(Re)Defining and Transgressing Norms of Black Female Sexuality

by

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I have come to believe
over and over again
that what is most important to me must be spoken,
made verbal and shared,
even at the risk of having it bruised
or misunderstood

-Audre Lorde
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Chapter 1
Introduction:
Historical Understandings and Transgression of Black Female Sexuality

This project sprang from my being, so I see no better way to begin than with my interests:

(1) I’m interested in talking about queer and gender non-conforming females. It is important to first make a distinction between “woman” and “female” for the purpose of this work. When referring to “female,” I mean those people biologically born female. When referring to “women” I mean those people who self-identify as such. To be clear, not all females are women, and not all women are females. It’s important to note that this work aims to not conflate the two—“woman” and “female”—as much of the scholarship on Black female sexuality has done thus far.

This conflation of “woman” and “female” is but one reason to why I am interested in talking about queer Black females and gender non-conforming people through dance. Examining the lives of these people reveals how societal restrictions on gender, sexuality and race are challenged on an everyday level. I highlight the false constructed nature of these restrictions as a means to promote the validity of self-expression. I hone in on this specific group of people because in other academic and artistic works that claim to promote the liberation of Queer people of color or claim to support Queer theory have mistakenly erased the voices of these females. Just as the creative and academic work that centers around Queer people of color is disproportionately less than those works centered around Queer White people, the works that indeed focus
on QPOC are disproportionately focused on male-bodied queers, somewhat creating a hierarchy of Black queerness.

(2) I am interested in the radical potential of art. I am interested in making and researching transgressive art as a means to bring some voice back to the voiceless. Sociologists Layli Philips and Marta Stewart write: “transgressive refers to expressions of gender, sexuality, or race in which people purposefully confront and contest mainstream conventions as a part of a larger political agenda for social change” (Philips, 2008). When utilizing Phillips and Stewart’s definition of “transgressive,” how can art be utilized as an act of transgression; as a promotion of transgression even? One can utilize art to transgress structurally, thematically, socially, physically, spiritually, etc. I’m interested in the works that transgress in multiple ways and most specifically through the social commentary embedded within the work, and the methodology behind the process of art making.

This paper works to compile a collection of work that I categorize as “transgressive art” in hopes to find new and deeper connections across artistic disciplines that actively engage Queer and/or radical identity politics. It is important to make such connections across lines of discipline in order to create a lineage of sorts of art and artists who confront normative notions surrounding gender, sexuality and race; a lineage in which current transgressive people, both artists and non-artists, can align themselves to. This lineage acts as proof that we are not alone in this struggle towards freedom of expression and a true sense of
individuality. More importantly, this lineage acts as proof to our existence, on an individual and collective level.

I argue that my work is transgressive in its methodological approach and thematic exploration. For example, my dancers contribute physically to the breaking of mainstream conventions by being and dancing who they are. In both choreographic works, I have chosen to work with all Black identified performers whose engagement in formal dance training varies from none at all to very extensive. This choice alone contests mainstream concert dance conventions on who gets to perform on the formal stage, in what style of movement and why. My performers’ race highlight and challenge the Euro-centric core of concert dance as an art form. The movements that the performers utilize highlight and challenge the technique-oriented core of concert dance. Additionally, the movements question the hierarchies deeply rooted within those techniques, in promotion of a post-modernist notion that any movement can be dance. In adopting a theme that reveals and contests heteronormativity embedded within Black female sexuality, the purpose of my work is to expand the possibilities of gender and sexual expression available to Black female-bodied people. How my art engages with such themes will be further explored in chapters three and four, where I present an in dept analysis of my personal dance methodology in comparison to that of other transgressive choreographers.

(3) I am interested in movement as an adequate form of inquiry and communication, of contestation and embrace, and of self-expression for all
people. As a mover I physically engage in the materials at hand, questioning the socio-political connotations that arise through movement and the movers formally presented on stage. Our identities are mapped onto our bodies and these identities are infused with social implications and expectations. As a choreographer I’m interested in playing with and challenging these bodily associations because the everyday relevance of such cannot be ignored. For example, walking down the street I will always be perceived as Black and as female (in addition to many other assumptions about my identity that may or may not be true, all of which varies depending on how I choose to formally present myself to others). When entering the formal performance realm as a dancer, I bring along these racial and gendered assumptions about my body that as a choreographer I can choose to ignore or work to move beyond. Yet when the performance is over, those assumptions are still at play and (again) projected onto my body by society. For this reason I choose to play into these assumptions, teasing out ways to challenge them within the formal performance arena. I cannot simply pretend the audience forgets these assumptions once I step onto the stage to perform, because then I would be sacrificing my Self for the sake of entertainment and for the sake of art.

The audience cannot erase the associations society attaches to the bodies viewed on stage without the proper space for such erasure. Such a space must first reveal the social norms projected onto bodies deemed as “Other” or “deviant” that are at play. Only then can the space be utilized to destabilize said norms and offer new possibilities for understanding “deviant” and non-
normative bodies. While each audience member may view the “Other” bodies in a slightly different light (shaped by past experiences and their own sense of Self), our society still possesses much control over how these bodies are understood publically. I’m interested in unveiling this social power as a means to promote self-definition.

This project formulates at the intersection of these three interests and consists of this written work and two ten-minute choreographic works. I utilize multiple theoretical frameworks to ground this project, which includes Black feminist theory, Queer theory, as well as dance and cultural studies scholarship. I see my art making as a translation of these theories into practice, thus aligning my work within a Black feminist trajectory.

I began research for this project in the summer of 2009, focusing heavily on the history of Black female sexuality. Though I did not realize it then, all of my research had a particular Black female at its core—a contradictory feminine heterosexual Black female. Historically femininity—or more so, Western conceptualization of femininity—has “belonged” to White female bodies under what Black feminists Patricia Hill Collins and Evelyn M. Hammonds refer to as “the cult of true womanhood” (Collins, 2000; Hammonds 1999).\(^1\) Collins states, “according to the cult of true womanhood, ‘true’ women possessed four cardinal

\(^1\) Here Collins and Hammonds reduce womanhood to all of that which involves female-bodied people by assuming these females express their gender in terms of “woman”. I actually would deem their understanding of womanhood as my understanding of female-hood, as the community that arises around biological sex rather than gender.
virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Collins, 2000).

Femininity is constructed with a White woman at its center and then projected onto the bodies of all other females. White femininity, then, shapes all other understandings and expressions of femininity, usually in very contradictory ways.

Many contradictions emerge when analyzing Black femininity, especially so because such construction of femininity exists in polar opposition to White femininity. Black femininity’s close ties to hyper-(hetero)sexuality most prevalently reveals its construction in direct polar opposition to White femininity. For example, while White femininity exemplifies purity and refinement, as Collins inserts, Black femininity refutes such possibilities for all femininity in being deemed as the epitome of sex. Historically, Black femininity has been associated and reduced to sex by the imagination and abuse of others (Collins, 2001; Hammonds, 1999; Hine, 1990). White slave owners and traders have used this reduction to justify the raping of Black females during the 19th and 20th century (Hammonds, 2002). This same exploitation can too be seen today in popular culture, especially so within the Hip-Hop and Rap music industry (hooks, 1997), a thorough investigation of which occurs in the next chapter. Even though, on the one hand, Black female sexuality is understood in terms of excessiveness, Black femininity, as well as all other forms of non-White femininity, still must simultaneously continue to strive for and uphold White standards of purity and refinement.
The hyper-sexualization of Black female bodies exposes but one of many contradictions that emerge when deconstructing Black femininity. Other contradictions include the “durability” of Black females and the notion of bad Black mothers. Durability implies the ability for Black females to work exhaustively in many arenas for long extended period of times. Such work includes, but is not limited to, physical labor, domestic work and reproduction. The historical deeming of Black people, specifically Black females, as work mules roots this understanding of durability. The Black female’s seemingly ability to conquer all tasks within both the domestic and public sphere—no matter how daunting—negates normative feminine notions that restrict female-bodied people to submissive (and generally domestic) roles.

Class specific images of Black females as bad mothers arise in relation to the large number of Black females who receive welfare or other forms of government aid for daily survival. Though these females are usually restricted to the domestic realm, society questions their work ethics and morals—What morally just person wouldn’t want to pursue the “American Dream” of working hard to get rich? The perceived inability to successfully perform nurturing duties as a mother defeminizes Black females.

The history of Black female (hetero)sexuality and the construction of Black femininity can be explained through an examination of three “classic” stereotypes: the mammy, the matriarch and the jezebel. Even today most (if not all) Black female stereotypes can be traced to these three controlling images (Collins, 2000). Though the three are not explicitly sexual images of Black
female-hood, different implications surrounding the sexuality of Black females surface through an examination of the three. Respectively, the three exemplify Black females as asexual, as invisible and as hypersexual. Also, the three stereotypes are unquestionably understood in terms of a heterosexual framework, yet are also mapped onto the bodies of Queer females.

These examples of the contradictions embedded in Black femininity are what make Black femininity unique. What makes Black femininity most unique is its history of exploitation, violence and commoditization. Though Queer female sexuality (unfortunately) also fits well within the previously stated framework, the violence continues today as popular discourse omits possibilities of non-normative or alternative gender and sexual expression as adopted by Black females.

It becomes an important task to defuse these controlling images and the ways they live on today, continuing to control Black females through the media and popular culture. The understanding of these archetypes as normal and justified reveals how oppression works at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality and class (Collins, 2000). Unmasking the power these controlling images hold establishes room for re-evaluation and potential for transformation of the Self for Black females.

Mammy is perhaps the oldest and most prevalent stereotypes of the three. Collins writes, "As the faithful, obedient domestic servant, the Mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black [female] behavior" (Collins, 2000). For many years this image acted as one of very few
representations of Black females within popular American culture. For example, with the emergence of the film industry Black actresses who did not possess the skin privilege to pass as White were forced to take on roles that reflected the Mammy image as cooks, nannies and other forms of domestic workers (George-Graves, 2000). The Mammy’s main occupation is to obediently serve White families. Thus images of Black females as obedient and partaking in domestic work stem from Mammy. In being perceived strictly in terms of nurturing, the Mammy becomes safe for Whites to interact with as the “public face that Whites expect Black [females] to assume for them” (Collins, 2000).

Mammy is never thought of having any sexual autonomy or sexual expression at all. Ironically, this figure acts as a de-sexed mother figure in both the public and private sphere for her White children and biological children alike. The Mammy’s asexuality arises through her grotesquely obese figure and middle-aged/elder status. Though we understand Mammy as a de-sexed figure, her status as a mother automatically deems her as heterosexual. Just as Mammy is unquestionably heterosexual, she too unquestionable identifies as a woman. In a sense her obedience to serving Whites places her much closer to the cult of true (White) female-hood than the other two Black female images. Her close proximity to the cult could also justify her portrayal as desexualized. If Mammy were to possess some sexual autonomy, then she would be deemed as unsafe. Her sexuality would undoubtedly corrupt the White household, especially so for White men who would not be able to resist a Black sexual figure under his roof.
While presenting the Mammy figure as desexualized differs vastly from current representations of Black females a hypersexualized, such presentations continue to reveal the sexual and gender expression of Black females as controlled or shaped by outside forces rather than as belonging to the Black females. The matriarch figure also formulates under a similar framework, only the matriarch is not explicitly desexualized. Instead, her sexuality is made invisible and overshadowed by her independence.

The matriarch represents a strong female head of the family. These females find themselves in this lead position for multiple reasons, one being the loss of the Black fathers to slavery (historically) and prisons (today). Additionally, the number of unemployed Black men (both historically and today) has and continues to force Black females into the work place, sometimes marking them as the main source of incomes for the family’s survival. The matriarch’s economic independence creates a power shift in the private sphere where patriarchy is thought and meant to rule. Economic independence and shifting power dynamics in the home both need not be negative things. In fact, both were main goals for the second wave feminist movement in the 1970s. The matriarch, however, becomes a negative image for Black females in the attitude she is thought to possess as angry, bitchy and man-hating. Her independence symbolically castrates her Black male counterparts, usually leaving her stranded to care for family on her own. Such isolation creates a “no B.S.” attitude that solidifies her state of loneliness and her role as the head of the Black family.
When it comes to gender expression, the matriarch complicates the normative notion that excludes one’s gender to biological sex. The matriarch takes on a masculine role in heading her family, presenting a way in which masculinity can be integrated into feminine roles. This acceptance however necessitates the negative imagery possessed by the matriarch, for such an integration of masculinity and femininity cannot be understood as normal practice. Instead the role of the matriarch must be understood as circumstantial, in order to preserve the rule of the patriarchal status quo.

