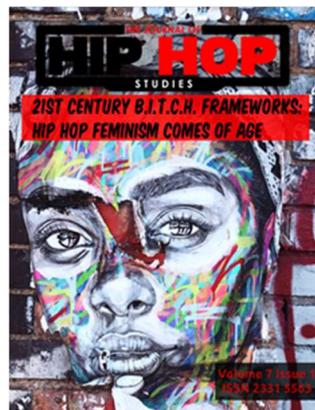


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Abstract

Hip Hop, particularly trap music, has been conceptualized as male-centered, despite Black women's role in its inception. This paper engages with trap music as a structural template that is co-constructed and used as a site of articulation by Black women to engage in gendered performativity. Rather than engaging with trap lyrics as literal representations of artists' desires and politics, I examine the types of gender constructions that are enabled when the aesthetic structure of trap music performativity is centered. I analyze this through ethnographic research in northeast North Carolina, situating trap music within a Hip Hop feminist framework. I contend that rural Black women, being marginalized in both dominant institutions and in the Hip Hop realm, have used style to carve out spaces of visibility within the trap genre to position rural Black women's subjectivity as epistemologically important. Rural Black women have reclaimed their time by stylizing trap songs with a precise rap flow and gendered double entendres to situate themselves as historical and modern actors within the Hip Hop tradition and American society. Trap feminism is an intellectual framework, consciousness, and day-to-day way of being that speaks to a type of hustling that creates space, both physical and ideological, in response to a gendered racial capitalism that intends to keep us confined.

Content warning: This article utilizes the N word.

Introduction

“In the 252 women rap like men. There isn’t anything wrong with rapping like men, we all the same. Women be spitting hard and I like hard rap. They be rapping about drugs and guns, but sometimes women may do a more girly rap,” Lisa explains to me after I asked about the sound of women’s rap in the in the 252 area code (pronounced two-five-two) in rural northeast North Carolina.¹ Lisa, a Black woman, has roots in New York, but moved to the 252 when she was 11 and has worked on-air with a major radio station in northeast North Carolina. Given the 252 is comprised of thirty small rural counties, Lisa’s radio station is widely heard within the region. In Lisa’s statement, she is operating from the notion that themes around violence and drugs are viewed as masculine, but she is also destabilizing it by suggesting that there is no inherent difference between men and women. Mainstream media invariably presents Hip Hop as male-dominated, but women have, from inception, constructed the organizational contours of Hip Hop.² The constant pairing of themes centered on drugs and guns as masculine is challenged by Hip Hop as a space that reimages Black women’s subjectivity. Donna Troka in “You Heard My Gun Cock,” documents how women artists such as Eve challenge the male-centered “master narrative” that women are passive contributors to society generally and have not played a role in constructing key themes within Hip Hop specifically.³

To engage with some of the ways in which Black women have used trap music to construct meaning, particularly a rural Black Southern identity, I view trap music as a structural subgenre of Southern rap music.⁴ “Black Rural Feminist Trap” references the Southern Hip Hop tradition of trap music as it originated in Atlanta.⁵ In its development, trap music was rap songs whose content centered on dealing drugs, which was accompanied by triple-time sub-divided hi-hats, heavy sub-bass, and layered kick drums.⁶ This paper engages with trap music as a structural template that is used as a site

¹ During my fieldwork Lisa worked for a major station in the 252. She spent most of her life in North Carolina, but her New York roots live with her. In our conversations about women artists in the 252 she often highlighted that the paths to success had gendered dynamics but made it clear that there is a lane open for women.

² Cheryl L. Keyes, “Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance,” *Journal of American Folklore* 113, no. 449 (Summer 2000): 255, <https://doi.org/10.2307/542102>.

³ Donna Troka, “You Heard My Gun Cock: Female Agency and Aggression in Contemporary Rap Music,” *African American Research Perspectives* 8, no. 2 (2002): 82-83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155959>. Troka addresses the erasure of women in rap and how they have played a key role in shaping the genre and culture.

⁴ Seneca Vaught, and Regina N. Bradley. “Of the Wings of Traplanta: (Re)Historicizing W.E.B. Du Bios’ Atlanta in the Hip Hop South.” *Phylon* 54, no. 2 (2017): 11-27. www.jstor.org/stable/90018659.

⁵ Vaught and Bradley, “Of the Wings of Traplanta,” 11-27.

⁶ Sam Friedman, “Trap Rap Has Been around for a Minute Now – So Why Does It Keep Working?,” *Flypaper*, September 22, 2017, <https://flypaper.soundfly.com/produce/why-does-trap-music-keep-working/>. Friedman describes the sonic qualities of trap music. In this interview, TI talks about starting Trap Music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fk2LS8bNMfw>. Trap music is not about drugs per se.

of articulation by Black women and men. I ask, What narratives can we tell when we view participation in trap music as not inherently masculine or as advocating on the behalf of gun and drug use? More specifically, in viewing trap music as a creative epistemological genre, how can we better understand the lived experiences of rural Black women who choose this structure to articulate Black women-centered sentiments? Through ethnographic research in northeast North Carolina, I want to engage with the types of gendered narratives that can be constructed by centering the aesthetic structure of trap music performativity, rather than engaging with trap lyrics as *literal* representations of artists' desires and politics. To this end, I am in part concerned with how artists creatively deliver their message. To engage with these narratives, I view the aesthetic choices made by rural Black women rappers from a Hip Hop feminist framework that is grounded in the intersectional approaches of the Black feminist tradition.

"You know you lied to me, said that you gone ride / I keep it on the side of me, I stay with that five," Redd raps on her song "Ride 4 Me" that I have blasting as I drive to my brother's house one Friday.⁷ While I was home in the 252 in rural northeast North Carolina that Friday, hanging at my brother's house after he recently purchased a car for nine hundred dollars, he looks up from his phone and tells me,

"That's my work car out there. I just drive it to work, but when it gets right, I might drive it on the weekend."

"Dang, what's wrong with it?" I ask.

"It run good. Just doesn't have a radio right now."

"You looking for a radio right now," I ask while he is looking at his phone. "Naw, seeing if anybody around here selling some rims. Need to fix her up."

Driving around the city is a form of social performance.⁸ The 252 is a non-urban community, thus "city" alludes to an urban imaginary that situates rural communities in modernity. For my brother, the car in its current state was only important for utility: to get him to work. The car in its current condition did not have the aesthetic and cultural attributes for him to be seen driving in a social setting.

Some may argue that it is more rational to buy a two-thousand-dollar car, rather than spend nine hundred on an extremely cheap car and a grand for it to meet aesthetic standards. While my ethnographic project was situated at the intersection of Hip Hop and incarceration, seeing this phenomenon through the eyes of a native researcher forced me to think back on growing up in the 252 and seeing Black women and men move through the world with flashy rims and heavy vibrations beaming through their

⁷ Redd is a 252 artist and she released a few projects during my fieldwork. During my fieldwork, my car rides was the time I used to listen to local artists music. Music hits different coming out of your car speakers.

