How We Do: The Miseducation of Modern Day Masculinity

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**Introduction**

Hip hop music is oft critically argued to be analogous with violence and inherent misogyny. It could be argued that doing any form of dissertation on hip-hop music is picking “low hanging fruit” as most people who are uninformed regarding this genre of music, fail to recognize the various sub genres of hip hop. My focus in this paper will be an analysis of a gangsta rap song, specifically.

Gangsta rap is profoundly multi-faceted, and often offers intimate insight into the inner-workings of urban life and its respective issues. Many of these issues are a direct result of society’s negligence and lack of attention to the often glaringly apparent disparities in equality. However, for the sake of analysis through a critical feminist lens, I will be focusing specifically on how gangsta rap functions in regard to women. I will be illustrating these complexities using the song “How We Do” (Gibbs, 2009) by popular gangsta rap artist, Freddie Gibbs.

The Gary, Indiana native recently made headlines in 2016 when he was apprehended in France, after a warrant for his arrest was issued regarding a rape charge in Vienna, Austria. Gibbs was eventually acquitted on the rape charge, yet endured criticism regarding his lyrical content that often expresses subtle and overt sexist beliefs. (Madualokam, 2017)

“How We Do” (Gibbs, 2009) is a chronicle of sorts, offering a detailed and intimate look into Freddie’s beliefs regarding women, how they operate, and ultimately the purpose that they serve in the framework of his life. The song is vulnerable, honest, and offers perspective into why Gibb’s has come to view women as interchangeable, yet it reflects dangerous and often archaic viewpoints that illustrate problems reaching far beyond the scope of gangsta rap.

As a woman and recovering drug addict, I have seen violence against women perpetrated in nearly every aspect of drug culture. It is certainly further reflected and mirrored back to me every time I listen to gangsta rap music, as it is relevant to my own personal experiences, and resonates in a way that has affected me deeply. My immersion in the drug world has at times warped my perception of acceptable behavior toward women. It is of grave importance to me to come to understand why myself and many others so readily accept this violence, how it transfers from chord progressions to street corners, and ultimately how I can reconcile my own love of the genre and culture, while maintaining a critical viewpoint.

“How We Do” (Gibbs, 2009) could easily be described as a song that offers a singular narrative regarding one man’s prejudice toward women, with strong anecdotal evidence that supports the viewpoint. However, the motifs repeated throughout the song extend far beyond the scope of Freddie Gibbs, and rather reflect a much more nuanced, and complex series of issues mirrored in popular culture.

In my analysis, I will be viewing the song through a focused, and critical feminist lens. The intent is not to individually incriminate Freddie Gibbs, but rather the subculture in which these beliefs are grown. I will first begin by (1) looking critically into how Gibbs describes women, primarily by their physical attributes and sexual currency, and how this operates in society at large. I will then (2) focus on the explicit language and how its oppressive and gendered nature further reinforces marginalization of women. (3) Lastly, I will look into the intersections of racism, sexism and urban issues as recalled in the song, and how they further reinforce negative consequences for women in a broader societal scope.

**Textual Analysis**

I will begin by giving a brief introduction into Freddie Gibbs, and his story as it is relevant to the context in which the song was created. Gibbs is Black male who was born in Gary, Indiana under the legal name Fredrick Tipton. Gary is infamous for its high murder rate. (Sloan, 1994) Before finding hip-hop as a musical outlet, Gibbs was involved in drug dealing and varying forms of criminal activity. Freddie describes being desensitized to violence, due to the regularity of crime, particularly murder. In his own words, “Gary’s the type of town that makes you fearless.” (Mao, 2014)

Gibbs would later go on to have a storied career, collaborating with some of the genre’s most acclaimed writers and producers. Many of his songs are rich with anecdotal stories regarding life on the streets. Notably, Gibbs was arrested in Vienna, Austria after a warrant for his arrest was issued in Europe. The story remains heavily contested by Gibbs, however two women aged 16 and 17 claimed they had been raped by a friend of Gibbs and Gibbs himself. Gibbs was eventually acquitted of rape charges, after spending a considerable amount of time in jail awaiting trial. (Madualokam, 2017) During the trial Gibbs’ lyrics were referenced by the prosecution. While Gibbs acknowledges that his lyrics have sexually suggestive content, he maintains that there “Ain’t no rape shit in my lyrics” (Madualokam, 2017).

