

“Thank God for Hip-hop”: Black Female Masculinity in Hip-hop Culture

THESIS

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By

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Abstract

“Thank God for Hip-hop” explores the racial, gendered, and sexual relations in hip-hop culture. To do this, this project centers Black tomboys and masculine-presenting lesbians (MPL). I differentiate between MPLs and tomboys based on the extent to which people within each identity centers masculinity. Masculine-presenting lesbian is understood as a strong masculine presentation of gender by lesbian-identified women. Tomboy, on the other hand, is understood as a hybrid space between femininity and masculinity and sexual orientation varies. This project challenges perceptions of hip-hop as an exclusively male, misogynist, homophobic and transphobic genre and culture. Black tomboys and MPLs represent queer potentials in hip-hop. What can we discover about racial, gendered and sexual relations within the culture? How is gender and sexuality negotiated by Black women who are tomboys or masculine-presenting lesbians? Gwendolyn Pough’s “bringing wreck” theory is centered in my analysis on how Black women disrupt gender and sexual politics in hip-hop. Utilizing hip-hop feminism, gender and queer theory, and queer of color critique strengthens my figuration of hip-hop queerness by opening the culture up to the margins of the margins. Through a textual and feminist discourse analysis, I engage lyrics, music videos, films, online interviews, and social media posts to argue that these Black women are disrupting hegemonic masculinity in hip-hop through their expressions of masculinity and navigation of hip-hop culture.

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Introduction

"I screamed it, Thank God for Hip Hop!"

- Queen Latifah (Hip-hop Honors: All Hail the Queens)

On July 11th, 2016 VH1 aired the Hip-hop Honors awards ceremony. The night was filled with performances and interview clips that all tribute the women being honored: Queen Latifah, Salt-N-Pepa, Lil' Kim and Missy Elliott. While the performances were entertaining and memory-evoking, the moments that stole my attention were the cultural moments in between the performances. One of these moments was Michelle Obama's congratulations to Missy and Queen Latifah. If the Jay-Z and Barack Obama connections that were made from 2008-2016 were not enough to cement the culture in the threads of American pop culture and entertainment, First Lady Michelle Obama's addition privileged the contributions of women of hip-hop. It was a special night to say the least, one that was purposefully focused on Black women. While specific artists were being honored, the ceremony was the first to spotlight the accomplishments of Black female rappers. It may be too early to tell, but hopefully that ceremony sets a precedent for the active practice of recognizing the contributions of Black women in a culture that they have been part of it since its inception.

There was one more moment that stood out to me. During Queen Latifah's segment, she was interviewed about her Academy Award nomination for her supporting role in *Chicago* (2002). She responded saying that upon learning of her nomination, the first she could say was "thank God for hip-hop!" As she got her start in hip-hop with her 1989 debut, *All Hail the Queen*, to be afforded opportunities enough to be nominated for an Oscar was all attributed to hip-hop. Her exclamation echoed a greater recognition of the ways that hip-hop has provided opportunities for Black women and how they have used that space. Queen Latifah has been the subject of decade-long rumors about her sexual orientation and has remained culturally relevant in hip-hop and other realms of pop culture. Whether it was from her willingness to speak on issues impacting Black women in Black communities in her early rap career or her portrayal of butch-lesbian Cleo in *Set It Off* (1996), Queen Latifah has been at the crux of hip-hop's relationship to gender, sexuality and race. While this project is not focused on Queen Latifah, it is focused on querying hip-hop culture about its relationships to masculine-feminine gender binaries and potentially restrictive expressions of sexuality as related to that binary.

This project is centered around expressions of Black female masculinity in hip-hop culture. Black female masculinity in this context is understood through an analysis of tomboys and masculine-presenting lesbians (MPLs). Working through the term *tomboy* as an identity marked by women's presentations of masculinity, I explore the racialized, gendered and sexualized implications that underscore the navigations done by Black tomboys in hip-hop. I will also focus on masculine-presenting lesbian women in the culture with a similar lens and intention. I differentiate between masculine-presenting lesbians (MPL) and tomboys based on the extent at which each identity centers

masculinity. While tomboy is understood as a hybrid space between traditionally legible performances of femininity and masculinity, masculine-presenting lesbian is understood as a majority masculine presentation in conjunction with lesbian sexuality. I employ the term masculine-presenting lesbian to include various expressions of masculinity and lesbian sexuality among Black women.

The core question of this project asks how Black women subvert hegemonic masculinity present in hip-hop culture? From that, if attention is given to tomboys and masculine-presenting lesbian women, what is discoverable about racial, gendered and sexual relations within the culture? How is gender and sexuality in hip-hop negotiated by Black women who are tomboys or masculine-presenting lesbians?

Embedded in my inquiry is Gwendolyn Pough's "brining wreck." As Pough's theory highlights the ways Black women and girls disrupt the U.S. imagination and male-dominance, I am interested in the ways that Black tomboys and MPLs "bring wreck" to hip-hop even with their gestures toward masculinity. There are dominant perceptions of hip-hop as predominantly male and masculine in ways that necessitates female bodies to perform femininity in tandem with hip-hop masculinity (Rose 1994). While there is no shortage of examples that prove this, contextualizing hip-hop as exclusively violent towards women and queer people further erases the role Black women and queer people have played in the culture. This also comes with the task of reestablishing hip-hop's queer potential. As Rinaldo Walcott states, "Queering hip-hop is not as difficult as the uninitiated might think or imagined. It might in fact all be about where you begin to look and what you are willing to see" (2013). Noting the way hegemonic Black masculinity pervades popular versions of rap music (Clay 2007), this

project seeks to explore tomboys and masculine-presenting lesbian's disruptions of the commercial perception and the culture at-large (including spaces that are independent and underground). In doing that, understandings of hip-hop transgress dominant narratives of hip-hop culture as misogynist, transphobic and homophobic.

Centering these two identities and expressions comes with the risk of perpetuating historical notions of Black women as masculine in contrast to whiteness and white femininity. However, it is also important to center the voluntary ways Black women express masculinity in hip-hop culture. The purpose of exclusively tending to Black tomboys and MPLs is to highlight the cruxes of race, gender and sexuality present in their identities and what that means to hip-hop culture. While tomboys and MPLs have been represented in various facets of American popular culture, they are often left out of discourses that aim to understand the complexities of Black gender and sexual relations in hip-hop. While integral works in gender studies, Black studies and queer theory have all considered female masculinity, Black genders and sexualities, gender and sexuality in hip-hop, Black queer genders and sexualities and hip-hop masculinities (Halberstam 1998, Halberstam and Volcano 1999, hooks 2004, Pough 2004, Hill-Collins 2005, Clay 2007, Rose 2008, Neal 2013), sole dedication to Black female masculinity in the context of hip-hop culture is lacking. Continuing to ignore Black masculine women in these discourses neglects valuable insight on racialized and queered gender expectations, gender and sexual cultures within hip-hop that fall outside of heteronormativity, and transgressive expressions of gender and sexuality done by Black women that complicate gender binaries and queer desires.

Hegemonic Masculinity Vs. Toxic Masculinity and Disruption vs. Progress

As Black tomboys and MPLs disrupt hegemonic masculine representations of hip-hop culture, they also risk perpetuating expressions of masculinity that do not aid in progressing hip-hop culture. As many forms of masculinity expressed by the women in this project fall in line with understandings of toxic masculinity performed by men, their expressions of masculinity do not necessarily move hip-hop culture beyond those representations of toxicity. Toxicity in this context is not the same as hegemonic masculinity though it is derived from it. Amanda Marcotte of *Salon* writes:

So, to be excruciatingly clear, toxic masculinity is a specific model of manhood, geared towards dominance and control. It's a manhood that views women and LGBT people as inferior, sees sex as an act not of affection but domination, and which valorizes violence as the way to prove one's self to the world (2016).