⁸ The spaces I am referencing are generally described as towns, given the small population sizes and their distance from urban spaces. However, I employ the term city because that is the term used by the community members.

subwoofers.⁹ It forced me to reflect on the first few weeks of my senior year of high school when my best friend Zay bought a Toyota Camry for a thousand dollars and, because of his fast-food job, was able to put some rims on it. I am not sure how much the rims cost, but when I would ride around town with Zay I felt cool as we moved through the city, vibing like the adults we looked up to.

In thinking through how Hip Hop has allowed the Black community in the 252 to perform gender, I understand buying a nine-hundred-dollar car and putting expensive rims on it the same way that I argue we should read Hip Hop performance and lyrical content. Derek Iwamoto in his essay on Tupac Shakur contends that scholars, fans, and critics have often misunderstood rappers' importance because they engage with rap as merely a literal representation of current experiences and desires, which does not allow them to see that rappers such as Tupac work is a matter of style rather than simply substance.¹⁰ My brother would rather invest in creating a car that would draw attention because of its aesthetic than to spend money on a car with a reliable engine and transmission. A car's aesthetic presentation has allowed him to perform a particular style of masculinity: reframing the substantive value of what's under the hood. To this end, in what ways does aesthetic presentation shape the societal function of material and lyrical culture?

Fred Moten situates Black performance in the Black radicalism tradition, suggesting it disrupts dominant discourses on Black subjectivity and is a form of resistance to objectification.¹¹ Similarly, Paul Taylor suggests that Black aesthetic performance has allowed Black folk to resist objectification by serving as a site where the Black subject has asserted their personhood, not by not focusing on disproving white assumptions about Black subjectivity, but turning inward to use Black self-consciousness and practices as ways of being.¹² This tradition is seen in Toni Morrison's works, specifically *The Bluest Eye*, where the Black subject (specifically Black woman) has the ability to self-define her aesthetic and human value outside of the hegemonic ideology prescribed by modernity.¹³ Similar to the way Travis Jackson has engaged with the aesthetic contours of the blues, I want to engage with the aesthetic and stylistic choices

⁹ Native researcher is conceptualized as it is in Kirin Narayan, "How Native is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (September 1993): 673, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/679656>. I am taking seriously the "many strands of identification" offered to me as being both a sociologist and born and raised in the 252.

¹⁰ Derek Iwamoto, "Tupac Shakur: Understanding the Identity Formation of Hyper-Masculinity of a Popular Hip-Hop Artist," *The Black Scholar* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2003.11413215>.

¹¹ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003), 251-54.

¹² Paul Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 16-17.

¹³ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Random House, 1999), xi.

made by Black women rappers in the 252 who use the trap music structure.¹⁴ Style is the process in which objects and behaviors are made to mean, with Theresa White showing that the style of Black women artists not only impact the way they are perceived, but the extent in which they resist and/or submit to stereotypes about Black women.¹⁵ Style is political and constructs meaning ascribed to words, bodies, and behaviors. My privileging of style is to not only think through what artists say in lyrics and share with me in ethnographic interactions, but to take seriously how they choose to aesthetically present their messages.

I contend that Black women being marginalized both in dominant institutions and in the Hip Hop realm have used style to carve out spaces of visibility to destabilize patriarchal structures. This essay argues that Black women in northeast North Carolina have made aesthetic choices while operating under the structural bounds of trap music to create a space of visibility for rural Black women. Trap feminism is a framework and consciousness that views the ways Black women have pulled from their lived experiences to challenge the material and ideological constraints placed on their existence. By stylizing trap songs with a precise rap flow and gendered double entendres, they have “reclaimed their time” in the same way Maxine Waters claimed hers at a House Financial Services committee meeting.¹⁶ Reclaiming my time speaks to taking the rules of a male-centered structure and reworking them to respect and make visible the time Black women have invested in the continuous construction of the modern world and Hip Hop.

Hip Hop Feminism

“The women artists round here are tough. They be spitting just as hard as the guys,” Mook yells from the kitchen when responding to my question about if there are any women rappers in the 252.¹⁷ Mook is a 26-year-old music producer and rap artist in the 252. Because of his dual role, he is well-connected in the Hip Hop scene, given successful producers must be able to network with a wide array of artists to market their beats. I was in the field for a month or so and had not seen any Black women artist videos shared on social media, rarely heard any Black women artists come up in conversations, and I had not engaged with any Black women artists in a meaningful way. But Black women were doing their thing as Nicole, a 252 singer-rapper tells me. “The women artists

¹⁴ Travis Jackson, “Jazz Performance as Ritual: The Blues Aesthetic and the African diaspora,” in *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective*, ed. Ingrid Monson (New York: Routledge, 2000), 24–25 and also see Jasmine Armstrong, “A Subaltern Black Woman Sings the Blues: A Blues Aesthetic Analysis of Sherley Anne Williams’ Poetry,” *Journal of Pan African Studies* 11, no. 6 (April 2018): 54–55.

¹⁵ Theresa Renee White, “Missy ‘Misdemeanor’ Elliott and Nicki Minaj: Fashionist’ Black Female Sexuality in Hip-Hop Culture—Girl Power or Overpowered?” *Journal of Black Studies* 44, no. 6 (September 2013): 608, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934713497365>.

¹⁶ Christine Emba, “‘Reclaiming My Time’ Is Bigger than Maxine Waters,” *The Washington Post*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2017/08/01/reclaiming-my-time-is-bigger-than-maxine-waters/>.

¹⁷ Mook, interview by author, 2018.

have a lot of natural talent, but the guys are so ruthless and will blackball you if you don't do what they want, so girls just don't make it,"¹⁸ she explains while documenting why women quit music or do not become well known. Nicole always spoke candidly about the gender relations in the 252.

While gender was not a primary focus of my research, noticing all my experiences were with a specific type of gendered body showed me that even though gender was not the focus, it was still at work. I had to actively insert Black women artists into conversations as I did with Mook, and through asking folks to consciously think about the women in the scene I was led to Lisa and eventually Nicole. During my first month physically in the field, my gender-neutral questioning about Southern trap music in practice produced responses on men and masculinity, erasing Black women from my purview.¹⁹ Reiland Rabaka contends that Black women have contributed to Hip Hop since its inception, challenging the canonical position Black men hold in the genre.²⁰ Black women's invisibility in mainstream narratives about the construction of the political and cultural landscape of the South, generally never has anything to do with their inactivity, but highlights how the interlocking systems of gender, race, and class not only restrict participation in society but disarms us from seeing it even when it occurs.²¹

Mainstream commodified rap music has disseminated, in uncritical ways, misogynistic and homophobic images that have provided straight men with material and social benefits.²² Within the context of White Supremacy and its propagation of patriarchy, rap music distributed through a globalized capitalism only aims to maintain these patriarchal standards. Too often it is women of color who are exploited within this structure and process.²³ This is not to suggest that Hip Hop has infected an otherwise sexism-free society, but rather that Hip Hop's sexism is indicative of larger patriarchal social processes engrained within the structure of society. Travis Harris, in his article "Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop?" positions Hip Hop as a flexible, adaptable, boundaryless global phenomenon, thus for me situating it as able to adequately engage

¹⁸ Nicole, interview by author, 2018.

