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EXPRESSIONS OF FEMININITY, BLACK FEMINISM, AND PAN AFRICANIST  
RHETORIC IN BLACK POPULAR MUSIC

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Music  
in Musicology  
The University of Mississippi

by

ALONYA L. CASTILLO

December 2022

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## ABSTRACT

Black women have long been subjected to misrepresentations and stereotypes which have denied them full access to their own femininity and womanhood. These misrepresentations and stereotypes are pervasive in Euro-American culture and can be clearly observed in film, television, and music. As a result, these women have combatted such narratives as an expression of agency. One of the most notable ways Black women have accomplished these goals is through Rap and R&B, genres that have allowed them to shape and reshape notions of femininity and Black womanhood. The participation of Black women in these musical traditions frequently draw on womanist rhetoric as a form of empowerment. Furthermore, the globalization of these genres has served to reinforce Pan-Africanist notions of a ‘Global Africa’ and “Africanisms.” Black women who perform and record Rap and R&B music across the African Diaspora reshape and complicate these notions. Two albums, NAO’s *And Then Life Was Beautiful* and Little Simz’s *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert*, showcase the way Black women across the diaspora explore femininity and Black womanhood and engage with Pan-Africanist rhetoric. In doing so, these women have not only helped reshape notions of femininity and Black womanhood but have also engaged with and often subverted the conventions of Rap and R&B, making clear in turn the multidimensionality of cultural transmission.

Keywords: Womanism, Pan-Africanism, African Diaspora, NAO, Little Simz, Rap, R&B

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all of my friends, family, and mentors who have shown me their love and given me their support.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express sincere gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Thomas Peattie, for his guidance and support throughout this process. In addition, I give special thanks to my committee members Dr. Michael Gardiner and Dr. Theresa Starkey for their enthusiasm and for taking the time to read my thesis. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Pierpaolo Polzonetti for his continued mentorship and support. I am especially indebted to my father, Michael, who filled my childhood home with music constantly. Without him, my love of Black music in particular would not be what it is. I am also indebted to my mother, Tiffany, who continues to uplift me and support me, though not always understanding what I do. Lastly, I would like to thank my good friend Rowan Swain, for her encouragement and for being a sounding board whenever I needed it.

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, Black women have often been misrepresented through harmful stereotypes, and caricatures in art, literature, as well as in a wide range of print and digital media. In response, these women have long used the same media to come to grips with these misrepresentations that have both constrained their identities as women and pathologized their perceived differences to the “female ideal” as defined by white female bodies and Western European notions of femininity and beauty. The perceived inability of Black women to conform to traditional notions of womanhood due to their race and has resulted in a particular kind of race-based gender discrimination which has been referred to as “misogynoir.” Misogynoir, coined by Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey in 2010, is pervasive in western cultures with roots that can be traced back to literature and art by western Europeans from the 1500s to the 1800s.<sup>1</sup>

During this period, white male travelers from Spain, Portugal, and England began writing about physiognomy of West African women as monstrous, animalistic, and grotesque and therefore deemed their behaviors as “unwomanly.”<sup>2</sup> These men’s perceptions of Black female bodies served as justification for the dehumanization, defeminization, and hypersexualization of Black women. This justification also led to the exploitation of women such as Saartjie Baartman,

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1. See: Moya Bailey, “They aren’t talking about me...,” *The Crunk Feminist Collective* (blog), March 14, 2010.  
2. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, “The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Imagination,” in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2002).



a South African woman who was used to prove ‘scientifically’ that African women were anatomically different to humans.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, paintings such as *Portrait d’une négresse* by Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist reveal European association with Black women and hypersexuality.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, misogynoir can be found within the Black community itself, most notably through art forms such as film and music. For example, films such as *Friday* (1995) and songs such as Tupac Shakur’s “I Get Around” paint Black women as hypersexual and/or as sexual objects.

In the 1990s, Hip-Hop feminist scholars began examining the way Black women have renegotiated preconceived notions and reclaimed negative stereotypes as a method of exercising agency through Hip-Hop culture. In this context, Hip-Hop culture constitutes the musical genres of Rap, R&B, and Neo-soul. Black women continue to use music as a form of exercising agency by empowering themselves and others, self-defining, and critiquing misogynoir. Furthermore, these musicians engage in both Pan-Africanist rhetoric, specifically Afrocentricity, as well as womanist rhetoric that expresses a form of indigenous knowledge or “street knowledge.” In this thesis, I draw on the work of two Black female musicians, NAO (b. 1987) and Little Simz (b. 1994), in order to achieve the following goals: first, a reconsideration of traditional Pan-Africanist rhetoric and argue for its continued relevance in Black musical discourse; second, an elucidation Black women’s participation in Hip-Hop as a method of exercising agency; and finally, a consideration of the place of NAO and Little Simz’s place in the continuum of Black music culture as members of the African Diaspora. To this end, I employ an interdisciplinary approach drawing from multiple fields of study including: film and media studies, women and gender studies, African American studies, and sociology. Additionally, my research draws

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3. Jennifer L. Morgan, “Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder”: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500–1770,” in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong*, 18.

4. *Ibid.*, 15.

extensively on the work of Black music scholars, including the ethnomusicologists Cheryl L. Keyes and Portia K. Maultsby.

This thesis was born out of my own personal “street knowledge” of Black popular music traditions and Black women’s participation in them. In preparation for writing this thesis, I devoted particular attention to 90s R&B, above all the music of the queen of Hip-Hop Soul, Mary J. Blige. Although, I have always been drawn to R&B, familiarizing myself with Rap and other Hip-Hop traditions was essential in developing my own “street knowledge” of Black womanhood and Afrocentricity. The interdisciplinary approach that has shaped the ensuing research was motivated by a perceived gap in the literature as it concerns Black vernacular music cultures in the field of musicology outside of Jazz. Musicology and ethnomusicology as changing fields have provided a platform to place this work in conversation with the methodology of both fields, even if this thesis possesses no ethnographic component.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that womanist frameworks, particularly Africana womanist frameworks, offer an important lens through which to analyze Black women’s participation in Hip-Hop culture. Black female Rap and R&B artists, while not necessarily identifying as womanists often incorporate womanism in the messages of their songs, songs that are as much about women’s empowerment as they are about finding community with Black men. In addition to detailing the history of Pan-Africanist rhetoric in Hip-Hop culture (with an emphasis on Black women to argue for its continued relevance as an analytical lens), I also complicate the traditional notion of a “Global Africa” and the term Africanisms in order to illuminate the multidimensionality of cultural exchange. By positioning NAO and Little Simz within the history of Black women’s use of womanist and Pan-Africanist rhetoric and by identifying the ways in which they both engage with and reshape the conventions of the Rap and

R&B genres, I aim to place the music of NAO and Little Simz's within a larger discussion of cross-cultural transmission within the African Diaspora, an approach that challenges a monolithic view of Blackness and in particular, Black womanhood. Simultaneously, I argue that this is an extraordinary aspect of the Black musical culture continuum. Finally, I posit that this music's importance lies in its continuation of old and new cultural forms rather than its conformity to western European notions of musical value.

Chapter One offers a historical overview of the ways in which Black women have been misrepresented in film and television, and well as in Hip-Hop music videos and song lyrics. In this chapter, I discuss a range of stereotypes and caricatures including but not limited to: the mammy, the tragic mulatto, and the sapphire. I identify the pervasive nature of these stereotypes in popular culture, which began in films produced during the Jim Crow Era and that can still be observed to this day. Additionally, I provide necessary context for the discussion of womanism that I take up in Chapter Two by explaining the role played by Black men in reinforcing these negative stereotypes. In doing so, I elucidate the backdrop against which Black women have historically attempted to change established narratives surrounding them within the Black community as well as within society at large. Finally, I discuss the tradition of Black women's responses to these narratives through music videos and end with a brief introduction of NAO and Little Simz and their place within this tradition.

Chapter Two opens with an overview of Black feminism and the way it has called into question certain aspects of white feminist rhetoric. This is followed by a discussion of womanism in which I identify its key concepts in relation to two seminal works: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. This sets the groundwork for a discussion of the relationship between womanism and Hip-Hop feminism,

using music by Black female musicians to emphasize this relationship. In this context, I elaborate on the way in which Black female rappers and R&B artists have historically incorporated womanist and subsequently Hip-Hop feminist in their music. By way of conclusion, I reintroduce NAO and Little Simz, placing them within this history through a discussion of select songs on their respective albums *And Then Life Was Beautiful* and *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert*.

Chapter Three begins by offering a historical discussion of Pan-Africanism, its problems, and its usefulness as an analytical lens for a discussion of Rap and R&B music. Here, I complicate the traditional notion of a ‘Global Africa’ and the term “Africanisms” which not only view Africa in terms of what it can give the African Diaspora, but also in terms as the only giver. In doing so, I argue that, although antiquated and not without their problems, these two notions are not one-dimensional and that cultural exchange within the African Diaspora happens in a multitude of directions. Finally, I discuss several songs by NAO (“Amazing Grace” and “Antidote”) and Little Simz (“Two Worlds Apart,” “Point and Kill” and “Fear No Man”) in order to demonstrate the extent to which they are participating in the long tradition of incorporating Pan-Africanism in their music. Among the primary aims of this discussion is to further reinforce their place within the Black music culture continuum by describing the ways in which they challenge the conventions of the Rap and R&B genres.

By way of conclusion, I offer a summation of the larger questions discussed in this thesis and consider the ways in which NAO and Little Simz’s works are in dialogue with womanism, Hip-Hop feminism, and Pan-Africanism. I suggest that their identities as members of the African Diaspora with different cultural heritages have informed their musical decisions and therefore have the power to reshape the conventions of both Rap and R&B. Finally, I draw attention once

again to the overall importance of the two genres, not only as tools Black women may use to express agency but also as art forms that are relevant in that they are informed by older musical forms and simultaneously undergoing constant development. By doing so I offer a critique of western European standards of musical value—ultimately arguing that this music has value whether or not it conforms to established standards of what makes music “good.”

CHAPTER 1  
IMAGES OF BLACK WOMANHOOD AND FEMININITY: STEREOTYPES,  
MISREPRESENTATION, AND AGENCY

Throughout history, Black women have been misrepresented and stereotyped, not only leading to their harmful portrayals of them in literature and media, but also contributing to the discrimination these women face on a day-to-day basis. These misrepresentations—which often present Black women as being either mammies, tragic mulattoes, or sapphires—can be observed most clearly in the Jim Crow era (ca. 1877–ca.1950), particularly through the films of the time. Moreover, these stereotypes are pervasive in American popular culture and have been used as justification for the continued oppression of Black women. In this chapter, I begin by providing historical context for these stereotypes both in a broader societal context and within the Black community. Next, I discuss several examples that showcase the ways in which Black women attempt to combat these stereotypes and the extent to which they themselves reinforce them. This is followed by an analysis of Hip-Hop and R&B music videos which help to provide context as to the variety of ways Black women express agency in their own self-representations. Finally, I introduce NAO and Little Simz as case studies and position their work within this history of expressions of femininity and Black womanhood.

The mammy stereotype is usually a depiction of a “big, fat, and cantankerous” Black woman used for comic relief, one who typically has darker skin and who is often portrayed as

asexual.<sup>1</sup> The tragic mulatto is usually a Black woman of lighter skin, traditionally presented as white passing and therefore deceptive and predatory. However, her proximity to whiteness allows for some sympathy from both fellow characters and audiences.<sup>2</sup> The mammy and tragic mulatto caricatures are frequently presented in film and television shows and are continuously combated by Black women. Early depictions of the mammy and tragic mulatto stereotypes can be found in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) through the characters Mammy and Lydia, both of whom were played by white women in blackface.<sup>3</sup> In the 1930s, Hattie McDaniel often played a maid who reinforced the mammy stereotype as in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Furthermore, in *The Little Colonel* (1935) McDaniel played Shirley Temple's "tough and non-nonsense maid" who had childlike qualities that mirrored her own.<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Dandridge's performance in *Carmen Jones* (1954), a musical adaptation of Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), dubbed her the quintessential tragic mulatto who was both "cool, calculating, and perfectly confident" as well as "animalistic and elemental."<sup>5</sup> The tragic mulatto was generally obsessed with upward mobility and seen as a cautionary tale rather than a comedic character like the sapphire with whom she shares many similarities with.<sup>6</sup> Almost five decades later, *Carmen: A Hip Hopera* (2001) debuted on MTV starring Beyoncé who reprised the role of Carmen as a tragic mulatto, elucidating the stereotype's relevance in Black media and film.

In the 1970s, the emergence of Black Nationalism and the increasing engagement with Black feminism resulted in the blaxploitation film genre. Early films placed Black women in minor roles in which they nurtured and helped their male counterparts. However, after the

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1. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 6.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 11.

4. *Ibid.*, 39.

5. *Ibid.*, 152.

6. Philip Kretsedemas, "'But She's Not Black!': Viewer Interpretations of 'Angry Black Women' on Prime Time TV," *Journal of African American Studies* 14 (2010): 152.

success of these films with male leads Black women also began starring in them.<sup>7</sup> Blaxploitation films promoted “unique, more dignified images of Black women while deconstructing familiar, stereotypical tropes.”<sup>8</sup> Black women in these films were often portrayed as protective without being maternal like the mammy stereotype.<sup>9</sup> Instead these women were strong, putting their needs before others, and were sometimes portrayed as militant. For example, Pam Grier in both *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) plays a vigilante who puts her life on the line to catch and sometimes kill drug dealers who hurt her family members. Both *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* use their sexuality to gain proximity to these dealers, often facing abuse but always emerging victorious at the end of the film. However, while subverting the mammy stereotype these films “perpetuate the myth of black female superhuman strength” which causes Black women to internalize their struggles within society at large by suggesting that Black women are more capable of handling hardship and pain than others.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in its attempt to subvert Classic Hollywood tropes of Black women, the blaxploitation film genre was flawed in its perpetuation of misogynoir. These films also reflected the anxieties surrounding militant Black feminists and their decision to take up arms during an era that saw the rise of the Black Panther Party (BPP).<sup>11</sup> In attempting to change the narratives surrounding Black women in media, blaxploitation films both reinforced the sapphire stereotype while also providing an avenue through which Black women could exercise a level of agency.

The rise of Black feminism and subsequently womanism both of which sought opportunities to cultivate a sense of agency among Black women can also be observed in the

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7. Lakeisha D. Johnson, *Iconic: Decoding Images of the Revolutionary Black Woman*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 46.

8. Camille S. Alexander, “Forget Mammy!: Blaxploitation’s Deconstruction of the Classic Film Trope with Black Feminism, Black Power, and “Bad” Voodoo Mamas,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 52, no. 4 (2019): 839.

9. *Ibid.*, 841.

10. *Ibid.*, 848.

11. Johnson, *Iconic*, 53.



writing of these women during the 1980s. Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982) and its film adaptation of the same name, released in 1985, offers a clear expression of Black female agency. In her novel, Walker renegotiates the notions surrounding Black womanhood by showcasing a “nuanced and complex portrait of black female strength tempered by vulnerability.”<sup>12</sup> The sapphire, or “angry Black woman,” stereotype restricts Black womanhood and posits it as one-dimensional—unforgiving and dehumanizing. Through her subversion of the myth that Black women have superhuman strength, Walker allows her characters a full range of human emotions, making clear in her depiction the oppression Black women face.<sup>13</sup> The main characters Celie, Sofia, and Shug Avery all undergo a process of self-naming, self-defining, and therefore becoming as they opt to attend to their own needs and desires—coincidentally pushing each of them away from the men in their lives. Instead of portraying these women solely as self-sacrificing, subservient, abused, and hypersexualized, Walker gives her characters the opportunity to explore life outside of the positions and roles in which they were forced into both by society at large and by Black men. The qualifications of Celie, Sofia, and Shug Avery as self-definers and self-namers are not only essential to womanist rhetoric but also to the renegotiation of Black womanhood. Literature of the 1980s, including *The Color Purple*, therefore played a central role in Black women's attempts to come to grips with the misogynoir found in blaxploitation films and media representations that came before them.

