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GEMS is a peer-reviewed, online journal that explores the myriad intersections between gender, education, music and society. Emphasis is on the ways in which music teaching and learning can be used to re-dress and eliminate inequalities brought about through ideologies of domination by creating an open-ness to the musical experience that promotes access to all (and thus by extension, also the ways in which music teaching and learning have not been transformative in the past). Gender will be approached, not as male or female, but as a continuum of possibilities sustained by socially and historically constructed notions of masculinity and femininity that interact in complex, often competing and contradictory ways. A wide variety of methodological (historical, ethnographic, philosophical, sociological, etc.) and inter-disciplinary orientations will be featured, with contributors encouraged to make use of the variety of creative options presented by the electronic medium.

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For Text:
Roberta Lamb and Julia Koza brought feminist critiques of music education.

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Editorial

I would like to welcome readers to the November 2014 issue of GEMS. Queen’s University is continuing to upgrade the Scholar’s Portal. Some of you may have notice that the GEMS web site, along with other journals housed by Queen’s University has been down for a few days. I was told that the Scholarly Communications staff is still looking into the glitches associated with the current upgrade.

GEMS Usage Statistics has been updated. I am not sure at this time if it is fully functioning due to the upgrade of the Scholar’s Portal, but I am pleased to announce that the November 2013 issue of GEMS has been downloaded at least 2079 times. I think this is very good news. I will continue trying to promote GEMS. Once again, I hope to devote the January issue of GEMS to discussing the Usage Statistics along with making indexes of the monthly issues, articles, reviews, and authors.

I encourage all readers to consider submitting an article, book review, book summary, CD review, or a CD summary for the December 2014 issue of GEMS.

I would like to remind readers that PDFs may not download properly with Microsoft Internet Explorer. If you experience this, please use Mozilla Firefox or Google Chrome. I also was informed some readers could not access the Scholar’s Portal to submit their article or book/CD review, if this happens to you, please email me your document. I would gladly consider it for publication in GEMS.

In the November, 2014 issue of GEMS, Meg M. Monaghan’s article titled “Gender equity and education: Examining teachers’ perceptions was originally written for Social Studies teachers, but I feel this article will be of interested to many readers of GEMS. This article examines the perceptions of preservice teachers in regards to gender equity, as well as the relationship between curriculum and gender. Monaghan asserts that learning about the lives of women, both ordinary and extraordinary, can be empowering for students, especially young women. In my mind, most school curriculum already represented the male experience and women were underrepresented, therefore the addition of women’s perspectives is necessary.

Bonnie Morris discusses forty years of the women’s music movement in her article titled “Sound memories from a recent revolution”. This historical article provides a discourse on women’s music festivals and concerts, as well as woman-owned recording companies from two generations of women’s music. Morrdiscis reveals that the two largest and oldest women’s festivals are going to celebrate their forty-year anniversary in summer 2015. I applaud Morris’ determination as an historian. In her journal, she states that “The women’s music festivals from summer are memories, now: golden-glazed soundbytes and images, stored in heart and mind.” She later points out that only three or four women’s festivals are still in existence. Without her documentation, many of us would not have learned about the women’s music movement.

Damien Sutton provides a contemporary discourse on one of the best-selling rap albums in his article titled “The throne is burning: The rise and fall of the gendered utopia in Watch the Throne. Using the theoretical framework established by Paul Gilroy in The Black Atlantic, Sutton defines and explores the utopia aspects present in the album. This will include a feminist and black masculinity analysis. He also discusses the utility of a utopia in modern society.

Alana Hulme Chambers provides a review of the book “Someone you know: A friend’s farewell” by Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli. According to Chambers, Pallotta-Chiarolli’s book is a biography that chronicles her long-time friendship with Jon. Pallotta-Chiarolli discloses that Jon is diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and through a personal, intimate narrative the reader will learn John’s personal and professional (he was a teacher) journey living and dying from HIV/AIDS. Chambers states that Pallotta-Chiarolli’s book is generous in the multiple insights it provides the reader concerning the stigma of HIV/AIDS, the vulnerability of someone having HIV/AIDS and the closeness of having a friend with HIV/AIDS.

Dr. Colleen Pinar, Editor
Gender Equity And Education: Examining Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions

Dr. Meg M. Monaghan

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Abstract: This article reports on a study which examined the perceptions of preservice teachers in regards to gender equity. Research on gender equity in the field of education has stalled in recent years, while existing literature often hinges on the assumption that teachers recognize gender equity as a relevant issue and are willing to initiate remedies to inequities in classrooms and content. This is an interesting assumption given the fact that young, American educators have been raised during an era in which gender equity is largely assumed to have been achieved, despite the fact that a significant gender gap still exists. Specifically, this study asked the following questions: How do preservice teachers perceive gender equity? How have these perceptions been informed by the participants’ individual life experiences? Findings suggest that participants do not perceive gender and/or issues of gender equity to be particularly relevant to their personal or professional lives; however, all of the participants acknowledged influences of gender in the classroom and in their professional practice.
Introduction

“I can’t believe it was a girl who chose this book!” Those were the incredulous words of a fifteen-year-old young man sitting in a summer reading discussion group being held in my classroom. Perhaps even more incredulous was the look on my face when I suddenly realized I was the “girl” he was referring to. It was the fall of my fourth year as a high school teacher, and I had submitted the book Flags of Our Fathers by James Bradley to the school-wide summer reading program. The school’s program required each teacher to submit a title to a master list from which students selected their own books to read in the summer. Students chose by title alone and learned the teacher’s identity in the fall during specially scheduled discussion groups. While Flags of Our Fathers has since been made into a major motion picture, at the time, the title was a bit obscure for most high school students. Despite this, well over twenty students had opted to read the book, and, as they entered my room chatting excitedly about the plot lines, I could tell they had enjoyed it. As the room steadily became more and more crowded, I realized that I was, indeed, the only female in the group. I also sensed a certain disappointment on the part of the students, as if my presence was somehow an intrusion. Unlike the “there is a teacher in the room” feeling so typical in secondary classrooms, this was a sense of awkwardness I had never encountered professionally.

After recovering from the initial shock of being called a girl by a 15-year-old student, I began to wonder why I was the only female in the room; why had only males opted to read this book, and why were they so surprised that the choice had come from me? Were the males enticed by a narrative about war, camaraderie, and a father/son relationship? Did these same topics dissuade female students? I had never really considered it odd that I was a woman who loved history, nor had I noticed the gendered nature of my assigned curriculum. Suddenly, I began to pay attention.

While brief, this classroom moment was very powerful for me in many ways. There was no attack, no harassment, or intolerance; rather a quick comment suddenly brought gender into the foreground. The result was a feeling of tension and discomfort, powerful enough to cause me to pause. As a professional adult who possessed a developing feminist consciousness, I was able to deconstruct the situation and identify the source of my unease as outside of myself. If I had not possessed this ability, I could have easily internalized the situation and “blamed” my feeling of discomfort on my own self-consciousness or insecurity. In this way, such a subtle gender bias is no less powerful than blatant discrimination.

This situation also made me begin to wonder how gender might influence my students’ classroom experiences. How would a female student have reacted in a similar situation? Certainly, her participation in the class discussion would have required additional effort to overcome any feelings of discomfort. It is easy to imagine such a student could have chosen to remain silent, even if her grade in the class was to suffer.

Finally, this experience drew my attention to the relationship between the curriculum and gender. Examining curriculum through a gendered lens reveals a very masculine nature of many of the disciplines. The male experience is often reflected in the dominant narrative. In social studies textbooks, for example, a male perspective is standard, while the female experience is either presented as supplementary knowledge or is ignored (Bernard-Powers, 1997; Clark, Ayton, Frechette & Keller, 2005; Levstik, 1997/1998; Noddings, 1991/1992, 1992; Wineburg, 2001; Woyshner, 2006). This fact suggests that additional effort by the classroom teacher is needed to present a more balanced curriculum.

Deconstructing this brief classroom interaction provides an opportunity to reflect on contemporary gender equity issues and gender equity in the classroom. However, such deconstruction hinges upon an individual’s consciousness in regards to these issues. Determining how an individual perceives these issues in his/her own life is necessary in order to understand the status of these issues on a larger level. To explore this notion more deeply, I began a qualitative study that was to become my dissertation. This study examined the perceptions of a sample of pre-service teachers in regards to gender equity in their personal and professional lives. It is my intention in this article to report on the findings of this study and make practical suggestions for the improvement of school curriculum in regards to gender equity.
Statement Of The Problem

For at least the past two decades, a discourse suggesting gender equity has been achieved, and has surrounded young Americans. These young Americans are constantly reminded “Girls can be anything boys can be!” Americans of these generations have been raised to believe that gender equity is a birthright (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). This notion has been supported by a variety of trends geared toward female empowerment, such as “Girl Power!” and Take Our Daughters to Work Day. These trends have been so visible and mainstreamed that some scholars believe the mid-1980’s marked the dawning of a “girl’s movement” in the United States (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). In many ways, the constant barrage of empowering messages may be viewed positively as an effort to steep young women in a belief of their own limitless potential. However, such discourse must also be viewed with caution, given the reality that gender inequities endure. The obvious danger lurks in encouraging young women and men to become accustomed to seeing equity where inequity exists. Such a perspective might prevent an individual from recognizing and combating oppression, essentially halting progress towards equity.

While the rhetoric of gender equity has become louder and more powerful, contemporary American feminism has simultaneously become less visible and less mainstream (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). According to Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Susan Faludi, the quieting of the American women’s movement has largely been the result of a conservative “backlash” against issues of equity in the 1980s and early 1990s (Faludi, 1991). Susan Faludi (1991) cites several examples of feminism being systematically tempered by the media, the government, and other vehicles of popular culture. From more subtle examples, such as movies and books that present the American feminist as a bitter, man-hating radical, to more overt attacks, such as Pat Robertson’s assertion that, “feminists encourage women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, become lesbians, and destroy capitalism” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p.61). Feminism has, quite simply, become a bad word. This negative connotation is clearly demonstrated by women’s general endorsement of feminist ideals- but widespread rejection of the “feminist” label (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). This backlash is also reflected in American education (Middleton, 1993; Sadker & Sadker, 1994), where the topic of gender equity in the schools and in the classroom seems to have fallen into a period of neglect (Hahn, Bernard-Powers, Crocco, & Woyshner, 2007), despite the persistence of gender inequities in American classrooms (Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

While considerable progress towards gender equity has been made in the United States over the course of the last century, the goal has yet to be met. Contemporary gender inequities persist and are often subtle, personal, and deeply entrenched. The most powerful national institutions continue to operate in the public sector (political, economic, and military) and are dominated by male citizens and supportive of traditionally male attributes, such as aggression, competition, and strength (Lerner, 1986; Noddings, 1991/1992). While American women have made significant gains over the past century in their struggle to have their perspectives and experiences recognized, their progress has largely been measured through increased inclusion into traditional social structures, rather than by the reshaping of American life into a gender balanced society (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Schuster & Van Dyne, 1998). Sectors traditionally dominated by female Americans, namely social and private institutions, continue to endure a secondary and more marginal status (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Noddings, 1991/1992; Schuster & Van Dyne, 1998). While females are increasingly represented in positions of power and prestige in the American government, economy, and military, their presence is not indicative of the greater American populace and is still considered an exceptional accomplishment.

