A Personal History of Desire in Porn and Hip-hop¹

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Through autoethnographic performance, I examine how hearing J Medeiros' hip-hop song "Constance," about a thirteen year-old girl in the Philippines who is sold and raped to produce internet pornography, prompted me to question the stability of my identity. While framed by a reading of the song and its accompanying YouTube video, my self-examination focuses on exploring the line separating sexual objectification from erotic appreciation, and therapeutic from critical analysis; on what it means to be a heterosexual man struggling between the often-dueling forces of a commitment to feminism, a love of hip-hop, and my own sexual desires; and on remixing a new hip-hop (pro)feminist self.

"Adult content."/The title blinks in bold letters, like the vacancy sign/it's his time to go get her/It's like his mind doesn't know better/Her soul is cryin' out "Let me go" but he won't let her/He's got her trapped inside his media player/Held captive by his need to be player/It's a matter of he bein' here and she bein' there/That's why he doesn't feel the need to care. (Medeiros)

Intro

I wish I could say that hip-hop has always been a part of my consciousness. That I grew up nursing on equal parts mother's milk and sampled beats. But hip-hop didn't find me, and I didn't find it, until the late-90s, long after its incorporation by the entertainment industry. My exposure to it started slowly. First, years of attending a

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¹ Big ups to Ronald Pelias. While I never quote him directly, this essay relies on his autoethnographic work, and is a "flip" of "A Personal History of Lust on Bourbon Street." A "flip" is a hip-hop production term that refers to a versioning of someone else's work using many of the conventions or overarching forms of the first work, but with only minimal direct sampling. The "flip" is meant to be in conversation with the first work, and is generally an homage to it. Thus, while I borrow many stylistic and structural elements of Pelias' essay, and I owe a great debt to it in formulating this essay, he is not directly referenced.

self-described "diverse" public high school, where snippets of hip-hop skittered across the courtyards like tossed-away copies of the school newspaper. Then, the ubiquitous "white-boy" intro to hip-hop: a Beastie Boys concert at the Oakland Coliseum with my posse in high school (okay, I'll cop to bumping some Vanilla Ice in elementary school, but in my defense it was sugar-coated by the very popular Ninja Turtles movie). It picked up more in college. Friends sending me songs over the school's high-speed network. Parties on the quad, presided over by the resident hip-hop DJ from NYC. By the end of college, the alternative rock CDs that had been a staple of my early musical life wouldn't make the cut in my 50-disc changer. No, I am not an OG, an old-school hip-hop head³ down from day one. But hip-hop has been a calling; a central point around which most of my life, and a large part of my scholarship, has moved for the past decade.

If I cannot say that hip-hop has always been a part of my consciousness, I can at least say that feminism has. Raised as I was by two women—women who loved each other as women—there was no way I too wouldn't love women or see women as equals, as capable of doing anything a man could do, sometimes more. This wasn't just "radical lesbian feminism" either. I learned these same ideas from my grandmother, a rather prim and proper woman who broke with gendered traditions to become a practicing lawyer way back in the day. So I grew up thinking about gender, sexuality, and sex a little differently than the "average kid." Misogyny, sexism, and homophobia were not just big words, they were issues that touched my life and with which I regularly grappled. It was not long before feminism would intersect with my growing interest in hip-hop to teach me about desire.

In the pages that follow, I track my personal history of desire and what it means to be a heterosexual man struggling between the often-competing forces of a commitment to feminism, a love of hip-hop, and my own sexual attraction to—and sometimes lust for—women. I frame this within a narrative of my reaction to hearing J Medeiros's song "Constance," the story of a thirteen year-old girl in the Philippines who is sold into sexual slavery as part of the internet porn industry. The critique embedded in this hip-hop track forced me to face the ways I might be complicit in the objectification of women through my consumption of hip-hop and internet pornography, particularly the kind of mainstream and commercially successful brand of hip-hop that is often but not necessarily misogynistic and homophobic, and the "mainstream" pornography produced by the porn industry for mass consumption by an imagined average (white) heterosexual man. I proceed with the help of a number of scholars writing on gender and hip-hop—most of them black women and men from the hip-hop generation—with a willingness to keep it real, and above all, with a

² Though I do not identify as white, my ambiguously-brown skin is light enough to let me pass for nearly anything. Given my education and its attendant class status, I find that I most often pass for white, regardless of intention or desire. Thus, for the purpose of this essay, and my attempt to grapple with my position as complicit with oppression or exploitation, I wear the mantle of this often-presumed whiteness rhetorically.

³ If hip-hop culture were a country, a "hip-hop head" would be its citizen.

commitment to carving out space for a (pro)feminist⁴ and sex-positive "white-boy" to bump some serious hip-hop.

Part of "keeping it real" also means openly offering the details of my own experience, which I do in this essay not as confession,⁵ out of self-indulgence or exhibitionist pleasure, or an opportunistic attempt to traffic in my own sexuality to get ahead in the competitive world of academic scholarship, but primarily out of necessity. To remix some Kevin Powell, I'm trying to work some shit out for myself, and, by doing it semi-publicly, to allow my own story to serve as a model or mirror for others thinking about the same issues (*Keepin' It Real* 132-133). If I must put myself on the line—and my dick on the page—in order to do so, then so be it.

