

“The Social Cut of Black and Yellow Female Hip Hop”

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Abstract

Korean female hip hop artists are expanding the definition of femininity in South Korea through hip hop. In doing so, they are following a tradition first established by Black female musical performers in a new context. Korean artists are conceiving and expressing, through rap and dance, alternative versions of a “Korean woman,” thus challenging and attempting to add to the dominant conceptions of “woman.” This Thesis seeks to point out the ways female Korean hip hop artists are engaging dominant discourse regarding skin tone, body type, and expression of female sexuality, and creating spaces for the development of new discourses about gender in South Korean society.

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Introduction – Into the Cut

Identities are performed discourse; they are formed when those who identify as a particular personality perform and establish a discourse in a particular social context. As George Lipsitz states, “improvisation is a site of encounter” (61). In South Korea, female Korean hip hop is the site of a social cut in dominant culture and has become a space of improvisation where new, counter-hegemonic identities are constructed and performed. In this Thesis, I argue that Korean female hip hop artists are enacting a social rupture by performing improvised identities. Homi Bhabha writes, “What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, ‘opening out,’ remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender or race” (313). This Thesis seeks to explore the social ramifications of the performance of female Korean hip hop through the construction of identities within locations of culture, specifically, the liminal areas “in-between” the dominant and an alternative definitions of “woman” in South Korean society.

The way a woman is discursively defined is how she will perform her identity in a social context. Judith Butler contends, “acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (173). Identity is constructed out of discourse. A discourse about “woman,” for instance, becomes the basis, the standard, that those who are considered to be women in a social context must aspire to. Every rule and expectation regarding those deemed to be women must be followed or risk social ostracism. What hip hop has done historically in America, and is now

doing in a South Korean context, is to cut the discourse regarding “woman” and open a social space where new definitions and standards appropriate to women are formed and subsequently performed. The prevailing discourse for Korean women is a mix of Neo-Confucian and Western norms. Though millennial Korean women largely ignore the “young unmarried/virgin, middle-aged woman/mother, and grandmother” (Williams 397) standard, the implicit expectation by the older generation for them to fulfill that standard remains. Additionally, certain aspects of Western beauty ideals have become standards Korean women are expected to reflect. However, a hip hop-derived discourse developed by female Korean hip hop artists allows them to proclaim and perform alternative conceptions of “woman.” That new discourse has entered into dialogue with the larger society in the liminal space between the dominant and female Korean hip hop communities. In this space new definitions and standards about “woman” are being contested in order to determine whether these new conceptions are to be added to the prevailing definition of “woman.” The female Korean hip hop community is developing a new discourse about the “acceptable” woman regarding skin tone, body type, and sexuality. This alternative discourse is a visual, active text of those who are performing alternative conceptions of “woman” within their own community as well as larger society. In so doing, they are continuing a tradition first established by Black American women where Black American popular culture became the site of enacting social rupture.

Black American popular culture has historically been a place of social rupture wherein counter-hegemonic definitions of “Black” and “woman” have been performed. Stuart Hall writes, “By definition, black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a sight of strategic contestation” (88). For Black women, popular music is where different conceptions of women are performed. The performing bodies of Blues singers such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and her

protégé Bessie Smith, the first American pop stars, set a template that was expanded upon by the likes of Billie Holiday, Salt 'N' Pepa, and Queen Latifah in subsequent generations. These artists performed a version of “woman” that countered White supremacist notions about Blackness and femininity through Black American musical artforms, including Blues, Gospel, Jazz, and hip hop. These performances were, in Homi Bhabha’s words, “interventions from beyond” that helped these Black females declare themselves as human, woman, and even children of divinity. It was primarily through the performance of the body where Black women’s counter-identities were established (Gilroy 75).

The identities that were created were not solely the woman’s, but also that of the communities in which the performance took place. In other words, the performance of the artist inspired the community to participate, thereby creating communities of resistance. These improvised communities formed through call-and-response; the response entailing a shout, a lyric, a melody, or a dance, developed a lingo, a discourse, a language that made a noise, a rupturing noise, in the dominant social fabric. These practices evolved into the popular Black American artforms (Davis 204). Though these artforms originated in the United States, they have become “interventions from beyond,” that rupture dominant discourse in social contexts around the world. Fred Moten writes, “black performance has always been the ongoing improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus [of the beyond] – invagination, rupture, collision, augmentation” (26). At the point of rupture, of incision into the placid standard discourse an intervention was/is enacted that operates in tension as tension to bring attention to the lives of those outside of representation. The identities of these newly created social communities were social blocs that hegemonic discourse had to communicate with, though that communication was/is often vicious and pejorative. The ultimate social goal is the creation of what Martin Luther King, Jr called the

“Beloved Community” where negotiation replaces domination and cultural supremacy is replaced by ethical acknowledgement and appreciation of difference. As Bhabha writes, “Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration. It makes possible the emergence of ‘interstitial’ agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism” (58). Popular culture artists who present alternative examples of race and gender are the agents of this interstitial agency and represent new possibilities of revising hegemonic conceptions. When new conceptions of race and gender are added to a dominant society’s definition of those terms it expands access to representation, presenting the possibility that previously subjected (or ignored) voices in society can be given the opportunity to speak and be heard.

Black American musical artforms, particularly hip hop, are creating social ruptures in a variety of global contexts, from inner city Latino/a communities in Chicago, Illinois to disaffected German youth in Frankfurt, Germany. For Latino/a youth in Chicago hip hop is “an explicit discourse centering the conditions of the inner-city, exploring conditions of racism, and challenging power relations in American society” (Pulido 68). In Germany, youth adapted an essential element of hip hop, rap, and are using it to speak to/about the local issues they face in everyday life (Bennett 178). Thus the performance of hip hop in a variety of global settings, as was the case with earlier Black American artforms, initiates a dialogue between the historical experiences that gave rise to hip hop in America and the local social situations youth are appropriating the artform to speak to. Andy Bennett writes, “the commercial packaging of hip hop as a global commodity has facilitated its easy access by young people in many different parts of the world. Moreover, such appropriations have in each case involved a reworking of hip hop in ways that engage with local circumstances. In every respect then, hip hop is both a global and a local form” (180). In South Korea, female Korean hip hop artists have appropriated hip hop to

dialogue with South Korean social norms regarding women. These dialogues are taking place in the liminal spaces between the female hip hop subculture and dominant Korean society. Bhabha writes, “The very possibility of cultural contestation, the ability to shift the ground of knowledges, or to engage in the ‘war of position,’ marks the establishment of new forms of meaning, and strategies of identification” (233). The marginalized, forbidden, and taboo that flourishes in the Korean hip hop subculture is the site of contestation with dominant society where new conceptions and definitions of femininity are presented for the possibility of being included within dominant culture.

To analyze how Korean female hip hop artists are expanding the definitions and roles of women there has to be an understanding of the context in which the dominant ideas arose. These definitions and roles regulate the Korean female body’s acceptable skin tone, body type, and expression of sexuality. Therefore, each chapter of this Thesis will detail the historical circumstances and ideological discourses that led to the establishment of dominant standards regarding femininity. I will then examine the social ramifications for women who are unable to satisfy these standards. As this Thesis argues that Korean female hip hop artists are continuing a tradition begun by Black female performers, at the beginning of each chapter I will analyze how Black women were defined in America regarding skin tone, body type, and expression of sexuality and how they use Black musical artforms to contest the dominant standards and create alternative standards of femininity for themselves. I will then transition into how Korean female hip hop artists are doing the same thing in a Korean context. The point of this is to highlight how Black musical artforms are a potent weapon in asserting agency for an oppressed community. Each chapter will feature particular performers who are representative of a larger cultural phenomenon. These artists were chosen because they are pioneers in performing alternative

conceptions of “woman” in mainstream society; they were the first to endure societal backlash for simply asserting who they are as their version of “woman.” I will feature at least one creative work of each artist as a framework through which I will posit my argument. These creative works were chosen because of their outstanding ability to encapsulate what the artist represents as well as what she hopes to inspire in her fans – which, in all cases, is ultimately self-acceptance.

The featured artists ultimately both construct and perform their alternative conceptions through a process of improvisation. Therefore, the role of improvisation is analyzed in conjunction with the femininity each artist performs for it is through improvisation that these artists most clearly link to a Black musical tradition that breaks the boundaries of previous discourses about acceptable femininity. Improvisation is not the development of something out of nothing, rather it’s the creation of something new out of elements already present. Of course, the practice of improvising as it pertains to Black music was most prominently seen in jazz. Yet, hip hop has its own versions of improvisation; freestylin’ is perhaps the most recognized example of rap improvisation. Hip hop dances are also frequently improvised. The common thread about these seemingly disconnected examples of improvisation is that all of them take common practices within the genre and re-arrange/re-orient them to create something new. The jazz player creates an entirely new composition out of the elements of a “standard”; the familiar flow and style of freestyle rap is the setting for newness; known dance steps and rhythms are re-arranged to create entirely new dance routines. The music and dance improvisation inherent in Black music artforms act as a template to be emulated in life. In other words, in the interstitial places, the improvisatory tradition that creates new artistic expressions also create new identities

that are formed out of the elements of a person's experiences and performed in ways unique to each individual.

More importantly, that which is newly created out of improvisation attempts to force acknowledgment from that which is already firmly established. For instance, an "improvised" identity is analyzed by hegemonic culture to determine whether this "new thing" is a threat or something worthy to be incorporated into the larger culture. This is the case even with music. A jazz standard an audience is familiar with goes through the process of improvisation, engages the audience, and provokes a response – whether to applaud this experimentation or to reject it. As Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz state it, "The core elements of the most achieved improvisers include careful listening, embodied presence, dialogue (even if dissonant or dissident), relational thinking, empathic and intuitive understanding blended with the skillful use of the materials at hand, and the power to awaken others to new possibilities in the improvised soundscape" (71). Thus, improvisation creates the setting for dialogic encounters where the new confronts and challenges the old. Fred Moten states, "I want to linger in the cut between word and sound, between meaning and content" (175). I am interested in lingering within the space where hip hop confronts, challenges, and (w)raps around hegemony to develop, what Bhabha calls "a third space [where] the negotiation of incommensurable differences create a tension peculiar to borderline existences" (312) and new identities are created. I want to explore the intricacies of *why* and *how* "improvisation within the third space" using a Black American musical artform is uniquely dialoguing with South Korean dominant culture.

This study aims to add to the conversation about the role of popular culture in challenging patriarchy; it also seeks to expand the knowledge of the impact of female hip hop in unique cultural contexts. While numerous studies by scholars such as Tricia Rose, bell hooks,

and Joan Morgan have examined the impact and influence of hip hop in an American context, very few have analyzed the impact of specifically Korean female hip hop. This oversight is glaring in an age where elements of Korean female hip hop is ubiquitous in internationally popular K-Pop female groups such as Blackpink, Twice, and Red Velvet. This scholarly oversight points to the historical elision of East Asian women from scholarly consideration suggested by Anne Anlin Cheng, who states, “the fact of yellowness’ remains an active myth that enjoys no critical stature and whose cultural capital, if we can call it that, remains the source of its dismissal” (2). Therefore, this Thesis seeks to introduce an in-depth study about a social revolution that is hidden in plain sight. It is my hope that it will lead to further interest in female Korean hip hop and the important work these artists are doing in challenging long-standing patriarchy and establishing agency in a context where they are still second-class citizens. This study also seeks to expand awareness of the societal impact of Black musical artforms on East Asian women in general. While Korea has historically been ignored from scholarly consideration regarding this subject matter, numerous studies have been conducted analyzing the effect of jazz on Japanese women. It is instructive to briefly mention the importance of this first encounter between a Black musical artform and Japanese women because of the similar Neo-Confucian cultural background Japan shares with Korea.

The improvisatory artform of jazz was the first massively popular Black American popular music genre in East Asia when it rose to prominence in Japan in the 1930s. Jazz was part of an influx of American influences that transformed the foundations of Japanese society after the devastating 1923 Kanto earthquake (Atkins 46), as well as helped create the new “modern Japanese woman” (Sato 19). Indeed, jazz was the soundtrack of young, single Japanese women who were leaving their rural birthplaces and becoming professional working women in

metropolitan cities such as Tokyo and Osaka. Along with American movies and the influx of American technological advancements, jazz was the soundtrack of Japanese modernity in both the inter-war period and immediately following the Pacific War. As in modern day South Korea, a Black musical artform, for Japanese women, accompanied an awakened sense of purpose and agency that enabled them to defy traditional Neo-Confucian, Japanese mores that had dominated Nippon culture for centuries (Sato 79). However, unlike South Korea's female hip hop artists, female jazz performers were not at the forefront of the Japanese jazz revolution. In other words, though "the New Japanese Woman" was immersed in the appreciation of jazz, she was not the primary producer/performer of jazz (with the notable exception of pianist/arranger Akiyoshi Toshiko) (Atkins 207).

Though female Korean musicians perform prominently in a variety of Black American musical artforms, I will focus exclusively on hip hop because it is the most prominent musical genre through which Korean female performers both create alternative identities and establish communities with a distinctive discourse that challenges dominant hegemony. This Thesis seeks to point out the ways female Korean hip hop artists are engaging dominant discourse and are creating spaces for the development of new discourses about gender in South Korean society. Additionally, though female K-Pop artists and groups prominently feature hip hop elements in their performances, I have chosen to focus on artists whose primary means of expression are the most distinctive features of classic hip hop, rap and dance. I have chosen to conduct my analysis and make my argument through creative performances of specific Korean hip hop artists, Yoon Mi-rae, Jessi, CL, HyunA, and Lim Kim. Whether through lyrics or performance, the ultimate goal of these performers is the redefinition of acceptable Korean femininity.

