# RAP VOCALITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

by

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**ABSTRACT**

**RAP VOCALITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY**

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This project fuses musical and socio-cultural perspectives in order to better understand how the voice participates in the construction of identities in rap music. Rap is an important site for the performance and negotiation of identity in the public sphere, and as rap has become increasingly entrenched in popular culture, many studies have been published on the importance of rap, its functions in identity formation, and its workings as a cultural discourse. My research contributes to this field by combining socio-cultural critique with discussion of the musical codes and conventions. Specifically, I explore the ways in which gender and race are performed vocally through musical and lyrical conventions. MCs' vocal production and performances are not only primary carriers of the lyrics, but also convey musical meanings through vocal nuance, declamation, and rhythmic delivery. The examination of MCs' vocality in relation to other aspects of rap production and reception provides insight into rap's gender roles and racial positions, which can illuminate constructions of gender and race in a larger social context.

Chapter 1 outlines the vocal parameters used throughout the dissertation. Chapter 2 discusses the ways that musical and lyrical conventions in rap have been coded as black, as well as how MCs have linked themselves to an African-American musical lineage. Chapter 3 outlines the masculine attributes of rap and the various ways in which masculinity is performed through the voice in rap. I also discuss how the roles of singing and rapping have been gendered and interrogate the ways in which these roles have been interpreted in rap music. Chapter 4 discusses a sexually aggressive style of MCing that is common among women and the problematic implications of this type of representation. By analyzing the vocal strategies of several prominent MCs, I demonstrate the ways in which they simultaneously resist and reinforce the raced and gendered norms of the rap sphere. Chapter 5 explores how white MCs negotiate the raced boundaries of the rap sphere. I contend that many successful rappers have exaggerated their whiteness in order to gain credibility, thus acknowledging their position within this predominantly black musical style.

# Introduction

After presenting a paper on female rapper Lady Sovereign at a recent conference on popular music studies, I was approached by colleague who had also presented at the conference. She had heard my paper, was a fan of the artist in question, and was enthusiastic about discussing Lady Sovereign's music. The conversation led to a broader discussion about my research, and when told that my dissertation focused on rap music, this colleague remarked, "You mean to tell me that you're writing a music theory dissertation on rap music?" When I responded that indeed I was, she questioned, "You actually found someone willing to supervise this project?" I must say that I was quite stunned by her comments. I am sometimes met with mild surprise when I tell people that I write about rap music. Scholars outside of the field of music are often intrigued by the project, and somewhat surprised that you can do this kind of work. Their surprise usually comes from a lack of knowledge concerning the breadth of methods used and topics studied within the fields of music theory, musicology, and ethnomusicology. Music scholars have also been surprised upon hearing about my project, simply because very few music theorists have tackled the study of rap. But what really surprised me about this particular colleague's shock at my topic was the fact that we were at a popular music conference: four days devoted entirely to the study of popular music.[1]

[1] The scholars who presented at this conference came from a wide variety of disciplines including musicology, music theory, ethnomusicology, cultural studies, media studies, women's studies, history, and African-American studies. Topics ranged from early American popular song, to Bjork, to Czech rap. There were six sessions devoted entirely to rap music. I went to every one of these sessions and the room was almost at capacity for each one, something that was not true of many other sessions at this conference. This tells me that people are interested in studying and talking about rap music, from a variety of perspectives.

The conversation I have just described is indicative of two things: the first being that there is a misconception about the type of research being done by music theorists; and the second being that rap music is still not considered a serious form of music by some people, even within the realm of popular music studies.[2] The analysis of rap music has not been a hot topic within the field of music theory. Despite this fact, there is a significant monograph on rap by a music theorist: *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, by Adam Krims (2000). Anther important article by a music theorist is "Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap" by Kyle Adams (2008).[3] There are also important music-analytic studies of rap by music scholars outside the field of music theory including: *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* by Felicia Miyakawa (2005), "Hip-Hop Drumming: The Rhyme May Define, but the Groove Makes You Move" by Jeff Greenwald (2002), and "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy," by Robert Walser (1995). [4] This is a very small body of research on rap's musical workings and I hope to significantly contribute to it with this dissertation. I also hope to contribute to a larger conversation in rap that deals with socio-cultural concerns. This body of scholarship does not typically address rap's sonic connections to socio-cultural issues, and I feel that my research can contribute to this area.

This project fuses musical and socio-cultural perspectives in order to better

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[2] Other scholars working specifically within a music-analytic framework have discussed the fact that rap music has often not been taken seriously as music. For example, see Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2000, Chapter 1.

[3] Kyle Adams, Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap," (*Music Theory Online* 14/2 , May, 2008).

[4] Felicia Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission,* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005); Jeff Greenwald, "Hip-Hop Drumming: The Rhyme May Define, but the Groove Makes You Move," *Black Music Research Journal* 22/2 (2002), 259-271; Robert Walser, "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy," *Ethnomusicology* 39/2 (Spring 1995), 193-217.

understand how the voice participates in the construction of identities in rap music. As scholars such as Tricia Rose, Imani Perry, and Cheryl Keyes have observed, rap is an important location for the performance and negotiation of identity in the public sphere.[5] As rap has become increasingly entrenched in popular culture, many studies have been published on the importance of rap, the function of rap in identity formation, the workings of rap as a cultural discourse, and the ability of rap to serve as a carrier of cultural meanings. Some important studies include: Rose (1994), Potter (1995), George (1998), Keyes (2002), Perry (2004), and Chang (2005).[6]

With a few notable exceptions, the majority of the research on rap music has focused on how social issues are constructed in relation to lyrics, video, and public image, rather than focusing on aspects of musical performance and construction.[7] My research contributes to this field by combining a socio-cultural critique with an exploration of the musical codes and conventions. Specifically, I will explore how gender and race are performed through musical and lyrical conventions. MCs' vocal production and performances are not only the primary carriers of the lyrics, but they also convey

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[5]Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America,* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness,* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002); and Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop,* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004). The work of these scholars primarily explores the articulation of black identity. Scholars who have addressed white, and Asian –American identities in relation to rap include: Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap.* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2007); Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wanksta, Wiggers, Wannabees, and the New Reality of Race in America,* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Deborah Wong, "Just Being There: Making Asian American Space in the Recording Industry." Chapter 10 in *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*, (New York: Routledge, 2004) 233-256; and Jason Tanz, *Other People's Property: A Shadow History of Hip-Hop in White America,* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007).

[6] (Perry, Rose, Keyes mentioned above); Russel Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism,* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Nelson George, *Hip Hop America.* (New York: Viking, 1998); Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: a History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005); and Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop,* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

[7] These exceptions include Adam Krims 2000; Felicia Miyakawa 2005; Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hip,* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); Kyle Adams 2008. All of these studies will be discussed later in the introduction.

musical meanings through vocal nuance, declamation, and rhythmic delivery. The examination of MCs' vocality in relation to other aspects of rap production and reception can provide insight into rap's gender roles and racial positions, which, in turn, can illuminate constructions of gender and race in a larger social context.

The identity of the researcher plays a large role in the interpretations they provide.[8] Given my subject position as a white, middle class, Canadian, female academic, I cannot directly speak from within the socio-cultural context from which rap is produced, nor the location and situation that it attempts to reflect.[9] I can, however, speak from the perspective of a rap fan. Many rap listeners are white, middle-class suburbanites, and many are also female. I am a part of the target audience of mainstream rap, and can speak from that perspective. I have also spent a great deal of time over the past two years learning how to and working as a DJ. This skill set and experience has contributed to my work on this project.

One of the motivations for this study is the desire to explore why so many people are drawn to rap music. A simple answer would be that rap has great beats, or catchy hooks. For some, it might even be their fascination with black culture or the hood.[10] Despite misogynist, homophobic, and violent themes, people of all ages, ethnicities, and socio-economic positions continue to listen to rap. I have seen countless feminist-leaning women dance to the most misogynist songs at parties and clubs. They are certainly aware of what the lyrics are about, but most seem unfazed by the references to women as "bitches" and "hoes." I strongly believe that something about the music, and the way in

[8] Keyes addresses this issue in her introduction, (2002, 6).
[9] Krims has discussed his position as a middle-class white academic as well, (2000, 7).
[10] Scholars such as Tanz, 2007, Ogbar 2007, and Kitwana 2005 have all discussed white listeners' fascination with the black cultural aspects of rap music.

which the lyrics are delivered incites us to listen to rap, despite the politically incorrect and often offensive lyrical themes.

This study will certainly not answer the question, "Why do we listen to rap?", or "Why is rap so popular?" but it will explore some of the connections between musical sounds and socio-cultural factors. This project engages with perspectives of music theory, musicology, cultural studies, women's studies, and African-American studies in order to interrogate musical and cultural connections. I will stress the importance of an intersectional analysis, taking into account both the race and gender of rap's participants.[11]

The repertoire I have chosen to discuss is taken from a ten year span from 1998-2008. This period encompasses all of the current trends and developments I wish to discuss in relation to rap vocality. I will focus on music within the context of the American mainstream music industry because it reaches both urban and suburban audiences. I have selected artists and songs that have enjoyed widespread success because they are representative of larger trends within the rap sphere. I elected to avoid exploring underground and global rap artists since they tend to encompass a greater variety of race and gender representations, depending on the time period and geographical location. Since I am making an initial attempt to outline the ways in which the voice participates in gendered and raced conventions, I have decided to explore the most prevalent musical practices. I have selected the artists in question in order to illuminate certain concepts, rather than based on sub-genres, (for example Gangsta rap),

[11] Kyra Gaunt has discussed this with regard to hip-hop culture, 2006, particularly pg. 10-11; and Kimberlé Crenshaw with regard to women in the public sphere, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," in *Critical Race Theory*, edited by Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. (New York: The New Press, 1995).

or geographical location, (for example East Coast rap).[12] The primary artists I have chosen include: Young Jeezy, Busta Rhymes, Snoop Dogg, T.I., and Nas in Chapter 2; Ja Rule, Baby Boy da Prince, 50 Cent, T-Pain, and Kanye West in Chapter 3; Lil' Kim, Trina, Shawnna, and Missy Elliott in Chapter 4; and Eminem, Lady Sovereign, Bubba Sparxxx, and Paul Wall in Chapter 5.

***Rap and Music Analysis***

In this section, I will contextualize my work within the existing music-analytic studies on rap in order to outline some of the research that my work draws on, as well as demonstrate the ways in which my approach differs. To do so, I must first define a few keys terms. Although there are many musical parts to any given rap song, the two primary features are the MCs' vocal delivery and the beat. The MCs' rhythmic delivery of the lyrics is typically referred to as flow.[13] According to Joseph Schloss, in his groundbreaking book on sampling in hip-hop, entitled *Making Beats*, beats are made by using "digital technology to take sounds from old records and organize them into new patterns."[14] He defines beats as "musical collages of recorded sound."[15] Later in this section, I will expand on the elements of beat and flow, as well as their importance.

Previous analyses of rap music have looked at issues of rhythmic flow, and music-text relations. For example, in the first extensive monograph on rap's musical workings, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, Adam Krims proposes a methodology

[12] Adam Krims (2000) explores both of these aspects: genre in Chapter 2, and geography in Chapter 4.
[13] The term flow is used by those in the rap community, as well as by scholars. A definition of flow can be found in Krims, 2000, 15.
[14] Schloss, 2004, 1.
[15] Ibid, 2.

for interpreting rap's musical workings.[16] Krims' approaches to interpreting rap's musical organization include delineating a genre system, measuring the textural density of rap songs, and developing a vocabulary with which to discuss MCs' flows. Krims' analytic techniques are primarily designed to draw out the rhythmic features of the MCs' delivery and the underlying musical texture. Krims outlines three primary styles of flow (or rhythmic delivery): "sung" rhythmic style, "percussion-effusive" style, and "speech-effusive" style.[17] With sung rhythmic style, the rhythms and rhymes tend to be similar to those of many sung styles of pop and rock music. Characteristics of the sung rhythmic style include strict couplet groupings, rhythmic repetition, on-beat accents, and regular on-beat pauses. Percussion-effusive and speech-effusive styles both have a tendency "to spill over the rhythmic boundaries of the meter, the couplet, and, for that matter, of duple and quadruple groupings in general."[18] This spill-over of the rhythmic boundaries is accomplished in a number of ways, including the staggering the syntax or rhymes, the subdivision of the beat, the repetition of off-beat accents, and the use of polyrhythms. Speech-effusive and percussion-effusive styles differ in that speech-effusive delivery and enunciation is closer to spoken language, whereas percussion-effusive delivery evokes the idea that the performer is using their mouth as a percussion instrument.[19] Krims notes that these styles of flow exist along a spectrum, and that the categories overlap in various ways. For example, many rappers might alternate between speech-effusive style and percussive-effusive style even within the same song.

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[16] Krims, 2000.
[17] Ibid, 49-52. An important point that Krims addresses is the fact that many fans, MCs, and producers talk about flow, and are aware of nuances between different artists, geographical locations, and time periods, however, there is not a commonly accepted vocabulary with which to discuss flows. As a result, the vocabulary that Krims develops is not one used by rap fans, artists, and producers.
[18] Ibid, 50.
[19] These are very brief descriptions of Krims' categories, found on pages 49-52. I will elaborate on this subject matter as it is relevant in my analyses.

In her book, entitled *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission*, Felicia Miyakawa critiques Krims' categories of flow.[20] Miyakawa points out that Krims' divisions of sung and effusive (percussion-effusive and speech-effusive) styles of flow really represent a historical division between old-school (sung flow) and new-school (effusive flow) styles of MCing. When discussing these categories, Krims does associate sung style with old-school rap and the effusive styles with newer rap styles. Old-school rap is usually thought of as early rap, originating from the late 1970s through the 1980s. Examples include Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Biz Markie, and Queen Latifah. As rap music evolved, styles of flow and production changed. Rappers often adopted faster lyric delivery, less regular phrasing, and more complex rhythms and rhyme schemes.[21] Despite Miyakawa's critique, Krims' terms are useful as a starting point for analysis of how meaning is conveyed through the MCs' rhythmic styling. Even if we accept that sung style describes old-school flows and that the two types of effusive flows reflect newer styles of vocal delivery, these terms allow us to categorize flows in a comprehensible manner. They allow us to categorize the style of flow commonly used by a particular artist, within a specific song, or even how a combination of flows may be used within a song. For example, it is not uncommon to hear a current artist performing in a manner that is reminiscent of old-school flows. Some recent examples include Lil Mama's "Lipgloss," and Classified's "Anybody Listening."[22] The flows of these current rappers are not identical to the styles of old-school flows used by the artists mentioned above, as they use some newer techniques,

[20] Miyakawa, 2005.
[21] For further discussion of old school vs. new school flows, see Krims, 2000, 48-54.
[22] Lil Mama, *VYP: Voice of the Young People*, Sony B000VI70U4, 2008; Classified, *Self Explanatory*, Sony/BMG B001US7P18, 2009.

such as a faster delivery and more complex rhymes within the phrase. What makes them sound old school is the rhythmic repetition within the phrase, and the consistency of the end rhymes falling on the fourth beat of the measure, categorized as Krims' sung style. Even within these tracks that are very reminiscent of old-school flows, it is not uncommon to hear the rapper mixing newer styles of percussion-effusive and speech-effusive flows into the song. In "Lipgloss," Lil Mama raps almost exclusively in an "old school" style, but breaks into a more complex, newer style, "effusive" rap during the bridge of the song. Similarly, Classified's flow in "Anybody Listening" can be described as a sped-up sung flow; however, he does deliver a few lines with more complex rhyme schemes, representative of a speech-effusive flow.

Both Krims and Miyakawa address rhythmic layers in their analyses. For example, Krims applies an analytic technique for interpreting rhythmic layers in a close reading of Ice Cube's "The Nigga Ya Love To Hate." A central aspect of Krims' analysis is the construction and interpretation of a layering graph. As Krims observes, layering is a basic procedure in many hip-hop songs. The graph, and his interpretation of it, includes discussion of form, interaction of different musical voices, and music-text interpretation. Krims uses the graph to show how Ice Cube's MCing forms notions of a black revolutionary identity in this song. Krims notates the various musical layers in more detail by labeling the specifics of each musical cell using graphic notation. One criticism that I have of Krims' analytic techniques is that the layering graph and the detail-oriented musical cells do not account for the circular nature of rap music. Rap is produced by the layering of musical tracks, but these tracks are generally repeated musical patterns that are looped, creating a circular, repetitive groove. Krims' analysis of "The Nigga Ya Love

To Hate" is very much abstracted from the music. As such, it does not seem to accurately reflect the average listener's experience of the music.

Miyakawa's approach to rhythmic layers in *Five Percenter Rap* draws on Krims' analytic methods.[23] Miyakawa formulates a methodology that centers on rap's groove, comprising a combination of flow, layering, and rupture.[24] Influenced by Krims' methods, Miyakawa discusses MCs' flows using a "flow map," which uses a beat-class analysis to mark the rhythmic fall of each syllable.[25] Since patterning is an important measure of flow, she compares measures in vertical stacks. By referencing the flow map, she demonstrates how an artist creates form based on the patterning. She discusses how artists use textual accents, correlation with backbeat, and speed of lyric delivery to structure the song. Miyakawa's method is very helpful in the discussion of the rhythmic patterning of flows, but does not fully engage with the lyrics or with the other musical layers.[26]

Building on Krims' methods, Miyakawa constructs a "groove continuum," similar to Krims' layering graph.[27] With her construction of the groove continuum, her focus is on the interplay of musical layers. Miyakawa claims that this new kind of transcription illustrates the centrality of layering in rap's formal construction. The groove continuum separates the sounds of the rap song into two large groupings: melodic layers and

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[23] Despite her focus on a particular religious movement in hip-hop and the particular meanings their music conveys, the analytic methods she uses are relevant to the study of rap music more generally.
[24] These terms are discussed by Tricia Rose, 1994. Following James Jaffa, Rose describes flow, layering, and rupture as three points of stylistic continuity central to the construction of hip-hop forms (rap, graffiti, and break-dancing). Rose discusses how these stylistic elements are reflective of the social conditions in which hip-hop developed: "These effects at the level of style and aesthetics suggest affirmative ways in which profound social dislocation and rupture can be managed and perhaps contested in the cultural arena" (Rose 1994, 39).
[25] See Miyakawa 2005, 73-76.
[26] Miyakawa explores the content and message of God Hop in other chapters, for example in Chapters 1-3.
[27] See Miyakawa 2005, 76-78.

percussive layers, in order to tease out the interplay between groove and melodic ornamentation (a figure/ground relationship common to black musical genres).[28]

Two areas that Krims' and Miyakawa's theories do not fully take into account are the discussion of aspects of rap vocality other than the rhythmic delivery, and the discussion of how the vocal line interacts with the other musical layers. For example, text emphasis and declamation are crucial aspects of how meaning is conveyed through the delivery of the lyrics. Elements such as word length, speed of lyric delivery, dynamics, vocal quality, pitch, and pronunciation should be read in conjunction with the rhythmic delivery of the text in order to interpret conveyed meanings. I strongly believe that these are all crucial aspects in the conveyance of meanings through MCs' flows.

In a recent article, entitled, "Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap," Kyle Adams picks up on my second critique of Krims and Miyakawa's methods: the interaction of the vocal line with the other musical layers.[29] In this article, Adams outlines an analytic approach to the interaction between vocal rhythm and the musical background. Adams begins from the premise that most rap music contains a variable rhythmic layer over a fixed rhythmic layer.[30] As with many other forms of African-American music, the variable layer in rap is the vocal line.[31] The fixed layer in rap is the music, which typically consists of a repeated two- or four-measure unit throughout the song. Adams argues that the best approach to studying rap's music-text relations "is first to disregard the semantic meaning of the lyrics, and to treat the syllable of text simply as

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[28] Ibid, 76-81.
[29] Adams, 2008.
[30] Adams cites Olly Wilson's work on West African musical structures; Olly Wilson, "The Significance of the relationship between Afro-American Music and West African Music," *The Black Perspective in Music* 2 (1974), 3-23.
[31] Adams is basing this aspect of his analysis on Lee Cronbach's observations of African-American musical structures; Cronback, Lee, "Structural Polytonality in Contemporary Afro-American Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 2 (1981-82), 15-33.

consonant/vowel combinations that occupy specific metrical locations."[32] Treating the voice as an instrument, Adams' analyses then explores how the rhythms, motifs, and groupings of the music correspond to similar patterns in the vocal line.[33] As discussed above, Krims has described percussion-effusive flows as vocal delivery in which the voice is used as a percussive instrument. Adams, however, extends these ideas to a more detailed account of the relation between voice (text) and music.[34]

A place where Krims', Miyakawa's, and Adams' analytic methods fall short is their discussion of the production of meaning through the music. Although these authors briefly discuss how their interpretations of the music can convey meaning, this is not their primary focus. For example, in the cases of Miyakawa and Krims, although their graphs can be read against the lyrics, the graphs do not really engage with the lyrics. With Adams' work, although there is an integrated approach to studying music and text, the emphasis is on rhythmic technique and interaction rather than interpreting textual and musical meaning. By critiquing these three approaches, I am not in any way attempting to devalue their work. These are excellent approaches to rhythm in rap music, and all three studies have greatly contributed to the musical analysis of rap.[35] These approaches simply do not illuminate the specific aspects of musical and socio-cultural meanings that I am interpreting.

I will not sketch out new ways of theorizing the rhythmic aspects of MCs' flows, since authors such as Krims, Miyakawa, and Adams have all made significant

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[32] Adams, paragraph 12.
[33] Adams uses the word 'text,' as "a metonym for the words themselves, the sounds and patterns of accentuation that they create, and their rhythmic placement" (paragraph 12).
[34] Krims, 48-53.
[35] This is particularly true with Krims' book as it is the first large-scale music-analytic study of rap.

contributions to this area.[36] These approaches are extremely useful to my interpretive framework, but my method will differ because I am interrogating how rap music reflects and produces meanings related to race and gender. The elements that do not emerge from the analyses described above are specifically those features of vocal expression that signify race and gender. I propose an approach to vocal analysis that takes into account the parameters of vocality that do point to racial and gendered meanings and context. I will discuss the vocal parameters used in this study in Chapter 1, "Rap Vocality."

***Terms and Language***

I will now clarify some of the terms and language that I use throughout this work. I mentioned the term rupture in my discussion of Miyakawa's work, but have not yet adequately defined it. It is an important concept in the analysis of rap music, and I will therefore take a moment to define it now. One way in which the MCs' flows can convey meaning is through the process of textural rupture. According to Miyakawa, rupture involves the disruption of layering processes, or, more simply, disruption of the groove. The concept of rupture, as described by Rose (1994), refers primarily to moments of rhythmic continuity, but Miyakawa extends this process to the manipulation of melodic layers.[37] According to Miyakawa, producers use percussive and melodic ruptures to outline formal design and to highlight expressive moments. Rupture can occur as either an addition to or removal from the musical texture.

Break beats were an essential component of early rap music. DJs used a mixer and two turntables, switching back and forth between the turntables to create an

[36] Of course there is more work that can be done in this area; however, this type of analysis will not be a major component of this study. This is an area of research that I plan to focus on in the future.
[37] Miyakawa 2005, 81-82.

uninterrupted beat. As Schloss has discussed, "the central innovation of early hip-hop was the use of this system with two copies of the same record for various effects, particularly the isolation of the 'break.'"[38] DJs would isolate the section of a song that featured a percussion solo and play it "over and over, flipping the needle back to the start on one while the other played through."[39] This rhythmic section was referred to as the break because it was the moment in the song where the band breaks down.[40] These break beats were then used as the underlying beats of rap songs.

The distinction between the terms rap and hip-hop is also something that needs to be addressed. Some of the scholars that I reference refer to rap and hip-hop interchangeably. Rap is the musical form that developed as part of a larger cultural movement, called hip-hop. Hip-hop emerged in New York in the 1970s, with rap, graffiti, and break-dancing all acting as forms of cultural expression for marginalized black and Latino voices.[41] Generally speaking, hip-hop and rap have become synonymous in the popular consciousness. I will refer to the music as rap, and the culture as hip-hop, but I will undoubtedly cite scholars who do not make these distinctions.

I would like to make a quick note on sources used in this project. The majority of my sources are scholarly, rooted in the various disciplines described above. However, I have found it necessary at times to cite music-journalistic sources to obtain biographical information about artists, or to capture a general public reaction about an artist, song, or trend.

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[38] Schloss, 2004, 31.
[39] Ibid. Schloss is citing: David Toop, *Rap Attack 2*, (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1991), 60.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Rose, 1994 2. Rose, Keyes (2002), and George (1998) all provide excellent accounts of how rap fits into the larger hip-hop movement.

It will be necessary to quote the lyrics of most of the songs I discuss. Given the conventions of North American rap, many of these lyrics contain explicit language. I have not censored these lyrics in any way, as the language used is an important part of this form of cultural expression. I have also strived to maintain colloquialisms in my transcriptions of the lyrics.

A final linguistic issue I wish to mention is the term used to refer to rap artists. I will refer to artists as either rappers or MCs. As most of you know, MC is short for Master of Ceremonies. MC is the term that has been used to refer to rap artists since this form developed. In rap's early days, the MC recited lyrics over the beats spun by DJs at parties and in underground clubs. The role of the MC has risen to prominence in rap, and the role played by the DJ has moved into the recording studio and is now carried out by the producer who creates the beats. Many MCs, fans, and even some scholars have switched to spelling MC as "emcee," thus distinguishing it from the role of Master of Ceremonies. I have opted to keep the spelling, MC, but I may quote certain sources that use this more colloquial spelling.

### *Chapter Organization*

Chapter 1, "Rap Vocality," provides an introduction to the types of vocal practices on which this study will focus. After providing several descriptive examples, I will outline the vocal parameters that will be used throughout this dissertation.

Chapter 2, "Black Voices?: Rap Music and Race in America," lays out some of rap's musical and vocal conventions that have been coded as black. I set out to explore this question because I wanted to consider why a voice sounds either black or white, and in particular, how "black voices" define the parameters of rap. The fact that race is

typically a factor in a rapper's success within the U.S. is evidenced by the very small number of successful white rappers, meaning that, in most cases, blackness is a requirement for success.[42] I begin this chapter by interrogating the category of "black music," discussing some of the ways in which voices have been coded as either black or white in earlier forms of American popular music. Through several case studies, I outline some of the ways in which musical and lyrical conventions in rap have been coded as black. I then discuss the notion of authenticity and some of the ways in which MCs have linked themselves to an African-American musical lineage.

Chapter 3, "Performing Masculinity via Rap Vocality," outlines the masculine attributes of this musical style and explores the varying ways in which masculinity is performed through the voice in rap. I begin by discussing the visual and lyrical signifiers of maleness in rap, and then discuss how these elements are musically portrayed. Next, I discuss how the roles of singing and rapping have been coded as feminine and masculine, and interrogate how these roles have been both adhered-to and deviated-from in recent rap music.

In Chapter 4, "Conflicted Representations of Women in Rap: Locating Power in Conformity," I study the ways in which black, American, female rappers perform their identities. I discuss a particular style of MCing that is prominent among women, one that promotes excessively aggressive sexuality. I also discuss the problematic implications of this type of representation of women. By analyzing the music, lyrics, and videos of several prominent MCs, I demonstrate how they simultaneously resist and reinforce the raced and gendered norms of the rap sphere.

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[42] Possible reasons for why particular white rappers such as Eminem have been successful are discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5, “White Rappers’ Negotiation of Race and Identity,” explores how white MCs negotiate the raced boundaries of the rap sphere. I contend that many successful rappers have exaggerated their whiteness to gain credibility amongst fans and peers. I illuminate the strategies used by Eminem and Lady Sovereign to perform their whiteness, as well as how Bubba Sparxxx has managed to sound black, but act white. I also discuss the problematic position occupied by Paul Wall, who has succeeded in adopting rap’s black musical and lyric conventions without addressing his position as a white rapper.

# Chapter 1

## Rap Vocality

This chapter will introduce a variety of practices of rap vocality. Vocality comprises those qualities of vocal performance that convey meanings to the listener. These aspects of vocal practice include: quality, resonance, timbre, articulation, declamation, pronunciation, register, range, pitch, and intonation. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that a wide range of vocal techniques are used in rap production and that vocal delivery is crucial to the construction of meanings in rap. Vocality is not only an important means of communicating the message and meanings of the lyrics, it is also important in the construction of the artist's performed identity. Rappers adopt specific vocal conventions in order to reveal aspects of their gendered and raced identities

The first section of the chapter will introduce the vocal parameters employed in this study. I will then discuss three analytic examples, "Forgot About Dre" by Dr. Dre, "Get Low" by Lil Jon and the Eastside Boys, and "Conceited" by Remy Ma. Each of these examples demonstrates different techniques of vocal production. Through these analytic examples, I demonstrate the types of meanings communicated through rap vocal performance. In the subsequent chapters, I will further investigate the raced and gendered meanings attaching to these vocal techniques.

## I. Vocal Parameters

In the introduction to this project, I discussed some important analytic studies on rap music, including those of Krims (2000), Miyakawa (2005), and Adams (2008).[43] As the reader will recall, none of these studies directly theorized the voice. Therefore I will briefly turn to Allan Moore's work on the voice in rock music as a means of contextualizing my work on vocality within the realm of popular music studies.[44] Moore believes that there are a minimum of four characteristics that must be taken into account when studying vocal production in rock: register and range, degree of resonance, the singer's heard attitude to pitch, and the singer's heard attitude to rhythm.[45] These elements are all present within my analytic framework; however, they are divided up slightly differently due to the very different nature of vocal delivery between rock and rap.

### *Rhythm and Flow*

I will begin by discussing the performer's attitude to rhythm. Rhythm is an extremely important aspect of rap music, both in terms of the rapper's delivery, and in terms of the rhythm of the musical underpinning. The primary parameter with regard to rhythm in this study will be the rapper's flow. This parameter will concern the rhythmic activity of the vocal line, including subdivision, regularity of phrasing, and the nature of

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[43] Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2000; Felicia Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005); Kyle Adams, Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap," (*Music Theory Online* 14/2 , May, 2008).
[44] Allan Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text: Developing a Musicology of Rock*, 2nd edition, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001).
[45] Ibid, 45.

the rhythm (even, swung, etc). I will often reference Krims' categories of flows as discussed in my introduction: sung style, speech-effusive, and percussion-effusive.[46]

Tempo will also be considered in my study of flow. The speed of lyric delivery is often a marker of style and competence. For example, some rappers are known and admired for their rapid-fire flows: Twista, Busta Rhymes, Krayzie Bone, Shawnna, Eminem and Ludacris to name a few.[47] The ability to rap with great speed requires exceptional skill. By contrast, there are also rappers who have developed a more relaxed style involving a slower speed of delivery; for example, T.I. and Baby Boy da Prince. A slower flow is not necessarily valued less than a fast one; however it can signify very different meanings. For example, a slower flow can be considered "chill" and relaxed, portraying an air of confidence on the part of the rapper. This is certainly the case with T.I.'s hit song, "Whatever You Like," in which he seduces a woman by telling her that he can provide her with anything she could possibly desire.[48]

Another aspect of flow that I will focus on is phrasing. I will explore not only the vocal line's independent phrasing, but also the phrasing in relation to the musical underpinning. With regard to the musical underpinning, a song's beat is arguably the most important aspect as it defines the song's tempo, contributes to the rapper's flow, and typically holds the song together. Many rap fans and artists consider the beat to be one of the defining characteristics of a rap song. Certain artists are associated with particular kinds of beats and producers are known for their ability to create a catchy beat. Artist and producer Timbaland is a perfect example of this. His beats have a distinctive sound that is almost immediately recognizable. He has produced for artists such as Missy Elliott, Flo

[46] Krims 2000, 49-52.
[47] Twista is short for "Tongue Twister," his MC name representative of his fast-paced rhymes.
[48] T.I., *Paper Trail*, Atlantic B001EG4T6K, 2008. I will discuss this song in more detail in Chapter 2.

Rida, Ludacris, and Ginuine, and has more recently made a name for himself on the pop charts by infusing pop songs with hip-hop inspired beats.[49] The beat is defined not only by its rhythm, but also by its sound; for example, what instrumental or electronic sounds were used to create it.

In my analyses, I will always discuss an MC's phrasing in relation to how it is set against the musical underpinning. Does the delivery of a line coincide with the musical phrasing? Does the MC's flow create a polyrhythmic structure when set against the musical backdrop? I will also discuss the internal nuances of the MC's phrasing. For example, does the rhyme scheme contribute to a sense of regularity in the phrasing? Which beats are emphasized within the phrase? Does the MC deliver the lines in a manner that emphasizes a particular beat as a goal? The answers to these questions can often help us to understand how a rapper creates a particular feeling or style with their delivery.

***Pitch and Intonation***

In considering the singer's attitude to pitch, my approach will differ significantly from Moore's. Moore considers the singers attitude to pitch "against an abstract norm of tempered pitches (the only ones an in-tune piano can sound)."[50] The voice can be measured against the rest of the musical texture and the melody itself can be discussed as in-tune or out-of-tune. Moore also discusses examples of singers sliding up to a pitch, or sliding down from a pitch, as is the case with Elvis, for example, who "tends to sing

[49] On the pop charts he has produced for Madonna, Justin Timberlake, Brandy, Nelly Furtado, One Republic, and the Pussycat Dolls.
[50] Moore, 46.

tempered pitches, but will frequently begin a note from slightly below, sliding up to the required pitch within a matter of microseconds."[51]

Although I will look at some examples of singing, for example sung choruses or passages of rap songs, the majority of my analyses will focus on rap, which is typically considered to be "unpitched."[52] As a result, I will look at intonation in a slightly more flexible manner. For example, most rappers deliver their flows on an approximate pitch or set of pitches. Rappers can hover around a pitch in much the same way as singers. Breath support and control play a substantive role in how intense their vocal delivery sounds. As Adams has discussed, "since rapping by its nature is not sung, the pitch content of rap is limited to the ways in which rappers might modulate their voices to match certain contours in the underlying track."[53] One way in which rappers do this is through groupings of text syllables reflecting groupings present in repeated harmonic or melodic patterns. For example, Adams provides a brief analysis of A Tribe Called Quest's "Can I Kick It?" in which he demonstrates that the rapper, Phife, aligns his rhymed syllables with the harmonic rhythm rather than the drum rhythm, and thus creates a rhythmic groove that is different from many rap songs of that time period (1990).[54] In addition to these types of modulations, rappers perform their flows along a spectrum of unpitched to pitched delivery.

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[51] Ibid, 48.
[52] The fact that rap is more "spoken" than "sung" is one of the primary reasons that many music scholars have not deemed it relevant for study, at least from a music-analytic perspective. Adams, among others, has discussed some reasons for the lack of music-analytic studies on rap. He lists three possible reasons why scholars have not pursued music-text relationships in rap: 1) the fact that rap is still not always accepted as a valid art form, 2) the fact that Western music theory has been traditionally pitch-centered, and a pitch-centered analysis might not yield useful results, and 3) the repetitive accompaniment usually means that text-painting is rudimentary (Adams, 2008, paragraph 2).
[53] Ibid, paragraph 20.
[54] Ibid, paragraph 21 and example 5.

In other words, some rappers' flows are more pitched than others, and this is one way in which MCs develop an individual style of flow. Many rappers have characteristic vocal traits with regard to pitch, for example rapping a line on the same pitch only to slide down from that pitch at the end of each line, as can be seen with 50 Cent's "In da Club," which I will discuss in Chapter 3. The use of pitched inflection is not only a marker of style, but can also be important in conveying meanings to the listener. For example, the words that are emphasized by pitch often carry lyrical significance within the phrase.

### *Vocal Emphasis*

A parameter that is related to the singer's attitude to pitch is that of vocal emphasis. In my opinion, vocal emphasis plays a very important role in conveying meaning through the delivery of text. I will focus on three aspects of vocal emphasis: accent (both musical accent and linguistic accent), diction, and declamation. These elements can convey a variety of things to the listener: for example, information about the rapper's geographical, ethnic, and class background. A British rapper is likely to have a different accent and diction than an American rapper. A Southern U.S. rapper may have a different accent and diction than a Bronx rapper. In addition, text emphasis can be achieved through any of the techniques listed above and is extremely important in conveying meaning to the listener.

Some aspects of vocal emphasis that will be particularly important to this study are the attack and release of syllables. The manner in which a rapper pronounces the beginning of a syllable can be extremely important in conveying the mood they are trying to create. For example, a hard attack on syllables is often a way in which MCs convey

aggressiveness. This can be further emphasized through the addition of accents, which is often achieved by a slight increase of air on the delivery of the syllable in question. Some MCs may use an attack that is crisp, but not hard, thus creating a percussive feel to their flow. In contrast to these types of attacks, it is very common for MCs to use a soft attack on syllables to create a relaxed feel. The release of the syllable is also important as a quick, clipped release will create a very different feel from flows that emphasize held pitches.

### *Vocal Quality*

Moore's category of resonance is one that maps quite nicely to the study of rap music. According to Moore, "resonance can be thought of as distance from what is often called a 'colorless' tone, that which is produced electronically as a sine wave, and which cannot actually be achieved by the voice. The adjective 'colorless' comes from the tone's total lack of overtones."[55] In relation to resonance, Moore considers "vibrato, changes in richness of voice with respect to register, whether the sound resonates in the nasal cavity (producing a thin tone) or in the chest (a fuller tone) and whether the sound seems to originate in the throat or is pushed from the diaphragm."[56] These aspects of vocal resonance are often referred to as vocal quality. Vocal quality is perhaps one of the most important signifiers of both style and meaning in rap music.

Vocal timbre is another musical element that could be relevant here, however, Moore does not specifically address timbre. Despite the fact that most of us hear timbral differences between voices, timbre continues to be a very difficult musical element to

[55] Moore, 46. Of the elements described by Moore, vibrato is the only one that is not necessarily relevant to the study of rap.
[56] Ibid.

analyze. Krims acknowledges the importance of timbre in rap's musical organization but states that he does not address timbre in order to allow for greater ease in interpreting rhythm.[57] He also admits that he has not yet developed suitable ways of discussing the relationships between timbre and rhythm in rap contexts.[58] This challenge is not one that I expect to overcome in this study, and, as a result, I will focus on vocal quality rather than timbre.

### *Register and Range*

Register and range are fairly straightforward parameters; they describe "the relative height and the spread of the pitches used in a song."[59] Vocal register and range may seem like unimportant musical parameters in a musical style where the majority of text is not pitched, however, I believe that these are important aspects for classifying race and gender. As I mentioned above, rappers do deliver their text on an approximate pitch or set of pitches, which can be low, moderate, or high. A rapper's delivery can sometimes shift pitches throughout a song, at times higher or lower. Rappers can sometimes modulate their voice to approximate a brief melodic gesture. As I will discuss in the following chapters, these elements contribute to our understanding of a rapper's raced and gendered identity.

### *Recording Texture, Space, and Arrangement*

Another category, not directly addressed by Moore, is that of recording texture and space. Production is an important aspect of rap; a great deal of the song, including the

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[57] Krims, 45.
[58] Ibid, 53. Krims discussing the use spectrographs to discuss timbre and states that he is not satisfied that they "give the kind of *culturally* relevant information that [he] would ultimately like to convey about timbre." (53, fn 9).
[59] Moore, 45.

voice, is dependent on recording and production techniques.[60] In relation to this, I will also address arrangement, vocal and instrumental interactions, and the placement of the voice within the texture. As I mentioned above, vocal and instrumental interactions will also be considered with regard to flow.

To summarize the criteria I have just outlined, the vocal parameters addressed in this study are as follows:

1. Flow (including rhythm, tempo, and phrasing)
2. Pitch and intonation
3. Vocal emphasis (including accent, diction, and declamation)
4. Vocal quality and resonance
5. Register and range
6. Recording texture, space, and arrangement

The parameters of vocality that I will employ throughout this dissertation are often interdependent. They are not necessarily discrete categories and my discussion of them will often overlap. For example, as I will demonstrate in the following examples, register and quality are often read together to capture how an effect such as aggressiveness is created by the MC. Adding vocal emphasis into the picture can then shed further light on how the effect is produced. I will not necessarily analyze all of these parameters for every song discussed. Instead, I will focus on the features that stand out in each song, with particular emphasis on how they signify meanings in relation to race and gender.

[60] I unfortunately do not have as much experience as I would like in identifying specific recording and production techniques. I feel very strongly about the importance of these aspects of rap production and will address these issues to the best of my ability throughout this study. In the future, I plan to do some work in a recording studio, learning more about sound engineering and production. For a more in-depth discussion of recording, sound-engineering, and production in popular music see: Albin J. Zak, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), and Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats*.

## II. Interpretive Examples

### *Dr. Dre: "Forgot About Dre"*

The song "Forgot About Dre" by Dr. Dre (1999), provides an interesting contrast among vocal techniques. [61] The song features Eminem as a guest artist, and the differing vocal qualities, lyrics, and mode of delivery between these two artists provides an excellent introduction to interpreting meanings in rap vocality. "Forgot About Dre" begins in a manner typical of most rap songs. The brief instrumental introduction establishes the song's musical background, which will be looped and repeated throughout the song. The music is catchy, consisting of synthesized strings playing quarter note chords, accompanied by an interesting bass pattern. After the first four measure unit is played (in common time), a twangy melody is added to the mix. After another four measure unit is played, the background is completed by the addition the synthesized percussion. The addition of the percussion ushers in the vocals and we hear Dr. Dre's low, percussive voice begin to recite the first verse.

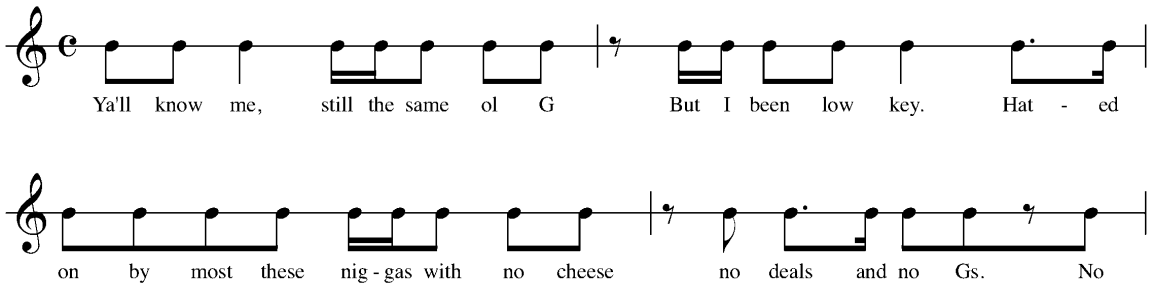
Dr. Dre delivers his line in a speech-effusive style, spilling over the phrase boundaries as established by the musical background.[62] His first word of text aligns with the downbeat of the first measure of a four-measure phrase unit, but he sometimes begins a line of text on the second half of the first beat, or even on the fourth beat of the previous measure. At times, a line of text may not match up with the start of a measure because his previous line has spilled over to the beginning of the next measure. This creates an irregularity to his phrasing in contrast to the rigid rhythmic framework of the musical background. Having said that, the rhythmic delivery of Dr. Dre's lines do not sound

[61] Dr. Dre, *Chronic 2000,* Universal, B000023VR6, 1999.
[62] The reader will recall that I defined speech-effusive in the Introduction.

disjunct as he delivers his lyrics primarily to quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, with almost no syncopation. Therefore, although his phrasing is slightly irregular, his rhythms are regular, thus creating an overall sense of rhythmic stability.

Dr. Dre's rhythmic regularity is enhanced by his use of rhyme, both within the line, and at the end of lines, forming couplets. For example, his first line, "Y'all know me, still the same ol G," contains the rhyming syllables "me" and "G," dividing the line into two sub-phrases with rhyming endings. In order for these rhymed syllables to sound symmetrical, they would be placed on comparable beats, for example, beat two and beat four. This is not the case, however, as "me" is placed on beat two and "G" is placed on the second half of beat four (see Example 1-1). The second line, "But I been low key," provides a matching end-rhyme with the first line, but the word "key" is placed on beat three in contrast to the last syllable of the first line, which was placed on the second half of beat one (see Example 1-1). The next few lines also have end-rhymes that match the first two lines, but these rhymed syllables are all placed on different beats. For example, in line three, the syllable "cheese" is placed on the second half of beat four. This is followed by the placement of the syllable "Gs" on the second half of the third beat in line four. The syllable "keys" is then placed on the second half of beat two in the fifth line. Dr. Dre's rhyme scheme, then creates a sense of regularity through the use of rhymed words, but not a sense of rigid structure as would be the case if the rhymes were placed on the same beat in each measure.

**Example 1-1 Dr. Dre "Forgot About Dre," Verse 1**




Dre delivers his lines at a moderately fast tempo with a fair amount of energy in his voice. His speed of delivery and vocal energy help create a sense of drive, but is not so intense as to create a sense of urgency. Dre manages to sound fairly relaxed, yet assertive and confident at the same time. The assertiveness is accomplished partly by his fairly crisp accentuation. His attacks on syllables are not hard, but they are fairly crisp, creating an almost percussive effect. There is a bit of separation between syllables: they are not quite clipped, but they are not typically dragged out either. The overall effect is that of a clear, assertive delivery of the lyrics.

Dr. Dre's vocal quality is an important aspect of the soundscape created in this song. He raps in a fairly low register with a quality that sounds slightly rough. The sound originates from the chest and syllables that begin with an "h" or "o" sound are recited with an influx of air and as a result sound "breathy." As I mentioned above, Dre's delivery is fairly fast paced and assertive sounding, but the MC still sounds relaxed. This relaxed feel is partly due to the way in which he tends to draw out vowel sounds, often holding them for a slightly longer note value. For example, Dre stretches out the vowel sound on the words "tracks" and "plaques" in the lines: "Got a crib with a studio and it's all full of tracks, to add to the wall full of plaques." These words are both held for half of a measure, a much longer note value than most of his other syllables. These words are

further emphasized by their placement at the beginning of the measure, meaning that they extend the phrases, rather than being contained within the measure.

To contrast with the laid-back pronunciation of vowels, Dre uses a very hard attack on words such as “fuck,” and “blow” towards the end of the first verse in the line “Fuck y’all, all y’all, if you don’t like me, blow me.” The harder attacks signal an increased aggressiveness in the MC’s delivery, heightening the tension as we head toward the chorus. This tension has been present throughout the first verse in the form of Dr. Dr’s assertive delivery of lyrics that call out his detractors. The lyric content of the first verse addresses Dr. Dre’s position within the rap community, particularly focusing on his accomplishments and the fact that he is still a contender in the rap game (the lyrics are provided below).

