Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Women Rappers: The Creation and Inhabitation of a New Sexual Landscape in Three Case Studies

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Abstract

This thesis is a series of three case studies, focusing on Missy Elliott, Azealia Banks, and Young M.A. These queer women rappers have changed the genre of rap as well as the way that women navigate the industry. By speaking explicitly about sex in their lyrics, these women have created positions of power and agency in rap music. Some topics discussed are gender performance, costume, transcending the gender binary, cunnilingus in the popular imagination, and normalizing women-loving-women activity. I address the following questions: How did Missy Elliott create a new sexual landscape? How did Azealia Banks inhabit that landscape, and how was she successful and unsuccessful in her efforts? How does Young M.A function within that landscape as visibly queer, while remaining authentic to her intersectional identities? Within my research I have pinpointed particular moments in popular rap music that have altered the way the audience understands sex, women’s roles in sex, and queer women’s roles in sex as well as within the rap industry as a whole.
Dedication

This thesis was possible due to the extreme patience and consistent support of Professor Molly Martin, thesis director and mentor. Without the careful guidance and productive conversation of Professor Christopher Packard, this thesis would still be a jumble of ideas in a Word document somewhere in the depths of my computer’s memory. Gracious thanks to Professor Ryan Harper, who shares my passion for hip-hop and offered encouragement when I questioned my own ability to tackle such a project. I am forever indebted to those that saw my potential before I recognized it in myself.
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INTRODUCTION

Hip-Hop is a relatively new genre of music; its origins can be traced to the Bronx in New York City in the 1970s, when New York was rougher than it is now. MCing, or mic-controlling, came after Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five figured out how to create a consistent musical loop by setting up two turntables side by side, marking the “get-down” or most interesting instrumental section of a song with a crayon, and switching from turntable to turntable while playing the marked section of the record on an infinite repeat. Rappers spoke over the beat, creating rhymes and engaging the audience with call and response. Over time, rap became commercialized and turned into a business that was both profitable and dangerous for those involved. One risked their livelihood, their self-respect, their privacy, and their reputation by becoming a rapper. Women especially were at risk, as the rap industry grew into a patriarchal empire. However, women always played a key part in the story of rap. Women MCs gained as much fame as men. So why weren’t they as respected?

Lyrics from rap music have long been known to be misogynistic; male rappers often refer to women as sexual objects instead of sexual interests, pawns instead of partners, decorative instead of worthy of time and consideration. However, in the early 2000s, something shifted. Now, rappers, even male rappers, speak about sex in a new and different way. The focus has shifted from receiving pleasure to giving pleasure to women. This by no means signifies an end to sexism within the industry; however, it does signal that a change occurred. In order to discover what happened to cause this change in perspective, I turned to the music and listened to some of the biggest names in the game. I noticed that women rappers also speak about sex; however, I
most women rappers that were ready to get explicit and specific about sex while retaining sexual agency were lesbian, bisexual, or queer.

In order to trace this genealogy of sexual freedom, I asked: How did lesbian, bisexual, and queer women rappers open up the space in the rap industry for feminism, specifically feminism in sex? In order to answer this question, I performed three case studies on queer women rappers: Missy Elliott, Azealia Banks, and Young M.A.

Throughout my thesis, I show how, over time, lesbian and bisexual women have engaged in sexual discourse to create positions of authority and agency within the rap industry. Along with cogent content, each of these rappers have shown extraordinary skill and talent when it comes to their craft, the business aspect of the industry, and their relationships with their audiences as well as the industry’s changing relationship to technology.

The time period in which the artists worked (the late 1990s to late 2010s) was one of volatile technological change. In the 1990s, tape-recorders changed to CDs, which then changed to digital music. Currently, digital music is changing due to subscription streaming services that allow listeners to stream unlimited music for a single serial payment. With the changing means of access, artists had to change the ways in which they interacted with their audiences. Social media, i.e. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, became a way to advertise and communicate with audiences, and to reveal the personhood of the artist themselves. It also eliminated the necessity of a middle man; artists could release music with or without their producers (or their consent), and without the necessity of a record label.

This affected the nature of my research. As I looked into Missy Elliott’s story, I found many print books that detailed her influence; as I travelled through time in my thesis, however,
these sources became more and more difficult to find. Instead, I found myself turning to recorded interviews, songs released without the backing of a label or producer, and the artists’ social media pages. This proved to be both a blessing and a struggle; while I was given a personal access to Azealia Banks and Young M.A’s words without the skewed lens of analysis or a nostalgic recollection, I was faced with the difficulty of finding academic discussions of these two artists’ work. Instead, I found myself often being the first person attempting to write a scholarly analysis of their lives and lyrics.

My first chapter is devoted to Missy Elliott, who troubled the public’s idea of gender performance and sexuality through her performance. She is known for her iconic trash-bag costume for the “The Rain” (1997) music video, her futuristic hit songs such as “Work It” (2002), and her boundary-pushing performance at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards alongside Madonna, Britney Spears, and Christina Aguilera. I will analyze how Missy Elliott transcended binarism in order to create a new sexual landscape in which heteronormative rules were brought into question, and sexual possibility was introduced. I analyze her costume and how she re-interprets the idea of body, the lyrics of “Work It” (2002) and how she makes sexually explicit lyrics sexually ambiguous, and how her performance of sexuality contrasted with that of Madonna, Britney, and Christina during the 2013 VMAs. I show how Elliott’s concept of gender and sexuality not limited by the male gaze.

My second case study focuses on Azealia Banks. Banks functions within the space that Missy Elliott created, and has worked closely with Elliott as an artist. Banks, however, struggled with societal backlash due to her specific performance of masculinity and femininity within her own artistic sphere. In the second chapter of my thesis I aim to answer how Azealia Banks made use of the new sexual landscape that Elliott had created, and what was successful and what was
unsuccessful. This chapter shows how Banks, who either identifies as Bisexual or refuses to label herself, created a new lexicon in order to give the new sexual landscape a vocabulary, terminology, and agency. She also interacted with heteronormative ideas about sexual expectation and taboos around cunnic slang and slurs. I also discuss how, although Banks’s behavior was divisive, she was not given critical acclaim despite the fact that others in the rap industry, specifically Kanye West, have behaved in a similarly destructive, and arguably more destructive, manner but were given leeway by the public due to the artists’ performance of gender. I also analyze the introduction of social media into the rap industry, and how it affected Azealia Banks’s performance of celebrity.

My third chapter discusses work by new recording artist Young M.A. Young M.A is a Brooklyn-based rapper with a troubled past. She is an out lesbian, and discusses women-loving-women sexual activity in her lyrical content. In this chapter I sought to discover how rap is changing in this moment, and what it might look like in the future. How can out, queer artists engage with the rap industry while retaining intersectional authenticity in their identities as queer and as members of the hip-hop community? I show how Young M.A works to normalize queer issues by equating them with other issues faced by subjugated groups, such as the impoverished or at-risk populations of inner cities. She also works to normalize lesbianism by creating raps that revolve around relationship issues instead of the lesbian aspect of the relationship; for example, I perform a close reading of the song “Karma Krys” (2016), which discusses the harmful effects of serial infidelity. The relationship just happens to be a lesbian one.

My thesis pays special attention to the power of terminology and words, which makes sense while considering the fact that the artists I analyze are rappers: in other words, wordsmiths. Through lyrical play, rhyme scheme, imagery, tone, and the construction of song through
samples, these artists have used sonic tools to change the way their audiences think about gender and sexuality. These artists are human, and are by no means ideal representations of any gender performance, sexuality, or even artistry. However, through my close readings of their work, analysis of their performances, and coming to know these artists through their own words, I have gained the utmost respect and admiration for each of them. Each of them has a place in the history of hip-hop, the history of rap, and the history of the LGBTQ community.
CHAPTER 1

Breaking the Binary: How Missy Elliott Transcended Western Binarism to Create a New Sexual Landscape

Hip-hop artist, rapper, producer, and talent scout Missy Elliott embodies the concept of bisexuality in all aspects of her performance, whether it be gender, sexuality, musical, or in costume. In this chapter, I will offer a refined definition of bisexuality that is inclusive of those who are not yet out of the “closet.” That definition also serves to explain and deepen the understanding of performance of gender. I will analyze how Missy Elliott functions both in and out of the closet through her music; much of this is based on Elliott’s refusal to conform to gender norms, from her introduction to the music industry all the way to her current music releases. I will analyze Elliott’s performance of bisexuality in terms of costume and formation of the gendered or nongendered body, using Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble as a cornerstone theoretical base. Then I will move into Elliott’s lyricism, her use of Hip-Hop Sonic Cool Pose, onomatopoetics, and her use of body in physical performance spaces, notably the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards. I will explain the boundaries and binaries that Elliott superseded, and in later chapters will describe the space which other artists were able to inhabit because Elliott had already broken ground.

The late 1990s and early 2000s were the years of black, male, rap superstars. With hits like “Hypnotize” (1997) by Notorious B.I.G., “Big Daddy” (1997) by Heavy D, and “What’s LUV?” by Fat Joe (2002), it was clear that the rap scene had a complex when it came to women.
In “Hypnotize” (1997), the hook for this song features obsequious admiration of Notorious B.I.G. (also known as Biggie Smalls) by a woman; the vocals for this song are sung by a woman named Pamela Long, who is not credited as a featured artist on either the Billboard listings or as a collaborative or featured artist when purchasing or streaming the song. Her absence speaks volumes in that it shows the disregard for women’s artistic talent, their vocal input, and their potential future in the music industry as they fail to be credited and recognized. In “Big Daddy” (1997), Heavy D waxes poetic about his abilities to buy a woman many outfits so that she can dress in a way that is appealing to him, taking away her agency and treating her as a Barbie doll to decorate as he sees fit. In “What’s LUV?” (2002) Fat Joe begins his rap with a clear statement of male sexual dominance, followed by a passive aggressive plea for his partner to stop talking – she is meant to be seen, physically consumed but not pleasured, and not heard. Over and over again, women were pushed to the sidelines of the rap industry; they were not credited with the work that they had done, were not offered positions of power or equality, were given very little creative control if they were independent artists, and were mostly considered objects of rap instead of subjects with very few exceptions. Women were rapped about by male rappers in

1Biggie, Biggie, Biggie can't you see?
Sometimes your words just hypnotize me
And I just love your flashy ways
I guess that's why they broke, and you're so paid

2Buy you a bunch of outfits, you’re sexy, you’re hot
So she could look good for Hev D

3Slow down baby
Let you know from the gate I don't go down lady
I wanna chick with thick hips that licks her lips
She can be the office type or like to strip
Girl you get me aroused how you look in my eye
But you talk too much, man, you’re ruinin' my high.

Here the lyrics are highlighted to show rhyme scheme, which helps visualize what is called “flow,” the change from one rhyme scheme to another.
misogynistic ways, they were complicit in the belittling of their own gender, or they were relegated to an off-shoot of the industry and not taken “seriously” or even recognized as true “rappers,” such as Salt n’ Pepa, who were considered comical, or Lauryn Hill, who was encouraged and pressured to change genres and move into Rhythm & Blues. That is, things were quite limited until Missy Elliott exploded onto the scene and altered the entire landscape of rap, creating an example for later artists to follow.

Elliott grew up in rural Virginia and always harbored dreams of becoming a music star. Her childhood friend, Timothy “Timbaland” Mosley, collaborated with her to experiment with music and quickly gained a reputation in the industry. Elliott formed an all-girl group called Sista and produced demo tracks with Timbaland; the group was never signed and they disbanded, but Elliott and Timbaland had begun to make a name for themselves due to their innovative production work. They began by writing songs for hip-hop artists such as Aaliyah, and then Elliott was offered the opportunity to write, produce, and perform music under her own label, called Gold Mind Records, by the head of the Elektra Entertainment Group (“Missy Elliott” Encyclopædia Britannica). This was an industry break through; Missy Elliott was the first woman ever to both create a label without a released studio-album. She was subsequently the first artist signed to Gold Mind Records (McDonnell 82). It was important that Elliott be completely in charge of her music and her creative capacity; there is a highly imbalanced power dynamic between the label that produces an artist’s work and the artist themselves. The producers choose the “image” of the artist, limiting creative control in many cases as well as appearances and interviews, stage performances, and costume. This happens to female artists especially. I will later examine the case of Azealia Banks, who was the victim of industry manipulation. Missy
Elliott, however, circumvented these aspects of the industry by being sure that she had no one exerting creative restriction or control over her.