However, to fully appreciate the role female hip hop is playing in challenging dominant ideologies regarding women, whether Black or Korean, we must center our attention on the site of contestation – the female body. Though hegemonic standards regulate the social rules and roles for the female body, to even be regarded as the ideal “woman” the female body must be disciplined to conform to social expectations. Both the West and Korea utilize a set criterion to judge whether a female can be considered the ideal woman, and is based on skin tone, bodily proportions, and body performance. In both discourses the requirement of white skin is the most essential, while the other two criteria differ dramatically from each other in their respective cultural contexts. This Thesis will dedicate a chapter to each of the aforementioned contestation sites and explore how female hip hop is challenging hegemonic rules for Black women in America and Korean women in South Korea. In the first chapter, I will address the most essential requirement needed to attain the status of the ideal woman – skin tone. I will document how and why white skin became so highly valued in both contexts as well as how female artists are contesting it. I will particularly examine Black American/Korean hip hop artist Yoon Mi-rae as she experienced the social consequences of not being able to attain the status of ideal womanhood because of her skin tone and bi-racial heritage in both cultural contexts. Through Yoon’s experience I will also examine the “social status” of bi-racial/mixed race people in both cultural settings and how hip hop is creating an improvisatory space for those who don’t fit neatly in either of the hegemonies. In chapter two, I will explore the bodily proportions requirement and will examine how Black female blues women set the template on how to “turn the tables” on hegemonic requirements and their subsequent influence on both Black and Korean hip hop artists. It will feature Korean artist CL, whose 2018 Olympic performance showcased the body of a woman who shattered all conceptions of Korean femininity both nationally and

internationally. In chapter three, I will focus on the performance of sexuality; specifically, how Black American and Korean female bodies are expected to perform/express sexuality. I will then highlight an American hip hop act, Salt 'N' Pepa, and a Korean hip hop artist, HyunA, have contested and are currently contesting societal standards through their hip hop dance performances by using the most shameful (by Korean standards) anatomical part of the female body to assert a liberated sexuality. Finally, in chapter four, I will examine how the West, through Orientalism, has “created” the Asian woman and set the standard for how her body is supposed to look and perform. I will then spotlight how Korean artist Lim Kim is using a mixed-genre musical palette to both symbolize and challenge Orientalist depictions of them. I will then demonstrate how Kim’s method serves as a strategy Asian women can use to challenge and escape the Orientalist expectations constructed by the West as well as the Neo-Confucian cultural expectations of them in an East Asian context.

Ultimately, this Thesis aims to show how a Black popular culture artform, hip hop, is contesting and pointing the way out of hegemonic notions and definitions of “woman” for both Black American and Korean women through the performances of hip hop by women of both ethnicities.

Chapter I – Yoon Mi-rae and Negotiating the West and East of Colorism

In conversations with her darker skinned sister, bell hooks would talk about “color politics and the ways racism has created an aesthetic that wounds us, a way of thinking about beauty that hurts” (113). The weapon such an aesthetic uses to wound is the eye, an eye that has been trained to recognize beauty in a certain shade of light; that pierces in its gaze and punishes by being the gateway to the disciplining mind of epistemic judgment. An aesthetic of beauty that wounds has its roots in the same tree that overshadows all aspects of the Black female body, including skin tone, body shape, and performance of gender. The female body is a docile text on which dominant patriarchy writes the rules, regulations, and specific physical attributes required in order for females to qualify as an ideal “woman” (Bordo 170). In America, White supremacist ideology has constructed the ideal “true woman” and through popular culture normalizes that ideal to the point where American women (no matter the ethnicity) consent to the ideal and strive to conform to it. Though the physical characteristics of the ideal, or “true woman,” which developed throughout the ante-bellum period (Carby 23), has changed over time, the central abjection, dark skin, has remained a consistently forbidden feature. The physical bodies of Black female slaves were marked with the evidence of manual and domestic labor, which was antithetical to the concept of purity White women were supposed to embody. Additionally, since skin tone was seen as the physical manifestation of the soul, true womanhood’s underlying concept was that “woman meant white” (Carby 34). This underlying concept has continued even after the end of slavery. Thus, dark skinned Black women are perpetually excluded from attaining true woman status because of their skin tone. In essence, White supremacist ideology has “trained” those within its hegemonic purview to imagine a “true woman” in the image it has established through philosophy, education, science, and popular culture. The true woman ideal

has been so effective that even Black men in positions of cultural power have accepted its anti-dark standard when evaluating the sexual appeal of Black women and have “adopted and therefore become perpetrators of the beauty standards of white America” (Mathews and Johnson 255). This is most clearly seen in Black male hip hop songs and videos where artists, including Kanye West, Chris Brown, and Lil Wayne reject Black women specifically because of their dark skin (Mathews and Johnson 255). Since the 1990s, hip hop has played a primary role in promoting the bi-racial physical features, including skin tone, of the Mulatto (half-Black and half-White). Mulatto features have supplemented whiteness as the modern American standard of beauty. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting writes, “the mixing bowl with a wee bit of nutmeg and cinnamon standard of beauty endorsed ostensibly by American culture (more specifically on Madison Avenue) parallels the shifting ideas of beauty in hip hop videos that are, some would argue, necessarily still derivative of a white ideal” (30). That is, a little darkness is okay, but not too dark – not too Black. This dimension of intra-policing of the Black female body, colorism, is a direct consequence of White supremacist ideology’s defining, and continually re-defining, hegemonic beauty standards.

Evelyn Nakano Glenn defines colorism as “the preference for and privileging of lighter skin and discrimination against those with darker skin” (381). Colorism, along with economic exploitation and continental devastation, is one of the enduring consequences of the transatlantic slave trade. In the ante-bellum period in the southern United States, bi-racial slaves who were lighter skinned were favored and tended to work in the home, while dark skinned slaves worked in the fields (Mathews & Johnson 252). Even after emancipation, the enduring benefit of having white skin was maintained throughout the West not through literal chains and whips, but through Western cultural hegemony and market capitalism. In the United States, most of the wealth and

means of social influence was concentrated in the hands of White men, and the myth of White supremacy was maintained and even strengthened through science, popular entertainment, and marketing. The control of the mass media, especially Hollywood (see *Birth of a Nation*) associated everything good, beautiful, pure, heroic, and wholesome with Whiteness, while everything degraded, ugly, evil, and dirty was associated with Blackness (Glenn 284). The White-controlled mass media's perpetual exaltation of Whiteness created a sense of inferiority within non-White peoples, and initiated a sort of sliding skin tone scale where the closer one was to Whiteness the more socially accepted one was; contrarily, the more "colored" one was the fewer social benefits that one could enjoy (Packard 94). In fact, "For [American] Southerners, a white skin was the distinguishing badge of mind and intellect. Black skin was the sign that a given people had been providentially designed to serve as menial laborers" (Davis 189). Consequently, White-owned (and eventually Black-owned) skin care corporations saw a profit opportunity and began developing skin whitening products to market to those, especially women, outside the zone of Whiteness. Glenn writes, "The yearning for lightness evident in the widespread and growing use of skin bleaching around the globe can rightfully be seen as a legacy of colonialism, a manifestation of 'false consciousness,' and the internalization of 'white is right' values by people of color, especially women" (298). This had lasting social consequences, especially for Black and bi-racial/mixed race women in the United States. Unlike other slave societies in the Americas, such as the Caribbean, where there was a multi-tiered, multi-colored hierarchy dividing Whites, Mulattoes, and Blacks, the United States established a strict legal binary dividing White and Black through the "one drop rule," which declared anyone with any trace of "black blood" as being Black (Packard 96). Though this had the positive effect of uniting Black Americans, no matter what shade they were, in a common cause for freedom

and equality, it had intra-racial ramifications that endure to this day. For dark-skinned Black women, the double social handicaps of being a woman and dark-skinned put them at the bottom of the American social scale of value. According to Tayler J. Mathews and Glenn S. Johnson, “Since light complexions have been socially construed to define beauty, African-American women who possess this trait benefit from an elevated social capital” (253). Though the commonly fetishized physical features of Black women, such as the butt, lips, and hair, has gradually been incorporated into modern conceptions of the ideal woman, dark skin has not been included in this “updated” Western version of ideal femininity (Sharpley-Whiting 38). Modern hip hop culture, because of the influence of White-owned entertainment conglomerates who own the means of music production and distribution and Black male hip hop moguls who have consented to the White supremacist-derived racial hierarchy, has adopted this hodge-podge construction of the ideal female (Mathews and Johnson 255). Sharpley-Whiting writes, “Beginning at opposite ends of the great chain of beauty’s color spectrum, hip hop culture and mainstream beauty culture meet somewhere in the middle in their fetishization of ethnic brewing” (38). The enduring impact upon dark skinned Black women’s psyche has spawned a desire within many to seek means to “whiten” themselves by any means available, including using skin whitening products.

On the other hand, light-skinned Black and bi-racial women have had to endure social ostracism from both sides of the Black/White binary at distinct periods in American history. Though there were eccentric and progressive voices in the ante-bellum period that actually promoted the idea of “race mixing” (in fact, the term “miscegenation” came from the mind of an eccentric, progressive, racist, utopian writer obsessed with the idea) (Talty 73), for the most part the offspring of amalgamation were considered defects unable to reproduce after “their kind” –

hence the “mule” in “mulatto” (Talty 72). The trope of the “tragic mulatto” has been featured in White popular culture since the 19th century, particularly in Hollywood films such as *Showboat*, *Pinky*, and *Imitation of Life*; these films seemed to be messages from White culture warning about the dangers of miscegenation and the banishment to a zone between the Black/White binary where only ostracism and the status of outcast awaited those born of Black and White parents. However, with the expanding hegemonic qualifications for attaining Whiteness that has occurred since the 1960s, bi-racial and lighter skinned Black women have had more social advantages among mainstream, White society. During the same decade, many Black women embraced the Black Power Movement and began to express self-love and pride in Blackness and developed a Black, anti-racist beauty aesthetic that exalted black skin and black hairstyles such as the “Afro” (Tate 302). In Black popular culture, for instance, the influence of assimilationism typified through the girl groups of Motown, particularly The Supremes, began to recede as the “natural Black woman,” such as Aretha Franklin, unashamedly expressed Gospel and Blues-inflected vocal stylings and presented/performed their unashamedly Black bodies in ways not seen in popular culture since the end of the blues women era in the 1930s. Artists such as Franklin represented an anti-racist beauty aesthetic that declared that the “only authentic black hairstyles would be dreadlocks, afro, cane-row and plaits. By extension, the only authentic blackness would be a dark-skinned one” (Tate 303). This beauty aesthetic was contemporaneous with the Black Arts movement, spanning music, poetry, and the visual arts, that linked Black artistic expression with Black cultural nationalism (hooks 107). In her essay, “An Aesthetic of Blackness,” bell hooks writes, “The [B]lack aesthetic movement was fundamentally essentialist...it inverted conventional ways of thinking about otherness in ways that suggested that everything black was good and everything white was bad” (107). The galvanizing

psychological effect this had on dark skinned Black women had the opposite effect on light skinned Black women within the Black community as Black aesthetic essentialism applied to skin tone as well; light skinned Black women were a problem within a new version of the Black/White binary. Though light-skinned and bi-racial Black women experience more social benefits within dominant White society (Mathews and Johnson 253), within the Black community they often endure intra-racial ostracism because of their inability to qualify as “authentically” Black. As a result, while they are now more accepted by White society, many are excluded from Black society (Tate 306), the exact opposite of what occurred in the pre-Black Arts aesthetic era. In a nation where the binary between Black/White endures, that there are those who don’t fit neatly within either category is a natural consequence of such a binary. To complicate matters, since 1965 when the quotas limiting Asian immigration to the United States was lifted, a new multi-racial reality created new possibilities of ethnic mixture with its own layers of racial significance. New stereotypes of Asians supplemented earlier Orientalist-derived constructs. For instance, the stereotype of Asians being “the ideal minority” (Morikawa 429) is but another manifestation of Western Orientalism, which can be defined as “[a] Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3). If a modern word for “Orient” is “Asia,” then we can say that the West defines and categorizes Asians according to its own imagination. Though past characterizations of Asia and Asians, such as exotic, mysterious, conniving, is still invoked in modern society, the ascendancy of the “model minority” designation has served as a form of epistemic discipline to all Asians who are unable to fulfill that expectation (Yang 30). However, it’s one thing to classify individual ethnicities (White, Black, Asian), but how does a still-binary American society classify a bi-racial Black/Asian and how does the one classified deal with being a “slash” in the Black/White binary? Natasha Reid,

aka Yoon Mi-rae, is one who has had to negotiate not only the Black/White binary as a “blasian” in the United States, but the Korean/Foreigner binary in South Korea.

