ABSTRACT

Get Crunk!
The Performative Resistance of Atlanta Hip-Hop Party Music

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This dissertation offers an aesthetic and historical overview of crunk, a hip-hop subgenre that took form in Atlanta, Georgia during the late 1990s. Get Crunk! is an ethnography that draws heavily on methodologies from African-American studies, musicological analysis, and performance studies in order to discuss crunk as a performed response to the policing of black youth in public space in the 1990s. Crunk is a subgenre of hip-hop that emanated from party circuits in the American southeast during the 1990s, characterized by the prevalence of repeating chanted phrases, harmonically sparse beats, and moderate tempi. The music is often accompanied by images that convey psychic pain, i.e. contortions of the body and face, and a moshing dance style in which participants thrash against one another in spontaneously formed epicenters while chanting along with the music. Crunk’s ascension to prominence coincided with a moment in Atlanta’s history during which inhabitants worked diligently to redefine Atlanta for various political purposes. Some hoped to recast the city as a cosmopolitan tourist destination for the approaching new millennium, while others sought to recreate the city as a beacon of Southern gentility, an articulation of the city’s mythologized pre-Civil War existence; both of these positions impacted Atlanta’s growing hip-hop community, which had the twins goals of drawing in black youth tourism and creating and marketing an
easily identifiable Southern style of hip-hop for mainstream consumption; the result was crunk.

This dissertation investigates the formation and function of crunk methods of composition, performance, and listening in Southern recreational spaces, the ways in which artists and audiences negotiate identities based on notions of race, gender, and region through crunk, and various manifestations of aesthetic evaluation and moral panic surrounding crunk. The argument here is that the dynamic rituals of listening and emergent performance among crunk audiences constitute a kind of catharsis and social commentary for its primarily black youth listenership; one that lies beyond the scope of lyrical analysis and, accordingly requires analysis that incorporates a conceptualization of listening as an embodied, participatory experience expressed through gesture.

The first chapter begins with a historical overview of race, segregation, and the allocation of public space in Atlanta, Georgia in order to establish the social topography upon which Atlanta hip-hop was built; it ends with a social and historical overview of yeeking, Atlanta’s first distinct hip-hop party dance style and marked precursor to crunk. The second chapter delves into essentialist constructions of Southern identity and hip-hop authenticity, from which Atlanta hip-hoppers constructed novel expressions of Southern hip-hop identity through a process akin to Dick Hebdige’s theory of bricolage. Chapter three discusses the history and sociopolitical significance of Freaknik, a large Atlanta spring break event that catered specifically to students of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. At its peak, Freaknik became the focus of a moral panic, which led to increased
policing of black youth in public space and ultimately the dismantling of the event due in large part to harassment; it is this moment in Atlanta's history which gives context to the performative abandon of crunk. The fourth chapter discusses the aesthetics of crunk music and imagery, focusing on the subgenre's embrace of Southern gangsta archetypes, timbral dissonance in compositional methodology, and crunk's corporeal and vocal catharses illustrated by performative violent embodiment (i.e. moshing) and the centrality of screams and chants. The fifth chapter focuses on gender performativity in Southern hip-hop party spaces. The chapter begins with a discussion of gender normativity in yeeking and how insincere non-normative performances of gender are incorporated as a means of reinforcing the gender normativity; this is framed by analyses of a yeek dance move called “the sissy” and the trap era dance, the nae nae. As is argued in the latter half of this chapter, women performers in crunk engaged in the same kind of bricolage outlined in chapter two in order to transform traditionally male-centric crunk music into something specifically and performatively woman centered. Ultimately, these discussions of gender indicate a kind of performative fluidity that echoes the kind of performance-based subversion that this dissertation argues crunk represented for black youth laying claim to public space in the years following the decline of Freaknik. The conclusion holds that, while the era of the crunk subgenre has passed, many of the underlying performative political subtexts persisted in subsequent subgenres of Southern hip-hop (e.g. snap, trap, etc.), which lays the foundation for discourse on methodologies of performative resistance in other hip-hop formats.
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I offer my gratitude.
Act A Fool

In the early 2000s, Lil Jon dominated hip-hop radio stations. Whether it was his performance as a rapper, his easily identifiable signature style as a producer, or his garish persona, hardly a hip-hop day went by without some experience touched by Lil Jon and, like a King Midas of Southern hip-hop party music, everything he touched was crunk. Lil Jon marketed the idea of crunk relentlessly, making the word a feature in his lyrics and challenging the audience to “get crunk,” but there was, for a time, some confusion, if not apprehension, about what exactly that meant.

I have a memory of riding in the car on the way to my elementary school with my parents. The radio was on, probably an R&B station that played a talk show in the morning as that was what my parents normally listened to, and they were discussing the word crunk. I remember three major points of discussion: What’s the right way to say it? What’s the right way to spell it? What does it really mean? The first question led to a humorous exchange about the actual phonemes in proper elocution. The back and forth revolved mostly around how the word actually ends, whether there was a hard K sound or not; the consensus was that the word has a nasal, abrupt stop. This talk ultimately hinged on a notion of Southern hip-hop incoherence; to say the word correctly meant adopting a kind of phonemic slipperiness affiliated with that distinct “jawja drawl.” This branched into the
second topic: spelling. Each person on the panel suggested alternate spellings, debating whether Cs or Ks were more appropriate for this new word. This was before years of marketing had solidified the orthographic coding of the word so there was debate about how a concept that was most manifested orally/aurally should be transcribed (Even as I write this, a wavy red underline reminds me that the proper spelling of crunk, even its acceptance into the lexicon, remains, in many ways, unsettled). Finally came the discussion of meaning. One of the speakers threw out the query about whether or not crunk was a bad word: should it be censored on the radio, and should children be punished for saying it? It is worth noting the paradox of debating whether or not a word should be censored on the radio while repeatedly evoking it on the radio. This suggests a possible level of insincerity in the radio hosts putting forth the notion of crunk as a novel obscenity. Still, the introduction of the subject of censorship affixes the term to a notion of indecency. This discussion struck me.

I knew the word; I knew how to use it and I knew that there wasn’t anything bad about it per se. But I also knew that crunk represented something that the adults around me might not deem acceptable. I remember around that time, my grade school had enacted several policies, the majority of which emphasized appropriate clothing for school. They enacted rules that prohibited sartorial markers of black youth culture at the time like baggy pants, plain white T-shirts, or monochromatic outfits.¹ Having teachers and administrators publicly reprimand us for speaking, moving, or dressing with hip-hop inflections was a near-daily

¹ There was particular apprehension surrounding sartorial monochromaticity because of, frankly, unsubstantiated concerns about gang activity in our school.
occurrence. While I didn’t understand why crunk was such a point of debate, I knew that the apprehension around crunk was related to the newly enacted policies that had an impact on how I was allowed to navigate the halls of my elementary school. So while I knew that even if crunk wasn’t “bad” (certainly not a word worth censoring on the radio) I also knew that it represented something aesthetically and conceptually taboo. And yet, the panel never came to a consensus. Instead they ruminated over a plethora of potential definitions and applications that never quite settled into a definitive usage.

The participants of the radio show attributed a kind of slipperiness to crunk’s meaning, spelling, and function. This slipperiness is apropos for a discussion of crunk music. The term is nebulous and multifaceted, existing simultaneously as a noun, an adjective, and a verb. This dissertation is an exploration of crunk music, which, for my purposes, employs two overlapping definitions/usages of crunk. The first is crunk music as a specific subgeneric format of hip-hop that first developed in Memphis in the mid-1990s, took root and grew in popularity in Atlanta in the late 1990s, and then gained national prominence in the early 2000s. Crunk music as a subgenre can be identified by specific compositional, thematic, and aesthetic features, e.g. the centrality of chant and/or call-and-response, moderate tempi, sparsely constructed beats, and incorporation of “rough” timbres. The second usage pertains to crunk as a descriptor, which is not confined to the subgenre. Rather, it represents a broad descriptive term that encompasses several iterations of Southern hip-hop that were composed explicitly to create and perpetuate party environments.
My dissertation offers a historical and ethnographic exploration of crunk as it applies to the subgenre and its direct sociomusical and aesthetic predecessors. I hold that specific historical and political phenomena in the American South were central to the formation of crunk music and are, therefore, essential in understanding the music, its aesthetic interventions, its political subtext, and the methods by which it achieves its work. In doing so, the aim is not only to deepen the understanding of crunk music, but to expand the analytical frames through which race, region, politics and genre are theorized, thereby adjusting some of the central approaches in hip-hop studies to accommodate discussions of meaning in a post-crunk era.

Hip-hop has become an exceedingly popular subject of academic discourse, serving as a medium through which members of several disciplinary communities can engage issues of race, representation, aesthetic, gender, class, and performance, to list some of the most frequently evoked topics. Scholars whose work demonstrates a close engagement with hip-hop quite frequently use the fruits of their research to advocate for marginalized American black youth by humanizing the hip-hop community, thereby disempowering what bell hooks refers to as “white supremacist patriarchal ideologies” which frequently renders behaviors, performances, and symbols aligned with black youth in the public imagination as antisocial and/or pathological. From roughly the mid-1990s onward, a generation of hip-hop scholars have risen to points of prominence in their respective fields, forming a canon of interdisciplinary work aimed at addressing the bumpy terrain encompassed by hip-hop.
Hip-hop is frequently theorized in terms of African-American youth countercultures (Cohen 2004; Cohen 2010; Dyson 2007; Ferguson 2001; Martinez 1997; Perry 2004; Rose 1994; Rose 2008). As such, hip-hop has been the frame around which arguments are made about the politics of racial authenticity and racial representation in the youth subset (Jackson 2005; Judy 2004; Kelley 1997; Perry 2004; Samuels 2004). While some scholars are critical of modern hip-hop for what is often termed antisocial politics (Samuels 2004), misogyny (Rose 2004; Rose 2008), homophobia (Boykin 2005; Rose 2008) and/or not fulfilling its social and political potential (Boyd 2004; Rose 2008; Tate 2002), many of those who engage in hip-hop scholarship have indicated the genre as among the primary means through which black youth articulate their social (Ferguson 2001; C. Cohen 2004; Murray 2004), political (Chang 2005; C. Cohen 2010; Dyson 2007; Jackson 2005; Jarrett 2002; Kitwana 2004; Martinez 1997; Murphy 2002; Rose 1994; Rose 2008), and aesthetic (Dimitriadis 2004; Perry 2004; Saddik 2003; Shusterman 1991) perspectives. It has been argued that manifestations of hip-hop in the South create and engage the aforementioned subjects with regionally specific methods that do not necessarily correspond to those of other regions (Miller 2008; Miller 2012; Westhoff 2011). Crunk, at the point of its emergence, fell into this category.

While the emergence of crunk as a musical descriptive concept and some of the individual practices that define crunk far precede the formation of the subgenre of crunk (Holt 2011; Jones 2003; Miller 2008; Westhoff 2012), the subgenre itself marks the solidification and unification of the term and practices at an important juncture in Atlanta’s hip-hop history when the national gaze on the city’s hip-hop
community intensified (Miller 2008; Thompson 2007; Westhoff 2012), resulting in crunk (subgenre) coming to represent and influence Southern hip-hop style generally (Holt 2011; Miller 2008; Westhoff 2012). Crunk music can be identified by a vocal performance based primarily upon collective chant performance, bodily and facial contortions, brooding beats, and an accompanying moshing style of dance (Holt 2011; Miller 2008; Westhoff 2012). As crunk music centralizes audience participation through such acts of engagement, academic analyses of gesture and performance provide an appropriate foundation upon which academic studies of crunk can be built.

Performance factors into this research on several fronts. Scholars in the humanities have theorized that people perform their social niches (Goffman 1959; Schechner 2007), racial identities (Jackson 2001; Jackson 2005; Johnson 2003), gender (Butler 2004; Johnson 2003), sexuality (Johnson 2003), and class positions (Goffman 1959; Jackson 2001). Additionally, specialized performances, done with adequate sincerity, offer the possibility of transcending the identity one affiliates with the self (Jackson 2005; Johnson 2005) or the significance of the space one occupies during said performance (Santino 2007) to those engaged, if only for the duration of the performance. This concept is important for an analysis of crunk because the adoption of crunk as a state of being persists only as long as the individual is actively engaged in performing crunk. The act of being (or doing) crunk is achieved at least partially by performing speech acts in a prescribed way. In this sense, the chant in crunk can be understood as constitutive of performatve acts (Austin 2007; Derrida 2007).
Gestures and symbols made within the context of crunk spaces take on specialized meaning. As in other subcultural formations, the construction of meaning is dependent upon a contestation, or reevaluation, of the significance and/or functions that objects, symbols, and gestures have within the subculture compared to their existence in the normalized sectors against which the subculture self-identifies (Hebdige 1979; Thornton 1996). Crunk artists and audiences reappropriated racially charged symbols to articulate their raced and regional experiences, i.e. the juxtaposition of (black) natural hairstyles and the Confederate flag (Holt 2011; Miller 2008). Studies of movement/gesture have been used as a phenomenological frame to theorize the ways in which people use physicality to express abstract concepts and/or symbolic meaning (de Abreu 2008; Iazzetta 2000; Franko 2004; MacKendrick 2004).

Despite the strong connotations of activism and empowerment in hip-hop scholarship, few have centralized ethnography as a primary methodological approach for the analysis of American hip-hop. The omission of diligent ethnography molds the ways in which critical discourse surrounding hip-hop takes shape; in essence, the dominant methodologies reinforce the positionality many hip-hop scholars hold academically, politically, and personally in debates surrounding hip-hop. A discussion of the aims and procedures of contemporary ethnographies in conjunction with those of traditional hip-hop studies highlights the potential a more ethnographically driven branch of hip-hop scholarship would have on the field as a whole. Furthermore, in engaging ethnographic methodology in this work, it is the aim of this dissertation to incorporate the personal, and sometimes conflicting,
accounts of participants in the scene in uncovering how crunk is defined, what work it does/should do, and how it accomplishes it.

One of the most basic concerns when approaching a socio-musical phenomenon critically is understanding the parameters of the subject one wishes to engage; many hip-hop scholars emphasize the work hip-hop does (or should do) without clearly defining what hip-hop encompasses. That the readers understand and agree with the author’s definition of hip-hop is taken for granted, leaving some of the more high theoretical concepts ungrounded or particularly open to misinterpretation, as readers apply them to their own, potentially disparate definitions of the genre.

