

Total Control: Identity Beyond Counterstance

A rare female DJ stands confidently, face betraying nothing, shielded from the bright stage lighting by a snug black cap and opaque shades. In her hands she effortlessly adjusts a controller packed with knobs and faders which control every aspect of a DJ's performance. Her touch is light, unexaggerated, but simultaneously precise and measured. Unlike the two men who flank her, her gaze seems distant, almost like that of a blind musician. The man to her right stares intently on her handiwork, sweat shining on his brow, a water bottle in his left hand. His apparent fatigue highlights the female DJ's freshness, her clean unwrinkled baggy t-shirt and Supreme hat look as if they're being worn for the first time. Just like her poised hands, her outfit speaks of intention. Not only is she controlling the audio that exudes from the club's speakers, she is just as deftly controlling the image that reflects off of her body.



This image, henceforth known as “Three Performers” depicts three DJs standing behind equipment used to perform a DJ set. This image was published online by Butterz, a small record label located in the UK which has these three performers under contract. This image was posted without caption or any other direct explanation. From surrounding paratextual information¹ it can be gathered that these three DJs are, from front to back, DJ Q, Flava D, and Royal-T.

In this essay I theorize that Flava D, visually conveys a sense of control that so exceeds her male counterparts, that it supersedes gender boundaries present in DJ culture, and begins to form an independent identity. Further, I explore how lay persons interpret control within a frame of dominant and subordinate relationships derived from racial stereotypes. In summation, I argue that the power of the *Three Performers* image comes from how it challenges the both lay and knowledgeable viewer’s conceptions of gender roles within DJ culture.

In this essay “Control” is defined such that it may be used universally in different contexts: “To exercise power or authority over; to determine the behavior or action of, to direct or command; to regulate or govern” (OED). Control is central to how the viewer interprets the *Three Performers* image. Within this essay I will be focusing on control derived from Flava D’s clothing and from the visual relationship between her, her male counterparts within the image, and female DJs generally within popular culture.

Many elements of Flava D’s clothing control what the audience can see, insulating her from outside forces. Her hat and sunglasses hide her face and eyes, shielding them the harsh light of the club and from the viewer’s gaze. Similarly, her baggy black t-shirt hides the form of her body, shielding her shoulders and chest with long sleeves and a high collar. These clothing

¹ On the Butterz record label website, *Three Performers* is surrounded by other images of the same three figures, and by links to a music hosting “Soundcloud” page where collaborations between Royal-T, DJ Q, and Flava D are published under the moniker “TQD.”

elements exact control as they exercise authority over what can and cannot be seen. This exertion of control over visual appearance runs contrary to traditional depictions of women as nude subjects, where “white women are passive objects to be looked at” (Mercer, 1993, p. 437). Furthermore, the black color of her garments contrast with white marble, a traditional medium used in nude sculpture (Mercer, 1993, p. 437).

Flava D’s clothing also effects the visual relationship between her and the men in *Three Performers*. Initially, one might read the relationship between Flava D and DJ Q, the man in the foreground, as one in which he is imposing himself upon her. This read identifies him as the superior, perhaps enforcing himself as a teacher or coach, watching for mistakes that need to be corrected. Yet, Flava D’s visual appearance seems to contradict this interpretation. Flava D’s clothing seems to insulate her from outside visual judgement. Furthermore, her headphones would screen out any attempt to instruct her verbally. Her sunglasses and disconnected gaze suggest the skill of a blind musician, while DJ Q observes her hands on the controls, Flava D can perform without relying on sight. When summed together, her clothing, headphones, and sunglasses, suggest that Flava D is the superior performer while DJ Q is the ignored, lower skilled subordinate.

Both of these readings subconsciously rely on specific stereotypes surrounding black men. In her analysis of black men as the subjects of photography, Kobena Mercer describes a representational split, “for every threatening image of a black subject as a marauding native, menacing savage, or rebellious slave, there is a comforting image of the black as docile servant, amusing clown, and happy entertainer” (1993, p. 438). Viewers who are not familiar with the preexisting relationship between these two DJs may subconsciously rely on stereotypes of dominant or submissive black men to interpret this image.