Yoon was born Natasha Reid in 1981 in Fort Hood, Texas to a Black American father and Korean mother. As a child, she not only faced the dilemma of the inability to fit within the “slash” of the American Black/White binary, but she also had to grapple with Orientalist conceptions of Asian American women as well as White supremacist conceptions of Black American women. As an Asian, she lived within what Karen Shimakawa calls the “liminal positionality of Asian Americans ‘between the poles of abject visibility/stereotype/foreigner and invisibility/assimilation (to whiteness)’” (Yang 27). Asian Americans are tagged with the stigma of invisibility and silence (Yang 29), where they are expected to be passive observers of the American social landscape while simultaneously learning how to assimilate into mainstream, White society. Reid’s Black features, however, prevented invisibility and instead caused her to stand out even more; she was instead an object of curiosity and experienced the intra-racial ostracism associated with being half-Black. She’s stated that she “always felt confused about her identity since she was considered neither American nor Korean nor African-American” (“Yoon Mi-rae Returns to Her Roots”). Ironically, bi-racial/light skinned Black women were historically referred to as “high yellow” within the Black community (Curtis Mayfield’s “We People Who are Darker than Blue” features the line “High yellow gal / Can’t you tell? / You’re just the surface of our dark deep well”). Reid was an actual representation of the “yellow” woman, with the physical features that set her apart from the more familiar “high yellow” Black woman. Thus, she experienced a double rejection, an “abjection, an ungrievability based on exclusion from blackness, of being perceived as not being really black” (Tate 311) and not being really Asian. In fact, according to the White supremacist/Orientalist parameters of Black and Yellow femininity,

Blackness and Asianness, she was simultaneously expected to be loud/silent, (Black female) masculine / (Asian submissive) feminine, and emotional/intellectual, among other incongruent opposites. Neither qualifying for aesthetic Blackness nor Asianness, Reid had no choice but to “disidentify” from both essentialist designations and proclaim an alternative identity for herself. Reid’s “unclassifiableness,” while socially isolating, presented an opportunity to challenge hegemonic assumptions about race and point towards new possibilities of identity construction. Yet, she had to experience social abjection in her mother’s homeland before she would perform her unique, alternative identity through hip hop.

In her early teens, Reid’s father was re-stationed to Korea, forcing her to move to the country of her mother’s birth. While stationed in Korea, he was a radio DJ in his spare time with access to over 30,000 LPs. It was through her father’s record collection and influence that she became exposed to various forms of Black American musical genres. In an interview she stated, “I just grew up listening to it. Not just hip-hop but R&B and jazz and pop” (Interrante). These musical influences were a psychological bulwark for her as she endured constant discrimination because of her mixed heritage. Her shelter of endurance, indeed her access point to an alternative, affirmative identity, was the Black American-derived music genres her father exposed her to. Through writing and performing her own songs, she developed an identity that valorized her skin tone, heritage, gender, and in the process, developed a model of identity construction emulated by other female Korean hip hop artists.

In an interview she stated, “Kids of my age only bullied me. They called me 'negro' and shouted 'Yankee, go home' at me. They told me to go back to my country with a ticket they were going to buy for me. I went to an international school, but there were only two students of African American descent including me, and I was still treated badly.” As a result of the constant

bullying, she took a high school equivalency exam after dropping out at the age of 15 (“Yoon Mi-rae Returns to Her Roots”). In 1995, she accompanied a friend to an audition and was selected “by accident” to join a hip hop group called Uptown (“Artists Speak to Artists: Kellee Maize, Drunken Tiger & T”). Though she was signed as a vocalist, “...a producer asked her if she wanted to rap on a song. “I didn't consider myself an emcee. The producer at the time said, ‘We have this track and I think it would be dope if a female dropped a verse on it. Would you like to give it a try?’ I gave it a try and fell in love and I've been hooked ever since” (Interrante). From that point she emerged as the preeminent female rapper in South Korea, earning her the distinction of being the “Mother of Korean hip hop.” However, even with providence blessing her steps, there was a constant struggle within her to establish her identity while at the same time enduring society’s hate toward her color.

At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. (hooks 148)

As essentially a person with no home within any binary established within the two societies she lived in, Yoon inhabited a marginal, undefined, space where she was at once isolated and liberated. From that in-between space she had no choice but to develop an “undefined” identity; she detailed the struggle of her journey towards a new identity through her song, “Black Happiness.” About the song she says, “I've sung many songs, but never sung about my life. So this time, I wanted to tell my fans who I am” (“Yoon Mi-rae Returns to Her Roots”). In another interview she stated that the song best represents who she is because it mixes both soul music and hip hop elements to reflect her identity composed of a mixture of influences

(“Tiger JK, Tasha and Bizzy Talk”). The performance was the soul of a woman transplanted to a foreign land and was subsequently named “foreigner” by the natives who crossed her path. High school, for her, was a place of terror and unremitting abuse. The Korean high school system is well-known for its bullying inhabitants; the foreigner was too good a target to miss. To emigrate from a country known for its racism just to live among those who have no felt knowledge of that particular mode of suffering – that of antiblackness – motivated her to isolate, and then escape, the presence of her would-be peers. Roiling in isolation were words, English and Korean, that intermixed and intermingled in search for a response to words of rejection. Those words were captivated, or captured, by melodies born from the Black female experience; harmonies, melodies, words, rhythms, beats reverberating out of the traces of 30,000 lps her father spun with the twirl of his fingertips. Billie Holiday’s anguished espousal of love here, Slick Rick’s rhyming genius there; wrapped in a package of Motown Moogs and funkadelic booty rhythms. In the midst of this roiling mixture of polyphonic, cacophonous madness, was the identity of Natasha Reid. What occurred in the chaos was the improvising of the disparate elements of Natasha Reid into the genesis of Yoon Mi-rae. Natasha, and everything associated with her, including the Black and Yellow, became Mi-rae (“future”); a symbol, a sign, a portent of the possibilities of improvisation in the cut¹.

She opens the song by singing, “My skin was dark from my past / People used to point at me / Even at my mom Even at my dad who was black, and in the army / People whisper behind my back” (Yoon Mi-rae). The verse alludes not only to Yoon’s past, but also to the history of Blackness in a Korean context. The link between Black American and Korean cultures goes back

¹ Fred Moten, in his book *In the Break*, proposes that the “in-between” places are the social “cuts” where social, political, and artistic improvisation makes possible the development of new ontologies that exist side by side with dominant ontologies.

to the Korean War, the first conflict in which the American armed forces were integrated. Though President Truman's signing of Executive Order 9981, which desegregated the US military, was an early victory for the nascent Civil Rights Movement, the negative perception of Black Americans within the US military was widespread, and thus, certainly spread among the Korean populace wherever American military influence was prominent. However, in the midst of the cultural and social transformations that developed during, and in the immediate aftermath of, the Korean War, Black American musical forms, particularly jazz and rock and roll, were introduced into the country.

The Japanese Empire colonized Korea from 1910 until 1945, during which time the idea of Koreanness began to coalesce in response to Japan's intention to expunge all aspects of Korean culture from their colonized subjects. Prior to the end of the Pacific War in 1945, the Japanese had propagated the idea that every person within the Japanese Empire was to consider themselves Japanese. Even as Japan tried to eliminate all traces of Korean culture, it adopted the "imperial ideology of formal integration, or assimilation from above" (Lie 9). Conversely, with the loss of its Empire and the signing of the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty, Japanese sovereignty was restored, but Koreans who were previously colonial subjects and therefore considered, at least empirically Japanese, were suddenly declared as "other." Thereafter, every social benefit associated with being Japanese was stripped from Koreans living in Japan as Japan conceived of itself as a monoethnic nation (Lie 37). Lie writes, "In short, Korean identity in Japan was at once polluted and taboo; Koreans were to be excluded and quarantined. Colonial racism transmuted into outright racial discrimination" (38). As a result, both Japanese and Koreans advocated repatriation to the Korean peninsula, in essence because "Japan is for the Japanese" and "Korea is for the Koreans." At the same time, what Hyein Amber Kim calls a

racial project was enacted by the formerly colonized Koreans on the Korean peninsula as a sense of ethnic pride was restored after liberation; though ideological, and then civil, war was waged, the idea of a discreet, monoethnic Korean identity began to solidify. In the midst of all of this, indeed the instigating factor in the sudden reconceptualization of both Japanese and Korean ethnic identity, was US military presence. US cultural hegemony, including its popular culture and White supremacist ideology, exerted itself first in Japan, and then in South Korea. Thus, at precisely the same time as a monoethnic, nationalist discourse began to take shape, the most prominent embodiment of multiethnicity (the US military) helped make the distinctions between Koreanness and “other” physically obvious.

Black American soldiers clearly stood out as the extremity of “otherness”; they represented everything a Korean physically could not be. To be sure, the social preference for white skin existed prior to Western intervention in the Korean peninsula. According to Kim, “Historically, Koreans perceived lighter, white skin to be more beautiful. ‘Porcelain-white jade-like skin’ was used as a metaphor to describe lighter, pale skin tones” (45). According to the Naver Korean dictionary, this traditional preference for “milky-white” skin is called *ppoyanpibu* (“Ppoyanipibu”). Though the *ppoyanpibu* preference has been part of Korean culture for centuries, the introduction of American cultural hegemony, with its established history of White supremacy, “weaponized” it and not only justified the practice of colorism, but strengthened and entrenched it into post-war South Korean culture. The strengthening of the Black/White binary resulted in skin tone being one of the chief physical markers to delineate between authentic Koreanness and foreigner. Even when children were born of Black/Korean parents, most could not assimilate or be considered ethnically Korean because of their skin tone. Only those who were pureblood Koreans (*suhhyeoljuui*), as opposed to “multicultural” Koreans (*damunhwa*),

could fulfill the hegemonic requirements to attain Koreanness (H. Kim 43). However, this strict demarcation not only effects bi-racial Koreans, but also native Koreans who are darker than culturally appropriate. While in Western nations racism born of White supremacy is the primary source of anti-Black discrimination, colorism that emerged out of the monoethnic concept of Koreanness is the source of anti-Black/anti-dark discrimination. Thus, ideal Korean identity is a socially constructed mix consisting of pre-colonial preference, social reaction to occupational oppression, and American White supremacy and currently acts in a manner akin to White privilege in the United States; those who are able to attain it are able to reap the benefits of membership, while those who are not are the “Other,” including native Koreans.

One of the verses Yoon sings in “Black Happiness” is, “I saw my mother's sadness / Everything seemed like it was my fault / Because of my guilt I washed my face every time during the day / With my tears I melt the white soap” (Yoon Mi-rae). Despite the fall of the old class structure that was prominent during the Neo-Confucian Joseon era, the coming of American influence did little to alter social prejudices regarding those with darker skin tones. This was primarily because of the way White supremacist American society defined and treated Black Americans at the time American influence became prominent in South Korea (during and after the Korean War). In other words, it wasn't hard for many Koreans to maintain the long-standing White/Black binary despite the introduction of American values such as freedom and democracy. The high value placed upon skin tone remained as prominent in South Korea as it had (and still does) in American society. Blackness is something to be erased, or at least mitigated, to insure social and self-acceptance. This discursive message is constantly reinforced through popular Korean dramas and variety shows, including those programs that are directly related to Black American culture. For instance, during the second season of the female rap

reality show, *Unpretty Rapstar*, popular K-Pop rapper, Yubin (from the groundbreaking group, Wonder Girls; herself dark skinned), in a “diss” battle with the darker-skinned Hyolin (member of another popular female K-Pop group) intentionally pointed out Hyolin’s dark skin as a negative. That an artform created by Black Americans was used to insult the physical Blackness of another Korean rapper is tragically ironic – but all too common.

She continues, “I always hated my dark skin / why O why / Does the world judge me” (Yoon Mi-rae). One of the most insidious aspects of hegemony is the weight of social significance it develops among those who have consented to its standards. As a result of the embroilment of American White supremacist standards of beauty with the traditional Korean preference for white skin, the standard was consented to by Korean society and became an essential part of Koreanness. Subsequently, in order to have a favored position in society, women had to physically resemble the hegemonic standard; Reid moved to South Korea at the precise time when this beauty standard was being heavily promoted through the Korean entertainment industry and at the precise age (a young teenager) when physical appearance starts to assume an important role in the development of self-conceptualization and self-acceptance. Not being able to change her physical appearance coupled with witnessing her mother suffer unjustly from her peers because of who she chose to marry and her daughter’s skin tone surely affected Reid’s psychological development as she matured in South Korea.

Though American White supremacist ideology regarding race is strong in American society, within the Black American community in the United States, Black women have a higher level of self-acceptance than any other female community (Evans and McConnell 163). Therefore, to leave the relative safety of one community and enter a society where one isn’t only viewed as physically ugly, but also as a foreigner would likely crush the morale of most women.

The fact that Reid had to endure rejection as not “really” Black in America, and not “really” Korean in Korea demanded a unique dialogic response to discourses of rejection. To combat and uplift herself spiritually and psychologically she re-immersed herself into the music that had resided within her since she was a child. She sings, “When I hate the world I close my eyes / I put my soul into the music my father gave me / I feel the volume / And fly higher and higher Far away / la musique” (Yoon Mi-rae). Through listening and performing Black music she not only affirmed her sense of self but became a new self – Yoon Mi-rae. Tricia Rose writes, “As in many African and Afrodiasporic cultural forms, hip hop’s prolific self-naming is a form of reinvention and self-definition” (36). The word “Mi-rae” means “future” in Korean; thus, a past of psychological oppression and degradation was transcended through the performance of hip hop to propel her to a future as a trailblazing innovator looked up to by not only budding Korean female hip hop artists, but also other dark-skinned people (Korean or otherwise) suffering from social derision.

