

The Queer Spaces of Black Dance Music

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Despite its hijacking by white artists and corporations and the subsequent risk of cultural erasure,² Black popular music remains “a way of resisting racial and sexual oppression, articulating experiences of resistance and struggle, and oppositional identities” (Nelson 7),³ and a privileged channel for expressing complex black identities.

My purpose in this article is to explore the impact of dance music performed by Black queer artists during Obama’s and Trump’s presidencies in terms of non-binary representations. Under the umbrella term “dance music,” I deal with contemporary artists performing in three related genres: house, techno, and hip-hop,⁴ the first two having been pioneered, like disco music, by Black and Latino queer artists, and the latter featuring, with relative invisibility until recently, a substantial number of queer and non-binary artists.

¹ The author wishes to thank very warmly for their time and commitment Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin, dance scholar, educator, and founder of Black Girl Brilliance, and cultural historian, poet, and activist Damon Percy, member of the Detroit Sound Conservancy, founder of the Club Heaven Sound System project.

² Of this erasure, Shanté Paradigm Smalls writes that it is “reworked to award [sic] white people [...] for ‘innovating’ or even ‘inventing’ cultural and performative forms that Black people crafted and perfected over years or even decades” (*Hip Hop* 16).

³ Similarly, Simone Drake describes Black popular culture as “a disruptive trope of fiercely resistant blackness” (3), and Stuart Hall as a site of “strategic contestation” (26).

⁴ Admittedly, hip-hop is not usually considered as a dance genre, however, audiences do dance at hip-hop events. As Miles White states about N.W.A.’s songs (but it is true for most hip-hop music), “as offensive as they might have been, [they] were nonetheless club-banging dance numbers, a fact that may have been overlooked by critics” and their album *Straight Outta Compton* was “a dance floor throw-down that was hard to resist” (60). On the same level, contemporary rapper Le1f recently added: “a lot of my music is made with the intentions of movement and dance” (qtd in Battan).

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Dance music performed by Black queer artists is located at the intersection of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, all intensely connected with matters of inter/personal and social identities. This has long been expressed through song and music, and many of the spaces where Black and/or queer and non-binary people have found a shelter are also associated with music or singing, from the Church to the “Houses” of the Ballroom scene.

What is “dance music performed by Black non-binary artists”? Does it describe a specific genre that could be identified textually or sonically? Is it just a convenient marketing – and academic – ploy? Should we rather refer to specific subgenres, such as “queer rap” or “queer R&B?” Are we not tying together artists who have little in common beyond questioning gender and sexuality? Do we not run the risk of further marginalizing them? Some queer artists oppose this classification, others appreciate the enhanced visibility.

My goal is to assess whether, over the last ten years, there have been any changes regarding the visibility of non-binary Black artists and what impact it might have had on their acceptance by the African American community, and by the country at large. Has the post-Obama period led to more visibility for Black queer artists, or have they been silenced, once again? If they have become more visible, has it led to a mainstreaming of their artistry? Can we observe subsequent changes in the conception of gender within the community? We shall also ask ourselves if by focusing on artists through the “queer/non-binary” lens, we are not putting too much emphasis on questioning gender and sexuality at the expense of other factors, such as race, or talent. A related question regards the appropriation of Black music and dance forms by the white establishment (club owners, promoters, producers, journalists, academics, etc.): is the Black community getting more control and economic windfall at this level? What role are Black political and religious institutions currently playing in terms of empowering the community?

In the *Call for Paper* for the conference they organized in 2020 on *Queering the City*, Anne Crémieux et al. asked whether territorial identification and spatial belonging are possible strategies for invisibilized groups to “create space” and whether these strategies are “overdetermined by intersectionality of gender, race, class and ableness?” (Crémieux “Call”) This paper similarly focuses on space from an intersectional perspective. Its initial inspiration was the number of publications, from the general and the specialized press to academic journals, referring to “space” in relation to LGBTQ issues, particularly regarding Black and Latino queers. The term is also extensively used by the artists, activists, and participants of the queer music scene themselves. So, admittedly, considering Black dance music as a

queer space is not a groundbreaking assertion. However, the term is often used as a given, and insufficiently problematized, and I wish to explore its implications more precisely. My claim is that in the Obama and post-Obama years, Black queer musicians have not only carved an increasingly visible physical and symbolic space for themselves, but that by challenging the silence and the rejection of different communities, including Black, musical ones, they have shaped more inclusive representations of gender.

Despite the growing body of publications related to Black queer studies,⁵ and Black popular culture,⁶ until very recently, most books and articles on queer music explored above all classical music or “white” rock (punk, queercore, homocore), and mentioned Black or Latinx artists only in passing.⁷ The seminal *Queering the Popular Pitch* (2006) edited by Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga did include a few articles dealing with queer and racial identities. It was supplemented in 2018 by *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, which devotes whole sections to the music of the African American community. Worth noting as well are a few recent books, articles, and special issues of scholarly journals⁸, among which Xinling Li’s *Black Masculinity and Hip-Hop Music: Black Gay Men Who Rap* (2018), Shanté Paradigm Smalls’ *Hip Hop Heresies. Queer Aesthetics in New York City* (2022), and Lauron Kehrer’s *Queer Voices in Hip Hop: Cultures, Communities, and Contemporary Performance* (2022). Yet, there remains a dearth of academic publications on the topic, and none focus on non-binarism.

As a white, straight, cisgender man, I will approach the subject as an “ally.” However, if for singer GodIsMikey, “being an ally means using whatever privilege you have to further the equality of those who don’t have it,” (qtd in Glendon) dance scholar Takiyah Nur Amin expresses serious doubts and reservations on the issue:

⁵ See for instance Delroy Constantine-Simms, Stefanie Dunning, Roderick Ferguson, bell hooks, Kara Keeling, J.L. King, José Esteban Muñoz, Siobhan Somerville.

⁶ See for instance Todd Boyd, Tamara Brown, Ellis Cashmore, Anne Crémieux, Simone Drake, Harry Elam, Stuart Hall, Tricia Rose, Harry Shaw.

⁷ See for instance Philip Brett, David Ciminelli, Robert DeChaine, Susan Driver, Mark Fenster, Cynthia Fuchs, John Gill, Judith Halberstam, Nadine Hubbs, Haro Ibars, Freya Jarman-Ivens, Doris Leibetseder, Judith Peraino, Kevin Schwandt, Deanna Shoemaker, Stevens Simels, Richard Smith, Jodie Taylor, Sheila Whiteley, Katarina Wiedlack.

⁸ See for instance Eric Shorey’s “Queer Rap is Not Queer Rap,” Adam Kruse’s “‘Therapy Was Writing Rhymes’: Hip-Hop as Resilient Space for a Queer Rapper of Color,” Brian Currid’s “‘We are Family’: House Music and Queer Performativity,” and Mark Wilson’s “Post-Pomo Hip-Hop Homos: Hip-hop Art, Gay Rappers, and Social Change.”