The masculine core of the matriarch marks her as a gender and sexual deviant. This deviance is also at the core of the erasure of the matriarch’s sexuality. Too occupied with her work and her family, the matriarch does not have the time to possess a sexual life. Plus her castrating nature undoubtedly pushes men away. Beyond this, however, not much is understood about the matriarch’s sexuality. It can be assumed that the matriarch figure—along with the mammy and the jezebel figures—is unquestionably heterosexual. Though she acts in a castrating manner towards men, we never question nor deny her attraction to them. Similar to Mammy, the matriarch’s sexuality is erased, left out and overshadowed by her man-hating, independent core.

On a completely different hand, the (sometimes tragic) mulatto jezebel figure is embedded in sex and sexual implications. Jezebel exemplifies sex by being a product of interracial mixing, by feeding into the sexual fantasies of White males surrounding Black females, and by constantly spewing seductive and lewd energy. The helpless Jezebel needs saving by White men (or other men
of a civilized nature), who only seem to give that helping hand in reaction to
Jezebel’s ravishing good looks and overt sexuality. Rather in need of saving or
not, the lascivious core of the jezebel controlling image always involves the
seduction of men. This stereotype’s sole make-up is surrounded by a sexuality
embedded in normative (hetero)sexual expression, and arguably possesses the
most control over Black females today. This control is exemplified in the
negative images of Black females in media and popular culture, much of which
we can thank the Hip-Hop industry for.

The mammy, the matriarch and the jezebel exemplify ways we can
understand Black female-hood in relation to how Black female identity has been
perceived and constructed historically. These images continue to reign over the
bodies of Black females today. Much can be learned about normative
understanding of Black female sexuality and gender expression through an
examination of the three archetypes. Such examination of their sexuality
supports the misconception of Black females as overtly sexual or essentially de-
sexualized, both through the imagination of others. Most importantly, such an
examination reveals the implicit heterosexuality and heteronormative gender
expression central to the construction of these three stereotypes, and thus of
Black female-hood. Is it a coincidence that the matriarch’s man-hating
tendencies are never questioned nor conflated with lesbianism or queerness?
Instead, like many lesbians and Queers of color, history simply erases her
sexuality by not commenting on it all.
The issue writ larges lies in the fact that not just Black females, but all people, are casted into constructed claustrophobic social boxes in regards to their gender and sexuality. These boxes change along racial, economic, and religious lines, and still cannot speak to the true complexity of human experience. Most importantly these boxes aren’t real!—in the sense that they don’t have to control our lives as much as they currently do. I do not intend to devalue the community that may arise from a group of people who fit into the same box or boxes. It is important, however, to acknowledge the false construction of these boxes and the existence of people who break these boxes through “non-traditional, non-conforming and transgressive expression of gender, sexuality and race” (Philips and Stewart, 2008). Depositing Queer Black females into a lineage of Black female sexuality is important because “alternative” gender and sexual expression is not something new that Black females—and really all people—are doing.

As proof of sorts, I present three Black female performers who adopted Queer habits or lifestyles in the early 19th century. Ma Rainy, Alberta “Bert” Whitman and Gladys Bentley were all performing artists, which possibly explains interest in recovering or preserving their histories. Their career choices during the time period in which they lived contributes to the flexibility of their gender and sexual expressions. The lifestyle of a working and touring performing artist differs vastly from that a Black female would have normally experienced throughout the first half of the twentieth century. These three females’ lives especially highlight non-normative artistic lifestyle through
adopted Queer tendencies. I do not mean to suggest that either of the three would identify their lifestyle or habits as “Queer” because such terminology did not exist then. In analyzing their lives within a Queer framework, I hope to deposit a few examples of Black females transgressing (hetero)normative restrictions of gender and sexuality through performance and art.

Accredited as the “Mother of Blues” Getrude “Ma” Rainey was born on April 26, 1886 in Columbus, Georgia. Rainey began her career performing at age fourteen with a local Georgia tent show. There she met her partner, Will Rainey, whom she married at age eighteen. Together the couple spent years traveling and performing a comedic act that combined song and dance entitled “The Assassinators of the Blues” (Haldarall, 2004; Harrison, 2006; Powers, 1999). Ma Rainey is credited to have coined the term “blues” after singing the mournful songs she heard sung by a young woman while performing in early tent shows (Harrison, 2006). After twelve years, Rainey divorced her husband and began her solo career traveling the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBY) circuits in the south. In 1923, she recorded her first record with Paramount Records, and is said to have produced ninety-three recordings in total, many of which she wrote herself.

Ma Rainey was known for writing songs that surrounded themes of lesbianism and prostitution. Her most famous “lesbian” song—“Prove it On Me Blues” (Rainey, 2003)—celebrated same sex erotic pleasure and also highlighted the ability of Black females to choose sexual partnership with other females (Haldarall, 2004). Openly engaging in relationships with both men and women
throughout her career, Ma Rainey’s refusal to hide her sexuality from the public eye inevitably led to harsh consequences. In 1925, after a police response to a noise complaint, Rainey spent the night in jail for hosting a lewd all-female party where officials walked in to a half-naked group engaging in sexual acts.

Rainey’s openness surrounding her deemed “deviant” sexuality in a time where such deviance was forced into the silent shadows of American life allows us to label her as transgressive. Ma Rainey’s music provided visibility to early twentieth century non-traditional and non-normative sexual expression available to Black females (Haldarall, 2004), also marking her as a transgressive artist of her time.

Rainey’s physical appearance also contributed to our ability to label her as transgressive:

“Often described as a short dark-skinned woman with unruly hair and a mouth full of gold teeth, Rainey’s appearance did not fall into the standard parameters of what defined a sexually attractive African American woman; her audiences, however, viewed her as extremely desirable” (Haldarall, 2004).

Rainey’s ability to be perceived as sexually attractive expanded the boundaries of beauty in the early twentieth century. Additionally, her masculine presentation created a homoerotic tension between the performer and both male and female audience members.

Another early twentieth century performer known for her abilities to capture, manipulate and display masculinity on stage was Alberta Whitman. Known as the best male impersonator of her time (George, 2002), Alberta adopted the stage name “Bert” for her male roles in a traveling vaudeville show
that she and her three sisters created and managed. From the 1900’s to the 1940’s the Whitman Sister produced and performed their vaudeville acts on racially segregated vaudeville circuits. The four Black sisters gained much success, mostly based on their ability to pass as White. Light skin privilege allowed them to navigate both the local White and Black circuits of the South, a task not many vaudeville acts of their caliber could do at the time. The success of their act marks the four sisters one of the first successful Black female owned and operated vaudeville act.

In her book *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville*, Nadine George-Graves concludes that the Whitman Sisters “challenged repertory norms by presenting women in traditionally male roles, capitalizing on sexuality and cross-dressing” (George-Graves, 2000). Such utilization of gender and sexuality as a means for economic success highlights Bert, and her three sisters, as innovative and transgressive artists. This innovation and transgression arises solely through their manipulation of gender and sexuality in non-normative ways. For example, George-Graves writes,

“By manipulating dress, voice, walk, name and mannerisms, Bert was able to alter the signs of identity, and thus alter their signification and significance. This image contrasts with the breeches roles in music hall and the nineteenth-century travesty dancer, for whom cross-dressing was, in part, an excuse to get women into short pants to show off their legs and reinforce dominant sexual norms” (George-Graves, 2000).

Thus, Bert redefined cross-dressing as a means for autonomous expression and artistry rather than upholding the exploitative status quo normally associated with cross-dressing females during that time.
Another marker of Bert’s transgression as a cross-dressing artists lies within the audiences’ acceptance of the non-traditional act. Bert’s specialty act of gender-bending received much critical acclaim, and was widely popular and accepted amongst Black and White audiences alike (George-Graves, 2000). The audience’s acceptance of the gender-bending act reveals a simultaneous acceptance of different and non-normative gender identities by the audience. Though there is no evidence of Alberta taking on her masculine persona off-stage, we cannot deny the political implications of Bert’s actions simply because they were used for entertainment purposes. Instead we can understand the performance stage as the only acceptable and available space in which norms surrounding gender and sexuality could be challenged and subverted during this time period. Such an understanding marks the radical potential for subversion and transcendence of social norms in the formal performance arena.

The final performing artist I wish to highlight as transgressive utilized this potential to confront social norms on stage, while also expanding such confrontation into her everyday life. Gladys Bentley was one of the only out Black lesbians who sang the blues in the early twentieth century. Born in 1907, Bentley left her home in Philadelphia at age 16 and moved to New York City to pursue a musical career. Bentley quickly gained success in Harlem during the Renaissance period as a pianist and singer, and worked in various prominent Harlem nightclubs. “It was within this nocturnal milieu of illicit sexuality, gambling, an drugs that Gladys Bentley found a place where she could be herself”
(Garber, 1988). Bentley performed in male clothing and often walked the streets
dressed as such.

Though none of her recorded songs specifically dealt with lesbianism,
Bentley performed many popular remakes in nightclubs that included “raunchy”
lesbian undertones. Additionally, during performances Bentley openly flirted
with females members of the audience. During the height of her career, Bentley
lived openly with her lesbian lover. Her alternative lifestyle contributed to the
downfall of her musical career. In an August 1952 edition of Ebony magazine,
Bentley submitted an autobiographical piece entitled “I’m a Woman Again” in
attempts to boost her musical come-back (Garber, 1988). So what exactly was
Bentley before when she “inhabited that half-shadow no-man’s land which exists
between the boundaries of the two sexes”? (Bentley, 1952). The title alone
suggests that Bentley adopted a different understanding of gender throughout
her/their life and musical career—an understanding that helps reveals the
fluidity of gender expression. It is this fluidity of gender and sexual expression
that arises through Bentley’s renunciation of her past lesbian lifestyle that can be
labeled as queer and transgressive.

There are many more Black females where Ma Rainey, Bert Whitman and
Gladys Bentley came from. The lifestyles and art of these three Black females
can be understood as transgressive and provide a real and necessary variation to
the history of Black female sexuality. Queer histories should be integrated into
the current rhetoric of Black female sexuality, for in loosing these females in
history the lineage of all Queer and gender non-conforming Black females is
simultaneously lost. In reclaiming such a history, new models arise for gender and sexual expression available to Black females.

New possibilities and new understandings of Black female sexual and gender expression underlines the main goal for this project in a whole. In the chapters to come, I highlight transgression as a key source to unveiling these new possibilities of expression available. This chapter has aimed to discuss female sexuality from a historical point of view, as a means to establish the foundation for a lineage in which all Black females can align to. By inserting queerness within a historical trajectory of Black female sexuality, my goal is to help bridge the gaps with new understandings of Black female sexuality.

In my next chapter, I shift focus to deconstruct current popular understanding of Black female sexuality through a thorough investigation of Hip-Hop as an industry and an art form. While the Hip-Hop industry itself acts as a key manufacturer of controlling images that effects and restricts many poor and Black people, hip-hop as an art form allows space for transgressing these same restrictions. This chapter highlights various transgressive hip-hop artists, and how these artists transgress norms regulating the gender and sexual expression of Black females.

Chapter three then shifts to analyze transgressive contemporary Black choreographers Bill T. Jones and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. In highlighting the ways these choreographers discuss and comment on Black female sexuality and gender expression, I aim to create a lineage in which I deposit my own
choreographic work. I disclose how stated artists transgress norms thematically, structurally and compositionally in their art that places Black females central.

