

COMPLICATING THE COMPLEX: LIL WAYNE AND  
IDENTITY CONSTRUCT IN SOUTHERN HIP HOP

by

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(Under the Direction of Jean Kidula)

ABSTRACT

New Orleans native Lil Wayne began his professional career in rap music at the age of eleven. Since then, he has garnered sixty-four number one hits on the *Billboard* hot 100 chart, the most ever by a rapper. Lil Wayne is among the most controversial artists of the dirty South hip hop scene, which has been accused of creating the most overtly problematic and self-degrading images in hip-hop culture. This document seeks to examine Lil Wayne in the context of these criticisms and controversies. Looking at the broader paradigms of Southern hip hop musical style, lyrical subjectivity and visual imagery, my hope is to reveal a certain complexity in Lil Wayne's gestures of identity construct. It is not my goal to defend or justify Lil Wayne's actions, but merely to complicate the reductive view of Southern hip hop as obtuse and destructive for the sake of enabling further scholarly conversation.

INDEX WORDS: Lil Wayne, Southern hip hop, rap, New Orleans, Dirty South, Cash Money Records, bounce

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRO

*In other words, the world of hip hop, particularly rap music, has been disputably divided into commercial rappers, who seem quite content to resuscitate and mimic blackface minstrelism, and conscious rappers, who allegedly really “keep it real” by rapping about sociopolitical issues.*

- Reiland Rebaka; *Hip Hop’s Inheritance* (2011)

When New Orleans native Dwayne Carter Jr. signed his first contract with local hip hop label Cash Money Records, he took the stage name “Lil Wayne.” Since then, he has amassed scores of pseudonyms and nicknames, from “Young Carter” to “Mr. Make-it-rain-on-them-hoes.”<sup>1</sup> The complexity of Lil Wayne’s professional nomenclature mirrors the complexity of his identity, which has been constructed around many of the classic narratives of an “authentic” hip hop lifestyle: an estranged father, a violent, drug-addled childhood in a poverty-stricken urban neighborhood and a swift transition to an archetypal symbol of urban wealth, success and excess. His career as a hip hop artist has also taken on a complexity that is reflected in his musical style and performance, but often explicitly denied by critics, artists and scholars who would reductively dismiss the rapper as simply propagating negative racial and gender stereotypes already prevalent in hip hop culture.

Lil Wayne is among the best-selling artists of the Southern hip hop sub-genre of rap. His music is expressly indicative of a unique style known as “Dirty South” hip hop, which borrows

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for an extensive list of nicknames.



slow, truncated drum machine beats from bass-heavy hip hop club music and simple, call-and-response style vocals from early rap styles. Beginning in 1998 with the Cash Money Records release of fellow New Orleans rapper Juvenile's album *400 Degreez*, the rap industry began to see a swift increase in southern rap sales, and the Dirty South style achieved a high level of prominence in the national rap scene.

Ultimately, however, Dirty South artists out of Houston, Atlanta, Memphis, Miami and New Orleans have fallen under the critical eye of the hip hop establishment, which accuses them of creating overtly problematic and self-degrading images of hip-hop culture. Musically, many Southern artists are seen as producing an artistically obtuse simplification of hip hop music, over-emphasizing simple dance-based beats and highly repetitive, meaningless vocals in lieu of complex lyrical subjectivity and narratives of social consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Lil Wayne's music has helped to define the Dirty South style, and his image has contributed significantly to the stigmatization of Southern hip hop culture; his tattooed, diamond-studded, hyper-masculine representations of blackness, and vulgar, violent, misogynistic lyricism are constantly scrutinized in the public eye. The reductive dismissal of southern rappers like Lil Wayne does not leave room for comprehensive discussion about the genre of southern rap and its relationship with the national hip hop music industry.

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<sup>2</sup> Such criticisms can be found in an array of popular online blogs and social media sites run by amateur music critics and fans. Popular hip hop media sources have entered into the discussion, as well; this 2009 XXL Magazine article discusses the phenomenon of "minstrel rap" in southern hip hop: <http://www.xxlmag.com/news/bloggers/2009/10/minstrel-rap-is-back/> (accessed 4/12/13). A number of black cultural critics and scholars have entered into the debate; Boyce Watkins and Michael Eric Dyson are two public scholars who have written frequently about mainstream hip hop and southern rap. Watkins has written specifically on Lil Wayne, posting this 2011 article entitled "Why I'm Boycotting Lil Wayne": <http://thyblackman.com/2011/06/24/lil-wayne-not-drake-boycott-him/> (accessed 4/12/13).

## Mainstream Minstrelsy

In his 2011 book *Hip Hop's Inheritance*, black cultural theorist and hip hop scholar Reiland Rebaka discusses an idealized African American popular music that engages with what he calls the “*idyllic impulse*” of African American history. This impulse highlights “African-Americans’ tradition of resistance and restitution and African Americans’ tradition of transcendence and opposition.”<sup>3</sup> Like many critics of popular rap music, Rebaka takes issue with those rappers who do not make use of their cultural platform to project constructively progressive, positive images and messages through their music. Many of the most widespread criticisms of Dirty South artists concentrate on its incongruence with an utopian idea of hip hop subjectivity, accusing artists like Lil Wayne of compromising the legacy of racial uplift in the African American arts community.

Lil Wayne’s popularity and success have elevated him into pop music’s “mainstream,” a status that can hold stigmatizing ramifications for popular musicians. In most popular music, “mainstream” differentiates major-label artists and “underground” artists. Underground artists’ music is released by independently owned, non-corporate record labels. While underground artists generally receive dramatically less funding for their projects than major-label artists, they usually have considerably more creative agency. Rebaka accurately equates this differentiation with a dichotomy of lyrical subjectivity in current rap music, which he terms “conscious” versus “commercial” rap. As Rebaka states, “the distinctions made between commercial and conscious hip hop usually have to do with whether or not a specific hip hop artist incorporates cultural criticism, social commentary, and political analysis into their aesthetic expressions.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Reiland Rebaka, *Hip Hop's Inheritance: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Hip Hop Feminist Movement* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 191.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

It is this question of lyrical consciousness that connects artists' work to Rebaka's idyllic impulse. By creating conversations about socio-political issues, conscious rappers engage with and enact counter-hegemonic gestures that oppose hierarchical authority, an authority that often marginalizes the African American community. This counter-hegemony is the artistic manifestation of the tradition of transcendence and opposition that Rebaka idealizes. Rebaka half-heartedly resists this dichotomy, however. He argues that "contemporary African American popular music must be simultaneously innovative and exciting, serious and playful, challenging and accessible."<sup>5</sup> He notes that the line between conscious and commercial rappers is not always clearly defined. Like many scholars, however, Rebaka's critique of commercial, mainstream rap is blatantly negative; "this music is very often, however unwittingly, predicated on and preoccupied with variants of very anti-black racist minstrelsy myths and sexual stereotypes... Both the monotony and vulgarity of what passes nowadays as commercial rap is outright offensive."<sup>6</sup>

Faced with this critical dichotomy, Lil Wayne is among a large number of mainstream rappers who do not fit properly into either commercial or conscious rap. There is juxtaposition within his "aesthetic expression" of stereotypical, pathological imagery as well as an implicit consciousness that speaks expressly to the struggles, dangers and pitfalls of the life that he has lived. Lil Wayne's music reflects the harsh realities of the New Orleans neighborhoods that he grew up in. His record label, Cash Money Records, markets some of the most stigmatizing images and sounds of mainstream hip hop's gangster rap, "bling" culture. All the same, he is recognized as one of the genre's most creative rappers. This document will explore this dichotomy as a means to better understand Lil Wayne as a musician and a cultural phenomenon,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 209.

complicating the reductive view of Southern hip hop as merely obtuse and destructive for the sake of enabling further scholarly conversation about Southern hip hop.

### Hollygrove and Cash Money Success

Lil Wayne was born on September 27, 1982. Most of his childhood was spent in the Hollygrove neighborhood of New Orleans' seventeenth ward, one of the city's poorest and most flood-prone areas. His parents divorced when he was two years old, and his father abandoned him and his mother. The family eventually moved to East New Orleans to escape Hollygrove's gang violence and crack-cocaine trade. While not much is recorded of his early life in Hollygrove and East New Orleans, a handful of lyrical references to his childhood sheds some light on the Hollygrove lifestyle:

Born In New Orleans,  
Raised In New Orleans.  
I will forever remain faithful New Orleans.  
I thank you New Orleans,  
Thank you Hollygrove.  
That's been my hood since a snotty nose.  
I come through the hood suicidal doors,  
I used to come through the hood on the handlebars.  
Gat in my draws,  
Money in my pocket, crack in my jaws,  
I hope it don't dissolve.<sup>7</sup>

These lyrics, from "La La La," an unreleased track recorded during sessions for his sixth studio album, *Tha Carter III*, describe a rough childhood in which he sold crack and carried handguns while riding around Hollygrove on bicycle handle bars. The authenticity of these lyrics as an

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<sup>7</sup> "La La La," an unreleased track recorded during sessions for *Tha Carter III*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJZGMRvfHmE> (accessed 4/3/13).

index of Lil Wayne's life is, of course, dynamically questionable, but Hollygrove is infamously one of the roughest neighborhoods in a city that struggles with high crime and murder rates.<sup>8</sup>

What is known about his childhood is that he was constantly in contact with the New Orleans' hip hop music scene, and began rapping at a very young age, eventually dropping out of high school to pursue his music career. At the age of nine, he met Bryan Williams (also known as "Birdman") and became involved with Williams' Cash Money Records, one of the city's most successful local record labels. He later signed an official contract with Cash Money to begin his solo career.<sup>9</sup> Williams became a mentor for the young, essentially fatherless rapper. The relationship between Lil Wayne and Bryan Williams is frequently referenced in interviews, but never discussed in depth. Since their 2006 collaborative studio album entitled *Like Father, Like Son*, Lil Wayne has often made reference to Williams as a father figure, sometimes referring to himself as BM J.R., an abbreviation of "Birdman Junior."

Bryan Williams and his brother Ronald "Slim" Williams cofounded Cash Money Records in 1991 with private funding from their father. Since its inception, the label has emphasized local New Orleans talent, initially catering to a specific genre of dance music called "bounce." More closely examined in the subsequent chapter of this document, bounce is a highly syncopated genre usually featuring drum beats and synthesized sounds programmed on a Roland TR-808 drum machine and highly repetitive, often call-and-response style vocals. When bounce music first began, its principal function was as dance music.<sup>10</sup> Bounce was a cultural marker for the block party scene of the New Orleans housing projects. The music ultimately

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2012/07/05/155986277/new-orleans-struggles-with-murder-rate-and-trust> (accessed 2/11/13).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.lilwaynehq.com/biography/> (accessed 4/22/13).

<sup>10</sup> Bounce's dance element will be further discussed in chapter four. See images in Appendix B for a visual representation of bounce's dance style. These images will be explained in chapter four.

evolved into the dominant form of rap music in the city, however, and has left a stylistic imprint on many national artists who claim a regional affiliation to New Orleans, particularly Cash Money's artists.

Cash Money was among a small handful of independent record labels that produced local bounce music almost exclusively in the early 1990s. The bounce style speaks significantly to the aesthetic of Dirty South hip hop, sharing specific style characteristics with other southern sub-genres, including "crunk music" and "trap music" out of Atlanta, Memphis and Miami. Moreover, it also speaks to the lineage of New Orleans music; at times borrowing rhythmically from roots jazz music and second line brass bands, as well as the diverse cross-cultural musics that contribute to New Orleans' creolized culture.

Between the years 1991 and 1997, Cash Money only garnered attention in New Orleans and other areas around the southeast where bounce music was becoming popular. In 1998, however, the Williams brothers signed a \$30-million deal with Universal Music that covered all of the label's pressing and distribution and entitled the brothers to eighty-five percent of the label's royalties, fifty percent of publishing revenue and complete ownership of all master tracks.<sup>11</sup> Cash Money and its cast of young local artists, particularly Lil Wayne, were suddenly thrust onto the national scene. The Williams brothers' Universal deal was instrumental in the emergence of southern hip hop and the introduction of Dirty South music into the national rap and pop music industry.

Lil Wayne's first success with Cash Money was in a group called the Hot Boys (sometimes stylized as Hot Boy\$, or Hot Boyz), which featured himself and fellow rappers Terius Gray ("Juvenile"), Christopher Dorsey ("B.G.") and Tab Virgil ("Turk"). The Hot Boys'

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<sup>11</sup> Murray Formen, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press), 335.

1997 debut album, *Get it How U Live!*, saw moderate success, but their second album, *Guerilla Warfare* (1999), reached number one on the *Billboard* Top R&B/Hip-hop Albums chart and number five on the *Billboard* 200 chart.<sup>12</sup> That same year, Cash Money released Lil Wayne's solo debut *Tha Block is Hot*, which also reached number one on the R&B/Hip-hop Albums chart, and number three on the *Billboard* 200 chart.<sup>13</sup>

Since the release of *Tha Block is Hot*, Lil Wayne has consistently been one of the most prolific artists in hip hop, releasing a total of twenty-eight full-length solo studio albums and mixtapes from 1999 to 2013. He has also consistently been among hip hop's most successful artists, with sixty-four songs on *Billboard*'s "Hot-100" chart between 1999 and 2010, the most ever by a rapper.<sup>14</sup> His most successful full-length studio albums have comprised the *Tha Carter* series; *Tha Carter* (2004), *Tha Carter II* (2005), *Tha Carter III* (2008) and *Tha Carter IV* (2011) have all gone multi-platinum and held top-ten spots on the *Billboard* 200. *Tha Carter III* and *Tha Carter IV* both held the number one spot for multiple weeks.

Lil Wayne has been a Cash Money Records artist (also referred to as a "Cash Money Millionaire") for the entirety of his professional career. As such, the bounce-heavy Cash Money aesthetic defined his early musical style. In 2005, Cash Money announced a new imprint label called Young Money Entertainment, which would become Lil Wayne's own personal record label. Since then, he has enjoyed significant creative and artistic license over his work. Lil Wayne has wielded that license to create a decidedly unique form of popular rap music. He blends the traditional sounds of bounce with an intense rhythmic and rhetorical facility in his

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<sup>12</sup> Hot Boys Chart History, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/414854/hot-boys/chart> (accessed 2/10/13).

<sup>13</sup> Lil Wayne Chart History, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/414854/lil-wayne/chart> (accessed 2/11/13).

<sup>14</sup> Lil Wayne Chart History, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/414854/lil-wayne/chart> (accessed 2/11/13).

rapping style, as well as an inclination, particularly in his most recent releases, towards progressive, almost experimental musical idioms.

Regardless of these artistically creative tendencies, Lil Wayne continues to garner negative criticism for the destructive potential that his messages hold for young Americans. Lil Wayne undoubtedly projects an abrasively polarizing, often offensive image of hip hop culture and African American society in general. It is impossible to argue that he should not be held more accountable in some way for the glorification of violence, drug use, misogyny, homophobia and sexism that pervades his music. This document does not necessarily seek to engage with or combat the negative criticisms of mainstream rap, or even Lil Wayne specifically. It does, however, seek to identify a particular complexity in Lil Wayne's career wherein he engages with Rebaka's "*idyllic impulse*" of resistance, restitution, transcendence and opposition in discursive ways, despite the controversial subject matter of his lyrics and the representational implications of his visual images.