**“Forgot About Dre,” verse 1**

Ya'll know me still the same ol' G
But I been low key
Hated on by most these niggas with no cheese,
No deals and no G's,
No wheels and no keys
No boats, no snowmobiles and no skis
Mad at me cause
I can finally afford to provide my family with groceries
Got a crib with a studio and it's all full of tracks
To add to the wall full of plaques
Hangin up in the office
In back of my house like trophies
But ya'll think I'm gonna let my dough freeze
Ho please, you better bow down on both knees
Who you think taught you to smoke trees
Who you think brought you the o' G's
Eazy-E's
Ice Cube's and D.O.C's and
Snoop D O double G's
And a group that said muthafuck the police
Gave you a tape full of dope beats
To bump when stroll through in your hood

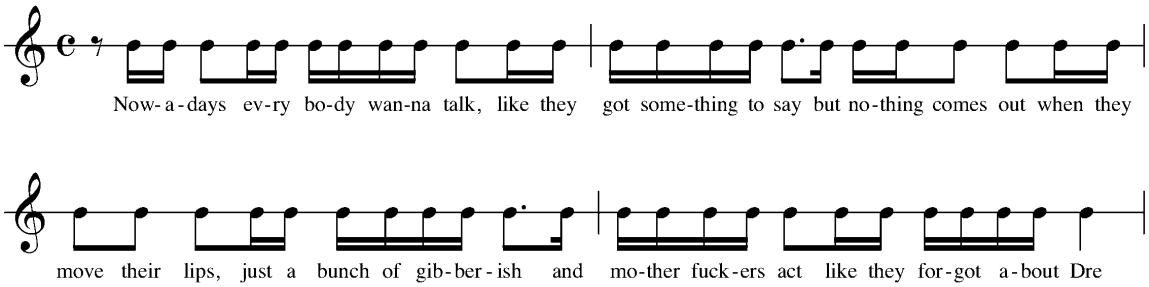
And when your album sales wasn't doin too good
Who's the doc that he told you to go see
Ya'll better listen up closely
All you niggas that said that I turned pop
Or the Firm flop
Ya'll are the reason Dre ain't been getting no sleep
So fuck ya'll all of ya'll
If ya'll don't like me blow me
Ya'll are gonna keep fuckin around wit me
And turn me back to the old me

Through the lyrics, we find that Dre asserts his position within the rap community because other MCs have questioned his credibility and his ability to continue to produce albums. By asserting himself as an MC and a producer, he is also asserting his masculinity. Through the lyrics, the listener finds that Dr. Dre's musical skills are bound up with his masculinity as the factors by which he defines his manhood are all related to his rap career. For example, he discusses his wealth, which was earned from working in the rap industry, he discusses his studio and his "wall full of plaques," reflecting his accomplishments, as well as the influence he has had on other rappers. The message is that Dre is still in the game and is a force to be reckoned with. He conveys this musically through his assertive style of vocal delivery, conveying an overall sense of confidence.

At the arrival of the chorus, the listener is presented with a very different style and quality of vocal presentation. Eminem raps the song's chorus with a contrasting style and vocal quality to Dre's delivery of the first verse. Eminem delivers his lines in a much higher register. His vocal quality is also starkly different as his sound is generated primarily in the throat and head creating a sound that is quite nasal. This type of nasality is common to white rappers, such as Eminem, and I will further discuss this aspect of vocal production in Chapter 5. Eminem's delivery also sounds much faster than Dre's. This is accomplished by a tendency to deliver more syllables per line: in the chorus

Eminem delivers his lyrics primarily in sixteenth notes (see Example 1-2). The speed sounds exaggerated because Eminem does not rest for more than a dotted eighth the entire chorus, with the exception of a quarter note at the end of the four-measure unit. Dr. Dre, by contrast, tends to incorporate longer note values, such as a quarter note, in many of his lines. As a result of Eminem reciting his lyrics primarily on sixteenth notes with very few rests or longer note values, his delivery sounds rapid-fire. This speed helps create a sense of intensity, an effect that is bolstered by Eminem's crisp annunciation of consonants. His crisp, hard attacks on consonants combined with his lyric speed makes his delivery sound more percussive.

**Example 1-2 Dr. Dre featuring Eminem "Forgot About Dre," Chorus**




Like Dr. Dre's lyrics in the first verse, the lyrics of the chorus help to reinforce Dre's position in the rap sphere:

> Nowadays everybody wanna talk
> Like they got something to say, but nothin comes out
> When they move they lips, just a bunch of gibberish
> And mutherfuckas act like they forgot about Dre

These lyrics diminish the contributions of other MCs and indicate that many people have forgotten about Dre's involvement in rap's development.[63] These lyrics do not

[63] Dr. Dre is considered to be one of the grandfathers of West Coast Gangsta rap. He gained widespread fame through his involvement with the group NWA (Niggas With Attitude) who operated out of Compton in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although Dr. Dre is an accomplished MC, he is better known for his

necessarily tell us anything about Eminem and since this is his first performance within the song, our perception of his performed identity comes only from his vocal quality and presentation, which is set apart from Dr. Dre's in terms of quality, register, and delivery style.

Eminem raps the second verse as well, and it is here that the listener acquires a better idea of how he is constructing his identity in this song. Here, many aspects of his vocal quality are similar to his delivery of the chorus. For example, he recites his lyrics in the same register with the same nasal vocal quality produced in the head. He also maintains a style of vocal delivery that is very crisp, with hard attacks on syllables. His lyric delivery in this verse is still fast, but he includes a few more pauses than he did in the chorus, which creates a slightly less urgent sounding flow. This is counter-balanced, however, by an upward pitch inflection at the end of many lines, which has the effect of sounding more urgent and intense. This upwards inflection occurs on the last syllable of many of Eminem's lines and is accomplished by the MC starting the syllable on the regular recitation pitch and then very quickly sliding up. This inflection helps create a sing-songy feel to his delivery, a fact that is aided by his use of matching end-rhymes. Unlike Dre who placed his end rhymes on varying beats within the measure, Eminem's use of end-rhymes is more regular. For example, in the first four lines, he rhymes the lines by ending with the syllables, "hate," "way," "way," and "A," all of which are placed on beat four (see Example 1-3).

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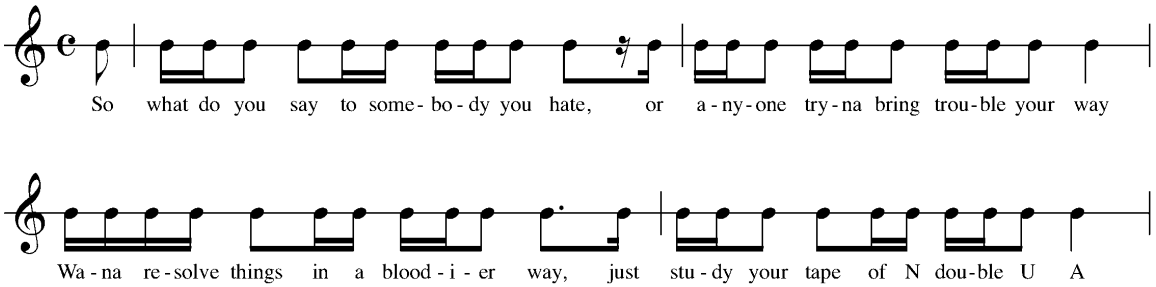
skills as a producer and he has helped launch the careers of many rappers, including Snoop Dogg, Emimem and 50 Cent.

**Example 1-3 Dr. Dre featuring Eminem "Forgot About Dre," Verse 2**




The lyrics in this verse reinforce the theme of the song, but, at the same time, reveal aspects of Eminem's performed identity (the lyrics are provided below). While Dr. Dre performed the persona of a confident, accomplished rap star and producer in the first verse, Eminem performs the persona of a violent, slightly crazy man. This is reinforced by lyrics such as: "When I caught a guy giving me an awkward eye, and strangled him off in the parking lot with his Karl Kani," "I'ma kill you and them loud ass muthafuckin barking dogs," "And I'm still loco enough to choke you to death with a Charleston chew," and "Sorry Doc but I been crazy, there is no way that you can save me."[64]

**"Forgot About Dre," Verse 2**

So what do you say to somebody you hate
Or anyone tryna bring trouble your way
Wanna resolve things in a bloodier way
Just study your tape of NWA.
One day I was walking by
With a walkman on
When I caught a guy giving me an awkward eye
And strangled him off in the parking lot with his Karl Kani
I don't give a fuck if it's dark or not
I'm harder than me tryna park a Dodge
But I'm drunk as fuck
Right next to a humungous truck in a two car garage
Hopping out wit two broken legs
Tryna walk it off
Fuck you too bitch call the cops

[64] Although this song was released very early in Eminem's career, it is representative of the public persona that has made him famous. He is well known for violent, over-the-top lyrics. I will discuss his persona further in Chapter 5.

I'ma kill you and them loud ass muthafuckin barking dogs
And when the cops came through
Me and Dre stood next to a burnt down house
Wit a can full of gas and a hand full of matches
And still weren't found out
From here on out it's the Chronic 2
Startin today and tomorrows the new
And I'm still loco enough
To choke you to death with a Charleston chew
Slim shady
Hotter then a set of twin babies
In a Mercedes Benz wit the windows up
And the temp goes up to the mid 80's
Calling men ladies
Sorry Doc but I been crazy
There is no way that you can save me
It's ok go with him Hailey

Eminem further personalizes this verse with his use of sound effects. A variety of sound effects can be heard throughout this verse, further separating Eminem's performance with that of Dr. Dre's in the first verse. For example, the sound effects of someone being strangled while Eminem recites the line "And strangled him off in the parking lot with his Karl Kani." Another example can be heard with the sound effect of barking dogs when Eminem recites the line "I'ma kill you and them loud ass muthafuckin barking dogs." A man can be heard screaming when Eminem says "And I'm still loco enough to choke you to death with a Charleston chew." Eminem also inserts his own vocal interjections and sound effects. For example, he makes interjections such as "hey" and "what?" at the end of some lines. In addition to this, he vocally imitates the sound of a record scratching at the beginning of the line in which he calls himself by the name of his alter-ego, "Slim Shady." These sound effects help reinforce the over-the-top nature of his lyrics and help place his lyrics within the realm of parody.[65]

[65] I will further discuss this aspect of Eminem's music in Chapter 5.

In summary, Dr. Dre and Eminem present two very different, yet parallel vocal practices in the song "Forgot About Dre." Both artists follow rap's conventions, but they each create very different personas, not only through their lyrics, but also through their vocal presentations. Their lyric and vocal performances in this song reflect two parallel, but differing masculinities. Dr. Dre presents the listener with a verbal and sonic picture of himself as a confident, accomplished, black MC and producer. In contrast, Eminem lyrically and sonically presents himself as violent, slightly crazy, white MC. The ways in which vocal delivery can signify these aspects of raced and gendered identity will be explored throughout this dissertation. I will now turn to a very different example of rap vocality to illustrate the wide variety of techniques used in rap vocal production.

***Lil Jon: "Get Low"***

The song "Get Low" by Lil' Jon features the voices of a number of MCs, often rapping in unison, or presenting overlapping phrases, thus presenting the listener with an interesting combination of vocal qualities.[66] Lil' Jon is the lead MC on the track, backed by the other two members of his group, the Eastside Boys. The guest artists on the track are two MCs known as the Yin Yang Twins.

The song's introduction consists of a simple vocalized melody set to the following syllables: "Brrr dum dum dum, dum da da da da dum." The rhythm is quite simple, consisting of quarters, dotted quarters, and eighths, set in common time, and the tempo is moderate. There are several voices present at this time, but the main melody is performed by one of the Yin Yang Twins who sustains the pitches through their full note value. The first syllable of the line involves a rolling of the tongue, creating an interesting textural

[66] "Get Low" was released on the following album: Lil' Jon and the Eastside Boys, *Kings of Crunk*, Island B00006GA4S, 2002.

effect. The melody is performed in a low register and repeated four times, before a high pitched yell ushers in the pre-chorus.

The pre-chorus is performed similarly to the introduction, with one person as the primary rapper and others doubling lines or interjecting a few words or sound effects. The lyrics of the pre-chorus are delivered by a low-pitched, rough voice, containing a scratchiness that seems to be generated in the throat:

> Three, six, nine, Standing real fine
> Move it to you suck it to me one more time
> Get low, Get low (x3)

High-pitched yells and catcalls are interjected, helping to create a party atmosphere as these rappers tell women to "get low," meaning to get low on the dance floor.

The pre-chorus leads directly into the chorus, which features a rapper with a slightly smoother voice shouting the lyrics in a higher register:[67]

> To the window, to the wall
> To the sweat drip down my balls
> To all these bitches crawl
> To all skeet skeet motherfucker
> All skeet skeet goddamn
> To all skeet skeet motherfucker
> All skeet skeet goddamn[68]

The lower, rough voice from the pre-chorus repeats either part or all of each line, thus reinforcing the explicit sexuality of the lyrics. It is not always the same rough, low voice that echoes the final words of the phrase. In most instances it is one of the Yin Yang Twins, but a couple of these repetitions are made by Lil' Jon, who has an equally low-pitched, rough voice. Lil' Jon's voice can be distinguished, however, because he often

[67] His register here would fall in the middle range for men, not high-pitched, but higher-pitched than the register used for the pre-chorus.
[68] Skeet is commonly understood as male ejaculation.

inserts a characteristic pitch inflection on held words. This pitch inflection involves a quick motion to a higher pitch and then back again, emphasizing the vowel sound in a word. For example, Lil' Jon can be heard repeating the word "goddamn," at the end of the line, "All skeet skeet goddamn," raising the pitch on the "a" sound. This pitch inflection is also typically accompanied by a slight increase in volume. The higher voice in the chorus sounds raw, almost strained, which combined with the lower voices, has the effect of sounding aggressive. The aggressiveness is paralleled with lyrics, such as "to all these bitches crawl." The aggressiveness is particularly emphasized here because the repetition of the word "crawl" by the lower voice at the end of the phrase is performed almost as a growl.

The overall feeling established in the song's pre-chorus and chorus is continued in the verses. The beginning of the first verse is performed by one of the Yin Yang Twins, the Twin with the low-pitched, extremely rough vocal quality. His flow is speech-effusive, but most of the lines are kept within the phrase. There is not necessarily a lot of energy in his voice and his volume level and tempo are moderate. His attacks on syllables are not particularly harsh and his delivery is not clipped. His low, rough, scratchy vocal quality, however, does make his delivery sound aggressive. This is problematic when taking the lyrics into account, which describe his thoughts about and encounters with a woman at a club:

> Shortie crunk so fresh so clean
> Can she fuck? That question been harassing me
> In the mind, this bitch is fine
> I done came to the club about fiftyith eleven times
> Now can I play with your pantyline?
> The club owner said I need to calm down
> Security guard go to sweating me now
> We got drunk then a motherfucker threaten me now

Midway through the verse, the second Yin Yang Twin takes over the primary vocal delivery. The lyrics continue along the same lines, however, gradually becoming more assertive and aggressive towards women:

> She getting crunk in the club, I mean she work
> Then I like to see the female twerking
> Taking the clothes off buckey naked
> ATL, hoe don't disrespect it
> Pa pop yo pussy like this
> Cause yin yang twins in this bitch
> Lil Jon and the East side boys with
> And we all like to see ass and titties
> Now bring yo ass over here hoe
> And let me see you get low if you want this thug
> Now take it to the floor and if yo ass wanna act
> You can keep yo ass where you at

The vocal delivery here is quite different, however, as this Yin Yang Twin sustains the rapped syllables for their full value in a recitation style that is closer to singing than rapping. He does recite/sing the syllables all on the same pitch, though, and it is the fact that he sustains the notes that really sets his delivery style apart from his partner's. To sustain the notes in a sung style, the MC uses more air support from his diaphragm, also providing more energy in his voice. This energy is held in check, however, as the artist offers very little nuance and inflection in his delivery, causing his delivery to sound almost monotone. His phrases are also rather rhythmically static, not sounding directed towards a particular beat. Like his partner, this Twin's voice is also quite low, but his quality is much smoother. Despite the assertiveness of his lyrics, the smoothness of his voice and his manner of delivery make this one of the least aggressive-sounding moments in "Get Low."

After a repetition of the pre-chorus and chorus, we hear Lil' Jon and the Eastside Boys perform the second verse. This verse is characterized by very short, repeated lines:

Let me see you get low, you scared, you scared
Drop that ass to the floor, you scared, you scared
Let me see you get low, you scared, you scared
Drop that ass to the floor you scared, you scared

Drop that ass ya shake it fast ya
Pop that ass to the left and the right ya
Drop that ass ya shake it fast ya
Pop that ass to the left and the right ya

Now back, back, back it up
a back, back, back it up
a back, back, back it up
a back, back, back it up

Now stop ( Oh) then wiggle with it
Now stop ( Oh) then wiggle with it
Now stop ( Oh) then wiggle with it
Now stop ( Oh) then wiggle with it

The lyrics in this verse order the woman/women in the song to dance sexually. They are recited aggressively by these MCs, an effect created by several different factors. Firstly, many of these lyrics are recited in unison, and as a result sound very powerful. Secondly, their volume and attack on the notes almost sounds as if they are shouting. Thirdly, their voices are all low-pitched and rough, resulting in an aggressive sound. When combining these factors with the assertiveness of the lyrics, these MCs present a very aggressive, controlling form of masculinity.

In general, the rhythmic flows used in this section are simplistic. The lyric phrases are generally contained within the musical phrase and, as I mentioned above, the lines tend to be short and repetitive. Although the lines recited by the Yin Yang Twins in verse one were slightly longer, in general, the rhythmic flows in this song are fairly straightforward. The song's appeal comes from the repetition of catchy lyrics and rhythms, as well as from the interesting use of vocal production. The juxtaposition of five different MCs' vocal deliveries within the song provides an interesting array of vocality.

Despite the fact that they all convey an aggressive masculinity through their lyrics and vocal deliveries, they manage to create a range of vocal sounds, only some of which I have discussed here. In addition to different qualities and styles of delivery, they double each other's lines, echo words and phrases, and use a variety of vocal sound effects such as shouting, tongue-rolling, and growling. These vocal techniques all play an important role in the signification of meanings in "Get Low."

Thus far, I have discussed only a limited range of vocal techniques used in rap music. Even within this array of techniques, a variety of performed identities can emerge. Dr. Dre, Eminem, and Lil' Jon and his crew all perform their masculinity in part through their vocal practices. The question of race also emerges in the case of Eminem since he is a white rapper performing in a predominantly black musical style.[69] Still further issues arise when we explore the vocal practices of female rappers. I will briefly discuss one example here to provide the reader with an introduction to how a female MC might construct her gendered identity.[70]

***Remy Ma: "Conceited"***

In the song "Conceited (There's Something About Remy)," Remy Ma puts forth a confident, yet relaxed feminine persona.[71] She constructs this persona through both lyrics and her vocal delivery. The song's lyrics describe all of the reasons why Remy Ma is conceited (see excerpt from verse two below):

**"Conceited," verse 2**

Now who's that peaking in my window
Nobody cause I live in a penthouse

[69] I will discuss rap's association with blackness in Chapter 2, and the role of white rappers in Chapter 5.
[70] I will discuss women's participation in rap more fully in Chapter 4.
[71] Remy Ma, *There's Something About Remy*, Universal B000CCBC5I, 2005.

Baby I'm sorry but I'm sexy
And all I want you to do is just bless me, lets see
This kid that I'm waiting on
He said he loves when my jeans look painted on
Wit a tight white tee, you ain't quite like me
Probably why I'm always getting hated on
Now shorty tryna push up on me like a wonder bra
Listen when I speak out I wouldn't want you take it wrong
Now number one I don't need you
Ya names Q I only see you when I see you
Listen two you never play me
Why is that, why is that?
Cause I'm such a fucking lady
And three is all about me I don't want to talk about it
If you'd like to hear it here it go
Here you go I wrote a song about it

According to Remy Ma, she is conceited because she is attractive, wealthy, and a skilled MC. The public persona performed by Remy is extremely self-assured, demonstrated by the fact that she refers to herself as "miraculous" and "phenomenal." Her lyrics not only describe the reasons she has to be confident, but also state that she will not be controlled by anyone; she is independent.

Remy Ma's confidence is expressed musically as well as lyrically. She recites the lyrics with a very smooth, low-pitched voice over a lulling musical backdrop that features a subtle beat and short, repetitive flute melody. Her confidence is displayed through the extremely relaxed manner in which she delivers her vocals. In terms of rhythmic flow, she presents fairly even lines that tend to remain within the boundaries of the phrase. Her lines are very much directed towards beat three, where she tends to place her end-rhymes. She does not rigidly enforce her rhyme scheme, however, and this is one factor that contributes to the relaxed feeling of her delivery. For example, in the first verse, she rhymes the first two lines with the syllables "to" and "al," from the word "unusual," (of course, it is the way she pronounces "al" that makes it rhyme with "to"). The next line

contains the internal rhymes of “state” and “great” at the sub-phrase level, but the end-rhyme does not match that of the previous or following line. The end of line four, however, rhymes with the end of lines one and two, ending with the word “do.” Line five contains neither internal rhymes nor an end-rhyme, but line six also rhymes with lines one, two, and four, ending with the word “you.” Lines seven and eight use the matching end-rhymes “up” and “fuck,” (the lyrics to the first half of verse one are provided below):

> See this ain't nothing that you used to
> Out of the ordinary unusual
> You gotta have the mind state like I'm so great
> Can't nobody do it like you do
> Miraculous, phenomenal
> And ain't nobody in here stopping you
> Show no love cause you what's up
> Look at ya self in the mirror like what the fuck

The aspect of Remy Ma’s delivery that most effectively conveys her attitude in this song is her vocal accentuation. The MC uses fairly soft attacks on syllables and stresses very few words. She also holds most pitches for their full value, stretching out her lyric delivery. This stretching out of words also affects her rhythmic delivery in that she has a tendency to slightly drag out some syllables, making some unequal note groupings (for example, a grouping of four sixteenth notes may not be delivered precisely). She uses some energy and breath support in order to sustain notes, but in terms of inflection, she manages to sound flat, almost monotone. This conveys not only a relaxed attitude, but also one of indifference.

In the song “Conceited,” Remy Ma articulates a performed identity that is extremely confident. Instead of employing an energetic, assertive identity, she portrays an attitude of indifference. This indifference tells the listener that she is so phenomenal (to use her words), that she does not care what anybody thinks of her. This very specific

female identity that Remy Ma is performing is only one of many different identities adopted by female MCs. What I wish to draw attention to here is the important role that her vocal delivery plays in the signification of meaning: vocality is a key aspect in the construction of her performed identity in this song. As I discussed in relation to the songs "Forgot About Dre," and "Get Low," vocal performance is a crucial aspect of conveying meanings in rap music. This project will explore a number of these vocal practices with specific reference to the ways in which they contribute to the construction of raced and gendered identities. I will explore some vocal conventions that have been established within the rap sphere, as well as some of the ways in which these conventions have been adhered to and deviated from by specific artists.

# Chapter 2

## Black Voices?: Rap Music and Race in America

Rap music has become increasingly entrenched in popular culture during the past few decades. Like many other popular music styles, such as rock and country, rap music is both reflective of the culture from which it is performed, as well as an influence on the thoughts and identities of its listeners. Rap's "blackness" is a point of reference, discussion, and contention among performers and fans, as well as rap's detractors, and is an extremely important aspect of rap's production and reception. Rap music developed as a mode of expression for black, urban youth, as part of the larger hip-hop movement, but has grown and changed with the spread of this style to the mainstream music industry as well as with rap's globalization.[72] The extent to which rap still sounds black and is still reflective of black, American, urban youth culture has been the subject of many debates.[73] To that end, many questions can be asked: What made rap sound black to begin with? Does it sound less black now? If so, why? What aspects of rap production and performance are rooted in African-American traditions? Is it a change in rap's production or a change in the fan base that might make it seem less reflective of black culture at this moment? For the record, I still believe that rap is presented as a

[72] There have been numerous studies done on rap music in various cultures, including: Tony Mitchell, ed, *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-hop outside the USA,* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001); Ian Maxwell, *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes: Hip Hop Down Under Comin' Upper,* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

[73] For further discussion on this subject, see Jason Tanz, *Other People's Property: A Shadow History of Hip-Hop in White America,* (New Work: Bloomsbury, 2007).

predominantly black musical style within the American music industry; however, the debates surrounding this point deserve some thought and explication. This chapter will interrogate some of these questions, focusing on the sonic realm of rap.

The fact that music can be a marker of gender, nationality, and race has been discussed from a variety of perspectives, including historical, ethnographic, and theoretical perspectives.[74] In recent years, scholars have explored the issue of race in relation to many styles of music from numerous global locations and different time periods. One reason why studies of race and music are so important is because audiences understand a range of musics in terms of race.[75] The interrogation of music as raced from a musicological perspective has a relatively short history because this important avenue of interrogation has only really been picked up over the last decade.[76] Collections of essays such as *Music and the Racial Imagination,* edited by Bohlman and Radano, *Western Music and its Others*, edited by Born and Hesmondhalgh, and *Western Music and Race,* edited by Julie Brown, are representative of a strong and growing interest in exploring how race is conveyed through and represented by musical sound.[77] As Brown has discussed, the majority of these studies have centered on three broad areas: "the anti-Semitic and so-called regeneration theories of Wagner, music and cultural policy of the Nazi period, and African American music."[78] My research in this chapter stems from the third category, African-American music, which has seen important contributions from

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[74] Julie Brown, "Music, History, Trauma: *Western Music and Race*, 1883-1933," in Western Music and Race, edited by Julie Brown, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xiv.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Philip V. Bohlman and Ronald Radano discuss this issue in the introduction to *Music and the Racial Imagination* , (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), as does Brown, 2007.
[77] Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, eds, *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
[78] Brown, xv.

scholars such as Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*; Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation*; and Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise.*[79]

My research picks up on the discussion threads that focus on how musical sounds can be raced in the 20th-21st century American context. The ways in which a voice can be a marker of race is particularly important in rap since it is a style of music in which the race of the participants is central to rap's overall aesthetic. Rap developed in an urban setting, and despite its widespread commercialization, and changing aesthetics within the rap community, it still retains strong ties to "life in the hood." For example, even for the MCs who embrace the commercial aspects of rap, showing off their "bling," there is still the idea that they worked their way up from the streets.[80] Historically, race has also been an important marker of rap, and various MCs have used it as a forum for social protest. A clear example of this can be seen with the Gangsta rap movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Gangsta rapper was an intensely political role. The negative themes of violence and crime were tied to a critique of police treatment of urban blacks and an overall resistance to existing social structures, such as life in the ghetto. One of the problems resulting from this form of protest was that Gangsta rap fueled racist stereotypes of black men as savage, violent, criminals.[81]

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[79] Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures From Bebop to Hip-Hop*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Other important studies include: Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and an early study by Phillip Tagg, "Open Letter: 'Black Music', Afro-American Music' and 'European Music,'" *Popular Music* 8/3 (October), 285-298.

[80] Bling is a term used to refer to flashy jewelry, a signifier of success in the rap world.

[81] Gangsta rap will be discussed further in Chapter 3. For further reading, see: Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Quinn, Eithne, *Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

Rap music has grown out of a particular history of African-American music. Although rap is in many ways different from the traditions of jazz, blues, gospel, soul, and R&B, it is also connected in many ways. Rap has developed in a specific climate of thinking about black music and black voices in the United States. This chapter draws on some of these connections to discuss how certain musical codes and conventions of rap are coded as black. This chapter will explore rap's blackness from a musical perspective: laying out some common codes and conventions. After interrogating the category of "black music" or "African-American music," I will discuss some of the ways in which black voices have been compared with white voices in American popular music. Then, I will lay out some conventions of blackness within rap through several analytical case studies. Finally, I will discuss the notion of "black authenticity" and some of the ways in which MCs link themselves to a historical lineage within hip-hop and African-American music.

**I. Musical Blackness**

In his chapter, "Elements of an analytic musicology of rock," Allan Moore summarizes some of the common strategies used to discuss vocal production in rock music.[82] He begins by summarizing some commonly discussed differences between "black" voices and "white" voices. Citing Dave Laing's description of James Taylor's vocal style, Moore observes that "the 'black' voice is demonstrative and communicates directly through the use of a wide variety of intonational and embellishing techniques."[83] By contrast, Moore describes the "white" voice as "restrained, gesturally restricted and

[82] Allan F. Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text: Developing a musicology of rock, 2nd edition* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2001).
[83] Ibid, 44. In this passage, Moore cites Dave Laing, "Troubadours and stars," in Laing et al. (1975), 68.

*apparently* uninvolved."[84] I should emphasize that Moore is not putting forth his own opinions on "black" vs "white" voices, he is encapsulating some commonly held views within rock criticism. What is important about the above contrast between "black" and "white" voices is that this contrast is representative of longstanding stereotypes that place black music in the physical realm and white music in the intellectual realm. These stereotypes have been present throughout the development of American popular music, and can be seen in scholarly and journalistic writings on swing, jazz, blues, gospel, and rock 'n' roll. An example of this can be found in Marvin Freedman's article, "Black Music's on Top; White Jazz Stagnant," from a 1940 issue of *Down Beat*.[85] In this article, Freedman contrasts "sweet" commercial dance band jazz with a newer, "hot" style of "swinging" jazz.[86] He connects the "sweet" jazz to white musicians and the "hot" jazz to black musicians. With an obvious bias towards "black jazz," Freedman describes "white jazz" as "colder, cleaner, more conscious" and "black jazz" as "richer, looser, and more relaxed."[87] As David Brackett has observed, "Freedman identifies black musicians with the body and natural spontaneity, while he identifies whites with the mind, calculation, and 'femininity.'"[88]

This tradition of thought was widespread in the first half of the 20th century, and was tied to essentialized notions concerning the voice. Many music critics and scholars believed that black and white musical traditions were tied to physical or biological

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[84] Ibid.
[85] According to David Bracket, *Down Beat* was "one of the first publications in the United States to cater to jazz connoisseurs," see "Big Band Swing Music," in *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates*, 2nd edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 15.
[86] David Brackett summarizes these ideas nicely in his introduction to this article (Brackett 15).
[87] Marvin Freedman, "Black Music's on Top; White Jazz Stagnant," in *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates*, 2nd edition, edited by David Brackett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 16. This article was originally published in *Down Beat*, April 1st, 1940, p7.
[88] Brackett, 15.

differences. The article by Freedman, discussed above, is a perfect example of this. As Brackett has observed about the article, "Clearly Freedman recognizes that the relationship between race and musical style is important in jazz, but he never distinguishes between whether these differences are social or biological, thus leading to a type of stereotyping that modern cultural theorists might describe as 'essentialist.'"[89] Freedman's essentialist position is provided at the outset of the article when he states: "you can still tell the color of a jazz musician by listening to the music he plays."[90]

Research in more recent years has disrupted this highly problematic notion of raced voices, emphasizing the socio-cultural realm as the source of differences in musical practice. Paul Oliver, for example, has argued against the idea of innate musical abilities being linked to race.[91] He discusses the fact that darker skinned jazz musicians are not considered superior to lighter skinned jazz musicians, thereby demonstrating that "the creativity of jazz musicians cannot be related directly to the measure of blackness in their skin pigmentation."[92] According to Oliver, it then logically follows that "aptitude for music, or any other aesthetic expression, is not racially predestined. When taken to its conclusion, an argument for innate abilities becomes not racial, but racist."[93]

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[89] Ibid..

[90] Freedman, 15. Despite the essentialist perspective that comes forward throughout the article, there is one passage where Freedman indicates that "white or black is [not] just a difference in the color of the musician. It's a difference in the music itself" (Freedman, 116). This suggests that the author has at least considered the possibility that musical differences are not strictly biological.

[91] Paul Oliver, ed, *Black Music in Britain: Essays on the Afro-Asian Contribution to Popular Music*, (Bristol PA: Open University Press, 1990). We must keep in mind that this source was written by a British author. Conceptions of race are quite different in the U.S. and Britain as a result of Britain's history of colonization and the United States' history of slavery.

[92] Ibid, 6.

[93] Ibid.

David Hatch and Stephen Millward take up the dichotomy of black vs. white music in their chapter entitled, "What is Black Music?" [94] They have argued that definitions of blackness differ depending on geographical region, time period, etc. Hatch and Millward used the example of legal definitions of blackness in the United States to demonstrate their point. According to these authors, rigid distinctions between black and white skin color "ignores not only the legal but the social realities in the United States."[95] They feel that "such factors render particularly nonsensical any equation of race with musical (or any other) ability."[96]

Phillip Tagg has put forth a similar argument in his "Open Letter," published in the journal *Popular Music* in 1989.[97] In his critique of the use of categories such as "black music" and "European music," Tagg points to the absence of commonly understood definitions of these terms. He believes that the meanings of these terms are often taken for granted: "We are all expected to know exactly what everybody else means and to have a clear 'common sense' notion of what is black or African about 'black music' or 'Afro-American' music and white or European about 'white' or 'European' music."[98] Tagg teases out some factors that seem to be common in definitions of black music, including the race, ethnicity, and skin color of the people producing the music, as

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[94] This chapter appears in their study entitled, *From Blues to Rock: An Analytical History of Pop Music*, (Wolfeboro, NH: Manchester University Press, 1987). I discovered this reference, along with Oliver 1990 in Chapter 4, "'Black Music': Genres and Social Constructions," of Brian Longhurst's *Popular Music and Society*, 2nd edition (Malden MA: Polity Press, 2007).

[95] Hatch and Millward, 117. With regard to the legal definition of black Americans, they state: "Legally speaking, the definition as to what constituted a black person varied from state to state under the 'Jim Crow' laws. In Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi, anyone with a 'visible' and/or 'appreciable' degree of 'Negro blood' was subject to segregational laws as a black person whereas in Indiana and Louisiana the color line was drawn at one-eighth and one-sixteenth Negro blood respectably" (117).

[96] Ibid.

[97] Phillip Tagg, "Open Letter: 'Black Music', Afro-American Music' and 'European Music,'" (*Popular Music* 8/3, October 1989), 285-298.

[98] Ibid, 285.

well as the geographical, social, and historical locations where the music is produced.[99] How these socio-cultural elements are understood and defined by those of us employing them differs depending on the context. Tagg also explores the specific musical characteristics that tend to be characterized as black.[100] These characteristics include blue notes, call-and-response, rhythm, and improvisation. Tagg deconstructs these musical characteristics as strictly black, or African-American, thus disrupting the notion that there even is such a thing as 'black' music. Despite all of his criticisms, I do not believe that Tagg is stating that there is no such thing as 'black' music or 'European' music, but rather, he is asking us to question our use of these terms, and to define how we are using them.

Paul Gilroy's work has been particularly valuable to this debate. Gilroy agrees that there is no biological or "natural" core to black music (and black culture more broadly), however, he does not believe that this means that there is no such thing as black culture or black music. According to Gilroy, "the self-identity, political culture, and grounded aesthetics that distinguish black communities have often been constructed through their music and the broader cultural and philosophical meanings that flow from its production."[101] Gilroy argues for an "anti-anti-essentialism that sees racialized subjectivity as the product of the social practices that supposedly derive from it."[102]

Despite the problems in defining black music, one cannot ignore both rap's roots in black communities, and the continued perception amongst many fans and participants

[99] Ibid, 286-288.
[100] Ibid, 288-291.
[101] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 102.
[102] Ibid.

of rap as a black musical style. My approach to studying rap's blackness has been strongly influenced by Kyra Gaunt:

> My stance is that musical blackness is a culturally transmitted set of practices, communications, and traditions, where embodied language and orality…play a significant role in the social construction and knowledge of being African American in a sphere of culture and identifications that is dominated by music.[103]

These ideas are rooted in Gilroy's understanding of black cultural practices as being constituted through social practices and definitions. As Gaunt has observed, the "black" and "popular" in "black musical culture is historical, cultural, and negotiated through gender roles and meanings."[104] It is precisely these sets of raced conventions, roles, and meanings that I will identify in rap's musical practices.

Some of the problems tied to describing rap as a black musical medium, rooted in social processes and definitions, have to do with the wide range of listeners, and the variety of participants within a global context. To begin with, I am not suggesting that all rap music is coded as black, but rather, that the majority of American rap produced and sold in the commercial mainstream is coded as black. I am referring to a very specific type of rap music that has become dominant within the U.S. mainstream.[105] With regard to white audiences, the representations of black performers becomes even more problematic, since these images are being commercially produced and marketed to white, suburban, teenaged audiences. One of the problems associated with this is the objectification of black identity for the purpose of entertainment, a process that has a lengthy and racist history in the United States. Unfortunately, this issue is beyond the

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[103] Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes From Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 38.
[104] Ibid, 35.
[105] Some of these conventions are present in underground rap and global rap as well.

scope of this particular chapter; I will discuss it further in Chapter 3, though a more thorough investigation can be found in Jason Tanz's 2007 study, *Other People's Property: A Shadow History of Hip-Hop in White America*.[106] All of these factors do not negate the fact that mainstream American rap music is produced by predominantly black artists, and is seen as a location for the performance of black identity.[107]

To characterize what constitutes a black voice or a white voice within the American rap sphere, I will discuss how both black and white voices have been described in earlier forms of American popular music. This chapter does not provide an in-depth history of African-American music, but rather draws on these traditions as they are relevant to rap's musical conventions. I will compare similar trends and modes of interpreting the differences between black and white voices in rap music and earlier African-American popular music.

In the context of American popular music, what has been categorized as 'black' sound, (in this case, 'black' referring to African-American musical traditions), is not necessarily always performed by African-American people. Although a history of black sound in the United States is necessarily linked to a history of racism, not all performers with a black sound are African American. Historically, most of the musicians who have been described as having a black sound have been dark-skinned, but there are also exceptions to this. Some of these exceptions will be referenced in Chapter 5.

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[106] These issues of representation are further complicated by the fact that most of the major record executives are middle to upper class white males. Other sources that explore these issues include: Lott, 1995; Rogin 1996; bell hooks, "Performance as a Site of Opposition." In *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance*. Edited by Catherine Ugwu, (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1995); Ed Guerrero, "The black Man on our Screens and the Empty Space in Representation," in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, edited by Thelma Golden and Jean-Michel Basquiet, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995).

[107] Perry has discussed rap as a black, American genre, taking many of these arguments into account; Perry, 2004, Chapter 1, particularly pages 10-13.

Brian Ward's extensive historical study on the social and political meanings present in black American musical practice proves to be a useful starting point for discussing what constitutes black sound.[108] One of the major premises behind Ward's study is that, in the United States, there is a "conventionally recognized spectrum of musical techniques and devices which ranges from nominally 'black' to nominally 'white' poles."[109] Ward acknowledges Tagg's critiques of these categories, as I discussed above, however, Ward believes that a black-to-white musical spectrum is a useful conceptual framework despite its shortcomings.[110] One of his primary arguments for maintaining this spectrum is that "both black and white audiences have cognitively accepted its existence."[111] A black-to-white musical spectrum allows for the discussion of certain musical styles and sounds alongside their perceived racial connections. We see these types of descriptors in early discussions of jazz and blues, as was the case with Freedman's article discussed above, with R&B, rock 'n' roll, and pop in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as with disco, R&B, and funk in the 1970s and 1980s. These associations of sound with race have continued to the present, and continue to be relevant in the study of rap music.

As Ward has discussed, music aesthetics were separated into "black" and "white" for commercial purposes in the 1950s.[112] There were separate Billboard charts for "Race," and, from 1949 onwards, "Rhythm and Blues," symbolizing the routine segregation of blacks in America.[113] Musically speaking, racial assumptions also shaped the nature of

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[108] Brian Ward, Just *My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations*,. (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1998).
[109] Ibid, 5.
[110] Ibid, 6.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid, Ch. 1, especially p. 28-29.
[113] Ibid, 28.

acceptable recordings. According to Ward, "Black artists recording for the black market were usually expected to conform to preconceptions about black style which held that r&b should never be anything but raw, relentlessly uptempo, sexually risqué or riotously funny."[114] These stereotypes continued to be reinforced with white R&B consumption and imitation in the 1950s and 1960s. According to Ward, "it all took place within a thoroughly conventional set of white stereotypes about blacks and their culture. Whites habitually reduced r&b, a richly diverse musical genre which embraced every aspect of human experience, to the hypersexual, sensual and instinctual characteristics they had associated with and projected onto blacks for centuries."[115]

Stereotypes of black music as hypersexual and sensual have been present throughout a good deal of the 20th century history of American popular music. As observed with Freedman's 1940 article, "Black Music's on Top; White Jazz Stagnant," the idea of black jazz as hotter and more spontaneous was certainly present during the Swing era. Ward has discussed the fact that these stereotypes persisted throughout 1940s and 1950s R&B. As rock and roll began to reach a young, white audience in the mid 1950s, a clear link emerged between sensual musical characteristics and stereotypes of the hypersexual black man. Opponents of rock and roll denounced the style of music as "sensuous Negro music," that threatened white, Christian values.[116] The fear of white women being seduced by the black sounds of rock and roll was contrary to the racist "morals" of many of rock's antagonists.[117] Protests were often tied to notions of racial purity and "the

[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid, 39.
[116] Ibid, 103.
[117] This opposition was particularly prevalent in the South (Ward, 103).

horror of black defilement of white youth and womanhood."[118] It was very likely that these same fears lead to an attack on Nat King Cole in 1956 as he gave a concert to an all-white audience in Birmingham, Alabama.[119] The attackers rushed the stage just after Cole had begun to sing his third song of the night, "Little Girl."[120]

The perceived difference between black artists and white artists can also be demonstrated in the variety of tactics that artists, supported by their record companies, used to "crossover" from the black charts to the white charts, thus reaching a larger audience. In the 1950s, many black groups or artists "whitened" their sound in order to crossover.[121] Record companies attempted to attract a white audience by "sweetening the sound and sense of r&b."[122] This involved smoother vocal lines with a clearer quality and "appropriate lyrics," leaning more toward romance than sexuality. This "cleaner" sound involved softening "the customary rasps of black singers."[123] An example of this cleaner sound can be heard with The Platters:

> With their melodramatic, highly orchestrated ballads, many of which were old standards like "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," the Platters indicated precisely the nature of the transformations black r&b needed to undergo in order to get coverage on pop radio and attract a wider white market.[124]

The softening of R&B also occurred via the lyrics. This can be clearly seen with the teen group scene of the mid-to-late 1950s, which "largely ignored 'adult' material and concentrated almost exclusively on evoking a juvenile world of specifically teen trauma

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[118] Ibid, 102.
[119] Ibid, 94 and 102.
[120] Ibid, 94.
[121] Ibid, Chapters 1-4.
[122] Ibid, 54.
[123] Ibid, 39.
[124] Ibid, 51.

and romantic delight."[125] On the black-to-white spectrum, "blacker" groups sang about more explicitly sexual themes, and "sweeter," meaning "whiter," groups sang about romance. This created a romance, ribaldry divide, where raunchier themes emerged from the blues tradition and sweet, romantic themes were geared toward a larger commercial, "pop" audience.[126] Artists who were "safe" were successful because they "generally avoided projecting the sort of dark sexuality which alarmed white adults and often excluded them from pop radio playlists."[127]

Successful crossover involved a non-threatening image as well as a "whiter" sound. For example, Ward discusses the fact that "The Platters with their neat tuxedos and pretty girl singer (Zola Taylor) seemed reassuringly safe when contrasted with Hank Ballard and the Midnighters and their odes to 'Annie" and her sexual adventures."[128] He discusses a similar image and crossover success with regard to teen groups of the late 1950s:

> Smiling young blacks sporting neat tuxedos or collegiate sweaters and singing devotional love songs were simply more palatable to many whites and the media than rock and rollers like Bo Diddley, whose fierce masculinity was forged in the forbidding black belt of McComb, Mississippi, and tempered in the blues-soaked South Side of Chicago….These adult singers stirred deeply rooted white fears of black sexual and, by extension, political aggression.[129]

[125] Ibid, 83. Songs like "Gee," "Shaboom" and "Earth Angel" crossed over to the white charts, as well as Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers' "Why do Fools Fall in Love."
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid, 52.
[128] Ibid, 51.
[129] Ibid, 83.

Little Richard wore makeup and glittery suits, adopting an androgynous appearance so that he would not be a threat to white people, but he too was often lumped in with adult, male rock and rollers, who were seen as more threatening than the teen vocal groups.[130] Nelson George describes a similar R&B-to-pop crossover process in the early 1980s, with artists such as Michael Jackson and Prince.[131]

The "whitening" of the R&B sound also took place with white covers of black songs.[132] Deena Weinstein has discussed how white covers in the mid-1950s transformed R&B vocals in the direction of pop: "Singers' voices were chosen for polish rather than rawness, and their enunciation of the lyrics was clear, not gritty, as in many of the originals."[133] Weinstein further emphasizes differences between black R&B songs and their white cover versions by discussing the role of the instruments: "in contrast to the R&B arrangements, pop clearly segregated the vocal and instrumental parts of the song, subordinating the instruments. This Tin Pan Alley style allowed the Crew Cuts, the McGuire Sisters, and Pat Boone, among others, to have hit recordings covering more raw, mainly black, and generally indie-label artists."[134]

Ward also discusses an interesting musical-political connection in the mid-late 1960s, when African-American musicians attempted to "darken" their sound by reaching back to African roots.[135] Ward contextualizes this within the civil rights movement of the 1960s. According to Ward, "the mid-late 1960s witnessed a number of musical attempts

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[130] Ibid, 53 and 83.
[131] R&B crossover in the 1980s parallels 1950s crossover in many ways. For further discussion, see: Nelson George, Chapter 6, "Crossover: The Death of Rhythm and Blues," in *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).
[132] Ward, 44.
[133] Deanna Weinstein, "The History of Rock's Pasts Through Rock Covers," in *Mapping the Beat: Popular Music and Contemporary Theory*, Edited by Thomas Swiss, John Sloop, and Andrew Herman, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 140.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ward, 346-347,

to further 'darken' the sounds of a soul music that was already rooted deep in the rich, dark soil of black gospel."[136] What is most interesting about this movement for the purposes of this study is the deliberate placing of black music on the black side of the black-white spectrum. As I will discuss below, a similar aesthetic is involved with certain forms of rap music, for example, Gangsta rap.

