceptable identity by characterizing love as spiritual or perhaps even predetermined. A great example of the spiritual narrative can be found in this passage of The Roots" "You Got Me":



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Anything but Queen I'll go to war like a King

This example shows the protection aspect of common spiritual love narratives. The poet feels it is unacceptable for anyone to "call you out your name", or in other words, use derogatory language toward his love. If someone were to do so, he would "go to war like a King", thus maintaining his masculinity.

In "Mind Sex", Dead Prez uses the spiritual narrative to talk about love introductions:

African princess, tell me yo" interests

Wait, let me guess boo, you probably like poetry

Here's a little something I jotted down in case I spotted you around

So let me take this opportunity

In this song, the poet uses the spiritual narrative to tell a story about the introductory conversation he had with a love interest. He refers to her as "African princess", once again showing the tendency of poets who use the spiritual narrative to refer to their love interests as royalty.

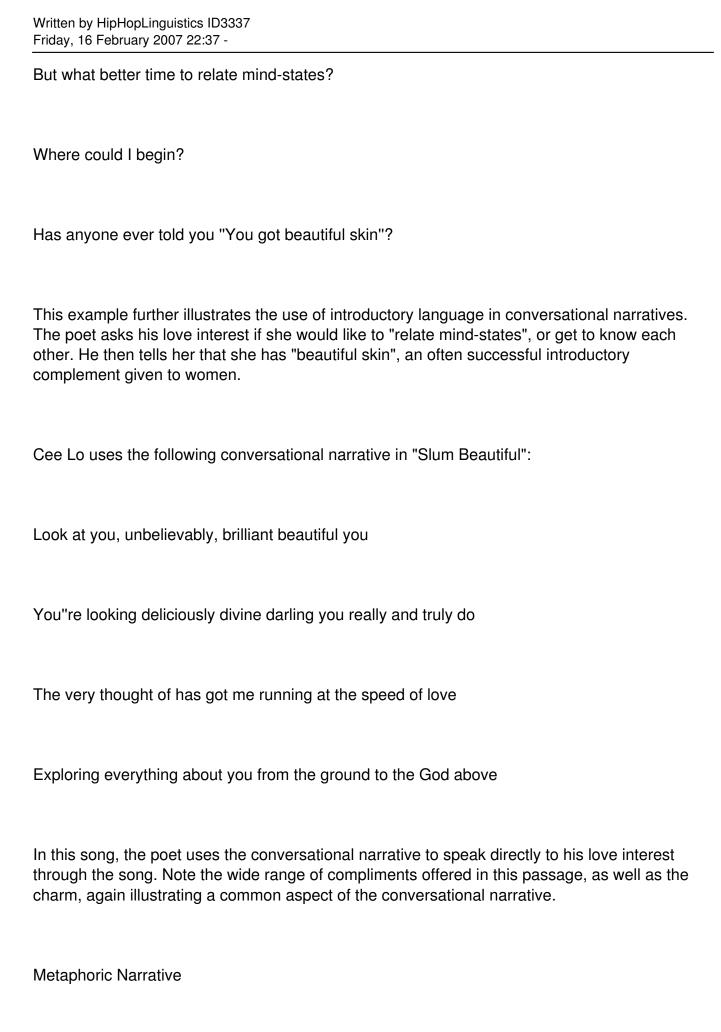
Conversational Narrative

The fourth common form for Hip-Hop love stories is the conversational narrative. The conversational narrative allows the poet to recite or recreate a conversation with his or her love and present it as play-like story about a specific love experience. Conversational love narratives are typically characterized by introductory speech and compliments, and are most commonly

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used as tools to tell a story about a first meeting or impression. These narratives allow the storyteller to construct an acceptable identity mainly because they often include many smoothly-structured compliments, and make the poet look like a cool ladies man. A great example of the conversational love narrative can be found this passage from Dead Prez" previously mentioned "Mind Sex":





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The fifth form of Hip-Hop love stories is possibly the most fascinating. It is the metaphoric narrative. The metaphoric narrative is used when the poet speaks of love in a metaphor of some kind. The most popular and socially acceptable form of metaphoric narrative is using Hip-Hop as the metaphor. Many followers of the movement view Hip-Hop as a driving force of love and happiness in their lives. Thus, many metaphoric love narratives revolve around Hip-Hop itself. A good example of such a metaphoric narrative is the following passage from Black Eyed Peas" "Rap Song":

