**Leaning Into The Red: on black feminist responses to 21st century post-feminism**

*Thanks so much to Luvell Anderson for the invitation to present some of my work on race and aesthetics to y'all. This is the first time I've ever spoken on at the APA Eastern, and the first time I've ever been on the main program at the APA. Quite simply, for as much as Beyonce's work is thinkpieced in the popular press and taught in other humanities departments, writing about her work, or really pop music in general, is not how you get academic philosophers to recognize your work as part of the discipline. Pop music (and by this I mean mostly Top 40 pop, music that isn't purely rock or hip hop) hits all the things that philosophers tend to devalue and not pay a lot of attention to because, to be frank, it's not part of most of their/our lifeworlds: it's pop culture, it's music, it's mostly made by and for women and especially black women...In a discipline obsessed with buddying up to the hard sciences (and all their gendered, racialized meanings and status) the study of popular music (and all its gendered, racialized meanings and status) contradicts disciplinary aims, values, and priorities. Philosophers of music may talk about rock and hip hop from time to time--generally because these are the genres men authors listen/ed to as teens and young adults--but they studiously avoid the pop charts...again, because pop music just isn't a part of their lifeworlds, except perhaps as something their kids do (and we should definitely think about this relationship between "what's in my lifeworld," the demographics of philosophy, and what generally counts as a properly philosophical topic). Similarly, though pop music is a common topic in non-academic feminism and in the field women's and gender studies, feminist philosophers avoid it almost entirely--a quick search of the Hypatia archives shows that I'm the only person to publish about pop music in that journal. So whatever conversations feminist philosophers are having about pop music aren't appearing in the institutional spaces reserved for feminist philosophy.*

*So, I'm going to talk about pop music. I'm doing this because I think it's something philosophers aren't particularly ready to hear as philosophy. And I'm not going to do the "how-is-this-paper-philosophy?" thing. The APA eastern program is an institutional space where the discipline is defined and shaped, and this talk is my attempt to redefine and reshape the kinds of work we do in philosophy. Beyonce, Rihanna, Nicki Minaj, Missy Elliot--when we take their work seriously as an object of philosophical study, we also treat the lifeworlds of these artists and their fans as spaces where philosophy happens and as worthy of philosophical*

*attention. (Not that they need our attention to legitimate them, but more that we philosophers need to get with the program if we hope to have anything to contribute to the world.)*

**[SLIDE 1]** Writing in *Noisey*, This yardstick comes up short in a lot of ways: it relies on clear-cut distinctions between agency and objectification, it uses respectability politics to make that distinction, and, as Garland suggests but does not develop, it focuses exclusively on videos and ignores the song itself.[1] These oversights are due to neoliberal post-feminism's reliance on classically liberal feminist understandings of the relationship between political representation and artistic representation. Because white liberal feminism thinks the lack of free verbal expression and inaccurate visual representation are the main impediments to women's political equality, sound and music appear, from this perspective, to be apolitical...or at least irrelevant to women's political emancipation. However, as I have argued elsewhere, post-feminism's inattention to sound lets sound and music work behind the scenes, either to critique or to reaffirm post-feminism's doubling-down on MRWaSP (Multi-Racial White Supremacist Patriarchy) sexual respectability and gender normativity.[2] Here, I focus on black women's use of sound to critique and develop alternatives to post-feminist pop's MRWaSP respectability politics. Because white post-feminism obscures the work sound does, black women musicians can use sound to "turn up" post-feminist rhetorics and politics, to push gender into the red.[3]

Black feminist music aesthetics often uses sound as the central method for negotiating and revising concepts like agency and practices like respectability, concepts and practices whose apparently clear definitions are designed to oppress black women.[4] For example, philosopher

---

[1] "Many singles drop audio first now, followed by a video a few weeks or often months later, leaving even more room for the discussion to move on and focus mostly on the track's visual aspect" (Garland).
[2] James, Robin. "Listening to Sounds In Post-Feminist Pop Music" in SoundingOut! (February 2016). http://soundstudiesblog.com/2016/02/15/listening-to-sounds-in-post-feminist-pop-music/
[3] In her article "An Ontology of Crunk: Theorizing (the) Turn Up," the Crunk Feminist Collective contributor crunktastic abstracts a theoretical practice from hip hop's sonic conventions, in particular, the "turn up" characteristic of ATL crunk. Crunk is turnt up, which means "to turn it up so loud that you might bust your speakers" (crunktastic 2014). This definition echoes Tricia Roses's canonic definition of hip hop aesthetics as pushing sounds "into the red" (1994, TKTK), i.e., past the point of distortion (the 'red' here refers to the gain monitor registering red, which indicates the signal is too powerful to be played safely and without distortion). Whereas crunktastic uses sonic practices as metaphors for feminist politics, this article examines how feminist politics and aesthetics manifest in sound, as sound practices. Crunktastic, "An Ontology of Crunk: Theorizing (the) Turn Up" in Crunk Feminist Collective, 4/29/2014. http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2014/04/29/an-ontology-of-crunk-theorizing-the-turn-up/
[4] See Davis, Angela. Blues Legacies and Black Feminism. New York: Vintage Books 1998; Havis, Devonya. "Now, How Do You Sound?" in Hypatia TKTK. Bradley, Regina. "Bow Down/I Been On" in TKTK. James, Robin. "All Your B/Ass Belong To Us" in Noisey July 2014.

