Abstract

This thesis intervenes into recent online media discourse on queer rap and its attendant queer liberal agenda by situating black queerness, hip hop, and homophobia within colonial and post-slavery contexts. The research project begins by exploring the ways in which websites that produce discourses on the “new wave” of “queer rap” participate in panoptical imaginaries that produce black sexualities as excessive and blackness as pathologically homophobic; this work therefore also examines the authenticating tactics used to confirm an artist and their music as “queer.” I argue that normalizing racial-sexual classifications, as well as the classificatory work of musical genre, are limiting and damaging logics that fail to fully take up a work of art and the individual artist’s personhood. I expand and complicate these narratives by turning to Le1f, an identified “queer rapper,” to focus upon the interaction between media coverage and the content that is represented in his music video “Wut.” I argue that when one examines this work closely, we find an articulation of Le1f’s sexuality that is closely bound up with his blackness and colonial histories of interracial violence, fantasy, and desire. “Wut” and Le1f, together, resist the media’s impulse to forget race in discussions of queerness. I then turn to another artist touched by this discourse, Zebra Katz, and examine interviews alongside his music video “Ima Read.” I show how Katz provides a space to think through racial-sexual classifications as sites of injury and trauma while also drawing attention to black queer education as a project of ethical relationalities.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract..............................................................................................................................................i

Acknowledgements................................................................................................................................ii

List of Figures........................................................................................................................................iv

Chapter 1 Introduction...............................................................................................................................1

Chapter 2 “Queer Rap” and Aesthetic Assessments...............................................................................32

Chapter 3 Disidentificatory Pleasure in Le1f’s “Wut”..............................................................................60

Chapter 4 “Ima Read” as Pedagogical Response to Racial-Sexual Trauma............................................76

Chapter 5 Conclusion...............................................................................................................................100

Bibliography..........................................................................................................................................107
List of Figures

Figure 1. A frame from Le1f’s music video “Wut”.................................................................70

Figure 2. A frame from Zebra Katz’s music video “Ima Read”...........................................92

Figure 3. A frame from Zebra Katz’s music video “Ima Read”...........................................96
Chapter 1

Introduction

The community of artists we’re a part of is not a queer rap scene. Zebra Katz, Dosha, Mykki Blanco and I are just queer rappers in it. Artists like Physical Therapy and Fatima Al-Qadiri are leaders of the pack too, and they’re straight.

—Khalif Diouf, aka Le1f.¹

On March 21, 2012, an article by Carrie Battan—writer for the popular online music publication, Pitchfork Media—was published, titled “We Invented Swag: NYC's Queer Rap: How a group of NYC artists are breaking down ideas of hip-hop identity.”² Outlined in this article are profiles of rappers and performers in New York City whom Battan describes as a group of queer artists actively resisting a heteronormative hip hop culture.³ The artists identified as members of this group include Zebra Katz, Le1f, Mykki Blanco, House of LaDosha, and Cakes Da Killa. The article opens with a description of performances by Mykki Blanco and House of LaDosha, with Battan positioning herself as the experiential informant. The description of the performances includes a stark commentary on queer aesthetics (coded as ultra-feminine and flamboyantly gay appearances and behaviours) alongside a discussion of the bold and confident delivery of raps (deemed hyper-masculine).⁴

I begin this introductory chapter with Battan’s article because it demonstrates the ways in which queerness, hip hop, and masculinity complicate how we understand race, sexualities, and

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³ While it is not possible to precisely enumerate the readership and cultural influence that Pitchfork as a music website holds, it has been referred to as the “most influential tastemaker on the [independent] music scene.” Dave Itzkoff, “The Pitchfork Effect,” Wired Magazine, September 2006, accessed January 12, 2015, http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/14.09/pitchfork.html.
⁴ Ibid., par. 4-5.
⁵ Battan, 2012: par. 3.
black cultures. The juxtaposition of queerness with masculinity, within Battan’s piece, results in the remainder of the article being a meditation on the past and current state of hip hop: what Battan’s text reveals and omits results in the positioning of black cultures and hip hop as conventionally homophobic, and black queer hip hop as recent and new. Yet, importantly, these disclosures and omissions actually allow Battan to avoid labelling black cultures as homophobic. More clearly, then, her text historicizes hip hop as traditionally homophobic, does not specify homophobia as “black” specifically, and, at the same time, fails to attend to longstanding and contemporary black queer music histories. Discussing the aforementioned emergent circle of artists as pushing boundaries and challenging conventions of the hip hop genre, Battan states:

Still, it's difficult to imagine a thriving queer-friendly subculture translating to acceptance on a bigger scale. Even as the rap industry and audiences open their arms to a wider array of artists, we're consistently left wondering when a gay male rapper will find mainstream success (or when successful mainstream rappers will stop feeling the need to stay in the closet).\(^6\)

The way in which Battan structures her profile of these artists reveals a drive to contrast this group and their raced-queered identifications against a tradition of hip hop that is deemed averse to gay or gender-queer artists and their work—even though, as I note below, there is a long history of sexual diversity within black musics and hip hop cultures. The above passage demonstrates how Battan carefully attends to issues of sexual identification, while taking hip hop to task for its homophobia without the same level of care. Indeed, she simply equates “the rap industry and audiences”—which are implicitly coded as black rather than explicitly named as black—as unaccepting of queer cultures. Battan continues: “If there's ever been a time for an artist to rip hip-hop identity conventions to shreds, it's now... From the top down, there's a lot

\(^6\) Ibid.: par. 24.
happening that doesn't quite jibe with textbook definitions.” What are these presumed “hip-hop identity conventions”? What are the “textbook definitions” to which she refers? Making these claims without explicitly stating what hip hop conventions “are” allows Battan to refrain from saying that hip hop (and by extension black cultural production) is behind the times, is vociferously homophobic, is out of touch, is not modern. Battan is able to point to a set of “textbook” rules without having to describe in depth what these rules might be, or who created them.

Later in the article Battan (2012) describes an exchange with rapper A$AP Rocky, and states, “For most heterosexual rappers, treatment of gays seems to go something like this…” By not having to disclose her use of the term, she is able to use “rapper” as a code for black straight (homophobic) men, or even black culture writ large. That is, while employing words and phrases that do not blatantly confirm yet subtly point toward a framing of hip hop as always already homophobic, and her neglect to confront the obvious racial underpinnings of the genre discussed, Battan permits herself to side-step any potential backlash for labeling a distinctly black form of cultural production as pathologically homophobic or queer-phobic.

With this article, the reader is led to view these artists through a narrative that tells a story about situating blackness and queerness alongside blackness and homophobia. Aside from her interesting conflation of queerness with being “gay,” as noted above, there are meaningful

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7 Ibid.: par. 4, emphasis added.
8 Ibid.: par. 7, emphasis added.
9 Battan’s conflation of gay with queerness interests me for the lack of nuance she brings to understanding queer culture. That is, her imagination of what queer is relies on a stable and pathologized notion of sexuality. Siobhan Somerville in *Queering The Color Line* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000) shows how this model of sexuality relies on attempts to identify physiological markers that distinguish the “homosexual” from the “normal” body (p. 37). This approach was borrowed from the racist medical discourses within sexology, which viewed white and black as natural racial opposites and thus the notion of the “mulatto” was constructed to make sense of the racially mixed body which seemed neither to be black nor white. Battan’s conflation also interests me for her reliance on a set of visual logics that demand for queerness to be announced by the queer, and thus to be visible and
assumptions in the article that concern me: that hip hop is always already homophobic; that this
group of artists, as black queer hip hop performers, are presented as new and unusual; and finally,
if these two assumptions are thought about together, that black music was/is always heterosexual.
Related, these assumptions, together, also fail to take up the ways in which racial and sexual
histories—specifically the racial violences that underwrote and underwrite plantation slavery,
colonialism, and white supremacy—inform hip hop cultures.

Battan’s portrayal of hip hop as a genre with audiences waiting for queerness (“…we’re
consistently left wondering when…”) implies that it is a musical genre that is behind and not of
the present. Black queer hip hop artists, even in spite of being presented in music coverage as
actively resistant—as in the above article by Battan—are often also positioned in these articles as
against what is popularly considered the openly hostile and homophobic culture of hip hop. And
even while Battan concedes that “[i]f there's ever been a time for an artist to rip hip-hop identity
conventions to shreds, it's now…[and that the] genre is the furthest left-of-center it's been in a
long time,”[^10] hip hop is still condemned for being homophobic and, at the same time, not “left-
of-center.” While never having to outright cite homophobia or conservatism, Battan’s piece on
“black queer hip hop artists” presents a distorted narrative that posits queerness as newly
emerging within the longstanding homophobic “traditions” of hip hop, of black cultural
production, and of blackness. This distorted narrative is informed by and emerges from a

[^10]: Battan, 2012: par. 4.

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hip hop” is informed by a societal fascination (within the U.S. in his discussion, but I would say that this fascination
extends beyond U.S. borders) with searching for and confirming the non-heteronormativity of blackness (284).
defenders of black queer hip hop artists who fail to be fully embraced by their own immutably homophobic and backward community.

In addition to obscuring a range of racial and sexual oppressions, Battan’s discussion of this group of artists as “new” erases a vibrant and longstanding history of black queer artists existing firmly within the hip hop genre. Holding these artists up as novel and extraordinary, as anomalies within an apparently otherwise heterosexist tradition of music, functions to position black queers as having always been outside hip hop. Further, her statement that gay male rappers fail to find mainstream success with successful mainstream rappers who “… [feel] the need to stay in the closet,” props up the perception that hip hop and its musicians are hostile to queer artists and present a barrier to queer emancipation and expression. At the same time, her article also conflates emancipation with being “out” of the closet, with being identifiable, and with being visually coded as “queer” in terms that are recognizable. While never explicitly naming this group as “black queer hip hop artists,” and in grouping these artists together, Battan has, in fact, identified them as “black queer hip hop artists” and generalized what are otherwise complex (and sometimes contradictory) racially queer identifications. What is queerness? Must one be “out” in order to be properly queer? And does “out” have to mean “visible and identifiable” to the critic and audience? And how do queerly black histories and performances shape how we understand, and talk about, sexualities?

Zebra Katz, the artistic persona of Ojay Morgan and one of the artists profiled within Battan’s article, is frequently celebrated in music journalism and online criticism as a “black queer hip hop artist.” The Guardian’s Hermoine Hoby writes:

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12 Ibid., par. 24.
Zebra Katz is often categorised [sic] as ‘queer rap,’ a term he feels ambivalent about. “It was maybe reassuring to a lot of queer artists to see that they can go out and make music, but I fought against it. I want my music to be listened to and I want my audience to find it and figure out what I'm doing, instead of journalists pushing that out.”

Morgan’s ambivalence toward a “queer rap” label, as suggested by the above quotation, is worth exploring further. What might it mean for music critics like Battan group and define these artists in a way that does not align with, or defies, these artists’ musical identifications and commitments? What can be learned from the discrepancy between the writing of these critics and the words and music of the artists themselves? This celebration of Ojay Morgan’s “identity”—an identity that is imposed upon him and which fuels his “ambivalence”—reflects larger issues of race, sexuality, and visuality. More specifically, the above quotation draws attention to the intermeshing of black and queer and rap cultures and musics—an intermeshing that is often elided in online music journalistic piece (a further examination of Morgan’s negotiations with the ways in which he is interpellated by music journalists will occur in the third chapter of this project).

In order to address the above tensions, my research builds on C. Riley Snorton’s unpacking of media representations and discourses surrounding the “down low,” and his analysis of the pairing of black and queer. Snorton writes, “… part of what informs media representations of … [discourses of black sexuality] is an assumption—a popular, long-held myth—that both the truth of race and the truth of sex are obvious, transparent, and written on the body.” With this in mind, this thesis takes as its starting point online independent music coverage beginning in 2012—approximately the same time what was being described as the

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“new wave” of black queer hip hop artists came to be taken up in music criticism. This coverage presents and celebrates these artists as new phenomena and part of a revolutionary movement, framing their existence and emergence as occurring in spite of a longer tradition of hostile, homophobic and hyper-masculine hip hop. However, this journalistic discourse works to produce queerness alongside blackness as something that needs to be visually located and apprehended.

The widespread participation on the part of indie music websites in their desire to *locate* queerness within blackness (by grouping these artists together and thus identifying them collectively and individually as queer), and therefore locate queerness within a distinctly black cultural form, reveals their interest and investment in disciplining black bodies and their representations. This media discourse also works to position queer black artists only in opposition to hip hop, thus framing the relationship as adversarial; this discursively presents black queer artists as victims of a pathologically homo-/trans-/queer-phobic culture—a phobic culture which is, because of the way these music critics conceptualize sexual diversity and race, an axiomatically black culture.

My research is thus working to understand the colonial logics and racial stereotypes—which can also be articulated as anti-blackness—underpinning music critics’ coverage of black queer artists in order to think through the ways the history of representation, race, queerness, and popular music, is laden with a difficult racial imaginary. This thesis begins with an analysis of black queer music as it is taken up in independent online music criticism (Chapters One and Two). This is followed by analyses of the selected work of Khalif Diouf (L1ef) and Zebra Katz (Chapters Three and Four), two hip hop artists that interrupt and complicate the visual underpinnings of black queer cultures. The research project will consider the kinds of possibilities that emerge when black studies encounter music and music criticism. Examining
this “queer rap” moment through black studies and attendant theories of race, racism and popular culture will reveal how the categorizations of race (black), sexuality/sexual intelligibility (queer), and genre (hip hop) overlap. The research will also uncover what regulatory function is achieved through re-performing and re-presenting these categorizations, and what affiliations (among individuals and bodies) are being created. My research draws attention to the ways in which critics and participants within popular culture rely upon colonial visual logics that bolster an ideological understanding of music, genre, race, sexuality, as simply “there” and transparent, for the music critic (and by extension, the reader or audience member) to see and therefore know. That is, I look at this “queer hip hop” moment as one that is informed by a longer history of black cultural production and black representation—a history that is underwritten by scripts that cast black peoples, their identifications, and their sexualities, as knowable truths—as they exist within popular culture.

Literature Review

My literature review is divided into three overlapping sections: contested histories and representations; queer popular cultures; and, queer panoptics. These overlapping sections have allowed me to think through how the heralding of “black queer hip hop” is premised upon the participation within panoptical imaginaries that locate individuals who apparently possess blackness and queerness (as written on the body) and that correspondingly identify these musicians as creating music primarily or exclusively defined as black and queer (as written in the lyrics and the sounds.) Panoptical imaginary illuminates the racial-sexual logics that undergird discourses of hip hop, queerness and homophobia.

Contested Histories and Representations
Black popular culture, as a site of racial and sexual representation, oppression, and resistance, is often historicized alongside plantation slavery. Chattel slavery created the economic, political, and ideological groundwork for the treatment of black people. Patricia Hill Collins provides an important overview of the effects of this system. Hill Collins attends to the gender- and sexuality-specific forms of organization that underwrote slavery, and the powerful ideological justifications for these social practices.\(^\text{15}\) Slavery assigned black people to status of non-human, animal, and commodity; their bodies were objectified and deemed property for commodification of human labour, as well as of sexuality and reproduction. The forms that the commodification of sexuality took were gender-specific: the sexuality and reproductive capacities of the enslaved were subject to the White (male) master and black women experienced forms of sexual exploitation and rape. Forcing black men to do hard manual labour was linked to white perception of black male bodies as large and strong and, therefore, the casting of black men as uncontrollably violent, intellectually inferior, and wildly sexual.\(^\text{16}\) All of these images worked to justify forced sex between black men and black women (partnerships enforced and/or overseen by slave owners and meant to reproduce the slave population), as well as the institutionalized rape of black women and men by slave owners. Black sexuality in its gendered iterations within the institution of chattel slavery, Hill Collins argues, had nothing to do with agency and pleasure for black women and men and it adversely impacted the relationships they had with their own bodies and with each other.\(^\text{17}\) After chattel slavery legally ended in 1865 (in the USA), black people continued to experience racial oppression and anti-black and sexual violence—all of which were ideologically justified by whites through shored up notions of black


\(^{16}\) Ibid.: 57.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.: 61.
hypersexuality and deviant sexuality.\textsuperscript{18} While black communities have always resisted and undermined these racial stereotypes and violences—including, of course, fostering different expressions of sexuality within black communities and contributing to anti-queer sentiments—the links between racism and presumed or inherent sexual deviance has shaped broader understandings of black sexualities.\textsuperscript{19} The complexity and specificity of black sexual history contextualizes black sexuality in the present and underscores the effects of white supremacy and slavery upon black cultures. This history, too, recasts typical racialized readings of black communities, wherein they are often held responsible for their marginalization, by bringing into focus how racial violence impacts upon how blackness, and black sexualities, are negatively perceived and adversely shaping black well-being.

This history of racial and sexual violence can be connected to systems of representation and negative portrayals of black communities and people. US popular culture has been theorized as a site of fantasy and myth, one that, due to antiblack ideologies, inherently relies upon the simultaneous vilification and embrace of black cultural materials in order to sustain itself.\textsuperscript{20} Stuart Hall shows the US to be a unique cultural context (in comparison to Europe, for instance), as it has always had multiple racial groups as part of its composition. As a result, US popular culture is defined by the constitution of racial hierarchies in general, and the adoption of black cultural vernacular traditions in particular.\textsuperscript{21} This popular cultural context can be traced back to chattel slavery, under which black people were objectified as commodities, with no legal or

\textsuperscript{18} Ib id.: 63.
\textsuperscript{19} Ib id.: 69.
\textsuperscript{21} Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?”: 105.
social human status. Among its many damaging and violent assaults on black humanity, slavery deeply affected black understanding of identity and self-worth. To justify the slave system and reinforce the political status of enslaved black people, white supremacist practices during slavery promoted images and representations of black inferiority. These images of blackness continued to circulate after the legal abolition of slavery well into the current popular cultural context, albeit in different forms. Overall, these racist and sexist images sought to produce, and thus validate, black political, economic, and social inferiority. These images were coupled with acts of racist and sexist violence, as well as a system of thought that drew on racial stereotypes (such as the hypersexual and sexually violent black) that circulated and calcified racial and sexual representations of blackness.

For centuries, black communities had no control over how they were represented within the context of white supremacy. The condition of black people being born in to a state of continuous domination produced what Cornel West terms “the modern Black diaspora problem of invisibility and namelessness”:

The modern Black diaspora problematic of invisibility and namelessness can be understood as the condition of relative lack of Black power to present themselves to themselves and others as human complex beings, and thereby to contest the bombardment of negative, degrading stereotypes put forward by White supremacist ideologies.

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23 Hill Collins, in *Black Sexual Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2004: 55-61) discusses the political economy of chattel slavery, and in doing so enumerates and analyses the many (gendered and sexualized) forms that these controlling images of blackness took.
24 Ibid.: 61-64. Hill Collins explains that in order to adapt to the shifting political environment post-1865 when slavery legally ended in the U.S., legal sanctioning of racial segregation permitted whites to mandate the separation of whites from blacks in unequal social spaces. Racist science used perceived biological differences between whites and blacks to justify racial segregation. Notions of black hyper and deviant sexuality persisted and were used to legitimate sexual violence against black women and men alike. Black women were deemed so lascivious and sexually desiring that they could not be raped, while black men as unable to control their hypersexual urges were deemed potential rapists.
25 West, 1999: 102 (emphasis in the original).
To combat regimes of representations that cast blackness always as inferior, black people engaged in a cultural politics that subverted white supremacist images. These images—songs, visual arts, and other modes of cultural production—provided a space to reimagine black humanity and subvert the dominant racial system. Many aspects of this creative work sought to create “positive” black images that combatted white supremacist stereotypes.\(^\text{26}\)

While such resistances to white supremacy vary, the question of positive black representation was and is complex. As Stuart Hall demonstrates, trying to represent the solely positive aspects of the black community presupposes the uniformity of blackness; the attempt to displace anti-black misrepresentations can, in some cases, work to repress and regulate a range of diverse black voices and artistic visions by casting all black voices and visions as a monolith. The fiction of black uniformity, grounded in solely positive representational politics, requires the erasure of (gendered, sexual, class-based, geographic) differences between black people. This complicates practices of cultural resistance and, in some ways, provides a counter-narrative that misrepresents the complexity that underlies the lives of marginalized communities. This predicament can be resolved through noticing and producing texts that, as Hall notes, draw attention to “… the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject.” To produce a resistant cultural politics, then, means moving beyond the essential (always positive or always negative) black subject toward a consideration of multiple identifications \textit{simultaneously}: to do so is to understand that race is articulated with other social categories that emerge within very specific historical contexts and to illuminate that blackness is a constructed category.\(^\text{27}\)


\(^{27}\) Ibid.: 443-444.
E. Patrick Johnson complements Hall’s thinking: “Because the concept of blackness has no essence, ‘black authenticity’ is overdetermined—contingent on the historical, social, and political terms of its production.”

