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On: 20 August 2014, At: 16:23

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwap20>

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Published online: 20 May 2014.

To cite this article: Jillian Hernandez (2014) Carnal teachings: raunch aesthetics as queer feminist pedagogies in Yo! Majesty's hip hop practice, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 24:1, 88-106, DOI: [10.1080/0740770X.2014.904130](https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2014.904130)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2014.904130>

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Carnal teachings: raunch aesthetics as queer feminist pedagogies in Yo! Majesty's hip hop practice

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This essay puts forward a notion of “raunch aesthetics,” theorizing raunch as an aesthetic, performative, and vernacular practice: an explicit mode of sexual expression that transgresses norms of privacy and respectability. Raunch aesthetics describe creative practices that often blend humor and sexual explicitness to launch cultural critiques, generate pleasure for minority audiences, and affirm queer lives. The author activates her formulation of raunch in analyzing Yo! Majesty, a hip hop group comprised of black female emcees who openly describe their sexual desire for women, and explores how the queer youth of color she works with have responded to their music. Working beyond the unexamined moralisms that give critiques of raunch culture their legitimacy, the author argues that Yo! Majesty's raunch aesthetics transmit queer and feminist teachings. While celebrating carnal pleasures, these artists critique heterosexism, subvert narratives about the incompatibility of belief in Christ and queer sexualities, and trouble notions concerning the emancipation of coming out of the closet and declaring a stable homosexual identity. In demonstrating how raunch aesthetics generate consciousness raising, the author discusses how her youth participants critically read and consume hip hop while negotiating unwieldy meanings of sexuality and gender presentation.

Keywords: raunch; aesthetic; pedagogy; black; queer; feminist; hip hop; Yo Majesty; sexuality; youth; consumption; gender non-conformity; masculinity; religion; spirituality; race

Yo! Majesty is a hip hop group based in the Tampa, Florida, area that is comprised of black female emcees Jwl B, Shon B, and Shunda K,¹ who openly express their sexual desire for women (Figure 1). Their recordings *Yo* (2006), *Kryptonite Pussy* (2008), and *Futuristically Speaking ... Never Be Afraid* (2008) combine the sounds of Southern crunk rap with Miami bass and electronic music. In 2013, after a hiatus during which Shunda K produced her solo album *The Most Wanted* (2011), Jwl B and Shunda K have re-grouped as Yo! Majesty and toured across the US.

The opening shot for their 2009 music video “Don't Let Go”² zooms in on a black woman asleep at her desk, surrounded by scribbled on Post-it notes and documents. She

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Figure 1. Yo! Majesty: Left to right, Jwl B, Shon B, Shunda K. Source: Image courtesy of Jim Lucio.

abruptly awakens, disoriented, and leaves the vacant office, visibly tired and overworked. She walks out onto the streets of a nondescript urban area in the UK donning a conservative and concealing outfit: black trousers, a loose-fitting pastel pink blouse, and black jacket. After strolling through a red telephone booth, the character magically undergoes an instant transformation in which her office attire is supplanted with a skin-tight, vinyl, full-body magenta cat suit that reveals her voluptuous figure. Now wearing spiky heels and a top that accentuates her cleavage, she bumps music from a large boom box she carries on her shoulder. The video follows the woman as she spends the evening suggestively dancing with delight in unorthodox venues such as a nail salon, bridal dress shop, tanning salon, and yoga studio. She infiltrates spaces where women discipline their bodies to fit normative standards of attractiveness and infuses them with raunchy revelry.

Men are notably absent from the spaces where the protagonist enters. Her lip licking, titty shaking, and booty clapping seem to be performed for her own enjoyment, and that of the women and girls she encounters. She incites them to stop worrying about their appearances and enjoy their bodies by dancing and having fun. In the beauty parlor that is frequented by black women and girls, the character's hypersexual presence is initially met with discomfort, disdain, and coyness. However, the patrons and beauticians, some of whom are Asian, cannot resist watching her perform and eventually join in, dancing, smiling, even waving directly at the camera. Their gestures and gazes toward the outside of the frame position the viewer as part of this homosocial, multiracial, and gleeful gathering.

The "Don't Let Go" video closes with a scene in which the protagonist disrupts a classical figure drawing class. She climbs over and dances atop the white female model and soon the students in the room, all of whom are women, start to dance together, draw more freely, and remove their clothing. The femme's raunchy performance undermines economies of visual spectacle for normative male consumption. For example, the anti-heterosexual narrative of the video is markedly articulated in a scene where the character playfully lays a kiss upon the lips of a woman trying on a wedding gown at a bridal store. The

character serves as Yo! Majesty's superhero of queerness, infusing heterosexist spaces with corporeal *jouissance*.

The protagonist of Yo! Majesty's video can be situated within Kara Keeling's theorization of the black femme in her book *The Witch's Flight*. In examining how the cinematic image of the black femme has disturbed normative valuations of race, gender, and sexuality in films such as *Set It Off* (1996), Keeling (2007, 9) advances that the figure of the black femme "exists on the edge of the visible and the invisible, serving as a portal through which present (im)possibilities might appear." The femme in "Don't Let Go" exhibits the capacity of moving through portals, as symbolized by her movement through the red telephone booth, and in the video she augurs dissident, or presently "impossible" forms of sociality between women across age and race. According to Keeling, the figure of the black femme valorizes butch-femme erotic and social formations, and affirms the existence of gender non-conforming women of color more broadly. The murder of the gender non-conforming black girl Sakia Gunn in 2003, and the perilous spaces occupied by such bodies in the contemporary normative regime, makes creative projects such as Yo! Majesty's crucial to mapping the "radical Elsewheres" that are signaled by Keeling's black femme (2007, 1).⁵

