

Resistant masculinities in alternative R&B? Understanding Frank Ocean and The Weeknd's representations of gender

European Journal of Cultural Studies

2015, Vol. 18(3) 283–299

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DOI: 10.1177/1367549414526730

ecs.sagepub.com



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Abstract

With the emergence of alternative R&B, contemporary R&B and hip hop culture are being confronted with a subgenre that challenges its key characteristics. One of the aspects that typify alternative R&B is the emergence of an alternative masculinity. The aim of this study is to research whether the alternative masculinities represented in alternative R&B resist the hegemonic masculine ideal established within R&B and hip hop culture. To this end, this study conducts a textual analysis of the representations of gender in the work of Frank Ocean and The Weeknd, artists considered representative for alternative R&B. The analysis reveals that Ocean's work features successful nonnormative masculine identities, whereas The Weeknd refrains to representing postmodern exaggerations of the hegemonic male. Despite divergent representational strategies, both artists do engage in questioning what it means to be a man in R&B and hip hop culture and thereby at least attempt to challenge the supremacy of hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords

Alternative R&B, cultural resistance, Frank Ocean, gender representation, hegemonic masculinity, popular music culture, R&B and hip hop, textual analysis, The Weeknd

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Introduction

When rising vocalist Frank Ocean announced his first love was a man via a personal Tumblr post (Ocean, 2012a), hip hop and R&B celebrities (e.g. Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Russell Simmons) spoke out their support for Ocean's coming out. The music press seized the opportunity to speak of a significant change of heart regarding homosexuality within contemporary R&B and hip hop culture (Jonze, 2012). Interestingly, Frank Ocean's sexuality is not the only aspect that distinguishes him from other R&B and hip hop artists. We argue that his public disclosure of same-sex desires links up to an alternative masculinity articulated throughout his work. Even more, he is not alone in performing a masculinity that diverges from a hegemonic masculinity established within contemporary R&B and hip hop culture. Alternative masculinities seem to be at the center of a music culture labeled by the music industry and music press as 'Alt R&B', 'PBR&B (Pabst Blue Ribbon R&B)' or 'hipster R&B' (DeVile, 2012; Fennessey, 2011; Soderberg, 2012) – genre labels that refer to contemporary artists whose music can be situated on the crossroads between hip hop, soul and contemporary R&B culture. The genre, which we refer to as 'alternative R&B', is considered both a continuation of contemporary R&B music (e.g. the (neo-)soul singing, stylistic elements or slick production) and a departure from it (e.g. alternative modes of distribution, broaching new and transgressive themes, gaining critical success and being positively received by indie-fan audiences) (Fennessey, 2011; Walters, 2012).

Of interest to this article is the way male artists in alternative R&B negotiate the hegemonic masculine identity of contemporary R&B and hip hop culture. Hegemonic masculinity is understood as the socio-cultural ideal of masculine practices and masculine embodiment in a given temporal and spatial context. In contemporary Western societies, hegemonic masculinity is conceptualized as practices and embodiment that justify and institutionalize the central position of patriarchal men and the suppression, discrimination or symbolic exclusion of women or of men who embody and/or express alternative masculinities (Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). We start from the argument that in contemporary R&B and hip hop culture, a particular form of hegemonic masculinity is being articulated which, to this day, is hypermasculine, hypersexual and heteronormative (hooks, 2004; Jeffries, 2010; Smalls, 2011; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009). Bearing in mind that recent studies have shown a decline in explicit homophobia and a renegotiation of masculinities in contemporary Western societies (see Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; McCormack and Anderson, 2010), we aim to study to what extent these socio-cultural transformations are reflected in a music culture often denoted to reinforce patriarchal gender notions. In other words, do the alternative masculinities represented in alternative R&B *resist* the hegemonic masculine identity in contemporary R&B and hip hop culture? To this end, we conduct a qualitative textual analysis to deconstruct and interpret the gender representations in the work of two alternative R&B artists, namely, Frank Ocean and The Weeknd.

Masculinities in contemporary R&B and hip hop culture

To study and understand the negotiation of masculinity by male alternative R&B artists, a discussion is needed on the embodiment and expression of masculinity in contemporary

R&B and hip hop culture. Why is it that this particular music culture has been repeatedly argued in public and academic debate to be sexist, misogynistic, homophobic or aggressive (Battan, 2012; hooks, 2004; Jonze, 2012; Smalls, 2011; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009)? We start by discussing gender norms in relation to Black popular music culture, from which contemporary R&B and hip hop culture emerged.

