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'Queering the Black Musical Atlantic': Black Queer Women artists and the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black Popular Music and Culture

PhD thesis. SOAS University of London

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***‘Queering the Black Musical Atlantic’
Black Queer Women artists & the
shapes, textures and boundaries of
Black Popular Music & Culture***

E. Falade

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD.

2023

Centre of Gender Studies
SOAS, University of London

Acknowledgements AKA Liner Notes

As a young person that was once obsessed with collecting CDs and other musical artefacts, one of the ways that I found myself being drawn closer to the music and the artist(s) behind the music was through the liner notes. One of the most interesting results of the dematerialization of music in the digital age is that liner notes are now what I would describe as a lost art. Liner notes have given me such rich insight into what it means to create art and what it means to be an artist, even more, liner notes have taught me that those two things are rarely ever done alone. Being an artist and creating art often requires one to have an enclave of folks around oneself to not only help make the art happen but to also help push the artist beyond their creative limits. So, in staying true to my love for all things that pertain to music, I have decided to fashion my acknowledgements into liner notes and in doing so pay homage to my own special enclave of folks that have helped to make this work happen and have pushed me forward at every step of the way.

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Abstract

This thesis interrogates and examines how the sociality of the musicking of Black queer woman artists serves as a rich terrain to illuminate the politics of race, gender and sexuality within and beyond Black popular music. This study is orientated towards responding to three central research questions which are as follows: how are the dominant gender and sexuality ideologies that R&B music reproduces implicated in the experiences and trajectories of Black queer women artists within and beyond Black popular music? how do Black queer women artists navigate and engage with the *shapes*, *textures* and *boundaries* of Black popular music? And lastly, to what extent can the musicking of Black queer women artists be positioned as radical contestations to the dominant order and conventions of forms of Black popular music? To respond to my research questions, this thesis employs ethnographic research methods which are informed by queer, feminist and anti-colonial research practices. I brought sociological and anthropological research methods which included in-depth-exploratory interviews with and direct observations of Black queer women artists, together with musicological research methods which included music-linguistic analysis, to create a multi-sited ethnography.

In its critical approach, this work is significant in that it brings Black feminist theory, queer theory and gender theory into dialogue with Black popular music and music theory as a means of transgressing the rigid boundaries of musicology and Black popular music scholarship and, offers an alternative mode of thinking about and theorising musicking. Furthermore, this work employs the term ‘queer’ and ‘queering’ as terms that disrupt and interrupt the silences within Black music scholarship.

Thus, this thesis is a Black queer, feminist insurgency into the orthodoxy of Black popular music studies which has historically avoided employing more interdisciplinary thinking and theorising and, avoided engaging with non-normative subjectivities.

I establish Black popular music, more specifically R&B music as a highly ideological arena that is heavily bound up with hegemonic ideology regarding gender and sexuality. I position the musicking of Black queer women artists within this context and demonstrate how the ideologies that figure centrally within rhythm and blues music are implicated in their experiences and trajectories. Furthermore, in critically analyzing how social ideology has figured in their experiences as artists, I deconstruct how the women in my study navigate and respond to Black popular music as spaces that are bound up with hegemonic social ideology. I maintain that through their musicking, Black queer women artists are generating radical contestations to normativity through covert and strategic moves to slowly dismantle the dominant order within forms of Black popular music and culture. This process of dismantling is creating transformative possibilities for the artists themselves and others at the periphery of popular culture.

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1. Introduction: Epoch.

1.1. Background

This work finds its origins in a thin, black, and tattered A4-sized sketchbook that is now lost. This sketchbook contained various unfinished songs and poems from my formative years as an amateur songwriter. Like many other budding young artists, my relationship with music and songwriting began in high school singing as part of a choir, and within a small band hosting Friday afternoon jams in the music room with four of my classmates.

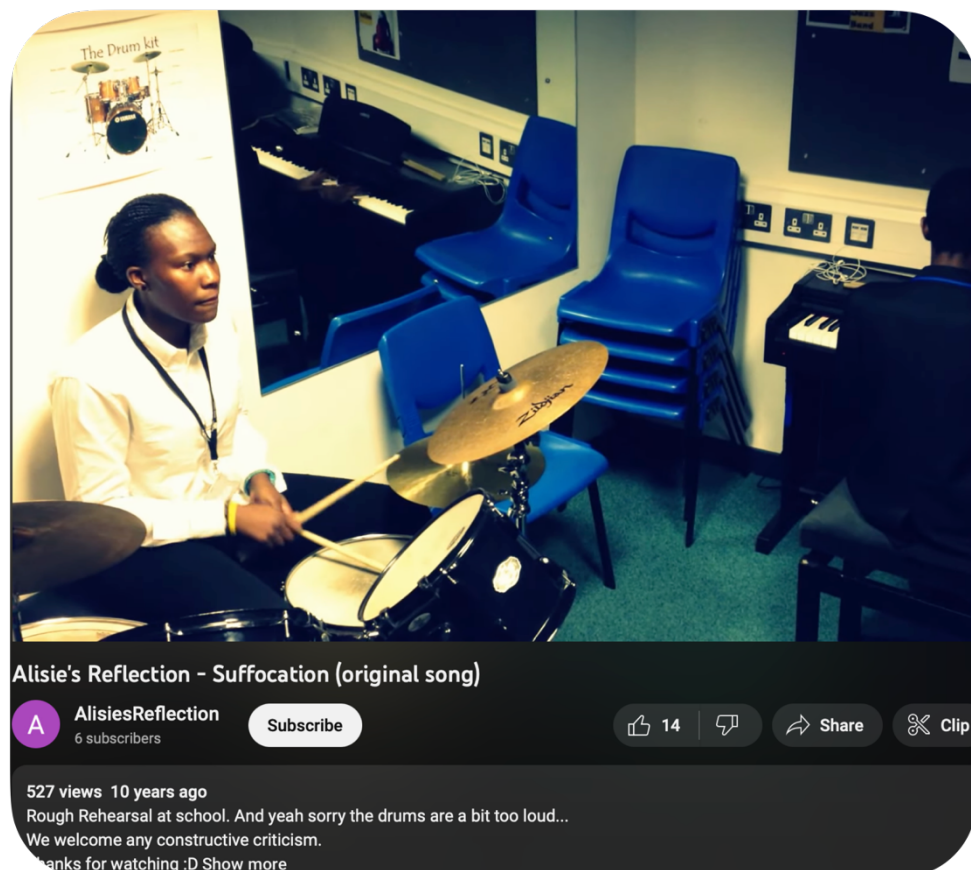


Figure 1: Alisie's Reflection, *Rehearsing Suffocation.*, 2012

From a young age, the process of songwriting (and writing in general) and music creation has, for me, been inextricably linked with extreme catharsis, an intense process of grappling with the unknown possibilities of queer romance and sexuality through chorus and verse. Music created an escape, and I used it to come to terms with the reality of my subjectivity as a ‘triple oppressed person’¹. I wasn’t ‘out’ at the time, so my queerness and same-sex attraction were firmly masked behind gender-neutral pronouns and thickly layered metaphorical lyrics alluding to forbidden or unrequited love.

There has always been a strange mystique that surrounds the way music has a hand in shaping the public and private, and the social and political. I first became attuned to its mystique whilst attending Nigerian hall parties² and other small-ish gatherings that involved the playing of Afrobeats, hip-hop, fùjì, R&B, reggae and dancehall music on different sizes of sound systems. These parties are of significance to me because I vividly remember them as being the first spaces in which I witnessed how varying musical tastes and logics of value were often disregarded for records that somehow managed to defy the latter and the former and move crowds of proud Africans and West Indians into vigorous dancing and on occasion, the spraying of immaculately crisp 1-dollar bills. I found that the opportunity to gather under one roof to listen, express and feel was more important than the actual occasion being celebrated. Central to these gatherings of varying generations of folks was the music that was played, for how could guests know that they were attending a birthday party if either King Sunny Ade’s or Stevie Wonder’s rendition of ‘Happy Birthday’ were not blasted through the rented speakers to remind them?

¹ A person that is oppressed through the connections that can be made through various forms of oppression, which in my case is my race, gender and sexuality.

² Hall parties refers to parties that are held in hired halls to celebrate a range of events such as birthdays and weddings. Typically organised by West Africans, hall parties not only play a huge part in West African culture on the continent but are also of massive importance within the diaspora as they are a chance to bring folks together whilst enjoying African music and food.

It was at these parties that I began to understand that music moved and *moved* people and that it represented something more for these folks and myself (and many others).

This concept of music *moving* people is something that I would like to give brief attention to. *Move* or *moving* in the musical sense takes up various meanings within the parameters of this research. Of course, music moves people in that it encourages, and facilitates physical movement, whether it be skanking, umlando-ing, komole-ing, whining or break-dancing. Music also *moves* people in that it evokes various emotional reactions such as laughter, anger, joy, and calls people into action. It also importantly shapes people's ways of being and moving through the world.

'Music is a dynamic social text, a meaningful cultural practice, a cultural transaction, and a politically charged, gendered, signifying discourse.' (Ramsey Jr., 2003: 18)

As Curran and Radhakrishnan also maintain, the ubiquitous nature of 'music in cultural life, the myriad ways in which it delights and moves people, and its rich scope for cultural significance at many levels, make it an incredibly important object of inquiry.' (Curran and Radhakrishnan, 2021:101) For me and many others, music is a 'valuable pedagogical and political project'. (Muñoz, 1999: xi) The music played at these functions was not just an expression of burgeoning Black culture, but also stood as a reminder of *home*, an emblem of the present, a symbol of resistance, familial ties, cultural traditions and Black artistic expression. It was clear that within these gatherings, there were distinct forms of communal sentiment derived from the music's capacity for enhancing experiences of collectivity, and I believe that there was, and is, an incredible amount of value and insight that can be drawn from that. I follow Steven Feld and Aaron Fox (1994) and position Black popular music, as being deeply 'embedded in local and trans-local forms of social imagination, activity and experience'. (1994:25)

It is from these parties that I learnt that Black music performs an incredible amount of work in the Black social world and that its sphere of influence on communities that looked like mine was and continues to be vast. These gatherings and the sense of sharedness they brought about were an intimate representation of what Black social life was (and in many respects, still is) to me, and the music played an intensely significant role in critically informing my perception of it.

Alongside this awakening towards the sense of sharedness and community that the music created, I also began to understand and experience music as something that was heavily bound up with the personal and subjective. It is not just a sense of collectivity that we derive from music, it is also a sense of the individual self. Curran and Radhakrishan underline this thinking and posit that ‘music continues to remain a core expression of and means for performing identity both within groups and to a broader world.’ (2021: 103)

In addition to this, music can also challenge, inform and reinforce parts of an individual’s identity and for me, it continuously does all three simultaneously. However, beyond my very foundational thinking of Black music existing simply as extensions of Black subjectivity and positionality was the realisation that there have been parameters that have been drawn boldly within and around what is conceptualised as Black popular music. These parameters reinforce gender binaries and implicitly encourage normative ways of living.

The ideological narratives and ‘characters’ within such music rendered my early musical endeavours marginal and somewhat foreign to what I had heard playing on Choice FM (now known as capital XTRA) back in the day. I felt an immense desire to push beyond the bounds of what I felt to be the constraints within and beyond the music that I love the most, the Black music that flowed through events varying from the vibrant hall parties that I attended as a kid to shubz³ held in my classmate’s crowded living rooms whilst parents were away. The

³ ‘Shubz’ taken from the Jamaican patois word ‘shubeen’ means party.

constraints that I felt were deeply embedded within soul music, hip-hop and R&B for a long time made me question my positionality within such music, not just as a listener but also as a creator. I saw no openly queer Black women performing on Top of the Pops, heard no songs sung by Black women about queer relationships playing on the radio and saw no Black women having another woman as a love interest in music videos shown on MTV Base, Channel U or BET. Moreover, I had not yet discovered Black intersectional feminism and the Queer of Colour theory that would provide me with the frameworks to think through and make sense of such issues much more broadly and critically. All I knew was that there was something about being a Black queer woman writing, singing or performing songs about having romantic relationships with other women that felt radical but, at the same time, felt unnerving and off-kilter. The creation of music for me had never existed as a separate entity from my positionality so naturally, I was stung by how ideas regarding authenticity, Blackness, sexuality and Black womanhood within and beyond the realm of Black popular music had heavily shaped the possibilities of the songs I had written and once wished would shape the lives of others, ‘boundaries, as they played out in my young musical world, became more apparent.’ (Ramsey, 2004:15) Black popular music dominated my world, and its reach grew far beyond my northeast London maisonette. Songs with expressly homophobic lyrics like Buju Banton’s ‘Boom Bye Bye’ (1992) and Vybz Kartel’s ‘Romping Shop’ (2009) were sung proudly in raves, so how could I, along with other Black queer woman artists, create and imagine ourselves within such a realm? I was a young woman- a Black queer masculine presenting young woman at that - how could I articulate this positionality without breaching the confines of what has been constantly positioned as ‘purely Black’ and ultimately antithetical to my being as it blared through my mother’s JVC sound system? My Blackness, queerness and the subversive expression of my gender identity taken together stood at the heart of the dilemma concerning working within the confines of Black popular music.

My interest in and relationship with Black popular music extended beyond the work I did as a pre-out, wannabe songwriter. Thus, I abandoned my dreams of Grammy awards and platinum album writing credits and turned my attention towards exploring the peculiarities of musicking as a Black queer woman. Musicking is a term coined by the musicologist Christopher Small (1998) that frames music not as a ‘thing’, but as a group of interconnected activities - something that people do. In Small’s words: ‘To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practising, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing.’ (1998: 9) I use ‘musicking’ to denote a wide range of activities that directly connect to music and musical performance.

Through several years I became focused on and aware of not only *what* was being sung but also *who* was singing and the position that they were singing from. This focus was critical because it allowed to me have a clearer understanding of the socio-cultural factors that often shape musicking.

1.2. Context

Through the research that I conducted for my master's dissertation, I found that expressions of Black queer women's queerness have been prevalent in early forms of Black popular music across the Black Atlantic, through popular music genres such as jazz and blues (Davis, 1999). However, Black queer women artists, their music and their experiences as key participants in Black popular music and culture have continuously been ignored and erased in discourse on Black popular music and cultures (Rabaka, 2012:81). My concerns have oscillated between the fact that the positionality and voices of those like me have continuously and consistently been written out of the discourse, and the fact that musicking within this space felt like an uphill battle. I am even more concerned about what this 'writing out' means in real terms for folk like me, what it means for Black popular music scholarship and what it means for Black popular music as a social and cultural organism in general. African American studies scholar Richard Iton asks us to critically consider 'how the excluded engage the apparent dominant order', furthermore, he questions whether progress entails that 'the marginalised accept mainstream norms and abandon transformative possibilities'. (Iton, 2008:3)

I believe that within Black Popular music the excluded are not simply excluded, the marginalisation of Black queer woman artists 'reflects and determines the shape, texture and boundaries of the dominant order and its associated communities'. (Iton, 2008:3) Taken from Iton's *In Search of The Black Fantastic* (2008), I use *shapes*, *textures* and *boundaries* to frame the sets of principles, representations, practices, and conventions of Black Popular music that are understood to be embraced by the majority of an artistic community and its audiences. They are the rules that reify and reproduce ideologies that promote whiteness, straightness, thinness and normative gender expressions. 'These are cultural, ideological

inscriptions of meanings conceived, created and constructed then projected by performances which suggest that certain ways of being, thinking, looking, and styling are normative, preferable, and validated. They are reflective of ideas, and they project powerful images and imagings that are sustaining and impressionable.’ (Banfield, 2010:9) In light of these things, I view Black popular music as a highly charged ideological arena where the stakes are high, and race, gender and sexuality play a significant role in shaping possibilities and trajectories.

The prevailing ideologies regarding race, place, gender and sexuality imposed by dominant society that shape our ways of being and moving through the world, have figured centrally in the fashioning of Black Popular music, particularly within its respective conventions and aesthetics. It is important to note here that the conventions and aesthetics do not passively reflect the social and social order; rather, social reality itself is constituted within it. I amongst many other music scholars argue that the aesthetics and conventions ‘serve as a public forum within which models of gender and sexuality organisation (along with other aspects of social life) are asserted, adopted, contested, negotiated’ (McClary, 2002:8) and articulated. I think of Black popular music and its associated subcultural coordinates as concurrently being bound up with ‘critical modalities of symbolic resistance to cultural hegemonies’ (Taylor, 2012:42) and regulatory regimes of normativity. McClary also maintains that repertoires testify to the various models of social organisation (particularly gender organisation) whether hegemonic or resistant (McClary, 2002:8)

The concurrency of the modes of resistance and the embracing of regimes of normativity (particularly heteropatriarchy) can more specifically be seen in hip-hop where in some senses the genre represents counter-cultural practices (Powell, 2011) (Peoples, 2008) but is also heavily invested in form of hegemonic social structures relating to gender, sexuality, ability and the body. I position a multitude of sociocultural practices and structures as being

‘brought to life’ and articulated through Black popular music. Hip-hop and grime are perhaps the most prominent forms of Black popular music where we can witness the articulation of Black social life more closely.

My concept of the *shapes*, *textures* and *boundaries* is drawn from my understanding of Black popular music (and popular music in general) as being a sociocultural space in which the social is ‘variously defined, organised, and constituted’. (McClary, 2002:29) I define the *shapes*, *textures* and *boundaries* of forms of Black popular music as intersecting and ‘disciplining’ forces that continuously construct meaning and provide the terms and templates for the ways that forms of Black popular music are to be written, produced and performed. The *shapes*, *textures* and *boundaries* represent the codes that define the limits of what counts as ‘good’ and ‘proper’ musical conduct and are (re)- produced within and beyond Black popular music as a matrix of truth and power. As McClary argues ‘struggles over musical propriety are themselves political struggles over whose music, whose images of pleasure and beauty, whose rules of order shall prevail’. (McClary, 2002: 28) In the case of Black popular music it is also a struggle over whose normative performance of gender and Blackness will prevail and dominate over all others. Thus, unless we have a nuanced sense of social history, it will be incredibly difficult to understand why in certain repertoires or genres some images and subjectivities dominate, and why others are prohibited or pushed to the margins (McClary, 2002:28) Like in many other kinds of music, the terms, templates and codes which surround Black popular music foremostly flow from social ideologies and the social orders that dominate our everyday lives. Gender normativity underpins the way that we are told to express our respective gender identities within popular culture. Furthermore, the dominant narratives regarding Black female sexuality, heteronormativity and body politics shape the music product and the music industry itself.

The *shapes textures and boundaries* of forms of Black popular music represent the development of a kind of musical semiotics (McClary, 2002: 7) of gender expression and sexuality – a set of conventions for constructing ideas of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ which function to codify gender difference and demarcate how it can be articulated, presented, sounded out, and performed in musical terms. Societal constructions of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ inform the ways that artists that gender themselves as such musick and artists (and other beings) ‘learn how to be gendered beings through their interactions with cultural discourse such as music’. (McClary, 2002: 8) I argue that the Matrix of Domination is crucial to how we can view Black popular music as an entity that has proved to be incredibly difficult for Black queer woman artists to navigate. I recognise that ‘the power of the matrix of domination comes in part from the weaving together of multiple forms of domination.’ (Hamilton et al, 2019:319) Furthermore, I understand that gender normativity, heteronormativity and racial ideology regarding Blackness are ‘inextricably bound and mutually dependent from the start’ and that ‘they often share resources and cultural understandings available in a particular time and place’. (Hamilton et al, 2019: 319) Thus, I use the matrix of domination to frame and analyse how masculinity and femininity are constructed, embodied and articulated by artists within Black popular music whilst using this analysis to demonstrate how such is implicated in the suppression of Black queer woman artists and their musicking.

Within this research, I continuously position musicking as a ‘collection of interconnected activities and texts employed as strategic resources [which enable and facilitate] self-expression and development, allowing us to construct new identities, express and transform existing ones’ (Taylor, 2012): 41-3) (Small, 1998) and imagine new worlds. However, as you will see in the fourth chapter entitled ‘A Prelude: The *shapes, textures and boundaries* of contemporary R&B’, I argue that whilst musicking may enable self-expression and the

imagination of new worlds, especially for Black queer women artists, the power that the social ideology of normativity wields within and beyond Black popular music as a distinct realm constantly draws limits on what kinds of self-expression are permitted. For example, my participants that are masculine-presenting often spoke at length about how they feel that their gender expression is something that has limited their access to certain opportunities, they argue that if they presented themselves in normative ways they would be taken more seriously as artists and would be afforded more opportunities.

Normalising ideologies that inform the *shapes, textures* and *boundaries* of Black popular music significantly tries to draw limits around what kinds of worlds can be imagined within the frameworks that it is bound by and views as legitimate. Black popular music executes and makes manifest the dominant codes of normativity through its *shapes, textures* and *boundaries*. Yet as McClary notes, crystallisation makes those ideologies and norms readily available for violation, ‘making music itself is a terrain on which transgressions and opposition can be registered directly: as Jacques Attali has argued, music is a battleground on which divergent concepts of order and noise are fought out.’ (McClary, 2002: 27)

While the works of Black feminist and queer of colour theorists are useful sites where naming, shaming resisting and destabilising primarily take place, Muñoz (1999) argues that queer of colour musical performances (and the music itself) are also sites of radical contestations to normalisation and oppression at multiple levels. Furthermore, Muñoz maintains that ‘minoritarian performance labours to make worlds...more than simply views or perspectives; [queer performances and musical creation] are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people.’(Muñoz, 1999: 195) I believe that for Black queer woman artists specifically, ‘music may serve as a resource for utopian imaginations, for alternative worlds and institutions, and

it may be used strategically to presage new worlds.’ (DeNora, 2000:159) DeNora and Muñoz’s theorising concerning music and queer musicking foregrounds the notions central to this thesis- the sociality of the music and performances of Black queer woman artists serves as rich terrain to illuminate the politics of race, gender and sexuality within and beyond forms of Black popular music. Going further, I position Black queer women’s musicking as knowingly and unknowingly generating radical contestations to normalisation through the performance and proliferation of ‘unstable’ and fluid ways of being. Their ways of creating, singing, writing, performing and being are constantly being constructed outside of the normative codes of racial identity, gender expression, sexual identity, and pleasure, and thus, are in opposition to the ways that dominant social ideologies have influenced and constructed the *shape, textures, and boundaries*. If *queer* and *queerness* as Sedgwick put it ‘represents an open mesh of possibilities, gaps and overlaps’ (1994:7) such an intimate social location and positionality, and the articulation of such intimacies through music, is in direct conflict with the binary and normative codes as demarcated by the *boundaries*. If *queer* marks a flexible space of expression and signification, the *shapes* mark an inflexible and rigid space that makes no room for deviance.

I have chosen to explore Black popular music foremostly because it is the music that I grew up listening to and it has shaped so much of my Black queer life. I take a particular focus on R&B music because it has informed not only the way that I see myself as a Black queer woman but how I see the world around me and my place within it.

Furthermore, R&B music is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of several Black communities and the role that it plays in Black social life across the diaspora is something that I believe is worth considering.

R&B music is what I would describe as an under-theorised space and is a highly fertile musical site for any form of discussion that seeks to engage race, gender and sexuality in an analysis of Black popular music. I hold the belief that there are too few studies within Black popular music scholarship that try to critically engage with contemporary R&B and the artists that create such music, whilst deconstructing how race gender sexuality play a major role in how such music is created, conceptualised and received.

Mark Anthony Neal's *Songs In the Key of Black Life: A Rhythm and Blues Nation* (2003) represents one of the most detailed efforts to 'take seriously the ways that contemporary R&B, reflects the joys, apprehensions, tensions, and contradictions of contemporary Black life'. (Neal, 2003:3) Neal writes that R&B stands as a 'guidepost to the contemporary Black anxieties related to issues such as gender, feminist politics, political activism, celebrity and the fluidity of racial and sexual identity'. (Neal, 2003)

Beyond my own personal investment in R&B music, I am particularly enamoured with how R&B musical practices 'include whole constellations of social uses and meanings, with complex rituals and rules, hierarchies and systems of credibility that can be interpreted at many levels'. (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 201:3).

1.3. Research Questions

The research questions that this thesis asks throughout are as follows:

1. How are the dominant gender and sexuality ideologies that R&B music reproduces implicated in the experiences and trajectories of Black Queer women artists within and beyond Black Popular music?

2. How do Black queer women artists navigate and engage with the *shapes, textures* and *boundaries* of Black popular music?
3. To what extent can the musicking of Black queer women artists be positioned as radical contestations to the dominant order and conventions of forms of Black popular music?

I position the internet, and technology in general as being critical to the musicking of Black queer women artists and their insurgence into Black popular music's cultural landscape. Through these explorations, I interrogate and examine how the sociality of the musicking of Black queer women artists serves as a rich terrain to illuminate the politics of race, gender and sexuality within and beyond Black popular music. Furthermore, I argue that through music creation and performance, Black queer women artists are knowingly and unknowingly generating radical contestations to normativity, and slowly dismantling the dominant order within forms of Black popular music and culture. Thus, this process of dismantling is creating transformative possibilities for the artists themselves and others that exist at the periphery of popular culture. Whilst I understood that Black popular music and popular music in general are sites where hegemonic ideology is often reproduced and cultivated, I also understood that 'popular music and its associated subcultural and scenic sites' have also 'long operated as critical modalities of symbolic resistance to cultural hegemonies'. (Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1991; Willis, 1978, as seen in Taylor, 2012:42). Furthermore, as Taylor notes 'as a common site of rebellion, popular music meanings and styled frequently emerge as a polemic against dominant notions of morality or int tension with stylistic commodification and "mainstream" sensibilities.' (Taylor, 2012:42)

These artists are turning 'spaces of marginalisation into spaces from which resistance and hope flourish'. (Collin et al., 2018; Smith, 2012). Inspired by the words of Daphne A.

Brooks, all of Black queer women's feelings, all of their strategies for living, are improvised and bundled into their music, in their sonic performances that have met and tackled convention head on, mixed and made new glorious forms, and expressed the capaciousness of Black queer life. Weaving the memories and experiences of my participants and I into a fine, dynamic and cross-cultural tapestry, I keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to myself as a teenage songwriter, 'promises to make invisible possibilities and desire visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to move beyond smuggling queer representation in where it must be smuggled and, with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queeradication impulses frontally where they are to be challenged'. (Sedgwick, 1994:3).

2. Literature Review: What's the 411?

This chapter critically examines the literature and theory that guided this thesis and has informed the research questions addressed throughout. Due to the highly interdisciplinary nature of my research, the literature and theory that have been examined are drawn from broad and diverse academic and non-academic fields. This chapter also examines and deconstructs the theoretical frameworks that I employed to underpin and inform my research. I also provide a critical analysis of the literature that currently exists within my fields of study.

The theoretical frameworks that have shaped this thesis follow as such: I draw from the music society nexus presented by feminist musicology scholar Susan McClary to ground my conception of the *shapes*, *textures*, and *boundaries*. I also use Black feminist theory as a starting point as it takes seriously the multiple and intersecting ways that Black queer

women's lives are framed, disciplined and controlled. (Davidson, 2019:112). Black feminist and queer of colour theory also provided the foundation for how I look at how the musicking of Black Queer woman artists is destabilising and deconstructing networks of knowledge and power within forms of Black popular music that 'dictate the behaviours, values, identities and desires deemed as normal, acceptable and advantageous'. (Taylor, 2012:27). I further draw from this claim and position queer subject positions as challenging and destabilizing the heteronormativity that informs and legitimises the *shapes, textures and boundaries* of forms of Black Popular Music.

I provide an examination of the past and present works that give critical insight into the *shapes, textures and boundaries* of Black popular music and how such works have not only set the terms of meaning-making within the Black popular music scholarship landscape but have also determined the ways Black music is to be defined, critiqued, appraised and valued. In Nu Directions (a sub-section of this literature review) I discuss the efforts of Black hip-hop feminist writers to counter the overwhelming cis-het voice and presence in Black popular music scholarship and their focus on the positionality of Black women within the structural dynamics of forms of Black popular music. I present my thinking around the need for Black popular music scholarship to begin to center the subjectivities that offer alternative modes of thinking about how Black women artists operate within and navigate Black popular music as social and cultural spaces. I argue that pertinent to the development of Black popular music scholarship and how we understand Black popular music as social and cultural spaces, is the need to decenter hip-hop as the main musical site and focal point of our analysis. I argue for the decentering of hip-hop as a means to widening our understanding of the way that ideology concerning race gender and sexuality is implicated and imbricated within Black popular music.

2.1. Black Popular Music: Taking Shape

2.1.1. What is...?

Attempting to define Black popular music has proven to be a difficult and problematic task for scholars, musicians, and their audiences. Definitions of what constitutes Black popular music are not only historically and culturally shifting, but they are also importantly subject to varying logics of taste and value. Many music scholars have attempted to answer the questions of ‘what is Black about Black music?’ and ‘what is Black music?’, whilst others have been focused on grappling with whether the term is meaningful or not. Many texts that attempt to conceptualise Black music often privilege African American music in their definitions, far too often is Black music simply framed as African American music and the musical expressions of African American folks. Ronald Radano’s *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black music* (2003) is perhaps one of the most popular texts that frames Black music as mostly African American cultural traditions.

Whilst African American music does indeed fall under the umbrella term that is Black music, I think it important to trouble the habit of scholars in completely centering African American music and erasing Africa, the UK, South America and the Caribbean from the concept of Black music. I believe that African American conceptualisations of ‘Black’ and Blackness have enshrouded the way that we think of Black music. As ‘Black’ and Blackness are often framed around African American identity, Black music has naturally been framed as an extension of that identity rather than the collective and individual musical expressions of Africans and descendants of Africans that exist across the diaspora.

In *Black Popular Music in Britain since 1945* (2014), Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi also attempt to complicate popular conceptualisations of Black music and maintain that the use of the terms Black popular music should acknowledge the historical experiences and histories of the African diaspora (p 4).

One of the earliest attempts to seemingly define Black popular music away from African American notions of Blackness and African American Identity was within the panel of the Symposium on Black music that was held in 1967 at Indiana University. The proceedings of the symposium were edited by the musicologist Dominique- Rene de Lerma and published as *Black Music in Our Culture*. (1970) During the symposium, the consensus defined 'Black music' as 'music which is, in whole or significant degree, part of the musical tradition of peoples of African descent'. (de Lerma, 1970) The symposium's definition is a good starting point when it comes to thinking about Black music because it does not privilege any one African or African diasporic culture in its definition.

However, like composer Olly Wilson (1983), I am somewhat left unsatisfied by the generality of the symposium's definition.

The Transformation of Black Music (2017) written by Samuel Floyd, Melanie Zeck and Guthrie Ramsey has very much shaped my own understanding of what Black music is. In attempting to define the musical tradition under more definitive and specific terms, I maintain that the displacement that the Transatlantic Slave Trade caused resulted in the fusion and evolution of African musical practices with the cultural influences of the receiving regions, so whilst Black music encompasses musical expressions that have ties to African historical and cultural roots, it is ultimately an appellation for a musical expression rooted in African Atlantic diasporan experience.

Included in this definition is Wilson's discernable and demonstrable qualities that help us to view Black music as a clear and distinct tradition. Below Wilson briefly explains his thinking regarding the Black musical tradition:

‘Nevertheless, the empirical evidence overwhelmingly supports the notion that there is indeed a distinct set of musical qualities which are an expression of the collective cultural values of peoples of African descent. This musical tradition has many branches which reflect variations in basic cultural patterns over time, as well as diversity within a specific time frame. However, all of these branches share to a greater or lesser extent, a group of qualities which, taken together, comprise the essence of the Black musical tradition, though influenced in different ways and degrees by other musical traditions, share a ‘critical mass’ of these common qualities. It is the common sharing of qualities which makes up and defines the musical tradition.’

The musicologist Samuel Floyd follows Wilson's thinking towards Black music's discernible qualities and argues that several clear ‘sonic characteristics underlie the diversity of African-diasporic musical styles that developed from the various ethnic and cultural practices of central and West Africans in the New World under enslavement’. (Morrison, 2017)

Furthermore, J.H. Kwabena Nketia (1973) notes that the various Black music cultures are essentially musical cultures that have been ‘exposed to different formative influences but which share a common conceptual identity in certain vital spheres’. (p 9)

I want to note here that I do not wholly follow Wilson in saying that Black music's qualities are an expression of the collective cultural values of people of African descent. I think that attempting to speak about the cultural values of people of African descent collectively

inevitably brings up several problematic ways of thinking. Such attempts often frame the cultural values of people of African descent as monolithic and static, whilst also reifying essentialism.

In this work, I want to avoid thinking of people of African descent in monolithic ways and instead, I lean towards presenting our lives, cultures, and experiences as diverse and varying. Furthermore, I follow the writing of Frank Kovarik and maintain that ‘Black music exists not because of any innate or biological traits that accompany being of African descent that somehow express themselves musically.’ (2011) Instead, some forms of Black music have emerged from some of the social and material conditions and experiences that having such ancestry has been associated with across the Black Atlantic over a vast period. For example, Black British genres such as grime and Afroswing emerged because of the efforts of first and second-generation, working-class West Indian and West African youths to both grapple with their experiences of living in the diaspora and forge connections with the music and culture that their parents and grandparents enjoyed back home.

I do however agree that the essence of the Black music tradition consists of ‘the common sharing of a core of conceptual approaches of music making’ and it is these approaches that I would like to continue to build a working conceptualisation of Black music on. Wilson states that regarding Black music there are a few assumptions that can be made about the musical process:

‘the notion of music as a ritualistic, interactive, communal activity in which everyone is expected to participate; the concept of music as a multidimensional, musical/verbal experience...a conception of music based on the assumption of the principle of rhythmic contrast; the predilection for call and response; cyclical musical structures; the propensity to produce percussive stratified musical textures; a heterogeneous

timbral sound ideal; the notion of physical body motion conceived as an integral part of the music-making process; and so on'. (1996: 44)

Grime music and Afro beats are genres that I believe reflect these basic elements that define the Black music tradition as the music is defined by 'rhythmic contrast, antiphony, percussiveness...' Black popular music 'manifests itself in multiple styles and genres, each with characteristics that extend far beyond what is simply seen and heard'. (Taylor, 2012: 41) As I argue in later parts of this thesis Black popular music constitutes something far greater than just texts. I believe that Black popular musical practices, 'include whole constellations of social uses and meanings, with complex rituals and rules, hierarchies and systems of credibility that can be interpreted at many levels'. (Connell and Gibson, 2002:3)

2.1.2. Black Music Scholarship

It is critical to examine the past and present works that have not only shaped the terms of meaning-making within Black popular music scholarship but have also determined how the music is to be defined and appraised.

A point to consider with respect to this literature review is that because Black music has often been principally defined as African American music, the scholarship that has emerged from its study has tended to focus solely on African American genres of music, the musicking and experiences of African American artists and Black popular music within the context of the US. As my critical analysis chapters focus on R&B music and R&B artists, I examine the

works of US-centred scholarship as it is the overwhelming voice within R&B music and Black popular music scholarship more generally.

Overwhelmingly produced and written by cis-heterosexual African- American men, the theorising within popular texts such as Amiri Baraka's *Black Music* (1963), *Blues Music* (1980) Samuel A. Floyd's *The Power of Black Music* (1996) and Nelson George's *The Death of Rhythm and blues* (2003) have been described as crucial to understanding the cultural production of Black people specifically within the context of the US. (Neal, 2003) These texts have had an insurmountable influence in shaping the broader theorising regarding Black popular music in recent years. The parameters that the aforementioned scholars have drawn around Black music as a scholarly field of study (and how it has been defined) emerge from hotly contested conceptualisations of Blackness and authenticity.

'Most Jazz critics have been White Americans, but most important Jazz musicians have not been' (Baraka, 1969: 17).

In their work, the scholars heavily critiqued the positionality and lack of reflexivity of white critics of Black music and attempted to bring about new ways of understanding the cultural production of Black folks away from works that had been previously formulated through the lens of whiteness. In *Black Music* Baraka muses about his frustrations with critics never going beyond *appreciating* the music and moving towards the exercise of trying to understand the attitude that produced that very music. Baraka argued that the basic *appreciation* approach that characterised the work of white 'middlebrow' jazz and blues critics 'strips the music too ingenuously of its social and cultural intent. It seeks to define jazz as an art (or folk art) that has come out of no intelligent body of socio-cultural philosophy'. (Baraka, 1969: 10). Within these first waves of Black popular music scholarship, there was a concerted effort by scholars to reclaim critiques of Black music and culture as a means of

counteracting the logic regarding Black music that was clearly influenced by the social and cultural mores of European society and their attitudes towards Black people and what white critics deemed as 'Negro Music'. Baraka's work amongst other scholars who wrote and worked in a similar vein perhaps marked the beginnings of concerted efforts to provide detailed and informed analysis of Black popular music. Baraka understood that what critiques of Black popular music and culture needed were not only a more intimate reading of the music itself but also a nuanced understanding and engagement with the people and cultures that the music emerged from and was rooted in. I sympathise with Baraka's scholarly endeavors, in that I believe that it is academically dishonest to examine the tradition of Black popular music whilst disregarding the context of the lived realities of the communities of Black folks that live, produce and consume this music.

Whilst the works of Baraka's generation of Black music scholars strove for the mitigation of the hegemonic social structures of Black popular music criticism, their focus on Blackness and authenticity within Black popular music itself produced new hegemonic social structures that still reverberate through Black music scholarship at this present moment. The focus on Blackness and authenticity positioned Black music as a mode of resistance to racist discourses and as representative of the 'voices of and visions of the socially, culturally, politically, and economically disenfranchised'. (Phillips et al., 2005) Framed through notions of authenticity and essential Blackness predicated on very specific African American Black nationalist ideologies of race and the patriarchal family, the theorising regarding Black popular music and culture that consistently emerge out of this wave of scholarship, have been born out of the 'myth of a consistent and stable socio-racial position of Blackness' (Rodano, 2003:3) or what Baraka named as a 'changing same'. The 'changing same' is centered around the belief that within Black music there is a unifying dynamic, a concrete underlying structure of feeling flowing through it. The concept of a 'changing same' emerges out of

attempts to both counter the logics that defined white engagement with Black music at the time, and to 'locate the cultural practices, motifs, or political agendas that might connect the dispersed and divided Blacks of the New world and of Europe, with each other and Africa'. (Gilroy, 1993:112) The notion of a 'changing same' within Black music illuminates how scholars employ music as a device of collective ordering. In the works of Baraka, Floyd and George, the logics of a 'changing same' are used as a means of organising the dispersed folks of the Black diaspora in such a way that their ways of being appear to be intersubjective, mutually orientated, inherent and aligned.

One of the major issues that emerge from these first waves of Black popular music scholarship that attempts to grapple with Black subjectivity and music lay within their theorizations of Blackness. How the aforementioned scholars have traditionally conceptualized Blackness has led to the *writing out* of marginalised subjectivities in scholarly writing on Black popular music.

Ethnomusicologist Dr. Kyra Gaunt notes that the theorisations of Blackness that emerge from the aforementioned literature is 'overwhelmingly imagined, talked about, and personified through the experience of heterosexual Black men'. (Hayes, 2010:155). Even more, such idealised constructions of Blackness from Black nationalists have historically been reliant on an 'absolute contempt of the lived complexities of Black vernacular cultures in the New world'. (Gilroy, 1993:113). What can be highlighted in these early waves of literature and theorising is that *Blackness* is often positioned as being diametrically opposed to everything that is constructed as white, and this often means being in direct opposition to non-cis and non-heterosexual subjectivities. (Womack, 2010: 91-2), (Mason- Johnson & Khambatta, 1993:21). There was a conscious effort made by Black nationalist thinkers writing within and beyond Black popular music scholarship to flatten out their conceptualisations of Blackness

and obfuscate those subjectivities that threatened the hegemonic structures that those conceptualisations reify. Black queer writers and scholars such as James Baldwin who wrote extensively about Blackness, Black subjectivity, Black nationalism and queerness were often vilified, attacked and denounced by scholars working in the vein of Black Nationalism. Eldridge Cleaver's 1968 memoir *Soul On Ice* is perhaps one of the most significant examples of how Black queer subjectivities were rejected in and written out of mainstream conceptualisations of Blackness. In *Soul On Ice*, Cleaver focuses his disdain for Black queer subjectivity squarely on Baldwin positioning his queerness as 'anti-Black' and an example of the 'most shameful, fanatical, fawning sycophantic love of the whites'. (p 127) Cleaver's attack on Baldwin makes clear the logic at play in that generation of scholar's conceptualisations of Blackness. Whilst we can position the notion of a static sense of racial authenticity as being detrimental to how we deconstruct and interpret Black popular music, such an ideology also affects the imagined legitimacy of 'deviant' subjects and subjectivities and the cultural and aesthetic value that is placed on their musicking.

Hip-hop and the scholarly writing that has followed it are domains that the theorising of Black nationalist critics regarding Blackness and authenticity has taken shape in real terms. In hip-hop scholarship, Blackness has essentially become a metonym for authenticity. (Maus et al, 2022: 403). With hip-hop 'dominating the Black social imaginary' (Neal,2004:4) and overtaking jazz and the blues as being the most popular genre of Black music, it has naturally become the focus of an overwhelming majority of studies that are focused on Black popular music. Hip-hop's entrance into the field of scholarship in the early '90s has led to what is described as a 'hip-hop canon', encompassing significant written works and dominant research themes that are identified with leading scholars. These key works include Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), *The Hip-Hop wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip-Hop and Why It Matters*

(2008), Mark Anthony Neal & Murray Forman's *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (2004) and Guthrie Ramsey's *Race Music: From Bepop to Hip-Hop* (2003). These works attempt to legitimise hip-hop and rap music as a form of cultural production that is central to the subjectivities of Black folks, especially in the United States. Various scholars working within the hip-hop cannon have had a special and extensive focus on white participation in hip-hop and hip-hop culture, as seen in texts such as Greg Tate's *Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking From Black Culture* (2003), Bakari Kitwanas *Why White Kids Love hip Hop: Wangstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (2005) and Jason Tanz's *Other People's Property: A Shadow History of Hip-Hop in White America* (2007). Legitimate concerns around appropriation and the participation of white people in Black cultural production have fueled what Richard Peterson (2005) has described as 'authenticity work'. Scholar Kembrew Mcleod (1999) maintains that this authenticity work that focused exclusively on Blackness, 'occurred in an effort to preserve hip hop's identity in the face of mainstream assimilation.' (p139) This authenticity work continuously frames hip-hop and other genres of Black popular music through notions of 'essential Blackness' (Harrison, 2008: 1784) that imply a stable Black identity that can be identified within any given Black cultural production. As Ronald Radano (2009) succinctly puts it, the mythologies that sometimes fictionalise the past (and present) are decidedly real in our time. The allure of linking essential Blackness and Black popular music in these ways is that it then positions the music as something that is sacred and sacrosanct and closes it off from 'unwanted' attention from white audiences and critics. As Radano maintains, 'this might explain the enduring influence of Black arts-based criticism in Black contemporary musical scholarship'. (Radano, 2009: 117)

In an attempt to tread through the murky terrain of the essentialism that occurs within popular analysis' of Black music forms and cultures, Paul Gilroy complicates the logics of the

aforementioned Black popular music scholars by asking ‘how are we to think critically about artistic products and aesthetic codes that, although they may be traced back to one distant location, have been somehow changed either by the passage of time or by displacement, relocation, or dissemination through wider networks of communication and cultural exchange?’ (Gilroy, 1991:111) The writing of hip-hop scholars that are particularly invested in flat and static notions of Blackness as a measuring stick for authenticity has shown us that there has been a lack of critical consideration for how unavoidable displacement and transformation are in cultural production and how the ‘developmental processes regarded by conservatives as cultural contamination may be enriching’. (Gilroy, 1991:122). In light of Gilroy’s comments, I believe that as scholars we must begin to *queer* our understandings of Black popular music by centring the experiences of a wider variety of Black folks across the Atlantic within studies of Black popular music. By queering our study of Black popular music, we can contest the logics of essentialism that have restricted not only our thinking around Blackness but also our thinking of Black popular music as socio-cultural spaces.

The work of scholars such as Msia Kibona Clark (2018), Paul Gilroy (1991), Paul Oliver (1990) and Monique Charles et al. (2023) has shown that Black populations across the Atlantic also have a symbiotic relationship with Black popular music. Their work demonstrates that Black popular music and its tenets extend far beyond North America and have created firm roots in places such as London, Lagos and Cape Town. Gilroy maintains that in places like Britain, the music of the Black Atlantic world was the primary expression of cultural distinctiveness which large parts of the Black British population seized upon and sought to adapt to its circumstances. (1991: 81-82). Within the scholarship on Black popular music, the constant centering of African American hip-hop is indicative of the African American experience being held as the quintessential Black experience and being used to define ‘Black culture’ and Blackness itself. In challenging the grip that African American

scholars have over theorising Blackness, Patrick E. Johnson argues that Blackness does not belong to any one group, 'rather, individuals appropriate this complex and nuance racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals.' Moreover, when significant attempts are made to lay claim to 'an intangible trope that manifests itself in various discursive terrains, identity claims become embattled, and Blackness becomes a dangerous phenomenon'. (Johnson, 2003:2-3)

Gilroy is a scholar that has presented a serious critique of the African American experience being constantly placed at the apex of Black cultural production and circulation. Gilroy challenges the use of the monolithic 'African American experience' in conceptualisations of *Blackness* by putting forward the argument that the hybrid character of Black cultures across the Atlantic confounds and obfuscates essentialist understandings of the relationship between racial identity and non-identity. For Gilroy, the syncretic complexity of Black expressive cultures such as Black popular music provides compelling reasons to resist the idea that an 'untouched, pristine Africanity resides inside Black music working a powerful magic alterity in order to repeatedly trigger the perception of absolute identity'. (Gilroy, 1991: 126) This thinking importantly moves us away from positioning the experiences of African Americans as wholly central to our analysis and thus, also means also moving beyond theorisations and conceptualisations of Blackness that do not extend beyond the North American socio-cultural context.

Within the confines of my research, it is crucial that in reconceptualising Blackness, we must resist fixity and rootedness and present it as 'something other than a fixed essence or a vague and utterly contingent construction to be reinvented by the will of aesthetes and symbolist'. (Gilroy, 1991: 127) Radical reconceptualisations of *Blackness* can be found in the works of scholars such as George Sefa Dei and E Patrick Johnson. Dei places importance on non-

hegemonic constructions of Blackness and maintains that readings of it must take into account the nuances and complexities of Black lived experience in the diaspora. Furthermore, Dei maintains that we must not underestimate the value of multiple areas of knowledge so that we avoid continuing to present flat and singular ways of seeing and defining Blackness (Dei, 2017:2). The sociologist Stuart Hall (1996) also challenges static readings and argues that Blackness should be presented as something that is always in process. Hall's perspective helps us to begin to move beyond the problematic notion of fixity towards understanding and presenting Blackness as something that is living, breathing and always in the process of becoming. The ways that we construct Blackness should be 'contingent on the historical moment in which we live and our ever- shifting subject positions'. (Johnson, 2003:3) In regard to Black studies, I follow the position of Dei and Johnson in maintaining that Blackness should always be positioned as an identity and experience with shared, contested and contingent histories. Much more than simply being a racial identification, Blackness is about intimate knowledge of culture, politics and history of Black experiences and realities. It is identification that comes with political consciousness, Black agency and resistance (Dei, 2017:65). I firmly hold onto these reconceptualisations because they do not lean on singularity and emphasis is placed on positioning Blackness as a racialised experience involving the shifting and unstable subject positions of Black folks across vast space and time.

2.2. Nu Directions Part I

2.2.1. Hip-hop feminism

Out of familiar paradigms of understanding and dispute has emerged a new canon of scholars and scholarship that makes attempts to move beyond essentialism, and think through how the intersection of race, gender and sexuality relate to musicking. Coined by Black feminist scholar Joan Morgan, hip-hop feminism can be defined as a ‘generationally specific articulation of feminist consciousness, epistemology, and politics rooted in the pioneering work of multiple generations of Black feminists and focused on the questions and issues that grow out of aesthetic and policies prerogatives of hip-hop and hip-hop culture’. (Cooper et al, 2013:722)

Hip-hop feminist scholarship stands amongst the most significant attempts to draw on parts of first and second -wave feminist theory and feminist musicological theory to counter the centering of cis-het male subjectivities, grapple with the positionality of Black women within the structural dynamics of Black popular music and culture, and examine the broader issues of power dynamics, misogynoir⁴ and violence against Black women in hip-hop. Black feminist scholars have also attempted to critically examine how issues surrounding the sexuality of Black women and authenticity affect Black women artists creating and performing such music. A vast amount of this analysis has had a particularly firm focus on deconstructing the ways that Black cis-heterosexual women rappers work within and against dominant sexual and racial narratives within and beyond hip-hop culture. (Rose, 1994:147). The writing of scholars such as Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper and Susana M. Morris (2013), Joan Morgan (1999), Tricia Rose (2004) (2008), Cheryl Keys (2000) (2016), Savannah Shange (2014), Tanya Saunders (2015), Layli Phillips, Kerri Reddick-Morgan and Dionne Patricia Stephens (2005) are amongst some of the most prominent works within hip-

⁴ Coined by Black queer feminist academic Moya Bailey, ‘Misogynoir’ refers to the ways that anti-Blackness and misogyny combine to malign Black women in the world. See Bailey 2004.

hop feminism. A fairly new term, 'hip-hop feminism' serves as a formative tool for deconstructing the ways that Black women mediate a marginalised status within hip-hop music and culture given the dominance of Black cis-heterosexual male subjectivities.

Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (2004) is one of the first pieces of literature within Black popular music studies to critically examine the issues of race and gender in Black popular music cultures. In *Black Noise* Rose attempts to situate the works of Black woman artists in relation to their racial, sexual and gendered identities. Rose deconstructed the thematic focuses of Black women rappers in order to give insight to the political intimacies of the Black women that defined hip-hop's 'female voice'. Rose's central argument in the chapter entitled 'Bad Sistas: Black women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music' is that while 'male rappers often contest police harassment and other means by which Black men are policed, Black women rapper's central contestation is in the arena of sexual politics'. (Rose, 2004:147) Rose further argues that these contestations essentially function as a proxy for discussing wider politics that pertains to Black women. Rose digs deeper into the premise that sexual politics is the main area of contestation for Black women rappers by maintaining that the discourse within their music directly responds to 'dominant notions of femininity, feminism and Black female sexuality'. (2004: 147-148)

Continuing the legacy of Rose is the writing of Black feminist writers Cheryl L Keyes and Savannah Shange. In 'Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance' (2000) and 'A king named Nicki: strategic queerness and the Black femmecee' (2014). Shange and Keyes focus their attention on dissecting the ways that Black women artists within hip-hop are 'stratified into limited and limiting categories based on varying images, identities, voices, and lifestyles they embody' (Shange, 2014). These stratifications are underpinned by the historical and deeply entrenched

representations of Black women and their sexuality, which have been formed and engrained in the western public sphere. The limiting categories that have been constructed for Black women artists within hip-hop mirror the white supremacist tropes illustrated by Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins which are the ‘matriarch’, ‘jezebel’ and ‘sapphire’. Collins explains that ‘from an elite white male standpoint, the matriarch is essentially a failed mammy, a negative stigma applied to those African American women who dared to violate the image of the submissive servant.’ (Collins 2009:74) The ‘jezebel’ trope originated from the belief that Black women are intrinsically promiscuous and have huge sexual appetites. The ‘sapphire’ trope is particularly characterised by the belief that Black women are aggressive, angry and dominant.⁵

Some of the categories that have historically been prescribed to Black women artists include the ‘Queen Mother’, also known as the ‘Righteous Queen’. Arguably being embodied by artist such as Lauryn Hill and Erykah Badu, this archetype represents the Black women artists that, through their music and performances, ‘drop science to the people’ (Keyes, 2000:257), are focused on community empowerment and positivity, evoke images of Black spirituality (through their use of African symbolism such as Ankhs⁶, the lighting of incense whilst they perform), and outwardly present themselves as the respectable Black women in Black popular music (as often shown in the way that they are dressed, head wraps made out of African textiles and non-revealing clothing). Another interesting category is the ‘Gangsta Boo’ which is perhaps the most proliferated category within hip-hop. Positioned as dichotomous to the ‘Queen mother’ category, the ‘Gangsta Boo’ is characterised by hypersexualised images of Black women such as Nicki Minaj, Lil Kim, Trina, Cardi B, Saweetie and Big Latto, women that are seen to ‘take pride in their sexual prowess, lyrical

⁵ Black women being blamed for the breakdown of the ‘Black family’- emasculation of the Black man

⁶ An Ankh is an ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol that has often been used within the African diaspora to symbolise a connection with one’s African ancestry.

dominance, and streetwise independence'. (Johnson, 2016:70). In the public sphere these artists are often portrayed as 'hypersexual' women that are always ready and willing to be used for the sexual pleasure of men. The artists that have absorbed parts of this category often find success in hip-hop and are easily marketable 'because of the already existing ideologies that designated Black women as hypersexual and morally obtuse'. (Peoples, 2008:24). Though artists that fall into this trope are granted a degree of sexual freedom, pleasure and success, such is only within the strict limits of the categories that have come to be bound by. Shange and Keyes analysis of the categorisation of Black women artists in hip-hop goes beyond simply identifying how these archetypes work, they begin to provide us with a detailed examination of how Black women and their sexuality is conceptualised in the public sphere, and how this then influences how women are often squeezed into these categories. Studies within the canon of Black feminist hip-hop studies start to 'demonstrate the potential of an intersectional analysis to illuminate how issues of race and gender might work in tandem' (Kehrer, 2017:6) to make difficult the endeavours of Black women artists creating and performing Black music, perhaps more specifically hip-hop music. These studies begin to critically interrogate the ways that Black women artists are limited by the misogynoiristic practice of categorisation and presented as flat one dimensional that must fulfil very specific roles within Black music culture in order to have any form of success.