¹⁹ I spent twelve months in the 252 in total and made consistent visits the next twelve months. While the Hip Hop scene is primarily male, the spatial dynamics of rural localities exacerbates this. The Hip Hop scene in the 252 exists in home studios, at video shoots, and other locations that you need invites to. Concerts and performance typically take place in the closest urban city. In public spaces you can stumble upon new artists, but when those public spaces are limited you must be in someone's network to meet them.

²⁰ Reiland Rabaka, *Hip Hop's Amnesia: From Blues and the Black Women's Club Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Movement* (Lanham: Lexington, 2012), 27-28.

²¹ Bernice Barnet, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class," *Gender and Society* 7, no. 1 (June 1993): 163, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/189576?seq=1>.

²² Albert Oikelome, "Are Real Women Just Bad Porn? Women in Nigerian Hip-Hop Culture," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 5, no. 7 (March 2013): 85-86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155959>.

²³ Raquel Rivera, "Butta Pecan Mamis: Tropicalized Mamis: Chocalte Caliente," in *That's That Joint: Hip Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (2nd ed., New York: Routledge, 2014), 420.

a range of contestations, contradictions, and negotiations.²⁴ Examining Hip Hop from a Black feminist perspective allows for us to engage with Hip Hop's fantastic sensibilities, while attuning to the ways it, at times, embraces misogynist and heteronormative discourse.²⁵

My ethnography in the 252 has revealed that Hip Hop Studies and Hip Hop Feminism should focus more on trap music. It allows us to examine how, in the era of policing and surveillance, Black women have styled lyrics on guns and drugs in unique ways to flip society's understanding of criminality and womanhood on its head. This work builds on and operates in space with Brittany C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn's *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, which fuses the hard-hitting beats and bass of Southern crunk music with feminism to make what they call a productive and compelling dissonance.²⁶ This pairing pulls from Black homes, the streets, and the academy to create a site to articulate sentiments about Black women that other spaces cannot conceptually produce. My notion of trap feminism similarly examines the way Black women have put together the heavy sub-bass and layered kick drums of trap music with Black women's sensibilities to create Black women-centered ideas while living metaphorically and literally in a trap. *The Crunk Feminist Collection* suggests that for the brothers who contend they are with them, it cannot just be in rhetoric, but it is about politics and a lifestyle.²⁷ To this end, trap feminism and my conceptualization of it are more than musical discourse, but an ideology and a way to life that is situated within the larger Hip Hop feminist tradition.

The Black aesthetic tradition broadly, and the Hip Hop feminist tradition specifically, have broken away from the logics of respectability to provide new frames of understanding Black performance. In Bettina L. Love's article, "A Ratchet Lens: Black Queer Youth, Agency, Hip Hop, and the Black Ratchet Imagination," she stakes out new terrain in understanding Black queer identity construction in New Orleans bounce culture.²⁸ She offers "Black ratchet imagination" as a methodological perspective that serves as a humanizing frame to engage the messy, fluid, imaginative, and localized lenses and practices Black queer youth use to construct identities that challenge one-

²⁴ Travis Harris, "Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop? From Global Hip Hop Studies to Hip Hop," *If I Ruled the World: Putting Hip Hop on the Atlas*, special issue of *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 6, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 68–69, <https://doi.org/10.34718/x1pk-bb88>.

²⁵ Here fantastic is borrowed from Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16 where the Black fantastic is defined as the minor key sensibilities that define notions of being created from the experience of living socially positioned as black and operating from within, in conversation with, against, and outside the boundaries of the modern.

²⁶ Brittany C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn, *The Crunk Feminist Collection* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2017), 1–2.

²⁷ Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn, *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, xxi–xxii.

²⁸ Bettina L. Love, "A Ratchet Lens: Black Queer Youth, Agency, Hip Hop, and the Black Ratchet Imagination," *Educational Researcher* 46, no. 9 (December 2017): 539–40, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17736520>.

dimensional narratives.²⁹ The term ratchet emerged in mainstream discourse to describe Black women, as loud, angry, and/or hoes, however Hip Hop feminism considers the agency of Black women in an epistemological shift that allows researchers to change the discursive rules that govern Black women.

Cardi B, a former stripper, Instagram model, and reality star has, in mainstream discourse, at best been thought of as authentic because she has not changed up who she is because of her fame, and at worst been dubbed a ratchet stripper who only raps about sex. Sherri Williams discusses how Cardi B's coming out as a feminist was met with racist and classist pushback because of how her feminism is packaged.³⁰ Williams cites Cardi B's response in a 2016 Instagram video message:

If you believe in equal rights for women, that makes you a feminist. I don't understand how you bitches feel like being a feminist is a woman that have an education, that have a degree. That is not being a feminist. You discouraging a certain type of woman, that certainly doesn't make you one. Some bitches wanna act like 'oh you have to read a book about feminists.'"³¹

Hip Hop feminism affirms Cardi B's feminist claims and provides a conceptual space to make sense of society's misreading of her. Aisha Durham, Brittney Cooper, and Susana Morris have suggested that we should not view feminism as adding intellectual validity to Hip Hop, but rather think through how Hip Hop feminism provides us with a new language and framework to ask new and different questions about representation and Black subjectivity.³²

Montinique McEachern's discussion of ratchetness in her article "Respect My Ratchet: The Liberatory Consciousness of Ratchetness" provides a pliable framework for discussion of Cardi B.³³ McEachern contends that ratchet is cultural knowledge and performance that allow Black girls and femmes to evade the dejectedness of respectability by maneuvering through oppression via creativity in expression.³⁴ Of Cardi B, McEachern writes that "she is not only a master codeswitcher, but she also embodies ratchet action and empowers regular degular schmegular girls to accomplish things that society tells them they cannot."³⁵ As shown in the way Aisha Durham writes about Beyoncé in her article "Check on It," Hip Hop feminism provides a framework to engage

²⁹ Love, "A Ratchet Lens," 539–40.

³⁰ Sherri Williams, "Cardi B: Love & Hip Hop's Unlikely Feminist Hero," *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 6 (September 2017): 1115, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1380431>.

³¹ Williams, "Cardi B," 1115.

³² Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 722, <https://doi.org/10.1086/668843>.

³³ Montinique Denice McEachern, "Respect My Ratchet: The Liberatory Consciousness of Ratchetness," *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 6, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 79, <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2017.6.3.78>.

³⁴ McEachern, "Respect My Ratchet," 79.

³⁵ McEachern, "Respect My Ratchet," 80.

the range of femininities Black women can perform, thus being ratchet and feminist is a multidimensional phenomenon.³⁶

It is within this context that I engage trap feminism. In what ways has trap added to and reshaped the range of Black femininities that Black women pull from? Do Black women who rap about “shooting and robbing niggas” offer new understandings of Black womanhood and feminism? To answer these questions, we must view Black women as embodying a broad range of creative and epistemological possibilities. One model is given by Marquita R. Smith in her book chapter “Hip Hop Feminism and the Embodiment of Black Femininity” when she calls us to look at a variety of aspects of Beyoncé’s identity to disrupt the practice of viewing women’s identity along the lines of oppressive binaries that lack intersectional perspective.³⁷ Hip Hop feminism is situated within intersectional approaches developed by Black feminists and negotiates the aesthetic, social, and political experiences of racialized bodies while attuning to interrelated structures of oppression. While oppressive structures are nuanced, we must be attuned to how Black women’s performances and critiques of these systems are just as complicated.

