"Yeah I'm Still That Bitch, but Now I'm Feelin' Like the Man": How Black Women Rappers Queer Masculinity in Hip Hop

Efua Osei

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/undergrad_etd

Recommended Citation

This Unrestricted is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Papers / Undergraduate Theses by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN SAINT LOUIS
Department of African and African American Studies

Advisor:
Dr. Lerone Martin

Thesis Committee:
Zachary Manditch-Prottas
Jonathan Fenderson

“Yeah I’m Still That Bitch, but Now I’m Feelin’ Like the Man”:
How Black Women Queer Masculinity in Hip Hop
Efua Osei

A thesis submitted for partial fulfillment
of the requirements for honors in the
Department of African and African American Studies
ABSTRACT

Being a "hard rapper," while a mark of legitimacy and skill in hip hop culture, can also be understood as an inherently masculine quality. Black male rappers have perpetuated this expectation in hip hop to be hard, to be gangsta, the "ultra-aggressive nigga," or the "badass thug" as Jason Nichols notes. Rappers must constantly be a threat to other rappers. However, cis-heteronormative understandings of femininity oppose this idea of hardness. Women are not expected to be hard. To be gangsta. To be the "ultra-aggressive nigga." Focusing Black women rappers from the 1990's to the 2020's, this thesis utilizes visual-cultural and lyrical analysis to investigate how women queer masculinity in hip hop to be perceived as hard, and often harder than their male counterparts. I specifically highlight two Black women rappers, Da Brat and Young M.A., as case studies to further discuss queerness, and its association with being hard women, and hard rappers.
INTRODUCTION

From Foxy Brown to Megan Thee Stallion, Da Brat to Young M.A., some of the hardest rappers have been Black women, despite the heavy saturation of Black men in rap and hip hop.\textsuperscript{1} MC Lyte and Da Brat, for example, were deemed two of the hardest female rappers in the late 80’s into the 90’s. The same hard females were simultaneously characterized as lesbians, queer, or ‘tomboys’. Roxanne Shanté, a New York born rapper rising to fame in the mid to late 80’s, even directly referred to MC Lyte as a “bulldagger” in her notorious 1992 diss track, “Big Mama.” Shanté raps:

\begin{quote}
Line 1.1 “Watch the bitch stagger, cause I don't dig the bulldagger
1.2 To me a butch don't deserve a mic in hand
1.3 Somebody tell her to stop acting like a man
1.4 She needs something real thick to help her out quick
1.5 (What?) And that's a good piece of dick.\textsuperscript{2}
\end{quote}

In this snippet, not only does Shanté imply that MC Lyte’s style of dress and overall demeanor suggest she is a ‘butch’ woman, but she also claims lesbian women need to have sex with a man to remind themselves they aren’t actually gay (1.4-1.5). While Shanté means to offend MC Lyte, it’s clear her aesthetic and tough exterior makes MC Lyte the hardcore, coveted rapper that she is. MC Lyte would become a pioneer as the first solo female rapper to release a major label studio album.\textsuperscript{3} Similarly Monie Love, a UK-born/ New-York bred rapper coming up around the same time, stated she hated being seen as feminine and cute being in such a male-saturated space. She states, “No I’m not cute... I’m a deadly venomous mess on the microphone

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[1]{Generally speaking, hip-hop and rap have become synonymous in the popular culture. I will reference these musicians as rappers, but reference hip hop music as umbrella term to encompass rap.}
\end{footnotes}
do not sleep on me.” In Monie Love’s eyes, being a hard rapper is almost anti-feminine. Being cute does not allow her to be seen, feared, or coveted in the way she regards herself. She saw herself as the hardest, not-to-be-fucked-with rapper in the game, and she explained she would shave her hair and tape her breasts down in an effort to make herself appear less feminine.

While this does not equate to either MC Lyte nor Monie Love being queer, it shows how Black women actively queer feminine and masculine social scripts to express the fluid ways we experience gender, and even create our own genders. I have been enamored with Black women rappers since I first listened to Lauryn Hill on the Fugees debut album, The Score. From Lauryn, to Queen Latifah, to Nicki Minaj, to Bahamadia, to Kari Faux (whose song “Chattin’ Shit” I reference as the title of this thesis), and Megan Thee Stallion, I love the way Black women rappers actively disrupt space and directly challenge cis-heteronormativity. Whether it's the effortlessness of Megan Thee Stallion’s killer delivery, or Lil’ Kim’s beautifully raunchy irreverence, Black women in hip hop have always inspired me. And it was rappers like Da Brat that have greatly informed how I see myself, my gender, and my sexuality; as fluid without apology or explanation.

So, what about being hard is inherently non-feminine? What about hard female rappers comes across to others as lesbian, or queer? There are a multitude of racialized and gendered implications associated with the word, hard. Chapter 1 of this thesis focuses on these implications, and further defining and contextualizing what it means for Black women rappers to be considered “hard.” Chapter 2 of this thesis presents two case studies, Da Brat and Young

---

5 Ibid.
6 Identifying as queer, or apart of the LGBTQIA+ community
7 By this I mean gender is queered when societal norms are challenged, however this concept will be discussed further in the next section
M.A., for further analysis of how queer Black women *queer* masculinity as well. Through this I conclude Black women not only achieve masculinity through queering it, but queer masculinity through achieving it.

**Literature Review**

In this section, I will contextualize my work within the various fields of study my research is situated in order to establish the frameworks and methodologies that my research draws on, but to also point out the key differences. I highlight Saidah Isoke’s master’s thesis, “Thank God For Hip Hop: Black Women’s Masculinity in Hip Hop Culture,” as it is one of the few pieces of academic literature that discusses my specific intersection of interests, hip hop, gender, and race. As Isoke states, this research is not to reinforce the idea that hip hop is a masculine or male-only art form, but to recognize how misogynoir and cis-het normativity has affected the dynamic of the culture. Given this understanding of how Black women disrupt normative sexual and gender politics, we can further pinpoint how Black women rappers have queered these spaces in hip hop.

Isoke discusses how hip hop has become a boys-only club, only allowing women the same notoriety and fame through exception (ie. using female rapper rather than just plain ‘rapper’, using “femcee” rather than emcee/MC). Isoke discusses the phenomenon of masculine presenting women (namely lesbian women) at the forefront of Black women breaking into these “boys-only” clubs.9 Isoke states,

Continuing to ignore Black masculine women in these discourses neglects valuable insight on racialized and queered gender expectations, gender and sexual cultures within hip-hop that fall outside of heteronormativity, and transgressive expressions of gender and sexuality done by Black women that complicate gender binaries and queer desires.10

---

8 Read cisgendered heterosexual  
10 Ibid, 4.
As Isoke states, neglecting Black women’s contributions to queering gender binaries skews history and fails to recognize Black women as the influential pioneers they are, especially in hip hop. Because this thesis focuses not only on Black studies, but queer theory, and hip hop studies, this research still remains a rather niche topic in academic literature. Furthermore, there is a severe lack of credit given to Black women in not only academic discursive spaces, but pop-culture discourse when discussing essential rappers and hip hop figures. My intervention, similar to Isoke’s, further bridges these gaps in academia and begins to unpack the root of these socially constructed ideals in our society.

Saidah Isoke’s thesis centers Black tomboys and masculine presenting lesbians (that she labels MPLs) specifically to examine the ways Black women in hip hop embody masculinity to further queer hip hop culture. She centers Gwendolyn Pough’s “bringing wreck” theory to investigate how women disrupt gender and sexual politics in hip hop. Her research continues to ask, ‘How do black women subvert hegemonic masculinity present in Hip Hop culture?’, especially through their engagement with masculine presenting aesthetics.

Track No. 1 I am Not Jasmine, I am Aladdin: Defining Masculinity and Queerness

Side A. Masculinity

To begin this discussion, a few terms should be defined prior. I frequently reference Jack Halberstam’s Female Masculinity as they describe their framework as “masculinity without men.” Halberstam defines this as attempting to compile the “myths and fantasies” regarding the rigid social scripts of masculinity and offers a new lens to reimagine masculinity. They also specify most of these alternative forms of masculinity are not only queer, but “female,” or what I

---

13 Ibid, 2.
infer to be masculinity performed by non-cisgendered heterosexual men. Succinctly, Halberstam defines masculinity stating,

Masculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth. Masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege.

Because of these social privileges, there becomes an association between maleness, power, and dominance. Similarly, Caroline Malpesa defines in her thesis, “What Place for Female and Queer Hip Hop Artists in the U.S.?” the concept of gender, stating, “Gender can be defined as the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex.” She explains gender is something performed daily, through acts, mannerisms or reactions society associates to gendered categories. Lyndon K. Gill alludes to this in Erotic Islands: Art and Activism in the Queer Caribbean. Gill states,

Furthermore, I propose that masculinity is perhaps best defined as the whole constellation of associations that any particular society or culture invests in the phallus—either directly or indirectly—constituting a web of meaning that defines the phallus but is not ultimately contained by it.

These points beautifully encapsulate how we can define masculinity without necessitating the subject being a cis-het man. Gill explains that masculinity is based in cultural ideas associated with phallus, but simultaneously is not bound by the phallus. Gill draws on Judith Butler’s gender theory, further reimagining masculinity with a “lesbian phallus.” She states by evoking the possibility of a lesbian phallus, “the imagination—or imaginative play with this

---

14 Ibid.  
15 Ibid.  
17 Ibid.  
transferable phallus—can trouble that unstable link between the material and the ideal by disrupting the seemingly natural order precisely at its moment of repetitive reaffirmation.”

