

Young M.A: Queering Blackness in the Classroom

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In 2021, I started teaching a class entitled “Black, Brown and queer voices in the U.S.” to freshmen, at the university Côte d’Azur in France where I set off to tackle key historical and social issues in the country through hip hop culture in general and rap music in particular. Although I have not grown listening to rap and have never been a b-girl, my research on critical pedagogy led me to hip hop education. I come from a background that greatly differs from that of most of my students. I am a middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual, white, French woman who grew up in a family of teachers and scholars. Young M.A whose own trajectory is, in some ways, much closer to theirs than mine appeared as a great means for me to bridge that gap. Nevertheless, the question remains: am I legitimate in teaching about her?

I subscribe with Audre Lorde’s idea voiced in the “Transformation of Silence into Action” (1977 in Lorde 2007), that for queer black women’s work to gain visibility, white women like me cannot use the excuse of not having the same life experience to refuse to learn and then teach about them. Because along with scholars like Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, I question the coloniality of knowledge¹ imposed by colonial European powers (Quijano), it was imperative for me to explore the work of an artist that my own social and geographical background had not groomed me to appreciate. Moreover, at a time when in France 78 % of young people under 24 listen to rap music (Richard and Bernier) and in the U.S. surveys report that half the population

¹ Quijano developed the concept of “coloniality of knowledge” in a 2007 article where he explained that colonial European powers have defined the systems of knowledge of colonized nations as inherently inferior, and less rational than that of the colonizer. This posture helps delegitimize non-Eurocentric knowledge, culture and art and explains why they are recurrently invisibilized in curricula, methodologies, and scholarship.

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believes that America, as it is today, is best represented by rap (Nguyen), this is clearly a genre that cannot be overlooked in education. Furthermore, in the language department where I teach, a sizable part of the student body openly identifies with the LGBTQ+ community while another, sometime overlapping, large part of the cohort is racialized. Out of 212 students who were free to tackle any rapper and debunk any myth they wanted about hip hop in a written assignment that I gave them last semester, 12.7 % chose to discuss homophobia, homosexuality or queerbaiting in U.S. rap. Along with numerous educators (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell; McLaren; Lamont-Hill, Alim et. al. 2023) I believe that since hip hop culture is part of our students lives, it needs to be engaged with in school settings. The same goes for the LGBTQ+ community. Queer themes and queer of color critics must be part of the material we look at when trying to teach composition, literature, sociology, or history for instance. Finally, to me, Young M.A was particularly interesting because unlike early queer rappers like Joan Grae, or Queen Pen who have been discussed by scholars already, she is commercially successful. The 30-year-old, New York rapper who rejects gender labels has been anointed by Beyoncé, opening on her Formation World Tour in October 2016. She made it to the “30 Under 30” *Forbes* list in 2018 and she is a hardcore rapper who makes no secret of her sexual preference for black women: “Light skin, dark skin, I love me some black women” (“Tip the Surgeon,” single, M.A music, 2022).

In music and popular culture in general, the past 5 to 10 years have seen a riptide of change. Rapper, singer, and songwriter Young Thug (over 30 million listeners on Spotify), who, as I write, is being tried on gang-related charges, has been known for dressing in women's clothes since 2015; Puerto Rican rapper Bad Bunny (over 74 million monthly listeners) has been a vocal LGBTQ+ ally since 2016. Lil Nas X (over 32 million listeners) boisterously portrayed gay aesthetics in his 2021 hit “Industry Baby” and Beyoncé (over 54 million listeners) proudly honored “black queer culture in Renaissance” (Chery). As *Rolling Stone* magazine underlined too, “Per Gallup, the share of American adults who identify outside of heterosexuality doubled from 3.5 percent to 7.1 percent between 2012 and 2022, with 21 percent of Gen Z adults landing on the LGBTQ spectrum.” Similarly, in France, an increasing share of the population freely identifies as LGBTQ+. While 22% of Gen Z adults identify as LGBTQ+, only 12% of Millennials do so (*Le Figaro*).

