Beyond Beyoncé:

Intersections of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in

Contemporary American Hip-Hop

c. 2010-2016

by

Lauron Jockwig Kehrer

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Supervised by Professor Lisa Jakelski

Department of Musicology

Eastman School of Music

University of Rochester

Rochester, New York

2017
Table of Contents

Biographical Sketch  iii
Acknowledgments  iv
Abstract  vii
Contributors and Funding Sources  ix
List of Figures  x
Introduction  1

Chapter 1  Nicki Minaj and Negotiations of Black Femininity  20
Chapter 2  White Women Rappers Get Ratchet: Iggy Azalea, White Girl Mob, and Cultural Appropriation in Hip-Hop  58
Chapter 3  “White Privilege and White Guilt at the Same Damn Time”: Macklemore’s Performance of Whiteness  105
Chapter 4  “Wut it is? Wut is up? Wut is wut? Black Queer Lineages in New York City’s Ballroom Rap  137
Chapter 5  “Bounce It, Biggity Bounce It”: Sissy Bounce and the Politics of Twerking  186

Epilogue  229

Bibliography  236
Interviews  258
Discography  259
Biographical Sketch

Lauron Jockwig Kehrer was born in Ypsilanti, Michigan, United States of America. She attended Michigan State University and graduated in 2009 with a Bachelor of Music degree in Flute Performance and an Undergraduate Specialization in Women, Gender, and Social Justice. She completed a Master of Arts degree in Ethnomusicology at the Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, and a Graduate Certificate in Women and Gender Studies from the Susan B. Anthony Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies in 2011. She served for the 2011-2012 year as a member of Rochester AmeriCorps, where she worked with the City of Rochester Department of Recreation and Youth Services as a coordinator for two youth programs: Girls Coalition and Safe Sex, Inc. She began doctoral studies in Musicology at the Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester in 2012. She was awarded a Robert L. and Mary L. Sproull Fellowship from the University of Rochester in 2012 and an Elsa T. Johnson Fellowship in Musicology from the Eastman School of Music for the 2016-2017 academic year. She pursued her research in intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in contemporary American hip-hop under the direction of advisor Lisa Jakelski.
Acknowledgments

Writing this dissertation has been a years-long task in which many, many people played important and necessary roles. First and foremost, this dissertation would not have been possible without the invaluable guidance of my committee members, Professors Lisa Jakelski (Eastman School of Music), Honey Meconi (Eastman School of Music and the University of Rochester), and Elliott H. Powell (University of Minnesota). I cannot express in full my gratitude for their mentorship and support, which came in many forms. Every meeting with each individual member always left me feeling uplifted and ready to continue to face the challenges of academia. From the beginning of this project they were positive and encouraged me to pursue my ideas and interests, while also pushing me when necessary to always produce my best work. Outside of reading drafts of this dissertation they also spent numerous hours writing recommendation letters on my behalf and offering professional advice above and beyond what was required of their roles. I am especially thankful to my advisor, Professor Jakelski, for giving me room to grow as a scholar while also always being an anchor.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge my Eastman network, which is rich with peer, alumni, and faculty support. Sarah Fuchs Sampson, Eric Lubarsky, and Megan Steigerwald all participated in dissertation writing and support groups with me at one time or another, and offered thoughtful feedback on aspects of this project and, most importantly, moral support when it was most needed. Thank you especially to Sarah for continually going above and beyond to read drafts, kindly offer advice, and generally being “my person” during the last three years. I offer also many thanks to Professors
Roger Freitas, Ralph Locke, Patrick Macey, Melina Esse, Holly Watkins, and others who mentored me as a student, writer, teacher, and scholar. Thank you also to Professor Emerita Kerala Snyder and alumnus Professor Glenn Watkins who created valuable funding opportunities from which I benefited greatly.

My professional network outside of Eastman has also been a source of inspiration, encouragement, and sound advice for the duration of my graduate study. The faculty, staff, and students associated with the Susan B. Anthony Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies, past and present, have been gracious with their resources, not only in terms of funding but also in terms of professional development. This includes Jane Bryant, Kaitlin Legg, Angela Clark-Taylor, and Nora Rubel. In the fields of Musicology and Ethnomusicology, Loren Kajikawa, Amanda Sewell, Shana Goldin-Perschbacher, Tes Slominski, Nicol Hammond, and many others have offered professional and, at times, personal support for which I am grateful.

I owe a special debt to those who helped me research Chapter 5 in New Orleans, Louisiana. DJ Rusty Lazer was particularly helpful in not only sharing his thoughts but also in referring me to a number of other artists who enriched this project. I am grateful to Keno and Ha Sizzle for taking the time to sit with me and share their stories about bounce music. I also want to thank the staff at the Amistad Research Center housed at Tulane University, particularly Phillip R. Cunningham and Chianta Dorsey, for their assistance with the center’s LGBTQ archives, and for connecting me to fellow bounce enthusiasts Holly Hobbs and Allison Fensterstock.
My family, including Laurie Jockwig-Kehrer, Ronald Kehrer, Katilin Kehrer-Scharphorn, and Julie Jockwig Finney, has offered nothing but unconditional love while I moved across the country and pursued graduate studies. Thank you for having my back and for always encouraging me to forge my own path.

Last, but most certainly not least, I must offer my most sincere thanks to my wife Maria Cristina Fava. I do not exaggerate when I say without her I do not know how I would have finished this degree. I am fortunate enough to not only have benefited from her professional expertise, but from her personal support and love as well. She read countless drafts, attended many talks and conference presentations, and bore witness to all the ups and downs of my graduate studies, never faltering in her encouragement and support. *Ti amo, mia bella e brillante sposa.*
Abstract

Notions of hip-hop authenticity often rely on the construction of the rapper as a black, masculine, heterosexual, cisgender man. Artists that fall outside of this “normative” identity, including black women, white men and women, and queer and trans individuals, employ performance strategies that engage with and challenge this construction in order to render themselves legible to hip-hop audiences. Taking as its starting point the many scholarly discourses surrounding the performer Beyoncé, this dissertation examines several of these strategies through a series of case studies that combine reception history with musical, textual, and visual analysis.

Following an introduction that lays out key concepts and theoretical frameworks, the first chapter focuses on Nicki Minaj and her recent shift to a performance style in which she balances a feminine gender presentation with a hardened, masculine lyrical approach. Chapter 2 examines ways in which white women rappers Iggy Azalea and former members of the White Girl Mob (Kreayshawn, Lil Debbie, and V-Nasty) misappropriate black culture and concepts of “ratchetness” while mediating their white female identities and negotiating the expectations of mainstream hip-hop. In Chapter 3 I demonstrate how white, cisgender, heterosexual male rapper Macklemore’s strategy for negotiating and articulating his own whiteness further marginalizes black LGBTQ artists by echoing white, mainstream concerns that hip-hop and, by extension, black communities are inherently more homophobic than white-dominated music genres and the communities that produce them. Chapter 4 explores the work of queer black artists
active primarily in New York City, including Le1f, Zebra Katz, Cakes da Killa, and Azealia Banks, focusing on the influence of Ballroom culture on their musical output and positioning them within a black queer musical lineage. In the fifth and final chapter I explore the contemporary dominance of openly queer and trans rappers in New Orleans bounce, a local hip-hop genre, a phenomenon that is in part a consequence of the displacement and devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Ultimately, this dissertation uses feminist, queer, and critical race frameworks alongside musical analysis to de-center the normative rapper figure and assert that hip-hop is a musical response to the socio-political experiences of all its practitioners.
Contributors and Funding Sources

This work was supported by a dissertation committee consisting of Professors Lisa Jakelski (advisor) and Honey Meconi of the Department of Musicology at the Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester and Professor Elliott H. Powell of the Department of American Studies at the University of Minnesota. Graduate study was supported by an Ann Clark Fehn Graduate Award, a Robert L. and Mary L. Sproull Fellowship, and an Elsa T. Johnson Fellowship in Musicology. Research for Chapter 5 was completed with funding from the Adrienne Fried Block Fellowship from the Society for American Music and the Glenn Watkins Travelling Grant from the Eastman School of Music. Portions of Chapter 1 were presented at the Feminist Theory and Music 13 conference in August 2015 with funding support from the Susan B. Anthony Institute for Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies (SBAI) at the University of Rochester. Material from Chapter 3 was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for American Music in March 2016 with funding support from the Eastman Professional Development Committee and SBAI. Portions of Chapter 4 were presented at the annual meeting of the American Musicological Society with funding from the society’s Keitel-Palisca/Membership and Professional Development Grant. Material from Chapter 5 was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for American Music in March 2017.
List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1.1</td>
<td>Sir Mix-A-Lot. <em>Baby Got Back.</em> Music Video. Directed by Adam Bernstein. Def American, 1992.</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1.2</td>
<td>Nicki Minaj. &quot;Anaconda.&quot; Single cover artwork. Cash Money Records. 2014.</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1.3</td>
<td>Nicki Minaj (featuring Drake, Lil Wayne, and Chris Brown). &quot;Only.&quot; Lyric music video. Directed by Jeff Osborne. Cash Money Records. 2014.</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.1</td>
<td>Emmanuel and Phillip Hudson. &quot;Ratchet Girl Anthem.&quot; Music video. Directed by Bobby Patterson. Archive Entertainment. 2012.</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.2</td>
<td>Kreayshawn, Lil Debbie, and members of Odd Future. &quot;Gucci Gucci.&quot; Music video. Directed by Joseph Zentil. Columbia Records. 2011.</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.3</td>
<td>Iggy Azalea. &quot;Work.&quot; Music Video. Directed by Jonas &amp; François. Def Jam. 2013.</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.4</td>
<td>Jennifer Lopez and Iggy Azalea. &quot;Booty.&quot; Music video. Directed by Hype Williams. Nuyorican. 2014.</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.5</td>
<td>Iggy Azalea and T.I. &quot;Murda Bizness.&quot; Music video. Directed by Alex/2Tone. Grand Hustle Records. 2012.</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.1</td>
<td>Macklemore and Ryan Lewis. &quot;Same Love.&quot; Music video. Directed by Ryan Lewis and Jon Jon Augustavo. Macklemore, LLC. 2012.</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.1</td>
<td>Zebra Katz. &quot;Tear The House Up.&quot; Music video. Directed by Ghost+Cow [Brandon LaGanke and John Carlucci]. Mad Decent. 2014.</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.2</td>
<td>Mykki Blanco. &quot;Wavvy.&quot; Music video. Directed by Francesco Carozzini. UNO NYC. 2012.</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.1</td>
<td>Beyoncé. &quot;Formation.&quot; Music video. Directed by Melina Matsoukas. Parkwood. 2016.</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.2</td>
<td>Rapper Katey Red and unknown male dancer. Photograph by the author. New Orleans, June 18, 2016.</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Introduction**

In January 2012, several media outlets, including the *Huffington Post*, *BBC Newsbeat*, *CBS News*, and *Rolling Stone* featured stories on a new course that was offered by the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies at Rutgers University. Taught by doctoral candidate Kevin Allred, the course, “Feminist Perspectives: Politicizing Beyoncé,” used the artist’s work and career as a focal point for the exploration of “American race, gender, and sexual politics.” While this was certainly not the first college-level course to use a figure from popular culture as a starting point for a sociological study (according to several of the articles, hip-hop scholar Michael Eric Dyson’s Georgetown University offering, “The Sociology of Hip-Hop: The Urban Theodicy of Jay-Z” was one precedent), the generally positive media coverage of the class reflects not only Beyoncé’s wild popularity, but also points to a new academic appreciation for what her fans and music critics have long recognized: the singer and her music illustrate the relationships between popular music, and popular culture more

---


generally, and pervasive identity politics.\textsuperscript{3} Thus Beyoncé has provided scholars, teachers, and cultural critics with a lens for understanding the pressing issues of race, gender, and sexuality in contemporary America.

While Beyoncé reception offers a clear instance of a celebrity musician providing a focal point for political discussion (as is especially evident in the coverage of her 2013 and 2016 visual album releases, \textit{Beyoncé} and \textit{Lemonade}, respectively), she offers just one example of the complex relationships between identity politics and contemporary hip-hop.\textsuperscript{4} Like Allred, I take Beyoncé as a starting point for this study, but I move beyond this singular artist to reveal additional ways in which hip-hop articulates a wide-range of multiple identities.\textsuperscript{5} I argue that hip-hop scholarship must take an intersectional approach to the constructions and representations of race, gender, and sexuality found in this music. By examining the work of a diverse array of hip-hop artists, including those who are mainstream and less well-known, black and white, male and female, cisgender and trans, heterosexual and queer, I explore ways in which each of these aspects of an artist’s identity are both sounded and negotiated through their music. Additionally, I illustrate some of the strategies that artists employ to render themselves audible and visible in a

\textsuperscript{3} See “Beyonce’s Rutgers Class: Singer’s Career The Focus of ‘Politicalizing Beyonce’” and “Beyonce course is offered at an American university” for examples.

\textsuperscript{4} For an example of the critical, feminist response to \textit{Beyoncé}, see Brittney Cooper (crunktastic), “5 Reasons I’m Here for Beyoncé, the Feminist,” \textit{Crunk Feminist Collective}, December 13, 2013, accessed July 3, 2014, \url{http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2013/12/13/5-reasons-im-here-for-beyonce-the-feminist/}.

\textsuperscript{5} Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “hip-hop” to denote both larger cultural practices and the specific musical genre, which includes rap. I acknowledge that while some hip-hop artists and significant figures, such as KRS-One assert that references to the nation or culture should be capitalized and not hyphenated, as in “Hip hop” or “Hip Hop,” the music genre, which is the focus of this study, is commonly related as “hip-hop” (see KRS-One, \textit{The Gospel of Hip Hop: The First Instrument} [Brooklyn: powerHouse Books], 2013). Additionally, most music outlets, such as iTunes and Amazon, use hip-hop.
genre that is typified as predominantly black, hypermasculine, heterosexual and cisgender male.

Exploring Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Hip-Hop

Like the popular music studies of which it forms a part, hip-hop scholarship is fundamentally interdisciplinary. Especially in the past ten years, numerous monographs and articles on hip-hop have been published in disciplines including (but certainly not limited to) musicology, ethnomusicology, American studies, anthropology, African and African-American studies, women’s and gender studies, literary criticism, and film studies. Despite the fact that hip-hop scholars have taken diverse approaches to their work on a wide-range of artists and subgenres, very few have addressed issues of gender and sexuality in the context of hip-hop, and even fewer have incorporated these discussions alongside meaningful musical analysis. Thus, I seek to bridge the gap

---

6 While the academics that publish on hip-hop work in each of these fields, their projects are often difficult to categorize within a single discipline. For example, musicological studies include Mark Katz’s *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Adam Krims’ *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), yet Katz uses ethnography and Krims uses analytical tools from the field of music theory; Tricia Rose’s ethnographic *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) is often considered an important ethnomusicological text, although Rose is an anthropologist; the author of *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), Matt Miller, is a professor of American Studies who also incorporates musicological and ethnographic approaches in his work; and sociologist Michael Eric Dyson draws strongly from theoretical frameworks pioneered in the field of African and African-American studies.

7 Publications that have engaged meaningfully with issues of gender and/or sexuality in hip-hop include Rose’s *Black Noise*; Adreana Clay’s “‘Like an Old Soul Record’: Black Feminism, Queer Sexuality, and the Hip-Hop Generation” (*Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* Vol. 8 No. 1 [2008]: 53-73); Gwendolyn D. Pough’s *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womahood, Hip-Hop Culture and Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004); and Miles White’s *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).
between musicological, sound-focused studies and hip-hop studies from other disciplines that rely on feminist/queer theories or critical race analysis but lack musical description.

The neglect of gender and sexuality in hip-hop scholarship is surprising given the attention afforded to another aspect of identity: race. Indeed, some of the driving questions in the field concern the constructions and representations of blackness in the genre and its problematic consumption and appropriation by white performers and audiences. Adam Krims points out in *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* that the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) announced in 1998 that rap was the “best-selling musical genre in the United States,” a fact that he attributes partially to its popularity among white consumers. As Miles White argues, the driving force of white consumers of black musical culture can be traced back at least as far as minstrelsy traditions beginning in the early-nineteenth century, and he raises questions concerning appropriation and racial identity as they relate to musical listening practices and the economic and commercial success of artists. Bakari Kitwana explores issues of whiteness, especially the popularity of hip-hop among white audiences, in his book *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America*. Although Kitwana includes interviews with white, female hip-hop fans in his study, he avoids a serious discussion of the impact of gender, or perhaps more importantly, the intersection of race and gender, on hip-hop listening practices. While

---

Kitwana, White, and other scholars’ contributions have been valuable in addressing issues such as cultural appropriation in this genre and for providing an important context for the historical appropriation of black popular music by white performers, they focus on male performers and listeners, assuming that white rappers and audiences are almost always male, and that white men and women, both cisgender and trans, have the same experiences of listening to hip-hop.

While race has been a leading concern in hip-hop scholarship, gender has also been an important issue, albeit one that is not as frequently discussed. One of the first ethnographic studies of this genre to incorporate black women performers and listeners is Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America.*

*Black Noise* includes a chapter devoted to black women rappers, a topic that had been and continues to be largely ignored. Rose situates these women “as part of a dialogic process with male rappers (and others), rather than in complete opposition to them [in order to] consider the ways black women rappers work within and against dominant sexual and racial narratives in American culture.”

This study provided the framework for most of the articles and books focusing on women of color in hip-hop that have emerged in the past twenty years, including Gwendolyn D. Pough’s *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (2004) and *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology* edited by Pough, Elaine Richardson, Aisha

---

12 Rose, *Black Noise.*
13 Rose, 147.
Durham, and Rachel Raimist (2007). As with *Black Noise*, many of these academic studies that address gender in hip-hop tend to focus on the struggles of individual female MCs, B-girls, and/or DJs, stressing the prevalence of misogyny as a barrier to commercial success.

Some scholarship and non-academic writing, however, emphasizes the importance of understanding hip-hop’s appeal to black women as congruent with their own understanding and expressions of feminism, emphasizing ways in which black women specifically have carved out spaces in an overwhelmingly sexist culture. Joan Morgan’s *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* is an example of this style of writing, as are recent online opinion and news articles, such as Brittney Cooper’s piece entitled “5 Reasons I’m Here for Beyoncé, the Feminist” posted on [www.crunkfeministcollective.com](http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com). These works highlight the connection between race and gender, privileging the experiences of black women and other women of color who identify with the racialized expressions of hip-hop and challenge assumptions that all hip-hop is anti-woman.

Studies of black women’s experiences of and relationships to hip-hop demonstrate the potential of an intersectional analysis to illuminate how issues of race and gender might work in tandem. Yet the literature that elucidates the connections between these identities typically emphasizes the importance and nuances of (implicitly) heterosexual
female sexuality, disregarding non-heterosexual, queer identities that are a crucial part of the matrix of identity politics. With the exception of a recent special edition of the journal *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* (Volume 2, Issue 2, 2013), almost no studies exist on issues of queer identity in hip-hop, and even fewer of those examine the music of queer artists; instead, these studies offer queer readings of mainstream, heterosexual artists. In the *Palimpsest* special issue, which features articles drawn from a conference entitled “The Queerness of Hip Hop/The Hip Hop of Queerness” which took place at Harvard University, only the contributions by Moya Bailey (“Homolatent Masculinity & Hip Hop Culture”), Tavia Nyong’o (“Queer Hip Hop and its Dark Precursors”), Richard T. Rodriguez (“Hip Hop Spice Boyz”), Mecca Jamilah Sullivan (“Fat Mutha: Hip Hop’s Queer Corpulent Poetics”), and Rinaldo Walcott (“Boyfriends with Clits and Girlfriends with Dicks: Hip Hop’s Queer Future”) offer any mention of queer artists, and do so only in passing. Instead, the majority of articles present perspectives on queering hip-hop, arguing that queerness can be found throughout the genre’s history, much as previous scholars have argued for feminist resonances within hip-hop. As Imani Perry suggests in her essay, “intellectual projects framed as pursuing inclusion, often simply reinscribe the center. And so, I’m not interested in just ‘adding’ queer subjects to hip hop. I’m interesting [sic] in understanding that Black working class

---


and poor landscapes are as much queer as they are straight, both theoretically and literally.”

Perry argues that there are ways in which focusing on queer subjects separates queer identities from others, such as Black and poor, which problematically gives the impression that artists and listeners are either/or: that is, either Black or queer, rather than Black and queer. Furthermore, she suggests that there are ways in which Black and poor are queer, in that they are all illegible within the hegemonic white culture that values heteronormativity. While her explanation clearly highlights important reasons for “queering” our understanding of mainstream hip-hop, focusing on artists such as Jay Z and Notorious B.I.G., as contributors Mark Anthony Neal and Sullivan do respectively, perpetuates the marginal status of artists outside the commercial and cultural mainstream, especially those who are queer-identified.

This dissertation seeks to build on this existing scholarship by making clear the connections between race, gender, and sexuality in hip-hop. While scholars have been grappling with issues of identity in hip-hop for at least the past twenty years, they have rarely sought to acknowledge and discuss the ways that race, gender, and sexuality might intersect. As a result, many artists, especially queer artists of color, have been rendered invisible in hip-hop scholarship. Outside academia, in the realm of popular culture critique, academics and non-academics alike are engaged in intersectional conversations about how hip-hop music reflects, influences, and challenges their everyday lives. A musicological approach that both acknowledges these critiques and grounds itself in

---

musical analysis will offer a more nuanced understanding of multifaceted identities as they are constructed and negotiated through the sounds of hip-hop.

Methodology, Sources, and Theoretical Frameworks

This project takes two primary methodological approaches. The first – close reading of songs, music videos, and other performances – aligns with more traditional musicological approaches. Hip-hop studies outside of musicology and ethnomusicology often rely almost exclusively on lyrical analysis, while musicological studies have often focused on sample-based genres or turntablism, perhaps as a way to negotiate the fact that there is no standardized way of describing hip-hop’s musical sound. For example, Krims attempts to tackle this issue by providing charts designed to illustrate the rhythmic flow of a rapper’s delivery along with musical features for context. Unfortunately, these charts leave out much of the nuance of a given performance and are not very effective in describing anything other than vocal rhythms. In her recent dissertation, Amanda Sewell describes her own typology of samples used in hip-hop as a way to differentiate between the roles of different musical sounds in a given hip-hop track. She delineates differences between structural samples, surface samples, and lyric samples, suggesting that structural samples play a foundational role while surface samples are more decorative. Although her approach attempts to create more specific language to strengthen our ability to describe hip-hop sounds, Sewell’s typology is reminiscent of tonal Schenkerian analysis

---

20 See for example Katz’s *Groove Music* and Amanda Sewell’s *A Typology of Sampling in Hip-Hop* (Dissertation, Indiana University, 2013).
21 *Krims, Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*.
22 *Sewell, A Typology of Sampling in Hip-Hop*.
23 Sewell, 26.
in that it can privilege certain sounds, particularly those deemed structural by the analyst. This kind of interpretation may not align with either musicians’ intentions or listeners’ experiences. For example, what an analyst might consider a surface sample, such as a cowbell marking downbeats in four-four time, might be considered foundational by a producer or listener in that it provides the structure around which other samples are placed. Additionally, this approach is specific to sample-based hip-hop, and is not easily applicable to other hip-hop compositional methods. While I also offer discussions of the musical texts of hip-hop, including descriptions of samples and other sounds used to build tracks, I move beyond merely mapping these sounds and offer instead interpretations of the meanings that the combination of these sounds and lyrics create. By focusing on this intertextuality of sounds and words, I illustrate the meanings created within the conventions of this self-referencing genre. For example, Nicki Minaj’s single “Anaconda,” in which she provides a litany of sexual conquests, relies heavily on a sample for Sir Mix-A-Lot’s 1992 hit single, “Baby Got Back,” which allows her to reference the original track and flip it from a celebration of the male gaze into an anthem for female sexual empowerment. The musical sample is altered so that Mix-A-Lot’s lines are interrupted and repeated within a strict new rhythm, demonstrating Minaj’s control over both his voice and his gaze. This musical element is crucial to the reading of the track as a whole, but does not require a tonal or structural analysis that emphasizes any type of musical or emotional progression, as is typically the case for analyses of tonal Western art music. In this way I recognize the need to describe sonic events while simultaneously resisting the reinscription of Western art music aesthetics and values.
The secondary approach is that of reception history, following Claire Bond Potter and Renee C. Romano’s definition of recent history as “histories of events that have taken place no more than forty years ago, [including] events that are less than a decade old.”\textsuperscript{24} In his contribution to their edited volume, \textit{Doing Recent History: On Privacy, Copyright, Video Games, Institutional Review Boards, Activist Scholarship, and History that Talks Back}, David Greenberg argues that electronic media, and television in particular, allows historians to examine political and cultural events as they were portrayed to the American public during their development.\textsuperscript{25} The Internet plays a particularly important role in this project, as it offers a space for immediate, public interpretation and commentary by professional journalists and critics as well as fans. I use writings from social justice-centered Internet media posted during the past ten years as primary sources for understanding the political and cultural impact of events such as single and album releases, video releases, live performances, and other hip-hop events. As Jeff Chang and others have noted, hip-hop journalism has been an important aspect of hip-hop culture.\textsuperscript{26} When we move beyond traditional music journalism, however, we find that other writers, bloggers, critics, and activists are also responding to hip-hop through a social justice lens, reading hip-hop as representative of and/or a challenge to social norms. Thus, writings about hip-hop outside of academic publications, including (but not


\textsuperscript{25} David Greenberg, “Do Historians Watch Enough TV? Broadcast News as a Primary Source,” in \textit{Doing Recent History}: 185-199.

limited to) those produced by trained academics, reveal the social impact and importance of this music. Accordingly, I draw from articles and blog posts from online media sources such as feministing.com, Colorlines, and Jezebel, as well as scholarly discussions such as those instigated by bell hooks to understand how feminist and queer audiences are receiving the messages and music of various artists.27

My diverse approaches in this project reflect the interdisciplinary nature of popular music scholarship, as well as my desire to present various perspectives that offer deeper considerations of a complex issue. To that end, my theoretical framework includes the use of queer and feminist theories, with a particular emphasis on queer of color critiques, to understand the matrix of identities represented and misrepresented by the artists I discuss. Conceptually, my study is indebted to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s notion of “intersectionality,” which first appeared in her 1989 article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics.”28  Crenshaw argues:

Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interactions of race and gender. These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account

cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.\textsuperscript{29}

Crenshaw posits that intersectionality is necessary for understanding the subordination of black women because of their particular location within a society that is both patriarchal and white supremacist. I extend her idea to encompass sexual orientation as well, focusing particularly on articulations of queer identity. My thinking on queer identity is indebted to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who defines queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”\textsuperscript{30} Rather than offering a strict definition as one might for the terms gay or lesbian, Sedgwick suggests that queer is that which falls outside of normative gender and sexual identities, and which is therefore rendered illegible in the dominant culture, as Perry suggests above regarding Black and poor. Both Crenshaw and Sedgwick argue for a repositioning of marginalized identities as centralized subjects. Intersectionality within this study, therefore, incorporates gender, race, sexuality, and other modes of identification, all of which interact to form experiences greater than the sum of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transmisogyny.

This dissertation also draws on the interdisciplinary field of black queer studies in its examination of black queer performances specifically. Black queer studies is situated at, and, in many ways, emerged as a corrective for, queer theory or queer studies, which largely ignored the experiences of queer and trans people of color (including black

\textsuperscript{29} Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” 140.
people), and black studies or African American studies, which historically overlooked sexuality as a subject worthy of investigation. A key idea of black queer studies is that both race and sexuality (as well as gender) are socially constructed, meaning they are created by cultural practices and are not rooted in biological fact, and they are also co-constructed. In his essay “Race-ing Homonormativity: Citizenship, Sociology, and Gay Identity,” Roderick A. Ferguson argues that the social phenomenon of designating sexuality is explicitly connected to practices of racial exclusion and racial privilege. He writes:

Sociological arguments about the socially constructed nature of (homo)sexuality index the contemporary entrance of white gays and lesbians into the rights and privileges of American citizenship. As they extend such practices and access racial and class privileges by conforming to gender and sexual norms, white gay formations in particular become homonormative locations that comply with heteronormative protocols. . . White homonormative racial formations claim privileges to the detriment of those communities marginalized by normative regulations – regulations that are racialized, classed, and gendered.

As white gays and lesbians gain social acceptance and access to heteronormative institutions such as military service and state-sanctioned marriage, they establish homonorms that are predicated on whiteness and white access. Acceptable homosexuality is thereby constructed as racially white and perpetuates racial and class stratification.

Centering black queer identity in scholarship, as the second half of this dissertation does, decenters these universalized constructs of queer as always already white.

---

32 Ferguson, 53.
For the purposes of this study I draw on Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s theory of racial formation to examine the role of race in hip-hop. They define racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.” Like gender, race is a social construct that, while originating in erroneous ideas about biological categorizations of human bodies, has a very real impact on social structure. According to Omi and Winant, racial formation is a process facilitated by racial projects that connect representations and meanings of race to the organization of social structures. They define a racial project as “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines.” We can, therefore, consider both hip-hop’s location in contemporary racial organization, but we can also consider specific hip-hop performances as racial projects themselves.

In examining issues of identity in music, it is important to distinguish between performativity and performance. Judith Butler famously posited that gender is constructed through a series of performative or discursive acts not contingent upon biological facts, a theoretical approach that has greatly influenced work in feminist and queer studies. Critiquing the lack of agency and subjectivity in Butler’s formulation, especially as it relates to a politics of resistance in a black queer context, E. Patrick

34 Omi and Winant, 55.
Johnson proposes situating performativity in conversation with performance theories. He argues that employing theories of performance, such as José Muñoz’s theory of “disidentification,” can highlight both the material realities of marginalized groups as well as the ways in which members of those groups use discourses to disrupt and undermine hegemonic power structures through performance. A framework that incorporates both theories of performativity and performance can, therefore, acknowledge subjectivity and agency in ways that theories of performativity alone cannot.

This dissertation focuses on performances by the most visible actors in the genre of hip-hop: the MC, or rapper. In focusing my analysis on the performances of these artists and how those performances are received, I engage with what film scholar Richard Dyer terms “star texts,” the combination of media texts and discourses that surround a public figure. As Jeremy G. Butler explains, star texts are comprised of particular performances as well as “magazine articles and interviews, press releases . . . news items, television talk shows and so forth – in short, a multitude of media texts.” Stars in Dryer’s formulation are bound up in general ideas about society; they are actors who have social significance but whose reception is determined in part by audiences’

---

38 Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies,” 138-139.
40 Butler, 11.
understandings of what exactly their social significance is. By focusing here on both performance texts (recordings, videos, live performances) and their reception, I examine rappers as actors and thus acknowledge their own agency, while also recognizing what they come to represent in larger discourses within American society, which, in turn, gives some agency to audiences as well. This is not to say that DJs and producers are not deserving of academic attention; my hope is that scholars will build upon this work by both considering the work of DJs and producers as part of rappers’ star texts (regardless of their level of fame) and by exploring their own impact on the socio-political landscape of American hip-hop in future studies.

This dissertation addresses complex relationships between race, gender, and sexuality found in contemporary American hip-hop through several different case studies. This methodology allows for close examination of the work of a few artists with special attention paid to their own social and political context. As psychologist Bill Gillham notes, case study research is “particularly appropriate to study human phenomena, and what it means to be human in the real world ‘as it happens’.” Each case study offers a distinct configuration of race, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, geographic location, and/or musical style that demonstrates ways in which these elements might factor into an artist’s work. They encompass both mainstream artists and those who are less well known outside of their local communities. I define mainstream hip-hop as artists, albums, and individual tracks that are well-known to the American listening public, as evidenced by some combination of their commercial sales, the status of their

41 Dryer, ix.
record label (major as opposed to indie, or independent), their appearance in popular print, television, and internet media and their location on Billboard charts.\textsuperscript{43} Rather than situating “mainstream” as a classification opposite a stable category called “underground,” I suggest, following Anthony Kwame Harrison, that there is a spectrum of popularity on which both mainstream and underground artists exist, in which an artist could be commercially successful and still considered outside of the mainstream, as is the case for the most prominent LBGTQ-identified rappers.\textsuperscript{44} Ultimately, each case reflects the interconnectedness of intersecting identities and proves that they cannot be fully examined or understood individually; rather, hip-hop scholarship requires an intersectional approach to clearly demonstrate hip-hop’s cultural importance and the ways in which artists are involved in a process of both social commentary and social change.

This study does not attempt to be comprehensive; rather, it offers several different perspectives on the myriad ways race, gender, and sexuality might intersect in an artist’s music. The first chapter focuses on Nicki Minaj and her recent shift to a performance style in which she balances a feminine gender presentation with a hardened, “masculine” lyrical approach.\textsuperscript{45} Chapter 2 examines ways in which some white women rappers,

\textsuperscript{43} For more discussion of hip-hop’s rise to mainstream commercial success and the various factors that facilitated rap’s popularity, see S. Craig Watkins, \textit{Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement} (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

\textsuperscript{44} Anthony Kwame Harrison, \textit{Hip Hop Underground: The Integrity and Ethics of Racial Identification} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 9. Harrison describes a category of hip-hop that he calls “commercial underground,” which includes Grammy-nominated artists Common and The Roots, as well as underground artists at the other end of the popularity spectrum who have only a small, local following and whose music has been primarily or even entirely self-produced, self-marketed, and self-distributed.

\textsuperscript{45} Throughout this dissertation I refer to the rapped, spoken, or sung words of songs as lyrics, rather than texts, to align with the language used by fans, artists, and popular music scholars. The term “text” can refer to a song and include both musical and lyrical aspects, or it can refer to a specific performance.
namely Iggy Azalea and former members of the White Girl Mob (Kreayshawn, Lil Debbie, and V-Nasty), misappropriate black culture and concepts of “ratchetness” while mediating their white female identities and the expectations of mainstream hip-hop. In Chapter 3 I demonstrate how white, cisgender, heterosexual male rapper Macklemore’s strategy for negotiating and articulating his own whiteness further marginalizes black LGBTQ artists by echoing white, mainstream concerns that hip-hop and, by extension, black communities are inherently more homophobic than white-dominated music genres and the communities that produce them. In Chapter 4 I explore the work of queer black artists active primarily in New York City, including Le1f, Zebra Katz, Cakes da Killa, and Azealia Banks, focusing on the influence of black gay culture, specifically Ballroom culture, on their musical output and positioning them within a black queer musical lineage. Chapter 5 considers the contemporary dominance of openly queer and trans rappers in New Orleans bounce, a local dance-based hip-hop genre that has begun making its way outside of the city and into the national consciousness. In a brief epilogue I consider two openly queer black performers, one real and one fictional: Frank Ocean and Jamal Lyon, a character from Fox network’s hip-hop television drama, Empire. In exploring the reactions to and portrayals of these figures, I bring my discussion full-circle to those questions posed by critics of the aforementioned mainstream artists: who owns hip-hop, who should be allowed to produce it, and who is listening?
Chapter 1

Nicki Minaj and Negotiations of Black Femininity

Hip-hop discourses of authenticity are dominated by the construction of the typical rapper as a hypermasculine, black, cisgender, and heterosexual man. Despite the diverse racial and gender identities of its founders and practitioners, hip-hop generally, and rap in particular, as Imani Perry reminds us, “is an iteration of black language, black music, black style, and black youth culture.”¹ As she points out, hip-hop is also gendered male. She writes:

Gender in hip hop proves complicated terrain, filled with the pitfalls of what Michael Eric Dyson has termed “femiphobia.” And yet it also constitutes a powerful location for asserting the particularity of black male identity. Hip hop is masculine music . . . I argue that masculinity in hip hop reflects the desire to assert black male subjectivity, and that it sometimes does so at the expense of black female subjectivity and by subjugating women’s bodies, while at other times it simply reveals the complexity of black male identity.²

Several scholars have similarly focused on the expressions of black male masculinity found in hip-hop and how these expressions are consumed and understood by (primarily male) listeners of various races. For example, in Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop, Michael P. Jeffries examines ways in which both black and white men understand racial construction and authenticity in the genre.³ He rightfully asserts that, regardless of the actual racial and gender diversity of hip-hop practitioners, “most

² Perry, Prophets of the Hood, 118.
commercially successful American hip-hop has had a black male face, body, and voice,” and that “the contest over cultural appropriation is explicitly concerned with the appropriation of black masculinity rather than simply blackness”. Thus while it is easy to identify commercially successful artists who are not black men, Perry and Jeffries confirm that hip-hop is overall understood as a black masculine culture, and that artists, especially rappers who are not black men must define themselves both in relation and opposition to that identity in order to be read as authentic performers in the genre. Furthermore, as Miles White explains in his study of the performance of black masculinity in rap, hip-hop literacy is contingent upon reading and reinscribing meanings on black (male) bodies even as hip-hop culture has become a global phenomenon. He writes:

It is not so much that the notion of an authentic urban black identity is encapsulated in hip-hop culture as a whole since even urban black identities are quite diverse, but that the culture of the street does provide social texts that make sense to black male youth who dwell in urban environments and who identify with the codes and meanings that emanate from various subcultures within hip-hop, for example, prison culture, street gangs, and hustlers. Since these texts are now largely consumed through the global diffusion of electronic media and have been broadly appropriated in many parts of the world, youth in virtually any geographical location can construct personal identity and localized meaning around hip-hop music and cultural practices, including the performance of masculinity derived from the mass-mediated posturings of black American males.

While the culture of hip-hop is understood to be that of black American men, it has been read, reconfigured, and reproduced globally and locally by members of many different

---

5 White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z*.
6 Ibid., 33.
communities. Although black masculinity is not a monolithic gender and racial expression shared by all black American men, the codes that are embedded and reproduced in hip-hop privilege certain expressions of black masculinity that can be read as normative within this genre. Identities that fall outside of the configuration of black, heterosexual, masculine male are always defined and redefined against that contextual norm.

In the process of identifying in relation to and/or against this hip-hop norm, artists employ strategies that allow them to position themselves as authentic hip-hop artists while also articulating their own individual subjectivity. In this chapter I look at one rapper who has positioned herself so effectively that she is now among the most commercially successful and highly visible hip-hop artists at present: Nicki Minaj. Minaj lyrically reproduces tropes of black masculine authenticity found in rap, often subverting them in order to position herself as an authentic hip-hop subject. She has achieved wide-reaching celebrity status and as such her performances and the reception of those performances reproduce discourses in which racial, gender, and sexual identities are constructed in tandem. Minaj engages in these discourses in order to successfully render her black female subjectivity readable in the hip-hop context.

Female artists employ a number of strategies when navigating the male-dominated terrain of hip-hop. For female rappers, this process is particularly fraught because, as we have seen, the aesthetics of rap center on ideas of hardness and male expressions of masculinity. As Gwendolyn D. Pough argues, “Black women participants in Hip-Hop culture have developed key survival skills and formulated various ways to
bring wreck to [challenge and disrupt] the stereotypes and marginalization that inhibit their interaction in the larger public sphere.”  

However, as Jefferies explains, in the male-centered hip-hop narrative, the roles embodied by women are still often limited to the tricks and hoes, women who “are to be treated with suspicion as disposable sex objects”, and the down ass chicks (or ride-or-die chicks), “women who are thugs’ partners in crime . . . valuable not only for their sex appeal but for their loyalty and emotional support.”  

These categories are defined by their relationships to men and their willingness to address men’s needs and desires, and yet they serve as the most visible roles carried out by women in the genre.

Several scholars have devised categories for explaining some of the strategies that women rappers use to create spaces for themselves in hip-hop that are in conversation with but also challenge these roles. Since there have been so few commercially successful female rappers when compared to their male counterparts, these scholars have typically established dichotomies with admittedly malleable boundaries to describe archetypes for female rappers during the course of the genre’s history. Some, such as Perry, trace the changing appearance of female rappers from the home girl looks and community-focused lyrics of Queen Latifah and MC Lyte to the hypersexual, feminine appearance and explicit lyricism of Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown.  

Savannah Shange, on the other hand, describes two categories of commercially successful women rappers: the Righteous Queen, “whose lyrics focus on community empowerment and positivity”; and the

---

7 Pough, Check It While I Wreck It, 87.  
8 Jeffries, 100.  
9 Perry, 155-190.
Gangsta Boo, “who often enters the scene as the protégé of a prominent male rapper, [and] whose rhymes spin tall tales of crime laced with sex.”\textsuperscript{10} Perry’s and Shange’s categories overlap somewhat, with Queen Latifah serving as an example of the Righteous Queen and Lil’ Kim filling the role of Gangsta Boo, but as Shange notes, “patterns of gender performance differ across these archetypes, with both Lyte and Latifah sometimes being read as masculine presenting and some shade of gay.”\textsuperscript{11} Thus gender presentation as well as sexuality, two different yet interrelated identity markers, affect both how women rappers are received as well as how they choose to navigate the business.

