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Why Hip-Hop Is Queer: Using Queer Theory to Examine Identity Formation in Rap Music

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**Why Hip-Hop is Queer:
Using Queer Theory to Examine Identity Formation in Rap Music**

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies

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Introduction

In 1987 Onika Tanya Maraj immigrated to Queens, New York City from her native Trinidad and Tobago with her family. Maraj attended a performing arts high school in New York City and pursued an acting career. In addition to acting, Maraj had an interest in singing and rapping. She started to appear as a rapper in various videos and mixtapes, produced by Brooklyn-based hip-hop record label, Dirty Money Entertainment. After seeing Maraj rapping in a video, famous rapper, Lil' Wayne, signed her to Young Money Records, and Onika Tanya Maraj donned the new name, Nicki Minaj. She quickly became a national sensation and contemporary pop icon. Minaj is now famous for her multiple outlandish characters and identities, as well as her hard-hitting and unabashedly self-promoting tracks, which discuss her superiority amongst both female and male rappers.

Over thirty years before Nicki Minaj released her billboard-topping, debut album *Pink Friday*, another young Caribbean immigrant made his way to New York City. In 1967, Clive Campbell moved from Kingston, Jamaica to the South Bronx. There, he encountered the often described harsh reality of a borough and a community neglected and ignored by both city and national government. Like many Black and Latino youth growing up in the South Bronx and neighborhoods like it across the U.S., Clive Campbell was searching for a space of his own where he could establish an identity and a name for himself.

Most hip-hop histories begin with the story of Clive Campbell, the young Caribbean immigrant who grew up in the South Bronx. Clive Campbell, who would later become the world-famous DJ Kool Herc, is credited as being one of the original creators

of hip-hop. While DJ Kool Herc is an integral part of the narrative of hip-hop's inception, it is emblematic of many of the underlying problems of hip-hop scholarship that he and a couple other male DJs are often the only ones credited with creating hip-hop. Today DJ Kool Herc is known for commanding sections of the South and West Bronx with the ability to throw a great block party and make the b-boys (or "break"-boys) get up and dance for hours. During the 1970's and 80's, the parks and other public areas in sections once dominated by gangs became party venues. Hip-Hop was becoming an alternate way to achieve fame, notoriety, and respect in a section of the city dominated by gangs of youth attempting to do the same thing through violence and control. However, what most prominent hip-hop narratives (which are commonly created and told by men) leave out is the significant role of Cindy Campbell, Kool Herc's sister. Hip-Hop journalist Jeff Chang's influential book, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, not only tells the same story of Kool Herc's singular innovation of the hip-hop block party that neglects Cindy Campbell's involvement, but also boasts an introduction by DJ Kool Herc himself that further validates Cindy Campbell's invisibility from the story.¹ Oneka LaBennett, professor of African-American studies at Fordham University and research director of the Bronx African-American History Project, challenges the dominant narratives of hip-hop's beginnings. LaBennett describes, Chang and others who have written narratives about hip-hop's beginnings emphasize the significant role that Kool Herc and his father played in planning the community parties that would later become recognized as the birthplace of hip-hop culture. However, Jeff Chang leaves out the vital role of DJ Kool Herc's older sister, Cindy Campbell, in the origins of these significant block parties. As LaBennet explains, "The elder Campbell provided the sound

¹ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005).

system with which Herc went on to spin records first inside 1520 Sedgwick and later at now famous outdoor block parties in surrounding neighborhoods.” Although this does not seem like a very important contribution, it is actually monumental.

Cindy Campbell’s role in the Sedgwick Avenue block parties, and to hip-hop itself, is dually significant. First, she provided him with the actual technology. Having access to a sound system that could play multiple records at once and that allowed for the technological innovation required for a DJ is an important contribution to the larger hip-hop music and hip-hop culture. DJ Kool Herc is renowned as the inventor of the “merry-go-round,” which is characterized as the continued looping of the instrumental, usually percussion-based break typically found in the funk and soul songs that DJ’s were playing. Access to the proper sound system was thus essential for Kool Herc’s development. Second, Cindy Campbell was also the one that encouraged her brother to host these parties in the first place, unlike the dominant narratives’ claim, thus providing him with the inspiration and vision to use the block parties as a venue for testing out his DJ skills.²

The erasure of Cindy Campbell from the narrative of hip-hop history demonstrates the need for the production of new narratives as well as the “excavation” (to use Oneka LaBennet’s term) of the hidden narratives of women and queer people, who have been marginalized and neglected within the grand narrative of hip-hop. Furthermore, excavating these narratives, as LaBennet suggests, sheds light on the significance of starting this thesis off with an anecdote about Nicki Minaj, an extremely famous rapper and a queer woman. Starting off with the story of Nicki Minaj recenters the narratives of women, and queer people, in hip-hop creation stories; juxtaposing Minaj and Cindy

² Oneka LaBennet, “Histories and ‘Her Stories’ from the Bronx: Excavating Hidden Hip Hop Narratives,” *Afro-American New York Life and History* 33, no. 2 (July 2009): 112.

Campbell's stories is an attempt to connect the predominant presence of a female rapper to a larger history of women in hip-hop music and culture's origins. Women's involvement in hip-hop is nothing new. With this "break" in the larger narrative of hip-hop, I attempt to shed light on the narratives of queer hip-hop performers as well as highlight the queerness of hip-hop, and its unique spaces for the creation of new narratives. In order to understand the current movements within hip-hop, we must go back to the beginning of the genre.

"These are the breaks:" Flow, Layering, Rupture, and the History of Hip-Hop

Hip-Hop emerges from a particular and localized social, historical, and political context. During the late 1970's and 1980's, Black and Latino youth across the South Bronx were searching for a way to make a name for themselves that challenged the systemic neglect of them as individuals, as well as their communities, neighborhoods, and families. As in our current moment, dominant culture portrayed Black and Latino youth as delinquent and deviant, and as thus deserving systemic neglect and violence. During the 1970's and 80's, deindustrialization, the rise and expansion of the prison industrial complex, and the exploitative economic policies of the Reagan era bolstered and propagated the damaging representations of Black and Latino youth of color in the dominant culture. As Tricia Rose explains in her canonical work on hip-hop studies, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, the context of urban poverty is essential in the development of hip-hop culture. Hip-Hop begins to take shape during the late 1970's and early 80's at the same time as the emergence of the systemic policy shifts listed above. Focusing on the South Bronx and other neighborhoods in which hip-hop's first innovations emerged, it is also important to

consider the severe neglect of national government and the ravaging of inner city neighborhoods caused by urban design policies geared towards facilitating “white flight.”³

Understanding the emergence of hip-hop requires a knowledge of the social, economic, and political realities that Rose outlines, as well as a connection to the rich cultural history of oral and musical traditions of the African diaspora. Hip-Hop takes its place in history as a part of both continuous histories and should not be severed from either. The histories of the urban context and the oral and musical traditions of the African diaspora are demonstrated in various aspects of hip-hop music and culture and are, in fact, essential to hip-hop’s definition. As Rose explains, “Hip hop remains a never-ending battle for status, prestige, and group adoration, always in formation, always contested, and never fully achieved. Competitions among and cross-fertilization between breaking, graffiti writing, and rap music was fueled by shared local experiences and social position and similarities in approaches to sound, motion, communication, and style among hip hop’s Afrodiasporic communities.”⁴ Hip-Hop is arguably part of a continuation of the tradition of the griot, which is an important part of the cultural structures of many West African societies. Griots are defined as a person or persons responsible for collecting oral histories of their society and community and presenting them through poetry and music.⁵ The griot also often considered a societal leader and

³ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 30.

⁴ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*. 36.

⁵ Thomas A. Hale, “From the Griot of Roots to the Roots of Griot: A New Look at the Origins of a Controversial African Term for Bard,” *Oral Traditions* 12, no. 2 (1997): 250.

adviser.⁶ In many ways, hip-hop can be seen as a continuation of this distinctly West African tradition because it is a collection and distribution of oral history through poetry, music, and dance. The social, economic, and political realities of the urban context of the South Bronx, as well as the rich cultural history of oral and musical traditions of the African diaspora provide the context for the nascence of hip-hop.

Black and Latino youth interacted with the histories and traditions enumerated above to carve out alternative identities outside of dominant racist and classist structures for themselves in the context of the South Bronx. In a neighborhood notorious for the prevalence of gang violence, gangs often provide spaces and communities for youth who lacked access to other spaces of belonging. While this was true in the South Bronx, Black and Latino youth were also forming communities of belonging and creating innovative pursuits of individual talents. Being marginalized actors living in a neighborhood that the dominant culture left out, young people like DJ Kool Herc and Cindy Campbell used their surroundings as inspiration and material to create alternate forms of cultural expression. Such innovation is evident in DJ Kool Herc's development of the DJ technique known as the merry-go-round, which I discussed previously. In hip-hop, "the break" refers to the part of a song that makes people get up and dance--usually an instrumental section consisting primarily of percussion. Kool Herc created the effect of looping two records together so that the break lasted for minutes at a time, rather than just a few seconds. Referring to this innovative technique as "the Merry-Go-Round," the effect was accomplished by taking two copies of the same record and back-cueing one to

⁶ The discussion and enthusiasm surrounding the griot in societies outside of West Africa do not often address the complexity of the term. Griots are a caste in most of the West African societies in which they are found, and are usually regarded with ambivalence, or even fear, in some societies because of their unique positioning of power and their power to control the stories and histories of the community and society through the revered forms of poetry, music and dance.

the beginning of the break as the other reached the end of the break.⁷ In my argument I position the “breaks” as not only the musical and dance innovation of Kool Herc, but also as breaks in the dominant narratives of culture, society, and hip-hop.

Hip-Hop allows for the production of breaks--disruptions, social ruptures, to use Tricia Rose’s term--in identity formation and (re)presentation. Although in contemporary, commercially successful hip-hop we often see the recapitulation of dominant presentations of identity, particularly Black masculine identities, the foundations of hip-hop identity interventions are rooted in conceptions of families. Rose explains, “Identity in hip hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience, and one’s attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family.”⁸ An alternative family and an identity rooted in specific, local experience as Rose describes it, is one of the key elements of hip-hop culture and music. Conceptualizing hip-hop as an alternative family is akin to conceptualizing hip-hop as a space, supported by lyrics and beats. As I discuss in my first and third chapters, “alternative families” are an integral part of forming alternative identities--that is, alternative families and identities constructed in localized experiences allow for the establishment of identities that challenge and resist the dominant culture’s imposed identities. Alternate families also create spaces for another key component of hip-hop culture: competition.

Close-knit and personalized identity formations played into the culture of competition, as individuals as well as groups compete against each other to determine the superiority of a particular group, or family. Furthermore, competition in hip-hop music and culture is connected to the Afro-diasporic oral and musical traditions of toasting,

⁷ Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005), 79.

⁸ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 34.

boasting, and signifying. Toasting, defined as rhythmic speaking over a beat provides a clear foundation for the development of rap, while boasting and signifying are constructions of speech that emphasize irony and metaphor as a means of demonstrating skill.⁹ As rapper Big Freedia and other participants in hip-hop communities describe, competition often strengthens the associations and personal relationships formed through hip-hop. Additionally, the members of families and groups prioritize other members of their group and support each other. The drive of competition is evident in all of the four most commonly referenced elements of hip-hop: graffiti, b-boying, DJing, and rap. As The legacies of the urban context, Afrodiasporic cultural and musical traditions, and competition tie the four elements of hip-hop together.

While all of the four elements are extremely important, and emerged interdependently,¹⁰ I focus my analysis on rapping/MCing in my thesis, along with two other more recently added elements: knowledge and style/swag not only because they are the most popularly recognized elements of hip-hop culture, but also because they provide the most explicit sites for actors to theorize about identity. In hip-hop, the act of theorizing often has a particular conceptual structure that can be characterized as “flow, layering, and rupture.” The concepts of “flow, layering, and rupture” are prevalent in all four of the elements of hip-hop. Tricia Rose provides an important analysis of the role of

⁹ <http://www.uic.edu/orgs/kbc/hiphop/overview.htm> and Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988): 44-45.

¹⁰ It is important to recognize rap’s location in an interdependent history and development of all of the elements of hip-hop as a culture and social movement and not as an art form developed separately and independently. However, rap, along with each of the four elements are individual and unique pieces of the culture with their own history. Although it is difficult to separate one element from the rest, I will be focusing on the development of rap and the role of the MC as it relates to the more recently added elements of knowledge and style, specifically swag, as I will discuss in more detail. For more information on the relationship between rap, knowledge, style, and the other elements of hip-hop, refer to Tricia Rose’s seminal book, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*.

these three phenomena in rap music. Flow, layering and rupture are all stylistic qualities that Rose argues characterize hip-hop as a musical genre and as a culture. Rose clarifies the role of flow, layering, and rupture by defining them, claiming, “In hip hop, visual, physical, musical, and lyrical lines are set in motion, broken abruptly with sharp angular breaks, yet they sustain motion and energy through fluidity and flow.”¹¹ Out of the four elements, rap perhaps best illustrates the relationship between flow, layering, and rupture and its importance in hip-hop. To paraphrase Rose, a rapper is considered talented for her ability to adeptly move between a smooth line that is connected to the beat that the DJ creates, and stuttering, halting, or changing the rhythm of her “flow” both within and in contrast to the beats. It is through these uses of flow and rupture that the rapper layers meanings, often using the African-American oral tradition of signifying to create double meanings.¹² Signifying is a linguistic device that demonstrates the context-bound significance and the cultural value of certain words and phrases that is shared and unique to members of that culture. The practice of signifying creates alternate meanings of words through rhetorical figures, and allows for certain words to have particular meanings that are only accessible to members of the culture from which the meanings are created.¹³ Signifying stems from the African-American folktale of the Signifying Monkey, which stems from the trickster figure in Yoruba traditions.

Rap is a powerful site for signifying and the construction of coded alternate meanings, as is swag. Signifying is strengthened and facilitated by flow, layering, and rupture. Rose states, “Let us imagine these hip hop principles as a blueprint for social

¹¹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 38.

¹² Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 39.

¹³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 44-45.

resistance and affirmation: create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish, and transform them. However, be also prepared for rupture, find pleasure in it, in fact, *plan on* [emphasis hers] social rupture.”¹⁴ Thus, it is essential to examine hip-hop and trace its narrative as both a musical and aesthetic culture and a social movement in the context of these significant cultural elements. Furthermore, the concepts of flow, layering, and rupture are also relevant to the epistemology of hip-hop. In order to study hip-hop and write about hip-hop, flow, layering, and rupture demand that a linear history of hip-hop be abandoned. Instead, hip-hop must be understood as a narrative of constant movement. This narrative requires the present moment in hip-hop to tell the story of the past and vice versa. The narrative of hip-hop is not a linear progression, but rather a system of knowledge that requires examining hip-hop outside of the traditional notions of history. Throughout hip-hop scholarship and popular discourses of hip-hop, categorical distinctions like “old school” vs. “new school,” “mainstream” vs. “underground,” “conscious” vs. “oppressive,” etc. dominate. Such a discourse is unproductive because it neglects the complexity in the interactions and cross-fertilization across these categories in hip-hop music and culture.

Hip-Hop Identity Interventions and My Project

In order to construct a non-linear narrative, I incorporate Gloria Anzaldúa’s theories of the borderlands along with other scholarship and theorizing on race, gender, and queerness, in addition to traditional hip-hop scholarship. In fact, I argue that hip-hop cannot be fully understood without the intervention of these theories and experiences because as the phenomena of flow, layering, and rupture demonstrate, hip-hop itself is

¹⁴ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 39.

queer due to its “break” from normativity. Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* provides a significant theoretical foundation for my analysis because hip-hop occupies a space that transgresses physical, emotional, and societal borders, which becomes evident in my analysis of Las Krudas and transnational hip-hop in my second chapter. Hip-Hop creates power from its positionality in the cultural borderlands and allows marginalized subjects to create identities across borders.

My analysis is also grounded in queer theory. Hip-Hop is queer. However, the ambiguity surrounding the word “queer” presents unique difficulties in constructing an argument about the queerness of something, particularly as queer relates to race and gender. Queer has become widely used as an umbrella term, not only for LGBT* people, but also for anything that is considered non-normative. As a result, “queer” is often stripped from its particular historical context and queer theory and queerness are often used to attempt to erase difference in experience along the lines of race and gender. However, the term and politics of queerness emerged during the AIDS crisis and the activism coming from the LGBT* communities, which is significant to defining and using ‘queer.’

The historical moment of the emergence of queer is significant because it sheds light on what queer means, particularly in relation to its politics. When I argue that hip-hop is queer, I do so because of overarching aspects of the definition of queerness that many scholars, such as Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler, have rightly scrutinized, such as its non-normativity and re-centering of narratives that are traditionally left on the margins. Hip-Hop is queer partly because it is not normative. Hip-Hop is constructed of oppositional narratives that challenge the dominant culture and mechanisms of social

control. These are important aspects of hip-hop's queerness, and what defines queerness. However, queerness must not be removed from its identity-based context of sexuality, and its historical context as a system of politics. I argue that hip-hop is queer because of these generalized aspects of queer theory, as well as the fact that hip-hop is the embodiment and production of theorizing. When a rapper rocks the mic, she is theorizing, and she is doing so in coded language created and established through the layering of meaning.

I also argue, however, that hip-hop is queer because it demonstrates a particular connection between the performances of identity namely race, sexuality, gender, and class through activism and cultural expression that demonstrate exactly how politics are queer and people are not. Using queerness as simply an identity allows analyses to fall into the problematic pattern of overgeneralizing or essentializing, which can result in the erasure of other significant identity markers of difference within queer communities. As Iain Morland and Anabelle Wilcox explain, "...queer activism's necessity and urgency lay in its challenge to the notion that identities could classify people, keep people safe, and keep them alive. It was a strategy not an identity. Put differently, the message of queer activism was that politics could be queer, but folk could not."¹⁵ Hip-Hop is a culture as well as a politics, and it relies on particular historical and social contexts to create meaning. Although hip-hop is grounded in localized identities, there is no one hip-hop identity, just like there is no one queer identity.