For example, in *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop*, Imani Perry includes analyses of folk/blues/neo-soul artist India.Arie, soul-pop darling Alicia Keys, and funk-jazz fusion phenom Meshell Ndegeocello, among others, into her exploration of hip-hop, drawing these performers under the genre’s umbrella (Perry 2004). The music, visual presentations, and audiences to which these artists are marketed are distinct from one another, and each largely contrasts those of artists topping hip-hop popularity charts. For Perry, hip-hop seems to encompass all of what Nelson George refers to as music of the (implicitly black) post-soul generation, including most of the music produced by people too young to have intimate memories of popular music in the era before the popularization of hip-hop.

The parameters of hip-hop set by Perry are different from those set forth in Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, in which the author conflates rap with hip-hop through much of her argument, thereby
centralizing the commercial rapper as the impetus of hip-hop. Still, some of the artists she includes within her hip-hop parameters might be excluded by other scholars. For example, she identifies Haitian-American Jean-Michel Basquiat as a rapper and graffiti artist (Rose 1994: 35), even though his graffiti fits more of the technical definition of the term (usually unauthorized writing or drawing on a public surface)\(^2\) than the stylistic definition generally affiliated with hip-hop and his “rap” manifested more as spoken/sung words over avant-garde electro-acoustic jazz. Such an inclusion indicates that Rose’s construction of early hip-hop focuses more on the dissenting creative acts of black and Latinx youth than any particular aesthetic expressive style.

Rose, who begins her most recent book on hip-hop, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—And Why It Matters* by plainly stating “Hip-hop is in crisis,” has a much narrower view of what is included in hip-hop than Perry, partially evidenced by Rose not extending her argument about the crisis of hip-hop to an argument of generational crisis. She goes on to assert that manifestations of hip-hop that embrace what she asserts is a regressive politics becomes detrimental to both the communities that embrace it and hip-hop itself, hence the crisis (Rose 2008: ix-2). From this, one can glean that according to Rose, hip-hop is meant to do certain progressive work and that any hip-hop, or derivative thereof, that doesn’t meet this standard is relegated to the realm of internal malignancy, a literal internal anti-hip-hop force. She grounds this by providing a list of progressive artists containing the likes of Outkast, Talib Kweli, and Tori Fixx, to

\(^2\) Definition taken from [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/graffiti](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/graffiti)
be contrasted with examples of regressive artists, like the Ying Yang Twins and D4L (Rose, 2008: 247, 218). Singers, or to borrow John L. Jackson's term sincere singers,³ lie outside of Rose's conception of hip-hop.

To Greg Tate, true hip-hop is a manifestation of urban folk culture and "New World African ingenuity," which he asserts has ceased to exist since its conformance to "global hyper-capitalism" (Tate, 2004). Greg Dimitriadis is equally pessimistic about the state and form of hip-hop today, asserting that, with the onset of the mass commercialization, hip-hop has lost several elements central to its coalescence, specifically the diminishing space offered to dance and graffiti traditions. For both these thinkers, hip-hop is defined by social function and style, but most importantly, by a specific temporal moment. Both suggest that hip-hop as it exists today is only a shell of a more authentic former self, and therefore, might exclude most mainstream music in recent years from the realm of hip-hop.

These represent only a few of the ways in which scholars apply the term hip-hop. Sometimes, even within a single text, hip-hop is evoked as a musical genre, as a cultural movement, as an aesthetic, and more abstractly, as a feeling or vibe. While these parameters are not inherently problematic, they highlight the ways in which different scholars apply the term hip-hop with differing significations. In similar fashion, many of the concepts evoked under the umbrella of hip-hop, including

³ Jackson notes two stages in the (male) rapper engaging in sung vocal performance: the insincere, or the rapper who purposefully evokes "bad" singing for comedic effect, and the sincere, the rapper makes a genuine attempt to produce an aesthetically pleasing vocal performance. I delve into this concept in more detail in Chapter 5.
crunk, amass multiple manifestations and meaning as theorizers of hip-hop negotiate them.

The application of ethnography neutralizes some of the tensions around setting the parameters for hip-hop, both for the reader and for the author. To begin with, the work of coaxing a fruitful interview with interlocutors necessitates a close interrogation of diction and meaning, through which one might discover multiple definitions, contexts, and implications that fans of the genre conjure in discussing hip-hop. Applying the concept of hip-hop as the interlocutors do gives the scholar a larger foundation upon which to support their interpretations of hip-hop. It allows the scholar to bypass the burden of theorizing all manifestations of hip-hop by offering the term (and by extension the analysis) a specific context. This also provides a space for the interrogation of the multiple levels of negotiation that fans and artists engage in when talking about and participating in practices they align with hip-hop. The scholar is freed from relying solely on a singular construction of hip-hop identity by allowing interlocutors to offer their own definitions of hip-hop, how they see that engagement with the genre manifesting communally, and the extent to which such engagements impact their perceptions of self.

Another parameter to be contended with is to whom scholarly writing refers when discussing hip-hop communities. Most scholars define hip-hop as urban black youth culture, a position that reflects the racial, spatial, and generational demographic of the spaces where hip-hop took shape in the late 1960s and early 1970s; however in the years since, hip-hop has expanded to include people outside of the subset of black youth who, undoubtedly, feel intimately aligned with hip-hop
identity. This is not to negate that hip-hop and black youth are symbolically linked. Arguably, the two are inextricably bound in the popular imagination. Studies that assume the black youth/hip-hop conflation make vital contributions to discourse of race, generation and representation; however the focus in such research is on hip-hop as it is imagined rather than hip-hop as it exists in the world and that distinction often goes unarticulated.

Hip-hop is predominantly theorized as being in opposition to the aesthetics and socio-political positionings of proximal adult demographics. While for many scholars the hip-hop demographic is decidedly a youthful subset, musical references often extend back to the 1980s with no sense of irony or generational self-awareness, even given that many of these artists and their original audiences are parents or even grandparents by the time the research is conducted. There are many ways in which the implications of this trend can be interpreted. One interpretation is that all hip-hoppers, after reaching a certain age and level of maturity, move on from hip-hop and associate with the musics embraced by their parents’ generation. Another is that older hip-hoppers have no investment, emotionally or culturally, in newer formats of hip-hop, with the suggestion being that they, in a sense, remain aesthetically and politically frozen in the era of their youth. One further conclusion is that the adult demographic’s only pro-hop-hop engagement is financial; that is, confined mostly to businesspeople in the music industry who reap benefits from the popularity of hip-hop and have little or no aesthetic or affinitive investment in hip-hop. Scholars who study hip-hop usually place themselves in a liminal category, which I will return to later. Black youth are
similarly homogenized in these studies, with little recognition of the diverse ways in which black youth interact with and through hip-hop.

Engaging in prolonged ethnographic fieldwork forces scholars, especially those focusing on urban fields, to contend with heterogeneity. The hip-hop community now encompasses multiple generations and spans the gamut of socioeconomic strata in this country. Even domestically, hip-hop transcends political, racial, and linguistic affiliations. Engaging with self-identified hip-hoppers in a specific field allows greater opportunity for understanding the complex negotiations of identity and belonging in conjunction with hip-hop as it manifests in a single location. Furthermore, such a study allows for the scholar to interrogate what manifestations of hip-hop arise in a given space, the different ways people in that space relate to hip-hop in a broader sense and to each other, and how those interactions impact their relationships with people outside of the space.

One of the primary objectives of the first wave of hip-hop scholars was to assert hip-hop as a valid subject of academic interest and to give scholarly voice to disenfranchised hip-hoppers who lacked adequate cultural capital to self-advocate in popular and academic discourse. Tricia Rose illustrates this struggle in an anecdote that introduces the third chapter of *Black Noise*. She recounts being told by an established music scholar that hip-hop has no musical value after she shared her research interest in the genre (Rose 1994: 62-65). The inclusion of this anecdote stresses the notion that the general academy, read adult, white, and socioeconomically privileged, stands in opposition to hip-hop, read black poor/working class youth, which contributes to the disenfranchisement of hip-hop
communities. Michael Eric Dyson opens *That’s The Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* with a similar anecdote, replacing the condescending academician with an elder African-American activist who, as the story develops, comes to represent the oppositional force that the parent generation poses against the hip-hop generation (Dyson 2004: xi-xiv). In this way, hip-hop scholars present themselves as activists, using their cultural capital as adults and scholars to articulate the perspective of the hip-hop community. Despite numerous scholars offering decades of work introducing academic communities to hip-hop and its increasingly normalized presence in American culture, there is still a need to actively advocate for hip-hop validity. In July of 2018, Dr. Gerald Benjamin, a professor of political science and the leader of the Benjamin Center of State University of New York (SUNY) New Paltz, publicly declared that he did not consider rap “real music” and that it did not reflect the values of “people like us, people in rural New York” while challenging the legitimacy of congressional candidate and former rapper Antonio Delgado (Simonton 2018). Even though his institution quickly denounced the statement and Benjamin later expressed regret in his choice of words (his recantation markedly stopping short of disavowing the sentiment of the statement⁴), this incident highlights the various ways in which hip-hop continues to be constructed as something antithetical to the values of the academy. This tension, omnipresent if not always articulated as explicitly as in Dr. Benjamin’s proclamation, prompts hip-hop scholars to incorporate arguments that explicitly affirm the worthiness of hip-hop

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music and culture. The need to declare a subject of study as worthy of the academy’s attention undoubtedly has an impact on the way it is framed.\(^5\)

Additionally, many of hip-hop studies’ most active and vocal contributors identify as advocates for other marginalized communities. Such overtly political motivations manifest in the arguments and conclusions forged in scholarly works on hip-hop. A close reading of these works reveal multiple points of authority upon which these authors base their claims in order to produce a persuasive argument; however, the absence of critical self-reflexive work allows the line between the objective and the subjective to be severely blurred. This section explores the ways in which applied tactics in hip-hop studies impact the presentation of information.

There is irony in the marginality of ethnography in hip-hop scholarship given that advocacy is a central impetus for the growing field; the very scholars working to give voice to hip-hop communities in some instances perpetuate their voicelessness. While these scholars are undoubtedly sympathetic to hip-hop and deeply invested in the music and the affiliated communities, even to the point of including hip-hop inflected language into the minutiae of their scholarly arguments, fans of hip-hop, especially those who are not themselves famous hip-hop performers, are rarely called upon to articulate their interpretations of hip-hop or their philosophical perspectives, let alone to have their thoughts put in direct discourse with those of scholars, artists, and detractors. Instead, the author often speaks for the everyday hip-hopper when such opportunities arise. A prime

\(^5\) I bring forward this critique of hip-hop studies even as my work engages similar tactics. In many ways, my approach to crunk works to counter the notion that crunk is inherently regressive or unworthy of academic interest.
example would be Rose’s *Hip-Hop Wars*, in which the author deconstructs ten arguments, five for and five against, surrounding hip-hop. She asserts that the ten selected arguments represents the most important and recurrent in hip-hop discourse, but never clarifies the basis upon which that claim is made. As she moves through the arguments, Rose deconstructs both sides of “the hip-hop wars” again never clarifying from whence she extracted these positions. She only references specific persons when she cites quotations from celebrity interviews as secondary resources. The silent implication throughout is that Rose is more adept in articulating points for the hip-hop community than its members could be; in other words, she uses her authority as an academician to speak for hip-hoppers more so than having them speak through her work. This approach also allows Rose to maintain a neat pro/anti hip-hop dichotomy throughout the book. While the framing is effective and the arguments, persuasive in their outlining of hip-hop discussions, the text eschews the task of centering how members of the hip-hop community relate to the subject matter.

One reason Rose and other hip-hop scholars are able to speak for hip-hop communities without explicitly articulating the nature of their engagement with hip-hop or arousing a great deal of skepticism from outsiders is because they often identify as members of the hip-hop community. Very few of them came of age before the late 1970s, making them a part of what Nelson George refers to as the post-soul generation, the generation of hip-hop. Many of them grew up listening to hip-hop and were/are, in some capacity, part of the scenes that they study, engaging in informal discourse with their peers and elders about the merit and function of hip-
hop. They also built vocabularies of aesthetic criteria by which qualitative assessments of hip-hop songs and artists are forged, made friendships and connections through hip-hop, and likely continue to engage with hip-hop recreationally. They are active members of the hip-hop community, or more accurately, socially and culturally engaged in specific hip-hop networks.

These personal experiences are compounded with scholarly experiences, allowing these scholars to simultaneously speak from both the authority of the academy and the authority of the insider. This allows them to centralize their musical interpretations as those of an expert, an ideal Adornian expert listener. In the introductory chapter of Introduction to the Sociology of Music, Theodor Adorno outlines several kinds of listeners. For Adorno, the expert listener is imbued with specialized musical, aesthetic, and contextual knowledge that makes their hearings and interpretations particularly virtuous and valuable (Adorno 1976: 4-11). My evocation of the concept here works to highlight the undergirding politics of authority that informed discourse about hip-hop aesthetics in academic spaces, notably during the formative years of hip-hop studies. This approach to musical research clashes with the inclusion of ethnography as a central method because, as an extension of the aforementioned logic, any interlocutor's perspective represents a less informed position than that of the scholar. To engage in extensive ethnography, one must concede that the interlocutors' perspectives are worthy to be centrally engaged in critical discourse. Reverence for (facets of) hip-hop and its (imagined) community does not translate to the inclusion of positions as they are analyzed and articulated by members of that community. That said, since these
scholars are members of the hip-hop community, the exclusion of ethnography does not produce a full negation of the hip-hop community, but rather a heavy emphasis on a single hip-hop perspective.

Another point of note is that, while these scholars are often members of hip-hop communities, they do not fully represent the hip-hop demographic as it exists in the public imagination or how it is most frequently theorized in academia. To begin with, the youngest of these scholars can only marginally be considered members of the youth subset and the privileged positions they hold as scholars with top accreditations complicates the widely held association of hip-hop with the urban working class. This allows many of these scholars to boast a position just outside of the hip-hop community, or, more appropriately, as a bridge between two worlds. In this way, many hip-hop scholars have been able to claim the ambassadorial role that some early ethnographers held, even without engaging in extensive ethnographic fieldwork.