Marcotte's focus on the valorization of violence is what characterizes toxic masculinity in conversations about masculinity overall. Hegemonic masculinity deals with dominance and the imbedded subordination of women in that dominance, however, it does not rely on the direct expression of violence and hatred for this dominance. R.W Connell writes in *Masculinities* (1995):

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently-accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (77).

Connell's recognition of patriarchy and dominance is what creates the hegemony of masculinity. Toxic masculinity, then, branches from hegemonic masculinity though the

two are not the same. In the context of hip-hop, hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity take on the same framework. Though the dominance of men in hip-hop is visible, toxic masculinity is not expressed by all artists in hip-hop. Violence towards LGBTQIA folks, women, men, trans and gender nonconforming folks is not a prerequisite for the dominance of masculinity though it is expressed by some. Dominant hip-hop masculinity Through their expressions of masculinity, MPLs and tomboys can perpetuate performances of toxic masculinity. However, through their bodies and identities as women who still play with or identify with masculinity, they disrupt hip-hop's gender binary that reserves masculinity for male-identified people.

Progress in hip-hop culture denotes an evolution of the culture and people involved in that no longer necessitates the degradation of Black and Brown women, evolves passed the containment of Black masculinity that is strictly tied to heterosexuality, homophobia, misogynoir, and violence. Additionally, a progressive hip-hop culture welcomes people of all gender identities and sexualities to participate and also thrive financially and commercially in the culture. Tricia Rose writes, "We must fight for a progressive, social justice-inspired, culturally nuanced take on hip-hop - a vision that rejects the morally hyperconservative agenda and the "whatever sells works for me" brand of hustler's neo-minstrelsy that have become so lucrative and accessible for the youth in poor black communities today (29)." Though Rose's progressive hip-hop is not completely validated by the presence of tomboys and MPLs, it is substantiated by their disruption of hegemonic masculinity.

Grounding

While hip-hop can be regarded as a standalone genre of music, its history and conception has garnered an impact that goes beyond the music itself (Watkins 1999; George 1998; Kitwana 2002; Collins 2006; Rose 2008). Hip-hop feminists have spearheaded analyses of hip-hop as a culture and have considered cultural impacts of hip-hop in their work (Morgan 1999; Pough 2004; Love 2012). This work is grounded in hip-hop feminist analysis that regards the lives of Black girls and women in relation to hip-hop culture. This project is inspired by Joan Morgan's assertion of hip-hop feminism as "a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays (1999)." The racialized, gendered and sexualized implications of black female masculinity in a culture perceivably dominated by cishet Black men are contradictory and deserve to wade in the greys. This project can only exist in the grey and the research that follows is dedicated to fucking with that gray.

Hip-hop feminism allows for an analysis that validates the experiences of Black and Brown women and girls as modes of learning and being. In this work, specifically, I utilize Gwendolyn Pough's "bringing wreck" from *Check It While I Wreck It* (2004). She writes:

I am concerned with the ways in which the rhetorical practices of Black women participants in Hip-hop culture "bring wreck"-that is, moments when Black women's discourses disrupt dominant masculine discourses, break into the public sphere, and in some way impact or influence the United States imaginary (12).

As a framework, bringing wreck marks various potentials for hip-hop. Rather, bringing wreck explores the margins within the margins of hip-hop to center identities and

narratives that are not consistently present in the commercial understanding¹ of the culture. I am interested in bringing wreck” in the context of tomboys and MPLs in hip-hop to interrogate the complexities of “dominant masculine discourses” that are created when centered Black female and masculine bodies.

Additionally, engagement with Jack Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* serves as a gender and queer theory basis for contextualizing female masculinity. Halberstam’s 1998 book is still one of the most relevant sources on female masculinity as a topic. He centers his analysis on the ways that female masculinity takes masculinity out of the hands of male identified people, and underlines the fact that it was never completely theirs to begin with. Halberstam’s analyses of female masculinity as an alternative form of masculinity destabilizes gender categories and creates a portal to broader understandings of gender. He asserts tomboyism as a masculine category due to the inherent rebellion against male ownership of masculinity. I build on his analyses of tomboyism to include Black tomboys in the conversation.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter one centralizes tomboy expression in hip-hop by analyzing a films and the lyrics and interviews of two artists: *Love & Basketball* (2000), singer Aaliyah and rapper Siya. Tomboy expression is asserted as a worthy space of masculine expression and is located in hip-hop through a close reading of the aforementioned films, lyrics and interviews. Navigating tomboyism in hip-hop culture relies on age, sexuality and commitment to various forms of femininity. Through Halberstam’s assertion of

¹ Mainstream hip-hop as seen and heard on radio stations, viral videos and all popular forms of media.

tomboyism as a masculine category, though not solely masculine, I position Black tomboys in hip-hop as bringing wreck to hip-hop's culture of gender and sexual politics.

Chapter two is focused on MPL representation. I discuss actor Felicia "Snoop" Pearson and her character on HBO's *The Wire* and Queen Latifah's "Cleo" from *Set It Off* (1996) and how their masculinity is made legible in a hip-hop context. This analysis sets up a foundation for the rest of the chapter that is focused on recent hip-hop sensation, Young M.A. While Pough's bringing wreck is how I analyze MPL navigations, I also employ Jose Munoz's disidentification (1994), Moya Bailey's homolateness (2013) and John Jackson Jr.'s sincerity (2005) to further address the grays present in MPLs presence in hip-hop. Because of their race, gender expression and sexual orientation, Black MPLs navigate hip-hop culture in specific ways. I identify these navigations as simultaneously disidentifying with perceived expectations of feminine desires and hegemonic masculinity expressed by cisgender Black men, being able to relate with and to other Black men, and being able to prove masculinity in similar ways that Black cisgender men do. These forms of navigation give way to the very gray areas that Morgan speaks about and that is where wreckage happens.

I conclude the project with a summary of the ideas presented in the two chapters as well as implications for the next steps this research will take. In the present form, this project is a sounding board for a more expansive project on Black female masculinity in hip-hop.

Chapter One: Tomboys

“A girl who behaves in a manner usually considered boyish.”

(- Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

The presence of tomboys and the childhood “phase” assigned to them have both maintained solid spaces in American popular culture. Examples include: Calamity Jane in *Calamity Jane* (1953), Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (the 1960 novel and the 1962 film), Darlene Conner in *Roseanne* (1988) and Jess and Jules in *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002). While representation of tomboys in popular culture is present, a proliferation of them depict childhood tomboy identity (Halberstam 1998). In addition to this, most, while not all, representations are of white girls and women. This trend is echoed in research in queer theory and gender theory. While various texts study the gendered nature of tomboys, attention to non-white tomboys, specifically Black tomboys is lacking². Within Black studies and Black feminist theory, study of tomboy identity is absent from conversations about gender identity and expression. Furthermore, oversaturation of childhood tomboy expression neglects adult women who express themselves with some form of masculinity.

² Ara Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok : Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2004); Michelle Abate, *Tomboys* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008);

This chapter locates the Black tomboy in Hip-hop culture and interrogates potential negotiations made by Black tomboys in relation to their desirability within the culture. Within hip-hop culture, a variety of tomboys have emerged as rappers, R&B artists, fictional cinematic characters and have disrupted this space with their gender transgression. What relationship do tomboys have with the culture and how are they able to occupy space within it?

From that, tomboy configuration through frameworks of desirability and hip-hop feminism is examined. A general understanding of desiring as an act is rooted in wanting, longing, and hoping for something or someone. What does it mean for a culture to desire? How is desire showcased and acted on? Additionally, what is lost (if anything is lost) when Hip-hop is only studied through its male dominated, misogynist framing? The presence of tomboys in the culture speaks to a making of space and meaning by Black women.

