Swarthmore College

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Twerk It: Deconstructing Racial and Gendered Implications of Black Women's Bodies through Representations of Twerking

An Undergraduate Senior Thesis

by

Niamba Baskerville

Faculty Advisor: Sarah Willie-LeBreton

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Arts degree

May 2014

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Acknowledgements

This work, like all others, would not have been possible without the help of several others. I would like to thank all those who made this work possible. First, I would like to extend a special thanks to my advisor Professor Sarah Willie-LeBreton for guiding me through this long and difficult process. I would also like to thank my second reader Professor Nina Johnson for her instrumental feedback back on my first draft as well as help finding sources. I am indebted to my interviewees (nicknamed: Unique, Keke, Trey, Sky, Vivica, and Isis) for participating in my study. I would also like to acknowledge Kimari and Big Freedia for publicizing their performances, as well as all of the bloggers I mention for producing the articles that this work analyzes. And last, but certainly not least, I would like to extend a big thanks to all of my friends and family who supported me spiritually, mentally, and emotionally through this long journey.

Booty Work: An Introduction

A young black woman stands on stage before a crowd. She is wearing black shorts, cut off just below the butt cheeks, and a white-collared shirt, tied just beneath her breasts. Her stomach and a bit of cleavage are exposed. With her back to the crowd, legs spread a little more than hip distance apart, knees slightly bent, and hands placed on the table in front of her, she moves her pelvis up and down, allowing her buttocks to shake. She flaps her legs in and out and snakes her body from side to side slowly, making a combing motion through her hair, but none of these movements outweigh the gyration of her buttocks. For it is the focal point of this dance. She peers over her shoulder briefly to see a sea of hands outstretched toward her. The audience has crowded the gate that blocks the stage. They reach over its metal rail, clapping in time to the syncopated beat of Travis Porter's "Bring it Back" as it blares through the speakers. They are reaching for her, cheering her on, applauding the show that she is putting on for them. The crowd is predominantly white, but those closest and most attentive to her seem to be people of color. Both male and female audience members seem to be impressed by her. Yet, black men seem especially entertained. She feels like they are seeing her for the first time with new eyes. She knows she is the object of their gaze, yet somehow she feels liberated. She realizes her performance might be read in terms of myths about black female sexuality, yet she feels totally in control of how the audience reacts to her and her body in this moment. The song changes and she turns at last to face the crowd. Some members continue to applaud her, moving their hands up and down slowly in a bowing motion. Others lose themselves dancing to the next song. She exits the stage and returns to the DJ stand feeling exhausted by the dance but exhilarated by the experience.

I am the young black woman described above. The dance I just described is the newly popular dance form called "twerking". I say "newly popular" instead of "new" because twerking originated at least 20 years ago, if not more. Yet, it did not receive much attention in mainstream popular culture until recently. In late August of 2013, Oxford Dictionary added a new list of terms to its online lexicon. Among these, was a definition of "twerking". According to the Oxford's Online Dictionary, to "twerk" means to "dance to popular music in a sexually provocative manner involving thrusting hip movements and a low, squatting stance."[1] This definition neglects to mention that gyration of the buttocks is the focal point of the dance. It also suggests that the dance is inherently sexual and provocative. While twerking involves "thrusting hip movements and a low, squatting stance", this does not mean the dance itself is inherently sexual or provocative. Instead, as I will argue, this dance form has come to embody hypersexuality in our cultural imagination because of its association with black female bodies. Historically (and currently), as future chapters will demonstrate, racist iconography aligned black female bodies with primitivity and sexual deviance. This thesis investigates the ways in which "controlling images" of black women in the media inform audiences' perceptions of the newly popular dance form of twerking. In doing so, it adds to existing explorations of the impact of race, gender, and class on media representations. By examining the very recent twerking phenomenon, it illustrates how these misrepresentations become embodied, and how they, in turn, affect the construction and performance of "black female" identity.

My initial interest in representation began with an interest in films. *Miss Representation*, a documentary which explores how current representations of women in the media uphold ideals of patriarchy, demonstrates how deeply embedded and pervasive sexism is in every type of

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[1] *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. "twerk," accessed May 4, 2014, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/twerk

media that we as a society consume. However, it lacks an analysis of how race impacts representation. Black feminist theory and historical perspectives on black women in film fulfill this gap. That is, they investigate the combined impact of racial and gendered oppression on the representations of black women and the implications these representations have for black women. Patricia Hill Collins, author of *Black Feminist Thought* (2000:69-96), for example, presents five “controlling images” of black women (mammy, matriarch, welfare mother/queen, black lady, jezebel/hoochie), discusses their origins, and the function each portrayal has in upholding race, gender, and class hierarchy. Her theory suggests that these mostly negative portrayals of black women impact the way others see black women and how they see themselves. But, she also acknowledges these images are dynamic and changing (Collins 2000:72), thereby justifying the need for continued study.

To examine these "controlling images" in contemporary films and discover how other black women thought the representations of black women in contemporary film affected them, I conducted preliminary research to propose future study. In interviews and discussion groups, respondents cited the angry black woman, the token (the one black character or friend in the movie or show), the loud ghetto woman, and the hypersexual black woman as "controlling images" they had seen in cinema. Of these, the hypersexual black woman archetype was mentioned most. While interviewees mentions the potential for a "strong black woman" character, they had difficulty citing examples of such a portrayal. Negative portrayals, which reduce the black female characters' identity to an uncomplicated stereotype, were more salient because they were more prevalent. Moreover, many interviewees suggested that young black woman are most vulnerable to the negative effects on self-esteem that these stereotypical portrayals can have. In essence, implications proposed by theorists held true for these more

recent images (Baskerville 2012, unpublished). The sad truth of this, however, is that these narratives about black women, which one would want to consider archaic and irrelevant, are still pervasive in today's society.

Expanding from film portrayals to other media contexts, I investigated the relationship between hip-hop music video portrayals of the ideal "video vixen" body and the practice of obtaining illegal butt injections, a practice which involves women either injecting themselves or paying others to inject them with silicone and/or other potentially harmful substances in their butts to make them bigger. Analyzing black feminist theory and literature on the body in light of hip-hop music videos and interviews of women who had received butt injections, I argued that butt injections have become a "technology of the self" [2] for some women to improve their bodies, social relations, and income because hip-hop music videos associate big butts with a sense "authentic" black femininity, desirability, and success (Baskerville 2013, unpublished). Using the body as a unit of analysis in this way illustrates how history, structural inequalities, and cultural meanings become inscribed in the body. Seeing social media reactions to twerking, in the wake of Miley Cyrus' controversial Video Music Awards performance, revealed that examining twerking combines race, gender, representations and the body as units of analysis, thereby justifying this study.

Plan for the Chapters

This thesis argues that twerking both constrains black women as its representations reinforce myths of their hypersexuality, and enables resistance to these representations by

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[2] "technology of the self" -a technology that "permits 'individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies... to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality'" from Thomas, M. Lynn. "Skin Lighteners in South Africa Transnational Entanglements and Technologies of the Self." in *Shades of difference: Why skin color matters*, ed. Glenn, Evelyn (Stanford University Press, 2009), 300 and 320

allowing black women a forum for expression and the ability to reclaim their bodies. Chapter one provides a brief history of the representation of black women's bodies in the U.S. This literature review outlines the hypersexual stereotype that has existed and still exists in black women's representation, while underscoring the relationships between black women's bodies, racial and gender hierarchy, media, and the construction of black female identity in the United States. These theories establish a framework from which to examine the twerking phenomenon. Chapter two defines twerking, its origins, and the implications of its current representations for its black female performers. Chapter three analyzes intentions of and reactions to Miley Cyrus' controversial 2013 Video Music Awards performance in order to assess how and why it had the effect of cultural appropriation for so many viewers. While these first three chapters emphasize the constraints that representations of twerking can impose on black women, chapter four explores the enabling potential that twerking can have for its performers.

Methodology

To examine differences in twerking portrayals, I have analyzed YouTube videos of twerking, including self-made and hip-hop music videos. To better understand viewer perceptions of twerking, I observed reactionary videos, comments, and online articles. Since race has been one of the key controversies raised in online discussions of twerking, I also conducted 6 interviews with black students from a highly selective liberal arts college to gage their opinions. To recruit interested students, I posted an ad to one of the college's black student groups' Facebook page. Interviewees were self-selected, but this method was preferred for this research because it meant that interviewees would be familiar with and have a vested interest in the topic. To maintain the anonymity of my informants, I have provided each person with a pseudonym: Unique, Keke, Trey, Sky, Vivica, and Isis. To my knowledge, no one in the liberal

arts college where I conducted this research possesses these names, and they therefore cannot be linked back to my informants.

Limitations of the study

I have limited the scope of research by focusing on twerking and black women. As a newly popular phenomenon, twerking is not as popular or familiar amongst older generations. So, while views of twerking might vary generationally, especially since ideas of what is appropriate for public performance have shifted, this research does not examine this in detail. A future study might explore these generational shifts, as well as twerking in the context of other groups. For example, another study might observe twerking in black LGBTQ communities. In this study I have discovered, that black gay men and trans-identified women, are also associated with twerking. Hence, a study with a larger scope could investigate the implications of gender and sexuality in those queer communities via twerking. Also, since Miley Cyrus' performance resulted in an influx of representations of non-black people twerking, a future study might explore the opinions of members of those other groups as well to employ a more comparative lens. These inquiries however, are beyond the scope of this investigation and will not be discussed further.

A Note on Positionality

Because this study does not include a survey, a statistical study, or a large sample size, its trends and themes are suggestive, not conclusive. The aim was not to quantify or reach comprehensive conclusions, but rather to explore the cultural perceptions of a very small and particular group. In that regard it is representative. The arguments made herein primarily reflect the opinions of black college-educated 20-somethings, primarily women, who attend an elite

institution. The points of view established reflect the experiences and interests these respondents have as persons with these particular identifiers. Though I focus on the United States context, I use of "black" instead of African-American throughout this study in order to recognize the diversity and reflect the diasporic experiences of my interviewees and of the communities of which I speak. Though all of my interviewees identify as black, not all of them are African-American.[3] Many of them are social science majors and all have some background and interest in black studies. Keke, Sky, Vivica, and Isis all twerk. These four have all had some "formal" dance training, but they each emphasized the fact that they have been dancing socially since they can remember. Though they do not twerk, Unique and Trey participate in other forms of social dancing and engage with twerking through friends and their friends' experiences. That said, it is important to acknowledge that as people who think about race analytically through academics, who encounter race issues through lived experience, engage regularly in media, and who are familiar with and share a vested interest in the current twerking, my interviewees are experts in the topic at hand.

The responses drawn from content analysis and other interactions represent a much broader demographic. Though many of the bloggers, cultural critics, and other respondents I mention are black, they vary in age, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, education level, occupation, etc. There are also a few cultural critics mentioned herein, who are not black; some are people of color, others are white. In any case, these respondents all have different relationships to and involvement in twerking. Still, their viewpoints, drawn from their different experiences, add to the perspectives of my interviewees.

[3] Unique and Isis were raised in African and Caribbean immigrant households respectively.

As a young black woman who twerks, it is important to acknowledge that I am personally implicated by the subjects of this research. I have personally experienced the limits of twerking's representations, as well as the opportunities it offers for expression. I recognize that my position as a young, college-educated, black woman who attends an elite institution and who twerks impacts my perception of this phenomenon. This thesis, however, though motivated by personal interests, is not an investigation of my own personal experiences. Rather it engages my experiences, in light of the experiences of others, as well as media content, in order to address the sociological and cultural issues embedded in this newly popular phenomenon known as twerking.

Chapter 1

Bring It Back: Historical Understandings of Black Women's Bodies

As aforementioned, historically, black female bodies have embodied racist notions of primitivity and sexual deviance. In "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," Sander Gilman (1985: 204-242) argues that, in the 19th-century, black women signified sexual deviance and bore the stigmata of "difference" "deviance" and "Otherness" in their anatomy. A key figure who illustrates the characterization of black women as such is Sarah Baartman, a Khoikhoi African woman nicknamed "Hottentot Venus" whose body was continuously put on display by 19th-century Europeans. Whilst living, she was often exhibited at parties and other European gatherings wearing little clothing as a form of entertainment. After death, she was dissected and her genitalia and buttocks were placed on display. Gilman argues that Europeans placed Baartman on display and reduced her to her sexual parts to reinforce racist notions about innate differences between whites and blacks. In their view, hypersexuality was "natural" for these "primitive" blacks who were the complete antithesis of whites in all aspects of humanity, particularly sexuality and beauty. European scientists used the alleged uniqueness of black women's genitalia and buttocks to substantiate claims about their innate inferiority, hypersexuality, primitivity, and difference scientifically (Gilman 1985:212).

For the 19th-century observer, "Sarah Bartmann's genitalia and buttocks summarized her essence" and as such they were understood as a "pathological summary of the entire individual" (Gilman 1985:216). European audiences "paid to see [Bartmann's] buttocks and...fantasized about the uniqueness of her genitalia," because, for them, the presence of an "exaggerated buttocks" represented all the anomalies of the black female genitalia and pointed to other,

hidden sexual signs, both physical and temperamental (Gilman 1985: 212-213, 219). From this we can see that these black women were fragmented into body parts (Martin 2001:21), and these parts were then understood to represent the individual's essence and identity. This demonstrates the power white male dominated society had to reduce Bartmann's identity. Iconography renders this association more lethal as it reinforces the link between the bodies of black women and hypersexual identity and becomes so prevalent that a historical and cultural association becomes mistaken for something natural, biological, and genetic.

"Jezebel": Black Women and the Myth of Hypersexuality

Like Gilman, Patricia Hill Collins, demonstrates that racist and sexist notions are embedded in iconography with her discussion of the five major controlling images of black women (i.e., mammy, matriarch, welfare mother/queen, black lady, jezebel/hoochie). She argues that these controlling images are fundamental to black women's oppression because they assume black women have certain traits and are so prevalent that they become hegemonic (seen as natural, normal, and inevitable) (Collins 2000:5). To better understand the depth of the hypersexuality myth that is attached to black women, it is necessary to examine the "jezebel" image more closely. The "jezebel", "whore", or "hoochie" is "constructed as a [sexually aggressive] woman whose sexual appetites are at best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable..." and who participates in activities associated with deviant sexuality like selling her sex, sleeping with women, engaging in anal and oral sex, etc. (Collins 2000:83-84). Collins (2000:81) suggests that this image originated during slavery, when black women were portrayed as being "sexually aggressive wet nurses", but as Gilman's work (1985:209) illustrates the association of black women with intense and animalistic sexual desire dates back to the Middle Ages.

The jezebel image has several functions. First, by characterizing all black women as sexually aggressive, it justifies sexual assaults against them. If black slave women were portrayed as having excessive sexual appetites, all sexual encounters were understood as having been provoked, thus sexual violence against them went unnamed and unprosecuted. Hence, white men were excused from their sexual violence against black women and white women could blame black women for their husband's exploits. If black women were the problem, rape and slavery could be excused.[4] A second function of this portrayal was to render the increased fertility of slave women a natural and expected consequence of their sexual appetite. A third function of the jezebel was for her sexual deviance to define the boundaries of normal sexuality (Collins 2000:81-83). Since the jezebel image transforms black womanhood into a symbol of deviant female sexuality, middle-class white women, who historically have been depicted as frail, chaste, objects of male desire more interested in romance than sex (Weitz 2003:6-7), represent normal female heterosexuality. Clearly, the hypersexual image of the jezebel had legal, policy, and social implications. This thesis explores how this image manifests currently and how it influences our relationships, conceptions of beauty, bodies, performances, and identities.

Gender and Cultural Identity Formation

Identity is typically conceived of as fixed, stable, and "natural" category deriving from an individual's supposed "essence". However, conceiving of identity instead as something that is socially constructed allows us to better understand the influence that these controlling images have. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Judith Butler (1988:519-531) redefines the notion of gender identity and strips it of its “naturalness” by demonstrating how it is performed through acts. These acts are performed by individuals with a script already written by social and cultural convention. Butler emphasizes that gender is not a radical project that reflects

[4] personal communication with Professor Sarah Willie-LeBreton, April 8, 2014

individual choice, nor is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual (Butler 1988:526). In other words, while gender performance is constrained by the social reality, and thereby not enacted with full freedom of choice, individuals still exercise some agency in their enactments. In their performance of gender, individuals choose from options already limited by culture, history, and patriarchy, among other things.

Butler's conception of gender as a performance informs Sandra Lee Bartky's discussion of "femininity" in "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" (2003:25-45). She argues that "femininity" is constituted through a set of actions on the body. She uses Michel Foucault's theoretical framework on the production of "docile bodies", which suggests that disciplinary practices, ways of controlling the body and its operations, produce a body that is "docile" meaning that it may be subjected, transformed, and/or improved (Foucault 1995:136-139). In her view, Foucault's failure to differentiate between the disciplinary practices and bodily experiences of men and women reproduces sexism by suggesting that men and women's' bodies bear the same relationship to "the characteristic institutions of modern life" which they do not (Bartky 2003:27). To ameliorate this, she combines his framework with Judith Butler's understanding of gender to explore the disciplinary practices that allow women to produce "feminine" bodies. Borrowing from Butler, she defines femininity as "an artifice, an achievement, 'a mode of enacting and reenacting received gender norms which surface as so many styles of flesh'" (Bartky 2003:27). This reinforces Butler's suggestion that femininity is neither "innate" nor "natural" rather it is produced, achieved, and constituted through a series of repeated acts.