Many subject areas have been heavily critiqued for a slow reaction to issues of gender equity in regards to curriculum, classroom materials, and teacher practices over the twenty years (Bernard-Powers, 1995; Hahn, Bernard-Powers, Crocco, & Woyshner, 2007). According to Carole Hahn, Jane Bernard-Powers, Margaret Crocco, and Christine Woyshner (2007), gender equity and other gender issues in the social studies, for example, now exist in a “holding pattern” (p.350). This is especially disturbing given the potential that exists within the curriculum to address issues of injustice and to question oppressive
societal structures (Crocco, 2001). As Margaret Crocco (2001) states, “…Educators are in a unique position to consider gender…because of their defining interest in citizenship education” (p.66). Research has demonstrated that students’ gender consciousness can be raised in classrooms where gender-related topics have been given explicit attention (Levstik, 2001; Tetreault, 1986b). Women’s studies courses, in particular, have been shown to be powerful agents to combat sexism and the acceptance of unfair gender roles (Harris, Melaas, & Rodacker, 2007; Stake, Rhoades, Rose, Eliis, & West, 1994; Stake & Rose, 1994). Unfortunately, these classes are rarely offered in American middle or high schools, which is why the vast majority of existing research has been conducted at the post-secondary level.

Given the evidence of persistent gender bias in curricular materials, such as textbooks, the responsibility for addressing issues of gender and gender equity falls heavily on the teacher. Unfortunately, research has shown that teachers overwhelmingly favor textbook based instruction (Hahn, Bernard-Powers, Crocco, & Woyshner, 2007) and often fail to adapt their curriculum to include gender equity (Hahn, 1996; Tetreault, 1986a). Explanations for this phenomenon are difficult to identify. Is this pattern simply a matter of convenience or time? Do teachers defer to the textbook’s authority? Do teachers lack the pedagogical knowledge needed to address such issues? Or is it that teachers fail to recognize gender equity as a significant issue? This situation is made even more complicated by the fact that existing research has largely been conducted with teacher participants who were witnesses to the Women’s Rights Movement of the 1960s and 70s. One might assume that gender equity issues could be “on their radar” so to speak. In contrast, teachers who are currently emerging from teacher education programs were largely born in the late 1980s, a time in which teacher education had also “quieted” in its approach to gender equity. Contemporary research suggests that gender equity is given only marginal status in most programs (Brown, 2000; Campbell & Sanders, 1997; Sanders, 2002). Thus, while the responsibility for addressing gender inequities hinges on the classroom teacher, these young educators have never known a life without feminism—its challenges and victories—nor have many of them been formally confronted with these issues. It is essential to examine how they perceive gender equity issues, before assuming that they will work to amend gender inequities in their classrooms. This is the purpose of this study. This study examined the perceptions of a sample of pre-service teachers in regards to gender equity in their personal and professional lives. Specifically, this study asked the following primary question,

- How do pre-service teachers perceive gender equity?

Additionally, the following secondary research question was examined:

- How have these perceptions been informed by the participants’ individual life experiences?

Research Methodology And Design

A basic or generic approach was used to design this study (Merriam, 1998). North Atlantic University, a large public university located on the east coast, was selected as the site of this research study. This university was chosen due to its convenient location and the researcher’s ability to gain access to an appropriate sample.

A purposeful sample was generated for this study (Patton, 2002). Insight about these participants’ perceptions is useful in conjunction with existing research and in designing future research projects; however, it is not the intention of this study to generalize findings across all preservice teachers or all content areas.

Participants were identified and selected based on three criteria:

- **Post-Secondary Education.** All of the participants were required to have maintained consistent enrollment in the Teacher Education Program (TEP) at North Atlantic University
- **Age, Professional Experience.** All participants were required to be “traditional” fifth year, master’s students, meaning that they had enrolled in college directly after their high school graduation and had entered the TEP program during their junior year of college.
• Professional Aspirations. All participants were required to be preservice, secondary teachers intending to begin a career as a full-time teacher in the fall following their graduation.

A total of nine students were identified as eligible for this study (five females, four males). Six individuals volunteered to participate (three females, three males). All six completed the interview protocol.

Data Collection And Analysis

Each of the six participants (three females, three males) was interviewed three times (each interview lasted sixty to ninety minutes) using Irving Seidman’s (2006) in-depth, phenomenological interviewing model. Each round had its own purpose, but the interviews also built cumulatively on one another as the participants were encouraged to reflect on ideas they had put forth and develop them further. Participants were aware that the researcher was examining how personal experiences impacted professional practice but were not told that gender equity was the focus of the study.

Amy Suzanne Johnson’s (2007) work demonstrates the power of using life history interviewing with preservice teachers in order to understand how they view the world. Amy Suzanne Johnson’s (2007) life history interview protocol was used as the foundation for the protocol in this study. The final protocol was semi-structured (Merriam, 1998), which enabled the interviews to feel more conversational, while providing a structure that allowed for comparison amongst participants (Merriam, 1998).

Findings

To articulate the participants’ perceptions of gender equity, I will highlight their beliefs on three, key topics, namely, gender equity in society, perceptions of feminism, and gender and professional practice.

Gender Equity In Society

During the final round of interviews, each participant was asked directly whether or not he/she felt men and women were equal in contemporary American society. All of the participants responded negatively to that question.

When asked to give an example of this inequity, the responses were again very similar and all placed women at an inferior position to men. Unequal wages (Sonia, Michelle, Arthur, Patrick), “glass ceilings” in the workplace (Kristen, Arthur, Patrick), female objectification (Arthur, Kristen), and male dominated school administrations (Kristen, Sonia, Patrick) were common responses.

However, a closer examination of the female participants’ comments reveals a more complicated situation. Each believed that inequity exists, but denied having experienced inequity personally. For example, Michelle talked about her aunt who she said was “dying” because she was “just so exhausted” trying to balance her job, children, and “responsibility to take care of the home”. Michelle’s example was personal, but not germane to her own life experience. Likewise, Sonia and Kristen identified inequity as something outside of their own lives and experiences. Sonia believed that inequity had never affected her life directly, but she admitted, “I am kind of oblivious to that stuff (laughing) I would never be like, ‘Oh, I was discriminated against!’” Like, I don’t know, I don’t really see things that way.”

Kristen believed that women face discrimination, but insisted that she was different because “I always feel accepted by guys… I’m like always friends with them…they see me differently than other girls.” Thus, she maintained that she “…can’t really pinpoint a time where I was like, ‘Hmmm, that’s because I was a girl… I am just not cognizant of like that kind of stuff.” I reminded her of a story she told during an earlier interview about having to petition the national headquarters of the Little League in order to play on an all boy’s team, only to face negative comments from other players and coaches. When I asked if she felt that was an example of gender discrimination, Kristen replied, “Not really, though.”

Thus, while Michelle, Sonia, and Kristen quickly deny the idea that men and women are equal in society, they seem to believe it is other women who experience oppression. Kristen’s denial is particularly interesting given the fact that I presented her with an example from her own life that she had talked about earlier. This disconnect between the lives of women, in general, and the female participants’ own lives is
perhaps more understandable when the participants’ views on “feminism” are examined.

Perceptions Of Feminism

While all of the participants believed that men and women are not equal in American society, four participants (two men, two women) rejected the feminist label. Participants were asked what they think of when they hear the word “feminist” and if they identified themselves as a “feminist.” A representative sample of responses is below,

- Brian: I think feminism is kind of taboo and if you are admitting that you’re a feminist, then the assumption is that, you know, you hate men and, you know, men are the cause of all of your problems…so, I could see women being less willing to show their interest in…subjects in history, like suffrage, because they might be afraid of being labeled as that.

- Michelle: Most people think lesbian, don’t they? Well, you know, they think crazy, you know, equal rights. I think people think protesting and talking about abortion rights and all that stuff, um…I think it’s negative! [I am not a feminist] because deep down I really wish I didn’t have to work and could just be taken care of by some really rich guy.

- Kristen: See, the problem is, I don’t like that word. I don’t know why. I always associate it with like crazy people for some reason, which is probably bad. I just always associate it with people who go like way over the top about stuff and that annoys me…it’s not like my nature to be over the top about issues. So, no [I would not call myself a feminist].

- Arthur: [I think of] someone who thinks men and women should be equal. Also, bra burners…Yeah, see I don’t have a like strongly formulated idea other than arguing that women and men should be at least equal…I don’t know if I am an incredibly active feminist. But, I mean my day-to-day behavior is that I don’t distinguish or I try not to behave in sexist ways.

- Sonia: I know this is wrong, but I automatically think of like revolutionaries, crazy activists. Like people that kind of annoy me. BUT, then I take a step back…then I think of someone who advocates for equity between genders…I would not call myself an active feminist, but like I am.

Together, these individuals described feminists as crazy, annoying, polarizing, radical, lesbian, man-haters. It is easy to see why someone would be “afraid” to “admit” an allegiance to such a label. Additionally, Michelle sees herself as excluded from the feminist movement given her “secret” goals.

Kristen’s comments struck me as particularly interesting given a story she related to me during our first interview about how her mother had handcuffed herself to her high school math teacher’s desk to protest the fact that she thought he was a sexist. At the time, Kristen had described her mother’s actions as “crazy”. During our final interview, I asked Kristen if she felt her mother was a feminist. She said,

I think she’s like a secret one. I think she’s not like all out there with it, but deep down…My mom, she definitely has like, she’s a strong woman. That’s what I would call my mom. [She is] a strong female.

It was surprising to me that Kristen did not consider handcuffing oneself to a teacher’s desk to be “all out there” with one’s beliefs; however, Kristen’s distinction between “a strong woman” and a “feminist” are very telling. The negative connotations of the feminist label are clear.

The final two participants, Arthur and Sonia, hesitantly accepted the feminist label, however, each possessed negative stereotypes of “a feminist.” They responded,

- Arthur and Sonia accept the feminist label when the definition of a feminist is on their terms and is not based on the stereotypes of “bra burners” or “crazy revolutionaries.” Neither feel strongly about their feminism, but both recognize that they are in agreement with what they see as the goals of the larger movement.

The extent to which the participants’ beliefs about feminism would transfer into their classroom is unclear. However, it is difficult to imagine any of the
participants initiating an in-depth examination of feminism in their classroom lessons.

**Gender And Professional Practice**

The participants’ insights on how their own gender has influenced their professional practice also contribute to a more complete understanding of their perceptions of gender equity. In this case, the differences between the male and female responses are notable. While all of the males said that their gender was a factor in their professional practice, all also explained that this was because of behavioral norms that governed their one-to-one interactions with students of the opposite sex. Their gender was significant because it made them more cautious around students, females, in particular. The female participants, on the other hand, all initially said that they did not think that their gender impacted their professional practice, but when urged to elaborate all offered powerful, even unsettling, ways in which their lives as teachers might be different if they were male.

Initially Sonia offered no possibilities for the influence of gender on her professional practice. She then reconsidered and sheepishly said, “The students might listen to me more…Um, I don’t know, like I could see myself maybe being higher up in education as a male. Like an administrator.”

At first, Kristen also responded negatively to this question. When prompted to consider how gender might impact a female teacher’s professional practice, Kristen offered, “I actually do think it’s a little bit harder to get the respect right off the bat from your kids when you are a girl.”

Perhaps most powerful was Michelle’s response. She said,

I don’t know if I would have been a teacher if I was a guy…I think I would be a little bit more concerned about things like making more money…more about my image than I am. I don’t know why, but for some reason teachers aren’t valued too high, so I would want to do something a little bit more, especially if I hadn’t been a girl.

Compared to the male participants, the female participants’ responses reflect a far more fundamental impact of gender on their professional practice. Being a male dictates more stringent norms for social behavior with students, while being a female changes the level of respect or professional advancement the teacher might expect. These are powerful consequences.

**Discussion**

Overall, these findings have led me to conclude that the preservice teachers who participated in this study do not consciously perceive gender equity to be an issue relevant to their own lives or their professional practice; however, tremendous potential exists for this consciousness to be developed.