In the fourth chapter, I focus more thoroughly on my personal methodology and art making process, revealing how my choreography transgresses racial, gender, and sexual norms rooted in our society. Finally, the fifth chapter concludes this project, highlighting the importance of transgression on an everyday level.
Chapter 2

Hip-Hop and Transgression: Negotiating Room to Self-Express

Express yourself, you gotta be
you and only you, babe
Express yourself, and let me be me
Express yourself, don't tell me
what I cannot do, baby (Salt-N-Pepa, 1990)

This chapter investigates Hip-Hop as an art form and a multi-billion dollar industry by highlighting how various hip-hop artists transgress structural norms working both within the industry and on a more underground level as well. I argue that while Hip-Hop affects how Black people, people of color, and people from working and poor class backgrounds understand themselves as gendered and sexual beings negatively, Hip-Hop also presents a space in which these people can self-express, thus allowing for the possibility of transgression. In this chapter I present a group of artists who I label transgressive for the purpose of this work. To understand how certain artists transgress social boundaries of hip-hop, it is important to first identify what those boundaries are within the industry today. I establish these boundaries in this chapter by highlighting specific examples (both contemporary and historic) found in Hip-Hop that speaks to how these boundaries have been created and shaped.

The origins of Hip-Hop can be traced to the 1970's, where members of the (generally poor) Black inner city youth of New York discovered new ways to express themselves creatively through music, art and dance. By the end of the decade pioneers, such as Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five, The Sugar Hill Gang, and Kurtis Blow, released the first ever hip-hop records. These songs
thematically included stories of life in urban cities, as well as love and despair. The success of said artists would pave the way for many younger generations of hip-hop emcees.

The emergent years of the 1980’s were vital for sustaining Hip-Hop as industry. Record labels, magazines and hip-hop shows (both on radio and television) quickly emerged to help spread the voice of talented urban Black youth nationwide and globally. Various Hip-hop artists challenged normative ideals that shaped (white) American identity and fought hard for the validation of their art. With this understanding the political roots of Hip-Hop begins to emerge. Today, however, it can be argued that Hip-Hop has loosened its ties to politics as a means to embrace the “finer” things in life (i.e. money). In doing so a shift has occurred in understanding hip-hop’s importance at origin. What began as a means to be true to your self—as a means to say, “Fuck You! I’m Black, I’m Poor and I’m here”—has now arguably become a means to gain economic success. Such a shift occurred once Hip-Hop shed its underground roots in pursuit of a capitalist “American Dream.”

No longer a movement under the cause of visibility and Black empowerment, Hip-Hop now can be understood as an institution operating under the rule of capitalism. No longer is emphasis placed on the artist’s lyrical talent or skill, but rather on one’s ability to be marketed and sold. Hip-Hop has become a social commodity readily available for global consumption—a guide of sorts to being poor and Black in America. In this sense, Hip-Hop can be understood a model for which our society understands poor and Black people.
This model works to establish limitations in which poor and Black people can understand themselves.

The various limitations and stereotypes promoted and (re)created by Hip-Hop reflect social understandings that surround race, class, gender and sexuality. This framework establishes dangerous generalizations such as all Black people are poor, and all poor people are Black. Hip-Hop can sometimes reinforce notions that poor Blacks are angry, violent, aggressive, potentially dangerous and criminals of all kinds. Hip-Hop can also support the understanding of all Black people as straight and all Queer people as White, a common misconception that LGBTQ people of color struggle with daily. In terms of gender, Hip-Hop can support the ideology of a gender binary where one’s biological sex and gender are conflated by establishing gender as restricted to a person’s anatomy—meaning all biological females are inherently “women” and all biological males are inherently “men.” Hip-hop can further this normative notion by promoting the established boundaries of maleness equating masculinity and femaleness equating femininity. These are just a few social norms reflecting race, class, gender and sexuality that Hip-Hop can help to construct and can operate within, all of which affects different bodies in different ways.

As a more specific example, I wish to look at Hip-Hop videos that star various male artists as a means to reveal how such videos can contribute to the hypersexualization of all Black bodies, albeit differently so determined by biological sex. Generally, Hip-Hop music videos somehow include a large number
of females (usually of color) scantily dressed and sexily dancing. These videos reveal male-bodied people as having large sexual appetites to be fulfilled on the multiple female bodies presented on stage. We can understand such a notion more clearly in the numbers of females presented in these videos. Usually the females outnumber the males vastly, allowing each male to have his pick between as many as four to five different females.

While Hip-Hop supports the notion that female-bodied people too possess large sexual appetites, their appetites are understood as passive and waiting to be enacted upon by their male counterparts. These females showcased in some Hip-Hop music videos can be thought of as engaging in a sense of competition to obtain the attention of male rappers. Such a difference in passive and active sexual roles reveals how Hip-Hop can project (White) patriarchal rule onto Black bodies, while simultaneously promoting historical negative stereotypes of Black people as hypersexual.

Evidence of said projection and promotion lies within hip-hop music and videos: images that Black people look to as a guide of sorts to success. The roles portrayed lyrically and visually shape normative understanding of all Black bodies in terms of gender and sexuality. Thus this work on Black female sexuality would not be complete without an analysis of the ways in which Hip-Hop (as an institution and an art form) influences it.

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In 1992, Sir Mix-a-Lot released his infamous music video for his number one hit “Baby Got Back.” The music video set encompassed mostly of enlarged
buttocks on which attractive Black females—in firm fitting and revealing clothing—danced “sexily” as Sir Mix-a-Lot rapped to and around them. During a time when “thin was in” Sir Mix-a-Lot used his music to confront societal notions surrounding female beauty norms, arguing for an insertion of different beauty ideals that could include Black females. Both lyrically and in his music video Sir Mix-a-Lot challenged White normative notions surrounding beauty that were projected onto the bodies of Black females through advertisement, fashion magazines and television (hooks, 1997). His statement, “I’m tired of magazines saying flat butts are the thing, take an average Black man and ask him that [he’ll answer] she gotta pack much back...” spoke much truth for many Hip-Hop artists at the time (1992).

Sir Mix-a-Lot’s hit song and accompanying music video acts as the first of oh too many hip-hop and rap songs and music videos that actively objectify Black females by reducing these females to isolated body parts. However, lyrically we can conclude that Sir Mix-a-lot’s intentions in fact seemed to be to promote a different ideal of beauty—a means to reclaim the Black female body as attractive and desirable. He states, “A word to the thick soul sisters, I wanna get with ya, I wont cuss or hit ya” and later continues, “Cosmo says you’re fat, well I ain’t down with that! ‘Cause your waist is small and your curves are kickin’ and I’m thinkin’ bout sticking’” (1992). Sir-Mix-A Lot’s “Baby Got Back” empowering intentions were, however, lost in translation and eventually evolved into Juvenile’s “Back that Ass Up” (1998), Mystical’s “Shake Ya’ Ass” (2000), Soulja Boy’s “Donk” (2007), and many more songs that “celebrate” the
Black female body as a commodity. These examples all reveal how Hip-hop and rap music actively contributes to the reduction of the Black female body to her physical (ass)ets.

The difference however, between Sir Mix-a-Lot and the more contemporary examples presented above is intention and purpose behind the making of these songs. It seems that Sir Mix-a-lot intends to present the Black female body as desirable while explicitly negating specific examples of White beauty ideals. Mix-a-Lot does this by lyrically including images that specifically negates White beauty norms. For example, he writes: “So I’m look at Rock videos/Knock-kneeded bimbos walkin’ like hoes/you can have them bimbos/I’ll keep my women like Flo Jo” (1992).

Unlike Sir Mix-a-Lot, the more contemporary examples presented do not give specific examples of how White beauty norms reflect their encouragement for the Black females to “Shake their Ass” or “Back that Ass Up.” Rather, they simply highlight the fact that Black females hold this potential to shake their “goods” and encourage such occurrences simply for the pleasure of male viewers. This difference in intent and purpose reveals an ideological shift in how and why the Black female body can be praised in Hip-Hop.

Today, explicit R-rated music videos that are no longer permitted cable airtime because of their explicit nature continue to gain much popularity through internet websites and communities such as YouTube, Myspace and Facebook. As time goes on, the videos get more and more “raunchy,” continuously representing Black females in harsher and harsher lights. What
remains constant is the obvious centrality of the (Black) male gaze within the creation of this music and the music videos that accompany them. Everything about the Black females included—from their clothing (or lack thereof), style of hair and color of skin to name a few—is presented solely for the pleasure and enjoyment of men. Images of the like establish a male oriented Hip-Hop sexual imagination that is effectively marketed to economically benefit both male and female artists.

Today, the commoditization of Black females has reached a new level of personal disgust in the recent inclusion of female homoeroticism within a generally homophobic industry. Male rappers and hip-hop artists vocalize their enjoyment of girl-on-girl action through their lyrics and the homoerotic images presented in their music videos and other forms of commercial advertisement. For example, St. Louis native rapper Nelly’s “Tip Drill” (2003) music video includes images of half naked females “grinding”—a close suggestive dance style that insinuates sex—on and with other females. These females are shown sensually slapping and rubbing each other’s bodies as well as exchanging suggestive tongue actions. All of these actions spew homoerotic tension between the females, yet strictly for the pleasure of the male rappers and viewers.

Additional examples of the commoditization of queer Black female sexuality can be found embedded in the lyrics of various hip-hop songs. Newly popular Canadian native rapper Drake’s hit song “Every Girl” (2009) has a line that asks females: “are any of ya’ll in to girls like I am lesbian-honest.” His lyrical play on the phrase “let’s be honest” cleverly deposits a heightened (male)
interest for non-heterosexual acts between two (or more) females. Also, critically acclaimed hip-hop artist T-Pain and rapper Lil’ Wayne both have songs which include the phrase “My Girl Got a Girlfriend” in the chorus (2007). In T-Pain’s version he sings of finding his girlfriend having an affair with another female, “…but it’s all right as long as [he] can be with her too.” T-Pain then deems an unfaithful female partner as acceptable only when she engages in sexual acts with other female-bodied people because of his own personal sexual imagination. Such presents same sex sexual acts as less serious than heterosexual acts, and contribute to the degradation of such acts in our society.

I can only understand this (mis)use of female homoeroticism as a new form commoditization endured by the Black female body, especially so by those who identify somehow as Queer. These images misappropriate queerness by centralizing the pleasure of the outside male party as opposed to the females engaging in the acts themselves. Queer or straight, these images contribute to the degradation and reduction of black females to isolated body parts and sex acts.

If Hip-Hop, as an industry, creates a detrimental space for the conceptualization of black bodies specifically in terms of gender and sexuality, how then can hip-hop as an art form be utilized as a tool of transgression to the harmful images the industry produces? Most importantly, what exactly is transgressive about Hip-Hop? I present three different examples of Hip-Hop as a site for transgression: hip-hop as self-expression, the Homo-hop movement, and female rappers/emcees.
Hip-hop as an art form creates space in which its practitioners may find opportunities to transgress the social boundaries deeply rooted within society because a core component of hip-hop from its very origins is self-expression, specifically in relation to social norms. Within the Queer Hip-Hop/Homo-hop blog-o-sphere, Queer blogger Anthony Thomas inserts the additional four main tenants of Hip-Hop as (1) Keeping it Real, (2) Speaking Truth to Power, (3) Changing the game and (4) Representing your hood (Thomas, 2010). These five principles represent all of this in which Hip-hop is meant to stand for and a guideline of sorts in which Hip-Hop’s practitioners must abide to.

We continue to see the importance of self-expression in relation to norms in the stories told through rhyme by early rappers like Kool and the Gang in the 70s and Slick Rick in the 80s, as well as in more current rapper’s flaunting of their material success from the 90s to today. In hip-hop, it doesn’t matter what story you tell, but rather that the story is your own to be told.

Many hip-hop artists talk about the importance of self-expression in their songs. Take, for example, the Salt-N-Pepa chorus quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The trio makes clear the need for themselves and others to self-define and self-express on one’s own terms, with an explicit emphasis on transgression of social norms. Salt-N-Pepa boldly states, “expression is rare, I dare you to express yourself...” (1990). In 1989, West Coast rap group N.W.A. sampled and recreated 1970’s soul/funk band Charles Wright & the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band’s hit song “Express Yourself” (1971). In their hip-hop version, rapper/producer Dr. Dre boldly states, “it’s crazy see people be what society
want them to be, but not me,” thus promoting the transgression of social norms and presenting himself as an example of such transgression (1988). True self-expression creates opportunities for transgression, especially so for those whose true self falls outside of the social norm.