This overdetermination exposes the requirement for blackness, as a construct, to be regulated and reinforced as well as being arbitrary. The arbitrariness means that blackness is contingent on the historical context in which it is constructed. To bring this understanding into practice means to engage rather than suppress difference while also interrogating and undoing codes that call up past (negative) instances of black representations.

A useful way to think about this is through the codified binary logic of blackness and whiteness. This logic means that one concept (whiteness) needs to be defined through and against its other (blackness). An example of this dynamic can be found blackface minstrelsy, one of the earliest and most widely practiced popular cultural industries in the United States. The performance was a series of acts and sites that go beyond binary terms of white (supremacy) and black (subordination) toward an uncovering of, at varying times, fear, desire, envy, and anxiety of blackness and black cultures. Underlying the persistent, dynamic, and racist “borrowing” of black culture for white mainstream consumption—as seen in white performers blackening up for the minstrel—is the struggle to establish the racial meanings for whiteness through an enduring obsession with black, specifically male, bodies. This obsession is markedly sexual in nature for the minstrel’s exposure of white fascination, envy, and repulsion, for black male sexuality.

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29 Hall, “New Ethnicities”: 446.
30 West, 1990: 105.
As suggested, this thread of whiteness that is defined against blackness extends to that of racial sexualities. This invites the question of who wields control over popular cultural production and how the resultant gaze authorizes specific images of blackness. Given the history of racism, the means of representation is overwhelmingly controlled and wielded by whites. This control over representation has affected popular images of blacks in ways that reveal white desire to dominate and subjugate black peoples and, at the same time, reveals a long-standing colonial sexual fantasy, and fascination, with black culture. That is, white representations and understandings of race are produced not only to dominate blacks. Rather, through and against the representation of black peoples as the deviant and sub-human other, white subjectivity is drawn up and reinforced. In this way, blackness is essential to white self-understanding for the way it structures the contours and relations of belonging. That is, white identity is defined in opposition to and as a negation of the images of blackness.

These vexed and complex histories are underwritten by colonial visual logics that confine and survey black bodies as not only containers of racial information, but also as bodies whose behaviors and actions communicate sexual meaning. This surveillance hints toward the implicitly racialized expectations for proper and respectable gender expression, with white gender performances situated as normal, and black bodies positioned as always standing outside of this normalcy, thus marking the boundaries of, and differentiating, what is “acceptable” and what is “deviant” behavior. Ann Stoler explains that deviance or otherness is defined by existing outside

32 While this thesis acknowledges that other racialized groups are negatively portrayed within the popular as well, the scope of this research focuses on black representation and images to highlight the peculiar and intimate relationship that whites hold with and against blacks, particularly within the context of the United States.
of the boundaries of respectability, bound up in the clarification of proper or respectable identities (particularly in the making of European bourgeois identity.)\textsuperscript{36} Rinaldo Walcott correspondingly argues that black deviance from white normalcy queers blackness.\textsuperscript{37} With this in mind, within black popular culture sexuality and queerness are ever-present, yet this is seldom acknowledged or fully disclosed.

In reflecting upon the linking of black and queer in the field of representation, Isaac Julien draws attention to the contestation of what it means to “be” black, thus troubling the notion of a black essence and also nodding toward a recognition of the immeasurable diversity and multiplicity of subjectivities that inhabit the category “black.”\textsuperscript{38} He shows that the issue of recovering and upholding “natural” blackness—through acts of censorship, mythologizing, trespassing and other representational strategies—ironically requires effort, thus exposing nothing natural but instead a manufactured image.\textsuperscript{39} Like Hall, Julien also opposes the demand for solely positive black (and queer) images as a set of easily identifiable criteria is called up to deem an image “positive.” He also explains how this demand dangerously dictates limits on what subject matter can be covered and how this forecloses a whole range of issues:

The project of producing positive images is an impossible one. Though it may have the best intentions of redressing imbalances in the field of representation, it is bound to fail as it will never be able to address questions of ambivalence or transgression …. Identity

\textsuperscript{38} Fred Moten, \textit{In The Break: The Aesthetics of The Black Radical Tradition} (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
\textsuperscript{39} Specifically, Julien in “Black Is, Black Ain’t” shows that acts of censorship include the more general erasure of queerness from black history as well as more specifically the attempt on the part of Langston Hughes’s estate to prevent showing Isaac Julien’s film \textit{Looking for Langston} (1988) for how it connects Langston with homoeroticism. Mythologizing refers to the presentation of a heterosexist blackness as “the” blackness; the notion that the coupling of queerness with blackness is “crossing lines” or “trespassing” exposes the fiction that these lines are not stable, secure from “intruders,” or that these lines do not actually exist. Isaac Julien, “Black Is, Black Ain’t: Notes on De-Essentializing Black Identities” In \textit{Black Popular Culture}, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1992): 255-263.
politics in its positive-images variant is always purchased in the field of representation at the price of the repression of the other.\textsuperscript{40}

The issues Julien sees as being foreclosed within a discourse that demands positive images are those of transgression: that is, transgression of racial, sexual and political lines. Considering this along with his statement, “[d]esire is always the axis along which different forms of cultural policing take place,”\textsuperscript{41} Julien allows me to connect how the demands for a positive image neutralize the possibility of exposing such repressed or disavowed desires. Though he does not cite him explicitly, Julien draws on the Lacanian notion of the scopic register to discuss the experience of the subject in interaction with the other.\textsuperscript{42} Julien shifts the discussion of representation to include not only who is represented, but \textit{how the viewer engages with that representation}, and in doing so implicates not only (black, queer) cultural creators and the audiences that interact with this work, but also the broader complicated processes of anti-black racism and black fetishism in which arguably everyone is immersed. Put another way, Julien is saying that the racial partitioning of white and black subjectivity is central to the othering that produces one’s desires—and that this partitioning also produces the incomplete repression and disavowal of desire.

\textit{Queer Popular Cultures}

I have a lot of problems with the academic queer community because it’s a community that exists completely removed from reality. Those kids who are selling their bodies on the West Side Highway, on Christopher Street, they don’t even know what the fuck queer theory is.

\textsuperscript{40} Julien, 1992: 261.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.: 259.
\textsuperscript{42} Both at the beginning and toward the end of the chapter, Julien uses the language of scopic imperatives (255) and scopic register (261). Julien, 1992.
While the contested histories and images of race and sexuality complicate representations of black people and black popular culture by imbricating blackness and queerness, queer theories, and therefore queer cultures, are still imagined as predominantly white. In the following paragraphs I take up queerness beyond the normative white configuration toward one that allows me to center a discussion that twins black and queer.

Queer, a term that has been reclaimed to identify sexually diverse politics, identities and practices, is a concept with contested origins. Since the post-1960s liberation movements, queer has been taken up in activism, fiction, and queer theory, with the latter dominating definitions of what queer identifications look like, how queer is practiced, and how non-normative sexualities are theorized. Indeed, queer theory and queer practices are also critiqued for the white privilege that underwrites them. This is ironic given that, on one hand, queer is meant to refer to what is considered marginal, unusual, or deviant, and on the other hand often marginalizes and excludes populations based on the very binaries that queer purports to try and undo. The more radical possibilities of queer liberation have been folded into a liberal identity project that actually excludes marginalized (poor, nonwhite, non-Western) communities.

If we understand queerness to not only mean LBGTQ identifications but, as well, a rejection of established binaries (straight/gay, man/woman, white/black) and a more general

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disposition that is unnatural, unexpected, undermining, undoing, then how might we racialize queerness, or queer race? 45 Specifically, how can we rethink black as queer? While there is a growing body of work that critiques the impulse to treat race and sexuality as separate and, in this, demonstrates the co-constitution of these categories, this very intersection, black and sexuality, is one that has in the past been doubly elided in the white queer academic tradition and in black studies. 46 E. Patrick Johnson, in his overview of the academic development of black studies and studies of black sexuality, highlights how the theoretical approaches to race can no longer continue to ignore questions of sex and queerness. 47

However, as suggested above, going beyond a strict understanding of queerness as a non-normative sexuality invites an understanding of black as having always been queer. Cathy Cohen critiques queer political activism for narrowly conceptualizing queer struggle as a binary of queer and straight. Queer activism, she notes, therefore fails to attend to the complex and intersecting power relations of race, sexuality, and class among others. 48 To attend to these relations, Cohen writes, would mean a more expansive conceptualization of what counts as queer: “For instance, how would queer activists understand politically the lives of women—in particular women of color—on welfare, who may fit into the category of heterosexual, but whose sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral, or worthy of state support?” 49 Cohen’s research on intersectional queer politics allows me to consider how black people, being fundamentally defined as in opposition to and outside the norms and values of dominant society,

49 Ibid.: 442.
are also queered. Focusing on the existence and development of odd, or queer, black diasporic communities, Rinaldo Walcott argues that these conditions constitute confirmation of a black experience as queer.\(^{50}\) Christina Sharpe argues that desire-imbued power relations, and the racial-sexual fantasies and sexual violence at the center of slavery, also allow us to think about how black and white communities comprise, simultaneously, post-slave subjectivities.\(^{51}\) In her work, Sharpe shows how black bodies carry the burden of signifying slavery and its excesses in ways that non-black bodies do not. The black body is also made and unmade, inhabited and constructed, by both white and black subjects.\(^{52}\) In this lies Sharpe’s conceptualization of the queerness of blackness as the “…lack of ‘proper’ signifying power in terms of sex and gender, monstrosity, malleability, and possibility.”\(^{53}\)

It has already been shown that white communities situate blackness as the other against which whiteness defines itself, thus exposing the parameters of what is normal, and conversely, what is deviant.\(^{54}\) Much black scholarship has also focused on how this relationship can be extended to differing epistemologies, political practices, and creative expression—though not all scholars label this deviance from whiteness as one through which blackness is queered.\(^{55}\) Nonetheless, black ways of knowing, doing, and living, are often invisibilized, trivialized, or simply treated as deviant; in this way we can understand black as queer.\(^{56}\) Thinking queerly

\(^{50}\) Walcott, “Boyfriends with Clits”: 168-173.
\(^{52}\) Ibid.: 121-122.
here would mean opening up that which is seen and understood—or that which “passes”—within dominant scripts as normative. It has been established at length that the struggle to establish coherent patriarchal and heterosexist narratives of blackness works at the expense of and through the repression of those who do not fit this narrative. To open up or see something other than these narratives is to see what is there, what was there all along, yet also what was or is unintelligible. If we perceive or apprehend such narratives and histories on different or multiple registers, those flattened or ignored presences may be made intelligible. In much of the aforementioned theory, this means looking to black cultural production, specifically within music, to try to see, hear, understand, what visions and ways of knowing black artists offer in their work.

Scholarship on black popular culture draws attention to its profound political importance and the inseparable connections between aesthetics and politics. Richard Iton argues:

… the suggestion that aesthetics cannot be divorced from politics does not imply that we cannot make aesthetic judgments regarding creative and political work; the point is that aesthetic judgments should not be confined to the artistic realm and cannot be detached from political considerations.

Reading popular culture as entertainment that does not have a political impact neutralizes any meaningful social and political criticism directed toward it. One way to think about this is to notice how modernity, and its related notion of the aesthetic as protected and distanced from the concerns of politics, legitimizes its violent articulations of blackness that deny agency and autonomy; black cultural production is rendered invisible and/or apolitical. With this in mind,

60 Wilderson, 2010.
what Iton argues is that viewing popular culture as purely aesthetic is an extension of colonality and modernity because it forecloses political engagement: “If the aesthetic is understood as a science of beauty that forecloses substantive political engagement or challenge, it must be recognized as a key brick in the wall of modernity and one of the cornerstones of the racialized edifice that has so effectively contained and restricted black life chances.”61 The other side of neutralizing art, and its attendant political energies, is the relegation of art to a space of delegitimized knowledge. Here, Rinaldo Walcott’s discussion of the treatment of the literary humanities as a lesser form of knowledge is instructive. Walcott’s insights on the creative energies that animate artistic production demonstrate that the “crucial importance of the literary humanities lies in the way questions of the imagination have important cultural, social and political impact and should never be assumed to be outside cultural and socio-political concerns and affairs.”62 This thesis understands these political potentials as extending beyond literature across diverse creative forms—such as music—as far as the imagination is involved in any of such practices.

In this way, popular culture is always an intensely political narrative. Black studies scholarship demonstrates that cultural practices that are often denied political importance or credibility—usually those not adherent to Western values and preoccupations—should be taken seriously as forms of politics.63 Politicizing popular culture is a way to consider and open up resistant and emancipatory imaginations and possibilities that may not currently exist in socially sanctioned political spaces (i.e. civil society.) This becomes especially pertinent when one considers how social and community-based institutions within North America have been slowly

61 Iton, 2008: 16.
63 Iton, 2008; Moten, 2003; Weheliye, 2005.
eroding for decades, thus increasing the importance and effects of popular culture as a readily available and accessible resource with which to engage information, share ideas, and dwell on the representational politics of race, class, gender, location, sexuality, and other practices of identification and differentiation.\textsuperscript{64}

Considering these histories alongside more recent representational sources (mediated forms of communication such as radio, television, and the internet, for example) it becomes clear that black cultural producers resist regimes of representation that position blacks as objects rather than subjects of representation.\textsuperscript{65} This resistance highlights both the tensions that emerge from white representations of black culture \textit{and} mechanisms of black resistance to such representations.

\textit{Genre, Queerness, and Panopticism}

What is hidden within, suppressed by, or in excess of, genre? What is not seen or heard within genre framings? How does genre manage our expectations of what a song, an artist, an album, might contain? Genre refers to a form of classification for artistic or cultural compositions that group creative works based on common characteristics. Musical genres group pieces of music together under categories that link their similar and distinctive stylistic traits; some of the many genres that circulate today include pop, rock, ambient, reggae, new wave, classical, and hip hop.\textsuperscript{66} The word genre derives from the Latin \textit{genus}, meaning genius and species, thus suggesting that the organization of artistic works is naturally occurring phenomena.

\textsuperscript{64} Dirks, & Mueller, 2007: 124-125.
\textsuperscript{65} Hall, 1996: 442.
But genre as a classificatory process is not objective or natural; it functions as and is comprehensible within a given set of socially constructed conventions. Even within these conventions there is disagreement around what constitutes genre or which works of art belong where, indicating that the discussion of genre is always a site of contestation. In this way, the presumed agreement over genre classifications that we have inherited today functions as a management of audience expectations in particular and cultural expectations more broadly, and thus can be seen as a hegemonic force that shapes the experience of art. As an example, world music as a genre is problematic for the way it presumes Western white music as the norm against which all other musics will be, or are, assessed, as well as for presuming a uniformity in the multiple articulations of music that come from other parts of the non-Western “world.” Musical genre here deemphasizes the construction of “world music,” against a universalized notion of music that is implicitly white supremacist and western-centric, and masks the colonial bracketing of white away from the primitive ethnic other. This othering exposes not only the racist machinations of musical genre generally but anti-blackness in particular, for the way that black musical expressions have often been challenged and negatively represented. Similarly, Michael Eric Dyson outlines how hip hop is more attacked than many other cultural institution for its “regressive views.” Dyson explains that in hip hop one finds the same attitudes found in larger society, but these attitudes are rendered more explicit, vulgar, blatant, than other conservative institutions. Because such views and attitudes are performatively exaggerated in hip hop, it is deemed an exceptional and inherent space, or genre, of manifested homophobia. Similarly, Dyson notes how hip hop is often construed as being a contemporary form of minstrelsy and

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sonic pathology—thus highlighting the racial antagonisms that arise from critical reception of black cultural forms.  

Genre relies on predictability and the practice of ignoring the particularities, singularities, and complexities of the creative process. Genre can also appear to be neutral: a simple description of similar kinds and types of music. Genre, however, is not neutral or predictable. Genre is produced to ascertain very particular meanings about music and is reproduced to sediment these meanings. Part of my argument in this thesis is to reveal that the colonial logics that underwrite black queer musics (logics that often rely on seeing familiar queer codes or labels, and therefore knowing the black queer figure), is underpinned and bolstered by the social production of popular musical genres. Examining black queer hip hop artists provides an opportunity to reveal and disrupt the regulatory process of popular music genre-making, but also provides a way to differently conceptualize music and creative works.

Taking my cue from C. Riley Snorton, this thesis is not setting out to confirm nor deny the queer labels assigned to these artists (and thus reify queerness as defined by critics), but rather to highlight and analyse the ways in which music writers and critics participate in panoptical imaginaries of coupling blackness with queerness. I therefore endeavour to separate the music critic’s understanding of queerness (which is always sutured to gender conformity and sexual acts and behaviours) from a broader understanding of queer that—as Khalif Diouf (also known as Le1f) puts forth in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter—is not always or necessarily attached to sexual and/or gender identity. Queerness can, then, refer to a practice in

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70 Snorton, 2014: 5.
aesthetic sensibility more broadly, and in music more specifically (in this instance “queer rap”). This is a practice that reveals committing oneself to non-normative sounds and “genre-bending” music crafting. It can also refer to a confrontation by the artist with racist and colonial logics. As José Munoz points out, the queerness of this practice can be located in the disidentificatory move of working within and through dominant cultural texts to highlight and decode hidden messages that naturalize exclusionary logics, and through disruption and remaking (or remixing), recasts these logics to not only include but empower minority identifications. The refusal through these gestures of hermeneutic (dominant) closure and thus fulfillment can be applied to both construction of colonial hierarchies as well as expectations toward and structures of musical texts.

I see similarities in the logics that inform developing and utilizing musical genres and those logics that develop and sustain fixed identity constructs such as “black,” “queer,” “woman,” and so on. While both systems of categorization unravel differently (genres of music are very different from corporeal identifications), they similarly justify and naturalize their distribution of musics and humans through the seeming self-evidence of our sensory perceptions: we use these categories because they simply “are,” because we can see, or hear, them. Paul Gilroy, in advocating for a new way of thinking about and through race, emphasizes the problems with our current system of knowledge that relies heavily on the visual to render racial difference as self-evident, as well as to silence any dissenting voices that might claim otherwise:

… [T]he signs of ‘race’ do not speak for themselves and highlight the fact that the difficult work of interpreting the system of meaning they create is always likely to appear illegitimate, “politically incorrect,” sometimes treasonable and usually speculative in the most dismissive sense of that term.  

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Gilroy here shows how the systems of race, sexuality, and genre, justify their continued existence and enactment on the grounds that we must make meaning out of the sensory input of our existence (and our coexistence with perceived difference). Gilles Deleuze puts it well when he states that in this unchanging and fixed classification of roles and identities, “… difference is in effect fully subject to the identity of the concept, the opposition of predicates, the analogy of judgment and the resemblance of perception.”\(^{72}\) While I acknowledge the importance of the desire to make meaning(s) that can soothe and comfortably situate oneself in this reality we call life, I do not believe that these meanings should remain static, nor should they derive completely from our limited sensory perceptions. Holding all experiences and individuals to a concept that is underwritten by genre or identity markers—and therefore to a single flattened and opaque meaning—is a refusal to acknowledge the multiplicities, differences, and knowledges that one might register outside this concept.

There is a recurring through-line in this thesis that dwells on what is seen and what is heard and draws out how these specific sensory perceptions both intersect as well as diverge. Just as I reject the naturalization and seeming “truth” of race and other visual markers, I seek to do away with conventional music genres that endeavour to pin down, rather than open up, possibilities for how we listen to and understand what we hear. Exploring those “foreclosed” interpretations of music brings to light the question of how our relationships to music(s) might change if we do away with current categorizations of music that rely on and are informed by visual logics that are shaped by colonialism, transatlantic slavery, and white privilege. What different relationships to noise, sounds, and artists might emerge?

