No Way of Seeing: Mainstreaming and Selling the Gaze of Homo-Thug Hip-Hop

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No Way of Seeing: Mainstreaming and Selling the Gaze of Homo-Thug Hip-Hop

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This essay examines the attempt to market to a mainstream audience a gay, Black rapper—Caushun—who embodies competing claims of "thug" masculinity and "queen" femininity. We argue that Caushun might experience failure because his music, and more importantly his music videos, will offer his target audience "no way of seeing" authenticity in his intersecting identities. That is the viewing experience, theorized as the gaze (Mulvey, 1975), when applied to Caushun, demonstrates "gaze gone wrong." He offers himself up as a "homo-thug" in a homophobic genre, even as the thug identity in hip-hop is marked by its hyper-masculine, violent, and homophobic rhetoric. Caushun lays bare a host of social and marketing challenges that demand exploration.

In 2001, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn resident and amateur rapper Jason Herndon phoned in to New York City's WQHT HOT97 radio station in the hope of showcasing his rhyming talents for disc jockey Funk Master Flex (Flex) and his Open Mic Night listening audience. WQHT with its New York market generally, and Flex specifically, are influential music industry vehicles for the promotion of both up-and-coming and established rap, hip-hop, and rhythm and blues artists. Herndon called in using his stage name "Caushun" (pronounced "caution"), and presented himself to the disc jockey with a gangster/thug affect. However, despite Caushun's repeated pleas to freestyle—to accept the great challenge of performing an impromptu rap to a beat of the disc jockey's choosing, Flex summarily denied the rapper the opportunity to "flow" or rap because,

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as Flex dismissed, Caushun sounded like a "cupcake." Caushun's voice had been stereotyped as being too effeminate by Flex and, therefore, contrary to the requisite hyper-masculine rough-voiced tenor of gangster/thug rappers such as, for example, a DMX who has been known to bark in emulation of a fierce dog during his rap performances. In rejecting Caushun, who is gay, the disc jockey rendered homosexuality deviant while working to protect the coveted hyper-masculine image that embodies much of rap iconography. Flex's dismissal also reaffirmed his own brand of heterosexuality—Flex is known for his sexual double entendre slogan "doing it big-dog style."

Caushun, recognizing the import of the radio station as a gatekeeper to the rap industry while too ignoring Flex's homophobic slurs, called in to Hot97 the next day. This time he reached Angie Martinez, one of the U.S.'s most popular female disc jockeys and a rapper herself (notably breaking into the largely male-dominated music genre), and asked to freestyle during her timeslot—the Angie Martinez Show. Not only did Martinez grant him airtime during her program, but she also affirmed Caushun's sexual orientation to her listeners and encouraged him to be diligent in his pursuit of a recording contract for his hard-core, gay thug rapper persona.

The introduction of Caushun to mainstream rap audiences, and his quest for a recording contract with a major record label, lays bare a host of social and marketing challenges that demand exploration. Caushun offers himself up as a "homo-thug" to an often virulently homophobic music genre. His presentation as a homo-thug is complicated and even confounded by Caushun's own admission that his demeanor is also "flaming" and "queenly." For Weeks (1985, p. 191), Caushun is enacting "semiotic guerrilla warfare" as he works to confound definitions of masculinity. For Caushun, however, these multiple sexual identity performances fail to be contradictory because, as he clarifies plainly, "if you're a man and you're influenced by hip-hop and you're intimate with another man, you're a homo-thug" (Spencer, 2001, ¶ 4).

This essay, then, examines the attempt to market a gay Black man who embodies competing claims of thug masculinity and queen femininity to a mass audience that may not only reject the value of his art, but also the authenticity of his identities. We argue that Caushun has to-date not experienced the mainstream success he hopes for and may ultimately experience failure because his music, and more importantly his music videos, will offer mainstream audiences *no way of seeing*. As John Berger (1972, p. 45) notes rather directly in his book *Ways of Seeing*, as a matter of course, in our social and mediated worlds, "men look at women." Therefore, as a gay Black man, gazing upon straight men (the typical consumers of gangsta rap), and asking for the return of their gaze, Caushun provides them no way of seeing, at least not yet. This essay draws upon theorizations of the male (homoerotic/homosexual) gaze as it operates within a social context that is dominated by heterosexist, patriarchal ideology, and which operates

within a media context (gangsta rap) that propagates such dominant ideologies while intersecting with a gender coded racial performance that confines the agency of those who look and those who are looking back. Heru (2003, p. 112) explains, "we can understand gazing or looking as a particular activity that is privileged by the dominant group in society and to be uncomfortable and objectifying for those upon whom the gaze" is applied. It is through the gaze that power is exerted (Foucault, 1988); more, that power becomes a controlling look that works not only to objectify but also, at times, to oppress. Some feminist media critics (e.g., Mulvey, 1975) have advanced that in these social and media contexts, it is women who most often are the objects of the gaze while it is heterosexual men who maintain a powerful hold on their role as subject and gazer. As a result it is subordinated women, and by extension that which is feminine or feminized, that are viewed as available for the visual consumption of their bodies, if and/or when men so choose to consume them. It is this power structure that too works to deny mutual looking (Rutter, 1984) or mutual gazing (Argyle, 1975) where understanding is gained between looker and the looked upon in absence of unequal levels of power and control.