There is a niche for the upwardly mobile, socially aware, politically active individual in hip-hop; the purveyor of what Adam Krims calls “knowledge rap” (Krims, 2003: 147). The demographic that most directly represents this archetype is generally either left unexplored in academic discourse, or is produced in juxtaposition to the gangsta rap archetype, which Krims refers to as “reality rap.” Class is rarely explored as an impetus for differing politics between these two archetypes; rather all hip-hop is cordoned off in terms of progressive and regressive. As Krims points out in his article “Marxist Music Analysis Without Adorno: Popular Music and Urban Geography,” the differences between the two
subsections of hip-hop Krims offers, “reality rap” and “knowledge rap,” manifest on multiple levels, with one end seeking to represent the harsh realities of life in poor urban neighborhoods and the other articulating an aspiration toward middle class values (Krims 2003: 142-147). This is extremely pertinent to understanding recurrent arguments in hip-hop analysis. That scholars frequently reference “knowledge rap” as the most aspirational manifestation of hip-hop is tied to the fact that this manifestation of hip-hop, more than any other, reflects the socio-economic stratum to which they belong. Furthermore, as implied by the term “knowledge rap,” these artists take on a pedagogical role that in many ways mirror the scholar’s impulse to spread knowledge.

There is also a political connection. Most “knowledge” hip-hoppers are considered progressive because they express primarily leftist politics, but they generally do so through means that works well within the politics of respectability set forth by older generations. Likewise, hip-hop scholars broadly embrace liberal politics, but work well within the confines of the academy, even as they work to transform the academy. This stands in high contrast to “reality” hip-hoppers, whose subject matter, presentation of self, and methods for expressing their political and philosophical ideals conflict with, and at times actively counter, traditional/accepted manifestations of cultural capital. The opposing positionalities get somewhat problematic when scholars addressing issues in hip-hop do so from a hybrid

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6 Krims’ dichotomous take on hip-hop leaves no room for subgenres of hip-hop that focus primarily on the party scene. Crunk and its related subgenres are neither knowledge hip-hop nor reality hip-hop. The same can be said for most of the earliest manifestations of hip-hop. The inclusion of his dichotomy is appropriate here, however, because it works in tandem with the text-centric song analyses that permeate the established hip-hop studies canon.
scholar-insider position and evaluate the differentiations in philosophies amongst insiders, framing that which is aligned with their own aesthetic as a relatively neutral assessment of issues and that which contrasts the aforementioned views as pathological. Such biases become more apparent when scholars include the kind of critical self-reflexive analysis that has become requisite to drawing valid conclusions from ethnographic research. The revelation that hip-hop scholars engage in one specific branch of hip-hop expression by virtue of their work and (many of their) political affiliations highlights the necessity for the inclusion of other voices from the hip-hop community in works that seek to analyze the genre.

The trend of emphasizing “knowledge rap,” in part, grows out of the diligent work done to validate hip-hop as a worthy object of study at the dawn of hip-hop scholarship. A popular tactic was to highlight hip-hop artists whose works sounded like a performed juxtaposition of traditional African-American poetry and jazz and whose content emphasizes many of the values that grew directly out of the civil rights movement. In some ways, the scholarly emphasis on “knowledge rap” was reactionary, seeking to counter hip-hop detractors who held that the genre was devoid of artistic integrity and promoted antisocialism and pathology amongst black youth; to counter those who believed hip-hop to be a force of pure destruction. Scholars were able to point to these examples of “knowledge rap” and argue that not all hip-hop centralized violence, accentuated pejorative terminology, or glorified the gangsta archetype. While detractors of hip-hop as a legitimate genre and subject of study have diminished significantly since the earliest scholarly works on hip-hop, many of the politics of propriety and respectability that framed much of the early
work persist, in some form, in much of today’s hip-hop scholarship. Even much of the work done on “reality rap” frequently seeks parallels to “knowledge rap” in analysis.

Inclusions and exclusions of songs in current analyses are generally made with little explanation of the selection process, suggesting that the themes explored through these selections represent patterns that go beyond the scope of the song itself; that analyses thereof represent a case study that can be applied broadly to the entirety of “hip-hop” however the author wishes to apply the term. Again, such an analytical tactic is not inherently flawed, but by not offering the reader insight into why some pieces are chosen as worthy of closer analysis or of status as an archetype, such a strategy forces the reader to yield to the author’s subjectivity, not only as scholar, but as listener. The inclusion of ethnographic work, in short, allows for the exploration of qualitative assessments of hip-hop songs without relying primarily on the author’s aesthetic.

Thus far, I have explored the absence of critical ethnography from the hip-hop studies canon. There have been, however, diligent ethnographic works that either contribute directly to hip-hop studies or focus on subject matter that coincides with some of the central concerns of hip-hop studies. Additionally, ethnographies that focus on unrelated or marginally related subject matter provide useful models for hip-hop ethnography methodologies. This section explores a few works that contribute to an understanding of hip-hop through ethnography.
Ann Arnett Ferguson’s book, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, focuses on perceptions of raced and gendered difference that become infused with the core of American institutions, ultimately resulting in an overarching association of black males with violence.\(^7\) Her field work was conducted from 1990 to 1993 at a school she calls Rosa Parks Elementary School,\(^8\) acting as a participant (teaching) observer in the classroom setting. She interviews students, parents, faculty, administration and staff in order to tease out why black males constituted a disproportional subset of students against whom disciplinary action was taken. Ferguson coins the term “the adultification of black youth” to explain her point. Innocence, particularly childlike innocence, is subconsciously affiliated with whiteness, so when black children and adolescents exhibit delinquent behaviors, authorities are less likely to receive their actions as the mistakes of children and more likely to receive them as a sinister, intentional step toward realizing a criminal potential (Ferguson 2001: 83). As a result, black youth, particularly males, are often given harsher punishments than their white counterparts for similar offenses, a trend that was replicated during Ferguson’s field research. Ferguson also found that many of her young black male interlocutors conflated the experience of being punished (and surviving punishment) with assertions of racial authenticity, a trope paralleled in gangsta rap narratives. Ferguson asserts the importance of rap music

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7 This book is the public version of Ferguson’s dissertation for the completion of her PhD in sociology from University of California at Berkeley.

8 Early in the book, Ferguson indicates that the name of the school and the people she interviewed were altered to maintain the confidentiality of her interlocutors. She does share that the school’s racial demographic is roughly 50% black, 33% white, 10% Asian, 4% Hispanic, and the remainder identified as Other. She also notes that the teaching staff is primarily composed of women who identify as White.
to her young interlocutors and notes parallels between black masculinity as it was constructed and articulated in her field site and recurrent themes in hip-hop. She astutely notes that while she had not had much exposure to rap music before conducting her research and her initial reaction reflected shock and offense at the lyrical content, she “was delighted to find that the lyrics articulated some of the very ironies and contradictions that [she] observed as a researcher” (Ferguson 2001: 16). She does not spend much time analyzing hip-hop, but uses some of her interlocutors’ favorite rap songs as framing devices throughout the book, thereby allowing the students’ hip-hop aesthetic to be articulated throughout. While her ethnography focuses primarily on the boys that were most frequently subjected to disciplinary procedures during her field research, she presents the field as a heterogeneous tapestry of social interaction. Such an approach would dismantle, or at least complicate, many of the homogenizing and dichotomizing arguments found in hip-hop studies.

Another ethnography that asserts a space in hip-hop studies is John L. Jackson’s *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*. In this book, Jackson proposes the notion of racial sincerity⁹ as an alternative to racial authenticity; in essence, he holds that the discourse surrounding racial authenticity must expand to include the ways in which racial authenticity are performed and the sincerity with which that

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⁹ His use of “sincerity” here is unrelated to his exploration of rappers who sing sincerely. A distinction is made between the sincerity of performing one’s identity, thus creating a sociocultural truth through performance, and the sincerity of singing earnestly.
performance is carried out.\textsuperscript{10} He also asserts that application of the term “authenticity” implies a subject evaluating an object, while “sincerity” entails evaluations made between subjects. Sincerity, in that way, reasserts the subjectivity of black people in the negotiation of what blackness signifies (Jackson 2005: 15). He conducted fieldwork in New York City, focusing primarily on black men in Harlem. Jackson includes a section where he describes the internal process he undergoes in preparing to engage in fieldwork. He describes himself as shy and awkward, needing to evoke his inner superhero, Anthroman, to produce useful engagements with his interlocutors. Furthermore, he inserts himself into the discussion of performing racial sincerity, informing the reader of times when his own black authenticity (and sincerity) were challenged. He chooses an uncomfortable encounter with his primary interlocutor to introduce the book, wherein Jackson is berated for his decision to be an academic, “sucking wind up under the white man” (Jackson 2005: 1-9). He responds with frustration. Throughout the book, Jackson offers insight into his feelings and methods in conducting fieldwork to serve as a pedagogical tool for budding ethnographers. He dedicates a full chapter to hip-hop, which he entitles “Real Emcees.” This is the only chapter in the book without an extensive ethnographic element; rather he focuses primarily on analyzing hip-hop lyrics. He also focuses specifically on male “knowledge” rappers with special emphasis on Mos Def.\textsuperscript{11} Jackson argues for heterogeneity in hip-hop, asserting that (“knowledge”)
rappers transform hip-hop performance and, by extension, the ways in which hip-hoppers sincerely perform black masculinity. Despite not extending his ethnographic methodology to his study of hip-hop, Jackson provides a foundation for ethnography in hip-hop studies by virtue of the theoretical arguments he asserts and his methods for ethnographic fieldwork exploring race, identity and performance amongst working class African-Americans in an urban setting.

Kiri Miller's *Playing Along: Digital Games YouTube and Virtual Performance* provides a vital ethnographic frame for scholars who wish to engage popular culture. This book, which focuses on the ways in which people come to embody and perform in tandem with various digitally based stimuli, asserts digital space as a legitimate field site. Popular culture is increasingly articulated through digital media, such that notions of aesthetic communities are less reliant upon physical presences than ever before. Hip-hop studies must account for the ways in which hip-hoppers create digital communities and how they impact the exchange between hip-hop creators and hip-hop appreciators. Applying Miller’s fieldwork methodologies to hip-hop studies would complicate many of the distinctions previous research has been reliant upon. For instance, the Internet offers even unsigned underground rappers the potential to build international hip-hop networks, a near impossibility in the time before the Internet boom. This means that distinctions like “underground” and “mainstream” must be revisited and re-theorized. Miller’s work also explores the interaction between physical bodies and imagined bodies, an increasingly important concept for hip-hop scholars because most interactions
audiences have with hip-hop artists occurs through recorded music and accompanying videos.

Dawn Norfleet’s dissertation offers an ethnographic study aimed at discovering the ways in which notions of culture, community, and identity are forged and solidified through live verbal music performance, Norfleet’s term for live rap performances. This dissertation is one of the first studies of hip-hop to incorporate extensive ethnography; as such, Norfleet provides insight into how one might manifest traditional ethnographic concepts, like “the field” and “participant-observation”, in hip-hop; “the field” had to account for the fact that hip-hop networks remain in constant flux and are not defined by place or identity. To counter this issue, Norfleet casts a broad net in defining her field, New York City, and allowed her interlocutors to define sites of importance where fieldwork might be concentrated. By providing an ethnographic work that explores the very concept of a hip-hop community, a concept that is frequently taken for granted in academic discourse, Norfleet provides foundational research for future hip-hop ethnographers.

Ethnomusicologist William E. Smith’s *Hip Hop as Performance and Ritual: Biography and Ethnography in Underground Hip Hop* is one of the most recent published hip-hop ethnographies. Smith works from the hypothesis that live hip-hop performances, particularly those with heavy freestyle elements, engage in similar rituals of listening, audience perception, and emergent performance to jazz musicians; as a rapper and jazz musician, Smith was able to engage with his field epitomizing multiple levels of insider status. He focuses his ethnography on an
underground ("knowledge") rapper based in Washington D.C., using his observations to draw conclusions about the process by which rap artists engage with, and improvise for, their audiences. Notably, Smith focuses on the interaction of live performance, rather than exploring recorded rap. This decision is, in part, Smith’s response to, what he identifies as, a deficit in hip-hop studies defined by scholars’ refusal to include analyses of hip-hop as it manifests in live performances. This decision also allowed Smith to work with a less abstract construction of a hip-hop field site than if the focus were on consumers of recorded hip-hop. One of his primary theoretical devices comes from outside of the humanities: physicist David Bohm’s notion of the holographic universe. Bohm holds that, as would be the case in a holographic image, the entirety of the universe, all of its composite patterns, are reproduced on a microcosmic level such that observation of any part actually contains the information necessary to determine the whole, although the smaller the observed section, the less defined the whole appears (Smith 2005: 93-94). Smith uses this notion of holographic relativity to shape his approach and subsequent analysis of his ethnographic research.

In his book, *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans*, Matt Miller offers a socio-historical overview of bounce, a subgenre of hip-hop that emerged in the 9th ward housing projects of New Orleans. This research, as others like it, argues that the ways in which the criteria by which hip-hop are be analyzed should take its specific socio-historical background into account. Miller asserts that the socio-cultural significance of bounce cannot be gleaned from its lyrical content; rather, the music’s merit is tied to the ways in which it occupies and activates space and, by
extension, how it garners certain types of embodied performance. Miller connects this subgenre of hip-hop to a history of black recreational musical styles that emphasized the body. Miller also argues for a space wherein participants resist the homophobia normally associated with hip-hop through a sub-category known as sissy rap; thus the traditional notions of gender norms, heteronormativity, and sexual propriety are in flux and, sometimes, break down completely. In critique, the ways in which Miller’s earlier construction of African culture in Louisiana connects to his discussion of bounce leans toward essentialism.

Bettina Love’s *Hip Hop’s Li’l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South* stands out as one of the only book length ethnographies that focuses on the hip-hop and youth culture in Atlanta. Love conducts a qualitative ethnography in Atlanta in which she seeks to discover how Southern girls use hip-hop in the construction of race, gender, generation, region and sexuality. Her project focuses on the many nuances required to navigate spaces charged with seemingly paradoxical ideologies that define Southern hip-hop feminist space. This contributes to the political work of offering female hip-hoppers a platform from which to voice their subjectivity. She argues against notions of passive consumption of hip-hop culture, arguing that not only do the girls of her study interrogate the images they consume, but they also reappropriate hip-hop in order to inject their own subversive, read anti-hegemonic, stances. In this case, ethnographic methodology works to allow the scholar to delve into the work that hip-hop does for its audience while not relying primarily on the intention of the artist. Ultimately, Love is able to effectively imply that much of the crisis rhetoric surrounding hip-hop consumption,
especially with regard to (re)producing regressive or violent politics, ignores the transformative and meaning-making work that audiences/listeners engage in. At the very least, the ethnographic work of Love and Miller suggest that hip-hop audiences, and possibly Southern hip-hop audiences in particular, engage language play and specially marked performances in ways that complicate the question of how meaning is conveyed in/through hip-hop. My ethnographic research exploring crunk reinforces this notion.