Self-expression, as a core principle of Hip-Hop, cannot be understood as limited in regards to gender, but rather necessary for all practitioners of hip-hop to do in order to maintain a sense of authenticity or realness. Yet only certain aspects of oneself are deemed appropriate to express within the boundaries of Hip-Hop. Generally when it comes to challenging notions surrounding race and class, hip-hop accepts these expressions as authentic to the movement and art form. Because Hip-Hop possesses strong and restrictive ideals surrounding gender and sexuality, it becomes harder for artists to express themselves in ways that challenge Hip-Hop’s heterosexist core. These artists do, however, exist and have experienced varying levels of success and visibility. Most importantly these artists, who confront gender and sexual norms embedded within Hip-Hop, are transgressive. It’s important to note that I categorize these artists as transgressive not only because they’re expressing their true selves, but also because their true self inevitably disrupts the norm of who gets to utilize hip-hop as a form of self-expression.

Though Hip-Hop has been noted for it’s notorious homophobic core, many Queer people continue to identify with hip-hop as a viable artistic form of expression. The start of the twenty first century marked the loose beginnings of a global gay hip-hop movement, mostly referred to in the Queer community and
blog-o-sphere as Homo-Hop. These artists not only openly identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer, but also rapped about LGBTQ themes. There are tons of Queer or alternative hip-hop artists and rappers worldwide, mostly connected (both nationally and globally) through a larger Internet community. The Internet has helped to provide the numbers, communication and space that pushes these smaller pockets of urban Queer communities into a larger Queer movement of sorts that revolves around hip-hop.

Amongst a few others, California based hip-hop/spoken word group Deep Dickollective, also known as D/DC, acted as pioneers for this U.S. nation-wide turned global homo-hop movement. The D/DC was active from 2000 to 2008. In their eight years, the group grew in numbers—from two to eleven members—and gained much popularity specifically on the west coast. Six albums were released under Sugartruck records, a Queer/Queer friendly production company created by D/DC founding member Juba Kalamaka. Additionally, members of the D/DC helped initiate the creation of PeaceOUT, an annual homo-hop festival held in Oakland, California from 2001 to 2007 (Hinton, 2006).

The group transgressed Hip-Hop norms as they openly lived and rapped about their lives as Queer men of color. The group also actively confronted the heteronormative gender binary and who get’s to identify as a man by inducting a transgender member into the group. Marcus René Van is a FTM transgender rapper and spoken word artist who became a member of D/DC in 2002. Marcus’ membership in the D/DC establishes the group as one of the most—if not the most—transgressive and radical rap group Hip-Hop has ever seen.
Many people know little to nothing about the D/DC and other homo-hop artists because the movement began and continues to operate on an underground level. Few homo-hop artists have attempted to gain mainstream acceptance and success, however none have been victorious in their efforts.

From my understanding, LGBTQ rappers are accepted in the mainstream Hip-Hop industry under two circumstances: the artists are either closeted, denying their gender and/or sexual difference or the artists are biologically female, refusing to rap exclusively about their sexuality or gender expression. I do not mean to suggest that queer artists should rap about their queer sexuality. Rather I mean to unveil the contradictory nature of Hip-Hop that openly supports compulsive heterosexual expression while simultaneously shunning and restricting queer sexual expression.

The acceptance of queer, lesbian or bisexual female rappers in Hip-Hip occurs only under strict and repressive circumstances. To gain success these females must first and foremost uphold the homophobic status quo, usually by taking on a more masculine persona in replication of the straight male gaze that dominates Hip-Hop. In other words, to gain success lesbian, bi-sexual or queer females must continue to operate within the homophobic framework Hip-Hop has established, usually by adopting a politic of silence or mystery surrounding their sexuality. Thus many lesbian, bi, or queer female rappers do not include sexually explicit lyrics in their songs that allude to non-normative sexual expression. In this sense these females too remain in the closet, only the door is left open for people's imaginations. The approach to lesbianism in Hip-Hip
resembles that of homosexuality in the Black community: the topic is labeled taboo and tolerated—rather than accepted—if and only if we do not openly talk about it (Clark, 1983; Gomez and Smith, 1990).

Operating within a male dominated space, female rappers constantly navigate an institution that promotes and degrades them simultaneously where their mere presence transgresses Hip-Hop norms. Because Hip-hop is thought of as a masculine form of creative expression, the terms “rapper” and “emcee” holds specific connotations in regards to gender. A female rapper must then distinguish herself as so by inserting the label “female” before “rapper” or “emcee,” thus revealing both “rapper” and “emcee” as inherently male categories. The “female” validates the artist as a rapper or emcee by distinguishing the artist as different from that of the norm.

This understanding of metalanguage embedded within the categories “rapper” and “emcee” extends beyond gender to race and sexuality as well. Non-black rappers too must insert their racial difference, just as Queer hip-hop artists must insert their sexual difference. Ultimately, this reveals the normative understanding of what a rapper/emcee is supposed to be: black, male and heterosexual. Those of us who do not identify as such must mark our difference.

In this sense, all rappers/emcees who do not identify as straight black males can be considered transgressive artists. Such a claim, however, eliminates the possibility for straight black men to use hip-hop as a tool for transgressing the norms that the Hip-Hop industry (re)creates and supports. Though rare, their existence is real and can be exemplified by politically conscious hip-hop
artists such as De La Soul and Common. For example, much of Common’s work is politically infused and speaks to Black love in positive lights. In his lyrics and music videos, generally Common portrays Black females as Queens and autonomous individuals, actively contradicting popular representations of Black females as a commodity. Additionally, in Common’s music video for “Come Close” (2002), the main heroine possesses a hearing disability. Hip-hop has been known to ridicule differences in physical ability. These three examples contradict some of the norms embedded within Hip-Hop surrounding relationships and female representation, and allow us to see how Common transgresses hip-hop norms, albeit his heterosexist portrayal of gender and sexuality.

Hip-Hop presents a tricky space that female rappers must navigate, where certain females are valued over others because of their gender presentation, and all females are heavily scrutinized over their lyrical abilities. As previously stated, rapping was introduced to this world as a masculine contribution to music and early female rappers such as Moni Love, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Roxanne Shanté quickly told the world otherwise (Keyes, 2000). Yet all female rappers run the risk of being labeled as lesbian, thus furthering this notion of rap as a masculine form of expression.

The risk of being misidentified in terms of sexuality presents two very visible distinctions between the female rappers who have experienced material success to varying degrees in their careers. On the one hand we have those female artists who conform to—or in some cases simply utilize—the masculinist
image projected onto their bodies by their male counterparts. Examples of such artists include Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, Trina and Nicki Manej, to name a few. They play into the male heterosexist gaze through their everyday presentation, costuming and lyrical content. Generally, this leads to female-bodied people disproportionately revealing much more skin not for a sense of empowerment, but rather for the pleasure of male viewers. These females understand and utilize the common marketing and advertising tool “sex sells” through their image and music. Yet the message that may unintentionally get passed along to younger generations of females, generally who are poor and of color, is that only sex sells and that this sex is inherently heterosexual.

On the contrary, some female rappers adopt a more masculine, androgynous or “tomboyish” gender presentation. Examples of such include Da Brat, Missy Elliot, Left Eye, MC Lyte and Yo-Yo, to name a few. Masculine gender presentation, while securing heterosexist ideals embedded in Hip-Hop, also creates new opportunities and understandings of feminine sexual and gender expression.

In the end, female rappers are transgressive through their occupation and navigation of a male dominated space, just as Queer rappers occupy and navigate a heterosexual dominated space. Such occurrences of transgression become possible as these artists stay true to their own sense of self-expression, thus marking such expression as a key to confronting norms in regards to race, gender, sexuality and class in Hip-Hop.

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It is important to investigate Hip-Hop as a site for transgression for the purpose on this work. While conducting research on alternative gender and sexual expression adopted by Black females, various references to and images within hip-hop continuously drew in my attention. These references vary from academic works on female hip-hop artists, to documentaries following the homo-hop movement, to highly offensive music videos on YouTube and cable television (just to name a few). As previously stated, an investigation of hip-hop is important to this project because hip-hop holds much power over how people, especially black people, understand themselves as gendered and sexed beings. Additionally, I saw hip-hop as a site in which queer people of color readily identified with, even with its ever-present homophobic core.

I too now realize that hip-hop holds an important role in this project to how I connect my creative work to my research earlier conducted. Though I have not chosen to utilize hip-hop as a source of creative movement research, I have utilized the core principles of hip-hop in the creation of my work: (1) Keeping it Real, (2) Speaking Truth to Power, (3) Changing the game, (4) Representing your hood and most importantly for my work (5) Expressing yourself (Thomas, 2010).

In the next chapter, I shift my focus to transgressions that arise in contemporary African-American/Black concert dance by choreographers Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Bill T. Jones. Through a critical look of their works, and the ways in which they do (and do not) transgress structurally, thematically, and
physically notions of Black female sexuality, I hope to forge some sense of a
lineage of transgressive art in which to align my own choreography.
When beginning this project, I immediately began searching for contemporary dances and choreographers who explored gender and sexuality as experienced by female-bodied people or dancers. I was especially interested in locating differences and similarities between these dances when race also acted as a central theme to the works. However, I quickly discovered that such dances did not exist in great numbers, especially so when race also became a central thematic issue. It seemed that Black concert dance did not encompass gender or sexuality, especially so in ways that challenged heteronormativity. Such lacking in thematic content mirrors the social experience of Queer females of color, who constantly feel pressure to foreground their race above their gender and sexuality, especially so when it comes to politics.

Additionally, the dances and choreographers I found that did actively challenge normative gender and sexual expression located such a contestation within a male body that was generally White. In a sense, this lacking in Black concert dance to tackle issues of gender and sexuality (specifically as experienced within the female body) motivated me to continue exploring these issues through dance; I felt as if my work could be that necessary insertion into the lineage of concert dance. Yet this silence surrounding gender and sexual
expression in Black dance also left me feeling isolated and confused: I had plenty of examples of what my work shouldn’t do, but none of what it should.²

This chapter investigates choreographic works by contemporary Black choreographers Bill T. Jones and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar that explore the sexuality of Black females. As previously stated in chapter one, Black female sexuality has historically been deemed an inherently heterosexual sexuality. In looking at Jones’s Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land (1990) and Zollar’s 25th anniversary retrospective Zollar: Uncensored (2010), I tease out the ways in which these choreographers support and/or negate this normative understanding of Black female sexuality as inherently heterosexual expression. This chapter is meant to contextualize my own choreographic work into a linage of concert dance that tackles Black female sexuality thematically. Additionally, this chapter aims to present both Jones and Zollar as transgressive artists, not only through their inclusion of politically infused themes, but also through the creative process in which their art is made.

Issues of sexuality and gender explored through dance centers the male dancing body because dance has been deemed a feminine form of artistic expression, a feminine spectacle of sorts. In her introduction to the anthology Dancing Desires, Jane Desmond writes “the feminization of spectacle, of putting oneself on display (without the cover of sport’s masculinity-authorizing

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² I do not mean to suggest that my work is the first to explore non-normative gender and sexual expression amongst Black female-bodied people, but rather to highlight the point of view in which I locate my research and creation of art.
violence) feminizes male dancers (thus enabling a representation of homosexuality as the “specter” to come true?)” (Desmond, 2001). The presence of the male body on the dance stage brings up constant questions for the audience that surrounds the performer’s identity. These questions lead to the male dancing body being perceived as effeminate and sexually deviant.

Many male choreographers and dancers work to negate such perceptions and assumptions attached to the male dancing body. For example, famous Black dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey made grand efforts to present Black men as masculine in his works by emphasizing their heterosexuality in a way that promoted, rather than confronted, stereotypes surrounding the Black male body. On this issue dance critic Gay Morris writes, “Ailey promoted the stereotype of black heterosexual potency with male virtuosity and sexually charged movement often aimed at the women performers” (Morris, 2001). Ailey’s attempts to liberate the male body from the feminine hold of concert dance were successful, receiving much praise by dance critics and audiences alike. However, in these attempts to liberate the male dancing body, Ailey continued to restrict the female dancing body to a submissive role of femininity.