While attention to diverse races and ethnicities and the gay gaze has been slim (notable exceptions include Altman's 1997 examination of an Asian gay gaze and Radel's 2001 examination of Eastern European gay gaze), media critics have advanced that anything that falls short of normalized forms of Black masculinity is viewed as threatening and ultimately rejected. Harper (1995) offers,

> while the black gay man seems recently to have become a key figure for crises that, at present, threaten the very foundations of institutionalized culture in the United States, this should not be taken to mean that his representations have not functioned to buttress (often specifically by *challenging*) normative conceptions of race, sexuality, and gender identity since at least the Black Power era of the late 1960s. (p. 390)

Wlodarz (2004), drawing upon his examination of 1970s blaxploitation era films, extends that masculinity and heterosexuality are intrinsically connected to representations of Blackness, especially the depiction of heroic, authentic Blackness and that the representation of gayness takes on a threatening power. The threat may be realized when homosexual imagery is considered as housing the potential to privilege mutual looking as the male gazer and the male object can choose to swap looking positions or hold both simultaneously. Such imagery, such as a Caushun video production, also presents the male body as available to a male viewing subject who is then introduced with the choice of not only to look, but to dominate. Some queer theorists (Wood, 2004) have observed that *gay* men, particularly within a heterosexist climate, when denied the position of powerful subject/gazer will fight for the controlling power of the male gaze, thereby

appropriating but also usurping the normative cultural hegemony on how the male gaze functions.

Overall and at present, within the heterosocial, the gay gaze and that which comes with it, the challenge to accept the gay gaze and act upon it, is seen as unappealingly disruptive to the dominant male heterosexist ideology. To be clear, this is *not* a piece that stands in opposition to the multiple identities that Caushun embraces. Rather, ours is a critique of heterosexist gazes and the challenges they pose to the marketing of diverse Black identities. We posit that Caushun's gay gaze will prove difficult to sell to consumers because mainstream audiences do not know how to consume his body, which is at once hyper-masculinized through his thug identity and hyper-feminized through his queen identity. We ask, then, how does Caushun portray gaze gone wrong by gazing at the wrong object for heterosexist, commercial, mainstream media? How can examining his gaze cast a new light on performances of masculinity, particularly Black masculinity? Does Caushun perform a gay identity, a thug identity, a gay-thug identity simultaneously or perhaps in a contradictory manner, or neither of these identities at all?

CAUSHUN THE GAY RAPPER

Caushun, 26, has been intermingling with celebrities for several years in his principal career as hairdresser to some of New York City's most well known glitterati at the Plaza Hotel Salon. His clientele includes, but is not limited to, notables such as actress Sarah Michelle Gellar, starlet Jennifer Lopez, and, most importantly, Kimora Lee Simmons, a record executive. An experienced runway model, and former wife of Russell Simmons, founder of DefJam records (a label responsible for rap artists such as RunDMC and Redman), Lee Simmons provided Caushun with a coveted key into mainstream hip-hop. Impressed by his breakthrough appearance on HOT97, Lee Simmons signed Caushun to her record label, Baby Phat Records. As Caushun explains, "I linked up with Kimora Lee. I was like 'Honey I'm rhyming, and this is what's happening,' and I always got her support" (Spencer, 2001, ¶ 5). Although signed to a record label, Caushun, a Black, gay, male, thug rapper, only stands at the threshold of mainstream hip-hop. He has not fully arrived because after more than four years of waiting he has yet to have his CD *Proceed with Caushun* released commercially. Sans the ghetto class positioning, the rags-to-riches biography, or the life of crime and violence that purportedly is inescapable due to dismal socioeconomic factors for many rappers, such as Biggie Smalls for example, Caushun enters the rap game flanked by the rich and the beautiful; notably, almost all women, such as Martinez and Lee Simmons, as well as his industry friends like Mary J. Blige and Foxy Brown.

Caushun is being marketed as "Caushun the Gay Rapper," the first openly gay rapper to make it into the mainstream. He tells *Newsweek Online*, "I'm pitching

myself to the open-minded heterosexual hip-hop community. I'm still marketing myself to women cause women, they don't care. And then there's a large gay community. I'm pitching myself to the BETs, the MTVs, which is mainstream pop culture. I want everybody to get a piece of the pie" (Spencer, 2001, ¶ 13). Nevertheless, Caushun is keenly aware of the homophobia that circulates around him. In his song "Misconception," he reassures that one cannot catch homosexuality from being around him: "just like being around you won't make me straight." Additionally, Caushun's web-documentary (See: www.thegayrapper.com) includes testimony from one of his straight male friends—"he don't be doing that around us"—who functions to restore confidence that Caushun knows how to stay in his sexual place around heterosexists. Caushun, then, also seeks to enter into a social discourse marked by religious, political, and moral rhetorics that mark his sexual identity as loathsome. Hopkins (1998) theorizes that such homophobia is explained away through political responses that assert gays pose a significant political threat because they seek to do away with heterosexual privilege. More, ours is a society that makes it difficult for, in particular, men to disrupt normative definitions of (hyper)masculinity and (hyper)femininity. Hopkins explains:

> When the little boy plays with toy soldiers and pretends to slaughter communists or Indians, his parents smile, encourage him, and even play with him sometimes. If he plays house with his little sister, he is always the daddy and she is always the mommy . . . a game in which the roles are correctly modeled and are thus emotionally rewarding—"I'm just like my daddy." However, the emotional (and sometimes) corporal punishments function the same way. If the boy is caught playing with dolls, or pretending to be the mommy, he may be told he is doing something wrong, or be punished . . . Homophobic tendencies will be carried along with all the other traits of conservative masculinity. (p. 176)

In short, such homophobic structures work to keep many heterosexuals confined to a set of belief systems and behaviors in which there are, as yet, few rewards for breaking out of. The potential to be accused of being a sexual traitor, and the threat and ostracism that such accusations bring, is particularly powerful.