My research presents a mixture of historical, ethnographic, and musicological analyses in order to theorize crunk as a phenomenon within the larger context of navigating gender, racial, and regional identities through music and movement. As such, this dissertation begins with a discussion of how various overlapping concepts and spaces of importance laid the foundation for what would become crunk music.

The first chapter takes on beginnings: both the beginning of the city of Atlanta and the beginning of Atlanta’s local hip-hop scene. The discussion of the two together highlights parallels between the city’s start as a throughway and Atlanta hip-hop’s fusion of other local Southern hip-hop styles. This juxtaposition is meant to bring focus on to how Atlanta is constructed as a space and the ways in which various people throughout the years have performed the Atlantan. This chapter also introduces the history of yeeking, Atlanta’s first signature hip-hop music/dance format, which formed in the city’s roller rinks. Yeeking is one of the first iterations of Southern hip-hop party culture and is definitively the first that was specifically from
Atlanta. As such, any discussion of crunk trajectories must begin with yeeking and the social, musical, and dancerly interventions its participants put forth.

Chapter two shifts the focus from Atlanta-specific histories and, instead, discusses the ways in which Southern identity is imagined and performed and how Southern black hip-hoppers played upon existing notions of Southern authenticity and hip-hop authenticity in order to problematize both. Given that through the 1990s, hip-hop and Southerness were seen as antithetical concepts, artists and audiences engaged in a process of Hebdigean subcultural bricolage wherein existing symbols take on new, sometimes subversive, meanings. I present Atlanta hip-hoppers’ various means of using the Confederate flag, a nearly ubiquitous symbol of (white supremacist) Southerness as an example of this process of reconfiguring and recontextualizing existing symbols in order to create something specifically Southern and hip-hop.

The third chapter addresses the rise and fall of the Atlanta Historically Black College and University (HBCU) spring break event Freaknik. Once one of the city’s largest events, Freaknik was the subject of a moral panic that had an impact on how the city at large interacted with black youth recreational behavior. As this chapter argues, Freaknik was an important part of Atlanta’s growing hip-hop party culture and, as detractors called for restrictive legislation that would eventually choke the event off, black youth party culture transformed in order to manifest a performed resistance to policing.

Chapter four focuses on performance methodologies and aesthetics in crunk music, extending the discussion to crunk’s Memphis counterpart, buck. Early crunk
and buck represent a shift in Southern hip-hop party music defined primarily by hypermasculine gangsta archetypes, which participants embodied by performing along with crunk music through chant and an aggressive moshing dance style. This chapter takes on the task of manifesting a performance-centric analytical frame for crunk music, ultimately asserting that meaning in crunk music lies in its capacity to (re)produce crunk embodiment (i.e. chanting, moshing, etc.). It is, therefore, imperative that analysis centers the performative realm in order to address what work crunk music achieves and how.

The fifth chapter incorporates song analysis and ethnography in order to discuss how gender performance is navigated in crunk music and crunk spaces. The emphasis of this chapter is on the ways in which participants construct, reinforce and, at times, challenge notions of gender normativity through music and dance. As I argue in the previous chapter, crunk music centered a specific iteration of hypermasculine gangsta archetypes. As a result, women on the scene engaged in the kind of bricolage discussed in Chapter 2 in order to subvert the marginalization of women in the format. I support this argument with a close analysis of Crime Mob’s “Stilettos (Pumps).” In this chapter, I also assert that gender normativity was simultaneously reinforced and challenged in crunk spaces through ironic performances of non-normativity.

Crunk is an innately elusive subject of study. It’s simultaneously evoked as a subgenre with a specific aesthetic and history, as a certain kind of performative engagement with space, and as a qualifier that, at one time, stood for the quintessence of Southern hip-hop. This research is more introductory than
exhaustive. With the following chapters, I delve into multiple iterations of crunk with special emphasis given to the various ways in which crunk fits into the musical, social, and political lives of those who created it, who listened to it, who danced to it; in short, this is a story of those who got crunk.
Chapter 1.

In The Beginning, There Was YEEK!

On several occasions, I asked my interlocutors to define yeeking. They always replied, in almost rehearsed fashion, “your energetic explosive klimax” (klimax defiantly spelled with a “K”). I understood the packaged answer as a part of an effort to introduce yeeking to the world; a mnemonic device to convey to outsiders what this thing called yeek might be about. The people from the scene are constantly thinking about what it means to market a dance style and the culture that it’s connected to and, for that reason, many of those with whom I spoke make sure they are in one accord with how they express their ideas as they see themselves as ambassadors. They have good reason to try to control the narrative surrounding yeek culture. As many of my conversations with these “yeek ambassadors” indicated, there’s a sense that yeek had already been mishandled, stolen from, or otherwise abused by outsiders who got a glimpse of it. Even artists who were once steeped in yeek culture or stood at its fringes failed to introduce yeeking to the national hip-hop scene in a way that resulted in material social, cultural and economic benefits for participants. This effort to produce, perfect, and capitalize upon yeeking as the definitive Atlanta hip-hop dance style extends back to the early years of Atlanta hip-hop history. Indeed, yeek was the genesis of getting crunk in Atlanta. The story of yeek is bound to the story of Atlanta and, by extension, crunk.
Atlanta: A Genesis Story

The city of Atlanta began as a settlement town called Marthasville, incorporated in 1843 (Mitchell and Martin 1991: 18). Marthasville was, itself, founded as an end point for several railways that connected various nodes in the state of Georgia to other states in the South and was formerly referred to as “Terminus” (Mitchell and Martin 1991: 18). Atlanta has, ever since, functioned in some way as a nexus, a center through which people in the American Southeast connected to other places, leaving bits of where they traveled from in the junction town. As time passed, the settlement grew to accommodate both the sojourners who passed through and those who decided to settle. In 1845, the town of Marthasville was renamed Atlanta and by 1847, the city limits were incorporated, a circular perimeter with a massive confluence of roads and railways at its center (Mitchell and Martin 1991: 18). In 1925, when the mayor of the city decided to dedicate an abandoned field to the construction of an airport, Atlanta extended its operation as a crossroads to air travel (Miller 2016). By 1949, the city was declared the “capital of the South” indicated largely by its ability to mix the “methods and manners of the metropolitan East” with the “more traditionally Southern [sic] qualities of graciousness and gentility” (Rutheiser 1996: 46). Atlanta maintained this shape and this function in the public imagination well into the present day and much about the sociocultural phenomena that took root in the city indicates this position as a literal and symbolic crossroads, a cosmopolitan oasis grounded in Southerness.

Likewise, Atlanta became a sort of cultural crossroads for Southern people. Centered on the junction of three interstate highways, many travelers across the
American Southeast would pass through the city. In the post-Civil War era, black people, many of whom were newly emancipated or seeking opportunities in an unfamiliar world that promised unprecedented freedoms, traveled from where they were and settled in the city of Atlanta. W.E.B. DuBois famously referred to Atlanta as the “Black Mecca” because it amassed a large and influential black middle class, which has remained a constant sociocultural phenomenon in Atlanta for over a century. After the close of the Civil War, Southern black people flocked to the city of Atlanta, motivated by the opportunity to leave behind the still oppressive demands of rural labor. The founding of several historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) furthered this draw for black Southerners. Following the DuBoisian pedagogical philosophy, many of the HBCUs in Atlanta, including Atlanta University (the institution at which DuBois was a professor from 1897 to 1910), aspired toward cultivating a black bourgeois class despite, or possibly to spite, the de jure oppression of the Jim Crow South. Atlanta, therefore, became a symbol of black social ascension and the resilience of a black middle class very early in the 20th century, a rare feat for a Southern city. By the mid 20th century, Atlanta had adopted a new slogan: “the city too busy to hate” (Kruse 2007: 3). This phrase, coined by Mayor William Hartsfield, arose in 1951 after Atlanta accomplished a fairly effortless and peaceful desegregation of the inner city compared to other areas in the South, due surely, in no small part, to the presence of a well-established black middle class (Kruse 2007: 3).

And yet, racial tensions persisted, just in a less overt manner than in other areas of the South. The U.S. was consumed with Southern anti-black bigotry enacted
through violence—black people being pummeled by fire cannons, the morbid aftermath of lynchings, bombings, and the myriad terroristic tactics enacted by white supremacists—with both passive and active support provided by the structures and practices of law enforcement in the South.

Another, more subtle, yet pervasive, iteration of Southern racism had to do with maintaining the normalcy of segregation. Even after *de jure* segregation fell in 1964 with the signing of the Civil Rights Act, social, political, and economic forces (together with both state sanctioned and terroristic acts/threats of violence) colluded to ensure the perpetuation of *de facto* segregation. As a result, the city of Atlanta, as well as many other Southern cosmopolitan centers, erected several invisible barriers for maintaining separate black and white neighborhoods, effectively dictating how and where black people could occupy, or be forced to figure out how to navigate through, public spaces.

Just one year after Mayor Hartsfield declared the city was too busy to hate, an occurrence reminded Atlantans of the prematurity and naïveté of such a utopian declaration. In Peyton Forest, a white, at one time a legally segregated, neighborhood on the West side of Atlanta, residents lobbied the city to commission the building of a physical barricade (a wall) to clearly demarcate the edges of the neighborhood and thus clearly mark the boundary beyond which black people would not be welcome nor tolerated (*Kruse* 2007: 4). Local civil rights activists understood the wall's erection as a hostile gesture and, one night, a group of unknown people tore it down and threw its remnants away, to which residents in the white neighborhood responded by re-erecting it with nearby trees and debris
This pattern of tearing down and rebuilding persisted until the courts deemed the wall an illegal segregatory structure and ordered it be taken down. In response, within a year many of the homeowners in that neighborhood fled, some publicly lamenting that the court’s support of the wall’s destruction was an assault on their safety and their way of life (Kruse 2007: 5).

This incident in 1964 highlights a lot about the spatial politics of race that germinated in Atlanta. While in this instance, the focus on the presence (or absence) of a physical barrier allowed courts to focus on a specific physical entity in upholding the Civil Rights Act, in many other cases, the barriers were less tangible but were no less palpable. Tactics such as the use of aggressive policing and real estate redlining coupled to civic and regional authorities’ hostility to black Atlantans effectively limited black residents’ and sojourners’ traveling through and occupation of public space in the city.

As a result, the neighborhoods remained mostly separate. As with a stirred glass of oil and water, shifts within the city over subsequent years did relatively little to intermix neighborhoods. The politics of public space, the spaces in between homes, the ventricles of the city, were even more nuanced. With the ephemera of segregationist constructions of belonging hanging in the air, certain ways of being and behaving marked as black were deemed transgressive in public spaces, particularly those set aside for whites. As long as residents honored the unspoken and invisible racial barriers and their affiliated codes of conduct, the city could maintain its visage of the city too busy to hate. But as soon as those barriers were crossed or those codes were resisted, the tension came to the fore just as it did when
the Peyton Forest wall came down. This is the context in which Atlanta hip-hop party music began its intervention through the idea of the cathartic black body.

**Who U Wit: Imagining Southern Identity**

The concept of Southerness as an identity, an aesthetic, and a means of navigating the world conjures, in the public imagination, notions of regressive otherness. Popular culture, in the past and today, reproduces Southern archetypes that emphasize an antithetical relationship to cosmopolitanism and modernity, sometimes pejoratively and at other times, in ways that are saturated with romanticism. In either case, representations of Southerness have often fallen back on homogeneity and regressive sociopolitical orthodoxy. This is important because it means that not only has the South been imagined in terms of geography or regional idiosyncrasy, but relationally behind the rest of the country, both temporally and evolutionarily. In other words, the American South is romanticized as a living anachronistic snapshot, a sociocultural time capsule where the people, in behavior and spirit, are an echo of a “less modern” time when things were simpler. As a result, over the past century, American popular culture has created an oeuvre of Southern symbols that effectively reinforced conceptual distance between Southerness and American normalcy. Furthermore, people in the South (and in regions that might not be geographically Southern but are nonetheless framed by Southern otherness) grapple with their own negotiations of what it means to be Southern and how Southerness is, or rather should be, performed. Caught somewhere between prevalent archetypes and lived realities, Southern people have
been faced with the task of determining how to represent self in the mundane performance of everyday life and in the aesthetics of framed spectacle.

In 1967, Allan C. Brownfeld published a piece in *The North American Review* entitled “The Crisis of Southern Identity.” The “crisis” he identifies is one defined by modernity attacking tradition, which he superimposes upon his construction of the North and the South. He extends this conversation to a concern that the United States of America might lose its morality, traditionalism, and identity if it becomes overly concerned with being “progressive,” hence those (Southerners) who stand as the apotheosis of traditional values must contend with a perpetual crisis as reformers infringe change on to American culture (Brownfeld 1967: 23-26). While filled with romanticized views about the nobility of the American South and veneration for the values and practices of the (implicitly white and certainly segregated) South, Brownfeld’s account accurately denotes that the South has, in a sense, become marked as a regressive space as a means of distracting or absolving the rest of the country of responsibility in perpetuating racial inequality. Through the reactionary rhetoric of this piece, one can glean a sense of marked cultural and ideological dissimilitude between the North and the South and, accordingly, differing constructions of what Southerness looks like and which people, places, and practices get to define its quintessence. Blackness is absent from this construction of Southern identity; moreover, blackness is seen as part of the modernity that threatens the sanctity of Southern ways of life. There is a simultaneous erasure of black identity from Southerness coming from both sides of the Mason-Dixon. Further, black people in the South and the treatment thereof are, in these
constructions, often used as a symbolic litmus test for the morality of Southern whiteness if engaged at all. The identity politics of what it means to be Southern were inextricably bound to bodies that were raced white and modes of being that were markedly rural.

This notion of Southern (rural, white) particularity manifested early in American popular music with the formation of the industry’s first generic distinctions, namely in the distinguishing of hillbilly music from race music and mainstream music. The genre known as hillbilly music, which would later be rebranded as country and western, was first and foremost defined by rural (implicitly Southern) white otherness. While aesthetically this genre might have bore similarities to music in either of the other two categories, its defining characteristics reinforced a sonic symbology of rustic white otherness (Fox 2004: 24-25, 229-231; Green 1965: 221-223; Hagstrom Miller 2010: 2).