With each of her albums, Missy Elliott pushed the boundaries of both Hip-hop and Pop, blurring the lines of accessibility to rap music. Because she was a crossover success, she was one the impetuses in the change from a strict divide between black and white listeners. In one of the first true profiles of Elliott, Hilton Als of the New Yorker wrote,

…in her video she has managed to catapult herself beyond the clichéd horny-boy images of girls in Jacuzzis chugalugging champagne. Instead, she has capitalized on the hip aesthetic that Sly Stone founded in the late nineteen-sixties, when he developed a persona that managed to retain a hard-edged black sound without making white listeners feel hopelessly unhip. (Als)

Here Missy Elliott is shown to have a deep understanding of her musical predecessors while maintaining a futuristic gaze. Her songs changed the focus from urbanity and sexual objectification to sexual agency, attraction, self-empowerment, and dynamism. Elliott helped facilitate the transition from Hip-hop into hip-pop, a moment that can be located in the early 2000s. Hip-hop exploded from the cities into suburban white neighborhoods, mingling with alternative and punk-rock on radio stations and the Billboard Hot 100 until it finally became the dominant force in popular music. This shift can be traced by observing the genres of the top few songs over the past decade on the Billboard Hot 100 year-end chart, which combines the data of each song’s air-time, streaming count, and physical and digital sales to find the one hundred most successful songs of each year. For example, in 2001, Lifehouse (Alternative Rock) and Alicia Keys (R & B) were vying for the top spot; in 2002, it was Nickelback (Rock) and Ashanti (Hip-hop); 2003, 50 Cent (Rap) and R. Kelly (Rap). From there on, we have R & B, Hip-Hop,
and Rap ranking in the top five most successful songs through 2008, when there is a notable absence of prominent rappers in the industry until 2012, with the arrival of Macklemore – the epitome of hip-pop, with bright and playful singles like “Thrift Shop” (2012) that became anthems for suburban white kids (“Music charts”).

In order to facilitate the shift from hip-hop to hip-pop, where hip-hop songs and aspects of hip-hop music find themselves understood as popular, Missy Elliott had to prove herself as a transgressor of boundaries. In the space of only one week, Timbaland and Elliott produced and recorded Missy Elliott’s breakout album, *Supa Dupa Fly* (1997) under Elliott’s own label, Gold Mind Records. Reflecting on *Supa Dupa Fly* (1997), music and pop-culture writer Evelyn McDonnell writes, “That album was a declaration of autonomy in a genre defined by male producers and songwriters - and it sold like gangsters” (83). Elliott was breaking boundaries not simply by the nature of her status and authority within her own label, but also through her innovative talent within the music itself. With singles like “The Rain” and “Sock it 2 Me,” Elliott challenged the very definition of rap, playing with rhythm, flow, and lyrical outrageousness. Elliott and Timbaland experimented with sampling, the act of taking sounds, cycles, and drum-beats from other records, and mixing them together to create something new. Sampling was a practice at the foundation of hip-hop music: originally an MC would rap over a repeated beat from the breakdown of a disco record, which was a section of a song that is usually drum-heavy and has little or no vocals. Here Elliott and Timbaland respected the roots of hip-hop, but sourced their samples from genres and records that were unfamiliar to the genre. They also worked with sound in new and different ways. With “The Rain,” they experimented with tempo, slowing the song down to a pace unprecedented in a rap song. Elliott rapped on each of the
tracks, always pushing the limit of experimentation, but also collaborating on certain songs with other big names from the day, such as Da Brat and Lil’ Kim.

Missy Elliott has produced six studio albums, beginning with *Supa Dupa Fly* (1997) and ending with *The Cookbook* (2005), which landed at number two on Billboard’s Top 200 Albums on its year-end compilation (“Missy Elliot” *Billboard.com*). On each of these albums, Elliott consistently transgresses the boundaries of the representation of gender and sexuality through her lyrics and the music’s accompanying visuals. Although Missy Elliott has never had a true “coming out” moment, she performs bisexuality in her music, lyrics, and stage performances and is read as bisexual by others in the industry and addresses this in a song entitled “Gossip Folks” (2002), which will also be discussed later in the chapter. Her first single, “The Rain,” (1997) introduced her as a figure that would not play by the rules of American gender binaries, and will be discussed later in the chapter.

In terms of vocabulary, when I say “bisexual” or “bisexuality,” I am using it in the sense of queer theorist Christopher James’s definition “the sexual or intensely emotional, although not necessarily concurrent or equal, attraction of an individual to members of more than one gender” (James 218), but also combining it with more developed and open interpretations of the word. This definition functions within the understanding of the term “bisexuality” at the time of its origin, which expressed a *transgression* of the Western gender binary of male/female by representing potential couplings of male/male or female/female in equal standing with the accepted male/female. However, it is essential to note that my working definition *transcends* the understanding of gender and queerness at the time in which the term “bisexual” was coined.
James writes, “Within theories of mutual interiority\textsuperscript{4}, bisexuality can be viewed as an open and growing site of contact within an otherwise permeable binarism, a disruptive third category significantly problematizing the others” (James 225). This can be understood as a freer definition than simply the attraction of one person to both female and male gendered others because it disrupts the idea of the female and the male existing as isolated opposites. Instead, it is possible to trace Elliott performing aspects of both masculinity and femininity but also performing above and beyond these two social constructs, exploring uncharted territory in her music video for “The Rain” (1997). Thus, when the performance of gender is troubled in that the gender that is being performed becomes unidentifiable, our understanding of bisexuality – which was predicated on the attraction to both parts of the “binary”, had to change. In this thesis, bisexuality exists as an ontological state within an engendered new sexual landscape, above and outside of – also actively rejecting - the heteronormative Western understanding of heterosexuality (attraction between male and female) vs homosexuality (attraction between partners of the same gender) as another solid binary. Bisexuality is, however, often filtered through the hetero/homo binary, and thus erased by those who exist within that binary. Often, society conflates bisexual acts as either heterosexual or homosexual activity; for example, a bisexual person in a heterosexual relationship is read as heterosexual as they perform public displays of affection, and homosexual as they do the same with a partner that is the same gender as themselves. This misunderstanding is often facilitated by the implied duality of the prefix “bi,” which some understand as a scale of extremes or an on/off switch style of existence that changes with time to one or the other state of

\textsuperscript{4} “Mutual interiority – the theorization of the social and psychological interconnected-ness of heterosexuality and homosexuality that appears to encompass slippages between sexual identities and desires – does not currently include bisexuality in its scope” (James 223).
being. Missy Elliott transcends and transgresses these binarisms and these societal assumptions in her music by troubling the idea of the object of her affection being strictly gendered at any given time, as well as troubling the performance of her own gender.

The performance of gender revolves around the specific ways in which a body is decorated and set into motion. According to Judith Butler’s landmark piece on gender and sexuality, *Gender Trouble*, “…‘body’ often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as ‘external’ to that body” (Butler 2542). In other words, our bodies serve as the canvas on which we choose to place different masculine, feminine, or non-gendered signifiers, such as clothing, makeup, posture, and body language. Butler points out that these signifiers are often prescribed to the body by the society in which the body lives. Missy Elliott rejects this social phenomenon by actively confusing her audience with her costume. As co-director of all of her music videos, she made executive decisions when it came to costume, design, and concept. She decided to reject what was accepted as contemporary feminine hip-hop fashion by portraying herself as an overt object of heterosexual desire. The video for Missy Elliott’s breakout single “The Rain” showed her dancing in a jerky, stop-motion manner in what seems to be an inflated trash bag for a large portion of the time she spent on screen. She wore a bedazzled bicycle helmet, black gloves and work boots, and red reflective goggles that obscured her eyes. [See Figure 1] Her lips were painted a dark brown, almost black color, and she wore large gold hoop earrings. This look became an iconic symbol of Elliott’s career and pioneering style, and it was echoed in subsequent hip-hop stars’ visual art. The inflated black “trash bag” serves to obscure the shape and form of Elliott’s body, leaving her body neither masculine nor feminine, while her earrings and makeup are signifiers for femininity, her boots and *lack* of overt feminine signifiers (such as clothing that emphasizes her
curves) are signifiers of masculinity. Instead of embodying either femininity or masculinity completely, she exists as an unidentifiable figure embodying a non-binaried sexual landscape.

In the visual for “Sock it 2 Me,” also from the album *Supa Dupa Fly* (1997), Missy Elliott and Da Brat, who features a verse on this song, are animated video-game characters. Footage of their faces is superimposed on their cartoon avatars. The two of them blast off from Earth in a spaceship on a mission to eliminate robot aliens with lasers on a foreign planet. Timbaland, who produced the song with Elliott, features visually in the last thirty seconds as an Einstein-esque scientist with an unruly grey wig, but clearly masculine. While her companion is featured with a long, blond weave and an hourglass figure with pink armor, Missy’s torso is expanded, with a block-like shape and hyper-muscular forearms. [See Figure 2] Her hair is short beneath her helmet, but she wears a full face of makeup.

These elements, through the lens of the heteronormative, contrast with each other; in the world of Elliott’s performance, the new sexual landscape, they function as non-conflicting elements of style. In the video they exist in an extra-terrestrial, and thus supra-societal, space. As aforementioned, Butler discusses gender as a repeated performance of choice (whether conscious or sub-conscious), involving the presentation of signifiers such as clothes, jewelry, and make-up, but also stance and composure. She writes,

What constitutes through division the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control. The boundary between the inner and outer is confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished.

(Butler, 2546)
Here, by choosing to express herself via costume that defies gender norms, Missy Elliott is doing more than simply wearing boys’ clothes, which would be within the realms of acceptable defiance within the understanding of the gender and sexual binary, or wearing girls’ feminine dress in societal compliance; she is actually *inventing*, expressing the non-conformative concept of gender and sexuality within by choosing non-conformative costume. Her “inner” self is able to find itself represented on her “outer” in the spaces of invention – her creative landscape. This creative landscape, because it is so widely disseminated via popular culture, acts as a readable and repeatable performance of gender – or lack thereof – and thus of sexuality. By making herself an unidentifiable figure, she troubles the concept of who ought to be attracted to her, and this is her performance of bisexuality.

The stylized helmet, by now a recurring symbol, is repeated in the video for “She’s a B**ch,” an anthem for female empowerment and a lyrical reclamation of the term “bitch.” [See Figure 3] Elliott is featured wearing a bald cap that acts as a helmet due to the black and white filter of the video; she is also wearing bejeweled goggles similar to those from the music video for “The Rain”. She also wears a long, black men’s cape, and in the darkness of the opening sequence is easily mistaken for a man. However, as she begins to rap, she caresses her breasts, which are nearly invisible as they are pressed to her torso in a hard amour-like top, but come into prominence as she handles them. This series of images serves to remind the viewer that the way that a person’s body is dressed is a choice, so long as the individual has the agency to dress themselves, and that what is underneath can be revealed or disguised as the individual sees fit.

Butler goes on in her analysis of the construction of the body,

Cultural values emerge as the result of an inscription on the body, understood as a medium, indeed, a blank page; in order for this inscription to signify, however, that
medium must itself be destroyed – that is, fully transvaluated into a sublimated domain of values. (Butler 2543)

Butler’s point about cultural values is reflected in Elliott’s choice of costume both in “The Rain”, “Sock it 2 Me”, and “She’s a B***h” (1997), where Elliott’s body takes on the form of either ungendered ambiguity, or a mix of masculinity and femininity. The costume choice troubles the traditional and ongoing understanding of what women and men are meant to look like; binaried visual cues are lacking, so the audience is unsure of how to perceive her. As a sex symbol, the question again arises: should females or males be attracted to her? And then, the implied answer: should we even be asking?

Throughout her career, but especially in her later albums, Missy Elliott uses lyrical ambiguity and onomatopoeics in combination with costume and dress as a tool to explore music through the performance of bisexuality. In Onomatopoetic theory, onomatopoeia can refer to more than just an object. The sound recalls shape, size, texture, and other sensory information (Brogan). Thus, the sound becomes more than simply a signifier for an object or idea, and becomes an experience in and of itself. Therefore, through sound, Elliott transcends the signifier/signified binary, relying on culture and the surrounding music to provide context to sounds that, isolated, don’t mean anything at all.

One of the ways Missy Elliott further engages in the disruption of binaries is by combining her onomatopoeic sounds with a performative stance called “Hip-hop Sonic Cool Pose” (hereafter referred to as HHSCP). In an analysis of black male rappers, Regina N. Bradley explains that “HHSCP lies in an understanding of sound as musical and nonmusical, and posits a sonically manifested space to interpret and explore aspects of black identity unavailable in other mediums” (Bradley 61). In other words, HHSCP, also known as simply “Cool pose,” exists
because music is not limited to musical notes; ethos, performative character, and identity all come into play during the production of sounds put together to make a record. All of this is expressed sonically, so the visuals for the songs are not necessary to understand the use of HHSCP, but they can help. Bradley continues, “Cool pose, the performance and positioning of the black male body as a symbol of coolness, in its present form leans heavily upon stereotypical and often uncontested expectations of black masculinity” (57). The performance of HHSCP is based in adopting aspects of often stereotypical, and not necessarily neutral, black masculinity, which include a blasé attitude, a detachment from emotion or an intentional distance from sensitive emotion, and an attitude of silliness and/or toughness. Missy Elliott employs HHSCP in a variety of ways, including laughing, speaking gibberish, using onomatopoeic words, and reversing her own recordings within her songs.