The representation and expression of New Orleans is one of Lil Wayne's most explicit musical projects; he claims the city as his own, and claims his music as the city's. The view of Lil Wayne as an authentic index of New Orleans decenters the metanarrative of the city's romanticized jazz music history. However, his music and image retain the "exoticism" and creolized identity of New Orleans culture by adhering to more traditional hip hop idioms, which stylistically retain the diversity of the cross-cultural origins of hip hop. This evokes a musical aesthetic that is more directed towards partying than poeticizing socio-political phenomena. His music achieves a certain level of consciousness through the expression of the challenges of black life in the city. In this way, he engages with the lineage of New Orleans music, which has



traditionally juxtaposed a “good times” milieu with an undercurrent of social consciousness that is implicit in an authentic artistic representation of the city.

In Chapter two, I will discuss the origins of Lil’ Wayne’s musical style, placing him firmly in the lineage of old school New Orleans bounce music by charting the historical tradition of that music and discussing its specifiable musical characteristics. Moreover, an analysis of several Lil Wayne songs that speak to the bounce tradition in particularly discursive ways will show how the artist’s continued engagement with the traditional hip hop idiom of his city is a gesture that exhibits a dialogic relationship between his identity and his place and space. That he upholds the stigmatized stylistic conventions of Dirty South hip hop and manipulates them to create innovative mainstream pop music is an act of resistance to the Dirty South’s most vocal critics.

Chapter three will examine Lil Wayne’s vocal performance, his lyrical subjectivity and his immense rhetorical facility. Lil Wayne’s lyricism retains the simple constructs of bounce music’s short, non-narrative phrasing, but he creates a disconnective discourse that is often a subtle abstraction of parody, pastiche and allusion, almost constantly employing extended metaphor and complex wordplay. When he does use narrative structures, they are often in the form of highly specific socio-political commentaries that stand in direct contention to Reba’s points about commercial rap. Specific rhetorical gestures significantly reflect the various social structures that have defined his life and the struggle of black people in the south, particularly New Orleans.

The fourth chapter will look at the visual imagery of Lil Wayne’s music videos. Examining the intersections of racial representation and gender representation, I will look at some of his most overt visual gestures of identity construct. Lil Wayne undeniably enacts

traditionally raced gestures of masculinity, but he does so in such a way that allows him to construct distinct counter-narratives that show the rapper literally and physically opposing hierarchical powers of government and law enforcement. Tensions between these hyper-sexualized, racially derisive images and counter-hegemonic narratives speak significantly about the negotiation of gender construct and racial representation in hip-hop music video and the imagery of Southern rap.

A close look at his work reveals a diversity of ways in which Lil Wayne engages in complex power struggles, making it an artistic priority to oppose hierarchical systems, subtly or aggressively, that seek to oppress or enact authority over him, or that marginalize the people with whom he identifies. He creates distinctly counter-hegemonic discourses that oppose systems of power and authority, speaking about New Orleans and its marginalized people often through commentary on corrupt justice systems, post-Hurricane Katrina bureaucracy and white racism. Lil Wayne is disenchanted with the powers that oppose him and he uses his music and image to enact his own oppositions in diverse ways. This document will examine the ways in which he does this, keeping a keen eye on his ability to retain mainstream success. This is a study of opposition within identity construct. My goal is to use Lil Wayne as an exemplar of the Southern hip hop community to start a much larger conversation about hip hop music in the South.

## CHAPTER 2

“MY HOMIES STILL (PUMP THAT BASS)”:

### TRADITIONAL BOUNCE MUSIC IN THE MODERN MAINSTREAM

*As with New Orleans jazz and R&B, however, the political significance of bounce is not defined by lyrics about David Duke or the police, but rather by the autonomy with which African American youth created participatory adaptations of rap music that spoke to their own particular experience and cultural frame of reference.*

- Matt Miller, *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans* (2012)

The musical expression of place and locality is one of Lil Wayne’s most pervasive identity constructs. In the wake of international stardom, he continues to present himself almost singularly as the seminal purveyor of New Orleans hip hop music in the mainstream. His lyrics are littered with references to Hollygrove, the New Orleans neighborhood where he grew up. Moreover, the stylistic and aesthetic milieu of his music represents the inheritance of the once-underground hip hop genre “bounce,” a dance music that began in New Orleans in 1991 and immediately became the stylistic impetus for the city’s early rap artists. Steeped in the conventions of Dirty South hip hop, bounce is a decidedly marginal subgenre of rap, but the music of Lil Wayne and a handful of other New Orleans artists brought bounce music into the mainstream of rap music.

That Lil Wayne upholds the stylistic authenticity of his city’s hip hop history is both a unique aesthetic gesture that diversifies the American hip hop scene, as well as a gesture of

resistance to the broader hip hop establishment that would seek to suppress diverse styles of hip hop music for the sake of mega-marketable homogeneity in mainstream pop music. This chapter will explore the ways in which Lil' Wayne's music represents the city of New Orleans through the employment of specific stylistic musical traits, and how this gesture complicates the established relationship between southern rap music and the national hip hop scene. The first section will briefly discuss the importance of the expression of space and place in hip hop music over the years. Ultimately, an overview of the history of bounce music and its definitive stylistic conventions will lead to a discussion of the ways that Lil Wayne has and continues to engage with bounce music in increasingly discursive ways.

#### Space and Place and the Emergence of the New South

Scholars have been speaking about the representation of space and place in hip hop music since the genre began to garner widespread attention. As Murray Forman points out in his seminal work on the subject, *The Hood Comes First*, the expression and representation of locality through hip hop music is one of the genre's most unique traits.<sup>15</sup> Since the late 1990s, the regional divisions and affiliations that defined subgenres in rap music have steadily broken down, effectively homogenizing much of what is considered mainstream hip hop. The emergence of Southern hip hop and its various subgenres – New Orleans' bounce music, as well as “crunk music” and “trap music,” primarily out of Memphis and Atlanta – has revitalized the regional diversification of hip hop music.

Beginning in the late 1970s, the different boroughs of New York (particularly Queens and The Bronx) developed unique, competitive hip hop scenes that were differentiated by

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<sup>15</sup> Murray Forman, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Hip-Hop* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), xv.

specific stylistic conventions and musical aesthetics. This early emphasis on region-based genre affiliation sparked a culture of what Foreman calls “the extreme local” in hip hop music.<sup>16</sup> The expression of one’s locality as a competitive mechanism quickly became an intrinsic gesture of identity construct. As rap music spread across the country to southern California, the expression of locality, space and place remained vital to all stages of the artistic process in a multitude of diverse ways. In *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, Adam Krims speaks to this diversity of expressive gestures: “a poetics of locality and authenticity can work through sound, visual images, words, and media images together.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the expression of locality in hip hop has been manifest in myriad ways throughout the history of the genre.

Tricia Rose, in the preface of her book *The Hip Hop Wars*, remembers the early days when “hip hop was a locally inspired explosion of exuberance and political energy tethered to the idea of rehabilitating community.”<sup>18</sup> Rose’s nostalgic statement provocatively unites the concept of locality and the politically conscious energy of the art form. Gestures of local expression are understood as mechanisms of identity construct whereby the representation of an artist’s locality strengthens the bonds within their community and fosters social progress.

With the development of genres specific to geographic divisions, rap music produced a constantly diversifying web of different styles and strains that were inextricably linked to neighborhood, city, state and most notably, coastal affiliation. The seeds of this diversity also produced a climate of aggressive competition, rivalry and confrontation between East Coast rappers and West Coast rappers. These confrontations and feuds culminated in the violent

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<sup>16</sup> Forman, xvii.

<sup>17</sup> Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 124.

<sup>18</sup> Tricia Rose, *Hip Hop Wars: What we talk about when we talk about music and why it matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), ix.

murders of Los Angeles rapper Tu Pac Shakur and New York rapper Notorious B.I.G. The culture of competition that spurred the diversity of the genre quickly became its most stigmatizing facet. After the deaths of Shakur and B.I.G., East Coast/West Coast rap feuds began to decline as artists reconciled their differences and began to cross musical boundaries. Bi-regional collaboration became the new form of crossover in popular music, and the regional stylistic specificity of subgenres in mainstream rap began to deteriorate.

At the same time, underground hip hop scenes in less established urban centers across the country had steadily developed highly localized hip hop subgenres. Among these developing subgenres, many of the most swiftly emerging artists hailed from cities in the Southeastern United States. By the year 2000, a widespread genre of southern rap, much of which fell under the stylistic umbrella of Dirty South hip hop, began to emerge as a “third coast,” challenging the dominance of scenes in New York and Los Angeles. Ultimately, rappers from these and other previously established hubs of hip hop music turned their confrontational and competitive energies towards the emerging new south.

The expressed locality of the various sub-categories of the Dirty South style unquestionably fueled a diversification that is predicated upon a return to regional-specific styles. The creative force of hip hop has continued to be directed towards the expression of locality, space and place, in the context of southern rap. In his 2012 book *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans*, Matt Miller asserts that, today, “most mainstream rap aspires to a sense of placelessness,” evoking the homogeneity of this breakdown of genre-specific style characteristics that had previously differentiated regional scenes. Miller goes on to stress the

importance of smaller, less mainstream scenes whose overtly expressed locality seemingly functions, in a corporate sense, to diversify the genre at large.<sup>19</sup>

Southern hip hop and artists that employ the Dirty South style often represent the counter-diversification that Miller talks about. New Orleans' bounce music was, from its inception, "oriented toward the musical preferences and narrative perspectives of residents of New Orleans's housing projects and other poor neighborhoods, and it proved to be an enduring and profitable feature of the local music landscape."<sup>20</sup> With the international success of Lil Wayne and other New Orleans artists, bounce music has come to play a pivotal role in the diversification of the current rap mainstream.

#### Searching for Hip Hop in New Orleans, Defining Bounce Music

Bounce music is undeniably the defining subgenre of New Orleans hip hop, but the history of the form dates back slightly earlier than the codification of the bounce style. While the first bounce songs were not produced until 1991, DJing at block parties in housing project yards and in school playgrounds was a part of New Orleans street culture as early as 1983. In these early years, however, the music was merely an extension of imported New York hip hop. As Miller states, "the (early) development of rap in New Orleans was strongly influenced by the genre's wider national context, including early focus in New York and the subsequent development... of a parallel scene in and around Los Angeles."<sup>21</sup> One of the earliest documented New Orleans rap groups was New York Incorporated, featuring New York transplant Big Easy and New Orleans native Mia X, who would eventually sign to No Limit records, one of the first

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<sup>19</sup> Matt Miller, *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

New Orleans labels to receive national recognition. The group's DJ/producer was Byron Thomas, later known by his stage name, Mannie Fresh.

Born in New Orleans on March 20, 1969, Mannie Fresh is a pervasive figure in the New Orleans rap scene. His stylistic influence began with his involvement in the city's early DJing parties and culminated with his fifteen-year tenure as the house producer and DJ for local label Cash Money Records, where he produced the first four Lil Wayne albums. After his pivotal role in New York Incorporated, he partnered with rapper Gregory D. and released the 1987 album *Throwdown*, which gained both artists citywide acclaim. Two years later, a twelve-inch single was produced which contained the song "Buck Jump Time (Project Rap)," a single that is cited as being one of the first New Orleans hip hop songs to expressly represent the city.<sup>22</sup>

The title, "Buck Jump Time," refers to a dance that is usually performed to the music of second line brass bands at parades in New Orleans. In lieu of the more conventional reliance on prerecorded beats and samples, "Buck Jump Time" features an originally composed beat by Mannie Fresh, programmed on a drum machine. The beat references the highly syncopated rhythms of New Orleans second line drum patterns, which directly draw from the lineage of traditional New Orleans music and early American jazz. As such, the song employs an aesthetic that has specific associations to the city's musical lineage and traditional party culture.

The song's subtitle, "(Project Rap)" refers to a constant stream of shout-outs to the various housing projects in New Orleans. The lyrics to the song make a clear statement about New Orleans as a hip hop city and foreshadow the pervasive expression of place and space that would help define the music in the years to come:

The point behind this whole rap,  
This city is cold as any other on the map.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



New York this, California that,  
Forget that talk, this is where it's at.  
They're talking 'bout California like it's so dope,  
Let me see Cali walk through the Calliope.  
The projects, Wards, all on time.  
New Orleans number one in this rhyme.<sup>23</sup>

In music critic Roni Sarig's book, *Third Coast*, Mannie Fresh remembers attending Joseph S. Clark High School with trumpeter Kermit Ruffins and members of the Rebirth Brass Band, who have carried traditional New Orleans second line brass band music into contemporary jazz, rock and R&B settings. Mannie Fresh's connection with traditional New Orleans jazz is unique among hip hop producers and DJs; the rhythmic aesthetic of second line that permeates his music created an early precedent for bounce. Although the original bounce sound is attributed to one song that Mannie Fresh did not produce, and which features a beat taken from a sample of a song by a New York rap group, Mannie Fresh is still considered "a pivotal figure in the emergence and crystallization of... bounce in the early 1990s."<sup>24</sup> The basic rhythmic pattern of the original bounce beat can be seen as having implicit and specific rhythmic congruencies with the basic patterns of second line that have distinguished Mannie Fresh's style at all stages of his career.

What came to be known specifically as bounce music is said to have begun with the 1991 track "Where Dey At" by DJ Irv and MC T. Tucker. As Miller states, "While it built on earlier expressions of a local rap sensibility in songs like 'Let's Jump,' 'Buck Jump Time,' and 'Get It Girl,' 'Where Dey At'... crystallized a new set of priorities that would shape rap music in the

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<sup>23</sup> Gregory D. and Mannie Fresh, "Where Your from (Party People)" / "Buck Jump Time (Project Rap)." (Uzi Records: 9MM-007, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Miller, 60.

city.”<sup>25</sup> Among these priorities, Miller identifies polyrhythm, a specific tempi range of 95-105 b.p.m., and vocal performances characterized by cellular structures and collective experience-based call-and-response styles. These were musical elements that could be variously found in most earlier New Orleans hip hop, but “Where Dey At” incorporated them all to achieve widespread success that brought a cohesion to the city’s rap scene and helped to codify its sound.

“Where Dey At” relies heavily on a sample of “Drag Rap,” an obscure 1986 single by the Queens, New York group the Showboys. “Drag Rap” achieved limited success in the national market, selling no more than five thousand copies before the group broke up. Somehow, despite seemingly cold reception, the single began to sell well in New Orleans in 1987. As Roni Sarig explains in his book *Third Coast*, “New Orleans DJs began looping the audience’s favorite part – the xylophone refrain – just as early hip hop DJs had done with funk breaks. They’d then scratch over it and... when people started grabbing the mic and chanting on top, bounce music was born.”<sup>26</sup>

“Drag Rap” comprises two contrasting sections. The first section samples the theme to the 1950s television show “Dragnet” and features a programmed drum sample on a Linn LM-2 drum machine. The second section (beginning at the 1:50 mark) features a beat commonly referred to as the “triggerman” beat (a reference to the stage name of Philip Price, the Showboys’ producer, who made the beat) (see fig.1.1), a syncopated kick and snare drum pattern programmed on a Roland TR-808 Rhythm Composer.<sup>27</sup> Commonly referred to as the “808,” the

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<sup>25</sup> Miller 75.