My argument that hip-hop is queer focuses on the queer alternatives to identity that are presented in Morland and Wilcox's definition of queerness. Hip-Hop achieves all

¹⁵ Iain Morland and Annabelle Wilcox, "Introduction" in *Queer Theory*, ed. Iain Morland and Annabelle Wilcox (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2.

of the queer alternatives to identity that Morland and Wilcox highlight, through the unique “conjunction of theory and politics.”¹⁶ Morland and Wilcox describe three different queer interventions in the structures of identity. The three queer interventions in approaches to normative constructions of identity are: identity as performative through speech acts, identities as normative community commitments, and “a vision of identity as *performance* or phenomenological.”¹⁷ In relation to the three queer interventions of identity, there is also the significant component of disidentification, as theorized by José Esteban-Muñoz, that is, the practice of disengaging with identity as it is understood, either as essentialist or social constructionist. Hip-Hop does all three through culturally and politically specific mechanisms that challenge not only heterosexist means of social control and domination, but also racist ones. (The connection between racism and heterosexism is an important one that I address more thoroughly in my first chapter). Furthermore, hip-hop demonstrates the queer interventions in the dominant construction of identity but through culturally specific mechanisms that are tied to particular racial and ethnic communities and historical contexts.

I am emphasizing the fact that hip-hop occupies a specific cultural, political, and historical location in order to avoid supporting the appropriative tendency of queer theory described above. Additionally, emphasizing and understanding how hip-hop operates from a racially and culturally specific context demonstrates how hip-hop allows for disidentification, an integral aspect of queer intervention. As Jose Esteban-Muñoz explains, “The version of identity politics that [*Disidentifications*] participates in imagines a reconstructed narrative of identity formation that locates the enacting of self at

¹⁶ Iain Morland and Annabelle Wilcox, “Introduction,” in *Queer Theory*, 5.

¹⁷ Iain Morland and Annabelle Wilcox, “Introduction” in *Queer Theory*, 4.

precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit. Such identities use *and* are the fruits of a practice of disidentificatory reception and performance. The term identities-in-difference is a highly effective term for categorizing the identities that populate these pages.”¹⁸ Here Muñoz is constructing an intervention in the popular conceptualizations of queer identities that reduce and essentialize. Instead, his theory of disidentifications revels in the spaces of conflict and difference as powerful sites for the deconstruction, (re)interpretation, and performance of identities. Hip-Hop is one of these spaces of conflict in which marginalized subjects create, perform, interrogate, and (re)present identities. I focus on how hip-hop accomplishes the queer interventions of identity by using its culturally, politically, and historically specific spaces, which I address more fully in this introduction and throughout my thesis.

Like the term, “queer,” hip-hop has an ambiguous definition, within which the tensions and differences are important. Nothing exemplifies the ambiguity surrounding the definition of hip-hop more than the history of the rise of the MC. The MC began as a vehicle to show off the DJ’s skill while pumping up the party-goers in the audience. The MC would take the microphone and introduce the DJ as well as make improvised commentary often in the form of short stanzas of rhymes throughout the DJ’s set. The emergence of the MC as an individual performer in her own right, and eventually an individual performer that would overshadow the DJ and other hip-hop performers, is an important indicator of the constantly changing nature of hip-hop. The MC’s success allowed for more notably individual success and allowed for the transition of hip-hop

¹⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, vol. 2 of *Cultural Studies of the Americas*, ed. George Yúdice, Jean Franco, and Juan Flores (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 6.

from an essentially communal and improvisational endeavor to an endeavor of individual artists, which is more easily packaged and sold.

As the stories of Clive and Cindy Campbell demonstrate, hip-hop was an essentially communal experience that allowed for the development and expression of individual narratives and identities. The individual talent of the DJ, b-boy, or MC could only be experienced in a live, community-centered event in neighborhoods like those of the South Bronx, and eventually throughout New York City as hip-hop began to spread throughout the city's boroughs. Experiencing and participating in hip-hop involved interaction with one's surroundings, the other party-goers, the performers, and of course, the music. In the early days of hip-hop, it seemed impossible to separate hip-hop from its localized and communal meaning. Chuck D, an influential MC who experienced the beginnings of hip-hop firsthand, explains the confusion surrounding "Rapper's Delight," the first-ever commercial release of a hip-hop song in 1979. He says, "I did not think it was conceivable that there would be such a thing as a hip-hop record...I could not see it."¹⁹ Chuck D's comment is significant because it marks another kind of break: a break from hip-hop's roots as a quintessential community-centered event and culture that was entirely dependent on improvisation and interaction between the crowd, the dancers, the DJ, and the MC.

The story of The Sugar Hill Gang, their song, "Rapper's Delight," and Sylvia Robinson, producer at Sugar Hill Records, is a story about the emergence of the emcee as a fundamental break and rupture within the narratives of hip-hop. While hip-hop was always a profit-driven and competitive enterprise, as we have seen, the beginnings of hip-

¹⁹ Chuck D in Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 130.

hop's commercialization marked a departure from many of the hip-hop traditions that Kool Herc and others helped carve out. The commercialization of hip-hop began with the new market for bootleg cassette tapes of hip-hop shows featuring prominent artists like Kool Herc.²⁰ From there, the market for hip-hop as a product only grew. The story of the Sugar Hill Gang's first single, "Rapper's Delight," sheds light on contemporary tensions in hip-hop. The Sugar Hill Gang was comprised of relative nobodies in the hip-hop world who stole the rhymes of rappers more established in the burgeoning hip-hop community. As Jeff Chang notes, it makes sense that relative outsiders were the first to break hip-hop into the commercial popular music arena because "...they had no local expectations to fulfill, no street reputations to keep, no regular audience to please, and absolutely no consequences if they failed."²¹ This new kind of hip-hop, which is how it was perceived by members of the hip-hop community at the time, broke from the hip-hop of community centers, block parties, and clubs, and moved towards the constraints of the music industry, changed the face of hip-hop forever. While hip-hop is still experienced as it was before the Sugar Hill Gang, it is done so in limited contexts, and most consumers of hip-hop music do not interact with the music in the same way as Chuck D and others have described. Furthermore, it is important to respect the ways that individuals who have participated in hip-hop communities since its beginnings perceive and conceptualize the shifts and changes in hip-hop culture.

"When Hip-Hop Lost Its Way, He Added a Fifth Element--'Knowledge'"²²

It is important that we do not think of the break in hip-hop marked by the Sugar Hill Gang and rap music's emergence into the popular culture as purely a negative

²⁰ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 127.

²¹ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 129.

²² Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 90.

occurrence in hip-hop's history. While it is clear that hip-hop changed forever with this significant leap into the popular imagination, hip-hop remained and continues to be queer. Hip-Hop remains a space for the construction and performance of oppositional narratives and maintains a challenge to the dominant culture's representations of people of color. This is most evident in the two newer elements of hip-hop mentioned earlier: knowledge and swag. However, there are issues of marginalization and oppressive patriarchal aspects to hip-hop culture, particularly in the more commercial hip-hop that has now situated itself permanently in the popular imagination. Misogyny and homophobia are present in hip-hop, just as they are present in all aspects of popular culture. As in its origins, hip-hop maintains its tradition of competition, and often, its profit-driven consumerist culture, exemplified by the rise of the Sugar Hill Gang. What is perceived as an embrace of the dominant Capitalistic, profit-driven, and consumerist culture is also a hidden narrative of resistance. The two elements of knowledge and swag provide a lens through which to examine rap music and the role of the MC in the context of hip-hop as a form of queerness and resistance. The various layered meanings in rappers' expression is the focus of the argument I will be unraveling throughout the next four chapters by looking at individual case studies and their connection to the broader changes and shifts in hip-hop knowledge.

The emergence of knowledge as a fifth element of hip-hop is credited to DJ Afrika Bambaataa, founder of the Zulu Nation.²³ The significance of knowledge as an element of hip-hop has grown with the development of hip-hop scholarship, and its permeation into the academy. Knowledge, in the sense in which Afrika Bambaataa is

²³ In Jeff Chang, Bambaataa is quoted as explaining that Zulus have "right knowledge, right wisdom, right 'overstanding' and right sound reasoning, meaning that we want our people to deal with factuality versus beliefs, factology versus beliefs."

using it to describe the members of the Zulu Nation and the dissemination of knowledge throughout the hip-hop culture, also refers to a particular kind of consciousness that is systematically obscured in the dominant culture's enveloping of hip-hop as popular music. Afrika Bambaataa's sense of hip-hop knowledge refers to a consciousness of hip-hop's history, its connection to a larger Afrodiasporic musical and literary tradition, as well as hip-hop's connection to a political consciousness tied to an Afrodiasporic community. Rap music's nascence as an important facet of the popular imagination demonstrates the denial of the significant contribution of African-American and Afrodiasporic musical, oral, and cultural traditions that have become a definitive part of not only rap music, but also all of popular "dance" music. Rose explains, "This denial is partly fueled by a mainstream cultural adherence to the traditional paradigms of Western classical music as the highest legitimate standard for musical creation, a standard that at this point should seem, at best, only marginally relevant in the contemporary popular music realm (a space all but overrun by Afrodiasporic sounds and multicultural hybrids of them)."²⁴ Thus, a consciousness of hip-hop's place in a larger Afrodiasporic musical tradition in addition to its role as a musical force for the postindustrial urban context is an essential part of hip-hop culture. Furthermore, such a consciousness presents more evidence for the queerness of hip-hop as creating a space for resistance to hegemonic standards of Whiteness as the definitive legitimation of creativity and cultural production.

Another equally significant component of the consciousness of hip-hop is its expression through the final element I discuss: swag. Swag is an example of many significant aspects of hip-hop culture. The word, 'swag' itself demonstrates much of the

²⁴ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 65.

narrative of hip-hop as a space for resistance. The history of the word ‘swag’ stems from the word, ‘swagger,’ which Merriam-Webster defines as “1. to conduct oneself in an arrogant or superciliously pompous manner; especially to walk with an air of overbearing self-confidence; 2. boast, brag.”²⁵ Rappers have appropriated the word ‘swagger’ and reassigned its meaning and significance to reflect the distinct values of hip-hop as a subculture. As Jay-Z concisely states in “Otis” (2011), “I invented swag/poppin’ bottles, puttin’ supermodels in the cab, proof,” and then, a sample of an older Jay-Z song states, “I guess I got my swagger back, truth.”²⁶ Jay-Z’s claims to have originated swag demonstrate the process of the reassignment of subcultural meaning and how these changes in meaning reflect the priorities of the subculture. Swag is not only a verbal embodiment of this process, but also a physical one. Swag has come to mean more than pompous attitude and demeanor, but also means the way one carries herself in general. Swag can refer to clothing, attitude, and/or general lifestyle. Swag is considered a positive attribute, almost like charisma, that one can either possess or not. Rappers use the concept of swag to boast about their own successes and personal style, attitude, and demeanor. Nicki Minaj, who was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, released the popular song called “Did It On ‘Em” that is essentially a testament to her swag as a performer in that it details her unique accomplishments, talents, and attributes that other rappers (specifically other female rappers) do not have.²⁷ Thus, swag becomes a tool for self-determination, self-representation, and resistance through personal demeanor.

Swag demonstrates the queerness of hip-hop because of the agency of self-determination that it requires and represents. Agency is an important part of queerness

²⁵ “Swagger,” www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/swagger.

²⁶ Jay-Z and Kanye West, “Otis,” *Watch the Throne*, Roc-A-Fella, 2011, Digital Download.

²⁷ Nicki Minaj, “Did It On ‘Em,” *Pink Friday*, Young Money, 2011, Digital Download.

because it recognizes the role of self-determination for the embodiment, performance, and representation of theorizing and resistance. Furthermore, the various uses and definitions of swag as a site for resistance and its participation in a continuous legacy of queer performativity can be traced, specifically in its connection to house and ball cultures of queer urban people of color. Swag is connected to knowledge, just as all of the elements of hip-hop are interconnected through their various capacities for constructing alternate meanings. Swag as a space for resistance, and a space that demonstrates the queerness of hip-hop, is perhaps most exemplified in several contemporary queer rappers/performers. In my thesis, I focus on these queer hip-hop performers to illustrate the potential of swag to demonstrate why hip-hop is queer, as well as hip-hop's potential as a narrative space for the performance of queer and racialized identities.

Chapter One

“Baby I Ride with My Mic in My Bra:” Nicki Minaj, Azealia Banks, and the Black Female Body as Resistance

As women who challenge sexism expressed by male rappers, yet sustain dialogue with them, who reject the racially coded aesthetic hierarchies in American popular culture by privileging black female bodies, and who support black women’s voices and history, black female rappers constitute an important and resistive voice in rap and contemporary black women’s cultural production in general.²⁸

Critics of hip-hop commonly point to the objectifying representation of Black women’s bodies as evidence of the pervasive misogyny in hip-hop. It is clear that many rap songs, music videos, and live performances contain objectifying representations of Black women’s bodies, particularly focusing on Black women’s breasts and buttocks, which have a long and troubling history of objectification, sexualization, and exoticization. However, the pervasive notion that such oppressive representation of Black women’s bodies as available for consumption is simply the fault of Black men rappers and producers is overly simplistic and stems from racist tropes of Black masculinity. As Tricia Rose explains in her chapter, “Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music,” women rappers are often reductively generalized as creating music in opposition to the pervasive misogyny in hip-hop. As Rose explains, such categorical thinking about women rappers is problematic because it pits Black women and men against each other and assumes that hip-hop is primarily sexist and oppressive towards women, especially women of color. Although the view of hip-hop as misogynistic persists, many rappers, of many genders are proving that this is not the case.

²⁸ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 182.

When discussing the representation of Black women's bodies in hip-hop, it is essential to consider who is consuming the images and who is profiting from them. As S. Craig Watkins explains in his chapter, "Fear of a White Planet," young white suburban males are the largest consumers of mainstream hip-hop.²⁹ Watkins states, "For the first time in the movement's commercial history young white consumers, a crucial demographic in the cultural and economic mainstream, emerged as a primary consideration rather than an afterthought in the making and marketing of hip-hop related merchandise."³⁰ Watkins is thus acknowledging that not only are white consumers dictating the trends of hip-hop musical and visual production, but white people are also profiting off of the images because they make up the majority of the executive boards of music companies. Understanding that hip-hop has shifted much of its musical and visual production in order to fit the tastes of the majority white male consumers complicates the notion that Black male rappers are solely responsible for the objectifying imagery of Black women's bodies. Furthermore, such knowledge suggests that Black women rappers are producing alternate narratives about Black womanhood, but not solely in opposition to Black male rappers. Instead, Black women rappers occupy a space from which they can challenge hegemonic racist and sexist tropes and imagery of Black women while also engaging Black men in a dialogue about Black sexual politics.

Dominant Western culture has historically marked the Black female body as dangerous and deviant in order to justify imperialism, colonization, and slavery. Scientific racism and emerging scientific discourses on sexuality bolstered the representation of the Black female body as sexually dangerous. Western society thus

²⁹ S. Craig Watkins, "Fear of a White Planet" in *Hip-Hop Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 94.

³⁰ S. Craig Watkins, "Fear of a White Planet," 94.

created and enforced systems and institutions meant to control the Black female body. It is difficult to discuss the means of social control of the Black body, particularly the Black female body, without discussing heterosexism as a means of the control and otherization of bodies. In her book, *Black Sexual Politics*, Patricia Hill Collins points to mechanisms such as segregation, the institution of marriage, and the dichotomy of normal/deviant that both racism and heterosexism use to achieve social control. Collins is quick to point out that although the mechanisms of social control are similar for both racism and heterosexism, the content and effects of the mechanisms are very different for people of color and for queer people. Collins explains,

Black people carry the stigma of *promiscuity* or excessive or unrestrained heterosexual desire. This is the sexual deviancy that has both been assigned to Black people and been used to construct racism. In contrast, LGBT people carry the stigma of *rejecting* heterosexuality by engaging in unrestrained homosexual desire. Whereas the deviancy associated with promiscuity (and, by implication, with Black people as a race) is thought to lie in an *excess* of heterosexual desire, the pathology of homosexuality (the invisible, closeted sexuality that becomes impossible within heterosexual space) seemingly resides in the *absence* of it.³¹

Collins' discussion of deviance is significant in the context of cultural production and social control. Hip-Hop emerged as a social movement and culture that rejected the negligence of urban Black and Latin@ communities. Hip-Hop also provides an alternate narrative of Black and Latin@ identity. Collins' argument about the distinct definitions and stigmas of deviance for Black people and LGBT*Q people is important because it provides a framework through which to analyze hip-hop as a cultural production that interacts with sexualized systems of social control. Thus, the works of Black women

³¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 97.

rappers, particularly Black queer women rappers, provide a lens through which to examine the creation and expression of alternate narratives that challenge the structures of racism and heterosexism. I compare the works and (re)presentations of Nicki Minaj and Azealia Banks, particularly their differing presentations of Black sexual politics, how they relate to the histories and tensions within the representations of Black women's bodies, and their relationship to the cultures of queer Black and Latin@ inner-city communities in order to demonstrate how hip-hop is a space for constructing the alternate narratives that challenge racist and heterosexist structures. Furthermore, comparing Nicki Minaj and Azealia Banks also demonstrates how hip-hop can contradictorily achieve the three queer interventions in identity, and sometimes fail to do so.

Although their music is strikingly different, Nicki Minaj and Azealia Banks share many similarities. They both grew up in New York City and even attended the same high school. Both women garnered attention for their unique rapping style, or flow.