Within what is generally conceptualized as a male space, Black women have thrived within the Hip Hop tradition and challenged assumptions about their erasure, while using these spaces to make Black feminist statements.³⁸ Trap music is one of these sites. Trap feminism is an intellectual framework, consciousness, and day-to-day way of being that speaks to hustling to make a way out of those spaces, physical and ideological, organized around gendered racial capitalism that are intended to keep us confined. It is the admission that Black women’s aesthetic power cannot be limited to rigid American conceptions of respectability and legality.

Black Aesthetic

Modernity is more than just a historical period organized around socio-cultural norms, but rather a racialized and gendered project predicated on the otherizing of Black people. Furthermore, if the European imperialist project moved the world from “primitive” to modern, then Blackness arose as antithetical to modernity.³⁹ Representations of Blackness and Black subjectivity as inhuman have been constructed within the societal imaginary to justify a global system of economic, political, social, and cultural degradation of Black people for neoliberal gains. Black aesthetics, the engagement of artistic endeavors centered on Black subjectivity, serves as an

³⁶ Aisha Durham, “Check on It: Beyoncé, Southern Booty, and Black Femininities in Music Video,” *Feminist Media Studies* 12, no. 1 (October 2011): 35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2011.558346>.

³⁷ Marquita R. Smith, “Beyoncé: Hip Hop Feminism and the Embodiment of Black Femininity,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Stan Hawkins (New York: Routledge, 2017), 232.

³⁸ Keyes, “Empowering Self, Making Choices,” 255–69.

³⁹ Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 10.

epistemological critique of aesthetics as being simply the contemplation of the beautiful. In contrast, Black aesthetics validates the ontological importance of understanding the Black body and Black subjectivity as instruments of knowing, perception, and feeling.⁴⁰ Black aesthetic performance is an intervention in the way white imagery has constructed Black subjectivity to recast Black people as historical and modern actors.

To center a Black aesthetic framework in examinations of Hip Hop is to understand Black artists as epistemological actors whose bodily and vocal performances serve as articulations of personhood that operate outside, alongside, and within structures of racial, gendered, and class oppression. Marvin Gladney has highlighted the ideological connections between the Black Arts movement and Hip Hop to view the ways in which Hip Hop is situated within the Black aesthetic tradition.⁴¹ Situating Hip Hop, particularly rural Black women rappers, in the Black aesthetic conceptual framework is to view the ways in which Black women rappers' performativity critiques hegemonic western discourses and has provided more accurate epistemological and ontological understandings of Black lifeworlds. Within this framework Hip Hop is understood as an aesthetically political identity, used to self-define racial and gendered identity.

It does us little intellectual good to view Black women's art as a derivative version of a masculine norm, but rather if we engage Black women's work from a Black feminist perspective it changes what and how we come to understand histories, subjectivities, and aesthetics.⁴² Hegemonic white supremacist ideologies centered on aesthetic (mis)representation have impacted Black women in ways that it has not impacted Black men. Dorothy Roberts documents how the aesthetic representation of Black women in America has always been linked to oppressive economic institutionalized decision-making, from using Black women's bodies to increase slave holdings to restricting Black women's fertility under the assumption Black women are undermining the welfare state.⁴³ There has always been a capitalist imperative to control how the contours of Black women's aesthetics are constructed within the political and cultural landscape of America to justify legal regulation of the ontological experience of Black womanhood. Janell Hobson in "The 'Batty' Politic" has argued that society's aesthetic understandings of Black women has been shaped around often contradictory tropes such as Black women as grotesque, deviant, hypersexual, undesirable, and a range of descriptors that

⁴⁰ Works that conceptualize black aesthetics as an ontological and epistemological critique of white supremacy see: Addison Gayle, ed., *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday, 1971); specifically, Adam David Miller, "Some Observations on a Black Aesthetic," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (Doubleday, 1971): 398–99.

⁴¹ Marvin J. Gladney makes this connection, see Marvin J. Gladney, "The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop," *African American Review* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 291–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042308>.

⁴² Marsha Meskimmon, *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 81–83. The author is not focusing specifically on Black women, but rather suggests that the way in which we engage and have conversations around women's art in part determines how we understand its historical, contemporary, and aesthetic significance.

⁴³ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999): 26–27.

ideologically disempower us to have adequate understandings of Black women's subjectivity.⁴⁴ To explore the way in which Black women have created space within the aesthetic realm to critique systems of oppression is to view how new ways to imagine personhood derive when Black women take control of their aesthetic representation.

Dia Sekayi has documented how Black women have engaged in aesthetic resistance in the workplace and educational spaces to challenge hegemonic notions of being.⁴⁵ Similarly, I ask how Black women have aesthetically restructured the conceptual contours of trap to make intersectional critiques of both America and Hip Hop. I aim to open an intellectual space to engage the narratives that can be told if we think through the ways in which rap lyrics are aesthetically presented.

Black Women in the 252

"Rap is the same as anything else. It's just like playing basketball, I guess. It is looked at as a predominately male thing so as a woman you have to be on your A1 at all times. Bring your best game because people constantly looking at you and judging you because you are a woman,"⁴⁶ Redd tells me as we are discussing how she felt being one of the few women artists in the 252. Redd was born and raised in the 252 and has long dreads, paired with what society would consider an urban aesthetic. In suggesting that rap is "like everything else," Redd is suggesting that society is a patriarchal structure and women's success is dependent upon performing better than men. Intercollegiate basketball is a site where men's performance has been used as a standard in which to make assessments of women's performances.⁴⁷ This is particularly important because Hip Hop and basketball are two popular cultural spaces where the spectacular performance of Black men receive economic, social, and cultural gain, but women have been pushed to the margins as sideshows.⁴⁸ Black women, to be seen as valid and legitimate, have had to master performativity in ways Black men have not.

In the 252 rappers range from folks who use their phones to record songs that will never be heard by the public to having Kendrick Lamar featured on their album (Rapsody). In my writing, "rapper" does not inherently refer to someone who makes

⁴⁴ Janell Hobson, "The 'Batty' Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body," *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (Fall/Winter 2003): 52-53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2003.tb01414.x>.

⁴⁵ Dia Sekayi, "Aesthetic Resistance to Commercial Influences: The Impact of the Eurocentric Beauty Standard on Black College Women," *Journal of Negro Education* 72, no. 4 (November 2003): 468, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3211197>.

⁴⁶ Redd, interview by author, 2018.