Misogynoir can also be seen in the films and television shows of the 1990s through the sapphire stereotype. Sapphires, also referred to as the “angry Black woman” stereotype, are usually loud, angry, and hypersexual. Additionally, her overt aggression is seen as a tool used to

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12. Ibid., 69.

13. Ibid.

control and emasculate Black men.<sup>14</sup> The sapphire stereotype has its origins in the character of Sapphire in the radio series *Amos n' Andy* which aired in the 1920s.<sup>15</sup> Infamous sapphires can be seen in films devoted to Hip-Hop culture during the 1990s. In these films, negative stereotypes of Black women persisted, reflecting the deep-rooted nature of these stereotypes within the Black community itself. For example, *Friday* (1995) includes many Black female characters, three of whom reinforce negative stereotypes about Black women. Mrs. Parker is depicted as hypersexual and seductive through her sensual body language and revealing clothing. As a result of her seductive nature, she is sexualized by most of the male characters in the film, even after it is revealed that she is unfaithful to her husband. Felisha is a drug addict, often depicted asking for money or items presumably for drug money. She also has an abusive boyfriend who terrorizes the neighborhood. Main character Craig's girlfriend, Joi reinforces the Sapphire stereotype. She is loud, aggressive, and sports semi-revealing clothing, long acrylic nails, gold hoop earrings, and large box braids. Joi is contrasted with the character Debbie who does not use AAVE (African American Vernacular English), does not wear revealing clothing, wears her hair short and straight, and overall is broadly perceived as educated and respectable.

Television shows of this time, such as *Living Single* (1991–1994) and *Martin* (1992–1997) included female characters that reinforced the Sapphire stereotype which portrays Black women as ghetto, loud, “sassy,” and undesirable. In the show *In Living Color*, singer and actor-comedian Jamie Foxx plays the character of Wanda, a “grotesquely ugly black woman—cross-eyed, protruding lips, and an enormous rear end—who not only does not know she is freakish

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14. Morgan C. Jerald, Monique Ward, Lolita Moss, Khia Thomas, and Kyla D. Fletcher, “Subordinates, Sex Objects, or Sapphires? Investigating Contributions of Media Use to Black Student’s Ideologies and Stereotypes About Black Women,” *Journal of Black Psychology* 43, no. 6 (2017): 611.

15. Philip Kretsedemas, “‘But She’s Not Black!’,” 150.

and undesirable, but has the audacity to be a hypersexual flirt.<sup>16</sup> *Martin*'s character Shenehneh Jenkins, played by Martin Lawrence, is portrayed as a "ghetto fabulous" dark-skinned Black woman, often seen with long acrylic nails, big gold hoop earrings, excessive jewelry, and sporting box braids. She also is portrayed as undesirable and poorly educated, often using AAVE in an exaggerated fashion. In comparison to main character Martin's girlfriend Gina—a light-skinned Black woman who often wears business casual clothing, wears her hair straight, and is portrayed as educated, desirable, and respectable—Shenehneh is often used for comedic effect. Additionally, Martin's mistreatment of Gina's best friend, a dark-skinned Black woman named Pam is reflective of the way these negative stereotypes often disproportionately affect Black women of a darker complexion. Pam is often subject to Martin's jokes—usually comparing her to an animal, calling her undesirable, or making fun of her hair despite it being straight most of the time like Gina's. On the surface, Gina and Pam are similar, both educated and working at the same job. However, Pam's mistreatment is the direct result of her dark skin tone as is seen in historical depiction of dark-skinned Black women in films.

The 1990s saw a rise in the Black middle-class and therefore media that created tension between the notions of the "Black Lady" and the "Educated Black Bitch," the Black Lady being the ideal Black woman and the Educated Black Bitch being a mean-spirited and hypersexual, yet professional Black woman. Films such as *Love Jones* (1997) and *Waiting to Exhale* (1995) included depictions of "professional Black Americans with careers and comfortable lifestyles" that depicted more positive images of Black women and Black men.<sup>17</sup> However, in the past two decades, filmmaker Tyler Perry's portrayal of the Black middle class, can be viewed as

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16. Robin Means Coleman, "'Roll Up Your Sleeves!'" *Feminist Media Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011): 35.

17. Cherise A. Harris and Keisha Edwards Tassie, "The Cinematic Incarnation of Frazier's Black Bourgeoisie: Tyler Perry's Black Middle-Class," *Journal of African American Studies* 16 (2012): 322.

cinematic incarnations of “E. Franklin Frazier’s rather scathing 1957 characterization of middle- and upper-class Blacks in his seminal work, *The Black Bourgeoisie*.”<sup>18</sup> Perry’s films have been criticized for several reasons, including the way in which they reinforce Frazier’s view of the Black middle-class as materialistic, dysfunctional, abusive, and classist. In films such as *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005) and *Madea’s Family Reunion* (2006) the Black female protagonists are victims of abusive relationships with their wealthy husbands and ultimately either end up alone or marrying lower-class Black men.

Helen, the main character in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, reinforces the “angry Black woman” stereotype while Lisa in *Madea’s Family Reunion*, reinforces the notion of the Black Lady. The Black Lady is an idealized image of the Black woman; one of the clearest depictions is to be found in *The Cosby Show* through the character of Claire Huxtable. These women are typically seen as the ideal middle-class Black woman—their sexuality tied to marriage and their demeanor portrayed as weak and nonthreatening.<sup>19</sup> The Educated Black Bitch on the other hand is in control of her own sexuality and body and emasculates Black men through manipulation, reifying the sapphire stereotype of the Jim Crow Era.<sup>20</sup> For example, the characters Diane and Angela in Perry’s 2007 film *Why Did I Get Married?* emasculate their husbands by being overbearing, manipulative, argumentative, and the breadwinners for their family. The juxtaposition between the Black Lady and the Educated Black Bitch both reinforce old stereotypes and create new ones, maintaining the perspective of Black women as one-dimensional.

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18. *Ibid.*, 323.

19. *Ibid.*, 325.

20. *Ibid.*

In the 2000s, reality television shows such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta (RHOA)*, *Basketball Wives*, and *Love & Hip-Hop* also reinforced negative stereotypes associated with Black women, specifically the sapphire stereotype. The women in these shows are often portrayed as prone to aggression and focused on upward mobility—a hybrid of the Educated Black Bitch and the sapphire. The sapphire caricature is also referred to as “ratchet,” a term first popularized by rappers such as Hurricane Chris in his song “Halle Berry” in 2009. The women of *Basketball Wives* and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* in particular usually are middle- or upper-class women, married to famous Black men and have money of their own. However, they tend to argue amongst themselves, often throwing insults and sometimes engaging in physical violence. Therefore, these women reify the sapphire stereotype and reinforce the perception of Black women as ratchet despite their class position.

*RHOA*'s Kenya Moore, for example, is a prime example of the hybrid sapphire and Educated Black Bitch. She is known for instigating conflicts and bragging about her accomplishments. Infamously, she instigated and provoked a fight between her and another cast member Porsha Williams in the season 6 reunion episode (2014).<sup>21</sup> Simultaneously, the women of *RHOA* are presented as “capable of creating their own opportunities for uplift and advancement in a competitive postracial environment” and meeting the ultimate goal of marrying successful men and being devoted mothers.<sup>22</sup> In confessionals, these women are “self-affirmed,” engaging in the essential actions of self-naming and self-defining—a key element of Black womanhood. Similarly, producer and cast member Shaunie O’Neal of *Basketball Wives* is often

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21. De Anna J. Reese and Delia C. Gillis “Sapphires Gone Wild: The Politics of Black Women’s Respectability in the Age of the Ratchet,” in *Challenging Misrepresentations of Black Womanhood: Media, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Marquita M. Gammage and Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, vol. 1 (London: Anthem Press, 2019): 126.

22. Cynthia Davis, “The Semiotics of Fashion and Urban Success in *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*,” in *Real Sister: Stereotypes, Respectability, and Black Women in Reality TV*, ed. Jervette R. Ward (New Brunswick: New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 84.

portrayed as a kind and gentle person while also expressing “behavior that displays a confrontational, hostile, and abusive personality.”<sup>23</sup> She along with other women on the show are depicted as being materialistic, judgmental, and self-affirming. Although the women of *RHOA* and *Basketball Wives* reify the sapphire-Educated Black Bitch hybrid stereotype, they also exercise a level of agency in the way they present themselves on television.

The women on *Love & Hip-Hop*, are ambitious yet often depicted as hypersexual, aggressive, and prone to getting into arguments with their romantic partners and other women, more so than the women of *Basketball Wives* and *RHOA*. These women in particular do not have the safety net of marriage and class, unlike the women in *Basketball Wives* and *RHOA* who try and, at times, fail to be proper Black Ladies. These women are constantly portrayed as instigators and victims of violence as well as being subject to dysfunctional relationships with Black men in who are ultimately unfaithful to them. In spite of their ambitions, these women do not fit the Educated Black Bitch stereotype due to their portrayal as uneducated and lacking in decorum. These women are less of the sapphire-Educated Black Bitch hybrid and fit are more “ratchet,” seen in the way they wear their clothes, what type of clothes they were, and their hairstyles which indicated to viewers that they are lower-class and therefore quintessential sapphires. However, the women of *Love & Hip-Hop* also exercise a level of agency in their actions and in the way in which they present themselves on screen. Yet while this agency can reaffirm negative stereotypes, it can also provide images of Black women as self-definers even if their self-definitions can be deemed harmful to Black women as a whole. In this way, Black women exercise their agency and define themselves on their own terms, either negatively or positively.

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23. Sharon Lynette Jones, “Contemplating Basketball Wives: A Critique of Racism, Sexism, and Income-Level Disparity,” in *Real Sister*, 145.

What is essential is recognizing that these women are exercising their right to choose how they are presented rather than being forced into certain roles involuntarily.

Attempts at creating multidimensional representations of Black women can be seen in the shows *Scandal* (2012–2018) and *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014–2020), both written by Shonda Rhimes. Although it could be argued that at times both shows reinforce negative stereotypes, they show successful Black women who are multifaceted and most importantly, human. Writer and producer Shonda Rhimes present main characters Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating as multi-dimensional Black women who are allowed to experience the full range of human emotion and engage in the processes of self-naming and self-defining. Olivia Pope in particular is a Black woman who controls not only her client's images in the media but also her own, twisting viewer perceptions in her favor. Olivia is also the President's mistress, helps criminals cover up assaults and murders, and eventually commits murder herself. Annalise Keating is a successful, yet controversial lawyer, but she also is an alcoholic and a murderer as well—even encouraging a group of her law students to help cover up a murder. They are both portrayed as Educated Black Bitches and have reputations as such in their respective towns, yet they ultimately wield the power to change narratives about who they are and exercise agency much like the women of the aforementioned reality television shows. Similarly, they may at times reinforce negative stereotypes of Black women as aggressive and hypersexual, but they are also displayed as vulnerable and caring, even while being self-serving. Olivia and Annalise are thus portrayed as Black women who do not fit neatly into the one-dimensional stereotypes forced onto them by larger society and reinforced by the Black community.

Issa Rae's *Insecure* (2016–2021) is another show that attempts to present new images of Black women that allow them agency and do not deny them their humanity. In season one, main

character Issa is forced to deal with a relationship that has seemingly run its course, a job that is ultimately unsatisfying, and friendships with other Black women that are at times strained. Issa Rae shows her characters feeling vulnerable, awkward, and insecure—subverting the myth of the “strong Black woman.” Additionally, these women are seen exploring their sexuality and their identity in a space that allows them to be fully-realized, multi-faceted human beings. They are neither mammies or tragic mulattos, nor are they sapphires or “angry Black women.” Rae presents Black female characters that are allowed to discover who they are as individuals as they navigate adult life. Her characters are constantly going through the process of becoming, especially Issa and her best friend Molly, ultimately achieving their goals and becoming who they want to be.

While Black women such as Shonda Rhimes and Issa Rae were creating characters in an attempt to combat negative stereotypes in the media, Black men were making movies in which they dressed up as mammies. This trend of “male mammies” can be observed through Martin Lawrence’s *Big Momma’s House* (2000), Eddie Murphy’s *Norbit* (2007), and the character of Madea in the films of Tyler Perry. Lawrence, Murphy, and Perry play the roles of the mammy figures in their films—providing images of Black women as overweight, loud, disciplinarians who are never too far away from enacting violence on other people. *Big Momma*, *Rasputia*, and *Madea* are all used for comedic effect as is traditional with the mammy stereotype and they reinforce the image of fat dark-skinned Black women as the ultimate example of undesirability—only ever capable of being the subject of jokes. *Big Momma* and *Madea* are seen as nurturing, family matriarchs whose sole jobs are to provide protection and advice to family members. *Rasputia* however is a love interest, depicted as hypersexual, overbearing, and takes advantage of *Norbit* who does not speak up for himself out of fear. Additionally, she is seen as extremely



undesirable compared to Norbit's childhood crush, Kate, who is played by light-skinned biracial actress Thandie Newton. Black men's participation in reinforcing negative stereotypes about Black women by not only writing the characters but also playing them make clear to Black women that they are undesirable within the Black community and within larger society. These media representations of Black women can be linked to not only the mistreatment they face but their own perceptions of "how they believe they should look."<sup>24</sup>

Michel Foucault's conception of "the gaze," later adopted by feminists, can be used to describe how Black women in this context "may internalize society's dominant beauty ideals without realizing they are doing so because these norms are pervasive."<sup>25</sup> Moreover, due to Black women being met with constant negative stereotypes it becomes clear to them that they do not meet established ideals of beauty and are instead constantly perceived as fitting into a one-dimensional stereotype. Black women's voices are essential in attempting to create identities not informed by dominant perceptions or ideal beauty standards. Historically, Black women have attempted to combat the views of dominant society and Black men through literature and media. Hip-Hop feminists, a label coined by Joan Morgan in her 1999 seminal work *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life As a Hip-Hop Feminist*, began analyzing the way Black women defined and renegotiated Black womanhood in Hip-Hop music.<sup>26</sup> Works such as Gwendolyn D. Pough's book *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* and Cheryl L. Keyes's article "Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity Via Rap Music Performance" elaborated on the way

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24. Gina Masullo Chen, Sherri Williams, Nicole Hendrickson and Li Chen, "Male Mammies: A Social-Comparison Perspective on How Exaggeratedly Overweight Media Portrayals of Madea, Rasputia, and Big Momma Affect How Black Women Feel About Themselves," *Mass Communication and Society* 15, no. 1: 119.

25. Ibid., 120; See: Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

26. See: Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life As a Hip-Hop Feminist*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

Black women in Hip-Hop culture exercise agency and position themselves as definers of Black womanhood.<sup>27</sup>

Hip-Hop music videos traditionally sexualize Black women and fetishize Black women who are deemed to be “exotic” or multiracial. Black male rappers tend to reaffirm dominant beauty standards and reinforcing the notion of Black women’s undesirability—particularly when they are unambiguously Black with dark skin, wide noses, big lips, and Black cultural hair styles. The “video vixens” in these Rap videos oftentimes favor light-skinned or multiracial Black women that have minimal curves outside of their breasts, hips, and bottoms. Furthermore, the positioning of these “video vixens” as represented of the “ideal Black woman” upholds the view that “darker skin among women is a handicap to be overcome; dreaded, braided, or “happy to be nappy” hair are “no-no’s”; and “big,” as in body type, is definitely not beautiful.”<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Hip-Hop culture has an intimate relationship with sexual violence with song lyrics glorifying sexual abuse. This glorification can be observed through the lyrics of DMX’s “X Is Coming” and NWA’s “One Less Bitch” in which both artists fantasize about rape.<sup>29</sup> Other songs characterize Black women as “bitches” and “ho’s” or “groupies”, who in Hip-Hop culture are viewed as sexually promiscuous gold diggers to be used by Black men for fun and sexual favors.<sup>30</sup>

Black women are thus seen as objects to control and take advantage of while simultaneously being viewed as largely undesirable. This is the backdrop against which Black women in Hip-Hop have had to use their voices and exercise their agency in representing

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27. See: Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003) and 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): 255-269.

28. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, “I See the Same Ho”: Video Vixens, Beauty Culture, and Diasporic Sex Tourism,” in *Pimps Up, Ho’s Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 36.

29. *Ibid.*, 59.

30. *Ibid.*, 91.

themselves on their own terms. Black female rappers and singers often have to combat negative images presented by Black rappers and dominant society—their bodies being heavily policed in terms of weight, hair, and skin color. However, Black women such as Erykah Badu express agency in their music videos in which Blackness “is the basis for strength, power, and a positive self-identity” and “darker skin is privileged.”<sup>31</sup> For example, in the video for “On and On,” Badu pays homage to *The Color Purple* by including iconic images from the film, namely the juke joint scene in which Shug Avery performs. Badu’s images of the juke joint emphasize its importance to Black identity and in this way engages with a Black tradition without depicting violence or reinforcing colorist, dominant beauty standards. Moreover, the decision to engage with Walker’s work, which paints a unique portrait of southern Black womanhood under Jim Crow, places Badu’s video in dialogue with womanism and Black feminism.

Jill Scott’s “The Way” is a song that describes the feelings of freedom that arise out of being loved properly. The music video also paints a unique portrait of Black womanhood and femininity in a way that privileges a non-sexualized image of the Black woman. The video follows Scott through two different storylines, one in which she is at an art gallery viewing a painting of herself and the other a performance of her singing the song. In both storylines, she is dressed in non-revealing clothing, wears light makeup, and light jewelry. The expression of her femininity has a softness to it and an element of respectability which, as we will see later, is in direct opposition to the depictions of hyperfemininity in other music videos from later generations. Her hairstyle, mini-twists, can also serve as an expression of Black femininity specifically in that the hairstyle is a cultural hairstyle that privileges naturally afro-textured hair over straighter textures as seen in expressions of the hyperfeminine.

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31. Rana A. Emerson, “‘Where My Girls At?’: Negotiating Black Womanhood in Music Videos,” *Gender & Society* 16, no. 1 (2002): 125.

The respectability of her femininity is also presented in relation to the art gallery she occupies for half of the music video. However, at the end of the music video, Scott is seen dancing and singing to the lyrics of “The Way” in the art gallery, an obvious faux pas. The other art viewers are shocked by her outburst but the feelings of freedom Scott feels while singing about love allow her subvert notions of respectability and express agency. In other words, her femininity is not strictly bound by respectability, but it is also encapsulated by feelings of freedom. While Scott is neither engaging in the hyperfeminine or the hypersexual, she still exercises agency. This projection of a respectable image of the Black woman is not uncommon in Scott’s music videos in general and is one that can also be found in Badu’s “On & On.” Both Scott and Badu reject the hypersexual and embrace a form a respectable form of femininity that praises Black womanhood specifically without reclaiming or reinforcing negative stereotypes.

Lauryn Hill is another artist that does not engage in the hyperfeminine or hypersexual, instead projecting a soft, respectable, feminine image of the Black woman. In her music video for “Ex-Factor” she wears minimal jewelry and makeup, wears her signature locs, and is pictured wearing the color white for much of the video—a color that signifies delicacy and virtue. Additionally, her identification with Black womanhood is emphasized through the dark blue lighting of the other half of the music video which highlights her dark skin tone. This projected imagery of Black femininity is in line with presentations seen in Badu’s “On & On” and Scott’s “The Way.” Neither of the three women are explicitly expressing their sexuality, nor are they expressing the femininity in an exaggerated fashion. While engaging in notions of respectability can be viewed as restrictive, these women express a version of femininity that is specific to Black women and are therefore still exercising agency. This is made clear through their positioning of Black women as beautiful and feminine, two descriptors that have been

historically denied to them. However, not all Black women choose to express their femininity and womanhood in this way. Other artists find agency in reclaiming their sexuality explicitly and disengaging from notions of respectability.

Missy Elliot's "Work It" is a song with sexually explicit lyrics which in itself is a subversion of negative stereotypes, namely the mammy stereotypes. Missy Elliot, a dark-skinned, full-figured Black woman would be viewed as asexual, undesirable, and loud by traditional images of Black womanhood. However, in this song she makes it clear that she is in fact a sexual being but not hypersexual. In the music video, she wears big hoop earrings, and baggy clothes that are reminiscent of the attire break dancers would wear. Unlike women in male Rap videos, she is not dressed for the male gaze and expresses sexuality on her terms, something dark-skinned Black women have not been afforded. Therefore, "Work It" is an overall reclamation of sexuality. Music videos such as TLC's "Red Light Special" and Janet Jackson's "Love Will Never Do Without You" provide additional examples of music videos in which Black women reclaim their sexuality and express it on their own terms.<sup>32</sup> This reclamation of sexuality and expression of agency has inspired Black women in later generations who go a step further to reclaim not only their sexuality but also femininity through an exaggeration of both. In other words, later generations of Black women engage in the hyperfeminine and the hypersexual as a form of exercising agency.

Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's "WAP" (2020) is a music video that expresses both the hyperfeminine and the hypersexual. "WAP" sparked internet debate and controversy for its sexually explicit lyrics and sexually suggestive imagery through their dance moves and the images of animals mating and in its music video. As a result of this controversy, YouTube forced

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32. Ibid., 130-132.

Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion to censor the music video, making it largely inaccessible to viewers on that streaming platform. In the music video, both women appear in scenes in which they have long straight wigs, long nails, wear high heels, and wear makeup—all traditional markers of femininity. However, they complicate the notion of femininity by exaggerating the length of their hair, nails, and false eyelashes while wearing extravagant leotards that expose their legs and accentuate their cleavage and curvy figures, and performing sexually suggestive dance moves. It can be argued that Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are reinforcing negative stereotypes that present Black women as hypersexual and animalistic which is emphasized through the animal imagery. However, Hip-Hop has been a genre in which Black women have exercised agency over their image as well as a site in which these women can reclaim their sexuality and sexual agency which has been historically stripped from them. The presentation of the hyperfeminine is also an essential part of this reclamation given the historical precedent for Euro-American denial of Black women's femininity and access to the notion of womanhood.

Saweetie's "My Type" music video also depicts the hyperfeminine alongside the sexually suggestive. The presentation of the hyperfeminine is similar to that of the "WAP" music video in that Saweetie and the other Black women in the music video wear long wigs and nails and makeup to an exaggerated degree. Additionally, these women are wearing flashy jewelry in the form of big gold hoops, watches, and big necklaces. These women are expressing their femininity in ways that have been deemed as 'trashy' or 'ghetto' by society at large which further denies Black women agency in engaging with notions of the feminine and therefore notions of womanhood. The women in Saweetie's music video are also dressed in revealing clothing that exposes their cleavage, legs, and midriffs. In a similar fashion to Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's "WAP," these women dance in a way that can be viewed as sexually

suggestive. Saweetie in “My Type” reclaims her sexuality and engaging in the hyperfeminine as a way of exercising agency and bodily autonomy. The shaping and reshaping of Black womanhood and femininity is thus a tradition that continues to be engaged by new generations of Black female artists.

The tradition of expressing Black womanhood and femininity through music, as made clear by the preceding discussion, occurs cross-generationally. In addition, this tradition continues to occur across the African Diaspora. British artists NAO and Little Simz and their respective albums *And Then Life Was Beautiful* and *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert* serve as case studies that help illuminate the ways in which this tradition is explored outside of the United States. NAO (b. 1987) is a British R&B and Hip-Hop soul artist from East London of Jamaican descent. She released her debut album *For All We Know* was released in 2016 and included the singles “Bad Blood” and “In the Morning” both of which reflected both R&B and electropop influences. Through her use of melismatic riffs and an impressive manipulation of vocal range, and the prominent use of synthesizers, NAO dazzled music critics with this recording. Her sophomore album *Saturn*, released in 2018, achieved the similar acclaim and included the single “Orbit.” *Saturn* which reflects more clearly the influence of R&B and jazz influence than her first album and is less synthesizer-heavy than her first release. Her most recent work *And Then Life Was Beautiful* was released in late-September of 2021. Little Simz (b. 1994) is a British rapper of Nigerian descent from North London whose popularity grew with her three independent releases: *A Curious Tale of Trials + Persons* (2015), *Stillness in Wonderland* (2016), and *Grey Area* (2019). *Grey Area* received critical acclaim as well as both the Ivor Novello and NME Awards for Best Album. She released her most recent album *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert* in September of 2021.

The music video for NAO's "Messy Love" includes images of NAO in big and flowy dresses, wearing long box braids and a long wavy wig, and sporting minimal makeup and jewelry. The presentation of NAO's femininity is one that both embraces the hyperfeminine and the subtler, respectable version of femininity seen the music videos of Badu, Scott, and Hill. Additionally, NAO expresses a celebration of Black womanhood and the beauty of Black women by wearing bamboo earrings and box braids, a culturally Black hairstyle. However, NAO does not engage in hypersexual expressions of femininity, instead choosing to embrace the hyperfeminine as a tool of exercising agency in "Messy Love." This agency allows her to embrace both the hyperfeminine and the softer version of femininity which helps to combat the negative stereotypes about Black women. The expression of both versions of femininity reveals the fluid nature of Black womanhood and gender identity in general. In the video for "Messy Love," NAO navigates a space in which she can explore femininity and different notions of womanhood.

"Woman" featuring Lianne La Havas, is another video in which NAO embraces hyperfemininity and Black womanhood by including images of women, including NAO, wearing red afros. NAO and Lianne La Havas are both clad in red, a color that has been associated both with promiscuous women and the idea of hypersexuality. However, this association is subverted as neither women are presented sexually, nor are the lyrics sexually implicitly or explicitly. Additionally, the music video compliments the lyrical content which praises women, Black women specifically. For example, the imagery of NAO and La Havas position them in high places—on top of mountains, in hot air balloons, and in the clouds looking out of windows.



Moreover, NAO presents an image of Black women that can access femininity and notions of beauty denied to them historically and in present day.

Little Simz's "Woman" featuring Cleo Sol is a song that celebrates Black women specifically although the music video opens this celebration up to all women, including women from different backgrounds. Each woman in the video expresses different versions of femininity including hyperfemininity in which the women wear dresses, furs and pearls. The women are also depicted in suits as they sit around a table and engage in a seemingly heated discussion as a subversion of traditional notions of femininity. In the latter case, Little Simz depicts these women, including herself, as strong and powerful. Little Simz not only navigates these different versions of femininity but also expresses different versions of Black womanhood. For example, she and the other Black women in the video wears different hairstyles that are commonly seen among Black women including straight wigs, faux locs, and braided up-dos. Much like the music videos of NAO, Little Simz's "Woman" presents a version of femininity and Black womanhood that is fluid.

Overall, the music videos of both NAO and Little Simz and the way they express femininity and Black womanhood in music are in dialogue with this tradition started by previous generations of Black women. In order to combat the misrepresentations of Black women in film and media, Black rappers and R&B singers put forth positive images of Black womanhood in their music videos. These women, through their music videos, create spaces in which they can express femininity in a way that has been largely denied to them, thus exercising a form of agency. This agency allows Black women to shape and reshape notions of femininity which provides an opportunity for Black women to engage in the practice of self-naming and self-defining, an essential part of Black womanhood.

CHAPTER 2  
WOMANISMS AND FEMINISMS: REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER IN HIP-HOP/RAP  
AND NEO-SOUL

As early as 1968, Black feminists and intellectuals had already begun theorizing and formally organizing outside of the academy about their experiences as Black women, specifically as it pertained to their racial, gender, economic, and later, sexual identities. By the late-1980s and early-1990s, Black feminist rhetoric began its transition from theory, “a set of tools and frameworks for subjecting the social world to scrutiny,” to thought, or “a fixed set of thoughts or observations,” through the writings of two prominent Black feminist scholars, Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw, both of whom were responding to gaps in the literature and foci of the academic fields of both Women’s studies and African-American studies.<sup>1</sup> In 1989, Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in her essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.”<sup>2</sup> In this essay, Crenshaw provides a Black feminist critique of court proceedings that places the discrimination Black women face within a larger historical context of gender and racial discrimination. In the case of Collins, her book *Black Feminist Thought* first

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1. Jennifer C. Nash, “Home Truths on Intersectionality,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 23, no. 2 (2011): 462.  
2. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 8 (1989): 139–167.

published in 1990, further elaborated on the intersection between race and gender as it pertains to the discrimination Black women experience at the hands of society at large, as well as within the Black community itself.<sup>1</sup>

Given that the fields of Women's studies and African-American studies focused at that time almost exclusively on the contributions and intellectual production of white women or Black men respectively, Black feminists such as Crenshaw and Collins were left without a place within the academy in which they felt their voices could be heard. Black feminist theory—whether it was developed in the community whether around the kitchen table or within formal organizations of the late-60s and the 70's—became an important framework from which womanist theory emerged. The Combahee River Collective (1974–1980), for example, was a Black feminist organization that felt liberation for Black women could not be achieved without an acknowledgement of the intersection between race and gender. Other organizations such as the National Black Feminist Organization (1973–1980) and Black Women Organized for Political Action (1968–) not only advocated for the liberation of Black women, but also aimed to create a collective identity and sense of community that was otherwise not found in traditional feminist movements and organizations.

The concept of womanism was first articulated by the American novelist and activist Alice Walker in her 1982 collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, which specifically focuses on gender and race related issues Black women face both intraracially and interracially.<sup>2</sup> The essays in this collection also focus on the Black family structure and improving relations between Black men and Black women—as summarized by

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3. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

4. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

Collins, “one is a “womanist” when one is ‘committed to the survival of entire people, male and female’”.<sup>3</sup> In 1983, womanism expanded its considerations to not only Black women, but women of color in general after Walker “defined a *womanist* as a Black feminist or feminist of color.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Black feminist rhetoric serves as a precursor to womanism and these labels are often used interchangeably, especially in light of Walker’s definition. Womanists critiqued feminism for being exclusionary and inattentive to the multiple identities women hold socially outside of their gender including race, class, and sexuality. It is the womanist’s view that these identities affect the types of discrimination women face and therefore changes what liberation may look like for women individually and as a group.

A major critique of first and early-second wave feminists—such as Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), Hélène Cixous (1937–), and Luce Irigaray (1930–)—is that they described a need for female solidarity based solely on gender, noting that women are a singular class of people and must band together to gain liberation from patriarchal norms. For example, in Simone de Beauvoir’s 1949 essay “The Second Sex,” she criticizes the treatment of women by men as “other” and argues that liberation can only come from women losing their oppositional relationship to men.<sup>5</sup> Cixous also highlights the oppositional relationship between men and women or masculinity and femininity in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa (1975) which advocates for writing as an avenue through which women may potentially achieve liberation.<sup>6</sup> Irigaray’s “The Sex Which is Not One” (1980) focuses on female sexuality and its suppression in

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5. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 42.

6. Selepa T. Rodgers “Womanism and Afrocentricity: Understanding the Intersection,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 27, no.1-2 (February 2017): 37.

7. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H.M. Parshley (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1972).

8. Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of The Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer, 1976): 875–893.

that it is deemed subordinate to the dominant male sexuality.<sup>7</sup> However, what these feminists failed to articulate was the different socioeconomic positions women have to navigate, positions that have the potential to affect each individual's relationship with their gender or identity as a woman and their definitions of liberation.