Additionally, both women came out as bisexual in interviews.³² However, Minaj recanted her statement in a later interview. In the interview, Minaj states, "...I had to show people that I can spit a verse without sex or talking about how good I look. I'm actually timid when it comes to being overtly sexy, which is weird because in the beginning people thought of me like a freaking porn star. Guys reference sex all the time in their raps...but when a female does it, people start tuning out. People live for [sexually explicit lyrics] I just have to balance it out a little bit."³³ In this excerpt from an interview, Nicki Minaj

³² "Nicki Minaj Talks Bisexuality, Celibacy & Laughing All the Way to the Bank with Complex Mag," by Natasha, *theybf.com*, September 20, 2010, theybf.com/2010/09/20/nicki-minaj-talks-bisexuality-celibacy-laughing-all-the-way-to-the-bank-with-complex-mag

³³ "Nicki Minaj Talks Bisexuality, Celibacy & Laughing All the Way to the Bank with Complex Mag," by Natasha, *theybf.com*, September 20, 2010, theybf.com/2010/09/20/nicki-minaj-talks-bisexuality-celibacy-laughing-all-the-way-to-the-bank-with-complex-mag

provides an example of the tensions inherent in being a Black woman rapper. Minaj is expected to be overtly sexual, even a “porn star,” but if she lives up to that particular gendered expectation, she is discredited and thought to be an inferior rapper. However, if she does not deliver some sensationalized sexual verses, she is also disappointing.

Minaj’s comments are connected to Collins’ discussion of the connection between racism and heterosexism. Minaj is perceived as being hypersexual, just by virtue of being a Black woman with a microphone. At the same time, she feels that she must maintain some sort of sexual expressiveness that is palatable to a mainstream audience or else she will be stigmatized as non-heterosexual. As a Black woman, Minaj is ascribed a hyper-heterosexuality by dominant culture, which if she challenges by coming out as bisexual could threaten to challenge the systems of racism and heterosexism as they are replicated and represented in popular culture. The tension that Minaj describes in this quote is strongly tied with her perceived sexual orientation, and it is a tension that Azealia Banks also encounters and represents in her music. In comparing the works of Nicki Minaj and Azealia Banks, and how successful each rapper is in creating and expressing narratives that challenge the racist and heterosexist structures that govern the representation and social control of women of color, I do not want to reproduce the sexist trope of pitting women against each other. I compare Minaj and Banks because they both illuminate the relationships between sexual politics, representation of Black female bodies, and the queerness of hip-hop, especially when examined and discussed in tandem.

“Super Bass:” Black Sexual Politics and Romantic Relationships in the works of Nicki Minaj and Azealia Banks

When Minaj claimed she was not actually bisexual in a later interview, she suggested that she only allowed rumors about her alleged bisexuality to circulate for publicity. Bisexuality is seen as sensational and interesting as long as Minaj only describes sexual desire in the context of her rap lyrics and music videos--where they could safely be enjoyed and consumed by the predominantly white male audience. In 2010, established popular R&B singer, Usher Raymond released a single that features Nicki Minaj. Usher and Minaj’s hit song, “Lil’ Freak,” is about a man who convinces his girlfriend to seduce another woman so that he can have a threesome with them. “Lil’ Freak” features a verse performed by Nicki Minaj, who begins the song by asking Usher, “You want me to get you something, Daddy?”³⁴ Later in the song, Minaj seduces the woman she and Usher have selected, rapping, “Excuse me, little Mama, but you could say I’m on duty/I’m looking for a cutie, a real big old ghetto booty.”³⁵ Significantly, in the music video for the song, Usher and Nicki Minaj are attempting to seduce a white woman who seems quite frightened to be in what appears to be an underground speakeasy-type lounge occupied predominantly by Black people.³⁶ The song itself contains problematic lyrics and imagery in which Usher manipulates Minaj and attempts to exploit her sexuality while simultaneously objectifying both Minaj and the woman she is supposed to be seducing for Usher. The music video, however, adds a disturbing

³⁴ Usher Raymond, “Lil’ Freak,” feat. Nicki Minaj *Raymond v Raymond*, Blac Elvis, 2010, by LaFace, digital download.

³⁵ Usher Raymond, “Lil’ Freak feat. Nicki Minaj,” *Raymond v Raymond*, Blac Elvis, 2010, by LaFace, digital download.

³⁶ “Usher-Lil’ Freak feat. Nicki Minaj,” Youtube video, 5:27, posted by “Usher Vevo,” March 26, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNVNzRzDt-k>.

dimension to the song in that it visually represents and racializes the male voyeurism of women's sexuality, which is the main focus of the song, which I explain in more detail later.

The music video is a clear representation of the interdependence of racism and (hetero)sexism. Usher and Nicki Minaj's sexual advances would not seem as thrilling or exciting if the element of race were not involved. Although Minaj is sexually pursuing another person of the same gender, she is still portrayed as promiscuous and hypersexual. Minaj is actively pursuing a white woman who says and does nothing but follow her sheepishly throughout the video and allows herself to be passively seduced by Minaj and brought to Usher. This representation recapitulates tropes of Black and white women's sexuality. The Black woman is sexually aggressive, and even potentially dangerous (that is the allure of the underground club) while the white woman is passive. Through such a presentation of women's sexuality, the video is emblematic of the fetishization of female bisexuality and the framing of queer desire between women as existing for the benefit of the heterosexual male gaze. In multiple frames, Usher is sitting in a control room viewing the seduction of the white woman on a television monitor. The entire exchange is created for Usher's pleasure. The voyeuristic element of the music video is significant because it emphasizes that although Minaj might be taking some pleasure out of the pursuit and exchange with the other woman, the ultimate consumer is Usher and his pleasure is the most important. In her verse, Minaj states, "I really like your kitty cat and if you let me touch her/I know you're not a bluffer/I'll take you to go see Usher."³⁷ Thus, Nicki Minaj names Usher as the ultimate and most important participant in the sexual encounter.

³⁷ Usher Raymond, "Lil Freak, feat. Nicki Minaj" *Raymond v Raymond*, Blac Elvis, 2010, by LaFace, digital download.

The music video also contains frames of Usher looking straight into the camera while faceless women dance near him. Although there is a clear racial divide in the club in which the action is taking place, race is never mentioned. The White woman is the one that is selected as the one to be seduced, not any other woman in the club. Nicki Minaj's body is just a way to attract the White woman for Usher. Black women's bodies are fragmented throughout the music video for "Lil' Freak," so that their faces are removed and highly sexualized body parts such as breasts and buttocks are accentuated. As a result, these body parts are what is sexually desirable about the women, not the women as a whole. In contrast, the White woman's body is never fragmented throughout the entire music video. The difference in representation reflects the connection between the mechanisms of racism and heterosexism that Patricia Hill Collins outlines. The fragmentation of Black female bodies and the characterization of the Black woman as sexually aggressive throughout the entire music video cannot be understood as solely the product of racism or solely the result of heterosexism. Racism and heterosexism work through similar mechanisms of social control, producing results that affect people differently according to race or sexuality, but demonstrate the interconnected tropes of representations in the oppressions.

In light of S. Craig Watkins' discussion of the predominantly white consumers that dictate what is successful in hip-hop, the representation of Nicki Minaj in Usher's "Lil' Freak" is particularly problematic. While Nicki Minaj's agency in participating in the creation and perpetuation of the objectification and hypersexualization of the Black female body should not be ignored, it is also important to consider who is consuming the

problematic images and lyrics in “Lil’ Freak,” and who is profiting. That said, Nicki Minaj’s performance does complicate the notion that Black women rappers are all categorically concerned primarily with producing songs that challenge Black men rappers on sexism. In “Lil’ Freak,” we see one very racist, heterosexist, limited, and problematic portrayal of sexual dialogue between men and women, but rap provides space for continued and expanding dialogues.

Nicki Minaj presents other kinds of sexual dialogue between men and women in many of her songs. Her 2011 hit single, “Super Bass” is emblematic of a different discussion of sexual and romantic relationships. Nicki Minaj describes the song as, “...about the boy that you are crushing over...And you kind of want to get your mack on, but you're taking the playful approach.”³⁸ In contrast to “Lil’ Freak,” Minaj is not attempting to seduce anyone in “Super Bass.” Instead, she is describing her ideal partner, emphasizing his wealth and physique. The juxtaposition of “Lil’ Freak” and “Super Bass” demonstrates how varied the discussions and presentations of sexual and romantic relationships are in women’s rap music. Minaj’s discussion of sexual politics and her representation of Black female bodies is problematic in that it replicates hegemonic perceptions of womanhood and romantic relationships. For example, the entire song is written and performed in heteronormative language. Although “Super Bass” is limited in its portrayal of relationships and sexual dialogues, it provides an alternative narrative to that presented in “Lil’ Freak.” Examining “Super Bass” and “Lil’ Freak” provides space for comparing and contextualizing the various kinds of dialogues, discussions, and analyses of sex and relationships possible in rap music.

³⁸ D.L. Chandler, “Nicki Minaj, ‘Letting It All Hang Out’ on ‘Super Bass’ Video Set,” MTV News, March 10, 2011, accessed December 15, 2012, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1659681/nicki-minaj-super-bass.jhtml>

Minaj is also occupying a space that interacts with the longer legacies of Black women's music and articulating many of the caustic and witty lyrical patterns that address gendered relations between Black men and women that stretch back to Black women's Blues. As Rose explains in her discussion of the music of MC Lyte and Salt 'n' Pepa, "By offering a woman's interpretation of the terms of heterosexual courtship, these women's raps cast a new light on male-female sexual power relations and depict women as resistant, aggressive participants."³⁹ Rap music provides an important space for Black women to create and sustain dialogue in the public sphere. Although Nicki Minaj's portrayals of relationship dynamics and sexual dialogues are problematic in that they bolster and often do not challenge the structures set up by white supremacist and heterosexist constructions of relationships and sexual expression, she is still interacting with the legacy of rap music as a space for Black women to define and discuss relationships. The legacy of rap as a continuation of the tradition of the blues as a space for Black women to create and sustain dialogues around relationships is evident in Minaj's caustic lyrics. Rose defines the complex nature of Black women's rap as it interacts with Black women's blues, explaining, "Similar to women's blues, [Black women's raps] are caustic, witty, and aggressive warnings...By offering a woman's interpretation of the terms of heterosexual courtship, these women's raps cast a new light on male-female sexual power relations and depict women as resistant, aggressive participants. Yet, even the raps that explore and revise women's role in the courtship process often retain the larger patriarchal parameters of heterosexual courtship."⁴⁰ Thus, "Super Bass" exemplifies the contradictory nature of Black women's rap music and how

³⁹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 155.

⁴⁰ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 155-156.

it echoes the larger tradition of Black women's blues because of its humorous lyrics, its centering of a woman's perspective on the power dynamics of relationships, yet it still reflects many patriarchal and heteronormative value structures.

In addition to defining relationships, Black women rappers also use rap as a space to engage in dialogue about sex, sexuality, and sexual expression. Within these dialogues, Black women rappers often create layered meaning through sexually explicit language. "Super Bass" does not contain lyrics as explicitly sexual as "Lil' Freak," in which Minaj raps lines such as "The girls wanna minaj/get them wetter than the rain man."⁴¹ These lyrics are a play on words that reflect how rap serves a space for Black women to create alternate portrayals of sexual relationships through the distinctly caustic and witty lyricism of Black women's rap music. However, sex and sexuality are constant themes throughout Minaj's music and the music of other women rappers. Minaj's comments about the tensions she feels in the popular perception of herself and her sexuality as a woman rapper shed light on the popular perception of hip-hop in general. Consumers of commercially successful hip-hop projected a highly sexualized notion of Minaj in order to be able to conceptualize the success of a Black woman rapper. Critics of hip-hop often write off rap music for containing too many obscene, sexually aggressive, and misogynistic lyrics and images.

A pertinent example of the public debate over obscenity in hip-hop is the public discourse surrounding the charges of obscenity levied against 2 Live Crew and their subsequent court case in 1991. Kimberle Crenshaw provides an important reading of the intersection of racism and sexism at work in both the court case and in the public outcry

⁴¹Usher Raymond, "Lil' Freak, feat. Nicki Minaj" *Raymond v Raymond*, Blac Elvis, 2010, by LaFace, digital download.

against and defense of 2 Live Crew. Crenshaw acknowledges the misogyny in 2 Live Crew and is deeply disturbed by it, especially considering the prevalence of gender violence throughout communities across the globe.⁴² However, using a Black feminist analysis, Crenshaw identifies several telling points that demonstrate why the obscenity charges against 2 Live Crew were racist. She also criticizes the undiscerning support that 2 Live Crew received. The public discourse surrounding the 2 Live Crew controversy and Kimberle Crenshaw's Black feminist analysis are useful for understanding the discourse of sexual politics in hip-hop. As Crenshaw explains, both the uncritical supporters of 2 Live Crew and the racist prosecution of 2 Live Crew bring Black women and Black women's bodies into the discourse on misogyny and obscenity in hip-hop. The attacks against rap music for being too misogynistic and obscene still use Black women as justification, but fail to see how racist their accusations are and how they are not empowering of Black women. Furthermore, the attacks on rap music's use of sexually explicit language silences Black women rappers who are claiming and constructing a self-determined sexuality in addition to the racist language surrounding the villification of Black men as sexual aggressors. As Crenshaw explains, "The debate over 2 Live Crew illustrates how race and gender politics continue to marginalize Black women, rendering us virtually voiceless...Fitted with a Black feminist sensibility, one uncovers other issues in which the unique situation of Black women renders a different formulation of the problem than the version that dominates in current debate."⁴³ Azealia Banks and other Black women rappers offer these Black feminist sensibilities and analyses, in addition to

⁴² Kimberle Crenshaw, "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew," 1991, *Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum*, www.bostonreview.net/BR16.6/crenshaw.html

⁴³ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew," *Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum*, 1991, www.bostonreview.net/BR16.6/crenshaw.html

queer analyses of racism, heterosexism, misogyny, and identities that are unique to hip-hop.

Azealia Banks is an important voice in the dialogues surrounding race, gender, and sexuality in rap music. Like Nicki Minaj, Azealia Banks produces unabashedly sexual lyrics and images. In many of her songs, Banks describes being sexually pleased and what she expects from sexual and romantic partners. Like most, if not all, male rappers, Banks also describes her sexual prowess with braggadocio. Banks' use of sexually explicit content could be considered obscene under some of the legal classifications and definitions of obscenity.⁴⁴ However, it is significant to discuss how Azealia Banks' music and performances use sexually explicit lyrics to create queer interventions in the dominant narrative of Black womanhood and Black women's sexuality.

Azealia Banks' song, "L8r" from her mixtape, *Fantasea*, released in July of 2012 exemplifies the significance of sexually explicit lyrics in creating alternative narratives and queer interventions. In "L8r" Banks describes her sexual relationship with an older man who had a girlfriend and explicitly describes the role of the man's girlfriend in their relationship. Banks also makes it very clear that she will not engage in any kind of relationship with a man who is not very wealthy. In the song, Banks states, "And when I lift the skirt, the n***a never gotta be coerced/I just squirt and he eats the dessert, and that's some real shit."⁴⁵ In this lyric, Banks offers a different perspective than the ones usually cited as examples of hip-hop's obscenity. She explains how she is so desirable that men as well as women want her. She goes on later to describe how she will not

⁴⁴ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew," www.bostonreview.net/BR16.6/crenshaw.html

⁴⁵ Azealia Banks, "L8r," *Fantasea*, 2012, Independently Released, digital download.

reciprocate oral sex with men or women, which is a common sentiment that many male rappers present. However, Banks' frank discussion of sex and her relationship with this older man demonstrate the powerful potential of hip-hop as a space for creating a queer sexual politics. Banks describes sexual practices and preferences that have been accepted and encouraged in male rappers, but are not equally encouraged in music by women rappers. Rap music has historically been a space for Black women rappers to create their own dialogues about sex and relationships with men, but Banks demonstrates how rap is also a space to create queer sexual dialogues and reclaim sexual agency. In "L8r," she uses sexually explicit lyrics to tell a story about her sexual expression, and although the song plays into a Capitalistic framework of valuing a potential partner based on his wealth, Banks puts forth a discussion of sex and relationships that is queer in that it involves multiple sexual partners of different genders, challenges the notion of the hyperheterosexuality of Black women as sexual objects to be gazed upon rather than as sexual agents, and rejects a moralistic framework imposed by compulsory heterosexuality.

Azealia Banks' music also demonstrates how hip-hop, rap music in particular, is a space for performing identities and constructing performative narratives of identity. Many White queer theorists have theorized the concept of identity as performance; however, the concept of performativity has particular implications for queer people of color that only a few theorists have explored.⁴⁶ Hip-Hop in general, and Azealia Banks' work in particular, enacts a queer intervention in identity formation that recognizes the intersectional processes of forming an identity. Banks engages in a process of disidentification through her music, as well as recreating and reconstructing identity

⁴⁶ A few examples of theorists that have explored the particular implications of performativity for queer people of color are: José Esteban-Muñoz, Sam See, Frances Negrón Muntaner, and several others.

through three other queer interventions of identity. “L&r” demonstrates the process of disidentification that José Esteban Muñoz defines. Disidentification is a process that recognizes the complexity of interacting with hegemonic and oppressive narratives of identity in that it defines the identity-making process of queer subjects of color as not completely without influence of dominant culture, but rather, as a process that engages with various narratives of identity. In “L&r,” Banks demonstrates how she interacts with certain dominant narratives about sex and relationships and adopts some of those structures, such as her insistence on using wealth as a measure of a partner’s worth, while at the same time rejecting other oppressive constructions of sex and relationships. For example, she constructs her identity through the contradiction of the relationship. She never labels her sexuality, but rather forces the listener to infer about her identity-in-difference by suggesting that she is interacting with both dominant norms of relationships and sexuality as well as queer formations of relationships and sexuality. Thus, Banks presents a complex relationship and sexual dialogue that empowers her as a sexual agent and adds layers of meaning to her performances of identity and relationships.

Azealia Banks rejects the hegemonic presence of whiteness as a driving force in mainstream queer culture. Patricia Hill Collins addresses the common perception of homosexuality being a white issue in *Black Sexual Politics*. Many individuals in communities of color believe that homosexuality is a corrupting force that is introduced by the White dominant culture. Collins states, “Beliefs in a naturalized, normal hyper-heterosexuality among Black people effectively ‘whitened’ homosexuality. Within a logic that constructed race itself from racially pure families, homosexuality constituted a

major threat to the White race.”⁴⁷ In addition to the racialization of heterosexual promiscuity, the dominant culture’s portrayal of queer people as almost exclusively White contributes to the impulse to disidentify with hegemonic queerness amongst queer people of color.