She closes the song by encouraging all of those listeners who could relate with her pain by singing, “Sometimes it’s hard to see all the good things in your life / But you gotta be strong and you gotta hold on and love yourself” (Yoon Mi-rae). In spite of social pressure, in spite of the bullying, and in spite of the spite of peers, Yoon inspires, enlivens the spirit, of her listeners re-associating that which is supposed to be hated as something to be loved. Henry Louis Gates writes, “The black person’s capacity to create this rich poetry and to derive from these rituals a complex attitude towards attempts at domination, which can be transcended in and through language, is a sign of their originality, of their extreme consciousness of the metaphysical” (77). That which is transcended through language – oppression – becomes the bridge to a new originality – a new identity; a new conception of femininity. Yoon’s lyrics encourage listeners to

thwart domination and establish an identity that cannot be dominated by social pressure. In large part because of Yoon's influence, an alternative community of young women composed of new identities began to express their counter-hegemonic assertions about themselves through rap.

Though undoubtedly mixed-race Koreans are inspired by Yoon's experiences and hip hop defiance, it is perhaps native, dark-skinned Koreans who benefit the most from Yoon's protest. After all, there are many more dark-skinned Koreans living in Korea than there are mixed-race Koreans. Yoon's most direct disciple, Jessi (Jessica Ho), represents these Koreans and takes great pleasure in defying skin tone standards expected of Korean women. Jessi took Yoon Mi-rae's place in Uptown after Yoon focused exclusively on her solo career. Like Yoon, Jessi was born in the United States and grew up in New Jersey but moved to Korea when she was 14. Unlike Yoon, however, she is ethnically Korean. She joined Uptown shortly after moving to Korea, but met with little success, causing her to return to the US. After trying to start a new life in America, she realized that making music is only thing that she could do, so she moved back to Korea in her 20s ("Jessi - Fun With Dumb - Ep. 22"). Due to her dark skin complexion and other counter-hegemonic body features (thick lips and larger than ethnically normal glutes) she was repeatedly rejected by the K-Pop industry. After enduring homelessness and getting accused of physically assaulting another woman, she was in the midst of a last-ditch effort to make it in the music business when she became a contestant in the first season of (the unfortunately named) *Unpretty Rapstar*, a competitive show featuring female Korean hip hop artists. Jessi immediately stood out because of her domineering attitude, boldness, and basic disregard for Neo-Confucian expectations for women. In fact, Jessi's publicly stated goal, according to her post on her Instagram page, is "Breaking Korea's society norms" (Jessi). Though Jessi finished in second place on the competition, she was the artist who most resonated

with fans of the show, both positively and negatively. She was widely reviled by more conservative-minded women but was accepted by others who admired the way she lives her life and expresses herself. Some Korean young women even consider Jessi a “girl crush” because of her exhibition of coolness and strength (H. Song). It is in her lyrics where she comments most upon skin tone standards.

One of Jessi’s most popular singles, “Ssenunni,” was released in 2015 and most clearly expresses her attitude concerning herself. The lyric alludes to how much hegemony not only psychologically and socially affects those of mixed heritage, but also Koreans who are unable to conform. The title is a combination of two words, “strong” and “Older Sister” (which is what younger women call women who are older than them). Thus, she beckons the listener to consider an alternative conception of ideal femininity by referring to herself as a “strong sister,” hence someone with an authority that young women should emulate and follow. She opens the song by simply rapping (in Korean), “When they see me, they go Ah so pretty, / ah ah, ah so pretty, ah so pretty, ah so pretty” (Jessi). In spite of the fact that in all the years she struggled to be accepted in the Korean music industry precisely because of her skin tone, she defies the Korean beauty standards by proclaiming herself as pretty (despite being on a show called *Unpretty Rapstar*) and is recognized as so by everyone who sees her in public.

Fred Moten asks, “what is the meaning and the implication of freedom in black music...?” (136). For Moten Black music is the locus of re-definition and improvisation. It is in Black music that signifiers are detached from their hegemonic signifieds and float freely to be played with by the performer searching, refiguring, and redefining what in the “straight” world is standard. The jazz standard is deconstructed in improvisation and a new composition with a trace of the original is created in the moment. In hip hop that same improvisatory practice reigns

through the free deconstructing and disassociation of words from understood meanings. For Jessi, the meaning and the implication of freedom is being able to walk down the street and be admired for embodying a color, a darkness, that society has considered ugly, “unpretty.” She continues, “Even when I see me, I can see the superior genes / that’s right got my space jams on super fly (in English) / Everyone asks me Who’s your mama? Who who? / They hashtag Jessi sexy” (Jessi). In an obvious line that exalts her “superior genes” (her superior skin?), she uncouples the signified value of beauty from “Whiteness” and replaces the signifier of value with one of an alternative signifier constructed out of improvisation within the interstitial cut. For it is in the darkness of interstitial chaos where improvisation flourishes and new values emerge. It is a place of mysterious darkness; a mystery that inspires a curious public to question how a Korean could be so dark.

In the chorus, she raps, “Who that Who that / They call me fierce ueonni / True that True that a seriously fierce ueonni / Dying, dying, everyone’s backing down / See that See that” (Jessi). The women (as indicated by the use of “ueonni”) are all pointing at Jessi, admiring her boldness, her pride in darkness, while all her haters are backing down in intimidation. Jessi is the dark star that blinds the eyes of those who exalt “Whiteness,” and subsequently leads admiring women out of their psychologically oppressed state into darkness that they too may reconstruct – reinvent – themselves and no longer see themselves as the inferior, but, through Jessi, as enlightened by darkness. In the bridge she sings, “Who are you to judge me? / This is my moment, whatever I do I succeed / Who are you to judge me? / This is my stage, whatever I do I succeed” (Jessi). In the verse addresses her hegemonic critics directly and bluntly signifies upon the idea that not fulfilling the hegemonic ideal is tantamount to failure. Because of a self-confidence borne of and expressed through hip hop, Jessi defiantly proclaims her truth,

alternative to societal standards though they may be, and implies to her female listeners (followers) that an immersion into the interstitial spaces opened up by hip hop can lead to the same “meaning and implication of freedom” many have been searching for.

The social results of Yoon Mi-rae’s influence can be seen in the aforementioned popular, but controversial competitive reality show, *Unpretty Rapstar*. The show ran for three seasons and featured some of the most popular female Korean rappers as well as female K-Pop stars who aspired to become rappers. Throughout the three seasons the viewer could witness all of the struggles involved in the intersection of race, skin tone, and gender in South Korea regarding Black American culture. Numerous rappers pointed to Yoon’s influence as a pivotal factor in inspiring them to become rappers. Some of them were so inspired that they openly appropriated Black American physical features. One artist, Truedy, even went so far as to darken her skin and adopt Black female hairstyles in an effort to look “authentic.” Such cultural appropriation is problematic because it associates physical Blackness with cosmetics that can be applied and taken off at will. In other words, the struggle Yoon (and other dark-skinned Koreans) experienced can be easily avoided by simply washing their face of the “dark skin” trend. Such superficiality prevents a true understanding, and subsequent enlightenment, that can be gained through experiencing unearned suffering, thus preventing the maturing of the larger society. That being said, the fact that these artists now value dark skin and no longer view it as a social negative points to the power of hip hop, and Black music, to challenge hegemonic cultural standards. Though the “Whiteness” beauty standard is still entrenched in Korean society, continued dialogue at the liminal places between the Korean female hip hop community and Korean beauty culture will surely lead to an expansion of hegemonic definitions of beauty.

Chapter II – The Performing Black and Yellow Female Body

In the early nineteenth century, Sara Baartman was displayed as a “freak,” a *Homo Sapiens Monstrous*, throughout Western Europe to an audience that displayed a mixture of awe, delight, disgust, and curiosity (Bush 817). Her body represented the physical extreme of everything the White, European-derived female body could not be, thus evoking questions as to whether Baartman herself should be considered a “her” or not. Could a person so obviously unfamiliar, exotic, and non-lady-like be granted any consideration of qualifying as human? Judging by the way she was showcased like an animal at a zoo, the obvious answer to that question was “no.” In fact, after her death, her remains were dissected and parts of it were displayed in a Paris Museum like so many captured animals and relics of nature until the early 21st century. The term, *freak*, was associated with abnormal examples of humanity and nature, to be paraded and displayed in carnivals and circuses throughout Western society (Collins 120). The Black female body has historically been considered a thing to be displayed and gazed at as well as an object to be domesticated for servitude and exploited for pleasure. Though slavery in the United States officially ended with the Confederacy’s defeat in 1865, the hegemonic view of Black women has not progressed as much as many would like to believe.

The “proper” performance of a Black woman’s body is another chapter in the patriarchal text distinguishing and eliminating them from any possibility of attaining the status of “true womanhood.” Susan Bordo contends, “Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity...female bodies become docile bodies – bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, ‘improvement’” (166). As with colorism, the development of the ideal appearance and performance of a woman’s body was established in America during the slave period. Essentially, everything not associated with

the Black female body set the boundaries for true womanhood, including proper body shape, gestures, and movements (Carby 30). As gender is ultimately performative (Butler 33), for White women to properly re-present the hegemonic standard for women's bodies, they were expected to embody "four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Carby 23). Those unable to fulfill these virtues were disqualified from the status of "woman" – which, of course, disqualified the vast majority of Black females because of the dehumanizing circumstances of slavery. If gender is fantasy inscribed on bodies (Butler 174), then the fantasies conjured up by White supremacy all related to Black women's status as objects fit to be used and exploited in any way it saw fit. They were treated like animals who were expected to fulfill domestic duties and breed new slaves for the plantation's benefit as well as embody the role of a concubine to satisfy the master's (or their sons') sexual lusts. The experience of the Black female slave and the cruel barring to true womanhood status is explicitly depicted in Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Every virtue of true womanhood was contradicted by Jacobs' life. For example, piety was an experience few slaves could exhibit because, according to Jacobs, "There are thousands [of slaves] who...are thirsting for the water of life; but the law forbids it, and the churches withhold it. They send the Bible to heathen abroad, and neglect the heathen at home" (117). The common occurrence of the rape of Black female slaves by their owners, which Jacobs experienced, made purity highly unlikely. She writes, "No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress[, in] either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men" (45). Additionally, after escaping to the north and witnessing the treatment of Black female servants even in northern homes, Jacobs boldly implored them to resist, rather than submit to, racist treatment and to stand

up for their rights as human beings (278). Finally, as an escaped slave, Jacobs didn't have the luxury of living a domestic life due to the fact that she had to support herself to establish a new life in the northern states. Thus, through her narrative text, Jacobs highlighted that the circumstances of a Black woman's life made obeisance to true womanhood standards an impossibility.

While modern Black women experience many more opportunities and freedoms compared to Jacobs, the way Black women are *perceived* hasn't changed as dramatically as many would like to think as seen in the way they are treated and presented in Western popular culture, particularly hip hop videos. The power and influence of major recording companies has presented Black female subjugation as a spectacle for mass consumption. As a result, many rising female hip hop artists are forced to either conform to the corporate image of the Black woman as a deviant, sexually available object, or not have a career. Perception and performance are often linked and perpetuate themselves through popular media. In the case of Black female hip hop artists, those who make a deal with the corporate devil are transformed and perform a new identity, that of a "bitch and ho," a perception birthed in White supremacy and perpetually reproduced at the whim of the corporate master and his Black male rapping overseer. Thus, while hip hop is both a site of exploitation and liberation, "The difficulty lies in telling the difference between representations of Black women who are sexually liberated and those who are sexual objects, their bodies on sale for male enjoyment" (Collins 126). This has been exacerbated since the mid-1990s with the consolidation of radio and mass distribution, when what Tricia Rose calls "commercial hip hop" became an appropriated branch of a veiled White supremacist ideology that characterizes Black men as "gangstas and pimps," and Black women as "bitches and ho's."

If one lifts the veil, beneath the superficial appearance of liberation, the depiction of Black women differs little from the White supremacist imagination evident in the early years of Hollywood when they were usually portrayed as either a mammy, Jezebel, or Sapphire (Rose 152). The agency and empowering performances exhibited in the 1980s and early 1990s by female hip hop artists such as Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, and Salt 'N' Pepa began to be superseded by a corporate strategy of objectification of the Black female body (Collins 128). After the mass sellout of hip hop to the corporate arm of White supremacy during the mid-1990s, female rappers who attempted to directly challenge this reality with a clear, empowering message simply would not be heard unless they were sagacious enough to use “the tools of the master” against the system. As it is,

Because sexism and excessively sexist images of black women rappers sell, corporate executives are free to use rappers to promote sexism, but rappers are not nearly as free to express outrage at racism, challenge government policies, speak out against the war, or identify whiteness as an unfair advantage; these kinds of free expression are regularly discouraged or censored by the music industry so as not to offend white listeners, government officials, or mainstream institutions. (Rose 155)

White supremacist hegemony over popular culture both sanctions what aspects of the Black female body should be presented in mass media as well as the attitude that should be exhibited towards that which is presented (hooks 231). The particular body parts of the Black female body that are prominently featured for ridicule or emulation are the hair, lips, breasts, and buttocks. These fetishized objects are what “make up” the Black female body in popular consciousness; in other words, the Black female body is a composite of fetishized and exoticized objects to be scrutinized by the White, mainstream public. Sarah Baartman was a specimen

because of her buttocks, as is Nicki Minaj (her considerable skills as a rapper notwithstanding). To the extent that a White woman's (or those included in Whiteness) body resembles what "belongs" to the Black female body is the extent to which that part is accepted or rejected by mass society. For instance, Kim Kardashian has transformed parts of her body to resemble what "belongs" to the Black female body; these "excessive" areas of her body are one of the sources of her enduring popularity. Though her father's association with OJ Simpson and her viral sex tape first made her a name, it is largely her appropriation of Black female body-associated enhancements that has allowed her celebrity profile to endure. In fact, it seems that the way to get pop culture buzz is to modify the body by appropriating that which is associated with Black femininity, whether through botoxing the lips, or augmenting the breast and butt.