Methodology

My research project employs an interdisciplinary framework by putting queer theory into conversation with black studies, black popular culture and music theory, and new media theory. This approach is intended to avoid the normative whiteness of queer studies while upholding a simultaneous reading of blackness with sexuality, all while reading the idiosyncracies of new media representations alongside a longer-standing figuration of (sexual) blackness. Eric Lott’s interpretation of representation is a key framework because it calls for a more nuanced, historically-contextual account of analysing black images and representation. Lott outlines this approach to representation as such:

Where representation once unproblematically seemed to image forth its referent, we must now thing of, say, the blackface mask as less a repetition of power relations than a signifier for them—a distorted mirror, reflecting displacements and condensations and discontinuities between which and the social field there exists lags, unevenness, multiple determinations.73 This reading of representation does not replicate binaries but rather seeks to notice multiple fields that signify racial and sexual complexities and tensions, especially on the part of those doing the representing. Conceiving of representation not as reflective but as constitutive is useful for me as a researcher in online music coverage because it emphasizes and uncovers the deliberate creation of black queerness. This framework is coupled with C. Riley Snorton’s notion of panopticism and the “panoptical imaginaries”: a system of knowing that, through a regulatory gaze, positions certain bodies as objects to be read and therefore understood or intelligible; panoptical imaginaries make racial and sexual meaning out of a subject’s often personal behaviors, acts, or, in my case, music.74 These methodologies allow me to go beyond

73 Lott, 2013: 8, emphasis his.
74 This is not a direct definition from Snorton’s writing; it is a definition I have formed out of his use of the term across his work. It is a term that informs his work but is not forthrightly defined. In his use and deployment of
the simplistic question of whether or not the claims made about these artists are “true,” and toward the question of what authenticating tactics, and what racial and sexual epistemologies, are relied upon by online music writers to interpellate these artists and their music.

Within the framework of new media representations I employ three methods: historical analysis, discourse analysis, and musical content analysis. As a genealogy, the historical analysis focuses on selected narratives around black sexuality that have shaped black cultural production in post-slavery and supposedly post-racial periods. By looking to these discourses I intend to situate hip hop not as an exceptionally maligned musical form, but as one that stands as part of a larger history of surveying and disciplining blackness. In doing so I seek to place this work within both realms of queer and black studies, showing that queer celebration, or queer liberalism, can be predicated upon anti-blackness. This method helps to enrich a discourse analysis of selected articles and reviews published by independent music websites about artists Zebra Katz and Le1f in particular, but also Mykki Blanco and House of LaDosha more briefly. The purpose of this discourse analysis is to attend to critical receptions of work that explicitly deals with blackness, paying attention to refusals (however implicitly or explicitly) to engage with slavery’s past and present. In doing so I intend to turn an eye toward those critics evaluating black creative works but are so often shielded from criticism of their own evaluative standards. I am interested in investigating constructions of these artists via the panoptical imaginary while also attending to the arguably limited media attention and efforts to confirm or assume the sexual identifications of specific artists.

Complementing these textual methods is a musical content analysis of musical texts, specifically music videos, from Zebra Katz and Le1f. Conducting analyses of actual songs from these artists will illuminate if they, in fact, “confirm” what the critics discuss when they write about queer hip hop and black queer artists, if they contradict this coverage with alternative identificatory expressions, if they are concerned with other issues entirely, or all of the above. Further, by examining the musical texts of these artists—as oral texts—there is a possibility to assign them a voice, de-privileging the interpretive authority of music websites but also unpacking the way such websites read and apprehend these works. A discourse analysis of interviews with Zebra Katz will also be conducted, to pay attention to the ways one artist navigates the online reception and interpellation of his work, as well as offer a current reading of hip hop in our contemporary queer liberal and fictive post-racial moment.

Thesis Outline

“Queer Rap” and Aesthetic Assessments

Chapter Two of the thesis focuses on a small-scale series of articles and reviews published by independent music websites about artists Zebra Katz and Le1f. I will show the ways in which these publications produce a common ideological narrative that structures the music reader’s understanding of the aforementioned group of artists as black, queer, and as both outside and at the margins of hip hop. Specifically, I track the labels and names assigned to each or both artists and how they inform an interpretation of their musical works, as well as the ways in which black sexualities, music, and creativity are (and are not) discussed in music criticism. While this project incorporates and acknowledges this history, the blog culture under study here is one that conspicuously omits, denies and/or ignores these sexual and racial histories in their aesthetic evaluations and coverage of musical artists. The moment I have chosen to study for this
project—that of the so-called “new wave of black queer hip hop artists”—is a fitting site to investigate music critics’ investments in and repudiations of the histories from which such music, artists, and artistic evaluation, emerge. The online music critic of black aesthetic works here is also one who treads carefully and strategically within a set of evaluative and critical parameters that ultimately erase—either completely or partially—the antebellum past and its link to the music, the ideas, the representations, within “our post-slavery, postintegration present.” By partial erasure, I mean the omission or denial of white perpetration, complicity, and investments, in race and slavery.

*Disidentificatory Pleasure in Le1f’s “Wut”*

The demand for a compulsory reading of queerness in the presentation of these artists supplants the voices of these artists in their own music, and the interpretive abilities of the listener. Chapter Three turns to the music itself, the supposedly veritable source of blackness and queerness, examining both lyrical and video elements of “Wut,” by Khalif Diouf (AKA Le1f). Engaging with the work of José Munoz, who theorizes artistic performance and texts by minority subjects, a close reading of Le1f’s musical narrations and narratives will allow me to think about how identities and identifications do and do not emerge in the work of the cultural producers. Here I notice queer possibilities that draw attention to race and racism and therefore focus on how white and black subjectivities can, together, underwrite queerly racial desires. The confluence of these themes works to critique exclusionary white queer movements, and connects their music to a past of black sexuality and queer presence. These findings work to complement and complicate pervasive narratives dominating online coverage of black queer hip hop music.

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75 Sharpe, 2010: 159.
“Ima Read” as Pedagogical Response to Racial-Sexual Trauma

Chapter Four is a close reading of selected interviews conducted with artist Zebra Katz, as well as an analysis of his music video “Ima Read.” This chapter seeks to uncover narratives of resistance and ambivalence in the critical reception and coverage of Katz’s musical career. Katz is an artist who is, according to independent music discourse, meant to rest neatly and comfortably within the borders and confines of black queer hip hop. Examining what Katz says in relation to himself, his work, and perceptions toward both, are a useful and important accompaniment to the panoptical imaginary that apprehends him as black and queer. I look to his music video, “Ima Read” as a text provides the conditions to consider the ways in which racial and sexual classifications are sites of injury and trauma, and to consider the productive pedagogy of black queer education.

Concluding Thoughts

This project does not aim to map out what blackness, queerness, music “actually” or “truthfully” are. In fact, my research has, I hope, left all of these seemingly secure categories unsettled and therefore less knowable. As I have suggested so far, I believe that analyses that open up and challenge the very things we may fervently believe and claim to know is a far more just, interesting, and conducive way of learning and living that, as well, makes room for alternative, often erased, voices, creative acts, and politics. I conclude this project with a brief discussion that points to further study that imagines a different aesthetics of music that hopefully draws attention—to borrow a term from Katherine McKittrick—to more humanly workable creative politics.76 This conclusion will also ask how in this moment of fictive post-racial feeling,

76 Katherine McKittrick, Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xii.
and queer liberal advocacy, can we pay attention to black creative works in a way that makes space for seeing and hearing colonial legacies that permeate this world and structure the lives of its inhabitants in uneven ways. I conclude by addressing the ways we can develop an understanding of music that can carry within it difficult histories and realities and, in doing so, provides an opening to learn from those histories and begin to have new, different, better relationships with and conversations about the complicated politics musical narratives, and artists, offer.
Chapter 2

“Queer Rap” and Aesthetic Assessments

In the last chapter I mapped out the tensions between hip hop, sexual diversity, and identity. In this chapter I turn to the concepts of aesthetics and genre to assert that their modern-colonial foundations reproduce scripts of anti-blackness. Aesthetics and aesthetic interpretation is a complex and often underestimated realm of influence and power. Indeed, aesthetics is normally conceptualized as a set of principals or philosophies that are completely separate from politics because it only attends to beauty, art, and artistic awareness. But as a branch of philosophy that examines art, perception and subjectivity—through defining and upholding historically specific and culturally contextual definitions of what art “is,” and classification systems for types of art—aesthetics is ironically a bid for how art is universally and foundationally understood.\(^1\) Such a bid presumes to account for the multiple—and fails to address the often contradictory—experiences of those who come into contact with art while simultaneously instituting a master discipline against which all other artistic sensibilities are to be measured.\(^2\) The complexities, specificities, and contexts from which creative works emerge not only expose the elitism and racism of instituted aesthetic evaluation, but also the absence of a conceptual basis for attributing value to a work. Critical approaches to aesthetics unsettle the notion that art is and can be (and should be) separate from politics; indeed, they suggest that art is inherently political.\(^3\)

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3 And, as Richard Iton suggests, politics is also intertwined with art and aesthetic concerns. Richard Iton, In Search of The Black Fantastic (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9-10.
In this chapter I think through and discuss the ways in which aesthetic evaluation is a critical site of contesting and advocating meaning within an artistic work. I do so by understanding aesthetics as an extension of the associated projects of colonialism and modernity. I specifically look to online music coverage of those hailed by online music critics as “queer rappers” and uncover the colonial position that interpellates not only the racial and sexual identities of the artist, but also the content and style of their music. I also suggest that the genre construction of “queer” alongside “rap” is indicative of a broader sustained European modernist take on aesthetics that establishes white forms of art as the standard, while bracketing non-European musical forms (the music of the colonized, especially black musical forms) as separate and distinct. I specifically nod toward the ways in which “genre,” as a concept and organizing rationale, has been used to racially bracket black forms of creative expression, thus creating a distinct standard of treatment and evaluation for racialized musicians and music. I then turn to Richard Iton’s notion of the “black fantastic” as a lens to analyze how the audiovisual works of these artists articulate visions and sentiments outside of the boundaries of the modern.\(^4\) Correspondingly, the black fantastic allows me to understand the media coverage of these “queer rappers” as containments that sequester or restrict the excesses of their visions. Put differently, I explore how media coverage draws attention to black queer visibilities that actually invigorate a colorblind politics of queer liberalism. That is, by recuperating their excesses into the suppressive space of the modern, media representations of black queer hip hop conceal the complexity of this music and its attendant politics. I end this chapter with a meditation on how seeking the black fantastic re-envisions a relationship to music that refuses simplistic generic

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\(^4\) Iton, 2008: 16.
(and genre specific) categorizations of music and instead embraces possibility and potential for simultaneous, ambiguous and ambivalent interpretations of musical meaning.

Assessing Aesthetic Assessments

In my introductory chapter I examined Carrie Battan’s article published in *Pitchfork*, identifying the troubling way in which she framed the so-called emergence of specific queer rappers. As I noted, the framing was troubling for the ways in which Battan grouped these artists together: despite having distinct stylistic and musical sensibilities, they were united in Battan’s piece on the basis of the kind of sex they are presumed to have (gay) and, relatedly, their identifications as rappers. The positioning of these artists against and at the margins of the genre of hip hop, I suggested earlier, was problematic for how it pathologizes hip hop, straightens out the black history from which it developed, and erases the queers already present within hip hop. In my ongoing research I noticed that this narrative framing was echoed in many articles published after Battan’s initial *Pitchfork* “queer rapper trend piece.” Some of these articles explicitly cite *Pitchfork* to bolster or substantiate their own coverage. While *Pitchfork* is not the first media publisher to attempt to locate queerness within rap, it can be argued that Battan’s article “We Invented Swag” specifically set the tone for how Le1f, Katz, and others, would be read. This chronology of circulation is interesting and important for how it signals the

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8 In my research, I could find nothing in online music archives and criticisms that grouped these black queer artists together that predated March 21, 2012: the date of publication for Battan’s article in *Pitchfork*. Battan’s article could, perhaps, be seen as an instructive text that sets the stage for reading queer hip hop and reading the artists
sustained observation of black bodies and black sexualities as well as various attempts to code these artists and their works in legible and monolithic ways. While these music writers and critics do not overtly attend to negative or homophobic stereotypes and representations, their interpellation of these artists and their music as being primarily queer, is troubling for how it forecloses alternative ways of reading these artists. Another reason why this coverage is important is because this—identifying and naming the “queer” in “rap”—is probably the foremost way they are reading and discussing these artists. Their lens and understanding of the artist and their music is, therefore, pre-conceptualized along the lines of sexuality and sexual practices rather than, say, musical content and musical aesthetics. In this way, music writers and critics can be considered gatekeepers of knowledge between the artist and audience.

These kinds of representational tactics, which homogenize otherwise complex artistic visions, demonstrate how one interpretation of musical meaning is not only authoritatively presented as the only meaning, but also how this singular meaning is passed on, and subsequently accepted by, other media publications. It should be noted here that while Pitchfork is indeed a highly influential music online publication, it is perhaps too simplistic to credit them with championing this interpretation of these artists and their music in this genre. It could, after all, be said that the other media publications would have framed these queer rappers in a similar way—even if Pitchfork had not published that article. Even so, Pitchfork’s scope of influence as a music publication cannot be ignored. Currently amassing a viewership of approximately more

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than five million unique visitors per month, with a reported thirty percent increase in viewership growth per year, *Pitchfork*’s gains status as dominating “indie tastemaker.” My interpretation will therefore attribute the emergence of this interpretive frame partially to *Pitchfork*, while also acknowledging that this interpretation comes from somewhere else: that somewhere else is the historical mistreatment of blacks and a normative fascination with and repulsion of blackness and black sexuality that underwrite how black cultural production is read; these are ideas that gain resonance by trading in ideas and ideologies that people latch on to or are attracted to.

The links between interpretive frames that shape reader engagement is usefully outlined by Henry Jenkins, et al. In their explanation of how content spreads online they focus on audience agency in the distribution and engagement of content: “Rather than seeing circulation as the empty exchange of information stripped of context and meaning, we see these acts of circulation as constituting bids for meaning and value.” But they fail to critically examine why content spreads or, relatedly, why ideas gain currency. I therefore ask not only where and how content (online articles or shorter pieces on these artists) circulates, but also why it circulates and what this can tell us about prevailing or influential ideas. Julianne Escobedo Shepherd, in noticing the queer rap narrative written up by Battan in *Pitchfork*, wrote: “I couldn’t speculate why tailoring a narrative would be part of the site’s agenda, other than headline-making and click-baiting, but it was troubling, particularly presented in a piece about homosexuality within


the larger framework of hip-hop.” Apart from her suggestive and useful reference to click-baiting, a term that cites the creation of provocative and sensational online content for increased advertising revenue, *Pitchfork*’s motives for publishing such a piece are confounding for Shepherd. I hold that these motives appear confounding and incoherent only until we attune ourselves to the ways in which dominant discourses and regimes of representation circulate and trade in ideas around hip hop in particular, and blackness more broadly.

To address the question of why Battan’s narrative and understanding of queer rap circulates and gains traction, I will look at both black studies and queer studies and do a discourse analysis of selected articles that cover these artists and their related themes of “queer rap.” My discussion will illuminate what the writing ideologically expresses in terms of normative understandings of blackness and queerness. Richard Iton’s concept of the “black fantastic” provides a useful framework for understanding and disentangling this “queer rap” discourse, its recurrence within disparate and different media sources, and its disguised (but nonetheless disclosed) relationship to blackness and queerness. Iton explains:

> My suggestive reference to a black fantastic, then, is meant to refer to the minor-key sensibilities generated from the experience of the underground, the vagabond, and those constituencies marked as deviant—nations of being that are inevitably aligned within, in conversation with, against, and articulated beyond the boundaries of the modern . . . We might also think here of the struggles to establish and maintain space for substantive, open-ended deliberative activity and the related commitment to the nurturing of potentially subversive forms of interiority through and by which private geographies are made available to the public. The *black* in black fantastic, in this context, signifies both a generic category of underdeveloped possibilities and the particular “always there” interpretations of these agonistic, postracial, and post-colonial visions and practices by subaltern populations.

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13. I say that the queer rapper discourse contains a disguised and disclosed relationship to blackness and queerness, as the authors of the following articles attempt to present their concerns as based in a political commitment to liberate queers, but their words betray them by revealing their true thoughts on blackness (that it is overly sexual, backward.)
It is Iton’s focus on the voices and visions of those existing “beyond the boundaries of the modern” that is valuable for apprehending the dynamics at play in this coverage of queer rappers. Though, as Paul Gilroy shows in his discussion of modernity, identifying the boundaries produced is not so straightforward a task. Beginning his book, The Black Atlantic, with an analysis of DuBoisian double consciousness that wonders how “to be both European and black,” Gilroy explores and deconstructs exclusivist and absolutist logics, such as race and nation, which underpin racial and geographic categories.\(^\text{15}\) In doing so, he argues that as Western settlers and colonizers forcibly and violently influenced other cultures (as in the colonies for instance), the West was also influenced by colonial racial encounters. This mutual intermixing of culture and consciousness challenges modern racial-nationalist discourses that presume the existence of essential or uniform identities. Gilroy’s concept of the black Atlantic refers to a counterculture of western modernity and Enlightenment thinking found within the development of black culture in various parts of the world.\(^\text{16}\)

The Black Atlantic demonstrates that black diasporic cultural and intellectual production is distinctly modern in a number of ways and that modernity can be understood through black diasporic politics that cannot be contained within nation-state borders but are, rather, engendered in excess of racial-national discourse. Characterized by hybridity and exchanges across disparate times and places, including exchanges among diverse black intellectuals and artists, the black Atlantic, and therefore modernity, signals shared experiences rooted in transatlantic slavery that transcend national borders. Gilroy therefore recognizes slavery’s centrality to western modernity; he reframes modernity not as a project that excludes black people on the basis of being “pre-modern,” but as a complex process that is, in fact, constituted by a black presence. With the

\(^{15}\) Gilroy, 1993, 1.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 2.
concept of ships in motion as his central organizing symbol, he sees the black Atlantic as a distinct geo-political unit of analysis that reconfigures how time and space are understood, particularly in its challenge to the modern nation-state as homogeneous container of culture (or racial-cultural nationalism), and to modernity’s constructed pre-modernity. Taking Gilroy’s black Atlantic into consideration therefore complicates the inside/outside modernity dichotomy, and correspondingly requires a different understanding of modernity’s intimate and constitutive relationship with blackness. Both Iton and Gilroy, with their concepts of the black fantastic and the black Atlantic respectively, point toward black cultural expression—but especially musical expression—as a key mechanism by which a counterculture of modernity is reproduced.

Sylvia Winter, in her essay “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’: Towards A Deciphering Practice,” discusses aesthetics as fostering unitary systems of meaning through which human social order is legitimated and amassed. In the essay she describes our current culture-specific mode of aesthetics (what she deems Aesthetic 2) as generated from a “paradigm of value and authority” that explains, justifies, and predetermines the rules for, and arrangements of, human beings. These culture-specific aesthetics are, she argues, presented as universal or the “only” mode of aesthetics possible. Our current discourse of the aesthetics therefore assigns values to different cultural forms and is correlated to the social dominance of the white, male, middle class and, a figure who, in turn, marginalizes those who are black, female, queer, lower class. The worlds, visions, perspectives of marginalized communities can therefore offer counter-signifying practices—without being overly prescriptive—that rethink race, sexuality, gender, and empire in

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18 “Paradigm of value and authority” is adopted, Wynter explains, from J. G. A. Pocock’s use, and used here to mean “… the governing code by means of which human ‘forms of life’ are instituted and their specific ensemble of behaviors regulated” (Wynter, p.245).
the context of our current hegemonic cultural imaginary. They can also offer glimpses, fragments, or snippets that may direct us toward more equitable ways of living and being human. The ability to share these imaginations, visions, and sounds with others is similarly empowering.