Hip-hop, by contrast, has a politics of authenticity that centralizes the opposite: Northern, urban, and affiliated explicitly with constructions of blackness. Jeff Chang’s seminal tome Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation has at its core the grounding concept that hip-hop definitively began in and radiated out from The Bronx, New York in the 1970s, evidenced by his dedication of most of the book’s opening chapters to constructing the sociopolitical particularities that defined the geographically marked space of The Bronx in the 1960s (Chang 2005). This construction of hip-hop’s genesis in this location has been reproduced throughout the canon in discussions of hip-hop as a culture (Dyson 1993; George 2004; Rose 1994, 2008) and as a political artist’s movement (Castleman 2004;
Banes 2004; Holman 2004; Hebdige 1987; Katz 2012; Rose 1994; Rose 2008). This early locational emphasis on New York caused many of the first cultural analytical tools in hip-hop studies to hinge on or relate to tactics that occupants of socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods in The Bronx used to comment on and resist their own marginalization; for example, the practice of siphoning electricity from the city’s light poles to fuel block parties accompanied by loud sound systems (Katz 2012: 43-44). Ultimately, this approach affixes hip-hop authenticity to a pantheon of New York-based formats.

In this way, Southern hip-hop is a paradox by its very existence, the conflation of two concepts that are, according to constructions of authenticity in the public imagination, fundamentally contradictory. And yet, Southern hip-hop found its footing in the sturdiness of deep seeded roots/routes. To begin with, the moment that Chang and many other hip-hop historians mark as the moment of hip-hop’s genesis in New York also marks the beginning of African-Americans moving en masse to the American South; a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “the Great Remigration” (Hunt et al 2012: 119-121). This suggests a contemporaneous negotiation of race, place, and space in both locales, but given the placement of Southern as fixed in the past and Northern as moving toward the future, the two would inevitably symbolize different temporalities.

In his book, Third Coast: OutKast, Timbaland, & How Hip-Hop Became a Southern Thing, Roni Sarig offers an alternative genesis myth to the widely held Bronx narrative; one which emphasizes the South as an active ingredient in what we understand as hip-hop culture. His theory of a newly conceived Southern genesis for
hip-hop has two major parts. First, some neighborhoods in Miami, like The Bronx, have a unique population composed of African-American, Caribbean, Latino and South American cultural presences, all of which brought with them the very elements that coalesced to create what we understand as hip-hop culture. He goes as far as to argue that Miami might have its own proto-hip-hop history and that Miami bass, the city’s signature hip-hop style, may be a separate contemporaneous musical construction to, rather than an outgrowth from, New York hip-hop (Sarig 2007: 10-13). The second part of Sarig’s theorization comes from the overwhelming emphasis on rap in hip-hop discourse. As he argues, the practices that constitute rap, which is to say performative rhythmic wordplay over music/beats, existed in black communities in the American South long before the widely accepted origins of hip-hop and traveled north as Southern African-Americans migrated to the North during the first half of the twentieth century (Sarig 2007: ix-xi). While these theorizations have not been widely accepted as alternate creation myths in the hip-hop studies canon, they work to destabilize the regional hierarchy implicit in traditional hip-hop research. Still, the perception of Southerness as the antithesis of hip-hop persisted and this is where many of Atlanta’s first major hip-hop artists entered the scene. But before coming from the studio, Atlanta’s hip-hop party aesthetics formed in the roller rinks through a tradition that would be known locally as yeeking.
“Bounce, Rock, Skate, Roll”

There is currently no literature on yeeking and there’s very little on the roller rink culture from which it emerged. Much of this research, therefore, had to rely on the stories of my interlocutors to construct an account of a moment, a culture that eluded decades of documentation. The following is a composite of oral histories put forth by people from the scene.

By the 1980s, Atlanta, like many other cities, had several roller rinks that catered to young people. They existed in a liminal middle ground between the playground and the nightclub. Roller rinks had deejays whose job it was to mix (and remix) dance music to keep the crowd satisfied; they also lacked an age minimum, so young people, even those younger than the legal age to attend other types of club spaces, were able to enter and enjoy, to actively evaluate and engage with new music in large gatherings. This positioned roller rinks as important nodes in black youth socialization in the metro-Atlanta area. Roller rinks like Jelly Bean in Ben Hill, Cascade in the West End and The Golden Glide in Decatur were flooded with black youth on weekends in the 1980s. These were some of the few spaces in Atlanta that were defined by black youth culture, especially black minors.

On weekends and over summers, school aged black youth would go to these rinks and stay there for hours; it was one of the few ways in which young black people were able to create connections across school district barriers. While there

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12 Roller rinks were important for American youth culture at large and black youth culture specifically in many places outside of Atlanta. The specificity with which the claim that roller rink culture is an important facet of black youth experiences in 1980s Atlanta is not meant to negate the social role of the roller rink elsewhere; however, the interlocutors that helped construct this oral history spoke specifically of Atlanta roller-skating and the claims made here are bound by that.
were established school rivalries, particularly with regard to sports and marching bands, roller rinks as a space provided a kind of interaction that was at once much broader (more tied to a local construction of “East side” or “West side” of the metro-Atlanta area) and more personal. In some cases, rivalries would arise by affiliated roller rink as attendees would argue that their preferred rink had the best music or the best skaters. At any rate, the experience of attending an Atlanta roller rink came with a kind of ubiquity: they each featured a large oblong skating rink with an elevated deejay booth on one side, standing between a gaming and dining area at one end near a small accessories shop and skate rental booth at the other.

Something else that became ubiquitous was the way in which the patrons related to and transformed the space, which would, eventually, become a driving force in Atlanta hip-hop aesthetics.

Dance-skating was a central feature of these spaces. The purpose of the rink was not simply to travel the circle en masse, but to do so with considerable style and flair; it was in essence a dance floor on wheels. Those who were able to skate backwards, do spins, splits, and steps, who could incorporate popular dance moves in their skating, while maintaining balance and momentum and weaving through the crowd had a great amount of cachet in these spaces.

The tradition of dance-skating goes back much further in Western history. The second industrial revolution brought with it a boom in recreational skating. Manufacturers pushed the idea of skate-dancing first as a pastime for the wealthy class, emphasizing the idea of the waltz on wheels and, much like the traditional waltz, mostly manifested very stiff and thoroughly choreographed succession of
moves to be carried out in unison by all participants (Turner and Zaidman 1997: 39-40). In the early decades of the 20th century, competitive organizations arose through which dancers would be ranked by their routines and competency, similar to today’s world of figure (ice)skating. During the 1940s, as most European countries drew focus away from frivolous activities like competitive roller skating and shifted attention to the increasingly devastating realities of the Second World War, the United States of America emerged as the leading stylistic force in the world of competitive roller skating. During these years the American style came to the fore, which was faster and brought much more emphasis on the idea of making movements seem as smooth and effortless as possible (Turner and Zaidman 1997: 41). By the mid-20th century, roller rinks had been built all over the United States as enthusiasts extended their interest in skating into sports, dance, and recreational arenas. In the 1970s, the concept of the roller disco arose. With roller discos came the full conflation of the pageantry of the roller rink and the flash and flamboyance of the nightclub. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the popularity, or at the very least the trendiness, of the roller disco became apparent with movies like Roller Boogie (1979), Skatetown U.S.A (1980) and Xanadu (1980). Regardless of the perceived merit of these movies (most roller skating themed movies received middling or low ratings from critics) the fact that several films were released around the same time featuring a mix of roller skating and dance indicate a great enough level of popularity among the youth subset to justify such significant attempts to capitalize upon the trend.
It is unclear how exactly black youth became the central patrons of Atlanta’s roller rinks. All of those who I interviewed discussed the roller rink as an essential site for black youth, but nobody seemed to remember a time before they were built. While there is little in the way of an official record supporting this phenomenon, there are some discussions that might elucidate how the roller rink and skate dancing became such a pervasive experience for black youth in the 1980s, in Atlanta and beyond. As stated earlier, roller disco achieved peak trendiness in the late 1970s, which would have prompted interest in building roller rinks. There is little evidence, however, that black youth were the initial target patrons for these business ventures, especially not those in poor and working class neighborhoods.

The Golden Glide Skating Rink, one of my field sites, is located in Decatur, on the east side of the metro-Atlanta area, in the Southwest corner of DeKalb County. The rink sits behind a wooded area near a dying strip mall; both share an uneven parking lot that phases in and out of patches of gravel and grass. For decades, the area has been defined primarily by a unique mix of poor and middle class suburban families, but the area is nearly wholly black, in both its residents and in the people who travel to/through it regularly. In the 1960s and 1970s, this area had a very different demographic. The area was mostly inhabited by upper middle class white suburban families, who accounted for roughly 94% of the population, but by the 1990s, the white population of this area had dropped to less than 12% (Kruse 2007: 263). Kevin Kruse attributes this shift to a phenomenon known as “white flight” wherein predominantly white areas shift demographics drastically, abruptly, and completely, catalyzed by non-white families taking residence in the area. As the
pattern goes, middle class black families move into predominantly white middle class areas and their presence is met with apprehension. In response, middle class white families begin to move in droves, causing a sharp and sudden decline in communal wealth. While originally, white flight was reserved for discussing the exodus of white people from urban inner cities in response to the increased presence of black people in the mid-20th century, Kruse extends the phenomenon to Atlanta’s suburbs from the late 1970s to the 1990s, a time during which white suburbanites moved back into the inner city or further out into rural areas as black communities shifted into the suburbs (Kruse 2007: 264). As white flight from one area occurs, so too does gentrification of another, as former residents seek out new spaces to occupy. This ultimately displaces poor and working class black communities, many of whom, in this instance, found themselves in the suburbs that former white residents left behind. These patterns of white flight have created a kind of suburban poverty that is unique to the city of Atlanta, defined in large part by poor and working class communities that live in neighborhoods that were once middle class suburbs and have some of, or some semblance of, the physical accoutrements of normalized middle class living (for example, living in houses with yards, living in close proximity to shopping malls, etc.); it should be noted, however, that many of the socioeconomic phenomena affiliated with poor urban communities persist in these areas.

I introduce all of this to suggest that, like the abandoned middle class homes, the roller rinks many of the people I interviewed grew up attending were likely an inheritance of suburban white flight. During the 1970s, when roller rinks were in
vogue among white youth, the neighborhoods in which they were built, and by extension the people to whom they would directly cater, were largely upper middle class and white; that shifted abruptly in the 1980s (Kruse 2007: 244). It is unlikely that the coincidence of this shift in demography and the genesis stories shared by my interlocutors is happenstance. Atlanta is not unique in manifesting a dedicated black youth roller skating culture; to the contrary, many urban areas across the country featured rinks wherein black youth injected the dance-sport of roller skating with funk, R&B and hip-hop inflected motions. The rink became a site of memory (to borrow from Pierre Nora’s lieux du memoire) for black youth of the post-Civil Rights era. The idea of the rink as a space of black youth activity carried with it a kind of translocal ubiquity; the movements/gestures that define the space, the cast of characters who perform through the fashion and experiences of the space, seem binding for black youth in Atlanta and beyond.

Throughout the 1980s in Metro-Atlanta, the most skilled skaters formed competitive troops at the roller rinks. These groups, usually consisting of between two and six members, would zip around the rink in highly choreographed unison. There was little room for improvisation in this format as the prestige of the group hinged on its ability to maintain formation and to move as one. The best troops circulated through all of the rinks, challenging other troops in other areas to best them in coordination, style, creativity and athleticism. Around this time, something else began to happen. Some of the troops began to transition their routines from skates to sneakers. While some troops zipped around the rink, others would be on
the sidelines or in the center of the rink, practicing or performing routines as (un-
wheeled) dance moves.

This dance format, which would later be known as yeeking, presented a mix of moves taken from skate-dancing and more traditional hip-hop dance styles. As interest in the dance moves intensified, so too did more troops emerge to compete against each other for bragging rights, each with its own name, brand, and style. Spontaneous contests would emerge in the center of rinks and, at some locations, would temporarily take over the entire rink for dance battles. Audiences gathered around these cyphers, at the center of which groups would be executing their routines with perfect precision. Onlookers would cheer and chant along with the music, calling upon an emergent vocabulary of heretofore nonsensical exclamations with a particularly impressive move or sequence was executed. Dancers and watchers alike would yell “AY!” “YU-ED!” and “YU!” to affirm the people in the center and, most importantly “YEEK!” when a concluding move hit just right (usually on the final 4th measure-beat of the sequence). To get the audience to yell “YEEK!” was tantamount to a victory knell, to a collective declaration of the dancers’ virtuosity, if not triumph, in the moment, so it is fitting that later, the dancers who engaged this style would take on this word as its name.

These troops also began to engage in what they referred to as talent shows. While schools commissioned some in these contests, it seems that others were more spontaneous or youth-organized events where the audience evaluated the talents of competitors and voiced their approval, or conversely their disapproval, with their immediate responses, not unlike the tradition of Amateur Night at the Apollo. This
amplified the stakes for performance. While there is theoretically some cover when troops performed at the rink, with skaters circling and people there enjoying the arcade and gift shop, transitioning to a stage meant creating a kind of showcase that necessitated absolute focus. This new context brought with it a desire to amp things up, in terms of the moves, the music, the costuming, and the intensity. By the mid-1990s, yeeking was a central feature of dance showcases, public party events, Atlanta-based music videos and nightclubs: at that point, it was the epitome of Atlanta hip-hop style.

**Y(our) E(nergetic) E(xplosive) K(limax)!**

“Your Energetic Explosive Klimax!” is a slightly unclear explanation for what yeeking is, but what exactly it is escapes simple definition. In many ways, yeeking is a performative portmanteau of b-boying, skate dancing, ticking, and pantomime. It all blends perfectly to express something specifically identifiable as Atlanta hip-hop style. While in Atlanta, I watched a lot of people yeek in different contexts: in practice, in performance, and in teaching. Each time, I learned a little more about what it is as a format and what it signifies as a means of articulating Atlanta hip-hop through music, body, and voice.