“How We Do” (Gibbs, 2009) comes long before the commercial success of Freddie Gibbs. The song was released on Gibbs’ 2009 debut mixtape, “The Miseducation of Freddie Gibbs”. The album is heavy with motifs of street life, and divulges into a layered deconstruction of his early experiences. “How We Do” (Gibbs, 2009) is a song exclusively about women and relationships. Gibbs describes his own personal struggles in relationships, and ultimately resigns himself to a singular, toxic view of women. The song describes women as interchangeable and particularly values their sexual currency above any and all other qualities. This reflects a greater societal problem, particularly in gangsta rap. “How We Do” (Gibbs, 2009) is at times subtle, and at times overtly sexist. However, the casual framework in how it is delivered, seems to indicate a common disparaging mentality regarding how society at large views women.

**Feminist Framework**

In order to apply a feminist framework to Gibbs’ song, it is important to first define feminism. There are several scholarly definitions of feminism, however, a good starting point is Wood’s definition that simply decodes the word itself. The word feminism originates from France in the late 1800’s. It is a combination of the French word femme, meaning woman, and the suffix -ism, meaning “political position.” Henceforth, feminism can be narrowly defined as a political position regarding women (Wood, 2013) Feminism is not a single, all-encompassing belief system, and is composed of multiple facets, and several supporting theories. (Wood, 2013) Feminism works to identify and examine the positionality of women in society, and how society, as a result, holds significant bearing on women’s agency and personal freedom. Furthermore, I will be using a variety of feminist concepts to support the points previously made in my thesis.

Firstly, bro code presents an ideal framework for Gibbs’ song, as a prominent tenant of gangsta rap, is a commonly shared misogynistic viewpoint of women. Thus, creating a measurement, in which a man can weigh his value and acceptance amongst other men based on the number of women he can attain, and the level of their attractiveness. This furthermore creates a goal for women, that they must compete amongst themselves for the affection of men. (Wood, 2013) Thomas Keith’s film, “The Bro Code: How Contemporary Culture Creates Sexist Men”, puts a large emphasis on bro culture, in particular, surrounding hip-hop. Many brands of hip-hop, including gangsta rap, push women to be sexual and submissive, and men to be dominant and sexually aggressive and voyeuristic (Keith, 2011) This is ever-present in “How We Do” (Gibbs, 2009) and thus bro code will be useful in analysis.

Secondly, I be exploring the concepts of sexism, hegemony and how they operate in conjunction with Gibbs song, particularly as it relates to verbal cues. Sexism offers an opportunity to further divulge into the inner-workings of a hegemonic gendered society. Furthermore, I will be using these two concepts in tandem with one another, to establish the cornerstone on which gangsta rap was built. Often, it is deeply engrained into the undercurrent of our interactions. Henceforth, it is important to discuss in relation to Gibbs and beyond.

Lastly, I will be discussing intersectionality in regards to race and gender. This is of particular importance, as there are unique issues stemming from Gibbs’ own struggles as a Black man living in poverty. Yet, it will be important to look for the similarities and differences inherent in oppression of White women versus that of minority women. There are different standards to which women must perform, based on identity.

Gangsta rap has thus yielded to countless feminist studies and dissertations regarding its content. The previously mentioned “Bro Code” (Keith, 2011) is a study in video form, that views how modern culture has shaped and perpetuated the importance of bro code. It uses hip-hop as an art form to dissect and analyze problems within the culture. Furthermore, bro code can serve as important tenant of perception in hip-hop music. There are above all else certain tenants that are commonly upheld in certain sub genres of hip-hop. Mostly they revolve around credibility, in particular regarding women. Another example of this area of study can be seen in the book, “Pimps up, ho’s down, hip hop’s hold on young black women” by Tracy Denean Sharpley-Whiting. The book offers perspective into the toxic elements regarding hip-hop music. How women, specifically Black women, are impacted by hip-hop’s alliance with an ever-growing sex industry, and the ramifications of relationships and romance thereafter. It is unsurprising that the mystifying genre has encapsulated the minds of many, therefore making it important and worthwhile to examine closely and critically. My analysis hopes to expand on these aforementioned studies, with assistance from feminist concepts.