Sexism is embedded in the disciplinary practices women must enact to produce the ideal "feminine" body. To show how women learn to discipline their bodies and police themselves so

that they conform to sexist ideals of "femininity", Bartky cites the following examples: women take up less space (e.g., while waiting for trains), learn to defer to men (e.g., averting their eyes under male scrutiny), return more smiles their male counterparts, and are touched more often by men than they touch. All of these examples illustrate her point that "Feminine movement, gesture, and posture must exhibit not only constriction, but grace and a certain eroticism restrained by modesty..." (Bartky 2003:30). Women must pursue and cultivate the proper "feminine" body, which requires that they learn to walk a certain way, look a certain way, speak a certain way, and interact a certain way. These disciplinary practices help to construct the ideal body of femininity and hence the feminine body-subject, a "practiced and subjected" body onto which inferiority is inscribed (Bartky 2003:33). Shrinking into space, while men are allowed to expand into it, and averting one's eyes, relinquishing claim to being the "looker" of the gaze, are actions that reinforce women's inferiority to men. These disciplinary practices as well as others like wearing heels or shaving affect women's identity formation.

To put it plainly, gender performances have consequences. "Incorrect" performances of gender lead to punishment, while "proper" performances reinstate the gender binary norms as "natural" and deriving from biological sex (Butler 1988:528). That is, by acting, in a manner that society considers to be "feminine", one who is biologically female reinforces the notion that these "feminine" ways of being are "innate" rather than culturally constructed as they, in fact, are. One who is biologically female who does not adopt the "proper" "feminine" mannerisms challenges the "naturalness" of this gender identity, posing a threat to the gendered hierarchy, and is therefore subject to consequences. One's value and identity, then, is tied to how well one performs the gender they are expected to. Bartky writes, "To have a body felt to be 'feminine'--a body socially constructed through the appropriate practices--is in most cases crucial to a

woman's sense of herself as female and, since persons currently can *be* only as male or female, to her sense of herself as an existing individual. To possess such a body may also be essential to her sense of herself as a sexually desiring and desirable subject" (2003:39). While performing gender appropriately reinforces gender binaries and patriarchy, patriarchy renders "proper" gender performance imperative for women to define their identity and to establish themselves as both sexually desiring and desirable.

Racist iconography makes it near impossible for black women to perform their gender appropriately. Since, in the U.S., men are expected to want sex while women are expected to want romance, the hypersexual black woman, who desires sex just as a man becomes masculinized. This effect is doubled if the jezebel desires sex with other women. Ironically, the jezebel is stigmatized for her "freaky" sexual habits, at the same time that she is desired for them, so long as she remains "appropriately flirtatious toward men" (Collins 2000:83). It is clear that, by having a "masculine" desire for sex, the hypersexual black woman is "improperly" performing her gender. This deviation from the norm is tolerated so long as she retains interest in appealing to male desires. This improper performance, however, does not go unpunished. In fact, the hypersexual image projects a presumed identity onto black women, who then have to face its consequences, whether or not they choose to perform in line with the image.

While Bartky and Butler demonstrate how historical, social, and cultural meanings affect gender identity, Stuart Hall illustrates how these produce cultural identity. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall (1994:392-403) defines cultural identities as the unstable points of identification, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. They are therefore "not an essence but a *positioning*" meaning there is always a politics of identity and position, but never an absolute origin (Hall 1994:395). The diasporic experience then, is "defined, not by

essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*," (Hall 1994:402). Taken together, these two definitions trouble our current notions of cultural identity as a "shared culture" which is essentially a fixed essence deriving from common ancestry or history. Hall's new view, like Butler and Bartky's notion of gender identity as performative, conceives of identity as a "'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted, within, not outside, representation," (Hall:1994:392). Each of these authors suggest that identity is a matter of "becoming". That is, one is not simply male or female, no more than they are black or white, these identities are not fixed aspects assigned at birth as we have been led to believe. In fact, they are "far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past" instead, "they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power," (Hall 1994:394). Conceiving of identity as performance and production, as these authors have, problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which identity markers often lay claim.

The Impact of Media Representation on the Formation of Black Women's Identity

Understanding cultural identity as a production shaped by history and culture allows us to better understand how black women are positioned and objectified in dominant regimes of representation. Since identity is constituted within representation, film and television are not mere reflections of what already exists but instead they are "form[s] of representation...able to constitute new kinds of subjects" (Hall 1994:402). That is, they are able to inform how we construct, constitute, and experience our identities. Hall demonstrates this point by citing numerous examples of dominant visual representations that have not only cast black people as "Other", but that have also had the "power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other'"

(e.g., colonial discourse, literatures of adventure and exploration, the ethnographic and travelling eye, travel brochures, Hollywood and its violent, pornographic languages of drugs and urban violence) (1994:394, 399-400). Considering that these dominant representations cast and made black people experience themselves as "Other", it becomes clear how the jezebel image casts and leads black women to experience ourselves in particular ways.

The media are the primary agents of socialization in which participants are seduced, educated, and transformed by ideas concerning race, gender, and class on a global level (Littlefield 2008:676). So the fact that its portrayals link sexual promiscuity to the "nature" and identity of black women, is significant. Historically and current representations of the black woman as hypersexual perpetuate dominant and distorted views of black womanhood and sexuality which affect social realities (Littlefield 2008:677). And although there is space for resistance within identity formation and most black women resist being objectified as the sexual "Other", this controlling image still remains a powerful influence on our relationships, ideas, and behavior (Collins 2000:89). With the growing influence of television, movies, videos, the Internet, and other new global technologies, popular culture has become increasingly important in promoting these images (Collins 2000:85). That is why this thesis explores representations of twerking and the relationship it shares with the controlling image of the hypersexual black woman.

From Jezebel to Bad Bitch

Though the image of the jezebel is situated in the past, it has been reincarnated in newer images like the 90s "hoochie" and today's "bad bitch". Like the jezebel image, these images represent black women as sexually aggressive women with insatiable sexual appetites who participate in "deviant" "freaky" sexual activities. These images also emphasize the black female

buttocks and body as symbols of this hypersexuality. Unlike the jezebel, however, these images are not purely imposed from outside of black populations. Instead, these images have permeated and seem to have been embraced by some segments of black culture. For example, 2 Live Crew's song "Hoochie Mama" explicitly states that the only use for "hoochies" is sex (Collins 2000:82). It's opening line "Big booty hoes hop wit it!" illustrates that fascination with black women's butts has been maintained even as this hypersexual image has evolved in contemporary popular music. "Hoochie" references now are a little dated, but like it, the "bad bitch" image circulates within some aspects of black culture and portrays black women as sexually aggressive women with large butts who participate in deviant sexual activities. Nicki Minaj, a black female rap/pop artist, proclaims herself to be the quintessential "bad bitch". Her verse in Big Sean's "Dance (Ass)" illustrates how the bad bitch image combines excessive sexual desire and fascination with the buttocks. Throughout it, she references her engagement in various sexual acts, drawing attention to both her genitals and her buttocks. For example she says,

> "Somebody point me to the best ass-eater.
> Tell 'em 'Pussy clean!' I tell 'em 'Pussy squeaky!'
> Niggas give me brain 'cause all of them niggas geeky" [5]

To clarify, to give "brain" means to perform oral sex. That said, the repeated references to sexual acts cited here and throughout the verse speak to the insatiable sexual appetite and participation in deviant sexualities of the bad bitch. It is important to note that though ideas of what constitutes "deviant sexuality" have shifted, the bad bitch maintains her deviant status by publicizing what many consider to be taboo or excessive. While oral and anal sex are no longer as far on the spectrum of deviance, sex with women and publicly proclaiming participation in these activities, are still considered deviant.

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[5] "Dance(Ass) Remix" by Big Sean ft. Nicki Minaj, lyrics from "Big Sean Lyrics Dance (Ass) Remix ft. Nicki Minaj," *AZlyrics*, accessed May 4, 2014. http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/bigsean/dancearemix.html

These sexual references often accompany a fascination with the bad bitch's buttocks.

"Kiss my ass and my anus, 'cause it's finally famous
And it's finally soft, yeah, it's finally solved!
I don't know, man, guess them ass shots wore off!
Bitches ain't poppin', Google my ass
Only time you on the net is when you Google my ass"[6]

Here, Minaj highlights that her butt is famous. It had become so because of its size. She has what 19th-century Europeans would have deemed an "exaggerated buttocks". In this verse, she confirms rumors which attributed her butt size to "ass shots", injections of silicone (or other substances) into the buttocks to enlarge it. She also suggests that her butt was so popular as to warrant web searches on it, which it certainly did particularly during the height of the rumors. In essence, Nicki Minaj's verse demonstrates how closely today's "bad bitch" resembles yesterday's "hoochie" and the historical legacy of the "jezebel". This image, like the others before it, suggests that black women are hypersexual and attach that hypersexuality to black women's bodies, particularly the buttocks. Collins argues that since "African-American men and women alike routinely do not challenge these and other portrayals of Black women as "hoochies" within Black popular culture" such tacit acceptance validates this image because it is given more credence as it circulates among U.S. blacks (2000:82). She is right that tacit or even outright acceptance by black women of this image, validates it, and can by extension increase the impact of the image on conceptions of black womanhood. Yet, she fails to consider the subversive potential of this proclamation. Yes, the hypersexual image itself presents constraints, but what, if anything, might it enable. Minaj and other self-proclaimed bad bitches seem to express pride, power, and security in that identification. There is also something to be said about this sort of public performance in a body which has historically been framed as something that needs to be contained.

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[6] "Dance(Ass) Remix" by Big Sean ft. Nicki Minaj, lyrics from "Big Sean Lyrics Dance (Ass) Remix ft. Nicki Minaj," *AZlyrics*, accessed May 4, 2014. http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/bigsean/dancearemix.html

Twerking, The Myth of Hypersexuality, Agency, and Constraint

Because many of its practitioners are black women, twerking and its representation are embedded in the historical and cultural meanings of the hypersexual black woman. This, however, does not mean that it's performance is purely objectifying. Quite the contrary, just as any other cultural production, twerking possesses subversive potential. In "Selling Hot Pussy: Presentations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace," bell hooks (2003:122-132) analyzes a scene from Spike Lee's film *School Daze*. In it, Lee depicts an all-black party where everyone is dancing in swimsuits. hooks writes, "The black 'butts' on display are unruly and outrageous. They are not the still bodies of the female slave made to appear as mannequin. They are not a silenced body. Displayed as playful cultural nationalist resistance, they challenge assumptions that the black body, its skin color and shape, is a mark of shame" (hooks 2003:124). On one hand, the scene celebrates black butts in opposition to their historic denigration. On the other hand, the transgressive potential of the scene is undermined by the film's sexual humiliation and abuse of black women. This example demonstrates the contradictions inherent in black popular culture. While black popular culture is a site of strategic contestation, it can never be explained in simple binaries like, resistance versus incorporation or authentic versus inauthentic (Hall 1993: 108). Thus, it is not enough to ask if twerking embraces or subverts the hypersexual black woman trope or to ask if twerkers are complete agents or purely constrained. There is not an either/or solution. Since black popular culture and black communities are packed with contradiction, these questioned must be approached with a "both/and" lens. But in order to better understand the contradictions twerking embodies, it is necessary to unpack its definitions, origins, representations, and audience perceptions.

Chapter 2

Make it Nasty: From Twerking Origins to Current Representations

As stated in the introduction, twerking is a dance whose focal point is the gyration of the buttocks. While this definition highlights the centrality of the butt to this dance, it fails to provide a full picture because, as Trey suggests, "twerking is one of those things you know when you see it, rather than necessarily being able to write a definition of it."[7]It is so varied that most definitions understate its complexity. The following definition, however, expresses the major components and variation of twerking.

> Unique: Twerking is a dance move that has a few different components. Mainly it's a dance move where most of your body is still and your ass is moving up and down, but there are various ways to twerk. You could just squat and twerk. You could be upside down on the wall and twerk. You can put one leg up in the air and twerk. You can be on the ground and twerk. There are lots of different variations of twerking but the main idea is that the butt is moving independently from its body. It's quite an impressive feat.[8]

Essentially, twerking involves a controlled, yet rapid shaking of one's butt to the beat of a song. However, there are a number of ways to initiate this movement. As Unique illustrates, one can twerk in a low squatting stance, while upside down in a handstand position against a wall for support, while standing with one leg in the air, or while stooped very low to the ground with their butt just hovering off the floor. This list is not exhaustive, but it provides adequate context for understanding the dance, its origins, and its representations.

Recall, Oxford's definition of twerking: "to dance to popular music in a sexually provocative manner involving thrusting hip movements and a low, squatting stance."[9] Unlike respondent definitions, which emphasized the technique of the dance, this definition suggests

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[7] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.
[8] personal interview with Unique, conducted December 2013.
[9] *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. "twerk," accessed May 4, 2014, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/twerk

that the dance is inherently sexual. Most interviewees resisted this notion that twerking is inherently sexual and instead argued that it is hypersexualized in its current representations. This chapter investigates twerking's origins and current representations in order to demonstrate the relationship between the hypersexualization of twerking and its attachment to black women's bodies. More specifically, I argue that twerking is hypersexualized because of its association with black women. Extending on this point, I argue that the representation of twerking as hypersexual reinforces myths about black women's hypersexuality. This does not only affect the perception of twerking, but just as other hypersexual representations of black women, it impacts the way black women see themselves, construct their identity, and how other members of society view and treat them.

Origins: Old Dance, New Phenomenon

Before describing current representations, it is important to establish the common understandings of twerking's origins. Though twerking has only recently become a mainstream phenomenon in the United States, it is not new to black popular culture. In the past, the movement that has been identified as twerking has been referred to as "booty shaking", "booty dancing", and "poppin'" among other things. Interviewees sometimes referred to twerking by these names and often emphasized that though they had only recently heard the term twerking, they had seen or even performed the movement before ever hearing the term.

> Keke: In terms of what I perceive to be twerking, I feel like that's something that I grew up with both in like daily spaces and with friends. But I feel like I didn't hear the phrase or the term "twerk" or "to twerk" until like maybe last semester or something. I feel like that's a recent terminology.[10]
>
> Isis: I feel like it's always existed, but now it's been more tokenized and labeled as "oh it's this thing", but really it's always been there...maybe I didn't know when I was younger what ["twerking"] meant, but it's not like people didn't move their hips or shake their butt in these

[10] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.

> different ways. It wasn't like that hadn't existed before, just now it's become this whole new craze this new fad.[11]

These responses reiterate the point that though the term "twerking" itself is relatively new, but the dance itself has been around for a while. In a Vibe Vixen interview about the history of twerking, choreographer Tanisha Scott said, "There's this thing that people have always come to me with. They're like 'Ok so you know how to twerk and all this new phenomenon.' I'm like actually it's not new because if you think about it, back in the days, and currently right now in Africa, that is the way we move. That's the whole culture and the basis behind that dance," ("Tanisha Scott discusses the History of Twerking" 2013). She later adds that the dance goes back generations. Interviewee responses to the question, "Where do you think it came from?" reiterate this notion that twerking is not new, and that it is in fact rooted in origins that date back at least a decade if not more.

> Unique: Jesus I don't know Africa. I mean I think a lot of these dances that African-Americans do are passed down through generations and are tweaked and adapted and morphed. But they didn't come out of the thin air cuz things don't . It's not just like "Hey guys we're gonna do this thing." It came from somewhere, some sort of tradition. And twerking has probably been around for longer than you and I have been on this earth. I have no idea how the name originated or why it's all of a sudden such a big deal, but twerking's been around or some variation of twerking has been around I'm sure.[12]

> Vivica: It's hard to figure out where all this started. Because I'm from Atlanta, I feel like that's a big place where this stuff comes from, like the dancing and the hip hop music...I mean I think twerking really comes from like Africa but since it's been introduced as twerking I do think it comes from Atlanta.[13]

> Isis: I mean I know in recent years it's gained popularity in New Orleans with the Bounce scene. I mean I don't know a lot about that, but I've definitely heard people[say that]. But if you're tryna go way back Africa, where black people are, that's where it came from. I don't know exact countries places dates, but yea.[14]

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[11] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.
[12] personal interview with Unique, conducted December 2013.

[13] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.
[14] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.

While the exact origins are unknown and contested, many suggest that twerking was popularized in black American, Southern dance culture at some point between the early 1990s and 2000s. Indeed, the earliest recorded song reference to twerking appeared in 1993 in DJ Jubilee's "Do the Jubilee All" which features that New Orleans artist instructing the crowd to "Twerk baby, twerk baby, twerk, twerk, twerk" (Lynch 2013). Though discrepancy remains over which Southern U.S. city is the true birthplace of twerking (mainly, New Orleans or Atlanta), most suggest that the movement can be traced further back to Africa. When asked about the origins of twerking in a Huffington Post panel discussion entitled "Twerking and Our Racial Perceptions of Dance" (2013), Clutch Magazine daily editor Yesha Callihan responded, " I don't know where it comes from. According to online Wikipedia, [the dance] was started by 2 girls in Atlanta in the early 2000s. Other people say it has origins in Africa, but I really doubt people on YouTube videos and students in San Diego [referring to students who posted a YouTube video of themselves twerking and got suspended] know about that type of dance and its origins in Africa" ("Twerking and Our Racial Perceptions of Dance" 2013). To that same question, VH1.com host and digital writer Bené Viera responded, "[The dance] originates in Africa... I think it was popularized in America in the Southern culture to, of course, songs we have called "crunk" songs, but it absolutely, the movement of the body, that all can be directly related to dances that they do in Africa" ("Twerking and Our Racial Perceptions of Dance" 2013). xoJane author of "The Origins of Twerking: What it is, What it means, and How it got Appropriated," Christiana Mbakwe, wrote ""Twerking" isn't new. Its ubiquity may seem sudden, but mainstream media's merely catching up to something that's existed in black global culture for years" (2013). Following this Mbakwe argues that while the current iteration of twerking is associated with the New Orleans bounce music scene, she has seen variants of twerking her

whole life. For example in West African praise dances and the London Dancehall scene. She suggests that “If people took the time to explore the root of what’s been dubbed as the “twerk” they’d realize its origins lie in West Africa. It’s strikingly similar to the Mapouka dance from Côte d'Ivoire, a dance done by women that focuses on the buttocks. It’s existed for centuries” (Mbakwe 2013).

