

Challenging the Genre He Calls Home

A discussion of Macklemore's "Same Love"
and how it challenges hip-hop

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A song promoting same-sex equality, “Same Love” takes on an issue left untouched by many and condemned by the hip-hop genre that Macklemore himself calls home. To understand Macklemore’s place in hip-hop, the genre must be defined by a few key characteristics: in *Decoded*, Jay-Z advocates for the inclusion of life experiences and truth in a rapper’s music, and in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Tricia Rose argues that personal responses to oppression and discrimination are the foundation for hip-hop itself. Macklemore remains true to his genre, encompassing both of these ideas in “Same Love.” Where he strays from hip-hop is in his support for same-sex marriage, shown to be a contrast to the hip-hop industry by Marc Lamont Hill’s “Scared Straight: Hip-Hop, Outing, and the Pedagogy of Queerness.” Hill delves into the existence of homophobia in hip-hop and provides numerous examples of the ways in which it presents itself in rap music. Macklemore responds to such instances of homophobia and explains his reasons for writing “Same Love” in a post on his website, solidifying his simultaneous connection to and challenge of the hip-hop community. In his song and music video, Macklemore takes his fans through the life of a gay individual and shows the development of a loving same-sex relationship. However, he does more than just advocate for gay rights—he delves into the existence of homophobia and reveals the hypocrisy of those who oppose same-sex rights. While Macklemore still maintains similarities to other rappers in the industry in his style of personal story-telling, he challenges typical hip-hop ideals by openly supporting same-sex marriage in an industry known for denouncing homosexuality.

Despite the challenge he poses to the industry, Macklemore stays true to a few important aspects of hip-hop. His style of personal storytelling reflects an ideology held by many other rappers, specifically Jay-Z, who in his book *Decoded*, advocates for the importance of sharing personal experiences. Jay-Z describes his life on the streets, saying, “I finally had a story to tell.

And I felt obligated, above all, to be honest about that experience” (17). The fact that Jay-Z felt “obligated to be honest” shows that he thought it was his responsibility to speak about his life accurately, and he knew he could not do so without sharing the details of his life, good or bad. Jay-Z explains that the rest of hip-hop needed to follow suit, claiming that the hip-hop “culture had to go somewhere else to grow. It had to come home” (12). The word “home” connotes a comfortable place where people can feel safe sharing their truths. Jay-Z’s statement that hip-hop “had to come home” says that the music needed to return to its roots of expression and personal stories, and that it needed to focus more on the substance of the music. In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Tricia Rose speaks of these roots and explains that hip-hop “is a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community” (qtd. in Neal 477). Here, she argues that hip-hop allows African-Americans to express the injustice they have faced. This “brutally truncated opportunity” refers to the discrimination against African-Americans, primarily towards the late 1900’s, that prevented them from obtaining the same success and status as other races, specifically whites. Rose writes that hip-hop serves as an outlet for the challenge of oppressors and that it furthers a sense of community by uniting people behind a common theme. Although Macklemore challenges a particular theme found in hip-hop, he still represents characteristics of the genre in his music, and in his style of story-telling and opposing oppression, Macklemore certainly fits the definition of a hip-hop artist.

The aspect of hip-hop that Macklemore challenges is the prevalence of homophobia in rap music, and author Marc Lamont Hill describes the history and full existence of anti-gay sentiments in rap music. In his article, “Scared Straight: Hip-Hop, Outing, and the Pedagogy of

Queerness,” Hill writes that “contemporary American hip-hop culture sustains hegemonic conceptions of masculinity through a variety of outing practices. Through these practices...we are able to preserve falsely obvious notions of uniform heterosexuality” (384). These “outing practices” refer largely to the homophobic slurs and insults used by many rappers to either insult their opposition by questioning their sexuality or to actually attempt to label another rapper as gay. The use of homosexuality as an insult places heterosexuality on a pedestal of normality, and it also serves to place emphasis on the apparent importance of hypermasculinity. While these ideals do exist in society itself, Hill emphasizes the severity of hip-hop’s homophobia, explaining that it goes beyond the expectation for heteronormativity and is instead blatantly anti-gay.

Rap lyrics operate as one of the most prominent and accessible sites for transmitting antigay beliefs and values within hip-hop culture. While it can be argued that all forms of popular music are pervasively heteronormative—that is, they presume, reinforce, and ultimately demand unquestioned heterosexuality—explicitly homophobic discourses are lyrically overrepresented within hip-hop culture (Hill 385).