As one of the most commercially successful and highly visible contemporary women rappers, Nicki Minaj has employed her own innovative presentation and performance strategies on her way to the top of the charts. As Shange points out, Minaj has avoided easy categorization within any of the aforementioned archetypes in part because of her use of multiple stage personae, her hyperfeminine gender presentation that contrasts with her masculine lyrics (which often employ phallic imagery), and her refusal to clearly identify as either heterosexual or queer. Shange uses the term “femmecee” to describe this strategic performance:

Sidestepping categorization as a Gangsta Boo or a Righteous Queen, Minaj’s verbose, hyperbolic bragadocios rhyme style qualifies as rap for rappers. However, since she also sings pop tunes and engages Lady Gaga-style wardrobe antics, Minaj’s work simultaneously challenges the boundaries of the very category “rapper.” In order to index the multiple moves Minaj makes in terms of gender, sexuality, and the generic conventions of hip hop, it may be useful to think of Minaj as a femmecee. Unlike the dismissive “femcee,” whose gender assignment at birth


\textsuperscript{11} Shange, 33.
modifies their right to the “emcee” title, a femmecee is a rapper whose critical, strategic performance of queer femininity is inextricably linked to the production and reception of their rhymes.\textsuperscript{12}

In exploring individual tracks, videos, and live performances, Shange demonstrates ways in which Minaj uses a strategic queer femme performance to both resist and acquiesce to genre norms from her 2009 mixtape \textit{Beam Me Up Scotty} through her second studio album \textit{Roman Reloaded} (2012).

Around 2014, however, Minaj shifted her strategy. She drastically changed her appearance, putting away her pink and blonde wigs and instead wearing long, straight hair in a natural color. She also moved away from her elaborate and colorful “Lady Gaga-style” outfits and instead began appearing at events and in photos posted to her \textit{Instagram} account with a more understated, “natural look.”\textsuperscript{13} Media coverage of Minaj’s new look was positive, with articles declaring the change a sign of the artist’s growing maturity under the public spotlight.\textsuperscript{14} The discourses surrounding Minaj’s hair is particularly problematic because writers often refer to her latest hairstyles as her “natural” hair. In fact, Minaj’s long, straight hair is most likely achieved through some combination of hair extensions and/or chemical straightening. In black communities, “natural hair” is used to refer to hairstyles that are achieved without the use of harsh chemicals or other damaging

\textsuperscript{12} Shange, 34.
means of hair straightening and manipulation, and often appear as locs, kinky curls, or other highly textured styles. Natural hairstyles are often viewed as oppositional to white beauty paradigms that privilege straight textures. Minaj’s straight hair, while viewed as natural in comparison to the brightly colored wigs she used to wear, is still in line with traditional white beauty standards.

As many of these same articles pointed out, this rebranding also coincided with the preparation for and release of her third studio album, *The Pinkprint*, which came out in December 2014. Like the reaction to her paired-down visual aesthetics, critics also wrote approvingly about Minaj’s “return to her hip-hop roots,” noting that *The Pinkprint* “will give us a more rap vibe compared to her hits like ‘Superbass’ and ‘Starships’.”

Thus in the media’s coverage, Minaj’s changing visual (increasingly minimal, “natural” style) and aural (less pop, more rap) aesthetics were inextricably linked.

In light of this “rebranding,” Shange’s femmecce paradigm falls short of explaining the strategies Minaj has employed in her recent work, most notably on *The Pinkprint* and other tracks that were released around the same time as that album’s earliest singles. Instead, we can see Minaj’s shift from a strategic queer femme performance that resists hetero- and homonorms to one in which her feminine gender presentation is displayed in direct contrast to her “masculine” lyrical approach. This approach highlights the continual struggle for feminine-presenting women rappers to

---

appear as serious, skilled, and tough as their male peers, and yet maintain their traditionally attractive feminine characteristics (which are themselves often challenges to white beauty paradigms). Three singles from this period, “Anaconda,” “Only,” and “Lookin Ass” demonstrate this shift in Minaj’s performance strategy and highlight ways in which she positions herself as a woman rapper in relation to her male colleagues and audiences.

“Anaconda,” Big Butts, and the Hottentot Legacy

Drawing on not only the music but also the images and texts of Sir Mix-A-Lot’s 1992 hit single, “Baby Got Back,” “Anaconda” offers a revised narrative in which Minaj positions herself as the subject, rather than object of a big booty anthem, thus reimagining the song’s black aesthetic in a decidedly woman-centered song. Minaj provides a litany of sexual conquests against a backdrop of jungle sounds, alarms, and a bass-heavy beat. The track relies substantially on samples from Mix-A-Lot’s original, which allows her to reference the well-known song and flip it from a celebration of the male gaze into an anthem for female sexual empowerment.

Mix-A-Lot’s single engages with the apparent disconnect between white, mainstream beauty ideals and black hip-hop culture by making explicit the relationship between large butts and black bodies. It opens with two imagined white valley girls, one of whom remains silent, critiquing the body of a black woman:

Oh, my, God. Becky, look at her butt
It is so big, she looks like
One of those rap guys’ girlfriends.
But, ya know, who understands those rap guys?
They only talk to her, because,
She looks like a total prostitute, ‘kay?
I mean, her butt, is just so big
I can’t believe it’s just so round, it’s like out there
I mean gross, look
She’s just so, black.

The size and shape of the nameless (and, in the music video, faceless) woman is strongly associated with the black body and the black culture of hip-hop. This introduction frames the big butt as a something viewed in mainstream white culture as disgusting and unattractive, much like rap music and its proponents. Mix-A-Lot continues to reinforce the relationship between race and butt size through his own verses, rapping lines such as “you other brothers can’t deny/That when a girl walks in with an itty bitty waist/And a round thing in your face/You get sprung;” “I’ll keep my women like Flo Jo;” “A word to the thick soul sistas/I want to get with ya;” and “Even white boys got to shout.” The terms “brothers” and “soul sisters” specifically imply black men and women as the aficionados and owners of round backsides, respectively. Yet Mix-A-Lot assures white (male) listeners as well that they are also welcome to appreciate this characteristic as he pushes against beauty standards that elevate thin white bodies above curvy black ones.

While this rejection of prevalent white beauty norms was in some ways a progressive and much celebrated step for mainstream popular music, as evident in the continued popularity of the track among both men and women, it was not devoid of problematic objectification. In the accompanying music video, disembodied butts inspired by the photographs of French fashion photographer Jean-Paul Goude, whose work featuring exoticized black women has been a source of criticism since the 1970s, dot the landscape while Mix-A-Lot and scantily clad (by 1992 standards) women of color
dance on top of and around them (figure 1.1).\footnote{16} While the video was never officially banned from MTV, it was only limited to broadcasts after 9pm, a move that certainly helped generate interest in the song. As former senior vice-president of music and talent at MTV Patti Galluzzi points out, the initial programming decision was a response to a “then-recently instituted rule against showing female body parts with no reference to a face.”\footnote{17} She continues: “We were trying to move away from MTV’s recent past, when videos showing slices of pie would drop into a girl’s lap, like in Warrant’s ‘Cherry Pie,’ were shown around the clock.”\footnote{18}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\end{figure}

\begin{flushleft}
\footnote{17} Patti Galluzzi (senior vice-president of music and talent, MTV, 1988-98) in interview with Rob Kemp, “‘And I Cannot Lie’.”
\footnote{18} Galluzzi.
\end{flushleft}
As Mix-A-Lot explained, however, he felt that his song was a move away from restrictive white beauty standards and an attempt to more accurately represent the realities of black women’s bodies and the black men who were attracted to them. The creative and executive teams involved in the video production noted that while some white women felt offended by the objectification of female body parts, black women in particular were pleased to see their body shapes reflected in the media. Mix-A-Lot recalls, “every black women I knew or met said ‘about time’ and ‘thank you.’ Girls who didn’t have big butts thought the song was cute, but girls who did have butts thought it was a revolution.”

Mix-A-Lot’s girlfriend at the time that the song was written, model Amylia Dorsey-Rivas, corroborates this point:

My background is such that being a woman of color – I’m half-Mexican, half-black, and have always been curvy – was not appreciated at all… The kind of thing that women in my position went through made Mix angry. He’d say “I don’t understand why you can’t get modeling work,” and I’d say “Look behind me.” This was my experience that he was writing about.”

Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda,” while not a remix or cover of “Baby Got Back,” carries these repercussions into the new century but with a very important divergence: rather than focusing on the praise and exaltation of her male admirers, Minaj demonstrates the advantages of having a big butt from a female perspective. She invites the male gaze and raps about the material benefits she receives from the lovers that her booty attracts, but she reframes her body as a resource that she controls, regardless of

---

19 Sir Mix-A-Lot in interview with Rob Kemp, “‘I Cannot Lie’."
20 Amylia Dorsey-Rivas in interview with Rob Kemp, “‘And I Cannot Lie’.‘ Dorsey-Rivas also provided the voice-over at the beginning of the track, “Oh my god, Becky. Look at her butt…”
who enjoys it. Additionally, she subverts the problem of objectification by fixating on her male sexual partners and their body parts.

It is apparent from the beginning of the track that Minaj has taken heed to Mix-A-Lot’s words and used them to her own advantage. The single opens with a familiar line from “Baby Got Back;” “My anaconda don’t . . . My anaconda don’t . . . My anaconda don’t want none unless you got buns, hun.” While the sample used here is altered so that Mix-A-Lot’s lines are interrupted and repeated within a strict new rhythm, demonstrating Minaj’s control over both his voice and his attention, they also draw an immediate connection between the two tracks. Punctuated by the sounds of a whip and an alarm bell, Minaj then enters with her first verse over Mix-A-Lot’s bass line. In a moderately slow tempo she describes her first “boy toy” of the track, a dope dealer whose money keeps her in haute couture fashions in exchange for her affections. After the first eight bars her rapping shifts to a more frenetic, faster pace, in which she begins to articulate why this guy is interested in her. She raps: “He can tell I ain’t missing no meals”; “He keep telling me it’s real, that he love my sex appeal”; and “Say he don’t like ‘em boney, he want something he can grab.”

The voices of white valley girls, whose critical commentary functions as an introduction in “Baby Got Back,” are also employed to draw attention to Minaj as the central subject, rather than the faceless, nameless black woman they reference in Mix-A-Lot’s original. “Oh my gosh, look at her butt,” an adaptation of the opening line of “Baby Got Back,” is interrupted, manipulated at different pitches, and repeated multiple times. Rather than serving as a critique, however, here the white girls sound both commanding
and admiring. With the absence of the lines that suggest disgust over black women’s bodies, the white women’s voices instead urge the listener to regard and admire Minaj’s butt specifically, and large butts more generally.

One of the key features of this track is that it offers an expression of sexual prowess, pleasure, and domination from a female perspective, rather than a male one. In the second verse Minaj becomes more overt about her sexual encounters with another “dude,” both explicitly and euphemistically referring to his genitals in a way that objectify him and his body rather than herself. She raps:

This dude named Michael used to ride motorcycles
Dick bigger than a tower, I ain’t talking about Eiffel’s
Real country ass nigga, let me play with his rifle
Pussy put his ass to sleep, now he calling me Nyquil
Now that bang, bang, bang
I let him hit it ‘cause he slang cocaine
He toss my salad like his name Romaine
And when we done, I make him buy me Balmain

We never get a sense of Michael as a person, only his body parts and performance in bed, along with a brief mention of his profession. She explains that she allowed Michael to have sex with her, an experience from which both parties derived pleasure. Finally, as with Troy, Minaj receives material and financial benefits from this partnership in addition to the sexual benefits.

Although all of these sonic and textual features reinforce Minaj’s control over her own sexuality, many of the visual images associated with “Anaconda” left some critics questioning whether or not the track is actually empowering to black women. The single’s controversial artwork, for example, features the rapper dressed in her signature color pink sports bra and G-string, blue “J’s” (Nike Air Jordan sneakers) with pink
accents, and nothing else (figure 1.2). She is posed in a squat, looking over her shoulder at the viewer, her left arm casually hanging behind one of her prominently featured butt cheeks. Likewise, the “Anaconda” video features Minaj and other women presenting, shaking, and touching that asset which Mix-A-Lot so prized: big butts.

Figure 1.2 Nicki Minaj. "Anaconda." Single cover artwork. Cash Money Records. 2014.

As several scholars have pointed out, these images recall the history of Sarah Baartman, the South African Khoisan woman known as the “Hottentot Venus” who was displayed in London and Paris in the early 19th century and whose large buttocks and genitals were used as scientific evidence of African primitivism and hypersexuality and
thus as justification for European colonialism.\textsuperscript{21} T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting writes that Baartman

was used as a yardstick by which to judge the stages of Western evolution, by which to discern identity, difference, and progress . . . [She was] relegated to the terrain of the primitive – the lowest exemplum of the human species – while European . . . [was] always . . . assume[d] the pinnacle of human development. The process of mediating the self, of reflecting the self, through the body of the black female Other begins and rebegins with every regard.\textsuperscript{22}

Baartman - whose body, including her genitalia, was dissected, measured, and examined after her death in 1815 by Georges Cuvier and whose skeleton and body cast remained on display at the \textit{Musée de l’Homme} until as recently as the late 1970s – became the locus for pseudo-scientific and socially oppressive theorizations of race and gender, and specifically of black women’s bodies, that have continued into the twenty-first century.

Some writers who acknowledge and engage with this history of exploitation of black women’s bodies by connecting it to contemporary hip-hop culture, however, often do so in a way that continues to put the burden of such negative representations on black women rather than the inescapable systems of racism and sexism. In 2006 article for \textit{PopMatters.com} titled “Negritude 2.0: Modern Day Hottietots,” for instance, Mark Reynolds makes an explicit connection between Baartman’s legacy and the prominence

\footnotesize

of scantily clad, large-bottomed black women in rap videos. In a misdirected attempt to speak out against the exploitation and commodification of black women’s bodies, he designates the “video vixen” or “video ho,” the phenomenon of women who appear in rap videos (such as those referenced by the valley girls in “Baby Got Back”), as well as strippers who share a similar aesthetic, as contemporary “Hottietots,” a modified version of “Hottentot.” He writes:

Black women, you see, have a special sensitivity as to how their womanhood is portrayed in mass culture. They’ve had to contend with centuries of being labeled promiscuous whores, hardwired for animalistic sexuality – and not much else – by that blasted jungle DNA. It has been a battle for decency and dignity at the most intimate, personal level. That victories in the battle have been so hard-fought, the wounds still so far from healed, that it doesn’t take much to call all that pain back to the surface. The ravages against black womanhood are legion, but with big butts on endless display in videos and “bitch” and “ho” all but commonplace in hip-hop lyrics, one particularly sad and disturbing case comes to mind.

While Reynolds’ concern about the representation and objectification of black women in mass media is admirable, his critique is both paternalistic and shaming and lacks a nuanced understanding of context. In addition to dismissing hip-hop entirely, which he identifies as a prime culprit in the exploitation of black women thanks in part to the “stupid little videos of stupid little songs,” he seems to suggest that black women are to blame for their own degrading, highly sexualized image. Rather than using Baartman as an example of the values and stereotypes imposed on black women in the diaspora since the colonial period, he uses her legacy to shame women whom he believes perpetuate it.

24 Reynolds, “Modern Day Hottietots.”
Reynolds offers for example one black woman, Melyssa Ford, who successfully built her career by appearing in rap music videos and publically (and proudly) speaks of the level of control she holds over her own business, asserting that the highly sexualized images she produces are damaging to both herself and other black women. He further claims that when Ford, an invited panelist at a conference on feminism and hip-hop held at the University of Chicago in April 2005, defended her work and the measure of control she exercises, “None of that impressed those scholars and activists in attendance, who called her a whore and pretty much blamed her for degrading black womanhood and the entire community.” While it seems unlikely that a room full of feminist hip-hop scholars would openly call a performer a “whore,” Reynolds’ insistence that they did speaks strongly to his own misplaced shaming of Ford and other performers.

The connection that Reynolds draws between Baartman and contemporary “hottietots” or “video vixens” is a tenuous one, which he himself admits:

The level of exploitative commodification in our pop culture is what bothers black womanists and activists against sexism. They recognize the fact that Ford . . . and Baartman may be worlds apart in some respects, but are indeed connected by a problematic and slippery slope. I’m not suggesting that these round-assed Hottietots are living and working in anything close to the indentured squalor that Baartman knew, or that the corporations that foot the bill for these videos, ads, and magazines are engaging in a spin-off of the slave trade. But what exactly is the difference between Baartman being prodded about in a cage and a black woman flapping her butt to sell phones?26

The difference, of course, is primarily that of agency and context. While Baartman was forcefully brought to Europe and subjected to a host of demeaning experiences, most

25 Reynolds, “Modern Day Hottietots.”
26 Ibid.
women choose to seek employment on the sets of rap videos and are financially and sometimes professionally rewarded as a result of their work. Additionally, as activist and popular culture critic Janet Mock suggests, there is an important distinction to be made between the amount of control artists such as Minaj (and, probably to a lesser degree, video dancers) exert over their bodies in the controlled environment of a video shoot than the level of autonomy that was denied to Baartman as she was paraded around Europe. While it is valid and even necessary to critique the corporate and economic structures that limit financial opportunities for black women, and to challenge the culture in which black women’s bodies are displayed and objectified for the benefit of male rappers and audiences, Reynolds’ silencing of Ford through his denial of her own autonomy is equally oppressive, as is well his shaming of her sexuality based solely on her line of work.

bell hooks similarly suggests that in popular culture, some performers have embraced the image of the sexually available black woman as a strategy for asserting control over their own representation. She writes:

Bombarded with images representing black female bodies as expendable, black women have either passively absorbed this thinking or vehemently resisted it. Popular culture provides countless examples of black female appropriation and exploitation of “negative stereotypes” to either assert control over the representation or at least reap the benefits of it. Since black female sexuality has been represented in racist/sexist iconography as more free and liberated, many black women singers, irrespective of the quality of their voices, have cultivated an image which suggests they are sexually available and licentious. Undesirable in the conventional sense, which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to the extent that it is

---

idealized and unattainable, the black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant.\footnote{bell hooks, “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace” in \textit{Black Looks: Race and Representation (Boston: South End Press, 1002), 65-6.}}

In this same essay, “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace,” she uses Tina Turner as an example of a singer who has fashioned (or been encouraged by the men with whom she works to fashion) herself in this image.


In a feature illustrated with suggestive photos of Kim in lacy black underwear and cheetah-print negligee, hooks opens with an unflattering physical description:

In pictures, Lil’ Kim looks like the images that used to appear in the sleazy black porn magazine Players. As teenagers, we used to laugh at those pictures. Women in them were always “overdone.” Sometimes they looked like raggedy drag queens – a bit rough around the edges. As representations of the hyperfemme, they called out the lack of imagination in sexist, straight male fantasies. Naturally, it’s been a bit puzzling for me to see “old” stuff revamped as new and daring. The only new thing happening here is that it took so long for a hip-hop girl to make the down-and-dirty talk pay her bills big-time. Mark my words. Long before Lil’ Kim could speak, smart sluts of all ages were talking trash. To talk trash and get paid has always been harder for women than for men. This 21-year-old has gone where others have not been able to go, ‘cause she’s got the right dudes behind her.\footnote{hooks, “Hardcore Honey.”}

While the rest of the interview reads as a respectful conversation between the older feminist scholar and the younger hardcore rapper, this lead-in clearly establishes hook’s refusal to grant Kim the empowered status that she projects. Elsewhere, hooks writes:
The more Lil’ Kim distorted her natural beauty to become a cartoonlike caricature of whiteness, the larger her success. Donning blond wigs and getting a boob job so that she can resemble a cheap version of the white womanhood she adores wins her monetary success in the world of white supremacist, patriarchal capitalism and helps her cover up the fact that she has no self-worth. She testifies that creating a “false self” in the personal of Lil’ Kim, the personification of a childlike ho, bolsters her low self-esteem. To her credit she does not pretend that it makes the low self-esteem go away, it just helps her cope. And this is a young woman whom thousands upon thousands of black girls want to emulate.\footnote{hooks, \textit{Rock My House: Black People and Self-Esteem} (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 49.}

Throughout the interview, as in this particular passage, hooks emphasizes that Kim’s rap persona is unreal, and she furthers the idea that Kim’s inherent, “natural” beauty has been compromised by an attempt to fit into unrealistic standards that reflect a white supremacist culture, in which white bodies and characteristics (lighter skin, straight blond hair, etc.) are considered more desirable than those more often found on black bodies.

Like those who disparage Minaj’s supposed hypersexuality, hooks argues that Kim’s performance reflects deeply ingrained gender and racial expectations. hooks views Kim’s presentation and public persona as a strategy for negotiating both unrealistic standards set by white conceptions of beauty and the racist/sexist legacy of the display and “study” of Baartman’s body, but she offers no possibilities for the subversion of these prescribed expectations. Nor does she allow room for the possibility that artists such as Kim who present themselves as sexually liberated beings might be expressing a genuine sense of self, albeit in a highly performative manner. As writer and cultural critic Roxane Gay asks, in response to the legacy of Sarah Baartman, “. . . are we [black women] enslaved to that fraught history? Are we not allowed to express ourselves
because of that fraught history?" Is it possible to be a sexy black woman in hip-hop and still push against the complimentary restrictions of white beauty standards and the hypersexual stereotypes that were cemented in response to Baartman?

Certain aspects of “Anaconda” clearly disrupt the narrative of the displayed black female body, especially the accompanying music video. One of the most profound of such moments occurs in the last few minutes, in which Minaj gives fellow Young Money, Cash Money label rapper Drake a lap dance. At three minutes and twenty-four seconds into the nearly five-minute long video, the scene begins to oscillate between Minaj and Drake in an empty and darkened room and a jungle setting where Minaj is seated alone in a heated pool of water, like a natural hot tub. Musically, Minaj breaks out of her rhythmic rapping to exclaim, “Yeah, he love this fat ass,” which she follows with an almost hysterical laugh. She continues:

Yeah! This one is for my bitches with a fat ass in the fucking club
I said, “where my fat ass big bitches in the club?”
Fuck those skinny bitches, fuck those skinny bitches in the club
I wanna see all the big fat ass bitches in the motherfucking club,
Fuck you if you skinny bitches
What? Yeah!

While Minaj returns to a more metered recitation, her bars become uneven, throwing off the strict rhythm of the rest of the track suggesting that the “dumb shit” that she is on has gotten the best of her. She expresses frustration at the attention afforded to skinny women by asserting solidarity with women who are shaped like her, curvy and with large butts. She ends with another laugh, suggesting that while she is serious about her critique of

---

32 Roxane Gay, “My Anaconda Don’t: Nicki Minaj’s Ass and Feminism” video.
traditional beauty ideals, she is not serious about starting conflict with women who embody those figures.

While Minaj raps this final verse, we see her crawl towards Drake who is seated alone on a chair, prepared to receive a lap dance as a patron might in any strip club. The video angle captures Minaj’s knowing looks as she occasionally looks at the camera towards the viewer, letting the audience in on her perspective. Unlike other rap videos such as Nelly’s infamous “Tip Drill,” in which the rapper and his entourage throw money at the women shaking their butts for them (and at one point sliding a credit card between one women’s butt cheeks) while rapping lines such as “It must be your ass ‘cause it ain’t your face,” we are invited to see the dancer, Minaj, not as an accessory, but as the protagonist. Despite the emphasis on her own butt, she is presented as a main actor, rather than reduced to a montage of body parts. Additionally, no money is exchanged in this encounter, and Drake, a well-known and accomplished rapper in his own right, remains silent throughout. When his excitement builds and he reaches out to touch the butt shaking in front of him, Minaj slaps his hand away and abruptly exits the room, leaving Drake alone and ending the video.

This moment is perhaps the most important of the video because it illustrates the main difference between Minaj’s performance and those performances that Reynolds so heavily critiques: Minaj, despite her suggestive posturing, retains agency by establishing and maintaining her own boundaries. She is not a decorative figure or a series of body parts that flash on the screen. She is a talented rapper first and foremost who prioritizes her own needs and desires over those of her male interlocutors, who also happens to be a
skilled dancer with an attractive body. While she may be capitalizing on the big butt fervor that was initiated by Mix-A-Lot but has only recently gained mainstream legitimacy, she uses it for her own means, be it material goods or her own sexual pleasure.

Furthermore, the use of jungle sounds and images also subvert Baartman’s legacy by playing with concepts of the primitive African and “jungle fever.” In “Anaconda,” Minaj reimagines the sexually liberated space of the jungle as an Amazonian oasis in which the male gaze is welcomed, even invited, but male control is completely absent. With the exception of Drake at the end, the video features only Minaj and other women. They lounge together in the jungle as Minaj recounts her sexual exploits. Minaj and her female compatriots work out together in their secluded gym in the jungle, with Minaj demonstrating routines that enhance rather than diminish their large backsides. This all-female space is non-competitive, with the women cooperating rather than vying for male attention. Nor do they superfluously make out with each other; while Nicki playfully bounces the butt cheeks of one of her companions, the women otherwise refrain from expressing romantic or sexual inclinations towards each other, thus avoiding the pseudo-lesbian display common in male-dominated rap videos, such as the aforementioned one for “Tip Drill”. In other scenes, the camera shakes in response to Minaj’s twerking, suggesting that she not only commands the male gaze with her butt, but it is also powerful enough to move the camera and unsettle the viewer’s frame. While the jungle has been associated with sexual freedom, and black women, in the shadow of Sarah Baartman, have been stereotyped as hypersexual due to their “blasted jungle DNA,” as
Reynolds calls it, Minaj playfully suggests that this sexually charged space could also operate as a female-centered domain where women of color express their sexuality not for male pleasure but for their own.

Despite its highly sexualized imagery and language, or rather, because of it, “Anaconda” playfully addresses serious issues surrounding the black female body. Black feminist scholar Britney Cooper concludes, “does her [Minaj’s] performance of sexuality foreclose something for black women, or does it open up something? I think it opens up more than it forecloses.” “Anaconda” opens up the possibility for black women to be sexually provocative in performance and yet establish and maintain control over their own boundaries and their own sense of pleasure. In moving away from her former queer femmecee performance style, Minaj embraces the possibilities of heteronormative feminine presentation while also maintaining a hardness that speaks to hip-hop’s tough pose. Although there remain some problematic aspects of Minaj’s performance, we can recognize the feminist significance of a black woman controlling her own sexual image.

Minaj as Bad Bitch

In the much-maligned lyric video for “Only,” the third single off *The Pinkprint,* Minaj continues to address themes of heterosexuality and control, here in the context of the music industry.  

---

33 Britney Cooper, “My Anaconda Don’t: Nicki Minaj’s Ass And Feminism” video.
34 A lyric video is music video that features the lyrics, or words of a song that appear on screen in time with the music. The practice originated as unofficial fan videos, where fans would essentially create slide shows to go along with the music, but artists have begun creating official lyric videos that may feature stylized fonts and special effects or, as in the case for “Only,” a entire video concept in addition to the appearance of lyrics. These videos not only help disseminate new songs, but also clarify the lyrics, which is especially
Money label artists Drake and Lil Wayne, as well as a chorus sung by Chris Brown. The track is built around a four-note ostinato, which remains constant throughout save for a few moments during which it drops out to emphasize certain moments in the text. The texture is sparse, with only programmed drum beats and instrumental, single-pitch samples added throughout, creating a menacing effect. Before the first two repetitions of the ostinato pattern finish, Minaj enters on an upbeat with her verse:

Yo, I never fucked Wayne, I never fucked Drake
On my life, man, fuck sake
If I did I’d Minaj [ménage] wid’ him and let ’em eat my ass like a cupcake
My man full, he just ate, I don’t duck nobody but tape
Yea, that was a setup for a punch line on duct tape
Worried about if my butt's fake
Worry about y’all niggas, us straight
These girls are my sons, John and Kate plus eight
When I walk in, sit up straight, I don't give a fuck if I was late
Dinner with my man on a G5 is my idea of an update
Hut one, hut two, big titties, big butt, too
Fuck wit’ them real niggas who don't tell niggas what they up to
Had to show bitches where the top is, ring finger where the rock is
Dez hoes couldn't test me even if they name was pop quiz
Bad bitches who I fuck wit’, mad bitches we don't fuck wit’
I don't fuck wit’ them chickens unless they last name is cutlet
Let it soak in like seasoning
And tell them bitches blow me, Lance Stephenson

Minaj’s delivers her verse in a steady, moderately paced flow. Rather than show off her rapping agility with speed or her character voices, she conveys her verse evenly, allowing listeners to catch on to her careful wordplay and subtle jokes.

---

Minaj preemptively responds to potential criticism by asserting that she did not gain success by having sexual relationships with her fellow Young Money artists, but she notes that she does have a boyfriend or male lover, a clear move away from the ambiguous sexuality she cultivated during her early career. She also addresses rumors that her butt has been surgically augmented with implants, not by answering whether or not these rumors are true, but by suggesting that her detractors worry about their own lives and problems.\(^\text{35}\) She situates herself as a leader through militaristic language (“hut one, hut two”) that is tempered by a description of her sexually appealing female body (“big titties, big butt, too”).

The rapper engages in the kind of boasting and self-aggrandizing that is typical of her genre, describing her position at the top of the rap game and mentioning her financial success through acquired material goods. However, she uses gendered terms to delineate both male (“niggas”) and female (“bitches”) individuals with whom she will or will not associate – “bad bitches” and “real niggas” being people she surrounds herself with, and “mad bitches,” or jealous or hateful women, being those whom she avoids. Unlike male rappers who suggest that they avoid women because they are unfaithful or only interested in the artist’s material wealth, Minaj identifies some women as potential competition, whether in the rap business realm or in her personal life.

Drake and Lil Wayne’s verses confirm Minaj’s claim that she never had sex with them, with Drake asserting “I never fucked Nicki cause she got a man,” and Wayne

adding “I never fucked Nick and that’s fucked up.” However, Drake’s verse focuses on his attraction to Minaj and women with a similar shape to her. He raps:

I never fucked Nicki cause she got a man
But when that’s over then I’m first in line
And the other day in her Maybach
I thought goddamn this is the perfect time
We had just come from that video
You know LA traffic, how the city slow
She was sitting down on that big butt
But I was still staring at the titties though

By referencing the filming of the “Anaconda” video, Drake confirms what viewers perceived as his frustration at not being able to act on his sexual attraction. He continues:

I mean, she say I’m obsessed with thick women and I agree
Yeah, that’s right, I like my girls BBW
Yea, type to wanna suck you dry and then eat some lunch with you
Yea, so thick that everybody else in the room is so uncomfortable
Ass on Houston Texas, but the face look just like Clair Huxtable

Drake uses the abbreviation “BBW” which is commonly used on internet personal ads and pornography sites to stand for “Big Beautiful Women,” connoting women with curvy figures or large women. Drake’s self-expressed desire for women with this body type follows Sir Mix-A-Lot’s preference for big butts and confirms Minaj’s use of her own butt as evidence of black beauty and attractiveness.

Drake and Wayne’s verses are problematic in that at first glance, they seem to contradict Minaj’s statement that she did not sleep her way to success, as they emphasize their willingness to sleep with her, were they given the opportunity (and, their words imply, her consent). However, their verses actually serve as a strategic move to negotiate what are often presented as two binary expectations for female rappers: either they have sex with men in the industry in order to move up the corporate ladder, or they earn
success without engaging in sex because they are considered too masculine and therefore unattractive to men in the industry and to potential audiences. By stating that she never fucked Wayne, the label co-founder, or Drake, one of the label’s break-out stars, but at the same time allowing both men profess their willingness to fuck her on the same track, she remains uncompromised and yet still fuckable; she maintains her sex appeal while also expressing traditionally masculine concepts of power and control.

The controversial lyric video for “Only” emphasizes these points. Molly Beauchemin, writing for *Pitchfork*, notes of the video: “Between the fighter jets, the infantry, the tanks, and legions of other military iconography, the animated video suggests what we’ve been anticipating all along: Nicki is building an army.”36 Indeed, the cartoon feature stars Minaj as a dictator in a skin-tight leather suit, with Drake, Lil Wayne, and Brown appearing as her close advisors dressed as a religious leader, a business leader, and military leader, respectively (figure 1.3). Minaj alternately sits on a throne-like chair at the head of an assembled army and strolls among their ranks, displaying her curvy profile. During Brown’s chorus, which begins “Raise every bottle and cup in the sky/Sparks in the air like the fourth of July,” images of fighter jets soar and bombs explode across the screen.

---

Many heavily criticized Minaj and video director Jeffrey Osborne for what they felt was overt use of Nazi imagery. Some critics, such as those at the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), suggested that the red banners displayed in the video and the red armbands featured on the soldier’s arms resemble those worn with by Nazi soldiers, and note that the Young Money symbol in this context looks very much like a Nazi swastika. In a statement responding to the video, ADL National Director Abraham H. Foxman declares:

Nicki Minaj’s new video disturbingly evokes Third Reich propaganda and constitutes a new low for pop culture’s exploitation of Nazi symbolism. The irony should be lost on no one that this video debuted on the 76th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the “night of broken glass” pogrom that signaled the beginning of the Final Solution and the Holocaust.

. . . This video is insensitive to Holocaust survivors and a trivialization of the history of that era. The abuse of Nazi imagery is

---

deeply disturbing and offensive to Jews and all those who can recall the sacrifices Americans and many others had to make as a result of Hitler’s Nazi juggernaut.\textsuperscript{38}

In response, the video’s director, Jeff Osborne, refused to express any regret. Instead, he offered the following statement on MySpace, which is worth citing here in its entirety:

Before I start, be clear that these are my personal views and not the views of Nicki Minaj, Drake, Lil Wayne, Chris Brown, or Young Money.

**First, I’m not apologizing for my work**, nor will I dodge the immediate question. The flags, armbands, and gas mask (and perhaps my use of symmetry?) are **all representative of Nazism**.

But a majority of the recognizable models/symbols are American: MQ9 Reaper Drone, F22 Raptor, Sidewinder missile, security cameras, M60, SWAT uniform, General’s uniform, the Supreme court, and the Lincoln Memorial. What’s also American is the 1\textsuperscript{st} Amendment, which I’ve unexpectedly succeeded in showing how we willfully squeeze ourselves out of that right every day.

Despite the fact heavy religious and economic themes were glossed over, there’s also Russian T-90 tanks, Belgian FN FAL, German mp5 (not manufactured until 1966), an Italian Ferrari, and a Vatican Pope.

As far as an explanation, I think its\textsuperscript{sic} actually important to remind younger generations of atrocities that occurred in the past as a way to prevent them from happening in the future. And the most effective way of connecting with people today is through social media and pop culture. **So if my work is misinterpreted because it’s not a sappy tearjerker, sorry I’m not sorry**. What else is trending? [Emphasis in original]\textsuperscript{39}

In this statement Osborne argues that the hodgepodge of references found in the video, which includes those pulled from Nazi imagery, is too diverse to imply that any one approach to government or military forces should be elevated above any another.

\textsuperscript{38} Abraham H. Foxman, ADL National Director, ADL statement.

Osborne’s non-apology also subtly reinforces Minaj’s hardness; he suggests that were the video a “sappy tearjerker,” a concept most commonly associated with feminine artists and audiences, it would not have been open to misinterpretation, whereas a video presenting her as a tough, militaristic figure has been cause for critique.

Minaj herself apologized via Twitter the day after the ADL released their statement, writing:

I didn’t come up w/the concept, but I’m very sorry & take full responsibility if it has offended anyone. I’d never condone Nazism in my art.  

Both the producer, & person in charge of over seeing the lyric video (one of my best friends & videographer: A. Loucas), happen to be Jewish.

While Minaj’s statement is certainly more of an apology than Osborne’s, she carefully positions herself as one of the main participants in the video, but not as its central author. This is a strategic move that highlights artists’ negotiations in the public sphere, especially considering that positive critiques of “Anaconda” rely on the opposite approach; “Anaconda” only functions as a feminist anthem if Minaj exercised full control over the video’s production. While it is most likely true that Osborne came up with the concept for the “Only” lyric video, Minaj also exercised discretion in approving the concept and participating in it, but remains strategic in how much responsibility she publically takes, especially when the images presented in her videos pose a challenge to normative gender roles.

---

41 Nicki Minaj, Twitter post, November 11, 2014, 7:51am.
The juxtaposition of American, Nazi, and other military symbols in the “Only” video generates several possible readings. The first offers a critique in which the American military and, by extension, government is made indistinguishable from the fascist Nazi regime. As Osborne points out, through the cartoon images of Drake, who appears as a pope or other holy figure, and Lil Wayne, who is dressed in a suit and tie (appropriate attire for a savvy businessman), religion and economics are also implicated in this system. The music and lyrics could reinforce this view through the menacing ostinato figure and the emphasis on crew loyalty respectively, which is reflected in the perceived loyalty among the dictator Minaj’s appointed advisors.

A second possible reading, however, suggests that Minaj and her Young Money crew appropriate these totalitarian and militaristic symbols to conjure up the powerful image of a government headed entirely by black leaders. The most significant aspect of this imagined regime is the fact that Minaj, the only female member of this crew, is positioned as the dictator, and thus the person who is ultimately in charge. As Beauchemin suggests, Minaj is indeed building her own army.

Minaj also combines images of violence with bragadocio lyrics and threatening music in “Lookin Ass” (originally “Lookin Ass Nigga”), a single from the Young Money label’s 2014 compilation album, *Rise of an Empire*. Rather than appearing surrounded by a uniformed army, here Minaj appears solo, with just her body and, in a few scenes, wielding automatic rifles. While the track’s appearance on the Young Money compilation suggests that she does have the backing of an entire crew (which is composed almost
entirely of men), in “Lookin Ass” Minaj does not give space for these men to speak on her behalf, but rather attacks certain men on her own terms.

In the opening of the video, which was released in February, 2014 on the website Worldstarhiphop.com, the camera offers a limited view of Minaj’s body, focusing on her torso and breasts, shots of her crotch and curvy hips, eventually her mouth, and finally her full body including her face. In between shots of Minaj, we see just the eyes of a black man, with the image of Minaj reflected in them. Through the course of the video, we never see more of the unnamed man beyond his eyes, which change in expression from relaxed to confused, to terrified as Minaj pulls out guns and starts shooting, to relaxed again as the guns disappear at the end of the first verse. At the end of the second verse and video, as Minaj pulls out two automatic weapons this time and begins firing, we see the man’s mouth twist into a silent scream, “No!” but we never see his entire face in one shot. Unlike typical rap videos or even videos in other genres where women are reduced to body parts, here the male figure is reduced to two characteristics, his eyes and mouth, which are used to demonstrate his reaction to what Minaj says and does to him. Much like Drake’s role in the “Anaconda” video, here the unnamed male figure is responding to Minaj, not controlling her.

The lyrics, arranged over a simple track consisting mainly of low bass pedal points and an uncredited vocal hook that also appears in part as a sample throughout, are an explicit indictment of men’s poor behavior. Each line Minaj delivers derides certain male behaviors, and she ends almost every line with the reiteration that the men of whom she speaks are “-ass niggas.” Lines such as “Look at y’all lyin’ ass niggas/Talking ‘bout
‘It’s paid off’ but it’s financed, lyin’ ass niggas,” and “Bunch of non-mogul ass niggas/ Frontin’ like they got a plan, Boost Mobile ass niggas” poke fun at men who are broke but act otherwise. While Minaj poses in skin revealing outfits, running her hands over her own body and playing with her hair, she also critiques men who take that as an invitation to only view her as a woman and not as a rapper, stating, “Look at y’all lookin’ ass niggas/ Stop lookin’ at my ass ass niggas.”

In “Lookin’ Ass”, as in “Only,” Minaj resists the idea that she slept her way to the top rather than succeeding based on her own talent. However, here Minaj takes her claim further, adopting masculine language and using heteronormatively gendered language to attack men who would challenge her. She raps: “I don’t want sex, give a fuck about your ex/ I don’t even want a text from y’all niggas,” reminiscent of her opening lines in “Only” (“I never fucked Wayne, I never fucked Drake”) and similarly distancing herself from her former femmecee persona. In the next line, as she pulls out an automatic rifle and we see the man’s eyes open wide in fear, she raps, “I’m raping you niggas.” Minaj equates rape not with sex, as she just insisted she had no interest in having sex with the men she is addressing, but uses the concept of rape as a way to assert her power, as does the gun in her hands. The fact that she is a woman insisting that she’s raping a group of men is the ultimate assertion of control.

In the second verse, Minaj attacks her interlocutors’ manhood on similar terms.

She raps:

No dick in the pants ass nigga
I be damned if I fuck a non-man ass nigga
I will, I will, I will never fuck a non-man ass nigga
I would never lie
Even if that nigga flew me and my bitches all the way out to Dubai
Pussy, you tried, pussy ass nigga, you lie
Pussy ass nigga, you high

In this section Minaj breaks from the rhyme scheme, changing her flow and inflection to add to the build-up to the last line of the verse. She uses language like “No dick,” “non-man,” and “pussy” to claim that the men who exhibit the behavior she has just catalogued are not real men in heteronormative terms. While male rappers often allude to other men as pussies or faggots in an attempt to assert their own masculine superiority, this perceived superiority is built on homophobic and misogynist notions that females are a subordinate class based on their lack of a penis as well as their inherently weak characteristics. In “Lookin’ Ass,” Minaj highlights her feminine body but adopts stereotypically masculine language to assert her authority, but in doing so, she denigrates her own identity as a woman.