Missy Elliott is one of the first female rappers to use HHSCP in a way that innovates instead of imitates what other male rappers have done. While contemporary rappers such as Lil Kim or Da Brat use a “tough” voice, lowering the pitch of their voice and over-annunciating their consonants, Elliott takes the idea of “cool” and recreates it. For example, she employs onomatopoeic lyrics such as “blah, blah, blah,” to express an “above it all” attitude, bringing the nonsense sounds into an unusual context as she speaks about the sounds produced during sex. She also takes positions that are typically inhabited by males and are associated with masculinity when her lyrics become sexually explicit, such as demanding oral sex or claiming dominance. However, she is never limited by her adoption of HHSCP or masculine traits, and pulls in elements of femininity that often leave the listener struggling to keep up with the sudden changes. However, the music pushes forward, forcing the reader to accept the lyrics and move on to the next set of bars.
In one of her most popular songs, “Work It” (2002) from the album *Under Construction*, Elliott gets explicit.

Phone before you come, I need to shave my chocha
You do or you don't or you will or won't ya
Go downtown and eat it like a vulture
See my hips and my tips, don’t ya
See my a** and my lips, don't ya
Lost a few pounds and my whips for ya
This the kinda beat that go ra-ta-ta
Ra-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta
Sex me so good I say blah-blah-blah

She demands oral sex using a poetic simile, “Go downtown and eat it like a vulture.” This is an aggressive, masculine command that, when fulfilled, results in physical pleasure only for Elliott, but not for her partner – a theme we’ve seen before, namely in Fat Joe’s opening lyrics for “What’s Luv?” (2002) that was released in the same year as “Work It.” Elliott, however, expresses femininity and coyness in the same breath, such as “lost a few pounds in my whips for ya.” “Whips” is a slang term for the area on a woman’s body encompassing the waist and hips. By claiming to have lost weight for her partner, Elliott inhabits the feminine space of submission, one in which changes are made specifically for the benefit of the partner whether or not they help or hinder Elliott herself. The lyrics adopt different stances on body image and a

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5 Note Elliott’s mastery of flow: the insertion of new rhyme scheme or the change of rhyme scheme throughout a song was an innovation on the typical use of rhyme scheme, which hinged on one rhyme pattern at a time.
woman’s role in a sexual relationship, the first a masculine tendency to demand and the second the feminine tendency to offer. However, the sonic impression during the recitation of this entire verse is maintained throughout: the tone is flat with little intonation except an up-lilt on the final syllable, followed by a mild echoing effect that leaves the listener with less of a masculine or feminine sound and more of a non-gendered, almost alien quality. When accompanied by the video visuals, the lyrics are no less ambiguous. Elliott wears a velour sweat suit while breakdancing, saying most of the above lyrics while impossibly frozen in an inverted position, a semi head/handstand. Her dress is neither overtly masculine nor overtly feminine, taking elements from both; her face is fully made, but she lifts her lip in an aggressive snarl at the camera. Then she smiles. Elliott confuses the assumptions of what a woman or a man should look like or sound like, combining qualities of both together in her lyrics and visuals while pulling in onomatopoetic elements that serve to provide an extra- or sopra-gendered quality to the music.

In another track on the same album, “Gossip Folks” (2002), Elliott addresses the rumors surrounding her various relationships, both professional and personal, as well as those surrounding her dramatic weight loss. In the music video, three young kids whisper several claims that have been made by the media, but exaggerated on such a scale as to make them seem ridiculous. And yet, the listener is not convinced that the claims are entirely untrue, and some lines are deeply coded. For example, the following lines address rumors of Elliott mixing her business and romantic relationships:

Oh well I heard the bitch was married to Tim and started fucking with Trina
I heard the bitch got hit with three zebras and a monkey.
Tim (Timbaland) was Elliott’s childhood friend and partner in production. Trina, an artist and one of many of Elliott’s musical protégées, featured on Elliott’s song titled “One Minute Man” (2001). The first line is an explicit example of the music industry and the public reading Elliott as a bisexual figure; however, because the lyrics speak about specific people in Elliott’s life, the interest is more in the relationship with the individual and less in the fact that one of the supposed sexual interests is male and the other female. The use of specific names draws attention away from the bisexual claim of the line; however, this claim is never contested explicitly throughout this rap or any other rap.

The second line is more confusing. “Zebras” and “monkeys” can mean several things. They are both racial slurs: a “Zebra” is a name for a biracial black/white person and a “monkey” is a slur for a black person; a “zebra” can be code for police cars, which are sometimes painted black and white; a “monkey” is also slang for “vagina.” It could also be entirely nonsensical, to emphasize the ridiculousness of the media rumors mentioned in the first line. However, I am prone to thinking that this line, found in the introduction of the song, is a prelude to the coded onomatopoeia found within the chorus of “Work It” (2002). “Gossip Folks,” track number three on the album Under Construction (2002) is immediately followed by “Work it,” track number four. In the song “Work It” (2002), Elliott uses a sample of the trumpeting of an elephant; the sound is prolonged for about a beat and a half, and its placement suggests the replacement of a word, and implies female or male genitalia, as will be discussed below. In “Gossip Folks,” the line “Oh well I heard the bitch was married to Tim and started fucking with Trina,” is evidence that the public was reading Missy Elliott as a bisexual figure, whether she had “come out” to her audience or not. The rumors were so far distributed that she felt the need to address them, but
never outright denied them – allowing her to remain in an ambiguous space, neither within nor out of “the closet.” The use of nongendered animals in the following line, as well as the ambiguous elephant sound in the chorus of “Work It”, functions as the intentional blurring of perception, while at the same time sharpening Elliott’s uniquely cultivated sopra-gendered performance. These two songs work together, a transgression of binaries in a new context. The two songs transcend the differentiation of tracks and time, expanding ideas over two separate songs without adulterating the musical integrity of each individual track.


Is it **worth it**, let me **work it**

I put my thing down, flip it and **reverse it**.

**Ti esrever dna ti pilf nwod gniht ym tup I**
**Ti esrever dna ti pilf nwod gniht ym tup I**

If you got a big *******, let me **search it**
And find out how hard I gotta **work ya**

The lyrics “I put my thing down, flip it and reverse it,” are said once forward, and twice backward. This line has several interpretations. First and foremost, her “thing” can be understood as her voice: she is putting it on the track, then flipping/reversing it for the following two lines. This has also, however, been understood as describing a series of dance moves. For the purpose of this thesis, however, the most relevant interpretation is that her “thing” refers to genitalia: she is, by leaving the “thing” unnamed, de-gendering herself. She then “flips” and “reverses” it, troubling the idea that gender or sexuality is permanent and ascribed. The following reversed lines trouble the listener’s assumption that all music will run left to right, in a teleological

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6 These lines show that they are “I put my thing down, flip it and reverse it” played backwards; however, they do not capture Elliott’s phonemes and accent. When listened to, the lines sound a little like “Its yer frimmin ippe fla nyep.”
fashion that follows the Western conception of time. Elliott declares through her lyrics that she is
disruptive without aggression, intentionally uprooting ideas that have been ground not only into
the musical genre of rap, but into the Western ideology set in general.

“Work It” touches on several topics, all of which are subversive in nature due to the
opinions that Elliott expresses. The first flow runs through a series of sexual demands that Elliott
conveys from a position of authority. She calls for sexual satisfaction, but names no one – only
the ambiguous “you” – which leaves the interpretation of the gender of Elliott’s partner up to the
discretion of the listener.

A woman claiming her right to satisfaction, posturing about what she can offer, and
asking if it’s “worth it” to even begin the is Elliott slipping into the role of masculinity in rap.
2002 is the same year that Nelly’s “Hot in Herrre” was released and reached the number three
spot on Billboard’s Hot 100 list. Nelly’s lyrics describe a simple command/response sexual
scenario in which Nelly orders a woman to “take off all your clothes,” and she responds “I’m
gonna take my clothes off,” with no question, agency, or expression of desire. In comparison,
Elliott inhabits a similar space to Nelly, but lacks an interlocutor within the realm of her song.
Instead, the entire audience fills the space of the ambiguous “you,” and the listener is brought
into Elliott’s new sexual landscape.

Let us now take a closer look at the line that samples a sound to replace a word: “If you
got a big ***, let me search it.” In this snippet of the chorus, Elliott uses a sample of an elephant
sound to refer to genitalia, here marked by three asterisks. Elliott employs the sound after using a
word that refers to size; however, as described in onomatopoetic theory, the sound itself can
imply size and shape. The sound itself is big, sensually associated with the creature that made the
sound. However, the sound does not signify the word elephant. Instead, it symbolizes the sensual
experience associated both with the elephant and the context of the song: sex. Therefore, the sound implies the phallic nature of an elephant trunk. And yet, any word representing “phallus” is entirely absent, thus Elliott employs intentional sexual ambiguity.

The heteronormative reading of the lines interprets the elephant sound as a replacement for a swear word referencing male genitalia, such as “dick” or “cock.” Thus the line would read, “If you got a big dick, let me search it.” However, the last phrase makes the reader pause: a heteronormative reading would not allow for a clear definition of what “search” means. One interpretation includes a visual image of a police or security pat-down, allowing Elliott to estimate the size or nature of the phallic genitalia. However, the nature of the elephant sample gives the reader the opportunity for other interpretations. Consequently, the entire scenario could be reversed to stand for female genitalia, more specifically the vaginal canal. The sound of the elephant calls to mind the image of the trunk, from which the trumpeting sound expels, but the trunk is a hollow cavity, and can be interpreted as equally phallic and cunnilingus. The lyrics following the sample, “let me search it,” function also as a reference to digital stimulation of the vagina, as a finger makes a “searching” or exploring motion while inside the vaginal canal. The phrases around the blank space troubles the issue of what the missing word could actually be.

Butler’s Gender Trouble addresses the heteronormative ideology surrounding the body; the penis belongs to the man and is used on a woman; the vagina belongs to the woman and receives the penis. These claims find themselves repeated across all forms of media consumption so often that there is a point where the audience can fill in missing information without the message becoming a nonsensical ad-lib. Butler writes, "The rites of passage that govern various bodily orifices presuppose a heterosexual construction of gendered exchange, positions, and erotic possibilities. The deregulation of such exchanges accordingly disrupts the very boundaries
that determine what it is to be a body at all" (Butler 2545). As I have shown, in the chorus of “Work It,” Missy Elliott fulfills this claim by troubling the necessity of specifically addressing gendered genitalia when speaking about sex. In the realm of bisexuality, the possibilities for pleasure have no limits; therefore, the lexicon must follow suit. In “Work It,” she lyrically questions what it is to be a body by troubling the idea of genitalia as representative of a person’s gender and society’s assumption of their sexuality. By replacing the word for vagina or penis with an elephant sound, Elliott is asking: does it matter which? In Bradley’s discussion of HHSCP, she says, “[Sampling] provides space for both hidden and public scripts of race and gender to sonically parlay, intersect, conflict, and consume” (Bradley 65). By sampling the elephant sound to replace a word, she is superseding the existing lexicon for gender and sex related issues.

Later on, in the same song, Elliott further addresses the meaning of body and integrity when she speaks about the sex-work industry in a positive light. This is the only section of the song (aside from the outro, in which Elliott dedicates the song to both the “fellas” and the “ladies”) in which Elliott addresses a particular gender. She raps,

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Girl, girl, get that cash
If it's 9 to 5 or shakin' your ass
Ain't no shame, ladies do your thang
Just make sure you ahead of the game
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“Shakin’ your ass” can be understood as stripping or pole dancing. In the video, this verse is spoken by Elliott as strippers and pole dancers perform in the background on a small stage covered with dollar bills. The stance that sex work should be considered equal to a typical office job (a “9 to 5”) in integrity and labor-value is one that people today, more than ten years later,
still have difficulty grasping. Elliott defies gendered rules and the suppression of sexual agency and sexual activity in women, thus freeing the space for both expression and open participation by women.

One of Missy Elliott’s live performances of “Work It” was a pop-culture landmark. During the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards, Elliott took the stage with Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and Madonna to put on a performance that shocked its audience with two “lesbian” kisses. At the most memorable point in the performance, Madonna turns to both Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera in turn to give a tongue-kiss. Elliott joins them onstage afterward; each of their performances of gender and sexuality was unexpected and deserves a closer look.

While Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears both wear belts emblazoned with the moniker “Boy Toy,” and Madonna looks like a dominatrix, Missy Elliott appears stage right in a loose-fitting track suit, waistcoat complete with bow tie, sneakers, and a backwards cap. Elliott rapped a short few lines from her 2002 hit “Work It,” danced with mild swaying motions, bowed, and left the stage with the other superstars. Elliott was onstage for about a quarter of the performance. Madonna, Christina, and Britney cavorted around each other, gyrated with each other, groped each other, and made seductive eye contact – all while glancing back at the audience, as if to be sure to include them in the exhibitionist-style performance. These three women performed under the heteronormative prescriptions for what a woman in entertainment can look, act, and sound like. They sounded high pitched, wore lingerie-like costumes, and kept sex at the fore of their performance, all while keeping things in consideration of the male gaze.

One of the most comical and “gifed” moments from this performance was MTV’s decision to pan the camera into the audience to capture reactions, and Justin Timberlake is seen nodding approvingly after the “lesbian” kisses. Even though there were two kisses between women, the
effect was a hypersexualizing of women-loving-women sexual activity, and it was intended for the male gaze due to the fact that neither Britney, Christina, nor Madonna are queer.

Elliott, the only one on the stage that is read as queer, physically and musically separates herself from the other three women. She does not participate in the binaried interpretation of sexual activity where women perform and men consume; instead, she takes the least sexually explicit lines from “Work It” and raps them, engaging the audience in a call and response activity. During the performance, Elliott focused on the music and the lyrics, refusing to compete with Britney and Christina for Madonna’s – or the male audience’s – attentions. Here, Elliott escapes and transcends the act of sexuality as a performance for the opposite sex, and rejects the role of women as solely providers of pleasure and not recipients or demanders of pleasure.

Missy Elliott’s dedication to new wave style, transcendent musicality, avant garde rap, and sexual freedom can be witnessed in her career decisions, which are composed of more than simple creative ones. Elliott was also a talent scout, a producer, a songwriter, and the head of a label. Much of the rap audience’s first exposure to Azealia Banks, a queer rapper of the next generation who will be analyzed in the next chapter, came from a collaboration by Missy Elliott, Riri, and Azealia Banks on a remix of M.I.A.’s “Bad Girls” along with N.A.R.S. The original “Bad Girls” was released as a single in 2010, but the remix was released in 2012 as part of a two-feature drop that signified Missy Elliott’s return to rap after a seven-year hiatus (2005-2012) due to health issues.

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7 Missy Elliott has Graves disease.
CHAPTER 2

Azealia Banks: Hyperfemininity Inhabiting the New Sexual Landscape

In this chapter, I will discuss Azealia Banks’s rise in the music industry. She followed many of Missy Elliott’s footsteps in the creative element of musical production, especially when it came to lyrical play. However, as I will elaborate later in this chapter, her journey through the business side of the industry was very different than Elliott’s. In Banks’s music video for “Chasing Time,” which was released with the 2014 album *Broke With Expensive Taste*, Azealia Banks gives a visual nod to some of her most influential inspirations in the industry. For one visual series, she copies the trash-bag and work-boots look from Elliott’s “The Rain” (1997) video, honoring Elliott as both an influencer and as having had a direct impact on Banks’s musical upbringing. Both rappers transcend the binary of signified and signifier, but do so in different ways. Instead of using onomatopoetics in her lyrics, Banks uses a series of existing words and changes their definition or connotation to better suit her purposes to create a new lexicon. While Missy Elliott’s costume suggests a rejection of the gender binary, Banks fully embraces the external signifiers of femininity. She dresses in a hyperfeminine style, but at the same time portrays herself as inhabiting masculine psychological spaces, which can be observed in her lyrics. I will analyze how Banks appropriated a model of celebrity behavior designed by Kanye West¹, a male rapper, and how it was both successful and unsuccessful for Banks due to societal pressures and her own personal mistakes.

¹ Whether Kanye West’s performance of celebrity is intentional or unintentional is outside the scope of this thesis.
Banks’s relationship with the music industry has been fraught since she first signed to a label. In 2012, Banks received a lot of positive press for both “212” and her collaboration with Missy Elliott on a remix of M.I.A.’s “Bad Girls”. Banks was surprised and honored by the collaboration, which was unexpected because Banks had not gained a level of fame within the industry to work with as much of a rap icon as Missy Elliott. Banks had, however, worked on several tracks with the well-known producer, Diplo, who said “[Banks] even worked on some stuff for Missy Elliott with me once.” Banks first met Diplo, among other producers, artists, and DJs, over the social media website Myspace, where she casually asked permission to use beats and samples to create her own songs (Stevens).

Banks signed on to a development deal with British label XL Recordings, but after presenting them with a single titled “212,” they refused to release it. Instead, Banks independently released the song and a video on the internet in 2011; after it gained extraordinary popularity, Interscope Records picked up the song for two million dollars and signed Banks (Haynes). After Banks wrote and recorded a complete album titled *Broke With Expensive Taste*, Interscope set a date to publish the album in Spring of 2012, but delayed the release. Banks publicized a release date, and then had to rescind her remarks. This negatively affected her image, creating a “girl who cried wolf” relationship with her fans and peers. During this time, Interscope requested that Banks alter her sound, re-write certain tracks, and release a rap with a more “commercial” appeal. She then wrote “ATM Jam” (2013) with producer Pharrell, which Interscope approved, but the song flopped. Interscope pushed back the release date of Banks’s album several more times; she finally turned to Twitter, publicly pleading for Sony Records to buy her out of her contract. In 2014, that is exactly what happened; her first studio album, *Broke With Expensive Taste*, which had been completed in 2012, was finally released in 2014 under a
boutique label, Prospect Park Records, aptly named considering Banks’s New York City roots (Vozick-Levinson).

Perhaps beginning with her failed battle with her record label to build a reputation of integrity and truthfulness, Banks has repeatedly struggled with her public image. Years later, Banks reflected that she was immature and lacked guidance and self-control during a period where people who are not in the spotlight get a certain amount of forgiveness or leeway for their behavior as they are learning to become adults. In a 2015 interview for NME magazine, she said,

“If you give a 19 year-old a million pounds and a bottle of vodka and a Chanel handbag and one of these” – she points at an iPhone on the glass coffee table – “then what do you think’s going to happen? I always tell my mom, just imagine if you were coke binging in the ‘80s and you had Twitter. Imagine if they had Twitter during the crack epidemic.”

(Haynes)

She is now infamous for her Twitter tirades, her Instagram clap-backs, and her public statements of derision and aggression on both televised and printed interviews. Her presence on social media is unfiltered, unlike artists such as Beyonce, who are extremely private and selective with their statements and shared photographs. Whereas Beyonce rarely, if ever, shares a photograph that is not from a professional shoot and edited, Banks uses Instagram and Twitter the same way non-celebrity users do: she posts photos of what she is doing in the moment, selfies of herself in bed, the occasional meme, and at times peppers her feed with outtakes from her fashion shoots just to remind her following that she is, despite her seeming normalcy, still a celebrity. This openness serves as both an invitation for ridicule and a performance of reality, where Banks reduces the gap between celebrity and fan base while still maintaining enough of a celebrity status that her fans still idolize her. She becomes instantly more attainable, more human, and
arguably more effective in reaching her audience with her music by being able to directly pinpoint advertisements and other information such as tour dates or new music releases to those who are most likely to purchase it. Other artists who have incorporated this style of audience outreach include Kanye West, who has caused a polarized divide in his audience, half of whom think of him as an artistic genius while the other half consider him a narcissistic fool. Rap legends such as Jay-Z claim this is a signifier of true artistry, boundary-pushing, and innovative spirit (Breakfastclubpowerfm “Breakfast Club Classic”). Banks’ image, however, has not caused so balanced a divide; though she behaves similarly to Kanye and is as explorative if not more so in her music, she has not achieved the critical acclaim that he has, nor the label of “genius” from industry influencers. Critics find it easy to dismiss Kanye’s rants, his rude and inappropriate behavior at high profile events, and his misogynistic lyrics, as exemplified in the following review of Kanye’s latest album, *The Life of Pablo*:

> So let him be cocky. Let him be egotistical. Let him be Jesus. With his rants on "Yeezus" as forward thinking and out-there as the foundation of beats he serves them on, this sounds like it came from a higher power. Bow down. (Gates)

Meanwhile, Banks has to defend herself for every comment she espouses, which are mostly in low-stakes scenarios – on a plane, or over Twitter – as opposed to Kanye’s high-stakes interruptions of major organized events. Banks’s disputes often create controversy on social media, where fans and spectators clamor to take sides, but it is rare to find someone in the music industry defending her. Because she was a relatively new artist, she has not released *enough* music to become critically acclaimed. Being caught in the entanglements of label contracts and restrictions on her creative vision created a toxic environment of frustration and vitriol. Banks was a signed artist for five years and was only ever able to release a single album; between her
breakout hit and her first studio album, the only singles she released flopped due to a lack of promotion on the part of the label and the deviation from Banks’s true passionate interests. While Banks was waiting for her label to release her album, three new hip-hop artists released their second studio albums. Nicki Minaj released, *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded* (2012), J. Cole released *Born Sinner* (2013), and Drake released, *Take Care* (2013). These rappers broke the “sophomore curse”, which is the name for a trend in rap music for an artist’s second studio album to perform worse than their first and third (if they get to a third), largely because of a lack of creativity. Five years later, in 2017, these artists’ new music shows very little creative or stylistic development. In other words, the music that was found on their first and second studio albums would find itself at home on their current release packages.\(^2\) There was a vacuum. In this short span of years, there was a marked absence of innovative hip-hop and rap stars; Macklemore and Ryan Lewis actually topped the year end Billboard 100 in 2012 with “Thrift Shop,” which can be described as extremely palatable to a white, suburban audience and decidedly center-laned. Missy Elliott spoke with Hip-Hop Radio News Show “The Breakfast Club” about the absence of true rappers who were experimental, willing to push the genre forward, but able to retain respect for the artists who had come before them. In her interview, she stated that there were no “superstars,” and that perhaps some rising artists, such as J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar, had promise, but she was clearly disappointed with the representation of women in the industry. “She’s the only one doing it,” Elliott said of Nicki Minaj – but Elliott, known for her personal code of never bad-mouthing a fellow woman, gently implied that Minaj did not deserve to be

\(^2\) I use the word “packages” to remain inclusive of industry experimentation with the vehicle through which music is currently released. Overnight digital album releases, three-packs, and “playlists” (such as Drake’s *More Life* (2017)) are more common than ever as physical album sales are nearly irrelevant and streaming counts are the barometer by which an artists’ popularity is measured.
considered the best woman rapper simply by default, despite Minaj’s growing fame (FunnyScripts). So in the years that Banks is being repressed and delayed by her label, she missed the perfect opportunity to come into a scene that was starving for new, interesting rappers and experimental music.

Throughout her experience of being a celebrity just outside the spotlight, Banks has struggled to gain fame and respect in the music industry. Part of this is because she was a black woman with a creative vision that did not fit in with preconceived notions of black femininity in hip-hop the way that other artists, such as Lil Kim and Nicki Minaj, did. In fact, Banks would struggle with the idea that the rules of black femininity were indeed so specific in the widespread American imagination for much of her career, ultimately resulting in her being banned from Twitter due to an angry outburst directed at Zayn Malik (Richardson). Other reasons for Banks’s rejection from inner celebrity circles can be blamed on simple bad behavior while the press was watching. In one such circumstance, Banks used the slur “faggot” while she had a disagreement with a flight attendant. While most people attacked her for the use of the slur, she defended herself by pointing out her own queer identity, and misogyny within the queer community; this can be considered misdirection, but Banks engaged the conversation and reacted publicly by defending herself in interviews and on social media. She argued that if gay men can still refer to women as “bitches” and appropriate that slur, then she had every right to use the slur “faggot.” In other words, appropriation of slurs were not limited to the insulted group so long as that insulted group attempted to appropriate slurs of any other insulted group. Fans swarmed to

\[3\] The discussion of black femininity and the consumer imagination is an important one to have, but it is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this thesis. To be noted here, however, is Azealia Banks’s response to a fan’s concern about Banks’s public frustrations, posted on Banks’s Instagram: "Black folk are the first to discard their own especially when white media/society hangs one of us out for public crucifixion. From the minute I appeared on the scene I was told by black men in black media that I was ugly, skinny, had bad hair, was weird, made music for white people etc... And those messages penetrated the social consciousness of black America very quickly."
both attack and defend her, but both sides welcomed the discourse on misogyny within the gay community. One blogger wrote in Banks’s defense,

> Not all gay men deserve the wrath of her tweets, but no woman deserves misogynistic abuse. We've fought - hell, we're still fighting - for equal rights and being referred to as a "bitch" undermines that cause. Gay men have to stop being sexist, and Azealia has tweeted that necessity with angry excellence. So, if you call me a bitch, then I'll call you a faggot. If you touch my breasts, then I'll touch your crotch. ("DEBATE")

Therefore, while Banks’s behavior may or may not have been acceptable to certain groups, her choice to engage with her fans and with media in a direct format – in essence, via social media – enabled her to have at least a small amount of control in the wider discourse. Social media gave Banks the opportunity to defend herself; however, it seemed that it took her a very long time to learn the adage, “Choose your battles.” In the years 2012 to 2015, when Banks was musically active, celebrities were still figuring out how to use social media effectively, balancing their celebrity status against the democracy of the platform. Banks, however, seemed to use it in an unfiltered way, neither associating nor disassociating her personal life from the way she performed celebrity. However, this does not excuse the insensitivity of her remarks and the harmful effects of using slurs; it simply gave her a platform to explain herself after the event, which arguably resulted in more press and debate as she continued the conversation. Thus, she cemented herself in the imagination of her audience as a figure at the center of heated discourse, and not necessarily as first and foremost a musician.