Out of the fiery counter-cultural legacy of hip-hop feminist writing emerges Daphne A. Brooks' gloriously dynamic *Liner Notes For the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black feminist sound* (2021). Brooks begins her book by venerating the musicking of the 'overlooked or underappreciated, misread and sometimes lazily mythologised, underestimated and sometimes entirely disregarded by generations of critics', 'remarkable sisters' that she argues 'have so fundamentally reshaped structures of feeling and expressive

cultural forms in the popular domain since the dawn of the twentieth century...’ (Brooks, 2021:12-13) Brooks places the artistry of Black women at the heart of this text and takes seriously the ways that their musical works have waged a revolution in which the articulation of diverse life worlds could, for oppressed and dispossessed folks ‘be sounded out in many registers and tied to the core meaning and vision of liberation itself’. (Brooks, 2021:13) I am particularly invested in Brooks’ claim that the musical practices and strategies of performances constructed by Black women ‘perpetually and inventively philosophise the prodigiousness’ of the scope of Black life and, are revolutionary because of the way said practices and strategies ‘both forecast and execute the viability and potentiality’ (Brooks, 2021: 13) of it also.

Alongside my own experience of being a Black queer woman artist, *Liner Notes* gave me both the theoretical and methodological tools with which I could think and write in intimate and nuanced ways about the uniquely transformative and disruptive aesthetics and musicking strategies of Black queer woman artists that have developed their artistry in often limiting and cumbersome socio-cultural spaces such as Black popular music. Whilst the work of Brooks and I share theoretical and methodological similarities in that we both seek to unearth and bring focus to the musicking of Black women, where my project differs is in my attempts to decenter the US as the most important site of Black musical analysis, decenter sexual and gender normativity and critically engage queerness as a lens with which scholars can examine Black popular music.

2.2.2. Critiquing hip -hop Feminism

In a similar vein to Brook’s attempts to ‘wrestle with some of the blind spots and missed opportunities in the oeuvres of some of my [her] fellow critics’ (Brooks, 2021:19), here I

discuss some of the silences, weak points and underlaps that I have noticed in the works of Black hip-hop feminist scholars.

Destabilising ‘woman’

More generally, hip-hop feminism has shied away from engaging with the category of ‘woman’ beyond monolithic, stable and abiding terms. There is a vast amount of multi-and interdisciplinary scholarship that ‘grapples with desires, practices and identities that resist and defy the dualities of social categories and unsettle the epistemological and methodological assumptions’ (Browne and Nash, 2010:5) that underpin the work of hip-hop feminists and others that have written works concerned with gender and sexualities - that there is ‘man’, or ‘woman’ to be studied as the object of research. (Browne and Nash, 2010: 5) Judith Butler (2004) (2006) and Oyeronke Oyewumi (2002) are two of the scholars that have put together perhaps the most prolific critiques of the use of ‘woman’ as a stable signifier and social category. Butler amongst many others contends that gender is socially and culturally constructed. Butler and Oyewumi maintain that the category of *woman* fails to be far-reaching because it is assumed to be universal and existing cross-culturally, and ultimately conceptualised without examining the fact that ‘gender is not always constituted coherently in different historical contexts’ (Butler, 1990:4), and it ‘intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities’.(Oyewumi, 2002) Butler and Marzia Mauriello (2017) engage in criticism regarding the binary system of sex and gender that has come to form the category of *woman* in the Western mindset. Mauriello writes that ‘the idea of an individual’s gender being inextricably tied to the body is the effect of how the modern world has learnt to look at the body as the core of a person, representing once and for all the identity of an individual.’ (Mauriello, 2017:55) Through the gendering of the biological body, one doesn’t only receive

an assigned gender, you also receive a particular sexuality. Butler continuously questions the logic that provides the foundation for the binary system of sex and gender by maintaining that the category of gender is socially and culturally formed, they describe gender as a 'kind of doing, an incessant activity performed...a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint'. (Butler, 2004:1) However, some scholars are not enamoured with or invested in queer theory's 'destructive tendencies', and numerous critiques of it have emerged out of scholarly and non-scholarly quarters. Groups involved in forms of identity politics such as second-wave women's or gay and lesbian movements have argued that in denying the stability of the subject, gender theorists such as Butler undermine and undercut the grounds on which many forms of political activism are built upon as they have essentially denied the existence of a viable political subject (Hartsock, 1990, Richardson et al. 2006, as seen in Browne and Nash, 2010:6). Furthermore, Browne and Nash argue that 'while identities may be unstable and shifting over the course of a lifetime, great comfort is found in these identities given they serve a central organising stability in many lives.' (Browne and Nash 2010:6) Considering these debates, within my research I view the category of *woman* as unstable and shifting with no pre-given meaning behind it. Additionally, I view gender as being as a result of performative acts conducted by the individual in specific discursive contexts. This work does not proceed from a binary understanding of gender, it instead flows from recognizing the multiplicity involving the gender identification process.

The framing of gender being a result of performative acts is integral to this research. The work of Butler has been essential in my understanding of gender as performance. Butler (1991) argues that 'gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation'. (p 21) Butler positions the act of gender as the thing that produce its meaning.

Like Oyewumi, Butler and Mauriello maintain, gender is not a stable social coordinate, but an ‘effect’ that ‘we have mistaken as a product of sex’. (Donnelly, 2017: 15).

Although hip-hop feminist scholars have made attempts to examine how gender becomes racialized, they have yet to extend their scholarly hands to examining how sexuality also becomes racialized within the context of Black popular music and culture. Thus, the work of hip-hop feminists has tended to adopt heteropatriarchal and heteronormative lenses that have rendered the life and works of Black queer woman artists as invisible. Kehrer notes that ‘the literature that elucidates the connections between these identities typically emphasises the nuances of (implicitly) heterosexual female identity, disregarding the possibility of non-heterosexual, queer identities that are a crucial part of the matrix of identity politics.’ (Kehrer, 2017:6). Where Shange, Keyes and other Black feminist writing regarding the positionality of Black women artists within Black popular music has weak points is in their lack of critical discussion around how the categories not only force Black women artists ‘in’ but also forces them ‘out’. The scholarship does not engage with what happens when Black women artists ‘don’t conform to the normative roles assigned to women within hip-hop’ (Neal, 2004:24) because of their subjectivities. What is needed within Black popular music scholarship is a critical analysis of the nuances of the positionality of non-heterosexual Black women within Black popular music and the ways that Black queer women work within and against the dominant order through their music and performances. Since Black queer women artists lack definitive social power to participate in oppression regarding race, gender and sexuality, who better to speak truth to corrosive forces within Black popular music than Black queer women artists?

What happens when Black women artists reject archetypal classification in Black music and present a challenge to the dominant notions of Black women within Black popular music and beyond it?

The work of hip-hop feminists is often limited by its failure to look beyond the scope of cisheterosexual normativity and critically engage with how a wider range of Black women artists are speaking back to issues regarding race, place, gender, and sexuality. What can Black queer women artists tell us about how race, gender and sexuality taken together, function within Black Popular music and beyond it that is not explored within the works of their cisheterosexual counterparts? How is music being used as a repositioning tool for those that do not fit into the binaries set within and beyond Black popular music?

I view Black queer women artists as integral and resistant voices in Black popular music that importantly sustain an ongoing conversation with their audiences (Clay, 2008) and others about sexuality, queer politics, racial politics, gender politics and Black cultural politics in a manner that no other figures do. Above that, since Black queer women are not positioned within of one of the groups that historically wield a magnitude of corrosive social power within Black popular music, they are able to articulate a path to freedom that allows them to embrace the intersecting characters of their identity in ways that affirm their sense of self with low risk of harming others. (Davidson, 2017:114)

With these things in mind, I believe that at present there is an urgent need to decenter the normative figures in Black popular music and scholarship and centre those that complicate our ideas about race, gender and sexuality within this musical category. In centering Black queer women artists, we can begin to offer alternative modes of thinking about the way that marginalised subjectivities navigate Black popular music as a socio-cultural space.

Texts such as Eileen M. Hayes and Linda F. Williams' *Black Women And Music: More Than The Blues* (2007), Andreana Clay's *Like an Old Soul Record* (2008) and Angela Davis' *Black Feminism and Blues Legacies* (1999) are amongst some of the most significant scholarly attempts to decenter. Brooks asks us as scholars to be ready and 'willing to shake up the standard perceptions of who makes culture and who gets to think and write about it'. If we are willing to cross the putative racial, gender, sexuality, and locational boundaries that have historically divided critics and artists, we might yet see the myriad ways that Black queer women artists have 'laboured in through sonic culture'. (Brooks, 2021:16)

In her analysis of Black queer woman artists and their works, Davis posits that themes that define the content of the works of queer artists such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey point the way toward the consideration of the historical politics of Black female sexuality (Davis, 1999: xvii). Through the exploration of the musical works of Black queer women artists such as Me'Shell Ndegeocello and genre-defining blues artist Bessie Smith, these scholars argue that there is a social and political ideology operational within their music and performances. The theorising of Davis and Clay allows us to see how the work of some Black queer woman artists is emblematic of Black feminist and queer of colour understandings of race, gender and sexuality whilst the artists also complicate those same discourses. Moreover, Brooks, Davis, Clay, Hayes and Williams importantly acknowledge that 'there is great significance and heuristic value in the ways that these women's lives, lyrics and performances disrupted social norms.' (Purnell, 2001:262) Through these works we can see that there is increasing value in investigating more than the mundane and usual and looking towards the musical expressions of Black queer woman artists for the unique opportunity to enhance our understandings of how complex and interlocking identities within one individual are sounded out and negotiated through music. Such writing is important to this thesis as it lays the foundations for a significant inquiry into how the music and performances of Black queer

woman artists give critical insight into the politics of race, gender and sexuality, but also how such can be useful in dissecting broader issues and contexts. Importantly, the Black feminist and queer of colour critiques that flow through these works chart new theoretical directions for my work and Black popular music scholarship more broadly.

Whilst issues of gender and sexuality in hip-hop are seemingly the most pervasive within Black popular music as a whole, issues surrounding gender and sexuality also stand as a site of contention within R&B. I believe that R&B stands as fresher terrain with which I can use to explore how the musicking of Black queer women artists illuminates the politics of race, gender and sexuality within Black popular music and culture. I find R&B music particularly interesting as a site of study partly because the parameters drawn around the genres are not as clear as those that have been drawn around hip-hop. Whilst it is abundantly clear that the US has hegemonic control over these forms of R&B, my thinking around the parameters of R&B music is partially due to the genre being not as firmly situated within one specific geographic location as other forms of Black popular music. Going further, I argue that the parameters around R&B music aren't as strict because unlike hip-hop, the genre is not continuously framed through notions of 'essential Blackness' (Harrison, 2008:1784) that allude to a 'real Black experience' that as we know, usually excludes non-male Black cis-heterosexual subjectivities. Moreover hip-hop's close relation to place, more specifically 'hoods and urban areas such as Brooklyn and South-Central LA, also reproduce and reify its rigid boundaries which then reproduce spatial conflict. An example of how such spatial conflict plays out is the East Coast/West Coast beef that has long been a theme within hip-hop culture, with some critics implying that tussle for power between the two coasts led to the murders of popular rappers Tupac Shakur and Biggie.

The closer that the music produced is to its ‘cultural origins’ the more it is ‘identified as ‘authentic’ and positively evaluated for that reason, while subsequent hemispheric or global manifestations of the same cultural forms are dismissed as inauthentic and therefore lacking in cultural or aesthetic value precisely because of their distance (supposed or actual) from a readily identifiable point of origin’. (Gilroy, 1991:122)

2.3. Nu Directions Part II

What we see in most of the leading scholarship on Black popular music is that there is a tendency for Black music scholars to fall into several problematic, normative and ultimately limiting patterns of thought and analysis. Scholars either have an overwhelming focus on hip-hop as a singular musical space in which most of the significant efforts to analyse the structures within Black popular music flow from and/or theorise the relationship that Black woman artists have with the *shape*, *textures* and *boundaries* very flatly in a manner that does not truly represent the multiplicity of the experiences and subjectivities that Black women have within these structures. Furthermore, scholars have not made significant attempts to provide a contextual synthesis of how race, gender AND sexuality affect both the ways that Black women in their variety create and perform within these structures but also how their work is received in the public sphere. In short, a more intersectional approach within the scholarship on Black popular music is overdue.

I argue that more critical consideration should be given to the ways in which race, gender and sexuality working as interlocking forms of oppression interact with the *shape*, *textures* and *boundaries* of Black popular music. Moreover, most of the analysis focuses on how the oppressive and limiting structures affect Black women artist’s without also focusing on how

these artists are ‘turning back and responding’. The scholars that I have discussed have rarely even attempted to incorporate these discussions alongside meaningful musical analysis.

What is clear is that Black music research has been a mostly conservative enterprise that has heavily relied constantly drawing ‘any ‘radical profile’ from the hip-hop feminist project and from the status of Blackness in American society at large, not from dramatic shifts in theoretical or methodological intervention’. (Ramsey, 2004:288). More often than not, Black popular music scholarship’s lack of ‘radical profile’ reflects how scholars writing about Black popular music have leaned towards providing a ‘convenient shelter, a vagary from the struggles of everyday existence’ (Ramsey, 2004:285) beyond Black cis-heterosexual existence. Thus, this work is a Black queer insurgency into the hetero-centric orthodoxy and canon of Black popular music studies. By centering Black queer woman artists and their works not only can we invite new questions about forms Black popular music, but we can also begin to move beyond the single and double identity politics that has plagued Black popular music scholarship.

To resist falling into the same problematic ways of thinking and theorising, I employ ethnomusicological theory, Queer theory and Black feminist theory as frameworks to underpin my examination of the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music and the musicking of Black queer women artists within this specific context.

2.3.1. Black Feminist Theory - A Critical Starting Point

I employ Black queer feminist theory to think through the ways that Black queer women have a unique socio-historical experience from all others within and beyond the sphere of Black popular music; and these experiences shape the way that they move (Davidson, 2019: 114) and create throughout the world. Furthermore, Black feminist theory allows me to reveal

ways of knowing that allowed me as a part of a subordinate group to define my own reality and the reality of so many others that share my positionality.

Intersectionality & The Matrix of Domination

First appearing in her 1989 article ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics’, Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality is a critical guide for my analysis of the positionality and experiences of Black queer woman artists and the *shape, texture, and boundaries* of Black popular music. The introduction of the theory of intersectionality into academic discourse by Crenshaw, ‘motivated certain epistemic transformations’ (Ferguson, 2007: 111) within and around Black feminist theory and Black queer feminist theory.

Intersectionality also known as *Intersectionality theory*, maintains that at an individual level and a collective level, ‘experiences are influenced by social locations: intersections of race and gender, of heterosexism, transphobia, xenophobia, ableism, all of these social dynamics come together’ and create unique challenges for marginalised people.’ (Crenshaw, 2016 as seen in Okundaye, 2018). I extend Crenshaw’s theory to include the social location of sexuality as well, more specifically I point to articulations of queer identity. I want to note here that the interaction between these intersections happens within a context of intricate and intermeshing structures and systems of power that constantly assume new types of imbrications, thus, Ferguson presents intersectionality as an ‘ongoing mode of interrogation’. (2007: 109)

Through its integration into Black queer studies, ‘intersectionality as a conceptual framework provides the foundation to a more integrated queer of colour theoretical framework in which one has to understand the significance of one’s identity as they work together as interlocking

systems.’ (Howard, 2014:3) ‘The theory of intersectionality/ taking an intersectional approach allows us to begin to understand the intersection between historically oppressed identities all lodged into one cultural body, such as triple jeopardy minorities- the Black queer woman.’ (Howard, 2014:1) Furthermore, without the acknowledgement that race, gender, ability, sexuality and class work together and yield unique perspectives and social positions, researchers and the works that they produce will continue to examine these identities in isolation. In examining identities purely in isolation from each other, scholars will continue to produce scholarship that further legitimises the single and double identity politics that has limited the visibility of Black queer women within and beyond scholarly domains and has limited the scope of scholarship concerning Black popular music.

There are several scholars that make attempts to complicate Intersectionality as an ‘intellectual rubric and tool for political intervention’. (Puar, 2013:372) Amongst these scholars are Anna Carastathis (2018) and Jasbir Puar (2013) In their critiques, both Puar and Carastathis argue that the theory of Intersectionality ‘inadvertently reproduces the very assumptions that it claims to be redressing’. (Carastathis, 2018:24). Carastathis takes major issue with the tendency of proponents of intersectionality to situate the identity of what they describe as the ‘hyper-oppressed subject’ at ‘the *intersection- the crossroads-* of race and gender oppressions’, Carastathis argues that ‘ the claim that the identity of Black women is produced by the intersection of gender and race is viable only if we think ‘Black’ without thinking ‘woman’, and if we can think ‘woman’ without thinking ‘Black’...Not only does the model [the theory of intersectionality] fall prey to widespread practice of aligning groups with particularity, or ‘visibility’, and others with universality, or ‘invisibility’; upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the intersectional model of identity conjures the very ontology that its exponents set out to undermine.’ (Carastathis, 2018:27)

The theory of intersectionality concurrently helps us to make sense of the experiences of Black queer woman artists creating and performing music within the context of Black popular music and allows us to have a nuanced understanding of the intricate ‘systems that give meaning to the categories of race, gender, class, sexual identity, among others’.

(Smooth, 2013:11) In other words, within the realm of Black popular music, intersectionality makes visible the complex workings within them that concretise the *shapes, texture* and *boundaries*, and pose a threat to the Black queer woman artists, whilst also providing a means to theorise their experiences at both a collective and an individual level.

I want to note here that within this research project, intersectionality is only a critical starting point. I move deeper within the theory of intersectional and heavily utilise one of its primary sub theories which is the matrix of domination. Hamilton et al (2019) notes that ‘ a primary premise of intersectional scholarship is that systems of power are not discrete or additive.’(Collins 1990, 2004; Combahee River Collective 1977, 1983, Crenshaw 1991; Glenn 2000; Moraga and Anzaldua 1983 as seen in Hamilton, 2019:318) Collins and Blige (2016) argue that ‘social inequality, people’s lives and the organisation of power in a given society’ should be understood as being shaped not by a single social coordinate or what they describe as a ‘single axis of social division’, rather these things are shaped by ‘*many axes that work together and influence each other*’. (2016:2) Thus, I take race, gender and sexuality as axes that are always being constructed within and around each other.

2.3.2. Destabilising Queer

As this thesis is shaped by the terms *queer*, *queering* and *queerness*, it is critical for me stage an examination of the three terms and how they are deployed in my work. The term *queer* as a ‘scholarly conceptual or theoretical approach, political perspective and a form of self-identification’ (Browne and Nash, 2010:3) has been subject to many hearty debates regarding its use, its scope, what it represents and the dominance of Anglo-US theorising in defining the term. I note here that when theorising about *queer*, *queering* and *queerness* within the context of this research, I run the risk of reproducing homonormative categories that reify heteronormative institutions and systems, with such categories typically overwhelmingly speaking to privileged white gay experiences (Puar, 2002, as seen in Muñoz, 2010: 57) *Queerness* is more often than not theorised and understood through ‘lenses that are largely academic, western, white and privileged’. (Muñoz, 2010:57) Scholar Lisa Duggan argues that the notion of ‘homonormativity’ emerges out of the developments in what can be described as ‘sexual citizenship in the West, citizenship that only extends to *certain* citizens. Such developments have only served to cement exclusion, marginalisation and the reification of the ‘boundaries of (un) acceptability between the ‘dangerous queer’ and the ‘good homosexual’. (Duggan, 2002, as seen in Taylor, 2017:77) Thus, within this thesis, my use of *queer* and *queerness* is without the privileging of any particular forms of queer expression and is positioned away from idealised versions of queer lifeworlds and imaginaries that emerge out what Taylor aptly describes as ‘new individualistic and bourgeoisie neoliberal sexual politics’.(Taylor, 2012:37)

In thinking about and constructing my definition of *queer/queerness*, I place particular emphasis on understanding the term as something that is locationally contingent. I think that it is quite difficult to produce a standing definition of *queer and queerness* that is intelligible and meaningful in every social, cultural and historical context. In this thesis I want to avoid the flattening of localised identities, languages and traditions that relate to queerness. I also

want to avoid uncritically applying western research indicators and assumptions to contexts that lay beyond the western world, contexts that I deeply engaged with throughout this work. An array of African scholars have criticised *queer* as a neo-imperial concept that often hides the diversities between groups of people (see Reddy et al 2018). However, some queer scholars that have written extensively about queerness beyond the West emphasise presenting *queer* as an unstable positionality that ‘manifests in different ways and may be done and/ or read differently according to an almost endless combination of feelings, experiences, contexts and contestations’. (Taylor, 2012: 27) Thus, I posit and as my fieldwork interviews and other analysis will show, there is no ‘true’ and stable meaning of *queer* and therefore, when I refer to Black queer women in a collective sense I am not necessarily naming and describing a cohesive group of folks. As Taylor maintains, ‘the usefulness of *queer* is that it marks a flexible space of expression and signification, and those that occupy this space will not necessarily understand themselves to be queer in the same way that others who also occupy this space.’ (Taylor, 2012:35) Like Barnard (1999) I do not search for an absolute definition of *queer* and *queerness*, a neatly tied box and/ or an essentialist notion. Instead, I amongst other scholars are invested in the ‘tensions’ that attempting to define the terms brings to life. Scholars such as Bernard and Chang-Ross place value on *queerness*’ lack of form as it importantly lends itself to an ‘interdisciplinary, multidirectional space of social activism and queering’. (Chang-Ross, 2010: 111)

Whilst some scholars argue that attempting to define *queer* is as a ‘decidedly un-queer thing to do’ (Sullivan, 2003: 43), I still attempt to define what *queer* is, in relation to my research, my subjectivity and the Black queer women that I engaged with throughout this work. In formulating my own definition of *queer*, I draw from a rich vein of scholars theorising around *queer* and *queerness* such as Sedgwick (1994), de Lauretis (1991), Anzaldúa (2012), Barnard (1999) Browne and Nash (2010), Jones & Adams (2010), Johnson (2003) (2001),

Muñoz (2009) Henderson & Johnson (2005) and Zethu Matebeni and Vasu Reddy (2018). I view *queer* as something that is not ‘limited to thinking about gendered and sexual subjectivities, rather it is a philosophical commitment to contesting the logics of normativity’ (Browne and Nash, 2010:29) and an ‘identity category that avoids the medical baggage of *homosexual*, disrupts the masculine bias and domination of *gay*, and avoids the ‘ideological liabilities of the ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ binary’. (Jones and Adams, 2017: 204) Furthermore, in avoiding formulating an essentialist definition, I embrace *queer* as a term that represents ‘the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality, aren’t made to signify monolithically (Sedgwick, 1994:7) but fluidly. My racial identity/experience also informs my understanding of queerness. Whilst none of my research participants defined queerness in exactly the same ways, they all also pointed to their racial identity as critically informing both their definitions of *queer* and how they experienced queerness. Some of my participants even argued that Black queer folks are queer in a different kind of way to white people who define themselves as such.

I follow Taylor in positioning *queer* as a ‘politicised rubric that asserts gender and sexual multiplicity and fluidity and is then available to signify a range of non-normative gender and sexuality subjectivities, practices and relationships that defy moral codes and normalising regimes imposed by dominant society’. (Taylor, 2012:36). When used and positioned in these critical ways, *queer* challenges and destabilises the ‘heteronormativity that informs our ways of seeing and systematically categoriing of life processes’. (Rodriguez, 2003 as seen in Muñoz, 2017:57) I continuously draw from the claim and argue that *queer* subject positions challenge and destabilise the heteronormativity that informs and legitimises the *shape, texture and boundaries* of Black popular music.

Muñoz's reading of queerness in *Cruising Utopia* (2009) has also been incredibly integral to my own conceptualisation of queerness. More than just being an identity category:

'Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present...we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing...Queerness is also performative because it is simply not a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of the here and now and an insistence on the potentiality or concrete possibility of another world.' (Muñoz, 2009:1)

My own queerness is a call to action to take up space in the 'social that has been colonised by the logics of white normativity and heteronormativity'. (Muñoz, 1999: xii) Ultimately, my queerness is an emancipatory praxis. For Muñoz and me, queerness is not only a being but it also a kind of 'doing'. What you will see in the last chapter of this thesis is how some Black queer artists have not only understood Muñoz's thinking around queerness but have also taken it up a kind of praxis.

Queering in this thesis is deployed as a term that not only works to challenge the norms and assumptions related to gender, sexuality and identity, it also functions to disrupt and interrupt the silences within Black music scholarship that have rendered the contributions of Black queer artists as invisible. In bringing the experiences and musicking of Black queer women artists into the realm of Black popular music scholarship, *queering* is also about the reclamation of queer music history. Furthermore, *queering* is also deployed as an alternative mode for examining music and musicking. Queering musicking is to broaden and reimagine

the term beyond traditional or mainstream perspectives and ultimately conceptualise it as an activity that is bound up with ideology regarding gender and sexuality. Ultimately, queering is a ‘framework, and a toolkit’ that I use to ‘interrogate, examine, and unpack regimes of the normal’. (Halperin, 1995 as seen in Yep, 2003: 45)

2.3.3. The Music-Society Nexus

This thesis does not try to prove or establish whether or not music has inherent meanings, rather I focus my attention on how music is shaped by the social world and how genres within Black popular music in particular ‘take shape; how people shape, follow, and abandon the musical fashions they have created; how people construct a sense of identity, individual and collective, around music...how musical performances unfold as symbolic rituals...’ (Kotarba and Vannini, 2008:3) The *music-society* nexus developed by various theorists including Tia DeNora (2000) and Susan McClary, is a theory that is critical to this research. The music-society nexus allows me to demonstrate how musical and social matters such as race, gender and sexuality can be ‘understood to be reflexively linked and coproduced’. (DeNora, 2000:4) Central to this research is the idea that ‘music shapes and takes shape in relation to the social settings where it is produced, distributed and consumed...through the confluence of performance and reception, musicking makes and partakes of values, ideas and tacit or practical notions about the social whole, agency and social relations; in this respect, music is an active ingredient of social life.’ (DeNora, 2000:19) In viewing music and musicking in this way, I position Black popular music as sites that are continuously bound up with socio-cultural practices and structures. As the popular culture scholar Lawrence Grossberg maintains, ‘popular music cannot be studied in isolation, either from other forms and practices of popular culture or from the structures and practices of everyday life.’

(Grossberg, 2002:27) With a particular focus on how genres take shape, how textures are created and how and why boundaries within genres of music have been drawn, within my research, the *music-society* nexus delineates a homology, an irrefutable relationship between musical matters and social matters. I use the music- society to not only demonstrate how normativity and flat and limited conceptualisation of Blackness have seeped into the core of Black popular music but also show how such is implicated in musicking.

Analysis drawn from purely semiotic readings of musical materials follows that music is to be understood as a form of text that can only be read unambiguously. I believe that most traditional approaches to musical analysis are limited because they rarely leave room for the listener's interpretation of the music, nor do they allow for an examination of its reception. Furthermore, because I would describe this thesis as ethnomusicologically minded, I seek to 'explain the relationship between the text and the context, between the structural and the referential, between the technical and the human dimension of the musical experience'.

(Ramsey Jr. 2003:18) In this project, I want to avoid where other sociologically minded examinations of music have faltered in that there is an ardent focus on how the creation, performance and reception of music is shaped by different social coordinates without also examining the workings of specific properties of the music and how they affect these things. I follow DeNora in that I place value on synthesising ethnomusicological and sociological perspectives throughout the analysis that flows through this project. Through this synthesis, I can properly consider the sociality, reception and use of the music of Black queer woman artists whilst simultaneously deconstructing how their music's specific properties are also involved in these processes.

2.3.4. Disidentification and Queer World-Making

Jose Estaban Muñoz's theory of disidentification has been crucial in helping me to deconstruct the ways that the musical works and performances of Black Queer woman artists can be done despite the 'conditions of (im)possibility' (Muñoz, 1999:6) that the limiting *shape, textures and boundaries generate*. Furthermore, disidentification accounts for one of the major ways that Black queer woman artists deal with the *shapes, textures and boundaries*.

Muñoz's theory of disidentification critically deconstructs and engages with the 'survival strategies that minority subjects practice to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship'. (Muñoz, 1999:4) In the context of my research the minority subjects are Black queer woman artists and the phobic majoritarian public sphere is again embodied by and articulated through the *shape, textures and boundaries*. Disidentification involves a process of fashioning a muddling and reconstruction of encoded messages and ideologies of cultural and social texts and conventions. Disidentification works to both unearth the encoded message's 'universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuit its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications'. (Muñoz, 1994: 4) Thus, disidentification is more than a survival strategy and goes a step further than just exposing the ideology and politics of the majoritarian public sphere; it uses the ideologies as raw material to represent a 'disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture'. (Muñoz, 1999, 31) Disidentification is utilised to transgress boundaries, transform logics from within and bring about transformative possibilities.

Also central to this thesis is the argument that one of the ways that Black queer women artists respond to and deal with the *shape, textures* and *boundaries* is by centering their musicking around the queer praxis of queer world-making. Queer world-making is a form of queer praxis that involves the process of envisioning and creating alternative, inclusive, and liberating worlds that challenge the norms, structures, and power dynamics of the existing social order. It is an imaginative and transformative practice of *queering* and activism. Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) provides a critical framework with which we can view the world-bending/ building orientations of the disidentifactory musicking of Black queer woman artists. In *Cruising Utopia* Muñoz maintains that 'often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic'. I extend Muñoz's 'realm' to include *fantasy* alongside aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, 'frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-drawing futurity'. (2009:1) I include fantasy because it is 'part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility'. (Butler, 2004: 28) I follow Butler in maintaining that the struggle for queer folks to survive 'is not really separable from the cultural life of fantasy...The critical promise of fantasy, where and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real...' (Butler, 2004:28)

For Muñoz, the utopian ideal of a world free from oppression and inequality provides a wealth of inspiration for queer activism and resistance. I want to note here that I draw my thinking around utopian ideals from the work of Claire P. Curtis. In 'Rehabilitating Utopia: Feminist Science Fiction and Finding the Ideal' (2005). Curtis maintains that 'Utopia is thus not an attempt to bring about heaven on earth. For the true utopian sees her project as a critical reflection on the flaws of her society and also a prescriptive outline for the possibility

of a better future.’ (p.148) Curtis’ conceptualisation can be described as a kind of ‘sceptical utopia’. I believe that it is a sceptical utopia that the musicking of Black queer woman artists is engaged with and sees as crucial to their contests of Black popular music and beyond it.

I believe that the limitations of the analysis that we can see in Black popular music scholarship stem from the failure to incorporate multivocal and interdisciplinary thinking. In this thesis, I focus on creating a more intimate and dialogical relationship with scholarship on Black Popular Music, scholarship on gender and sexuality and queer of colour scholarship more broadly. In taking an increased interdisciplinary approach regarding the analysis of musicking and artist (and the analysis of other things that relate to Black popular music), the intervention that this thesis makes is a more critical analysis of how race, gender and sexuality are positioned as interrelated entities are bound up with musical work and that the aforementioned social coordinates are constantly being engaged within the contexts that that work is placed in.

The methodological intervention that I hope to make through this research comes in the form of introducing queer and feminist methodologies into the realm of Black popular music scholarship as a means of transgressing its boundaries and widening its scope. Furthermore, in order to produce more in-depth knowledge, I also hope to bridge the gap between sound focus studies and studies that heavily rely on Black feminist theory, critical race theory and Queer of Colour theory and lack adept musical description. I believe that such a project is integral in reconceptualising and reimagining the current socio-cultural landscape of Black popular music and in bringing a much-needed paradigmatic shift in Black popular music scholarship.

2.3.5. Social Shaping and Technology

Alongside my use of theory that positions the social as being linked to music, its creation, performance and reception, this project is also guided by theory that makes claims about the relationship that the socio-cultural has with technology. As my research is partially oriented towards both unearthing the ways that technology has shaped Black popular music and culture, and how important technology and online spaces are to the musicking of Black queer women artists, I must highlight the theory that underpins my analysis of these relationships and forms a part of the theoretical framework for this project. This project is very much led by the position that social shaping theorists such as Lister et al. (2008), Raymond Williams (1974) and Paschal Preston (2001) take up concerning technology and the role it plays in society. While technological determinist approaches position technology as an ‘independent, seemingly autonomous force that drives change in society’ social shaping theorists maintain that ‘it is impossible to separate technology from the social environment within which it emerges, and that reification of the technological is flawed.’ (Rogers, 2013:19) Social shaping theories work to present a serious challenge to technological determinist positions regarding the nature and trajectory of technological change and its impacts and influences on the social world. The theorising of Lister et al. (2008) regarding technology places particular emphasis on ‘the role of sociocultural conditions in the shaping of technologies’. (Rogers, 2013:20) Lister et al. position social shaping theory/approaches as:

‘Implicitly arguing that technology on its own is incapable of producing change, being that whatever is going on around us in terms of rapid technological change, there are rational and

manipulative interests at work that we should primarily direct our attention’. (Lister et al., 2008: 74 as seen in Rogers, 2013:20)

Through the writing of Lister et al. (2008), we come to an understanding that social shaping theorists are trying to refute and undermine the primacy of technologies in society. Instead, they bring forward an approach that is based on the ‘society shaping the outcome of technologies to its own needs, or perhaps more appropriately, technological innovations and evolutions as struggles between different groups in society, many of which are removed from any predominantly technological logic or trajectory’. (Rogers, 2013: 20) The writing of one of the leading social theorists Raymond Williams in *Communications As Cultural Science* (1974) is invested in highlighting the part that ‘real decision-making groups’ in society play in shaping how technologies have been utilised in the social world. Brian Winston (1998) builds upon the theoretical foundations of Williams and maintains that there is a ‘range of historical continuities that underlie seemingly radical technological innovation’. (Winston,1998:11) Furthermore, Winston ‘illustrates how new technologies are suppressed by “general social constraints “that coalesce to limit the potential of the device to radically disrupt pre-existing social formations’. (Winston,1998:11 as seen in Rogers, 2013: 20). Whilst some social shaping theorists often avoid positioning any one specific social constraint as limiting the potentiality of technology, some scholars have begun to grapple with how social factors such as race have a significant impact on how technology is being deployed. In *Race After Technology* (2019) sociologist Ruha Benjamin maintains that there exists a ‘New Jim Code’ which are racial biases and inequalities that have been embedded in technological systems and designs. Benjamin ‘integrates the tools of science and technology studies and critical race studies to examine the coded inequity and our contemporary racial landscape’. She argues that ‘social norms, ideologies, and practices are a constitutive part of technical design.’(2019:37-42) Benjamin importantly points out that when thinking about technology

and race, we as scholars must move away from solely focusing on the ‘digital divide’, on ‘unequal access to computers and the internet that falls along predictable racial, class, and gender lines’ because it often ‘reproduces culturally essentialist understandings of inequality’. (2019:42) Instead, Benjamin argues that we should employ the approaches of Race critical code studies and look at ‘how race and racism impact who has access to new devices, as well as how technologies are produced in the first place’. (2019:44) Race critical code theorists such as Benjamin, Safiya Noble (2018) and Simone Browne (2015) all argue that anti-Black racism is ‘not only a symptom or outcome, but a precondition for the fabrication of technologies’. (2019:48-49) I do not shy away from arguing that a combination of race/place/gender/sexuality/class shape the technologies that are utilised specifically with the realm of musicking. Like Rogers, Benjamin, Noble and Browne, I hold firmly onto the belief that we as scholars must move beyond technology-centred analysis, the ‘digital divide’ and technological determinist approaches to ‘address the empirical interplay of key socio-economic interests and powers that are framing the practical application and/or appropriation of the internet in the context of the music industry’. (Rogers, 2013:21)

Thus, I use race critical code theory and social shaping approaches as the theoretical basis for my chapter that focuses on the relationship that the internet and technology had/has with Black popular music and culture and the role it also plays in the musicking of Black queer women artists. Using such theorising I argue that although the internet and technological advancements present liberatory opportunities for artists that are of marginalised positionalities, these opportunities are to an extent mediated and mitigated by specific social constraints.

3. Methodology: ‘Reflections, A Retrospective’

Because my research is centered around examining the socio-cultural aspects of Black Popular Music and the **experiences** of Black queer woman artists, qualitative research methods were utilized, more specifically, ethnographic research methods were utilized. I would specifically describe my ethnography as multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) because it involved me engaging with my participants and ‘things’ across multiple sites in the Black Atlantic, Nigeria, the US and the UK. Creating a multi-sited ethnography allowed me to ‘move out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research design to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space’. (Marcus, 1995:96) Marcus maintains that ‘multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logical of association or connection amongst sites that in fact defines that argument of the

ethnography.’ (Marcus, 1995:105) I wanted to ensure that I built a holistic understanding of how queerness, gender, Black ness and musicking are imbricated across different geographical contexts. I also wanted to be able to compare and contrast the ways that those four things are imbricated across different contexts.

Within my ethnography was also what I would describe as a digital ethnography.

Throughout the research process it was clear that for an ethnographer like myself that exists in contemporary digital society (Lupton 2014) and who is partially aiming to write about the role of the digital and its relationship with various things, ‘to *follow things* from site to site is necessary to confront online environments, which tend to be ubiquitous and places where social actors spend a significant part of their everyday lives.’ (Caliandro, 2017:5, Beneito-Montagut 2011; Hine 2008) Beginning in early 2020, the global pandemic Covid-19 would cast a huge shadow of doubt over my plans to travel to the multiple fieldwork sites that I had chosen. Unable to travel because of the various restrictions put in place, the digital/ virtual emerged as a highly viable solution to the limitations and complexities that had been presented by the deadly virus.

The digital and the virtual world played a significant role not just in how I went about gathering ‘data’ but as I will illustrate in later parts of this research, also forms parts of the very foundations of my work. The presence of the pandemic brought about the methodological necessity for me to adapt the traditional ethnographic techniques to the digital domain, somewhat *virtualizing them* by hosting my interviews with my participants over zoom and Skype and watching their live performances via live streams on YouTube and Instagram. Digital ethnography was integral in shaping my understanding of my participants and important in helping to develop my own understanding of how they use digital media and

the virtual environments to disrupt and destabilize, organize, and create communities that often transcend geographical locations.

Mainly employed by media studies researchers, digital ethnography is defined as ‘any ethnography in which data-gathering methods are mediated by computer-mediated communication or digital technologies’. (Angelfish Fieldwork, 2019) In conducting digital ethnography, I relied heavily on digitally ‘travelling through’ various online platforms/ social media environments and using platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, skype and Zoom in order to seek out and connect with participants. Despite the presence of Covid-19, I had the experience of being in the *field* through multiple mediations.

I was particularly enamored by Twitter, TikTok and Instagram because of their fluidity, ease of use, large user base and their dispersed respective sociocultural contexts.

Pink et al maintain that ‘as new technologies offer new ways of engaging with emergent research environments’(2015:2), my actual practices as an ethnographer change. The online/digital environment is not only vast, but it is also multifidous in nature hence my approach to conducting ethnography had to leave room to accommodate and absorbed its intricacies. It is important to note that although digital ethnography was a foundational part of my research, as we will see in the subsequent parts of this chapter, my methods were not strictly digital-centric. As Pink et al argue ‘the digital ethnography project should not be prefaced with the idea of needing to use digital methods. Rather, the use of digital methods should always be developed and designed specifically in relation to the particular research questions asked.’ (Pink et al., 2015:2). Furthermore, I kept the place of the ‘digital’ in this research mostly relational to the other significant elements and domains of this research, its sites and methods and the research questions that this thesis tackles. By keeping the place of the digital in research relational, ‘we are able to understand the digital as part of something *wider*, rather than situating it at the centre of our work’. (Pink et al., 2015:3) This enriched

the ways in which I was able to study/ examine ‘qualities/affordances’ of the digital/ internet and the way that participants used it as artists, and this helped me to produce insights into the impacts of the digital/internet on wider elements that constitute the everyday environments, experiences, activities and relationships of myself and my participants, which is wholly integral to my research.

When I first began to think about my methodological orientation, I thought about the important questions that Queer scholars Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash pose in *Queer Methods and Methodologies* (2010). Because I employ queer and Black feminist theory throughout this work, I had to consider the question of ‘if, as queer thinking argues, subjects and subjectivities are fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming, how can we gather ‘data’ from those tenuous and fleeting subjects using the standard methods of data collection such as interviews and questionnaires?’ (Browne and Nash, 2010: 1) I felt that queer theory should not only inform the theoretical framework of this research but that I should also apply it to my methodology and choice of methods.

The queering of the ethnographical process for me meant going beyond simply employing ethnographic methods to ‘research’ the Black and queer lives of my participants, it meant seriously examining the conventions of ethnographic research that I felt had often denied my participant's presence as speaking subjects through what Castell and Bryson (1998:98) describe as exclusionary disciplinary practices. I want to note here that this denial of the presence of Black queer folks as speaking subjects has been something that has continuously taken place within Black popular music scholarship, and this forms a part of the necessity of this project. It became clear that the way that ‘subjects’ and ‘subjectivities are constructed within traditional ethnographical research practices is contrary to the queer and feminist foundations that this thesis is built. I found that traditional ethnography is shaped by

conventions that are grounded in the presumption of a ‘direct knowable brute reality’ (Benko and Strohmayr, 1997) and the envisioning of the nature of the ‘subject’ of research as a unified, coherent and self-knowledgeable individual (Browne and Nash, 2010:4). Thus, I used queering as a methodological approach to counteract normative research logics that often plague ethnographic research projects like mine. Furthermore, I also employed feminist and decolonial approaches within this methodology.

My methodological orientation was informed by queer, decolonial and feminist approaches partly because they foremostly problematize knowledge orders, epistemology, and the concept of the stable subject. These approaches question the lenses through which social scientists have historically viewed research and denounce hegemonic beliefs around the observability of the subject, power dynamics within the field and whose experience counts as valid, scientific knowledge. As Postcolonial feminist scholar Leinius maintains ‘Postcolonial feminist research ethics and methodologies reveal and challenge the many ways in which academic knowledge production is shaped by unequal relations of power.’ (Leinius, 2020:71) Alongside this project’s unsettling of Black popular music scholarship through the process of queering, a decolonial and feminist approach within my methodology attempts to unsettle and reconstitute taken-for-granted assumptions, perspectives and systems of Eurocentric knowledge production in the Western academy that order the world (Southeast Network for Social Sciences, Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021:3). Anti-colonial and political ecologist Lisa Tilley argues that ‘in order to create alternative and critical forms of knowledge, methodology- the process of generating knowledge- must also be revisited from an ethical perspective.’ (Tilley, 2017, 40 as seen in Trzeciak, 2020:118) Thus, centering queer, decolonial and feminist research methods within my project provides a critical framework with which I can use to produce new, critical and transformative geopolitics of knowledge that challenge normative and Eurocentric research logics. Decolonizing research in general

means ‘centring concerns and world views of non-Western individuals, and respectfully knowing and understanding theory and research from previously ‘Other(ed)’ perspectives’.(Battise, 2000; Datta, 2018; Smith, 2012 as seen in Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021:2) Mignolo & Walsh (2018) and Santos (2015) position decoloniality as a praxis that ‘aims to open up distinct canons of knowledge with the motive of displacing Western thought as the only framework or possibility for knowledge’.(Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021:2) Thambinathan and Kinsella note that while ‘there is no standard model or practice for what decolonizing research methodology looks like, there are ongoing scholarly conversations about theoretical foundations, principal components, and practical applications’. (2021:3)

3.1. Black and Queer ‘doing’ Black and Queer Research

In any works that make claims about being steeped in critical decolonial and feminist research ethics (and being feminist research itself) ‘partiality, positionality and accountability are seen as indispensable for ensuring that research does not reinscribe inequality through the knowledge that it produces’. (Bhavnani 1994:28-29 as seen in Leinius, 2020:80) ‘The subjective experience of the researcher has to figure prominently in the research so that the role of the researcher in the collection and analysis of data as well as the partiality of all knowledge claims is made explicit.’ (Leinius, 2020:81) Furthermore, ‘feminist and critical scholars have stressed that reflexivity is a useful tool to open up research to more complex understandings of multiple voices and silences.’ (Peake and Tritz, 1999 as seen in Trzeciak, 2020: 124)

Because I am particularly invested in queer, feminist and decolonial approaches, I was compelled to think through the complex and challenging issues regarding positionality, reflexivity and the power relations taking place when conducting ethnographic research.

I want to state plainly that my position as a Black, Queer *woman* critically informed the ethnographic lens with which I used to enter the field. For many researchers like me that have pursued research on racialized, gendered, embodied, and sexualized lives ‘our fieldwork is located, if not directly in our own personal, social, and political spaces, then in spaces where we are at least potential “insiders”’. (Nash, 2010:130) – queer folk who sit comfortably as part of the crowd. Writing on Feminist methodologies and epistemologies, Andrea Doucet and Natasha Mauthner (2007) note that while the acknowledgement of social locations is integral to feminist approaches to research methodology, ‘reflexivity also means *actively reflecting on* personal, interpersonal, institutional, pragmatic, emotional, theoretical, epistemological, and ontological influences on our research and interpretive process.’ (2007: 42)

Thus, critical consideration of my own positionality was not just something that I negotiated before I went into the field and let fall to the wayside, it was something that I really engaged with throughout the various stages of my respective research process. Before embarking on my fieldwork, I recognized that my positionality and social location as a Black, queer woman born, raised and living in the West would affect the knowledge production process thus impacting the way that I conceptualised this methodology, the way that I collected my data and analyzed it, the way that this analysis is interpreted and written and even the way that I am presenting this very methodology. Moreover, before I entered the field as an ethnographer, I anticipated that my embodied situatedness in the subject positions of my participants would play an incredibly significant and noteworthy role and indeed it did.

I found that the shared/similar social and cultural coordinates of my participants and I all being Black, *woman* and queer and steeped within the music industry gave me access to my participants as an ‘insider’ – a person that already had trusted knowledge about certain ‘rules’ whether spoken or unspoken. This shared social and cultural capital was pivotal in building a

deep sense of mutual trust between my participants and I and was integral in allowing me to be able to connect to the multiple layers that our conversations often created. Even with my African American participants, it did not feel as if there was much distance between us culturally because all of us had been in some shape or form steeped in western Black queer culture, I even surprised some of them with how much I knew about US Black queer culture. I felt that in having shared social coordinates I was able to cut through and break down some of the boundaries that are often felt between a researcher and participants. I continuously placed specific emphasis on the fact that I too was a research Participant and it helped to mitigate the sometimes-awkward relationship between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’. Because of this sharedness I felt like it didn’t take long for my participants open up to me, most of them spoke incredibly freely from my first interview with them and many even showed a level of eagerness to have their second and third interviews in quick succession. Some of my participants noted that their openness came from finally being given the room to think and talk about some of the topics that were presented to them by someone who knew what it was like to have had similar experiences. Most of my participants even highlighted their eagerness to read my thesis once it had been finished. Even beyond our shared identity markers, the fact that I also had the experience of being a musician and was able to demonstrate my extensive knowledge on how Blackqueerwomens issues often permeated into the music industry was an incredibly crucial resource, especially during the interview process.

Despite the connectivity that came about because of our shared positionalities, because I was engaging with artists that live in (and are from) Nigeria, I had to work through the tensions that arise out of embarking on research in collaboration with subjects that are often ‘othered’ within the Global North and Global South dichotomy. Conducting fieldwork across international borders ‘involves being attentive to histories of colonialism, development,

globalization and local realities, to avoid exploitative research or perpetuation of relations of domination and control'. (Sultana, 2007:375)

As Leinius notes, 'the central dichotomies that hierarchically structure research practice' often remain intact even in feminist research like mine that 'strives to be emancipatory and critical'. (Leinius, 2020:75) Whilst 'proximity to the communities one researches with is a necessary part of the research process', as Leinius notes 'proximity, however, should not be equated with uncritical closeness; It involves the continuous critical reflection of the relationships that develop during research in terms of power, representation and oppression'. (Leinius 2020: 80)

I recognized that even though I shared proximity with my Nigerian participants in that I am also Nigerian, our experiences of being Nigerian and experiencing Nigerian culture would be markedly different because my experience of being Nigerian is located away from Nigeria and situated in the West and that this would most likely affect the power dynamics between us and the intimacy of the research relationship. Furthermore, having both Nigerian and British citizenship gives me the privilege to travel to and from Nigeria as I please and this put me in a position of privilege in comparison to my Nigerian collaborators who were only in possession of Nigerian passports. My dual citizenship meant that I would not have to confront some of the issues that come with being Nigerian and queer within the context of Nigeria. In recent times, resistance to the rights of LGBTQIA+ folks in Nigeria has culminated in the passing of the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) banning gay marriage, same-sex 'amorous relationships' and members of gay rights groups with penalties of up to 14 years in prison. I had to be careful not to carry out exploitative research interactions with them and not reproduce and reinforce the 'relations of domination and control' (Sultana, 2007:375) that they already experience.

I understood that sharedness would not necessarily translate into any form of intimacy and the severing of the typical 'researcher' and 'researched' divide that ethnographers often face within the field. Leinius ask us as researchers adopting feminist ethics within our research practice to critically consider how emancipatory research can be done considering such powerful divides and hierarchies that structure research practice. Furthermore, I had to give strong consideration to how I could bridge the seemingly stark differences between my Nigerian participants and I, 'renegotiate power relations, responsibilities and hierarchy within the constraints and contexts' of my research endeavor and ultimately 'produce research that is mutually defined'. (Sultana, 2007: 381) Adopting decolonial and feminist research ethics towards the production of knowledge called for me as the principal 'researcher' to do two things: challenge the historically colonial dichotomy of 'researcher' and the 'researched' and 'go beyond seeing the people being researched as mere subjects of the research, but as collaborators and co-designers of research agendas, opening up opportunities for co-producing knowledge'. (Ndege and Onyango, 2021) The work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith in *Decolonizing methodologies* (2012) and feminist decolonial scholars such as Sultana (2007) Leinius, (2020), Trzeciak (2020), Lather (1991), Stanley and Wise (1983) Datta (2018) and Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) compelled me to 'be attentive to the politics of knowledge production' (Sultana, 2007:3760) and 'embrace decolonizing approaches when working with populations oppressed by colonial legacies'. (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021:1)

Because of the precarity of queer positionalities in Nigeria and the privilege that comes with being able to be openly queer living in the UK, I had to constantly negotiate my positionality throughout my interactions with my Nigerian participants that still lived in Nigeria. Taking guidance from Ranjan Datta's (2018) work on decolonizing researcher and research and Dina Taha's *Methodology, reflexivity and decolonizing refugee research* (2018), I reframed my

positionality from ‘discoverer’ to learner. Reframing my positionality forced me to rethink some of my interview questions and orient them towards framing my participants as experts and collaborators, rather than victims or simply witnesses. During the interview process, I also made room for my participants to ask me questions throughout. The reframing of my interview questions and the room that I gave my participants to ask questions was an active attempt to not only reinforce my participant's positions as speaking subjects but also stood as an attempt to rebalance the power relations by recognizing them as knowledge holders alongside myself.