Caushun is not the first gay man to seek success within hip-hop. Outside of the confines of the mainstream exist a vast and musically diverse community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) rappers including Rainbowflava, Morplay, and Deep Dickollective—none of whom are promoted in mainstream hip-hop media outlets. Notably, such performers have found the Internet the most effective place in which to build their significant fan-base and market their music. For example, Deep Dickollective, a popular touring group, has had three CDs released in as many years, while Caushun still waits to have his first see distribution. What Caushun awaits, and is demanding, is mainstream access

and, ultimately, mainstream acceptance. To-date, he has been featured in periodicals such as *Newsweek*, *Vibe*, *Black Beat*, *Out*, and *Advocate*, on ABC, E!, and MTV television, and on websites and blogs about rap music and/or homosexuality. His presence is often used to signify issues such as rap's well-known homophobia, as well as to question what effect homosexuality in hip-hop will have upon its contingent of hyper-masculine Black men. Each of these media outlets reminds its audiences that Caushun is taking on a daunting foe in hip-hop; for example, as Andre Benjamin a.k.a. Andre 3000 of the Grammy award-winning duo Outkast proclaimed, "one of the worst rumors I heard about myself was that I was homosexual. Especially, in the hip-hop world, that ain't a cool rumor to hear" (Collins, 2004, ¶ 1). Even with other crucial media appearances under his belt, such as the Star and Bucwild Morning Show,[1] then on HOT97, and in the "Star and Bucwild Gong Show" at the famous Caroline's in New York, Caushun is largely treated by mainstream media as a novelty. Mainstream media favor his publicity photos featuring his inviting come-hither gaze which turns (male) viewers into objects, over his thug poses to evidence that *they* will soon be coming, even as neither commercial radio nor music video channels offer Caushun's music. For example, *Source*, a mainstream hip-hop magazine known for featuring the most hyper-masculine of rappers, to include some that cannot be played on radio or music video channels during the day due to FCC regulations, asked Caushun, "Will the emergence of the gay rapper threaten hip-hop's masculine image" (Wasfie, 2001, p. 58)? In this context, the question was not one of whether Caushun could loosen hip-hop's masculinist, heterosexist grip, rather the question was one of: what are we, the heterosexual mainstream, going to do about this intersectionality?

AUTHENTICITY: TRUE NIGGAZ AIN'T GAY

The *mainstreaming* of Caushun—music video, CD packaging, promotional photos—necessitates a lyrical (rap) and imagistic marketing of co-mingling, narrowly defined tropes within hip-hop as they pertain to: (1) Blackness in the popular, (2) masculinity as it intersects with thug identity in the popular, and (3) masculinity as it intersects with gay identity in the popular. The convergence of these three systems of cultural identity may be, as argued here, one of the more difficult sells within mainstream popular culture. Quite simply, the mainstream arena remains an impoverished site for cultural exemplars of the racial, gendered,

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[1]The "Star and Bucwild Morning Show" is a youth-centered morning radio show that airs live from 105.1FM in New York, and is syndicated in Hartford, Connecticut, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Miami, Florida, Richmond, Virginia, and multiple cities in Georgia.

and sexual diversity that Caushun represents. Dow (2001), in critiquing the main-stream coming-out discourse of Ellen DeGeneres and her celluloid alter ego Ellen Morgan, offers that confessing one's sexuality unburdens the confessor by promising liberation (see also Foucault, 1978). DeGeneres's very public outing of herself may be viewed as a "recovery of authenticity" (p. 126), as the *true* self is openly embraced. Caushun has frequently proclaimed that in being open about his gay identity, he is most in accord with the practice of "keepin' it real," that is, staying true to one's core identity. "'I'm definitely keeping it real because I'm not straight, so I can't keep it real by trying to act straight and play it straight'" (Spencer, 2001, ¶ 7). However, LaFountain (1989) reminds, "truth does not reside in the confessor but rather . . . only reaches completion in the one who assimilates and records it . . . it aligns the interpreter with knowledge and truth, and with power" (p. 132).

Within hip-hop, keepin' it real authenticity is more far reaching than pro-claiming a core identity. It becomes a yardstick that seeks to measure one's prox-imity to the socioeconomic and racial conditions that define Blackness in America. Keepin' it real authenticity claims, though fraught with overly reduc-tive, essentializing, and even short-sighted definitions of what *the* legitimate Black American experience is, have focused on proximity to ghetto culture, rejection of dominant culture, and historical and cultural experiences that emerge uniquely from within Blackness. Within hip-hop, the authentic is also male and masculine, demonstrated by rap texts, industry icons, and imagery that are all symbolically and physically, heterosexual/ist, male and hyper-masculine (think, Death Row Records and Suge Knight). Hence, as a gay rapper, Caushun's ideal of authenticity upends unscrutinized notions of heterosexuality and Black male performances of masculinity. Though Caushun (n.d.) is true to his lyrics, "come up out that closet, let the truth set you free," by being honest about his own sexu-ality, authenticity will never be solely his to define. Rather, it will be read, as with any text, polysemically. Despite his own encoding, Caushun will be decoded in ways that may be wholly distinct from his intentions. Therefore, keepin' it real about his sexuality does not redeem Caushun for hip-hop consum-ers, it merely offers another aspect of his being to be judged before he is accepted in the genre.