As this paper is situated in the context of hip-hop *culture*, I see Aaliyah as a viable subject of study because of her proximity to hip-hop through her fashion choices, collaborations with Timbaland and Missy Elliott, and her constant referring to Hip-hop in her musical style. Siya is legible in this framework through her position as a rap artist, media presence and self-identification and full disclosure as a masculine-presenting lesbian woman. Even though Aaliyah passed away in 2001 and Siya is a current artist, Siya's open references to Aaliyah in her own interviews are analyzed.

Locating the Black tomboy in Hip-hop requires viewing the culture outside of its formal elements [deejaying, graffiti, breakdancing and rapping]. While these elements maintain their importance, Hip-hop has expanded to include most, if not all, elements of

popular culture and society. As Pough writes, “Thinking about Hip-hop as a culture and understanding the founding elements allow us to better understand the ways in which Hip-hop has grown and includes other elements” (2004). She goes on to list the ways in which popular culture interacts with Hip-hop, citing Hip-hop cinema, “raptors” (hip-hop actors), “raptivists” (hip-hop activists), and the ways that hip-hop beats infiltrate commercials all as ways that hip-hop has become its own culture. Furthermore, the importance in studying transgressive gender expressions by Black women in Hip-hop rests in the acknowledgement of hip-hop as a generational space. Seeing as how Hip-hop was created in the mid-late 70s, a number of Black people born during and after that time grew up adjacent to the impending movement of the culture. As stated in the “Hip-hop Generation Feminism Manifesto” by the Crunk Feminist Collective, “We identify with Hip-hop because the music, the culture, the fashion, and the figures provide the soundtrack to our girlhood and our young womanhood” (2010). For Black women of the hip-hop generation, Hip-hop culture provided an expressionist space through the rise of female emcee. My analyses, though not primarily focused on the female emcee, recognizes the value in studying the space created and maintained by women.

Tomboy

While the term tomboy typically renders a visualization of a woman who, at the most basic level, dresses “boyish”, there is more to this expression that needs to be explored. In *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam writes, “Tomboyism tends to be associated with a “natural” desire for the greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys”. The “greater freedoms” and “mobilities” that Halberstam mentions are associated with self-motivation and independence (1998). When read in the context of young

tomboys, examples are illustrated by the ability to play outside, get dirty, wear pants as opposed to skirts, etc. When employing Halberstam's definition of tomboy in the context of hip-hop, representations of tomboys can be found in artists like Aaliyah, MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, TLC, Missy Elliott, to name a few.

Legibility and navigation of tomboys and tomboy expression usually happens in three contexts: childhood, aesthetic and compulsory heterosexuality. Halberstam describes tomboyism as an "extended childhood period of female masculinity" and further asserts the idea that there is no immediate abnormality perceived in a young girl who takes on a tomboy expression (5). Rather, it is when the phase of being a tomboy either surpasses girlhood and transfers into budding womanhood or leans *too* far to masculinity that a problem is perceived and fears are created. *Too* far in this context includes expressions of masculinity like having a "boys" name and dressing in all masculine clothing (6).

The second legible context of tomboy expression is in aesthetic. In "Tomboy Chic: Re-Fashioning Gender Rebellion," Jamie Skerski writes "The fashion trend of tomboy chic exemplifies the effort to re-define tomboy identity as merely a fashion statement and illustrates the latest attempt to contain adult female masculinity" (2011). A brief example of what tomboy fashion looks like would be baggy jeans, t-shirts and a consistent forfeiting of feminine clothing. Skerski asserts the idea that the same societal fear of adult tomboyism that Halberstam writes about comes out in a pressure to "grow out of it" and grow into the socially assigned femininity they've been given (467).

The third contextualization of tomboy expression is in compulsory heterosexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality as a structure assumes that all women are

heterosexual and works to enforce heterosexuality on women through multiple societal modes (Rich 1980). Writing about film representations of tomboys, Skerski notes that the depiction of older tomboys rarely, if ever, is unaccompanied by a heterosexual attraction (469). Even though tomboys do not have to be lesbians or butch, expression of a heterosexual orientation becomes an important factor in the acceptance of their tomboy identity if they are adults or nearing adulthood. Compulsory heterosexuality for tomboys acts as a mode of navigation for tomboys to express themselves with their female masculinity.

If transcribing the descriptions of tomboy identity onto Hip-hop, are the same phenomena at work? Meaning, is there an acceptability of childhood tomboyism present in the culture? Are there negotiations of fashion and sexual orientation needed by tomboys in Hip-hop to further establish their place? How do Black women identify with tomboyism in Hip-hop with or without restriction?

A cinematic example would be Monica Wright (portrayed by Sanaa Lathan) from *Love & Basketball* (2000). *Love and Basketball*, though not a film about hip-hop, came out in 2001 to a generation of young Black people who were part of the hip-hop generation³. In addition to this, multiple hip-hop songs were featured in the soundtrack for the film. In the film, during a scene where the family is having dinner, a conversation happens between Monica and her mother, Camille (portrayed by Alfre Woodard):

CAMILLE

I don't know why I keep hoping you'll

³ Hip-hop generation in this context is taken from The Crunk Feminist collective's recognition of the hip-hop generation. They write, "We are members of the Hip Hop Generation because we came of age in one of the decades, the 1990s, that can be considered post-Soul and post-Civil Rights (2010)."

grow out of this tomboy thing.

MONICA

I won't. I'm a lesbian.

Lena chokes on her drink, cracks up.

CAMILLE

That's not funny

MONICA

Well, that's what you think, isn't it?
Cause I'd rather wear a jersey than an
apron...

This scene is a direct depiction of the negotiations of tomboys and their sexual orientation. While Monica is only joking about being a lesbian, she does acknowledge the assumption of homosexuality assigned to her tomboy expression. Furthermore, her mother represents the societal anxieties of parents with daughters whose tomboy phase never 'phased out': the fear of a queer daughter. While Camille's comment about hoping Monica will grow out of the phase expresses these same anxieties, it also showcases the pressures at work for women to conform to hegemonic ideals of femininity instead of the tomboy identity they express.

While Camille showcases some anxiety surrounding Monica's tomboy expression and sexuality, ultimately Monica's heterosexual orientation quells her worries. Through her relationship with Quincy (portrayed by Omar Epps) her tomboyism is somehow overshadowed. Furthermore, there are scenes where Monica eventually "grows into her femininity" and most forms of her tomboy expression are contained to the time she spends on the court. For example, when Monica goes to the spring dance right after suffering a tough loss on the court, her sister Lena (portrayed by Regina Hall) gives her a

makeover and a new dress in addition to having one of her college friends (Jason, portrayed by Boris Kodjoe) take Monica to the dance. Upon arriving at the dance, Jason showcases his interest in her when she takes off the jacket she had covering the dress. Quincy also notices her, much to both of their surprises, and spends a fair amount of time ignoring his own date for Monica. Even though she is still in high-school at this point, the scene serves as a coming-out for Monica. It is the first time the other characters and the audience get to see her be the feminine young woman that her mother and sister want her to be. Her expression of this proscribed femininity garners the attention of her date and Quincy. For Quincy, more importantly, her attire to the dance signifies the potential for her to be more than his friend and next door neighbor. Monica can now be desired by him while Lena and Camille can now feel relief that she has at least successfully attempted an approved and feminine version of herself.

What's read in *Love and Basketball* are the negotiations that have to be made by tomboys. What Halberstam and Skerski both acknowledge as childhood containment and heterosexual exceptions are present not only in this film but in other representations of tomboys. The same contexts of desire and approval of expressions of female masculinity can be found in artists Aaliyah. Though Aaliyah did not play basketball like Monica, they both navigated their tomboyism in ways that were desired and approved by their surrounding public. Further than that, Aaliyah's female masculinity present in her style and early-career aesthetics have been read as masculine by rapper Siya, who is a masculine-presenting lesbian. The relationship between navigation of tomboyism, legible masculinity and desirability are all informed by imbedded gender and sexual politics in hip-hop culture.