Yo! Majesty's hip hop critiques sexism and affirms the lives of women, such as sex workers, who are often judged as deviant "hos." The lyrics of "Don't Let Go" celebrate a woman who is labeled a ho because of the sexy way she dances in the club. The chorus urges her to ignore these insults and sustain her connection to the music and its pleasures: "Don't let go, let the music touch your soul / Don't let go, break your back 'till you lose control / Don't let go, let the music set you free / Don't let go, shake your body so we can see." Although many mainstream hip hop songs prompt women to move their bodies and set themselves "free" to the music, the voices articulating such messages are often male, heterosexual, and sexist. In "Don't Let Go," the voices are those of queer, masculine body-presenting black women, and the lyrics are crafted in opposition to the denigration and sexual policing of women. I aim to demonstrate how what I call Yo! Majesty's "raunch aesthetics" perform pedagogies that transmit queer and feminist teachings. I define pedagogy as a mode and style of instruction and consciousness raising. Like the imaginative markings crafted on the pages of the sexually liberated art students in the "Don't Let Go" video, raunch is theorized in my argument as a perverse aesthetic craft. "Perverse" here indicates a flagrant, and explicitly sexual deviation from the normal, and a critical avowal of hypersexuality (Shimizu 2007). The perversity of raunch aesthetics defies dominant regimes of respectable and heteronormative sexual expression, and presents possibilities for marginalized subjects to experience pleasure and affirmation.

School of raunch

Knowledge production and transmission has been a major component of hip hop practice since its emergence in 1980s New York City. The instructive storytelling of pioneers like KRS-One and Slick Rick enlightened audiences with cautionary narratives that aimed to steer them away from violence, and Afrocentric histories were shared in order to raise critical consciousness, righteous anger, and social action. Yo! Majesty's hip hop both stems and deviates from this context in that their teachings are articulated by and for queer, gender

queer, and female-identifying audiences. They school listeners in ways similar to that of the lesbian Afro-Cuban hip hop group Las Krudas (Saunders 2009), who launch feminist and antiracist critiques, but the knowledge Yo! Majesty drops is often articulated in tandem with messages that celebrate God and strip-club culture. Drawing from Ruth Nicole Brown and Chamara Jewel Kwakye's framing of hip hop feminist pedagogy as "a way of asking questions about and speaking to the discrepancies and the contradictions that exist in the material lives of young people" (2012, 5), I center youth narratives to demonstrate how queer and feminist consciousness raising can be conducted through raunchy sexual expression.

The pedagogical work performed by Yo! Majesty's raunch aesthetics were recognized by the young queer women of color I worked with at the non-profit organization Pridelines Youth Services in Miami, Florida. Some of these youth identified as bisexual, others as lesbian, and a few did not identify. They considered themselves female, and their gender presentation varied from masculine to androgynous to feminine. Sometimes they combined, or moved in and out of these sartorial modes. I engaged with them as a researcher and as an educator of Women on the Rise!,⁴ an outreach program of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami, that I developed in 2004 in response to the growing number of girls entering the juvenile justice system in Florida. The program has since expanded to engage hundreds of girls and young women a year in art making and critical conversations about gender, embodiment, sexuality, race, and class in partnership with educational and social justice organizations throughout Miami. The working class African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Latina young women I worked with at Pridelines for two years frequently talked about hip hop amongst themselves.

During a Women on the Rise! workshop on hip hop in 2013, I asked my Pridelines students if they were familiar with Yo! Majesty and none of them had heard of the group. Interested in what they would think, I played the "Don't Let Go" video from my laptop. It was projected onto a wall in a Pridelines conference room that served as our makeshift art studio. While it played, the group of five snapped pictures of the projection with their smartphones and posted the stills on Instagram and Facebook. The video made them laugh, and several expressed that they found the black femme in the tight pink cat suit sexy.

Q, who identifies as African American and lesbian, enjoyed the video, and commented: "She [the protagonist] was kinda raunchy but she was like, goofy with it. You see her figure but she was so goofy with it." Beth, who identified herself as bisexual and "white Hispanic," contrasted Yo! Majesty's work with mainstream hip hop videos in which women portray highly affected tough and sexy attitudes that appear to conform to male desires. In lauding Yo! Majesty's feminist approach, she said: "It was more of a turn on because she was so goofy with it." The blend of explicit sexuality and humor my interlocutors at Pridelines described as raunchy generated both sexual desire (for the femme) and cultural critique (of mainstream hip hop). This is Yo! Majesty's teaching at work. The video prompted them – through the performance of the black femme, lyrics, and beats – to contrast it with mass mediated hip hop production. It also "taught" them alternative modes of sexiness that do not preclude humor. Their enjoyment of the video led them to make a record of a performance they felt to be unique and significant, and to circulate it via social networks for consumption by other queer youth. My students taught me something,

and I build upon their project of archiving and theorizing queer feminist woman of color performance here. Our pedagogical exchanges, from student to teacher and vice versa, demonstrated the possibilities and politics of Yo! Majesty's work.

In this essay I analyze the modes through which Yo! Majesty transmits queer and feminist teachings through the raunch aesthetics of their hip hop practice and interview statements. Although their work does not have a mainstream audience, I argue that it is a critical archive of queer black female feelings that merits documentation (Cvetkovich 2003). This archive could be mobilized to engage queer youth of color in critical and creative consciousness raising. I draw upon my discussions with youth at Pridelines about hip hop, queer sexualities, and gendered embodiment in assessing the cultural politics of Yo! Majesty's work. My engagement with them raises questions regarding the visibility and valuations of non-normative sexualities in contemporary hip hop, and reveals the complex ways in which queer youth of color negotiate music consumption and issues of gender non-conformity more broadly. I will elaborate my conception of raunch aesthetics and attend to the ways in which Yo! Majesty expands thinking about the role of spirituality in queer of color politics and subjectivities.