In his article "Authenticity within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation," Kembrew McLeod (1999) calls upon rappers themselves, through interviews, to aid him in mapping the range of meanings associated with authenticity. McLeod notes six general "real versus selling out" authenticity dichotomies that circulate with hip-hop culture. They include:

1. staying true to yourself vs. following mass trends
2. Black vs. White
3. underground vs. commercial

4. hard vs. soft (a gender/sex attribute, with "hard" being masculine)
5. the street vs. the suburbs
6. old school vs. mainstream

These dimensions are discursively offered as *real* facets of the social reality of Blackness. However, within this context, Caushun's authenticity claims within hip-hop falter. For example, while staying true to himself by proclaiming his sexual identity, he encounters authenticity slippage by following the mass trend of going commercial *and* mainstream rather than at least beginning underground, such as MC Hammer and 50-Cent did. Moreover, he opts to go mainstream by sampling and remaking more recent hits such as "In Da' Club," a 2003 50-Cent hit, rather than invoking the "old school" as does, for example, Snoop or the late Tupac with their sampling of soul classics from the group(s) Parliament Funkadelic and singer George Clinton.

Next, while Caushun's relationship to African Americans as a collective is not called into question, his proximity to Whiteness is by, first, his decision to go commercial and mainstream, thereby selling-out. Second, there is Caushun's gay identity which, Wlodarz (2004, p. 12) reminds, conflicts with the infamous statement of author Le Roi Jones (a.k.a., Amiri Baraka) that "most White men are trained to be fags." More, according to Wlodarz it is Whiteness that is often purposefully employed as gayness in media texts as a tool to further strengthen Black heterosexual masculinity. Third and finally, given his occupation as hairdresser in-service to non-Blacks, Caushun is moved even farther away from a cultural investment in Blackness that is so prized within hip-hop.

Finally, there is Caushun's gendered performance and sexuality, or hard versus soft concerns. Ice Cube's (1991) infamous quote, "true niggaz ain't gay" best intimates the rationale for Caushun's possible mainstream failure. On this point, McLeod elaborates, "to claim one is a real man, one is defining himself not just in terms of gender, but also sexuality, that is, not being a 'pussy' or a 'faggot'" (p. 142). Hence, masculinity cannot be associated with femininity in any way. This is particularly problematic for Caushun in his feminized or "soft" trade as hairdresser, as opposed to a barber. In gangsta/thug hip-hop, "hard" occupations are drug dealer or pimp. Homosexuality, which has been feminized in a variety of dominant, heterosexist spaces, cannot in any way be associated with hip-hop's brand of heterosexuality. For example, LL Cool J, who introduced the love song to rap with "slow jam" raps such as, "I Need Love," has been accused of being soft, and even gay, because he raps about romantic love with women. By contrast, 50-Cent (2001) boasts his hardness in his song "In Da Club," with "I'm into having sex, I'm not into making love." This, then, can be read as: respectful intimacy, even with the requisite member of the opposite sex, is not manly enough. Real and hard men use women as sexual conquests. Hence, this is the manner in which 50-Cent's, and those like him, hetero/hyper-masculine identity is reaffirmed.

Likewise, 50-Cent couples his hetero/masculine assertion with thug revelations about hailing from the streets, "holla if you in NY, they'll tell you I'm loco," engaging in illegal activity, "I got that ex if you into taking drugs;" and reviling in gun play, "I've been hit with a few shells but I don't walk with a limp." Caushun, however, cannot lay claim to any of these tropes of Black masculinity within hip-hop. If LL Cool J, with his love for women is seen as soft, while 50-Cent is the measure for hardness, there is no room on the hip-hop barometer for Caushun, the gay rapper.

HOMO-THUG PERFORMANCE

At its core, lyrically, thug-themed rap is marked by its braggadocio around violence. For example, Jay-Z (2003) boasts, "They tried to play the boy like he's saccharine, but ain't nothin' sweet 'bout how I hold my gun, I got 99 problems, being a bitch ain't one!" As Kelley (1994) reminds, however, much of what is "spit" by rappers is metaphorical. He writes, ". . . to challenge competitors . . . the mic becomes a Tech 9 or AK 47, imagined drive-bys occur from the stage, flowing lyrics become hollow-point shells" (pp. 189–190). Thus, hope for Caushun-as-thug requires his audience to buy (literally and figuratively) into the thug imaginary. Such hyperbole is, as Kelley continues, at times ridiculous, "growing out of a much older set of cultural practices, these masculinist narratives are essentially verbal duels over who is the 'baddest motherfucker around.' They are not meant as literal descriptions of violence and aggression" (p. 190). However, recent thugger-than-thou discourse has moved rappers like Ja Rule to claim they are truly keepin' it real based on the number of bullets that have pierced their bodies and the number of times the have had to fire their own Techs or AKs.