Reading this, I understand symbols of masculinity can become transferable, and able to be experienced regardless of how one identifies.

Not only can masculinity be defined by these non-biological factors, but as Isoke alluded to, the homosocial nature of hip hop, invited many women into these spaces as one of the guys. Moya Bailey’s “Homolatent Masculinity & Hip-Hop Culture” questions preconceived understandings of homosociality. Bailey explains the term “homolatent” attempts to encapsulate how masculinity and heterosexuality are “signaled through tenuous performative utterances” which often include homosocial behavior that exists outside of the realm of erotic or sexual. She builds on this, explaining how Black queer rapper/hip hop artist Syd is rendered masculine by her association to a group of men, namely hip hop collective Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All, better known as Odd Future. As Bailey explains, this relatability to cis masculinity can be seen as homosocial behavior. This homosociality to cis-het Black masculinity is what renders certain performances masculine. This literature offers a conceptualization of masculinity unattached to the biological criteria to be considered male, but rather the hegemonic structures and privileges afforded to certain individuals in society rather than others. My reading of these terms also offers room to think about masculinity as embodied actions that can be performed to gain some of these privileges.

Many scholars discuss gender by using socially understood scripts to reimagine these somewhat rigid binaries and barriers. Through this, I establish thoughts of gender and sexuality,

---

19 Ibid, 103.
21 Ibid, 191.
as being socially practiced concepts, and not biological and/or innate behaviors due to having specific genitals.

Side B. Queer

The term queer is used throughout this thesis to reference not only sexuality, but to describe the act of *queering* normative spaces and ideas. As Meg-John Barker explains in her book, *Queer: A Graphic History*, the word queer has a derogatory history as it was used as a slur against members of the (then) LGBT community.\(^{22}\) Not only is the word queer now a reclaimed identity within the LGBTQIA+ community, but now has become a named sector of Gender and Sexuality Studies. Barker includes an illustration by Michael Warner, which states, “We queer things when we resist ‘Regimes of the Normal’: The ‘normative’ ideals of aspiring to be normal in identity, behavior, appearance, relationships, etc.”\(^{23}\) Halberstam also states in *Female Masculinity*, their methodology is “queer” because it attempts to remain, “supple enough to respond to the various locations of information on female masculinity and betrays a certain disloyalty to conventional disciplinary methods.”\(^{24}\) I use the idea of queering, or troubling normative concepts, to base my analysis of how Black women attempt to be perceived as masculine whilst still being attached to their cis-womanhood; how these black women subvert hegemonic masculine scripts to render them “hard enough” to be perceived less feminine/ more masculine.

Based in queer theory, José Muñoz defines and contextualizes the term he coins, *disidentification*. He illustrates queer formation of identity stating, “Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a

---


\(^{23}\) Ibid, 46.

\(^{24}\) Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 10.
phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.” As Muñoz alludes to, disidentification can be seen as the means by which oppressed peoples navigate the push and pulls of wanting to align with dominant hegemonic culture as well as reject it; as both survival and resistance. Muñoz references this Pêcheuxian paradigm describing when faced with identificatory questions, subjects either agree, and align with normative hegemonic culture, or they completely disagree, and reject normative hegemonic culture.

Muñoz explains that disidentification is a third mode, “dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.”

Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counter identification, utopianism), this working on and against is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.

In simple terms, disidentification attempts to answer complex questions of how to navigate spaces in which we acknowledge the perpetuation of problematic rhetoric, but still want to take part in this space as an oppressed person in this dynamic. It depicts how many queer people, who often do not fit into these cis-het gender norms, navigate the world.

Black men do not own the monopoly on masculinity, and this can be seen in the many ways we define masculinity. Halberstam perfectly encapsulates the mission of my thesis. Not only to compile ‘myths and fantasies’ about masculinity, but to explain how masculinity has continuously been reimagined by Black queer people, Black trans people, Black women and

---

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
Black non-binary and genderfluid folks. I specifically name the Blackness of this phenomenon, as it not often a central component of non-male masculinity, or “reimagined masculinity,” in academic queer theory. Even as Halberstam attempts to map and historically contextualize moments of female masculinity, much of this history focuses white butch women’s experience with gender expression. However, I utilize these different theories, frameworks, and methodologies to focus on this specific intersection of gender, sexuality, queerness, and most importantly Blackness.

Black women have always been a part of hip hop music, despite rappers’ often flagrant rhetoric based in misogynoir, homophobia, and transphobia. However, having Black women in these spaces have attempted to completely flip these normative scripts, whether these women know they are doing the work or not. The next section speaks to these implications of hardness to which I utilize this literature to analyze further.
CHAPTER 1
Big D Stands for Big Demeanor\textsuperscript{28}: What it Means for Black Women to be Hard

“I brought the pen, like I got penis” Doja Cat\textsuperscript{29}

This chapter will discuss how Black women rappers are perceived as hard, or masculine, through various aesthetics, posturing and posing, and sonic disturbances. From the beginning, hip hop culture centered around having \textit{street cred} and exhibiting the hard, abrasive exterior only afforded to those embodying a specific type of masculinity. Jason Nichols describes this masculinity as the “ultra-aggressive nigga,” or “badass thug,” stating these images trace back to the Black male caricatures in history from slavery, to reconstruction, ghetto realism, Black civil rights, and “mythic Blaxploitation heroes.”\textsuperscript{30} As Tricia Rose explains in her book, \textit{The Hip Hop Wars}, hip hop embraces a patriarchal and “violent male” masculinity that has systematically benefited those who fit the criteria. She explains that this idea of the violent, hard Black male stems from the need to serve as a symbol of protection for the Black family and the community against larger systems of oppression, while unfortunately perpetuating oppressive stereotypes and problematic understandings of masculinity.\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{Track No. 2 Really go harder than hoes, harder than some of your bros}\textsuperscript{32}: 

\textbf{Defining Hardness}

The most commonly used adjective to describe great rappers is “hard.”\textsuperscript{33} Many of those deemed hard are often the most lyrically gifted rappers. Others are deemed hard by how much

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Cardi B, “WAP ft. Megan Thee Stallion,” 2020, Spotify.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Megan Thee Stallion, “WTF I Want,” track 1 on \textit{Tina Snow}, 1501 Certified Ent, 2018, Spotify.
\item \textsuperscript{33} I.e. “[Insert Rapper] the hardest rapper” “Their album goes hard”
\end{itemize}
their music emphasizes their aggression or machismo. Whether it's rapping about how hard having a gun makes you, or how hard [erect] the speaker is physically; this idea of hardness is attached to brawn, dominance, power, and all things opposite of soft. This is often associated with gangsta rap culture. Gangsta rap is described as a subculture or sub-genre of hip hop. However, as several participants stated in a 1996 MTV documentary on gangsta rap, “there is no such thing as gangsta rap; gangsta rap is something someone gave a name to.”

Regardless, gangsta rap becomes what the West Coast rappers are known for. From Ice T to Snoop Dogg, the culture of gangsta rap was not only about showing people, but telling people what makes the rapper scarier than you, manlier than you, harder than you. Bill Stephmey, a hip hop historian and CEO of Stepsun Entertainment, notes on the documentary, gangsta rap is characterized by “how you dress, the album you make, the record company you’re on, the town that you come from,” which is what he believes made it so difficult to articulate what exactly gangsta rap is, but easy to provide examples of what is and what isn't. Similarly, it can be difficult to articulate what it means to be hard, but easier to recognize it.

Oxford defines hard as being “solid, firm, and rigid; not easily broken, bent, or pierced.” This description of hardness evokes the image of an impenetrable force. These forces are impenetrable from the outside world, but also protective of what is inside, like a shield. Hardness necessitates a certain demeanor that is meant to protect the person who is putting on this hard exterior. Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson similarly discuss the idea of the “cool pose,” a behavior that is exhibited as a means of “surviving in a restrictive society.”

---

35 Ibid.
characterize this coolness fashioned by Black men as an unbothered, aloof poise in the face of oppression and violence, as well as a coveted swagger, rendering the Black male visible and empowered. As coolness, as described by Majors and Billson, is rooted in the same normative Black cis-het masculine social scripts as hardness. Both concepts recognize that unique patterns of speech, walk, and demeanor express this embodied quality. As hardness can signify strength and impenetrability, it can also be used to articulate something legitimate in the eyes of cis-het masculinity. Being hard is a quality which when embodied by women is seen as “passing” as one of the guys.

Hardness can also be interpreted in a more sexual context. In this consideration, being hard or erect, can signify sexual dominance, being the penetrable force. The idea of being hard in this context has become less attached to the actual physical proportions of one’s genitalia, but a non-physical quality the subject possesses. This can be culturally understood as having “big dick energy”. Alex Abad-Santos and Constance Grady, two writers for Vox Entertainment, write, “Big Dick Energy (BDE) is the unavoidable subject of the minute on social media. What began as a joke... has since sparked an all-consuming cultural urge to determine who possesses it and who is lacking — as well as the urge to define it.” BDE is not unique to the current social media moment, but only in recent years has it become such a widely used phrase. Abad-Santos and Grady continue on, stating that BDE is an “emotional” attribute, rather than something physical. They state, “Rihanna does not have a dick, but she has BDE for days.” Because

---

37 Ibid, 5.
38 Ibid, 2.
39 In queer culture, this idea of passing comes from trans folks experiences in navigating cis-heteronormativity as a transgendered person. I do not use this to mean these Black women “pass” as trans-men, but that in both cases, the same cis-heteronormativity that they are disrupting can simultaneously validates them.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
Rihanna identifies as a cis-woman, the point is made that non cis-het men can also “carry” this BDE.