Despite accusations of queerbaiting for some rappers on the one hand and virulent legislative pushback against the LGBTQ+ community in certain conservative states in the United States on the other (Yang), music,

particularly rap, seems to be more inclusive than ever and lightyears away from the career breaking homophobia Marc Lamont Hill described in his 2009 article or even from Snoop Doggs' 2013 statement that "[Homosexuality is] acceptable in the singing world, but in the rap world I don't know if it will ever be acceptable because rap is so masculine." Even though Katorah Kasanova Marrero's (M.A's birth name) visibility has substantially diminished due to a protracted battle with alcohol addiction, she was still featured on Eminem's 2020 song "Unaccommodating" (*Music to Be Murdered By*, Shady Records, Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope Records). With this featuring, Eminem's long track record of homophobic lyrics was apparently disowned signaling yet again a profound change in the culture. But how profound?

How does Young M.A queer blackness, and how does studying her in class helps us quare² pedagogy? While the *New Yorker* rejoiced at the fact that she is "challeng[ing] regressive ideas about sexuality and gender presentation," others like non-binary black cultural critic Hunter Ashleigh Shackelford still consider her as "problematic as fuck". Indeed, misogynistic clichés still pervade her music. This paper is meant to help equip teachers like me who are newcomers to the hip-hop world with arguments to tease out the apparent paradox that M.A represents. First, I explain how toxic masculinity in hardcore rap functions as a shield allowing the artist to establish her credibility in a context where vulnerability can amount to a death sentence. Second, I highlight how through parody and contradictions, M.A reveals the smokescreen of toxic masculinity to be a way of marooning her black queer identity away from the white gaze. Finally, I highlight the challenges of discussing these complex issues in class.

The Shield of Toxic Masculinity

At first sight, M.A seems to be joyously buying into the general atmosphere of toxic masculinity prevailing on the hardcore rap scene. Women or more specifically "hoes, skeezers, thotianas, thotties or treeshs" (slurs referring to immoral women with an overblown pride for their looks) are routinely dehumanized. They are assimilated to cars in "Thotiana," and the Victorian moral condemnation of their intense sexual activity is reasserted:

Before I buy a bitch I need to know her mileage (Facts)

² Quare is a term that blends queer and black (Johnson) for which you will find a further definition in the introduction to this volume.

50K or more she a thotiana (Yeah, that's a thot)
 And every nigga drive her (Skrt)
 No, no, no that's a nada (No-no) (in "Thotiana" remix of Blueface's
 track, M.A music, 2019)

M.A "disses" and rejects those women that she still consumes. She vilifies their past sexual life when hers is portrayed as sexual prowess all the while reactivating the cliché of the untrustworthy sexual temptress:

When I fuck a thot, I keep my socks on (Ooh, ooh, ooh)
 Never trust a thot, I keep my eye on her (I see you) (in "Savage
 mode", *Red Flu* EP, M.A music 2020)

M.A is apparently not above mixing sexism and homophobia:

Y'all niggas got a clitoris
 Niggas must be on they period
 Niggas must be bi-curious (in "Body Bag", single, MA music 2015)
 Fuck your man, he a dick eater (Yeah, hoe) (in "Don Diva" ft Rubi
 Rose, *Off the Yak*, M.A music, 2021)

Xinling Li, quoting Andrew Read's analysis of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, explains that "men's sense of freedom under capitalism 'involves mastery over subjugated others' which entails that black³ men ought 'to seek total mastery over the only people they are in position to dominate: black women'" (Li 19; Read 535). Young M.A's sexism fits into this capitalistic framework where one's sense of identity is determined by their capacity to dominate someone else. The category of the "thot" allows the lesbian rapper to present herself as superior, as a "winner." This imagery is undoubtedly pervasive in M.A's work. Other female rappers resort to similar hierarchies in their music but at the bottom of the food chain, we no longer find the "thot" or "hoe," who turns into a "lit thot" in Cardi B's music for instance (see her the eponymous song on the *Gangsta Bitch* album, 2016), but the "broke nigga" who is the object of unadulterated condemnation and contempt.