Banks explaining her sexual desires and how she demands certain sexual relationships and encounters between her and her partners in “L8r” illustrates a process of disidentifying with both the dominant understanding of queerness as well as the dominant understanding of Black womanhood. She challenges notions of the dichotomous Black female sexuality that is represented in popular culture. On one side, there’s the popular representation of Black female sexuality as hypersexual (which is usually tied to a working-class sensibility) and on the other, there is the model of a desexualized middle-class Black womanhood, which Patricia Hill Collins argues is reinforced with the introduction of Claire Huxtable to the popular imagination.⁴⁸ Banks disidentifies with the dichotomous representation of Black womanhood and of the White standard of queerness in “L8r” by describing her desire to include a man and a woman into her sexual encounter, but at the same time insisting on being the one who determines the parameters of the encounter and the relationship to follow. She exclaims, “I was tryna kick him out, but he was like can he/Eat a little dinner, want to sit with my family/Nah, there’s probably not a lot in his container/If it ain’t about a dollar, I’m a holler at you later.”⁴⁹ In these lines, she rejects the notion of being defined as either hyper-heterosexual or completely desexualized. She embraces a queer sexuality and takes the power of determination and pleasure unapologetically denying her older man the opportunity to stick around. Instead,

⁴⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 106.

⁴⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 139.

⁴⁹ Azealia Banks, “L8r,” *Fantasea*, 2012, Independently Released, digital download.

Azealia Banks creates her own meaning in identities throughout her musical and visual repertoire.

“Hey, I’m the Liquorice Bitch:” Challenging Dominant Representations of the Black Female Body

In the song, “Liquorice,” from her first E.P., *1991*, Banks raps about being sexually desirable because of her Blackness. Sexual desirability is a common theme amongst rap songs, regardless of the gender of the rapper. However, it is not very often that Blackness is the main feature of sexual desirability. In “Liquorice,” however, Banks asserts that it is her identity as a Black woman, in addition to her skin color that makes her desirable. Banks, who is known for her humor and wit as a lyricist, addresses a White man throughout the song, explaining to him why she is so desirable. Representations that reduce Black womanhood to bodies--specifically to the breasts and buttocks, particularly exoticized and sexualized parts of the body--are pervasive throughout the U.S. popular imagination. While many rappers and studios perpetuate this reductive representation of Black female bodies as linked to their hypersexuality, Banks is using the caustic and witty wordplay made possible in rap music to disidentify with such a representation. What is significant in “Liquorice,” however, is that she is not rejecting the notion of the Black female body as a site of desire altogether.

Banks presents a queer intervention of identity that Judith Butler describes as performative speech act. In the essay, “Contagious Word: Paranoia and ‘Homosexuality’ in the Military,” Butler explains that the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy reflected the paranoid belief that the word “homosexual” itself carried the meaning of identity so much that saying, “I am a homosexual” is equivalent to engaging in homosexual acts. As a

result of the paranoia, however, the word “homosexual” did become as integral to the identity of homosexual as homosexual acts.⁵⁰ However, the speech act of identifying oneself by saying, “I am a homosexual” took on a paradoxical quality in which the person identifying had the agency of using the term to define herself--an act that is now considered the equivalent of engaging in a sexual act with someone of the same sex--but at the same time, the power of definition came from elsewhere, the military, not the individual. Butler explains, “The term ‘homosexual’ thus comes to describe a class of persons who are to remain prohibited from defining themselves; the term is to be attributed always from elsewhere. And this is, in some ways, the very definition of the homosexual that the military and the Congress provide. A homosexual is one whose definition is to be left to others, one who is denied the act of self-definition with respect to his or her sexuality, one whose self-denial is a prerequisite for military service...”⁵¹ However, it is important to recognize that “homosexual” is not the only signifying term that LBGT*Q people use to identify as gender or sexual minorities. Butler reminds us that no one name can claim to be the final answer of identity, but that all of the language of identity carries questions of who has the power of determination. Thus, José Esteban Muñoz’s theoretical challenge of disidentification is important to challenging the top-down determination of identifying language, and speech acts.

In “Liquorice,” Banks uses the artistic and witty wordplay and reappropriative practice that defines a good rapper to create her own performative speech act that challenges the dominant language surrounding the identity of Black women. Rap

⁵⁰ Judith Butler, “Contagious Word: Paranoia and ‘Homosexuality’ in the Military” in *Queer Theory*, ed. Iain Morland and Annabelle Wilcox, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 143.

⁵¹ Butler, Judith, “Contagious Word: Paranoia and ‘Homosexuality’ in the Military” in *Queer Theory*, ed. Iain Morland and Annabelle Wilcox, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 144.

provides a space for the reappropriation of meaning through coded language that is not available in spaces within the dominant culture. “Swag” and “swagger” are emblematic of the power of rap’s poetic structure to create layered meanings, and to reappropriate words by imbuing them with coded meanings.

Throughout the song, Banks uses multiple codes to refer to her dark skin as the site of desire and to construct new meaning in identity through performative speech act. She first flips the trope seen throughout various cultural productions, including popular hip-hop, of Black men preferring White women over Black women. She states, “These n****s be vanilla, the chips be legitimate/They just want the pumpernickel sis in the linens with ‘em.”⁵² In these lines, Banks is relocating desire in the Black female body, but she does so by associating her power and wealth with her body. She does not mention her breasts and buttocks as the reason for attraction, but rather demands that her entire body/bodies (not just her physical body, but also her body of work) be the site of desire. Banks goes on to say in the same verse, “I make hits motherfucker/Do you jiggle your dick when your bitch pop singing on the liquorice hit?”⁵³ Banks is thus directly correlating her sexual desirability with her power as an artist.

Furthermore, Azealia Banks names the Black female body as a site of resistance as well as desire. It is her Black female body that gives her the power in determining the terms of the relationship with the White men she is addressing. As opposed to representations of White male sexual desire being imposed on the Black female body, Banks rejects that power relationship. Her body is the site of White male desire, but it is also the site of her own self-determined sexual pleasure and distinct pride. Of course, in

⁵²Azealia Banks, “Liquorice,” *1991*, 2012, independently released, digital download.

⁵³Azealia Banks, “Liquorice,” *1991*, 2012, independently released, digital download.

discussing White male desire of Black female bodies, Banks is interacting with the historical process of exoticizing Black female bodies as a mechanism of colonialism, imperialism, and commodification. However, in removing the emphasis of sexual desire as focused on historically fetishized body parts, such as breasts and buttocks, Banks complicates the legacy of exocitization by celebrating her desirability as well as celebrating her agency in determining her sexual partners. Furthermore, it is Banks' identity as a Black woman that makes her desirable, not her physical features, as is evident in her last verse. Banks exclaims, "These bitches know that I be on that Black girl shit/That Black girl pin-up with that Black girl dip/Put that Black girl spin up on ya whack girl tip."⁵⁴ These lines are a commentary on a similar verse that Nicki Minaj raps in her song, "Kill da DJ." In her song, Minaj raps, "I just know that I be on my fly-girl shit/A fly-girl pop-up and a fly-girl dip/A fly-girl stunt like a fly-girl flip/and I don't ever guzzle it, I fly-girl sip."⁵⁵ By using a flow similar to Minaj's, Banks is paralleling "Black girl" with "fly-girl," suggesting that "Black girl" refers to a particular coolness and aesthetic the way that "fly-girl" does. Furthermore, Banks changes many of the lyrics to reflect the particular connection to the Black female body as a space of power and coolness. She refers to "that Black girl pin-up" to suggest that there is a particular kind of beauty and sex appeal related to her identity as a Black woman. She also contrasts "Black girl spin-up" with "whack girl tip" which reflects a particular coolness and power that is associated with being a Black woman, in contrast to "whack girls" who are uncool. Thus, Azealia Banks disidentifies with "Black girl" and Black womanhood as it is dominantly constructed and instead uses performative speech act, which she accomplishes through

⁵⁴ Azealia Banks, "Liquorice," *1991*, 2012, independently released, digital download.

⁵⁵ Nicki Minaj, "Kill da DJ," *Beam Me Up Scotty*, 2009, Trapaholics, digital download.

rap's unique ability to reappropriate language in order to alter the meaning. In "Liquorice," announcing, "Hey, I'm the Liquorice bitch," and "I be on my Black girl shit," are both equivalent to the act of identifying as and representing a resistant Black body.

Fierce: Affirmation and Appropriation of Queer Black and Latin@ Cultures

Popular culture's appropriation of Queer Black and Latin@ cultures is nothing new. Madonna's 1990 hit song, "Vogue" is one of the most famous examples of pop culture's appropriation of queer Black and Latin@ cultures. When Madonna released her song, "Vogue," she received critical acclaim for the music and the music video, as well as the dance craze it started. She also received celebration for bringing what many referred to as a "gay subculture" or "New York City's underground gay scene" to the forefront of the popular imagination.⁵⁶ Madonna owes much of her success to the cultural innovations of people of color that she conveniently forgets to credit or acknowledge. Although many have defended Madonna's song, "Vogue," saying her lyrics demonstrate she has a working understanding of the complicated racial politics inherent in voguing, there is nothing in her lyrics or in Madonna's discussion of the song that evidences such a defense. Madonna, and others in popular culture, such as Jenny Livingston, the director of the documentary *Paris is Burning*, ignore the implications of racial identity that is *intersectional* with queer identities and profit from the cultural work of others.

Azealia Banks and Nicki Minaj both incorporate aspects of queer Black and Latin@ cultures, specifically the house and ball cultures of New York City, but do so very differently. After denying that she was bisexual and recanting her earlier statement about her sexuality, Minaj maintained that she was a supporter of the queer community.

⁵⁶ "100 Greatest Dance Songs," *Slant Magazine*, www.slantmagazine.com/music/feature/100-greatest-dance-songs/206/page_10

Minaj often discusses her large gay fan base and how she wants to “eradicate homophobia in hip-hop.”⁵⁷ Minaj defended her decision to recant her earlier statement about being bisexual by saying she did not like labels and that she would not use them. Although she outwardly claims support for queer people, she has done very little to challenge the white, heterosexist, capitalist, patriarchal structures that inform the homophobia of hip-hop. For example, Minaj claims that gay men are fans of hers because of her theatricality and her flamboyant wardrobe and cast of characters.⁵⁸ In addition to using language that affirms stereotypical representations of queer people, she also participates in the appropriation of what she perceives as queer cultures. Among her alter-egos is Roman Zolanski, whom she claims is a gay British man. Although Minaj states her appreciation for her gay fans, she continues to engage in problematic representations of sexuality. Roman Zolanski, for example, who is one of her most popular alter-egos is often used in Minaj’s most angry songs, many with sexist lyrics. For example, her song, “Roman’s Revenge” features Eminem who raps shockingly violent lyrics reminiscent of the ones for which 2 Live Crew were prosecuted. In the same breath, however, Minaj claims to seek to empower women and support the gay community despite the shocking use of a gay male character to rap lyrics that endorse violence against women. For example, Minaj adopts the voice of a gay man from the privileged perspective of someone who does not identify as queer. She then makes the character of Roman Zolanski extremely violent and even mentally unstable (she has multiple songs in which she references Roman’s need for medication). Poor mental health and mental instability

⁵⁷ Caryn Ganz, “The Curious Case of Nicki Minaj,” *Out Magazine*, September 12, 2010, www.out.com/entertainment/music/2010/09/12/curious-nicki-minaj?page=0,0

⁵⁸ Caryn Ganz, “The Curious Case of Nicki Minaj,” *Out Magazine*, September 12, 2010, www.out.com/entertainment/music/2010/09/12/curious-nicki-minaj?page=0,0

are damaging stereotypes of queer people that a significant portion of the population maintains. Nicki Minaj and Madonna uncritically include what they believe is queer representation in their music, but what they consider representation is a limited and simplified appropriation of the voices or cultural innovations of queer communities that completely neglects the political contexts of queer cultural production.

Azealia Banks also uses cultural innovations from queer Black and Latin@ cultures in her music. Her song, “Fierce,” from her mixtape, *Fantasea*, is perhaps most indicative of the influence of house and ball cultures on Azealia Banks’ music. Like Madonna, Azealia Banks uses the beats and sounds of the New York City youth houses and drag balls. However, Banks refers explicitly to houses and balls and instead of appropriating the voice of someone who might be a participant, she samples an ex-ball contender named Franklin Fuentes who is interviewed in the documentary, *Paris is Burning*. “Fierce” also uses the power of rap to reappropriate language and use new meanings. Banks uses words that stem directly from houses and balls. The difference is that Banks intentionally aligns them with their original history as coming from communities of color. Banks uses the terms, beats, and a direct sample from members of the houses and balls. The title of her song, “Fierce,” is a perfect example. The word, “fierce,” as it is used in popular culture originated in houses and balls as a term to describe the most talented and beautiful drag queens and voguers because it meant they were fierce competition. The sonic elements of Banks’ song also stem directly from house and ball cultures. The song’s beats are perfect for voguing and sound like the songs used in houses and balls for competitions. The connection is so explicit that a Youtube user even created a music video for “Fierce” that is a series of clips from the film *Paris Is*

Burning in which people are voguing and talking about their experiences in houses and balls. However, she situates it directly in its particular historical context through the use of the sample. Her voice throughout the song discusses how she has entered the rap music scene and taken it by storm, using the language of the house and ball cultures.

Banks' use of language and sonic elements from house and ball culture demonstrates the influence of queer youth of color cultures on hip-hop. Banks locates herself as an up and coming rapper in the cultural history of balls as being the new "belle of the ball." She inserts herself into the culture while still allowing members of the culture to speak for themselves. For example, she uses the testimony of a former ball competitor throughout the song, as opposed to other artists who have used queer cultures in their songs. Franklin Fuentes, who is the former ball competitor that is highlighted in the song, is credited as a featured artist on Azealia Banks' single. In Madonna's "Vogue," hers is the only voice heard throughout the song. Furthermore, Banks points to several aspects of houses and balls that are directly linked to hip-hop, such as the concept of localized identities and chosen families. Houses are collectives of queer youth that perform and compete at balls as individuals and as groups. Houses take on localized meanings much like groups of b-boys or graffiti tags do in hip-hop culture. Like groups of b-boys and graffiti tags, houses and balls allow participants to take pride in their communities and their locations, which have been demonized and neglected by national politics and popular culture. Houses and balls also act as alternate families for queer youth of color who often do not have family support, or have been kicked out of their homes. Houses and balls are explicitly structured like families, with mothers or fathers at the heads of houses, with younger and less experienced competitors who are referred to

as children, sons, and daughters.⁵⁹ The family structure of houses demonstrates how closely members of a house are aligned and how important the groups are for each individual.

Another example that distinguishes Azealia Banks' use of house and ball cultures from Madonna's is that she acknowledges the significant aspect of race in creating and influencing the culture and the way the culture is represented. Banks situates the legacy of drag balls with its beginnings in Harlem at the end of the first verse of "Fierce."⁶⁰ Furthermore, by connecting herself so explicitly to the house and ball cultures, Banks is participating in another queer intervention for which hip-hop provides space. Identity as performance is another popular model for identity formation in queer theory. It is important to acknowledge how we perform identity every day, through language, as we have seen, as well as through physical appearance, and fulfilling or disassociating with social roles we are expected to fill based on a particular identity. In "Fierce," Azealia Banks samples a drag queen of color who is a former contender in drag balls. She is alluding to drag as a particular performance of gender identity, and she connects herself to that history, calling herself the top competitor, or belle of the ball. Banks is perhaps suggesting that she similarly must perform a certain gender identity as a rapper. Nicki Minaj expressed a similar sentiment when she discussed the highly sexualized expectations she faced as a Black woman rapper. By connecting rap music to drag balls, Banks is suggesting that rapping is performative and that it requires certain norms of feminine gender presentation, some of which she ascribes to and some of which she does not. Additionally, Banks discusses the rap music industry as parallel to the drag balls,

⁵⁹ Emanuel Levy, "Paris is Burning (film review)," [emanuellevy.com](http://www.emmanuellevy.com), September 27, 2007, accessed April 12, 2013, <http://www.emmanuellevy.com/review/paris-is-burning-1/>

⁶⁰ Azealia Banks, "Fierce," *Fantasea*, 2012, independently released, digital download.

suggesting that there is an element of performance of identity involved in rapping in general. However, Banks is adamant that she will be the “belle of the ball” in rap.

In addition to the element of identity as performance, “Fierce” also highlights how the histories and cultural signifiers in hip-hop and house and ball cultures are similar. Both “queer” and hip-hop have important specific social and political contexts, and they emerge at around the same time. Queer Black and Latin@ youth were looking for alternative families that would embrace them and provide safety. Like Clive and Cindy Campbell, queer youth of color were also looking to make a name for themselves and to challenge the dominant narratives about their identities. Azealia Banks makes an important connection between hip-hop culture and house and ball cultures; both are spaces to construct oppositional narratives, both demonstrate identity as performance, and both are subject to appropriation and misinterpretation. Although Banks is not the first to make this connection explicit, she is one of the first to garner positive attention for doing so.

The histories of hip-hop and “queer” both rely on being located at particular social, historical, and political moments. The meanings and connotations of hip-hop and “queer” have changed drastically over time and they have taken on vastly different meanings as identities. Nicki Minaj and Azealia Banks provide a lens through which to examine the relationships between hip-hop and queerness and how rap music in particular can be a space for queer interventions in the construction of Black sexual politics and Black womanhood. While I argue that Azealia Banks is more successful in demonstrating hip-hop’s ability to create queer interventions in dominant understandings of identity, I want to emphasize that Nicki Minaj provides a unique musical and visual force in

contemporary popular hip-hop. Minaj is problematic in her presentation and articulation of a Black sexual politics and the Black female body. However, examining Minaj and Banks in relation to each other demonstrates the significance of dialogue between Black women rappers in challenging the dominant constructions of Black sexualities, femininity, and queer cultures.