In referencing Lyndon K. Gill’s Erotic Islands, Gill explains masculinity to be understood as, “the whole constellation of associations that any particular society or culture invests in the phallus—either directly or indirectly—constituting a web of meaning that includes the web of meaning that defines the phallus but is not ultimately contained by it.”43 I read the “energy” in BDE, as synonymous with this “constellation of associations,” and socially scripted mannerisms, postures, clothing choices and more that are rendered masculine, therefore hard (or hard therefore masculine). Even without identifying as a cis-het man, one can be seen as hard in the eyes of heteronormative culture, inherently queering this understanding of masculinity.

This idea of hardness also becomes a mark of one’s legitimacy in the hip hop canon. The hardest rappers are subsequently the ones who exhibit this sense of toughness and impenetrability, BDE, or “cool pose.” In short, the hardest rappers are usually men whose expressions of self reiterate ideals promoting or exhibiting normative Black cis-het male culture, or even alpha-male archetypes. Men who rap about “killing niggas in cold blood,”44 or men who rap about “smackin the bitches, and jockin the hoes.”45 In reading this, I conclude hardness to be inherently masculine, but not necessarily male.

Black women rappers have proven that people other than men can still be seen as hard, sometimes even more so than their cis-het male counterparts. Hardness describes a type of masculinity, which can be (quite easily) replicated. Furthermore, it isn’t coincidental that many women who have successfully embodied this hardness are also perceived as queer. As Fleetwood

45 Eazy-E, “Boyz-n-the-Hood,” track 1 on N.W.A. and the Posse, Priority Records, 1987,
describes in her book, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, placing women in the position socially understood to be masculine queers otherwise heterosexual content, or disrupts how Black women navigate normative gender scripts. This disruption complicates the means by which society places meaning to these embodied characteristics. These women are not perceived as feminine, yet they are not men with penises. Black women embodying the hardness that is inherently tied to cis-het Black masculinity, thus queers this narrative. This renders the Black women less feminine, thus more masculine, as well as not straight, thus lesbian/queer.

These societal and cultural markers of power, privilege, and swagger can be communicated through the words we say, how we say them, and the manner in which we position our bodies in front of an audience. Caroline Malpesa states in her thesis that “power-posing” is integral to the visual culture of hip-hop. Wealth, power, status, etc. are embodied in fashioning various poses, and can be seen throughout hip hop’s visual history. In analyzing some of these visual and sonic cues, I pinpoint what visual and sonic cues render these Black women rappers “hard”. Through these musical expressions of self, many Black women rappers can be understood as emulating the hardness afforded to their Black male rapper counterparts, thus queering this idea of masculinity such that they are seen as hard, or masculine.

---

48 This idea of passing translates to success in queering/subverting ideas in dominant hegemonic culture.
Track No. 3 I am the Female Weezy: Tomboys and Male Co-Signs

Figure 1.1 and 1.2 Girl groups Xcsape and TLC fashioning 90’s tomboy aesthetic

Generally, many use clothing to express themselves, and their formations of identity. Entering the new decade, the 1990’s would see an explosion of Black women rappers coming into the industry. From Bahamadia to Queen Latifah, many women sported the baggy t-shirt, baggy jeans, sneakerhead aesthetic (seen in Figures 1.1 and 1.2), and were often called tomboys, or a gendered term along the same lines. Tomboys, as Isoke explains, usually wear non-feminine clothing. Tomboys occupy a “hybrid space” not only between, but outside of femininity and masculinity. While some argue that tomboyism is a case of cross-gender or masculine identification, others assert tomboys are better categorized as androgynous, performing both masculinity and femininity, perhaps choosing the "best of both worlds." Halberstam explains, “Tomboyism tends to be associated with a ‘natural’ desire for the greater freedoms and

51 Ibid, ii.
mobilities enjoyed by boys.”\textsuperscript{53} As many queer theorists can agree, tomboys are one of the most early forms of non-normative gender expression. While being a tomboy does not necessitate one’s sexuality, tomboyism is associated with lesbians/sapphics more times than not. This is usually when tomboyism is ridiculed. Halberstam speaks to this stating, “Tomboyism is punished when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification (taking a boy's name or refusing girl-coded clothing of any type) and when it threatens to extend beyond childhood and into adolescence.”\textsuperscript{54} As Halberstam concludes, tomboyism is accepted into cis-het culture only in the context of adolescent tomboys. When young women (as well as young and/or closeted trans folk) assert masculinity in this way instead of growing into cis-het womanhood with puberty, they run the risk of becoming outcast in these non-LGBTQ+ friendly spaces.

This is because tomboys inherently disrupt gender norms from young ages, queering stereotypical assumptions of both femininity and masculinity. This can be further explored in looking at how 90’s R&B/hip hop girl group Xscape was viewed as tomboys; they were considered manly or masculine presenting. The Notorious B.I.G in his 1994 song, “Just Playin (Dreams)” alludes to the point that he would rather have sex with Ru-Paul, a famous drag queen, rather than the “Xscape bitches.”\textsuperscript{55} He is insinuating their demeanor and presentation render them quite masculine, more so than Ru-Paul who, while he is a drag queen, still identifies as male.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{53} Halberstam, \textit{Female Masculinity}, 6.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} “I'll fuck RuPaul before I fuck them ugly-ass Xscape bitches,” Ibid.
Malpesa quotes Judith Butler, stating she was one of the first to theorize societal constructions of gender and gender performance. She describes gender as,

an ‘effect’ produced through the ‘stylization of the body’ aimed to be understood in a ‘mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.\(^{57}\)

As both Malpesa and Butler agree, there are various ways everyone performs their gender unknowingly. Wearing certain clothing becomes gendered aspects of our society, for example a tight dress will often symbolize femininity as opposed to masculinity. Many acknowledge (or at least project) that tomboys are still female and not men, yet they are still seen as “one of the guys.” Similarly, this one of the guys aesthetic was extremely prevalent in various Black women rappers of the time. So much so, these women were often referred to as the female version of another well-known male rapper.

---

Hailing from Chicago, Da Brat was often referred to as the “Female Snoop Dogg,” as Iandoli remarks, due to her laid-back West Coast-reminiscent flow and delivery, as well as her iconic tomboy aesthetic. She always wore either cornrows, braids, or twists in similar Snoop Dogg fashion. While the two do not have an official song together, Da Brat samples Snoop Dogg’s 1993 track, “Who Am I (What's My Name)?” in her critically acclaimed 1994 single, “Funkdafied.” This further solidified that Snoop Dogg’s influence was significant for her, both appearance wise, as well as sonically. This association between Da Brat and Snoop Dogg, makes Da Brat not only seem tomboyish or masculine by association, but legitimate in the eyes of hip hop. Having a Snoop Dogg co-sign, whether unofficial or not, as an up-and-coming artist made listeners see Da Brat as not just a “female” but as cooler, with a similar Snoop Dogg swagger that everyone respected. Even Nicki Minaj, while she’s never described as dressing or behaving similarly to him, refers to herself as the “Female Weezy,” (Lil’ Wayne) as she states on her 2012 track, “Stupid Hoe.”

Figure 1.4 Da Brat (~mid-90’s) and 1.5 Snoop Dogg on the right (~90’s)

---

58 Iandoli, God Save the Queens, 108.
60 Nicki Minaj, “Stupid Hoe.”
Whether these artists have worked together or not, the way Black women rappers choose to express themselves through dress necessitates that their image be tethered to another male rapper image. It’s often a reductive generalization that strips the artist of their unique identity. However, due to this association, these women rappers are rendered hard. Even for women who do not receive direct male co-signs, there is something about the style of dress or specific demeanor that gives off this swagger not only symbolic of “OG” hip hop culture, but symbolic of masculinity. This is often communicated through embodiment of certain masculine archetypes and aesthetics, as well as posturing and power-posing.

*Track No. 4 Still a nigga, Still a threat* ⁶¹: *Hardness and Gangsta Rap Aesthetics*

A common pose that encapsulates this idea is the infamous “rapper squat”. The rapper squat (also described as the “prison pose” by Google) is seen on many albums covers, as well as the casual go-to poses for many photographs. As an online forum sarcastically comments, “gang signs are out, rapper squats are in.” ⁶² This posturing of the body is socially understood to represent the object as hard. ⁶³ Due to this association, this rapper squat is often associated with Black male rappers.

---


⁶³ Ibid.
As seen in the photos Janette Beckman takes of Ice Cube in 1990, he is squatting, legs open to the camera, with a serious look on their faces. Ice Cube is squatting and pointing to the camera, posturing his hand as if it were a gun (See Figure 1.7).

Similarly, MC Lyte is pictured squatting legs open to the camera, with the same nonchalant, but stone-faced expression (1.9). Similarly, Da Brat is pictured in her statement

---

baggy jeans oversized striped shirt ensemble, kneeling and pointing to the camera, also with a nonchalant cool expression (2.1). Both women, while just posing in this manner, embody the same hardness and coolness communicated in Ice Cube’s posing. The posturing of their bodies in such ways (i.e. rapper squat, posing with a gun) evokes a sense of toughness, an effortless swagger that is indicative of the culture of hip hop, but also indicative of how Black men are criminalized.

Ice cube emulates a hardness in these simple poses meant to capture the same level of hardness he raps about in his music, which falls within gangsta rap. Ice Cube’s motioning of the handgun not only becomes symbolic of criminality, but given the phallic symbolism of possessing a gun, evokes a masculine image. Even the naming of the squat to be a “prison pose” is further symbolizing the criminality. Being a gangsta/ gangster alone symbolizes criminality. Even without actually being in a gang, Black men become gangsta symbols because they are Black men.