Devonya Havis argues that "sounding" is a philosophical technique black women use to "feign complicity" with oppressive institution. With respect to neoliberal post-feminism, musical sound is one of these zones. In this talk I consider two ways black women pop stars use sound to negotiate white popular post-feminism's "Is it feminist?" yardstick, particularly its demand that women demonstrate agency and overcome the negative effects of misogyny. First I argue that post-feminism's demand for agency is a new type of respectability politics, and show that Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda," Beyoncé's "Drunk In Love," and Missy Elliott's catalog-spanning use non-verbal sounds both (1) re-scripts femininity and feminine body experience and (2) produces bodily and aesthetic pleasures outside the jurisdiction of post-feminist respectability. Each artist uses a distinct technique or set of techniques, but the effect is the same: sounds create femininities beyond the narrow confines policed by respectability politics. Second, I argue that the music and diegetic sound in Rihanna's BBHMM video redirects the flow of racialized sexual violence that produces and distributes "personhood as property" (Weheliye 2014, 44), in particular, the "personhood as property" post-feminism grants to privileged women who Lean In to the market and the State. Because Rih's character butchers white patriarchal privilege rather than Leaning Into it, her performance is not legible as post-feminist agency; it redirects white post-feminism's systematic expropriation of personhood-as-property from black women cultural workers.[5]

But before I get into these responses to post-feminism, let me establish what I mean by popular post-feminism and post-feminist pop.

---

[5] That's the paper's main argument. But there's also a meta-argument implicit in this talk's method. That argument is that analyses of pop music can be a way of practicing non-ideal theory. As Mills defines it, ideal theory is the practice of theorizing from how we think things ought to work in ideal (i.e., perfect) conditions, not from how things work in manifestly non-ideal and imperfect daily existence. The problem with ideal theory is that it naturalizes those existing imperfections and doubles down on them rather than fixing them. Liberal approaches to equality are a classic example of this: treating everyone as already equal--because in the end everyone should be equal--reinforces existing inequalities (like racism or sexism) rather than ameliorating them. And just as ideal theory makes for bad political philosophy, it also makes for bad philosophy of sound/music. You can't just theorize about sounds--as the term "philosophy OF music" implies--you have to theorize with and through them, treating them as theoretical texts. This is, after all, what Rousseau was doing when he wrote his Second Discourse, which Mills identifies in Contract & Domination as Rousseau's "non-ideal contract" (Contract & Domination 115-6). At the time he wrote the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Rousseau was deep in a beef with music theorist Jean-Philipe Rameau, and Rousseau's musical writings deeply informed his early political work. The Second Discourse is non-ideal theory not because Rousseau was, for once, theorizing from political reality, but from music and music theory. Theorizing from music made Rousseau a better political philosopher, and that's a precedent for what I'm doing in this paper.

**Popular Post-Feminism and Music**

**[SLIDE 2]** Post-feminism begins from the understanding that feminism's mission--equity between women and men--has been accomplished. As Angela McRobbie explains, "post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" (2004, 256). McRobbie focuses on the kinds of post-feminism that regard feminism as obsolete and unattractive. However, in the decade following her article's publication in 2004, Anglo-American pop music (likely influenced by other media, like tumblr and the rapid growth of a feminist media industry (publications like Broadly, The Toast, Jezebel, The Cut, Reductress, etc., for which feminism is a brand or market segment)) has developed a type of post-feminism that treats feminism as something to be actively if not obligatorily embraced. As I argued in Resilience & Melancholy, feminism (more precisely, a certain type of feminism) is now a component of 'normal' feminine gender performance. As Sarah Banet-Weiser puts it, in "the cultural space of postfeminism...the focus on female individualism and individual empowerment" (208) obliges women to act as though they are fighting for if not already reaping the benefits of feminist victory.

**[SLIDE 3]** This is particularly evident in popular music performance and reception. On the performance side, there's Meghan Trainor's massively popular hit about positive body image ("All About That Bass"), Beyoncé's explicit embrace of the term "feminist," Charli XCX's documentary about feminism, and a slew of songs on various post-feminist themes (Demi Lovato's "Confident," Trainor's "Dear Future Husband" or "No," Lilly Allen's "Hard Out Here," Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off"). Kat George argues that 2014 is "The Year Feminism Reclaimed Pop": it was both "a year defined by women in pop clamoring to be the biggest feminist," and a year defined by women clamoring and succeeding to be the biggest hits (the first time in Billboard 100's 56-year history that all top five songs were sung by women"). Even USA Today noted the prevalence of explicitly feminist messages in 2010s pop. On the reception side, feminism is increasingly the primary lens audiences and critics use to evaluate work by women musicians. For example, there are lots of listicles covering feminist pop songs, titled things like "17 Of The Most Feminist Songs Of 2014." In this title, the comparative "most" implies that people want and expect pop songs to be feminist: the more the better. From the extremely

negative reactions to her non-response to domestic abuse (as I discuss in Resilience & Melancholy) to accusations that her work is violently misogynist (as I discuss below), Rihanna in particular has been repeatedly criticized for failing to exhibit sufficient feminism. This reinforces Emma Garland's above-cited claim that audiences expect women pop stars to make explicitly feminist work.

Audiences have this expectation because feminism is a status symbol, like a Gucci bag or a solider of a boyfirend. As Sady Doyle puts it, "Beyoncé made feminism fashionable" with her 2013 self-titled album. Proclaiming your feminism shows that you personally have overcome the limitations patriarchy puts on women, that you are more successful and more resilient than women who continue to experience femininity and feminization as political, social, and economic hindrances. This distinction between post-feminist and pre-feminist is a neoliberal upgrade on the tried-and-true virgin/whore dichotomy: agency and autonomy replace chastity as what separates high-status from low-status women.

**[SLIDE 5]** This is why post-feminist pop and pop criticism thinks, for example, "there's a lot to love about this ode to sexual agency from pop superstars Nicki Minaj and Ariana Grande [titled "Get On Your Knees"]...but, mostly, it's refreshing to hear two women reject objectification and assert their status as sexual subjects" (Dunlap, 2014). Neoliberalism shifts the measure of respectability from sexual chastity to economic, political, and sexual agency...as long as that agency aims for socially acceptable things (like hetero/homonormative reproductive monogamy, property ownership and economic success, etc.). Women who don't want those things and/or fail to attain them are pathologized and punished; internet memes about "welfare moms" with supposed luxuries like smartphones show Cathy Cohen's claim that poor single black mothers are treated as both sexually and economically deviant is still valid. Post-feminism doesn't liberate women; it just re-engineers the mechanisms of white supremacist patriarchy so their intensification looks and feels like their defeat.