Ted and Mel are the two dancers who took on the education role most centrally and were, therefore, the two who most directly articulated how to perform the movements and where they came from. Mel organized the class, as she is a choreographer who teaches many styles, but she let Ted take point as the primary teacher when it came to yeeking. Mel often deferred to Ted’s teaching because, as
she asserted many times, Ted had been yeeking longer. Both have jobs outside of
dance, but both have been integral in the yeek community and central to the revival
that the dance style was experiencing during my fieldwork. Ted’s introductory
speech always came with him performing the basic step of yeeking: a lateral two
step with a step-tap move that goes from side to side. This step is coupled with a
one-sided shoulder bounce that always matches the direction of the step. This
movement, he explained, came directly from the basic movement of roller skating.
The zig-zagging push and glide of the rink is recalled every time this basic step is
done. Every yeek routine I saw, regardless of its context or of who was doing it,
started with a brief recall of this movement to the music. Every other step and
gesture grows out of this basic movement.

One of my first observations took place at a dance studio at the nexus of
Decatur and Lithonia, just past the eastern border of I-285, the highway that
encircles the perimeter of the metro-Atlanta area. There, Ted led a beginner’s
yeeking demonstration for a class of mostly women. At a cursory glance, I guessed
that most of them were in their mid-to-late 20s and would have been much too
young to be a part of the first few waves of yeek culture in the 1980s and 1990s.¹³ I
would later learn that all in attendance to this class had worked with Mel before in
various other dance styles in a (somewhat unofficial) dance company. The fact that
the class consisted of mostly women, with the exception of one male student and

¹³ The history of yeeking was often described to me as a series of temporally distinct
waves or eras. These waves were either enumerated (i.e. first wave, second wave,
etc.) or named for defining spaces (e.g. the roller rink era or the talent show era).
Notably, these waves were defined more relationally than temporally; the
beginnings and ends of the waves had less to do with dates than with important
shifts in place and performance.
myself, held a slight irony because, as Mel often told us, women were largely excluded from yeeking for most of its history.\textsuperscript{14} It’s possible that the revival would come with a reversal of that trend.

In these yeek classes, Ted taught everybody the basic step and then slowly added in new named moves: elbow, the face plant, the pull, the muscle, “give ‘em some,” the smurf, the cowboy and “the MJ” among others. After teaching the moves, all of which maintained the same basic shape of the left-to-right footwork, Ted would turn on some music and lead the class in a, surely slowed down, yeek dance. The music, often Afrika Bambaataa’s “Planet Rock,” blared, but not so loudly that Ted couldn’t be heard because, as I observed, the process of creating yeek choreography is semi-improvisational, with a leader yelling out the next moves in time. Ted and the students rocked back and forth together in the basic step and when he called out a move, “Elbows! Elbows!” for example, the students would know to “throw their ‘bows” on the next beat. Most moves take two-to-four beats to perform. As the students became more accustomed to the moves and the calls, the called combinations got more complex.

I witnessed the dynamics of this engagement when Ted worked on routines with his peers, those whose expertise in the Atlanta dance scene matched his own. Mel and Ted invited the members of a yeeking troop that went by the name 14K to aid in putting a performance together and they became a mainstay for the duration of my fieldwork. When Ted choreographed with 14K, it was very similar to how he interacted with the students, but the process and the movements were much faster.

\textsuperscript{14} There were some notable women yeekers that Mel pointed out, whom I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5.
The names of the moves, the moves themselves, work somewhat syntactically, a pool of well known fragments that can be broken apart and recombined in new sequences that insiders can perform in unison if guided by a leader calling them out. While most yeek competitive routines were meticulously carved out beforehand, this ability to coordinate on the fly both expedites the choreography process and would be useful on the roller skates where, even without a planned routine, a troop could have maintained formation in the rink. These calls were part of the soundscape. Almost rapped, they have a rhythm to them that fits in with the music and becomes part of what is expected of the performance. Even at times when the choreography is settled upon before the performance, the dancers would interject vocalizations, not unlike those that the audience would contribute at the rink competitions, as a means of articulating their moves. In short, yeeking is a kind of dancing, but a major component to the performance is the voice, both as a communicative tool in emergent choreography and as an exclamatory punctuation. On different occasions, the established yeekers offered some historical context for the moves they taught, usually referencing a specific person that was known for the move. The implication is that the canon of yeek movements grows directly out of the competitive dancers’ drive to put forth something new; however, as most of these histories warned, one troop/person might have invented the move, but it was often transformed and standardized by another.

While the choreography was specific, the music seemed to be interchangeable. I witnessed the same routine practiced to different songs with different tempi. Sometimes, the dancers would go through several songs searching
for the right tempo and feel to match their energy for the night. As long as the song was in 4/4, had a moderate-to-fast tempo, and a strong bass line, any yeek routine, improvisational or through-choreographed, could be performed to it.

As carefully crafted as the choreography is and as rigidly synchronized as the dancers have to be, yeeking maintains an explosive sense of abandon. Most of that comes from small gestural amendments each dancer makes to the moves, enough to express a kind of individuality. For instance, Ted emphasizes his turns and changes in the direction of his step by turning his head the opposite way while Mel goes just a little deeper than everybody else when the choreography calls for a dip. These decisions, unperceivable to an outsider, are a part of how yeekers evaluate each other. In a dance where everybody moves in unison, where every group pulls from the same pool of movements, the how becomes a central means of earning prestige, a method of formulating a signature. Additionally, this latitude for micro-adjustments allows for a slight imprecision that ultimately adds to the feeling that each dancer is truly expressing their “every explosive klimax!” in a way that is incapable of being fully contained.

The vocalizations that accompany yeeking, possibly even the pacing and rhythms of the stomps and claps that the dancers make, would likely seem familiar to any person who has at least a cursory familiarity with Atlanta hip-hop from the 1990s or early 2000s. That is, in no small part, because of the role that yeeking and the dancers who defined it played in stylizing the local hip-hop style. The story goes back again to the roller rinks in the 1980s as yeeking groups first began to emerge.
Those who were on the scene when it first emerged spoke nostalgically of songs that were played on heavy rotation at the rink. The ones that they selected for practice most frequently included “Planet Rock” by Afrika Bambaataa, “Din Daa Daa” by George Kranz, “Panic Zone” by N.W.A. and “Set It Off” by Strafe. To my surprise, the selected music only occasionally included more local (Atlanta) artists. This mix, however, makes sense for referencing the genesis of yeeking. Atlanta did not have a well-established hip-hop party sound in the first half of the 1980s and roller rink deejays would have, undoubtedly, pulled dance records from non-local artists to establish and maintain the party. The early yeekers danced and skated to this music, but as the dance style broke free of its roller origins, the dancers began to demand something different from the repertoire. According to the dancers I spoke to, the first musical shifts for yeeking occurred when some dancers lamented that the tempi of most music was too slow. Since the dancers no longer had to coordinate moves with the pragmatics of skating, they were free to incorporate more acrobatics, more elaborate footwork and, importantly, faster speeds. Troops resolved to get somebody to physically force records to play faster by pushing the record along with their fingers. The familiar hip-hop and R&B songs would become faster (hovering around 140-175 bpm), higher, and timbrally tinnier. Additionally, the acoustics and crowd noise, or more appropriately the vocal contribution of the audience and performers, combined to create the unique sound of yeek. The desire for this musical aesthetic and this tempo drove many yeek dancers to branch into music making.
Many of my interlocutors from the yeeking scene had at some point become involved in making hip-hop music, be it as singers, rappers, producers, or deejays; but the driving force behind their music always revolved around creating something to be danced to. Mel talked about rapping and singing on tracks, eventually contributing to one of Atlanta's local anthems, Kilo Ali's “Nasty Dancer” in 1995, performing as the song's Atlanta-inflected “Tina Turner” a la “Private Dancer.” As much of the music made by yeekers, “Nasty Dancer” sounds like Turner's song, sped up with an added booming bass line and rap verses. The music is referential, but rarely relies on direct samples. Artists and producers like LA Sno and Playa Poncho also began as yeek dancers and transitioned into music making first to create music that fit yeek dance style. The rhythms of the move calls are replicated in the flows of these artists; a kind of playfulness that makes reference to the named dance moves and the party environment in which they exist.

There were several music producers that started out either dancing or who focused on making music for troops. Ted shared that he was once in a yeeking/skating troop with the men who would later form Organized Noize, one of Atlanta's most prominent hip-hop and R&B production teams. Ted also made a point to inform me that he is the son of the bassist from the funk band Brick, a connection which he intimated had some bearing on the heavy funk influences of Organized

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15 While Mel provides the sung vocals for this song, she is not credited on the track's original metadata. According to Mel, she was invited to the studio to sing through some ideas for Kilo Ali, but was not told that her part would be used in a final version of a song and she was not paid for her performance. Mel only discovered that her vocals had been used after hearing the song play on the radio. This eventually led to a lawsuit. Mel is recognized locally for her contribution to this song. Despite this, she has, to this day, never agreed to perform “Nasty Dancer” live with Kilo Ali.
Noize. DJ Taz and DJ Kizzy Rock, some other local celebrity producers who were central in forming and producing the subgenre of Atlanta bass, credit yeeking with inspiring their composition methodologies. In an interview, Kizzy Rock spoke specifically of a yeek dancer who inspired the texture of one of his most successful produced hits, “Whatz Up Whatz Up,” performed by Playa Poncho and LA Sno:

“The first record I produced... “Whatz Up Whatz Up”...the whole concept came from yeeking and the dancers. It was about the talk. You heard what [Ted] just did? When he came out here? ‘Got damn. Unh. Whatz up [performed with yeek-style hand gestures with a sparse rap-style vocal]...it came from that and that one little thing...so when Playa Poncho [the featured artist] talking about ideas and shit, he a lying muthafucka. That’s some real shit...The dance offs. That’s where it came from. I got it from Ant [a yeek dancer]. That nigga talk like a muthafucka. More than anybody. He’ll be like ‘Whats up...Ya grandmamma too...Get some...Unh!...Suck a dick nigga...’[performed as before] I could give it to you over and over. But I got the whole concept of “Whatz Up Whatz Up” from the dance talking. For real.” (February 2016).

Kizzy Rock’s track for “Whatz Up Whatz Up” is typical of Atlanta hip-hop party music of the time, i.e. the mid 1990s. The beats featured extended sections of chant and/or voiced interjections that mirrored the yeeking soundscape; it was part of the underlying sonic texture of Atlanta’s hip-hop dance music. While some of the inspiration for this music came directly from the subgenre of Miami bass, which I explicate later in this dissertation, the incorporation of the sonic and performative features that are specific to yeeking marked the style as distinctly Atlanta. The patterns of call-and-response in this song and others bring focus onto the role of the audience’s performance in hearing. “Whatz Up Whatz Up” is essentially yeeking disembodied, packaged, and redistributed for hip-hop dance styles, yeeking and other, to be performed and vocalized with.
Kizzy Rock’s contention that Playa Poncho is a “lying muthafucka” for claiming to be the driving force behind the song’s format highlights a fundamental rift between perceptions of creation/ownership in traditional hip-hop and the collaborative/democratic gestural and compositional methodologies that were most prominent on the yeek and post-yeek scene. As the primary rapper on the song, Playa Poncho is the one most credited with it, just as the vocalists on many mainstream hip-hop songs are often considered the “owner” or the one most responsible for the songs’ gravitas. The notion that meaning and impact are most attributable to the rapper is, at least in part, due to a text-centric evaluative approach that likens hip-hop music to poetry. From this perspective, the importance of the chanted section and its connections to the scene to which it refers is diminished if not disregarded; or conversely such a section, as is the case of “Whatz Up Whatz Up” is understood as an extension of the rapper’s creativity. In asserting that the composition of the song is based upon the sonic experience of yeeking, the vocalizations of both the dancers and the crowds, Kizzy Rock directly challenges the focus on a singular narrative-style vocal performance of the rapper. In this subtle way, Kizzy Rock articulates that Atlanta bass, the music that got people crunk in the 1990s, was about two things: a cathartic body and collective voicing. This intervention would define crunk music and the articulation of meaning for years to come.
“Yeeking saved my life” – The Stakes

When addressing the issue of how subgenres of hip-hop come to mean, one must contend with the ways in which outsiders perceive black youth and the impact that has had on their lived experiences. In an ethnographic investigation, Rod K. Brunson and Jody Miller posit that black youth “typify the ‘symbolic assailant’ in the eyes of the police” which means that black youth become symbolically aligned with notions of criminal behavior and are treated as such, regardless of whether or not evidence of wrongdoing emerges (Brunson and Miller 2006: 534). As they argue, policing policies in low-income black neighborhoods are harmful, and frequently feature hyper-surveillance in the form of harassment to black youth residents which frequently turns into physical, sexual, and/or psychological violence (Brunson and Miller 2006: 548). As is indicated here, such events are a direct outgrowth of the construction of poor black youth in the public imagination as predisposed to criminality.

Cathy Cohen’s work with the Black Youth Project exhibits further exploration of the construction of black youth in the public imagination from both inside and outside of the subset, her primary goal being the extraction and documentation of the sociopolitical stances through which Americans articulate their opinions regarding the state of values, morality, youth culture, race/racism, gender/sexuality, and the government (Cohen 2010). Throughout her study, Cohen troubles, if not flatly denies, the notion that hip-hop is responsible for “pathological” decisions that foster the perpetuation of racial inequality, while noting that many scholars, public speakers, and even listeners of hip-hop implicitly or explicitly embrace this position.
Her study, therefore, offers an invaluable contribution to understanding the construction of black youth identities and behaviors in the public imagination, especially those based primarily in archetypical themes in popular culture.

Themes in hip-hop invariably impact this process of imagining black youth. Hip-hop scholar Erik Nielson argues that persistent surveillance and aggressive policing tactics have become integral to hip-hop, noting state-sanctioned investigative campaigns centered on the documentation and surveillance of popular hip-hop artists. He holds that “rap is what it is because of surveillance, with many of its most salient lyrical, structural and thematic features having evolved as a direct, though at times perhaps subconscious, response to it” (Nielson 2010: 1255). Nelson highlights several compositional, performative, and promotional tactics that respond to this surveillance and have molded the genre into its current format and charged it with its sociocultural subtexts (Nielson 2010: 1259-1269). He argues, via Foucault, that the proactive surveillance tactics levied against black youth, especially those in poor neighborhoods, induces “a state of conscious and permanent visibility” (Nielson 2010: 1269).