Tanisha Scott, Yesha Callihan, and Bené Viera all link the dance back to Africa, but none of them tie it to a specific group of context in Africa making the point at first less convincing. Christiana Mbakwe, however, cites Mapouka, an African dance from the Ivory Coast, for us to compare to “twerking”. In “Mapouka, Ivory Coast’s Dance-Style Version of ‘Twerking’”, American radio personality Marco Werman describes Mapouka as “twerking before twerking”(2013). He explains that the Mapouka dance, commonly translated to mean “the butt dance”, originated long ago in the Southeast of the Ivory Coast. This dance, which was primarily performed by women during ceremony, involves shaking the butts vigorously from side to side “almost as if the rear end is shivering independently of the rest of the body” (Werman 2013). Werman's definition of Mapouka mirrors Unique's definition of twerking. Both emphasize that the butt appears to move independently from the rest of the body.

Videos further illustrate the relationship between twerking and Mapouka. One video entitled "Mapouka, The Origin of Twerking" features African women wearing one piece bathing suits performing the dance on the beach. It focuses primarily on one woman, who for the majority of the video is bending forward and shaking her butt, which seems to be moving independently of the rest of her body. In some shots, the woman is joined by three other women. At times, they bend only slightly at the waist. Other times they bend completely over placing their hands to the ground, further emphasizing the gyration of their buttocks. Though there are

instances where these women face the camera, much of the dance is filmed with their back sides facing the camera. The music in the background is traditional African music, which features a polyrhythmic drum beat and call and response vocals ("Mapouka, The Origin of Twerking" 2013). Comparing this video, to videos and performances of twerking, it is clear that Mapouka bears a striking resemblance to twerking. The resemblance between the two further support claims that while "twerking" has been popularized in U.S. black Southern dance culture, then re-popularized in the mainstream media by Miley Cyrus, the dance has deeper roots in global black dance culture.

Current Representations: The dance is not inherently hypersexual , its portrayals are

Prior to Miley Cyrus' VMA performance in August of 2013, twerking was most prominently featured in hip-hop music videos, song references, and video contests of twerking or compilation videos by "twerk troupes" (dance troupes who specialize in twerking) like the Twerk Team. In these contexts, it was most often performed by black women. The hip-hop music videos and song lyrics tend to be more explicit than the twerk troupe videos. Rap videos, like "Twerk It" by V.I.C, tend to emphasize sex and the body, while twerk troupe videos, like those by The Official Twerk Team showcase the dancers' ability. After Miley Cyrus's performance, there was an influx of twerking videos performed by white people, twerking related news, how-to videos, reaction videos, as well as rap videos which featured white women twerking (e.g., Migos' "Versace" and "Hannah Montana" music videos). After Cyrus' performance, twerking generated more conversation, controversy, and buzz in mainstream media than ever before. When asked about the kinds of things they had seen about twerking in the media interviewees responded:

> Unique: On the news I've been hearing things like [imitates white newscaster voice] "Group of girls in urban city have been suspended from school for posting a video of twerking on YouTube"

> some shit like that. So yeah ridiculous cases like teachers and principals flipping out because girls are shaking their ass on the Internet. I saw this one YouTube video, it's a video watching elderly people watch twerking videos. It's very interesting. They're all pretty much horrified talking about how sexual it is or whatever.[15]
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> Isis: Oh man sometimes some very racist, judgmental things. Like I remember one of my friends told me twerking was on the news and how it's the new evil, and youth are twerking, and "What is this?" That it's taking up the masses and just crazy things like that.[16]
>
> Trey: I had friends posting articles on twerking and examining it and examining peoples responses to it. And some were arguing that there were forms of racism in people criticizing the dance as vulgar and such. And other people, who are less politically minded, they were just posting videos of people twerking.[17]

These responses demonstrate that issues of sexuality, or in this case hypersexuality, and race figure prominently in current discussions of twerking. Some accept this categorization of twerking as sexual and embrace its sexiness. For example, artistic director of Exotic Dance Central Aleesah Williams suggested that twerking evolved from a sexy dance strippers were doing in the strip club ("The History of Twerking" 2013). Some reject the sexuality that is associated with the dance. Most of my informants, however, suggested that twerking is not inherently hypersexual , and that it is simply considered as such because of its media portrayals.

Upon hearing about the topic of this research, Keith, a homosexual male recent graduate of color, became really excited and responded," Yea I hate the way [twerking is] hypersexualized because it's not about that."[18] Similarly, Keke suggested that people now forget that twerking doesn't have to be sexual and argued that twerking, like belly dance originated as a social and familial dance, but has now shifted because of the way that it is being marketed.[19] Reflecting on what people think about twerking Vivica responded,

> Vivica: I mean I guess the things we think twerking brings about sex and babies and stuff. Those are things that have kind of been pinned onto it by society and not necessarily things that come

[15] personal interview with Unique, conducted December 2013.
[16] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.
[17] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.
[18] personal communication with Keith on April 10, 2014.
[19] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.

just by doing the dancing.[20]

In saying that we as a society think that twerking "brings about sex and babies", Vivica illustrated the link that is often drawn between twerking and hypersexuality, but she suggests that these ideas have been pinned onto the dance by society, they don't necessarily come automatically. Isis too, stated that twerking is framed as sexual, even though it isn't inherently sexual. To clarify this point, she cited Busta Rhymes' "Twerk It" as an example of a song that frames twerking as sexual.

> Isis: Certain songs that are out, like "Twerk it" right now. Just the things that Busta Rhymes is saying it's just very, very explicit. Like oh no I just wanna dance, I don't wanna hear these words.[21]

Throughout the song's verse, Busta Rhymes describes an explicit sexual encounter in patois saying things like "Batty big watch how me love it up, bend over and spread it mek mi stick it in and bun it up"[22] instructing his partner to bend over and spread her big butt open so that he may enter, before launching into the chorus which repeats "twerk it". Having the repetition of "twerk it" amidst lyrics that describe explicit sexual activities connects twerking to sex. "Twerk It" is just one song of many that pairs allusions to twerking with explicit sexual activity (e.g., "Pop That" by French Montana, "Round of Applause" by Waka Flocka Flame, "Whistle While You Twerk" by the Yin Yang Twins).

In addition to song lyrics, music videos further establish the portrayal of twerking as hypersexual. Black male rapper V.I.C's "Twerk It" opens with two topless women kissing. Then, as the song starts, the screen shifts between different shots of women twerking. The rapper is the only male present in the video. When onscreen, he raps while either sitting in a chair or

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[20] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.
[21] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.
[22] "Twerk It" by Busta Rhymes, lyrics from "Busta Rhymes - Twerk It," *RapGenius*, accessed May 4, 2014 http://rapgenius.com/Busta-rhymes-twerk-it-lyrics

standing in the center of a room, surrounded by a group of women twerking for him. When off-screen, the women do sexual things with one another. For example, there is one scene in which one woman lays back in a chair as two others pour a white creamy substance between her exposed breasts. All of the women are wearing heels and either black or silver spandex hot pants with a portion of their butt peeking from the bottom. Those who are not topless wear lingerie tops. It is worth noting that though this video features a number of racially ambiguous women, the close-ups of shaking butts are only of black women's butts. In addition to the women kissing and pouring cream down a woman's breasts there are a number of other sexual innuendos. For instance, there is an image of a woman rubbing a banana slowly up and down her thighs. There is also an image of a woman licking whipped cream off a pie which is placed between another woman's legs. The video fades out on a close-up of three black twerking butts being sprayed with champagne from off-screen ("Twerk It" 2012). In the song lyrics, the rapper describes how turned on he is by the woman's twerking and just like the video, the chorus which repeats "She say she twerkin' it for daddy, twerk-twerkin' it for daddy" makes it clear that this performance is only for his sexual pleasure. Black female rapper Lady's "Twerk" video sends a similar message. It features black women twerking in bikinis and heels as Lady stands in the center wearing a one-piece bathing suit, fishnet tights, and heels rapping about how impressed men are with her twerking abilities (e.g., she brags that her twerking makes men want to pay for a dance). The video shifts between close-ups of Lady's face rapping and close-ups of her dancer's twerking butts. At one point she says, "The best thing about [this dance] is I can do it on a dick," thereby reinforcing the idea that twerking is a sexual act directly related to male pleasure ("Lady-Twerk" 2011). From both of these videos it is clear that twerking is not just portrayed as sexual, but hypersexual because the women depicted exceed the limit of "normal" sexuality in the

suggestion that they engage in a range of "deviant female sexualities" like oral and anal sex, sex with other women, and selling their sex (Collins 2000: 84). Just as interviewees suggest, these sorts of representations lend to the idea that twerking is hypersexual, the dance itself is not inherently sexual. As Keke and others highlighted, it can be performed in non-sexual familial and social contexts. Yet, the prevalence of this hypersexual representation lends to people who are not familiar with it in these other contexts to understand twerking as sexual.

Twerking is Hypersexualized because it's attached to black women's bodies

Twerking is as closely related to hypersexuality as it is to black women. This is apparent in representations such as V.I.C's "Twerk It" video, which while it features women of many races, it's close-ups of twerking only feature black women's butts. Also, recall that race, in addition to sexuality, figured prominently in interviewee accounts of current twerking discussions. Though he was critical of some aspects of their arguments, Trey mentioned that a lot of the political and race-based articles he read discussed this link between twerking and black womanhood stating, "Somehow twerking was associated with black womanhood and by insulting twerking, you're making implicit comments about black women in general."[23] These race-based responses to twerking are not the only ones establishing these links. When asked who they see twerk most often, interviewees emphasized that they usually only see black women twerking, in videos and in person.

> Sky: I think it's like predominantly associated with women of course, black women. If you look at Miley Cyrus' 23 video whoever's shakin' in her video, or who's shakin' their ass in Diplo's "Express Yourself" video, a lot of black women are associated with it in the media...I think the name twerking is kind of slowly attached to black women and when other people are doing it I think it is twerking, but everybody still recognizes that it's not really twerking. It's some kind of authenticity with black women and twerking just like with rap and black people. You kind of can't say [twerking] without having black women in my mind.[24]

[23] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.

[24] personal interview with Sky, conducted December 2013.

As aforementioned, there was an influx of videos featuring white women and men twerking after the Miley Cyrus performance. Sky acknowledges this in her response when she mentions that "other people are doing it". However, she emphasized that even when other people are twerking, it is still so closely linked to black women. So much so, that she suggests that one can't say twerking without having black women in mind. This is because even with other people performing it, black women still figure predominantly in videos and other images of twerking.

Considering the links between black women and hypersexuality, twerking and hypersexuality, and black women and twerking, it stands to reason that twerking is viewed as hypersexual and deviant by some audiences (namely those who are unfamiliar with the form outside of its media representations) because of its associations with black women. Chapter one demonstrated the longstanding portrayal of black women as sexually deviant, so this connection is no stretch of the popular imagination. Indeed though a few interviewees suggested that twerking is described as sexual because of its association with the butt (which as has already been noted was also historically a symbol of black women's deviant sexuality), race was more often cited as the reason that twerking was deemed sexual, deviant, and nasty. Unique felt that labeling twerking as sexual was completely arbitrary. To her, it did not make sense that twerking, which she doesn't think resembles sex at all is deemed sexual when dances like the worm which involves "humping the floor repeatedly" are not considered sexual.[25] When asked if she had any idea why twerking was given this arbitrary label she responded , "maybe because it's been done by black women."[26]

Bené Viera underscores this same point in the aforementioned Huffington Post Live

[25] personal interview with Unique, conducted December 2013.
[26] personal interview with Unique, conducted December 2013.

panel “Twerking and Our Racial Perceptions of Dance” (2013) when responding to the following viewer tweet.

> kathy_Sandru : “As an African-American woman, I am disgusted to see this new trend whose origins are not in the dance clubs, but in the stripper clubs. It’s disgusting and perpetuates the stereotype of Black women being hypersexual ”[27]

kathy_Sandru's tweet expresses her anger and disgust at the twerking dance form, which she attributes to strip clubs. She argues that the dance itself perpetuates the stereotype of black women being hypersexual. In response, Viera, like many interviewees, made a distinction between the dance itself and the representation of the dance. She said, "I actually don’t agree with that comment at all, because I think it [twerking] becomes hypersexualized because of the history of black women’s bodies being dehumanized and objectified. But I think it only becomes disgusting when we look at it as something that women are doing for the pleasure of men, which I totally don’t agree with. I think there has to be a place for sex positivity so I disagree with that comment, " (“Twerking and Our Racial Perceptions of Dance” 2013). Here, Viera suggests that twerking can be looked at as something other than a form done by women for men's pleasure and hints that it can be a place for sex positivity as opposed to hypersexuality, Chapter four explores these points further. More germane to this chapter's argument, however, is her suggestion that the hypersexuality of the dance is not inherent to the dance itself, but rather it is the result of the history of black women's bodies being dehumanized and objectified. Consider the aforementioned hypersexual portrayals of twerking in which black women feature prominently. These videos which focus on the black women's buttocks, portray her sexual availability, and depict her willingness to participate in deviant sexuality align with historical and current representations of black women that reduce black women to their bodies and deviant sexual

[27] transcribed from "Twerking and Our Racial Perceptions of Dance" 2013.

behavior. Thus, though twerking is not inherently sexual, the fact that its representations are hypersexualized and often employ black women to create that hypersexual image means that like other hypersexual representations of black women, representations of twerking can have material consequences for black women. That is, these kinds of representations can affect how black women see and present themselves, how they construct their identity, as well as how other members of society view and treat black women.

Twerking as a means to construct femininity

Recall that femininity is an "achievement", "a mode of enacting and reenacting received gender norms," and that movement is one of the means of enacting and reenacting those norms (Bartky 2003:27,30). In our cultural imagination, twerking is a movement that is linked to femininity. Respondents highlighted that it is most often performed by black women and occasionally gay black males. There is only a limited number of dances that are considered "appropriate" for males to perform. Twerking is not among these. In fact, Trey said he only saw heterosexual men engage in twerking as a parody.[28] Likewise, Keke suggested that twerking is among a set of behaviors which is associated with women, and that if a (traditionally masculine) man can take on the behaviors it is viewed as if he is mocking it, meaning the performance then doesn't reflect on his identity. The fact that a males are only able to engage in twerking as parody suggests that by our society's gender norms, twerking is considered to be a feminine activity in which masculine males cannot freely or seriously engage. Busta Rhymes described twerking as "something that's inspired by the way the female chooses to express herself when she's havin' a good time" ("History of Twerking" 2013). By not acknowledging the possibility of men performing this movement, Busta Rhymes reiterates the link between twerking and

[28] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.

femininity in popular imagination. Of all my informants, only Trey and Unique did not twerk themselves. When explaining why not, Trey explained his lack of ability, but also that it's considered inappropriate for males.[29] Unique's response also demonstrates this gendered norm. She mentioned that she didn't think that she had the skill before adding,

> Unique: I don't have the motivation to twerk it's not something that I strive to do. I don't care that I don't know how to do it. I just know that I can't and it's not something that I want to do so I don't even think I look good doing it. I don't think I feel comfortable doing this but that's just me.
> I: Why don't you feel comfortable?
> Unique: I don't know. Maybe because it seems very feminine and I just don't identify as a very feminine person. I don't know.[30]

Though Unique identifies as a woman she does not identify as "very feminine" and is not comfortable engaging in twerking because she considers it a "feminine" activity. Her viewpoint further illustrates that twerking is linked to an enactment of normative femininity. Media certainly furthers this association in the way it portrays twerking. It constructs twerking as feminine with who is depicted most often twerking (i.e., black women and sometimes gay males), as well as with how they are often depicted (i.e., hypersexual and hyperfeminine wearing revealing clothing, and desiring male attention). Thus, twerking can be conceived of as a means of enacting femininity and as such, its representations can be drawn upon to construct feminine identity. The type of representations available, however, restricts that construction.

Hypersexual representations can affect how black women represent themselves

Twerking becomes yet another hypersexual representation of black women which impacts how they see themselves and thus, how they construct their identity. When describing media portrayals of twerking, Keke argued that they are problematic because they influence how black women, particularly, young women represent themselves.

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[29] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.

[30] personal interview with Unique, conducted December 2013.

> Keke: I wouldn't say I'm influenced by the media as an individual but ...I definitely see that the girls are heavily influenced by what they see as acceptable in the media. Like a lot of them have false eyelashes and I'm like we weren't doin' that in middle school. And it's a lot of like Nicki Minaj, baby doll looks and I feel like representations of us are so limited in scope that I think it gives young girls who are black and brown very few ideas of what it means to be an acceptable person in my skin. So I'm seeing a lot of girls who look in a way and behave in a way that is ultra hypersexual and I think that's because well, what other representations do they have to aspire to? It's like either you're twerking in the background or you're some type of baby doll, Barbie doll Nicki Minaj or you're freakin' Michelle Obama or Oprah. There's no middle ground and no multiple representations and multiple images. I feel like it's the same. You got three options, pick one. And no 13 year-old is tryin' to look like Oprah...I remember a placement I did in an elementary school and this girl, it was a fourth grade classroom, and she came in with a pink wig and I was like "the fuck?" cuz in the fourth grade you're like 11, no not even, you're 9 and she came in with a pink wig. That's a direct media influence you know what I mean. And I think if people had more representations, not that they wouldn't necessarily make the same choices, but at least there would be a multitude of images to look to or to choose from... As I said right now I'm doing my student teaching in a middle school and I definitely see that a lot of the girls don't know how to represent themselves if it's not in this super made-up, super cosmetic, or hypersexual way.[31]

Throughout her response, Keke reiterated the ways in which limited representations of black women affect how young women she works construct their identity. She suggested that "representations of us are so limited in scope that...it gives young girls who are black and brown very few ideas of what it means to be an acceptable person in [their] skin." This response underscores a key theoretical point, that representations impact self-presentation and identities because identities are constructed through a set of historical, social, and cultural possibilities.