Overcoming feminization, particularly feminization understood as objectification, won't fix black women's gender-based oppression because black women were *already* stereotyped as exerting excessive sexuality and pathological sexual agency. In fact, as I argued in *Resilience & Melancholy*, black women's overcoming of feminization *intensifies* the misognoir they experience.

Black women musicians' use of sound to negotiate gender norms and respectability politics is a centuries-old tradition.[6] The particulars of that tradition adapt to evolving contexts. I focus here on this tradition in the context of neoliberal post-feminism: how do black women pop musicians use sound to address the white supremacist cisheteropatriarchal effects of hegemonic femininity, which is construed in terms of sexual agency, economic empowerment, and resilience?

**Sounds Queer Bodily Pleasure**

Pleasure is a central theme in black feminist theory. Writing in 1996, Laura Alexandra Harris argues that "Pursuing pleasure has become central to my understanding of a queer black feminist model" (21).[7] Nearly 30 years later, Joan Morgan proposes, "echoing the sentiments of my fellow Pleasure Ninja, Brittney Cooper: "There is no justice for black women without pleasure."" (Morgan, 2).[8] Think about those welfare-mom-with-a-[Gucci bag/iPhone/etc] memes: they're about policing black women's pleasure. Think about how food assistance programs police pleasurable foods. The idea that black women aren't entitled to or deserving of pleasure runs so deeply that it guides official government policy (those food assistance programs), aesthetic norms about humor...it's like black women's experience of pleasure is felt to be a theft of cultural and/or economic labor and productivity.

Even though black feminist theorists have long argued for the political character of sexual and aesthetic)pleasure, there has been some disagreement about how to incorporate sexual pleasure into black feminist politics and theorizing. The question of how one is "supposed to get their rocks off and still be admitted to feminism as more than an object for reform" (Harris 25) stands between black and white feminisms, but also among black feminisms. For example, Morgan cites Patricia Hill Collins's distinction between the "erotic" and "sex/fucking" (Morgan, 6) as an example of how black feminist theory has tried to take the sex out of sexuality (or, to use

---

[6] Shana Redmond's article on Janelle Monae reviews these traditions as they are relevant for black women pop musicians in the US. Redmond, Shana. "This Safer Space: Janelle Monae's 'Cold War'" in The Journal of Popular Music Studies Volume 23, Issue 4, Pages 393–411. See also Davis, Angela. Blues Legacies & Black Feminism. New York: Vintage Books 1998.

[7] Harris, Laura Alexandra. "Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle" in Feminist Review, No. 54, Contesting Feminine Orthodoxies (Autumn, 1996), pp. 3-30.

[8] Morgan, Joan. "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure" Joan Morgan (2015) Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure, The Black Scholar, 45:4, 36-46 http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2015.1080915

Jared Sexton's terms, to desexualize race (Sexton, 157-8)). This is a problem because it enacts an internal, class-based respectability politics that disinfects black women's sexuality of ratchetness--which is, as L.H. Stallings defines it, the possibility for sexual and gender "transitionality" or queerness that working-class black sexualities and aesthetics ignite.[9] Taking the ratchet out stabilizes binary cisheterogender, and all the relations (e.g., property and kinship) built on that system. In other words, Collins's distinction between the "erotic" and "sex/fucking" makes blackness less queer by disarticulating black eorticism from its historical association with sexual abnormality ("fucking") and thus restabilizes cisbinary gender.

Though Morgan claims that she "want[s] an eortic that demands space be made for honest bodies that like to also fuck" (Morgan, 6), Kinitra Brooks argues that Morgan's project doesn't live up to her own stated aims. Listening to Mark Anthony Neal's interview with Morgan, Brooks points out that

> Morgan shares that her business, EmilyJayne [a skincare and beauty line], is about expanding black women's ideas of pleasure. That pleasure goes beyond sex to the realm of sensuality. That pleasure is about feeding one's senses, about "black women developing a tactile relationship with her own feminism—so that the idea of non-sexualized touch fails to be foreign." And yet, where does this leave desire?[10]

Yet again, bodily pleasure is disarticulated from sexualized desire and sensation. Morgan's emphasis on "non-sexulized touch" reinforces the traditional, cishetero reduction of sexual eroticism to the genitals; the body and senses aren't treated as or felt to be erogeneous. In this strain of black feminist theory, actual sex seems to regularly slip out of the equation even as theorists try to keep it in the center of their analyses; the further the sexualized pleasure is from bourgeois cishetero respectability, the farther it slips away. Black feminist theorists encourage women's agency in pleasure, but also sometimes privilege pleasures cleansed of ratchetness.

At the same time, white post-feminism thinks overtly sexual agency--agency in and over "fucking" in Collins's sense, *but without the ratchet because it's white*--is a necessary component of normal feminine gender, at least for white women. I discussed that extensively in

---

[9] Stallings, L.H. "Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination" in Pampliset: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International. Volume 2, Issue 2, 2013: 135-139.

[10] Brooks, Kinitra. "The Politics of Pleasure and the Smell of Desire" in African American Intellectual History Society. 9/1/2914. http://www.aaihs.org/the-politics-of-pleasure-and-the-smell-of-desire/ Last accessed 2/12/16.

the last section, so I won't re-hash it here. White popular post-feminism puts black women musicians on especially tricky ground. On the one hand, they have to negotiate shifting racialized concepts of gender and sexual normativity. Black women musicians have been performing overt sexual agency for decades and this was seen as a sign of their deviance, not their normalcy. Now they're being asked to do what they've previously been punished for...and likely won't get rewarded for now, either. As MRWaSP (multi-racial white supremacist patriarchy) conditionally and instrumentally includes people of color in privileged spaces, it demands "normal" gender performance for the most legibly feminine women of color. As long as black women don't express or evoke any ratchetness--any potential for blackness to destabilize cisbinary gender and hetero/homonormativity, to make gender and sexuality transitional--their sexuality and sexual agency will actually contribute to MRWaSP, because that's what post-feminism does: prop up MRWaSP. Black women musicians are in parallel double-binds: from both white popular post-feminist and black/hip hop feminist perspectives, they're damned-if-they-do/damned-if-they-don't perform sexual agency.