As discussed before, gangsta rappers were described as hard, due to their hood (or actual gang) affiliation. However, even as Black women fashion these “hood rich,” gangsta rap aesthetics, they are still rendered hard in a similar masculine way. Isoke discusses this further quoting Halberstam,

The Black female masculinity that [Queen] Latifah portrays [as Cleo from Set It Off] is convincing precisely because it is infused with racial and class dynamics that render the masculinity part and parcel of a particular form of abjected female identity.66

While Cleo’s character is very clearly a lesbian, it does not detract from the fact that much of her masculinity was learned in poverty; “a survival skill as well as a liability,” Isoke states.67 As

67 Ibid.
Isoke explains, there is something inherently hard about Blackness experienced in the context of the hood, especially as a woman. Megan Thee Stallion references this in her 2019 single “Girls in the Hood” which also samples Eazy E’s iconic 1987 “Boyz-n-the-Hood.”

Song 1
1.1 Cause the girls in the hood are always hard
1.2 Ever since sixteen, I been havin' a job
1.3 knowing nothing in life, but how to get rich.68

Song 2
2.1 'Cause the boys in the hood are always hard
2.2 You come talkin' the trash, we'll pull your card
2.3 Knowin' nothin' in life, but to be legit69

Megan Thee Stallion mirrors Eazy-E’s main chorus (1.1, 1.3 vs. 2.1, 2.3) as she alludes to what it means to be a girl, or a woman in the hood. She explains being hard, to her, is about hustling, constantly “grinding” to make more money (1.2, 1.3). By this Megan Thee Stallion can also mean, girls from the hood are inherently hard, accustomed to a life of being seen as criminals, regardless of their record. As the song suggests, there is an intrinsic connection between hood affiliation, criminality, and being hard. Similarly, Bo$$’s 1993 album Born Gangstaz discusses the same gangsta rap rhetoric emphasizing that she is in fact armed and dangerous.

Figure 2.1 Cover of *Born Gangstaz*  

Bo$$ is pictured on the cover looking the camera in the eye, holding a gun, with others in the background also holding guns (see Figure 2.2). She raps about everything from “puffin chronic,” to “grabbing 40’s by the neck.” Born Gangstaz is the quintessential gangsta rap tape. It’s these aesthetics that various rappers evoke in their music, creating the image that they’re hard too. Rappers emblematic of this era include Ice Cube and the entire N.W.A collective, Snoop Dogg, and Tupac. Similarly, Southern gangsta rap was just as integral to the formation of gangsta rap culture, especially due to pioneers DJ Spanish Fly and DJ Squeaky, and later Juicy J, Project Pat, and Gangsta Boo (apart of Three 6Mafia), and other Memphis “OG’s”. While the West Coast sound was unmistakably chill, yet aggressive, the Southern, namely Memphis, sound was described as “dark” and “menacing,” often including samples of horror movie sounds, amidst unique percussive elements such as the cowbell. Modern day trap music, a sub-genre of

---

71 These lines refer to smoking weed, and drinking 40oz beer/liquor. Iandoli remarks these being icons of west coast/ gangsta rap music/ aesthetic.  
72 i.e. Dr. Dre, DJ Yella, Eazy E  
74 Ibid.
hip hop, is very much influenced by this Southern gangsta rap culture.\textsuperscript{75} Black women rappers such as Bo$$ and Gangsta Boo fashioned these gangsta rap aesthetics in their music as well as presentation, and were regarded as tough, as hard.

Figure 2.2 Cover of \textit{Straight Outta Compton}\textsuperscript{76} and 2.3 Cover of \textit{Live by Yo Rep}\textsuperscript{77}

\textbf{Side A. More on Posturing and Power-Posing}

Thinking more about these images of posturing and power posing, I reference this 1989 image of Slick Rick pictured by Janette Beckman. He is posing in a more sexually explicit manner grabbing his pelvis and biting his lip in a seductive manner (see Figure 2.5). The subject is seen gesturing towards his penis, which can be understood as a sign of this masculinity and perceived BDE. The grabbing of one’s pelvis implies there being a penis one is grabbing, which translates to the pose embodying a sexuality associated with cis-het manhood; a masculinity tied to the having of a penis. This pose can be imitated by to evoke this same hardness and masculine

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
energy. This can be seen in this old photo of R&B girl group Xscape captured by photographer Raymond Bod.

![Figure 2.4 Slick Rick portrait](image1.png) ![2.5 Xscape group picture](image2.png)

In similar Slick Rick fashion, Tameka Cottle of Xscape is pictured in the font of the group grabbing her crotch and staring intently at the camera. While Cottle is a cis-gender woman who does not have a penis to grab, she emulates this pose to evoke the same hardness associated with a man grabbing his penis.

In a more contemporary example of this pose, Nicki Minaj is pictured holding a dildo to her pelvis as she performed her 2010 hit, “Did It On Em,” in one of her shows around 2011. Similarly to Slick Rick, and Cottle of Xscape, Nicki Minaj is grabbing not only her own pelvis, but grabs an actual dildo to insinuate she has a penis.

---


79 Estradoll (@BasicBitching), “Biggie Smalls said he’d fuck RuPaul before he’d fuck any of them,” Twitter, July 1, 2020, 12:18 p.m., [https://twitter.com/BasicBitching/status/1278377546959200257](https://twitter.com/BasicBitching/status/1278377546959200257).
Like Cottle of Xscape, Minaj’s posturing of her body during her performance and choice to use a penis form as a prop speaks to how gendered, and queer, this performance becomes. While this is a little more theatrical on the part of the performer, it attempts to do the same thing, which is disrupt space, and assert dominance, or a masculinity about oneself. Similarly, to how Black women queer masculinity through their appearance, Black women disturb gender norms implementing various sonic features that would be seen as hard, or “masculine.”

Track No. 5 Raah, Raah, Like a Dungeon Dragon: Embodying Hardness Though Sonic Disturbances

Regina Bradley, in her essay “Contextualizing Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose in Late Twentieth– and Twenty–first–century Rap Music,” explains that while numerous studies of cool pose have relied on visual interpretations of Black manhood, there is lack of literature discussing these sonic interpretations. Bradley explains this further by coining the term, “Hip Hop Sonic  

---

Cool Pose” to conceptualize performance of Black masculinity in hip hop music.\footnote{82} As Bradley alludes to, there are often sonic features Black women often utilize to make themselves not only appear harder, but sound harder as well. Lauren M. Jackson alludes to this explaining Nicki Minaj and many Black women rappers, use various grunts, laughs, screams, and other “auditory disturbances” simply to be disruptive as a woman in a space that does not respect her.\footnote{83}

David Caldwell, in his linguistic study of the rap voice versus the sung voice notes, “The rapping voice is typically characterized, both within and outside of the academy, as an aggressive, individualistic, didactic vocal performance.”\footnote{84} Rappers often speak emphatically at the listener rather than singing melodically to the listener. Caldwell also notes how the rap voice is almost always pitched down, while the sung voice is often pitched higher.\footnote{85} This difference is quite stark looking to various artists who both sing and rap. Chika, an Alabama born rapper rising to fame in the late 2010’s, remarks this sentiment on her Twitter. She explains that listeners often cannot pinpoint her gender based on her voice, as she loves to “play with range.”\footnote{86} She’s includes a snippet of her song in an attached video that displays this range, whether it be the high pitching versus low pitching, singing versus rapping, or even her perceived femininity versus masculinity.\footnote{87} While she lives in this fluid space of singing and rapping, she also has specific sonic cues that create this range, differentiating her softer R&B moments from moments she starts rapping.

Side A. Yoncé

Beyoncé's iconic *Homecoming* Coachella performance is a perfect example of this in action. She starts rapping her infamous song “I Been On,” where her voice is distorted, and pitched an entire octave lower, despite not changing her appearance.\(^8^8\) Beyoncé, as well as her male dancers around her, are seen break-dancing and krumping (almost reminiscent of the old school hip hop’s B-Boy) with the same menacing stone faced, bare-teeth aggressive facial expressions.\(^8^9\) She raps about the gold chains and gold grills she owns, showing a sign of wealth seen often in many hip hop songs. She ends the song stating,

1.1 The capital B means I'm 'bout that life  
1.2 the capital B means I’m ‘bout that life bitch.\(^9^0\)

Being “about that life” can mean a multitude of different things, but this performance suggests that this comes as a threat to those who may doubt she can be threatening. Beyoncé quite literally becomes the hard, Houston-reppin’ Yoncé before the audience's eyes. Visually, she has not changed her appearance aside from her stone-faced expression. However, sonically the distorting of her voice and the emphasis on the braggadocio, intimidating lyricism differentiates this performance from others in the concert. The way she “flexes” in this deep voiced performance emulates a swagger, a coolness, and toughness seen in many male rappers’ performances, such as Jay-Z her husband.

Side B. Roman

Similarly, Nicki Minaj channels her iconic alter ego, Roman, in “Roman’s Revenge.” Throughout this song, there are multiple features Nicki Minaj uses to evoke the same

---

\(^8^8\) *Homecoming*, performed by Beyoncé, aired April 17, 2019, on Netflix. Excerpt from Youtube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BzElxHroXY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BzElxHroXY).

\(^8^9\) Ibid.