Chapter Two

“Vamo a Vence:” Las Krudas, Feminist Activism, and Hip-Hop Identities across Borders

I'm Black, I'm a woman, and I'm Cuban. *¿Entiendes?* I'm not above all Cuban...But there are moments when I don't know *what* it means to be Cuban. Many times in places like schools and things I'm treated like: 'yes, you're Cuban, but you are not representative of Cuba.' *¿Entiendes?* So then I ask myself, *¿Soy Cubana o no soy Cubana?* Am I Cuban or not?"⁶¹

Las Krudas are a rap group comprised of three queer Cuban women of African descent. They are well-known in the Cuban hip-hop world and have developed a following in the U.S. As self-identified feminists, Las Krudas deliver quickly syncopated rhymes that contain important messages about inequality and justice. Las Krudas' music reflects the transnationality of hip-hop, as do Las Krudas themselves. Born and raised in Cuba, the members of Las Krudas, Pelusa, Wanda, and Olivia, now split their time between Cuba, Austin, Texas, and the Bay Area. Through their music, Las Krudas are able to cross borders that many Cubans cannot. In addition to the 90-mile water “borderlands” between Cuba and the U.S., Las Krudas have been able to navigate the borders in Cuban society and in their own hearts and minds through feminist activism and self-determination. Las Krudas' music provides an important lens for examining hip-hop's role in identity formation. Examining the connection between Las Krudas and identity formation through hip-hop requires a foundation in Gloria Anzaldúa's border theory. Las Krudas present an understanding of self through hip-hop that is grounded in such ambivalence as is represented by the quote that begins this chapter. Using Anzaldúa

⁶¹ Olivia of Las Krudas quoted in Ronni Armstead, “‘Growing the Size of the Black Woman’: Feminist Activism in Havana Hip Hop,” *NWSA Journal*, 19, no. 1 “Feminist Activist Art,” (Spring 2007): 106.

in conjunction with the theorists constructing the queer interventions of identity illuminates not only the tensions that are inherent in Las Krudas' music, but also how the tensions demonstrate the queerness of hip-hop on a transnational scale.

Before its emergence from the South Bronx, hip-hop's voice had transnational roots. Many scholars locate hip-hop's origins in the Caribbean, some say hip-hop really began in Jamaica, while others claim hip-hop originates in Panama. The influence of these cultures, as well as the dialogue between them, on hip-hop's development is great. Calvin and Cindy Campbell's significant role in shaping hip-hop is a pertinent example of the influence of the dialogue of cultures and migration on hip-hop. Hip-Hop's transnationality continued to expand as hip-hop's popularity across the U.S. also expanded. Hip-Hop owes a significant amount of its dissipation around the world to migrants who left their home countries and migrated to the U.S. for work. In addition to other factors such as the globalization of American corporations that sell hip-hop and other aspects of popular culture to youth across the world, migration remains an important part of hip-hop's transnational development.⁶² The importance of recognizing hip-hop's transnationality cannot be understated, especially in conjunction with investigating hip-hop's role and reflection of the identity formation of marginalized subjects across the globe. In her 2008 article, "Aquí en el Ghetto: Hip-Hop in Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico," Arlene Tickner explains, "More so than other cultural practices, music offers strong evidence of the existence of a transborder space of symbolic expression and cultural construction that circulates globally. It integrates several highly fluid modes of expression that facilitate transatlantic and transethnic movement and

⁶² Arlene B. Tickner, "Aquí en el Ghetto: Hip-Hop in Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico," *Latin American Politics and Society*, 50:3 (Fall 2008): 129.

interaction, including song, dance, drama, speech, body language, and dress.”⁶³ Many scholars of hip-hop and cultural production have theorized about hip-hop’s particular global success when so much of the hip-hop that dominates American popular culture is distinctly commodified. The imperial project of American hegemony abroad includes the power of representation and legitimation of cultural production. As Adam Haupt argues, hip-hop provides a space for subjects to critically engage with global capitalism and its representational and cultural forces. While others suggest that hip-hop has become enfolded in the machine of American imperialism through the distribution of popular culture, Haupt maintains that certain hip-hop artists around the world are identifying with hip-hop in ways that reclaim control of representation and agency in cultural production.⁶⁴

Marginalized subjects around the world use hip-hop to develop identities and movements in opposition to American imperialism. Haupt grounds his analysis in the music of Immortal Technique, an Afro-Latino rapper of Peruvian and American origins. Haupt explains, “In fact, Immortal Technique collapses the tidy developed/developing worlds, first/third world or centre/periphery binaries that are often used uncritically in everyday speech. These binaries prevent subjects from seeing that ‘we are in the same struggle’ and that ‘America (read: Empire) can’t exist without separating (us) from (our) identity.’”⁶⁵ Immortal Technique uses hip-hop to demonstrate and attempt to alleviate the separation from “knowledge of self” amongst Latinos and African-Americans. The lack of “knowledge of self,” he argues, is part of the imperialist project of continued

⁶³ Arlene B. Tickner, “Aquí en el Ghetto: Hip-Hop in Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico,” *Latin American Politics and Society*, 50:3 (Fall 2008): 128.

⁶⁴ Adam Haupt, “Hip-Hop, Gender and Agency in the Age of Empire,” *Agenda*, 57 (2003): 26.

⁶⁵ Adam Haupt, “Hip-Hop, Gender and Agency in the Age of Empire,” *Agenda*, 57 (2003): 26.

marginalization within the U.S. as well as the exploitation of people in South America and the Caribbean. In one song, he explains, “As different as we have been taught to look at each other, we are in the same struggle. And until we realize that, we’ll be fighting for scraps on the table of the system that has kept us subservient instead of being self-determined.”⁶⁶ Thus, hip-hop can be viewed as a transnational tool for constructing identity, specifically forging a new identity that is inherently connected to a global consciousness of marginalization.

El Hip-Hop Cubano

Hip-Hop’s presence in Cuba is also grounded in exploring, challenging, and constructing identity formations. Before discussing Las Krudas and their queering of hip-hop in Cuba and transnationally, it is necessary to historicize hip-hop in Cuba. A discussion of the history of Cuban hip-hop is important in order to contextualize the current state of Cuban hip-hop, as well as the significance of Las Krudas as a queer transnational hip-hop form of anti-imperialist resistance. Unlike its emergence in other Latin American countries, hip-hop was not introduced to Cuba through migration. The restrictions on movement between the United States and Cuba due to the embargo make cultural communication and exchange difficult. Hip-Hop crossed the 90-miles between the U.S. and Cuba, through the innovation of marginalized Cuban youths. Residents of a predominantly Black housing project (one of the largest housing projects in the world) in the town of Alamar, in the eastern part of Havana picked up hip-hop from pirated radio transmissions from Miami.⁶⁷ The introduction of hip-hop to Cuba is powerful when contextualized in the tense history of the U.S. embargo and Cuban isolation. Despite the

⁶⁶ Adam Haupt, 25.

⁶⁷ Ronni Armstead, “‘Growing the Size of the Black Woman’: Feminist Activism in Havana Hip Hop,” *NWSA Journal*, 19:1 (Spring, 2007): 108.

considerable efforts of politicians, militaries, and policies, Cubans on the island continue to forge some sense of community and continuity across their diaspora through alternate and subversive means. The introduction of hip-hop to the island is indicative of Cubans' creativity in gaining access to cultural production that speaks to them, but to which they have been denied access. Through pirating radio transmissions from Miami, Cubans used alternate and subversive means to gain access to the community of Cuban-Americans as well as a piece of American culture in Miami. As a result of this unique migration of music, hip-hop has flourished on the island and has been an important space for many Cubans to challenge racism and economic inequality, particularly for young Black Cubans.

Compared to many other Latin American countries, hip-hop has a considerably large following and more active participation in Cuba. Cuban hip-hop has also developed significant global popularity because it has come to be associated with messages of progress and revolution.⁶⁸ Cuban hip-hop, rap music specifically, has a unique trajectory, distinct from that of rap music in other countries. Rap music is nationalized by the Cuban government in Cuba. There are two government-sponsored institutions for rap music, the Asociación Hermanos Saíz (AHS) and the Agencia Cubana de Rap (Cuban Rap Agency, ACR).⁶⁹ The two agencies coordinate rap shows and festivals as well as promote individual rappers and rap groups. The annual Havana Hip Hop Festival is perhaps the largest and most popular of the government-sponsored rap shows. Performing at the

⁶⁸ Arlene B. Tickner, "Aquí en el Ghetto: Hip-Hop in Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico," *Latin American Politics and Society*, 50:3 (Fall 2008): 130.

⁶⁹ Geoffrey Baker, "¡Hip-Hop, Revolución! Nationalizing Rap in Cuba," *Ethnomusicology*, 49: 3 (Fall 2005): 369.

Havana Hip Hop Festival can accelerate a rapper's career, and increase her popularity in Cuba and around the world, as the Festival draws Hip Hop fans from all over the globe.

The relationship between the state, rappers, and rap music can be a very beneficial one, but it is undoubtedly complex as well. While many rappers embrace the involvement of the Cuban government in their careers, others are more critical. As Geoffrey Baker explains in his study of the nationalization of Cuban rap, the state has a significant role in the development and construction of Cuban rap. In fact, Baker demonstrates that the Cuban government uses rap to mobilize and perpetuate its revolutionary discourse. Although the government's use of rap to achieve political ends is obvious, (the AHS, which sponsors so much of Cuban rap music, is the cultural wing of the Union of Young Communists), the institutionalization of rap music influences and reflects the relationship between culture and Cuban identity, an identity that is both localized and transnational. Baker states, "Alonso [Grau, president of the AHS] told me with pride about the association's efforts to promote rap, and he enthused about the dialogue between rappers and their audiences and the 'authenticity of their discourse.' He emphasized the importance of the debates stimulated by rappers on a national and international level, portraying Cuba not simply as a country which offers a space for such debates, but as a global leader."⁷⁰ The state has explicitly explored the relationship between rap and Cuban identity through state-sponsored shows and the 2005 Havana Hip Hop Festival.⁷¹ This is not to say that there has not been conflict and concerns about state censorship and appropriation of hip-hop amongst Cuban rappers. For example, the government censored a song by rap group Clan 537 that criticizes the pervasive racial and economic inequality

⁷⁰ Geoffrey Baker, "¡Hip-Hop, Revolución! Nationalizing Rap in Cuba," *Ethnomusicology*, 49: 3 (Fall 2005): 368.

⁷¹ Geoffrey Baker, "¡Hip-Hop, Revolución! Nationalizing Rap in Cuba," 374.

that persists in Cuba despite state rhetoric that inequality disappeared with the success of the revolution. The Clan 537 song, “¿Quién tiró la tiza?” is about a Black child who gets blamed for trouble-making and cheating in school solely based on racial stereotypes. The song also addresses the economic hierarchy that is closely bound up with racial and gender difference.⁷² As a result, the Cuban government banned “¿Quién tiró la tiza?” from Cuban television and radio.

The relationships between rappers, rap music, and the state is further complicated by the question of appropriation. Few scholars have written about the nationalization of Cuban rap, but many of the scholars that have broached the topic maintain that by sponsoring and controlling the promotion and development, the state has appropriated Cuban hip-hop. However, Geoffrey Baker contends that state sponsorship has not resulted in appropriation because of the unique and important role of “cultural intermediaries who are neither government functionaries nor rappers in the assimilation of rap into national culture,” who act as mentors and advocates to rappers.⁷³ While Baker argues that a polarized view of appropriation is flawed, appropriation requires the power to separate a cultural production from its community, which the Cuban government has. I am not arguing that the Cuban government appropriates Cuban rap in any way resembling American corporations’ appropriation of hip-hop. The state sponsorship of hip-hop allows rappers and rap music to develop and grow in a mutually beneficial system, but there is a distinct difference in power that reflects the racial, gender, and economic inequality that persists in Cuba. Most of the members of the Cuban government,

⁷² Arlene B. Tickner, “Aquí en el Ghetto: Hip-Hop in Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico,” 131.

⁷³ Geoffrey Baker, “¿Hip-Hop, Revolución! Nationalizing Rap in Cuba,” 371.

including the ACR and AHS, are White men, while rap music remains a space for challenging the inequalities and reconstructing Cuban identities.

Thus, the concerns over limited artistic freedom and possible appropriation are legitimate ones. However, the Cuban government also provides sponsorship, legitimacy, and advocacy for rappers and rap music that is unmatched in the United States or in other nations. Like many things in post-revolutionary Cuba, the nationalization of rap is multifaceted, involving various considerations of differing power dynamics and the agency of rappers themselves. As Baker explains, “The nationalization of rap, then, has never been straightforward, and contradictions between policy and practice abound, usually being met with the typical shrug and ‘es Cuba’– ‘That’s Cuba.’”⁷⁴ While Geoffrey Baker presents what is perhaps the most comprehensive study of the relationship between the state and rap music in Cuba, his article barely mentions women rappers, and focuses instead on male rappers, government workers, and cultural intermediaries.⁷⁵ Similar to rap music in the U.S., writing and thinking about rap in Cuba remains centered on cis men.

Las Krudas and Queer Cuban Feminist Activism

The discussion of the nationalization/institutionalization of rap music in Cuba reflects the tensions in Cuban society as a whole, which rap music gives voice to and amplifies. The music of Las Krudas, or Krudas Cubensi, challenges the racism, sexism, inequality, heterosexism, and imposed borders/isolation in Cuban society. Pelusa, Wanda, and Olivia are community performance artists and activists in addition to, and in conjunction with, their careers as rappers. The members of Las Krudas often discuss the

⁷⁴ Geoffrey Baker, “¡Hip-Hop, Revolución! Nationalizing Rap in Cuba,” 398.

⁷⁵ Geoffrey Baker, “¡Hip-Hop, Revolución! Nationalizing Rap in Cuba,” 396.

importance of self-determination in their art and activism, and why hip-hop is such an important part of that process. In her study of Las Krudas' hip-hop feminist activism in Cuba, Ronni Armstead discusses the integral connection between hip-hop and community activism for Las Krudas. Armstead explains, "[Olivia] proudly insists that Las Krudas seek to incorporate their African roots into their daily lives as well as into their artistic projects, and rap has been a good way to do that: 'This hip-hop movement is a really beautiful way to urbanize and modernize and bring up to date the Afro-descended culture that is here,' she explained."⁷⁶ Thus, Las Krudas view hip-hop and their relationship to African-descended cultures as both an individual and communal endeavor. Furthermore, the open and proud identification with African roots is a significant part of self-determination in Cuba.

Las Krudas' celebration and retention of their African-descended culture is a powerful act of reclamation. Although Cuban culture is comprised of cultural elements of the colonizers, the colonized and the enslaved, Cuban education and national rhetoric has historically neglected the significant contributions of enslaved Africans and their descendants to Cuban culture and national identity. Cultures and memories of African retention are still stigmatized in Cuba as are people of African descent, despite the pervasive presence of Africa, the Yoruba people specifically, in the collective pulse of the Cuban people. Such a border within Cuban society and within the Cuban soul, body, and mind is particularly difficult to traverse for Black Cubans. Through cultural production, such as hip-hop, Black Cubans are forcing Cuban society to confront this

⁷⁶ Ronni Armstead, "'Growing the Size of the Black Woman': Feminist Activism in Havana Hip Hop," *NWSA Journal*, 19:1 (Spring, 2007): 107.

border, and are reclaiming the power of self-determination, not allowing themselves or Blackness to be defined by the White Cubans who still control the cultural machine.

The struggle for self-determination in Cuba echoes a common struggle for members of the African diaspora. Grappling with racist representations of the Black female body as hypersexual, available for consumption, but still inferior to and less desirable than White femininity, Black women across the diaspora innovatively use cultural production to challenge these dominant notions and create unique, community-oriented visions of identity. Despite similar experiences of exoticization across the diaspora, Las Krudas and Azealia Banks and Nicki Minaj occupy very different spaces as Black women. Although certain experiences and histories are common across the diaspora, African-American women and Cuban women are interacting with distinct legacies of colonization, slavery, segregation, imperialism, and contemporary racism. Las Krudas' music, music videos, and performances demonstrate the theoretical interventions against the hegemonic construction of Black femininity and the Black female body. These interventions are interrelated with the queer interventions of identity and demonstrate further how racism and heterosexism interact with and support one another. Furthermore, as Las Krudas argue, the hip-hop movement provides a unique and integral space for the theorizing and reforming of Black female identity across borders.

In order to further contextualize Las Krudas' queer performances of Black femininity as diasporian subjects, more theoretical background on Blackness, femininity, performativity and visibility is necessary. Nicole R. Fleetwood's argument about self-determination and performativity and Blackness in visual culture is helpful in examining Las Krudas' music, particularly in conjunction with queer theories of performativity.

Fleetwood presents four key theoretical concepts for analyzing Blackness and visibility; they are troubling vision, non-iconicity, excess flesh, and visible seams. I focus on Fleetwood's theory of excess flesh in my discussion of Las Krudas because of its focus on performativity and its explicit link to Black femininity and the Black female body.⁷⁷ Fleetwood defines excess flesh as "a term that I develop to attend to ways in which black female corporeality is rendered as an excessive overdetermination and as overdetermined excess. It is a strategic enactment of certain black female artists and entertainers to deploy hypervisibility as constitutive of black femaleness in dominant visual culture."⁷⁸ Las Krudas employ hypervisibility and references to the perceived excessiveness of the Black female body. In my analysis, I use Fleetwood's notion of excessiveness in reference to Las Krudas' queering of Black Cuban female identity through performances that use bodily and physical excess as a refusal to ignore and diminish Black Cuban identity. Perhaps the clearest example is Las Krudas' song and accompanying music video, "La Gorda."

In "La Gorda," Las Krudas combat fatphobia and the oppressive hegemonic standards of beauty, which are distinctly racialized. The song reclaims the word "gorda" as a point of pride because it recognizes a body that deviates from the hegemonic standard of White womanhood, and is therefore beautiful. La Gorda is beautiful and meaningful because she takes up space and forces herself to be visible. Thus, Fleetwood's notion of excess flesh is apparent in the message of the song. In "La Gorda," Las Krudas challenge the construction of fatness as inherently ugly. Instead, they claim

⁷⁷ Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visibility, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 9.

⁷⁸ Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visibility, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 9.

that they are fat, and therefore, powerful and beautiful. Fat women are penalized and denigrated in both Cuban and American cultures partly because fat women are viewed as taking up space. Claiming space and claiming visibility through corporeality is a point of pride for Las Krudas.