On the surface it could appear that society is finally accepting Black women. In reality, however, it's the parts of the Black female body that have been selected, scrutinized, and added to the ideal conception of the modern "woman" that have been valorized, while Black women themselves have been ignored. Though those parts associated with Black femininity that were previously ridiculed are now accepted as part of the beauty ideal, that acceptance is qualified. In fact, one might argue that the American Latina (with their varying mix of European, African, and Native American genes) embodies the perfect blend between Black and White femininity in that they have the "proper" skin tone as well as just the right Black-derived features. However, even with Latinas there is a fine line between being perceived as the ideal feminine and being perceived as a mere compilation of objectified body parts. Thus, there is a fine line between how American society judges the body of Selma Hayek, for instance, and that exhibited by Jennifer Lopez. Though both Latinas have the "proper" skin tone, Lopez's butt, in that it most resembles what is associated with the Black female body, is fetishized whereas Hayek's body is "perfect,"

which is to say that her body doesn't cross the line separating ideal from fetishized objectification (Guzman and Valdivia 159). Guzman and Valdivia write, "while news media images of Lopez foreground her buttocks...profile shots of Hayek in movies and magazine covers show both her breasts and her perfectly shaped booty. Frontal shots of Hayek's body highlight her deep cleavage as well as her long dark hair, worn straightened when performing a more glamorous image, and by implication Anglo identity" (159). In other words, Hayek's body acceptably combines qualified Blackness with White female features, while Lopez is exoticized because of her excessive, "too" Black behind. In general, then, "Latinas occupy that in-between space between the White booty...and the Black booty whose excess falls beyond the boundary of acceptability and desirability within U.S. popular culture" (Guzman and Valdivia 159). In essence, the Black female body is an image, a shell, to be scrutinized or edited (shaped just enough) only to be discarded and ignored after all the desirable parts are salvaged. Thus, the ultimate result of this valuation of Black female body parts is the forced invisibility of the Black woman. The parts gain the attention (positively or negatively), while the Black woman herself practically does not exist; she (it) is a compilation of objects on flesh to be exploited, picked apart, and displayed, whether in a museum in Paris (as with Sarah Baartman) or in ubiquitous hip hop videos on YouTube.

However, there was a brief period of time in the early twentieth century when an alternative version of a Black woman existed contemporaneously with the overt manifestations of White supremacist-derived depictions. These women exhibited agency in how they presented and performed their bodies in the popular consciousness. While poems, sermons, slave narratives, and novels written by Black American women were the site of the most prominent dialogic interactions over conceptions of race and gender in the pre-Emancipation through the

immediate post-Reconstruction eras, the emergence of the blues as a popular artform in the early 20th century provided opportunities for Black female blues singers to unashamedly perform their female bodies. Black blues women were the first modern pop stars (O'Brien 8) and through their performances and lyrics they challenged traditional gender roles for women in both dominant White American culture as well as Black patriarchal culture. The dialogic response of early blues women, particularly Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and her protégé Bessie Smith, to true womanhood's idea of "woman," was blatant defiance through their performing bodies and lyrics. In fact, often their actions, sartorial choices, sexual mores, and even body types were typically associated with men. K.A. Hammer writes, "Sexually libertine and outrageous, Rainey and Smith disrupted gender/sex alignments and notions of cisnormativity embedded in African American communities" (280). The blues' first star, the "Mother of the Blues," was Ma Rainey, who, despite being dubbed "the ugliest woman in showbusiness," confidently posed, strutted, laughed and moaned her way into the eyes and ears of a Black and White American audience (O'Brien 9). The unashamed performance of her Black female body, along with an attitude that had the temerity to suggest that it was a site of glamour with its décor of rhinestones, gold bracelets, and necklaces, showed the liberating possibilities of a Black popular music genre in service to resistant ideals. A century later, in a completely different context, female artists are following in the trailblazing tradition of the Black blues women by appropriating another Black American musical artform, hip hop, not in servitude to the aforementioned corporate interests of capitalism, but in service to a hegemony-defying motivation.

In modern American popular culture, as mentioned, Black-derived female body parts are "in" and prominently featured on non-Black celebrities. Popularity, however, is cyclical and there is nothing preventing the re-association of these fetishized parts with disapprobation as

they were a century ago in the US and as they are now in South Korea, where they have yet to affect the Korean beauty aesthetic. How a Korean woman's body parts resemble what is associated with the Black female is the extent to which her body will be subjected to social discipline and ridicule, whether she be a popular entertainer or not. For instance, Hwasa, a member of the K-Pop R&B group, Mamamoo, was ridiculed as a child because of her weight. For solace she listened to the music Beyoncé, whom she idolized; it was because of Beyoncé that she decided to become a singer. When she mentioned this in an interview, the male interviewer jokingly asked her if she idolized Beyoncé because her "thickness" resembled Beyoncé's ("Mamamoo"). The implication was that Hwasa could only love Beyoncé because no Korean female singer looked like her, so she had no choice but to idolize a Black American singer. This attitude is a repercussion of the Korean beauty aesthetic that rejects all Korean women who in some way resembles the "Other," especially any aspect of the body that resembles the Black other. This elision of native Korean women from qualification of proper femininity obviously fuels self-hatred as well as resentment towards all that do not represent the hegemonic ideal, which makes CL's 2018 Winter Olympics performance so significant. Not only did it challenge Orientalist notions of the Asian woman, but also the Korean beauty aesthetic regarding the Korean female body.

Chae-rin Lee, who goes by the stage name CL, was the leader of one of the most pioneering and innovative K-Pop groups, 2NE1. The group's music transcended Korean borders and gathered fans from all over the world, particularly after their hit single and video, "I Am the Best," was released in 2011. Lee wrote or co-wrote songs for both 2NE1 and for her solo work. Though she was born in Korea, she spent most of her early life in Paris and Tokyo; when she did return to Korea, she attended international schools ("CL Interview"). Like Jessi, her cultural and

social education was primarily in a context outside of Neo-Confucian Korea, which obviously affected how she perceived herself as a woman and a performer. Nonetheless, all of her artistic success was achieved while living in Korea. In fact, after she auditioned for YG Entertainment, she was chosen to be a trainee, where she was eventually assigned to the group 2NE1. Thus, after being recruited, she came under the direct influence of both Neo-Confucian and White supremacist hegemony inherent in the K-Pop industry. Despite this, 2NE1 gained the reputation of being a female empowerment group that challenged Neo-Confucian conceptions of femininity (Unger 31). The perception of CL as a woman with agency only increased after she began her solo career with her hit song, “The Baddest Female” in 2013. CL’s continued chart success in Korea as well as her signing with American producer Scooter Braun in 2015 ought to testify to the positive impact she was having on Korean society, particularly for women’s empowerment. However, after several years of minimal success following the breakup of 2NE1, CL’s physical features changed. In public appearances in late 2018, observers noticed that CL had gained weight and hardly resembled the pop idol they remembered just a few years earlier. Several media pundits harshly criticized CL for not conforming to the hegemonic standards expected of women in general – and female K-Pop performers in particular. One writer from *The Korea Times* wrote, “K-pop artist CL from defunct girl band 2NE1 shocked fans who believe the rapper, known for her charisma [and] sexiness...has apparently been neglecting to watch her weight” (Ko). According to the *Korea Herald*, “The singer from now-disbanded 2NE1 was even labeled as “XL” by a local media outlet, an abbreviation of the “X-large” size, which was intended to rhyme with her stage name” (“CL body-shamed”). Yet, instead of shamefully hiding her body from public view, she exhibited the boldness of the classic blues women by showcasing it as confidently as she had during 2NE1’s prime years.

As tempting as it is to analyze one of CL's songs to examine how her lyrics invite her female fans into the freedom inspired by hip hop, I believe examining CL's public display of her body at her most counter-hegemonic testifies to the effect her practice of rapping has had on her psyche, thereby making her a model of emulation for her fans. Perhaps more than the impressive flow of lyrics that she spits forth, the posturing of her body on stage for the world to see is as big a testimony to the possibility of an alternative identity as anything she rapped. Thus, I will analyze her 2018 Winter Olympics performance to show how *as a rapper* she signifies against Korean female body standards while at the same time inviting female fans outside of the hegemonic standard to join in the freedom being expressed from the stage. It is in her performance where she harkens back to an era long before hip hop when the pioneering blues artists Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith had no hesitation about shaking and displaying what nature had given them. Like CL, they were also fully in charge of the production of their shows. Angela Davis writes, "Women like Rainey and Smith presided over blues gatherings, and they were respected for the backstage work they did to pull these often extravagant shows together" (137). Likewise, CL was performing as virtually an independent artist with the full responsibility of paying her backup dancers and everyone involved in her entourage with no big label help (though she was still technically signed with YG Entertainment), which made the success of her performance on a worldwide stage that much more impressive.

CL's performance is an utterance from the social cut enacted by female hip hop. As if she were an evangelist from the land of roiling chaos, she stands in silhouette with arms spread wide and hair blowing in the winter breeze while draped in a gothic black dress more at home in the theater of a 19th century European stage than at the closing ceremonies of the Winter Olympics. *Who is this? What is this? Who's ever heard of an ash-haired, Korean, gothic queen posed like a*

goddess on Mount Olympus about to spit fire through skills derived from the Black land of America? The incongruity of the image is the essence of the “in-between.” In interstitial places, mismatches and misfits, as perceived by conventional society, somehow match and fit. These are improvised characters, fantasies stitched together like a Frankenstein monster, yet anointed by the “monster” themselves as beautiful and worthy to be praised. To be sure, they aren’t “normal” by societal standards, but are “beyond” normal from the land of beyond where the body is the physical expression of fantastic improvisation. Judith Butler writes, “To posit possibilities beyond the norm or, indeed, a different future for the norm itself, is part of the work of fantasy when we understand fantasy as taking the body as a point of departure for an articulation that is not always constrained by the body as it is” (28). CL herself is a composite – composed of elements from Seoul, Tokyo, Paris, and New York. The Seoul girl with Shibuya taste and Parisian style raps in New York about how she’s got a “40 and a shorty” (CL “Lifted”). She fronts a crew composed of multi-ethnic, multi-figured female performers on a “Hello Bitches” tour stomping, humping, and twerking on stages from America to Japan. This Seoul girl evolved from a slender K-Pop idol to a New York butt-swiveling “fly girl” to a statuesque, curvy diva. To “normal” Korean society she is a fallen idol; a monster who “let herself go.” Yet, CL is no monster in her own eyes, she’s the “Baddest Female”; a constructed Korean, gothic, rapping, full-figured diva from the land of the “in-between” come forth to speak her truth and enlighten the minds of Korean women utterly incapable of embodying the physical social standard.

The Korean beauty aesthetic has specific standards for the appropriate female Korean body. In addition to the fair skin requirement, it “must possess the proper body proportions and attitudes such as being good, clean, and ultimately submissive” (Unger 31). In contrast with the blues women, Korean female hip hop artists have an added layer of hegemonic beauty

requirements to fulfill imposed upon them by the Korean music industry. In addition to the Korean beauty aesthetic, they also have to fulfill the Orientalist-derived aesthetic expected to appeal to an international market. In several ways, both beauty aesthetics overlap; for instance, both require women to be demure and doll-like in their appearance. The process of creating a female idol begins after girls, sometimes as young as five years old, are recruited by one of the K-Pop agencies. The recruits are akin to plastic in that they are essentially products to be constructed in the image of the Orientalist ideal. Solee I. Shin and Lanu Kim write, “The entertainment houses gradually [aim] for a complete start-to-finish manufacture of the product... [and are trained] in subjects ranging from singing, dancing, rapping, composition, and musical instruments to foreign language and manners” (265). The K-Pop industry, motivated purely by profit and global success, designed and construct an idol’s body in an Orientalist image. Essential to the process of transforming the body of a trainee into an international idol is plastic surgery. Dave Hazzan writes, “K-pop idols are often required to undergo plastic surgery on their still-growing bodies; eyes are rounded, jawbones are shaved to be more pointed and noses are raised” (44). Thus, the body is shaped to satisfy both domestic and international tastes. However, in the West, the Korean female body, by itself, is insufficient. An extra element of sartorial ornamentation is also expected to be present to fulfill the Orientalist vision of the exotic, Asian, “yellow” woman. She thus operates on two aesthetic planes at the same time, one relating to the body and one relating to what decorates the body. Anne Anlin Cheng proposes “the yellow woman as hybrid: present/absent, organic/synthetic, a figure of civilizational value and a disposable object of decadence” (xii). In Korea, the female Korean performer is indeed a fleshly, organic being, albeit with a value based upon her ability to satisfy the Korean aesthetic standard, while in the Occident the Asian female body is an objectified, synthetic, ornamented, and

ultimately, disposable figure. In other words, in the West, she is an object to be viewed in order to satisfy Orientalist notions of the “yellow” woman, but she does not exist as an organic person with a personality: she is merely a performing decoration (G. Kim 201). The yellow woman (to use Cheng’s term), in the Orientalist imagination, can manifest as, among other things, “Celestial Lady, Lotus Blossom, Dragon Lady, Yellow Fever, Slave Girl, Geisha, Concubine, Butterfly, China Doll, Prostitute” (Cheng 4), yet these roles are signified by the decorations (ornaments) that distinguish the particular roles. Therefore, an Asian female decorated in ways not congruent with any of these roles challenges the Orientalist gaze. CL’s gothic, European-derived outfits featured in her Olympics performance can be read as an assertion of agency – an assertion of individuality and personality so absent from a typical K-Pop female group performance. Thus, CL’s rap show was through a full-figured (at least according to the Korean beauty aesthetic) performing body ornamented with an outfit defying the Orientalist gaze.

