

RATCHET: AN ETYMOLOGICAL ORIGIN & SOCIAL DISPERSION THEORY

by

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(Under the Direction of LEWIS C. HOWE)

ABSTRACT

Ratchet has received a tremendous amount of pop-culture attention within the last decade. Despite folkloric theories as to the origins of the term in the working-class black population of the Southern United States, this work presents evidence that showcases the development of *ratchet* within the chiefly white trucking community. From there, the word is traced through the ages, arriving and once again departing from the black community supposed to have proliferated the term, stopping by the LGBTQ community, and finally resting with the young, white middle-class. Attention is paid to the sociological implications of the word's progression from an underground label to a mass-population phenomenon, including the various gender-specific, racially-charged, and class-based sentiments associated with its use. In summary, *ratchet* is evaluated for the multi-level appropriation of culture that it so accurately represents with special consideration to the concepts of language variation and both lexical and semantic change.

INDEX WORDS: sociolinguistics, slang, etymology, dispersion, rap music, reality
television, class, gender, race, African-American Vernacular English,
AAVE

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BA, University of Georgia, 2013

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2017

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May 2017

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to *Ratchet*

As has been common in the development of English for centuries, borrowing and convergence from other languages or cultures provides much of Standard English production. These patterns of language transfer are still evident today in the United States, where borrowing of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) is becoming increasingly popular among white youth (Sutton 1995). With the rise in popularity of black cultural phenomena, such as rap music, adoption of AAVE structure, phonological features, and lexical items have begun to permeate the speech of young white middle-class Americans (Sutton 1995).

Of particular interest in this shift of dialect is the integration of particularly 'black' terms often associated with the lower-class black community. These terms, often dispersing from particular types of underground rap music, are explicit in their reference to gang activity, drug use, objectification of women, and general participation in a diverse and often illegal party scene. The world referenced in these lyrics, though frowned upon by majority society, is exalted by this style of music, leading to an idea of exclusivity and rebellion that many of America's white youth revel in. Because of this, many lexical items from this seemingly underground culture have become prevalent in America's majority culture.

One such term, *ratchet*, has rapidly become a favorite among upper middle-class white females. As a member of the word classes adjective, noun, and verb, this word is used to denote a sense of 'ghettoness.' Being 'ratchet' is characterized by a loud, obnoxious demeanor, a lack of education, the use of seemingly outdated technology, and a particularly underprivileged look or

feel (Urban Dictionary 1999-2016). When applied to an event, such as a party, the meaning can range from “wild and crazy night out” to “the location of this party makes me uncomfortable.”

As in:

“Sarah: Hey Jessica, were you invited to Starr's ratchet party tonight?

Jessica: Starr knows not to invite me, I'm not a ratchet, I wouldn't be caught dead shaking my booty in front of others.”

(Urban Dictionary 2015)

“I don't like going over to Christina's ratchet-ass house. Her neighbor tried to sell me crack last week!”

When used to describe an object, the term typically refers to the malfunction or decrepitude of the object, such as older, not up-to-date technology. For example:

“You still use a flip phone. That's ratchet.”

“girl: that is the most ratchet-ass car i've seen

boy: i'm glad we dont have one like that”

In reference to an older vehicle.

(Urban Dictionary 1999-2016)

In its most common form, as a significant of a type of female, *ratchet* typically refers to black women of a lower socioeconomic status, who are often seen as larger-bodied with “torn leggings,” “caked on make-up,” “8” or higher heels, and large gold jewelry (Urban Dictionary

1999-2016). These women are described as having an uncouth manner of presenting themselves that is often culturally applied to their race and social class. As in:

“God Damn! Look at that Ratchet ass bitch over there!

[When] pointing out an extremely unattractive woman walking by in a Bikini too small for her body type and her tampon string hanging out.”

(Urban Dictionary 1999-2016)

"Ayy yo tell me why this bitch is down to let the whole team smash?!?"

Cause she ratchet..."

(Urban Dictionary 1999-2016)

Ratchet, much like better known derogatory terms for black people, describes a stereotype - a stereotype that seems to not only not fit in white society, but creates a sense of majority prestige in its use by white people.

If media popularity is any indicator, the past ten years have seen the popularity of *ratchet* skyrocket, with previously small pockets of use expanding to include the masses. From rap music to modern sitcoms, the word is everywhere in contemporary media. The word is even facing backlash for its seemingly racial overtones. Theories abound as to the origins of *ratchet*, but how did this word truly come to be a recognized part of the American lexicon, and how did white middle-class Americans so quickly and efficiently infiltrate the ranks of *ratchet*?

In order to answer this question, lexicographic etymological research constitutes a large portion of this work. Luckily, Zimmer & Carson (2013) laid out a small portion of the required research in their work with the newly fashionable terms of 2012. Within this work, an article for *American Speech* titled “Among The New Words,” Zimmer & Carson compare and contrast

many trendy terms that merged into common speech during 2012, including popular or newly coined terms, like *YOLO* “abbreviated phrase used as motto to encourage one to enjoy life” (2013: 211), *mansplain* “explain in a condescending manner to a woman” (2013: 200), *phablet* “midsized electronic device with the properties of both a mobile phone and a tablet computer” (2013: 206) and *slut-shaming* “publicly deriding women who engage in sexual activity” (2013: 209). Much of the data displayed by Zimmer & Carson relies heavily on the technological aspects of modern research techniques. In concern to *ratchet*, Zimmer & Carson seem to assume the mass propagation of the term to set its beginning, themselves claiming that “its origin is unclear” (2013:197). Because of this assumed timeline, their research barely scratches the surface of the term, dating only as far back as 1999. In fact, the lack of continuous research into the history of *ratchet* allows them to erroneously include the term in the list at all, as other resurgent terms are excluded due to their previous domains of use (2013: 196). In following only the majority use of *ratchet* Zimmer & Carson miss out on a large portion of the terms history and underlying social connotation, including the derogation implied towards black and lower-class communities.

Following the research style laid out by Zimmer & Carson, modern technology, such as social media platforms, blogs, and user-submitted dictionaries, are cited frequently in this work. Of these, Urban Dictionary, created by Aaron Peckman, proves to be one of the most useful. Used both in this work and the definition provided by Zimmer & Carson (2013), Urban Dictionary has become an extremely useful tool in not only defining slang terms but retrieving information on public opinions and usage (Demaso & Cotter 2007). These sources prove to be invaluable to the social aspects of *ratchet*'s rise. However, *ratchet*, as a diverse and long-standing slang term, required more than a cursory internet search. In order to determine the

complete long-term trajectory of the term, its semantic variances, and its cross-cultural appropriations, a large portion of the research here relies on traditional research methods - long hours at the library, investigative research, and theory-based analysis.

Compilation of this data, however, is not sufficient to answer the question posed above. In an effort to uncover information concerning the dispersion of *ratchet*, sociolinguistic analysis permeates the work. Much of this sociology-based research is viewed through the lense of Variationist Sociolinguistics. Considering the strong presence of gender, race, and class-based meaning behind *ratchet*, deep focus on Feminist Linguistics, particularly the culturally expanded Third-wave, makes up a large portion of this analysis, concentrating on finding the beginnings, patterns, and social implications of *ratchet*.

Through the progression of *ratchet*, one pattern can easily be seen - the morphing of *ratchet* from a simple derogatory term to a dynamic and multi-faceted slang word. This “extreme polysemy,” reviewed below, is recorded in the work of Litty et al (2016: 140), in which other popular slang terms are evaluated for lexical change over a span of 200 years. Similar findings to the semantically changed patterns of *ratchet* led the researcher to deduce that social and cultural constructs, rather than simply structural factors, define the patterns in which words may change in meaning (Litty et al 2016: 142; Schulz 1975). This style of lexical-semantic change is easily viewed in the history of *ratchet*, with an obvious widening of the connotations behind the original meaning. The responsible social and cultural constructs involve the ‘exchanging hands’ of the term, as well as the rise in popularity of black culture, including rap music. Initially, the word moved from a CB slang term denoting a constant and/or obtrusive speaker on the radio to the widened meaning of simply a constant and/or obtrusive speaker, showing a widening of meaning. The term then lingered within the working class, gaining a sense as a significant of a

black female of low socioeconomic standing, possibly through analogy of the loud, angry black woman stereotype. This movement to female derogation is closely and historically followed in the work of Muriel Schulz (1975), in which pejoration of terms in order to distinguish negative female stereotypes is outlined. Continuing from this idea, a small patch of underground rap artists in Shreveport, Louisiana ameliorated the term - applying it as a marker of pride in and for the lower-class black community of the area. Continuation of the term's popularity forced *ratchet* into more mainstream outlets, in which a mixture of the previously-mentioned meanings joined together in congruence to Litty et al's research (2016: 142). This association with mainstream culture forced the word into yet another new meaning, arguably an amelioration, in which females, particularly black females, began to claim the term as a point of pride denoting their street savvy. This pattern of development continued for a period of time, ultimately ending in yet another interpretation of the term, one in which mass, and predominantly white, usage had created an overall negative viewpoint of the term, while simultaneously removing many of the racial implications involved (Aaron 2010).

