



Battling the race: Stylizing language and coproducing whiteness and colouredness in a freestyle rap performance

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Abstract

In the last 19 years of post-apartheid South African democracy, race remains an enduring and familiar trope, a point of certainty amid the messy ambiguities of transformation. In the present article, we explore the malleable, permeable, and unstable racializations of contemporary South Africa, specifically the way in which coloured and white racializations are negotiated and interactionally accomplished in the context of Capetonian hip-hop. The analysis reveals the complex ways in which racialized bodies are figured semiotically through reference to historical time and contemporary (translocal) social space. But also the way iconic features of blackness are reindexed to stand for a transnational whiteness.

Introduction

In the context of South Africa, the structural category of race remains a primary mold into which everyday interactions and identities are cast, providing an enduring and familiar trope, a point of certainty amid the messy ambiguities of post-apartheid transformation. Racial discourses couched as metaphors of racial harmony such as the “rainbow nation,” the invocation of pan-African imaginaries of new communities of Ubuntu, and the crass practicalities of affirmative action and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) dominate public debate and government legislation. Despite the perpetuity of race as a lived category, *discourses of racialization*, that is the words and ways through which people construct and navigate race on an everyday basis, are fluid, shifting and entangled: they are “a complicated multiplicity of identifications producing, reproducing and transforming identities under changing social and historical circumstances” (Walker 2005:41).

The purpose of this paper is precisely to explore some of the ways in which the malleable, permeable, and unstable racializations of contemporary South Africa are indexed and performed linguistically. We look at how people use language to position themselves and are positioned as racial subjects in order to examine the “forms of racialized subjectivity that are produced in different racialized forms of life” (Durrheim, Mtose, and Brown 2011:201). Specifically, we explore how forms of racial positioning in everyday interactions reproduce or contest the historical faultlines of hegemonic racial discourses of the apartheid state 20 years on. We do this by drawing on recent research on the indexicalities of race and language in the performance of popular culture and

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