Butler argues that "the body...is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and *reproducing* a historical situation," (1988:521). Since identity is materialized via the body, one can only construct identity from a set of historic or social possibilities. So, if media and the social context present a limited view of what it means to be a particular identity, then those who identify with that particular group have limited options from which to choose in materializing that identity. hooks has shown that since black female sexuality has been represented in racist/sexist iconography as more free and liberated, many black women singers have cultivated an image

[31] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.

which suggests that they are sexually available and licentious (2003:124). Here, Keke stressed the prevalence of hypersexual images, like twerking background dancers and Nicki Minaj and cited examples of girls presenting themselves in a hypersexual manner (e.g., wearing false eyelashes, or donning a Nicki Minaj-esque pink wig), thereby showing that these representations still impact how black women present themselves. Though she acknowledged that Michelle Obama and Oprah present a different kind of image, she emphasized that the scope of representation is still limited, and that few girls try to cultivate this image. hooks argued that many black women cultivated an image of themselves as sexually available, since the black female body gains attention and becomes desirable only when it is synonymous with accessibility (i.e., sexually deviant) (hooks 2003:124). Considering this, it makes sense that "no 13 year-old is tryin' to look like Oprah" as Keke suggested. Keke's final observation that "a lot of the girls don't know how to represent themselves if it's not in this super made-up, super cosmetic, or hypersexual way" affirms that the prevalence of hypersexual images of black women, like those of twerking, can result in some black women, particularly young girls having difficulty representing themselves.

Keke is not isolated in her observations that the scope of black women's representation is limited and that this affects young women. In their November 2013 issue, *Essence* magazine published a study entitled "Reflections of You and Me" in which they asked 1200 participants to keep video diaries to see if they felt black women were being adequately represented in media (Walton 2013). When describing the study's finding, Vanessa K. Bush, *Essence*'s editor-in-chief, said that there is a huge gulf between extreme characterizations. Like Keke, she articulates that there are superstars like Oprah or Michelle Obama on one end, "modern jezebels" (which evolve from Collins' jezebel image and depict hypersexual black women) at the other and a whole gulf

in the middle that is not being represented ("A Huge Gulf in Media Images of Black women" 2013). Keke, Bush, and *Essence's* 1200 participants agree that representations of black women are limited in scope. The study divided images of black women into two categories: "the negative images that cause us pain" and "the positive types we're not seeing enough". In this study, "negative" images included: gold diggers, modern jezebels, baby mamas, uneducated sisters, ratchet women, angry black women, mean black girls, unhealthy black women, and black Barbies. This category's name itself suggests that these images adversely affect black women. "Positive" images included: young phenoms, real beauties, individualists, community heroines, girls next door, and modern matriarchs. However, while the first category was produced by asking participants what they were seeing, this category was produced by asking what kinds of characters participants would create if possible, meaning these images are not necessarily being represented. Of all the images they saw, participants cited modern jezebels, baby mamas, and angry black women as the top 3 most frequent images of black women in the media (Walton 2013). That the "modern jezebel" is ranked among the top three "negative images that cause us pain" reiterates the prevalence of images of the hypersexual black woman.

These limited representations pose a constraint for black women. Bush argued that this study was trying to show "that if there were balance, if you saw more diversity, [if representations were] more multi-dimensional then there'd be a truer picture of who [we] really are. You would see our complete humanity. What you're seeing is just a scratch of the surface, predominantly just negative and sometimes feels mean spirited" ("A Huge Gulf in Media Images of Black women" 2013). Her response implies that with such a limited scope of representations, black women are left with an incomplete image of themselves that does not reflect their complete humanity. While this affects how others see them, Rinku Sen, Indian-author , activist, and

publisher of Colorlines.com emphasized that these predominantly negative images, "have a really terrible effect on the self esteem of black women" ("A Huge Gulf in Media Images of Black women" 2013). The modern jezebel image is particularly constraining. Commenting on the modern jezebel image as it manifests in some hip-hop videos one respondent said, "It's as if the Black woman exists for no reason besides her body" (Walton 2013). Another participant argued that, “The hypersexual image is particularly harmful to young Black women. It’s seriously damaging to their sense of self-worth and how they form a positive self-image” (Walton 2013). This point coincides with Keke's and illustrates that since representations of black women are so limited and hypersexual images of black women are so prevalent, portrayals of black women as hypersexual can affect how black women see and present themselves as well as how they construct their identities.

Hypersexual representations can affect the societal view black women

Hypersexual images of black women not only affect how black women see themselves, but also how they are viewed by other members of society. This is apparent from the kinds of assumptions that arise from portrayals of twerking. When explaining his exasperation with twerking portrayals, Trey clarified that his frustration derives from the following kinds of tropes that are associated with twerking.

> Trey: Well I guess the tropes and the associations it comes with is the extreme sexuality and promiscuity of black urban youth. That's the foremost one it comes with, a lack of self-respect and self -regard, and then a lack of refinement and sophistication. Like when you contrast it with ballroom dancing or something it just comes across as not as sophisticated. [32]

Trey's response demonstrates that portrayals of twerking are often packed with assumptions about the "extreme sexuality and promiscuity of black urban youth". He also highlights that

[32] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.

some people view twerking as a demonstration of black urban youth's lack of self-respect, self-regard, refinement and sophistication. Unique points out that a lack of familiarity with the dance makes one more susceptible to these kinds of negative assumptions that are portrayed in the media.

> Unique: If it's something completely foreign to you and you haven't been introduced to it or things that remotely look like twerking and maybe you just heard about it on the news or friends talking about it at work or school when you see it you're like "what are they doing they're just shakin' their ass all around for people to see and it's just crazy and nasty and deviant. You know I don't know if it's not something that's part of your everyday, not something that people who you interact with are exposed to in a positive light, chances are you're gonna have negative feelings about twerking, chances are you're gonna look down upon people who twerk or think they're some sort of nasty sexual deviant. Like principles who suspend girls for twerking, I'm sure that's how they feel about that.[33]

Unique underscores that seeing people twerk on television without having been introduced to twerking in its "positive light", that is, without having been exposed to twerking outside of its hypersexual representation as a fun forum for expression, leads one to apply negative connotations to the dance and to those who perform it. She suggests that without this context, people are likely to assume that twerkers are crazy, nasty, and sexual deviants. Thus, negative assumptions about the dance extend to groups associated with the dance.

Vivica too, demonstrates how negative views of twerking are attached to its performers.

> Vivica : Twerking as we talk about it now sometimes has bad connotations and deviant connotations...The first thing that comes to mind is on World Star Hip Hop. There's these different videos, like a video of the week of a woman twerking, bouncing her butt in her own space, and some of the comments are like "Why are you twerking? You should be getting your degree." or "We need women who are in books and not twerking their ass everywhere." Or when I see little kids do it, some of the comments are like "Why would you let your daughter do that? You know she's gonna have ten babies by the time she's..." however old, at a very young age.[34]

Like Trey's and Unique's responses, Vivica's response illustrates that negative views of twerking are often expressed in terms of negative views of its participants. Because the dance is depicted

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[33] personal interview with Unique, conducted December 2013.
[34] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.

in such a hypersexual way, those who do not know twerking in any other context are likely to view it as hypersexual and thus those who perform it as crazy, promiscuous, and unsophisticated. Indeed, comments often question the performer's motives and character as opposed to commenting directly on the dance. Many negative comments about twerking present it as an antithesis to success as Vivica suggests . For example, Farrah Gray, an internet personality released a gif. with an image of Oprah on the cover of Fortune with the caption "This could be you, but you too busy twerking."[35] Other images carry this same caption (e.g., young black women holding diplomas). Images and statements like these render twerking from a dance form to an indication of what is holding black women back in the popular imagination and become a justification for negative life outcomes like lack of educational attainment and early pregnancy, when in fact, these outcomes are symptomatic of larger structural inequalities.

The negative assumptions, which are mapped onto twerkers, reveal a greater social phenomenon. That is, it shows that stereotypical images of black women still permeate popular culture and public policy. It also shows how, in our social structure which is overwrought with racist and sexist ideologies that become hegemonic (natural, normal, and inevitable), certain assumed qualities that are attached to black women are used to justify their oppression (Collins 2000: 5). In the aforementioned *Melissa Harris-Perry* panel discussion, Rinku Sen said, "I also think that there's a connection between these images on television and the earlier discussion we were having about government, the role of government, the shutdown...it's one of the ways people who don't think of themselves as conservatives actually perpetuate these negative stereotypes that then drive things like tax revolt and a passion for starving government programs..." ("A Huge Gulf in Media Images of Black women" 2013). Essentially, Sen and

[35] "RealFarrahGray" tweeted "This could be you, but you too busy twerkin'" gif. January 29, 2014, accessed May 4, 2014 http://twicsy.com/i/D76GNe

fellow panelists, argue that the media's narrow stereotypes of black Americans actually drive policy decisions ("A Huge Gulf in Media Images of Black women" 2013). Keke articulated how images of twerking play into these negative assumptions which then drive policy.

> Keke: With older folks, I think it's according to where you're coming from. If there's someone whose maybe white and of a privileged background and they've had limited encounters with black and brown people, then having a bunch of media representations of black and brown people shaking their asses and not having the voice to be a person, but just being this body shaking your ass, I think it definitely lends itself to this kind of faceless group of people. And even though it's a leap, I think that when you have those kind of negative representations, if they're hearing about Obamacare or they're hearing about welfare, I think they are making those connections to "Well how do I see black and brown people?" "Oh they're those people shakin' their ass all the time, of course they're on welfare,". Even though that might seem like an extreme connection... if you don't have that background [familiarity with the black community and the idea that there are multiple meanings of what it is to be black] and all you know are maybe you're one black friend and all these images of people twerking and Nicki Minaj and her fake ass, then what are you gonna think about black people?[36]

First, Keke emphasized that one problem with the representations of twerking, is that it portrays black and brown people shaking their asses, but without giving them the opportunity to discuss their performance and display their humanity. This reaffirms that the problem is not with doing the dance itself but in how its portrayed and not giving black and brown people voice allows for negative stereotypes to go unchallenged. Following this, stresses that those with limited encounters with twerking and black people outside of their representations, might mistake representations for the real thing. In this case, she posits that hypersexual images of twerking, in which black women are just "bodies shakin' their asses" become a reference point for the group and a justification for the social woes of the group. When those who are otherwise unfamiliar with black people think about them and all they have are these representations which suggests that black people, particularly black women are sexually deviant, lack self- respect, and sophistication, then these sort of culturally deficient arguments are used to justify their adverse

[36] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.

social outcomes. Taken together, all of these points illustrate that the representation of twerking as hypersexual, which primarily depicts black women, results in other members of society having negative views not just of the dance but of black women as crazy and sexually deviant. These views affect policy and ultimately how black women are treated.

Hypersexual representations can affect how black women are treated

Collins argued that the controlling image of black women as hypersexual remains a powerful influence on black women's relationships with whites, black men, other racial/ethnic groups and one another (2000:89). Interviewees stressed the influence that hypersexual representations of twerking can have on how men treat black women. Keke explained that the kinds of assumptions of hypersexuality that people ascribe to black women because of representations like these affect interpersonal interactions.

> Keke: I also see that the guys almost don't know how to treat the girls as an individual. They're just like, "This is what she looks like", "This is what she's doing" but I feel like it's very hard for them to interact as like "This is just a girl who I can talk to about math." There's some sort of disconnect.[37]

She explains that in her experience boys have a difficult time interacting with these girls, especially when it comes to viewing them as intelligent figures who they can relate to intellectually. The reduction of black women to their bodies in these representations leaves no room for consideration of their mind, voice, or personality, thereby making it difficult to see them as anything more than their bodies. Trey attests that when he's with his male friends, "then they are talking about girls twerking and stuff like that, they're objectifying the girls..."[38] He then provides an example of this objectification.

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[37] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.
[38] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.

> Trey: There was one guy in my research program who was making fun of the way [sorority girls] dance. And he went and he rubbed his ass and tried to twerk all over this girl, this African girl who is somewhat prude with her traditional African values and just doesn't like sexual type things. He knew it made her uncomfortable. People sat there and they laughed at him doing it, laughed at her and her reactions and such. None of the negatives fell back on him, he was able to go and make fun of his Black [sorority] sisters and all that crap. He was making fun of women, he was making that girl feel uncomfortable, and none of it came back on him...my male friends do the same kind of stuff, it's their own way of objectifying black women.[39]

In this example, the guy objectified the girl by imitating twerking, "rubbing his ass on her", and making her uncomfortable. It's worth noting that this man was able to stigmatize this black woman using a dance she doesn't even participate in, by performing twerking satirically.

This example reexamines the earlier point that twerking is associated with women, and shows that men are distanced from the stigma of the hypersexual associations of twerking. Reflecting further on his male friends' views on twerking Trey says, "it's easy to go talk about something that's not gonna come back and affect how people view them, because people don't think of men twerking or something."[40] In this case, the distance afforded to him by male privilege, allowed this man to perform twerking without fear that the assumptions would reflect on him. In fact, he knew that it would reflect on his black sorority sisters and not him. Keke too, reflects on how male privilege distances men from the stereotypes associated with black women, in ways that allow for women's objectification.

> Keke: There are certain behaviors that I feel like are associated with women, but if a man can successfully take on those behaviors then it's like he's mocking it in a way where he can do it [and] enjoy himself ,but he doesn't get any of the slack of doing it that a woman would. Almost like those damn Tyler Perry movies where it's a man actin' like Madea. He can take on all the characteristics of stereotypical mammy type black woman figure, but he doesn't get any of the slack of it because at the end of the day he's a man so you're not gonna characterize any of those traits with him. He's just putting on a show that everybody can enjoy, including him. Then again its fucked up because it exploits black women who aren't even in the picture or aren't even getting hired to do the acting in that moment, but they're still gonna get that negative perception and the

[39] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.

[40] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.

> man can take off his [wig and make-up]. And with the white boy doing the vine video I feel like it's the same thing. He can encounter and be in that space and do that dance, but at the end of the day he's a white baseball player at North Carolina or wherever it is and that twerking incident will have no impact on who he is or how people perceive his identity.[41]

With her examples of Tyler Perry embodying the black mammy figure through Madea and a white baseball player adopting twerking in an online video, Keke highlights that in engaging in parodies like this, these men can further the stereotypes and negative assumptions of the thing that they are performing, without receiving any of the negative attention that those groups who are implicated in the performance (namely black women) do. This leads to further objectification.

Performing twerking ironically is just way in which men can display their privilege and objectify black women via twerking. Interviewees also described instances in which men decided to take ownership over their bodies by touching or grabbing them or other women who were twerking.

> Keke: It's interesting because sometimes when I'm dancing I'll see the way a guy is gonna grab a girl or approach a girl depending upon how she's dancing . And if a dude grabs me and I throw my elbow at him, he's surprised because of the way I was dancing, because it suggested something about what I was looking for or what kind of attention I wanted . It's definitely weird because again I think it's a respectability politics, because I think if you dance a certain way in certain types of spaces, then people are gonna assume that you're down for certain things. And it's important where you're twerking. If it was like a competition somewhere and it's a place where everybody know there's a lot of good dancers, then when you're twerking it seems like wow she has a lot of skills, but when you're in a club it's sexual.[42]

Keke's example suggests that in club contexts some men assume that twerking women are sexually available and proceed according. They try to grab them to dance or approach them to dance in a sexual way assuming that these women want that kind of attention just based of the fact that they were twerking, which is not necessarily the case. This concern is not specific to Keke. Though Isis said that she often engages in twerking when in spaces she feels safe and

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[41] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.
[42] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.

surrounded by people she knows, she admitted that there is this kind of pressure in some contexts and that she wouldn't feel comfortable twerking in some places. She said, " I feel like with anything heightened around the butt, people just feel very comfortable to do things they wouldn't normally do, like touch your butt or touch you."[43] This reiterates that in some instances people interpret twerking as an invitation to initiate sexual contact. Vivica expresses her frustration with these kinds of assumptions and interactions.

> Vivica: In a lot of social clubs and stuff dance clubs, it's like this interesting dynamic between males and females. I feel like when I dance or when my friends are dancing and when we are shaking our butts or moving our waists as opposed to doing a two-step or something more men will come and try to dance with us. And not even necessarily come and dance with us, but feel like they can touch us or touch me or come behind me and I don't know what they think they're doing. I wouldn't call it dancing or getting a dance [describing grinding or attempts to grind with them]... There are times where I like dancing and I want the person to dance with me but it's like a lot of the time the guy is not dancing with me it's me dancing and them like, it almost feels like I'm performing a service for them because they just stand there and stand behind me. Or just feel like they can come up on me without saying or asking can I dance with you. So yea and there are times where I just wanna dance to the music and not be inhibited by someone trying to grab me while I'm dancing.[44]

From this account and the others, it is clear that hypersexual representations of twerking lead some men to misread the performer as hypersexual. However, it seems that the major frustration is not necessarily the assumption itself, but the act of touching or grabbing without gaining permission. Vivica admitted that she used to dance to gain men's attention, but explained that she now twerks for her own enjoyment. She also added "I find myself dancing less like that in clubs because... I feel like I know what it signals to other people."[45] Essentially, Vivica admitted that she inhibits herself depending on where she is to protect against other peoples' assumptions and stop unwanted attention. Her description emphasizes that having men grab or touch them presents a huge imposition and can inhibit twerkers' dancing, both in the sense that it aims to

[43] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.
[44] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.
[45] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.

restrict their dancing to a performance for male pleasure, and in the sense that they may be inclined to restrict the way they dance in certain spaces to avoid unwanted assumptions.