In the interest of comprehensibility, this work opens with an outline of established folk etymological theories surrounding *ratchet* and continues with a refutation of these theories. A historically-based origin theory for the term is then drafted. From there, I trace the progression of *ratchet* from a little-known mocking term in CB radio slang to full-blown derogation. In this progression, there is an outline of the pre-1990's era of *ratchet*, during which the term existed as working-class jargon, the first occurrences of *ratchet* in rap music in the 1990's coupled with the basics of its initial socially-biased connotations, description of a lexico-semantic shift of *ratchet* - one that offered representation of lower-class black America rather than female lower-class black America -- that occurred in the 2000's, and the mass-marketing of *ratchet* in both music

and television, in which yet another lexico-semantic shift shows reclamation of the term by females. These sections are spotted with descriptions of the many responses to *ratchet* and its social implications during its rise to infamy. Finally, the last chapter provides the closing statements of this argument -- the most major of which shows the centrality of *ratchet* to social class, an inextricable element of social and cultural differences in the United States.

CHAPTER 2

Ratchet Folklore

Folk explanations of the origins of *ratchet* include many fictive origins, from a “mispron[ounced]” *wretched* to an adaptation of the French *rotchet*, each with its own unique spin on the word (Urban Dictionary 1999-2016; Zimmerman 2013; Corsetti 2013).

The most prominent of these theories of the term’s origins ascribes *ratchet* [rætʃɪt/rætʃɪʔ] to a “mispronunciation” or “ghettoized form” of *wretched* [rɛʃɪd] (Urban Dictionary 1999-2016; Zimmerman 2013; Corsetti 2013; Thorne 2014). *Wretched* does hold a similar meaning to *ratchet* -- “ADJ. deeply afflicted, dejected, or distressed in body or mind; extremely or deplorably bad or distressing; being or appearing mean, miserable, or contemptible; very poor in quality or ability : inferior” (M-W 2017a), but phonological evidence for vernacularization of *wretched* is weak at best . Initially, the structure appears to follow AAVE phonological patterns by accurately devoicing the final voiced stop [d] to the voiceless stop [t] or glottal stop [ʔ], a pattern believed to be exclusive to AAVE (Pollock et al. 1998). The theory falls short upon close examination of the first syllable vowel shift from [ɛ] to [æ] because this type of shift is not recorded in AAVE (Pollock et al. 1998). Rather, AAVE commonly raises [æ] to [ɛ] (Pollock et al. 1998), the complete opposite of the shift in *ratchet*. Theoretically, a major impetus behind the strength of this argument may lie in the same mass propagation centric timeline proposed by above. The average human is not versed in the intricacies of Southern AAVE, and as such, may relate *ratchet* with *wretched* simply on their limited capacity regarding the terms’ definitions and

sound qualities. This theory, though seemingly plausible, is easily diminished by the lack of evidence behind it.

Another mispronunciation-based theory of origin from the United Kingdom claims that *ratchet* is simply a dialectal alteration of *ratshit*, defined as “(something) awful” (Thorne 2014). The phonological base for this theory is sound, as the continued pronunciation of *ratshit* [rætʃɪt] could result in a combination of the alveolar stop [t] and fricative [ʃ] into the affricate [tʃ], resulting in [rætʃɪt]. However, *ratshit* is not a common slang word in the United States, so continued use of it would not be plausible. Considering that no use of *ratchet* in the United Kingdom predates use of the word in the United States, it can be inferred that the term truly originated in the US, and thus not as a derivative of *ratshit*.

Another erroneous origin story involves the initial introduction of *ratchet* via the trap music recording group Lava House Records (Ortved 2013; Urban Dictionary 1999-2016). In the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, Lava House Records released multiple songs with reference to the word; the most influential of which, “Do Tha Ratchet,” was first released in 2004. This song, accompanied by a music video, displayed “Tha Ratchet” as a type of jerky, rambunctious dance. Many theorists believe the spasmodic style of dance to have been influenced by the similarly jerky movements made by the use of a ratchet tool. This is based on the assumption that the slang version of *ratchet* directly relates to the tool. This is easily disproved with further research, from which it becomes increasingly clear that *ratchet* predates “Do Tha Ratchet” by many years. Use of the word in rap music dates as far back as 1992, when UGK, a Texas rap group, released “I’m So Bad” (The Right Rhymes 2016). Between 1992 and the 2004 initial release of “Do The Ratchet,” at least three other groups released music using the term, including previous releases by the artists associated with Lava House Records (The Right Rhymes 2016; Zimmer & Carson

2013). A 2013 interview with Angie Locc, a Lava House Records member, substantiates this claim by referencing use of *ratchet* by a grandmother of her co-rapper, Anthony Mandigo (Zimmer & Carson 2013). In contradiction to this folkloric origin theory, *ratchet* had been used in the black community of the Gulf Coast for an extensive amount of time prior to the dance.

Some researchers have proposed that the origins may lie in an amalgamation of Acadian French and a word derived from earlier Middle English, *brach* [bræʃ] (Gaskell 2014). *Brach*, believed to be of French origin, traditionally refers to “A kind of hound which hunts by scent..., always feminine...; a bitch-hound,” but has become a “A term of abuse” in a similar fashion to the derogatorily-used term *bitch* (OED 2016a). This word, in its French and ultimately Middle English origins, is comprised of many derivational and inflectional forms, the most salient to this argument being its singular form - *brachet* [bræʃɪt] (OED 2016a). This theory is backed by the closely coinciding semantic properties of both *ratchet* and *brachet* as derogatory terms for females, as well as their similar structure and pronunciation. Unfortunately, no direct connection between the two words can be formed due to a lack of historical evidence pertaining to the use of both *brach* and *ratchet* in the area theorized to have spawned *ratchet*.

A final hypothesized origin story involves adaptation of the word from the French word *rotchet*. This theory is not particularly strong and its validity seems to hinge upon Cajun origins of *ratchet*. *Rotchet*, defined as “a lance head or bobbin,” is a variantly-spelled version of *rochet*, which is a predecessor to the traditional term *ratchet*, a tool (OED 2016b). In summary, *ratchet* may be a derivative of *rotchet*, just not the semantically distinct *ratchet* discussed here.

CHAPTER 3

Etymological Origin of *Ratchet*

The strongest theory for the origins of *ratchet*, and the one that will be explored here, focuses on previous slang use in the Gulf area. It suggests that *ratchet* does, in fact, derive from *ratchet*, the tool, but the word first had to undergo a transformation, primarily through collocated slang use with the word *mouth*. The phrases *ratchet mouth*, *ratchet-mouth*, or *ratchet-jaw*, used interchangeably within this work, have a long history in American English, dating as far back as the 1950's (Green 1998). Traditionally used as a verb meaning "to talk nonsense, to talk for the sake of hearing oneself," the phrase has been adapted as both a noun and an adjective in reference to "a chatterer" (Green 1998). Concrete examples of use can be found as early as 1965 when John Lawlor published his work *How to Talk Car*, a guide to vehicle-related slang (Dalzell 2009; Dalzell & Victor 2013). Following this vehicle-related pattern, use of *ratchet mouth* occurred as Citizens band (CB) radio slang, a type of documented slang use dominated by truck drivers. There are references to use of the phrase in CB slang in works of literature from the 1970's and 1980's (Dalzell 2009; Dalzell & Victor 2013; Green 2010).

"Overcrowding, which can turn 'good buddies' into nasty rivals. CBers are supposed to limit calls to five minutes and those who do not are called 'ratchet jaws.'" - 1977, *1977 World Book Year Book*, p.267 (Green 2010)

“I never turn the damned CB on anymore. Too many assholes ratchet-mouthin’ shit at each other.” - 1981, George V. Higgins, *The Rat on Fire*, p.14 (Dalzell 2009; Dalzell & Victor 2013; Green 2010)

These early references depict a working-class environment of use and an enormous possibility of dispersion through commercial trucking. This theory is made particularly strong by the status of Shreveport, Louisiana, the supposed base of *ratchet* and self-proclaimed “Ratchet city” (Urban Dictionary 2007), as the largest city of Ark-La-Tex, a commercial and cultural area that joins the states of Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. This status, particularly the commercial and multi-state aspects of it, accounts for its dispersion through an extensive proximity to the trucking community.