<sup>26</sup> Roni Sarig, *Third Coast: Outkast, Timbaland, & How Hip-Hop Became a Southern Thing* (Da Capo Press, 2007), 257.

<sup>27</sup> The Linn LM-2 and the Roland Tr-808 were the two most popular drum machines used in the first decade of hip hop music. The two machines produce dramatically different sounding beats, most notably differentiated by the samples they use. The LinnDrum uses samples of real drum

TR-808 is known for its deep, hollow kick drum sound and high and tight snare sound, which are both extremely clean tones that are employed sparsely to create a notably minimalist aesthetic. The 808 is the most recognizable drum sound in early hip hop music. In New Orleans, where most early rap producers relied on samples instead of originally composed beats, the 808 trend was championed by Mannie Fresh. Mannie Fresh has continued to use the 808 almost exclusively throughout his career.

The drum beat features a four note syncopated kick drum pattern with the backbeat emphasized by snare drum hits. The rhythm puts a natural emphasis on the fourth beat of the measure, recalling second line drum core and early New Orleans jazz. The dotted eighth, sixteenth note figure in the kick drum, when combined with the offbeat of beat three and the snare hit on beat four, complete this analogy when understood as derivative of a 3-2 clave, or rumba clave pattern (see fig. 1.2.,) an Afro-Cuban construct that was fundamental in both the development of New Orleans second line drumming as well as rap music in all regions.



fig. 1.1: Triggerman drum pattern, “Drag Rap” and “Where Dey At?”

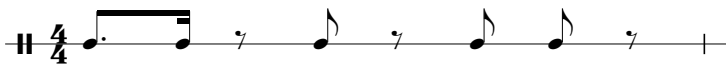


fig. 1.2: Rumba clave

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sets and percussion instruments, creating the illusion that a real musician is playing on the track, while the 808 uses synthesized sounds.



The backing track for “Where Dey At” comprehensively and directly samples the “triggerman” beat from “Drag Rap,” over which Tucker chant-raps in disconnective, non-narrative lines, sometimes calling for party goers to do certain dances, or sometimes just repeating the phrase “the nigga nigga” over and over again until the verse cadences on “the nigga you love to hate.” Miller connects this vocal style to “Afro-Caribbean musical values based on its cellular, rather than linear structure,” and notes that “[MC T. Tucker’s] extemporaneous performance shows the influence of a groove-centered New Orleans musical sensibility, a collective fascination with the ‘endless repetition of short motif’ that can be traced back through the twentieth-century and beyond.”<sup>31</sup> This cellular, non-linear approach to vocals was central to the aesthetic of the music and remains a definitive element of modern bounce music, particularly in hooks and choruses. Moreover, it is also one of most definitive characteristics of Southern rap music and the Dirty South style in general.

As the bounce genre expanded through the mid-nineties, much of its musical aesthetic remained. DJs continued to sample the “triggerman” beat, sometimes recreating its elements using different drum machine sounds and programs. The most dramatic stylistic alteration to the original bounce style was to vocal delivery. Many critics and amateur scholars have referred to the developments of the mid-nineties New Orleans hip hop scene as “gangsta-bounce,” a new sub-style brought on by a younger generation of MCs who were more in touch with the vocal and lyrical sensibilities of gangsta rap on the broader national hip hop scene.

Vocals in early bounce had largely been comprised of a “string of shorter, chant-friendly phrases, hooks or choruses that lend themselves to call-and-response participation.”<sup>32</sup> Just as in “Where Dey At” and “Buck Jump Time,” this style spoke significantly to the functionality of the

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<sup>31</sup> Miller, 82. Miller quotes Chadwick Hanson extensively.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 90.

music; Sarig refers to the “social aspect of Southern hip hop,” wherein the DJ’s only job was to motivate dancers and inspire a party.<sup>33</sup> With the development of gangsta-bounce, some artists began to move towards more narrative lyrical content that resulted in a more direct and compelling expression of the realities of life on the streets of New Orleans. As such, the style began to take its first turn towards more modern manifestations of bounce music.

Among the local record labels that produced and released bounce music, Cash Money Records, which was started in 1991 by brothers Ronald and Bryan Williams, was notable for its specific focus on young talent. In 1997, Bryan Williams assembled a quartet of extremely young rappers who were all strongly linked to the emerging gangsta-rap-influenced style of bounce. Christopher Dorsey (later known as “B.G.”), Terius Grey (“Juvenile”), Tab Virgil (“Young Turk”) and Lil Wayne had all signed to the label as teenagers, and had been appearing in solo cameo spots on various Cash Money releases prior to the formation of the new group called the Hot Boys. In 1998, Cash Money officially made its push for national recognition. “The Williams brothers attracted the attention of the major labels and eventually, in 1998, signed a three-year, \$30 million dollar pressing and distribution contract with Universal Records, which provided upfront financing for the label.”<sup>34</sup> Their first big hits were Juvenile’s album *400 Degreez* in 1998, and subsequent releases from the Hot Boys, most notably *Guerilla Warfare* in 1999, which peaked at number five on the national pop charts.

Cash Money Records marketed a style that was undeniably connected to bounce music. This was in large part due to their in-house DJ and producer, Mannie Fresh. Mannie Fresh had been connected with the Williams brothers since they began the label, and produced almost all of the Cash Money releases until he left the label in 2005 for financial reasons. Mannie Fresh’s

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<sup>33</sup> Sarig, xvi.

<sup>34</sup> Foreman, 335.

production style continued to employ a rhythmic aesthetic that evoked the syncopated rhythms of New Orleans second line while incorporating the 808 “triggerman” beat formula. As the Williams brothers and their artists began to gain traction, bounce music started to find a global audience for the first time. By the early 2000s, southern rap held a commanding presence in the national hip hop scene, boasting chart positions and album and ticket sales that were consistently high enough to challenge the dominance of pre-established East Coast/West Coast labels.

### Lil Wayne and Modern Bounce

Along with the release of Juvenile’s album *400 Degreez*, Lil Wayne’s first solo album, *The Block is Hot* (1999), was fundamental in the codification of the Cash Money sound and the initial reception of New Orleans rap on the national scene. The aesthetic was almost singularly influenced by the collaboration with Mannie Fresh, who produced both albums in their entirety.<sup>35</sup> Musically, songs like “Drop it Like it’s Hot” and “The Block is Hot” incorporated backing tracks that relied heavily on the aesthetic of the “triggerman” beat, but that were originally composed by Mannie Fresh. While his use of the Roland-808 lent a similar aesthetic to the new songs, Mannie Fresh was able to modify the original bounce beat, often incorporating highly syncopated snare drum fills that have been analyzed as direct references to second line snare patterns, as well as creative manipulations to the “bones motif.”

The albums that comprise the *Tha Carter* series (sequentially, *Tha Carter*, *Tha Carter II*, *Tha Carter III* and *Tha Carter IV*) have been Lil Wayne’s biggest mainstream successes and represent his most mature and personal work. As such, these albums are the most indicative of both his initially discursive engagement with traditional bounce music as well as his most

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<sup>35</sup> Miller, 130.

experimental manipulation of the style. The following discussion will look at four singles from the first three *Tha Carter* albums, each chosen because of the specificity of their engagement with the stylistic conventions of the bounce tradition.

The 2004 album, *Tha Carter*, was, in a sense, a send off for Mannie Fresh, who produced the album and left Cash Money a year later. From the first beat of “Bring it Back,” the debut single off of *Tha Carter*, Mannie Fresh employs the “triggerman” sound with a clean, deep 808 kick drum sound, and a synthesized hand clap on the back beats that simulates the original high pitched snare drum. The beat itself (see fig.3) is considerably more complex and syncopated than the “Where Dey At” pattern, consisting of a four bar phrase instead of the original one bar repetition (see fig.1.1). The beat four emphasis that connected early bounce music to New Orleans second line drumming occurs only in the fourth beats of measures three and four; the only two backbeats that do not contain any syncopation.

When the song opens, there is a synthesizer line that is in a lower register than the original “xylophone arpeggiation” bones motif, but which builds on the same ascending and descending figure. As the verse begins, however, the synth moves into an upper register and the bones motif is more fully evoked (see fig. 4).



fig.3: “Bring it Back” Drum pattern



fig. 4: “Bring it Back” upper register, compared to original “Bones motif” (see fig. 2)



Interestingly, Fresh also incorporates two separate synthesizer pad sounds which interact, particularly during the second half of Lil Wayne's verses and through the choruses, to subtly recall the *Dragnet* reference from the first half of "Drag Rap."

The hook and choruses of the song also feature Mannie Fresh as a vocal presence. As was frequently the case in early Cash Money releases, Mannie Fresh would sing, rap or chant the vocal hooks and refrains on most songs that he produced. His vocal cues bear a palpable connection to the original vocal style of bounce music. Much in the same fashion that MC T. Tucker commanded his listeners to dance in clubs and at parties where he performed, Fresh makes a call for dancers to "Put ya hands on ya knees and bend ya rump, put ya back in back out do the hump." Lil Wayne's virtuosic verses, marked by his progressive flow and dynamic rhythmic aptitude (discussed further in the next chapter), are bookended by refrains that distinctly recall the cellular, non-linear structure developed by Tucker and other early bounce artists. An interesting juxtaposition of old and new styles can be noted.

In the wake of Mannie Fresh's break from Cash Money, subsequent Lil Wayne releases featured a string of producers who did not have roots in the bounce tradition. The Cash Money style was widely disseminated, however, particularly throughout the south, where the majority of these producers were from. The aesthetic of bounce was therefore well known and understood by these producers, and frequently upheld. Interesting hybrid forms were developed as producers began to negotiate the interaction of their own styles (sometimes connected to other southern scenes) with the Cash Money, Mannie Fresh aesthetic.

In this way, *Tha Carter II* (2005) reflects a broader Dirty South aesthetic as much as it does a traditional New Orleans bounce style. The album represents a new versatility for Lil Wayne, wielding a level of comfort with an increasingly eclectic range of musical styles. The



The second single, “Hustler Musik,” is a significant departure from the bounce aesthetic. Instead of the more conventional synthesizer-heavy compositional technique, the backing track makes every effort to create the illusion that there is a real band playing along with Lil Wayne. While it can be assumed that the song was not recorded with a live band, it is unclear which instruments are programmed synthesizer simulations and which parts were played by live musicians. The horn and string sounds are clearly synthesized. Several layers of guitars, heavily modified with wah-wah effects pedals, have a distinctly authentic sound, however. A variety of keyboard parts including a Hammond B3 organ and Rhodes electric piano were most likely recorded using live instruments, but may have been sampled. Authentic or not, the illusion of live musicians on the track contributes to a decidedly more soul and R&B inspired musical style than old-school New Orleans bounce.

Despite the textural and instrumental disparity, the drum pattern itself is more indicative of early bounce than that of “Fireman” (see fig.6). The kick drum bears slight resemblance to the classic 808 sound and the pattern is a two bar phrase wherein the first bar is exactly the same as the “triggerman” clave pattern, with a sixteenth note pickup beat before the off-beat of beat three. The backbeat is emphasized by a synthesized “cross-stick” sound, meaning that the drumstick is laid across the snare drum with the tip of the stick resting on the head of the drum while the thick end of the stick strikes the rim, resulting in a sharp “crack.”



fig. 6: “Hustler Musik” Drum beat

This sound is consistent with the R&B, soul aesthetic of the song, which borrows the cross-stick technique from jazz drumming. Cross-sticking in jazz is considered a simulation of clave dowels, originally used in Cuban music to beat out clave patterns. The second bar maintains the

same basic rhythm, with a slightly more embellished beat two, articulated by a cross stick snare note on the first and fourth sixteenth notes of the back beat, a rhythmic convention often used in soul and R&B drumming.

The song also features a rare instance in which Lil Wayne sings his own hook. The sung refrain would not be surprising for a West Coast rap artist, but for a New Orleans bounce artist, it would have been unheard of. The chorus' long, linear, melodic phrases go against one the most established characteristics of the genre; the short, cellular, non-linear chanting of hooks and refrains adapted from MC T. Tucker's "Where Dey At" performance. The sung hook and the overt reference to R&B music all present an interesting incarnation of the discursive relationship between different styles of hip hop and popular music, but are not necessarily radical or alarming, considering the close ties that the music has to African American popular music in the 1960s in and outside of New Orleans.

The first two singles off of 2008's *Tha Carter III*, "A Milli" and "Lollipop," reflect a much more radical shift in style. At the same time, both songs engage with the actual rhythms of the "triggerman" beat more directly than any of the previous songs discussed. While many of the songs on *Tha Carter III* continued to use the R&B faux-instrumental style of "Hustler Musik," these singles employed newer, more progressive sampling and programming methods in such a way that reflected a strange, often grotesque manipulation of traditional bounce elements. Ironically, both tracks also spoke significantly to the broader conventions and priorities of Top-40's pop music. Both tracks won Grammy awards in 2009; "Lollipop" won for best rap song and "A Milli" for best rap solo performance. Both went multi-platinum ("A Milli" twice and

“Lollipop” five times) and peaked in the top ten on the *Billboard* hot 100, “Lollipop” spending five consecutive weeks at number one.<sup>36</sup>

“A Milli” is a highly experimental postmodernist deconstruction of the very basic elements of bounce music. There are only six sounds in the whole song, and they are all used sparingly with the exception of the constantly repeating sample of the Tribe Called Quest song “I Left My Wallet in El Segundo (Vampire Mix).” The sample is an extremely short sound bite of the rapper Phife Dog, of Tribe Called Quest, imitating a Jamaican MC speaking in non-distinct syllables, chanting the words “A Milli Milli Milli Bum.” The sound byte is dramatically slowed down (76 b.p.m.) and cut up to make it sound like he is saying “A milli a milli a milli a milli a mil a mil,” and repeated without break for the entirety of the song.

Despite the monotone of Phife Dog’s vocal performance, if the song were sped up to the natural tempo of the sound byte, the three-note sample would resemble the constant sixteenth notes of the bones motif, particularly if laid back over the drumbeat of “A Milli.” A deep Roland-808 kick drum sound replicates the pattern of the “triggerman” beat with an added pickup on the offbeat of beat four (see fig. 7.1). The “triggerman” clave pattern engages with the rhythm of the sample, complementing the phrasing of the sample so that the kick drum notes fall on the “a” of each repeated “a milli” sound byte (see fig. 7.2).



fig. 7.1: “A Milli” drum machine pattern

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<sup>36</sup> Lil Wayne, *Billboard* chart history, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/307264/lil-wayne/chart> (accessed 2/24/13).