Las Krudas' queer performativity differs from that of Azealia Banks and Nicki Minaj. Perhaps the most obvious difference is that Las Krudas are openly queer, while Nicki Minaj recanted her original statement about her bisexuality. In certain important ways, Las Krudas and Azealia Banks interact with and challenge the historical processes of the exoticization of Black female bodies similarly. For example, both Azealia Banks and Las Krudas reclaim Blackness as a site of beauty and desire. "La Gorda" is not the only song in which Las Krudas emphasize physicality and corporeality as essential to their Blackness and Afro-Cubanness. In "Eres Bella," another song from their mixtape *Krudas Cubensi*, Las Krudas rap in the chorus, "Eres bella siendo tu, ebano flor, negra luz."⁷⁹ There are also important differences in Banks and Las Krudas discussions of Blackness and beauty. While Banks contextualizes her performances of identity as a queer Black woman mostly in discussions and analyses of interpersonal relationships, Las Krudas focus their performances of identity on communal struggles with history, contemporary imperialist policies, and empowerment. When asked why so much of their music emphasizes Blackness and beauty, they replied,

"Nuestra musica es autobiograficamente kruda, estamos alzando esa voz ke kieren silenciar quienes nos temen y nos envidian porque somos esas criaturas poderosxs que ocupan no solo el Hip Hop, pero tambien cada espacio que exista para hacernos visibles, orgullosas, presentes, dueñas de estxs cuerpxs hermosxs y capaces de dejar escrita en piedra nuestra

⁷⁹ "Las Krudas Cubensi - Eres Bella (Rap Mujer)" - Youtube Video, 4:07, posted by Mando Olivares, July 14, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldsxrWJW8Eo>. Translation: "You are beautiful being you, ebony flower, black light."

huella empoderando a otrxs semejantes, a otrxs seres hermanxs, que necesitan nuestra voz, nuestra poesia para ser libres y felices en nuestros tiempos y tiempos futuros. (Translation in footnote)⁸⁰

Las Krudas emphasize their Afro-Cuban identity and pride, and similarly highlight their mission to amplify the voices of marginalized peoples and colonized peoples, which have been silenced throughout Cuban society, and across the world. As queer, third-world women of African descent, Las Krudas represent a voice and a presence that imperialist forces attempt to drown out through racist policies of migration and through silencing certain histories in favor of the dominant one, Las Krudas are presenting a complicated and layered excessiveness. Their statement highlights their use of visual and corporeal excessiveness, as exemplified in this section of their response: “...pero tambien cada espacio que exista para hacernos visibles, orgullosas, presentes, dueñas de estxs cuerpxs hermosxs.”⁸¹ Las Krudas supplement their statement about corporeal and visual excessiveness with a discussion of their music as poetry that can be used for amplifying collective voices that are historically silenced.

In their response, Las Krudas highlight a key component of Jose Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentification. Muñoz discusses the danger of the counterdeterminism of ideology and identity formation for queer people of color. Although scholars are often tempted to track the subject formation of marginalized subjects as either strictly assimilationist or diametrically opposed to dominant ideology in every way, Muñoz

⁸⁰ Las Krudas, e-mail interview with author, February 6, 2013. Translation: “Our music is autobiographically Kruda, we are raising that voice which they want to silence, those that fear and envy us because we are those powerful creatures that occupy not only hip-hop, but also each space that exists to make us visible, proud, present, owners of these beautiful bodies, and able to leave our footprints imprinted in stone, empowering other similar people, other siblings, that need our voice, our poetry to be free in happy in our time and in the future.”

⁸¹ Translation: “...but also each space that exists to make us visible, proud, present, owners of these beautiful bodies...”

theorizes a more complicated relationship between marginalized subjects, namely queer people of color, and dominant ideology.⁸² An essential part of Muñoz's theory of disidentification is the role of power in shaping world-making, which is evident in Las Krudas' discussion of their music. Muñoz explains, "Thus, all the disidentificatory performances I have chronicled have been enactments of power in the face of repressive truth regimes and the state power apparatus."⁸³ Las Krudas' music is shaped by the power of reclamation of truth and the power to construct a world in which the "excess flesh" of Black womanhood is definitive of beauty. Significantly, Las Krudas make explicit a connection inherent in disidentification. Muñoz defines disidentificatory performance as a "utopian blueprint for a possible future while, at the same time, staging a new political formation in the present."⁸⁴ In their statement, Las Krudas say that they aim to cast their footprints in stone so that there is a path for queer people of color to forge their own worlds. The imagery of casting their footprints in stone is not only beautiful, but also significant in its permanence. In contrast to many of the "rags to riches" narratives of individual success found in commercially successful rap music, Las Krudas' narrative of individual success is inherently tied to the communal. Although rappers who present a "rags to riches" narrative often include communal sentiments in that they promise to share their wealth and power with their families and communities, Las Krudas offer a different interpretation of success and community. Las Krudas are adamant that they're ability to cast footprints in stone is so that other queer people of color throughout the

⁸² José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, vol. 2 of *Cultural Studies of the Americas*, ed. George Yúdice, Jean Franco, and Juan Flores (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

⁸³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, vol. 2 of *Cultural Studies of the Americas*, ed. George Yúdice, Jean Franco, and Juan Flores (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 199.

⁸⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 200.

world can have the microphone in order to create their own poetry and footprints towards their own utopian blueprint.

Las Krudas' utopian blueprint runs throughout their discography, but one song in particular provides a unique example of disidentificatory performance as it relates to borderlands. As discussed previously, the history of conflict over Cuban migration informed the development of Cuban hip-hop and cultural production. Performances of borderlands and migration are thus integral pieces of Las Krudas' performance of political identity formation, as well as their utopian blueprint for the future. One pertinent example of borderlands and disidentification in Las Krudas' work is their 2011 song, "No Me Dejaron." In the song, Las Krudas describe not being allowed to migrate to Spain because they are Cuban. Throughout the verses of the song, they describe not only the difficulties of the oppressive and gendered policies of migration, but also what a world without borders would look like. Drawing immediately on the history of colonization to frame the discussion of borders, Las Krudas demonstrate the non-dichotomized identity formation of queer people of color that Muñoz describes. They rap, "Dicen que toda nuestra gente se quieren quedar allí/se olvidaron de cuando vinieron a colonizar, sí."⁸⁵ Las Krudas relate the history of colonization to their own personal history, saying that they themselves are descendants of Spanish colonizers, despite being Afro-Cuban.

The discussion of colonization and personal history demonstrates a more complicated relationship to the oppressive political formation of colonization and contemporary nation-states. As Afro-Cuban women, Las Krudas embody the borderlands as a psychological space where the histories of colonizer and colonized converge. In "No

⁸⁵ "No Me Dejaron" - MySpace Video, 3:49, posted by Las Krudas, February 16, 2011, <http://www.myspace.com/3krudas>. Translation: "They say that all of our people want to stay there, but they forgot about when they came here to colonize, yeah."

Me Dejaron,” Las Krudas use the paradox of not being allowed into Spain because they are Cuban (even though being Cuban makes them descendants of Spaniards) to inform their utopian blueprint of a world without borders. Furthermore, as queer people, Las Krudas further occupy and embody the borderlands. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa claims that queer people are the “supreme crosses of cultures.”⁸⁶ The strictly policed and militarized borders and migration policies due to restrictions governing marriage and immigration that often prohibit people in queer relationships from gaining citizenship status, as well as the histories of queer people denied entrance into certain countries because they are deemed “immoral”⁸⁷ further marginalize Las Krudas. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa argues that queer people must live on the borderlands of their cultures, their families, their communities, and themselves, and constantly have to navigate whether or not it is safe for them to be their full selves in any given situation.⁸⁸ Las Krudas exemplify Anzaldúa’s argument in “No Me Dejaron,” because they are attempting to unite people affected by migration policies all over the world, which is something, as Anzaldúa argues, queer people of color have a unique ability to do. The unique ability to cross borders is not based on an essentialist notion of queerness, but rather on the experiences of having to constantly navigate and negotiate borders that many queer people understand and live. After chanting that migration is a human right, Las Krudas enact Muñoz’s theory of world-making by exclaiming, “ahora las mujeres

⁸⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 106.

⁸⁷ Eithne Lubheid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 21.

⁸⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 106-107.

vamos a gobernar!”⁸⁹ In the world that Las Krudas imagine, the roles are reversed and men are meant to clean up the mess they made with the world. In the woman-governed world that Las Krudas imagine, “la tierra sera una...sin fronteras.”⁹⁰ Las Krudas challenge the current political formation of nation and identity through their existence as queer Afro-Cuban women, and through disidentificatory performance challenge the dominant ideology of migration with such a statement.

Las Krudas’ music demonstrates the three other queer interventions of identity in addition to Jose Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentification, but I specifically address the formation of identity as normative community commitments present in Las Krudas’ work. In “Identity Judgements, Queer Politics,” Mark Norris Lance and Alessandra Tanesini argue, like Muñoz, that it is important to disengage with a formulation of identity as either biological or socially constructed. However, Lance and Tanesini explain that identity judgements are normative and reflect political commitments to and representations of communities.⁹¹ Lance and Tanesini argue that even performative formulations of identity are merely descriptive accounts of normative claims. In order to make such an argument, Lance and Tanesini explain that identities involve attempts to find “cohesiveness” or discordance across different aspects of each others’ identities.⁹² Las Krudas exemplify the formation of identity as normative commitment to communities, as evidenced by their commitment to cast their footprints in stone for their

⁸⁹ “No Me Dejaron” - MySpace Video, 3:49, posted by Las Krudas, February 16, 2011, <http://www.myspace.com/3krudas>. Translation: “Now we, the women, are going to rule!”

⁹⁰ “No Me Dejaron” - MySpace Video, 3:49, posted by Las Krudas, February 16, 2011, <http://www.myspace.com/3krudas>. Translation: “The earth will be one...without borders.”

⁹¹ Mark Norris Lance and Alessandra Tanesini, “Identity Judgements, Queer Politics” in *Queer Theory*, ed. Iain Morland and Annabelle Wilcox, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 172.

⁹² Mark Norris Lance and Alessandra Tanesini, “Identity Judgements, Queer Politics” in *Queer Theory*, ed. Iain Morland and Annabelle Wilcox, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 174.

communities. Las Krudas' identities as queer Afro-Cuban women are tied to normative community commitments, which they explain in their interviews and in their music. Furthermore, Las Krudas' work sheds light on how this identity intervention is present throughout hip-hop. Their song "La Gorda" most clearly demonstrates the principle of identity as normative. The song revolves around the decision to claim "gorda" as an identity. As discussed earlier, doing so reclaims the power to define beauty. In addition, calling themselves "gorda" reflects their identities as queer Black women, because "Gorda" challenges the dominant, white, heteronormative principles of beauty and identity. As Lance and Tanesini explain, "to say that one is of a given identity is to say that one *ought* to take that identity to be part of one's script for one's life, that one ought to allow an associated script to demand coherence with one's other scripts..."⁹³ For Las Krudas, "gorda" is thus exemplary of the normative nature of identity because it demands coherence with the other aspects of their identity, namely their queerness and blackness. In the first verse, Las Krudas claim that demanding to be "gorda" is demanding to be happy and to be able to participate freely in a world with many different kinds of women.⁹⁴

Las Krudas' music and participation in their communities thus demonstrate queer interventions of identity at work. Furthermore, studying Las Krudas in the particular context of Cuban hip-hop demonstrates the specificity of hip-hop and its ability to cross borders. Las Krudas' music provides a radical reclamation of power to create a world that centers queer women of color and demonstrates the radical politics that is at hip-hop's core. When Las Krudas have the mic, it is undeniable that hip-hop is queer and that it is

⁹³ Mark Norris Lance and Alessandra Tanesini, "Identity Judgements, Queer Politics," 179.

⁹⁴ "Krudas Cubensi 'La Gorda' - Youtube Video, 4:49, posted by Adrian Archuleta, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mlzf9BPHZY0>.

essentially a space for oppositional narrative. Las Krudas participate in a broader context of Latin American hip-hop that stands in opposition to empire, particularly U.S. imperialist policies restricting migration and perpetuating economic exploitation. Additionally, Las Krudas participate in a transnational aspect of hip-hop that sheds light on the narratives of transgression that make hip-hop uniquely powerful. Las Krudas' music and they themselves enact Jose Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification through constructing a utopian blueprint for the future that challenges the current political formations. In addition, Las Krudas demonstrate a queer formation of identity as normative, and tied to cohesive constructions of community-based identity. The music of Las Krudas is an example of the power of hip-hop to spread a queer message of anti-imperialism across the world.

Chapter Three

Coming Out and Keepin' It Real: Frank Ocean, Big Freedia, and Hip-Hop Performances

“In the context of respondents’ stated preferences, data show that listeners’ authenticating processes are flawed, context specific, and subjective, as Peterson (2005) and John L. Jackson (2005) suggest. However, these data remain useful because they tell us about the authenticity discourse produced by respondents and reveal the power of authenticity as a concept that emphasizes fixity over continuous social construction and disguises subjectivity as objectivity for the purpose of evaluating cultural products.”⁹⁵

Hip-Hop authenticity centers around the concept of “keepin’ it real.” For most consumers of hip-hop, authenticity is a determining factor in a rapper’s success and credibility. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, hip-hop is a powerful space for the formation of identity for many people around the world. In the United States, commercially successful, mainstream hip-hop partially dictates how many view themselves and each other, especially across racial lines. In his book, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop*, Michael Jeffries reports his findings about the racialized and gendered constructions of hip-hop based on extensive interviews with multiple men in the Boston area who identified themselves as hip-hop fans. Based on the interviews, Jeffries demonstrates common threads in the understanding of hip-hop authenticity, and what makes someone “real.” Participants in his study usually pointed to several factors in determining the realness of a rapper, which were tied to anti-commercialism, class origins, and an often context-specific definitions of belonging to

⁹⁵ Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 136.

hip-hop culture.⁹⁶ For example, Jeffries notes that the participants in his survey consider celebrating wealth and commercial success as inauthentic, and while celebrating racial/ethnic pride is authentic, most respondents avoided the issue of discussing the role of white rappers and their claims to authenticity, but seemed to imply that whiteness was inauthentic.⁹⁷ Jeffries also reports that notions of authenticity were gendered. Respondents considered performances of hypermasculinity to be authentic, but used coded gendered language, such as “toughness” to indicate performances of masculinity.⁹⁸

Authenticity is a significant part of hip-hop culture because it demonstrates one’s connection to the culture and legitimizes certain performances of identities. In addition to Jeffries’ discussion of authenticity, several other scholars have discussed authenticity as being a determining factor in sales and commercial success of popular hip-hop performances. Race is an inextricable part of constructing authenticity narratives in hip-hop according to scholars such as S. Craig Watkins and Todd Fraley.⁹⁹ Consumers of commercially successful hip-hop link performances of race to constructions of authenticity despite being hesitant to explicitly name race as a key part of hip-hop authenticity. Such a link becomes problematic when considering what group constitutes the largest consumers of hip-hop: white male youth. As such, this group has been instrumental in shaping what kind of hip-hop performances are considered successful since the early 1990’s.¹⁰⁰ Watkins explains how white, middle-class youth drove sales for N.W.A.’s first album, *Efil4zaggin*, and brought gangsta rap to the forefront of popular

⁹⁶ Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 135.

⁹⁷ Michael P. Jeffries, 137-139.

⁹⁸ Michael P. Jeffries, 149.

⁹⁹ Todd Fraley, “I Got a Natural Skill...: Hip-Hop, Authenticity, and Whiteness,” *The Howard Journal of Communications* 20 (2009): 37-54.

¹⁰⁰ S. Craig Watkins, “Fear of a White Planet,” *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Popular Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 94.

music and culture.¹⁰¹ N.W.A.'s album is full of misogyny and violent imagery to an extent that was unprecedented in hip-hop, prompting many to question why this album from a relatively unknown group had skyrocketed to the top of the charts. Watkins explains that the largest consumers of N.W.A.'s album were affluent white teenage males, which reflects a paradox in commercially successful hip-hop that sends ripples throughout hip-hop culture around the world.¹⁰²

The enthusiasm and spending power of young suburban white males suddenly became focused onto N.W.A., their album, and the representations of urban, poor, Black experiences, which called into question the authenticity of hip-hop as a commercial venture. Watkins connects the purchasing power of white suburban male consumers of hip-hop to Eminem's superstardom and argues, "Eminem's superstar status brings to light hip hop's greatest paradox: the rise of young white consumers as the most lucrative and preferred market in the movement's expansive economy. The voracious appetite for rap by young whites fortified hip-hop's status. And yet, white youth's embrace of hip hop also exacted a costly, albeit seldom acknowledged toll on the movement."¹⁰³ *The New York Times* and other publications began publishing article after article attempting to explain the sudden fascination with hip-hop culture and representations of Black, ghetto lives. Many of the cultural critics whose articles populated the pages of the *New York Times* and other publications decided that hip-hop had simply become the "rebellious music of the '90s," while others argued that white consumption of hip-hop meant that race had become de-centered in popular culture and that the popular imagination had

¹⁰¹ S. Craig Watkins, "Fear of a White Planet," *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Popular Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 93.

¹⁰² S. Craig Watkins, "Fear of a White Planet," 95.

¹⁰³ S. Craig Watkins, "Fear of a White Planet," 93.

become de-racialized.¹⁰⁴ Arguments about hip-hop that attempt to de-center race are naïve and misguided. Instead, scholars like Watkins argue that hip-hop offers a voyeuristic appeal for young, white, affluent, suburban consumers. Thus, the domination of affluent, white, male consumers in hip-hop presents considerable problems for constructing and presenting performances of hip-hop authenticity.

Despite the paradoxical and problematic nature of authenticity in commercially successful hip-hop, questions of authenticity, and “keeping it real” remain significant components in hip-hop culture. “Keeping it real” means being yourself, but given the consumption patterns of hip-hop, and the fact that the people profiting the most from hip-hop are the white executives of the music companies, it is difficult to determine what is real, and to whom. Although the respondents in Michael Jeffries’ study felt uncomfortable talking about race as a factor in determining authenticity, the notion of realness has racial implications, as Watkins and others have demonstrated.