Hegemonic R&B and hip hop masculinity is grafted onto a history of racism and systematic oppression by White Americans of African-American men (Penney, 2012; Wise, 2001). E. Patrick Johnson (2003) argues that Black masculinity has never been taken for granted. Whether by acts of violence, degradation or emasculation, the manhood of Black men has been constantly scrutinized, questioned and defied. Hence, he argues that strategies of preserving a normal Black male identity have been employed. As a consequence, identities, practices, or norms and values that threaten the 'normality' of Black manhood are being rejected, which enables possibilities to indulge in homophobia, sexism and misogyny. Zooming in on hip hop culture – which came about at the end of the 1970s in Black impoverished inner city communities (Neal, 1997) – the socio-cultural setting has fortified the need for Black young men to embody this masculinity. Different strategies have been applied by men in these neighborhoods. First, men have claimed their masculinity by expressing in public a hypermasculine identity. Derek Iwamoto (2003) considers this a way of showing to their peers and to White mainstream society that despite the racial oppression and socio-economic deprivation, Black men still have control and agency. A second way is by performing homonegative, homophobic or sexist rhymes or songs as a way to ensure a hierarchical superior position. Michael P. Jeffries (2010) considers this practice typical for contemporary R&B and hip hop artists who embody the thug identity. They dissociate themselves from lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and queer identities while representing women in binary inferior roles (the despicable 'gold digging tricks/hoes' vs the worthy 'down-ass chicks') and with little agency. In Ronald Weitzer and Charis E. Kubrin's (2009) analysis of misogynist gangsta rap songs, this translated in objectification, depersonalization and fragmentation of women, in the celebration of sexual activities without responsibility, in measuring sexual success to gain status and respect among its peers, in glorification of gang-banging, the legitimization of violence against women or the celebration of prostitution or pimping. The authors stress to see their analysis not as implying that rap music is misogynist, but as pointing out that a significant amount of rap songs do contain sexist or misogynist content. Third, we stress the central role of hypersexuality (Smalls, 2011; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009). A historical association of the Black body with sexuality is connoted by the practice of expressing and embodying a hypersexual identity. bell hooks (2004) elaborates on the role of sexuality within segregated Black communities. She argues that for many Black men who find themselves in a politically and economic powerless situation sexual prowess and sexual successes are ways to excel. Sexuality becomes a means to gain social status – a practice that is stimulated by, on the one hand, Black peers who reiterate patriarchal and heterosexist discourse and, on the other, White society who expresses a desire for the image of the hypersexual Black stud. For hooks, this rigid and pressured focus on the hypersexual only creates victims: the women who fall victim to the misogynist and heterosexist

practices, the Black men who fail to embody the sexual norms and the hypersexual Black men who remain deprived from developing a healthy sexuality.

Yet, the argument that contemporary R&B and hip hop masculinity is predominantly rooted in Black identity politics dismisses the role of heteronormative discourse (Jeffries, 2010; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009). Materialized, institutionalized and naturalized in contemporary Western societies, heteronormative discourse equally affects the gender politics in contemporary R&B and hip hop culture. The essentialized, hierarchical and binary approach to race, gender and sexuality is a pivotal assumption within heteronormative societies. Hegemonic masculinity may thus be considered a means to preserve the supremacy of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1999; Halberstam, 2005; Warner, 1999). Weitzer and Kubrin (2009), for instance, argue that the misogynist trope in gangsta rap is not only directed at Black women but at all women. Similarly, Shanté Paradigm Smalls' (2011) illustration of how audiences in the hip hop community were troubled and angered by male soul artists who confuse gender and sexual norms links up to the heteronormative desire for a gender and sexual hierarchy in which identities are clear-cut, stable and easy to control. The example is also illustrative for various heteronormative practices that negotiate alternative masculinities. Even though gender norms in Western societies still demand of men to embody hegemonic masculinity and to disavow other masculinities, the practices have become more complex. Within explicit homophobic environments, excluding gender and sexual others is the norm. However, within liberal environments such as current Western societies, an inclusive and gay-friendly attitude is articulated in relation to a strategy of heterosexual recuperation. Here, heterosexual men will indulge in expressing nonnormative gender behavior or pro-gay attitudes, but they will mostly do so in a way that does not threaten their public image of being a heterosexual masculine man (McCormack and Anderson, 2010). Ian Biddle's (2007) work on the performance of male vulnerability by contemporary Anglophone White male singer/songwriters serves as a good illustration. He argues that the appropriation of musical and lyrical expressions generally attributed to women does not per se mean that hegemonic masculinity is challenged. For him, many of these artists deal with the feminine in abstract and disembodied ways while feigning vulnerability and intimacy. He considers these strategies as typical for how in contemporary Western societies male heterosexual supremacy is concealed rather than truly defied and abolished.