Conclusion

Shange’s “femmecee” model explains Minaj’s early strategic performance of queer femininity as “inextricably linked to the production and reception of [her] rhymes.”\(^{42}\) She writes:

[Minaj] challenges us to acknowledge her dick and her throne without demanding reconcilability . . . Her queerness denies legibility, and instead is revealed to be yet another strategy for black female survivance that bends the rules of neoliberal capital without breaking them . . . King Nicki’s hypervisibility as a black femmecee and her refusal to cede to any regime of recognition confound the multiple common senses – hip

\(^{42}\) Shange, 29.
hop/patriarchy/ homonormativity – that seek to produce her as a compliant subject.43

Drawing on pre-2013 performances in which Minaj hints at her own involvement in femme-femme sexual couplings (which, as Shange argues, resists both heteronormative [male-female] and homonormative [butch-femme] configurations), as well as real-life interviews in which Minaj refuses to directly address questions regarding her own sexuality, Shange suggests that Minaj’s use of queerness, as expressed through her femme gender presentation, is a strategy that she used to avoid easy categorization within any dominant archetypes of successful female rappers.44

In more recent performances, however, Minaj has moved away from a performative queerness and instead exhibited an adherence to more traditional heteronormative beauty norms, while at the same time continuing to embrace the masculinist language of mainstream rap. In this way, she expresses a hardness that aligns with the ideas of black male authenticity in hip-hop described at the beginning of this chapter, but maintains her feminine gender expression that facilitates her appearance as an attractive sex object for (heterosexual) men. Even moments with queer potential, such as the woman-to-woman interactions that occur in the reimagined Amazonian space of “Anaconda” are undermined by the lyrical emphasis on heterosexual desires and Minaj’s gaze through the camera towards her audience. Her visual transformation aligns with a sonic one; as she relinquishes her campy, over-the-top costumes and wigs she also abandons her pop diva-hood, both of which distance her from the realm of hip-hop

43 Shange, 42.
44 Ibid., 33.
authenticity. As Justin Charity, in a piece on pop’s “colonization of hip-hop” for *Complex*, writes:

As the most scorned and marginalized demographic in the U.S. (and in hip-hop itself), black women are the most creatively endangered by hip-hop’s gentrification. While the intramural rivalries of Iggy Azalea vs. Azealia Banks and Nicki Minaj vs. Lil’ Kim are ego battles, for the most part, it’s true that, in both cases, the superstar is the more pop, more accessible, more universally beautiful rapper, and the underdog is the grittier bitch.\(^{45}\)

While Minaj’s pop hits brought her commercial success, it also undermined her identity as a rapper.\(^{46}\) Her recent visual rebranding and sonic and lyric return to her “hip-hop roots” could be understood as a strategic move that aims to legitimate her position as a “bad bitch” rapper, rather than saccharine pop star. Her presentation as a curvaceous femme with tough lyrics allows her to position herself as a serious rap artist without sacrificing her sex appeal.

The media and fan responses to Nicki Minaj’s transformation in the past few years speak to the values of the hip-hop community and to American society at large. Within American culture, feminine heterosexual women are valued, especially if they are white or emulate white beauty standards to some degree. We see these values in reflected in the most commercially successful pop stars, such as Taylor Swift, whose album *1989*


\(^{46}\) For example, Hot 97 radio personality Peter Rosenberg dismissed Minaj’s pop hot, “Starships” and her fans from the stage of the Hot 97 Summer Jam on June 3, 2012, stating: “Before I get to the real hip-hop shit of the day, because I see the real hip-hop heads sprinkled in here, I see ‘em. I know there’s some chicks here waiting to sing ‘Starships’ later, I’m not talking to y’all right now, fuck that bullshit. I’m here to talk about real hip-hop shit.” Not only did he feel that the pop song and, by extension, the artist who performed it were not representative of “real” hip-hop, he also suggested that women were the song’s primary fans, and that the men in the audience were the true hip-hop heads. Peter Rosenberg as quoted by Brandon Soderberg, “Nicki Minaj vs. Peter Rosenberg: The Worst Beef Ever,” posted at *spin.com* on June 4, 2012, [http://www.spin.com/2012/06/nicki-minaj-vs-peter-rosenberg-worst-beef-ever/](http://www.spin.com/2012/06/nicki-minaj-vs-peter-rosenberg-worst-beef-ever/), accessed August 24, 2015.
was the best-selling album of 2014.\textsuperscript{47} Likewise, we see them expressed in the positive response to Minaj’s move away from pink wigs and outrageously colorful outfits to her more subdued and understated style, including straightened hair that by design emulates white hair textures. Within hip-hop culture, however, notions of authenticity trump popularity when it comes to measures of success. As Mark Anthony Neal and Jean Grae recently discussed, these notions of authenticity are especially tied to gendered perceptions of authorship and black masculinity; in addition to engaging with a genre whose main narratives express the experiences of black men, women MCs are also more likely to have their authorship of their own words called into question than their male counterparts.\textsuperscript{48} Minaj’s transformation from a performative artist who used over-the-top outfits and multiple stage personae to express herself to a hardened lyricist with a “natural” look reflects these values, and the ways in which black women especially must negotiate expectations and innovations in order to carve out a space for themselves in the rap game.


\textsuperscript{48} Mark Anthony Neal, Jean Grae, and Marc Lamont Hill, “Ghostwriting Accusations: A Battle that Female Emcees Know Too Well,” Huffpost Live video, 4:04, posted on newblackmaninexile.net on July 25, 2015, \url{http://www.newblackmaninexile.net/2015/07/authorship-authenticity-gender-in-hip.html}, accessed July 25, 2015. In the conversation, the participants point out that despite the fact that most commercially successful hip-hop albums are created by a team of lyricists, producers, sound engineers, etc., male MCs are commonly assumed to be the sole authors of their own rhymes, while women MCs are often accused of not writing any of their own words. As they point out, notions of authenticity are problematically tied to both black male identity and individual authorship.
Chapter 2

White Women Rappers Get Ratchet

Iggy Azalea, White Girl Mob, and Cultural Appropriation in Hip-Hop

In September 2014, *Vogue* published an article by Patricia Garcia declaring: “We’re Officially in the Era of the Big Booty.”¹ Paying special attention to women’s derrieres in American popular music, the article traced the evolution of the large backside from an unwanted attribute to the desirable female asset displayed and celebrated by artists such as Nicki Minaj in “Anaconda.” Several other media outlets, including *Buzzfeed, The Daily Beast, Huffington Post,* and *Billboard* followed suit with their own lists of the most memorable booty moments of the year, from Kim Kardashian’s “internet-breaking” cover for *Paper Magazine* to the “glorious mountain of glittery Beyoncé-approved butts” at the singer’s Video Music Awards performance.² According to these trend pieces, big butts had “officially become ubiquitous.”³

*Vogue* was heavily critiqued for its article, and with good reason. While some women found aspects of this mainstream appreciation for large behinds empowering,

---


³ Garcia, “We’re Officially in the Era of the Big Booty.”
especially when packaged in a catchy, upbeat pop song such as Meghan Trainor’s infectious hit, “All About that Bass,” many women of color have argued that big butts are neither “new” nor “trendy.” Writing for the feminist website *Jezebel*, critic Kara Brown pointed out that this particular body shape had been admired in black and Latinx communities long before it became acknowledged as a desirable characteristic among white women. She contended that: “This is the ‘Era of the Big Booty’ for obvious[ly] *sic* white people only. Vogue and its homogenous group of editors are simply noticing for the first time that a fat ass is actually quite delightful when you don’t Photoshop it away.” Brown highlights a pressing concern over the media’s fascination with the big butt trend, which is that it represents just the most recent example of “the mainstream only becoming comfortable with beauty in color when it’s on a white body.” What *Vogue* and other publications fail to address are the intersecting racial and gender repercussions of this supposedly recent development, especially in hip-hop and hip-hop inflected pop music. As Brown notes, lacking sufficient historical and political perspective, trend pieces such as *Vogue*’s, as well as many of the white musicians they highlight, engage in a (mis)appropriation of black culture and black women’s bodies.

---

4 See for example, Britt Julious, who wrote in an article for *The Guardian* that “underlying both [Minaj’s “Anaconda” and Trainor’s “All About That Bass”] is a message of personal empowerment and assertion over the physical ideals of the day. . . Skinniness is the ideal; its pervasiveness persists despite the changing average size of the American woman.” (Britt Julious, “Iggy Azalea and J-Lo’s AMA Booty show caps a banner year for the butt,” posted at theguardian.com on November 20, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/culture/musicblog/2014/nov/20/jlo-iggy-azalea-ama-booty-show-banner-year-for-butt, accessed November 23, 2015).


7 Brown, “We Need to Talk about ‘Butt Selfie Queen’ Jen Selter.”
The mainstream embrace of the big booty is but one recent example of white appropriation of the cultures of people of color. In his text *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, James O. Young defines cultural appropriation as appropriation “that occurs across the boundaries of cultures.”[^8] He writes, “Members of one culture (I will call them *outsiders*) take for their own, or for their own use, items produced by a member or members of another culture (call them *insiders*).”[^9] In his defense of appropriation in artworks, Young attempts to strip the term of any “moral baggage,” claiming that not all appropriations are exploitative or immoral. In so doing, however, Young fails to acknowledge the power differentials between what he terms *outsiders* and *insiders* in the equation. Conversely, journalist Nadra Kareem Nittle, whose work focuses on issues of race, defines cultural appropriation as the borrowing, or perhaps more accurately, the theft of cultural products, aesthetics, or ideas of a marginalized group by members of a dominant group.[^10] Unlike cultural exchange or cultural appreciation, cultural appropriation has a deservedly negative connotation because it relies on and reinforces the power imbalance between the group from which culture is borrowed and the group doing the borrowing. As Nadra Kareem Nittle writes,

> Typically those doing the “borrowing,” or exploiting, lack a contextual understanding of what makes the cultural symbols, art forms and modes of expression significant. Despite their ignorance of the ethnic groups from which they borrow, members of the majority culture have frequently profited from cultural exploitation.[^11]

[^9]: Young, 5.
Taking, for example, the big booty phenomenon, we see how certain body shapes have been valued in black and latinx communities long before they became a trend of white culture. And yet, once predominantly white media began positively reporting on and embracing this same body shape, such as in the aforementioned Vogue article, it was couched as something completely new that had simply emerged without precedent. Thus the discourse surrounding this shift in values stripped the big booty of its historical and cultural context.

The appropriation of black cultural expressions and products by white Americans in the realm of popular music is especially well documented. Rock and roll, for example, emerged as a white genre built on the musical and lyrical language of black genres, such as rhythm and blues. White artists employed musical styles and ideas from black musicians that were repackaged as appropriate for white audiences, and it was these white artists who gained the most commercially and culturally from the styles and ideas that they appropriated. As Loren Kajikawa points out, however, hip-hop has retained its visible and cultural blackness despite successfully crossing over into the mainstream popular culture. As such, blackness remains an important signifier of authenticity within the genre, and white rappers must negotiate their whiteness in relation to this norm. Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 1, hip-hop has also retained a black


masculine, male-gendered identity, and women must similarly navigate the gender expectations of the genre. White women rappers are in the particular position of being outsiders (to borrow Young’s term) by virtue of both their race and gender, and thus must navigate these intersectional identities in relation to hip-hop’s black masculinity. Nitasha Tamar Sharma complicates our understanding of appropriation by arguing that there are “dual flows” of power and appropriation: “‘appropriation as othering’ (by which one appropriates in order to reaffirm the distance between racial groups) and ‘appropriation as identification’ (through which borrowing practices signal a bridging across differences.”¹⁴ In this chapter, I argue that many white women rappers problematically engage in cultural appropriation as othering in order to access authenticity, legitimacy, and legibility in hip-hop.

In the following chapter I explore some instances of cultural appropriation enacted by white female rappers Iggy Azalea, Kreyshawn, Lil Debbie, and V-Nasty, the latter three being former members of the now defunct White Girl Mob. I focus on two strategies they frequently use to they position themselves in relation to blackness: appropriating black cultural signifiers, including aspects of appearance and language, and the literal use of black bodies to demonstrate their close proximity to blackness. In negotiating the intersections of their race and gender, these rappers often align themselves with the black masculinity that has typified mainstream hip-hop, either by forging real or imagined relationships with black men or by engaging with a politics of respectability that is particularly detrimental to black women. Rather than building

alliances with black women rappers such as Nicki Minaj, who must also assert their legitimacy in the male-dominated genre, these white women rappers’ appropriation of black culture situates them as directly oppositional to black women.

Respectability Politics and Ratchet Culture

One of the ways in which white women rappers benefit from white privilege is that, while they do have to negotiate expectations placed on them by a patriarchal culture, they are not beholden to the same standards of respectability that are frequently imposed on black women. The politics of respectability, a term first coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, describes the discourse surrounding the belief that racial oppression can be eliminated if members of a marginalized group, especially poor black people, adhere to the values and moral expressions of the dominant (white, upper-middle class) culture. It is rooted in post-civil war notions of racial uplift and places the burden of the struggle for equality firmly on the shoulders of the oppressed. In an article for Dissent Magazine, professor of political science Fredrick C. Harris writes:

What started as a philosophy promulgated by black elites to “uplift the race” by correcting the “bad” traits of the black poor has now evolved into one of the hallmarks of black politics in the age of Obama, a governing philosophy that centers on managing the behavior of black people left behind in a society touted as being full of opportunity. In an era marked by rising inequality and declining economic mobility for most Americans – but particularly for black Americans – the twenty-first-century version of the politics of respectability works to accommodate neoliberalism. The virtues of self-care and self-correction are framed as strategies to lift the

---

black poor out of their condition by preparing them for the market economy.\textsuperscript{16}

In the twentieth-first century, respectability politics frequently appears, as Harris notes, in calls for black youth to abandon the style of sagging pants and hoodie sweatshirts with their hoods up; school administrators sending black students home for wearing their hair in dreadlocks or Afro styles that violate white-centric dress codes; and encouraging black people to work hard to achieve economic success without any accompanying discussion of the structural barriers of systemic and institutionalized racism.

The politics of respectability are particularly pertinent to black women. In a review of recent scholarship that highlights the relationship between black women and respectability politics throughout the twentieth century, Paisley Harris writes:

Respectability was part of “uplift politics,” and had two audiences: African Americans, who were encouraged to be respectable, and white people, who needed to be shown that African Americans could be respectable. African American women were particularly likely to use respectability and to be judged by it. Moreover, African American women symbolized, even embodied, this concept. Respectability became an issue at the juncture of public and private. It thus became increasingly important as both black and white women entered public spaces.\textsuperscript{17}

Because respectability was tied to issues such as temperance, polite public behavior, and sexual purity, black women were often both the main arbiters of respectability politics and the people on whom the onus of respectability was, and continues to be, most frequently placed.


\textsuperscript{17} Paisley Harris, “Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women’s History and Black Feminism,” in Journal of Women’s History Vol. 15 No. 1 (Spring 2003), 212-220; 213.
Respectability politics, as Harris notes, is as much about class as it is about race, and it serves to reify class status within the African American community. She writes:

The prevailing interpretation suggests that the politics of respectability [of the Progressive Era] undermined the rigidly scientific nature of racial categories, but generally tended to reinforce status distinctions within the African American community. These distinctions were about class, but they were defined primarily by behavioral, not economic, terms. By linking worthiness for respect to sexual propriety, behavioral decorum, and neatness, respectability served a gatekeeping function, establishing a behavioral “entrance fee,” to the right to respect and the right to full citizenship.\(^{18}\)

Respectability politics continue to function as both a self-policing mechanism within communities of color and as a gatekeeping method by which white people and white institutions exclude racial others. It also continues to link behavioral practices to racial identity and class status, stratifying these practices into those that are considered good, appropriate, and respectable, and those that are not.

Proponents of respectability politics believe that these practices are the antidote to the “culture of poverty”. This term was first coined by Oscar Lewis to explain the values and behaviors that he observed in poor families living in rural Mexico and described as reactions to poverty, but, as S. Craig Watkins explains, the term has since been used to argue the opposite: that “the culture and behavior of the poor produce social and economic inequality.”\(^{19}\) As Watkins points out, this interpretation of Lewis’ work identifies a cultural deficiency as the source of poverty among non-white communities,

---

\(^{18}\) Harris, 213.

allowing politicians and policy makers to invoke cultural arguments rather than explicitly racial ones while still enabling racist systems and structures. Watkins writes:

The crisis of inner cities, it is argued, is the direct result of a deviant lifestyle and culture that are passed on intergenerationally, thus failing to equip poverty-stricken children with the proper values and behavioral modes – a strong work ethic, delayed gratification, thrift, and sexual restraint – that promote social and economic mobility. . . This critique of urban social and economic blight represents a distinct shift from biological notions of racial inferiority to a logic that focuses on black culture in order to explain social and economic inequality.20

Watkins goes on to suggest that hip-hop emerged in part as youth of color resistance to both respectability politics and the culture of poverty thesis, in that it not only “eschews both the comportment of social acceptability and the racial chic of neo-black nationalist politics” but that it is “representative of working-class definitions of blackness that contest bourgeois-inflected definitions.”21

Hip-hop artists’ engagements with concepts of ratchetness, or ratchet culture is one manifestation of the tension between respectability politics and resistance to those discourses. “Ratchet culture,” as defined by feministing.com contributor Sesali Bowen, refers to the “linguistic, stylistic, and cultural practices . . . of poor people – specifically poor people of color, and more specifically women of color.”22 It includes cultural practices and products that emerged in these communities that have been appropriated by white people (often with humorous intentions), such as gold teeth, clothing made from sports jerseys (including dresses, swimsuits, and leotards), certain hair styles (such as

20 Watkins, Representing, 41.
21 Ibid., 66.
wearing a hair wrap out in public), styles of dance (like twerking), and a general attitude that is considered a tough response to the difficulties of growing up in an impoverished area.

Contrary to popular mythology, the term “ratchet” is not derived from the word “wretched.” As John Ortved chronicled in *New York Magazine*, ratchet emerged from the Cedar Grove neighborhood of Shreveport, Louisiana, where the term was first published as a song lyric in local rapper Anthony Mandigo’s 1999 release “Do the Ratchet” on the album *Ratchet Fight in the Ghetto*. The song was re-recorded in 2004 with Lil Boosie and Untamed Mayne, and this version, along with an accompanying dance featuring rotating arms with pointed elbows (a motion reminiscent of that of a ratchet or socket wrench), became popular throughout the south, to such an extent that the term caught the attention of well-known artists such as Lil Wayne and T.I. In the liner notes for that CD, producer Punk Dawg defined ratchet as “n., pron., v, adv., 1. To be ghetto, real, gutter, nasty. 2. It’s whatever, bout it, etc.” Originally, then, the term had both positive and negative connotations. However, it always relied on the authenticity of place, whether that place was the poor and working class neighborhoods of Shreveport, or, more generally, the real and imagined impoverished black neighborhoods of the United States. To be from such a place, and thus to lack the refined sensibilities of the white middle and upper classes, was to be ratchet.

---

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
The term quickly took on a gendered connotation, however, as it came to signify poor, urban black women who “carry outdated flip phones, go clubbing while pregnant, and try to punch other women in the face.”26 This archetype is exemplified by Emmanuel and Philip Hudson’s 2012 parody song and accompanying video, “Ratchet Girl Anthem.” In it, the brothers play two women (one of whom is pregnant), decked out with colorful hair, tightly-fitting clothes, and large gold hoop earrings, who spend a night at a club partying, taking pictures on their phones, discussing recent purchases made with their boyfriends’ money, and starting fights with other women (figure 2.1). In the chorus the two women refer to other women who are dressed or behave inappropriately as ratchet, when the Hudson brothers are clearly using their characters to represent the epitome of that term. Likewise, LL Cool J’s 2012 single, “Ratchet,” describes his relationship with a ratchet woman who is only after his money. “Can I have some cash?” a woman sweetly asks, to which Cool J responds, “It’s time to get rid of your ratchet ass.”

---

26 Ortved.
In these examples male artists use ratchet to express disdain for a certain kind of black woman: those who fail at respectability. Some black women artists have also used the term as, at best, a critique and, at worst, as a derogatory slur. For example, in early 2015 Tink, a young, up-and-coming rapper from Chicago, released her track “Ratchet Commandments” (a play on The Notorious B.I.G.’s “Ten Crack Commandments,” which first came out in 1997, just two years after she was born). In it, she “preaches” to other women whose actions exhibit questionable morals, proclaiming in the first verse, “Some of y’all ratchet, imma write you hoes a manual.” In the second half of each verse, she offers four rules, each framed by a chorus of women, reminiscent of a gospel choir, singing, “Thou shalt not…” In the first verse she raps:

(Thou shalt not) fuck up on a nigga
When you know he got a missus, you are labeled side bitches
(Thou shalt not) lie upon the Bible
How you looking for a title when you sleeping with his rivals?
(Thou shalt not) put trust in these men
These niggas are now bitches, quit acting so feminine
(Thou shalt not) pacify the truth
If you know your pussy loose, you a ho, so do better

By invoking sonic and textual references to the black church, which has historically been one of the most prominent proponents of respectability politics, Tink positions herself as a moral authority over the women (and, in one homophobic and femmephobic line, men) that she describes as ratchet. Through describing what behaviors women should avoid in her proclamations, she also defines ratchet as the constellation of these inappropriate behaviors and attitudes. Like the Hudson brothers and LL Cool J, she uses ratchet as an insult that serves to police the behavior of black women as well as black men who act like women.

As several black women scholars point out, however, black women can also use ratchetness to resist the respectability politics and gender policing that the above examples highlight. Hip-hop scholar Regina Bradley writes that while an antebellum aesthetic of respectability . . . continues to dictate southern women . . . an oppositional parallel for black women excluded from this niche of finer womanhood is the highly visible and commodified form of expression that we have come to recognize as (the) ratchet. . . ratchetness is an intervention of sliding contemporary politics of respectability currently in place against women (of color).

Similarly, Brittney Cooper writes:

---

27 See Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent.
. . . when I see the “rabid” nature of respectability politics that makes grown-ass women feel justified in referring to other sisters hustling trying to make it as “brood mares” I am reminded that I don’t ever wanna be down with the myopia and pathology of the respectability racket either! It is so absolutely clear that this respectability shit IS.NOT. working, no matter how much we remix it. The refusal to see that requires what I like to call indignant ignorance, and frankly ain’t nobody got time for that! On the other hand . . . ratchetness gives me pause, every single time! It’s meant to. Ratchet acts are meant to be so over-the-top and outrageous that they catch your attention and exceed the bounds of acceptable saying.29

While Cooper uses examples from television and music to explore how respectability is often pitted against ratchetness as the only alternative, she also infuses her discussion with personal experiences to complicate the ways in which she, like Bradley, navigates these concepts in terms of both her upbringing and her career as an academic. Cooper cites the way in which she experienced her own family, which consisted of her single mother, herself, cousins, and members of her step-family, as alternative in light of the normalized model of the nuclear family. She finds herself both acknowledging a potential reality show featuring rapper Shawty Lo, his 11 children, and his 10 “baby mamas” as another alternative model in its ratchetness, and shunning it for the ways in which it reinforces patriarchal values. She writes, “Ratchetness emerges . . . as a kind of habitus through which (some) working-class folks and folks with working class roots interact with every aspect of their lives from entertainment to family to government.”30 Thus while Cooper admits that ratchetness may have limits that preclude it from being a revolutionary movement, in light of the failures and dangers of respectability politics, she

30 Cooper, “(Un)Clutching My Mothers’s Pearls.”
suggests that it is one strategy that some working-class black folks, especially women, use to negotiate the patriarchal assumptions placed upon them.31

Both Cooper and Bradley apply this view of ratchetness to some of Beyoncé’s recent performances and visual images. In March 2013 Beyoncé released “Bow Down/I Been On” on SoundCloud, an online audio platform, along with a photo of her as a young girl wearing a pageant sash and tiara and surrounded by trophies, a clear marker of her past and present successes. This track later became the basis of “***Flawless,” one of the breakout hits of her surprise 2013 self-titled visual album, Beyoncé. “Bow Down/I Been On,” like “***Flawless” a few months later, caused some controversy because while many fans appreciated the departure from her typical sound to a grittier one, others objected to the aggressive lyrics in which Beyoncé continuously commands bitches to “bow down.” At its core, “Bow Down” is a boast rap in which Beyoncé pays homage to her hometown of Houston, Texas and makes sonic and textual references to the Dirty South.

One such sonic reference includes her use of a trap beat. Trap music refers to a genre of rap that originated in the American South in the early 2000s whose lyrics reference illegal drug economies and other elements of street culture. Producers and DJs who pioneered this genre, including Shawty Redd, provided tracks that prominently featured Roland 808 drum beats with a heavy kick drum and a fast double- or triple-time high-hat that created what is often described as a dark or menacing feel that frames the

31 Cooper, “(Un)Clutching My Mothers’s Pearls.”
underworld-style lyrics.\textsuperscript{32} The term “trap” also refers to a place, either the trap house where drugs are sold or the impoverished neighborhood in which these houses are found, both of which can be difficult to leave due to the cyclic nature of poverty. Thus this sonic marker brings the track into the ratchet realm.

Over this style of beat, Beyoncé snarls:

I know when you were little girls  
You dreamt of being in my world  
Don’t forget it, don’t forget it  
Respect that, bow down bitches  
I took some time to live my life  
But don’t think I’m just his little wife  
Don’t get it twisted, get it twisted,  
This my shit, bow down bitches

Bradley argues that, “Beyoncé broaches a type of ‘sonic’ ratchet in ‘Bow Down,’ using sound to signify not only her southern ‘ruts’ (roots) but utilize an aesthetic that allows her to vindicate her southern black womanhood while sustaining her (visual) global image.”\textsuperscript{33}

While acknowledging the problematic nature of referring to other women as bitches and demanding that they bow down, Bradley suggests that Beyoncé successfully uses a ratchet mode to navigate between her middle-class upbringing (and upper-class reality) and the black working-class sensibility (what fans often refer to as “realness”) of hip-hop. What Bradley refers to as Beyoncé’s sonic ratchetness is one of the strategies that the artist uses to negotiate her black female pop-star identity within hip-hop’s normative black masculine narratives.


\textsuperscript{33}Bradley, “I Been On (Ratchet).”
When Beyoncé was released in December 2013, it featured the reworked version of “Bow Down/I Been On,” which had been retitled “***Flawless.” In this new version, Beyoncé featured a sample of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TedX talk, “We should all be feminists.” “***Flawless” juxtaposes, or rather, combines lyrics such as those above with Adichie’s political discourse, including the following definition:

“Feminist: A person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.” While some felt the song represented a contradiction in terms, arguing that calling other women bitches is in fact the antithesis of a feminist act, others embraced the assertive track as a musical expression of the complexities of intersectional feminism.34

Beyoncé herself said of the song:

I went into the studio, I had a chant in my head, it was aggressive, it was angry, it wasn’t the Beyoncé that wakes up every morning. . . Imagine the person that hates you. Imagine a person that doesn’t believe in you. And look in the mirror and say, “Bow down, bitch” and I guarantee you feel gangsta.35

This statement suggests that Beyoncé uses ratchetness to push back against both those who are critical of her career as well as the confines of being a black woman artist in a


white supremacist, patriarchal culture. Feminists who embrace this sentiment recognize that Beyoncé’s words could speak to larger institutionalized systems: many women can imagine waking up in a world that does not believe in them, surrounded by systemic sexism, because this is often their reality. Rather than imagining a person who hates them, women can respond with anger and attitude to the cultural sexism that imposes limitations on them. Ratchet becomes a tool of resistance, here employed musically as what Cooper calls “a kind of joy and celebration, that the rush to respectability simply doesn’t allow.”

This expression of resistance is an example of what Cooper elsewhere refers to as “ratchet feminism.” In an online post about the reality television show “Love and Hip Hop Atlanta,” Cooper writes of ratchet feminism:

It doesn’t matter if the sisters are loud, uncouth, ‘ghetto,’ ‘hood rich’ or struggling; if they call out sexism and challenge its operation in their lives, then they’re down for the cause. To me, this is the kind of feminism that matters most. Our ad nauseum academic stunting can’t save us when shit gets real. Feminism that works is the only feminism I believe in. And as long as Hip-Hop culture perpetuates Black male emotional immaturity, the women in the culture can and must coopt and appropriate its terms in ways that facilitate survival. So #letsgetratchet!

Ratchetness, therefore, can be a mode of expression that pushes against the racial, class, and gender expectations of respectability for black women. Ratchet acts and behaviors do not necessarily preclude feminist ones and, as Cooper and Bradley argue, can actually be used to enact a feminist politics that is rooted in lived experiences.

---

36 Cooper, “(Un)Clutching My Mother’s Pearls.”
38 Cooper, “Ratchet Feminism.”
realities rather than academic theorizing. Ratchet can be reclaimed from the men and women who would use it to police black women and used instead as a powerful form of resistance.

White Girl Mob and Ratchet Culture

The use of ratchet as a tool of resistance, however, requires first-hand lived experiences if not of class disparity, then at least of racial difference. As Bowen and Cooper point out, some individuals can move more freely in and out of ratchet than others, and thus ratchetness is not a mode of expression that anyone can claim. Bowen writes:

Folks with certain privilege are willing and able to float in and out of ratchet at will. The term ratchet became popular for me when I was still in undergrad about three years ago. All of us young, black scholars (constantly trying to justify the black side of the coin or the scholar side, as if they are polar opposites) were enamored with this term as a way to distinguish when we were or were not on the “right side” of the respectability table. When it was time to party we would say, “Let’s get ratchet!” But when I would go check my mail with my hair still wrapped in a scarf or was overheard talking to my friends from “back home” in our local dialect, I was just ratchet . . . I know that for me and many of my friends, the use of the term ratchet was a constant navigation of our identities as young, sexual, inner city hood Chicago-raised, black girls and privileged, college educated, Western women. I can’t stress enough that pop culture trends like twerking, “ain't nobody got time for that,” or even just using the word ratchet to define the wild things that happened at last night’s party are all rooted in someone’s lived experience.39

Bowen suggests that, despite the ways in which she may conform to certain modes of “respectability” (in this case primarily through her participation in higher education), as a

39 Bowen, “Let’s Get Ratchet!”
black woman she can never fully move out of ratchetness, regardless of any shifts in her socio-economic status. Others, from celebrities to college co-eds, who are white and thus not beholden to the same demands of respectability in the first place, adopt the term to describe a temporary state or series of uncouth acts that fall under the purview of “getting ratchet.” These actors are able to leave ratchet behind when the party is over primarily because their ratchetness does not come from lived experiences. Rather, white people perform ratchetness as a way to engage in behaviors and acts that are far from respectable and, in white supremacist American culture in which race and class are often co-constructed, are associated with blackness.

Many white women rappers have utilized a strategy of performance that includes this problematic appropriation of ratchetness. Rather than using ratchet as an expression of resistance, rappers such as the former members of the White Girl Mob, including Kreayshawn, Lil Debbie, and V-Nasty, as well as mainstream rapper Iggy Azalea employ ratchet as a means of projecting hip-hop authenticity. Their performances of blackness attempt to confirm the culture of poverty thesis and continue to associate non-respectable behaviors with the black urban poor and working class. White people who embrace the term “ratchet,” especially in the context of hip-hop performance, frequently do so as a way to either demean the behaviors of black women or, as Bowen points out, as a way to describe their own indulgence in non-respectable behaviors.

The White Girl Mob offers a clear example of white women MCs who use ratchetness to both disavow allegiances with black women and to contextualize their non-respectability. A now defunct crew comprised of white women rappers Lil Debby, V-
Nasty, and their leader MC Kreayshawn, the Oakland-based group first appeared in the national spotlight in the summer of 2011 when Kreayshawn released a video for “Gucci Gucci” on *YouTube*. The video received over a million “hits,” or views, and became a viral sensation. The song, as well as its accompanying video, can best be described as white hipster meets G-funk: Kreayshawn raps that because “basic bitches” wear designer brands such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Fendi, and Prada, she “doesn’t even bother” over a beat featuring the slowed-down, synthesized melodic content that has come to typify West Coast rap. Like the fictional women in the Hudson brothers’ sketch, she outlines the ratchetness of other women, rapping, “Bitch you ain’t no Barbie I see you work at Arby’s/ Number 2, super-sized and hurry up I’m starving.” At the same time, however, Kreayshawn also boasts about consuming and selling drugs, and participating in other illicit behavior:

```
Call me if you need a fix, call me if you need a boost
See them other chickenheads? They don’t never leave the coop
I’m in the coupe cruising, I got the stolen plates
Serving all the fiends over there by the Golden Gate Bridge, I’m colder than the fridge and the freezer
I’m snatching all your bitches at my leisure
```

This final line is delivered out of time, adding a touch of word painting as she draws out “leisure” and indicating that she has all the time in the world to engage in activities outside of holding down a regular job, including engaging in the illegal drug trade and partying.

In “Gucci Gucci” we see the typical paradox of ratchetness: a woman remarks on her superiority over other women who she deems ratchet (in this case using the term “chickenhead,” an older African American Vernacular English (AAVE) term for a
woman who uses her feminine sexual appeal or even sexual favors to win over men who provide them with cash and material goods, while she herself displays traits of ratchetness. She smokes Swisher blunts, wears large gold hoop earrings and snapbacks, drinks champagne out of the bottle, and parties late into the night. In what is both a display of disdain for rachets or basic bitches (which, given the racial and gendered implications of these terms, we can surmise to mean black women in particular) as well as an acknowledgement that she is a white woman performing a certain mode of blackness, she employs numerous black men, including fellow Bay Area residents Jasper Dolphin, Taco Bennett, and Left Brain of the hip-hop collective Odd Future, who silently appear in her video and thus serve to authenticate her performance and provide legitimacy to her budding rap career (figure 2.2). They dance with her and her White Girl Mob crewmate, Lil Debbie, in the streets, party with her at house parties, drive her around (in cars with stolen plates, if we follow the lyrics), and pass her a blunt, but they are never seen rapping. In contrast, all of the women who appear in the video are white. Kreayshawn uses black men to legitimize her claims to black culture, but black women are rendered invisible.

40 For more on discourses around “chickenheads” in black communities, see Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home To Roost*. 
In “Rich Whore,” another track she released online in 2011 before her major-label record deal, Kreayshawn similarly critiques the behaviors of other women, but uses class difference to position herself as a product of Oakland’s street life. Over a trap beat, Kreayshawn opens by referencing Gucci Mane, the Atlanta rapper who helped bring southern trap music into the mainstream with his 2005 debut studio album, *Trap House*, whose title track features common trap characteristics including double-time beats typically made on a Roland TR-808 drum machine; dense, menacing instrumentals; and lyrics that illustrate aspects of street life such as drug dealing and violence. In her contribution to the genre, Kreayshawn describes “rich whores” who buy and consume powder cocaine, a drug that is generally associated with wealthy, white drug users; until recently, the disparity between the amount of powder cocaine a user needed to posses in order to be charged with a felony crime was one hundred times that of crack cocaine users (in 2010 that disparity was lessened to 18-1, a ratio that still favors white drug
users). Despite their apparent wealth, these women wear secondhand clothes, attend design school, and try unsuccessfully to pass themselves as hardened by street life:

What up, bitch? I heard you go to FIDM [Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising]
What up, bitch? I see you dancin’ with no rhythm
What up, bitch? I know you like that gangsta rap
[But] You’d probably piss your pants if you ever seen the trap

In contrast, Kreayshawn smokes Swisher blunts (as she also states in “Gucci Gucci”), did not go to school, and yet hustled her way to financial success. By invoking the trap both sonically and lyrically, she attempts to lay claim to both a rap genre and the street life from which it emerged. The song is coded in such a way that implies that the “rich whores” to which she refers are wealthy white women, and yet she places herself in opposition to that identity by emphasizing her own working class background. Because ratchetness relies on the co-constructions of blackness and poverty, Kreayshawn uses an invocation of economic marginalization to displace her own whiteness and align herself with black hip-hop culture.

Indeed, the title of Kreayshawn’s now-defunct crew, White Girl Mob, seems to function as a physical descriptor alone, as all three members perform a similar mode of blackness that reinforces the co-constructions of blackness and poverty. Furthermore, their attempts to access authenticity by aligning themselves with hip-hop’s black masculinity further marginalizes black women. One of the crew’s most obvious

---

appropriations of ratchetness is Lil Debbie’s conspicuously titled track, “Ratchets,” and it is this song that most clearly delineates White Girl Mob members’ superiority over their imagined black female Other. In the hook, Debbie raps:

I got bitches, you got bitches
Tell them bitches come over
If they ratchet, let’s get ratchet
Pick ’em up in that Rover
Ratchets in my living room ’til 6 in the morn’
And when I finish up this weed, man I’m sending them home

In the video, Debbie raps these lines with a flock of black women behind her, dressed in leotards advertising Budweiser beer (in fashion similar to the dress worn by one of the Hudson brothers in their “Ratchet Girl Anthem” video) and white high heels, twerking and performing other dance moves behind and around the white rapper. These women not only provide a visual image of the ratchets about whom Debbie raps, but they also serve as unnamed entourage members and backup dancers, there only to support the rapper.

In addition to the use of black women’s bodies as props in the video, Debbie’s lyrics further insinuate that black women are disposable playthings that she keeps around her when it is time to party, but dismisses the next day. Not only does she demonstrate Bowen’s point that some individuals can move freely in and out of ratchetness, choosing to “get ratchet” when it is time to party but moving out of ratchet when the party stops, she also exercises control over that which is ratchet around her. She raps in the second verse:

Get high with these ratchet bitches
I got that Range Rover
Dark tint, I might add some switches
That means I’m balling and these ratchets fronting like they know me
Only if I had a dick, yo they could fucking blow me
Like Kreayshawn, Debbie aligns herself with not with black women, but with male and masculine elements of hip-hop culture. Unlike Nicki Minaj, who uses phallic imagery as a queer tool to resist male dominance in the genre, Debbie claims this imagery as a way to further subjugate black women. At the same time, the presence of these women authenticates her assertions that she knows how to get ratchet by demonstrating her proximity to black bodies and thus black life.

Gleaning authenticity through proximity to blackness has been an important strategy in how the members of the White Girl Mob have positioned themselves as legible hip-hop subjects. Drawing on ways in which blackness and poverty are often problematically co-constructed, as in the concept of ratchetness, the various members often substitute class- and place-related identities for acknowledged racial ones. For example, by featuring Odd Future members and showing locations around Oakland in the “Gucci Gucci” video, Kreayshawn locates herself in a city known for having both a large black population and high rates of poverty, both of which are considered authenticating factors in hip-hop. White Girl Mob members use class as a substitute for race, echoing the culture of poverty thesis and suggesting that despite their white identities they have unfettered access to black culture.

Certainly this was the group’s response to critics who expressed disapproval over crew member V-Nasty’s regular use of the word “nigger” and its derivatives (“nigga,” etc.) in her music. V-Nasty, who of the three white women has adopted the most (black)

---

masculine forms of gender presentation, a trait especially evident in her dress (baggy pants, gold “grills” on her teeth, snapback hats, sneakers, etc.) and speech mannerisms, has begrudgingly admitted that she now avoids the word in her raps, but her remorse seems to be for the possibly negative effect it had on her career, not from a genuine sense of regret.\(^{43}\) Kreayshawn herself has a history of using the n-word on social media, but in response to the controversy surrounding V-Nasty, she claims that she does not use it or support its use.\(^{44}\) Music journalist Brandon Soderberg points out that in an attempt to mitigate the damage caused by criticism over V-Nasty’s use of the n-word, Kreayshawn publically posted a video on YouTube in which she stated:

\[
[V\text{-Nasty}] \text{ says it [the n-word] all the time and that’s just because she grew up all different. Like she goes in and out of jail for armed robbery all the time and like, you know, her mom calls her that.} \quad ^{45}
\]

The implication of this statement, of course, is that growing up “all different” means growing up in unusual circumstances for a white woman. It suggests that V-Nasty was raised in an underprivileged, predominantly black neighborhood and engaged in criminal acts that led to her spending time in prison, a situation commonly associated with

\(^{43}\) V-Nasty, “V-Nasty TELLS ALL!! EXCLUSIVE GODER INTERVIEW 05-05-2013,” interview with GODER Magazine, posted on youtube.com on May 8, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aMIT6qck0o, accessed July 15, 2015. V-Nasty has continued to use the word in her music, which has lead some critics, such as rapper Nocando, to believe she uses the word for the entertainment hype it elicits (Nocando, quoted in Westhoff, “Which White Entertainers have a ‘Hood Pass’ to Say the N-Word?”).

\(^{44}\) Brandon Soderberg, “Kreayshawn’s White Girl Mob & The N-Word.”

\(^{45}\) Kreayshawn, YouTube video post that is now unavailable, cited in Soderberg, “Kreayshawn’s White Girl Mob & The N-Word.”
growing up in an impoverished black community.\textsuperscript{46} It problematically collapses race, class, and place into one imagined space, the “black ghetto.” As Craig S. Watkins argues, the black ghetto in popular culture serves as a fiercely charged location of ideological struggle as “competing cultural producers struggle to assign [it] meaning,” thus producing and re-inscribing what he refers to as the “ghettocentric imagination.”\textsuperscript{47} Here, the former members of the White Girl Mob invoke the ghettocentric imagination, in which blackness always exists in the impoverished ghetto, to position themselves as worthy arbiters of black urban culture in order to deny allegations of cultural appropriation and racism. They rely on the co-construction of blackness and poverty, using evidence of one (poverty) to justify their performance of and access to the other (blackness).

The narrative that White Girl Mob members used to defend V-Nasty is reminiscent of the struggle trope, a common narrative found in hip-hop. In this narrative, the rapper positions him- or herself (but typically himself) as a hero who struggled throughout his or her childhood to overcome poverty, violence, drug abuse and/or other associations with the illegal drug trade, and racism, rose out of the ghetto and life on the streets through hard work (the “hustle”) to become a successful and wealthy artist who nevertheless refuses to distance him- or herself from his or her roots. While Kreayshawn and V-Nasty did grow up in or near predominantly black neighborhoods (Lil Debbie hails from the largely white city of Albany, California) and all three rappers have an affinity for hip-hop culture and the communities from which it grows, their defense both

\textsuperscript{46} For more on the impact of mass incarceration on black communities, see Alexander, \textit{The New Jim Crow}.