**[SLIDE 6]** It is in this complicated context that I want to situate Nicki Minaj's, Beyoncé's, and Missy Elliott's use of sound and their bodies as instruments to generate sounds. In the repertoire of black women's pop music performance traditions, singers and rappers make non-verbal sounds as a way to experience physical, corporeal pleasure in the performance of the song. For example, Francesca Royster argues that Michael Jackson's use of non-verbal sounds produces an erotics that exceeds the cisheteronormative bounds of his songs' lyrics. They were what allowed her, as a queer teenager, to identify with a love song that otherwise excluded her:

> in the moments when he didn't use words, 'ch ch huhs,' the 'oohs,' and the 'hee hee hee hee hees'...I ignored the romantic stories of the lyrics and focused on the sounds, the timbre of his voice and the pauses in between. Listening to those nonverbal moments--the murmured opening of "Don't Stop Till You Get Enough," or his sobbed breakdown at the end of "She's Out of My Life,' I discovered the erotic (117).

Royster references a black sexual politics in line with Audre Lorde's notion of the erotic, which is bodily pleasure informed by the implicit and explicit knowledges learned through lived experience as a on the margins of the "European-American male tradition" (Lorde 54), and best

expressed in the phrase “it feels right to me” (Lorde, 54).[11] Lorde’s erotic is a script for knowing and feeling that doesn’t require us to adopt white supremacist gender and sexual identities to play along. Royster calls on this idea when she argues that Jackson’s non-verbal sounds--his use of timbre, rhythm, articulation, pitch--impart erotic experiences and gendered performances that can veer off the trite boy-meets-girl-boy-loses-girl stories in his lyrics. “Through his cries, whispers, groans, whines, and grunts, Jackson occupies a third space of gender, one that often undercuts his audience’s expectations of erotic identification” (119). Nicki, Missy, and Beyoncé all pick up on this--they use non-verbal sounds as opportunities to feel their singing, rapping, vocalizing bodies as a source of pleasure--and as opportunities for their audiences to feel some bodily pleasure as we sing along. And this bodily pleasure veers off the white cisheteropatriarchal scripts that produce the above-mentioned double bind: these sounds make the gender of their performers’ bodies transitional.

**[SLIDE 7]** Nicki makes a lot of noises: she laughs, snorts, trills her tongue, inhales with a low creaky sound in the back of her throat, percussively “chyeah”s from her diaphragm, and a bunch of other things. She makes a lot of these sounds in “Anaconda.” The video shows scene after scene of Nicki enjoying her body and the bodies of the women around her. The last part of the video, which coincides with the song’s coda, is where she makes most of the non-verbal sounds. It kicks off with a quasi-sarcastic cackle that goes from her throat and chest up to resonate her nose and sinuses, and her verse ends with a trademark “chyeah,” which is followed by another cackle. Then she has a gristly, creaky exhale and inhale, trills her tongue, makes a few more “chyeah”s. In “Feelin Myself,” she ends a long “lazerrrrrrrrrrrr” with a little trill, and then ends the song with a low, knowing laugh, a trill, another laugh, and an inhale. She does a similar extended “Wai-ki-kiiiiiiiiiiiiiii [inhale]” in her verse in Big Sean’s “A$$.” Sure, these sounds have rhythmic, timbral, and pitch effects in the songs, but they’re also, well...fun to make. They *feel* good. And given Nicki’s constant discussion of how much she likes her body, it makes sense that these sounds are, well, ways that she can go about feelin herself.

**[SLIDE 8]** Making these sounds puts the body performing them off-script in the sense I discussed above. For example, in “Anaconda,” the “Baby Got Back” sample flips the script on Sir Mix-a-Lot’s misogyny, rearticulating cishertero male desire as Nicki’s erotic. First, instead of

[11] Lorde, Audre. “The Uses of the Erotic” in Sister Outsider. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984: 53-58.

accompanying a video about the male gaze, that bass hook now accompanies Nicki's pleasure in her femme body and the bodies of other black femmes (e.g., as she touches and admires other women working out with her). Second, Nicki re-scripts the bass line as a syllabification: "dun-da-da-dun-da-dun-da-dun-dun," which keeps the pattern of accents on 1 and 4, while altering the pitch and rhythm of the melody. The original hook is all eighth notes, whereas Nicki's syllabification adds some sixteenth notes (the "da"s); the original raises pitch on the the and of 2, four, and the and of four, whereas Nicki raises pitch only on the and of 2. Just as "Anaconda"'s lyrics re-script Mix-A-Lot's male gaze, so do the sounds. If the original hook is a script that orients listeners to legibility as cishetero "men" and "women," Nicki's vocal performance rescripts the sounds, using nonverbal vocal sounds to perform and create bodily pleasure in terms off those scripts.

**[SLIDE 9]** Nicki isn't the only black woman rapper to use non-verbal vocal sounds to re-script gendered bodily pleasure. Missy Elliot's 2015 video for "WTF" uses non-verbal vocal sound to re-script Missy's gender performance. In the intro, we hear Missy's disembodied voice and see people sing and dance along to her. So there's explicit instructions that it's cool to play along with her, that it's not just about Missy having fun, but us too. In the first verse, she extends some "nnnnn"s and "uuuuunnnnng"s. This gets your whole mouth buzzing, up into your sinuses. There are tons of uptalked "What?!"s all over the song, along with an "Umm-hmm-hmmm-hmmm yack-it-to-the-yack," some gunfire sounds, a "purrrrrrrrrsy cat," and a "blah-blah-blah-blah." Elliott has used similar techniques throughout her ouevre. There's a bunch of guttural "Uhhhhhhhs" in "Lose Control." "Work it" has the backwards rapping, the "bom-bo-domp-domp" and "gadonk-a-donk-donk"s, and some more percussion sounds and "blahs." "Get Ur Freak On" has a "skrrrrr!", some "sw-sw-sw"s, a spitting sound, and, of course, the famous "holla"s and the "brrrrrrah!"s. These sounds serve an aesthetic function in her song--they're part of her flow, part of the musical composition. For Missy and whomever raps along with her, these sounds aren't just aesthetically pleasurable: producing these sounds makes your body do things that are physically pleasurable. These sounds often accompany discussions of Missy's praise of her own body and its sexuality: for example, the aforemetioned "gadonk-a-donk-donk" is a reference to her butt, and "Lose Control" begins with Missy claiming "I got a cute face, chubby waist, thick legs in shape, make you do a double take." These sounds have the potential to take these discussions off the cishetero scripts respectability politics police