Unlike their male counterparts, female dancers have never had their sexuality or gender automatically questioned on the formal concert stage because “female dancers are already feminized, already positioned as spectacle” (Desmond, 2001). Because audiences perceive the gender expression of female dancers as normal (read feminine) on stage, the sexuality of female dancers can also be understood in terms of normality (read heterosexuality). Contemporary
dances that address non-normative female sexuality and/or gender expression are lacking in numbers not because these females do not exist in the world of concert dance, but rather because the masculinization of female dancers is not an ever-present issue whereas the feminization of male dancers is. The few works that do challenge normative representations of female dancers, however, do not address these expressions as pertaining to Black or other bodies of color. Thus, even in the world of concert dance, non-normative sexualities and expression of gender belonging to Black females are rendered invisible or non-existent. Instead, Black female sexuality is (again) presented (if at all) in terms of heterosexuality in concert dance. We can return to the Alvin Ailey example from before for further support of this notion. In his dances, the female performers had to be perceived as heterosexual feminine women to reveal the male performers as heterosexual masculine men.

While some Black choreographers have explored female gender and sexual expression, such has been done in way that (perhaps unintentionally) promotes the heterosexual status quo. For example, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar has made issues surrounding Black female- hood and community a central theme to the creative works performed both by herself in earlier solo works, as well as currently by her company Urban Bush Woman. Because Zollar's choreography presents Black females as active subjects, rather that passive objects, the heteronormative repressive core surrounding the female dancing body on the concert stage is challenged. However, this occurs strictly within the boundaries of femininity and heterosexuality. Zollar does not aim to challenge the
presentation of the dancers as “women” (thus creating new definitions of “women”), but rather to expand the current definition of “women” to include the performers presented on stage. While her goals are quite honorable and important in a world that has deemed Black females as less than a woman, she still falls into the trap of a gender binary that controls us all as gendered, sexed and sexualized being. Why can’t these female performers be, in the words of my dancers, “whatever the fuck they want to be?” An answer that comes to mind for me surrounds the historic devaluation of the Black female body. Empowerment arises through reclaiming what has been unrightfully taken away; in reclaiming what seems rightfully yours. In this case femininity has not been an available expression for Black females, thus abiding to the terms of femininity for Black females becomes a revolutionary, and thus transgressive, act for Urban Bush Women.

In their recent retrospective celebrating 25 years of successful art making and community building, Urban Bush Women performed a compilation of works surrounding female sexuality and sensuality. Zollar: Uncensored presents a wide-array of excerpts from Zollar’s previous works, from critically acclaimed Batty Moves to the lesser-known solos in the LifeDance series. Zollar revamps and connects these works to create a new and exciting hour-long piece that thematically encompasses reclaiming and praising the Black female body, as well as rape and violence enacted on the Black female body. Overall, I would argue that Zollar: Uncensored presented new understandings of sexual expression amongst Black females, yet does so while reinforcing heteronormativity.
embedded within such expression. Differently put, Zollar presents new ways for the audience to perceive Black females as in control of their bodies—thus their gender and sexual expression—without challenging the audience to perceive the performers beyond the limitations of heterosexual—thus normative—gender and sexual expression.

The first section of Zollar: Uncensored I wish to analyze as it pertains to transgressive gender and sexual expression stood out most to me in its unknowing connections to my own choreographic works for this project. In this section, the performers confront the audience head on while sensually putting on bright red lipstick. This simple act holds much significance and importance in relation to Black female sexuality. While participating in Urban Bush Women’s Summer Leadership Institute in New Orleans this past summer, Jawole shared a story with our morning meditation class about her interests in wearing the color red in her teen years, and her mother’s refusal to allow such occurrences because of the social connotations attached to the color. Zollar stated that red lipstick, nail polish and accessories were only worn at that time by females who were perceived as “fast.” The fiery color hints to a keen or heightened sense of sexuality that many Black females strayed away from, and influenced younger generations of Black females to stray away from as well. This censorship of sexuality is closely connected to the emergence of a politic of respectability that Black feminist Evelyn M. Hammonds equates to the induction of a Black middle class in mid-twentieth century United States (Hammonds, 1999).
When seeing the members of Urban Bush Women paint their lips red I immediately thought of Jawole’s story. At that moment I understood the performers as sexually autonomous beings, boldly (re)claiming control over their sexuality despite the fear of being labeled as “loose” or “fast” by society. To see Black females in such a light confronts past notions of Black female sexuality as shaped and controlled by others, mainly White men. Yet these females putting on lipstick also reflects a feminine gender expression rooted in heteronormativity; i.e. female bodied people are supposed to wear lipstick. With this understanding we see how Zollar utilizes lipstick to transgress normative notions surrounding Black female sexuality, while continuing to uphold the status quo surrounding feminine gender expression.

Before moving on to another section in Zollar: Uncensored that hints to non-normative sexual expression, I wish to take this moment to connect Zollar’s usage of lipstick to my own in All that’s forgotten over and over again and On Our Own Terms. In my choreography, I utilize red lipstick in a similar fashion as Zollar: as a marker of sexuality or sexual expression. However, in contrary to Zollar, these containers of femininity are used to mark our bodies in non-traditional ways. In All that’s forgotten... the performers mark their faces and neck with lipstick as a symbol of (re)claiming ownership of both their sexual and gender expression. By marking everywhere but the lips, I aim to hint to this expression of gender and sexuality as non-conventional and transgressive. In On Our Own Terms the performers come onto the stage with their bodies already marked with lipstick, eyeliner and other forms of make-up. The opening image of
adding red “warrior” marks just beneath the eyes suggests that the previous markings were too performed by these individuals, again revealing the performers as sexually autonomous beings in control of their gender presentation. My personal inclusion of red lipstick furthers Zollar’s notion of presenting Black females as sexually autonomous beings to self-ruling individuals in charge of both their gender and sexual expression.

The next section of Zollar: Uncensored that hinted towards non-normative understandings of Black females in terms of sexuality began with a flashlight highlighting various performers moving in the dark on stage. As the lights slowly began to rise, attention is drawn to a female sitting on a blanket eating a cupcake. She begins to moan, obviously enjoying her treat. Louder she moans as another performer joins her on the blanket to eat. As the second female eats and moans, another mover drops to her knees and joins in with the moaning. The third moaner is then joined by another, who begins running her fingers through the third moaners’ hair. By the end, the whole company is on stage, moaning in pleasure, loud and proud, both verbally and physically through movement.

The moaning has obvious connections to sex and sexuality. Presenting these females in such a “vulnerable” state is empowering and daring. Such a presentation also reinforces the female performers as sexually autonomous beings, especially so in the ways they enact the moaning. For example, I understood the first two moaners as giving themselves pleasure, a metaphoric masturbation of sorts enacted by eating (and obviously enjoying) a delicious dessert. The two reveal the importance and power of self-pleasure, thus negative
normative understandings of sexual pleasure as occurring between two (heterosexual) people.

The second two moaners I understood to be moaning in relation to each other: one metaphorically giving pleasure to the other by running her fingers through the recipient’s hair. The active participant seems to be equally enjoying the exchange, a reflection on the pleasure that arises in pleasing another. This exchange of pleasure between two females brings out hints of homoeroticism that does not occur in any other form throughout Zollar:Uncensored. In this moment, the audience questions the sexuality of the two performers. Only in this moment is it hard to understand these performers as heterosexual. Thus in this moment Zollar transgresses normative understanding of Black female sexuality, by presenting two females engaging in an exchange of pleasure enacted verbally through moaning. Though the sexuality of the two performers is questioned, the gender, however, is not. So again, while Zollar transgresses norms in a certain sense, such transgression does not occur fully in terms of both gender and sexual expression.

Overall Zollar: Uncensored highlights and negates historical notions surrounding Black female sexuality, as the audience continues to generally perceive the performers both as “women” and as “heterosexual.” Such a perception reinforces the trap that historical representations of Black female-hood has fallen into by presenting Black female-hood as inherently heteronormative. However, the transgression that I’m interested in addressing
and promoting through this project actively avoids that trap into heteronormativity in terms of sexual and gender expression.

Choreographer and dancer, Bill T. Jones has created works that negates this sense of heteronormativity, yet these works were located solely in male-bodied performers. In his early years, Jones and his late life partner/art collaborator Arnie Zane created and performed solos and duets that thematically involved identity politics. While none of these pieces were overtly sexual, many critics comment on the works hinting towards sexuality, specifically homosexuality (Morris, 2001).

Bill T. Jones has addressed female sexuality through dance in his restaging of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which Jones entitled *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land*. I wish to focus on the *Eliza on Ice* section that is based on Stowe’s leading Black female character Eliza who escapes to freedom with her young son.³ In *Eliza on Ice*, Jones divides Stowe’s character into parts, as represented by a group of dancers, four female and one male.

The first of the four Elizas establishes a connection between the group by passing along the Eliza mask to the other female dancers. The group stands in a line as the lights come up, the front female holding the Eliza mask to her face. The mask is then passed down the line from one person to next, each holding the

³ It is said that this character was based on a true account of a female slave who gained freedom by crossing the frozen over Ohio River (V.I.E.W. Video, 1994).
mask to their face before passing it along. This action allows the audience to see each female as one part of a whole.

Although the Eliza characters are made up of a multi-racial group of females, we can still understand each solo as referring to and representing Black female- hood, for the character Eliza is Black in Stowe's novel. Yet Jones utilizes Black female-hood in this sense to possibly transgress racial boundaries and comment on all females as gendered and sexual beings. In the documentary *Dancing to the Promise Land* Jones comments on *Eliza on Ice* as “not just another dance about feminism...we’re really talking about these women performing it” (V.I.E.W. Video, 1994). However, this discussion of *Eliza on Ice* focuses on Jones’s commentary in terms of Black female-hood for the purpose of this work on Black female sexuality.

Jones deems the first Eliza as the historical Eliza, whose solo is performed as Jones’s Harriet Beecher Stowe narrator reads excerpts from Sojourner Truth’s famous speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” The dancer’s strong movements mirror the words of Truth and connect the mover to a history of Black female-hood. The audience may perceive this Eliza as ever enduring and hardworking, as a female whose life has been full of pain. Such images are rooted in the history of Black females as slave laborers, both domestic and in the field. The first Eliza’s reflection on such a history reveals these issues of perception and envisioning Black females as still present today.

The second Eliza shares a story of abuse and betrayal with the audience. Performed by a Jewish-American dancer, her solo is meant to reveal a modern
day narrative of survival (Albright, 1997). Her integration of words into her movement mirrors Jones’s early solo performances in the 1980s. She speaks, “I believe...My father told me turn the other cheek...My mother told me not to expect much” as a means to contextualize her movements, “marked by the contrast between clenching her body to herself and striking out at the forces around her” (Albright, 1997).

While the first two Eliza solos do not explicitly comment on female sexuality, both are rooted in normative gender expression by aiming to present the female dancing bodies on stage as women. This holds especially true for the historic Eliza as she moves the words to Sojourner Truth asking, “Ain’t I a Woman?” The lack of commentary on the sexuality of the two allows the audience to assume the norm: heterosexuality. The two solos confirm these performers as heterosexual women, thus representing Black female sexuality on those same heteronormative terms.

The third and fourth Eliza solos speak more specifically to Black female sexuality. Jones dubs the third Eliza as a woman “who commands men—part Joan of Arc, part dominatrix and part martial arts master” (V.I.E.W. Video, 1994). This Eliza uses her sexuality as a source of empowerment. Such becomes clear as she physically controls and commands the male chorus dancers, which Jones refers to as the “dogs.” Constantly on guard, we see this Eliza’s task as daunting and tiring. Yet it is clear that she performs the role of puppet master to the dogs on her own terms. When she is ready to call it quits she simply runs off stage.
Thus the third Eliza presents Black female sexuality as an autonomous form of expression.

On the other hand, the fourth Eliza presents Black female sexuality as passive and a site of abuse. In this solo the Eliza figure is consumed by the “dog” and passed along in various ways. In fact, her feet never touch the ground. Jones describes this Eliza as “exotically beautiful” thus alluding connections to the jezebel figure. Such a connection allows the audience to perceive this Eliza as purely sexual in a similar light to that of Jezebel. Because the “dogs” seem to have complete control of this Eliza, images relating to rape and sexual abuse arise.

This representation of Black female sexuality presents females as sexual objects, thus reducing these beings to embody the epitome of sex. Additionally, such a representation aligns well with historical representations of Black females.