The analyses I present here are also animated by a concert I attended in Brooklyn, New York, in June 2009 at the Music Hall of Williamsburg in which Shunda K of Yo! Majesty performed alongside the queer musician Peaches. They collaborated on the song "Billionaire" for Peaches' 2009 album *I Feel Cream*. The crowd gave Shunda K rousing applause as she came onstage and recited her rhymes:

Lick that pussy just right, oh you don't know this hand don't fire dynamite, that's me, outta mind and outta sight/ Lead that pussy up, down/ No offense, bring that hook back in and watch me act a clown just like/ The mic stand, come up to the show, in case you didn't know/ Now turn around don't fuck this up/ I got you girl, take off your clothes, damn!

I was thrilled to see the performers work the queer audience into a raunch-fueled frenzy through their fast-paced performance and explicit lyrics – dancing, bouncing, singing, rhyming, and sweating.

Towards a theory of raunch aesthetics

"Raunch" is a term that is commonly used, but rarely defined. It is a concept undertheorized in gender, sexuality, and critical race studies. I recently conducted a search on the topic and of the few articles that emerged in the results that contained the key word "raunch," none conceptualized the term or operationalized it in analysis (Nash and Bain 2007; Bale 2011; Bishop 2012; Mitchell 2012). The word was used in this literature as evocative shorthand to describe explicit, unromantic, and poor/working class sexualities.

An influential engagement with raunch has been Ariel Levy's 2005 book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. Levy critiques what she identifies as a trend of women rejecting feminism and embracing heterosexist expressions of sexuality such as *Girls Gone Wild* videos. She claims that women who perform in and enjoy raunchy pleasures believe they are demonstrating agency when in fact they are victims of false consciousness who contribute to their own subjection. Levy does not flesh out

her conception of raunch. Rather, she treats it as a readily identified, degenerate sexual aesthetic and point of departure for launching critiques of popular representations she feels are damaging to women.

Levy ignores the dynamics of race and class in the text, and seems to be primarily concerned with white women. It is crucial to recognize that notions of raunch draw upon racialized constructions of class, and vice versa. Laura Kipnis theorizes the class politics of feminist disgust with porn, the kind of disgust articulated by Levy. She analyzes how the pornographic magazine *Hustler* levels critiques at bourgeois moralism through depicting grotesque bodies that are the antithesis of the glamorized figures in publications such as *Playboy*. The bodies in *Hustler* exhibit pubic hair, emit body fluids, have gaping orifices, and are sometimes gaseous. In troubling standard assumptions regarding “negative” depictions of women in sexually explicit productions, Kipnis (1992, 378) argues that feminist disgust “is not without a function in relation to class hegemony, and more than problematic in the context of what purports to be a radical social movement.” Kipnis’s argument is useful for highlighting the class politics operative in feminist devaluations of raunch aesthetics.

Black sexualities have been framed as always already excessive, low-class, and degenerate by Euro-American imaginaries (Collins 2004). Hip hop music has taken the fall for purportedly reifying these negative stereotypes. Work such as T. Denean Sharpley Whiting’s *Pimps Up, Hos Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women* (2008), have critiqued the framing of black women in hip hop as denigrated sexual objects. In *The Hip Hop Wars*, Tricia Rose (2008) framed black female emcees such as Trina, who deploy explicit sexuality in their work, as self-exploitative due to the manner in which they reify sexist representations of women by many mainstream male rappers. In contrast to narratives of objectification, there is a growing body of work examining the anti-racist and feminist potential of sexualized performances by black women in hip hop and pornography (Miller-Young 2008, 2010; Nash 2008). These studies shift our perspective, and urge us to see beyond racial stereotype, trauma, abuse, and injury to examine expressions of female sexual pleasure and pleasure *in* blackness. My discussion of raunch here aims to contribute to this scholarship.

Issues of race and sexual aesthetics have high cultural stakes. Take for example the flashpoint that occurred in the early 1990s in response to the arrest of the rap group 2 Live Crew under charges of obscenity, and the labeling of their album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* (1989) as obscene by a federal judge. Henry Louis Gates Jr. defended their music in the *New York Times*, arguing that the group’s explicit lyrics were a form of “sexual carnivalesque” that exaggerated stereotypes of black male hypersexuality in order to undermine them.⁵ In “Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew,” Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) also critiqued the policing of black male sexuality and denigration of black expressive forms by the state. Yet she decried what she found to be the group’s promotion of sexual violence toward and objectification of black women.

Crenshaw’s analysis left unconsidered the subjectivities of young working-class women of color coming of age in the 1990s. Growing up as an adolescent in Miami listening to songs like “I Wanna Rock” by 2 Live Crew, and watching their videos while my parents slept, presented a non-moralistic mode of exploring my sexuality against the Catholic

and Latin@ heteronormativities I negotiated as a child. Crenshaw also overlooked the raunchy hip hop production of black women who were working in the early 1990s as well, such as Salt-n-Pepa and Wanda Dee. Nevertheless, an important intervention made by her essay was highlighting how black women's perspectives were missing from the 2 Live Crew "obscurity" debate. In the late 1990s and early millennium, artists like Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown mobilized explicit lyrics and sexualized body presentations that proved marketable to mass audiences. They paved the way for contemporary mainstream female rappers who traffic in hypersexuality, such as Nicki Minaj. Although these artists have effectively circulated their gendered perspectives in the male-dominated industry and practice of hip hop, the bodies and sexual voices of queer, gender non-conforming black women have remained underground.

My theorization of "raunch" responds to the paucity of critical terminology available for analyzing sexually expressive forms. I work outside and beyond the often-unexamined moralisms that give existing critiques of raunch sexualities in hip hop their legitimacy and cultural currency. I suggest that, rather than assume we *know* what we mean when we say "raunch," and that we *know* that its expression cannot possibly conduct anti-racist, anti-heteronormative, and feminist work, that we instead conduct close visual, textual, and discursive analyses of its mobilizations to better understand its creative and cultural effects.