A diva in a silhouette of Blackness, she poses with raised fists and protruding buttocks as she introduces the opening lines of “The Baddest Female.” As the lights flash around her, she descends onto the ice stage adorned with male and female dancers dressed in black. The fireworks erupt skyward as she raps her most popular song as a solo performer. Perhaps the second and fourth verses of the song best capture the essence of CL’s message and links her to her hip hop and blues women antecedents. She raps, “I’m a queen bee, I’m the heroine / I’m like a rugby ball, / Don’t know where I’ll bounce to next / On my neck is a gold chain swingin’ left right / I’m not lonely, every night I get right” (CL). The combination of metaphors and a simile identifying herself as a queen bee, heroine, and rugby ball challenge the Neo-Confucian standard for women to be little more than domesticated servants by suggesting that a “queen” can be just as rough, aggressive, and adventurous as a “rugby” ball bouncing freely on the field. The

allusion to traveling harkens back to the classic blues trope of the “travelin’ blues (wo)man.” Davis writes, “For Rainey and other black women who toured as entertainers...the interminable journeys around which they constructed their lives fundamentally challenged the normal social expectations surrounding the female experience. These women disengaged themselves from the usual confines of domesticity” (72). Gold ornamentation is a trope used widely by hip hop artists as well as the blues singers to signify royalty and wealth despite the unfavorable circumstances their real lives were in. As Rose explains, “Hip hop artists use style as a form of identity formation that plays on class distinctions and hierarchies by using commodities to claim the cultural terrain” (36). In “The Baddest Female,” CL reverses traditional gender roles by identifying herself with phallic dominance as she “swings” the gold while she “does it right.”

In verse four she raps, “Guys call me honey / Girls call me unni (big sister) / My cool words have a good effect / Round round, this strange melody / turns and turns yeah” (CL). In this verse she clearly testifies to the effect her words are having upon the minds of her male and female fans; her words are beckoning them into an alternative conception of “woman” as they are swept up in the words, music, and beat of the “baddest” female. One of the refrains is the repeat of the word “unni,” which represents the female fans addressing CL as the big sister worthy to be emulated. Indeed, CL’s presence on the biggest stage in the world is good motivation to “do it” like her.

The significance of CL’s performance goes beyond the inspiration stirred within Korean women to challenge patriarchy, as important as that is. CL introduced the world to the artistic effects of a South Korean social rupture. Of course, the world already knows about Hallyu (the global spread of K-Pop and K-dramas and films); BTS, Blackpink, and Girls’ Generation and Psy before them, are global phenomena. Even CL, as a member of 2NE1, experienced renown as

a global icon. Her 2018 Olympic performance, however, exposed the world to the raw and bold power of a Korean woman whose K-Pop surface history had been shed and replaced with a confident, unashamed woman forged in the fire of improvisation. No trace of the Orientalist-derived “Madame Butterfly” was extant in CL’s performance. No long-legged, synchronized choreographed pale manikins were on her stage that night. She represented an alternative version of an Asian woman; a subversion of what the world has come to know of a performing Korean woman. During my research about Korean music I had the pleasure of interviewing a female Korean who voiced her displeasure about the “Lolita” theme constantly presented in K-Pop music videos. Her frustrations were directly related to having to contend with that (along with the subservient “Madame Butterfly”) image. CL’s presentation and presence were a stark contrast to what most of the world has come to expect; it was a culmination of disparate elements that merged and expressed an alternative identity through a Black American artform.

CL’s performance was her contribution to the dialogue about Korean femininity in South Korea; it was also her presentation of a counter-narrative that seeks to be included in the conversation about the Korean conception of “woman.” As stated earlier, CL is continuing a tradition first established by Black American female blues antecedents. Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz write, “...the history of African American improvised musicking [is to] ‘say something,’ to sound truth to power, to recast the identities and histories of aggrieved populations and to promote self-representational counternarratives that enable an enlargement of the base of valued knowledges, in short, to prompt and promote resistance, activism, and mobility in relation to institutions of history-making knowledge-production” (56). The restrictive beauty standards that are preventing women from gaining employment, a positive self-concept, and a sense of hope was challenged by CL in her assertion of a body that defies those standards. Though the process

of change is long, CL's contribution to the conversation is sure to be effective, at least for the female listeners who take her message to heart, for as Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz assert, "The core elements of the most achieved improvisers include careful listening, embodied presence, dialogue (even if dissonant or dissident), relational thinking, empathic and intuitive understanding blended with the skillful use of the materials at hand, and the power to awaken others to new possibilities in the improvised soundscape" (71). CL certainly qualifies as a "most achieved improviser."

Chapter III – Performing Sexuality

White supremacist and Orientalist beauty aesthetics defined what the female body is – for Black women a compilation of fetishized parts and for Korean women a frame on which to decorate. However, both Black and Korean female performers established agency that highlighted the person over the parts and the ornaments. The blues women and early female hip hop pioneers established alternative identities where they were not defined by their parts, but by their own conceptions of themselves and performed their bodies in service to those conceptions. Korean female hip hop artists continue that tradition of dictating the narrative of themselves and performing their counternarrative. In this chapter I seek to show how both Black and Korean female hip hop artists performed their objectified roles not as showpieces on hegemony's stage, but as tools of agency for the express purpose of exalting a concealed sexuality.

As with the other aspects of the Black female body, the ideal of true womanhood formed and perpetuated the sexuality of the Black female in the public consciousness by creating a binary that contrasted the definitions of White and Black female sexuality. In fact, the fetishized body parts are directly connected to the definition of Black female sexuality (Carby 25). Collins writes, “Western sciences constructed racial difference by searching the physiology of Black people's bodies for sexual deviance” (120). In other words, the dominant view was that the “excessive” body parts were physical markers of an internal nature bent on sexual deviancy. From this perception came the various stereotypes regarding Black male and female sexuality; it was all based on the physical appearance of the parts of the body. Thus, Sarah Baartman's objectified features were perceived as outward manifestations of an unbounded, nonhuman, animalistic sexuality that fascinated and repulsed those viewing her staged body. This perception had sinister consequences for enslaved Blacks, especially the women. The perceived animalistic

sexuality of Black women, for instance, was blamed for “inviting” White masters (and their sons) to rape them (Bordo 236). The aforementioned Jezebel trope, “sexually wanton Black woman” (Collins 56), emerged from this idea. This image was perpetuated through all of the avenues of epistemic discipline in American society, particularly popular culture; in fact, it was powerful enough to dominate Black women’s entertainment careers. Dorothy Dandridge, for example, was a pioneering Black female actress/singer who became a major Hollywood star in the 1950s. Unfortunately, her most prominent roles were limited to portraying the Jezebel trope, whether in her role as Carmen in tempting male lead Harry Belafonte in *Carmen Jones* (1954), or as Mahia in her varying acts of intrigue in *The Decks Ran Red* (1958). Her career was reduced to dependency upon White men, particularly director Otto Preminger, who treated her as his mistress with his unfulfilled promises of marriage (much like the geisha who were an affluent man’s “main woman” while his unloved wife languished at home) (“Starring Dorothy Dandridge”). The roles Dandridge played in films as well as in real life were a representation of a common occurrence in the days of slavery and the Jim Crow south. In relations between Black women and White men, whether consensual or not, White men had control over the relationship as well as how the relationship appeared to the general public, particularly their wives. Even if the relationship between the two was based on love, if found out by the wife, the White man could “blame” the relationship on the Black woman by invoking the excuse that it was in the nature of Black women’s sexuality to seduce White men, so he couldn’t help it. As Carby writes, this was a consequence of how “Black womanhood was polarized against white womanhood in the structure of the metaphoric system of female sexuality, particularly through the association of black women with overt sexuality and taboo sexual practices” (32). The “blame the Jezebel” impulse thus sullied the perception of Black women in the eyes of White women, which could

perhaps be one of the reasons (along with the reverse perception of White women seducing Black men) why White women and Black women often have a mutual distrust of one another. This distrust has carried over into modern Western feminist movements – a direct consequence of White supremacy’s influence over race *and* gender.

However, lest one think that a White supremacist-derived view of Black female sexuality is a relic of the unenlightened past, or the sole possession of White society, it is present in modern Black male hip hop videos who use the same justifications for abusing/insulting Black women as the White slave masters did two centuries ago. Sharpley-Whiting writes,

It is a new black gender politics completely in the service of a jack-legged black masculinity. And that black masculinity has been cobbled together from the stultifying remains of white supremacy, media, and the undeserved privileges accrued globally by American manhood. (51)

I would contend that the media and American manhood are far from “the remains” of White supremacy, but rather are the continued manifestations of it in popular consciousness. The tragedy of the situation is that White supremacist hegemony has been consented to by powerful Black male media moguls who now conceivably have the power to change the perception of Black women in Western society, but instead have perpetuated it. On the other hand, perhaps they really have no choice; perhaps it was part of the Faustian deal that in order for Black men to have power “on the plantation” they had to retain and continually reproduce (in order to justify) the perception of Black women as defined by White supremacy. Though no Black mogul would dare say such a thing, their actions (i.e. the entertainment content they produce) has made this term of the “sell out” deal patently obvious.

As with the blues women in the early twentieth century, pioneering Black female hip hop artists established agency and redefined their sexuality in counter-hegemonic ways. One way they did this is by using the very parts objectified and fetishized by White supremacy and, on purpose, re-presented them as symbols of a sexuality with agency. In other words, for these performers, the parts used to define Black women as Jezebels and to justify their exploitation by both White and Black men, became the primary tools of proclaiming female sexuality from the woman's point of view. The main way they did this was by revaluing the most devalued anatomical part highlighted by White supremacy to define Black female sexuality, from Sarah Baartman to Josephine Baker to Nicki Minaj – the butt. In fact, though some have decried what they feel is the objectification of the Black female buttocks, within Black culture it is valorized and has been a site of expressive liberation for Black female performers since the early twentieth century. hooks writes, "'asses' have always been eroticized in black sexual iconography, [and within] black folk culture the asses that are ridiculed and mocked are those of whites, called names like 'ironing board butts'" (216). However, there is a fine line between performing the behind as a tool of agency and spectacle. As bell hooks argues, "When calling attention to the body in a manner inviting the gaze to mutilate black female bodies yet again, to focus solely on the 'butt,' contemporary celebrations of this part of the anatomy do not successfully subvert sexist/racist representations" (106). Thus, to determine whether the behind is being used by a female performer to offer a counter-sexuality or as a prop to entice the male gaze, the cultural context of the performance has to be considered in conjunction with the visual content.

Before hip hop, but after the prime of the early blues women, the most famous (or infamous) Black female performer was Josephine Baker. Many scholarly articles have argued for or against the notion that Baker showed agency in her controversial roles on Parisian theatrical

stages and on film, largely stemming from their own cultural vantage point and perspective regarding how a Black woman is “supposed” to perform her body (hooks 216). In reality, though still constricted by White supremacy in many social endeavors, “sexuality was one of the few realms in which masses of African-American women could exercise autonomy” (Davis 44). The African exotic and primitive were “en vogue” in Parisian artistic and cultural circles in the early Modernist period (most clearly evidenced by Pablo Picasso’s paintings at the time), and Baker certainly took advantage of the opportunity to embody White supremacist expectations of “the primitive” in her performances, but she also exhibited something more, an alternative conception beyond that which was expected of her, at least in the eyes of some of those who saw her perform. Though, of course, many spectators viewed Baker as a spectacle, a living embodiment of the African jungle, for others Baker’s performances hinted at something beyond such simplification. For instance, American poet, painter, essayist, author, and playwright E.E. Cummings described Baker as “a creature neither inhuman nor superhuman but somehow both: a mysterious unkillable Something, equally nonprimitive and uncivilized, or beyond time in the sense that emotion is beyond arithmetic” (Cheng 5). Baker herself never thought twice about the appropriateness of her performances, even considering herself as an agent in the liberation of “asses” (hooks 216). Whether subsequent scholars accepted her justification for her performances, the fact that both Baker and at least a portion of her audience considered herself something “other” than how she was conceived of by White supremacy points to the role and the possibility of the Black female body in performing alternative conceptual possibilities outside of hegemony.

The first prominent female hip hop performing act to posit a counter view of Black female sexuality via the butt is Salt ‘N’ Pepa through their video of the song, “Shake Your

Thang.” Rose writes, “Salt ‘N’ Pepa’s physical freedom, exemplified by their focusing on their butts, is no random expression; the black behind has an especially charged place in the history of both black sexual expression and white classification of it as a sign of sexual perversity and inferiority” (167). Far from using their bodies as a weapon to seduce men or fulfill the oversexualized stereotype White supremacy established concerning Black women, Salt ‘N’ Pepa instead present their bodies as a site of fun and play; certainly not as a site of shame or even protest. They rap, “Don’t tell me how to party / It’s my dance, yep, and it’s my body” (Salt ‘N’ Pepa). In large part because of Salt ‘N’ Pepa, American anatomical standard of beauty gradually changed over the course of the 1990s. The “thin, blonde, blue-eyed, fair-skinned female” standard with relatively small glutes has changed in contemporary times so that modern American female standard of anatomical beauty “is indeed black-derived, curvy, and ‘thick,’ ...” (Sharpley-Whiting 38). Contrarily, the ideal that was replaced in the West is still largely the standard in South Korea. Yet, even a body that fulfills the Korean beauty aesthetic can still be a potent site of contestation.