How lay persons attempts to read this image is one facet of what gives this image power. Without contextual knowledge these viewers are dependent on stereotypes to make sense of the image. In her article about the framing of visual rhetoric, Sonja Foss explains that visual rhetoric as a is primarily focused on the reactions of lay persons, those without technical knowledge of what they view, who then must rely only on their own personal worldly experience when attempting to interpret images (2004). From a lay person's perspective, stereotypes become reality in the absence of information to interpret the image otherwise (Foss 2004). Part of what give this image power is how it pits stereotypes surrounding black men against each other, leaving the lay viewer unable to fully decide who is dominant and who is submissive.

Wherein a lay audience may read these two DJ's relationship as contested or adversarial, those with technical knowledge about these DJs may read their relationship differently. These DJs perform and compose a genre of electronic music called "Grime" which is not well known outside of the United Kingdom. As an image that is not widely circulated outside of its intended audience, an understanding of the knowledgeable audience's reaction becomes important. At the very least, an examination of the knowledgeable audience's response will supplement our understanding of this images larger impact.

Paratextual sources suggest that knowledgeable audiences recognize Flava D independently from her male counterparts. In a recent documentary about the Butterz record label, co-founder Skilliam describes her influence on audiences, "were seeing a lot more girls coming into the raves now, and it's like, sometimes it's the girls that are going crazier than the guys. I'm not sure whether that's because we've had Flava D on board and people like the kind of music she plays, it attracts them a bit more" (Western 2015). Flava D is a relatively new artist on the Butterz record label. To lay audiences, a rookie status might support the interpretation that

she is subordinate to Veteran DJ Q, but increased club attendance by women suggests that she has her own audience, and that her association with DJ Q is actually a mutual endorsement.

In either case, lay or experienced, audiences seem to be reacting to Flava D's visual appearance. I suspect that her appearance is significant because it exerts a level of visual control that absent in her male counterparts, and exceeds even that of other image conscious female DJs. Female DJ's have a history of clothing styles that attempt to exert control over identity. The concept of the "T-Shirt DJ" is explored and defined by Rebekah Farrugia in her 2012 book where she examines the unique obstacles that women face as DJs. In her interviews, Farrugia uncovered a perceived dichotomy that is commonly expressed among Female DJs, "You can be a novelty item have no talent, wear a bikini and make a lot of money' or 'always wear a long-sleeved Adidas t-shirt because I don't like being objectified at all'" (Farrugia, p. 50).

In a recent interview, Flava D explained how she omitted details about her gender early in her career, "I never said 'heyyy I'm a female producer' – I was just sending beats out, and all they'd see was the name, Flava D, nothing to say it was a female. That's probably a good thing in a way, because people might think if you're a female you're using it to your advantage or something..." (Gooding 2014). According to Farrugia, hiring practices by clubs and corporations favor women who are already models or socialites, with little regard to their musical skills (2012, p. 43). These hiring practices reinforce the idea that female DJs are either a visual spectacle or skilled in their craft, but never both (Farrugia 2012). Some female DJs, who Farrugia calls "T-shirt DJs" intentionally wear loose fitting shirts and jeans, apparel common to male DJs, in order to be taken more seriously (Farrugia 2012). Through clothing, female DJs exert control over identity, adopting typical male garb, and thus resisting dominant hiring practices.

Part 11 – Going Beyond a Counterstance

One way to consider the T-Shirt DJ's choice of dress is through Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of the "Counterstance". Anzaldúa' defines the counterstance as an identity that is formed as a defiant refutation of dominant views and beliefs (1987). The T-Shirt DJ's clothing style is a counterstance identity because it developed as a response to the hiring practices of dominant cultural groups. However, the T-Shirt DJ's identity is also limited by Anzaldúa's criticisms of counterstance identities wherein, "All reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against." (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 234). In this sense the identity of the T-Shirt DJ is tied to dominant male forms of dress, defined by that which it resists. If the clothing styles of male DJs change, the T-Shirt DJ must too change her visual appearance to remain in opposition to dominant views of female DJs as merely visual tools. Further, the T-Shirt DJ counterstance forces women to abandon any feminine traits which might attract unwanted attention.