It was crucial for me to focus on collaboration and reciprocity with my research participants as a decolonizing research method from the conception of this project to the end and to ‘establish collective ownership over the entire research process, the data analysis, and its dissemination’. (Datta, 2018 as seen in Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021: 4). The decolonial feminist approaches in the works of the aforementioned scholars encouraged me to see my research participants not simply as objects of research that are providing raw data to be converted into theory by me as the researcher but to instead engage in a collaborative effort to critically reflect on our lived experiences (Leinius, 2020:74) The work of decolonial scholars asks me as a researcher to grapple with the extent to which it is ‘possible to realize research collaboratively and dialogically within the (limited) scope of a doctoral thesis which is located within the context and the logic of an academic institution in the global North?...how can a research process be shaped to study with the people and not the people?’(Trzeciak, 2020:118, Daniel Mato: 2000)

I want to point out that whilst I primarily focused on the process of collaboration between my participants and I as a means to *write with*, collaboration served as what Apostolidou and Daskalaki (2021) describe as a double purpose. The collaborative approach that I adopted was also employed as a ‘co-laboration’, which can be defined as a ‘primarily epistemic mode

that supports researchers delving into other disciplinary areas in order to gain insights and techniques they would then ‘bring back’ to their own field’. As referenced in earlier parts of this chapter, this methodology (and this project as a whole) has been critically informed by a combination of various relevant disciplines.

Collaboration regarding my ethnography more generally, was based centrally on the idea of my research being a dialogical and reciprocal process. I felt that creating a dialogical-oriented ethnography (Trzeciak, 2020) was integral for a decolonial and feminist research praxis.

Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) note that ‘to conduct collaborative research grounded in decolonial values, respect for self-determination and reciprocity calls upon the act of listening as a symbol for healing wounds...’ (2021:4) However, Cahill (2007) ‘argues that for listening to take on the power of a decolonizing methodological weapon, it must go beyond its usual biological definition and incorporate an emotional, trusting relationship between people’.

(Cahill, 2007 as seen in Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021:4)

During the interviews that I conducted with my participants, I found that our conversations would mostly consist of us building and affirming each other’s thoughts and experiences. For example, as my Nigerian participants would share intimate details about things such as their experiences growing up hiding their queerness in Yoruba and Christian households, I would then affectively listen then share information about my experiences growing up in the same environment and this was a cyclical process that lasted throughout all my interactions with them. This sharing and vulnerability amongst me and most of my participants was not only crucial in consolidating a foundation for us writing *with* and creating intersubjective relations but was also important in bridging some of the differences in the way they we experienced Nigerian/Yoruba culture, differences which at times led to unspoken tensions.

My research process, especially my interviews can be defined by this horizontality, and it really helped build and sustain trust and mutuality. However, Decolonial research ethics

concerning collaboration and reciprocity pushed me beyond just focusing on trust and mutuality, it also oriented me towards including accountability, accountability towards my participants through allowing them to partially steer the direction of my work and actively seeking feedback from them after each interaction with them. Before each interview, I would often go over some of the answers/thoughts that they shared from our previous interviews and give them opportunities to openly reflect on what they had said. Weaving accountability and openness into my methodological orientation was an effort to ensure that how I interpreted my participant's answers was not done in complete isolation from them and that they would be an important part of the process of analysis. This process which Taha describes as Egalitarianism- brought about an unsettling and blurring of where epistemic authority often lies between the researcher and the researched (Sabaratnam 2011: 801 as seen in Leinius, 2020: 74) and 'links back to the idea of viewing participants as experts'. (Taha, 2018) This way of 'doing' research which Trzeciak (2020) describes as 'dialogical knowledge praxis' brought about fresh and intimate insights that even often transcended the scope of this research project.

It is important for me to note that although the possibilities for collaboration and reciprocity were not limited to stays in the physical environments of my participants because of my use of technologies such as Zoom, I felt that there was still a little bit of a struggle to capture some of the intimacies and emotional and physical aspects of conducting ethnographic research underpinned by queer, feminist and decolonial research ethics. With COVID-19 pushing the majority of my interactions with my participants online and under tight time constraints, my ability to do some of the 'mucking around' in the field that Sarah Zukerman (2021) argues is imperative to help spark 'inductive theories that reflect realities on the ground' (Zukerman, 2021: 4) was incredibly limited. Because most interviews were

conducted online via Zoom I often was unable to read the body language and mood of my participants which I believe would have added another dimension to my research and may have been influential in helping to shape some of my interview questions.

This study attempts to create a more fluid synthesis between Blackqueerfemist theory, queer and decolonial methodologies, digital methodologies, and Black popular music scholarship as a means of transgressing its rigid boundaries and widening its scope.

Throughout the fieldwork process I placed particular emphasis on using digital platforms for cultural and social analysis and recognized creative outlets such as performances, recorded music, and non-traditional forms of orality as viable and one of the major focal points of my analysis.

I consider my ethnography to have four prominent strands:

1. Participant observation (which took place online and in person)
2. Lyrical analysis – (the close interpretive reading song lyrics)
3. Textual analysis of Music Videos
4. In-depth, exploratory interviews

I engaged in conversation with 43 Black queer woman artists from the US, Lagos and London and attended various musical performances, rehearsals and recording sessions in London.

Alongside the feminist, queer and decolonial orientation of this methodology, I considered 3 highly significant things: Firstly, music is something created, used and interpreted by different individuals and groups, ‘it is human activity involving social relationships, identities, and collective practices’ (Cohen, 1993:127) second, the theorising of Derek Scott which states that musicology and the critical works that flow from its study should be ‘an intertextual field of inquiry rather than a discipline’ (Scott, 2010) and lastly, the need for me

as a musicologist to embrace the ‘juxtaposition of different voices as a means of expressing the dynamism’ (Negus, 2017:1) of the musicking of Black queer women artists as an open-ended and continuous dialogue of intimacies, of tearing down and building back up again, of pleasure and pain. In following the intellectual path that Brooks and *Liner Notes* have laid out, my methodology focused on uprooting how I and Black queer women artists ‘lay claim to the power of the sonic as a transcendent form of world-making for a subjugated people’ and how our musicking are disruptive ‘cultural forces that dialectically shape and speak back’.(Brooks, 2021:30) Thus when entering the field, I continuously borrowed from multiple sites of ethnomusicological, sociological, cultural and philosophical thought on music, race, gender, sexuality and geographies to critically inform my research practice and ensure that it continued to be grounded in Black, queer, feminist and decolonial theory and praxis.

3.2. Digital g*rl in a digital world Part I

My use of digital ethnography and my exploration of social media environments was multifaceted, it was used to seek out and engage with my participants, examine, observe and grapple with how my participants (and other key players) operated and existed in the digital world and beyond it, and look at how they used the digital in their everyday lives as artists. Moreover, the digital greatly aided me in my discourse analysis.

In her study of (Twitter) microblogging as professional identity construction, Dawn R. Gilpin (2010) maintained that the rapid growth of online communication environments such

as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram can be viewed as an opportunity to extend the reach of the ethnographer's efforts to gain important insights into the world of their participants.

Social media offers unprecedented opportunities for the surveillance of artists and a high level of access into their personal lives.

The internet and social media environments now formulated a large part of the *field*.

As Professor Lupton states in *Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic* (2021), 'social research has been conducted online for many years, of course. There are many examples of using online survey tools or doing content analyses or ethnographies using existing online interactions as research materials.' (p1)

My approach to doing digital ethnography can be partially defined by the principle of multiplicity. Multiplicity as a principle delineates the interdependence of digital technologies and media (and the various things that people do with them) with the infrastructures of everyday life. Importantly, multiplicity as a concept involves examining and ultimately using the multitude of channels through which 'data' can be collected. These channels not only helped to mediate the physical distance between me as the researcher and my research participants, but they also helped in maintaining the relationships that I had created with them. Additionally, by using and examining multiple contrasting channels and virtual worlds, I was able to attract and form relationships with a wider variety of participants and compare and contrast not only how they moved through the different channels, but also how these channels and worlds differ from each other and how their contrasting natures impinged on my participants and beyond them. Social media environments and my participants heavy participation in them were monitored as means of following their *everyday practices*, which mostly, if not exclusively took place online considering the pandemic. Following Hine's methodological intuition concerning *mobile ethnography*, I took advantage of the digital

channels/ social media environments *native techniques* (Rogers 2008) and used each platform's 'variety of ready-to-hand tools' such as their search bars to identify potential participants and explore some of the sociocultural processes taking place online and in the outside world.

The main digital channels that were used in my data-gathering process were Zoom, Apple music, Spotify, YouTube and Soundcloud. The social media environments explored were Instagram, Twitter and TikTok.

With an estimated active user base of over 290.5 million, Twitter (now known as X) was a social media environment that I explored and used consistently throughout the fieldwork process. Used at first to only source and contact participants, Twitter became a primary research site. I used Twitter for Participant observation which involved examining the tweets of my participants and examining some of the evolving discourse taking place on twitter around subjects that are integral to my thesis such as queerness, Blackness, gender, community, Black popular music (and the industry surrounding it) and COVID-19, and examining how and why Black queer woman artists are coming together as a community to destabilize, disrupt and transform. Hine positions the development of blogging on social media sites such as Twitter offering up new and dynamic forms of social interaction to explore (2008:260).

The kind of real-time discourse search that Twitter affords to researchers and social media was central to why the platform was used so heavily throughout my research.

Twitter has been described as a rival to a Google search, with some academics claiming that searching Twitter will soon be one of the most effective and accessible ways to gather information for a variety of uses (Rocketboom, 2009 as seen in Zappavigna, 2012:6)

Twitter configures itself as an environment that provided me as the ethnographer with an array of integrated tools that allowed me to organize the vast space and flow of interaction that takes place on the platform in real-time and traverse its ‘thick’ terrain.

The retweet, quote tweet and hashtag functions allowed me to channel and constrain the scope of the action that I was looking for. The hashtag (#) function was particularly useful in helping me to identify potential participants and topics that were of importance to them.

Media scholars Axel Bruns and Jean E. Burgess define Hashtags as digital devices that are for the categorization and collation of tweets ‘related to a specific topic’ (Bruns and Burgess 2011:2) Furthermore, the hashtag (#) function is seen as a *methodological source* ‘for filtering and sampling texts as well as for constructing *grounded categories* through which the content of such texts can be analysed’. (Caliandro, 2017: 8, Lewis, Zamith, and Hermida 2013; Poell and Borra 2012). Thus, by searching hashtags such as ‘#Blackqueerartist’, ‘#Blackqueermusic’ and ‘#BlackqueerR&B’ I was able to come across several potential participants that had been using such hashtags in their tweets to promote themselves and cater to those that were specifically looking for such artists and music.

Moreover, by following those hashtags and hashtags such as ‘#Blackqueercommunity’ and ‘#Blacklesbian’ I was able to take note of and begin to define specific online social formations, namely how Black queer women artists were using the hashtag function to come together as communities to organize and destabilize the digital and outside world in new and pioneering ways. Postill and Pink maintain that the hashtag ‘can be thought of as integral to the nature of Twitter as a *social* medium’. As such it produces the experience of being ‘in the digital crowd’. (2012:131)

For my participants and others that share their specific positionalities, Twitter specifically provides a forum for Black queer cultural production.

However, to properly frame and understand Twitter's sociality and how this organizing and cultural production was taking place, it was not enough for me to only follow and take note of the hashtags being used, I also examined and got to grips with some of the practical uses my participants and other actors made of those hashtags that were mentioned above.

Twitter's availability in multiple geographical locations, its native techniques and its functionality that essentially allows users to curate their own personal 'timelines'⁷, have increased the ability for minority groups to form global alliances, distribute information and importantly formulate online communities that transgress geographical borders. Whilst some academics have debated the extent to which any one group of participants in a hashtag may be described as a community in any real sense, (Bruns and Burgess, 2015), through my exploration of the site (and my general experience of using Twitter on a regular basis) I found that Twitter has increasingly become populated by these online communities that many academics (that are invested in the online environment as a viable ethnographic site) argue are not 'mere virtual entities, but instead real and complex social formations that have concrete influence on the life of their participants'. (Caliandro, 2017: 4, S. Jones 1995; Kavanaugh and Patterson 2001; Komito 1998)

Through my immersion into my own curated Twitter community, namely 'Black, Queer Twitter', I found that many Black queer women artists were using those hashtags to try and increase their own visibility as artists in order to attract fans and opportunities for themselves. My research participants and similar actors were also at times trying to indirectly respond to other members of their shared communities, whether it was a response to some form of call to

⁷ A timeline is a stream of tweets from accounts that a user has chosen to follow.

action or through simply wanting to increase the visibility of the community that they belong to.

The Black, Queer Twitter community is what I would describe as one of the most prominent networks of resistance within the online sphere. This burgeoning community consists of Black queer folks that are but not limited to artists/musicians/athletes/activists/academics/cultural commentators and come from a multitude of places spanning across the Atlantic. I found that this community was formed (and is still being formed and re-formed) and coordinated via ‘dynamic networks of communication and social connectivity’ (Bruns and Burgess, 2011:7) organised around their shared positionalities as Black, queer folk and their commitment to various common goals such as: challenging gender binaries and norms within Black communities on the continent and in the diaspora, decolonisation, increasing access to healthcare and education, and discussing other issues/ information that are paramount to the current Black and queer condition across the globe. Because I had been a member of this online community for over 10 years, I had already witnessed and participated in its social practices and had a rich understanding of its aggregated gaze and of the shared culture. Moreover, I can testify to how these online communities often very much become intertwined with offline ones, I would even go as far as positing that they often mirror each other in several ways. Kozinets (2010) also frames online communities in this way and stresses that ‘online communities are not simply “virtual”, but in many cases, those who participate in them meet face to face too.’ (2010: 15, as seen in Postill and Pink, 2012:126)

Twitter emerged as a boundary-blurring tool that linked multiple online spheres and spans the divide between offline and online domains (Gilpin, 2010).

The dynamic nature of the conversations that were and are still being had within this community that has grown beyond the online environment provides fresh insights into their

inner workings: it enabled me to trace their operations as a multifaceted sphere that facilitates forms of resistance through ‘speaking back’ to certain power structures that have oppressed and limited them. Such observations also offer fresh perspectives on the ways in which online environments can offer ‘safe spaces’ ‘...particularly for people of counter-normative sexualities to construct an identity, forge connections, and articulate voices otherwise subjugated in some offline spaces’. (Pain, 2022: 2, Taylor et al., 2014) The Black queer community in general have appropriated Twitter as a space and resource that is shared by wider publics.

Although the searching and examination of hashtags and their multiple uses for community building formed an integral part of my methodology, hashtags themselves ‘represent only a specific subset of all of the communicative layers provided by *Twitter*’ (Bruns & Moe, 2014: 15-29) in general and in reference to my research objectives.

I found that one of the most useful and insightful parts of Twitter was its ‘micro-blogging’ aspect. The micro-blogging aspect of Twitter allowed me to also focus on socialities. As Postill and Pink posit, ‘this approach attends to the *qualities* of social relationships’ (2012:127) as well as communities formed online.

Through the examination of several tweets and threads made by my participants and several other actors, I found that many essentially use Twitter as an interpersonal resource of sorts. Capped at 280 characters (formerly 140 characters), tweets act as mini diary entries that directly and indirectly give us as researchers unprecedented access into the lives of our participants. More specifically, I conducted what I would describe as a critical analysis of a large set of tweets posted by my research participants and other actors that share some the same positionality but were not active participants in this research. Through my analysis, I

focused on the practice of meaning-making by interpreting the meaning of identifiable narrative elements and the dominant trends in each tweet and evaluating how these meanings act as illustrations of the larger stories and broader social systems that will be presented in subsequent chapters of this thesis. Again, Twitter's native tools, namely the search bar proved highly useful as it allowed me to go directly to the profiles of each of my participants and search for specific words instead of having to sift through thousands of their tweets that would have not been entirely relevant to my research. Another native tool that allowed me to be able to easily identify the tweets of participants amongst the thousands of tweets that fill my timeline daily was the 'bell' function that essentially allowed me to receive a notification any time one of participants tweeted. Through looking through hundreds of tweets from my participants, I found that a large portion of their tweets revolved around 3 main areas: MusicBlacknessQueerness, Gender and queerness and their general struggles. Examining their tweets gave insights into the varying relationships that my participants and other artist had with music, their visibility as Black queer woman artists and the work that they are doing to further the reach of artists and folks that share the same positionalities as they do. I found that on Twitter there is a growing movement of solidarity not only amongst Black queer woman artists but also amongst fans that share the same positionalities and so-called 'allies'. This movement of solidarity is founded upon the knowledge that these artists have been consistently written out of conversations concerning Black popular music and that their artistry deserves more recognition and support. My exploration of Twitter allowed me to not only capture the conversations that were happening concerning the erasure of these artists both in real-time and retrospectively but also allowed me to get a deeper sense of my participants even before ever having a long conversation with them.

I was highly aware of certain factors that mitigate and ultimately shape the manner in which my participants tweeted. I found that my participants and other actors that had affiliations with record labels (and other music institutions/ brands), had more exposure and a larger follower base tended to tweet in an incredibly measured way mainly using their Twitter accounts to talk about the various projects that have been working on, occasionally interact with fans and other artists and announce new music releases and upcoming performances. On the other hand, some participants who did not have the same commitments to labels and potential collaborators were far more candid and used their accounts as deeply personal diaries that documented the everyday and broader struggles of being an artist that exists at the intersection of multiple oppressed identities. Furthermore, censorship was a major point of conflict and contention for participants who had not openly spoken about their sexual and gender identities and don't plan on speaking about it openly. I found that my participants that live in Nigeria deeply censored themselves and often used metaphors in their tweets in fear of being outed within their community. Also, my Nigerian participants would often go silent for several weeks on end because of the banning of Twitter by the Nigerian government so at times I found it hard to engage and analyse their tweets in the same ways that I had done with my other non-Nigerian participants.

Instagram and TikTok were social media platforms that I primarily appropriated for cultural and social analysis and to again, witness and engage with the everyday lives of my participants. The two popular social media sites were also used to seek out participants.

Whilst Twitter allowed me to formulate deep and textured insight into the varying forms of interaction, meaning making and cultural production through text, the ongoing visual documentation of everyday life that takes place through Instagram and TikTok gave me as an ethnographer the opportunity to witness and focus in on how Black queer women artist are

using visual media to normalize embodied practices such as same-sex sexual desire and gender queerness, to challenge the hegemonic and normative ways that popular culture presents gender and sexuality and, to bring to life the visual components that they feel their music invokes and evokes.

3.3. Me, Myself & I...on Autoethnography

The employment of a racialized queer consciousness meant that I quickly recognized and understood that my participants and I were made up of subjects and subjectivities that are fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming. I say my participants and I because I critically recognized that I too was a research subject/Participant within this project. I see myself as a research subject not only because I entered the research relationship from the perspective of my own subjectivity but also because of the auto-ethnographical aspects of my research. This research is foremostly built on autoethnographic foundations.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe autoethnography as follows:

‘Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural...focusing outwards on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural

interpretations... in these texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture...' (2000:739)

In identifying as a subject of this research, my own experience of being a Black queer woman trying to be an artist is highly integral to this work and shapes the thinking and logic throughout it. I tell personal stories that involve the significant process of witnessing, testifying, and remembering and I engage with personal narrative as a focal point.

The reflexivity that this research employs demands a personal narrative not only as a point of analysis but also as a reliable mode of expressing findings from the field. As Adams et al (2017) maintain, '...we write these experiences to assemble a text that uses tenets of storytelling devices, such as narrative voice, character developments, and dramatic tension, to create evocative and specific representations of the culture/cultural experience and to give audiences a sense of how being there in the experience feels'. (2017:3). Moreover, given my methodological commitment to decolonial research practices and 'given the colonial roots of ethnographic methods and practices that replicated the material and symbolic violence of an entitled and invasive, all-knowing (often, Western male) observer, autoethnography's commitment to reflexive and ethical engagement is paramount.' (Adam et al, 2022:7)

My emotions, interactions and stories involving my lived experiences are heavily bound up with the dialogue that was created with my participants. Furthermore, in line with the Black feminist and decolonial research practices that this project employs, creating an autoethnography encouraged a more personal, collaborative and interactive relationship between my participants and I. In embracing autoethnographical practices, I wanted to counter the conventions of academic research that often constrain which stories folks that are

triply oppressed can tell and how we can tell them, stories like my mine and my participants that deviate from and transgress the canonical ones found in Black popular music scholarship. I also wanted to ‘show how people can do and resist the forms of social control that marginalize or silence counternarratives’. (Ellis and Bochner, 2000:744). Thus, the weaving of my own personal experiences into this work both tries to counter the conventions of academic research and ground my Black and queer sites with lived Black and queer experiences. Like Muñoz (2009), my intention in utilizing my personal experiences is not ‘simply to wax anecdotally but, instead to reach for other modes of evidencing’. (p4) Furthermore, as Adams et al (2022) maintain we as auto ethnographers share ‘intimate and vulnerable’ stories and experiences ‘to show how we and others with whom we interact might make sense of a life, disrupt unnecessary silences about uncomfortable issues...challenge institutional and insidious ideas and practices, as well as offer lessons about making do, getting by, and living our best lives’. (p3) Alongside the substantial opportunities that autoethnography and personal narrative created for my research, employing such practices also came with certain risks.

Scholars such as Paul Atkinson (1997) have criticized autoethnography and the employment of personal narrative and claim that such practices advance a ‘romantic construction of the self-unworthy of being classified as part of social science...if you are a storyteller rather than a story analyst, then your goal becomes therapeutic rather than analytic’. (p335) Atkinson believes that ‘if you don’t subject narrative to sociological, cultural, or some other form of analysis, treating stories as “social facts”, then you are not doing social science.’ (Ellis and Bochner, 2000:745) For scholars such as Atkinson, narratives are only viewed as useful ‘insofar as they advance sociological, anthropological, or psychological theory. For these critics, ‘narrative threatens the whole project of science’. (Ellis and Bochner, 2000:746)

However, decolonial and feminist theory teaches us that as scholars we should not follow such a narrow definition of social inquiry and that there needs to be a constant questioning of our own assumptions, ‘the metarules that govern the institutional workings of social science-arguments over feeling, theories of stories abstractions over concrete events, sophisticated jargon over accessible prose.’ (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 746) Within this project I give accounts that express the complexities/ difficulties/vulnerabilities/conflicts of being Black queer women trying to be artists despite the bleakness that often faces us at multiple levels. The usefulness of my narratives (and narratives in general) can be found not only in their analytical value but also in their capacity to ‘provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathetically into worlds of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered.’ (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 748)

It is important for me to note here that the data-gathering process for this research began long before I entered the ‘field’, before this very thesis was conceived and, long before I had entered any higher educational institution. The ‘data-gathering’ process in a way began when I started queering myself at the age of 13, and when I first began to comprehend and question what it meant to be Black and queer talk less of being a Black queer artist in a highly phobic industry. My thoughts and questions only intensified when as a teen, I began exploring the internet and came across other queer wannabe artists like myself who were looking for kinship through various social media sites such as Myspace, Tumblr, and Twitter. The long and intimate conversations that we had had regarding our positionalities and the possibilities of queer futures has been etched into my memory and I continue to remember the songs and

voices that both reassured and challenge the way that I conceived of myself as an artist and as a Black queer person from a work-class background.

Through the queering and decolonizing of my ethnographical processes, I believe that I was able to continuously present a counter to the normative logics of ethnography and challenge the epistemological and ontological assumptions in relation to the coherence of identity categories and redraw my participants as ‘contingent, multiple and unstable’ and ‘constituted within historically, geographically, and socially specific locations (Browne and Nash, 2010:4).

3.4. Sampling & Participants

When it came to sampling for this project the first important step I took was thinking through the type and nature of my study. I considered the fact that my research is wholly qualitative and ‘an understanding of sample design and its consequences is essential for conducting and evaluating...’ (Turner, 2020: 12) this research. Because I wanted to balance my methodology being ‘guided by the conceptual concerns’ of my study and wanting to engage with a broad enough group of people through which I could understand and interpret experience, I chose a purposeful and multistage sampling approach to ‘identify information rich’ cases related to the phenomenon of Interest’. (Palinkas et al., 2002, as seen in Gordon, 2020: 436).

Because my research samples were going to be used to make inferences about the population, ‘understanding the means by which the data arrived in the database is an important aspect of analyzing and drawing conclusions from the data.’ (Turner, 2020:8)

One of the first things that I did when designing this research was to define the target population that I would like to make these inferences about. Precisely defining my target population was not at all a difficult task because the sample group is explicitly named in the title of this research project.

My target population was primarily made up of Black queer woman artists that make R&B music and are based in London, New York, Atlanta and LA.

These locations were chosen specifically because they have large Black Queer populations and burgeoning Black Queer cultures. Furthermore, these are the cities that are widely considered to be amongst the locations with the most vibrant and rich musical histories and cultures. These cities have shaped the trajectory and sound of contemporary and alternative R&B music since the turn of the millennium and the role that they continue to play regarding the genre cannot be understated. I also included Lagos as a fieldwork site not only because I wanted to engage with Nigerian queer woman artists as a means to expand our understanding of how race/gender/sexuality is imbricated in R&B music across the Black Atlantic, but also because of Nigeria's seemingly rapid insurgence into the Black popular music sphere.

Today's R&B is slowly being influenced by artists and sounds that have roots in Lagos and I would be remiss to ignore the musicking that Nigerians are contributing at this present moment.

However, about 1/3 of the way through the fieldwork process, I made the decision to cast my purposive net wider in terms of trying to engage with potential participants from a wider range of cities. I made this decision because I wanted to be able to select from a much larger pool of participants, I wanted to make sure that my participants were a more accurate and broad representation of the population of Black queer woman artists and lastly, I wanted to move this process more in line with one of the central aims of this research: to engage with voices and narratives that are often ignored, forgotten about and deemed as secondary. Thus,

my participants originated from and were situated in a variety of cities and states across the Atlantic which included London, San Francisco, California, Birmingham UK, Chicago Illinois and Appleton Wisconsin, to name a few. In casting my net much wider I was able to engage in conversation with a wider range of artists that had varying experiences.

Regarding finding research participants, my approach to sampling was modelled around what I would describe as multistage sampling. With multistage sampling, I was able to use a combination of different sampling methods at different stages during the duration of my fieldwork. Because my ethnography was mostly conducted in online environments, I felt that these methods were the most appropriate for such settings. Furthermore, I felt that by trying to utilize different sampling methods across different platforms and avenues, I would be able to counteract some of the issues that arise from only using one sampling method by itself. During the first stage, I used purposive sampling, more specifically what is referred to as *Maximum Variation sampling*. MVS is a purposive sampling method that encourages researchers to select participants from a 'broad spectrum relating to the topic of study' and 'look at a subject from all angles, thereby achieving a greater understanding'. (Etikan, 2016:3)

One of the primary reasons that purposive sampling was used was because it allowed me as the researcher to apply my 'expert knowledge of the population to select in a non-random manner a sample of elements that represents a cross-section of the population'. (Lavrakas, 2008:524) Again, because I myself am a Black queer woman with a special interest in the music of other Black Queer women, and because I am a part of what can be described as an online Black Queer community, I was able to use this knowledge and positioning to easily identify members of my chosen research population on Twitter, TikTok and Instagram.

MVS and purposive sampling in general were particularly useful also because of the research circumstance that I found myself in during COVID-19. With limited resources (because of my inability to interact with people face-to-face and attend events because of the threat of covid) I had to optimize the research process by quickly identifying and selecting certain individuals with characteristics of interest in my project and going with those individuals that were available, showed a complete willingness to participate and the ability to share their opinions and experiences in an expressive, open, and reflective manner.

Furthermore, purposive sampling was used for this project because I felt that it would be effective in exploring potential 'anthropological situations where the discovery of meaning can benefit from an intuitive approach'. (Business Research Methodology, 2022).

During the 2nd stage, I mostly relied on snowball sampling which involved my existing participants referring me to other potential participants and reposting my call for participants on their respective social media accounts. Snowball sampling ended up being a rather successful strategy because those participants were more immersed in the Black queer woman artist community thus, they would know exactly who would be receptive to my project. Furthermore, I feel that snowball sampling worked well because those participants that had been referred could often anticipate what my engagement with them would be like before I even spoke to them, (because they were told by other participants that I had already engaged with) and thus would be more open and comfortable from the very beginning of the process.

Whilst my sampling was indeed multistage, the different methods were used simultaneously and ran concurrently with each other to maximize my reach, allowing me to cast my net far and wide and ultimately allowed me to select a good variety of participants. Although I was quite purposeful with whom I chose to select as my participants in the beginning stages of my

research process, I wanted to ensure that I selected participants across a broad spectrum relating to my topic of study.

However, I was aware that there were a few potential problems that could arise when using these sampling strategies. Given the subjectivity of MVS and purposive sampling more generally, bias is one of the biggest issues that I had to work through and around when using each sampling strategy. The reliance on my own judgement to select participants meant that I approached the artists that I knew would be receptive to being a research Participant over ones that I knew would be less receptive for a variety of reasons such as: being too busy to commit to a meeting with me for interviews, fear of being outed and fear around losing potential opportunities if people somehow figured out that they had participated. I want to note here that although I purposely selected participants who I felt would be more responsive to my interview questions and my observations of them, this was done without considering the potential specific answers that those participants could potentially give me in response to my interview questions. To put it clear, I did not choose any participants based on whether or not they would answer a question in a specific way.

Despite the issues I faced regarding potential bias, I feel the purposive sampling within the context of this project was the most appropriate sampling mechanism considering the relatively restricted population definition and the nature of some of the difficulties surrounding engaging with folks that are under threat.

Although I identified my participants using Instagram, Twitter and Tik Tok, my approaches towards them were made via Instagram, Twitter and email. I understood that because of issues around visibility and accessibility⁸, I would likely end up with more participants from

⁸ From the 5th of June to the 13th of January the Nigerian government banned Twitter, which restricted it from operating the country which made it significantly more challenging to come in to contact with Nigerian artists. The lack of visibility of Queer Nigerians on twitter because of the fear of being outed also posed an issue to finding Lagos based participants.

the UK and the US than from Lagos. Again, because I share the same positionality as my participants and the fact that I used purposive sampling, I also managed to interview a few artists whom I already had relationships with prior to the conception of this research.

I was able to engage with 43 participants, either through interviews or direct/ indirect observation. Although I was able to have at least 1 interview with all 43 participants, I was only able to carry out all three rounds of interviews with 13 participants and was only able to carry out direct in-person observations with 3 out of 13 of those participants due to restrictions around COVID-19. These 13 participants formed the core group from which most of my analysis flows. At the request of 12 of these participants, I will be referring to them as letters in order to protect their identities and maintain their anonymity. Emmavie was the only participant that did not mind being named as a research participant. All these participants describe themselves as Black queer women. Below is a table consisting of the 13 core participants.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Location/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Notes</u>
Participant A	23	Lagos (moved to pursue music career)	Interviews took place over zoom
Emmavie	33	London Nigerian & Cameroonian	Out of all of my participants, I was able to engage with Emmavie the most because I had known them before they were my research participant. Our first interview was held over zoom because it was during the second COVID-19 lockdown that took place in the UK whilst our two subsequent interviews were held in person. I was also able to observe Emmavie whilst they have been producing music, at their rehearsals and live performances for their headline show that took place during the summer of 2021 and their shows as a support act for the band Moonchild in September and October of 2022.
Participant E	30	London Nigerian	All of my interviews with Participant E took place over Zoom. Participant E introduced me to Participant V.
Participant V	27	London	All of my interactions with them took place over Zoom.
Participant K	28	London West Indian	Participant K was the first Participant that I interviewed, and this first interview took place at their home in South London whilst our final two interviews took place over Zoom. I also observed Participant K producing their own music which also took place inside their home where they have a home studio.
Participant J	28	London (grew up in Birmingham) West Indian	Participant J's first interview took place over Zoom whilst our subsequent interviews took place at my sister's old art studio in London. I also observed Participant J at their headline show which took place in London in September of 2021.
Participant T	33	Chicago	Interviews took place over zoom
Participant P	21	Wisconsin	Interviews took place over zoom
Participant S	36	Los Angeles	Interviews took place over zoom
Participant BM	27	New Jersey	Interviews took place over zoom
Participant SM	31	Los Angeles	Interviews took place over zoom
Participant C	27	London (spent significant time in Atlanta and LA)	Interviews took place over zoom
Participant D	22	Lagos (moved to pursue music career)	Interviews took place over zoom

I had hoped to interview older participants, but I found it hard to locate them especially because I mainly connected with potential participants through various social media channels and older artists tend to have less of a presence on social media in comparison with their younger kinfolk. The older potential participants that I did manage to locate declined to have interviews with me as they felt that they had nothing more to add to the ongoing discourse/conversations surrounding Blackness-queerness-Black popular music/music industry, however, they did point me in the direction of some previous interviews that had done in past years for insight into how they felt about the topics that I had told them that we would potentially be discussing.

I wanted to speak to older artists because I wanted to learn more about how they navigated their musicianship and artistry without the internet and digital environments and how the existence and rapid growth of the latter affected and shaped the former, if indeed they did. Furthermore, I also wanted to speak to older participants to gain insights into how the Black popular music industry has changed and developed in terms of its acceptance of and involvement with ‘alternative’ positionalities, the kinds of resources and opportunities that were being made available to such positionalities then (Pre internet) and now, how those positionalities are building communities and finally what these older artists think of the representation (or lack thereof) being shown within the industry today.

I spoke to artists that had a lot of experience with being an artist and others that didn’t have much experience , some that had released a lot of music and some that had only one song out on music streaming services, artists that had travelled around the world touring as a headliner and/or as a supporting act, artists that had never left their countries/cities and never performed to a room full of people, artists that are backed by small labels with management teams, artists that were once signed but now are unsigned, artists that have never been signed,

artists that manage themselves with no investments, struggling artist, artists that are just at the beginning of their careers, and artists that see themselves as being in the twilight of their careers, artists that are on musical hiatuses, artists that have built their own make-shift recording studios within the comfort of their own homes, and those that rely on booking studio time, artists that perceive themselves and their music as ‘underground’ and ‘underrated’ and those that see themselves as fairly ‘mainstream’. As I anticipated before entering the field, my participants were an amalgamation of the things that I mentioned above. In attracting a diverse array of artists, I believe that I was able to engage with and get a nuanced sense of the sheer breadth and depth of their experiences and delimit the scope of this research in terms of who and what my writing represents and who I wrote this research *with*. An interesting thing that I want to note here is that an overwhelming majority of my participants identified as ‘masculine presenting’ with others shying away from categorizing subsets of their gender expression in any way. I believe that this *imbalance* happened because of the purposive sampling technique that I used in which I selected participants that were readily available to me in my own networks. Because I categorize myself as someone that is ‘masc’ presenting my own networks are mostly filled with other masc women. However, I do not necessarily see this imbalance as something that negatively affects my research, rather I see it as adding texture to my research findings, texture that I will expand on in the chapter entitled ‘A Prelude: Black Queer Woman and the Shapes, Textures and Boundaries of Black Popular music.’

Although the process of finding participants was fairly smooth because of my own lengthy submersion within the Black queer woman artist community and my appreciation for all things Black woman and queer, I still encountered a few stumbling blocks when it came to the recruitment of participants and the continuation of the interview process with participants

who had agreed to take part in my research. One of reasons that I was only able to complete 3 interviews with only 12 participants is that after the introductory conversation with participants, some would simply stop replying to my request for a second interview or decline my requests altogether. Because my fieldwork was mostly mediated by digital technologies, the prospects of exchange, reciprocity and collaboration were not limited to stays in the physical environments of my participants. However, difficulties presented by COVID – 19 often made long-term and sustainable contact and negotiations of collaboration tricky. Because most of the intro/ first official interviews were conducted during global lockdowns, participants generally had more time to sit down and talk because of restrictions around movement. However, when it came time to conduct the second round and third rounds of interviews and lockdown restrictions were being lifted, some participants no longer had time to dedicate to these interviews which meant that at times, I was barely able to get a real sense of who they were and could not really begin to scratch the surface of their experiences and life stories. With the 13 participants that make up the core group, I was able to complete all three rounds of interviews with them and carry out some observations with them. Thus, I was able to get a fuller picture of who they are as artists, their musicking and their respective experiences.

3.4.1. Money and Research

During my fieldwork process an issue that I found myself encountering was being asked for remuneration for potential interviews. For example, I sent an introductory message via Instagram direct message and email to an artist that I thought would potentially be a great research participant, however instead of the artist responding I received a response from her management asking about whether I would be able to compensate the artist for their

time/participation. I replied with an email stating that I was unfortunately unable to compensate her for her participation but that I would be happy to share any materials that may come out of our potential interviews with them for their own internal use. The times that I told a potential Participant that I would be unable to compensate them for their time I was usually met with a swift rejection or a subsequent lack of response thereafter. Although I often found the lack of response or rejection frustrating, I completely understood where those artists were coming from and the positions that they were in. I understood that even though I am a researcher that centred collaboration within my research practice, I was the only person in the research relationship that really stood to benefit from our interaction in tangible ways. Furthermore, I also understood that I was essentially asking for their time and their labor, two things that artists of their positionalities are often not compensated for. The context of the pandemic also added another layer of complexity because of how much it limited artists' ability to make money from their musicking.

Bioethicists Emily A. Largent and Holly Fernandez Lynch note that while the practice of offering payment to prospective participants in exchange for their participation in research is 'widespread and longstanding...such payment remains the source of substantial debate...' (2017:1) There are some scholars that argue that 'payment can be one way of recognizing and beginning to equalize' (Thompson, 1996:2) the imbalance of power that often occurs within research relationships in the field. Despite payment potentially being able to temper some of the power imbalances that were present, especially between me and my participants that are based in Lagos, one of the biggest ethical concerns that I had regarding giving financial remuneration to participants is what Adrianna Surmiak (2020) describes as the commercialization of the researcher-Participant relationship. The questions that I asked myself when thinking about whether I should offer payment to participants were how could I have gone about putting a price on their knowledge and experiences? And is there a clear-cut

way of calculating how much someone's stories and experiences are worth? I felt that by paying participants I could potentially reduce the research relationship to one that was based on superficial exchange. I didn't want my participants to feel like I was putting a price on or purchasing their knowledge and experiences, rather I wanted to build a solid and organic foundation of mutual trust, exchange and understanding which I believe would have been difficult to create if our research relationship started with what would likely have been an awkward monetary exchange. Furthermore, I also felt that in paying my participants, I would be placing undue pressure on them to commit to the entirety of the research process instead of them wanting to be a part of it on their own terms. I believe that the overwhelming majority of my participants ultimately didn't expect financial remuneration because they understood the nature of my research project, they understood that I wasn't being paid a large amount of money to conduct this research and that it wasn't being conducted on behalf of any large institution.

3.5. Lyrical Analysis

Within my research process, I mainly focused on examining the lyrical content of the music of my participants, other Black queer women artists and R&B artists more generally to unpack and discover how their musical creations reflect their social realities and how ideology regarding race, gender and sexuality are constructed, sounded out and embodied in song. Alongside an understanding of the sonic elements of my participant's music (such as tone, tone of voice, pitch, timbre etc), it was incredibly crucial to build an understanding of the textual parts of their creations. Thus, analysis of song lyrics made up 1 of the 4 prominent strands of my research methodology. For scholars like me who place the analysis/study of

songs as central to their methodological practice, ‘the convergence of music and language in song presents an interesting challenge.’ (Radhakrishnan, 2019:53)

I follow the idea that music reflects and constructs social and cultural experiences (McClary 2002, Taylor 2012, Fast 2019, Lingold, Mueller & Trettien 2018) Powell and Gershon build on the idea that music has a symbiotic relationship with the social and cultural by maintaining that sonic ethnography ‘presents the researcher with the ethnographic tools required to explore and examine the sonic in relation to social and/ or environmental structures and patterns- not just how sound reflects such phenomena but, importantly, how it produces them’. Feld and Fox also focus on the voice both ‘as the embodiment of spoken and sung performance, and...as a key representational trope for social position and power’. (1994:26 as seen in Radhakrishnan, 2019:54)

I examined the way that linguistic forms influence the way that my participants perform specific songs and the ways the musical performance in general influences broader contexts. Radhakrishnan argues that alongside giving due importance to musical and linguistic forms, scholars must also pay attention to the discursive contexts and structures within which artists demonstrate their artistry. So, when deconstructing the songs of my participants, the deconstruction was done with a nuanced understanding of the songs being created within the context of contemporary R&B music, its conventions and wider socio-cultural boundaries. This mapping of lyrics and the contexts that they are produced in came together to form a kind of critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis was particularly useful for my research because of the emphasis that it places ‘on the role of language as a power resource’. (Willig, 2014, as seen in Gordon, 2020:435) This aspect of CDA is particularly relevant to a research project like mine since one of the primary units of my analysis is the linguistic aspects of songs that were deconstructed. As Gordon (2020) notes ‘songs are known to be linguistically innovative, and to rely on words to communicate meaning and nuances.’

(2020:435) Through this interrogation of language/lyrics-context, this critical discourse analysis enabled me to uproot and unearth the heteronormative gender and sexuality politics implicit in the conventions and aesthetics of R&B songs, how these songs have been used to construct gender, race, place and sexuality and how Black queer women are responding to such through song and musicking in general.

Inspired by the work of Nickesia S. Gordon (2020) in ‘Discourse of Consumption’, to do this specific uprooting and unearthing, I utilized Dianna R. Mullet’s (2018) seven-stage analytical model. The first stage was to select the discourse which is to explore and expose the politics of R&B songs and how they construct the social. The second stage was to ‘locate and prepare the data sources.’. For this stage I used criterion sampling to ‘determine the criterion of importance for songs to be included’. (Gordon, 2020: 437) Then I employed intensity sampling to ‘determine the rich examples from that set’. (Gordon, 2020: 437)

As Gordon notes ‘intensity sampling allows the researcher to select a small number of rich cases that provide the depth information and knowledge about what is under investigation.’ (Gordon, 2020: 437)

Guided by the criteria of having references to race, gender, sex, sexuality and romantic relationships in their lyrics or in their title, the collection of songs were identified via Billboard’s Hot R&B song chart between the year 2000 and 2022 , The R&B UK playlist curated and presented by Spotify, the *Black, Queer & Proud* playlist also curated and presented by Spotify, Janelle Monae’s five albums, *Metropolis*, *The ArchAndroid*, *The Electric Lady*, *Dirty Computer* and *The Age of Pleasure*. I also chose songs from Janelle Monae’s Black Pride playlist presented by Apple Music Pride and finally, some of the music released by my participants, with their express consent of course. The year 2000 was used as a starting point because that’s when this specific iteration of R&B music really started to take

shape and come to the fore of Black popular music across the Black Atlantic. As references to race, gender, sex, sexuality and romantic relationships are quite commonplace in contemporary R&B music, this process yielded an excessive number of songs. To whittle down the amount of songs had, I ended up only selecting 20 songs that I felt represented the most intensely ‘rich cases of the categories of music being studied’. (Gordon, 2020:437) As Gordon notes ‘this final selection process is in line with an a priori thematic saturation-sampling model wherein a final sample is reached based on the degree to which identified codes or themes are exemplified in the data’. (Fusch & Ness, 2015 as seen in Gordon, 2020:437) In the case of this research project. The ‘pre-established identifying criteria’ were contemporary R&B songs sung by any gender identity, and the songs of my participants, with songs that centre narratives around gender, sexuality and identity more generally. From my analysis of songs and their accompanying music videos, dominant themes and conventions were then extrapolated.

As Gordon notes ‘CDA emphasizes choosing documents that focus on “naturally occurring language use” as in the case of song lyrics, rather than texts produced specifically for a study’. (Wodak & Meyer, 2008: as seen in Gordon, 2020:436).

Below is a table that shows the songs that were selected:

<u>Name of song</u>	<u>Artist</u>
Oops	Emmavie
A Woman’s Worth	Alicia Keys
Lipstick Lover	Janelle Monae
Neighbors Know My Name	Trey Songz

Gynia Boy	Trey Songz
Rather Be	Emmavie
Chanel	Frank Ocean
Cater 2 U	Destiny's Child
Trading Places	Usher
Girl Like Me	Jazmine Sullivan ft. H.E.R
Bed	J. Holiday
Violet Stars Happy Hunting!!!	Janelle Monáe ft. The Skunks
Many Moons	Janelle Monae
Sincerely Jane	Janelle Monae
Locked Inside	Janelle Monae
Q.U.E.E.N	Janelle Monáe ft. Erykah Badu
Sally Ride	Janelle Monae
Screwed	Janelle Monáe ft. Zoe Kravitz
Phenomenal	Janelle Monáe ft. Doechii
Bad Religion	Frank Ocean

Table 1

The third stage involved me engaging in ‘an exploration of the background of the texts’ (Gordon, 2020:436) and the sounds. The songs that I ‘examined were “scripted” as part of the market place’. (Gordon, 2020:436) of Black popular music and culture. I investigated the

background of contemporary R&B music and its related industry and described its socio-politics as well as some of its 'historical practices'. (Gordon, 2020:436) Stage four consisted of me 'coding texts and identifying overarching themes' (Gordon, 2020:436) within the songs. This step of my analysis employed methods of lyrical analysis to 'unearth overarching' ideologies and themes. Musico-linguistic analysis within my CDA 'allows one to incorporate elements of 'context' into the analysis of texts [song], to 'show the relationship between concrete occasional events and more durable social practices'. (Fairclough, 1997: 5 as seen in Gordon, 2020:436) Stage five is where 'external relations in the text are analyzed' (Gordon, 2020:436) In this step I explored how socio-cultural practices and ideologies relating to race, gender and sexuality inform the songs. In stage 6 I examined the 'internal relations' in the songs. For this part of the process, the linguistic elements of song and the way that they coincide with the sonic elements are 'examined for indications of their discursive and rhetorical intentions'. (Gordon, 2020:436) Essentially, during this part of the analysis, I grappled with some of the premises that this research makes, that heteronormative gender and sexuality politics are implicit in the conventions and aesthetics of R&B and that the musicking of Black queer woman artists is generating radical contestations to it. Stage 7 is where my interpretation of my 'data' occurs. In this stage I 'conducted analysis of emerging major themes' in the songs whilst weaving some of the data from my interviews and observations.

3.6. Textual Analysis of Music Videos

*'I'm a Black dark-skinned and gay- as-f*ck! I don't fit what music standards are today, what societal standards are for what music's idea of beauty is, who they are going to put on the screen when I watch music videos. I don't see someone that looks like me ever.'* – Participant

BM

Music videos being referenced here is important because they directly contribute to the constructed aesthetic codes of contemporary R&B music. Furthermore, 'from its initial penetration of domestic space via MTV, the medium of music video has maintained its cultural ubiquity, and produced perpetually experimental, provocative, sexual imagery, which warrants continued analysis.' (Donnelly, 2017: 14) The creation and releasing of music videos are integral to musicking within the context of Black popular music and the wider context of contemporary popular music in general.

Music videos have played an incredibly important role in the popularization of contemporary R&B music and culture and in the establishment of its visual identity. Hype Williams is perhaps the most prolific music video producer and director within R&B music and Black popular music more generally. With an award-winning videography which includes Aaliyah's 'Rock The Boat' (2001), Ne-Yo's 'So Sick' (2006) and Genuwine's sultry ballad 'Differences' (2001), Williams' work defined the era of new-millennium music videos that have complemented the R&B hits of the early – late 2000s. Williams' music videos amongst others, brought to living colour this new wave of R&B. The TV channels that housed R&B music videos such as MTV and BET⁹ played a particularly integral role in shaping R&B music and culture. More specifically, The BET housed American hip-hop and R&B music video show 106 & Park was arguably one of the most influential television shows within the context of Black popular music and culture. Shot and produced in New York City and on air from 2000-2014, 106 & Park was once the epicentre of Black Popular music and culture. As young Black brits growing up in the UK, 106&Park was one of the primary ways that we could really connect with Black American popular music and culture. I remember rushing home from basketball practice to catch the latest episode of 106&Park to try and stay up to date with all of the latest trends that were taking place in R&B and hip-hop. Amongst my favorite contemporary R&B music videos are Ray J's 'One Wish' (2005) and Destiny's Child's 'Soldier' (2004). I really enjoy these videos because they perfectly encapsulate the essence of their respective songs. Additionally, the visuals align with how I envisaged the songs narratives to be played out on video. For me, R&B music videos and the programs/channels/platforms that play them play an incredibly crucial role in allowing me and others to be able to visualize what the genre's conventions and aesthetics look like. If you

⁹ Acronym for Black Entertainment Television.

were to asks fans of R&B music to illustrate or visualize the aesthetics of contemporary R&B, they would often draw on music videos.

Not only playing a role in the solidification of already known social structures, I want to recognize that R&B has what Kotarba and Vannini describe as an polity- forming capacity of its own. Contemporary R&B music videos constructs gender and sexuality, thus, it can be ‘analyzed and critiqued as a gendered discourse’. (McClary, 2002:7)

Music videos are often the spaces where conceptions of gender and sexuality are embodied. Within R&B music videos constructions of hegemonic gender performances and heteronormativity play out and are performed in real time. R&B music videos do not just passively reflect social order, rather they reproduce social order and even produce distinct forms of social reality. I argue that R&B music videos are a realm where women often perform gender.

Grounding my thinking around R&B music videos as a outcome of the gender performances of artists in R&B is the conceptualisation of gender as a social construct. Butler (2006) amongst many other gender theorists, argues that socially constructed gender identities constitute a performance in which gender is created through the act of performing.

Narratives around sex, sexual desire and romantic relationships are what artists build their performances on and constitute the main ‘things’ that ideologies regarding gender and sexuality are expressed through in R&B music videos. Additionally, through the propagation of these narratives, women artists become gendered and sexualized in extremely narrow and homogenous ways that squeeze out and constrain those that don’t gender or sexualize themselves in normative ways.

Hugh Klein and Kenneth Shiffman (2006) posit that ‘groups that are valued in a particular culture tend to be shown frequently in the media, and viewers/readers come to learn about these groups’ purported characteristics and their implied value to the culture-at-large by virtue of their media exposure.’(p2)The lack of representation that ‘othered’ Black women receive in R&B music videos is a part of a much larger network of erasure.

Whilst I looked at how hegemonic gender and sexuality performances are constituted within and produced by R&B music videos, I also closely looked at how Black queer woman artists produce Black queer resistance to such performances in their own music videos as a means to demonstrate how they are contesting the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music in general. Similar to Ryann Donnelly’s writing on *Radical bodies in music video* (2017), I make a close visual and textual analysis of the ‘radical performances and images whose values is frequently overlooked for their standing within the often- disposable landscape of commercial, and popular culture’.(p14) In examining the music videos of Black queer R&B artists through the lenses of Black queer and feminist discourse, I argue that these radical contestations are constituted through subversive gender and sexuality performances. I also maintain that the performative subversion within the music videos of Black queer woman artists has been greatly affected by technological shifts that have taken place in recent times, such as the shift from MTV to YouTube being the main medium where audiences go to view and interact with music videos.

Alongside the textual analysis of songs, the textual analysis of their respective music videos also formed an integral part of my research methodology. Whilst I at times, conducted analysis of songs and music videos as separate entities, I also analyzed them jointly. In line with ethnomusicological approaches to audio-visuals, I offer critique on how songs and the

visuals that accompany them work together by using the song as the starting point in my analysis of music videos.

Within the realm of Black popular music and popular music in general, music videos are incredibly important because they are articulations of songs and the aesthetic style of various genres. As music scholar Carol Vernallis (2004) maintains ‘the interaction among music, lyrics and image creates complex social meaning.’ (p XIII)

The work of Donnelly (2017) asks us as scholars to ‘examine the relationship between the objects of study, and the historical climates in which they are produced’. (p14)

Thus, it is important to note that within the context of this project, music videos are of importance because they are subject to the influences of institutional structures, technology and socio-cultural contexts (Vernallis, 2004: XV). I approach music videos with the understanding that they are an ‘ideological apparatus’. (Vernallis, 2004:210). Such thinking around R&B music videos allows me to further contextualize the videos aesthetics, themes and narratives as direct responses to ideological apparatuses that surround the musical tradition.

The study of music videos is a fairly new research phenomenon within ethnomusicological studies. Moreover, analyzing how music videos play out hegemonic constructions of gender, race, place and sexuality is also a recent phenomenon.

Whilst there are many different approaches that have been gathered from many different academic disciplines and fields of study, my methodological approach to this significant audio-visual medium is drawn from psychoanalytical and sociological models.