⁴⁷ Elaine M. Blinde, Susan L. Greendorfer, and Rebecca J. Shanker, "Differential Media Coverage of Men's and Women's Intercollegiate Basketball: Reflection of Gender Ideology," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 15, no. 2 (1991): 98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/019372359101500201>.

⁴⁸ Michael Hanson, "Asphalt Stages: Pickup Basketball and the Performance of Blackness," in *Routes of Passage: Rethinking the African Diaspora*, ed. Ruth Hamilton (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2006), 170-171.

music but someone who holds rapper as an identity. This conceptualization acknowledges the magnitude of rap in that most Black kids have spit some bars before and points to rap being more than about music, but an ideological and performative process. During my fieldwork, I had twenty-six formal interviews with male rappers and five with women rappers.⁴⁹ Because of the fluidity of my conceptualization, it is difficult to gauge how many rappers are in the 252 given the process of identification is constantly in flux. At the eighteen shows I attended, artists varied greatly on how much time, money, and identity they staked in their music.

“There aren’t a lot of us women artists. There really aren’t any Black women producers, engineers, or studio owners and the men always seem to want something from us women to work with us” Nicole exclaims.⁵⁰ Nicole is an artist and alopecia survivor and has dealt with negotiations of her aesthetic presentation because of her severe hair loss. Nicole describes the Hip Hop scene in the 252 as a “network of misogyny” where the entire structured experience of music-making, from the engineers to the male artists, is organized around misogynist behavior towards women that comes in the form of not promoting a woman’s music or providing her with top-level beats if she does not sleep with them.⁵¹ In northeast North Carolina, while Hip Hop has served as a performative site of liberation for certain Black identities it has in other ways reproduced structures of oppression. Nicole and other women in the 252, despite the gendered oppression, cite Hip Hop as a space to communicate with women who may not have readily available representations of resilient Black women, which is exacerbated by living in rural spaces. I attend to the ways the 252 Hip Hop scene has at moments served to uphold structures of gendered oppression, while also engaging how Hip Hop has allowed Black women to engage with their fantastic sensibilities.

Reclaiming My Time

On July 27, 2017, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin was testifying on the House floor when Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.), the committee’s ranking Democrat, asked why his office had not responded to a letter from her regarding President Trump’s financial ties to Russia.⁵² Mnuchin, rather than answer her question, responded with platitudes and political rhetoric by speaking around her question and invalidated Waters as a political figure by essentially suggesting she was not worthy of an answer. Waters would

⁴⁹ I had a lot more informal ethnographic interviews with artists than formal. Formal interviews were ones scheduled at a specific time and location with artists knowing beforehand they will be interviewed. Informal interviews were conversations at shows, parties, studios, or even through Facebook.

⁵⁰ Nicole, interview by author, 2018.

⁵¹ Sarah Banet-Wesiser and Kate Miltner, “#MasculinitySoFragile: Culture, Structure, and Networked Misogyny,” *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 1 (December 2015): 171, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1120490>.

⁵² Eric R. Thomas, “It’s Maxine Waters’ Time; We’re Just Living in It,” *Elle*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/news/a47004/maxine-waters-reclaiming-my-time/>.

continuously interrupt Mnuchin's rambling by stating, "reclaiming my time": a way for a member who has yielded to another member to take the time back while on the House floor. Waters went viral on the internet because Mnuchin's attempt to invalidate her by wasting her time was reflective of a society organized around invalidating the voices, experiences, and humanity of Black women. Waters' suppressing of Mnuchin's attempted misdirection by utilizing long-established rules to her advantage allowed this incident to be read by many as a powerful overturning and reworking of a system generally used to keep Black women invisible and marginalized.⁵³

I use *reclaiming my time* as a theoretical intervention to describe the ways in which Black women artists in the 252 use Hip Hop to contend with the invisibility of their subjectivity, desires, and humanity. As stated earlier, Nicole alludes to Hip Hop in the 252 as male-structured when she says, "[t]here aren't a lot of us women producers, engineers, or studio owners."⁵⁴ Reclaiming my time points to Black women taking the rules of a male-centered structure and reworking them to respect and make visible the time Black women have invested in the continuous construction of Hip Hop. This is not to suggest that Black male rappers in the 252 hold power and/or take up space in ways that white men on the House floor do. It is pointing to the ways the Black community in the 252 has used Hip Hop to contend with structural forms of exclusion and how gendered narratives do not always make it to the forefront. Black women in the 252 have created spaces of visibility to disseminate Black feminist interventions. This is not to suggest that all aspects of 252 Black women rapper's aesthetic presentation and lyrical content is Black feminist-oriented, but that they have carved out a conceptual space to make Black women-centered statements when needed.

Flow

In the 252, Black women artists have restructured trap music with a rough gritty cadence to carve out spaces of identity formation for women. There is a long tradition in Hip Hop of singing rappers, currently with trap rapper Future being one of the most notable.⁵⁵ Rappers primarily do this using auto-tune: a studio technique that can take a vocal and move it to the proper note and pitch.⁵⁶ Local male rappers in the 252 have appropriated this rapping technique. "Singing doesn't make you soft. It just shows you have more to offer as an artist,"⁵⁷ Shell, a male 252 artist, tells me while we discussed how

⁵³ Emba, "'Reclaiming My Time' Is Bigger Than Maxine Waters."

⁵⁴ Nicole suggested that the 252 did not have a lot of women who controlled the music-making process. She continued to suggest that you would have to go to urban cities such as Raleigh or Greensboro to link up with women producers and studio owners. This seems to be a spatial divide and a gendered one. Larger cities by virtue of having more people and a larger Hip Hop culture provide for me gendered engagement. Rurality seems to exacerbate gendered issues.

⁵⁵ David Drake, "The 50 Best Future Songs," *Complex*, January 5, 2018, <https://www.complex.com/music/the-best-future-songs/>.

⁵⁶ Josh Tyrangiel, "Auto-Tune: Why Pop Music Sounds Perfect," *Time Magazine*, February 5, 2009, <http://apumusictech.com/courses/mus496/files/2014/02/pop-music-autotune.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Shell, interview by author, 2018.

widespread the practice of rappers singing on their songs has become.⁵⁸ “Do you sing on a lot of your songs?” I ask in an inquisitive manner to suggest that I did not think singing was soft. Unapologetically he says, “Yes. I add some vocals to most tracks.”⁵⁹ Shell has a humble demeanor and his glasses add an eclectic feel to his Black urban style of dress that incorporates cut-up jeans and Timberland boots. We sat in his living room as Shell attempted to negotiate his masculinity, while situating singing as a way to make aesthetic choices.

Given their marginalized position in mainstream commercial rap music, women face different creative and aesthetic expectations for their music than male rappers.⁶⁰ We often read folks’ performances partly through the ways their status characteristics such as race, gender, and class position them to us. This is seen in the 252 with women investing time in perfecting their flow. “I have had to create my own wave and I became happy with my sound. I got that trap soul flow,” Redd tells me as she makes the case that a woman’s delivery must be on point for her to be recognized.⁶¹ This is extremely important given words take shape and meaning through the way they are aesthetically presented.