and produce. One way they do this is by reinforcing her Robo-Diva cyborg femininity.[12] The stuttered syllables and repeated consonants (Ns, Rs, Hs) evoke a glitchy, Max-Headrom-like robot or AI. When she sounds like a cyborg, this takes her racialized gender presentation and performance of sexuality off-script: they're no longer features of human femininity, or feminine performances that humanize her, but posthuman performances that take her femininity off the scripts of (white) humanity. And we can see this in her costuming (e.g., the bubble suit from "The Rain") and dancing (e.g., the CGI'ed choreography in "Lose Control"). In these cases, her body, its image, comportment, and movements don't follow the standard feminine scripts.

**[SLIDE 10]** Beyoncé isn't as prolific a noisemaker as Missy and Nicki, but the same general idea often informs her singing. For example, the variety of singing styles and techniques she uses on her 2013 self-titled album very obviously require her to use all different parts of her body, from her sinuses down to her diaphragm. From its high-pitched Janet-like giggles to its low husky verses, "Drunk In Love" features Beyoncé resonating a range of different body parts. Aesthetically, the song translates the physical pleasure of sex (which is what the lyrics are about) into the physical pleasure of singing. Beyoncé doesn't just *tell* us how good the sex is--she *shows* us. And she shows us in terms that aren't obviously legible as sexual. This technique gets her out of the above-mentioned double bind black women face when performing sexual agency, and it is consistent with what Regina Bradley has identified as Beyoncé's general strategy of shifting the most ratchet aspects of her sexual performance to the sonic dimensions of her work.[13] This is most evident in the "surfbort" lyric, which became a fairly viral meme.[14] For example, people would change any word ending in vowel+d or vowel+t to "-ort": Sesame Street characters Bert & Ernie became "Bort & Ernie," "Board of Directors" became "Bort of Directors," and so on. The thing about "surfbort" is that it's not just funny to think about and understand, it's *fun to say and hear*. In addition to the humor in the pun, the "surfbort" meme's virality spreads sensory pleasures in talking and listening. Crucially, because "Drunk In Love"'s lyrics clearly use "surfbort" as a euphemism for the male genitals that the song's

---

[12] James, Robin. "Robo-Diva R&B" in The Journal of Popular Music Studies, TKTK.
[13] Bradley, Regina. "Bow Down/I Been On" in SoundingOut! TKTK.
[14] This is likely why the term became a meme. See "Surfbort" in UrbanDictionary.com. http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Surfbort Last accessed 1/13/15; "Drunk In Love" in KnowYourMeme.com. http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/drunk-in-love Last Accessed 1/13/15. Also, a Google Image search for "surfbort" shows evidence of the term's popularity: https://www.google.com/search?q=surfbort&es_sm=91&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=Wgq1VL-NMoivggSWp4H4Cw&ved=0CEUQ7Ak&biw=1259&bih=658 Search run 1/13/15 at 7:28am EST.

narrator is enjoying in the midst of a sexual encounter, this sensory pleasure re-scripts the song's sexual politics. Saying and hearing "surfbort," we experience sexual pleasure as sensations, and with parts of our bodies, that aren't conventionally recognized as sexual. Sonically, "surfbort" veers toward Royster's erotic and Stallings's ratchet. This isn't a story about overcoming objectification, nor even returning an oppositional gaze (hooks), but using sounds to access and experience bodily pleasure beyond the narrow scripts of respectability politics.

Nicki, Missy, Bey, they all use *sounds that feel good to make*. When we sing along with them, we too feel a little bit of bodily pleasure in our mouths, throats, faces, and torsos. Activating lots of different parts of the body, these sonic performances are a variation on the "whole-body eroticism" that Richard Dyer attributes to queer music in his famous 1979 "In Defense of Disco." [15] The songs don't just talk about how great it feels to live in one's body, they offer us specific techniques for enjoying our bodies. And if we follow Royster's understanding of queer eroticism as a kind of erotic that involves something other than genitals and other conventionally gendered body parts, then this practice fits that bill. Non-verbal vocalization is, in these instances, a type of corporeal orature that put performers' bodies in transition. They transition the bodies that perform them beyond traditional boundaries of femininity and feminine sexuality, beyond contemporary narratives of their overcoming, and the respectability politics that police these boundaries and narratives. In "Anaconda" and "Drunk In Love," these non-verbal sounds punctuate lyrics that are overtly about sex. These songs don't desexualize physical pleasure, as Collins's "sex/fucking" distinction does, but imagine the body's eroticism in non-cisheteronormative terms. Or: putting the gendered body in transition also puts its sexuality and sexual pleasures in transition. Such pleasures avoid the double-bind white post-feminism produces for black women's sexuality.

Nicki, Missy, and Beyonce use sounds to put their gendered bodies in transition, so that the femininities they perform veer off post-feminist gender scripts, in particular, the script of sexual agency.

Rihanna's BBHMM also uses sounds to take her gender performance off post-feminist scripts, but works with different techniques and different scripts.

---

[15] Dyer, Richard. "In Defense of Disco" in On Record. TKTK.

**Leaning Into The Red: Pornotroping & Property-In-Person**

**[SLIDE 11]** Many critics of popular post-feminism point to its narrow focus on the economic empowerment of bourgeois white women. Dawn Foster calls it a "trickle-down feminism" that seeks to "add a few 'golden skirts' to places of high responsibility."[16] This type of feminism parallels liberal lesbian and gay politics, which, in their narrow focus on marriage equality, privilege access to private property over a host of other issues (immigration, violence, homelessness, incarceration) more immediately relevant to non-white and working class LGBTQ people, and in so doing compound the oppression of the least privileged members of oppressed groups.