A more concrete practice of heterosexual recuperation can be found in hip hop culture, where it is used to express homosocial intimacy without running the risk of being labeled as gay. Jeffries (2010) illustrates the practice by discussing rapper Lil' Wayne's use of the phrase 'no homo'. The artist uses the phrase each time he publicly associates himself with or expresses admiration for a fellow male artist to ensure that his public disclosure of same-sex intimacy is not interpreted in sexual terms. Even though used to transgress certain gender norms, Jeffries, nonetheless, reads into the act an expression of heteronormative masculine anxiety, which is equally manifested in other studies on gay panic in hip hop culture (e.g. Penney, 2012). hooks (2004) is the most critical in her analysis of hip hop culture. She argues that there is nothing real about hegemonic Black hip hop masculinity as it only reflects the norms and values of a White supremacist capitalist patriarchal society. She points out the embrace of capitalism, the reiteration of rigid gender roles and patriarchal violence, the neglect of a history of suffering, the disdain of

emotional complexity and the refusal to disclose emotions as anything but Black. She compares it to blues music, which she considers a genre that dealt with the pains and joys of everyday life in an honest manner. By contrast, she sees hip hop as emotionally immature and absorbed into the ideology of White Western capitalism. In this perspective, Gilbert B. Rodman's (2006) work sheds a new light on the gender politics in contemporary R&B and hip hop culture. He argues that an intensified and isolated scrutiny of specific artists within this genre fails to acknowledge the structural and institutional elements in mainstream Western society that instigate and perpetuate racism, misogyny or homophobia. Or, to put it differently, that construct and consolidate the blueprint for hegemonic masculinities. He builds his argument by pointing out a double standard in the treatment of hegemonic masculinity in popular culture. Whereas Black popular music is systematically questioned for its sexist discourse, White popular music genres and artists are exempt from scrutiny. Rodman stresses the irony of this situation by pointing out that hegemonic masculinity is articulated by both White and Black artists and by deconstructing the idea that popular music genres are racially pure forms. Like Brian Ward (1998), Rodman stresses to acknowledge the processes of creolization and hybridization in the history of popular music culture. Thus, in order to avoid reinforcing the idea that only Black popular music culture articulates hegemonic masculinity, these articulations need to be understood as complex negotiations of genre and culturally specific characteristics (e.g. Black identity politics) and broader ideological strategies of mainstream Western society (e.g. heteronormativity and White Western capitalism).

However, with this article, we also want to acknowledge the progressive potential of contemporary R&B and hip hop culture. In contrast to hooks' (2004) analysis, these genres are potentially able to engage in progressive gender politics. Furthermore, scholars have always nuanced the popular assumption that the genres' gender politics are only invested in reiterating a hegemonic masculine identity. Even though hegemonic masculinity assumes a key position in many contemporary R&B and hip hop tropes –whether by upholding specific heteronormative values or by embodying hypermasculinity– it is challenged in multiple ways (Jeffries, 2010; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009). First, we want to emphasize the critique that within popular debate, the politics of representation employed by media are being ignored. The exaggeration, reduction and stereotyping in media coverage on R&B and hip hop have fostered the assertion that hip hop artists are 'violent, sexist, homophobic, anti-gay, heteronormative, and male-centered' (Wilson, 2007: 117). In addition to fortifying the violent and patriarchal norms and values, the media represent the African-American male artist as a unique spectacle of hypermasculinity, ignoring both the artist's agency, his personal complexities and his creative work (McLeod, 2009). Furthermore, instead of engaging in representing the diversity in everyday-life Black masculinities, mainstream media glorify a stereotypical patriarchal male as one of the few mediated role models for other Black youngsters (Iwamoto, 2003). Also, not only mainstream media have reiterated this image, the music industry as well participates in promoting the thug artist and thug life. Considering the hypermasculine identity as profitable, the music industry has encouraged artists to perform this image (Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009). As James B. Stewart (2005) and Watkins (2006) underscore, this packaging of ghetto pop to mainstream audiences is done by both Black and White moguls within the music industry who responded to the success of the genre

with suburban White male teens. For some artists, this has resulted in the contradictory situation of becoming affluent by rhyming about their inner city lives (Neal, 1997; Watkins, 2006). Other artists within the genres resolve this issue by refraining from tackling social and political issues and solely singing and rapping about the material benefits and sexual successes of a contemporary R&B and hip hop artist (hooks, 2004; Stewart, 2005; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009).

Moreover, the discourses on masculinity that circulate in contemporary R&B and hip hop culture are far from monolithic. Even though a hegemonic masculinity is present, a diversity of cultural practices exists within the genres that diverge from or resist the hegemony of the hypermasculine, homophobic and/or heteronormative man. A first form of practices that challenge the superiority of men and the dominance of heteronormativity is offered by female artists within the genres. It concerns female artists who question male dominance and seek to empower women (Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009) or who appropriate the language and behavior of fellow male rappers to expose and deconstruct the heteronormativity that governs the male rappers' masculine pose (Smalls, 2011). Second, there are those male artists within the genres who hold up a mirror and question hegemonic masculinity. This may range from explicit rejections of hypermasculinity to more subtle and complex negotiations. For instance, Iwamoto's (2003) reading of thug artist Tupac Shakur revealed how, despite performing a hypermasculine identity, he tackles the difficult socio-economic situation of Black women in inner city communities as well as the violence inflicted onto women. A third group of practices concerns male artists who embrace and/or negotiate aspects of queer popular culture – cultural practices that are generally associated with LGBT individuals and/or transgressive gender identities. Joel Penney (2012) speaks of a queer-inflected style in hip hop culture that defies the hegemonic hypermasculine identity in several ways. For instance, heterosexual Black artists sample electronic dance music (EDM) known as queer-friendly, associate with openly gay fashion designers and explicitly critique homophobia. Last, there are the artists who explicitly represent themselves as gender-nonnormative, LGBT and/or queer. These artists embrace the political potential that has typified Black popular music and use the aesthetics and rhetoric of the genres to, first, break a lance for other queer artists within the genres and, second, to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity in general (Wilson, 2007).¹ For instance, Michael Quattlebaum's artist persona Mykki Blanco – a female rapper – articulates hypermasculinity (using braggadocio as rap style) together with ultrafemininity (style of dress and make-up) in his/her rap performance and thereby unsettles rigid and oppositional gender norms (Battan, 2012).