To put this rationale in more academic terms, I have chosen to use autoethnographic personal narrative as my method in order to highlight the theoretical and political issues that arise at this particular conjunction of pornography, hip-hop, feminism, and heterosexual male desire. My methodological choice can be justified through both a queer theory critique of so-called academic objectivity (Slagle "Ferment" 311) and a modification of the standard feminist theory line that "the personal is political" (Allen; Philaretou and Allen; Hausbeck and Brents). Further,

⁴ I choose to use "(pro)feminist" instead of "feminist" not because of a resistance to the label of "feminism," as suggested by the work of Williams and Wittig, but out of a desire to mitigate the possible male colonization of feminism, an idea discussed by male "pro-feminists" like Australian sociologist Michael Flood or Brian Klocke of the National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS). While I remain uncertain about whether men should, or can, identify as feminist. I believe that "(pro)feminist" walks the line between "feminist" and "profeminist," and in so doing still offers solidarity with and deep investment in feminism without colonizing it. I am fully invested in ending patriarchy, misogyny, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia (to name only a few of my least favorite isms), but I also recognize that I benefit from many kinds of privilege that I cannot easily erase. This is just one contradiction I struggle with in this essay.

⁵ At least I hope it's not a confession in the more problematic ways that David Terry has described them in terms of their tendency both to inscribe problematic power dynamics between audience and performer that shut down dialogue between the two and to inscribe a split between the self performing the confession and self being confessed about. In terms of the first, I am explicit in my desire that this piece serves as a part of a larger discourse, and invite others to respond to what I have written here. Further, this piece is itself an audience response to another personal narrative (see note 1), thereby troubling the sense of audience as silent "eavesdropper" (213). In terms of the second, I am careful to trouble any idea of a fixed self that could lead to the problematic split of performative and constative self described by Terry. As I discuss toward the end of this essay, my self is always fluid and this is only a fleeting version of that self that is no more or less "authentic" than any other in the endless stream of versions of self, all of which I must take responsibility for. It is not a story "in which one part of the self claims to have transcended another," but a story about remixing a new version of myself made from all the previous versions. All this said, I do view this as confession in the sense that Barry Kanpol uses it to refer to a kind of "owning up" to ones position within larger ideological and social structures, especially as part of a critical pedagogic or social justice project (189).

while explicitly discussing the personal details of my sexuality as part of this autoethnography runs the risk of "insulting lay and professional people's sensitivities regarding appropriate moral boundaries" (Philaretou and Allen 71), I believe it necessary in order to fully engage the politics of this essay.

As Slagle argues, "queer criticism, then, both draws attention to and challenges the notion that sexuality is a private matter that is best left in the bedroom. For queer critics, when people suggest that it is inappropriate to discuss issues of sexuality, they are really saying that nonnormative sexualities are inappropriate" ("Queer Criticism" 134). Though my heterosexual male desire may appear normative on the surface, this essay reveals important contradictions within that desire, especially in relation to my commitment to feminism and my relationship to pornography, and I hope it will consequently be read as an attempt to destabilize any normative vision of sexuality, heterosexual or otherwise. Put differently, by disclosing the details of my sexuality I embrace the vulnerability that male feminist and hip-hop scholar Mark Anthony Neal argues *must* come with giving up male heterosexual privilege (49).

Gut Check

"I see you looking," her eyes say. It's a reproach. She bears witness to my sexual desire. Calls attention to my complicity in the objectification of women. It could easily have been the woman walking past me on the street, giving me notice for peeping out the way her booty fills her jeans. It could have been my girlfriend, expressing her disapproval of the way my eyes slide down the nearly bare bodies grinding across the frame of the latest music video. Or the eyes of the "actresses" whose fully nude bodies were writhing on the bed of the video I'd just downloaded. It could have been any of these or a number of other all-too-common-glances we heterosexual men have a tendency of giving (or, more accurately, imposing on) women. But it wasn't. It was a 13 year-old Filipina girl named Constance, and she reproaches us all.

The guitar stutters. A sample. Looped, it offers an easy beginning to a deceptively powerful song. Enter drums, and an underlying bass-line. They build tension until the guitar drops out, replaced by the cutting words of J Medeiros flowing over an eerie string and flute sample. Two verses, each capped by a slightly sped up sample from Eva Cassidy's heart-wrenching rendition of Sting's classic, "Fields of Gold." The power of the song is in this relative simplicity. J Medeiros' production is elegantly minimal when compared to your average hip-hop song, or, for example, the explicitly political tracks of a group like Public Enemy, which frequently had too many samples to count. While Medeiros' style, rhymes, or cadence aren't complex, he's a solid MC. But it's this very simplicity that lets the song slip under your skin, embedding itself in you, haunting you. By the time his lyrics coalesce into a message, it's difficult to stay apathetic.

Put bluntly, the song is about rape. It's about a man raping a barely pubescent girl to make pornography; the international sex-trade that destroys women and children's lives all over the world for the profit and enjoyment of men; the exploitation and

objectification of women within the entertainment industry, specifically heterosexual commercial pornography and mainstream hip-hop, though certainly not all of either. And, as I feel it, a commentary on men, including me, who consume this entertainment, and our complicity in the misogynistic and even violent, whether physical or mental, cycles of exploitation and sexual objectification that these entertainment forms often create and/or perpetuate.

I would like to say that, walking down the leaf-strewn street of Iowa City one fall afternoon, jacked into my ipod, I heard "Constance" for the first time and it froze me; made me break down in tears, made me immediately question my own complicity in the objectification and abuse of women, made me swear off mainstream hip-hop until it could clean up its act, or made me run down to the local women's shelter to offer my support. I wish I could say my inner feminist reacted immediately. The truth is, it didn't. It took time for the song's two stories to register. The first, the story of 13 year-old Constance as she's sold to an American and raped to produce internet porn. The second, the story of a lonely young American who, attempting to fill a void he feels in his marriage, purchases this porn. Though I didn't feel it then, it was only a matter of time before J Medeiros's message, or more accurately, Constance, would burrow into my soul.