Often I have had the experience with people saying they want to be an ally, [...] but the minute that folks in the community do something or make a decision that makes them feel negatively implicated, they withdraw their support, because they disagree with that tactic, or don't like the way it makes them feel. [...] This is why I say you can't name yourself as an ally, it is the community that you claim to be supporting that can identify you in that way.⁹

In this article, I do not use “queer” as a catch-all term to describe any non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender person. I only apply it to artists who explicitly claim the term to signify their refusal of identity assignment, binarity, and essentialism in all its forms, often (but not always) as part of a process of “disidentification” (Muñoz). It includes the disruptions and dissonances, the “*coitus interruptus*,” as Shanté Smalls puts it (“Queer” 125 emphasis in original), whose modalities move away from the usual strategies of social protest in favor of what Arlene Stein and Kenneth Pummer describe as “a politics of carnival, transgression and parody” (182). Embodied in performance, “queer” often borrows from camp or kitsch and gender is bent out of its inadequate binaries.

I will first deal with the development of Black queer Anglo-American music before exploring Black non-binary musical spaces. The case of New Orleans' bounce will ultimately allow to study the impact of such spaces on gender representation, through its most visible and vocal representative, Big Freedia.

The Musical Context

Popular music is a fertile ground for the exploration and contestation of gender and sexual norms,¹⁰ and not only for white artists. Already in the early 20th century, singers such as Gladys Bentley, or Bessie Smith alluded to their homosexuality. Ma Rainey made her attraction for women clear in “Prove It on Me Blues” (1928), as did Lucille Bogan in “Women Won't Need No Man” (1927) and “B.D. [for bull dyke] Women Blues” (1935). Such newly gained freedom was made possible by Harlem's many jazz cabarets and clubs, some of them openly gay, like the Ubangi Club. However, underlines Emma Chen,

⁹ Takiyah Nur Amin, personal interview conducted on March 30, 2023, cut and rearranged for clarity and brevity, with respect to the original conversation. All further quotes by Takiyah Nur Amin are from this interview. The whole interview can be found in the present volume.

¹⁰ As Jodie Taylor stresses, “music's ability to locate the individual in the social has the potential to provide marginalized people such as queers with a means of transgressing the public/private dichotomy that has long operated as a means of sexual repression” (*Playing* 45).

“there were still limitations as to how much even these women could express themselves. Homosexuality was still criminalized and police raids on the various emerging gay enclaves occurred regularly” (25). After the war, Gwen Avery, who passed away in 2014, was one of the few open lesbian artists in the African American community. She was best known for her song “Sugar Mama” on the famous *Lesbian Concentrate* compilation released in 1977 by the all-female Olivia Records label. And if most male blues or Rhythm & Blues singers boast about their (hetero)sexual prowess with deep, low voices, such as Muddy Waters in “Mannish Boy” (1955), the countertenor voices of Smokey Robinson, Al Green, Curtis Mayfield, Clyde McPhatter, Marvin Gaye, Little Richard, or later Prince and Michael Jackson questioned such binary heterocentrist notions.

However, openly challenging gender or sexuality remains difficult in certain traditional Black music genres. The case of gospel is particularly revealing. Though the homosexuality of many singers or choir conductors is well-known, the ban regarding sexuality in the Church implies that for major figures like Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Clara Ward, Willmer Broadnax, or Reverend James Cleveland, “the basis of their categorization as queer” remains “speculation, hearsay” (Johnson, “The Gospel” 82). Many gospel singers, now middle-aged, stress that performing in a choir surrounded by a substantial number of fellow homosexuals while being simultaneously submitted to preaches vilifying homosexuality was a traumatic experience. Reverend Irene Monroe confirms that “The Black church applauds its LGBTQ congregants in the choir pews, yet excoriates [them] from the pulpits.”¹¹ She quotes Donell Patterson, chair of the Gospel Music department in New England Conservatory’s School of Preparatory and Continuing Education, for whom “A day without gay people in the choir, there would be no church and in some cases pastors, too. Gays are integral to the black church, and it can’t deny it.” The situation is slowly changing. For example, Patrick E. Johnson, dean of the School of Communication at Northwestern University, gave a special lecture on “Gays and Gospel” for National Coming Out Day in

¹¹ Cultural historian Damon Percy, who comes from the voguing community and used to sing in a Church choir, confirms: “The Black Church will pimp you out for your musical ability, your talents, all that stuff, and toss you away. You see so many musicians who passed on, they don’t honor they legacies. These people have created sounds and all these things that you’ve stolen, as the Black Church, but you won’t give them the credit at all.” (Damon Percy, personal interview conducted on April 21, 2023, cut and rearranged for clarity and brevity, with respect to the original conversation. All further quotes by Damon Percy are from this interview. The whole interview can be found in the present volume).

October 2022. But in the Black Church, that has been described as both “the most homophobic and most homotolerant of any institution in the black community” (Boykin 17), tolerance remains for a large part, as in most Churches, based on a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy regarding trans, non-binary, and sexual issues.

However, the situation differs sensibly for the different genres of Black dance music developed from the 1970s onwards by gays, lesbians, or transgender people of color for audiences that looked like them, first with disco music, and then house and techno. With artists like Gloria Gaynor, Patti Labelle, The Pointer Sisters, Sister Sledge, Donna Summer, Sylvester, or The Village People, disco started in the early 1970s an unprecedented movement of sexual liberation, allowing gay men and lesbians to express themselves openly in the clubs of New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Chicago, or Detroit. The mainstreaming and commodification of the genre led its main performers, mostly DJs, to move to something else. In fact, despite the “disco bashing” events of the late 1970s, which were as much a rejection of queers of color as of the music as such, disco did not die. It just returned underground and became what was later dubbed “electronic dance music.” The experimentations conducted by the four historic DJs, Larry Levan in New York’ Paradise Garage club, Frankie Knuckles in Chicago at The Warehouse, and Ken Collier and Stacey Hale in Detroit, gave birth to house and techno music, whose hypnotic, trance-like sounds were adopted by a growing crowd initially mostly composed of gay African American, Latinx, Caribbean, and Asian American youth.

If the clubs that accommodated techno and house gradually attracted a mainstream audience, increasingly composed of straight and white people, the drag balls of the ballroom community occupy a remarkable, though more underground, position. Developed mostly by the transgender community, drag balls offer a combination of beauty pageant, fashion show, and dance competition. The first drag balls took place in Harlem as far back as the 1860s, and particularly during the Harlem Renaissance. Announced as “costume balls,” they allowed to safely bypass New York’s regulations against cross-dressing and same-sex dancing. Drag balls have historically been attended by queers of color, although there has always been a minority of white, straight and/or cisgender participants. In the early 2000s, the ballroom scene branched out into a lighter variant called Kiki,¹² more youth-oriented,

¹² According to the *Urban Dictionary*, “kiki” is “a slang term in gay culture referring to friends gathering to ‘spill the tea,’ or simply just engage in casual conversation. A party including good music and good friends” (“Kiki”).

and less focused on competition, that included house music and techno, as Damon Percy (who was born in the early 1970s) remembers: “My generation, [...] it was house music, and a lot of gospel house [...] with Crystal Waters, and CeCe Peniston, and Ten City.”