First, in order for gender equity to be seriously considered in schools and in classrooms the notion that feminist issues are ideological needs to be overcome. Those who resist the incorporation of feminism(s) into the secondary classroom based on the assumption that they are promoting a radical agenda have missed the point. As Florence Howe (in Schuster & Van Dyne, 1998) noted,

> Teaching is a political act: some person is choosing, for whatever reasons, to teach a set of values, ideas, assumptions and pieces of information, and in so doing, to omit other[s]…If all those choices form a pattern excluding half of the human race, that is a political act one can hardly help noticing…To include women with seriousness and vision, and with some attention to the perspective of women as a subordinate group, is simply another kind of political act (p.84).

To avoid serious and thoughtful discussions of gender equity and gender relations based on a fear of “pushing” a feminist agenda (or the fear of being perceived a feminist) is, in fact, to be promoting the dominant, patriarchal ideology.

Next, it is important to clarify what an incorporation of gender, gender equity, and gendered perspectives looks like in the classroom. Without exception, the participants in this study interpreted questions about the incorporation of “gender” in the classroom to be asking about women and women’s history. When asked about “gender,” they responded with comments about suffrage, Sojourner Truth, and Rosa Parks. “Gender” was synonymous with “women.”
I will admit that I shared this tendency in the beginning of this research project. Speaking for myself, I believed that the need to talk about gender equity really was a need to include more women in the curriculum. I believed (and still do!) that learning about the lives of women, both ordinary and extraordinary, was empowering for students, especially young women. In my mind, the most school curriculum already represented the male experience and women were underrepresented, therefore, the addition of women’s perspectives was necessary. I suspect that the participants might share similar conceptions.

What I have come to realize, however, is that a broader conception of gender is needed. If one accepts that gender is socially constructed as individuals interact with their environment and that gender identity is not merely a product of biological sex, then gender becomes a dynamic component of the human experience. It is the filter through which both women and men view the world (Hahn, 1996; Levstik, 2001). Conceptualizing gender in this central way makes a careful and continuous examination of changing gender roles and gender relations over time seem obvious. Part of this examination would naturally include a greater infusion of women into the curriculum, but simply mentioning more women would not be enough. Instead themes, such as gender relations, gender equity, and gender norms, would be revisited throughout the curriculum in order to develop a consciousness of gender that could be applied to both past and present issues. As Linda Levstik (2001) noted, this type of “regular and systematic” study of the influence of gender across time could help prepare students to function in a “decidedly gendered public” (p. 191).

References


Sanders, Jo. (2002). Something is missing from teacher education: Attention to two genders. Phi Delta Kappan, 84(3), 241-244.


Sound Memories From A Recent Revolution

Dr. Bonnie Morris

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Abstract: As we celebrate forty years of the women’s music movement, its founding mothers and elders are beginning to pass on. Feminist scholars and activists are just beginning to write historically about the events (concerts and women’s music festivals) and material culture (recordings and photographs) from two generations of women’s music. This essay raises questions about how we will remember and historicize the unique politics and contributions of women’s music artists, and offers a glimpse of drum artist Ubaka Hill’s 1997 recording session with the late Kay Gardner.
The women’s music movement, a radical, grassroots, and authentically North American folk genre, has thus far attracted few scholars and archivists, for it seems too recent a scene to be regarded as historical. Its roots in the lesbian-feminist politics of the 1970s, too, which stress a uniquely woman-identified communalism, have alienated a present cohort of progressive activists who object to the absence of male and/or transgender artists onstage. But this is a year of celebration in women’s music. Both the National Women’s Music Festival (founded in 1974) and the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (founded in 1976) are hosting their fortieth anniversary gatherings in summer 2015. Recording artist Cris Williamson, whose 1975 album The Changer and the Changed remains Olivia Records’ best-selling release, is touring in celebration of the album’s fortieth anniversary. While the passage of time and shifting political allegiances have reduced attendance at women’s music festivals, these anniversary celebrations help other interested performers, reviewers and audiences to discover women’s music for the first time. A network of feminist concerts, fans, and studio recording collaborations thus remains vibrant.

But while newer generations debate this legacy of woman-only events, the movement’s elders are starting to die. We have already witnessed the passing of women’s music foremothers Ginni Clemens, Therese Edell, Maxine Feldman, and Kay Gardner. Who will remember them? How is their vision best articulated to future generations? Which archives are best entrusted with the ephemera others might discard: outmoded vinyl, clumsy cassettes, yet the soundtrack of an era? A material culture of feminist performance culture now waits to be warehoused; a movement so recently constructed prepares to be critically deconstructed.

It’s an appropriate time for tributes to the women who instigated and sustained the women’s music movement: artists whose woman-affirming lyrics and female-led sound crews endured, for over thirty years, in an often misogynist and homophobic society. There are dozens and dozens of such dedicated and radical stage performers.

From its explosive emergence in the 1970s, the women’s music movement grew as a defiant counterpoint to the limited roles and opportunities for female artists in the mainstream recording industry. Independent musicians, woman-owned record companies (primarily Olivia and Redwood), woman-only festivals, and concert tours blossomed across North America; producers, writers and fans invested their dollars, careers and very lives in the transmission of a feminist message by women, to women. This call for change also identified the issue of racism as a stumbling block to female unity, so that intentionally diverse stage lineups and self-scrutiny became hallmarks of women’s music concerts and collectives. The will to identify and prevent learned, hierarchical practices led to unique production ethics, such as sign language interpretation of concerts and up-front, accessible seating for Deaf and disabled fans. The lesbian fan base, during the pre-Ellen era of 1973-1998, proved to be a hitherto untapped consumer niche for material production. Soon woman-made art, clothing, mugs and books were sold alongside the music at festivals, and the preponderance of lesbian consumers created a new sense of accountability for artist whose own sexuality connected them to their audiences. What women’s music provided to the first generation of post-Stonewall lesbian couples was a soundtrack of political love and commitment; album after album and concert after concert boldly proclaiming the existence of women who loved women.

The network of women’s music also offered an important alternative to bar culture, long the only gathering space of the gay community and a surefire role in fostering alcoholism in the pre-Stonewall generation. Thus the oft-mocked moniker that women’s music was “healing” had a hard truth for those combating dependence on alcohol and drugs; some women’s music festivals, such as the Gulf Coast Festival in Mississippi, were deliberately substance-free. In this climate of politics, inclusion, and recovery, a focus on musicianship might seem to take last priority, and yet the festival stages have ultimately produced some of the nation’s greatest crossover household names: Melissa Etheridge, the Indigo Girls, Ani DiFranco.

It’s significant that these aforementioned artists--all excellent songwriters and instrumentalists--are white women, perpetuating an archetypal “girl with guitar” image belying feminist commitment to diversity. In fact, Tracy Chapman, too, began
performing at women’s music festivals, appearing onstage at the Michigan Women’s Music Festival in 1987. Vicki Randle rocketed from performing on one of Olivia Records’ first albums to a long-term gig as percussionist on NBC’s Tonight Show with Jay Leno. Less commercially well known on America’s airwaves, but most beloved from an actual audience standpoint, are women of color whose talent and charisma made them festival favorites year after year: Linda Tillery, Judith Casselberry, Nedra Johnson, Toshi Reagon.

In this essay, I pay homage to the artist Ubaka Hill and her role in opening a space for women to participate in drum traditions long denied them. Performing at multiple women’s festivals since the 1980s and still leading a “drumsong orchestra” on the acoustic stage of the Michigan festival each August, drum artist Ubaka Hill—once nicknamed Peanut for her deceptively diminutive stature—revitalized drumming as a community act. Her work helped bridge a painful divide in a subculture where drum circles had taken on racial rather than rhythmic meaning.

By the mid-1980s, due in large part to the work of breakthrough performer Edwina Lee Tyler, drum circles had become a reliable part of women’s music festivals, popularizing a skill traditionally reserved for men only. Particular types of drums and inherited songs, however, were sacred to African, Asian, and Native American diaspora communities, aspects of ceremonies or beliefs long threatened by encroaching Westernization. Where white feminists were excitedly discovering the heritage of traditional music as an oral storyline for women, who for millennia had been denied other intellectual outlets or access to higher education, their learning curve was slower in accepting contemporary drum circles as ritual spaces valued by women of color.

In the early 1990s, the problem of unskilled and occasionally inebriated white women dropping in on every festival drum gathering to bongo party-style led to drum workshops being advertised for women of color only. And such separatism, even in a community of lesbian separatists, created howls of protest. But this issue, perhaps more than any other antiracism workshop, forced many white festiegoers to see that women of color remained a distinct minority at lesbian festivals, easily visible in a sea of white women. While going shirt-free and learning about soundboards might feel radical to white campers, for many black women festivals merely reproduced the same hegemonic dynamics of white majority rule. Drum circles had become places of mutual support and alliance, akin to the self-selecting “black table” in a white-majority school lunchroom, and just as glibly misunderstood.

What emerged in the mid-1990s was a careful campaign to educate white festiegoers about drum technique as heritage, combined with enhanced opportunities for mixed play, along with the preservation of some spiritual gatherings that were not open to all—in recognition that a tourist mentality sometimes prevailed when nondrummers toted cameras to African drum circles. This potentially still-explosive area was soon soothed by Ubaka Hill’s striking role as a mediator, and her work as an authoritative conductor at festivals across the country.

From her first festival appearances, offering stunning drum compositions and poetry, Ubaka Hill initiated a format of inviting interested drummers to rehearse with her and then join the stage for a community finale. She was also the first artist in any festival context to offer music workshops for Deaf women, teaching intensive drum rhythms and then placing Deaf drummers in key performance roles. This “open-drum policy,” coupled with a loving but strict rehearsal process, attracted scores of women, most of whom had never owned a drum.

Summer 1995 was Ubaka Hill’s turning point. On Memorial Day weekend, at southeastern Pennsylvania’s Campfest retreat, nearly every woman on the land filled the old lodge up to its rafters and drummed hypnotically for hours, drumming and dancing and then drumming again, standing, seated, embracing, using any available percussive tool when all drums and shekere were taken—tinplates, spoons, open palms beating on thighs. This spectacular gathering was followed, just one week later, by Ubaka Hill’s first mainstage appearance at the National Women’s Music Festival, held in the acoustically stunning music hall on the campus of Indiana University. In that packed audience, one rapt festiegoer could be heard declaring “I think Ubaka could be some kind of messianic leader,”—prophetic words for the subculture of lesbian festivals. Over this same summer, Ubaka Hill released her first CD, Shape Shifters, on Ladyslipper Records’ label, and the season
culminated with her first Drumsong Orchestra on the acoustic stage at the Michigan festival’s twentieth anniversary that August. The newly enlarged acoustic stage filled with 156 women drumming as one, and many eyes filled with tears as Ubaka invited up her own role model to join in onstage: longtime festival performer and drum soloist Edwina Lee Tyler.

With the public linking of these two artists—whose works insist upon both the sacred and the playful as paired elements—the torch was passed. Festival audiences saw drumming’s spiritual significance transcend to a next generation of serious drum students. That moment was also one step forward in the group process of using the women’s music movement—and festival season—to explore the fight against racism.

In September of 1997 I was invited to join Ubaka Hill for a studio recording in Woodstock, New York: a front row to percussive album-making. My role was to describe what Alice Walker has called the womanist feel of a collaborative drum recording produced by primarily lesbian artists. The story I produced helped publicize the new album, but was never published. I include it now as a valuable snapshot of women’s music history: a collaboration between Ubaka Hill and the late women’s music flutist and producer Kay Gardner. What was the mood in 1997?

From My Journal: In The Studio With Ubaka

September, 1997. The women’s music festivals from summer are memories, now: golden-glazed soundbytes and images, stored in heart and mind. Fall’s the season for getting back to business, for facing the demands of the “real” world, which seldom cares that thousands of women just spent their summers in vibrant celebration of the women’s music movement. You won’t find coverage of these long-enduring women’s festivals in any mainstream music publication. Spin, Vibe, Rolling Stone—they’re not interested in the prehistory of alternative feminist stages; they’re preoccupied with Lilith Fair, believing it to be the first production of its kind. Lilith Fair will make commercially feasible the concept of an all-female lineup, but it’s no innovation; women have been out front in rock, blues, folk and jazz firing up soundstages for twenty-five years in the independent lesbian scene, with its industry of production/distribution networks and attendant, loyal fan base.