Method

Starting from the argument that hegemonic masculinity in contemporary R&B and hip hop culture can be and has been challenged, we conducted a textual analysis of the gender representations of two artists within the genre of alternative R&B. As implied in public debate (cf. *supra*), male alternative R&B artists are embodying and expressing alternative masculinities. This research wants to, first, investigate how the masculinities performed within the genre are alternatives to the hegemonic norm within R&B and hip

hop culture and, second, whether the alternatives qualify as cultural resistances to the norms and values linked to the hegemonic masculine man.

We chose to work with two young Black artists, namely Frank Ocean and The Weeknd, who are considered popular within alternative R&B and representative for the genre. Frank Ocean, the artist persona of Christopher Breaux, is a Black American artist who wrote songs for, among others, Justin Bieber and Beyoncé and who sung as a member of the hip hop collective Odd Future (Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All (OFWGKTA)). Under the name of Frank Ocean, he released his mixtape *Nostalgia, Ultra* (2011) for free, which gathered the attention and praise from the music press. In 2012, he released his first official commercial album *Channel Orange* (Def Jam Recordings, 2012). Since the release of the album coincided with his public disclosure of same-sex feelings (cf. supra), both the critically acclaimed album and the artist became the focal point of Western media attention (Jonze, 2012). Next to Frank Ocean, this article considers the work of The Weeknd, the artist persona of Black Canadian artist Abel Tesfaye. In contrast to Frank Ocean, The Weeknd/Abel Tesfaye remains a mystery. He debuted the work of The Weeknd with the free mixtape *House of Balloons* in 2011, whose work was lauded for its musical and thematic risks. That same year, he released two other mixtapes, namely *Thursday* and *Echoes of Silence*. Again, the music had to speak for itself as The Weeknd was not giving any interviews. Taking into account the debauchery, hedonism and sexual and drug excesses, the music press is conflicted whether the absence of author interpretation is a good thing or not for the music culture he created (Lawrence, 2012; Soderberg, 2012).

Specifically, we put the music released as album of both artists at the center. For Frank Ocean, this concerns *Nostalgia, Ultra* and *Channel Orange*. For The Weeknd, we chose to analyze *Trilogy* (republic records, 2012), the commercial re-release of his three free mixtapes compiled in one digipak. From the albums, all songs are selected for an analysis of the gender themes that are being represented. Even though the focus will be on lyrical aspects, formal aspects will be taken into account.

Frank Ocean: men searching for a real love

Over the course of two albums, Frank Ocean has engaged in portraying a musical universe that is both aesthetically and thematically diverse. Pinpointing him to solely alternative R&B is already something that can be considered restrictive, as his music blends genre conventions that characterize EDM, alternative rock, (neo-)soul, funk, hip hop and contemporary R&B. He further varies in choice of instrumentations, sound and ways of vocalizing. Similarly, the choice of artists he samples and/or invites to sing or play along reveals Frank Ocean as an artist who refuses to remain in the confines of Black popular music culture. Thematically, Frank Ocean does not take the safe road that is paved with picture-perfect, heteronormative and neoliberal fantasies. Rather than reiterating these commercial tropes, he explores socio-cultural and political issues that typify contemporary Western society. As tackled in early hip hop and soul music (Maultsby, 1983; Stewart, 2005; Watkins, 2006), racial segregation, class distinctions, and community building return as themes in his music. For some music journalists (e.g. Soderberg, 2012), this is what makes alternative R&B *alternative*. It defies classical, marketable and

racialized categorizations, which are traditional marketing strategies regarding Black popular music. By offering his first mixtape for free online, he further undermined the music industry's neoliberal model of making profit. Even though these strategies can be interpreted as niche marketing, they have nonetheless unsettled the aesthetic, thematic and commercial conventions of the genre.