Like in Vernallis’ *Experiencing Music Videos* (2004) my methodological approach is orientated towards uprooting the ways that ‘musical and visual codes operate in music videos’. (2004:X) Using the same kind of analysis that takes place in CDA, I attended to

features held in common to a range of R&B music videos. Vernallis notes that what a music video has to say is located in the relation to all of its parts as it plays out in real-time- in play between both the visual and musical codes (2004:199). The ‘voice’ of the music video can be found in its subtleties, in its overt or covert expressions of themes relating to the song's lyrical content, ‘in what the music is doing in one location and elsewhere, in what the video maker or artist finds musically worthy of emphasis and what they choose to downplay’.

(2004:199) It is in an approach such as this which pays special attention to these features that I have come to learn about R&B music videos and more importantly, R&B music’s distinct modes of representing race, place, gender and sexuality politics. I attempt to bring forward an analysis that understands musical aesthetic codes and conventions as providing the means by which music videos are structured and conceptualised.

Taken with the song lyrics and the music, Vernallis maintains that ‘images acquire a more complex dimensionality’. Furthermore, she maintains that ‘lyrics serve a number of structural functions, existing in varied relations with the music and the image and casting a narrow or wide range of influence. In this way they can exert a special power over music videos.’

(Vernallis, 2004: XIII). Because I follow the position that lyrics can be positioned as the ‘prime determinant of music video’, my analysis of music videos begins from the analysis of the accompanying song lyrics. The special power that lyrics exert over R&B music videos is that they shape and help to drive narratives.

Whilst some music and/or media scholars argue that music videos are ‘fundamentally antinarrative, a kind of postmodern pastiche that gain energy from defying narrative conventions (Vernallis, 2004:3), I am of the belief that music videos, especially R&B music videos often do use narratives as a device. I want to note here that whilst I believe that R&B music videos often involve narratives, they rarely ‘embody complete narratives or convey

finely wrought stories'. (Vernallis, 2004:3) Rather, R&B music videos covertly articulate overarching conceptualisations of various socio-cultural ideologies. Additionally, whilst Vernallis argues that 'videos mimic the concerns of pop music, which tend to be a consideration of a topic rather than an enactment of it' (Vernallis, 2004:3), my project positions R&B music videos as both considering socio-cultural ideology and staging an enactment of it at the same time.

In my analysis of multiple and varying R&B music videos released by R&B artists, I demonstrate that these videos not only showcase the artists, underscore the music and reflect the lyrics, the lyrics are not reflected passively. The videos often visually articulate the gendered and sexualized modalities of being that the lyrics and genre often propagates. I considered music videos narrative dimension in direct relation to the accompanying lyrics. Based on the textual analysis of the sexual and gendered content of R&B music videos, by analysing songs and their music videos, a greater understanding as of how contemporary R&B constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs the musicking of Black women artists as it pertains to race, gender and sexuality is achieved.

3.7. Interviews and Participant Observations

Alongside sound and semiotic ethnography and the Participant observation that took place by looking at the online behaviors of my participants, my central method of data collection also included qualitative, in-depth exploratory interviews and in-person observations.

3.7.1. Interviews

Because of the various Covid-19 lockdowns, most of the interviews that I conducted with my participants took place online. The interviews that I was able to conduct in-person took place in places varying from recording studios, vegan cafés, art studios and even within participant's homes. Before I conducted my first round of official interviews, I made sure to hold informal conversations with all my participants primarily over Zoom. The purpose of these first informal conversations was firstly for my participants and I to familiarize ourselves with each other and for me to do a 'temperature check' on them. Doing temperature checks allowed me to have insight into how they felt about my proposed research topic, the methods that I was using and just how they felt about things more generally. Furthermore, I wanted these conversations to be an open forum for me to answer any questions that they had about my project. I was also able to discuss my expectations of them as research participants and talk about what they could expect from me as the principal researcher. Again, throughout these introductory conversations I placed particular emphasis on me also being a research participant, I felt that by doing so I put my participants at ease when it came to talking about the intimate details of their lives and experiences. Facilitating these conversations was incredibly important because it allowed my participants and I to begin to form the collaborative ties that I spoke about in detail in earlier parts of this methodology. It was during our second conversation that I began to really 'exchange' with my participants and get into the nitty gritty details that inform this project.

Within my interviews, I used what can be described as a multi-approach which began with semi-structured interviews during the first rounds and then finished with the 'Interview guide approach'. (Patton, 2002) Before I started my interviews, I designed a guide that would help me to collate information on my participants so that I could approach my interviews in an informed manner and really home in on the topics that not only I wanted to discuss but also

the topics that my participants had said that they wanted to discuss when our introductory meetings took place. Most of the questions that I asked my participants were guided by 4 main overarching themes: Experiences and behaviours, opinions and values, feelings and emotions and finally knowledge. Furthermore, the questions that were asked were specifically designed to get them to talk about themselves as people, their music and the world that surrounds them. Questions posed also focused on habits and relationships.

Utilizing the semi-structured approach for the first round, I began by asking a standard open-ended question which was usually ‘how would you describe yourself as an artist and how would you then describe your artistry?’ Depending on the answers that the participants had given me I would then slip into questions that would encourage them to either build on those answers or think about their experiences in more detail.

Using the Interview Guide Approach during the second round of interviews, I approached the interviews with a series of issues and topics that I wanted to address. I asked questions and steered our conversations towards finding out and examining how we use musical and social practices in everyday life and how music is an organizing force in social life through the lens of race, gender and sexuality. I found the Interview Guide approach conducive because it framed our interviews in a quasi-conversational mode and allowed my participants and I to have a degree of freedom that is not typically available in more structured interviews. The dialogical/ conversational manner of these interviews was highly fluid. Mason emphasizes the importance of having such fluidity in interviews and maintains that interviews that follow too much of a rigid and linear structure often ‘lack the flexibility and sensitivity...required if we are to listen to our interviewees’ ways of interpreting and experiencing the social world (Mason, 2002:213)

One of the biggest difficulties that I experienced during the interview process when interacting with my American participants was the time difference. Again, because I was

unable to meet with any of them physically, we had to schedule our interviews for times that were often very awkward for me. For example, my participants that lived in the Western coast of the US would typically schedule interviews with me for either the early afternoon at 1 or 2pm or mid evening at 6/7pm PST which would be 9 or 10pm GMT and 12 or 1am GMT. The lateness of the interviews often meant that I went into some of them feeling tired from having to work during the day. If I did not have to work during the day of a late interview, I would have to take a nap during the day to conserve some of my energy.

3.7.2. Observations

The difficulties presented by COVID and the various lockdowns, meant that my ability to conduct Participant observations was incredibly limited. The observations that I did manage to conduct were limited to just three of my participants and because of restrictions around travel, they were all based in the UK. Because Participant observation has no preset formal steps, I found that my observations of my participants began almost as soon as I met them. The first observation that I conducted was at the home of one of my British participants. This artist whom I will refer to as Participant K, had built a small home studio for themselves in the living room of their small and homely south London apartment. I found that many of my participants had built their own home studios because they could not afford to use professional studios regularly. I also conducted Participant observation by attending some of the rehearsals and live shows of my participants. In light of the relationship that I had built with Emmavie, I was even able to follow her as she performed at 2 festivals in Europe and went on tour as a support act across several cities in the UK.

The purpose of observing my participants in studio settings and at their rehearsals and performances was to get ‘close to the data’ (Swanwick, 1984) and get an intimate insight into their creative practice/ processes as artists.

I took being invited into their homes, rehearsals, studios and recording sessions as a massive privilege because they are spaces that are intimate highly specialized, extraordinarily complex' and give great insight into 'rituals carried out by a group whose mysterious world is closed to other people'. (Bannister, 1992: 134) I believe that it is my duty as an ethnographer to reveal these rituals. Osborne (1987) posits that detailed description of the techniques and rituals employed by research participants is of critical importance in the establishment of validity in ethnographic work. Whilst I do not subscribe to the validity logics that are often pervasive in sociological studies, I do believe that rich and informed commentary can only stand to benefit my ethnography.

I also employed what can be described as ethnographic interviewing (Spradley, 1979) which involved me asking some of my pertinent interview questions within the context of the observations that were taking place. During these observations, my participants and I would talk about what they were doing and why they were doing it. On other occasions, I was less involved in any particular conversations and simply watched them as they worked.

Furthermore, the musico-linguistic approach that I took allowed me to have informed conversations with them about their music and importantly enabled me to ask specific questions relating to their music's sonic and lyrical qualities which then critically informed my understanding and analysis.

Each interview that was conducted via video call was documented using Zoom's record function and each interview that was held in person was recorded with a small Dictaphone. Any notes made during interviews and observations were either handwritten or typed on a small iPad. During observations, particularly during my participant's shows and rehearsals, I would record numerous videos, take pictures and make descriptive notes. In terms of my online observations, I would take screenshots of my participant's tweets and any other interactions/conversations that I felt were relevant. The videos, pictures, and screenshots that

I took were invaluable in providing me with a substantial set of records to work with once I started to write up my research findings. Laurier maintains that such records are a 'retrievable dataset' and reviewable to find unanticipated details that went unnoticed during observations (Laurier, 2010:120)

3.8. Analysing the 'data'

I primarily used thematic content analysis to analyze my interview transcripts and observation notes. Rosemarie Anderson maintains that thematic content analysis (TCA) 'is the most foundational of qualitative analytic procedures and in some way informs all qualitative methods'. (Anderson, 2007:1). TCA involved me distilling from tweets, my interview transcripts and observation notes a set of themes and patterns of thought that 'give expression to the commonality of voices across participants'. (Anderson, 2007:1) My TCA of the tweets of my participants and other parties also involved me interpreting the meaning of identifiable narrative elements and the dominant trends in each tweet and evaluating how these meanings act as illustrations of the larger stories and broader social systems that will be presented in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

The structure and content of the chapters within this thesis are very much guided by the overarching themes and narratives derived from my CDA in relation to the music and the TCA in relation to the interviews, observations and tweets. In my analysis and discussion chapters (Chapters, 4, 5, 6 and 7) I weave relevant quotes from tweets and interviews with the

critical discussion of each quote and the critical discussion of my observations to form an analysis that is geared towards addressing my three central research questions. For example, one of the main themes that was derived from the TCA and my CDA was my participants and other Black queer women artists partially orientating their musicking towards ‘imagining a new world’, I then related this commonality in the responses of my participant’s to how they navigate and respond to the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music.

To summarize, my ethnography focused on conceptualizing Black popular music as a space where social ideology is reproduced and articulated, excavating the extent that this social ideology is implicated in the experiences and trajectories of Black queer women artists, gaining a fuller understanding of how the internet and social media practices have been absorbed into their musicking and lastly illuminating how these artists are responding to the social ideology woven into the *shapes, textures and boundaries*. By conducting my ethnography with these things at the heart of every question, interaction, and exploration, I was ultimately able to finely balance my understanding and insights of what the musicking of my participants represents and ‘means’, what it ‘does’ as dynamic and rich materials of Black queer existence and the dissonant contexts that they experience, live and create in.

4. A Prelude: The shapes, textures and boundaries of Contemporary R&B

This chapter delineates the aesthetic codes and conventions of contemporary R&B music. Using the data drawn from my critical discourse analysis of R&B songs and utilising the *music- society nexus* and the Matrix of Domination as a theoretical basis, I discuss and critically deconstruct how prevailing ideologies relating to gender and sexuality that shape our ways of being and moving through the world, figure centrally within contemporary R&B, and the aesthetic codes and conventions of the genre. Through this analysis, I am then able to frame how the reproduction of those ideologies shapes the trajectories and experiences of Black queer women artists and position their musicking within this context.

I specifically look at contemporary R&B music because it can be positioned as a guidepost for cross-Atlantic Black cultural anxieties and world-building related to issues of gender, Black feminist politics, Black masculinity and femininity, and the fluidity of racial, gender and sexual identity. The music from today's artists that create R&B such as Emmavie, Syd, Alicia Keys, Frank Ocean, Sza, Drake, Summer Walker, Miguel, Beyonce, and

PARTYNEXTDOOR embody both collective and individual sentiments around Black social life, especially for me and other Black millennials.

I focus on aesthetic codes and conventions because of two main things: firstly they are central to the ways that social ideology is brought to life and crystallized within the realm of music and secondly they encompass concerns with ‘appreciation, discrimination, value, the historical-cultural line of conception, the common practices, as well as what it is believed to be ‘the good’, how the art is recreated and taught-...an aesthetic helps to guide how to be ‘in’ and informed by the meanings and the relevance of the creative work’. (Banfield, 2009:14).

One of the main contentions that I make in this chapter is that to an extent, heteronormativity, gender normativity and their tenets inform contemporary R&B’s conventions and aesthetics codes.

4.1. Contemporary R&B

4.1.1. Rhythms

Contemporary R&B evolved from traditional Rhythm and blues and combines the musical conventions of soul, funk, hip-hop and pop. Writing in 2003 (when contemporary R&B started to really gain traction), music critic Robert Christgau describes contemporary R&B music as being ‘about texture, mood, feel- vocal and instrumental and rhythmic, articulated as they are smooshed together’. (Christgau, 2003) The genre has moved away from the roots aesthetic and has come to be defined by various new and transformative technologies often pioneered in hip-hop- like 808s and sampling in order to create an undated musical landscape for the up-and-coming artist. Maulsby (2014) underlines this new approach to the production

of R&B music and maintains that by the late 1990s and early 2000s, two production techniques were commonplace in this new and fresh version of R&B: ‘ (1) collaborations between rhythm and blues /soul singers and rappers; and (2) sampling choruses and refrain lines from 1970s /1980s/1990s rhythm and blues /soul recordings’. (p355) The music executives and producers Missy Elliot, Kanye West and Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs can be positioned as being at the forefront of creating a highly successful and lucrative crossover formula based on these collaborations and samplings. R&B starlets Monica’s R&B hit ‘So Gone’ (2003) and Ashanti’s ‘Rain On Me’ (2003) in many respects represent typical examples of the sampling of blues /soul recordings that have come to define contemporary R&B music. Produced by Elliot, ‘So Gone’ samples the horns and strings from The Whispers 1976 slow jam ‘You Are Number One’ to create this infectious 70s-inspired R&B groove. Timbaland¹⁰, Rodney Jerkins¹¹ and Teddy Riley¹² can also be pointed to as the pioneers of this sound.

Using slick and modern approaches to production, contemporary R&B began to dominate the airwaves in the late 90s-2000s with artists such as Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, Mary J. Blige, Usher, Destiny’s Child, Alicia Keys, Brandy and Beyoncé really encapsulating the sound of this new age of R&B and gaining critical acclaim for their respective projects whilst dominating international charts.

¹⁰ Timbaland is a Grammy Award winning producer hailing from Virginia that is best known for working with acts such as Aaliyah and Justin Timberlake. Timbaland is also well known for using obscure samples for classic hits such as Jay-z’s ‘Big Pimpin’ (2000) and Aaliyah’s ‘Don’t Know What To Tell Ya’ (2003)

¹¹ Rodney Jerkins is another Grammy Award Winning producer that has worked with highly successful artists such as Brandy, Destiny’s Child and Tony Braxton. Jerkins is said to have been inspired by garage music during a visit to London in the 90’s and went onto blend it with R&B resulting in songs such ‘Angel in disguise’ (1998) by Brandy.

¹² Hailing from Harlem New York, Teddy Riley is a producer that has been credited with creating the New Jack Swing genre. Riley is known for blending hip-hop and R&B together in his musical production predominantly in the 80’s and early 90’s.

Experimentation with sound and technological innovations have come to form an important part of the genre's conventions and have defined this relatively new wave of R&B music. Voice-altering effects such as autotune and vocoders were popularised by artists such as T-Pain on songs such as 'Bartender' (2009) and 'Buy U a Drank' (2009). The borrowing of sounds and production techniques from other musical traditions such as reggae/dancehall/classical music has also partially defined the R&B of the new millennium. Scholars and critics point to the work of Alicia Keys as being particularly representative of the way that R&B music often borrows from classical music and reference her debut album *Song in A Minor* (2001) as a project that blurred genre lines and brought disparate musical influences together (Maultsby, 2014) (Sanneh, 2021) (Perone, 2021) As a jazz and classically trained pianist, Keys' signature sound is defined by her 'classical piano style featuring arpeggiated chords and the classical-flavoured string arrangements layered on to her melismatic gospel-styled vocals'. (Maultsby, 2014:357) Those that are heavily invested in contemporary R&B often argue that although this relatively new form of R&B can be defined by this blending and borrowing from other genres, similar to more traditional R&B, it is still 'real music'.

Looking beyond the context of the US, R&B music and culture as we know it today is a culmination and combination of Black artistic endeavours originating from across the Black Atlantic. Whilst North America continues to be the epicentre of contemporary and alternative R&B music, culture and industry, the genre has found roots and began to blossom in other countries that have burgeoning Black populations. To be more specific, Black British acts such as Floetry, Estelle, Craig David, Mis-Teeq, Big Brovas, Jamelia and Damage have found relative success making and performing R&B that at times, seamlessly blends elements from Black musical traditions such as grime and garage. Released at the turn of the millennium, David's debut studio album *Born To Do It* (2000) produced by garage duo Artful



Figure 2: Craig David, *Born To Do It*, 2000

With hit singles such as 'Fill Me In', '7 Days' and 'Walking Away', *Born To Do It* merged new forms of R&B vocal stylings with UK garage beats which brought a new and transformative sound to contemporary R&B that was expressly Black British.

The early 2000s also saw various Nigerian artists begin to experiment with mixing sounds that could typically be found on Afrobeat/Afropop records with R&B. Dubbed Africa's 'Boys II Men', the Nigerian R&B quartet Styl-Plus found relative popularity with singles such as 'Runaway' (2006) and 'Olufunmi' (2006) hearty and emotional ballads that see the band regularly interchanging between singing in English and their native tongue Yoruba. In more recent years the 27-year-old Nigerian artist Tems has risen to prominence with songs such as 'Free Mind' (2020) which has been dubbed 'Afro-R&B'.

One of my personal favourite contemporary R&B albums that I discovered as a child and still regularly listen to today is *Full Moon* released by Brandy in 2002. Amongst other personal favourites is the song ‘Be Without You’ taken from Mary J, Blige’s 7th studio album *The Breakthrough* (2005). Peaking at number 3 on the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart in February 2006 and as of March 2017, ‘Be Without You’ was named the most successful R&B/hip-hop song of all time. Blige’s powerful and melismatic vocal performance, the drum machine-backed rhythm and looping piano melody produced by Grammy award-winning producer Brian Michael Cox make it a great example of a contemporary R&B song; it follows the conventions of the genre in terms of theme, vocal performance/ vocal arrangement and composition more broadly.

Figure 3. Sheet music for Mary J. Blige’s *Be Without You*. The last part of the pre-chorus leading to the chorus.

Mary J. Blige and the other artists that I have mentioned gained success not only by making R&B music in its own right but also by collaborating with various successful hip-hop artists, with some critics and scholars arguing that with such collaborations becoming so

commonplace, the two musical traditions ‘literally became one and the same’. (Ruff, 2022)

At the centre of this innovative collaboration between two heavyweights of Black musical traditions was the late great music executive Andre Harrell and his culture-shifting but now defunct record label, Uptown Records. Music writer Stereo Williams notes that Harrell aimed to blend hip-Hop and R&B in an organic and soulful way. ‘With the Uptown sound, acts like Blige and Jodeci pushed mainstream R&B into new territory (famously dubbed ‘hip-hop Soul’) and completed R&B’s embrace of hip-hop swagger and sounds’ (Williams, 2020)

Whilst some music critics have claimed Blige’s sophomore project entitled *My Life* arguably ‘pioneered the marriage between hip-hop and R&B’ (Ruff, 2022) others consider the new jack swing/ R&B boy group Bel Biv DeVoe as moving R&B ‘squarely into hip-hop’s sonic, cultural and visual orbit’. (Williams, 2020). It was within this period of the early to mid-90s that ‘hip-hop and R&B’s sounds (and audience) became so intertwined on the charts and in the public consciousness, that Billboard changed their charting to Hot R&B/hip-hop in 1999 which officially consolidated the genres’ (Ruff, 2022) and recognised its ‘increasing symbiosis’. (Sanneh, 2021:305)

The prevalence of such collaborations and stylings meant that R&B singers would often adopt the spoken word style of delivery that was commonly associated with rappers, which they would then incorporate into their sung vocals (Maultsby, 2014:356) In more recent times, Beyoncé’s ‘Crazy in Love’, featuring Jay-Z (2003), Usher’s hit single ‘Confessions’ Part II (2004) and Mariah Carey’s ‘Shake It Off’ (2005) have become some of the most commercially successful examples of the blending the two vocals styles that have come to define contemporary post-2000 R&B music.

Contemporary R&B artists and producers have continuously linked the past and the present by engaging in the process of re-imagination and reinvention. They remain rooted in older Black musical traditions such as jazz, traditional R&B, soul, blues and funk whilst

simultaneously extending, adapting, and realigning themselves and their works to an ever-evolving music scene that has been greatly influenced by changing tastes and logics of value, the music business landscape, politics and technology.

4.1.2. Blues

4.1.2.1. *The Score*

The aesthetic codes and conventions of contemporary R&B are what I would describe as a technology of ideas and ideals. In the case of R&B, it is ideas and ideals that are particularly centred around sex and sexuality, pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness, gender, femininity and masculinity. The commercialisation and popularisation of R&B music has meant that it has become an integral part of the ‘solidification of social structures and public order’.

(Kortaba and Vannini, 2008:69)

Black popular music is not just a space where music is created, recorded, released, and consumed. It is a space where shared systems of meaning, and practice come to life in very real terms. In the case of R&B music, the powerful and entrenched ideological alliance of race, heteronormative gender and sexuality politics are made manifest through the genre’s aesthetic codes and conventions which often restrict access and obfuscate queer positionalities and standpoints. Such positionalities stand in contravention with how the genre articulates racial, gender and sexuality ideologies. This squeezing out of peripheral standpoints is achieved by the reification of ideologies that weave queerphobia, fatphobia and anti-Blackness together into a system of domination.

Kortaba and Vannini note that because of popular music's inextricable links to other forms of popular culture such as film and fashion (which play an immeasurable role in Black popular culture), the aesthetic codes that exist within R&B have the 'capacity to draw and even shape like-minded audiences characterised by similarities in outlooks, values and taste'. (Kortaba and Vannini, 2008:74) Thus, as laid out in the introductory chapter of this project, R&B music and Black popular music more generally 'in its capacity to draw and form communities may then be said to be a social and political force'. (Kortaba and Vannini, 2009:74) However, in comparison to the ways that hip-hop music has been positioned as the central artistic social and cultural force within Black popular culture, contemporary R&B has not often been seriously linked to any forms of social ideology. Audiences, scholars and critics often don't consider contemporary R&B's focus on specific kinds of sex and romantic relationships and its embodiment of hegemonic heteronormativity as something that can be read as socio-cultural or political, -whether or not artists intend it to be.

The aesthetic codes and conventions of contemporary R&B can be defined by how its artists often 'do' and perform gender and sexuality through their musicking. Kortaba and Vannini note that 'despite the myth of the lonely genius doing music on his/her own, like all social activities music-making is a collective accomplishment.' (2008:77) Musicking is a collective accomplishment in that artists make musical and aesthetic choices with special consideration given to the socio-cultural ideologies that the genre of music that they make has been shaped by.

R&B music artists negotiate their authenticity and their identities through how well they can embody specific gender and sexuality ideologies through their musicking. Again, the embodiment of normative conceptions of gender and sexuality plays an insurmountable role

in R&B music and culture and the musicking of its artists. Lemos (2011) argues that ‘music has the potential to act a medium through which gender relations are negotiated and (re)articulated.’ (p200) I position R&B music and culture as realms where models of gender and sexuality organisation (gender hegemony) are realised, articulated and negotiated.

I start from two central arguments: contemporary R&B singers constantly negotiate how to ‘do’ and perform gender and sexuality in song and their music videos. Underpinning this position is Butler’s (2004) premise that gender is not ‘done’ in isolation, as they maintain in *Undoing Gender* that one does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone. ‘One is always “doing” with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary.’ (2004: 1)

R&B structures the gender and sexuality performances of said artists. Furthermore, I also maintain that in the process of ‘doing’ gender and sexuality, the gender performance of women artists within the realm of contemporary R&B is orientated ‘toward achieving hegemonic cultural ideals’ (Hamilton et al, 2019:326) and such performances often enable them to find mainstream popularity and success.

As Hamilton et al note, ‘the ability to instantiate hegemonic femininities serve as fungible currency women can strategically deploy for individual benefit.’ (2019:326) I use the themes that emerge from my critical discourse analysis to highlight how R&B artists often embody and ‘act out’ different scripts that pertain to gender and sexuality within the context of R&B music and culture.

Whilst R&B music is viewed as less polemic than hip-hop because it hasn’t been associated with the same kinds of gender politics that hip-hop has, I link R&B directly to gender hegemony because I believe that heteronormativity and hegemonic femininity are central to the narratives of success for Black women artists within the given context.

Furthermore, whilst it has been made clear how women in hip-hop often play out and embody specific gender and sexuality narratives, how R&B artists also follow similar patterns of stratification has been a line of action that has yet to be uncovered and unearthed in literary texts.

Central to this project is the understanding that musicking within and beyond Black popular music has been constructed as an incredibly gendered group of activities.

Because of gender theory, we understand that ‘gender is a form of work, a social production’ that brings to light ‘a complex of socially guided perpetual, interactional, and micropolitical activities’ that results in the strict ‘categorisation of someone as a man or a woman’. (Kortaba and Vannini, 2008:96) (West and Zimmerman 2002:42) ‘*Gender, therefore, is a social accomplishment, something that is transparently practiced in the presence of others, and carried out according to the social norms existent within particular social situations. Gender, in sum, is an emergent feature of the categorization of social interaction, something that comes off a situation in light of people’s conceptions of what is proper and on the basis of beliefs and routine activities expected of members of a sex category.*’ (Kortaba and Vannini, 2008:96)

4.1.3. 'And as a young' in I was taught the game' – Contemporary R&B and Masculinities

The lucrative alliance created between hip-hop and R&B not only shaped the purely musical aspects of new millennium R&B¹³, but also had a hand in shaping some of the more non-sonic aspects of the genre. The relationship between hip-hop and R&B caused certain aesthetic tensions with specific regard to how male R&B artists have had to embody gender and conceptions of masculinity. In other words, hip-hop has had an influence on the musicking of R&B artists, being particularly influential on how male R&B artists perform gender.

Sanneh maintains that 'male R&B singers, in particular, had to contend with the perceived toughness of male rappers, who would make their R&B counterparts seem rather soft by comparison.' (Sanneh, 2021:231) In order to counteract this image of 'softness' R&B music boy bands such as Jodeci were shaped and developed by powerful music execs into having what Sanneh describes as a 'rowdy, hip-hop- inspired image'. Often sporting flashy jewellery, baggy clothing and heavy construction boots and sneakers during their performances and in their music videos, Jodeci set themselves apart from 'courteous matching suit R&B acts like Boyz II Men' (Sanneh, 2021:321-2) who were starting to be perceived as old-fashioned and outdated. As Williams puts it: 'It was a new age and hip-hop's influence had taken over the genre.' (Williams, 2020) Male Contemporary R&B artists like Trey Songz often move through and produce masculinity by engaging their musicking in practices that the majoritarian sphere constructs as masculine. I would even go as far as saying that male contemporary R&B singers often collaborate with male hip-hop artists to (re)masculinise themselves.

¹³ The term 'New millennium' R&B is used to indicate a time frame not a genre.

In recent times, there have been some factions of R&B legends that have become quite critical of the aesthetic influence that hip-hop has had on R&B. Shawn Stockman member of the legendary R&B group Boyz II Men recently tweeted his thoughts on the matter:

'R&B has lost their identity because it felt like it had to compete with the bravado of the hip hop world. Because labels stopped supporting the perception of Black men being more than displaying a "thug image".'- @shawnstockman

Stockman believes that the 'thug image' or aesthetic that is usually associated with hip-hop artists has pervaded R&B music and has led to the loss of any discernible R&B identity perhaps like the one he and his fellow artists found lots of success with during the 90s. What is clear is that the legacy of the hip-hop aesthetic still reverberates throughout contemporary R&B.

Trey Songz is a contemporary R&B artist that has 'tried to compete with the bravado of the hip-hop world' and separate himself from the tenderness that has long been associated with R&B music. On the 2008 track titled 'Gynia boy' (slang for Virginia boy where Songz was born and raised) we see Songz at the beginning stages of his music career attempting to embody the 'thug image' that Stockman is referring to and position himself as a 'hard' hypermasculine singer:

*'I'm from the home of where n*ggas serve packs and thangz,
quick to stab their brother in the back for change,
and as a young 'in I was taught the game,
used to watch my daddy whilst he cut that cane'*

Minute 1:51-2:06 of 'gynia boy'

Here we see that Songz is trying to establish himself as a singer whose life and musicking has been shaped by the toughness of things that he has seen and experienced from a young age. 'Gynia boy' is a decisive attempt to stake his claim in the world of masculine posturing that exists within and beyond this new iteration of R&B music and culture. Songz is trying to establish that whilst he may be an R&B singer, he has the same life experiences and bravado that are typically attributed to male rappers who are always positioned as hypermasculine. Thus, Songz believes that he should be treated and perceived as having equal levels of masculinity in the eyes of his audiences. The construction of contemporary R&B music as 'soft' or 'tender' also complicates the musicking of male artists. Whilst male contemporary R&B artists understand that emotional sensitivity and tenderness are amongst the genre's most well-understood conventions, they still actively work against being perceived as tender or sensitive because of how sensitivity and tenderness are constructed as being a part of what some describe as subordinate masculinities. In *La conciencia de la mestiza* queer and feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldua contends that the constructions and interpretation of emotional sensitivity and tenderness as 'subordinate' 'is a facet of contemporary and toxic manifestations of masculinity in the present gender binary'. (Anzaldua, 1999 as seen in Elkins, 2018:3)

The kind of posturing that takes place on 'Gynia boy' was born out of the negotiation of tenderness and manifestations of masculinity (which often sees male artists talking about drugs, violence or women). 'Gynia boy' is not only an attempt by Songz to stake his claim within the hierarchy of masculinities, it also an effort to fend off the any form of queer sexual narratives that are often placed on male singers (and men in general) that don't particularly engage with identifiable masculine practices. Trey Songz was not only 'taught the game' in

that he learnt how to make and package illegal drugs, he was also taught the ‘game’ of how to be a man, what Trey Songz is alluding to here is that the roughness of being ‘from the home of where n*ggas serve packs and thangz’ has figured centrally in him going from a boy to a man.

Schippers (2007) and Connell (1995) (2000) note that ‘through their recurring enactment over time and space these practices structure the production and distribution of resources, the distribution of power in the form of authority, cathexis...the social arena of desire and sexuality, and symbolism of the production of meaning and values.’ (Connell 2000)

(Schippers, 2007: 86) Furthermore, such hegemonic gender practices operate ‘through the subordination and marginalization of other masculinities’. (Schippers, 2007:87)

Male R&B singers are especially cognizant of homophobic fears amongst Black audiences and some segments of Black communities (where queerness is positioned as diametrically opposed to Black masculinity and Blackness), thus, fears around not being perceived as ‘hard’ and masculine are rooted in fears of being perceived as homosexual.

Homophobia indeed structures the experiences and identities of heterosexual folk (Kimmel et al., 2004:20)

Grammy Award-winning R&B singer Miguel is a male artist that has often faced homophobic ridicule because of the unconventional way that he styled himself and the aesthetic that he fostered at the beginning stages of his career. As Black music scholar Shanté Paradigm Small notes ‘the Black performer who strays away from the contemporary sanctioned roles of masculinity is often labeled with an invective imagined to be the most damaging: something related to being gay, a faggot, or possessing a “feminine” quality.’ (2022: 107) One only has to google the words ‘Miguel gay’ to see a plethora of articles and blogs that had deemed him as gay for presenting himself differently to the other R&B artists that came up at the same time as him. Black queer positionalities within the realm of R&B

music have historically had to exist in secret and under the cloak of heteronormativity, as Clarissa Brooks notes ‘...Black queer artists have not always had the means or autonomy to be public with their identity; legends such as Whitney Houston, Luther Vandross, and Sylvester all dealt with hiding their sexuality to move in the safety of ambiguity throughout their career.’ (Clarissa Brooks, *Teen Vogue*, 2023)

4.1.4. Contemporary R&B, Sex & Sexual Desire and the Negotiation of Sexuality and Gender Identity

One of the most overt conventions of Contemporary R&B music is its focus on sex and sexual desire. Contemporary R&B music has come to have a distinct relationship with the bedroom shenanigans of its audiences.

From the genre in its many forms being referred to as ‘bedroom music’ to certain songs being tagged with the moniker ‘baby-making hits’ to songs that overtly reference sex and sexual acts, post- 2000 R&B often finds its home and fulfils its alluring effects in incredibly intimate spaces such as the bedroom. With popular R&B songs such as J. Holiday’s hit record ‘Bed’ (2007) and R&B lothario Trey Songz’s raunchy single ‘Neighbors Know My Name’ (2009) and Usher’s ‘Trading Places’ (2011), R&B music is inextricably linked to the bedroom. All three songs explicitly reference sex and sexual acts, and this also dominates the narratives within their respective videos. Whilst it may seem that the songs are only about sex and sexual acts, bubbling underneath the surface of all these songs are covert narratives of sexual dominance that emerge from normative performances of gender, namely performances of hegemonic masculinity. I argue that these songs demonstrate how steeped R&B music is in the reproduction of ideas and ideals surrounding hegemonic masculinity and normative performance of gender. Connell (1995) and Schippers (2007) define hegemonic masculinity

as ‘the qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.’ (Connell, 1995) (Schippers, 2007:94) Schippers notes that ‘hegemonic masculinity, when embodied by at least some men over time and space, legitimates men’s domination over women as a group’. (2007:87)

While I take Connell and Schippers's framing of hegemonic masculinity as central to this work, I follow Collins in seeing it as a construction that is about more than just gender.

On ‘Bed’ Holiday sets the tone of the song from the off and establishes himself as the principal instigator of the sexual situation that the song constructs:

‘Put you to bed, bed, bed

Put you to bed, bed, bed’

Holiday then directs his fictional lover to *‘change into that Victoria’s secret thing that I like’*. The *‘put you to bed’* and then the directing of his lover illustrates how men often position themselves as the ones in charge and in control of heterosexual sexual situations. In the accompanying music video, the spraying of the perfume by the video vixen after Holiday sings *‘Perfume, spray it there’* further shows how men often control and direct sexual situations and illustrates how women are often portrayed as docile and solely been led by men in these contexts.

Songz’s ‘Neighbors Know My Name’ follows a more overt narrative of control and sexual dominance. The lyrics of the song positions Songz as the main ‘doer’ of the sex and sexual acts.

‘And as soon as I go deep getting it in’

I bet the neighbors know my name

Way you screaming, scratching, yelling'

'Take this pillow right here, grab this

And I know you're so excited if you bite it

they won't hear'

'So the music gon' be loud, you gon' scream

and shout

Girl, your body's a problem

they call me the problem solver'

'While I'll be banging on your body'

The lyrics taken from different parts of this song articulate how men continuously position themselves as the 'giver' and position women as the 'receiver' in heterosexual sexual situations. Songz constructs his imagined sexual partner's body as a 'problem', a problem that must be solved, a challenge that must be conquered. In this way 'sex becomes a contest', when sexual pleasure happens within the context of heterosexual sex, it is often positioned as a man's victory of a woman's resistance (Kimmel, 2004: 5). I want to note here that on this record, Songz never once croons about any sexual acts that are being done to him. This is because heteronormative sexual ideals that critically inform such songs do not ever view sex as something that is 'done' to men. Rather in the context of heterosexual sex, sex is something that is always positioned as being done to women, 'modern, patriarchal, Western

culture has decreed...that in sexual relationships, to penetrate is masculine and to be penetrated is feminine' (Bankhead, 2014:30)

As Schippers notes

'...in Western societies, the cultural construction of embodied sexual relations, along with other features of masculinity and femininity, defines a naturalised masculine sexuality as physically dominant *in relation to femininity*. Despite women embracing and expressing sexual agency at different historical times and in different cultural settings, contemporary, Western constructions of heterosexual sex still reduce it to penetrating and being penetrated and that relation is consistently constructed as one of intrusion, "taking", dominating.' (Segal, 1994) (Schippers, 2007: 90)

In heterosexual coital sex 'the active role is assumed to be the male and the passive role by the female' (Anonymous, 2012)

Interestingly, on 'Trading Places' Usher attempts to subvert hegemonic gender and sexuality norms lyrically and visually by using the entirety of the song and its accompanying video to construct a narrative that sees him trading his place as a 'doer' for his sexual partner's position as 'receiver'. Usher attempts to flip the normative script of men being in control over sexual situations by centering the narrative of him being the one that is controlled and seduced in the typical manner that women are in such contexts.

'Trading Places' is a testament to how R&B songs written for men often embody and articulate hegemonic heteronormative and gendered ideologies relating to masculinity, sex and sexual desires. Usher establishes that the sex and the sexual situation that is about to occur in 'Trading Places' is going to be *different* from the norm '***Man, I know what you used to, but we gon' do something different tonight.***' He then goes into explicit detail about

exactly how this situation is going to be different. Instead of him doing all of the wining and dining that is positioned as a chivalrous and masculine thing to do before sex, he positions himself as being on the receiving end of this perceived masculinist behaviour,

'Now we gon' do this thing a little different tonight

You gon' come over and pick me up in your ride

You gon' knock, then you gon' wait

Oooh, you gon' take me on a date

You're gonna open my door

And I'ma reach over and open yours

Gon' pay for dinner, take me to see a movie

And whisper in my ear, how bad you really wanna do me

Girl, now take me home and get up in my pants

Pour me up a shot and force me to the bed'

'Girl' is said here to remind his audiences that even though he has 'demasculinised' himself by putting himself in the typical place of a woman, he retains a position of power because he is still about to have sex with a woman. The chorus and outro of this R&B hit are perhaps its most important and exposing parts

'I'm always on the top, tonight,

I'm on the bottom

'Cause we trading places'

'You've been me, I, I've been you

But we gon' switch this thing back'

Here Usher exposes his cognizance of what some have described as the ‘sex politics of positioning’. Usher understands that in many respects, the kind of sex where a man is ‘on the bottom’ and a woman is ‘on the top’ is not the norm and even immoral within some socio-cultural contexts. Not only is Usher ‘always on top’ because he enjoys it, he takes up this position because he believes that it is the natural order of things, that always on top is where he is meant to be as a man, and that it is his ‘place’ that he has only temporarily ‘traded’ hence his singing in the outro that ‘*You’ve been me, I, I’ve been you But we gon’ switch this thing back*’, back to regular scheduled programming.

Whilst the video vixen in the video is mostly pictured in her underwear and lingerie, in most of the shots taken of Usher he is either fully clothed or without a shirt on. This shows that despite the trading of places i.e., sexual positionings that the song is based around and repeats over and over again, Usher refuses to let go of portrayals of sexual dominance and power that he and the likes of Songz and Holiday often depend on to establish control over sexual narratives in their accompanying videos. Despite the ‘trading of places’ that the song articulates, Usher is still in firm control of the sexual situation. The playing of the imaginary piano in the video layered on top of the rudimentary nature of the constantly chiming chords is juxtaposed against the supposed ‘sophisticated’ narrative that the song articulates.

Although Usher believes that he is subverting gendered sexual norms, ‘Trading Places’ only confirms that heterosexual male-led sex is what is believed to be the norm and that sex is not viewed as an equal parts exchange between men and women. In other words, ‘Trading places’ ‘realises the patriarchal dividend’. (Schippers, 2007:87)

My analysis of ‘Bed’, ‘Neighbors Know My Name’ and ‘Trading Places’ demonstrates that songs written and performed by men often reify and reproduce heteronormative and gendered

ideologies around sex and sexual desire. Furthermore, these R&B songs are an example of how ideas regarding gender are often brought into sexual interactions.

Such songs explicitly demonstrate how the normative gender performance of men within and beyond Black popular music is often dependent on the subjugation of women in multiple contexts. As Schipper and Connell note, gender hegemony operates ‘through the subordination of femininity to hegemonic masculinity’. (Schippers, 2007:87)

The effects of the collective embodiment of the practices deconstructed here on ‘individuals, relationships, institutional structures, and global relations of domination’. (Connell, 2000) is that domination over women and non-normative subjectivities is maintained and legitimised.

Amid this subjugation, there are several contemporary R&B musical texts that try to articulate and negotiate womanhood and what it means to be a woman. These musical texts are a means of negotiating the position that women find themselves in within the matrix of domination that exists within Black popular music. Whilst vocal stylings and production are varying, their articulations of womanhood are all drawn from the same unifying ideology of gender hegemony. ‘Cater 2 U’ (2005) by now disbanded platinum-selling R&B supergroup Destiny’s Child, ‘Girl Like Me’ (2021) by Jazmine Sullivan featuring H.E.R and ‘A Woman’s Worth’ (2001) by contemporary R&B virtuoso Alicia Keys exemplify the interplay of ‘emphasised femininity’ and hegemonic femininity implicit in a lot of contemporary R&B written and performed by women artists. Coined by sociologist Raewyn Connell (1987), emphasised femininity ‘is defined around compliance with subordination and is orientated to accommodating the interests and desires of men’. (1987: 184) My understanding of ‘hegemonic femininity’ is drawn from Hamilton et al extrapolation from Collins’ *Black Sexual Politics* (2004) which frames hegemonic femininities as ‘the most celebrated cultural

ideals of womanhood in a given time and place that serve to uphold and legitimate all axes of oppression in the matrix of domination simultaneously.’ (2019:322)

I argue that within all of the referenced tracks, these women embody and articulate the patriarchal gender politics that emerge from emphasised and hegemonic femininity that have now come to figure centrally in contemporary R&B. I note here that heterosexuality has been ‘baked in’ to hegemonic femininities’ that these women embody. I argue that a lot of cis het women in contemporary R&B strategically use hegemonic femininities to make an array of ‘trades’ and negotiations as they move within Black popular music as a matrix of domination.

Released on Destiny’s Child’s 2004 album *Destiny Fulfilled*, ‘Cater 2 U’ is a record that I would describe as being squarely focused on not only accommodating the interests and desires of men but also centering them. Throughout this record all three members of Destiny’s Child, (Beyoncé Knowles, Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams) thanklessly ‘pour out their love letter’ to the men in their lives and place how they believe men should be catered to at the center of the song’s narrative. It is within Kelly Rowland’s pre-chorus that the song’s orientation towards hegemonic femininity is laid bare:

‘I promise ya (Promise ya)

I’ll keep myself up (Up)

Remain the same chick (Yeah)

You fell in love with (Yeah)

I’ll keep it tight, I’ll keep my figure right

I’ll keep my hair fixed, keep rockin’ the hottest outfits

When you come home late, tap me on my shoulder, I’ll roll over

Baby, I heard you

I'm here to serve you'

This section of the record articulates the practices that women often perform to position themselves within hegemonic femininity and maintain their attractiveness in the eyes of men. *'I'll keep my hair fixed, keep rocking the hottest outfits'* illustrates how far 'feminine beauty is consistent with the naturalisation of active masculine desire for women as sexual or romantic objects' (Hamilton et al, 2019:324) Kelly understands that 'keeping herself up' by adhering to feminine beauty standards is essential in maintaining not only her place in the hegemony but it also critical in helping her keep and 'cater 2' her man. In realms such as R&B music and culture there is what some scholars have described as a 'beauty premium' 'in earnings and career success, which is 'determined in part by conformity to gendered appearance ideals'. (Cawley, 2004; Cook and Mobbs 2018; Hamermesh and Biddle 1994 as seen in Hamilton et al, 2019:327) By always having their 'hair fixed' and making sure their figures are 'tight' and 'right', women R&B artists are particularly invested in racialised gendered appearance ideals because they know and accept that it is integral to their visibility within and beyond R&B. In the context of the West, Black women, in particular, understand that 'they are judged (and judge each other) on their relative abilities to meet racialised standards of beauty central to hegemonic femininities'. (Hunter 2002, 2007 as seen in Hamilton, et al 2019: 329) As Hamilton et al notes, 'celebrity status for women is tightly coupled with the ability to perform hegemonic femininities.' (Hamilton et al, 2019:327) Sabala and Gopal (2010) also maintain that 'in an era of globalisation, the images around us of "ideal" feminine beauty and the pressure to emulate these ideals operate as reflections of patriarch and capitalism, largely through the use of diets and consumer products designed to 'enhance' our faces, hair and bodies.' (p.44)

In the case of Black women in the West, racialised standards of feminine beauty often involve the upkeep of hair in specific ways (straight/ chemically straightened, covered by

wigs and weaves) and the upkeep of the body ‘tight’ and ‘right’ (Slim, not too athletic, Brazilian Butt Lifts, breast augmentation, nose jobs, lip fillers) It is important to note that racialised beauty standards and beauty standards in general for women are constantly shifting. When Black women move closer toward Western, hegemonic beauty ideals, they are often able to gain popularity in whatever field of entertainment they are in.

When asked about what she believes is the standard for Black women to gain increased popularity within and beyond R&B music Participant P stated: *‘One thing I have noticed is that Ari Lennox¹⁴ had been releasing beautiful music for years, had her hair natural hair out, braids, then the moment she gets a buss down middle part¹⁵, everyone starts paying attention to her, everyone was like ‘oh Ari Lennox is so gorgeous! You know like that, so I feel like you definitely need to have a frontal, BBL, that’s just how its been for the past...I want to say at least a year now, BBLs and frontal¹⁶s, really honestly, truly.’*

What is considered as beauty and beautiful within the context of Black popular music and culture are ‘typically the forms of embodiment, adornment, and deportment that display valued sides of all relevant binaries...and this signifies complicity and support for existing power structures’. (Cottom 2019 as seen in Hamilton et al, 2019:324)

‘I’ll keep it tight, I’ll keep my figure right’ illustrates that hegemonic femininity and idealized deportments are constructed and embodied through body politics, body politics that often, leans into fatphobia. In the music video that accompanies ‘Cater 2 U’ we see the camera pan across several parts of Kelly’s body whilst she sings those lines.

¹⁴ Ari Lennox is a popular R&B singer that is known for often sporting her natural hair in her music videos and whilst performing.

¹⁵ A ‘Buss down middle part’ refers to a hairstyle that involves the use of high-quality hair extensions or wig to create a voluminous and lustrous middle part. The term ‘buss down’ is a slang expression that originated amongst African Americans in hip-hop culture and generally refers to something that is flashy, extravagant or high-quality.

¹⁶ A frontal, also known as a lace front, is a type of hairpiece/wig that is designed to mimic a natural hairline and cover the front portion of the head. Frontals are usually used to create a seamless and natural looking hairline, especially when installing a wig or a weave.



Figure 4: Destiny's Child, *Cater 2 U*, 2005

By constantly panning across her slender frame/figure, the video attempts to construct Kelly's own body as the 'tight' and right figure that she refers to in the song whilst at the same time constructing the bodies of those that do not resemble hers as the opposite. '*I'll keep it tight*' is also incredibly ambiguous because Kelly could not only be referring to her body in this instance, but she could also be referring to her vagina. Focusing in on the language that is used to bring forward this politic, Kelly's references to her body and the repetition of the word 'keep' pushes forward the notion that gender 'is instituted through the stylisation of the body' (Butler, 1988: 519) and that emphasised femininity is not a place, rather, it is a constant negotiation and ultimately an 'incessant activity performed'. (Butler, 2004: 1) As Butler importantly points out 'as in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualised form of their legitimation.' (Butler, 1990) Here Kelly is staging an reenactment of

acts that have been reinforced by societal norms regarding the body, they have long been established as feminine and place her at the apex of ‘womanliness’.

The second line that stand out within this text is ‘*When you come home late, tap me on my shoulder, I’ll roll over. Baby, I heard you, I’m here to serve you*’. The ‘tap me on my shoulder, I’ll roll over’ presents Kelly as being incredibly submissive to and receptive of her man’s late-night sexual advances and desires, ‘*I’m here to serve you*’ further positions sex as an act of service to men within the heterosexual context. Such performances of femininity are often reliant on women being sexually subservient to men. It is important note that some of the language used throughout this song has been precontextualised by previous songs that are based on similar themes. For example, by adopting ‘submissive’ routines such as ‘remaining the same chick’ and keeping ones ‘figure right’, Kelly performatively evokes ‘existing tropes of the submissive woman’ (Meyerhoff, 2014: 3) that already exist within several R&B songs. The use of this language ‘projects forward in time’ and maintains normative performances of gender. The kind of language being used in ‘Cater 2 U’ acts as what Meyerhoff and Ochs (1990) describe as an *index* for womanliness (Meyerhoff, 2014:3)

Written and produced by Alicia Keys, ‘A Woman’s Worth’ attempts to construct what a woman’s perceived worth is through her relation to men. Wittig (1992) maintains that ‘through the “heterosexual contrac”, women are constituted as real” women and men as “real men”.’(Wittig, 1992: 44 as seen in Yep, 2003:32)

I focus on two lines within this song that attempt to frame what a woman should be. I argue that ‘A woman’s Worth’ frames a woman’s worth through her ability to embody and act out ‘characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity’. Through this framing, ‘A woman’s

worth' inadvertently 'guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women'. (Schippers, 2007:94)

On 'A Woman's Worth' Keys positions 'real women' as those that know how to engage with their men in specific ways. '*And a real woman knows a real man always comes first*'.

Central to emphasized femininity ideologies and the way that women are meant to engage with men is patriarchy. According to patriarchal ideology, men always come first and historically, women have been socialized to not only believe such but actively participate and buy into it.

Women's studies scholar Carrie Paetcher (2018) notes, 'the normalisation of hegemonic gender forms makes it appear to those that are oppressed by them that such forms are not just how things are but how they ought to be. Those oppressed by a particular gender ideology such as patriarchy are nevertheless caught up and invested in it.' (2018:123) Furthermore, the kind of hegemonic femininity that this song articulates is one that not only perpetuates the traditional gender order but by alluding to what a 'real woman' is, it presents itself as the kind of 'femininity that all women should aspire to'. (Paetcher, 2018:124)

'If you treat me fairly, I'll give you all my goods,

Treat you like a real woman should'

Like Kelly on 'Cater 2 U', Keys positions sexual relations with men as legitimising her positioning as a 'real woman'. Kitzinger & Wilkinson maintain that 'in modern Western societies, being a 'real' woman means declaring oneself as heterosexual and engaging in heterosexual sexual activity.' (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1994b as seen in Yep, 2003: 32)

Hamilton et al also point out that 'women who are complicit in upholding the matrix of domination must concede on one dimension: They gain individual benefits while supporting gendered forms of oppression that disadvantage women as a group. The tradeoff of individual benefits for collective subordination within the gender axis is captured by the concept of the

'patriarchal bargain.' (2019:330) By giving her man all of her 'goods', Alicia is securing her position as a real woman.

Furthermore, this trading of sexual goods for being treated fairly illustrates how women in R&B articulate this bargaining and 'conform to men's domination as a means of accessing...personal benefits'. (Kandiyoti, 1988)

The multiple mentions of a 'real woman' in this song is also an attempt to reify the notion of a preexisting identity that is 'woman'. The argument that being a 'real woman' is expressed through acts such as giving sexual goods to men and putting men first implies that 'gender itself is something prior to' (Butler, 1988:528) these acts, that there is a core essence of gender that is separate from this expression. Furthermore, in referring to what a 'real woman is' Key's is implicitly stating that there is a 'fake woman' or women.

'Girl Like Me' articulates an ascendancy of hegemonic femininity that reproduces forms of oppression and inequality. This record demonstrates how women within and beyond this realm often try to position themselves as 'better' than other women 'in part by leveraging investments in hegemonic femininities'. (Hamilton et al, 2019:326)

'Yeah, I made a profile on Tinder

Since you left me to be with her

I think that means I'm getting' desperate'

You must've wanted somethin' different

Still don't know what I was missin'

What you asked I would've given

It ain't right how these hoes be winnin'

Why they be winnin'? Yeah (why they be? Why they be?)

No hope for a girl like me, how come they be winnin'? Yeah

(Why they be? Why they be?)