Even as the song haunted me, I remained ambivalent. On the one hand, I had a growing sense of guilt about how disconnected my (pro)feminist ideals had become from the everyday practices of my life. A suspicion that I wasn't keeping it real as a (pro)feminist when I listened to some hip-hop, watched hip-hop music videos, and viewed the easily accessible porn on the internet; or worse, that I might be participating in the objectification and sexual exploitation of women simply by consuming porn and hip-hop at all. On the other hand, I also resisted the urge to condemn either wholesale; I couldn't abandon hip-hop or porn—not to mention my own feelings of desire at the heart of my relationship to both—without a fight, or serious attempt to break it all down.

Not that I thought hip-hop and pornography were equivalent, or that all hip-hop or all pornography were internally consistent. I understood that not all hip-hop, for example, was misogynistic. I'd heard many artists, male and female, that tried to avoid the kinds of misogyny and homophobia that tended to run rampant in the vast majority of what was available to the average hip-hop listener. But often I'd become disillusioned with them as I realized that many of these "conscious" hip-hop artists fell short of their spoken ideals when it came to the lyrics and music videos of their songs. In some cases, "conscious" hip-hop appeared to me to be just one more marketing label that the music industry used to sell more hip-hop.

While trying to untangle these conflicting feelings and ideals I watched the video for "Constance" on youtube.com.⁶ The video follows the lyrics of the song, weaving

⁶ This video is available via youtube.com and J Medeiros' own site, mrjmedeiros.com. The internet is simultaneously the leading medium for distributing pornography and crucial for

the story of Constance with the story of the young man that consumes her via the internet. We see images of Constance being sold and images that evoke her rape: money changing hands, used condoms, a camcorder, and man's hand roughly touching her face. We also see images of the young man at his computer preparing to consume the pornographic images of Constance and presumably masturbate. While the song had crept up on me, the video was a punch in the stomach, its power immediate.

In offering the video only in summary, and further, by placing myself at this essay's center through autoethnography, I try to avoid reinscribing and exploiting the violence of Constance's rape. Yet, as Hausbeck and Brents write, "in turning the gaze on ourselves, we risk making invisible or at least secondary the women whose stories so desperately need to be told" (25). And I do believe these stories need to be told as often as possible. I also believe that we need to tell how these stories, and in this case Constance's story, affects those who hear them. Of course the question of whether the subaltern can speak is rendered moot if I don't also attempt to pass the mic. I cannot offer Constance's voice, but perhaps one way of addressing her silence is to instead offer some questions to reflect on: are we—listeners and viewer of "Constance" and readers and writers of this essay—participating in her rape via our consumption of her story? Do we feel an erotic charge in reading about, listening to, or watching "Constance"? Repulsion? Both? Are any of us innocent? Can any of us escape implication?

Porn and Hip-Hop

I've heard people say that men are highly visual. More so than women. This often gets used to rationalize why men look at pornography, visit strip clubs, or seemingly demand a certain standard of physical beauty from women. This in turn "explains" why similar-looking and not-quite-nude women are frequently shown gyrating in most music videos; why men so frequently make breast contact instead of eye contact; in short, why women get reduced to the physical appearance of their bodies. While I have frequently disagreed with this broad generalization, especially when it's used as a blanket excuse for misogynistic behavior, I also have to admit that it's become increasingly true for me: I have become more reliant on visual stimulation. In the past, I would argue against this generalization, using as proof my preference for written erotica and my own imagination as masturbatory aides. Yet, as I've grown older, I've had to face the fact that porn has become integral to maintaining the vitality of my solo-sex life. Though I resist the mostly right wing and conservative comparison of porn to drugs for the way it casts sex as inherently dirty, negative, and sinful, some similarities do hold true in my own experience. I started looking at porn online before I even knew what the Internet was. It was easy.

offering distribution to videos like "Constance" that challenge the hegemony of mainstream porn and hip-hop.

On the way home from junior high, I pick up a copy of the free Microtimes newspaper from the grocery store around the corner from my house. At home I check the listing of bulletin boards until I find one that looks promising—PICs and games. I'm home alone, so I dial in, the improbable aphrodisiac of high pitched beeps and screeches as computers couple already beginning to condition my horny body so that I can feel a preemptive stirring in my shorts. The connection is slow, but that's standard. It takes a few minutes to find the kinds of pictures I'm looking for: topless. I make sure to open a game—this one's named Labyrinth—so that if someone comes home I have a good alibi. I download the first low-quality picture. Line by line it fills in the screen from the top. First a head of blond hair. Next eyebrows, then a set of eyes. I get bored and switch to the game for five minutes while the rest fills in. By the time I turn back, I've got a full, albeit pixilated, picture of a topless woman. I try to ignore how square her nipples look. If I squint a little I can pretend she's just slightly blurry instead of a mess of little colored boxes. Looking at these pictures helps me populate my sexual fantasies: I feel too guilty masturbating to people I know and celebrities are too implausible.

At the time, my enjoyment of these pixilated breasts, and eventually, still pixilated nude female bodies, was also intimately tied in with curiosity. Pubescent, I was desperate to see what a young, sexually attractive woman's body looked like. Eventually that curiosity gave way to an enjoyment of women's bodies based on what I thought was appreciation. When seeing attractive women, whether mediated or in my daily life, I not only fantasized about what they might look like naked, what we might do together sexually, but also how I would get to know them, what my life might be like with them, how we would fall in love. This kind of pornography gave me an imagined "safe space" where I could feel sexual desire for women, even intimacy, without having to struggle with the reality of gender roles, politics, or more fundamentally for my adolescent self, rejection. It was a place where the person I desired wouldn't judge my desire. Perhaps if I'd stuck to looking at pictures of naked women as a way of fueling my sexual fantasies, not as a replacement for them, I wouldn't be writing this.