While the third Eliza challenges normative thinking surrounding Black female sexuality by aiming to present the female dancer as in control of her sexuality (and the sexuality of others), the fourth Eliza solo seems to completely negate such an understanding by presenting this Eliza as a victim and an object of sexual desire. Additionally both Elizas, just as the first two, are rooted in heteronormative understandings of the females as “heterosexual” and as “women.” Overall, the four female Eliza solos combine to present a very complex representation of Black female sexuality. Such an act in and of itself challenges normal depictions of Black females (and their sexuality) as one-dimensional. In this sense, Jones successful transgresses historical norms surround Black female
identity. However, it still holds that each Eliza seems rooted in heterosexuality and normative gender expression.

The fifth and final Eliza, however, breaks normative understanding of womanhood by including a male-bodied person in the “woman” category. In this solo, a male-bodied dancer dressed in a tight white mini-skirt and matching white pumps enters the stage to perform. The movements in this solo include an oscillation between shaky moments of unbalance and gestural movements hinting towards this Eliza’s male genitalia. By the end of the solo, however, this Eliza finds the balance and strength to strut off stage in a similar manner to her female-bodied counterparts. Jones’s inclusion of a male and seemingly homosexual Eliza actively expands our understanding of “woman” while simultaneously presenting new versions of sexuality. In this sense, Jones transgresses the social boundaries of gender and who gets to identify as a woman, while continuing to promote such transgression of gender and sexual norms as located solely within male bodies.

My main critique of Eliza on Ice, if not apparent by now, is that transgression in terms of gender and sexuality is (yet again) located solely within the male body. I simply wonder when, if ever, will female-bodied dancers be allowed this same liberation or possibility for transcending social norms in relation to gender and sexuality. I cannot deny however, the progress that both Bill T. Jones and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar create in their creative works tackling issues of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, both Zollar and Jones create art that allows me to label them as transgressive.
As previously explored, a main way that Bill T. Jones and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar transgress traditional Western concert dance norms involves their inclusion of politics in their art thematically. While making political art itself is not a new thing that choreographers are doing, Jones and Zollar’s unique inclusion of identity politics can be understood as transgressive. Before, in a White dominated arena, the mere inclusion of Black dancers in concert dance marked a choreographer’s transgressive nature. Because today Western concert dance continues to be dominated by White bodies, the creation of multi-racial professional companies, like Jones’ company, and all Black companies, like Zollar’s company, continues to be seen as a political, and thus transgressive, act.

It is not the fact that their art is political that allows us to see these choreographers as transgressive, but rather the politics that their work addresses. Rooted in identity politics, both choreographers stress the importance of bringing who their dancers are into their art by providing collaboration opportunities that reflect the famous feminist political statement: the personal is political. Their works focus on, especially so in the creation process, the integration of personal meanings and (hi)stories into movement. This allows the dancers to perform a sense of themselves to the audience. Such integration is rooted in identity politics and is meant to confront and challenge the social norms that surround the performing bodies presented on stage.

Thus the performers that both Jones and Zollar choose to include in their works also contribute to understanding them both as transgressive artists. In his
earlier group pieces, Bill T. Jones pushed limits by casting non-traditional
dancers, who can be deemed as such based on their physique and technical
abilities. In contrary, Bush Women are usually very technically trained dancers,
yet their physical bodies (which vary in shape and size) challenge norms that
present the female dancing body as White, thin and prepubescent-like. With this
understanding, both Zollar and Jones question who gets to perform on the
Western concert stage and why: a notion that contributes to their transgressive
core.

As Black choreographers, both Jones and Zollar contribute to the lineage
of Black concert dance, a formal realm that has been rooted in techniques that
usually somehow combine African or African diasporic dance techniques with
Western (read White) techniques, such as ballet or contemporary modern dance
techniques. Zollar’s works continue to center itself on technical precision,
combining African and Afro-Cuban techniques with contemporary modern forms
to create a unique technique of its own that the company refers to as “Bush”
technique. While Zollar’s work generally holds tighter to that history of Black
dance technique, Bill T. Jones pushes the technical limitations of Black concert
dance into the post-modern realm. Jones’s use of post-modern techniques in
dance marks his difference and transgression as an African-American
choreographer.

When it comes to the making of their art, both choreographers adopt non-
traditional ways of collaboration and creation. For example, for his slightly
controversial work *Still/Here*, Jones conducted various movement workshops
across the U.S. that invited people with terminal diseases to explore their sickness with movement as a key tool of exploration. Jones then created many works based on these workshops, some of which workshop participants performed in. Thus, Jones not only utilized art, and art making, as a means to promote the visibility of terminal diseases, but also as a means to forge community. I understand this art for the sake of political visibility and community building as transgressive, for it no longer becomes centered around entertainment or aesthetics as much concert dance does today.

In a similar fashion, Zollar and Urban Bush Woman place much emphasis on the community that arises around the making and performing of art. In fact, they see community building as a main goal for all of their artistic creations. The radical potential for healing and growth arises in the techniques they adopt to create this communal art. One technique in particular that I drew from in the making of *All that’s forgotten...* Jawole has named “asset building,” which calls for the compilation of the specialties each participant possesses. This technique not only allows each performer to “shine” in ways specific to their past experiences, it also instills a sense of pride in one’s creative abilities. This becomes especially important in communities of people that society deems unimportant or useless. Techniques as such, in addition to others not mentioned, allows me to classify Zollar and Urban Bush Women as transgressive artists, for the present opportunities in which communities of people possess the space to (re)conceptualize themselves in a positive light.
It is an important task for this project to tease out the ways both Zollar and Jones transgress the norms embedded within Western concert dance and the norms surrounding Black female gender and sexual expression. With such an understanding of transgression, I align my own choreographic works to a lineage of Black choreographers utilizing dance as a form of social commentary as well as means for political activism. In the next chapter I move to a more in dept analysis of my personal adopted methodology utilized to create *All that’s forgotten... and On Our Own Terms*. Additionally, I hone in with much detail to how my works transgress both the social norms surrounding Black female sexuality and the norms embedded within Western concert dance.
In this chapter I outline my creative process and choreographic works in more detail. Both dances can be separated into four sections. In “All that’s forgotten over and over again” I see these sections as the opening build, the children’s trio, the workout/diagonal duet and the transformation. In “On Our Own Terms” the sections are the prelude, the diagonal, the solo/duets, and the bonding.

When it came time to cast my dances, I knew I wanted to work with movers who identified as Black and as female because I wanted the dances to somehow include who these people were and how they self-identified. From there I thought I’d be able to challenge how these Black females were perceived by highlighting the way each performer perceived themselves.

In the fall I chose to work with a larger group of nine because of the power numbers reveal. I went into the process wanting to create a fierce army of Black female movers to confront a space that has not always welcomed their bodies. A large group also allowed me to focus on juxtaposing images reflecting the history of Black female sexuality with images that re-define Black female sexuality.

In the spring, I decreased the numbers of dancers drastically to three because I wanted to provide a more intimate piece. While both dances highlighted the movers as individuals in the piece, the spring performance
focused more on the intimate relationships created between the individuals. I wanted to show intimate relationships occurring between two Black females while also promoting the possibility for (and validity of) these individuals partaking in multiple intimate relationships. A larger group would have led to me focusing on separate intimate relationships, rather than establishing a non-conventional intimate group relationship. I understand this as how I challenge monogamy and the consideration of monogamy as normal in the U.S.

Another big change from the fall to the spring was my participation in the piece as a performer. The biggest struggle I faced in both dances involved integrating Queer identity into the performance. This felt especially strange for me because only I identified openly as Queer. I feared falling into the trap of mapping identities onto already thoroughly mapped-on bodies. In a sense, I felt hypocritical when trying to Queer my dance and afraid that I’d be abusing the trust of my dancers. My inclusion as a dancer in the spring performance helped alleviate these feelings of hypocrisy and fear. Additionally, it provided a deeper connection to the autoethnographic roots to this project as a whole; as previously stated in the first chapter, this project sprang from my being.

The creation process for each dance was slightly different, but both were rooted in improvisation and group collaboration. In the fall, I spent much time leading the group through improvisation structures to establish a bond between the ten of us and build comfort around improvising, which would then be utilized in the performance. Much of the creative process involved giving the performers new experiences with moving and providing comfort with moving in
different and unique ways. Because many of the movers had never been involved in a formal performance, much of the process revolved around creating comfort with performing for an audience.

We partook in various creative movement generating activities, re-working various phrases in different groupings. We used the letters of our names as a movement generation prompt, then connected individual names to create duets and trios. Though we ended up not using it, I taught the movers a phrase, which we played with choreographically in rehearsals. We would disrupt the unison of the phrase by finding moments to repeat. We furthered this disruption by allowing the repetition to build and transform into a new movement phrase—an “explosion” process that would be utilized in both performances. As a group, we created an asset list, where we compiled all our individual talents that could be possibly be used for the piece. Various small group phrases were then created based on our assets. Finally, we collaborated as a group to create a “power stance” sequence, where each mover contributed one shape in an around-the-table-like manner. Most of the movement sequences and groupings we created did not make it into the performance. However they all contributed to forging a community and comfort amongst the ten of us.

Group writing was also a part of the creation process for the piece. We completed some creative writing activities that provided some of the words that were utilized in the performance (See Appendix A). I introduced two writing prompts: “home is...” and “woman is...” We integrated the words from the first
into our name phrases, duets and trios. The words from the second prompt were utilized in the final section of the piece.

In the spring, most of our rehearsal process involved improvisation. We worked with six movement themes in particular, all of which were incorporated into the performance. The first two themes we worked with together involved moving around each other/yourself and making/breaking straight lines. From these themes we set individual phrases that were placed together to create a short trio. This set trio was later deconstructed to provide movements for our solos in the third section of the piece. The “moving around yourself” theme also brought about the tying or bonding action incorporated both in our solos and in the final section of the piece.

The third theme involved experimenting with moving at different speeds. To create the movements for the diagonal section, we improvised under the instruction to “move as fast as possible.” From there we picked out the most interesting or well-remembered movements that could be repeated, giving us a pool of movements to choose from while moving on the diagonal pathway. The fourth theme we played with involved holding or carrying each other. We played with ways one person could be held and carried by the two others, as well as ways where the three of us could be held and carried simultaneously. From this came the many moments of holding and carrying each other’s heads, mostly in the duets in the third section of the dance. This structure also led to the choreographed weight sharing/balance phrase—which I call the “trust” phrase—located in the opening section.
The fifth theme we utilized involved being pulled and thrown. This movement experiment began with finding ways our full bodies could be pulled or thrown and morphed into pulling and throwing isolated body parts. Just as for the diagonal, we established a pool of movements that we all incorporated into our solos in the third section of the dance. We worked with the final theme quite a bit, usually as a warm-up exercise. Generally, I introduced this theme as “moving yourself into being” or as “finding your dance for today.” This theme involved self-expression and being true to your body’s movements. The prelude section, as well as the solo/duets section, of the performance utilized this theme.

Unlike the fall, we did not spend rehearsal time writing as a group. However, I did ask all to bring in words that we integrated into the set trio that came from the moving around yourself and making/breaking straight lines themes. The prompt for these words was to “write yourself into being.” I later spent more time in private reflecting on this writing prompt, which led to the words that we actually used in the performance: “To claim/express/define on my own terms.”

There are many aspects of my methodology that can be considered transgressive. Traditional dance processes involve the choreographer bringing in pre-set movement phrases to teach to the dancers. From there the choreographer can choose to find different ways to interact with the movement, as well as different ways to present the movement formally on stage. Generally, my art making process eliminates the first half of a traditional dance process—I almost never bring in a movement sequence to teach. On those occasions when I
do teach phrases, my purpose is to somehow disrupt the nature of the phrase taught. Additionally, my utilization of improvisation as a choreographic and performance tool reveals that transgressive core to the methodology of my work.

Finally, thematically, my works are grounded in identity politics and activism. The political core of these works revolved around bodies that are typically forgotten, silenced and ignored. My inclusion of these voices as a political and artistic statement challenges the silence that typically muffles these voices. The way I use my art and art-making process as a political activism allows us to label such as transgressive. This sense of transgression is revealed thematically. The next section of this chapter breaks down both “All that’s forgotten...” and “On Our Own Terms” in more detail, addressing how I think about each piece and the connections I see being made. This in depth analysis reveals the transgressive nature of themes at hand.