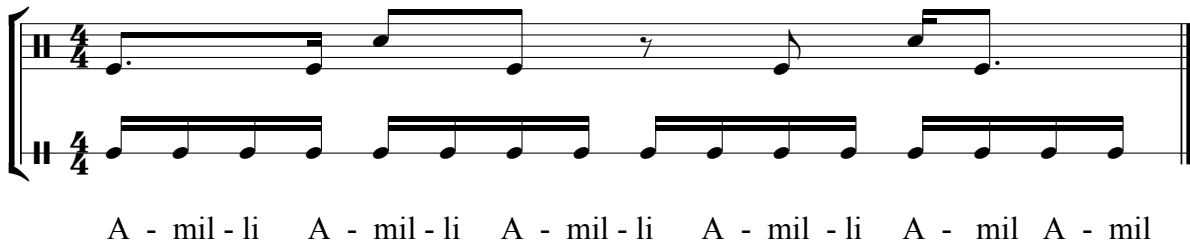


fig. 7.2: “A Milli” sample and drum pattern lined up

The backbeat is emphasized by a synthesized handclap sound instead of the classic snare sound heard in traditional bounce. The song lacks any recurring hook or refrain; instead structure is established every two bars when the handclaps and the kick drum drop out and are replaced by a sharp 808-snare sound that embellishes the original clave pattern.

The song “Lollipop” does not contain such experimental sampling. Instead, what sets “Lollipop” apart from Lil Wayne’s previous musical style is the song’s mega-glossy production value, marked by what is currently the most infamous signifier of mega-pop Top-40s production: the Antares Audio Technologies Auto-Tune audio processor. Originally developed as a post-production tool to fix out-of-tune vocals and pitched instrumentals, the auto-tune’s simple function is the alteration of pitch in recorded music. The processor can be exploited, however, to create a vocal effect that mechanizes the voice, giving it a robotic feel as the singer moves from note to note. Florida R&B singer T-Pain (who appears on the third single off of *Tha Carter III*, “Got Money”) quickly rose to prominence by using the effect on the overwhelming majority of his vocal performances. As the technique caught on, auto-tune became an immense trend in popular music and ultimately a stigmatizing musical gesture, provoking harsh critics who, not surprisingly, labeled it as another sign that the south was killing hip hop.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Jay-Z’s 2009 hit “D.O.A. (Death of Auto-Tune)” called for artists to “get back to rapping, you’re T-Paining too much.”

Like “A Milli,” however, “Lollipop” used this sound to create a new setting of traditional bounce elements. The “bones” motif is again represented at a much slower tempo, but this time in an upper register synthesizer sound that is much truer to the original form (see fig.8).



fig. 8: “Lollipop” upper register, compared to “bones motif” (see fig. 2)



fig. 9: “Lollipop” drum machine pattern

The drum pattern is a two bar phrase with the first verse only slightly embellishing the original “triggerman” beat by adding a sixteenth note on the end of beat two, and a sixteenth note pickup on beat three (see fig.9). The second measure of the phrase is more syncopated, particularly on beat two, but still reflects the clave feel of the original beat. Structure is achieved when solo snare drum fills are added at the end of each four bar phrase. The higher pitched snare figures recall Mannie Fresh’s 808 second line snare fill references.

Most significant, however, is the auto-tuned melodic line that makes up the refrain. Not unlike “Hustler Musik,” Wayne attempts to sing the chorus, this time reinforced by the auto-tune processor, which stabilizes the melody in addition to stylizing the vocal delivery. In this sense, the use of the auto-tune is serving two purposes: both the originally intended function of altering the melodic line of a weak singer to fit the song, and the enactment of the mechanized vocal effect. Moreover, the use of the auto-tune is an overtly stylized gesture of pop-music sensibility.

## Conclusion

Tricia Rose's *Hip Hop Wars* is a study of mainstream hip hop music that directly warns against the destructive nature of millennial commercial rap. Her earlier cited quotation from the text (see note 18, p.14) laments the loss of a fundamental social consciousness in mainstream hip hop, connecting that consciousness to the explicit inspiration of locality and place in hip hop subjectivity. This connection speaks significantly to Matt Miller's discourse on the evolution of bounce music as an exemplar of Southern hip hop, wherein Miller sees New Orleans rap as one instance of a new diversification based on the classic hip hop expression of locality in regional subgenres. While many Southern rappers are significantly implicated in the socio-cultural problems that Rose points to in the body of her text, this expression of place that is so definitive in Southern hip hop is implicit in the local inspiration to which she refers.

In this chapter, I have shown how Lil Wayne's music is an overt expression of his city, enacting gestures of local expressivity through the persistent evocation of specific regional stylistic conventions. While Lil Wayne is a polarizing pop music artist who undoubtedly speaks to Rose's lament of the destructive nature of mainstream hip hop, a small part of what she was lamenting has indeed been regained by the emergence of Southern hip hop into the mainstream, whereby artists like Lil Wayne enact these gestures of locality, often indirectly (although, sometimes directly, as will be shown in the subsequent chapter) promoting the sort of community resuscitation that Rose called for. Moreover, as a result, the diversification of popular rap music is a resuscitation that is not often recognized, but easily disputed when one considers these issues.



## CHAPTER 3

“SO MISUNDERSTOOD BUT WHAT’S THE WORLD WITHOUT ENIGMA”:

### LYRICAL DEXTERITY AND SOCIAL MISCONDUCT

*the last thing I'd ever want to do is make an enemy out of my own brother... But one thing I can't support is this kind of irresponsible music without realizing the implications that it has on our young children, and how their lives are destroyed before they even have a chance to make decisions for themselves.*

- Boyce Watkins on Lil Wayne as an  
“enemy of the black community” (2011)<sup>38</sup>

*Lil Wayne is a rhetorical genius of incredible imaginative powers. That doesn't mean that there is not pathology and dysfunction. That doesn't mean that there are not hostile expressions against women and other vulnerable peoples that need to be articulated and expressed, identified and resisted.*

- Michael Eric Dyson (2012)<sup>39</sup>

In early January 2013, Lil Wayne made a one verse cameo appearance on a song by Atlanta rapper Nayvadius Cash (better known by his stage name, “Future”) called “Karate Chop (remix).” During his verse, Lil Wayne equates a rough sexual act to the brutal slaying of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American whose 1955 torture and murder was a crucial incident in the civil rights movement at the time. The lyric produced a maelstrom of negative

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<sup>38</sup> Clutch Magazine Online, “Boyce Watkins: Lil’ Wayne is ‘An Enemy of the Black Community,’” <http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2011/06/dr-boyce-watkins-lil-wayne-is-an-enemy-of-the-black-community/> (accessed 2/26/13).

<sup>39</sup> Boyce Watkins and Michael Eric Dyson, Brown University Political Theory Project lecture and panel discussion, “Hip Hop: Should Artists be Accountable for Their Words?” [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Political\\_Theory\\_Project/janus/events/lectures/hip\\_hop\\_should\\_artists\\_be\\_accountable\\_for\\_their\\_words](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Political_Theory_Project/janus/events/lectures/hip_hop_should_artists_be_accountable_for_their_words) (accessed 2/26/13).

response from the Till family, as well as The Rev. Jesse Jackson and hip hop critic Boyce Watkins. All parties denounced the lyric, pointing to the destructive potential that the analogy holds for the legacy of Till and others like him. Epic Records immediately apologized to the Till family and pulled the lyric from the song.<sup>40</sup>

Lil Wayne's lyrics usually offend or alienate at least one demographic of the American public. He frequently takes aim at the LGBT community, employs sexist and misogynistic tropes that directly objectify women or, in the case of the Emmett Till controversy, offends his own African American community. In all of these instances, Lil Wayne is representing what Reiland Rebaka sees as the "worst" of his generation. As Rebaka notes, "it is often very difficult to determine whether hip hop is highlighting the ongoing harshness of the African American experience... or simply glorifying the vices and vulgarities of ghetto life and culture."<sup>41</sup>

The Emmett Till lyric represents Lil Wayne's most socially destructive lyrical potential. His blatant disregard for the consequences of his abrasive lyrics border on nihilism. Regardless of this destructive potential, however, he is one of rap music's most rhetorically creative artists, blending complex metaphor and extended word play with a subtle mastery of cadence and rhythmic flow in his delivery. His lyrical structures are indicative of southern hip hop's characteristic cellular, non-narrative style, but when he does employ narrative forms, his lyrics often directly take on a social consciousness that critics like Rebaka idealize.

This chapter examines Lil Wayne's lyricism, looking specifically at the dichotomy of offensive, derisive lyrics and progressive rhetorical creativity. To prompt a discussion of specific lyrical examples, I examine the conflicting opinions of Boyce Watkins and Michael Eric

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<sup>40</sup> David Itzkoff, "Record Label Apologizes for Lil Wayne's Obscene Reference to Emmett Till," New York Times Arts Blog, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/14/record-label-apologizes-for-lil-waynes-obscene-reference-to-emmett-till/> (accessed 4/12/13)

<sup>41</sup> Rebaka, 1.

Dyson, two prominent hip hop scholars who frequently speak and write about Lil Wayne.

Watkins and Dyson recently participated in a panel discussion at Brown University in which they debated their conflicting views about hip hop lyrical subjectivity and artist accountability. In the second section, an examination of specific examples will reveal a complexity in lyrical style that speaks simultaneously to both Watkins' and Dyson's critiques.

### Boyce Watkins and Michael Eric Dyson

On February 23, 2012, Watkins and Dyson spoke at a Brown University panel called "Hip Hop: Should Artists be Accountable for their Words?" The prompt for the debate presented the following question: "With allegations that hip hop affects perceptions of sexism, racism, and glorification of violence, to what extent can or should artists be held accountable for their words and imagery?"<sup>42</sup> The debate that ensued addressed the question of accountability with a specific focus on mainstream, commercial hip hop. Both scholars used Lil Wayne to support their contrasting positions. The two stances on the general subject at hand and the specific comments made about Lil Wayne create an interesting backdrop for the discussion of Lil Wayne's lyrics.

Boyce Watkins, professor of business at Syracuse University, hip hop scholar, and author of the blog "Your Black World," is an unrelenting critic of negative, irresponsible lyrics and images in rap music. He frequently addresses the pervasiveness of violence, criminality, sexism, misogyny, drugs sales and alcohol abuse in hip hop culture. To Watkins, there is a causal

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<sup>42</sup> Reference is made to a lecture and panel discussion that took place at Brown University on 2/23/2012 as part of Brown's Political Theory project. The panel featured Michael Eric Dyson and Boyce Watkins and was called "Hip Hop: Should Artists be Accountable for their Words?" ; "Hip Hop: Should Artists be Accountable for their Words?"; [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Political\\_Theory\\_Project/janus/events/lectures/hip\\_hop\\_should\\_artists\\_be\\_accountable\\_for\\_their\\_words](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Political_Theory_Project/janus/events/lectures/hip_hop_should_artists_be_accountable_for_their_words) (accessed 3/1/13).

relation between the glorification of such vices and the rising trends in concurrent activity and attitudes in African American youth. This direct causal relationship that Watkins perceives provokes a critique of artists seen as role models who should be held accountable for the messages they project. Lil Wayne is his most consistent example; Watkins has repeatedly referred to the artist as an “enemy of the black community.”

In the opening comments of his talk at Brown, he describes Lil Wayne as “the most powerful mega-pastor in America,” accusing him of “preaching the gospel of ignorance and self-destruction.” Watkins outlines this gospel by listing seven lessons that he sees as being ingrained in the minds of young (black) people to whom the music is marketed. These lessons are (paraphrased): 1. Consume drugs and alcohol as much as possible. 2. Always carry a weapon and never be afraid to use it, especially if you're going to kill a black man. 3. Have as much sex as possible. 4. Be ignorant and be proud of it; education is for suckers. 5. Do not save your money. 6. Prison is nothing to be ashamed of; it’s a badge of honor. 7. Never show any respect to women. Watkins sees all of these lessons as explicit in mainstream hip hop lyricism. To him, the messages of these lessons are impossible to disconnect from rising HIV rates, low graduation rates, rising handgun violence and increasing mass incarceration of young black and Latino people. By promoting these lessons, “the good pastor Lil Wayne” has taught the youth of America a precise formula for self-deconstruction.<sup>43</sup>

Michael Eric Dyson, hip hop scholar and sociology professor at Georgetown University makes clear that he does not necessarily disagree with Watkins. He recognizes that the pathological behavior expressed in hip hop music is visibly and unfortunately reflected in the landscape of American society. Dyson agrees that artists should be held more accountable for

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

their actions. He does not, however, recognize a one-to-one causal relation in the same way that Watkins does. Instead, he cites external causes for the declining symptoms of urban youth in America. He points to larger socio-political phenomena, such as the prison-industrial complex and the new Jim Crow, as creating strenuous living conditions that foster a culture of pathological behavior, which leads to higher incarceration rates and drops in educational accomplishment among blacks and Latinos living in urban areas.

Dyson's 2007 book "Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster," addresses such issues in New Orleans specifically, discussing the mishandled distribution of federal aid, the ideological implications of the government's neglect and the ramifications on New Orleans' primarily poor black community that was most affected by Hurricane Katrina. He uses examples like this to show how criminal tendencies of America's urban youth are circumstantial of larger systemic marginalization. In this respect, Lil Wayne is a particularly apt example because of his inextricable connection to the city of New Orleans, where some of the nation's most marginalized and under-privileged urban poor people live. In Dyson's view, solving the sort of systemic problems that create environments like New Orleans' projects and ghettos would ease symptoms of pathology, and the abrasiveness of artists' messages would naturally decline.

Unlike Watkins, Dyson's assessment of Lil Wayne is one that emphasizes the rapper's immense rhetorical facility and creativity. While Lil Wayne is among those mainstream artists who should be held more accountable for his actions, the pervasiveness of the issue reflects larger problems. As he says,

Of course hip hop artists should be accountable for their words. *All* artists should be. Hip hop has garnered incredible controversy because of its hyper-visibility, which is rooted in the suspicion and skepticism in America about the fundamental place and priority of black life to begin with... the status of African American intelligence and humanity in the

face of a culture that has been fundamentally inimical and hostile to black humanity and intelligence, long before hip hop.<sup>44</sup>

Dyson takes issues with the question of the inimicality and hostility towards black intelligence. He sees Lil Wayne not as an enemy to the black community, but an example of the potential of mainstream rap to create provocative art. To him, Lil Wayne is a “rhetorical genius of incredible imaginative powers.” He may be offensive, but the risk of offense is a necessary element of the artistic process. Indeed, “art is not meant to coddle you and make you feel good, sometimes the purpose of art is to make you feel uncomfortable.”<sup>45</sup>

### Birdman and Gangster Rap Lyricism

When Lil Wayne signed to Cash Money Records, he was eleven years old and had essentially been fatherless since the age of two. Bryan “Birdman” Williams, the co-owner of Cash Money Records, took Lil Wayne under his wing and became a professional mentor for the young rapper. Lil Wayne soon began referring to Birdman as a father figure, a gesture that seems to have more to do with renouncing his paternal father than his actual relationship with Birdman, who is essentially his boss. Nevertheless, their close relationship is reflected in some basic influences that the older rapper has had on Lil Wayne. As a rapper, Birdman’s lyricism is simplistic and transparent compared to Lil Wayne’s. He consistently employs a clichéd set of gangster tropes that almost always concern his extreme wealth, his never-ending access to women or his crew’s violent gang activity. If Birdman can claim any stylistic influence over Lil Wayne, it is in these basic tenants of gangster rap lyrical subjectivity that pervade Lil Wayne’s lyricism at all stages of his career.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Lil Wayne makes it clear that his lyrics are completely original, however, and that they come from a source of instinctual creativity, despite Birdman's influence. Freestyle rapping is a technique used by rappers in which nothing is written down or planned out; lines are delivered as spontaneous improvisation. As he has explained in a number of interviews, Lil Wayne makes a point of not over-thinking or over-planning his lyrics; he does not write them down.<sup>46</sup> As Birdman explains, Lil Wayne's writing process is uniquely extemporaneous and requires a level of dexterity that most rappers cannot achieve. "Wayne don't even write, man... I don't know how he do that shit he do."<sup>47</sup> Not all of Lil Wayne's verses are performed completely as freestyle; true freestyle rapping implies that none of the words or phrases are premeditated, which is not always the case for Lil Wayne. The prominence of gangster trope is the result of both Birdman's influence and Lil Wayne's writing process, which avoids complex narrative structures and is driven by extemporary thought processes. Even for an artist with the creative focus of Lil Wayne, what comes to mind first is naturally that which he is most comfortable with, which was, particularly in the early stages of his career, dominated by the Birdman-inspired gangster trope.