Currently, there is a discourse circulating in hip hop feminist circles concerning the term "ratchet." This work analyzes the cultural politics of its deployment to describe the perceived over-the-top, racially and aesthetically excessive bodies and behaviors of poor and working class black women.⁶ My work (Hernandez 2009) on the "sexual-aesthetic excess" of young Latina women – pejoratively termed "chongas" for signifying working-class hypersexuality, crass behavior, and ethnic difference – has much in common with these examinations of the cultural cachet of the ratchet term and aesthetic. However, it is analytically necessary to distinguish ratchet from raunch. The term ratchet describes classed behavior and embodiment more than it describes sexual comportment and bodies, although it at times collapses the two. Ratchet also does not have the connotations of sexual explicitness that raunch does. Although certain expressions of raunch could be considered ratchet, as raunch does carry racialized "low-class" significations, not all forms of ratchet could be considered raunchy – for example, reality television depictions of black women verbally or physically fighting with each other.

I conceive of raunch as an aesthetic, performative, and vernacular practice, an explicit mode of sexual expression that transgresses norms of privacy and respectability. Raunch aesthetics celebrate the movements, looks, sensations, and affects of bodies. They aim to incite arousal while often simultaneously generating laughter. One can think of the ways in which my Pridelines students described the dancing of the erotic black femme in the "Don't Let Go" video as "goofy," and the manner in which Shunda K followed her vivid depiction of pleasuring her partner's pussy with descriptions of herself as a "clown" in the song "Billionaire." Raunch aesthetics seriously center sex, but do not take sex seriously. These expressive modes do not search for or affirm the truth of sexual subjects; rather, they celebrate, often through hyperbolic excess, multiplicities of bodies and pleasures in the mode of a Foucauldian *ars erotica* (1978). In performance, the mobilization of raunch

aesthetics can create spaces in which queer publics can assemble and experience erotic, musical, performative, and comedic pleasures.⁷

Although many mass culture hip hop productions articulate raunch sexualities, I am formulating the concept of “raunch aesthetics” to index sexually explicit works that move beyond titillation and mass-marketed tropes. The controversial raunch-inflected performance by the white celebrity Miley Cyrus at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards, in which she appropriated the butt-shaking movement developed in black dance culture called “twerking,” and slapped the ass of a black woman on stage, demonstrates how the culture industry is keen to adopt racialized forms of sexually explicit performance to build audiences and boost sales.⁸ Processes of cultural appropriation are shifting and dynamic. However, attending to the effects, aesthetics, and meanings of such performances can facilitate analysis of the political economy of raunch sexualities.

Unlike the performance by Cyrus, the forms of raunch aesthetics crafted by Yo! Majesty and cultural workers such as comedian Margaret Cho, for example, serve to generate pleasure for minority audiences, affirm queer lives, and regularly blend humor and sexual explicitness to launch cultural critiques. I do not use the term “aesthetic” to situate the concept in the realm of elite cultural production. Rather, I frame raunch aesthetics as stylized forms of crafting.⁹ Raunch aesthetics get low, and live in the low.

In this, raunch aesthetics are akin to the hip hop “ass politics” theorized by Jason King. In discussing how the beats of the “Dirty South,” the kinds of beats generated by Yo! Majesty, work on black bodies and subjectivities, he writes:

Newly gravitationally centered on the ass, the body becomes its own intimate dance floor, an ever more knowledgeable site where new “steps” are rehearsed and practiced. This beat wants to move to the body, and the body must learn to re-move the beat. The rise of ass music, this pursuit of percussive tactility, might be a continuation of the subaltern longing for corporeal freedom from and against the “shitty” history (and therefore “shitty” present and future) of Western imperial civilization.

(King 2001, 439)

For King, ass music serves as a form of knowledge production and transmission for black subjects.

The quotidian, “vulgar,” and excessive valences of raunch aesthetics could be framed in relation to Bakhtinian notions of the transgressive effects of grotesque and carnivalesque expression. However, I resist this uncomplicated interpretation in that it would attribute too much subversive potential to raunch. Peter Sallybrass and Allon White (1986) and Achille Mbembe (1992) have persuasively argued that grotesque and carnivalesque aesthetics can consolidate normative regimes as much as undermine them. Rather than transgression, raunch can be framed as a mode of sexual-expressive deviance. Cathy J. Cohen (2004, 30) suggests that acts of deviance can potentially contribute to radical politics by revealing how marginalized folk employ their limited agency to undermine norms “in pursuit of goals important to them, often basic human goals such as pleasure, desire, recognition, and respect.”

The effects of raunch aesthetics are modest, but significant. These expressions may not bring about a revolution in formations of race, class, gender, and sexuality, but do present modes through which non-normative subjectivities and lives can be affirmed and creatively

sustained. As Audre Lorde (2007) has proclaimed, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” and the raunch aesthetics I engage here articulate black queer female poetics via hip hop. The significance of such poetics is powerfully articulated in Kara Keeling’s (2009) reading of *The Aggressives* (2004), a film that documents the lives of genderqueers of color. Keeling incites us to envision a time in which bodies like those of the youth I work with at Pridelines, Sakia Gunn, Shunda K, Shon B, and Jwl B, can have a less precarious existence. She argues that new poetic and temporal modes are needed to disturb the symbolic orders of past and present. Yo! Majesty produces sounds, images, and performances that provoke us to imagine what such a future would feel like, and they teach us how to invoke it.¹⁰

In what follows I analyze a debate held among my Pridelines interlocutors concerning female gender non-conformity and queer visibility in contemporary hip hop to ground my examination of the ways in which Yo! Majesty transmits queer and feminist teachings through raunch aesthetics. I focus on how these performers trouble normative valuations of raced and gendered bodies, and further, how their music and interview statements complicate widely accepted notions regarding the emancipatory potential of coming out of the closet, and the incompatibility of black queer sexualities with Christianity.