And I ain't wanna be

But you gon' make a hoe out of me

Yeah, you gon' make me a gold digger (gold digger)

Maybe I should look like a stripper

Wearin' Fashion Nova dresses

All these dudes be so pressed and impressed with it

You leave me with no choice, ohh

I can't do this good girl shit no more'

Sullivan positions folks that use online dating apps such as Tinder as desperate. One of the major ways that women are invested in hegemonic femininities is by positioning other women that deviate from practices and performances that are defined as feminine as what Schippers described as 'Pariahs' (2007: 95)

Both H.E.R and Sullivan position themselves as 'good girls' and the women that their men have left them for as 'hoe', 'gold digger' and 'stripper'. '*Fashion nova dresses*¹⁷' are often associated with those same women that are positioned as 'hoe' etc. thus '*Wearing fashion Nova dresses*' further illustrates how far women in R&B are invested in gendered appearance ideals that emerge from the respectability politics that flows through the hegemonic femininities that they are advantageous to their careers. As Hamilton et al note 'hegemonic femininities require a demonstration of 'respectability' but as 'Girl Like Me' demonstrates this does not play out in isolation of other women, 'some women are routinely at the wrong

¹⁷ Fashion Nova is a popular online fashion retailer known for its trendy and affordable clothing, including dresses.

end of sexual respectability politics' (2019:328) The positions of 'Hoe', 'gold digger' and 'stripper' are brought to life within the context of R&B and other Black popular musical traditions such as hip-hop. Several contemporary R&B songs and music videos articulate respectability politics in varying ways, 'Nasty Girl' (2002) by Destiny's Child, P!nk's 'Stupid Girls' (2006) and Justine Skye's 'Jezebel' (2016) come to mind as songs that do such.

Not only do 'pariah' characteristics like the ones stated in 'Girl Like Me' 'become master statuses' for women who are deemed to enact or exhibit them, 'these women are considered socially undesirable and contaminating to social life more generally' (Schippers, 2007: 95), hence H.E.R's disdain towards the fact that '*All these dudes be so pressed and impressed with it*'. By positioning themselves in contrast to those 'hoes' that 'look like a stripper' and wear 'fashion nova dresses', Sullivan and H.E.R are then constructing themselves as virtuous and the opposite of whatever they believe a 'hoe' to be. This kind of hegemonic femininity that 'Girl Like Me' and other songs like it articulate can be thought of as a kind of 'femininity premium'. The songstresses embody this kind of hegemonic femininity and achieve this 'othering' by trying to 'set the terms of sexual judgment by framing their own behaviors and attitudes as the norm by which others should be measured'. (Armstrong et al. 2014 as seen in Hamilton et al. 2019:327) This kind of othering that takes place within such songs as the ones that I have deconstructed has multiple benefits for woman R&B singers which include, being framed as respectable. 'Women who embody hegemonic femininities are not passive victims of social structure but are instead actively complicit beneficiaries of the matrix of domination.' (Hamilton et al.2019: 316)

What makes the femininity performances of Keys, Destiny's Child, Sullivan, H.E.R and many others hegemonic is that they simultaneously 'reproduce multiple structures of oppression'. Hamilton et al importantly note that 'gender as a system is reinforced when

women claim a pure and respectable femininity in need of protection’ and use femininity in service of men’s projects. (2019:333) In addition to this, the narratives that these women constantly produce within their music contribute to the endorsement of interlocking social meaning, practices and structures that elevate cis het subjectivities to the top and relegate non-normative subjectivities to the bottom of social hierarchies within and beyond Black popular music. What’s more is that in demonstrating that there is a unifying logic and ideology that run through these songs it works to maintain the position that Butler takes up in *Undoing Gender*, that ‘one does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone. The constant circulation of different ideas and ideals regarding how gender is *meant* to be performed within these songs demonstrates that ‘one is always ‘doing’ gender with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary’. (Butler, 2004)

4.1.5. Tensions arising

There have been certain aesthetic tensions that have risen out of R&B’s focus on sex and sexual pleasure. Alongside the insurgency of hip-hop aesthetics into R&B, the sexual narratives that dominate R&B music have caused a certain ‘death’ narrative to begin to swirl around discourse regarding the genre.

Several critics and listeners have even been embroiled in debates around whether R&B is ‘dead’ or ‘alive’ (Neal, 1999) (George, 2003) (Mixon, 2022) (Wolfson, 2015) (Harrison, 2019) (Chery, 2020) (Nwanji, 2023) with some describing contemporary R&B music as a ‘degraded shell of its former self’. Even R&B/hip-hop producer Sean Combs took to Twitter in August of 2022 to proclaim that R&B is dead by asking his 15.3 million followers ‘Who killed R&B?’ Combs’ tweet sent the R&B community into a frenzy with various artists and

tastemakers firing back with remarks about how the genre is in fact, very much alive and that there are several artists who have been working hard to sustain the genre's place at the forefront of popular culture and popular music charts.

Whilst some critics argue that the supposed 'death' of the genre has come about because of the sharp turn away from the realm of 'thoughtful, politically conscious' singers such as Marvin Gaye, Luther Vandross and Aretha Franklin in favour of flashy, sexy and outlandish hip-hop inspired club records (Sanneh, 2021:257), others follow Shawn Stockman and argue that it is going through an 'identity crisis' and/or has just taken a backseat to hip-hop and melodic rap. George argues that these new waves of R&B are 'just not as gutsy or spirited or tuned into the needs of its core audience as it once was' (2003:13) What is interesting about the 'death' discourse within R&B music is that it has been taking place across several different generations of R&B audiences. Moreover, these conversations often seem to take place during phases of social, cultural and at times, economic shifts or disruption, whether it is deemed to be small or significant or 'good' or 'bad'.

While at the surface level it may seem that this long -spanning discourse was/is about the supposed decline of R&B music and culture, upon taking a closer look, it is clear these tensions exist because of the continuous process of adopting, challenging, abandoning and recycling of conventions and aesthetics.

Through the music-society nexus what can be understood is that as social, cultural, economic, and political contexts shift, the conventions and aesthetics of musical traditions also shift and are critically shaped by those shifts. Constantly shifting social economies play an incredibly crucial role in the development of the aesthetics and conventions of musical genres.

For example, take the post-World War II context that Neal (1999) and George (2003) discuss and reference at length. Both Neal and George maintain that as the battle for political, social

and economic freedom raged on in the 30 years post World War II, ‘the struggle to overcome the overt apartheid of America had given Blacks an energy, a motivating dream, that inspired the music’s makers.’ (2003: 162) (1999:148) The post-war social context produced burgeoning Black communities, cultures and artists in the US that were ‘forged by common political, economic and geographic conditions’. (George, 2003: 12)

Thus, ‘as the organised struggles for African- American empowerment intensified and subsequently migrated North to urban centres, the Black popular music tradition began to convey the urgency of its historical moment.’ (Neal, 1999:170) The musical works of Detroit’s Aretha Franklin and Chicago’s Gil Scott-Heron really embody the historical moment that Neal refers to.

In places like Nigeria, which was experiencing its own turbulent post-independence context, artists such Fela Kuti and the Lijadu Sisters were coming to the fore of the Nigerian Juju and Afrobeat music tradition through their distinctive anti-establishment musicking.

However, as time inched closer to the new millennium, Nelson notes that the struggles that many Black folks faced at the time had somewhat been tempered by new economic opportunities and ‘post-race’ America, thus a segment of Black America had beaten the odds and achieved the American dream that once seemed like a distant folklore tale. With this new socio-cultural context came an abandoning of the conventions of old with R&B artists in their droves signing seemingly lucrative recording contracts with major labels such as MGM, ABC, RCA and Warner in the mid to late seventies, however with these contracts came pressure to ‘reach quite intentionally for white sales’. (George, 2003:164)

It was at this moment in time that marked a significant shift in the conventions of Black musical traditions such as R&B music. With Record labels such as Motown outwardly and explicitly fostering strategies for institutionalising ‘crossover’ (the sale of Black music to white audiences), sensibilities that would appeal to what Neal describes as ‘the arms of mass

consumer culture and American modernity' became the zeitgeist of the conventions of this emerging wave of R&B music and in the new millennium, the rise of the internet and digitalisation stood to deepen R&B's love affair with mass consumer culture.

Although artists do understand and actively pursue the selling of sex and sexual desire, I do not perceive it to be much of a departure from perhaps the more 'respected' blues music traditions. I cite blues music because it came into the fore before Black popular music was drawn into the fore of mass consumer culture and because R&B music is a derivative of blues music not just sonically, but more importantly in its expression of sexual narratives.

The 'B' (blues) in R&B has historically been firmly grounded within discourse regarding Black sexual politics. As Davis states, 'provocative and pervasive sexual imagery [flowed through] ...Sexuality was central in both men's and women's blues ...' and arguably defined it. Davis posits that 'the blues ...articulated a new valuation of individual emotional needs and desires.' In fact, as Davis posits, the birth of the blues was 'aesthetic evidence of new psychosocial realities within the Black population...it both reflected and helped to construct a new Black consciousness'. (Davis, 1999:3,6,11) So whilst R&B music can be defined by its articulation of sex and sexual politics, rather than it placing importance on the aesthetic ideal of originality, it somewhat pays homage to the aesthetic ideals of its origins.

Interestingly, contemporary R&B music and other Black musical traditions that have been born out of the blues tradition mark a distinct departure from how blues music often embraced the musical articulation of same-sex sexual desire and even queer gender expressions. The musicking of blues icons Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey demonstrate that whilst heterosexual sexual desire naturally took center stage, the musical articulation of queer sexual desire also came into the fore within the blues musical tradition.

4.2. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated that ideology regarding gender and sexuality figures centrally within the aesthetic codes and conventions of R&B music and musicking. This chapter exposed how Black popular music, more specifically R&B music is a realm where musicking is staged through tenets of heteronormative gender and sexuality politics. I found that artists that make and perform R&B music often embody and perform hegemonic masculinities and femininities through their musicking. Within my discussion of the way that R&B artist embody and articulate such gender ideology through their musicking, I illustrated that ‘In the on-going process of recurring patterns of social practice within contemporary R&B, ‘the quality content of masculinity and femininity becomes not just the gender identities or gender displays of individuals, but also, and perhaps more importantly, a collective iteration in the form of culture, social structure, and social organization.’(Schippers, 2007:91) Both men and women artist use their musicking to uphold their ends of the patriarchal bargain through various performative acts. Furthermore ‘the idealised features of masculinity and femininity’ that emerge out of my critical analysis of contemporary R&B songs and are known to be ‘complementary and hierarchical, provide a rationale for social relations at all levels of social organisation from the self, to interaction, to institutional structures, to global relations of domination.’ (Schippers, 2007:91) Thus, contemporary R&B as a genre uses ‘masculinity and femininity as the rationale’(Schippers, 2007:91) for what to do as ‘men’ and ‘women’ and how to do it within the context of R&B. I first mapped out how hegemonic gender and sexuality ideology is articulated through the musicking of cis-heterosexual men that make R&B music. I found that the musicking of cis-heterosexual men that make R&B music is typically shaped by hegemonic masculinities. In

the section entitled 'And as a young' in I was taught the game' I argued that one of the ways that men within R&B music articulate ideology regarding masculinities within their musicking is through adopting a 'thug image' to fend off any form of queer sexual narrative that would position them within what is widely perceived to be subordinate masculinities. The following section entitled 'Contemporary R&B, sex and sexual desire and the negotiation of sexuality and gender identity' demonstrated that the R&B music that men make often articulates their sexual domination over women and such underpins their masculinity. R&B music is a realm where men not only articulate their sexual domination but also reaffirm their masculinity through centering their musicking around such domination and other performative acts.

In looking at the work of popular women R&B singers I illustrated that such musicking is heavily bound up with and reliant on performances of hegemonic femininities that relegate those that fail to perform 'womanhood' in the same ways to obscurity.

The naturalized hegemonic femininity that has been reproduced and articulated through the musicking of women contemporary R&B artists is 'deployed as a rationale or legitimating discourse for social practice, policy, or institutional structure' (Schippers, 2007:93). If we understand that 'axes of domination such as race, class, sexuality and age, mold a hegemonic femininity that is venerated and extolled in the dominant culture, that not only emphasizes the superiority of some women over others' (Pyke and Johnson 2003:35), but also obfuscates the personalities of those women that do not fit into these ways of being, then we must examine what the outcomes of this superiority and obfuscation are in real terms.

5. An Interlude: Black queer women artists and the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music

'What does being gay have to do with being able to rap or sing? Or whether you should be successful in hip-hop and n rnb? Someone explain please.' –

@EmmavieSXF

'There are Black queer people making the R&B y'all crave and y'all are ignoring it because it's not the love that fits into y'all's narrow vision...it ain't dead. It's different.' - @hennyondattweet

Within the contemporary R&B music scene, audiences and artists have come to understand that musicking within this realm is an incredibly gendered and sexually-orientated activity where those that are deemed to be in contravention of the genre's aesthetic codes and conventions are often ignored and repudiated. My analysis of contemporary R&B songs and their music videos reveals that women's musicking regarding R&B tends to be a 'performative accomplishment' (Butler, 1988:520) and that contemporary R&B reproduces hegemonic gender and sexuality ideologies that structure the musicking of Black women that make such music. The purpose of this chapter is to map out what the hegemonic sexuality and gender ideologies that R&B reproduces and articulates specifically mean for Black queer woman artists and how such is implicated in their experiences and trajectories within and beyond Black Popular music and culture. My primary sources of data for this analysis are my observation notes, interview transcripts, tweets of my participants and the tweets of other

users invested in R&B music and culture. This chapter has primarily been organised using the themes that emerged from the TCA of the interviews, observations and tweets and appear as follows: Black Popular music and Black queer gender performance; The body; Place; and Alternative R&B and the new Black consciousness.

5.1. Black Popular Music and Black Queer Gender Performance

In an impassioned Twitter thread written in response to Black queer woman R&B artist Emmavie being left out of SpotlightFirst's¹⁸ list of UK Black women in music that people should support, a fan argues that:

'Emmavie is a big name missing from this list. Of course, one list can't fit every Black woman in the UK on it but it needs to be said that the reason she is left out of this list is because she is a queer woman and does not match the image/aesthetic this list perpetuates. Emmavie has done so much for not only Black women in this country, but UK R&B and she is always excluded from conversations about Black women in the UK and it can no longer be acceptable. She has BEEN a pioneer for all of the women in this list but is erased from the convo? How are we actually uplifting Black women in the UK when the conversation is never inclusive of women that sit outside of a certain aesthetic? We need to start recognising WHY we erase her? Black music

¹⁸ SpotlightFirst is a Black owned media and entertainment company that is aimed at bringing together a community of young music and art enthusiasts to discover, showcase and nurture emerging talents from all backgrounds.

and women already struggle enough. As a community we have to be responsible for being completely inclusive and making space for ALL Black women. We have failed if we continuously leave out one of our top Black female singers from conversations about Black women. [This erasure] comes from the fact that we have a standard image of what we believe a Black woman to be. Especially a Black woman in R&B. It's limiting to all Black women if that image isn't expanded.' - @Kirsten_LP, 2020

In response to THE @Kirsten_LP thread SpotlightFirst explained that:

'This isn't a conclusive list. We merely mentioned names of women we are fans of. It's clear you don't know much about SpotlightFirst to assume that we missed

@EmmavieSXF off our list because she is queer; there are actually several women in this list who are.'

@SpotlightFirst_, 2020

@Kirsten_LP then responded with:

'It's not about her just being queer! It's that she specifically doesn't look like anyone in this list. She presents [as] masculine. There is an issue with Black queer women who present queer being erased from conversations about Black women. That's what needs to be acknowledged...its about visibility and that's what needs to be understood right now.'

Emmavie responded to Spotlight First's explanation writing:

'Please understand that this isn't a critique of your platform but a wider discussion about the ceiling being much lower for Black women that don't look a particular way.'

It's a flaw that hinders ALL Black music because a lot of incredible music gets left out of the equation.'

Participant K who is an R&B artist and producer from London also specifically referenced Emmavie's erasure and their belief around why she has not been as successful as some of her peers: *'When you look at an artist like Emmavie, she's a great artist but it has taken her so long to get the props that she deserves because she is a Black woman from London who is gay.'*

User @MusicConnoisseu argued that *'when it comes to UK female R&B artists their popularity amongst UK fans is linked with how sweet they look & how sexualised they can become more so than their talent...'*

In response to @MusicConnoisseu's tweet user @rianajemide writes that *'Emmavie is someone who comes to mind, she is basically the Syd of UK R&B. Incredibly talented but doesn't present as the 'R&B girl' the fans want.'*

I believe that an important dimension to extract from @Kirsten_LP's thread, Emmavie's response to it and @rianajemide's tweet is that they specifically recognise that there is indeed a *certain* aesthetic and 'standard image' for women in R&B. This standard image has long been perpetuated and forms what audiences and even artists believe a Black woman in R&B should be, this image can most certainly be derived from R&B music videos and the musicking of successful woman R&B artists, and it dominates the aesthetic identity of R&B music. Kirsten and Riana Jemide understand that for artists like Emmavie who are perceived to embody queerness through their visual identity and their musicking, sitting outside of the 'certain aesthetic' that has been well established often leads to their erasure from discourse concerning R&B. This 'certain aesthetic' for woman in R&B emerges from the hegemonic

performances of femininity and gender expression that are more than commonplace in R&B. What is even more salient within Kirsten's thread is her exposure of the fact that queerness itself is not the only reason that Black queer women such as Emmavie are often erased and repudiated.

The embodiment of Black queer aesthetics through gender performances such as 'masculine presenting' for Black queer women artists further compounds how queerness is in contravention to the hegemonic gender ideology that R&B is entangled with. Within Black queer culture, 'masc' or 'masculine presenting' typically denotes a queer woman or non-binary person that refutes conventionally gendered aesthetics (Manders, 2020) and express their gender and or non- gender in a masculinised way typically through their demeanor, clothing choice or style. Through our stylings, masc folks like me 'disregard and reject the confines of a sexualised and commodified femininity' (Manders, 2020) that are encoded into the way that women R&B artists are encouraged to perform gender and sexuality.

For masc presenting women, the embodiment of this kind of queerness constitutes not only a 'refusal to complement hegemonic masculinity in a relation of subordination and are therefore threatening to male dominance' (Schippers, 2007: 95) but also presents a threat to the hegemonic femininity and normative gender performances that have been sustained through R&B music. For this reason, such subjectivities are often contained. Subjectivities such as Blackmascqueer contradict and create a divergence away from practices that have been deemed to be feminine, and importantly 'constitute a refusal to embody the relationship between masculinity and femininity demanded by gender hegemony'. (Schippers, 2007: 95) Within R&B there is a 'tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain' (Butler, 1988:522) covert and overt hegemonic gender and sexuality politics.

When thinking about my own music career (and my life in general) and its trajectory, one of the things that I constantly struggled with is how I would be perceived as a masculine-presenting person and how I would ‘present’ myself as an artist. Even before having a nuanced understanding of how gender performances are negotiated in musicking and in society more generally, I had an idea that the way that I presented myself as a masc person was something that would not necessarily be welcomed or supported. The lack of representation of masc Black queer positionalities within popular culture let me know that no room had been made for us.

I knew that presenting as myself, which I would describe as fairly masc, was something that wasn’t necessarily viable and that I would run the risk of becoming subject to queerphobic questioning, similar to the experiences of Missy Elliot and Da Brat. Growing up, I had already been subjected to queerphobic questions from my family and my peers, ‘why do you walk like that?’ ‘Why do you dress like that?’ and in trying to pursue a music career I knew those questions would only intensify.

Whilst a large portion of my participants made it clear that they were unwilling to hide this embodiment of queerness when pursuing their careers, they note that there is underlying ‘politics’ surrounding how an artist chooses to represent themselves, especially within the sphere of Black popular music and this has made have to really think through how they present. Most of my participants expressed that they felt that their queer gender performance has had a significant influence on the trajectory of their careers. The important questions to be considered here is that if various performances of hegemonic gender expression, namely hegemonic femininity, must be embodied and enacted by women R&B artists for them to be commercially successful, what happens to those women that enact performances of gender that are viewed as subordinate and deviant? What are the stakes of not materialising ‘oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility?’ (Butler, 1988:522)

When discussing how their non-normative gender performance has shaped their musicking and affected the trajectory of their career Participant V expressed that:

‘A lot of people ask about what it’s like to be a queer masculine presenting Black woman making R&B music? It didn’t matter that I was a woman that could sing, write or produce until I really started to get involved with the music industry and bodies that sell music. I realised that when I wanted to get past a certain threshold – the conversation started changing, people started saying things to me, and people started to give me advice that was in direct conflict with who I am. – saying that if I wanted to do anything in music, I would have to do this, that and the other.’

Participant C also shared a similar experience regarding being a masc present queer woman, being involved with organisations that sell music and fears around what signing a deal would mean for how she presents her queerness in her musicking:

‘I remember when I was 19/20ish, I was out in LA and I got offered a million -dollar deal. A representative of the label that wanted to sign me has taken me out shopping, this is around my birthday, I told him that I didn’t want anything, back then I wasn’t really a shopper, I wanted the sheer basics to get by in my life, I’ve never been that person, glitz and glamour has never really appealed to me. So, he was walking/driving me around LA, showing me what apartment that I was going to live in, he was really trying to convince me, he put me in the studio with...do you remember X? He put me in the studio with him and he was all promising me that I would be able to get into the studio with Z, he was really trying his best convince me

you know? The glitz and glamour weren't going to convince me but getting me into the studio with people that I look up to would, so I recorded a song with X and it was really good but to this day I don't have a bounce of the song, why? Because I didn't end up signing with him, why? Because this guy wanted to get me in a dress, that's it, I turned down all of that money because I didn't want to be forced to wear a dress. If I signed, I wouldn't be able to use female pronouns in my songs, I know that for sure, they would have told me not to do that. I haven't had an industry/ label meeting in years because I'm not interested in it, I'm not bothered, every time I get an email, I'm like nah, thank you but I'm really not on it. There's nothing that they can give me, they can hand me a nice lump sum of money but what does that come with? Are you going to try and mould me and change me into something that I'm not? Because that's not my portion. In every meeting that I've gone into bar one, I've been told 'oh you can't sing like that, you can't dress like that, ooh maybe you need to lose abit of weight.'

By rejecting what would have been a life changing opportunity, here we see how important being able to embody a queer gender expression is to not only participant C's personage but also to their artistry and musicking. For participant C their ability to both embody queer gender expression and use of female pronouns is connected to a level of authenticity that they hope to maintain within a music industry that many have conceptualised as fake and superficial.

Participant C's comment around being consistently told that she had to 'lose abit of weight' in meetings with record labels demonstrates that alongside being invested in hegemonic gender politics, the popular music industry is also particularly invested in fatphobic body politics.

Participant K is another Black queer woman artist that is masc presenting. Whilst talking me through all the photos of herself that are dotted around her cosy South London flat, K spoke intimately about how she used to present as ‘femme’ because of her membership at a local church. K explained that once she left the church, she was able to fully embrace a form of gender expression that felt more comfortable but left her feeling like she was ‘*always going to be swimming against the current*’ especially when it comes to being an artist. Like Participant C, Participant K has avoided signing any record deal because she feels that they are likely to try and coerce to change how she presents herself as a queer artist. She mused that as a masc presenting artist:

*‘I am not really interested in labels and A&Rs because I know that if you want to take me on you’re going to have to market me in ways that don’t match who I am. So I’ve decided that I’m just going to do my own thing and build my own sh*t from the ground up and build the leverage for myself where if they approach me, I’ve built my own thing, so they’ll have to add value to that not change me to fit something that they are already doing.’*

Like participant C, participant K is unwilling to change her queer gender expression in order to fit into the conventions that are typically associated with a commercial R&B artist.

Participant K and participant C were not the only participants who showed a level of defiance when it came to how they express their queerness whilst being an artist, participant SM maintained that:

‘In the beginning I was really afraid to come out as myself because being queer in the music industry is very tough, you have to either put on this identity front to be popular or you have to make a decision like me to stay to true to yourself and see how it plays out.’

Disdain for queer performances of gender often even spill over into the lack of accommodations made for queer folks regarding being styled for things such as photo shoots and appearances. In a tweet posted in 2022 Participant S wrote:

'Stop paying these stylists to make y'all look silly. Terrible fit, no tailoring, wrong colour combos; especially queer women who wear menswear and/or dress androgynous. Feeling like it's purposeful at this point smh.'

In stating that Participant V would have to change the way that they embody their sexuality and gender identity, we know that this thinking is indicative of an understanding that in order to 'get past a certain threshold' overt expressions of queerness, specifically 'masc' expressions of queerness must be limited or even abandoned. The lack of accommodations made for masc women is indicative of the tendency of the industry to force artists back into the binary. Furthermore, Black queer woman artists that present as masc mutually understand that governing 'bodies' within the music industry such as labels and A&Rs have '*something that they are already doing*' in that '*they are going to keep giving us beige, they are going to keep giving us straight*' (Participant S) and in attempting to engage with these bodies, there is an expectation that they will have to conform to being presented and marketed in ways that suppress the way that they embody their queerness.

Acts of gender nonconformity such as 'mascness' ultimately create a new reality of gender that cannot be easily categorised in the existing norms within and beyond R&B. In essence, 'masc' and 'mascness' hotly contest normative expectations of what is to be a *woman*, especially a woman in R&B. Since those artists that embody normative gender performance through hegemonic femininities (and hegemonic masculinities) dominate the institutional structure of the R&B landscape, outright refusals to embody any kind of femininities carry

the penalty of rejection and dismissal. As Butler notes ‘gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences...performing one’s gender wrong instantiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect...’ (Butler, 1988:522- 528)

I believe that one of the punitive consequences of subversive gender performances such as ‘masc’ is that these artists are not viewed as legible.

Participant S who also describes herself as ‘masc ’echoes Participant V’s sentiments and explains that her performance of gender can not only be linked to her trajectory but that it has had an adverse effect on her imagined legibility within the music industry:

*‘What’s for me is for me but I think if I was a different person, or I presented in a different way I would probably be further- just point blank. They just started to let some of become really mainstream you know, Syd is out there, Arlo Parks¹⁹ is out there but there’s still not a lot of us. You know it’s been a hard road. They tell us that ‘oh there’s no audience or we don’t know how to market you’- I’ve been told sh*t like that you know. The industry is still run by white men and if you are not for their consumption, they don’t know what to do with you- it’s just sh*t like that I’ve had to run into.’*

There is an understanding that because there is no established framework or formula for the success of a Black queer masc woman artist out there, bodies that operate within R&B music don’t know how to market us and don’t know what to do with us in general. Essentially what is being implicitly relayed to these artists is that their unwillingness to act their part in a ‘culturally restricted corporeal space’ (Butler, 1988:526) is making them illegible thus

¹⁹ SYD and Arlo Parks are presently perhaps two of the most commercially successful Black queer masc presenting artists. Whilst SYD is a R&B artist, Arlo Parks is a Indie pop/folk singer.

rendering them as unmarketable. Here we see how gender norms are often ‘regulated and enforced’ by institutions within the music industry. Such attitudes show that ‘compulsory normative heterosexuality is not merely about recognising some subjects as normal and vilifying other subjects as abnormal and unworthy. It is about the process of subject formation itself, the attempt to constitute legible personhood on the basis of heteronormative sex-gender’ (Nguyen, 2023:122) and performances of gender. In this process, the non-normative such as Black queer women artists are produced as what Nguyen describes as a *non-subject Other* which then ‘foregrounds and naturalises the cultural denigration and economic discrimination to which they are subjected’. (Nguyen, 2023:122)

As maintained by Participant SM who also describes themselves as masculine presenting, *‘like any other industry, the [music] industry is very political, there are rules that are within the system whether or not we want to think about them or admit that they are there. The craziest part about it all is that unless there’s a blueprint for it, ‘they’ can’t see it.’*

Not only can these structures not foresee the success of Black queer women artists, but they also often refuse to see any worth in their musicking and works. In an incredibly capitalist music industry and society at large, the consequence of not being ‘seen’ is that ‘queers are always already *worth-less*, their labour and power cheapened. ‘This manifests in labor market discrimination and economic marginalisation of queer workers.’ (Nguyen, 2023:122)

Not only have some of them been offered less beneficial recording contracts because labels have believed that they might not be able to recoup all of the money that they could invest, but as I will discuss in ‘the body’ section of this chapter, some labels have even withdrawn their interest because they don’t like the way the artist presents themselves, despite showing an interest in that artist’s music before they knew what that artist looked like.

In continuing to think through how as we as specifically masc presenting folks have had to manage our performances of gender within our visual identities as R&B artists, Participant S noted that *‘even coming up before Syd came and all of the other folks came, I had to figure out how I wanted to present, who I was or whatever. You know R&B can sometimes be very ‘this is just what it is, this is the box’ and I really had to deal with that when I first started out. People even questioned the kind of music that I made.’*

Kayleigh Watson (2021) writing for Women- centred publication Gal-dem maintains that ‘the music industry itself is a predominantly white space despite the mainstream success of Black artists. Those controlling the purse strings, in positions of authority, are typically white, cis men.’ Participant P also maintains this position and argues:

‘Straight white men that have been in these CEO positions at record labels and companies for ages, they have the resources to be putting out these images constantly, having people think what things should look like, what things should sound like, what’s more acceptable and what’s not acceptable. I feel like they have the resources to put out these messages that are going to establish and uphold the status quo.’

For those that are pursuing mainstream success, there is often an incredible amount of pressure being placed on them to present themselves in specific ways that appeal to the white cis het male gaze and the cis het male gaze in general. Within this context the white male gaze represents ‘punitive and regulatory social conventions’. (Butler, 1988:527)

The point that Participant S makes regarding not being for the consumption of white men is critical. Here we can begin to understand that for particular subjectivities such as masc Black women within Black popular music and popular music in general, not positioning themselves for the consumption of men is something that shapes their experiences at every turn. Since

masculinity is an 'aesthetic and repudiation of the male gaze, (Manders, 2020) thus resisting and subverting the gender hegemony and hypersexualised status quo that is essential to R&B and R&B musicking, our works are constantly being viewed through lenses that frame them as unintelligible and unrecognisable. Essentially queer and queerness appear as what Kara Keeling (2019) describes as a 'structuring antagonism of the social' (p37) and thus is an affront to all of the 'institutions, practices, and so on' that R&B and Black popular music, in general, is constructed through and seeks to 'govern sociality and the terms of sociability' (Keeling, 2019:37), which include the management of gender, sexuality and the body.

5.2. The Body

'I just don't get it, what does my weight or the shape of my body have to do with the music that I'm about to release? make that math for me, it doesn't.' – Participant C

Something to consider out of my critical discourse analysis is how the bodies of women, specifically Black women are constructed and coerced. Black feminist scholarship has been crucial in putting the bodies of Black women on the 'intellectual and theoretical map of society and history'. (Sabala and Gopal, 2010: 44) Black feminist scholars have brought forward numerous studies that have examined how Black women's bodies have been constructed and portrayed in popular culture, such as Nickesia S. Gordon's study 'The Rhetorical Construction of the Black Female Body as Food in hip hop and R&B music (2020), Jackson and Camara's analysis of 'Black bodies as sites of sexual eroticism and exoticism'(2006) and Henderson's examination of the 'exploitation of Black women's bodies in particular, as they are consumed in the popular music industry' (Henderson 2013, as seen in Gordon, 2020: 430).

When we think about the body and how Black women's bodies are portrayed and represented especially within R&B music videos, we often only consider the overarching sexual connotations that emerge out of these representations and aesthetics.

On one hand it is important to critically consider how contemporary R&B music videos such as 'Cater 2 U's' sexual and gendered narratives are often constituted through normative representations of Black women's bodies. However, on the other hand it is also important to examine how fatness, alongside subversive gender performances, darkness (in regards to skin tone) and (dis)ability as separate and intersecting social coordinates are constantly implicated in the experiences and trajectories of Black women within and beyond contemporary R&B music. I want to note here that fatness, subversive gender performance, darkness and (dis)ability are contours of race, gender and sexuality. From gender theorists such as Butler we understand that bodies are essentially 'shaped and controlled by the norms and expectations of the gendered social order in which gendered bodies are produced for a social world creating identities and self-definitions'. (Sabala and Gopal, 2010:44)

Considering this, important questions to consider are what are the consequences of Black women's refusal of their bodies to be 'coerced to perform by heteronormativity' (Bankhead, 2014:30) and the gendered social order? What are the outcomes of their refusal to keep their bodies 'tight' and keep their figures 'right'?

The music- industry has historically fostered 'hegemonic values about bodily appearance' and more specifically has been 'suffused with pro-thin and anti-fat dispositions'. (Sturgis, 2020:1) As Participant S maintained:

'At the end of the day that lack of shifts that are happening in wider society are being replicated in the music industry, it's still very male dominated, very beige, very conventionally attractive, very conventionally sized.'

Within Contemporary R&B music videos, (mostly dark skinned) Black women's bodies are often portrayed as commodities that are for the consumption of the general masses.

The hegemonic femininity ideals that have been tightly woven into contemporary R&B are constantly implicated in the trajectories of women that make such music to the extent of limiting what opportunities are afforded to them if they refuse to submit to those ideals.

I want to note here that body politics²⁰ within the context of Black popular music has been something that has been in a constant state of flux.

Contemporary R&B singer Kelly Price is an artist that has been particularly vocal about the way that her career has constantly been framed through the lens of fatphobic body politics and how fatphobia has figured centrally in her experiences of musicking within R&B. In an interview given in 2020 to *The Core 94*, Price speaks at length about how fatphobic body politics has shaped her career:

'It's been so hard for women of size to be viewed as anything other than [a] matronly, gospel singer, house music singer, or opera singer. You were not allowed to come across as having too much confidence or to believe that you were sexy or that you could compete with the skinny girl...there was a lot of body shaming. If we had the phrase body shaming when I was coming along, hell! You know how much further I'd be?'

Price goes on to explain that when it came to signing a recording contract, conversations regarding her weight figured centrally in negotiations regarding whether or not Jive Records were going to offer her a recording contract:

²⁰ 'Body politics refers to the practices and policies through which powers of society regulate the human body; particularly the female body. It involves the struggle over the degree of individual and social control over the body' (Nzegwu, 2015:1)

'I go by Jive Records before I go sign the contract at my lawyers and I walk into a conference room and sitting there is the head of every department... They're like, 'we're glad you could come by. Today's signing day' I'm like, 'Yes!' So, they say. 'We have some things we need to talk about' And I'm like, 'sure, what do we want to talk about?' and someone says, so we need to talk about this weight' ...it's [an] awkward silence and finally somebody says, 'Come on. We knew we had to have this conversation. We're not going to put the record out unless you lose a massive amount of weight.'

Such conversations provide us with a sense of how much emphasis is placed on weight and body size when it comes to giving artists opportunities within the music industry. Fatness is constantly positioned as sabotaging contemporary R&B's aesthetic identity, hence the label's apprehension to sign Price because of her fatness. Not only does her perceived fatness make Price's journey difficult in that she becomes boxed in by the perception that she must be a 'house singer or an opera singer' and couldn't possibly be an R&B singer (because apparently successful R&B singers are never fat), but her fatness also sabotages her chance of releasing music because the label executives are 'not going go to put the record out unless you lose a massive amount of weight'.

The body shaming and positioning of Price's weight as something that takes away from her in general is carefully articulated on her 2000 single 'You Should've Told Me'.

'You should've told me I wasn't small enough' Price sings at the beginning of the song's chorus. The narrative around Price's weight is really brought to life in the song's accompanying music video. Price and her love interest are shown having various disagreements around the fact that he believes that she should lose weight in order to become more attractive to him. Price's love interest shows her various magazines filled with women with the 'look' that he likes. The women shown in the magazines are all slim further

illustrating the belief that ‘thin is in’. By constantly comparing Price to the women in the magazines, he is positioning her body within the binary of attractive and unattractive bodies.

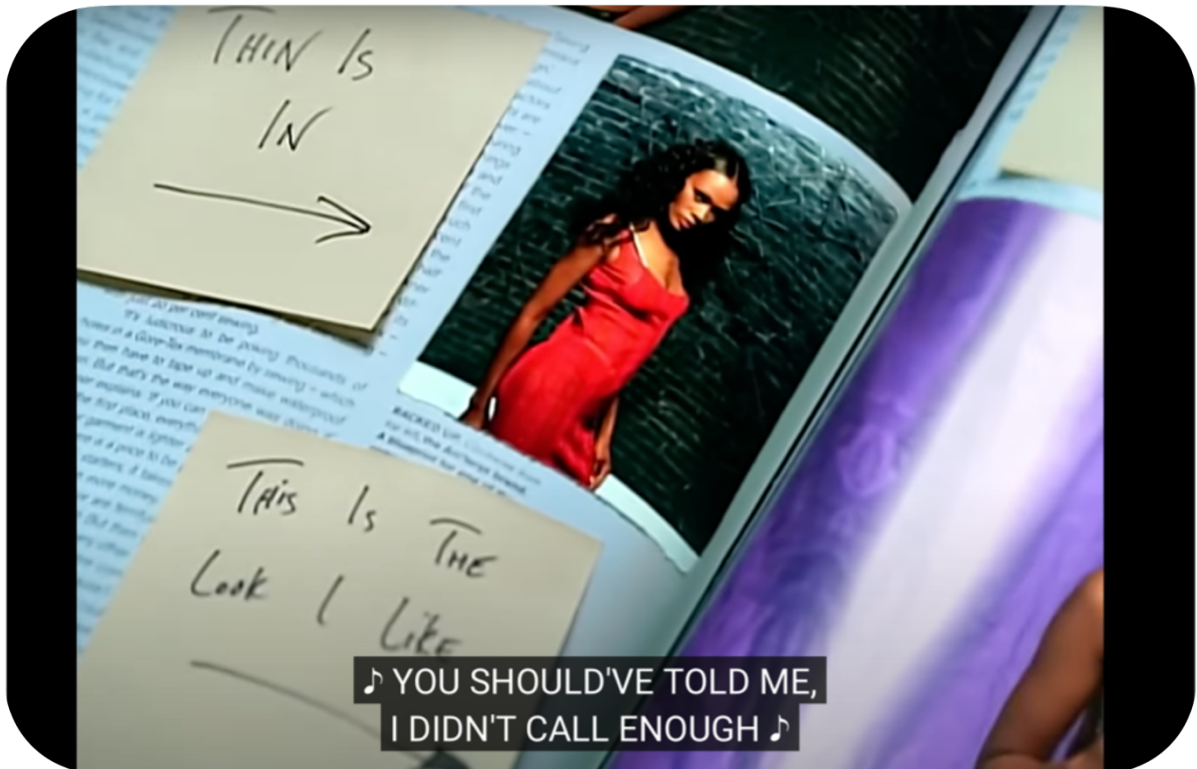


Figure 5: Kelly Price, *You Should've Told Me*, 2000

Further along the video, Price is seen going into her home gym and destroying it by using the dumbbells to smash the mirrors within it and tossing her treadmill over her apartment balcony. The destroying of Price’s home gym and her singing the lines ‘*I won’t waste my time with you*’ symbolises her refusal to give into the pressure that hegemonic femininities often place on Black women within and beyond Black popular music.

When Price becomes unreceptive to her partner’s fatphobic demands to lose weight he becomes negative towards her and begins to treat her with disdain. This video illustrates the

price that women pay for not performing ideals of hegemonic politics that relate to the body.

It shows that for women like Price who show an unwillingness to perform parts of hegemonic femininity, the outcome of such refusals is often outright rejection and stigmatisation.

When talking about the body politics that is rife in R&B and the wider popular music industry, Participant V was also quite open about how fatphobia has served to only compound issues around her race, gender expression and sexuality:

‘Not only am I Black queer woman in an industry that is largely racist, sexist and homophobic- at the time too I was a pretty heavy woman and essentially, the industry is massively fatphobic. I feel like when I started music that [fatphobia] created a barrier for me more than anything. Being a Black queer woman is a hard enough thing to navigate when I start talking to labels, when I start talking to radio stations- when I start talking to people in the music industry in general.’

In a similar vein to Kelly Price, Participant V also shared a poignant story about how at the beginning of her career her perceived fatness really shaped her interactions with labels and the music industry and limited her opportunities when it came to getting a recording contract:

*‘When I released *****, which was my first serious body of work, I got an email from a music lawyer saying that she really liked my EP and that she wanted me to come down to her offices. I remember spending a few days trying to figure out what I should wear, getting my hair done- all of this stuff because it was first industry meeting where it was all about me and my music. I remember getting all dressed up, going to Bond street- going to this incredible building and as soon as we’ve met each other at the door I started feeling like I didn’t get the reception from her that I anticipated... I know now that she probably felt disappointed- even though she had gassed up my whole life for a week. I’m like 22/23 at the time and she seemed*

like she wanted to change my life and my career, but I get there, and the vibe is just off. Upon meeting her, - the conversation no longer progressed,- It's almost like she doesn't want to sell me anything anymore like the dream that she had sold me up until this point. She almost started backtracking a little bit. The meeting just became more of a tour of her office and then the meeting was over after about 30 or 40 minutes. I didn't even get to ask any of the questions that I wanted to ask her. I left and then I never saw or heard from her again. I really had to think about what took place. In the meeting with the music lawyer, I was literally sat there thinking like what is it? I'm thinking...I've tried to dress appropriately and cool and interesting this time...I came away from the experience thinking and knowing that people are going to meet me and not like me immediately and that's what I learnt a week after releasing this EP and its so hard not to internalise that. That was the first time it was so blatant. After that there were other times where I could see the same sort of patterns and I could out two and two together in my head.'

Even though the music lawyer in Participant V's case did not display her fatphobia in the explicit ways that Price's contract negotiators did, V felt that fatphobia in more covert ways, and it ultimately limited her opportunity to further her relationship with the lawyer in the way that she had hoped to. Price and V's testimonies illustrate that there are a lot of implications that come with appearing in certain ways when it comes to being an artist, especially an artist that makes popular music. Participant V's comments and experiences illustrate just how far musicking within the realm of Black popular music is bound up with desirability politics and normative gender performance.

Participant V's struggles have been doubly compounded by the intersection of her mascness and fatness. Not only is she deemed unattractive and undesirable because of her fatness, she

is also rendered invisible because she has what some scholars have described as a ‘Queer(ed) body’. The ‘Queer(ed) body is considered as a body that not only ‘does not meet heteronormativized society’s notion of what a proper body is’ (Bankhead, 2014:1) but also constitutes a body that represents itself beyond heteronormative conceptions of what specific gendered bodies look like. Because Participant V refutes conventionally gendered aesthetics and has situated herself and her body outside of and beyond the heteronormative gaze through her mascness, she is repudiated by this gaze and the norms that it reifies. Essentially, Participant V and other masc presenting women in possession of queer(ed) bodies are repudiated because they do not appear to be folks that have ‘conformed to the heteronorms’ (Bankhead, 2014: 27) that would render their bodies and presentations of their bodies as culturally intelligible. Furthermore, society and the heteronormativity that R&B has come to be defined by consistently seeks to deny the multiplicity of gender performance choices and draws bodies into the binary.

When Price eventually signed with Isley Brother’s lead singer Ronald Isley in partnership with Island Records, and put out her debut album, *Soul of a Woman*, on the same day that R&B singer Mya’s album was also released, an ‘executive at her label made a bet with another at Island that- in his words- his pretty, light skinned thin girl [Mya] would outsell the big, Black, fat girl that could sing circles around her. That’s what the executive at MCA said’. (Aliya Faust, 2020)

Here we see how colourism intersects with fatphobia and misogynoir to construct Price’s body as being outside of the boundaries of R&B and popular music’s hegemonic beauty ideals. The executives recognise and understand that despite the widely known fact that Price could ‘sing circles’ around the more pleasantly perceived Mya, Price’s perceived fatness and darkness limits her artistic talents, and drops her down in the pecking order of attractiveness.

Here we see how for Black women, fatphobia is incredibly *raced*. In *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (2019) Sabrina Strings unearths how ‘the Black woman’s body first became tethered to fatness as part of the national endeavor of instantiating whiteness and making it appear supreme’. (Sturgis, 2020:2) Slenderness has historically ‘served as a marker of moral, racial and national superiority’ (2020: 12), and this attitude is on full display within popular culture.

By allowing their weight to shape the dynamic of their interactions and focusing on it as a means to judge whether or not Price and Participant V should be tendered with recording contracts, music executives recognise that bodies that are perceived as fat are antithetical to what is deemed as desirable within the context of popular music and culture. Not only are fat Black bodies within this context deemed to be undesirable, but they are also deemed to be lazy and indicative of a lack of self-control. As Participant V states: *‘People make judgments about what your lifestyle is like based on what you look like. What a lot of people assumed about my fatness is that I didn’t take care of myself and that I didn’t care.’*

Historically, Black women have often been depicted in racist caricatures as overweight and lazy, which has only worked to reinforce the belief that they are less capable and less deserving of respect. Such beliefs have become so commonplace within popular culture in the Western context and as we can see from the testimonies of Price and Participant V, they have been consistently used to justify discrimination and marginalisation in terms of access to resources and opportunities. Hegemonic social order particularly around the body and desirability is constituted and reproduced within music spaces.

5.3. Place

Throughout my interviews with my participants and my research on Twitter, place/geographies were a central theme that was continuously positioned as important within their own musicking and musicking in general. My participants often ruminated over the geographical context in which they musick and the role such has played in their careers.

Going back to Participant K's comments regarding Emmavie I want to highlight the fact that they posited that Emmavie's career has been limited not only because she is a Black gay woman but more specifically because she is a Black gay woman that is from London.

Participant K recognised that place colliding with the intersection of race, gender and sexuality not only shapes the musicking of Black queer women artists but is also conversely implicated in trajectory within the context of contemporary R&B music.

Place only works to further muddy the waters for Black queer woman artists, especially those that live and musick away from context of the US and those locations within the that have rich R&B histories²¹. Even for Black women R&B artists that are not queer, place is also deemed as an incredibly important factor.

For Participant S, LA has been a place that she has found that has not just a rich musical community but has also shown more of an openness for difference within the Black popular music industry:

²¹ The migration of African American to urban industrial centres, namely Los Angeles, Detroit, New York and Chicago in the 1920 and 1930s created a new market for Black musical traditions such as Blues, and Jazz. In more recent times the city of Atlanta, Georgia has become the capital of R&B music and culture.

'I think LA has been musically more...my experience has been up and down, but I've definitely been able to find community in a way that I wasn't sure I was going to because LA can be very cliquish, but I think LA is cool. If you can find those people and find those connections, LA is a place where you can get a conduit to actually doing this for a living in a way that you can't in some other places...you either have to come here or go to New York...there's some opportunities here that don't really exist in other places...LA specifically-, better than New York and better than The Bay area, LA has more inroads to industry opportunities.'

Hailing from Appleton in the midwestern state of Wisconsin, US, Participant P regularly mused about how living and musicking away from Black cultural centres such as LA and Atlanta have compounded her struggles as an artist:

'Wisconsin is a white state, it's an extremely white state- it's not just your regular 'oh we eat corn' state, Wisconsin is defined by what we call the three Cs-, corn, conservatives and cows. I would say that I was a little bit lucky being from Appleton because it's a city of 70,000 people. Appleton is a musical city, just not my kind of music, they do more country, more folk, more indie here. That's what thrives out here, more alt stuff – more punk. I'm not that [kind of artist] at all but it's cool for people who are that. I feel like it affected my music in the sense that I was always exposed to different musical cultures and sounds but at the same time I feel like it stifled my creativity because I didn't see a lot of people that looked like me not only in big mass media but also, I didn't see anyone in my hometown doing the things that I wanted to do. People be forgetting that Wisconsin even exists, I've even had to remind people that it was voted as one of the worst places to raise a Black child. To an extent, honestly, I think growing up in a small town- because we didn't have the super hard Atlanta sound and type of stuff like that-, it did make me a little insecure about my sound because I was like

people are not going to want to listen to my music because of what I was seeing other people listening to around me like popular music wise.'

Participant P's reference to the 'Atlanta sound' illustrates her cognizance of how closely linked Black popular music is to particular places within the context of the US. She recognises that because there is no Black popular music culture in her state, those around her may struggle to really connect with her music.

Beyond the context of the US, artists that make R&B music also struggle to get their local audiences to really recognize and connect with their music.

Although Participant C is from the UK, she has spent significant amounts of time musicking in Atlanta and in LA. When asked about her experiences of musicking in the US as a British artist she said:

'Do you know what the funniest thing is? America, every time I went and every time, I went to the studio over there they loved it. They couldn't quite understand it and they couldn't quite understand why I sang things the way that I did but they loved the sound of it. It was actually England that had the biggest problem with it.'

In the UK, R&B music has had quite a subdued history. R&B first breached the shores of the UK between the 1950s and the early 1960s mostly through an amalgamation of British jazz, funk and soul movements/ scenes and the inescapable sphere of influence that once surrounded Motown. However, R&B didn't really start to circulate amongst British audiences and gain pockets of popularity until the early 2000s. Only in the 2000s did British artists start to enjoy relative success with contemporary R&B in the UK. Again, Craig David and Estelle²² are amongst some of the most successful British R&B acts and their music even

²² Estelle's single 'American Boy' off of her successful sophomore album *Shine*, managed to reach number 1 on the UK Singles chart in 2008 and catapulted her into the purview of US audiences. The song experienced chart success in the US, rising to number 11 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart. 'American Boy' which saw Estelle

managed to crossover into the US to reach mainstream success there. In more recent times British acts Ella Mai and Tianna Major⁹ have signed record deals with American labels and have also managed to receive crossover success making R&B music.

In an article entitled ‘R&B The hardest music to sell in the UK: why is British R&B being ignored?’ (2023), Popular Black British DJ and Presenter Trevor Nelson argued that R&B is ‘probably the hardest music to sell in this country. It just is. It’s always been.’

There have been numerous conversations Twitter regarding the state of UK R&B, and the lack of appreciation, support and regard there is for the genre from both audiences and the UK music industry, as well as the difficulties R&B artists face because of these things.

Audiences have raised questions about ‘why British R&B has failed to take off in a country where other forms of Black music, such as grime and drill, have broken through what was once impenetrable barriers.’ (Mohdin, 2023)

The lack of regard for UK R&B was put on full display when it came the 2023 Brit Award nominations for ‘Best British Pop/R&B Act’. Amongst all the acts that were nominated for this year’s award, none were R&B acts. The five acts that were nominated for this award, Cat Burns, Dua Lipa, Charli XCX, Sam Smith and Harry Styles are all quite recognisable pop acts. In fact, since the category was first created and awarded in 2000, retired in 2006 and subsequently brought back in 2022, no R&B act has ever won the award. When the nominations were announced two important questions were posed by R&B audiences on Twitter, - is it that British R&B acts are not being recognised because they are simply not good enough or is it that there is just no audience for the genre on this side of the pond?

When the nominations for ‘Best British Pop/ R&B’ act were announced via the Brit Awards twitter account, various users took to the platform to express their frustration at the lack of

feature hip-hop juggernaut Kanye West, won Estelle a Grammy for Best Rap/Sung Collaboration at the 51st Grammy in 2009.

representation and attention that British R&B acts receive within the UK music industry and the UK in general. With a search of the words 'UK R&B' one could find a plethora of tweets angled at both expressing disdain for how UK R&B has been treated and how this issue has come about.

In response to the Brit award nominations and the constant erasure that UK R&B acts face, user @TheLondonHughes tweeted:

'My American friends will happily tell you they love them some Mahalia, Nao, Cleo Sol, Joy Crooks, Jorja Smith, Bree Runway, Etta Bond and Bellah...but England will swear there's no such thing as British R&B.'

@Kirsten_LP wrote: *'We have a strong ass R&B scene and the audience is there. The talent is especially there. So, what more do we need to have these artists included?'*

Grammy nominated British singer and producer MNEK chimed in on the conversation around the Brits and tweeted:

'OK this is silly now. We get it. UK industry doesn't know what to with R&B. But there's enough R&B/hiphop artists to have their own category at LEAST. Bellah, Tiana Major 9, Jack James, FLO, none of these artists (ESPECIALLY @catburns) is making R&B music. It's whack cos the gen pop will think cos Cat is Black, she's R&B. I also think it's whack cos the category would still be valid if the "R&B" wasn't added, BPI could do with explaining the need for this in the award title. Cos, it's not like the people haven't spoken!'

In response to MNEK's tweet user @DaneBaptweets wrote:

'As an old azz uncle I can tell you that this is not an accident. RnB proliferation means that they would have to respect the differences between Black British Music. DO NOT FORGET

THIS INDUSTRY CALLED ALL OUR WORK 'URBAN'. You're doing amazing BTW, keep rising brother!

Something to highlight in MNEK's tweet alongside the disdain that he shared about the lack of R&B representation, is the genuine confusion as to why pop and R&B were even grouped together in the first place.