In oral tradition, there is no definitive text; rather, the significance of the text/lyrics is partly constructed in the way ideas are vocalized.⁶² Rappers add meaning to their songs through their flow. A rapper’s flow has been described as dealing with the nature and frequency of the words they rhyme, the length of their sentences, and the frequency with which they repeat or construct new rhymes in a song.⁶³ I do not contend that there is a set flow that concretely distinguishes men and women in the 252, as flow greatly fluctuates from artist to artist. In an attempt to understand Southern Hip Hop flow, Elaine Richardson views language as history, culture, and lived experience and asks, “How do rappers display, on the one hand, an orientation to their situated, public role as performing products, and, on the other, that their performance is connected to discourses

⁵⁸ Shell was speaking about his experience as a Black man and how people assumed someone like him would not like country music because of his appearance. He suggests that his identity is multidimensional. While he has learned the sax and wants to incorporate that into his music, he argues that the quality of his music lies in part in being able to express all the different aspects of himself. This is done through the aesthetic choices he makes in his songs.

⁵⁹ Shell, interview by author, 2018.

⁶⁰ A. Harmony, “Why Do We Have Different Expectations for Female Rappers?,” *Aside*, April 25, 2018, <https://ontheaside.com/music/why-do-we-have-different-expectations-for-female-rappers/>.

⁶¹ After our interview I sent Redd a message asking if she would describe her flow. I listened to one of her albums on iTunes and could not put a finger on the sound. She responded by sending me her song “Believe Meh.” I assumed that she felt no label could accurately capture her flow, but rather the experience of it meant more than its characterization. She says that trap soul is the best way to describe it.

⁶² This is documented by Claudia May, “‘Nothing Powerful like Words Spoken’ Black British ‘Femcees’ and the Sampling of Hip-Hop as a Theoretical Trope,” *Cultural Studies* 27, no. 4 (2013): 617, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2012.725751>; and Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the “Vulgar” Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 22.

⁶³ Martin Conner, “The Rapper’s Flow Encyclopedia,” *Genius*, February 28, 2013, <https://genius.com/posts/1669-The-rapper-s-flow-encyclopedia>.

of authenticity and resistance?"⁶⁴ In some ways a rapper's flow is situated at the nexus of using and making localized and personal aesthetic performances feel relatable and sincere to broader spaces.

Atlanta battle rapper Chef Trez in a Rap Grid interview finishes a segment of the interview, describing the relationship between his flow and his region by saying, "It's just a little, I don't know if you call it swag or sauce, a little finesse we have. It's just something about niggas from here, people from here, like star quality."⁶⁵ Building on Chef Trez, I argue that regional or gendered flow doesn't point to the same sound, but to the way the essence of the cadence of the artist's delivery reflects particular localized and gendered realities (real and assumed). A rapper's accent, word choice, and speed of delivery often positions them within our real and imagined understanding of a particular locality and this sound is mixed and mastered with an artist's own individual subjectivity. In the shows I attended and the songs I analyzed; women artists were less likely to rely heavily on singing with auto-tune. Women artists do use auto-tune to sing and style their rap flow, but women were more likely than men to aggressively deliver their lyrics than to use auto-tune to hold specific notes.

While in the field, I would often travel to shows with artists or friends because most shows were located about an hour and a half outside of the 252. Given the 252 is home to small rural counties, there are few venues that host Hip Hop-related events, or any musical events. One Saturday night, I'm preparing to travel to Raleigh, North Carolina to attend a show that is advertised as hosting the top local artists in eastern North Carolina. I notice a woman artist named Ivy on the flyer.⁶⁶ This was ethnographically important because until this point, I had to actively seek out Black women artists. This is not only a gendered issue, but a spatial one. With small populations and limited venues, the rural Hip Hop scene often had to physically converge in urban areas, adding a layer of complexity to locating 252 rappers. Prior to Ebony "Ivy Monae" Young's set, I approached her at the event with a warm greeting and she smiled and greeted me back politely, but her body language read uninterested in my conversation. My initial approach and interest in her music must have read as a generic pick-up line, which I assumed she got a lot because her responses seemed as if they were performed before. As I picked up on this, I slid more toward the research side of the native-researcher spectrum and started talking about my research project more specifically. "I'm completing my dissertation at Virginia Tech and I'm writing about Hip Hop in the 252. I would love to chat if you are free in the coming weeks," I say with an academic cadence

⁶⁴ Elaine Richardson, *Hip Hop Literacies* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 1-2.

⁶⁵ *Rap Grid*, "The Story of Chef Trez: Changing Leagues, Health Issues and Remaining Humble," YouTube video, 19:19, May 31, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMimklRNevY>.

⁶⁶ Ivy's real name is Ebony Young

to ease the ideas that my interest was not sexual. “That’s dope. I would love to help,”⁶⁷ she says as she pulls out her phone so we can connect on Facebook.

Shortly after Ivy begins performing, the crowd becomes enchanted by her eloquently rhythmic structured bars and starts cheering. Her flow is difficult to capture in text, but it hit my soul the same as when I heard Biggie’s “Juicy” for the first time.⁶⁸ In a follow-up conversation weeks later, attempting to gauge how Ivy understood her flow, I ask: “How would you describe your rap delivery?” “My style as an artist is raw. My flow is more like the New York spitters,” Ivy says confidently.⁶⁹ In an interview on her YouTube channel advertising the Spoken Gunz Female Cypher, Ivy cites Fabolous and Biggie as two of her biggest influencers in developing her passion for Hip Hop culture and her flow.⁷⁰ Like a lot of artists, for Ivy poetry served as the genesis of their interest in rap. Bill, a 252 artist who is short in stature but has a big personality and undying love for his community, says, “I always wrote poems and stuff like that when I was younger. Something would happen like a death, I would write a poem to cheer the family up. Then it transitioned to music, but my grandma would tell me to write a book, because she wasn’t feeling the music.”⁷¹ Rap is the way artists feel they could aesthetically speak their truth when other outlets did not vibe well with them. A lot of women artists, like Ivy, use a continuous free-flowing delivery style as this rhythm structures the vibe of the song around notions of seriousness and toughness. It is my contention that Black women artists in the 252 have relied less on singing their rhymes and harmonic adlibs, but instead have invested time in developing a precise rhythmic delivery that engages in an aggressive continuous flow as a way to highlight their mastery of rhyming to expand their aesthetic repertoire.

A few weeks after attending the event with Ivy, I rode with my friend James to support him at a Hip Hop showcase in Raleigh. A Hip Hop showcase is an open mic event where artists pay to perform. The winner receives a range of prizes that may include free studio time, appearances on local radio stations, songs being played on radio stations, cash prizes, and free marketing materials. As we walk into the venue, I noticed it is designed to have a basement vibe. The lights are dim, and it seems that on a Friday or Saturday night this would be a dope place to party. I am not sure if Hip Hop showcases

⁶⁷ This was my first-time meeting Ivy in person, but I recognized her from her social media photos and her image was on the event flyer. Often in the field I did not consciously feel like a researcher, but when I approached women artists in dark venues filled with alcohol, I played more of the researcher role to make my intentions well known. This impacts the texture of data collected, where I am sure my formality shapes the way in which Ivy and other women artists engaged me.