**Analysis**

*Argument 1*

To begin, a detailed description and subsequent analysis of how women are described in “How We Do” will help in understanding the problematic motifs of female sexuality omnipresent within the work. Women, especially in Gibb’s world, are described by their physical qualities. Also notable is that Gibbs never describes any of the women he discusses by name, minus his mistress Nicole. One of the opening lines of the song begins with Gibbs adlibbing “I’m still too cool to love these hoes, all I want to do is fuck these hoes.” (Gibbs, 2009) One of the tenants of bro code is being able to amass a large quality of sexual partners, particularly women who are conventionally attractive (Keith, 2011) This is of grave importance for Gibbs to articulate as he describes the first woman he ever loved only by physical identifiers such as, “She had a cute face, thin waist, a nice smile, titties mediocre but ass was like BLAOW!” (Gibbs, 2009). All these attributes can be considered desirable and attractive by western standards, women are pressured to adhere to. Women already receive constant signs through media encouraging them to be thin based on images we are exposed to. (Wood, 2013). Although Gibbs is articulating throughout the song that he does not value women, it is important for him to reinforce that the women he does attain are, at minimum, beautiful.

Additionally, a paradoxical idea that women who say “no” to sex are simply teasing, or playing an elaborate game with men, becomes an idea reinforced in popular culture. Music videos, music and film often portray women as oversexed, and constantly willing and able to have sex. (Keith, 2011). We can use Freddie Gibbs’ description of Nicole as an example of the aforementioned. “I had a bad bitch from Nap named Nicole, Nicole used to keep a nigga dick on swole. She knew I had a girlfriend but she loved my pole, and when she saw me with my woman, man, she lost control. And went crazy.” (Gibbs, 2009). Not only does this shift the responsibility of the relationship onto Nicole, but it implies that Nicole was only a part of Gibbs’ life to fulfill a specific need, his sexual desire. What encompasses a man’s worth, is often linked to how well he sexually performs, and his ability to treat women as disposable. How then can women navigate the confines of being expected to be sexually available, while at risk of being labeled a “skank, hoe” (Gibbs, 2009) or other degrading vernacular often present in music? The problem with viewing women as sex objects, as Gibbs does, is that the harassment and objectification is not confined to the music. Stereotyping women as sex objects is directly linked to sexual harassment, particularly for women in the workplace (Wood, 2013). This could give a good indication as to why the prosecution in Gibbs’ rape trial chose to play bits of his lyrics for the court. Gibbs himself argues that while his lyrics may be hypersexual, this does not translate into him being guilty of rape. (Madualokam, 2017) While there is truth in Gibbs’ particular case, the issue of sexual harassment is obviously prominent in our society. Yet given the overtly sexual nature of many of Gibbs’ songs, how unrealistic is it that Gibbs could be guilty of sexual harassment? It’s a shaky line to draw in the sand at best, but has greater implications beyond Gibbs.

Furthermore, nearly all the relationships in the song are centered around sex. Gendered hegemony and popular discourse in America leads us to believe that sex has high importance. Yet the importance is assigned differently to men versus women. While women have undergone somewhat of a sexual revolution, where it is becoming more commonplace to express desire for sex, men have remained more so stagnant in how they continue to view sex. (Jhally & Kimmel, 2015) In Gibb’s case, this is still ever apparent, and can be summed up succinctly by Gibbs proclaiming “I would laugh when a broad made my nigga feel blue, but the jokes ain’t funny when the jokes on you”. (Gibbs, 2009). Unsurprisingly, viewing women beyond their sexual currency still remains a problem in music. Gangsta rap is not immune, and society at large is still working to reconcile the divide between perceiving women as sexual objects, while simultaneously denouncing them for their sexual agency.

*Argument 2*

Gender plays a significant role in communication, not necessarily because men and women are inherently different communicators, but because gender hegemony dictates acceptable ways of communication. Take into consideration Gibbs’ usage of derogatory language, the majority of it is exclusive to women, “bitches, hoes, skanks”. While there doesn’t exist an alternative for men. Sexism can be directly linked into gendered language, particularly because the previously mentioned words are specifically female oriented. Increased prevalence of the feminist movement has perhaps made this worse. (Mills, 2008) Derogatory language toward women can be seen as a way for men to undercut the movement, and thus assert dominance over a changing landscape (Mills, 2008) This is relevant to Gibbs in this particular instance, because a large part of what fuels his song and plight, is a romance gone awry. The woman in question “had a dude,….[I was] thinking I was special and different, lost my respect for the rest of the bitches.” (Gibbs, 2009) Gibbs goes on to do the exact same thing his previous partner did, by diversifying the women in his life, and seeing women through a revolving door. Yet, the words we can use to critique Gibbs’ toxic mentality are few and far between, at least in a gendered scope.