In an interview on an LGBTQ radio channel by Jorge Olivares, Banks, who identified as Bisexual, but typically rejects labels in general, defended her use of the word “faggot.” She claimed that her use of the word was not a reclamation, but instead an active redefinition.
When Olivares asked Banks to define the slur, she replied, "The word 'faggott' [sic] came to me from my mother. And it was never a thing about a guy being gay. It was always just a man who hates women. You can be gay or straight. You can be a straight faggot… Faggots are men who want to bring women down, fuck with their heads, control them."

(Davies)

Here you have Banks, more than once, publicly addressing a tense situation. She is forced to talk about the drama in interviews, asked to apologize, and often does so on social media. She has the tendency to act first, and explain later – a quality that is often found excusable only when performed by men, and is often actually encouraged within the lyrics of rap.\(^4\) The excusable nature of verbal violence in masculinity is also exemplified in Kanye West’s behavior toward Taylor Swift at the 2009 VMAs, where he interrupted her acceptance speech for Video of the Year to claim that she did not deserve the honor. While this made headlines, it was quickly turned into a situation of comedy, and forgiven. Five years later, West apologized for his actions at the 2015 VMAs while accepting the Michael Jackson Video Vanguard Award. Others, however, had long deemed this unnecessary, as exemplified by comments made by fellow rapper A$AP Rocky:

He doesn't have a reason to rant right now. He's the man and he's getting rewarded for something that he did, influencing people such as myself to step it up, as far as videography goes. (Fleischer)

\(^4\) “See, where I come from
We act first, ask questions later” from Joell Ortiz’s “Finish What You Start” (2011)
“Shoot first, ask questions last” from Wacka Flocka Flame’s “Bustin’ at Em” (2010)
In other words, as long as Kanye West continues to be a musician, his actions can go unaccounted for and his apologies are unwanted, his discussions and reflections on those actions moot. After this moment, the Taylor Swift feud resurfaced and then transformed into a focal point of West’s latest album, *Life of Pablo* (2016)\(^5\), continuing a vicious cycle of bad behavior.

Here we have two examples of gender performativity in the music industry; while Kanye is performing as a male is expected to perform – aggressive, sultry, and at times impulsive – while being hyper-masculine in both dress and musical expression, Banks is ranging along the other side of the spectrum in dress. In a review of rising female artists that were pushing the boundaries of genre, music writer Tyson Taylor says,

> [Artists, including Azealia Banks,] present with their music, lyrics, and images a sort of superhuman femininity, which stretches the very notion of womanhood into new forms which can range from the uncannily alluring to the existentially terrifying. (Taylor)

In other words, new performances of femininity result in a disturbed audience, or even an audience that viscerally rejects that performance. Banks can be described as hyper-feminine, constantly bringing her female anatomy to attention, dressing in tutus on her album covers and in photo shoots [See Figure 4], and performing while nude or partially nude in her music videos [See Figure 5]. She is also, however, performs masculinity the same way that Kanye West does

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\(^5\) Lyrics from a single titled “Famous” off the album *Life of Pablo* are directed at Taylor Swift. “I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex
Why? I made that bitch famous.” This was followed by a scandal due to the fact that Taylor Swift publicly denounced the lyric, calling it sexist. After this statement, Kanye West’s wife and business mogul Kim Kardashian-West released a recording of the telephone conversation between Taylor Swift and Kanye West revealing that Swift did in fact have knowledge of at least some of the lyrics in “Famous.” The music video for “Famous” also featured an array of wax figures of celebrities in the nude sharing a bed, positioned as if they were sleeping. Taylor Swift was on one side of Kanye West, while his wife Kim lay on the other side.
in her actions. She is aggressive, sultry, and at times impulsive. These two conflicting images shake the public vision of what a woman is *supposed* to be, and is met with a troubled rejection by those who cannot or will not divorce themselves from the gender binary. Yet, the performance is met with elation by people who identify with Banks. In this case, it can be argued that Banks’s form of hyper-femininity challenges notions of female sexuality, gender performance, and social constructs of female identity and duty, especially in terms of dealing with public relations.

Returning to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, we can define exactly what it means to perform gender.

Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 2552)

If I adopt Butler’s stance on gender performativity for the performance of sexuality as well, there exists a constantly mutable sexual performance. Just as gender is designed and curated based on “a stylized repetition of acts,” sexuality is expressed by each individual through their various amative encounters, fantasies, desires, or performed desires. Sexuality lives in a state of flux, along with a series of physical signifiers developed over a history of repression that signify queerness; most of these signifiers exist as those identifiers that trouble the understanding of a person’s gender. Sexuality can, in fact, be as mutable as gender. How can anyone know that they are only attracted to the “opposite” sex unless they encounter every single person on the planet, and then identify their feelings toward all other genders as entirely platonic? This is an
impossible scenario; labelling one’s sexuality as self-identification is pointless outside of the effects of creating like-minded communities in oppressive societal circumstances. As soon as societal binaries are deconstructed and sexual preference for any other consenting adult is normalized, labelling one’s sexuality becomes moot. Upon normalization, danger of discrimination and violence decreases, thus eliminating the necessity for identifiers; when being cis-gendered and heterosexual is as common as being any shade of queer in equal proportions, labels are unnecessary; a person simply bases their attraction on individual encounters without the expectation of rejection or acceptance based on the gender they choose to perform. Therefore, eliminating possible experiences before encountering situations in which the experience is possible is a limiting and self-prohibitive process. In the new sexual landscape, the need for self-identification is eliminated. Thus, a new lexicon becomes necessary.

Banks, like Elliott, shows the limitation that a heteronormative society places on the language society employs toward femininity, female sexuality, and queer sexuality, especially within the rap industry, through her lyrics. Where Elliott turned to onomatopoetics, Banks turns to terminology, changing words’ definitions to suit her needs. In her breakout hit, “212” (2011), Banks marks the beginnings of a new rap lexicon.

You’re gay to get discovered in my two one deuce
Cock-a-lickin’ in the water by the blue bayou
Caught the warm goo
In your du-rag too son?
Nigga, you’re a kool-aid dude
Plus your bitch might lick it
Wonder who let you come to one two”
Here the word “gay” becomes neither a sexual identifier nor a slur; it is included in a phrase that is relevant to the music industry. It functions as a slang word that codes for eagerness. “Gay” here comes much closer to the original meaning of the word (“happy”), but still an entirely new definition. It holds neither a negative nor a positive connotation; instead, it is used in a phrase of challenge. The negative connotation of the phrase as a whole relies on the context of the situation: the fact that Banks is well-known while her opponent is not within the realm of New York City. “Get discovered” means to become known within the industry; “two one deuce” is a play on words with the area code “212” which signifies old New Yorkers.\(^6\) The word “deuce” is a play on the slang term “deuces,” which means “goodbye.” The term “deuce” or “deuces” is another word for the peace sign made with the index and the middle finger (e.g. the phrase “chuck up your deuces” means put up a peace sign), and was originally a neutral or benevolent term. It gained a negative connotation after Chris Brown’s 2010 hit breakup song, “Deuces,” which called for a person in a relationship to first put up the middle finger to send a message, and then bring up the index finger to say goodbye, and then leave the situation.\(^7\) Now, the term “deuce” is meant to be said in a dismissive or defeatist tone and said from a stance inhabited by power, confidence, and the sort of “hipness” that comes with being familiar with the

\(^{6}\) “When area codes were first created, 212 covered the entire city. As telephones became more popular, 718 was introduced for Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island, and eventually the Bronx. By 1992, 212 was exclusive to Manhattan. But two decades ago, as the inventory of available 212 numbers neared depletion, regulators threatened to divide old New Yorkers from newcomers by laying a second area code — 646 — over Manhattan” (McGeehan).

\(^{7}\) Chris Brown was a very successful R & B and Hip-hop artist in the early 2000s. After physically assaulting his then-girlfriend, hip-hop star Rihanna, in 2009, Brown received lukewarm media backlash. He still has a relatively successful career, has not been blacklist by the media or by the music industry, and has released several singles (including “Deuces,” which became a hit less than one year after the scandal) and featured on other artists’ songs while the event made headlines and after the scandal faded.
latest slang words. Within the wordplay, Banks is thus employing HHSCP with a hyper-feminine sonic tone (her high-pitched voice) and a new vocabulary.

Banks challenges other male contenders by threatening their relationships, taking the “steal your girl” trope to a new place. Typically, a male rapper would threaten the status of other males or male rappers by claiming to steal his opponent’s girlfriend. Chris Brown, for example, uses the moniker “Mr. Steal Your Girl” in the introduction of some of his songs. The extant examples play into the misogynistic habits of male rappers to claim women as property or sexual objects. In “212,” Banks offers a new scenario: she is more appealing than a man, and there is the potential for women-loving-women sexual activity that will be out of the control of a man, superior to a heterosexual sexual encounter, and not designed with the male gaze in mind. This use of women-loving-women activity comes in direct contrast to the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards performance that included two “lesbian” kisses, as discussed in Chapter 1. In the following excerpt from “212,” Banks explores sexual possibilities.

I just wanna **sip** that punch with your **peeps and**

**Sit in** that lunch if you're **treatin'**

**Kick it with your bitch who come from** **Parisian**

She know where I get mine from, and the **season**

Now she wanna **lick** my **plum** in the **evenin'**

And fit that **ton-tongue d-deep in**

**I guess that cunt getting eaten**

It is important to note that Banks is addressing a male, here – the same unnamed person is being challenged throughout the entire song. In this verse, Banks shows a technique of infiltration; she wants to “sip that punch with your peeps,” meaning spend time with the man’s friends in a group
and become familiar enough with them to join them on outings. In this way, she can become close to the man’s female sexual interest, his “bitch from Parisian,” (i.e. French sexual interest) close enough to seduce her. The result is that Banks is on the receiving end of cunnilingus, the man is none the wiser, and the coup of masculinity and authority is complete. Banks, by being a woman, can provide a woman with intimate pleasures that only another woman could conceive or understand. The action here is a decapitation of the power of masculinity over women, creating a more democratic, clearly consensual, and subversive relationship in which a man is pushed out of the scenario entirely.

In rap music, sex is a common theme. In rap by women MCs, the topic of sex becomes complicated; as women in an industry that already sexualizes and objectifies them, they must reconcile their own sexual agency with the pressures of the industry. Thus, in an analysis of women rappers over time, Jason D. Haughen writes, a common theme in female gangsta rap is the sexual manipulation of men. It is here that the reversal of the possible sex roles generally attributed to women in gangsta rap occurs, and the switching of power roles, vis-à-vis sex roles, is accomplished. (438-9)

The author explicitly refers to gangsta rap, but the sexual manipulation of men can be found in female rap in general. How Azealia Banks changes things is through her introduction of the explicit sexual manipulation of men that does not result in their sexual satisfaction; instead, Banks’s lyrics offer the listener a scenario in which a woman leaves her male partner in order to participate in sexual activity with Banks herself. So there is not only a reversal of gender roles in a sexual encounter, where the man would typically be the dominant force, but also an upset of what sexual satisfaction is by describing the act of cunnilingus as a positive and rewarding act for all involved. As mentioned in Chapter 1, in Fat Joe’s lyrics for “What’s LUV?”, cunnilingus
was seen as an undesirable act or even an emasculating one. In the lyrics we also find the return of the derogatory slur “cunt” to its physiological definition, but with a neutral instead of negative connotation.