Modern feminism, or fourth-wave feminism (2012–present), is not without its issues either. For example, the co-opting of first-wave Black feminist theory—namely the concept and term “intersectionality” which was formalized by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 but discussed earlier by both Black feminist scholars and other women of color.<sup>8</sup> This co-opting or institutionalization of Black feminist theory brought about the deradicalization of this theory and resulted in a narrowing of the concept of intersectionality to a single-oppression model in which the only intersections worth interrogating are race and gender, something that in turn reduces Black women's experiences to these two identities.<sup>9</sup> In this view, there is no consideration of other structures of power and how they may affect the experiences of Black women and women of color, either in a way that highlights their oppression or even highlights their privileges as they navigate particular identities, not all of which they navigate all at once in the same way in different spaces.

More recently, what is colloquially referred to as “Girlboss Feminism” (c. 2014)—a ‘brand’ of feminism focused on the success of the individual in the business world specifically as a means of opposition to the gender-based discrimination women face in their professional lives—has been subject to critique as well. This brand of feminism encourages women to not only stand up to their male counterparts, but also become the heads of major business and

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9. Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which is Not One,” in *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, ed. Iain Borden, Barbara Penner, and Jane Rendell (London: Routledge, 1999), 60–66.

10. Nash, *Home Truths*, 451.

11. *Ibid.*, 459.

corporations. However, Black feminists and womanists critique this brand of feminism for not considering how class and race-based and gender-based discrimination affect a woman's ability to achieve upward mobility in professional spheres, attain pay raises, and assume the positions of power as their white counterparts. Additionally, a further criticism is that white Girlboss feminists benefit from capitalism, an agent of white supremacy, and therefore ignore the relationship between race and class, not to mention the fact that it is often women of color in lower paying, more labor-intensive positions. The main critique of these feminist traditions is one that has long circulated in Black feminist circles: specifically, that white feminist rhetoric does not interrogate or attempt to destabilize structures of power. In other words, the work done is largely non-intersectional in which white feminists attempt to assimilate to or recreate structures of power whereby they assume positions of power and neglect to consider the needs of their non-white counterparts who will still likely be oppressed no matter who is sitting at the head of the table. It is work that privileges "the belief that it is only through the development of Western industrial capitalism that the potential for the liberation of women can increase."<sup>10</sup> In this view, white feminist rhetoric reinforces oppressive hierarchies and systemic processes in a way that position white women as direct replacements for white men.

Against this backdrop, womanism thus emerged as an avenue through which Black women might find community; redefine the notion of motherhood outside of feminist rhetoric; and enter into a dialogue with African spirituality – particularly the West African Orisha. These themes have received some of their most detailed exploration through literature and other art forms, including music. Examples of early womanist literature include in the works of both Alice Walker, who as we have already seen coined the term, and Zora Neale Hurston from whom

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12. Mounir Ben Zid, "Unearthing New Dimensions of Black "Womanism": Poetic Resistance and the Journey from Absence to Self-Representation," *Advances in Language in Literary Studies* 10, no. 6 (2019): 14.

Walker drew inspiration from, namely in *The Color Purple* (1982) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Walker and Hurston respectively. Hurston's 1937 novel set the precedent for Walker's later book in its discussion of the gender and racial violence that Black women face by both Black men and white people in general. In Hurston's novel, the main character Janie is married off by her grandmother to a wealthy farmer but is largely unsatisfied with her life and dreams of leaving her stable, yet loveless life with her husband, a wealthy farmer, in search of physical and romantic fulfillment. She eventually leaves her husband and becomes entangled with domineering and sometimes physically abusive men. However, despite the hardships she faces, Janie finds her voice as she continues to grow spiritually and gain liberation.

Walker's *The Color Purple* explores similar themes, as the main character Celie is also married off at a young age and experiences sexual and physical violence from both her stepfather and her husband. Later, it is revealed that Celie is attracted to women and she eventually finds the opportunity to explore her sexuality and her identity apart from being a mother and a wife. Both Janie and Celie explore themes of liberation and enlightenment in different ways, find community within the women in their lives, and escape some of the violence brought upon them by Black men. Through community with other Black women, they each experience mothering, neither in a biological sense nor in a patriarchal way, but in the sense that they are nurtured, heard, and taken care of by the women in their lives and, in Celie's case specifically, respond in kind. Mothering thus becomes an act of sisterhood. Mothering in this context is more in line with the roles precolonial African women held in their societies, in which women possessed economic authority and autonomy as well while they cared for their children and transmitted cultural

values.<sup>11</sup> Towards the end of the book, when Celie is finally able to leave her abusive husband, Celie does not only become mothered by others, but she begins to mother herself – starting her own business, gaining her independence and an increased sense of consciousness, and allowing herself a sexual freedom through her relationship with Shug Avery that she did not have while she was still with her husband. Celie’s act of self-mothering shows how mothering is not only a form of creating consciousness and solidarity, but also a form of expressing one’s freedom and reclaiming one’s time when turned towards oneself.

Motherhood or mothering in the Black community is traditionally a site of oppression whose roots can be traced back to slavery but in the context of womanist and Black feminist theory, it is a site of renegotiation. Black women’s sexuality during slavery was controlled by the owners of these women—their bodies thus becoming commodities and sites of production only that supported their white owners instead of supporting their families and economic autonomy as in precolonial times. In the 1970s Black feminist scholars observed that within the Black community, Black motherhood underwent sanctification in which Black mothers were glorified for their self-sacrificing nature by Black men and placed on a pedestal. This image of the glorified, self-sacrificing Black mother simultaneously helped to shed a positive light on Black mothers in a society intent on painting Black women as bad mothers while forcing them to “place their needs behind those of everyone else, especially their sons.”<sup>12</sup> Black mothers are thus forced to navigate a world in which they experience oppression on multiple levels – placed in one box by larger society and placed into another by their own community. For this reason, motherhood to some Black women has increasingly been viewed as a site of burden and oppression while for others it has been viewed “as a site where Black women express and learn

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13. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 49–50.

14. *Ibid.*, 174.



the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment."<sup>13</sup>

Both Janie and Celie benefit from the support and guidance of "othermothers" – women in their communities that may not be their biological mothers but help support their growth as people. While othermothers are typically present from the beginning of someone's life as grandmother, aunt, or friend of the "bloodmother," othermothers can also be found later in life and do not necessarily need to be older. Motherhood or mothering then becomes synonymous with sisterhood or kinship in this context – the community-based child-care in Black diasporic communities becoming reconfigured in this context to fit the needs of adult Black women who may have missed mothering in their adolescence. Janie, for example, is raised by her grandmother Nanny who acts as an othermother but also experiences mothering as she herself grows spiritually and explores her sexual freedom through the various relationships she holds with the men she encounters throughout the book. Mothering in the context of sisterhood comes for Janie at the end of the book as she recounts her story for the only person who will listen without judgment – her friend Pheoby Celie, like Janie, lacks a relationship with her bloodmother but experiences othermothering from her relationship with Shug Avery which is complex due to its romantic and sexual nature. This renegotiation of motherhood or mothering is a method employed intentionally by Walker and other intellectuals in order to challenge the notion of the "Mammy figure" especially and other myths as well.<sup>14</sup>

### **Womanism and Hip-Hop Feminism**

As we have seen, womanist and Black feminist theory began as a form of oppositional knowledge fostered to fight oppression against structures of power around the kitchen table, in

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15. Ibid., 176.

16. Zid, "Unearthing New Dimensions," 17.

community-based organizations, in the academy, and in literature. Since the 1990's, second wave Black feminism or Hip-Hop feminism emerged as scholars such as Tricia Rose, Gwendolyn D. Pough, and Cheryl L. Keyes began examining representations of Black women in Hip-Hop/Rap and Hip-Hop soul or Neo Soul (a musical child of both Hip-Hop and R&B) by Black men and women alike.<sup>15</sup> Hip-Hop feminism was aimed at critiquing representations of race and gender and interrogating how Black female rappers responded to their stereotypical representations and discussed their experiences as Black women through their music. In this context, oppositional knowledge can be referred to as “street knowledge” where the intellectuals are the artists, producing art for working class Black people instead of scholars in the academy.<sup>16</sup> This “street knowledge” as communicated through their music has been seen by Layli Phillips, Kerri Reddick-Morgan, and Dionne Patricia Stephens as a “dual oppositionality that allows them to contest sexism within the Hip-Hop universe as well as confront sexism, racism, classism, and other oppressions vis-à-vis mainstream society.”<sup>17</sup> While these artists may not have identified as womanists or Black feminists, they are clearly influenced in some way by theory and in some ways create it, as theory is practice – acting of not only expanding communal and individual consciousness. Womanist rhetoric in particular is especially prominent in that female Hip-Hop and Neo-soul artists “relationship to male rappers cannot be characterized as complete

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17. See: Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); and 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): 255–269.

18. Layli Phillips, Kerri Reddick-Morgan, and Dionne Patricia Stephens, “Oppositional Consciousness within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip Hop, 1976–2004,” *The Journal of African American History* 9, no. 3 (2005): 259.

19. *Ibid.*, 272.

opposition” given that the lyrical content of such artists advocates for Black love, sometimes reaffirming patriarchal standards, as often as they critique Black men.<sup>18</sup>

Performance, an essential element of Hip-Hop culture, is a site in which Black women express their “street knowledge” by renegotiating gender and challenging stereotypes placed upon them by larger society and Black men. Taking control of one’s performance or public image in order to be representative in a positive way or to challenge the views of the public can be seen in Black female performances dating back to the civil rights era (1954–1968). Female blues artists during this time often challenged the image of the domestic worker and instead “offered the counterimage of the beautiful black dame,” dressing themselves “in furs, diamonds, sequined gowns, and gold.”<sup>19</sup> In addition to physical appearance, these women used their lyrics to call into question the preconceived notions surrounding Black female sexuality, namely by “(1) publicly claiming that they indeed had sexuality, (2) blurring the lines of sexuality by claiming female dominance and in some cases lesbianism, (3) laying claim to female desire, and (4) disrupting popular and classed notions of love and sexuality.”<sup>20</sup> In doing so, female blues singers set the precedent for Black women to subvert stereotypes of sexual promiscuity and redefine Black women’s sexuality through Blaxploitation films such as *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) discussed in the previous chapter and later through Hip-Hop music culture. The representations and stereotypes of Black women in Hip-Hop culture include images that depict these women as “bitches, hos, stunts, skeezers, hoochies, pigeons, chickenheads, and baby mamas.”<sup>21</sup> These are the images Black women still struggle to deconstruct today.

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20. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 149.

21. Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 58.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 74.

In their discussion of music from the mid-1980s through to the '90s, Hip-hop feminist scholars Phillips, Reddick-Morgan, and Stephens have observed three specific commonalities in the music of Black female rappers that indicate that they are engaging with womanist and Black feminist rhetoric: talking back to men as a way of defending women and demanding respect; encouraging women's empowerment, self-help, and solidarity; and defending Black men against the structures of power that seek to oppress them.<sup>22</sup> In Pough's perception these commonalities can be viewed as an engagement with "bringing wreck" or using Black female discourse to "disrupt dominant masculine discourses, break into the public sphere, and in some way impact or influence the U.S. imaginary, even if that influence is fleeting."<sup>23</sup> In bringing wreck to dominant ideologies within larger society and within Hip-Hop culture, female Hip-Hop and Hip-Hop soul artists navigate a space in which they can express themselves and advocate for themselves as a means of increasing their own consciousness or "street knowledge" as well as increasing that of others. As part of Hip-Hop culture, both Hip-Hop and Hip-Hop soul artists create community, identity, and communicate the extent of their "street knowledge" through their music. Artists such as Salt-n-Pepa, Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill, and Erykah Badu have expressed their dual oppositionality or "street knowledge" throughout their work in this way – bring wreck by either talking back, advocating for empowerment, or defending Black men. While Black feminists may have not necessarily acknowledged that Black men have an important role in the Black community, womanists historically have made space for Black men while also critiquing their contribution to the oppression of Black women – exercising their own form of dual oppositionality.

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24. Phillips, Reddick Morgan, and Stephens, "Oppositional Consciousness," 261.

25. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 76.

Cheryl L. Keyes identifies four distinct categories that Black women embody in Rap performances specifically: “Queen Mother,” “Fly Girl,” “Sista with Attitude,” and “Lesbian.”<sup>24</sup> Queen mothers typically wear afro-centric garb and lyrical content as seen in the style and music of Queen Latifah. In the 1990s, Latifah commonly wore African headdress, Kente cloth, and a necklace of the continent of Africa. Her first singles and debut album *All Hail The Queen* (1989) evoke images of Black women as powerful and a royalty which reveals her “self-identification as African, woman, warrior, priestess, and queen.”<sup>25</sup> While Black female artists may still identify with the “Queen Mother” category by referring to themselves as queens or wearing natural and protective hairstyles, in modern times it is uncommon to see women still adorning themselves in traditional headdresses and cloth. Fly Girls of the 90s were fashionable, chic, and erotic. Salt-N-Pepa and TLC were Fly Girls in that they wore clothes that were slightly revealing, donned shiny jewelry and long nails, and wore a variety of hairstyles.<sup>26</sup> Modern Fly Girls such as Rihanna and Lizzo are well-known for their music as much as they are for their fashion choices.

Simultaneously, Foxy Brown, Lil’ Kim, and Trina are all artists that reclaim the derogatory images of Black women as “bitches” and “hos” that male rappers depict in their lyrics and music videos, making them Sistas with Attitude.<sup>27</sup> By doing so, these women both talk back to Black men and empower themselves and other women to take control of their own image. In modern Hip-Hop, this reclamation of derogatory terms and images can be seen in the music and performances of Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, and Megan Thee Stallion. These women, much like the blues artists of the civil rights era publicly claim their sexuality and assert female dominance, at

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26. 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): 256.

27. *Ibid.*, 257.

28. *Ibid.*, 260–261.

29. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 100; Keyes, “Empowering Self,” 262.

times expressing female homoeroticism. Doing so creates a sense of agency in which these women after “being read as supersexual – or asexual, in the case of the mammy stereotype” gives Black women an opportunity to position their sexuality as something to take pride in.<sup>28</sup> The “Lesbian” category arose in the late-1990s through Queen Pen’s song “Girlfriend” in which she “positions herself as a suitor in a lesbian relationship.”<sup>29</sup> Rappers such as Syd the Kid and Young Ma openly speak about their romantic and sexual relationships with women, a revolutionary act in a genre that is not only largely misogynistic but also homophobic.

Another topic that female Hip-Hop and Neo Soul artists alike discuss while simultaneously talking back, empowering their sisters and/or othermothers, and defending Black men is love – an essential topic within womanist and Black feminist theory. It is through their discussion of love, mainly romantic love with Black men, that these artists express their dual oppositionality or oppositional knowledge. When romantic love fails with Black men – this failure colloquially referred to as “struggle love” – it is a chance for women to empower each other and love one another, offering advice and solidarity. This tradition, which Collins refers to as “love and trouble,” that has roots in the blues music of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, both of whom offer “rich advice to Black women on how to deal with unfaithful and unreliable men.”<sup>30</sup> Rose calls this love and struggle tradition “courting disaster” in which female rappers write raps that “are caustic, witty, and aggressive warnings directed at men and other women who might be seduced by them in the future.”<sup>31</sup> The love and trouble tradition, or struggle love, is a site on contention in which Black women and womanists alike advocate and show their love for the Black men with whom they are romantically involved with while also attempting to come to

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30. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 188.

31. Keyes, “Empowering Self,” 264.

32. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 152.

33. Rose, *Black Noise*, 155.

terms with the mistreatment they experience by these same men. It is important to note that the love and trouble tradition does not strictly denote a romantic relationship. However, romantic relationships are most commonly those that are examined in the aforementioned genres of music as it pertains to relationships between Black men and Black women. The focus on this tradition and the origin of it is directly related to “the influence of heterosexist, Eurocentric gender ideology – particularly ideas about men and women advances by the traditional family ideal – on African-American women and men.”<sup>32</sup> This influence has put pressure on Black men and Black women to emulate white masculinity and femininity respectively which puts Black women in an impossible position whereby they must adhere to beauty in behavioral standards while still not being afforded the privilege of being fragile and ornamental – hence, the “struggle” in struggle love.<sup>33</sup>

Black women in their relationships with Black men are forced to deal with mistreatment ranging from infidelity to physical, verbal, or sexual abuse. The love and trouble tradition is deemed necessary in defining Black masculinity and affirming Black manhood “in terms of Black men’s ability to “own” and “control” their women, and Black femininity in terms of Black women’s ability to help U.S. Black men feel like men.”<sup>34</sup> This belief is rooted in the dichotomy between Black women’s responsibility to give Black men the love and defense they often do not see reciprocated. The survival of the people, as in Walker’s definition, in this context seems to solely rest on the shoulders of Black women. However, act of empowering women and talking back to abusive Black men is an act of love in itself and therefore an act of ensuring the survival

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34. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 152.