⁶⁸ Notorious B.I.G., “Juicy,” *Ready to Die*, Bad Boy/Arista Records, 1994.

⁶⁹ When talking about flow, Ivy says that North Carolina’s flow is pulled from New York and Atlanta sounds. She contends that North Carolina artists use these flows as a template to construct their own regional sound. She positions herself as one of the artists who is on the New York side of the spectrum.

⁷⁰ Spoken Gunz Female Cypher is the first all-woman rap cypher in North Carolina. Ivy Monae, “@IvyMonae Takes You Behind the Scenes of the Spoken Gunz Female Cypher!,” YouTube video, 4:47, December 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqaFTq2jfOA&feature=youtu.be&a=>.

⁷¹ Bill, interview by author, 2018.

are inherently social-networking events, but at the three I attended, for about an hour prior to the start of the event, artists and their supporters exchanged social media information, connected about upcoming shows, and shared drinks. While the audience was around forty people with about six women, there was only one woman performer. Kay, the sole woman performer, took the stage with blue braids and a versatile flow. She began her set with a heavy hitting delivery, similar to that of Ivy. However, on her second song she slowed it up with a more sensual vibe. As Lisa stated in a previous conversation, “women do more girly rap too.”⁷² This is not me contending that to be sensual is inherently a feminine style, but rather working within and outside the assumptions of a gender binary that has socially labeled some behaviors masculine and other feminine. Kay started her performance with a precise, rhythmic, hard-hitting flow and it highlighted that she had mastered rap delivery. After solidifying her place as a “legitimate” artist, she engaged in other aesthetic presentations of her music.

Rashad Shabazz in “Masculinity and the Mic” documents how Black men have been prevented from adequately developing masculinity within public spaces, which has produced a compensatory form of masculinity in regards to control over the public domain within Black communal spaces.⁷³ Within this process of remaking public space, masculinity becomes linked to the mic, but Shabazz insists Black women have always disrupted the uneven geography of Hip Hop. Black women artists in the 252 have mastered the technical components of flow and used it to carve out spaces of visibility within trap music. They have *reclaimed their time* by learning the particularities of trap music’s structure and delivery to situate their selves not just as participants of trap music, but to make visible their mastery of it.

Gendered Double Entendre

The content of Black women’s songs is often similar to that of the men, however, their precise aggressive flow paired with gendered double entendres have been used as stylized tools to make their songs socially identifiable as a Black woman construction. While both Black women and men are continuously constructing the trap genre, it is in the way in which songs are styled that we see differently gendered approaches. Black women in the 252 within this co-construction of trap music with men have used gendered poetic tools within trap music to carve out spaces of visibility for rural Black women. Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs suggest the way language is aesthetically employed through formal patterning and symbolic content of texts plays a central role in

⁷² When talking to Lisa about the music women make, she was making the case women had a broader range. On one hand, women rapped about street life just like men and on the other women rapped about things particular to women. While men and women both rap, discuss, and enjoy themes of love and sensuality Lisa alludes to how these topics have been inaccurately positioned as feminine within society’s gender binary.

⁷³ Rashad Shabazz, “Masculinity and the Mic: Confronting the Uneven Geography of Hip-Hop,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 21, no. 3 (2014): 370–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.781016>.

constructing community's social reality.⁷⁴ The linguistic contours of Hip Hop and African American Vernacular English have provided Black women and men a conceptual space to deconstruct hegemonic sensibilities of the English language. Black women in the 252 use poetic devices, particularly gendered double entendres, to articulate Black women-centered sentiments. Centering Black women rappers' style in the 252 is to engage in what Gwendolyn Pough calls "bringing wreck."⁷⁵ Bringing wreck are those moments when Black women's discourses disrupt dominant masculine discourses and impact the way we understand women and/or Hip Hop in the public imaginary.

Reclaiming Black women's time and bringing wreck in the 252 have been met with pushback from local male artists and engineers. Speaking explicitly about women's issues has been seen as problematic and unmarketable by Black male artists and producers. The music-making process has been described as a network of misogyny and when Black women destabilize that oppression through lyrics it has drawn the ire of male artists. In a phone conversation I had with Nicole, she states:

A lot of guys don't like when you talk positive about women, and I don't understand that. Why wouldn't you want us to talk positive about ourselves or uplift each other? Because ya'll help each other all the time [said in a manner so I would know that I was included] or put out a positive message for males. But when it comes to a woman ya'll think that's crazy or too different. And ask us, 'Why would you do that? No one's going to listen to that.' I remember one guy told me, 'guys aren't going to listen to that or take that serious because you are talking too positive about women.' And I'm like 'what?' I'm like, 'that is ridiculous.' For you to say that to me and you are supposed to be one of these people that is in the music industry hard and well known. You would think they would like that women are helping each other, uplifting each other. Even though the song had a positive message too, it was a catchy song.⁷⁶

Walter DeKeseredy has previously documented how men are equipped with and use powerful discursive moves to delegitimize the validity and reception of any form of feminist rhetoric.⁷⁷ Men in the 252 are not monolithic in the way they engage with women artists. Oak, a 252 rapper, actor, and painter, states, when I ask generally about women artists in the 252, "We have the Cardi B's and a few conscious women. We need more women to really tell how it is."⁷⁸ For Oak, the power of music comes from its ability to showcase the truth. Nicole speaks to her experience of having her pro-Black women lyrics met with rhetorical comments centered on taste and viability. However, Black

⁷⁴ Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, "Poetics and Performances as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (1990): 60.

⁷⁵ Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 12.

⁷⁶ Nicole believes that part of the power of Hip Hop is its ability to uplift communities. She talked about being inspired by women artists, one being Ivy Monae, and their ability to inspire their community. She continued to argue that she does not believe some men really rock with these songs. She believed men could not see their selves in songs she conceptualized as "speaking positive about women."

⁷⁷ Walter S. DeKeseredy, "Tactics of the Antifeminist Backlash against Canadian National Woman Abuse Surveys," *Violence Against Women* 5, no. 11 (November 1999): 1260, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778019922183363>.

⁷⁸ Oak, interview by author, 2018.

women artists also make gendered statements. Their lyrics are not generally always explicitly about women's liberation. But Black women artists transform masculine or gender-neutral statements with Black woman-centered analogies and metaphors to reclaim their space in Hip Hop and to bring wreck. To frame this conversation on women using style to carve out spaces of visibility, I turn to Ivy's song "Roll in Peace":

*I just want to roll in peace, but bitches be thinking I'm weak,
Cuz I stay cooking in every kitchen I walk in, but I'm never in beef.*⁷⁹

In this excerpt, Ivy is engaging in a rap scheme contending that she is tough or gangsta. She engages in this scheme in an extremely gendered manner. "Roll in peace" alludes to a double entendre from rapper Kodak Black suggesting she can't just chill in her city because everyone knows her or has something to say; and also alludes to not being able to comfortably roll a blunt because of police activity. "But, bitches be thinking I'm weak," refers to men and women assuming she is soft. The following line, "Cuz I stay cooking in every kitchen I walk in," is a gendered double entendre that is a play on the idea that a woman's place is the kitchen, but she is simultaneously referencing cooking crack. She finishes by stating "but I'm never in beef," which for her is a gendered double entendre letting us know I'm in the kitchen, but I'm not handling food; and, they think I'm weak because I don't engage in beef (prolonged arguments) with anyone. Many Black women artists in the 252 utilize musical content that is trap centered, but these artists destabilize the masculine undertones by styling the content with gendered aesthetics. The songs on the surface may be talking about drugs or guns, but by poetically styling the song with gendered references, the vibe of the song resonates with Black women sensibilities. In repositioning the importance of content and privileging the stylistic moves Black women make, we can see how they reclaim what has been socially defined as Black male spaces and themes.