With the above in mind, I dwell upon and take up Iton’s invitation to understand the black fantastic as an effort to make room for and defend the practice of “open-ended deliberative activity.” By fixing Le1f, Zebra Katz, and others in place as newly emergent, in spite of the homophobic hip hop genre to which their music belongs, Battan and other writers participate in a panoptical imaginary that functions to survey black bodies for sexual meaning. Using Iton’s black fantastic as a frame, I read the fixed representation of Le1f, Zebra Katz, and others in such articles as, at the very least, a refusal to open up alternative ways to interpret black queer artistic expression. More perniciously, such coverage, which does not radically diverge from the narrative of black sexualities from Battan’s original claim, can be read as a containment strategy—regardless of acknowledgment and intent on the part of the writers. Several black studies scholars emphasize the ways in which structures of feeling around race can be thought to circulate beyond the general awareness of individuals, particularly whites. Sylvia Wynter in studying aesthetics and artistic representations explains that the endurance of certain signifying practices is owed to their being “… generated in ways that transcend not only the consciousness of the normal scriptwriter but also that of the mainstream cinematic critic …” Isaac Julien corroborates this assertion and takes it further by noting how the underlying and often unspoken desire for and repression of the other permeates social life, and aesthetic worlds as well, since

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20 Iton, 2008: 16.
22 Wynter, 1992: 244.
one’s interpretations emerge from how one interacts and engages with a creative work. The articles I researched reveal a set of beliefs that configure blackness as pathology: hip hop is cast as homophobic and anti-modern and hip hop artists are often described as highly sexual and unable constrain their behavior—all of which also speak to a longer history of white anxieties and fantasies surrounding sexualized blackness.

The following is a close reading of five articles published in *Pitchfork, The Guardian, The Daily Beast,* and *Out.* These articles focus primarily on Zebra Katz, Le1f, Mykki Blanco, House of LaDosha, and Cakes Da Killa, respectively. Sometimes other rappers are mentioned, including Azealia Banks, Angel Haze, MC RoxXsan, and Brooke Candy—but these musicians (notably all women-identified) are not presented as part of the central group of queer rappers.

The central artists are invariably placed in conversation with each other in service of the larger question of hip hop’s intolerance toward queer subjects. I have discussed in my introductory chapter at length the way in which these artists and their music are constructed as defiant of and being in opposition to hip hop. In the following close readings, I will examine the logics of visibility that guide the reader or listener toward the figure that is the “gay” or “queer” rapper. In doing so I ask what authenticating tactics and what racial and sexual epistemologies are relied upon by these writers to interpellate these artists and their music.

26 While it is outside the scope of my thesis to attend to how questions of sexuality and black femininity intersect with hip hop and music, it is telling that the recent “queer hip hop” upsurge also marginalizes queer female identified artists. This marginalization is a longstanding pattern in music criticism and theories of popular culture. See, for example, Eileen M. Hayes, *Songs in Black and Lavender;* Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism;* Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past,* 318-31; Kara Keeling, “‘Ghetto Heaven’: Set It Off and the Valorization of Black Lesbian Butch-Femme Sociality,” *The Black Scholar* 33, no. 1, 33-46.
Locating Queerness Through Visual Logics

On August 8, 2012 Khalif Diouf, also known as his artistic persona Le1f, was the focus of an article on the website The Daily Beast. The title of the article, “Too Gay for Hip-Hop? Le1f Takes On Traditionally Homophobic Genre,” calls attention not only to Diouf’s sexuality but also discourses that presume that his sexuality is in excess of the suppressive and suppressed hip hop genre.27 Journalist Melissa Leon, the author of the piece, suggests that Diouf’s music, specifically his single “Wut,” is sonically alike and therefore indistinguishable from other rap songs that were included on many “best rap song lists” that year. Leon then pivots focus to the visual contents of the “Wut” music video, calling attention to distinct visual cues wherein “you’d see him [rapping] from under a shock of purple hair, sitting on the knee of a mostly naked, oiled-down, Pikachu mask-wearing white guy…. He sashays around in a pair of purple Daisy Dukes and he twirls the long ends of his hat like pigtails. Le1f is a rapper who is openly gay.”28 The last statement, delivered in juxtaposition to the description of Diouf’s hair, dress, movements, and company in “Wut,” suggests that such descriptors act as explanation and clarification of his sexuality. A list of descriptors is gathered to iterate and reiterate queerness as the central focus. When taken all together, these descriptors come to simultaneously render self-evident Leon’s proclamation that “Le1f is a rapper who is openly gay,” and to produce a visual landscape (purple hair, sitting on an oiled down white man, sashaying purple Daisy Dukes) that demands the focus of Le1f to be directed at his sexuality. The approach by Leon to associate Diouf’s queerness to the artist’s stylistic choices can be found in the introduction of other artists as queer in the aforementioned related articles.

28 Ibid.: par. 2-3.
Strategies reliant on visual logics that cite a subject’s nails, hair, and apparel as “proof” of their subjectivity conceal the ways in which such proof is never objective or immanent but rather makes sense only within operational cultural ideologies, specifically schemas of gender, race, sexuality, and class. Here, it is useful to turn to Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology, which he understands as being “systems of representation—composed of concepts, ideas, myths, or images—in which men and women … live their imaginary relations to the real conditions of existence.”\(^\text{29}\) Importantly, ideology precedes the subject, and even while it is reductive to say that ideology is always already inscribed (and correspondingly that the subject is always already interpellated), ideological formations carry on from the past, awaiting a subject at birth. However, as Stuart Hall points out in his examination of Althusser’s contributions to the concept of ideology, it is just as reductive to assume ideology (as a complex and differential unity of varying concepts about the world and our places in it) is always stably reproducing the conditions necessary for “society-in-dominance.”\(^\text{30}\) Because of ideology’s very nature—that of being imagined, slippery, multiply connotative—it is thus able to be disrupted and is therefore never guaranteed as stably reproducing itself and, correspondingly, the conditions of domination. Hall proposes an alternative to Althusser’s notion of ideology’s function (to reproduce the social relations of production).\(^\text{31}\) Instead of seeing ideology as directly fulfilling its purpose, Hall believes the power struggle inherent in interventions upon language and meaning demonstrates the capacity to maneuver within ideology. Indeed, I will argue later that this can be seen in the ambivalent and shifting logics at play to index what is “queer” about queer rappers. Further, if ideology is the imagined relationship individuals possess with their real conditions of existence,


\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) Hall, 1985: 98.
the concealment of ideology—as being foundational to subject formation—permits the subjects in question to be discussed as though they are simply “as is” rather than being constituted through ideology. I suggest that these ideological apparatuses constitute Pitchfork and other online music publications, particularly as they attend to, and describe, black queer artists. While these online music publications are seemingly less influential in their scope compared to mainstream media, and are perhaps more “progressive” in their editorial choices, they are embedded within the ideological field of longstanding normative racial-sexual scripts.

With this in mind, I draw on C. Riley Snorton’s concept of the panoptical imaginary. Panoptical imaginary illuminates the racial-sexual logics that undergird discourses of hip hop, queerness and homophobia. Specifically, the panoptical imaginary allows me to track how “gayness,” or “queerness,” is registered and confirmed by the authors of the aforementioned trend piece articles and, as well, demonstrate that their narratives are rooted in a simplistic and dangerous set of visual logics that rely on narrow conceptualizations of queerness. Indeed, part of my research has shown that the authors of these trend pieces tend to link queerness to performances, postures and fashions that mimic white femininity. Putting these logics to work in such a directed way also highlights the way that black subjects are beholden to the “glass closet,” a concept conceived by Eve Sedgwick and then reworked by Snorton. The glass closet is a metaphor describing the space of hypervisibility and confinement that black subjects occupy; it draws attention to the ways that black sexualities pass through routine regulation and surveillance and how this regulation and surveillance is tied to practices of seeing blackness as outside normative sexual scripts. Applied to the trend of locating, defining, and regulating queer rappers within the aforementioned articles, the glass closet here allows me to clarify the ways

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these music critics legitimize the “queer rap” label by visually locating queerness on the bodies of these artists. This interests me not only for how queerness is narrowly conceptualized through visual markers and thus linked to a white conceptualization of queer, but also for the way that visual registers are deployed to confirm the truth of queerness in a set of sounds and noises (in musical texts, for example).

In similar ways to how Le1f’s queer identity is confirmed by detailed descriptions of the visual, the appearance of Antonio Blair—also known as Dosha Devastation and part of the hip hop art collective House of LaDosha—is commented upon in striking detail. In Pitchfork, for example, Battan writes: “Antonio Blair, who also goes by Dosha Devastation, is decked out in a caramel-blonde wig and shiny red, skin-tight waist-high pants squeezed over a leopard-print turtleneck. He's so tiny and impeccably primped that he could easily pass for a female rapper if it weren't for the miniature patch of hair sprouting from his chin.” Battan’s description of Blair as almost being eligible to pass as female—with his male-signified facial hair, “the miniature patch of hair sprouting from his chin,” betraying him—roots queerness in a problematic and perplexing dyad of gender and sexuality. Fusing femininity and non-heteronormative sexuality together by describing Dosha’s performance as “ultra-feminine and flamboyantly gay aesthetics” highlights the confusion as to what “queer” is, as well as the imperceptibility of simultaneously reading queer and hip hop together. The description of Blair by Clare Considine, a journalist for The Guardian, gestures not only toward the aforementioned visual logics but also the broader discursive production of blackness as a site of queerness and libidinous excess. Considine states: “Antonio Blair is Dosha Devastation, one half of arthouse speed-rap duo House of LaDosha. He raps in six-inch heels and a weave, with his bushy goatee the only clue as to what's under the

33 Battan, 2012: par. 2.
34 Ibid.: par. 3.
Interestingly, commentary on House of LaDosha’s music is either subdued or completely absent from these series of articles that presume to discuss the musical contributions of the artists.

Speculation as to what is underneath the sequined bodycon draws attention to the ways that Battan, Considine, and others cannot actually see what is underneath Dosha Devastation’s outfit; in this they gesture toward what is unknown and, in fact, reveal their preoccupation with locating evidence of Blair’s trans- or cis-sexuality. Snorton’s concept of the glass closet as a process that rests on revealing and seeing public black sexualities is useful here: he argues for an expansive definition of the “down low” that encompasses not only black masculinity but “a range of genders subject to homosexual or transsexual speculations.” This expansive understanding of what constitutes sexual or gender duplicity nods toward a history in which black sexualities are routinely figured as queer, specifically through visual recourse to the body. The imagining and contemplation of what is concealed behind Blair’s bodycon echoes Hortense Spillers’s thoughts in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Spillers argues that the New World’s socio-political order—through European “discovery” and colonization of the Americas—was, for African and indigenous peoples, coupled with the loss of “gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific.” Thus, Spillers allows me to think through how a compulsion to visually perceive and apprehend gender and/or sexual difference is bound up with problematic readings and representations of black bodies.

It is noteworthy to mention here that the other half of House of LaDosha, unspoken by

35 Considine, 2012: par. 10.
36 Snorton, 2014: 122.
Considine, is Adam Radakovich (AKA Cunty Crawford), a visibly white man. None of the articles in question mention him in relation to the other identified queer rappers. Despite being an equal participating member of LaDosha, Radakovich’s performative contributions and visual style is unremarked upon. Speculation as to what is under Blair’s sequined bodycon reverberates from a longer history of white fascination with and objectification of black men’s phalluses, or, black man as phallus—locating it as the foremost characteristic of black masculinity, a site of mutual fear and envy, and as proof of black male (sexual) deviance.\textsuperscript{39} Noticing the resounding silence around Radakovich, then, brings into view the highly specific ways in which black men are regularly read as primarily phallic beings, assumed to embody only sexual excesses (including their voracious desire for white women). James Baldwin delineates these racial presumptions by discussing the specificities of black men’s sexuality: “I think that I know something about the American masculinity which most men of my generation do not know because they have not been menaced by it in the way that I have been. It is still true, alas, that to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays, in one’s own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others.”\textsuperscript{40} Bringing Cunty and his whiteness into the representational frame draws attention to the phallus as a distinct racial feature with different significations based on blackness and whiteness. Indeed, these racial significations would, I argue, interrupt the representational frame many of these articles put forth—which reduce black men to their body parts, lacking the coherence necessary for defining black men’s sexuality—precisely because it widens and exposes the making of racial sexualities as


\textsuperscript{40} James Baldwin, \textit{Nobody Knows My Name} (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 217.
differential.

Importantly, too, black male sexuality in this instance is modified as being man-desiring, contradicting prior images of black men as possessing insatiable appetites for white women. In grouping House of LaDosha and others under the “queer rap” banner, it is assumed by Kretowicz of Out that all named musicians are “openly gay artists,” and that public consideration of their object(s) of desires as same-sex partners, and attendant sexual practices, is fair game.\(^{41}\) Bell hooks explains that conceptualizations of patriarchal and white supremacist imaginings of black masculinity are “the quest for phallocentric manhood … [that] rests on a demand for compulsory heterosexuality.”\(^{42}\) Thus, if media institutions participate in repeated representational images of black men as white-woman-desiring, confrontation with the gay or queer black man contradicts such a representational frame.\(^{43}\) That is, the image of black man as sexual predator of white women is not as coherent a representation for making sense of non-heteronormative black sexualities and masculinities. How, then, can we make sense of the repeated discussion of queer rap almost always in relation to the presumed homophobic backdrop of hip hop? We can see the framing of black queer men against a homophobic black cultural form as an ideological pivot toward yet another representation that condemns blackness while also taking pleasure and delight in the black male’s sexual embodiment. As Snorton discusses, media institutions, via the panoptical imaginary, constantly speculate and survey black sexualities:

Those insistent on pursuing ‘out’ rappers are indebted to a particular understanding of visibility (as intervention) based on a double formulation of blackness-as-pathology, in which blackness is both too homophobic (too regressive, pre-modern, anti-modern) to

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\(^{41}\) Kretowicz, 2013: par. 1.


allow black people to construct “proper” sexual identifications and simultaneously so lascivious as to be unable to constrain any imaginable sexual proclivities.\textsuperscript{44} It is the logic of seeming evidence, through visual cues, that bolsters an ideological apparatus that, in turn, masks exploitative arrangements by conceiving of blackness as both hateful toward queers and too queer.\textsuperscript{45} In the articles studied, though, the artists have been identified as queer. The process of rumour and speculation, which underwrites Snorton’s analysis, is not necessary—as their queerness is confirmed, if ambivalently, within the each music critic’s text. Given the opportunity, as has been shown in the visual descriptions and speculations of Blair’s body, Battan and Kretowicz feel permitted to openly express their titillation and pleasure in locating black sexualities. We can read these moments, particularly Considine’s reference to what may or may not be behind the sequined bodycon, as surplus pleasure and satisfaction.

These writers also demonstrate the anxieties that come with explicitly discussing race within a “colour-blind” culture (while also exalting queer subjects within a queer liberal context). We can perhaps look at this moment as symbolic of a larger pattern of racial-sexual antagonism. If we agree with Richard Iton, that an understanding of black popular culture necessarily requires seating it within the larger context of precarious and untenable black citizenship and belonging, a fuller analysis of the dynamic at play emerges. Specifically, a more nuanced reading of the figures within hip hop—often flatly and solely described as hyper-masculine and phobic—opens up. Iton’s “duddy state” expresses the undead or ghostly phenomena of coloniality, which permeates political discourse throughout history and discloses how “emancipation is haunted by slavery, independence by colonialism, and apparent civil rights victories by Jim Crow.”\textsuperscript{46} If

\textsuperscript{45} At various points throughout these articles, journalists refer to hip hop collectively as being simultaneously homophobic as well as closeted, attributing such a predilection to the collective fear of coming out.
\textsuperscript{46} Richard Iton, 2008: 135.
black forms of popular culture such as hip hop do deploy discourses on authentic masculinity—which necessarily means rejecting any (deemed) “feminized” traits, practices, behaviours—it must be understood as one of the many ways in which black patriarchy is stationed as the solution and/or the cure for racial inequality. So on one hand, black patriarchy—as non-feminine—is being mobilized in reaction to white supremacy and anti-blackness. On the other hand, there is a broad refusal, often on the part of white consumers, to see how black communities negotiate their identities and their lives within the context of white supremacy. This is especially the case within our current “post-racial” or “colour-blind” context, one that not only denies contemporary and ongoing incarnations of racial oppression, but also does so by declaring that racial oppression no longer exists.

At the same time, we also see the mobilization of what David Eng describes as “queer liberalism”: the empowerment of certain queer subjects within state- and capitalist-sanctioned contexts. Music journalists publishing on queer rap engage in a politics of queer liberalism that selectively mobilizes and empowers certain queers for liberal inclusion, while relying on the logic of colour-blindness—which is the forgetting of racial histories and/or the denial of racial difference and oppression. In an interview with Hattie Collins for The Guardian, for example, Brooke Dyan Candy, better known simply by her stage name Brooke Candy, states: “I'm a woman, I'm white, I'm fucking gay in hip-hop; it's fucking hard,’ she admits. ‘I completely polarise myself in an industry that is homophobic and against women. But it's going to happen. Whether it's me or someone else, someone gay is going to break into the mainstream hip-hop

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world.” Candy here assumes hip hop is homophobic (“I’m fucking gay”) and misogynistic (“I’m a woman.”) However, she also figures hip hop in a particular way when she politicizes her racial identification (“I’m white.”) That is, the inclusion of her whiteness, alongside gendered and sexual discrimination—and called up as an impediment to her musical progress in hip hop—reveals an assumption that hip hop is black, anti-white or, perhaps even “reverse racist.”

Underlying Candy’s assumptions is a disavowal or denial of continuing racial disparities while claiming her whiteness as proof of innocence and victimhood. By doing so, she refuses to acknowledge the white supremacist and anti-black context from which hip hop emerged, a culture which Paul Gilroy describes as “the powerful medium of America’s urban black poor.”

Candy’s assertion of victimhood also explicitly ignores how the racialized political economy of colonialism created the possibilities in the New World for modern articulations of the liberal rights-bearing subject. Specifically, this articulation of human freedom (to desire) was born from and made possible by the enslavement and regulation of black people. Eng describes this context as the functional operation of white supremacy and anti-blackness through the racialization of intimacy and the forgetting of race.

Many racial-sexual anxieties are projected onto black queerness, specifically black queerness that manifests in and out of a male-read body. Michael Quattlebaum Jr.’s rap persona Mykki Blanco is demonstrative of such anxieties. That is, articles about queer rap and queer hip hop almost always frame Blanco primarily as Quattlebaum cross-dressing, there is a lot of confusion as to Quattlebaum’s “true” identity. Masculine and feminine pronouns are used interchangeably amongst many of the pieces, signaling a lack of understanding about “who”

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50 Gilroy, 1993: 33.
51 Eng, 2010: 11-12.
Mykki is and whether she is also Michael.\textsuperscript{52} Carrie Battan of \textit{Pitchfork} introduces the artist as “Rapper Mykki Blanco—born Michael Quattlebaum.”\textsuperscript{53} The \textit{Daily Beast}’s Leon describes Mykki as such: “Mykki Blanco, a knockout glamazon—who, biologically, is a man named Michael Quattlebaum Jr., but who takes the stage as her female alter ego, Mykki…”\textsuperscript{54} The \textit{Guardian}’s Considine, contrastingly, addresses Mykki/Michael as male, “Rapper Mikey Quattlebaum Jr, AKA Mykki Blanco” and writes how he “tells me with zeal about the first time he really dressed up as a woman.”\textsuperscript{55} The \textit{Guardian}’s Collins similarly invokes masculinity and cross-dressing yet demonstrates confusion over pronouns. Michael’s alter Mykki complicates a straightforward comprehension of Michael’s gender and sexual identities, as is shown through the above journalists’ discomfiture on how and to whom should gender pronouns be assigned. As shown in Battan’s recounting of her first meeting with Michael, performing a cross-gender alter can also be seen as a strategy of resistance under the regulatory gaze of queer visibility politics: “When I go to meet with Quattlebaum in a Williamsburg cafe in February, I initially breeze by his table. I've never seen him out of drag and makeup, and I don't recognize him in a relatively conservative denim button-up with hair cropped close to his head. It seems counter-intuitive that he would have moved \textit{away} from this look and \textit{toward} drag to become a rapper…”\textsuperscript{56} How can we understand this moment of misrecognition or invisibility as installed in a permeating politics of mandatory visibility? The answer to this question may also provide a reply for the ways in which it actually \textit{may not} be “counter-intuitive” for Mykki to move away from his “look.” Iton discusses the ways in which black life is structured and violently bound by hypervisibility and

\textsuperscript{53} Battan, 2012: par. 1.
\textsuperscript{54} Leon, 2012: par. 19.
\textsuperscript{55} Considine, 2012: par. 13.
\textsuperscript{56} Battan, 2012: par. 9.
scrutiny, as well as the limitations of increased visibility as solution for marginalization and suffering:

If race, racism, and depictions of the raced are interpreted as lying outside of the significant, normal, and natural—and simply as signs of the unreasonable rather than the colonial—the thick meanings excluded populations assign to these references will be read by many in the intended audience as being outside of politics and the recognized and proper boundaries of the political (e.g., the supposition by some liberals and leftists that references to race are depoliticizing). There might exist no evidence that could override the strength of these sorts of visceral commitments.\(^{57}\)

Iton points to how calls for increased visibility of black queer hip hop artists is both restricted and dangerous as a strategy for garnering legitimacy and support while also suggesting that alternative tactics that do not engage in a typical politics of queer visibility are required for artists of colour.