35. *Ibid.*, 153.

36. *Ibid.*, 157.

of the people which is unobtainable through the continued abuse and oppression of Black women by Black men.

Songs such as Queen Latifah's "U.N.I.T.Y.," Lauryn Hill's "Ex-Factor," and Destiny Child's "Girl" detail unhealthy and abusive treatment by and relationships with Black men but also offer a sense of solidarity and/or are meant to empower Black women. Additionally, Tamia's "Stranger in my House" and Chante Moore's "Chante's Got a Man" seem to speak both to Black men and women and explaining how good men are supposed to conduct themselves. Tamia criticizes her own mistreatment as being opposite of proper treatment from a good partner while Chante Moore provides an initially encouraging song which promises that good Black men are out there that turns into a cautionary tale at the end. Method Man's "I'll Be There for You/You're All I Need" featuring Mary J. Blige is another song depicting struggle love. The woman speaker, in this case Mary J. Blige, declares "I'll sacrifice for you, dedicate my life to you" while the male speaker, Method Man, is dismissive of romantic gestures evident in lines such as "Valentine's cards and birthday wishes? Please!" and "All that romance crap, just show your love." The two different voices in this song communicates to the listener that, like in most instances of struggle love, the woman is expected to make emotional sacrifices in which she gives and shows more love than her partner can provide.<sup>35</sup>

In their engagement with the "love and trouble" tradition, Black female Hip-Hop and Neo-soul artists "bring wreck" by challenging their assigned roles as women outlined by white western patriarchal standards and reinforced by Black men, specifically Black male Hip-Hop artists. In doing so, these female artists also challenge the Eurocentric gender binary – negotiating what it means to be woman and critiquing the parameters with which they have been

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37. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 180.



presented. The empowerment they bring to themselves and other women through their performances which help to shed light on the ways in which they reject struggle love indicates the presence of womanist ideals in female Hip-Hop culture. This presence is essential in destabilizing patriarchal standards of being, which have historically been largely inaccessible or unobtainable for people of color and queer people. It also provides a space outside of white feminism where Black women can find community, empower each other, and engage in the act of becoming in which they can define and redefine their relationships to womanhood outside of oppressive white patriarchal models, reinforced within the Black community by Black men. Therefore, this culture is one that can “challenge the status quo of American feminism as it continually prioritizes the White gender binary.”<sup>36</sup> The fluidity of gender is thus acknowledged as Black women shape their own identities and critique the identities forced upon them.

### **“Bringing Wreck” in the Music of NAO and Little Simz**

NAO’s *And Then Life Was Beautiful* is an album that engages with many issues including romance, friendship, and self-empowerment. Although the Hip-Hop soul genre has undergone a considerable transformation since the 1990s, including the addition of pop and electronic elements, it is clear that the influence of Neo-soul is present in this album vocally and instrumentally despite NAO’s rejection of the R&B label and coinage of the term “wonky funk” to describe her music. NAO’s vocal timbre is soft and light and she employs a sort of breathy approach in her vocal delivery which is often enhanced by distortion—giving many of her songs a dream-like quality. Many of NAO’s songs reveal her pop and neo-soul influences in terms of instrumentation (bass, drums, electric guitar, and strings), arrangement (hip-hop backbeat, prominence of the bass drum, cyclical melodic phrases) and feel. In addition to these musical

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38. Angela M. Mosley, “Women Hip-Hop Artists and Womanist Theology” *Religions* 12, no. 12 (2021): 2.

aspects, her music reflects the influence of “bringing wreck” and womanist rhetoric – particularly her rejection of struggle love in “Messy Love” and “Glad That You’re Gone”, her empowerment and/or mothering of women in “Woman” featuring Lianne La Havas, and the mothering of herself in “Burn Out.”

“Messy Love” and “Glad That You’re Gone” both possess the clear imprint of Neo-soul in their use of strings, bass drum, electric guitar, syncopated lines, and breathy vocals. For example, “Glad That You’re Gone” in particular has a similar rhythmic groove and guitar melody that evokes the Fugees’s “The Sweetest Thing.” The vocal layering, breathy vocals, and prominent use of the bass drum in “Glad That You’re Gone” lends it a greater complexity than “The Sweetest Thing” in which Lauryn Hill, with her darker vocal timbre and that also occupies a lower vocal register, uses clear vocal onsets to start her melodic phrases (i.e. no vocal fry, no aspirated attacks, or growls) and limits distortion and reverb. This “straight-forward” approach to music vocally and instrumentally is distinctive of the Neo-Soul/R&B sound found in the ‘90s and early-2000s. In addition to a clearer sound quality characterized by minimal distortion and vocal layering, Hill’s uses her characteristic melismatic runs which are commonly found in blues, jazz, R&B, and soul. The music of Lauryn Hill, Erykah Badu, and Jill Scott—Scott a particular source of inspiration for NAO—conveys how common melismatic singing and simple instrumentation was during that time. Although the use of distortion, reverb, vocal layering, and breathy onsets is popular in many genres including modern Hip-Hop soul, R&B, and Pop, the rhythmic patterns and instrumentation seem to be in dialogue with traditional Neo-soul.

Lyrically, both of these songs offer a rejection of the struggle love or “love and trouble tradition” discussed by womanist and Hip-Hop feminist scholars. The production of “Messy Love” is characterized by two key elements of the Neo-Soul genre, including the Hip-Hop

backbeat with its heavy percussive elements and emphasis on the bass drum, and a cyclical structure which includes: repeated phrases, rhythmic patterns, and non-functional harmonic progression in a ‘bridge’ section. NAO also draws on the soul elements of Neo-soul in her vocal delivery in which she uses melismatic runs throughout the song and manipulates the vowels of certain words in order to create a colorful timbral landscape. For example, in each iteration of the chorus NAO sings the words “kind” and “love” differently to create a darker timbre which she then brightens in the outro for climatic effect. This brighter version of the chorus is layered on top of the original iteration—different timbres interwoven to create a richer sound.

In “Messy Love,” NAO declares that rather than engaging with someone she knows to not be good for her, she will instead set boundaries and walk away from the situation: “I’m saying goodbye, I won’t even change my mind.” Struggle love, sometimes interpreted as a necessary rite of passage of sorts that all Black women must go through before they find their romantic match, becomes optional in this context. NAO stating her intentions to say goodbye to this lover before they become more deeply involved is antithetical to the struggle love tradition seen in songs of the past. Many of the songs in traditional Hip-Hop/Rap and Hip-Hop soul such as Queen Latifah’s “U.N.I.T.Y” and Erykah Badu’s “Tyrone” encourage women to leave such situations after they have already become deeply entangled with the other party. Songs such as Mary J. Blige’s “I Can Love You” featuring Lil’ Kim even encourage struggle love as Mary J. Blige pushes for her lover’s infidelity so that they may be together. An important difference in “Messy Love” is not only NAO’s ability to identify the person in question as a bad fit for her personally but that she also exercised agency and self-empowerment, setting boundaries before she was affected by the struggle love that would encompass their relationship.

“Glad You’re Gone” is a celebratory song and acts as a sort of sister track to “Messy Love” in which NAO celebrates the end of a bad relationship and unfit romantic partner. This track is about the healing process that comes after finally leaving a situation that is detrimental to the speaker’s mental and emotional health and like many other songs in the “love and trouble” tradition, it provides encouragement to leave after the two parties have already become seriously involved with one another. In this way, these songs are acknowledgements of lessons learned and provide insight to other women in the hope that they do not have to learn these lessons the hard way. NAO describes this sort of unhealthy relationship dynamic acting as a lesson for her and as a waste of time when she sings “Shouldn’t have been with you in the first place/Too bad I had to learn in the worst way.” Not only does this this song appear to be essential in NAO’s personal healing process, her listeners can engage with this song and view it as a cautionary tale in a similar way that Chante Moore’s “Chante’s Got A Man” reveals itself to be a lesson and a cautionary tale at the very ending despite Moore’s initial rejection of struggle love by encouraging the pursuit of heterosexual relationships by women rather than being content with being alone.

While “Messy Love” and “Glad You’re Gone” can be viewed as two songs that are simultaneously about self-empowerment and women empowerment, “Woman” featuring Lianne La Havas is a better contender for the category of female empowerment in connection with the notion of “bringing wreck.” This song makes use of heavy percussive elements and syncopation that emphasize beats two and four, a style that is reminiscent of the funk traditions that can be heard in songs such The Gap Band’s “Outstanding”. Here, NAO’s vocals are less breathy and she leans into the beginning of her phrases with a darker timbre, revealing the unique qualities of her lower register. The lyrical content of depicts women as magical and even positing that God

may be a woman deserving of worship. This worship should come from not only other women but men as well which becomes clear as Lianne La Havas sings “If God is a woman, on Sunday I’m a worship us/Take my mirror out the bag and fill it with confidence/Yeah a woman’s worth is everything without you, baby.” Not only are women placed on the highest pedestal but they are also deserving of self-empowerment, self and outside worship, and it is clear that their worth is neither defined by men or their proximity to men. This solidarity with other women and the encouragement of NAO’s own confidence can be viewed as both female empowerment and mothering or sisterhood.

Encouraging women to nurture the relationship they have with themselves and other women is a form of mothering in which she acts as “othermothers” for the all women she is trying to reach in this song by encouraging self-respect and valuing oneself. The concept of self-mothering is particularly evident on the fifth track on NAO’s album, “Burn Out” which recounts the difficulty of carrying a heavy mental and emotional load, fighting against the “strong Black woman” stereotype, and nurturing oneself and advocating for mental health. The hip-hop backbeat is distorted in this song and accompanied by electronic interpolations, subverting the Neo-soul tradition in which the hip-hop backbeat is generally clear. This production choice highlights the cyclical melodic phrases and repetitive lyrical phrases that act as textural elements—traditional Neo-soul elements that combine into an aural representation of the mind when it is exhausted and overwhelmed with tasks. Essential to self-mothering is acknowledging pain, its source, and how one may overcome it which NAO highlights when she states “When I give up my energy to all of everybody else’s priorities/So low/I burn out into a low-low” and later “I really need to slow for me.”

The “strong Black woman” stereotype that paints Black women as self-sacrificing and praises them for being so is subverted in this context as NAO laments the pressure she feels and the unhappiness that arises when she is taking care of everyone but herself. When she lives for other people, she no longer is herself but is something for other people in the way that the “mammy” figure and the traditional mother figure in the Black community is not a person with her own feelings, desires, and wishes, but rather a servant to others there to fulfill their needs instead of her own. NAO acknowledges that she needs to pour more energy into herself and take into consideration her own feelings and desires for once, in other words mother herself, when she sings “Should save a little love for me.” In this context, NAO acknowledges she needs to indulge in self-love and self-advocacy much like Janie and Celie after they began their journeys of acting in their own best interests. Overall, the womanist rhetoric in *And Then Life Was Beautiful* is evident in the discussions of self-mothering, other-mothering, female empowerment, and a rejection of the “love and trouble” or “courting disaster” tradition.

Little Simz also “brings wreck” in her music—particularly on her album *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert*—specifically, the songs “Woman” featuring Cleo Soul, “Introvert,” “The Rapper That Came to Tea,” and “Little Q, Pt. 2.” As is the case with NAO, Little Simz empowers women and engages in self-mothering as a form of self-empowerment. However, something that Little Simz does that NAO doesn’t is talk back, in this context to society at large, through her defense of Black men against systemic racism. The act of talking back and defending black men is in line with content in traditional female Hip-Hop/Rap as observed by Hip-Hop feminists. “Woman” employs electric bass guitar, piano, percussion, and strings in a way the evokes the music of male rappers of the 1990s such as Nas, Common, and Wu-Tang Clan and therefore the larger tradition of blues, jazz, and soul music that influenced subsequent Black

musical traditions. In fact, much like the music of the aforementioned rappers, her music also incorporates jazz and R&B elements. In the context of a musical tradition that has undergone considerable transformation and lost much of its connection to R&B music in favor of the faster, more percussive Trap style, Little Simz continues to engage with traditional Hip-Hop conventions.

Lyrically, Little Simz takes time to acknowledge women of color in general by giving praise to Nigerian, Sierra Leonean, Ethiopian, Tanzanian, Bajan, Indian, Jamaican, Ghanaian, and Black American women. She acknowledges her admiration of other women and her support of them when she raps “Ain’t nothing without a woman though/Woman to woman I just wanna see you glow.” To further give praise to these women and their self-reliance, independence, and determination Cleo Soul sings “I love, how you go from zero to one hundred/And leave the dust behind/You’ve got this/All action no talk” in the chorus. Listing specific ethnicities of women, mainly Black women empowers women in the African Diaspora and thus makes this song a womanist anthem about empowering women of color. In her empowerment of mostly Black women, Little Simz reinforces womanist and Black feminist rhetoric.

“Introvert” is a song that clearly displays how Little Simz “brings wreck” to larger society, specifically by citing government corruption, violence, and personal loss. This is especially highlighted with particular clarity in the lines: “All we see is broken homes here and poverty/Corrupt government officials, lies and atrocities.” Her acknowledgement of poverty and its effects is of particular interest given due to the fact that traditionally, rappers, especially male rappers, tend to discuss class in a way that supports capitalism and the acquisition of expensive material items. Musically, the song begins as a sort of a call action as made clear through the instrumentation which includes a drumline pattern that sounds like a march and horn calls which

are accompanied by a chorus. When the verse begins, the march disappears and is replaced by a repetitive backbeat, the horn call becomes fragmented, and interpolations of strings, guitar, and xylophone are woven throughout the music. The horn calls and drum line music return repeatedly in between verses and the chorus as a means of urging listeners to take action in combating government corruption and class inequality. Little Simz is not necessarily highlighting class issues in an unprecedented way for the genre but she does so in a way that is not accompanied by more conventional rhetoric that implies that capitalism, Black capitalism specifically, is integral to the liberation of Black people. In the same way Black feminists and womanists have critiqued white feminist scholars for ignoring the intersections of class, gender, and race, they have also critiqued the Black community's engagement with capitalism and lack of awareness for how it negatively affects them and other marginalized people across the world. For example, capitalism and gentrification are directly related which tends to negatively affect poor minorities which Little Simz, despite her success as an artist acknowledges when she raps "Knocking down communities to re-up on properties/I'm directly affected, it does more than just bother me."

Little Simz "brings wreck" to larger society in another way by addressing the effects of systemic racism on Black men in the song "Little Q, Pt. 2" in which she tells the story of her cousin who grew up in a rough area in South London and had to assume considerable responsibilities due to an absent father and absent older brother who went to jail and later was a victim of a stabbing. Acting as the voice of her cousin, she acknowledges the way systemic oppression can create a cycle of violence between the state and marginalized communities and within marginalized communities themselves – going on to say "The broken homes in which we're coming from, but who's the blame when/You're dealt the same cards from the system



you're enslaved in.” This acknowledgement of systemic oppression shows how she, or her cousin, is not upset with the kid involved in the stabbing but rather the larger system that creates such conditions for violence to be such a common occurrence in certain areas. This cycle of violence is also represented in the cyclical nature of the melodic and harmonic material, cyclical forms being common in soul, R&B, and Rap. The percussive elements, bass and electric guitar, piano, and chorus is reminiscent of soul traditions found in songs such as James Brown’s “Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud” To further emphasize the issues that she has with systemic oppression, Little Simz declares “We all know real criminals live in the suit,” positioning her cousin “Little Q” as a victim of systemic racism whose story is not unlike other Black boys and men in London and other Western countries in particular. Through her defense of “Little Q” and Black men in general, Little Simz is engaging with and displaying her “street knowledge” and consciousness.