Most interesting in the history of the term is the work of Charles Shafer (1971-72), in which *ratchet jaw* is attributed to the speech of Texas prisoners. For those in the prison system, specific language use can denote identity, creating an in- or out-group status for its user (Bramwell 2017; Hargan 1935). The slang in prisons often reflects and spreads to a large population due to the ever-revolving and cohabiting population of inmates in a state. This would allow for a large population of typically working-class citizens to acquire the term while in population and then spread the term in their own communities upon release (Quinn 2013: 53). Due both to the prominent role of black males in the prison system (Pew Research Center 2013; Quinn 2013: 46) and the decision of Texas to privatize and expand prisons following *Ruiz v. Estelle* in 1972 (Quinn 2013: 45-47), there existed a perfect climate for the dispersion of this term among the black lower-class.

Whether first a prison slang or a CB term, the term’s initial distribution from Texas west to Louisiana began sometime between 1970 and 1999, spreading primarily through contact

within the working class of the area. At some unknown point in the journey, *ratchet mouth* lost its noun, retaining the negatively intensifying adjective *ratchet*. Both terms, used interchangeably for a period of time, began to be concentrated in its use towards black women, as evident in early rap music containing the words, in which a majority of the references are applied to women. This focus can be attributed, though not solidly, to the stereotype associated with black females as loud and particularly vocally obnoxious, a factor still referenced in the meaning of *ratchet* today (Morris 2007; Urban Dictionary 1999-2016).

CHAPTER 4

Pop-culture Etymology and Dispersion

4.1: Pre-1990's

Dispersion of *ratchet*, as mentioned above, initially began in working-class areas through close contact between truckers and/or prisoners and the communities around them. Being the original “mobile phone,” CB radios saw a huge increase in popularity in the 1970's that continued into the early 1980's (Watts & Barton 2011: 387; 389). Their ease of use and ready availability allowed for the working class to communicate in a way that had never been possible before (Watts & Barton 2011: 388; 394-395). This led to the spread of CB lingo, a slang dialect still known today. The point of this language was to effectively get the statement across in the shortest amount of time in order to leave the channel clear for others. Much of this language is based on active use of police and emergency-vehicle radio calls, but a large portion of CB slang originated in the use of CB radios by truckers, who relied on the method of communication to quickly deliver their cargo while avoiding roadway interruptions such as speed traps. From this jargon, a plethora of words emerged, from “ten codes” like *10-4* for confirmation to the appellation *Hotlanta* for Atlanta, Georgia. CB radio enthusiasts quickly picked up and passed these words to others within the CB community. This includes *ratchet mouth*, which even claims its own CB lingo song by country music singer C.W. McCall (1976): “Ratchet Jaw.”

Just as CB slang was picking up, Schafer (1971-72) first documented the use of *ratchet mouth* as a lexical item in a Baytown, Texas penitentiary. His work within the prison as an English instructor allowed him to record the speech of the inmates that he encountered, a

collection that later appeared in Abernethy's (1990) *The Bounty of Texas*, a compilation of works outlining Texan folklore and society. Unfortunately, Schafer did not record demographic data in his publication. This omission leaves a number of important gaps concerning his information on *ratchet*, as a true original demography cannot be determined beyond the working class of Texas.

From the mid 1980's on, not much is seen as to the progression of *ratchet mouth* to *ratchet*. This is perhaps due to the decrease in CB radio use or the general lack of documentation of working-class slang.

4.2: 1990's

The current slang meaning of *ratchet* was first attested in the early 1990's through the works of rap artists in the Gulf Coast area. This early rap music and the image that it portrayed set the stage for modern interpretations of *ratchet*, particularly in reference to black females of the lower socioeconomic classes.

The first recorded use of the word in rap music appears in the Port Arthur, Texas rap duo UGK's 1992 release of "I'm So Bad" with Jive Records (The Right Rhymes 2016). In this song, based around the Underground Kings request for oral sex, *ratchet* is used as an adjective to describe an unnamed female sexual object who refuses to participate in the requested sex-act. Implicitly, the term appears to be used to characterize a female who is all talk, and no show.

"So you can get your knees dirty ho
Or either get your ratchet ass out my fucking do'
Cause I'm Pimp C, I put a bitch in her place"
(UGK 1992)

This reference sets the stage for *ratchet* in rap music as a descriptor for females as sex objects, a theme that continues throughout the course of *ratchet*'s usage history.

Theoretically due to his close relationship with UGK and other southern rappers via the collaborative album *Southwest Riders*, fellow Jive Record rapper E-40 continued the *ratchet* phenomenon in rap. In 1998, he released “Lieutenant Roast a Botch” featuring Silk-E on his album *The Element of Surprise* (The Right Rhymes 2016). The rap outlines a back-and-forth exchange between a male, “Lieutenant Roast a Botch,” and a female, “Sherrie Stack a Grip,” who will not favorably reciprocate his advances. “Sherrie” is portrayed as a talkative and argumentative woman and is thus referred to as “ratchet mouth[ed],” a slang term defined by Johnathon Green (2010) as “a chatterer.” This usage correlates well with the theory that *ratchet* derives from *ratchet mouth*. It is here that the full origins of *ratchet* can be inferred, and thus an original meaning: a loud, argumentative, unwilling female.

“Sherrie Stack a Grip

Nicknamed Sherrie Stuff a Dick - The Ratchet Mouth Biotch!!

See I go hard on a batch (HARD)”

(E-40 1998)

In 1999, Lava House Records of Shreveport, Louisiana released their first song showcasing their self-claimed ‘ratchetness,’ a term that would come to define the rap business in their Northern Louisiana town, Shreveport. “Ratchet,” a collaborative effort led by Mr. Mandigo, or Anthony Mandigo, functions to epitomize the culture of Shreveport. Claiming to have adopted the word from his grandmother (Zimmer & Carson 2013), Mandigo dotted his 1999 release with use of *ratchet*. The song also includes the first encounter in rap music of *ratchet* as a noun, in

this case used to describe, yet again, a sexualized female. Ironically, this use as a nominative also demonstrates the first appearance of *ratchet* being used by a female. Angie Locc, or Angela Nichols, comprises the first few minutes of the rap and the first few recorded instances of *ratchet* as a noun. Locc uses the term as a negative, typically referring to other women, with the implication that her significant other is adulterous.

“You making love with them ratchets on the phone”

(Lava House 1999)

Years later, Jada Durden (2015), journalist for the Shreveport Times, claims that this song began a musical “movement,” equating Shreveport “Ratchet Rap” to other rap movements across the nation like “Houston's Screw, Memphis' Trap, Atlanta's Crunk and New Orleans' Bounce.” Durden uses Mandigo’s own words, “Ratchet is not just a song. Ratchet is a movement,” to support her claim that Lava House Records took “a derogatory term to describe someone as jealous, trashy, having little to no morals or someone who claims to be something they're not” and turned it into a rap phenomenon (Durden 2015). Ratchet Rap is known for its “extension of hip-hop, told from the streets of Louisiana...with moderate tempos, riveting high hats, pocket snares, hand claps in da 16ths, hypnotic synthesizers and keyboard fills, humorous catchphrases and that bayou bottom bass[, and its] Bouncy [feel,] lyrically infused with the reality and struggle of the streets” (Durden 2015). For Durden and the black community of Shreveport, *ratchet* does not simply relay a derogatory meaning; it relays a way of life -- their way of life.

4.3: 2000's

Mandigo's "Ratchet" acted as a predecessor to the infamous "Do tha Ratchet" attributed to Lil' Boosie, or Torrence Hatch (2006). In this work first released in 2004 but officially recognized in 2006, Lil' Boosie, along with contributors from Lava House Records, depicts a dance called "Tha Ratchet". The dance is a mix of jerky, erratic movements, much like those of an actual ratchet. This song, as mentioned above, is considered the proliferating factor in the dispersion of *ratchet*, as many people believe it to be the origin of the word itself. From the information listed above, it is obvious that this song is not the true origin, but rather a major factor in the spread of the word.

What sets "Do tha Ratchet" apart from its predecessors in rap music is its use of *ratchet* generally, not simply towards females. In his song, Lil' Boosie constructs a seemingly glamorous lifestyle around the term, rather than a negative view.

"and we all got some ratchet in us
(erbody, erbody got a lil ratchet)
for real dey gon love dis one"
(Lil' Boosie, Lava House 2006)

His embrace of the term allows for a new perspective on the dynamics of *ratchet* in the black community. The song elaborates the lifestyle of the Shreveport black community, claiming *ratchet* as an adjective for the struggles and triumphs that both he and his listeners face daily. For Lil' Boosie, being 'ratchet' is a point of pride, and his acceptance of it allows him to express himself. His song seems to be one of self-acceptance, thus opening the way for people in the black community to use the word without any necessarily negative connotations. The

unconventional use of *ratchet* as a positive adjective in Shreveport appealed to seemingly counter-culture groups by glorifying the working-class black lifestyle of the area. Being ‘ratchet’ became a claim to a specific subgroup of American culture. In this subgroup, people were allowed to be gaudy and outlandish without backlash from mainstream society.