This chapter traces twerking from its origins to its current representations to understand how it is perceived in our popular imagination. Twerking is an old dance with roots in black global dance culture, that has become a new phenomenon in mainstream media. In mainstream media, twerking is commonly interpreted to be sexual. But many who are familiar with these global origins and twerking in contexts outside of its current representations, suggest that the dance form itself is not inherently sexual, but rather it is considered to be such because of the way that it is represented. Indeed many current representations of twerking portray it as hypersexual and rely on black women's bodies to create that representation. Considering the associations that have been made between twerking, black women, and hypersexuality, representations of twerking have become part and parcel of the lineage of black women's representation as hypersexual. As such, these representations present constraints for black women (twerkers and non-twerkers alike). Like other hypersexual representations of black women, representations of twerking can affect how black women's self-image and self-presentation, the societal view of black women, and therefore black women's treatment. A paper with a larger scope might explore the disputes over twerking that arise between black women or how these representations affect black queer men who also engage in twerking. As previously stated twerking is contested and there are many responses to these representations, interviews with other kinds of communities would illustrate those other kinds of responses.

Chapter 3

We Can't Stop: Investigating Miley Cyrus' VMA Performance as Cultural Appropriation

Miley Cyrus' controversial performance for MTV's 2013 Video Music Awards (VMAs) elevated twerking to the mainstream phenomenon that it has now become. Though the white Disney-turned-pop star received some attention for twerking in earlier YouTube videos, no performance received nearly as much attention as this one. In fact, I was not interested in watching this performance, or in pursuing this topic, until I noticed the volume and kind of media attention both twerking and Miley Cyrus had received in its aftermath. The star boasts that her VMA performance garnered 306,000 tweets (Twitter statuses) per minute. Tweets are just a microcosm of the media sphere. There were also a number of television segments, interviews, blogs, articles, comments, and videos responding to the singer's twerking performance. Many reacted to the sexual nature of the performance. Some declared Cyrus' attire (or lack thereof) and dance moves to be vulgar, degrading, slutty and inappropriate, while others defended her right to express her sexuality freely. Viewers also questioned her motives and abilities. Some criticized her for twerking poorly, while others debated over whether what she did actually constitutes twerking or not. This latter debate, as I will demonstrate, is loaded with issues of race, gender, privilege, authenticity, and cultural ownership. In this chapter, I argue that despite Cyrus' stated intention, her twerking performance at the VMAs had the effect of cultural appropriation or cultural theft because it relied on the objectification of black women, because of her relationship to black culture and because of the privilege she possesses as a white celebrity.

VMA Performance Description

Before discussing these controversies, it is necessary to describe the performance. While the following description does not capture the experience of viewing this performance either live or in real time, it does provide sufficient context.

Miley Cyrus emerges from the stomach of a gigantic teddy bear wearing a shiny silver one piece body suit with her hair pulled into two small buns atop her head. She exits the bear seductively: slowly descending the staircase, swiveling her hips, and sticking her tongue out to one side of her mouth. She takes center stage and begins to dance after the slow futuristic music with the refrain “twerk it out” gives way to a faster beat accompanied by a guitar rhythm. First, she sways from left to right beckoning for more applause and playing air guitar. Then, she claps, widens her stance, and begins shaking her butt from side to side, circling her head around, and kicking one leg out to the front at a time. Hopping back up to a more narrow stance, she pops her pelvis up and down rapidly in a way that resembles "crunk dancing," a Southern hip-hop dance style involving fast, sharp gestures like fist pumping. Meanwhile, she is encircled by a group of black women wearing black sunglasses, black shirts cut off just beneath their breasts, red leggings, and large fuzzy teddy bears strapped to their backs. They all twerk until the intro music fades, at which point, they strike a pose. The camera zooms in on Miley Cyrus standing with one hand on her crotch, the other aimed at the audience, and her tongue jutting out the side of her mouth.

As her number one single “We Can’t Stop” starts to play, the women start to twerk again. Miley Cyrus, still in the center of their circle, leans forward, grabs the floor, and twerks along to the beat. As Cyrus belts her first verse, the black women surrounding her retreat upstage. Cyrus moves around the stage, singing and gesturing to the audience. When she reaches the chorus, she approaches a tall, curvy black woman who is standing with her knees just slightly

bent, shaking her large buttocks. Unlike the other black female dancers, this woman is wearing patterned leggings beneath a black thong, a white tank top, and a blond wig. More of her lower back and butt are exposed because she has only the head of a teddy bear strapped to her back. When Cyrus reaches this woman, she places her hand on the woman's buttocks, leans her head just inches away from it, and imitates analingus. She also spanks the woman while sticking her tongue out, before turning to face the audience again. Later, Cyrus bends over and twerks in front of a section of the audience. Her three black female back-up dancers in red leggings then run over to join her and act as her "hype women": echoing her words and gesturing to the crowd to encourage more excitement. They follow Cyrus to another part of the stage and twerk standing upright, kicking their legs out and twisting their heels inward and outward to accentuate the movement of the thigh. This movement looks similar to Cyrus' introductory dance, but their movements are more controlled. Still, the camera focuses on Miley Cyrus, who finishes her song with a Michael Jackson-esque crotch grab, complete with his famous "Wooo".

For the second half of the performance, white male R&B singer Robin Thicke joins Cyrus on stage for a joint performance of his summer single "Blurred Lines". Thicke is wearing a black and white striped suit with a black collared shirt and aviator shades. After ripping away her silver one-piece, Cyrus is now wearing tight, nude-colored hot pants with a matching bustier. She also has a large "We're #1" foam finger, which she occasionally rubs between her legs as she sings. When the two performers meet in the middle of the stage, Cyrus circles Thicke seductively rubbing the foam finger around his shoulders, back, and between his legs. She then bends over in front of him and twerks onto his crotch. Walking away, she playfully thrusts her pelvis with the foam finger pointed between her legs as if it were an erect penis. When Thicke joins her again, Cyrus turns to him, embraces him, and licks his neck. As the song ends, Cyrus

turns around, facing her backside to his crotch once again, and leans back slightly while playfully biting her foam finger ("We Can't Stop/Blurred Lines/Give It 2 U (Medley)" 2013).

Effects trump Intentions: Discrepancy between Stated Intention and Reactions

As aforementioned, this performance attracted a lot of attention and created a lot of controversy. While some seem to have enjoyed it, many were shocked, confused, and/ or displeased by the performance. In a phone interview with Fuse TV, Big Freedia, self-proclaimed Queen of Twerking and New Orleans Bounce music (an up-tempo heavy bass call-and-response genre from New Orleans) said, "She [Miley] was going too far. She's trying to twerk, but don't know how to twerk," (Newman 2013). Respondents in my sample expressed similar sentiments.

> Unique: Yes so I saw that performance and I saw her videos. She didn't twerk very well, but you know whatever.[46]
>
> Sky: I just, I really didn't like the performance first of all.... It didn't reflect anything about twerking it was just a bad representation of twerking.[47]
>
> Vivica:...I just didn't know what she was doing. I was like "Why are you sticking your tongue out at the camera? You're running around in this little suit and people are in teddy bear costumes." I just didn't understand what was going on. It wasn't tasteful to me. Yes there was a lot going on, and it's cool I guess that they had on bear costumes, and it was still like a production, but it didn't do anything except make people say "Ooo look what Miley's done now. She had this crazy ass performance.[48]
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> Isis: Just looking at people's faces in the audience I feel like a lot of them captured my feelings, like the Smith family and Rihanna's reaction to it, but I was disgusted kinda like "What are you doing?" First of all, she's not even doing it correctly and sticking her tongue out is just nasty, that's just extra...[49]

The above responses reflect a general displeasure with the performance that was shared by many viewers. Some critiqued her ability, with statements like "She didn't twerk very well" and "She's not even doing it correctly". Others made a distinction between twerking and what Miley Cyrus

[46] personal interview with Unique, conducted December 2013.
[47] personal interview with Sky, conducted December 2013.
[48] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.
[49] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.

did, saying things like "I didn't know what she was doing," "It didn't reflect anything about twerking," " It was just a bad representation of twerking" and "She's *trying* to twerk, but don't know how to twerk [emphasis added]". The fact that respondents criticized her ability and created this distinction reveals an obvious aversion to the performance. Further inquiry suggested that this aversion was related to the social dynamics that viewers perceived within the performance. Beyond the initial critique that she cannot or did not twerk, interviewees and other viewers expressed the following concerns to explain their aversion to Cyrus' performance: she was objectifying black women, she was not giving credit where credit was due, she was taking it and popularizing it without knowing the culture and origins from which twerking derives. These, in turn, demonstrate how Cyrus' performance can be read as an act of cultural appropriation which relied on and reinforced the objectification of black women. Since the notion of cultural appropriation assumes a degree of homogeneity (Thrift 2003), it is important to emphasize that ideas about twerking and black culture are contested. While there are some common themes amongst the responses herein, the diverse viewpoints represented still demonstrate this point. There are also a number of responses from black viewers, especially black women, which are not reflected in this study. My goal is not to essentialize twerking as a marker of black culture or black identity, but instead to investigate how and why some people experience Cyrus' twerking as objectification and cultural appropriation, as well as what could have allowed people to interpret this act so differently than Cyrus proclaimed to have intended.

According to Miley Cyrus, her VMA performance was "supposed to be funny slash somewhat you know obviously provocative" ("Miley Cyrus Discusses Her VMA Performance on Ellen" 2013). Audience members did not appear to register this humor. Trey is the only interviewee who reported laughing while seeing the performance.

Trey: My first reaction, I just burst out laughing. It was just hilarious. I think maybe if I had more

> connection to twerking [my reaction would be different]. I didn't make the connection to the societal implications and all that and cultural appropriation, I wasn't thinking of all that. I saw this girl I used to associate with being a teen idol suddenly up there doing ridiculous things, I mean her hair was cut in a ridiculous way, she just looked like an idiot so that was my reaction to it. I don't even think I made the connection "wow she's twerking". I think the connection was more "wow she's being a fool up there".[50]

Though this response is more in line with Cyrus' reported expectation, it seems few shared his reaction. Even Miley Cyrus admitted that she, "saw a lot of faces that were kind of like 'Ummm should we be laughing at this, is this supposed to be funny?' ("Miley Cyrus Discusses Her VMA Performance on Ellen" 2013). As she said this she dropped her jaw and widened her eyes, looking from left to right, to mimic the audiences' shocked expressions. After adding that the performance was supposed to be an adaptation of her and Robin Thicke's music videos, which feature twerking and nude women respectively, she added that she was confused by the audiences' reactions. She said, " I don't know why they were shocked, I had clothes on. I was tryin' to get away with it, but MTV threatened to dead air me. So I couldn't come out in the full birthday suit, I had to put something on...of course nude latex always works" ("Miley Cyrus Discusses Her VMA Performance on Ellen" 2013). She could not understand the audiences' shock. In her mind, she did nothing different from any other artist that night. I argue that her lack of understanding stems from her uncritical performance of a dance which is laden with black sexual and cultural politics. As Trey's response implies, in order for him to see the humor of the performance, he had to disconnect it from its societal implications and ideas of cultural implications, which he acknowledges were later brought to his attention. This suggests that in order to see the humor in the performance one has to consume it uncritically, divorcing it from its racial, gendered, and class implications. Acknowledging these implications thereby make it easier to understand how so many found the performance troubling.

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[50] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.

In order to demonstrate this point, I draw on Melissa Campbell's article entitled, "Go White Girl!': Hip Hop Booty Dancing and the White Female Body"(2004). In it, Campbell argues that white women's performance of "booty dancing" is laden with racial and sexual politics. She poses two questions critical to interpreting Miley Cyrus' performance: "When a white girl shakes her booty, is she colonizing black female bodies with her own, ironically performing both race and gender, or negotiating spaces for her own sexuality? And what relationship does she have with the music that drives her gyrations...?" (Campbell 2004:498). Campbell shows that white women's booty dancing re-inscribes racist notions of black women's bodies by relying on them to sexualize their own bodies. As previously argued, black women have been cast as hypersexual and deviant. This stereotype helps to sustain the racist conception of their inferiority and the patriarchal image of white women as virginal and innocent. Because the hypersexual black woman image helps to create a black "whore"/white "virgin" dichotomy (Collins 2000:145), the black female body has also historically given white men and women access to forbidden or taboo forms of sexual expression. That is, by projecting a narrative of sexualization dissociated from whiteness onto black bodies, early North American whites could sexualize their world using black presence (hooks 2003:123). Simply put, black bodies have been appropriated to sexualize white ones. For Campbell, this is one problem with bourgeois white women, imagining themselves as "black video chicks" and engaging in booty dancing. In doing so, they attempt to adopt the "sexuality" that racist discourse construes black women as having for their own "sexual liberation". Yet, they do so temporarily and uncritically, ignoring the ways in which their consumption of black female hyper-sexuality furthers this discourse (Campbell 2004:503).

Another problem with white women performing booty dancing is that while they may be doing so ironically, their irony does not outweigh the discourses in which their performance is embedded and it may not be received by the audience. Regardless of how they see their own booty dancing, white women may not be able to avoid being perceived as "hoochies" or "hos" because the "pimpin'" discourse that is involved in dominating black female sexuality and intertwined with hip hop music culture, codifies their movements and the women who perform them as men's accessories (Campbell 2004:506). Still, because satires of pimpin' play a big role in shaping white perceptions of hip hop culture, white women find "pimpish posturing" funny and choose to perform booty dancing ironically (Campbell 2004:504). However, there is a disconnect between the performance of irony and the audience's perception. Audience members who inhabit different "discursive communities" than the white female performer, are bound to interpret the booty dance differently because their knowledge, beliefs, values and communicative strategies differ from those of the performer. And the context of mass culture, which manufactures and widely distributes the visual spectacle, makes it all the more likely that this will be the case. So, "If white women intend ironic booty dancing as a kind of self-defense mechanism, a way of avoiding implication in racism and sexism, it is not a particularly effective one because different communities interpret the same action differently" (Campbell 2004:506). Taken together, these points demonstrate how others might interpret a white performer's " booty dancing" as racist or otherwise troubling despite intentions of irony. Moreover, they provide a useful lens for understanding the reception of Miley Cyrus' performance.

Like the Australian white women Campbell describes in her work, Miley Cyrus reportedly twerked ironically to rouse humor from the audience. Her use of sexual humor throughout the aforementioned interview (i.e., her sexual innuendo about Robin Thicke

enjoying their sexual interaction and her expressed desire to be nude) disrupt her association with her former image as an innocent Disney star and with the purity historically ascribed to white women. Considering her image as a virginal Disney star, along with her admission that this VMA performance was supposed to be funny and somewhat provocative, it is reasonable to assume Cyrus intended to perform twerking ironically to assert her own sexual liberation. However, many failed to register this irony, when attending to her use of black women as props and reflecting on her relationship to twerking, black women, and black culture. Thus, the effects of Cyrus' uncritical adoption of twerking outweighed her intentions. Acknowledging the power dynamics between Cyrus, her backup dancers, and the culture she is borrowing from, as well as the ways that she reinforces tropes about the hypersexual black female illustrate how her performance came to be experienced as a troubling act of cultural appropriation as opposed to funny and somewhat provocative.

Miley Cyrus puts the "prop" in appropriation

In the wake of Cyrus' performance, my Facebook Newsfeed was full of reactions like the following, “Finally, something to describe what I saw during Cyrus’ and every single rappers performance--black female bodies decorating a stage...as props *smdh [shaking my damn head] at this world.” This post, which included a link to another bloggers’ critique, emphasizes the racial implications of the performance. Specifically, it highlights discontent with Cyrus’ use of black female bodies as props during the VMAs. A number of reactors took issue with the performances’ representation of black women, arguing that her twerking and use of black women in the performance are prime examples of cultural appropriation. For example, white feminist blogger Anne Theriault wrote, "Miley used black women as props -- like, *literal props* -- and barely anyone said anything. I saw very few people displaying any outrage over the fact that

Miley was, at one point, slapping a faceless black woman on the ass as if she was nothing more than a *thing* for Miley to dominate and humiliate" (Theriault 2013). In her critique entitled " What Miley Cyrus Did Was Disgusting—But Not For the Reasons You Think," Theriault indicts other white feminist bloggers for their focus on the sexual aspects of Cyrus' and their inattention to race. For her, this use of black women as props was the most disgusting thing about the performance. And Cyrus' slapping of "a faceless black woman on the ass" was a particularly salient exemplar of her manipulation of her black female props. xoJane author, Christiana Mbakwe, remarked that she was most disturbed by Cyrus' use of black women as props and admitted that she winced at the aforementioned ass-slapping (2013). Vulture music critic, Jody Rosen described the performance saying, "Cyrus stalked the stage, mugging and twerking, and paus[ing] to spank and simulate analingus upon the ass of a thickly set African-American backup dancer"(2013). Isis, who mentioned articles like these, also reacted to Cyrus' domination and humiliation of her employees.

> Isis: Her background dancers were...basically in the background like objects, her smacking people's butts... She's just sort of like 'This is cool. This is fun. Oh these girls, Look at their butts! My butt can never look like this so I'm gonna have them here and smack their butts and be ridiculous.[51]

Clearly, these viewers found Cyrus' use of black female back-up dancers troubling and her smacking this black woman's butt was a particularly memorable instance of their objectification. This makes sense given that this action and the staging of Cyrus' performance is embedded in a history of black women's objectification. As chapters one and two demonstrate, black women's buttocks' have been used to symbolize and justify their supposed hyper-sexuality. Though unintentionally, Cyrus' VMA performance employed these symbols.

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[51] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.

After stating that she did not like the performance, Sky explained why she considers Cyrus' use of black female bodies as objectifying.