“The Rapper That Came to Tea” is an interlude between songs “I See You” and “Rollin Stone” where Little Simz is seems to be questioning herself in a way that highlights some of her insecurities such as her introversion and how this is in conflict with her vocation as an artist that requires her to speak and perform. She questions herself in a way that reveals her feelings of uncertainty about whether this is the right path to follow given her quiet nature as an orchestra plays and a chorus sings—the strings, harps, harmonic progressions, and vocal melodies evoking a dream-like sound that indicates that she has entered a new mindset. She then answers her own question as a chorus chimes in and repeatedly sings “It don’t matter where you are/You can still reach for the stars.” This interlude resembles an intimate conversation that Little Simz has internally with herself and through this conversation, she is self-mothering in that she acknowledges that being a rapper is her destiny. Through the use of the chorus, she gives herself

the encouragement she needs and the reassurance that she is indeed on the right path and that pursuing her wants and needs is feasible. In this interlude, Little Simz allows herself the space to be vulnerable and question the things she wants and is actively pursuing which is an act of self-determination and self-love.

### **Modern Hip-Hop Feminism and Redefining Black Womanhood**

As is evident from the preceding examination NAO's *And Then Life Was Beautiful* and Little Simz's *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert*, Hip-Hop feminist theory has remained a relevant tool for interrogating the way Black women navigate the world, exploring the production of art, and for considering issues of self-representation. Whereas these two albums are stylistically very different, they nevertheless manage to achieve a common goal—the representation of oneself in a way that actively resists societal perceptions and stereotypes. NAO subverts the notion of struggle love, encouraging herself and others to accept more from their romantic partners from the beginning instead of begging someone to treat them with the proper love, care, and respect. She also subverts the trope of the “strong Black woman” who is self-sacrificing without consideration of her own wants, needs, and desires. In this way she challenges the very notion of what it means to be Black and woman – without the need for heterosexual relationships, without the need for self-sacrificing and compromising one's own well-being. Through her subversion of the aforementioned tropes, NAO assures herself and her listeners that identify as Black women that it is not okay to not be strong and that self-love should be privileged over struggle love.

Little Simz pays tributes to Black women across the diaspora, praising them simply for being women and encouraging their self-reliance, independence, self-determination, success, and self-confidence. She positions herself as a “go-getter” who, in the face of adversity and self-doubt fueled by negative messages from society at large, still takes the leap of faith required to

pursue her dreams. She also does not shy away from acknowledging her talent as a rapper in spite of a society that tell women, marginalized women especially, that confidence and being sure about oneself should only be reserved for men. Additionally, her identification with the term introvert in both “Introvert” and “The Rapper That Came to Tea” is in direct opposition with the stereotype that Black women are naturally loud and outspoken and therefore “ghetto.” She subverts this stereotypes and calls attention to the intricate and complex ways one can be a Black woman. Like NAO, she redefines Black womanhood in a way that is contradictory to societal perceptions of race and gender.

Through their albums and their music, both artists engage in the process of “becoming” women, “becoming” Black women specifically, in which they renegotiate their identities and their relationship to the term “woman,” something that has traditionally been only afforded to white women specifically. Therefore, Hip-Hop/Rap and Hip-Hop soul acts as a platform for which this “becoming” can take place as observed by Hip-Hop feminist scholars through works by artists such as Queen Latifah, Salt-n-Pepa, Lil’ Kim, Lauryn Hill, and others. Furthermore, NAO and Little Simz are continuing this tradition of “becoming,” renegotiating, and redefining Black womanhood in a way that is beneficial to and representative of their individual experiences as Black women and Black women as a whole. Hip-Hop feminist and womanist rhetoric employed by Black female musicians as a display of “street knowledge” or dual oppositionality allows them the space to represent themselves how they see fit—whether that be through subversion of negative stereotypes or reclamation of them as a form of empowerment.

## CHAPTER 3

### BLACK CULTURAL TRANSMISSION AND PAN-AFRICANIST RHETORIC

Pan-Africanism, although fully realized as a movement by the late-nineteenth century, has roots in repatriation and unity efforts in the late-eighteenth century by abolitionists and missionaries. Abolitionists such as Olaudah Equiano (ca. 1745–1797) and Prince Hall (ca. 1738–1807) as well as the first Baptist missionary George Liele (1750–1820) pioneered initiatives in which “they identified positively with Africa” initiatives that were often “accompanied by efforts to refute the dominant racist ideology of the day.” This set an important precedent for the Pan-Africanist rhetoric established by Marcus Garvey (1870–1940) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963).<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) can be considered an early manifestation of Pan-Africanism and African unity as it resulted in the liberation of Africans in Haiti and unified Africans across the Caribbean. This led in turn to the establishment of a common language, set of religious practices, and worldviews—effectively subverting the notion of African inferiority.<sup>2</sup> During this period of rebellion, African Americans and Africans from the Caribbean were involved in repatriation efforts and advocated for self-sufficiency. For example, Paul Cuffee (1759–1817) and J. Albert Thorne (1860–1939) both attempted repatriation efforts to west, central, and east Africa—Cuffee using his own ships and partially funding a trip that

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1. Adi Hakin, *Pan-Africanism: A History*, (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), 7–8.

2. *Ibid.*, 9.

sent African American settlers to Sierra Leone.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, prominent figures such as Martin Robinson Delany (1812–1885) and Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912) advocated for repatriation as a means of elevating and uniting Black people across the diaspora. They fought against racist views of the time, sometimes supporting colonialist rhetoric which inspired the views of twentieth century Pan-Africanist leaders such as Garvey and Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972).<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the first official Pan-African Conference in London in 1900, the 1893 Congress of Africa in Chicago discussed the notion of ‘civilizing’ continental Africans through Black colonialism and the controversy surrounding African American repatriation and migration—a notion whose roots lie in Eurocentric ideas.<sup>3</sup> The London Pan-African Conference focused on combating colonialism, racism, slavery, and repatriation while still engaging with Eurocentric ideals of colonization as it pertained to ‘civilizing’ native Africans. Pan-Africanist leaders during this time felt that colonial efforts had the potential to positively affect Africa and Africans as long as it was carried out with the consideration of the views of Western, well-educated Africans. Unlike the meeting in Chicago seven years prior, this conference included speakers from across the diaspora, including the Caribbean and Africa, instead of those only from the United States—among these speakers were the composer Samuel Coleridge Taylor (1875–1912) and W. E. B. Du Bois.<sup>4</sup> The convening of this conference set the precedent for future Pan-Africanist conferences, newspapers, and activists – Pan-Africanist rhetoric later paving the way for Afrocentricity which appears both in political and artistic movements such as the Harlem

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3. Ibid., 11–12.

4. Ibid., 13–14.

5. Ibid., 19.

6. Ibid., 22.

Renaissance (ca. 1918–1937) and the Black Power movement (1966–1975) and later, Hip-Hop and Hip-Hop culture more generally.

Much of the Pan-Africanist rhetoric seen in political and artistic movements post-1900 is indebted to Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois. During the First World War, Garvey, a Jamaican writer and activist, became a significant figure in the Pan-Africanist movement—establishing the first Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Jamaica in 1914. Inspired by Booker T. Washington's role in the establishment of Tuskegee University, the UNIA manifesto called for “establishing ‘a universal confederacy amongst the race’, as well as promoting ‘racial pride and love’, developing education, commercial enterprises and ‘conscientious Christian worship’, as well as assisting in ‘the backward tribes in Africa’”—Eurocentric notions of colonization (including industrialization and conversion to Christianity) and African unity being key components of Pan-Africanist rhetoric during this time as inspired by rhetoric of the previous century.<sup>5</sup> The establishment of the first UNIA and its manifesto gave rise to policies commonly referred to as Garveyism which was further reinforced as Garvey began establishing chapters of UNIA in the United States and Africa. The increasing popularity of the UNIA and of Garveyism's in the United States led to the ‘New Negro’ movement, more commonly known as the Harlem Renaissance, which “found its expression not only in political demands and organizations but also in literature, art, and the music of the ‘jazz age’”—Zora Neale Hurston and Bessie Smith were among the many prominent figures of the time associated with this movement.<sup>6</sup> Hurston and Smith later became key inspirations for Black feminist writers and musicians in the late twentieth century.

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7. *Ibid.*, 29.

8. *Ibid.*, 31–33.

The Black Power movement was born out of new forms of Pan-Africanism and emerged in the United States as a movement focused on “racial solidarity, cultural pride, and self-determination”—popularized by Richard Wright through his 1954 book *Black Power*.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Wright popularized the term, Marcus Garvey and other Pan-African leaders are credited with creating the concepts of Black Power with their advocacy for self-determination and self-government.<sup>8</sup> In the 1960s, Kwame Ture (1941–1998) advocated for Black Power which would allow Black Americans to take over “the government of those areas where they were a majority,” something that signified a period in the Civil Rights movement where beliefs and activism became more militant.<sup>9</sup> One of the most important figures of the militant Black Power movement was Malcom X (1925–1965). Originally a leading spokesperson of the Nation of Islam (NOI) until 1964, he began developing a “new political philosophy that placed African American liberation within the context of wider Pan-African and global struggles”—a philosophy that still supported African unity but was, unlike earlier Pan-Africanist leaders rhetoric fought against colonial and imperialist efforts even by African Americans.<sup>10</sup> Malcom X’s particular brand of Pan-Africanism was controversial in that he not only supported African unity, but also supporting matching the violence of oppressors in order to achieve liberation.<sup>11</sup>

Inspired by Malcom X, Huey P. Newton (1942–1989) and Bobby Seale (1936–) founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) in 1966. Other important leading activists associated with the BPP include Angela Davis (1944–) who, like the others, became key figures of the Black Power movement. However, within this movement Black women faced gender-

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9. Ibid., 163.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 164.

12. Ibid., 165–166.

13. Michael Mwanza Koster, “‘They were revolutionaries!’ Malcom X and Jomo Kenyatta’s Pan-Africanism, 1960–1965,” in *Global Africans: Race, Ethnicities, and Shifting Identities*, ed. Toyin Falola and Cacee Hoyer (New York: Routledge, 2017), 166.

based discrimination especially given that cofounders Newton and Seale supported the findings of the “Moynihan Report” which posited that Black women were responsible for the emasculation of Black men.<sup>12</sup> As a result, Black nationalists, men and women alike, embraced patriarchal views in which “hegemonic masculinity—a political economy of male domination that ranges from influence to exploitation—[became] an ideal that [was] embraced and/or exaggerated.”<sup>13</sup> The patriarchal views of the BPP leaders are what raptivists initially drew inspiration from when creating their politically charged music.<sup>14</sup> For example, Ice Cube’s LP *Amerikkka’s Most Wanted* revisits the masculinist rhetoric of Newton and Seale in which he endorses gender roles, hypersexualized Black women, and sometimes fantasizes about enacting physical violence against them.<sup>15</sup> In addition to masculinist rhetoric, Malcom X’s militant politics in particular saw a revival by such artists during this time.<sup>16</sup> Artists such as 2Pac, Common, and Public Enemy employed Black Panther iconography and their pro-Black, anti-police violence, and anti-imperialist politics in their music—particularly through their songs “Panther Power,” “A Song For Assata,” and “Fight The Power.” It was not uncommon for artists during this time to use images of Black Power leaders, especially Malcom X and Huey P. Newton.

Their politics not only inspired Hip-Hop/Rap artists of the 1990s but has continued to inspire musicians to this day. For example, in her album visual album *Lemonade* (2016), Beyoncé includes audio clips of Malcom X and footage from the Civil Rights movement. The 1980s and 1990s saw leaders advocating for African reparations, defined as the “efforts to repair

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14. Charise Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out: Sexual Politics in Golden Age of Rap Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 36.

15. *Ibid.*, 38.

16. Hakin, *Pan-Africanism*, 167.

17. Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out*, 100.

18. Koster, “‘They were revolutionaries!’” 173.



the damage that have been inflicted upon groups of people as a result of historical and contemporary injustice”—reparation activists reinforcing the Pan-Africanist rhetoric of a ‘Global Africa’ which referred both to Africa and the African diaspora.<sup>17</sup> Activists in the United States and across the diaspora, such as Nigerian businessman and politician Chief M. K. O. Abiola (1937–1998) believed that reparations should be legally mandatory. However, the governments of former colonial powers such as the U.S. and Britain refused to entertain repatriation efforts and demands. Yet, demands for reparations inspired by Pan-African rhetoric have continued throughout the twenty-first century as these and other demands continue to be made throughout ‘Global Africa.’<sup>18</sup>

### **Pan-Africanist Women and Africana Womanism**

Pan-Africanist organizations such as the UNIA and the BPP have a long history of being exclusionary towards Black women despite the fact that these women played important roles in Pan-Africanist politics. After Garvey’s death in 1940, his successor James R. Stewart established the newspaper the *New Negro World* which allowed “UNIA members to address various issues ranging from racial violence in the Jim Crow South to decolonization in Africa.” Although, majority of the contributing members were men, a number of Black nationalist women used the paper to express their political agency.<sup>19</sup> The 1940s saw increased concern about global racism, imperialism, and colonialism amongst activist and also hope amongst Black women as they made up 600,000 out of one million Black workers during the Second World War and actively sought to improve their socioeconomic conditions.<sup>20</sup> During this time, the UNIA and the *New*

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19. Hakin, *Pan-Africanism*, 218.

20. *Ibid.*, 219–220.

21. Keisha N. Blain, “‘We Want to Set the World on Fire’: Black Nationalist Women and Diasporic Politics in the *New Negro World*,” *Journal of Social History* 49, no.1 (2015): 195–196.

22. *Ibid.*, 197.

*Negro World* provided a connection between Black American and other members of the diaspora. However, ideas of Black liberation in the visions of Garvey and Stewart were masculinist and patriarchal—promoting Martin Anthony Summers’s notion of the “spirit of manliness” which positioned Black men as providers, producers, and respectable individuals.<sup>21</sup> This masculinist rhetoric founded in Eurocentric patriarchal ideas set conditions for Black women in the UNIA to be viewed as inherently submissive and subordinate which prevented them from being able to directly critique these masculinist ideas.<sup>22</sup> However, Black nationalist women still used their voices to advocate for liberation across the diaspora and bring attention to the various issues plaguing Black men and women in the United States—lynching being an issue of particular concern.

Despite the prominence of this masculinist rhetoric in Black nationalist circles, this rhetoric also has a long history of being criticized by Black women. Maria Stewart was among the first to criticize her male peers through her 1833 address “Address at the African Masonic Hall” which set the precedent for women in the UNIA to challenge masculinist beliefs.<sup>23</sup> For example, Theresa E. Young in her article “The Real Solution” lamented the racial violence and discrimination enacted on Black men, women, and children throughout the United States.<sup>24</sup> Black women continued to contribute to the *New Negro World*, reinforcing the notion of a ‘Global Africa’ and African unity. In 1942, Eustance G. Campbell called for global Black activist to initiate an immediate response against white supremacy, advocating for self-determination.<sup>25</sup> Campbell along with other Black nationalist women such as Ethel M. Collins

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23. Ibid., 198.