More daunting, a hurdle for Caushun is the lasting confines of the gendered, hyper-masculine nature of violence that defines thug rap, to include the misogyny directed toward women, a violence, according to Rose (1991) that is prompted by men's masculine angst: ". . . the fulfillment of male heterosexual desire is significantly checked by women's capacity for sexual rejection . . ."(p. 115). Evidence of masculinity in either incarnation of violence—street or against women—are non-existent in the true-life story of Jason Herndon and rendered unbelievable in Caushun.

Caushun's road to authenticity becomes rocky because of the gay identity performed by his sexed body. "It should come as no surprise," writes Burstyn (1999), "the dominant Black ideal is physically tough, socially stoic, and personally cool and detached" (p. 203). Such an ideal is displayed bodily through performances such as the cool pose. Robin D. G. Kelley (1994) in his chapter, "Looking for the Real Nigga," summarizes that the cool pose is comprised of physical posturing, impression management, and a talk and walk (e.g., crip

walking[2]) that communicates Black pride and strength. It is a performance that is socially constructed as off limits to women, gay men, and those outside of ghetto-economics. Caushun, however, strikes a different pose, one that is in direct conflict with the thug image that he seeks to align himself with. He admits that when one sees his walk, hears his talk, and views his performance, there is no question that he is gay because of his simultaneous public presentation of a queen. Russo (1981) in critiquing mainstream film offers that queens or "sissies," "serve as yardsticks for the masculinity of the men around them" (p. 59). There is no escaping Caushun's sexuality.

There also can be no separating the man from his lyrics, which often refer to sexed male bodies: "spitting flames like your sick dick after intercourse" (Caushun, n.d.). Caushun, by demanding the consumption of himself as both thug and queen, challenges heterosexism's definitions, uniquely queering them. A Black, gay, thug image coupled with lyrics that explicitly, literally and figuratively, celebrate homosexual sex (though not necessarily love, because thugs don't really love), disrupt what mainstream popular culture has taught mainstream audiences of the popular about the role and function of homosexuality. According to Dow (2001), homosexual characterizations are used to assign supreme deficiency to already problematic individuals. For example, Erni (1998) observes that Michael Jackson, already queer due to his sensitive public affect, non-traditional sexual encounters with women that bear his children, sexual ambiguity, and vitiligo marked penis, is further queered, as his crotch-grabbing dance moves and pedophilia charges are conflated with homosexuality. On other occasions, according to Dow (2001), homosexual characterizations are one time appearances and/or incidental characters whose homosexuality problem needs to be solved by heterosexuals, whose problem-solving ability works to further advance heterosexist normativeness. Caushun's iconography works to disturb notions of supreme deficiency, one-timeness, and a heterosexist center while demanding a paradigm of acceptance. More, he is at once imagistically active in looking at his audience and therefore masculine, as well as permissive in accepting viewers to look upon him and to be the object of their looking, hence simultaneously feminine (see: Dyer, 1992). However, he does not equip the mainstream audiences with the ideological methods to understand that they need not fall in line with dichotomous choices of viewing engagement.

Merging Black and gay identities into one conversation proves to be difficult even for scholars as evidenced by the wealth of literature that bifurcate gay Black men into either Black or gay discussions (a notable exception is the work of

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[2]Crip Walking is a popular dance in hip-hop culture often done to rap music. It has had a controversial reception because its name and supposed origins have to do with Crips gang members, who "crip walk" in order to identify themselves with the community.

Dwight McBride, 1999, 2005a, 2005b). Absent from the scholarly literature, it comes as no surprise that Black homosexuality is further exponentially marginalized by rap music and in hip-hop culture. "A black gay person who is a sexual conundrum to society is already, long before the question of sexuality comes into it, menaced and marked because he's black or she's black. The sexual question comes after the question of color; it's simply one more aspect of the danger in which all black people live," argues James Baldwin (Goldstein, 1984, p. 14). The absence of openly gay Black men within hip-hop culture, within much of Black scholarship, and within the popular, signals a continued inability to legitimize and/or conceptualize this way of being.

Nevertheless, valuable lessons are to be gleaned from such literatures that focus on marketing gay identities. Hip-hop, in particular, has become wildly popular with situation comedy creators (e.g., *Fresh Prince of Bel Air, Living Single, the Method Man and Red Man Show*) and with advertisers. Forman (2002) observes that since the end of the 1990s, rap has become a staple for advertisers: ". . . hip-hop's stylistic codes offered a stock set of images that were incorporated into the marketing of name-brand soft drinks, snack foods, clothing, footwear, children's toys (including Mattel's Barbie doll) and such products as Campbell's soup, McDonald's Chicken McNuggets, and Pillsbury baked goods . . ." (p. 214). Like gayness in the mainstream, hip-hop is similarly rendered neutral and harmless to facilitate crossover appeal. However, the specificity of Black, gay, thug, *and* queen houses a complexity that mainstream commercialism has not (yet) figured out how to make palatable and marketable.