This “lyrical overrepresentation” of homophobia can be seen in the songs of some of the most successful and well-known rappers in today’s industry. Hill mentions Jay-Z, 50 Cent, and Eminem as some of the many rappers who use words like “faggot” and “homo” in their music (385). The use of these words, even if unintentionally insulting, still proves that hip-hop is resistant to tolerating homosexuality. Hill uses the battle between Nas and Jay-Z to prove that even seemingly harmless jabs about homosexuality make a statement about hip-hop’s intolerance. He states, “Despite the playful nature of their practices, Nas’ and Jay-Z’s use of lyrical outing as a battle strategy reiterated the inherently pejorative meaning of gay as a signifier within the hip-hop world” (Hill 389). Hill argues that even in jest, the willingness to use

homophobic slurs as a way to undercut opponents demonstrates a large disrespect for homosexuals and therefore solidifies the genre's opposition to homosexuality.

In a post on his website, Macklemore.com, Macklemore comments on the homophobia that exists in hip-hop and lists this as one of his reasons for writing "Same Love." He also explains how his experiences growing up and how his connection to hip-hop made him feel an extra obligation to respond to his genre's lack of tolerance. Macklemore writes, "This song, which I wrote in April, is a response to what I have observed and experienced, and is also an act of personal accountability....My intent is not to scrutinize or single out hip hop. It happens to be the culture that has profoundly shaped me, and the one I feel most accountable to." Macklemore assures his fans that placing blame on hip-hop and challenging his fellow rappers was not his intention; however, rapping in support of marriage equality in an industry so predominantly homophobic comes as a challenge in itself. By using the word "accountable," Macklemore alludes to the feelings he has regarding his responsibility to rap about his support for same-sex marriage, regardless of the reception he receives from his genre. Like Jay-Z, Macklemore stays true to the idea that rappers have an obligation to share their experiences and personal beliefs with their fans. Macklemore implies that because hip-hop has had such an impact on his life, he owes it back to the industry and to his fans to be honest about his feelings and his opinions. Although he wrote about what is true to him, Macklemore reveals that writing "Same Love" did not come easily. He says, "It was not easy to write, and I struggled with how I, as a straight male, could genuinely speak upon this issue." Despite being straight, Macklemore wanted to find a genuine way to express his feelings regarding his support for same-sex marriage. Macklemore maintains a personal connection to his song by rapping about his own observations of homophobia and how he has seen it affect people; in doing this, he supports Jay-Z's notion

that rap should mimic storytelling and that real rappers speak on the issues that they have seen and experienced in their lives.

Through his exposure to hip-hop, Macklemore has undoubtedly observed the prevalent use of homophobic slurs and insults. He states that “intolerance of the gay community in hip hop is widespread. The best rappers will use homophobic language on albums that critics rave about, making hip hop and homophobia inextricably linked.” As Hill explains in “Scared Straight,” hip-hop is one of the largest outlets for anti-gay messages. While Macklemore does not commit to labeling hip-hop as “explicitly homophobic” like Hill does, he argues that regardless of intention, hip-hop and homophobia are intertwined as a result of the many examples of homophobic slurs found in rap music from highly successful individuals. In his own music, however, Macklemore presents the opposite message.

Throughout his song and music video, Macklemore defies typical hip-hop ideals of heterosexuality. By opening “Same Love” with a discussion of the stereotypes surrounding homosexuality, Macklemore shows that gay does not have to look the way many envision it. In his opening lines he admits, “When I was in the third grade I thought that I was gay/‘cause I could draw, my uncle was, and I kept my room straight.” Here he shows the commonly held beliefs that being artistic, neat, and having gay family members implies homosexuality. The last words of each line provide an interesting contrast: gay vs. straight. Keeping his room “straight” didn’t make him gay, and the definitions of these words are not as black and white as they seem. As he says these words, the music video shows children playing: young boys run around outside, climbing trees, and little girls play with dolls. These images represent the typical views of heterosexual gender roles. After saying that his mom immediately reassured him he was not gay, Macklemore raps, “Bunch of stereotypes all in my head/I remember doing the math like, ‘yeah

I'm good at little league'/A preconceived idea of what it all meant." This statement emphasizes the stereotypes of what "gay" looks like that plague our society, showing that even young children often have these ideas built into their minds.