\textsuperscript{47} Craig S. Watkins, \textit{Representing}, 197-8.
essentializes certain aspects of black culture as more black or real than others and attempts to erase the fact of their racial identities. To claim that a white rapper has access to the n-word because of their proximity to it during their youth and in their everyday lives negates the social and historical context from which the word emerges and the racial implications it continues to hold. V-Nasty’s use of the term, combined with her and her fellow former White Girl Mob members’ appropriation of aspects of black culture, express their lack of awareness or consideration of the power dynamics their whiteness entails.

The members of the now-defunct White Girl Mob have argued that their experiences growing up in the rough (read: black and poor) neighborhoods of Oakland have influenced their language and style of dress, and therefore justify their performances of blackness. While this approach does follow other authenticating narratives found in hip-hop, especially those of West Coast rappers (see for example, Kendrick Lamar’s recent rise to fame following his 2012 studio album, *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*, in which he chronicles some of his experiences growing up in Compton, California), it neglects to take into account the differences between growing up white in Oakland and growing up black in the same city or in nearby places. For example, a recent study funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that, “even comparing black and white children raised in [economically] similar families, black children typically have lower incomes as adults” and that “blacks continue to be much less likely than whites to rise out of the bottom of
the income distribution,” regardless of the neighborhoods in which they grew up.\textsuperscript{48} Furthermore, using class to justify performances of blackness characterizes the experiences of drug use, crime, and poverty as essentially black, and suggests that these white women who grew up in proximity to blackness have open access to cultural signifiers of blackness. In contrast to the views of poor black communities held by proponents of the culture of poverty thesis, however, the behavior of these white artists are not seen as indicative of all white people or white culture; as Bowen suggests, they can choose to perform ratchetness, but can move back into the realm of respectability if and when they so choose.\textsuperscript{49} Their use of ratchet culture, as they both embody and critique it, perpetuates a schism between white and black women, in which these white women exploit and distort black women’s culture and labor for their own gain.

“White Chick On That [Tu]Pac Shit”: Iggy Azalea

As the experiences of the former members of the Oakland-based White Girl Mob demonstrate, place plays an important role in both the creation and reception of hip-hop, not only in terms region-specific styles (such as West Coast G-funk, or New Orleans bounce), but also as the foundation of self-authenticating narratives. While Kreayshawn


\textsuperscript{49} As Peggy McIntosh points out in her well-known article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” many examples of white privilege include the ability to act in any way without others looking on those actions as indicative of the flaws of the entire white race; for example, she writes, “I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.” (Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in \textit{Peace and Freedom Magazine} (July-August 1989), 10-12.
and her now-disbanded crew used place as a way to support their performances of blackness, the white, Australian-born rapper Iggy Azalea cannot use that same defense. Instead, she relies on a non-racially specific version of the aforementioned struggle narrative. In her version, the struggle is a rise from poverty and the challenges of immigrating to a new country in search of better economic opportunities, in addition to trying to “make it” in the tough rap music business. However, Azalea also uses black cultural features to authenticate her hip-hop performance, including rapping in AAVE, a vernacular that, given her Australian upbringing, has been intentionally cultivated and that many see as akin to verbal blackface. Additionally, Azalea employs black bodies as authenticating tools in her songs and especially in her music videos, using people to provide evidence of her proximity to blackness. While she relies less heavily on markers of ratchet culture in her performance of blackness than Kreayshawn, Lil Debbie, or V-Nasty, she similarly presents herself as an insider to black and hip-hop cultures while refusing to meaningfully acknowledge her racial difference.

Perhaps the clearest example of this strategy in practice can be seen in her 2014 song, “Work.” The track opens with Azalea not so much rapping as rhythmically speaking over a series of sustained chords without any drums or other beats. She states:

---


51 For example, as I explore in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, Macklemore acknowledges his racial identity and the privileges that entails in several of his raps as well as in interviews and other forms of public address. As Brittney Cooper points out, “one does not need to mimic blackness in order to be good at [rap music]. Ask the Beastie Boys, Eminem, or Macklemore” (Cooper, “Iggy Azalea’s post-racial mess”).
Walk a mile in these Louboutins
But they don’t wear these shits where I’m from
I’m not hatin’, I’m just tellin’ you
I’m tryna let you know what the fuck that I’ve been through

Azalea invokes language that is culturally coded as black as she uses this introductory narrative to frame “Work” as a tale about her personal struggle and ultimate triumph. We learn from the first two lines alone that Azalea is rich and successful, as evident in her reference to expensive designer shoes, but that she wasn’t born into wealth. The music video opens with a scene of Azalea walking in a pair of the iconic, red-bottomed stilettoes down a deserted road presumably in rural Australia.

Through the course of the song and in its accompanying video, Azalea describes scrubbing floors to save up enough money for a plane ticket to the United States, where she “hustled” (here used not necessarily to imply illegal business activities but rather working hard to move ahead) in the music business, facing a few setbacks before experiencing her hard-won success. The only time she invokes her own race, however, is to imply that her whiteness made it more difficult for her to establish her hip-hop career.

She raps:

White chick on that [Tu]Pac shit
My passion was ironic
And my dreams were uncommon
Guess I gone crazy, first deal changed me
Robbed blind, basically raped me
Rose through the bullshit like a matador
Just made me madder and adamant to get at ’em and even the score
So, I went harder
Studied the Carters [Jay Z & Beyoncé] till a deal was offered

As in Beyoncé’s “***Flawless,” “Work” invokes a working-class sensibility, here by illustrating Azalea’s own hustle narrative. Both tracks present a female perspective in
which the artists respond to critics by demanding that they tell their own stories. Unlike
the Houston native that she cites, however, Azalea establishes her whiteness as the key
barrier to her success, noting that she does not fit the typical rapper profile and as a result
was treated unfairly in her early business interactions. She also explains her that her
strategy in overcoming this perceived adversity was to study accomplished black
performers, notably hip-hop’s most successful couple, Jay Z and Beyoncé, and implies
that she incorporated their performances strategies into her own, which ultimately led to
her success. She openly states in this track that she studied black performers and
emulated them in order to move her career forward; that is, she incorporated a
performance of blackness in order to demonstrate her authenticity and understanding of
the genre.

Like Minaj, Azalea navigates the masculine expectations placed upon rappers
with her own identity as a woman, and she similarly presents herself as both feminine and
hardened, wearing tight, revealing clothing while also bragging about her rapping skills
and determination. She further suggests that prior to her involvement with the hip-hop
music industry, she had an innate innocence that the industry took from her, and she
troublingly employs the term “raped” to describe a non-physical interaction with her
former record label. This analogy is problematic because it uses the term “rape” to
describe something that by definition was not a rape, and thus undermines the seriousness
of sexual assault. This lyric, combined with her line about innocence creates a narrative
that is particular to a female rapper’s perspective: rarely do male rappers allow
themselves to appear to have been vulnerable at any point in their career, even in a
retrospective statement such as Azalea’s. She indicates that a result of her earliest forays into the rap industry was to become more hardened, much like her male colleagues, in order to be successful alongside them.

In navigating the rap world as a white woman MC, however, Azalea makes the unfortunately common mistake of using black people to authenticate her performance of blackness. In “Work,” this exploitation is evident not only in her use of AAVE, but also in the presence of black women as visual props in her video. In several scenes, we see Azalea surrounded by black women twerking (figure 2.3). While Azalea herself does dance provocatively, including in one scene where she gives a man a lap dance before stealing his keys from his belt and escaping with her (black women) friends in his car, she is afforded a narrative that explains the few camera shots on her shaking back side, while her black back-up dancers are not. We barely even see these women’s faces; instead the camera focuses on their butts as they twerk, with their faces either facing away from us or just out of the frame. The presence of black women sidekicks and dancers, like the presence of the black women in Lil Debbie’s “Ratchets,” provides visual evidence for Azalea’s proximity to blackness and, in tandem with the aforementioned sonic elements, suggests that she is enacting an authentic black experience.
The presence of twerking black bodies as decorative objects surrounding Azalea in the “Work” video, which was released in 2013, was also a precursor to the aforementioned “The Year of the Booty” fad. However, it was Azalea’s appearance on the remix of Jennifer Lopez’s 2014 single, “Booty,” that helped inspire the moniker and the trend pieces that employed it.

Originally recorded with Cuban-American rapper Pitbull for Lopez’s album *A.K.A.*, the remixed single was released along with a salacious video featuring the two women writhing together in butt-revealing leotards (figure 2.4). Unlike Minaj’s ode to her own sexuality in “Anaconda,” however, Lopez and Azalea’s collaboration panders to the male gaze by presenting a third-person narrative in which Lopez advises, “it’s his birthday, give him what he asks for.” Middle-eastern sounding synthesizer riffs combine

---

with the visual images to collapse the exotic and the erotic: the artists reduce themselves to mere body parts that exist only for male sexual pleasure.

Figure 2.4 Jennifer Lopez and Iggy Azalea. "Booty." Music video. Directed by Hype Williams. Nuyorican. 2014.

The song itself is a lackluster dance track with a disappointing vocal performance from Lopez, but the addition of Azalea and the “double bubble” effect has, in one reviewer’s words, “at least some chance of breathing life into [Lopez’s] dead album.” Indeed, despite her ongoing repudiation of the role her white privilege has played in bolstering her career, Azalea has been commercially quite successful. For example, in addition to the lyrics of “Work,” as cited above, which demonstrate Azalea’s understanding of her whiteness as a hindrance rather than a help in her industry, she has

---

also become embroiled in exchanges on Twitter with fellow rapper Azealia Banks in which she claims that Banks’ charges of cultural appropriation stem from Banks’ own bigotry and denies that her race had anything to do with her success.⁵⁴ And yet, she was awarded the 2015 People’s Choice Award for Favorite Hip-Hop Artist and received several Grammy nominations, including a controversial one for Best Rap Album.⁵⁵ Azalea’s achievements as a rapper have been viewed by many in the hip-hop community as indicative of American racial politics: white artists appropriate a black musical style and, despite their arguably mediocre talent, are rewarded both financially and critically over artists of color.⁵⁶ However, the fact that “Booty” was re-recorded with Azalea demonstrates the role white performers play in legitimizing the aesthetics of communities of color, even as those artists locate authenticity in those communities.

Further expanding the racial implications of “Booty” is the fact that Jennifer Lopez, the primary artist on the track, is Latina. Both the aforementioned Vogue article and critics such as Brown agree that Lopez played a major role in the propagation of

⁵⁵ Azalea lost this Grammy to fellow white rapper Eminem, whose album The Marshall Mathers LP 2 was voted the winner. The nomination was controversial not only because Azalea is white, but because two of the three nominees in the category were white, because the single “Fancy” from the album was also nominated for Record of the Year and was the only rap song included in that category, and because “Fancy” was also nominated for best Pop Duo/Group Performance, confirming for many hip-hop heads that Azalea’s album should have been considered pop, not rap.
large behinds. Brown writes, “Jennifer Lopez kicked off the popularization and acceptance of big asses in the mainstream – a trait that has been present and celebrated in black and Latino communities in America since basically forever.” Azalea herself cites Lopez as a big booty foremother, rapping, “Last time the world saw a booty this good, it was on Jenny from the block.” However, in an article published in 2003, more than ten years before the release of “Booty,” Janell Hobson argues that it is exactly Lopez’s racial identity that made her butt so appealing. She writes:

Dominant culture came to celebrate Lopez’s behind as part of a recognition of “exotic” and “hot” Latinas, women perceived as “more sexual” than white women but “less obscene” than black women. In this way, Lopez’s body avoids the specific racial stigma that clings to black women’s bodies.

As Hobson suggests, while Lopez’s butt is a site of racialized and sexualized Otherness, which is reinforced by the exotic sounds of “Booty,” it is also considered less deviant than the black female butt and therefore appeals to a variety of audiences. On the remix, Lopez plays, in one (male) reviewer’s words, “butt-mentor” to Azalea, thus completing the transition to mainstream white booty appreciation and heralding a cultural amnesia in regards to the historical stigma of the black female backside.

In this present transitional moment wherein traditional white beauty standards are challenged and expanded to include curvier bodies with large behinds, however, mainstream white artists continue to emphasize the proximity to black people in order to authenticate and legitimate their own performances. For Azalea, this goes beyond

57 Kara Brown, “We Need to Talk about ‘Butt Selfie Queen’ Jen Selter.”
59 Hobson, 97.
60 Farber, “J. Lo’s ‘Booty’.”
featuring black bodies in videos such as “Work”: she also relies on the public backing of her mentor, Grammy-award winning rapper and Grand Hustle Records label founder T.I.61 Indeed, much of her credibility as a white Australian rapper who employs the dialect of black southern Americans is predicated on her relationship to the Atlanta-based, black male artist. In response to criticism over Azalea’s role as a white rapper and her behavior towards other black artists, specifically her twitter beef with rapper Azealia Banks, T.I. has consistently and quite publically voiced his support for her.62 His presence as a black (male) rapper on her album, in her videos, and in the media defending her has therefore served to legitimize her own performance of blackness by providing the missing essentialized components, including that of skin color, but also by explicitly connecting her to an established industry insider who fits the normative rapper description.

T.I.’s earliest collaborations with Azalea appear on her 2012 EP, *Glory*, particularly the single “Murda Bizness.” Another boast rap, here Azalea describes going to the club with her entourage, dressed well, flashing her money by purchasing expensive

---

61 For example, Kashann Kilson writes, “You’ll never convince me that a kid from a small town in Australia (shout out to Mullumbimby, New South Wales) rapping about ‘Murda Bizness’ in a thick Brooklyn accent is authentic. I’m not sure what the ‘hustle game’ is like in the coastal resort town where she grew up, but I’m willing to be it’s not the same hustle game she’s been rapping about.” Kilson, “Iggy Azalea Gets Away With Reverse Minstrelsy Because There’s A Market For It.”

drinks, and generally giving the appearance that not only is she wealthier and more successful than other club goers, but also others in the rap business. In the hook she raps:

Hit the club, with bad bitches
Stack of hundreds, bunch of fifties
Super clean, fa’ sho get ’em
Hit the scene, kill shit, we in the murda bizness
I kill pride, I hurt feelings,
Click clack, bang bang we in the murda bizness
My outfit? It murk [murder] bitches,
Click clack, bang bang we in the murda bizness.

Here the “murda bizness” refers not to murdering people, but to murdering careers, i.e., the careers of other rappers. She adopts black slang, as evident in the title, “Murda Bizness,” and in several lines, such as “fa’ sho get ’em,” despite the fact that she grew up in Australia, in an attempt to demonstrate her rap skills. Furthermore, given that by the time of Glory’s release Azalea had yet to solidify her mainstream success, and ultimately was only able to do so in part because of T.I.’s involvement, she seems to be emulating a formula seen in successful songs by other rappers rather than expressing her own lived experiences.

Additionally, we again see Azalea align herself with male rappers, particularly T.I., and boasting that she only associates with other “bad bitches.” In the first verse she raps:

Iggy, do it Biggie, tell ’em keep sending bottles, I’mma pop fifty
These other bitches think they hot?
Not really
She a broke ho, that’s how you know she not with me
Keep my heels on high, ride or die
760Li, ridin’ fly
I’m the God’s honest truth, they decide to lie
They just divide they legs, I divide the pie
And nah, nah, nah, nobody diggin’ ya’ll hoes
When Iggy in the spot, they be iggin’ ya’ll hoes  
I’m cold, get in that thang  
Kill bitches dead, click clack bang bang it’s the murda bizness

Without using the exact term, Azalea positions other women as ratchets and herself as a woman who can hang with the guys. Other women are liars, are constantly broke, and rely on sex as a tool to get what they want from men. They are lazy and do not work, which is why they have no money. According to this narrative, Azalea’s wealth is the result of her own hard work. Flaunting her money in the club is not only a demonstration of that wealth; it is also evidence of her own determined efforts and work ethic, something ratchet women seem to lack.

In the music video, inspired by the then-popular television series about young girls who participate in beauty pageants, Toddlers and Tiaras, T.I. often appears in the frame just behind or next to Azalea as he adds short vocal forms of support (“uh-huh,” “okay,” etc.) when she finishes a line (figure 2.5). He performs the third verse, which includes similar lyrics to Azalea’s first two verses, and thus reinforces her narrative. In these ways, he legitimizes her performance, not only as an important figure in the hip-hop industry, but also as a black male rapper. There are many children who appear from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, but the only other adult is a black woman who also frequently appears in the same frame as the rapping Azalea, but unlike T.I., she remains silent, with the exception of a break from the music during which she poses as a mother giving a pseudo interview with her competing daughter, in the style of the television show on which the video is modeled. Otherwise she is only seen dancing next to Azalea and sometimes lip-synching the words of the chorus that Azalea raps. The
absence of any other white adults in the music video further serves to suggest that Azalea has integrated herself into the black culture of hip-hop.

In a review of the *Glory* EP, *XXL* magazine writer Adam Fleischer noted that, “Iggy is still navigating her way to be comfortable enough on a track to fully make it on her own, which is why the strongest cuts on the six-track project find her bringing along a partner in rhyme to add a twist.” He continued:

There’s a reason that T.I. brought Iggy Azalea to Grand Hustle [T.I.’s Atlanta, Georgia-based record label], and it’s not just her long legs and blonde hair (though those attributes certainly don’t hurt her marketability). The up and comer has a personal history and set of experiences not

---

typically told in hip-hop, and potential as an MC if she continues to hone her skills and learn from those around her.\textsuperscript{64}

As we saw in “Work,” a single from her debut studio album, \textit{The New Classic} (2014), Azalea did start to assert in her rhymes that she has her own unique story to tell, but she continues to mold that story within pre-existing hip-hop narratives. Fleischer suggests that as someone who both embodies mainstream ideals of white beauty (long legs, blonde hair) and has an unusual background that could provide inspiration for original and interesting material, Azalea stands to make an artistically valuable (and commercially marketable) contribution to the Grand Hustle label. And yet, rather than embrace her own distinctive personal history, she continues to rely on common hip-hop narratives and uses black people to authenticate those narratives, even while she refuses to acknowledge that, as Fleischer points out, it was ironically her own body that helped elevate her to mainstream success.

What makes Azalea’s performances so problematic, especially for hip-hop heads, is both the impression of inauthenticity that her blatant attempts at authenticity create and the commercial and critical success, including but not limited to Grammy and other awards and nominations, that she is afforded by primarily white music institutions. Like other artists who fall outside of the normative rapper identity matrix, Azalea and other white women rappers must negotiate their identities and performances in a way that makes them legible within the norms of the genre. At the same time, however, hip-hop’s obsession with authenticity and notions of “keeping it real” demand that these

\textsuperscript{64} Fleischer, “Iggy Azalea, \textit{Glory EP}.”
negotiations include a contextualization of the rapper’s racial identity, not a repudiation of it.

Conclusion

Azalea, Kreayshawn, Lil Debby, and V-Nasty’s whiteness does not and should not foreclose their participation in hip-hop culture. Indeed, white artists have been present, albeit in smaller numbers than those of other participants, from the genre’s inception. However, in their strategies for navigating hip-hop’s particular brand of identity politics, specifically contextualizing themselves as white women within this black male-dominated genre, these rappers problematically use two main performance strategies: the use of black people as signifiers of authenticity and an appropriation of ratchet culture. Whereas some black women actively engage with and challenge the negative connotations of being ratchet, instead reappropriating and reclaiming the term as a form of resistance to respectability politics, white women artists, regardless of their class background or status, do not have those lived experiences of systemic racism upon which to draw. For them, ratchetness presents a justification for non-respectable behaviors and attitudes, but it also represents a liminal experience from which they can return at anytime without the stigmas attached to being black and poor.

In his study of appropriating blackness, E. Patrick Johnson argues that notions of both authentic whiteness and blackness are “based not solely on phenotype but also on the symbolic relationship between skin color and the performance of culturally inscribed
language or dialect that refers back to an ‘essential’ blackness or whiteness.” While none of the artists discussed here would claim a racial identity other than white (i.e., they do not claim to actually be black), they continue to lay claim to expressions of black culture that are divorced from any critical reflection of the construction and impact of racial difference.

Sharma argues that appropriation as othering, as opposed to appropriation as identification, is marked by its reinforcement of hierarchical understandings of race:

Non-Blacks’ adoption of stereotypical and exaggerated notions of “Blackness” marketed by media conglomerates illustrates appropriative acts that others and distances groups, thereby resembling the logic of minstrelsy. In fact, the adoption of racialized identities can advance racism rooted in the principle of bounded groups defined by difference. Othering practices occur when individuals consume decontextualized and uninformed notions of an other in ways that reinforce essentialist and totalizing notions of difference that are hierarchically valued. . . Appropriation as othering can work through positive stereotyping, such as in the idealization or exotification of the other, or through demonization.

The rappers I discuss here engage in both positive stereotyping and demonization, often mapped directly onto gender difference (black men are idealized, black women are demonized). Yet, through their performances they distance themselves from the blackness even while they claim proximity to it. We can thus understand their performances of blackness as a new minstrelsy minus the blackface; they mimic certain behaviors and employ certain cultural characteristics that fall outside of that which is respectable and are understood by white audiences as markers of blackness and yet are safely removed from any lived experiences of actually being black. As Cooper writes:

---

66 Sharma, 240.
Iggy [Azalea] profits from the cultural performativity and forms of survival that Black women have perfected, without having to encounter and deal with the social problem that is the Black female body, with its perceived excesses, unruliness, loudness and lewdness. If she existed in hip hop at a moment when Black women could still get play, where it would take more than one hand to count all the mainstream Black women artists, I would have no problem.  

Azalea and the other white women rappers discussed in this chapter fail to acknowledge the impact of race on their careers, in their music, and in American culture. As such, they continue to benefit from and perpetuate an uneven playing field in which whiteness functions not as a hindrance, as the lyrics of “Work” suggest, but as an advantage.

I have explored ways in which some white women rappers appropriate and perform blackness as a way of navigating their gender and racial identities in a music genre that is dominated by black men. It is also important to note that the artists mentioned here also employ masculine stances to help them negotiate their gender. As Ann Powers has suggested:

Assuming masculinity is as important to Azalea’s shtick as is taking on blackness . . . Pouring herself into the cartoon shape of a thug, Azalea fancies herself protected from the sexism she regularly encounters within hip-hop’s gentleman’s club. When the New York radio DJ Peter Rosenberg dwells on her waist-to-hip ratio during an interview – or worse, when fans try to sexually assault her during performances – she can deflect it with a chuckle and the voice she adopts, a male voice resounding with the evidence of her striving.

---

67 Cooper, “Iggy Azalea’s post-racial mess.”

Powers takes Azalea and other white performers to task for their reliance on stereotypes of black men specifically in their performances, but also notes that it serves a legitimate purpose: to help combat the experiences of sexism and misogyny that women artists constantly face in the course of their careers. In the following chapter, I explore ways in which another white artist, Macklemore, negotiates his white, heterosexual, cisgender, male identity. His strategies, unlike those of the white women presented here, include a socially conscious engagement with his racial identity that, despite its progressive approach to whiteness, raises its own set of ideological complications.
Chapter 3

“White Privilege and White Guilt at the Same Damn Time”

Macklemore’s Performance of Whiteness

The role of white hip-hop practitioners and fans is a hotly contested one both within and outside the hip-hop community. Hip-hop culture, whose original elements include rapping (also known as MCing or emceeing), DJing, dancing and graffiti, first coalesced in Afro-Caribbean, African American, and latinx neighborhoods in the Bronx, New York City in the 1970s as an expression of the city’s multi-ethnic youth of color.¹ When rap entered the American mainstream in the 1980s and 1990s, its multi-ethnic roots were somewhat obscured as it came to represent an expression of blackness, especially a particular kind of black masculinity.² As noted in previous chapters, notions of racial identity and authenticity in the genre most often hinge on the construction of the typical rapper as hypermasculine, black, cisgender, and heterosexual man. Listeners, critics, and other hip-hop artists at times call into question the authenticity and intentions of white male rappers, whose racial identities place them outside of this normative rapper identity matrix.

As Loren Kajikawa notes, rap is one of the few, if not only genres of American popular music that crossed into the white mainstream without becoming visibly white,

² Kajikawa, Sounding Race in Rap Songs, 5. See also Chapter 1 of this dissertation.
and yet it has not been immune to co-optation. Some of rap’s most commercially successful artists have been white stars, including the Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice, and Eminem, and their successes have often been recognized by predominantly white institutions, such as the Grammys, in ways that black artists’ have not. For example, Bakari Kitwana points out that much of the backlash against Eminem from hip-hop insiders, including *The Source* magazine owner Dave Mays and rapper Ray Benzino, had to do with the commercial impact of his success on black artists:

The problem here is not simply that Eminem is white and can rap – but that he’s white, can rap so well, has received honor after honor as a rap great by the entertainment establishment (two Grammys for *Slim Shady* and three for *Marshall Mathers*) and that for thirty years hip-hop has been almost exclusively associated with Black Americans . . . It is not unprecedented in America’s white supremacist culture for mediocre whites who perform as well as Blacks, in an area dominated by Blacks, to find themselves elevated through the stratosphere. In addition to the increased mainstream attention their race often affords them, in their attempt to lay claim to hip-hop’s black masculine authenticity white men rappers often invoke the worst stereotypes of black men, which are thus perpetuated through their aforementioned commercial success. For example, Miles White argues that the Beastie Boys used “black music to act out for white audiences the brutish stereotypes of lewdness and violence historically associated with black males,” despite the white rappers’ middle-class upbringings. As I demonstrate in Chapter 2, white women rappers Iggy Azalea and former members of the White Girl Mob also enact notions of rachetness to resist respectability and position themselves in proximity to blackness in order to offer more

---

3 Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*, 5.
5 White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z*, 100.
“authentic” rap performances. Given the dissonance between commercial rap’s common narratives of struggle over racism and poverty and the lived experiences of white rappers, these performers must navigate their whiteness in ways that allow them to appear genuine, or “real,” while also relating to the accepted aesthetics of the genre and avoiding the pitfalls of cultural appropriation.⁶

Macklemore is one such white male rapper who has recently achieved mainstream success with his and producer Ryan Lewis’ 2012 debut studio album, *The Heist.*⁷ Unlike his white predecessors, who have navigated their racial identity either through their class status or through a notion of racial and musical transcendence, Macklemore presents himself as self-consciously aware of his own position within black hip-hop culture and committed to socially progressive causes. He articulates both his racial identity and his racial positioning in songs such as “A Wake” and “White Privilege,” as well as in recent interviews, such as that on the Ebro in the Morning radio show.⁸ However, his biggest commercial hits, which have reached a wide audience beyond the hip-hop community, demonstrate ways in which his own racial identity compromises his pointed critiques of certain aspects of hip-hop, such as its perceived homophobia and glorification of

---


⁷ For the purposes of this study I focus on Macklemore, the MC-half of the duo Macklemore and Ryan Lewis. While Lewis’ contributions as producer are important to understanding the racial and gender politics of the duo’s output, Macklemore has been the most outspoken in his approach to social justice issues and has been the primary speaker in interviews and on social media. Because his position as MC has made him the most visible and verbal of the two musicians, I believe audiences have responded more strongly to Macklemore than to his partner.

materialism, that implicate black culture and black communities. Indeed, while Macklemore engages with tropes of hip-hop authenticity in order to present himself as an insider to hip-hop culture despite his white identity, he also positions himself outside of that culture by offering a critique that echoes white mainstream concerns that hip-hop and, by extension, black communities are inherently more homophobic than white-dominated music genres and the communities that produce them.  

Articulating White Privilege

The Seattle-based rapper-producer duo, Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, achieved national success with “Thrift Shop,” the fifth single off The Heist. The track, which topped both the Billboard Hot 100 and Rap Songs charts in early 2013, made them only the second independent artists to ever reach the number one spot on the Hot 100, a feat that extended their fan base from a limited local audience to a widespread, national one. The upbeat track, which uses a buoyant saxophone riff and features Wanz (the stage name of the Seattle-based singer Michael Wansley) performing the catchy hook, finds Macklemore embracing the hipster moment as he raps about finding sartorial treasures in second-hand stores. He raps:

---

9 A notable exemption to the construction of white-dominated music genres as generally inclusive of LGBTQ identities is Nadine Hubbs’s work on country music and the ways in which rural, working-class whiteness has been constructed as homophobic. See Nadine Hubbs, Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014). In this instance, a real or perceived class divide (i.e., working poor or working vs. middle- or upper-class) facilitates a ideological division as much as a racial one, and points to ways in which class, race, gender, and sexuality are all co-constructed identities.

I’ll take those flannel zebra jammies, second-hand, I rock that motherfucker.
The built-in onesies with the socks on that motherfucker.
I hit the party and they stop in that motherfucker.

Wanz’s hook, “I’m gonna pop some tags/ Only got twenty dollars in my pocket/
I’m hunting, looking for a come-up/ This is fucking awesome,” succinctly captures the joy and cost-effectiveness of thrift shopping that permeates the song.

As Macklemore lists and celebrates his Goodwill finds, however, he also critiques the name-brand consumerism that is frequently associated with hip-hop culture:

They be like, "Oh, that Gucci - that's hella tight."
I'm like, "Yo - that's fifty dollars for a T-shirt."
Limited edition, let's do some simple addition
Fifty dollars for a T-shirt - that's just some ignorant bitch shit
I call that getting swindled and pimped (shit)
I call that getting tricked by a business
That shirt's hella dough
And having the same one as six other people in this club is a hella don't

Macklemore never mentions hip-hop by name, but as he himself has acknowledged in interviews, the track pushes back against the glorification of wealth and materialism found in much mainstream rap. He states: “Hip-hop is usually an art form that is about bling, consumption . . . it’s usually about spending money.”

While this up-beat track might therefore be understood as a socially conscious challenge to consumerist hip-hop culture, it is also a problematic critique in that it fails to acknowledge the difference between choosing to buy clothing second-hand because it fits a certain aesthetic or being required to because there are no other economically viable

---

options. As music critic Brandon Soderberg writes, Macklemore’s performance “stinks of privilege.”\textsuperscript{12} He explains:

There is . . . a corny R. Kelly joke, and a point where he pitches his vocal down to sound like a black dude and calls himself a “honky.” Not to mention, the implicit message of this rap song is that “Thrift Shop” is not like all that other gauche hip-hop about ballin’ and champagne-poppin’, blah blah blah.

[I] Probably shouldn’t have to explain this in 2013, but when you didn’t have to wear hand-me-down threads or thrift-shop clothes your whole life, there’s a novelty to wearing them in your 20s so you have some extra beer money. And hey, maybe you even feel like you’re getting one over on a world of American Apparel-wearers by spending $2.99 on an already-worn-in colored T-shirt, but well, fall back. And that’s not even the point. The dynamic that this is a song rejecting conspicuous consumption is, for the most part, projected by its listeners. Macklemore’s embrace of the thrift shop is exclusively for wacky outfits to get him attention at parties, as well as something to lord over his peers in Gucci. He is, in the hierarchy of people poring over cheap-ass clothes in the Goodwill, only slightly above jerks who go there for Halloween outfits. At the top of this hierarchy, of course, are people who don’t have enough money to buy new clothes.\textsuperscript{13}

While the interview cited above demonstrates Macklemore’s perpetuation of the idea that this song is a rejection of consumerist culture, Soderberg is right to point out that Macklemore’s main benefit from thrift shopping, as per the song lyrics, is not saving money, but rather attention from others, especially women. Had Macklemore grown up in an economic situation that required, rather than allowed, him to stock his wardrobe primarily with second-hand items, Soderberg posits, it would not hold the same allure.

In addition to the thinly veiled critiques of hip-hop culture, “Thrift Shop” also


\textsuperscript{13} Soderberg, “Stop Saying Nice Things About Macklemore’s ‘Thrift Shop,’” emphasis in original.
includes a self-referential nod to Macklemore’s whiteness. In the first verse, he raps: “Ice on the fringe, it's so damn frosty/ That people like, "Damn! That's a cold-ass honkey." As Soderberg points out, in the recording Macklemore lowers the pitch on his own vocal so that what we hear what we imagine to be an adult black male to sound like, but is really Macklemore himself. In the video for “Thrift Shop,” it is indeed a black male who points towards Macklemore off-screen and appears to be saying the line, a sort of blackface performance by proxy. This use of this derogatory slur for white people is indicative of Macklemore’s approach of acknowledging his whiteness in a hip-hop context while at the same time criticizing aspects of the genre, including its emphasis on consumerism and its homophobia.

This strategy is perhaps most apparent on the track “A Wake,” which also appears on The Heist. This mid-tempo track, which features singer/songwriter Evan Roman, would sound as if it belonged on a pop record were it not for Macklemore’s rapped verses. Over a drum, bass, and synthesizer instrumental reminiscent of 1980s synthpop, he raps about shifting generational issues such as safe sex practices and drug use and abuse. In the second verse, however, he begins by acknowledging how fans and music critics praise his music in contrast to mainstream hip-hop:

- They say it's so refreshing to hear somebody on records
- No guns, no drugs, no sex, just truth
- The guns that's America, the drugs are what they gave to us
- And sex sells itself, don't judge 'til it's you
- Ah, I'm not more or less conscious
- The rappers rappin' 'bout them strippers up on the pole, copping
- These interviews are obnoxious
- Saying that it's poetry it’s so well spoken, stop it

He then turns his attention to ongoing racial inequalities in the United States and situates
himself as a self-aware white rapper who is concerned about racial inequality:

I grew up during Reaganomics
When Ice T was out there on his killing cops shit
Or Rodney King was getting beat on
And they let off every single officer
And Los Angeles went and lost it
Now every month there is a new Rodney on YouTube
It's just something our generation is used to
And neighborhoods where you never see a news crew
Unless they're gentrifying, white people don't even cruise through
And my subconscious telling me stop it
This is an issue that you shouldn't get involved in
Don't even tweet, R.I.P Trayvon Martin
Don't wanna be that white dude, million man marchin'
Fighting for our freedom that my people stole
Don't wanna make all my white fans uncomfortable
But you don't even have a fuckin' song for radio
Why you out here talkin' race, tryin' to save the fuckin' globe
Don't get involved with the causes in mind
White privilege, white guilt, at the same damn time
So we just party like it's 1999
Celebrate the ignorance while these kids keep dying

Macklemore suggests that the topics he addresses in his songs contrast to those found in mainstream hip-hop (outside of the subgenre of conscious rap) and that his lyrical approach invites a large crossover audience, not necessarily the music’s pop sound.

However, he also contextualizes his own position as a white rapper in a historical and contemporary moment of police brutality and racism. His strategy is to present himself as self-consciously aware of his whiteness and the privilege that entails while also demonstrating that he advocates for racial justice through the mode of hip-hop.

Macklemore’s negotiation of his white identity and, to a lesser extent, class status in a black musical genre contrasts with strategies employed by another famous white rapper, Eminem. Unlike Macklemore, Eminem shies away from discussions of white
privilege and racial justice, focusing instead on rearticulating his own racial and class identity in order to position himself as someone at a disadvantage within hip-hop.

Kajikawa, drawing on Mickey Hess’ models of navigating whiteness in hip-hop, argues that in his breakout album *The Slim Shady LP* (1999) Eminem employed a strategy of “inversion” to negotiate his racial identity in the rap world. Rather than attempting to transcend race or ignore it, as Kajikawa suggests he did with his first unsuccessful album, Eminem began to address his own whiteness directly in a way that rendered himself legible to a rap audience. Kajikawa writes:

> Parodying common understandings of whiteness, Eminem advanced a white identity both at ease with black culture and humble before it. He also emphasized the contradictions in whiteness, particularly with respect to class, allowing him to recast himself as the ultimate underdog.

Eminem’s approach allowed him to acknowledge and articulate his whiteness while avoiding criticism over racial authenticity, whereas ignoring his race altogether, as he did early on in his career, had put him at risk of being seen as an imitator of black rappers or an oppressive appropriator of hip-hop culture. As Kajikawa argues, this particular strategy engaged with and reflected evolving notions of whiteness during the 1990s.

Like Eminem, Macklemore openly acknowledges his white identity in his music, but his position reflects the changing racial climate of the 2010s. In referencing gentrification of black neighborhoods and the 2012 killing of Florida teen Trayvon Martin, whose death sparked renewed national protests against rampant violence towards

---

15 Kajikawa, “Eminem’s ‘My Name Is’,” 347.
16 Ibid., 342.
unarmed black men and youth, Macklemore demonstrates his own cognizance of persistent racial inequality. It is worth noting that during his time as an undergraduate at The Evergreen State College, Macklemore volunteered with incarcerated youth at the Green Hill School, a maximum-security juvenile detention facility where he ran workshops on writing and performing raps.\(^\text{17}\) He attributes this experience with exposing him to many of the racial injustices of the prison system, and sparking his awareness of racial difference more generally. Rather than situate himself as an activist for social justice and offer a call-to-arms, in “A Wake” Macklemore offers a glimpse into the self-conscious awareness he has as a white citizen who bears witness to institutional racism such as that he observed during his work with incarcerated youth. His verses articulate both a desire to create racial equality, but also an acknowledgement that he is the beneficiary of institutionalized racism and the discomfort such knowledge brings. It is a nuanced approach in which Macklemore positions himself as a self-aware white rapper who is attentive to the political repercussions of his own choices, both musical and otherwise.\(^\text{18}\)

“Same Love” and the Myth of Black Homophobia

As “Thrift Shop” and “A Wake” both demonstrate, Macklemore strategically puts forward his self-conscious awareness of his own racial identity rather than offering a narrative of racial transcendence or ignoring his racial difference altogether, either of

\(^{18}\) Shea, “Behind the Awesome.”
which would be disingenuous positions to take in a genre that values above all else the
notion of “keepin’ it real.” However, his self-acknowledged white privilege has helped
him achieve a certain status in the music industry from which he can reach a very large
audience. Coming from this place of privilege, some of his critiques are framed in such a
way that they perpetuate negative myths about black communities and maintain the
erasure hip-hop of artists of color who are further marginalized because they are queer.
Regardless of his actual intentions, whether to simply self-promote his work, to sincerely
help marginalized groups, or some combination thereof, Mackelmore’s music does not
have a uniformly positive impact. The negative repercussions of his approach stem from
a lack of intersectional understanding in his critiques of hip-hop, and they are most
clearly illustrated in his and Lewis’s most recognizable track, the hit single “Same Love.”

“Same Love,” the fourth single from The Heist, was recorded as part of the Music
for Marriage Equality Project that worked to approve Washington State’s Referendum
74, which legalized same-sex marriage in that state.\(^\text{19}\) The duo donated much of the
proceeds from the song to the advocacy group Washington United for Marriage.\(^\text{20}\)
Following that successful campaign, as well as the radio success of two previous singles
off the same album, “Thrift Shop” and “Can’t Hold Us,” “Same Love” rose up the charts
in 2013 as the Supreme Court prepared to rule on challenges to the federal Defense of
Marriage Act, and quickly became a nationally-recognized anthem for marriage equality


and LGBTQ rights.\textsuperscript{21} American rock critic Robert Christgau wrote that the track was “the best gay marriage song to date in any genre and as corny as it damn well oughta be,” implying that it was sentimental in a way that might move listeners.\textsuperscript{22} Writing for \textit{A.V. Club}, Chris Mincher described the song as a “refreshing” reminder that “hip-hop can be an effective tool in advocating social transformation,” problematically suggesting that other contemporary hip-hop singles were apolitical.\textsuperscript{23} The \textit{New York Times} noted that “Same Love” was “the first song to explicitly embrace and promote gay marriage that has made it into the Top 40,” indicating that unlike so-called gay anthems such as Lady Gaga’s 2011 hit single, “Born This Way,” Macklemore and Lewis’s track actually named marriage equality and LGBTQ rights as its focal point.\textsuperscript{24}

The track’s breakthrough on the \textit{Billboard} Top 40 charts followed the success of the duo’s “Thrift Shop” and “Can’t Hold Us,” all of which fit comfortably in the sonic realm of pop. Macklemore and Lewis’s crossover appeal can be at least partly attributed to their music’s sonic characteristics, which share a pop aesthetic with other chart-topping hip-hop and R&B tracks of that summer.\textsuperscript{25} “Same Love” opens with a held

\textsuperscript{21} McKinley, “Stars Align.”
\textsuperscript{24} McKinley, “Stars Align.”
\textsuperscript{25} For example, the only other hip-hop songs on the Top 40 during the week of June 29, 2013, when “Same Love” reached the number 33 position, were Macklemore and Lewis’s own “Can’t Hold Us” and “Thrift Shop” (numbers 3 and 19, respectively), “Power Trip” by J. Cole featuring Miguel at 21, Wale’s “Bad” (featuring Tiara Thomas or Rihanna) at 23, Drake’s “Started From The Bottom) at 35, “U.O.E.N.O.” by Rocko featuring Future and Rick Ross at 36, and Lil Wayne featuring 2 Chainz, “Rick as F**k” at 38. Most of these songs were similarly pop crossovers. At the top of the hip-hop and R&B singles for that same
chord, reminiscent of the opening of a church hymn. A hesitant-sounding piano introduction enters over this chord, closely followed by delicate string tremolos. These sounds then drop out to make space for the opening piano melody, based on the beginning of the 1965 single “People Get Ready,” a gospel-tinged R&B track written by Curtis Mayfield and initially performed by the Impressions. It is not until about halfway through Mackelmore’s first verse that the beat, which consists of soft drum set sonorities, is added, and it remains tertiary to the song’s melodic and lyrical content. Indeed, the instruments used, especially the sustained organ chord and melodic piano, suggest churches and suburban spaces rather than the landscapes often invoked in commercial rap, such as the hip-hop club or city streets. The inclusion of the melody from “People Get Ready,” a song very much rooted in African-American freedom song traditions, and which features Underground Railroad imagery, invokes comparisons between the mid-century Civil Rights movement for racial equality and the contemporary mainstream LGBTQ rights movement. As Joseph G. Schloss argues, samples in hip-hop are not necessarily used to make particular intertextual references; more often, producers or DJs use samples that are obscure and thus harder for the average listener to identify. In “Same Love,” however, the borrowed melody, or quotation, is not an electronic sample but rather is performed on an acoustic instrument, and is easily recognizable, thereby invoking a historical reference to music of the Civil Rights era. The sonic comparisons

---

between that period and the contemporary LGBTQ marriage equality movement are further supported in Mackelmore’s lyrics.