Queer young women of color negotiating gender, sexuality, and hip hop politics

I aim to build upon scholarship examining gender, sexuality, race, and embodiment by engaging the perspectives of young queer women of color and foregrounding their everyday mediations of identity and embodiment (Butler 1993; Halberstam 1998, 2005; Muñoz 1999, 2009; Holland 2012).¹¹ From 2011 through 2013, I conducted participant observation and focus groups with Women on the Rise! participants that centered on issues of body styling, popular culture, and visual art production.¹² Here I specifically draw upon a conversation I had with participants from Pridelines, most of whom were in their early 20s at the time. I will be referring to them through pseudonyms they created and using their own ethnic, racial, and national identifications. I analyze how the youth negotiate their consumption of music and how this consumption shapes their understandings of sexuality and gender; especially as I have learned about the struggles faced by my masculine body presenting participants, such as rejection by family, street harassment, and strain in romantic and/or erotic relationships. The stakes are high for black gender non-conforming young women whose bodies are read through racist and heteronormative logics that subject them to violence and harassment. These are bodies that do not fit stock narratives of proper subjectivity and victimhood (Wanzo 2008; Green 2009).

I asked my Pridelines class who some of their favorite artists were the night I showed them Yo! Majesty’s “Don’t Let Go” video, as I was interested in learning about the music they consume. Q said she likes hip hop and neo soul, artists like Frank Ocean, Miguel, Kanye West, and Nicki Minaj. Suzie, an African American poet, mentioned the rapper Common, Ella Fitzgerald, Lil Wayne, and the soundtrack to the *Lion King*. Beth shared that she was interested in the work of up-and-coming female rappers like Iggy Azalea and Azealia Banks. Tamyra, an African American dancer, is a fan of 1990s R&B artists like Boyz II Men and Silk. Alaika, who is Haitian-American, said she listens to “everything.” Their citation of artists revealed the wide range of cultural texts they engaged.

Unlike their other music videos, the one for “Don’t Let Go” does not include footage of Yo! Majesty performing. After it played, I searched the web for photos of the group. I felt it was important for my students to see the gender non-conforming body presentations of the emcees in order to provide a wider context for our discussion about their work. The members of Yo! Majesty wear no makeup, and usually don baggy jeans, loose fitting T-shirts or form-fitting white cotton tank tops, and sneakers. Jwl B and Shunda K usually style their hair in long dreadlocks, and Shon B often has her hair done up in cornrows. While we looked at the images, I asked the students if they thought an act like Yo! Majesty would have a chance of entering the mainstream. Tamyra and Q answered “no,” immediately, forcefully, and in unison. Beth disagreed, asserting, “I think so! Now with all these girls coming out? All these hardcore girls coming out [in the mainstream music industry].” Beth was referring to artists like Nicki Minaj, Iggy Azalea, and Azealia Banks, contemporary “hardcore” rappers who have feminine body presentations. Suzie disagreed with Beth, saying: “Not this masculine. I think the industry right now might be ready for lesbians, just not masculine-bodied lesbians.”

The class then entered a debate about queer visibility politics in mass culture, and figures such as Frank Ocean, a black celebrity in hip hop and R&B who expressed his love for a man via the social media site Tumblr. Ocean’s public declaration was celebrated in the media as a threshold moment in which hip hop would be inclusive of folks with non-normative sexualities.¹³ Homonormative expressions of “gay friendliness” in hip hop have been circulated by commercially successful acts such as Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, whose 2012 song “Same Love” gained attention for affirming (monogamous) same-sex relationships. Beth’s comments about the realistic possibility that a group like Yo! Majesty would have a chance to enter the mainstream drew on a similar discourse of inclusion. Although Ocean did not label his sexuality, she interpreted the act as him “coming out” as bisexual.

Beth: But notice how these rappers like Frank Ocean came out as bisexual, and ASAP Rocky, the rumors have been percolating that he’s bisexual too. That he has more feminine traits, that he’s canoodling with certain men, and he’s very affectionate with men in public.

Q: But it’s one of those things where, especially with R&B men in particular, for some reason, it’s one of those things where they can be borderline, kind of whatever, as long as they’re not hard rappers. It’s like, “Ok, you’re R&B, you’re singing soft, so you’re kinda soft anyway.”

Unlike Beth, Q does not frame the acceptance of Ocean’s same-sex desire as indicative of a new embrace of queerness in mainstream hip hop. Rather, she points out, and I concur, that his branding in part as an R&B performer, and the “soft” masculine gender performance that is normatively framed as intrinsic to the genre, likely makes his queer desire assimilable to existing forms of male gender presentation and sexuality. Q also referenced the bodies of hip hop artists like Missy Elliot, who is often thought to be lesbian or bisexual. In our conversation, she and Alaika noted that Missy’s masculine aesthetics were often tempered by the styling of her face, which was usually marked by feminine makeup.

Yo! Majesty’s underground status stems from inequalities that women experience in the music industry at large, where the most marketable acts are conventionally feminine, sexy, and light skinned, even if African American or Latina. Despite the fact that their sound is

similar enough to popular Southern crunk rap that it could attract a wider audience, it is their subjectivities as masculine black lesbians that make them ostensibly difficult to market within the profit-driven music industry. Interestingly, my Pridelines students' commentary on the body presentations of hip hop artists revealed how they drew upon readings of gender to discern sexuality.

Suzie wanted to bring the work of Kin4Life into our discussion, so we visited YouTube and watched their "Makeup Girl" video. Kin4Life is an African American rap and R&B duo from Mount Vernon, New York whose music engages their lesbian sexuality. Suzie was the only person in the group who had heard of them, and explained that she learned about them through Facebook, as she is a member of lesbian groups on the social networking site. She noted that what she liked about their music is that it deals with everyday life issues. Both Kin4Life artists dress in the masculine manner of the queer women my participants describe as "studs." The reactions to the video among the group revealed how they judge and theorize gender non-conforming body presentations.