THE MAINSTREAM GAZE: NO WAY OF SEEING

Images of bisexual women and lesbians, particularly "lipstick lesbians" have long been salable to heterosexual men, who are encouraged to see erotic fantasies of lesbian sex, either as voyeurs, or as the intended audience of such sex performances (Clark, 1993, Haineault and Roy, 1993, Sender 1999). The truly triumphant man may even become a participant in the lesbian encounter, with the ménage a' trois being the ultimate male conquest. Men are positioned to reject any form of being looked upon, except that from women. Even then, the looking of women must be viewed as non-threatening in an effort to construct the masculine, not as equal and certainly not subordinate (hence, feminized), but as more powerful. Dyer (1982) points out that to accomplish this powerful positioning of men: (1) heterosexual women are *privileged* [italics added] to gaze upon men, and (2) men hold the assertive gaze and similarly assertive body, which are never weak or passive. And yet, Caushun challenges both rules. In some promotional photos displayed on his website and those used in magazines, Caushun co-opts a come-hither, coquettish gaze to rival Marlena Dietrich or Julie Newmar. More,

Caushun's thinner body, absent a hyper-masculine aesthetic, is often covered with layers of loose-fitting clothing, such as hooded sweatshirts and baggy jeans. Such dress is in stark contrast to contemporary, mainstreamed thug rappers such as Lloyd Banks, Ja Rule, and Fabolous that assert their hyper-masculinity through ample displays of bare chests, chiseled abs, and bulging biceps, all accompanied by deep, rough voices. This masking of Caushun's thinner body is also the only way to imbue his image with the mark of hip-hop culture. Caushun is also denied the staple of hyper-masculinity in hip-hop: the scantily clad, window-dressing female video dancers (colloquially known as "video hos") whose presence promises endless sexual encounters and alludes to male virility.

By embracing a queen identity within his gayness, Caushun alienates the one semi-acceptable performance of Black gayness, the "down low brotha"[3] who lives his multiple sexualities in secrecy. Thus, the bit of status he might have been afforded as either a down low/passing-for-straight gay man, or even an openly gay, but stereotypically masculine man, is further denied because he is publicly effeminate. Sender's (1999) reception study into readings of advertisements that may have a gay subtext is a solemn reminder of the risk that Caushun is taking by moving not just his gay identity, but also a queen identity into the mainstream. In Sender's study, the perceived effeminacy of a male model in a Versace advertisement prompted one respondent, a straight male named Steve, to confide what his and his friend Richard's encounter with a gay man would be like: "This guy's a wanker, that's all I have to say—if Richard and I walked into that room . . . [Richard] would probably suggest kicking the shit out of that guy, just jump[ing] him" (p. 182). Steve's remarks, according to Sender, are met with laughter by Richard who is present for Steve's meaning-making moment.

Mediating Caushun through music videos becomes especially difficult because the hip-hop genre does not allow for the (visual) consumption of homosexuality. Music videos are rife with sexual innuendo and heterosexual-aimed hyper-sexualized relationships. Caushun's music videos would demand a radical abandonment of hegemonic gender roles. Hence, not only would viewers be called upon to either identify with or reject Caushun, more importantly, they would be called upon to consider sexual politics in a manner the mainstream has not required in the past. Since the gay rapper is not objectionable on other grounds, like the "down low brotha" who is an immoral health risk as a result of his secrecy, viewers' like or dislike of Caushun must be entirely predicated on his displayed sexual identity; that is, if he secures the opportunity to display it at all. Caushun's access to media may be jeopardized by, first, what may be perceived

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[3]"Down Low Brotha" is a contemporary phenomena referring to African American men who openly live heterosexual lifestyles, but secretly engage in homosexual practices with other men. The concept was popularized by J. L. King's (2004) *On the down low: A journey into the lives of "straight" black men who sleep with men.*

as him performing inappropriate "social codes of looking" (Chandler, 2003) or, second, by racist and classist marketing trends. Denzin's (1995) research into the cultural variability of gendered ethnic gazing in media, such as length of time and proximity of acceptable looking, reveals that African Americans are restricted from looking across colorlines, are placed in secondary positions of being looked up, and may deem too much gazing upon them as controlling or threatening (See also: Argyle and Cook, 1976). Under these circumstances, Caushun may be the recipient-turned-victim of a hate stare (Goffman, 1963)—a violent looking that works to intimidate and ultimately halt any further exchange of gazes. Additionally, as Gluckman and Reed (1997, p. 7) in their book *Homoeconomics* observe, "today, the sword of the market is slicing off every segment of the gay community that is not upper-middle class, (mostly) white, and (mostly) male."

While the manner and intensity of engagement varies based on the medium, for example flipping through a magazine versus television viewing at home with a remote control and other distractions versus more engaged viewing in a darkened movie theatre, 21st century media forms evidence a blurring of technologies (e.g., TV shows on cellular phones) and forms (e.g., music videos as feature length films) that makes the power of the gaze less medium specific. Neale (1992, p. 281, as cited by Chandler, 2003) reminds that in a heterosexist, patriarchal society "the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated, its erotic component repressed." Commercial media, to date, has offered few outlets for the erotic male body (one exception being erotica and pornography) because "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 12). Quite simply, gazing is erotic fantasy for the gazer. For viewers of Caushun's imagery where sex and sexualized performance are overtly present, the textual frame may seem to be one of pornography, specifically gay pornography, which as Dyer (1985) argues build upon the desire of both performer and gazer to ejaculate. For the untrained viewer, whose only benchmark may be the erotic fetishistic portrayal of Black men in White dominated gay pornography (Radel, 2001), the gay man gazing upon other (hetero)men ultimately constitutes an act of sexual violence. Thus to gaze at a man and wholly objectify him through the gay gaze, creates an impossible situation, particularly in hip-hop culture. Rap videos do not allow for the wholesale destruction of a male body, *ever*.