The online music critics discussed above position themselves (however implicitly or unacknowledged) as bastions of benevolence and tolerance; yet they ironically fail to go beyond sensationalist analyses of queerness that are rooted in the gender binaries and normalized white supremacist histories. This is best evidenced in their exclusively feminized notion of what it means to be “gay,” as explored earlier, but also through the ways in which gay, bisexual, and trans are interchangeably deployed in their coverage of queer hip hop artists.\(^{58}\) This narrow depiction of gayness or queerness cannot fully take up Ojay Morgan, also known as his rap alter Zebra Katz. Specifically, Morgan’s sexual identity is not performed in an intelligible way that leans toward femininity; his work does not rely on spectacles of hyper-femininity, “explicit lyrics,” and an explicit association with male companions. Journalist Considine describes Zebra Katz as a “butch rapper with the strong jaw,”\(^{59}\) which interestingly works to queer masculine-

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\(^{57}\) Iton, 2008: 108.

\(^{58}\) Battan, 2012: par. 5; Collins, 2013: par. 9; Considine, 2012: par. 5; Leon, 2012: par. 19

\(^{59}\) Considine, 2012: par. 3.
read facial and visual markers by using the word “butch,” a term popularized in lesbian communities to describe gender identities. Later in the same article, Considine describes Zebra Katz’s song “Ima Read” and its reference to ball culture: “Morgan has chosen to reference his [ball culture] foremothers, but only very subtly.” Considine attempts to both queer Morgan by affixing the term “butch” to his appearance and demeanor, while she simultaneously endeavors to explain the unintelligibility of queerness in his music by describing its presence as “subtle.” The contrast between these undertakings exposes the powerful effort to both install Zebra Katz under the umbrella of “queer rap” by attempting to “queer” him, while simultaneously attempting to explain away the absence of explicit gender and sexual nonconforming content in his music. Battan takes her interpellation of Morgan even further: “But while Zebra Katz and ‘Ima Read’ are conceptual and performative in some of the same ways as the work of Quattlebaum of House of Ladosha, Morgan’s explorations of sexuality in his raps are intentionally understated. ‘Ima Read’ is lyrically abstract—the lines could be rapped by someone of any gender or sexual preference, and Morgan doesn't cross-dress.” These descriptions of Morgan’s relationship to queerness in connection with other artists highlights the questionable and narrow operational definition of what “queer” is. They also show how Zebra Katz disrupts an easy and coherent queer narrative through the absence of clearly established visual markers. Perhaps this is why so many of the articles retell Morgan’s story as one of associations: Morgan is often associated with ball culture; the “reading” in his song “Ima Read” is often analyzed as specifically “queer” practice; Rick Owens—self-identified bisexual and fashion designer—is

62 Battan, 2012: par. 16.
63 A more extensive explanation of ball culture and its cultural origins can be found in chapter four of this research project. Also, see: Marlon Bailey, “Engendering space: Ballroom culture and the spatial practice of possibility in Detroit,” Gender, Place and Culture 21, no. 4 (2014): 489-507.
often called up as the person who discovered Morgan’s track and played it in his show for Paris Fashion week; he is also elevated by, and thus associated with, Azealia Banks (also a self-identified bisexual queer rapper).\textsuperscript{64} Morgan does not perform familiar representations of homosexuality that draw on popular and stereotypical queerly feminine representations of masculinity, which means that many music critics seek out confirmation of his sexual identifications in associative queer texts and figures.

Minor-Key Sensibilities

Creating their own space and identity is the next challenge for the generation of performers ready to admit to their sexuality in a notoriously resistant culture. \textit{Indeed, one artist declined to take part in this feature for that very reason, preferring to be known first as a rapper rather than a ‘gay rapper’}."

—Hattie Collins.\textsuperscript{65}

What does it mean to give a voice to queer hip hop artists and rappers who inhabit highly restricted and constrained creative spaces? Richard Iton’s “minor-key sensibilities,” which emerges from his “black fantastic” framework is useful for its evocation of multiple ranges of creative expression and for the ways in which it elicits unusual or alternatively established tones within a larger sonic register. I think of Zebra Katz, Le1f, and others, as artists who are beholden to a single axis of their presumed identity. While these observations address the issue of locating queerness with blackness and re-pathologizing hip hop—primarily through visual cues and markers—I also want to think about how one’s queerness extends into the sounds these musicians create. It is important to notice how these articles locate queerness within music itself and how this is done rather simplistically. There is an underlying assumption that if a person is “gay,” their music is “gay.” Steph Kretowicz describes Le1f, Mykki Blanco, Zebra Katz, Cakes

\textsuperscript{64} Considine, 2012: par. 4-5; Leon, 2012: par. 17; Battan, 2012: par. 14, 18.
\textsuperscript{65} Collins, 2013: par. 7, emphasis added.
da Killa and House of LaDosha, together, by drawing on their shared sexual orientations and connecting it to their music at a lyrical level:

These are openly gay artists working within the genre of hip-hop, where their aesthetics and lyrics are explicitly deviant and consciously provocative. Of course, “queer” is not a genre, rap is; words don’t have sex, the people who write them do. But whatever we call it, we can’t deny the trend of legitimate talent on the margins of sexual identity appropriating and subverting what has been an aggressively homophobic domain.  

What do “deviant” and “consciously provocative” mean here? How are these artistic practices different from rap that exists outside of the “queer rap” category? Even as Kretowicz concedes the separation of queerness from sounds—“words don’t have sex, the people who write them do”—she contradicts herself immediately afterward by bolstering a logic that situates artists identified with non-normative sexualities as unusual and noteworthy. This is meaningful, especially because there are many artists who are not expected to bear the burden of a single axis of their identity permeating any and all of the creative work they produce. This kind of categorization is particularly pronounced in hip hop, a musical form that is connected to histories of surveillance and the vilification of black communities and their cultural systems.

How do these critics come to the conclusion that these artists create “queer rap” as a musical form? Here, it is useful to turn to Nicholas Cook’s meditation on musical meaning. Cook asserts that meaning is not inherent within music; meaning is not an essence that exists within the structures or sounds of music independently of what exists external to it. However, while Cook understands that musical meaning is socially constructed, he does not believe that a piece of music can take on an infinite number of interpretations. In other words, he does not see musical meaning as being shaped arbitrarily. Instead, Cook advocates for an understanding of musical

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66 Kretowicz, 2013: par. 1, emphasis added.
67 Cook’s viewpoint is elucidated in the following: “The argument is in essence a simple one: any pot or picture has an indefinite, though not infinite, number of physical attributes, and each society makes its own selection from and
meaning as negotiated and emergent. He explains that music’s meaning is not just “there,” embedded within the sounds, notes, melodies, silences, but rather that music meaning is socially and historically constructed, dependent on the listener’s subjectivity, as well as the sonic attributes of a musical work. What is at stake if the meaning that is informing black queer hip hop and rap music is tied to ascertaining meaning, first and foremost, from the bodies and behaviors of the artist instead of from the sounds and songs they create? If the association of an artist’s music with race, body, and behaviors seems a plausible way to read and assess the creative work, this plausibility is underwritten by what Cook identifies as the notion of homology: homology denotes two entities possessing similar structure or characteristics due to relatedness or common origin. Homology creates the illusion of validity in musical interpretations through reductionist analyses—such as in the presumed connections made between the sounds and structural elements in music and whatever meanings (i.e. sexuality) they are said to possess. Homology in music shares a logical kinship with homology in biology and evolutionary studies—shared ancestry of DNA or physical structures, structures that “fit” together. Here we can begin to see how these paralleling logics depend on a shared foundation that lays authoritative claim to the objective existence of such structures by simply pointing to homology, asserting that social (or biological) meaning is inherent to whatever is being studied. However, what is unacknowledged is that homologies rely and depend on common and shared signifying structures; without them, these interpretive connections lose their plausibility. Cook explains:

interpretation of those attributes. (It is perhaps easiest to see what this might mean in terms of the different ways certain paintings have been seen at different times…” (p. 178, col. 2). Nicolas Cook, “Theorizing Musical Meaning,” Music Theory Spectrum 23 no. 2 (2001): 170-195.

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 172.
But it is central to my argument that music never *is* ‘alone,’ that it is always received in a discursive context, and that it is through the interaction of music and interpreter, text and context, that meaning is constructed, as a result of which the meaning attributed to any given material trace will vary according to the circumstances of its reception. In this way it is wrong to speak of music *having* particular meanings; rather it has the potential for specific meanings to emerge under specific circumstances. Or to borrow a term from J.J. Gibson, music does not have specific meanings, but it *affords* sentiments of love, grace, prestige, desire, whatever. And that is a second way in which there is an articulation in the relationship between music and meaning, and hence another source of the cultural variability of musical meaning.70

The aforementioned music journalists’ interpretations of music are founded upon what is presumed to be the objectively “there” material workings of society—a society that is not socially constructed but “natural.” To apply a perspective, to *force* a perspective onto creative works that are produced by subjects who occupy minority positions within society, is to ignore the alternative visions and performances enacted by these subjects, and ultimately extends the modern project of stabilizing and universalizing a Western and white colonial perspective. This kind of musical interpretation presumes an inherent social meaning within the music *in advance*; that social meaning is reinforced through the (seemingly) self-evident workings of society and inevitably *reinforces* the workings of normalized social codes, namely, white supremacist structures and colonial subjectivities. Put differently, this reinforcement happens without having to notice that society is, in fact, colonial and deeply racialized and, further, erases how we came to inhabit a world that produces and reproduces such inequitable conditions. In this sense, Battan and others are able to frame Le1f and Katz’s music as primarily emerging from their naturally embodied (black queer) knowledge because they are, in advance, reading the work with presumptions about what hip hop is (already), what racial identity and race relations in the U.S. are (already), and what sexuality is and how that is performed (already).

70 Ibid., 180-181, emphasis in original.
Concluding Thoughts

Aesthetic evaluation is not simply the interpretation of creative works but is a field in which important bids for meaning are made. Closely reading passages from the above articles demonstrates the importance of questioning the underpinning logics at play when race, creative works, sexualities, blackness, and colonialism enmesh. In my analysis, these enmeshments are taken up by music critics not as complexities or resistances that emerged and continue to emerge in face of ongoing practices of racial violence, but rather to affirm what is ostensibly already “there” and transparently knowable—whether it be the presumed sexual identity of an artist, or the presumed meaning inherent in a musical piece. Richard Iton’s black fantastic opens up a way to think about how artistic visions and sounds are competing for space within the context of racial modernity, surveillance, embodied knowledge, and identity claims. Part of my argument is that the visual currency of black queerness stands in as a truthful racial script that singularizes black music, aesthetics, and identity politics. For music journalists to authoritatively produce one form of meaning from Katz, Le1f, and Blanco, among others, and present it as the only meaning, forecloses a whole range of potential meanings that emerge in black music. This also erases the important minor-key sensibilities—and thus the potentially transformative visions and sounds—that can be heard in excess of the narrowly conceived liberatory politics of visibility.
Chapter 3

Disidentificatory Pleasure in Le1f’s “Wut”

I return here to Khalif Diouf, also known as Le1f, and his music video “Wut.” In this chapter, I begin by revisiting some articles from the previous chapter to contemplate the moments in which Le1f is the focus. Specifically, I look at Steph Kretowicz’s Out article, “Confronting Rap’s Last Taboo,” and Melissa Leon’s The Daily Beast article, “Too Gay for Hip-Hop? Le1f Takes On Traditionally Homophobic Genre.” 1 Whereas in Chapter Two I discussed the authenticating tactics that erase racial histories and interpellate Le1f and others as legibly and transparently queer—rather than creative artists who also embody a range of racial and sexual identifications—here I am concerned with how these articles work through, or do not work through, his breakout single “Wut.” Put simply, I argue that both Kretowicz and Leon provide shallow readings of “Wut.” I suggest that because they only focus on one specific moment in his video (where they describe Le1f as “crunking up against a half-naked male body” and “sitting on the knee of a mostly naked, oiled-down, Pikachu mask-wearing white guy” and couple this with blogger responses to the video, they fail to engage the more complicated histories embedded in the video and song. 2

Beyond the brief descriptions of one visual moment in the video with “the white guy” there is no analysis or engagement with the implications of these images in relation to racial and colonial histories. What these writers do focus on are responses and reactions to Le1f’s work. Both writers make sure to point out that the music video was met with homophobic vitriol in the

2 Kretowicz, 2013: par. 2; Leon, 2012: par. 2.
of negative comments and hostile website posts online. Kretowicz is specific about the source of this vitriol, describing Le1f’s “Wut” as “enduring a barrage of discriminatory comments after he posted it on the popular blog WorldStarHipHop.”3 Leon similarly writes: “Perhaps predictably, since the video’s release, hate tweets and comments have rolled in for Le1f. Less predictably came hate headlines,” which are cited from “black culture blog Bossip” and again, WorldStarHipHop.4 Identifying the source of bigotry toward Le1f as Bossip and WorldStarHipHop—the latter a notorious content aggregator that focuses on rappers and hip hop and whose primary users are presumed to be black men—reveals both writers’ investments in narrating Le1f’s success through and against black homophobia.5 The focus on the actions and behaviors of black men in spaces like WorldStarHipHop takes focus away from, and thus refuses, a range of homophobic practices enacted outside the black community. While I am not turning a blind eye to homophobia within the black community, I am drawing attention to how the racial underpinnings, and silences, within Kretowicz and Leon’s commentary undermine more nuanced and complex interpretations of Le1f’s song and video. Their interpretation of the responses to Le1f, which act as evidence of hip hop’s homophobic foundations, undermines the deep and thorny connections between black identity, sexuality, race, and cultural production.

Interestingly, while they both mark Le1f as queer and dwell upon black and hip hop homophobia when discussing his music video “Wut,” Kretowicz and Leon fail to attend how the artist himself is racialized. In placing homophobia solely on the shoulders of black culture blogs,
like Bossip and WorldStarHipHop, Leon and Kretowicz discount or deny the racial dimensions of Le1f’s life, specifically anti-blackness and white supremacy. This is especially intriguing given that he alludes to such dimensions within this very song. Their narrow reading and coverage of “Wut” reveals the normalized practice of “not seeing” or “not remarking on” whiteness even though race structures racial-sexual recognition. This can be seen within the critics’ racial designation of the man who briefly co-stars, yet becomes the focus of, “Wut”; he is described, as noted above, as the “half-naked male body” and the “Pikachu mask-wearing white guy.” Thinking about the “white guy” with and against the blogs that point to black and hip hop homophobia, demonstrates how these critics’ discussion of black sexualities is undergirded by a white supremacist logic: whiteness is left unmarked (and therefore unremarkable), blackness is marked (as solely and backwardly homophobic.) This bifurcation refuses to account for the ways in which white supremacy colours the context in which discussions of race, gender, and sexuality take place. By failing to account for the complex place of white supremacy and racism in Le1f’s “Wut,” Leon and Kretowicz are able to rest their ascription of black queerness upon, solely, the repudiation of hip hop, which is coded as black.

These limited reading practices can be better understood through Christina Sharpe’s description of the “white imagination.” The “white imagination,” Sharpe, explains, is the invisibility, non-complicity and innocence of whiteness in the project of slavery and its violent horrors. It is important here to stress the sexual nature of this violence. Whites, as the principal agents of slavery who instituted sexual violence against blacks, also radically altered black

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kinship structures and identified the enslaved as deviant (queer.) Following Sharpe, slavery and black subjugation were crucially structured by the slave owner’s desires, “the monstrous intimacies of the plantation romance.” Tying this violent history to contemporary queer liberalism discourse renders visible the otherwise invisible white complicity in slavery, and remembers many forgotten racial ties that underpin a range of queer identifications, what Sharpe terms “post-slavery subjectivities.” This is not to say that queerness is the same across time and place, but rather to notice how black sexual histories conceptually interrupt and complicate the sexual present. From here we can understand the figure of the queer rapper performing two functions. First, this figure is meant to shore up specific constructions of queer desire and intra-racial violence. Casting the queer rapper—a distinctly black queer artist—as a persecuted subject in hip hop, requires the plausibility of black homophobia and the black community’s rejection of non-normative sexual practices and thus centers queer rap discourse solely around adversarial blackness. The queer rapper, secondly, functions to ignore or omit interracial desire and violence; this figure is not imagined in relation to racial fetishism or racism. That is, white-black desire, in connection to post-slavery subjectivities, is pushed to the margins or rendered invisible by such discourse.

The readings of “Wut” by Leon and Kretowicz fail to fully engage the actual works (songs, music videos) of Le1f and stand as an example of the symbolic violence that has been inflicted upon black creative artists and musicians. At the most simple level, the critics only focus on narrow racial (white and nonwhite) workings of queer identifications. At a more complicated level, the critics elide how racial violences inform reading practices and cultural...
production. Informing all of this is their disengagement with the Le1f’s fuller, more comprehensive, musical portfolio. While Leon and Kretowicz remark upon Le1f’s contributions as a “queer artist,” they stop at his identity, failing to acknowledge what his creative works open up. In the following pages, I will redress this imbalance by examining some lyrical and visual moments from Le1f’s music video “Wut.” Applying Jose Munoz’s concept of disidentification, I draw out the ways in which Le1f articulates the indivisibility of his selfhood, as both gay and black. I show that the mutual constitution of these aspects of Le1f’s selfhood, through his lyrics and accompanying visual representations, provide us with a meditation on the ways in which fantasy and desire are informed by colonial and racial subjectivities.

Black and Queer and White and Queer: Wanting (to be) The Other

The playful and minimal nature of the music video for Le1f’s song “Wut,” can be best explained by looking to director Sam B. Jones’s description of the fortuitous conditions which led to its creation: “I had free access to a studio for a day and asked my friend Le1f if he would be down to do a video. I pulled together a small budget and a group of friends, and we built an ‘impossible triangle’ in the studio. 2 years and over 2 million views later, this video helped launch Le1f’s career and got me started as a video director.” The video itself reflects the limitations of Jones’s small budget. The video opens with a sequence of clips of Le1f dancing, walking and posing in an empty white space, both with and without two young black women. What follows are a series of moments in which Le1f is rapping, dancing, and standing in place, either in emptied out white, black or grey spaces, sometimes with the aforementioned “impossible triangle.” He dances alone, with the women, with two men, with another black man dancer and—in what I believe to be received by critics and audiences alike as one of the most

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controversial moments in the video—he raps on the knee of a seated, oiled down white man wearing a Pikachu mask.¹¹ Le1f works within specific material conditions and limited resources—and with the impossible triangle—that Sam B. Jones describes, demonstrating how he and others who must work with and resist the conditions of black (im)possibility that dominant culture generates.¹² Jones’s impromptu invitation to produce a music video, and Le1f’s willingness to participate, calls attention to how art provided Le1f an entry point to name, work with, and alter racial-sexual codes.