\(^9^0\) Ibid.
domineering, monstrous, bigger-than-life presence that isn't Nicki, but her more masculine alter ego Roman. She starts off the first verse stating, “I am not Jasmine, I am Aladdin.”⁹¹ As Aladdin is the male protagonist of the movie Aladdin, and Jasmine is the perceived damsel in distress, this declaration marks the first moment in the song Nicki Minaj expresses herself to be harder (and in this case more masculine) than what people may see. She establishes this attitude and sets the tone for the rest of the song. Not long after Nicki Minaj growls on the song rapping, “Raah, raah, like a dungeon dragon. I’m starting to feel like a dungeon dragon.”⁹² This sonic disturbance resembles Busta Rhymes on 1991 A Tribe Called Quest hit, “The Scenario,” in which he raps, “Raa! Raa! Like a dungeon dragon, Change your little drawers 'cause your pants were saggin'.”⁹³ This embodiment of a powerful dragon greatly informs how threatening, yet larger-than-life, the listener views Roman, or at least Roman’s ego. Additionally, using a Busta Rhymes sample (another iconic New York born rapper) greatly informs how the listener views Nicki Minaj’s legitimacy and skill as a rapper.

Nicki Minaj’s sonic features (i.e. pompous laughter and guttural growls) become a part of her alter ego’s persona. These “auditory disturbances”⁹⁴ create discomfort amongst those who perceive good Black women to not act loud or “ghetto,” or worse, like a man. The loud cockiness of Roman directly challenges the idea of a soft, meek woman such that in those moments, Minaj is not seen as a “female” or a woman at all. She is seen as Roman the lyrical murderer, Roman the Aladdin, Roman the enraged dungeon dragon. Minaj’s sonic disturbances, as well as flagrant lyricism come across as unladylike, and unfeminine. The same braggadocio rappers implement

---

⁹¹ Nicki Minaj, “Roman’s Revenge ft. Eminem.”
⁹² Ibid.
in their music is what makes the rapper appear threatening, and the receiver to feel weak, and lesser than. Nicki Minaj becomes Roman in these moments, completely eviscerating the subject of the track. Her added laughs, growls, and deep voiced intonations further solidify this alter ego to be anything but a feminine woman.

In the same ways Nicki Minaj becomes Roman, Beyoncé becomes the deep voiced, big-ballar Yoncé. While Beyoncé is not a rapper, she utilizes similar techniques many Black women rappers use to appear more domineering, intimidating, and harder when they choose to. They can challenge these restrictive cis-heteronormative ideals, by changing their voice/ tone on their records, loudly laughing, growling, or using explicit or threatening language. In this way, these women can be perceived as masculine whilst not even changing their appearance or style of dress. Through using these various sonic disturbances, any rapper can evoke this hard quality that is unique to cis-het Black male rapper culture. Black women in hip hop have not only queered masculinity to look like one of the guys, but to sound like one of the guys as well, often better. More specifically, Black women rappers often sonically and lyrically embody a hardness that renders the orator more masculine.

As this chapter discusses, Black women have and continue to queer cis-heteronormativity in male dominated hip hop spaces. They continue to break into the boys-club of hip hop, and be seen, heard, and respected as if they were one of the guys, and not just a female rapper. As seen with various Black women rappers through this chapter, hardness can be defined as something not unique to only cis-het men. Black women rappers embody masculinity in the ways they fashion baggy pants, pose in a photoshoot, or alter their voice on a specific flow. Black women rappers articulate the same hardness afforded to men through these aesthetics and sonic disturbances. In these ways, Black women queer masculinity in order to be perceived as hard.
The next chapter focuses on how Black women queer these spaces in hip hop, not only through these external ways, but in identifying as queer women.
CHAPTER 2
I Got Bitches on my Dick, and I Ain’t Even Got a Dick: Masculine Presenting Queer Women in Hip Hop

“Women are like, fallin’ all over me like I’m some type of dyke” Lady of Rage

This chapter looks to rappers Da Brat and Young M.A. in their respective musical primes, as case studies of the not only gendered, but queer implications of being a hard rapper, or a hard woman in general. Until this point, queer has been used as a concept understood as troubling ideas of cis-heteronormativity. In this chapter, I will also be using “queer” to refer to sexual orientation as well (i.e. being lesbian/bisexual/sapphic). Queerness as pointing to visually discernible culture in embodying these different gender expressions, but not being contained within one type of sexual experience. These queer women queer masculinity to be perceived as hard through accessing this space of homosociality with cis-het Black men. In this space they are perceived as hard, or masculine not only because they look masculine but share common sexual and/or romantic attraction to women.

This is why YouTuber Jade Fox begs the question, “Why are studs so damn toxic?” Fox is a Black lesbian YouTuber who regularly makes content centering Blackness and queerness. Throughout the video she further discusses the idea that studs, or Black masculine presenting lesbians, constantly regurgitate toxic ideals in their expressions of masculinity. She explains that studs do not aspire to be cis-het Black men, but they embody masculinity in an attempt to further themselves from the tiresome and traumatic realities Black women experience, when perceived as a “female” (i.e. hypersexualization, sexual assault, not taken as seriously etc).

98 Ibid.
acknowledges that in this attempt to remove oneself from traditional ideas of femininity, some studs inadvertently align with the toxic masculine behavior exhibited by Black male cis-heteronormative culture.

Further, Halberstam also characterizes the “stone butch”, the dyke, or the stud as almost “hardened” women, not wanting to receive pleasure in a sexual relationship. Halberstam makes it a point to emphasize the impenetrability of stone butch women, emotionally as well as physically. Studs are not only hard because their appearance fits that societal idea, but their (often assumed) sexual impenetrability adds another implication to this understanding. Often seen in the Black queer community, especially lesbian couples, there is an undeniable stud-femme dynamic. This stud-femme dynamic being that as a masculine presenting person, one must have a femme presenting partner; almost like an unwritten rule of being a lesbian. As Walker concludes in her article, many in the lesbian community believe that only stud-femme, or femme-femme, relationships makes sense. However, having a relationship in which a masculine presenting person has a masculine presenting partner is a very clear taboo. This is because cis-heteronormativity does not allow for masculine people to be perceived as penetrable, sexually or emotionally. This idea transgresses sex such that masculine presenting queer women are perceived to be hard in all aspects of life.

As Isoke states in her thesis, “Black female masculinity is made legible in hip-hop through their [queer women’s] desire of women and racialized expressions of gender and class.” Not only as queer/lesbian women, but as rappers, these women can express their

---

99 Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 120.
101 Ibid.
gender such that it is rendered masculine. Isoke uses *The Wire* to discuss images of Black female masculinity as it is experienced by Felicia “Snoop” Pearson, a masculine presenting lesbian featured on the show as character, Snoop.\(^{103}\) Isoke explains that due to her affiliation with the drug trade, Snoop’s masculinity “made her legible” to her male peers in this “decidedly male-centered endeavor.”\(^{104}\) Isoke asserts that being a lesbian amongst a group of all men, especially when involved in trapping or drug dealing, Snoop is perceived as more masculine or even male adjacent.

Snoop primarily appeared on popular reality show *Love and Hip-hop: New York*.\(^{105}\) However, Snoop came into this experience as part of this reoccurring friend group on the show named “the Creep Squad,” which is a very clear all male friend group.\(^{106}\) The only common thread amongst this grouping of people is their sexual and romantic attraction to women, emphasized by Snoop’s masculine presentation. Isoke explains this influences perception of Snoop, as less of a “woman” and more of a man, enough to be included into this all-male friend group. She states,

> [Snoop’s] masculinity and acceptance into the Creep Squad is never challenged. In fact, there are little to no references toward Snoop being different than the original members of the creep squad who are cis-het men.\(^{107}\)

In both cases, Snoop is rendered masculine because her “relationality” with other male figures around her, whether that be fictionally as a drug dealer, or her sexual and romantic attraction to women.

\(^{103}\) Ibid, 24-25.
\(^{104}\) Ibid, 26.
\(^{105}\) Isoke, “Thank God for Hip-hop,” 27.
\(^{106}\) Ibid.
\(^{107}\) Ibid, 28.
These women’s masculinity is as much a product of their queerness as their rapper identity. However as queer Black women, this is both achieved and complicated due to their sexual and romantic attraction to women. While some women who are masculine presenting usually describe themselves as lesbian, such as Young M.A., other women I reference do not have a sole attraction to women, such as Da Brat. Therefore, I deploy the term Masculine Presenting Queer Women (MPQW) rather than Masculine Presenting Lesbians (MPL). I utilize these terms not to assume the identity of the women I discuss, but as a means of analysis based on how their gender expression aligns with what is understood today as queer, messages in their music, and how they are perceived in the greater hip hop culture. I question how MPQW subvert hegemonic culture to be rendered hard, and how their queerness plays into this as well.

As discussed in Chapter 1, there are a multitude of ways even cis-het women can be seen as hard, regardless of assumed sexual orientation or not. I establish these ideas to further discuss the means by which masculinity is embodied in the case of two Black MPQW; Da Brat whose mid-90’s mainstream success was just as much the first of its kind as Young M.A. mid 2010’s mainstream success.

Track No. 6 Puttin’ It Down Ain’t a Thang to Me: Da Brat

Hailing from Chicago Shawntae “Da Brat” Harris would make history as the first Black woman solo rapper to go platinum, with her 1994 album, Funkdafied. From the onset of her career, many have referred to her as the “female Snoop-Dogg” in not just sonicism and flow, but in appearance as well. In a behind the scenes documentary for the making of Funkdafied, entitled “Who’s Making All That Funky Noise”, she explains when she first heard rap music, she saw it

---

108 MPL being a term Isoke coins in “Thank God for Hip Hop”
109 Masculine Presenting Queer Women
as writing poetry, but being able to roll like the “big ballers”, Da Brat would be the first woman signed to Jermain Dupri’s Atlanta label, So So Def.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 2.7- 2.8 Photos of Da Brat**

Da Brat regularly wore oversized t-shirts, baggy jeans, expensive sneakers and had her hair in plaits, twists, or under a hat. She was never really seen wearing dresses, skirts, or clothing that's form fitting to her body during the time of her *Funkdafied* era, and this stands true to this day. Her appearance alone made many assume she was queer, some describing her as the “first dyke” they saw represented in the entertainment industry. She explains to Variety,

You can’t go in there looking tough like I did [back in the day] and be like: ‘I’m a rapper.’ They’re going to say, ‘Let’s get you out of those tomboy clothes and dress you up in a teddy.’ But that changes who you are — and then your rhymes start changing because you look different. Then you’re not so relatable because you’re not being yourself anymore. Now you’re somebody else. Who are you?