The many thousands of women who attended Campfest in May, National in June and Michigan in August now have their eyes and ears fixed on one rising artist, a figure for the times, whose music they yearn to bring back home and enjoy year-round. This fall, it’s a big deal to our community that Ubaka Hill is about to go into the studio and record a new album. I’ve come to Applehead Studios in Woodstock, New York, where forty-two women from eight states and two countries have gathered to make history—or, as Ubaka calls it, “sistery.” Ubaka has brought these women together to play as the drum orchestra on her second CD; this has never been done before, in North America, the recording of an all-female drum ensemble. The women waiting patiently with drums and weathered hands are black, white, dreadlocked, redhead, Latina, Jewish, Arab, the eldest in her fifties, the youngest a home schooled nose-ring-wearing nine-year-old named Leila. Some have been drumming for over twenty years; others began just recently, through one of Ubaka’s festival “drumsong” workshops. These so-called drum orchestras, conducted by Ubaka at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival each year, offer any interested woman the chance to play in a large-scale ensemble, performing on the acoustic stage the last morning of the festival; recently, one hundred and fifty-six drummers joined that concluding show. Now the trick will be translating that earth-shattering tribal sound, perfected in the woods, into studio confines, on schedule, under budget. Ubaka’s mantra for the occasion is “Be tribal, but maintain the integrity of the pattern,” and her recording engineer is certainly the right woman for this job: Karen Kane once wrote an article titled “Maintaining Acoustic Integrity.”

Today’s goal is to record two different pieces, “Singing in Silence” and then “Spiral Dance.” Kay Gardner, the album’s producer, and Karen Kane, as co-producer and recording engineer, drove down to Woodstock from Maine and Toronto, respectively. These women’s music veterans know that time in money in studio work, and would prefer to record three or four tracks a day if such a schedule didn’t exhaust and water down what Karen Kane calls “the vibe.” So we’ll do two recordings today, and make them count; the drum orchestra ensemble plays on the
first track, and that will take us from nine a.m. to nearly four p.m. to do.

We begin the day joined in circle, singing “Woman I am, spirit I am, I am the infinite within my soul.” Ubaka leads a social mixer, splitting the women into small groups by astrological sign, then by decade of birth (mostly the 1950s and 1960s, here), and then by favorite women’s basketball team from the WNBA (nearly all present root for the New York Liberty, so we’re back in one clump again.) Ubaka concludes the warm-up by asking each woman to explain how long she’s played her instrument. I’m the only non-drummer permitted here, so when my turn comes I hold up my fountain pen: I’ve been writing for thirty-one years.

Setting up the microphone stands, placing the drums, placing the women, and testing the sound levels takes us up to nearly 11 a.m. Karen’s at the sound board saying “Bring the level down.” I’m allowed to sit in the sound booth and watch through its glass windows when the drummers start up, led by Ubaka, conducting with arms raised and curved. The beat rises; the women with their djembes, percussion, voices shake the room. From my vantage point I can see two potted plants actually trembling from the drum thunder, and the upturned faces in this orchestra of women: faces, shoulder blades, hair all mobile with ecstasy. Someone whispers to me “This is a dream come true, for these women, to record with Ubaka.”

That dedication is revealed in the license plates on the cars lining the dirt road outside: Michigan, West Virginia, Massachusetts, Maryland. Some of the musicians are in Ubaka’s core performing group, the Shape Shifters: Hillary Kay and Gabrielle Shavran, Suhir Blackeagle, and guest artist Edwina Lee Tyler, the first name in festival drum performance.

Kay Gardner reminds the beatified throng that the project can’t afford more than one rehearsal per take. There’s no talk of good versus bad drummers, here, but Ubaka tactfully replaces a “wavy” drummer with one more “confident.” Then off we go: “Roll tape. They think it’s a rehearsal, but let’s see what we get,” Karen whispers; then, “God, how I love these old faders. They’re so good for tracking.”

What I know about drums, faders, and tracking would fill a thimble; but I know about production values, and the sound waves I’m sitting in set my legs trembling from feet on up when the drums begin again. The nervous players look down at their own forearms, corded veins bulging. The veterans play freely, rolling their heads and arms independently of their skilled hands, exposing hot collarbones, necks and throats to my camera lens. Ubaka’s dreads fly, barely held down by earphones.

This is music that women I know really are waiting for, waiting eagerly to buy, after seeing and hearing and feeling Ubaka’s shows only at a festival. There simply has not been a drum orchestra recording available until now; that’s why I’m here, to help publicize the breakthrough of a genre. Bass, tone tone. Bass, bass tone. Slap slap tone. This is hot music, and no mistake; when the first take is played back, the women look up in amazement as they hear what they have done.

I move into the studio, journal in my lap; and when the women begin again the beat literally lifts my ass off my seat. This is the most powerful writing music available to me in my lifetime; the drum orchestra is discipline made creative, creativity disciplined, controlled looseness. One woman is brick red in the face, and appears about to explode into fragments; others are smiling so broadly that their eyes have disappeared, and my old friends Sharon Marcus has the look of approaching a finish line at the Olympics. The standing drummers dance as they play, necklaces bouncing in sweat-beaded cleavage.

Feet clad in boots, moccasins, sandals beat delicately around the heavy sound cables on the floor. This is the sound of the advancing army of the matriarchy; the sound of Woodstock, New York, in 1997, is female. “The vibe is tribal,” says Ubaka, laying down her hands.

In Closing

When I look at these images from 1997, it’s with both sadness and fresh determination. Sadness: because so much has changed. All but three or four women’s festivals have shut down; and while the two largest and oldest are each set to celebrate a forty-year anniversary in summer 2015, National has never received the respectful publicity it deserves; and the Michigan festival is under threat of attack and economic boycott by critics who oppose its born-female intention. Kay Gardner is no longer with us. The arc and playbook of the women’s music
movement remains neglected by both music and social historians.

Ubaka Hill’s drumsong orchestra, however, continues to thrive at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, where Ubaka (with several more albums to her credit by now) conducts that living tribe. More recently, Ubaka convened a “Million Women Drumming” event near her home in Catskill, New York. My determination is to continue as an historian who took note of what individual women, and the grand collective of artists, gave to the women’s music audience: the sound of female empowerment. This is but one snapshot of a movement that needs more homage: for its artists, audience, producers and consumers are all graying even as we still participate in making lesbian sound. There was—there is-- a home-grown movement here, and one that must be archived while its music is still played.

References


The Throne Is Burning: The Rise And Fall Of The Gendered Utopia In Watch The Throne

Damien Sutton, MA

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Abstract: This paper examines the best-selling rap album from Kanye West and Jay-Z entitled Watch The Throne. Using the theoretical framework established by Paul Gilroy in The Black Atlantic, I define and explore the utopia aspects present in the album. However, this is not a pure paradise, as it will quickly become evident that the gender relations present in the album are incredibly problematic. This will necessitate a feminist analysis and, most importantly, a historical analysis of black masculinity and femininity as is defined within the context of rap music. It cannot be over-emphasized that the misogyny found within this album is not unique to this album, but is in fact present in the larger culture it was created within. Finally, because of problematic gender relations and issues of identity, the utopia created by Kanye West and Jay-Z self-destructs. This leaves us with a brief discussion of the utility of utopias.
Introduction

This is something like the Holocaust
Millions of our people lost
Bow our heads and pray to the lord
Til I die I’mma f***in ball
Now who gon stop me?
(Carter & West, 2011)

In examining the experience of the black diaspora, it has become fruitful for academics to analyze previously ignored forms of artistic expression that, while not necessarily a part of the academic community and dialogue, are often times the outlets most readily available to a community silenced by various forms of institutional oppression. It is because of the push in academia to discover new forms of knowledge from various forms of art that one sees a desire within academia to better understand “black music”\(^1\), a diverse medium that encompasses many different musical genres such as jazz, blues and rap.\(^2\) It is this final genre of “black music” that I will focus on over the course of this essay. Rap, unlike many other mediums available to the black diasporic community, such as both the blues and jazz were forms of social protest. Rap specifically began as an artistic movement for the expression of frustration experienced by the black community, who often were socioeconomically disadvantaged in a post-industrial United States. It was a movement that attempted to critique and analyze the larger forms of oppression supported and created by national and international institutions. In its formation, rap began as a form of protest. Yet, to examine rap purely from this standpoint is to ignore how it has evolved over the past forty years into a music that includes a multitude of voices and ideologies. Just one of those ideologies is that of utopia or, rather, the idea that “a future society will be able to realize the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished” (Gilroy, 1993, p 37).

It is with this in mind that I turn my eye to the utopia crafted by rap artists Kanye West and Jay-Z over the course of their hit 2011 album, Watch The Throne. As will be more thoroughly analyzed in this paper, both artists juxtapose a particular black experience, that of the economically and racially oppressed, with a world of grandeur and opulence that they, leaders of a new cultural black nationalist movement, define as “Black Excellence” and hope to bring to the diasporic black community. However, this is not a perfect utopia particularly because it is highly gendered. Women, black women in particular, are denied full rights and access to the utopia created by these two artists. In fact, when they are allowed to take part in the utopia it is often to serve the males of the community either sexually or as an obedient wife. I argue that it is because of this that this utopia fails to exist as a true paradise for the black community. Furthermore, because of the complex and diverse nature of the black experience in America, this attempt to create a universal black identity proves futile and eventually leads to its self-destruction. Since this utopia is nothing more than a fraud and filled with internal division, the creators of this promised land are left with no other option but to let it burn to the ground and abdicate the throne to the next leaders of the black music community.

Significance Of Watch The Throne And The Analysis Of The Album

Prior to the actual analysis of the album, I feel it important to first justify the examination of it. Unlike many of their peers, Kanye West and Jay-Z have a cultural recognition that transcends their activities within the musical realm. When more ink is used in speculation over the naming of their child than on the
music actually produced by the artists, it quickly becomes apparent that the lives and cultural dialogue surrounding these artists are more closely associated with the British royalty than of the common musician. Of course, this similarity is not lost on the artists as one of them Kanye West, comments on “Ni**as in Paris” (the ubiquitous single from the album) that “Prince William’s ain’t do it right if you ask me/Cause I was him I would have married Kate & Ashley” (Carter & West, 2011). Given their success, one can fairly speculate that any attempt to make an admittedly muddled political statement is only to further their success, gain more popularity and sell more records. This is further complicated by the fact that there are certainly contemporary artists (EL-P, Killer Mike, Nas and Angel Haze all come to mind) that are more overtly political and have made more of an attempt to criticize larger institutions of hegemonic power. Furthermore, one must question the attempt to create a black nationalist movement that is mainly supported by a largely white consumer base (Yousman, 2003, p 367).

While this is true, there are several issues with these arguments. First, while these artists (just a few of the many rappers that identify as a part of the conscious rap movement) are certainly more political in terms of content, it is this politicized content that often limits their audience solely to that of the most devout rap fans. Further, while Nas and his magnum opus, Illmatic, certainly have a great deal of relevancy in terms of popular culture, the album is over a decade old and much scholarship has already been written on its importance and deeper meanings. Furthermore, while the majority of consumers of this album are in fact white, I feel that it is because of this that their message contesting global white supremacy is only strengthened. I argue that the act of getting a majority white consumer base to purchase an album that openly challenges its hegemonic power is nothing short of a coup d'état of these global forces of oppression. This, of course, is assuming that the whites who purchase the CD are the oppressors. It could be that they are also oppressed in a variety of ways and empathize with the general messages in the rap music.