> Sky: The way she was using female bodies was just like very exploitative. It was just like "We know black girls do twerking, so we gonna put some bad bitches up here and start twerking." I found it offensive and derogatory. It didn't really respect twerking as an art or as a dance... Twerking is somewhat about ability and just having girls up there dancing you're not thinking about twerking and like how it's perceived, you're just throwin' up girls to dance...In the video, the girls were just basically their backs were to the stage and they were just twerking, not even turning around. It was just very stationary like "You're gonna sit here and you're gonna twerk". I didn't think it was twerking at all and that's why I thought it was problematic ...If she really wanted to do twerking she would've gotten her usual dancers and started twerking. But just using black girls to twerk and not really making them the centerpiece of it, they were just being used there, they were just standing there. They didn't really have any other movement besides twerking.[52]

Her explanation illustrates how the background dancers became props (objects). Sky repeatedly highlights the fact that the dancers were stationary aside from their twerking. She was bothered that they were not the focal point of the performance and that they instead were being used to twerk because of the assumption that "black girls do twerking". But as Sky implies, if Cyrus wanted to do twerking she could have used her usual back-up dancers who are white. That she didn't implies that these dancers were not just "used" for their twerking ability, but also for the sexuality that black women's bodies symbolize in our cultural imagination. Hadley Freeman, writer for online news site The Guardian, agrees that Miley Cyrus "used the tedious trope of having black women as her backing dancers, there only to be fondled by her and to admire her wiggling derriere," and suggests that in doing so, she reduced them "to background fodder" and "black women to exaggerated sex objects" (2013).

Similarly, in set of Twitter responses to critics of his above cited article, Jody Rosen emphasized that he compared Cyrus' performance to minstrelsy because of her "ornamental/cartoonish use of black people" and because "it reduced her dancers to totems of--'nasty,' outré [excessive] sexuality" (Vulture Editors 2013). He then, highlighted that no white

[52] personal interview with Sky, conducted December 2013.

dancers accompanied Cyrus on stage, or if they did they were wearing masks. He proposes that the black women's faces and bodies served the purpose of triggering centuries of racial imagery which depict black women as hypersexual (Vulture Editors 2013). This point is made even more convincing by the fact that the dancers' buttocks' were emphasized. They often had their backs to the audiences and beneath their large bear backpacks, only see their butts, thighs, and legs were visible. It could be argued that this is a function of twerking, because the buttocks is its focal point. However, Cyrus twerked and her buttocks was not always the focal point. Moreover, her white buttocks is not attached to the same preconceptions of hyper-sexuality that her black female dancers face. In the early 19th century having a black presence represented in an artwork suggested sex (Gilman 1985:209). Here, having black women with bears strapped to their backs twerk was intended to mark Cyrus' performance as funny and sexually provocative. By reducing her dancers to anonymous black, hyper-sexed twerkers virtually indistinguishable from one another, this performance continued in the lineage of objectification and exploitation of black women's bodies.

Props Can't Talk Back: The issue of voice

This use of black women's bodies as props is troubling not only because it continues in this lineage of objectifying racial imagery, but also because it becomes an issue of voice. Props cannot talk back and as a couple participants pointed out, these background dancers are often not afforded the opportunity to speak back.

> Vivica: They're using black bodies for the body performance. Yet, Miley Cyrus gets to talk or some other non-black woman gets to talk, while black women shake their asses. And not that that's a bad thing, but it becomes bad when mind is favored over body...They are just the dancers in the music video and everyone can comment on them as much as possible without actually having heard from them what they even say about anything .[53]
>
> Keke: When she has these black dancers you know tappin' each other's ass and stuff like that on

[53] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.

> stage, but they don't have the voice to be able to say what they're doing the day before or the next day. Then, you kind of have this consistent static representation of black women as those people in the back twerking versus Miley is able to appropriate that dance and say "Oh look what I'm doing. This is saucy. This is explicit." But, at the end of the day, she can also be in an interview and she can also do other things. So I feel like she has an agency that a lot of the women she uses as her background dancers don't have... a white person gets to be an individual who is twerking whereas with the people of color that is who they are. Like they are the twerking people...People start to look at them like oh yea those are those women twerking and there's no other idea about who they may be outside of that and then that's where you get guys treating you in a way that's hypersexual...so again I really think it all comes down to voice.[54]

Though Miley Cyrus has been able to explain and defend herself in numerous interviews, the same cannot be said of her back-up dancers, few even know who her background dancers were to be able to question them. And as Keke's response suggests, this discrepancy over voice means that twerking gets mapped onto person of color identities in a different way. That is, since these black women are not allowed the voice to express their full identities, the static representation stands in for whole people, defines them, and how others see and treat them.

Distinguishing between Cultural Exchange and Cultural Appropriation

Cyrus' use of this racial imagery combined with her privilege as a white female celebrity and her lack of a relationship to "black culture" marks her performance as cultural appropriation. Culture was long ago defined by anthropologists as "a unique mix of beliefs, practices, values, and institutions shared by members of a society" (Brown 2003: 4). As such, it was nothing more than an analytical device used to discuss behavior, attitudes, and shared understandings of a given society. Now it has a life of its own: "In public discourse, culture and such related concepts as 'tradition' and 'heritage' have become resources that groups own and defend from competing interests" (Brown 2003:4). This is particularly true in contexts where culture has become a commodity fetish or marketable product. It is also especially true for marginal groups whose culture is prone to exploitation. Since black bodies and "black culture" are fetishized as "cool"

[54] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.

"exotic" commodities in today's popular and mass media entertainment cultures (Fleetwood 2011: 111), it makes sense that some members of the black population experience culture as a resource in need of protection. Though some do not claim twerking as belonging to "black culture" (e.g., Unique and Trey), those who do view Cyrus' performance as cultural appropriation, an act of taking from a culture distinct from one's own.

Unlike cultural exchange, the term cultural appropriation implies a difference of power and privilege between the parties involved. In *The Black Dancing Body*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild suggests that "power of the purse" or "power of persuasion" (i.e., economic or social power) makes the distinction between exchange and appropriation (2003). She writes, "Because white-skin privilege confers a degree of power upon the most well-intentioned of its carriers, a benign act of cultural borrowing can have the effect of calculated theft" (Gottschild 2003:21). Fear that one's culture is being "appropriated" or stolen then, is directly related to power differences of the social hierarchy and a history of domination. Marginal groups are rarely compensated for knowledge that has commercial value so objections to cultural theft are partially economic. More often, however, these objections are fueled by fear that "that elemental understandings are coming under the control of others, so that native people are no longer masters of their own traditions, their own identities" (Brown 2003:5). The latter issue is particularly relevant with the advent of new electronic media, such as YouTube videos, because it can facilitate the uncontrolled replication of cultural forms. Responses to Cyrus reflect both economic and social objections and illustrate the relationship between them. Miley is profiting at the expense of black women and black cultural meanings of twerking. She renders twerking a commodity fetish, and in so doing masks power relations, historical contexts, and structural

inequalities (Fleetwood 2011:111), and thereby allowing for difference to be readily and unapologetically consumed.

Misunderstanding and misrepresenting "black culture"

The critiques of the performance reflect concerns that Cyrus misunderstands and misrepresents black culture, and by extension, the black and brown bodies with which it is associated. Many articulated that Miley "took an aspect of culture to which she is not privy, to which she is not a part."[55] At one point, Sky said that she was bothered when Cyrus "comes in and is like look at me twerking" because "It's not. And also you weren't raised with that kind of like you know culture of twerking. So that just makes me not believe you."[56] Her statement highlights that Cyrus' lack of relationship to the culture makes her not believe the performance and distinguish it from "real" twerking.

> Isis:... I don't know [she's] just really trying to act like she knows what black culture is, is in it, and is like "yes I'm leading you all" and "I'm...trying to represent it" and "I'm doing it right" and "I'm doing it authentically" but really it's just sort of like you're being, you're co-opting it and you're trying to take it as your own and it's not yours to take like that. [57]

Isis too, finds Miley Cyrus' positioning of herself at the forefront of this twerking movement troubling because, as she suggests, Cyrus is "trying to act like she knows what black culture is" and trying to represent it. She uses words like "co-opting" and argues that Miley is "trying to take it", which are associated with cultural appropriation. She later reiterates this same problem with Cyrus' relation to black culture when describing what she thought was so wrong with the performance.

> Isis: I feel like she's just, it's fake, it's just like, just interviews of her [imitates Miley Cyrus in a pretentious, phony, excited voice] "Oh I'm starting a movement, all my people with me, yes." It's just everything, like her new album is just crazy, this is not what you were doing before. Not to say that you can't change your image, you can do that, but... to say you know black culture and

[55] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.
[56] personal interview with Sky, conducted December 2013.
[57] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.

> you're helping because you're representing. Just the fact that you're trying to represent it doesn't make something. I feel like she doesn't understand the origins, doesn't understand what it means and she's not really recognizing that...[58]

By highlighting that Cyrus "doesn't understand the origins" and meanings of twerking and "black culture", Isis demonstrates her frustration that Cyrus is trying to represent a cultural form and culture to which she has no connection. According to Anne Theriault, "[Cyrus] is playing at being black without even *trying* to understand what the lived experience of being black really is. She is appropriating cultural elements without taking any time to reflect on her position of privilege and how her use of the term "ratchet" or her twerking are contributing to the oppression of black people" (2013). Both Isis and Theriault emphasize that Cyrus neglects to reflect on her position as an "outsider" to "black culture" and the lived experience of being black. Like Campbell, Theriault's statement underscores that adopting cultural elements without these understandings can further the oppression of the groups from which one borrows. Because, as a white female celebrity, Cyrus has the privilege to further a misrepresentation of the black women she performs with, while distancing herself from that representation.

Her privilege as a wealthy white woman in our social hierarchy allows her this exploitative power. As the conduit that brought twerking into mainstream consciousness, many will only come to know the kind of twerking that she performs, rendering the community of origin invisible and removing their power to control its representation. Again, this is not to suggest that her exploitation is intentional, but rather to suggest that her privilege means that she does not have to think about the implications of actions which could have racial impacts. Sky said, "the thing with Miley is she has enough money to take something up and just do it, whereas friends and regular people can't really take that and just be actin' like they can twerk."[59]

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[58] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.
[59] personal interview with Sky, conducted December 2013.

Likewise, in describing why he felt so many people claimed that Miley Cyrus was culturally appropriating Trey said, "I think what ultimately happened is people were offended they saw this as her mocking a culture which she has no ties to, which she has so much greater privilege than, and they threw sociological terms like cultural appropriation and stuff like that at it..."[60] Both of these comments cite Miley's privilege as a primary reason why people interpreted her performance as cultural appropriation. Keke too, supported this with her description of what she found problematic about the way twerking is represented.

> Keke: Yea I would say I mean I don't think [twerking is] problematic in and of itself, because as I said you catch me any Saturday I could be doing it myself. But I think it's problematic how people who control media or people who can heavily influence what people are gonna talk about [represent it]. Like a Miley or Lily Allen, how they use twerking to help themselves but in the meantime they may be exploiting black and brown women or lending to this idea of black and brown women as hypersexual. Inadvertently, I don't think Miley Cyrus got up, started twerking, and was like "Yea Imma be in front of these black women and this is how I'm gonna perpetuate these stereotypes about women of color." I don't think she did that consciously, but I think the fact that you can make that decision and not have to be conscious about it is problematic.[61]

Keke underscores that the fact that Miley Cyrus can twerk without having to be conscious of how her performance may affect or exploit black and brown women demonstrates her privilege. In fact, in many ways, as a white female celebrity, Cyrus is distanced from the people, culture, and stereotypes that she is embodying.

> Keke:*sighs* I mean I think because she's a celebrity it's a little different. I think becuz she's coming from being a childhood star it's a little different. But I do think that she had the freedom to act in that way and it was perceived like oh this cute little white girl is acting out versus if you saw a black woman doing that sort of thing you would be like oh yea well that's who she is and I feel like it wouldn't have even blown up because it would've been taken for granted like oh yea of course that's what black women do, what else would they do?[62]

As aforementioned, twerking gets mapped on to black and brown identity differently than Miley Cyrus and other white performers because of historical relationships. When she performs something that is considered to be lewd and sexual, she is labeled a sexually white liberated

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[60] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.
[61] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.
[62] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.

woman working against the stereotypes about white female virginity. But, when a black woman does it, it is assumed to be a part of her inherently sexual nature. Cyrus' status as a member of a dominant race and class means that she is able to pick and choose what parts of black culture she wants to embrace without having to deal with the racism that black women live with every day. She can imagine that she is a part of the culture and try to represent it without having any concept of what it really means for those who are actually a part of the culture. As Mbakwe argues, appropriating black culture as opposed to being black allows one to exploit elements of the culture for profit, social clout, and/or coolness factor while avoiding the systemic prejudice that accompanies being black. She writes, "[Miley] doesn't understand the politics of race and gender at work while she gets to live out her beautiful capitalist fantasy surrounded by colorful props. I doubt she grasps intersectionality and how it means women of color experience oppression at an intensity that white women don't...That's what wealth and privilege do, they inoculate you from feeling the acute pain oppressed groups live through daily" (Mbakwe 2013). Thus, wealth and privilege allow its holders to "misappropriate" tiny elements of cultural experience for profit and shock value, while distancing themselves from the oppression that communities associated with those cultures must experience. Furthermore, incorporating black cultural elements into her performance uncritically, allows Cyrus to market non-representative aspects of black life to the masses (Campbell 2004:502). This then, results in those unfamiliar with the culture mistaking these misrepresented cultural elements as the "real" thing, and divorcing them from the meaning of the original culture.

Not giving credit where credit is due

Critiques of the performance reflect a second issue that renders Cyrus' act cultural appropriation. She is not only taking elements of "black culture" without understanding

meanings, but she is also failing to acknowledge the origins. Many who are unaware of the history of twerking, attribute its origin to Miley Cyrus because she popularized the recent phenomenon. Instead of informing the masses of the "true" origins, she uses the attention she has received from her performance of it for personal advancement, while the originators receive no recognition and instead are left with the stereotypes that her use of black women as props furthers. Big Freedia suggests that Miley Cyrus twerking has "become offensive to a lot of people who've been twerking and shaking their asses for years, especially in the black culture... I've been transforming twerking for the last three years around the world and for her to just come out of the blue and just start twerking, a lot of people are very offended by it, especially in New Orleans. When something get hot, everybody want to jump on the bandwagon and act like they created it. That's totally understandable but they have to give credit where credit is due" (Newman 2013). Here, Big Freedia emphasizes that many people who have been twerking for a long time find the performance offensive because Cyrus neglected to give proper recognition to its creators. To this view, Vivica adds:

> Vivica: Miley Cyrus, if she's twerking or just even talking about she is recognized as doing something that's game changing basically. Where like I said people been doin' this, so she really hasn't...it's like they get the credit, other people get all of the credit...[63]

Like Freedia, Vivica highlights that Miley Cyrus is being unfairly recognized as doing something "game changing" and receives credit for that while those people have been twerking for years receive none of the recognition they deserve.

Later, Big Freedia added, " Every time we do something, people want to snatch it and run with it and put their name on it. And they still don't even have the moves down yet. Just get me and Miley together so I could give her ass some lessons"(Newman 2013). Big Freedia's use

[63] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.

of the phrase "snatch it and run with it" underscores that like Isis, she feels that Miley has taken something of cultural significance. Yet, she is not only bothered by Cyrus' lack of relationship to the culture, but her willingness to and "put [her] name on" twerking and reap the benefits of its creation, when she took it from somewhere else. Freedia reiterates the problem of not giving credit where credit is due when she says "That's why I'm working so hard; for [twerking to reach the masses] to happen on my end, not on the end of someone who's not even familiar with the culture. That's what's so offensive, when you've been doing it for so many years and then someone who just jumped off the porch tries to do it," (Newman 2013). "Someone who just jumped off the porch" is a colloquial expression that emphasizes that the subject in question is inexperienced. This shows that she finds Cyrus' lack of familiarity with the form and the culture problematic, but more telling is Freedia's frustration that she was working hard to popularize twerking for years and someone who knew less about it was able to popularize it. Sky shares this sentiment:

> Sky: Also at the same time when did she ever twerk in other videos before? So I'm like you just learned this yesterday so you really didn't twerk you know.
> I:Does it bother you that she's new and now she's known for it?
> Sky: Yea it's an appropriation I feel like.[64]

Sky clarified that she felt that Cyrus' performance of twerking was appropriation because she was new to the form, but she became known for it. Taken together, these responses demonstrate frustration with the fact that Miley Cyrus acknowledge the origins of twerking or the people who created it. That Cyrus places herself at the forefront of twerking while relegating black women to the background, as she quite literally did in her VMA performance, has material consequences. Namely, that she is allowed to advance further by exploiting black women and

[64] personal interview with Sky, conducted December 2013.

black culture, while the community of origin is rendered invisible as the creators, but hyper-visible as exotic hyper-sexed beings.

Furthering her own privilege

Respondents were also troubled by Cyrus' use of this performance to further her own privilege. Keke suggested that the performance for Cyrus was simply a " way of tapping into this 'African-American' culture so that [she] can seem relevant to a mass population."[65] According to Vivica, her goal was "not just to show people something that is rich, creative, and artsy; to get [them] to think and just appreciate it, but to actually make it something that is buzzworthy, sensationalized."[66] These responses reflect interviewees' concern that Cyrus' performance was just a means to another end, the achievement of multi-cultural, economic, and social capital. Capital refers to the monetary, social, and cultural resources that individuals may receive, draw upon, and exchange in the social world (Lareau 2003: 275-276). An individual's social location and background experiences shape the amount of capital that they have, meaning that their race, gender, and class confer a certain amount of capital, but this is subject to change as they negotiate the social world. Economic capital refers to money, while social capital refers to one's social status and the social networks they are able to establish. Multicultural capital derives from Peterson & Kern's idea of the "cultural omnivore". It explains the sense of distinction that comes along with partaking in multiple cultures different from one's own. The early 90s has marked a qualitative shift from snobbish exclusion (i.e., shunning cultural expressions not deemed elevated) to omnivorous appropriation (i.e., being open and seeking out cultural expressions produced by socially marginal groups) (Peterson and Kern 1996: 900-901). Thus, the acquisition of multicultural capital, and not snobbish exclusion, confers a sense of accomplishment,

[65] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.
[66] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.

knowledge, and "worldliness" upon its owner. The latter is privileged in today's increasingly global world, which is managed by those who make their way by demonstrating their knowledge of the cultural expressions of others (Peterson and Kern 1996: 906).