In terms of persuasion and consent, it is important to note that the Parisian woman wants to perform cunnilingus; it is not a forced, requested, or expected activity, like the act of fellatio in male rap lyrics, and even at times in female rap lyrics. For example, in the 2016 song by Drake “Sneakin’,” 21 Savage raps “Baby girl gon’ suck it till her jaws lock.” Today, rappers are still perpetuating aggressive sexual speech, commanding and demanding without any intonation of consent from the opposite party. In Lil’ Kim’s 2000 song titled “Suck my D**k,” she says, “If I was a dude/ I’d tell y’all to suck my dick.” Here a woman doesn’t feel comfortable, or even empowered enough to dismiss another person without adopting the identity of hyper-masculinity. There are no words that a woman can use that have an equal effect without appropriating male genitalia. Then, if cunnilingus is mentioned by male rappers, it is usually used as a power stance, in which the male rapper holds control over the woman in the song, rendering her incapable of agency. This is exemplified in Lil Wayne’s “Maybe She Will” (2011), where the lyrics run: “Eat her til she cry, call that wine and dine,/ Try to check me and I'ma have 'em checkin’ pulses.” The focus is not on her pleasure, but instead on his power. The fact that the line is immediately followed by threats of violence implies that the two ideas are not entirely divorced, and that the power stance of a man is dependent on both authority in sexual situations as well as authority in violent confrontations.

In Banks’s lyrics, she employs HHSCP by including the words “I guess” when speaking about cunnilingus, which is dismissive of the gravity of the fact that she is talking about women-loving-women sexual acts in rap, something hardly seen before and absolutely never seen before
in the main stream. This use of HHSCP serves to normalize such sexual acts, claiming them as commonplace instead of revolutionary. The blasé attitude is one that encourages others, if they want to be “cool,” that they should accept this as normal behavior. By folding in these statements of subversive sexual activity with innovations on slang terminology, the sexual activity becomes as cool as the new slang.

In the following excerpt from *Bitch* magazine, feminist writer Erica Fricke explains the consequences of negative terminology revolving around cunnic genitalia, and how harmful terminology reflects the popular imagination. She says,

> Even terms that seem to grant power to women's bodies are ultimately unhelpful. "Snatch," another man's word, describes women's voracious, toothed genitalia, as in this bathroom graffiti dialogue: "Why are men like that?" "They're afraid of you cuz they think your snatch has sharp teeth." What does "snatch" really refer to? The Vagina Dentata, the toothed vagina that consumes men. While this image reappears cross-culturally in myths and fairy tales, representing fear of castration through fear of the vagina, there is an important distinction between holding the power to cause fear, and serving as the symbolic representation of fear--which is more like being an object of neurosis. The owner of a snatch is not stronger for it, because it's scary on its own--she doesn't control it and make it eat men up. Therefore, while a man can "dick with someone" or "fuck them up," I can't "snatch them over." There is no corresponding turn of phrase in which the woman is the agent committing violence. (Fricke)

Banks engages with the metaphor of Vagina Dentata in both the lyrical and visual aspects of “212” and its corresponding music video. In the song, the line “I guess that cunt getting eaten” is repeated several times in an echo. In the visual, during the repetition of that line the camera
zooms in to Banks’s face, focusing on her mouth, where she annunciates the line once and then smiles while the echo plays. She also licks her lips and teeth, but in a nonsexual manner [See Figure 6] – she is not doing it to seduce the viewer; instead, it seems as if she is preparing for further speech. It is slightly aggressive in nature due to the direct face-to-face angle; it is also a play on the idea of being “in your grill,” or “in your face,” which is an aggressive invasion of another person’s space. The lips of the mouth are a visual metaphor for the lips of the vagina, but the baring of teeth is a play on the metaphor of “vagina dentata,” that harsh or threatening women have teeth in their vaginas, ready to devour and cuckold a man. In this case, Banks is not the butt of the joke, but the triumphant subject. While Fricke notes that the classical interpretation of the Vagina Dentata is as a physical organ that is out of control of the person to whom it belongs, Banks reclaims the metaphor and relocates it. Her “Vagina Dentata” is equal to her mouth, the tool with which she is challenging masculinity throughout the entire song. The reversal of roles here is an essential part of Banks’s feminism; she takes ownership of elements of femininity that patriarchal society has condemned. By re-appropriating the metaphor, she gains control over it. Thus the terrifying and uncontrollable beast that was a part of what was considered female physiognomy (The Vagina Dentata) becomes a weapon (the mouth, therefore speech), much like a cat’s claws, for attack against those that would attempt to hold women down or restrict their sexual selves.

By subverting the visual pun in combination with the positive use of the slur “cunt,” Banks is participating in the reclamation of the slur in general. “When viewed as a positive force in the language of women - as well as a reference to the power of the anatomical jewel which

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8 A grill is a decorative mold of a person’s front four or six teeth; a grill is typically made of gold, but can be made of other precious metals. One can wear a grill on the top teeth, the bottom teeth, or both. Often a grill is decorated with precious stones.
unites us all - the negative power of "cunt" falls in upon itself, and we are suddenly equipped with a word that describes all women, regardless of race, age, class, religion, or the degree of lesbianism we enjoy" (Muscio). The vocabulary here falls in line with the idea that a new lexicon is necessary, one in which feminine anatomy is not equated to negative stereotypes or mystified. As a bastion of femininity, Banks reorients the female sexual organ in language with her reclamation of the term “cunt,” in mythology with her reclamation of the visual Vagina Dentata, and in ethos with her hyper-feminine performance.

Each of these creative choices plays a role in the conscious construction of Banks’s identity. In an analysis of black female stereotypes, Joy L. Lei comments:

Identity construction encompasses an active and dynamic process through which an individual identifies himself or herself in relation to how he or she is constituted as a subject by dominant discourses and representations. As Hall points out, we should think of identity as a 'production,' 'which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.' (1997:51) Thus, every time we label ourselves, it is a response to someone or some institution that insists that we do. (159)

When Banks refuses to label herself as anything other than the umbrella term “queer,” she is refusing to participate in the hierarchy of social powers that created the subjugation of her several identities: black, female, queer, even as a rapper. As these identities intersect, Banks felt them boxing her into a prescribed performative set; instead of participating in that set, she rejected it by rejecting labels altogether. This is reflected in her music, which incorporates more than just a steady beat constructed with an 808, which is the current popular trend in hip-pop and rap; instead, she includes elements of electronic music, a progressive and boundary-push source of crossover music, especially in songs such as “212” (2011) and “Ice Princess” (2014).
This subversion of genre limits within the construction of the song is representative of the exploration and inhabitation of the new sexual landscape that is expressed in her lyrics, and a continuation of genre-bending begun by Missy Elliott in her explorations of samples and sound adjustments.

Banks also followed in Missy Elliott’s footsteps by claiming her creative agency through any means necessary – which, in Banks’s case, led to a chain of label switches, a lot of media backlash, and a blacklist that frustrated the release of her music. In the music video for “Chasing Time” (2014), Banks nods to Elliott’s creative genius by wearing, along with her dancers, a version of Elliott’s infamous trash-bag costume from the video for “The Rain” (1997). This public declaration of Elliott’s influence on Banks can be seen throughout Banks’s music, her lyrics, and her creative choices. By pushing the boundaries of music in different ways than Elliott had, she became explicit in her lyrics, normalizing the idea of women-loving-women sexual actions. By inhabiting the new sexual landscape that Missy Elliott had made available, Banks claimed the space for rap music, making room for explicitly lesbian rappers to come onto the scene with much less ridicule for their sexuality and a greater focus on their music. It also held open the door for a reclamation of sheer authenticity in music, which Missy Elliott embodied by following her own creative vision despite the fact that the industry was male-dominated, and Banks struggled for by fighting against the labels that presumed to control her celebrity persona and musical style. In the next chapter, I will discuss what Young M.A., an openly lesbian rapper, does to subvert the industry’s pressure toward conformity in gender performance, sexuality, and in classic methods of musical production.
CHAPTER 3

Young M.A: Masculinity on the Female Body and Authenticity in Rap

In this chapter, I will introduce Young M.A, a Brooklyn-based hip-hop artist. As an “out” lesbian rapper, she is changing the way that those in the industry perceive gender performance, sexuality, and sexual agency. I will analyze her performance of butch lesbianism as well as several of her songs to show how she works to normalize queerness. I will also highlight her struggle with the performance of masculinity, which can at times be toxic to Young M.A and those with whom she has relationships. She introduces something both new and old to the contemporary rap scene, which offers us as an audience a glance into the future of rap, both as a business and as an art. Young M.A gained traction in the public eye for her hit single “OOOUUU.” It was the urban summer street anthem, blasted from cars with sub-woofers in the trunk and all the windows down; with a two-step beat reminiscent of Bobby Shmurda’s “Hot N*gga” (2014), it had everyone dancing. However, Young M.A. had been rapping long before this song hit the Billboard Hot 100.

Having grown up in East New York, a New York City neighborhood notorious for violent crime and police corruption, Young M.A. gathered most of her inspiration from the streets. When she was seven years old, Young M.A. moved to Virginia with her older brother and her mother. After several years in the South, the family was unhappy so far from their roots, and returned to their old Brooklyn neighborhood. Almost immediately upon return, tragedy

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1 M.A stands for “Me Always.”
struck. When Young M.A. was seventeen years old, on September 26, 2009, her brother was murdered by a member of his own gang. After a brief period attempting to make ends meet by working in retail, Young M.A. turned to rap as catharsis. She decided to devote herself completely to the music industry, as an honor to her brother and a promise to herself to follow her passion and talent, and to develop her craft. (Young M.A. and her Brooklyn Roots)

Young M.A. gained local fame by uploading videos of freestyles and cyphers\(^2\) to YouTube, but her video views exploded when author and pundit Boyce Watkins criticized one of Young M.A’s rap videos as an example of what a woman shouldn’t do. (Reeves) In a Facebook post and video, Watkins claimed that Young M.A promoted violence and was a harmful role model for black youth. (An Open Letter) This backfired when the video, which was a “Chiraq” freestyle, went viral, gaining fame for Young M.A as an artist as opposed to infamy for the violence in her lyrics. Currently the video has nearly nine million views on YouTube. Unlike many contemporary rappers, who focus on fashion, wealth, and prestige, Young M.A. presents herself as an old-school hip-hop persona, which means her dress codes for black, hip-hop masculinity. She wears white t-shirts or wife-beaters, loose men’s shorts, and often flashes her Tommy Hilfiger boxers, perhaps to emphasize her choices as both masculine and humble [See Figure 8]; she is not showing off labels such as Gucci or Calvin Klein. Although at points she does show fistfuls of money, in her songs she emphasizes hard work and the value of her music over the profit of the industry.\(^3\) Her videos and music videos tend to show her in either a room that could be found in most urban lower-class neighborhoods, typically sparsely furnished with

\(^2\) A cypher is a group effort to continuously rap over a single beat or a set of beats decided by a third party. Each participant in the cypher raps for either a set amount of time or until they can no longer continue, then the next participant carries out their turn; these raps are all freestyles, or made up on the spot.

\(^3\) “My goal is the business, fuck seven digits” Quiet Storm (2016)
folding chairs and card tables; in a humble car, like the Hyundai Sonata she drives in her video for “Karma Krys” (2016); or on the streets of Brooklyn, as in the music video for “Girlfriend” (2015).

Young M.A’s decisions to present herself with masculine signifiers while being openly lesbian, which has been clear in each of her many interviews with radio personalities and magazines as well as explicit in her lyrics, make her easily read as a “butch” lesbian. In most definitions of what it means to be “butch,” queer theorists Sherrie Inness and Michele E. Lloyd note,

…definitions of the butch [tend] to fall into some configuration of the following four categories: she is a masculine woman; she is like a man; she adopts an active sexual role; and/or she desires femmes. (13)

However, as proved by these theorists, it is not necessary for a butch to fall into the last two categories to identify herself as a butch; therefore, the first two categories become paramount, and we must ask ourselves what it means to be a “masculine woman” and what it is to be “like a man.” Inness and Lloyd conclude that a butch is “a lesbian who adopts masculine identifiers” (14). This means that a butch is a lesbian who may wear masculine clothing, participate in what are traditionally socially accepted as masculine activities (occupations, hobbies, etc.), and have a masculine carriage – that is, body language. We see all of these signifiers in Young M.A in that she wear men’s clothing. She is a rapper by trade – which is a traditionally masculine enterprise, and still a male-dominated field – and does so in a way that does not model women; in fact, she is often confused for a man by those who are unfamiliar with her, which can be observed in the YouTube comments of first time viewers. Her posturing, gestures, and body language are all masculine identifiers: she wears a grill, and reveals it not by seductively lifting her lip or licking
her teeth, but instead by pulling back the corners of her mouth in a grimace. She wears her hair in braids, but not in box-braids or cornrows – instead she wears them in a style typically employed by men, using very few thick braids, typically between two and four, that fall to her shoulders. Her hand gestures are masculine; she never paints or wears acrylic nails, and if she wears jewelry it is men’s jewelry.