The "Makeup Girl" video narrates relationship problems stemming from infidelity in the lives of the two protagonists, who are the Kin4Life emcees Nor and IQ. The first commentary made about the video in the group centered on the makeup of the emcees, who were wearing caps, loose-fitting T-shirts, and jeans. Their masculine dress was contrasted with their heavily made-up eyes, caked with conspicuously colored eye shadow and mascara. Their lips were pink and glossy, and their cheekbones accentuated with rosy blush.

Beth: I've never seen a stud with a smokey eye.

Q: That's true, I rarely see studs with makeup on.

Alaika: Yeah, just take off the makeup. The [eye] shadow is throwing me off. They would actually look way better as femmes.

While a scene in the video played that showed one of the emcees cheating on her partner with another woman, Beth, who dresses in casual basics that are neither feminine nor masculine said: "That's why I don't like studs." Her statement set off an intense debate about studs and male-identification, all while the video continued to play in the background. Alaika, who considers herself a stud, responded: "Excuse me?!!! These are the studs that mess it up for the rest of us."

Beth: I think they [studs] step up to be like the stereotypical guy.

Jillian: Do you think that studs try to construct themselves as dudes?

Alaika: Some.

Q: Not overall.

Tamya: I don't like it when studs think that they are guys. They want to be called "she," but, if there is a kid in the relationship – "I'm daddy." I'm like, "No, we're two girls, you can be mommy and I can be mommy." It can be different; you're not supposed to conform. Studs think that they are supposed to be the man in the relationship.

Tamya was not describing her own life situation in this comment, but playing out an imaginary scenario to make her point about the replication of heteronormative relationship dynamics in some lesbian families in which studs parent.

Suzie: I think it's just sort of like imitating a heteronormative type of relationship for finding your place in that relationship. You choose the one [gender role] you identify with. Maybe it's the mindset of the stud to sort of emulate that subconsciously and sort of show that outwardly. So maybe they don't really know that they're kind of like being, dominating.

Beth: Oh they know, believe me.

This exchange illuminated the complex and often paradoxical negotiations of gender elaborated by my Pridelines students. Despite their divergent views on the politics of stud subjectivity, what being a "man" or "masculinity" entailed among them was a stable concept that was conflated not only with male bodies, but also with actions that are normatively associated with men, such as infidelity and domination.¹⁴ They also viewed eye makeup as incompatible with a masculine look. Even as Tamyra strived to make Q aware of the normative gender logic informing some studs' assumption of the term "daddy," she drew on an understanding of masculine female embodiment as an *emulation* of an original masculinity that is the province of those with male bodies by stating "we're two girls, you can be mommy and I can be mommy." Jack Halberstam (1998, 1) has noted that "female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing." Halberstam suggests that "masculinity" becomes recognized as such in a deviant, threatening way when it leaves the white male middle-class body. This observation is critical for the queer women of color I engage here, whose hypervisibilized class, race, and gender non-conforming presentations make them subject to various forms of oppression.

Suzie's comments theorized the psychic subject formation of studs, positing that their dominating behaviors likely develop in a subconscious way that allows for them to make sense of their dissident body presentation. Their conversation demonstrated the complex and contradictory ways they understand and critique both gender norms and gender non-conformity through the consumption of hip hop performance. Their narratives and debates should not be framed as indications of queer youth of color sexual and gender conservatism, but rather, as processes through which they conduct and theorize the precarious work of signifying sexual, gender, race, and class difference in a racist and neoliberal culture.

My discussion with them revealed that most are not exposed to black lesbian created media, and that they would not necessarily adopt such work. Overall, the group enjoyed Yo! Majesty's practice, citing their positive messages and playful raunchiness, but did not like the gender presentation, or what they perceived as hegemonic masculine behavior of Kin4Life. This shows how, as thoughtful readers with complex subjectivities, their racial, gender, and sexual identifications do not fully determine their appraisals of cultural products.

My Pridelines interlocutors exhibited their critical reading of mass music production by highlighting the ways in which the heteronormative gender order limits the visibility of gender non-conforming women such as the artists of Yo! Majesty, while celebrating normatively gendered queer artists such as Frank Ocean. A significant outcome of our conversation is that it demonstrated how the sexually explicit work of queer female hip hop artists could be activated pedagogically by both queer youth and educators for inciting critical, difficult, and necessary conversations about gender presentation, sexuality, and cultural production. Considering the cultural stakes involved in gender non-conformity and queer

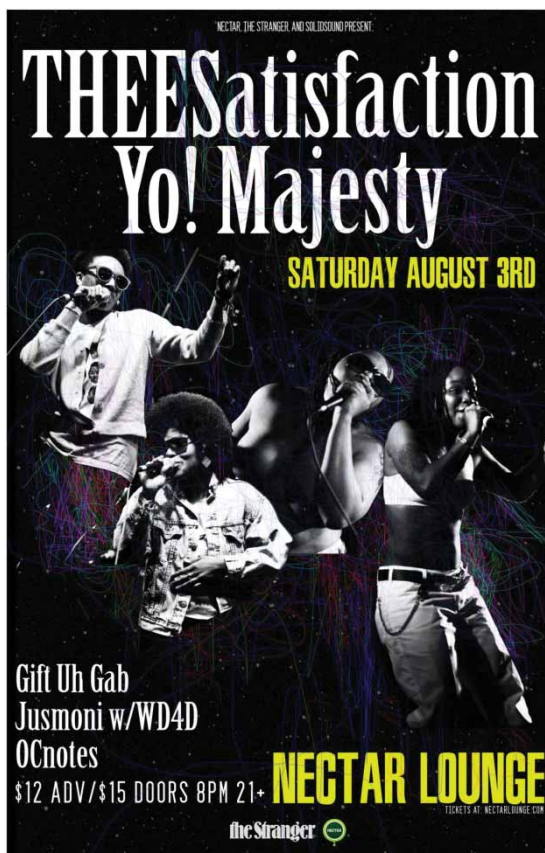


Figure 2. Promotional graphic for 2013 Yo! Majesty and THEESatisfaction performance. Jwl B and Shunda K on left side of image. Source: Image courtesy of Shunda K.

sexuality for women of color, how does Yo! Majesty navigate and address these positions in their work?