Nadia Brown & Lisa Young (2015: 17), in their analysis of “Ratchet Politics,” outline this in-group versus out-group mentality by claiming that ‘ratchet’ lifestyles and behaviors act as buffers to “respectability politics,” or the pressures faced by the black community to groom themselves according to “White Victorian norms.” Assimilation to dominant white culture has historically been a societal goal for the black community in order to gain higher socioeconomic status and mainstream respect. ‘Ratchetness’ allowed for a truth-be-told, no-holds-barred way for black communities to differentiate themselves from these established conventions and to define their own social standards. In her study of the methods of control used in institutionalized settings, Cathryn Houghton (1995) finds that this backlash towards the culturally-accepted norms or standards rings true in institutionalized Latina adolescents as well. Her work on therapist domination of both physical and linguistic aspects of patients’ lives and discourse shows not only the methods in which societal norms, typically based on the norms of middle-class white citizens, are used to suppress the cultural norms deemed inappropriate but also the modus operandi employed by patients to counteract this suppression (Houghton 1995). Much like the black community’s seeming opposition to white societal norms, Latina adolescents use “The Power of Resistance” (Houghton 1995: 134-138) to differentiate both their actions and their linguistic practices from the perceived oppressors.

Around the same time as “Do Tha Ratchet,” other artists began their claim to the newly popular word. In 2004, Northstar officially released “Ballin’,” in which rappers Christ Bearer &

Meko The Pharaoh, prove their street credibility by announcing, “Shit, I’m still hittin’ them ratchets,” a line meant to depict the fact that stardom has not influenced their everyday lives and that money has not prevented them from interacting with and participating in sexual acts with women of lower socioeconomic status. The California rap group appear to have acquired use, and the misogynistic meaning, of the word from close contact with Wu-Tang Clan and Pimp C of UGK, the group attributed here to have first used the word in rap music.

In Shreveport, *ratchet* continued its climb to fame within the black community. Lava House artists, like Hurricane Chris, Lil’ Boosie, and Mr. Mandigo, continued to promote the growing fame of the word. In 2007, Hurricane Chris, also known as Christopher Dooley, Jr., released “Walk Like That” on his first studio album *51/50 Ratchet*. In the song, Dooley refers to *ratchet* as a type of demeanor and dress that gives him pride. His first mention of the word, “She know I’m from Ratchet city and I’m ballin’,” refers to a female being able to identify his hometown, Shreveport, via the manner in which he walks and talks. Later, he goes on to describe his dress and lifestyle, “Pants stay saggin, can’t help it I’m just ratchin / Money make me happy, hoes like my swag.” Interestingly, this represents one of the first recorded instances of a verbal *ratchet*, suggesting that *ratchet* being depicted as a multi-gender, lower socioeconomic lifestyle allowed for a further progression into other domains. Also within the song, Dooley discusses having, “The same ratchets on my phone, I can’t help it I’m a dawg.” Ironically, this refers to females, but does not have the same negative connotation as previous mentions of ‘ratchet’ females in rap lyrics. By appointing himself as ‘ratchet,’ Dooley has narrowed the gender divide associated with the word. This diminishing of the gender divide appears to be a theme in Shreveport rap and Lava House Records, both of which apply ‘ratchetness’ to the lower socioeconomic black community as a whole.

A major factor in the success of *ratchet* can be attributed to the multi-platinum producer of Lava House Records, Phunk Dawg, or Earl Williams. Williams not only produced many of the upcoming artists associated with this time period in the history of *ratchet*, but also contributed to the marketing and distribution of “Ratchet Rap.” He also composed the first formal definition of the word in the liner notes of Lil’ Boosie’s 2004 release of “Do Tha Ratchet,” claiming *ratchet* as “n., pron., v, [and] adv.” and defining it as “1. To be ghetto, real, gutter, nasty. 2. It’s whatever, bout it, etc.” Using key terms and slang known to the area, this definition gave the community of Shreveport a sense of pride in their ownership of a word to define their collective place in society.

Contrarily, Billy Broadway, also known as Billy Moore, of Red Dolla Gang Music Group holds a particularly negative view of the term *ratchet* and its depiction of his hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana. From his perspective, *ratchet* refers to people who “will do any and everything, [have] no morals or standards about themselves, [are] loud and attention seekers with no responsibilities in life, and [are] content with living life one way” (Durden 2015). Moore harbors a distaste for the lifestyle that *ratchet* glorifies and the image that it constructs of the black community. Moore’s goal is to denounce the term and the lifestyle that it implies. Moore elaborates on the scene that he wishes to distance himself from: “Ratchet Music is what they pop X to. That's all it was — pill popping to make people jig” (Durden 2015). In the song “Shreveport,” Moore announces, “I’m from Shreveport, but ain't nothing ratchet 'bout me” (Durden 2015). He uses his overall demeanor as a tool to remove ‘ratchetness’ from the rap music scene from Shreveport as well. His close, polite contact with fans, as well his close relationship with his child, is showcased in his intermittently-posted online videos. For Moore, *ratchet* is a one-way ticket to negative views of the community of Shreveport with “nothing

positive about it once the outside world got a hold to it” (Durden 2015). He continues, “I don't think Shreveport should want to be noticed for that because every time we pop up in the news it's always for something negative. Those artists think it's just a cool saying. I don't think they know the true meaning” (Durden 2015).

The underground popularity of Lava House Records, paired with the forced migration that occurred following Hurricane Katrina, allowed for a spread in the use of *ratchet* (Billboard 2006). Hurricane Katrina left much of southern Louisiana in disarray, forcing mostly “lower-income African Americans” to evacuate (Sides 2015). Movement of this population of working-class black Americans caused contacts situations with other areas across the United States, particularly the Southeast (Bliss 2015). Much of this contact revolved around the increased prominence of politically-charged rap music. This music focused on the seemingly unfair and biased treatment of the Katrina aftermath by FEMA and the Bush administration, as well as the racial and socioeconomic implications of the unhurried aid following the disaster (Fensterstock 2015; Hobbs 2015). Mostly consisting of artists associated with New Orleans Bounce rap, these newly distributed artists gave way for mass media recognition of rap music as a whole, resulting in an ever-increasing distribution of previously unknown and underappreciated rap across the United States (Fensterstock 2015; Hobbs 2015). This meshing of cultures resulted in dialect contact. In bringing their own music and slang with them as they traveled to more hospitable areas of the US, Evacuees and rap artists exposed those areas to working-class black culture. This exodus introduced a larger area of the US population to the underground rap scene of Louisiana and its surrounding areas. Many young Americans, influenced by their new peers, embraced this culture as their own by adopting the speech patterns and lexicon. This became

increasingly prominent in the middle-class white population (Urban Dictionary 2013; Bowen 2013).

4.4: Since 2010

The early portion of the 2010's saw a major increase in the widespread use of *ratchet* among a variety of classes and races. This moved the term out of the realm of racial divide and into common use. The peak of *ratchet* arguably occurred in 2012, as both working class blacks and middle class whites used their interpretation of the word with frequency (Young 2012; Ortved 2013). A major part of this popularity was emboldened by the continued deployment of *ratchet* in popular media. The front-runners of linguistic change, young females, began to adopt and adapt *ratchet* as their own, reevaluating the word as an overall definition for anything 'ghetto,' lower-class, urban, unsatisfactory, or stereotypically black.

4.4.1: Contemporary Rap Music and *Ratchet*

2012 to 2015 saw a dramatic rise in *ratchet* references in music in comparison to previous years (The Right Rhymes 2016). Beginning in more mainstream rap, the term began to spread into other genres including parody and indie rock. "Ratchet Girl Anthem," a comedic interpretation of what it means to be 'ratchet' by Atlanta natives Emmanuel and Phillip Hudson, furthered the interpretation of *ratchet* as a 'ghetto' and low-class female (2012). The song and accompanying video depict the "average" life of a 'ratchet' female.

"...Her lace front is all wrong (Cause she ratchet)...

Girl yes, I'm pregnant but I still hit the club That's right!

In the middle of the floor no shoes (What's up?)

I had to look cute today, apple bottom jeans fur boots today...

Had to keep it lookin good cause my baby daddy just payed bail he a thug he'll shoot today (That's right)

New baby need new shoes today

Child support check get two today (Cha-ching!)

Got the tracks, yesterday girl, did you get the glue today? (You know it!)...

It's the 15th I got my food stamps (Cha-ching)

Got a brand new piercing, brand new tat

Paid 95 dollars for this weave, plus tax (Bow!)

