

Scholarly Framework: Ethnomusicology

Alex de Ramon

Note: This process assignment is an exploration of the workings of a specific academic discipline. Students investigate a wide range of resources about their chosen discipline, then distill their findings by answering a series of questions about what they learned. Rather than a formal, cited essay, the result is an informal snapshot of what they've discovered and how they might use it.

My chosen discipline is ethnomusicology, which can be defined as a subset of anthropology studying how music is a product of culture and how it also reflects cultural and social values and norms. I chose this discipline because it serves as a good framework for connecting the cultural backgrounds of artists with the music they produce, which is key to my central project of how differing cultural norms about gender and sex may produce differences in hip-hop and rap lyrics around the world, as opposed to the well-known sexism prevalent in American rap music. In other words, are international hip-hop artists more heavily influenced by the founding American artists of the genre in terms of sexist and misogynist lyrics? Or, on the other hand, do foreign artists' conceptions of gender and sex reflect their local cultures and ensuing social norms and gender roles? I think that this discipline will shape my work by forcing me to focus on cultural norms about gender/sex both as an input and an output: in other words, gender roles and the typical male "bravado" culture of rap music influences lyrics about sex, women, and relationships, which in turn reinforce social norms by being expressed as a piece of popular culture.

While ethnomusicology is somewhat interdisciplinary and draws from cultural anthropology, linguistics, music theory, history, and race or ethnic studies, its scholars generally study music as culture and as a reflection of culture. They see music as an essentially human activity that is shaped by its cultural context. Topics studied recently in the field include Westernization and globalization, which has resulted in folk music blending with global popular music trends, as well as increasingly blurred lines between different types of genres. Another topic is popular music and its standardizing effect (which leads to questions over whether pop music actually reflects cultural values or if it simply reflects the corporate sector and its pursuit of profit). Ethnomusicologists would ask questions such as: How do social and cultural factors affect the content and form of music? What is the effect of globalization and popular Western music on local music styles? How do individuals create and experience music and how is this music socially interpreted? These scholars find exigency in cultural and social practices and the meanings of music to its audience and how these meanings are conveyed. They also take a global approach to music in order to correct for previously ethnocentric views of non-Western music in the early decades of the field.

For my work, Ellen Koskoff's theory of gender in ethnomusicology will be most relevant. Essentially, Koskoff contends that gender can help explain musical practices of a society: for example, gender-based dualisms (such as private/public and feelings/actions) are as common in music as they are in other realms of society. This has even (historically at least) affected the field of ethnomusicology itself, as women who may have been confined to the home or the private sphere may not have been allowed or given access to ethnomusicologists who conducted lengthy fieldwork. Koskoff goes on to say that these kinds of divisions

demonstrate how societies view gender; does musical behavior, as a whole, support established gender roles or reflect cultural change by subverting them? In terms of rap, this theory may help me go beyond simple analysis of lyrics. Rap has always been an overwhelmingly male-dominated industry in the US (and it seems so internationally as well according to my presearch), which I think says a lot about gender roles in and of itself in the industry. I think examining Koskoff's dualisms may help me make more authoritative conclusions about gender roles in US and global hip-hop than close reading of lyrics alone would allow me to.

Historically, typical methodologies in ethnomusicology consist primarily of ethnographic fieldwork, which consists of directly observing the music being studied and often gaining skills in another music tradition as a performer or theorist. This kind of direct personal experience will not be relevant to my work, but this type of methodology has shifted as technology has made it possible to record performances and create videos and documentaries, so that accurate studies can be made outside of the field. Because my focus will necessarily be on how lyrics about relationships and sex reflect different gender roles and varying degrees of sexism, a close reading of lyrics and analysis of their social and cultural implications should be a good methodology to pursue. In addition, it would be interesting to pursue how female rappers (both in the US and internationally) interpret gender roles and how they respond to the dominant masculine influence in hip-hop, which may connect to Koskoff's theory mentioned above.

I plan to use the methodologies of close reading and content analysis of a small sample of songs from both US hip-hop songs and a variety of international hip-hop artists. This method will allow me to comparatively assess similarities and differences between the two in

order to determine the extent to which local culture dictates how gender roles are expressed in the music versus the extent to which globalized US rap music influences these international artists and consequently, their lyrics about sex, relationships, and gender. I will then use Koskoff's theory of gender dualisms to extend my findings by analyzing how a possible variance in the number of female artists and their relative popularity (as it is likely harder for female rappers to "break into" the industry) may further affect the aforementioned gender roles.

Established conversations in the discipline (focused on US rap and hip-hop) question whether sexism and misogyny are a function of social norms, of rappers' own personal experiences and beliefs, or of what the label company thinks will be popular and make money (a more structuralist interpretation). Because international hip-hop industries are usually on a smaller scale and not dominated by record labels, a prevalence of similar kinds of lyrics about gender roles to the US may help me join this conversation by allowing me to emphasize the power of social and cultural norms in determining musical attitudes about gender roles. On a macro level, however, there have not been many studies or much focus on gender roles or sexism in international hip-hop, even though a wealth of research has been done on this topic for rap in the United States, so I think this will be a unique and fresh angle for me to enter the conversation about gender in rap music.

In terms of challenges or limits, I am necessarily limited by the scope that my paper can possibly take, as I will not be able to closely analyze enough songs to be a representative sample of the broad topic of "international hip-hop." However, I think I will be able to analyze enough to make my paper an interesting start on the topic, considering its freshness in the discipline. Also, another challenge that I have considered

will be understanding foreign rappers as many of them rap in languages other than English. However, I have already found at least ten possible international artists I can use for my paper that rap mostly or at least partially in English, which I think will be enough considering the limited scope of my paper. Of course, I will have no shortage of US hip-hop songs to choose from, but I would like to have some sort of relative balance with a combination of contemporary and older artists, as well as considering the region of the country where the artists are from (West Coast, New York, South, etc.).