Yo! Majesty's queer and feminist (mis)educations

Yo! Majesty's fast-paced, sexually charged raps celebrate lesbian sexuality and the female body. Their live shows are high in libidinal energy (Figure 2). For example, Jwl B often performs topless. She has explained that she takes her shirt off because she *feels* the crowd and intensity of the music, just like many male rappers do without needing to answer for it. In an interview conducted at the 2008 Sónar music festival in Barcelona she said:

Why can't I have that same intensity and that same feeling [as male rappers]? Cuz I had titties all my life, so titties aint a real big thang to me, and I suck titties. I've been with women half all

of my life so, titties aint really a big deal for me. You understand what I'm sayin? When I do it, it's just an expression. Cuz when I was younger I was controlled by religion, by my family, or by a relationship, so that's just therapy for me.¹⁵

In her statements Jwl B blends feminist critique of heteronormative constraints on female embodiment with a raunchy description of her sexual experiences with women. In part, it is her lesbian sexual experience that provides Jwl B with the impetus to subvert corporeal policing.

In addition to interviews, Yo! Majesty's lessons are imparted through songs like "Hit It and Quit It," a cautionary narrative about the perils of unsafe sex and HIV contraction. In "Monkey," the emcees instruct women on how to please themselves through masturbation: "I'm saying to the ladies/ Put your hand between your thighs and rub on your monkey/ Motion to the left, motion to the right." The group's unique work foregrounds their erotics while simultaneously expressing their belief in Jesus Christ. In the song "Hustle Mode" Shunda K repeats, "I give to receive, I have faith, I believe." The group has framed their musical practice as a form of "ministry" to the people. In fact, the "Majesty" in the group's name is a reference to God. As Shunda K explained to Beth Ditto of the alternative rock and electro band Gossip in an interview:

We trying to bring healing to the people man. There are so many people out there that is gay, like especially the kids and shit ... The parents, they know they [their children] gay, but they don't know what the fuck to do cuz they've never dealt with a situation like that, ok? So here come Yo! Majesty, we on they level, we could talk to the people, we can minister to them.¹⁶

Here Shunda K expresses a desire to reach out to and teach youth, such as my students at Pridelines.

Yo! Majesty's seemingly contradictory combination of raunchy queer sexuality and faith in God demonstrates how theorizations of sexuality must take the racial and spiritual positions of subjects into account. Shunda K, for example, has not exhibited the "out and proud" attitude that has become the standard expression of sexual subjectivity in many white queer communities in the United States. Driven by her spiritual convictions, Shunda K ceased sexual relations with women and married a man for several years. Although she was eventually divorced and entered a serious relationship with a woman, she has expressed ambivalence about her sexual identity. This issue is touched upon in an interview with the performer Peaches documented on YouTube:

Shunda K: We believe in God. We believe in Jesus Christ being our Lord and Savior. We still have a relationship with him and he still uses us even though we in the club talking about rubbing on your monkey and how hot kryptonite pussy really is. God is the one making this happen for Yo! Majesty.

Peaches: God has no problem with you being total lesbians?

Shon B: I don't believe that. Be yourself. Love who you love and call it a day.

Shunda K: You right [to Shon B], but I see it a different way. And I can't be nobody but who I am. But I feel like it's not the will of God for us to be gay.¹⁷

Shunda K's experiences as a queer, masculine body presenting black female performer echo those of her antecedent Gladys Bentley, a black blues singer who was active in the 1920s and 1930s.

After years of performing sexually explicit lyrics, openly dating women and donning men's clothing, Bentley publicized marrying a man and claimed Christian faith later in life (Yaeger 2009, 722). In the introduction to an issue of the PMLA journal on "Queer Modernism" Patricia Yaeger, after discussing the ambivalence that marked Bentley's experiences as a queer black woman, works to situate her back into the narrative of liberated out-ness:

Bentley may have kowtowed to these [heterosexist] norms in the 1950s, but in her heyday, the era of a blues-based, lesbian-biased *ars erotica*, Bentley's lavish persona was, in itself, a polemic against heterosexual norms. In the Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s her drag identity could be loud, queer, and proud. As the foremost member of a gang of celebrity male impersonators, Gladys Bentley exemplifies the strange quotidian life of a queer modernist. (724)

In trying to recover her life in a progressive narrative of queer history, Yaeger silences Bentley's claims to Christianity and heterosexuality by framing them as kowtowing. Yo! Majesty complicates normative understandings of sexuality and spirituality by foregrounding their imbrications.

Shunda K and I connected on Facebook in 2013. I have asked her what she feels Yo! Majesty's impact has been to fans and she responded: "I've seen many fans inspired by the fact that we are a gay group that reverences The Most High." When I asked if she identified as Christian she wrote: "Hell to da naw!!! I'm a believer in Yashayah (Christ) and our Father (Ahayah).¹⁸" In the song "Rock and Roll," from her solo album *The Most Wanted* (2011), Shunda K raps:

I can rearrange the whole thang, from the church to da club in His name, so let dis rock and roll ya soul, jus let go of all dis year's drama, on bac, from da first day of ya life, I know it wasn't right but now it's time to move on, time to do what you want to be free, tell da devil, no more controllin' me, and sometimes, he can be ah human being, cause most of da time, dats what it is for me, what you do believe, oh, I see, no, I'm not into religion either, da thought of it bring about a fever, jus everything about it so evil, don't get me wrong, I am ah believer in Jesus Christ, hell, I'm gay, and me He still likes, so dis ah shout out to all my dykes, fags, lawyers, and doctors cause God is Love!!!

These lyrics communicate the artist's evolving relationship with God and feelings about her sexual identity, as they contrast with her previous belief that it was not God's will for her to be gay.¹⁹ Shunda K has removed herself from religious institutions while maintaining her spiritual beliefs. In our correspondence she stated: "Religion kills, however, over the years I've developed a strong relationship with the True and Living Power."