Hip-hop tells a different story. Although there is a long history of queer presence in hip-hop¹³, it is routinely considered as a heteronormative, homophobic, and misogynistic genre. Xinling Li thus writes that “hip-hop culture has not been a place where gay rappers are welcomed” (2), Mark Wilson adds that hip-hop culture is “violent, sexist, homophobic, anti-gay, heteronormative, and male-centered” (117), and Kruse notes that the music is saturated with “misogynistic and homophobic rhetoric” (101). Hip-hop’s hypermasculine rhetoric is sometimes explained to leave behind the genre’s quintessentially queer roots: disco, house, and ballroom culture (Kehrer, Li, White). However, the interrelation that existed between queerness and hip-hop from the genre’s inception is increasingly brought to the fore. Thus, for Jeffrey McCune, “hip-hop is as much a part of queer world-making, as queer world-making is a part of the history of hip-hop” (*Sexual* 127). Smalls claims that “LGBT and queer, intersex, genderqueer, and gender-nonconforming (QIGGNC) bodies have been both integral to US hip hop cultural production and denied as integral to said production” (“Queer” 125), and it is the central argument of Lauron Kehrer’s recent opus, in which she demonstrates that “hip hop is not *inherently* homophobic” (32).

A common explanation to the strongly homophobic content of both the lyrics and the public utterances (tweets, interviews, etc.) of hip-hop’s main performers (particularly within the gangsta rap subgenre), is that rappers do not necessarily express personal opinions, but merely reflect the prevalent attitude within the Black community. Damon Percy upholds this perspective: “I was used to Black men talking like that, that’s what it was in the neighborhood. My brother’s friends, that’s how they were, that’s how they spoke. I didn’t take it personally [...]. At that time, it was about how the community at large felt”.

Another explanation of gay and lesbian bashing in hip-hop is that it would bear the trace of the prominent historical role played by religion in the development of African American musical idioms, down to hip-hop. A third explanation is that slavery emasculated the Black male and turned the Black community into a feminized race, which hip-hop challenges by adopting the

¹³ *The Source*, the most respected hip-hop magazine, published in 1997 three articles on gays and hip-hop.

aggressive male posture promoted by Afrocentrism and Black Nationalism.¹⁴ As a result, so-called “nationalist hip-hop”¹⁵ developed, presenting a form of resistance through the threatening voice and bulging muscles of the Black urban male, construed as the opposite of homosexuals. The presumably sweet, melodious voices of “queer hip-hop performers” became inaudible. Together with R&B singers, they were ostracized precisely because they “sang,” “singing” and “being musical” being two sexual slurs (or at least derogatory innuendos) directed at homosexuals. “Rapping” (as opposed to singing) was the only possible sound of Black manhood, the only possible voice against white domination. “As a result,” concludes Li, “homophobia was no longer a matter of personal belief but an attitude one had to adopt to be accepted as pro-black and be recognized by the male-centered hip-hop community” (36).

Hip-Hop and Non-binary Communities. During hip-hop’s formative years, several female artists were instrumental in fighting the heteronormative, misogynistic, and homophobic dimension of the genre, most notably Queen Latifah, who celebrated women empowerment with British-born Monie Love on “Ladies First” in 1989 and addressed domestic violence and harassment on “U.N.I.T.Y.” in 1993. In recent years, and particularly during the period under scrutiny, many openly queer hip-hop artists have become extremely successful, and the genre has evolved toward a more fluid and inclusive aesthetic. The first stirrings date back to the late 1990s when “Homo Hop,” a loose, multiethnic, multiracial movement of LGBTQ rappers and MCs was organized by the San Francisco-based band Rainbow Flava around a record label and production company called Phat Family. Its website defines Homo Hop with great care, underlining that non-binary performers are not threatening the fabric of hip-hop, but “building a home for [them]selves within it” (Phat Family).

Prominent within the Homo Hop movement is Deep Dickollective (D/DC), a California-based rap crew of African American gay men, founded in 2000, which built a new form of “political consciousness from a diversity of identities, particularly based on race, sexuality, and class” (Wilson 119), rather

¹⁴ Katrina Thompson Moore, for instance, claims that there is “a long history of the term ‘emasculat[i]on’ being associated with Black male identity due to Black men being denied full participation in White male patriarchal privilege” (86). Megan Morris sees the hyper-masculinity of hip-hop as “an extension of the metaphors of phallic power defined by the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, and championed by [...] Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and Amiri Baraka” (30).

¹⁵ See for example Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*, Temple U P, 2006.

than on purely racial criteria. Taken as a whole, the various forms of Homo Hop challenge “dominant accounts of hip-hop as a culture frequently characterized by violence, homophobia and misogyny” (Taylor, “Claiming” 5).

Though not systematically, and often less visibly, non-binary, Trap Queens have also contributed to the development of more inclusive forms of hip-hop. Originally associated to drug dealing, and to the female partners of dealers, the phrase has come to describe powerful, independent Black women, and is now commonly applied to several female rappers in the trap subgenre of hip-hop, which combines heavy, repetitive beats with R&B and pop influences. Among the genre’s leading artists, we can mention Megan Thee Stallion, Angel Haze, whose lyrics occasionally deal with homophobia, Princess Nokia, and Lizzo.

2012 marks a watershed in the development of non-binary forms of hip-hop. In July, a few months before Barack Obama’s re-election, singer/rapper Frank Ocean¹⁶ released an open letter on his blog¹⁷ revealing his love for another man (nothing about gender, though), which earned him the support of fans and other artists, something hard to imagine a few years earlier. A few weeks before, in March 2012, an article written by Carrie Battan for *Pitchfork* profiling Mykki Blanco, Zebra Katz, Lelf, and House of Ladosha and titled “We Invented Swag: NYC Queer Rap” launched the term “Queer Rap” which gradually came to describe a second wave of rap artists claiming openly their non-binary status. Often influenced by ball culture and drag aesthetics (which was not as much the case with homo pop), they gained more mainstream coverage. They were aided by several straight and cis allies from the mainstream hip-hop community, from Jay-Z to Macklemore, Murs, Kendrick Lamar, and Kanye West. The overarching label was immediately questioned. Pop culture writer Eric Shorey asks: “How are we supposed to talk about ‘queer rap’? Is it a scene? A genre? Is this just a case of a handful of incredibly disparate artists unwittingly (some unhappily) being grouped together for the sake of the convenience of labeling?” Indeed, the label “queer rap” is often applied to any subgenre of hip-hop provided it is performed by an artist identifying as LGBTQ. The interraciality of queer rap is rarely mentioned (Smalls, *Hip Hop Heresies* 24) and journalists tend to focus on gay men, framing lesbians within a masculine angle of power (“girl power”).

¹⁶ Admittedly, Franck Ocean is more a singer than a rapper in the conventional sense, which may have made his coming out more acceptable for the hip-hop community, since it did not question directly its hypermasculine posture.

¹⁷ <https://frankocean.tumblr.com/image/26473798723>

Nevertheless, as Annika Brandes claims in a recent issue of *Dig*, “the versatility and evolution of contemporary hip-hop and R&B has given a voice to those who are deconstructing both the genre and the idea of black sexuality.” Juan Velasquez asserts in *Them* that “2022 was a landmark year for music by LGBTQ+ artists. The sheer number of iconic tracks that came out this year is astonishing [...] Innovative queer and trans musicians pushed the boundaries of the sonic landscape. [Their] songs dismantle and reconstruct entire genres into different forms.” At the time of writing, about a hundred Black queer male, female, and transgender artists are listed on the Wikipedia page devoted to “LGBT representations in hip hop music.”¹⁸ Some remain fairly obscure, while others like Lil Nas X total millions of views/downloads.