Bend that thang over while I spank my thong (Get it girl!)...

Cause 2 Chainz is my future baby daddy (MAURY!)..."

(Hudson 2012)

Ultimately, their lyrics represent stereotypical lower-class black females in a negative light, showcasing the labels placed on those individuals by society (Bowen 2013). The mass population loved it, and young white Americans began using the word more than ever (Ortved 2013).

Accordingly, most male artists who recorded lyrics containing *ratchet* during this time-period used the term to refer to an offensive female (Ortved 2013). Often these females are depicted as coming from low socioeconomic status, living a 'ghetto' lifestyle, financially dependent, existing in the life of the rapper as a sexual object, or a combination of these. These categories follow closely the types of terms outlined by Laurel Sutton (1995) in her work with derogatory slang terms for women. Sutton (1995) finds that men, often seen as proliferators of negatively-charged, female-based slang terms, use a number of terms for women in a demoralizing fashion, most of which revolve around sexuality and subordination. Accordingly,

the use of *ratchet* in modern male-centric rap continues the popular culture theory of women as objects of misogyny (Conrad et al. 2009). Furthermore, this depiction of *ratchet* strongly implies the current gender politics of rap music, in which women are often allocated to the bottom rung as subordinate and less-respected characters (Conrad et al. 2009).

In October of 2012, LL Cool J, a well-known front-runner of pop-rap, released the pre-album single “Ratchet,” an ode to a gold-digging girlfriend. With lines like

“It's time to get rid of yo' ratchet ass...I should've never been with yo' ratchet ass,”

(LL Cool J 2012)

the song was not well received, ultimately obtaining the status of number five in Complex’s “The 10 Worst Songs of 2012” (Baker 2013). The theme of male dominance continued in 2013 with Tyler, The Creator’s “Trashwang,” in which financial dependency is prominent in the depicted male-female relationship. The song outlines the role of the male as a financial provider for a slew of associated females.

“Paying all these ratchets' phone bills”

(Tyler, The Creator 2013)

2013 also saw the release of a slew of releases by or featuring Juicy J, or Jordan Michael Houston that contained derogatory forms of *ratchet*. Two tracks from Juicy J’s *Stay Trippy* contain unflattering depictions of women. “Show Out” refers to females as seemingly expendable member of a harem-like situation, and bases the worth of this supposed harem on solely physical attributes.

“Got a few ratchets, even a couple models”

(Juicy J 2013a)

In “Wax,” Houston continues the stereotyping of women through his use of *ratchet*.

“In the projects with a ratchet bitch, her house look like a crash sight”

(Juicy J 2013b)

His depiction of the locale and living situation of a ‘ratchet’ female leaves the listener with a distinct bias concerning the type of person that can be coined as *ratchet*.

Interestingly, "Talkin' Bout," another track of *Stay Trippy* containing the term, prompts listeners of all genders to embrace the ‘ratchet’ lifestyle.

“Trippy niggas... let's get ratchet”

(Juicy J 2013c)

This use appears to hark back to the heyday of Lava House Records. The track shows a different and much more encompassing meaning behind *ratchet*. Ironically, the track was released the same day as Big Sean’s “MILF,” a track containing *ratchet* that features both Juicy J and Nicki Minaj. This track refers to Big Sean’s, or Sean Anderson’s, penchant for participating in sexual intercourse with multiple mothers. Nicki Minaj plays a role as one of these mothers, describing herself in an extremely negative light, while Juicy J describes the lifestyle and character depicted by Nicki Minaj’s words as *ratchet*.

“ (Nicki Minaj) I got my welfare check, smokin on that crack

Hell yeah, I'm unemployed, baby daddy-down my back...

(Juicy J) With a ratchet bitch, you laid up
I'm on my tour bus fucking mamas getting paid up...

Yo mama, ratchet-ass bitch”

(Big Sean 2013)

Machine Gun Kelly, also known as Richard Colson Baker, released the song “Ratchet” in 2013. In this track, the white rapper known for his rapid style of rapping expounds upon his desire to participate in sexual acts with a ‘ratchet’ female.

“This one’s for the ratchet

Yeah – all my bitches (ratchet, ratchet)

Ratchet – Cleveland we get (ratchet, ratchet)

Ratchet...

Ass up with your legs split

Dick all in your mouth

Talking’ ‘bout “I don’t usually give head”

Bitch!...

I’mma turn it up and get (ratchet)

Never seen a ratchet get wifed

But I done seen these wives get ratchet...”

(Machine Gun Kelly 2013)

What is most interesting about Baker's use of *ratchet* is the simultaneous degradation of women and esteem for the 'ratchet' lifestyle. Baker idealizes a world in which people can act 'ratchet', without truly being 'ratchet'. As is obvious from the evidence provided above, a majority of the uses of *ratchet* in male-centric rap during this time-period revolved around the derogation of females, whether through depiction of major dependence, physical form, lifestyle, or sexual willingness. This theme, when referring to the history of *ratchet* as a whole, has been prominent in rap lyrics from the beginning of the genre.

Of particular interest for this time-period is the manner in which female rappers chose to portray the word. For female rappers, the role of *ratchet* varies from a similar connotation to male rappers, a stereotypically lower-class female, to an idealized form of street credibility. As mentioned previously, Nicki Minaj, a female rap artist known for her controversial public image, played a major role in the pejoration of the word. In addition to her collaborative efforts with male artists like Big Sean and Juicy J, she released her own iteration of *ratchet* in her 2012 album *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded*. "Right By My Side," a track featuring Chris Brown, uses *ratchet* similarly to its original female user -- as a referent to an adulterous significant other's paramours.

"Wait, oh, let me see your phone, cause all them bitches is ratchet"

(Minaj 2012)

This style of depiction continues for many of the female artists, namely those that embraced the more contentious role as vulgar, 'unlady-like' artists. Many of these artists, like Nicki Minaj and Angie Looc, continued use of vulgar lingo in their productions in order to fit into a previously male dominated rap community (De Klerk 1992: 220; 286; Conrad et al. 2009).

This willingness to accept the term as a debasement of females falls in line with dominance-based approach to male and female roles in language use (Uchida 1992: 551), in which females may feel it necessary to pattern their own speech based upon the characteristics displayed by the dominant group, males, in order to gain peer-approval and “symbolic capital” (Eckert 1989: 256). This attempt to gain economic status in the rap community shows patterns described by Penelope Eckert -- development of authority via use of “man’s power” (Eckert 1989: 256), or, in this case, man’s derogations. Critically, this assumed peer-pressure has been evaluated for rap music videos as well. In their appraisal of rap music video themes, Conrad et al. (2009) found that women were more like to not only be cast in misogynistic roles but to place themselves in misogynistic scenarios in which they appear as subordinate to males or as sexual objects. As mentioned above, a strict gender economy can be surmised by the role of *ratchet* in male-centric rap music.

Contrarily, a large number of female artists embraced *ratchet* as a statement of pride and solidarity, much like previous reappropriations of derogations like *bitch* (Sutton 1995). These artists applied the term to themselves in order to delineate their roles in the rap community as savvy, worldly members who can take care of themselves (Ortved 2013). Interestingly, this contradicts one of the major roles of typically portrayed ‘ratchet’ females as gold-digging and dependent. These artists opted to accept the term as a positive modifier, a strategy used by many marginalized groups throughout history to lessen the sting of derogatory and debasing terms. Past reclamations by marginalized groups include the reappropriation of *bitch* and *ho* by females (Sutton 1995) and of *queer* by the gay community, among others. By accepting and appropriating *ratchet*, these artists were able to begin another redefinition of the term - one

involving a strong sense of specifically female pride -- while simultaneously staking their own claim within the patriarchal rap music scene.

This new depiction is extremely apparent in the work of Beyoncé, a southern-born African-American singer-songwriter. In 2013, Beyoncé posted a picture online showcasing stereotypically ‘ratchet’ gold doorknocker earrings with the actual word inscribed on them. Intriguingly, Lady Gaga also joined the world of *ratchet* during this time period, appearing online in her own set of *ratchet* emblazoned door-knocker earrings (Lady Gaga 2013) just months before Beyoncé.



Rumors of collaboration between Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and Azealea Banks became prominent in the rap and pop communities (Wilson 2013; Ramirez 2013). What is most interesting about this social media encounter overall is that Beyoncé, an artist of African-American descent received much more criticism of her use of *ratchet* than Lady Gaga, a white woman, whose use of the term was seemingly swept under the rug. The backlash towards Beyoncé stemmed from online bloggers discrediting her claim to *ratchet* due to her privileged lifestyle, age, and motherhood (Bossip 2013). On the other side, some bloggers embraced the new Beyoncé, claiming ‘ratchet’ Bey as a icon for women. From their perspective, females should be able to balance both ‘ratchetness’ and classiness (Platon 2015), harking at the newest form of *ratchet* being publicized at the time.