In her investigation of popular hip-hop songs extending from 1979 to 1997, Denise Herd makes the observation that allusions to violence in hip-hop music have steadily increased since 1979, presenting a discernible jump after 1989, when large record labels overtook independent labels’ centrality in hip-hop production and distribution. Herd posits that references to violence have increased, even as weapons violence decreased by 59% and firearm violence decreased by 63% in the span between 1993 and 2001 (Herd 2009: 403). She concludes that, while the initial
introduction of violence into hip-hop music may have been the direct result of independent artists reporting on social ills in poor urban communities, by the 1990s, the violence trope had been recognized as having mass appeal by large, white-owned corporations, who promoted artists’ use of violent references, or conversely offered greater opportunities to artists with propensities toward depicting violent narratives, as a means of boosting sales; a shift from “street reports” to tabloid-ese sensationalism. This trend, in all likelihood driven by these hyper-capitalist entities, nonetheless reflects back on black youth, particularly those in poor urban communities, which further leads to aggressive policing tactics.

Denise Herd’s 2009 overview of violent imagery in popular hip-hop songs between 1979 and 1997 indicates that violent images have increased since 1979, from about 24% in 1979-1984 to roughly 60% by 1997, with a marked leap in violent imagery after 1989. It should also be noted that there was an increase in the number of total rap songs from 1979 to 1997, which means that the percentage difference corresponds to a much larger numerical difference. Herd found a strong positive correlation between references to illegal drug use and violence, but found increasing correlations between violent imagery and songs that allude to glamor, wealth, and personal prowess. She also notes that after 1994, reported acts of violence declined nationally, while violent images in hip-hop continued to increase, which, she asserts, indicates that violence in hip-hop shifted from being representative of actual increases in violence in the 1980s to industry constructions.

Yeeking traditions are left outside of these studies. It is unlikely that any of the researchers who engaged in these works on black youth and how they are
constructed in the public imagination were aware of yeeking as a phenomenon or the particularities of Atlanta's hip-hop scene; however it is just as unlikely that outsiders drew distinctions between the politics and presentation of yeeking and those of the concurrently emerging gangsta rap. Said another way, yeeking emerged during a time when black communities, particularly black youth, were homogenized and criminalized in the public imagination and the sociocultural emphasis that the music industry and hip-hop detractors placed on gangsta rap rendered yeeking virtually invisible on the national hip-hop scene.

Beyond the elusive definition of what exactly yeeking is looms the question of what it means to the people who do it. Given that yeeking has eluded being the subject of research or even much journalism, how does knowledge of yeeking contribute something useful to hip hop discourse? The answer is twofold. First, as I have asserted, yeeking is at the core of Atlanta hip-hop party music. It was the driving force behind many Atlanta hip-hop artists’ first foray into music making and led many of them to form compositional techniques that became signatures of Atlanta’s style. Accordingly, elucidating yeek offers context the kind of hip-hop and how it manifested meaning for subsequent Atlanta hip-hop movements, thereby offering contextual and analytical tools for more current subgenres.

The other reason yeeking must be entered into discourse has to do with the investment of the people on the scene. Many of the interviews I conducted included some summation of yeek’s importance to their lives or, in some cases, to their survival. A recurrent theme was the extremely limited opportunities in poor and working class black neighborhoods for black youth recreational time. They each
shared a sense of malignant stagnancy in the city for black youth, a feeling that had it not been for yeeking, they might have succumbed to a treacherous path. In a city that, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, intensified its campaigns to draw tourism by displacing inner city black neighborhoods, yeeking in roller rinks and at talent showcases was one of the few activities in which the black youth of the city could express a sense of agency in defining space and cultural particularity.

One especially potent conveyance of this sentiment came from Mel. When I asked her what yeeking was all about, her response was “yeeking saved my life.” She told the story of being a girl of about fourteen dealing with emotional trauma and a sense of uncertainty, even contemplating self-harm when she happened upon a troop of yeek dancers practicing on a sidewalk. She didn’t know what exactly they were doing, but she was enthralled by their moves. She watched them dance for a while and then went home, got in front of a mirror and attempted to emulate what she saw. She spent hours dancing and perfecting the moves, which, she holds, gave her something to hold onto at a difficult time. That moment led not only to an interest in yeeking, but to a career as a dancer and choreographer. She still shares this story with those who join her dance company. Hers was one of the few stories that I came across where the introduction to yeeking did not happen in the roller rink. For Mel, this dance style offered a sense of community and belonging that she didn’t have before. Yeeking became a safe space where black youth were not only valued, but were creators, the dictators of how the format would be defined, a place to be explosive in a world that pressured them to shrink.
Conclusion

Your Every Explosive Klimax! The mnemonic device chosen to delineate yeeking speaks to the work that the dance style and its affiliated music accomplishes; it speaks to a catharsis, concentrated into a single moment marked by extravagant gesture and a full emphatic vocality. It is simultaneously singular and communal, an expression of individual skill and affirmation of prestige. Yeeking was a central guiding force in the hip-hop fashion, music, and dance of the Metro-Atlanta through the 1980s and 1990s.

And yet, YEEK! offers much more than that as a theoretical entry point into Atlanta hip-hop. The meaning and function of yeek, as a word and as a concept, would certainly be lost to outsiders as it is, in no way, an outgrowth of standard English and went without a standardized definition for decades. Rather, it was first a phonemic rendering of something markedly black, Southern, and explosive. And when words failed to accurately capture what that moment, or more appropriately that movement, was about, participants spilled it into a new term. Ambiguous though it might have been, performers on the scene imbued it with immense value and used it to self-define and to self-advocate. That this word only settled into a more explicit definition decades after the term had been around speaks to a centrality of gesture and the decentering of language when it comes to the expression of meaning within this scene. Likewise, when crunk came about, a descendant of yeek, collective gesture and performance would be paramount in its sociomusical work. Though it began humbly in the corners of roller rinks and remained largely unknown outside of the Metro-Atlanta area, yeeking would lay the
aesthetic foundations for a hip-hop movement that would eventually come to represent the sound of the South.
In 2005, Ludacris and Field Mob released the song “Georgia” as homage to Southern, or more appropriately country, hip-hop. The song starts with Jamie Foxx crooning the signature opening repetition of the word “Georgia” from “Georgia On My Mind,” Georgia’s state song, in the style of Ray Charles. Foxx’s vocalization is interrupted by a high-pitched ascending major third played by strings, the very same interval that begins Charles’ “Georgia On My Mind.” What functions as an introduction in the original song becomes a disruption, a striking departure from the jazz standard’s chord progression. At this moment, the progression circles back and Foxx sings the vocal opening again. After Foxx sings again, this time with more melismatic ornamentation, the beat drops. This moment marks the song as undeniably hip-hop; the metronomic ticks of a hi-hat, booming bass, and addition of Ludacris’ rapperly delivery of the lyrics simultaneously pushes against, recontextualizes, and blends with the jazz balladry of the opening sequence. The rest of the song oscillates between a hook inspired by the opening of Charles’ “Georgia On My Mind” and more centrally hip-hop verse.

This song epitomizes one of the central challenges that Southern hip-hoppers faced from the 1990s through the early 2000s: how to effectively represent hip-hop

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16 It should be noted that the year before, Foxx gave a stellar performance in Ray Charles’ cinematic biopic Ray. Foxx received overwhelming accolades for the accuracy of his portrayal; thus, Foxx’s opening in “Georgia” lead many to believe that the song begins with a sample of Ray Charles singing “Georgia On My Mind.”
while simultaneously representing tenets of Southern identity, many of which were considered antithetical to hip-hop aesthetics. This chapter explores some of the ways in which Atlanta hip-hop artists incorporated symbols of Southern identity into their music and music videos as a means of articulating something new, something that reoriented hip-hop in order to address the social, political, and spatial politics of what it means to navigate Georgia as a member of the hip-hop generation. Moreover, these artists represent staged performances that call back to the everyday performances of identity for the audiences they represent. It is therefore pertinent to begin this chapter with a discussion of how Southern identity has traditionally been constructed in the public imagination, both in the South and elsewhere. This discussion lays the foundation for understanding how Southern authenticity politics often left black youth and modernity on the margins as representations of Southern identities emphasized mythic pasts, both romantically and pejoratively.

I then delve into hip-hop artists’ incorporation of one of the most contentious symbols of racial tension and the American South: The Confederate flag. This seemingly preposterous conflation, hip-hop and the Confederate flag, and its many iterations offers insight into how various artists and audiences navigated the symbol as a representation of both a violent past and their lived realities. I argue that these artists complicated both conceptions of hip-hop and of Southern identity by dismantling homogenous identity politics that made Southerness and hip-hop seemingly incompatible in the 1990s.
I close with a close reading of OutKast’s song “Rosa Parks” as a case study of what it means/meant to perform Southern identity in hip-hop lyrically, compositionally, aesthetically. “Rosa Parks” exhibits performative and sonic constructions of Southern/country identity that disrupt, or at the very least complicate, the East coast/West coast centrality of hip-hop authenticity debates by suggesting rural roots. This song also exhibits one of the earliest incorporations of “crunk” as a word/concept. This song, therefore, stands as a bridge connecting Southern hip-hop party music’s crunk future to a newly conceived black and hip-hop inflected mythic past, which ultimately laid the foundation for the induction of crunk, and by extension crunk performativity, into the Southern hip-hop canon.

Southern Pride: Atlanta Hip-Hoppers Use the Confederate Flag

Just before the onset of the new millennium, the state of Georgia experienced significant shifts on two planes, both of which engaged issues of race and representation. The first of these two shifts was political, focusing on the use of the Confederate flag in official state capacities. At the time, Georgia’s state flag consisted of the Confederate flag and an image of the state crest. Furthermore, the Confederate flag, commonly referred to as the rebel flag, could frequently be found waving on the poles of state buildings and in the yards of state politicians. Citizens of the South engaged in a lively debate about whether the flag should be preserved for its historical value or destroyed for its racist connotations. This dialogue engaged most Georgians in one capacity or another for years, inspiring public forums, protests, and political movements (Leib 1995).
The second major shift was the emergence of the South, particularly Atlanta, as a major force in the hip-hop industry, which had its own impact on representations of Southern people. Around the country Southern hip-hop permeated radio stations, television shows, and popularity charts. Southern artists and Southern-specific hip-hop styles, particularly crunk, became nationally acknowledged participants and influences in the ever-developing hip-hop canon. The new emphasis on Southern spaces offered Atlanta-based artists a new national stage to not only express their aesthetic but to also voice their political beliefs. As a result, the symbols and archetypes affiliated with the South began to expand to accommodate the style and practices of these hip-hop inflected black youth movements.

The concurrence of these movements deeply affected the ways in which Southern rappers introduced themselves to the greater national audience. They came not only bearing their Southern swagger, but also many symbols of Southern pride, amongst them, the Confederate flag. This conflation of seemingly contradictory symbols ultimately stirred up controversy in the greater hip-hop community, most of which fizzled out without much resolution. The following is a contextualization of the Confederate flag's employment in hip-hop, the significance of the gesture, and its reception.

The Confederate flag, also known as the “rebel flag” or “rebel jack,” is one of the most well-known symbols of the South’s attempt to secede from the Union in order to preserve “the peculiar institution” of slavery. While those who argue for the inclusion of the Confederate flag’s continuance in normalized American symbology
often abstract the issue as a symbol of state’s rights versus federal power, for many
it continues to conjure images of the forced enslavement of African people and their
descendants.\textsuperscript{17} The Confederate flag is a symbol still so powerfully resonant that
even 150 years after the Civil War and fifty years after the Civil Rights Movement,
there are still active protests to bring state sanctioned presentations and
celebrations of the “stars and bars” to an end. It is no coincidence that Confederate
flags are brandished by the loudest disciples of the most reprehensible and
terroristic white supremacist positionalities. In the mid-twentieth century, as racial
equality began to gain traction as the legal standard of the land, white supremacist
organizations, the Ku Klux Klan among others, revived symbols of the Confederacy
in their violent, often murderous, crusades to preserve inequality. Therefore, in
addition to representing the 19th century movement to preserve the enslavement of
black people (even at the expense of keeping the country united), the Confederate
flag from the mid-twentieth century onward symbolized more current
manifestations of anti-black terrorism. The rebel flag has remained ubiquitous in
Georgia since the Civil War as a symbol of Southern pride, usually referencing a
desire to return to antebellum ideologies and social norms. For Georgia, the
Confederate flag achieved its most visible official manifestation since the decline of

\textsuperscript{17} While my discussion here focuses on the arguments formulated around the
Confederate flag, it should be noted that there is evidence quite often pro-flag
positions were tied to overtly anti-black motives. The insistence that the flag debate
is separate from race is more of a rhetorical tactic meant to cover racist positions in
a shroud of deniability. For a more detailed discussion, see Carol Anderson’s \textit{White
Rage: The Unspoken truth of Our Racial Divide} and Reingold and Wike’s “Confederate
Symbols, Southern Identity, and Racial Attitudes: The Case of the Georgia State
Flag.”
the Confederacy when in 1956, it consumed roughly two-thirds of the state flag as a protest to the growing civil rights movement. The primary catalyst was the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling two years earlier, in which educational segregation was deemed unconstitutional (Reksulak, et al. 2007). Here, the flag is displayed as a blatant disapproval of racial equality and remains one of its dominant connotations in the popular American imagination.