Most started their careers in the early 2010s and have become increasingly successful during the last years of Barack Obama’s presidency.¹⁹ Since Donald Trump’s election, the trend has not abated. While a growing number of LGBT rappers has come out and remained successful, others, straight and/or cisgender, have apologized for their past insulting behavior towards gays (Eminem, in 2018), or now speak up against discrimination and in support of gay or transgender persons.²⁰ On “Auntie Diaries” (2022) Kendrick Lamar problematically raps “my auntie is a man now;” on “Smile” (2017), Jay-Z pays tribute to his lesbian mother; at the 2023 Grammy Awards ceremony, Beyoncé expressed her gratitude to her late gay uncle and the queer community.²¹ Refuting allegations of cultural appropriation sometimes thrown at Beyoncé, Damon Percy explains how, on the contrary, her use of house music is having a major impact on Black queer youth and their approach to gender and sexuality: “What she said is very impactful. [...] in terms of

¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_representations_in_hip_hop_music

¹⁹ During his eight years in office, President Obama displayed ties with Black musicians, some openly queer, others notoriously queer friendly.

²⁰ Insulting LGBT people has also become more perilous: “Now the artists see the power of our [gay] community taking them down. Lil Baby, after what he said on stage, hasn’t been able to get any good press. You know, you have to be careful, it is a business” (Damon Percy).

²¹ Beyoncé declared: “I want to dedicate this award to my uncle Johnny—the most fabulous gay man I’ve ever met who helped raise me and my sister. He lived his truth. He was brave and unapologetic during a time when this country wasn’t as accepting. Witnessing his battle with HIV was one of the most painful experiences I’ve ever lived. I’m hopeful that his struggle served to open pathways for other young people to live more freely. LGBTQIA rights are human rights. To choose who you love is your human right. How you identify and see yourself is your human right. Who you make love to and take that ass to Red Lobster is your human right.”

visibility. [She brought] awareness to the community that she's speaking of". The impact of Beyoncé's album *Renaissance* (2022) regarding the visibility, and recognition of Black dance music, and Black queers' role in its development, cannot be underestimated, and she was hailed as a remarkable ally of the community, as noted in mainstream press articles and academic papers.²² However, since my main focus is on non-binary artists, I will not specifically examine her contribution.

Another striking feature of the last decade is the increasing involvement of out rappers in the anti-racist struggle. Conversely, the current social movements against police brutality have sparked an equal interest in the long-overlooked central role working-class queers of color played in the development of dance music. In her introduction to her interviews of "18 Creatives on the Black Queer Future of Dance Music," Michelle Kim claims that "since George Floyd's death sparked a national uprising for racial justice, the push to reclaim the narrative around dance music has taken an unprecedented urgency." The increasing number of LGBT people of color coming out suggests that there is an increasing number of "safe places" where they can express themselves, the music scene being one. The next section elaborates on the notion of space within Black dance music.

The Queer Spaces of Black Dance Music

Safe Spaces. One way to assess the impact of Black dance music is to observe the expanding physical and symbolic spaces it has generated, a process that has accelerated during the last decade. "Safe space" is the term most often used by journalists, activists, artists (dancers, DJs, musicians), and participants to describe physical environments (clubs, bars, ballrooms, etc.) where they feel comfortable. One of the obvious reasons behind the need for safe spaces are the "spatial restrictions that most black people feel at an early age—having rocks thrown at you for being on the wrong side of the tracks, for instance," reminds Ta-Nehisi Coates ("My President"). He put it even more bluntly in a 2015 essay: "In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – *it is heritage*" (*Between* 103 emphasis added). Takiyah Nur Amin makes a similar connection: "Violence [is] pointed at our very bodies, at our fleshiness, at our materiality".

²² See, for instance: Battan; Motah; Williams. In the latter, Williams delves on the connection the album's title establishes between the Renaissance Era, and the "rebirth of house music culture." The post is particularly interesting as it considers Renaissance as a "history lesson on the roots of Black music" and examines it from a religious, or at least spiritual, perspective.

For Martez Smith, the organizer of Dick Appointment queer parties in New York, “[Our society has] really criminalized and punished the Black body, and told us like, ‘Yo, you are not allowed to celebrate your sexuality. You are not allowed to be queer’” (qtd in Kim). Black women or non-binary people often must deal with unwanted behavior on the dance floor. Many recount how straight men feel entitled to touch them, or expect them to perform, and entertain them in a sassy way. They also complain about the physical rejection they experience: “[White people] are literally blocking you from moving and won’t make space for you and your marginalized body” (qtd in Wheeler).

“Marginalized body” is not a metaphor. Marlon Bailey defines the spatial marginalization of Black LGBT people as “The ways in which Black LGBT people are structurally prohibited from, denied access to, and oppressed within public and private spaces due to the race, gender, and sexual identities they claim” (6). Often economically vulnerable, Black LGBT youth are made physically invisible, with little access to safe neighborhoods, to the education and health systems, or to the job market. Reliable data is hard to find, but according to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless, Black LGBT youth represent about a third of all homeless LGBT youth (Ray). The Human Rights Campaign claims that more than forty percent have attempted suicide (Matthes). 2021 saw the highest number of anti-trans murders ever recorded, at 57 (Sosin). The situation is particularly serious in the Kiki community, whose members are sometimes as young as 13. Activists estimate that fifty percent are HIV-positive (Jordenö). The protection of these communities was the main reason behind the development of ballroom houses, stresses J. M. Nimocks: “the organizers of the ballroom scene have always been clear about the primary purpose of ballroom from its conception as providing a safe and celebratory space for mostly black and brown LGBTQ+ communities.”

More than just physical places where to live, dance, and socialize, queer spaces are transformative and performative utterances and actions that trouble the mainstream world. Queer spaces are material (dance clubs, houses), mental (successful black queer artists), and social (human interaction). Nightlife spaces are about more than just dancing, they offer a network of resources and support, love and friendship, creative inspiration and professional opportunity, and provide opportunities to establish business connections (producers, video directors, technicians, dressmakers, make-up artists, graphic designers...) and to express freely non-binary forms of sexuality and gender.

Electronic Spaces. The most visible Black queer space today is the Internet where, over the last five years, the presence of Black queer dance music has sharply intensified. Streaming sites like Deezer, Apple Music, or Spotify offer a choice of recent songs²³ grouped according to the ethnicity and sexuality/gender of their performers, such as “Queer Hip-Hop,” “Black and Queer AF,” or “Black, Queer, and Proud” (note the “political nod” of the latter, with its allusion to Nina Simone’s 1970 song “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” and James Brown’s 1968 anthem “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud”).