Also during this time, white music icons, like Miley Cyrus, began to apply *ratchet* to themselves, pushing buttons within the black community, who at this point had laid claim to the word. Cyrus claimed that her ability to twerk, an African-American dance style, as well as her down-to-earth, ‘ghetto’ lifestyle and disregard for social norms placed her into the world of ‘ratchetness’ (Bowen 2013). Her claim was not well-regarded by the black community, who saw Cyrus as an imposter (Bowen 2013; Stewart 2013). Claims that Cyrus was appropriating black culture and “accessorizing with black people” while ignoring the “underprivileged, undereducated, oppressed, underrepresented, disenfranchised, systemically discriminated against and struggling” origins of *ratchet* became a staple in entertainment media (Stewart 2013).

In April of 2014, Australian rapper and American star Iggy Azalea referenced her own “ratchet[ness]” in her track “100” featuring Watch the duck. Her depiction of herself as a young, strong, and independent female seems to contradict the previous iterations of *ratchet*.

“I’m a fancy bitch, but I’m ratchet”

(Azalea 2014)

For her, *ratchet* appears to be a way of saying that she can be affluent but sly in a ‘down home’ manner, meaning she looks good and takes care of herself, but she would be willing to get scrappy if the occasion arose. Interestingly, Azalea’s use of the word once again applies a sense of blackness to her demeanor, showing a sense of worldliness commonly associated with the black woman. In 2015, Azalea chose once again to declare her claim to *ratchet*; this time through a Twitter post.



(Azalea 2015)

For reasons unknown, but possibly related to the commercial appeal of *ratchet* at the time, Azalea’s use of the word received little to no backlash despite her pale complexion, a factor she herself has perceived as negative in her struggle to enter the rap world (Ahmed 2011; Hernandez 2014).

In the face of the *ratchet* movement within the black community, some artists have decided to completely distance themselves from the word and its ideology. Many of these artists fall into what is now referred to as ‘intellectual,’ ‘educated,’ or even ‘nerdy’ rap, a genre stemming from an increase in the availability of education for young artists (Urban Dictionary 2008; Urban Dictionary 2005), many of whom no longer come directly from the ‘hood, but suburban neighborhoods (Burgess 2013; Lanigan 2016).

Tink, also known as Trinity Homes, is one such artist. In her 2015 single, “Ratchet Commandments,” a young Homes takes a hard stance on the females of her generation, accusing them of glorifying a ‘ratchet’ lifestyle over hard work and independence.

“I been at this thing for years
It's done turned me to an animal
Some of y'all ratchet, I'm a write you hoes a manual
Step by step, G shit for you to keep

This the ratchet commandments, I need a moment to preach...

Fuck up on a nigga

When you know he got a missus, you want labels, alright bitches

(Thou shalt not) lie upon the bible

How you looking for a title when you sleeping with his rivals?

I'd rather be making money

Than taking care of some kids...

We act belligerent, generation of ignorance..."

(Tink 2015)

Her depictions of a lazy, disloyal, social-media-influenced, and promiscuous group of women put our current society in perspective while also drawing parallels with the hard-working youth, such as herself. What is most striking about Homes's depiction of the Millennial love for all things *ratchet* is her direct call to the male population as well.

"And niggas ratchet too, just in another way

You fake fathers never held your daughters, never had a conversation

You too fucking immature to get an occupation..."

(Tink 2015)

By defining *ratchet*, not just as a word for a female but as a word for a lifestyle accepted by both males and females, Homes effectively depicts the current use of *ratchet* today - as an all-encompassing, ungendered, newer version of the now outdated adjective *ghetto*. Her depiction

was rapidly accepted by mainstream media, receiving the title of Pitchfork's "Best New Track" for its relevant social commentary (Torres 2015). Also included in this line-up is the work of Rapsody, a North Carolinian artist known for her complex rhymes and extended metaphors. In her 2014 release, "Illuminaughty (Chinchilla)," she claims to be "a poet baby Laurette" continuing with "I don't relate to ratchet." Her lines delineate her position on the term and are further backed by her words in interviews:

"I'm like, "this singer and me are total opposites; that doesn't make any sense." They might be R&B or ratchet style and I'm pure hip-hop; that makes no sense. That's been the craziest thing to me. Put me on a tour that makes sense. I can tour with an Ab-Soul, I can tour with a Kendrick Lamar, I can tour with an Jean Grae, I can tour with a Talib Kweli. That makes sense to me. This R&B singer? These females? Not to say they are not good but just because we are females doesn't mean we are the same type of music." (G. 2015)

Mentioned as an appropriate tour mate by Rapsody, Jean Grae throws an educated and nerdy twist on her use of *ratchet* in her lyrics. In her lines, she references Ratchet, a robotic science fiction character popularized by the Transformers media franchise.

"Comma face balm for after on my dot com; I'm basically batshit
You basic bastard I never pace it
I crave action, I transform like I'll save y'all
But then I stay Ratchet"

(Jean Grae 2013)

This is obvious from her use of both the verb “transform” and the capitalization of “Ratchet.” Her intricate wordplay involves not only an implication of maintaining street credentials á la traditional *ratchet*, but identifies her as inclusive in the portion of society commonly referred to as ‘nerds.’ Effectively, Jean Grae validates her street credibility on two fronts, in the rap scene and in the hearts of science-fiction lovers, a love that is only fortified by her chosen moniker, a reference to the American superhero franchise X-Men.

Also, but arguably included within this genre of *ratchet* use is the work of 3D Na’Tee, or Samantha Davon James. James career started in her hometown of New Orleans, but was rapidly pushed into the limelight by the spread of New Orleans rap following Hurricane Katrina. In “The Miseducation of 3D Na’Tee” the rapper composes a letter and tribute to Lauryn Hill, a pseudo mother figure for James. She outlines her struggles as a youth and the strength that Hill was able to instill in James through her music. James claims to be an active participant in ‘ratchet’ culture, but her claim to metaphysical enlightenment sets her apart from many ‘ratchet’ rappers.

“I’m from the streets where we hardly see a healthy balance

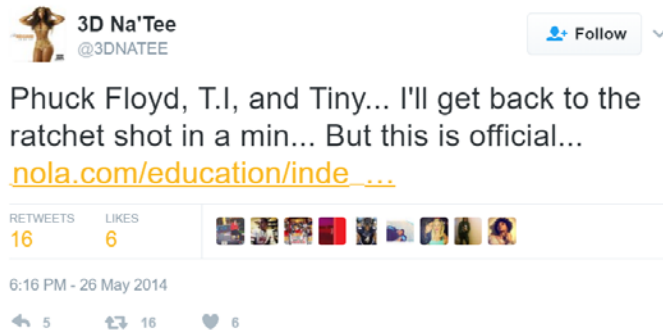
See, I’m kinda sorta ratchet but I’m hella woke

Third eye open like a savage”

(3D Na’Tee 2016)

James’s differentiation from her peers in fully claiming *ratchet*, implying instead that *ratchet* is a part of her upbringing rather than her self, is enlightening in that it gives perspective to the overall pressure faced by young females growing up in socio-economically deprived communities and the challenges that they may encounter in building lives and personas for

themselves. The song allows for a frame of reference that is not always forefront in rap today -- the battle of nature versus nurture. This topic seems to be a theme in the life of James, who two years prior to the release of her Lauryn Hill ode posted a similar story of the unfortunate upbringing and ambitious inner-workings of a young New Orleans boy to her Twitter.



(3D Na'Tee 2014)

In her post, James seems almost apologetic for her non-‘ratchet’ behavior, showing a never-ending conflict between her tutelage and chosen life.

4.4.2: Use of *Ratchet* in Television

Ratchet has gained major popularity in television, particularly in the reality television genre. Beginning in shows showcasing the lives of black Americans, the word has managed to permeate television, showing up in a variety of sub-genres, most notably series depicting predominantly white culture.