Of interest to this article, however, is the way he represents masculinity. Demonstrated in the literature review, hip hop and contemporary R&B are ambiguous toward gender equality. Even though some male artists advocated gender equality (see Iwamoto, 2003), hypermasculinity remains the dominant trope, while the genres' progressive political potential remains tied to class and race issues. Frank Ocean, however, does not follow suit. The 'authentic' male identity often promoted in many hip hop songs is challenged by Frank Ocean's portrayal of diverse male characters. His songs consist of men that vary from traditional, patriarchal figures over men who reevaluate their (masculine) identities to men who are comfortable with engaging in nonnormative gender behavior. By giving these diverse masculinities a stage, Frank Ocean explores the performativity of gender and questions what it means to be a real man. On the first record *Nostalgia, Ultra*, for instance, the male characters include, among others, a workaholic estranged from his female partner in 'Songs 4 Women', a heartbroken and suicidal man in 'Swim Good', and a man dealing with the death of his grandfather and the absence of a father in 'There Will Be Tears'. What is interesting about all characters is that, despite their differences, they struggle with how to deal with their emotions. 'There Will Be Tears' is exemplary. Even though he sings about having to hide his tears for his friends, the song itself operates as a public expression of a man crying. This is further emphasized by sampling verses of the eponymous song 'There Will Be Tears' by Mr Hudson. What is being challenged is the idea of having to live up to an ideal of masculinity that, besides being a patriarchal socio-construction, conflicts with the everyday-life emotions of men. Yet, due to societal pressure, they often put on a hypermasculine performance to hide their vulnerability, love or jealousy. For instance, on *Channel Orange*'s 'Thinking Bout You', he portrays a male character who is in love for the first time. However, afraid of assuming the vulnerable position in the relation, he conceals his emotions by singing to the other character:

No, I don't like you, I just thought you were cool enough to kick it

Got a beach house I could sell you in Idaho, since you think

I don't love you I just thought you were cute, that's why I kissed you.

He masks his desires and instead articulates traditional masculine behavior. Taking into account that the other character is presumably male,² the verses are remarkable in terms of de-feminization: he addresses the other man in a hypermasculine lingo, he broaches about property and wealth and he emphasizes that the kiss has nothing to do with love. Yet, at the same time, he uses the hook – sung in a higher and more vulnerable manner – that he is actually thinking about being together forever. In the end, 'Thinking Bout You' portrays a hypermasculine man whose performed masculinity keeps him from happiness. In other songs as well, hypermasculine men are featured and represented in a similar way. Take the two main male characters Frank Ocean portrays on *Channel Orange*'s diptych

'Pyramids'. In the song, he portrays two stereotypical men who, each in their own way, abuse their women and consider their acts justified. Yet, the patriarch (in the first part of the song) and the pimp (in the second part of the song) are portrayed as despicable, estranged and ultimately disconnected from the women who were once their partners.

By representing masculinities and critiquing the masculine identity considered hegemonic in R&B and hip hop culture, he is deconstructing the idea of an unchangeable masculinity that is generally taken for granted. A few songs highlight this by undermining fixed ideas regarding men and women. For instance, the insertion of a monologue spoken by Nicole Kidman's character in the film *Eyes Wide Shut* (Kubrick, 1999) in 'LoveCrimes' (*Nostalgia, Ultra*) is significant. As such, he metaphorically gives women agency in his music and allows them to counter ingrained stereotypes regarding women. The character is making a stand for the sexuality of women. She reproaches the evolutionary psychological perspective that justifies men's sexual behavior to 'stick it in every place they can', while ridiculing men for thinking that women are only interested in security and commitment. By making only these phrases audible, Frank Ocean inserts a plea for female sexual agency while questioning hypersexual and hypermasculine behavior. At other times, he makes explicit his views on gender equality. In 'We All Try' on *Nostalgia, Ultra*, he expresses the following statements:

I believe a woman's temple
Gives her the right to choose [...]
I believe that marriage isn't
Between a man and woman but between love and love.

The verse explicates his support for abortion rights and same-sex marriage, expressed in a song that predates his public coming out. Notwithstanding his sexual identity, the song is significant as it acknowledges the role of politics to bring about emancipation of women and sexual minorities.

Yet, advocating same-sex marriage does not imply he is not critical of the institution of marriage. 'American Wedding' (*Nostalgia, Ultra*) – a song that uses the master track of The Eagles 'Hotel California' – tells the story of a young man and woman who decided to get married, a marriage that did not last long. He refers to the marriage as an American wedding, an institution he describes as having little meaning, unable to last long and due to result in an 'American divorce'. Even though the song can be interpreted as making a case for taking the institution of marriage more seriously, it also allows to be read as critical of the institution itself. In particular, the song consists of a verse that describes the married woman turning in her term papers:

M-R-S dot Kennedy, she signed her name in pen
In a fancy fancy cursive, then turned her term papers in
A thesis on Islamic virgin brides and arranged marriage
Hijabs and polygamist husbands, those poor un-American girls.