Ward credits James Brown for succeeding more than any other artist "in 'blackening' the sound of his soul in the mid-late 1960s," eventually progressing to funk music by the early 1970s.[137] Brown's music pared down harmonic and melodic elements to emphasize the rhythm and physicality of his music. Rhythms carried the songs, but also "became master of his melody, harmony and lyrics. Again, this emphasis on rhythm was conventionally associated with the African end of the African-American musical spectrum."[138] Later musicians followed Brown in prioritizing rhythm: "Melodic and harmonic instruments were often pressed into percussive service to create intricate latticeworks of heavily syncopated rhythms."[139] Rap music picks up on this trend of prioritizing rhythm, taking it a step further. Vocals were percussive in the funk period, but this is taken to the extreme with rap, where the voice is more percussive than melodic. Rap reduces the importance of the melodic and harmonic even more than funk did, since the beat and rhythmic vocal delivery are the main musical elements.[140]

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[136] Ibid, 346. Larry Star and Christopher Waterman reference Ray Charles as a precursor to the soul movement of the 1960s. Star and Waterman describe the final portion of the song, "What'd I Say," as featuring shouts and groans in call and response with a female chorus, "to produce music that simultaneously evokes a wild Southern Baptist service and the sounds of a very earthly sexual ecstasy," Larry Star, *American Popular Music*, 2nd edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 274-275.
[137] Ward, 350.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[140] It is interesting to consider that many rap artists have sampled the break from funk songs as the basis of their beat.

Before relating these points to current black vocal practice in rap, I will briefly mention some of the other research that connects rap music to an African-American musical tradition. Scholars such as Tricia Rose, Cheryl Keyes, Imani Perry, and many others, have all linked rap to previous musical practices.[141] I will only briefly summarize some of their findings, since these scholars have focused on very different musical characteristics than I will focus on in the rest of this chapter. Scholars such as Rose have connected rap not only to African-American musical practices, but also to African and African-derived musical practices. Rose focuses on rhythmic aspects of African and African-derived musical practices, comparing these practices with Western music's emphasis on harmony.[142] She also focuses on repetition and circularity as key features of rap's musical organization.[143] According to Rose, it is the "hybrids between black music, black oral forms, and technology that are at the core of rap's sonic and oral power."[144]

Perry has situated rap within a black musical tradition, from a primarily cultural standpoint. Perry draws connections between blues, jazz, and rap by discussing the fact that all of these forms feature an improvisational aesthetic.[145] In hip-hop, the improvisation aesthetic manifests itself as freestyling.[146] Even non-improvised flows often have a spontaneous feel to them, giving the impression that they are improvised over the existing musical track. Following Rose, Perry also observes that "Rap's fascination with and deep reliance on the break and its repetition constitutes it as music

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[141] Rose, 1994; Perry, 2204; Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness,* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).
[142] Rose 1994, 65-67.
[143] Ibid, 69.
[144] Ibid, 64.
[145] Perry 2004, 33.
[146] This is of course tied to the notion of black music as more spontaneous, as I discussed above.

built on the central drama of traditional black music."[147] Based on Samuel Floyd's work in *The Power of Black Music*, Perry discuss the various ways in which rap fits within the call-response trope.[148]

**II. Black (Male) Vocal Practice in Rap**

Although there are many facets of rap production that connect to African-American music history, I will focus on two: firstly, a rough, raw sound that has been historically stereotyped as black; and secondly, an exaggerated sexuality and sensuality. My reason for emphasizing these, over the more obvious rhythmic connection, is twofold: firstly, because several studies that explore rhythmic connections already exist; and secondly, because of the complex ways in which these stereotyped sounds are performed in rap.[149] Mainstream rap tends to exploit these stereotypes of roughness and explicit sexuality, through image and lyrics as well as music. Sometimes the exploitation of these stereotypes is deliberate, subverting their meanings, and at other times, the stereotypes are simply negatively reinforced, contributing to the many problems in the representations of African Americans. The performance of these characteristics, as well as other "black" characteristics, is how artists and record companies place rap on the black side of the black-white spectrum

A rough, gritty vocal quality, which has been associated with many earlier "black" sounds, is a desirable feature in rap music. A rough quality can contribute to a hard, edgy sound, which when combined with lyrics and image, can give the impression that a rapper is tough and masculine. Blackness is intimately tied to masculinity in the rap

[147] Perry, 33.
[148] Ibid, 33-37. Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
[149] Rhythm has been dealt with more extensively by Krims 2000, Miyakawa 2005, and Adams 2008.

sphere, and these are often the two criteria by which credibility is measured. Female rappers and rappers with various other ethnic backgrounds often have to negotiate the raced and gendered boundaries of American rap. Both Perry and George have discussed rap as an extension of African-American maleness.[150] The representations of rap as a predominantly black, male musical style are tied to larger socio-cultural issues in the United States. For example, Gaunt has observed that patterns of differentiation and sameness "are reduced to black masculinity as the primary, if not sole, signifier of race in mass popular culture."[151] Gaunt also cites Gilroy: "Today's crisis of black social life is routinely represented as a crisis of masculinity alone. The integrity of the race is defined primarily as the integrity of its menfolk."[152] I will discuss some of the ways in which women and Caucasian rappers negotiate the raced boundaries of rap in Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 3, I will also flesh out connections between race and masculinity; however, it is necessary to think about these connections with regard to raced vocal conventions in rap.

Rough, gritty vocal qualities can be achieved in a number of ways, for a number of purposes. I will take the reader through several case studies below in order to better illustrate a few common techniques. Some rappers have capitalized on their low-pitched rough vocal timbres. This can be enhanced in rap through specific techniques in the delivery, such as producing the sound gutturally, in the throat, and using harder attacks on syllables. A rough vocal quality is sometimes, but not always, tied to aggression, a

[150] Perry, 2004, Chapter 5; Nelson George, *Hip Hop America,* (New York: Viking, 1998), Introduction, particularly xiii.
[151] Gaunt, 2006, 114.
[152] Gilroy, 1993, 7; cited in Gaunt, 114-115.

further signifier of masculinity in rap. Aggressiveness of delivery can also be achieved by the speed of lyric delivery and a louder dynamic.[153]

The idea of an exaggeratedly sexual, sensual sound has been redefined in the context of rap. The idea of "hot" rhythms has carried through from earlier traditions. As I have mentioned before, many of rap's beats are looped samples taken from the breaks of funk songs, redefining both the lyrical context and the vocal delivery. The stereotype of black music as being exaggeratedly sexual is perhaps exaggerated even further with the sexually explicit lyrics of rap. Sexual vocals and sound effects in rap easily rival Donna Summers' suggestive moaning from her 1975 Hit "Love to Love You Baby."[154] Lyrics and delivery can also be sexually aggressive and misogynist attitudes are widely circulated in the rap community. A seductive delivery is also common, emerging in artists who adopt the role of a pimp or a player.[155] Rap music is one of the most controversial types of music of this generation and it is also one of the most highly sexualized forms of popular music at this moment. It is these lyrics, sound effects, rhythmic vocal delivery, and beats that have couples grinding on the dance floors at clubs.[156]

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[153] Rap is not the only form of current popular music that relies on a rough vocal timbre. Rock, often thought of as a predominantly white form, can also feature extremely rough vocal delivery. Studies on this include Robert Walser, Running *with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press); Suzanne Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex," in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, ed. Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley (Zürich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999); and Walter Everett, *The Foundations of Rock: From "Blue Suede Shoes" to "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes,"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[154] The sexual references in this song are discussed in Andrew Kopkind, "The Dialectic of Disco: Gay Music Goes Straight," originally published in *The Village Voice* (February 12, 1979). Reprinted in David Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul reader: Histories and Debates*, 2nd edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[155] These roles will be further discussed later in this chapter, as well as in Chapter 3.

[156] Reggaeton and other Latin influences genres are also highly sexualized. Recently, artists have fused reggaeton with rap to produce highly sexual songs (songs that inspire sexual dance moves, even in public venues, based on the beat, lyrics, and vocal delivery). For further reading on reggaeton see: Raquel Z.

I will now turn to several case studies that demonstrate how some of these stereotypes emerge in rap vocal delivery. I will begin by exploring two very different performances using a rough, gritty vocal quality: "Soul Survivor," by Young Jeezy and "Touch It" by Busta Rhymes. I will then turn to songs by Snoop Dogg and T.I. that feature either the sensual delivery of a pimp or player or a more exaggerated sexuality.

### *Young Jeezy: "Soul Survivor"*

Southern rapper, Young Jeezy is known for having a particularly rough vocal quality when he raps. Despite some earlier recordings, he only really broke out into the mainstream in 2005 with the release of a solo album, entitled, *Thug Motivation 101*, as well as an album with the group Boyz in da Hood.[157] Young Jeezy's music tends to deal with the themes of crime, poverty, and life in the hood, themes that connect to aspects of his personal biography.[158] His years spent in the Southern drug trade have given him the necessary street credibility to go along with his skills as an MC.

The song "Soul Survivor," off of *Thug Motivation 101*, is an excellent example of how Young Jeezy marries rough, raw sounding vocals with narratives of life in the hood.[159] The song features Akon, a hip-hop singer, who has been featured as a guest artist on countless rappers' tracks.[160] I refer to Akon as a "hip-hop singer," rather than an R&B

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Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernande, *Reggaeton*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

[157] The album released by Boyz in da Hood was self-titled. Young Jeezy has released two more solo albums during his career: *The Inspiration: Thug Motivation 102* (2006), and *The Recession* (2008). For more information on Young Jeezy's early career as a local entrepreneur and MC in Atlanta, see: Shaheem Reid, "Young Jeezy," *MTV News*, (2005) http://www.mtv.com/news/yhif/young_jeezy/.

[158] Biographical information on Young Jeezy, particularly with reference to his childhood can be found in: Bonsa Thompson, "I'm a King," *XXL* (2005), www.xxlmag.com/Features/2005/oct/jeezy/index.html.

[159] This song helped launch Young Jeezy's career. Young Jeezy, *Let's Get It Thug Motivation 101,* Def Jam B000A0GPR2, 2005.

[160] He has been featured as a singer on tracks by Eminem, Bone Thugs and Harmony, Three 6 Mafia, Wyclef Jean, and Kardinall Official just to name a few.

or pop singer who is simply featured on rappers' tracks. Akon holds a unique position in the mainstream rap sphere because he has made a name for himself primarily within this realm. His first major label release, *Trouble* (2004), includes "West African-styled vocals with East Coast- and Southern-styled beats."[161] His vocal quality has a very unique sound and I believe that this, combined with the hip-hop beats, has helped solidify a place for him within the rap sphere. Akon considers himself a hip-hop artist and includes feature rappers on many of his own tracks.[162] Akon's history with crime, including a stint in jail, also provides him with credibility in the rap sphere. This aspect of his identity comes forward in "Soul Survivor."

After the song's introduction, which contains a shout-out to the performing artists, Akon enters, singing the chorus:[163]

> If you lookin' for me I'll be on the block
> With my thang cocked possibly sittin' on a drop (Now)
> 'Cuz I'm a rida (Yeah)
> I'm just a Soul Survivor (Yeah)
> 'Cause er'body know the game don't stop
> Tryin' to make it to the top for your ass get popped (Now)
> If you a rida (Yeah)
> Or just a Soul Survivor[164]

The song's chorus describes a man waiting for a drug deal to go down, with his "thang," meaning gun, at the ready. It also references a continuing "game," referencing life, business, and getting ahead in a life of crime. You have to keep playing the game to "make it to the top." The lyric "soul survivor" references the fact that you have to be tough to survive in the hood, in this life of crime.

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[161] Akon, *Trouble*, SRC/Universal (2004). Quote from: Johnny Loftus, "Akon Biography," *All Music Guide*, http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:fzfoxqr0ldae~T1.
[162] "Akon Biography," *Akon Music*, http://www.akon-music.com/biography.html.
[163] It is extremely common for rap songs to begin with the artist shouting out his name, and/or the name(s) of the featured artists on the track.
[164] The bracketed words are interjections by Young Jeezy.

Akon sings the song's introduction and chorus in his signature style, blending a soulful melody with his unique vocal timbre. His vocal quality is starkly contrasted by the entrance of Young Jeezy, in the first verse. Jeezy's vocals are extremely rough and low pitched. He enters with the following lyrics:

> Tonight I can't sleep--we livin' in hell (Yeah)
> First they, give us the work, then they throw us in jail
> (Ayy)
> Road Trip ya--I'm trafficing in the white
> Please Lord don't let me go to jail tonight (Yeah)
> Who Me?? I'm a Soul Survivor
> Ask about 'em in the street, the boy Jeez a rida (Jeez a rida)
> A hundred grand on my wrist, yeah life sucks
> Fuck the club, dawg, I rather count a million bucks (Ayy)

With these lyrics, Jeezy references the hell of living in the hood, as well as the paradox of selling drugs to "the white" and then getting thrown in jail; ("first they give us the work, then they throw us in jail"). This is the same type of social commentary that enters into many of the "us vs. them" dialogues typical of Gangsta rap, referring to the racial inequities in many American, urban neighborhoods.

Young Jeezy's delivery is, in some ways, representative of the slower-style flow that is associated with some Southern rappers, for example, T.I.[165] Sometimes this type of slow, drawn-out southern flow is referred to as "lazy," as some rappers employ less breath support, making their delivery sound lethargic. Jeezy's flow is slow, but does not sound lazy; despite the slower speed of delivery, he has a lot of energy in his voice. His delivery does not necessarily sound directed towards the end of the line, as a faster delivery might, but, in general, he is not lagging behind the beat either. Jeezy's vocals are set against a repeated, melodic eighth-note pattern, which is sometimes enhanced by, or

[165] Ludacris is an example of a Southern rapper is not associated with a slower paced flow.

alternates with a chordal sixteenth-note pattern. Most of his vocal accents coincide with quarter beats, but there is very little regularity in his phrasing. For example, sometimes he begins a line ahead of the beginning of the backing music's phrase, and other times he starts his line after the downbeat. This type of delivery is an example of Krims' category of speech-effusive flow. Jeezy does, however, use matching end rhymes in couplets, for example, the first two lines end with "hell" and "jail." The third and fourth lines end with the syllables, "white" and "night."

Jeezy emphasizes certain words by accelerating the air flow. For example, on the word "life," at the end of the phrase, "This ain't a rap song, nigga, this is my life," he slides into the word, pushing the airflow toward the center of the word.[166] This syllable is held for a slightly longer duration than his delivery of most other words, allowing Jeezy to really accentuate it. The interpretive reason for doing so is to really draw attention to the "realistic" aspect of the song. "Realness" is an important aspect of rap and one reason why an artist's biography is so important in establishing their credibility. "Realness" simply involves a rapper reflecting the reality of their life, which is also meant to reflect the reality of black, urban life. The "realness" in this song is reinforced by phrases such as: "My biography, you damn right, the true story."[167]

Jeezy also accentuates words by dragging out the vowel sound, for example with the word "dreams," at the end of the phrase, "I guess we got the same dreams," (which is recited near the beginning of the second verse). This phrase is paired with the phrase, "Or is it the same nightmares?" The word "nightmares" is emphasized by an aspect of production, rather than a physical emphasis by Jeezy. It is repeated at the end of the line

[166] This phrase occurs near the end of the second verse.
[167] This phrase occurs towards the end of the third verse.

by the use of delay. The pairing of these words "dreams" and "nightmares," and the fact that they are both emphasized, draws the listener's attention to them, as well as to the meaning of these phrases, which are best understood in the context of the preceding phrases: "Another day, another dolla, same block, same nigga, same part, same green." I interpret these phrases as referring to the "American dream," which is the goal of "playing the game." These men are trying to change their social situation and move beyond their class boundary through illegal ventures, which is how the dream becomes a nightmare.

Another type of vocal emphasis employed by Young Jeezy is upwards or downwards inflection at the end of a word. For example, the word "judge," at the end of the line, "When mailman got his time he shot birds at the judge," ends with a downwards inflection.[168] Similarly, each of the following phrases in the third verse ends with an upwards inflection:

> Just because we stack paper and we ball outrageous
> Them alphabet boys got us under surveillance
> Like animals, they lock us in cages
> The same nigga that's a star when you put 'em on stages

This segment of lyrics comments on the social positioning of the black male as both a thug and superstar, placed in the public eye for the purpose of white spectatorship. Scholars such as Imani Perry and Ed Guerrero have addressed this issue, and I will elaborate on it in Chapter 3 where I discuss male roles in rap.

All of these forms of accentuation add to the intensity of Young Jeezy's vocal delivery, as well as to the rawness, and perhaps "realness" of his sound. It seems as though he is expressing his emotional state and his frustrations with his life through his

[168] This line occurs midway through the second verse.

vocal delivery. This is probably most evident in his delivery of the phrase, "If you get jammed up don't mention my name," which occurs toward the end of the second verse. It sounds as though he is delivering this verse through gritted teeth: the air flow is coming through a smaller space, and his pronunciation is less clear. The phrase almost comes out as a growl: he sounds angry and threatening. This is immediately contrasted with the following line, "Forgive me Lord, I know I aint livin' right," which is closer to a sung line than the majority of his phrases. It sounds closer to sung due to the pitched inflection of certain words, such as "Lord," as well as longer rhythmic durations.

The rough quality of Young Jeezy's voice is amplified by the process of voice doubling. Voice doubling is one process of "thickening" a recorded voice. It is a very common technique in both pop and hip-hop that gives the voice a larger-than-life sound. There are two methods of achieving this effect: the first is to record two separate tracks, and the second is to use delay.[169] Both techniques of doubling are used in this song. For the most part, Jeezy's voice is centered in the mix, but at certain moments, the doubled voice is panned left and right, clearly revealing the fact that it is doubled. This process also gives the impression that the voice is coming at you from both sides, dominating the musical texture. An example of this panning can be heard during the chorus as Young Jeezy interjects with "yeah."

As mentioned above, it is also the contrast between Akon's and Jeezy's voices that emphasizes how rough and raw Jeezy's voice sounds. Akon's singing opens the song and the chorus is then sung in between all three rapped verses. Akon also sings the song's bridge, which occurs between the third verse and the final repetition of the chorus. In the

[169] My knowledge of voice doubling has been enhanced by conversations with James Law, sound technician at the University of Ottawa, School of Music.

bridge, Akon's melodic range opens up, and we hear him sing a series of ascending lines. Akon's voice is doubled in the bridge, and a lower octave added, making his voice sound very thick, adding emphasis to his lines:

> 'Cause if you lookin' for me you can find me
> On the block disobeyin' the law
> Real G--thoroughbred from the streets
> Pants saggin' with my gun in my draws
> Just to keep on movin' now

It is not only the direct contrast, from verse to chorus to bridge, that provides a distinction between their voices. Jeezy continually interjects utterances while Akon is singing. Most commonly he says, "yeah," "ay," "oh," and "that's right." Sometimes these are short and clipped, and other times they are drawn out, held for a longer duration. For example, after the line, "Cuz I'm a rida," in the chorus, Jeezy says "yeah," leaning into the vowel sound, stretching it out. As is the case with all of the interjections, Jeezy's voice is low and rough. Here, voice doubling is also used, making his voice sound very thick.

In this song, Jeezy performs his race and masculinity through both lyrics and vocal strategies. The song's lyrics describe the struggles of life in the hood, including getting caught up in a life of crime in order to survive. The lyrics reference the performative identity Young Jeezy has constructed for himself: that of a thug, or hustler. This identity is strongly reinforced by the artist's personal biography since he spent several years in the Southern drug trade. This biographical connection to the lyrics provides him with credibility, and a sense or "realness" that is extremely important in the rap sphere.

Although these aspects of realness and Young Jeezy's biography are referenced extensively in the lyrics, his persona as a tough, black man is also bolstered by his

musical performance. His race and masculinity are musically performed through his use of the conventional vocal practice of performing with a rough, low-pitched, aggressive quality. These traits are further reinforced by production techniques such voice doubling. The connections between lyrics and musical meaning are further reinforced by his various techniques of vocal emphasis, which include accentuation, diction, breath support, and pitch. The roughness and aggressiveness of Jeezy's voice is also emphasized by its contrast with Akon's smoother, sung vocal presentation. A reading of this song that combines the interpretation of the lyrics and vocal delivery, as well as considering how the artist works within rap's conventions, helps us to better understand the meanings conveyed and how he is constructing his identity.

***Busta Rhymes: "Touch It"***

A rough vocal delivery in rap is not always associated with the hood or a life of crime. Busta Rhymes' flows are a perfect example of this. An East Coast MC of Jamaican heritage, Busta Rhymes is known for his halting, ragga-inspired style that is obviously influenced by the Jamaican tradition.[170] Ragga is a term used to refer to Jamaican dancehall music and it is not uncommon to see stylistic connections between dancehall and rap.[171] The influence of ragga on rap is so prevalent that it can even be seen in songs by MCs who are not of Jamaican heritage, for example, in the song "We Run This," by Missy Elliott.[172] Busta's flows are typically rapid-fire and his vocal quality is

[170] Bush, John., "Busta Rhymes Biography," *All Music Guide*, http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&searchlink=BUSTA|RHYMES&sql=11:fvfixql5ldje~T1.
[171] Ragga was a term primarily used outside the Jamaican context to describe dancehall, which developed from reggae during the 1980s. By the mid-1980s, ragga featured an emphasis on synthesized, digital "riddims." For more information, see: Norman C. Stolzoff, *Wake the Town and Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*, (Duke University Press, 2000), especially pages 106-107. Thanks to Paul Jason for pointing me to this information.
[172] Missy Elliott, *Respect M.E.* Goldmind/Atlantic, 2006.

usually quite rough. The song "Touch It" (2006) is typical of Busta's vocal style, and lyrical themes.[173] His lyrical style is very tongue-in-cheek, and this song describes how popular he is: the guys want to hang with him and the women want to have sex with him.

The song's hook is performed by an "automated" female voice which repeats: "Touch it- bring it - pay it - watch it -turn it - leave it - stop - format it."[174] The rhythm of the voice is very regular: each syllable set to an eighth note, creating a two-measure unit that is then repeated. It is a crisp delivery, with the eighth notes sounding almost clipped. The female's line is performed primarily on one repeated pitch, F, with an occasional semitone shift down to E. The overall effect created is that of a rigid, mechanical, female voice. The hook opens the song with two repetitions before the main beat even begins. As such, the rhythmic regularity of the hook establishes a rigid rhythmic framework for the song as a whole. The hook is then repeated four more times before Busta enters with the first verse.

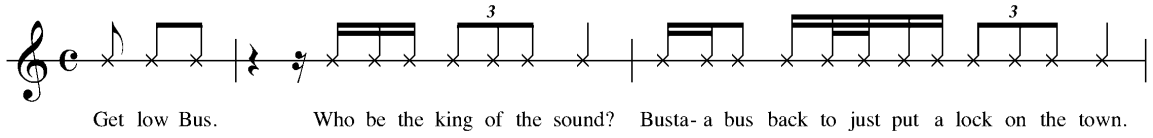
When Busta begins to rap, his flow sounds highly irregular against the rigid rhythmic framework that was set up by the "automated" voice at the beginning. Here, the syncopations in the beat are combined with some vocal syncopation to essentially disrupt any sense of regularity. Despite a feeling of disjointedness, Busta consistently ends his line on beat four, with matching end rhymes (the end rhymes of the first four lines are: "sound," "town," "round," and "down."). Four-measure groupings are created, in part, by the matching end rhymes, which consistently occur on the downbeat of beat four. His lines are directed toward beat four, with a triplet figure on beat three leading into the line's final syllable (see Example 2-1). The line's final syllable is stressed by its arrival

[173] Busta Rhymes, *The Big Bang*, Aftermath B000F8DSTM, 2006.
[174] The hook is performed by a female voice that has been manipulated to sound robotic, automated.

on the beat as well as by the fact that the MC's voice and the backing beat sound simultaneously at this point. Busta further accentuates beat four by drawing out the vowel sound, slightly emphasizing the word. Despite the directed flow towards beat four and the matching end-rhymes, Busta's flow in these first few lines sounds fairly relaxed. His rhythmic delivery is not exact, meaning that sometimes he anticipates the beat, and sometimes he falls slightly behind. The first verse is provided below:

(Get low Bus!) Who be the King of the Sound? (Uh huh)
Busta Bus back to just put a lock on a town (Uh huh)
Lot of my bitches be comin from miles around
See they be cumin (Uh!) cause they know how the God get down (TURN IT UP!!) NOW YOU KNOW WHO HOLDIN THE THRONE SO GIMME THE CROWN (Huh)
NIGGAS SOLUTIN AND TRYIN TO GIVE ME A POUND (Come on)
I DON'T REALLY FUCK WITH YOU NIGGAS YOU NIGGAS IS CLOWN
MAKIN THE BITCHES STRIPPIN THROW THEY SHIT ON THE GROUND
(Get low Bus!) Now that's the way that it goes (Uh huh)
When we up in the spot the shit be flooded with hoes (Come on)
See we a make it hot, the chicks will come out their clothes
That's when you get it (Huh) mami already know I suppose (TURN IT UP!!)
SHORTY WILDIN AND SHORTY OPEN SHE BEASTIN IT OUT FOR THE RECORD (Huh) JUST A SECOND I'M FREAKIN IT OUT (Come on)
WHILE SHE TRYIN TO TOUCH SEE I WAS PEEPIN IT OUT
SHE TURNED AROUND AND WAS TRYIN TO PUT MY DICK IN HER MOUTH I LET HER

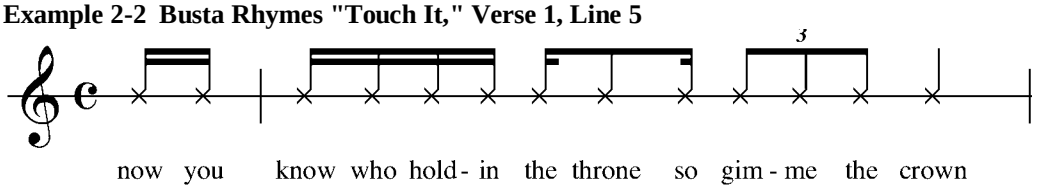
**Example 2-1_ Busta Rhymes "Touch It," Verse 1, Lines 1-2**




Busta also creates four-measure groupings by alternating his flow between distinct styles of flow. The first four measures are delivered in the first style, measures

five to eight in the second style, and measures nine to twelve in the first style, etc. This alternation is consistent throughout the song. The two styles of flow are marked by a distinct shift in register, dynamics, and speed of lyric delivery (the second style is in the capitalized lyrics provided above). Busta's initial flow is low pitched and fairly soft. When he begins his delivery of the fifth line, the listener is presented with an abruptly aggressive flow. Busta has jumped up into a higher register and his dynamic level is much louder. He puts a great deal more energy into his delivery and spits more syllables per phrase, which results in a faster lyric delivery (see Example 2-2). Busta creates an overall effect of shouting. He begins each phrase with two or three sixteenth notes as a pick up and then the first beat of each measure contains four sixteenth notes, creating a faster, more agitated feel to the delivery. One aspect of Busta's delivery that is consistent between the two styles of flow are the matching end rhymes on beat four (in measures five through eight, the lines end with "crown," "pound," "clown," and "ground").

**Example 2-2 Busta Rhymes "Touch It," Verse 1, Line 5**




I find it interesting that this song connects flow style with register: higher pitched with a faster, more aggressive style, and lower pitched with a more relaxed delivery. I should note that "higher pitched" is a relative description, since even in the higher register, Busta still has a fairly low voice. A really interesting feature of this song is the fact that Busta says "get low" before rapping in his lower pitched, more relaxed flow, and then "turn it up" before shifting to the higher pitched, faster, more aggressive flow. These statements do two things: firstly, they demonstrate the artist's awareness of vocal

delivery and production and bring that awareness into the song's lyrics, and, secondly, they highlight these registral and stylistic shifts for the audience.[175] Busta also employs a fairly wide vocal range in the context of a rap song. Of course, he only raps on two pitches, one high and one low, but this kind of registral difference by the same MC, within the context of a single song, still represents an ability to manipulate their style of flow to create an effect. In this case, the lower register, combined with the other aspects of his delivery, described above, creates a relaxed yet confident sound. By contrast, the flow delivered in the higher register is extremely aggressive. The aggressiveness only emphasizes the rough quality of Busta's voice.

In this song, Busta performs his masculinity and his blackness via his rough, low voice, and rapid lyric delivery. Both aggressive sexuality and a softer, more relaxed feeling are created through registral shifts and style of flow. Busta's song fits strongly within a raced notion of masculinity as his delivery creates a polyrhythmic structure against the backbeat and he lyrically and vocally expresses his control over women, and boasts of his reputation. A different form of male control and boasting can be seen with Snoop Dogg's vocal delivery, as will be discussed in the next case study.

### *Snoop Dogg: "Beautiful" and "Step Yo Game Up"*

Snoop Dogg entered the rap scene in 1992 as a featured artist on Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*.[176] Snoop made a name for himself as a West Coast Gangsta rapper, his credibility reinforced by a personal history of violence. Coinciding with Snoop's image

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[175] Of course we know that artists make decisions about flow, style, etc., but it is interesting to have that awareness articulated. We sometimes hear MCs' refer to their flow in their lyrics, and I find that equally interesting.

[176] Stephen Thomas Erlewine, "Snoop Dogg Biography," All Music Guide, http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:jxfwxql5ldse~T1.

as a Gangsta, a lot of his credibility comes from his ability to seduce and control women. He puts forth the image of a pimp and a player, personas that are supportive of the role of a Gangsta rapper.[177] One aspect of being a Gangsta rapper is to demonstrate control over others, to dominate them. This control extends to both men and women. According to rap scholar Imani Perry, the power of the player or pimp "lies in both the acquisition of wealth and female bodies."[178] The rapper taking on this role assumes control of female bodies as a way of asserting his manhood. As Perry has discussed, the "player" is sometimes a term used synonymously with the term pimp, but other times the term "player" describes a lover: a smooth, seductive man. He may have great deal of success with the ladies, but does not necessarily exploit them for money. There is a fine line between these roles and they are often merged into one.

Snoop's persona of the pimp has been reinforced by his participation in several adult videos. The 2001 film *Doggystyle*, produced by Hustler Video (2001), combines pornography with rap. Snoop Dogg hosts the video, which was filmed at his estate in California. Although he does not appear nude in the film, "Snoop cast the actors and wrote the score, and he can be seen rapping and cavorting in several sequences that introduce X-rated scenes."[179] The name of the film not only plays on the name of a sexual position, but also references the title of Snoop's first album, *Doggystyle*, released in 1993. Snoop Dogg also hosted a video in the *Girls Gone Wild* video series, which features young women exposing their breasts on camera. The title of Snoop's video was *Girls Gone Wild: Doggy Style*, released in 2002. This video fits perfectly with the rap

[177] The various roles adopted by male rappers will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.
[178] Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 132.
[179] Joe D'Angelo. "Snoop Dogg Wins Porn Awards for 'Doggystyle' Flick," *MTV News* (January 17, 2002), http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1451830/20020117/snoop_dogg.jhtml.

persona of a player or a pimp, because this figure controls women sexually, sometimes by force, but more often by convincing them to willingly participate in sexual acts. In the *Girls Gone Wild* video, Snoop convinces young women to expose themselves. Snoop Dogg's involvement in the Players Ball also reinforces his role as a pimp. The event is an annual ball for "pimps" and "hoes," successful members of the adult entertainment industry, with celebrity guests and feature performers. The feature performers are usually prominent rappers and Snoop Dogg is a regular performer and attendee at the ball.

Many of the lyrical themes in Snoop's music conform to notions of the MC as a pimp and a player. He often boasts of his sexual conquests and overtly seduces women through his music. An example of this can be seen with the song "Beautiful," (2002), in which Snoop tries to seduce a beautiful woman.[180] The lyrics to the first verse are provided below:

> I know you gon' lose it, this new Snoop shit
> Come on baby boo, you gotsta get into it (Oh-hooo!)
> Don't fool wit the playa with the cool whip
> Yeah-yeah, you know I'm always on that cool shit
> Walk to it, do it how you do it
> Have a glass, lemme put you in the mood and, (Oh-hooo!)
> Lil' cutie lookin' like a student
> Long hair, wit'cha big fat booty
> Back in the days you was a girl I went to school wit
> Had to tell your moms and sister to cool it (Oh-hooo!)
> The girl wanna do it, I just might do it
> Here to walk wit some pimp-pimp fluid
> Mommy don't worry, I won't abuse it
> Hurry up and finish so we can watch "Clueless" (Oh-hooo!)
> I laugh at these niggas when they ask who do this
> But everybody know who girl that you is[181]

[180] Snoop Dogg. *Paid tha Cost to Be da Bo$$*, Geffen Records B000075A20, 2002.
[181] These lyrics are cited from the official Snoop Dogg website: http://www.snoopdogg.com/lyrics/default.aspx?pid=1421&tid=12992.

Notice that Snoop refers to himself as a player in the line, "Don't fool wit the playa with the cool whip," firmly identifying his public persona. He also makes reference to pimphood with the line, "Here to walk wit some pimp-pimp fluid," not only referring to himself as a pimp, but also making an explicit sexual reference to his bodily fluids. In this song, romance is merged with sex as Snoop Dogg courts the object of his affection, while making explicit references to sexual acts. As is the case with many rap songs, sex is not only the implicit outcome desired in the courtship of a woman, but this desire is also overtly stated.

Snoop's vocal delivery also epitomizes the cool, suave, seducer. He achieves this by sounding very relaxed and confident. To contextualize Snoop's vocal delivery I will begin by discussing the song's introduction. The song begins with a fairly fast, syncopated rhythm that establishes an upbeat musical framework. This atmosphere is maintained when the sung vocal line of the chorus enters. The chorus, "You're beautiful, I just want you to know, you're my favorite girl," is sung by Pharell Williams, in falsetto voice. The falsetto voice has often been used in the pop and R&B realm to croon to ladies, and the fact that the chorus is sung in falsetto helps set the mood for Snoop's seduction.[182]

With the upbeat tempo established in the song's introduction, a listener might expect the rapped line to also be upbeat, but instead, when Snoop Dogg enters, he is very relaxed. His voice sounds extremely calm, partly achieved by a lack of energy in the

[182] The falsetto voice is problematic when considering gender roles. It has been perceived as a signifier of masculinity due to the fact that it takes a great amount of skill to sing well in that register, but it has also raised questions concerning the "maleness," of certain performers (Justin Timberlake, for example). I will address the issue of falsetto further in chapter two. For an interesting discussion of Justin Timberlake's falsetto singing, see Stan Hawkins, "[Un]Justified: Gestures of Straight-Talk in Justin Timberlake's Songs, In *Oh Boy!: Masculinities and Popular Music*, edited by Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2007), 197-212.

delivery. His lines are short, mostly contained within the phrase. Initially, his flow sounds like a cross between sung-style and speech-effusive style. The sung-style emerges through the regular phrasing and the speech-effusive style comes from the way in which the lyric delivery is close to speech. The old-school, sung style also emerges from the very regular rhyme scheme. Beats two and four are emphasized with matching rhymes. For example, in the first two lines, the words, "lose," "Snoop," boo," and "to," fall on the second and fourth quarter notes of the measure in the following lines: "I know you gon' lose it, this new Snoop shit. Come on baby boo, you gotsta get into it." The regularity of the rhythmic patterns feels comfortable and relaxed.

Snoop's voice sounds like it is recorded close to the microphone and then brought to the center of the mix. This aspect of production helps create a sense of intimacy as the MC spits his rhymes. His dynamic level is fairly soft, and his tone sounds gentle and unthreatening. He uses very light attacks on syllables and emphasis is often created by a stressed word, rather than by the attack. For example, the words emphasized by beats two and four, "lose," "Snoop," boo," and "to," are stressed in two ways. Firstly, they are rhythmically stressed, accomplished by a longer note value in comparison to the preceding notes in the phrase (e.g. these are eighth note values preceded by sixteenths). Secondly, they are also stressed by the way that Snoop slightly increases his airflow on these syllables, leaning into the vowel sound "oo." All of these factors contribute to Snoop Dogg's relaxed, and confident sound, which combines with the song's lyrics to mark him as a player.

Snoop Dogg's relaxed approach to flow as a pimp/player is best heard in contrast to more aggressive approaches to sexuality. The song "Step Yo Game Up," from the

album *R&G* (*Rhythm & Gangsta): The Masterpiece*, is arguably one of the most sexually explicit and derogatory songs released in the past few years.[183] There are several things that make this song more offensive than the average rap song. To begin with, the lyrics are not only sexually explicit, but they are also sexually aggressive, controlling, and violent. For example:

> *[x2]* Break it down bitch, let me see you back it up
> drop that ass down low then pick that motherfucker up
>
> *[x4]* Back that pussy tease a motherfucker
>
> *[x2]* Rub that shit it's yours bitch, grab his dick it's yours
> bitch
>
> *[x2]* Now turn around bitch, put that ass on a nigga, grind
> on his dick make it get a little bigger[184]

The lyrics quoted above comprise the first verse, performed by one of the feature rappers on the track: Lil' Jon. Before addressing the delivery of this verse in relation to Snoop's delivery, I would first like to elaborate on the song's content. The lyrical themes of "pimpin" and misogyny are laid out in the spoken introduction:

> Yeah Man What's Going on Man
> It's really really pimpin' up in here man
> I know you ain't seen pimpin' in a long time man I've been
> MIA
> You know what I'm sayin' missin in action
> I ain't been on no milk carton box
> but I've been milking and boxing these bitches
> cuz they got to step they game up you know what I mean

Aside from the mention of "pimpin,'" Snoop also talks about "milking and boxing these bitches," implying not only using them for sex, but the term "boxing," could be taken to

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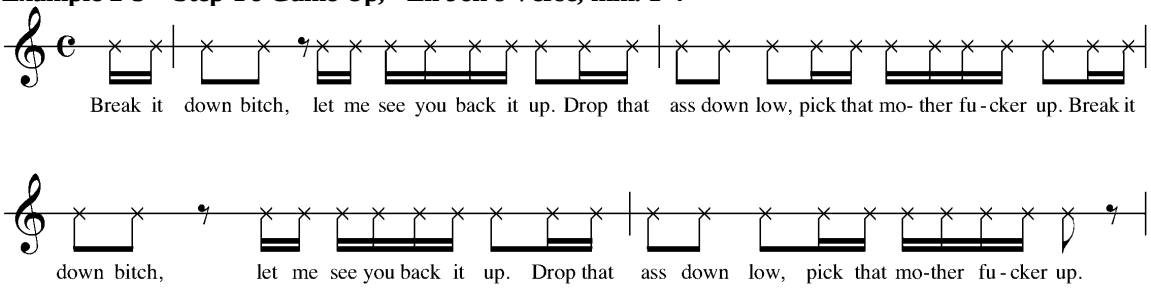
[183] Snoop Dogg, *R&G* (*Rhythm & Gangsta): The Masterpiece*, Geffen Records B000675KH0, 2004. Nelly's song "Tip Drill" is on par with this in terms of misogynist, sexually explicit lyrics. "Tip Drill" will be briefly discussed in Chapter 3.

[184] These lyrics are cited from the official Snoop Dogg website: http://snoopdogg.com/lyrics/default.aspx?pid=1416&tid=12901

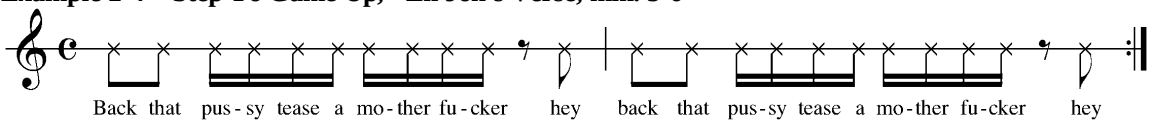
mean a verb for intercourse or for beating women. Snoop Dogg's verse, (verse 2), is filled with references to women as "hoes" and lyrics asserting his control over the woman addressed in the song. For example, "quit bullshittin' and get naked ho," and "move them biscuits and hit them tricks bitch." Perhaps most problematic is the direct indication of violence with the phrase, "bitch I'ma slap you." In this song, Snoop is not the player he was in "Beautiful," but rather a pimp, sexually controlling and exploiting women.

The lyrics are not the only problematic aspect of this song. In fact, it is the delivery of these lyrics that heightens the sexual aggression. Lil' Jon's delivery of the first verse is exceptionally aggressive, bordering on rage. Lil' Jon is known for having a particularly rough vocal timbre. He does not speak or recite the lyrics, he shouts them. His rhythmic delivery of the lines is very regular, emphasizing the first two eighth notes of the measure. His delivery consists almost entirely of straight eighth and sixteenth notes, with no syncopation. (See Example 2-3). In his first phrase, "Break it down bitch, let me see you back it up," the word "bitch" is emphasized by a slightly sharper attack. In the line, "Back that pussy tease a motherfucker," Lil' Jon draws attention to the first part of the phrase with clear pronunciation and a crisp attack on the words "back" and "pussy." The rest of that line is delivered with a sloppier pronunciation, slurring the syllables of "motherfucker" together (see Example 2-4).

**Example 2-3 "Step Yo Game Up," Lil Jon's Verse, mm. 1-4**

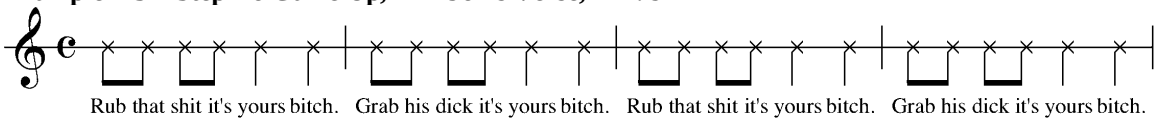


**Example 2-4 "Step Yo Game Up," Lil Jon's Verse, mm. 5-6**

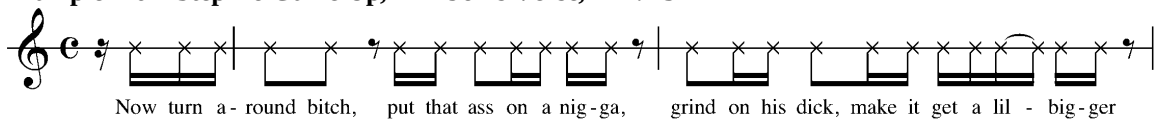



The phrase, "Rub that shit it's yours bitch," sounds very directed. He begins the line on the downbeat, the first four syllables set to eighth notes and the fifth and sixth syllables set to quarter notes (see Example 2-5).[185] The words "yours bitch" are stressed because of their longer note values. These words are not clipped, but rather held through the beat. The word bitch is also recited with a slight upward inflection, further emphasizing it. The second half of the rhymed couplet, "Grab his dick it's yours bitch," is recited with the same rhythmic pattern and vocal inflections. In the final couplet, "Now turn around bitch, put that ass on a nigga; grind on his dick make it get a little bigger," Lil' Jon again uses a slightly sharper attack on the word "bitch." The words "grind on his dick make it," are performed a bit more sing-songy than the rest of the verse has been, with the word "grind" accented. When the lines are repeated a second time, "grind on his dick make it" are performed more aggressively, corresponding to the style of the rest of the verse (these lines can be seen in Example 2-6).

**Example 2-5 "Step Yo Game Up," Lil Jon's Verse, mm. 9-12**




**Example 2-6 "Step Yo Game Up," Lil Jon's Verse, mm. 13-14**




[185] Lil' Jon begins some phrases with a pick-up and others directly on the beat. The first couplet begins with a pick-up, the second section of the verse, "Back that pussy…" starts directly on the beat. The third couplet, "Rub that…" begins on the beat, and the final couplet begins with a pick-up. The phrases that start directly on the beat sound more directed than the ones that begin with a pick-up.

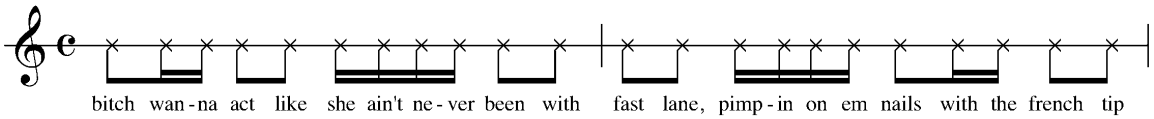
There is a lot of repetition in Lil' Jon's verse. A typical verse in a rap song has different text for each line. A word or several words may be repeated at the end of the line, or the final line in a verse may be repeated, but it is not typical for every line in a verse to be repeated. In this verse, the first rhymed couplet is presented, then repeated. The third line is presented, then repeated three more times. The fourth and fifth lines, another rhymed couplet, are presented, then repeated. And finally the sixth and seventh lines are presented, then repeated. This type of structure is more common in a chorus, bridge, intro, or outro. The fact that these sexually explicit, aggressive lyrics are repeated only adds to their overall effect, which is violent and shocking.

Lil' Jon's verse is immediately followed by Snoop Dogg's smooth vocals in the chorus. The chorus features Snoop smoothly speaking a line, which is then followed by the phrase, "Step yo game up," performed by several voices. Snoop says things such as, "What you lookin' at," and "Drop it to the floor and just," phrases that are completed by "step yo game up." There is a distinct contrast between Snoop's relaxed, spoken lines, and the aggressive, directed line that follows. One of the voices performing "step yo game up" is definitely Lil' Jon's, because you can hear his distinctly rough vocal timbre, but I am unsure of whether or not the second voice is Snoop Dogg or somebody else.

Snoop's vocal delivery in the second verse provides a sharp contrast to Lil' Jon's in the first verse. The most obvious differences are the vocal quality and style of delivery. Snoop's voice is much smoother than Lil' Jon's, and he delivers the lyrics with less aggression. The more relaxed sound comes from a softer dynamic level, as well as less energy and breath support in the delivery. Snoop's rhythmic delivery is also fairly regular, tending to begin on the downbeat, with a few pick-ups (see Example 2-7). The

exception to this comes toward the end of the verse, where his lines start after the downbeat, reflecting a heightened tension in the lyrics: “You say you wanna make it ho, well quit bullshittin' and get naked ho.” Lil’ Jon’s delivery is very hard-hitting, with almost every quarter beat being emphasized, with the exception of the fourth beat in some phrases. Snoop’s, by contrast, is less accented, with slight accents falling on beats two and four.