In a punchline that fuses the two objects of contempt together, Young M.A raps in "Foreign" (2019): "Broke nigga, ho nigga, ho nigga, broke nigga, ho nigga, leave the room." There is reason to believe here that rather than misogyny, what is at stake is a classist vision where financial success is the ultimate goal because it is seen as establishing credibility and respectability. When M.A invites Rubi Rose, a femme presenting female rapper to feature on "Don Diva," Rose displays the very same braggadocio as M.A: "I switch up my niggas like I switch up my flows (Switch)." Rose intertwines the

³ Li does not capitalize Black. I do. See Columbia School of Journalism for the rationale. <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php> (last retrieved 02.21.24).

expressions of sexual prowess and vocal ability, suggesting that boasts about sexual performance often serve as metaphors for the ostentatious display of artistic talent. Much more prominent female heterosexual rappers like Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, Nicki Minaj, or The City Girls all participate in the same trend. Admittedly, the highly standardized creative process in rap music (the aesthetics norms and conventions of braggadocio, ego trippin' tropes and others) should predominantly be understood as the product of the paradigm in which these artists evolve rather than as straightforward confessions, despite the repeated authenticity claims to “keep it real” (Edwards; Nielson and Dennis). Nevertheless, identifying the tropes does little to alleviate the pressure of the sexist (or sexually toxic) undertones that the pervasive expression of a cut-throat, transactional vision of sexuality entails. Furthermore, the sexual braggadocio and recurring putting down of the hypersexualized, dehumanized “thot” does not in any way help further the cause of women (nor does the equally reductive, presence of the ride-or-die loyal girlfriend for that matter—in “Hitta,” *Her Story in the Making*, M.A music, 2019). But behind those stereotypes lies the urge to establish one’s street credibility in the game through a masculine of center aura. Even the hyperfeminine Nicki Minaj “lyrically reproduces tropes of Black masculine rap authenticity in order to position herself as an authentic hip hop subject” as ethnomusicologist Lauron Kehrer explained. And while Minaj recurrently reduces men to sexual objects in her songs, is the somewhat paranoid putting down of the other sex simply an expression of how women establish themselves in a ruthless capitalist world, or does it signal a collapse of traditional gender norms?

Leading hip hop feminist Joan Morgan, in her seminal essay “When Chickenheads come Home to Roost” published in 1999, suggested that what goes around comes around and that somehow women consent to that exploitation. She explained that if “women love hip hop—as sexist as it is—is ’cuz all that in-yo-face testosterone makes our nipples hard.” But then she elaborates, explaining that women can both enjoy and reject what is at play here. In other words, women can be “fuck[ing] with the grays” (34). What is interesting with Young M.A is that when it comes to sexually explicit lyrics, it is clearly not the testosterone that turns women on. The heterosexual male gaze is obliterated with a splash of what she calls “carrot juice” in “BIG” (on *Her Story in the Making*, M.A music, 2019). She unambiguously wants to give oral sex as much as she wants to receive it. As Shackelford writes: “This is a black queer woman saying that head is imperative to her sexual pleasure. This is radical as fuck because she also doesn’t pretend or perform around the

desire for cis-het men's dicks." Despite her unashamed vision of queer sexual pleasure, is Young M.A adopting the codes of oppressive masculinity to both be successful and escape her own condition as a woman, just like some people belonging to minorities have embraced codes of white supremacy to avoid being associated with Black people?