At first sight, the verse reports the woman's socio-cultural critique of Islamic marriage. Yet, the verse implies that the aspects she deplores (e.g. virginity, arranged marriage, polygyny and hijabs) are taken out of its historical and spatial context and are only used to reinforce her American-centric perspective on marriage. Yet, at the same time, the verse evokes the notion that her marriage is not that different from the 'un-American girls'. Emphasizing the practice of taking the husband's last name, she partakes in yet another patriarchally constructed marriage. If anything, Frank Ocean uses his work to stress the value of an emotional commitment rather than to have it institutionalized and rendered empty, hollow or disposable. It is not surprising that many of his songs deal with heartbreak, estranged lovers and unstable relationships. Yet, this does not imply that he promotes heteronormative bliss. As songs such as 'Nature Feels' (*Nostalgia, Ultra*), 'Pink Matter' and 'Monks' (*Channel Orange*) illustrate, sex can be perfectly experienced in a pleasurable way outside of wedlock and without the necessity of love. What he does criticize are the discourses – whether materialized in political institutions or in socio-cultural norms and values – that hamper intimate commitments. We already referred to his plea for same-sex marriage rights. In addition, his critique is equally implied in the representation of the hegemonic male who conceals his emotions (cf. supra) or the man who becomes a victim to a woman's sexuality. This is illustrated in 'Pilot Jones' (*Channel Orange*), a song about a man who has seen his female partner becoming a drug addict and dealer. He wants to quit the relationship, but she uses sex to seduce him. Even though the story, in a way, reads as a gender reversal of the story of a male drug addict convincing his girl to remain loyal to him, it, nonetheless, expresses the inability of a heterosexual hegemonic male to distance himself from his sexual desires.

Last, the burden of being governed by hegemonic discourses and hegemonic masculinity also affects Frank Ocean as a man with same-sex desires – a theme that became more readable in his music after publicly disclosing that his first love was a man. Take for instance 'Bad Religion' (*Channel Orange*). The song features Frank Ocean confessing his unrequited love for a man to a cab driver. He tells the driver that he has 'three lives balanced on his head like steak knives', which might be interpreted in terms of feeling forced to embody a fixed sexual identity category even though the identity might not correspond to his desires. Challenging the notion that sexual orientation is a fixed construction, his songs (and his tumblr note) avoid the labels 'gay' or 'homosexual'. Even though he might experience his sexual desires as confusing, he refuses to be confined to a rigid sexual identity category. He challenges the rational categorization in 'Pink Matter'. The song is not only intended as a deconstruction of masculine behavior, it also explores the relation between sexual pleasure and gender identities. Whereas the first verse of the song explores the relation of the male character with women – metaphorically referenced as pink matter – the second verse questions whether 'matter' is so important when it comes to sexual pleasure, as the verse ends with Frank Ocean making a stand for 'pleasure over matter'. Nonetheless, the song also brings to mind the power of hegemonic discourses such as heteronormativity – metaphorically represented as the purple matter – which is able to enforce the idea that sexual identity is fixed, natural and stable. Consequently, when Frank Ocean sings near the end of the song that he has no choice but to stick to blue matter since blue is his favorite color, he adopts a homosexual identity.

Yet, the reconciling, defeated attitude at the end of 'Pink Matter' is short-lived. The songs that succeed on the record consist of the cheerful, humorist love song 'Forrest Gump' – in which he confesses a romantic and sexual interest in the main male character of the eponymous movie *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994) – and the bonus track 'Golden Girl' – a romantic song addressed to a girl living on an island remote from the United States. As he stresses on the last track, he refuses to be 'going backwards' because he found happiness. Concluding, Frank Ocean features many male characters who are craving for realness (e.g. 'Super Rich Kids'), yet only those who transgress the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity seem to succeed in finding something real.

The Weeknd: hegemonic masculinity in crisis

With The Weeknd, alternative R&B was given yet another face that unsettled the conventions of contemporary R&B music. Like Frank Ocean, he defied the music industry by releasing his three mixtapes for free on the Internet, all in the same year. The Weeknd's music sounds less varied than Frank Ocean's and remains more close to the contemporary R&B signature in aesthetics and vocalizing. Nonetheless, by sampling, among others, 1960s French pop artist France Gall and a diversity of contemporary alternative rock artists such as Beach House and Cults, he broadens the musical perspective in which he positions himself. Furthermore, he introduces new themes into contemporary R&B by exploring a hedonist life of sex and drugs. Yet, what distinguishes him from the other artists in alternative R&B is his choice to remain a mystery. He conceals his private persona – Abel Tesfaye – as much as possible and refrains from providing background and interpretations to the musical world he creates. Taking into account the subjects he broaches and the questionable roles he assumes, however, both audiences and the music press are left wondering what to make of the songs and of the norms and values the artist holds.

