

# Introducing the New Sexuality Studies

Original essays and interviews

*Edited by*  
Steven Seidman  
Nancy Fischer  
Chet Meeks

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## Wait . . . hip hop sexualities

Thomas F. DeFrantz

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

Summer 2005, driving home from the gym in Bull City (Durham, NC, if you don't know), FM radio cranked. A new beat catches my body. Hot and lean. I ride its tones downward, catching the finger snaps in between the throaty, falling and rising bassline that asks a question then answers itself in one continuous swoop. Funky, hot, and full of potential, the spare beat is only a basstone and a fingerpop, but it is defiant and inevitable as it commands me to move my shoulders, my neck, my pelvis. A whispering male voice draws me toward the radio speaker; for a moment, I focus only on the sound and its desire for me to pay attention to its musical imperative. "Wait till I show you this . . . You will never get enough."

Like any hip hop academic – corny as that may sound – I rush home, fire up the laptop, and Google the hook. In seconds I get it: Ying Yang Twins, the lead single from their just-released CD *United States of Atlanta*, and the version I heard in my car was a "clean" version of a "dirty" song. I download the real deal. In anticipation, I position the laptop speakers and let loose the preferred, original, explicit version. This is more like it. The beat bounces just as hard in its insistent groove, but now the rhyme sizzles with exhortations to flirt, to give head, to fuck, switch positions often, and finally the provocative hook – "Wait till you see my dick . . . Gonna beat that pussy up." I laugh, incredulously, at the inelegant rhyme, and immediately forward the tune to everyone I can think of. Within days, it seems to be the only song I hear, at parties, on the radio, at the gym, in the club.

Ironically for the hit single "Wait (The Whisper Song)," hip hop is broadly conceived as never being about waiting for anything, always about sex, and seldom about whispering. So how did "Wait" achieve such an effect in the popular imagination? What made it the radio and club hit of the summer? The anecdote of my first hearing of the tune demonstrates several important tenets of hip hop. This music is portable, easily separated from its original local context. It thrives in public and private transcripts, with "secret" versions of songs easily available to fans in the know. "Wait" demonstrates a laughable misogyny, at once humorously boastful and patently rude. It is not precious – it flashes into and out of pop consciousness aggressively, making its statement and generating buzz before moving, just as quickly, out of

circulation, making way for the next cycle of hits and misses. Most importantly, the music demands dance, and predicts playful interaction in some social space – the club, the gym, and possibly (although, not probably) the bedroom.

Hip hop offers an array of obvious and urgent questions surrounding sex and sexuality. Is hip hop truly obsessed with depictions of sex and sexuality? What kinds of depictions are most prevalent? What depictions are resisted by hip hop hedz, and why? How do sex and sexuality feed hip hop into world markets? How has a global marketplace for hip hop accelerated a demand for sexually explicit musical materials? How has hip hop come to stand for a youth sensibility that conjures perverse behaviors – as often social as sexualized – practiced as oppositional rituals to an increasingly corporate-controlled mainstream? Are hip hop sexualities different from other kinds of sexualities?

## Hip hop histories

Constructing answers to these questions transports us to the complex areas of popular culture and marketplace culture. Hip hop, a constellation of esthetic practices imbued with undeniable focus on style, emerged as the first post-civil-rights manifestation of black expressive culture in the United States. Its four constituent elements consist of B-Boying/B-Girling, which includes breakdancing and the physical attitude of hip hop; writing, which includes graffiti and visual representations of hip hop; dj'ing, which includes turntablism and the aural component of hip hop; and emceeing, which includes rapping and spoken-word poetry, the narrative aspect of hip hop. Each of these elements is bound by what some call the fifth element of hip hop – knowledge, or consciousness, which allows hip hop to inspire productive change among its participants, whether they be artists or fans. While each of these elements also has some relationship to representations of sex and sexuality, emceeing, or rapping, holds the most profound implications for a consideration of sex and sexuality defined by contemporary popular culture.