This overhanging gaze that we are tempted to adopt as academics here is problematic because it implies that the object of our research is incapable of any self-reflection or contextualization. We would be suggesting that even as a queer rapper, M.A can't see how homophobic and sexist she is, that she can't help but being conditioned by the heteronormative injunctions surrounding her. Concluding the discussion here fails to account for the complexity of the artist and her context. A further dive into Young M.A's discography highlights that she is somehow rather paying her dues, paying, so to speak, an entry fee to the hardcore rap game. She apparently gives in to the commercialization, consumption and ultimate annihilation of Black female bodies while at the same time introducing queer sexuality as a norm but also subscribing to the glorification of independent women in "Bad Bitch Anthem" (*Red Flu* EP, MA music, 2020) and "NNAN" (*Her Story in the Making*, MA music, 2019), and singing about the importance of female sexual pleasure "Angels vs Demons" (*Red Flu* EP, MA music, 2020) (particularly as she raps, "But when I fucked, I always made sure they actually came"), all the while even enrolling 50 Cent to support her dildo business during the pandemic on Twitter in April 2020.

By avoiding the head-on confrontation that a more conscious type of rap would induce, she normalizes girl on girl sexuality, sex positivity and the ideal of the entrepreneurial independent black woman. She also gets heterosexual cis men like no other than 50 Cent to engage in the queering of blackness. His 2003 "P.I.M.P" anthem had been widely attacked by black feminists but it took M.A's deft intervention to move him (on *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, Shady, Aftermath, Interscope). Thanks to her, men like him are screaming at the top of their lungs how they want to "please" women or how they want "carrot juice." When you know that as recently as 2018, 26 million monthly listeners strong DJ Khaled declared he would never give oral sex to a woman, there is clearly progress in the multiplication of voices like M.A's. In other words, Marrero is subversive to hardcore rap but is she subversive enough to challenge the imperative of domination of the other of the capitalistic paradigm?

Marooning Queer Blackness

The pervasiveness of sexist themes and slurs works as a decoy, sending away the casual listener while true fans know better than to call her homophobic when they listen to her rap: “Fuck your man, he a dick eater (Yeah, hoe) / You be cheatin’, I be cheatin’ but I’m the big cheater (I’m a hoe)” (in “Don Diva” *Off the Yak*, M.A music). The anti-gay slur is out but if she calls herself a hoe, if she’s “the big cheater” for calling him a “dick eater,” who is really homophobic? “You be cheatin’, I be cheatin’...” in other words, everybody in the rap game partakes in cheatin’ queer people by using the slurs. The rhyme is there for a reason. This pattern of reversals, decoys and contradictions is everywhere in her work and her words, and it is in that sense that she is queering blackness. She continuously disrupts the classical sexist and homophobic tropes other rappers use. In “BIG,” she parodies the seminal gangsta rapper through her use of falsetto when she sings:

Ooh, ooh
 That’s that big drip (That’s that big drip)
 Big wrist (Ooh)
 Big body, big whips (Ooh)
 Big Glockes (Ooh)
 Big guap, big notch (Ooh)
 Big goons (Ooh)
 Small problems, big moves

The braggadocio of rappers who turn small problems into big moves is here made to sound ridiculous, just like rappers who overexpose the female body: the two black women twerking and frolicking in a kid’s pool in the “BIG” video being quite obviously a spoof of the recurring stereotype of the black Jezebel (Hill Collins). To top it up, she also engages in a nursery-rhyme like performing of the actions (flexing her muscles), while all characters in her video joyfully smoke marijuana.

Furthermore, while Young M.A certainly does not belong to the tradition of “conscious rappers” who urged black people to “fight the power” like Public Enemy in 1989, she still challenges the notion that rappers’ lyrics should be taken at face value. Culture critic Chris Vognar wrote “it’s a lot easier to sell a smoking gat or a model’s jiggling anatomy than to celebrate humor [in hip hop].” Looking at rap lyrics literally and failing to see the parody, satire, double-entendre, and other literary devices in it reflects a racist trend that has been documented repeatedly in recent years in the U.S., UK, France and elsewhere (Nielson and Dennis; Fatsis; Owusu-Bempah; Carinos Vasquez 2022).