What makes *Three Performers* powerful is how Flava D seems to move beyond this counterstance identity. Her appearance projects both masculine and feminine elements which exceed her counterparts. Viewers will recognize her skull ring and forearm tattoos as masculine symbols which stand out against her male counterparts' generic clothing. At the same time, viewers will also recognize Flava D's long hair and delicate hands as feminine symbols which stand out against DJ Q's close cropped haircut and large upper arm. Through this fusing of masculine and feminine elements, Flava D stands out on her own, disengaging from connections to dominant culture. The viewer recognizes the control that Flava D exudes because her appearance challenges dominant conceptions of both female and male DJs.

The reaction that Flava D is getting from female fans shows that she is transcending an identity that is meant to blend in. It is possible that female presenting fans are drawn to her performances because they see something in Flava D's appearance which they perceive as powerful, but not wholly removed from femininity. A lay audience may not perceive the ways in which her appearance specifically challenges norms within DJ culture, but perhaps the dissonance between the subordinate and dominant readings will prompt them to investigate this image further. Hopefully the power of this image will provoke a change in how female DJs are assessed by dominant culture, providing a third identity beyond the sensual vs. skillful binary described by Farrugia's interviewees.

References

- Anzaldúa, G. E. (1987). *Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute.
- Butterz. (2016, March 15). "Three Performers" image. Retrieved from Butterz Official Site:
<http://butterz.co.uk/>
- Farrugia, R. (2012). *Beyond the dance floor: female DJs, technology and electronic dance music*.
Bristol: Intellect.
- Foss, S. K. (2004). Framing the study of visual rhetoric: Toward a transformation of rhetorical
theory. *Defining visual rhetorics*, 303-313.
- Gooding, D., & Cushnie, E. (2014, July 9). New era: Flava D interviewed. (J. Muggs,
Interviewer) Retrieved from [http://www.factmag.com/2014/07/09/new-era-flava-d-
interviewed/](http://www.factmag.com/2014/07/09/new-era-flava-d-interviewed/)
- Mercer, K. (1993). Reading racial fetishism: The photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe.
Fetishism as cultural discourse, 307-30.
- Western, W. (Director). (2015). *Pull up: Grime through The eyes of butterz* [Motion Picture].
United Kingdom: Fact Magazine. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/wx3tcZ0IuXg>

Outline

1. Initial close read
2. Naming image
 1. Light background info on subjects
3. Thesis
4. Defining Control
5. Clothing derived power
6. Clothing and relationships with male DJs
 1. Possible Read 1 Q over D
 2. Possible Read 2 D over Q
7. Reliance on stereotypes of black males.
8. Importance of lay person's perspective
9. Argument for including subcultural reactions
10. Going beyond other female DJs
11. Going beyond a counter stance.
12. Temp Wrap up conclusion

Banked Ideas

1. Location derived power
2. baggy shirt, . With her tattoos, skull ring, and watch, her masculine appearance seems far more intentional than that of her male counterparts who wear more generic clothing.

3. Part 6 – Craft Derived Power

In conjunction with these choices of clothing, Flava D gains power through the assumed connotation of control associated with DJing as a craft. The craft of DJing itself emphasizes one's ability of control and manipulate predetermined sounds as opposed to creating new rhythms and melodies. The equipment that DJs use to mix together track are even called "controllers." While pop musicians rely on clear self-promotion and branding, many DJs thrive on exclusivity, hiding the names of their tracks and performing under pseudonyms, exerting control over their craft and their written identities. Through these manipulations of identity, DJs gain power as individuals with control over exclusive skills and musical knowledge.

4. Part 7 – Location Derived Power

5. Further, the mysterious nature of the photo's background hides where performance is occurring, suggesting only some sort of underground lair, hidden and inaccessible, wherein only those informed have access.
6. How does this connect to control? Control of the gaze? How does this differ from Mappelthroe, wherein his images erase context. This image is full of context and referential info that the viewer may know, so these readings of the black body don't totally fit.
7. Talk about paratextual element, considering their pre-existing relationship? Audience that know who these people are, the intended audience is known to interpret these differently, and the label and photographer know that? Cite Butterz documentary? Flava D interview?

8. “Three Performers” suggests both reading depending on how leaves the viewer to decide
With read of Flava D and DJ Q’ relationship
9. But if this image is not widely circulated, what is the point in analyzing it from this
perspective, when lay personal are not an audience who will ever see or react to it?