Macklemore begins his first verse with a personal story about growing up with stereotypical ideas about what it means to be gay, revealing that while he himself is straight, he has a gay uncle. He finishes the verse with a critique of religious and political conservatives for their anti-gay positions:

America the brave still fears what we don't know
And "God loves all his children" is somehow forgotten
But we paraphrase a book written thirty-five hundred years ago
I don't know.

Additional references to anti-gay sentiment in churches recur throughout the track. In the second verse, for example, he raps, “It's the same hate that's caused wars from religion,” and “When I was at church they taught me something else/ If you preach hate at the service those words aren't anointed/ That holy water that you soak in has been poisoned.” The critique of religion, or more accurately, the homophobic use of religion and religious rhetoric, is particularly apt here as the campaign against Referendum 74 was heavily championed by religious organizations such as the state’s three Catholic dioceses.27

The emotional power of the track hinges in large part on the hook provided by Seattle-based queer singer-songwriter Mary Lambert, who sings, “And I can’t change/ Even if I tried/ Even if I wanted to/ My love my love my love/ She keeps me warm.”28 While this chorus is a touching cry for acceptance (both from self and from others), it


28 The Seattle-based lesbian singer-songwriter released her own song, “She Keeps Me Warm,” which expands on that hook, to much critical acclaim in 2014.
also reinforces the idea that homosexuality or queerness is not a learned behavior or constructed identity but rather an inherent, possibly genetic trait such as hair or eye color. This claim has been used since the earliest gay rights movements in the United States as a plea for equal treatment. This line of reasoning assumes that if queer people cannot help how they were born, if homosexuality is not a choice, then they constitute a protected class that the US government and other institutions must treat equally under the law. This argument stems from similar methods used by some Civil Rights activists, who suggest that because people of color have no control over the race into which they were born, it is both morally and legally unfair to treat them differently than white people. As we shall see, this connection, which Macklemore himself makes in lines such as, “Gender to skin color, the complexion of your pigment/ The same fight that led people to walk-outs and sit-ins,” is a problematic comparison that many LGBTQ activists make, but has particular repercussions for a widely acclaimed hip-hop song.

The music video for “Same Love” clearly illustrates the track’s mainstream message for LGBTQ equality. It opens with a birth scene, which recalls the liberal LGBTQ tenet that queer people are born that way. The video continues to follow the apparently mixed-race child as he moves through childhood, where he is shown playing carefree with friends in the woods and near a stream, to adolescence, where he participates in a round of spin the bottle, making pained faces that only the camera picks up, letting the viewer in on his discomfort at this heterosexual rite of passage while his

29 For example, in her book on lesbian history in twentieth-century America, Lillian Faderman writes of the early homosexual organizations of the 1950s, the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, “Their major effort became to educate both homosexuals and the public with regard to the ways in which the homosexual was just like any other good citizen.” Lillian Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 190.
peers around him remain oblivious. In a scene that takes place at a high school dance, the teenager is shown first dancing with his classmates to dance tunes, but when a slow dance begins he is the odd man out, standing alone as everyone around him forms into heterosexual pairs. Eventually this unnamed protagonist meets another man who becomes the love of his life, and, after a period of dating and some push back from his family (which is presented in the form of an awkward dinner scene in which the parents get up from the dinner table and walk away, leaving the protagonist and his partner alone), they get engaged and are married. Macklemore appears as a guest at their wedding, which is presented as the climactic pinnacle of this story, with even the aforementioned homophobic parents in attendance, smiling with tear-filled eyes as their son is wed (figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Macklemore and Ryan Lewis. "Same Love." Music video. Directed by Ryan Lewis and Jon Jon Augustavo. Macklemore, LLC. 2012.
The video ends with the interracial couple as old men, holding each other’s hands as the protagonist lays dying in a hospital bed, presumably the same hospital in which he was born. While these images show that the couple has remained together for many years, seemingly demonstrating again that same-sex couples are just like heterosexual couples and that marriage equality leads to long, healthy relationships (rather than healthy relationships leading to successful marriages), they also illustrate another argument in favor of marriage equality that centers on legal protections for couples when one is hospitalized or dies. Historically, without the ability to be legally married, LGBTQ couples have experienced many hardships that would be alleviated by the benefits afforded to their heterosexual counterparts. Same-sex partners are often not legally considered family or next-of-kin and can thus be barred from visiting ill partners in hospitals or prevented from making arrangements after a partner’s death. Marriage equality extends those legal protections afforded to spouses to same-sex couples, including the right of spouses to serve as power of attorney in situations in which one partner is unable to make informed decisions.

The story offered in the “Same Love” video is familiar from narratives told as part of a mainstream and primarily gay, white male-dominated movement for LGBTQ equality. These narratives are exemplified by the messages that make up the “It Gets Better Project” in that they illustrate the struggles of LGBTQ youth but suggest that if one can make it to adulthood most of their problems will dissipate because they will be

---

30 According to a study released in December 2014, same-sex couples dissolved their legal relationships (i.e., marriages or civil unions) at a rate of 1.6% annual, a rate slightly lower than the 2% rate for different-sex couples (M.V. Lee Badgett and Christy Mallory, *Patterns of Relationship Recognition for Same-Sex Couples: Divorce and Terminations*, Los Angeles: The Williams Institute of the University of California School of Law, December 2014).
assimilated into and accepted by the larger adult culture.\textsuperscript{31} The “It Gets Better Project” was founded in 2010 by columnist and gay activist Dan Savage in an attempt to “communicate to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth around the world that it gets better, and to create and inspire the changes needed to make it better for them.”\textsuperscript{32}

The project consists primarily of videos made by people, including celebrities and influential individuals such as President Barack Obama, expressing their support for LGBTQ youth and assuring them that whatever their current struggles, their lives will improve as they grow older. The idea is that these videos will inspire LGBTQ youth who may be coping with bullying, intolerant families, depression, and other LGBTQ-related issues to be resilient and positive. A section of the “It Gets Better Project” website, entitled “Timeline: How It’s Gotten Better,” lists primarily legal accomplishments for LGBTQ populations in the United States and in other countries, such as progress for legal recognition for same-sex marriages and the passing of trans-inclusive legislation at local and national levels.

From its beginning, however, the project has been criticized for what many view as its lack of racial and gender analysis that has allowed it to capitalize on the deaths of white, male LBGTQ youth and focus on ways life gets better for that relatively privileged group. In a critique of the campaign, Kirk Grisham, a researcher at Columbia University writes:

\textsuperscript{31} It bears mentioning that this adult culture is predicated on heterosexual notions of domesticity and relationships. The “It Gets Better Project,” like the homophile movements of the mid-twentieth century, is therefore largely invested in the sameness approach, in which LGBTQ people are positioned as the same as heterosexuals in all but one, small way.

\textsuperscript{32} “What Is the It Gets Better Project?” posted on itgetsbetter.org, \url{http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/}, accessed April 9, 2015.
Indeed, when we think of victims of homophobia-induced violence, many US citizens can easily recall the names of white gay males Tyler Clementi and Matthew Shepard but not Sakia Gunn, a black working class lesbian or Brandon White, a black gay youth. Why is that? Because many of the news stories prioritized within gay media outlets are framed by folk who seem to have a limited platform that favors particular persons, namely, middle-class white gay males, over some others. Savage and other middle-upper class gay white men benefit from this form of commodification.33

Grisham goes on to cite several of Savage’s implicitly racist comments throughout his career, including his supportive response to the United States’ military involvement in Iraq in the early part of the twenty-first century, in which he engages in Islamophobia under the guise of eliminating anti-gay violence.34 As Grisham concludes, Savage often uses the rhetoric of LBGTQ equality to justify the continued marginalization and oppression of people of color.

Although Macklemore’s “Same Love” does not at first blush appear to diminish the importance or value of people of color, especially given the racial identity of one of the video’s protagonists, the circumstances surrounding the song’s success, particularly when considering Macklemore’s own position as a white, straight, cisgender male working within the genre of hip-hop, raise similar concerns as the “It Gets Better Project” and of mainstream American LGBTQ movements in general, especially the current focus on marriage equality as a priority. Perhaps nowhere have these issues been more present than at Macklemore and Ryan Lewis’s appearance at the 2014 Grammy awards, where

34 See Dan Savage, “Say ‘YES’ to War on Iraq,” posted at thestranger.com on October 17, 2002, http://www.thestranger.com/Seattle/say-yes-to-war-on-iraq/Content?oid=12237, accessed November 15, 2016. Savage has since backtracked, stating that he was wrong to support the U.S. invasion of Iraq, but the original post remains accessible online.
the duo not only took home four Grammy awards, including a contentious one in the Best Rap Album category, but also performed “Same Love” with Mary Lambert and guest artists Madonna, Trombone Shorty, and Queen Latifah, who officiated the legal marriage of thirty-three couples as part of the performance.

In her introduction to this segment of the televised Grammy awards live broadcast, Latifah, appearing in a simple black evening gown, states, “This song is a love song not for some of us, but for all of us,” thus setting the stage for a performance that manages to erase queer identities even while it claims to celebrate them. As she finishes her introduction, the lights on the stage darken and Latifah disappears, while neon lights in the shape of cathedral windows begin to take shape, and Macklemore emerges in silhouette from an arched neon gate. As the song progresses, the scene created by the lights become more and more intricate, drawing designs and patterns reminiscent of the stained glass windows found in Christian places of worship. Thus the Grammy stage becomes another institution in which the battle for marriage equality frequently plays out: the church. Mary Lambert comes into view not through the gate from which Macklemore emerged, but to the side of it, backed by the rich brass sounds of New Orleans’ Trombone Shorty and his band. The camera offers a few quick glimpses of Ryan Lewis, situated behind a drum set and computer set-up.

After the third verse, the music pauses except for a held chord from a synthesized organ, the sound that brings audiences to the church they have just witnessed taking

---

shape. Queen Latifah steps through the neon gates, taking on role of preacher as she begins to officiate the legal wedding ceremony from the Grammy stage. As she takes her place on the Grammy stage-cum-pulpit, she begins the ceremony:

We are gathered here to celebrate love and harmony in every key and every color. As I look out on this audience I’m delighted to see the faces of thirty-three couples who’ve chosen this moment to celebrate their vows with us here in Los Angeles, and everyone watching around the world as witnesses. It is my distinct honor to now ask our participants to exchange rings to signal their commitment to one another and to a life shared together with the music of love. Will you please exchange rings? Do you each declare that you take each other as spouses? By the power vested in me by the state of California, I now declare you a married couple!

For audiences watching from their television sets, the camera toggles between shots of Latifah, the rows of brides and grooms, and birds-eye views of the entire audience. In quick succession we see both same-sex and opposite-sex couples: one man in traditional Indian dress marrying another man in a Western suit; one white heterosexual couple next to them; and a Latina bride and her white soon-to-be husband next to them. After another quick shot of Latifah we see a lesbian couple, one femme-presenting with an arm full of tattoos clothed in a white dress and the other with a short haircut and a black suit. The scene points to the diversity of the participants, while also erasing their individual experiences under the auspices of their shared celebration of a difference-erasing love. In honoring the newlyweds as “married couples” Latifah folds the experiences of non-heterosexual couples into the heteronormative model.

As Latifah completes the ceremony, Madonna enters from the neon gate performing the chorus from her own “Open Your Heart” in a white tuxedo. The camera alternates between shots of her and views of the just-married couples. Many of these
couples are shown crying, embracing, and sometimes dancing, but never kissing. Even as we see a few same-sex couples begin to lean towards each other, the camera quickly moves to a different scene, as if producers intentionally censor these displays of affection between people of the same gender. The music returns to that of “Same Love” as the newly wedded couples process through the audience along with Trombone Shorty, and Madonna joins Lambert for the end of the song. By the end of the performance, the stained glass windows of the neon cathedral that has been growing and increasing in detail are filled in with bright colors, the transformation of Grammy stage to church wedding now complete. As Lambert and Madonna finish the song, the camera shows celebrities such as Keith Urban and Beyoncé in the audience smiling and wiping tears from their eyes at the touching display.

Although many lauded the performance as a powerful pro-marriage equality statement, others took issue with both the performance and its message. Writing for thegloss.com, Julia Sonenshein faulted the performance for positioning Macklemore as a savior figure for LGBTQ causes (almost literally so, as he stood on stage with neon church windows behind him). She rightfully noted that Macklemore, due to his sexual orientation, benefited from rapping about homophobia without ever having to experience

---

36 In an article posted at christiantoday.com, for example, Jennifer Jones cites examples of tweeted responses to the performance, including complaints about Macklemore’s characterization of Christians and the perceived leftist agenda of the presentation (Jennifer Jones, “Natalie Grant responds after leaving Grammys early; Mass wedding at award show criticized as ‘political stunt’ to push gay marriage agenda,” posted at christiantoday.com on January 29, 2014, http://www.christiantoday.com/article/mass.wedding.at.2014.grammys.criticized.as.political.stunt.to.push.gay.marriage.agenda.natalie.grant.responds.after.early.exit/35586.htm, accessed October 13, 2015.)
it himself.37 These criticisms echo those voiced by openly queer black rapper Le1f, who, in a series of tweets blasting Macklemore after his appearance at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards, asked, “do any proceeds go to any gay people? The HRC [Human Rights Campaign]? Aids [sic] foundation? Or does this straight white man keep the money?”38

As noted above, Macklemore and Lewis did contribute some of the proceeds from “Same Love” to Washington United for Marriage, but since Referendum 74 passed in 2012, it is unclear if the proceeds from subsequent performances have gone to other groups organizing for LGBTQ rights. In any case, it is evident that the heterosexual Macklemore’s performance opportunities are much higher profile than those afforded to openly queer black rappers such as Le1f.

In addition to subsuming queer couples under the rubric of heterosexual marriage, this live performance of “Same Love” also highlighted some of the tensions between mainstream white LGBTQ activism and communities of color. Perhaps in an effort to mitigate the Recording Academy’s difficult relationship with hip-hop over years, producers of the show advertised that the mass wedding would feature couples that were “gay, straight, old, young, of many races and many colors” prior to the broadcast.39

However, the Grammy performance amplified Macklemore’s critiques of hip-hop, erasing the black music genre’s history of grassroots activism and drawing on rhetoric often used by proponents for marriage equality that creates a false dichotomy between black communities and LGBTQ individuals.

This false dichotomy, which demonizes “black homophobia” as a particularly large hurdle for (white) LBGTQ Americans on the road to legalized same-sex marriage, was perhaps most evident in the backlash against black voters following the passing of California’s Proposition 8 (hereafter Prop 8), an amendment to the state constitution that banned same-sex marriage in that state. Early exit polls, later proven inaccurate, estimated that seventy-percent of black voters, most of who voted for President Barack Obama, also voted in favor of Prop 8. In the days following the November 4, 2008 election, several of the biggest media outlets cited this statistic as fact, and struggled to account for a population of Californians who would elect a Democratic president while also approving such a conservative ballot measure. Political analyses that appeared in the following days in major publications included Karl Vick and Ashley Surdin’s “Most of California’s Black Voters Backed Gay Marriage Ban” in the Washington Post and Farhad Manjoo’s “Props to Obama: Did he Help Push California’s Gay-Marriage Ban Over the

Top?” which appeared in Slate, each placing blame squarely on the large number of black voters who turned out to elect the nation’s first black president. Vick and Surdin wrote:

. . . No ethnic group anywhere rejected the sanctioning of same-sex unions as emphatically as the state’s black voters, according to exit polls. Fifty-three percent of Latinos also backed Proposition 8, overcoming the bare majority of white Californians who voted to let the court ruling [in favor of same-sex marriage] stand.

The outcome that placed two pillars of the Democratic coalition – minorities and gays – at opposite ends of an emotional issue sparked street protests in Los Angeles and a candlelight vigil in San Francisco.

Neither the Washington Post piece nor the Slate article mentions the staggering amount of financial and political backing offered by the Mormon Church, whose members are overwhelmingly white and who contributed in one estimate at least fifty-percent of the financial backing used to pass the ballot measure.

As Vick and Surdin’s language suggests, many white marriage equality supporters used the false exit poll results to justify scapegoating black communities for Prop 8’s passing. Dan Savage wrote a blog post following the election in which he decried “black homophobia” as the root cause of the setback to marriage equality:

African American voters in California voted overwhelmingly for Prop 8, writing anti-gay discrimination into California’s constitution and banning same-sex marriage in that state . . .


I’m thrilled that we’ve just elected our first African-American president . . . But I can’t help but feeling hurt that the love and support aren’t mutual. I do know this, though: I’m done pretending that the handful of racist gay white men out there – and they’re out there, and I think they’re scum – are a bigger problem for African Americans, gay and straight, than the huge numbers of homophobic African Americans are for gay Americans, whatever their color.42

While Savage claims to be inclusive of LGBTQ people (or rather, simply gay people) who are nonwhite, his language suggests he is engaging in what is colloquially referred to as “oppression Olympics,” in which Savage, a member of an oppressed group (gay men), insists that the oppression that he experiences is worse than and, in many instances, caused by, another oppressed group, namely African-Americans. He further insists on speaking for gay men of color (he only mentions gay men in his tirade, never women or people of other genders or sexualities) when he states that homophobia, not racism, is the greatest threat to their safety and happiness, rather than exploring ways in which homophobia and racism may interact in these men’s lives.

Savage was far from the only commenter who jumped on the idea of black homophobia as way of explaining California’s setback in marriage equality. Andrew Sullivan, another well-known white gay blogger, also voiced his opinion that the black church was rampant with homophobia and posed a threat to LGBTQ equality. Following the 2008 election, he echoed and built on Savage’s comments:

For gay and lesbian black men and women, the blow [of black voters approving Prop 8] is even harder. But this community needs to be engaged not demonized, and we haven’t engaged enough. The black church is one of the most powerful forces fomenting homophobia in American, and has fostered attitudes that have literally killed countless gay black men. It’s

---

time to Act Up against those elements that p.c. liberals have been too timid to confront. For the sake of African American gay and lesbian people as much as anyone else.  

Sullivan’s approach, which appears at first to recognize the impact of the passing of Prop 8 on black LGBTQ people, takes a decidedly paternalistic turn, when he suggests that “we” (presumably white gay folks like himself) act on behalf of black LGBTQ people against the powerful homophobia of the black church.

As Slate contributor Jamelle Bouie points out, this scapegoating of black voters, like Macklemore’s scapegoating of hip-hop, is part of a larger phenomenon of “invented black pathology,” in which “behaviors present among other groups of Americans become pathologies when they’re exhibited by blacks.” Citing the report released by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in January 2009 that found that only fifty-eight percent of African American voters supported Prop 8, he writes:

Prop 8 didn’t win because of blacks or Latinos, it won because millions of Californians – white as much as black or brown – opposed same-sex marriage. Older Californians were most opposed (67 percent), but a near-majority of 30-to-44-year-olds and 45-to-64-year-olds also supported the amendment.

And yet, the narrative was set: If not for homophobic blacks, Prop 8 would have lost. As such, when North Carolina banned same-sex marriage in 2012, the blame fell again on black Americans, treating black support as a function of “blackness” and not religiosity or age. 

---


45 Bouie, “Blacks Don’t Have a Corporal Punishment Problem.”
This narrative, as Bouie illustrates, positions homophobia as a uniquely black problem, rather than an American problem that cuts across all ethnic and racial communities. By painting homophobia as such, white LGBGTQ leaders position themselves as wiser, more progressive, and thus better situated as leaders of a mainstream movement that can “fix” the problems within communities of color. It also further marginalizes queer people of color who are left primarily outside of this discussion, unless they are invoked as infantile subjects in need of saving from their own communities.

Macklemore’s assertion in “Same Love” that, “If I were gay, I would think hip-hop hates me” functions in much the same way as the backlash against black voters following the passing of Prop 8 in that it also relies on the exaggerated concept of black homophobia as a threat to LGBTQ people. Rather than emphasize the black church as the source of the communities’ bigotry, he targets the cultural institution of hip-hop, but the accusation still relies on an invented black pathology that locates homophobia in hip-hop but not in other, predominantly white genres. While it is true that some mainstream hip-hop features anti-gay slurs and attitudes, Macklemore’s position as a white rapper and the lack of any openly queer, black performers on his track complicates his criticism of the genre. Rather than combating homophobia in hip-hop, his claims actually serve to bolster his strategic performance as a self-conscious, socially aware white rapper, while negatively impacting the perception of the genre by outsiders and perpetuating the false dichotomy of black vs. gay.
Conclusion

Macklemore and Ryan Lewis won four of the seven Grammys for which they were nominated in 2014, including those for Best New Artist, Best Rap Album, Best Rap Song, and Best Rap Performance, with the last three being major awards in the Rap category. Aware of his sweeping success in one of the few categories in which black artists often win, Macklemore sent a text message to fellow rapper Kendrick Lamar, whose 2012 release *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City* was also nominated in the Best Rap Album category but lost to *The Heist*. In this text, Macklemore awkwardly attempts to demonstrate his cognizance of the privilege that won him this accolade. It reads:

>You got robbed. I wanted you to win [Best Rap Album]. You should have. It’s weird and sucks that I robbed you. I was gonna say that during the [acceptance] speech. Then the music started playing during my speech and I froze. Anyway, you know what it is. Congrats on this year and your music. [I] Appreciate you as an artist and as a friend. Much love.  

Macklemore then posted a screen shot of the text to his Instagram account, making what most felt should have been a private admission to a colleague a very public performance of his self-awareness. By posting this text online, Macklemore shared not just what might very well have been genuine admiration for a black artist in his genre, but also his own understanding of his white privilege. The Instagram photo was thus more a display of his own consciousness of his race than an apology to the individual he claimed to have “robbed,” and this public display further highlighted his strategic positioning of his own racial difference.

Macklemore later expressed regret for posting the text in an interview on HOT 97’s *Ebro in the Morning*, a hip-hop radio talk show with a wide following.48 He stated:

We’ve [Lamar and Macklemore] texted [since the incident]. I made a mistake and a lot of fear was going into that moment. I wanted to win some Grammys . . . I think we [Macklemore and Ryan Lewis] made a great album. I think it had great impact . . . I wanted to win Song of the Year. I wanted to win Best New Artist. I wanted to win some rap categories. But I thought Kendrick had a better album . . . The mistake came from Instagramming the text message and betraying my homie’s trust. That’s wack . . . The language that I used was a bad call. “Robbed” was a bad choice of word. White people have been robbing black people for a long time. Of culture. Of music. Of freedom. Of their lives. That was a mistake.

Looking back at it, I learned about the voting process of the Grammys. Random people that aren’t necessarily part of the culture whatsoever joining in on the ballot that comes back down to this whole issue of privilege because they’re familiar with whoever is the biggest artist. That’s who they check the box [for]. And in 2013, we had the biggest record.49

While Macklemore does state that he should not have shared the text as a public post (which was never removed from his *Instagram* account and remains available to anyone with internet access), he cites his use of language and his revelation of a private conversation as his mistake, not the highly visible and performative display of race consciousness that he enacted. The apology thus further serves Macklemore’s self-fashioning project in that it both highlights his racial self-consciousness, including his self-awareness of his own privilege, and positions him as an authentic subject thoughtfully engaged in the racial discourses of contemporary hip-hop.

---

48 “Macklemore Joins The Great Race Debate on Ebro in the Morning [VIDEO].”
In both his music and his public life, Macklemore carefully navigates the hip-hop world by acknowledging his racial difference and privilege in a self-conscious way. Like Eminem, who, as Kajikawa argues, rearticulated his whiteness to reflect the changing discourses around race and class in the late 1990s, Macklemore’s approach also mirrors his own historical and social context. In presenting himself as an activist-artist concerned with social justice issues, he connects his work to pressing issues such as police brutality against black people and marriage equality. At the same time, however, he draws on rhetoric that both pathologizes black communities as disproportionately homophobic and continues to cast black people, and hip-hop culture specifically, as oppositional to LGBTQ communities. He also continues to gain success in the larger music industry thanks in part to his whiteness, which draws the attention and appreciation of white fans that would not necessarily listen to black hip-hop artists: as he himself stated, “Why am I safe? Why can I cuss on a record, have a parental advisory sticker on the cover of my album, yet parents are still like, ‘You’re the only rap I let my kids listen to.’ . . . it’s because of white privilege.” 50 His recognition of that fact and his willingness to engage in discussions of racial difference does not mitigate that reality, but it does open a space for him to perform a new kind of white authenticity in hip-hop, one in which racial difference in the context of rap’s predominant black masculinity is addressed directly rather than obfuscated through the lens of class.

In addition to maintaining a false narrative around black homophobia in America, Macklemore’s strategy, which succeeds in making his whiteness legible in a hip-hop

50 “Macklemore Joins The Great Race Debate on Ebro in the Morning [VIDEO].”
context, also perpetuates the invisibility of out, queer black performers in the genre. His whiteness works in tandem with his heterosexuality and cisgender identity to help him gain the access to wide audiences that queer and trans artists of color typically do not have. Furthermore, his insistence on hip-hop’s inherent homophobia fails to take into account the presence of queer and trans rappers who have embraced and work within this supposedly homophobic genre, as well as the queer and trans listeners that have existed since the genre’s inception. In the following chapters, I examine some of the openly queer black artists who have thus far been left out of the conversation, including a handful who are based in New York City and are situated on the cusp of mainstream success and the queer and trans artists who currently dominate New Orleans’s bounce scene. I explore ways in which they construct and express their black queer identities through their music, and how some of them respond to the work and public commentary of artists like Macklemore that continues to render them invisible while at the same time professing to advocate on their behalf.
Chapter 4

“Wut it is? Wut is up? Wut is wut?”

Black Queer Lineages in New York City’s Ballroom Rap

On March 13, 2014, the New York City-based producer-turned-rapper Le1f appeared as a musical guest on the “Late Show With David Letterman.” Dressed in a blue skort and white calf-high sneakers, Le1f performed his 2012 single, “Wut.” With lines such as “I’m getting light in my loafers” and “I’m the kind of john closet dudes wanna go steady on,” his performance left little doubt regarding his queer sexuality. For years, critics writing for publications such as The Guardian and Pitchfork had been predicting the rise of “queer rap.” Le1f’s appearance marked the first time an openly gay rapper performed on a major network’s late-night show, and seemed to suggest that “queer rap” was finally having its mainstream moment.¹

Le1f is frequently cited as part of a larger trend of emerging queer hip-hop artists, especially in and around New York City, such as Zebra Katz, Cakes da Killa, Mykki Blanco, Azealia Banks, and others.² In Pitchfork, for instance, Carrie Battan wrote, “If there’s ever been a time for an artist to rip hip-hop identity conventions to shreds, it’s now. The genre is the furthest left-of-center it’s been in a long time – or at very least, the


² Considine, “Zebra Katz, Mykki Blanco and the Rise of Queer Rap,” and Battan, “We Invented Swag: NYC’s Queer Rap” are two illustrative examples.
line between mainstream stardom and underground oddballism is blurring beyond recognition.” Writing for The Guardian, Clare Considine similarly noted in 2012 that, “a whole wave of fearless gay New York rappers are stepping out and sticking two well-manicured fingers up to the notion that there is no room for them in hip-hop.”

Many journalists, such the authors of the aforementioned articles, have jumped on the notion of gay rap because it is seemingly antithetical to the aesthetics and values of hip-hop, at least as it has been understood in the mainstream. As I demonstrate in Chapter 3, even socially progressive rappers such as Macklemore continue to suggest that hip-hop and queerness mix like oil and water, creating a false dichotomy between black and gay that erases queer and trans people of color. As Bakari Kitwana argues, however, hip-hop has become ubiquitous among several generations of American youth from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, and thus it should come as no surprise that the diversity of hip-hop practitioners extends also to sexual orientation and gender identity. Black queer rappers have perhaps always existed at the intersection of LGBTQ communities, communities of color, and hip-hop culture, but are just now becoming visible and audible.

While historically mainstream hip-hop has been antagonistic toward queer folks, there has been a shift in recent years with major artists such as Jay Z, Kanye West, Common, and A$AP Rocky publicly voicing opinions in support of the LGBTQ community, or at the very least discouraging discrimination against them. And although

---

3 Battan, “We Invented Swag.”
5 Kitwana, Why White Kids Love Hip Hop.
6 Admittedly, interviews with many of these artists, especially A$AP Rocky, indicate a level of discomfort with non-heterosexuality, with most them stating that sexuality is irrelevant to their careers or that they do not care, which is not the same as openly engaging with LGBTQ communities on an advocacy level. (For a
it may be difficult to challenge the heteronormative narrative of hip-hop’s origins and to seek out queer voices from among the pioneers of the genre, a changing national climate has helped to increase the visibility of contemporary queer and trans artists. In light of this public shift, journalists and music critics seem to forget that there have always been queer hip-hop practitioners, including dancers, listeners, DJs, and yes, rappers.

Despite the critical acclaim that he has received in large part for his openly queer content and performances, Le1f himself has stated that he prefers not to be known as a purveyor of gay rap. He told Natalie Hope McDonald in an interview for *Philadelphia* magazine, “I’m proud to be called a gay rapper, but [my work is] not gay rap. That’s not a genre.”7 Scholarship and media coverage, however, has continued to consider all queer artists together, tending to situate them as individual artists fighting to be heard within an inherently homophobic genre and thereby focusing on their shared identities rather than their music, an approach artists such as Le1f try to resist. While these comparisons do highlight the importance of the work of openly LGBTQ rappers, it also collapses a diverse group of artists into one identity-based category. The music of a rapper such as JenRo, a queer woman rapper from California’s Bay Area who is influenced by the region’s gangsta rap, for example, cannot necessarily be considered part of the same genre as Big Freedia, who hails from New Orleans and whose work epitomizes bounce

---


---
music. “Gay rap,” as Le1f suggests, does not exist because the queer identity that many rappers share is not a sufficient enough basis upon which to define a genre.

The New York City rappers whom Pitchfork and other outlets have considered together, even if musically quite diverse, do share an important but often downplayed feature: a connection to the city’s Ballroom scene, a vital focal point of the local black and latinx queer culture. Le1f describes the influence of Ballroom on his music and performances:

> When I first found out about voguing as a teenager, it was an eye-opening experience because it felt like an innate way of moving. And a lot of my music is made with the intentions of movement and dance. But it's the cultural side-- the experience of being at a ball-- that's affected what I rap about. The fact that there's a scene that's existed for so long with such a rich history, and is ceremonial, is really nice.  

Le1f acknowledges that his familiarity with Ballroom has affected his performances, and gestures towards his participation in its cultural lineage. He notes that this lineage has had the greatest impact on his lyrics, but it has also influenced his music in other ways, a point to which I will return. Le1f explicitly connects his work with the Ballroom scene, and it is evident that drawing on the slang, gender categories, and other aspects of the culture is one strategy that Le1f employs that allows him to articulate his own black queer subject position through his music.

Hip-hop genres have often been defined by a combination of geography, production technique, musical stylistic characteristics, and/or thematic lyrical content. Artists such as Le1f, Cakes da Killa, Zebra Katz, and Azealia Banks, in addition to sharing a geographical center, also share Ballroom culture as an important cultural

---

8 Le1f, quoted in Battan, “We Invented Swag.”
reference point that ties their music together into a hip-hop genre we might refer to as Ballroom-influenced rap, or simply Ballroom rap. This genre is not based on shared queer identity, but rather shared references to cultural aspects of queer communities in which they participate. These references appear in their work, and place them within a black queer cultural and musical lineage that is central to LGBTQ communities of color in New York City.

In this chapter I examine ways in which some of these openly queer rappers lyrically, musically, and visually reference the city’s Ballroom scene order to invoke a specifically black queer musical and cultural lineage. I briefly trace the roots of this lineage in 1970s disco, as well as the emergence of house music as an underground response to the homophobic and racist backlash against disco’s success. I then consider the role of house music in Ballroom culture and black LGBTQ communities, paying particular attention to the ways in which participants use music in the creation and performance of the Ballroom gender system in which gender and sexuality are co-constructed. Finally, I demonstrate ways in which the aforementioned rappers utilize aspects of Ballroom culture as a means to perform a black queer identity, and suggest that black queer rap that shares this cultural reference point can indeed be considered a hip-hop genre.

Musical and Cultural Lineages

The recent proliferation of online and print articles profiling openly queer rappers such as Le1f, Mykki Blanco, Zebra Katz, and others suggest that the success of these artists is newsworthy because they are anomalies. Hip-hop, however, evolved from music
genres that began in queer spaces, especially disco, and as such has probably always had queer practitioners and most certainly has queer roots. As Alice Echols notes, the earliest rap performances used disco records, as is evident in the first rap record, Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,” (1979), which was built on the bass line and other elements of Chic’s 1979 single, “Good Times.”9 As rap evolved, however, it distanced itself from the dance genres that were perceived as inherently gay or too white. Rapper Chuck D. of Public Enemy, for instance, articulated such a stance on house music:

My thing is I don’t like house music. I first heard it as a DJ, when I was doing radio shows, and I said then that I thought the beats lacked soul . . . And I dislike the scene that’s based around house – it’s sophisticated, anti-black, anti-culture, anti-feel, the most ARTIFICIAL shit I ever heard. It represents the gay scene, it’s separating blacks from their past and their culture, it’s upwardly mobile.10

Chuck D.’s resistance to house, while seemingly based on musical preferences, is rooted in homophobia. It is an example of revisionist narratives that attempt to separate hip-hop from other dance genres that have queer or feminine associations. To counter this problematic narrative, which erases the contributions of black queer artists, we can instead place hip-hop, especially its contemporary queer expressions, within a black queer musical lineage. As this context demonstrates, it was that lineage that produced rap’s predecessors: without black queer music making, there would be no hip-hop.

Scholars have widely acknowledged that the birth of disco can be traced largely to the black and gay clubs in New York City at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the

---

However, in their efforts to emphasize the multiculturalism of disco’s origins, as well as the homophobia that fueled the backlash that resulted in its decline in the mainstream, many scholars have failed to acknowledge the specifically black queer influences on the genre. I do not intend to essentialize disco by declaring it solely a black gay genre; rather, here I wish to pull together existing scholarly threads in order to highlight ways in which black gay communities and individuals were a major yet often underemphasized force behind the genre and its successors.

Disco is a constellation of spaces, sounds, and performances centered on communal dance experiences. As a musical movement of the 1970s, it often played an important role in the social lives of individuals from various marginalized communities who were engaged in challenging their position in society. Walter Hughes describes disco as “not only a genre of music and a kind of dancing, but the venue in which both are deployed,” especially for gay men. He continues:

It is, as its name suggests, site-specific music, the music of the discotheque. The name also defines it as music that is technologically reproduced, ‘on disk,’ not performed . . . for urban gay men, ‘disco’ is where you dance and what you dance to, regardless of the technicalities of musical innovation and evolution.

Nadine Hubbs similarly regards disco as “a musical, social, and cultural space with critical African-American, Latino/a, and variously queer involvements” (emphasis in the

---

12 Hughes, “In the Empire of the Beat,” 148.
13 Hughes, 148.
original). Echols notes that disco developed in relation to social movements and helped to broaden “the contours of blackness, femininity, and male homosexuality.” Disco, as both music and space, reflected newfound freedoms brought about by activist movements that began in the preceding decade and was the soundtrack for several marginalized communities finding their groove.

David Mancuso’s dance parties, which he organized in his private space known as the Loft, were among the earliest and most influential and became the model for not only gay discos but also for many of the clubs that proliferated in the 1970s. Mancuso drew inspiration for these early gatherings from the tradition of rent parties, a mainstay of black communities in Harlem especially during the early twentieth century. Eric Garber has chronicled black queer life in Harlem during the years of the Harlem Renaissance (approximately 1920-1935), noting that during the Great Migration that brought an influx of African Americans from the South to northern industrial cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and New York, black lesbians and gay men formed social networks and institutions, some of which are still in place today. While rent parties were an important focal point of black life, Garber writes that they were especially important for black queer individuals:

Private parties were the best place for Harlem lesbians and gay men to socialize, providing safety and privacy . . . Few of Harlem’s new residents

15 Echols, Hot Stuff, xxv.
had much money, and sometimes rent was hard to come by. To raise funds, they sometimes threw enormous parties, inviting the public and charging admission. There would be dancing and jazz, and bootleg liquor for sale in the kitchen . . . the dancing and merriment would continue until dawn, and by morning the landlord could be paid.  

In addition to the practical benefits of raising funds, rent parties also provided a private space in which black (and sometimes white) lesbians and gay men could gather together and hear blues musicians perform songs that reflected their own queer experiences, dance in same-gender couples, and participate in a particularly black queer culture.

Mancuso’s Loft parties were inspired by these rent parties, and were known for attracting a very diverse crowd, much more so than the clubs that existed in New York City during this time. Disco historian Tim Lawrence writes that the crowd included many black and Latino gay men, but:

It was also very mixed, with Mancuso’s invitees – who could bring along a guest – cutting across the boundaries of class, color, sex, and sexuality . . . Economically the congregation spanned rich and poor; racially it was United Nations leaning toward black and Latino/a; sex-wise, women were always central to the setup (even if men were dominant); and sexually it was as wide as the ocean (although fish that swam in the same direction were in the majority).

While Mancuso’s parties were not specifically black or gay, many black gay participants found a home at the Loft, including Larry Levan and Frankie Knuckles, who would later became influential disco and house DJs themselves.

Spaces serve as important factors in the evolution of disco, as they were influenced by and reflective of the social and political climate of the time. Before the Stonewall riots of 1969 sparked a new wave of pro-LGBTQ activism in the United

---

18 Garber, 321.
19 Lawrence, 22.
States, there were few options for LGBTQ people to socialize together in groups. House parties, which were held in private homes, offered discretion but required invitations and a network of connected individuals. Public spaces were limited to gay bars that were frequently mafia-owned and were subject to constant police raids, which often resulted in patrons’ arrests and their names being published in local newspapers. This act of public outing and shaming had dire consequences for some, including losing their jobs and experiencing increased stigma from society as well as families. In the years following the Stonewall riots, public spaces for members of gay communities, especially white gay men, evolved drastically. Not only did laws change (slowly but surely, thanks in part to new resistance to those laws), but an ethos of pride also began to develop among members of the LGBTQ community. This included a desire to celebrate gay identity in public ways; dancing was one of the expressions of that celebration. As Frank has noted, disco emerged as the “music of liberation for gay white men” because it “coincided with – and provided a focal point for – the process of becoming politically visible and winning civil rights within American culture.”

Discos played an important role in the development of a politically active and increasingly visible population because they provided spaces where LGBTQ people could “imagine a sexual community and coordinate their gay identity.”

While gay-owned discos that featured a largely gay clientele blossomed during the early 1970s in New York City especially, they were not always the multiethnic and

multiracial utopias that many would like to remember. The LGBTQ community was not immune from the rampant racism of mainstream American culture, and this racism played out in the policing of some disco spaces. For example, The Flamingo, a predominantly gay club that opened in Manhattan (the center of gay nightlife in New York City) in December 1974, was overwhelmingly white thanks in part to an expensive membership system. As Lawrence notes, club owners claim to have not consciously turned away numbers of black patrons, but that doing so helped foster a friendly relationship with the club’s neighbors and attracted a upscale crowd.

Despite disco’s queer roots, enthusiastic gay audiences, and popularity in gay clubs, very few artists who performed in the genre (aside from DJs and producers) were openly gay-identified. The gender-bending singer Sylvester, whose singles “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” and “Dance (Disco Heat)” were club hits in both the United States and Europe, is a notable exception. Early in his career Sylvester performed with a non-traditional, theatrical drag troupe, the Cockettes, who were not interested in passing as women and instead performed in women’s clothes and wigs but with their beards intact. Unlike other members of the troupe, who viewed themselves as transcending all social categories, Sylvester was largely invested in performing his black identity. He was deeply inspired by black blues women, such as those who were mainstays of the aforementioned Harlem rent parties, and drew on their legacy in his own performances. As a disco artist, his vocal style featured a sustained falsetto and his appearance, while

---

22 Lawrence, 139.
23 Ibid., 139.
24 Echols, 141-2.
25 Ibid., 141.
androgynous, leaned toward the feminine. Walter Hughes suggests that “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real),” with its gospel-inflected vocalizations of desire and repetitiveness, “performs the representative hypostatization of [Sylvester’s] gay identity:”

His impassioned repetition becomes as orgasmic as Donna Summer’s in “I Feel Love,” insisting that, for the gay black man, the realization of the self can have the ecstatic force of a revelation . . . This is a “gay” realness that flickers into being with a “touch” and a “kiss” – at the moment of homosexual physical contact.26

Rather than mapping their same-sex desire onto the performances of black women divas, gay men, particularly black gay men, were able to hear it reflected in Sylvester’s voice and the words he sang.