**Example 2-7 Snoop Dogg "Step Yo Game Up," Verse 2**

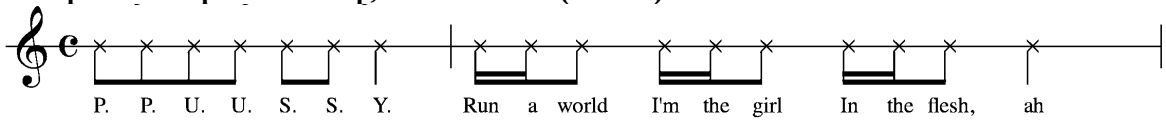



Although Snoop’s delivery is soft and relaxed in comparison with Lil’ Jon’s, it does not sound seductive as it did in the song “Beautiful.” There is slightly more energy in the delivery and his voice is lower pitched than it was in “Beautiful.” His delivery is also a bit more energetic and directed. These changes reflect an overall difference in tone; in “Beautiful he is the player, the seducer, but in “Step Yo Game Up,” Snoop is a pimp. He is not trying to seduce a woman as was the case in “Beautiful,” here he is sexually controlling her. This change in attitude can also be seen in subtle nuances in tone. For example, when Snoop delivers the lines, “Stay in line ho, It’s a pimp affair,” he alters his voice to sound slightly more menacing. His delivery is nowhere near as aggressive as Lil’ Jon’s, but there is a noticeable change in tone at this point.

Female MC, Trina, is featured on the track, performing the song’s third verse. Her lyrics are indicative of the commanding, sexually assertive attitude present in the songs of

many female Gangsta rappers.[186] She begins her verse with a spelling out of the word, "pussy." She draws attention to her sexuality not only by beginning her verse with the word, but also by spelling it out, having its delivery take up an entire phrase. The syllables are set to three pairs of eighth notes, ending the phrase on a quarter. The second phrase is paired with the first, only this time, each beat contains two sixteenths and an eighth, the fourth beat still ending on a quarter (see Example 2-8). These phrases also have matching end rhymes, "y" and "ah," pronounced so that they rhyme. These lines establish a sense of regularity in her flow from the outset. Her phrases tend to begin on the downbeat, culminating on beat four with matching end-rhymes, usually in couplets. An exception to this regularity occurs with the line, "Same nigga talkin' all that shit," where Trina begins the line slightly after the downbeat. She recites the next line, "Just a little bitch, little balls, little dick," however, with the regularity she had established earlier in the verse. It is interesting that she begins this line, slightly off-beat, thereby drawing attention to it, considering that it is the point in her verse where she emasculates the man she is addressing.

**Example 2-8 "Step Yo Game Up," Trina's Verse (Verse 3)**




In general, Trina turns the tables on the male rappers in the song, by addressing men in the same terms that they address women. She is looking to be sexually pleased, just as the men were earlier in the song. She is demanding and controlling with statements such as "Lookin' for a nigga that will suck me like a blow pop; Run that dick

[186] These same types of lyrics can be found in songs by Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Shawnna, and Remy Ma. These artists will be discussed in Chapter 4.

to the door, do me baby don't stop," and "Let me show you how to work your tongue like a hurricane." She also reinforces stereotypes about women only being interested in money with her final lines: "Get your man, take his money, and then buy the world; So nigga don't front, cuz fat wallets and big dicks is all I want." These sorts of sexually explicit lyrics play a large role in how some female rappers' identities are constructed in the rap sphere. This issue will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4. Within the context of this song, Trina's competent lyric delivery and sexual assertions help to provide some balance to Snoop Dogg's and Lil's Jon's misogynist flows.

As I have discussed in my analysis of "Beautiful" and "Step Yo Game Up," Snoop Dogg effectively performs the identity of a pimp or player. It is the combination of both lyrics and vocal delivery that convey these aspects of Snoop's identity to the listener. I will now present two analytic examples that explore how another rapper, T.I. vocally and lyrically constructs his identity as a player.

### *T.I.: "Porn Star" and "Whatever You Like"*

Although T.I.'s persona is multi-faceted, he portrays himself primarily as a suave, relaxed, confident player on his most recent album, *Paper Trail* (2008).[187] The MC constantly spits rhymes boasting of his greatness; financially, physically, and romantically (or sexually). Despite some more socially conscious lyrics, such as the ones found on tracks such as "Live Your Life," and "Ready for Whatever," T.I. spends most of his energy on braggadocio and seduction.[188] His boasting emerges in tracks such as "I'm Illy":

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[187] T.I., *Paper Trai*l, Atlantic B0001EG4T6K, 2008.

[188] "Live Your Life" opens with the following lyrics: "What you need to do is be thankful for the life that you got. You know what I'm sayin'. Stop lookin' at what you ain't got, and start bein' thankful for what you

> Hella rich never have to sell a brick again…
> Never been fucked in the game I'm celibate….
> Now how could a nigga think that he could see me,
> Other than the magazine covers or the t.v.
> You know I sold more mixtapes than your cd,
> You're waiting on your big break praying you can beat me.

A more aggressive example can be seen in the chorus of "Every Chance I Get":

> Hey I'm so raw, and I'm so rich
> And you so flawed niggaz ain't 'bout shit
> I'll take yo' broad, I can fuck yo' bitch
> Know that I'm gon' ball every chance I get

With lyrics like these, T.I. is not just rapping about how rich and famous he is, he is also demonstrating that he is better than other men. He has "sold more mixtapes than your cd," meaning that he was more popular than the average rapper before he was even signed to a label. He can even "take yo' broad" and "fuck yo' bitch," emasculating the other male addressed in his lyrics (the other male stands in for men in general).

One of the most common themes that emerges in T.I.'s boasting is that of swagger. He constantly raps about his swagger, which is essentially a very relaxed, suave state of being. Swagger is equivalent to extreme confidence. For example, in the song "No Matter What," he says: "Have you ever seen a nigger with a swagger like mine?" In "56 bars," he says:

> Better check my swagger,
> How I walk, how I talk, how I stack that cheddar
> What I drive, how I dress, nigga looks just better
> Hundred stacks on that nigga, I just better

---

do got." "Ready for Whatever," deals with the real-life shooting of one of T.I.'s friends and his upcoming incarceration for illegal possession of weapons.

There is even a song, titled, "Swagga Like Us," which is built entirely around a sample of M.I.A. singing: "No one on the corner have swagger like us."[189] Throughout the whole song, T.I. and feature rappers, Kanye West, Jay Z, and Lil' Wayne all rap about their swagger.

This confidence and swagger are tied to success with women. A man with swagger is not just confident, rich, and successful; he is also successful with the ladies. This aspect emerges not just in the songs centered on braggadocio, but also in songs about sex. An example can be seen in the following excerpt from "Porn Star":

> I been watchin' you awhile now.
> And I just wanna find a way to make you smile now.
> Why you blushin, forget about them other guys now,
> I know you ain't gon' try to tell me that you shy now,
> Now realize that your beauty could intimidate,
> Them suckas you aint got no business wit em anyway.
> Got such a pretty face, big booty lil' waist line,
> I wanna grind from behind to the bass line….
> I promise all wanna see is you up under me,
> And we can disappear whenever when you wanna leave.
> I can guarantee the ride of ya life,
> Any fantasies on ya mind, we can try em tonight.

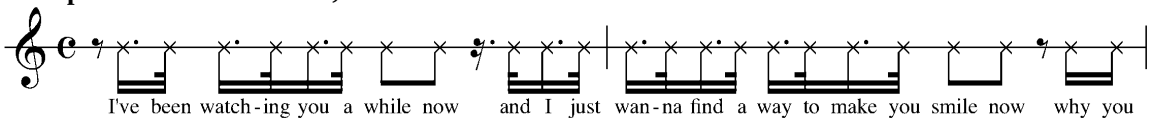
When T.I. delivers these lyrics, he is literally seducing a woman in the song text, but he is also figuratively seducing the female listener with his vocal delivery. He does this by using a softer tone that is partly achieved by a lower dynamic level. This tone is also achieved by softer attacks on words, making the rhythmic delivery seem more fluid. The pitch of his flow is slightly higher than it is on most other tracks, a fact that is emphasized by an immediate contrast between his regular speech and his rhymed delivery in this song. This is established by T.I. opening the song with a spoken line: "Damn shawty,

[189] M.I.A. is a London born artist associated with rap music, along with many other genres. Her music combines elements from UK garage, dancehall, electro, hip-hop and bhangra. For more information, see: "M.I.A. Biography," *NME*, http://www.nme.com/artists/mia#biography.

look at you I'm sayin man is it just me or is it you got too much ass in them jeans?" The pitch difference is quite obvious when T.I. enters with the first rapped line: "I been watchin' you awhile now." The higher pitch combined with the lower dynamic level creates a sense of intimate conversation, despite the fact that it is a one-sided conversation.

The rhythmic flow is speech-like and representative of speech-effusive flow. The speech-like quality and softer attacks on words makes the rhythm seem less deliberate than is typical in rap. T.I.'s delivery in this song is quite similar to Snoop Dogg's flow in "Beautiful." A fairly regular and even flow contributes to a relaxed attitude; T.I. delivers each line with a fairly regular swung, dotted sixteenth-note rhythm that climaxes with an even eighth note end-rhyme on beat three (see Example 2-9). For example, the first four lines end with "while now," "smile now," "guys now," and "shy now," all delivered to eighth notes on beat three. Although T.I. does not maintain this exact pattern throughout the song, he uses similar patterns in two measure groupings, usually emphasizing beat three. He also tends to add a slightly pitched ascending or descending vocal inflection to the ends of lines. For example, a slight upward inflection may be used to sound questioning or anticipatory, and a slight downward inflection may be used to sound convincing, such as with the line: "Them suckas you aint got no business wit em anyway." Adding to the sensual quality of his delivery is an obvious breath exhalation on the delivery of certain words. For example, the word "I've" that begins the first verse is rapped with a breathy vocal quality, sounding as though he is exhaling into the pronunciation of the word, making it sound like "hive."

**Example 2-9 T.I. "Porn Star," Verse 1**




The musical background also contributes to the sensual lyric delivery by setting the mood. The music consists of lush, synthesized string sounds and a moderately slow, R&B-style beat, complete with backing vocals. The style is reminiscent of the love songs by 1970s and 1980s R&B and soul artists such as Luther Vandross and Isaac Hayes, often associated with "getting her in the mood." The musical background and beat are, of course, modified from the soul style described above to be consistent with rap aesthetics; this means a slightly heavier beat as well as synthesized and electronic sounds. The chorus, performed by Ricco Barrino, is also in the style of an R&B love song, with the following lyrics:

> "Sittin here, (I'm looking at you like that)
> We're sippin on Patron, and something's on my mind
> (you wanna leave with me tonight).
> It's been killing me all night long,
> (misses shawty let me tell you what I'm thinking 'bout).
> Ooh girl I wonder,
> (for real shawty let me tell you what I'm thinking 'bout).
> It's the end of the night, and I'm thinking you might
> (Wanna leave the bar, park the car, turn into) porn stars.[190]

The R&B style chorus and musical background help set the mood for T.I.'s verbal seduction, which is, in fact, a seduction of the female in the narrative as well as a seduction of the female listeners. Notice that romance is highly sexualized through the objectification of the woman's body, "Got such a pretty face, big booty lil' waist line", as well as through the vivid description of sexual acts, "I wanna grind from behind to the bass line," and "I promise all wanna see is you up under me". The ultimate sexualization

[190] The lyrics in parentheses are interjected by T.I.

comes at the end of the chorus, when T.I. suggests that they "park the car (and) turn into porn stars." The over-the-top nature of suggesting they turn into porn stars is heightened by the delivery of the line. The majority of the chorus is sung by Ricco Barrino, with T.I.'s interjections coming at the ends of lines, sometimes overlapping with the sung line. T.I.'s comments are heard as secondary to the sung line until the very last line where his dynamic is raised to the forefront of the texture and he raps: "Wanna leave the bar, park the car, turn into." His earlier comments in the chorus were delivered in a manner close to speech, but his final line is not only louder, but it is also more rhythmic and pointedly leads towards the end of the phrase where Barrino sings "porn stars" in a manner that sounds excited, comedic, and slightly over-the-top. Lyrics discussing sex rather than romance are commonplace in rap music and contribute to notions of rap as both exaggeratedly sexual and misogynist. Sexuality is not only discussed in explicit terms, but also exaggerated and misogynist because the sexual lyrics by male rappers typically objectify women and discuss them as if they can be bought and sold. Chapter 3 discusses the commodification of women as an act of asserting masculinity.

T.I.'s first hit single off of *Paper Trail*, "Whatever You Like," combines two prominent themes from the album: braggadocio and seduction. The premise of the song is T.I. telling a woman that he can give her anything she wants: "Patron on ice," while chilling at the club, "five million dollar homes," and he can even "gas up the jet for (her) tonight" so that she can go wherever she would like to: "baby you can go wherever you like." The lyrics reinforce the popular stereotype that women's sexuality can be bought if a man offers enough money and security. T.I. takes this a step further by offering sexual pleasure and material wealth to the object of his affection. This is put forth with lyrics

such as “Late night sex so wet and so tight” and “That thang get so wet and so tight, let me put this big boy in your life.” He makes his physical desire known to her by repeating the lyric: “I want your body, I need your body.” The exchange of sex for money is implicit in his expression of desire for her body, which is immediately followed by an offer to buy her anything she wants:

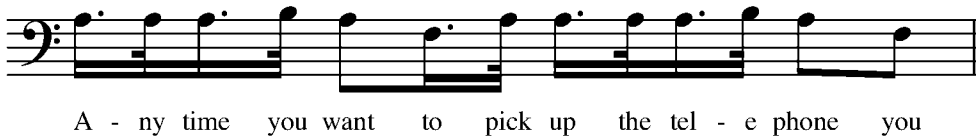
> I want your body, I need your body,
> Long as you got me you won’t need nobody.
> You want it, I got it. Go get it, I’ll buy it.
> Tell them other broke niggas be quiet.”

T.I. not only seduces the female he is addressing with offers of material wealth and sexual pleasure, he also uses this song as an opportunity to boast. Throughout the song, he boasts about the extent of his wealth and his sexual prowess, essentially telling other men that they could not possibly compete with him. The boasting is reinforced with lines such as “My chick can have what she wants,” implying that most men cannot provide such luxury, and “Tell them other broke niggas be quiet,” implying that most men could not complete with him. The lyrics that refer to his wealth and sexual abilities serve two functions: firstly, to attract the attention of the woman he is seducing, and secondly, to boast to other men.

T.I.’s vocal delivery in “Whatever You Like” is similar to the vocal style described earlier in the discussion of “Porn Star.” His voice is higher pitched, soft, and alluring. He delivers his lines with a fairly regular rhythmic flow, involving a slightly swung dotted sixteenth pattern (see Example 2-10). The primary carriers of the beat in “Whatever You Like” are several synthesized patterns: the first provides a regular eighth note rhythm, and the second, which is a repeated pattern of two sixteenths followed by three eighths. The vocal line sounds more rhythmic than the one in “Porn Star, but the

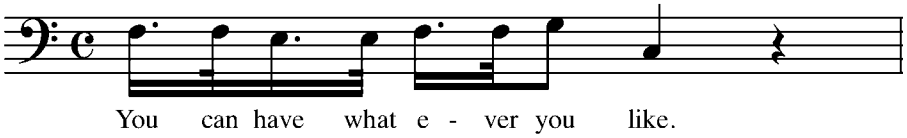
attack on each note is still generally legato. The delivery sounds more rhythmic due to a vocal stress on every quarter beat. T.I. creates this stress by slightly leaning into the syllable being stressed and pushing the air flow a small amount.

**Example 2-10 T.I. "Whatever You Like, " Verse 1**




The vocal delivery differs distinctly between "Whatever You Like" and "Porn Star." "Whatever You Like" features a more pitched vocal delivery and T.I. sings his own hook, rather than having a featured singer. The melodic range of this hook is simple, spanning a fifth, from G down to C (see Example 2-11). The majority of the hook simply alternates between F and D. Even T.I.'s rapped verses have a pitched element to them. He begins by reciting/singing the first line over three pitches: A, B, and F (see **Error! Reference source not found.**, above). He then raps the rest of the first verse primarily on F. It is definitely more of a sung style of rap in that you distinctly hear which pitch he is reciting the lyrics on.

**Example 2-11 T.I. "Whatever You Like," Hook**




In "Whatever You Like," T.I.'s boasting and extreme self-confidence is greatly enhanced by the production technique of voice doubling. The voice doubling gives the feeling that his voice is larger than life, which is exactly the type of persona that he is adopting in this song. The doubling is made obvious by the fact that T.I.'s first line, "You

know them old sugar daddies, they be trickin they tell them girls," is not doubled. When the doubling is used on the next line, "I said you can have whatever you like," it can be clearly heard. The doubling is used throughout the song: in both verses and in repetitions of the chorus. Both types of voice doubling are used: delay and a second physical reproduction of the track. This larger than life effect is further emphasized by the fact that the voice is not centered in the mix, the vocals are panned left and right, likely with a chorus effect. This creates a sense that T.I.'s voice is coming at you from both sides, almost dominating the texture.

In "Whatever You Like," T.I. seduces the listener with his smooth, suave vocal delivery and confident lyrics. The confidence and boasting are typical of the rap tradition, particularly with regard to boasting about sexual prowess. The production techniques and vocal delivery greatly contribute to the meaning of the song's lyrics. The combination of vocal delivery and lyrics firmly place T.I. within the hip-hop category of the player: a seducer who "plays" women, using them for sexual gratification.

**III. Black Authenticity: Creating a Link to the Past**

One way in which rap's lyrical and musical conventions are coded as black is through a constructed notion of authenticity. The term authenticity, in the context of popular music, is problematic and becomes even more complicated in the context of rap, where the notion of authenticity is fraught with contradictions. The use of the term authenticity in descriptions of popular music is problematic in that it means different things to different people. For example, someone may use the term authentic to describe whether or not a musician is "authentically" portraying their own emotions, thoughts, and feelings. Authenticity can also be used to describe whether or not an artist's performance

is true to the performance traditions of a particular style. Allan Moore's 2002 article, "Authenticity as Authentication," is one of many scholarly articles that have attempted to theorize the use of this term in popular music studies.[191] Moore has argued that authenticity is ascribed to, rather than inscribed within a performance. He suggests that there are three primary categories of authenticity. First person authenticity, or the authenticity of expression, conveys the performer's integrity and genuineness to the audience. Second person authenticity, or the authenticity of experience, occurs when "a performance succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that the listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is 'telling it like it is' for them."[192] Third person authenticity, or the authenticity of execution, occurs when a performance "succeeds in conveying the idea of another, embedded within a tradition of performance."[193]

The use of the term authenticity in rap is just as problematic as it is in other popular music styles. All three types of authenticity are relevant to rap. For example, first person authenticity is directly tied to the notion that a rapper's history of crime, or childhood in the hood, gives them credibility in the rap sphere. Second person authenticity can apply to any number of situations in which the listener attempts to relate to the MC. Most relevant to the goal of this chapter, however, is Moore's category of third person authenticity, which outlines some of rap's conventions that have been coded

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[191] Allan Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," *Popular Music* 21/2 (2002) 209-233 .Other articles that deal with this issue include: Simon Frith, "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music," in *Taking Popular Music Seriously*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 257-273, (see pages 257-261 in particular); Deanna Weinstein, "The History of Rock's Pasts Through Rock Covers," (1998), 137-151; Michael Coyle and Jon Dolan, "Modeling Authenticity, Authenticating Commercial Models," in *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics*, Edited by Kevin J.H. Dettmar and William Richey, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 17-35. Brian Ward talks about "black authenticity" in the context of R&B music in *Just My Soul Responding*, 1998, 10-12.
[192] Ibid, 220.
[193] Ibid, 218.

as black. The central aspect of rap authenticity that I explore in the rest of this chapter is the tradition of linking oneself to hip-hop's past, as well as the process of authenticating hip-hop within a lineage of black musical tradition. This topic could easily fill the pages of an entire book, so I will only briefly examine some of these relationships, concluding with a case-study.

One of the ways in which rappers authenticate themselves is by connecting themselves to rap's history. It is common to see new artists aligning themselves with successful, well-established artists to gain credibility. Obviously, MCs must prove themselves worthy of a place in the rap sphere by demonstrating their skills as an MC or a producer, but aligning themselves with an established artist can gain them entry into the public ear. For example, Snoop Dogg first appeared on Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*, in 1992. Dr. Dre had already earned respect as a member of NWA in the late 1980s.[194] Rapper 50 Cent gained entry into mainstream rap through his affiliation with Eminem and Dr. Dre. New artists are often affiliated with established artists by appearing on their album, or by having the established artist appear on their album. This affiliation can also occur by having the senior rapper play a role in the album's production, or by label affiliation.

Authenticating themselves through a connection to rap's history does not always happen so overtly. More subtle lyrical references can also create a link to rap's past. For example, a rapper can compare his flows to those of another rapper. References to old-school rap are extremely common and can often create a link to the past. This technique is not only common for newer MCs, who are trying to make a name for themselves, it is also used by established rappers to further authenticate themselves, and to place themselves within a lineage of great MCs.

[194] NWA stands for "Niggaz With Attitude."

A connection to rap's past can also be achieved musically. One way in which MCs can do this is by adopting an old-school style flow. MCs and producers can also create a historical connection through sampling or musical references. A notable example is Missy Elliott's use of the Sugarhill Gang's "Apache (Jump on it)" as the musical background for "We Run This." The sampling of this song is significant in the context of a rap lineage as the Sugarhill Gang is considered to be one of the first prominent rap groups. Their 1979 hit, "Rapper's Delight," launched rap into the mainstream. "Apache," has also become something of a rap anthem and most serious fans will be familiar with the song.[195] The Sugarhill Gang based "Apache" on an existing song by the same name, originally written by Jerry Lordan, and recorded by the Shadows in 1960. [196] The song has been covered by many artists, gaining significance with the early hip-hop community through a version by the Incredible Bongo Band (1972). Some of the earliest hip-hop DJs, such as DJ Herc used the Bongo Band's catchy rhythmic break from "Apache," making it an underground hit by the time the Sugarhill Gang referenced the piece in 1981.[197] Thus, by sampling it, Missy is creating an aural link between herself and some of the grandfathers of rap, contributing to her authenticity within the rap community.[198]

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[195] Both the melody, and the rhythmic break of the Incredible Bongo Band's version of "Apache" have been sampled countless times, including by Sir Mix-a-Lot in "Jump on It," (1996), the title obviously referencing the Sugarhill Gang, and by Fatboy Slim in "Apache" (1998); Michaelangelo Matos, "All Roads Lead to 'Apache," paper presented at the *Experience Music Project*, Seattle, Washington (April 2005). This paper can also be found on Matos's blog, http://m-matos.blogspot.com/2005/04/notes-on-emp-to-follow-probably-later.html.

[196] The track was popular in Britain, but only became known in North America through a cover by Danish guitarist Jorgan Ingmann; (Matos, 2005).

[197] The Sugarhill Gang did not sample the Incredible Bongo Band's version, they re-recorded it; the break was played by the Sugarhill Records house band, and the Chops horn section. "Apache (Jump on it)" was featured on the Sugarhill Gang's second album, *8th Wonder* in 1981. (Matos, 2005).

[198] Given the popularity of "Apache," and the number of artists who have covered or used this material in their work, there are likely many interesting intertextual meanings present in Missy Elliott's song, "We Run This." I have chosen not to provide a close reading of this song, but many of the cultural meanings of "Apache" are discussed in Matos, 2005.

It is also common practice for an MC to place themselves within the broader history of African-American popular music. Going back to rap music's beginnings in the Bronx in the 1970s, DJs went "digging in the crates," looking for interesting albums and songs to spin at parties and underground clubs.[199] Although any material can, and has, been sampled, early DJs "tended toward soul and funk breaks."[200] As Joanna Demers has observed, "Musical borrowings, or samples, have long been a means of creating lineage between hip-hop and older genres of African-American music such as funk, soul, and rhythm and blues."[201] Artists choose samples not only for their interesting sound and their potential to mix with other material, but often to evoke the feeling of an earlier time period, or to reference a particular artist or style. For example, Demers has studied how rap's sampling of music from 1970s blaxsploitation films draws a connection to this black, American cultural form, and in doing so also restates and re-interrogates the identity, politics, and political consciousness of the era. According to Demers, "hip-hop culture prizes and cultivates its memory, such that lyrics and images of rap songs from the 1970s and 1980s are still accessible and usable to MCs today."[202] As I have discussed, this cultivation of hip-hop's memory is both lyrical and musical, and extends to a longer lineage of black, American popular music.

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[199] Joseph Schloss talks about digging in the crates, and the social significance of this practice in Chapter 4, "Material and Inspiration: Digging in the Crates," *Making Beats*, 2004. The process of digging in the crates has now become a means of connecting oneself to hip-hop history, since it has been a central aspect of hip-hop culture (Schloss, 92).
[200] Ibid, 36.
[201] Joanna Demers, "Sampling the 1970s in Hip-hop," *Popular Music* 22/1 (2003), 41-56.
[202] Ibid, 41.

***Nas: "Can't Forget About You"***

Nas' 2006 song, "Can't Forget About You," from the album *Hip Hop is Dead*, draws on rap's musical lineage in several important ways.[203] Nas authenticates himself within hip-hop's history through his lyrical narrative, while simultaneously authenticating himself in a larger history of African-American music through the process of sampling. The song's lyrics are centered on the idea of reminiscing about the good old days, both personally for Nas, and more broadly for the good old days of hip-hop. Nas establishes the tone of remembrance in his opening lines:

> There comes a day in ya life
> When ya wanna kick back
> Straw hat on the porch
> When you're old perhaps
> Wanna gather your thoughts
> Have a cold one, brag
> To your grandkids on how life is golden

He continues the first verse by mentioning "all of the things he did, all the money and the fame," thus drawing importance to himself and his success. He goes to on rap about "Colliding with big names that coulda made your career stop," again referencing his importance within the hip-hop community. He also boasts about his importance in the last two lines of the first verse: "All that, and your man is still here, and I'm still hot. Wow! I need a moment y'all, see I almost felt a tear drop."

It is in the pre-chorus, however, that Nas makes explicit reference to hip-hop history:

> When was the last time you heard a real anthem?
> Nas, the millionaire, the mansion
> When was the last time you heard your boy Nas rhyme?
> Never on schedule, but always on time

[203] Nas, *Hip Hop is Dead,* Columbia/Def Jam B000JVSZIY, 2006.

These lyrics are important since Nas implies that he is bringing back the hip-hop anthem. A hip-hop anthem is a rap song that makes an important cultural, social, or political statement. It may be serious, or humorous, but represents something important to a large group of people within that culture. It is a song that would hold meaning for many people and would also be well known and recognizable. For example, the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" can be thought of as an anthem due to its popularity, as well as the fact that it represents hip-hop's acceptance within the mainstream.

The chorus of "Can't Forget About You," performed by R&B singer, Chrisette Michelle, reinforces the themes of reminiscence and success already introduced in the first verse and pre-chorus:

> These streets hold my deepest days
> This hood taught me golden ways
> Made me (truly this is what made me)
> Break me (not a thing's gonna break me)
> Ooooh I'm that history, I'm that block
> I'm that lifestyle, I'm that spot
> I'm that kid by the numbers spot
> That's my past that made me hot
> Here's my lifelong anthem
> Can't forget about you

A new theme that emerges in the chorus is the connection to the streets and life in the hood, lyric themes that provide credibility in rap. The last lines "Here's my lifelong anthem, can't forget about you," reiterate that this song is intended to be an anthem and also state the song's title. The lyric, "can't forget about you," seems to be an attempt to contextualize Nas' own success and contribution within the hip-hop world.

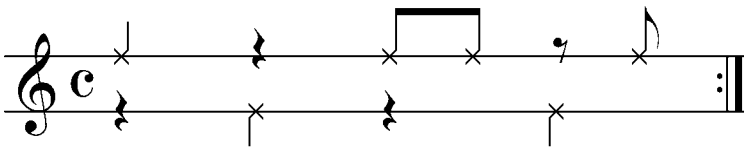
Nas recontextualizes the song's title at the beginning of the second verse with the line, "Can't forget about the old school," in which he reminisces about old school rap. This theme carries through the second verse with lines such as, "Can't forget when the

first rap Grammy went to Jazzy, Fresh Prince - Fat Boys broke up, rap hasn't been the same since." With lyrics such as these, Nas aligns himself with old-school rap, therefore further authenticating himself within the rap tradition. Throughout the second and third verses, Nas also makes references to prominent figures in African-American history, such as actors, athletes, and musicians (aside from rappers). For example, "So irregular, how it mess you up when Mr. T became a wrestler; Can't forget about Jordon's retirement," and "It's the same vibe Good Times had right after James died." In the context of this song, Nas is not only reflecting on rap's history, and his place within that lineage, but he is also reminiscing about other aspects of African-American culture.

The connection to African-American culture and history is most clearly established through Nas' use of musical borrowing in "Can't Forget About You." Nas builds the entire song around the melody and harmony of Nat King Cole's "Unforgettable," originally released in 1954. Nat King Cole is an iconic figure in American popular music history and this is one of his most recognizable songs. Nas begins the song with the beat, a simple pattern of quarters and eighths (see Example 2-12. The beat also features bells on every quarter beat. After the first four introductory measures, a shaker is added, pulsing out sixteenth notes. In measure eight, the final beat and a half features a sixteenth note scratching pattern that introduces the beginning of the first verse. At the beginning of the ninth measure, the rest of the musical backing track enters as Nas begins to rap. A portion of Nat King Cole's original backing music can be heard faintly in the background, but a piano replaying of Cole's melody from "Unforgettable" is the featured musical element supporting Nas' flow. Every so often, the strings from the original recording are brought to the forefront of the texture, but even in

the background, they do contribute to the 1950s atmosphere being evoked. The hip-hop beat and Nas' rhymed flow, combined with the older style of musical backing track substantially contribute to the themes of reminiscence from Nas' lyrics.

**Example 2-12 Nas "Can't Forget About You"**



A sense of authenticity is also garnered from the production of Nas' vocal delivery. There is no voice doubling, his voice is very hard-hitting and is centered in the mix. His pace is moderate, without the use of complex rhythms. His attacks are crisp, without having a hard edge that typically signals aggressiveness. His mode of delivery places emphasis on the words being delivered, rather than on an interesting vocal quality or complex rhythms.

The musical borrowing becomes explicit at the end of the song as Nas brings in a sample of Nat King Cole singing the end of "Unforgettable." The sample features Cole singing "That's why, darling, it's incredible that someone so unforgettable, thinks that I am unforgettable too." This direct sample clarifies the musical references used throughout the song for any listener who may not have caught the reference; it also creates a direct link to a musical past. Musically, what makes this final section of the song stand out most is a transition in the musical texture. The beat drops out as Chrisette Michele sings the final repetition of the chorus. The background music brings in the lush string arrangement of the original track as we hear Michele's voice transition to Nat King Cole's. The transition from a hip-hop texture to a more traditional, acoustic instrumental

texture occurs gradually: first with the beat dropping out during Michele's final chorus, and then with the return to the original sample (re-mastered, of course). In all other repetitions of the chorus, the beat was present. The song's ending, with a gradual shift in musical texture back to the original sample, is almost like a final reminiscence. The entire song has created a link to the musical past, both through the sample of "Unforgettable," and through Nas' lyrical sentiments about the good old days of hip-hop. This moment seems to provide both Nas and the listener with a final moment to reflect on the past.

Nas creates another link to musical tradition in the song's video by featuring Natalie Cole at the piano during the song's final segment. In a 2007 MTV news interview, Nas discussed the inclusion of Natalie Cole in the video:

> It was just an idea I wanted," Nas elaborated about reaching out to Cole. "It's a given, though, if we use the track. Nobody could forget what she did with the record, her and her father," he added, referring to the 1991 album on which Natalie sang a posthumous duet with her father using a track of his original vocal. "That was one of the most major moments in music. With the family and what the song meant to a generation before her and our generation when she did it with her father. I'm not blood-related, but I'm musically related, and I guess I'm the child of their generation and I'm bridging the gap from Nat King Cole to Natalie Cole to Nas King Cole, and we're going to make it one family all over again.[204]

Nas says that he is "musically related," connecting himself to a history of African-American music, and reinforcing the idea of a musical lineage. The clip featuring Natalie Cole shows her sitting at the piano, playing, with Nas looking on. As her father sings the final words, "unforgettable too," Natalie Cole looks up at Nas and mouths the words. The presence of Natalie Cole in the video only serves to further authenticate Nas' musical

[204] Shaheem Reid, 2007. "'Nas King Cole' Shoots 'Unforgettable' Clip, Preps New Album for '07." *MTV News* (January 9, 2007), http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1549573/20070109/nas.jhtml.

borrowing, and therefore, albeit indirectly, also authenticates him within that particular lineage, "from Nat King Cole to Natalie Cole to Nas King Cole."

As I have already discussed in this chapter, the idea of rap music as a black musical medium is highly problematic in many ways. Despite these problems, many people within the rap community continue to view rap as predominantly black. This is reinforced by the sounds, words, and images of rap. What I have done in this chapter can be thought of as a first step in the interrogation of how rap vocality is coded as black. As I mentioned earlier, many of rap's vocal traditions that are coded as black are also tied to rap masculinity. I will continue to explore the connection between blackness and masculinity in the following chapter.

# Chapter 3

## Performing Masculinity via Rap Vocality

Masculinity plays a large role in how we define rap music in North America. As rap scholar Imani Perry has observed, hip-hop "constitutes a powerful location for asserting the particularity of black male identity."[205] Throughout rap's development, masculine posturing and male identity formation have dominated many aspects of this art form. These forms include lyrical themes, visual images, such as music videos and album art, and even the music and vocal presentation of rappers. Masculinity has been such an obvious and exaggerated facet of rap performance and marketing that some scholars have identified rap as "hypermasculine."[206] This chapter explores some of the ways in which masculinity is represented in rap vocality. I will begin by discussing some of lyrical and visual components of masculinity present in rap, as already observed and discussed by scholars in the field. After establishing some of the commonly held views on rap masculinity, I will explore how these aspects of masculinity carry into the musical realm.

### I. Gendered Positions in Rap: A Brief Introduction

Rap music is currently a male-dominated musical style. Although female MCs have been active participants in rap since its inception, they have been strongly

[205] Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 118.
[206] For example, see Perry, 2004, Chapter 5; Davarian Baldwin, "Black Empires, White Desires," in *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader,* edited by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, (New York: Routledge, 2004) 159-176.

outnumbered by men, and women in general have often been relegated to less important roles.[207] For example, Ted Swedenburg has discussed the fact that the genre of Nationalist rap "tends to relegate women to second place, to supporting roles, and at best 'respects' them as 'mothers' and 'Queens.'"[208] By contrast, Gangsta rap lyrics "are pervaded by derogatory references to women as bitches, hoes (whores), and skeezers (gold-diggers)."[209] Female rappers do occupy a different space than most women in the rap sphere—they often possess more power and control over their sexuality, but to do so they must negotiate the boundaries imposed by men.

Although the issues of women's roles in rap will be discussed further in the following chapter, I want to briefly address this issue now, to draw attention to the sense of male exclusivity that is present within the rap domain. The fact that men dominate the rap scene is an important consideration when discussing how masculinity is articulated through performance. One reason is that cross-gender relations shape the ways in which our masculinity and femininity are performed. For example, male rapper's attempts to control female sexuality in lyrics and music video will contribute to the ways in which we perceive their masculine identity. Secondly, less female involvement means that there is more interaction among men.[210] Rap's hypermasculinity is only partly due to the fact that men make up the majority of rap performers. The small percentage of female rappers can account for some of the excessive masculinity, but this cannot be the only factor. In what follows, I will attempt to establish some context for rap's hypermasculinity.

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[207] Scholars such as Perry have also discussed that rap is dominated by men: "hip hop as an art form is gendered male, despite the presence of some excellent female artists" (129).
[208] Ted Swedenburg, "Homies in the 'Hood: Rap's Commodifcation and Insubordination" in *That's the Joint: the Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, edited by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 587.
[209] Ibid.
[210] This is one factor that has lead to accusations of homoeroticism in hip-hop.

**II. Masculinity: Definitions and Context**

In order to interrogate the ways in which masculinity in performed via the voice in rap, I must first establish what constitutes rap masculinity in a more general sense. I do not wish to define what masculinity is, but rather explore how masculinity is represented and performed in the rap sphere. More specifically, I will discuss the ways in which masculinity is portrayed by the majority of mainstream American rap artists.[211] I realize that many of the aspects of masculine representation I will discuss contain stereotypes of black masculinity. These stereotypes are performed, reinforced, and manipulated by many, if not most, popular rappers and are therefore important areas and issues to explore.

The stereotypes performed by many mainstream rap artists are part of a system of images and sounds that constitute this musical style. Sut Jhally discusses the system of images present in rap videos in the film *Dreamworlds III* and I will briefly summarize some of these general points before focusing on the specifics of rap videos.[212] The film as a whole discusses gender representation in all genres of music videos. Jhally reveals how women are fragmented and displayed as passive objects solely for male consumption. Men, on the other hand, are almost always represented in positions of power, controlling the female body (images of male power and entitlement). The majority of music videos fall under what Jhally calls "the commercial, male, heterosexual, pornographic imagination."[213] Jhally demonstrates that these representations are common throughout

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[211] This is not to say that these stereotypes are not performed in various underground rap scenes, but that there tends to be a wider variety of themes and images in underground hip hop than in the dominant images of mainstream rap.

[212] Sut Jhally, *Dreamworlds III: Desire, Sex & Power in Music* Video (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2007).

[213] I will discuss how female rappers negotiate this male, pornographic imagination in the next chapter.

many genres of music videos. He does, however, address the fact that images depicting male control over female bodies are particularly prevalent in rap music videos. Jhally emphasizes that it is not only the representation of women in rap videos that is problematic, but that representations of black masculinity are equally troubling: "Black men in mainstream music videos are largely presented as violent, savage, criminal, and drunken thugs."[214]

There are a broad range of images found in rap music videos, and of course black men are not always presented in the same way. Rap music videos have changed throughout rap's history, coinciding with larger shifts in rap aesthetics. For example, rap music videos from the 1980s are very different from current rap videos. This has as much to do with the development of music video production in general as it does with the development of rap.[215] Even looking at videos produced within a specific time period, we will find a variety of representations of black men. For example, if we look at several examples from 1988 to 1990, we will see representations of the black male as a dangerous criminal in Gangsta rap videos such as NWA's "Straight Outta Compton." (1989).[216] We will see less violent representations of black inner-city life in videos such

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[214] Sut Jhally, "The Pornographic Imagination" in *Dreamworlds III*.

[215] This research is not centered on rap music video production, although numerous videos will be discussed in relation to issues of race and gender representations. While a study of the evolution of rap music video production would be informative, it is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this project. For further reading on music video production, reception, and analysis see: Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). In *Dreamworlds III*, Sut Jhally also provides a more in-depth look at the content and images of rap music videos.

[216] "Straight Outta Compton" depicts a group a black men, the members of NWA, walking the streets of Compton. The members are represented as tough and a viewer would likely associate these images with that of inner-city gangs based on the combination of lyrics and images. The opening lyrics even label them as a gang; "Straight outta Compton, crazy motherfucker named Ice Cube from the gang called Niggaz With Attitudes." The members of NWA are later pursued and captured by the police for their crimes, which the listener learns of through their lyrics. The images of black men provided in this song and video is that of violent, dangerous, criminals. This track was released on the album *Straight Outta Compton*, Priority Records B000003B6J, 1989.

as "Life is…Too Short" (1988) by rapper Too $hort.[217] We can find more "family-friendly" images such as Kid 'N Play in a high school setting in "Rollin' With Kid 'N Play" (1988).[218] Common narratives of courtship and dating can be seen in videos such as Biz Markie's "Just a Friend" (1989).[219] This is by no means an example of every type of rap music video from the late 1980s: it is a sampling of videos that show the stark differences in the depiction of black male rappers even within the same time period in rap's development. The differences between these videos reflect the varying lyrical content and image of the rappers in question, as well as the genre of rap being performed. For example, we do not expect a music video for a song about guns, robbery, and being chased by the police to have the same images as a song about heterosexual courtship.[220]

That being said, Jhally's point concerning the representation of black men in rap videos as "violent, savage, criminal, and drunken thugs" is valid in many cases. Despite the range of images shown in rap music videos, there are certain stereotypes that have prominently emerged throughout the development of rap music videos. For the purpose of this study, I am primarily concerned with fairly recent rap videos (1998-2008).[221]

I will now turn to a description of some more current rap videos to provide specific examples of how black male rappers are depicted. The image of the black male

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[217] This video depicts Too $hort hanging out in and driving around his neighborhood in Oakland, California. The song was the title track for the album *Life is Too…Short*, Jive B0000004UU 1988.

[218] The video for "Rollin' With Kid 'N Play" takes place in a high school, featuring the MCs performing at the school, as well as participating in gym class. Women's bodies are objectified as the Kid 'N Play gawk at the ladies exercising in leotards. The rappers are portrayed as non-violent, non-threatening guys having fun at school.

[219] The video for "Just a Friend" is primarily a visual narrative that coincides with the lyrics. Markie is shown dating a girl and then discovering that she is having an affair with someone that she said was "just a friend."

[220] I will discuss genres of rap music in more detail later in this chapter.

[221] I chose to provide an example from the late 1980s because this was when Gangsta rap was emerging as a genre and the sorts of images found in Gangsta rap videos have greatly shaped our perceptions of rap music more generally.

rapper as a gangster has been a dominant one since the late 1980s.[222] These representations include men with weapons, committing crimes and acts of violence, being chased by the police, and being incarcerated. An early example was mentioned above: NWA is chased by the police in the video for "Straight Outta Compton." More recent examples include the video for 50 Cent's "Many Men," which depicts the rapper being shot in a gang related incident.[223] The video for "Still Will" by 50 Cent featuring Akon depicts both artists performing from within prison cells.[224] T.I.'s video for "Hero" also features a number of scenes filmed in a prison setting. The video for Chamillionaire's "Ridin" plays on the stereotype that a young black man driving an expensive car must have stolen it, or be involved in something illegal, hence the song's repeated lyric, "hopin that they gon catch me ridin dirty." Even the recent video for Young Jeezy's "Vacation," which focuses on the MC relaxing on a beach, surrounded by friends, alcohol, expensive cars, and beautiful women, opens with Jeezy being arrested. The context for his arrest is given to the viewer at the end of the video, where we see him being arrested while on vacation. We are never told the reason for his arrest, but his public identity is constructed as a gangster with ties to the hood, so one can assume that his crime is related to that lifestyle. [225]

Equally prevalent are music videos featuring male rappers reveling in money, expensive cars, and scantly clad women. An example of this can be seen in the video for Lil Wayne's "Lollipop," which features an excessive display of wealth. The video

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[222] Gangsta rap dominated mainstream rap production throughout the early 1990s.
[223] This song and video references the fact that 50 Cent was actually shot nine times in a gang-related incident.
[224] The video for "You Don't Know," by Eminem, featuring 50 Cent, Lloyd Banks, and Cashis also takes place at a prison.
[225] This was discussed in Chapter 2 in my analysis of Young Jeezy's "Soul Survivor."

features a big rig converted into a limousine, where Lil Wayne parties with countless beautiful women. The video for T.I.'s "Top Back (remix)," featuring Young Jeezy, Young Dro, Kuntry King, and B.G., showcases sexy women and expensive cars, both being objects that signify a man's success. Numerous women in little shorts and bikinis dance around the rappers, in front of a wall of rims, and in front of cars. They are also shown washing the cars, repairing them, and, of course, sitting in a sexual pose inside of cars.[226]

Particularly problematic are the highly sexualized images of women, especially those in which women are controlled by men, which is typical with rap lyrics and videos. Women are often depicted as commodities to be bought and sold. One of the most talked about examples of this type of negative representation is the video for Nelly's song "Tip Drill."[227] There are two commonly understood definitions of a tip drill. As Sut Jhally has discussed, a tip drill is a woman whose sexuality can be bought and sold, and who is willing to be passed around for money. Another understanding of the term is that a tip drill is a person who has an ugly face, but is good enough to have sex with from behind. This second understanding may even have come into being through Nelly's song, via lyrics such as: "It must be your ass cause it ain't your face, I need a tip drill." The video is set at a pool party and depicts a great deal of female nudity, such as topless women in bikini bottoms, women in thongs, men spreading women's butt cheeks, and girl-on-girl action. Perhaps the most insulting part of the video, certainly the excerpt that has garnered the most attention from scholars and the media, is a scene towards the end of the video where Nelly swipes a credit card between a woman's butt cheeks. This action is a

[226] The video images correspond to the songs lyrics, which reference cars, hip-hop beats, and women.
[227] This video has been discussed in Byron Hurt's documentary, *Beyond Beats and Rhymes* (2006), and Sut Jhally's film, *Dreamworlds III* (2007).

direct statement concerning women's willingness to sell their sexuality and is highly problematic given the prevalence of these types of images in rap videos. As Jhally has discussed, these images become normalized and reinforce the male heterosexual pornographic imagination that dominates the world of music videos.[228]

I would argue that this system of images exists not only in rap music videos, but also in media and promotional material, such as album covers and advertisements, as well as at concerts and in artists' television interviews. I would also like to extend the idea of a "system of images" in rap to include representations of masculinity in a broader sense. Black masculinity is presented to us in particular way in the rap sphere as a whole—not just in music videos, but via lyrics and vocal performance as well. These images, lyrics, and music are often violent, hypermasculine, and misogynist, presenting what Jhally calls "a threatening and out of control black masculinity."[229] As Jhally discusses, it is important to remember that "these images do not reflect the reality of African-American masculinity, but how someone has chosen to represent it at this point in history."[230] These representations of masculinity are not only tied to race, but also a particular socio-economic status. Black masculinity in the rap sphere is tied to the hood, the ghetto, and the streets. Even with the more recent trend of rappers openly displaying wealth, there is an understanding that they had to work hard to become wealthy. A prime example of this mentality can be seen on 50 Cent's album *Get Rich or Die Trying*.[231]

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[228] Jhally, "The Pornographic Imagination" in *Dreamworlds III,* (2007).
[229] Ibid.
[230] Ibid. This should cause us to pose the question: Who is controlling these images? According to Sut Jhally, this power primarily belongs to the white men who hold the majority of power in our current media empires.
[231] 50 Cent, *Get Rich or Die Trying*, Universal B000084T18, 2003.