Hip Hop is about keeping it real and women artists add gendered flava to this process. Jaz in her song "Rock" says:

*I was serving trying to stack, because my nigga he locked,
Made sure he had some bread when he came up out the box,
I was standing right there when the case got dropped,
He was looking for all his homies off the block,
They was suppose to be his brother, so why the love stop,
Ain't nobody want him around, they said that nigga too hot,
That ain't even matter because I was right there.*⁸⁰

Jaz narrates how her boyfriend's homies, who were supposedly down for him, forgot about him when he was locked up. She documents how she made a way to help him financially, when no one else could or wanted to by the use of a gendered double

⁷⁹ Ebony "Ivy Monae" Young, "Roll in Peace (Remix)," <https://youtu.be/IBegdVFRXkw>.

⁸⁰ I was introduced to Jaz and her music through TDot, a local Hip Hop videographer. She has a heavy-hitting flow that reminds the listener of Lil' Kim.

entendre. She says, “Made sure he had some bread when he came up out the box,” alluding to the stability that comes with money and a home-cooked meal. She positions herself as real and genuine in comparison to the males from the block. Realness and authenticity are central organizing frames in the Hip Hop world.⁸¹ In mainstream society and Hip Hop, a girlfriend is generally constructed as secondary in status to the boyfriend or thought of as a sidekick. In this rhetorical scheme, by appropriating Hip Hop’s huge emphasis on realness and staying true, Jaz positions the girlfriend as an active player in that process, even when male friends cannot.

V, a Black woman artist I became familiar with through 252 videographer TDot, has a precise and aggressive flow that places her among top up-and-coming Hip Hop artists in North Carolina. I extensively listened to her discography during my fieldwork. Her work frequently incorporates gendered double entendres, with her song “Roofie” stating:

*Touchdown nigga, like I’m about to run a play,
Threw it back twice like I’m fucking Hardaway,
Legend in my league, I watch him overdose,
I put it on him so good that nigga comatose.*

Here she uses a sports scheme that is styled with double entendres and drug references to use her sexuality to position her as important in the trap world. In this football scheme “touchdown” is a reference to landing in a new city. “Threw it back twice like I’m f*cking Hardaway” is a gendered double entendre alluding to rhythmically moving her butt during sex or a sexual encounter and slamming a dunk in a basketball game. “Legend in my league, I watch him overdose, I put it on him so good that nigga comatose,” pulls from the trap structure by organizing lyrical content around drug themes. V is suggesting that her sexual prowess is similar to that of drugs, where too much can leave you faded.

Travis Harris builds on the likes of KRS-One and Gwendolyn D. Pough in contending that Hip Hop is more than an aesthetic, being a phenomenon and way of living that extends beyond space and time and the music that is heard.⁸² These artists are taking the contextual structure of trap and using it to live their truth in ways that cannot neatly be captured by normative American readings of Blackness and Hip Hop. Black women artists in the 252 are developing a localized identity through the gendered stylized choices they make in their participation in this global field of engagement.⁸³ The way they choose to stylize their music is more than the product that becomes created; it allows us to see how they actively position their selves within a global diasporic process. In reclaiming their time by creating spaces that uphold the visibility of Black women to position the importance of the time Black women put into the construction of trap music,

⁸¹ Mickey Hess, “Hip-Hop Realness and the White Performer,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no. 5 (December 2005): 375, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180500342878>.

⁸² Harris, “Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop?,” 20–21.

⁸³ Viewing participating in Hip Hop as participation in global phenomenon.

identity is constantly constructed through the negotiation of a particular kind of experience. I am not contending that taking what are generally conceptualized as masculine themes and styling them with an aggressive flow and gendered language is the only or the best way for Black women in the 252 to assert womanhood. There is a historical legacy in Hip Hop where Black women become popular because of how close they stay to dominant masculine discourses.⁸⁴ However, I am suggesting that: (1) notions of realness, authenticity, and drugs may be socially viewed as masculine themes in commercial Hip Hop, but are co-constructed by Black women; and (2) stylized references that incorporate experiences of Black womanhood create a vibe that allows us to know Black women in a different way. The content of a song can be centered on drugs, guns, or any other street-culture theme, but when Black women incorporate gendered stylized forms of presentation, songs are experienced differently.

Conclusion

Rural Black American women have been rendered invisible within Hip Hop scholarship, and to center their Hip Hop aesthetic social processes is to develop a broader view of Hip Hop and Black woman subjectivity. Engaging with Black women trap music from a Black feminist framework that views Black women as epistemological agents allows us to think through the larger structural critiques and identity negotiations occurring within the music.⁸⁵ Trap feminism embodies the trap spirit, one that recognizes making a way within structures that are organized to produce your oppression oftentimes requires us to think beyond traditional standards of American legality, and to deconstruct gender hierarchies. With this tradition in mind, I aimed to view trap music beyond its structural content engaging with drugs and violence, and instead take seriously the aesthetic negotiations that occur within the genre.

Black women Hip Hop artists are not a monolithic group in the 252 and possess different styles, desires, and subjectivities. This research does not aim to tell *the* story about Black women Hip Hop in northeast North Carolina, but rather to tell one of the many narratives that can come from a culturally vibrant community when we view artists as creative epistemological agents. Precise structured flow and gendered double entendres are positioned as two aesthetic techniques to contend with the misogynistic organization of Hip Hop. While Hip Hop is viewed as inherently masculine, women have developed a more precise rhythmic flow to make visible their rapping contributions. This is similar to the way Waters understood the floor procedure in more nuanced ways than Mnuchin. Black women in the 252 have stylized their flow with gendered double entendres to reclaim their time and space within the trap music tradition.

⁸⁴ Andreana Clay, "Keepin' it Real: Black Youth, Hip-Hop Culture, and Black Identity," *American Behavioral Scientist* 46, no. 10 (June 2003): 1349, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764203046010005>.

⁸⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 269.

While these Black women are creating a space for their selves within contemporary Hip Hop discourse, they are also constructing rural Black women identity. These women are providing new representations and modes of identification for rural Black women. Black Hip Hop aesthetic representation in the mainstream is connected with the urban Black experience, but these women are providing young rural Black people with new frames of reference to discover themselves. They provide new possibilities for Black women subjectivity.

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