Looking at the subjects in his work, it is remarkable that racial and class issues are largely ignored or left unspoken. Whereas Frank Ocean and other R&B and hip hop acts do engage in explicit and implicit social criticism of racial and class inequalities, The Weeknd portrays himself as a character whose main worries are related to women. Gender relations are at the heart of his music. Almost every song is built around the relation of The Weeknd with a girl/woman he is addressing in the lyrics. Throughout *Trilogy*, these relations are predominantly shaped as unequal. We are presented with a male character who is superior to almost all female characters in the songs, whereas the female characters are muted, objectified and, with the exception of a few songs, nameless and rid of any agency. On top of that, the female characters come across as passive and submissive, who are willingly subjected to his opinions, confessions and seductions. Whereas Frank Ocean represented diverse and contrasting masculinities, The Weeknd represents variations of the hegemonic masculine man. 'High For This' introduces audiences to this man and his attitudes toward women:

Close your eyes, lay yourself beside me

Hold tight for this ride

We don't need no protection

Come alone, we don't need attention.

Sung in an authoritative and seductive voice, he tries to persuade a woman into doing drugs and having sex. As the latter two phrases reveal, The Weeknd knows best. Yet, reading between the lines, the fact that a man convinces a woman of engaging in unsafe sex and doing drugs without priors implies that there is something suspicious with what is going to happen if she follows him. Other songs further fortify this image of a patriarchal deceiver. In 'Lonely Star' and 'Thursday' – two songs that make up one story – he convinces a woman to give up her life and devote herself to him. In return, he promises her 'the clothes, the jewels, the sex, the house' ('Lonely Star'). Yet, he then reveals the condition on which the relation will be based; he will only see her on Thursday. First, the songs reveal him as a patriarch who is not per se interested in loving a woman but rather owning a woman. He is prepared to provide her material wealth in return for sex. She, however, cannot expect an emotional commitment. Second, he is a hypersexual man who wants his (sexual) freedom – whether symbolically or literally – preserved. Even though he assumes often the role of patriarch, he does refer to other types of male characters in his songs. On the one hand, the songs feature men who are ridiculed, despised or threatened with violence if they are current or former boyfriends of the girls he is trying to seduce (e.g. 'What You Need', 'House of Balloons/Glass Table Girls'). On the other, he references his gang, his 'boys', who have his back and who come first before the girls (e.g. 'Loft Music', 'Life of the Party'). In sum, The Weeknd qualifies as a hypermasculine, hypersexual and misogynist R&B and hip hop man.

However, that is just one way of looking at it. Reading The Weeknd's music, three other aspects need to be taken more explicitly into account to fully understand the gender politics of his songs. First, and quite central in his work, is a question of sincerity. Lacking context, each song has the potential to provoke the thought whether the artist supports the hypermasculinity and misogyny expressed by the I-character in his songs. To understand his position, we point out the song 'Valerie' as key in unraveling his position toward the hegemonic male identity. The song discusses how 'performance' is a crucial strategy employed by men to ensure their superior position:

There comes a time in a man's life

Where he must take responsibility

For the choices he has made

There are certain things that he must do

Things that he must say

Like I love you

And I need you

I only want you

And nobody's going to know if it's true.

The cynical last phrase reveals how he and, according to him, men in general are able to fake a loving and dependable position in a relationship. A woman will never know whether her partner is merely putting on a show or not. Yet, more remarkable about this phrase is the exposure of that performance. Additionally, the last phrase also fortifies our argument that his music is not *per se* intended as true narratives and experiences. As audiences, we will never be able to know whether what he portrays is true. Yet, by provoking this thought, it does evoke a reading of his music as rather critical of the superiority of hegemonic masculinity.

Furthermore, The Weeknd's musical choices help to read his music culture as rather criticizing men's behavior than supporting it. First, by sampling songs by female artists in which men are critiqued, he allows the samples to operate as challenges to the discourse he expresses in his songs. For example, in 'House of Balloons/Glass Table Girls', which samples the distinctive guitar riff and hook from Siouxsie and the Banshees' 'Happy House', the hook of 'Happy House' is used as an ironic and cynic commentary to The Weeknd's attempt to convince his girl that their imbalanced and abusive relationship is perfectly normal:

This is a happy house

We're happy here

In a happy house

Oh this is fun.

As in the original song, the hook mocks the patriarchal exploitation of the male character. Another way of using music to convey a critique of hegemonic masculinity is articulated in specific conjunctions of sound and text. 'Life Of The Party' and 'Initiation' are exemplary for this practice. In the former, the spectrum of sound consists of raging electric guitars, an acoustic guitar that is strummed in an ironic way, and threatening metallic percussion sounds. Meanwhile, The Weeknd moans, sighs and giggles in a lunatic manner while his voice sounds slightly distorted. As The Weeknd is trying to, once again, lure a girl into a room full of men and drugs, the connotation of abuse becomes enhanced in the oppressive and upsetting sound of the song. In 'Initiation', which features a similar narrative, the technique is pushed to an extreme. Drenched in a charged sound of brooding basses and sketchy break beats, The Weeknd tries to convince a girl into 'meeting his boys'. In return, he promises her his heart. Whether his boys operate as a metaphor for actual boys or for drugs, the threat of falling victim to a gang bang or to a risky drug party is near. Not only the sound operates as a warning, also his manipulated voice – which is rid of any humanity by being electronically lowered and sharpened throughout the song – announces the girl may end up in peril. The hegemonic male has been unmasked as a ghastly debased character.