Presentation as a butch lesbian can be an issue for someone in the public eye, especially in the rap industry. Where Elliott brought attention to the issue of heteronormativity and misogyny within the industry via costume and lyrics, and Banks used her lyricism to bring forth women-loving-women sex acts, Young M.A exposes her quotidian reality by dressing “normally” – she is not wearing a costume, but is wearing instead what she normally chooses, whether she is performing on stage or going to the corner store. This is important because, as Innes and Lloyd say,

…butch lesbians use clothing as a way to indicate membership in a group; butches are easily recognized as lesbians because both lesbian and heterosexual cultures typically interpret masculine appearance and clothing, particularly when combined with few feminine signifiers….as indications of homosexuality. (15)

Thus, she is providing normalizing visibility for fellow members of her community by performing gender and sexuality with authenticity. By openly exposing herself as a lesbian and as a butch lesbian, Young M.A makes herself easily identifiable by other members of those groups that would be found in her audience (Inness and Lloyd 15). However, while this visibility serves as a bastion for other lesbians and women in general, providing them with a model much in the same way that black women in other occupations (engineering, the sciences, as authors and poets, etc.) are essential for representation, it comes with the weighted consequence of
becoming a target for the frustrations of those that are entrenched in the gender binary and heteronormativity.

With visibility comes ridicule in a heteronormative society. As a performance of gender, butch lesbians embody traditionally masculine traits while retaining their gender and sexual identity as women loving women. Young M.A. puts herself at risk by expressing her identity through her music and dress, and faced discrimination throughout her journey through the music industry because of it, as will be analyzed in the lyrics for “Eat” (2016). In order to make her appear more palatable to both the female and male gaze in heteronormative society, she was encouraged to perform as a femme, about which she rapped in “Quiet Storm” (2016). In the following verse, Young M.A makes it clear that performing as a femme was an emotionally traumatic event, and that she rejected it wholeheartedly.

| had to **cry**, | had to **hurt**, | was at my **worst** |

Mama wondered **why** I never **liked** to wear a **skirt**

Or wear a **purse**, I **tried** to be girly once

But fortunately it didn’t **work**.

In the video for “Quiet Storm,” Young M.A. raps non-stop into the camera as if she is performing an old-school freestyle. At various points in the song, a transparent photograph is flashed onto the screen to verify what she is referencing in each verse. When she mentions her late elder brother, a picture of the two of them in black-and-white appears. When she raps the above rhyme, a photo appears of Young M.A. as a child, probably about eight or nine years old, in a football uniform kneeling on the field for team photos. [See Figure 9]
This gives evidence to the fact that Young M.A participated in socially masculine activities at a young age, and gives credence to her claim that she rejected feminine identifiers such as purses and dresses for most of her life. Here Young M.A. is speaking exclusively about her gender performance, but it relates to her sexuality due to the relationship between the gender and sexual performances of the identity of butch lesbianism. By not performing femininity the way that society expected her to, she began curating the identity of visible lesbianism since she was a grade-school child. As aforementioned, with visibility comes risk. In her single “Eat” (2016), Young M.A discusses the homophobia she has faced as her popularity has risen and her life is pulled further into the spotlight.

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

And to sit on y'all is part of the damn plan

They just mad cause I beat the pussy like bam bam

Here Young M.A. opens a window into her coping mechanisms. Homophobia exists, and Young M.A. is a victim of it, but instead of folding under the pressure she channels the energy into her music and produces work with a message. She implies that insulting or harassing her for her

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4 Young M.A’s raps are usually extremely organized when it comes to rhym scheme. Here, a little messiness shows that the message of the lyrics was more important to rap than the flow. Young M.A made a lyrical sacrifice to make sure that the meaning of this verse was clear.

5 This is a reference to the cartoon character “Bam Bam” from the Flintstones, a male child who carried a club and would smash things for comic effect.
sexuality is a projection of insecurities found in heterosexual men; Young M.A. claims that her sexual prowess is a threat to heterosexual men⁶, and that fear results in an anxiety funneled into hate speech. Young M.A. also later in the rap as well as in other songs targets those who attack people over the internet. She raps:

My goons in the fields, not the internet.

I hate when niggas use the internet to send a threat.

This implies the cowardice of people who threaten or bully others over the internet as opposed to saying things in person. The comparison to herself and her “goons,” meaning the people she surrounds herself with, draws attention again to reality versus falsity. Young M.A is claiming authenticity. By belittling and delegitimizing the commentary of those that would criticise her for her gender performance and sexuality, employing HHSCP by creating an “above it all” attitude, Young M.A works to normalize non-conformative sexuality, specifically lesbianism. She also deconstructs the formerly accepted ridicule of queer people by questioning the perpetrators’ motives, turning the issue into a self-reflective one. What are the “haters” hiding? Why are they spending time and energy on criticizing the life of someone that has no effect on them?

However, while Young M.A’s views on homophobia are progressive, her performance is not without its flaws.

It is noteworthy that the first lesbian rap artist to reach the Billboard Hot 100 in the twenty-first century is a woman who projects masculine identities, and not a hyper-feminine bisexual or lesbian rapper. It is almost as if, via the harsh tone and delivery of the words, people

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⁶ “If that’s your chick then why’s she textin me? Calling up my phone speaking sexually?” Lyrics from Young M.A’s “OOOUUU” (2016)
subscribe to the music because of the familiar lyrics that objectify women (that are not butch), and discusses sexual activity mostly in familiar terms of heterosexual acts (e.g. “giving head”, “deep-throat”-ing). This is lesbian sexual activity at its most palatable for the current hip-hop audience. While Azealia Banks became unapologetic about feminine strength, and Missy Elliott before her muddled the understanding of sexual and amative possibility, Young M.A. turns the tables in that she insists on beating hyper-masculine, heterosexual men at their own game. She raps from a perspective that a man can adopt with very little adjusting, but also from a perspective that is inclusive of women who are lesbians that identify with Young M.A and female sexuality, specifically women-loving-women. While Azealia Banks is relatable to those with female genitalia when her lyrics speak explicitly about sex, Young M.A.’s lyrics mix Missy Elliott’s intentionally ambiguous innuendo with the solid detail of Banks’s lyrics to form a punchline or flow that everyone can relate to, rap along to, and understand – or not – to their own benefit or neutrality.

In fact, Young M.A has directly commented on her ability to walk the line between understanding and confusion. On Genius, a lyric website that asks songwriters to comment on their own music, Young M.A commented from a verified account on specific lyrics that fans were attempting to analyze or understand. About the line “She make me weak when she deep-throat” (OOOUUU 2016), Young M.A says:

“I mean, I understand, you know, guys that don’t understand. Because they’re not a dyke. You understand what I’m saying, but all the dykes out there, they know exactly what I’m talking about. It ain’t for a guy to understand. If you don’t understand, you don’t gotta understand it.” (Young M.A)
This speaks to the fact that Young M.A makes music for herself more than anyone else, but is also cognizant of the fact that she is a member of a widespread community that understands what she is coding; she is expressing what makes sense to her because she comes from a certain perspective, which includes identification with not only queer culture, but black culture, hip-hop culture, New York and more specifically Brooklyn culture, and life on the streets. Not understanding one or more of those perspectives does not hinder one’s enjoyment of the song or the music in general, just like you can dance to a song that is in a foreign language, but the deeper meaning of the song is made available to those that speak that language. This is not new to hip-hop, and rap in particular.

An example of coded language in rap can be found in the song “Swagga Like Us” (2008) by T.I feat. Jay-Z. Jay Z’s line runs: “Can’t wear skinny jeans ‘cause my knots don’t fit” but not everyone knows what a “knot” is7. However, the fact that some members of the audience don’t know exactly what a “knot” is does not matter because the cadence of the line flows with the rest of the song. It’s not an interruption, though it may hang around like a question mark for a fan who really wants to know – and then they can learn, opening a window into the life and lifestyle of others. It functions to expand the vocabulary of the curious, and acts as a signifier to those that do understand that they are part of the “in-group,” or in other words, that they can identify with the speaker. In Young M.A’s case the LGBTQ community is that “in-group,” and through her use of “in-group” terminology, Young M.A allows her audience access to greater understanding and thus greater acceptance. By putting forth the question of what it means for a lesbian to “deep-throat,” Young M.A is changing the conversation of women-loving-women activity from

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7 A “knot” can be understood as a stack of cash that is folded in half and tied with a rubber band.
a fetishized version made available for the male gaze to an experience documented by a member of the community, in all its nuanced glory.

Young M.A. is consistently asked to answer for her explicit lyrics in interviews, and one of the most common questions she is asked is how her sexuality influenced her experience in the music industry. Young M.A takes her “closet” struggle particularly seriously, but instead of categorizing herself as being in the throes of an internal struggle or rapping about the difficulty of self-identification, she has moved beyond the point of depressive mental head space created by homophobic society and heteronormative societal expectations, and instead embraced her lesbian identity as a fact of her life instead of an experience. Like the gunshots, the alcohol, and the death of her brother, Young M.A. folds her sexual and romantic life into her raps with a natural sense of realism. She uses punchlines to create a more comfortable space for her listeners, both queer and straight, such as the following lines from “Brooklyn Poppin’” (2015):

I said, ‘Come and get this D’
She said, ‘Where? Nigga, stop it’
I said, ‘I got that eight-inch in the closet.’

Young M.A teases herself about being masculine, but without male genitalia. However, the point of the wordplay is that she can sexually satisfy a woman without male genitalia. Being comical about her sexuality invites others in on the joke, that she is conflating male genitalia with an eight-inch dildo that she keeps in her closet, and offers a new style of comedy that is made available to heterosexual listeners. This comedy does not position the queer person as the butt of the joke, but uses heteronormative expectation as the basis for the juxtaposition of two unexpected ideas: Young M.A having a penis, and the surprise fact that the penis is a fake one. The surprise is what makes it funny. By doing so, she creates ethos and characterizes herself as a complex figure instead of being boxed in by labels such as “lesbian” or “gangster.” Approaching
all aspects of her life with a democratic sense of relevance and importance, here lyrics function as an exposé, creating an intimate visibility.

At times, this intimacy comes in combination with an almost shocking vulnerability, as is evident in the following lyrics of “Karma Krys” (2016).

I just wanna call your phone and apologize
But my pride got me colder than some Haagen-Daz
I can't cry but know it's tears there behind my eyes
And honestly I had a lot of truth behind them lies
But how could you be feeling someone else
I thought that you was focused on yourself
Getting money yeah, focused on your wealth
I guess you was just speaking for your health
And I know I ain't shit but this is it
You really just gone throw away all the time that we spent?
All the places we been
My lover, partner, and friend

Karma Krys was inspired by Jay Z’s “Song Cry” (2001) and actually quotes from “Song Cry” and appropriates it for “Karma Krys” later on:

“I know the way a n*gga livin was whack,
but you don’t get a n*gga back like that...
I was just fucking them girls I was gonna get right back.”
“Song Cry” directly addresses the issue of toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity can be defined as masculine-identifying traits that result in men being incapable or unwilling to express their emotions, often committing emotional or physical violence against women or other men. In this case, Young M.A and Jay-Z are discussing the emotional violence they have committed against their partners, specifically serial infidelity, and their inability to express their emotions without filtering them through their art. The song focuses especially on tears or outward physical expression of sadness, which can be interpreted as weakness in a toxic masculine culture. Instead of shedding tears, Jay-Z must make his “song cry.” In other words, he expresses himself through his music instead of in a vulnerable way during confrontation with his significant other. Interestingly, “Karma Krys” enables the listener a unique view into the way that toxic masculinity feeds into the performance of masculinity for butch lesbians, and how that particular performance of masculinity can be harmful for everyone involved. By modelling masculinity that adopts identifiers and behaviors that are toxic for men as well as for feminine women, a butch lesbian in Young M.A’s situation must cope with the harm that she has done, and is able to do so because she can empathize.

In “Karma Krys,” the rap is introduced and interrupted by real voicemails from Young M.A’s ex-girlfriend that discuss a relationship in the midst of a bad break-up. Young M.A says, “The girl on the voicemail is really my ex-girlfriend, and she really left that voicemail on my phone. I just put it to the [microphone], and recorded it on the track. It's relationship problems that we all go through in life. I know people can relate to it. I wanted them to hear my side of the story and how I felt about things, and what I did and how I felt wrong for what I did.” (Reeves)
The rap discusses Young M.A.’s admission to cheating, and the title reflects the fact that being cheated on reciprocally was her karma, and that she completely acknowledges her own wrongdoing and deserves the result: a breakup. However, the pain is real because the love was real. One of the most tender lines, “My lover, partner, and friend” succinctly sums up the idea that the relationship was one based on mutual love and support and embellished by memory and experience. The experience is brought to an arena that everyone can understand: infidelity hurts both parties involved, and often the cheater feels deep regret for what they have done. If Young M.A. were male, the rap would still be remarkable in its sensitivity and openness, but entirely heteronormative. Here, instead, we have the normalization of a lesbian relationship and its struggles: no different than many struggles that a heterosexual, or any, couple goes through. It’s an insight into the availability and unavailability of the emotional aspects of life and relationships, expressed through the lens of an adopted and performed toxic masculinity.