The song "BM J.R.," from Lil Wayne's fourth studio album, *Tha Carter*, is a direct reference to his fabricated familial ties with Birdman. The title is an abbreviation of one of Lil Wayne's nicknames, "Birdman junior." In the song, Lil Wayne's verses are framed by short intros and interludes in which Birdman boasts about wealth and power. The juxtaposition of Birdman's spoken/rapped phrases and Lil Wayne's verses exposes the influence of Birdman over

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<sup>46</sup> This issue is discussed in a widely disseminated CBS News interview with Katie Curic; "All Access: Lil Wayne," [http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-503843\\_162-4775952.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-503843_162-4775952.html) (accessed 2/25/13).

<sup>47</sup> Birdman defends Lil Wayne's rapping skills, <http://www.rapbasement.com/baby/021610-cash-money-records-boss-birdman-aka-baby-defends-lil-waynes-writing-skills-watch-here.html> (accessed 2/26/13).

Wayne's early lyrical style, but also serve as an early indication of Lil Wayne's rhetorical versatility, an attribute that Birdman clearly lacks. Birdman's gangster rap influence carries interesting baggage with respect to those views about hip hop lyricism expressed by Dyson and Watkins.

The song begins with Birdman boasting about his ability to achieve power, and the Cash Money's endless greed for women and money.

(Birdman):  
You know what we gon' do huh? what we been doin', ha nigga.  
We gon' load up, get a lot mo, get a lot mo...  
Loadin' up on mo' bitches.  
Then, you know what I'm sayin', we gon' get greedy too nigga,  
I ain't never gettin' full,  
I'm full blooded with this grind.<sup>48</sup>

Subsequent interludes reflect these same sentiments, with variations on wealth-driven braggadocio, sexual activity and the achievement of power by violent force. Lil Wayne's verse begins with a reference to New Orleans as the "murder capital," a term that had recently been used by the rapper Jay-Z, referring to New York City.<sup>49</sup> What follows is a relatively simple verse that consists mainly of warnings from Lil Wayne to his enemies about the dangers of New Orleans streets and what he is capable of if he is opposed.

(Lil Wayne):  
Murder capital, only key to survive is kill.  
If the elements don't murder you the riders will, for real.  
And niggas know I go hard to the fullest,  
Get involved and I got 'em playing dodge-ball wit' bullets.<sup>50</sup>

Although the subject matter of the song lyrics is not particularly creative, he does use some interesting imagery, setting up simple wordplay that hints at the complexity he would develop

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<sup>48</sup> Lil Wayne, "BM J.R.," *Tha Carter* (Cash Money: 2004)

<sup>49</sup> Jay-Z, "Lucifer," *The Black Album* (Roc-A-Fella: 2003).

<sup>50</sup> "BM J.R."



further in the years to come. For example, he denies a role in the drug trade by playing with the term “drug lord” and claiming that he has no religion. In the same line, he extends the wordplay by referencing biblical scripture, asking forgiveness for his enemies, who do not understand who they are dealing with and apologizing to God for having to kill them:

Real shit, I'm ducking bombs from a drug war.  
No religion but the cops swear that I'm a drug lord.  
Father forgive 'em for they know not who they pushin' Lord,  
Father forgive me if I have to send 'em to you Lord.  
I'm just tryin' dodge the shots they send to the God,  
They ridin' up highway to heaven boulevard.<sup>51</sup>

As the first verse ends, Lil Wayne continues to challenge his enemies, but he puts a characteristically playful spin on the ensuing confrontation, shifting swiftly from a line about murdering with an AK-47 assault rifle, “the A and the K will make your face crook to the side,” to a sarcastic line that refers to his enemies as different flavors of pie, and ultimately referencing the common street-slang euphemism of a gun represented as a biscuit:

...and when we hungry, you look like pie;  
Sweet potato-ass nigga you lemon merengue, apple custard  
Cherry jelly. Don't make me get the biscuit busta...<sup>52</sup>

This line, like the previous line that evokes scripture, is indicative of one of his most common tactics; rhetorically equating violence with implicitly non-violent subject matter. This is a tactic common for many hip hop artists. Lil Wayne is a master of injecting abrasive discourse with ironic, even parodic tones by linking together such disparate imagery.

This rhetorical linkage between the drug trade and sacred texts or gun violence and lighthearted food imagery speaks directly to Watkins' comments about the mishandling of such

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

vices in rap lyrics. While the lines about drug trade and religion reveal that Lil Wayne denies involvement in the selling of drugs (a claim that he moves back and forth on throughout his career), they do represent an ideological stance that gun violence is forgivable, and even necessary. The opening lines of the verse deliver this message directly; in the murder capitol, where “the only key to survive is kill,” murder is an absolute necessity of life. Similarly, the use of the biscuit euphemism and the satirical comparison of his victims to pie flavors clearly makes light of the act of murder in such a way that would have Watkins wondering whether his humor is in fact simply glorifying gun use.

While Lil Wayne’s later works more acutely reflect the rhetorical genius that Michael Eric Dyson speaks about, these earlier examples do show signs of a tendency towards wordplay. Moreover, these verses speak to Dyson’s conception of hip hop as an expression of urban lifestyle. What Dyson sees as the idealized hip hop is a music that gives voice to marginalized black youth.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps the most pervasive gesture in the lyrics of “BM J.R.” is the reference to New Orleans and the expression of the dangers of living there. That Lil Wayne implicates himself as a murderer may be seen as a poor choice with respect to his “role model” status in popular culture, but his discussion of the necessity of murder to survive can also be read as a poignant description of the hard truths of living in New Orleans. In this respect, despite the fact that the song glorifies gun use and offers implicit ideological exoneration for murderers, there is a sense that Lil Wayne is speaking about life in New Orleans and the struggles of living there in such a way that gives voice to the poor black community coping with life in “the murder capitol.”

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<sup>53</sup> Michael Eric Dyson and Boyce Watkins, Brown University.

In the first chapter of her book *The Hip Hop Wars*, entitled, “Hip Hop Causes Violence,” Tricia Rose discusses the politics of “artists who have adopted gangsta personas” and the “fiction of full-time autobiography in hip hop... (which) has been exaggerated and distorted by a powerful history of racial images of black men as ‘naturally’ violent and criminal.”<sup>54</sup> Rose suggests discourse about authenticity that highlights the expression of hardship which Dyson values.<sup>55</sup> Lil Wayne’s allegiance to Hollygrove is the seminal construct of his identity as a legitimate gangster. Lyrics like those in “BM J.R.” corroborate his claim of authenticity, but as Rose points out, they are an overt exaggeration that has powerfully subversive ramifications for the African American culture he represents.

This dichotomy of authenticity and exaggeration of lifestyle is a pervasive balancing act in hip hop subjectivity. The fact that Lil Wayne’s lyrics are so influenced by Birdman’s gangster rap subject matter at this early stage calls into question the authenticity of his own “autobiography,” but this does not preclude the poignancy (however sarcastically or ironically delivered) of his expression of the hardships of life in New Orleans. As both Dyson and Rose point out, violent imagery and the glorification of guns pervade popular culture at all levels, not just in rap music. In rap music, artists are given the platform to speak “openly and in depth about... the grip that street culture has on many young people.”<sup>56</sup> Lil Wayne undoubtedly does this; the question is whether the tone and demeanor of his delivery compromise the value of his message.

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<sup>54</sup> Rose, 38.

<sup>55</sup> The implications of the imagery that Rose discusses are examined in chapter four of this document.

<sup>56</sup> Rose, 135.

“Tie My Hands,” gangster consciousness

Most of the material on Lil Wayne’s first four albums reflects a similar lyricism to that of “BM J.R.” He articulates a simplistic set of gangster rap tropes that revolve around violence, misogyny, sexism and the drug trade in relatively simple rhetorical terms. While the 2005 album *Tha Carter II* is considered by most critics to have been his breakthrough album, 2008’s *Tha Carter III* and 2011’s *Tha Carter IV* both represent his most significant departure from this early, simpler lyrical style. *Tha Carter III*, Lil Wayne’s most critically acclaimed and best-selling album, debuted at number one on the *Billboard* 200 with over a million sales in its first week. The album was certified triple platinum, with over 3.6 million copies sold in the United States.<sup>57</sup> *Tha Carter IV* sold equally well, but received less critical acclaim, producing no number one hits.

Both albums boast some of Lil Wayne’s most advanced lyrics; the rhetorical facility that Dyson points out is on full display. While the lyrical structures that he employs generally maintain the cellular, non-linear and non-narrative forms of his earlier work, the more intricate use of extended metaphor and wordplay lends a particular complexity to the flow of meaning in his verses. Although the lyrical subject matter of *Tha Carter III* and *IV* still largely pertains to the gangster tropes that defined his early work, some songs engage with more complex issues, dealing directly with government policies that Lil Wayne takes issue with and personal problems that he has had to endure as a result. While this developing complexity in subject matter combats Watkins’ critiques, the negotiation of this subject matter through more interesting and creative rhetorical gestures reveal a more advanced lyrical style.

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<sup>57</sup> Lil Wayne, *Billboard* chart history, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/307264/lil-wayne/chart> (accessed 2/24/13).

*Tha Carter III* was Lil Wayne's first album released after Hurricane Katrina. The seventeenth-ward neighborhood that he grew up in sustained severely destructive storm damage. Many of Lil Wayne's family and friends were forced through some of the harshest realities of post-Katrina disaster relief. On *Tha Carter III*, Lil Wayne frequently makes reference to the hurricane and the devastating impact it had on his community. Specifically, a number references on the album serve to outline Lil Wayne's disgust with the Bush administration. The song "Tie My Hands" is a direct reference to Bush's reluctance to send help to New Orleans. Addressing the poor black communities in New Orleans that were devastated and marginalized by the slow response of the government, the song sends a message of hope and positivity despite what they endured at the hands of the government.

The hook of the song, sung by pop singer and producer Robin Thicke, speaks to the administration's oppression of those who were unable to fend for themselves in the wake of the storm. The song essentially blames the government, in its neglect, for the suffering that ensued. "You tie my hands what am I gonna be? What have I done so bad, what is my destiny?"<sup>58</sup> The imagery of tied hands specifically evokes the feeling that the government constricted the people of New Orleans, effectively holding them hostage. The verses directly address what Lil Wayne sees as the administration's lies, identifying the lack of support and relief as compromising the implicit ideological freedoms of the American experience. Once the storm hit, the poor people of New Orleans who could not afford transport to leave the city became prisoners, "but they talked that freedom at us, and didn't even leave a ladder." In the final verse, Lil Wayne speaks directly to the people of New Orleans, offering a hopeful message of perseverance in the wake of disaster, holding himself and his success up as an example.

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<sup>58</sup> Lil Wayne, "Tie My Hands," *Tha Carter III* (Cash Money 2008)

This final message in “Tie My Hands” might be the best example in all of Lil Wayne’s music of the sort of idealized, utopian lyricism that scholars like Watkins and Reiland Rebaka seek from mainstream hip hop artists.

And if you come from under that water, then there's fresh air.  
Just breath baby, God's got a blessing to spare.  
Yes I know the process is so much stress,  
But it's the progress that feels the best.  
Cause I came from the projects straight to success, and you're next.  
So try they can't steal your pride it's inside  
Then find it and keep on grinding  
Cause in every dark cloud there's a silver lining, I know.<sup>59</sup>

The song represents Lil Wayne’s most distinct departure from gangster rap lyricism, expanding his lyrical subjectivity to incorporate distinct social consciousness. Not only does “Tie My Hands” reflect a very specific consciousness that calls actual government bureaucracy and policy into question, it also offers a distinct counter-message of hope and transcendence to poor black people who were marginalized by the government. In this way, Lil Wayne shows his versatility with his ability to employ a diverse array of subjects, simultaneously reflecting the positive potential that both Watkins and Dyson see in hip hop music.

In the final chapter of *Hip Hop Wars*, Tricia Rose presents “Six Guiding Principles for Progressive Creativity, Consumption, and Community in Hip Hop and Beyond.” Her final principle is “Don’t Settle for Affirmative Love Alone; Demand and Give Transformational Love.” The behavior of the Bush administration in the wake of Hurricane Katrina is a poignant example of what Rose sees as a “fundamental disaffirmation, the denial of African humanity,” which calls for such transformational love.<sup>60</sup> This speaks significantly to the manner in which Lil Wayne approaches the issue in “Tie My Hands.” Moreover, the value of the final verse is in

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Rose, 270.

its evocation of this fundamental principle of Rose's; the genuine tone of uplift in the face of disaster that Lil Wayne offers to the poor people of New Orleans is intended to be a transformational gesture of love for his community. One of the fundamental purposes of this document is to reveal those elements of Lil Wayne's music and identity that complicate the reductive view of him as simply a destructive force in hip hop culture. The idea that a song like "Tie My hands" might foster community uplift and transformational love certainly serves this purpose.

Of course, one song in which Lil Wayne raps about a socio-political circumstance does not belie the racially derisive, sexually subversive and violently negative imagery found in scores of his other songs. While other songs invoke confrontation with the government over the hurricane, songs like "A Milli," "Lollipop," "Got Money" and others from *Tha Carter III* all revert back to the same gangster subjectivity of Lil Wayne's earlier years, and are considerably more prevalent.<sup>61</sup> The more widespread complication to the view of Lil Wayne as a transparent or obtuse cultural figure is his continually developing rhetorical facility and creativity. Dyson points out that it is this characteristic that significantly challenges the inimical view of intelligence and humanity in African American art.

"6 Foot, 7 Foot," poetic braggadocio and absurdist metaphor.

On October 22, 2009, Lil Wayne pleaded guilty to charges of criminal possession of a weapon and possession of marijuana. On March 8, 2010, he was sentenced to a year in prison, which he served on Riker's Island, New York City's largest jail facility. Although considerable

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<sup>61</sup> While not an official release, the song *Georgia Bush*, off of the mixtape "Dedication 2," features an even more pointed response to the Bush administration, referencing friends of Lil Wayne's who died in the storm and linking the attitude of the administration with racist ideology.

work had already begun towards material for *Tha Carter IV*, the record label decided that the album would be rerecorded with new material after Lil Wayne was released from jail. On November 4, after serving eight months at Rikers Island, Lil Wayne was released and immediately began work on the album.