These images of black men are not exclusive to rap music videos and promotional material; they are reflective of many of the stereotypes of African-American men in the popular sphere.

> Ed Guerrero notes that American society receives two images of black masculinity through the media: 'On the one hand, we are treated to the grand celebrity spectacle of black male athletes, movie stars, and pop entertainers doing what all celebrities are promoted as doing best, that is, conspicuously enjoying the wealth and privilege that fuel the ordinary citizen's material fantasies.' By contrast, as the alternative image, 'we are also subjected to the real-time devastation, slaughter, and body-count of a steady stream of faceless black males on the 6 and 11 o'clock news.'[232]

Hip-hop unifies these two images into a single picture of the black male superstar and thug.[233] This is the same critique expressed by Young Jeezy in the song "Soul Survivor," as I discussed in Chapter 2. In the third verse of the song, which deals with the lyrical themes of crime and a life in the hood, Young Jeezy states: "Like animals, they lock us in cages, the same nigga that's a star when you put 'em on stages."

When discussing representations of masculinity in rap, we must always remember the intersection of blackness and masculinity. Due to its origins in black culture and the continued dominance of black performers in mainstream rap, rap is at least partly defined in relation to blackness. As such, representations of masculinity are always tied to the ways in which blackness has been understood in popular culture. Perry has discussed these intersections at length in her chapter, entitled "B-Boys, Players, and Preachers: Reading Masculinity."[234] According to Perry, masculinity in hip-hop is a version of black urban masculinity, which "is complicated by the American exploitation of black male

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[232] Perry, 2004, 121, citing: Ed Guerrero, "The black Man on Our Screens and the Empty Space in Representation" in Golden *Black Male*, 183.
[233] Perry 2004 and Guerrero 1995.
[234] Ibid, 119-122.

identity and fraught with sexist troping."[235] Referencing bell hooks, Perry explores how the patriarchal objectification of black masculinity through the white male gaze has contributed to the hypermasculinity of black male rappers.[236] Perry and hooks have argued that the objectification of black men has caused them to become feminized, and that black men have fought back by embracing hypermasculinity.[237] According to Perry, black male bodies have been objectified and consumed in North American culture. She states: "If one thinks of the athlete, the thug, the kinetic entertainer, the idea of inherent physical ability and intellectual inability, and the hypersexual threat, there emerges an obsession with and the observation, parody, and mutilation of black male bodies."[238] She links this tradition of objectification to earlier pornographic obsessions with the size of black male genitalia and the fear of black male sexuality. One can see this physical objectification of male rappers' bodies on album and magazine covers, and in music videos (see Figure 3-1 and Figure 3-2, below).

[235] Ibid, 118.
[236] Ibid, 121. Perry references bell hooks, "Feminism inside: Toward a Black Body Politic," in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art 1994).
[237] See hooks 1994, 127.
[238] Perry, 120.

**Figure 3-1 50 Cent**

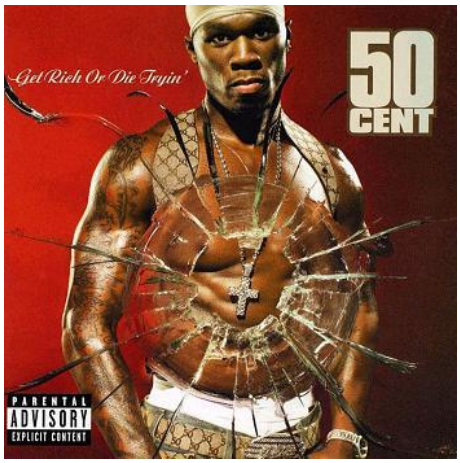
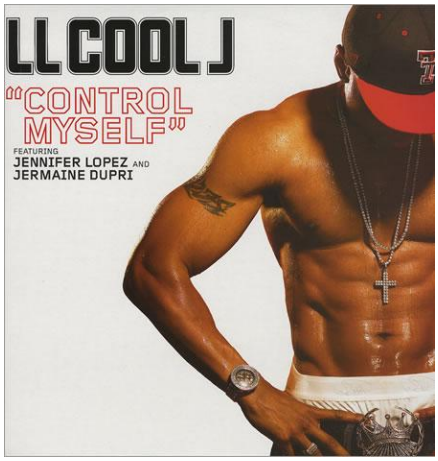



**Figure 3-2 LL Cool J**




Although the representations we see in rap do not directly reflect the reality of black male experience, it can be an important location to assert black male identity.[239] The masculinity that we see in the rap sphere is a version of black, urban masculinity. As Perry has discussed, this version of black masculinity is complicated by the American exploitation of black male identity and sexual troping.[240]

[239] Ibid, 118.
[240] Ibid.

***Masculine Identity in Rap***

We can think about masculinity in rap in terms of the attributes possessed, as well as the roles and identities performed. There are a number of attributes expected to be present in performed male rap identities. These attributes are stereotypes of black manhood portrayed by the majority of mainstream rap artists. As Byron Hurt discusses in his documentary film *Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, in hip-hop you have to fit into a box to be considered masculine. According to Hurt, "in order to be in that box you have to be strong, tough, have a lot of girls, you have to have money, be a playa or pimp, be in control, dominate other men, other people."[241] These behaviors are considered norms in mainstream rap and those who deviate from these norms lack credibility, more specifically "street cred," which means everything in the hip-hop community. According to Hurt, if you are not any of the things described above, "people call you soft or weak, pussy, chump, faggot. Nobody wants to be any of these things, so everybody stays on this side of the box."[242] Many of these attributes have become so standardized in rap music that at least some of these qualities are expected to be present in all black male rap performances. Just to reiterate, these traits are:

1) Male
2) Black
3) Heterosexual
4) Tough
5) Street-smart/business smart
6) Powerful (having power over your women, crew, and adversaries)

Although not every mainstream American male rapper exemplifies all of these traits all of the time, they rarely go against these norms, particularly not by showing weakness or affiliating with homosexuals. An example demonstrated in *Beyond Beats and Rhymes*

[241] Byron Hurt, *Beyond Beats and Rhymes* (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2006).
[242] Ibid.

is that of rapper 50 Cent showing a video of fellow MC Ja Rule crying. As the image of Ja Rule plays on the big screen, 50 Cent says, "This is what a bitch nigga looks like." Calling someone a "bitch nigga" is equivalent to calling them a "pussy" or a "fag." The term implies weakness and calls the subject's manhood into question.

These attributes are not performed only by black, male rappers, but they have become associated with both blackness and maleness through the process of stereotyping. Although female rappers may perform some of these attributes as well, they are not always necessary to obtain credibility. These qualities of masculine identity have become established norms and greatly contribute to the stereotypes of black men in popular culture and society.

Many male rappers also embody archetypal roles. Scholars have discussed these roles in a variety of contexts, however, I will rely on Perry's descriptions of these roles, as well as Krims' categorization of these roles into genres.[243] One of the most prominent personas adopted by rappers is that of the Gangsta. The image of the Gangsta really became popularized in the late 1980s, and early 1990s, especially on the West Coast. This role was "drawn from the real-life gang battles over economic control of drug markets in communities from Los Angeles to Seattle."[244] Early Gangsta rappers include Ice T and NWA; a more recent example of a Gangsta rapper would be 50 Cent. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the role of the Gangsta rapper was extremely political, rooted in a social critique of white power and the economic disparities between people of different

[243] Perry, 2004, Chapter 5; Krims, 2000, Chapter 2.
[244] Perry, 131.

races in the U.S. Many of these critiques were directed at the police and justice system through Gangsta rap's lyrical themes.[245]

The persona of the Gangsta falls into Krims' genre of "reality rap," which includes rap music dealing with a number of themes. Gangsta rap is certainly the most controversial of these, but reality rap includes any type of rap music whose themes "undertake the project of realism…which in this context would amount to an epistemological/ontological project to map the realities of (usually black) inner-city life."[246] Many rappers strive to illustrate the hardships of life in poor, urban neighborhoods, as well as continued racism in the U.S. context. With many recent rappers, the Gangsta persona often intersects with the broader definition of reality rap, as is the case with Young Jeezy.

The genre of reality rap also includes the figure of the hustler. As Perry has discussed, the hustler has been more common on the East coast and in the Southern U.S. This figure differs from the Gangsta in that he does not fight a war based on affiliation (gang affiliation), and his goal is to overcome the limitations of his social class.[247] Examples of the hustler persona can be seen with artists such as Scarface and Rick Ross. A well known example can be seen with Rick Ross' song "Hustlin," which contrasts the wealth of South Beach, Florida with the "real" Miami, where they hustle.[248] The song's hook consists of the phrase, "Everyday we hustlin,'" repeated over and over again. In this song, Ross is specific about how they hustle, with lyrics such as "I'm in the distribution" and "We never steal cars, but we deal hard." The contrast between South Beach and Ross'

[245] For more information on Gangsta rap, see Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, (1996) and Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang* (2005).
[246] Krims, 70.
[247] Perry, 132.
[248] Rick Ross, *Port Of Miami*, Universal B000FZET70, 2006.

neighborhood in the "real" Miami is depicted in the music video through the use of color: South Beach is filmed with bright color and Ross' hood is much darker.

The player or the pimp is a very commonly adopted persona. As Perry has discussed, the pimp's "power lies in both the acquisition of wealth and female bodies."[249] As I discussed in Chapter 2, Snoop Dogg is one of the best known pimp figures in rap. The term "player" is sometimes a term synonymous with pimp, but other times used to describe a lover. The player is often a smooth, seductive man, who may have great deal of success with the ladies, but does not necessarily exploit them for money. An example of a player would be T.I., as can be seen with the songs "Whatever You Like" and "Porn Star," as discussed in Chapter 2. Since there is a fine line between them, the roles of pimp and player are often merged into one. The pimp and the player are personas that fit into Krims' genre, "Mack rap." According to Krims, "a 'Mack' is not necessarily a literal pimp, although that possibility is not precluded. Rather, a Mack may simply be a man whose confidence, prolificness, and (claimed) success with women mark him as a player."[250] The player is a role that seems to be dominant in current mainstream rap, a persona that has even been adopted by male R&B singers who are affiliated with hip-hop; for example, Chris Brown, Usher, and Ne-Yo. Sexual dominance over women is a key signifier of an MC's manhood and the player freely exerts this type of control.

Another role taken on by rappers is that of the scholar or intellectual. This persona is taken on by MCs who "cherish vocabulary and sophisticated rhyming."[251] These rappers are often very political, critiquing American society and politics. Rappers who can be

[249] Perry, 132.
[250] Krims, 62.
[251] Perry, 132.

considered to fit this archetype are Common, Mos Def, and Talib Kweli.[252] The scholar or intellectual falls within Krims' genre of "Jazz/Bohemian," which includes not only intelligent, critical rap, but also rap that is strongly influenced by jazz. Examples include A Tribe Called Quest, The Roots, and De La Soul. The artists who make up this genre would be considered "connoisseurs," according to Krims. These rappers are often, but not always, mainstream, but are typically an exception to the negative stereotypes discussed above.

A genre of rap discussed by Krims that does not necessarily match up to any single one of the personas discussed above is that of "party rap." Party rap is commercial rap and it is often marked by danceable beats and less serious lyrical themes. Krims cites Biz Markie and Doug E. Fresh as examples of this genre. Although party rap has not necessarily promoted a particular role or persona as being predominant, being a player is often a prerequisite. Krims notes that the separation between Mack rap and party rap is often ambiguous.[253] I would cite MCs such as Kardinal Offishall and Flo Rida as current examples of the party rap genre.

As Krims has discussed, these genres are permeable, and many rappers cross between them. It is not only the genres that are permeable, the roles are also fluid and many rappers shift between these different personas. For example, it is possible for an MC to be a Gangsta and a pimp, as has been the case with Snoop Dogg. It is also possible for an artist to sometimes perform as an intellectual and sometimes within the genre of party rap, as has been the case with Mos Def and Wyclef Jean. MCs may even occupy different roles at different points in their career.

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[252] Perry, 133.
[253] Krims, 64.

**III. Male Vocal Expression**

How are these aspects of masculinity transferred into rap's musical practices? How does music, and specifically the voice, participate in the construction of identities in hypermasculine texts? As I have discussed, masculinity is tied to race in American mainstream rap. As such, many of the vocal conventions of blackness that I discussed in Chapter 2, are also tied to representations of masculinity. For example, a rough vocal timbre is not only a signifier of blackness, it is also a signifier of hardness and aggressiveness, which are necessary male qualities within most genres of rap. An example of this can be seen in Young Jeezy's "Soul Survivor," where Jeezy's rough, low, raw, vocal quality contributes to his lyrical themes of crime, violence, and life in the hood. Lyrical prowess and rapid lyrical delivery are also signifiers of masculinity, and often used to signal aggressiveness, as I discussed in the case of Busta Rhymes' song "Touch It," in Chapter 2. These characteristics are associated with a number of roles/genres of rap, including reality rap, Gangsta rap, the hustler, and even the intellectual at times, particularly when he is critiquing American social processes and politics.

Confidence is tied to braggadocio and is often associated with a somewhat slower paced delivery, but still involves a great deal of lyrical skill. A rapper expresses lyrical confidence with regard to wealth, power, and importance within the community. This type of confidence appears in all genres of rap. Confidence is one of the main criteria of maleness in rap. A rapper with extreme confidence is said to have swagger. For an MC to have swagger, he must demonstrate verbal prowess through impressive flows, and clever rhymes. A good example of MCs demonstrating swagger can be seen with T.I.'s song,

"Swagger Like Us," featuring Kanye West, Jay-Z, and Lil Wayne. These MCs define swagger through their lyrics: to have swagger you must be well-dressed, be financially secure, successful, powerful, be "real," and most importantly, demonstrate exemplary skill as an MC.[254]

Related to swagger is the cool confidence of the pimp or player. This kind of confidence can be performed aggressively, as was the case with Busta Rhymes in "Touch It," and Snoop Dogg and Lil John in "Step Yo Game Up," both discussed in Chapter 2. This type of confidence can also be turned towards the art of seduction, featuring a soft, sensual vocal delivery. We saw this style of deliver in Snoop Dogg's "Beautiful," and T.I.'s "Whatever You Like," in Chapter 2.

Another common vocal technique used to signal seduction is that of whispering. Although this strategy has been used by many MCs, one of the best known examples is probably the Yin Yang Twins' "Wait (The Whisper Song)," also referred to as "Beat That Pussy Up."[255] The Yin Yang Twins perform the entire song in whispered rap. The whispering creates a feeling of intimacy that ties into the song's lyrical themes which revolve entirely around sexual acts. The song's hook consists of the following phrases: "Wait till you see my dick," followed by "I'm gon beat that pussy up." Although both phrases are repeated, the hook ends with "beat that pussy up" repeated numerous times. The widely circulated censored version replaces the word "dick" with suggestive moaning by both male and female voices. The word "pussy" is replaced only by a female voice, creating a slight paradox. The male voices are intimately whispering "beat that pussy up," while pleasured sounds are made by a female voice. Violence and pleasure are

[254] I also discussed this song, and the idea of swagger, in Chapter 2, in the section, "T.I.: 'Porn Star,' and 'Whatever You Like.'"
[255] Yin Yang Twins, *United State of Atlanta*, TVT B0009E32JS, 2005.

thus intimately connected in this song in a manner that may be uncomfortable for many listeners since the song's lyrics are about controlling women's sexuality.

Production techniques also help MCs perform their masculinity through their vocal delivery. The most commonly used technique is probably that of voice doubling. As I discussed in relation to Young Jeezy's "Soul Survivor" and T.I.'s "Whatever You Like," in Chapter 2, voice doubling is an extremely common technique in rap. The thicker voice created by doubling sounds almost larger than life, giving the impression that the MC or singer is more powerful. The technique of voice doubling can therefore act as a signifier of masculinity, contributing to an MC's aggressiveness and/or confidence: he dominates the music texture with his voice.

In practice, these aspects of an MCs' vocal delivery tend to overlap, and an MC will often use several strategies simultaneously. I will refer back to these aspects of vocal performance later in this chapter. First, however, I would also like to address another aspect of male vocal performance in rap, that of singing. In order to contextualize this, I must first explore rap's gendered roles.

This next section delves into aspects of gendered performance that relates to both men and women. As I mentioned above, aspects of female rap performance will be explored more fully in Chapter 4. In this next section, however, I will begin to develop some ideas about gendered roles. I will discuss women's roles as singers, not rappers, with respect to how they are positioned alongside male rappers.

**IV. Gendered Roles in Rap**

This section explores the gendered roles of singing and rapping in hip-hop and in doing so, interrogates recent trends surrounding rap's male exclusivity. As I have stated above, despite the presence of female MCs, rap is a male-dominated cultural medium and has a history of being hypermasculine, violent, aggressive, and misogynist. The skill of MCing, demonstrates verbal prowess and lyrical mastery and is a cultural signifier of masculinity. Within rap, singing has typically been associated with femininity and contrasted with the masculinity of MCing. For its first two decades, rap generally separated singers from MCs. Although some raps included singing, it was usually sampled or performed by a feature singer. Examples include Run DMC's "Walk this Way" featuring Aerosmith, P Diddy's "I'll Be Missing You" featuring Faith Evans, and Jay-Z's "03 Bonnie and Clyde" featuring Beyoncé Knowles, and Kardinal Offishall's "Numba 1 (Tide is High)" featuring Keri Hilson.

There has been a recent trend of MCs crossing the boundary between rapping and singing. Famous rappers such as Ja Rule, Busta Rhymes, Eminem, and T.I. all ostentatiously walk the line between competence and incompetence in their vocal presentations. By crossing the boundary dividing "masculine" rapping from "feminine" singing, male MCs paradoxically reinforce these musical gender roles. As I will demonstrate, their showy displays of vocal incompetence serve precisely to confirm/cement their roles as non-singers, and hence to re-draw the conventional gendered boundaries of rap music by crossing between the mediums of rap and song.

I will explore how maleness and femaleness are vocally performed in rap music. I will discuss how male rappers perform maleness through the physical production of

voices, through stylistic conventions of vocality, and through a gendered historical dialogue in rap. Finally, through a musical analysis of the songs “Down Ass Bitch” and “Between You and Me” by Ja Rule, as well as “The Way I Live” by Baby Boy da Prince, I will discuss some of the gendered and sexual implications of the performance of excessive masculinity in rap vocality.

One way in which gendered voices are performed in the discourse of rap music is through the physical production of the voice. Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender and sex is useful in understanding how the physical production of voices can be used to convey gender.[256] Butler has put forth the idea that the body can be a site for the inscription of gender through the repetition of performative acts. Musicologist Suzanne Cusick has also discussed the application of Butler's theory to the singing voice by interrogating the gendering and enculturation of vocal performance. [257] It is common for people to reduce gendered differences in vocal production to biological differences of high vs. low voices. This distinction is rooted in the essentialized notion that internal, physical characteristics of our body (including the voice) are biological: men's voices are low and women's are high. This is true to a point: our physical bodies do partially determine the possible range of sounds that we can produce, but the range of sounds created by any given body in a lifetime demonstrates that our voices are not entirely prediscursive. As Cusick has observed, "Voices are always performances of a relationship negotiated between the individual vocalizer, and the vocalizer's culture."[258] Although voices are partly internal, they interact with culture, and thus are, in part,

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[256] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[257] Suzanne Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex." In *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music.* Edited by Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley. Zurich and Los Angeles: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 25-48, 1999.
[258] Ibid, 29.

culturally constructed, and are, therefore, able to serve as sites for performing gender and sexuality.

Before discussing how physical voices are performed in rap, I would like to discuss the ways in which gendered practices are coded in rap. Both the physical and culturally-specific performative aspects of vocal production play into the discursive representation of men's voices in rap.

As I have already mentioned, gendered voices are performed in rap music through stylistic norms. As I have discussed in relation to race in Chapter 2, musical codes and conventions are cultural organizers of style and genre categories. One such convention in rap is the practice of MCing. The rhythmic, nuanced delivery of lyrics is a primary signifier of rap. Historically, the conventions of rap have created a clear distinction between rapping and singing. This rap/song binary is not only marked by a distinction between pitched and non-pitched lyric delivery, it is also gendered. Rap is understood, and generally understands itself, as a hypermasculine, black, urban, male phenomenon. It is the act of MCing in particular that is most closely linked to masculinity. As I have discussed, in the rap performance context, verbal prowess, rhythmic skill, and lyrical ability are signifiers of masculinity.

Collaborations between female R&B or pop singers and male rappers have become extremely common. This is certainly not a new phenomenon — women's voices have been sampled in rap music for years. A famous, and controversial, example is Eminem's sampling of Dido's "Thank You" in his song "Stan" (2000). Rap songs often feature a sample or a soloist singing the chorus or hook. This is often, but not always, a female singer. The use of male R&B singers is also common. Their role is often

complicated because their smooth vocals are in stark contrast to the hypermasculine flows of the MCs. This is a similar position to that occupied by female singers in rap songs. The difference with male singers, however, is that their lyrics conform to the conventions of mainstream rap; their lyrics may be presented via smooth melodic lines, but they often reinforce the violent, misogynist themes put forward by the MCs. Within rap's conventions, the male R&B and pop singers' vocal production does not tend to carry the same signifiers of maleness as the MCs, but these singers retain their masculinity through lyrical themes. This is also reinforced by their personas, which are often that of players. Examples of male singers featured regularly in rap songs are: Usher, Chris Brown, Justin Timberlake, and Akon.[259] Akon is an interesting figure as he defines himself solely as a hip-hop singer, rather than as an R&B or pop singer. Akon's role was discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to his featured role in Young Jeezy's "Soul Survivor." While many of the male R&B and pop singers featured in rap songs pick up on the lyrical themes of being a player through the seduction of women and the acquisition of wealth, Akon takes his lyrical affiliation to rap a step further by incorporating themes of violence and a connection to the hood.[260]

The tradition of women singing and men rapping has been traced back to the soul tradition by Nelson George: "In contrast to soul music, which evolved out of the black church where female sensibility is an essential part of the environment, rap's sensibility

[259] Justin Timberlake is one figure who has been feminized both in and outside of the context of rap songs. His affiliation with the Boy Band 'N Sync as well as his skillful falsetto singing and image as a pop icon have resulted not only in the feminization, but also a queering of his voice and persona. The fact that he is one of only a few white, male singers to be featured prominently in male rappers' songs is a point that warrants further investigation. For more on the queering of Justin Timberlake's voice, see: Stan Hawkins, "[Un]Justified: Gestures of Straight-Talk in Justin Timberlake's Songs, in *Oh Boy!: Masculinities and Popular Music*, edited by Freya Jarman-Ivens, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 197-212.

[260] T-Pain is another interesting figure in this regard because he performs almost equally as a feature rapper and as a feature singer. His role is further complicated by his reliance on the vocoder. I will discuss T-Pain towards the end of this chapter.

was molded in the street where macho values have always dominated."[261] A gendered notion of men rapping and women singing coincides with the masculine associations of rap music, as well as the relative exclusion of women from rap DJing and MCing.
A parallel exists in rock and pop music that can contribute to our understanding of a "men rap/women sing"-binary in rap. Although pop-rock music does not set the standards by which all popular vocality should be judged, I am invoking it here as a parallel example.

Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie's 1978 article "Rock and Sexuality"[262] has been influential in the interpretation of gender and sexuality in popular music. This pioneering article on gender in pop-rock music laid claims about men's and women's roles in the production and consumption of pop-rock music that continue to be relevant even now, thirty years after the article was first published.[263] Central to Frith and McRobbie's understanding of rock music was the idea that men were active participants and women were passive observers. They claimed that "in terms of control and production, rock is a male form."[264] Despite the involvement of a few women rockers such as Janis Joplin, Stevie Nicks, and Joan Jett, rock was predominantly a male genre.[265] Frith and McRobbie established the important binary of "cock rock" and "teeny bop." They defined cock rock as "music making in which performance is an explicit, crude, and

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[261] Nelson George, *Hip-hop America,* (New York: Viking, 1998), 184.
[262] Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality," (1978) In *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word.* Edited by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 371-89.
[263] Not all of their claims have stood the test of time. Frith and McRobbie revised some of their ideas in "Rock and Sexuality," in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word,* edited by Frith and Goodwin, (New York: Routledge, 1990). I am citing the portions oft heir argument that I find relevant to the present argument.
[264] Ibid, 373. Although race is not specifically addressed in their article, it is implied that they are speaking of rock not only as a predominantly male form, but also a white, male form.
[265] As I will discuss in the next section of this paper, this is similar to the way in which rap music is represented as a male discourse, despite the participation of women.

often aggressive expression of male sexuality."[266] In contrast, "teenybop plays on notions of female sexuality as serious, diffuse, and implying emotional commitment."[267] "Teenybop" music presents an image of male sexuality that is romantic and sensitive.[268] Many of the attributes of "cock rock" and "teenybop" have been mapped onto different forms of popular music. Before I compare these categories with similar categories in rap, I wish to clarify that I am not attempting to directly transplant these categories from one musical style to another, but rather point out a similar dichotomy in rap. It is important to remember both the historical moment in which Frith and McRobbie's article was written (1978), as well as the very different cultural spaces in which these bodies of music are created—cock rock and teeny bop (now rock and pop) are primarily white musical forms and hip-hop is primarily black. Rap is a performance arena where gender and race are staged vocally; in this domain, blackness is normative.

Frith and McRobbie highlight the aggressive, hypermasculinity of rock music, as well as an emphasis on hetero-male sexuality. They claim that "Cock rockers' musical skills become synonymous with their sexual skills."[269] Rap music has similar attributes to rock in its homosocial dynamic, aggressive style, and masculine representation. We can also view the skill of lyric delivery in rap as analogous to the technical prowess of guitarists in rock, therefore making lyrical skill analogous to male sexuality. In contrast, the emphasis on romantic love in teenybop song lyrics can be compared with a similar preoccupation in current R&B songs. With the onslaught of female performers in this musical style, the emphasis is no longer on representations of male sexuality; however,

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[266] Frith and McRobbie, 374.
[267] Ibid, 375.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Ibid, 374.

the pre-occupation with heterosexual romance is still a central theme. These musical styles also have parallels in the sense that both rock and rap are harder-edged, and more aggressive, whereas pop, R&B, and rap's sung choruses focus on a softer, more melodic style of singing.

In consideration of the raced differences between these two binaries, we can think of different physical voices as well as different cultural and music-stylistic practices. In terms of physical, raced voices, we can consider elements such as pitch, register, and quality. Rock singers often express their masculinity through an aggressive presentation of the lyrics, but one that still focuses on melody. By contrast, rap music elevates the rhythmic presentation of the lyrics over pitch. The aggressive yells and vocal delivery in rock often soar into a very high register, in contrast to aggressive rap lyric delivery, which tends to be in a lower register. In terms of stylistic conventions, we can consider rapping versus singing; electric guitar versus electronic beat; elaborate guitar solos versus elaborate rhythmic delivery of text. Regardless of the different music-stylistic conventions, different vocal traditions, and the very different cultural positions in which these bodies of music are created and performed, these discourses occupy similar gendered positions in their respective spheres.

I will now turn to a particular gendered dialogue in rap's history; a dialogue in which women rappers have fought to create a space for themselves and male rappers have often responded with ridicule, thus policing the gender borders of rap.

**V. Answer Raps: A Precedent for Male Rappers' Singing**

Despite the presence of some early female crews such as Us Girls and the Sequence, in its early years, rap was dominated by male DJs and MCs. It was not only dominated by men by their physical presence, but also by misogynist lyrics that presented disparaging views of women. These misogynist attitudes were sometimes challenged by female rappers in a very public forum—that of "answer" or "diss raps," which were very popular in the 1980s. One of the most famous answer raps is Roxanne Shante's "Roxanne's Revenge" (from 1985), an answer to rap trio U.T.F.O.'s "Roxanne, Roxanne" (released the previous year). U.T.F.O.'s song was about a woman refusing the crew's sexual advances. In "Roxanne's Revenge," Roxanne Shante assumed the character of "Roxanne" from U.T.F.O.'s song, and dissed the members of the rap trio. By giving a voice to the pursued woman in "Roxanne, Roxanne," Roxanne Shante sent a message to the rap community that said that women would not passively suffer insults and degradation.[270]

The song gained immediate popularity and sparked an onslaught of answer songs, most of which were performed over the same musical tracks. Examples include "Sparky's Turn (Roxanne, You're Through)" by Sparky D, "Roxanne's Doctor-The Real Man" by Dr. Freshh, and "The Parents of Roxanne" by Gigolo Tony & Lacy Lace. Many of these songs directly assaulted Roxanne, her family, and her singing voice.[271] Eventually U.T.F.O. also released a response entitled "Calling Her a Crab: (Roxanne Part 2)." In this

[270] Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check it While I Wreck it: Black womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, (Boston : Northeastern University Press, 2004), 165.
[271] Of course they were not only insulting the character Roxanne from their first song, they were also insulting Roxanne Shante.

version, U.T.F.O take back compliments given to the character Roxanne in their original song and dish out numerous insults instead.

The sung hook "Roxanne, Roxanne" in U.T.F.O.'s first version was replaced by the hook, "She's such a crab," in their answer song. This new hook is sung even more out of tune than the original, drawing attention to the ridiculing nature of the song. Their singing can be seen as one of many precedents for mocking women rappers with "bad" singing.

Roxanne Shante started a battle, creating space for women's voices, but ultimately one in which men's voices remained dominant. According to Gwendolyn Pough, answer raps like that of Roxanne Shante and her contemporaries, Salt-N-Pepa, for example, "paved the way for women who would later initiate their own conversations," creating a space for women to enter into rap's dialogue.[272] Although some women have entered into rap's dialogue, it has remained a field dominated by men, reinforcing musical, lyrical, and visual conventions of masculinity.[273]

Rap/R&B trio TLC's hit song "No Scrubs" (1999) is one example of women claiming space and asserting themselves within the rap sphere.[274] In this song, the three members of TLC diss male players with lyrics such as:

> A scrub is a guy that thinks he's fly
> And is also known as a buster
> Always talkin' about what he wants
> And just sits on his broke ass[275]

A "scrub" is a guy who is thinks that he is cool, but in reality is lazy, and broke. His economic situation is discussed further with lyrics such as: "If you live at home wit' your

[272] Pough, 165.
[273] I will address this issue further in Chapter 4.
[274] TLC, *Fanmail*, Sony B00000DFTD, 1999.
[275] These lyrics comprise the first verse.

momma, Oh yes son I'm talkin' to you" and "Hangin' out the passenger side of his best friend's ride," which, within the context of this song, implies that he cannot afford his own car. A scrub is a guy with no game, who does not treat his partner with respect:

> There's a scrub checkin' me
> But his game is kinda weak
> And I know that he cannot approach me
> Cause I'm lookin' like class and he's lookin' like trash
> Can't get wit' a dead-beat ass[276]

As a result, TLC proclaim that they "don't want no scrubs," repeatedly throughout the song, in both the chorus, as well as the pre-chorus, provided below:

> So (no)
> I don't want your number (no)
> I don't want to give you mine and (no)
> I don't want to meet you nowhere (no)
> I don't want none of your time and (no)

TLC's singing would be considered competent by R&B and pop standards. They are known not only as an R&B trio, but also for their connection to hip-hop, based on the inclusion of rapping in their songs, as well as many hip-hop inspired beats. Similar to other female R&B groups of the 1990s, such as Destiny's Child, TLC promoted gender equality. The song "No Scrubs" denigrates men, but has been viewed as pro gender equality as it demonstrates women's independence and refusal to be reliant on men.[277]

Responding to the denigrating lyrics of "No Scrubs," the male rap group Sporty Thievz released the answer song "No Pigeons" later that year.[278] Sporty Thievz sing TLC's melody completely out of tune, with seemingly deliberately bad vocals, parodying the original song. The Sporty Thievz both sing and rap over TLC's musical backing

[276] These lyrics are from the second verse.
[277] This is of course problematic, because insulting men does not necessarily promote equality. This type of rhetoric is common with the late 1990s female pop and R&B groups.
[278] Sporty Thievz, *Sporty Thievz* Sony/BMG, 2000.

track. They sing the first verse, set to the same melody as the original, but the lyrics are changed to the following:

> A Pigeon is a girl who be walkin' by
> My rimmed up blue, brand new sparklin' five
> Her feet hurt so you know she want a ride
> But she frontin' like she can't say hi (What?)

The melody is only really altered in the last note of each phrase, where the male rapper does not seem to have the range to jump down to the lowest pitch in TLC's melody. The biggest musical change comes with the competency of singing, however. The Sporty Thievz member who sings the first verse sings as if he is using his speaking voice. In other words, he does not employ the breath support necessary to have a good, clear tone, and be in tune. His melody is extremely out of tune—mostly flat, and sounds very lazy as a result of the lack of breath support. This style of singing is adopted by the other male members as they sing the pre-chorus and chorus.

An interesting change to the pre-chorus occurs with the vocal interjections made by the supporting group members. In TLC's version, the interjections were the word, "no," but in this version, the interjections are changed to "uh oh." The pre-chorus is provided below:

> (Uh oh) Ya'll chicks ain't gettin' nada
> (Uh oh) Your pussy ain't worth the Ramada
> (Uh oh) Anyway your friend looks hotter
> (Uh oh) Game is somethin' we got a lot of

TLC's statements of "no" were clear, directed, assertive, and in tune." Sporty Thievz's interjections are unsupported (in terms of breath), out of tune, and sound like something a child might say upon making a mistake. The child-like nature of this utterance is, in some

ways, representative of the song as a whole, which is reminiscent of schoolyard teasing with regard to the mode of singing; the lyrics are of course more explicit.

As one of the members performs the second verse, there is a remarkable improvement in the energy level of the voice. This does not reflect an improvement in singing, however, as he raps the second verse. The verse and pre-chorus are merged as he continues to rap, although the musical background of the pre-chorus remains untouched. The vocal interjections from the pre-chorus that are made by the other members also remain, sung out-of-tune, as they were before.

The Sporty Thievz lyrically address the insults directed at men in TLC's "No Scrubs." For example, they respond to the insult "Hangin' out the passenger side of his best friend's ride" with lyrics such as: "My rimmed up blue, brand new sparklin' five, her feet hurt so you know she want a ride, but she frontin' like she can't say hi"; and "This ain't my Benz there, it's my man's, yeah, but this ain't my car like that ain't your hair," implying that these women have no reason to make fun of a man for borrowing his friend's car if their hair is fake. Along these same lines, they also refer to her fake nails, fake jewels, and the fact that she is so broke she has to borrow her friend's shoes. They respond to TLC's lyrics by taking the insults a step further, calling women dirty, depraved, and rapping/singing lines, such as: "Your pussy ain't worth the Ramada," and "you make me sick"

Although their bad vocal quality and out of tune singing stands out, their parody is primarily a rap song, rather than an R&B song. TLC's version included only one rapped verse towards the end of the song, (verse 4), but Sporty Thievz's version is roughly fifty percent singing and fifty percent rapping. They have remade the song on

their terms, with incompetent singing, but competent rapping. Answer raps like “No Pigeons” police the borders of rap, preserving the maleness of this musical style, responding to women rappers and R&B singers by mocking them with “bad” singing.

**VI. Men's Singing in Rap**

Over the past decade, a number of male rappers have crossed the boundary from rap to song, thus altering the gendered dynamic of hip-hop discourse. Although examples of male rappers singing can be seen throughout rap’s history, this phenomenon has become increasingly common within the past few years. Crossing between rap and song, these MCs are not only crossing a music-stylistic boundary but also a gendered one, as singing has been more often assigned to women. Male R&B and pop artists as feature singers on rap tracks has also become more common over the past decade.

A common characteristic among many of these rappers' singing styles is their lack of vocal competence. This lack of competence is measured by common standards of R&B and pop singing, which, of course, reflects the style and competence of singers featured in their rap songs. Examples of this style of competent singing can be found with artists such as Usher, R. Kelly, and Chris Brown.

By contrast, typical singing traits of rappers who sing include a rough, untrained vocal quality, and unclear pitch placement and intonation. By pop and R&B standards, their singing would not, in most cases, be considered competent. Examples of this “bad” singing can be heard in songs such as Chamillionaire’s “Turn it up” and “Ridin”; DMX’s “Ruff Ryders Anthem”; Busta Rhymes‘ “I Know What You Want”; and Baby Boy da Prince’s “The Way I Live.” This is only a very small sampling from a pool of numerous other examples. This bad singing has become so prevalent that the phenomenon has

garnered media and public attention. An example can be seen with *New York* magazine's online piece: "Rappers Singing Badly: A Brief History."[279] In this article/slideshow, Amos Barshap takes the listener through the ten most memorable rap-song performances. Barshap's piece was triggered by the release of Kanye West's album *808 & Heartbreaks*, in which the rapper sings, rather than raps most of the tracks.[280] Barshap cites Biz Markie's "Just a Friend," released in 1989, as one of the earliest culprits of bad singing. In this reworking of Freddie Scott's "You Got What I Need," Biz Markie raps the verses, but sings the chorus very badly. His singing is extremely out of tune and it sounds as if the MC is struggling to hit not only the high notes, but all of the pitches. Barshap's top-ten list, provided below, culminates with Kanye West's "Robocop," in which he describes Kanye's voice as thin and overstretched. I may not agree with his discussion of "Robocop" because his critiques do not allow for the fact that Kanye's voice is made to sound this way through deliberate manipulations of technology and production, however his critique of the other tracks on this list are pretty much spot on.[281]

**Top Ten Memorable Rap-Song Performances:**[282]
10. Biz Markie, "Just a Friend," 1989
9. Ol' Dirty Bastard, "Drink Game (Sweet Sugar Pie)," 1995
8. Mos Def, "Travellin Man," 1998
7. Puff Daddy feat. Jimmy Page, "Come With Me" 1998
6. Ghostface Killah, "Child's Play," 2000
5. 50 cent, "P.I.M.P." 2003
4. Lil' Wayne, "Prostitute," 2007

[279] Barshap, Amos, "Rappers Singing Badly: A Brief History," *New York Magazine Online* (November 19th, 2008), http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2008/11/hiphop_slideshow.html.
[280] Kanye West does rap the occasional verse on the album, but he certainly sings more than he raps. I will discuss the song "Heartless" off of this album later in this chapter.
[281] I will address these aspects of production on Kanye's *808 & Heartbreaks* in my discussion of the song "Heartless" towards the end of this chapter. Barshap is correct in observing that Kanye does not have a great singing voice, a fact that is very apparent when listening to him sing without the vocoder on earlier tracks, as well as hearing him sing live with the vocoder. However, my critique still stands on Barshap's observations of this particular track, since every aspect of the song was manipulated and carefully crafted in the production studio, a fact that becomes obvious when listening closely to the entire album.
[282] According to Barshap, 2008.

3. Snoop Dogg, "Sensual Seduction," 2008
2. Jay-Z, "Wonderwall," 2008
1. Kanye West, "Heartless," 2008

I would like to clarify that I am not saying that all MCs cannot or do not sing well according to conventional standards, but that there are a number of popular mainstream artists who have been singing in this manner for the past few years and the trend seems to have caught on. This is demonstrated by the sheer number of rappers who have incorporated singing on their tracks, as well as the number of these rappers who have adopted this type of bad singing.[283] I will now discuss some specific examples of male rapper's singing style to explore how masculinity can be signified through this type of vocal expression, and how we, in turn, might interpret these performances.

***Ja Rule: "Down Ass Bitch" and "Between Me and You"***

One of the first male rap-to-song crossover artists, Ja Rule is well-known for his low, rough vocal delivery in both rap and song. As one of the first rappers to consistently sing as well as rap, his vocality is well-represented in the mainstream. The song "Down Ass Bitch" is a prime example of Ja Rule's vocal style.[284] In this song, he frequently switches back and forth between MCing and singing, seemingly attempting to integrate these types of vocal utterances. The song features a female performer, Charlie Baltimore, but unlike most rap songs, she is not a feature singer, but rather a featured MC. In "Down Ass Bitch," it is the male rapper who performs the sung chorus, a reversal from rap's conventions. Upon first hearing of this gendered voice-reversal it may seem as though the

[283] Another article that deals with this subject is: Kelefa Sanneh, "The Sweet Sounds of Really Bad Singing," *The New York Times Online* (January 18, 2004), http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/18/arts/the-sweet-sounds-of-really-bad-singing.html?fta=y.
[284] Ja Rule, *Pain is Love*, Universal B00005ONMT, 2001.

female rapper has taken on the dominant, masculine role of rapping, and the male the feminized role of singing. This is not the case, however; Ja Rule takes on both gendered vocal roles as he both raps the verses and sings the repetitions of the chorus, while Charlie Baltimore raps only one verse.

Ja Rule performs his masculinity through both song and rap. His voice has a harsh, rough vocal quality in both his singing and rapping. The difference between his MCing and singing quality is that the roughness of his voice is consistent with the aesthetics of rapping, but this is not a vocal quality typically heard in most sung choruses of rap songs. Ja Rule sings within an expansive range that lingers on low pitches that sound deep and rough, to fairly high pitches where his voice sounds strained and constricted. When he sings in a higher register, his vocal quality is rough, strained, and open, and he consistently hovers between being in tune and not in tune. In the lower register, Ja Rule alternates between two singing styles: one which is similar to the one just described for the upper register and another which is relatively in tune and lyrical. This second singing style only emerges occasionally, an example of which can be heard in the chorus on the lines "If you'd die for me, like you cry for me." This more lyrical singing style would still not be considered a "good" singing voice by R&B and pop standards, but is certainly less "bad" than his other singing styles.

Ja Rule attempts to perform both gendered vocal roles simultaneously, thus appropriating the more feminized position of singing. However, by performing his masculinity through his less conventional vocal style as well as rap, he appropriates the role of singing, thus re-embedding rap's male exclusivity, despite the presence of a female rapper. This is a paradoxical move, as the presence of the female rapper seems

empowering to women in the rap sphere, but Ja Rule's overpowering masculine vocals and his domination of the song's lyrics re-articulates rap's male exclusivity. [285] Ja Rule's domination of this song is also reinforced by the lyrics themselves. The lyrics tell the story of a male/female crime team, a situation that would seem to reflect an equal partnership. The first verse is provided below:

> I know that you're lovin me, 'cause you thug with me,
> Who bust slugs for me?
> My baby
> Who gon' kill for you, like I comfort you, who else but the
> Rule?
> You feel me
> Girl when we connect the dots we hit the spot
> Twin Benz's, you ride hard, I ride drop
> And to make it better, baby got the nina' Beretta tucked low
> And I'm two cars back with the four-four
> And it freaks you out, on your momma's couch,
> That's what us thugs be 'bout
> You know me
> And when I pray for love, baby pray for us, who celebrates
> the thugs?
> My lady
> Got me seekin capital game when I spit sixteen
> Whether bars or sixteens in the doors of cars
> A star is born
> In the hood, made a name live on, R-U-L-E, ladies, feel me

Despite the fact that an equal partnership is implied, the language used reinforces the dominant position of the male subject in this song. For example, Ja Rule constantly expresses his possession of the female character in the song with phrases, such as "You're my down ass bitch." This possession is re-articulated by Charlie Baltimore when she repeatedly raps "I'm your bitch." The lyrics presented by both artists show what this female character can do for the male character: she can comfort him, she can take care of

[285] He performs the majority of the song; Charlie Baltimore only raps one verse, while Ja Rule performs the introduction, two verses, all repetitions of the chorus, the bridge, and the outro.

his business, she can protect his reputation while he's in prison, and she can kill for him. Examples of this can be seen in the chorus:

> Baby say yeah, (baby say yeah)
> If you'd lie for me, like you lovin me
> Baby say yeah, (baby say yeah)
> If you'd die for me, like you cry for me
> Baby say yeah, (baby say yeah)
> If you'd kill for me, like you comfort me
> Baby say yeah, (baby say yeah)
> Girl I'm convinced, you're my down ass bitch

This is presented as a one-sided relationship, as Ja Rule does not offer to take care of the female character in the same ways.

Another song by Ja Rule that features the artist both singing and rapping is "Between Me and You."[286] There are two versions of this song, one in which Ja Rule is a soloist, and a second version that features Christina Milian singing the chorus. The first version greatly breaks from rap tradition since the MC delivers the lines of the verses as well as singing his own chorus, a role traditionally reserved for a featured singer or a sampled song excerpt. In this version, Ja Rule performs his maleness through both his rapping and his lame singing; he does it all. This makes the statement that he does not need a singer to perform with him, he does it himself. He crosses the boundary between rap and song, but by singing badly he does not assume the type of gendered position traditionally ascribed to singers in rap.

The second version of "Between Me and You" fits within the traditional spectrum of rap songs in that it features a woman singing the chorus. Where it breaks from tradition is in Ja Rule's alternation between rap and song in the verses. In this version of the song Ja Rule's bad singing is even more apparent as it is contrasted with Christina

[286] Ja Rule, *Rule 3 36*, Universal B00004YSGM, 2000.

Milian's sweet, pop-style vocals. Milian's more traditional vocals are a stark contrast to Ja Rule's non-conformity to traditional R&B or pop vocalism. We can see this vocal difference even more closely if we compare the same moment in the two different versions of the song. The line "Cause see, every time that I'm alone with you," is sung by Ja Rule in his solo version and by Milian in the second version. Ja Rule sings it in his upper register, seemingly straining to reach the notes. His tone sounds open and his vocals are out of tune. The combined effect is one of heightened tension, a sound of urgency, perhaps urgent sexual longing in the lyrical context of the song. The lyrics allude to the "freaky" sexual acts of Ja Rule and the object of his affection (Christina Milian in the second version), who he is having an affair with:

> Cause see, every time that I'm alone with you (with you)
> Shorty be checkin up on you (on you)
> But if baby girl only knew (only knew)
> You've got a lot of freak in you, baby

Ja Rule asserts his masculinity through his performance of rap and song. His rough singing and rapping style is very typical of male vocal quality in rap. I will now turn to several other examples of men's singing in the rap sphere in order to further demonstrate their techniques of vocal performance.