By twerking, Miley Cyrus is acquiring multi-cultural capital and relying on the "coolness" factor of black culture and tropes about the hypersexuality of black women to change her social status and re-signify her previous image, thereby allowing her to achieve social and economic capital. Many viewers highlighted her attempt to change her image in their responses. Keke said:

> Keke: Like I think when people saw Miley Cyrus twerking, they viewed it as a young white girl trying to act out or rebel or show that she's not like some Disney character whatever she used to be and saw it as disrespectful for someone of her place.[67]

> Unique: She wasn't doin' it right. Either way I shouldn't be mad because twerking like I just said doesn't belong to someone, but like I was saying with my other friends, I don't know her intentions but it does seem like it's coming from an ingenuine space. I do think she's doing it solely to get some sort of attention. Maybe she's using the fact that twerking has been labeled as a sexual thing to help her break from the Disney channel a little bit. I don't know what her intentions are, she's a whole mess anyway.[68]

Both of these responses allude to Cyrus' former Disney past and suggest that she used the performance disconnect from that. When Unique says, "Maybe [Miley's] using the fact that twerking has been labeled as a sexual thing to help her break from the Disney channel a little bit," she underscores two things. First, that twerking has been labeled as sexual. And second, that Cyrus may be relying on those sexual meanings to alter her former "pure, innocent" Disney channel image. She also argues that doing it "solely to get some sort of attention" makes this performance of twerking disingenuous. In fact, she shared a story of a group of her white friends who have what she calls a crazy fascination with twerking. She described how this group of

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[67] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.
[68] personal interview with Unique, conducted December 2013.

friends makes repeated references to twerking and tries to engage in it though albeit not very well according to her. She then clarified that the way that these friends interact with twerking is very different than how her black friends who introduced her interact. For the latter, twerking was something fun and exciting the two enjoyed doing together that they didn't feel the need to publicize. For the former, it was something else entirely.

> Unique: I feel like the white friends are doing it because it became this fad and they were picking up on it. And grabbing hold of something that is blown out of proportion. It sort of became social cachet or capital to understand what twerking was and be really into it and want to Twerk yourself, which I don't know if that's exactly what's going through their head but it's just what it seems like. "Oh I'm so cool I can twerk."[69]

This example emphasizes that twerking became a means for some white people to acquire capital. And for Unique and other respondents, participating in twerking simply to further one's own privilege in terms of capital rendered the performance disingenuous and changed its meaning, making it an act of cultural appropriation.

Online critiques of the performance merge concerns about Cyrus' use of black women's bodies and her use of twerking for personal advancement to justify how the performance is cultural appropriation. Jody Rosen argues that Cyrus's twerk act is a part of this lineage of minstrelsy, which he defines as a shortcut to self-actualization for white performers, because she is using "the potent sexual symbolism of black female bodies" to transform herself from an innocent Disney star to a provocative Pop Star (2013). To him, that Cyrus is using elements of black culture and using black female bodies as props, in order to solidify her star status makes it an act of cultural appropriation. Anne Theriault echoes this comparison to minstrelsy, adding that Cyrus took different aspects of a culture to achieve street credibility and sexual liberation, without having to acknowledge or deal with the racialization that those who belong to the culture she's appropriating must (2013). Famous comedian Kevin Hart illustrates similar sentiments in

[69] personal interview with Unique, conducted December 2013.

his response to the performance. After jocularly suggesting that Miley Cyrus didn't have the body to twerk and playfully comparing her VMA performance to soft porn, he proposes that what she is doing is smart because she is taking people's mind off the fact that she was a Disney star. He adds that this may seem crazy, but as an artist it will be good for her ("Kevin Hart give his opinion on Miley Cyrus 'twerking' at the VMAs" 2013). The comparison to soft porn demonstrates that he also noticed the sexual nature of the performance. At one point he even noted that her sexual antics, were a far cry from Hannah Montana, her Disney persona, thereby establishing the connection between her display of sexuality and changing her Disney image. The preceding points highlight a general sense from viewers that Miley Cyrus was adopting the "coolness" and hyper-sexuality associated with "black culture" through twerking in order to change her image from the innocent Disney star to this provocative pop diva, thereby resulting in cultural appropriation.

It is important to note that Cyrus' achievement of social capital yielded and will continue to yield her other benefits, namely economic capital. Her financial profit is apparent. In the wake of the VMA performance, she had two hits in the top ten and a number one single, which both lead to a spike in album ("Miley Cyrus Discusses Her VMA Performance on Ellen" 2013). So the attention that she received, negative though it may be, is certainly paying off. By selling "blackness" through her white body via twerking, Cyrus capitalized on the fact that the world is enamored with black culture and that corporations would rather sell and explore the black cultural experience using white faces and bodies (Mbakwe 2013). Mbakwe referred to Miley Cyrus' tour as a "cleverly marketed hyper-sexualization tour" and in doing so, emphasized the economic capital she gained and still stands to gain from her reliance on tropes of blackness and hyper-sexuality via twerking. Other viewers are certainly aware of this benefit and find it unfair

given Cyrus' aforementioned estrangement from black culture and failure to acknowledge the community of origin.

> Isis: I mean I'm sure she's happy with all the attention and now people are paying more attention to her, buying her album, she's probably getting a lot of commercial success in some ways or notoriety but like still it's just unfair because people have been [twerking]. It's not like that's the first time twerking has existed in songs and videos in the past. That's been in existence, but it just hasn't been as looked at...[70]

With this, Isis reiterates the commercial success, notoriety, and privilege that Miley Cyrus received as a result of the attention around her twerking. Like Big Freedia, she also emphasizes that this level of capital which Miley has been able to acquire through twerking is unfair because other people have been twerking, that fact has not been acknowledged. Vivica too, expressed some of her anger about the performance in these terms. After explaining that Miley Cyrus and other people who "twerk" but who have no connection to the communities of origin get credit while the creators don't she added:

> Vivica: Right and then three, two years from now it might get recognized in a backwards way like [imitates white reporter again] "it turns out twerking comes from Africa" you know. Like is that a new discovery you just made, no. But after it's all over and everyone's made their money then people can tell partial truths.[71]

These last few responses ties all the themes of the critique together. Essentially, some viewers experience Miley Cyrus' twerking as appropriation because she has no relationship to the people and culture from which it derives and yet she tries to represent the culture as if she does. By becoming the center of the phenomenon and failing to acknowledge the communities of origin as creators, but instead using them as props in her performance, to enable herself to further her capital and privilege Cyrus is engaging in cultural appropriation.

Historicizing this moment

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[70] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.
[71] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.

Some might suggest that this kind of analysis reads too much into this one performance. However, it is important to realize that Cyrus' use of racial imagery is not restricted to this VMA performance. In fact, she has employed racial imagery by twerking elsewhere, proclaiming a love for “hood music”, claiming spiritual affinity with rapper Lil’ Kim, imitating crunk music videos and telling songwriters she wanted something that "feels back" (Rosen 2013, Freeman 2013). It is also critical to note that even if her reliance on racial imagery is not intentional, it is embedded in a lineage of whites appropriating black culture. Hazzard- Gordon writes, "Whites have steadily borrowed from African-American dance-- largely without acknowledgement or appreciation of the source" (1990: xi). Between 1877 and 1920, the white theater, the recording industry, and the newly emerging popular culture industry, adopted African-American music and dance, albeit poorly, but systematically excluded blacks from those markets (Hazzard-Gordon 1990: 93). For example, Irene and Vernon Castle "transformed black culture into something that white Americans could *safely* partake of" [emphasis added], which then led to white invasion of black cultural spaces and the " exploitive commercialization of African-American entertainment of the next three decades" (Hazzard-Gordon 1990: 93). More recently, Madonna constructed herself as a cultural icon by appropriating signifiers of feminist, queer, African-American, and Latino subcultures (Tsanev 2006: 83). For example, her "Vogue" song and accompanying video appropriates "voguing" a dance borne out of queer African-American ball culture. While some of the dancers have been able to attain some success from participation in her video, it pales in comparison to the recognition, attention, and success she was able to achieve by using that and other elements of subculture. This exploitive commercialization is precisely the issue that those who experience twerking as belonging to "black culture" have with Miley Cyrus. Hazzard-

Gordon highlights that African-American social dance continues to be a creative source for white popular culture.

This chapter supports this claim, by showing how Cyrus' 2013 VMA performance appropriated twerking. Respondents were troubled by her use of black women as props and her simultaneous reliance on the black hypersexual female stereotype to render her performance funny and sexually provocative. They were also disturbed by her lack of relationship to "black culture" and failure to acknowledge the communities of twerking origins. They noted that her privilege as a white female celebrity allowed her to introduce her misrepresentation of twerking to the masses, thereby rendering black people invisible as creators, but hyper-visible as hypersexual, yet exotic "Others". By "twerking" Cyrus used racial and gendered imagery to activate her multicultural capital, to reshape her image, and gather the attention necessary to further her economic and social privilege as a white female celebrity. In doing so, she transformed twerking into something white Americans could partake in to appear "cool" and "edgy" thereby altering its meanings, while leaving black women with the stigma its hypersexual meanings imply.

Chapter 4

Express Yourself: Highlighting the Healing and Humanity of Twerking

Up to this point, this work has focused primarily on the ways in which twerking representations can constrain black women. Chapter one introduces the historical legacy of the representing black women's bodies as sexually deviant. Chapter two demonstrates how current representations of twerking as hypersexual can affect social realities. By constructing black women as hypersexual, these portrayals can affect black women's self-image, self-presentation. They can allow black women to be objectified by men who perform twerking satirically or men who misinterpret their performance as a sexual invitation and proceed to touch, grab, or otherwise express ownership over these women's bodies. Furthermore, these images can also impact societal views of black women, casting them as culturally deficient and therefore deserving of negative social outcomes which actually result from the racial and gendered hierarchy of our social structure. Chapter three shows how white female celebrities can rely on the hypersexual trope of black women's bodies in their performance of twerking. That is to say, these celebrities use black women's bodies and their supposed sexuality in order to sexualize themselves, acquire capital (social, economic, multicultural) and further their own privilege, while leaving black women to face the stigma of the performance. From these examples, it is clear that black women who twerk must indeed face constraints. In fact, black women who do not twerk must also to deal with the effects of this hypersexual representation of twerking since it adds to a lineage of portrayals that cast black women in this way.

However, within black communities and black popular culture, the uses of black female butts impose as many constraints as they provide opportunities for self-empowerment (Campbell

2004:502). On the one hand, as has been demonstrated, when focus on the buttocks negates appreciation of black women as full beings, it has the potential to result in the same fragmentation and objectification of black women's bodies imposed during slavery. On the other hand, celebration of the buttocks can be "'an inversion of the aesthetic hierarchy that renders black women's bodies inadequate and sexually unattractive'" (Campbell 2004:501). Beyond its representations, the actual dance form of twerking can have this latter effect for its performers Rather than, encouraging them to de-emphasize their bodies as the practice of respectability would demand, it encourages them to embrace their bodies and its abilities. Though twerkers may not think about their enactments as subversive, twerking can enable its black female performers to challenge social parameters by allowing them to reclaim their bodies and express themselves.

Reclaiming the black female body through booty dance

Booty dances, like twerking, can allow for the black female buttocks to be resignified. Choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar argues that the butt can be powerful. At the 8th Annual International Association of Blacks in Dance Conference, she noted that shaking the butt is "raised to a powerful level of artistry" in Nigeria and suggested that Americans should work to bring that kind of energy here so that they may begin a "healing cultural momentum" (DeFrantz 2002:24). Zollar's own works (*Batty Moves* and *The Walkin' Talkin' Signifying Blues Hips, Lowdown, Throwdown*) explore this empowering potential, by employing the booty as satire, a work of gender education, an initiator of movement, a source of heat, fun, a focal point of conversation and desire, and of celebration (DeFrantz 2002:24). In her pieces, the black female butt became the site for multiple meanings, not just a symbol of black woman's sexual deviance thereby resignifying it. Dance scholar, Thomas DeFrantz's review of these pieces demonstrate

how. He wrote, “The women allow their cheeks to slope toward the corners of the space; to support precarious balances on one leg; to bat against the air...Each woman works [the butt] out in her own good time, sometimes circling her torso and breasts slowly, magnificently-- as if to finally discover her anatomy in motion” (DeFrantz 2002:24). His use of “allow”, coupled with the idea that these women work their butts in their “own good time” emphasizes the level of control that these women exert over their own buttocks’ and their bodies as a whole. DeFrantz later emphasizes this level of control again when he suggests that the way the dancers take their time "working a turn with one leg held in attitude position" demonstrates "how the gluteus maximus runs even that show” (2002:25). Though their butts "run the show", these women orchestrate that butt movement. They decide how it will move in space and how long it will be on display, thereby illustrating the level of control over their buttocks', bodies, and space that these resignifying performances allow.

This demonstration of control and dance ability is not reserved for professional dancers, interviewees also discussed twerking as a means to demonstrate control, skill, and ability.

> Isis: To actually be able to do some of those movements well is a skill. And to some people that's crazy, but I think it is, it definitely takes different muscles, different movements and... control too to be able to pop one butt cheek and not the other butt cheek like what? That's real. That is impressive, even if not everyone thinks it is.[72]

> Keke: I feel like someone who is twerking really will know the drops to a song or the stops on a beat. When you're twerking its almost like you're showing how well I know this song so look at what I can do to it. Especially if it's a song that makes you really hype or you know really well then you wanna dance really well to it. And other times it is like a showing off of skills...[73]

> Sky: If you’re doing it by yourself you’re basically showing that you can do these things with your body which most people can't. [74]

[72] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.
[73] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.
[74] personal interview with Sky, conducted December 2013.

All of these responses emphasize the level of control and skill involved in twerking. The control and skill that twerkers exhibit over their bodies challenge corporeal parameters. But by placing their butts on display for themselves and reclaiming control over their bodies through demonstrating their dancing abilities, these women also challenge social parameters which stipulate that the black female body is one of excess that needs to be contained, exploited, or controlled by others.

In other words, twerking enables black women who perform it to challenges the social by instilling pride in place of shame the shame which misrepresentations instill. Recall, hooks' assertion that the *School Daze* party scene challenged assumptions that the black body is a mark of shame by displaying and celebrating unruly, outrageous, and mobile black butts (2003:124). Similarly, twerkers challenge the idea of the black female body as a mark of shame, by taking pride in the movement of their buttocks.

> Trey: [Twerking] implies that black people have rhythm and an ability to do something that white people can't necessarily do. I think there is some pride that comes in it. I know female friends that I mentioned who do it, they do have pride in their ability to do it.[75]

Isis' remarks that popping one butt cheek at a time is "real" and "impressive" and Sky's assertion that you are doing things "with your body which most people can't" support Trey's observation that ability to twerk can come with a sense of pride. That twerking can instill pride in place of shame is significant, especially considering that one's sense of self as distinct and valuable is tied to what one knows how to do, and that a sense of mastery can secure a sense of identity (Bartky 2003:39). The act of twerking challenges the shame imposed upon black women's bodies, by providing a forum for black women to experience control over and take pride in their bodies and its ability. Zollar suggests that we can understand booty dances as, “dances of presence and desire; movements that celebrate the power of the individual and

[75] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.

challenge the realm of the social. They are movements of the bottom that inspire controversy and healing at the top" (DeFrantz 2002:25). And in doing so we acknowledge the enabling potential of these booty dances. They represent contradictions and allow for control which is often denied to black women. Like Zollar's choreography, twerking reminds us that our bodies are profound. By instilling pride into the buttocks, which has been used to stigmatize black women for a very long time, twerkers challenge the social realm which would seek to hide or negate this sense of pride in the black female body's ability.

Dancing as Expression: What exactly are dancers expressing when they say this?

> Isis: Yes but I mean I'm not trying to say oh I'm like the best twerker, I'm just doing what I feel like is right for my body and I'm just trying to express myself. Like I remember I said something in casual conversation of course my friend [Trey] put it on Facebook. I said "sometimes you just have to shake your ass" I just said that and I think that's true you just need to do you, just let loose.[76]

> Unique: Yeah I dance I love to dance. I don't pursue it in academic or professional sense it's really just for fun, casual, dance at parties, dance with friends it's always been a great way to let off steam a fun way to express myself this is how I see dance in my life...It's just a great outlet. Dancing is so fun.[77]

Each of these emphasize that dancing is a form of expression. Isis proposes that while she is twerking she is doing what feels right for her body. Her suggestion that "sometimes you just have to shake your ass", "do you", and "let loose" illustrates that for her, shaking her ass enables her to express individuality and break from daily constraints. Though Unique does not twerk, she engages in other social club dances, and shares Isis' sentiment. She suggests that dancing with friends has always been a great way to "let off steam" and a "great outlet" thereby supporting the idea that twerking and other social dances can offer both an opportunity to engage socially and a release from the normal restrictions of everyday life. In this way, twerking and dance in general enable a freedom of expression; freedom to express connection, to foster

[76] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.
[77] personal interview with Unique, conducted December 2013.

community, and to express sexuality, desire, release, spirituality, happiness, and humanity.

Twerking can restore an historical severed link

Many studies have noted that blacks have used dance to articulate group experiences and that its institutions have served the social needs of its constituents (Hazzard-Gordon 1990:xi). One need that social dance has fulfilled is restoring the historically severed link between African-Americans and their African past (Hazzard-Gordon 1990:3). Some interviewees expressed that twerking allowed them to feel connected to African ancestry. For example, when asked how she felt while twerking, Vivica said, "Well I just feel like I'm doing something that is natural to me and natural to like my ancestors and where I come from," thereby demonstrating a connection to African ancestors.[78] Sky too, demonstrated this connection to ancestry when arguing that twerking is more authentic when done by black women

> Sky:...because it's so close to the African movements in how it's done and who practices it. I feel like black women practice more than other women in this society but I don't know I could be wrong. But I think that's why its associated with black women, the African roots and who practices it.[79]

Her response reiterates the assumed relationship between twerking, African movements and " African roots", proving that black social dance allows for some black Americans to establish a connection to their African ancestry. This perceived link is significant considering that slavery attempted to sever this connection and rid black slaves of their African identity. Because of its capacity to function as a form of social intercourse, cultural expression, and political expression, black social dance can help to link one's personal identity to that of the group. And in this way, it can be a means of fostering and solidifying community, and hence a threat to racial hierarchy, which seeks to divide and conquer racial minorities (Hazzard-Gordon 1990:3, 22).