For instance, in “Kold World” (*Her Story in the Making*, MA music, 2019) Young M.A raps: “It’s a cold world, brr-brr, buy fur.” In pure Marie-Antoinette style, she enjoins listeners to buy the most ostentatious and priciest possible winter clothing. Obviously, since she grew up poor herself, she knows at least part of her audience is made up of people who are struggling to afford heating their homes. In a classic form of satire, she is ventriloquizing the heartless message that the elite passes on to the poor and the transactional nature of all relationship developing under this paradigm:

You give me some coochie, I might pay your rent (Ooh)
 Uh, throw you out the condo if you throw a fit (Get out there) (In
 “Kold World”)

The satire here works to appropriate the prejudice and exorcize it. Miles White underlined a similar phenomenon of reappropriation and subversion of the hardcore thug cliché by Ice Cube who “wields the black male body as a weapon of retribution and transgression, turning centuries of ambivalence, fear, and derision back on his tormentors.” Distinguishing between satire and glamorization of either the hardcore thug or the heartless capitalist may appear hard to do at times, but, in both Ice Cube’s and Young M.A’s cases, reading keys are dropped elsewhere in the music. Ice Cube, as White underlines, unveils where he really stands when he raps:

You wanna sweep a nigga like me up under the rug
 Kicking shit called street knowledge.
 Why more niggas in the pen than in college?

Likewise certain punchlines, or songs even, in Young M.A’s music function as shibboleths. “Open Scars” confirms her position on material wealth: “I don’t need material shit, my aura could shine too” (“Open Scars” single, M.A music 2023).

In another recent release “Tip the Surgeon” (single, M.A music, 2022), at first sight, she appears to be adhering to a particularly sexist worldview. She is a sugar daddy bragging about how she pays for her lover’s plastic surgery while condescendingly patting a black twerking woman’s derriere on screen but then she raps: “Invest in her business, don’t buy her a Birkin”. And if that was not clear enough, the video ends with this white on black statement: “Being natural isn’t a statement; it’s the closest thing you can get to being yourself.” With that, she clearly undermines the previous sugar daddy persona she was embodying. But as a savvy businesswoman, M.A knows that the superficial visual and musical representation of misogyny sells. In “OOOUU” (*Herstory*, M.A music, 2017), the lyrics that turned the song into an anthem were: “You call her Stephanie (You call her huh?) I call her Headphanie.”

These words reduced the woman named Stephanie here to the ill-famed status of chickenhead (the bobbing motion of the chicken calling attention to the similar movement performed in oral sex) while delighting the crowds. The pun sounds cheap to a tired feminist audience but a careful dive into the rest of her discography reveals a real aptitude in subverting the codes of toxic masculinity. While her message never goes so far as to pleading for an ascetic or anticapitalistic re-envisioning of the world, she nevertheless proves she is not duped by the hyper consumeristic and hyper masculinist messages surrounding her. The parody and satire in Young M.A.'s work prove Joan Morgan's point when she highlighted that a lot of rap lyrics were "depression masquerading as machismo" (73). Recently, J. Cole confirmed the idea when in the same song he forcefully rapped "I'm counting my bullets, I'm loading my clips" and undid the statement in the melancholy chorus with "Pistol in your hand don't make you real" ("Middle Child" on his eponymous album, Dreamville Records, 2019).