Jose Munoz points out the ways in which processes of identification are especially fraught for those subjects with multiple minority identifications. Here, Le1f stands at the intersection of black and queer—with the former often signifying, simultaneously, heterosexuality-homophobia-deviance and the latter, especially most recently, signifying white queer liberalism.¹³ Munoz writes that, “what stops identification from happening is always the ideological restrictions implicit in an identificatory site.”¹⁴ At first glance, the celebratory interpellation of Le1f and others as queer rappers might appear as though no “ideological restrictions” are imposed. But as I have suggested, these interpellations are predicated upon antiblackness—narratives that posit blackness as pathologically homophobic and as deviating from and in excess of normative sexual scripts. Certain lyrical and visual elements of “Wut,” however, foreground Le1f’s blackness alongside sexuality, and in doing so complicates queerness by refusing it as a singular identification. Munoz’s concept of disidentification is helpful here:

¹³ Ibid.: 8.
¹⁴ Ibid.: 7.
Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications … [they] use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by dominant culture.15

Le1f performs disidentification through the very act of co-constituting his sexuality alongside race. This can be located within the lyrical content of “Wut,” in which he narrates queer interracial desire that describes and plays around with the white colonial racist pleasures and fantasies in fetishizing black men.

The scenes of the music video, varying blank and empty spaces interrupted only by the presence of Le1f and others, can be seen as a space onto which one can imagine or project fantasy. In the very process of narrating white desire of himself as a black queer, Le1f gestures toward the often unspoken or unknown fantasies or desires that structure colonial histories. At the same time, he also opens up the ever-present queer energies at play in the white imaginary of black men. Eric Lott’s work on the white imagination in the practice of blackface minstrelsy refers to such queer energies.16 Lott argues that minstrelsy was, for white performers and audiences alike, not simply a display of white supremacy and black subordination, but also the opportunity to spectate and participate in the erotic celebration and exploitation of blackness, particularly racist notions of black male sexuality.17 Emphasizing blackface as a vehicle of distinctly white male fantasy, the minstrel not only shows vulgar racist stereotypes of blackness (as sexually deviant); it also underscores how the wider preoccupation with black sexuality betrays both white male desire for and fear of black men. That is, underwriting minstrel

17 Ibid.: 152.
performances were a profound fear and fascination of racial intermixture and miscegenation, and sexual envy of imagined hyper-sexual black men. In any case, the repeated performances that portrayed black men revealed their place in the white male imagination as a powerful object of interest and of the white male gaze. Lott goes on to further argue that white men donning drag as blackface “wenches” along with other men on-stage evidenced the misogyny of minstrel performance, while also revealing an encounter with anxiety and pleasure in the blackface cross-dresser. Of course, white pleasure in minstrelsy, as well as the queer and erotic energies it created, are circumscribed by the fetishization, commodification and objectification of the black male body: “‘Black’ figures were there to be looked at, shaped to the demands of desire; they were screens on which audience fantasy could rest, and while this purpose might have had a host of different effects, its fundamental outcome was to secure the position of white spectators as superior, controlling figures.”

Jose Munoz’s disidentification provides a way of reading and engaging “Wut” not as a simple mimesis of the majoritarian phobic schemas of race, gender, and sexuality. What is brought forth, instead, are the ways in which racist notions of black male sexuality—such as those outlined by Lott— are rewritten in ways that recognize the agency of the black man as well as the beauty and desirability of the black male body. This is primarily achieved in “Wut” by naming and locating the white male as desiring subject, thus rendering him visible as a willing participant in the production and enactment of his desires and fantasies. This reworking of racial desires and histories can be heard in the second verse of the lyrics for “Wut”:

Ukrainian cutie – he really wanna cuddle
The fever in his eyes. He wanna suckle on my muscle

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18 Ibid.: 56, 60.
19 Ibid.: 166.
20 Ibid.: 145.
He wanna burst my bubble and see what’s up in my jungle
A Christopher Colombo fumble’s how that cookie crumbled.\textsuperscript{21}

Importantly, by locating and naming the presence of the “Ukranian cutie,” Le1f makes us aware of the hidden surveillance mechanisms that have historically structured the racist dynamic of white male desire, and thus the way asymmetrical looking relations are imbued with power. For Le1f to also be aware of and to see the Ukrainian cutie is to interrupt his positioning as an objectified spectacle for white consumption.\textsuperscript{22} The Ukrainian is revealed or unmasked as the as the desired (in some ways faceless, with the exception of the Pikachu mask) subject/object, thus interrupting the transcendental projection of white fantasies onto Le1f’s black body. Nowhere to hide, the white male here is exposed to the listener and viewer as a willing and desiring participant in the construction of racist libidinal desires. That white depictions of the black man configure him as hypersexual, sexually dangerous and overpowering—seeing him only as “muscle” and “jungle”—say more about the subject who fears (or desires) this than it does the body onto which such fantasies are being projected.

It is important here to turn to Christina Sharpe’s work on slavery and its concomitant power dynamics of racial-sexual subjection and freedom as informing contemporary human subjectivity. Sharpe argues that the violent, sexual subjugations of transatlantic slavery fundamentally shape black and white subjectivities into the present. Key to understanding the “monstrous intimacies” of violence and sexuality from slavery and their residual traces onward is the examination of these post-slavery subjectivities. However, Sharpe primarily argues that the black body is made to bear the marks of slavery’s violent subjections: “That is, while all modern subjects are post-slavery subjects fully constituted by the discursive codes of slavery and post-

\textsuperscript{21} Le1f, 2012.
\textsuperscript{22} Lott, 2013: 157-8.
slavery, post-slavery subjectivity is largely borne by and readable on the (New World) black subject.”

Sharpe’s insights provide a way to read Le1f’s “everyday transactions” as a black queer subject, engaging in interracial encounters, as exemplary of such monstrously intimate relations between post-slavery subjects.

Sharpe defines monstrous intimacies “as a set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, circulated, and transmitted, that are breathed in like air and often unacknowledged to be monstrous.”

Le1f communicates the Ukrainian’s desires with a vocabulary that crosses temporal moments connected by intimate colonial relations between white and black. The reference to “the fever” in the Ukrainian cutie’s eyes, and the cutie’s desire to see what’s in Le1f’s “jungle” draws on and reworks the expression “jungle fever,” a cultural term that usually references white (sexual) attraction toward blacks. “Fever,” furthermore, connotes a state of delirium, excitement or agitation that functions to absolve white control over their fantasies of and desires toward blackness. However, the above verse revolves exclusively around what the Ukrainian wants to do to, or with, Le1f. To want to “see what’s up in my jungle” connects a white fetishizing desire for the black male body with European colonial perceptions of the jungles of Africa as savage, dangerous, and mysterious. Le1f’s “jungle,” a highly suggestive reference to Le1f’s sexual organs, is mapped on to the jungles of Africa.

Desire for Le1f’s body, structured by colonial impulses to explore and tame unknown “jungles,” situates the interracial encounter, in the time and space of this video and song, as firmly embedded with the ongoing effects of slavery and colonialism.

This framing—most obviously underscored by the term “Christopher Colombo”—opens up a consideration of the how the ongoing impact of colonization shapes contemporary racial and

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23 Sharpe, 2010: 3, emphasis in original.
24 Ibid.
sexual relationships. However, Le1f’s reference to “a Christopher Colombo fumble’s how that cookie crumbled” suggests that the white colonial desire to both enter and conquer untamed “jungles” is partly unmet, or fumbled. Returning to Lott, the white imaginary figures the black body vis-à-vis blackface minstrelsy as an embodiment of black sexual power, as a figurative container of fear, desire, and other fantastical imaginings of blackness. Such fumbling gestures, perhaps, toward the burden of representation the black body is made to bear upon other subjects, and the consequent failed, or incomplete, materialization of white fantasy and idealization of the racial other.

Racial-Sexual Subjectivities, Desire, and “Guilty Pleasures”

As previously noted, a moment in “Wut” occurs where Le1f, while rapping rapid-fire, is sitting on the knee of a shirtless white man wearing a Pikachu mask. The camera cuts to a stationary close-up shot of the white man in the video from the chest upwards; he is slowly rotating laterally, the shot inviting us to gaze upon his skin, textured and shiny with oil. This shot cuts to a shot of the same man, though this time doubled in a split-screen frame. The camera then returns to Le1f rapping on the white man’s knee, cutting to a series of shots in which Le1f dances in close proximity to the white man situated in the same seat.
Figure 1. A frame from Le1f’s music video “Wut.”

Keeping in mind the lyrical analysis above, the visual spectacle here draws attention to Le1f sitting on, and dancing around, a white masked man while also displaying his own pleasure and enjoyment in this moment. Notably, in the lyrics, Le1f does not explicitly condemn or celebrate the white fantasies mentioned (secreted racist desires for and violence toward for black men, jungles, phalluses, and so on). The video and the lyrics, together, are an articulation of disidentification. Instead of disavowing or dispelling white racist fantasies, Le1f works on and recycles them in such a way that invests them with new life. Importantly, he enacts these audio-visual encounters in “Wut” as an autonomous agent and retains his subjectivity; the majority of the track’s lyrics revolve around Le1f self-narrating his prowess as a rapper and as a sexually desirable subject. He expresses his own desire in the song, referring to the Ukrainian as a “cutie” and calls upon an unknown addressee for sexual pleasure: “Time to step your cookies up / You

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25 The frame from Le1f’s “Wut” is used in conformity with the academic use and limited dissemination allowance of copyright law.
26 Muñoz, 1999: 12.
ain’t giving it enough / I need my Oreos double-stuffed.” Using food as sexual allusion, Le1f request to have his “Oreos double-stuffed” gestures not only toward his buttocks or the pleasures of gay male sex. Given the term “Oreo’s” vernacular use, “black on the inside, white in the middle,” and its relationship to the symbolic connection made between skin color, as well as the behaviors and speech acts that gesture to embodying “authentic blackness,” Le1f allows us to further consider the ways in which scripts of racial authenticity comingle with queer desire.27 That Le1f invites and takes pleasure in such encounters stands as stark contrast to historical forms of black objectification that “make blackness into a marketable object of white interest.”28 While I am not arguing here that Le1f undoes or discards those racist components of desire, I see Le1f’s reworking of white fantasies of blackness as disidentification. I also suggest that that disidentification enacts a kind of structural change around the racial codes that narrate black male sexuality (as always deviant) by demonstrating that it is inextricably bound up in white male sexuality. Lott clarifies this inextricability:

… “[D]isgust bears the impress of desire,” and, I might add, desire that of disgust. In other words, the repellant elements repressed from white consciousness and projected onto black people were far from securely alienated; they are always already “inside,” part of “us.” Hence the threat of this projected material, and the occasional pleasure of its threat. (I do not assume that black people escape such splits, only that these occur by different means. It is important to grasp that for white Americans the racial repressed is by definition retained as a (usually eroticized) component of fantasy. Since the racial partitioning so necessary to white self-presence opens up the white Imaginary in the first place, the latter’s store of images and fantasies is virtually constituted by the elements it has attempted to throw off.29

28 Lott, 2013: 64.
29 Ibid., 154.
Pairing this with Isaac Julien’s concern with “the sexual and racial violence that stems from repressed desires of the other within ourselves,” demonstrates that racial, sexual and any number of identifications rely upon a simultaneous counter-identification and therefore the “denial of the Other within ourselves.” Le1f’s references to interracial encounters—specifically white male desire, fantasy, and sexual contact with himself as a black man—along with the above scene, can be thought of as a resource that opens up a way to think through, on one hand, the problematic practices of objectification that structure white desires of black men and, on the other, to encourage an acknowledgment and examination of the pleasures the minoritarian subject, the black gay man, might gain from those very same places. Specifically, reflecting upon some lyrical and visual moments in “Wut,” I suggest that Muñoz’s concept of “disidentificatory pleasure” captures Le1f’s articulation of his racial-sexual subjectivities—that is, his articulation of a complex black gay male subjectivity that is laden with a range of, sometimes competing and ambivalent, racial and sexual narratives.

Concluding Thoughts
In developing his theory disidentificatory pleasure, Jose Munoz draws works through the dialectical relationship that emerges between Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography of black gay men, Isaac Julien’s film Looking for Langston, and cultural criticisms of Julien, by Kobena Mercer. He states:

I wish to suggest that the pleasure that Mercer, Julien, and other gay men of color experience while consuming Mapplethorpe’s images is a disidentificatory pleasure, one that acknowledges what is disturbing about the familiar practices of black male objectification that Mapplethorpe participated in, while at the same time it understands

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that this pleasure can not easily be dismissed even though it is politically dangerous …. disidentification is an ambivalent structure of feeling that works to retain the problematic object and tap into the energies that are produced by contradictions and ambivalences. Mercer, Julien, and Jane Gaines have all explicated the ways in which the ambivalence that a spectator encounters when interfacing with these images is not only a racist exploitation of, but simultaneously a powerful validation of, the black male body.  

Produced by the contradictory and ambivalent embrace of the racially and sexually exploitative hauntings of white-black male interracial desire, are what Munoz terms “energies.” What might these “energies” be? What might we miss if white desire, fantasy, and fetishizing of black (male) sexuality are too quickly dismissed? What might be disclosed if we read black creative works more fully, rather than drawing attention to normative disciplinary scripts (such as black homophobia and queer liberalism)? In this chapter I considered the centrality of desire, fear, and disavowal to the construction of white and black subjectivities, across a spectrum of genders and sexualities, not just male and gay. Identification (whereby a subject assimilates an attribute or property from an other subject), and counter-identification (whereby a subject refuses such an attribute), involves the simultaneous discarding or counter-identification with other aspects of the psychic world. However, the disidentificatory pleasure found in “Wut,” as an ambivalent structure of feeling, provides an orientation toward fantasies, fears, and desires that does not attempt to disavow those aspects of identity which we might repress, or mask. To “retain the problematic object’ of racist sexual fantasy—an object that would cast Le1f as hypersexual, overpowering, phallic—is to ruminate within the pleasures and dangers of objectification. There are, Munoz notes, perhaps spaces within practices of objectification for respect, dignity, and love: “The object that is desired is reformatted so that dignity and grace are not eclipsed by

33 Ibid.: 70-71, emphasis added.
34 Ibid.: 208. Indeed, in a footnote Muñoz explains that it is not only “gay men of color” who can disidentify with the photos of Mapplethorpe.
36 Ibid.: 71.
racist exploitation. Disidentification is this ‘making over’; it is the way a subject looks at an image that has been constructed to exploit and deny identity and instead finds pleasure, both erotic and self-affirming.”

To embark on this project might be considered “politically dangerous” and risky for the way it entails an intimate encounter with racist and sexual exploitation. I would argue that this project is nonetheless worthwhile because, as the above artists and scholars show, fantasy and desire are crucial and necessary sites that inform and support “the highly charged racist, sexist, and homophobic reproductions of power relations that we are always encountering and negotiating.”

Disidentificatory pleasure as an ambivalent structure of feeling can be thought of as a way to think beyond binary uplifting or oppressive discourses that so strongly inform racial and sexual politics. It is a way to understand “politically correct” discourse as the “politically forbidden,” as a discourse that limits the consideration and charting of “the unspoken and often unknown fantasies or desires that complicate and structure our lives, the fantasies that redouble with every denial and every repetition.” As Christina Sharpe suggests, what might be at stake if we inspect such fantasies, however ugly or problematic as they may appear to us, is to consider them the first steps toward a critical awareness of their centrality to the “racial partitioning” of white and black subjectivities. While it may be foolhardy to wholeheartedly believe, I suggest with caution that inspection of such fantasies and confrontation with their implications for

37 Ibid.: 72.
39 Ibid.: 1090.
40 Lott, p. 154. While Lott explains this racial partitioning as central to white selfhood and fantasy, he also states: “I do not assume that black people escape such splits, only that these occur by different means.”
41 Sharpe, Monstrous Intimacies: 3.
selfhood may allow us to interrupt their “redoubling” and “repetition,” or, more modestly, to learn to desire in a different way.\textsuperscript{42}

Chapter 4

Ima Read as Pedagogical Response to Racial-Sexual Trauma

What is dark about education? What is harmful about reading? The music video “Ima Read” by Hip hop artist Ojay Morgan—creator of persona Zebra Katz—explores and complicates these questions by presenting education and pedagogy through black queer cultural production. The video’s opening frame offers a darkened row of nondescript shelves of library books, a frame that is replaced by washed out empty corridors that are lit by fluorescent lights. A grainy image and de-saturated filter connote a darkened atmosphere for the educational space of this school sequence. The video returns to the initial frame of the library in this sequence, though this time the row of bookshelves is not empty, but occupied by two young black girls standing still and facing the camera’s gaze; they are wearing what appears to be matching school uniforms and their faces are covered with white masks.1 The sequence takes us again to empty corridors, to an empty boardroom, again with the same girls. Over this sequence is the voice-over of Zebra Katz: “Ima that bitch, Ima that bitch, Ima that bitch. Ima Ima Ima.”2

The production, lyricism, and sartorial choices within the music video are a valuable point of departure for reimagining black queer cultural production.3 Lyrical reiteration and the reworking of the space of a school are two of the more obvious characteristics that shape both the video and the song. By his use of minimal and repetitive lyrics, as well as utilizing and

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1 Here I am confident that Ojay Morgan, aka Zebra Katz, is referencing Frantz Fanon’s pioneering work *Black Skin White Masks*. However, due to my own theoretical concerns and the scope of this project, I will not be performing a Fanonian reading of these moments.


navigating the space of a school outside of its dominant significations (as a space of respectable white colonial education), Zebra Katz challenges the normalized and normalizing institutionalization of race, gender, and sexuality. The song repeats the term “bitch”—a signifier that is familiar across many racial identifications, is prominent in masculinist rap cultures (the most obvious musical text is Snoop Doggy Dogg’s *Doggy Style*), and is popular slang in the black queer ball scene. Through repetition of the term, Katz excavates and reworks an epithet that is both commonly understood as a gendered slur and as a word that has come to evidence the discriminatory underpinnings of hip hop. This repetition is juxtaposed with the school setting, allowing him to present institutionalized spaces of learning as ones that justify and perpetuate prejudice and harm. The video juxtaposes the socio-spatial setting of the school with what in queer ball culture is the “real art form of insult”: “reading” (in ball culture “reading” is observing a person and their wears and verbally highlighting their flaws).⁴ “Ima Read” therefore provides a way to consider the ways in which racial and sexual classifications are sites of injury and trauma while also opening up the productive pedagogy of black queer education. This chapter draws on theories that attend to ethical pedagogy, specifically the act of learning in relation to historical trauma. I specifically look at Dina Georgis and R. M. Kennedy’s proposal for a “pedagogy of emotions,” which offers an approach to learning that starts from the affect of racial injury.⁵ I examine the lyrics and visual narratives from the song and video “Ima Read,” and read them alongside excerpts of interviews conducted with Ojay Morgan, in order to disentangle and draw out the tense and contrapuntal relationships that race, sexuality, education,

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⁴ *Paris is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston (1990; New York: Miramax, 2005), DVD.
and harm share. Thinking through these themes returns us to the original problematic set forth in this thesis: how might we recast the narrow and simplistic interpellation of Zebra Katz and others—as queer rappers who visually evidence black homophobia, black deviance, and white queer liberal values—and uncover the nuanced narratives they then open up.

Zebra Katz’s breakout single “Ima Read” has received much attention. Both Carrie Battan of *Pitchfork* and Clare Considine of *The Guardian* described the song, early on, as a “pro-education anthem.” They reference the song’s steady use of educational language as analogy for a situation in which Katz, and collaborator Njena Reddd Foxxx, confront an adversary (“that bitch.”) Beyond that interpretation, several journalists are quick to point out that more fundamentally, “Ima Read” is a reference to and recycling of the word “reading” as it is used in ball culture. Ball culture consists of a network of houses or families—groups of black and Latino/a LGBTQ people and their respective house mothers—that produce and engage in ball events. Marlon Bailey explains: “At ball events, participants compete individually or on behalf of his/her house in performance categories based on gender and sexual identities, body

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6 I include excerpts of interviews conducted with Ojay Morgan alongside an analysis of music video “Ima Read” to both explore through José Muñoz’s notion of disidentifications the ways in which “Ima Read” demonstrates a complexity of artistic vision that exceeds the interpretations of music journalists, and to heed Muñoz’s assertion that “It is also important to note … that disidentification is not always an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct…” Thus, I also include Ojay Morgan’s “pronounced and direct” responses to his work, perceptions of his work and of himself. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 5.