**VII. Rap-Song Integration: Busta Rhymes, T.I., 50 Cent, and Baby Boy da Prince**

An integration of rapping and singing similar to Ja Rule's style has become common. Examples include T.I.'s "Whatever You Like," Busta Rhymes' "I Know What You Want," and many of 50 Cent's songs, including "In da Club" and "Many Men." An MC's bad singing is most obvious when contrasted with more conventional vocals by a featured singer, as was the case with Ja Rule and Christina Milian in the example

discussed above. We hear a similar contrast in Busta Rhymes' "I Know What You Want," which features Mariah Carey, a well-known pop vocalist.[287] In this song, Busta plays the seducer, beginning with softly spoken words: "Shorty, I know what you need; I got everything you need." Busta then sings the song's chorus: "Baby if you give it to me, I'll give it to you, I know what you want." Busta's singing is not horribly out of tune, as was the case with Ja Rule, but his vocal quality is definitely rough, a fact that is made obvious by the fact that Mariah Carey immediately repeats these lines, with a slight lyric alteration ("I know what you want is changed to "as long as you want").

The verses are rapped, some by Busta, and some by the featured rappers of Flipmode Squad. The rapped verses are not representative of the aggressive style of many other of Busta's songs, such as "Touch It," discussed in Chapter 2. This song is about seduction; Busta, and the other male rappers, are the players. Busta's flows are softer, slower and less aggressive than is typical of his style, but it is his singing that really brings out his softer side. It does not matter that he cannot sing well, he is a player crooning to the object of his affection. Like Ja Rule, he dominates the song by both rapping and singing.

T.I. also plays the seducer in the song "Whatever You Like." As I discussed in Chapter 2, T.I. forgoes a sampled or feature singer and sings his own hook. His style of singing for the hook is very similar to Busta's in "I Know What You Want." T.I. is relatively in tune, but his vocal quality would not hold up to the standards of traditional pop and R&B singing. His vocal quality and the presentation of the melody is not as smooth as it would be if performed by most singers. As T.I. begins to perform the first four lines of the first verse, he uses a pitched delivery that is somewhere between rap and

[287] Busta Rhymes, *It Ain't Safe No More*, Sony B000077W8N, 2002.

song. As a result, in these first few pitched lines, T.I.'s voice sounds somewhat strained, as if he is struggling to reach the notes. This does not seem to matter though, because T.I presents himself as being overly self-assured. This, of course, goes along with the overall aesthetic of the song: T.I. is suave, a player. He is confident enough that he can sing as well as rap. The singing has a similar effect as did Busta's singing in "I Know What you Want"; it shows T.I.'s softer side and is reflective of the fact that he is seducing someone. This song also demonstrated the merging of rap and song within the verse. Although T.I.'s delivery of the first four lines is pitched, much of the rest of the verse is rapped on a single pitch, an F.[288] He uses this rapped/sung alternation throughout the song.

This merging of rap and song is seen frequently in 50 Cent's songs. For example, in the song "In the Club," 50 Cent's chorus is performed in a rap-sung style.[289] 50 Cent performs most of the chorus on a single pitch, G-sharp, but moves pitches at a key moment. The chorus describes 50 Cent hanging out at a club, drinking, and trying to pick up women:

> You can find me in the club, bottle full of Bud
> Mama, I got that X, if you into takin' drugs
> I'm into having sex, I ain't into making love
> So come give me a hug if you into getting rubbed

50 Cent's pitch change occurs on the line "So come give me a hug": he shifts up a semitone to the pitch A on the word, "come." This move to a higher pitch strongly emphasizes the word. It is as if he is beckoning to a woman in the narrative and this subtle vocal technique emphasizes his role as a seducer. It is important to note that 50

[288] Although the remainder of the first verse is recited on one pitch, it still sounds kind of sing-songy due to his rhythmic presentation and the fact that you can clearly identify which pitch he recites the lyrics on. For further discussion of this song, see Chapter 2.
[289] 50 Cent, *Get Rich or Die Trying*, Universal B000084T18, 2003.

Cent is not romantic, his softer side is strictly about sex, as is emphasized with the lyrics: "I'm into having sex, I ain't into making love."

50 Cent recites the verses in a manner more typical to rap: meaning not sung. He adopts this rap-song style in each repetition of the chorus as well as in the bridge. His style of rapping, as well as his rap-song style, is very laid back and the MC sounds relaxed and confident. His vocal quality is fairly rough, but not as raw as Ja Rule's. His vocal delivery sounds like pitched speech: he is not using the amount of airflow needed to sing. His sound is also very tight: it sounds as if he is not opening his mouth wide enough. In 50 Cent's case, it is possible that this aspect of his vocal production is linked to his physical abilities, since he was shot in the face, a biographical fact that emerges in the next song I will discuss.

50 Cent also uses singing for emotional purposes, as is the case with "Many Men (Wish Death)." In this song, he raps that "many men wish death upon (him)" and re-tells the story of his shooting.[290] 50 Cent sings the chorus of this song, with extremely out–of-tune vocals. Like his rap-song style employed in "In da Club," it sounds like he is using his speaking voice to sing with, meaning very little air support is used and the sound coming more from the chest than from the diaphragm. The out-of-tune singing works for him in this song because it makes him sound emotional: as if the rapped verses trigger such a strong emotion that he must sing in order to express it. The song lyrically situates 50 Cent as a Gangsta rapper and the sound effects of gun shots opening the song, as well as many instances of the sound effect of a gun cocking, help reinforce 50 Cent's role as Gangsta and add to the song's realness. 50 Cents' aggressiveness also comes through

[290] He was shot nine times in a gang-related incident. This is a factor that has helped him establish street cred. within the rap sphere.

towards the end of the first verse as his moderate speed of lyric delivery is increased, signaling increased aggressiveness in the lyrics: "Turn your back on me, get clapped and lose your legs. I walk around gun on my waist, chip on my shoulder, till I bust a clip in your face, pussy, this beef ain't over." Competent rapping and incompetent singing are paired in this song to create intense emotional expression and express the violent and aggressive lyrical themes.

An example of extremely lazy singing can be heard in Baby Boy da Prince's "The Way I Live."[291] Similar to 50 Cent's vocal delivery in "Many Men," Baby Boy da Prince's singing sounds like an extension of the speaking voice with the addition of pitches. This seems to be an extremely common aspect of bad singing in rap. There is a very obvious lack of energy in the vocal production: there is almost no support from the diaphragm, and the pitches are extremely flat against the musical backing track. He sings the chorus and raps the verses and both forms of vocal production sound lazy, laid back, totally relaxed, as if he has no cares in the world. His rapping sounds relaxed because it is a fairly slow tempo over a fairly slow beat. This is a relatively common southern-style flow: the tradition to which this New Orleans rapper belongs. The lazy singing and relaxed rapping sets an appropriate mood for the lyrics in which the MC sings:

> This is the way I live
> Lil' Boy still pushin' big wheels
> I stack my money, lay low, and chill
> Don't need to work hard that's the way I feel, I feel

The chorus, provided above, references the fact that since he hustles to make an illegal living, he can "lay low and chill" because there is no need to work hard.[292]

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[291] Baby Boy da Prince, *Across the Water*, Universal Republic B000NA1Z2E, 2007.

[292] It is interesting to note that this song became extremely popular in New Orleans right after the devastation of hurricane Katrina. The song was a local success, before gaining widespread airplay in the

I have discussed several overlapping ways in which male rappers perform their gender through the voice: through the physical production of voices; through stylistic conventions of vocality; and through the historical constructions of gender in rap. All of these aspects of performativity rely on culturally intelligible performances. The performance of maleness through the physical sound of their voices only works if it can be understood within culturally conceived systems of interpretation (intelligible notions of what sounds "feminine" and "masculine"). Since the gendered boundary between rap and song is one that has been constructed by rap's participants and the mainstream record labels, performances must be understood in relation to this. Male rappers such as Ja Rule, T.I., 50 Cent, and Baby Boy da Prince re-draw the boundaries of their discourse by crossing between the mediums of rap and song. These rappers take on the more feminized role of singing, but do it in their own way, on their own terms, performing their masculinity through their rough, untrained voices. These rappers are creating a different aesthetic of acceptable singing within the realm of rap music. Their 'lame' singing marks the domain of rap as male, reinforcing maleness as normative. We cannot entirely ignore the artists' intentions, but it is possible that these singers may not be consciously thinking that their vocal utterances have these particular cultural effects. Regardless of intent, we, as listeners, can still interpret these performances as they are received within culture.

**VIII. Competent Male Singing in Rap**

As I mentioned above, despite the prevalence of male rappers singing badly, not all male rappers who sing follow these conventions. The group Bone Thugs 'n' Harmony

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U.S. (Cyril Cordor, "Baby Boy da Prince Biography," *All Music Guide*, http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll).

is an example of how rapping and singing can be merged competently, without either type of vocality being compromised. The members of this group all shift between rapping and singing and keep within many of lyrical themes that are typical of mainstream rap. The song "I Tried," featuring Akon, is an example of their R&B infused style of rap song.[293] It is not uncommon for any one of the group members to seamlessly shift from rapping one line of text to lyrically singing the next. This rap-to-song transition is different from the rap-song style performed by artists such as T.I. and 50 Cent. Unlike T.I. and 50 Cent's vocal presentations that can sometimes sound sing-songy, the members of Bone Thugs 'n' Harmony tend to either sing or rap. Although they constantly shift back and forth between these types of vocal presentation, one can clearly hear the difference between their rapping and singing. Their singing fits within more conventional standards of R&B, is typically in tune, and infused with more energy and better air support.

Alongside the trend of male rappers singing badly is a recent turn to the vocoder as an enhancement to both singing and rapping. Artists such as T-Pain and Lil Wayne rely on the vocoder as a characteristic of their individual styles. The vocoder was invented in Germany during the Second World War "as a means of disguising military voice transmission."[294] The device made its way into the music industry, at that time as a piece of analog equipment that created a voice modulation effect that has often been described as robotic or mechanical.[295] It has been available since the late 1980s as a

[293] Bone Thugs 'N' Harmony, *Strength and Loyalty*, Universal B000O58ZQW, 2007.
[294] Kay Dickinson provides an excellent account of the vocoder's history and meanings in: "'Believe'?: Vocoders, Digitalized Female Identity and Camp" in *Popular Music* 20/3 (2001), 333.
[295] Ibid.

digital plug-in and can be used to create a variety of timbral effects with the voice.[296] It is currently used by artists in many styles of popular music, including pop, R&B, and country. The use of the vocoder in popular music gained a great deal of public attention through Cher's song "Believe," in 1998.[297] Auto-tune technology is a variation on the vocoder that not only provides interesting vocal effects, but can also adjust pitches and is often used to correct pitch problems in a recording. Auto-tune technology is also widespread in many current forms of popular music. Technologies such as auto-tune and the vocoder can be thought of as either enhancing a good singing voice or masking the faults of a mediocre or bad voice. Auto-tune technology can be undetectable when used by a skilled sound engineer; however, this technology is often used to create a deliberate artificiality of the voice. When the vocoder or any of its variants is used to create a specific effect, it is heard as automated, robotic, or mechanical.

T-Pain's reliance on the vocoder and auto-tune technology has led to questions concerning the competency of his singing.[298] Despite these questions, T-Pain's career is thriving. He is an interesting figure as he is known for both his singing ability and his verbal skill as a rapper. When he is featured as a guest artist on various tracks, he is sometimes featured as a singer, sometimes as a rapper, and sometimes as both. For example, Flo Rida's song "Low," which held the number one spot on Billboard and American Top 40 charts for weeks in 2008, features T-Pain as the guest singer.[299] On this track, T-Pain sings the popular hook in what sounds like his "natural" voice, meaning

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[296]Ibid, 334.
[297] See Dickinson for more on Cher's use of the vocoder.
[298] See: Francois Marchand, "iSpy: Auto-Tune." *Edmonton Journal*, (July 7, 2008), www.edmontonjournal.com; and Jim Farber, "Singers Do Better With T-Pain Relief" *Daily News*, (December 11th), http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music/2007/12/11/2007-12-11_singers_do_better_with_tpain_relief-1.html
[299] Flo Rida, *Mail on Sunday*, Atlantic B00132D7ZY, 2008.

without an exaggerated use of the vocoder. This does not mean that his voice was not technologically enhanced, just that it is not an overt enhancement, as is the case in many of his songs.

T-Pain is also featured on MC Lil' Mama's song "Shawty Get Loose."[300] Here T-Pain is featured as a rapper and the chorus is sung by pop/R&B artist Chris Brown. T-Pain raps the second verse, again without his signature use of the vocoder. His voice is obviously enhanced by voice doubling in the second half of the verse, but this does not seem out of place, given the emphasis on production in the song (the use of voice doubling occurs throughout). The song also begins with a brief introduction of T-Pain speaking with the effect of the vocoder.

T-Pain has collaborated with Chris Brown in the past, most notably as a guest artist on the track "Kiss Kiss."[301] In this song, T-Pain is featured as both a rapper and a singer, thus demonstrating that he can do both. He joins in with Chris Brown to sing the chorus where both artists use the vocoder. The effects are more pronounced when Chris Brown sings a line on his own than when the two artists are singing together. T-Pain's rap skills are displayed in the third verse, with a subtle use of the vocoder.

T-Pain's signature use of the vocoder is most obvious in his solo songs. For example, both "Bartender" and "Buy You a Drank"[302] clearly demonstrate his typical singing style. The use of the vocoder creates the effect of natural meeting artifice as some pitches are mechanically altered and others are not. The effect of the vocoder is hot right now and has caught on with rappers spitting straight flows, rappers using a sung-rap style, and rappers who sing. T-Pain is credited with revitalizing this technique and

[300] Lil Mama, *VYP: Voice of the Young People*, Sony B000VS6PBE, 2008.
[301] Chris Brown, *Exclusive*, Sony B000T988DI, 2007.
[302] T-Pain, *Epiphany*, Sony B000P0JQ9Q, 23007.

bringing it into common use in the realm of hip-hop, but it has become so commonly used that many people are starting to feel that it is over-used. The rap magazine *XXL* had a parodied "conversation" with "a very exhausted Auto-Tune."[303] The piece credits T-Pain's revival of the technique, while at the same time critiques his over-use of it: "Turns out this mutha – 'scuse me – this *man* is in love with me (no homo). He acts like he can't sing without me."[304] This piece also goes on to critique the fad, saying:

> The fad is over, my dudes. If you just have no voice at all, I really can't help you, bruh. I'm not a miracle worker. I understand I'm dope and all, but it's all about moderation. Using me is cool, abusing me is not."[305]

The trend of male rappers singing seems to have reached a peak with the release of Kanye West's album *808 & Heartbreaks* in November 2008.[306] This album not only exemplifies the trend of rappers singing, but also the trend of using the vocoder. [307]

***Kanye West: "Heartless"***

Kanye West's album, *808 & Heartbreaks*, features the prominent MC singing rather than rapping. He does rap occasionally, on select tracks, but the emphasis is on his singing ability, which is, of course, aided by the vocoder. Kanye's foray into singing can still be contextualized within hip-hop as the beats and backing music fit within this style, and there are several MCs featured on the album.[308] The song "Heartless" provides a representative look into Kanye's vocal techniques on the album.

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[303] "It Don't Stop: XXL has a conversation with a very exhausted Auto-Tune," *XXL* (December, 2008), 37.
[304] Ibid.
[305] Ibid.
[306] Kanye West, *808s & Heartbreak*, Universal B001FBIPFA, 2008.
[307] Dickinson discusses the vocoder's use in recent years by women, and in musical genres associated with camp and homosexuality. Further research is needed to contextualize the current use of the vocoder by hypermasculine rappers such as T-Pain and Lil Wayne from this gendered perspective.
[308] Most notably, Young Jeezy and Lil Wayne.

"Heartless" tells the story of a man scorned. The song begins with a repetition of the chorus, provided below:

> In the night, I hear them talk
> The coldest story ever told
> Somewhere far along this road, he lost his soul
> To a woman so heartless
> How could you be so heartless?
> Oh, how could you be so heartless?

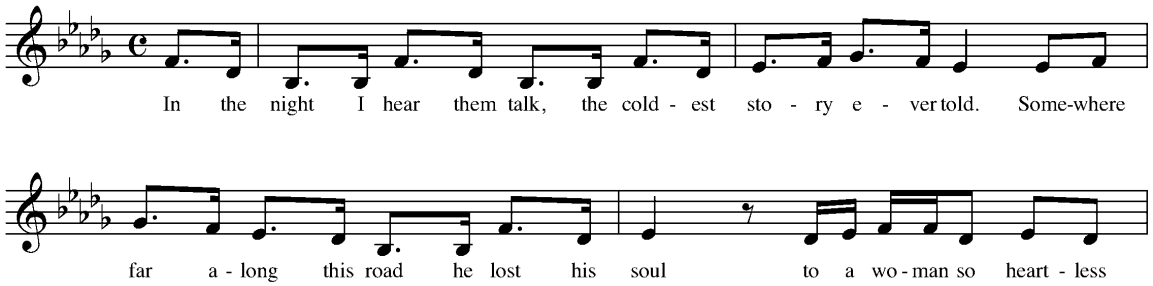
Kanye sings this initial version of the chorus over a very subtle musical background, a soft beat that sounds like a slightly erratic heartbeat. The sparse musical texture puts the emphasis on Kanye's voice, while the erratic "heartbeat" is perhaps meant to signify his broken heart. An interesting effect is created in this introductory passage as we hear a very "natural" sounding heartbeat, which, of course, has been electronically created, contrasted with Kanye's very overtly digitized voice—it has clearly been manipulated by the vocoder. In the realm of rap music, the listener is accustomed to electronically constructed beats set against "real" voices.[309] Here, we have the opposite effect, but the effect is altered about twenty-two seconds into the song when the rest of the electronic beat is brought into the texture.

The melody of Kanye's chorus outlines a B-flat minor triad, featuring a repeated, descending root-third-fifth pattern at the beginning of the melody (see Example 3-1). Most of the melody is stepwise, moving between the third and the fifth, with the occasional jump of a fifth between the tonic and dominant. The rhythm is also quite simple, consisting primarily of a swung dotted eighth-sixteenth note pattern. The melody

[309] Of course, "real" is relative, because the voices are recorded and produced and very often manipulated even when the listener is not aware of it.

is catchy, but the real interest is in the mechanical delivery of the voice set against the "heartbeat."[310]

**Example 3-1 Kanye West "Heartless," Chorus**




The primary musical background enters at the end of the chorus and the beat is carried by a steady eighth note pattern "played" by electronic strings. The pattern is segmented into four measure units by a sixteenth-note piano pattern played on the last dotted quarter of the fourth measure (in common time). This regular phrasing is maintained by the vocal line as Kanye's flow does not spill over the boundaries of the beat (see Example 3-2). I have referred to Kanye's rhythmic delivery here as a flow, despite the fact that he is performing in the context of song rather than rap. I have used this terminology because his vocal line is very close to a rapped line in the verses with regard to rhythm as well as pitch. Kanye's delivery in the verses is actually close to a sung-rap style, similar to that of 50 Cent's described above, but perhaps with less complex rhythms. His flow is similar to an old-school style, what Krims would refer to as sung style, in that Kanye adopts a similar rhythmic pattern for each line, does not spill over the boundaries of the phrase, and uses matching end rhymes. For example, in the first four lines, Kanye places the final syllable of each line as an eighth note on the

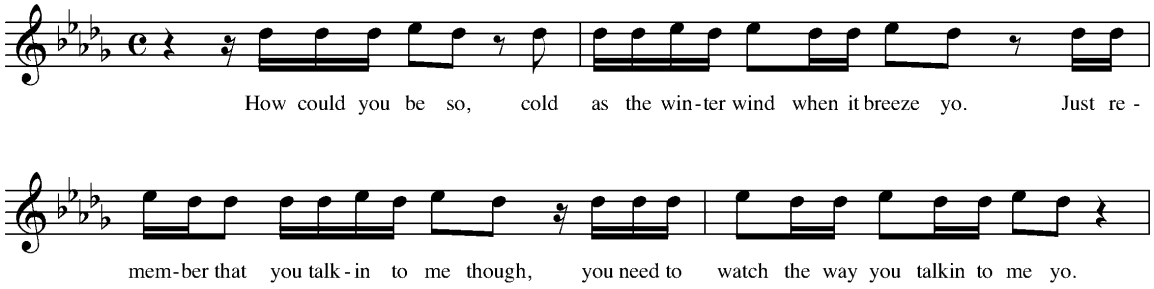
[310] The minor key also helps set the mood for the song's lonely and depressing narrative.

second half of the third beat of the measure. Each of those syllables is either the same or rhymes: the first line ends with “so” and the second through fourth lines all end with “yo.” Kanye takes the matching rhyme scheme and rhythmic pattern a step further by also rhyming the second-last syllable of each phrase. For the first four measures, he places the second-last syllable as an eighth note on beat three and the rhymed words are as follows: “be,” “breeze,” “me,” and “me.” The text of the first verse is provided below:

> How could you be so
> Cold as the winter wind, when it breeze yo?
> Just remember that you talkin to me yo
> You need to watch the way you talkin to me yo
> I mean after all the things that we’ve been through
> I mean after all the things we got into
> Ayo, I know there’s some things that you ain’t told me
> Ayo, I did some things but that’s the old me
> And now you wanna get me back and you gonna show me
> So you walk around like you don’t know me
> You got a new friend, but I got homies
> But in the end, still so lonely

Kanye’s lines are directed towards the third beat. The earlier syllables of the phrase tend to be set to faster rhythmic values, such as sixteenth notes, which seem to come to a climax on the two even eighth notes on the third beat of the measure.

**Example 3-2 Kanye West "Heartless," Verse 1**



Kanye's pitch also contributes to the rapped feel of the verses, as he sings primarily on a single pitch, F, the dominant (refer again to Example 3-2).[311] He sometimes slides up a semitone to the G-flat, most notably on the first eighth of beat three, which also helps emphasize that beat. The rhyme scheme, rhythm, and pitch all point towards the third beat as the climax of each line. In the verses, Kanye sometimes also shifts down a tone to an E-flat at the end of a four-measure grouping. For example, on the words "some things" in the eighth line of the first verse, he does extend his range down to a low B-flat at the end of the first verse with a descending melodic pattern, thus signaling the start of the more melody-driven chorus. The very narrow pitch range, the rhythmic delivery, and the rhyme scheme of the verse all work together to create the effect of a sung-rap style.

In the second verse, Kanye moves closer towards a sung melody, rather than performing in exactly the same rapped-sung style of the first verse. He does so by expanding his melody to include a greater range of pitches. For example, at the end of the second line of the second verse, Kanye moves from the comfortable F that he sang the first verse on, up to the B-flat above. He does this several times, before moving up to the B-flat for a more extended period on the fifth and sixth lines of the second verse. In these lines, "Why would you be so mad at me for? Homie I don't know, she's hot and cold," he not only sings on the B-flat instead of the lower F, he also reaches up a tone to the C on the words "be," "me," and "know," extending his melodic range even further.[312] The extension of the melody to higher pitches at this moment may be meant to convey Kanye's emotional state as he asks his ex-lover why she is angry with him. The greater

[311] Note that this F is an octave below the starting pitch of the chorus.
[312] Here I am referring only to his melodic range in the verse, as Kanye's singing of the chorus extends to a higher range than this.

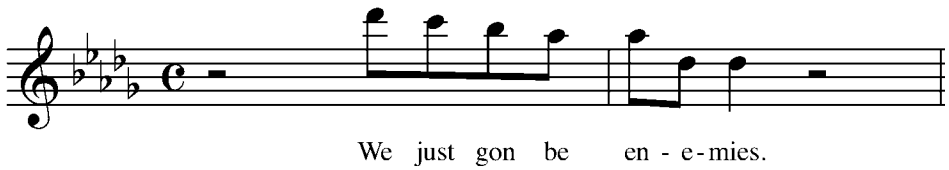
melodic range in the second verse has the effect of making Kanye sound more emotional as the song progresses.

The bridge is perhaps one of the most interesting moments in the song from the perspective of Kanye's use of voice-modulating/enhancing technology. The beat drops out entirely in the transition into the bridge. Even the soft, subtle "heartbeat" is temporarily removed from the texture. A wave of electronic sound ushers in the vocals of the bridge, which begin mid-phrase. The fact that the beat drops out leading into the bridge, combined with the fact that the vocal phrasing no longer matches up with the phrasing of the musical background, creates a slight feeling of disjointedness. The regularity of the phrasing that had been set up through the first two verses and three repetitions of the chorus has been thrown off. Kanye's melody in the bridge involves a number of slightly elaborated descending scale passages. These passages emphasize the tonic triad, B-flat minor, and the fourth line of the bridge descends to a low B-flat, the lowest pitch that Kanye sings, one that has only been heard in two other instances: on the last syllable of the first and second verses.

The most interesting aspects of the bridge, however, involve the use of the vocoder. Mid-way through the bridge, on the line "And we just gonna be enemies," we hear the use of intense distortion, rather than just the modulating effect of the vocoder. On this line, Kanye descends through an octave, from his highest pitch, F, to the F an octave below the pitch that dominated his vocal line during the first verse (see Example 3-3). Kanye's voice is distorted throughout the entire line, with the highest level of distortion occurring on the word "enemies." There is also a delay effect on "enemies," causing the word to be repeated, thus adding to its emphasis. The distortion on this line,

and particularly on this word, emphasizes the tension between the narrator and the woman to whom he is singing.

**Example 3-3 Kanye West "Heartless," Excerpt from bridge**




Partly as a result of the use of distortion in the phrase described above, the bridge is the section of the song where the artificiality of the voice seems most prominent. This is further enhanced by a juxtaposition of Kanye's actual breathing. We hear a sharp intake of breath, close-mic'ed, at the end of each line, creating a sense of intimacy. The breathing is a signal of Kanye's physicality and it sounds strangely out of place when heard in the context of the mechanized sounding voice. Kanye's breathing was left in the mix intentionally, a fact that is made obvious by the level of detail and manipulation that has gone into every aspect of the production of this song.

In general, Kanye has demonstrated with "Heartless," and the album as a whole, that it is possible to crossover from rap to song. Despite the critiques the album has received, he has already had two chart-topping hits off of the album: "Heartless" and "Love Lockdown," only several months after the album has been released. As for the quality of the vocal production, his singing voice sounds fine with the help of the vocoder and perhaps the use of auto-tune as well. Can Kanye sing without the help of technology? Does it really matter? Given the prevalence of bad singing in the rap sphere, it is unlikely that his voice would be held to the same standards as a pop or R&B singer – he is a rapper first and a singer second. I caught a glimpse of Kanye singing "Heartless" live on American Idol and was not surprised to hear a substantial difference in vocal quality

between the album and live versions.[313] He sang with the vocoder, but his vocal quality and pitch accuracy were not anywhere near as clean as on the album. I also noticed that his delivery of the verses was even closer to a rapped style than on the album. (Once a rapper, always a rapper?)

Are the trends of male rappers singing badly and the widespread use of the vocoder in rap indicative of the direction in which rap is heading or simply current trends that will be glossed over in the near future? Male rappers perform their masculinity in a variety of ways. There are certain conventions that are followed, for example rough vocal quality, verbal speed and prowess, confidence, and an emphasis on sexuality and seduction. Yet even within these conventions, rappers have their own unique styles of delivery. Despite similarities, a seasoned rap fan can identify most mainstream rappers voices and style of flow just by listening to a verse. What is clear is that vocal performance is just as important as lyrics and image when it comes to asserting one's maleness in the rap sphere. Attitude, aggression, hardness, and confidence are necessary traits for almost any rapper, even female MCs, as I will discuss in the next chapter. The best way for a rapper to display these traits is through a skilled delivery. In the end, it is all aspects of the performance that contribute to a rapper's raced and gendered identity: persona, image, lyrics, musical background, and delivery all contribute to our understandings of MCs' identities.

[313] The performance can be viewed on Kanye's blog: www.knyeuniversecity.com/blog/ (March 12th, 2009).

# Chapter 4

## Conflicted Representations of Women in Rap:

## Locating Power in Conformity

As I have discussed in previous chapters, rap music is an important vehicle for the representation and negotiation of black identity in the public sphere. Although men have typically dominated this musical style, women have also used this medium as a means of performing and negotiating their identity. Despite the presence of early female crews such as the Sequence and Salt 'N' Pepa, female rappers have been conspicuously few in number relative to male rappers.[314] The small number of successful female rappers is not the only obstacle these performers must face; they must also deal with the established musical, lyric, and visual conventions of rap which tend to reinforce predominantly male perspectives and excessive displays of masculinity. As a result of rap's hypermasculinity, women rappers must negotiate their performances within the boundaries established by male performers, producers, promoters and record executives.

This chapter takes an intersectional approach to studying the ways in which black, American, female rappers perform their identities. I argue that many women rappers simultaneously resist and reinforce the raced and gendered norms of the rap sphere. By

[314] As Russell Potter states: "despite the reputation of hip-hop as a black male genre, sistas have been at it from the start" (92). Potter cites rap artist Grandmaster Flash who recalls "'back in the day,' there were more female crews then male, though far fewer of them were able to break into the recording side" (92). (Russell Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism,* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

analyzing the lyric, musical, and visual components of songs by several prominent female rappers, I demonstrate how these rappers assert their place in the public sphere though the manipulation of gendered stereotypes. These women rap aggressively about controlling male sexuality using vocal and lyrical cues typically associated with male performers and, at the same time, their overtly sexual visual appearance and actions closely conform to the established feminine norms of popular music videos. The work of these female rappers can be read as a feminist, resistant claiming of black women's sexuality in the sphere of hip-hop, but one that also conforms to acceptable forms of femininity, thereby reinforcing the gendered norms that these artists are resisting.

**I. Black Female Identity in the Rap Sphere**

Kimberlé Crenshaw has discussed how black women's issues are often largely ignored in discussions of violence against women, by both feminist and anti-racist criticism.[315] Women face a similar problem in the dialogue of hip-hop. Primary narratives in rap music include the preservation of black culture, poverty, racism, violence, and police harassment. Feminist issues are given lower priority and are rarely acknowledged in discourse about rap music, except in regard to the sexual exploitation of female bodies in music videos (a threat to the dominant, white hegemony), and also in regard to the misogynist lyrics of male rappers.[316] As such, the focus is removed from how women choose to represent themselves, or what identities are available to them within this sphere, and placed on how they are represented by others, further disempowering them.

[315] Kimberlé Crenshaw "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," In *Critical Race Theory,* edited by Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. (New York: The New Press, 1995).

[316] Rap music and feminism are often seen as incompatible. The particularly male-dominated, misogynist sphere of rap tends to be disassociated from feminist ideals even though women have been involved in rap since its inception. In fact, many themes in women's rap music involve sexual politics (Rose 1995, 147).

The extent to which women's issues are ignored in hip-hop discourse can be seen, for instance, in how much more attention the appropriation of the rap medium by white artists (which are relatively few in number) receives than women in rap.[317]

The representation of women's identities in hip-hop needs to be considered in terms of both race and gender. Crenshaw identifies these multiple dimensions of black women's identity as key to understanding their specific issues in regards to violence. Their intersectional identity is also an important factor in understanding both how they are under-represented and misrepresented in the mainstream music industry and popular discourse, as well as how these women negotiate social conventions and boundaries to have their voices heard.

As I will discuss below, there is a limited range of identities available to women in hip-hop, but even within this range, this medium can be used as a discursive space for women's resistance.[318] Women in hip-hop are often placed in a double bind: either play by the boys' rules, which also happens to include society's desired representations of femininity, or eschew the possibility for mainstream success. Most successful female rappers, therefore, choose to play by the boys' rules—at least outwardly. Gendered norms and compulsory femininity in women's rap are thus reinforced even as they are being resisted.

Black women rappers participate in the formation of their identities by way of their persona in the public sphere, but also represent women in a larger sense. In her

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[317] For example, the popularity of white rapper Eminem has gained far more media attention than the growing number of female rappers in the mainstream.

[318] Cheryl Keyes has outlined identities available to women in rap, which include the "Queen Mother," the "Fly Girl," "Sista with Attitude," and "the Lesbian," in *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 189. Jason Haugen has also explored the alternative femininities constructed by female rappers who appropriate the styles and subject matter of Gangsta rap; Jason Haugen, "'Unladylike Divas': Language, Gender, and Female Gangsta Rappers," *Popular Music and Society* 26/4 (December 2003). I will discuss these identities in more detail later in this paper.

influential study on rap, Tricia Rose has discussed how "Black women rappers interpret and articulate fears, pleasures, and promises of young black women whose voices have been relegated to the margins of public discourse."[319] As such, women's rap is an important discursive site for the resistant voices of black women.[320] As Rose has observed, women's rap can be contextualized both in dialogue with male rappers and in dialogue with larger social discourses, including feminism, where female MCs "struggle to define themselves against a confining and treacherous social environment."[321] Rose uses George Lipsitz's application of dialogics to popular music to discuss the ways in which women rappers are in conversation with male rappers and other social discourses.[322] Lipsitz's use of dialogic criticism "understands that popular practices enter into and revise dialogues already in progress."[323]

I mentioned earlier that women tend to be under-represented in the hip-hop community and in the discourse surrounding hip-hop. Not only are they under-represented they are also often misrepresented. Rose has identified a problem with media and critical writing, which often places "sexist" male rappers in opposition to "feminist" female rappers. A primary problem with this binary is that "it places female rappers in a totalizing oppositional relationship to male rappers."[324] This simplistic sexist/non-sexist binary of men/women rappers draws out the gendered side of women rappers' identities, while simultaneously creating a barrier between them and their male counterparts on

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[319] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America,* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 146.
[320] Katina Stapleton has also discussed women's voices as resistant in rap; "From the Margins to the Mainstream: The Political Power of Hip-Hop," *Media, Culture & Society* 20 (1998) 219–34.
[321] Rose, 1994, 148.
[322] Lipsitz applies Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism to popular music. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Music*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).
[323] Rose, 1994, 148.
[324] Ibid, 149.

issues related to race. Rose invokes dialogism as one solution to the opposition created in discourse:

> Dialogism resists the one-dimensional opposition between male and female rappers as respectively sexist and feminist. It also accommodates the tension between sympathetic racial bonds among black men and women as well as black women's frustration regarding sexual oppression at the hands of black men.[325]

According to Rose, "dialogism allows us to make sense of the contradictory modes of resistance in women rapper's work."[326] Thus, Rose's critical discussion of women in rap is an example of how we can come to terms with the different aspects of women rappers' identity in the way that we frame discussions about their music. Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality in discourse is another way of dealing with the multiple sides of women rappers' identities.

As Cheryl Keyes has discussed, there is a limited range of identities available to women in hip-hop.[327] Of the range of possible identities that Keyes describes, the two categories of female rappers that are most common are the "Fly Girl" and the "Sista with Attitude."[328] The "Fly Girl" is portrayed "as a party-goer, an independent woman, and as an erotic subject rather than an objectified object."[329] Keyes' category of "Sista with

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[325] Ibid, 148.
[326] Ibid, 149. Rose's study explores the following ways in which black women rappers challenge and comment on sexual politics: 1) themes of heterosexual courtship; 2) mastery of rap skills and formation of identity; and 3) sexual resistance (Chapter 5).
[327] Keyes, 2002. For further discussions on women's role in the rap sphere, see Rose 1994; Gwendolyn Pough, *Check it While I Wreck it: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston : Northeastern University Press), 2004; and Venise T. Berry, "Feminine or Masculine: The Conflicting Nature of Female Images in Rap Music," In *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, edited by Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 1994 183-201.
[328] Keyes 2002, 195-200. The other two categories of female rapper described by Keyes are the "Queen Mother" (rappers who view themselves as African-centered icons), and "the Lesbian" (female rappers who openly rap about the lesbian lifestyle). These categories are much less common than that of "Fly Girl" and "Sista with Attitude." The "Queen Mother" category of rapper was more common in the 1980s and early 1990s before Gansta rap emerged. At the time this book was written, Keyes was only able to identify one rapper who fit into the lesbian category, Queen Pen.
[329] Ibid, 195.

Attitude" is comprised of "female MCs who value attitude as a means of empowerment and present themselves accordingly." They adopt a hardcore approach and an aggressive, arrogant, defiant attitude.[330] In the case of many female rappers from the late 1990s onward, these two categories have merged into one: a category of female rapper who touts her independence, expresses attitude, parties, and flaunts her sexuality. This persona is exemplified by female rappers such as Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Trina, Shawnna, and Remy Ma.

Many American female rappers adopt similar styles of vocal flows to male artists, delivering their lyrics aggressively with fairly low pitched vocal timbres and explicitly sexual lyrics. This is particularly true of some of the female "Gangsta" or "Hardcore" rappers, such as Lil' Kim, who spits aggressive rhymes that rival those of her male counterparts in terms of verbal skill, profanity, and violent and sexually explicit content. This is not to say that these female rappers do not rap about different topics and use different strategies than male rappers, as there are obvious stylistic similarities. Hip-hop scholar Michael Eric Dyson has observed that "the success of women (rappers) has suffered as a result of the prerogative of men to set the standards for what's acceptable and not acceptable in hip-hop and, quite frankly, to set the rules of the game as to what lyrics, what styles and what genres will be most popular." [331] It is, therefore, not surprising that the music of female rappers would bear stylistic similarities to the music of male rappers.

Although this is not true of all female rappers, many have adopted an extremely sexualized public persona, one in which their appearance conforms to conventional

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[330] Ibid, 199-200.
[331] Michael Eric Dyson, quoted in "Female hip-hop fights a bad rap," by Mariel Concepcion for *Reuters/Billboard*, June 4, 2007.

notions of femininity in rap.[332] Although there are many exceptions, rap promotes the idea that women are "bitches" and "hoes" and women in music videos are usually featured as scantily clad 'arm candy' for male rappers.[333] Many successful female rappers have adopted a style of dress that fits within these conventions, although in many cases they have used their sexuality via their lyrics and assertive flows to turn the tables on men.[334] Examples can be seen with artists such as Trina and Lil' Kim, who pose pin-up girl style on their album covers, in promotional materials, and in music videos, but at the same time aggressively deliver lyrics about controlling their own sexuality as well as controlling men in the sexual arena (see Figure 4-1below).[335] As Jason Haugen has discussed in his article entitled "Unladylike Divas, Language, Gender, and Female Gangsta Rappers," female Gangsta rappers have been assertive about their sexuality as a means of claiming power in the social sphere.[336]

[332] The power of highly sexualized images in rap has even influenced Missy Elliot, who strongly resisted rap's beauty standards early in her career, but eventually changed her image in such a way as to better conform to these standards. I will discuss Missy Elliott later in this chapter.
[333] Jason Haugen discusses male discourse about femininity in rap in his article, "Unladylike Divas: Language, Gender, and Female Gangsta Rappers" *Popular Music and Society* 26/4 (December), 2003.
[334] Characteristics of this type of sexualized persona include extremely revealing clothing, erotic dancing, and an abundance of graphic sexual lyrics.
[335] For example, see the album covers for Lil' Kim's *La Bella Mafia* (2003) and Trina's *Diamond Princess* (2002).
[336] Haugen, 438-439.

**Figure 4-1 Lil' Kim (left) and Foxy Brown (right)**


Gail Woldu has also discussed this form of female empowerment in rap in her article entitled "Gender as Anomaly: Women in Rap." Woldu has observed that Lil' Kim has defied rap's stereotypes and has "infiltrated areas that very few women have dared, including the use of lurid and pornographic texts."[337] In other words, Lil' Kim has adopted a style of verbal presentation and lyric content typically reserved for men in commercial rap music. Lil' Kim's success in the rap sphere was followed by a host of female rappers using similar strategies, including Foxy Brown, Trina, and Shawnna. As Woldu has observed, "The popular images of Brown and Lil' Kim as 'hoochie mama' clad in thongs and bustiers, mugging for the attention of the camera with legs wide apart or straddling some species of wild animal are difficult to reconcile with their claims to

[337] Gail Hilson Woldu, "Gender as Anomaly: Women in Rap," in *The Resisting Music: Popular Music and Social Protest,* edited by Ian Peddie (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 89-102.

speak for all women."[338] By delivering their lyrics in a low-pitched, aggressive manner typically associated with masculinity, using a multitude of vulgar language and discussing their own sexuality and their control over men in a manner that is similar to male rappers, these female rappers embody a "masculinized" representation of femininity. They resist the hegemonic norm by claiming space in this male-dominated sphere and by rapping about topics of independence and sexual control. However, at the same time that this position of power is claimed, these rappers are participating in, and even reinforcing, these norms with their hyper-sexualized mode of dress and persona.

I will now turn to several examples of how women rappers negotiate multiple social boundaries and identities, simultaneously resisting and conforming to acceptable notions of femininity.

**II. Women's Vocal Expression in Rap**

Rapper Lil' Kim has gained a presence in the music industry with her overt sexuality and aggressive lyrics and style of MCing, for which her song "How Many Licks?" (2000) is a prime example of her explicitly sexual rapping.[339] The narrative of this song describes Lil' Kim's sexual exploits, in particular her use of men to satisfy her desires. The following is an excerpt from the first verse:

> Dan my nigga from Down South
> Used to like me to spank him and cum in his mouth
> And Tony he was Italian (Uh-huh)
> And he didn't give a fuck (Uh-huh)
> That's what I liked about him
> He ate my pussy from dark till the mornin
> Called his girl up and told her we was bonin

[338] Ibid, 97.
[339] Lil' Kim, *Notorious K.I.M*, Atlantic B00004TSX6, 2000.

> Puerto Rican papi, used to be a Deacon
> But now he be sucking me off on the weekend
> And this black dude I called King Kong
> He had a big ass dick and a hurricane tongue

Lil' Kim turns the table on the dominant hegemony of mainstream rap by adopting an aggressive, traditionally male form of vocal delivery and language. Lil' Kim has already adopted a masculine medium by rapping, but it is enhanced further by her aggressive style of MCing and adoption of a lyric-style that is most often found in male rap songs.[340]

Lil' Kim's narrative is also enhanced by the role of her featured male singer, Sisqo, who sings the chorus: "So, how many licks does it take till you get to the center of the?" Sisqo's singing of the chorus – a historically feminized role in rap – reflects the desire of his character to please her sexually.[341] Lil' Kim works within a masculine vocal medium to take control her sexual identity. Her lyrics tell the tale of her sexual exploits, the use and discarding of men equivalent to that of a male player's treatment of women. Sisqo's supporting vocal role in this song achieves a sort of vocal gender role-reversal that empowers Lil' Kim with social space to express her identity.[342]

The video for "How Many Licks?" contributes to Lil' Kim's claiming of her sexuality, but also reinforces dominant stereotypes of the sexualized black female body. Lil' Kim's appearance and marketing in general is geared toward a primarily male audience and this video is no different; she is dressed in extremely provocative clothing, which is emphasized by her sexual dance moves.[343] While assuming a more masculine role of authority and control in her music and lyrics, at the same time she presents an

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[340] By masculine lyrics, I am referring to the lyrics which have themes of sexual dominance and "taking what you want" associated with the "player", a role I discussed in the previous two chapters.
[341] In Chapter 3, I discussed the ways in which the act of MCing has been coded as male.
[342] I should clarify that I am not referring to the actual, personal identity of Lil' Kim, but to the identity of her public persona.
[343] The theme of the video is the manufacturing and marketing of three 'Lil Kim dolls: Candy Kim, Pin-up Kim, and Nightrider Kim.

image that is appropriately feminine and plays into many males' fantasies. She assumes control of her sexuality and at the same time exploits it, creating a conflicted image that simultaneously resists and conforms to conventional femininity.[344] Whether or not her sexy appearance is a conscious decision made by her or a marketing tool decided upon by her management and production team, Lil' Kim visually fits within a desired feminine mould that has allowed her to achieve success within this male-dominated sphere.[345] "How Many Licks?" can thus be read as a feminist, resistant claiming of black women's sexuality in the sphere of hip-hop, but one that also conforms to an acceptable form of femininity, and thereby reinforces gender norms.

***Trina: "Killing You Hoes"***

Miami-based MC Trina followed in the footsteps of fellow hardcore rappers Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown.[346] Her latest album, *Still da Baddest*, was released in 2008 and reached number one on the Billboard R&B/ Hip-Hop album chart as well as number one on the Rap album chart.[347] The album's title picks up on Trina's debut solo album, *Da Baddest Bitch*, released in 2000. Like Lil' Kim, Trina is known for her aggressive flows and crude lyrics. Violence and sexuality are both important aspects of her persona, as is

[344] Although the video plays into many male fantasies, I would like to note that a central focus of the video is Lil' Kim demanding sexual pleasure. At one point in the video the phrase "she doesn't satisfy you…you satisfy her" flashes across the bottom of the screen, just in case the viewer had forgotten that she is not only the object of male's fantasies, but also the dominatrix of this sexual fantasy.

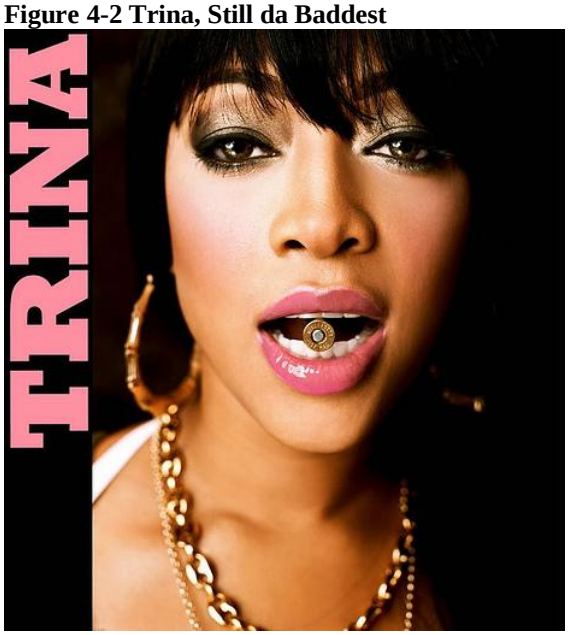
[345] The decision to flaunt one's body in hip-hop can be interpreted as a positive claiming of female sexuality (see Rose 1994, Chapter 6). Female rappers who have not had a sufficiently thin, attractive, sexy appearance have often not been successful in the industry, or have been strongly encouraged to change their appearance. A prime example of this is Missy Elliot, an extremely successful female rapper, who received tremendous pressure from her record company to slim down and adopt a more conventionally feminine appearance.