Twerking can foster and solidify community

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[78] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.
[79] personal interview with Sky, conducted December 2013.

The notion of community assumes that a group has shared attitudes, interests, and goals.[80] When thinking and discussing the "black community", this idea of shared features often erases difference, thereby marginalizing some members of the supposed community. In invoking the term community, this paper is not suggesting that blacks in the U.S. consist of some monolith. Rather, it employs community to explore the feeling of fellowship which some may experience when engaging in twerking or other social dances. Scholars have argued that, in the context of slavery, social dance promoted community fellowship, consolidation, and helped build cultural institutions. Then later, "jook joints", cabaret parties, and block parties, places where blacks could engage in social dance, provided black communities with a similar level of community expression, a sense of group identity, and encouraged values of achievement and pride (Hazzard-Gordon 1990:47, 153-155). Respondents that twerking can foster this same sense of communal fellowship. When defining her relationship to twerking, Keke informs us that

> Keke: Growing up, people in my family would twerk and it could be a social thing and a familial thing and not be sexual at all... you could do it as a family dance and it's just about showing off , showing your skill, showing your ability to really be in tune with music.[81]

Her description of twerking as a social and familial thing for people to show off their skills, illustrates that like these earlier black social dances, twerking can be celebrated in communal and familial contexts. Sky's response shows how these familial and communal contexts can encourage fellowship, achievement, and pride.

> Sky: If I'm like around my sister or people I know it's like very encouraging...When I'm with my sister or my friends who are black, or some kind of ethnic person, when we're twerking we're encouraging each other like "oh yea go". And then when I'm here, it's like you just look and it's just like "uhhhh haaa yea [some unenthused spectator sound]" or "Oooh let me, can I ? Oh my gosh how do you do that? [mimicking a white girl voice]" or something like that. So because it's a white school it's different.[82]

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[80] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "community," accessed May 4, 2014. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community

[81] personal interview with Keke, conducted December 2013.

[82] personal interview with Sky, conducted December 2013.

Here, Sky contrasts her home environment to that of her predominantly white school environment. She argues that when she twerks at home with family or friends who are black, it is a supportive environment, one where they encourage one another's abilities. In her predominantly white school environment, on the other hand, there is either a lack of enthusiasm or a kind of enthusiasm that presents an imposition. She later clarified, that she is bothered by the enthusiasm of some white students who wish to participate in something that has so much cultural meaning for her, without appreciating that meaning. This stark contrast reiterates the constraints which twerkers face in some environments, but also illustrates the support and encouragement one stands to gain while twerking in other contexts.

It is possible that the shared experience of oppression renders this support and fellowship around social dance possible for some black communities. In trying to explain, her cultural connection with twerking, Sky argued that twerking and dancing in general are more acceptable in the "black community" because of the shared history of oppression.

> Sky: Why is it more acceptable in the black community? ...I think dancing in general was kind of a freeing thing. And so it's associated with black culture and this whole history of oppression and so it's just an expression of freedom. It's definitely a part of the whole freedom thing. I feel free when I twerk. I feel free when I'm doing things that I can do with my butt that are easy, but also good to other people.[83]

And indeed, historically dance has been an expression of freedom attached to black cultures and their history of oppression. During the Middle Passage dance aboard the slave ship became associated with "resistance and dissembling", in fact, "African slaves learned to camouflage their hunger for freedom through dance and exploited it as an opportunity to resist domination" (Hazzard-Gordon 1990:12-13). One example of resistance through dance is that slaves managed to keep the African deities alive through dance. A second example of this is the fact that many

[83] personal interview with Sky, conducted December 2013.

rebellions were organized through dances or at public dance sites (Hazzard-Gordon 1990:12-13). Hence, Sky's suggestion that black dance has historically been a cultural expression of freedom in response to the history of oppression is documented. But later, in saying "I feel free when I twerk", she demonstrates that this connection between freedom, resistance, and black social dance still exists through twerking for some of its practitioners.

Twerking enables sexual freedom

Thus far, we have seen that twerking can enable black women control over their historically dominated bodies, instill pride in place of shame, and allow for fellowship and support. It can also be an expression of sexual freedom. Katrina Hazzard-Gordon argues that there was a paradigmatic shift wherein black social dances became less associated with community and work, and more associated with sex. She writes, "In the atmosphere of increasing urban anonymity and the pleasures of a good time, dance...became more directly associated with sensation and sexual coupling" (Hazzard- Gordon 1990:87). As a result of this growing association with sexuality and the free consumption of pleasure, she argues that "the partnering relationship, became more isolated and individualized" and in some cases, hip shaking and pelvic innuendo became more of a statement to one's partner than to one's community (Hazzard-Gordon 1990:93). Rather than a dynamic shift as she suggests, I argue that fellowship and sexuality coexist in twerking. Respondents focused more on the familial and social aspects of twerking in their interviews, but a few also mentioned sexual dynamics. Though the aforementioned chapters focus on the constraints of the *hypersexual* associations mapped on twerking, it is important to also acknowledge that some interviewees created and embraced their own *sexual* meanings for the dance.

The idea of black women performing anything even remotely sexual, publically can be jarring for some. Especially considering the politics of respectability. As previously alluded to, practicing "respectability" has been one strategy black communities have adopted to address the objectification of black female bodies as sexually deviant and excessive. It requires that black women cover up, hide their flesh, and de-emphasize their bodies to counteract the dominant culture's probing, dissecting, and displaying of black female bodies. This strategy, however, actually maintains black female marginalization by encouraging black women to restrict their dress and behavior, and to become silent, invisible, and "respectable" (Fleetwood 2011:120-121). It also fails to address the real problem of racist/sexist ideology and its misrepresentation of black women. Respectability answers the hypersexualization of black women by calling on black women to desexualize themselves. This is also constraining. Recall, Bené Viera' s point that there needs to be a space for sex positivity when it comes to discussions of black women's sexuality ("Twerking and Our Racial Perceptions of Dance" 2013). Some claim this space through twerking, as it just like other booty dances, can allow dancers to reclaim their sexual being through dance (DeFrantz 2002:24).

Sky proudly proclaimed, "When I'm doing it, I feel sexy," which is significant considering that representations of black women either desexualize or hyper-sexualize them. To experience feeling "sexy" in this kind of context is powerful.

> Trey: There are a few of my friends who do it. One of the friends, given her prudeness I'm very surprised that she embraces it so much. She and I have talked and I think that she's come close to admitting the fact that dancing and twerking, for her, is a way of releasing a lot of pent up sexual frustration and let out a side of herself that she has to constantly hold back because she thinks that's the Christian way. And I have other friends who twerk once in a while and stuff like that and they just enjoy doing it because according them it's fun and it's just a way to let loose and stuff.[84]

[84] personal interview with Trey, conducted December 2013.

Trey's description of his female friend's experience of releasing sexual frustration further support the idea of twerking as a means of sexual freedom for its practitioners. As a "dance of presence and desire" (DeFrantz 2002:25), twerking provides the opportunity to negotiate black female presence and desire in a way that doesn't necessarily suggest hypersexuality. That is, twerking allows these women to own and express a sexual identity that is not deviant. While it may be considered deviant by onlookers, the fact that it can make women feel sexy and desirable when they racist conceptions of beauty and esteem often deny them these feelings is meaningful. So, while media representations map *hypersexuality* onto the black female body, it can be very empowering to be able to express *sexuality* through twerking instead of having to limit one's self as the practice of respectability dictates.

Twerking enables expression of spirituality, happiness, wholeness, humanity

Sexuality is just one aspect of humanity denied black women, which twerking enables them to restore. Through Vivica's changing relationship to twerking, we can see that twerking offers other forms of healing as well.

> Vivica: Yea ok so I'll say twerking, so umm...It's changed over time. I feel like when I was younger I liked getting attention for my dancing and having guys and girls see me dance and even sometimes guys trying to dance on me. But umm, now I do it because I want to do it because it feels good to me. I'm excited by dancing and the music and by interacting with the rhythms and stuff and now it's more for my enjoyment and less for trying to get people to look at me. Or as something to make like a guy attracted to me. [85]

By her account, twerking for her, was formerly an expression of sexual desire and a means of sexual initiation, but it has sense transformed into something that is more personally fulfilling. Though Vivica acknowledges that twerking can be an expression of the sexual, she explained that expressing desire is not the sole reason why she or anyone else would want to dance. She then emphasized that she sees it as more of an expression, not of sex but of the self.

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[85] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.

> Vivica: I see it as more of like an expression, an expression like any other kind of dance. So I think I'm the type of person where I think that people should try to be our whole selves as much as possible...I think it's like an expression of my soul. I have things that I do like talking and walking but I wouldn't consider that to be an art form, a human art form. I feel like dance to me is an art and art for me is connected to the vibrancy of our souls. So when I think about how dancing makes me feel and what I'm expressing, I'm expressing the happiness of just being a person.[86]

In her explanation she argues that it is wrong to try and suppress movements like those of twerking just because of the stereotypes and assumptions attached to it by society. Though she admits elsewhere, she sometimes inhibits her own dancing to avoid other peoples' assumptions, here she emphasizes that such a suppression denies experience of this powerful expression. The link Vivica establishes between dance, human art, and "the vibrancy of our souls" illustrates that she sees a connection between performing booty dances like twerking, spiritual well-being, happiness and humanity. For her, twerking and other kinds of dances are means of restoring a sense of wholeness, joy, and humanity.

Though articulated differently, this sentiment of twerking as a restorative, healing mechanism is reflected elsewhere as well. In late August of 2013, rapper Juicy J announced his $50,000 "Twerk Sumthin" scholarship on WorldStarHipHop.com ("Twerk Sumthin: Juicy J is Giving Away A $50,000 Scholarship With Worldstar!" 2013). Kimari, a senior at the University of Texas at Austin, majoring in Africa and African diaspora, as well as radio, television, and film studies, expressed this idea of twerking as healing in her video submission. In the video, Kimari describes her personal interests as well as her academic pursuits. She considers herself to be a "twerking scholar" and discusses research she has done on twerking and expressive dance culture in relationship to her personal involvement in twerking and other scholarly and extracurricular

[86] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.

activities. The video blends images of Kimari twerking, living, working, and studying at school. She closes her video by explaining why she deserves to win the scholarship:

> "And that's why I deserve to win this scholarship. Because I twerk to heal myself. I twerk to heal the earth and her inhabitants. And I twerk for my community. I twerk for Juicy J. And I twerk for Jesus! Alright! Peace in the Middle East. Vote for me" ("Juicy J Scholarship Contest- World Star Hip Hop" 2013).

Here, Kimari admits that she twerks to heal herself, thereby supporting Vivica's sentiment that twerking can promote restorations of wholeness, joy, and humanity. In saying that she twerks "to heal the earth and her inhabitants" along with her "community", reiterates earlier points that twerking can establish and restore communal fellowship. Lastly, Kimari's assertion that she twerks for "Jesus" playfully suggests a spiritual connection with twerking. Throughout the video Kimari emphasizes the importance of this dance to her personal and academic pursuits and her ability to express the whole of her identity, thereby supporting the notion that twerking can enable wholeness and humanity.

Twerking enables temporary release from social stigma

All things considered, twerking's most subversive potential lies in its ability to allow some black women temporary release from social stigma. Fostering fellowship, allowing for sexual expression, instilling a sense of pride, wholeness, and humanity, all counteract the social stigma which black women must face daily. From interviewee responses, it seems that while concerns of how the dance will be received, interpreted, and reflected back upon the dancer exist, they do not figure prominently while these women (myself included) are engaged in their dance. For example, when asked if she cared what other people thought of her while she was dancing Sky responded:

> Sky: No not really, no. But I would be a bad example because I don't really care...It's more of an individual thing. Even though it's perceived sexually by others, and I know it is, and I know I'm

> being sexual , I'm not worried about other people when I'm doing it.[87]

Though she declares herself a "bad example", many other interviewees expressed this same sentiment in their responses. For Vivica, the joys of twerking outweigh any potential stigma.

> Vivica: When I twerk or do any other kind of dance, it feels good to my spirit and it makes me happy. So, I feel like that is more meaningful than someone thinking that I'm being nasty or I'm performing sex or whatever.[88]

Similarly, Isis stated:

> Isis: Yea I think it's just comfortable. It feels right. It's not like I'm worried about what other people are thinking, I'm just having a good time expressing myself and being with my friends.[89]

She later added, that she thinks twerking well requires the ability to express one's self with their body, to move it in ways they feel comfortable, and to not feel judged because they are moving it in that way[90], emphasizing that, in her view, release from caring about the stigma is a crucial component of engaging in this dance successfully. Though she does not twerk, Unique echoed this same point when reflecting on her own dance experience:

> Unique: No, truthfully I never really think about what other people think when I dance. It's part of one of the really liberating things about dancing. You're sort of in your own zone and you're totally comfortable moving in whatever way feels right in the moment. It just never really crosses my mind to think about how other people are perceiving me at that time. I don't know how other people are perceiving at that time. Frankly, I guess it doesn't really matter to me all that much.[91]

All of these responses emphasize the positive feelings the dancers experience while they are dancing. They argue that it feels "comfortable", "natural", "right" , and "good" to engage their bodies in these various ways. That these informants privilege these aspects of their dance experience over thoughts about what other people think, illustrates that twerking and other social dances like it have liberating potential. They can assert themselves by doing what feels

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[87] personal interview with Sky, conducted December 2013.
[88] personal interview with Vivica, conducted December 2013.
[89] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.
[90] personal interview with Isis, conducted December 2013.
[91] personal interview with Unique, conducted December 2013.

"natural", "real", "right" and "good" to them. That is, they are allowed to "do them" and be themselves to the fullest extent. While performing, they were temporarily freed from concerns about social stigma, what others thought, and how they felt others would perceive them and could just relish in that freedom while taking pride in their ability.

So while the hypersexual media portrayals and stereotypes that twerking is associated with can influence people to police their bodies in certain spaces, the dance itself can also allow dancers to resist that impulse. When asked how she would respond to the idea that twerking is bad or negative Big Freedia responded,

> "I basically respond to it's a new generation, people are being very bold about what they do, how they express themselves...You know we are being able to express ourselves in this new generation. It's not about being afraid to express your culture or who you are or where you come from. And we're very bold in New Orleans. We wanna represent... you know we shake from zero to 99 and we represent and we let people know that this is our culture, we're not afraid to be who we are and I'm just one of those representatives to let people know be who you are don't be afraid. Express yourself through dance, through music, through fashion, through all of it," ("The Queen of Bounce on New Orleans Culture" 2013).

While the idea of public performance of something can be considered sexual was unheard of in the past, especially for black women who had to project a certain image and separate themselves from the hypersexual myth of their bodies, it seems that this new generation embraces this performance as a strategy to combat objectification. In her video, Kimari asserted:

> "I'm not just a twerker and I'm not just here for your hypersexual consumption. I am more than that. I am an intellectual. I'm an artist. I'm an activist. I'm a student and I'm a teacher. I'm a motivator, an encourager, and a community leader. And I'm trying to figure out what does it mean for me to express myself in this way, and saying that I'm more than just the labels people put on me. And I will continue to express myself because I deserve to be respected for who I am and not have to put on this mask and say, 'Oh yes, I'm proper and I can do this and I can do that' and please people and show them how well I act out whiteness and white supremist ideas over blackness..." ("Juicy J Scholarship Contest- World Star Hip Hop" 2013).

Here, Kimari asserts her body and her voice. She created a representation of twerking which speaks back to the dominant regimes of visual culture that reduce black women to their bodies. Though she is twerking, she is aware of the assumptions that come with it and speaks to those

emphasizing that she is not there for hypersexual consumption and that her identity is multiple and manifold. She grapples with how this form of expression implicates her in these stereotypes, but also refuses to inhibit her expression because of them. Twerking enables her to reject the politics of respectability and the performance of an identity that white patriarchal values dictate and to instead demand respect for her identity in the way that she opts to perform it. Still the constraints of misrepresentation exist, but as Kimari's and other twerker's experiences show us, twerking or otherwise reclaiming our black female bodies as marks of pride instead of shame, allow us to challenge the social parameters which threaten to marginalize and objectify us.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself.

2.Where are you from?

3.What's your major/minor, other your academic interests? Extracurricular activities?

4.What do you do for fun typically?

5.Do you ever dance for fun?

6.How often do you dance? In what kinds of spaces do you most often dance? What kinds of dances do you do?

7.Would you consider yourself a dancer? Are you classically trained?

8.When did you first hear about/learn about twerking?

9.What have you heard about twerking in the media? What stories have you heard about it in the news or through social media? Do you agree with the things that you have heard?
How would you define twerking? Where do you think it came from? How do you feel about it?

10.What does it mean to you?

11. Where do you see it/hear about it most often? Who do you see performing it most often? So I know one of the things that kind of put twerking on the map was Miley Cyrus twerking at the VMA's this past summer. Did you see that performance? If so, what did you think about it? What about her other twerking videos? Have you ever seen any of them? If so, what did you think about them? How do you feel about the attention that Miley Cyrus has gained from twerking?

12.Why do you think it has become such a huge phenomenon?

13.How do you think people view those who twerk? (That is, are there any specific characteristics you think people associate with twerkers)

14.How do you view people who twerk?

15.Do you twerk? If so, where do you twerk (your room, parties, etc)?

16. What do you think people think of you while you're twerking?

17. What kind of reactions do you get from people when twerking or afterwards?

18. When you twerk, what do you hope others think about you, if anything? What don't you want them to think about you?

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