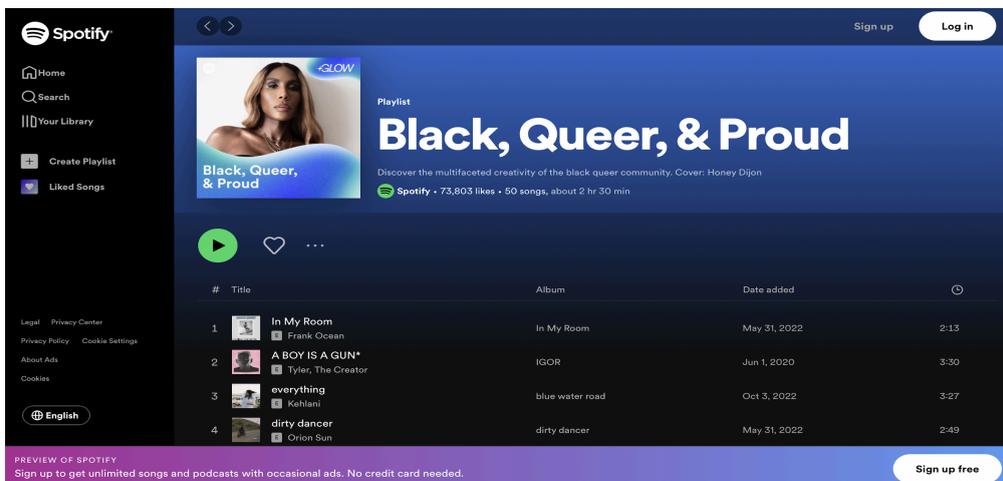


Figure 1. Playlist, *Spotify*, April 2023

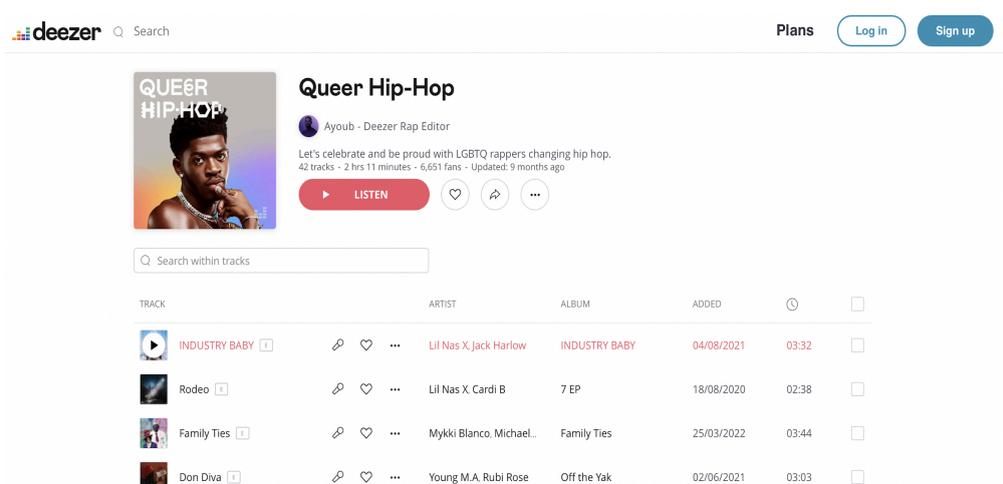


Figure 2. Playlist, *Deezer*, April 2023

²³ The oldest songs date from 2020.

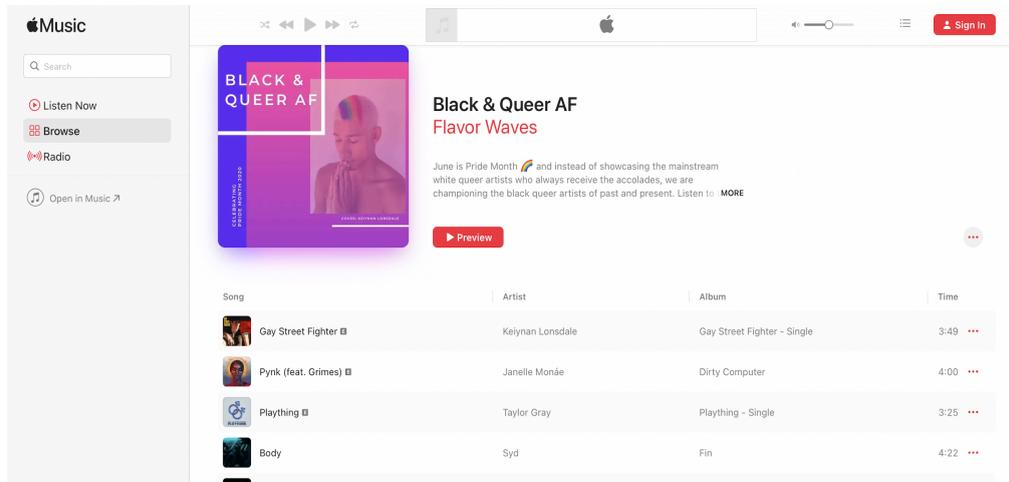


Figure 3. Playlist, *Apple Music*, April 2023

The electronic press is also increasingly covering the topic. The online magazine *Them* has started a thread on Twitter and a weekly column on its website to enable its readers to follow the latest trends, under the header: “Openly LGBTQ+ artists are releasing tons of great music, now more than ever. To help you with this extremely good problem to have, *them* is selecting the best songs released by queer musicians on every New Music Friday.”²⁴ The list below is a random selection of recent online articles from trade, and general interest publications. It gives an indication of the variety and intensity of this new, timidly intersectional, focus, though they rarely problematize the issue and merely provide lists of names, rather than in-depth analyses:

- “15 Queer Black Music Artists Who Are Proudly Living Their Truth,” *HuffPost*, June 15, 2017
- “8 Queer Black Artists Taking Music by Storm,” Devin Randall, *Instinct*, July 30, 2019
- “Queer Black Artists and Their Quests for Visibility,” Annika Brandes, *Dig*, February 7, 2020
- “5 Black, Queer Musicians to Listen to During Pride Month,” Patrick Ryan, *USA Today*, June 2020
- “A Soundtrack to The Queer Black Revolution: 15 Trans & Queer Black Musicians You Should Add to Your Playlists,” Attou Mamat, *Sayaspura*, June 24, 2020
- “10 Black Queer Artists Get Real About the Intersectionality of Resistance During Pride,” Francis Glendon, *Billboard*, June 24, 2020

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/them/status/1395844424412893184>

- “The Sound of a Movement: 18 Creatives on The Black Queer Future of Dance Music,” Michelle Kim, *Them*, June 29, 2020
- “38 Black Queer Musicians,” *Out Magazine*, January 2021
- “The Summer Black Queer Music Took Over,” Ernest Owens, *Rolling Stone*, September 5, 2022
- “Black Queer Musicians Are Pushing the Music Industry Forward — and Proving They Can Exist Outside of It,” Clarissa Brooks, *Teen Vogue*, March 30, 2023

One reason for this expanding visibility is obviously the growing interest in issues related to gender and sexuality in society at large, and the increased possibility for artists, including African Americans, to come out without fearing negative repercussions for their careers. Donald Trump’s election and increasingly repressive State legislations have made these spaces even more essential.²⁵ Asked whether he thinks safe places are still necessary today, Damon Percy answers: “We always need safe places [...] where you can go and be uplifted for who you are. [They] are an escape from the world, which is right now a horrible place to be. [...] You want to go to where you have your own people, where you are affirmed, and celebrated, not just tolerated.”