In addition to race, there are other performances of identity that are judged for their authenticity, such as gender and sexual performances. In order to discuss how hip-hop consumers deem performances of race authentic or inauthentic, we must also examine how racialized performances intersect with gender and sexuality. One pertinent example of the intersections of identity in performances of authenticity is the construction of the thug. As Jeffries argues in his article, “Can a Thug (get some) Love? Sex, Romance, and the Definition of a Hip Hop ‘Thug,’” the image of the thug in hip-hop culture is generally considered solely a racial and class-based performance, “...but thug performances are profoundly dependent on sex and gender constructs, and romance and

¹⁰⁴ S. Craig Watkins, “Fear of a White Planet,” 97.

partnership narratives force us to reconsider the definition of a thug.”¹⁰⁵ Without gender and sexual performances, the racialized meanings of hip-hop performances, and hip-hop authenticity, are not transmittable. Jeffries discusses the masculine anxiety and negation of queer sexuality that characterize thug performances in addition to the ways in which the thug relies on limited gendered constructions of femininity in order to add authenticity to the thug performance. He explains, “In order to strengthen one’s masculinity in a hegemonic context where masculinities are arranged in a hierarchy according to identity markers including ethnoracial status and sexual preference...subjects who occupy a hierarchal location other than the ideal (straight, white, Christian, bourgeois) may adopt a range of strategies.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, hegemonic and oppressive performances of masculinity become intrinsically connected to the thug’s status as a racial and class outsider. Performances of hyper-masculinity and homophobia are used as oppositional performances meant to challenge and negotiate the thug’s status as a racial and class outsider. However, as Jeffries emphasizes, although thug narrative and performances are oppositional and subversive, as long as they rely on narratives of gendered and sexual violence and oppression, they cannot be seen as wholly empowering.

The criticisms of thug performances are valid and important, and I argue that there is space in the discourse of authenticity as it relates to the hip-hop thug and other performances of “realness” for challenging the oppressive constructions of identity. Robin Means Coleman and Jasmine Cobb present a perspective that many scholars, hip-hop fans, and others hold. Coleman and Cobb argue that there is a fundamental

¹⁰⁵ Michael P. Jeffries, “Can a Thug (get some) Love? Sex, Romance, and the Definition of a Hip Hop ‘Thug,’” *Women and Language* 32, 2 (2009): 35.

¹⁰⁶ Michael P. Jeffries, “Can a Thug (get some) Love? Sex, Romance, and the Definition of a Hip Hop ‘Thug,’” *Women and Language* 32, 2 (2009): 37.

dissonance in queerness and thug performativity that makes it impossible for a Black queer male rapper to be commercially successful. They use Caushun, and his failed attempt at commercial success as evidence. In their discussion of Caushun, a Black gay male rapper, Coleman and Cobb argue that because Caushun performs a homo-thug aesthetic and identity, hip-hop consumers will not buy into his authenticity claims. Caushun is the stage name of Jason Herndon, a rapper originally from Brooklyn, New York. Caushun is openly gay and describes himself as a homo-thug, saying that thugness and queerness are not contradictory, explaining, ““If you’re a man and you’re influenced by hip-hop and you’re intimate with another man, you’re a homo-thug.””¹⁰⁷ At the time that Coleman and Cobb wrote their article, Caushun worked as a hairdresser at New York City’s Plaza Hotel Salon, meaning he was constantly interacting with celebrities, most notably, Kimora Lee Simmons, who has given Caushun her support and decided to back him with her record label.¹⁰⁸ Although he signed with a major record label, Caushun still could not achieve mainstream commercial success or even commercial distribution of his first CD, *Proceed with Caushun*. Caushun and his representatives took pains to emphasize how he had all the elements of a thug rapper, despite his queerness. Caushun emphasized his rags-to-riches story, and class and race positioning in an attempt to gain authenticity claims. He even had his straight friends testify in a web-documentary about him, ““he don’t be doing that around us.””¹⁰⁹ Despite attempting to reconcile his queerness with his thug identity and demonstrate how palatable he could be for

¹⁰⁷ Robin R. Means Coleman and Cobb, Jasmine, “No Way of Seeing: Mainstreaming and Selling the Gaze of Homo-Thug Hip-Hop,” *Popular Communication* 5, 2 (2007): 90.

¹⁰⁸ Robin R. Means Coleman and Cobb, Jasmine, “No Way of Seeing: Mainstreaming and Selling the Gaze of Homo-Thug Hip-Hop,” 92.

¹⁰⁹ Robin R. Means Coleman and Cobb, Jasmine, “No Way of Seeing: Mainstreaming and Selling the Gaze of Homo-Thug Hip-Hop,” 93.

mainstream audiences by assuring them that he knew his place on the heterosexist sexual hierarchy, Caushun could not attain commercial success.

In spite of their repeated claims that they support Caushun and the inclusion of queer rappers in commercially successful hip-hop, Coleman and Cobb rely on harmful tropes of thug performances and do not include a critical examination of the role of affluent, white, male consumers of hip-hop in constructing these limited tropes. Their discussion of Caushun is important, although flawed, because it provides an examination of the function of the gaze in hip-hop and how the power structures of the gaze are replicated and challenged throughout various spaces in hip-hop. Coleman and Cobb argue that the intersectionality of Black, gay, thug, and queen identities is not marketable for commercially successful audiences, but they do not unpack why that is, and make no mention of the affluent, white, male consumers who dictate what performances are considered authentic.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, Coleman and Cobb rely on racist tropes of male rappers as sexual predators and as performing hyper-masculinity to argue that it is up to Caushun to give mainstream audiences a way to consume him, gaze upon him, and thus grant him authenticity and legitimacy as a rapper. For example, they claim, “The challenge here is that hyper-masculinity is born out of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ ... which views real men not only as objectifying and oppressing women, but too oppressing lesser or softer men as well. Since being a thug is all about conquest by violence, Caushun disallows the possibility that one can be Black, gay, sexual, and humanizing without being disruptive.”¹¹¹ The argument quoted here is flawed in two distinct, but connected

¹¹⁰ Robin R. Means Coleman and Cobb, Jasmine, “No Way of Seeing: Mainstreaming and Selling the Gaze of Homo-Thug Hip-Hop,” *Popular Communication* 5, 2 (2007): 99.

¹¹¹ Robin R. Means Coleman and Cobb, Jasmine, “No Way of Seeing: Mainstreaming and Selling the Gaze of Homo-Thug Hip-Hop,” 102.

ways. First, Coleman and Cobb position Black men and Black masculinity in proximity to hegemonic masculinity, when as Jeffries and others have pointed out, Black men do not benefit from hegemonic masculinity and are thus performing hyper-masculinity and other forms of masculinity in order to approximate, but also challenge hegemonic masculinity. Secondly, Coleman and Cobb do not take into consideration the significant amount of space that thug performativity provides in hip-hop. As Jeffries argues, thug performativity is malleable and context-driven. There is no one definition of a thug, and furthermore, ‘thug’ is a highly performative identity space that relies on performances and alternate definitions and discussions of love and sexuality.

Coleman and Cobb’s argument is also faulty because although it acknowledges the power of a homo-thug positionality to disrupt “...the directional power and privilege that the gaze has traditionally been afforded,”¹¹² they only describe and define thug and hip-hop authenticity in terms of constructed notions of Blackness and hyper-masculinity. For example, Coleman and Cobb argue, “Within hip-hop keepin’ it real authenticity is more far reaching than proclaiming a core identity. It becomes a yardstick that seeks to measure one’s proximity to the socioeconomic and racial conditions that define Blackness in America.”¹¹³ Coleman and Cobb’s argument demonstrates the complexities and contradictions inherent in hip-hop. Although authenticity is often rigidly defined and bound to constructions of race and class, as well as gender and sexuality, authenticity claims can be used to grant legitimacy to actors who do not perform identities that are traditionally profitable and consumable in commercially successful hip-hop. Racial and

¹¹² Robin R. Means Coleman and Cobb, Jasmine, “No Way of Seeing: Mainstreaming and Selling the Gaze of Homo-Thug Hip-Hop,” 105.

¹¹³ Robin R. Means Coleman and Cobb, Jasmine, “No Way of Seeing: Mainstreaming and Selling the Gaze of Homo-Thug Hip-Hop,” 95.

class conditions are integral to the definition of hip-hop authenticity, but Coleman and Cobb's analysis fails to examine the potential within constructions of hip-hop authenticity for challenging the gender and sexual norms that they contend prevent rappers like Caushun from achieving superstar status.

Perhaps the most obvious challenge to Coleman and Cobb's argument that queer male rappers provide "no way of seeing" for mainstream audiences is the commercial success of Frank Ocean. Frank Ocean is a singer/rapper originally from New Orleans, Louisiana. Although he began his career as a ghost writer for several pop stars, including Justin Bieber, Frank Ocean began receiving critical acclaim after joining hip-hop collective OFWGKTA, more commonly known as Odd Future. His work as a solo artist also began to take off with the release of his first mixtape, which garnered the attention of Jay-Z, Beyoncé Knowles, and Kanye West, who then featured him on Jay-Z and Kanye West's record-breaking album, *Watch the Throne*. Ocean continued to garner fame and critical acclaim as a solo artist, which grew steadily through the release of his first solo album, *Channel Orange*, in 2012. Shortly before the official release of *Channel Orange*, Frank Ocean famously wrote an open letter, which he posted on his blog, describing falling in love with another man. He presented the letter without commentary, and it went viral. Frank Ocean's open letter created an enormous amount of discussion and speculation. To this day, many fans, critics, and scholars label Frank Ocean as gay, although he never defined his sexuality in the letter. Despite his coming out, or maybe because of it, Frank Ocean and *Channel Orange* have skyrocketed to the top of the charts and Ocean's commercial success has never been in question. Although there are several important differences between Caushun and Frank Ocean, most notably that their

attempts to break into the mainstream hip-hop market are over five years apart, and that Caushun and Frank Ocean have very different musical styles, Ocean's success demonstrates that it is more than possible for a Black, queer, male rapper to succeed. In fact, Ocean's letter probably boosted the sales of *Channel Orange* and Ocean's notoriety.

Frank Ocean's commercial success demonstrates not only that it is possible to achieve mainstream success as a queer Black man in hip-hop, but also that love, relationships, and sexual dialogues remain an important part of making meaning in hip-hop. As argued in the first chapter, rap music has historically been a space for Black women rappers to construct sexual dialogues and challenge dominant notions of Black femininity and sexual agency. Jeffries' article on thug performativity, love, and sexuality reveals how thug performativity also provides a space for the construction of sexual dialogues and the (re)presentation of alternate narratives of love and masculinity. Despite Coleman and Cobb's claims that a homo-thug rapper provides no way of consuming and gazing for mainstream audiences, Frank Ocean validates that hip-hop can be a space for challenging mainstream audiences to shift their gaze. It is in hip-hop that many people of color and marginalized people throughout the world create a vocabulary, a physicality, and an expression of identity that challenges the dominant white, heterosexist, capitalist, patriarchal structure, as Las Krudas' work makes evident in the second chapter. Although commercially successful hip-hop is often not a welcoming and empowering a space, Frank Ocean's success demonstrate that it is possible to use hip-hop to challenge mainstream audiences to shift their patterns of gazing and consumption. Frank Ocean gave "no way of seeing" to use Coleman and Cobb's term, to mainstream audience in important ways: he did not label his sexuality, the content of his songs highlight love and

sexual relationships with partners of different genders, his affiliation with Odd Future, a group known for the misogyny and violence of their lyrics, all complicate his identity as a hip-hop performer. However, Frank Ocean is still one of the most famous names in mainstream hip-hop today.

In thinking about the liberating potential of hip-hop authenticity and keepin' it real, it is imperative to challenge the traditional construction of the gaze, particularly as it relates to consumption patterns in hip-hop and the existence of oppositional narratives of Blackness in visual and musical cultures. Coleman and Cobb address the importance of redirecting positionality in the gaze, explaining, "It is this power structure that too works to deny mutual looking or mutual gazing where understanding is gained between looker and looked upon in absence of unequal levels of power and control."¹¹⁴ In hip-hop, such power structures are evident in patterns of gazing as well as in performances of oppressive hyper-masculinity as discussed previously. However, as Frank Ocean's success, as well as the previous chapters demonstrate, hip-hop provides a unique amount of space for challenging those traditional structures of gazing, which Coleman and Cobb ignore in their discussion of Caushun.

Big Freedia, Queen Diva: Twerking, Positionality, and Challenging the Gaze

New Orleans-based rapper, Big Freedia, actively challenges the oppressive power of the gaze and repositions herself and her audience members as agents who are gazed and gazed upon. Big Freedia has been a star in the bounce music scene of New Orleans for over a decade. Bounce music is known as a sub-genre of hip-hop that is energetic and quick-paced. Its structure is call-and-response based, and relies heavily on sampling beats.

¹¹⁴ Robin R. Means Coleman and Cobb, Jasmine, "No Way of Seeing: Mainstreaming and Selling the Gaze of Homo-Thug Hip-Hop," 91.

Bounce music is also known for its sexually expressive lyrics and dance moves. Big Freedia began her career in bounce music doing background vocals for Katy Red, whom Big Freedia credits as the first transsexual bounce musician in New Orleans, and as her best friend.¹¹⁵ In the past year, Big Freedia and bounce have become the subjects of considerable attention from mainstream news sources, such as the *New York Times* and *NPR*. She is fascinating to so many people because to many outsiders of New Orleans bounce music, she is an anomaly. Big Freedia is an openly gay, genderqueer rapper and she actively makes her concerts a safe space for women and queer people. As throughout hip-hop culture, queer people are important participants and contributors to bounce music, but are often ignored in discussions about the development of the genre. Big Freedia's testimony about her own career and how she grew up rapping alongside other queer and trans* rappers in the bounce clubs of New Orleans for over fourteen years demonstrates the presence of queer people in bounce music.

Big Freedia's personal trajectory through the bounce music circuit of New Orleans and some mainstream fame is important to her challenges of hegemonic reproductions of the gaze because she is included in the discourse of authenticity. It is important that Big Freedia has access to authenticity claims that are recognized and respected in hip-hop communities because they legitimize her challenges and complications of constructions of authenticity and gazing. While commercially successful hip-hop shapes and propagates a definition of hip-hop authenticity that relies on hyper-masculinity, misogyny and homophobia, Big Freedia's authenticity has never been questioned. She is considered authentic because she embodies the other elements that the participants in Jeffries' study emphasized. Her national success is deeply rooted in a

¹¹⁵ Big Freedia, in discussion with the author, November, 2012.

localized identity because of bounce music's New Orleans origins. In addition, she has claims to a larger legacy and community of rappers, and is part of an alternate, or chosen family.¹¹⁶ Alternate families are important to hip-hop culture because they cultivate a sense of belonging, become bases for competition as families fight each other, and provide mentorship and recognition.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, Big Freedia projects a self-confidence about herself and her realness, which requires her to not have to address her authenticity, which the participants in Jeffries' study pointed out as evidence of true authenticity.¹¹⁸

Big Freedia's authenticity and her unique challenges to the hegemonic positionality of the gaze, which Coleman and Cobb argue is what prevents queer rappers like Caushun from gaining mainstream success, become clear when seeing her perform live. Almost every article written about Big Freedia in the past couple of years has highlighted the highly interactive nature of her concerts, most notably the articles about her in *The New York Times* and *NPR*. The *New York Times* article entitled, "New Orleans' Gender-Bending Rap," discussed the prevalence of women at Big Freedia's concerts and their active participation in her performances.¹¹⁹ At her concerts, women and queer people jump to the center of the dance floor, claiming space, and even go up on stage with Big Freedia and dance for and with her. When I interviewed Big Freedia last year, I asked her about the importance of the active participation of the audience, and particularly, how she is able to achieve such a safe space for women and queer people to

¹¹⁶ Big Freedia, in discussion with the author, November 2012.

¹¹⁷ For more on alternate families and their significance to hip-hop, refer to the introduction and first chapter.

¹¹⁸ Jeffries, Michael P., *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 137.

¹¹⁹ Jonathan Dee, "New Orleans' Gender-Bending Rap," *New York Times*, July 22, 2010, accessed April 7, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/25/magazine/25bounce-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

twerk without fear of judgment, gazing, or unsolicited advances from men. She explained she wanted the audience “to know they can come on stage and touch me, you know, get down with me.”¹²⁰ The personal interaction Big Freedia is advocating is evident in all of her performances. Women and queer people in the audience join her on stage and twerk next to her. She even pulls people out of the crowd and onto the stage to dance with her while she raps. Big Freedia concerts are notable because they are queering the spaces in which they take place. Big Freedia performs everywhere, from sports bars to music festivals, and although it is common for people to dance during performances, Big Freedia challenges her audience to take a more active role and to go beyond the usual scripts of performances. Furthermore, Big Freedia creates and maintains a space in which women and queer people are at the center of the experience, rather than on the periphery. Instead, cisgender men are the ones who must remain on the periphery in order to maintain the safe environment for women and queer people to dance without unwanted attention. Big Freedia further queers the space by rejecting traditional scripts of performance and participation by de-centering herself. Although she remains in control of the performance and the dancing, she encourages the stage to become flooded with dancers to the point that she blends into the crowd on stage as well. Thus, Big Freedia rejects the artificial border created between artist and audience.