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All that’s forgotten over and over again...

I. OPENING BUILD The lights pop on, bright and loud, to reveal an empty stage. From the right of the audience, nine performers enter one at a time. With the entrance of first dancer, the music begins with a whistle and transforms into a rhythmic vocal melody. The first thing that one may notice is that all of the movers appear to be Black and female, yet they are dressed in men’s slacks and a variation of firm fitting tops and sports bras. Upon each entrance the performers add in to a movement sequence established by the first dancer. The sequence
rotates and repeats as the dancers accumulate on stage. After each iteration a
dancer calls out “again” as the next iteration begins. This continues until the song
eventually fades. Upon that moment the dancers break the structure one-by-one
as they rapidly repeat an excerpt from the original sequence. This repetition
looses control, taking the performers off stage.

The accumulation holds much significance in this piece. First, it reveals
the building of a community on the stage between the nine movers, all of whom
are equal and connected through movement. The continuation of the repetitive
sequence after all nine performers are present on stage suggests that more
people are meant to add in, boldly stating, “there are plenty more of us where we
came from.” This forges a connection to a wider community of people who
identify with the nine movers: a community of Black females. Also, the
accumulation comments on our society’s need to identify people by placing them
into categorical boxes. The movements for this opening section are purposefully
simplistic to give the audience space and time to ponder over the bodies
presented. This choreographic choice ironically comments on the ever-present
display that all people deemed Other face daily, especially so in White dominated
spaces like academia and concert dance. Finally, I also understand the
accumulation as a confrontation to the dance audience: a bold statement of
claiming the dance stage as an appropriate site for these performers to be.

**II. CHILDREN’S TRIO (THEY WRITE ON US)** A soloist is left behind in a pool of
red light. The performer repeats a rhythmically structured movement phrase in
a slightly bent over position. The soloist’s posture suggests a connection to the
African Diaspora. The intensity of the red suggests lewd sexual implications. The performer’s obvious internal focus suggests an inner conflict, and when paired with the intense pool of red light suggests the conflict concerns sexuality.

Meanwhile two dancers enter humming a seemingly innocent children’s tune. Upon reaching the soloist in the space, the two performers retrieve tubes of lipstick from their pockets. The two then begin marking the neck and back of the soloist, encircling and singing the lyrics to the previously hummed song:

Postman, Postman, Do your duty
Here comes the girl with the big ‘ol booty
She can do the pom-pom
She can do the twist
But most of all she can kiss, kiss, kiss
K-I-S-S-I-N-G

All the while the soloist continues to repeat their phrase, reacting to the markings subtly by disrupting the flow and speed of the repetitive phrase.

The childlike nature to the tune symbolically mirrors the youth in which young girls are introduced to femininity. The lyrics of song reflect the scarily ever-present marker of sexuality young Black girls face today. At a young age she is thought of to already possess a desirable “big ‘ol booty,” thus making her the most desirable to kiss. The song comes from a hand-clap game, very similar to the ones I grew up playing at recess from as young as kindergarten to middle school. I utilize this song to comment on the socialization of Black girls into sexed beings and the reduction of these beings to isolated body parts, both of which begins at a young age and continues throughout their lives.

As stated in Chapter Three, lipstick symbolically represents sexuality in my works and is used to mark bodies three times throughout the piece: In the
first trio, when two performers mark a soloist performer; in a duet where both performers mark each other; and finally, in the very ending when the nine performers mark their own bodies. Words overlap the lipstick each time it is used. The first two times bodies are marked the children’s song from above is sung. In the final lipstick section, however, each performer speaks as they mark their own faces. The trajectory of who marks who is important to understanding the transgression of the piece. In this first section where two performers write onto the body of a soloist, a connection is made to our society mapping identities onto “Othered” bodies. In a similar sense, the two performers map a sexual identity onto the body of the soloist. Thus, this sexual identity can be understood as heteronormative, mirroring the historical sexual identity of Black females, and also presents an implicit “woman” or feminine gender expression.

III. DIAGONAL DUET/WORKOUT AND WATCHING (WE WRITE ON EACH OTHER) The lights flash on bright again, as performers re-enter the space with a run, each following the same path. With Nina Simone’s See-Line Woman blasting, the group splits into three smaller sub-groups. A trio upstage left and a quartet downstage right are separated by a lit diagonal pathway that a duet performs in. The trio and quartet move in unison, performing moves that one associates with athletics or sports and showered in red lights. The duet runs up and down the lit diagonal, randomly stopping at the ends to move. At the upstage end, the two vigorously throw their bodies. At the other end, the two stand strong and engage their backs muscles to create a chest bumping motion. As See-Line Woman ends the two meet at the downstage end, continuing the chest bumping motion. The
diagonal fades and the other seven movers gather around the duet, continuing to use the athletic movements of their unison phrase. With the group watching, the duet reaches into their pockets for tubes of red lipstick. The two then mark each other’s faces red as the group quietly sings, “Postman, Postman...” When the song ends, the crowd parts and the diagonal re-appears on the floor. With the group still watching, the duet, then, carry and hold each other while traveling up the diagonal as Nina Simone sings:

“My baby don’t care for shows
My baby don’t care for clothes
My baby just cares for me...”

The juxtaposition of the duet and the unison group athletic movement reflects a negotiation of the history of Black female sexuality. The movers in red, along with Nina Simone’s *See-Line Woman* represent that history which is rooted in exploitation and violence. I incorporate athletic moves to comment on the durability supposedly possessed by Black females. I wanted to show all of the movers working hard, and becoming tired from that work. Their apparent tiredness negates the notion of durability attached to Black female bodies. While the group represents a historical image, the duet represents the negotiation of that history.

I see the diagonal as a spectrum of gender expression that pulled the two dancers to either end. The two ends symbolize the man/woman gender binary. The gravitational pull to either end symbolizes our society’s emphasis to uphold the gender binary. The movements performed at either end of the spectrum symbolize the frustration to force oneself to fit into that binary. I see the
movements as representing what happens when individuals who do not fall into either end of the spectrum continue to force themselves into those gendered roles.

The couple coming together to mark each other’s faces reveals the only intimate pairing in this dance. This presents the marking in a totally different light than before. Writing onto each other implies a new discovery of sexuality in relation to another person; a discovery that allows for a stronger sense of sexual autonomy. The change of movement when the spectrum re-emerges symbolically represents a different understanding of gender expression. Instead of being pitted at the extremes, the two travel, together with more ease and each other’s support, along the spectrum, thus mirroring the fluidity of gender expression.

**IV. THE TRANSFORMATION (WE WRITE ON OURSELVES)** As the duet approaches the end of the diagonal pathway, a dancer dissolves the image by introducing a short rhythmic phrase. The group joins, repeating the rhythm in unison and gathering in a clump center stage. Once together the movers begin to jump, reaching above their heads as if they were grabbing something from above. Excitedly, a dancer shouts, “I got it! I got it!” while leaving the clump in a twirl. One-by-one, each dancer gets “it” and begins to fill the space again. In this section, the dancers were instructed to improvise a dance of praise to themselves as they spoke empowering words: “No boundaries, no restrictions, no limits” and “I am...fluid, pretty rough stuff, whatever the fuck I want to be.”(See Appendix A) Little balls of light fill the space like stars and extend into
audience. As their praise dances come to an end, the dancers line up along the front of the stage. The lights then fade to reveal only their faces. They continue to speak as they begin to mark their faces red with lipstick, leaving the audience with this final image.

I understand the transformation section as the movers taking back their bodies from a history of sexual exploitation and violence. In this section, the dancers possess free will to choose what they say and when, as well as how they move and where. In a sense, “All that’s forgotten…” is a coming to age narrative in reflection of the history of Black female sexuality. The dance is about coming to terms with one’s skin and claiming ownership over a body that is rightfully yours. Along with that ownership comes the ability to express on one’s own terms, moving us to the spring semester’s choreographic work.

On Our Own Terms

I. THE PRELUDE (SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER AND TRUST) The lights fade up to reveal three standing bodies in separate lit boxes, as the live accompanist on violin begins plucking a continuous rhythm that acts as a heart beat of sorts, repeating throughout the entirety of the piece. The performers are dressed in oversized men’s button down shirts and black or grey men’s boxer briefs. Their exposed body parts are elaborately decorated with make-up to each performer’s liking. The movers reach into their shirt pockets to pull out a tube of red lipstick, and mark two additional red lines under their eyes. Nonchalantly they place the tubes off the edge of the stage and return to their original position, looking back
into the audience as the audience looks at them. The performers begin to move in a sexy manner, sensually rubbing their bodies and pulling at their loosely buttoned shirts. From left to right they begin to speak while integrating a new and individual style of moving that physically interacts with the words they say: “To claim/to express/to define on my own terms.” The two outer performers back out of their boxes to meet the middle performer as she lifts her arms to fall. The three engage in short weight-sharing phrase that begins with one performer falling and the other two catching and dragging the first across stage. The role of the person being dragged switches so that all three performers have the opportunity to fall.

The action of lining our faces with lipstick is meant to mirror the previous semester’s final marking. By beginning the spring piece where the fall left off, I aimed to show the connection between the two. The lipstick markings also reflect, very much so, the words being spoken. We use make-up on our bodies in non-conventional ways to suggest our non-conventional gender and sexual expression. The make-up on bodies in addition to men’s clothing worn by performers reflects the charge to determine one’s gender and sexual expression outside of the norm.

The sexy movements generates a symbolic representation of how these performers would normally be perceived as hypersexual Black females, and when paired with costumes that consist of male clothing the symbolism highlights the heterosexual implications embedded within that hypersexuality. Without the words, the audience may conclude that these females have just
engaged in a heterosexual act. Yet the words present new reasons to why the females are dressed as they are. In the end, the words, paired with costuming and movement, conclude that the performers are presented to reflect how they want to be perceived: as autonomous sexual beings with varying gender expressions.

The catching and dragging phrase represents support and trust that the three performers possess for each other. By repeating the phrase with the roles switched we can see the performers as equal individuals. The repetition also allows the audience to think of the three as one whole, a small community, or an intimate love triangle of sorts.

II. THE DIAGONAL (NEGOTIATING THE GENDER SPECTRUM) After the final falling iteration, the performers stand together in contemplation as a diagonal pathway emerges. The violinist plays louder and more intensely, creating suspense for what will come. At the height of the violin’s screech, the movers begin. The performers choose from a pool of movements established during the creating process. They repeat these movements at high speeds while traveling down the diagonal, with a goal to make it to the other end of the spectrum. Once reaching the end the performers begin moving backwards up the diagonal with a shuffle that seamlessly bleeds into a jump: a movement that marks the beginning of the diagonal’s second phase. At this point the performers have two new options to choose from: (1) to move in any direction along the diagonal and (2) to repeat any movement until it explodes into a burst of continuous flow, a process discussed earlier in this chapter. The structure continues until the
dancers find themselves at the opposite end of the diagonal from which they started, repeating a chosen movement in unison. The unison then builds in speed once more for one last explosion.

In this section the diagonal pathway, as in *All that's forgotten...*, represents a gender spectrum. The performers choice to move up and down the pathway represents the possibility of fluidity in terms of gender expression. The distinct beginning and ending of the pathway reflects the understanding of gender as a binary. However, the performers themselves, while recognizing the binary, focus more on the space in between the two ends. This section is all about the performers negotiating the spectrum, discovering what placement(s) fits best.

**III. SOLO/DUETS (SELF-EXPRESSION AND INTIMATE COUPLING)** Out of the explosion begins a series of solos and duets, physically separated by the lighting. Each duet begins and ends with the dancers making and breaking eye contact with a turn. The first duet involves the two performers aiding each other to the floor. Back to back, one performer melts into the back of the other who guides them both safely to the ground. The guiding performer then carefully aids the other performer to a laying position as she returns to a standing position. The two then move around each other maintaining eye contact before the roles are reversed.

The second duet focuses on the two performers moving around each other while maintaining eye contact in close proximity to ground. The two move towards and away from each other while doing so, urging to forge a physical
connection. A connection eventually occurs as each dancer rests a head on the others back, and again as one performer holds the head of the other, providing a secure surface for the head to roll.