User @playboyredhead wrote: *'These are all pop acts there needs to be a separate RnB category! Everything I'm hearing about the Brits is totally backwards lol.'*

Further adding to the discourse around the grouping of Pop with R&B, user

@JordanMackampa wrote *'I don't wanna take away from what Cat Burns has and will achieve in future bc this is huge for her but merging Pop & RnB together is an insult to how incredible the UK RnB scene has been as of recent.'*

For Emmavie, the issue around the lack of local/national support for UK R&B artists has been a double-edged sword.

'I think in the earlier stages of my career, being an R&B artist from London was a setback for trying to build a career here in the UK. There's been little to no infrastructure for R&B music in the major label space in the UK, so I've not had many looks for deals and investment. But equally, my British spin on the genre is one of the things that has made me stand out in the rest of the world. It's why I ended up signing to an independent American music label and why my music has always performed better stateside. If I was to start my career today, I might have a completely different experience. Who knows?'

Whilst the users quoted above rightly express their disdain for the lack of support and representation that British R&B acts get within the UK, other users have really tried to grapple with why these acts struggle and why their erasure is so commonplace.

The lack of 'infrastructure for R&B music' within the UK is an interesting point to consider here. Emmavie's contention that '*there's been little to no infrastructure for R&B music in the major label space in the UK*' begins to unearth why most UK R&B artists have really struggled to gain exposure within the context of the UK.

Twitter user @Jojoldn echoes and expands on the contention that Emmavie makes in relation to UK R&B:

'The lack of infrastructure around genres that aren't rap and dance/ electronic music is stunting growth big time. That's the root of the issue. Rappers have a plethora of platforms to be seen and heard on. There's a hierarchy so the better you become there's access to bigger platforms. These platforms are 10+ years deep. Experience is key, this allows smaller platforms to have reference points when building their ting. R&B doesn't have it at all. The gaps between doing a session for an up & coming platform and the big ones (i.e. Colors) is massive cos once you do colour s, where do you go from there? There needs to be more steps in the ladder. However, for Black music in the UK, the industry isn't built for fair and proportionate growth. It's built to extract as much money from what's hot. We saw it with grime 2.0 then afro swing and finally drill. London (and the UK) Black culture is the centre of Black culture in Europe...we don't move like it. The ambition here is low, ppl operate with a scarcity mindset, the crabs in a barrel ting. Things may never change but I hope it does. The central/general audience here also aren't the most open minded. If something isn't viral, it aint popping. That's not sustainable, how can we only enjoy suttin if it's viral? This decade we need to look at the platforms that are built for other genres of music, they need our views, engagement etc. otherwise they just give up- it's happened so many times. Ppl are trying! I

hate to see the UK R&B convo coming up every few months (for the past 4 years!!!) This decade we can try sumn different man.'

Emmavie's experience of having to sign with an American label because of the lack of R&B infrastructure at music labels in the UK is quite commonplace when you look at British R&B acts that have found mainstream success in recent years. Estelle, Ella Mai and Tiana Major9 are all British R&B acts that have signed deals with American music labels and have found success stateside. With her 2008 hit 'American Boy' Estelle was able to win a Grammy Award for Best/ Rap Song Collaboration. Ella Mai was also able to win a Grammy for Best R&B Song with her 2019 hit, 'Boo'd Up'.

For Nigerian R&B acts that live and musick in Nigeria, the situation for them is even more stark. Whilst there are some Nigerian R&B acts that have begun to make waves and have crossover success, Afrobeats still takes a lot of if not all of the spotlight in Nigeria. Moreover, Nigerian R&B acts such as 'Free Mind' singer Tems have only really found success because of their blending of afrobeats into their music to make it have more of an alternative/ Alté²³ sound rather than having a purely contemporary R&B sound. What's more is, because of the lack of R&B infrastructure and the lack of label infrastructure in Nigeria in general, Tems is no longer based in Nigeria. Signing a recording and publishing contract with Since 93, RCA Records and Sony Music Publishing respectively, Tems is now based in the UK where her blending of R&B and Alté Afrobeat sounds are somewhat more welcomed.

Participant D reflected on her short experience with trying to pursue a career in R&B music a Nigerian artist living in Lagos:

²³ Alte music is characterized by its experimental and eclectic nature, blending various genres such as Afrobeat, R&B, hip-hop, electronic, and alternative music. It often features unconventional sounds, lyrics and fashion choices, challenging the more mainstream Nigerian music scene.

‘Since I decided to pursue this music thing, I’ve realised that I’m fighting at battle that is on multiple fronts, I’m fighting against being shoehorned into being seen as an Afrobeat artist and I’m fighting to finally get the spotlight on the people that want to push Nigerian and African R&B music to the forefront. I try not to even think about the issues that being queer in Nigeria consistently brings up because that doesn’t feel like a battle that I can face right now; I’m trying to focus on the things that I can realistically change. The first step was to move to Lagos because that is where most of the action is happening in regard to the entertainment industry but beyond this, I don’t really know what else I can do but hustle, that’s how most of these guys have made it, by hustling, working hard and making sure that they were in the right place at the right time.’

Going back to user @Kirsten_LP’s thread regarding Emmavie, we see that whilst there is a well evidenced issue of the erasure of British R&B acts within the UK music industry, queerness and mascness further complicates this issue because Black queer masc woman acts are then doubly erased. We know that there is hardly any prominent infrastructure for British R&B acts to flourish here in the UK, but the subversive gender expressions of British R&B artists that make R&B further complicates this issue.

However, as I will demonstrate in the chapter entitled ‘Digital G*rl in a Digital World’, the integration of the internet, more specifically social media into contemporary musicking has begun to mediate and remedy issues that some artists face in terms of place.

5.4. Queerness and Capitalism

A critical point to consider within my discussion of how R&B’s commitment to cisheteronormative ideology is implicated in the experiences and trajectories of Black queer

women artists is how much the genre and the wider popular music industry are bound up with capitalism. Questions that I often find myself thinking about when it comes to Black queer artist trying to find commercial success is how far the queerness that they embody is compatible with the capitalistic psyche that trying to be commercially successful to an extent, demands, how far are queerness and the capitalistic nature of the music industry compatible? ‘What role, if any, do heteronormativity, homophobia and transphobia play in neoliberal capitalist production?’ (Nguyen, 2023:113)

The reason that I have thought through these questions is because the radical and deconstructive ‘things’ that I believe queer, queerness and queer temporality to be seem at times be in contravention to what capitalism demands and produces. Gender and sexuality are more often than not framed as things that are private, ‘an individual's attribute that has nothing to do with production, exchange, consumption, and reproduction. In reality, sex, sexual desires, and sexuality are material relations integrally connected to labor, capital, and the accumulation of surplus value’. (Nguyen, 2023:113) all of which are incredibly important within the Black popular music industry and the music industry more generally.

Capitalism heavily ‘relies on technologies of power that incite and produce certain lifestyles, bodies, and subjectivities and ‘benefits from the construction of workers whose production, reproduction, and personhood are articulated through and along heteronormative sex-gender categories’. (Nguyen, 2023:120) Sexuality and heteronormativity are incredibly crucial technologies of power for capitalism. Heteronormativity subtly ‘enables subjects and bodies to be constituted, governed, normalized, and rendered natural facts that as such, play a key role in the (re) production of capitalist society. Heteronormative social relations together with the heteronormative knowledge power nexus create fictions of coherent identities and bodies’. (Ludwig, 2018) The co-production of normative, coherent identities and bodies

(heterosexual and cis gender) and the incoherent and unintelligible identities and bodies (queer, trans, gender non-conforming) ‘serves an important economic function in capitalist production’. (Nguyen, 2023:119)

I believe that Black queer woman artists have struggled within the music industry partly because they stand in contravention with the fictions of ‘natural’, ‘coherent’ bodies, subjects, and identities that are necessary for the music industry's capitalistic mode of production, and this ‘imperative of coherence’ is ‘infused in the needs of capitalist reproduction’. (Cover 2004, 304 as seen in Ludwig, 2018:13)

Their fatness, subversive gender performance etc. obfuscates how gender and sexuality is constructed in capitalist domains, as Nguyen notes ‘disrupting heteronormativity could potentially throw a wrench into the working engine of capitalism, undermining its workability.’ (Nguyen, 2023:119)

Nguyen (2023) and Chitty (2020) argue that ‘capitalism has come to rely on a particular kind of sexual hegemony, one that can ensure its reproductive needs are satisfied through the normalising of certain subjects and the violent censoring of others.’ (2023:113) Nguyen also importantly points out that ‘the heteronormative regulation of sexuality dialectically interrelates with other social relations of power such as racism, patriarchy, and settler-colonialism to form the ongoing condition of possibility for capitalist accumulation.’ (2023:113)

Since capitalist institutions such as record companies often endeavour for coherence to contain and control risk and maintain production, ‘along the axis of the social, capital must manage queer’s proliferations of errant, irrational, and unpredictable connections in the interests of objectifying and delivering reliable futures’. (Keeling, 2019:40) This management often involves the outright rejections of queer positionalities but in more recent times has begun to also involve queerness being ‘modulated according to the demands of

capitalism' (Keeling, 2019:40) Ludwig (2018) notes that 'the neoliberalization of capitalism has made sexual politics more 'open', inclusive and 'tolerant' by integrating individuals with certain non-heterosexual lifestyles who act in accordance with heteronormative normality' (p138)

Keeling also maintains 'that a particular historical trajectory of 'queer' has been domesticated in the United States- contained through the affirmation of 'gay marriage' and the increased visibility and recognition through which it was achieved- is simultaneously a sign of victory of a vivacious, bold, and heterogenous movement for 'LGBT rights', and evidence of a recent modulation of control vis-à-vis sexuality and the organisation of social life'. (p40) Although things like gay marriage have often been 'touted as moral progress by the mainstream LGBT rights movement' such modulations neglect 'the fact that progress and morality are often defined in terms of capitalistic value'. (Nguyen, 2023:114)

Within the context of the Black popular music industry this neoliberalisation and 'management' has resulted in the growing acceptance of mostly queer femme²⁴ positionalities. I believe that queer femme artists like Kehlani and Victoria Monét have been able to become incredibly successful partly because of their perceived femininity and sexual ambiguity. In the eyes of capitalistic record labels, queer femmes are palatable enough to not disrupt the binaries and normativity that genres of music such as R&B utilizes to maintain its relevancy in the music market.

²⁴ Queer femme describes individuals who identify as both queer and femme, indicating that that they have non-heterosexual sexual orientation or gender identity and also embrace femininity in their self-expression and performance of gender.

5.5. Alternative R&B and The New Black Consciousness

Out of the defiant socio- cultural- political spirit and legacy of blues music, and the sonically innovative patrimony of contemporary R&B, rises a new subgenre of R&B that has heavily drawn from their canonical musical texts whilst concurrently generating radical contestations to their aesthetic codes.

Finding traction and popularity in the early 2010s, alternative R&B, sometimes described as ‘PBR&B’²⁵ (Harvey, 2013) and dubbed as an ‘R&B Renaissance’ (Neasman, 2012), is a stylistic and aesthetic alternative to contemporary R&B that blends elements of R&B and hip-hop with dance, electronic, jazz and soft rock. Coined by music journalists such as Brandon Neasman of the Grio, alternative R&B acts such as The Weeknd, Miguel, SZA, Jhené Aiko and PartyNextDoor all have clear contemporary R&B influences but as Ruff maintains, are melodically and thematically unlike what contemporary audiences are used to (Ruff, 2022) Described as ‘musically ambitious, lyrically complex, intelligently constructed and overall, creative in its approach’ (Kamila, 2012), this new subgenre of R&B represents the changing of the guard within R&B, from the smooth, cool heartthrobs like Usher to vulnerable, off-kilter personalities like Frank Ocean amid the effects of social media on popular culture. Furthermore, the rise of alternative R&B has seen a move away from the ‘honey sweet, soulful voices’ of artists such as Brandy and Mariah Carey to ‘whispery, semi-nasal, autotune- heavy vocalisations and vocal inflections’ (Ruff, 2022) from acts such as Jhené Aiko and Brent Faiyaz.

²⁵ ‘PBR&B’ is a combination of the abbreviation ‘PBR’ (which stands for Pabst Blue Ribbon which is a beer that has been associated with hipster culture) and R&B

In terms of production qualities, critics argue that alternative R&B garners its distinct sound from aggressively pulling away from the conventional boundaries of contemporary R&B and trading the genres defining chord progressions for a synthetic coolness that champions edgier, genre-bending production, whilst maintaining soulful melodies. (Walters, 2012) (Kennedy, 2012) On highly popular alternative R&B records such as Frank Ocean's *Nostalgia Ultra* (2011), *Channel Orange* (2012), PartyNextDoor's *PartyNextDoor* (2013) and SZA's *Ctrl*, (2017), the artists merge 'echo-laden and lofty', 'lo-fi and richly textured' production and vocals, 'often using a lot of synthesisers and filtered drums' (Neasman, 2012) (Walters, 2012) with introspective lyrics that range from 'navel gazing to voyeuristic and sexually explicit, and a socio-internet-y dialogue'. (Walters 2012)

What has made the works of SZA, Ocean and other alternative R&B artists so popular and important amongst young Black audiences is the ways that it speaks to and embodies the shifting and fluid nature of the contemporary consciousness that this audience have begun to adopt. Interestingly, alternative R&B leaps back over contemporary R&B in that it has drawn lines of continuity from the radicalism of the blues musical tradition. Alternative R&B music not only departs from the older and more tenured Contemporary R&B sonically, but also in its conception and musical articulation of gender, race, sexuality and the body. Alternative R&B has developed out of new and renewed psychosocial realities within a range of Black populations across the Black Atlantic that represent what I and others describe as 'New Black consciousness' or *new Blackness*.

Not to be mistaken for the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s that instigated a social, cultural, and political awakening in apartheid South Africa, 'New Black consciousness' or more simply put 'New Blackness' (I use the terms interchangeably) represents what I believe to be the cross-cultural efforts of peoples of African descent to

define the tempo and texture of Black resistance through various intellectual and artistic pursuits. Coined by Black lesbian biographer and academic Alexis De Veaux, *new Blackness* is a Blackness oriented towards a ‘radical fluidity that allows powerful existential ‘conversations’ within ‘Black ness across genders, sexualities, ethnicities, generations, socioeconomic positions, and socially constructed performances of ‘Black’ identity’. (Neal, 2003:13). De Veaux’s thinking around *new Blackness* links back to Stuart Hall’s theorising regarding *Blackness* as an unfixed identity. New generations of Black R&B audiences are trying to resist fixity and the ‘crude racist litmus test that has historically been used to establish true Blackness’ and are embracing the artistic works of those that ‘are viewed as outside the parameters of ‘true’ Blackness and thus the Black community proper’. (Neal, 2003:129-130) Furthermore, alternative R&B tries to resist hegemonic conceptions of gender and sexuality.

This New Black consciousness/ New Blackness embraces the fullness of the lived realities of Black folks across the Black Atlantic and not only gives us a framework through which we can stage conversations around Blackness but also allows us to really contend with entrenched ideologies that inform conceptions of it particularly around race, gender, sexuality, and place. I think of this NBC²⁶ as being underlined by a more evolved iteration of ‘The Black Aesthetic’ that was first coined by scholar Larry Neal in 1968. Less shaped by the belief that ‘art should be used to galvanize the Black masses to revolt against their white oppressors’ (Pollard, 2006), new Black consciousness is shaped by introspection, renewed Black urban culture and the belief that art should be reflective of this new consciousness and reinvention of Blackness. Thus, through this new framework of Blackness, artists are then called and compelled to ‘sound out’ the breadth of their multiple and shifting positionalities and experiences.

²⁶ An abbreviation of New Black consciousness

I point to Frank Ocean and his works such as his singles ‘Chanel’ and ‘Bad Religion’ from his incredibly popular debut album, *Channel Orange*, as defining this new wave of Black artistic expression that is shaped by new Black consciousness. Debuting in 2011, Ocean stands as perhaps the most important and influential figure in alternative R&B music. Across his three major musical works, Ocean often finds himself embroiled in tensions around his sexuality. In coming out as bisexual in a letter penned in 2012 and published on his personal Tumblr page, Ocean ‘broke the unspoken but massive rule’ (Walters, 2012) that exists in Black popular music, that men cannot openly ruminate on their sexuality or gender expression in their musicking. Ocean coming out alongside the release *Channel Orange* challenged the hypermasculine culture that still dominates R&B and marked the beginnings of a new wave of subversive R&B music.

‘My guy pretty like a girl

And he got fight stories to tell

I see both sides like Chanel

See on both sides like Chanel’

The first verse taken from Frank Ocean’s single ‘Chanel’, 2017.

On his 2017 single ‘Chanel’, Ocean openly muses about his bisexuality as he compares it to the Chanel logo. Comprised of two Cs facing in opposite directions, Ocean portrays the two Cs as being representative of the two opposite sides of his sexuality. ‘Bad Religion’ is another song written and produced by Ocean that articulates the renewed energy of Black artists in expressing the fullness of their sexuality through music. On ‘Bad Religion’, Ocean

recounts a conversation that has taken place between himself and a taxi driver. Focusing on the tensions that arise out of unrequited love and having to hide one's queer sexuality, Ocean paints a picture that evokes feelings of hopelessness and anguish. Whilst the somber mood of the song is brought about by the song's subject matter in combination with its sonic qualities, what is especially striking about this record is the way that Ocean juxtaposes the organ led-hymnal chords with the queer subject matter of the lyrics. It feels as though the hymnal tone of the chords are being used as a form of penance by Ocean. By using an instrument and a style of music that is largely associated with the church and religiosity, it is almost as if Ocean is asking for forgiveness for his sexuality- which is further underlined by the fictional taxi driver telling him that he needs prayer 'Bo Bo, you need prayer' and Ocean agrees by saying that- 'I guess it couldn't hurt me'.

The rawness and openness that Ocean's work is defined by gives audiences a glimpse of how this wave of R&B and its artists have worked to try and transcend the limitations of R&B music that are often 'ideologically shackled to the past'. (Walters, 2012)

These artistic expressions often transcend the thematic and aesthetic borders of broader R&B music by making bold statements that embody a new Black diasporic consciousness that is moving away from being invested in rigid notions of Blackness and all that comes with it. Not only 'alternative' in terms of its sonic qualities, but alternative R&B stands as an embodiment of alternative Black life worlds that are attempting to embrace more diverse positionalities and experiences.

Black queer woman artist Me'Shell Ndegeocello is also often referenced as an artist that embodies the notion of a *new Blackness* (Clay, 2008). Ndegeocello's fourth album, *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape* (2001) is argued by critics to be the literal embodiment of the praxis of this concept of fluidity and presents a powerful challenge to the rigid perceptions of

Blackness and queerness (Neal, 2003: 5). In songs such as 'Dead N*gga Blvd. (pt. 1) Ndegeocello 'takes lay on Afrocentrism, in which folks hold on to an 'Africa of the past'. Ndegeocello's cutting criticism of the romanticising of Africa at the heart of Black nationalist conceptualisations of Blackness, stands as an overt response to the positioning of queerness as antithetical to 'authentic' Blackness (Neal, 2003:15). Alt R&B's geographical fluidity and the concomitant fluidity of social categories presented by this notion of new Blackness appears to have presented even more tenured contemporary R&B artists with fresher terrain to traverse and musick through. Even R&B superstar Beyoncé has begun to embrace the sounds and themes that are offered by alternative R&B to reinvent herself as an artist that has always existed and made music within the purview of the increasingly mainstream. Critic Emma Holbrook (2014) notes that 'Beyoncé's 2013 self-titled album indicated a slight departure from her signature R&B balladry to explore darker beats and more boldly sexual tone; perhaps best seen in Partition...'

I position alternative R&B as a genre that sits in and soothes the new Black consciousness that is still hungover from rigid notions of Blackness. It uses music as raw material with which artists and their audiences can question and disrupt their own sexual and gender politics in a manner that Black popular music has not witnessed since the popularisation of the blues and its pioneers, such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. In effect, alternative R&B stands a new kind of 'language' of a 'Blackness that many folks had been afraid to embrace for fear that somehow it was a reduction or erosion of Blackness'. (Neal, 2003:13)

5.6. Conclusion

What the testimonies of my participants have demonstrated is that the hegemonic social ideology that is reproduced within R&B music is to a large extent implicated in their experiences and trajectories. The ways in which they embody their queerness, their rejection of performances of hegemonic femininity, and their refusal to integrate such performances into their musicking have seen many of these artists struggle with gaining exposure, lucrative opportunities and sustained success. In this chapter, I examined how central to the issues that many Black queer women artists face within R&B music is their embodiment of queerness through queer aesthetics and subversive gender performances. The queerness of these artists, their subversive performances of gender such as Black mascness positions them in contrast to the well-established and accepted aesthetic for women in R&B. Overt expressions of queerness through queer aesthetics are indeed an outcome of not materializing ‘oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility’ (Butler, 1988: 522) Alongside the ways in which the music industry tries to limit which specific kinds of gender performance can be integrated into R&B musicking and how this squeezes out Black queer masc presenting women artists, we see that hegemonic ideology regarding bodily appearance also plays a critical role. For Black queer women artists that make R&B music, colourism, queerphobia, misogynoir and fatphobia often intersect to construct their physical bodies outside of the boundaries of R&B and popular music’s hegemonic body politic. Underling the struggles that Black queer women artists face regarding their bodily appearances and subversive gender performances is geographies. The geographical context within which these women musick evidently plays a key role in the trajectories of their careers. The lack of infrastructure in regard to R&B in the UK has meant that many British R&B artists, not only Black queer women artist looks to America for opportunities and engagement. However, America is not a

monolith went it comes to supporting R&B artists. The testimony of Participant P demonstrated that support for R&B music and R&B artists is state-specific with larger metropolitan cities such as LA, New York and Atlanta being more conducive for R&B musicking.

The capitalistic model of the music industry also plays a significant role in the experiences and trajectories of Black queer women artists. Again, because Black queer women artists via their subversive gender performance, position themselves outside of the heteronormative, coherent identities that capitalistic systems such as the music industry rely on and deem as intelligible or 'easy to sell', they are often seen as too much of a risk to invest in. Thus, these artists often miss out on lucrative opportunities to their cisheterosexual counterparts because they are already deemed as legible and easier to 'sell' to R&B music audiences that are a familiar with normativity and normative musicking.

6. Digital G*rl in a digital world II- The Internet and/in*** the musicking of Black queer women artists.

Musicking in the new Millennium is a range of musical activities that cannot be separated from the Internet and the digital world. A nuanced and detailed examination of the musicking of Black queer women artists cannot be had without critical consideration of how technological advancements have not only transformed the popular music landscape but also importantly how those advancements have begun to underpin their musicking. Interestingly, the internet has played a paradoxical role regarding the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music and culture. The internet and technology have to a certain extent crystallized certain ideological inscriptions into the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music whilst at the same time it has also opened those same shapes, textures and boundaries to violation and transformation.

The internet has not only transformed the landscape of popular music but has been incredibly integral in permitting the ‘fluidness of gender to be realized and experienced’. (Bailey & Telford, 2007 as seen in Webb and Temple, 2016:639) As established in the previous chapter, gender and the performance of gender are critical to musicking within Black popular music and they shape experience and trajectories, so the emergence of the internet can be argued to invite new possibilities for musicking of those that perform gender in subversive ways.

For the past 20 or so years the wider popular music industry has been characterized by ‘rapid technological metamorphosis’ (Hughes et al., 2016:2) and a detachment to the physicality of music. What some would describe as the ‘age of the internet’ or digitalization in the recorded

music industry has birthed a new and renewed industry that offers new possibilities for creativity to flourish in that it ‘facilitates increased opportunities for twentieth-century artists to collaborate, to communicate and to interact with others interested in their music’. (Hughes et al, 2006: 1) Hughes et al (2016) note that ‘traditional notions within the former music industry – performance, liveness, production, artist, training, success, creativity- have been altered through digital disruption.’ (p2) The internet and digitalization has completely transformed the way that music is written, produced, performed and consumed. As digital music scholar James Wade Morris maintains: ‘Music’s circulations in now thoroughly intertwined with computing technologies, and this has led to a series of innovations, interfaces, and ideas for music that reorientate the role of music in everyday life.’ (2015:32) Alongside these progressive changes, there has also been a seismic shift in the monetary and creative value that audiences place on music. Musicologist Keith Negus explains that ‘the very ubiquity of digital music- the way it can be actively used, reused and circulated, or perhaps more significantly, the way it can be skipped, passed by, ignored as part of the ambient drone of omnipresent mobile content has impacted dramatically on listeners judgements about the appropriate economic and social value.’ (Negus, 2015:1). Music is now not only distributed and sold in its physical form, but online spaces have also created incredible opportunities for record labels, distribution companies and artists on their own to sell and market their music via an unprecedented number of avenues. Online spaces and the digital have also given fans and audiences unprecedented access to the intimate details of artist's lives and artists can now go directly to their audiences to get their opinions on their works. As Morrison posits, for ‘industry executives, record labels, and technology companies, music’s new digital formats have enabled greater control over the flow of music through new possibilities for surveillance, advertising, versioning, and technological interference’. (2015:32) A striking example of artists using versioning and surveillance is

Summer Walker's use of TikTok and the release of the 2022 sped-up version of her 2018 released EP *Last Day of Summer*. Summer Walker and her team had noticed that sped up versions of singles from her EP were gaining traction on the TikTok app. Videos that used the sped-up version of her singles in the background or sometimes as the main track were amassing millions of views so they decided to release the sped up version of the EP on streaming sites as a way to directly and monetarily benefit from the new traction that this project was getting. Because of TikTok sped up songs have now become so popular that Spotify produced their own curated playlist of sped-up songs that has currently been liked by almost a million Spotify users.

This chapter is not oriented towards giving a comprehensive account of the history of music and its relationship with technology and technological advancements such as the internet. Rather, I map out the more recent and specific history of streaming and social media networks and make attempts to situate the musicking of Black queer woman artists within this constantly shifting context of music- technology-internet. In this chapter I use the data drawn from my interview transcripts and my online observations of my participants to offer a critical examination of what the internet and digitalization has meant for Black queer women artists and artists more generally whilst also examining how they are utilizing the digital and the internet in their musicking. More specifically, I discuss how Black queer women artists not only use the internet for direct monetary gain a la Summer Walker amongst many others, but also how they use it to counter the social ideologies that underpin and run through the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music and popular culture more generally.

Digital technologies have not only affected music industries more generally but have also greatly shaped and affected musical traditions. Newness in this current technologically

advanced musical landscape has revolved around the rejection of previous traditions (Hughes et, 2016:2) It is no coincidence that the rise of relatively new subgenres of R&B music has happened alongside the technological and digital transformation of the music industry.

6.1. The Internet and Technology in***The Musicking of Black Queer women artists

Within this thesis I use musicking to denote a wide range of activities that directly connect to music and musical performance. However, I want to widen Small's description of musicking because I believe that the internet has now come to figure centrally in the musical activities of artists that make popular music, especially in the musicking of Black queer women. For Black queer women artists, technology and the internet are the primary tools with which their musicking both 'happens' through and is legitimized, their music lives and is brought to life by the internet. The internet and technology are central to how their music is created, heard, *performed*, marketed and distributed. Black queer woman artists engage with the internet at multiple levels and the power that it wields for them has begun to unlock doors that had been previously firmly shut. What I argue in this chapter is that the internet and technology have created new and renewed opportunities with which Black queer women artists have cultivated their careers, and contested both their erasure and the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music.

Whilst the generation that I grew up in engaged with music and artists through a multitude of channels which included, television, music publications, radio and the internet, the new generation of listeners have primarily come to discover music and engage with it through the internet and its varying sites. The Covid-19 pandemic which started during the back end of

2019 further deepened the relationship that the musicking of Black queer women artists have with the internet and social media. Whilst it is clear that there wasn't a single part of the music industry that wasn't affected by COVID, the most obvious effect that the pandemic did have was on live music. For my participants and others that mainly depended on touring as a source of income, the pandemic marked an incredibly turbulent time in which many were forced to adapt to the new circumstances that the music industry and beyond it faced. Because of the restrictions around movement and the gathering of crowds, artists were forced to take their performances online via live streams on sites such as Apple music and Instagram. In the UK Covid 19 is said to have had a 'catastrophic impact on the live music sector which generated £1.1 billion a year for the UK economy before the virus struck and the lockdown was imposed'. (UK MUSIC, 2020)

Aside from the economic impact the virus had on the music industry, some of my participants felt that COVID-19 allowed them to really take time to work on new music and on bridging the gap between themselves and their audiences through interactions and engagements via social media. Before the pandemic social media had already played an incredibly important role in the interactions of Black queer women artists and their audiences but the general usage of social media sites during the pandemic created new possibilities for both artists and their audiences.

6.1.1. Social Media

In today's increasingly internet-mediated world social media has become a mainstay in the careers of both up and coming and established acts. Beginning with the creation of 'OG' social networking site Myspace in 2003, the rapid growth of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok has arguably transformed the popular music landscape and musicking itself. Even more, social networking sites have changed the way

that people use the internet. ‘Myspace so thoroughly defined the way the 00’s looked, sounded and felt...’ (Tedder, 2020:3)

What was transformative about Myspace was that it was not just a site that people used as a primary social and communication tool like the dial up bulletin boards of yesteryear, it was also a site where groups such as artists could actively market themselves and share their music. Myspace also marked new and transformative ways for artists to connect with their audiences, for audiences to connect with each other and ultimately changed the way that people discovered music.

In his comprehensive oral history of Myspace, Michael Tedder (2020) unearths how Myspace created one of the first platforms where artists could really take control of their own marketing and interactions with their audiences. The site was an incubator for features that would come to form the bedrock of new popular social media networks, It marked the first time that artists could have unmediated communications with their fans. Incredibly successful artists such as Calvin Harris, Arctic Monkeys and Adele were discovered through their use of Myspace to showcase themselves and their musical talents.

When Myspace ‘died’ in 2008, arguably because the company was repeatedly bought and sold and started to charge users to use it, the gap it had left was seismic but was quickly filled by popular social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

Music audiences on Twitter are clued in on how social media sites have now come to figure squarely in the musicking of artists. Artists and audiences alike are also recognizing how these sites are slowly dismantling the power that music labels once had over consumers’ decision-making, the power labels had over ‘making or breaking’ artists and the influence that they had over the decision making of artists when it came to their artistry and the way that they engage with their fandom.

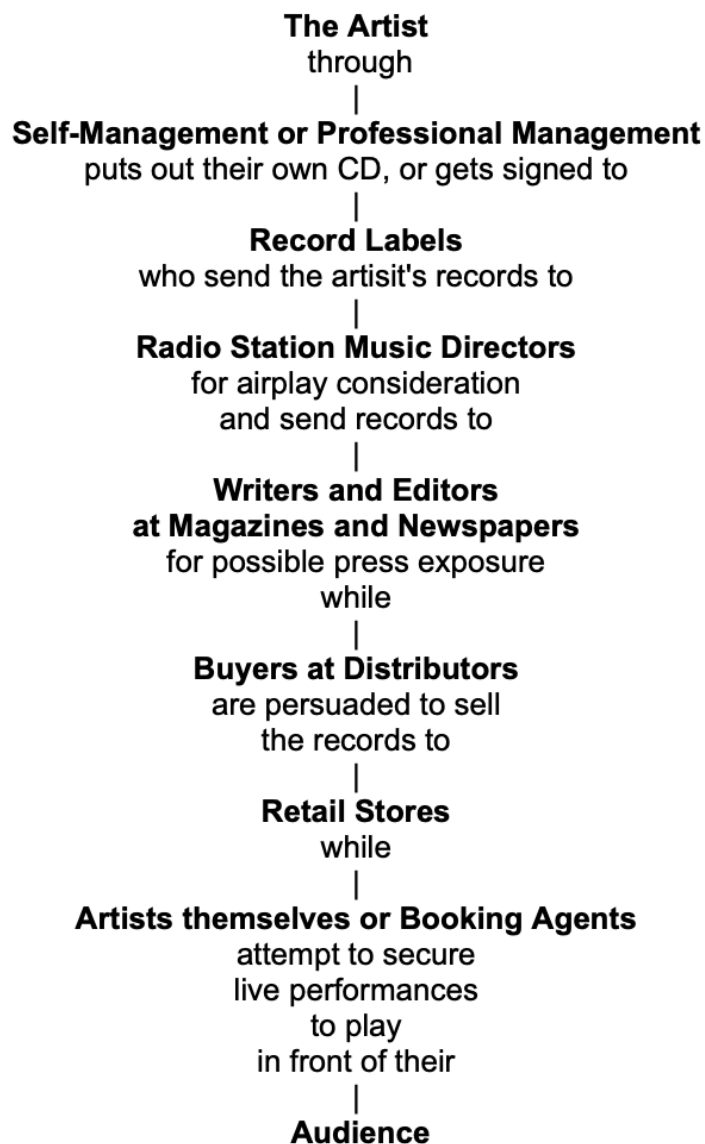


Figure 6: Christopher Knab, *Gates*, 2008

In a series of tweets, a group of users on Twitter staged a conversation regarding technological changes and how they think it has affected the popular music industry.

@brethawriter's tweet sparked the conversation, she tweeted:

'Music labels used to be the influencers back in the day. I don't believe they have the power to make or break an artist like they once did. The power is now in the consumers and social media.'

User @jordanrivera0 responded by saying *'agreed. People are now turning to social media for music curation and discovery which means promotion is decentralizing from labels to influencers.'*

User @_Playboykurt responded to @brethwriter's tweet and stated that *'things did switch up a little. I believe it gave Artists more leverage for their artistry. Instead of fishing for customers now they can go direct to source and find out what truly works or not.'*

@_JayMontenegro writes that *'Shit opened up now. Blogs had the labels stressed cause they can't manufacture shit anymore.'*

In rounding off the conversation user @imxnixlew writes that *'That's why they're tapping in so hard to influencer culture, the gotta bunch of old heads running labels who only know how to break artists in the club or on the radio.'*

Because of the powerful legacy that Myspace had left, gone are the days where artists careers are principally shaped by musical labels, gate keepers or their ability to pay exorbitant amounts to marketing agencies and publicists just to connect with their fans and get their faces out there. Whilst music labels, gate keepers and marketing agencies are still highly influential within the music industry, for Black queer women artists, social media presents a new liberatory tool which they have been able to connect with other artists and build social enclaves.

What is interesting is that the online activity of artists and music audiences before the popularity of social media was often overlooked as a useful resource by those within the enclave of the music industry. Now social media and its relationship with artists (especially

those that are at the periphery of popular culture) and audiences is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. In her 2012 study of social media and its mediation of the artist-audience relationship, Nancy K. Baym posits that ‘in recent years, the recording industry is reeling from the activities of online audiences and what once seemed irrelevant is now at the center of rethinking how to make music making and its associated professions sustainable’.
(2012:287)

‘Nearly all music professionals seem convinced that social media – and in particular musicians use of those media to connect with audiences- are key to their survival.’ (Baym, 2012:287). Furthermore, with sites like Twitter the belief that relationships between audiences and artists should simply be treated as parasocial (Soukup, 2006) (Beer, 2008) has been made to look naïve. Marwick and Boyd (2011) and Baym (2012) argue that social media sites have changed the relational expectations that audiences have for artists and that ‘musicians now find themselves in a career where continuous online impressions management and relationship building seem to be requirements.’ (Baym, 2012:288)

I struggle to think of an artist within more recent popular music that has found mainstream success without engaging with social media to some extent and in some shape or form. Several of my participants are also convinced that because they already exist at the periphery of wider popular culture, engagement with social media must form a key part of their musicking, some even attribute the success that they have had in their careers to social media. An interesting point to consider is how social media has ‘opened up the world’ for artists and mediated the distance between them and their audiences.

Emmavie maintained that:

‘I owe so much of my career successes to these apps. Sharing my art online has allowed me to connect with people and be discovered by thousands of people across the globe from the comfort of my own home and has been part of the reason that I’ve

travelled a lot, been booked for shows and worked with some many other creative people and businesses. There is no doubt social media might be the most useful tool for building a music career today when it's utilized correctly.'

Participant P is an artist that has invested significant thought, time and resources into building her social media presence as an artist. Participant P has made significant attempts to engage with social media as a means of making musicking a financially sustainable endeavor for her. Like a lot of young, up-and-coming independent artists, Participant P has primarily relied on crowdfunding²⁷ across all her social media platforms to help make her debut album.

'Me and my producer went and applied to so many different artist grants and we just kept getting turned down- so I was like we're just going to crowd fund now because my music has to get out one way or another. Because we decided that we wanted to go with crowd funding, we had to push back our original release date back by a month.'

Utilizing her TikTok account by regularly posting song clips of her songs and creating 'content' centered around her music, Participant P was able to grow her following to a sizeable follower count of 58,200 and successfully raise enough funds to make and release her album.

Throughout our discussions around social media and music, Participant P continuously referenced the internet and the short form video hosting platform as a site that not only figured centrally in mitigating her proximity to Black cultural centers, helped her grow the

²⁷ Crowdfunding 'is the practice of funding a project or venture by raising money from a large number of people, typically via the internet'. (Calic, 2018)
Crowdfunding through internet based sites such as Gofundme has become a popular way for up and coming artists, authors, film producers and directors to raise significant funds to help create and release their works.

audience for her music and interact with them but more importantly, as a site that has come to form an integral part of her musicking:

‘TikTok has helped me especially in the age of the internet. It was very hard for me to find my ‘niche’ at first because I didn’t really know...[I just said to myself] look I’ve got music and I think that I’m kind of funny, I’m just do funny stuff and hope that people also think that its funny and that kind of worked for a little bit but then I realized that okay you also do music stuff so you need to like post stuff about your music because that’s kind of the entire point of you having this page, yeah so once I starting figuring out how to do that, it was a little easier but ummmm essentially I will say that TikTok really taught me a lot about marketing. I’m be real, everyone is like oh you need to have the perfect light, the perfect set up [to make good TikTok videos], I was like that at first but now? I will prop my phone up and just make sure I have me a nice lil ring light and that’s it. [TikTok] showed me how to connect with people well. What I’m learning is that a lot of ways that you can gain new followers, find and create community is through hashtags and I don’t know much about them. In my head those are like 2010, 2011 [things], like who does hashtags? But you need hashtags apparently!’

The use of social media for artists can be incredibly varied, there are subtle nuances within what artists choose to share with their audiences and how they choose to navigate their way through various online environments. Whilst some artists use their social media as a personal diary of sorts, Emmavie has said that she users her social media in more of a depersonalized way:

'I only really use social media as a highlight reel, a way to re-engage my followers around a new release and subtly advertise my music. I don't share too much of my personal life online. It's just not natural for me to document and share everything or talk to the camera but I really recognize the value in that as an artist today. I understand how much we all yearn for connection and seeing artist's vulnerability and authenticity coupled with their talent'.

One significant way that Emmavie chooses to engage with her fans and followers is through Live streams on Tik Tok and Instagram.



Figure 7: Emmavie live streaming on TikTok whilst in her home studio. 2023

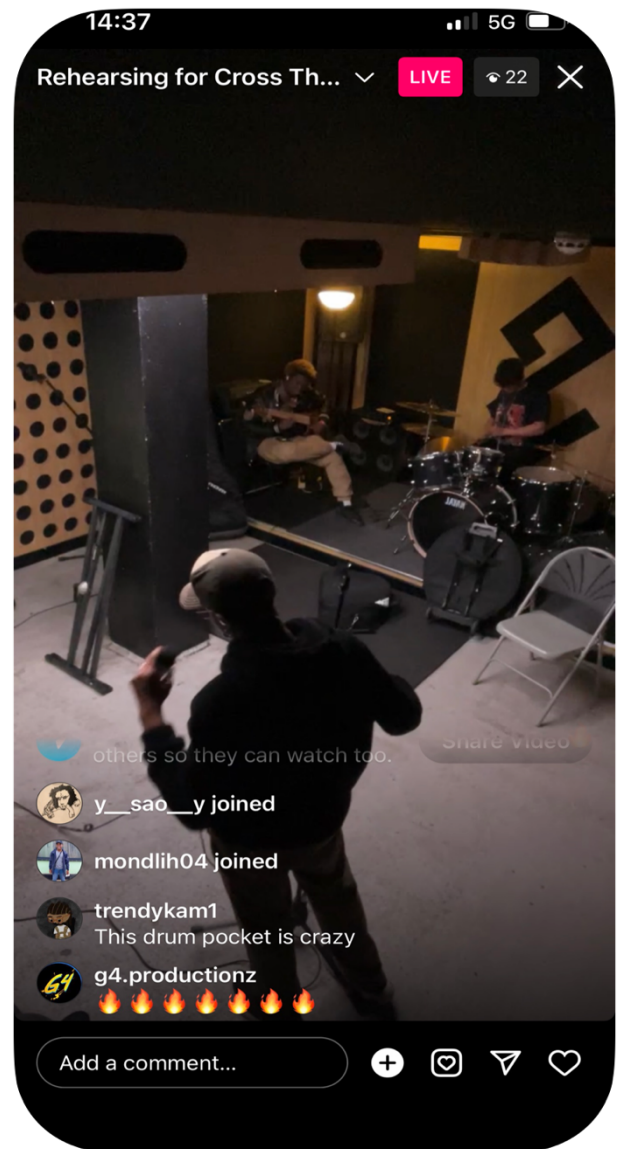


Figure 8: Emmavie live streaming her band rehearsal. 2023

'I use live streams because I believe that there is no more valuable and intimate time in art than real-time. Live streaming is the third best way to see me after seeing me at a show and that is second to me being in the studio with me.'

During her live streams, Emmavie often plays unreleased music and even sometimes shows herself producing music. During her live streams, Emmavie sometimes invites her fans and other artists to join her in playing their own music. On one particular occasion, Emmavie

invited a fan and artist from Louisiana, US named Wakai to play his own music and this interaction led to them eventually collaborating on a song together, the song that they went on to create is called 'Starter Jacket' and it has gone to accumulate over 1,000,000 streams on Spotify. Emmavie tells the story of how she first interacted with Wakai on a live stream and how this song came about:

' I was on Instagram one evening and I think I was feeling quite sociable, I think I was just sharing unreleased music and probably making something, I'm not so sure but I think that I was playing music that I had already worked on and I was also letting people join my live which I don't often do and I can't remember how many people had come up before him but I remember that I had spoken to a few people that day and I remember he [Wakai] came on and he said he was like cool with Gwen Bunn and I think he said he was also Iman Omari's cousin so I was just like well I know how the family thing can be when all of you do music so you might be good and he seemed really cool, he said that his crew/ collective really like my music and we were just talking about how he had sampled me. They've posted a few things of me sampled in their music so I was abit like ok you fucks with me and maybe stroked my ego in the right way and then he played me some beats. He said he was a producer and a rapper first, the production was nice, and I was kinda like 'this is good!' and he said 'can we work on something' and obviously there's the pressure of being on live which is also a really good tactic cause there's an audience and I'm going to be pressured to come across as a nice person haha, but his music was good so he had a chance anyways but he was like yeah 'can we work on some music' and I was like 'I'm going to be straightforward, don't send me a whole bunch of stuff, send me THE song, send me ONE song that you definitely know that I'm going to like and you know

it sounds like I would be a good fit so be really selective, send me that one tune and I'm going to send you a verse back' and yeah he sent me the song and I was like this is actually good! I didn't write it straight away actually, I don't know what it was, I had a bit of writer's block at the time but he sent me a few messages asking for it so one day I thought ah I have to just get this done so I sat down after work one day, freestyled something, wrote some lyrics that actually fit that and then Starter jacket was born and that was that and I feel like I did my due diligence and we're here!'

Here we see the power of social media in not only connecting artists with their fans but also in connecting them with potential collaborators. The connectivity that the internet and social media enable can bridge geographical distances between people, help create and sustain relationships and importantly bring about new opportunities for artists that have not been afforded the exposure that being attached to music labels often provides.

For my other participants, the integration of social media into their musicking has been less of a smooth journey. Participant A who currently lives in Lagos details her struggle to really utilize social media because of issues regarding accessibility, connectivity, and the anti-LGBT laws that are currently in place in Nigeria.

'While I think the internet has been so helpful in connecting me with people and other artists, my use of it at the moment has been a little bit limited. As you know Twitter was banned in Nigeria for a while, so it was a little bit hard to stay connected. I managed to get a VPN on my phone to allow me to still use Twitter but using it was expensive and it wasn't always reliable. At times I feel frustrated because I am not able to have the same consistency as my peers. What I mean is that I am not able to

post consistently, and truth be told, I sometimes struggle with knowing what to post. As much as the internet has, you know, shaken things up people still need to learn how to navigate through it and there are still a lot of barriers to access and visibility. I used to have a fear of being outed on social media hence the reason that I never post pictures of myself, and I go by an alias, but I'm not as fearful as I once was. I'm grateful that the experiences that I have had using social media have been mostly pleasant.'

Although there are some that believe that the multiple 'voices', open flow of information and the interconnectedness that social media sites and the internet have brought about have brought into question the need for some of the traditional roles and pathways within the music industry, my participants and I recognize and understand that the music industry and its respective structures still play a massive role in the trajectories of artists. Me and most of my participants understand that whilst the integration of the internet and its varying sites into their musicking presents them with various potentially liberatory tools, we know that this musicking is not done away from the machinery of major corporations that have been forced to also work through mass-users sites (Rogers, 2013:8) to continue to try and mediate and control relationships and strategies fostered by artists like my participants.

Furthermore, as technology and the algorithms that these sites use have evolved over time, the social networking sites themselves have now become the powerful structures that mediate strategies and the relationships between artists and their audiences. As Jenzen notes social media sites are 'carefully managed spaces of civility with clear commercial end aims and users are increasingly up against restriction limitations...' (Jenzen, 2017:1628)

Algorithms on social media sites like TikTok dictate the vast flow of content that is created online and constrain what is made visible. Whilst it can be argued that algorithms are

necessary to prohibit harmful content from being posted and viewed, they can equally be encoded with measures that often suppress the content of those like my participants that are deemed too political or too ‘woke’. What can be described as ‘algorithmic bias’ (Heilweil, 2020) can be seen to be plaguing sites such as Instagram and TikTok. ‘Algorithmic bias’ refers to the systematic discrimination that is often embedded into the design, implementation and or outcomes of algorithms. The bias typically arises from the biases and assumptions of the human developers that create the algorithms.

In recent months TikTok has gone through somewhat of a reckoning with Black and Queer content creators demanding to be treated ‘more fairly amid accusations of censorship and content suppression’ (Rosenblatt, 2021) through algorithmic bias.

Although Participant P has found relative success on TikTok she also spoke at length about how these sites are often configured to censor and ‘shadow ban’ users like herself that create and upload Black and/or queer orientated content. Communications Studies scholar Jessica Sage Rauchberg argued that ‘the censorship of marginalised Creators is no accident, it is key to TikTok’s algorithmic infrastructure.’ (2022:197) ‘Referring to the alleged practice of limiting the spread of content without notifying creators that it violates any community guidelines, shadow banning has become an increasingly widespread concern among users not only TikTok, but also Twitter and Instagram.’ (McCluskey, 2020).

‘A 2019 whistleblower report from German investigative reporting collective *Netzpolitik* revealed that TikTok's AutoR function, which facilitates algorithmic suppression, was shown to target accounts where users were apparently disabled, trans, queer, or fat.’ (Köver & Reuter, 2019) (Rauchberg, 2022:197)

Speaking during the time of her crowdfunding campaign, Participant P explained that she has regularly been a target of TikTok’s racist and queerphobic algorithms:

*‘My issue with TikTok is that they don’t like Black people and I wish that they would just say it with their chest at this point. For example, I’ve been running this crowd funding campaign and posting stuff about the campaign since forever and its only been in the last week and half that I’ve actually been able to get any engagement for my videos and I have like 30k followers so there’s no reason why I should only be getting like 700 views and 3 comments on my stuff...I mean me and plenty other Black queer content creators have found that they are constantly suppressing our content, constantly censoring our content...even within that for example my friend *****, she is dark skinned and she gets censored on TikTok way way way more than I do, the only difference between me and her is what? Complexions. She’s not the first person that I’ve heard say things like this about TikTok. Even look at the filters that they be putting out there for people to use, it makes your skin lighter, your nose smaller, it makes your lips bigger, like they are a very anti-Black platform and they continuously treat Black content creators terribly.’*

Participant BM echoed Participant P’s sentiments towards TikTok and specifically maintained that TikTok is not just anti-Black but it also a ‘very colourist’ app.

Rauchberg importantly maintains that ‘though the internet might be considered a post racial world, platforms, websites, and other digital spaces reflect the ideologies and social practices of those who are programming the codes that build communication guidelines on these same sites. In other words, technology is not neutral: it is an extension of dominant political, cultural, and ideological views’ (2022:197) and those cultural and ideological views that have also shaped the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music are now being crystalized by and spread through the internet.

Furthermore, although Emmavie attributes most of her successes to social media she still has mixed feelings about how artists are having to use social media to promote themselves:

‘My ADHD brain paired with being an over-thinking Virgo means I have a great conflict in my mind about how permanent the internet is. I battle with a need to share sexy, perfectly curated content but not having the attention span needed to complete things. Certainly not enough to build the consistent routine needed to really reap the benefits of social media.’

As Emmavie notes, a consistent routine is needed to really reap the benefits of social media for artists and their musicking. Continuous online impression management is key to the success of artists that are having to manage their social media accounts for themselves as opposed to big artists who often have social media managers that help to manage all their social media accounts. However, as previously noted, continuous interactions with audiences and online impression management for artists like my Nigerian participants has proven to be difficult.

The internet and its multiple sites are not only spaces where Black queer women artists can musick through and connect with their audiences, it is also spaces they have begun to use to present counters to the exclusionary politics of Black popular music and wider popular culture, particularly in regard to gender and sexuality, despite the issues they face with censorship and algorithmic bias. Social media has emerged as integral to their survival strategies within and beyond the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music and culture.

Using social media sites such as Instagram and Tiktok as what Rauchberg describes as ‘sites of oppositional discourse’ (2022:198), Black queer women artists are making attempts to legitimize and communicate their lived realities as existing at the intersection of Blackness and queerness and pushing popular culture to recognize and respond to these realities. Whilst there is an understanding that the internet is a space where popular culture and the hegemonic social ideology that runs through it are disseminated and legitimized, the internet also possesses liberatory potential, particularly regarding performances of gender, it has become an essential arena for gender and sexual politics. Hans et al. argue that ‘the internet can be viewed as a space where gender can be performed in new ways.’ White (2003) Bruckman, (1993) Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie (2006) also argue that ‘innovative identities can be imagined by online representation and gendered scripts can be re-conceptualised.’ (as seen in Webb and Temple, 2016: 639) Social media plays an integral role in contemporary performances of gender, as Webb and Temple note ‘online venues provide opportunities for individual users to enact gender.’ (2016:638) More specifically, online platforms provide multiple opportunities to enact gender in ways that counter the ways that gender is conceptualized and performed within popular culture. Internet-based sites such as TikTok and Instagram can importantly ‘become education sites, rearticulating difference as neutral, not negative’. (Rauchberg, 2022: 203)

What is interesting about contemporary queer communities is how they hold their visibility on online spaces in incredibly high regard. However, visibility for Black queer women artists in the digital age is not ‘simply about being gay and using social media platforms at the same time’ or ‘participating in ‘writing and lifestreaming...and curating [a} digital portrait of one’s action and thoughts (Wargo, 2017, p.10) as an out LGBTQ person’ (Hester, 2022:169) Rather, visibility for these women is centered around actively disrupting their own erasure and the whitewashing of queerness and cis-het washing of Blackness respectively.

The internet not only enables the visibility of queer folks like my participants, but it also allows them to ‘perform queerness in such a way that one engenders a public knowledge of their atypical erotic identity’. (Hester, 2022: 170)

Participant SM is another artist that has really utilized social media within their musicking. What is different about how SM uses social media in comparison to say, Participant P is that the promotion of her music is very much linked with attempts to display her subversive performances of gender and to challenge the gender hegemony. SM displays her subversive gender performances and challenges towards the gender hegemony primarily via Instagram on which she has 248,000 followers. In a post made early last year Participant SM posted a picture of herself playing basketball and sporting her signature shaved bleach-blonde hair, underneath the picture read a caption that said *‘I need space to be opened up....#womenempowerment’* Under another photo posted by Participant SM she writes *‘I am women’s history.’* In our final interview I asked Participant SM why she posted those particular photos with these specific captions:

‘I feel like when it comes to things like women’s history, queer women are often forgotten about, especially Black masc and androgynous women. I get it, we don’t fit into everybody’s little box of what women are meant to be and or look like but that doesn’t mean that we don’t exist, the posts were just a call to cis het women to make space for us, it was also a call to other Black, queer folks to take up space and refused to be silenced and erased.’