The music video then shows two teens playing catch—an activity Macklemore ties to heterosexuality—yet it is revealed throughout the video that one of the teens is gay. Macklemore takes his fans on an emotional journey not typically found in rap music, showing the teen's progression into adulthood and the feelings of exclusion and confusion he feels growing up in a primarily heterosexual world—he is uncomfortable during spin the bottle and stands alone at a school dance. As an adult in a relationship with another man, the main character of the video receives a marriage proposal on the beach from his boyfriend. This is an image seen quite often in heterosexual relationships, and with this Macklemore aims to prove that heterosexual and homosexual relationships share many of the same qualities. During the scene in which the two men get married, Macklemore raps, "We press play, don't press pause/Progress, march on/With the veil over our eyes/We turn our back on the cause." With these words, he advocates for marriage equality and "marching" on to progress while also criticizing society for living "with the veil over our eyes." These words, "march" and "veil" evoke a matrimonial feeling that matches the music video's wedding ceremony, and although these words bring heterosexual marriage to mind, Macklemore says them while showing a same-sex marriage to emphasize that the two are not that different. As the ceremony ends, Macklemore says, "Underneath it's all the same love," once again emphasizing that hetero- and homosexuality share more ways in which they are alike than in which they differ.

Placing these sexual orientations at the same level undercuts the emphasis that hip-hop places on heterosexuality. In "Same Love" Macklemore addresses the homophobia in hip-hop,

pointing out that these anti-gay statements are made with very little thought. In the opening line of his second verse, Macklemore says, “If I was gay, I would think hip-hop hates me/‘Man, that’s gay’ gets dropped on the daily/We become so numb to what we’re saying.” In saying this, he describes the exclusivity that hip-hop practices in shutting out homosexuals with thoughtless anti-gay lyrics. The casual but insulting use of the word “gay” is something that Hill discusses as well, and his ideas further Macklemore’s claim that the carelessness of using homophobic slurs creates a hostile anti-gay environment.

Macklemore describes this environment in “Same Love,” rapping that “kids are walking ‘round the hallway plagued by pain in their heart/A world so hateful some would rather die than be who they are.” In these lines, Macklemore references the many news stories about bullying that leads to suicide. The oppressive nature of bullying and anti-gay sentiments is highly prevalent in rap music, and Macklemore relates this lyrical persecution to the historical oppression faced by African-Americans from colonial times up to the Civil Rights movement. In “Same Love” Macklemore ties the two issues together, saying “Gender to skin color, the complexion of your pigment/The same fight that led people to walk outs and sit ins/It’s human rights for everybody, there is no difference.” As he says this, old footage of burning crosses, bombs, and civil rights protests appear in the music video. He pairs these words with these images to point out that discriminating against someone on the grounds of sexuality has just as little basis as race-based discrimination. He hints at the hypocrisy of it all, saying, “A culture founded from oppression/Yet we don’t have acceptance for ‘em.” The statement “culture founded from oppression” holds two meanings. Macklemore presents the idea that although the United States itself was founded on freedom from persecution, gays are still not treated as equals. Perhaps the more interesting message Macklemore introduces is one that aligns with

Tricia Rose's explanation of hip-hop's origin. While hip-hop was created primarily as a response to the oppression faced by Blacks up to the late twentieth century and into this century, hip-hop artists still have little to no acceptance of homosexuals—another group trying to fight oppression and discrimination. This idea drowns homophobic hip-hop artists in hypocrisy, demonstrating the cruel double standard that has been created. While it is true that hip-hop serves as an outlet for frustrations regarding unfair treatment, Macklemore exposes the hypocrisy of transitioning from oppressed to oppressor. In "Same Love," Macklemore poses the ultimate challenge to the hip-hop industry: he raps about oppression, remaining true to hip-hop's foundation, yet the oppression he speaks of is caused in part by hip-hop itself.

Macklemore goes against normal hip-hop standards of homophobia and raps about homosexuality and same-sex marriage in a supportive light. As evidenced by Jay-Z and Tricia Rose's ideas on the features of hip hop, Macklemore shares similarities with his fellow rappers in the sense that he raps about his life and what is true to him. However, the actual ideas presented in his song go against what so many rappers in the hip-hop industry present in their own songs—namely homophobia, which Marc Lamont Hill explains is highly prevalent in rap music. In "Same Love" and its music video, Macklemore takes his fans through the misguided stereotypes of homosexuality and proves that heterosexual and homosexual relationships are not all that different. Within his discussion of homophobia and the cruel nature of rap artists' lyrics, Macklemore reveals the hypocrisy of a group founded in oppression furthering the oppression of another group. Although he remains a clear member of the hip-hop industry, Macklemore challenges typical homophobic hip-hop ideology and instead provides a refreshing view of tolerance in a rather close-minded industry.

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