24. Ibid.

25. Cheney, *Brother's Gonna Work It Out*, 41.

26. Blain, “‘We Want to Set the World on Fire,’” 199–200.

27. Ibid., 201.

and Elaine Cooper continued to “emphasize the need to create a black nation state elsewhere” while Black male leaders such as W. E. B Du Bois encouraged participation in the war effort as a means of improving the political standing of Black Americans.<sup>26</sup> Much like early male Pan-Africanist leaders, these women advocated for emigration efforts as a means of escaping racial segregation and other forms of racial violence and discrimination. This was controversial in that it subscribed to Eurocentric ideas of colonization, specifically the notion of ‘civilizing’ Africans by African Americans. These women showed support for the reintroduction of the Greater Liberia Bill, originally introduced in 1939, which called for the government to provide a million dollars in federal aid for the relocation of African Americans to West Africa. Despite a clause that would implement U.S. military control over West African countries, Black nationalist women and men alike felt that this was a great opportunity to “control and Americanize native Africans,” further illuminating the at times contradictory beliefs of Pan-Africanists.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the masculinist and patriarchal ideas within a Pan-Africanist organization that positioned Black women as subordinate (perpetual mothers meant to carry the race forward and offer unquestioned support for male leadership), Black nationalist women engaged in “community feminism” in which they challenged these ideas. For example, Ethel Collins openly challenge Stewart’s leadership and executive decisions in 1943—leading to Stewart denouncing her and painting her as disloyal to the Pan-African cause.<sup>28</sup> Collins and other Black female nationalists continued to engage in a gender-conscious Pan-Africanism that challenged traditional Pan-Africanist thought throughout the twentieth century. This gender-conscious Pan-Africanism led Black female nationalists Audley Moore and Dara Abubakari (born Virginia

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28. *Ibid.*, 202.

29. *Ibid.*, 203.

30. *Ibid.*, 205.

Young) to their establishment of the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women (UAEW) in 1957—their activism reflecting the extent of the influence the UNIA in New Orleans had on their perspectives.<sup>29</sup> Through the UAEW, Moore and Abubakari supported Black women on welfare, restorative justice for convicted Black men, reparations, and emigration.<sup>30</sup> As key organizational leaders of the Republic of New Africa (RNA), Moore and Abubakari advocated not only for an autonomous Black nation state, but also “promoted women as key figures in the shaping of race relations, “encouraging them to support the RNA and its radical politics.<sup>31</sup> The contributions of Young, Campbell, Cooper, Collins and, in particular, Moore and Abubakari “propelled Pan-Africanism, diasporic connectivity, and African liberation struggles” which set the helped set the precedent for Afrocentricity and therefore Womanism, specifically Africana Womanism.<sup>32</sup>

Womanism and Afrocentricity are directly related in that both are concerned with the liberation, survival, harmony, and transcendence of all Black people. Both highlight race, class, and in the case of Womanism specifically, gender oppression. Africana Womanism, a term coined by Clenora Hudson-Weems in 1993, moves away from “the feminist-womanist tie by locating womanism in the words of Sojourner Truth (i.e., “Ain’t I a Woman”) and Afrocentric cultural values”—placing womanism in dialogue with Pan-Africanism and Pan-Africanist women.<sup>33</sup> Hudson-Weems problematizes feminism, Black feminism, and womanism by claiming that they are all generally exclusionary and fail to adequately represent the struggles and

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31. Ashley D. Farmer, “Mothers of Pan-Africanism: Audley Moore and Dara Abubakari,” *The Howard Journal of Communications* 13, no.1 (2016): 280.

32. *Ibid.*, 281–282.

33. *Ibid.*, 286.

34. *Ibid.*, 290.

35. Selepa T. Rodgers “Womanism and Afrocentricity: Understanding the Intersection,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 27, no.1–2 (February 2017): 37.

perspectives of Africana women—women of African descent. She defines Africana Womanism as:

An ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between the mainstream feminist, Black feminist, the African feminist, and the Africana womanist. (15)<sup>34</sup>

One of the principal conflicts between mainstream feminism and Africana womanism, is the acknowledgement that with respect to the latter it is not Black men that are the enemy, but rather the systems of domination that oppress both Black men, women, and children.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, Africana womanists recognize the historical exclusionary and discriminatory practices of predominantly white organization and acknowledge that race and gender are not the only intersections of oppression that affect Africana people globally.<sup>36</sup> The Africana womanist: is a self-namer; a self-definer; family-oriented; works together with Black men to achieve common goals; is not restricted to traditional gender roles; engages in sisterhood; strong; has positive companionships with Black men; respects herself; is authentic; spiritual; respectful of elders; adaptable; ambitious; and committed to mothering and nurturing.<sup>37</sup> Afrocentric values are evident in Hudson-Weems's descriptions of the Africana womanist, especially in its emphasis on community with Africana men, women, and children as a means of creating a strong sense of unity to combat the systems of domination that threaten the well-being of Africana people and increasing consciousness. In emphasizing Afrocentric values and attempting to be inclusive of

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36. Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 15.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

39. *Ibid.*, 35–49.

Africana issues globally, Hudson-Weems's Africana Womanism can be seen as a reinforcement of Pan-Africanist rhetoric—particularly the notion of 'African unity' and a 'Global Africa'.

### **Pan-Africanism and Afrocentricity in Hip-Hop/Rap and Neo-soul**

Melville J. Herskovits's 1941 study *The Myth of the Negro Past* examined the degree of 'Africaness' in different diasporic communities which led to his association with the concept of 'Africanisms'—a term used by Herskovits to describe African customs that were retained by African-Americans.<sup>38</sup> Africanisms describe the cultural traditions, beliefs, and religious practices enslaved Africans brought with them which were evolved because of their displacement and the subsequent discrimination they faced. Herskovits's concept of Africanisms was contested by other scholars who studied the African diaspora, particularly E. Franklin Frazier who believed that the trauma of slavery was so great that African American culture evolved independently of African cultural practices.<sup>39</sup> In 1955, M.G. Smith also offered a critique of Herskovits's study, claiming that his notions of what is and isn't 'African' and what is not are too general and immeasurable and that he failed to acknowledge the way cultural transmission occurs in more than one direction, and that the effects of imperialism are hardly negligible.<sup>40</sup> While arguably antiquated, the concept of Africanisms as it pertains to Pan-Africanism and its notion of a 'Global Africa' continues to offer a useful window for understanding how cultural transmission between various communities within the African diaspora reinforce and transform Pan-Africanist rhetoric.

Some of the ways in which members of the African diaspora have reshaped and reinforced this Pan-Africanist rhetoric is through the discussions and production of Black

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38. Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, (New York and London: Harper, 1941).

39. E Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1966).

42. Stephan Palmié, "Africanisms," *African Diaspora* 11, no. 1–2 (2019): 21–28; See: M.G. Smith, *A Framework for Caribbean Studies* (Kingston, Jamaica: University College of the West Indies, 1955).

popular music, namely Hip-Hop/Rap and Neo-soul/R&B. Scholars including Portia K. Maultsby have examined the Africanisms in African American music—in particular the invention of “blue notes” which were created as an outlet for creative and cultural expression after musicians were confronted with Western instruments and Western scale structures.<sup>41</sup> “Blue notes” (lowered third, fifth, and seventh scale degrees) laid the foundation for the invention of various genres of music including jazz, gospel, funk, Hip-Hop, and R&B. Music in the African American community serves a communal or social function and often includes social aspects such as call-and-response and audience participation either verbally or physically in the form of clapping or stomping. Maultsby argues that this communal aspect of music-making can be found in certain African cultural practices.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, Maultsby discusses three aspects of the Black music traditions originally defined by ethnomusicologist Mellonee Burnim which include: style of delivery, sound quality, and mechanics of delivery.<sup>43</sup> Although these categories were originally conceptualized for gospel music, they can still be applied to other forms of Black popular music—including Hip-Hop/Rap, R&B, and Neo Soul—and can be used to demonstrate that the mechanisms of cultural transmission happen not only from Africa outwards but within diasporic communities and across diasporic communities.

With respect to style of delivery in musical performances in Black American culture, this encompasses “body movements, facial expressions, and clothing” all of which are key elements that invite approval or critique of the audience, serve as a form of cultural expression, and can aid in displaying “intensity of emotion and total physical involvement.”<sup>44</sup> In gospel

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43. Portia K, Maultsby, “Africanisms in African American Music” *Africanisms in American Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Joseph Holloway (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 328.

44. *Ibid.*, 330.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*, 331.

performances, colorful robes and movement of the choir and lead singer(s) evoke verbal and physical responses from the audience and allow them to engage in the sense of “liveliness” created by the performers. This also helps in signifying the genre of music and type of performance which therefore provides the audience members information about the kind of participation expected in terms of dress and verbal and physical interactions. In Hip-Hop/Rap performances, artists may wear clothing, hairstyles, jewelry that are deemed stylish or even flamboyant. For example, the colorful and at times baggy outfits of Salt-N-Pepa, Queen Latifah, and TLC in the 1990s, as well as their dance moves and physical gestures contributed to the overall images of the performers themselves as Hip-Hop artists.

Sound quality refers to the important role of played by timbre in Black musical performances in which sounds vocalists make are not necessarily meant to sounds “beautiful” in a conventional sense, but rather to communicate emotion and add color by manipulating “range, texture, and shading.”<sup>45</sup> In gospel music, this manipulation has a variety of names, including: hollering, hooting, and squalling. Approval of these sounds is communicated through facial expressions, physical movements, and verbal expressions.<sup>46</sup> In Neo-soul or R&B performances, vocal manipulation and distortion is not as pronounced as it is in gospel music, yet the display of vocal range, raspy vocal timbres, and intricate, melismatic runs found in the music of Lauryn Hill, Whitney Houston, Lalah Hathaway, and many others is often met with similar audience reactions as in gospel performances.

Finally, the mechanics of delivery allow for different interpretations of the same song in order to ensure that performances are not monotonous, something that helps engage the audience and further encourage participation. Different styles of delivery include manipulation of time and

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47. Ibid., 331.

48. Ibid., 334.



rhythm through improvisation and ornamentation, as well as by adding texture through repetition, hand-clapping, the layering of voices, instrumental interludes, and call-and-response.<sup>47</sup> Both Hip-Hop and R&B performers encourage audience participation by asking audience members to clap, stomp, or engage in call-and-response—reinforcing the communal aspect of Black popular music and creating a music-making process that is constantly evolving.

The presence of the Pan-Africanist concept of Afrocentricity in Hip-Hop culture is another way that Africanisms, as they pertain to cultural transmission and the creation of a ‘Global Africa’, reinforces Pan-Africanist rhetoric. Afrocentricity can be examined through the lyrics of Hip-Hop/Rap songs and “seeks to bring about harmony and transcendence in the African American community.”<sup>48</sup> Cummings and Roy identify three stages in which rap has evolved in its increasing engagement with Afrocentricity: banter and self-assertion, social critique, and experimentation with other genres.<sup>49</sup> With its often political and sometimes controversial, subject matter Hip-Hop/Rap music provides a space where Black American youth can find community, express themselves, engage in Black radicalism, and contest structures of domination. The roots of rap music in African cultural traditions can be seen in the use of “rhetorical devices such as proverbs, idioms, repetitions, sing-songs, environmental images, metaphors, and folklore among others.”<sup>50</sup> From this perspective, the rap artist can be seen as akin to the African griot or village oracle, storyteller, and historian—further emphasizing the influence of African cultural traditions in Black popular music. Furthermore, the African concept of *nommo* or the “supernatural power of the spoken word” has been identified by Afrocentric

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49. Ibid., 335.

50. Melbourne S. Cummings and Abhik Roy, “Manifestations of Afrocentricity in Rap Music,” *The Howard Journal of Communications* 13, no. 1 (2002): 60.

51. Ibid., 62.

52. Ibid., 61.

thought as a key element of rap music in that it provides a stage for harmony and balance to take place.<sup>51</sup> The use of *nommo* in rap music can employ various mechanics of delivery including call-and-response and repetition for the purposes of intensification and communal participation. For example, the repetition of “so fresh and so clean, clean” in their song “So Fresh, So Clean” increasingly encourages audience participation.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Too Short’s “Blow The Whistle” encourages audiences to yell out the word “bitch” when he asks “what’s my favorite word?” *Nommo* can be used culturally and politically, such as in the repetition and pro-Black subject matter in Queen Latifah’s “U.N.I.T.Y.”—meant to create harmony and transcendence between Black men and women and bring awareness to the circumstances surrounding the strained relationships between both groups.

The manifestation of Afrocentricity in Neo-soul is most clearly seen in its indebtedness to the soul genre. Artists such as D’Angelo, Maxwell, and Erykah Badu acknowledge their cultural lineage by engaging with Black music traditions of the past such as soul, jazz, and even gospel.<sup>53</sup> Neo-soul is a genre based on hybridity whose music blends the past with the present and engages in cross-generational cultural transmission. Black music traditions commonly incorporate “dense configurations of independent, but closely related rhythms, harmonic and nonharmonic percussive sounds, especially drum sounds” which Neo-soul artists and rap artists alike draw upon.<sup>54</sup> It is also not uncommon for the voice to be an integral part of music making, usually involving melismatic runs, repetition, and timbral manipulation. In addition to connecting with African American culture, artists also may choose to evoke images of Africa both physically and

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53. Ibid., 62.

54. Ibid., 66.

55. Sarah Fila-Bakabdio, “‘Pick Your Afro Daddy’: Neo Soul and the Making of Diasporan Identities,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 54, no. 216 (2014): 925.

56. Rose, *Black Noise*, 66.

within their songs. Neo-soul is therefore a celebration of Black musical traditions and therefore Black people across the diaspora. Erykah Badu is an artist who expresses Afrocentric values not only through her music, but also through her appearance as she is commonly seen wearing kente cloth and donning protective hairstyles. Her discussion of ancient Egypt as a way of connecting with Africa and creating a sense of ‘African unity’ in her debut album *Baduizm* signifies the presence of Pan-Africanist rhetoric with the Neo-soul genre.<sup>55</sup> D’Angelo’s “Africa” achieves the same result by emphasizing cultural continuity and a collective Black identity in his praise of Africa as “the motherland.”<sup>56</sup>

The globalization of Hip-Hop culture and therefore the Rap genre is another site in which Afrocentricity takes place. Through globalization, Rap, along with other traditionally African American genres, is now a musical tradition that Black people across the African Diaspora participate in. Rap artists in Africa connect their artistic lineage to both American and African artists which is indicative of the way in which the genre has undergone transformation as it gains a new sense of meaning or importance as it has made its way through the African Diaspora.<sup>57</sup> Youth from the Caribbean and Latin America also transform the genre by combining its key elements (polyrhythm, couplet rhymes, etc.) with their own cultural traditions.<sup>58</sup> The globalization of Hip-Hop culture and Rap music “illustrates the power of the language of rap and the salience of the stories of oppression and creative resistance,” connecting members of the African Diaspora by reinforcing the notion of a ‘Global Africa’ and providing a space for cross-generation cultural transmission to take place on a larger scale.<sup>59</sup> Rap as a genre thus becomes

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57. Fila-Bakabadio., “‘Pick Your Afro Daddy,’ 927.

58. Ibid., 929.

59. Halifu Osumare, “Global Hip-Hop and the African Diaspora.” In *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, ed. Harry Justin Elam and Kennel Jackson (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 271.

60. Ibid., 273.

61. Rose, *Black Noise*, 19.

negotiated and renegotiated as members of the African Diaspora engage with it and it becomes influenced by the variety of unique cultural identities members hold.

Cross-generational cultural transmission can be seen through the use of sampling '70s music in Hip-Hop/Rap songs and the mention of Pan-Africanist leaders.<sup>60</sup> For example, N.W.A's "Fuck Tha Police" samples James Brown's "Funky President (People It's Bad)" as a means of engaging with political issues of their time. Their use of Brown's political track transforms the tune and gives it a new context that both pays homage to the struggles of their predecessors and highlights their own struggles. Furthermore, other political tracks like Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise" included clips of Pan-Africanist leaders speaking, in this case Malcom X, as a means of connecting with previous generations and making their own political statements. This cross-generation cultural transmission is a type of Africanism used within a specific diasporic community which Herskovits failed to recognize in his study of African diasporic communities. Soundtracks range from a variety of Blaxploitation films were also a source of sampling for these artists which typically involve a departure from the songs original context or meaning. For example, Jay-Z's "Reservoir Dogs" samples the "guitar solo and rhythm from Isaac Hayes' "Theme to Shaft" in which he portrays the character of Shaft as more aggressive than he is in the actual film, adapting the context of the original song to fit the, at times, hypermasculinist content of Rap songs.<sup>61</sup> The Civil Rights Era was seen as a period of resistance which was reinforced through soul music, whether it was written as part of a Blaxploitation film or not. Rap artists have a history of using sampling from this time period as a way of connecting to the generations before them and evolving the genre of Rap itself.