Desire and Hip-Hop Feminism

Locating the desires of hip-hop comes with the task of recognizing Hip-hop's ability to have desires. Desire is contextualized in *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose states "Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America...From the outset, rap music has articulated the pleasures and problems of Black urban life in contemporary America" (1994). I relate desire to the pleasures of Black urban life and contextualize it to include sexual, platonic, professional attraction or longing for involvement. All forms of involvement from hip-hop professionals and fans alike. However, desire is also measured in this context by varied forms of commercial success and popularity. While commercial success has shifted over the decades with the rise of new technologies, the idea remains the same: an artist's ability to capture the attention of large groups of people propels their popularity and success most of the time. In hip-hop though, the measurement of success is no longer solely dependent on radio spins or record sales. Recent times have seen the push to include YouTube views and song streams. Omar Burgess of *HipHopDx.com* writes:

The precious BDS spins Cudi ranted about and the YouTube views Google audited—whether real or imagined—matter because they're the primary ways people discover new music. They're also ways labels and artists monetize their product...in an age where we can access a wealth of statistical data at the click of a mouse, independent artists can have much more of a say over their financial future. And a return to the good old, boom bap days of artists refusing to get in bed with major corporations is out of the question. If we're really going to

measure an emcee's success by the bottom line, we should take all the available data into account (2013).

Berguss's point of including all available data in how we think through commercial success of hip-hop is what underlines my contextualization of desire. Video streams, music streams, sponsors, appearances on other media platforms all dictate artists success. Additionally, in a heightened blog culture, knowing more about what is on the mind of larger groups of people has become easier. Locating the desirability of tomboys in hip-hop allows for a broader understanding of gender and sexual politics in hip-hop culture.

As compulsory heterosexual is part of legibility of tomboys at large, including queer Black women in this topic provides an opportunity to delve deeper into the complexities of Black female masculinity. Siya, a rapper and self-identified lesbian has gained a fair amount of attention in Hip-hop through her music, affiliation with R&B singer Tank and her casting in Oxygen's *Sisterhood of Hip-hop*. In her masculine presentation, Siya takes on many of the signposts of Black masculinity that consumers have been familiarized with through the expressions of masculinity by male Hip-hop artists. For example, in the music video for her song "MVP", Siya is seen wining and dining her girlfriend with expensive meals and luxurious car rides in a Rolls Royce. She is wearing a white collared dress shirt with a vest in addition to other outfits that could also be seen as masculine. While these are images we usually see being expressed by men in Hip-hop, she has solidified her expression of her masculinity in her music and visual art. In "Out in Hip-Hop", a Vh1 program dedicated to exploring the current climate of queerness in Hip-hop, she had this to say about the perception of her masculine expression:

...but being a masculine woman, I can't dress how I want to dress. I still get shunned. It doesn't make sense. I have to put on a skirt and have my tits out to be accepted? Coming from my where I come from, I was always accepted as that little tomboy chick, I was always me. So why would I change who I am just to fit in the music industry?

As Tricia Rose notes in *Black Noise*, one of the themes found in most female rappers presence in Hip-hop is heterosexuality (1994). Paying close attention to Rose's observation of heterosexuality as a primary role of female rappers, Siya's feelings of being shunned may be attributed both to her masculine presentation *and* her lesbian sexuality. By using the word "shunned", Siya is illustrating treatment she has received being in Hip-hop, rendering her (at some point) undesirable. However, as she gains more popularity and acceptance in Hip-hop, it will be important to pay attention to how her masculinity is negotiated in the culture (or if it needs to be at all) and what that means for Hip-hop at large.

When discussing tomboys in hip-hop, an example of tomboy identity can be found in singer, Aaliyah Dana Haughton (January 16, 1979 – August 25, 2001). She is perhaps one of the most revered artists and models when it comes to tomboy identity and fashion. A wide variety of fashion and entertainment blogs still credit her with being one of the first young artists to pioneer tomboy streetwear in the 90s, 00s and present day (e.g. Vibe.com, Huffingtonpost.com, Hypebeast.com). When locating her desirability, her early tomboy image was popularized as evidenced in the multiple magazines covers and spreads she occupied. As Aaliyah was a teenager at the time of her debut album, it's important to examine the ways her childhood tomboy identify was accepted.

Additionally, the early-mid 90s was a time for tomboy fashion so her gender expression was legible through that as well⁴.

When we examine photographs and music videos of Aaliyah's early career we can see that she was perhaps her most tomboyish in the time of her debut album, *Age Ain't Nothin' But a Number* (1994). For example, in the music videos for "At Your Best (You Are Love)" Aaliyah is comfortably wearing baggy jeans, jackets, overalls, bandanas, locs and more. These articles of clothing would be considered to be on the "boyish" or "masculine" side but the way she dons the apparel is what has garnered her the title of tomboy pioneer. However, stepping away from the aesthetic appeal of Aaliyah's early tomboy identity (present in this video), it is important to note the way in which she 1) expresses heterosexuality by singing about men and 2) performs "femininity" in the soft-spoken nature of her voice⁵.

When regarding the negotiations of young adult and adult tomboy identity, both Halberstam and Skerski noted that heterosexuality and tomboyism contained in childhood is ideal for acceptance. However, reading these negotiations in the context of hip-hop, Aaliyah's commercial success (both while alive and in death) and overall negotiation of her tomboy identity can be read in the same way. While she continued to find fashionable

⁴See: Hypebeast, "Aaliyah's Legacy: A Pioneer of the Tomboy Style." (2015); BuzzFeed, "29 Of The Best Moments '90s Tomboys Have Never Forgotten." (2016)

⁵ Aube, Jennifer, Hilary Norcliffe, And Richard Koestner. 1995. "Physical Characteristics And The Multifactorial Approach To The Study Of Gender Characteristics." *Social Behavior & Personality: An International Journal*. 23 (1).; Lisa M. Silva, "As Loud As I Want To Be: Gender, Loudness, and Respectability Politics," <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/02/09/as-loud-as-i-want-to-be-gender-loudness-and-respectability-politics/>;

ways to incorporate menswear into her aesthetic as she grew up, the bulk of her tomboy identity stayed in her teenage years.

Through the desires of hip-hop culture (as commercial success and popularity) we see that expressions of masculinity by Black women are both desired and undesired through a variety of negotiations. While commercial success and popularity is a viable way to conceptualize desires of a culture, it does run the risk of erasing the agency and pleasure of these Black women. In “Hip-hop Generation Feminism: A Manifesto,” the Crunk Feminist Collective states “We unapologetically refer to ourselves as feminist because we believe that gender, and its construction through a white patriarchal capitalist power structure fundamentally shapes our lives and life possibilities as women of color across a range of sexual identities” (2010). Hip-hop feminism as a framework allows for the transgression present in these Black women’s decision to blend/bend gender in hip-hop.

Siya’s and Aaliyah’s varied occupancies of space in hip-hop showcase the desires of the culture. While Siya acknowledges how her gender expression is potentially read negatively in the culture, in an interview with BET.com, she credits Aaliyah as inspiration to present herself how she’d like:

With Aaliyah, the thing that made me fall in love with her is because she’s such a tomboy and I just admired that so much. I definitely fell in love with the fact that she was so honest with herself and I love how soft-spoken she was, [she was] just like a true artist. I’ve never been afraid to admit who I was, artists like that just made it ten times easier. Just knowing how the game is so male-dominated but to

see strong women like that overpower men in such a great way is amazing. Who wouldn't want to see that and be involved?

While it can be read that Aaliyah's early tomboy expression was negotiated by her heterosexuality and soft-spoken vocalizing (i.e. feminine voice), there's more to analyze with the identification of tomboys in general. For a masculine-presenting lesbian woman to identify with a tomboy, the presence of the tomboy should be seen more as a gender-bending space, one that disrupts notions of Black femininity and sexuality. As women's space in Hip-hop is closely tied to femininity (sometimes hyper-femininity) and compulsory heterosexuality, tomboys occupy a space that disrupts hegemonic expectations of Black women's gender expression and sexuality.