Finally, I feel it important to note that even though the album has been out for approximately two years it remains culturally relevant for several reasons. First, in spite of its existence in an increasingly competitive music world, the album was able to acquire platinum status (the sale of one million copies) just one month after its release in August 2011 (Lamy, 2011). This is particularly noteworthy because the RIAA (Record Industry Association of America) had yet to include digital sales in its calculations, thus ignoring the approximately three hundred thousand digital albums sold in its first week of release through various venues like Amazon and Itunes (Kaufman, 2011). Furthermore, the success of this album marked one of the few times in the new millennium that a collaborative album was able both to top sales charts and to receive high critical praise. Finally, the album has been able to accomplish what no other major album has been able to in recent years due to the proliferation of online piracy: avoid an album leak. By keeping the album shrouded in secret, the duo were able to repeat what Kanye West had accomplished previously with his album My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy and hold to its shipping day. This created an event in which the entire global music community was able to access and experiences the album together and at the same time. Of course, this all occurs within a context where rap, formally a small subculture of hip hop, has been transformed into a billion-dollar industry that is “exploited by corporate capitalist and the petit bourgeois desires” (Neal, 1999 p. 150). It is because of this global reach that I argue that it is important to examine the various messages found throughout the album.

With the justification provided, I will now, prior to my analysis, review both the importance of music in general for diasporic communities and how “black music,” rap in particular, is important to the overall understanding of both the black experience and the formation of black identity in the United States.
Music As A Site For Diaspora

I feel it important to briefly examine the role music plays for diasporic communities at large. Simply put, a primary aspect of music’s existence is its ability to connect both the past and the present. This is because time is contained and limited to the song itself, thus transcending traditional notions of time and its passage. Furthermore, a song is the embodiment of human community because no portion of a song exists alone, as each piece must work in conjunction with the other to create a functional piece of music. Failure to do this results in the creation of disorder, pain and noise. To stretch this metaphor, it has been argued that the totality of life can be found within a song. Like life, a song is nothing more than an abbreviated journey with a beginning, middle and end. As we grow with the song, our perception of it changes and when it ends, we sometimes can experience a loss. We as listeners enter into an intimate relationship with the piece and have, whether emotionally or physically, been altered. Thus according to Prosser (2011) song is a world and a life in it of itself.

It must also be noted that music is able to affect displaced communities in a more tangible manner as it often acts as the bridge between these communities and their “homeland.” As the music enters the ears of displaced persons, it is able to invoke memories of home for the listener. Depending on the experience had by the listener this can either invoke a feeling of longing or, as will be seen in the case of rap in the context of the black diaspora, a hope for a better tomorrow (Prosser, 2011). This is because the music does not necessarily invoke the memory of a homeland (while Africa plays a central role in many songs and in the music of many artists, this is often of the mythologized variety and cannot be returned to as such), but a history of racial subjugation and oppression in the land of supposed opportunity.

Utopia For The Black Diaspora: The Creation Of Black Identity And Utopia In Rap

To begin, much of the theoretical framework used for the purposes of this paper is derived from the scholarship found in Paul Gilroy’s influential piece, The Black Atlantic. First, it is of great importance to briefly describe his theories concerning modernity and the black identity as it stands now. In describing how scholars and political leaders had originally positioned the black community, Gilroy explains that the black experience was often either viewed in an essentialist manner or in a pluralist manner. The former often came in two varieties with the more important being (for the purposes of this paper) that of the strategic variety employed by Black Nationalist leaders throughout the Civil Rights movement. The “strategic essentialism” employed by these individuals harkened back to the mythical Motherland of Africa that black individuals in the Americas shared in common. This homogenization of the black experience was used to collectivize against global white supremacy and racial inequality found in many Western nations. The second position, plurality, is similar to that of the postmodern critique of race because it states that any attempt to homogenize the experiences of the black community is essentialist because race is a social construction. Furthermore, it argues this collectivization often ignored the lived reality of Africa, as it exists today. Finally, those that hold to this position have stated that they feared that this homogenization only furthered the power had by racist institutions that stereotype black identity for its own exploitative purposes. However, the problem with plurality has been in its inability in creating a movement based in its negativism (Gilroy, 1993).

Given the problems found in both these positions, Gilroy offers an alternative view of modernity and the black identity. Specifically, he explains the modern black identity, to some degree, lies between these two positions. While all identities, race included, are socially constructed, there is at times a common experience based in the location, history, and culture that a person finds themselves to be a part of. This experience then interacts with larger discourses and helps inform an identity, which is constantly in flux. It should be noted that this identity may in fact combine with and influence other identities and discourses. This makes it possible to collectivize in a manner that avoids the essentialist trappings found in previous Black Nationalist movements (Gilroy, 1993).

It is in this hybrid, or creolized identity that one finds rap’s placement in the modern black community. Rap is considered to be a part of this modern definition of “blackness” because of its origins as the creolization of various cultural elements stemming from black experiences in The United States, the Caribbean and
Africa. Furthermore, the music is thoroughly influenced by the convergence of past and present as the diaspora, specifically the slave trade, is often “actively reimagined in the present” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 74) to connect listeners historically, criticize the larger powers that created this situation of destitution and benefit from it, and show how the effects of the slave trade continue to have real world consequences.

“Black music,” and rap specifically, has been integral in this effort to connect the past and present because it transcends the realm of academia and allows individuals to actively take part in the formation of an identity, which was often in opposition to the monolithic definitions espoused both by academia and those in power. The gatekeepers of this experience are seen in the musicians as they are often the ones that directly speak about a black experience that the masses deem more readily accessible and easier connect to (Gilroy, 1993, p. 76-78). Simply put, while there can be no universal black experience, rap music exists and flourishes because of its use of a “common fund of urban experiences, caused by the effect of similar segregation, as well as by the memory of slavery, a legacy of Africanisms, and a stock of religious experiences defined by both” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 83).

The importance of rap in terms of the experience had by the black diaspora does not end simply in the description of what occurred and what currently is. Instead, rap is able to create a new community not based in reality, but instead in the desires and fantasies had by the artists. Rap often uses the invocation of a world that exists free of racialized oppression that is not far removed from the world as it exists today. This is not some civilization that exists in the minds of white consumers in the United States would never be no universal black experience, rap music exists and flourishes because of its use of a “common fund of urban experiences, caused by the effect of similar segregation, as well as by the memory of slavery, a legacy of Africanisms, and a stock of religious experiences defined by both” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 83).

The importance of rap in terms of the experience had by the black diaspora does not end simply in the description of what occurred and what currently is. Instead, rap is able to create a new community not based in reality, but instead in the desires and fantasies had by the artists. Rap often uses the invocation of a world that exists free of racialized oppression that is not far removed from the world as it exists today. This is not some civilization that exists in the minds of science fiction authors, but simply a society that holds equality as a central value. This is important for members of the black diaspora (both listeners and musicians) because “by posing the world as it is against the world as the racially subordinated would like it to be, this musical culture supplies a great deal of the courage required to go on living in the present” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 36).

**Playa Daddy, Sapphire And Jezebel: Complex Gender Relations In Rap Music**

With a brief examination of both the utility of music for communities in diaspora and rap music’s particular role for the black diaspora complete, it is now possible to begin the examination of contemporary debates within the rap community. Specifically, the next section will examine the complex and ever-evolving history of gender relations within the genre. This will entail a close examination of the three gendered archetypes that we see present in this particular utopia: The Playa Daddy, the Sapphire and the Jezebel.

To begin, let us first examine the evolution of the “Playa Daddy,” as it is this role that will be most readily present throughout the course of Watch The Throne. This is a relatively new phenomenon in rap. With its creation came a new definition of masculinity that largely counters previous definitions found within one of the more popular subcategories of the genre, gangster rap. Within that subcategory, black male entertainers were defined by a “fearsome, criminal masculinity” (Randolph, 2006, p. 206) that emphasized violence as the best possible means of gaining power within a society filled with hate. However, unlike previous rap artists like Public Enemy, this violence was not directed at the various institutions that benefited from the subjugation of the black community, but at the community itself. Male artists were generally pictured in angry poses and in all black clothing to further project a sense of authority. It is here that I feel it appropriate to re-emphasize the fact that the consumer base during this period was largely white and it has been theorized that the reason for the proliferation of this violent subgenre lay in the fact that it confirmed the hegemonic racist ideologies had by its consumers (Randolph, 2006, p. 215). Of course, it should be noted that this was understood and used strategically by many artists that performed this masculinity, as one of the leaders of gangster rap, Ice Cube (son of two professors at UCLA), explained that white consumers in the United States would never

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4 It should be noted here that this paper is specifically examining “playa rap,” one of the many subcultures found within rap music. This particular genre began in the late 1990s and differs greatly from the “gangster rap” subculture that defines most common media presentations and academic discussions on rap music. While it is still present, the most popular artists would most likely fall under the new “playa rap” subgroup. Furthermore, it differs from the self-conscious rap community whose main focus is to critique larger institutions of oppression (Randolph, 2006, p. 206).
purchase music that offered nuanced examinations of the black community (Randolph, 2006, p 206).

“Playa Rap” differed greatly from this type of music because of its emphasis on both sensuality and consumption. While sex has largely been a part of rap since its inception, “playa rap” altered its gendered dynamics and the role of the male in this largely heteronormative activity. Specifically, the male is to woo his partner in some manner (though usually done with either smooth words or the purchase of gifts) and together they form a relationship that is to last for either that night or a lifetime. This directly contests previous notions of black male sexuality as described by “gangster rap” that was hyper-aggressive and, at times, made reference to sexual assault (Randolph, 2006). Furthermore, this emphasis on sensuality is of particular importance as it can “be understood as Black men reclaiming the autonomy of their own bodies” (Randolph, 2006, p. 207) because black men have, throughout history, been “denied the pleasure of enjoying their own bodies” (Randolph, 2006, p. 207) for the sake of various agendas had by institutions and ideologies in power. Consumption and participation within the capitalist system, previously feminized activities within rap, became particularly important in this genre within the context of a post-industrial United States. Informing this desire to consume is a context in which one sees poverty disproportionately affect the black community and little effort on the part of the government to rectify this situation. Due to this institutional indifference and because capitalism is unlikely to be destroyed, artists took it upon themselves to emphasize consumption and the display of wealth as a new method to demonstrate power (Randolph, 2006, p 207).

However, masculinity does not stop here, as this new genre of music will place emphasis on a new role previously ignored by rap music: fatherhood. This new definition takes place in a cultural context that largely paints and stereotypes black fathers as either invisible agents within the household or completely removed from the house, thus abdicating any responsibility as a parent. While it is true that single-mother households are common within the black community (and many other racial communities), this discourse and cultural dialogue ignores many of the institutional and economic oppressions that cause tension within the household. This tension, caused by the inability to work as a “provider” then led to a flight from the home for some black fathers (Oware, 2001, p.1-2). It is this context in which “playa rap” finds itself forming, thus further altering the previous definition of black masculinity in rap music. In “playa rap” artists place an incredible amount of importance on the role of the good father who is able to both love and provide for his wife and children. This is usually juxtaposed with criticisms of their own fathers who are often portrayed as absent from the artist’s life. While they are far from perfect (particularly with regards to their relationship with their partner), these new fathers want to be a part of their children’s lives to avoid the pain they had felt growing up in a single-mother household (Oware, 2001).

In spite of the changing definitions of masculinity, how women and femininity are defined within rap music has largely been static. Specifically, one sees both the role of the Sapphire and the Jezebel present early on in rap and only further reified by its various forms. Before unpacking and explaining these terms, I feel it would be beneficial to first address the academic debate centered on gender, specifically on the objectification of and misogyny directed at black females in rap music.