For Participant S visibility and representation are also key to their social media strategy. Participant S has also used Instagram to not only underpin her musicking but also uses it to make covert commentary about the intersection of Blackness and queerness and interestingly

challenge what Hester (2022) describes as the ‘chaste and docile form of gayness where love is love *and nothing more*. In other words: a homo without sexuality’. (p170) Hester argues that if queer folks ‘hope to truly actualize their identities in defiance of the heteronormative social structures that seek to snuff them out, they must have the freedom to act hyper-sexually and pornographically in the public sphere, to live at once as their fully homo and fully sexual selves’. (2022:170)

On Instagram, Participant S posted a short clip of a scene from the 2004 Spike Lee-directed movie *She Hate Me*. The clip from the scene shows two of the film’s protagonists Fatima and Alex who are in a Black lesbian relationship kissing and about to have sex whilst Participant S’s music is dubbed over the scene’s audio. Underneath the film clip Participant S writes ‘*Happy Black History Month*’ with a smiley face emoji. Here Participant S is attempting to covertly draw attention to how Black queer folks are often erased when it comes to Black history. Beyond trying to reconcile Black history with queerness, Participant S’s post also importantly stands as an attempt to move away from the ‘anti(homo)sexual environment within which cyberqueers currently find themselves in , an environment structured by multiple overlapping censorship movements that support virginal forms of visibility’ (Hester, 2022: 170), the ‘whitewashing of queer bodies’ (McCready, 2010 as seen in Zaino, 2021:114) and flaccid and *respectable representations* of queerness and queer folks. This push for queer folk to be more palatable within the mainstream undermines what I believe queerness to be. In Black queer women using Instagram and other social media sites in this way, the site then shifts from the ‘virginal fixation’, ‘pride flag repositories’ and respectability that queer folks often position themselves within, to the ‘affective battlegrounds of embodied activism’ and defiance, “a cultural frontline” where every lewd and/or sexually suggestive photo or video a Black queer artist ‘become a warrior fighting to make room for the most genuine version of their identity’. (Hester, 2022: 170) This fight to

make room for the most genuine form of their identity is incredibly crucial for Black queer women artists that already exist within a sphere that is built upon cis-hetero, palatable performances and representations of gender and sexuality, which the internet and social media sites have been used to maintain and reify.

The music dubbed over the sex scene is crucial to the way that Participant S hopes to underpin her attempts at removing the scales of homonormative respectability politics from the ways that queer folks, more specifically Black queer women often must represent themselves within and beyond online spaces.

‘I want my music to contribute to imagination and innovation, tapping into intimacy and eroticism.’

By dubbing her music over the sex scene, Participant S is positioning their music as the soundtrack to this queer sexual desire and the fight to push forward more subversive and disruptive representations of that desire.

‘Aint no rules,

We vers’

These lyrics that play over the film clip take up multiple meanings. ‘Aint no rules’ alludes to the fact that Participant S believes that there should be no rules to the way that queer folks represent themselves, live their lives and fulfil their sexual desires within the context of consensual relations. Furthermore, ‘we vers’ refers to the non-normativity of queer sexual acts. The word ‘vers’ which is taken from queer slang and is derived from the word ‘versatile’ is used to describe queer folks who do not necessarily take up specific positions like ‘top’ or ‘bottom’ within sexual situations. For Participant S, social media is the perfect arena to platform the subversive sexual desire and the ‘Intimacy and eroticism’ that she wants her music and musicking to channel.

6.1.2. The ubiquitous age of streaming

One can argue that one of the biggest effects that the rise of the internet and the digital has had on musicking and music in general is in the way that artists release music, the way music is distributed and the way that contemporary audiences consume and access music. As the music industry scholar Jim Rogers (2013) posits, the first decade of the 2000s can be characterized by the music industries endeavors to ‘come to terms with the change in how consumers access music and how their established tactics and strategies for maintaining market dominance have been challenged’. (2013:12)

Gone are the days when audiences/fans queue outside of HMV/Tower Records/Woolworths/Virgin Megastore²⁸ to get a CD copy of their favorite artists hot new album or single. As Negus succinctly puts it ‘a recording is no longer a prized physical, numerically finite, collectable object; one visibly displayed in the store, under the arm when walking down the street, or in the home.’ (2015:151) In the new millennium fans and audiences have replaced the physicality of accessing the music of their favorite artists with the clicking, swiping and scrolling of music streaming apps/platforms that collate millions of songs into one place. Music streaming via platforms such as Apple Music, Spotify and TIDAL has now taken the place of CD’s and tapes as the most popular way to circulate, access and listen to music. Users are able to stream music through the subscription-based services that music services offer. For example, I pay around £15 a month to have access to

²⁸ As of today, none of these companies exist as ‘bricks and mortar’ entities thus illustrating one of the most negative effects that digitalization has had on the music industry. Rogers (2013) has written extensively about the collapse of ‘bricks and mortar’ retail outlets for recorded music and notes that ‘primarily, the transfer from physical to digital and the related spread of peer-to-peer file-sharing is perceived as reducing the market for recorded music, with physical retailers a resultant prime casualty’. (2013:44)

music on Spotify and Apple music. Through this monthly payment I can have access to millions of digital copyright restricted songs on-demand, meaning that If I wanted to listen to ‘Jumpin’, Jumpin’ (2000) by Destiny’s Child at 3am, I would be able to. Services such as Swedish based company Spotify offer different tiers of access which are dependent on whether or not the user wants to use the service for free or pay a monthly subscription. Spotify offer a free service in which users can get full access to its centralized library; however, they will have to endure randomized audio advertisements between every few songs. If users choose to pay, then there are no ads.

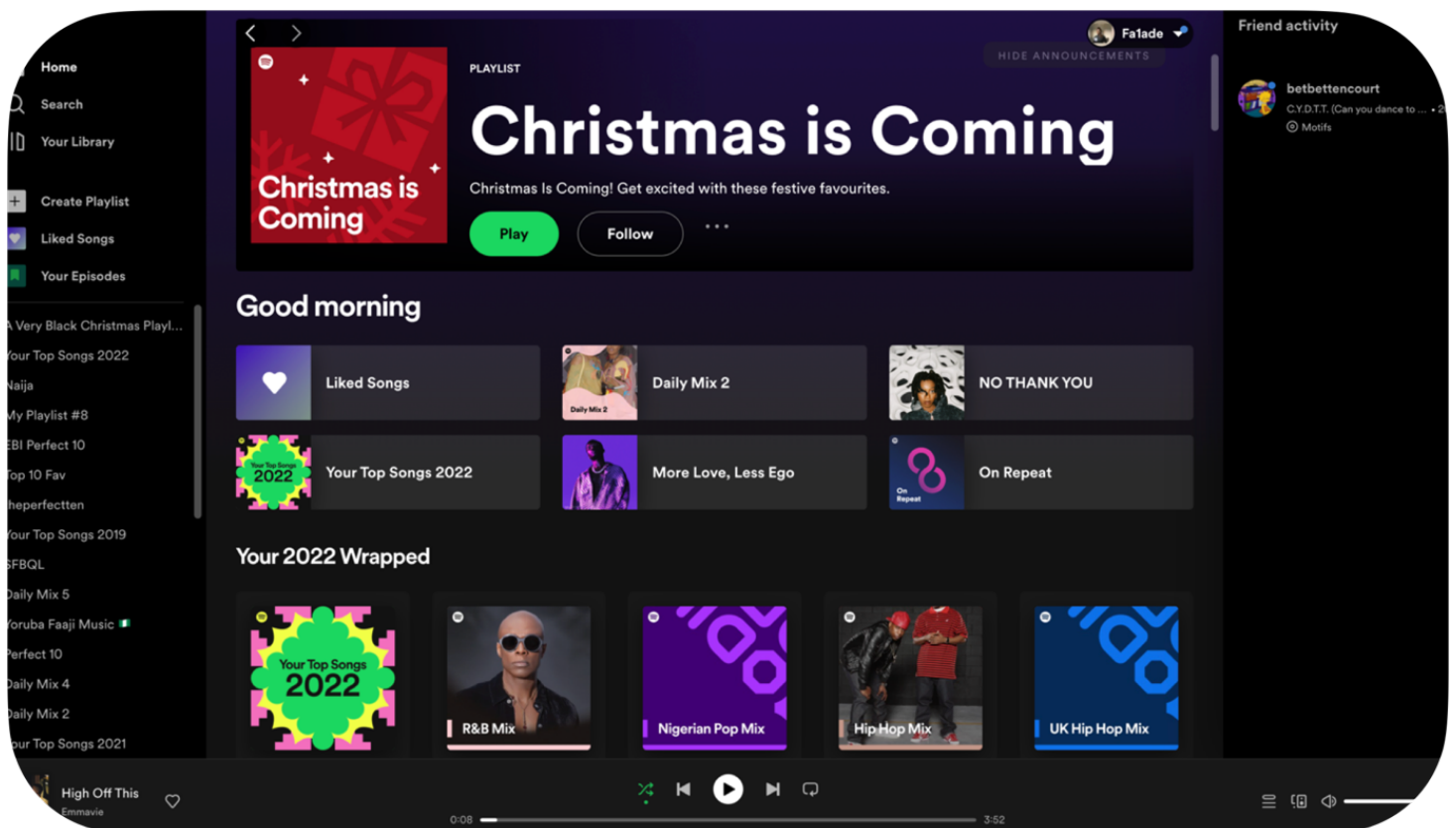


Figure 9: My personal Spotify Homepage, Screenshot taken of the homepage of the Spotify Mac OS app. 2022

Sites like Spotify are powered by artificial intelligence and complex algorithms that create recommendations and personalized playlists for each individual user using their listening history amongst other factors.

Streaming platforms such as Spotify, Apple music and SoundCloud came about because of the music industries response to the threat of total obliteration presented by the Pirated digital music sharing trade.

Whilst the story of the digital music era arguably begins in 1982 with the invention of the compact disc²⁹, the digital era went through a complete transformation with the advent of the MP3 file format. In contrast to CD's which were reliant on an industrial infrastructure³⁰ to get the music 'out there', MP3s like other digital files are 'ones and zeros, bits and bytes that, together with the right software and hardware, play music'. (Morris, 2015:21) Developed by the Fraunhofer Society in Germany and other digital scientists working in the US, The MP3 was a compressed audio file that although made transfers possible within the low-bandwidth of the early web, it reduced the audio's quality and fidelity. As technology advanced at a relatively rapid rate, Brad Hill notes that 'severely compressed song files became less necessary...but MP3 has remained in wide use at higher but rates that conserve more sound quality.' (Hill, 2013) Critics and scholars of digital technology and its relationship with music mark the invention of the MP3 as being the beginning of the move to the wholly digital, namely streaming.

6.1.2.1. Digital disruption

Some critics and scholars point to piracy as the central reason for the move towards streaming. Piracy also known as illegal file sharing is defined as 'the circulation of compressed digital computer files over the Internet using an array of location and exchange

²⁹ Compact Disc is often shortened to 'CD'.

³⁰ Morris notes that whilst the CD marks the beginning of the digital era, 'CDs as a whole were only musically digital' in that they came with 'very non digital packaging- discs and jewel cases that require physical retail stores, manufacturing plants, distribution trucks, and store shelves. CDs, in other words, rely on the same industrial infrastructure that many music commodities that came before them did'. (Morris, 2015: 21)

software.’ (David, 2010:30) ‘Infringements of intellectual property rights that *do* not involve the use of physical “hard media” (such as CD, DVD, flash drives, etc) for the reproduction and exchange of pirated material’ (OECD, 2009: 16) In academic scholarship and popular media, piracy was positioned as the cause of the ‘crisis’ that griped the recorded music³¹ industry.

File sharing and piracy scholar Matthew David maintains that in making their music collections available online, file-sharers created a community of sharing that took the affordances of network technology in radical new directions. Furthermore, David posits that ‘hundreds of millions of networked computer users and upwards of a billion files made available at any one time’ presented a huge challenge to gatekeepers and the musical oligarchy of major record labels, whose ongoing concentration ‘stood in stark contrast to a free flow of information’ that threatened to sweep them aside. (David, 2010:31) In the early 2000’s and in parts of the 2010s, dominant players in the film and music business saw file-sharing as a fundamental threat to the way that they had been conducting business for the past couple of decades.

Before the age of the internet and illegal file sharing was the ease with which consumers could ‘rip’³² CD’s containing music and buy re-writeable discs and ‘burn’³³ cds. Although these first instances of music piracy seemingly caused anxiety within the recorded music industry, David and Lee Marshall (2005) maintain that the process of burning and ripping CDs, also known as ‘bootlegging’ ‘whether commercial or home taping, never represented a substantial threat...home taping fostered a culture of music listening in those who would then go on to purchase music they liked when they could afford to do so’. (David, 2010:119)

Furthermore, in stark contrast to the bootlegging that defined the late 80s and 90s, digital

³¹ I use the terms the ‘recorded music industry’ and ‘the music industry’ interchangeably.

³² Ripping a CD is the process of ‘copying songs from an audio CD to a PC. During the ripping process, the player (or the software you use) compresses each song and stores it on your drive as a WAV file or an MP3’.

³³ Burning a CD is the process of music, pictures or video onto a blank CD or DVD.

releases of music and the creation of the mp3 file created more problems for the music industry and its associated economic success.

The MP3 which is a digital audio file, was brought about by ‘the development of digital compression techniques to enable ease of storage and transmission...as a tool for enabling producers, mixers, directors and editors to work on material recorded in different locations, and to facilitate other needs to distribute the work in progress and production...as such, compression technology was developed for and by the entertainment industry...’ (David, 2010:119-120) With the rise of the Internet and user friendly web browsers in the late 90s happening alongside these technological advancements in digital recording and the storage of audio files, there came about user friendly interfaces such as Napstar and Limewire that allowed internet users with digitally recorded music on their computers (typically from ripping CDs) to exchange files with other users (David, 2010:121) Perhaps the most notorious and popular Illegal music sharing P2P site there ever was, Napster is often pointed to as the platform that principally enabled the rapid development of illegal music sharing. Platforms such as Napster, it’s users and their enabling of illegal music file sharing were considered to have undermined, or at least troubled the traditional economics of the recorded music industry which were dependent on production, distribution, and consumption. The International Federation of Phonographic industries have estimated that between 2008 and 2015, Illegal file sharing/ digital piracy resulted in a cumulative loss of 240 billion euros to European industries including the music industry whilst creating a loss of up to 1.2 million jobs in these sectors (IFPI)

Because of these record losses, traditional power structures were at risk of collapsing under the demand for digital music products. Historically the recorded music industry has been and still is controlled, almost exclusively by what Napier Bell (2008) described as a ‘musical oligarchy’, a small group of powerful players that have concentrated ownership. (Rogers,

2013: 11). As the internet began to transform the landscape of the recorded music industry, 3 major record labels, namely Universal, Sony and Warner, controlled over 70 percent of the global market for recorded music. (Negus, 2011 as seen in Rogers, 2013:11) The advent of P2P networks presented a threat to this oligopolistic concentration. In 2002 the founding executive editor of Wired magazine Kevin Kelly argued that ‘the recording industry as we know it is history...[with] digital file-sharing technologies...undermining the established economics of music.’ (Kelly, 2002: 19-21)

Although this new demand for digital music content sent the recorded music industry into a supposed crisis, there were some artists and critics that importantly embraced the new possibilities that digitalization and the internet could bring about. As Rogers notes: ‘the promise and potential that the internet and digitalization had to destroying pre-existing industrial structures and the potential shift in the balance of power from big business to individuals was a possibility that was celebrated.’ (2013: 8) One of the biggest industrial structures that big music labels had control over was in music distribution. American artist and activist Kembrew McLeod explains that ‘for a century, the major label system dominated the music industry because it owned the means of production and distribution.’ (McLeod, 2005:527)

It was thought that with the demise of the power that the musical oligarchy had over music distribution would come the liberations of artists. ‘There was a commonly held belief that new information and communication technologies were liberative for artists and that structural change in artist-intermediary- consumer relationships have been a net gain for artists.’ (Rogers, 2013:2) An often-underrated benefit of the detachment of audiences from the physicality of music consumption is that it gave independently released music somewhere

to 'live'. Before the age of digitalization, if you could not afford to physically distribute your music, it was incredibly difficult to get your music heard by the masses.

Because artists were now able to go on P2P networks like Napster and distribute their music themselves and go on social media and market themselves, it meant that the power of major music companies and marketing agencies to act as intermediaries in artist- consumer relationships had been greatly diminished. Thus, the longstanding belief that 'exclusive distribution through established record companies is the only, best or even viable way to make money from musicking had been questioned and subsequently abandoned'. (David, 2010) Moreover, whilst Kelly lamented the undermining of the power of major record companies, he maintained that these new technologies and networks were concurrently 'empowering recording artists to act more independently than ever before'. (2002: 19-21) For the first time independent artistry seemed more and more viable and artists that were yet to sign deals and artists that had were beginning to question the archetypal career path that major labels had sold to them.

As such, musical labels were increasingly being challenged by both artists and the pressures that P2P network and digital music piracy had brought about.

It became clear that there was a high demand for digital music products and the music industry had to figure out a way to quickly monetize their content to create new revenues streams and find new means of distribution.

Although the internet and these new technologies threatened to erode the major record labels market hegemony (McLeod, 2005:522) and long-established structures, the music industry has actually been quite resilient and somewhat innovative in responding to the challenges presented by digitalization and the internet more generally (Rogers, 2013:4) Digitally induced disruptions within the music industry that were perceived to have given greater

power to both artists and consumers by freeing them from the shackles of hegemonic music corporations ultimately fell short of the mark. To counter the disruptive nature of P2P networks and harness this new demand for digital music products, the music industry and major labels essentially coopted internet distribution and used its trans mediations for renewed exponential economic growth in the form of streaming. Bonini and Gandidni (2020) maintain that ‘we are now witnessing a re-intermediation of music consumption practices controlled by commercial music streaming platforms.’ (p 1) Streaming through highly subscribed sites like Spotify and Apple music has now become the principal vehicle through which almost the entire market for digital music has been contained and constrained. Of equal importance is the fact that streaming has also become the primary way that audiences now consume music.

Thinking more about how the technologies and strategies that major music corporations utilized before the popularization of the internet, streaming has not been exempt from being absorbed into the musical oligarchy. Just like the ‘old heads’ at record labels being able to get their artists music into popular radio playlists and compilation albums, they have also been able to utilize streaming playlists to push the works of their artists.

6.1.3. Technology & Music: Democratization?

For my participants who are mostly independent artists, the weakening of the grip that the big labels have over the music industry has meant that they are now able to have careers that would have been incredibly difficult for them have without the backing of a recording contract from a music label.

Participant S shared some more general insight into how technological advancements such as streaming and social media networks have affected the popular music industry and shaped her career:

‘I think its been super super important you know? After what 2010, you know that’s really the way that people listen to music. I had a period where I was like doing shows and selling CDs but you know-You! You are in the UK and who know who I am, people in Africa know who I am, people in China know who I am, so technology has been super helpful especially for someone like me who is really independent, not even on an independent label that helps with distribution or helping me figure stuff out pre distribution, putting stuff on bandcamp etc. Technology for me has really, really, really helped propel my career in a way that without it, I wouldn’t have the reach that I’ve had at all.’

Speaking more specifically, Participant S talks about how she has had to form relationships with curators³⁴ at streaming platforms in order to get her music on official, service-backed playlists³⁵, which are often supported by PR campaigns and have wide reach.

³⁴ Music curators

³⁵ *Who we be*, *Best of British* and *R&B UK* are amongst some of the popular Black popular music playlists that have been curated and backed by Spotify. *Essentials Afrobeats*, *Africa Now* and *The Agenda* are amongst some of the popular playlists that have been curated and backed by Apple Music.

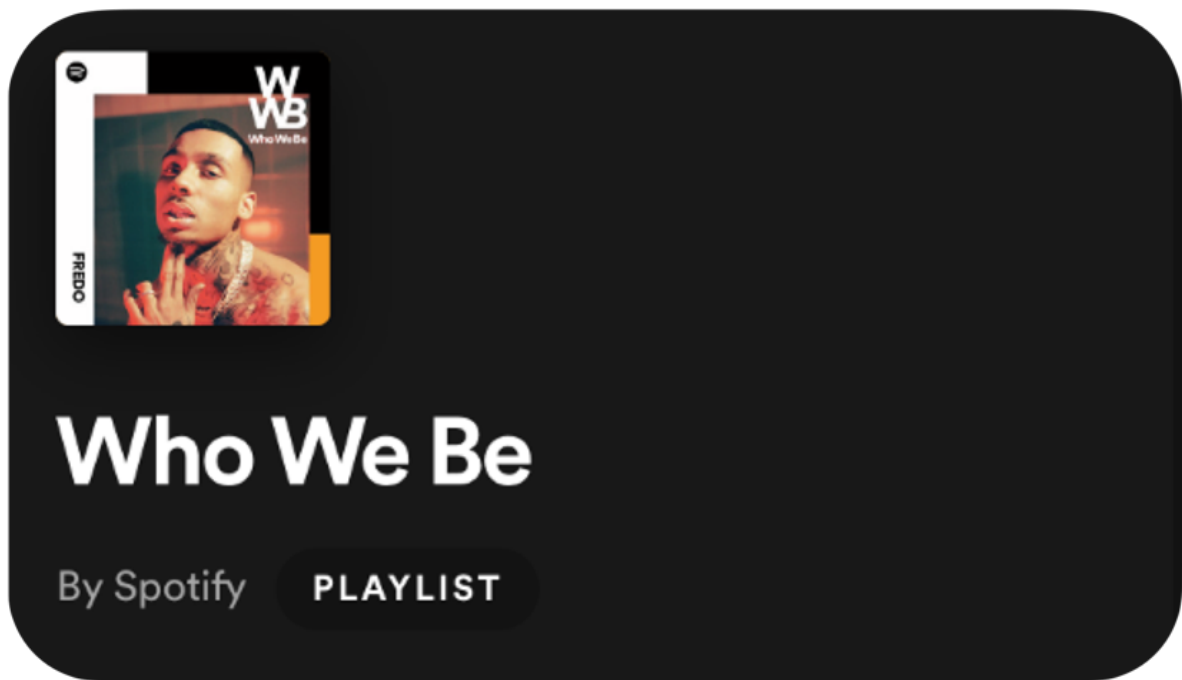


Figure 10: *Who We Be* Playlist, 2022

As Matt Benn (2017) notes ‘playlists have now become one of the most important avenues for music promotion. Getting your music on to a powerful playlist can generate thousands of plays for your music on Spotify, Apple Music or Deezer.’ (Benn, 2017)

Participant S maintained that:

*‘It’s hard. I think it was way easier [to connect with curators] like three years ago. I think especially at Spotify it’s like you really don’t know who the people are. It’s very hard to figure out who’s running their playlists, and so for independent artist it’s a little harder to get on their playlists. When I put out *****, even before I put it out people had heard 3 songs and somebody at Spotify ended up reaching out to me and they connected me with another person and so I had that connection and then it just kind of dried up. I believe that artists, especially artists that are not as big get more love on Apple music where playlisting is concerned because it’s real people at Apple, you know exactly who the*

people who do R&B at Apple are. Two of like the best heads of R&B over there, I know them, we've dm'd and met, they're very...like they've just put in one of our artists that just came out on a playlist, so they're very much connect to the R&B and very much connected to artists and wanting to support artists. I think I was just doing research; I think I was just paying attention and doing research and found the Apple people, I followed them on Instagram and they had put my stuff on a playlist and so I might have just dm'd and thanked them. I think it goes a long way when you can find somebody, if you do see them and they are plugged into what you're doing, just letting them know that you know who they are and that you appreciate what they did. It's always very random.'

For independent artists like Participant S and most of my other participants, being able to get into direct contact with powerful figures like playlist curators has been a game changer and is something that has really only been made possible by the interconnectivity brought about by social media. Being able to form these useful relationships shows how much social media has opened things up for artists, especially independent artists. As Participant S notes: *'new technologies have democratized a lot of stuff- it has allowed a lot of artists that wouldn't be able to have a career to have one/*'.

Furthermore, for the first time, independent artists have viable data that can be extracted from streaming sites regarding listener behavior such as listening habits, preferences and playlists. This data has become valuable for artists, labels and marketers as it can inform decisions regarding promotional strategies, tour planning, and marketing campaigns. Whilst Participant S doesn't use her streaming data analytics just yet, she notes that the data will figure in her future plans when it comes to touring.

'I'm not quite at the place to use it in the way that I would like to yet, I'm not quite that big to have the resource to use it. I think most artists use it as far as touring

basically, that's what the data really tells you, who's listening to you and where and leveraging it in that way. I know the bigger that I get I can use the data to probably have a show her [Los Angeles], I can probably have a show in New York, probably go to the UK maybe.'

Whilst Participant P and Participant S have flourished in their integration of social media and technology into their musicking, some of my other participants have been more reluctant to fully adopt this new way of musicking. For Participant V who is around 10 years older and is more tenured than Participant P, social media, internet and technology more generally is something that has worked in polarizing ways. More specifically social media, technology, and the internet and how they have affected the way that audiences now consume music are of particular concern to her:

'When we look at ourselves right now, we are so overstimulated and we are so overexposed to things that our attention span is so short, but I again, I think there's good and bad to everything I think the good thing about us needing a hit of dopamine really quickly all of the time is that I don't have to be perfect all the time when I put something out, that's the one thing I can spin on its head and be like 'actually I can just keep putting things out there and see, instead of spending 10 years trying to make the perfect album or something like that, knowing that no one is going to listen to it for more than eight seconds before they decide whether they're going to continue listen to it or skip it, I'm like actually no! Every small idea that I have, unpolished, unfinished, just raw, like it was just in the moment, it was just us in the bathroom, like freestyling and we just recorded it and put it out there, its just like all of those things suddenly have a chance. They have a chance because someone will just be randomly

scrolling, and they will consume it because we are just consuming so much and people are distracting themselves so much with entertainment. They're distracting themselves so much that by chance that everybody or somebody somewhere can stumble across something that I made in no time at all just because of this perpetual scrolling that we're doing and that's actually giving all of us more opportunity to be heard because more people are just consuming at a higher rate and I don't have to focus too much on spending too much time, energy, resources making the perfect thing you know? It neutralizes everything to an extent.'

I want to give focus to this contention that Participant V makes: *When we look at ourselves right now, we are so overstimulated, and we are so overexposed to things that our attention span is so short.'*

Alongside Participant V, some critics have maintained that whilst it may or may not be true that the reduction of barriers to entry into music brought about by technology has reduced the importance of traditional roles within the music industry and 'key principles within artistry', It can be argued that 'an increasingly algorithm led industry is creating a space where the interest in full songs is reduced in favor of snippets' because of the lack of attention span that listeners have.

Such arguments around social media/ technology and streaming how it has affected the way that audiences consume products of popular culture like music and television are not new.

What Participant V is referring to here is what psychologist, economist and Nobel Laureate Herbert A. Simon described as the 'attention economy'. The attention economy refers to the idea that in an increasingly saturated digital landscape, the scarcest and most valuable commodity is the attention of consumers. Companies and marketers are engaged in constant

competition to capture and keep the attention of consumers in order to sell products or services, deliver content or influence behaviour.

Having to form relationships with curators at streaming services to get playlisted seems no different to the artists of the pre-digital age having to form relationships with radio DJs to get played on the radio, the music industry still largely being constrained by gatekeepers and intermediaries. Gatekeepers within the music industry are those key players that essentially ‘decide, filter and select what to expose listeners to and which songs to direct their attention to’. (Bonini and Gandini, 2020:3)

Scholars have maintained that ‘music streaming platforms in combining proprietary algorithms and human curators constitute the “new gatekeepers” in an industry previously dominated by human intermediaries such as radio programmers, journalists, and other experts.’ (Bonini and Gandini, 2020:1) Some even argue that curators at music streaming services are even more powerful than traditional gatekeepers because they have ‘more data, more tools to manage and to make sense of these data’. (Bonini and Gandini, 2020:1) Again, algorithmic bias plays a part in which artists and which music gets popularized. Airoidi, Beraldo and Gandini, (2016) argue that it is ‘necessary to understand the role of algorithmic logics, particularly with regard to digital music consumption- not in isolation, but through their interplay with social logics and human interventions’. (as seen in Bonini and Gandini, 2016:3) Just like record labels in the pre-digital age and in the current music landscape, ‘music streaming platforms seem to be able to similarly shape the global agendas of music consumption...When a music curator and/ or an algorithm places a song at the top of a Spotify playlist like ‘New Music Friday’ or ‘Rap Caviar’ and assigns less visible positions to others, this creates not just a numerical but also a cultural hierarchy of the importance of those songs. The platformization of music curation imposes therefore new “regimes of

visibility” (Bucher, 2012) and intensifies what Bucher (2018) calls the “threat of invisibility”: algorithms and curators decide and discipline the visibility of an artist within the platform.’(Bonini and Gandini , 2020:7)

Since label backed artists are more often than not afforded a budget to advertise themselves and their music via paid for advertisements on social media, there are able to beat out any competition from their independent counterparts for the attention of music audiences simply because independent artists often cannot afford to advertise themselves as extensively and continuously. Furthermore, artists that are signed to major labels that have partnerships and relationships with streaming services are often automatically placed onto popular playlists which then makes them incredibly visible to audiences whilst the music of independent artists is practically made invisible and gets lost in a sea of label backed releases and other independent releases. Furthermore, while streaming has provided new opportunities for artists, it has raised concerns regarding fair compensation, particularly for smaller or independent artists.

The complex system of royalty distribution and the dominance of major labels has made it challenging for some artists to earn sustainable income from streaming. Many artists have begun to criticize the extremely low royalty rates and the complex distribution of revenue within the streaming ecosystem. The biggest music streaming companies in the world are Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube and Amazon Music.

As of 2023 YouTube pays artists the lowest amount at \$0.002 per stream out of the big four music companies. Spotify pays the second lowest paying artists \$0.00318 per stream, Amazon music pay artists \$0.00402 per stream and Apple Music pay the most at \$0.008 per stream.

Participant S notes that:

*‘Technology with music is definitely a double-edged sword, in one way it has democratized a lot of stuff, so its allowed a lot of folks who...even someone like me who wouldn’t have been able to have any semblance of a career have that but there’s so many people now so it’s hard to kinds of break through and it’s so hard to get paid now, so it’s a lot of innovation happening but also exploitation but in a different way. Music is a mind*ck.’*

Again, Participant S recognized that whilst technology has to an extent ‘democratized’ musicking especially for queer artists like herself, this musicking is still happening within the larger frameworks of an incredibly saturated and record company-dominated industry:

‘Every other over day I’m like, what does music really look like for me? To be like very anti-establishment and trying to build something outside of the establishment with my music, potentially with a record label, trying to do these different types of deals and these different things, trying to build that up alongside this huge machine that lets people in sometimes because it starts to make them money, but it is still this very white, male machine. There’s still a lot of work to do.’

Although Black queer woman artists have to an extent been able to take advantage of the liberatory nature of technology for the benefit of their musicking, the very technology that they have become accustomed to using has not only been hugely occupied by the structures that they wanted to get way from but it has also been shaped by the very structures and frameworks that have long made musicking from their positions incredibly difficult.

Geographies also play an integral role in who gets access to curators at streaming platforms.

One of the ways that Participant S was able to build a relationship with the curator at Apple

music is because they are both based in LA, for those artists that musick away from major R&B hubs like LA, it is difficult to get access to such important players within the music industry let alone build lucrative relationships with them.

6.2. Conclusion

In this chapter I illustrated how technological advancements, more specifically social media and music streaming have revolutionized the music industry, transformed the landscape of popular music and have now come to figure centrally in the musicking of Black queer women artists and in musicking more generally. The innovation that we have seen regarding technology has increased access to music and musicking, transformed revenue models, reshaped the dynamic between artists, labels/music businesses and audiences, and significantly influenced the ways in which music is accessed and enjoyed. It has presented incredible opportunities for artists to grow far beyond where their musicking is located geographically and the music industry continues to evolve as it adapts to this new era of music consumption.

More interestingly, the relative freedom of today's internet-mediated music climate has helped Black queer women artists to an extent, navigate the industry and their musicking on their own terms. The disruption that technological advancements have caused to the way that music can now be made and distributed has given a level of independence to artists that have historically been positioned beyond what the music industry and labels deem as 'commercially viable'. While the evolution of music streaming has presented new opportunities, it has also posed challenges that cannot be overlooked, particularly regarding

fair compensation, exploitation, and the sustainability of the music industry not only for independent artists but for artists in general.

Social media has to a large extent, revolutionized the musicking of Black queer women artists.

Black queer women artists and Black queer folks, in general, are today facing increasing amounts of censorship online and offline that is threatening the livelihoods of those that have placed their musicking squarely within digital realms. Despite the present threat of shadow bans and community guideline strikes, Black queer women artists are continuously turning social media sites into affective battlegrounds of activism and defiance, their behavior online demonstrates a refusal to be silenced and erased within and beyond Black popular music.

Social media sites offer Black queer women at times, an unmediated space to situate themselves and their musicking within history. By integrating the internet and its multiple sites into their musicking, Black queer women have created a level of visibility that has been crucial in them being able to seize social agency and move beyond what fits into the delimited possibilities that consistently structure their lives and experiences.

7. Aijuswanasang: Black Queer Woman Artists in response to the Shapes, Textures & Boundaries

'I want my music to contribute to imagination and innovation, tapping into intimacy and eroticism, especially with everything this is happening now. Presenting a perspective that maybe is different, is challenging, that somebody needs or wants, that creates a possibility for somebody, because this place is not what it should be. Through music I would like to present and represent a different world or comment on this place from our perspective and how it feels to be us in this space and in this place.' –

Participant S.

Keeping in mind how hegemonic gender, race and sexuality ideologies intersect and are constituted within the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music, in this chapter I detail how Black queer women artists have been responding to these ideologies and how their musicking emerges as resistant and disruptive forces despite the perpetual constraints that are placed on their subjectivities and musicking.

I make two main contentions in this chapter, firstly that the musicking of Black queer woman artists is bound up with disidentifactory performances that generate contestations to the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music and secondly, the musicking of Black queer women artists centers queer world-making as a means of challenging and disrupting cis-heteronormativity and other forms of normative thinking within and beyond Black popular music that enforce rigid binary categories of gender, sexuality and identity.

From a young age I developed an understanding that as queer folk, we exist at the periphery. As I got older, I then understood that when you exist at the periphery, our ways of living cannot be left relegated to the realm of fantasy but must be brought forth through constantly imagining and reimagining new-life worlds and being engaged in the process of fighting to bring those worlds to life in one way or another. I believe that the musicking of Black queer woman artists creates worlds where ‘disregarded voices can be heard and sexual, gendered and racial identities shaped, challenged and renegotiated’. (Lecklider, 2006: 117).

I begin with Participant S’s construction of queerness:

‘Queerness for me has always been attached not only to sexuality. There was a quote going around that positioned queerness as in fuck patriarchy, fuck white supremacy, all that stuff you know. That’s what queerness is to me, it is difference, it is outside of the norm, it is different from all these norms and all of these paradigms that I think we need to change and breakdown. In part it’s about who I love and who I’m attracted to but in many ways, it is also about being different from the norm and challenging what is normal and not seeing the norm as the blueprint and the example of something to aspire to. I don’t aspire to normalcy; I don’t aspire to heterosexuality. My identity is about challenging, and it is about being myself in a place that doesn’t value me, and others like me.’

For Participant S, myself and many others, our queerness is positioned as something that is constantly in *response to*, in *opposition to*, it is a pressing call and a demand to orient ourselves towards freedom.

7.1. The musicking of Black Queer women artists...disidentifactory?

The musicking of Black queer women artists especially within the realm of R&B, are activities that I would describe as being inextricably bound up with disidentifactory practices. Jose Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification emphasizes the importance of creative resistance for marginalised communities in their ongoing struggle for social justice and cultural recognition. Muñoz's theory highlights the ways in which marginalised communities can subvert and challenge dominant power structures through their cultural production and performances while also creating alternative modes of cultural production and meaning making. For Black queer women artists, disidentification is a form of resistance that allows them to both critique and participate in dominant cultural productions within R&B while creating new, alternative cultural expressions that challenge the dominant norms and representations, thus challenging the shapes, textures and boundaries of the genre. What I appreciate in the theorising of Muñoz regarding the practice of disidentification is that he recognizes that 'disidentification is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects' Muñoz makes it clear that 'at times, resistance needs to be more pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of colour and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere.' (1999:5)

Some Black queer women artists are engaged in the practice of 'disidentification' with the hegemonic norms and ideologies within Black popular music as a means of negotiating their place within it. Through disidentification, these artists resist and subvert the dominant norms and expectations whilst creating new and renewed forms of self-expression and resistance. The theory of disidentification has allowed me to examine and highlight how the musicking

of Black queer woman artists demonstrates the agency and creativity of marginalised folks in shaping their own identities and experiences despite the conditions of impossibility that the contexts that they live and musick in present.

One of the major disidentifactory practices that my participants and other Black queer women artists regularly participate in as a direct violation of the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music and culture is the subversion of sexual narratives and hegemonic gender performances through their musicking. I want to point out here that for many of my participants, more covert subversions of sexual norms are what define their disidentifactory practices. For these artists, I found that their disidentification mostly be found in the realm of subtext and the subliminal, alongside overt subversive performances of gender and/or sexuality.

Emmavie is an artist that I believe has employed disidentifactory practices in her career as a means of opening space for alternative forms of self-expression and navigating and resisting the dominant cultural norms and expectations within and beyond R&B in the UK.

I gravitated toward the musical works of Emmavie because of my reading of what I believed to be subtext that alluded to her queerness within her songs. I first discovered Emmavie's music during my first stint as an undergrad just under 10 years ago. In those days one of the main ways that I went about discovering new music/artists was through SoundCloud.

SoundCloud was great because it allowed users to have access to independently released music and the possibility for what one could find were seemingly endless. At that point in time, I had wanted to listen to more Black British made and performed Neo-soul/ R&B music so I would often search 'British Neo- Soul' and 'British R&B' into the search bar on SoundCloud and listen to whatever came up. Emmavie had recently released her first EP entitled 'L+HATER' so it was one of the first things that popped up during my search.

What I enjoyed (and still enjoy) about Emmavie’s music is its subtlety, to me it is a perfect coalescence of neo-soul, jazz and alternative & contemporary R&B sounds. When I found out that Emmavie produced and wrote all the songs on her debut EP and wrote all of the songs on her sophomore EP with critically acclaimed jazz musician Alfa Mist, I became more and more enamoured with her artistry. Emmavie describes herself as a ‘gender non-conforming Queer and unapologetically Black artist forever working to take and create space in a binary music industry’.

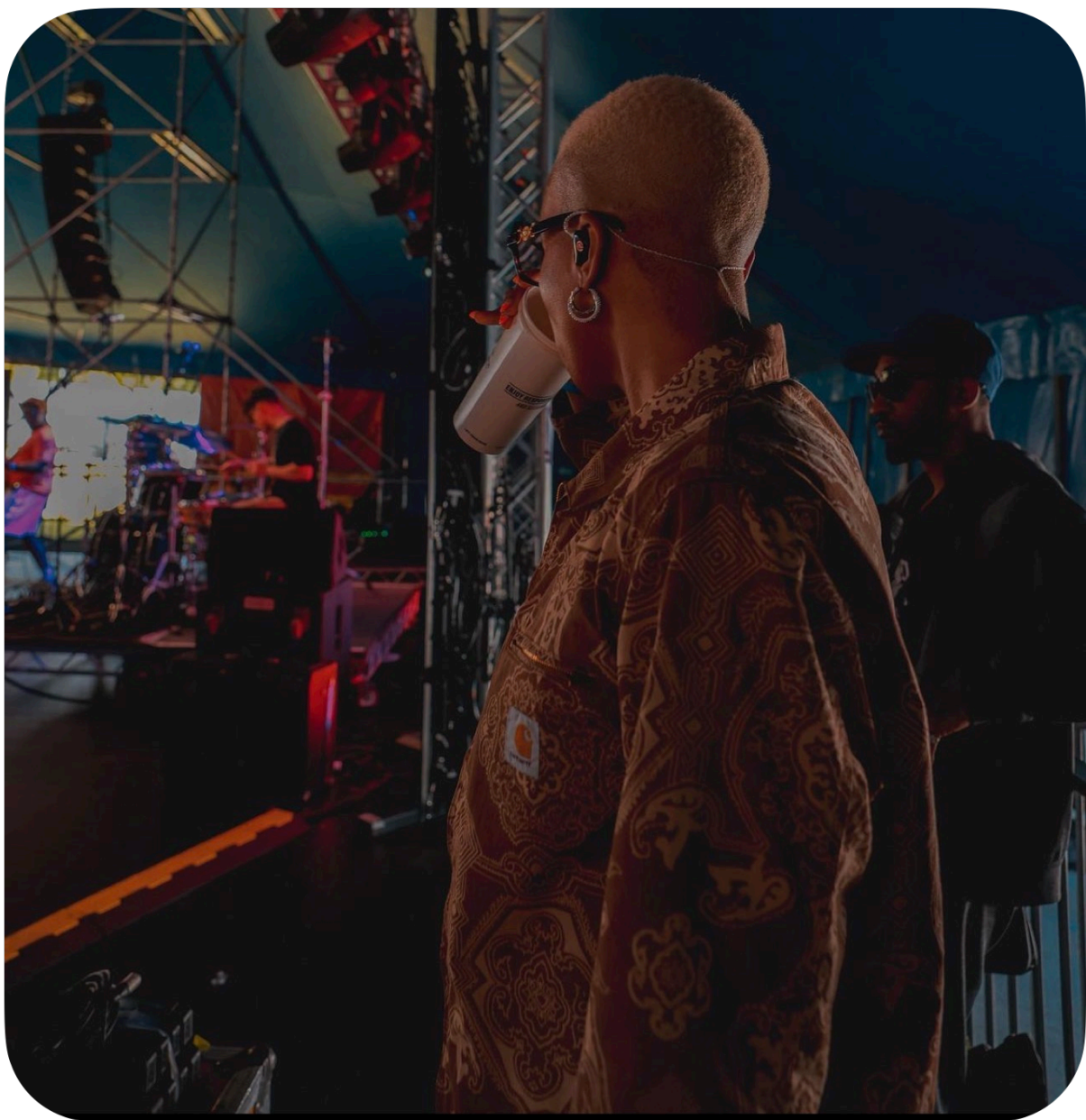


Figure 11: Emmavie about to go on stage and perform at Cross The Tracks in London.

What I find particularly disidentifactory about Emmavie's music and musicking is that she uses the norms of R&B, which are mostly centred on desire and sexual situations in songs to challenge and disrupt the normative expectations and fixed categorizations that R&B music has historically been shaped by.

Despite the charts indicating that music about sex and sexual desire does indeed sell, it is important to highlight that the *kind* of sex and sexual desire that sells and is normalized within R&B music is normative and always conceptualised through heteronormative lenses.

Through the critical discourse analysis given in chapter 4 of this research, I have established that within contemporary R&B, normative performances of gender and sexuality have been constructed as central to the musicking of successful R&B artists. Thus, I contend that any subversive performance of sexuality and sexual desire through R&B musicking can be read as disidentifactory in that such performances both critique and participate in the dominant cultural productions of R&B while creating new, alternative cultural expression that challenge their dominant norms and representations.

Take Emmavie's use of sexual narratives on her 2018 single 'Oops'. On 'Oops' written, produced and performed by Emmavie, the relationship that R&B and sex are perceived to have and its supposed effect on the bedroom of its listeners and creators are stated in the dulcet and soulful tones that the multi-hyphenate artist is known for:

'Why'd you have to play that R&B?

Now slowly undressing it's so natural,

know you've got that playlist on repeat

now we're slow dancing to D'Angelo'

‘Why'd you have to play that R&B?’ Emmavie quizzes her fictional love interest as if to say that the music that her lover has played has compelled and seduced her into the intimate situation that she has found herself in. This part of the song is the pre-chorus after the second verse. This line is sung almost in a sarcastic way. Amongst the honeyed vocal inflections on ‘Oops’, Emmavie reels off a rapid ‘baptism of fire’ rhythmic cadence during the second verse that stands as a testament to how hip-hop has influenced R&B music over time.

‘All this time that I been spending with ya

I been painting pictures

Making bad decisions

Figures

We were supposed to take some time off

But your figure it just so soft

I’ve just got to get my finger off the trigger

*How I stop myself from really f*cking with ya*

Damn I got to get my mind off’

Written solely by the Northwest London based artist/producer, this second verse expands the dialogue between her and her lover. This mesmeric and almost rap- like verse reads and sounds as if Emmavie is trying to plead with her lover before she succumbs to her powerful and seductive techniques. The lyrics and sonic properties of the song really drives home it’s musical vision, to employ a narrative that is centered around seduction to then seduce its listeners. On a rainy autumn afternoon at a music studio somewhere in East London Emmavie gave me some insight into the thinking that went into writing/producing ‘Oops’:

'I felt inspired to write 'Oops' from the perspective of an imperfect romantic relationship. It's a little tongue-in-cheek as I was inspired by the concept of 'make up sex' ...I don't know if it's obvious, but the lyrics are my inner dialogue during an bedroom interaction with my partner. My thoughts paint a short scene after an argument. My girl and I are both too stubborn to apologize but eventually she gives in, and initiates contact by doing a familiar pattern of seductive things she knows I can't resist...'

As Emmavie alludes to on 'Oops' and in her discussion of the record, R&B music is often used to foster a sexually charged atmosphere, it is used as a technique for seduction. The buttery vocals poured over the deep-darkish wailing of the alto sax on 'Oops' only prove to underline Emmavie's seductive efforts. Even the title of the song implies a sarcastic/cheeky knowing unknowingness about R&B alluring effects.

Emmavie's nod to Neo-soul/R&B singer-songwriter D'Angelo also stands to underline her understanding of the effects that R&B has within sexual contexts. From 'Heaven Must Be Like This' (1998) to 'Feel Like Makin' Love'³⁶ (2000), D'Angelo's works can be positioned as canonical within the realm of R&B music. Mostly known for his hot single 'Untitled (How Does It Feel)' (2000) in which he appeared shirtless for the entirety of the music video, D'Angelo is often referred to as a sex symbol and his musical works embodied renewed articulations of sexual desire in Black popular music. R&B artists that have made works that are deemed to be canonical are even referenced beyond the R&B music context to help create the R&B 'vibe'. On 'Slow Jamz' (2003) all three artists that are featured on the record, rapper and producer Kanye West, singer Jamie Foxx and hip-hop artist Twista reference

³⁶ 'Feel Like Makin' Love' is a cover of the June 1974 soul classic of the same name released by Roberta Flack.

various important Black R&B figures in order to make it clear what the song's intentions are both to their fictional sexual partners and to their audiences.

'I'mma play this Vandross, you gon' take your pants off'

Thus, by mentioning artists like D'Angelo, who make music that is deemed as canonical musical articulations of Black intimacy and sexual pleasure, Emmavie amongst other artists, are especially cognizant of R&B's conventionality regarding sex and sexual desire.

As made clear by the lyrics of the song and in Emmavie's explanation of it, she is participating in a well-established convention of R&B musicking by explicitly singing about sex and sexual desire. Where Emmavie's performance can be read as disidentificatory is in the realm of subtext. Emmavie's explanation of 'Oops' makes it clear that the song is about a sexual situation between her and another woman *'my girl and I'*.

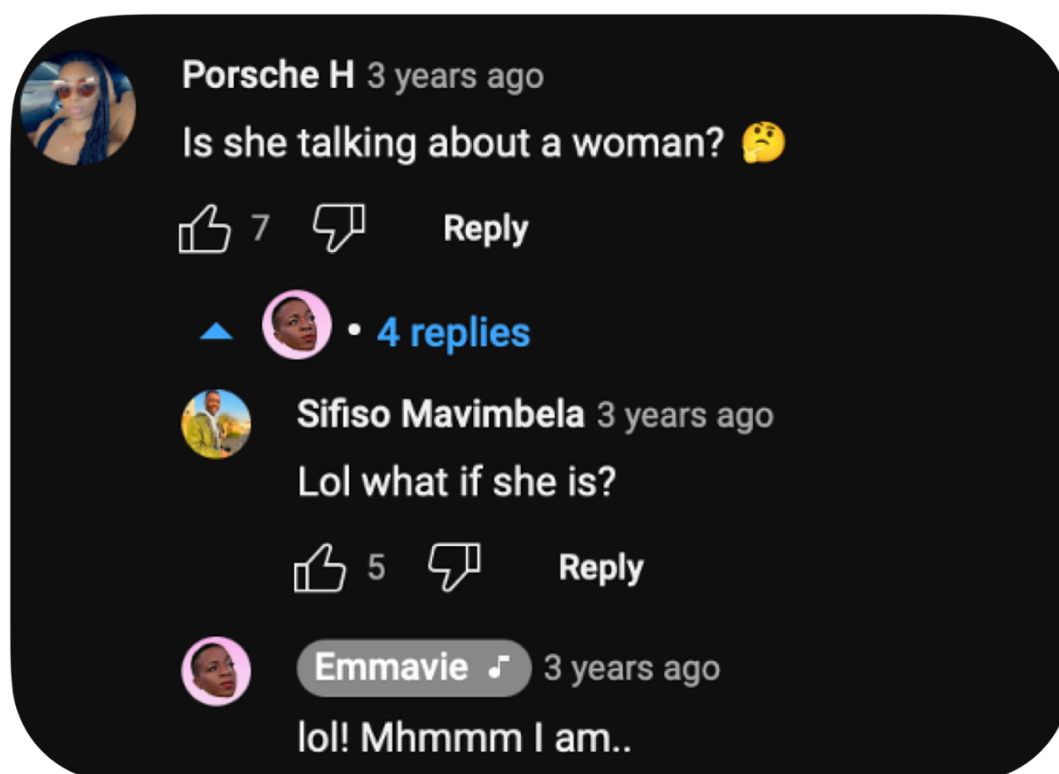


Figure 12: Comment left underneath the audio of 'Oops' on YouTube, 2019

Although she does not make it clear that the situation that she is describing is between her and another woman in the typical way that some may expect her to e.g. using the gendered pronouns ‘she’ ‘her’ to refer to her partner, If we take a closer look at the language that Emmavie is using to describe her love interest and the sexual situation that they are in, it becomes clear that she is specifically singing about a queer sexual situation. Emmavie herself describes ‘Oops’ as ‘playfully suggestive’ and explained that when it comes to her songs, she *‘often trusts the listener to read between the lines and glue all the parts together.’*

In reading ‘Oops’ as being a song about a woman-to-woman sexual situation, one line of this record sticks out:

‘We were supposed to take some time off

But your figure it just so soft’

This line reads as decidedly queer to me specifically because of how Emmavie has chosen to write about their sexual partner’s body. In firstly describing her partner’s body as a ‘figure’ we know that she is describing a woman because in typical texts, only women are ever really constructed as having a particular figure. Several comprehensive dictionaries, including the Cambridge dictionary even define ‘figure’ as ‘a woman’s body shape’. Secondly, Emmavie describes her co protagonist’s figure as ‘soft’. Again, in typical texts only women’s bodies are ever constructed as being soft supposedly because of the various skin regimens that women often have. From Emmavie’s explanation of ‘Oops’ and my own reading of the lyrics it is clear that this song is about a queer masc presenting woman being seduced and dominated by another woman.

So, through the deconstruction of the use of covert language, we come to understand that whilst ‘Oops’ may at first be read as your typical contemporary R&B performance that is centered around sexual desire and sexual situations, it is disidentifactory in that it obfuscates how sex and sexual desire is normatively constituted within contemporary R&B music. From

my CDA of highly popular R&B songs we come to understand that the framing of sex and sexual desire is done so in incredibly normative and hegemonic ways so the queer/same-sex sexual desire that Black queer women artists often center their works on is a disidentifactory practice in that they subvert one of if not the central motif of R&B music.

‘Oops’ ‘scrambles and reconstructs’ the encoded messages of R&B music and recircuits it workings to ‘account for, include, and empower’ (Muñoz, 1999) queer identities and identifications. Furthermore, ‘Oops’ not only highlights the code and conventions of R&B music, it uses a convention of R&B music as raw material for its own queer ends and represents a positionality that Black popular music and culture often renders as unthinkable and unintelligible.