---

112 *Who’s That Makin’ That Funky Noise?* directed by David Nelson, performed by Da Brat (USA, 1995), VHS, Uploaded to YouTube.

113 ShoeBoxFull4L (@BigGucciBeeber), “Da brat u was the first dyke I’ve ever seen in my life ..” Twitter, June 5, 2020, 11:00 a.m.

By this Da Brat explains her look lacked a feminine quality that many in the industry felt needed to be centered in order for her recognition from the men. While Da Brat explains this toughness would not be as accepted today, her very masculine presentation was still not the norm during the height of her career in the 1990’s, when her among other women in the industry were pushed into this sexy, promiscuous female rapper persona. Black women rappers were often forced into the mold as “Sex Kittens”, as Kathy Iandoli describes in *God Save the Queens*.\(^{115}\) Men in the industry assumed the only way for Black women to sell hip hop music, would be using their bodies to appeal to the male gaze, regardless of their actual lyrical ability.

Her more masculine/genderfluid appearance led many to call her sexuality into question insinuating she was a lesbian, much like Shanté’s dig to MC Lyte I reference in my Introduction. However early on, she never publicly verified nor denied the rumors, but she often made explicit references to being with men, romantically and sexually in her music. That is until 2020, when she publicly came out posting her girlfriend Jessica Dupart.\(^{116}\) Variety quotes The Grio, stating, “Both misogyny and homophobia created a culture where coming out would have been career suicide for a Black woman in hip-hop.”\(^{117}\) Da Brat explains more about her choice to not disclose her sexuality for so long, stating, “I was always told you want to be f—able to men and women to sell records — you don't want anybody to discriminate...It was absolutely my decision.”\(^{118}\) As Da Brat explains, she had many reservations in disclosing her sexuality when her career was at its height, which only followed her throughout her adult life.

In a 2011 interview, Da Brat speaks to her experiences in prison. She explains many women in the prison had crushes on her, and even tried to pursue her, but she was insistent in the

\(^{115}\) Iandoli, *God Save the Queens*, 116.
\(^{116}\) Herman, “Da Brat's Coming Out Story.”
\(^{117}\) Ibid.
\(^{118}\) Ibid.
interview that she did not reciprocate attraction to the women in this way.\textsuperscript{119} It's particularly interesting to take note of her persistence to establish the interest was not reciprocated, yet emphasized that the interest was still there. As Da Brat explained in the Variety article, she was taught in the hip hop world to appeal to all genders; to “sell” to everyone.\textsuperscript{120} As this interview emphasizes, she liked the idea of being attractive to not only men, but having women interested in her as well. We can assume this was often reciprocated at the time, but not publicly confirmed.

Da Brat released the hit record, “Whatchu Like” in 2000. The title alone hints to her sexuality, and various rumors circulating. Titling the song, “Whatchu Like?” seems to answer the many questions, with another question. In this way she neither confirms nor denies many of these rumors, but nevertheless hints at them. Da Brat raps, “Ain't nothing in the world that Brat can't do. She is attractive to them, him, her, and you, shit.”\textsuperscript{121} In this line, Da Brat acknowledges, as she explains in the interview, that she knows she is seen as attractive to many women, both as a symbol of fame that inevitably attracts ‘groupies’, and as a queer symbol of sexual curiosity. In seeing how Da Brat speaks of her sexuality 20 years later, these earlier interviews provide further validation.

Off her debut, multi-platinum album, \textit{Funkdafied}, “Funkdafied” speaks more to the ways Da Brat makes reference to her sexuality, in her embodiment of this hardness. In the song, Da Brat raps, “Putting it down ain’t a thang to me, ain't too many hoes that can hang with me.”\textsuperscript{122} Reading “putting it down” in a sexual context, her claim creates imagery of her giving rather than receiving; dominating rather than submitting to. In this context, as the one in control of the sexual act shows a sexual domination that embodies an impenetrable quality, a masculine

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{119} “Da Brat Clears Up ‘Every Girl Wanted Me’ Comment,” interview by Vlad TV, April 29, 2011.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Herman, “Da Brat’s Coming Out Story.”
\item \textsuperscript{121} Da Brat, “Whatchu Like,” track 3 on \textit{Unrestricted}, Sony Music Ent., 2000, Spotify.
\item \textsuperscript{122} Da Brat, “Funkdafied,” track 4 on \textit{Funkdafied}, Sony BMG Music, 1994, Spotify.
\end{itemize}
quality. She also explains in “Ain’t No Thang” as well as “Come and Get Some,” that same line comes as a warning, that she isn’t afraid to get physical, or even to kill someone who disrespects her, or her clique.123 This coupled with Da Brat’s very masculine presenting attire positions her as *one of the guys*, who can get women as easily as she can turn around and get a man.

Side A. Lady Pimps and Female Playas

These messages coupled with *pimp* and *player* aesthetics in her music, only heighten this perceived swagger. From Jay-Z to 50 Cent, rappers have transformed the pimp figure beyond the historically understood financial beneficiary of prostituting women. As Eithne Quinn explains, “Pimp imagery proliferates in gangsta rap. Many artists adopt the role for whole tracks, becoming stylish, sexual hustlers.”124

![Figure 2.9 Clip from Jay-Z’s Dirt Off Your Shoulder](image)

Quinn further explains many Black women rappers embody not only the gangster, but as the *lady pimp*; the main features of their persona being, “materialism, their commodification of sex, and

---

their rejection of romance-based courting rituals.” Rappers have adopted the same language to describe a womanizer, a “player.” Da Brat references this in “Funkdafied,” stating:

1.1 Brat and J.D. coming like that big baby
1.2 So lay back and listen as I catch up on my pimping

This painting of Da Brat as a pimp, exudes a masculine presence which asserts dominance over others, lethally; sexually. Megan Thee Stallion also makes pimp references in her music, remarking Pimp C as one of her favorite rappers of all time. As Quinn alludes, Megan’s pimp image is rooted in her materialism and player (playa) mentality. Megan Thee Stallion is a pimp the way she both frequently collects and disposes money and men, and has complete agency regarding both. She makes various references throughout her discography:

Song 1
2.1 If you ain't wanna pimp, then what you fuckin' with me for?
2.2 I know them other bitches probably say they ain't like other bitches
2.3 But I guarantee it's somethin' 'bout me that be breakin' niggas

Song 2
3.1 I must be poppin' if they know my name
3.2 Bitch I'm a pimp, where is my cane
3.3 Ho get too close and get slapped with the rain

As Megan Thee Stallion explains in her songs, she consistently warns people that she is a player, a pimp (1.1, 2.2). With that is the expectation that she cannot be monogamous, and that she moves on quickly. She also insinuates that she isn’t like most women, in that her abrasiveness, curtness, and demeanor are humbling to men, as she explains she “breaks” them (1.3). Da Brat’s similar language and demeanor communicate the same womanizer, player

126 Ibid.
127 Da Brat, “Funkdafied.”
attitude. However, unlike Megan Thee Stallion, Da Brat’s pimp image is furthered by her perceived attraction to women. In this way Da Brat is seen as a player in the way men are seen as pimps and players.

Most recently, Da Brat released a new song in June 2020, during the global COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, many states were still on official lockdown, and people were forced to quarantine and self-isolate. Da Brat released a Covid-19 love song, entitled “Quarantine With You”. It’s a love song to her girlfriend, Dupart, detailing how much Da Brat has learned about love through spending more time with her. She explains in the song how she intended to keep “it” to herself, being both her sexuality as well as her girlfriend, but found it hard not to share her with the world.\textsuperscript{131} Early 2020, Da Brat publicly came out, confirming she has always had an attraction to women.\textsuperscript{132} When asked what Da Brat thought would have happened if she had come out whilst at the height of her career in the 90’s, she answers, “I’m not quite sure what would have happened but I’ll tell you what I didn't want to find out, and I didn’t find out”.\textsuperscript{133} Da Brat’s girlfriend in the same interview explains that once Da Brat saw how comfortable she was in her sexuality, it made Da Brat feel more comfortable with the idea of going public.\textsuperscript{134}

As discussed in the previous chapter, Da Brat was seen as the “female Snoop Dogg,” noting not only how similar the rappers’ music resembled each other, but Da Brat’s proximity to the same masculinity Snoop Dogg embodies. There is even a behind the scenes clip of Da Brat in a studio session with Snoop Dogg and other prominent male rappers.\textsuperscript{135} Da Brat queers masculinity such that she doesn’t seem out of place in these cis-het spaces. Da Brat’s visibility in

\textsuperscript{131} Da Brat, “Quarantine With You”, “Quarantine With You (Single), Ishotcha Music, 2020, Spotify.
\textsuperscript{132} Herman, “Da Brat's Coming Out Story.”
\textsuperscript{133} “Da Brat on Waiting 25 Years to Come Out: “I Just Kept It to Myself,” interview by the Tamron Hall Show, Feb 1, 2021.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{135} Clip of Snoop Dogg in the studio, appearance by Da Brat. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPiZJd68uxk&list=LL&index=2&t=311s.
hip hop in the 90’s was incredibly significant. She made it cool to be a tomboy, to be hard well beyond adolescence. Her sexual ambiguity made her figure of sexual curiosity, for many women. She never explicitly needed to make her sexuality public, but she leaned into this identity, appealing to women sexually as much as she was encouraged to appeal to men. Da Brat’s story parallels contemporary rapper Young M.A., whose expressions of gender have become the topic of pop-culture conversation since her rise to fame in 2016.

