

Acceptable Urban Identities Hip Hop Love Songs

Written by Hip Hop Linguistics ID3340
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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.

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 disrespectful. 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.

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

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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'll be okay"

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":

This world is crazy, she's supposed to help me stay sane

Supposed to help with the pain

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Supposed to help me maintain

In this song, Guru uses the contrasting narrative to share his view of what love should be. He admits that his "world is crazy", and that his love interest is the one person who can make it bearable.

In "She Tried", Bubba Sparxx uses the contrasting narrative to tell a story that actually recalls his love being there for him when he was in trouble with the law:

A fly country girl, just workin" them gifts

She's my queen, was a virgin I guess

But I ain"t never ask and I ain"t never tell

But Betty had the cash every time I went to jail

This song further illustrates the use of contrasting narratives to express love. Though the poet confesses spending a lot of time in jail, Betty was always there to bail him out, again acting as a positive contrast to his troubles.

Perceptual Narrative

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

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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:

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 seniorita 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."

Another great example of the perceptual narrative can be found in the following passage of Black Star's "Brown Skin Lady":

I don"t get many compliments, but I am confident

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Used to have a complex about, gettin" too complex

You got me, willin" to try, looked me in the eye

My head is still in the sky, since you walked on by

In this example, the poet admits to having relationship issues, but tells of how love helped him to overcome these issues. The poet's love interest helped him to change his perception of love and fear of "gettin" too complex".

In "Ms. Fat Booty", Mos Def further illustrates this point by demonstrating the perception of other men and speaking to his love on how he is different:

Yo, let me apologize for the other night

I know it wasn"t right, but baby you know what it's like

Some brothers don"t be comin" right

I understand, I"m feelin" you

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.

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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":

Somebody told me that this planet was small

We use to live in the same building on the same floor

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And never met before

Until I'm overseas on tour

And peep this Ethiopian queen from Philly

Taking classes abroad

Here, the poet uses the spiritual narrative to describe the time, place and emotions that his love was founded on, speaking of them as if they were somehow meant to happen. He also refers to his love interest as "this Ethiopian queen from Philly", using the royal characterization so common in spiritual love narratives.

In "Love Language", Talib Kweli also uses a spiritual narrative form and refers to his love as a kind of royalty:

Now if they call you out your name

Then that's a different thing

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.

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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 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":

Pardon me love but you seem like my type

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What you doin" tonight?

You should stop by the site

We could, roll some weed play some records and talk

I got a fly spot downtown Brooklyn, New York

In this example, the poet is reciting the conversation between himself and a love interest. As with many conversational narratives, it is based around meeting someone for the first time. The poet is telling a story about a girl he met that "seem[ed] like my type". He then inquires "What you doin" tonight?", and follows with a list of charming speech in an attempt to create a social relationship with the girl.

In a similar narrative, "Beautiful Skin", Goodie Mob uses the following conversational narrative to retell the first phone conversation he had with his love interest:

This is Carlito from a couple of days ago, you sound tired

Forgive me if I've called you too late

But what better time to relate mind-states?

Where could I begin?

Has anyone ever told you "You got beautiful skin"?

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This example further illustrates the use of introductory language in conversational narratives. The poet asks his love interest if she would like to "relate mind-states", or get to know each other. He then tells her that she has "beautiful skin", an often successful introductory complement given to women.

Cee Lo uses the following conversational narrative in "Slum Beautiful":

Look at you, unbelievably, brilliant beautiful you

You're looking deliciously divine darling you really and truly do

The very thought of has got me running at the speed of love

Exploring everything about you from the ground to the God above

In this song, the poet uses the conversational narrative to speak directly to his love interest through the song. Note the wide range of compliments offered in this passage, as well as the charm, again illustrating a common aspect of the conversational narrative.

Metaphoric Narrative

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":

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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

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

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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.

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:

I met this girl, when I was ten years old

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And what I loved most she had so much soul

She was old school, when I was just a shorty

Never knew throughout my life she would be there for me

In this example, the poet starts off telling a story about a girl he met when he "was ten years old", and how she was always there for him. The poet continues to use the metaphoric narrative to speak of this girl, including the good times and hardships they faced together. Not until the end of the poem does the listener actually realize that the entire song is a metaphor. The song ends with the following passage:

I see rappers slammin" her, and takin" her to the sewer

But I"ma take her back hopin" that the shit stop

Cause who I"m talkin" bout y"all is Hip-Hop

In this song, the poet used the metaphoric narrative to tell a story about the love of his life, the struggles she faced, and his desire to save her. In the end, he admits that this love is not a real person, but instead his love of Hip-Hop.

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

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could come to a greater understanding of and appreciation for the Hip-Hop vernacular, literature and, ultimately, culture.

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