9 The kinship structure of the house is at times named after the houses of haute couture fashion designers, while others are named after words or symbols with which the house parents want to be associated.
presentation and fashion, and voguing.”¹⁰ “Reading” in ball culture, as noted above, is the art of verbally insulting an opponent, both on-stage while performing and competing at the ball, and off-stage.¹¹ Reading therefore carries culturally-specific meanings found in ball culture—which means that Zebra Katz is, no doubt, nodding to black queer and transgendered practices and performances. But, when his lyrics are thought about within the music video’s visual-audio stylistic operations—specifically alongside the darkened and ominous space of the school setting—“reading” is also in excess of ball culture’s significations. I am suggesting, then, that the song is not simply a commentary on ball culture; nor is it a pro-education anthem. Instead, if we engage the lyrics and the video together, what emerges is a narrative on pedagogical discipline that intersects with black queer performance. In the following section, I will read a small set of interviews conducted with Ojay Morgan alongside the audio-visual contents of “Ima Read,” to explore the significations of “reading” that extend beyond the ball. I will read and move Morgan’s text toward an encounter with remembering, and learning to live with and in reaction to, racial-sexual dehumanization and loss. In doing this difficult learning, there is the potential to work through traumatic histories and, perhaps, to also open up a way of living and learning with one another that imagines relationships ways that do not reinvigorate colonial racial and sexual categorizations.¹²

Zebra Katz, The Surviving Blackamoor

When asked about the origins of “Ima Read,” Ojay Morgan explains its roots in his own personal educational experiences in the liberal arts program at New York City’s Eugene Lang

¹² The term “difficult learning” is borrowed from Georgis & Kennedy, 2009: 23.
College. Through varying levels of disclosure across different interviews he has held, Morgan
describes the genesis of the track as “a sort of personal mantra, which ‘just came from being in
college and being fed up.’” Feeling “fed up,” he explains, was in reaction to being a black
student in classes where the majority of the students were white. Specifically, his frustration
emerged from his experience of being typecast as black and the refusal, on the part of his peers,
to institute colorblind casting practices in his drama class. In addition to being frustrated with
his fellow students, Morgan also developed “Ima Read” as a mantra, as “something I would
always say to myself as a joke, because I took this class called ‘How To Read A Play,’ and I
couldn't stand the teacher, so I was always like ‘Ima read that bitch.’” In response to being
racially typecast, and never being offered the opportunity to play other (normatively white)
characters, Morgan produced “Moor Contradictions,” a performance piece, as his senior thesis
project; from this project emerged the character of Zebra Katz, and Morgan’s “Ima Read.”

An excerpt from the lyrics of “Ima Read” is instructive:

Ima reach that bitch
Ima teach that bitch
Ima give that bitch some knowledge
Ima take that bitch to college
Ima reach that bitch
Ima teach that bitch
Ima take that bitch to college
Ima give that bitch some knowledge
Ima read Ima read Ima read

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14 Ibid.: par. 6.
16 “Moor Contradictions” earns its name through its adaptation of the Moors, a set of characters within Shakespeare’s body of work whom are described to have dark complexions. Ojay Morgan explains: “I was really fascinated with the Moors from studying Shakespeare [sic]. I wanted to reapply them to today with these solo characters. They all had their own performances, but Zebra Katz got his break, so he’s the one surviving character out of them.” “Breaking: Zebra Katz,” 2013: par. 16.
If his experiences in college are taken together with the aforementioned politics of reading in ball culture, what does reading mean for Morgan when he intones “Ima Read”? That is, how does reading tie together schooling, the ball, racism, and white supremacy, and how do these ties highlight unresolved and unspoken antagonisms in the classroom? With its minimal and pared down lyrics, leaving much of the surrounding context of the song open to interpretation, the song can be understood as open to signifying in multiple ways. However, thinking through the “illocutionary force” of Zebra Katz’s lyrics of “Ima Read” may be useful. A term derived from language philosopher J. L. Austin’s theory of speech acts, illocution refers to the communicative function of an utterance, which emphasizes not what is said but what an utterance is meant to do.

This draws attention to Katz’s intention in producing these utterances and repetitions. Katz commits to “reading” “that bitch.” The presupposition at play in his utterance is the belief that there is someone (“that bitch”) who is in need of being read. As the passages from the above articles suggest, reading here is a painful and necessary education, based on the use of the term from ball culture. It is painful because “that bitch” is “learning” about all of their flaws; it is

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18 Reading here can take on many meanings: As failing to pass as gender or sexuality conforming, as is understood within the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals. Also, if one hears the lyrics differently, “I’m a read” may refer to the event of being read; such an interpretation draws attention to the ways in which self-presentation signals meaning and inherently draws speculation and surveillance from one’s surroundings. Eventually Njena Reddd Foxx, a collaborating rapper with Zebra Katz on the single, in uttering “Ima that bitch” over and over, allows the statement to collapse into the proclamation: “I’m that bitch.” In this instance, one interpretation of the song may gesture toward the ways in which we are all “bitches” and in need of being read, reorienting the act of reading as one which implicates all.
19 Wynter, Rethinking Aesthetics: 267.
necessary that “that bitch” becomes aware of it, and in doing so can perhaps address these flaws. The lyrics of the song, and their repetitive accusatory tone—directed at that bitch—provide a base for thinking about the complex layers of reading race, reading queerness, and reading as implicit to broader white colonial education systems. Specifically reading here can be thought of as a teachable moment, which Bryant Keith Alexander defines as “an intersection in time and space in which the ignorance of one person can be informed by another; and the conditions under which we live can be used to impart knowledge as well as to engage a critical dialogue.”

Understanding reading this way, as the seizing or embrace of a teachable moment, reveals the ways in which such action for the ignorant individual may be and is perhaps necessarily uncomfortable or harmful, especially when their ignorance is imagined as injuring or harming others.

Morgan’s experiences of racism and typecasting in the drama classroom—in one interview he proclaims, “[They] want me to put a piece of bone in my nose and play Caliban, you know?”—exposes the contradictions of how safety and injury prevention are normatively thought of in the classroom. Katherine McKittrick lays out the tensions of an academic discourse that suggests that the classroom should be safe:

I wonder a lot about why the classroom should be safe. It isn’t safe. I am not sure what safe learning looks like because the kinds of questions that need to be (and are) asked, across a range of disciplines and interdisciplines, necessarily attend to violence and sadness and the struggle for life. How could teaching narratives of sadness ever, under any circumstances, be safe!? …. I call this a white fantasy because, at least for me, only someone with racial privilege would assume that the classroom could be a site of safety! This kind of privileged person sees the classroom as, a priori, safe, and a space that is tainted by dangerous subject matters (race) and unruly (intolerant) students. But the

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22 Hoby, 2013: par. 6.
classroom is, as I see it, a colonial site that was, and always has been, engendered by and through violent exclusion.\textsuperscript{23}

McKittrick here shows the ways in which the configuration of a safe classroom—as a place of learning that avoids difficult and painful topics—is actually a site that repeats harm, especially and perhaps exclusively for marginalized groups. Rinaldo Walcott in excavating his own pedagogical experience of teaching the history of slavery offers another angle from which to examine this issue. He describes the desire on the part of his students for a black history that is redemptive and self-affirming, and the disappointment they feel when they encounter “negative” historical narratives of black victimhood and suffering. Walcott problematizes this reluctance to encounter trauma: “While this sense that painful stories of slavery are too much to bear is quite valid, it is nonetheless fraught with difficulty, because it preempts working through the trauma of slavery.”\textsuperscript{24} In a classroom that avoids difficult learning, the repetition of harm can occur as a result of the historical and contemporary traumas of marginalized groups being left untouched and unexamined. While “heroic” narratives that are meant to uplift marginal groups may act as a salve, they do not address the ways in which that salve covers over, hides, and thus maintains, unaddressed traumas and what they mean for (racial-sexual) minorities in the present. The failure to consider how these traumas impact our presently constituted notions of selfhood and relationality also preempts moving through these traumas toward a place where we see beyond the narrow interpellingating logics of race, gender, sexuality, toward a more humanizing logic that includes us all.


Reading as Injury and “Safe Critique”

Perhaps the most well-known and commonly cited definition of reading comes from femme queen, founder of House of Corey, and icon of the ballroom community, Dorian Corey. In Jennie Livingston’s now famous documentary Paris Is Burning, Corey explains: “Shade comes from reading, but reading came first. Reading is the real art form of insult. You get in a smart crack, and everyone laughs and kikis because you’ve found a flaw and exaggerated it, then you've got a good read going.”25 Why is reading a part of ballroom culture? What does it mean to have “a good read going”? Why do black and Latino/a LGBTQ people perform and present their bodies in such a way that leaves them open to reading—to verbal insult and critique? Marlon Bailey contextualizes ball performances as necessary survival strategies that, within a larger social context, deem gender and sexual nonconforming bodies—especially black bodies—as open to and deserving of homophobic or racist violence.26 To be confrontational and insult a ball participant on their performative gender and sexual identities—and thus criticize their effort to “pass” into/as ball normative figures such as Femme Queen and Butch Queen Realness—can be considered an exercise that tests the participant’s ability to “unmark” themselves as queer.27 Ultimately, to “pass” as gender and sexual conforming subjects in public spaces is to develop a strategy to avoid discrimination and violence: “Ballroom members literally perform and present their bodies to make an impact on how they are ‘seen’ in a society where the Black body, specifically, is read as a text. And if such a person's body is read as ‘queer’ in terms of gender or sexuality, they will be treated as such, making the person vulnerable to a tragic end in a

27 Ibid.: 366.
homophobic and transphobic environment.”28 I emphasize Bailey’s assertion—that the black body is one that distinctively becomes a text for others to read—to focus on the ways in overarching racial and colonial frames of race, gender and sexuality circumscribe what is considered “normal” or “natural” while also affirming, through the movement and performance of the body, how normative categories are uneasily inhabited by queer peoples.

Thus, reading here can take on many meanings, beyond an elevated form of insult. As Bailey explains, to “work the body”—wherein black queer subjects take up the labour to modify their appearance—and to critique the body or “read” it as a text, reveals the way in which educational vocabulary is reconfigured to give language to ways of knowing and learning in the ball community that reflect the lived realities of its members. Indeed, Bryant Keith Alexander blurs the boundaries between the spectacle and drama of gendered and sexualized performances, and the seeming objectivity and neutrality of the space of knowing that is the classroom, when he states “the classroom is always a site of performance and drag is always relative.”29

Reading, then, can be thought of as a form of critique—a seemingly harmful one—that reveals the ways in which racial-sexual knowledge is learned, taught, and disciplined. Not only this, but the ball is an event “for the rehearsal and the safe critique of gender performance among fellow participants.”30 To offer that “reading” performances of black queers are considered “safe” lays bare a way of learning that operates through a discursive labour, which appears as a form of injury (verbal, from ball members), in order to avoid gender and sexual violence in other spaces. The public and private as spaces, coded as heteronormative and/or white supremacist and racist, delineates that which is normal, or good, or correct, often in

28 Ibid.: 367, emphasis added.
29 Alexander, 2005: 256.
disciplined and harmful ways.\textsuperscript{31} If a queer of colour subject does not meet these racial-sexual criteria by being “real” or embodying “realness,” then they may experience violence in normative heterosexual white spaces. Just as Bailey outlines the ball house as an alternative site that engenders alternative kinship systems within ballroom culture—as that which supplants the biological home or family—I see the ritualized performances, including the practice of reading, as an alternative education system that supplants normative “education” practices. These disciplinary educational practices impose societal definitions of sex, gender, and sexuality on queers of colour and are coupled with dehumanizing encounters they face due to racism and the performance of gender non-normativity. Put another way, I see the ball events as one way in which ballroom members produce black queer education through teachable moments that are grounded in reading. Through presenting and performing the body in a way that requires an adept knowledge of discourses of race, gender, and sexuality, members of the ball community study such epistemologies; they also write them through the re-creation of discursive ideas of femininity and masculinity on and through their bodies as text; and finally, they read each other’s abilities to successfully map these embodiments, and thus the production of gender and sexual conformity, to see whether they “pass” (or “fail”) the test.\textsuperscript{32}

In the following section, I return to interview excerpts with Ojay Morgan, and audio-visual elements of “Ima Read,” to connect his articulation of reading with pedagogies of remembrance and trauma, and with reading as survival strategy in the ball community. Reflecting on Zebra Katz’s “Ima Read,” as well as interviews conducted with Ojay Morgan, I suggest that when the lyrics and video are taken together we are provided with an angle from which to see experiences of racial-sexual injury as sites of painful learning, but also of potential

\textsuperscript{31} Bailey, 2014: 496.  
\textsuperscript{32} Bailey, 2011: 378.
un-learning, of re-learning, and re-making. In doing so I hope to lay out, through Katz’s verbal and musical articulations, his own form of education that gestures toward a way of knowing and learning and living with each other through and perhaps beyond our current damaging racial, gendered, and sexual logics, toward a practice that may rework notions of self, other, and relationality.

“Ima Read” As Racial-Sexual Pedagogy/As Revolt, or Working Through Racial Trauma

In an interview with Swide.com, Ojay Morgan elaborates upon the development of both song and declaration “Ima Read.” Morgan describes the ways in which it acted both as a response and strategy to deal with feelings of helplessness, tensions, and conflicts he experienced in the classroom:

The line itself [Ima Read] is like a mantra to help me get through times when I thought that [sic] wasn’t that much control that I had on certain situations or more specifically in an academic setting of a performing arts school and you sit around sitting with people who may not have the same background and knowledge experience that you may have. So, I think that I was reading people, taking them to college and showing them what is out there that they were missing due to a lack of interest in certain things.33

Remembering the previous passages by Morgan that describe his experiences of racist typecasting and white supremacy in the classroom, Morgan here delineates the psychic impact of racism, a sense of powerlessness over “certain situations” that the educational environment engenders. He also describes a way to actively deal with these experiences of discrimination by “reading people, taking them to college.” To read those people, to provide them with an education that they failed to provide for themselves, Morgan explains, comes from their lack of

interest in “certain things.” What are those “certain things” to which Morgan refers? It is perhaps not entirely possible to know, but when the above passage is taken together with his previously cited experiences during his time at college, we can perhaps read Morgan’s reference to his peers’ lack of interest as exemplary of the way that silence, neglect and avoidance structure experiences around racial learning, or around “people who may not have the same background and knowledge experience that you may have.” This becomes more pronounced when we recall McKittrick’s naming of educational space as a distinctly colonial site. By naming educational spaces as colonial connects the classroom and mainstream education to those very same histories of trauma and pain that are characterized by racism and white supremacy and which are often elided as topics of learning. In this way, Morgan “reading people, taking them to college and showing them what is out there that they were missing due to a lack of interest in certain things,” can be read as revealing the ways in which whiteness insulates itself from learning and acquainting itself with histories of communities of colour, particularly black histories.

To better understand and work through this moment—in which Ojay Morgan takes his experiences of racism and pedagogically responds by “reading”—I turn to Dina Georgis and R. M. Kennedy’s theoretical proposal on teaching anti-racist humanism. To access a way of learning that can reach beyond racist logics, Georgis and Kennedy propose a “pedagogy of emotions,” an orientation to learning that starts from the affect of racial injury.³⁴ To focus on the moments in which a subject encounters racial dehumanization can provide the conditions to learn from and hopefully, better understand the daily lived experiences and negotiations with, and survival of, the violence of objectifying racial logics. In focusing on these moments, Georgis and Kennedy place attention on the “psychic strategies of racial survival” and the ways that such

³⁴ Georgis & Kennedy, 2009.
strategies are manifested through the emotional valences of sadness and rage.35 Here they center

Julia Kristeva’s concept of revolt:

For Kristeva, revolt has a psychic dimension that in and of itself does not have social value except in the ways that it is an affective occasion for making new meaning. Revolt is the return of the repressed but not the transparent repossession of something lost. It is instead a remainder, and therefore a reminder, of loss that must be worked through. It is a ‘visitation’, so to speak, from the unthinkable and unassimilable parts of the past. As a visitation, it provides the conditions for reassessment because it stirs and agitates.36

Revolt, as that which “stirs and agitates,” then, provides a way think through how violent or inured reactions toward racial violence are both a contestation of racist norms and a productive space in which reconstruction of memory, and re-articulation of subjectivity, are made possible for those subjects harmed by race and, I would argue, sexuality. What kind of revolting (home)work does “Ima Read” perform and also ask us to do? Does it attempt to make new meaning and, if so, what are those meanings? I return to the subject matter of “Ima Read,” to ask what “psychic strategies of racial[-sexual] survival” are available in Morgan’s enunciation of reading. Put differently, I ask: how can we analyze reading strategies through the above contention that such reactions, sometimes violent or harmful, can actually permit those who participate in reading/critique to make new meaning within the context of queered and racial dehumanization?

Georgis and Kennedy describe race-thinking as a major obstacle to humanist thinking. They state: “At the root of the problem is an Enlightenment notion of the human that derives its intelligibility, in no small part, through those lives imagined as less than human.”37 Ann Stoler, in re-reading of Foucault’s History of Sexuality, finds that linking imperialism to Foucault’s account of the emergence of 19th century bourgeois sexuality, the latter coincides with the

36 Ibid.: emphasis added.
invention of truth claims around “race.” The language of race, Stoler argues, worked to centre Europeanness as well as treating European society as pure and refined and therefore in opposition to the primitive, savage, othered colonized regions and their inhabitants. By accounting for empire and imperialism alongside European bourgeois notions of sexuality, Stoler pays attention to sources and vocabularies drawn upon to produce those notions of sexuality; she pays attention to practices that racialize bodies (that sort people, for instance, into “white” or “black.”) If we consider modernity and the racial-sexual discourses which underpin it as a violent form of learning—the site of the colonies as one not simply of exploitation, as Ann Stoler writes, but also of the “laboratories of modernity”—the intersection in “Ima Read” of black queer culture with injurious learning highlights the ways in which race and sexuality are inextricable for their constitution through Eurocentric notions of humanness. When we understand that sexuality and race were and are produced in order to define and discipline those who are cast as unfit or abnormal or less than human, the kind of performative and corporeal labour that black and Latino queers enact at the ball, as their own form of education, is significant. The very bodies that are deemed “wrong” (or “failed”) within the context of colonial spaces and attendant normative (heterosexual, white, two-sexed) bodily scripts, are offering themselves and each other their own schooling. This speaks back to the logics that produce these communities as incorrect by repeating the normative scripts with a difference. Through the language of the ball, Ojay Morgan’s responds to his own experiences of racism in the classroom—via his role of teacher and “reader,” Zebra Katz, in “Ima Read”—by fostering a critical practice of learning and teaching through remnants of colonial educational histories that

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carry into our present. In doing so, Morgan gestures toward the development of a historical
consciousness that, through its encounter with painful histories, can pass through toward a better
way of relating to one another: relationships that do not require the forgetting of difference and
trauma but rather retains their presence while also interrogating the logics that produced them.

Zebra Katz’s Curriculum

It's interesting, because when everyone thinks about otherness or black otherness, you can say queerness if you want, they associate it with the ball scene in New
York as a reference point, but it’s also about the black vernacular.40

—Ojay Morgan

In the above passage Morgan provides a way to think through queerness as situated
outside the narrowly conceived understanding of non-normative sexual practices; in this, he
unsettles narratives that interpellate him and his music as queer (rather than, say, queerly black.)
Morgan’s offering to conceive of queerness more broadly—as that which is “other”—provides a
way to think through its function as identifying and defining certain populations as deviant in
multiple and varying ways. Morgan’s proposal to expand how black queerness is understood can
be found in the educational space of the classroom in “Ima Read.” What can be learned by
paying attention to Zebra Katz as teacher? How can an expanded definition of what is “queer”
enact a different kind of politics around race, sexuality, gender, and other classification logics?

Consider the curriculum offered by Zebra Katz as an illustration. In the music video for
“Ima Read,” we see Zebra Katz play the role of the teacher in various scenarios: wielding a

pointer stick, speaking into the school intercom system, lecturing in front of a classroom podium, and rapping from his teacher’s desk (which is littered with textbooks and papers to be marked.) Here, it is useful to visit one of Munoz’s definitions of disidentification: “For the critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy.” What might it mean for Katz, “a minority subject,” to play a teacher and a figure of authority and knowledge? Within the space of the school in “Ima Read,” Zebra Katz’s performance as a teacher is an exercise of power and agency. This is to say that the status of teacher places Katz in a position wherein he ostensibly possesses complete license over the attention of his students, the curriculum for his (unseen) classes, and the assessments of their academic performance.