Hence the various initiatives providing Black queer people with an enhanced level of protection. For Kadar Small, photographer of the Dick Appointment parties launched in 2019 by Kenny Jovan in various New York nightclubs, Black queer people need “a space where they know they’re going to be fully comfortable, where they’re going to be fully accepted, and you don’t have to worry about anything” (Gillani). Such is also the rationale behind the “Rave Reparations” parties founded in 2020 in Los Angeles by Alima Lee and Mandy Harris Williams. The politically weighted appellation shows to what extent “making amends” has become an important form of advocacy for Black people. To the extent that “becoming visible is transformative” (Crémieux, *Now* 5), Black queer spaces have also become spaces of empowerment. Takiyah Amin draws an interesting parallel between Black and LGBT issues. For her, like the Civil Rights movement gave the race question a visible, human reality, “the LGBTQ+ communities have always been an expressive, active part of our society. It is just that our lens hopefully is getting broader and deeper”.

Bodies in Motion. The sounds, lyrics, and especially dances of Black queer

²⁵ See for instance Wyatt Ronan, “2021 Officially Becomes Worst Year in Recent History for LGBTQ State Legislative Attacks as Unprecedented Number of States Enact Record-Shattering Number of Anti-LGBTQ Measures into Law,” *Press Release of the Human Rights Campaign*, May 7, 2021.

music bestow a symbolic agency to its participants, a degree of social prominence and cultural authority. In his study of class relations in a Malay village, James C. Scott coined the term “hidden transcript” to describe practices “likely to create and defend a social space in which offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relations may be voiced” (xi). Dance is one of these hidden transcripts, a powerful form of infrapolitics that sends an intra-community message and contributes to organizing support and resistance.

Dance, as performed by non-binary, working-class, Black and Brown individuals on the dance floors of American cities, on a background of house, techno, or queer hip-hop music, defines and occupies a major queer space, both physically and symbolically. Resorting to an aesthetic of parody, humor, and above all, excess (of vocal expressions, make up, gestures, hairdos, clothes, movements...), abstract notions such as “dissidence” or “resistance” become a daily reality. Takiyah Nur Amin insists on the intimate connection between the dancing body and resistance: “Protest exists at the level of our fleshy materiality. I think whatever liberation looks like, it is going to include a reckoning with our bodies, and dance is one of the tools. [...] Dance is a part of the resistive technology that talks back to oppressive structures”.

Indeed, dance floors allow LGBT individuals to celebrate “family” in safe environments that “talk back to oppressive structures.” After the flamboyant and life-affirming phase of disco music in the 1970s, quintessentially dance genres such as Chicago house and Detroit techno were engineered by and for working-class queers of color.²⁶ Dance is central to the ballroom scene that emerged in the late 1980s. Its participants, mostly African American and Latino LGBT youth, started to vogue on house music, resorting to complex, highly codified movements (hand performance, floor performance, duck walk, catwalk, spins and dips, etc.). The participants of the vogue scene frequently describe how the genre allowed them to find a way out of abusive families, neighborhoods, church leaders... Amin suggests that the way the Black body has been mistreated throughout history turns dance into a site for “bodily enactments of pleasure, agency, and resistance” (“The Booty” 240). This speaks to why Black queer dance video clips materialize queerness through excess, to compensate the violent discipline and control Black people are subject to. The steps and gestures performed on sonic backdrops create both physical and symbolic spaces of protection and empowerment.

²⁶ However, disco, house, and techno’s origins were erased when white American and European DJs adopted the genres and started to cater for an increasingly white, middle-class audience.

The last part of this article focuses on the recent, spectacular development of a queer subgenre of hip-hop, whose specific dance practices have become its trademark. It will further position Black dance music as a generator of empowering queer spaces, relying on the resistive impetus of sexuality despite mainstreaming and appropriation.

The Case of Bounce

Bounce was born in New Orleans in the late 80s at the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, and geography. From a second-rate form of heterosexual hip-hop, non-binary Black artists have developed a spectacular subgenre, based on the combination of humorous, sexual, and energetic repetitive lyrics and dance steps, including, among many others, twerking. My claim is that bounce opens a Black queer space, as defined above, creating a strong sense of belonging by mixing the performance of sexuality and gender with references to Africa and slavery.

When bounce's early success began to fade in the late 1990s, it was taken over by non-binary artists. In fact, Hettie Williams credits Trap Queens and Drag Divas (some of whom are explicit about their non-binary identity) with the invention of bounce (*Black Perspectives*). However, New Orleans journalist Alison Fensterstock's label, "sissy bounce," though catchy, was deemed offensive and eventually abandoned. Bounce found an unexpected audience of mostly Black, working class, heterosexual women, but it does not only "oppose antiBlackness and misogyny, but also homophobia and transphobia" (Schoux Casey and Eberhardt 321). Big Freedia is currently bounce's biggest name. Not a cross-dresser, nor a drag queen, she wears make-up, nails, flamboyant clothes, wigs, but not necessarily from the "traditional" women's wardrobe. She says she is above all an artist who happens to be gay and accepts both pronouns. Her career has recently taken a national, and even international dimension, with the publication of her memoir, a six-season (2013-2017) reality series, and collaborations with stars like Drake and Beyoncé (though her name is not always mentioned).

Local Spaces. New Orleans' bounce artists stage names, as well as the titles and subject matter of many of their songs and video clips refer to New Orleans' wards and projects. While citing local spaces is obviously intended to foster a sense of community and commonality among listeners, it is also for bounce artists a way to chronicle the displacements the Black community has had to endure. In his dissertation, referring to the consequences of hurricane

Katrina or policies of urban renewal,²⁷ Andrew Chapman draws attention to the fact that “Neighborhoods, the actual physical spaces that many Black New Orleanians once called home, are literally gone, either from being razed, washed away, or crumbling from disinvestment” (21). By narrating physical and social spaces, bounce becomes a rallying cry providing cohesion and comfort to disoriented communities. Many comments on streaming sites insist on the comforting sense of “home” experienced when listening to such songs by former New Orleanians now living in Baton Rouge, Dallas, Atlanta, or Houston because of Katrina. But local spaces are in turn radically queered by bounce’s strong African presence.

The African presence. The central element in the queering process initiated by bounce artists is the introduction at unprecedented levels of African, more precisely West African, elements in their performance, in ways that trouble the genre’s American, Southern, working class, hypermasculine background. This is of particular significance in a place like New Orleans, “the most Africanized slave culture in the US,” according to Gwendolyn Midlo Hall (1049), where African, indigenous, and Caribbean cultures blend.

The most visible African presence can be found in the different dances connected to the genre, among which the infamous “twerk,” popularized nationwide by Big Freedia. Infamous, because many (educators, journalists, leaders, etc.) consider it lewd and obscene, even particularly shocking and inappropriate when performed by teenagers in the streets, in cars, on front porches, in school yards, even in classes sometimes, and most of all, on the Internet. Twerking has pushed the limits of acceptable behaviors for mainstream audiences. For Takiyah Amin and Christin Marie Taylor, these dances have obvious African roots. However, such claims are always difficult to prove. Franco-Cameroonian choreographer James Carlès claims that indeed, twerking came after *mapouka*, but that “the influence of this style is much more visible in *coupé-décalé*” (qtd by Sauphie). For Carlès, there is a continuum in all Afro-descendant dances, from Africa to Europe and the United States, rather than a direct link.