If CL’s performance at the 2018 Winter Olympics was a bold display of alternative possibilities through the physical body of one sustained and psychologically transformed through the practice of a Black American artform, Hyuna Kim (HyunA) proposes an entrance into an alternative conception of femininity through the avenue of sexuality as expressed through hip hop dance performance. In other words, it’s through performing her body as an extension of a vibrant sexuality that she provides an access point to an alternative conception of Korean “woman.” This is significant since HyunA is the only artist featured in this thesis who spent her entire life in South Korea, and thus is perhaps more culturally relevant to native female Koreans than the aforementioned Yoon Mi-rae, Jessi, and CL. She directly experienced growing up as a

female subject to South Korean social standards as well as Orientalist beauty standards as propagated by the K-Pop industry. HyunA's skills as a rapper, though impressive in some respects, would hardly be worth mentioning without considering those skills in combination with a calculating cleverness in a body that gestures and dances to intentionally defy restraints. HyunA's dancing body enacts a hip hop "social rupture," a "sexual cut," that tears through tradition and unveils that which is taboo. The rupturing act of dance has been an essential element of hip hop since the 1970s (Rose 38); through dance, HyunA's performing body continues a well-established tradition. Though her body, itself, is hegemonically constructed due to the K-Pop industry's role in crafting and shaping it to satisfy Orientalist expectations, the *acts* she performs with her body are certainly not in accord with those standards. As mentioned previously, the Orientalist conception of the Asian woman is as an object of decoration through which she performs her role according to how she's adorned. In fact, K-Pop idols' (particularly girl groups) outfits obscure the performers' personalities for the express purpose of exhibiting the image the outfit represents. Gooyong Kim asserts, "the uniformed female idols homogenize themselves as an erotic spectacle. As a sartorial symbol of conformity, the idols' matching uniforms visually regulate the female performers' bodies" (201). HyunA, on the other hand, for the sole purpose of expressing herself as an individual personality, performs her body, particularly her butt, in a manner that not only resists decoration, but shakes it off! As Rose states about Salt 'N' Pepa, HyunA "mock[s] moral claims about the proper modes of women's expression and enjoy[s] every minute of it" (167). In the final video for the single she released before being fired by her label, "Lip and Hip," HyunA deliberately echoes the motivation to "force a wedge between overt female sexual expression and the presumption that such expressions are intended to attract men" reminiscent of Salt 'N' Pepa's "Shake Your Thang"

(167). Though the lyrics of the song directly contradict this assertion, the content of the video itself makes it clear that she's not attempting to appeal to a man as much as she's attempting to psychologically and physically accept and express her own body, and by extension encourage her female fans to accept and express their bodies, as entities alternate to Koreanness and Orientalist expectations.

HyunA continues, in a drastically different context, a hip hop tradition first established by Salt 'N' Pepa in valorizing the butt to symbolize both sexual freedom and an unrepressed female identity. In a Korean context, HyunA's butt signifies open and free expression of sexuality as close-ups of it are interspersed throughout the "Lip and Hip" video (including a shot of a ButtDonald's instead of McDonald's as well as a psychedelic color sequence with her underwear acting as a movie screen!). The repeated close-ups and allusions to HyunA's rear end has a different social impact in a Korean context compared to Salt 'N' Pepa's in an American context. By Western standards, HyunA has a small butt; indeed, numerous commenters on the "Lip and Hip" video point out HyunA's "flat" butt – her "absence" of a rear end. Thus, her dance obscures and frustrates the Orientalist gaze by featuring the most "fleshly" and derided anatomic part of the Asian female body "undecorated," thus establishing agency in a Western context by performing "that which should be concealed" boldly, with no shame. As could probably be assumed, the butt is not a highly regarded element of Korean beauty standards. In fact, the face is the most critiqued feature of the female body (Kim, Seo, and Baek 32); the face is to be the crowning feature of a thin, long-legged frame. Thus, the butt is essentially "absent" from the ideal Korean woman, though, of course, not "absent" as much as concealed. Just as the butt is concealed from beauty standards, so is open expression of female sexuality in dominant society, of which HyunA's butt is the symbol. As a cut in a body opens up and reveals what has always

been submerged underneath the surface, so the social cut enacted by HyunA unveils a vibrant sexuality through the unveiling of her butt. Thus, what is “absent” signifies what is fecund; what is lacking as an anatomical feature represents what is abundant and yearning for release.

Ironically, the body part most associated with “excess” concerning Black women is associated with “absence” concerning Korean women, yet both Salt ‘N’ Pepa’s and HyunA’s behinds are prominent signifiers of a performatively improvised sexuality alternative to the dominant norm.

“Lip and Hip” opens with a wide-angled far shot of HyunA, and her female backup dancers, with backs facing the viewer before they slowly protrude and rotate their butts as the camera slowly zooms in. It then cuts to a slow-motion close-up of HyunA’s rear end as she strolls through a hallway. The video then shifts its focus to HyunA trying on different outfits and makeup styles perhaps in an attempt to find an identity she’s comfortable with; essentially, trying to become comfortable in her own skin. As well as the sartorial and cosmetic stylings she experiments with, the video also features various visual symbols of sexuality (including a fork with two meatballs stuck to the end of it, and two half-tomatoes being smashed) to symbolize her discovery and acceptance of her budding sexual maturity. In fact, the acceptance and expression of sexuality seems to be the main theme of the video as even the male dancers are dressed in red pajamas more socially appropriate for women than men. As pointed out by a YouTube commenter, the video also features subtle commentary on the moral standards and near-starvation consumption requirements for female K-Pop artists. Helen Edworthy writes, “It’s not a secret that idols starve themselves. Hell, [K-Pop idol] Luna starved herself before comeback, filmed it and put it on YouTube...no idol can ever be the ideal ideal” (“Paper Dolls”). In a series of shots, HyunA signifies upon the industry that made her famous through an affective visual metaphor. The first shot shows a close-up of HyunA putting out a blurred cigarette; in the next

shot the cigarette becomes a French fry dipped in ketchup, while HyunA sits on the toilet. In the next shot, written in ketchup on the white cabinet beside the toilet are the words “LOW WEIGHT.” It then cuts to a close-up of HyunA, not eating the fry, but merely sucking the ketchup off of the fry presumably to prevent herself from gaining weight. After its commentary on the K-Pop industry, the video wraps up by coming full circle and zooming in on HyunA’s symbol of sexuality, her butt, as she walks out of the room. Thus, a video whose main subject matter is experimentation with identity, is framed by an emphasis on the butt as a symbol of sexuality. This implies that, for HyunA at least, sexuality is an essential component in both the formation and expression of identity.

This is even more directly seen in her 2019 New Year’s Eve performance on the MBC network’s New Years Eve special. In front of a national television audience, solely through a hip hop dance that again featured her butt as the symbol of liberated sexuality, and an element of an alternative identity, HyunA performed her most powerful expression of liberation and identity without uttering a word. The performance featured both HyunA and her boyfriend, Dawn; their relationship was the reason why both were fired from their agency, CUBE Entertainment. It opens with HyunA locked in a white cage (the symbolism with her former company is obvious) and is soon joined by Dawn, who enters the cage to be with her. After a brief dance by Dawn, HyunA then pins him to the white bars and twerks in his midsection. Their subsequent dance inside the cage symbolizes the surreptitious relationship the two had while they were under contract by CUBE. The reason for the clandestine nature of their relationship was due to the well-known “no dating” policy enforced by most major K-Pop agencies. In Fall 2018, tired of constantly hiding their relationship, HyunA and Dawn publicly admitted their relationship, prompting CUBE to first suspend, and then fire both of them (“We’re dating”). Later, CUBE

tried to persuade HyunA to return to the agency but, after releasing a public letter detailing her experiences and unrequited toil for the agency, she declared her independence (“HyunA Revealed”). A few months later she signed with Psy’s indie company (whose “Gangnam Style” video made her an international star), PNation (along with Jessi).

As the performance within the cage continues, they both dance as if they’re negotiating, even scheming, for a way out. After briefly joining hands, HyunA proceeds to be the first one to find the exit and break out of the cage, holding the cage door to allow Dawn to follow her. This act in itself symbolizes the flipping (off?) of the traditional patriarchy dominant in Korean society. That HyunA was the one who broke out of the cage first, with the male following her lead, was another symbol of the power of hip hop dance to challenge dominant hegemonic standards. After their liberation from the cage, HyunA again returns to expressing her symbol of liberation. With overt sexual overtones she freely sways her butt in front of Dawn, suggesting that no social, economic, or cultural cage could cage their sexuality or their relationship. The performance ends with the two lying next to each other in opposite directions (suggesting a yin/yang balance), with a crew of male and female dancers encircling them. Significantly, it is the female dancers who stand prominently dominant in front of the pair, while the male dancers are passively in the background.

The entire two and half minute performance summed up HyunA’s career-long message without a single lyric rapped from her mouth. It testified that hip hop dance has as much socially rupturing potential as any rap song. In front of a national audience, HyunA’s dance writhed in the cut enacted by a Black cultural expression and not only challenged the business practices of the K-Pop industry, but Korean patriarchy as well. Yet, as with “Lip and Hip,” HyunA’s butt is the primary “weapon” used to both challenge hegemony and declare liberation. How she uses her

“thang” in the MBC performance points to the exalted value of the physical body, even a taboo body part, in expressing identity.

Chapter IV – Dis-Orientation

Female-derived hip hop continues to expand upon its legacy by causing cultural and societal rupture. Yet, it now exists as a powerful element among many in an improvised stew of influences. South Korean female hip hop-influenced artists are at the forefront of new conceptions of femininity that are being developed, and improvisation is the method and means of both proclaiming that alternative femininity and embodying it. Though Korean artists continually challenge Neo-Confucian constructions of women, they must also contend with an international audience's expectation of them; expectations defined over the last few centuries by Western Orientalism. The Orientalist construction of the East Asian woman has regulated how they are treated and perceived by the West. As Orientalism has "packaged" all of East Asia under the heading of "Asia,"² this chapter will expand its analysis beyond Korea to include Chinese and Japanese examples to more clearly illustrate Orientalism's essentialist discourse to define three very diverse cultures. To do this I will frame this chapter using Korean artist Lim Kim's (Kim Yerim) song, "Yellow," off her *Generasian* EP, as that song's expressed purpose is to challenge Orientalism as it applies to Asian women (limkim.net). Though Yoon Mi-rae, CL, and HyunA unconsciously challenge Orientalist conceptions of the Asian woman they don't explicit address it as Lim Kim does. Kim's unique method of using improvisation to both compose and perform a *mélange* of musical genres points to a potential social strategy that could expand Western perceptions of women in South Korea and larger East Asia.

² Originally, Edward Said's *Orientalism* addressed western Europe's Orientalism regarding the Near East (Middle East). However, with the recognition of American imperialism, he acknowledges the expansion of the scope of Orientalism to the Far East (2).

Lim Kim was formerly a successful K-Pop “idol,” but left the industry in 2016 to become an independent artist. Kim’s motivation for leaving the K-Pop industry was not only because of the demanding and demeaning physical restraints, but also due to the formulaic musical limitations imposed upon the artists. During her four-year sabbatical away from making music, she traveled and started to come up with genre-busting musical ideas that would mix all of the musical influences that were important to her, Eastern and Western. Her *Generasian* EP mixes many musical genres together, including traditional Korean melodies, rhythms, instrumentation, as well as distorted industrial guitars, and rap. About the instrumentation she states, “Based on familiar genres of western music such as pop, hip-hop, and electronic, I tried to combine those elements with Asian instruments and Korean traditional music Pan-sori. I wanted to Transform them into unexpected music and characters” (limkim.net). In Korean, the word “sori” means sound, and “pan” has a variety of meanings, but one possible meaning is “a song composed of varying tones” (“Pansori”). Thus, a folk Korean traditional music style’s basic meaning infers improvisation. Though many elements are packed within each composition, hip hop elements and style is prominently evident throughout her compositions. Indeed, if the legacy of Black female hip hop is to challenge norms and assert authenticity, then Kim’s EP, though infused with a multiplicity of influences, continues and expands upon that legacy. Lim’s improvised musical mixture of elements that technically should not work well together but improbably does points to a potential dialogic, social strategy of bringing together many disparate elements to create new definitions and meanings contrary to essentialist notions of Asian femininity.

According to Edward Said, “Orientalism [is a] Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). The chief role of Orientalism is the “scripting” of Western conceptions of the Asian person on Asian surfaces. Though it was an

ideology at first applied to the Near East (or Middle East), the British victory of the 1839-1842 Opium War over China gave the British Empire control over key port cities (most important of which was Hong Kong). British control meant Chinese subjugation; this was accomplished by a discourse that defined the Chinese “as fixed, despotic, isolated in a distant past, devoid of rational ‘rule of law,’ and in need of Western modernization and development” (Lowe 103). Chinese women’s bodies were declared to be the source of disease and moral depravity (Lowe 133). Additionally, the various Chinatowns that developed in the West beginning in the mid-19th century, though usually uneventful and full of Chinese carrying on the daily routines of life, became blank slates on which Western fears about the Orient could be fantasized through pop (pulp) fiction and the media (Richards 94). The “Yellow Peril,” “Yellow Menace,” and miscegenation fears that were rampant in the wake of British imperialism in China and the California Gold Rush were brought to life in the lurid/exotic Chinatowns of Thomas Burke, whose totally made-up version of the Limehouse Chinatown in London were featured prominently in his books. These fears were also featured in Sax Rohmer’s Fu Manchu series of books, which featured the evil, conniving, scientific genius mastermind intent on destroying the “White race” and enslaving White women (Richards 95).