Rihanna's 2015 single "BBHMM (Bitch Better Have My Money)" addresses corporate feminism's narrow focus on private property, in particular, "liberal ideas of personhood as property" (Weheliye 81). Race and gender direct the circulation of personhood and/as property; for example, they determine who *is* property and who *owns* property (Pateman 1988). Post-feminism grants otherwise normal women personhood as property, and BBHMM uses sound to hack two overlapping techniques that grant personhood and distribute property in ways that advantage white supremacist patriarchy/MRWaSP: classical pornotroping narratives and post-feminist resilience narratives. In both cases, sounds put Rihanna's gender performance in transition so that it veers of the scripts that let certain femininities lean into patriarchal privilege. Because gender relations are property relations, tinkering with gender performance also affect property relations. Leaning her gender into the red, Rihanna also puts property relations in the red.

(a) Pornotroping

Pornotroping is Hortense Spillers's term for racialized sexual violence--both interpersonal and the violence of the law (Pateman & Mills 2007)--that produces black women as propertiless-in-person, and white patriarchy as owner of property (Spillers 67).[17] If, as Cheryl

[16] Foster, Dawn. "Why Corporate Feminism Is Convenient for Capitalism" in The Guardian. 11 December 2013. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/11/corporate-feminism-capitalism-womens-working-lives

[17] As Spillers puts it: " 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality;

Harris argues, whites' access to the benefits of white supremacy is "property that could not permissibly be intruded upon without consent" (Harris 281),[18] one way to produce black women as propertliess-in-person is to treat them as beings who *can* permissibly be intruded upon without consent, i.e., who can be raped without negative consequence.

The concept of pornotroping shows that the racialized sexual violence inflicted on black women's bodies is constitutively paradoxical: the violence that dehumanizes someone by treating her as an non-person also sexualizes her--that is, it denies her one human attribute (subjectivity) and grants her another (sexuality). As Spillers puts it, pornotroping can happen when "sexualities" circulate in the "absence from a subject position" (167). Such sexualities are, in a way, posthuman: they are attributes of de-humanized, non-humanized beings. Because white heteropatriarchy treats gender as a component of sexuality and sexual desire, pornotroping attributes to black women a queerly gendered identity, a gender identity that is queer because it's not precisely human.[19] Some theorists argue that this paradox can be a tool black women use to turn pornotroping into something beyond subjection. "The continuum of ungendering that is unleashed by racial slavery's violence/sexuality matrix (pornotroping)" (Weheliye 96) could queer the very dominant institutions that set it loose. Thus, Alexander Weheliye argues, "the idea of pornotrpoing must also be understood as conceptually *igniting*...im/potential libidinal currents" (108; emphasis mine), queer desires and circuits of relation that put property relations and property-in-person in transition, much in the same way black womens' "corporeal orature" does in the club. Weheliye describes this transitionality as "viscous deviances (112).

---

2) at the same time-in stunning contradiction - the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor; 3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness"; 4) as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness," resonating through various centers of human and social meaning" (67). Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" in Diacritics, Vol. 17, No. 2, Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection" (Summer, 1987), pp. 65-81. A body that is already not free, captive, is sexualized, but that sexuality is felt to be excessive, pathological, almost siren-like in its "irresistible, destructive" (Spillers 67) quality.

[18] Harris, Cheryl. "Whiteness As Property" in Critical Race Theory. Eds. Crenshaw, et al. The New Pres, 1996:

[19] Think of it this way: all women are targets of racialized sexual violence, but there's something particular to the racialized sexual violence black women experience (namely, misogynoir) that produces them as *black*, and thus both women and imperfectly feminine.

**[SLIDE 12]** As a representational strategy and technique for art-making, pornotroping's viscous deviances can put sensory currents and sensorial medium in transition. Pornotroping's libidinal charges are "in the red," to borrow Tricia Rose's term for the hip hop aesthetic practice of pushing sounds (especially the gain) past the point of distortion.[20] So, to represent these charges, the artistic medium must go in the red--"off the screen, off the map off the charts, off the books," where they "do not appear as desire" (Weheliye 111) but as something else entirely, in the way colors might manifest as smells for someone with synasthesia. For example, reading Spillers's "Mama's Baby…", Weheliye notices that the violence that de-genders captive bodies is present in the written historical accounts Spillers analyzes *as sound.* In William Goodell's study of the North American slave code, which Spillers cites, "Godell narrates, 'The smack of the whip is all day long in the ears of those who are on the plantation...'" (HV 67). In depicting a scene of racialized sexual violence, the text turns or deviates from verbal propositions to sounds. Likewise, when the grain of the voice or "regionally accented expression, "'I craves,'" is what makes "the white I, synonymous with Man" (HV 111) intelligible, the rhythm of that "chant...lends quasi-decipherability to the heiroglyphics of the flesh" (HV 111): timbre turns and deviates to rhythm. As a representational technique, pornotroping's transitionality or deviation manifests as a shift in perceptual registers. This register shift illustrates how pornotroping ignites an im/potential current that can spark transitional bodies and relationships.

(b) BBHMM as bizarro pornotroping

BBHMM isn't an instance of pornotroping, at least in the conventional sense. Rather, BBHMM is in conversation with pornotroping as a trope, mixing around some of its elements--racialized sexual violence, de-(normal)gendering, the production of property ownership--to dramatize a process that resembles pornotroping but has a different outcome, a sort of bizarro pornotroping that *uses sound to push gender into the red*.