The first single off of *Tha Carter IV*, entitled “6 Foot, 7 Foot,” employed a beat by Shondrae Crawford (also known as “Bangladesh”). Bangladesh previously wrote the beat for the song “A Milli,” the first single off of *Tha Carter III*. The backing track for “6 Foot, 7 Foot” features the same peculiar sampling style that Bangladesh used in “A Milli.” Prerecorded vocal lines are sampled, cut up into short, non-distinct syllabic cells and then looped incessantly, creating a highly repetitive chant-like track that is integral to the song’s rhythmic pattern. These repetitive vocal samples combine with the cellular lyrical structures and virtuosic rhythmic dexterity of Lil Wayne’s rapping to create a remarkably thick texture that speaks to the bounce tradition, discussed in chapter two, in interesting and discursive ways.

The non-narrative, disconnective phrasing of Lil Wayne’s lyrical style lends itself to straightforward, non-complex messages that usually rely heavily on gangster tropes. While these gangster tropes remain, the challenge that Lil Wayne meets in “6 Foot, 7 Foot,” is the maintenance of complex strains of meaning through multiple metaphorical signifiers. The concept of narrative in the song is deconstructed; each line seems to be only a fragment of a thought. Most of the lyrical phrases span one or two four beat measures, and almost every successive phrase is unrelated in subject matter to the one before it. The first two lines of the song, for example, “Excuse my charisma, vodka with a spritzer / swagger down-pat, call my shit Patricia,” are composed of four short fragments that maintain no consistent line of thought. In



this way, Lil Wayne's vocals frequently uphold the cellular, non-linear vocals of traditional bounce music.

Each line of Lil Wayne's verse is a truncated thought, a short cell, similar to the lyrical structures of early New Orleans MCs like T.T. Tucker. While the structure of Lil Wayne's lyrics recall Tucker's non-narrative style, they preclude the element of chant-like repetition that was fundamental to his sound and to that of most early New Orleans rappers (Tucker's "Shake that ass like a salt-shaker," or "Tha nigga nigga" lines from "Where Dey At," for example).<sup>62</sup> Indeed, in Lil Wayne's stream of consciousness lyrical style, most successive lines represent a completely new line of thought; no ideas (much less specific phrases) are repeated. Repetition is instead manifested in the texture of Bangladesh's programmed samples, creating a provocative reconstruction of the vocal style of early bounce music through the combination of backing track and vocal performance.

"6 Foot, 7 Foot" is particularly indicative of the rhetorical facility that Dyson sees as fundamental in Lil Wayne's craft. Indeed, Lil Wayne often explicitly references his own intelligence and the challenging nature of his lyricism:

... So misunderstood, but what's the world without enigma?  
... mind so sharp I fuck around and cut my head off.  
... I think you standin' under me if you don't understand me.

Lil Wayne is putting an interesting spin on the arrogant braggadocio that is such a pervasive element of hip hop lyricism. Where most rappers devote large portions of their lyrics to arrogant claims of wealth, sexual activity and gang violence, Lil Wayne is instead boasting about his superior intelligence and the complexity of his message.

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<sup>62</sup> See discussion of MC T.T. Tucker's "Where Dey At" in chapter two.

Wealth, sexual prowess and violent behavior have long been the subjects of boastfulness in rap music. Birdman's short interludes in "BM J.R." are excellent examples of this kind of braggadocio. This is also one of the most transparent gestures of the glorification of pathological behavior with which Watkins takes issue. To Watkins, when Birdman brags about getting women or spending money, he directly incites a concurrent desire in young people to imitate his actions. Dyson points out the ironic truth that while a small elite subsection of artists (Lil Wayne included) have achieved staggering levels of career and financial success, much of this braggadocio is overt exaggeration, leaving young rap fans longing to emulate an unrealistic, unattainable wealth.<sup>63</sup> In these lines, however, Lil Wayne's braggadocio concerns his intelligence, the sharpness of his mind and his intellectual dominance. If boasts of money, sex and power incite pathology in young listeners, what is the result when those boasts are replaced with arrogant claims of intellect and brainpower? The fourth lesson of Watkins' "gospel of Lil Wayne," regarding ignorance and education, is undeniably called into question.

Of course, this is only one side of the increasingly complex matter. Lil Wayne's boastfulness is frequently not tethered to intelligence, and a different kind of boastfulness in the same verse raises questions of ignorance with respect to other issues:

Two bitches at the same time, synchronized swimmers.  
Got the girl twisted cause she open' when you twist her.  
Never met the bitch, but I fuck her like I missed her.

These lines clearly boast the successes of Lil Wayne's sexual conquest and his skill at arousing his sexual partners. "Synchronized swimmers" is used as a metaphor for multiple women with whom Lil Wayne is simultaneously engaging in sexual intercourse. The line, "she open when you twist her" equates the arousal of one of his partners with the opening of a twist-off bottle

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Eric Dyson and Boyce Watkins, Brown University.

cap. Watkins' final lesson in the gospel of Lil Wayne, regarding the overt denial of respect for women, is even more poignantly enacted than the question of intellect in the previous lines.

The song also contains some of his most complex examples of extended metaphor. The longest lyrical phrase in the first verse weaves together multiple metaphors and employs one of his more pervasive rhetorical devices, creating comparisons that use literal meanings of figures of speech or the personification of abstract concepts. In this case, he personifies life, death, sleep, Father Time and Mother Nature, cynically turning two different figures of speech against each other and ultimately making a claim of his own otherworldliness.

Life is the bitch, and death is her sister  
Sleep is the cousin, what a fuckin' family picture  
You know Father Time, and we all know Mother Nature  
It's all in the family, but I am of no relation.

To Lil Wayne, life is a bitch, but no better than her sister, death. If sleep is the cousin of death, the whole family is undesirable (the feminization of all three as negative concepts is a notably misogynistic gesture). If Father Time and Mother Nature are the parents of all three, Lil Wayne is not related; he is of another world.

He employs this device again in the second verse, making a play on the phrase "paper chasing," a hip hop figure of speech that refers to the pursuit of money and power: "paper chasin', tell that paper, 'Look, I'm right behind ya.'" Lil Wayne personifies the money, pretending to speak to it as if he were literally chasing it. The next line is another playful food reference, not unlike the pie and biscuit line from "BM J.R." He makes a play on the term "real G," which stands for "real gangster" (a derivative of OG, a hip hop title meaning "original gangster"). "Bitch, real G's move in silence like lasagna." The idea is that a "real" or authentic gangster moves silently when he is committing a crime; silently, like the g in the word lasagna.

Many of these examples reveal an element of absurdity in Lil Wayne's lyrics. The equation of murder victims with pie flavors in the earlier example conjures a sense of playfulness in the depiction of murder. By contrast, the equation of the intricate movements of a "real G," a dignified distinction in ghetto street culture, with the silence of the letter g in the word lasagna is an absurd image that almost seems to parody or even mock the concept of the "real G." Where most rappers seek to create discourses that might prove their own status as real gangsters by unfolding intricate autobiographies about killings and drug deals, Lil Wayne seeks to weave a discourse of rhetorical irony that jokingly engages with the idea of the real gangster, or other gangster tropes.

### Conclusion

Where does this leave Emmitt Till? It seems, at times, that Lil Wayne's lyrical project is more attuned to the rhetorical technique of delivery than the actual subject matter of his messages. While he frequently achieves his likely goal of rapping in an ever-increasingly intricate and virtuosic manner, he often seems to do so with a level of disregard for the actual meaning of his messages, and the ramifications for the community that receives those messages. The Till analogy is an evocative example of Lil Wayne's relationship with his lyrical content and its message. The line is constructed under the auspices of several of the lyrical concepts and gestures discussed in this chapter: most notably, the stream of consciousness of freestyle rapping and the unfortunately playful equation of disparate images of contrasting socio-cultural and political gravity. It would appear as if Lil Wayne is unconcerned by the prospect of offending anyone, not even the fundamental legacy of African American struggle against racism. This undeniably reveals an undercurrent of hypocrisy in those brief moments, such as "Tie My

Hands,” in which he attempts to directly address the socio-political marginalization of his people and foster progressive community growth.

As Dyson points out, however, inoffensive and unobjectionable subject matter is not and should not be a requirement of great art. Lil Wayne’s Emmitt Till lyric has been publically regarded as disgusting and offensive; it is a poignant example of the rapper choosing to act with blatant disregard for the people whom his actions affect. The analogy has destructive implications for the legacy of Emmitt Till, and therefore, the civil rights movement at large. But Lil Wayne remains an artist who is unchallenged by objections to his craft. While the Emmitt Till lyric was removed from Future’s album, Lil Wayne released no statement of apology, he was clearly unconcerned by the controversy. He just does not seem to care what people think. Incidents like these may alienate Lil Wayne beyond the potential for open-minded conversation about his craft, and perhaps rightly so. Nevertheless, it is clear that he will continue to hone his rhetorical craft and wield it in his own innovative style, regardless of the unfortunate ramifications for his community.

## CHAPTER 4

“I’M A GANGSTA, I AIN’T S’POSED TO BE ON TV”:

### THE GENDERED PERFORMANCE OF RACE IN SOUTHERN HIP HOP

*Gender, race and class are not autonomous or even merely intersecting categories. Instead, these identities continually and mutually construct each other, becoming interdependently defined.*

- Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 2004.<sup>64</sup>

*Every movement of black liberation in this society, whether reformist or radical, has had to formulate a counter-hegemonic discourse of the body to effectively resist white supremacy.*

- bell hooks, “Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic,” 1994.<sup>65</sup>

Lil Wayne is a purveyor of some of the most polarizing representations of black masculinity in popular music. His performance of gender is filled with signifiers of hip hop hyper-masculinity. By and large, these signifiers are performed tropes that underscore the subjectivity of white racism in America. These are enacted in intriguing ways, however. Different forms of gender representation are juxtaposed and an over-arching visual counter-narrative is established in which Lil Wayne is portrayed as an oppositional force to systems of authoritative power. Issues of hypersexual representation via female objectification and fetishized male bodies cross paths constantly with images of criminality, violence and aggression. The relationships between these various gestures of masculine representation are

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<sup>64</sup> Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 118.

<sup>65</sup> bell hooks, “Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic,” in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 127.

apparent in the music videos for the songs “Get Something,” “Go DJ,” and “Got Money.” This chapter will examine these videos and discuss the diversity of ways in which Lil Wayne constructs black masculinity through performance and narrative.

### Power and Masculinity

Lil Wayne’s representation of gender in these three videos is complex in its evocation of multiple sources of power from which he gains his masculine subjectivity. Often, these sources use conventional signifiers of race that are steeped in sexism.<sup>66</sup> First, the ubiquitous objectification of women, scantily clad and prominently on display, has long been a signifier of masculine power, and is almost constantly present in Lil Wayne’s videos. As Diane Railton and Paul Watson explain, the voyeuristic gaze upon the hyper-sexualized female body can be seen as a displacement of invisible male sexual physicality onto visibly present female bodies. This is characteristically amplified by the dress of the performers – male rappers wearing baggy clothes that hide the physical form, while women wear tight, revealing clothing.<sup>67</sup>

Second, Lil Wayne’s own physique, in a skintight “wife beater” or shirtless, is often displayed employing a similarly voyeuristic approach. In cases such as this, the subject becomes “blackness and the black male body as site of erotic fantasy.”<sup>68</sup> The voyeuristic gaze upon the black male is undeniably driven by the fear of and fascination with the “otherness” of black sexuality.<sup>69</sup> To this end, Lil Wayne is an extreme case. Many stereotyped visual signifiers of black masculinity as a manifestation of ghetto street life are present: tattoos, gold chains and

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<sup>66</sup> Imani Perry, “Who(se) Am I? The Identity and Image of Women in Hip hop,” in *Gender, Race and Class in Media*, ed. Gail Dines, Jean Humez (Sage Publications, 2002).

<sup>67</sup> Railton and Watson, 129, 130.

<sup>68</sup> Railton and Watson, 127.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

baggy clothes; he literally has diamonds instead of teeth. Every visual element of hip hop culture purported to signify the otherness of the black male image is present and pushed to the limits. Lil Wayne flaunts these signifiers and draws distinct power from the evocation of both fear and fetish.

The videos are made more intriguing in their juxtaposition of both male and female sexualized bodies. These images can be considered conflicting in their representational motivation. The dichotomies of hidden and exposed male bodies and simultaneously fetishized male and female physical sexuality represent an approach to gender representation that is not fixed or overly simplistic. While the female is undoubtedly objectified, both bodies are at times subject to the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator, and both bodies often engage with one another. As such, the construction of masculinity seems to be fluid in its diversity of enactments, which call on varying degrees of power or subjugation. This is not entirely progressive in nature, however. All of these gestures are in fact enacted in the context of masculine privilege, and as such, Lil Wayne's construction of gender is relatively static, always relying on power drawn from some sort of specifiable privilege held over another.

Moreover, the fetishization of the black male body, that which contextualizes blackness as "different, excessive, other," also drives the third and most sophisticated source of power in Lil Wayne's videos: the existence of visual narratives wherein power structures such as the American penal system, law enforcement and government bureaucracy are mocked and overturned for the sake of marginalized people. Lil Wayne enacts a counter-hegemonic discourse via his representation of race and gender that has come to be understood as fundamental in African American culture, as indicated in the opening quote by bell hooks. Herein, a discourse on the nature of black masculinity as derivative of white nineteenth-century



conceptions of blackness in popular culture becomes central to the discussion as we are faced with the subjectivity of the black male as being defined as “hard” and “real,” to use Miles White’s terminology.<sup>70</sup> The violence, aggression and criminality that characterizes the classic “black brute” character becomes the driving force behind Lil Wayne’s ability to topple systems of authority as these three sources of power come together to contribute to the complex identity construct of Lil Wayne’s image as projected in music video.

### “Get Something”

The video for “Get Something” is comprised almost completely of staged performance. It lacks a consistently developed narrative, with one short but significant exception. What is most visually palpable in the video is the constant manipulation of the scopophilic gaze upon sexed bodies. From the outset, we have a decidedly derisive, objectifying representation of women, around which masculine subjectivity is immediately built. In the opening frames, Lil Wayne and his producer Mannie Fresh are shown sitting on top of a building, high above a dancer in a short white dress. Not only are we seeing the men spatially situated above the outnumbered woman, but they are also showering her in dollar bills emblazoned with Lil Wayne’s face. Immediately, the visual focus is on the female dancer and her subjugation at the hands of the male rappers.

One of the major projects undertaken in Laura Mulvey’s article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” is to define and explore “the voyeuristic-scopophilic look ... (as) a crucial part of traditional filmic pleasure.”<sup>71</sup> This voyeurism is fundamental to the idea of the gaze,

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<sup>70</sup> Miles White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 63.