Plausibly, the first major encounter with *ratchet* in mainstream television occurred in Bravo’s popular reality television series *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (RHOA). The series chronicles the exploits of a revolving group of women residing in Atlanta, Georgia. The housewives in the series are often depicted as outlandish, a desired result for the self-proclaimed

“circus show” (Essence 2009). Quintessentially, the show revolves around glorifying wild, unthoughtful actions and decisions by its stars. Porsha, one of the housewives, proclaims her love for this lifestyle, stating, “See, this is what I like. I can be, you know, classy, and I can be sweet, but I like to get a little ratchet” (Bravo a). This comment is made as a reference to a dress-up party, during which she displays herself in a revealing outfit with a large wig and gold accents, including a false gold tooth (Bravo a). As such, the apotheosis of the stars’ irritability and lashing out towards others runs throughout the work with use of *ratchet* or “ratchet” actions incurring air-time. With lines like, “I see what kind of manipulative, ratchet type of chick you are,” being thrown around, it is no wonder that articles covering the events of the show circulate around the idea of ‘ratchetness’ with considerable attention paid to which character is the most “ratchet,” citing a network prompted debate between the housewives over the same topic (Bravo b). While RHOA has been seen as a viewer indulgence or guilty pleasure, the negative representation of black women has gained major recognition. Bloggers abound who speak of the negative portrayal of black women, some claiming that “RHOA is a lesson in what NOT to do with your Black sisters. It is a lesson in how NOT to behave” (Jackson 2013). These same blog posts are shedding light on the portrayal of ‘ratchet’ activities as a trope similar to the trope of the angry black woman in literature (Jackson 2013). Bravo itself has come under critique for its goal of pushing “entertainment value...[with the]...slow degradation and ratchet-makeovers of otherwise happy people” (Cintron 2015).

This obvious stereotyping of the black community, and particularly of black women, became a point of departure for multiple movements within the black community, which seemed to resent their race being depicted in such a way, claiming that “a larger system of cultural appropriation, commodification, and sometimes exploitation...has resulted in the birth of ‘ratchet

culture.’ *Ratchet* has become the umbrella term for all things associated with the linguistic, stylistic, and cultural practices, witnessed or otherwise, of poor people; specifically poor people of color, and more specifically poor women of color.” (Bowen 2013). A movement to eliminate *ratchet* and its connotations directed towards black females emerged.

An attempt to reclaim *ratchet* in a similar fashion to recent attempted reclamations of the words *slut*, *queer* and *bitch* (Sutton 1995) has been made by the black community. One portion of this movement, “Bury the Ratchet,” headed by activist Michaela Angela Davis, campaigned to promote more positive views of southern black women, particularly those in Atlanta. She claims that the depiction of black women in shows like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* leads society to view them as “mean, gold-digging women” (2012). Her distaste for reality television and its role in creating negative images of black women in the media spawned a national movement to remove these stereotypes and focus on the accomplishments of Atlanta’s black female population. Her goal -- to create open dialogue -- spearheaded a movement to “help more women reconsider the images they chose to support and the definitions of black women that they seek to change” (Membis 2012).

Despite movements against *ratchet*, the term continues to flourish within society, mostly with the young, white, middle class. Due to ignorance of or indifference toward the origins, these young people, typically female, have repurposed the word to mean anything that does not suit their needs or register in their own class (De Klerk 1992: 288; Aaron 2010). It also allowed them to act less middle-class and white, effectively providing a way to differentiate themselves from the mundane world of white normativity (Hein 2013; De Klerk 1992: 278-279; Sutton 1995; Hudson 1983). Being ‘ratchet’ became fun (De Klerk 1992: 278-279). It carried with it a sense of otherness. These women could act out without reproach from their birth-given in-group if they

were just being ‘ratchet’ (De Klerk 1992: 278-279; Sutton 1995). The term, like many seemingly unorthodox slang terms, gained a sense of covert prestige within the white youth of America (Risch 1987: 357; Sutton 1995). This seeming divergence from their white parents and culture gives the white youth of the United States an opportunity to stake their ‘own’ claim in society (De Klerk 1992: 278-279; Hein 2013; Sutton 1995), despite the obvious implications of appropriating these terms and ways of speaking from black culture.

The popular MTV television series *The Real World* showcases how white prestige becomes extremely prominent when *ratchet* is put into use by young white females. During the filming of Season 31, Jenna, a southern white female, uses *ratchet* to describe her antagonistic roommate Ceejai, a black female (B/M 2016). This conversation, though between Jenna and a friend in her hometown, is overheard by Ceejai, who becomes immediately offended (B/M 2016). Jenna remains completely unaware of her discriminatory language, despite being repeatedly told that her actions are racist (B/M 2016). For Jenna, the word *ratchet* is simply an insult, not a racially charged slur (B/M 2016). Like Jenna, much of the American youth using the word today do not fully comprehend the implications of its use, relying instead on the ways they have heard it used by other white people (Aaron 2010).

This negative use by white females is also evident in the popular, but controversial reality dating show *Dating Naked*. In the show, the premise of which is a polyamory-based dating show, competitors are prompted to vie for the attention of the main, longstanding participants (VH1 2016). This often leads to very negative reviews of each other by the competitors. One such review, given by a white female, Michelle, of her competitor, a black female named Chinnet, revolves around the ‘ratchetness’ of Chinnet. Michelle, when selected as the co-star of the show, David, as a “keeper,” reports in her personal interview that she is “not surprised” by his decision

to keep her as the other options are “like ratchet, upon ratchet” (VH1 2016). Ironically, Michelle uses this term while vying for the attention of a black male (VH1 2016). Because of the setup of the show, reactions by the other cast members to this utterance are not presented; however, the tension between Michelle and Chinet leading up to this comment relays an obviously negative connotation.

Ratchet has become prominent in use by young white females without the racial connotations as well. In the MTV teen dramedy *Awkward*, the main character, highschool-aged Jenna, and her friends are often heard throwing around this word. Characters within the show seem to perceive no racial connotation with this use, relying on it instead as a universal insult for any female enemy. This is easily seen in Season 4, Episode 10, in which Sadie refers to an opposing classmate as a “ratchet whore” (Lungerich 2014). Second, the group also uses the word to describe disheveled or lacking in pristine items, such as in Season 5, Episode 9, in which Tamara refers to an unfinished hemline as “look[ing] pretty ratchet” (Lungerich 2015). For the purposes of the show, the writers appear to use *ratchet* to appeal to their audience - young, white, middle-class females. This stylistic decision of the series writers shows in great depth the progression of *ratchet* from more clandestine to widespread terminology as this group, as has been mentioned, is the current main group of use for *ratchet*.

Throughout the age of *ratchet*, the word has played a major part within the gay community. *Ratchet*, along with terms like *yas*, *shade*, and *read* associated with the gay community, seems to cross hatch with the black community (Barrett 1997). This belief stems from both the similarity in its manner of use and its close proximity to linguistic varieties, ethnicity-based and sexuality-based linguistics in this case, which is known to occur in diverse speech communities (Barrett 1997). In the gay community, the word has been used as an in-

group semi compliment, typically referring to the ingenuous and often resourceful ways that flamboyant homosexuals dress and act, and a complete insult for the same resourceful flamboyance. By the 2012 rise in popularity of *ratchet*, the gay community had already begun letting the word pass into obscurity, with statements like “The word is hella last year” to follow shortly (Ortved 2013). *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, an iconic show in the gay community, showed the fading importance of *ratchet* in its Season 6 (WoW 2014) introductory scenes via a dismissively-placed rhinestone-encrusted necklace emblazoned with the term. The word had by Season 8 become nearly antiquated in the gay community (WoW 2016). Interestingly, it is in Season 8 that we see a white female embrace and use the term in reference to a black drag queen, an act that not only suggests a type of racial power play but also dates the popularity of the term via showing movement of *ratchet* from an active part of the gay community to limited occurrence by a white female. Michelle Visage, a vocalist and television personality known for her direct manner and large bosom, began referring to the drag style of Bob the Drag Queen, a professional drag queen and comedian, as “ratchet drag” (WoW 2016). This terminology, used by Visage to reference the simple, lacking-in-glamour style of the queen, quickly became an insult toward Bob by other queens, namely Derek Barry, a Britney Spears impersonator (WoW 2016). Despite the negative view of his co-stars, Bob ends up embracing his “ratchet drag” himself, opting to appear in the final performance in traditionally ‘ratchet’ attire and holding a clutch emblazoned with a rhinestone “*ratchet*,” making it the focal point of his final performance (WoW 2016). Her decision to celebrate “ratchet drag” through large, natural hair, gold chains, door-knocker earrings, cut-off jean shorts, a sports jersey, and a hand-emblazoned clutch, rather than the glamorous gowns of most finalists (WoW 2016), shows her acceptance and ownership of the term. Similarly, her use of backup dancers dressed as construction workers (WoW 2016)

function to suggest both a more working class dynamic, both of drag and of the origins of *ratchet*. What is most fascinating about this social phenomenon is the decision by Bob to champion a seemingly negative term in a similar manner to the progressive female rappers mentioned above, something that has occurred throughout the history of derogatory terms in general.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions

In its time as popular American English slang, *ratchet* has seen much of the entertainment-based media outlets, including music and television. This rise to fame can be most correlated with the American black population, particularly through rap and commercially edited reality television. Despite this racially characterized popularity, most evidence shows the beginning of *ratchet* within the trucking community, a stereotypically white (Trucking SOS; Watson 2014) and working class group of people. Though there is evidence of an initial relationship between *ratchet* and prisoners also, this claim cannot be fully substantiated from a singular record of occurrence. Because of the evidential origins of the word, it must be assumed that though a racially charged word currently, *ratchet* began its ascent to fame not from a racial group, but from an economic class.