The history of hip hop can be easily aligned with African-American creative practices that stretch from the blues and jazz traditions of the early twentieth century. In general, these practices interwove boasting and toasting – that is, competitive bragging about one's abilities, and celebrating the achievements of another – with the musical accompaniment of the day. African-American culture has long prized a comfortable connection between spirituality, physicality, and sexuality in its performance traditions. These performances allow for: ecstatic release of energy; the call-and-response of performer and witness in service of communication; and a commitment to the well-being of the gathered community for the performance. Importantly, they are also built upon the willingness of witnesses to be amazed and surprised by the performer. Taken together, these esthetic aspects of performance led directly to the place of sexually-charged lyrics in hip hop music. Some hip hop, like some of the blues before it, connects audiences through boastful stories of sexual encounters staged as bragging rituals about near-impossible events.

Race is an issue here. The blues, like hip hop, attracted many denouncers as it gained popularity, and particularly as it moved from African-American contexts, where sex might be discussed as part of a constellation of human activity, to white-dominated public venues that denied conversations about sex and sexuality. In line with the fear of miscegenation that haunted white domination of black bodies in the United States, the suggestion of sex by African-Americans created anxiety for whites resistant to social mixing. So, while an extensive library of raunchy blues lyrics has been documented from the first decades of the twentieth century,

few, if any, of these songs received airplay on commercial radio. For example, the suggestive lyrics to "Long John Blues," a popular song recorded by Dinah Washington in 1948, attracted attention from moralists: "I went to Long John's office and told hini the pain was killin' . . . / He told me not to worry, that my cavity just needed fillin' . . . / He took out his trusted drill / And he told me to open wide / He said he wouldn't hurt me / But he'd fill my hole inside / Long John, Long John, you've got that golden touch / You thrill me when you drill me, and I need you very much." Songs in this tradition functioned by innuendo and intrigue, with a heavy dose of tongue-in-cheek humor that surrounded their performance and reception. Too easily, African-American expressive cultures like blues dancing and singing were characterized as patently immoral and lascivious, without redeeming artistic consequence. In this way, sexualized African-American popular culture fed into an ancient American consciousness that considered black bodies as sub-human and animalistic in comparison to demure, civilized white bodies.

Hip hop follows the blues, but differs dramatically because of its relationship to technologies of mass production. As hip hop emerged, youthful emcees quickly created a strand of boastful narratives that attracted audience attention with outlandish tales of sexual stamina and virility. But changing public standards allowed these raps with suggestive lyrics to receive commercial airplay, and an ascendant music video industry capitalized on sexualized imagery as a major selling point for hip hop. As the market solidified and expanded, its producers veered more aggressively toward sex, and exploited the racist, but popular, presumptions that affiliated young bodies of color with rampant, excessive sexuality. As hip hop achieved commercial exposure unprecedented for previous black expressive cultures, so did its most sexualized lyrics, and typically without regard to the political consequences that these representations engendered in mainstream contexts.

## Back in the day

The earliest mainstream hip hop rhymes offered innocent and almost naive depictions of courtship and sexual curiosity. Playful emcees taunted each other and the object of their affection in raps like "Roxanne, Roxanne," a 1984 recording by the group UTFO, which told a story of guys trying to talk to a girl on the street. As the rap progressed, each emcee was rejected by Roxanne, which allowed the next prospect a chance to horn in on her with his best lines. Almost immediately an answer rap – "Roxanne's Revenge," released by Roxanne Shanté in 1984 – confirmed the elasticity of rap for sexual politicking. Set to a beat borrowed from the first record, the 14-year-old female rapper dismissed the UTFO emcees and boasted about her own qualities and abilities as an emcee.

Other answer-back recordings followed immediately, and the market for sexualized bravado in rhyme hardened. Emcee Positive K achieved a big success with "I Got A Man" in 1992, a party track that suggested an inviolable war between the sexes, performed, in a little-noted irony, by the emcee as both the male and the female voices. While underground hip hop had long embraced explicit depictions of sexuality, as in Akinyele's notorious 1993 release "Vagina Diner," it held few aspirations toward commercial radio. But, by 1995, the success of LL Cool J and LeShaun's "Doin It" confirmed the crossover possibilities of sexually-charged rap, with simulated foreplay and sex acts integral to the narrative drive of the track. Set to a sample borrowed from Grace Jones, the song, while still playful, exuded an undeniably explicit sensibility in its references to particular sexual acts, a sensibility amplified by the accompanying music video directed by Hype Williams.