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62. Errol A. Henderson, "Black Nationalism and Rap Music," *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 3 (1996): 311–312.

63. Joana Demers, "Sampling the 1970s in Hip-Hop," *Popular Music* 22, no. 1 (2003): 49.

In addition to cross-generational cultural transmission, the concept of Africanisms or a ‘Global Africa’ is evident in the invention of Afrobeat by Fela Anikulapo Kuti in the late-1960s. While in Lagos, Nigeria, Kuti began composing and recording highlife songs and “hybrids incorporating elements of rock, blues, and other popular genres along with jazz” at the same time the soul music of James Brown was becoming popular amongst West African audiences.<sup>62</sup> After moving to Los Angeles in hopes of embarking on a tour that would increase his popularity, Kuti with the help of drummer Tony Allen developed rhythms and grooves reminiscent of the ones employed by James Brown in much of his music. For example, both Allen and Brown’s drummers emphasized the “and” of four, placed a strong accent on beat one, and used sixteenth-note subdivisions. However, unlike Brown’s drum patterns, Allen did not include a snare backbeat on beats two and four, balanced syncopation by including it on both the first and second halves of the measure, and used more bass drum which is “reflective of traditional West African practices in which the largest drum is often the lead drum”—aiding Kuti’s vision of creating a more “African” sound in his music.<sup>63</sup> Kuti’s creation of Afrobeat is a form of Black nationalism and Pan-Africanism given the inspiration drawn from Black American soul music and traditional music practices from his own culture. Cultural transmission thus happens not only within diasporic communities and from Africa outwards, but also occurs from diasporic communities to the continent—creating a sense of unity of African and African-descendant people, in other worlds a new form of a ‘Global Africa’.

Kuti’s creation of Afrobeat can be viewed as a source of inspiration for the genre Afrobeats, popularized by British DJs in the 2000s. Afrobeats is a genre that draws from

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64. Alex Stewart, “Make It Funky: Fela Kuti, James Brown, and the Invention of the Afrobeat,” *American Studies* 52, no. 4 (2013): 102.

65. Stewart, “Make It Funky,” 110.

“Afrobeat, hip hop, dancehall, hiplife, R&B, pop, and highlife and rap.”<sup>64</sup> Increasing popularity of Afrobeats in the UK and in the U.S. allows for the Afro-diasporic communities that live there to have an organic connection to Africa and to Black musical traditions. Furthermore, Afrobeats is a genre that is important to consider when analyzing Pan-Africanist rhetoric in Black popular music. Afrobeats is a hybrid genre that heavily relies on the near constant cross-cultural transmission that occurs in the African Diapsora. Its hybrid nature also reshapes the notion of a ‘Global Africa,’ making clear the way Afro-diasporic communities influence and learn from each other. In other words, the Afrobeats genre is a clear example of multidimensionality of Black musical traditions and therefore Blackness.

### **Afrocentricity in NAO’s and Little Simz’s Music**

NAO and Little Simz’s participation in Black popular music-making through R&B and Hip-Hop/Rap exemplifies the way in which cultural transmission can occur between different communities within the African diaspora—in this case between Black American musicians and Black musicians from the UK. NAO’s *And Then Life Was Beautiful* and Little Simz’s *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert* both engage with Pan-Africanist rhetoric, including Africana womanism and ‘African unity’. NAO’s song “Amazing Grace” takes a lyric from a traditional Gospel song and borrows musical aspects the genre. For example, she emphasizes the “and” of beat 2 in her melodic phrases by raising the pitch of the note she is singing. Simultaneously, she is supported by a chorus of vocal layering that doubles the end of her phrase lyrical phrase for added texture and intensification. Additionally, the end of her phrases in which she is not emphasizing the off-beat is answered by a male chorus that performs a melismatic run on the last word or syllable of her previous phrase—creating a sort of call-and-response. The simple instrumentation is

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66. Christian Adofo, “Afrobeats (Yes, with an S),” in *A Quick Ting on Afrobeats* (London: Jacaranda Books, 2022), 138.

reminiscent of Gospel music, NAO in this case chooses to use guitar and percussion as the main drivers of the tempo while using her voice as a rhythmic driver. The emphasis on her voice as the lead instrument with the guitar and percussion as supporting players serves to highlight the vocal line in a way that is not uncommon in Gospel music. Her engagement with the Gospel tradition is an example of the way artists across the African Diaspora can reshape Black music traditions and participate in cultural transmission.

Several songs on NAO's album emphasizes the bass drum, which is common in traditional West African musical practices in which the larger drum takes the lead. "Antidote" featuring Adekunle Gold is an Afrobeats song that features key elements to the genre including a strong emphasis on: the bass drum, the "and" of four, and beat one. Additionally, the repetition of certain syllables in the chorus on the word "antidote" and her manipulation of timbre on vowel sounds with each repetition reflect the 'Africanisms' in this song, as detailed by Maultsby, which fall under the categories sound quality and mechanics of delivery. This manipulation of timbre on the last vowel of the word "antidote" adds further percussive elements to the song and put emphasis on the word itself which is a technique that can be found in gospel music and later soul music, all of which help to inspire Afrobeat genre and subsequently Afrobeats. NAO's engagement with this genre provides an example of how different Black music traditions continue to be a source of inspiration and undergo evolution with the African Diaspora—creating a rich sense of collective cultural identity.

Little Simz's "Two Worlds Apart" is in dialogue with older Rap songs of the 1990s that engage in cross-generational cultural transmission by sampling Smokey Robinson's "The Agony and The Ecstasy." The mechanics of her delivery, much like NAO, include repetition of the same phrases, words, and rhythmic structures elucidates the presence of Afrocentricity in Hip-

Hop/Rap. Furthermore, the cyclical or repetitive nature of the sample can also be interpreted as an Africanism. While both songs are neither is political nor engages in social critique, they both discuss the struggles of romantic love—falling in line with the tradition of Rap artists sampling songs that relate to the subject matter of their own songs. Sampling a song with similar subject matter is a way in which rap artists connect with previous generations and bridges the gap between different genres of music. By engaging with this tradition, Little Simz’s “Two Worlds Apart” can be seen as reinforcing Afrocentric rhetoric and the notion of a ‘Global Africa’ as she is participating in a musical tradition that originates from elsewhere in the African diaspora. The influence of an African American artists on Little Simz provides an example of the way cultural transmission occurs more like a web—therefore evolving the one-dimensional concept of ‘Africanism’ explored by Herskovits.

This multidimensionality of cultural transmission and the notion of a collective Black identity can also be seen through the songs “Point and Kill” and “Fear No Man.” Both songs have roots in the Ghanaian Highlife music genre that, since its emergence in the 1950s, has spread to western Nigeria. This genre, much like Neo-soul, is a hybrid genre that draws inspiration from not only local music traditions and African American jazz but also Western European music which can be seen through the incorporation of Western instruments. The highlife genre was a genre that inspired Fela Kuti’s invention of Afrobeat as he experimented with Nigerian music and Black American soul music. The Highlife influence in these two songs can be heard in the polyrhythmic drumming, guitar loops have an improvisatory quality, repetitive vocal parts, and horns. Little Simz incorporation of her own musical heritage into a rap album reveals the way in which cultural transmission has the potential to expand the parameters of what signifies as one genre or another. Through the process of cultural transmission, it becomes clear that identity and



culture are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated as artists like Little Simz continues to explore a variety of Black music traditions as a form of artistic expression.

Although the original conception of a 'Global Africa' has incited controversy in that its support of Eurocentric notions of 'civilizing' Africans and Black colonization ignores not only the wants and needs of native Africans and the cultural variation on the continent, the notion of a collective Black identity is not absent from Black political circles nor Black music. Pan-Africanist rhetoric has undergone considerable transformation and has begun to value cultural sensitivity and different the different cultural contributions of members of the African Diaspora. This transformation can be seen through the music of Black artists across the Diaspora including NAO and Little Simz. With technological advancements and the globalization of Black music traditions, a greater global consciousness has been achieved within the African diaspora. This consciousness is revealed through the cultural transmission of genres including Rap, Neo-soul/R&B, and Afrobeats. Cultural transmission, specifically through music traditions, is a multidimensional site that allows members of the African diaspora negotiate and renegotiate a collective Black identity based upon input and influence of various diasporic communities.

The notion of a collective Black identity, especially in the early years of Pan-Africanism, runs the risk of being one-dimensional and ignoring the different intersectional considerations of the diaspora, including gender, class, and even nationality. However, the participation of Black musicians across the diaspora provides a different view in which the contributions of different communities outside of the Western world are acknowledged and valued. NAO and Little Simz's engagement with Black music traditions that they do not necessarily have direct ancestral ties to creates a space in which collective identity is not simply created by one's level of 'Africaness', as in Herskovits' study, but by an engagement with and acknowledgement of those traditions no

matter where they may originate from. Collective identity is therefore in a constant state of becoming rather than something stagnant. The very notions of Blackness and Black music are constantly undergoing transformation as new formulations, ideas, and influences make their way around the African diaspora. The various communities of the diaspora and different cultural contributions of each community makes for a rich collective Black identity not strictly defined by marginalization or a one-dimensional view of Blackness.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis I hope to have illuminated the ways in which reshaping misconceptions of Black womanhood relies heavily on the ability to exercise agency, an ability that can be observed with particular clarity in much of the Rap and R&B music produced by Black women. The main questions I aimed to answer were: how does music allow Black women to change narratives surrounding Black womanhood? Where do Black women in the African Diaspora outside of the U.S. fit into this conversation? How might Pan-Africanism be useful in examining cultural exchange and transmission within the African Diaspora as it pertains to Rap and R&B music? My choice to use NAO and Little Simz and their most recent works as case studies was a deliberate one. Through a discussion of their music, I have shown not only the way their work is in dialogue with Rap and R&B conventions as Black women, but also the ways in which these artists reshaped these genres by breaking established conventions. For example, NAO's heavy use of the bass drum, synthesizers (reminiscent of electropop), and Afrobeats in her album allows her to expand on R&B musical conventions by breaking free from preconceived notions of the genre. Similarly, Little Simz's incorporation of orchestral and choral arrangements and Highlife music challenges the conventions of the Rap genre.

NAO and Little Simz, while engaging with established musical forms whose roots lie in Black American musical genres simultaneously reshape the genres by adding elements from different genres of music, including elements from their own cultural heritages. Furthermore, in the exercising of their agency as Black women and as members of the African Diaspora, NAO

and Little Simz renegotiate notions of Black womanhood in a way that is both in dialogue with their Black American peers and contributes something new. NAO and Little Simz engage with womanist and Hip-Hop feminist rhetoric and cross-generational cultural transmission while also making clear the ways in which their identities as Black Londoners shape their relationship to Black womanhood and Rap and R&B more broadly. This is evident in the ways in which they deviate from the conventions of the genres and find their own voice as members of the African Diaspora. Moreover, their music helps to position the notion of a “Global Africa” as site in which its members shape and reshape Blackness and, in this context, Black womanhood.

NAO and Little Simz reaffirm Black women as self-definers, self-namers, and othermothers. Indeed, the lyrics of *And Then Life Was Beautiful* and *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert* engage with a variety of topics and can both be viewed as a celebration of Black women, a celebration of the self, and a tool to advocate for liberation and empowerment. These albums challenge the negative stereotypes about Black women and Black womanhood by showcasing the inherent multidimensionality in Black womanhood through womanist rhetoric. NAO offers Black women more options in her refusal of struggle love and support for self-advocacy while Little Simz empowers Black women across the African Diaspora and rejects the notion of Black women as intrinsically “loud” or “ghetto” through her identification with introversion. Neither women reclaim negative stereotypes, instead choosing to create a space in which their listeners who identify as Black women are afforded their full humanity including feelings of vulnerability, softness, beauty, and even exhaustion. All of these feelings have been denied to Black women historically by dominant society and, at times, Black men. Therefore, NAO and Little Simz create a safe space for Black women, a tradition founded in the music of Black women across the African Diaspora.

As current artists in the Rap and R&B genres, their music is important in discussions of the globalization of Black popular music and the subsequent contributions members across the African Diaspora bring to Black vernacular culture. The value of NAO's *And Then Life Was Beautiful* and Little Simz's *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert* lies in its contribution to historical expressions of race and gender in Black popular music. Both of these albums are in dialogue with Black musical forms of the past, including but not limited to gospel and soul. Additionally, their own creative contributions to the genre keep those musical forms relevant and keep them in dialogue with previous generations. In describing the value of this music, I resist the urge to discuss whether or not it is complex, nor do I assign value based on its repetitiveness or lack thereof. Scholars and critics have historically deemed African and Afro-Diasporic musics, namely Jazz, as having less value for their perceived lack of complexity, repetitive nature, and circumscribed harmonic language. For this reason, I have not described the music of NAO and Little Simz in terms of western European standards of musical value nor do have I attempted to prove they do not fall within those stereotypes. In fact, to do so would be antithetical to my thesis which posits Rap and R&B as important cultural forms in their own right.

My study of Black women's participation in Black cultural forms, in particular music, was an intentional undertaking in order to combat the gaps within musicology as it pertains to Black female musicians. Given that Afro-Diasporic studies Rap and R&B remain few and far in-between, especially in connection with issues of gender, this thesis represents a modest step in combating the silencing of Black women's voices, acknowledging the contributions of women to these genres, and assessing the impact of the globalization of Black popular music. This study provides an overview of the prominence of Black musical forms in Afro-Diasporic communities

and highlights the importance of this research in expanding notions of Blackness and Black music, which is still understudied in the field.

Further research on this topic might aspire to incorporate the voices of Black women outside of the West in addition to Black queer women's contributions to the genre. Women's contributions to the Rap and R&B genres are largely understudied in Afro-Diasporic communities outside of the West. Moreover, scholars may also wish to include Afro-Caribbean and African contributions to the genre. Additionally, much of early Black feminist rhetoric engages in queer theory as a form of exercising sexual agency.<sup>1</sup> The queerness of Black womanhood lies in the history of Black women not fitting into "the female ideal" which was reserved for white women. Furthermore, Black women were neither viewed as being woman nor human, instead being compared to animals and described as "monstrous."<sup>2</sup> This context has the potential to strengthen this study in that it provides further context of historical misrepresentations of Black womanhood and also opens the door for more research on Black queer women's representation of Black womanhood in Rap and R&B.

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1. Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 301-320.

2. Beverly Guy-Shetfall, "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Imagination," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong*, 13-35.

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VITA

**Alonya L. Castillo**

**Education**

**BA in Music**

(Ethnomusicology, Theory, History and Composition)  
University of California, Davis

June 2020

**MM in Musicology**

University of Mississippi, anticipated graduation date:

Dec 2022

**University Involvement**

**Volunteer**

UC Davis LGBTQIA Resource Center

Apr 2017 – Jun 2017

**Awards and Honors**

**Eileen Southern Scholar**

American Musicological Society

Sep 2022

**Outstanding Graduate Student Award in Musicology**

University of Mississippi

Apr 2022

**DEI Award for Best Presentation**

University of Mississippi  
GSC Research and Creative Achievement Symposium

March 2022

**Graduate Teaching Assistantship**

University of Mississippi

May 2022 – Dec 2022

**Excellence in Inclusivity Fellowship and Scholarship**

University of Mississippi

Jan 2021 – May 2022

**Performance of *Love, Loss, Rebirth* (Original Work for String Quartet)**

UC Davis Undergraduate Composer's Concert

May 2019