Track No. 7 Yeah, I’m Young M.A, but She Call Me Papi: Young M.A.

Young M.A. (the M.A. stands for Me Always), born Katorah Marrero, hails from Brooklyn, New York. She rose to fame after the multi-platinum success of her debut single, “Ooouuu”. M.A. notes on her Spotify bio that since then, she has “toured with 21 Savage, opened for Beyoncé, and found herself on her own global tour.” She’s also featured Forbes’ 30 Under 30 list for 2018 and received a proclamation from New York City. In short, M.A. has quickly made a name for herself. In an interview with the Guardian, M.A. discusses her sexuality, knowing she has been attracted to women from her first day of grade school but wasn’t ready to discuss that with her mother and close family and friends until she was 18. From then on M.A explains music became her way to express her sexuality comfortably. She explains,

There’s a lot of rappers out there, a lot of gay girls expressing themselves; I’m not the first to say it, I’m not the first to rap about it. But I’m the one who broke down those doors that everybody has been trying to break down. I did that. I’m the one who went triple platinum first.

---

139 “Artist Page - Young M.A.”
140 Ibid.
141 Dionne, “Young MA: 'Music Is Where I'm Going to Speak about My Sexuality'”
As M.A. explains, she found comfort in her ability to express her sexuality through her music, as many have done before her, but Young M.A. being the first, out lesbian rapper to garner mainstream recognition is quite out of the norm.

She expresses her masculinity in a multitude of ways. Her signature attire, as she explains in her interview with GQ, consists of white tees, baggy jeans and basketball shorts, her grill, and her iconic four braids she’s always wearing under a hat. Young M.A. even has a brand deal with FashionNova Men, emphasizing the point that she doesn’t align with normative femininity or women’s fashion. In an interview with Fader, M.A. comments on her more masculine appearance, and her general expression of her sexuality. She states,

It was always the female rappers that looked like female rappers and it was the guys. That's what I grew up to see, so in my mind I [thought] that's how it’s supposed to be. Until I got to a point where I had to find myself. Once I found myself, I didn’t care about

---

what the industry wanted or what people thought they wanted to see or whatever the case may be.\textsuperscript{144}

As M.A. explains, she seldom saw women like her, masculine presenting lesbians, becoming the notable female rappers and gaining mainstream success. It wasn’t until she became more comfortable expressing all the parts of her sexuality before she decided to be the representation she lacked growing up. In an article with Out Magazine, Young M.A. explains,

They thought I was a boy…[and] I get why people think I’m a boy because I look like a little nigga. It was like, ‘Oh, this is a girl, and she is talking about deepthroating? How, how, how?’ I never felt like I needed to explain to anybody how I have sex. Take it how you want to take it. I do what I do when I’m in a bedroom.\textsuperscript{145}

Young M.A. finds this unique ability to command the attention of many in hip hop culture like any male counterpart and is still able to be comfortable and out about her sexuality. M.A. through her dress, and sexual proximity to women, render her hard, and very masculine. Much like the tomboys, M.A. ‘s ‘one of the guys’ demeanor allows for her interaction with men to be very homosocial and non-sexualized or romanticized but seen as of the same experience.

\textbf{Side A. BIG (2019)}

In her 2019 hit “BIG”, M.A. discusses an array of topics from, “bragging about her material possessions to her ability to win women over.”\textsuperscript{146} It is the third track on Young M.A. ’s debut studio album, \textit{Herstory in the Making}. M.A. talks about the casual sex she has with women.\textsuperscript{147} Like stated before, M.A. makes it very clear in her music her attraction to women and how she embraces this stud-femme relationship dynamic. She has been critiqued for aligning herself with toxic masculinity in her lyricism, similarly to Jade Fox’s sentiments in her YouTube

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{146} Young M.A., “BIG”, track 3 on \textit{Herstory in the Making}, M.A. Music/3D, 2019, Spotify.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
video. She raps “Ayy bro, don't you cuff that ho ‘Cause I done had her too”.

By this line M.A. explains to her friends, presumably male, not to consider any serious relationship with a certain woman in question, as M.A. already has had sex with her. This line alludes to the point that many women M.A. comes into contact with are ‘groupies,’ just trying to have sex with her and her crew, meaning both her and her male counterparts. This further concludes the idea that women can take part in this male homosocial act of ‘passing’ women around. This is an idea that many male rappers frequently allude to, amongst other misogyny/misogynoir. Omarion on his 2014 hit single, “Post to Be”, states, “She told me you was just a homie, She came down like she knew me, Gave it up like a groupie.”

With this statement, Omarion similarly to young M.A. discusses women who have sex with many people in a friend group or crew. While having sexist undertones, M.A. embodies this masculinity through the denigration of women’s worth due to their having frequent and/or casual sex.

With this line, it’s established without having to explicitly state that both of these people, M.A. and her bros are namely masculine presenting people, whether they be cis-het men or not. The idea of homosociality is prevalent here as M.A can navigate the space in which she can relate to her bros, without needing to feel othered due to her womanhood. In this case, Young M.A. is both rendered recognizably masculine, but recognizably queer through embracing her lesbian identity in this way.

Side B. Dreams (Freestyle)

Prior to this, Young M.A. released a freestyle sampling The Notorious BIG’s “Just Playing (Dreams)” on her 2015 Mixtape, Sleep Walkin. In the original record, Biggie discusses

---

148 Ibid.
his sexual fantasies in the industry, naming everyone he would want to have sex with.\textsuperscript{150} Many have adopted this format of song and we can assume it is inspired by Too $hort’s 1987 hit record, “Freaky Tales. However, Biggie’s rendition has become a memorialized record in hip hop culture.

Both Biggie and Young M.A. introduce the song claiming there are many women in the music industry the both of them want to have sex with. Biggie raps, “As I sit back relax, steam a blunt, sip a Becks, think about the sexy singers that I wanna sex,“\textsuperscript{151} while Young M.A. raps, “...my pipe game is real, I had dreams of fucking an industry bitch.”\textsuperscript{152} This is one of the many parallels between Biggie’s original version, and Young M.A. ‘s remaking that show the intertextuality between these two songs. After this intro, Young M.A. and Biggie both go on to list all the women in the music industry they think about having sex with. While the verses follow similar structure and sonic flow, the main difference between these songs is seen in the chorus.

Song 1\textsuperscript{153}
1.1 Dreams of fuckin' an R&B bitch (I'm just playin', but I'm sayin')
1.2 Dreams of fuckin' an R&B bitch (I'm just playin', I'm sayin')
1.3 Dreams of fuckin' an R&B bitch (I'm just playin', but I'm sayin')
1.4 Dreams of fuckin' an R&B bitch (I'm just playin', I'm sayin')

Song 2\textsuperscript{154}
2.1 This ain't serious
2.2 I know you straight girls are curious
2.3 So I take 'em home, make 'em moan and shit
2.4 Young M.A, how it feel to fuck an industry chick?

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
Biggie’s chorus continues on the theme, and he repeatedly exclaims he wants to have sex with an R&B singer (1.1 - 1.4). However, Young M.A.’s chorus is unique to her identity as a masculine presenting lesbian. As a masculine presenting lesbian, or a stud, Young M.A. is seen as a symbol of sexual curiosity for women. She often talks about her ability to “turn straight women out.”  

Young M.A. speaks more to by claiming she knows that straight women are “curious” to be with a woman, especially a masculine presenting woman (2.2). She further positions herself as a being of sexual curiosity that can provide sexual pleasure to women, better than many cis-het men. Young M.A ends the chorus saying, “Young M.A., how does it feel to fuck an industry chick?” (2.4), which calls back to Biggie’s repeated chorus of, “Dreams of fuckin’ an R&B bitch.” Young M.A. attempts to disrupt these very hegemonic hetero-normative discursive elements in hip hop music, simply by being a masculine presenting lesbian remaking this song and talking about sexual fantasies with other women. More recently, Nicki Minaj remixed the same song, in her 2018 hit, “Barbie Dreams.” She disses various industry men, insinuating they couldn’t please her sexually, or couldn’t level up to her lyrical ability.

3.1 Dreams of fucking one of these little rappers  
3.2 I'm just playing, but I'm saying  
3.3 Barbie dreams, Barbie dreams  
3.4 I'm just playing, but I'm saying  

4.1 Talking 'bout "yo, why you got these niggas fighting and shit"  
4.2 On the real, I should make these niggas scrap for the pussy  
4.3 Young M.A., Lady Luck, get the strap for this pussy

Nicki Minaj repeats these lines (3.1-3.2), throughout the chorus, mirroring Biggie’s “Dreams of fuckin' an R&B bitch (I'm just playin', but I'm sayin'),” and Young M.A.’s “Young

---

155 meaning the process of seducing a heterosexual woman into engaging in queer sex  
156 Nicki Minaj, “Barbie Dreams,” track 3 on Queen, Young Money Records, 2018, Spotify.  
157 Ibid.
M.A., how does it feel to fuck an industry chick?” Describing these men in the industry as “one of these little rappers” queers this understanding of women and male dynamics in sex, as well as the male dominated space of hip hop. In this song, Nicki Minaj positions herself as not only the sexually dominant force, but the superior rapper. She criticizes the men and their ability to please her if given the chance, and in the same breath criticizes their lyrical ability insinuating she will always be the better rapper.\textsuperscript{158} She even makes casual references to having sex with Young M.A. herself, as well as fellow New York rapper Lady Luck (4.3) emphasizing she has the power to demand sex from anyone she pleases. In this way, Nicki Minaj queers this normative understanding of sexual power and dynamic, exhibiting a dominance from dissing and belittling many of these men throughout the song. However, she still sexualizes them, still maintaining this dynamic of male submission.