And yet, as Hughes also points out, even though Sylvester’s identity as a black gay man should make sense in a genre that originated as one that was primarily vocalized by black (usually straight) women and enjoyed by gay (usually white) men, “he is nevertheless rendered invisible if not impossible by the dominant culture’s potent alliance of homophobia and racism.”27 In other words, Sylvester’s open performances of his own black gay identity was not only a rarity in disco in particular and popular music more generally, but his career often goes unmentioned in histories of the genre not because it lacked impact, but because the particular intersections of blackness and queerness are so often subsumed under either race or sexuality, i.e., black or gay, not black and gay.

The erasure of black queer identities in narratives of disco is also a result of some scholars’ focus on multiculturalism, on the idea that disco was enjoyed across social boundaries. This emphasis on a multicultural community of listeners and dancers,

26 Hughes, 154.
27 Ibid., 153-4.
however, decentralizes the influence black individuals, especially black queer
individuals, have had in disco’s development. Echols and others note that disco was
played in gay clubs long before reaching a larger audience, but gay listeners in scholarly
accounts are nearly always assumed to be white.28 When scholars discuss gay people of
color at all, they do so primarily in the context of the multiracial gay club, where their
experiences are subsumed under a universalized white gay male narrative. For example,
Gillian Frank highlights some of the ways in which early disco especially resonated with
multiple marginalized groups at various points of intersection:

From its origins, disco music was associated with cultural difference. At the beginning of the 1970s many disco artists were Latinos or African Americans, and many were African American women. The audiences for the first wave of disco were predominantly urban straight and gay African Americans, straight and gay Latinos, and white gay men dancing in African American and gay night clubs in major urban centers like New York and Chicago.29

Frank positions early white gay audiences within African American and gay nightclubs, but this construction makes it unclear whether these clubs catered to an African American gay clientele or to those who were either African American or gay. Furthermore, he explains that white gay men reinterpreted disco music, especially those tracks that featured black artists, as expressive of their own experiences of marginalization and coming together as a community. This explanation is offered without regard to how that community often reinscribed racial hierarchies in white gay spaces, as noted above.30

28 For example, Echols writes that, “By the time Vince Aletti wrote about what he called ‘party music’ and ‘discotheque rock’ in a fall 1973 issue of Rolling Stone, gay men had been dancing in discos for three years” (2).
29 Frank, 284.
30 Ibid., 284.
I push back against the idea of a utopic, multiracial gay disco dance floor, however, not to essentialize all disco experiences as simultaneously black and gay, but to draw attention to the ways in which multicultural discourses erase the contributions of black queer communities. In relocating disco’s origins at the intersection between blackness and queerness, I wish to situate successive black queer cultural productions in similar black queer spaces. The public backlash that eventually pushed disco and dance music back underground at the end of the 1970s provides a useful illustration of the ways in which homophobia and racism intersected in this genre and in the music’s reception.

Like most popular music styles of the United States, disco is rooted in black popular music traditions and technological changes. During the Stonewall era, recorded music was the main form of entertainment at both private parties and in gay bars, and it was the record that became the site of the musical and technological innovations that fueled the emergent genre.31 Drawing on the sound associated with Detroit’s Motown label, the house band of producers Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff’s Philadelphia International Records label, MSFB transformed the beat and tempo and produced the “Philly sound” that became the foundation for the new recorded dance music. Drummer Earl Young describes how he created the disco beat:

I thought the Detroit sound was unique. Motown used four-four on the snare – khh, khh, khh, khh – and the heartbeat on the bass – dmm-dmm, dmm-dmm, dmm-dmm, dmm-dmm – and they also used four-four on the tambourines . . . I would use cymbals more than the average drummer, and I realized that if I played the four-four on the bass I could work different patterns on the cymbals.32

31 Frank, 284.
32 Earl Young, quoted in Lawrence, 120.
The new beat, with its four-on-the-floor emphasis in the bass, provided a framework that allowed DJs to transition more easily between records and keep dancers on the dance floor for longer stretches. Later, this somewhat standardized beat would facilitate new approaches by prominent DJs who, paralleling similar contemporaneous developments in hip-hop, would loop, lengthen, and remix their own versions of dance singles.

Disco was not limited by these rhythmic characteristics and DJs, the real stars of the scene, played music according to their own tastes. In tandem with disco’s emergence as a mainstream phenomenon, an increasing number of white performers, including rockers such as Rod Stewart and the Rolling Stones, began to record their own disco singles. Michael Fresco, the owner of the Flamingo, suggests that it was the distinction between DJs’ musical choices (i.e., the ability to select musical styles closely associated with predominantly white or predominantly black artists) that primarily influenced the racial make up in his club. In fact, a combination of factors including musical selection, door policies, and general feel of a particular club had an impact on a club’s racial demographics. As noted above, some clubs catered to primarily white audiences, including gay clubs, which left black gay participants to create their own spaces as well as social and professional networks. Rather than assert that there are particular musical styles and sounds that divide audiences among racial lines, I contend that it was involvement and socialization in these networks that might have led to a shared musical taste and style that contributed to the racial division found in many disco spaces.

---

Lawrence, 139.
This intersection of racism and homophobia led to the establishment of what Lawrence calls the black gay network within the scene, and it was in this informal social and professional network that participants, including DJs, interacted and shared musical ideas. In her study of gay American modernist composers in the mid-twentieth century, Nadine Hubbs argues that through their shared marginalized identities as homosexuals, gay composers including Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson formed professional and social circles in which they influenced each other’s compositional techniques and approaches. This does not suggest that there is an inherently queer form of composition; rather, their queerness influenced gay composers’ personal and professional lives in such a way that it had an impact on their musical output. Similarly, I do not wish to suggest that there were particular records or artists that provided the soundtrack for black queer spaces exclusively. Instead, it was the formation of spaces that acknowledged and welcomed black queer participants and the networks that emerged out of necessity that might have led to a perceived or actual distinction between the musical styles that were preferred by different racialized groups.

By the late 1970s there was a large and vocal movement proclaiming that “Disco Sucks!” This anti-disco sentiment coalesced in the now-infamous “Disco Demolition Night” that took place on July 12, 1979 at Chicago’s Cominsky Park during the Chicago White Sox versus the Detroit Tigers baseball game. Steve Dahl, a radio DJ for Chicago’s WLUP-FM 98, inspired tens of thousands of his listeners to bring disco records to be destroyed during the intermission, and the result was a riot in which attendees stormed

the field, rushed the gates, and wreaked havoc on the stadium. As Hubbs, Frank, and others have argued, at the root of this demonstration and its participants’ rallying cry of “Disco Sucks!” was a desire to reclaim white masculinity’s dominance in mainstream music by privileging album-oriented rock (AOR) over dance music. Frank writes:

The sexual and gender politics of the antidisco backlash marked a moment in which a primarily white male and middle-class audience sought to assert their masculinity within heterosocial spaces. Put differently, the backlash against disco saw heterosexual men attack disco music because they believed that disco culture limited their ability to interact with women, excluding them from heterosocial spaces, imperiled their heterosexuality, and privileged an inauthentic form of masculinity.

Although the relationship between homophobia and discophobia has therefore been clearly outlined, Frank de-emphasizes the ways in which the “authentic” form of masculinity that anti-disco protestors championed was also racialized. He acknowledges that the participants in the anti-disco movement were primarily white men, but fails to stress the ways in which masculinity and whiteness are co-constructed and performed, and that the backlash against disco was fueled not by homophobia alone, but by the intersection of homophobia and racism. As Hubbs argues, participants in the Cominsky field demonstration were “defending not just themselves but society from the encroachment of the racial other, of ‘foreign’ values, and of ‘disco fags’.” She suggests that the backlash against disco demonstrated participants’ recognition that disco

---

35 Frank.
36 Ibid., 280.
37 Hubbs, “‘I Will Survive’,” 231.
“constituted a coalition around shared experiences of difference,” not of sexuality, gender, or race alone, but across these differences.\textsuperscript{38}

The homophobic and racist (as well as sexist and classist) backlash against disco did not kill the genre, but it did succeed in pushing disco back underground to the gay and black (and gay black) clubs from which it had emerged. The music industry distanced itself from the controversy by relabeling disco as “dance music,” and the scene moved back into underground clubs and away from mainstream attention.\textsuperscript{39} In the crucible of predominantly black queer spaces, several regional offspring genres emerged, including what came to be known as house, so named for the Chicago club from which it emerged, The Warehouse. As a direct descendent from disco, and attributed primarily to the innovations of former Loft attendee and DJ Frankie Knuckles, house music is the sound that accompanied black gay dancers in The Warehouse and other Chicago spaces. It found its way across the black gay urban American landscape, eventually returning to New York City partly through the work of another former Loft devotee, DJ Larry Levan.

Scholars have undoubtedly located house’s musical beginnings in Chicago, but it is worth noting that the so-called godfather of house, Warehouse DJ Frankie Knuckles, was a former Loft-devotee who cut his teeth DJing in New York City discos. At the Warehouse, which opened in 1977, he found that the local black gay patrons, or “kids,” wanted high-energy music to fuel their dancing from very late Saturday nights through Sunday afternoons. Knuckles and other local DJs began pushing the tempos to 120 beats-

\textsuperscript{38} Hubbs, 241.
per-minute (bpm) or faster in order to satisfy these dancers. Like disco, therefore, house developed as a series of DJ-promoted technological innovations designed to enhance the dancing experience. In addition to increasing the tempo to create a high-energy sound, Knuckles and other Chicago DJs began to make their own mixes of disco and other records (including soul, Philly, and R&B) by looping, re-mixing, and adding electronic rhythm tracks. The new style maintained disco’s four-on-the-floor bass drum rhythm, but introduced electronically programmed drumbeats and more complex cross-rhythms. In house, everything and everyone became subservient to the rhythm: vocal and instrumental sounds were reduced and reintroduced as rhythmic flourishes and repeated motives, not as focal points.

There is no question that house music originated in a particular black queer location. Like disco, house is both a sound or musical style and a scene, and, as such, it cannot be divorced from the black gay clubs in which it developed. As Anthony Thomas points out, not all those involved in the house music scene were gay, and not everyone who was gay was involved in the scene, but there is an important connection between the groups and the musical developments.  

He writes, “the sound, the beat, and the rhythm [of house] have risen up from the dancing sensibilities of urban gay Afro-Americs” (emphasis in original). The black queer origins of house, like many contributions of queer and trans people of color to the struggle for LGBTQ rights and visibility, have been subject to revisionist white-washing. Writing in 1995, Thomas noted that house had begun to radiate out to white gay communities as well, and expressed concern that

40 Thomas, “The House The Kids Built.”
41 Ibid., 438.
listeners would cease to remember house’s roots in African and African-American musical traditions. Brian Currid confirms the existence of a universalist narrative that places black queer cultural production under the umbrella of an un-raced (i.e., white) gay tradition:

Built around the reconfiguration of the sounds and styles of disco, House serves as a site where queers create historical narratives of continuity across time and space, centered around the continuous production and consumption of meaning in these musical signifiers. At the same time, the construction of these narratives in such a dynamic and contested realm of signification as music, no less as a music that is explicitly identified as African American, provides an alternative to unilinear white middle class understandings of queer history. House thus powerfully accesses the primary contradictions of “we are family,” as it is used simultaneously to mobilize a notion of community which performs the ontological stability of the “we” across time and space, and to defer that very stability, critically problematizing who and what this “we” is.

Currid not only places house in a queer lineage with disco, but emphasizes the black queer lineage, pointing to clubs as spaces in which black queers could avoid the homophobia of predominantly straight black clubs and the racism of predominantly white gay clubs, and challenge the existing narratives of queer history that marginalize, rather than center, the roles of black queers in the construction of gay identity and community.

Despite Currid and Thomas’ warnings against downplaying its black queer origins, what little house music scholarship has been done in the past twenty years has indeed largely erased this history. An illustrative example is a 2001 article by Stephen Amico, who discusses house music and its relationship to queer dancing without even mentioning race, despite the important ways in which race and sexuality are co-

---

42 Thomas.
43 Currid, 173.
44 Ibid., 173.
constructed, including in queer spaces. Amico examines the ways in which “various symbols of stereotypical masculinity operate to inform the musical discourse” at a specific New York City club. Despite his focus on the relationship between physical appearance and musical discourse, and the problematic use of terms such as “African war dance” and “tribe,” which one of his informants used to describe communal in a queer dance space, pass unremarked upon, the only time Amico mentions race is to note the prevalence of black women singers in house music. Not only is this study disconnected from the particular black queer history of house, it also erases black queer and trans participants from any contemporary dance music scene, and participates in the problematic universalization of gay culture which Currid urged us to resist.

House, which spawned a large number of other house music genres, including garage, acid house, jungle house, Hi-NRG, Detroit techno, and many more, did eventually take root in New York City, where black queer disco began. In addition to influencing the soundscape of the city’s black queer clubs, such as the Paradise Garage, it became the soundtrack for another important queer black and latinx cultural institution: the Ballroom scene. Ballroom culture, or ball culture, is a largely underground community network that consists of a structure of “houses” whose members compete in balls where participants dress up and engage in highly gendered performances. Consisting primarily of black and latinx LGBTQ members, ball culture first emerged in the 1960s in Harlem, where black drag queens, largely excluded from white drag balls,

46 Amico, 359.
began to host their own events, making it a development contemporaneous to and sometimes intersecting with the disco scene.\footnote{See Michael Cunningham, “The Slap of Love,” in Open City Magazine No. 6 (1996), 175 and Lawrence, Love Saves the Day, 46.} Participants formed houses, often named after fashion labels, such as House of Chanel or House of Dior, and began to host balls where participants competed against members of other houses in categories such as best dress. According to DJ David DePino, in the early 1970s Paris Dupree, founder of the House of Dupree, began adding dance moves and poses given in time to the music heard outside Footsteps club. He explains:

> Paris had a Vogue magazine in her bag, and while she was dancing she took it out, opened it up to a page where a model was posing, and then stopped in that pose on the beat. Then she turned to the next page and stopped in the new pose, again on the beat. Another queen came up and did another pose in front of Paris, and then Paris went in front of her and did another pose. This was all shade – they were trying to make a prettier pose than each other – and it soon caught on at the balls. At first they called it posing, and then, because it started from Vogue magazine, they called it vogueing [sic].\footnote{David DePino, as quoted in Lawrence, 46–7.}

While voguing styles have changed and developed over the past several decades, as documented in Jennie Livingston’s well-known ballroom documentary, Paris Is Burning (1990) and, more recently, in Marlon M. Bailey’s account of the contemporary Detroit scene, it remains perhaps ballroom’s most enduring legacy and the one most easily recognized by outsiders.\footnote{Marlon M. Bailey, Butch Queens Up In Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2016).} This recognition can be partly attributed to the popularity of
Madonna’s 1990 hit, “Vogue,” despite the controversy over whether or not her use of the
dance styles associated with ballroom culture were appropriative or not.\textsuperscript{50}

Ballroom culture has its own gender system that determines in which categories
of competition one will compete. Bailey identifies six gender categories, which are
actually categories in which sex, gender, and sexuality converge:

1. \textit{Butch Queens Up in Drag} (gay men who perform in drag but do not
take hormones and do not live as women).
2. \textit{Femme Queens} (transgender women or MTF at various stages of
gender transition involving hormonal or surgical processes, such as
breast implants).
3. \textit{Butches} (transgender men or FTM at various stages of gender
transition involving hormonal therapy, breast wrapping or removal,
and so on or masculine lesbians or females appearing as men
irrespective of their sexuality.)
4. \textit{Women} (biological females who live as women and are lesbian,
straight identified, or queer).
5. \textit{Men/Trade} (biological males who live as men, are very masculine,
and are straight identified or nongay identified).
6. \textit{Butch Queens} (biological males who live and identify as gay or
bisexual men and are or can be masculine, hypermasculine (as in
thug masculinity), or very feminine.\textsuperscript{51}

As Bailey notes, this system both relies on and challenges the more widely accepted
male/female gender binary. It also provides more options for people who were assigned a
male gender at birth than people who were assigned female, placing Butch Queens in a

\textsuperscript{50} For more about this controversy, see Jesse Green, “Paris Has Burned,” first published in the \textit{New York Times} on April 18, 1993, available on nytimes.com, \url{http://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/18/style/paris-has-burned.html?pagewanted=all}, accessed September 8, 2016. For more recent commentary on issues of
vogue and appropriation, including contemporary resonances, see Benji Hart, “\textit{Vogue is Not For You:}
Deciding Whom We Give Our Art To,” posted at radfag.com on May 31, 2015, \url{https://radfag.com/2015/05/31/vogue-is-not-for-you-deciding-whom-we-give-our-art-to/}, accessed
September 8, 2016.

\textsuperscript{51} Bailey, \textit{Butch Queens Up in Pumps}, 36.
particularly privileged position.\textsuperscript{52} Additionally, because these categories exist within the framework of a predominantly black and latinx subculture they can be understood as implicitly racialized gender categories as well. Drawing on E. Patrick Johnson’s concept of racial performativity, Bailey argues that Ballroom participants engage with constructions of racialized gender and sexual normativity:

For the Black LGBT members of the Ballroom community, the discursive meanings of race and gender serve as the means through which racialized gender and sexual identities are rehearsed at ball events and performed in the public sphere. Ballroom members take up, coconstruct, and rehearse the normative but shifting scripts of Black femininity and masculinity to have them judged by the “experts,” as it were, in the Ballroom community.\textsuperscript{53}

The ballroom gender system, while offering options outside a normative binary system, relies on a traditional dichotomy of masculine and feminine gender expression, as well as racialized constructions of normative gender and sexuality, which shape the performance/competition genres and is further underscored by musical choices that accompany competitions.

House music plays an important role in the construction, performance, and maintenance of these gender categories. As a popular music idiom that developed in black queer clubs, that association with black queer culture translated to its use in house, as it did for disco in the early years of the balls.\textsuperscript{54} Bailey observes that while the musical styles played by DJs at balls have expanded to include R&B and hip-hop, house music

\textsuperscript{52} Bailey notes that in Ballroom, as in the larger Black LGBT community, men occupy a privileged position (Bailey, 44).

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 57.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 152.
has remained important to the scene.\textsuperscript{55} His description of the use of music during competitions is worth quoting here at length, as it provides insight into the close relationship between black LGBTQ history and contemporary music, dance, and gender performance:

I have participated in balls in which the DJ played R&B songs to underscore Sex Siren categories for Butch Queens, Femme Queens, or female figured participants. Because of their sensual, smooth, and sexy sound, R&B songs like “Love Hangover,” recorded by Diana Ross, an iconic figure for Ballroom members, and “Nasty Girl” by Vanity 6 are frequently played. Another song that continues to maintain popularity is “Love Is the Message,” by MSFB, a tune from the early Black gay club scene in Chicago. This has become the signature song for Old Way Vogue . . .

Yet I want to highlight the beats of house music because of how important it is to New Way Vogue performance, a dance form and competitive category that best exemplifies the crucial function of the performance system and its actors and the ritualized practices that undergird this system at ball events . . . Many of my interlocutors said that the prominence and repetition of the beat in house music guides their performance, putting them in a zone that enables them to block everything out of their minds and focus on their walk while still feeling and hearing the beat and the support from their fellow Ballroom members on the sidelines.\textsuperscript{56}

As Bailey describes, certain styles and even particular songs are used to reinforce the style and gender expression tied to any particular competitive category, with house music serving as one of the most constant and well-recognized genres that also invokes a history of black LGBTQ life. He also acknowledges that while hip-hop has gradually become more and more popular and included in Ballroom, it is often situated as dichotomous to house music, as it has been outside of the subculture, with house music representing a more feminine expression and hip-hop articulating a hardened black masculinity that

\textsuperscript{55} Bailey, 152-3.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 153-4.
serves to underscore performances in masculine categories. In their use of music genres, then, Ballroom members reinforce binary gender categories while simultaneously broadening them and challenging their normative constructions. This usage also draws out differences in the ways hip-hop and house are received (i.e., as masculine or feminine genres, respectively), while also placing them together in a queer context that complicates their gendered boundaries and calls attention to their shared black queer roots.

Like the DJs at Ballroom competitions, I position house in a specifically black queer musical and cultural lineage that begins with disco (or even earlier, if we consider its relation to black queer Harlem of the 1920s and 30s), and put it in conversation with contemporary hip-hop. House and hip-hop developed along separate paths, but both continued to have queer participants, even if those participants remained much more visible in the former than in the latter. Contemporary black queer rappers based in New York City are not, therefore, an anomaly, nor are they antithetical to hip-hop’s values. They are, however, among the first to be openly identified as queer and to receive much mainstream visibility. A full account of New York City’s black queer heritage contextualizes these rappers’ black queer subjectivities and the ways in which they perform race, gender, and sexuality through hip-hop.

Queer New York City Rappers and Ballroom Invocations

Many openly queer black rappers based in or around New York City reference aspects of Ballroom culture in their work in order to articulate their black queer identities and position themselves in conversation with black queer cultural practices largely native
to New York City. Black gay male rappers in particular, including Le1f, Cakes da Killa, and Zebra Katz, negotiate the assumed masculine stance of most male rappers through references to Ballroom and other aspects of black queer life to signify that their hardness comes not from heteronormative masculinity but from their experiences of queer community and survival within a homophobic world. Like the Ballroom gender system itself, these and other rappers use Ballroom language to open additional possibilities for being within the realm of hip-hop.

I place these New York City-based black and openly queer artists within an emergent and shifting genre that I call Ballroom rap. As noted above, many of these artists resist the idea that their work constitutes a genre of queer or gay rap, especially given their musical diversity and sometimes-divergent subject matter. However, they all invoke a shared cultural reference point in order to articulate a black queer identity, and in that way their work places them not only within a lineage of black queer cultural and musical production within that city and other northern American cities, but also in conversation with each other. As part of a shared musical genre, each of these artists reflects some of the norms of American hip-hop, including a shared vocal rap delivery and bragging lyrics, but they also incorporate elements of New York City’s distinctly black queer musical and cultural lineage that is manifested in the Ballroom scene.

As members of shared genre, Ballroom rap artists negotiate the pervasive heteronormativity of mainstream rap with more or less explicit references to black queer culture. Considering these artists as part of a genre grouping allows us to analyze the similarities that place them in conversation with each other, which journalists have
already observed by lumping them together in trend pieces. These articles create a framework from which listeners understand New York City’s black queer rappers, but they also highlight ways in which this framework already existed. Eric Drott argues that genres can be understood not just as groupings of music that share structural or even stylistic similarities, but also as unstable and nonexclusive categories that are constantly being created and reconstructed. He writes:

Conceiving genre as something that is enacted and not given a priori, as something that is defined in “relational” terms and not “substantive” ones, sheds light on the conflicts of interpretation to which music can give rise – conflicts that take place not just between separate persons and groups but within the individual subject, as different musical competences and different sites of aesthetic investment intersect, interact, and interfere with one another.⁵⁷

In the genre I have outlined here, musical competences include not just knowledge of hip-hop but also knowledge of Ballroom culture and other aspects of black queer life. Additionally, these artists demonstrate ways in which these cultures (hip-hop and Ballroom) can relate to each other. Through their negotiations of these seemingly divergent but actually related cultures, they enact a new genre that is not based on black queer identity alone, but on the cultural expressions developed within black queer communities in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Ballroom rap artists use different modes to reference Ballroom culture and other aspects of a black queer cultural and musical lineage particular to New York in order to articulate a particular black queer identity in their performances. In her study of Five Percenter Rap, Felicia M. Miyakawa identifies four ways in which Five Percenters share

⁵⁷ Eric Drott, “The End(s) of Genre,” in *Journal of Music Theory* v. 57 n. 1 (Spring 2013), 4.
the teachings of or reference their faith through music: lyrics; flow, layering, and rupture; sampling and musical borrowing; and album packaging and organization. Similarly, Ballroom rap artists embed their references through different means. They use lyrics that employ Ballroom slang and/or conjure up aspects of the Ballroom scene. Their musical approaches can be quite diverse, but some invoke the sounds of house music as a way to reinforce their musical and cultural lineage, or use vocal samples from Ballroom members in their tracks. Visual images presented through album artwork and music videos also enable rappers to access aspects of Ballroom culture, including dance, fashion, and gender presentations that are more closely aligned with the Ballroom system than with a traditional biological-based binary. In the following section, I examine how black queer rappers use lyrics, sonic characteristics, and visual images to place them in a distinctly black queer musical and cultural lineage.

**Lyrical References**

Le1f, the artist with perhaps the most visible profile of this cluster of queer New York City rappers (as evidenced by his performance on a major network late night show), also has among the most explicitly sexual lyrics for a queer rapper. His songs leave little room for confusion that he is interested primarily in sex with other men. In his lyrics he also articulates his blackness, incorporating Jamaican slang terms, such as “batty man,” and other phrases that signify the experiences of growing up in multi-ethnic New York City neighborhoods. Most importantly, the combination of all of these references, and his

---

use of Ballroom slang and culture, articulates the overlapping communities with which he identifies.

Take, for instance, “Wut,” the track that Le1f performed during his appearance on the Letterman show. The performance was significant not only because Le1f was the first openly queer rapper to perform on a late night television program, but also because he was explicit about that identity through his performance. Following an introductory rap that includes the first part of the chorus, the first verse of the song opens with the line, “Came through in the clutch / Stomping like I’m up in Loubitons.” In this first line Le1f combines typical rap braggadocio (performing through adversity or difficulty) with a reference to the Ballroom scene, specifically to the gender performance category Bailey identifies as Butch Queens Up in Pumps. Another Ballroom reference appears at the end of the second verse, when Le1f asks, “[I’m] Mother of the house. Care to see me in a new pose?” These references point to the importance of Ballroom in the construction and performance of his black queer identity.

Le1f draws on many different influences and interests in “Wut” and embeds them in his lyrics. The intersection of many of his identities is evident in the hook:

Wut it is? Wut is up? Wut is wut?
What it do? Wut it don’t?
Wut it is? Wut is up? What is wut?
What it do? Wut it don’t?
I’m getting light in my loafers
And I stay getting life ‘til life’s over
I’m butter like cocoa
L O L O L O L I’m loco

The line, “I’m getting light in my loafers” reclaims a slang phrase that has been used at least since the 1950s to refer to homosexual men, who were also stereotypically
considered effeminate. Gay men have also historically used “light in the loafers” as a euphemism to identify each other without explicitly outing someone as gay. “I stay getting life” also draws on Ballroom slang that has crossed over to straight communities, and is derived from the saying that something is “giving me life,” meaning it is something to be very excited about. In this context, Le1f suggests that he is living his life to the fullest. “I’m butter like cocoa” is a play on several word meanings, such as being smooth like butter, but cocoa butter specifically, which is both a skin care product highly associated with black Americans, and also a slang term for semen coming from a black male. Finally, in using “loco,” a Spanish term for crazy, to refer to himself in combination with later lyrics such as “Rolling up a personal and chomping on a mango,” references the particular blended influences of black and latinx cultures in New York City especially. Thus this short hook, in the context of the entire track, provides much information about Le1f’s identity(s), particularly his intersecting cultural and geographical reference points.

“Hey,” the title track off Le1f’s 2014 EP, is also full of references to Ballroom and other aspects of black queer life. Lines such as “If you feeling cunt enter circles with your bubble butt” and “I’ll be serving my body telling them, ‘About face’ ” invoke the language and rituals of competitive balls, and employ them in a sexually suggestive way. Specifically, the term “cunt” is used in Ballroom circles to mean feminine and is used to describe certain vogue categories that emphasize femininity, such as “Vogue Femme Soft and Cunt.” It can also mean fabulous or diva-like, depending on the context. Other competition categories include face and body categories, in which contestants are judged
on their facial or physical appearance, respectively. Le1f invokes these well-known
categories, but imbues them with additional meaning; rather than describing the actual
walks or competitions, he uses the language of the Ball to speak to members of primarily
black (and latinx) queer communities who are familiar with that language. Similarly, the
hook of the song uses Ballroom language to engage in rap braggadocio:

I steps into the cut and all the kids say (hey)
I get through to the showroom and the assistant say (hey)
I grace the floor and the children say (hey)
If you getting it how you live, let me hear you say (hey)

Terms like “the kids” and “the children” reference the kinship and hierarchical structures
of Ballroom houses, where housemothers and housefathers serve as leaders who take
responsibility for the performance and well being of their “children,” or other members of
their house. Club culture and Ballroom culture are also conflated here, where kids could
refer to club kids or house kids, a population with a large degree of overlap. The “floor”
could be either or both a dance floor or the floor of Ballroom competitions. “Hey,” the
title of the song and recurring response in the hook evokes the familiar vocal patterns and
cadences of many effeminate men’s voices greeting each other. Following the hook,
Le1f’s electronically manipulated voice sings “Now get down, g-g-get down” twice
across registers, from high to low, not only offering a moment of word painting but also
sonically suggesting a range of feminine to masculine gender expressions embodied in
one person’s voice. This range, in the context of the lyrical content, reflects the multiple
gender positions of the Ballroom gender system, challenging hip-hop’s traditional gender
binary.

59 For more on the kinship structure of the houses, see Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*. 
Zebra Katz’s best known hit, “Ima Read” (featuring Njena Reddd Foxxx, 2012) is a perfect example of the crossover of Ballroom elements into hip-hop culture. To “read” someone in Ballroom vernacular means to tell someone about her or himself, generally in an honest but negative way. The entire song is a read about reading someone, unfolding over a minimalist track in a nearly monotone delivery. After a repetitive introduction section, Katz raps in the first verse:

Ima read that bitch
Ima school that bitch
Ima take that bitch to college
Ima give that bitch some knowledge

And in the second verse:

School’s in Ima read that bitch
Ima write a dissertation to excuse my shit
When I act out of line and I spit and I kick
And I rip and I dip and I yah trick
What bitch you don’t like my shit?
What bitch you wanna fight me trick?
In the back of the classroom sittin’ talking shit
Better shut yo ass up before I reach you real quick

If one is familiar with the culture and ritual of balls, it is easy to picture a scene unfolding that involves the dips and turns of a competitor walking, responding to the competition with witty banter and threatening to read them or more. With trophies on the line, one can picture a confrontation escalating from shit talking to physical confrontation, but here that competitive tension meets rap braggadocio and the tension is released lyrically.

Unlike Le1f, whose lyrics are graphic and focus on sex acts between men, Katz’s lyrics are less sexually explicit but rely on cultural references to code them as gay. Katz has stated:
It’s a fine line that I’m playing here. I’m trying to see how cleverly I can walk a tightrope. You have [fans from] the ball culture, and then you have hip-hop heads who are gonna say this is hard because it’s very minimal and to-the-point.60

Katz intentionally draws on aspects of Ballroom culture to reference his own black queer identity, rather than incorporating graphic sexual lyrics that leave little room for doubt. Ballroom slang in this track becomes coded lyrics that, while certainly enjoyable to the average hip-hop listener, carry additional queer meanings to audiences familiar with the particular black queer culture from which the language comes.

Like Le1f, Cakes da Killa uses sexually explicit imagery to articulate an unquestionably gay identity, and he also refers to aspects of Ballroom culture in his lyrics. He is perhaps most known for his track “I Run this Club,” which certainly invokes the gay club that has historically played an important role in black queer communities (and possibly the hip-hop club as well), but other tracks draw clearer connections between his work as an openly queer black rapper and his cultural lineage that relates to the Ballroom scene. Lines such as “I know niggas be gagging” and “kikiing in multi-million dollar mansions” in “Living Gud, Eating Good” from his Hunger Pangs mixtape (2014), “I keep a trade in the clutch” in “Goodie Goodies” from his mixtape The Eulogy (2013), and “I mean its shade on the panel / how you claiming legend when ya shit is all samples” in “Oven Ready,” also from Hunger Pangs. The titles of tracks “It’s Not Ovah” and “Get 2 Werk” (Hunger Pangs) also draw explicitly on Ballroom slang.

Cakes uses Ballroom vocabulary generally in service of his style of brag rap; he combines the competitive nature of Balls with the long tradition of rap boasting to

---

60 Katz as quoted in Battan, “We Invented Swag.”
suggest that he is both highly desirable to other men but also street smart and capable of inflicting harm on those who would threaten or offend him. He also uses terms such as cunt and pussy in the way that they are often utilized in the Ballroom scene to indicate femininity, especially his own, but suggests that femininity does not necessarily indicate weakness, but can be a characteristic from which men such as himself can draw strength. This ideal is one that is firmly rooted in Ballroom culture, where Butch Queens occupy a privileged position in the gender system.

Musical References

In addition to lyrical references, many New York City artists make musical gestures that recall Ballroom culture and the music with which it is closely tied. These musical references add an additional layer of meaning and place them directly in a musical lineage stemming from the black queer experiences that prompted the emergence of disco and house musics. There are two main ways in which musical references appear: samples of music that recalls this lineage, especially disco or house hits, and more general use of styles that recall these genres and incorporate shared musical aspects.

One clear example of the sampling approach is found in “Soda,” a track by Le1f and his frequent collaborator Boody from their EP, *Liquid* (2012). The track heavily samples Masters at Work’s “The Ha Dance,” which as Bailey notes, is a widely used track for Ballroom walks, especially in New Way Vogue categories.61 While the sample is at times distorted, anyone familiar with the original track, as all Ballroom participants

61 Bailey, 154.
or spectators are, would immediately recognize it and associate it with the Ball scene. This relationship is underscored in the music video for the track, which features dancers performing different styles, including vogue.

Cakes da Killa also uses musical samples to reference a black queer musical and cultural lineage. He opens his 2013 full-length mixtape, *The Eulogy*, with a sped-up sample of Donna Summer’s performance of “MacArthur Park” (1978), manipulating and slightly distorting the voice of one of the most recognizable disco divas as she sings a line that mentions cake. This sample allows him to play on his own name, Cakes da Killa, while also invoking the queer associations of disco. The aforementioned “It’s Not Ovah,” from *Hunger Pangs*, also features a sped-up sample, this time of First Choice’s 1977 hit “Let No Man Put Asunder,” which has been used in multiple house music tracks, including Frankie Knuckle’s own 1983 remix.

On the *Eulogy*’s “Life Alert,” rather than a musical sample Cakes includes an interlude that consists of a recording of an unidentified Ball participant stating, “I’m one of the top upcoming children, legendary. You have legendary children and upcoming legendary children.” Not only does this recording bring Ballroom culture directly into the track to position Cakes’ music within a black queer ethos, it also connects the unnamed participant’s self-confident bragging (that he is one of the “top” upcoming competitors who will reach legendary status) with the long tradition of rap boastng. Cakes draws connections between two seemingly disparate cultures: hypermasculine heterosexual rap and queer Ballroom, demonstrating that they need not be incompatible.
Other artists, such as Zebra Katz, are subtler in their musical choices, avoiding samples and producing music in a style reminiscent of 1980s and 1990s house, the era that provides much of the soundtrack for Balls. Katz’s tracks “Tear the House Up” (2014) and “I Bad Bitch” (2014) both sound like house tracks, from the four-on-the-floor beats with snare and handclap embellishments, to the minimalist, at times static synthesized bass lines with timbres reminiscent of those created using the Roland TB-303 bass line machines that were so popular in dance music during the last two decades of the twentieth century. The biggest difference between Katz’s tracks and those produced by house artists is that the lyrics play a more centralized role, rather than serving as additional rhythmic material or momentary accents. In this way, Katz, like Cakes da Killa, combines musical elements of two styles that are already closely related but frequently understood to be at odds: the beats and synthesized sounds of house with the word play and sharp delivery of hip-hop.

House music also plays an important role in the musical output of Azealia Banks, the artist from this cluster of New York City rappers who has received the most widespread attention outside of the local scene. As hip-hop critics Ebro Darden and Peter Rosenberg have noted, the incorporation of house is in fact a distinctive aspect of Banks’s musical style that, along with her lyrical abilities, sets her apart from her peers.62 She is best known for her first break-through single, “212,” released on the 1991 EP. At

the end of the first verse of this track, Banks offers a blatant description of a queer sex act in a brief break from her threatening lyrics, rapping

Now she wanna lick my plum in the evenin’
And fit that tongue, tongue d-deep in
I guess that cunt getting’ eaten

The last line is repeated several times while the music builds until the bass drops out, a common gesture in various dance music genres but especially in house. Like Le1f and Cakes da Killa, Banks is graphically explicit in this track, but there are no overt references to Ball culture other than in its musical style. Similarly, the tracks “Chasing Time” (Broke with Expensive Taste) and her recent single “That Big Big Beat” (2016) share the house music sound, from the danceable beat to the synthesizer accents. She also sings on these tracks, alternating between vocals reminiscent of the divas whose voices appear over house tracks and her tough rapper persona.

Like other black women rappers, Banks must negotiate the racialized gender expectations placed upon them both within hip-hop and in the larger culture. As James McNally argues in his study of “212”, Banks rearticulates black female identity by “confronting the listener and viewer with lyrics and images that assert her sexuality, while at the same time presenting herself as independent and empowered and avoiding the kind of objectification common in the music and videos of previous female rappers who had achieved mainstream success [such as Nicki Minaj].”63 In support of this argument, McNally points to Banks’ use of the term “cunt” in “212,” noting that not only does her use of the word in this context highlight her bisexual identity, it also presents a

---

reframing of “cunt” in a positive light, contrary to its derogatory connotations in most other hip-hop contexts. He writes:

Banks’ willingness to discuss and validate sex with another woman . . . distinguishes her from most mainstream female rappers and challenges prevailing heteronormative standards in hip-hop. Taken together, Banks’s use of “cunt” permits her to reassert her sexuality on her own terms. To be sure, Banks’s use of the term to denigrate a female rival raises potential charges of hypocrisy; despite this possibility, she has characterized the word as empowering: “To be cunty is to be feminine and to be . . . aware of yourself. Nobody’s fucking with that inner strength and delicateness.”

McNally’s assessment of Banks’s rearticulation of black female identity is correct, but incomplete, as it fails to take fully into account the rapper’s use of Ballroom aesthetics to rearticulate a black queer female identity. As noted above, “cunt” or “cunty” has evolved in Ballroom parlance to mean exactly what Banks defines it as: feminine and strong. While butch queens or trans-feminine individuals within Ballroom culture use the term most often, Banks, a cisgender woman, draws on that usage as she also negotiates racialized gender expectations. Furthermore, while McNally notes Banks’s preference for house-influenced tracks, he does not acknowledge house music’s relationship to black queer communities in New York City and Ballroom culture specifically, a relationship that is embedded in Banks’s work. The influence of Ballroom culture in Banks’s work is also evident in some of her performance choices; for example, on June 3, 2012 she hosted a performance she called the “Mermaid Ball,” a clear reference to competitive Balls that featured other Ballroom-influenced artists such as House of LaDosha, a performance

---

collective that includes the musical artists La’fem Ladosha (formerly Dosha Devastation) and Cunty Crawford and whose musical collaborations include “B/M/F” (Black Model Famous), a remix of rapper Rick Ross’ “B.M.F.” (Blowin Money Fast), and “Burning like Paris.”

Banks not only rearticulates black female identity, she rearticulates a black queer female identity, and she does so using black queer terms. In positioning Banks within the genre of Ballroom rap and locating her within a black queer cultural lineage specific to New York City, I argue that she shares certain stylistic and aesthetic values and cultural reference points with other artists in this genre. Drott proposes that by “relating a piece of music with one set of texts and not some other, individuals (including analysts) make an implicit judgment regarding what kinds of knowledge are relevant for ‘correctly’ understanding the work in question.” Indeed, I suggest that, as McNally’s study demonstrates, black queer knowledge, or at least knowledge of the particular location of black queer identities, is necessary for if not a “correct” understanding Banks’s work, at least a more complete understanding. Placing Banks’s work in conversation with that of other Ballroom rap artists helps make visible the influence of Ballroom and other black queer cultures on their work.

**Visual References**

Ballroom culture places a large emphasis on the visual, with most competition categories focusing on appearance above all else. Many Ballroom rap artists similarly

---

65 Drott, “End(s) of Genre), 14.
incorporate visual aspects of queer culture into their performances, some of which reference the Ball scene. *Haute couture* fashions, voguing, and drag find their way into rappers’ stage appearances and music videos. Often these images rely on the close association of fashion with Ball culture. The video for Katz’s “Tear The House Up” has the rapper appearing in a number of designer outfits, to the extent that an entire *mtv.com* article is dedicated to a look-by-look analysis of the styles (figure 4.1). 66 Fashion has always been an important aspect of Ballroom; the original houses were named after designer brands, and there are specific Ballroom categories dedicated to emulating fashion shows in both walking style and appearance. Indeed, the very term house comes from the fashion industry, so it makes sense that artists would honor that past by engaging in visual aesthetics of the culture.

Additionally, artists often feature recognizable styles of dance and performance, especially voguing, in their music videos. As mentioned above, the video for Le1f’s track “Soda” features a dancer performing vogue moves, and the rapper himself engages in voguing in the video “Koi,” a track off his 2015 EP *Riot Boi*. Thanks in part to Madonna’s 1990 hit “Vogue” and its accompanying music video, voguing has become perhaps the most recognizable aspect of Ballroom culture to non-participants. Incorporating vogue dance styles in music videos is, therefore, the clearest way an artist can reference Ballroom culture in a way that resonates with audiences who are not Ballroom participants.