First, it must be understood that the misogyny found in rap music does not exist in a vacuum, but instead is created within a largely patriarchal and misogynistic society that contributes to the music’s view on women. Furthermore, there is often little attempt to actually criticize the institutions that support ideologies that support violence against women. Instead one sees the individualization of violence at the level of the artist and it often appears to be more of an attempt on the part of critics to “further stigmatize black males as violent and/or criminal” (Rebollo-Gil & Moras, 2012, p. 119). Simply put, it is within this context that both sex and violence become important

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5 According to the most recent supplemental poverty measure, approximately 24% of black males fall under the poverty line and 29% of black females fall under the line (Institute For Women’s Policy Research 3)

6 It should be noted here that rappers, by and large, are highly respectful of their mothers. One can find numerous songs dedicated motherhood and mothers, however, express some pain and anger from lacking a father figure (Oware, 2011, p. 6).
institutions as a method to distract people from individualizing blame was employed by larger racist women who that challenge male authority and cause fault of systemic oppression as the reason for black poverty. Poverty was not the unsavory because larger discourses define these traits as being a “money hungry, scandalous, manipulating and demanding women” (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 952). With this in mind, I feel that we can now examine the role of the Sapphire and the Jezebel in rap.

To begin, it should first be noted that both these definitions have their roots in US history and often stem from outside the black community. These figures were often employed by a racist white population as a means of empowerment through the continued disenfranchisement of black women. Because of the continued use of these stereotypes, one sees black women stigmatized by general US society and the permeation of these roles into the black community (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 947). Historically and within rap, a female identified as “Sapphire” was seen as being a “money-hungry, scandalous, manipulating and demanding women” (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 947). While the term is not often employed directly by rappers, the term most closely associated with this definition is the word “b*tch.” This is a female that has a strong will and thus must be silenced by her male counterpart because of the fear that she will challenge his masculinity. More so, these attributes are seen as unsavory because larger discourses define these traits as the reason for black poverty. Poverty was not the fault of systemic oppression, but of strong-willed black women who that challenge male authority and cause them to flee from the household. This method of individualizing blame was employed by larger racist institutions as a method to distract people from questioning the actual institutions responsible for poverty (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 947-948). The second term, “Jezebel” has some resonance in other communities, but is particularly pronounced in its use in rap to describe black women. This individual is a “sex object that can be used and abused in any form to satisfy the sexual desires of a man” (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 948) often in the hope to receive some kind of material good. Once again, like in the case of the “Sapphire,” the new term used in place of “Jezebel” is “ho.” While the terms and identities are sometimes used interchangeably, it is important to note the differences between the two with the central being that the “ho” exists to please her male partner and is often defined by him (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 947-948).

With gender roles within this particular genre of rap explained, it is now possible to define the particular utopia created throughout the course of Watch The Throne.

**Definition Of The (Gendered) Utopia: Contestation Of Global White Supremacy, The Embracing Of Global Capitalism And The Push For Better Fathers**

With the general theoretical background necessary for this paper explained, it is now possible to conceptualize this particular utopia. The promised-land created by Kanye West and Jay-Z is made possible thanks to the universalization of the black experience and the invocation of black history. Furthermore, the concept of “black excellence,” a phrase used by the artists in discussing the status of black Americans within the utopia of this album, is defined by the following: contestation of global white supremacy, sensuality and consumption, and fatherhood. Before analyzing individual songs, let us first briefly define each of these sections.

In examining global white supremacy, it becomes important to first note that this is an ideology rooted in the history of colonization and global exploitation of persons from the Global South. This ideology is often to the service of individuals that identify as Caucasian and is sometimes the basis of racialized oppression of non-white individuals. The effects of this have been explored in previous sections; however, I would like add one caveat to this theory. Specifically, global white supremacy has become particularly important in terms of beauty standards for
men and women. Simply, in many regions and communities throughout the world, one sees a push to have a lighter skin tone. This is because a lighter or whiter skin tone is often associated with a higher socioeconomic class and, more importantly for the purposes of this paper, power (Pierre, 2008, p. 21). Both of these versions of global white supremacy will play an important role in terms of defining this utopia. In this utopia, one sees the desire to create a land that has racial equality, not only in terms of political and economic power, but also in what is considered beautiful.

Within this utopia one sees the codification and reification of the masculinity formed and supported by the “playa” aesthetic. Specifically, this will be a realm that offers men freedom to enjoy their sexuality in a multitude of manners. Of course it should be noted that these sexual relationships are problematic because the power most certainly resides with the male partner females, barring only a few exceptions described in this utopia are left with little power and must depend on men both for support and happiness. They are, like in the case of the Jezebel/ho described previously, both defined by and created for the pleasure of men residing in this utopia. Completing the reliance on the “playa masculinity” for this utopia, both artists will pay particular attention to the importance of displaying wealth so as to display one’s power. Money and the use of it are key to this Eden, thus framing the utopia within a pro-consumerist ideology.

Finally, the role of the good father cannot be left out of discussions of this utopia. Much like many other contemporary rap artists, both Kanye West and Jay-Z come from single-mother households. It is because of this experience that both artists hope to create a utopia, in which fathers are present in the household, love their children and provide for their family. While one could problematize their emphasis on the father/son relationship, I feel this directly relates to their personal experience and a desire to reach some personal fulfillment.

**Black Excellence: Watch The Throne as a New (Gendered) Utopia**

In order to best define this album as a utopia within the parameters described above, I shall compartmentalize the album in the following manner: “Promise to Never Repeat Him” (the role of a good father), “A Playa’s Paradise” (validation of the playa masculinity), and “All Black Everything” (examination of the contestation of global white supremacy). Furthermore, as will quickly become apparent when examining the third subsection, “A Playa’s Paradise,” this is an incredibly gendered utopia and mainly to the benefit of men. A more complete analysis of the gendered dynamics of this utopia will follow in the next main section. I will first establish, through lyrical analysis, this album as reflective of the black diaspora. Specifically, it is in its use of the black history of forced migration and institutional oppression that one sees the album’s placement within the community.

**Not Bad For Some Immigrants**

This album does not hide its reliance on the black diasporic identity, as it is this identity and the history of it that proves to be most important in terms of the creation of a utopia. More so, this shared history will be employed by both Kanye West and Jay-Z strategically in order to develop the new black nationalist movement needed to bring about this utopia.

As quoted in at the beginning of this paper, Kanye West, in the soaring and aggressive chorus to “Who Gon Stop Me,” memorably invokes the black diaspora in the lyrics “Something like a Holocaust/ Millions of our people lost.” Not only is this a direct reference to the African slave trade, but it also hints at the fact that while we, as a society, are approximately one-hundred and fifty years removed from the actual event, its effects continue to reverberate and resonate within the black community. By placing such a political line at the forefront of a possible single, West demonstrates an unwillingness to abandon or ignore the event that is most influential in terms of shaping black experience in the Americas. While this is the

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7 Future scholarship would benefit from an analysis of the complexity of heteronormativity over the course the album. While both individuals identify as straight, the usual heteronormative framework used to analyze and critique rap albums is problematized by the high-profile presence of Frank Ocean, one of the biggest stars within the hip hop community and who also happens to identify as bisexual.

8 The portions following the sections establishing the theoretical framework for this paper are named in such a manner to reflect either song titles or lyrics found within certain songs.
most assertive use of the slave trade, one quick scan of the lyrics to “Otis” (the album’s first hit single) shows another reference to it in Jay-Z’s verse stating:

Welcome to Havana
Smokin Cubanitas with Castro in cabanas
Viva México, Cubano
Dominicano, all the plugs that I know
Drivin Benzes, with no benefits
Not bad, huh? For some immigrants
Build your fences, we diggin tunnels

While not necessarily apparent at first glance, this verse works as a subtle reference to two historical events the African slave trade and colonization. Jay-Z lists several locations, the Dominican Republic specifically, that play a key role in the slave trade. Furthermore, by including other areas affected by colonization, he demonstrates the integration of cultures and experiences that help shape new Caribbean and Latin identities. What is of most interest is his ironic use of the word “immigrants” given the forced nature of black migration to the Americas. Finally, he adds in a little humor in undercutting societal expectations of both Black and Latino communities, both disproportionately affected by European colonization, by showing the grandeur that the communities have and hope to achieve. One might ask why the artist decided to make the reference as subtle as it is, to which I can only speculate that it was done as an effort to avoid the alienation of fans. Those aware of the history of the black community are more readily able to decode the language used by Jay-Z and are thus privy to knowledge others may overlook.

The duo does not simply use the history of the African slave trade to unite the black community, but instead also examines the history of institutional oppression and indifference directed at blacks in the United States. While one could argue that this alone allows for the demystification of a universal black identity, the artists still position the black experience in America as one filled with gang violence and drugs. This is best exemplified in the deeper cut, “Murder to Excellence,” in which the artists take turns detailing various contemporary societal ills befalling the black community, while also explaining this is also an opportunity for the community to rise to excellence with Kanye West and Jay-Z at the leadership position. West beautifully details violence experienced within the community and the apparent lack of care displayed by the national government when he raps:

And I’m from the murder capital, where they
murder for capital
Heard about at least 3 killings this afternoon
Lookin’ at the news like damn I was just with
him after school,
No shop class but half the school got a tool,
And I could die any day type attitude
Plus his little brother got shot reppin’ his avenue
It’s time for us to stop and re-define black power
41 souls murdered in 50 hours

The paper read murder, black on black murder,
The paper read murder, black on black murder
again
Murder again…

Is it genocide?
Cause I can still hear his momma cry, know the
family traumatized
Shots left holes in his face, bout piranha-size
The old pastor closed the cold casket
And said the church ain’t got enough room for all
the tombs
It’s a war going on outside, we ain’t safe from
I feel the pain in my city wherever I go
314 soldiers died in Iraq
509 died in Chicago

This stark description of black on black violence both shocks the listener and, important for the accomplishment of the goals had by West, elicits empathy on the part of listeners that identify as a part of the black diaspora. Most impressive is his description of the personal psychological effects created by this violence such as depression, hopelessness, and a general feeling of insecurity. All of these traits are common for individuals displaced from their homeland and given little aid by the host country. Further complicating this analysis of violence

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9 The phrase “deeper cut” usually refers to a track on an album that is not going to be a released as a single, or a song that is to be consumed on mass outside of the context of the album.
is the indictment of institutional indifference. This can be found in the final stanza in which West questions whether or not this rampant violence can be classified as a self-inflicted genocide or, at the very least, a war. In spite of this warlike environment, one that tops the conflict in Iraq in terms of fatalities, the US government has largely ignored the plight of the community and allows it to self-destruct. It is this void in security that allows for the beginning of a new black nationalist movement, led by Kanye West and Jay-Z, towards “Black Excellence.”

Promise To Never Repeat Him

As described previously, both fatherhood and family becomes particularly important in the shaping of “Black Excellence” within this utopia. In this utopia family is a peaceful arena that must be supported and enjoyed by black males. In “Made in America,” Jay-Z raps,

I pledge allegiance, uh, to my Grandma
For that banana pudding, our piece of Americana
Our apple pie was supplied through Arm & Hammer
Straight out the kitchen, shh don't wake Nana!
Built a republic, that still stands
I'm trying to lead a nation, to leave to my little man's
Or my daughter.

While sweet and filled with a nice sentiment, these lines play a more important role in demonstrating the importance of family to Jay-Z and within this utopia. Not only does Jay-Z express interest in participating in family life, but he pledges allegiance to the matriarch present in his life, the grandmother. This act, while small in actual effect, is important to note because it shows the value of family as something that supersedes previous loyalty to the United States. This is because within the context of an uncaring government that may in fact actively participate in the continued oppression of the black community, it is one’s family that can be counted on for protection and love. Family is the new nation.

While the whole family is important within this context of “Black Excellence,” the relationship between father and son plays a central role in defining masculinity in this utopia. This ideology is epitomized on the track “New Day,” in which both artists write brief odes to their theoretical sons. As previously seen, it is the lyrics of Jay-Z that best demonstrate this thought.