Twerking was already one of several similar dances performed in association with bounce music when Miley Cyrus released a Facebook video that went viral, followed by on-stage twerking at the MTV Video Awards

²⁷ This is particularly the case with the construction of the elevated Interstate 10 over North Claiborne, which destroyed what used to be a thriving Black district. However, as Tejai Beula Howard underlines, “Bounce music’s history reveals how African Americans, particularly Black New Orleanians, created a sound and culture that allowed them to thrive in spaces that the government designed to destroy them.”

ceremony on August 26, 2013. This was soon followed by Rihanna's "Pour it Up" video on October 2, 2013. Interestingly, despite Rihanna's fame, six days after its release, the video had garnered only 34 million views compared to Miley's 310 million. These statistics are telling evidence of the limits of media penetration of African American artists, compared to what white artists can achieve. Thus today, even if "Pour It Up" has reached 500 million views on YouTube, Miley Cyrus "We Can't Stop" is at one billion, and if Pharrell William's, Childish Gambino's or Beyoncé's most watched videos reach the billion mark, they are topped by Mark Ronson, Ed Sheeran, Katy Perry, Maroon 5, or Justin Bieber, and by Latino artists Luis Fonsi, El Chombo, or Shakira, some of whom are over eight billion views.

Kyra Gaunt points out that "omitted from Miley's performance and from reports about it were any musical linkages like the call-and-response party chants that most Bounce songs inherited from both Mardi Gras Indian masking traditions and brass bands in New Orleans" (268). She claims that Miley "de-racialized" the dance (256). For Big Freedia, cultural appropriation is "offensive to Black culture and Black women who've been twerking for years" (Ross 205), which Amin explains by the fact that "Black communities are creative in general. So, people always want to steal our stuff."

Takiyah Amin and Christin Marie Taylor establish twerking's African roots based on several elements. The dance combines two New Orleans traditions, bounce being born "when these traditions collided with the hip-hop movement" (C. Taylor 66). The first of these traditions are the "baby dolls," masked Black prostitutes who, starting in the early 1900s, paraded in the streets doing what, according to eyewitnesses, already looked like twerking. They were often joined by men disguised as women (while some baby dolls cross-dressed as men). The second origin of twerking is a daring women's dance from the Congo, the *mapouka* (called "danse fossier" in the Ivory Coast) which was already danced at the time of slavery in Congo Square in New Orleans, and in Alabama, as early as the eighteenth century. Accusations of vulgar hypersexuality and African traces have been used to expel high school girls who posted twerking videos. "Black bodies are always already wrong—troubled, tainted, unworthy, dispossessed," claims Amin ("The Booty" 239).

"The groin area has extraordinary power," writes Freddie Ross, alias Big Freedia, "it is more than sexual; it's also deeply intimate and transformative. For us sissies, who lived under such constant oppression – the violence, poverty, and homophobia – Bounce is our way to transmute that pain into joy" (220). The groin and the "booty" are bounce's main targets, as celebrated by

Big Freedia in “Azz Everywhere” (2010). Hips are often isolated in various dances throughout the African continent. These dances partake in the socialization of young working-class Black girls by helping them transfer their identity, via electronic media, from the private (their bedroom) to the public sphere at a critical moment of their lives. This socializing role is yet another space created by Black queer artists. The transformative role Big Freedia mentions is connected to the freedom of movement twerking allows, together with its implied sexual autonomy, whether the claim is actualized or not.

Specific verbal elements also contribute to connect bounce to its African heritage and as such to complexify and enrich its image. The numerous exchanges between the MCs and their audience²⁸ inscribe the dance within the call-and-response tradition. This is often the case with Big Freedia who uses her voice for repetitive, percussive beats, such as with the word “yaka,” which could at first hearing be taken for a mere onomatopoeia, and which serves as a propulsive background for dancing. In “Explode,” for instance, the song sampled by Beyoncé, it is repeated 16 times before Freedia exhorts her audience to “release yo’ wiggle.”

Of the word “yaka,” Big Freedia says that it “is basically like glocka – when we’re shaking, we’re like, ‘Ooh, she’s glocka, she’s going hard.’ Yaka is kind of the same. We use it for glocka. It’s a feeling of, ‘She’s getting some, she’s going hard, she’s going in.’ I usually come up with my own words to relate to some of the words we already use, but to change the concept of it. Yaka and glocka are kind of the same thing” (Qtd in Feeney). However, researchers have also discovered that “Yakah” is a Congolese surname referring to “people near a river,” and that it echoes the Bantu phrase “yaka awa,” or “come here,” connecting bounce even more directly, albeit unconsciously, to its African origins (C. Taylor).

Admittedly, the most prominently featured lyrics in bounce music are of a crude, (homo)sexual nature. However, they should be replaced within the African American tradition of humorous and hyperbolic verbal jousting, such as “the dozens,” often used in blues, and not to be taken at face value.

Bounce thus results from the intersection of three elements: an emphasis on local spaces; witty, energetic hypersexual lyrics and dances; and politically laden borrowings from African cultures. This combination turns the genre into a joyful “hidden transcript” that uses movement and space to counter the

²⁸ “A string of shorter, chant-friendly phrases, hooks, or choruses”, according to Matt Miller in his groundbreaking Ph. D. Dissertation (Miller 169), which he later adapted into a book, *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans* (2013), to my knowledge, the only full-length work on bounce so far.

control of dominant groups. Bounce disrupts not only middle-class, heteronormative expectations, but also homonormative ones, as well as participants in the hip-hop scene, troubling sexual or gender identities. In the process, bounce is not only opening unexpected spaces of freedom to marginalized groups, but also deconstructing entrenched attitudes regarding how gender and race are understood today in the United States.

Black Gender

What I intend to explore in this last section is the impact queer Black dance music has had on the nature of Black gender representations. Can we provide an analysis that would take the ongoing changes into account?

For the last thirty years or so, African American gender has been increasingly defined by hip-hop's discourse, from New School and Golden Age eras, down to gangsta rap, hardcore, and regional scenes. The record covers, posters, video clips, and live performances featuring mostly male rappers have presented the often-threatening image of an "hypermasculine, Black, cisgender, and heterosexual man" (Kehrer 66) buttressed by an ethos of struggle and material success. Emotions must be withheld, since, according to White, they suggest "vulnerability" (25). He explains further: "For many young males even the act of smiling is seen as registering weakness, feminization, and relative lower social status. The performance of hardcore masculinity rejects the softening of one's facial features in favor of the cold, hard stare intended to project strength and inspire fear if not respect" (25). The feminine being usually devalued in patriarchal societies, displaying what could be interpreted as feminine would automatically entail considerable discredit.

What initially only concerned a handful of artists eventually came to define, in the United States and throughout the world, how people conceived Black masculinity,²⁹ a cause for either fear and repulsion, or fascination and envy. Those who did not fit the frame, homosexuals, transgenders, or straight, cisgender individuals who just did not identify with this image, had to make do with the margins of social and media life.