Drag also plays an important role in Ballroom’s visual aesthetic. Not all Ballroom participants compete in drag; as Bailey notes, despite being such a highly visible aspect of the culture, drag is only one of many practices in the scene. Ballroom members who compete in drag participate in categories such as realness, vogue performance, and body and face categories, all of which require the participant to “pass,” or appear as cisgender women by mainstream standards.

Realness, according to Bailey, is a “theory of urban performance that emerges from the Ballroom community” in which race, gender, and sexual identity are co-performed. He writes:

> The range of performative gender and sexual identities that are performed at the balls are framed within a discourse of blackness. Mirroring forms of Black gender and sexual performance by means of which members are largely oppressed, the Ballroom community understands that the material realities of their lives (including their safety) are largely contingent on how they are interpellated, how they are seen by and within the optic lens

---

67 Bailey, 38.
68 Ibid., 60.
69 Ibid., 65.
of White supremacy on the one hand and Black heteronormativity on the other.\(^{70}\)

The criteria for realness, then, for both Butch Queens and Femme Queens, is established by the Ballroom community as a strategic response to mainstream constructions of race, gender, and sexuality that both resists and reinscribes those constructions.

Within realness competitions, however, there is one category, usually performed by a Butch Queen, called Realness with a Twist in which the competitor “displays both extremes of the masculine-to-feminine spectrum in one performance.”\(^{71}\) The goal of this performance is to enact both “thug realness,” or heightened heterosexual masculinity, and “soft and cunt” femininity successfully. Performers who compete in the Realness with a Twist category highlight the ways in which all gender expressions are performative but also reliant on normative notions of masculinity and femininity.

Mykki Blanco, the stage persona of performance artist and rapper Michael Quattlebaum Jr., embodies some aspects of the Realness with a Twist performance, but also challenges both the concept of realness as a desirable category and the dichotomous construction of feminine and masculine. Blanco’s performances and music videos feature the performer in various states of drag, but never a drag that would satisfy Ballroom judges’ requirements for realness. He often appears with a wig, makeup, perhaps a feminine bottom, but often without a shirt, exposing his masculine tattooed chest and torso. He offers a gender performance that pushes against both the well-worn binary and

\(^{70}\) Bailey, 65.
\(^{71}\) Ibid., 65.
the Ballroom gender systems, offering a critique of both that opens up new modes of
gender, especially in hip-hop.

In the music videos spanning his career so far, such as “Wavvy” (2012) and
“Coke White, Starlight” (2015), for example, Blanco alternates between appearing in and
out of drag, but his drag persona never completely offers an illusion of cisgender
womanhood. Instead, Blanco appears in blonde, red, or brown wigs, makeup, and
feminine clothing, but without a shirt (figure 4.2). The videos never suggest that Blanco
is occupying two different subject positions or using drag to present two separate
characters; instead, Blanco embodies both feminine and masculine qualities at once,
sometimes highlighting one over the other but always offering them as different aspects
of the same person. In “High School Never Ends” (2016), Blanco appears only in drag,
but again in an intentionally unconvincing manner. The video reinterprets the Romeo and
Juliet tale in contemporary Germany, with Blanco playing the lover of a white German
man whose violent neo-Nazi friends resist both sexual and racial difference. In flashbacks
to the lovers’ youth, the young Blanco is presented as a cisgender boy. While Blanco’s
adult character in the video could be interpreted as a trans woman, a gay man in drag, or a
person with an altogether different non-conforming gender identity, viewers still
understand that it is the same person. Blanco challenges the idea that gender performance
needs to adhere to heteronormative binary ideas to be convincing, or that gender
performance need ever be convincing at all.
Blanco’s play between masculine and feminine through the medium of hip-hop is especially acute in the video for “She Gutta” (2014). Opening as a parody of reality crime television shows such as *Cops*, the video follows a fictional underworld of Los Angeles gangland in which queerness and stereotypical thug masculinity go hand-in-hand. Breaking from his typical approach, Blanco does not appear in drag, but the video does feature women who could be trans as well as muscular, tattooed black men, including one with whom he engages in sexual acts. Stan Hawkins argues that the video for “She Gutta” does political work for LGBTQ communities:

Artists such as Blanco turn to a progressive sexual politics in the guise of transgendered representations in order to advance an awareness of the reality of violence and sexual discrimination in the US today. The video performance of ‘She Gutta’ is a fearless attempt to forge a path for imagining civil rights and social justice in the future. At the same time, the outrageous shifting between a dark blond female and a sexually active young black gay male, wrapped up into one person, demystifies queer
sexualities. Thus, Blanco insists on his/her equal right by stating explicitly in a narrative of explosive force. Authorizing this is a tactic of deferral that is, in actual fact, a disavowal of shame.\textsuperscript{72}

Blanco’s performances, in “She Gutta” and elsewhere, do push against the notion of shame and implicitly call for civil rights. However, they also draw attention to co-constructions of race, gender, and sexuality in ways that also invoke an element of play. Blanco eschews the rigid notions of gender of both mainstream and Ballroom cultures, drawing on those ideals while also offering an alternative that is noncompetitive and non-conforming.

Conclusion

The artists I have explored here all engage in similar forms of what Bailey terms performance labor through which they participate in “individual and collective self-fashioning.”\textsuperscript{73} He writes:

Black LGBT people perform gender and sexual identities not only to survive the dangers of the urban streets but also to engage in play, pleasure, and competition. Performance makes it possible to revise, negotiate, and reconstitute gender and sexual categories and norms, enabling Ballroom members to reconfigure gender and sexual roles and relations while constructing a more open minoritarian social sphere.\textsuperscript{74}

Rappers who incorporate aspects of Ballroom culture into their performances are similarly taking part in this performance labor, but they extend that work into the realm of hip-hop. Additionally, through Ballroom references, be they lyrical, musical, or visual,

\textsuperscript{73} Bailey, 32.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 17-18.
these artists are also placing themselves within a black queer cultural and musical lineage that has carried through urban LGBTQ communities of color throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the United States, especially in New York City. Their references of this largely underground culture position them as the latest generation of black queer cultural workers, who continuously challenge and rewrite the gender and sexuality options available to them.

Applying the genre label Ballroom rap to the work of openly queer or trans black artists based in New York City positions their musical texts in relationship with each other in such a way that their multifaceted identities and musical styles are no longer collapsed into the contested category of “gay rap.” Instead, this genre accounts for the shared cultural reference point that has led music journalists and listeners to already profile these artists in relation to each other, while also making visible the often unnoticed heritage of black queer culture in the city over the past century and acknowledging that this culture is not monolithic and is constantly in flux. As Eric Drott notes, genres are groupings that must be “continually produced and reproduced”:

Genres . . . result from acts of assemblage, acts performed by specific agents in specific social and institutional settings. One consequence of this is a certain fluidity in the classification of individual musical texts. Depending on who is doing the classifying, and under what circumstances, the same song or work may be brought into a relation with a variety of other songs or works and, in this way, with a variety of distinct genres.75

The specific agents who perform genre-grouping acts are not necessarily artists themselves, but listeners, critics, and scholars who wish to understand the relationships between certain musical texts and, for example, the social contexts or values that they

---
75 Drott, 10.
might share. Thus we can position an artist such as Mykki Blanco, who identifies more strongly with punk than rap, in conversation with other artists such as Le1f, Zebra Katz, Azealia Banks, and Cakes da Killa and recognize the shared black queer cultural work that they all do in their own diverse ways.\textsuperscript{76}

Other agents besides artists can also identify and position contemporary rappers within a musical and cultural lineage in order to draw out common themes and strategies. In her groundbreaking musicological study of rap, Cheryl L. Keyes positions black female rappers in a lineage with black women blues singers of the early twentieth century, all of whom rearticulate and redefine black female identity and use music as a site from which to “contest, protest, and affirm working-class ideologies of black womanhood.”\textsuperscript{77} In so doing, she argues that women rappers in the late twentieth century did not emerge without precedent, but instead are part of a continuum. In examining shared themes that both early blues women and late twentieth century women rappers address in their music, Keyes demonstrates ways in which women MCs find historical antecedents from which to draw inspiration and legitimization. Similarly, in his study of black gay literary traditions of the 1980s and 1990s, Simon Dickel argues that black gay

\textsuperscript{76} In a statement following the release of his mixtape \textit{Gay Dog Food} (UNO, 2014), Blanco stated, “You can choose to call me a gay rapper, you can choose to not even call me a rapper if you want to, it doesn’t matter. I’m a punk, a creative punk and i’m [sic] going to continue to create and entertain without boundaries” (cited in Zoe Camp, “Mykki Blanco Releases \textit{Gay Dog Food Mixtape}” on \textit{pitchfork.com} on October 28, 2014, \url{http://pitchfork.com/news/57225-mykki-blanco-releases-gay-dog-food-mixtape/}, accessed September 11, 2016). Articles that consider Blanco as part of the same cohort as other gay rappers in New York City include Clare Considine, “Zebra Katz, Mykki Blanco and the Rise of Queer Rap”; Eric Shorey, “Queer Rap is Not Queer Rap” posted at \textit{pitchfork.com} on March 31, 2015, \url{http://pitchfork.com/thepitch/712-queer-rap-is-not-queer-rap/}, accessed May 12, 2016; and Battan, “We Invented Swag.”

writers often placed their work in conversation with earlier literature.\textsuperscript{78} He notes that, like other marginalized groups, black gay activists and artists sought legitimacy and self-empowerment through their references to the Harlem Renaissance and the Protest Era.\textsuperscript{79} Ballroom rap, whether recognized by the artists, listeners, critics, or scholars, similarly places contemporary practices in conversation with historical traditions, legitimizing and calling attention to long-overlooked particularities of black queer culture in New York City during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Black queer rappers based in New York City who incorporate aspects of Ballroom culture into their music engage in performance labor that articulates a black queer identity that is specific if not to their city, then at least to northern urban centers in the United States. Artists working in other geographical areas engage in their own labor that connects them to their local lineages and articulates not only their black queer identities, but their regional identities as well. The enactment of these identities often involves the incorporation of musical and lyrical elements that are place-specific and which therefore serve as musical geographical markers. In the following chapter, I explore ways in which queer artists who participate in New Orleans bounce music engage in similar performance labor, but in a way that signifies the importance of their own time and place.


\textsuperscript{79} Dickel, \textit{Black/Gay}, 7.
Chapter 5

“Bounce It, Biggity Bounce It”:
Sissy Bounce and the Politics of Twerking

On Saturday, February 6, 2016, a day before appearing during the Super Bowl halftime show, Beyoncé released a surprise music video for a new song, “Formation.” The first single from Lemonade, her visual album that would be released a few months later in April, “Formation” was the track that launched a thousand think pieces. In a New York Times-published conversation with Wesley Morris and Jenna Wortham, for example, pop music critic Jon Caramanica described the significance of some of the political imagery that characterizes the video, especially those scenes where Beyoncé is positioned on top of a sinking New Orleans police car and a young black boy in a hoodie dances in front of a line of police officers (figure 5.1). He writes:

In “Formation,” [Beyoncé] returns to [New Orleans]; this time, she’s in scenes that suggest a fantastical post-Katrina hellscape, but radically rewritten . . .

This is high-level, visuallystriking [sic], Black Lives Matter-era allegory. The [Super Bowl] halftime show is usually a locus of entertainment, but Beyoncé has just rewritten it – overridden it, to be honest – as a moment of political ascent.¹

The three commentators raise the question of whether “Formation” marks Beyoncé’s turn from celebrity pop star to activist, and whether or not it is possible to be both. In a piece

penned for *The Daily Beast* on the day of the song’s release, Kevin Fallon similarly acknowledges that “Formation” is both a “black power anthem for the masses” and “another entry in Beyoncé’s canon of dance floor calls-to-arms.”² “Formation” unapologetically focuses on black American experiences and comments on contemporary issues of racial justice, an emphasis so unusual for the singer that, a week after the single’s release, the popular comedy show *Saturday Night Live* aired a sketch in which white Americans listening to the track discover, seemingly for the first time, that the singer is herself black.³

![Figure 5.1 Beyoncé. "Formation." Music video. Directed by Melina Matsoukas. Parkwood. 2016.](image)

Although many journalists, scholars, and fans agreed that “Formation” represented Beyoncé’s most political work to date, others, such as Shantrelle Lewis, took

---


issue with the singer’s use of New Orleans as a backdrop for her foray into Black Lives Matter politics. Reflecting in a piece for *Slate* on the ways in which the “Formation” video exploits New Orleans’ post-Katrina trauma and racial politics, Lewis pointed out that while Beyoncé features the voices of two New Orleans artists in the song, she fails to contextualize them or their work in a meaningful way:

“What happened at the New Wildins? . . . Bitch I’m back, by popular demand.” The words of the late bounce rapper and comedian Messy Mya braggadociously introduce Beyoncé’s anthem. A marginalized queer black man, Messy Mya in all of his wildest imagination, ribbing, and capping would not have believed that the world’s biggest pop star would use his voice in a video – without, however, acknowledging his humanity in life and in death. Messy Mya, a household NOLA name, was shot and killed at age 22. . . In focusing on black New Orleanian lives, it would have been easy for Beyoncé to dedicate “Formation” to Messy Mya and other victims of gun violence. She provided no context for his life or death. Those not in the know could mistake his sassiness with that of the Queen of Bounce, Big Freedia, whose voice is heard a little later in the song. This is not gumbo. These are black lives.\(^4\)

Lewis focuses on the appropriation of New Orleanians’ trauma for the sake of a pop music video (regardless of the importance of its political message), but she also draws our attention to one of the song’s many paradoxes: in featuring New Orleans artists Messy Mya and Big Freedia, the song incorporates queer artists, but renders their queerness invisible and inaudible through a lack of context and appropriate acknowledgement.

Beyoncé is not the only contemporary artist to incorporate aspects of New Orleans musical and cultural traditions into their latest songs. Overshadowed by

Beyoncé’s performance at the Super Bowl Halftime show on February 7th, 2016, rapper Missy Elliott released a new single, “Pep Rally,” that not only references the marching band traditions that permeate the city, but also features lyrics that sound eerily similar to bounce artist Ha Sizzle’s “Bounce It Biggity Bounce It” (Ha Sizzle’s “Bounce it, biggity bounce it, biggity bounce it, biggity bounce it” becomes “Bounce, biggity bounce, biggity-biggity bounce, bounce”) and what sounds like a sample vocal from Big Freedia at the very end of the track. Neither of these artists is given any credits on the track, and while some bounce rappers are glad that their style of music is garnering national exposure through major performers such as Elliott, the New Orleans artists themselves are not always benefiting directly.

Many national artists are noticing the thriving hip-hop scene in New Orleans, which centers on an indigenous style called bounce that first emerged in the early 1990s. In the last fifteen years or so, the genre, which is designed for dancing, has sped up in tempo, making it attractive to artists interested in producing dance tracks and club hits. Additionally, the dance styles themselves, which often feature moves highlighting dancers’ butts, have drawn mainstream attention. In performances where artists have incorporated moves such as twerking into their own on stage routines, especially those of Miley Cyrus, the dance is often taken out of its bounce context. Again, while many local artists are glad their cultural traditions are being acknowledged outside of New Orleans, the ways in which bounce music and dance is used outside of the city often fail to acknowledge one of the genres most interesting aspects: for the past decade the scene has

---

5 New Orleans native K. Keon Foley-Griffin, also known as Keon the Connect, performs the hook and chorus on the track.
been dominated primarily by openly queer and trans rappers. “Sissy bounce” is the term that was coined by local music journalist Alison Fensterstock to refer to this current phenomenon in which a critical mass of “sissy rappers,” or openly gay or trans rappers currently lead the scene. The term draws on the language of bounce rappers themselves, such as influential artist Sissy Nobby, who self-identify as gay and reclaim a once pejorative term to openly express their sexual and gender identities through their performances.

Sissy bounce may seem like a surprising development for hip-hop, which historically has struggled with representing identities outside of the hypermasculine, cisgender, heterosexual male model that has become the most easily recognizable rapper image today. But for over the past decade, local New Orleans hip-hop has had a largely visible group of openly queer and trans artists who are not only accepted, but in many cases are leading figures. Additionally, as attested by the success of gender non-conforming bounce rapper Big Freedia, who has been featured in her own national reality television show since 2013, audiences outside of New Orleans are also ready for rappers who challenge this standard image.

In this chapter I examine the sissy rapper’s rise to dominance in New Orleans, which began in the early 2000s but was significantly boosted in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. I examine musical developments in contemporary bounce, especially as they relate to dancing, one of the key components of the genre. Dancing, or “shaking” as it is called in the bounce lexicon, illustrates both the gender fluidity expressed in bounce and the music’s role as therapeutic healing art, especially in response
to Katrina. Dance is, after all, the main reason that bounce music exists and persists.

Finally, I explore the inroads bounce artists are making into mainstream and national markets and argue that centering the queer and trans identities of those artists, even if they resist the sissy bounce label, is necessary to prevent the erasure of these identities.

Bounce Takes Over

New Orleans bounce music first emerged in the early 1990s and quickly took over the local rap scene. Bounce scholar Matt Miller writes that this style was particularly popular in part because it spoke to the specific location of New Orleans’ housing projects and impoverished neighborhoods and was influenced by other local, vernacular music traditions including the parades of “social and pleasure” clubs and the rise of brass bands. He traces the “emergence of bounce as a distinctive local subgenre” to MC T. Tucker and DJ Irv’s 1991 song, “Where Dey At,” and other tracks that relied heavily on The Showboys’ 1986 recording, “Drag Rap” (referring to the television show Dragnet, not the act of dressing or performing in drag). He notes that the use of this recording generated a style that became distinctive to New Orleans:

In this period, the preferences of New Orleans audiences – which included polyrhythmic layering of musical elements, tempi between 95 and 105 b.p.m. [beats per minute], vocal performances in cellular structures, an emphasis on collective experience based in call-and-response rather than individual narrative – were, to an important extent, distinct from those associated with national, mainstream audiences. Artists or companies in New Orleans who ignored these preferences did so at their peril; engagement with audiences at the grassroots level of nightclubs and block parties was a crucial first step for aspiring artists, producers, and label

---

7 Ibid., 75.
owners, regardless of their personal artistic aspirations, and bounce was quickly becoming central to the expectations of local audiences.\(^8\)

As Miller points out, the popularity of The Showboys’ “Drag Rap,” a song often referred to in New Orleans as “Triggerman” or “Triggaman” after one of its New York City-based co-producers, Phillip “Triggerman” Price, reflects the ways in which the early New Orleans rap scene was reliant on trends from New York City in its earliest days.\(^9\) The Roland 808-produced “Drag Rap” or “Triggaman” beat became the skeleton of the newly emerging sample-based genre.

To this day, bounce music is built over only a handful of beats. In the early 1990s, producers combined the “Drag Rap” beat with Cameron Paul’s “Brown’s Beat,” a drum break taken from “Rock the Beat,” a 1987 track by Derek B, to create the iconic bounce sound referred to as “dat beat.” According to Sissy Nobby, contemporary bounce beats are primarily built on five main samples: the “Drag Rap”/”Triggerman” beat, “Brown’s Beat,” the “Roll Call” beat (produced by DJ Dickie but based on a Mannie Fresh beat that is in itself based on a beat used by Cheeky Blakk), Big Freedia’s “Na” beat which is a looped sample of her singing “Na,” and, more recently, what he calls the DJ Doug beat.\(^10\) Other beats are added, and some artists have moved away from relying on pre-existing samples, but the majority of bounce tracks are made with beats based on the “Drag Rap”/”Triggerman” and “Brown’s Beat” combination.

\(^8\) Miller, 75-6.
\(^9\) Ibid., 78.
In the years following the release of “Where Dey At,” bounce music persisted as a local favorite, but was largely ignored by major labels and national rap markets, in part because it was so place-specific and oriented towards New Orleans audiences. In the late 1990s, New Orleans rappers who were breaking into mainstream markets, such as Lil Wayne, shifted their sound away from bounce to appeal more widely to national audiences.\(^\text{11}\) By the early 2000s, the culture was still a part of the soundscape of the city, but according to Rusty Lazer, a DJ who has worked with numerous bounce artists including Big Freedia, the scene had somewhat stagnated.\(^\text{12}\) Sissy rappers had started to gain footholds in the scene, but they were more the exception than the rule.\(^\text{13}\) There were successful and prominent queer and trans artists, such as Katey Red, who got her start performing in 1998 at a nightclub near the Melpomene housing projects where she was raised, but they were far from a dominating force.\(^\text{14}\) However, the rise of sissy bounce can be linked directly to the impact of Hurricane Katrina, as sissy rappers played a prominent role in the city’s recovery.

**Hurricane Katrina and Bounce**

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina passed southeast of the city of New Orleans, missing the city but making landfall in the nearby St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes. As has since been well-documented, it was not so much the storm itself, but the

---

11 See Miller, *Bounce*.
12 Rusty Lazer, interview with the author, June 8, 2016.
13 Rusty Lazer, 2016.
preventable failures of human-made levees and the subsequent flooding of large portions of the city that caused the most damage. The lasting destruction caused by these floods had a disproportionate impact on black and low-income communities.\(^\text{15}\) In addition to those who evacuated before the storm, many others were forced to leave in the aftermath of Katrina, resulting in a displacement of a large amount of the city’s population. This created a New Orleans diaspora in other parts of the country, including those in cities such as Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, and Baton Rouge.\(^\text{16}\) Many displaced citizens, particularly those who lacked resources to rebuild, never returned to the city, creating a significant shift in New Orleans’s demographics.\(^\text{17}\)

Despite the horrors of the storm and the recovery period, Hurricane Katrina in many ways helped bounce, as it created the conditions that allowed the genre to attain even more popularity both within and outside the city. This boost occurred for three reasons: first, the newly formed New Orleans diaspora created a demand for bounce outside of the city, as many of the displaced were homesick for their regional music. Second, this displacement also encouraged bounce artists to embrace the use of digital tools, such as social media websites and download platforms, to share bounce music,

\(^\text{15}\) See for example Jean Ait Belkhir and Christiane Charlemaine’s intersectional analysis of the storm’s disproportionate impact in “Race, Gender, and Class Lessons from Hurricane Katrina” in Race Gender & Class Vol. 14 No. ½ (2007): 120-152.

\(^\text{16}\) Laura Bliss, “10 Years Later, There’s So Much We Don’t Know About Where Katrina Survivors Ended Up,” posted at citylab.com on August 25, 2015, \url{http://www.citylab.com/politics/2015/08/10-years-later-theres-still-a-lot-we-dont-know-about-where-katrina-survivors-ended-up/401216/}, accessed August 29, 2016. Part of this article draws on research conducted by the RAND Corporation as part of its Displaced New Orleans Residents Survey (DNORS) project.

\(^\text{17}\) Elizabeth Fussell, “Constructing New Orleans, Constructing Race: A Population History of New Orleans” in The Journal of American History, Vol. 94, No. 3 (December, 2007): 846-855. Fussell notes that the perception that New Orleans became “older, whiter, and more affluent” was largely supported by population data. She further argues that a larger proportion of white residents had returned to the city than blacks larger because of the pre-existing income and housing disparities that existed (and persist) along racial lines.
giving the genre a reach that stretched beyond the city limits. Third, the storm left a musical vacuum within the city, as many clubs shut down and musicians fled. Bounce artists, specifically sissy rappers, filled that void and were among the very first musicians to return and bring live music performance back to the city.

As one of those New Orleans residents who was displaced by the storm, bounce artist Ha Sizzle’s experiences exemplify this change. In the summer of 2005, the rapper, then preparing for his senior year of high school, recorded what would become three of his biggest hits: “She Rode That Dick Like A Soldier,” “Bounce It Biggity Bounce It,” and “Buckle Your Knees.” He relocated to Texas in anticipation of the storm and finished school at North Dallas High. There, he was surprised when he discovered one day that a classmate had downloaded “Bounce It Biggity Bounce It” as her cellphone ring tone, and he realized that the track, which had been produced by DJ Lil Man, was a hit among New Orleans bounce fans in the new diaspora. After recovering from the shock of hearing his own music being played outside his hometown, he responded by connecting to potential audiences and other artists through social media:

Immediately I get on MySpace and I’m with it finding out everything that was taking place. I made a MySpace. So many different people, the main person was my DJ, Lil Man, he hit me up, he was in Houston, Texas [and] he was like, man where you at? You’re the biggest thing poppin’. You have the hottest bounce song that’s out, ever. And when Katrina came I can say from fifty states to overseas, “She Rode that Dick Like A Soldier” and “Bounce It Biggity Bounce It” was being played.18

Upon discovering that there was a displaced audience for his music, Ha Sizzle reconnected with his DJ and began performing outside of New Orleans:

---

18 Ha Sizzle, interview with the author, June 17, 2016.
I was young, I was lost . . . I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know who to call, I didn’t know how to do this, I didn’t know how to do that, I had no management, no promoter, none of that. So I’m just like, I don’t know what to do. But then my DJ, thank god for DJ Lil Man, he wound up getting everyone the right contact information on me and I moved from Dallas, went to Houston and went to perform everywhere down south and I just went to traveling, performing little songs and it was just everything.¹⁹

While touring in the south, Ha Sizzle found homesick audiences who had visceral reactions to hearing live bounce music performed again:

> I actually seen people cry and tell me I really love that song like this song really brought me back. So many people was hurt because of Katrina and lost so much. Bounce music wasn’t everywhere no more. New Orleans bounce music is the culture. We hear this everyday out, no matter if we played trap music, country music, western music, R&B music, bounce music gonna be somewhere in there. Once that took place it’s like, everyone just went to falling in love with the music even more, with bounce music. People who never even heard bounce music. And I must say Katrina was a big eye opener, and it opened up the door to bounce music. . . I was kinda proud more than anything because it brought back the smile and the joy of the culture.²⁰

The demand for bounce music grew among the diaspora outside of New Orleans and the genre also gained new listeners, inspiring artists and fans alike to find new ways of making the music more easily accessible. As digital downloads and CD sales outside of New Orleans increased, one DJ got the idea to create a YouTube channel dedicated to bounce music. From this one channel, listeners outside of New Orleans could hear their favorite artists, old and new songs. Ha Sizzle explains:

> They had people listen to bounce all over. A lot of local DJs went to sell their bounce music from online to selling CDs at the clubs and everyone just went to buying them. We was getting them FedEx, UPS, everyone was just getting the bounce music no matter if it was old or new, people

---

¹⁹ Ha Sizzle, 2016.
²⁰ Ibid.
just wanted to hear it. And then my best friend Magnolia Schooly was his name, God rest his soul, he passed away in 2013. He took upon himself and put all bounce music on YouTube, and he had the most views and subscribers with over a million people that was following him and listening to music. Bounce music, New Orleans bounce music. He had every artist. And it was not to get paid, it was not to make money off no one else’s music. It was because of the loss that a lot of people had in the city of the music. He decided to put it on YouTube and just put it out to everyone. And he did that.²¹

New Orleans’ displaced citizens actively sought out the sounds that most reminded them of home, and an unintended but positive consequence of the newly formed diaspora was the inroads bounce artists began to make outside of their native city. Rapper Keno notes that as a result of Katrina, bounce music actually became stronger in many ways: “It’s like that’s all we had left as a unit, was bounce music.”²²

Many residents were slow to return to New Orleans. The earliest returnees came home to a lack of services, and this extended to musical communities.²³ By most accounts, bounce artists were among the first musicians to return to the city and begin performing again. Sissy Nobby, who returned to New Orleans at the end of September 2005, claims to have been the very first artist to begin performing in the city following Katrina. As he explained to interviewer Holly Hobbs, he wanted to come back “because I was getting homesick because of bounce music, honestly . . . I came back maybe, in the end of September. They still had our lights off and the streets were still smelling some

---

²¹ Ha Sizzle, 2016.
²² Keno, interview with the author, June 14, 2016.
type of way and stuff, but I came back.”\textsuperscript{24} He found that because so few performers had returned as quickly as he had, a plethora of opportunities were available:

> It was a lot of work, there was a lot of businesses open, I had jobs. Clubs were trying to get back, they called whoever they could get. I think that’s what really helped me a lot, that I came back to the city first and these clubs was like, we need a hype person we need someone to do this and this and that. So that really helped me out a lot to get these clubs. While all these other artists that normally be in the clubs was like, they’re trying to capitalize Houston, I came back home.\textsuperscript{25}

He recalled his first post-Katrina performance, which took place at a teen club on the West Bank, as being a positive homecoming of sorts: “By the time dancing teens come in and stuff, it felt like home again. It felt like home again. I’m like, ‘Yas! Glad to be back.’ It felt good. It was just a good vibe, a good feeling.”\textsuperscript{26}

Bounce music was instrumental in bringing small moments of pleasure to a mourning city. In 2005, 5\textsuperscript{th} Ward Weebie released his song, “Fuck Katrina,” as a way to inject some humor into what he called a “terrible, horrible situation.”\textsuperscript{27} He later recalled:

> I’m also a victim of Katrina. [I] lost my history, lost a lot during that time, misplaced family members, all that. We went through all that. People in New Orleans, we have big spirits when it comes down to going through something. That’s why we second line after funerals. We’re sad, we cry, that’s in the dirt, but then it’s, pick your head back up, life move on. Let’s celebrate that, they’re going to a better place, or whatever the case may be. [“Fuck Katrina”] just was one of those situations just like that. Like, man, we went through a lot, man, it’s time to, let’s pick our spirits back up. Let’s get some humor about the situation. It was like a healing to the soul for a lot of people, is to be able to laugh at that. To be like, “yeah, that’s the truth!” . . . And people started getting right back to normal life. And I was glad that I was able to do that and that I was part of that.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{24} Sissy Nobby, 2014.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} 5\textsuperscript{th} Ward Weebie, interview with Holly Hobbs, 2014, NOLA Hiphop Archives, \url{http://digitallibrary.tulane.edu/islandora/object/tulane%3A28432}, accessed July 25, 2016.
\textsuperscript{28} 5\textsuperscript{th} Ward Weebie, 2014.
As Weebie suggests, the song was widely popular in part because it reflected a New Orleans tradition of turning tragedy into a celebration for those who continue living.²⁹ Keno agrees that “Fuck Katrina” helped mark bounce as an important soundtrack to the recovery process by bringing people throughout the city, not just those who listened to bounce before the storm, to the few clubs that were open:

[“Fuck Katrina”] was a bounce song about Katrina but the whole city knew it. It just brought bounce that’s from the club scenes [to everyone] . . . after Katrina because that’s all we had. There wasn’t many clubs over there they only had a few but everybody flocked to them. And that’s how we felt at home again, despite the tragedy.³⁰

Weebie, like other bounce artists, draws a distinct connection between the city’s tradition of funeral second lines and the work of bounce in New Orleans residents’ grieving process post-Katrina. As anthropologist Helen A. Regis notes, the term “second line” has come to have multiple but connected meanings:

It refers to the dance steps, which are performed by [social and pleasure] club members and their followers during parades. It also refers to a distinctive syncopated rhythm that is said to have originated in the streets of New Orleans. More importantly, second line means the followers, or joiners, who fall in behind the “first line,” composed of the brass band and the social club, which typically sponsors the parade . . . The distinctive interaction between the club members, musicians, and second liners produces a dynamic participatory event in which there is no distinction between audience and performer . . . when jazz funerals elicit mass participation, they too are second lines.³¹

²⁹ The song was even featured on the HBO show Treme, a series that offered a fictionalized account of the years immediately following the storm. Treme, season one episode four, directed by Anthony Hemingway (New York: HBO Entertainment, 2010).
³⁰ Keno, 2016.
As Regis explains, the key component of the second line is the element of participation; everyone is expected to engage in dancing, regardless of the solemnity of the event. Joel Dinerstein similarly notes that in a second line, “everyone is supposed to dance or, at the very least, roll wid it: as a phrase, this refers both to the physiological movement – a sort of half-crouched, bent-over, rolling dance-walk – and the philosophical import of maintaining one’s spiritual balance in the face of social and economic pressures.”

Second lines, then, offer opportunities for enacting kinetic community responses to grief, especially in the context of jazz funerals. While to outsiders the city may consider joyful expressions to be inappropriate responses to somber occasions, to native New Orleanians these expressions embody a sense of celebration for those left behind to continue living. They are a much-needed respite in a world full of racial and class disparities.

In this cultural context bounce, with its up-tempo beats and sense of humor and fun, was the perfect musical style to help mitigate grief. Ha Sizzle emphasizes what he calls the joyful nature of bounce as its key feature and the main reason for its popularity, particularly in the wake of Katrina. He notes that, “Bounce music . . . can take you from being sad to happy . . . In New Orleans you have people who pass away out there, and we second line, and we have DJs throw block parties, they become nothing but bounce music, and we shake [dance].” Rusty Lazer also notes that, “after Katrina it was the immediacy of [Big Freedia’s] return that really led to the positional dominance of gay

---


33 Ha Sizzle, 2016.
rappers, I would say. The fact [is] that these were the artists who came back and locked in immediately and went to work on making people happy, who really, really needed it.”

Sissy rappers were not, however, the only bounce rappers to return to the city. As Nobby notes, DJ Jubilee also returned fairly quickly. So why did sissy rappers became the dominant force in bounce after the storm? One reason may lie in the kinship networks that queer and trans artists formed among themselves. In addition to being part of a bounce community, these artists were also members of New Orleans’ LGBT community. As I argued in Chapter 4, non-biological kinship networks play an important role in many queer black communities. Much like the house system of the ballroom scene, many sissy bounce artists belong (or at one time belonged) within a hierarchical family structure in which more seasoned performers and older members of the community act as “gay mothers” or, less often, “gay fathers” to younger, less experienced members. For example, Sissy Nobby is Big Freedia’s gay daughter, indicating that Freedia has served in some ways as a mother figure or mentor to Nobby. Not all members of this network are bounce artists: for example, in her memoir Big Freedia mentions that Mark Tavia, a “sissy” from her neighborhood, became her gay mom when she was a teenager. The kinship network does, however, include artists, and their connections often move from the personal to the professional and back again.

---

34 Rusty Lazer, 2016.
35 Sissy Nobby, 2014.
36 Big Freedia and Nicole Balin, Big Freedia: God Save the Queen Diva! (New York: Gallery Books, 2015), 13.
Keno identified Sissy Nobby as his gay mom and Ha Sizzle as his gay dad, and noted that both helped him navigate the LGBT community.\textsuperscript{37} When he was outed to his family as gay by some peers, they were not very supportive and he ended up moving in with Nobby and staying with him for a year. He recalls:

[Nobby] really taught me just about the gay world, period. And it was like a bunch of us in Nobby’s house, me and like five of my gay brothers. And Nobby took care of all of us . . . I will say no matter what happens between us, Imma always have that love for him I’ll never disrespect him like, in public or anything. Yeah we might get into it from time to time, but I never actually take it there. I just have too much love and respect for him.\textsuperscript{38}

Keno notes that his personal relationship to Nobby differed from his professional one in that there was an added element of competition, but he also acknowledges that he learned from the more experienced gay rapper who also gave him opportunities early on in his career:

Nobby really taught me how to hustle, how to get out there and grind with my music. ‘Cause I went to a lot of shows with him, his shows. Well, I can honestly say he kinda like was a mentor to me. Because he let me perform, open up for him a lot, and Freedia did also.\textsuperscript{39}

It is worth noting that when I first asked both Keno and Ha Sizzle about mentors in bounce, both claimed that they did not have any, although they did have artists whom they looked up to and respected. It was later in the conversations, in the context of LGBT community, that both acknowledged that figures such as Sissy Nobby served as mentors to them. It is possible that the familial ties between these community members trump their professional ones, causing Keno and Ha Sizzle to view Nobby as a kinship figure

\textsuperscript{37} Keno, 2016.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
first and foremost, and professional mentor secondarily. This approach, like that taken by children who distance themselves from their parents in order to assert their own independence, also indicates the younger rappers’ desire to make their own unique marks on bounce music.

As in any biologically based family, members of queer kinship networks do not always agree with each other or even get along. As Rusty Lazer notes, the system in New Orleans can cause headaches for promoters who must carefully navigate the social relationships between kinship members:

[In bounce] all the family things apply, and it’s real. And it also means that sometimes when I’m a person who’s looking at it as a business person from outside just being like, so, hey I got this show, so and so’s not available but they want an opening act, can we just go and bring this person? And then [and artist might be] like, I don’t talk to him. You know? Like, dammit there’s shit that I gotta consider. But that’s also why I live in New Orleans, because real talk counts. If you have a real talk situation let’s real talk it and if you can’t be around them, don’t be around them. It’s a small town, you don’t have to be around everybody.

Rusty Lazer identifies ways in which the kinship network can make it difficult to program certain artists together, but the opposite, as Keno demonstrates, is also true; gay mothers and gay fathers can help bring new artists into the scene by offering them opportunities, as well.

Hurricane Katrina and the human-made structural and policy failures that followed devastated the city of New Orleans, but the storm also opened up new opportunities for bounce artists, and sissy rappers in particular, that lead to a flourishing of the genre in its wake. The New Orleans diaspora helped spread bounce to other communities outside of the city, and led to the increased use of digital means of
disseminating the music. Bounce artists were among the first musicians to return to the city and they engaged in much-needed entertainment to sustain the recovery process and help the residents of the city process their grief. In part because of their near immediate return and because of the queer kinship systems to which many of the queer and trans artists belonged, they were able to fill a void left after the storm and rose to dominance in bounce music. That dominance continues over a decade later.

The role bounce played in helping participants process grief grew out of older New Orleans, specifically that of the second lines. But it was because bounce is music for dancing, and because of the intimate and highly physical styles of dance so closely associated with the music, that bounce performances became cathartic moments of release and trauma recovery for those who were touched by Hurricane Katrina’s devastation. In the following section, I examine dance more closely in relation to bounce music, focusing on the relationship between trauma and dance as well as the ways in which dance has helped bring bounce into national focus.

Dance as Resistance and Recovery

Perhaps the most important relationship in bounce is that between the MC and the dancers, because the MCs are responsible for facilitating dancing, which in turn raises the level of energy in performance between both parties. Indeed, bounce rappers’ performances are geared towards dancers, or convincing audience members to dance. Dance is such an important aspect that most rappers hire dancers to tour and perform on stage with them, while also engaging audience members in dance as well; like the second
lines, audience members are expected to participate in bounce performances not necessarily by singing along, but by moving their bodies to that beat. Dancing is therefore the main medium through which audience members participate in the call-and-response aspect of bounce. As the most visible aspect of the genre, it has also made appearances in national popular culture and in this way helped some bounce artists gain footholds in national markets.

The earliest bounce hits, such as those by DJ Jubilee, were all about inventing new dance moves and commanding the audience to perform them. Some of the king of bounce’s most recognized call outs include “do the dirty bird,” “shake it like a sissy,” “wobble it,” “walk it like a dog,” and, as the title of one of his most well-known hits indicates, “Do the Jubilee All.” This tradition continues today in the form of the roll call. The roll call is a call-and-response technique wherein the rapper focuses on one particular dancer, either one he or she knows or someone he or she has singled out in the crowd, and calls for them to dance. Keno defines roll calling as “commanding” the dancers: “You say a certain word and that’s what they do. It’s like you’re giving directions and that’s why I like it so much. It’s like a call and response; Imma say this and you gonna do this.” Ha Sizzle claims to have originated the trend of roll calling, but his style is but one of the most recent manifestations of rapper/dancer interaction. He explains his technique as follows:

---


41 Keno, 2016.
I can take a person name and I can roll call a person name and make it sound like real music. Roll calling is like you calling someone name and add everything from shake, wiggle and wobble, and twerk. If I know someone name Ashley I can just be saying, “Say Ashley, won’t ya back it up, what? Won’t ya back it up? Her name Miss Miss Ashley, won’t ya back it up, what? Won’t ya back it up right here. I say I say won’t ya work that ass Ashley won’t ya bounce it Ashley won’t ya shake it, work it” . . . I’m taking that person name and I’m pretty much putting a stamp on it of, this is you, it’s like you’re your king you’re your queen, you shine you show them all what you can do, you show everyone how you feel about the bounce music, you show everyone how you feel about the dancing, about what he’s saying, about what the style is . . . Don’t get me wrong, we had people roll calling before me, but the style of roll calling have changed. See at one point in time, it was just, “Ashley, go Ashley, go Ashley, go Ashley, go Ashley, bounce it up Ashley, go Ashley.” But now, it’s [faster] “Brrrr dock dock Ashley, could ya work it Miss Ashley? Get moving Miss Ashley.”

Roll calling therefore involves taking a dancer’s name and transforming it into a chant that propels the dancer into action. It can include suggestions for dance moves (“back it up”), sound effects, and encouragement (“Get moving”). And while Sizzle is insistent that he developed this particular style of rapper and dancer call and response, he argues that the style is now out there for anyone to develop as he or she wants:

I’m proud to say, I’m humbled by it, that everyone was trying this style and a trend of something that I started when they come to roll call. I love to see it . . . From Sissy Nobby to Fly Boi Keno to Katey Red to you name it, I’m just so proud to say oh my god, that’s something that I started everyone is trying, and it’s good because I want it to go on. I wanted to be, if someone else can take it and flip into another creative style, I would love that!

In the example above, Ha Sizzle offers the known name of a dancer. However, he can and does use his roll call style on audience members whose names he does not know.