I just wanna take ya to a barber
Bondin’ on charters, all the sh*t that I never did
Teach ya good values, so you cherish it
Took me 26 years to find my path
My only job is cuttin’ the time in half

When Jay-Z raps these lyrics, he defines his central role as a responsible father. A father that will both be present in his son’s life for the most trivial of events, like a haircut, and to offer advice on how to best find one’s way in the United States. He, realizing the various mistakes that he has made over the many years, wants to circumvent this and help his son find the right path. While one could argue that this line of argument does in fact, to some degree, fail to take into account the various institutional issues affecting black fatherhood, these lyrics read less of a criticism of an absent father and more as a rally cry for a connection to one’s child.

A Playa’s Paradise

In examining this new world, it quickly becomes apparent that it is very much modeled by the various desires had by the archetypal “playa.” Specifically, one finds the world of Watch The Throne divided between the two artists with Kanye West’s lyrics most indebted to the pursuit of male sensuality and sexual pleasure. While certainly interested in living the life of luxury, West’s most interesting and impassioned verses are often those involving sex. His partner, Jay-Z appears less focused on sensuality more interested in displaying his power in a different manner: spending money. Instead of challenging the capitalist system that has benefited globally from the destitution of the Global South, Jay-Z sees little chance of a true revolution against this system and openly embraces it.

To be frank, sex is a key aspect of this album. Specifically, sexual gratification and sensuality, previously shunned by older forms of rap, come to be

10 The removal of troops from Iraq had not yet occurred at the time of this album’s release.
defining aspects of this utopia. I should note here that two of the songs used here will be examined through a feminist lens in the next section. As discussed in the specific examination of black masculinity within the context of “playa rap,” the album is focused on male sexual pleasure, which one can see when West raps on “Ni**as in Paris”:

She said Ye can we get married at the mall?  
I said look you need to crawl 'fore you ball  
Come and meet me in the bathroom stall  
And show me why you deserve to have it all.

Within these lyrics one quickly sees that women within this utopia are seen to be only as valuable as their sexual prowess. More so, West displays little interest in whether or not the female addressed is interested in sexual pleasure because he defines feminine pleasure as material. In this utopia, it is men that receive sexual pleasure from women and in return, women are given material goods through this heteronormative coupling. Further, within this relationship and in the bedroom men have sole control. In “No Church in the Wild” he states, “You will not control the threesome/Just roll the weed up until I get me some.” West quickly demonstrates that the act of sex is solely for his pleasure. As argued in the previous section, lines and lyrics such as these have been theorized as the attempt by black male rappers to reclaim their bodies in the face of a history of being denied access to sexual pleasure from various racist institutions. This very well could be true; however, we shall reexamine these songs in the next section as the reification of racialized archetypes (“The Sapphire” and “The Jezebel”), thus further stigmatizing black women in the wider culture.

Jay-Z pays little attention to sex and sensuality in this album. Instead, Jay-Z is more interested in wealth because this is how one largely gains respect in a global capitalist culture. Returning to “Otis,” Jay-Z explains that money is the most important tool for one to gain power. With it, one is able to avoid jail time and purchase access to other nations at will. One can speculate that like in the case of the vow to his family, this appeal to a cosmopolitan identity can be seen as an attempt to limit the power had by a US government that has been indifferent to the needs of the black community.

**All Black Everything**

Black collectivization is central to the creation of this new utopia and is seen in the constant evocation of the color in everything from the color of a car to the color of one’s clothing. This is the hidden meaning behind the title for this subsection and the line popularized by Jay-Z. However, it is not material goods that I wish to focus on in this subsection as I feel that is often more demonstrative of consumption than of political power, which I feel to be the purpose of this particular attempt at collectivization. Specifically, I feel that both artists wish to use black collectivization to contest global white supremacy. I argue that they wish to do this on two fronts: politically and with beauty standards.

In examining the political dimensions of “All Black Everything,” it behooves this analysis of *Watch The Throne* to return to “Murder to Excellence.” In particular, it is this verse sung by both Kanye West and Jay-Z:

Run up on Yeezy11 the wrong way I might murk ya  
Flee in the G-450 I might surface  
Political refugee asylum can be purchased  
Uh, everything's for sale  
I got five passports, I'm never goin' to jail

This verse demonstrates that money is not a thing of evil, but the item needed to be comfortable in this new society. With money, not only is one able to access items like a Mercedes Benz (shortened to “Mercer”) and a G-450 (private jet commonly owned by celebrities), but also fame as demonstrated by his reference to the paparazzi. Furthermore, money does not simply buy one material goods and fame, but, most importantly within this utopia, political power. With little of the subtlety seen previously in “Otis,” Jay-Z explains that money is the most important tool for one to gain power. With it, one is able to avoid jail time and purchase access to other nations at will. One can speculate that like in the case of the vow to his family, this appeal to a cosmopolitan identity can be seen as an attempt to limit the power had by a US government that has been indifferent to the needs of the black community.

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11 Yeezy is the common nickname used by Kanye West.
and Jay-Z that best demonstrates the power of collectivization:

The new black elite, they say my black card bear
the mark of the beast
I repeat, my religion is the beat
My verse is like church, my Jesus piece, now
please, domino, domino
Only spot a few blacks the higher I go
What’s up to Will\textsuperscript{12}, shoutout to O\textsuperscript{13}
That ain’t enough, we gon’ need a million more

and

Yea it’s all messed up when it’s nowhere to go
So we won’t take the time out til’ we reach the T.O.P.
From paroles to hold G’s, sold keys, low keys
We like the promised land of the OG’s
In the past if you picture events like a black tie
What’s the last thing you expect to see, black guys
What’s the life expectancy for black guys?
The system’s working effectively

These lines are not subtle and they are employed strategically by individuals who hope to begin a movement towards a better society for the black community. Within the first set of lines one sees Jay-Z discuss the creation of a new black elite in the United States by invoking figures like Will Smith and President Obama. These are individuals, very much like Jay-Z and Kanye West, who have been mainstreamed into US culture and exist in places of power in spite of a global culture of white supremacy. And yet, as noted by these artists, the movement is far from complete as there are still millions of members within the black community who that live in poverty and face racialized acts of violence. It is because of this that the movement must carry on. In the second quoted section, one sees Kanye West tackle the lack of power often afforded to the black community because of institutional oppression. He states that while the community has made great strides in terms of gaining socioeconomic power, it continues to fall victim to racist discourses that stereotype the black community as forever destined for poverty. As noted previously, he hints that this is the result systemic oppression directed at the community.

And yet, it is not simply political freedom that Jay-Z longs for, but freedom from beauty standards that define whiteness as the global measure by which all men and women are compared to. Ironically, this sentiment is captured in the most problematic song of the album, “That’s My B*tch.” In it, Jay-Z raps

How can somethin' so gangsta be so pretty in pictures?
Ripped jeans and a blazer and some Louboutin slippers
Uh, Picasso was alive he woulda made her
That's right ni**a Mona Lisa can't fade her
I mean Marilyn Monroe, she's quite nice
But why all the pretty icons always all white?
Put some colored girls in the MoMA
Half these broads ain’t got nothing on Willona
Don’t make me bring Thelma in it
Bring Halle, bring Penélope and Salma in it

Parenthetically it should be noted that the individual that Jay-Z is referring to at the beginning of this verse is his wife, Beyoncé. In this verse, he examines and typifies white beauty standards by alluding to Pablo Picasso and the Mona Lisa, a piece often times referred to by casual fans of art as the standard to which all other artwork should be compared. Obviously, he finds this highly problematic and contests this idea by exclaiming that this individual does not hold a candle to his wife. More so, he openly questions this white standard and lists off various non-white and international actresses that counter the idea that one must have a lighter skin tone in order to be deemed beautiful by society. By reconceptualizing and challenging white beauty standards, these artists continue to contest global white supremacy.

That’s My B**ch: A Paradise Based In Domination And Objectification

While one can argue, as I have, that this utopia created over the course of the album is noble in some respects, one cannot ignore the problematic gender

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\textsuperscript{12} This is a reference to Will Smith.
\textsuperscript{13} This is a reference to either President Obama or Oprah, though given the gendered dynamics of this utopia one can speculate that this is a reference to Obama.
relations found throughout *Watch The Throne*.

This is because while the promised-land created by Kanye West and Jay-Z certainly sounds like a paradise for men, this is largely no safe space for black women. Yes, there is a challenge to global beauty standards; however, the themes of domination and objectification are too pervasive, which dilutes this positive message to a large degree. Much of this sexism is based in the employment of the previously discussed characters, the Sapphire and the Jezebel.

To begin, let us first examine the Jezebel, or “ho,” archetype reified throughout the course of this album. I choose to begin with this role because it is more commonly employed in the album. Within minutes of the album’s beginning, one hears Kanye West rap,

Thinkin’ bout the girl in all-leopard
Who was rubbin’ the wood like Kiki Shepard
Two tattoos, one read “No Apologies”
The other said “Love is cursed by monogamy”

Thus, he defines women as there for his sexual pleasure. Personality and aspirations mean little to West, as women, within the context of this utopia, are defined by their ability to provide men sexual gratification. Interestingly, one could extrapolate from his discussion of monogamy the idea that he is contesting heteronormative ideologies that often demonize other sexualities like polyamory. However, given the context of the album I would argue that this is used by West as a justification to further sexualize women because these multiple partnerships are unlikely to be equal. Furthermore, the agency of women is limited to that of an inanimate object, which is seen in a throw-away line from “Ni**as in Paris,” in which he proudly boasts to Jay-Z, “You know how many hot b*tches I own?” The use of the word “own” implies that women are nothing more than property to be traded among men for sex. Women, in this context, are not future leaders or even equal members, but simply “something” there to provide men with some form of gratification.

Women that contest this objectification are dealt with swiftly and are silenced within this gendered utopia. This leaves little room for the existence of the Sapphire, an individual who challenges the masculinity of the men by either criticizing male domination or by maintaining independence. This is because these acts, while seemingly positive, are framed as negative traits that fracture the utopia due to the fact that it challenges male authority. This person is belittled and characterized as a person that only cares about her own pleasure and, when engaged in a partnership with a male, is only present for material benefit. Unlike the Jezebel, the Sapphire (or “b*tch” as referred to in contemporary rap music) is defined in opposition to the male. This hostile relationship can first be seen in “Ni**as in Paris” when Kanye West plainly states “Bougie” girl, grab her hand/ F*ck that b*tch she don’t wanna dance.”

The economically independent female, or “bougie girl,” rebukes West’s aggressive advance and is quickly ostracized by the utopia. She challenged his authority, and thus his masculinity. This act causes her to be deemed unfit to exist within the utopia. This all can be seen throughout the course of Kanye West’s lyrics on the track “That’s my B*tch.” Specifically, when he raps,

I paid for them titties, get your own
It aint safe in the city, watch the throne
You say I care more about them basquion's, basquiat
She learning a new word, its yacht
Blew the World up as soon as I hit the club with her
Too Short called, told me "I fell in love with her"
Seen by actors, ball players and drug dealers
And some lesbians that never loved ni**as

Opening this silo of highly gendered language, West quickly states that if the Sapphire wishes to live without him, then she will have to live without his money and that the world outside a relationship with him is dangerous. Furthermore, he proclaims that her success and entrance into the world of luxury was dependent on his aid. Finally, one sees the use of

\[\text{This is an abbreviation of the word bourgeoisie, or the French elite in the 1800s. The term “bougie” has recently become popular as a manner of describing an economically independent individual that acts in a belittling manner towards individuals deemed to be of “lower class.”}\]

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\[\text{It is unclear why the lyrics analyzed for this section belong solely to Kanye West.}\]
homophobic language to disparage women that choose not to enter into a relationship with him. This is because, as defined within this utopia, a female’s role is to either offer up sex or enter into a docile relationship with her male counterpart, in the hope of creating a family in the future. If a female decides against this arrangement than she is defined as a “b*tch” that must also be a lesbian. Simply put, this is no paradise for women, but the exchange of one patriarchal and misogynistic system for another.