"Don't Let Go"

The creative practice and critical perspectives of Yo! Majesty value and archive queer black female subjectivities and trouble universalized narratives about the antagonistic relationship between belief in Christ and non-normative sexualities (Figure 3). They subvert celebratory notions of the emancipation of coming out of the closet, and the stability of a lesbian/gay identity (Decena 2011; El-Tayeb 2012). Yo! Majesty's extremes of pleasure are accompanied by feelings of confusion and pain, and their openness about the vicissitudes



Figure 3. Shon B (left) and Shunda K (right). Source: Image courtesy of Sammy Rawal.

of their sexual and spiritual identities should be read as an expression of queer politics (Cohen 1997). In fact, the group's expression of these instabilities makes their work particularly fruitful for consciousness-raising with queer youth of color who are negotiating the production of their identities.

The conversations sparked among my students at Pridelines by viewing music videos produced by queer black female rappers illuminated the unwieldy meanings of gender presentation they negotiate. The complexity of their discussion on female masculinity also attested to the ways in which they critically read and consume hip hop. Their appreciation for, and documentation of Yo! Majesty's "Don't Let Go" video revealed how raunchy performance pedagogies can inspire queer youth by inciting deviant desires and cultural critiques.²⁰

Yo! Majesty crafts raunch aesthetics that generate spaces for non-normative pleasures and modes of consciousness raising and uplift. For subjects who are marginalized by norms of gender, sexuality, race, and class; folks whose futures are far from secure, such a hip hop practice can inspire and sustain their imaginaries. The crux of Yo! Majesty's teachings can be summarized in the title of their 2008 album: *Futuristically Speaking: Never Be Afraid*.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the youth and staff at Pridelines for sharing their time, space, and vibrant energies with me. I thank Louisa Schein, my mentor and intellectual *agent provocateur*, for taking my thoughts on raunch aesthetics seriously, and driving me to articulate them. This essay also benefitted from lively conversations with Arlene Stein, Carlos Decena, Jorge A. Bernal, and Anya Wallace. Ariella Rotramel provided helpful suggestions on an early iteration of this project. I am grateful to the peer reviewers and editors of this issue for their insightful feedback, and to Shunda K for her support of, and assistance with, this article. I dedicate this essay to José Esteban Muñoz.

Funding

This research was made possible in part by an American Association of University Women Dissertation Fellowship.

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Notes

1. In e-mail correspondence, Shunda K explained that Shon B has not performed with Yo! Majesty recently due to personal differences.
2. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbbvugSXUvc>
3. Keeling draws from Deleuze's concept of cinema as a "radical Elsewhere."
4. Women on the Rise! blog site, mocawomenontherise.wordpress.com; Facebook page for Pridelines Youth Services, <https://www.facebook.com/pridelinesyouth>
5. "2 Live Crew, Decoded," 19 June 1990.
6. See Heidi R. Lewis, "Exhuming the Ratchet Before It's Buried," The Feminist Wire, <http://thefeministwire.com/2013/01/exhuming-the-ratchet-before-its-buried/>; Regina N. Bradley, "I Been On (Ratchet): Conceptualizing a Sonic Ratchet Aesthetic in Beyonce's 'Bow Down,'" Red Clay Scholar, <http://redclayscholar.blogspot.com/2013/03/i-been-on-ratchet-conceptualizing-sonic.html>; Brittney Cooper, "(Un)Clutching My Mother's Pearls, or Ratchetness and the Residue of Respectability," Crunk Feminist Collective, <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2012/12/31/unclutching-my-mothers-pearls-or-ratchetness-and-the-residue-of-respectability/>
7. For more on how young queer women create community through consumption of music see Driver (2007).
8. See "Show Performance: We Can't Stop/Blurred Lines/Give it 2 U (medley)," MTV, <http://www.mtv.com/videos/misc/942064/we-cant-stop-blurred-lines-give-it-2-u-medley.jhtml>
9. I am grateful to Jessica Hurley for suggesting the notion of raunch crafting to me when I presented an early version of this work at the Future/No Future conference at the University of Pennsylvania in 2010.
10. For an in-depth theorization of queer futurity see Muñoz (2009).
11. I more thoroughly explore how they negotiate race in my book manuscript in progress.
12. I conducted participant observation of hundreds of Women on the Rise! students over a two-year period, and 61 girls and young women participated in my focus groups. About half of the study participants identified as African American or Afro-Caribbean, and the other half identified as Latina, Hispanic, or multi-racial.
13. See Russell Simmons, "The Courage of Frank Ocean Just Changed the Game!," Global Grind, <http://globalgrind.com/entertainment/russell-simmons-letter-to-frank-ocean-gay-bi-sexual-comes-out-photos>
14. Young queer women articulated similar notions of masculinity in C.J. Pascoe's research (2007).
15. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efYkS6nEdVU>
16. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzT7T2cCJl>
17. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KVJwWV89co&feature=related>
18. The quotes in this paragraph are from Shunda K's e-mail correspondence with me, 14 October 2013.
19. Lyrics from *The Most Wanted* are cited here verbatim from the album booklet.

20. A recent example of how raunch aesthetics and pedagogies crafted by young women of color agitate norms of sexuality, race, and class can be found in the barrage of disparaging comments that have been continually leveled at the hip hop group Pretty Taking All Fades (P.T.A.F.) for the sexually explicit lyrics in their viral song “Boss Ass Bitch,” which has accumulated over 12 million hits on YouTube since it was posted in May 2012 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6ihCQZK-r0>). For a discussion on how their performance serves as a sex-positive educational space for young women of color see, Jillian Hernandez and Anya M. Wallace, “Nicki Minaj and Pretty Taking All Fades: Performing the Erotics of Feminist Solidarity,” *The Feminist Wire*, thefeministwire.com/2014/03/minaj-erotics/.

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