Unfortunately, my sexual fantasies were almost as frustrating as my in-the-skin sex life—or lack of one. I could no more imagine having sex with a stranger than really do it. My fantasy life was subject to the same rules as my real life. Every imagined encounter had to be realistically preceded by a period of wooing. Before anything sexual could happen, I had to figure out how the woman and I would meet, establish a rapport, and more importantly, a reason or occasion that expressly "legitimated" us having sex, regardless of whether at times this was ultimately predicated on other questionable narrative conceits like violence. Common theme 1: walking home I stumble upon an incongruously beautiful woman who is being robbed. I beat up the robbers and save the woman. Her clothes have been torn in the process and her breasts are partially exposed. Out of gratitude for my bravery, she gives me a blowjob. Common theme 2: I am kidnapped along with a young woman.

For some vaguely defined reason, the kidnappers force us to have sex, which we do reluctantly though pleasurably.

In short, I needed some way to legitimate my desire, whether by creating a plausible degree of intimacy or removing the responsibility of action, if not desire, from myself, before I could move on to the sex. Even if it was all imagined. And while my fantasies allowed me to have sex as a character within my fantasies by removing responsibility for my desire, they often did so through some serious mental gymnastics that occasionally required less than noble narrative decisions for me as the author of those fantasies: for example the reliance on different kinds of violence apparent in the themes above. As a teen I imagine I would have dismissed that inconsistency as academic, though now as an academic, that inconsistency seems an early example of the very conflict at the heart of this essay. Nevertheless, all this rationalizing was tedious for sexual fantasy and it turned most masturbation sessions into exceedingly long affairs. In retrospect, it may have been this very problem that pushed me towards porn. I'd previously avoided porn for the "unrealistic" depictions of sexual encounters, or more accurately, for the lack of a plotline that led to the sex itself—though in retrospect my fantasies were no more realistic than imagining myself as the ubiquitous porn pizza delivery boy being rewarded for showing up with "extra sausage." Ironically, it was probably this very lack of plotline that made porn now seem attractive. It was like an instant sexual spark; I could bypass all the mental foreplay and skip to the (self) sexin'.

While it felt like an easy fix at first, there were consequences. The problem with porn is that, even as it pumps you full of sexual imagery, giving you plenty of material for sexual fantasies, it simultaneously robs your of your ability to generate this material yourself (Kimmel 95). And this is why porn and drugs are similar for me. The more I used porn to get aroused, the more I became reliant on porn to get aroused. Soon, it became difficult to get aroused without porn, until I needed more and more hardcore stuff. Neither my imagination nor erotic stories could sustain my sexual attention enough to be effective. To return to the drug parallel, it's like regularly taking Viagra, not for a legit case of physiologically caused erectile dysfunction but because it's quicker and easier than putting in the work to get up naturally. Over time, I imagine one might become mentally if not physically reliant on Viagra to get aroused. Porn is like a little blue pill that gradually loses its potency so that ever-larger doses are needed to make it work. But this is not necessarily true of everyone or of all porn.

This wasn't the only way my reliance on porn started corrupting my sense of desire. Before long, I began to notice a growing inconsistency in how I dated. Intellectually and emotionally, I was still interested in the same women, but I found myself physically attracted to new ones. The more I watched porn, the more the women I physically desired came to look like the women in the porn. Or more accurately, I began internalizing the idea that the tall skinny blondes with unrealistically large breasts so often featured in hetero porn were the women I should desire. I started to believe that these women were desirable and the ones I had always

desired before —the ones with darker hair, darker skin, and maybe a little more ass and hips and a little less height and chest—were not. This is one difference between hip-hop and porn. Hip-hop is frequently seen as a site for an "alternate" image of the desirable woman; hip-hop tends to sexualize curvier women of color, often with an emphasis on backsides rather than breasts (Neal 130), though both porn and hip-hop are also overwhelmingly conventional in privileging the physical/sexual attractiveness of women and mistaking this for their worth. Yet, even as I noticed the shift in who I found desirable, I continued watching porn. I rationalized that as long as I stayed "conscious" and aware of this potential danger, I could avoid it. But it's impossible to keep fantasy and reality cleanly separated (Bordo 286), so I played myself 'til Constance checked me.

Strugglin'

Around the time I was watching "Constance," there was a second hip-hop video I peeped more than once: Nelly's "Tip Drill." That shit was controversial! The video, like many in hip-hop—and almost every genre on music television—featured scantily clad women dancing around Nelly and his posse like so much available meat. What made this particular video scandalous was less the fact that many of the women were actually nude, their nipples and nethers blurred by boxes as skimpy as the g-strings the rest of the women wore. Rather, it was a scene that has come to symbolize all that is misogynistic about hip-hop: the infamous swipe of Nelly's credit card down the crack of one woman's ass. To sample some Mark Anthony Neal, "there was something disturbing and indeed frightening about the possibility of [women] being reduced to giant sexualized credit-card machines" (139).