---

42 Ha Sizzle, 2016.
He explains a few techniques he uses for engaging unknown audience members at his live shows:

I started it off with my dancers. It’s easy to explain to people . . . I could say if you feeling this beat I want you to tap the person next to you and tell the person next to you I’m feeling this beat. So, that’s one of my ways, I tell a person, tap the person next to you and say you want to get roll called tonight? And they go like, well what’s roll call? And I say let me show you how a roll call is. And I’ll call out one of my dancers, got one of my dancers dancing and saying this is roll call. This is Reedy. I’m gonna roll call Reedy, her name is Reedy, ya’ll gonna know Reedy after this. [So I] roll call Reedy, [and] once she dance, they gonna see it, they gonna be wowed, like, oh my god this girl really just shook her ass off, she really just did this she really just did that! And to the simple fact I can look in the audience and say eenie meenie minny moe, I want you. The person gonna come, what’s your name? Ah, my name is Amy. Well Amy, welcome to the stage are you ready to be roll called? Amy’s gonna stand right there, she’s gonna do whatever that she can do that’s to the best of her knowledge but just know, Amy is being roll called. She’s go, oh my god he’s saying my name. “Amy Amy Amy Like a booka booka booka. The author and the shaker she a player just work it.” So it’s right in that’s like, oh my god, I’m Amy he talkin’ ‘bout me! . . . When they see those videos [of my performances], when they see the recalls of what things took place, every one who sees it start to say, I want to be roll called!43

Ha Sizzle demonstrates that engaging audiences in dancing is one of the main goals for bounce rappers, and they develop and employ their own original techniques to do so. The dancers in turn respond to the rappers by performing as they are asked, often on stage during live shows. It is common for bounce rappers to not only have their own dancers on stage during performances, but to call up members of the audience to get on stage so their dance moves can be in the spotlight along with the rapper.

To outsiders, bounce dancing, or shaking, might look like a limited number of moves performed over and over again, regardless of what the rapper calls. In reality,

---

43 Ha Sizzle, 2016.
there are many different variations with different degrees of difficulty. Ha Sizzle believes that contemporary bounce has five elements: hustle, wobble, wiggle, swiggle, and acrobats. He explains:

The hustle is the person that can stand flat on they feet and just pretty much wobble they body in that one spot. The wobble is a person who can stand flat on their feet and wobble, but the hustling you moving with it, okay? The hustle is like you walking with it, you going around in a circle with it, you hustle. With the wobble, you can stand in one spot like we’re at the wall and make your ass work a complete circle. With the swiggle, you make your topper [upper] body and your lower body go around, okay? And with the acrobats you have people who fall into splits, lift they leg up, people who get flexible, pretty much. Back flips, all kinds of things, to go with that. The wiggle is pretty much you just wiggling your hips from side to side, and the wiggle you can mix. If you mix all that together, you get a shakedown.44

All of these dancing (or, as they are called in New Orleans, shaking) techniques involve lower and/or upper body movements that focus on the shoulders and/or buttocks (figure 5.2). And while rappers often perform and travel with their own dancers, as the roll call approach shows, everyone in attendance is encouraged and expected to dance, regardless of their level of ability.

44 Ha Sizzle, 2016.
Some bounce practitioners acknowledge that there are gendered connotations to dance styles, and they can fall into three general categories: boy style, girl style, and sissy, or punk, style, which is the style developed by queer men. However, individuals can move between styles freely, embodying the kind of gender and sexual fluidity that is expressed in bounce music. DJ Rusty Lazer explains:

People [in New Orleans] just sort of feel free to do whatever the fuck they want to do, really. And so, there is a boy style in bounce that’s not sticking your ass out. There’s girl style, boy style, and then like gay men style. Girls do both, boy style and girl style, and boys who do boy style only do boy style. They don’t do that other thing. It’s like foot work, and shoulder work, a lot of things like that. But what’s cool about that is it’s totally morphed into this queer version for gay men that’s really like totally the most liberated position in the dance community. They’re really free to do

both styles and work it. And then the girls were finally just like, oh I’m just gonna take that shit too, I’ll just do shoulder hustles too.\footnote{Rusty Lazer, 2016.}

As Rusty Lazer notes, it is typically the queer men who adopt a combination of so-called girl and boy styles, making them among the most visible and sought-after dancers. By using the term “liberated,” Lazer suggests that there are more accepted ways for men to express themselves through bounce dance styles than there are for people of other genders. Bounce provides a space for diverse gender expression, but, like the Ballroom gender system, it offers more possibilities for people who were assigned male at birth than it does for others, thus keeping gay men in a relatively privileged position.

Shaking in bounce is an example of both a racialized and gendered performance and a performative act in which gender and racial identity are co-constructed. Judith Butler famously posited that gender is constructed through a series of performative or discursive acts, many of which are subconscious, and is not contingent upon biological facts.\footnote{Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble}, 33-34.} However, as black critical theorists such as E. Patrick Johnson have argued, Butler’s formation strips the gendered subject of agency in constructing their own identity, especially as it relates to a politics of resistance in a black queer context. Drawing on the work of queer scholars of color, such as the late José Muñoz, Johnson proposes situating Butler’s formulation of performativity in conversation with performance theories in order to highlight both the material realities of marginalized groups as well as the ways in which members of those groups use discourses to disrupt
and undermine hegemonic power structures through performance.\textsuperscript{48} In the context of bounce, this approach allows us to recognize that while shaking consists of performative acts in which gender is constructed and conveyed, the black queer practitioners who blend gendered styles to reflect their own queer identities are both participating in and actively disrupting those gender discourses. These is an example of what Muñoz calls “disidentification,” which is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.\textsuperscript{49}

The queer men who have created a hybrid bounce dance style reconstruct the encoded messages of multiple contextually dominant groups: the dominant white culture of the United States and the largely heterosexual black culture of previous bounce iterations. Their recombinations of dance movements previously gendered as “boy style” and “girl style” work both within and against bounce’s gender discourses.

While in many hip-hop communities we might expect there to be some pushback against the high visibility of queer men dancing at shows, in bounce this is not the case. Rusty Lazer chalks this phenomenon up to the live and let live mentality of life in New Orleans:

It’s just like, whatever, I mean really. God, we’re so fucking past it here about people’s choices for being deep in the south but like, there’s just a lot of, well whatever. If that feels good to you, then you go ahead and do

\textsuperscript{48} Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies,” 138-139.
\textsuperscript{49} José Muñoz, \textit{Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.
that. And there’s just not a shit ton of judgment in that way and that allows for that conversation. I think it’s why things like bounce and jazz and all the forms you think of as being New Orleans, right? Funk in ways, you know. It’s the reason why they’re so enduring here, because they can cross over more. They’re like, it’s okay for like girls to change their style, [and] it’s okay for guys to change their style of dancing. It’s okay for gay men to co-opt this or co-opt that. And we’ll just weave it in together and change the music to suit that and then we’ll keep going.50

In bounce dancing, then, there are some styles that are gendered in particular ways: shoulder work is associated with men while butt shaking is more closely associated with women. However, the lines between dance styles are extremely malleable, and many dancers move freely between styles. In this way, dancers embody the fluidity of expressions that are made possible in bounce much more so than in other hip-hop genres. Like the black queer rappers who reference New York City’s Ballroom culture, openly queer and trans bounce artists (including dancers) open up additional possibilities for gender expression beyond the binary.

Outside of New Orleans, audiences have become increasingly familiar with bounce culture not through its distinct musical style, but through its associated dances. Most notably, in August 2013, Miley Cyrus employed one bounce dance move, twerking, at her strangely staged MTV Video Music Awards (VMA) medley performance of her single, “We Can’t Stop.” The performance transitioned into Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines,” and featuring the singer emerging from a giant stuffed teddy bear and, at one point, bending over and twerking against Thicke’s crotch. Her performance brought the dance into the homes of an estimated 10.1 million viewers and sparked a nation-wide conversation regarding the explicitly sexual nature of her dance moves, as well as the

50 Rusty Lazer, 2016.
dance’s origins.\textsuperscript{51} For better or worse, Miley Cyrus made “twerk” part of the larger American pop culture lexicon.

There were many negative reactions to the performance. Most of them fell into two camps: viewers and critics who felt that the dancing was lewd and inappropriate, and those who felt that Cyrus had misappropriated an aspect of black culture to which she had no claim and for which she received attention while black performers did not. The former reaction belies a twenty-first century respectability politics and the policing of gendered and raced bodies; the idea that twerking, a move that features bending over at the waist and shaking the butt and is primarily associated with women and girls, is inappropriate is partly tied to the belief that any style of dancing that highlights that part of the body is inherently sexual (although admittedly, in Cyrus’ performance, that appeared to be the intention), and that open expressions of sexuality by women and girls, especially white women and girls, are shameful or harmful in some way. Comments made by conservative radio hosts such as Laura Ingraham and Rush Limbaugh epitomize this response, with Limbaugh referring to the performance as “just this side of onstage pornography.”\textsuperscript{52} As ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt notes, however, there is more to twerking than “just shaking your hips indiscriminately:"

Twerking . . . is not just shaking your ass as many YouTube parodies by non-black or light-skinned performers suggest. It’s part of a 20-year culture. It is not simply being sexy to grab attention in videos . . . From my


observations on YouTube from March 2013 [when Cyrus released the music video for “We Can’t Stop,” in which she appears twerking] to July 2014, videos labeled “twerking” represent a complex spectrum of stylized and rhythmically-timed gestures. It includes demonstrating dropping, popping, locking, and bouncing with the fleshy part of one’s ass to articulate through kinetic orality different aspects of a rap song including miming lyrical bars or accenting styles of rhythm textures or beats. 

While Cyrus’ performance did highlight the perceived sexual nature of twerking, in its original bounce context, twerking is not inherently sexual, just like any other popular social dance. Furthermore, the use of twerking as sexual expression is itself valid and legitimate; women should not be shamed for twerking whether or not it is intended as a sexual expression.

When aspects of cultural expressions that originated in black communities are employed and hypersexualized by white performers, however, it detracts from communities of origin. This is the root of the latter negative reaction, which stems from the serious issue of white appropriation of black cultures. Writing for Vulture magazine, Jody Rosen identified race as the primary concern regarding Cyrus’ VMA performance, not sexuality. He writes:

Cyrus has spent a lot of time recently toying with racial imagery. We’ve seen Cyrus twerking her way through the video for her big hit “We Can’t Stop,” professing her love for “hood music,” and claiming spiritual affinity with Lil’ Kim. Last night, as Cyrus stalked the stage, mugging and twerking, and paused to spank and simulate analingus upon the ass of a thickly set African-American backup dancer, her act tipped over into what we may as well just call racism: a minstrel show routine whose ghoulishness was heightened by Cyrus’s madcap charisma, and by the

---

dark beauty of “We Can’t Stop” — by a good distance, the most powerful pop hit of 2013 . . .
Cyrus’s twerk act gives minstrelsy a postmodern careerist spin. Cyrus is annexing working-class black “ratchet” culture, the potent sexual symbolism of black female bodies, to the cause of her reinvention: her transformation from squeaky-clean Disney-pop poster girl to grown-up hipster-provocateur. (Want to wipe away the sickly-sweet scent of the Magic Kingdom? Go slumming in a black strip club.) Cyrus may indeed feel a cosmic connection to Lil’ Kim and the music of “the hood.” But the reason that these affinities are coming out now, at the VMAs and elsewhere, is because it’s good for business.55

Rosen does not discuss the intersecting concerns of race and gender, including the fact that Cyrus’ back up dancers were all black women, and that she engages in “ratchet” behavior as a problematic way to shirk her former reputation as, in Limbaugh’s words, “clean and pure as new snow.”56 However, as Rosen illustrates, it is not Cyrus’ sexuality per se that is worthy of critique, but the racial tropes and imagery she employs in order to perform that sexuality, tropes similar to those employed by the white women rappers I discuss in Chapter 2.

While the reactions I have highlighted here were critical of Cyrus’ twerking performances, most bounce rappers who were asked about the incident afterwards did not view the performance in such a negative light. In fact, aside from a few subtle (and even fewer overt) mentions of Cyrus’ seemingly novice skills (or lack thereof), many New Orleans bounce rappers were glad that Cyrus had brought national attention to their local culture and felt that her stage antics had provided them with opportunities to explain to others outside their communities what twerking is really all about. When asked by New Orleans bounce historian Holly Hobbs what she thought about Miley Cyrus, Cheeky

55 Rosen, 2013.
56 Limbaugh’s phrasing here also suggests a connection between “innocence” and white skin.
Blakk, the rapper who first used the term “twerk” in her 1994 song “Twerk Something,” stated this:

I love her. I love Miley! I love Miley. Why I love Miley? It’s simply ‘cause of this: it took Miley to come to New Orleans, to hear Cheeks [Cheeky Blakk] . . . When they talk about bounce, or when they talk about twerk, they gotta come all the way back to [points to herself] the originator. ‘Cause some way, some how, my name gonna pop up.  

In an article for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, music writer Fensterstock noted that Blakk did not see Cyrus’ VMA performance as racist. She writes:

“‘I’m good with it, it’s cool with me,” she said. “I think she’s all right, and I’m glad she’s putting it out there. Like my song says, ‘Twerk something if you real with it.’ I think she’s real with it.” And, she added: “Teenagers do act out.”

On the one hand, Cheeky Blakk’s easy-goingness regarding Cyrus’ twerking reflects a larger trend in bounce where artists add their own twist to concepts presented by other artists before them. Like Ha Sizzle’s view on other bounce rappers adapting his roll call technique to their own performance styles, some artists feel that having their concepts borrowed and adapted is a sign of their own skill, that they created something worthy of becoming a trend among others. On the other hand, however, she also subtly undermines the performance by joking that it may be an immature way of “acting out,” and by noting that interest in Cyrus’ twerking will ultimately lead back to her because she was the move’s creator.

---

Big Freedia also benefited from Cyrus’ performance, even if she was critical of it.

In an interview for Bust magazine, she noted of the VMA performance:

It’s offensive to black culture and black women who’ve been twerking for years. Every time we do something, people want to snatch it and run with it and put their name on it. And they still don’t have the moves down yet. It should’ve been someone else having those dancers up there and not Miley. We want to empower women of all walks of life to express themselves through dance music.\(^{59}\)

For Freedia, it was not just Cyrus’ appropriation of a black dance style that troubled her, but the fact that she did not perform the dance well. She continued:

I have some amazing white dancers who would get up there and shut Miley down. They could’ve used girls from New Orleans, even if they were not black, who knew what they’re doing. They’re just using anybody possible just to get that buzz since twerking is hot now.\(^{60}\)

Whatever her criticisms of Cyrus’ use of the New Orleans dance style, Freedia capitalized on the singer’s controversial performance and the new popularity of twerking. She released a bounce song response called “Twerk It,” appeared in multiple tutorial videos and television shows demonstrating proper twerk technique (including appearances on “The Real” and “White Guy Talk Show”), released her own Twerk App (users downloaded the app and recorded video of themselves twerking and superimposed it on scenes of Freedia and her dancers twerking, which they could then share on social media), and even staged an event in which she broke the Guinness World Record for most people twerking simultaneously, with three-hundred fifty-eight people twerking


\(^{60}\) Big Freedia cited in Mignucci.
together for two minutes. Her efforts as twerk teacher and ambassador supported her tongue-in-cheek offers to Cyrus improve her own skills. They also served as advertisements and support for her reality television show, “Big Freedia: Queen of Bounce.”

The generally positive reaction to the increased popularity of bounce outside of New Orleans, despite its roots in Cyrus’ performances, is also indicative of bounce artists’ belief that their style of music is for everyone, and as long as audiences are respectfully engaging, they should feel free to embrace the local dance styles. Twerking lessons are available at New Orleans dance studios, and when I attended live shows, I was often asked if I was there to shake. It is expected that if you listen to bounce, you also dance to bounce.

Before the spectacle of the 2013 VMAs, however, shaking was used as a tool for mitigating and working through post-Katrina trauma. As dance scholar Paul Scolieri notes, “Dance performs multiple and complex roles in refugee communities worldwide – as a form of cultural currency, survival strategy, movement therapy, political activism, and social service.” In many ways, those displaced by Katrina were refugees both outside and within the city, working to rebuild and retain cultural traditions as well as the physical aspects of the city, and bounce dancing played an important role in that process. While the outside world might read twerking and other styles of shaking as explicitly

---

62 I did not shake at performances while conducting research, but was often encouraged to. I did, however, dance in other styles, because it was impossible to not move during a live bounce performance.
sexual, inside New Orleans shaking is seen as so much more: it can be an expression of athleticism, intimacy, and resistance, among other things. Like the tradition of the second line, shaking is a way of transforming grief into joy, suffering into escape, and oppression into celebration. As Ha Sizzle told me:

Bounce music and dancing is like church and the Bible. Seriously. And I have to say that way because without the Bible, there'd be no church, and without bounce music, it wouldn't be the shaking and dancing that you see. And the tempo, they have so many different tempos to bounce music, no matter if it's a slow tempo or a fast tempo, you can still bust open, you can twerk, you can rock, you can wobble, you can bop. You can do whatever is possible when it comes to a bounce song, no matter what, it can be a singing [lyrical] bounce song, you still can dip, you can walk with it, you can groove, you can move your shoulders, you can tap your feet. It's like, it's just so much for bounce music when it come to the dancing part. It's amazing. It's so hard to explain but it's so easy to do... when you hear bounce music you have no choice but to dance.⁶⁴

Bounce music, therefore, is the necessary catalyst for the transformations that shaking enables, and it is the rappers’ job to empower everyone, regardless of their level of experience, to participate.

Resisting Sissy Bounce

Although “sissy bounce” is easy shorthand that centers the identities of queer and trans performers, not all queer and trans bounce artists appreciate being included under this umbrella term. Resistance to the sissy bounce label also comes from artists’ desires not to see themselves or their work pigeonholed as another form of “gay rap.” They do not want to be limited to performing just for LGBT audiences, or feel that the topics about which they rap are limited because they are expected to only speak to queer or trans

---

⁶⁴ Ha Sizzle, 2016.
experiences. This resistance reflects how integrated queer and trans rappers are in the overall bounce scene; aside from very few naysayers like Partners-N-Crime (PNC)’s Mr. Meana, who has suggested that queer artists are overshadowing bounce’s (presumably heterosexual) legacy, sissy artists have been widely welcomed and continue to be the most visible artists in the genre.65 Even Mr. Meana’s concerns were not explicitly with the presence or even success of queer rappers, but that the scene is “oversaturated with their style of bounce” and overshadowing the work of heterosexual artists such as himself.66 Some have suggested that this open acceptance of queer and trans rappers is unique to New Orleans, such as Miller who stated in 2008: “if there’s going to be a town where gay rappers are going to break out, New Orleans would pretty much be the only place in the world that could happen.”67 Regardless of whether or not that is actually the case (and clearly other American cities, especially New York City, have their own clusters of openly queer or trans rappers making national and international inroads), it does speak to the fundamental importance of appreciative local communities (such as those found in New Orleans) for queer and trans rappers as they build professional networks and fan bases. The idea for some is that if their local communities are accepting, there is no need to distinguish themselves from their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts, and that their identities are just part of who they are as performers. Thus many sissy bounce rappers have insisted that they do not perform sissy bounce: they are simply bounce artists like their heterosexual counterparts.

66 Fensterstock, “Sissy Strut.”
67 Matt Miller cited in Fensterstock, “Sissy Strut.”
So-called sissy rappers are not the only performers in the contemporary bounce scene, but they are by far the current dominant force. And yet, many bounce artists still resist the label “sissy bounce” to describe themselves and their music. Big Freedia told *Time* magazine that there is really no such thing as sissy bounce:

> We don’t separate it here in New Orleans at all. It’s just bounce music. Just because I’m a gay artist, they don’t have to put it in a category or label it. We have a lot of straight artists here, and they are offended by the term sissy bounce. We never did separate it here at home, and we don’t plan on it.68

This resistance could be a strategy to negotiate a few issues with being openly queer and/or trans in bounce in particular, but also in hip-hop more generally. One is that queer and trans bounce artists want to avoid being further ghettoized within an already small, primarily local genre and expected to constantly perform their sexual and gender identities. Many artists have songs that are explicitly queer (“homo songs”), especially Big Freedia and Sissy Nobby, but others don’t. Some have lyrics that reflect the same sexual fluidity that dancers often embody, but others rap about completely different topics altogether. Ha Sizzle explains:

> I never ever qualify myself as like they say the sissy music because I’m the type of person I feel that, music is music. Just because a person grow up being gay, straight, bisexual, anything does not mean that people can just go ahead and give them the title, oh, since you’re gay you doing sissy music. No! No, no, no, no. I could be gay, I could be straight, I could be bisexual, I could be transgender, I’m doing music. Okay? So I always was the person to follow my mind, I never ever laid behind other people or be a follower always just a leader . . . I never was the type of person to be like everyone else. If you have someone saying that they like to eat pussy, or they like to suck dick, I never was the person to go right behind them and

---

say oh this what I like ‘cause they said it. No, I give it to them, I say I like to pet puppies. And then after that everyone would start saying, oh my god I like to pet puppies too.⁶⁹

While Ha Sizzle identified openly queer and trans artists as the biggest influences on his early career and his interest in bounce, he distances himself from the idea that they constitute a separate category of bounce music, preferring instead to forge what he views as his own path.

Second, many contemporary bounce artists have mainstream aspirations, and they understand that the hip-hop industry outside of New Orleans is different than their local scene in that it is more judgmental of any kind of difference. For example, the manager of one openly gay rapper whom I interviewed informed me that, because the rapper was a month away from dropping a single with a major national artist, he would not be discussing sissy bounce or anything related to that because they did not want to jeopardize their collaborative relationship with the mainstream artist. The rapper disagreed with his manager’s decision and spoke to me openly about his experiences, but the manager’s reluctance is indicative of the level of homophobia that persists in the music industry, which has led some openly queer artists not necessarily to closet themselves, but to downplay their queer identities so as not to risk missing opportunities on a national level.

Some rappers, such as Keno, use a positive, resilient attitude to carefully navigate the tension that can result from being an openly queer artist from New Orleans who seeks collaborations with nationally recognized artists:

⁶⁹ Ha Sizzle, 2016.
It’s 2016, like, get over it. It is what it is . . . We’re not out here down bad, oh I’m gonna mess with you, mess with you, mess with you. We’re just living. I don’t mess with anybody right now. I just want to focus on my music.  

He pushes against the idea that hip-hop is not ready for queer rap artists, and that he has to remain closeted in order to have mainstream success. He also noted that Big Freedia had broken down a lot of barriers for queer artists, and that the world outside of New Orleans was becoming generally more accepting of LGBTQ people, including performers. He was also keen to point out that there are most likely many more queer people in hip-hop: gay rappers are not necessarily new, but their openness and increased visibility is.

Ha Sizzle takes a similar approach. He, too, feels that the music should be the most important aspect of any artist, regardless of how they identify. He explains it as follows:

I’m a grown man. I have a daughter. I refuse to be stereotyped, or be that person that people try to make a clown out of because they don’t have nothing else better to do with themselves and they don’t want to see your music advance to where it’s at. That’s why I’m so proud and so happy for Big Freedia. Okay? I’m super excited for Fly Boi Keno. Super excited. Sissy Nobby. I’m excited for the things that these, Nicky da B, God rest his soul, things that all these people are getting to accomplish and do with their music. To say that we are the people who are stereotyped each and every day. People want the image. Oh you can’t do this ‘cause you look this certain way. You can’t do this you can’t do that. Well music is music. Just let the music speak for itself. That’s all I want. If people let the music speak for itself, I’d be big right now.

Ha Sizzle’s response speaks to how integrated queer and trans artists are in the New Orleans bounce scene generally. With the exception of a few folks who want to “bash

---

70 Keno, 2016.
71 Ha Sizzle, 2016.
gays,” as he put it, most bounce fans have no qualms about the queer and trans identities of the most prominent contemporary rappers.\textsuperscript{72} Many are thrilled about the national profile Big Freedia has developed through her reality show, and everyone is incredibly proud of her success. Even Mannie Fresh, an influential New Orleans rapper and former in-house producer for Cash Money Records, has stated that gay rappers have been around the city “forever” and that in the local culture it is not a big deal:

\begin{quote}
We got gay gangsters in New Orleans, dude. It’s deep. But that’s just the whole thing about New Orleans. We cool, nothing bothers us. We’re a city where if you mind yours, we cool. Our hip-hop scene . . . bounce is just crazy, that’s a part of New Orleans. But we got another side of it as well. For some reason, there’s a lot of gay artists that do bounce music right now. But it don’t bother nobody in the city because it’s just a flavorful city. We just embrace everything, we not trippin’.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

Fresh continues to explain that the label “sissy bounce” is not a term that the artists themselves created, nor one that he would use to describe the prevalence of queer and trans rappers in the city:

\begin{quote}
That’s a label that somebody put on it. But there’s some dudes I wouldn’t say that to. I wouldn’t say that’s sissy bounce of some of them. Some of them dudes [are] like real hardcore killers! To me, I’m gonna respect everybody. Whatever is going on with you, that’s your space, and you have the right to have individuality.\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

Like Ha Sizzle, Mannie Fresh argues that queer and trans bounce artists’ identities do not matter, as long as they are talented musicians who put out good music. He even suggested that there could be a nationally recognized rap star who was openly gay – if only this person had enough talent.

\textsuperscript{72} Ha Sizzle, 2016.


\textsuperscript{74} Mannie Fresh, 2013.
Although statements such as Mannie Fresh’s indicate that attitudes towards openly gay rappers, and openly queer and trans people in general, have shifted, they also promote the idea that the music industry is a meritocracy where one’s level of success depends solely on their inherent talent and ability, as well as a willingness to work hard. It relies on a sort of sexuality-blind approach that ignores the fact that queer and trans artists do have different experiences than other rappers, and that those experiences can have an impact on their ability to achieve mainstream success. The existence of queer kinship networks within the bounce scene suggests that these artists have more difficulties navigating social life and their careers, and that these networks were created to help mitigate those struggles. While the networks themselves do provide opportunities for their members, as illustrated above in the aftermath of Katrina, their necessity also demonstrates continuing challenges and barriers for openly queer and trans rappers.

Additionally, while mainstream artists have brought attention to the New Orleans bounce scene, it has also created opportunities for exploitation, and it is often the most marginal among bounce participants who are the most vulnerable. For example, the music video for Beyoncé’s “Formation” uses footage from a 2014 documentary short about New Orleans bounce directed by Abteen Bagheri called That B.E.A.T. While Beyoncé’s team clarified that they received permission from the owner of the footage to use it in the music video, the director, producer, and artists featured did not give their permission, nor were they compensated for their work.  

---

appeared in the film, especially a young, gay male dancer, are featured in the music video uncredited. One of my informants was reluctant to speak about the situation on record, but did try to express to me the disappointment many of the artists experienced when the single was released:

It’s not something that’s worth casting aspersions on anybody, I don’t actually blame anyone, I think this is just the expedience of the industry at large. And so it’s not like, oh Beyoncé’s supposed to be perfect because she’s famous! Or because she represents for black women or whatever. She doesn’t have to be perfect, she can’t get everything right. I don’t really care. But I do know that the dancer in question called me the morning after the video came out and was crying, and was sad. When I went to bed I was like, when he sees this I wonder if he’s gonna call me and be happy or sad. And I went to bed and I woke up and he called me and he was crying. I secretly hoped you would just be happy, because I knew there’s nothing we can do about it and he was like, I do too. If someone had just asked me, I would’ve given the right to use it away for free.⁷⁶

The New Orleans artists involved do not have the financial or legal means to fight a major celebrity such as Beyoncé for compensation or recognition. As my source noted, it took their original work out of context and assigned control of the narrative away from the creators of their own work and to Beyoncé and her team. While the artists featured in That B.E.A.T. would have most likely said yes to appear in what has become an iconic video from the legendary singer, they were never even given the opportunity to decide for themselves.

Other artists use the intellectual work of bounce artists more subtly. As noted above, rapper Missy Elliott’s “Pep Rally” sounds surprisingly similar to Ha Sizzle’s “Bounce It

⁷⁶Anonymous source, in interview with the author, June 2016.
Biggity Bounce It,” but not similar enough to warrant crediting him on the track. He noticed the resemblance between the two tracks right away:

I truly love Missy Elliott’s “Pep Rally.” When I first heard it, first verse that came to my head was, mmm Missy Elliott must’ve been listening to some of my music. And once I heard it again and a lot of other people, artists heard it everyone went to calling me, man Missy Elliott must’ve listened to your music ‘cause she sound like your style of bounce music. And then the confirmation came that she does listen to bounce music, once I spoke with one of her friends. And her friends is like, yes ‘cause she always listening to this and that and she put on [bounce] music . . . But just by hearing that, I was like, well at least she heard. At least she’s hearing me.  

Ha Sizzle was reluctant to speak negatively about both Missy Elliott and the track, instead framing the release as a compliment to his own work and as a good thing for his blossoming career and bounce music more generally, just like the adoption of roll call by other artists reflects positively on his own contributions. However, it is clear that, as with Beyoncé, the national star was drawing on the local scene without explicitly crediting its primarily queer and trans artists.

With the increased national popularity of bounce and its widening influence, this attitude might be changing, with more national artists giving bounce artists credit where credit is due. The producer Diplo has featured queer bounce artists, particularly the late Nicky da B and Keno (formerly Fly Boi Keno) on the moderately successful tracks “Express Yourself” and “Beats Knockin,” respectively. The combination of electronic dance music (EDM) and bounce has been particularly successful, with Keno choosing to brand his own style as EBM, or electronic bounce music. The rapper was also recently featured on a track with the nationally known, Atlanta-based rapper Lil Jon. Ha Sizzle

---

77 Ha Sizzle, 2016.
was given full credit for his contribution to “Child’s Play,” a track off of Canadian rapper Drake’s 2016 album *Views*. The song samples Sizzle’s bounce hit “She Rode That Dick Like A Soldier,” which he notes was in heavy rotation in Houston after it was released in 2005. He told me that Drake’s management team reached out to him to get permission to sample the track, credited him as a writer, and, at the time of our interview, both parties were in talks about bringing him on tour as an opening act.

Ideally, bounce artists, especially queer and trans bounce rappers, will be able to transition into the mainstream without losing both their New Orleans flavor and their openness about their identities, and will be given full credit for their work. Furthermore, the successes of the above-mentioned artists, as well as those of openly queer and trans artists from other parts of the United States such as New York City, indicates that the country is ready for an openly gay rap superstar. Many artists, queer and straight, believe that sexual orientation should be a non-issue in hip-hop generally, as it seemingly is in New Orleans. Certainly Mannie Fresh believes so:

> It can happen [a nationally-recognized gay rap star] if it’s based on your talent. Because a lot of people come to New Orleans and it’s just like what you said, they can’t believe the whole culture of the city. They like, well ya’ll got your own little thing going on, ya’ll living in your own little bubble. The crazy thing is, you gotta take like a Frank Ocean. Well, Frank Ocean said what he said [and came out as queer], yeah it took guts but in New Orleans it wasn’t a big deal because it was like, well shit, that’s been around here for forever. Nobody in New Orleans was trippin’. That was just like, wow, alright. You should’a been said.

---

78 Ha Sizzle, 2016.
79 Mannie Fresh, 2013.
Epilogue

The media coverage of New York City-based black queer rappers and the increasing influence of queer and trans New Orleans bounce artists on the work of mainstream performers suggests that queer hip-hop artists are experiencing a moment of unprecedented visibility. This visibility, however, has not translated into a radical repositioning of normative rapper identities. To demonstrate ways in which the hypermasculine, heterosexual, cisgender, black male rapper identity continues to dominate the hip-hop imagination, I offer two examples of hip-hop artists who both reflect and are influencing the current discourse of queer identity in hip-hop. One is Frank Ocean, the critically acclaimed singer, songwriter, and rapper who came out on his Tumblr blog in 2012, and Jamal Lyon, the fictional middle son of hip-hop record label mogul Lucious Lyon on Fox network’s television show, Empire, which premiered in January, 2015. While one of these figures is real and the other fictional, they highlight some of the ongoing issues surrounding queer identity in hip-hop, including the fluidity of sexual identities, intersections of queerness and blackness, and ongoing homophobia in the music industry, especially in the mainstream.

On July 4, 2012, prior to the release of his debut studio album Channel Orange, Ocean posted an open letter on his Tumblr blog that was originally intended to be part of
the “Thank Yous” in the album’s liner notes.¹ In the letter, Ocean writes about unrequited love that he had for another young man, whom he calls his first love:

4 summers ago, I met somebody. I was 19 years old. He was too. We spent that summer, and the summer after, together. Everyday almost. And on the days we were together, time would glide. Most of the day I’d see him, and his smile. I’d hear is conversation and his silence. . Until it was time to sleep. Sleep I would often share with him. By the time I realized I was in love, it was malignant. It was hopeless. There was no escaping, no negotiating with the feeling. No choice. It was my first love, it changed my life.²

While Ocean never openly identified himself as gay or bisexual, the message was clear that he did not identify as straight. Furthermore, the fact that this coming out story was framed as part of the acknowledgements section of the liner notes to his forthcoming album, suggests that Ocean’s music was in some ways influenced by his personal relationship to another man.

At the end of the letter, Ocean remarks, “I feel like a free man. If I listen closely. . I can hear the sky falling too.”³ While Ocean’s trepidation was certainly understandable, his open letter was met with a generally positive response by fans, critics, and other members of the hip-hop community. Jay Z, for example, posted an essay by dream hampton entitled “Thank You, Frank Ocean” on his curated news website, *Life+Times*, thereby endorsing Ocean.⁴ Russell Simmons also demonstrated his support, stating in response to the open letter, “Today is a big day for hip-hop. It is a day that will define who we really are. How compassionate will we be? How loving can we be? How

² Ocean, “thank you’s.”
³ Ibid.
inclusive are we?”

Even Ocean’s fellow Odd Future member, Tyler, The Creator, who has been criticized for his excessive use of the term “faggot” in his music, supported his colleague in tweet: “My Big Brother Finally Fucking Did That. Proud Of That Nigga Cause I Know That Shit Is Difficult Or Whatever.”

The outpouring of support for Ocean from some of the most important figures in hip-hop is remarkable, and certainly would have been unimaginable just a decade before. It also begs the question: would some of these figures have offered the same kind of open support had Ocean not already established his professional career and public profile? Or was his coming out and the subsequent approval only made possible by the level of celebrity he had already achieved?

Perhaps drawing inspiration from the real-life figure of Ocean, Empire’s Jamal Lyon (played by Jussie Smollett) also comes out, and his story line explores sexual fluidity and suggests sexual orientation is not a static aspect of one’s identity. Jamal’s musical identity is also similar to Ocean’s: his style is primarily R&B, and the character spends much more time on screen singing soulful ballads and pop hits than he does rapping. Like Ocean, Jamal begins as a relatively obscure songwriter whose career shifts when he begins to do more solo work that puts him in the spotlight. Also like his real-life inspiration, Jamal’s public coming out is generally well received, although his father,

---

Lucious, a former drug-dealer and infamous rapper, struggles to come to grips with his son’s gay identity. Taken at face value, the relative success of *Empire* (especially in its first two seasons when Jamal’s sexuality was a major aspect of the plot) and positive reception of Ocean (who won two Grammys in 2013) would seem to suggest that hip-hop is ready for openly queer artists to represent the genre in the mainstream.⁸

The catch, however, is that both Jamal and Ocean are not really rappers in the traditional sense of the word: their delivery styles are primarily singing, not rapping. Furthermore, their music, while undeniably falling within the malleable boundaries of hip-hop culture, is more accurately characterized as R&B and/or pop, not rap *per se*. Thus, both Ocean and Jamal are able to exist as queer within hip-hop without challenging the normative rapper figure; rap remains strictly in the realm of the heterosexual male.

While the outpouring of support of Ocean in the wake of his coming out and the popularity of Jamal’s character on *Empire* demonstrate hip-hop’s openness to queer identities, mainstream rap in particular is loath to broaden its borders.⁹ As Snoop Dogg stated in response to Ocean’s revelation and its aftermath: “Frank Ocean ain’t no rapper.

---


He’s a singer. It’s acceptable in the singing world, but in the rap world I don’t know if it will ever be acceptable because rap is so masculine.”

Perhaps unbeknownst to Snoop Dogg, queer rappers of all types already exist. And yet, as Snoop’s response demonstrates, there is still resistance to rappers whose identities exist outside of the normative rapper identity matrix. In her essay to Ocean, hampton writes:

You fulfill hip-hop’s early promise to not give a fuck about what others think of you. The 200 times Tyler says “faggot” and the wonderful way he held you up and down on Twitter today, Syd the Kid’s sexy stud profile and her confusing, misogynistic videos speak to the many contradictions and posturing your generation inherited from the hip-hop generation before you. I’m sure you know a rumor about Big Daddy Kane having AIDS and with it, the suggestion that he was bisexual, effectively ended his career. You must have seen the pictures of pioneer Afrika “Baby Bam” from the Jungle Brothers in drag and read the blogs ridiculing him, despite the fact that he’s been leading a civilian life for nearly two decades. I know as a singer you love Rahsaan Patterson and bemoan the fact that homophobia prevented him from being the huge star his talent deserves. Only last month Queen Latifah unnecessarily released a statement denying that her performing at a Gay Pride event meant she was finally affirming her identity for thousands of Black girls. Imagine if Luther had been able to write, as you closed your letter, “I don’t have any secrets I need kept anymore…I feel like a free man.”

hampton demonstrates that while Ocean’s coming out was a major event in hip-hop, it falls within a pre-existing discourse on homosexuality in the genre. She marks this event as an important milestone in hip-hop history while also acknowledging that Ocean is not the first, nor the last, gay artist in the genre. Jamal’s presence on a national television show centered on hip-hop culture continues this conversation in the mainstream.

---


11 hampton, “Thank You, Frank Ocean.”
In this larger discourse, it is okay to be queer in hip-hop, but it is nearly impossible to be a queer rapper, and even more so to be a queer rapper who exhibits anything other than a hypermasculine gender presentation. Gender expression is still problematically tied to sexual orientation; queer men such as Ocean are presumed to be effeminate and unable to convincingly perform rap’s masculinity. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be traditionally feminine in appearance but emulate the masculine language and stances of the men in their profession. If they fail to maintain that precarious balance, they could be labeled pop stars instead of rappers, pushed outside the boundaries of hip-hop or, at the very least, to its fringes. Many, such as Latifah, distance themselves from any suggestion that they are queer, thus reinforcing the notion that there are no gay rappers and that to be queer in a hip-hop context should be source of shame. If they were to openly embrace their queer identities, however, they would run the risk of losing fans and the support of an industry that is both hostile to women and invested in presenting only a heteromasculinist ideal of rap. Furthermore, there is no mention of transgender, gender non-conforming, or non-binary identities in this rap discourse. Openly queer and trans rappers exist, but they are frequently relegated to the hip-hop underground, limited to a particular local scene or circuit of LGBTQ-focused venues and events.

As I demonstrate in this dissertation, there are many ways to be a rapper, and that includes a plethora of sexualities and gender identities and expressions. In the mainstream, however, few artists have managed to become commercially successful while also negotiating their non-normative identities. Rappers such as Nicki Minaj are
continually labeled pop-rap or compared to other women rappers, rather than rappers as a whole. White women such as Iggy Azalea and Kreayshawn appropriate modes of negotiation particular to black women’s social location, thus using black music to contribute to the cultural and structural systems of racism in the United States. Macklemore challenges homophobia within hip-hop and positions himself as an advocate for social justice as a way to negate his whiteness in a genre in which blackness is viewed as authentic. Black queer artists are diverse, with some drawing on the lineages of their particular city, especially New York City and New Orleans, to create a local sound that can translate to a national stage. What they all have in common, however, is that they must negotiate the expectations of the genre, which positions rappers as primarily heterosexual, hypermasculine, cisgender, black men. The strategies they use to navigate these expectations necessarily depend on the particularities of their own intersectional identities, and their reception must be understood through a similarly intersectional lens.
Bibliography


Caramanica, Jon. “Finding a Place in the Hip-Hop Ecosystem.” Nytimes.com, January 27,


———. “Iggy Azalea’s post-racial mess: America’s oldest race tale, remixed.”


Fallon, Kevin. “Beyoncé’s ‘Formation’: A Fiery Black Power Anthem and Call to


Harris, Paisley. “Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women’s History and Black Feminism.” Journal of Women’s History Vol.15 No. 1 (Spring 2003); 212-220.


———. *The Queer Composition of America’s Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music,*


http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/01/arts/music/stars-align-for-a-gay-marriage-anthem.html?_r=0.


http://www.avclub.com/article/macklemore-amp-lewis-same-love-is-more-than-a-pro--200929.


———, Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham, and Rachel Raimist, editors. *Home Girls*


Sacks, Ethan. “VMAS 2013: Miley Cyrus twerk causes knee-jerk reactions from


Stein, Spencer. “EXCLUSIVE: Creator of Nicki Minaj’s Nazi-Themed ‘Only’ Video


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aMIT6qck0o.


http://www.laweekly.com/music/which-white-entertainers-have-a-hood-pass-to-say-the-n-word-2411498.

http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/.


Wortham, Jenna. “‘Why Can’t We Stop Watching ‘Empire’?” Nytimes.com, March 18,

Interviews


http://digitallibrary.tulane.edu/islandora/object/tulane%3A28432

http://digitallibrary.tulane.edu/islandora/object/tulane%3A48047


http://digitallibrary.tulane.edu/islandora/object/tulane%3A28446
Discography


———. The Pinkprint. Young Money, Cash Money. CD and MP3 album, 2014.