While hip-hop is typically seen as a male-dominated, misogynist, transphobic space, the centering of that conceptualization runs the risk of erasing narratives of people in the culture who are queer, trans and gender conforming (Lindsey 2015). While tomboys have silently occupied spaces in Hip-hop, their presence outside of their aesthetic choices are ignored. Though negotiations must be made, it is important to center their presence as transgressive. As tomboys have transgressed gender, they have also transgressed the culture. Understanding hip-hop outside of its perception as restrictive allows for the unearthing of the culture where space can be created and maintained by people who fall outside of the immediate public perception of it.

Noting that tomboy identity, while given a place in popular culture, has 1) been centrally located in childhood and adolescence and 2) has positioned white girls and women at the center of tomboy representation, this paper's goal was to locate the Black tomboy in a culture that they have seemingly and quietly occupied space in. With their

presence the perception of this space is challenged and furthermore maintained through the freedoms and liberties claimed by Black women in the space (such as tomboys).

Lastly, by contextualizing tomboyism within childhood, aesthetic and compulsory heterosexuality, I have identified the ways in which tomboy expression is read from a gendered and fashioned standpoint. By reading Siya and Aaliyah, I have briefly explored the desires of Hip-hop culture when it comes to tomboy expression. However, Siya as a MPL presents more context to the nuances of Black gender and sexual politics in hip-hop. The space that she and Young M.A occupies can offer a greater understanding of the relationality involved in hip-hop culture.

Chapter Two: MPLs

Black MPLs In Context

The term “masculine-presenting lesbians [MPLs]” is utilized to describe the women I focus on in this chapter. Similar terms would be “butch”, “stud”, or “aggressive (Halberstam 1998, Moore 2006, Clay 2007). However, to not label these women with words they may not prescribe to themselves, I employ MPL as more of a description for my own analysis as opposed to a label to place on them. MPL emerges as an understanding of the gender presentations and sexual desires of women who present themselves as more masculine while also desiring women.

Black female masculinity is made legible in hip-hop through their desire of women and racialized expressions of gender and class. As hip-hop masculinity is often linked to violence and expressions of aggression, it is also linked to specific ways of desiring women and being in the world. Mignon Moore writes, “When transgressive lesbian’s appropriate certain representations of masculinity owned by black and Latino men, they portray images that are raced, classed, and associated with violence and menace (2006).” While I posit the lack of ownership of masculinity by Black and Brown men, I do recognize the ways racialized masculinities are expressed and performed regardless of the body. Andreana Clay’s recognition of the rigidity of Black masculinity that is also experienced and performed by queer women in San Francisco club spaces is another illustration of the mutability of Black masculinity between men and women

(2007). In her article, Clay grapples with some of the contradictories present in hip-hop masculine performed by women. While she contests expressions of toxic masculinity done by men, she finds that she's able to justify it more when it is being done in queer women spaces. She writes:

Moreover, the expression of sexual desire between two queer women of color is rare, if at all existent, in popular culture. In these all female, queer club spaces, the decoding of black male masculinity is exciting, normalized and even "safe (157)."

The transferability of hip-hop masculine performances of women in those club spaces speaks to the instability of masculinity as exclusively male. In recognizing the similarities of masculinity expressed by Black men and women, I want to point out the ways Black women are made legible within masculinity. In hip-hop culture, desire and classed understandings of Black gender expressions makes both Black men and women legible as masculine. However, Black women, and specifically MPLs may experience a vetting process that grants them the ability to read as masculine.

Part of discussing masculinity is its legibility in the context of hip-hop. The previous chapter complicates legibility through the different ways tomboyism is understood and accepted in hip-hop. In the case of MPLs, masculinity becomes legible through a relation to women, race and class. An example of this relationship is Felicia "Snoop" Pearson, known popularly as "Snoop" on HBO show *The Wire*. Her character on the show was part of one of the more popular crews from the show and her character committed murders for the gang when called for. Mark Anthony Neal talks about Snoop's masculine legibility through Halberstam's reading of Queen Latifah's Cleo from *Set It Off* (1996) ideas on Black female masculinity:

Halberstam argues that the “black female masculinity that Latifah portrays is convincing precisely because it is infused with racial and class dynamics that render the masculinity part and parcel of a particular form of abjected female identity.” Halberstam adds, “Cleo’s masculinity is as much a product of her life in the hood as it is about her lesbianism; it is a masculinity learned in poverty, ... a survival skill as well as a liability.” Assuming that Snoop’s ambitions can be tied to her attachment to the drug trade, her female masculinity made her legible to her peers in a decidedly male-centered endeavor (91).

Both Cleo’s and Snoop’s characters warrant a masculinity that is necessarily tied to their race and class status. In both examples, the characters existence in the show revolves around illicit economies.

However, I’m interested in the way legibility functions in each example. Halberstam writes that Latifah’s credibility in the portrayal of Cleo comes from the adoption of a rap masculinity that we can see in characters like Ice Cube’s Doughboy in *Boyz in the Hood* (1991) (229). Her expression of gender matches with her lesbian identity and furthers a legibility of masculine that departs from cis-het male desire. A scene where Cleo is laid on top of a lowrider with her girlfriend, Ursula dancing above her, showcases Cleo’s desires clearly. When her friends walk in, she brags about having bought Ursula new things and grabs her gun when she becomes defensive against Stony’s judgments about robbing more banks. She expresses her desire for women and her aggression when being challenged similarly to what we see of Black men in other movies

where crime and class are backdrops (*New Jack City* (1991), *Dead Presidents* (1995), *Belly* (1998), *Paid In Full* (2002)). While Cleo's masculinity is not authenticated by other men, it stands alone and is never directly contested by her friends or other men for that matter.

A similar phenomenon happens with Snoop on *The Wire* as well as in *Love and Hip-hop*. Snoop's character on *The Wire*, while being referred to as "girl" sometimes, is never asked to prove her masculinity. Regardless of her gender identity, her expression of masculinity in the context of Marlo's crew and the show's Baltimore background is enough to consider her sincerity as a black masculine woman. As Neal notes, her relationality to the other characters on the show puts her in a space where masculinity is effortlessly being experienced and read. Though she challenges male-centric masculinity, her relationality to the other male characters bolsters her legibility as masculine.

Additionally, when Snoop made her first appearance on *Love and Hip-hop: New York*, it is through a group of men self-named "the Creep Squad." Before Snoop's casting on the show, the creep squad consisted of Peter Gunz, Rich Dollaz, Cisco Rosado and recently, DJ Self. There is never any true definition declared as what the creep squad is, however viewers are left to identify these men as a group of friends with reputations for being creeps- in the context of having sex with various women.

On the first episode of season 7, Snoop is introduced to the show as being part of the creep squad. She meets with Self, Richie D, and Cisco and is promptly thrown into a contest of masculine measure - can Snoop get the girl at the bar? She proceeds to play along with their game and approach a woman who we come to find out is already her

girlfriend. In the time where the rest of the creeps are unaware of their relationship, they authenticate her as “true creep” as she succeeds on her “creep mission.”

While Snoop’s drama with her girlfriend becomes the focal point of her trajectory on the show, her masculinity and acceptance into the Creep Squad is never challenged. In fact, there are little to no references toward Snoop being different than the original members of the creep squad who are cis-het men. In the confessional, Snoop admits that she is not a “creep” in the way that that Creep Squad has contextualized the label. However, she continues in the group for the camaraderie and connections. This phenomenon of incorporating MPLs in the boys club of hip-hop masculine spaces can best be described by Moya Bailey’s homolatency. Further that than, Young M.A’s recent claim to fame and commercial success in hip-hop also illustrates homolatency and disidentification as navigations of hip-hop culture as a MPL.