While this scene is certainly disturbing for anyone concerned with the objectification of women, it simply made obvious an exchange that was *already* a regular part of most mainstream hip-hop: the exchange of women's bodies, through sex, for money. But let's keep it real, "despite popular belief, hip-hop is *not* the most prominent site of sexism and misogyny in American society but a reflection of the misogyny and sexism that more powerfully circulates within American culture" (Neal 146), a misogyny that is deeply embedded in American society generally. All you have to do is look at June Cleaver's perky ass getting pimped by Ward, consider the popularity of shows like *Desperate Housewives*, or watch commercials on TV for 10 minutes to know that we Americans apparently dig the exchange of women's sexual

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⁷ Interestingly, this also has implications for the shift in the kind of women I find desirable. If watching porn was responsible for the shift towards the kind of women featured in porn, then perhaps my hip-hop fandom was also partially responsible for my earlier interest in women with darker complexions.

wares for material goods, whether it be a car, a pearl necklace, or a credit card in the ass-crack.⁸

While "Constance" had me reevaluating my relationship to pornography, videos like "Tip Drill" forced me to extend this self-reflection to hip-hop. What was exposed under both, was desire. Even while I critiqued "Tip Drill" for its misogynistic and sexually objectifying depictions of women, I had to admit, some of the honeys were fly! Watching the women was pleasurable, their barely covered bodies causing a stir in my shorts. It was easy to feel sexual desire for them. What's more, this was true of women I ran into on the street, in the library, the classroom, grocery stores, bars, coffee shops, everywhere. Women with ample cleavage, tight tops or pants, short skirts and high heels. What does it mean, then, to be a heterosexual man who wants to keep it real with both his sexual desires and his commitment to a (pro)feminist position? Further, what does that mean for my love of hip-hop or my use of pornography? Is it possible to appreciate a stranger's body, or even particular attributes of it, without objectifying her? To sample some more Neal, "Do feminists [regardless of gender] check out each other's asses?" (128).

I don't yet know if she identifies as a feminist, but I've been checking out her ass all night. There's no doubt X is hot, though much younger than I'm used to dating. I dig how forward she'd been in hitting on me at the café. Even the way she downs the egg rolls we get at the Chinese spot up the street is appealing; a woman with a healthy appetite. Plus her lips look delicious, whether decorated with spicy mustard sauce or the fruit-flavored lip-gloss she applies compulsively. Or that the black pants of her barista's uniform invitingly hug her hips and behind. At this moment, however, my focus is not on her ass but on something else: the tears filling her emerald eyes. It's not a reproach, but nonetheless my inner feminist jabs viciously at my guilt center and stomach. "What am I doing?" I ask myself. X chokes once, then twice, before finally removing my penis from the back of her throat to take a breath. I lie on the bed unmoving. "Should I say something? Should I stop this?" Before I can decide, X smiles and drops her head to once more cram my penis into her mouth. She continues, new tears forming out of reflex each time she gags and chokes. I continue to let her.

Though I barely move externally, inside I'm tumbling. At first I think my inner feminist is battling my penis, bludgeoning the patriarchal desire of my smaller brain. If she were simply battling the "dark" forces of some "natural" misguided male desire to conquer and dominate X, then I might cheer her on, but I know it's more complicated than that. For one, I wasn't the instigator of this encounter. Not only has X picked me up in the café where she works nights to pay for nursing school, but she

⁸ Hip-hop is often vilified as misogynistic, sexist, homophobic, and violent to disproportionate degree. As I discussed in my dissertation and during a presentation at the 2009 meeting of the National Communication Association, and also noted in Neal (146), this may be a function of the complicated racial forces at work within the economy of hip-hop consumption. Please see any of these sources for more information.

is also the one to start getting sexual. What's more, she's gagging on my penis not out of any effort on my part, but of her own initiative. Nearly from day one of my "sexual activity" I've been conditioned to avoid touching a partner's head when receiving oral sex. I've been told, point-blank, that this is off-limits: it's coercive, patriarchal, and demeaning. So even as X chokes on my penis my hands remain at my sides locked around fluffy hunks of comforter instead of playing with her bleach-blond locks.

It's also more complicated because X is clearly *enjoying* deep throating me! Though I'm the one most directly in the process of "getting off," X is very obviously getting off too, just not in the way that Linda Lovelace's character did in the film <u>Deep Throat</u>. So while there's no clitoris mysteriously nestled in the back of X's throat, there's *something* about this that gives her pleasure. Her skin is flushed. Not a blush, no shame or embarrassment, but arousal. Mixed in with what I would otherwise label the sounds of distressed breathing are sounds of pleasure: low moans, sighs, occasional purrs. And though filled with tears, her green eyes sparkle with desire. She wants this. I feel my own desire lift me up. My inner feminist still struggles with something unidentified, but with every second I care a little less. It feels good! Her desire gives me permission to recognize that my own has been there all along. And once I have that permission, the heat of the moment kicks my desire up to a serious simmer. My hands remain by my side, but lost in the moment my hips facilitate her attempts to choke and gag on my penis.

Later, when it's all over, the post-orgasmic doubt kicks in. This becomes a regular occurrence as X and I settle into our nearly yearlong relationship. My internal conflict over whether it's okay for me to enjoy having X deep throat me to the point of retching quickly gets pushed aside when we're in the throws of passion, only to return with a vengeance once my orgasm has abandoned me. I often lay awake in her narrow bed afterwards while she sleeps snuggled next to me, wondering if it's "okay," fearing that any minute my inner feminist will start making calls and have my already provisional, by virtue of being male, membership in the club revoked. I know I should talk to X about it—she's smart and opinionated—but I don't know how to start.

Instead, I try to work through the issue on my own, sweat blooming on my brow from the effort and the heat of her sleeping body warming mine beneath the covers. I'm not sure what rules come with the permission I feel with X to enjoy what we do, or whether that permission is conditional. I don't know where her desire to deep throat me comes from. It doesn't feel like X does it solely to please me; she gets too much enjoyment out of it herself. But why does she enjoy doing it? I have nagging suspicions. She's already told me that she likes watching porn and has a healthy solosex life of her own. I wonder what role porn has in shaping her desire. Does that matter? If her enjoyment of giving me this kind of oral sex is a product of watching porn, does that invalidate my permission to enjoy and even desire this kind of encounter with her? Is deep throating inherently objectifying X regardless of her desire, of our desires, or how much I respect her in our relationship? And even if part of why we both enjoy this kind of oral sex is because of the unequal power

relationship at work in it, something I nervously suspect is true, is that necessarily wrong?