However, more complex and nuanced representations are gaining ground. Early stirrings of non-aggressive Black masculinities could already be heard in 1950s gospel and doo-wop harmonies, "an entire strain of black music in

²⁹ This is true at least for the generation born in the 1980s, as Damon Percy explains: "The generation under me, they wanted [hip-hop] because they wanted to present an image, this toughness, this whole masculine thing."

contradistinction to white supremacist gender constructions of the black buck” (Pennington 122). Later, artists such as Marvin Gaye, Prince or Michael Jackson offered a suave, sophisticated, sometimes ambiguous image. But in the wake of the evolution initiated by the Homo Hop movement, contemporary Black artists are reshuffling the cards even more explicitly. While straight rappers like Jay-Z or Kendrick Lamar reveal their vulnerability, confusion, or grief, queer performers are flaunting radical forms of gender expression.³⁰

Miles White identifies in African American folkloric traditions two counter-hegemonic figures of resistance and subversion. One he calls “the black bad man”, which he describes as “a truly heroic figure in the classic sense of that term, because he seeks the good of those in his community and works toward that even if he is seen by whites as a troublemaker” (65). The second type is “the bad n...”, who “exerts his power by resisting all social and moral control, and tends to be viewed as a threat by other blacks since he acts in his own self-interest even if it hurts his community” (65). If the aggressively virile rapper fits the second category, at least in the eyes of the white and Black middle-class, queer artists rather fit the first one. Of course, for some, they are just vulgar, crude, hypersexual louts, as threatening and repulsive as any other rapper, but the response they get on social networks, in the clubs, or even in the streets, tells a different story. By deploying, like Big Freedia, a tongue-in-cheek “masculinity of assertiveness and strength” (Morris 38) that at the same time embraces make-up, stylish hairdos, warm smiles, and humor, they appeal not only to queers of color, but also to the Black community, from schoolgirls to housewives, and to straight, white people. By referencing ballroom culture and the hardships they have been through, Lauron Kehrer suggests that Black non-binary hip-hop artists “signify that their hardness comes not from heteronormative masculinity but from their experiences of queer community and survival within a homophobic world” (50). For these artists, being masculine means being resilient rather than violent, tolerant rather than mean, welcoming rather than vicious.

Others, like Todrick Hall, opt for a traditional feminine look that they carry with an empowering swagger, disregarding the stigma that comes with it. Such open feminization of the Black man represents a major change. For centuries, the only acceptable social space for effeminate Black men was in the margins, as entertainers, hairdressers, or decorators. The issue of Black crossdressers,

³⁰ However, Li suggests a cautious perspective since most Black queer artists promoted by the media and music industry are mostly of the flamboyant and effeminate type, probably for marketing and economic reasons (152).

for instance, whether they were gay or not, used to be extremely sensitive. Asked in 2006 by NPR's Ed Gordon what he thought of the Black male comedians that don a dress to entertain, Todd Boyd, a professor in Critical Studies at the University of California, a Black man himself, stresses the cost for the community in terms, once again, of emasculation:

Perhaps by feminizing the image of black masculinity, some people are made to feel less threatened and more comfortable. Perhaps the cross-dressing black man is a way to neutralize the image of empowered black men that hip-hop culture provides on a regular basis. Perhaps some entertainers will do anything for a laugh and a dollar. I'm sorry. I don't want to see any more black men in dresses. That is dead. There are already too many forces at work in society attempting to emasculate black men as it is. (Boyd)

However, Black men dressed in women's clothes, from RuPaul to Todrick Hall or Lil Nas X, and the occasional straight rapper, no longer get a laugh. Rather, they attract media attention, get imitated and complimented for their flair and panache.

Perhaps the most formidable achievement of contemporary queer dance music is the reconfiguration of "cool" it has achieved. "Cool," another example of "hidden transcript," had for long been the epitome of "true" Black masculinity. Being cool meant dressing, talking, behaving in a way that oozed aggressive hypermasculinity, heteronormativity, pride, and self-esteem. In other words, "cool" was part of the infrapolitics of African American communities, a means to survive, a coping mechanism. Megan Morris insists on the political connotations of the cool pose, "an impenetrable, expressive ideal of black masculinity that is able to unhinge the dominant society rather than contend with the same pursuit of authentic masculinity" (32). She adds that by being cool, "like their jazz predecessors, gangsta rap artists embody and express a masculinity that explicitly rejects reigning constructions of both race and gender," (33) which tend to place the Black man in a subservient, servile position. Todd Thomas concludes that "anything that wasn't masculine, tough, or gangsta became not cool. And it's this chasm that allowed for homophobia to inject itself into the genre." Consequently, if hip-hop was cool, house and techno were not. If rappers were cool, queer artists were not. "Fabulous" maybe, but not cool. In fact, underlines McCune, in African American culture, "the combination of queerness and coolness is incongruous" ("Out in the Club" 302).

However, contemporary queer artists are redefining what it is to be cool. They are reconfiguring the basis for pride, and self-esteem, in terms of gender,

by breaking binaries. In this respect, the prison setting chosen by Lil Nas X for the official music video of the track “INDUSTRY BABY” (2021) is emblematic, since jails have been construed as the realm of the tough, hypermasculine cool gangsta. Duetting with introspective white rapper Jack Harlow, Lil Nas X, in his signature, female-assigned pink-color pants, blends gender-nonconforming sartorial choices with assertive displays of physical strength and Black emancipation. The impact of artists like Lil Nas X, is considerable, explains Damon Percy: “His tour was just like a big gay party [...] I never thought I would see in my lifetime somebody on that level, that successful. I’ve seen so much of this ceiling that we can’t get past because of the phobias, and societal norms...” Not only is Lil Nas X unabashedly gay, he also breaks gender norms in ways that are all the more potent as he embraces some normative aspects of Black masculinity such as body-built muscles. Looking nothing like a woman, he redefines Black masculinity beyond binaries. Takiyah Amin examines these current shifts from a historical perspective: “Black masculinity [...] is always shifting and changing. What we have now is more Black men in the public eye who are willing to question notions of masculinity, and how these have been harmful”.

Queer and butch women are also being given more space in the music scene. Much like the women blues singers of the early twentieth century, rappers like Young M.A. or Syd challenge the heteronormative, misogynistic gender roles of the previous decades by being “hard but also effeminate [...], masculine but not male” claims Lauron Kehrer (65). Explicit lyrics by Young M.A. (“Ooouuu” 2017, with more than 400 million views on YouTube) or Syd (“Fast Car” 2022) bring lesbian sexuality into the mainstream on their own terms, not the male “girl-on-girl” gaze, but the exploration of sexual pleasures from a female perspective.

Last Words

I have mentioned Barack Obama’s appreciation of Black musicians, including queer ones. In the fast-changing world of Black gender representation, Obama himself has played an important role, embodying a “compelling alternative model of black masculinity” (White 132). “Cool,” confident, and successful, neither aggressively virile, nor effeminate, he unites formerly opposite representations of the gender spectrum, with humor, flair, and determination. The increasing visibility of non-binary Black musicians in the American space is both a sign of, and a catalyst for, the evolution Obama signposted and that Donald Trump’s policies have not been able to halt.

The stunning, unexpected success of the songs, shows, and videos by artists like Lil Nas X, Young M.A., and many others, reveals a growing openness and acceptance among their audience regarding issues of sexuality and gender. Gender binaries are no longer taken for granted. The Black queer spaces these artists are creating may only raise questions, and provide tentative answers, but this alone is an extraordinary achievement.

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