<sup>71</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no.3 (Autumn 1975), 17.

wherein woman is seen “as image, (and) man as bearer of the look.”<sup>72</sup> That the scopophilic gaze is highly indicative of the pervasiveness of pornographic, strip club culture in America is undeniable, particularly with the image of the dancer being showered by money (an apt example of the concept behind the phrase “make it rain”). With this opening shot, the gaze is plainly set up, as is a clear application of hierarchical hegemony. The male rappers immediately claim power via their physical placement above the female dancer, their excess of money and moreover, the simple fact that they are relaxing, watching the dancer while she works. This is a clear example of what Railton and Watson would see as “black women’s bodies put on display for the (black) male gaze.”<sup>73</sup> As spectators, we take on their point of view as our own, and spend the remainder of the video gazing at the dancers.

Later in the video, a somewhat cohesive narrative is established. Lil Wayne is hanging out on the front steps of a house in Hollygrove with various members of his “Young Money Millionaires” crew.<sup>74</sup> The group’s identity as Young Money members is signified by the logo on their jump suits – a play on the New York Yankees logo, made famous in the hip hop world by Brooklyn rapper Jay-Z, with whom Lil Wayne has often exchanged lyrical hostility.<sup>75</sup> By altering the iconic New York logo, it seems that Lil Wayne is enacting what is often referred to as a “third coast” confrontation; the archetypal East Coast versus West Coast polarity of rap music has traditionally subjugated southern hip hop. The power of these hitherto dominant rap

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> Railton and Watson, 129.

<sup>74</sup> Many of the characters in Lil Wayne’s videos are played by other Young Money or Cash Money artists, business partners, bodyguards or friends. This is the basis for a rappers “crew,” which in this case is termed “Cash Money Millionaires.”

<sup>75</sup> The New York Yankees logo is, of course, autonomously famous without Jay-Z. This reference is to Jay-Z’s lyric in the recent hit song “New York State of Mind,” wherein he claims “I made a Yankee hat more famous than a Yankee can.” Baseball is considerably less a part of hip hop culture than other sports, and the Yankees logo has indeed become emblematic of Jay’s New York identity within the hip hop world.

forces had already been challenged by the moderate success of No Limit and Cash Money Records in the nineties. With the emerging position of the Dirty South as a “third coast” in the battle for hip hop dominance, every Lil Wayne release has challenged the rap establishment more and more.

These Young Money logos are an enactment of a thoroughly masculine regional confrontation, but a more physical gesture is also at play through the matching, bulky jump suits. While the Young Money crew is hanging out, they are apprehended by a squad of scantily clad policewomen dressed in what appear to be sexy police Halloween costumes; black hot pants and tight fitting, low cut police shirts with bare midriffs. Herein, the gaze set upon the female body is in full effect, and thoroughly amplified by Lil Wayne’s ultra-baggy Young Money outfit. As previously noted, the visual objectification of women is often enacted via the displacement of invisible male sexuality onto a visible female body, the male covered up by oversized clothing and the female on display, often wearing little or nothing at all.<sup>76</sup> This polarity of representation is central to the claiming of power that allows Lil Wayne to display his masculinity, based in his ability to direct our attention towards the hyper-sexed female body in lieu of his own.

Railton and Watson discuss the music video for the 2000 song “Untitled,” by neo-soul singer D’Angelo, at length as an example of how performers achieve a specific masculine subjectivity without the visual objectification of women. The video is one continuous shot of D’Angelo in staged performance against a neutral grey backdrop. The camera rotates around the singer, focusing on different physical features as he stands in one place and sings. The shot widens to a full visual of the artist’s ultra-defined musculature, his torso is shot from the upper part of his pelvis up. The focus of the video is clearly D’Angelo’s impressive physique and his

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<sup>76</sup> Railton and Watson, 129,130.

masculine desirability. Through the visual images of the singer, the video's subject is established as the fantasized eroticism of blackness and the black male body, not the artist specifically. Performances are often framed in this way, constantly drawing the viewer's focus towards the unrevealed penis. Ultimately, the video's focus becomes the "super phallic imago."<sup>77</sup> Clearly, the gaze is constructed as a gender-centralized point of view, or frame of reference from which the view addresses the subject. Just as Mulvey's did, Ann Kaplan's discourse in "Gender Address and the Gaze in MTV" essentially seeks to re-contextualize this address and take it out of the patriarchal contract from which the hegemonic male gaze originates.<sup>78</sup> As such, progressive conceptions of gender representation would look to a more decentralized point of view.

Lil Wayne's videos often enact the same gesture that the D'Angelo video does. The first staged performance in "Get Something" occurs in front of the same building that Lil Wayne and Mannie Fresh sat on at the video's opening. The rappers have descended to the dancer's level, compromising the spatial gap that helped to set up the perspective of the gaze when they were sitting above the dancers, showering them with dollar bills. In this setting, shots of Lil Wayne frequently feature the rapper shirtless and sweaty. Sometimes we see a close-up shot of his face, leaving the spectator to wonder what is hidden below. Other times, we see a full on shot of his highly defined, muscular body. Not unlike D'Angelo (although, admittedly less artistically achieved), there is at times a distinct hyper-sexualization of Lil Wayne's image through the framing of his body, particularly his muscular torso. Herein, a sexualized Lil Wayne becomes

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<sup>77</sup>Robyn Wiegman, "Feminism, 'The Boyz', and Other Matters Regarding the Male," in *Screening the Male*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), 185.

<sup>78</sup>E. Ann Kaplan, "Gender Address and the Gaze in MTV," in *Rocking Around the Clock, Music Television, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture*, (New York: Rutledge, 1988), 89-142.

the subject of gaze instead of the female dancers, the gaze of the audience as well as the gaze of the dancers themselves.

In her article entitled “Who(se) am I? The Identity and Image of Women in Hip Hop,” Imani Perry makes an interesting point about Black American dance, calling it “discursive” in its conversation with other moving bodies, as well as its engagement, particularly in southern hip hop, with the rhythmic qualities of the music.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the movement of the dancers in “Get Something” seems to be a fluid rhythmic engagement with the flow of Lil Wayne’s rapping in the verses as well as the song’s bounce beat. It can be noted that in almost all iterations of dance in bounce settings, the most common feature is the forceful protrusion of the buttocks (appendix B shows three examples of body positioning common in bounce dance styles). The three images shown in the appendix reveal three basic positions; bent over with one hand against a wall (or on the ground), more upright with the arms held outward, or with the knees at a ninety degree angle. Whatever position is held, usually, the buttocks is pushed outward and aggressively shaken or gyrated. The speed and variety of movement indicates the dancers level of talent.

While the video opens with shots of a single female dancer being watched by male rappers, there are a small handful of shots in which Lil Wayne and Mannie Fresh join the dancers in movement. In a similar vein, a later scene shows a couple watching Lil Wayne get arrested on television. As Lil Wayne raps, they get up and begin to dance together. Perry’s theory of discursive dance can be seen as a poignant answer to much of the criticism of the Dirty South style and its emphasis on dance music aesthetic in lieu of complex lyrical subjectivity. Lil Wayne’s lyrics are often complex and sophisticated, debunking many of these critics. In this case, however, the visuals themselves, seen as an enactment of Perry’s notion, underscore the

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<sup>79</sup> Imani Perry, 137.

underappreciated worth of discursive movement through dance in conversation with music and other bodies of the opposite sex. However, it could also be argued that a closer look at the actual dancing reveals that the movements of the male rappers are not always significant or engaging enough to be considered completely discursive with the women. While the spatial gaps and the “make it rain” visual context from the opening shot are compromised, the male rappers’ movements are insignificant. They remain relatively stiff and upright, subtly rocking their shoulders forward and backwards in rhythm with the eighth note pulse of the song.

Regardless, the simultaneous hyper-sexualization of male and female bodies from the earlier sequence, juxtaposed with more traditional images of covered up masculine sexuality, creates a complex system of signifiers, whereas other rap videos that tend to employ more one-sided fetishizations and enactments of the gaze. While the gaze is shifted towards Lil Wayne at times, this does not necessarily achieve the desired outcome of a gender decentralized point of view pointed to by Mulvey or Kaplan. As Railton and Watson point out, “While it is important that there are a range of masculine subject positions made available through popular culture... with very few exceptions, they are constructed and operate within the rigid constraints of a heteronormative discourse.”<sup>80</sup> This “heteronormative discourse” is the masculine-centralized point of view from which the gaze is constructed. Lil Wayne makes himself a spectacle for both the spectator and the dancers, ostensibly giving the dancers the power to view the rapper, as he viewed them in the opening shots. Logically, however, if the objectification of female dancers enacts a power wherein masculine physicality is covered up and displaced, the fetishization of the masculine form itself only serves to further contextualize gender as existing under masculine control.

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<sup>80</sup> Railton and Watson, 125.

### “Go DJ”

Unlike “Get Something,” the video for the song “Go DJ,” the second single from the album *Tha Carter*, maintains a consistent, if simplistic, narrative. The video takes place in a prison where Lil Wayne is incarcerated along with several high profile members of the Cash Money Millionaires. In the opening shots of the video, DJ Mannie Fresh instigates a jailbreak, broadcasting the opening lines of the song over the prison intercom as inmates begin pouring out of their cells. Interestingly, what follows is less a traditional jailbreak than it is a coup. The inmates, once free from captivity, do not flee the prison. Instead they remain, converting various spaces within the grounds into hyper-masculine block party settings. In “Get Something,” the points of masculine subjectivity discussed were built around physical representations of the body. In “Go DJ,” these same gestures are enacted, the visual context specifically encoding them with criminality, hardness and violence.

The prison inmates are all males. As such, women are almost completely deleted from the video with the exception, like “Get Something,” of female police officers. The initial lack of feminine subjects is itself a classic construct of masculine subjectivity in music video. Without the inclusion (or at least with the depletion) of females, it is clear that masculine subjectivity is free from dependence on the female form, unlike the construction of femininity, which is generally depicted in music video as being impossible without some sort of masculine subject.

Interestingly, the polarity of physical representation between male and female form in “Go DJ” is enacted differently than it was in “Get Something.” First of all, the subjectivity of black masculinity is evocatively elided with the subjectivity of criminality through the style of the inmates’ uniforms, modified to fit the codes of hyper-masculine hip hop clothing style,

wherein the male body is hidden. The inmates wear matching black prison outfits, but they are markedly baggier, or in some cases, unbuttoned, revealing “wife-beaters” and bare, muscular chests.

“Get Something” features female police officers who are not so scantily clad as those in “Go DJ.” Initially, they are dressed in legitimate prison guard attire; button up police shirts and long, loose fitting pants. Lil Wayne’s agency over the female form has transformative powers, however. Eventually the guards’ shirts are unbuttoned as they join Lil Wayne in staged performance. Later, several guards accompany Lil Wayne into the prison showers. There are implications of drug use and sexual activity, and one guard emerges stripped of her authority, wearing tight fitting and revealing street clothes and fulfilling the role of “ho” or “bitch” to Lil Wayne’s highly criminalized “pimp.”

Admittedly, there is significantly less sexual objectification of the female form in “Go DJ” than there is in “Get Something.” It would also be incorrect to say that the male body itself is objectified, but it is clear that the scopophilic gaze is fully enacted and directed towards the inmate’s bodies. In Miles White’s book *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity*, the author discusses the broader ideology that drives the fetishized visuals of blackness and masculinity and addresses the idea that many of the stereotypes either enacted by or read into hip hop performance are derivative of traditional stereotypes of blackness which have their roots in white racism of the nineteenth-century. Much of White’s discourse revolves around the idea, or image of “Hard Men” that contribute to “Gangsta culture.”<sup>81</sup> Michael Eric Dyson also addresses this subject in his book *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop.*” Dyson talks about the reductive perspective created when masculinity is derived

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<sup>81</sup> Miles White, 63.



from violence and aggression. He sees this perspective as derivative of long traditions of hypermasculinity in America.<sup>82</sup>

What Railton and Watson talk about as the “otherness” of blackness comes into play as well; it is a certain exoticism that is central to the ideology of white racism in America. Lil Wayne is playing with a complex system of signifiers implicated by the prison setting; the black male body is constructed around violence and aggression, and masculinity is tangibly on display via the same scopophilic gaze addressed earlier. In the context of the prison, however, it simultaneously enacts fear with fetish. An intriguing space is created where the idea of fear as enacted by criminality and violence elides with the previously established fetishization of the male form. The theoretical impetus for these forces are similar. Particularly poignant are the scenes in the video in which the prison ‘yard’ has been converted into a boxing arena. Two inmates are faced off, both shirtless, exhibiting the hyper-sexualized male body. Herein, the otherness of black masculinity is amplified, encoded with a visual element of literal violence and aggression, authenticating those existing elements in the identities of the criminals via the physical act of fighting and the lyric, “Pow! One to the head, now I know he dead.” The aggressive nature of the inmates is on display throughout, however, beginning with the initial shots of them breaking out of their cells with hard, crazed and furious facial expressions.

White and Dyson both discuss the idea of criminality at length, and pose questions about the critical response from within the hip hop community against the propagation of “black brute” stereotypes that are embodied through the representation of black subjectivity as criminal. As White notes, “many young black males no longer challenge the demonizing stereotype of the

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<sup>82</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop*. (New York: Basic Civitas, 2007).

black brute, but instead claim criminal histories as marks of distinction.”<sup>83</sup> The images of black masculinity in “Go DJ” are initially built around the basic matter of fact that the men are in prison because they are convicted criminals. Indeed, one way that Lil Wayne claims his masculine subjectivity is by claiming his own criminality, signified throughout the video by the prison setting, and maintained by the fact that the prisoners, once in control of the prison, do not flee its walls, but instead convert them into a hyper-masculine block party.

### “Got Money”

“Got Money,” the fourth single off *Tha Carter III* is among Lil Wayne’s most successful recordings to date. The single was certified double platinum, and received the Grammy award for best solo Rap performance. The video for the song establishes a particularly cohesive narrative, more so than in the videos for “Get Something” or “Go DJ.” The narrative is essentially a bank robbery, but is bookended by opening and closing scenes that convey what has come to be one of Lil Wayne’s most poignant points of commentary: the reproach of ineffective post-Katrina bureaucracy in New Orleans, particularly FEMA support and the leadership of president George W. Bush. Growing up in the flood prone Hollygrove, Lil Wayne has spoken in a number of interviews about friends and loved ones whom he lost to Hurricane Katrina.<sup>84</sup> His dissatisfaction with bureaucratic response, particularly from president Bush, became a recurring theme throughout his work immediately following the hurricane. Songs like “Georgia Bush,” off the *Dedication 2* mix tape, and “Tie my Hands,” also from *Tha Carter III*, are among a number of songs that directly address the hurricane and lackluster government aid that left many lives in

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<sup>83</sup> White, 71.

<sup>84</sup> The effect of the hurricane on his life is documented in lyrics, but these issues are particularly explored in a number of high profile interviews he has given since Katrina, most well known is his 2009 interview with Katie Kuric on CBS news.

his community badly broken. Interestingly, in the song “Got Money,” an international mega-hit, the lyrics do not convey any socio-political statement; these sentiments are instead created via the visual counter-narrative of the video itself.