**Rome Is Burning: Destruction Of The Utopia**

It is fair to ask as the listener, given this new knowledge of the gendered dynamics of this album, what is to become of the utopia in *Watch The Throne*? This is answered by the creators of the album and that answer is that it must self-destruct or face insurrection. Fittingly, one sees the destruction of this kingdom on the final track of the album, “Why I Love You.” While it would benefit this paper to quote the entire track, I shall instead focus on this portion to begin the analysis of this fallen paradise:

> Picture if you will, that the throne was burning  
> Rome was burning, and I’m sitting in the corner  
> all alone burning  
> Why does it always end up like this?  
> Something that we don’t determine  
> Same people that I fought for  
> That I fight for, that I ride for  
> That I live for, that I die for  
> Be the reason that these n**as is alive for  
> And they want me dead  
> But I’m so sorry but I just can’t die for you

Immediately, Jay-Z declares himself as the leader of this movement (or the king of this kingdom) towards “black excellence.” Not only is he the leader of this movement, but he explains that the only reason for his existence has been to fight for the liberation of the black community against the various institutions of oppression described previously. Of course, this line of argument is similar to that made by the feudal lords of yore that only ruled because the people were supposedly unfit to govern themselves. And yet it is not this act of condescension that brings about the collapse of his empire. Instead, I argue that the reason Jay-Z (and Kanye West, though he seems positioned as a second-in-command) loses his utopia is because of his attempt to universalize the black community under this banner of “black excellence.”

This is because the album does not fully embrace the modern hybrid identity described by Paul Gilroy. While the album does in fact make a noble attempt to combine the history of the black community (invocations of the African slave trade and colonization) with contemporary issues facing black individuals specifically in the United States, it fails to take into account one key detail. That detail is that there is no homogenous black experience in the United States, thus making any attempt to universalize it based on one’s personal life inherently problematic. While there is some similarity in terms of experience, the black community in the US is still a fractured community that has distinct histories, desires and needs. Furthermore, the attempt by Kanye West and Jay-Z to create a utopia was doomed to fail if only because it also alienates approximately half the black community, women. By positioning women as only existing within the utopia to either please men sexually or be docile wives, these artists are undoubtedly going to feel a great deal of resistance. Given these complications, it should come as no surprise that this utopia was a futile enterprise. Given the option of destruction through internal conflict and suicide, Kanye West and Jay-Z choose the latter.

**No Church in the Wild: Lessons Learned From Watch the Throne**

As this paper comes to a close, I feel it important to reflect on the lessons learned from the ashes of this utopia. Specifically, this is an opportunity to ruminate on the utility of a utopia in modern society. While wonderful in concept (a land that promises to rectify contemporary or past sufferings), most utopias are framed within the author’s own experience. This means that they, to some degree, are an imposition of one’s idea of perfection and paradise over another’s idea. This is further complicated when one examines the problematic gender relations present in this album and other supposed utopias. Yet, with that said, I feel it premature to completely reject the idea of a utopia in literature because, as discussed by Paul Gilroy, this idea of a utopia, works less as a promise and more as a catalyst. If used properly, a utopia can be used to inspire the hope needed to bring about societal change.
and revolution. While both artists fail to inspire this social revolution over the course of Watch The Throne, I, an avid consumer of rap, look forward to traveling to the “new utopias” created by rap’s next generation of Queens and Kings.

References

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This review of Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli’s book Someone You Know is undertaken from an analytical perspective, from my personal response as the sister-in-law of a young man who died from AIDS, and as a former PhD candidate of the author. This book is a biography that chronicles the journey, from the mid to late 1980s, of Maria alongside her friend Jon, as Jon finds out he is HIV-positive and subsequently becomes unwell, eventually dying from AIDS-related complications.

The book contains six parts. Part one introduces us to Jon and Maria’s lives and friendship. We learn about Maria, her Italo-Australian background and how societal preconceptions of what it means to be an Italian female in Australia are challenged by Maria herself in how she lives and what she believes. Equally complex is Jon, whom we learn comes from a religious family who do not accept that he is gay. As Maria recalls in the early chapters, Jon relates their respective identities to that of chameleons, “changing colours” in order to negotiate the multiple identities they take on in their multiple worlds. We also meet some of the significant people and places in their individual and collective realms. Maria’s husband Rob, Jon’s then-partner and later, steadfast friend and carer Kevin are introduced to us. We also become acquainted with other friends and colleagues whose own journeys help to shape the book.

It took me a few pages to orientate myself in Jon and Maria’s world to start with, with chapters one and two throwing me into two different cities and points in time. From this point, however, the style of the book becomes familiar and we are clearly led in and out of Adelaide and Sydney, and the narratives that accompany each location. It is in part one that we are both comforted and confronted with everyday life events such as work and collegial relationships, family gatherings, holidays and house-hunting. Jon and
Maria’s shared workplace, a secondary school, provides the location in which much of the book is set. Maria’s clever juxtapositions mean that, on one level, these events appear mundane but, on another, they reveal the stigma, discrimination, isolation and prejudice that exist for gay men living in heteronormative worlds. I think of my brother-in-law, coincidentally named Jonathon, and what his life would have been like in the time before he knew he was HIV-positive. I never met Jonathon, so I read with interest this section of the book as it chronicles the mid-1980s. For readers alive in that era, the mention of cassette players and public phone booths is a nostalgic prompt. For younger readers, it is an insight into the world pre-smart phone and social media.

In part two, Jon and Maria’s lives and friendship are altered by two life-changing events. First, we accompany Jon and Maria to the doctor as they receive Jon’s diagnosis that he has tested positive for HIV. We also learn of Maria’s pregnancy around the same time and the simultaneous joy and grief that Maria feels in knowing that she is going to have a baby and, at the same time, watch her best friend die. The events in this short section deftly frame part three of the book. This third part is intimate and candid as we follow Jon’s grapple with his diagnosis and declining health and, at the same time, Maria’s fears that accompany many women throughout pregnancy, around miscarriage or other issues that can result in the loss of a foetus. There is again a powerful juxtaposition posed regarding the differences in support Jon and Maria receive for their respective health situations: “I am amazed at the amount of attention and support I receive because of my pregnancy. Meanwhile, Jon suffers alone with little support or encouragement…” (p.89). This raises for us the opportunity to reflect on contemporary society, and whether anything has changed for people with HIV.

We also watch as Maria struggles to know how to respond to Jon as he struggles the reality of his situation. Jon’s comparison of his bodily changes with that of Maria’s reminds us about societal stereotypes that serve to isolate: “aren’t you lucky? God’s taking me away, an ageing queen, and giving you in return a brand new lovable baby” (p.79). Maria writes about herself and about Jon in ways that bare their insecurities and foibles, which helps us to understand this is a biography about genuine people, viewed through a realist, rather than a nostalgic lens. The relationship between Jon and Maria is tested at this time by Jon insisting that his diagnosis of HIV is kept secret, compelling Maria to lie to work colleagues and some friends by saying he has cancer. This reminds me of my brother-in-law Jonathon, who kept his illness a secret until he was so ill he could no longer escape seeking medical attention and receiving his own diagnosis of HIV. As I read I imagine how Jon and Jonathon must have felt, shamed by their illness to the point they needed to hide it from friends and family members. I have asked my sister-in-law about this time in Jonathon’s life and watched her emotionally recount how Jonathon did not want anyone to know, not even his closest friends. Tears well in my eyes as I read, empathising for Maria in having to lie in order to protect Jon, and the mixed feelings she experiences as she progresses in her pregnancy whilst Jon’s health simultaneously declines. I agonize for Jon in not being able to safely disclose his illness because of the stigma of being a gay man with HIV. Jon and Jonathon’s journeys must be reminiscent of many, many people who are diagnosed with HIV, both then and now. I feel ashamed that, more than 25 years after the events in this book, people living with HIV are still unable to disclose their illness in safety.

We are stunned at the end of part three by Jon’s relocation to Sydney in order to get treatment and his saying goodbye to Maria via a letter to her. Jon explains the letter to Maria over the phone, saying “I couldn’t stand to be with you, knowing what we’ve been through. I’m scared I’ll never see you or the school again” (p.100). Whilst at first I am surprised that Jon uses a letter to say goodbye, at the same time, however, I feel we know Jon well enough to accept that he chose this way to depart. The pain I feel as I read this section of the book is surely a tiny fraction of how Jon must have felt to choose this way to leave his Adelaide life behind.

In part four of the book we are honoured to share in the intimate details of the birth of Maria’s baby, and this new chapter in her and Rob’s life. However, this joyful event is tempered by Jon’s significant decline in health. Maria describes the physical changes in Jon, hitting us with the cruel reality of AIDS: “For a moment, I am taken aback. He looks paler, thinner,
hesitant and vulnerable...I move forward to embrace him...Beneath my palms, I feel the rib-cage, his spine, his bony shoulder blades” (p.114). We silently witness how these stark physical changes herald changes in Jon and Maria’s relationship and we sense the helplessness Maria must feel as she watches Jon’s body decline. Jon speaks of death. He attempts to make sense of his mortality and the brutal way in which his life is being taken from him: “…I know that somewhere out there, in those infinite cycles of life and time, there is meaning in it all. It’s bloody awful getting there, but once I’ve shed this troublesome flesh, I’ll be free, at peace with myself, and powerful” (p.121).

Part five is the most compelling, and yet most difficult part of the book to read. We know that Jon is going to die. I don’t want to accept it, just as Maria writes of her own feelings of anxiety as she travels to Sydney to see Jon, who is in the final stages of his illness. I am in tears as I recall this section whilst writing this review, as I was in tears as I read it. Maria writes that she cries, and I cry with her. Intertwined in this pain that we experience through Maria, however, is a deep and profound sense of love and humanity as we are privileged to share Maria’s last days with Jon. We are there as she and his friends care for him in his final hours. We are also there as we see Maria and Jon’s friends grapple with the collision of their love for Jon with that of anger toward his now-present parents, whose views about homosexuality and AIDS have been a long-standing source of pain for Jon. For anyone who has been present when a loved one has died, this part of the book is utterly familiar. Maria deftly captures the conflicting feelings of all the different people surrounding the dying person: anger, fear, love, grief, humour all colliding as each person contends with the impending death of their loved one. This section of the book is very tangible; I feel like I am being absorbed into the pages, alongside Maria, feeling the temperature of the Sydney air, hearing the sounds in the hospice where Jon lays dying. I am again reminded of my brother-in-law Jonathon, and what I know about his last weeks in a hospital dying of AIDS, and I feel sorrow for him and for Jon, for having to die in young men’s bodies no longer recognizable because of the ravages of the virus.

Reading part six is like taking a deep breath after sobbing uncontrollably for a few minutes. Maria steadies our grief with her narrative around the hours, days and months after Jon’s death. She helps to move us from immediate anguish to a point of reflection about the entirety of her and Jon’s journey. Maria reminds us that life goes on and that, like life, her love for Jon continues.

Overall, this book is generous in the multiple insights it provides to us about stigma, vulnerability and friendship. Maria reveals her own insecurities and vulnerabilities in a way that helps us to distinctly feel what she is feeling. As a result, the book provokes in us an opportunity for deep introspection into our own beliefs and prejudices, both subconscious and obvious. The interspersion of anecdotes of everyday mundane life alongside the magnitude of dying is a powerful mechanism that Maria uses to remind us that living is not always as we anticipate. Someone You Know can be read as a historical account, or used as a means for discussing complex issues including homophobia, heteronormativity, stigma and discrimination. Within these issues, this book delivers a profound message about the fragility of the body and the enduring strength of friendship and love; a message that never grows passé. Humanity would do well to consider the issues raised in Someone You Know more often in everyday life.