Young M.A. queers this as well, in expressing herself as a Black masculine lesbian who is in control of her sex with women and can be this “womanizer,” much like Biggie. Through this remaking of Biggie’s original record, Young M.A. achieves the same reality as Biggie; that they both want to (and will) have sex with various women. She achieves this masculinity rooted in sexual domination, especially in her claim that she can seduce a woman into leaving her former heterosexual relationship. However Young M.A.’s identity as a lesbian woman, queers this normative understanding of that same masculinity. As Isoke states,

This phenomenon of incorporating MPLs in the boys club of hip-hop masculine spaces can best be described by Moya Bailey’s homolatency. Further, Young M.A.’s recent claim to fame and commercial success in hip-hop also illustrates homolatency and disidentification as navigations of hip-hop culture as a MPL.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{159} Isoke, “Thank God for Hip-hop,” 28.
As Isoke alludes to, M.A.’s commercial success is yet another marker of how her masculinity has allowed her to navigate hip hop in certain ways she may not have been able to if she was perceived more feminine. To this point Isoke also references the diss New York rapper Mulaan Milla directed at young M.A. Isoke quotes Mulaan stating,

5.1 “Couple of ya exes said you ate it, you ain’t fuck nothin
5.2 Young MA who you puttin’ on the front for?
5.3 Tryna impress ‘em wit a image that is not yours
5.4 I know ya background, tight jeans, lip gloss, tight shirt, pink curls, you prolly aint even like girls 160

Isoke notes, “Present in the diss is a challenge of Young M.A’s realness as a lesbian woman. However, her challenges echo similar challenges made to Black cis-het men.” 161 As Isoke explains, Mulaan Milla’s diss to Young M.A. questions not only her sexual skill to please women, but her attraction to women in general, resembling a dynamic between cis-heterosexual Black male rappers. This instinct to effeminize Young M.A. (who is already a woman) emphasizes how much she has transgressed this idea of being perceived as a woman or a “female” in hip hop.

As she explains in an interview with the Breakfast Club, much like Da Brat, she was told she needed to appeal to the male gaze in the beginning of her career. She explains she was discouraged to come out, and especially to come out “aggressive, like she is now.” 162 Young M.A. states, “It was like I had to be a lesbian, but say ‘I like guys too’.” 163 Like Da Brat, Young M.A. was encouraged in the beginning of her career to appeal to men in some way, regardless of her gender presentation, nor her actual sexuality. This is why Da Brat and Young M.A.’s careers have very similar parallels, leading me to believe Da Brat, like Young M.A. has always openly

162 Young M.A. Interview,” interview by The Breakfast Club, August 19, 2016.
163 Ibid.
been who she was, but just hadn’t felt safe enough to be explicit until recently. Whereas Young M.A. took no time to be explicit about it.

In the same interview with the Breakfast Club, talk show host Charlamagne directly questions Young M.A. about the lyric in her song, “Ooouuu” which references M.A.’s sexual partner ‘deep-throating’ her\textsuperscript{164}. He explains his confusion, as this line alludes to a woman performing fellatio, and Young M.A. (to his assumption) does not have a penis.\textsuperscript{165} He questions her ability to receive fellatio, if she does not have a penis. Isoke comments on this moment explaining,

For that reason, among others, M.A. and MPLs like her inform hip-hop culture on a subject matter it is not readily aware of, but will be. Her unwillingness to deeply engage him speaks to a sector of gender and sexuality that Black cis-het men don’t have access to and don’t need to have access to as long as they make room for it.\textsuperscript{166}

While M.A.’s sexuality and masculine presentation positions her closer to men than other feminine presenting Black women, the queerness of her sexuality still others her. This is because Black men don't have access to the same experiences she has as a lesbian woman. In the same vein, various men have insinuated that they would still have sex with M.A. as long as she is still a woman with a vagina.\textsuperscript{167} Therefore, whether on her own terms or not, Young M.A.'s tie to her womanhood again queers the means by which she performs her gender. Young M.A.’s queer masculine presentation gains her access to this space of relationality to Black masculinity, that Halberstam describes earlier. This informs both her homosociality to other men in hip hop

\textsuperscript{164} Referencing fellatio
\textsuperscript{165} “Young M.A. Interview,” interview by The Breakfast Club.
\textsuperscript{166} Isoke, “Thank God for Hip-hop,” 43-44.
\textsuperscript{167} Saycheese TV(@SaycheeseDGTL), “Young Chop sends a message to Young Ma: I will fxxx the shii outta you Young Ma NBS you still got a Puxxy right?” Twitter, April 3, 2020, 2:23 pm, https://twitter.com/SaycheeseDGTL/status/1246156510612328450.
culture. However, her queer masculine presentation simultaneously others her from the cis-heterosexual male experience, in a manner that attempts to both emasculate *and* effeminize her.

Da Brat and Young M.A.’s masculinity is rendered believable as she is seen as a symbol of sexual curiosity, due to sexual ambiguity instigated their masculine appearance and references to a womanizer, or a player (or a pimp). Their perceived hardness and masculinity allow them to exist in various spaces in hip hop as if they are one of the guys. In queering both femininity and masculinity, masculine presenting queer women like Da Brat and Young M.A., neither assimilate nor completely reject one or the other. Rather, they achieve masculinity through queering what cis-heteronormativity deems masculine.
CONCLUSION

Black women have broken into the boy’s-club of hip hop, and completely taken it over. Black women have changed the image of the quintessential rapper time and time again. Hip hop pioneers such as lyrical murderer Lady of Rage, smooth lady pimp Da Brat, rapper turned pop icon Lil’ Kim or even the theatrical Missy Elliot have created spaces for all of these different types of rappers and musicians to exist, and to blend into one another. Disrupting cis-heteronormativity such that they are seen as harder than the men.

It was Megan Thee Stallion’s freestyles that reminded people of the old school hip hop culture, where MC’s had a beat and a mic and that’s all. I remember watching her freestyles enamored by how cool I thought she was. Megan Thee Stallion often comments that her favorite rapper of all time is Pimp C. She explains she wanted her music to make others feel how Pimp C made her feel.168 She states, “He made me feel real cool, like real playa, but I’m trying to add that sex appeal on top of that.”169 She explains that she wants to “bring that swag”, be the cool player, but as a sexy confident woman. The interviewer even remarks how bold she is to call herself Tina Snow, after Pimp C’s Tony Snow.170 Channeling the coolness, the swag, and the hardness from rapper Pimp C’s music is what inspired her moniker Tina Snow, and the title of her debut mixtape that changed her life. It’s what inspired me to start thinking about what it means to be seen and respected as a hard rapper, especially as a woman.

So, what about being hard is inherently non-feminine? What about hard female rappers come across to others as lesbian, or queer, or manly? Hardness is intrinsically a masculine trait, as this article begins to unpack. Masculinity being a male-coded adjective then becomes queered

168 “Megan Thee Stallion Explains Who Tina Snow Is & Pays Homage To Pimp C.”
169 Ibid.
170 Ibid.
when describing non-men. Tomboys, for example, are seen as male adjacent, therefore assumed to be queer, or lesbian identifying. Another Black woman can lower her voice, and start flowing like Busta Rhymes, such that her gender is questioned altogether. However, in the context of hip hop, appearing and sounding less feminine has historically allowed Black women to exist in these homosocial spaces with men and dare to be hard AF (despite the inevitable misgendering). Through this discourse, I conclude hardness to be inherently masculine, but not necessarily unique to cis-malehood. Black women are deemed hard by fashioning these masculine aesthetics, and existing in these homosocial spaces with cis-het Black men. These Black women queer masculinity (within this queering these hip hop spaces) such that they are perceived harder than their womanhood alone would suggest.

Isoke states in her thesis, “Queering hip-hop is not as difficult as the uninitiated might think or imagined. It might in fact all be about where you begin to look and what you are willing to see.” Isoke’s words stand true. Disruption of cis-heteronormative spaces is so necessary, especially in historically Black spaces. Black women have always, and continue to, disrupt these spaces. If not celebrated as it should be, we need to acknowledge and talk about it.
References


Chika (@oranicuhh). “dis why i say i like when certain people say they can’t identify my gender, especially music. cuz i can play w/ range!” Twitter. August 11, 2020. 7:09PM. https://twitter.com/oranicuhh/status/1293338836416643073.


Spotify.


Malpesa, Caroline. “WHAT PLACE FOR FEMALE AND QUEER HIP-HOP ARTISTS IN THE U.S.?” Master’s Thesis. The University of Franche-Comté. 2018


ShoeBoxFull4L (@BigGucciBeeber). “Da brat u was the first dyke I’ve ever seen in my life ..” Twitter. June 5, 2020. 11:00 a.m. https://twitter.com/BigGucciBeeber/status/1268935628701532161?s=20.

Snoop Dogg in the studio, appearance by Da Brat. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPiZJd68uxk&list=LL&index=2&t=311s.