"Rap Song":
Yo, she got hips to hop
And she ain"t goin" pop
She like a record that I wanna rock
When I'm rollin" in my ride cruisin" down my block
In this example, the poet actually uses a unique play on words and speaks of a love interest as a Hip-Hop metaphor. He relates this person to "a record that I wanna rock". The group further extends the metaphor in the following passage:
She like a beat that makes me wanna grab the mic
She like the lyrics that I wanna recite
She like the old school mic with the cable

Hip Hop Love Songs Written by HipHopLinguistics ID3337 Friday, 16 February 2007 22:37 -You can bring your records and I'll bring the turntable yo Again, the poet relates his love interest to other things he and his audience love, including "old school mic with the cable", reciting lyrics and spinning records on a turntable. Another great example of the metaphoric narrative is in The Roots" "Act Too ... Love of My Life": Learnin" the ropes of ghetto survival Peepin" out the situation I had to slide through Had to watch my back my front plus my sides too When it came to gettin" mine I ain"t tryin" to argue Sometimes I wouldn"ta made it if it wasn"t for you

Hip-Hop, you the love of my life and that's true

This passage is unique because it utilizes both the metaphoric and contrasting narrative techniques. The poet refers to Hip-Hop as "the love of my life", while simultaneously showing how that love created a positive contrast to the tough "ropes of ghetto survival". The poet admits that he "wouldn"ta made it if it wasn"t for you", showing that his love for Hip-Hop was and is a driving force in his life.

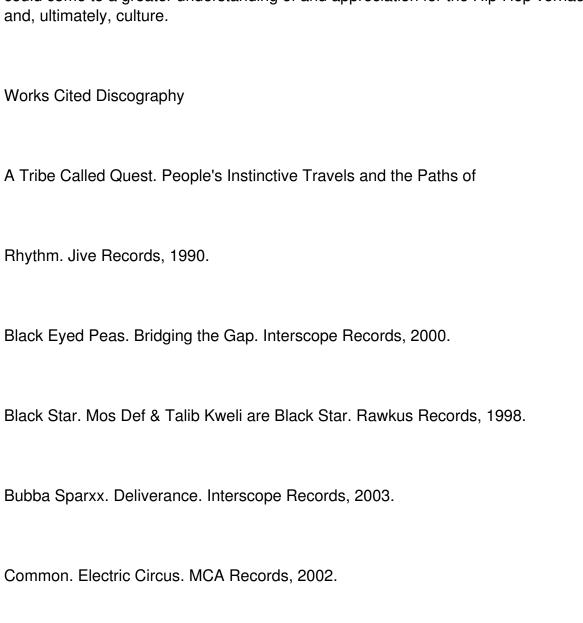
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And that leads us to the most popular metaphoric Hip-Hop love narrative of our time. In "I Used to Love H.E.R.", Common Sense uses the metaphoric narrative to express his love for Hip-Hop. He starts off the narrative with the following passage:



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The presentation of Hip-Hop love narratives and their relation to identity construction is a very difficult task. In order to talk about love and still construct a socially acceptable urban identity, artists tend to implement one of the five successful love narrative forms. I believe that our society's analysis of Hip-Hop music and culture is lackluster at best. The Hip-Hop love narratives presented above could provide a great basis for linguistic and sociolinguistic studies. Not only are they presented in a variety of styled narrative forms, but they also include deep thought, perception and analysis of the urban environment that characterizes an increasing majority of American society. Through the analysis and study of these love narratives, linguists could come to a greater understanding of and appreciation for the Hip-Hop vernacular, literature and ultimately culture.



Common Sense. Resurrection. Relativity Records, 1994.

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Dead Prez. Let's Get Free. Relativity Records, 2000.

Goodie Mob. Still Standing. La Face Records, 1998.

Guru. Jazzmatazz Streetsoul Vol. 3. Virgin Records, 2000.

Method Man. Tical. Def Jam Records, 1994.

Mos Def. Black on Both Sides. Priority Records, 1999.

Outkast. ATLiens. La Face Records, 1996.

Outkast. Stankonia. La Face Records, 2003.

Talib Kweli & DJ Hi-Tek. Train of Thought. Rawkus Records, 2000.

The Roots. Things Fall Apart. MCA Records, 1999.