In a brief series of shots, he can be seen at the front of a dark classroom, with a projection of a diagram showing a wig design head. Looking closely at the image (see Figure 2.) one can see, for example, how the user would attach the wig (with tabs), the materials to assist in application of the wig (mesh, elastic), as well as the brand of wig.

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41 Muñoz, 1999: 25.
Yet this image also calls forth the pseudoscience of phrenology: diagrams of human brains, as well as skull measurements, that supposedly mapped out an individual’s mental faculties. The image in “Ima Read” breaks down parts of the skull; there are labels that are appropriate to specific areas of the head, and so on. Phrenology, widely known as a form of scientific racism, is one that justified the slavery and servitude of black people in North America, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. Mapping out the brain and placing humans into discrete racial categories for the purpose of constructing and imposing a racial hierarchy, as understood alongside the visual projection of a wig design head demonstrates differing mapping logics. The wig head is not necessarily mapped out to assign an inferior status to black people; instead it is in service of

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42 The frame from Zebra Katz’s “Ima Read” is used in conformity with the academic use and limited dissemination allowance of copyright law.
producing a head covering of hair or synthetic materials for a person to adorn. The deployment of this image, and the history it calls upon, calls attention to the way that the wig design head is adjustable, customizable, instead of fixed and static. The head that Zebra Katz teaches his viewers about is one that speaks back to racist discourses of black inferiority while also connecting such discourses to black hair and appearance as a highly visible and contested—visual signifiers that have a meaningful relationship to power, authenticity, and beauty. Bell hooks describes the ways in which hair, for black women singers specifically, is inevitably bound up in aesthetics that covet and idealize blonde, straight (white) hair. She also teases out the way that the politics of black hair responds to or resists white beauty ideals; hooks draws attention to how, ironically, such white beauty ideals that are expected to be embodied by blacks necessarily entails artificial construction (vis-à-vis relaxers or the purchasing of synthetic or human hair wigs). Thus, this tension exposes the ways that hair politics as well as identity politics, however fraught and contested, revolve around socially constructed notions of “naturally superior” corporeal (and therefore racial) features. These products, which aim to sell privileged and desired (white-like) female hair textures, are also bound up in racial capitalism that profits from white feminine notions of beauty and, correspondingly, the devaluation of black feminine beauty.

However, if the wig diagram is read not only through anti-black racism and racial politics of hair, but also through the ball, it calls up the ball’s origins in drag beauty pageantry, and its entanglements with pervasive racism and white supremacy. Ivan Monforte traces the origins of

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45 Ibid., 70.
the ball community back to 1869, during which time “female impersonation extravaganzas” were held at the Hamilton Lodge Ball in Harlem. These events evolved and continued through to the 1970s, at which time the balls were primarily white-organized with anti-black bias in the selection of winners. In 1972, a shift occurred in the ball scene, with black and Latino/a queers responding to racist and exclusionary beauty standards. Puerto Rican queen Crystal LaBeija competed in these white-organized balls at the time, and explains: “It was our goal then to look like white women.” Frustrated and exhausted by the anti-black bias of the balls, LaBeija with Lottie, a Harlem drag queen, began organizing balls for black and Latino/a queers. In doing so, they also formed a group, called the “House of LaBeija,” and this spurred other black drag queens to form their own houses. This series of events led to the formation of balls and houses—communities and kinship structures by and for queers of colour, especially black queers—highlights the shifting demands made by ball participants and what definitions of beauty they wanted affirmed. So, when the ball is taken together with Katz’s wig diagram, what comes into view is a complex symbol—wigs/hair, construction/realness—that further impresses upon Katz’s definition of reading. This is to say that Katz, teaching the wig, calls up the complicated relationship the ball and its participants have with reading—with evaluative practices that seek to determine whether a wig is “real” or not—as well as with beauty ideals. The wig here is a symbol that represents the adherence to the performance of gender and/or sexuality—at times wrapped up in white feminine ideals of beauty—that signals the authenticity and coherence of gender and sexual identities via the embodiment of markers of femininity or masculinity. The

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
wig—which covers over and sits upon the head—provides a visual cue to such identifications and is established and only makes sense within the social arrangements of race, gender, sexuality, and class.\textsuperscript{51}

The history Katz cites is one that is politically and emotionally fraught and is therefore also one of resistance and remaking. Katz’s curriculum—the phrenology underpinning the wig diagram—can be seen as rewriting of dominant scripts of anti-blackness that simultaneously centralize queer cultures and ball cultures. Zebra Katz’s presentation and engagement with various kinds of “reading” shows how a space of institutionalized learning can be hostile while, at the same time, opening up a space for a “defiant political imagination,” that offers an alternative form of education.\textsuperscript{52} This kind of subversion is extended to the presentation of, religion, gender and sexuality (see Figure 3.)

\textsuperscript{51} Bailey, 2011.
\textsuperscript{52} Muñoz, 1999: 25.
Figure three shows Zebra Katz teaching alongside a projection of a pentagram featuring Baphoment, a Sabbatic goat, as well as the names of Samael and Lilith, figures from Jewish mythology who extend into Christian, Occult, and Satanic religions in Western culture. While this symbol possesses a rich and complex history as it relates to religion-based conceptions of good and evil, the mythic figure of Lilith will be examined for its implications into socio-cultural understandings of femininity, sexual agency, and otherness. In Jewish legend, Lilith is described as the first woman created by God; not made from Adam’s rib, God made Lilith from the earth. Lilith considered herself equal to Adam, as they were created from the same source (while Adam perceived her to be below him). Lilith, refusing to subjugate herself to Adam, “pronounced the Ineffable name of God and flew off into the air.” Jewish tradition characterizes Lilith variably as a devil, demon, seducer and other and, as Michele Osherow observes, she is the embodiment of many pervading cultural fears and anxieties surrounding femininity and feminine sexuality. That Lilith values her independence and self-determination over patriarchal male companionship, and is subsequently demonized as its result, she exposes the ways in which, I would argue, specifically white feminine autonomy has been perceived as a threat that must be destroyed. Standing in as a mythic female stereotype, Lilith is also perceived as the embodiment of darkness and other: “she’s immortal, powerful, strong, feared, sexual, and midrash even tells us she can fly.” Osherow conceptualizes the revising of the myth of Lilith as one that is highly responsive

53 The frame from Zebra Katz’s “Ima Read” is used in conformity with the academic use and limited dissemination allowance of copyright law.
57 Ibid. Midrash in Judaism refers to a body of texts devoted to biblical interpretation.
to the cultural demands of its creator and context; that is, Lilith’s revision reflects a given culture’s standing views on women’s roles in contemporary culture. I take Osherow’s contention further by asserting that the revision of Lilith provides insight into the processes by which marginalized subjects—not only women (coded as white)—are deemed evil, deviant, and other. When installing Lilith in to the cultural black and queer histories found in “Ima Read,” Zebra Katz expands normative understandings of black and queer. By situating Lilith—representative of societal fears of white feminine (sexual) autonomy outside of patriarchy—alongside the ball, wigs, colonial pedagogy, and hip hop, Katz powerfully aligns and juxtaposes these histories in such a way for his pupils/the viewer to dwell in their connectivity.

Concluding Thoughts

Zebra Katz offers glimpses into a new way of thinking about race. He ties race to histories of anti-black racism and links this to the control and persecution of white feminine sexuality. By tying these histories together, Katz provides an entry point into thinking through the ways in which we imagine these histories as separate and unrelated. In bringing our attention to this, Katz challenges us to forge connections between femininity and blackness while also noticing how these connectins where perhaps foreclosed due to the separating logics that distinguish and create boundaries around race, gender and sexuality. If those connections can be made successfully, what is created is “not the fantasy of a universal common experience,” but a way to think beyond race and sexuality logics. 58 What is considered racial knowledge and what is considered queerness, then, moves toward the possibility for imagining where the commonalities of humanity lie. 59 Katz both acknowledges and ruminates within the material and

59 Ibid.
social realities of racism, sexism, queer-phobias, and the truth of their histories, while also gesturing toward a way of relating to one another that might be different.

Ojay Morgan’s “Ima Read,” as his own personal mantra, as a psychic strategy of racial survival, and as a pedagogic and aesthetic resource, can be thought of as engaging in a mode of remembrance and a “hopeful practice of critical learning.”\textsuperscript{60} Insofar as he has taken past moments of racial-sexual pain and trauma—Morgan’s own racial injury, Shakespeare’s Moors, and the projections of, respectively, the wig/phrenology diagram and the Samael and Lillith pentagram—he reopens them via “reading” his own experiences of racial injustice and injury and reworks them in such a way that they themselves work upon the present. That “Ima Read” is narrowly read as only being evidentiary of Morgan’s queer identifications is but another layer of racial-sexual dehumanization. In bringing together his experiences of racism from his college experience (and undoubtedly outside of it) with the aforementioned historical moments, Morgan is conducting that “required meeting with traumatic traces of the past.”\textsuperscript{61} Crucially, he touches and entwines historic moments of pain that are seemingly disparate. What can it mean to place ball culture in conversation with, for instance, Samael and Lillith?\textsuperscript{62} Shakespeare with rap? What is at stake in positioning wig diagrams, that call up phrenology and black hair practices, alongside dancing black figures who are wearing Fanonian white masks? In bringing such moments together, Morgan engages in a learning practice that can be thought of as the starting point to shape what Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert call a “politics of relationality”: a practice which implicates all in the learning and teaching of those whose subjectivities have been touched


\textsuperscript{61} Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert, 2000: 5.

\textsuperscript{62} Zebra Katz’ song “BLK WICCAN,” for instance, is one that reinforces this twinning of sexual deviance with blackness, reworking ‘deviance’ as sexual pleasure, autonomy, and indulgence.
or harmed by such violences. Georgis and Kennedy similarly urge for an acknowledgment of “the relationality of being” and “the relationality of race” in order to push us toward thinking through how race and other classification systems hurt all of us—in uneven ways—but all of us nonetheless. This is not an easy or “safe” learning process, as it is one that is characterized by receptivity to others and a confrontation with pain that lingers. Thus, Morgan’s assertion that “There'll always be that bitch at school that needs to get read” can be thought of as a way to consider our own responsibilities to pay attention to those we read, and get read by. In doing so, maybe the loss enacted by dehumanizing logics can be fully felt, worked through, toward something else, perhaps even something better, something more human.

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64 Snoad, 2013: par. 2.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

By situating black queerness, hip hop, and homophobia within colonial and post-slavery contexts, this thesis intervenes into recent online media discourse on queer rap and its attendant queer liberal agenda. I have considered how music websites perceive black gender nonconforming and black sexual nonconforming subjects as in need of “special” media attention and scrutiny because they are, on the surface, read as working within the hostile, heteronormative, and discriminatory hip hop genre—a black cultural form that is presumed to be especially homophobic and/or queer-phobic. The heralding of a “new wave” of “queer rap,” I argue, uncovers the active participation, on the part of online music critics, in panoptical imaginaries: a regulatory gaze which aims to detect and reveal queerly-identified individuals—as legibly black and queer—by visually locating queerness as though it were written on the body.¹ I further contend that the panoptical imaginary that exists within music culture extends beyond and relies upon these visual logics to define queerly-identified artists as primarily black and queer rather than cultural producers and the creators of subversive music, sounds, and songs. These insights, based on visual logics that locate queerness on the black body, constantly fail these artists by indexing what is “queer” about them and/or their music—therefore producing their bodies as containers of authentic queer information and, consequently, refusing to fully engage their creative work.

Reading black cultures and black cultural production in this way is premised on a long history of racial violence that shored up racist images of black masculinity and understands black sexuality as deviating from the norm. Contemporary media discourse replicates and repeats this

history of seeing black deviance and therefore works to justify the increased surveillance of black bodies. Without thinking through the histories of black sexualities—including the queering of blackness that emerged from transatlantic slavery as well as other hidden queer histories\(^2\)—demonstrates how online music criticism adopts a queer politics of visibility which fails to account for race and racial antagonisms that continue to permeate contemporary black (queer) life. In order to address these unacknowledged histories, I have turned to the musical works by the “queer rappers” themselves; I have theorized the ways in which these musical artists provide, through the lyrics and the audio-visual stylistic operations of the music video, their own articulations of selfhood, blackness and queerness.

Exploring the meaning of “queer rap” within media discourse has also allowed me to link authenticating tactics that index what is queer about particular artists to visual logics; this indexing provides insight into the ways in how categories like “black,” “queer” and “hip hop” make sense within the context of colonialism and white supremacy. That is, what is presented to both prove and naturalize claims around the ostensible queerness of particular rappers is of critical import, for it exposes the way that such evidence is neither objective nor immanent but is rather rooted within normative ideological schemas of race, gender, and sexuality. Music critics that write about “queer rap” continually cite features of the body, hair, bodily adornments such as clothing—features that situate queerness as the practice of mimicking white femininity—to locate and read queerness on the black body. This practice is indebted to a history through which black sexualities are consistently conceptualized as queer and deviant. However, the speculation and surveillance of black sexualities, and the search to see and therefore know or authenticate “queer rappers,” actually discloses writers’ ambivalence and confusion to index exactly what is

“queer” about these artists. This ambivalence and confusion reveals a refusal, willful or otherwise, to fully take up race: specifically the legacies of racism, white supremacy, and anti-blackness—in discussions of queer liberalism, queer progress, and queer uplift—are obscured. The visual logics used to interpellate artists as authentically queer are problematically extended beyond the artist’s body to confirm the fact of queerness within their auditory creations and in their music. This is to say that music critics assume their specific understanding of queerness, one that relies on visual markers and is defined in relation to black homophobia, can be heard in the artists’ music. The plausibility of this logic is underwritten by homology, a concept that refers to two entities possessing shared structures. However, such a process elides the ways in which homology depends on a common signifying structure generally, and how music journalists interpret art through preexisting notions about, for instance, blackness, hip hop, and queerness. Such findings have critical implications for how aesthetic evaluation and interaction with art is practiced and demonstrates the need to adopt a politically conscious and ethical stance in our broader engagement with cultural production.

After establishing the visual indexes used to authenticate what is “queer” about particular rappers, I focused on Khalif Diouf, also known as Le1f, and his music video “Wut.” Le1f’s work allowed me to reflect on the interaction between online music journalist coverage of black queer art and artists, and the lyrical, audio-visual elements of the art itself. This provided space to analyze the content of the art itself and also provide a powerful counterpoint to the way black queer art is interpreted by online music critics. I argued that music critics writers provided a shallow reading of “Wut” and narrated its meaning almost solely in relation to its reception by an ostensibly homophobic hip hop community. Contrasting this with select lyrical and visual moments within “Wut,” I demonstrated that Le1f’s articulation of sexuality is bound up in his
articulation of blackness. Drawing on Jose Munoz’s concept of disidentification, I argued that Le1f’s decision to foreground his sexuality alongside his blackness acts as a powerful complication of queerness as it is normatively understood, while also situating his experience as a black gay man within the context of colonialism. ³ Further, Le1f’s “Wut” provides an important entry point into thinking through interracial desire and its often unspoken and unacknowledged presence within histories of racism and white supremacy. When engaging his work—which expresses ambivalence but nonetheless desire for the racial other—questions of agency, beauty, and objectification arise. “Wut” therefore provides a way to think through how a passing through the problematic legacies of white-black interracial desire, such as white fantasy and consumption of the black other, can create the possibility to reach toward interracial encounters that acknowledge and can perhaps start to address asymmetrical power relations, shaped by colonialism and racism. Disidentificatory pleasure—as an ambivalent structure of feeling—is a disposition toward those aspects of interracial desire that might be deemed “wrong” or “problematic”; instead of discarding what is deemed “wrong” or “problematic,” disidentifactory pleasure maintains these complicated affective tensions. This kind of queer text opens up a way to read these encounters of (difficult) desire and pleasure as sites of self-affirmation while also critically considering the role of fantasy in the production of desire.

I then turned to Ojay Morgan, also known by his rap moniker Zebra Katz. Another artist who has been placed under the “queer rap” banner, I examined his music video “Ima Read” in order to center the music (rather than the visual) and provide an analysis of the musical work. It is important to note here that part of my thinking was guided by the need to engage more than one queer hip hop artist in order to demonstrate the limitations of generically classifying artists,

together, based on sexuality, thus showing the widely varied lyrical styles, visual imagery, and subject matter that these musicians take up. Reading interviews with Morgan alongside the audio-visual contents of “Ima Read” provided a way to think through racial and sexual classifications as sites of injury and trauma while also drawing attention to black queer education as a politically-oriented and ethically-oriented way of relating to one another. I looked specifically at the juxtapositions within the video and the lyrics of “Ima Read”: the ominous school setting, coupled with the practice of “reading” as it is used in the ball culture community, and this opened up a way to think about pedagogical discipline, black queer performance, and how education is structured and subverted by racial, gendered and sexual schemas. My reading is complemented and bolstered by Morgan’s explanation, in interviews, of how “Ima Read” became a mantra that both disclosed and pushed against his experiences with racism in education. Drawing upon histories of anti-black racism and the persecution of white feminine sexuality, Zebra Katz provides a different way of thinking through racial knowledge and queerness. As well, I believe he provides a starting point to shaping a politics of relationality that both passes through and reaches beyond the separating logics of race, gender, and sexuality toward the (albeit uneven) responsibilities and injuries we all share with one another as a result of such logics.

Research on theorizing musical meaning and genre will be worth investigating further—especially in relation to musical works that emerge from marginalized communities. Drawing upon Nicholas Cook’s critical work on theorizing musical meaning and complementing it with a black studies and decolonial perspective allows the consideration of the logics, such as homology, at play in producing and making sense of musical meaning. Specifically, thinking through how such logics operate within other musical contexts would be beneficial. Considering other
“musical genres” would provide further insight into the ways that their related raced, gendered, sexualized, classed contexts make sense to the critic, viewer, or listener, and become foundational to their interpretations and evaluations of a given musical work. In a further investigation, I would ask: If genre classification is tied to race, gender and sexuality classifications, how can we reimagine relationships between musical works and the artists themselves? What might that look or sound like? How might we engender a music culture that remembers and works through the traumatic histories of dehumanization, and how would that alter aesthetic evaluation practices? In asking future questions about how musical genre, race, and sexuality (as well as other identifications) are related and constructed, we can explore how critical race, queer and gender theory productively comingle with the profound imaginative capacities of art that can exceed academic language. Richard Iton’s work on the black fantastic is a crucial site through which to reach for the “agonistic, postracial, and post-colonial visions and practices by subaltern populations” ever-present in the work of marginalized artists.⁴ What I have attempted to illustrate through these questions is that music and musical interpretation are crucial contact sites connecting people in surprising and unanticipated ways, and thus can produce a space to understand the myriad forms of dehumanization and work through them via the potentially liberating energies that art and music produce.

As has been suggested throughout this project, the “queer rap” media discourse, which is instituted through our contemporary moment of queer liberalism, is one that forgets race and erases its attendant violent and traumatic racial histories. This discourse also attempts to lay an authoritative claim to what genre, race, and sexuality are without interrogating the forgotten histories and logics that underpin them. I have argued throughout this project that the central

problem to such claims is the failure, willful or otherwise, to account for these logics and the preexisting beliefs one holds while encountering the art of marginalized communities. To retain and remember these histories, therefore, is to necessarily forge a different relationship to art and artists that complicates, and I would argue, positively invigorates discussions around artistic production and evaluation. I believe that this is a key element in avoiding or at least mitigating panoptical imaginaries and their damaging discourses of anti-blackness, racism, and anti-queerness; this would necessarily make space to ethically engage with, and learn from—in the Zebra Katz pedagogical sense—these artists who are marginalized by such discourses. This has been most effectively, and perhaps ironically, demonstrated by paying close attention to the art of those very artists who have fallen under the “queer rap” banner. The musical works of both Le1f and Zebra Katz, in singular and divergent ways, have provided the blueprints for reimagining the very world that their critics work to preserve. These artists open up difficult identifications, disidentifications, relationalities, and educational practices that undermine the facile visual logics that tend to structure how black queer hip hop is read and engaged with. While the scope of this project has limited the number of artists who were identified, by online music critics, as “queer rappers,” I believe that the works of Le1f and Zebra Katz here provide a starting point to begin centering and learning from the voices of artists who are marginalized within music culture. In a way, one of the pursuits of this project was to show that the voices and imaginations that show us different ways of living have always been there, we just have to listen differently.
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