LL Cool J (born James Todd Smith) established himself as a rap sex symbol. Having taken his moniker as a sexualized boast – Ladies Love Cool James – his performances solidified the persona of a romantic thug, a hypermasculine African-American man who operates as a stylish, considerate lover. LLJ began this arc of his career with raps like "Round the Way Girl" (1990), a sort of "everyman" narrative celebrating a diversity of women of color seldom described by mainstream media. As LLJ boasted about the kinds of girls he hoped to date, he also confirmed, in rhyme, fashion trends and style prerogatives of the day. In videos, LLJ often capitalized on his sex appeal by appearing shirtless and smiling seductively at the camera.

LLJ's mainstream success predicted the rising popularity of sex in media representations of hip hop, as well as the preferred terms of female participation therein. In LLJ's videos, women typically functioned as silent, dancing props who could bolster the ego of the emcee. The abundance of voiceless female bodies in these videos led quickly to the late-1990s phenomenon of "video hoes," scantily clad women of color, who performed lewd gestures toward an unblinking camera. While dancing girls have long been a trope of American entertainment, the hypersexualized imagery of hip hop music videos approached a pinnacle of degradation unimaginable before the advent of music video. Probably the most extravagant use of women as background material came in Nelly's notorious "Tip Drill" video (2004), directed by Benny Boom. Set at a house party in a lavish mansion, dozens of women in bikinis and high heels demonstrate booty-popping moves and simulate sex acts with each other and the emcees. The women here are moistened, available, silent, and unflinchingly willing. This depiction of available flesh echoed longstanding American conceptions of black bodies as sexually provocative and predisposed to physical labor. In this realm of music videos, hip hop created little space for nuanced dialogue across gender about sex or sexuality.

### Let's talk about sex

While mainstream conversations about sex in popular culture are few, many scholars have noted that hip hop offers a public platform for some women to talk, frankly, about sex. Some rappers, including Queen Latifah and the groups T.L.C. and Salt n Pepa, established their mainstream reputations in the 1990s as straight-talking women who brought a no-nonsense attitude to the public discourse surrounding sex. But these rumblings of public conversation almost always occurred in heterosexist terms that valorized masculine domination. For example, some female emcees adopted the mainstream's misogynistic attitudes toward sex in an attempt to express an empowerment of female sexuality. Emcees including Missy Elliot and Foxy Brown promoted a pop-sensibility of sex-positive women in control of their sexual destinies, in recordings that offered directives for men to fulfill the rapper's sexual needs, as in the 1996 Lil' Kim track "I Don't Want Dick Tonight," which concluded its hook, "Eat my pussy right!" Some of these efforts led to action beyond hip hop as a realm of entertainment: Jimmie Hatz, a condom company founded in 2003, aggressively promoted its products as a hip hop consumer item. In the main, however, female rappers and singers working in hip hop embraced highly sexualized personae that confirmed heterosexist fantasies of women entertainers as commensurate with professional sex workers.

Hip hop has produced its own resistant recordings that critique mainstream preoccupations with misogyny, most famously in DJ Vadim and Sarah Jones's spoken-word anthem "Your Revolution" (1999). Conceived as an antidote to the hypersexualized depictions of women in hip hop, the song answered back an expansive string of hit songs with a wry

rejection of their terms of engagement. In a relaxed but direct cadence, Jones dismissed LL Cool J and others as she explained: "Your revolution will not find me in the backseat of a jeep / With LL, hard as hell, you know doin it and doin it and doin it well / Nah come on now / Your revolution will not be you smacking it up, flipping it, or rubbing it down / . . . Your revolution will not happen between these thighs." The song achieved a modest underground following without commercial airplay; in an ironic twist, the Federal Communication Commission sanctioned a Portland, Oregon, radio station for airing the song in 2000, claiming that it defied decency regulations. Three years later the ruling was overturned and fines were dismissed, but by then the song had received national attention as a harbinger of how hip hop could critique itself and its own representations of sexuality, even if it functioned within a larger mainstream context committed to maintaining a heterosexist orthodoxy.