[346] Trina came onto the rap scene a couple of years after Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, but all three were popular hardcore rappers in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

[347] The album also reached number three on the R&B chart, and number six on the top album chart (this information was retrieved from Trina's Official Website: http://www.trina-online.com/, and it can also be found at Billboard.biz). Trina, *Still da Baddest*, EMI B0011WMI56, 2008.

evidenced on the album's cover; a close-up of Trina, suggestively holding a bullet between her teeth (see Figure 4-2, below). These aspects of her persona are evident in most of the tracks on the new album, including the album's title track, "Still da Baddest," as well as "Killing You Hoes," "I Got a Bottle," and "Phone Sex."[348]

**Figure 4-2 Trina, Still da Baddest**




Like many other female MCs, one way that Trina expresses attitude is by referring to herself as a "bitch". This term, along with calling oneself a "ho," is similar to male MCs referring to themselves as "niggas"; it is a reclaiming of negative terminology and a subversive performance of a stereotyped identity.[349] As Davarian Baldwin has discussed, "the nigga became the embodiment of black defiance against all comers through a highly masculinist imaginary, where the nigga was strong when he wasn't a

[348] A slight exception can be heard with the song "I Got a Thang for You," featuring R&B singer Keyshia Cole. On the surface, this song is less sexually aggressive than most of Trina's songs, it is more about romance. There are still some graphic lyrics featured, for example: "When I open wide, you better work inside."

[349] For further discussion on the nigga as a performed identity, see: Davarian Baldwin, "Black Empires, White Desires," 2004, particularly page 166.

'punk,' 'bitch,' or 'pussy.'"[350] Similarly, a female MC is strong if she is a bitch. The ho is similar to the archetypes of the "Pimp" and "Player," as I discussed in Chapter 3. Taking on the role of the ho allows a woman to get what she wants from a man. It is presented as a position of power, not as a position of submission, as it is when a male MC refers to a woman as a ho. The position of power comes from the fact that she can use her sexuality to procure what she wants. Trina calls herself a bitch constantly on this album.[351] For example, the hook of the album's title track, "Still the Baddest," is "I'm still the baddest bitch" repeated four times and the song opens with "the bitch is back" repeated numerous times.

The song "Killing You Hoes" opens with the same type of sentiment: "yup, the baddest bitch is back." Although Trina does not directly call herself a ho on this song, she alludes to this persona with phrases, such as "So while you fuckin for free, I'm tryna get rich" in the song "Killing You Hoes." In this song, she has adopted the typical persona of a "ho," but positions herself above the other "hoes" that she insults throughout the song. She is better than these other hoes, because her body and sexuality allow her to procure wealth.

The song "Killing You Hoes" is interesting for the combined lyrical themes of violence, explicit sexuality, and braggadocio. The song's chorus features the statement, "I'm killing you hoes" at the end of each line (the chorus is provided below):

> You see that outfit bitch, I'm killin you hoes
> Cute face and ass swoll, I'm killin you hoes
> I got the best pussy out, I'm killin you hoes
> And ain't non you can do about it, I'm killin you hoes

[350] Ibid.
[351] The same is true of her previous albums. Her moniker is "the baddest chick," which is a media-friendly replacement for "the baddest bitch," ("Trina Bio." 2008. Trina Official Website. http://www.trina-online.com/).

When Trina says "I'm killing you hoes" this does not imply a literal act of violence, the phrase is more likely meant to indicate that she is better than these women: sexier, better in bed, a more skilled MC, and wealthier. There is still the threat of violence, however, and aggressiveness in her word choice, particularly since "killing you hoes" is repeated so many times.[352] The aggression can also be seen with phrases such as "And I can go in any club and shut that bitch down" in the second verse. Trina even utters threats in two instances. The first occurrence is at the end of the first verse with the lines "And don't you cross that line cause I get hot quick. And if you do it's gonna be me and you up in this bitch." Another threat is made in the second verse with the line "Cause I got a couple of my dawgs that ready to clamp, and you'd be best off sittin your tired ass down."

Trina also boasts in much the same way that male rappers do.[353] She boasts that she is better dressed, as expressed in the chorus "You see dat outfit bitch." She is more attractive than the women she is addressing, as can be seen with phrases such as "Cute face and ass swoll" in the chorus, and, "Look at how my ass poke out when I walk" in the second verse. She asserts her superiority over these women by insulting their appearance, such as in the following lines from the third verse: "You lost a lot of weight shit, you fallin off fast. I feel sorry for ya' might let you borrow some ass."[354] Not only is she more attractive than these other "hoes," their men want her, as is stated in the second verse: "Cause your nigga wanna fuck me, it ain't my fault." Her sexual abilities are promoted with the phrase "I got the best pussy out," stated in each repetition of the chorus.

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[352] The chorus is repeated twice each time it is performed at the beginning, and in between all three verses, as well as at the end of the song.

[353] The reader will recall my description of male rappers' braggadocio in Chapters 2 and 3, particularly with respect to T.I.'s swagger in Chapter 2.

[354] Within the rap sphere, a woman does not want to be too skinny. A big butt is prized. This rhetoric is probably best known to the public through Sir Mix-a-Lot's song, "Baby Got Back," (1992).

According to Trina, she has more money, for example, “You get your money in pieces I get mines in a lump” is recited in the third verse. She also refers to other women as “broke hoes,” insinuating that she is more affluent than them. She is independent: “And I don’t sweat niggas, I don’t fight over dick” is stated in the first verse. She expresses confidence with statements such as “I can fuck whoever I want,” in the third verse. She also talks about having more class in the third verse: “A little fly ass chick who got a lota class.” This boasting is one way of exerting control over other women. Her aggressive confidence is one way of claiming superiority over them.

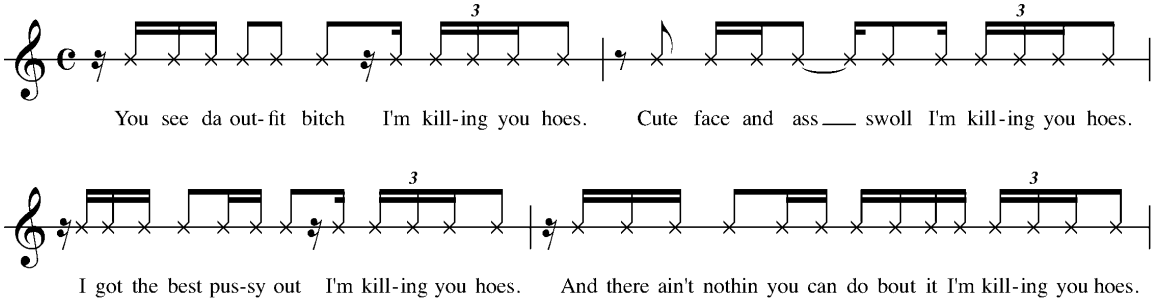
Similar to other hardcore rappers such as Lil’ Kim, Trina performs an exaggerated sexuality. The fact that the phrase “I got the best pussy out,” is repeated in the chorus is a perfect example of this. With Trina’s lyrics, sexuality is not only explicit, but also crude, as is demonstrated by phrases such as “And I don't sweat niggas and I don't fight over dick,” in verse one, and “Cause your nigga wanna fuck me it ain't my fault,” in verse two. Her sexuality is most overtly described with the phrase: “And my pussy sit up real nice in ma shorts.” This line stands out, particularly because of how Trina puts a strong emphasis on the word “real” stretching out the vowel sound so that the word receives a longer note value than all of the other syllables in that line and in that verse.

It is not only Trina’s lyrical content that is aggressive and assertive. Her mode of vocal delivery also helps reinforce these aspects of her performed identity. As was the case with Lil’ Kim, Trina not only adopts the lyrical themes typical of male rap songs, she also adopts a similar mode of delivery. Trina may not have a low pitched voice, but she makes up for it with her aggression. In “Killing You Hoes,” we hear some aggression in her tone, but it is more of a relaxed, confident style of delivery similar to what we hear

with rappers like T.I. We hear an even more aggressive style of delivery in songs such as "Still the Baddest," in which Trina performs at a much faster pace, making her delivery sound even more aggressive.

In "Killing You Hoes," the chorus does not have a rhyme scheme, the continuity comes from the repetition of "I'm killing you hoes" at the end of each of the four lines (see Example 4-1). The song's hook, "killing you hoes," is emphasized in several ways. First, it is emphasized by the number of times it is repeated, as the four lines of the chorus are repeated a second time every time the chorus reappears, this line is repeated eight times between every verse, for a total of sixty-four times. It is also emphasized by its rhythmic placement in the phrase. Although each of the four lines is delivered to a slightly different rhythm, "killing you hoes," is always placed at the beginning of beat four as a sixteenth note triplet figure (refer to Example 4-1 again). This phrase is also emphasized in the third and fourth lines, as the beat drops out exactly as she recites "killing you." When the beat drops out, the sudden rupture in texture draws even more attention to the recitation of the lyrics.[355]

**Example 4-1 Trina "Killing You Hoes," Chorus**



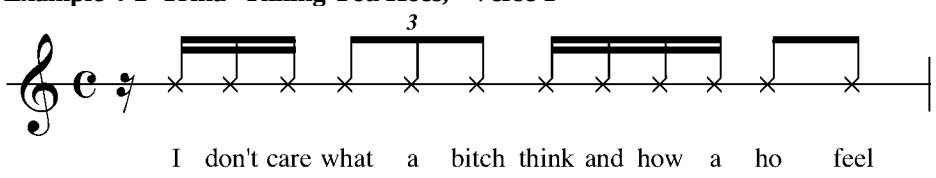

Trina's flows are delivered over a fairly regular rhythmic backdrop. The background melody is primarily composed of eighth notes in common time, creating a

[355] Refer to the introduction of this project for a definition and discussion of rupture.

steady rhythm over which she delivers her lyrics. Her delivery of the lyrics, however, is much less precise than the backing track. I have provided an approximated transcription of the first line of the first verse in Example 4-2, however, Trina has a tendency to draw out syllables, making her rhythmic delivery sound slightly uneven.

In the verses, she tends to have matching end rhymes, but the rhymes are not exact. It is her pronunciation of the words that makes them rhyme, for example, "feel," and "bills" at the end of the first and second lines, and "crib," and "whip," at the end of the third and fourth lines. She also does not consistently place the end rhymes in the same place in the measure. For example, they may sometimes fall on beat four, sometimes on the second half of beat four, on the second sixteenth of beat four, on the last sixteenth of beat three, and so on. This, combined with the slightly uneven rhythmic delivery, creates a slight sense of disjointedness, keeping her flows from sounding sing-songy. This is a clear example of speech-effusive delivery. The message to be taken from this is that she is a skilled MC: she can draw out syllables and place her end rhymes in slightly different places, yet still create the overall effect of a rhymed line. This style of delivery creates more complex rhythmic connections between the voice and backing track. Trina further demonstrates her skill by rhyming words by pronunciation, instead of only choosing words that naturally rhyme, as I discussed above.[356]

**Example 4-2 Trina "Killing You Hoes," Verse 1**




[356] The fact that Trina wants to be taken seriously as an MC can be heard in the following lines from the first verse of "Still da Baddest": "Said she couldn't rap but I'm still here standing…. I step in da booth kill a track one take. Trina won't break I'm so heavy weight." She boasts of her skill continually on the album.

Another technique that is used on the track "Killing You Hoes" to make Trina sound more aggressive is that of voice doubling. As I discussed in the previous two chapters, voice doubling is an extremely common technique in rap, often used to make a voice sound larger than life. This can help an MC sound more confident and/or more aggressive, both of which are true with this song. During the chorus the doubled voice is panned left and right, making the voice sound like it is coming from all directions. The doubled voice is centered in the mix during the verses, creating a slightly straighter, cleaner sound. A delay effect is added to certain words in order to create emphasis, for example, "baddest" and "bitch," in the first verse. When this type of emphasis occurs, the delayed voice is panned left and right, creating an even thicker vocal sound at those moments.

Like the other hardcore female rappers of her generation, Trina performs an exaggerated sexuality through her lyrics and image.[357] She asserts her independence from within the established boundaries of rap, adopting masculine language, attitudes, and assertive modes of lyric delivery. This image and style of MCing is not isolated to a specific time period, as is demonstrated by the fact that Trina has been actively rapping in this style for almost ten years. This is also not a phenomenon isolated to only a few MCs, as is demonstrated by the fact that there are a substantial number of female MCs adopting similar personas, lyric themes, and styles of delivery.[358] I will briefly discuss one more artists who exemplify this style in order to illustrate my point.

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[357] I have only discussed the album cover of *Still da Baddest*, however, her mode of dress and overtly sexual posing in promotional photos and videos is very similar to that of Lil' Kim, as I discussed above.

[358] Of course, the number of female MCs fitting into the hardcore category must be contextualized within the number of female MCs who have been successful in the mainstream. In other words, there are not that many successful female rappers, compared to the large number of male rappers who gave gained a reputation within the music industry. Within this small group of successful women, many of them have adopted this hardcore style.

***Shawnna: "Shake dat Shit" and "Damn"***

Like the artists described earlier, Shawnna has built a reputation for herself based on sexually explicit lyrics, an assertive attitude, and excellent verbal skills. Active in the rap sphere since 1999, her first album, *Worth tha Weight,* was finally released in 2004.[359] Her second album, *Block Music*, was released in 2006, and she has been actively appearing as a featured artist on many tracks, including songs by T-Pain and Ludacris.[360] Her visual appearance conforms to notions of conventional femininity within the rap sphere, as can be seen on *Worth tha Weight*'s album cover, where Shawnna is sporting low slung pants over bikini bottoms as she stands with her arms crossed over her breasts (see Figure 4-3, below).[361] Shawnna received her first widespread exposure as a guest artist on the Ludacris' song "What's Your Fantasy," (2001). Her next hit came with the song, "Shake dat Shit," off of her debut solo album (2004), this time featuring Ludacris as the guest artist. In a sense, the fact that her first two hit songs rely on Ludacris' success positions her as dependent on a more successful male artist.[362] Shawnna portrays herself as assertive and independent and it is possible to interpret her reliance on Ludacris as female reliance on a strong male figure.

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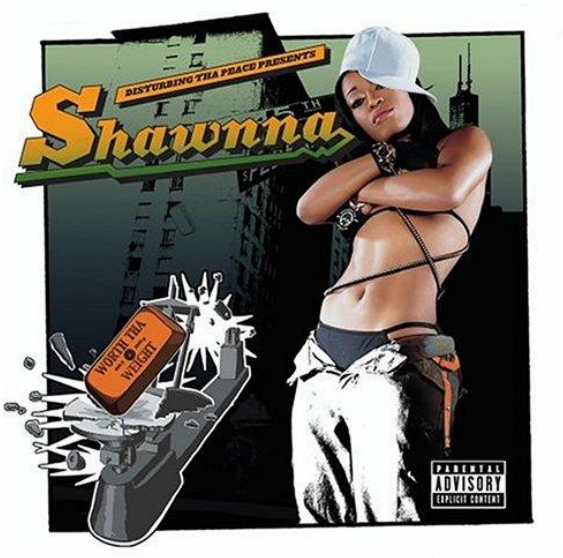
[359] Shawnna, *Worth tha Weight*, Universal, B0002ZMJDE. It was originally scheduled to be released in 2002, but the date kept getting pushed back; Andy Kellman, "Shawnna Biography," *All Music Guide*, http://allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&searchlink=SHAWNNA&sql=11:axfqxqe0ldae~T1.
[360] Shawnna, *Block Music*, Universal, B000FOQ12C.
[361] You can tell that she is wearing a bikini top, but the pose is still quite suggestive.
[362] We must take into account, however, the fact that it is common to have more successful artists featured on a track in order to help launch your career. I discussed this with relation to authenticity in Chapter 2.

**Figure 4-3 Shawna, Worth tha Weight**




"Shake dat Shit" begins with the song's chorus, which is performed by both artists. Ludacris performs the first half of the chorus in a fairly laid back manner, but with a moderately fast tempo:

> Maannn, these bitches is awfully nasty
> And these bitches keep walking past me
> Either way, I'm a pimp for today
> Put your bootie in the way and shake that shit!

As Ludacris' voice is the first one we hear, he sets the tone for the song by referring to women as bitches. Of course, calling a woman a bitch in the context of a rap song is not unusual, but he turns it into a direct insult by calling them nasty.[363] Of course, since he is playing the role of the pimp in this song, he instructs these "nasty" women to put their booties in front of him and "shake dat shit." Shawnna performs the second half of the chorus and, following Ludacris' lead, raps about performing oral sex on "niggas:"

> Now these niggas is bout they bank
> And these niggas keep buying dranks

[363] In this context, nasty could also be taken to mean "dirty" in the sexual sense.

Lips creep from my body on your lips
Get it closer to the tip and shake that shit!

Shawnna's reference to men as niggas parallels Ludacris' reference to women as bitches. She complains about men wanting to buy her drinks, but like Ludacris, gives into sexual pleasure for the moment. Both artists adopt a similar style of flow in the chorus, using matching end rhymes in what we would consider a speech-effusive style. Ludacris and Shawnna both deliver their first two lines with the matching end rhymes falling on beat four of the measure (which is in 4/4 time). They both present their third and fourth lines as a single unit—the phrases connect with no pause in between.

All three verses of the song are rapped by Shawnna, with a repetition of the chorus occurring after each verse. She begins the verse by spelling out her name "S-H-A to the W double N-A;" the act of announcing oneself at the beginning of a song is fairly common within this musical domain. Shawnna uses spelling as means as beginning all three verses. In the second verse, she spells out, "C-H-I to the C-A, G-O," identifying her hometown. The third verse also situates her geographically by spelling out, "M-I-D to the W-E-S-T."[364] The spelling out of her name and geographical affiliation helps her to mark her territory. As I mentioned above, this track was the debut song off of her first solo album and phrases such as these help to present her identity to a new audience.

Shawnna asserts herself throughout the song. As was the case with Trina, Shawnna refers to herself as a bitch; for example, her second line of verse one is "Real bitch don't play." By referring to herself as a bitch, she is presenting herself as an

[364] The reader will recall that I discussed Trina beginning the third verse of Snoop Dogg's "Step Yo Game Up," by spelling out "P-P-U-U-S-S-Y," in Chapter 2. The spelling out of words and names in this manner seems reminiscent of school-yard games. Kyra Gaunt explores young girls' musical practices in *The Games Black Girls Play*. She discusses the ways in which male rappers pick up on some of these linguistic and musical practices, and notes that female rappers do not tend to adopt these musical games in their songs, (2006, Chapter 5). I have not yet had the opportunity to explore how female rappers' spelling out of words fits into these traditions and their significance.

aggressive woman, which is enhanced by the fact that she “don’t play,” meaning she does not play games—she is a serious contender in the rap game. Although the song’s chorus references sexual acts, the majority of Shawnna’s lyrics in this song are used to give her credibility and “hardness” through references to the hood, crime, and her rap skills. For instance, in the first verse she references the hood with the line “Wild ones, walk with a bitch through wild slums.” In the second verse she also references the hood with the line “I stomp through the hood, with a grand on my feet like that ain't tight.” She references the street and cops at the end of the second verse: “Hold up! They mad cause the streets is sold up. I'm back on my feet, so watch for the cops, we'll never stop, just rep for ya block and throw it up.”

Although there are references to Shawnna’s verbal prowess throughout the song, the majority of these references occur in the third verse, for example: “You say you got skills, put 'em up let's see. Show and prove, I hate to really see what y'all goin through, put on any beat we could spit it in the street.” Lyrics such as these present her as extremely confident and display the type of boasting that is so central to rap.

Shawnna’s lyric delivery is very crisp and hard-hitting. Although her delivery of most lines features fairly straightforward rhythmic patterns, her speed is quite fast, displaying her skill as an MC. As I mentioned above, she begins the first verse by spelling out her name. What is most interesting about this is the fact that she stretches out this spelling over a measure and a half (see Example 4-3). She does this by placing the first two letters on quarter beats before speeding up to eighths and sixteenths for the remainder of the line. Her delivery throughout most of the song is set to eighths and sixteenths and most of her phrases fit roughly within the measure (see Example 4-4 for a

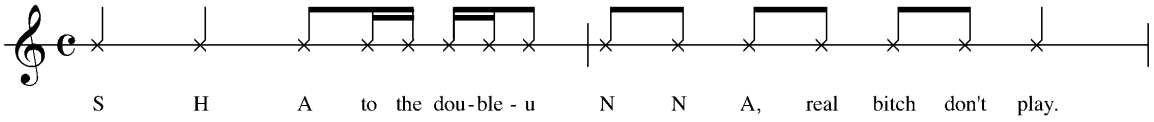
transcription of the third line of verse one). The message that she sends with this first phrase is that she is important and the listener should pay attention to her and remember her name.[365]

The technique of stressing a syllable by placing it on a quarter instead of the more typical eighth and sixteenths is something she does several times in each verse. For example, she stresses the words “wild slums” and “wild guns” in the following lines from verse one:

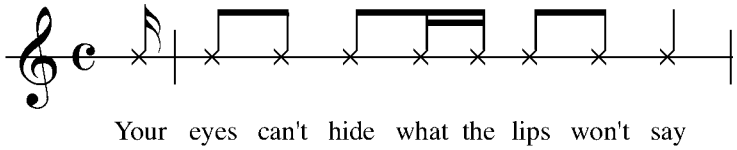
> Wild ones, walk with a bitch through wild slums
> Trying to figure out if they're scared of the hips or the chips
> Or they really can't talk to a bitch with wild guns
> No games, hat to the side wit low frame

While her delivery of the “S” and “H” in the first line were quite crisp, these words are drawn out and held for the whole quarter beat.

**Example 4-3 Shawna "Shake Dat Shit," Verse 1**




**Example 4-4 Shawna "Shake Dat Shit"**




As I mentioned above, Shawnna’s flows are quite regular. She demonstrates flexibility, however, by adjusting her dynamic range and attack on the consonants to create certain effects. For example, the majority of the song is quite assertive, featuring a crisp, hard-hitting style of flow, but she makes herself sound more aggressive by slightly

[365] She uses this same rhythmic pattern at the start of each verse.

increasing the volume of her voice and attacking the consonants more sharply. This can be heard on lines such as “She’s most wanted bitch, wait your turn,” in the first verse. She also recites certain lines in a softer, more seductive manner, accomplished by a lower dynamic level and softer attacks on the consonants. This can be heard on lines such as “It’s O.K. They gon learn” and “Y’all can’t smoke none anyway” in the first verse. This kind of flexibility helps demonstrate her skill as an MC.

While “Shake dat Shit” contained some sexual lyrics, we get a much better sense of this aspect of her identity in the song “Damn,” (2006). The lyrics of this song boast of her wealth and affluent lifestyle, as well as her sexuality. In the first verse, Shawnna focuses on material things. For example, in the first line she states “Now you can tell my stilettos cost about nine hundred.” She raps about letting her chain hang down to her tummy and about the fact that she only swims in designer suits, such as “Donatella or some BCBG.” She says that you can find her in a yacht or “in that Rolls or that Ferrari, either one.” She also situates herself as having come from wealth and not having worked her way up by hustling, as is so common with rap personas: “My daddy got that paper I been rich since I was one. Been living in them mansions, been soaking up the sun.” These lyrics would then suggest that her association with the hood and the streets, as she mentions in other songs, such as “Shake dat Shit,” was by choice, not necessity. These sorts of incongruities may cause a listener to question her street cred.

Shawnna also positions herself in Miami at the beginning of this song: “I'm in Miami actin ghetto hollerin out Shy run it.” By placing herself in the South, she strengthens the connections between herself and the other rappers she collaborates with,

many of whom are signed to Ludacris' label, Disturbing the Peace. [366] She conjures up images of Miami by referencing swimwear, yachts, etc. in her lyrics. These images are made visible in the music video, most of which was shot on a beach in Miami, with Shawnna clad in a bathing suit and high heels.

She musically conjures up the South by adopting a southern-influenced style of flow in this first verse. She has a tendency to stretch syllables out, holding them on a pitch which she then slides down from. This stretching out of the word is particularly audible at the end of her lines. This style of rapping tends to be slow to moderate in tempo and sounds very relaxed. Many rappers who adopt this southern style rap with less energy in their voices, sounding lazy, as is the case with Shawnna's first verse. A comparable example can be heard in Baby Boy da Prince's rapped verses in the song "This is the Way I Live," as I discussed in Chapter 3.[367] Shawnna's adoption of this more southern style is not surprising given her numerous collaborations with Ludacris.

In the second verse, Shawnna turns to the type of sexually explicit lyrics that appear in most of her songs. She begins the verse with the following lyrics:

> Hold up wait a minute step back let a nigga just catch my breath
> Got 'em all up on it want it, watch it go right to left
> Watch it go up and down like that
> Watch it go front to back hope it don't hurt too bad

The first line is interesting as she refers to herself as a nigga, a term most often used by male rappers. Female rappers tend to refer to themselves as bitches and hoes, but nigga is reserved as an assertion of black masculinity. In this case, Shawnna is further incorporating male rap conventions into her delivery. When she raps, "watch it go right to

[366] Ludacris' label is part of Def Jam Records. Shawnna is also signed to this label; Andy Kellman, "Shawnna Biography."
[367] I also discussed the southern style of flow in relation to Young Jeezy, and T.I. in Chapter 2.

left, watch it go up and down," she is referring to her butt. This is made clear to the listener via the chorus that immediately preceded these lines, where she describes men observing her butt and saying:

> Damn she got a donkey
> And that shit so chunky
> How she get them jeans on that monkey
> Like man got me like a junky
> Only when she pump me
> Whisper in my ear I think she want it

Shawnna's lyrics become more explicit as the second verse goes on. She describes the act of having sex with the following lines: "They like it how I move it up and down and make that booty roll. They see that pussy swoll, it be so juicy Ohh." Her lyrics become more explicit as she vividly describes oral sex:

> He said he wanna try to take me home and eat that pussy whole.
> Said he never had the chance But he gotta have a taste.
> And he was like a kid and I was like shit, I just wanna ride the face.

As I have discussed above, this type of crude, explicit expression of sexuality is extremely common to male rappers, acting as a means of asserting their manhood.[368] Female rappers have adopted this type of language, demonstrating that they can be just as sexually assertive and crude as the men. This is problematic, however, as most women who adopt this type of language also tend to dress extremely provocatively while doing so, thus objectifying themselves at the same time as attempting to claim control of their sexuality.

Shawnna makes a distinct shift in her flow at the beginning of this second verse. She switches from a lazy, southern flow to a faster, more energetic flow, which she

[368] I have discussed this above, as well as in Chapter 3.

maintains throughout this verse. The faster flow and increased energy make her sound slightly excited, and perhaps even more confident. Even though her flow in this verse is faster and more energetic, she keeps the pitch slide at the end of the lines, maintaining a connection to the style of flow used in the first verse. Shawnna's ability to switch styles of flow makes her very versatile. She does not necessarily have a signature style that is immediately recognizable. However, she clearly has a great deal of skill, a fact which has made her fairly marketable. Although her solo albums have not launched her to superstardom, she has been able to carve out a niche for herself in the rap community, primarily in collaboration with other artists.

**III. Alternative Identities? Missy Elliott's "Ching-a-Ling"**

I have just described several female artists who occupy a particular persona: that of a hardcore MC who adopts violent, aggressive and explicitly sexual lyrical themes and flows. These same women also fit into a specific physical mould: dressing, dancing, and posing in a suggestive manner. There are, of course, female rappers in current mainstream rap that do not fit this model. The most prominent of these is of course, Missy Elliott. Missy Elliot's career is remarkable among female rappers in that she has managed to climb her way to the top and stay there. She has gained respect from the majority of artists and fans in this male-dominated domain and has maintained this status for more than a decade. This type of longevity is only paralleled by a handful of male rappers. [369]

Often referred to as masculine or asexual, Missy Elliot has performed a very particular type of gendered identity throughout her career, one that falls outside the norms

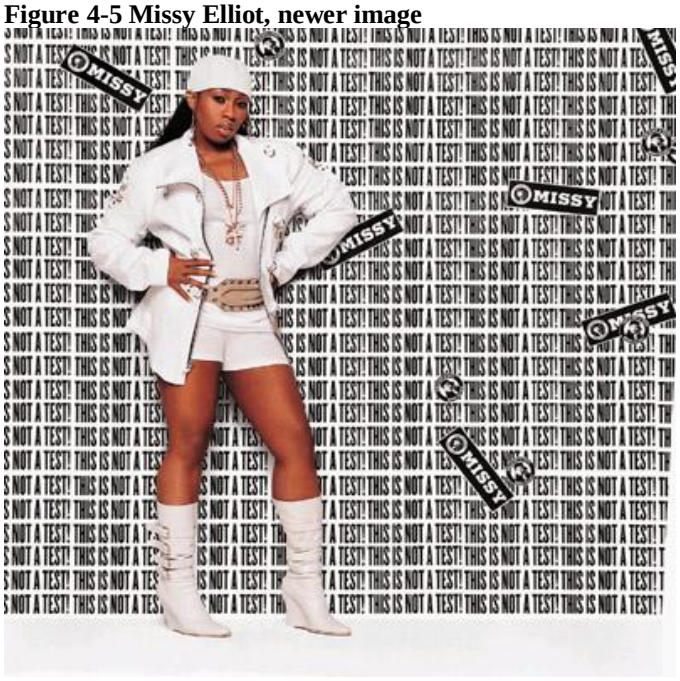
[369] Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, Jay-Z, and Diddy are examples of male MCs who have managed to maintain their popularity over many years.

of conventional femininity in the popular realm. When Missy Elliott's debut solo album was released in 1997, she presented a very masculine image; she was a large woman with short hair, who was typically seen wearing baggy clothes, such as track suits and ball caps (see Figure 4-4).

As her career progressed, Missy moved a few steps closer to conventional images of female rappers by losing weight, sporting more stylish hair-dos, make-up, etc. (see Figure 4-5). She maintained her own style with regard to clothing, often still wearing track suits and caps, but gradually they became more fitted, more stylized, and more feminine. Missy was critiqued for this shift in her appearance; many people felt that adopting a more feminine appearance meant that she was abandoning her resistant, feminist position. Essentially, people assumed that she had sold out. Despite her shift towards a more conventionally feminine appearance, Missy Elliott still assumes a very different image than most female MCs. She does not appear half naked on album covers or in videos, and she does not pose with her legs spread or dance provocatively in videos. Her visual appearance and public image has been consistently that of a strong, independent female MC.

**Figure 4-4 Missy Elliot, pre-weight loss**

**Figure 4-5 Missy Elliot, newer image**




But how do her lyrics and flows compare to those of the MCs discussed above? The themes of her songs are as varied: reminiscing about old-school hip-hop; complaining about folks who gossip; expressing various states of emotion, such as anger,

hate, frustration and love; referencing important social and political issues; and expressing her sexuality. Despite the variety of lyrical and narrative themes in Missy's music, she does, at times, adopt the pointedly sexual vocabulary used by the hardcore rappers discussed above. For example, the song "Pxxxycat" (2002) describes the fact that the way to keep a man from cheating is to make sure that you are great in bed (see the chorus below):

> Pussy don't fail me now
> I gotta turn this nigga out
> So he don't want nobody else
> But me and only me

In "Pxxxycat," Missy occupies an interesting position, both sexually controlling and submissive.[370] She can control her man with sex, but she also expresses the fact that she needs to please him sexually in order to keep him from cheating. Another example of Missy's highly sexualized lyrics can also be seen in the song "One Minute Man" (2001) where Missy states: "I don't want I don't need I can't stand no minute man." The song's chorus consists of the phrase "Break me off, show me what you got, cause I don't want no one minute man" repeated over and over again. Here, she is the one in control, demanding sexual satisfaction and demeaning the man who is unable to satisfy her.

Missy's styles of vocal delivery are extremely varied. At times she performs in a vocal style common to male rappers and at other times she delivers her lyrics and vocals using more conventionally feminine modes of performance. Her flows are sometimes delivered in a very low register, as can be heard in the song "Ching-a-ling" (2008).[371] At other times, she raps in a medium to higher register more common to female rappers, as

[370] Missy Elliott, *Under Construction*, Elektra B00008BNSS, 2002.
[371] This song appeared on the soundtrack for the film, *Step Up to the Streets*, Atlantic B000Z66RSS, 2008.

can be heard in the song "Work It" (2002).[372] Her flows are sometimes slow and sometimes rapid-fire. Her rhythms are sometimes simple and sometimes complex. Her delivery is sometimes rough and aggressive, and sometimes smooth and seductive.

She has an incredible range and ability with regard to her vocal production that allows her to achieve a wide variety of moods. An example of such shifts can be seen in "Ching-a-ling," where she raps most of the song in a very low register, shifting up an octave for only one verse. She builds an awareness of this register change into the song's lyrics by beginning this verse with "Missy switch it up, do ya damn thang."[373] Her vocal quality here is not only higher pitched, but also soft and delicate sounding. She achieves this by adopting a sing-songy style, using a soft dynamic and a softer attack on consonants. She switches back to the original register and style later in the verse, abruptly saying "What you know about that?" aggressively, with sharp attacks on the syllables.

"Ching-a-ling" is also an interesting example of how she merges themes that are both typical of female MCs with themes that are not. For example, she raps about her affluence and materialistic things with phrases such as "French on my feet, cost about fifty," in the first verse and "House on the water, Aston Martin in the lot. Look at my watch, cost a whole lot, so iced out, you can't see it tick-tock," in the second verse.

She also boasts of her sexual ability with lines such as "Sex so good, I can freak you in my sleep." In addition, she separates herself from the highly sexualized images of female rappers with statements such as "I don't swing from a pole, Missy swing from a tree," referring to the fact that she does not dance, dress, or act like a stripper. She boasts her skills – a necessity for both male and female rappers – by referring, for example, to

[372] "Work It" is also on *Under Construction.*
[373] We saw this same type of lyrical description of registral change with Busta Rhymes in "Touch It," discussed in Chapter 2.

her incredibly fast rhyming skills with the line "I'm Mohamed Ali, cause I can sting like a bee" and also stating "Yeah I'm so hot, and I can't be topped," and "My flow so mean, if you know what I mean." Moreover, in this song she refers to herself as a Mack, a persona typically adopted by male rappers, as well as a Queen, a persona adopted by early female MCs.[374] Hence, Missy essentially adopts both feminine and masculine roles in her lyrics as well as vocal presentation.

Missy at times reinforces gendered norms, and at other times resists them. Regardless of how she adheres to certain norms, she can be seen as a unique and complex figure in the music industry. Although the voices of women are often left to the wayside in rap discourse, female rappers attempt to make their voices heard, creating an intersectional space for black women's voices that allows for multiple aspects of their identities to emerge, including both race and gender. This is not a perfect solution, as women must negotiate prescribed identities, but it is certainly a step towards controlling the way women are represented in this cultural space.

[374] Please refer back to Chapter 3 for further discussion on the Mack. Cheryl Keyes discusses female rappers who adopt the role of the Queen, 2002, 189.

# Chapter 5

## White Rappers' Negotiation of Race and Identity

White rappers occupy an interesting space in the American rap sphere. This is a space in which black identities and voices are normative, but a great deal of the market consists of white, suburban teenagers.[375] Particular representations of black identity are displayed as spectacle for the entertainment of white audiences.[376] White Americans "have been fascinated by commodifiable black cultural production" since the rise of minstrelsy in the late 19th Century.[377] As Jeffrey Ogbar has observed, white Americans have co-opted numerous black cultural forms throughout the past century.[378] White artists who adopt black cultural and musical forms are often viewed as cultural bandits.[379] To gain acceptance within the rap sphere, white rappers must then find a way to authenticate themselves within this predominantly black cultural space. This chapter interrogates the strategies that some white MCs use to negotiate the raced conventions of rap. The MCs I

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[375] For discussions on white teenagers' fascination with rap music, see: Jason Tanz, *Other People's Property: A Shadow History of Hip-Hop in White America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007); and Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wanksta, Wiggers, Wannabees, and the New Reality of Race in America.* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

[376] For further discussion of this refer to Chapter 3, as well as Ed Guerrero "The black Man on our Screens and the Empty Space in Representation," 1995.

[377] Ogbar, Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Hip-hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 55. For further discussion on minstrelsy and cultural theft see: Eric Lott *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, 1995; and Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 1996.

[378] Ogbar, 55.

[379] Ibid. Ogbar cites Greg Tate who has noted that "a long line of black 'impersonators' from Paul Whiteman, Elvis Presley, and the Rolling stones to Brittney Spears, Pink, and Eminem have reaped the financial benefits of cultural mimicry," (Ogbar, 55, citing Greg Tate, *Everything But the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black Culture* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 4-6.

will discuss use a variety of musical and lyrical techniques to create a niche for themselves. I focus on the success of Eminem, Paul Wall, Bubba Sparxx, and British rapper Lady Sovereign. My exploration of white rappers further illuminates black rap conventions, primarily by discussing the ways in which white MCs depart from these conventions, shedding light on some of the issues discussed in Chapter 2.

Discussing how white rappers deviate from stylistic conventions, even subtly, helps to define what is "normal" or conventional to black rappers. The very fact that the race of white MCs is called into question only serves to reinforce rap's blackness. Before delving into white rappers' vocal practice, I would like to briefly discuss some interesting ways in which a black rapper draws attention to white vocal practice.

In 2007, Kanye West released a remix of rock band Fall Out Boy's hit song "This Ain't a Scene, It's an Arms Race," creating an interesting rap/rock fusion.[380] Fall Out Boy is categorized within alternative rock, a style that has typically been associated with its predominantly white performers. Kanye's remix of the song merges two musical styles that are on the opposite ends of the racial spectrum in popular music. We have, of course, seen numerous rap/rock fusions over the past two decades, including Aerosmith's "Walk This Way," featuring Run DMC (1986), the music of Swollen Members, and, more recently, Kevin Rudolf's song "Let it Rock," featuring Lil Wayne (2008).[381] Kanye's remix of "This Ain't a Scene" is slightly different, however, due to how Kanye plays on the black/white binary by drawing out the whiteness of the band and their musical style in relation to the blackness of his own musical style.

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[380] Fall Out Boy and Kanye West, "This Ain't a Scene, It's an Arms Race" single, released in mp3 format, Universal, 2007.

[381] "Let it Rock" is interesting as it features rock guitar and vocals over an electronic dance beat, with a rapped verse by Lil Wayne.

As the song begins, listeners familiar with the original might be slightly surprised by the slower, heavier beat in this remixed version.[382] While the heavier beat is not surprising in the context of a hip-hop remix, the slower tempo is unusual. When a rapper or DJ remixes a pop or rock song, they usually speed up the beat to make the song more danceable, more appropriate for clubs. This is definitely not the case here, as the beat is slowed down considerably. The second major change to the song occurs approximately one minute into the song, at the first repetition of the chorus. In the original version, fast electric guitars enter, as well as a faster-sounding drum beat, creating a great deal of energy. In the remix, there are just vocals with drums and bass: the texture is essentially unchanged from the opening. For listeners familiar with the original, this creates a kind of tension as they wait for a musical event that never occurs.

It is Kanye West's rapped verse, however, that I am most interested in for the purpose of this study. Kanye's lyrics emphasize the whiteness of the band, physically and musically. The first half of the first verse is fairly straightforward: Kanye attempts to puzzle out the songs meaning and gives them credit for having a number one hit:

> Now, I don't know what the hell this song is talking 'bout
> Do you?
> She said yeah, I've been spending all day trying to figure
> that out
> You too?
> The arms race made them raise they arms
> And race straight to the top
> Who knew?
> Right now, they got the number one spot
> Do you want that?
> Me too

[382] The original version of "This Ain't a Scene" was extremely popular, reaching number one on Billboard charts for a number of weeks. It received an immense amount of radio play. For these reasons, it is likely that many listeners would be familiar with the original.

It is only in the second half of the verse that the MC articulates his thoughts on their mode of dress and lyric delivery. He calls them out, dissing them, in fun, for their "whitened" manner of dress:

> One thing I gotta call out boy, take a look at fall out boy
> Since they ain't black when they get money they don't ball out, boy
> They just buy tight jeans 'til their nuts hang all out boy
> They figure, y'all dress tight so we gon dress tighter
> He dress white so we gon dress whiter
> Silk and spider, anything you mighter seen or heard, this scene occurred

The lyrics are amusing, but what I find particularly interesting is Kanye's vocal delivery, specifically his pronunciation and emphasis. When he recites the line "They figure, y'all dress tight so we gon dress tighter," he pronounces the "er" in "tighter," without articulating the "r," making it sound like "tighta." The dropping of the final "r" sounds in words is the common pronunciation in hip-hop. Kanye then contrasts this with his pronunciation of the following line's end-rhyme, as he pronounces "whit*er*" with the emphasis really on the r, making an "er" sound instead of an "a" sound. This sounds extremely out of place in the context of rap, where listeners are used to hearing the more typical vernacular pronunciation. In fact, it is the immediate contrast between these two lines that draws such emphasis to his delivery and exaggeration of "whit*er*." Kanye keeps this same "white-*er*" pronunciation for the end rhymes of the next two lines: "spid*er*" and "might*er*."

In Kanye's remix of "This Ain't a Scene," it is not only the heavy beats and rapped section that push the song into the realm of black musical production; it is also Kanye's lyrics and vocal delivery. Kanye plays on the black/white binary by drawing out the whiteness of the band and the genre in relation to his own musical genre. This gesture

reminds the listener of the raced conventions of both genres. Kanye's pronunciation "blackens" the song and reinforces the raced divisions present in the realm of popular music. The fact that Kanye so clearly and obviously presents these linguistic conventions speaks to the extent to which vocal practice is coded in rap. I would now like to turn to a discussion of the ways in which four white rappers perform their race in the context of rap music.

**I. Performing Whiteness**

White rappers have had a difficult time working their way into the rap mainstream. One reason for this is the fact that rap developed as a musical medium in which the majority of its participants were, and still are, black. A second reason for this relates to the lack of credibility of early white rappers due to commercialization: most notably, Vanilla Ice.[383] One of the biggest differences between white rappers who are successful and those who are not has to do with how they authenticate themselves within the rap sphere. Some white rappers attempt to emulate black rappers' vocal styles and lyrical themes, but, historically, successful white rappers have found their niche in the rap sphere by doing something different.

Jason Tanz has discussed this phenomenon in his recent book *Other People's Property: A Shadow History of Hip-Hop in White America*.[384] He observes that white rappers who have attempted to adopt black musical style and image have been largely unaccepted within the rap community. Rappers such as Vanilla Ice may have enjoyed a

[383] This statement is based on a commonly understood idea that the more commercial an artist is, the less credible they are. For example, black rapper MC Hammer was successful on the pop charts and roughly contemporaneous with Vanilla Ice, yet was also considered to be commercial and, therefore, not well respected within the rap community,. This stigma of commercialization has faded somewhat given the popularity of rap in the mainstream, however, many "elitist" rap fans and fans of underground rap still launch these types of critiques.

[384] Tanz,, 2007, Chapter 7.

fleeting moment of fame on the pop charts, but have not had staying power and have also lacked respect among fans and other rap artists. By contrast, successful white rappers, such as the Beastie Boys and Eminem, share a common characteristic. According to Tanz, they have maintained aspects of their white identity and carried this identity into their vocal performances. For example, Tanz describes the vocal quality of MC Frontalot as high-pitched and as having "that telltale nasal hum common to white rappers" as well tending to "over-enunciate his words, hitting the ng's and r's hard, rather than smoothly gliding over them like most of the other artists in his genre."[385] Here, Tanz is referring to the ng's and r's at the ends of words, such as in the Kanye West example I described above. According to Tanz, these white artists have been successful in gaining credibility and authenticating themselves by performing their whiteness within a predominantly black musical style, instead of adopting black performance style wholesale.[386] In the case of Eminem, Tanz describes how it is not only his vocal delivery that reveals his whiteness, but also the very subjects that he raps about: the ghetto signifiers are replaced by "symbols of trailer-park depravity."[387] As Tanz has observed, Eminem's popularity can, in large part, be attributed to the fact that "Eminem didn't front; he was unabashedly white."[388]

Eminem's reputation has been built upon extremely skilled flows, combined with lyrical themes that push the envelope when it comes to political correctness. His rhymes are fast and energetic and his lyrics range from extremely violent and aggressive to

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[385] Ibid, 152.
[386] Although there are some white rap performers, the vast majority of rappers in the U.S. and U.K. are black. Despite the popularity of rap within white suburban communities, rap music developed as, and is still primarily marketed as, a black, urban musical style.
[387] Tanz, 161.
[388] Ibid.

humorous insults. He has managed to authenticate himself within the rap sphere through his verbal prowess and through his performance of a white identity.[389] I am most interested in how Eminem has exaggerated his whiteness through lyrics and vocal delivery to create a space for himself in the rap industry.

### *Eminem: "Cleaning Out My Closet" and "Just Lose It"*

As scholars such as Tanz and Edward Armstrong have observed, Eminem's lyrical themes reflect his identity as a white male.[390] His claims to "realness" come from a childhood of poverty in the trailer park rather than the violence of an inner-city ghetto, as is the case in most rap narratives. Eminem eschews the typical rap narratives of hustling, pimping, and gang violence in favor of narratives that depict aggressive and violent acts towards women and homosexuals. Not all of Eminem's lyrics are violent, however, as he often turns to parody and humor, making fun of himself and others.[391] Both his humor and his aggression tend to push the limits of acceptability, even within a musical medium that accepts explicit references to violence and sexuality as normative. His ability to push the envelope has undoubtedly aided his popularity.

Although Eminem deals with a relatively wide range of lyrical themes, he tends to employ two primary styles of vocal delivery: a serious, aggressive delivery that is used for songs dealing with violent and misogynist themes and a playful, ironic style used for

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[389] Edward Armstrong has discussed how Eminem has constructed his authenticity through his lyrics, biography, and persona; Edward G. Armstrong, "Eminem's Construction of Authenticity," *Popular Music and Society* 27/3 (October 2004), 335-355.Armstrong discusses how Eminem is firmly grounded in the three types of authenticity discussed by Allan Moore (Armstrong 336-337); the reader will recall that I outlined Moore's theory in Chapter 2.

[390] Armstrong argues that "commercial concerns motivated Eminem to promote his white identity, to foster his violent misogyny, and to steer clear of the 'N-word'" (347).