The video has five sections, each defined sonically as much as visually. There's the (1) birdsong-filled shot of Rihanna's legs leaning out of the trunk, (2) the schmaltzy classic Hollywood string-accompanied shots of the Accountant's Wife (AW) and their home cut in with cricket-filled shots of Rihanna carrying the trunk with a bound and gagged AW inside back into this home, (3) BBHMM's verse/chorus/verse body, which shows Rih and her crew on the run

[20] Rose, Tricia. Black Noise. Middletown, CT: Weslyan University Press, 1994.

with a kidnapped AW, and (4) BBHMM's coda, which begins with the cricket-filled shots of Rih from (2), and then shows Rih butchering the Accountant. **[SLIDE 13]** We then return to an extended version of (1), which I'll call (1a); this then fades out into (5) a second coda of shrieking synths punctuated at the end with a piano chord; here we see "BBHMM" in white letters on a red background, and then cut to a blood-soaked close-up of Rihanna's steely-eyed face.

**[SLIDE 14]** Even though the video begins and ends with shots of blood dripping off of Rihanna's character's naked, femme, dark-skinned body, her character's body depicts racialized sexual violence *that she did not experience*, at least as its target. That's why this isn't classic pornotroping. The coda and meta-coda flip the script on the standard pornotroping narrative. Rihanna's character visually presents a sexualized black femme body, but she's the perpetrator, not the recipient, of the video's racialized sexual violence. Some of her violence is directed at the AW: she's stripped and kidnapped, pistol whipped, and somewhat of an object of the camera's/audience's scopophilic pleasure. But most of this violence is addressed to the Accountant himself: Rihanna butchers him with a toolkit designed for men, especially past sexual partners, who have wronged her. But that violent butchering is never represented directly on screen, only implied. This violence must appear off screen and in another register because it depicts something that is unthinkable and unrepresentable to white supremacy or in its terms: a black woman stealing back her property-in-person, her "money," the credit for her artistic genius, as Doreen St. Felix puts it.[21] BBHMM reverses both the roles in the most stereotypical pornotrope--white man and black woman--and the flow of property/personhood.

Remixing the elements of the pornotrope, BBHMM situates Rih's character as both property (object of Love & Theft, all the money and the thinkpieces and communicative capital generated by this video) and something more or other than property (what I talk about in *Resilience & Melancholy* as M-R, her money, money with Rihanna's face on it, which we see in the "Pour It Up" video). This parallels the way pornotroping produces black women as both not women and something more or other than feminine (i.e. queerly gendered), but is not identical to it. BBHMM's eccentric libidinal charge is generated by *the indecidability of Rihanna's status as*

[21] St. Felix, Doreen. "The Prosperity Gospel of Rihanna" in The Pitch. 1 April 2015. http://pitchfork.com/thepitch/724-the-prosperity-gospel-of-rihanna/ Last accessed 3 August 2016.

*owner of property-in-person, as executor of the racialized sexual violence that makes you an owner of property-in person.*

Within the video's narrative, Rihanna's character occupies the position of property owner; however, beyond the fourth wall her character her body and her performance are spectacles consumed in ways that make her the object of a gaze that fixes her in sub-personhood. Tons of people extracting surplus value from Rihanna's work in the song and the video, and some audiences will still sexualize and objectify her body in quite traditionally white patriarchal terms. But post-feminist media is responsible for most of this character's objectification. Mainstream white post-feminist responses to the video's violence fixed her as pre-feminist, backwards, and incapable of embodying contemporary neoliberal femininity. This latter gender norm expects women to work on *themselves* to overcome the limitations of traditional feminization. But instead of working on herself, Rihanna takes things out on other people: her accountant, and, most controversially, on the accountant's wife. Critics argued that the racialized, sexualize do violence Rihanna's character perpetrated against the accountant's wife was evidence that the video, if not Rihanna herself, was misogynist, and had not made sufficient progress toward post-feminism. So even in flipping the script on pornotroping and becoming the executor of violence she would conventionally be the object of, Rihanna's character still experiences the same underlying outcome: even as subject of this violence, she's denied the status it's execution gives white people. In this way, BBHMM's bizarro pornotroping produces traditional pronotroping's paradoxical ambivalence between personhood and non-personhood, except in different terms: not woman as object of white men's desire, but woman as subject of post-feminist property ownership.

The video represents that undecidability *sonically* as the tension between metric instability and gender instability. (This is another reason it's a riff on pornotroping: the visual narrative's violence manifests in another perceptual register, in this case, sound.) In the main body of the song, the meter is very woozy and it's not always easy to find the downbeat. In the intro/chorus, the music-box like treble synth is a two-bar loop that emphasizes the fourth beat of the first bar, drops out on the downbeat of the second bar, and then comes back in on the second beat. This makes it seem like every other fourth and second beat are emphasized. The vocal phrases (including the brrap!s) begin on the third beat of every measure, and emphasize the downbeat. So we have the music box synth on a 2/4 pattern and the vocals on a 1/3 pattern–which is

totally common. What's uncommon about BBHMM is that it's really 4/2 and a 3/1 patterns. It's the reverse of the conventional pattern of rhythmic emphasis, and it sounds off-kilter to ears accustomed to the conventional pattern–it may even sound somewhat off meter. The bass synth in the choruses comes in on the downbeat, and then on two offbeats spread over the two-bar loop; their synchopation contributes to the woozy off-kilter feel. During this part of the song, Rihanna's vocals are unaltered and the gender of her vocal performance appears consistent with the gender of her performed persona: feminine. So, the main body pairs metric instability with stable gender performance.