The third duet combines elements of the first two duets, while also focusing mainly on establishing a mirrored physical connection. As the two move towards and away from each other, moments of sustained mirroring movements arise. Each time the two move away from each other, a gravitational pull brings them back together. As in the other two duets, much attention and care is paid to heads as the two move with and around each other.

The improvised solos occur simultaneously with the duets. In no particular order, the soloist withdraw from four different improvisation structures established in our rehearsal/creation process: moving around yourself, making and breaking lines, moving yourself into being, and being thrown and pulled. Additionally, the soloist finds moments to lace and tie themselves.

The solos are meant to present the performers in their most raw form. Utilizing the various structures, the movers have the space and time to listen and act on their inner impulses and to reveal as much of their true self to audience as they please. This section is all about self-expression and staying true to that sense of self. The individual moments of tying are meant to foreshadow the ending where the three tie each other together. Tying one’s own body represents a sense of building, of securing, of protecting one’s body.
The turning motion paired with an intense eye contact that connects the solos and duets holds much significance. Firstly, the eye contact creates a sort of sexual tension that connects the three duets. The turning motions bring up notions of negotiation for me. Paired together, I understand these moments as a negotiation of sexual interest between the performers.

In addition to the eye contact movement, various movements involving close attention to heads are recycled throughout the three duets. This attention reflects the intimacy and care the performers have for each other as they move in duets. I understand our heads as one of the most vulnerable parts of our bodies. By intrusting the weight and pressure of our heads in the hands (and other body parts) of our partner, a strong sense of intimacy and care arises. Such allows the audience to perceive the relationships between the pair not only as intimate, but also sexual.

IV. LACING/BONDING TYING (BUILDING AN INTIMATE COMMUNITY). As the last solo and duet ends, the three rejoin together establishing eye contact from a distance while turning around themselves. The three performers melt to floor, as the lights dim and focus on center stage. Each dancer slowly crawls into the spot and the three begin engaging in contact improvisation that involves rolling on and around each other, as well as holding and carrying each other. The improvisation builds until the three are closely interlocked together, and the three bodies become one entity with multiple appendages. Once the three bodies are closely interlocked, the three reintroduce the tying action. The lights fade out as the performers wrap and tie imaginary strings around each other.
In this section I wanted to reveal the three performers as intimately connected together, as connected through a greater life force. Such intimacy supports the community that arises around non-normative gender and sexual expression. In the end as the three become one entity, I aim to leave the audience thinking about relationships in a non-binarcic and non-traditional sense.
Chapter 5
A Conclusion of Sorts:
The Importance of Transgression on an Everyday Level

What does it mean to transgress on an everyday level? How to we actively confront social norms on a day-to-day basis? More importantly, why should we actively engagement in such a cause?

Transgression arises in different ways depending on the person. A great example lies in the lives documented by David Peddle in *The Aggressives* (2006) as well as in *Paris is Burning* (1990), directed by Jennie Livingston. Both Peddle and Livingston follow the underground ball scene in New York City, where Queer people of color perform in drag balls as an opportunity to conceptualize and present themselves on their own terms. The performers fuck with their gender presentation in various themed competitions that vary from “construction worker versus firemen” to “realness” to “divas versus banji girl.” These people transgress norms surrounding race, gender and sexuality both on and off the stage through costuming, clothing and a personal unique sense of style. Most importantly this transgression arises in the individuals being true to themselves and expressing that true sense of self.

Beyond physical appearance, I would argue that most apparent and important opportunity for transgression arises through an ideological shift in understanding oneself in relation to society and the social norms produced by

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4 “Banji” refers to heterosexual Black females, described as “the girl from the block picking up her little sister from school” (Livingston, 1990)
society. With a proper and concise understanding of social norms and how these social norms are enacted on an everyday level, one can choose to actively challenge said norm, if one so desires. For example, according to social norms only female-bodied people can (and should for that matter) wear dresses and skirts. A transgressive male-bodied person can refute such notions in one of two ways. The most obvious solutions would be for the male-bodied person to include skirts and dresses (or other "feminine" attire) in his wardrobe. Or this male-bodied person can acknowledge the issue and influence those people around him, i.e. his children, siblings, other family members or friends, to challenge such restrictions of clothing based on gender. In the end, it’s all about being aware of the norms, how they shape your life and the lives around you, and discovering new ways to confront these norms. In this sense everyone can actively transgress the social norms that shape social understandings of people as raced, gendered and sexualized beings by acknowledging and then deciding to discover ways to challenge the norms associated.

I do not mean to suggest that a female-bodied person who does wear dresses or skirts cannot be seen as transgressive. Rather, I mean to imply that transgression on an everyday level arises in how we think about the choices we make and why we decide to make those choices. Furthermore, the most transgressive state of mind one can adopt is to accept—rather than tolerate—all individual’s right to choose: to choose how the want to be perceived by others, and how they choose to perceive themselves.
I also do not mean to suggest that these choices are as simple to enact on an everyday level as it is for me to suggest and write them in this paper. It takes courage and strength to stand out against the norm, to be comfortable in expressing oneself as a unique individual. It is a bold and daring move to (re)claim control over one’s body and one’s bodily presentations.

The main goal of this project is to create new scholarship and art that presents Black females as autonomous beings in control of their bodies and their bodily presentations. This is not to say that only Black females lack control over a sense of self, for all beings deemed “Other” can relate to the struggle of negotiating their bodies in relation to social norms. However Black females, due to their oppression in terms of both gender and race, can act as a specific example to how social norms restrict “Other”s from enacting on their own personal sense of self as well as being understood as individuals by larger society. In this sense this project acts as a case study that promotes the equality of all beings to express themselves in whatever way feels right.

Many scholars criticize works such as this that hones in to one specific identity, claiming that such works stabilizes social constructions of race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. While I agree that these works holds stabilizing potential, contributing to the lack of art and scholarship that actively reveals “Other” beings as whole and individuals outweighs the risk of stabilizing social categories for me, especially because these categories are socially constructed, and thus in a sense not real. In the words of a great Black lesbian feminist, “I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me
must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood” (Lorde, 1984). Until our society and academia can properly and successfully integrate different narratives that speak to the true lives of “Other-ed” individuals, I must continue to use my voice to do that speaking because this is what is most important to me. I understand how honing in on one group of people problematically continues the cycle of a skewed version of life, of history and of our society being captured and told. However, in a time where social categories matter almost as much as money (i.e. capitalism) I see no better option to promote visibility and change on an everyday level. I must create scholarship and art that can reach the masses, scholarship and art that represents the masses.

As artists and academics, we must continue to create works that promote the lesser-heard voices of society because if we do not address these issues of inequality, oppression and injustice our society will continue to operate on an everyday level as if these voices do not exist. I have to talk about racial difference, because my White counterparts do not. I have to talk about gender inequality, because my male counterparts do not. I have to about sexual deviance, because my straight counterparts do not. If I don’t speak to these issues I fear that no one else will. I fear we will continue to operate in this false state of complacency; this unproductive state of cynicism; this self-indulgent capitalist state of selfishness masked as individuals fighting to achieve the
unachievable “American Dream.” I must believe that one day things will be better for us “Others.” I must believe that my life, my art, my voice is important. Because if I don’t believe, then who will?

This is a life and death matter, contrary to popular belief. If I do not strive to reveal the importance of my voice in life, then I’m damn sure my voice will be forgotten in death. We “Others” must know that we can exist outside of the structure provided for us. We must know that we are not crazy, or wrong, or evil. Most importantly we must know that we are not alone.

In closing, I must continue to make myself available as a model for younger generations of people of color who are artists, who are poor, who are academics, who are Queer. Of people who are transgressive without really knowing why or what that even means... This is my contribution to the struggle towards liberation and equality.

5 Save yourself now, the dream wasn’t meant for us all
Appendix A

Writing Prompt: Woman is...

Woman is pretty. Rough stuff. Afro puffed and loving it all the time. Woman is on my mind. Never let her go far cuz woman is in my breath. My tongue. And no she doesn’t taste sweet but she tastes good. I never would have expected woman to take over my life. And I never expected that I wouldn’t want to be someone’s wife… Woman is fluid. But they don’t want you to know it.

Woman is whatever in the world she wants to be, in and out, of and without society. Woman is me, my strong voice, broad hips and eager waist. Woman is she with her bright smile and kinky hair. Woman is sweet, woman is meek woman is proud, woman is loud. Woman is real, she is contagious and recognizable you never miss her she’s that visible. Woman is...

Woman is the most gorgeous species on the earth, being able to be sexy and beautiful while still being smart. She understands the dynamic on earth of men—women and she takes it in and brings the most wonderful joy to Earth. She cleans up the mess on man’s society and is quickly learning how to rise up and defeat their capitalistic bullshit society. Woman is the future for beauty and grace, and she doe it all with her sexy face on!

Woman is strong when she wants to be. Always talking bout something. A voice to be heard. A leader among fool. Not to be taken lightly. Don’t tempt because you will unleash the fury woman is. Woman is anything she wants, can be whoever is needed at the time sometimes shy to speak her min but will be ready when the time comes. Woman is loving gentle sensuous nature, the bearer of life and the strength. Was oppresses but is finding her stride.

Woman is… benevolent/wise/cunning/radiant/phenomenal/XX/gamine

Woman is….why I intrigue you, why you’re listening, why I speak. To you, to science, to my descendents, I am a bearer of big beautiful “brown babies.” My mothers desire, my destiny, our legacy. To me, to us, to we, I am a bearer…of knowledge wisdom and “undeniable truths.” My mother’s desire, my destiny, our legacy.

Woman is: prophet/spiritual/she has power beyond her words and her emotion, her fury warn you of her wrath, vulnerable, trustful, faithfull and connected to life. She is a life source. Woman is sacred, woman is strong, woman is all.
Appendix B:

Writing Prompt: Home

this sweet spot in my back let the beat drop. my bones rest in small cup fulls, a lota rice. Treat top block night grid lock—pass on, pass on. food topics and pork chops line tree rings tell of years when smells linger heavy. into the night, till blue mornings pop—again. wound tight tapes-repeat-repeat. bring close and wash well. tend to. listen real hard when lights are calling. they carry smoke from other worlds. they hold our own. they carry smoke and true music—pass them on real well—pass them on real full. you know they tastey they are, we know. it was this longing they wrote of, even when homes inside of them. even when its difficult.

13 months of sunshine/sometime I look at people I know and try to imaginve them as strangers. Undo the history

home is where I knew a boy who I once loved before I knew what love was/ where mommy and daddy make sure to pretend, always pretend, where love is dated like cash home like hot summers and secret gardens where once I was a child where spanish is english and I cant tell the difference between the two. home like that harsh city where boys and girls grow up fast where black girls though remain unnoticed, hiding.

Home—funny thins is casa means both home and house. For me there’s fluidity in that home doesn’t mean just a geographical location but more so the people and sensitivity tied to home. The love/emotions tied to Wes rooms, apartments, or houses in the island. Home is where emotions run wild because of the intensity and passion tied to and tying those bonds.

Old, not so old taxi drivers standing some sitting at the taxi stand, safari buses $1 dollar, $2 to town. People. lots of them smiling cooking feeding us. Tall grasses swaying...left—right. Lions, Zebras African Pride. Warm... Mother’s touch, consoling. generous love. Provider. Babies hungry Mama feeds Johnny cakes Yum!! Stew chicken sticky fingers wide grin.

My home is warm/Bright and green. People. Lots of them. Cooking. Feeding us. When I think of home I’m sometimes sad. I’m sad that a part of me that is beautiful can be so ugly/harsh and cold. Still I miss it and can’t believe that I soon must call some other place home. I wonder if you can really change your home? Detach yourself from your roots? Can unrooted flowers live?

Growing up, I was an shy girl. Leaving from mommas bosom and daddy’s glove, I find myself. A chi girl here where there’s drunken laughter and sirens. Is it wrong that fire truck sounds remind me of Prospect? The only home I knew? The lights and screaming horns were a constant. I began to pray when they passed me, for blessings. I remember. But it’s the sounds that I can’t hear that make me cry. Mom’s laugh, nephews’ laughs, sisters’ smile. I want them with me.
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