The viewer of a Caushun music video would gaze through his eyes and take on the persona of a gay man (the eye/I), seeking pleasure through the objectification of a male body. Mulvey (1989) asserts that the objectification of the male body produces in heterosexual men a castration anxiety where the controlling gaze is seen as voyeuristic and ultimately sadistic. Van Zoonen (1994) extends the notion that castration is inherent in heterosexist patriarchal culture as it strengthens the man in control of the gaze, and makes others', usually female's, lack of a penis key to the consumption of the body. Simply, women as lookers

are not threatening because they lack physiological prowess. Women may ravage each other for the pleasure of men, or they may invite men to consume female bodies, but they never defy the traditional interpretation of sexual difference. From the vantage points of Mulvey and Van Zoonen, the two penises present in the image and in the male viewer of a Caushun music video would render one penis irrelevant for the sake of consumption. Caushun is going to be unpleasurable to some straight men because he refuses to avert his gaze (Dyer, 1982) thereby looking away or avoiding looking directly at viewers. Therefore, consuming his gaze requires that one man be castrated, and that cannot be Caushun because he is at the center of the looking moment. The male gaze can only castrate Caushun if he organizes it himself, thereby rendering the viewer powerless— or he can enlist the viewer in the castration of another male body.

Not only might such a project border on the grotesque for some hetero-hip-hop consumers, it is also unintelligible because the patriarchal confines of media do not school the audience on men gazing at men. There are few instances in mainstream media in which the viewer watches two Others physically engage each other without the encounter being highly problematic. Whether it is Black gay sex depicted violently in the confines of prison on HBO's *OZ*, or Julien, whose turbulent, closeted gay relationship ends with him marrying a fundamentalist Christian woman on F/X's *The Shield*, the coupling of similar bodies must be overtly pathological so as to underscore how wrong the engagement is. Through embracing thugness, Caushun heightens this effect by asking for his audience to participate in the exchange of gazes, looking at two similar beings with one to be consumed in his entirety. In such instances, it is not simply the notion of homo-erotica as a concept that problematizes Caushun. The homoerotic may always be implicated in the performance of any thug identity, even as the lack of homo-erotic potential is implicated through the thug's requisite hate for homosexuality. For Caushun, it is that he demands the entire consumption of the other through gazing by hyper-masculine norms, which requires that there be a victor, which adds a layer of difficulty to his project. The challenge here is that hyper-masculinity is born out of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1987) 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 destructive.

CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES TO SEEING

The mainstream marketing of Caushun attempts to emerge in the midst of, and disrupt, dominant notions of gendered (masculinist), sexuality (heterosexist), and Black authenticity ("hard" and underground) definitions. Possibly one of the

greatest marketing challenges to dispelling such normative notions is, as Sender (1999) argues, that ". . . notions of appropriate gender and sexual behavior then become tied to 'correct' purchasing decisions" (p. 172). Thus, the perception that consuming Caushun's music is simultaneously a validation of his identities may imply, particularly to heterosexist (Black) men, a secretive "down low brotha" status that introduces a hurdle for such men to go into stores or on-line to purchase Caushun's CD.

Caushun, then, has ahead of him the uncharted territory of carving out a marketing niche that will embrace a range of sexual and racial identities in a social climate that in some dominant sectors is hostile to the very idea. Currently, the common marketing trend is to court LGBT persons through subtle gay codes, so as not to offend or alienate mainstream segments of consumers (Sender, 1999; Clark, 1993). Within the context of more overt heterosexist texts, Bronski (1984, as cited in Sender, 1999, p. 174) explains, ". . . blatant homosexuality does not have mass appeal, but the exotic implications of hidden homosexuality have huge sales potential." Indeed, while semblances of direct address gazes have recently emerged in male advertising, subtle, homoeroticism and texts that hail women as well as men in the main is far more salable and acceptable, as evidenced by the success of the ads of Calvin Klein. However, Caushun rejects covert tactics, opting to keep it real by being honest about his sexuality and openly displaying it through queen performance. Caushun's celebration of his identities, therefore, takes sexual identity passing and androgyny out of marketers' hands.

Because Caushun will not be presented covertly, and, ultimately, safely to mainstream audiences, he will continue to grapple with the task of assimilating into the mainstream market which demands that gay popular icons be palatable for heterosexuals (that has included pairing gay men with straight women to form a sort of heterosexual couple, like on *Will and Grace*). Additionally, Caushun continues to run afoul of Black authenticity claims regarding the thug, because he cannot rise to the definition of the authentic thug persona. His queen performance nullifies his thug lyrics. More, as the book *The Greatest Taboo* (Constantine-Simms, 2001) reminds, in the Black community, real Black men are still not yet thought to be gay. Overall, Caushun faces a bind because those ideals that will allow him to break through these masculinity boundaries require forms of sexual passing that render him false and inauthentic.