Young M.A, Homolatency and Disidentification

Currently, fans of hip-hop, nearby onlookers and outsiders are all witnessing a critical moment within hip-hop culture: the rise of female identified rapper Young M.A. Born in Brooklyn, NY, Young M.A. has been flying low under hip-hop radar, garnering some fame in 2014 when the video for her song “Brooklyn Chiraq” went viral. “The release of her single in 2016 catapulted her to the mainstream.” This single also went viral in addition to quickly claiming space on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. As the song garnered commercial success on the charts, the beat made for the song also became the sonic backdrop for various unofficial remixes and freestyles. Two of these most notably being diss tracks made by rappers, The Game and Meek Mill to use against each other in a beef that started online.

Her rapid success goes against various alleged understandings about hip-hop: that hip-hop is misogynist, male-dominated, homophobic and transphobic; that women in the culture are hyper-feminized and only exist in relation to men. This is not because M.A. is female, this is because M.A. is female identified, openly gay and presents masculinity in her clothing, lyrics and overall persona. While M.A. is garnering a great deal of attention, there are also questions arising about her masculinity and what it means for hip-hop⁶. As M.A.'s masculinity is similar to notions of dominant masculinity in hip-hop, is she actually as good for hip-hop as people in the queer community are hoping? Is she the female queer rapper that hip-hop supposedly "needs?"

While M.A. is not the first openly gay, or even openly queer and masculine female rapper, her success for a rapper of those intersections is what positions as her in this hip-hop culture moment. Queer rappers like Tim'm West, Mykki Blanco, Angel Haze and more have all claimed spaces in hip-hop that were not thought to be there originally. Even masculine lesbian rappers like Temper and Siya have done the same. However, her relationship to commercial success is what underscores this paper. While commercial success is defined in a variety of a ways, I reference commercial success as an artist's presence that pervades all pop culture media outlets like social media, internet videos and top 40 radio⁷. The previous chapter focused on Black tomboys in hip-hop as a source for the exploration of Black female masculinity. Underlining their navigation of hip-hop was the leveraging of their desirability based on their ability to become and

⁶ Tom Briehan, "Young M.A Is A Bully And A Boss," 2016, *Stereogum.com*; Judnick Mayard, "Meet Young M.A, The Brooklyn Rapper Who Owned The Summer," 2016, *TheFader.com*; Julie Schott, "This Is Young M.A," 2016, *Elle.com*;

⁷ Omar Berguss, "Today's Mathematics: How Hip Hop Measures Commercial Success"

remain legible and commercially successful to hip-hop. Tomboy expression that accompanied young age, aesthetic and/or heterosexuality were posited as three ways that Black tomboy women could maintain this desirability and legibility in the culture.

The hip-hop cosign typically functions as a precursor to a new artist's success and longevity in the industry. Uba Anyadiegwu for bonuscut.com writes:

It's quite simple: it is when an artist, usually someone with commercial success, gives a different artist, usually someone with lower success, a shout-out by acknowledging that they like his/her music. Co-signs can also be when those successful artists allow up-and-coming artists to be featured on their songs.

The cosigns and collaborations M.A has been part exist within hip-hop's homolateness (Bailey 2013) Additionally, I understand these cosigns to function as a place-holder for any obvious critiques or questions of M.A's sexuality and gender expression. They function as a silent acceptance from hip-hop culture and other artists alike. In "Homolateness Masculinity & Hip-hop Culture" Moya Bailey names homolateness:

...an attempt to more accurately encapsulate the ways in which masculinity and heterosexuality are signaled through tenuous performative utterances that often include homosocial behavior...While there is a hyperrelational connection between masculine of center people, in that much of hip-hop-influenced black masculinity is dependent on masculine people's relationships to each other and not with women, I hesitate to call it simply homosocial (190).

Bailey's recognition of the ways that Black masculine people in hip-hop relate to each other in a way that is necessitated by hip-hop culture underlines the relationships created in hip-hop. As she posits a relationality that goes beyond homosocial, she references Syd

Tha Kyd of Odd Future at the time and understands the “homogenous gender expression” that the group is centered around. Syd’s lesbian identity and nonrelation to other women is she is able to thrive in the group (191).

In the case of Young M.A, her talent as a rapper, lesbian identity and gender expression are related to masculinity in ways that are picked up by other men in hip-hop. In August of 2016, 50 Cent posted a picture of himself with M.A on Instagram with a caption that read:

“YOUNG MA the hottest shit out right now, her swag reminds me of my mother. 😏 So official, i dont like a lot a shit but this is Tuff. Im glad she from New York.#EFFENVODKA.”

His social media cosign of M.A accompanied his remix of “OOOUUU” which became one of the most recognized remixes of the song. Young M.A has noted on a number of interviews that 50 Cent is one of her favorite rappers and one that has influenced her own style. His cosign speaks to her talent in one sense, but also to her sexuality and gender. 50 has been recorded remembering his own mother’s non-normative sexuality on “Hate It or Love It” where he raps, “*comin up I was confused, my mama kissin' a girl.*” He has briefly mentioned his mother's sexuality on various interviews. He has come under fire for homophobic remarks in his music, in commentary about the Fox’s *Empire* and other social media moments. Additionally, he has also had moments of openly supporting the LGBT community. Whether 50 Cent is a champion for LGBTQ equality and rights is complicated, however in the context of hip-hop and Young M.A, his Instagram post and his presence on a remix of “OOOUUU” serves as a cosign.

A\$AP Ferg, another collaborator, contributed to the remixes of the hit single and he also kept M.A's introductory vocals on the track shouting her out before he starts his verse. However, later in the verse he also includes M.A's name in the verse. He raps, "*I teach you how to be a player, Bill Bellamy / Funny cause I fucked that same bitch Headphanie.*" He ends the verse with, "*Me and M.A at the strip club blowin' all these Franks.*" Relationality and homolateness continues as a theme in rappers acceptance and collaboration with M.A. Bailey writes:

Hip hop scholars continue to explore the ways in which cis men speak almost exclusively to each other in hip hop. These homosocial behaviors necessitate a female referent, but she is rarely a speaking subject in these contexts (192).

Bailey's description Black men's homosocial behaviors as speaking directly to each other is illustrated in Ferg's referencing M.A in his verse. However, M.A's identity as a woman complicates the absence of women as "speaking subjects" in these contexts. Still, M.A's expression of masculinity and desire for women sets her apart from the silenced women subjects being spoken about in Ferg's verses and many of hers. Much like Bailey's analysis of Syd Tha Kyd's place in Odd Future as being dependent on her ability to separate herself from the women subjects of their songs, M.A is placed in a similar position in Ferg's verse. A theme of what M.A and Syd can do in their social spaces is connected to opposition embedded in queer desire. That queerness and desire for women as a woman someone positions on the opposite side of them to become a commentator and storyteller about "them" seems like a prerequisite for any homolateness relationality to form between cis-het men in hip-hop and MPLs.

When discussing M.A's success, central inquiries arise about how she has been accepted in hip-hop in spite of the dominance of cis-het men. Homolatency highlights how someone who is female and queer can navigate space in hip-hop. As tomboys negotiate hip-hop through their expressions of gender and sexuality, MPLs do the same in different ways. Hip-hop being dominated by sexuality that regards women through heterosexuality goes unchallenged with a rapper like M.A because of her lesbian sexuality and more specifically because of her masculine expression that is familiar and legible to hip-hop culture. Though M.A's persona as an artist falls into the toxic masculinities hip-hop culture has become accustomed to, her body and willingness to always assert her gender and sexuality disrupts the space and breaks open the monopoly that cis-het men have on desire in hip-hop (Moore 2006).