These were questions I hadn't quite resolved even after my relationship with X ended and I first heard "Constance." With the addition of "Constance," desire became the focal point around which this struggle between feminism, sexuality, pornography, and now hip-hop began to unfold. The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if there was a difference between appreciation and objectification. I wanted to believe that it could be possible to enjoy sexuality, and representations of it, in either hip-hop or porn, without this enjoyment spilling over into objectification; that there was some definable difference between admiring a nice booty on your partner—or even a fine stranger on the street in a pair of skin-tight jeans—and reducing her to that booty. As Neal says in his conversation with Joan Morgan, "I like women. When Mos Def in 'Ms. Fatbooty' is like 'Ass so fat you can see it from the front.' Damn, that's an ass! That's an ass I kinda wanna see. That's an ass I appreciate There's a fine line between objectification of Black female sexuality and appreciation of it" (237). Shit, that line felt finer than a NY Thins cap. A line made even thinner by the historical baggage tied to the racial identities of those women frequently featured in hip-hop videos and its predominantly white audience.9 Was the difference in intent? Was it about what you thought or what you did? My experiences with X hadn't given me a clear enough answer, so like any hip-hop head, especially an academically oriented one, I turned to "Constance," the text, hoping for answers. I found partial ones in the hip-hop of J Medeiros.

To break it down for a minute, J Medeiros resists being a hip-hop cliché. While most rappers drop rhymes about "bitches" and "bling," Medeiros avoids profanity. The only "hos" are girls like Constance, where the critique is obvious. Medeiros has been an outspoken proponent of radical and positive social politics within hip-hop, launching verbal assaults on issues like human trafficking, materialism, and body image, to name only a few. Medeiros embodies hip-hop activism and the growing ethos that being "conscious" isn't enough. If "conscious" hip-hop means a version of hip-hop that focuses explicitly on social issues, then absent from this is any necessary connection to politics, or more important, to *doing* or *performing* that politics. Rather than be satisfied with "conscious" rappers and songs, heads like me want activist and social justice rappers and songs, we want hip-hop that makes change.

Most mainstream hip-hop—and much of the industry-produced porn—seems to be about a superficial kind of performance that lacks much consciousness or feeling, and conscious hip-hop about identifying these superficial performances as negative and replacing them with deeper feelings and a more socially progressive consciousness. But in doing so, conscious hip-hop may have neglected the performative aspect of the equation. A raised consciousness is only half of it; we need a hip-hop that moves beyond mere consciousness; a "post-conscious" hip-hop that actually performs progressive consciousness, that puts it into practice. In this I believe

⁹ See note 8.

hip-hop insightfully highlights the importance of performance itself. When Mahatma Gandhi said we should "be the change we want to see in the world," he was dropping some post-conscious hip-hop wisdom. You can't just talk about changing the world, you have to embody that change on the individual level first and equally important, to perform that individual change publicly and in a way that moves beyond yourself to affect change in others. And this was one of the reasons why I so often became disillusioned with "conscious" rappers who were good at talking the talk of progressive politics—especially when talking seemed to help their image—but were less good at walking the walk—especially when doing was less obviously self-beneficial.

"Constance" moved beyond this and is thus a good example of a post-conscious song. "Constance" hit such a nerve with its audience that Medeiros began receiving emails from people sharing their own stories of sexual abuse, violence, and exploitation from places all across the globe. Through "Constance," Medeiros moved beyond "consciousness" to work explicitly for change. He partnered with other antihuman trafficking and sexual abuse organizations to found the I Am Constance Campaign, aimed at helping victims find counseling and other services. J Medeiros kicked it Post-Conscious style, leveraging rhymes into social action, whereas most conscious rappers seemed to be content just talking about the issues—I'm still waiting for the I Am Ms Fat Booty Foundation that helps young women gain confidence in their bodies or increases the representation of black women in science- and math-based professions.

Keepin' It Real

The zero-point, the point of vanishing, now becomes the place where we can be the no thing and everything. It is like the black hole, the place where we are sliced into many pieces and, with our inner DJs, put ourselves back together again. We are living convergences in relation with all the living things around us. We are part of a process of continuity. We remix and remix so that we are in relation with the ethereal and physical part of our existence. This is sampled consciousness. (karimi 229)

Maybe hip-hop was not the problem, but the answer. Not just the idea of a "post-conscious" hip-hop that stresses the importance of right mind and right action, right theory and right performance, but also hip-hop's very essence. Hip-hop is about engaging on a critical level. It's not passive, but active. It's about the conversation between its multiple pieces: the samples, the beat, the rhymes. Hip-hop is "both-and," it's the fragmented pieces and the whole it makes (Neal and Morgan 238). And this cutting and remixing is continuous. As hip-hop artist/activist and award winning slam-poet robert karimi suggests above, one can apply this to the self by realizing one's own sampled consciousness: the way one blends together the fragmented parts of a self. "Post-conscious" hip-hop takes, as it's starting point, a sampled existence.

"Conscious" hip-hop is about rejecting mainstream commercial rap's hedonistic obsession with the physical—sex, violence, and drugs—and the material—money, cars, and jewelry (Rodriquez 653; Swedenburg 583). In doing so, it erred too much on the side of mind and spirit. "Post-conscious" hip-hop, however, strikes a balance between these, uniting mind/spirit and body once more by performing that consciousness.