Once Young M.A. is done with the masquerade, the tone shifts substantially. In "Yak Thoughts" the penultimate song on her 2020 eponymous album, she unbosoms herself. Alcohol works as a disinhibitor (Yak standing for Cognac, rappers' drink of choice since the 1990s). Paranoia, loneliness, depression, and a fear of economic downfall, alcohol addiction: she is amazingly straightforward and raw. The loss of her brother to gang violence and mental health issues are also centered in the song. She unveils the pain and despair behind the masquerade:

Hopin' for hope, but I'm hopeless
 Too much distractions, I'm losin' my focus
 Too much pain, could barely notice the beauty in things

Her penultimate song to date, "Open Scars" (December 2023) documents her come back from a mental health breakdown and it is even more explicit:

Smilin' was a disguise, it was tears under that mask
 Suffocatin' inside for years under that mask
 No regrets 'cause when I lost love, I found peace
 When I finally dug deep, nigga, I found a beast

Puerto Rican scholar Pedro Lebrón Ortiz recently contended that "hip hop provides a space in which dehumanized subjects can affirm their humanity but also establish a sense of *self* that is distinct from 'measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity'" as W.E.B. Du Bois put it in *The Souls of Black Folk*, almost 120 years ago. "As such", Lebrón Ortiz explains, "hip hop can be interpreted in a broad sense as a *palenque*, or maroon town" (83). But rather than considering hip hop in

general as a maroon town, it might be more accurate to say that artists like M.A are hiding those spaces of freedom of expression within their music.

Interestingly, while M.A questions her ability to have healthy relationships with women, while she even confesses her dismay with the current state of U.S. politics (“The government, ain’t no controllin’ it,” in “Yak Thoughts”), the final litany she voices is one that reasserts the need for economic survival:

I’m never goin’
 Never go broke again
 Can never lose (Can never lose)
 Told ’em, “I can never lose” (Told ’em, “I can never lose”)
 Told ’em, “I can never lose” (Told ’em, “I can never lose”)
 Told ’em, “I can never lose” (Told ’em, “I can never lose”)
 Can never lose (Can never lose)

The ultimate fear for M.A is that of going “broke again.” “Yak Thoughts” is M.A’s maroon town where she can completely bare her soul and admit the most primal fear of poverty. But the reason why she can strip her music and video of the glamorizing and posturing demanded by the codes of a toxic masculinity in a capitalistic world, the very codes that gave her credibility in the game, is precisely because the rest of her music is never as explicitly raw, vulnerable and honest. She either hides her truth behind conflicting statements as is the case in “Tip the Surgeon” (2022), behind parody just like in “BIG” (2019), or in satire in “Kold World” (2019). Those various outlets for a more complex narrative of herself are made possible because on songs like “Off the Yak,” that immediately follows “Yak Thoughts” and concludes her album (2021), she puts her guard back up. When she’s weaned of the disinhibiting effect of alcohol (“off the cognac”), she seems to be telling us that she must go back to the holy trinity of “guns, hoes and bros” as a matter of survival.

Pussy, just know that we got it (Grr)
 Them niggas was tryin’ to rob me
 My shooter, he cocked it and popped it (Grr, baow)

Appearing aggressive, and trigger-happy here, is the ultimate camouflage that allowed her to be unfiltered in the previous song. With “Open Scars,” she goes closer to fully shedding the camouflage when she raps the final punchline:

Heal first, find peace, find keys, mind free
 First step find God, next step find me

And once again puts the guard back up with “Watch (Still Kween)” (single, January 2024, M.A music, released on Spotify under another name: Red Lyfe Kween). Where she calls “Open Scars” an “interlude” and presses the audience to “listen to the music.”

None of you rappers can fuck wit' me
 I'm her, I'm him, I'm shim, not them
 She does her own kind of queer.

Conclusion: Queering Blackness When Studying M.A

Parents do not want their children listening to [rap], and educators do not see the educational value in [rap]. I believe that the value resides in the critique (Pough 92-3)

That comment, written twenty years ago, is no longer valid. First, because there is now a vast literature in the U.S. about how and why hip hop can be leveraged at school. Second, because there is a discreet number of teachers who have leveraged it quite positively in the U.S., the UK, or France (Morrel and Duncan-Andrade; Lamont Hill and Petchauer; Chetty and Turner; Love 2017; Souyri). Finally, the value of hip hop is not solely in the critique and probably never has been. While unpacking the contradictions between the pleasure queer Black youth and others may get from hip hop and the pain hip hop doles out to them does matter; and while we need to build more research to guide teachers through the paradoxes and support them when they help students “fuck with the grays” to use Joan Morgan’s expression again, it is also crucial we, as teachers, keep paying attention to what our students are listening to.