This method of only considering the surface representation, also employed by Zimmer & Carson (2013) to define *ratchet*, is common in society, in which mass propagation often overshadows the true history of many slang terms (Aaron 2010). The research methods being used to elaborate on such terms must be taken into consideration. Previous analysis of *ratchet* ignored much of its long history in fringe cultures, settling simply for the most obvious and blatantly mainstream interpretation of the term. This is also true of the many misdirected theories of *ratchet*'s folk etymology, many of which skim only the surface. Failure to continue farther into the etymology of the term has allowed for misunderstanding, with specific ignorance of possible social implications and levels of appropriation. Delving into the history of terms allows

researchers to create an accurate image of not only the current interpretation but the many layers of meaning, much like the controversy-causing polysemy found in *ratchet*.

Ratchet, in its current form, may be most equated to the term *ghetto*. The two words have origins other than in the ethnic group that they currently represent. *Ghetto*, originally defined by Merriam-Webster as “a quarter of a city in which Jews were formerly required to live,” holds historical roots in World War II, in which the Jewish people of Europe were condemned in small living areas of disrepair (M-W 2017b). In modern times, *ghetto* has morphed to refer to the areas in which the people of the lower socioeconomic class live, as well as to the people themselves, gaining the more modern definition “a quarter of a city in which members of a minority group live especially because of social, legal, or economic pressure” (M-W 2017). The underlying connotations being that the people of color, due to the general oppression of American society, is the most likely to live in these conditions (Iceland & Wilkes 2006; Corcoran & Nichols-Casebolt 2004: 222-223; Mason 2013: 691) with the 2007-2011 US Census reporting that more than twenty-five percent of the black population lives in poverty (Macartney et al. 2013). Likewise, *ratchet* is derived from a predominantly white group’s slang (Trucking SOS; Watson 2014), but has come to represent the culture of black Americans, particularly of the lower socioeconomic class, while also holding meanings unknown to its current consumer (Aaron 2010).

Despite its origins, *ratchet* has come to represent the lifestyle of poor black people. Systematic oppression of minorities, particularly black Americans, has been a major factor in the continuation of disparities in education, available resources, and, ultimately, socioeconomic status between the black and white populations of the United States (House & Williams 2000: 95; Corcoran & Nichols-Casebolt 2004: 216-223; Azzam 2008). As a result of this large disparity between classes, races, and even genders, lower-class black females have long held the

bottom rung in upward mobility (De Klerk 1992: 278), leaving them not only in a lifestyle not of their choosing, but as easy targets for non-normativity based hatred and terminology (De Klerk 1992: 278; Sutton 1995). In the face of scarce educational resources and overwhelming opposition, many of these women have resorted to alternative means to attain their goals, often employing use of their body and cunning in order to move up in the world, a life-route frowned upon by majority society for its disregard of “self-control” (Mason 2013: 694) principles, despite the barriers placed onto these women regarding their autonomy and survival. For this ingenuity in upward mobility, these women face constant criticism and are often administered negative social standings, such as the referent *ratchet*. At some point, many of these women may begin to accept society’s interpretations of themselves, acting and labeling themselves as *ratchet* without thought to their ability to negate the stereotype (Brown & Young 2015; Morris 2016: 49-50). Logically, and referring to the persistent and systematic progression of racism, sexism, and classism in the United States, these women are allotted their titles and positions in life for reasons beyond their control. As has been mentioned, “being ratchet is only cool when you do it for fun, not if those are valid practices from your lived experiences” (Bowen 2013).

Rap music, a historically and predominantly black style of artistry (Conrad et al. 2009), and its spread through the United States popularized *ratchet*. Words like *trap* for a drug dealer’s house, *12* for police officers, *head* for oral sex, and *grind* for working hard, among others, have permeated the speech of Americans of all ethnic and economic backgrounds. These words have set a precedent for the youth of the United States in that they represent inclusion in a new and enticing lifestyle that may coincide with young rebellion. Just as other popular words have spread initially from rap, *ratchet* has followed a similar path of development. This popularization also created many of the connotations of *ratchet* used today - as ‘ghetto,’ ignorant, and/or a

particular type of black female. These representations of the word spread to the masses through the music of rap artists, influencing the youth of America well beyond the black community.

As argued by some, the most effective way to eliminate *ratchet* as a representative of the black community may be for the black community to redefine it, rather than simply accepting it or describing themselves by it. This reappropriation has begun in movements like Davis's "Bury the Ratchet" discussed above; however, reclamation of the word is likely to require active acknowledgement of the issue by a larger group of people - namely males. As the dominant group in rap, male rappers have great sway on the direction in which musical styles and specific lyrics proceed, and thus, have great influence on how rap music and the rap community is portrayed to the ever-impressionable youth of the United States (Conrad et al. 2009). Showing respect for female counterparts, along with removal of the glorification of the term, could potentially influence the manner in which *ratchet* is used. However, this is an argument long fought in the rap community in which many females have fallen victims to the seemingly never-ceasing extension of the patriarchy in rap music. Coincidentally, women in the black community have also played a major role in the proliferation of *ratchet* as a female trope. Rappers like Angie Locc and Nicki Minaj, as mentioned above, have used the term as a negative identifier for other women of color. The RHOA hold responsibility for this crime against their own gender as well. By perpetuating the use of the term to define a type of female, these people are working against each other rather than working to build a community within their own gender (Gomez 2013). As a last argument focusing on the black community itself, many members of the lower-class black community have viewed use of *ratchet* by the middle and upper-class black community as a fallacy in itself (Ball 2015; Arceneaux 2013; Young 2014). This sentiment between classes delineates the extremely prominent variable of class in the definition of *ratchet*. For them, the

“Bougie Black People,” limited by their enrollment in the bourgeois, do not fit into the definition and lifestyle of *ratchet*, thus eliminating them from rightful use of the term (Ball 2015, Young 2014). This divide within the black community, though greatly accepted in pop-culture, is not valuable to social equality.

Unfortunately, the mentality that concentrates on the black community as the proliferator of *ratchet* is the same mentality that has helped to perpetrate negative stereotypes of the black community as a whole. Contemporary US society seems to revel in debaucherous, non-normative behavior. This psychology has resulted in a world in which rap artists are praised for their negatively-pointed interpretations of lower-class lifestyles, rather than portrayals of basic humanity (Oware 2013). In the same manner, reality television has depicted normal humans, via editing or pressure, as monstrous caricatures. For example, RHOA’s DeShawn Snow was removed from the show for her inability to play into the desires of the producers to depict herself as outlandish (Essence 2009). This phenomenon is best described by activist, Davis: “The only interest that pop-culture has in black women is this ratchet world” (Ortved 2013). Majority culture has created a world in which black people cannot fully be themselves, instead having to portray a mask or trope of themselves in order to reach approval. Paradoxically, the trope required of black entertainment personalities is one created by an aversion to the respectability politics established to gain white approval (Brown & Young 2015; Maddox 2016).

Ultimately, it may be too late to attempt elimination of *ratchet* from referring to any social or ethnic group. The word has become ingrained in its previous reclamations, leading to its current status as an overarching negative. From the slang of truckers to a word of the black working class, *ratchet* gained the added meanings of an entire lifestyle. Then from a black working class patois to a star-studded rap phenomenon, *ratchet* found its way into the linguistic

repertoire of the white masses by effectively describing an aspect of working-class and black culture that differed from the norms of mainstream society (Hein 2013; Sutton 1995; Hudson 1983). Now, in its current transition from rap lingo to a term of the young, white masses, *ratchet* has spread too far and for too long for any one group to lay full claim to the term. At this point, *ratchet* simply refers to anything “broken, old, or just plain “black”,” a far cry from either the original meaning or the one defined and popularized by black America (Weaver 2013). The word is primarily used in any and all of the polysemous meanings by white females, rather than the abundant audience it once had among different classes and races. Black users of the word have begun to see the term in a negative light, as a reminder of larger society’s views of them. Members of the gay community have also given up the word, some stating “The word is hella last year” (Ortved 2013). It has simply become too mainstream to continue to hold its ‘cool’ and ‘edgy’ status, thus removing the sense of otherness that so many of its users thrived in. As most things do, the age of *ratchet* seems to have come to an end. With fewer and fewer people using the word, it is slowly falling into the abyss of past-used slang. Despite the now overarching status of *ratchet*, the social implications that can be drawn from it must not be ignored, as they tell us much about the socio-political structure of our world.

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