This remixing and blending embodied in "post-conscious" hip-hop is a good place to start working through this struggle of finding a (pro)feminist sexual desire. It suggests a way to make both mind and action right: a way to thicken the line between appreciation and objectification. At its root, objectification is the denial of someone's humanity. It's the reduction of their whole to a part, particularly a sexualized physical attribute (Awkward 106-107). It is a selfish move that wallows in the physical sensations of arousal and sexual desire. In short, it is performance stripped of any meaning, a going-through-the-motions. The vast majority of porn epitomizes this quality, where the focus is on sexual gratification via the sensation of genital pleasure (Lorde 54). And this is clear in the empty and superficial performances of sexuality depicted in this porn. Appreciation, in contrast, can't help recognizing another's common humanity. It doesn't avoid sexual sensations or desire, but widens their scope to the whole body and deepens them with feeling, remixing them as sensual and erotic, to sample some Audre Lorde (54).

In short, appreciation reinforces the connection between performance and feeling, acknowledging desire and the pleasure one might find in sharing both emotions and sensations with another person. It's this sharing of pleasure and feeling in the act of doing that is important within appreciation. Whereas objectification removes one's control over one's own body and sexuality, appreciation does not. Appreciation respects that we are all—regardless of our gender or subject of desire—in control of our own sexualities, our own pleasure; it does not seek to control or reduce people to sexual conquests, whether actual or imagined (Neal 47). Perhaps Neal included this idea in his earlier question, "Do feminists check out each other's asses?" He seems to suggest that as long as we are open to checking out *each other's* asses, to respecting *each other's* humanity, agency, sexuality, and of course, desire, we can fill in this line between appreciation and objectification. Perhaps.

Even as karimi's sampled consciousness or Medeiros's post-conscious hip-hop both offer a way to bring together the seemingly disparate elements of sexual desire, (pro)feminist ethics, and hip-hop, they aren't solutions. That is, these elements, though remixed and blended, never cease pulling in their individual directions. But that is precisely the power of hip-hop, in being able to bring the pieces together in a conditional and perpetually remixed and remixable performance. As Joan Morgan writes, "Truth can't be found in the voice of any one rapper but in the juxtaposition of many at the magical intersection where those contrary voices meet—the juncture where 'truth' is no longer black and white but subtle, intriguing shades of gray" (Morgan 281). For some of the scholars whose voices I have tried to remix in this essay—hip-hop heads like Kevin Powell, Joan Morgan, Mark Anthony Neal, and

Ayana Byrd—this has meant owning up to some painful or politically incorrect contradictions. Places where their self-perceptions, political convictions, and ethics, are betrayed by their behaviors, their realities. We also need theories that can handle these contradictions without cracking. Enter hip-hop. When we use hip-hop as a method for thinking about our performances of self, we realize that identity need not be about internal consistency, but can instead be the beautiful song that comes out of creatively combining the sometimes dissonant fragments of self and consciousness. Just as hip-hop music might combine a drum sample from Clive Stubblefield, an electronic clang from Kraftwerk, and a throaty hook from Nina Simon as part of the track on which a rapper will flow, hip-hop as a theory of self might allow us to see our identities as a combination of influences, experiences, beliefs, desires, and actions over which we lay the flow of our daily lives. Sometimes that flow harmonizes in expected ways and other times the discordant clashing makes for a song beautiful in its own way. Further, it's important to acknowledge that, as with all performances, it's never a settled matter or fixed solution; each self-song is available for sampling, remixing, and flipping. Rather than hold tight to the notion that we have some fixed and stable identity chugging along with little recourse for change when confronted by difference or contradiction, hip-hop as theory of self allows us to understand our selves as vast and ever expanding collections of samples that we are constantly remixing into our identities in any given moment as we respond to the world. There is room for contradiction and harmony just the same, but we are always responsible for how our self-songs sound.

"Remixing" applies to other theoretical modes as well, and it's in starting to remix a feminism for the next of us that the older-school heads above have been most helpful. As Morgan puts it:

... we need a feminism committed to 'keeping it real.' We need a voice like our music—one that samples and layers many voices, injects its sensibilities into the old and flips it into something new, provocative, and powerful. And one whose occasional hypocrisy, contradictions, and trifeness [sic] guarantee us at least a few trips to the terror-dome, forcing us to finally confront what we'd all rather hide from. (281)

So it's keep it real time. Time to hit play and let the world hear the current (and thus not all encompassing) remix that is my self. ¹⁰ I am (pro)feminist. I am the son of two women who love women, and who taught me to love women too. I believe in the universal equality of people regardless of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and a whole-fucking-lot of other categories we've used to cut people's humanity into strips.

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¹⁰ Since this is the current remix of my self, it is conditional and incomplete by definition (Philaretou and Allen 66). Further, while the focus of this essay on sexuality may reinforce the notion that all men are consumed by/with sex, a more accurate reading would see this essay as an in-depth examination of only one "aspect" of my self, an "aspect" that, like all other "aspects," reaches its tendrils into my whole being, but is not necessarily more central than any other "aspect."

But I'm also a white heterosexual guy who loves the way women's bodies look. Who often appreciates the way particular women's bodies, and particular parts of women's bodies, look, and who sometimes lets that appreciation linger a little too long on a pair of legs, breasts, or a particularly nice butt. A man who gets off fantasizing about women, about the hot and not always "PC "sex we might have, but also about the life we might make together denying patriarchal conventions and gender scripts as I stay home with our kids and she brings home the (kosher? Tofurkey?) bacon.