How we communicate is systemic. A large problem with sexism, racism and other societal issues of marginalized groups, comes from the insidious, often discreet, nature. Sexism doesn’t have to be overt and obvious to be oppressive. Who is speaking affects what is said and what it means. (Wood, 2013). It wasn’t until recently that sexual harassment was seen as a serious problem in the workplace, (Wood, 2013) That’s why Gibbs language can be viewed as perhaps normative, and a narrative we widely accept. In this instance, it is okay for Gibbs to paint women with a broad brush based on a single negative experience, because language in music and beyond has taught us that these same “oversexed” women who men innately desire, are the same women unworthy of respect. Additionally, hegemony has negatively affected how men can grieve. Gibbs runs into a predicament in how he can express his feelings, “And shit was fine, we on the same beat, and she don’t have a problem with me being in the street.” (Gibbs, 2009) Street culture values relentless masculinity, thus it’s unsurprising this trickles into how men are allowed to express emotion. This is seen in nearly all public forums from music to politics. Problematically, men crying is linked with femininity, and in an attempt to distance themselves from women, we shame men for being visibly emotional even when the situation is appropriate. (Gesualdi, 2013) Thus, Gibbs is conforming to a hegemonic representation of grievance by asserting his dominance over women, and having little regard for them outside of trading pieces, “I played hoes and shank hoes for bankrolls, never thought they’d fill my heart with pain though” (Gibbs, 2009)

It could be easy to write off Gibb’s song as a personal experience, an experience that does not reflect society and men at large. However, sexist language has become so engrained in our vernacular, that it’s become normative. Often the language used is reflective of stereotypical beliefs regarding women. (Mills, 2008) Determinism plays a part in this narrative, as it can be argued that if we change the language surrounding women, we can change the way we think about women. (Mills, 2008). In the case of Gibbs, his dialogue surrounding women is rooted in stereotypes. Skanks and hoes are women who have casual sex, an according to the language itself this is a negative quality. Women must balance the act of needing to be available for men to have sex with, while mainting an air of purity. This double standard is sexism at work. Language works in tandem with stereotypes to reinforce these beliefs, and it has become so embedded in our society, that we many not even be aware of the greater social responsibility. (Mills, 2008). That’s why we can look at a work like “How We Do” (Gibbs, 2009) and not necessarily see it as sexist. The context of the song and the attitude toward women is so engrained culturally, that it seems to weave effortlessly into the fabric of hip-hop music.

*Argument 3*

Finally, we can look at the implications of intersectionality and how they play a role in the context of “How We Do” (Gibbs, 2009) In this instance, Gibbs is a Black male, which offers its own set of difficulties. Not only is Gibbs Black, but he is from an impoverished background, and the intersectionality of race and class have their own unique set of marginalization. In Gibbs’ particular case, the rape accusation and consequent trial held a significant amount of weight. Looking back from a historical context, rape and sexual assault has had racial complications. Particularly because many imagine(d) the Black male assailant, White female victim narrative. This not only harms Black men but Black women alike, who’s rape cases have typically not yielded the same response of urgency. (Crenshaw, 1994). For Black men, particularly from poor circumstances like Gibbs, the scope of their abilities is grossly underrepresented. Gibbs discusses in the song his lack of financial means when comparing himself to another man “she had a dude, with hella money, hella jewels, I was just another nigga at school” (Gibbs, 2009). This then poses the question of the importance of money and class standing. For Gibbs, achieving success is arguably of grave importance. The ability to transcend boundaries, in a climate that does not offer equal opportunity to do so. In this circumstance, Gibbs must deal with difficulties of being Black, subscribing to hegemonic ideas of toxic masculinity, achieving monetary success and maintaining dominance in a society that works to systematically oppress minorities.