The interaction between Big Freedia and the women and queer people in her audience disrupt the hegemonic positionality of the gaze. Not only is Big Freedia being gazed upon, she invites audience members to touch her and to be gazed upon by the rest of the crowd while twerking, which is a sexually expressive style of dance that includes moves such as “pussy popping.” Twerking is defined as the controlled, yet seemingly

¹²⁰ Big Freedia, interview with author, November, 2012.

uncontrolled, movement of the waist, thighs, buttocks, and hips in various positions that require extreme muscle control and strength. Some of the most impressive twerking moves are ones in which the person twerking does a handstand while still moving hips, buttocks, and waist. Jonathan Dee, who wrote the *New York Times* article, was captivated by the phenomenon of women performing such sexual dancing without fear of or concern about the male gaze. For Big Freedia, twerking is a requirement for herself and for her audience, which is why she works hard to make it a safe space for the women and queer people dancing on the stage with her. Big Freedia challenges the power of the audience to gaze upon her, and challenges Coleman and Cobb's notion that there is no way for queer rappers to fit into the hegemonic positionality of the gaze. Instead, Big Freedia and Frank Ocean demonstrate how queer rappers are able to disrupt the dichotomous definition of gazing, and require audiences to redefine their positionality in the act of gazing. She maintains that she protects the people twerking with her on stage from any unsolicited attention.¹²¹ Frank Ocean refuses to label his sexuality and embodies much of the contradictions of hip-hop by participating in a group notorious for violent and misogynistic lyrics while at the same time himself creating music that celebrates queer desires. Thus, it is not about a queer rapper fitting into a dichotomous positionality of gazing, but rather, the potential of queer rappers to disrupt that positionality and challenge who traditionally holds the power to gaze. Big Freedia provides that challenge in her concerts because she, as a Black queer subject, controls the space in which she performs and challenges some of the viewers to participate, thus disrupting the dichotomous positionality of gazing, while challenging other viewers who are

¹²¹ Jonathan Dee, "New Orleans' Gender-Bending Rap," *New York Times*, July 22, 2010, accessed April 7, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/25/magazine/25bounce-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

traditionally in positions of gazing power to step back, which further disrupts the hegemonic structure of the gaze.

Part of Big Freedia's success as a rapper and performer is due, in part, because her music is ideal for twerking. It is difficult to define twerking because it is more than the complicated movements that make up the dance form. Twerking embodies hip-hop's potential to queer dominant discourses, and examining Big Freedia's music and the coinciding participatory twerking demonstrates how that is possible. Furthermore, twerking can be considered the physicality of the queer interventions of identity in hip-hop, particularly disidentification. In March of 2012, a woman who goes by "strugglingtobeheard" on tumblr.com, created and released a video of herself twerking in celebration of mothers everywhere. The video was met with disdain and ridicule when it was leaked to popular hip-hop website, "World Star Hip Hop," because many viewers were incredulous that twerking, a dance form the popular discourse has deemed to be simply "dirty dancing," could be empowering.¹²² Strugglingtobeheard and her supporters claim otherwise. Twerking is a liberating act for many women of color because it allows for unabashed sexual expression and confidence in a uniquely physicalized beauty that is not subject to the same kind of dominant colonization of the bodies of women of color. Strugglingtobeheard explains, "Twerk is the release of that feeling, the release of stress, of negative energy, to make you feel good. To me it's about celebrating my body and my mood and when I feel like twerking, I can with ease..."¹²³ She went on to explain the

¹²² Mikkipedia, "Black Women's Bodies, Ourselves (and a twerkin' for mothers video): An Interview with strugglingtobeheard," <http://mikkipedia.tumblr.com/post/23160833082/black-womens-bodies-ourselves-and-a-twerkin-for#> =

¹²³ Mikkipedia, "Black Women's Bodies, Ourselves (and a twerkin' for mothers video): An Interview with strugglingtobeheard," <http://mikkipedia.tumblr.com/post/23160833082/black-womens-bodies-ourselves-and-a-twerkin-for#> =

negative attention she and her video were receiving, “It was an attempt to shame someone they have read as a Black woman for not falling into the ‘respectable’ mold of womanhood.”¹²⁴ Strugglingtobeheard’s comments demonstrate twerking’s ability to be an embodied act of resistance to the hegemonic structuring of Black womanhood and sexuality. Twerking can be done in one’s living room by oneself, in a crowded club, in a homevideo distributed nationally, or at a concert, but no matter the space, twerking remains an act that is primarily about the enjoyment of the individual doing the twerking.

When Big Freedia discusses the importance of audience participation and her role in protecting the space in which women and queer people can interact with her, she is encouraging people who are hegemonically positioned as objects of sexualized gazing to physically reposition themselves as subjects creating and actively participating in sexual expression. As strugglingtobeheard explains, “[Twerking] really is the art of celebrating your ass and what you can do with it.” Considering how women of color, Black and Latina women in particular, have been socialized to be ashamed and otherwise hyperaware of their buttocks, it can be empowering to many women and queer people of color to physically celebrate a part of our bodies that has historically been degraded and fetishized. Big Freedia’s songs often focus on ass, but they are strikingly different from other commercially successful hip-hop songs on the same theme. One of Big Freedia’s biggest hit songs is “Ass Everywhere.” In the song, Big Freedia shouts out instructions, such as “bend over, like I told ya,” over a fast pulsating beat. While other songs, performed almost exclusively by heterosexual cis-men, include similar instructions, very few, if any, challenge the power structure presented in the songs in which women are

¹²⁴ Mikkipedia, “Black Women’s Bodies, Ourselves (and a twerkin’ for mothers video): An Interview with strugglingtobeheard,” <http://mikkipedia.tumblr.com/post/23160833082/black-womens-bodies-ourselves-and-a-twerkin-for#> =

supposed to dance for the enjoyment of male spectators.¹²⁵ “Ass Everywhere” and other Big Freedia songs are not challenges to hegemonic structures of gazing simply because Big Freedia herself is a queer, genderqueer person of color. Big Freedia’s songs are challenges because they inherently require and force physical participation that disrupts the dominant popular positionality of consuming hip-hop. Furthermore, the inherently participatory nature of Big Freedia’s music recalls the roots of hip-hop as a necessarily communal and participatory venture. Just as the emcees of the South Bronx block party days used to call the b-boys and b-girls and get them to start dancing, Big Freedia and her bounce music crew call on audience members to get up and dance.

Although Big Freedia has not achieved superstar-level success, she has undoubtedly gained significant national recognition. Robin Means Coleman and Jasmine Cobb insist that homo-thug rapper Caushun provides no way for mainstream audiences to see him and gaze upon him in a commercially successful context. Instead of challenging the necessity of an entrance into commercial success that is dependent on replicating dominant patterns of gazing and consumption, Coleman and Cobb rely on traditional constructions of hip-hop authenticity to support their claim that a homo-thug rapper like Caushun could never enter the popular imagination. Big Freedia’s success demonstrates that realness can grant legitimacy to queer interventions of hip-hop just as her own. In several interviews, Big Freedia has expressed disdain for the term “Sissy Bounce,” which outsiders have begun to apply to Big Freedia’s and other queer and trans* Bounce musicians’ music. She emphasizes in almost all of her interviews that people in New Orleans do not categorize Bounce music as “Sissy Bounce” or “Bounce,” everything is

¹²⁵ There are several examples of songs like these. Some recent songs that immediately come to mind are: “Ass” by Big Sean, “Mercy” by Kanye West, and others.

considered “Bounce” regardless of who produces it.¹²⁶ Big Freedia’s insistence on not separating Bounce music and Bounce musicians based on sexual orientation or gender identity demonstrates her refusal to give up certain authenticity claims. Frank Ocean’s refusal to label his sexual orientation suggests a similar impulse to live in the contradictions of authenticity discourses and hip-hop. Both Big Freedia and Frank Ocean challenge hip-hop consumers to reject binary notions of authenticity and of hip-hop consumption itself. Big Freedia insists on being referred to as a bounce musician and not a “sissy bounce” musician because she grew up in a community revolved around bounce music, in which the members of the community did not refer to it as “sissy bounce” despite the impulse in popular culture to categorize forms of cultural production. Instead, Big Freedia forces the audience to avoid categorizing her and instead to actively participate in her performance of identity and of music. Because commercially successful hip-hop authenticity is constructed along heterosexist and hypermasculine terms, as Michael Jeffries, S. Craig Watkins, Robin Means Coleman and Jasmine Cobb have all discussed, calling Big Freedia and her contemporaries “Sissy Bounce” musicians is a way to delegitimize or de-authenticate her music and herself. Big Freedia refuses such a distinction, and as a result, maintains her authenticity claims, which act as legitimizing forces for her challenges and interventions in dominant structures of gazing and consumption. Big Freedia and her music demonstrate how hip-hop is a space for queer interventions, and even provides a unique physicality of those interventions in twerking. Big Freedia uses dominant narratives of hip-hop authenticity constructed and continued by white, middle-class, male consumers to disrupt the hegemonic positionality of the gaze on which hip-hop consumption patterns rely.

¹²⁶ Big Freedia, interview with author, November, 2012.

Conclusion

“So if you ask me what I love about this culture, I would say everything and nothing/That it has killed as many as it has saved, that it has moved as many as it has paralyzed.”¹²⁷

Although hip-hop is a space in which queer identity interventions are possible, and constantly occurring, like all cultural production, hip-hop is contradictory. It is important to recognize that hip-hop is oppressive and empowering, and that there is just as much to be critical of in hip-hop as there is to celebrate. Understanding that hip-hop can be both oppressive and empowering entails an understanding of the lasting effects of white capitalist patriarchy throughout our popular cultures. bell hooks provides perhaps the best analysis of the criticisms of gangsta rap. She explains that while it is important to critique the violence, misogyny, and materialism of gangsta rap, “...this critique must always be contextualized or we risk making it appear that the behaviors this thinking supports and condones—rape, male violence against women, etc.—is a black male thing. And this is what is happening.”¹²⁸ The demonization of hip-hop and young black men is never going to be an effective criticism of the oppressive elements of the culture because it does not take into account the legacy of white capitalist patriarchy and its impact on the consumption patterns of hip-hop and throughout hip-hop culture in general. In this project, I set out to complicate such problematic notions of hip-hop, but instead of only exposing the legacies of white, capitalist, heterosexist, colonialist patriarchy, I set out to demonstrate how hip-hop is a space of empowerment in its own right.

¹²⁷ “Joshua Bennett-Hip Hop,” Youtube Video, 3:52, from a live performance by The Striver’s Row called “Viewer’s Choice,” posted by “The Striver’s Row,” November 21, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZu00zpcD4k>.

¹²⁸ bell hooks, “Misogyny, Gangsta Rap and The Piano,” *Race and Ethnicity*, published February 1994, <http://race.eserver.org/misogyny.html>.

Like all forms of cultural expression, hip-hop is a space for identity formation. Hip-Hop is an art form constructed by African-American, Caribbean, and Latin@ urban youth, and it can and does remain a space for the construction, formation, and expression of these identities, and other marginalized identities all over the world. In my thesis, I have highlighted how queerness intersects with identities marginalized on the basis of race, class, gender, and global location in hip-hop narratives. Hip-Hop not only has space for the intersections of these identities, but is also inherently queer itself because of the queer identity interventions in rap music. In my thesis, I point to four overarching queer identity interventions, three of which are taken from Iain Morland and Annabelle Willox's anthology, *Queer Theory: Readers in Cultural Criticism*, and the last is the theory of disidentification, created by José Esteban-Múñoz. The four queer identity interventions seen in rap music are: identity as speech act, identity as normative community commitments, identity as performance, and disidentification. The poetics of rap music and the space of rap as a place for the construction of oppositional narratives and marginalized subject formation make it a unique and powerful queer identity narrative.

As the three chapters of my thesis demonstrate, hip-hop's queer narrative is powerful in that it is fungible and highly contextual in meaning. The queerness of hip-hop's identity formations stretches across borders, and are demonstrated by hip-hop performers across location, gender, sexuality, and even hip-hop genre or style. Although I have argued that the four queer identity interventions listed above are at work in the music of Azealia Banks, Las Krudas, Frank Ocean, and Big Freedia, each of these artists creates a very distinct and unique hip-hop narrative. Furthermore, individuals who are

fans of hip-hop construct their own identities and narratives in relation to those presented by these queer artists. Hip-Hop continues to be a space for the construction of oppositional narratives using the four queer identity interventions despite the legacy of white, heterosexist, capitalist patriarchy that largely dictates the consumption patterns of mainstream commercially successful hip-hop. Furthermore, despite the significant differences between the four hip-hop performers I discuss in the three chapters of my thesis, all interact and construct identity using cultural expression within a queer of color framework. Such a framework challenges the notion that rappers are exclusively straight cis-men, as well as sheds light on the important contributions of queer communities of color to hip-hop culture.

There are several pertinent examples of the too often neglected contributions of Black and Latin@ queer people to hip-hop. For instance, much of the vocabulary that we associate with hip-hop vernacular and that often appears in rap and hip-hop songs has its origins in the Black and Latin@ queer communities of New York City, like the terms "shade," "fierce," and many others. Whereas academic discourse and knowledge production about queer theory and hip-hop have historically focused on white queer people and heterosexual and cis-gender people of color, respectively, I aim to create and support a narrative of hip-hop that acknowledges a queer of color analytical framework. Such a framework has always been a significant part of hip-hop because it speaks to marginalized peoples around the world, which necessitates intersectional identity frameworks.

Recently, more and more queer rappers have gained national attention, and there is a growing discussion in popular media outlets about the possible non-homophobia and

queer acceptance of hip-hop, some mainstream media have even gone as far to call hip-hop queer. The majority of mainstream media articles treat the queerness of hip-hop as a completely new phenomenon. An article in popular website, BuzzFeed, titled, “The Year Hip Hop Went Queer,” announced the rappers who spoke out in support of same sex marriage, and the rappers who are openly queer as evidence of hip-hop’s newly found queerness.¹²⁹ As I have demonstrated in my thesis, hip-hop is not queer simply because there are queer rappers and non-homophobic rappers and performers, nor is the queerness of hip-hop a recent development. “The Year Hip-Hop Went Queer” and other recent articles like “New Orleans’ Gender-Bending Rap,” that exclaim what they see as hip-hop’s newfound tolerance of queer people are problematic because they fall into the trap of critiquing hip-hop without contextualizing it, and without acknowledging the work of queer hip-hop performers over time. Hip-Hop has always been queer because it is a space for the formation of “identities-in-difference,” to use José Esteban-Múñoz’s term for a queer of color understanding of identity formation. Implicit in the shock and revelation in popular media articles like “The Year Hip Hop Went Queer,” is the assumption that hip-hop is inherently homophobic. Such thinking stems from racist assumptions that hip-hop is uniquely homophobic and oppressive instead of the reality, which is that the legacy of white, heterosexist, capitalist patriarchy is homophobic and hip-hop, like all aspects of our cultures interacts with that legacy.¹³⁰

Instead of defining hip-hop as either homophobic or queer, we must move towards an understanding of hip-hop as both, and realize how our own cultures work to

¹²⁹ Stacy Lambe, “The Year Hip Hop Went Queer,” BuzzFeed, December 13, 2012, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/stacylambe/the-year-hip-hop-went-queer>

¹³⁰ bell hooks, “Misogyny, Gangsta Rap and The Piano,” *Race and Ethnicity*, published February 1994, <http://race.eserver.org/misogyny.html>

oppress and empower us. The quote at the beginning of this conclusion is from a poem called “Hip Hop,” by Joshua Bennett, a spoken word artist. Bennett’s poem speaks to the complexities inherent in hip-hop as a reflection of the complexities inherent in developing a consciousness of our cultures and ourselves as subjects that are marginalized by institutions and dominant culture. For those of us whose cultures are often seen and constructed as deficient, we can be very protective of our cultures. Joshua Bennett’s poem demonstrates the tensions inherent in celebrating our cultures while at the same time critiquing the parts of our cultures that are oppressive. Our identities have tension built into them, and our relationships with our cultures reflect that tension. Hip-Hop is an effective space for identity formation and creation of oppositional narratives because it embodies that tension.

Each chapter of my thesis demonstrates the role of the tension between embracing and critiquing hip-hop, which helps highlight the queer identity interventions at work. Azealia Banks and Nicki Minaj each use sexual expressiveness and interact with hegemonic beauty standards in significantly different ways. The differences between Azealia Banks and Nicki Minaj highlight the conflicts within the queer narratives of hip-hop. Similarly, Las Krudas’ music provides a transnational perspective on queerness and hip-hop, and highlights the frictions in constructing a queer of color identity using hip-hop, which provides important tools for anti-imperialist work but is also itself a cultural product imported abroad through imperialist channels. Big Freedia provides insight into the tensions in the physicality of hip-hop identity expression. Twerking has contradictory meanings for people within and outside of hip-hop cultures, but Big Freedia’s music and

performances demonstrate how twerking is the physicality of deconstructing oppressive paradigms and creating new ones, despite and because of these strains.

Hip-Hop scholarship is an emerging field that takes into account the contradictions inherent in the cultural expression of identities-in-difference. However, up until recently, hip-hop scholarship was lacking in its discussion of queerness. Currently, there are many scholars who are doing important work on the queerness of hip-hop, such as Andreana Clay and Jessica Pabón. I hope that my thesis adds to the growing scholarship on the queerness of hip-hop and to the existing scholarship on the relationship between cultural expression and identity formation for marginalized subjects. Moving forward with this project, there are many more potential sites for further queer identity intervention in hip-hop. There are many exciting hip-hop performers that I have not covered in my thesis, whose work is fascinating and provide significant insight into the role of queer identity intervention in hip-hop identity formation, such as Mykki Blanco, Angel Haze, and more. Furthermore, my project could be extended to be more transnational in perspective. Examining the queer interventions of hip-hop in transnational perspectives would provide significant insight into the intersections of hip-hop as cultural expression and space for identity formation in the contexts of migration, imperialism, and globalization. Such an expansion of my project would be beneficial in queering the current transnational scholarship on these issues.

When discussing my project with a classmate who also identifies as a queer woman of color, she told me that she thought of rap music as a militant art form.¹³¹ For her, rap music is a space for the expression of ideas and forms of ourselves that are considered dangerous by virtue of the experiences of people of color to which they are

¹³¹ Dafina Bobo, interview with author, January, 2013.

being true. She explained that although she is only slowly starting to see her full self reflected in the genre, hip-hop has always been an important space for her to grapple with her culture and her identity. Her words remind me of the unique ability to negotiate the intersections of our identities and to navigate the parts of ourselves, our communities, and our cultures that embody both oppressor and oppressed. Hip-Hop is an art, a culture, a way of life, that is almost as complex and multilayered as we are.

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