Third, a few songs explicitly emasculate the hegemonic masculine man. To do so, The Weeknd connects the emasculation to a drug-infused lifestyle. In his music, drugs function as literal and metaphorical obstructions to having a healthy private and public life. Even though many of the male characters express a desire to be together with a woman, they are generally more interested in getting her as high as they are and, eventually, end

up alone and/or emotionally detached from these women. In 'Gone', he boasts to a girl about his skills to satisfy her sexually but ends up apologizing to the girl as he sinks more into his drug trip and eventually fails to perform. 'Gone', like other songs on *Trilogy*, undermines the powerful and superior position of the hegemonic masculine man. In 'Coming Down', the main male character acknowledges this. The song is an apology of a guy to a girlfriend after coming down from his drug trip. He expresses remorse and guilt while admitting that he is addicted to his 'friends' – used as a metaphor to the drugs he is on. This song features a rare moment of a male character exposing himself as vulnerable. Yet, other songs, such as 'Wicked Games', 'The Knowing', 'The Zone' or 'Rolling Stone' all feature male characters who are confronted with their own emotions and forced to deal with unrequited love, insecurity and jealousy. Yet, rather than negotiating the fact that the hegemonic masculine ideal is unrealistic and accepting their own emotionality, vulnerability and humanity, they indulge in more debauchery, machismo behavior and self-loathing.

In fact, if anything, The Weeknd presents a repertoire that explores a hegemonic masculinity in crisis. As Frank Ocean did in a few songs, The Weeknd holds out a mirror to men and shows them what is wrong with *men* in contemporary Western society. Even though he situates the characters of his songs in an underground community outside civil society, he populates the community with familiar men who consider their patriarchal rights natural and essential and who engage in verbal or physical abuses on their female partners.

Conclusion

This article started from the assumption that alternative R&B brought about a new array of masculinities, alternatives to the traditional and dominant characters of masculinity in contemporary R&B and hip hop. Even though Frank Ocean and The Weeknd differ significantly in approach, they both are engaged in questioning what it means to be a man in R&B and hip hop culture. Their representations of masculinity both express a craving for something real – a realness that stretches back to what hooks (2004) described as real in blues music and what she finds lacking in men of contemporary hip hop culture. Looking back at the gender representations in the work of both artists, it seems that only the masculinities in Ocean's world seem to qualify as 'real'. The male characters represented by Ocean are at least attempting to challenge the hegemonic interpretation of masculinity offered by both contemporary R&B and hip hop culture and heteronormative society at large. In the case of The Weeknd, we are predominantly confronted with men having a crisis over what is real. Furthermore, the postmodern approach employed by The Weeknd remains debatable. If anything, the ambiguous approach of exaggerating the gender hierarchies and gender violence rather than 'explicitly' critiquing it, while avoiding to represent a strong nonnormative masculine character and independent, confident female characters, holds the risk of being misinterpreted. For some, the songs may be read by some as a justification of gender and sexual violence, and for others, the thematic connotations may evaporate while listening to the music rather than the lyrics. As such, one may enjoy his crooning and angelic vocalizing while ignoring the ambiguous and unsettling content. In a way, the duplicity that typifies The Weeknd's approach is comparable

to the work of other artists within R&B and hip hop culture, particularly White rapper Eminem. Rodman (2006) emphasizes that Eminem's hegemonic masculinity has often been considered autobiographical. As a result, his private and public persona has been held responsible for the use of violent, misogynist and homophobic lyrics. Ironically, Eminem's performance of multiple identities (e.g. Slim Shady and Marshall Matters) has seldom been taken into account when interpreting his music. Like The Weeknd, his work allows to be reinterpreted in terms of a hegemonic masculinity in crisis.

To conclude, both Frank Ocean and The Weeknd can be understood as being part of a music culture that reflects the social complexities of masculinities in current Western public spheres. The liberal environments in which contemporary R&B and hip hop operate are less dominated by homophobia, sexism and misogyny and provide spaces for nonnormative gender representations and pro-gay attitudes. However, as the crisis within The Weeknd's work illustrates, the changing of cultural understandings of masculinities is often accompanied by same-old hegemonic recuperations. Moreover, these continuous oscillations between representations of alternative masculinities and hegemonic reinforcements debouch in multiple everyday interpretations and appropriations at the individual, societal and cultural level.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. It should be noted that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgenders (LGBTs) do not automatically challenge hegemonic masculinity. Like heterosexual and cisgender men, men who experience same-sex desires and transgender men can assume/perform a hegemonic masculine identity and/or express homophobia and misogyny (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).
2. We assume the other character is male, based on the following verse: 'My eyes don't shed tears, but boy they pour when I'm thinking "bout you"'.

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