### Queer hip hop practices

March 2000, cruising Tempe, Arizona, with a pal in a drab rental car. Headed to an underground queer African-American club we found out about – somehow. Talking about Lauryn Hill's visionary hip hop, realized on a spiritual plane with its R&B roots intact; and D'Angelo's hot-as-hell nude video for "Untitled (How Does It Feel?)," we land in the parking lot – folks are dressed as they want to be for a Saturday night: some cats in shiny suits, others in baggies; glam women in tight dresses arm in arm with big niamas sporting work boots. Once in the door, the vibe is positive and happy. A small club, with a dance floor at one end, and some already jumpin', jumpin' to Destiny's Child. The deejay shouts out to a sister at the back, grooving high as the new tune bleeds into the air – a sinister pizzicato string sample sets a mood of insistent menace. The beat drops. A tinny, electronic assemblage, built from a synthesizer and a drum machine, with a hyperactive break that comes around every chorus. A cheer erupts from the crowd. The dance floor fills, and we get out our versions of the wop and the shake, even as Juvenile rhymes, "Girl you workin with some ass yeah, you bad yeah / Make a nigga spend his cash yeah, his last yeah / Hoes frown when you pass yeah, they mad yeah / . . . Got a nigga schemin' large yeah, on the hard yeah / A smooth little broad yeah from out the projects / A nigga do a trick yeah, on the dick yeah . . . Girl, you looks good, won't you back that ass up / You're a fine motherfucker, won't you back that ass up." The music calls for a dance that rises up through the shoulders and the neck for the break, but settles down, hard, for some deep booty-banging at each and every release.

The anecdote of my dance in an Arizona club demonstrates that queer hip hoppers may respond to the social imperatives of the music in much the same way that straight fans do; the music may contain calls for particular dances in rhyme as well as in the musical structure and content. In the dance space, the misogyny or homophobia of a rhyme can be easily disregarded as celebrants communicate with their bodies. Some hip hop rhymes may be read as queer in their particularity: rhymes like Sir Mix-A-Lot's "Baby Got Back" (1992), or Juvenile's "Back That Ass Up" (1999) explore a fetish of anatomy that attempt to normalize particular unstated African-American erotic desires. The "queerness" of a fetish of the rump here – as with the penis of the Ying Yang Twins' "Wait . . ." – suggests how hip hop can create space for alternative conversations about sex, conversations that would not happen in

other musical contexts. Hip hop's focus on sex can attract queer interest, even when its overt message is heterosexual.

Like previous African-American popular music forms, hip hop has bolstered the continued practice of dances based in the expert manipulation of isolated regions of the body, especially the pelvis. These dances, now many generations removed from historical contexts of fertility rituals that likely inspired them, can be extremely difficult to achieve and perform well. In this, music videos often depict masterful dancers engaged in social dances that could be considered salacious by some. After all, expertise in hip hop dance is valued by hip hoppers in any venue, and an explicit focus on the possibilities of the body attracts people of any gender or sexual persuasion to these dance practices. From B-Boying and B-Girling, through C-Walking and poplocking, to rumpshaking and bootypopping, hip hop's beats reveal and confound the body in rhythmic motion.

But the body and its dances needn't be conceived only in terms of how they predict sex or sexuality. Access to hip hop culture, including its dances, reaches beyond any limits prescribed by mainstream conceptions of what sex looks like, sounds like, or seems to be. As emcees take up more outlandish stances and create more ribald imagery in rhyme about sex, be it normative, queer, or entirely unexpected, it may continue to be true that dance contains the glue that ties hip hop sexualities together.