The coda, as codas do, resolves the main body's metric instability into a very unambiguous 4/4.Traditionally codas reinforce the harmonic resolution of a piece--they usually rearticulate a main theme in the tonic, kind of hitting us over the ears with "YES THIS IS THE KEY NO REALLY IT IS." The coda in BBHMM produces a sense of closure by resolving the tension in song's rhythm and meter. The main body of the song shifts emphasized beats among the various voices so that it's sometimes hard to figure out which beat is the song's actual downbeat. In contrast, the coda is an extremely clear 4/4. So, the coda emphasizes the song's rhythmic and metric organization, the 4/4 in which "Money" always lands on the downbeat. The coda resolves the body's metric instability. But the coda also augments the instability of Rhi's gender performance. BBHMM's coda shares a lot of sonic features with "I Been On," the second half of Beyoncé's "Flawless" predecessor "Bow Down/I Been On." There's similar percussion and synth sounds: the synth that enters at around 1:22 in IBO  there's stuttering of previously un-stuttered material (~1:10 in IBO), and, most noticeably, Rih's vocals are lowered Baddie Bey style. Also, like BBHMM, "Bow Down/I Been On" was criticized as anti-feminist for its use of "bitch." But, as Regina Bradley argues, the track uses sound to destabilize the binary gender norms by which "bitch" is a misogynist slur:

> BaddieBey signifies Beyoncé's awareness of hip hop as a space of (exaggerated) gender performance….[and] gestures towards what I suggest is a type of sonic drag – using sound to bend markers of gender performance in order to blur characteristics of black masculinity and womanhood.

According to Bradley, Baddie Bey destabilizes the relationship between hip hop masculinity and the performance of a (cis)male identity and embodiment. Like "Bow Down," BBHMM uses sonic drag to king on hip hop masculinity, which is itself already an exaggerated gender performance (like, we can think of Rozay (nickname of rapper Rick Ross) as masculine drag in the same way

that Dolly Parton performs a kind of feminine drag). BBHMM uses sonic drag to destabilize racialized gender norms--the very racialized gender norms that ensure the white supremacist patriarchal distribution of private property and property-in-the-person that make Love & Theft (and the Accountant's theft) possible.

This sonic drag isn't just in the coda's vocals, though. It's also in the coda's music, which has Kanye's Yeezus (talk about exaggerated performances of masculinity in hip hop...) written all over it. For example, the timbre of the bass drum synth and the down-pitched vocals recall the timbre of the bass drum synth and the downpitched vocals in Kanye's (very Gesaffelstein-y) "I Am A God" recall Rihanna's downpitched vocals. So, even though the coda resolves the body's metric instability, it augments the instability of Rihanna's gender performance. There is no stable equilibrium here: either meter or sonic gender performance pivots between two alternatives (4/2 + 3/1 vs 1/2/3/4 for the meter; binary gender norms in the latter case). Something--meter or gender--is always in transition.

This transition manifests formally and compositionally at the end of the video, where there's a meta-coda on top of the song's coda. The meta-coda has two images, each accompanied by related sounds. The first image is "BBHMM" in white on a red background, and the second image is a closeup of Rih's bloody face and hair. In the first scene, there's a very dissonant, treble-synth heavy sustained chord, and then a percussion hit right before we switch to the second scene, which takes that dissonant chord and slowly raises the pitch of some the higher notes; this builds tension that then should be resolved by the piano chord at the very end. The tension isn't resolved fully, both because that's not a root-position tonic chord (which is the gold standard for harmonic resolution), and because harmony isn't/wasn't how BBHMM sonically and musically organized itself in the first place. The main tools the song uses to demarcate formal sections, to build and release tension--those are rhythmic and timbral, not harmonic. In the meta-coda, rhythm and timbre get pushed in the red, and are thus audibe *as harmony*. Shifting registers from rhythm to harmony, BBHMM's meta-coda parallels pornotroping's register-shift, e.g., from prose to sound. This register shift is how the meta-coda depicts the eccentric libidinal charge generated by BBHMM's formal tension between rhythmic/metric instability and gender instability, and its narrative tension between Rihanna's character's possession and dispossession of her property-in-person. The transition in register depicts, in aesthetic terms, the transitional gender Rihanna's character performs and BBHMM's property relations enact.

How exactly is this character's gender transitional? In neoliberal post-feminism, the most normal, outwardly respectable black women are conditionally and instrumentally accepted into the realms of "normal" femininity, white supremacy, capitalism, and so on. These women get some property-in-person because society needs to demonstrate its "inclusive" post-racial post-feminism.[22] Leaning In to corporate life, women both get money (they get more prestige, authority, and a higher salary) and produce more surplus value for their employers, who profit (from brand image, for example) from appearing 'diverse' and 'progressive.' In BBHMM, the tactics Rih's character she uses to "get her money" are precisely the opposite tactics one is required to perform as part of a "normal" feminine gender identity. Instead of scapegoating black men for remaining misogyny, as Gaga and Beyonce do in both "Telephone" and "Video Phone", she identifies white professional men (represented here by her accountant), and perhaps even the entertainment industry itself, as misogynist. Also, Rihanna's feminist overcoming of her thieving, misogynist accountant can't be celebrated as a 'feminist' victory because the kidnapping narrative complicates any read of Rih's character as a virtuous post-feminist subject. So, the femininity Rihanna's character performs veers off post-feminist scripts into the red. Whereas the pornotrope uses racialized sexual violence to un- and thus queerly gender black women, Rihanna's performance in BBHMM riffs on that violence, bending it and the circuits that distribute property and desire in another direction.

Post-feminism demands women show agency, agency in sexuality, agency in the market and their careers. This agency is proof that patriarchy and sexism are over: if women have overcome the limitations femininity traditionally places on them, then those limitations must no longer be in effect. The catch is, there are new limitations. And just like the old limitations, they both reinforce white supremacy and compound black women's oppression. Now that post-feminism has hit the American Top 40, black women hip hop artists have developed techniques to negotiate MRWaSP's disguises as various aspects of post-feminism. Here, I've focused on two specific uses of sound, each of which addresses particular aspects of post-feminism. Some black women hip hop artists use non-verbal vocal sound to re-script their

[22] Similarly, neoliberal post-feminism includes non-white, generally non-Western women and girls by treating them as "financializable" human capital: human capital that, with sufficient development and reform, can either successfully embody homo economicus/the Young Girl, or, morel likely, can remain the medium by which more privileged women build their human capital (e.g., through NGO work).

feminine gender performance so that it avoids the double-binds respectability politics put black women in. Others modify pornotroping's register-switching so that hip hop's "in the red" sonic aesthetics have the effect of pushing gender and racialized, gendered "property-in-person." In both cases, black women artists use sound to perform femininties off the scripts that post-feminism and MRWaSP write for black women.