Yet I've also got to admit that I avoid hitting on attractive women I don't know not only because I don't want to be "that guy," but because I don't really know how to be "that guy." Or that sometimes I do actually want to be "that guy," but am too shy and afraid of rejection to be him. And my motive for wanting to be "that guy" is typically sexual, just as it is also frequently driven by the hope that she might be "the one." And more personally, it means admitting that in my search for "the one," I too may occasionally "Eat the Other;" that I have fetishized, objectified, and consumed people and cultures that are different from me and mine, have fed on that very difference, while simultaneously working against such racism and prejudice in society. Or similarly, that living in Harlem or Oakland scares me for different reasons than living in the Midwest does; that I am susceptible to harboring fears of frat guys and black guys, of Others and Otherness, even as my life and work depend on this very same diversity of being.

Above all, it means taking responsibility for this remix of myself, for embodying and performing the intersection of these often contradictory fragments of identity and desire that make up my self-as-remix, and offering that performance up as a model for others to potentially sample as they remix themselves.

Outro

To put it simply, "Constance" made me give-up internet porn, and avoid hip-hop that objectifies and demeans women either lyrically or via music video. In Constance's reproach I found two reasons to do this. The first is connected to the traditional liberal feminist critique that pornography harms women—and hip-hop's treatment of women is often arguably pornographic; that the production of pornographic material may involve treatment of women that is violent, exploitative, and demeaning, and that we may be unknowingly complicit in this violence by consuming porn like that described in "Constance." But I also found in her reproach a more personal, and compelling, reason to give it up: the harm it does me. As Audre Lorde said, "Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling" (54), sex without intimacy, denaturing the sampled consciousness of a remixed self as a result.

But I have not totally abandoned either my sexuality or hip-hop. Instead, I take responsibility for finding ways to enjoy them without it being at the expense of others or myself. I am still a sexual being with desires and urges. I have returned to the laborintensive world of sexual fantasy that I once left. While it is not as convenient as pornography, neither does it feel as harmful. I have also managed to find some visual

material that is sexually explicit without being objectifying. Some of this is material made by real people who want to share their pleasure with others; material that does not shy away from feeling deeply, but rather feels, and invites viewers to feel as well. Some of this is labeled or marketed as "feminist," such as movies like the post-conscious hip-hop infused *AfroDite Superstar*, which uniquely and, more importantly, successfully mixes a critical look at misogynistic hip-hop/R&B production conventions—complete with bell hooks and Gloria Steinem quotes embedded in the narrative strands—and some hot sex centered on female pleasure and not "money shots." And while *AfroDite* is not the porn panacea—it remains at worst the marketed "cure" manufactured by the same industry that makes the poison, 11 and at best an imperfect attempt by some insiders to salvage the master's house with his own tools—it is a welcome offering for those of us interested in consuming "alternative" products, especially ones that are self-reflexively produced to include critiques of their own conditions of production.

With hip-hop more broadly, it has meant critiquing exploitative commercial rap—even as I occasionally bump some less than perfect hip-hop myself—while privileging the purchase of music from artists that offer a positive, post-conscious, alternative. Artists like Medeiros. While these materials help me balance on the fine point of desire, hip-hop, and porn/erotica, they aren't a complete fix. The amount of feminist, hip-hop inspired erotica and conscious hip-hop, let alone high quality joints like AfroDite Superstar or Of Gods and Girls, is vastly outnumbered by the mainstream pornography and rap music that tempts me back. But there is no complete fix, certainly not one at the level of consumable products. The lesson about desire, porn, and hip-hop, if there is one, is that the remixing is always fluid, always in revision, always being remixed. And that, in continuing to perform that remix, in making it open to critique, both from the self and others, we acknowledge, own up to, and are held responsible for the necessary contradictions and complexities that come together to create our self-songs.

To remix Kevin Powell, it is a constant struggle, and I am not perfect. I am not a hero, or a saint (obviously). I am often a typically (hetero)sexist and racist straight white boy. Some days I do better than others, and some days I regress. Fortunately, it's getting a little less lonely to swim against the stream of "American male-centeredness" and rap-infused bravado and "nut-grabbing" as more of us gather to remix our post-conscious hip-hop selves in (pro)feminist, sex-positive, and thoroughly true-school style ("Confessions" 63). So as this track begins to fade I pass the mic to you, my fellow academics and hip-hop heads alike, those of you who like that underground "ish" and those who bump the top-40, those who peep porn, my

¹¹ I owe a debt to one of my anonymous reviewers for this perspective on the industry's "antidotes" to the very "poisons" they produce.

(pro)feminist brothers, and anyone else reading this in need of emancipation, I invite you, I urge you, to let your remixes drop.¹²

¹² I offer my narrative as both a case study and a hopefully generalizable model for thinking about the intersection of feminism, hip-hop, pornography, and heterosexual male desire. As Philaretou and Allen argue, because autoethnographies are traditionally written by academics, the general public may not find them accessible (73). I disagree with the absolutism of their assertion and have attempted to write for both audiences by braiding academic and hip-hop voices. I hope my ability to code-switch between these two vernaculars has been successful. Still, I recognize that for some scholars, the content and informal voice of this essay may be too "non-academic," and for some fellow hip-hop heads, it may sound fake, inauthentic, "uppity," or "bougie." Regardless, I hope that both will read this and feel inspired to offer a remix of their own selves, or if nothing else, to offer a thorough critique (or dare I ask, a "diss rap") in response. Whether one remixes to work out some academic or personal shit the potential of such a remix of the self is powerful. In the words of Philaretou and Allen, "Autoethnographic self-reflection can ... be used to re-narrate subjugated sexual scripts and reconstruct emancipated sexual identities, thus enabling individuals to rid themselves of the shackles of confining, essentialist gender ideologies set forth by sociobiological determinism" (74). This certainly seems generalizable to me.

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