7.2. Songs in the Key of Black, Queer Life

‘... we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.’ (Muñoz, 2009:1)

‘Through musical contestations of the majoritarian public sphere, we can read the potentialities of queer world making’ (Taylor, 2012:48) where the musicking of Black queer women artists directly instigates a violation of the limitations placed upon both Blackness and queerness. Furthermore, ‘through music, queer bodies, subjectivities, desires and social relations are frequently constructed, affected and performed, and a queer coalescence around particular musics has made space for, and temporally mapped otherness in, aggressively

heteronormative cultural landscapes. Through music, queers have made and remade worlds.’ (Taylor, 2012:49). The imagining of new life-words is something that Black queer woman artists hold as central to their musical praxis not just as an affront to the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music but also as a direct challenge to the oppression that they face in multiple spheres. However, the ways that Black queer women go about imagining and building new worlds is often more covert than overt. As Taylor notes, a point of criticism that can be levelled at studies that are orientated towards examining subcultures and the activities of those within them is that they are often ‘preoccupied with the more spectacular of leisure pursuits and grand public displays of stylised deviance visible at a ‘street’ level’. (2012:55) Some of the insurgency of Black queer women into Black popular music can be partially understood within the framework of what James C, Scott positions as ‘hidden transcripts’. Mark Anthony Neal (1999) notes that ‘these transcripts have historically accented underground resistance in which ‘signifying’ and double entendre played major roles’. (1999:7)

Beyond specifically including gendered pronouns that indicate queerness, many of my participants spoke at length about their refusal to settle for the conditions of impossibility that their current lifeworld’s have presented to them.

These artists want to engage their musicking with the process of ‘tearing down’ and building back up’, the process of deconstruction then reconstruction. The thinking around their music is not strictly geared towards challenging within the confines of Black popular music, rather they want to use their musicking as a tool to challenge the things that also lay beyond it.

When asked about their refusal to settle for this reality Participant T explained that:

‘I want to challenge everything. I think that way that we should all live our lives and in our art and work is to challenge this place at every turn because this is not a healthy place, it’s

not a sustainable way to be, it's not a sustainable way to live, so anything that we can do to challenge that, to shift the paradigm to something that is people first, is earth first, is love first, is justice first, however you do that is something that I take up or at least try to.'

For my participants and other Black queer woman artists, their musicking is knowingly and unknowingly engaged in the challenging and shifting of the paradigm that Participant T and others have spoken of. Strikingly, whilst my participants understand that their queerness has certainly had a constraining effect on their experiences and trajectories, they more importantly recognize that queerness has demanded an alternative innovation from them. For these women, queerness has demanded of them to not only challenge this world at every turn but to bring to life our different iterations of the world. This alternative innovation has culminated in these artists being engaged in using their musicking as a medium to help us see this world as it is, open it up for violation, imagine new worlds and create alternative futures for ourselves.

As Muñoz states, 'minoritarian performance labours to make worlds- worlds of transformative politics and possibilities. Such performance engenders worlds of ideological potentiality that alter the present and map out a future.' (Muñoz, 1999: 195) But what does the 'world making' that Taylor (2012) and Muñoz reference mean?

Muñoz explains that 'the concept of worldmaking delineates the ways in which performances – both theatrical and everyday rituals- have the ability to establish alternative views of the world.' (Muñoz, 1999: 195) I believe that world-making/building is queer praxis because queer praxis can be 'conceptualised as a creative construction of alternative ways of being...' (Sullivan, 1999: 251) Where Muñoz's construction of 'worldmaking' within the context of Black and queer performances becomes crucial to my research is within his recognition that 'these alternative vistas are more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional

ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate
minoritarian people.’ (Muñoz, 1999: 195) I maintain that the musicking of Black queer
woman artists provides a ‘ground level assault on a hegemonic world vision that substantiates
the dominant public sphere’ (Muñoz, 1999:196) constituted within Black popular music. I
follow Nakayama and Morris III in maintaining that worldmaking and queer worldmaking
more specifically, ‘takes place in all kind of places, at all different times, involving all kinds
of people, who work toward creating a different world. It is not a strategic plan, organized by
anyone, but a bottom-up engagement with the everyday’. (2014:vi)

Within the disidentifactory performances of Black queer women artist there is what I would
describe as utopian possibility.

‘Disidentifactory performances & readings require...utopian possibility. Although utopianism
has become the bad object of much contemporary political thinking, we nonetheless need
to...risk utopianism if we are to engage in the labor of making a queerworld.’ (Muñoz, 1999:
25)

Black queer artists such as Emmavie and Janelle Monáe ‘employ disidentification as a crucial
practice of contesting social subordination’ (Muñoz, 1999) through the project of world
making. Significantly, Participant S consistently spoke about making music and
accompanying videos that visualise new possibilities and presage a ‘new world’, she places
particular value on being able to articulate and present these possibilities through her
musicking:

*‘I like to make things people will be able to seem themselves in or see possibility... I think
musically, just me being a musician writing from a true place, you know? Writing my own
stories. The more I write and a lot of the music that I’m writing now has more of a cinematic
kind of tone to it, a kind of world bending/building kind of vibe to it. Even with the songs, I*

feel like my songs are creating little/mini tv shows, mini movies, mini worlds and narratives and also visioning the visuals, visioning what things could look like and then trying to create it. I was talking to my wife the other day and I was talking about how Black music, especially R&B, when I think about music videos, people were creating a new mythology. When some people think of mythology they don't ever think about music videos but when I think about you know Missy Elliot videos, Michael Jackson videos and Janet Jackson videos, they were creating these new worlds, new visuals, images and culture and so visually I've been thinking about creating this new kind of Black queer mythology. I'm trying to think more about what my perspective is in this world, in 2021, its about to be 2022, we're in the future. I'm questioning myself on what my perspective looks like, what it feels like, what does it sound like? What are the answers to those questions going forward? – That's what I'm really trying to do with my visuals, I'm trying to answer those questions alongside thinking about where we are and what are we are going to do in the future. I want to create new worlds with my visuals- represent who I am and maybe represent who we were.'

7.2.1. ***'Sitting at the Edge of the Ocean'*** - Emmavie and Black Queer Imagination

On 'Rather Be' (2018) written, sung and produced by Emmavie, the world making orientation and forward-drawing futurity of the musicking of Black queer woman artists is brought to life. Released in 2018, 'Rather Be' has been described by critics as a 'hybrid of funk synths and trap drums with a soulful melody containing a conscious escape from reality'. More than just a 'conscious escape from reality' 'Rather Be' is an attempt from the

queer artist to ‘*come on out from undercover*’, expose the change that this world needs and imagine new ones.

The song starts off with a heavily autotuned rallying cry for the ‘change’ and ‘action’ that our world is missing:

*‘We need change / We need action,
We need love / We need passion,
In a world full of darkness
We need courage / We need guidance.’*

The use of autotune here points to the futurity that the song centres. In R&B and other genres of Black popular music such as hip-hop, autotune is often used to create a distinct robotic or synthetic sound. Furthermore, autotune is used within R&B music to symbolize innovation and experimentation in music and vocal production. In using autotune, Emmavie is making references towards technological advancement in order to help listeners make a connection to a future world.

The repetition of ‘*we need*’ here is pushing listeners to try and explore the possibilities of life beyond the limitations imposed by our present culture.

(Chorus)

‘I’d rather be / (Sitting on the edge of the ocean)

Yes, I’d rather be, rather be beeee

(Moving like poetry emotion)

If only life could be so easy Woooah no

(I'm sitting on the edge of the ocean)

During our second time of meeting under the context of us talking through her discography, Emmavie explained that 'Rather Be' only scratched the surface of her queer world-making endeavours:

'Rather Be' was purely a free flow of ideas and melodies... I had flipped a song I'd made for my dissertation a few years prior, and something possessed me to do this kind of 'rap singing' which just lent itself to speaking about my life, thoughts and desires on a level. I guess that's what I thought was appropriate for rap singing at the time - the added self-reflective story telling element of rap. When I think about what I say lyrically, it doesn't even skim the surface of what my life experiences have been, what I've thought and what I've felt. I'd do this whole song completely differently as today's version of me.'

On the chorus of 'Rather Be' Emmavie is telling us that instead of existing in this world that is filled with discrimination, devoid of change, action, love, passion, courage, guidance and is full of 'darkness', she would rather be 'sitting at the edge of the Ocean'. Emmavie's reference to the ocean is crucial to the song's futurity. Here the ocean is used to symbolise incredibly vast and boundless space with unknown fortunes and futures. *'Sitting at the edge of the ocean'* – for Emmavie, is sitting at the edge of the boundless possibilities that queer worlds try to bring forth. The use of the word 'Ocean' here is critical to Emmavie's construction and imagining of a new world. The ocean represents the boundless nature of the universe and the unknown mysteries that lie beyond our present human understanding.

In varying cultural contexts, the ocean not only represents the unknown and unexplored, but also symbolizes freedom, hope, possibility, new life, vitality and refreshment. More specifically, in western Christian mythology, water has been continuously used in religious

rituals such as baptisms to cleanse believers of their sins and to protect them in their new walk in the faith. In singing that she would rather be near the ocean, Emmavie is articulating her desire not only for freedom but also for the cleansing power and possibility that the ocean offers.



Figure 13: Emmavie, *Rather Be*, 2019

For Ashton T. Crawley (2016) ‘Queer worldmaking demands the ‘inhabitation of and living into *otherwise possibilities*’ (p2), ‘ a continual gesture toward and invocation of spaces and times beyond the narrow regime of ‘normative white reproductive futurity’. (Zaino, 2021:579) In contrast to ‘Oops’, Emmavie does not relegate the orientations of ‘Rather be’ to the realm of metaphor or subtext. Rather, this song has been carefully constructed as a piece of musical text that is overtly orientated towards exposing exactly what is wrong with this world and outlining and envisioning the possibilities presented by queer futurity where there is:

‘No more bullshit hate

No more bullshit wars

No more bullshit borders

No more bullshit rules

No more bullshit starvation

No more bullshit segregation

No more bullshit discrimination

No more bull shit hurt

No more bullshit in general'

7.2.2. Janelle Monáe and Black Queer imagination.

‘On oil dance floors, sites of public sex, various theatrical stages, musical festivals, and arenas both subterranean and aboveground, queers live, labor, and enact queer worlds in the present.’ (Muñoz, 2009:49)

For Black queer artists, I found that the creation of conceptual albums and accompanying music videos have been one of the central mediums that have been used in their imagination and articulation of a new world as means of contesting the marginalization that they face in this present one. Janelle Monáe is a Black, non-binary queer artist that has made significant conceptual musical works that have been bound up with the imagination and articulation of Black and queer lifeworlds and has created the kind of mythology that Participant S spoke about. Monae’s musicking stands as response to Muñoz’s call to collectively step out of ‘this place and time to something fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter’. (Muñoz, 2009: 189) Monáe’s work not only represents a direct violation of the shapes, textures and boundaries of

Black popular music in many respects, as I will demonstrate, it also symbolises a disruption of the boundaries of what Black queer life has often been framed as in popular culture. Released in 2008, 2010, 2013, 2018 and 2023 respectively, Monae's *Metropolis*, *The ArchAndroid*, *The Electric Lady*, *Dirty Computer* and *The Age of Pleasure* incorporate Black and queer iconography and conceptual elements of Afrofuturism and science fiction not only as a means of creating what essentially stands as musical commentary about the oppressive structures that exist in the world but also as a means of creating 'new worlds' in which those that have been long oppressed are able to eventually find freedom.

Speaking in 2012, Monáe states that:

'I love speaking about the future because it gives us all a chance to rewrite history and do what's right or, continue to do what's wrong, oppress those that we don't understand, oppress those that may not look like us and I think that it is important that those issues are subjects that are still being brought to the forefront.'

Although such conceptual attempts are not wholly new in that acts such as Parliament-Funkadelic, Sun Ra and OutKast have all released projects that explore similar themes (Kot, 2010), where Monae's 'emotion pictures' differs is in their covert then overt use of the intersection of queerness, subversive gender expression and Blackness as a motif. Furthermore, these works contain what Muñoz (2009) described as an 'anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present'. They are 'sites of embodied and performed queer politics...of mass gatherings, performance that can be understood as defiantly public and glimpses into...a social actor performing a queer world'. (p 49) Monáe's background in musical theatre is put on full display through her musicking.

Critics describe all of Monáe's albums as being 'loaded with vivid imagery and sound effects that resonate like movie scenes' with the albums standing as attempts to make 'emotion pictures' about her futuristic world'. (Kot, 2010) *Metropolis*, *The ArchAndroid*, *The Electric Lady* and *Dirty Computer* are part of 7-part series that explores and comments on issues of race, class, slavery, love, gender and sexuality. Monáe uses her music videos as an opportunity to flesh out the works narratives/ mythology and, expand and visually illustrate her Black and queer story world.

Described as having an 'omnivorous musical appetite' combined with a striking appearance (Kot, 2010), Monáe assumes an alter-ego personality named 'Cindi Mayweather' who she constructs as a 'messiah-like figure from the distant future who returns to the present to a save a community of androids'. (Kot, 2010) In *Metropolis* the androids are constructed as a community of people that have been 'othered'. In an interview given to Greg Kot of the Chicago Tribune in 2010 and Jenna Wortham in the NY Times in 2018, Monáe explains that:

'I chose an android because the android to me represents 'the other' in our society. I can connect to other because it has so many parallels to my own life. The android represents the new other to me.'

'You can parallel the other in the android to being a Black woman right now, to being a part of the L.G.B.T.Q community. What it feels like to be called a nigger by your oppressor.'

The construction of the 'other' is something that Monáe holds as critical to her musicking, and the articulations of her experiences being positioned as an 'other' is what defines it. The 'android' as constructed in Monáe's works not only represents the 'other' but also represents

what contemporary philosopher and feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti (2013) described as the ‘post human’. Braidotti’s conceptualisation of the ‘post human’ emerges from her belief that there must be a reconfiguration and expansion of human subjectivity that involves the rejection of essentialist and completely fixed identities in favour of more fluid understandings and constructions of the self.

In *Undoing Gender* (2004) Butler notes that:

‘The terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable. And sometimes the very terms that confer ‘humanness’ on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human. These norms have far-reaching consequences for how we understand the model of the human entitled to rights or included in the participatory sphere of political deliberation. The human is understood differently depending on its race, its morphology, the recognizability of that morphology, its sex, the perpetual verification of that sex, its ethnicity, the categorical understanding of that ethnicity. Certain humans are recognized as less than human, and that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life.’ (p2)

Considering how Black and queer folk like Monáe have been considered and constructed as less than human in several moments of Western social, political and scientific history (Braidotti, 2013: 1), it is no surprise that artists with such positionality often construct themselves beyond the realm of what is considered as human in western thought. As Alyssa Favreau notes ‘when by reason of racism, sexism, homophobia, or all other injustice, we are denied full humanity, what other possibilities open themselves up to us?’ (2021) Braidotti reads such constructions of the ‘posthuman’ as a significant ‘opportunity to empower the

pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge and self-representation'. (Braidotti, 2013: 12)

Not only has Monáe utilized her musicking to explore this otherness and alternative schemes of thought & self-representation that her Blackness and queerness present, but in each work, she also weaves together narratives that continuously build upon the imagined lifeworlds that she first constructed in *Metropolis*. Whether audiences take her works as separate entities or view them as parts of a larger interwoven story, all these works are engaged in Black queer feminist praxis, which is naming, shaming, resisting and destabilizing. I also believe that *creation* forms another important part of Black feminist praxis.

Metropolis: The Chase Suite

Described by critics as being an 'AI filled future dystopia parleyed into smoky, sexy R&B', *Metropolis* 'is the first instalment of Monáe's seven-part *Metropolis* conceptual series and is inspired by Fritz Lang's science fiction classic film, *Metropolis* (1927)' (Kellman, 2008). *Metropolis*³⁷ is not only the title of the EP, but it is also the name that Monáe has given to her imagined world. *Metropolis* can be viewed as a musical introduction to Monáe's conceptualisation of her imagined world and illustrates the experiences of the 'other' through her construction of this dystopian planet and her embodiment of the fictional android character named 'Cindi Mayweather'. Favreau notes that 'in many ways, Cindi, is the perfect posthuman subject, created both to transcend the bounds of the human, and to comment on how the 'human category has for so long been forbidden to someone like Monáe'. (Favreau, 2021: 46)

I read *Metropolis* as a piece of dystopian musical commentary about the nature of our world.

³⁷ *Metropolis* refers to the title of the album and *Metropolis* is used when I am referring to Monáe's fictional world.

‘Cindi Mayweather’ which is Monae’s alter ego, is constructed as an ‘indentured android who becomes aware of the unfairness she and her fellow androids suffer at the hands of humans’. (Sterritt, 2013) In this fictional world, humans are constructed as being a part of the ruling class whilst androids are constructed as the ‘others’/ the subordinate class.

Throughout her musicking and her wearing of her once signature Black and white tuxedo, Monae specifically pays homage to the subordinate class and has consistently maintained that *‘I don’t make music for kings and queens, I make music for regular people. I wear my Black and white uniform to pay homage to those who are working every single day like my mother and father...I represent the working class and I try to create songs that are uplifting because this world can drive you insane...’*

Monae also maintains that the wearing of the suits was a way for her to push back against gender norms.

In an interview given to US-based radio show *The Breakfast Club* in 2023 after the release of her 5th studio album *The Age of Pleasure*, Monae spoke about some of the backlash that she received for regularly wearing suits during earlier stages of her career:

‘The amount of time, I couldn’t tell you that people would say “why are you wearing that suit, you know you got a nice body, why don’t you show more of your ski? Just wear a dress, be more feminine. Take off that monopoly man suit” I don’t think it’s funny to try to police- in an already patriarchal, misogynistic, conservative- the country that we live in, where we already don’t have freedoms, to criticize them or don’t respect them for how they dress, I’ve never loved the respectability politics of it. I had to defend why I wore a suit for 10 plus years.’

Here we see how much music audiences that are invested in forms of Black popular music are also invested in hegemonic notions of gendered stylings, self-representations and gender performance. Monae received criticism and backlash because she refused to conform to the

normative and ‘intelligible’ ways of being, looking and styling that have been woven into the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music and culture.



Figure 14: Janelle Monáe wearing her once definitive Black and White suits.

Going back to *Metropolis*, listeners are first introduced to Monae’s dystopian world and Cindi Mayweather’s story via the first track ‘March of the Wolfmasters’ which is a radio announcement that enthusiastically calls for Cindi’s disassembly as part of her punishment for falling love with a human. Accompanied by marching band- esque drums and haunting horns and strings that emphasize that this announcement is not to be taken lightly, the speaker says:

‘Good morning, cy-boys and cyber-girls!

I am happy to announce that we have a star-crossed winner in today’s heartbreak sweepstakes

Android Number 57821, otherwise known as Cindi Mayweather

Has fallen desperately in love with a human named Anthony Greendown

And you know the rules!

She is now scheduled for immediate disassembly

Bounty hunters, you can find her in the Neon Valley Street District on the 4th floor at the

Leopard Plaza Apartment Complex

The Droid Control Marshals are full of fun rules today

No phasers, only chain-saws and electro-daggers!

Remember, only card carrying hunters can join our chase today

And as usual, there will be no reward until her cyber-soul is turned into the Star

Commission

Happy hunting!'

As Sterritt states, this announcement is our first introduction to Monae's imagined world and its rules. The lyrics reflect themes of love, societal norms, oppression, and rebellion against those norms. This track is a significant introduction into the larger narrative of the album and sets the tone for its nuanced exploration of concepts of identity, freedom, and love in a futuristic, dystopian society.

The Grammy award nominated lead single 'Many Moons' is a call to the 'androids' to revolutionize their lives within Metropolis and '*find a way out*'. The song illustrates that whilst the 'androids' may be 'stuck here' there is indeed a way out.

(Verse 1)

'We're dancing free, but we're stuck here

underground

And everybody's trying to figure their

way out

Hey hey hey hey, all we ever wanted to say

Was chased erased and then thrown away

And day to day, we live in a daze’.

(Bridge)

‘We march all around till’ the sun goes down

Night children

Broken dreams, no sunshine, endless

crimes, we long for freedom (for freedom)

You’re free but in your mind, your freedom’s in a bind.’

(Hook)

‘Oh make it rain, aint a thing in the sky to

fall

(The silver bullet’s in your hand and the

War’s heating up)

And when the truth goes BANG the shouts

splatter out

(Revolutionize your lives and find a way out)

This verse, bridge and hook makes clear the action and change orientation of this record. Like Emmavie on ‘Rather Be’ Monae uses water more specifically rain, as a symbol of her desire for transformation and renewal, even when it seems like there's nothing left to fall. The mention of a "silver bullet" and the imagery of the truth going "BANG" stirs up a revolutionary spirit, urging people to confront the injustices and constraints they face. The call to "revolutionize your lives and find a way out" further encapsulates the overarching theme of Monae’s musical works, which implore listeners to seek liberation and empowerment in the face of the adversity that they experience in the world.

Whilst Monáe's musical works often explore themes of liberation and freedom, such is at times grounded by records that also explore bleakness.

The bleakness presented by *Metropolis* is out on full display on the chorus on the sixth track of *Metropolis* which is entitled 'Sincerely Jane'. This song is 'dressed up in all the fantastical instrumentation of an otherworldly Broadway production' (Kellman, 2008) but the song's sonic qualities are juxtaposed against the 'grim realism' and despair that emerge from its lyrical content.

(Chorus)

'Are we really living, or just walking dead

now?

*Or dreaming of a hope riding the wing of
angels?*

*The way we live, the way we die (The way
we live, the way we die)*

What a tragedy, I'm so terrified

(Daydreamer)

Daydreamers please wake up

We can't sleep no more'.

On 'Sincerely Jane' Monáe implores the 'daydreamers' – namely those that have been passively existing in this constructed world, the 'walking dead', to 'wake up' because no longer can they exist in such a world that is so tragic and so terrifying- 'we can't sleep no more'. What is even more salient is Monáe's covert reference of social death. 'The way we live, the way we die' can be read as a reference to social death in that this song and others on *Metropolis* are constantly illustrating how within *Metropolis*, a group namely the 'androids'

are excluded and marginalised from the rights, privileges, and expectations of their society. Through the covert use of language that alludes to the concept of social death, Monáe positions 'Sincerely Jane' as a record that pushes its listeners and critics to reckon with the process through which certain individuals or groups are denied access to the benefits of citizenship and full participation in society based on their social status and/or identities.

As we go through the track list, it becomes clear that there are parallels that can be drawn between Metropolis and our present world. Furthermore, parallels are meant to be drawn between how 'androids' are treated and how those that have been in 'othered' in our world are treated. Here Monáe is attempting to demonstrate that although the narrative of social stratification between the androids and the humans, and the androids being 'disassembled' and destroyed because of who they love may seem fantastical and dystopian, they have direct linkages to how our present world often 'disassembles', erases, stratifies and renders useless those that have been constructed as the 'other', the queers, the fat, the Black and the disabled. 'Disassembly' here is used as a metaphor for social death.



The ArchAndroid (Suites II and III)

Figure 15: Janelle Monáe, *The ArchAndroid Liner Notes*, 2010

The ArchAndroid contains the ‘blueprints and schemata of a forward-drawing futurity’ that Muñoz spoke of in *Cruising Utopia*. Released just before the total detachment from the physicality of music, the paper liner notes for *The ArchAndroid* provided very useful context for my reading of the second installment of Monáe’s world-making series. Through the liner notes we learn that although Metropolis is a place that mirrors the ‘real’ world in terms of social stratification, it is more importantly a world that is quickly being reshaped by dissent and subversiveness. Furthermore, we learn that through active dissent Metropolis *then* becomes something that is in-between utopia and dystopia, a world that is ‘waiting for us in the future’.

Let us first briefly return to the posthuman subject that is Cindi Mayweather. Posthuman subjects like Cindi Mayweather are for Braidotti ‘forward-looking experiments with new forms of subjectivity’. (2013:45) Favreau notes that ‘by embodying what is outside of the human, the known, there is so much imaginative potential’ in that ‘existing in the realm of the posthuman allows us to create new worlds.’ (2021) Furthermore, critics have noted that ‘Mayweather was a proxy for all the things about Monáe that made others uncomfortable,

liker her androgyny, her opaque sexual identity, her gender fluidity- her defiance of easy categorization' (Wortham, 2018) I believe that Monáe has used posthumanism and the posthuman subjectivity as a way to help us reconceptualise our lives and subjectivities beyond the categorization and social death that Western constructs of 'human' has forced us into as Black queers.

The ArchAndroid, houses several songs that carry on from where Monáe left off in *Metropolis*. Adopting a musical style that is reminiscent of R&B/soul/funk band Earth, Wind & Fire, Monáe continues to acknowledge the grave injustices in the world on songs such as 'Locked Inside'.

(Verse 1)

'I'm locked inside

A land called foolish pride

Where the man is always right

He hates to talk but loves to fight

Is that alright?

(Pre-Chorus)

'...

And when I look into the future

I see danger in its eyes

Hearts of hatred rule the land

While love is left aside

Killing plagues the citizen

While music slowly dies

I get frightened, I, see I get

Frightened I...

(Verse 3)

'She's quick to fight for her man but

Not her rights

Even though its 3005

When will we end this genocide?

And that not right?

Her children cry

No food to eat and afraid as flies

The colour Black means it's time to

Die

And nobody questions why

Cause they're too scared to stop

the man

(Pre-chorus)

'Cause when I look into the future

I see danger in its eyes

Babies die before they're born

And no one ever smiles

The writers and the artists, all are

Paid to tell us lies

To keep us locked inside, they

Keep us locked inside

‘The colour Black means it’s time to die and nobody questions why’ alludes to the afro-pessimist reading of how (anti) Blackness is tied to both social death and physical death. Afro-pessimists’ readings of social death ‘engages anti-Blackness as a fundamental condition of civil society’ (Chavez, 2021:3) – hence Monáe states that nobody questions why. Again, Monáe is attempting to bring the conditions that Black folks exist under into focus.

Monáe then turns her focus onto her fellow artists and writers that have been ‘paid to tell us lies’. In an interview facilitated by Studio Q in 2012 Monáe explained that:

‘Being an artist, you have a responsibility. Music is a very powerful weapon. Music is my weapon and that’s what I focus on, I encourage people to dream bigger.’

For Monáe, the job of an artist is to help us get closer to the truth of things, to help us break free and imagine worlds beyond this one. Monáe’s judgment of her fellow artists draws from Theodore Adorno’s criticism of popular music and culture. One of Adorno’s major criticisms of popular music and its artists is that it has become a ‘mere exponent of society, rather than a catalyst for change in society’. (Adorno, 1973: 16) Artists like Monáe that engage social/political commentary in their musicking believe that artistic rebellion that challenges the status quo should be what defines artistry rather than the ‘disguised and gentle conformist enforcement’ (Mason) that today’s artists are being paid to enact through their artistry.

During Monáe’s performance of ‘Come Alive (War of the Roses)’ at the 2020 Oscars, Monáe stated:

‘The misfits, the outcasts

The misunderstood,

Those voices long deprived

Be loud, be seen, be lit

Be heard, because tonight

We come alive!

Like Participant SM, Monáe places particular importance on the ‘other’ taking up space.

Participant P also spoke about learning to take up space:

‘Now that I’ve been able to really know who I am, I’m learning to be to take up space. That’s another thing that I’m coming to realise about myself, I have been really shrinking myself for a very long time and at first I thought it was like ‘okay I’m just trying to keep the peace, you know keep everything smooth’ but I’m not really into keeping things smooth anymore, that’s what I’m learning about myself, some things are definitely worth the sacrifice but other things like you know? I’m learning that it’s okay to be the person that I am and I shouldn’t have shame about it. Being who you are without shame or inhibitions.’

Monáe’s call to action and this idea around taking up space that is shared amongst my participants and other Black queer artists is crucial. There is an understanding that ‘collective action in the public sphere is also a key component of worldmaking.’ (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 558 as seen in Nakayama and Morris, 2014:vi), This push for collectively taking up space demonstrates that they understand that the heteronormativity of the Black popular music industry and the music industry in general ‘is not something that can easily be rezoned or disavowed by individual acts of will, by a subversiveness imagined only as personal rather than as the basis of public-formation’. (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 558) These artists are consistently making attempts to walk the ‘line between individual practice and collective action.’

The Electric Lady

Released as the fourth and fifth instalments of her seven-part *Metropolis* series, *The Electric Lady* sees Monáe begin to move towards abandon and defiance as motifs for her musicking. On ‘Q.U.E.EN’ which features Neo- Soul Legend Erykah Badu, Monáe defiantly proclaims:

*‘Even if it makes other uncomfortable,
I will love who I am.’*

‘Sally Ride’ is an incredibly sombre record that sees Monáe become introspective. ‘Sally Ride’ is inspired by the queer astronaut Sally Ride who was the first American woman to fly in space. Continuing with references to water, on ‘Sally Ride’ Monáe wishes to be near a body of water for its cleansing and replenishing properties *‘Take me to the river, my soul is looking for a word from God’*. Monáe continues to look beyond this world for something better – *‘I’m taking my space suit and I’m taking my shit and moving to the moon where there are no rules...Sometimes I just wanna get away Right now, going on right now.’*

Dirty Computer & The Age of Pleasure

Dirty Computer (2018) and *The Age of Pleasure* (2023) are perhaps Monáe’s most defiant works. Although these albums see Monáe depart from Cindi Mayweather and the *Metropolis* narrative, Monáe does not depart from some of the thematic elements of her previous musical works. Defiance being a motif for musicking is something that is shared amongst my participants and other Black queer woman artists. For Participant BM in particular, defiance forms an integral part of her musicking. When asked about how she would describe herself as an artist Participant M said that she is limitless, unafraid and fearless:

‘As an artist I want to that music is my language of choice and I think I express myself very unapologetically. For me, music is my language of choice meaning that it is the way that I express myself and I get to do it in a way that it is my own, it is my personal experience so why not be honest and tell a story that is raw. If I want to express myself to the best of my ability and I want to convey the message that I’m trying to convey, and I want it to be as honest as possible. I think you need some sort of defiance if you want to do what you want, I personally need to defy. My need to defy comes from my positionality, I have to be defiant, I have no choice but to be defiant, I don’t fit any form of standard, so my music always has to be defiant. It goes hand in hand with me being dark-skinned, queer and a woman at that.’

Dirty Computer and *The Age of Pleasure* are arguably Monae’s most distinctive works within this set of albums because they not only centre defiance to remake the world, but they importantly also centre pleasure. *Dirty Computer* and *The Age of Pleasure* as projects of queer worldmaking not only articulate queerness and otherness as sites that the majoritarian sphere wants to subordinate and repress, but it also marks them as sites of ‘pleasure, enjoyment, and sociality’. (Stoffel, 2022:3) Whilst some critics have described Monae’s latest works as simply being about ‘hedonistic abandon’ (Petridis, 2023) I argue that Monae has not abandoned the disruptive orientations that have defined her musicking thus far.

Monae’s work on both albums are forms of what some may describe as ‘pleasure activism’ and stand as attempts to use queer and disruptive narratives of pleasure to challenge the normative narratives of pleasure that are prevalent within and beyond Black popular music.

Monae's earlier musicking was more centred around traditional approaches to social justice and activism which saw her works focus primarily on pain, struggle and oppression. While Monae has often addressed systematic oppression and injustice in her work, she has come to recognize that the pursuit of pleasure, both individually and collectively, is crucial for sustaining movements, fostering resilience and importantly, envisioning alternative futures. These works push boundaries, explore alternative forms of desire and openly celebrate queer experiences. Author Adrienne Maree Brown describes pleasure activism as 'the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy...learning to make justice and liberation the most pleasurable experiences we can have on this planet.' (2019:9) If we are to view the world-making and the creative construction of alternative ways of being as queer praxis, 'the practice of queer pleasure constitutes one such mode of possibility.' (Sullivan, 1999:251) The pleasure activism that runs through Monae's current musicking emphasizes the importance of pleasure, joy, and satisfaction as critical components of social and political transformation especially within the socio-political climate that we as Black queer folk currently exist in. *Dirty Computer* and *The Age of Pleasure* push forward the idea that seeking and experiencing pleasure can be a powerful tool for personal and collective liberation in multiple spheres. Again, Monae recognises that because of her positionality, she is going to be '*pushed to the margins, outside margins, of the world*', however this does not stop her, in fact it inspires her. Unlike in her previous musical works, Monae is more direct with the orientations of these albums, the chant of 'pleasure, pleasure, pleasure' on 'Paid in Pleasure' (2023) makes it clear where Monae's and this album's priorities lay. On track 5 of *Dirty Computer* Monae's defiant attitude towards pleasure is brought to the forefront. The 'futuristic funk-pop' (McPherson, 2018) track entitled 'Screwed' partially defines this album's defiant nature.

'I don't care,

You've fucked the world up now,

We'll fuck it all back down.'

Here Monáe is demonstrating her refusal to just accept the 'fucked-up' nature of the world whilst reclaiming her sexuality as a source of power in fighting against its nature. 'We'll fuck it all back down' is a line that alludes to Monáe's use of pleasure to rebuild the world. Queer writer Carolina De Robertis argues that 'perhaps this will sound radical, but I don't think we'll ever reach liberation as women, or as queer people without affirming our true erotic selves, or our right to joy'. (Alexia Arthurs, 2019) For Monáe and many other queer artists and writers such as James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, there are deep connections between 'pleasure and agency, desire and survival', 'Pleasure and the erotic have the potential to be sources of healing, acceptance, release, excitement, playfulness, wholeness, defiance, subversion, and freedom.' (Johnson). Foucault (1978) also explicitly identified pleasure as 'one of the central rallying points in the counterattack on normalizing power'. (Trumbull, 2018:523)

Pleasure can be a valid site of resistance in that it is 'often limited to a set of conditions, a checklist of sorts that determines the legitimacy of pleasure and the erotic. These conditions are in general an illusion, a cultural fable of morality and respectability created to police, surveil, and shame certain bodies, while simultaneously reaffirming and privileging others'. (Johnson, 2018) Johnson asks us as scholars who are looking to engage with pleasure and pleasure activism as a (queer) politic to consider 'who is free or deemed worthy enough to feel pleasure? When is one allowed to feel pleasure or pleased? With whom can one experience pleasure? What kind of pleasure is accessible? What limits one from accessing their full erotic and pleased potential?' Johnson argues that 'these questions reveal the fact

that pleasure and the erotic are deeply interrelated to race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and disability.’ (Johnson, 2018)

Monáe recognizes that for individuals like herself ‘whose identities often justify their policing, non-white, queer, BDSM, polygamous, non-reproductive, sex work, trans*, poor, disabled’, pleasure has very much been something that they have been routinely denied access to. Such positionalities are often rewarded with ‘disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions’. (Johnson, 2018) Despite these things Monáe believes that it is incredibly important for such folks to still find their pleasure.

In an interview with Amazon Music Monáe explains that whilst her older works were about honouring her community and her identity, she is now orientated towards ‘*Making music that makes us feel seen, makes us feel good and I think with Dirty Computer you saw that even more pronounced as I started to open up a little bit more and allow the world to sort of get a deeper look into who I was and my identity, I think with this project [The age of Pleasure]...I wanted to make it known that even in the midst of the heaviness, it’s important to find your joy, find your pleasure and create your beauty.*’

I want to return to the position that Matthew Hester takes up in ‘Her Phallic Sword: Hypersexual Cyberqueer Activism on Social Media Platforms’ (2022). Hester maintains that ‘should queer individuals hope to truly actualize their identities in defiance of the heteronormative social structures that seek to snuff them out, they must have the freedom to act hyper sexually and pornographically within the public sphere, to live at one as their fully homo and fully sexual selves.’ (Hester, 2022:170) The music video for ‘Lipstick Lover’, and *The Age of Pleasure* more generally are musical and visual manifestations of this push to act

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Figure 16: Janelle Monáe, *Lipstick Lover*, 2023



Figure 17: Janelle Monáe, *Lipstick Lover*, 2023



Figure 18: Janelle Monáe, *Lipstick Lover*, 2023

Figure 19: Janelle Monae, *Lipstick Lover*, 2023

In the video for ‘Lipstick Lover’, the pleasure activism practice of collective joy and celebration is put on full-frontal display. The video is filled with shots of Monáe and others ‘dancing, singing and kissing her [their] way through a sex-positive, sapphic and sultry pool party with a defiant red pop of lip colour.’ (Iftikhar, 2023) Regarding the video for ‘Lipstick Lover’, Monáe maintains that:

‘I’ve gone through life not always feeling safe to explore all of me. This visual and where I am is representative of how important it is for queer folks and non-binary folks to have a safe space and to feel safe enough to explore these sides of ourselves that we all have’.

Shot on 8-millimetre and 16- millimetre film, the various party scenes that define the video demonstrate that joy, happiness and celebration are not antithetical to activism. In the face of societal discrimination and marginalization, collective joy and celebration such as what is

seen in this video, challenges the narrative that the identities and experiences of queer folks should be hidden.

Documented queer celebratory events and spaces such as the ones displayed in the video disrupt oppressive norms about what Black queer life should look like and asserts our right to exist and express ourselves in any way that we want to. As Monáe explains in an interview given to New-York based radio station Hot 97: *'It was really important for me to document during this day and in this age of pleasure, that we lived, that we loved.'*

Like *Quee(ring) Pleasure*, *Dirty Computer* and *The Age of Pleasure* are 'a resistance to the narrow logic of pleasure and eroticism'. These musical works are a homage to a politics of radical sexuality. Within this move towards centring narratives of pleasure is the reclamation of sexual agency and bodily autonomy, as Monáe explains:

'There's a lot of work that needs to be done when it comes to making people feel safe...making folks who...over bodily autonomy, that's what it's about you know? Being able to understand that non-binary people, trans folks, Black women, and women have not been safe in this country and everything we do to express our liberty and our freedom is not about you, it's about us, it's about making sure that we're not betraying our own bodies...we don't often have control over our own bodies because of white supremacy, because of patriarchy, people abusing their power.'

In the pre-chorus of 'Screwed', Monáe repeats the line '**sex, body, we're gonna crash your party**', For Monáe the 'party' that she is referring to symbolises cis-heterosexual order and normativity. By reclaiming her body and her own sexual pleasure, Monáe is in essence blurring, obfuscating and 'crashing' the historically normative order of things, the

normativity that constantly orders the genres of music that she makes, the world around her and its narrow logic of pleasure. Here we can witness how Monáe's musicking is trying to challenge the cultural narratives and norms that shame, silence, and deny certain forms of pleasure, particularly those related to marginalised identities and sexualities.

Dirty Computer, *The Age of Pleasure* and Monáe's public reclamation of her sexual agency and bodily autonomy are incredibly significant when you consider the history of how the sexual agency and bodily autonomy of Black women and queer folks have historically been presented, controlled and curtailed particularly within the context of Black popular music and western society and culture. Even looking more closely at how laws regarding bodily autonomy are currently being conceptualised within the American political sphere, with multiple pieces of legislation that have protected the rights of women and queer folks currently being repealed. In interviews given to a multitude of media publications as part of *The Age of Pleasure*'s release cycle, Monáe has spent significant time talking about the multiple orientations of this work and her musicking in recent times. Monáe positions *The Age of Pleasure* as not only a concerted effort to reclaim and realise her full queer and sexual self and resist normative and restrictive representations of pleasure but also as a response to the rise of anti-trans, queerphobic legislation alongside the stripping away of Women's reproductive rights in the context of the US.

As a response to the stripping back of the rights of women and queer folks, *The Age of Pleasure* encourages queer folk to fight for what can be described as 'erotic justice' (Kapur, 2005) Erotic justice is a critical component of pleasure activism, it emphasises the importance of individuals, especially queer individuals, having agency and control over their own bodies, desires and sexual experiences. Importantly, erotic justice challenges the control and regulation of sexuality by institutions, laws, and societal norms, advocating for people to

have the right to make informed choices and decisions about one's own body and sexual expression.

In her 2018 single 'Yoga' featuring Nigerian-American singer Jidenna, Monáe defiantly proclaims to the majoritarian sphere '*You cannot police me so get off my areola, get off my areola!*'

In articulating forms of erotic justice, Monáe presents a challenge to attempts to curtail her bodily autonomy and the control and regulation of specific forms of sexuality within and beyond Black popular music, advocating for a more expansive understanding of desire and sexual expression.

'Spectacular, musicalized manifestations of peculiar, strange, queer embodied obscenities' like Monáe's performances on *Dirty Computer* and *The Age of Pleasure* can be considered disruptive 'especially dangerous, disturbing and subversive because they pre-empt, perform and circulate a range of new identifactory and disidentifactory possibilities that lie outside of the given codes of gender and sexual identity and pleasure- codes upon which society relies on for the maintenance of order and power'. (Taylor, 2012:48)

Furthermore, Where Monáe's musicking draws its destabilizing power from is in its inherent ability to 'help us imagine the future without abandoning the present' and our present selves.

7.3. Conclusion

Through disidentification and integrating queer world-making into their musicking, Black queer artists have challenged heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions, disrupted oppressive power structures, and imagined new possibilities for a more inclusive and just present and future. Despite the perpetual constraints placed on them, the musicking of Black

queer women and non-binary artists has provided a creative and visionary space where marginalised voices can be amplified, and where new narratives and ways of being can be explored, celebrated, and embraced.

They have reinterpreted and transformed existing musical forms, incorporating queer themes and sensibilities. This process of disidentification and queering music has expanded the possibilities within Black popular music, challenging heteronormative assumptions and creating space for diverse expressions of identity and desire.

The musicking of Monáe, Emmavie and other Black queer folks allow us as queers to both look beyond our present realities as oppressed folks whilst at the same time, pointing us towards ways to 'resist'. It refuses to accept the world for what it is and tries to inspire us to imagine the way that that world should and could be. Their musicking has contributed to imagination and innovation and has presented a perspective that not only creates possibilities for queer folks and other folks that exist at the periphery of popular culture but also disrupts our erasure.

What is powerful about the musicking of Monáe and many other Black queer artists is that it demonstrates that 'worldmaking is not a clear-cut path...worldmaking is a messy enterprise driven by a vision of another world, another way of living but it requires engaging the contemporary situation with its historical legacies, varying interests and more'. (Nakayama and Morris III, 2015: vi-vii) These artists remind us that whilst we fight, we must also find and experience joy and pleasure no matter how fleeting it may seem.

8. Conclusion

This study has brought together popular music theory, Black feminist theory, gender theory and queer theory to delve into the profound influence of gender and sexuality ideology on the aesthetics and conventions of R&B music and how such has shaped the experiences and trajectories of Black queer women artists that make such music. What this thesis reveals is how R&B serves as a platform where conventional notions of gender and sexuality are articulated, performed and upheld. Significantly, cis-heterosexual men and women R&B artists employ their musical expression to reinforce established gender norms and power dynamics, perpetuating binary ideals of masculinity and femininity.

Women R&B artists are especially entangled in performing hegemonic femininities, their music is often a medium through which societal expectations of femininity and womanhood are conveyed and legitimized.

In examining the repercussions of performances of hegemonic femininity and gender in general within R&B music, it becomes evident that they not only reinforce notions of superiority and subordination among women artists but also impact broader social structures. The crystallisation of hegemonic femininities into R&B musicking for women, relegates those who deviate from these norms to obscurity.

My first analysis chapter underscored the significance of contemporary R&B as a vehicle for articulating, propagating and reinforcing gender and sexuality ideologies, shaping cultural norms and social interactions at various levels. This chapter utilized gender theory and the music–society nexus to unravel the intricate interplay between gender, sexuality, and R&B music, revealing how artists' musicking both reflects and perpetuates prevailing norms, ultimately shaping our understanding of identity and relationships within the genre and

society at large. In exploring the lyrics and sonic qualities of songs by incredibly successful R&B acts such as Usher, Destiny's Child and Alicia Keys, I found that to musick within the realm of contemporary R&B is to continuously negotiate one's performance of gender and sexuality within the bounds of normativity. This chapter demonstrated that the ways in which gender is a 'kind of doing, an incessant activity performed...a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint'. (Butler, 2004:1)

The second chapter of this research brought forward the testimonies of Black queer women artists and used them to highlight how the dominant social ideology that shapes R&B music has figured significantly within their experiences and has also shaped the trajectories of their careers. This study explored how these artists express their queerness and challenge gender norms, positioning them in contrast to the accepted standards for women in R&B.

The testimonies of these women have illustrated that their refusal to be 'coerced to perform heteronormativity' (Bankhead, 2014:30) and not materialising themselves in accordance with hegemonic ideology regarding gender performance and stylisation has led to challenges in gaining recognition, opportunities, and lasting success in the music industry. Again, the testimonies of these women demonstrated how far contemporary R&B music and cultures is bound up with cis heteronormativity. My participants and other artists within the R&B tradition have also illustrated the extent to which body politics and their lack of mainstream desirability has structured their experiences and limited their trajectories. From this chapter we learn that fatphobia and queerphobia for Black queer masc presenting women often intersect to deny them visibility and legibility within and beyond the realm of Black popular culture.

In this chapter I also importantly positioned geographical context as playing a crucial role in the experiences and trajectories of not just Black queer women artists but also in the careers

of R&B artist in general. With limited infrastructure for R&B in the UK and in Nigeria, Black British and Nigerian artists have struggled to make significant marks in their respective locations. The lack of infrastructure in both locations has pushed these artists to seek opportunities in America, where support often varies by location. In rounding off the second chapter I explored how the capitalistic music industry model further compounds the struggles of Black queer women artist, as their subversive performances does not fit easily into marketable norms, making them perceived as risky investments compared to more conventional counterparts. I illustrated that being perceived as risky investments often results in missed opportunities for these artists in a music landscape that has historically been dominated by normative ideals.

The third analysis chapter of this thesis discussed the significant impact of technological advancements, particularly social media and music streaming, on the music industry and on the musicking of Black queer women artists. I demonstrated that the advancements have transformed the music landscape by changing how music is accessed, distributed, and enjoyed. They have also given artists new opportunities for independence and growth, allowing them to a somewhat limited extent, navigate the industry on their own terms. I also demonstrated that although the technological advancements that the music industry and artist have witness have wholly been transformative, challenges such as fair compensation and exploitation continuously pose a threat to the viability of musiciking within today's industry. This chapter also importantly explored how for Black queer women artists; social media has been transformational. For Black queer women artists, the integration of social media into their musicking has increased their accessibility, facilitated collaborations, and provided platforms for promotion. Despite facing increasing levels of censorship online and offline, these artists are using social media as a means of activism and resistance, refusing to be

relegated to the realms of obscurity. Black queer women artists are using social media platforms to assert their presence, challenge norms, and importantly claim their position within history and culture. This integration of the internet and social media into their musicking has allowed them to challenge their invisibility head on and has significantly given them the power to shape their own narratives.

The last chapter of this thesis explored how Black queer artists, through integrating disidentifactory performances and the queer praxis of queer world-making into their musicking, have generated radical contestations to the normativity and other oppressive apparatuses that have structured their experiences within and beyond Black popular music. I identified that where the power of the music and musicking of Black queer women artists lay is in their ability to not only help us challenge the here and now but to also help us in imagining queer futures and the creating of transformative possibilities. Despite facing constraints brought on by censorship and their subversiveness, their music becomes a space for marginalized voices to be heard, celebrated and promoted. These artists are constantly making concerted attempts to infiltrate existing musical forms with queer themes and visioning, expanding and challenging the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music to offer and embrace diverse expressions of identity.

Figures like Janelle Monáe and Emmavie provide a source of inspiration and resistance. Their music encourages us to imagine a better world and to always challenge the status quo. By engaging with history and contemporary realities, they engage in worldmaking that points us a Black queer folk to freedom that many of us have been unable to imagine. These artists remind us that amid our struggles, finding joy and pleasure is also critical to resistance, our existence and our liveability. Overall, their music contributes to both imagination and

innovation, disrupting our erasure and creating space for marginalized communities within and beyond popular culture.

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Information Sheet For: Queering the Black musical Atlantic: Black Queer female artists and the shapes, textures and boundaries of Black popular music

The purpose of this form is to provide you with information, so you can decide whether to participate in this study. Any questions you may have will be answered by the researcher or by the other contact persons provided below. Once you are familiar with the information on this sheet and have asked any questions you may have, you can decide whether or not to participate. If you agree, you will be asked to fill in the consent form for this study or record your consent verbally.

Research title:	Queering the Black musical Atlantic: Black Queer female artists and the <i>Shape, textures and boundaries</i> of Black Popular Music
Name and contact details of research	Elizabeth K. Falade 594659@soas.ac.uk
What type of research project is this?	PhD Research
Who is funding this research project?	SOAS, University of London
What is the research project's purposes?	To investigate how through music creation and performance, Black queer female artists are knowingly and unknowingly generating radical contestations to normativity and slowly dismantling the dominant order within forms of Black popular music.
Why have I been chosen?	You have been chosen because you identify as a Black queer artist.

Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary and you can choose to discontinue your participation at any time.

Do I have to take part?

This stage of the research project will last approximately 10 months and your participation will be needed throughout this time period.

What will happen to me if I take part?

I will be recording the audio of our interviews using a Dictaphone. The recordings will be transcribed and used for analysis. Only I as the principal researcher will have access to the recordings.

Will I be recorded and how will the recordings be used?

Risks and Benefits of participation	There are no benefits of participating in this research.
How will information I provide be kept secure?	All of the data that I will collect will be stored and backed up on secure encrypted hard drives.
Will I be kept anonymous in this research project?	Your responses, identifying information and other name mentioned will be kept confidential and anonymous. Only the major lines of thought that emerge from the interviews and observations will be used to support important ideas.
What will happen to the results of this research project?	The data and research results will be published in my PhD thesis and will be made available on Open Access via the internet.

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The data controller for this project will be SOAS University of London. The SOAS Data Protection Officer provides oversight of SOAS activities involving the processing of personal data and can be contacted at dataprotection@soas.ac.uk

Your personal data will be processed for the purposes outlined in this Information Sheet. The legal basis that would be used to process your personal data under data protection legislation is the performance of a task in the public interest or in our official authority as a controller. However, for ethical reasons we need your consent to take part in this research project. You can provide your consent for the use of your personal data in this project by completing the consent form that has been provided for you or via audio recording of the information sheet and consent form content.

Your Rights

You have the right to request access under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to the information which SOAS holds about you. Further information about your rights under the Regulation and how SOAS handles personal data is available on the Data Protection pages of

the SOAS website (<http://www.soas.ac.uk/infocomp/dpa/index.html>), and by contacting the Information Compliance

Manager at the following address: Information Compliance Manager, SOAS, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, United Kingdom (e-mail to: dataprotection@soas.ac.uk).

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, please contact SOAS in the first instance at dataprotection@soas.ac.uk. If you remain unsatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/data-protection-reform/overview-of-the-gdpr/individuals-rights/>

Copyright Notice

The consent form asks you to waive copyright so that SOAS and the researcher can edit, quote, disseminate, publish (by whatever means) your contribution to this research project in the manner described to you by the researcher during the consent process.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research study.

Consent Form for *Queering the Black Musical Atlantic*

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an equivalent explanation about the research

Project Title: ***Queering the Black Musical Atlantic***

Researcher Name: Elizabeth Falade

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated 25/10/2020, or it has been read to me.		
I have been able to ask questions about the project		
I agree to take part in the project and understand that taking part involves my voice being recorded with a dicatophone and the audio being transcribed into a written/ typed document.		
I agree that my interview is recorded using audio		
I understand that I can refuse to answer questions		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the study at any time by notifying the researcher/s involved and I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part		
I understand that my withdrawal or refusal to take part will not affect my relationship with SOAS, University of London		
I understand that that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the research team		
I understand information I provide will be stored securely by being saved on password protected and encrypted hard drives.		
I understand that the information I provided will be used for a PhD Thesis and made available on SOAS Research Online.		

I understand that my information will be anonymised so that I cannot be identified in any of the analysis.		
I agree to waive copyright and other intellectual property rights in the material I contribute to the project		

Contact Information

Telephone No: 07538387390

Email Address: 594659@soas.ac.uk

Alternative contact: Dr Awino Okech awino.okech@soas.ac.uk

Research Participant Declaration

Name of Participant [printed]

Signature

Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and to the best of my ability, ensured that that participant understands what they are freely consenting.

Name of Researcher [printed]

Signature

Date

SOAS Consent Form Adapted From UK Data Archives Model Consent Form and licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-Alike 4.0 International Licence](#)

Please ensure a copy of this document is retained safely for future reference.