The popularity of the Fu Manchu novels in England and America (the first was published in 1913 and the last in 1959) “created” the Chinese, and hence the Asian/Oriental, in the eyes of the Western public, most of whom didn’t know an Asian person. More influential than Orientalist novels in shaping the perception of Asians were Hollywood films with their conjured “China of the imagination” evident in films such as the various adaptations of the Fu Manchu novels and classics such as *Shanghai Express* (1932). Despite admitting that he had no personal knowledge of Shanghai specifically or China in general, *Shanghai Express* director Josef von

Sternberg's version of China became the image that stuck in the minds of the American viewing public (Richards 121). Outside of the film's star, Marlene Dietrich, it was Anna May Wong's portrayal as Hui Fei that garnered the most praise in her role as a heroic courtesan. Wong's career is a testament to how a multi-talented Chinese woman was limited to the "yellow woman" shape created for her by Orientalist discourse. According to Jeffrey Richards,

There were two classical stereotypes of Chinese women in the heyday of Hollywood, the "China Doll" and the "Dragon Lady." The "China Doll" was the fragile, passive, submissive, childlike female who falls in love with a white man and usually ends up committing suicide. The most celebrated incarnation of this role was actually Japanese, Madame Butterfly...The "Dragon Lady" was the powerful, cruel, treacherous and ruthless female ruler. (Richards 69)

How an Asian woman was ornamented and how her actions were perceived determined which archetype would be applied; once it was applied it defined how that woman was expected to perform in her career as well as her life. Anna May Wong portrayed every one of those tropes over the course of her long, controversial career. Despite longing to play more realistic portrayals of Chinese women, she was continually typecast to the point that even other Asians (included Madam Chiang Kai-Shek) disowned her for, in their minds, "demeaning the race by her negative screen roles" (Richards 93). While Wong was limited and ultimately rejected because Orientalism's role in determining her career, Yoko Ono's life was defined as being the living embodiment of the Dragon Lady. Blamed for "stealing" one of The Beatles, and subsequently for breaking up the most popular band in popular music history through elaborate scheming and manipulation, the Orientalist-derived depiction of Ono spared no aspect of her life, whether it pertained to her career, personality, or personal appearance. Like Wong's perception among

other Chinese, Ono was harshly treated by fellow Japanese, particularly the press, and ridiculed for ruining her long-respected family heritage (Rhee 101). Both women, like Dorothy Dandridge, had numerous relationships with White men, partially a result of being alienated from their own people because of how Orientalism had defined their professional careers and shaped the public's perception of them as "exotic" Asian women. On the other hand, these women did what was in their power to exhibit agency in their careers and private lives. By the end of her career, though reduced to starring in cheaply made B movies, Wong insisted on playing uplifting and powerful female roles that exalted her Chinese heritage (Richards 92). She also resisted the Chinese custom of arranged marriage which is probably the main reason why she had affairs with White men. Likewise, Ono also resisted having her marriage arranged and chose her husbands (her first husband was Japanese and the other two were White) (Norman 682). Ono could also be considered the "foremother" of Lim Kim's mixed-genre, binary-busting use of music to challenge Orientalism. Barry Shank writes, "The music that Yoko Ono would produce was designed to resist both the existent binary options of blackness and whiteness and any apparent acquiescence to an Orientalizing gaze" (285). Ono's mix of Japanese instruments, sonorities, rhythms, and musical philosophy with Western classical and American blues-based rock music prefigures Kim's mix of Korean instruments and genres with hip hop. Thus, "Yellow" as a song is just as affective in communicating its counter-binary stance as the more celebrated video.

In the music video Lim Kim performs various Western Orientalist tropes of Asian women constructed over the centuries. Kim's stated purpose for the song (as well as EP) and video was to expose how Western conceptions of East Asian (particularly Korean, Chinese, and Japanese) women defined their identities and to encourage them to break free from an Orientalist

“Asian woman” image and assert an identity rooted in the reality of their experiences. Though Korean is her native language and her early K-Pop career mandated that she sing primarily in Korean, “Yellow” and the other songs on her *Generasian* EP are all sung in English, indicating that her anti-Orientalist statement was directed towards the West as well as for Asian women in larger East Asia (whether Korean, Chinese, or Japanese). In actual fact, she doesn’t reject the term “Oriental” or the descriptive “Yellow,” but appropriates the words in order to redefine them from an East Asian woman’s perspective. On her website, she states, “Orientalism is a [western way] of seeing Asia, so I felt that we need a redefinition of our own because we often forget the context and use it. Especially, I wanted to escape the stereotypes that are applied to Asian women, that are treated ridiculously in the media” (limkim.net). To challenge Western stereotypes, she not only acknowledges them, but mixes them all together in order to subvert them. In fact, the entire “Yellow” video is the embodiment of improvisational subversion. Her strategy of mixing aspects of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean sartorial styles, Eastern and Western musical genres, and the English and Chinese languages in an improvisatory way points to a strategy that Asian women can adopt to challenge Orientalist depictions of them.

In “Yellow,” Kim improvises and plays with the tropes of three Orientalist-derived conceptions of East Asian women, the subservient “Madame Butterfly,” the sexually available courtesan, and the “Yellow Menace.” In the video, Kim is an ornamented improvisation of all three of those conceptions. According to Anne Anlin Cheng, “ornamentalism describes the peculiar processes (legally, materially, imaginatively) whereby *personhood is named or conceived through ornamental gestures*, which speak through the minute, the sartorial, the prosthetic, and the decorative” (18). Hence, the Asian woman is an aesthetic being, an ornament that is animated according to what she’s decorated in. In other words, the Asian woman becomes

the decoration; she is not a person, but an aesthetic object, a performing mannequin if you will, according to the Orientalist conception of her. It is no accident that K-Pop videos, in an effort to appeal to a Western audience, decorate their female idols by dressing their bodies according to the aforementioned tropes and choreograph their dances in a manner that resemble well-trained, disciplined automatons – mannequins with the same personality, same physical features, and same ornamentation.

“Yellow” can be considered Lim Kim’s Inferno, or an Asian woman’s depiction of a hell spawned by Orientalist depictions of them; the dark negative “yin” of a dominating “yang.” It opens with the camera slowly zooming in to a large white and red curtain flanked by the Chinese character for “yellow.” The red in the curtain evokes blood as the color seems splattered on the fabric as it spills onto the red floor. As the camera zooms, traditionally-attired dancers with fans emerge from behind the curtain as it opens up to reveal Kim sitting attired in a dominatrix leather outfit straight out of the Tokyo-decadent Japanese movies of the 90s while adorned with hair styled in the matted curly-ques reminiscent of Anna May Wong in her 1920s and 30s Hollywood films. She is an ornament seemingly awaiting the breath of life as she stares at the pensive but approaching camera. One can imagine an Orientalist being captivated by his fantasy come to life, what with a seemingly passive and available Asian woman serenaded by butterfly dancers welcoming him to the one spotlighted in mystery – of course, in reality he’s being lured into the hell his lusts are the result of. Suddenly, she comes alive as her rap bursts through a filter of red – the mix of Japanese (outfit) and Chinese (hair) ornamentation accompanied with a grating, thoroughly unsubmitive voice (a call-back to Ono?) a portent to the disorientation to come. The high lilt of an Oriental accent is not the pleasing voice of the courtesan, but a demented, twisted version that evokes the image of the yurei, a vengeful geisha emerging from hell to enact

vengeance on he who did her wrong (“Yurei”). As the camera rotates while zoomed in on her face, she raps, “We do it like no other man / I’m just being me / Asian girls sing like me / They singin’ like a queen” (Lim Kim). The assertion “I’m just being me,” indicates that Lim’s improvised self is the “real” Kim, taking elements of “Asian” femininity and rearranging them into a newly conceived self that disrupts expectations as expressed through the deliberate mixing of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean decorations. Additionally, she’s rejecting the easy-listening type of music she was forced to sing by the K-Pop industry by deliberately vocalizing as if she is a yurei enacting vengeance on an industry that denied her agency – the unbounded “unpretty” voice has come to haunt the entity that constructed, or forced out a “pretty” voice through disciplinary punishment. Kim also appropriates the Orientalist-derived images of the three conceptions to redefine their signification. In other words, she’s not a servant or a sex toy; she’s “singin’ like a queen.” Thus, the ornament is rebelling; she’s playing “out of character” and asserting a personality foreign to the Orientalist decoration. She then proclaims to the world that Asian women are not the Orientalist-derived beings they’ve been perceived as, but rather they’re “Queens.”

At the same time as she challenges Orientalist conceptions of Asian femininity, she also confronts the Neo-Confucian patriarchy that has consigned Asian women to second-class social status in various East Asian contexts. She raps, “Female fighter / Throwing rebellious ball / Break domes of male dominance” (Lim Kim 2019). Thus, she challenges both Western and Neo-Confucian conceptions of race and gender by appropriating discursive words associated with oppression and, through improvised musical performance, redefines those words with liberationist intentions. For instance, throughout the song, she chants “Yellow” followed by the repeatedly asserted statement, “See who’s the fucking Queen.” She plays with the word

“fucking” by using it to evoke the courtesan trope while at the same time exalting herself as a Queen “breaking down male dominance.” The unconscious man who at the beginning of the video was greeted by a seemingly available courtesan is now dead as she crawls over a carcass killed by the hands of the “yellow killa” and, for good measure, decorated with a necklace of pearls – pearls that perhaps once ornamented her. Kim then holds open one of his eyes and threatens to lick it in a symbol of dominance indicated by the quick succession to the “break down the male dominance” refrain. At the end of the video, it is revealed that the dominatrix-clad Kim is actually being chained by three mysterious, shadowy-faced figures. One can only see that they are blonde-haired women dressed in white. This could symbolize how the Orientalist, and ultimately White supremacist, conceptions of beauty have chained Asian women over generations. White supremacist-derived standards of beauty can be defined as “a thin, blonde, blue-eyed, fair-skinned female” (Lie 139; Lim 36; Evans and McConnell 157). Throughout the video she “rattles the chains” so to speak by playing against type, against the ornamentation. The culmination of this rebellion is the literal snapping of the chains enslaving her as Kim closes the video by singing, “Break chains / Make it loud; your inner voice / Wild storm, can’t keep out calm / I’m the yellow killa” (Lim Kim 2019). Her aim is to “kill” Orientalism, White supremacist beauty standards, and patriarchy in order to release every individual Asian woman’s “inner voice” in order that it may be her true guide and not the voices of hegemony that have shaped and ornamented her body as well as defined her roles for centuries.

Conclusion

All of the featured Korean female hip hop artists examined in this thesis not only established agency in their music, but in their careers as well. When they started their careers, all of them (except Lim Kim) were assigned to different groups with specific roles to play within

that group (primarily as a rapper). They were also assigned particular styles and songs to sing, regardless of whether they liked the style or song. However, all of them eventually left their agencies and took over their own careers because of a fundamental desire to not be controlled and manipulated any longer. As of this writing, CL is a free agent after leaving JYP, HyunA and Jessi are signed with independent label PNation, and Lim Kim and Yoon Mi-rae (with her husband) are running their own labels. Thus, in one way or another, these women are independent of the White supremacist/Orientalist-motivated companies that currently shapes the careers of their contemporaries. This is significant not only because these women are pioneers and role-models for current K-Pop artists dissatisfied with the management of their careers, but also for Korean young women themselves who can see in them the embodiment of an alternative conception of life. For the aforementioned artists, living an alternative conception of “woman” isn’t a desire or a theory but a reality, and the motivational potential latent in their freedom could inspire a generation of young Korean women to see through the enslaving motivations of White supremacy and Orientalism and assert their liberation by stepping outside of the definitions they’re expected to conform to. Ultimately this expression of freedom through hip hop was made possible by the social rupture continually caused by Black popular culture and modeled by Black female performers since the 19th century. It is “an erotics of the cut, submerged in the broken, breaking space-time of an improvisation. Blurred, dying life; liberatory, improvisatory, damaged love; freedom drive” (Moten 26). It is the cut that slices binaries, whether Black/White, Korean/Foreign, Woman/Other; the “slash” of these binaries is where liberation exists and where, like the pioneering Black female performers in America, these Korean female hip hop artists immersed themselves and developed an agency through which they can live and embody their own version of “woman” contrary to hegemonic constructions.

Popular culture can be and is often perceived as a debased avenue through which to communicate possibilities of social progress. Hip hop has especially been the target of political and social disapprobation. However, if one views popular culture, or more specifically, hip hop, as a venom, a curse-spawn that reveals the ills of society, then one could also view it as an “anti-venom serum” that can be used to cure the poison spread through dominant discourses. The female artists featured in this thesis are the “serum” to counter the disease caused by White supremacist and Orientalist ideologies; they are using their skills to encourage their fans to develop a self-love that accepts who they are as individuals. More importantly, these artists are demonstrating, through their performing bodies, that a meaningful existence is possible outside of the rules, regulations, and borders established by dominant society.

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