There are templates available (for better or worse) to facilitate the mainstreaming of Caushun. First, in order for Caushun to realize such a progressive positioning for himself and for society, he must orient his audience on how to consume, or look upon, his gay identity. This begins with extending the notion that homosexuality is a positive difference. This tactic has been attempted by network television, for example, through *Ellen*, *Will and Grace*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* which describes homosexuality as fun, colorful, and asexual, and thereby without threat to heterosexuality. In the mainstream, more "daring,"

purportedly liberal messages regarding homosexuality are offered by putting the children of hyper-masculine men in the care of homosexuals (which works to further effeminize gay men, and allows straight persons to be self-congratulatory for being so "tolerant," such as John of *NYPD Blue* and George of *Kevin Hill.*

Homosexuality in mainstream media has largely been depicted as White. However, Blackness has had more success on premium cable television through *Six Feet Under* and *The Wire*. Basic cable presentations, such as Julien of *The Shield*, show a Black man destructing from self-hate regarding his homosexuality, which he believes is against God. In mainstream Black funk/soul music, Me'shell N'degeocello represents a lesbian presence. However, because she appears as a lipstick lesbian in some of her music videos and with sexuality blurring lyrics, she calls for an ambiguity that does not entirely topple the status quo and invites a male to female gaze. Thus, as Dollimore (1997) suggests, the route to progressive politics is to eroticize the social world. This means creating a climate where men are made to acknowledge their feminine components, and women their masculine ones. This also means that homosexual spaces (often feminized for men, and sometimes masculinized for women) in heterosexuality are revealed.

Second, Caushun himself must be willing to resist the lure of identifying homosexuality as safe (e.g., comic fodder or nearly invisible) to appease heterosexists. Rather, Caushun must be a facilitator of media consumers, to see him as a whole, full, realized subject, not an object for gaze or voyeurism. This means imagistically, such as in music videos, rejecting moving the camera's eye from top down, which masculinizes the viewer, or bottom up, which feminizes the performer, to one where the lens invites an equalizing look—eye to eye—where all are on par with the other.

Caushun likely does have at least two audiences that may attend to him without the predictable mainstream conventions of marginalizing through othering/silencing. The first, may be heterosexual women who use presentations of gayness to learn to look at men without the threat and control that comes from heterosexual men looking back (Marks, 1996). Second, there are those that accept gayness. Caushun is hailing, in addition to the mainstream, those with an investment in gay identity and culture that would value songs like "The Gay Rapper's D-Lite." Caushun, as foil to masculinist/heteronormative invested straight and gay men, may work to create a consumer group that sees him as advancing diverse gay identities further into the mainstream.

The decisions facing Caushun are not easy ones. For example, a third option may be sexual ambiguity. Certainly, there is some power in an unmarked identity. It is, according to Clark Silberman (2001, p. 194), a "deflection of a [fixed] identity" that may better ensure crossover appeal. Such an appeal is hinged on an avoidance of not just a sexed body (Caushun cannot unmark his race), but it is a call for an overt rejection of the (Black) phallus. While the Black body,

when gazed upon in the popular is often eroticized (see: Hill-Collins, 2000; Lott, 1997; Mercer, 1994), Black genitalia, either talked about or displayed, demands an engagement or action—gaze or turn away, accept or reject. In this third option, refusing to be marked may spare the mainstream some of the dilemmas posed regarding the gaze, allowing them to avoid making the decision at all.

Barrett (2001), in peeling apart the layers of Dennis Rodman's sexual identities, reveals "warring trajectories" and "inconsistency or incoherence" because Rodman does not embody any single sexual configuration. Here again, this lack of identifying allows Rodman to move through the mainstream generally at will. Though his sexuality seems to possess multiplicity, it is simplified in the cultural imaginary in that viewers don't know what he is, but they know that he is not propositioning Black men, specifically. Rodman presents himself as an eccentric or puller of publicity stunts (think the wedding dress book signing), thereby leaving his maleness (and phallus) largely intact. Caushun, in contrast, does not appear in an apolitical vacuum. Caught in a racial, masculinity, and sexual-orientation triple-bind, he must attend to the question of whether presence and visibility in traditionally heterosexual, male dominated hip-hop will bring legitimacy and, ultimately, acceptance.

While gay consumers are beginning to be hailed, though still subtlety as not to offend the heterosexual majority, there remain those within gayness who are not hailed by marketers, such as those who do not meet a narrow Will-like (of *Will and Grace*), hetero-informed masculinist, gay performance. As Gluckman and Reed (1997) offer, the key to success for gays in the popular is to pretend or "pass," an option that is out of reach for Blacks and for queens like Caushun. Even from within gayness, Caushun may find his acceptance not readily forthcoming due to hegemonic forces of self-hate and rejection. Qboy, a rising gay, White rapper from Britain reveals that England's gay audiences "struggled to comprehend" what he was trying to do (Collins, 2004). Anecdotal evidence reveals a lasting valorization of masculinity, as displayed by some gay bars denying admission to effeminate men (Jacobs, 1997; Altman, 1982).

To again be explicitly clear, ours is not an essay that is antagonistic toward the mainstreaming of gay, thug identities in, or outside of, hip-hop. We are particularly hostile to the mainstream treatment of gay hip-hop, to date, which functions to do little more than reduce artists like Caushun to novelty, sideshow status. Hence, our goal remains to identify spaces for intervention for those, like Caushun, who choose to go mainstream. In the end, we believe that though there is no way of seeing Caushun in the very immediate, there are ways in which the looking of the mainstream can be trained to facilitate his participation. If successful, there is much to be gained by men and women, across gender and sexuality definitions, in disrupting the directional power and privilege that the gaze has traditionally been afforded.

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