Indeed, the lyrics reveal nothing about a bank robbery, and particularly have no connection with any response to post-Katrina community unrest. Instead, the lyrics simply convey a common, clichéd crunk-rap sentiment of wealth-driven braggadocio. To this end, the concept of “making it rain” reappears, evoked directly in the third verse of the song: “Ok, Its Young Lil Wayne on them hos, AKA Mister make it rain on them hos, and everybody say, Mister Rain Man can we have a rainy day...,” and played with earlier in the song: “I make it snow, I make it flurry...,”<sup>85</sup> wordplay replacing rain with snow to reference Lil Wayne’s financial ability to freely dispose of diamonds, tossing them on to the crowd as if they were money.

A counter-narrative to these trite lyrical gestures injects the song with a socio-political consciousness. In this way, Lil Wayne enacts his most complicated representation; the counter-hegemonic gesture, aggressively challenging systems of power and authority. The video complicates and develops the simple idea of obtaining wealth by showing the rapper in a Robin Hood-like role, stealing from a federal bank and giving back to those marginalized by FEMA and the US government. The opening shots of the video show Lil Wayne and members of his crew planning a bank robbery around a pile of newspapers with headlines reading “Bush stays on vacation after Katrina” and “Katrina fraud swamps system.” In this way, while the rapper’s lyrics do not necessarily evoke a specific political or social consciousness, he still connects with

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<sup>85</sup> Lil Wayne, “Got Money” *Tha Carter III*.

the counter-hegemonic gesture and philosophy that is historically at the heart of those hip hop artists who champion complex, poetic, socially conscious lyrical subjectivity.

Lil Wayne wields these counter-hegemonic powers, however, using the same constructs of blackness and masculinity that have already been discussed. Looking at the opening shots of the actual bank robbery, for example, as the action begins to unfold, we are immediately faced with the same manipulations of the scopophilic gaze that have already been addressed. In this case, we once again have Lil Wayne and his female counterparts as the simultaneous subjects of voyeurism. As he storms the bank and jumps up onto the teller's booths, the cameras pan to a shot of the female bank tellers, who are busty and clad in remarkably tight business suit attire (again, like sexy bank teller Halloween costumes). The tellers are initially shocked and afraid, but ultimately gaze upon Lil Wayne with intensely suggestive facial expressions.

Clearly, we are to assume that they are sexually attracted to Lil Wayne based on his physicality, but it is also implied that his status as an object of desire is amplified by his actions. The fetishized criminality of black masculinity is again on full display here. In Lil Wayne's brash ability to take on the powerful American banking and bureaucratic systems with criminal gestures, he becomes all the more masculine and all the more sexually desirable. This is perhaps the rapper's most complex source of power, but a look back at "Get Something" and "Go DJ" show that it is a recurring theme throughout his videos. All three examples create visual counter-narratives in which Lil Wayne is shown as an active foe to systems of authoritative power.

### Recap

When the police arrive in "Get Something," Lil Wayne's crew scatters and it is immediately clear that he is the specific target of the operation. He stands up and apathetically

throws his arms up in the air, willingly giving himself over to the officers. Clearly Lil Wayne is not worried about or intimidated by the prospect of incarceration. Once arrested, the rapper's indifference to the situation is further amplified by his demeanor in the back of the paddy wagon; he is clearly comfortable and continues to rap, eventually joined by the officers, who dance suggestively around him. The reason for Lil Wayne's arrest is explained within the narrative of the video, creating a humorous metaphor for standards of lawfulness and criminality in New Orleans and the black community at large. During a break in the music, a television news anchor covering Lil Wayne's arrest explains that he has been arrested for being "too fly," a gesture of ironic braggadocio that is encoded with sexual desirability and recreational misogyny. Lil Wayne's demeanor fully displays his overall indifference to the authority of the police force. He plays with the idea of law enforcement, ultimately feminizing it and placing it within the parameters of his own masculine power.

"Go DJ" is as poignant an example of Lil Wayne's ability to aggressively take on systems of power as is "Got Money." The jailbreak in and of itself is a literal toppling of authoritative structures. Masculinity constructed around the visual signifiers already discussed sexualizes this counter-hegemonic gesture, and the fact that the inmates remain in the prison after they have freed themselves is a statement about the ostensible "authenticity" of criminality in black masculinity. Like "Get Something," the relationship between female and male roles further places Lil Wayne's response to authority in a gendered space. The use of female police officers as prison guards feminizes the authority that Lil Wayne is challenging. When a female guard makes her transition to become Lil Wayne's "ho," the penal system is literally and metaphorically stripped of its authority, spaces are co-opted, and female guards are transformed for the hyper-masculine needs of the male prisoners.

The final shots of “Got Money” show the end of the bank robbery. Lil Wayne is arrested and being walked out of the bank and into a waiting police car. He is led past a crowd of onlookers, who begin to applaud him, signifying his view of himself as an appreciated source of power for marginalized people. His voice is over-dubbed saying “of course we got caught, but that ain’t the only thing we got,” as a member of his crew (Birdman) turns and walks away from the crowd carrying a tote bag of stolen money. The counter-hegemonic, criminal gesture of the bank robbery is contextualized as a dignified crime in the name of the people. His indifference to arrest in this case is less a mockery or parody of the penal system as in the other videos. In this case, Lil Wayne is prideful; he temporarily accepts the terms of arrest. He knows that although he lost “the battle” of incarceration, he achieved something more significant by making a statement about “the system” and (as is apparent in the shot of the undetected Birdman) successfully getting away with a bag full of the bank’s money.

### Conclusion

From its inception, southern hip hop has been aggressively counter-hegemonic in nature. Like other hip hop subgenres, it often functions as an oppositional force to those systems of authority and power that marginalize black people in America, but also to the hip hop establishment that has fought to marginalize rap artists in the Southern margins of the country. While there are those southern rap artists, Lil Wayne included, who have challenged the establishment with comparable lyrical creativity and talent, the visual identity constructs of many southern rappers have proven at times to be equally as powerful and more frequently employed, for better or worse.

Indeed, the images that contribute to the representation of black masculinity in southern hip hop have become concurrent to the subjectivity of hip hop as a whole in particularly complex and discursive ways. On the surface, Lil Wayne's masculinity is constructed visually by employing a hierarchical system of representation using objectifying images of women and amplified, hyper-sexed images of his own physical form. These gestures of sexist trope are autonomously effective in his representation of masculinity, but they contribute to a more complex construct of masculine power, built around the visual narratives of counter-hegemonic gesture discussed herein. Just as bell hooks suggests, these gestures are employed in what can be seen as a tool of resistance against the policing and containment of black male bodies, both the enactment of white supremacy and the subjugation of southern rap at the hands of East Coast/West Coast rap.

## CHAPTER 5

### OUTRO

#### Holes and Suggestions

My goal in this document has been to reveal gestures of identity construct that disrupt or complicate commonly held biases about Lil Wayne and his cultural project. In doing so, I hope to have spoken simultaneously to similar issues in the broader Southern rap community, whose artists largely bear many of the same representational traits, absorb the same criticisms and negotiate with the national hip hop scene in a similar manner as Lil Wayne. As such, my document is essentially a case study of Lil Wayne as an exemplar of Dirty South hip hop. Naturally, however, this project leaves holes in the broader discourse about Southern hip hop that I seek to enact. Because of his hyper-visibility on the international pop music scene, Lil Wayne bears the burden of representation for the Southern rap genre. Naturally, however, he cannot comprehensively represent all southern rappers.

Indeed, there are subgenres of southern hip hop whom Lil Wayne's musical style and cultural project do not speak to. Atlanta rap groups like Outkast and Goodie Mobb, for example, bear close connections to storytelling and "conscious" styles of old school New York rap that run counter to the conventions of Dirty South hip hop discussed herein. But these groups both uphold a specifiable Southern musical aesthetic. Although Outkast's "Southern-ness" differs significantly from that of New Orleans bounce, or even bounce's Atlanta counterpart, "crunk music," Outkast is still considered to be among the most prominent Dirty South acts. If southern



rap is to be adequately engaged with in the scope of hip hop studies, these dramatic disparities in subgenres will have to be more thoroughly examined than the size and scope of this document have allowed.

Furthermore, there are holes specifically in my case study of Lil Wayne that need to be more thoroughly explored to better engage with the hip hop community. My discourse on Lil Wayne and the representation of masculinity does not engage with one of his most controversial gestures, the overt and abrasive derision of the LGBT community. Widespread homophobia in hip hop music is one of the genre's most alienating facets. Lil Wayne openly embraces his homophobia, frequently attempting to use it as a marker of his masculinity. There is the opportunity for very provocative research to be done that discusses the intersection of current mainstream New Orleans rap and the recent underground phenomenon of "sissy bounce," a highly popular local scene of drag queen bounce artists. Sissy bounce's biggest star, Big Freedia, has recently become a national figure, and has been drawing widespread attention to the New Orleans sissy bounce scene. Such a study could effectively take Lil Wayne to task on the issue of homophobia by examining sissy bounce for what it is: a transgender stylistic development that lies directly in the lineage of Lil Wayne's own genre, which speaks so heavily to his personal identity.

Finally, there is room for an expansion of my research by an engagement with a much more diverse scope of African American and black cultural studies issues from a historical perspective. There has been a recent trend in scholarship that has examined issues of racial representation in some hip hop music, particularly mainstream hip hop, as a form of modern-day

blackface minstrelsy.<sup>86</sup> Hip hop performances have been likened to the phenomenon of black minstrel entertainers wearing blackface in the late-nineteenth century through the performative construction of race and identity. At times, these connections have served as the subjectivity to criticisms similar to those parsed out in this document. Many of the racially derisive images and messages in southern hip hop that I have discussed could be further complicated if examined as the representational inheritance of the minstrel tradition.

This context is a specific historicization that is built on a concept of lineage in African American popular music. I hope to engage in the future with Henry Louis Gate's text *The Signifying Monkey*, in the hopes of better understanding a historicized view of the African American tradition of representation and signification. Such a historicization is lacking in much of the discourse on hip hop in current scholarship, and it could greatly benefit the field by contributing more complex psychological and theoretical underpinning. The blackface phenomenon can be understood as one of the primary signifying impetuses of early stereotyped conceptions of race in America, an in-depth appreciation for the role that music plays in the propagation of these stereotypes would greatly benefit this project.

### Final Thoughts

In the song "Shooter," off of *Tha Carter II*, Lil Wayne sends a message to the hip hop community demanding respect for Southern artists: "And to the radio stations, I'm tired of being patient. Stop being rapper racists, region-haters."<sup>87</sup> *Tha Carter II* was released in 2005, when

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<sup>86</sup> W.T. Lahmon's book *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* is one example. I also reference Miles White's *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: race, rap, and the performance of masculinity* in this document. A more recent text is Jake Austin and Yuval Taylor's *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip Hop*.

<sup>87</sup> Lil Wayne, "Shooter" on *Tha Carter II*.

Southern rap had recently achieved a new level of dominance in the hip hop industry. As a result, Southern hip hop's harshest critics attacked the genre for its destructive social and musical potential. As the debate about Southern rap expanded, Lil Wayne became one of its central figures, frequently boasting about his lyrical dexterity and its intrinsic connection to his identity as a Southern rapper: "So many doubt cause I come from the South, but when I open up my mouth, all bullets come out."<sup>88</sup>

Indeed, Lil Wayne is one of the champions of the cause of southern rap, the originality of his sound and the virtuosity of his delivery combat many of the most widespread negative opinions about Southern rap music. His explicit lyrical and visual representation of the city of New Orleans, and his expression of the hardships that marginalize African Americans there have created some of mainstream hip hop's most poignant discourses on ghetto life in the south. As Michael Eric Dyson points out, his rhetorical abilities are unique in their often parodic and metaphoric engagement with those challenges, even if they do at times make light of unfortunate problems.

He is also, however, one of Southern rap's most self-destructive characters. All of the pathological subjectivity that scholars tie to mainstream hip hop is manifested in his image in myriad ways. Aggressive corporate marketing to young people in America makes Lil Wayne the perfect target for a critic like Boyce Watkins, who seeks to expose and challenge the destructive potential of mainstream hip hop. So much of Lil Wayne's work does not convey messages of value and uplift to the African American community. In fact, he frequently takes direct aim at its the legacy of racial uplift. It is this dichotomy that makes Lil Wayne such a complex and interesting cultural figure. The ways that Lil Wayne negotiates the definitive underpinnings of

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

Reiland Rebaka's "conscious versus commercial" polarity expose a complicated web of representational gestures that cannot be easily unpacked to reveal a one-dimensional identity that adheres to either pole consistently.<sup>89</sup>

This is the fundamental problem with the discourse of a scholar like Boyce Watkins. Of course Lil Wayne holds destructive potential for America's youth, of course his representation of blackness and masculinity is at times heavily flawed. By focusing too much on these flaws, however, Watkins' critique is overly reductive in its disregard for the complexities of hip hop culture at large. Neglecting to engage directly with those complexities complicates any acknowledgment of Rebaka's "*idyllic impulse*" of resistance, restitution, transcendence and opposition in mainstream rap. Lil Wayne exists in this complicated space and negotiates with the problems of hip hop representation in discursive, if not always successful ways. He frequently challenges the hierarchical and hegemonic forces that oppose him while simultaneously projecting images and messages that fuel the ideological fire of those oppositions. Indeed, his tactics are often unfortunate, but Lil Wayne's personal goals are not transparent. Like many other rappers, he might say that his only ambitions are the amassing of wealth or sexual conquest, or a personal victory in the hierarchy of the rap industry. It is increasingly clear, however, that he is a far more complex figure than the achievement of any of these ambitions might suggest.

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<sup>89</sup> Rebaka, 202.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A:

The most recurring nicknames and pseudonyms of Lil' Wayne, as organized, documented and published on RapGenius.com

#### Carter

Carter, The  
Carter  
Deepwater Carter  
Dr. Carter  
Eagle Carter  
Little Carter  
Mr. Carter (or, for special occasions, Mr. Dr. Carter)  
Mr. Coach Carter  
President Carter (Young Money Democrat)

#### Mr.

Mr. Coach Carter  
Mr. Crazy Flow  
Mr. Director's Chair  
Mr. Go Harder  
Mr. I-Can't-Make-An-Appointment  
Mr. Lawn Mower  
Mr. Make-It-Rain-On-Them-Hoes  
Mr. Ointment  
Mr. President  
Mr. Shoot 'Em Down  
Mr. Water Coolers  
Mr. Weezy Baby

#### Young

Young Baby  
Young Carter  
Young God  
Young Nino  
Young Popeye

Young Roy Jones, Jr.  
Young Stunna  
Young Tune  
Young Tunechi  
Young Wayne Carruth  
Young Weezle  
Young Weezy  
Young Wizzle

#### Uncategorized

Best Rapper Alive, The  
Birdman Jr.  
J.R.  
Fireman  
Heatman  
I Can't Feel My Face  
Killa  
Little Big Kahuna  
Lil Cardiac  
Lil Tune  
Lil Weezy  
Lil Weasel  
Lil Full Clip  
Martian  
New Orleans Nightmare, The  
Pussy Monster, The  
Rapper Eater, The  
Red Alert  
Weezy F. Baby  
Weezy F. Crazy  
Wizzy Fizzy  
Usain Wayne

Appendix B: various body positions in bounce dance style



Art credit: Jessie Merriam

Images interpreted from homemade bounce videos posted to Youtube by Stacy Johnson and Tiara Nichole (see bibliography).