Black women perhaps suffer the most in this climate. Not only are they subjected to the complications of race, but a subsequent enhanced sexism as well. For example, statistically speaking, Black men who are accused of raping White women are more likely to be charged and prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Naturally this provides discrimination against Black men, however it creates an erasure of Black women, and shows their standing and importance in the issue of violence against women. (Crenshaw, 1994). It’s unsurprising then, that when Gibbs was jailed abroad there was noticeable racism in the process. (Madualokam, 2017). However, it raises questions about how we teach certain men that they can combat oppression by way of asserting dominance. For Gibbs, that is his ability to possess women. “Why have one when a nigga can have two? Three or four hoes I like the ass brand new” (Gibbs, 2009) Or adhering to behavior that can be linked with accepted masculine images, such as Gibbs drinking during the How We do music video. (Keith, 2011) (JacksonTr1ggs, 2010)For all intents and purposes, he comes across as hyper-masculine. Money, women, and power remain the elusive goal for men, and the more they can diversify, the more we view them as valuable. (Keith, 2011) This is evidenced by Gibbs discussing his girlfriend who has another man with money. We usually see a competition between women to vie for the attention of men, to maximize their sex appeal. (Keith, 2011) when the script is flipped, it is threatening to bro code, and rather than analyze the problems within, Gibbs defaults to putting the bulk of the responsibility onto the women. “Freddie I can’t believe you played me. People told me that nigga from the G was shady” (Gibbs, 2009)

Violence against women, especially Black and marginalized women, remains a large issue. (Crenshaw, 1994) It does not help that men are taught to distance themselves from portraying or adopting stereotypically feminine traits. (Wood, 2013) This further creates a dissonance between men and women. When race comes into the equation, it only complicates the matter at hand. Our inability to discuss the racial issues in regards to violence, is keeping a padlock on how we approach these matters of violence. (Crenshaw, 1994) It’s thus important to analyze Gibbs’ portrayal of women, and eventual rejection of women and emotions, again a stereotypically feminine trait. “But now I know that love is a four-letter word like fuck and shit, so love you can suck my dick” (Gibbs, 2009). Not only does this reject the notion of love, but interjects a derogatory insult in relation to male genitalia. In order to disfigure and analyze our patriarchal society, we must accept the reality that intersectionality and marginalization pose challenges for other oppressed groups. Feminism must be for Black and other minority women, as much as it is for White women. We must understand the unique pressures of Black and minority men that further creates divide between their female counterparts. “How We Do” (Gibbs, 2009) offers additional insight into this pressure.

**CONCLUSION**

In essence, How We Do (Gibbs, 2009) is an important artifact to analyze because it poses many sets of unique and nuanced gendered problems. Applying feminist framework is imperative to this particular song, because it addresses a variety of issues, ranging from basic feminist concepts to problems that exist from an intersectionality perspective. It’s useful to interpret music, because it infiltrates us in nearly all facets of life. Music is, at its core, entertainment value, but it remains a reflection of our societal ideals, and is often a medium in which individual artists feel they can be vulnerable and, at times, explicit. I learned the importance of not drowning out content matter. Freddie Gibbs is someone who’s music I admire greatly, although an avoidance of the obvious problems, further enforces the casualty of sexism in our day to day media. It’s possible for me to enjoy the music, while still fundamentally disagreeing with some of the narrative being told.

I believe it’s also part of my responsibility to help further the conversation regarding intersectionality and marginalization. Thus far, feminism has benefited White women the most. In order for the movement to thrive as a whole, I believe it must be inclusive. I do not view Freddie Gibbs as the problem, it is more so the society at large that poses a problem. Feminist analysis has taught me that feminism benefits both men and women, seeing as both genders struggle with the unique demands. If we could take the significant pressure off of men to perform in certain ways, how could this then trickle down and benefit society at large? Unsurprisingly, feminist analysis also helped me truly dissect the double standards that exist for women. It’s a difficult balancing act to try and remain chaste, yet be sexually available for consumption, all while being pressured into submission. The issue is portrayed brilliantly in “How We Do”. (Gibbs, 2009) Gibbs only desires women for sex, and at the same time denounces and belittles them by using terminology that is sexually charged and oppressive.

Having the discussions surrounding sexism and feminism can be often uncomfortable for both genders. It is through honesty, consistency and inclusivity that we can continue to make focused and detailed change. It is important to look contextually at a variety of situations, particularly because sexism can often operate subconsciously. Our media is bountiful with artifacts and examples ideal for analysis. Keeping the conversation going, and approaching it with vulnerability is one of many ways we can bring clarity into a difficult but necessary topic of discussion.

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