Hip-hop media has posed M.A's success as contradictory to her identity and expression as a masculine lesbian woman. Masculinity in the context of M.A remains traditional in that the relationality other rappers share with M.A has nothing to do with them wanting to have sex with M.A, but everything to do with their ability to talk about and interact with women the same way they do with other men.

Masculine Sincerity

Masculinity as a social construct can be challenged at any moment. Young M.A's presence in hip-hop illustrates this as there have been various attempts made to discredit the Black female masculine rapper she has come to be known as. So far, outside of her talent, her legibility as a rapper has come with plenty of comments and questions about her sexuality and gender. For reference, a personal account of mine is helpful. When I showed my Gender, Sexuality and Race in Pop Culture students the video for

“OOUUU” several of them expressed surprise when that M.A was a woman. When I asked about their knowledge of the lyrics, as she makes references to her gender (“*My brother told me fuck 'em, get that money sis*”) and sexuality (“*Shawty make it clap, make it applause / When you tired of your man, give me call*”), they had little to say other than the beat being hot and figuring she was a man because she was talking about women, guns and money. While the conversation warranted some laughs, our unpacking of the song, video and critical reception from the blogosphere is what underlined a potential relationship between Young M.A and her MPL sincerity. I utilize the term sincerity in this chapter in reference to John Jackson Jr.’s work on racial sincerity in *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (2005). He writes,

Authenticity presupposes a relation between subjects (who authenticate) and objects (dumb, mute and inorganic) that are interpreted and analyzed from the outside, because they cannot speak for themselves. Sincerity, however, sets up a different relationship entirely. A mere object could never be sincere, even if it is authentic. Sincerity is a trait of the object’s maker, or maybe even its authenticator, but never the object itself, at least not as we commonly use the term. Instead, sincerity presumes a liaison between subjects - not some external adjudicator and a lifeless scroll (15).

In the context of race, Jackson finds that authenticity is an incompetent framework for understanding Black people’s individual relationship to Blackness as authenticity mandates an outside authenticator to prescribe approval or disapproval. Instead, sincerity leaves room for Black folks to have agency in their own expressions of Blackness. I find this framework useful in the context of MPLs because much of my discussion around

gender expression in the context of tomboys and MPLs comes from legibility, I center their agency in this discussion. MPLs being sincere about their expressions of gender and sexuality are all rooted in agency. However, in hip-hop, gender and sexuality are often two aspects of identity that are consistently challenged.

While Young M.A has been widely accepted for her expressions of gender and sexuality, she has been challenged. One particular case would be a local New York rapper Mulann Milla posted a diss-track on YouTube of her rapping over Drake's "Back 2 Back," that became famous during his 2015 beef with Meek Mill. She rapped,

Couple of ya exes said you ate it, you ain't fuck nothin/

Young MA who you puttin' on the front for?

Tryna impress 'em wit a image that is not yours/

I know ya background, tight jeans, lip gloss, tight shirt, pink curls, you
prolly aint even like girls/

Present in her diss is a challenge of Young M.A's realness as a lesbian woman. However, her challenges echo similar challenges made to Black cis-het men. M.A's expression of desiring women is then factored into the common disses made between male heterosexual rappers, even though she is not male. Asserting that a person only performed oral sex on a woman versus fucking not only delegitimizes forms of non-penetration sex but also asserts the need for another form of sex, most likely penetration, as the only legible way that someone can maintain their credit as being real. While Milla's choice words about M.A's presumed background are exaggerated, since M.A has been rapping for years, there are videos and pictures that surfaced showcasing a less masculine M.A than the current public is used to. However, Milla's decision to point this out and exaggerate the

truth (M.A has expressed that she has been a tomboy for most of her life and always found herself in opposition to forced femininity) is in tradition with hip-hop's attempts at emasculating other rappers in order to prove a point of authority. MPLs ability to disrupt the hip-hop gender and sexuality imaginary is what centers their bringing wreck to hip-hop. Destabilizing that binary is what Young M.A does with her body and desires. However, her sincerity as a Black masculine women is then able to be challenged by others as it becomes available for public consumption.

While masculine women have always been present in hip-hop as both rappers and fans, their distinct gendered and sexualized positionality has not been talked about nearly enough in hip-hop. As Andreana Clay notes, Black queer women are part of hip-hop and even find themselves in tandem with some of its gendered expectations.

Bringing Disidentification?

Damn, I'm must really put fear in these niggas/

Because they call me a dyke, a faggot, a gay bitch/

I ain't shit, that hate shit, that hatred, goddamn/

That just make them look less of a man, fam/

Through her disruptions of hegemonic masculinity Young M.A. as bringing wreck to hip-hop. Although she presents masculinity, her commercial success as a non-heterosexual woman interrupts dominant notions of masculinity as exclusively belonging to the male body and heterosexual men. M.A. is not male, but masculine. As a Black woman, her body is readily in opposition to the United States imaginary that Pough talks about, however she is also in opposition to dominant representations of hip-hop (12). Her

assertion of her female body forces viewers and listeners to understand gender expression as potentially unrelated bodily sex. For example, in “EAT”, she raps:

Who would've guessed that the next best is/
Nobody expected, me a she/
Nigga, accept it I'm here/
I swear to god I ain't scared of these niggas

As hip-hop maintains a space for male masculinity, Black queer masculine women disrupt this and provide alternative modes of gender and being within the same space (Clay 2007).

Though M.A. disrupts the bodily identification of male and masculinity in hip-hop, she does not necessarily dismantle hegemonic masculinity and oppression within hip-hop culture. She references her sexual and masculine gender expression through tales of sexual exploits with other women. While she is garnering a large fan base, various blogs and cultural critics are exploring the complexities in her music and gender expression. Even though she identifies as a woman, and presents masculinity, she has been charged with perpetuating the same misogyny and sexism present in rap lyrics from male rappers. For example, “Henny and Hoes” from her *Sleep Walkin* (2015) mixtape, she raps:

What you doing with them goodies, you should give me those/
Fuck you in your sundress, you don't even gotta undress/
Shawty she was straight, now she like girls/
Ate her 'til she came, made her cum fest/

In an article for *The Root*, Samantha Master writes, “If Chance the Rapper represents the Carefree Black Boy, Young M.A. represents the Audacious Black Dyke—bold, unyielding and unapologetically herself. Therefore, her visibility is both exciting and deeply troubling (2016).” Master goes on to express her own excitement for M.A.’s career but notes that her taking on of misogyny and violence as troubling worthy of critique. Masters’ continues,

Unfortunately, though, and perhaps expectedly, while black queer and transgender women are organizing toward black liberation on the front lines of movements and giving new language to building black power, Young M.A., in some ways, has used the cultural space largely created by black women to promote the re-enactment of elements of toxic masculinity (2016).

Master expresses the concern that various people have with M. A’s success. While Master’s offers an in-depth expression of that concern in reference to the way M.A could be taking advantage of the pop culture and activist moment of Black women making and taking space, other media outlets have reconciled M. A’s toxic masculinity. After Ellen wrote about Young M.A citing her as potentially “first stud lesbian star (2016).” Trish Bendix, the writer of the article, even sites her misogyny and violence and taking of what Masters sees as toxic masculinity, as a fair “trade off” for queer women to see themselves in hip-hop. She writes, “...for or better or for worse, there’s probably more where that came from. Perhaps a fair trade off for queer women (especially queer women of color) finally being able to see a version of themselves in popular music (2016).” What is present in both articles from Master and Bendix is the disappointment embedded in

assumption that Young M.A being black, woman, queer and masculine would be able to differentiate her moment from that of other cis-het men charged with toxic masculinity.

Through her lyrics and interviews, M.A. has expressed her unwillingness to be an “LGBT” rapper. She’d rather just be a rapper. While she’s well aware of how people in hip-hop both understand her and refuse to understand her, her attention is to the music and being herself (*The Breakfast Club*, 2016). Her commitment to her own identity beyond the meaning it represents in hip-hop and American society, while disrupting the space of hip-hop culture through her body reads to me as disidentificatory. José Muñoz’s *Disidentifications* (1999) introduces and outline his theory of disidentification. As a practice, disidentification can take on various politics or antipolitics. He writes,

The version of identity politics that this book participates in imagines a reconstructed narrative of identity formation that locates the enacting of self at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit (6).