Her lyrics provide the audience with the information that she is lesbian but only marginally. “Karma Krys”’s focus is not the fact that Young M.A is a lesbian; it’s about her being in an unfaithful relationship. Writing this way normalizes her sexuality, sexual experiences, and women-loving-women relationships. She also compiles her struggles and those of others together, as if they were equal in weight despite their differences; in fact, the idea that everyone is going through a struggle is one that is pervasive in Young M.A’s lyrics. She attempts to motivate people to not engage in activities that are harmful – for example, spreading hateful comments online – by encouraging people to “be on their grind” and make money - and also is determined to show people that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. In “Ether” (2016), she raps,
To all the rappers out grinding, keep going, you got it.

To all my gays struggling, still stuck in the closet.

Just come out, be you, never try to disguise it.

To all my trap niggas trapping, cooking and chopping.

Watch for them snitch niggas ratting, giving names to the coppers.

Do anything you want to do, you got plenty of options.

In this way, no one struggle in her life becomes prioritized as greater or more difficult than another. There are similarities in feeling trapped by the poverty cycle and being “stuck in the closet,” and so Young M.A records both struggles with understanding and camaraderie for those in similar situations and a window into the life for those who never before understood. By rapping about personal stories, social issues, and pushing for a progressive future for those in communities similar to hers, Young M.A is going back to Hip-Hop’s roots, where rappers used to tell of their own struggles, such as Notorious B.I.G’s classic rags-to-riches rap “Juicy” (1994). Not only does she return to hip-hop roots in her themes, but she also returns to an old-fashioned style.

When Young M.A. claims Brooklyn in all of her songs, she is tapping into something historical within the rap community. Commenting on the practice of hip-hop DJ’s and rappers of claiming spaces, music writer Murray Forman says, “This emphasis on territoriality involves more than just a geographical arrangement of cultural workers and the regionalism of cultural practices. It illuminates a particular relationship to space or, more accurately, a relationship to

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8 This is coded language referencing drug dealing. Trapping is actually selling drugs at a set location; cooking is processing the drugs (e.g. to make angel dust, crack cocaine, etc.); and chopping is separating the drugs into small sellable bags or selling small bags on the street.
particular places” (67). This means that it takes more than living or working in an area to claim it; one must have a cultural relationship to the space, or in this case, neighborhood. Azealia Banks, from Harlem, claims “New York,” which is understood by New Yorkers to signify Manhattan, especially in her references to the 212 area code, but this reads to non-New Yorkers as claiming the entire city. Young M.A.’s specificity when she claims “Brooklyn” adds another layer to her authenticity and deep connection to the roots of hip-hop. Even her consistent references to her team, known as RED Lyfe\(^9\), recall the sort of collaborative spirit of the original Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. This is not unique to Young M.A.; in fact, pop rap collaborations between Nicki Minaj, Drake, and Lil’ Wayne were announced under the moniker “Young Money,” also the name of the label. However, as each artist became more independent in style and independently created hit records, they stopped featuring on each other’s songs and (arguably, to the detriment of the quality of their music), lost the collaborative group mentality and spirituality, thus severing ties with their roots in the history of rap. In other words, Young M.A. is painting herself both as a traditionalist in the genre in her habits, as respectful of the rappers that paved the way before her, and as an innovator in the content of her lyrics and flow.

In many of Young M.A.’s songs, such as “Summer Story” (2016), she raps over a musical loop, which is reminiscent of the New York rap scene when it first emerged with Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, who pioneered MC-ing over a repeated breakdown\(^{10}\) on a record. In the new age of technology and its influence on music, a rapper can pull the hottest ten to fifteen seconds of a song and repeat it on a constant loop, whether it is the break down or

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\(^9\) RED Lyfe, which has often been misunderstood as an affiliation to the Crips, stands for “Repent Every Day (for) Life.” Young M.A is deeply religious, and practices Christianity. It is not clear which sect of Christianity she practices, or if she has devoted herself to any sect in particular.

\(^{10}\) The instrumental part of a record that featured heavy drum beats and no vocals. It was usually a disco record.
not. The comments sections on Young M.A’s YouTube videos - which are her main platform, seeing as she is unsigned - are full of claims that she is “better than most guys out right now” or calls for her to be seen on an equal status with contemporary male rappers: Bobby Shmurda, French Montana, etc. claiming that she is the missing element. When hip-hop went hip – pop, it seemed to have lost something along the way, resulting in – according to Missy Elliott, as aforementioned – an oversaturation of the market, resulting in rappers who have lost touch with what rap originally was: punchlines, flow, beats, and the message. In an interview with Rolling Stone, Young M.A said, “A few years ago, I woke up and was, like, "I'm going to start rapping about truthful things"” (Reeves). She also said that this realization was the key to her gaining both confidence in herself, freedom in her artistry, and a gain in popularity because the quality of her music increased exponentially.

When Young M.A. raps, she raps the truth as she sees it – and is open and unafraid about her lyrical message. While many rappers have picked up on common themes from rap’s origin days – the streets, gang violence, drugs, etc. – they had forgotten that the original rap, including the original gangster rap, came from a place of experience and truth. When you have artists like Drake singing “started from the bottom, now we here,”

11 “Started From the Bottom” (2012) by Drake

then find out that he actually grew up in a comfortable Toronto suburb, his raps about the struggle seem that much more hollow. Then Young M.A. enters the scene. A hard-as-nails woman who grew up in East New York and lost a brother to gang violence began rapping about how to overcome conflict while living authentically. Suddenly things clicked into place: the rap game has been lacking in the unique combination of authenticity and talent that the superstars of the 90s and early 2000s carried. In this way, the homophobia falls into place in her rhymes as just another form of “hate”, and is
easily brushed off because living her truth has allowed Young M.A. a form of success that hiding her identity never would have allowed her to have. She says herself in “Quiet Storm” (2016) that she tried being “girly once, but fortunately it didn’t work,” and that enabled her to be able to tap into genuine artistry. I am not trying to argue that Young M.A.’s expression of either gender or sexuality is an ideal; in fact, her adoption of toxic masculine behavioral patterns has worked against her, as she acknowledges in her music, notably “Karma Krys” (2016). What is important about the way that Young M.A. performs is the measure of relatability to audiences that supersedes sexual orientation and gender performance of the listeners.

Being openly gay gives Young M.A. automatic ethos as well. Being queer is something relatively easy to hide, especially when rapping and music is a performance that can be altered by switching one’s identifiers, such has hair, makeup, and clothing. The industry actually pressured her to be more “girly” and even wear dresses for publicity purposes, perhaps to seem more palatable as a sexual object, playing into heterosexual men’s fetishizing of lesbian and bisexual women (Breakfastclubpowerfm “Young M.A Interview”). However, Young M.A insisted on authenticity, independence, and creative control: she never signed to a label, and in fact openly stated that she will not do so any time soon. In an interview published on YouTube, Young M.A said, “We’re trying to build our own label. I don’t want people to feel that they can control my craft” (Young M.A and Her Brooklyn Roots). Here we can see similarities to Missy Elliot in both character and determination with a healthy dose of good instinct when it comes to dealing with the music industry. Instead of becoming entangled the way that Azealia Banks was, Young M.A can see an alternate route to success, one in which she can continue developing as an artist without risking her independence. With artists such as Missy Elliot, who did not see a
route and so created one as role models, and contemporary use of the more democratic platform of the internet, Young M.A has many options for independent creative work.
CONCLUSION

This thesis was created in response to a gaping hole in the study of hip-hop and rap music. When I began researching, most content revolving around hip-hop music focused on its harmful effects on society. There were studies that questioned the effects of violent lyrics on the mentality of children, the perpetuation of the poverty cycle due to the glorification of gang violence, and the religious implications of rap. Much of these studies function under thinly veiled racism designed to discredit hip-hop, rap, and those that perform and create it – mainly black people, Latinos, and other marginalized groups. Rap music is not perfect; however, like any art form, it is deserving of serious academic study and inquiry. Rap exists as the poetic expression of a sect of people that often feel oppressed or sidelined by society; this is perhaps one of the reasons why queer rappers have found a niche in the industry, despite its troubled past of homophobic and sexist lyrics.

The three queer rappers I have studied, Missy Elliott, Azealia Banks, and Young M.A, have each contributed to the progression of hip-hop and rap music. Missy Elliott let her audience wonder about what it meant to be a woman or a man, and whether or not it actually mattered. She pushed the boundaries of heteronormative understandings of sex and sexuality, while advancing the sexual agency of women through her lyrics. Azealia Banks went a step further to become explicit in her lyrics. In women-loving-women sexual scenarios, Banks eliminated men from the equation. She, in Elliott’s footsteps, changed the understanding of queer sex by allowing the story to be told from a place of authority. Instead of settling for the understanding of lesbian and bisexual women posed by heterosexual men, Banks offered an authentic perspective through her lyrics. Young M.A, on the other hand, worked to draw attention away from sexuality despite being the most visible lesbian rapper currently in the industry. Instead of queer folk being
labelled and thus restricted by their queerness, Young M.A advocates for authenticity in all areas of life, allowing multiple identities to intersect and exist together to create individualism and creativity. This creativity ultimately lends itself to excellent craftsmanship in rap.

This thesis has hopefully provided some insight into the way that queer women have made a difference in the way that people understand, consume, and listen to rap. There has absolutely been a change in the industry, especially in regards to the way that rappers speak about women and sex. Less than two decades ago, Fat Joe was rapping “I don’t go down, lady” (“What’s LUV?” 2001), but Kendrick Lamar just released the highest debuting rap single in seven years, titled “HUMBLE” (2017). In the first verse, Kendrick raps, “Ooh that pussy good, won’t you sit it on my taste buds?” In this small case, you can see an about-face in the way that male rappers talk about women, sex, and cunnilingus. Where Fat Joe was aggressive, demanding, and rejected the desires of his partner, Kendrick does not demand, but asks. He also claims pleasure from pleasing his partner. In order to understand how this shift occurred, we must return to the origins of altering the public imagination’s view of the vagina and cunnilingus, which occurred in the lyrics of queer women rappers.

Something essential changed when queer women began to speak out about sex; instead of being threatened, men listened, and queer women claimed the space and the platform for women in general. Once queer women made rapping about female sexual agency and empowerment popular, it enabled women in the industry to take charge and create great music that inspired others to feel empowered. Without Elliott’s determination to create a pathway through the male-dominated entertainment industry, Banks would never have become as popular as she was. Banks’s sound is, self-admittedly, inspired by Elliott’s genre-bending work. Then, without Banks normalizing cunnilingus and lesbian sexual activity, Young M.A could never have been taken
seriously as an artist. She would have been shut out. However, technology has also played a huge part in the democratization of the music industry, but has also caused issues of profitability and compensation.

The genre is ever evolving, and like other art is reflective of the society in which it is created. As more queer rappers gain visibility and create more music, more studies must be done. The three artists covered in this thesis were simply a tip of the ice berg; each of these three artists made their mark on popular culture. However, there is a wide range of queer hip-hop artists that exist in the underground rap scene: Dej Loaf, 070 Shake, and Angel Haze are all queer women rappers that stream their music on Spotify. They each have something unique to add to the conversation, to answer the question: What does it mean to queer a traditionally patriarchal space?

The advent of streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music have changed the way that people purchase, listen to, and consume music. In a way, they have provided a more democratic platform for musicians, allowing those that would have been marginalized or pushed out of the industry to find a more direct pathway to their audience. However, it also eliminates the necessary filter of expert critics rejecting those that do not do honor to the craft. This has arguably led to an oversaturation of the genre, as Missy Elliott and Timbaland have commented. This also raises the question of who gets to decide what is good rap and what is bad rap: is there a right way to rap? Does it matter who performs the rap so long as it is objectively good quality rap?
Much needs to be done in the study of rap music and how it intersects with sexuality, especially queer sexuality. How do queer male rappers influence the industry? How did Frank Ocean’s “coming out” effect rap, and why was there no similar public reaction to the milieu of queer women in rap? How did queer women rappers from rap’s origin days affect the projection of the industry, and how did they become shut out? How has the fusion of R & B and rap changed the way that rappers sing and rap about women? The questions are varied, and each possible answer opens up ever more questions. Hopefully, over time, the gaping hole will fill with serious scholarly studies of rap, overshadowing the entirely unsatisfying majority of extant work.
LIST OF FIGURES

[Figure 1]

Two side-by-side screenshots of Missy Elliott wearing two different costumes for the music video “The Rain.”
Figure 2

A screenshot from the music video for “Sock it 2 Me.”
A screenshot from Missy Elliott’s music video of “She’s a B***H”
Screenshots from Azealia Banks ft. Lazy Jay “212.”
A picture from Young M.A’s Instagram.

A screenshot from the music video for “Quiet Storm” (2016). Here you can see Young M.A’s childhood football photograph lain over her as she raps.
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