The rap genre has been frequently subjected to an array of generalist reductions that often have been produced by people who seem to have refrained from listening to the emerging artists of the new generation. When renowned race scholar Paul Gilroy argued that “[t]he counter-cultural voice of black Atlantic popular music [and rap in particular] has faded out” (2010: 121, 124; and 2000: 179-182), one is tempted to ask whether he was paying any attention since he missed Dead Prez, Common, Nas, The Roots, Missy Elliott, and countless others. In his defense, he is not the first teacher (or even rapper) who “dissed” younger generations of artists. Ismaël Metis, a French rapper and educator I work with, underlined how much of an epiphany it was for him to realize that rejecting his students’ musical tastes would lead him nowhere pedagogically speaking (Souyri). This said, misgivings about the apolitical stance of gangsta rappers’ exaggerated parodies still apply to certain songs. As Peter McLaren wrote in 1999:

when the gangsta rapper undertakes a “parodic hyperbolization” [...] of the subjugated black man—in the figure of the gangsta with a gun –

but does not connect it to a larger political project of liberation, this may rupture the image of the subjugated black subject but fail to unsettle the exploitative relations connected to white supremacist patriarchal capitalism. By not connecting its subversion to a larger politics of possibility, gangsta rap runs the risk of ironizing its own act of subversion and parodying its own performance of dissent in such an I-don't-give-a-fuck fashion that, rather than erode dominant social relations of exploitation and subjugation, it may actually reinforce them. (54)

McLaren may have a point but then again, if rappers reinforce stereotypes when they resort to parody, is that because they are unaware of what they are doing? A somewhat arrogant academic gaze can lead us to believe that, but it can also then easily prevent us from paying attention to the music in its elusive vastness and complexity. Such complexity should prevent us from trying to placate a Manichean vision distinguishing between sexist and feminist rappers, politically conscious and politically inept artists because at the end of the day they're rarely fully one or the other.

Bettina Love, who is a prominent hip hop education scholar today insisted ten year ago that "as a member of the Hip Hop generation, a Black woman, a lesbian," she was taught by male MCs, about what it means to grow up urban, angry, disenfranchised, and yet resilient, but it was female MCs like Lauryn Hill, Salt-N-Peppa, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte who taught her "to love [her] community and find [her] voice within the male bravado of rap and society at large" (Love 2012, 21). These artists surely have a lot to bring to the classroom but here again we must be wary of projecting our own experience and preferences or reaffirming traditional binaries dividing up female and male MCs, conscious and gangsta rap. An artist like Young M.A is particularly interesting in that respect. Her pervasive use of double entendre and contradictions forces us to steer clear of any hasty judgement and helps students and teachers alike interrogate complexity and challenge the fast paced, mindless consumption of rap music that prevails nowadays.

Finally, as white teachers, we need to be mindful that too often whiteness has been understood as giving us the "right to determine meaning" as Cheryl Harris insisted (1992). In other words, when discussing M.A's tracks with our students we cannot impose our interpretation on them but can only strive to give them interpretation tools, concepts that they can then use, challenge, or dismantle. Finally, while not all LGBTQ+ kids listen to hip hop, if Patricia Hill Collins is still right that "for Black and Latino youth who have been denied high-quality educations, school is no longer the place where they learn

literacy and politics. Rather, for many, mass media has become their classroom” (2006, 191), then we need to learn from Instagram and TikTok pros like Young M.A, Lala&ce, Janelle Monáe, and others. In other words, we need to follow our students’ lead because they are the ones who are queering blackness and changing the game now.

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