He continues later,

Disidentification negotiates strategies of resistance within the flux of discourse and power. It understands that counterdiscourses, like discourse, can always fluctuate for different ideological ends and a politicized agent must have the ability to adapt and shift as quickly as power does within discourse (19).

Her position in hip-hop is disidentificatory. As Muñoz asserts disidentification’s complexity and varied potential, M.A works from different angles of identity to present herself as an artist.

M.A.'s identity as queer and willingness to express her desires in her music does not mean that she is immune to versions of masculinity that are hegemonic. The complex web of legible signposts that are read onto M.A.'s body and music are her own ways of disidentifying with a righteous queer politics and feminism, but also disidentifying with the wholeness of hip-hop hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, her willingness to do both still makes her legible on various points of an anti-political and political spectrum. Her identity, and willingness to identify with anything (politics and narratives) is based on her own tailored form of resistance and survival. She works within and outside of power structures. I assert that this makes her legible to both queer communities and fans as well as non-queer hip-hop fans and those within the culture. Positioning Young M.A. as a disidentificatory subject creates space to reconcile her ability to both disrupt and perpetuate hegemonic masculinity in hip-hop culture." Disidentification also helps contextualize her commercial success in a commercial culture that Andreana Clay recognizes can be seen and experienced as restrictive, dominant and closed off to queer women of color (2007).

Though Young M. A.'s current commercial success in hip-hop is sparking conversations and questions of race, gender and sexuality both within hip-hop culture and outside of it, I find it important to recognize the ways in which her success does not fall on one side of any given spectrum. She transgresses gender binaries through her expression of masculinity and by doing this, brings wreck to hip-hop culture with her body. Though she is legible as being a part of the hip-hop community, she remains legible in a way that challenges the polarized ideals of gender expression and gender

identity within hip-hop culture. However, through her lyrics, she disidentifies with expectations of feminist politics and versions of hegemonic masculinity.

The importance in this departure is to recognize how various facets of Black identity that deal with race, gender and sexuality can be transgressed and destabilized to include Black female masculinity in a way that is often ignored in the Black community and in African-American Studies and Black feminist literature. A rapper such as Young M.A. can be seen as an opportunity to start community and academic conversations about Black female masculinity. While her visibility is in the context of hip-hop, it is important to note how hip-hop as a Black cultural creation is embedded in contemporary Black culture (Kitwana 2002, Crunk Feminist Collective Mission Statement).

Conclusion

Black female masculinity is a disruption of gender binaries and expectations upheld in hip-hop culture through hegemonic masculinity. Though I do not want to perpetuate the widely-held anxieties about hip-hop being predominantly for men and therefore is a masculinist art form, I do recognize the power structure that has formed in hip-hop culture that privileges men and masculine points of view. Therefore, Black female masculinity emerges as an important category of inquiry. It reveals the nuances of hip-hop spectrums of gender and sexuality to hip-hop, gender and queer theory scholarship. As Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* solidified the study of masculine women as an important incorporation into gender and queer theory, Black female masculinity in hip-hop is a necessary interjection into ideas about hip-hop and gender. Gwendolyn Pough's "bringing wreck" acts as a vehicle for understanding how Black tomboys and MPLs disrupt hegemonic masculinity through their own expressions of masculinity. If Black women's rhetorical practices bring wreck to hip-hop then I offer the Black tomboys and MPLs, specifically, bring wreck to hip-hop culture through their expressions of gender and sexuality. However, their work does not come without navigation and direct interactions with the potential rigidity of gender in hip-hop.

Though tomboyism has been explored in American popular culture, it has not afforded the same exploration to tomboys of color—specifically Black tomboys. This is unfortunate, however, as tomboy expression offers much to the field of gender and queer

theory as a space of gendered potentials. Highlighting race within tomboyism and hip-hop culture underlines forms of Black and hip-hop masculinity. Specifically, locating Black tomboys within hip-hop underlines the fluidity and possibilities of masculinity and sexuality. As tomboys like Aaliyah offer a more desirable view of tomboyism (as she confirms forms of femininity and heterosexuality that quell anxieties of queerness), she still affords viewers and fans the opportunity to broaden what is masculine and why. If a MPL rapper like Siya can identify with her, through her expression of tomboyism, then gender and sexuality in hip-hop is more transgressive than attitudes about hip-hop may seem. However, through their navigations of age, sexuality and femininity, tomboys still present Black masculinity in a way that challenges the potential rigidity of it.

While MPLs do not negotiate femininity or heterosexuality, they do have to navigate masculine legibility, homolateness, masculine sincerity and disidentification. Their expressions of Black masculinity disrupt any imaginative ideas of Black masculinity belonging only to Black cis-het men. Instead, masculinity and desire for women is opened to everyone within hip-hop. Though MPLs risk perpetuating toxic masculinity, their bodies being present in hip-hop spaces does a lot to interrupt hegemonic masculine through-lines within hip-hop. While this may not be a project of progress it is one of disruption. A prime example of this disruption comes again from Young M.A during her interview with The Breakfast Club. Charlamagne Tha God addresses her lyric from “OOUUU,” “*Damn, she make me weak when she deep throat...*” He expresses his confusion over the lyric and other lyrics like it as he is curious to what she could deep throat since M.A is a woman. M.A, clearly aware of his unawareness opts to not go into much detail and insists that it is her business and

comically suggests that Charlamagne's intrigue is suspicious as he is a cisgender-heterosexual male. Why would he need to know? Though she chooses not to engage his heterosexual male gaze in the interview, she continues to make various sexual references about the sex she has with women in most of her music. Although Charlamagne's curiosity reveals ignorance about different forms of sex, specifically queer sex, the fact that he even asks the question speaks for a culture that is new to the explicitness of queer sex. If for nothing else, Charlamagne had to open his imagination to the idea that forms of oral sex expressed by men in hip-hop, could also go for women too. For that reason, among others, M.A and MPLs like her informs hip-hop culture on a subject matter it is not readily aware of, but will be. Her unwillingness to deeply engage him speaks to a sector of gender and sexuality that Black cis-het men don't have access to and don't need to have access to as long as they make room for it.

As this project is a work in progress, there are points of inquiry that I would like to address later. Since I've started this research I've had peers address the tomboy chapter in a split, some recognizing Aaliyah as a tomboy, and some not. I want to unpack that discrepancy and go beyond mere personal taste and explore more gender and sexuality expectations of masculinity. Who gets to be legible as masculine, really? A film analysis of *Alike* from *Pariah* will serve as a starting point for that trajectory. I would like to think through feminine expressions of masculinity as well. For example, feminine-presenting and heterosexual identifying artists within today's hip-hop makes similar references in their music that denotes privilege and desire for women. What does it mean to borrow from masculinity and desire in hip-hop? Additionally, I want to broaden my analysis of desire. While I focus on desirability of tomboys in the first chapter and desirability of

women from MPLs in the second, I hope to work on a more concrete definition of desire as a framework. As hip-hop is both generational and regional, I will incorporate both in my analysis to unearth more nuances within Black genders and sexualities within hip-hop. The 80s and 90s as eras in hip-hop emerges in our imaginations about tomboy expression because of artists like MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, and Missy Elliott. Hip-hop fashion during those times allowed for a more blended expression of gender in the name of fashion, but why? Regionally speaking, hip-hop fashion and style always depends on the region. Thinking through styles and hip-hop requires a deeper look at regional specific understandings of gender, sexuality and fashion. This list of topics serves as a springboard for future implications of this research and I anticipate that the topics presented in this thesis will continue to transform.

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