[391] There is an excellent discussion on white rappers' use of parody by Mickey Hess in *Is Hip-Hop Dead?: The Past, Present, and Future of America's Most Wanted Music* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2007). Unfortunately this text came to my attention too late in the writing process for Hess' ideas to be effectively included in my discussion of parody. I will incorporate them in a later version of this work.

the purpose of parody, humor, and insults. "Cleaning Out My Closet" (2002) is a clear example of his serious, aggressive style of rapping.[392] This song is meant to be autobiographical, expressing aspects of his life as well as his emotional state.[393] The first verse describes the difficulties he has had with people protesting against him (the lyrics are provided below):

> Have you ever been hated or discriminated against,
> I have, I've been protested and demonstrated against
> Picket signs for my wicked rhymes, look at the times,
> Sick is the mind of the motherfuckin' kid that's behind
> All this commotion, emotions run deep as ocean's explodin',
> Tempers flaring from parents, just blow 'em off and keep goin'
> Not takin' nothin' from no one, give 'em hell long as i'm breathin',
> Keep kickin' ass in the mornin', and takin' names in the evening,
> Leave 'em with a taste as sour as vinegar in their mouth
> See they can trigger me but they'll never figure me out
> Look at me now, I bet ya' probably sick of me now,
> Ain't you mama, I'ma make you look so ridiculous now

His delivery of these lyrics is very aggressive. This is achieved by a high level of energy in the voice, directed flows, and a crisp, accented delivery of the text. There is an almost constant stream of lyrics: one line flows into the next, with very few pauses. MCs usually take a brief pause for breath at the end of lines, which also helps emphasize the end rhymes. The fact that Eminem does not do this makes it sound like he is in a highly emotional state. The aggression is also achieved through his crisp pronunciation, with sharp attacks on almost every syllable. His delivery is primarily fast eighth notes or triplets and he accentuates the quarter beats with a slight dynamic accent. This has the

[392] Eminem, *The Eminem Show*, Universal B00006690G, 2002.
[393] While some aspects of the narrative are true, it is important to remember that Eminem is acting out his public persona. He may very well be expressing real emotions, but this is still a performance.

effect of accenting every second or third syllable. His clear pronunciation includes the ending consonants of words as well. For example, the r's and ng's are enunciated at the ends of words instead of dropped off as is the case with black rappers' vocal conventions. His vocal quality has that "telltale nasal hum" that Tanz has discussed. This quality comes from Eminem's production of the sound in the head, with the tongue high in the mouth. Eminem's voice is also made to sound more aggressive through the process of voice doubling. With this track, it is primarily a physical doubling that we hear, meaning that two tracks are laid down.[394] This is fairly easy to hear as there are slight differences between the two tracks.

The lines become more aggressive as the verse goes on. Eminem also increases his dynamic throughout the verse, increasing his energy level as he goes along. This creates the effect of intensifying his emotional state—he is becoming angrier as the verse goes on. There is a noticeable shift in aggression and volume that occurs on the line: "Keep kickin' ass in the mornin', and takin' names in the evening." Within this verse, once he reaches a certain level of volume and energy, he does not back off, he only increases it from that point onwards. The "telltale nasal hum" that Tanz mentions can be heard most clearly when Eminem sounds agitated, with more energy in his voice, which causes his pitch to rise slightly as well.

The lines that lead up to the chorus: "Look at me now, I bet ya' probably sick of me now, ain't you mama, I'ma make you look so ridiculous now" are the most aggressive of the verse. His dynamic level has elevated to the point that he is practically yelling. His anger is also displayed through occasional guttural sounds coming from the throat—this is subtle, but the effect is there. It is surely not a coincidence that these extremely

[394] The reader will recall that I discussed the process of voice doubling in Chapters 2 and 3.

aggressive lines are directed towards his mother. He has expressed hatred and resentment towards his mother in several of his songs, as well as in public interviews.

The aggressiveness of the final lines of verse one build up to the chorus, which serves as a momentary climax. Here, Eminem sings to signal his heightened emotional state. The lyrics of the chorus address his mother, to whom he apologizes for "cleaning out his closet." This refers to the fact that he has aired his dirty laundry, so to speak, including the fact that his mother was a drug addict, a comment that caused her to sue him. The lyrics of the chorus are provided below:

> I'm sorry mama,
> I never meant to hurt you,
> I never meant to make you cry,
> But tonight I'm cleanin' out my closet

Eminem's singing of the chorus is significant for two reasons. First, it is an important way for him to express a heightened emotional state. Second, it indicates his adherence to particular conventions within the rap sphere. As I discussed in Chapter 3, male rappers singing as well as rapping has become extremely commonplace. In particular, male rappers tend to sing with rough voices that may or may not be tune. Eminem's singing here conforms to these conventions: his voice is not terrible, but it is not great either. He tends to slide up to the pitches, rather than hitting them straight on, struggling to reach the high notes. Eminem has sung "badly" on quite a few tracks in recent years. I've noticed that he switches to song in two types of lyrical passages. The first is in relation to emotional lyrics, particularly when referring to his family, as can be seen in "Cleaning Out my Closet," as well as in "Hailie's Song" and "Mockingbird," in which he sings to his daughter. Eminem also uses sung vocal utterances for the purpose of parody, as can be heard in songs such as "Just Lose It" and "Ass Like That."

"Just Lose It" is typical of his comedic approach, as he not only makes fun of public figures, but also himself.[395] His first comedic comment comes in the introduction as he says:

> Now everyone report to the dance floor
> To the dance floor, to the dance floor
> Now everyone report to the dance floor
> Alright Stop!.....Pyjama time

There is a lengthy pause before he says "pyjama time," drawing a great deal of attention to the lyric. This line plays on MC Hammer's song "Can't Touch This," where Hammer says, "Stop!....Hammer time." This moment is further emphasized by the fact that the beat also stops at this point.[396] Here, Eminem parodies MC Hammer, poking fun at the fact that Hammer's signature pants, often referred to as "hammer pants," look like pyjama pants. This sets the tone for the humorous and parodied elements that permeate the song.

Eminem's lyrics in the first verse of "Just Lose It" are a strange combination of ideas, poking fun at Michael Jackson, making fun of his own rhymes, and relying on toilet humor. For example, Eminem references the child molestation charges against Michael Jackson with the following lines:

> What else could I possibly do to make noise?
> I done touched on everything, but little boys
> That's not a stab at Michael
> That's just a metaphor, I'm just psycho
> I go a little bit crazy sometimes
> I get a little bit out of control with my rhymes

[395] Eminem, *Encore*, Universal B00065XJ52, 2004.
[396] This phrase occurs at the end of the Bridge in "Can't Touch This," leading into the third verse. The beat did not drop out as MC Hammer says, "Stop!...Hammer time."

The reader will notice that in the lines following the “stab at Michael,” Eminem refers to himself as psycho, as a little bit crazy, as he gets “a little bit out of control with [his] rhymes.” Eminem often refers to himself as being crazy, both in relation to his hyper-violent lyrics, as well as his humorous ones. He then reinforces the silliness of his lyrics by turning to toilet humor with the following lyrics:

> And it's cool if you let one go
> Nobody's gonna know, who'd hear it?
> Give a little "poot poot", it's Ok
> Oops my cd just skipped
> And everyone just heard you let one rip

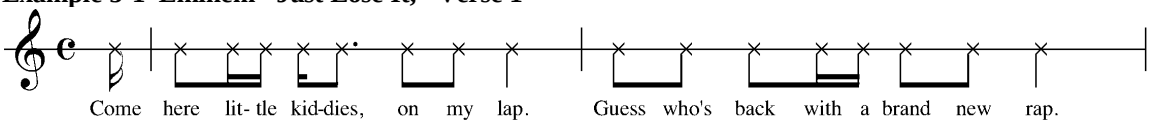
At the end of the line “Give a little ‘poot poot,’ it’s Ok,” the sound effect of a CD skipping occurs and the beat drops out exposing a fart sound. It is effects like these, combined with the lyrics that contribute to Eminem’s style of humor, which is quite unique in the rap sphere.

It is in the chorus, however, that Eminem truly mocks himself. As the chorus begins, it sounds as though he is inviting a woman to the dance floor: “Now I'm gonna make you dance, it's your chance.” Although the gender of the person he is addressing is not stated, most listeners would assume that he is speaking to a woman, given that heterosexuality is the norm in the rap sphere. He follows this phrase with the line, “Yeah boy shake that ass,” which he immediately corrects with the line, “Oops I mean girl, girl, girl, girl.” This is an intentional play on the idea of a Freudian slip. Eminem is expressing his security in his own heterosexuality through these self-mocking references. In other

words, he is secure in his heterosexuality and this allows him to poke fun at himself. Eminem uses these self-mocking lyrics to pre-empt attacks on his heterosexuality.[397]

In this song, Eminem's nasal tone is extremely obvious. This vocal quality seems to be most prevalent when he raps in a humorous style. He is playing the jester with this song and he, therefore, loses some of the aggressiveness in his voice. His delivery of the syllables is still crisp, but he adopts a lighter tone in his voice. His rhymes also become a bit more sing-songy, with clear end rhymes. For example, the first two lines of the first verse "Come here little kiddies, on my lap. Guess who's back with a brand new rap" end with matching rhymes: "lap" and "rap." Both of these words fall on beat four, but in addition to this, the rhythms leading up to the end rhyme are the same: two eighths on beat three (see Example 5-1). With his delivery of these lines, he is not spilling over the boundary of the measure and not presenting the listener with a continuous flow of lyrics, as was the case in "Cleaning Out my Closet." While a few lines in the first verse of "Just Lose It" stretch out longer, spilling over the measure, the majority of the verse features a fairly straightforward rhythmic presentation.

**Example 5-1 Eminem "Just Lose It," Verse 1**




Eminem turns to song rather than rap in the first few lines of the third verse. In this case, he uses song for parody, instead of the expression of extreme emotion, as was

[397] Many fans and detractors have accused him of being a closet homosexual due to the prevalence of homophobic lyrics in his songs, (he protests too much, therefore he must be gay). Freya Jarmen-Ivens explores the complexities of masculinity in relation to homosexuality in rap music in "Queer(ing) Masculinities in Heterosexist Rap Music" in *Queering the Popular Pitch,* edited by Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Routledge, 2006) 199-219. She spends a great deal of time discussing Eminem and his song "My Name Is."

the case in “Cleaning out my Closet.” The lyrics here describe someone heading to a party, “crusin’ on the freeway,” letting their hair blow in the wind:

> It's Friday and it's my day
> Just to party all the way to sunday
> Maybe til monday, I dunno what day
> Everyday's just a holiday
> Crusin' on the freeway
> Feelin' kinda breezy
> Got the top down, lettin' my hair blow
> I dunno where I'm goin'
> All I know is when I get there
> Someone's gonna "touch my body"

The lyrics and singing style used by Eminem here are meant to conjure up the style and atmosphere of a female pop singer. Eminem sings in a fairly high register, with a soft voice. There are several things that indicate to the listener that this is a parody. First, the fact that Eminem is singing at all signals a shift in mood, as the rest of the song is rapped. Second, the fact that his singing is not very well in tune adds to the comedic nature of this section. Third, if the listener has not yet figured out that this is a parody, they are informed of this on the last line as Eminem shifts to a lower register to recite the lyrics “touch my body.” Here, he not only shifts registers, but also switches back to rap and presents the lyrics with a humorous vocal quality, one that sounds forced and sarcastic.[398]

Eminem’s vocal differences are quite apparent in songs where he has collaborated with other MCs. In these cases, his voice can be compared with black rappers in the context of a single song. For example, an extremely obvious difference can be heard

[398] At this point, many listeners may realize that he was likely poking fun at Mariah Carey, whom he dated for a short period. Although he could be making fun of any female pop singer, the line “touch my body,” insinuates that it is Mariah since the hook of one of her most popular songs is “Touch my body.” The fact that he makes fun of her frequently also makes this connection tenable.

between Eminem and Dr. Dre on songs in which they have collaborated.[399] Songs such as "Guilty Conscience" (1999), "Forgot About Dre" (2000), and "Crack a Bottle" (2009) contrast Eminem's higher-pitched, nasal, rapid-fire, clipped flows with Dre's slower, more languid flows, in which the pronunciation is not as crisp and fewer syllables are accented.[400] Similar comparisons can be seen in the song "You Don't Know," (2006) which pits Eminem's skills against those of 50 Cent, Cashis, and Lloyd Banks, as well as the Trick Trick song "Welcome to Detroit" (2005), featuring Eminem.[401] Eminem's performed identity is complex. He exaggerates his whiteness, but does so within rap's lyrical and musical conventions, altering them just enough to mark his space.

### *Lady Sovereign: "Love Me or Hate Me," and "Random"*

In 2006, British rapper Lady Sovereign crossed over to the U.S. mainstream, capturing the attention of both rap and pop fans with her witty rhymes and huge personality. The young rapper had been active in the U.K. for several years and made a breakthrough into the U.S. when rap mogul Jay-Z signed her to Def Jam Records early in 2006. Sovereign's unique vocal delivery and lyrics set her apart from most popular

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[399] Here, I am referring to songs in which they both rap. They have also collaborated with each other in a producer/artist relationship. Dr. Dre is better known as a producer than as an MC.

[400] "Guilty Conscience" was released on: Eminem, *Slim Shady*, Universal B00000I5JQ, 1999. "Forgot About Dre" was released on Dr. Dre, *Chronic 2000*, Universal, B000023VR6, 1999. "Crack a Bottle" has been released as a single and will appear on: Eminem, *Relapse*, Aftermath B00192M9FC, 2009. "Crack a Bottle" also features 50 Cent, thus contrasting his deep voice with Eminem's voice as well.

[401] "You Don't Know" was released on Eminem, *The Re-Up*, Universal B000IHY9SE, 2006. "Welcome to Detroit" was released on Trick Trick, *The People Vs*,. Motown Records B000593402, 2005. "Welcome to Detroit" is also interesting for the shout out that Trick Trick gives to Eminem at the end of the song. During the song's outro, Trick Trick says, "Ayo Em, I got your back my nigga," thus placing him within rap's tradition of blackness. Trick Trick then rearticulates this statement just in case anyone missed it, "Damn right I said my nigga. That's my nigga." This is particularly important given the fact that the song is set in the context of inner-city Detroit, a city which has a disproportionately large percentage of African Americans living in the core, as well as the history of race riots. For a critical exploration of Eminem's use/ and non-use of the word nigga, see Armstrong, 2004, and Ogbar, 2007, 60-64.

female rappers, thus offering the possibility for alternative female identities in the American rap sphere.

In this section, I will discuss some of the ways in which Lady Sovereign navigates the raced and gendered dynamics of rap, carving out a niche for herself not only within a British subculture, but also within the American rap and pop markets. As the first white female rapper to gain widespread popularity in the U.S., Sovereign's music is a prime location to explore issues of gender and race. I contend that Sovereign exaggerates her whiteness as well as her 'girlish' voice and appearance to create a space for herself in the competitive rap industry.

Although Lady Sovereign's musical style shows a number of different influences, she began her career in and is still considered representative of 'grime,' a London-based offshoot of hip-hop. Grime music tends to have faster, more clipped beats than American rap, and features ominous, electronic sounds, and shouted verses. The lyrics are often about working-class life on the streets and the overall sound tends to be reminiscent of garage or do-it-yourself musical production. Lady Sovereign is one of only a handful of female grime rappers, which is not surprising considering that women are still a very small minority among rappers. She is not only the first white female rapper to gain widespread popularity in North America, but also the first British recording artist to reach the number one spot on MTV's *TRL*.[402]

[402] *TRL (Total Request Live)* is a daily music video program on MTV that tracks the most popular music videos in the U.S. A video that tops this chart is one that is both watched and requested by a very large viewing audience and is thus one marker of a song or video's success.

Here, I will focus on Sovereign's music within the North-American context, exploring how her music participates within the conventions of American rap.[403] I will begin by discussing some of the ways in which Sovereign's performance differs from that of the prominent American female rappers discussed in Chapter 4. The reader will recall that rappers such as Lil' Kim, Trina, and Shawnna adopt explicitly sexual personas. They wear provocative clothing and tend to spit rhymes that feature explicit sexual themes. They use many of the same lyrical and vocal conventions as men, thereby performing a particular type of sexual, "masculinized," femininity.

Lady Sovereign's appearance, lyric content, and vocal delivery are distinctly different from the typical American female rap image. Sovereign's appearance is cute, girlish, and non-traditional, depicting a very different femininity from the hyper-sexualized image of American rappers such as Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Trina, and Shawnna. Her baggy clothes are definitely not sexy, but her small physical frame, young, girlish attitude and appearance, and cute side-ponytail have a Sporty Spice appeal that has attracted the attention of many young girls (see Figure 5-1below). She fits into the overall 'hip-hop image' with her baggy pants, hoodies, track suits, and tennis shoes, but these clothing items are more like those worn by male rappers than female, with the exception of Missy Elliott who is often seen sporting trendy track suits.[404] Despite the more masculine clothing, Sovereign's tasteful makeup and cute hairstyle do embody femininity, simply a different type of femininity than female rappers such as Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim, and Trina: one that is less sexually overt.

[403] Further consideration of her music from within the British rap music industry would be informative, but is, unfortunately, outside the scope of this project, which focuses on American rap music.
[404] For photos of Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Trina, Shawnna, and Missy Elliott, see Chapter 4.

**Figure 5-1 Lady Sovereign**

Sovereign also rejects the feminine norms of the North American rap sphere through her lyrics, which espouse a cheeky sense of humor that pokes fun at both herself and others. The majority of American female rappers have a more serious style of lyric composition than Sovereign. They do use humor, parody, and sarcasm in their lyrics, but humor is not typically the most important aspect of their lyrics, as is the case with Sovereign. Some conventional topics in women's rap include: references to hood life, women's roles as Gangstas or homegirls, financial and sexual independence, the ability to control men with their sexuality, relationships, and material possessions.[405] Sovereign's lyrics, on the other hand, are almost always humorous and silly, making fun of herself, societal norms, other rappers, and her white British heritage. The very common themes of romance and sexuality are rarely present in Sovereign's songs. When she talks about issues of community and her ties to London projects, it is always underscored with humor, a contrast to serious raps about the hardships of life in the hood. Sovereign's

[405] Gail Woldu provides insightful commentary on women's themes in rap on pages 91-96 in "Gender as Anomaly: Women in Rap," 2006.

lyrics are often about everyday routines, but unlike the everyday routines of American female rappers, Sovereign's lyrics are about sleeping in, drinking too much, burping, and playing video games.

Lady Sovereign's first U.S. single, "Love Me or Hate Me," is an excellent example of how her lyrics differ from that of her American counterparts, in this case, by mocking the American preoccupation with women's appearances.[406] The first verse begins with "I'm fat, I need a diet. No in fact, I'm just too light," dismissing women's obsession with being thin. She continues with "I ain't got the biggest breasts, but I got all the best disses," asserting that her MC skills are more important than her looks. She not only mocks society's preoccupation with appearances, but also makes fun of herself with lines such as "I got hairy armpits" and "I'm the one with the non-existent bum." It is this relaxed attitude, indifference, and cheeky humor that comes across in all aspects of her performance and helps create a representation of femininity that is different from many American rappers.

Sovereign's differing performance style carries over into her delivery of the lyrics. Her vocal quality is very different from the American norm: her quality tends to be higher pitched and is more nasal. Her declamation is British-accented, especially in her production of vocal sounds and consonant placement. At many points, the youthfulness of her voice is exaggerated by high-pitched words and utterances mixed into her flow. For example, her signature shout-out of the beginning of most songs "Make way for the S.O.V." features a rising vocal glissando on the "V," making her voice sound girlish and feminine. Other examples include expressions such as "ugh," "whoops," and "ooh shit." Generally speaking, these high-pitched words and expressions give her raps a young,

[406] Released on the album *Public Warning*, Universal/Def Jam Records B000IFRQAY, 2006.

girlish sound that is quite different than the lower, more masculine, and highly sexualized vocal quality of prominent American female rappers.

These distinctions would actually suggest that we can identify different sub-genres among female rappers; they do not belong in a single category. It is also important to remember that, in a larger context, this is a male-dominated musical style, and female rappers must negotiate these conventions. As I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the dominant themes, perspectives, and images of the rap sphere are driven by men, and, when interpreting the music of female rappers, we must consider the fact that they are participating in these male conventions.

Sovereign not only performs her gender vocally, but also her race, class, and nationality. Like some white American rap artists, Lady Sovereign exaggerates her whiteness in her performances as one method of carving out her own niche in the rap industry. Sovereign uses similar vocal and lyric strategies to some of the white rappers discussed earlier, performing her whiteness instead of "fronting" as black. The remainder of this paper will explore some of the ways in which Sovereign performs her whiteness. As the first female rapper to successfully employ these strategies within American rap, her music provides an opportunity to explore the implications of this raced, gendered performance in relation to rap's cultural meanings.

As a British rapper performing in the U.S., Sovereign's nationality is a factor in her performance. Her British accent is clearly audible when she raps and her lyrics make numerous references to her heritage and to British culture. Some of the primary vocal strategies Lady Sovereign uses to distinguish herself as white are her declamation and accentuation. Of course, there are a lot of black British rappers, but, in North America, a

British accent is not just a signifier of nationality, it can also be perceived as a signifier of whiteness. The fact that the U.K. rap scene is primarily black is often overshadowed by dominant images of England's Anglo Saxon heritage. This is despite the fact that British culture is fairly multicultural, owing to the once wide-spread British Empire, among other factors. Sovereign plays with such stereotypically white images in her lyrics and vocal delivery. Throughout the remainder of this paper, I will refer to Sovereign's accentuation in her vocal delivery. An analysis of her vocal accentuation allows us to see how this plays a large role in how we perceive her race through her vocal delivery.

Class is also a factor in Sovereign's British-accented performance as her race and nationality is strongly tied to an urban, working-class aesthetic. Grime emerged from the dilapidated housing projects of east London and the lyrics tend to reflect the genre's geographical and socio-economic roots. The following excerpt from Lady Sovereign's "My England" describes one perspective on the area of London in which she was raised:

> It ain't about the tea and biscuits,
> I'm one of those English misfits.
> I don't drink tea I drink spirits,
> And I talk a lot of slang in my lyrics.
> These goes a horse, horses for courses,
> Nah more like corpses on corners,
> And Staffordshire Bull Terriers and late night crawlers.
> Police carry guns not truncheons, make your on assumptions,
> London ain't all crumpets and trumpets, it's one big slum pit…
> Cricket, bowls, croquet, nah PS2 all the way,
> In an English council apartment.
> We don't all wear bowler hats and hire servants,
> More like 24 hour surveillance and dog shit on pavements.

As I mentioned above, even when discussing serious topics, in this case, crime in an economically disadvantaged area, Lady Sovereign does so with humor and sarcasm.

Lady Sovereign uses her race and nationality as a means of playing with musical and linguistic codes through lyrical references as well as through the pronunciation and production of words. In "Random," Sovereign quotes and reinterprets lines from several popular American rap songs, including J-Kwon's "Tipsy" and Ludacris' "Move Bitch" (see verse 1 lyrics below). The first verse of "Random" begins with the phrase "Everybody in the club getting tipsy," a quote from the chorus of "Tipsy," which was a big club hit for J-Kwon in 2004.[407] She quotes Ludacris' "Move Bitch" in the second verse with the line "Move titch, get out the way."[408] As a white woman, the fact that she parodies black male rappers from within a predominantly black musical style raises interesting questions as to how we will interpret the song with regard to race and gender.

> Everybody in the club gettin tipsy,
> Oh fuck that, just wine like a gypsy.
> Can't see straight, like I only got one eye (pop)
> Your bottle open, oh my.
> Let's…. get started
> ooh shit, my word plays nasty,
> ooh shit, don't put it past me.
> Move titch get out the way,
> Ah, none of that I'm here to stay.
> For lazy.. pick the pace up when I flow less hazy
> Jlo's got a batty
> Well u cant see mine cause I wear my trousers baggy.
> Anyways.. yeah, let's commence.

Not only does she quote lyrics of male rap artists, she produces them in a way that imitates their sound. For example, in her quote from J-Kwon's "Tipsy," Sovereign perfectly imitates J-Kwon's laid back delivery of the phrase, with a strong emphasis on the first syllable. Both artists slur the two syllables of "every" together to sound like "air." Sovereign matches the rhythm of her lyric delivery to J-Kwon's, using the same

[407] J-Kwon, *Hood Hop*, Sony B0001FVEGI, 2004.
[408] Ludacris, *Word of Mouf*, Universal/ Def Jam B00005R8EL, 2001.

soft declamation of consonants throughout most of the line; the exception to this is a slightly more clearly annunciated “g” and “t” for the word “gettin.”

Although she captures nuances of the original artist, Sovereign’s voice still conveys aspects of her own vocal timbre and style of flow. For example, her delivery of the word “gettin” in her quote of “Tipsy” is an aspect of her vocal delivery that gives us an aural indication of the working-class race and national identity that she is performing. The harder pronunciation of consonants provides a sharpness to her flow, creating a momentum that is quite different from the more laid-back flows of many American rappers. The harder consonants towards the end of this phrase also lead into the next line, “Oh fuck that, just wind like a gypsy,” where we hear Lady Sovereign’s British accent emerge again, clearly marking the J-Kwon quote as satire. The fact that the J-Kwon quote follows her signature call out “Make way for the SOV” and is immediately followed by a return to her British accent, contextualizes the quote within her own vocal style and accentuation.

To show the complexity of her accentuation, I would like to point out that another way in which Sovereign plays with racial musical codes is by sometimes switching between British and Jamaican accents. This occurs quite frequently in “Random” and is extremely audible as it occurs in every repetition of the chorus (see below):

> Everybody get random
> All gal them, all man them
> Everybody get random
> Just do something random

Like the quote from “Tipsy,” the Jamaican accent is heard in the context of a British rap, thus drawing our attention to the fact that accent is something that she is able to

appropriate and perform. In this case, the Jamaican accent draws attention to Jamaican dance-hall tradition, a strong influence on rap.

The most obvious occurrence of Sovereign's manipulation of accent that I will discuss occurs in the second verse of "Random." In lines nine through twelve, she plays with the vowel pronunciation in the words "there," "here," and "chair" by contrasting two different pronunciations of each word back to back, see lyrics below:

> My words hurt you jus' like loosin' your virginity (owww).
> Well I'm right thur,
> And I'll tell a lie cause I'm Right there,
> Right hurr, na' right here,
> Now get off your chur, I mean chair,
> Some English MC's get it twisted,
> Start sayin' cookies, instead of biscuits!
> Anyways.. yeah, lets... commence...

She says "Well I'm right *thur*, and I'll tell a lie cause I'm right *there*," placing an accent on "there." The vocal emphasis is strongly punctuated by a break in the beat at that moment. The beat resumes as she says "Right hurr," then drops out again as she says "nah, right here," and remains so as she says "Naw get off your chur, I mean chair." With her delivery of these lines, Sovereign highlights a style of pronunciation common to American rap, and at the same time separates herself from that tradition. By contrasting two different ways of pronouncing these vowel sounds, one of which falls specifically within a black American musical tradition, Sovereign draws attention to the ways in which her vocal style, identity, and nationality depart from that tradition. The fact that she is able to perform vocal styles of different geographical and gendered traditions demonstrates that race, gender, and nationality can all be constructed and performed in rap music.

Through my analyses of the songs "Love Me or Hate Me" and "Random," I have demonstrated how Sovereign conflates black and white musical signifiers through her vocal quality, accentuation, and declamation. I have also discussed how gender, race, class, and nationality intersect in Lady Sovereign's persona and performances. By playing with gendered and raced musical conventions, she offers a female identity that is quite unique to the American rap sphere, one which eschews the excessive sexuality that pervades much of the genre. A question that has been asked by many rap critics is: will Lady Sovereign have staying power or will she quickly be cast aside as a gimmick? Her second album, *Jigsaw*, has just been released in the U.S., so we will have to wait and see whether or not it garners the success of *Public Warning*.[409]

**II. White Skin, Black Voices?**

A second model of successful white rapper has emerged within the American music industry. Rappers such as Paul Wall and Bubba Sparxxx are unique in their ability to perform their persona and music primarily using the conventions of black male rappers, rather than exaggerating their whiteness. Both of these MCs are from the south, and it seems as though this aspect of their identity has been more important than their whiteness. Bubba Sparxxx and Paul Wall have very different sounds and personas, however, both have adopted aspects of the "dirty south" style of flow and lyrical themes. I will briefly explore songs by both artists to demonstrate the ways in which they have negotiated being white in a predominantly black musical sphere.

[409] Lady Sovereign, *Jigsaw*, Midget Records, B001QCJNNQ, 2009. The album was released in the U.S. on April 7, 2009.

***Bubba Sparxxx: "Ugly"***

When Bubba Sparxxx first emerged on the rap scene in 2001, many fans were surprised to discover that he was white. According to popular music critic, Jason Birchmeier:

> When the video for "Ugly" hit MTV and Sparxxx's face subsequently began appearing in the press, the dumbfoundment truly set in: Sparxxx was not only from the South but was very large — and white. In other words, he seemed the antithesis of what a rapper was suppose to be, and similar to the overnight success previous white rappers experienced — Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice, Eminem — Sparxxx was suddenly more than just an anomaly; he was a bona fide superstar.[410]

In this case, the majority of the public had a preconceived notion of what a white rapper should sound like based on the previous success of the Beastie Boys and Eminem and, therefore, associated Wall's sound with that of black rappers. Sparxxx grew up in a rural area of Georgia and his persona is all about being a southerner. He does not ignore his race, but does not necessarily make a direct issue out of it, as is the case with Eminem. His vocal delivery is very much within the tradition of black vocal performance, but his whiteness sometimes emerges through lyrics and aspects of video production.

The song "Ugly" encompasses a number of lyrical themes, most of which serve to introduce Bubba Sparxxx as an MC. He begins by saying "Shit I ain't choose to rhyme, rhymin chose me." He talks about how life has improved for him and that this is his moment to shine. He makes personal references throughout the song, but other than describing his skills, his most important claim to identity is as a country boy from the south. For example, at the end of the first verse, he says "What you need to do, is just

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[410] Jason Birchmeier, "Bubba Sparxxx Biography" *All Music Guide,* http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:wpfixqrkldae~T1. "Ugly" was release on the album, *Dark Days, Bright Nights*, Universal, B00005O566, 2001.

admit you love me. The South has always been dirty but now it's gettin ugly." He then begins the first verse by saying "Though I am country, don't get the wrong idea.
My ego's gettin bigger, with every song I hear." At the end of the second verse, he again associates himself with the South by saying "This that new South , take a picture of me. Cause I'm a fuckin legend, and this is gettin ugly." His identification as a country boy from the South is important as it situates him within the rap sphere. Most southern rappers are tied to urban areas in major cities. His claim to a rural location places him slightly outside the mainstream. Of course, it is really the fact that is a *white* rural southerner that places him outside of the mainstream, but there are no lyrics in this song to indicate his whiteness. This specific raced, geographical identification is only made in the video, which places Bubba Sparxxx on a farm and various other rural locations. The video for "Ugly" was important in "communicating Sparxxx's rural, white, country-boy background" to his mainstream audience.[411] The associations with whiteness in the video are presented not only through Bubba's own skin color, but also through the other people featured in the video, which features mostly white, urban men and women hanging out in the yard, in a bar, and on a farm.

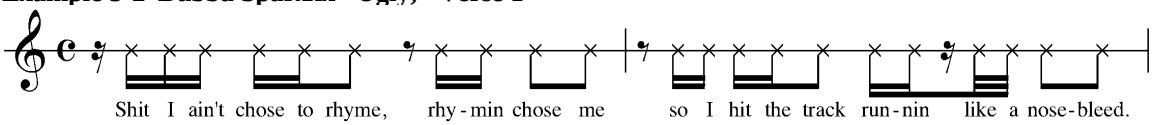
For many listeners, there is a disconnect between Bubba's appearance and his vocal delivery. As I mentioned above, many listeners initially mistook him for a black MC. His voice is low and he raps with a southern accent. He does not rap in a higher register, with a fast, accented delivery as other white MCs do. Although he does not have Eminem's style of crisp, clear, accented delivery, it is also not the lazy southern drawl associated with rappers such as Baby Boy da Prince (as I discussed in Chapter 3). His tempo is moderate and he has a slight tendency to draw out the delivery of his lyrics, as is

[411] Ibid.

common to the southern style of rap, but he does not do this excessively. His pronunciation of words is within the norms of the rap sphere, meaning he clips the final syllables of words. For example, he does not pronounce the "er" in "summer," instead pronouncing it "summa," and he pronounce "mother," as "mutha." Although I can see why many listeners would mistake his voice as black, for the reasons I just stated, I still hear a little bit of that nasal sound found with many white rappers. Perhaps the other aspects of his delivery overshadow this particular quality.

His rhythmic delivery is very relaxed, but not lacking energy. His flow is fairly regular, typically with the end rhymes occurring in the same place in each measure. For example, in the first two lines "Shit I ain't choose to rhyme, rhymin chose me. So I hit the track runnin like a nosebleed", the final two syllable of each line "chose me" and "nosebleed" are placed as eighth notes on beat four of the common time measure (see Example 5-2). One interesting aspect of his rhythmic delivery is that he tends to begin each line just after the downbeat of the measure, either on the second or third sixteenth subdivision. This has the effect of his line sounding delayed, slightly behind the beat, which combined with his stretching out of certain syllables, contributes to the sense that he is very relaxed. This is, of course, the complete opposite of the feeling that we get with rappers such as Eminem or Lady Sovereign.

**Example 5-2 Bubba Sparxxx "Ugly," Verse 1**




The fact that "Ugly" features Timbaland's beats helped establish Bubba's credibility within the rap community. The song not only features Timbaland's beats, but

also samples from another song that Timbaland produced: Missy Elliott's "Get Ur Freak On" (2001).[412] At the end of the song, Timbaland says "Switch" and the beat seamlessly glides into the beat from "Get Ur Freak On." He then says "Switch it one time" and the beat switches back to the beat from "Ugly." Timbaland then says "Now switch it back baby" and it switches back to "Get Ur Freak On" before finally settling back on "Ugly." The song ends with Missy Elliott saying "Holla!! Ain't no stoppin me. Copy-written so don't copy me." Timbaland interjects with "so what," thus creating a dialogue between the two artists. Missy repeats her phrase again, this time with Timbaland doubling some of her words. This exchange could be taken as Missy implying that Bubba is stealing her beats, but most listeners will realize that this is just a playful encounter. Missy's appearance at the end of this song helps establish Bubba as a real player in the rap game.

As I mentioned above, many white MCs who "front" black, adopting the black conventions of rap wholesale, have not been viable commercially and have generally not been accepted due to a lack of credibility. Bubba Sparxxx has been quite successful commercially and has gained a great deal of respect within the hip-hop community. He adopts many of the many conventions of black vocality and does not outwardly address his whiteness. Historically, within rap, this has been a recipe for disaster. I think one of the reasons that this has worked for Bubba is because of his position as a country boy. Although he does not vocally or lyrically exaggerate his whiteness, he does not try to front as black. Instead, he happily occupies his position as a rural southerner.

[412] Missy Elliott, *Miss E…So Addictive*, Elektra B00005J7GF, 2001.

***Paul Wall: "They Don't Know"***

Paul Wall is anther southern white rapper who has gained a great deal of respect within the rap community. He is based in Houston, Texas and, like Bubba Sparxxx, latches onto his southern roots as the primary aspect of his identity. Even more so than Bubba Sparxxx, Wall has gained a reputation for sounding black. According to Village Voice columnist, Tom Breihan:

> If you'd never seen a picture of him, you wouldn't know he was white. His voice is a deep Southern roll rather than the nasal jackhammer flow that most white rappers have. On *The People's Champ*, currently sitting at #1 on the Billboard charts after knocking off Kanye, he doesn't make a single reference to his pale skin or middle-class background…[413]

Wall's vocal quality and delivery, as well as his lyrical themes, all point towards rap's black conventions. Most of his song titles sound as if they could be on any southern MC's album, for example, "I'm a playa," "Ridin Dirty," and "Hustler Stackin' Ends."[414] His lyrical themes explore life as a southerner as well as the conventional themes of hustling, crime, and being a player.

The song "They Don't Know," featuring guest artists Bun-B, Pimp-C, and Mike Jones, is representative of Paul Wall's music.[415] To begin with, the use of established rappers as featured artists helps give him credibility; as I discussed in Chapter 2, this is a technique used by many MCs. The lyrics of this song situate the performers in the South by constantly mentioning Texas; for examples, see the second half of the song's chorus, provided below:

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[413] Tom Breihan, "Status Ain't Hood's History of White Rappers," *The Village Voice* (September 23, 2005) http://blogs.villagevoice.com/statusainthood/archives/2005/09/status_aint_hoo_3.php

[414] "Husler Stackin' Ends" was released on: Paul Wall, *Already Famous*, Paid in Full B00197TZVI, 2008. "Ridin Dirty" and "I'm a Playa" were released on: Paul Wall, *The People's Champ*, Atlantic B0009G3BWE, 2005. "Ridin Dirty" is also coincidentally the hook of Chamillionaire's hit song "Ridin." Wall and Chamillionaire were collaborators for many years, but are no longer speaking.

[415] Paul Wall, *The People's Champ*, Atlantic B0009G3BWE, 2005.

They don't know what that scar bout'
They don't know what that bar bout'
They don't know what that candy car bout'
Or smokin' that joint about
Texas is the home of the playas and pimps
Showin' naked ass in the great state of Tex'
Third Coast Born I mean we're Texas raised
Texas muthafucka that's where I stay

Wall also mentions Texas in the first verse "down here in this Lone Star state" and claims Houston as his town:

Outta towners be comin' around
Runnin' they mouth and talkin' down
but you don't know nuthin' bout my town
either hold it down or move around

Of course, he does not mention Houston directly here, but a listener is intended to pick up on the reference from having listened to his other songs, as well as knowing his biographical information. Names of local businesses are also mentioned, providing an insider perspective on the location.

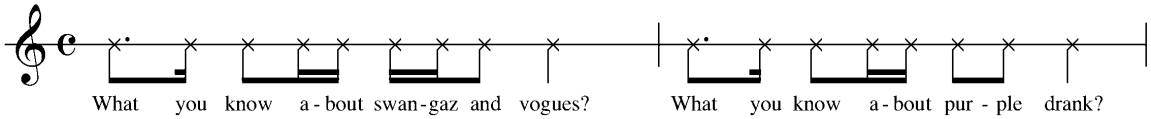
This song also addresses the themes of bling, cars, pimpin, hustling, violence, and verbal skill. An obvious reference to pimpin can be seen in the chorus above: "Texas is the home of the playas and pimps," although there are numerous other references as well. References to bling and cars can be seen in the following lyric quotes: "We sittin high on twenty-inch chrome"; "I crack a smile and show platinum mouth:" and "Platinum and gold on top our teeth, big ol' chains with a iced out piece." References to hustling can be seen in lines such as "Grindin daily just to stack my bread."

Wall's voice is very low-pitched and his delivery comes from the body more so than the head. He does not have the "telltale nasal hum" of most white rappers. His lyric delivery is forceful and aggressive, but performed at a moderate speed. His delivery is not

clipped, but rather very deliberate. His pronunciation cannot be distinguished from the featured rappers in the song. Although one can clearly hear which rapper is performing at any given time in this song, most listeners would not be able to tell that Paul Wall is white just from listening to his voice.

Wall's flows in "They Don't Know" are fairly regular, with the placement of the final syllable almost always occurring on beat four of the common time measure (see Example 5-3). Wall does not use consistent end rhymes, but he does rhyme the final syllable of every second line. He tends to begin his phrases on the downbeat with a directed motion toward beat four. He also stresses the syllables falling on every quarter beat by placing a slight dynamic accent on those syllables.

**Example 5-3 Paul Wall "They Don't Know," Verse 1**




In the song "I'm Throwed" (2007), Wall's voice is pitted against feature rapper Jermain Dupri's.[416] In this song, we have almost the opposite effect of hearing Eminem's voice compared to Dr. Dre's in the songs discussed earlier. Dupri's vocal delivery is in a much higher register than Wall's, thus emphasizing the deepness of Wall's voice. Both MCs perform their flows in the typical relaxed, southern style, drawing out the delivery of many words, and performing within a black rap vocal tradition.

Paul Wall's music videos tend to reinforce his position as part of the black southern rap tradition. Most of Wall's videos situate him geographically as a Texan. For example, the video for "They Don't Know" places Wall in the city of Houston through

[416] Paul Wall, *Get Money, Stay True*, Swishahouse/Asylum/Atlantic B000NVIXDM, 2007.

visual cues such as road signs, the front of the criminal justice building, brief shots of downtown Houston, shots of local businesses and restaurants, and an apartment building saying "Houston House Apartments." Most of the video is shot in a lower-income neighborhood outside of downtown Houston. The neighborhood's location is situated in the video through various shot depicting downtown Houston in the distance. Wall positions himself as part of the predominantly black community as he strolls through the neighborhood, sits on the front stoop of a house chilling with a friend, and hanging out with people in the neighborhood. The themes and images in the video for "They Don't Know" can be found in many of Wall's other videos. As one music critic has observed: "He's the only white face in the "Still Tippin'" and "Sittin' Sidewayz" videos, and he doesn't seem to think there's a single thing weird about that."[417]

The claim to being a southerner seems to be Wall's most prominent lyrical theme and the primary characteristic of his public persona. Many fans and journalists have discussed Wall's position as a white MC in a black musical sphere. One journalist has noted: "Paul Wall is not a White Rapper. He is a rapper who happens to be white."[418] The problem with this type of statement is that it ignores the fact that Wall is appropriating black conventions without engaging with his raced identity in any way (other than to mark himself as a southerner). As I have discussed earlier, most successful white rappers have engaged with their whiteness in some way. Artists like the Beastie Boys, Eminem, and Lady Sovereign exaggerate their whiteness, while Bubba Sparxxx claims the position of a white country boy. As Breihan has observed, "Paul Wall is the first-ever famous white rapper who doesn't talk about being white, who makes no attempt to engage with

[417] Breihan, 2005.
[418] Koslow, Jessica. 2005. "Paul Wall: Avoided the White Thing." Hip-Hop DX (August 15). http://www.hiphopdx.com/index/features/id.451/title./p.all.

his contradictory position (white guy selling black culture to probably mostly white people)."[419] So far this approach has worked for him commercially and within the rap community; he is successful and well respected. Is Wall's successful adoption of these performance practices a signal that the mainstream American rap community is opening up to new identities?

Perhaps Eminem paved the way for rappers such as Paul Wall and Bubba Sparxxx, who rap with "black" voices. As Paul Wall has said: "Eminem came to the spotlight and broke down a lot of barriers for other rappers that are White. He earned respect. He kept it real. He made people say that's cool, you being you."[420] What is clear is the fact that there are still very few white MCs who have been able to achieve success within mainstream rap. Those who have perform their identities in a number of ways and must always negotiate the raced boundaries of this performance medium.

This chapter has focused on the construction of a particular type of raced performance in the context of rap. I have chosen to illuminate the problematic position of white MCs because a black-white dichotomy has been prevalent within discourse on rap's socio-cultural positioning. There are many other types of raced identities within the North-American rap sphere. A few examples include: Arabic MCs such as Belly, Filipino MC apl.de.ap from the Black Eyed Peas, and M.I.A. who comes from a mixed ethnic and cultural background. Like white rappers, these MCs must also negotiate rap's blackness. An in-depth exploration of these differing identities would be needed in order to provide a complete picture of how raced identities are negotiated in rap. The exploration of these

[419] As I discussed in the introduction to this section, Ogbar has explored the problematic co-option of black musical genres, 2005, Chapter 2.
[420] Koslow, 2005.

performed identities and how vocality acts in their construction will have to be the focus of future projects.

## Concluding Remarks

What I have laid out in this project is only the beginning of the identification and classification of raced and gendered vocal practice in rap. This is only further complicated by the fact that rap is constantly evolving and new forms of vocal practice are always emerging—this is demonstrated by the current popularity of the vocoder. Lyrics, image, and music all play into how we perceive MCs' vocal delivery. A discussion of rap vocality should, therefore, not be isolated from rap's other components.

As I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, rap's conventions are primarily coded as black and male. As such, we must consider the intersectional aspects of their performed identities. Despite the fact that most rappers follow these conventions in some way in order to gain credibility and acceptance, there is still room for these MCs to assert individuality within their performances. As Byron Hurt has observed, however, the predominant images of black male rappers are some of the most racist stereotypes we have seen in American media since D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, which portrays black men as oversexed and dangerous.[421] Rap music is thus a location for the construction and representation of black identity, but one that is fraught with negative stereotypes.

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[421] Byron Hurt, *Beyond Beats and Rhymes*. *Beyond Beats and Rhymes,* (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2006). Hurt's ideas here are referencing those of Michael Eric Dyson, and Sut Jhally, as expressed in the interviews included in the documentary. D.W. Griffiths, and Frank E. Woods, *The Birth of a Nation,* directed by D.W. Griffith, (New York: Kino Video, 2002, originally produced 1915).

As I discussed in Chapter 4, many female MCs also fall into stereotypical roles. Although female rappers are in some ways resistant figures, asserting their sexuality and independence, they still must negotiate the conventions set out by rap's male participants. Many women rappers, therefore, end up reinforcing normative representations of femininity within the rap sphere. These are the same black, male conventions that white rappers must negotiate. As I discussed in Chapter 5, most successful white MCs exaggerate their whiteness rather than "fronting" as black. Their performances serve to further reinforce rap's status as a predominantly black musical form, a status that may or may not continue to be common in the mainstream as styles continue to evolve.

Rap music is a medium in which public identities are formed and articulated and vocal practice is one of the primary means of expression. Discussing MCs' vocality is difficult because we have very few frameworks to work with. This project is only a stepping stone in identifying how MCs work within established vocal practices. Understanding the ways in which these vocal practices are tied to race and gender can help us to better comprehend how artists articulate their identities. My next step in understanding these practices will be to move into the production studio. Current rap music is very much centered on production and the voice is manipulated in any number of ways in the studio. The use of the vocoder, auto-tune, voice doubling, the effects of delay, chorus, reverb, and where the voice is centered in the mix all greatly contribute to the sound achieved. I hope that further research will allow myself, and others, to discover better approaches to the study of rap vocality, approaches that help account for the ways in which race and gender are so intricately bound up in musical performance.

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