The display of the rebel flag continued for the following thirty-five years though minor protests against its use rose and fell many times throughout that time span. These protests were generally countered by arguments that the Confederate flag signifies an important facet of Georgia’s history and that it no longer has the same overtly, or at least actively overt, racist connotations that it once held. Still others protected the rebel jack on the basis of championing white supremacist, if not simply segregationist, beliefs. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) began a campaign for the abolishment of the rebel flag’s use in both official and unofficial capacities but their efforts proved fruitless in Georgia until 2001, when they persuaded the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to reject Atlanta as a viable location for the Final Four tournament (Reksulak et al. 2007). This rejection reflected poorly upon Georgia; not only would this be an obstacle in Atlanta’s efforts to promote tourism, but the public refusal to allow Atlanta to host the tournament on the basis the state’s use of an image symbolically charged with white supremacist ideology attracted national
attention, indicating the widespread contempt for the use of such symbols by most Americans (Sarratt).\textsuperscript{18} 

The response was swift though the legislative efforts to mitigate the bad publicity were achieved with the least amount of public involvement as possible. A bill was passed in January 2001 for a newly designed flag that would retain the Confederate flag but not display it so prominently, a compromise that pleased virtually no one (Reksulak, et al. 2007). Those in favor of protecting the original flag were appalled that the state flag was altered without a vote and that the once prominent symbol of the Confederate flag was reduced to one in a series of symbols at the bottom of the Georgia flag. Further, those who opposed the original flag were dissatisfied by the retention of the Confederate symbol at all. Most individuals on both sides of the debate, however, agreed that the new flag was simply aesthetically unpleasant. The general unpopularity of this flag incurred further debates, resulting in a series of votes taken to determine the best way to compose a representative image of Georgia that appealed to all of its citizens, paid homage to its history, and worked to debunk the popular affiliation of the South with bigotry and backwardness. The result was a new flag, chosen in 2003, that displays the state crest encircled by thirteen stars in a blue canton accompanied by three horizontal red and white stripes (Reksulak, et al. 2007).\textsuperscript{19} The successful efforts of groups and individual officials to discontinue the use of the rebel flag in official state contexts brought about a resurgence of informal Confederate flag use. The flag became

\textsuperscript{18}Taken from: http://xroads.virginia.edu/~class/am483_97/projects/sarratt/intro.html

\textsuperscript{19}It should be noted that this flag is also largely based on one of the flags of the Confederacy, albeit a much lesser known, and therefore less symbolically charged, iteration of the Confederate flag.
charged with yet another political connotation: An assertion of self-definition in the face of forces that, some felt, wished to designate Southern culture as inherently inferior, a carcinoma on an otherwise healthy country (Sarratt). With all of these constant shifts and symbolic affiliations, Georgians formed a fraught, complex relationship to the flag.

As debates over how the South would choose to present its face for the new millennium continued to rage, the Southern hip-hop scene was in the process of becoming a major player in the hip-hop world. While there had been Southern hip-hop artists to gain national recognition in the previous decade, Arrested Development, OutKast, and Goodie Mob, for example, their successes were rarely connected to the geographical spaces that produced them. The group TLC, arguably the most successful Southern hip-hop/R&B group of the 1990s, was marketed as geographically neutral, their packaging emphasizing gender, youth, and sexuality. OutKast and Arrested Development, both well-known long before the new millennium, made more overt geographical references, though Arrested Development, a group formed in Atlanta but consisting almost exclusively of non-Southern members, conjured a depiction of African-American rural poverty that was more indicative of national imaginings of Southern life than of any of the various budding Southern hip-hop movements20 (Miller 2008). OutKast and Goodie Mob,

20 My use of “movements” is in acknowledgement of various distinct cells of Southern hip-hop, each with its own history, sociocultural context, and aesthetics. That they are clumped together under the umbrella of Southern hip-hop has more to do with a politics of sociocultural taxonomy than it does with drawing critical linkages between them. Each is representative of an idea of Southern hip-hop, but acknowledging that is not an argument for Southern hip-hop homogeneity or a singular developmental succession.
two of TLC’s label-mates at LaFace Records, were anomalies, with their pronounced accents and constant allusions to life in Georgia, including Goodie Mob coining the now-popular term “dirty South.” These two groups were established as beacons of Southern hip-hop (Miller 2008) though they were often clustered under the umbrella term “conscious rap,” as opposed to the mainstream, along with countless other hip-hop artists who were deemed politically progressive and unconventional.21 The emphasis on lyrical content and unconventionality made these artists (OutKast and Goodie Mob) seem anomalous in terms of hip-hop more broadly rather than drawing focus to the social and geographical landscape that informed their artistry.

Another important facet of Atlanta’s hip-hop scene surrounded African-American party culture, with particular emphasis on Freaknik, which was composed of a series of events, during which many students engaged in varying displays of recreational catharsis. As I argue in chapter 3, Freaknik featured musical genres that brought focus onto the body, most notably go-go, house, and bass which became the building blocks of the Freaknik aesthetic (Thompson 2007). These genres, affiliated with Washington D.C, Chicago, and Miami respectively, combined in Atlanta and spread rapidly through the Southern black club circuit, producing a hip-hop subgenre known as Atlanta bass, or booty bass, music. This movement became one of the most important in Atlanta hip-hop history, providing a stage for

21 Even the construction of ”politically progressive conscious rap” is linked to a particular notion of what kind of political arguments hip-hop should engage in. For instance, “conscious rappers” like Common and Lauryn Hill, beloved for their engagement with progressive political politics, have both been taken to task for homophobic lyrics, which in other contexts would foreclose both artists from being considered progressive.
many locally celebrated artists and producers, such as Kilo Ali and Jermaine Dupri (Miller 2008); this party music became one of the most recognized manifestations of a Southern hip-hop aesthetic in the 1990s.

Bass music has some very distinct characteristics, most of which reflect its primary affiliation with party environments. It generally made allusions to spring and summer festivities with frequent reference to good weather, courtship, sex, general happiness, and playfulness (Miller 2008). These themes were compositionally enforced by the application of fast tempi in beat construction along with the frequent use of major keys and bright timbres. This music also represents an implicit representation of apolitical social gatherings. In the bass environment, making overt references, sonically or in the accompanying visuals, to controversial matters irrelevant to the perpetuation of the party environment was a rarity. Another distinctive feature of these songs is the extensive employment of chants, particularly in call-and-response format (Miller 2008). This approach to song construction allowed audience members to act as invited active participants in the sonic display. More to the point, this music was composed to promote dancing. It hit its peak in Southern states at about the same time that the greater hip-hop community became consumed by the gangsta aesthetic, defined by a narrative rap format usually expressing extremely violent accounts over slow, brooding beats; two very contrasting styles. Nevertheless, bass music remained central to Atlanta’s hip-hop party aesthetic until the late 1990s, when a new tributary was formed along this trajectory: Crunk.
The term crunk has been used in the South for years, usually when referring to a high energy party. One popular creation myth asserts that hip-hop icon Ice-T invented the term in 1995 during an interview with Conan O’Brien, a portmanteau derived of crazy and drunk. Another etymological myth suggests that crunk is the hybridization of chronic and drunk, finding a place of prominent application in nightclubs where young African-American party goers would smoke marijuana and drink alcohol, resulting in extreme intoxication. In a 2003 interview with USA Today, Lil’ Jon, born in 1972, asserted that crunk is a term that has been used in similar contexts in the South for as long as he can remember (Jones 2003), suggesting that the term is an African-American Southern colloquial derivative of the word crank, referring specifically to the cranking up of energy (Miller 2008).

Crunk as a musical style is distinguished from other styles of hip-hop by the way in which the underlying beats are composed and its unique textual format. Generally, the beats are composed of two primary tonal themes. These themes include one low register motive and one piercing motive several octaves higher accompanied by a drum machine, generally pulsing around 75 beats per minute in 4/4 time (Miller 2008). There is an emphasis on the bass component of these beats that often results in buzzing speaker distortions when played at high volumes that are often strong enough for one to feel the vibrations physically.

The sparse construction of the harmony is, therefore, functional. The lower register ensures a palpable sonic experience, while the upper register is pitched high enough to withstand the powerful bass. Before the entry of the vocalist, these beats establish a sense of movement and energy building that coincides and, in some
cases, competes with these sonically aggressive structures. The music is composed, not as background or supplementary to poetry, but as an integral component of the conveyance of crunk to the audience. Unlike hip-hop formats that employ Bronx-based beat construction approaches, sampling, or the incorporation of excerpts from previously recorded pieces, is a rarity in crunk and was nonexistent in its formative years (Miller 2008). This marginalization of sampling, or direct reference to older compositions, emphasizes the focus on the moment.

The approach to vocal performance is another distinguishing feature of crunk music. Performers along this trajectory usually employ screams and growling tones in giving voice to the text. Textual content in crunk music is generally more limited than other manifestations of rap, usually only referencing the present tense. Most of the textual content revolves around conversational excerpts from an imagined club experience, usually reflecting a masculine braggadocio character. They depict introductions, arguments, assertions of dominance, fights, and, at times, acts of vandalism. Others focus on the female body and on heterosexual courtship ritual in urban club spaces, though these are in the minority.

Since its inception, crunk music has been closely affiliated with Southern African-American club culture. As an extension of this association, crunk has become primarily affiliated with Southern black youth in their late teens and early twenties who have the social and economic freedom to dedicate a substantial portion of their energies to late night ventures and to whom current trends in hip-hop enjoy the most appeal. In this light, Sarah Thornton’s work on club cultures is germane to an investigation of crunk. She asserts that subcultural capital, or capital
based upon one’s perceived “hipness” rather than forms of cultural capital normally affiliated with ideas of climbing the social hierarchy, is the primary means through which agency and authority are established in club spaces (Thornton 1996). Though one’s life outside of the club space impacts the ability to express adequate subcultural capital in many ways, having the economic freedom to gain access to and enjoy the club space, for example, reveals the way in which the establishment of both types of capital is highly correlated with one’s ability to establish insider status.

Lil’ Jon of the group Lil’ Jon and the Eastside Boyz was the first to promote crunk as a distinct subgenre. He enjoyed middling success in the bass movement but was thrust to the forefront of the growing crunk phenomenon and was largely responsible for establishing and standardizing many of its elements. The group’s 1997 hit “Who You Wit (Get Crunk)” became the template after which subsequent crunk music would be formed (Miller 2008). Just as in the case of its bass predecessor, crunk music is composed specifically for party contexts, maintains an emphasis on the body, and is marked by extended sections of chanting (Miller 2008). These methods are not specific to this trajectory. They have been employed by many call-and-response based African-American musics (Floyd 1995); however, the extensive application of these methods within hip-hop, particularly in its modern format, is unique.

There are many characteristics that distinguish crunk from Atlanta’s previous party scene. For instance, crunk makes no general textual reference to the world outside of the club setting with the exception of denoting where one is from, with an implicit “now I’m here.” Crunk makes much more use of minor modalities,
rattles, and purposefully distorted timbres than bass, which emphasizes aggressive, and at times violent, themes.

The accompanying visualizations are another point of departure. As the sonic construction suggests, bass music is generally depicted visually by bright colors. Music videos for bass songs usually consist of party and beach montages in which young party goers smile and interact playfully. Bright colors and smiles are a rarity in representations of crunk, which generally depict active male participants in aggressive displays of conflict and/or affection with other males, accompanied by passive women who usually perform some facet of heterosexual male fantasy.

Crunk was able to appeal to a manifestation of black masculinity, namely that of the gangsta, in a way bass was not. Crunk was musically much closer to the sound of gangsta rap, although bass generally featured an emphasis on lyrical complexity that is more akin to gangsta rap’s lyricism. The primary dance form that accompanies crunk is an incarnation of moshing during which participants slam into and push each other in a chaotic and cathartic show of aggression. This dance style further represents the antithesis of the harmony alluded to in the bass genre.

Crunk became one of the South’s first major nationally recognized hip-hop tributary; as such, the distinguishing elements of crunk became symbolic of all Southern African-American youth aesthetics. However, crunk defied traditional hip-hop narrative formats and emphasized the body, particularly through an engagement in chaotic and violent performance. The violent performance to which I refer is more symbolic than actual. While there was an emphasis on pushing and thrashing, there was no expectation of the kind of physicality that would result in
injury. Still, performance stages and dance floors alike would be filled with this kind of performative corporeal outburst. Many fans, artists, and scholars of hip-hop (outside of crunk audiences) assumed that crunk, and by extension all Southern hip-hop, was either devoid of meaning or was insidiously regressive and, as a result, had very little of value to contribute to the hip-hop canon. Still, others celebrated the Southern born aesthetic as both a new wave of energy in hip-hop and as some sort of retro-authenticity, citing the South's prominent history in producing African-American musical movements (Philadelphia 2005).

In the first years of the new millennium, Southern hip-hop became more celebrated than ever before, while the South, particularly Georgia, was chastised for an inability to dismantle racist symbolism. With the increasing tension surrounding the Georgia state flag, there was a corresponding increase in flag commentary within Atlanta's hip-hop scene. Atlanta rappers and many of their fans engaged in a public dialogue of symbols by donning, in a multitude of contexts, one of Georgia's most controversial symbols: the rebel flag.

The Confederate flag found a place of prominence on the hip-hop stage, though this mixing of symbols was not received without dispute. Even many of the artists who employed the flag held very differing views about the significance of the gesture. While there were countless applications of the rebel flag in Southern hip-hop, most of them are connected to a relatively small number of contexts and performances of note.

The group Goodie Mob's use of the Confederate flag in the music video for the 1995 release “Dirty South” is one of the earliest notable uses of the flag in hip-
The video features the group members engaging with the camera in a series of Georgia locations, both urban and rural, spliced with scenes addressing issues of illegal drug trafficking in black neighborhoods. These scenes, which switch back and forth rapidly, are interrupted by flashes of a young white girl with blond hair and blue eyes drawing with chalk on a blacktop. At the conclusion of the video, the camera pulls back, revealing the piece she has been working on, a very large Confederate flag (Miller 2008). The seemingly innocent symbol of a child drawing becomes charged when juxtaposed against the idea that she has been exposed to and reproduces a symbol of racist ideology; one that has a larger history in producing the other depicted scenes. Here, the Confederate flag is displayed as a symbol of white supremacy with little irony or further connotations. The question, “what you really know about the dirty South” hangs in the air as the viewers see this representation of bloody secession, of enslavement and racist acts of terrorism, rendered carefully (possibly even lovingly) by somebody who, it appears, is too young to understand the subtexts of that symbol, but reproduces it nonetheless. We are left to ask, what kind of world, what kind of environment brought her to this moment? That tells you something about the dirty South. This juxtaposition complicates the popular notions about who the carriers of such ideologies might be and how naturalized these ideas become (Miller 2008); not a crotchety senior shaking his fist at the notion of racial equality, but a member of the next generation, playfully settling into the normalization of white supremacist ideology.

Farah Jasmine Griffin tackles the complex relationship between blackness and notions of Southerness in *Who Set You Flowin’?: The African-American Migration*
Narrative. As Griffin notes, over the course of the twentieth century, the South as a site of memory has represented both an oppressive barrier that must be escaped and ancestral land that holds the key for redemption in African-American literary art (Griffin 1995: 16). In either case, African-American migration narratives continually relate back to the South, painfully and nostalgically, as a place of origin. The South, in these constructions, is decidedly rural and is contrasted with the urban North; a trend which Griffin notes continues into the realm of hip-hop with groups like Arrested Development (Griffin 1995: 178-179). Imagining an urban South, a task that many Atlanta rappers took on, creates a different narrative. If traditionally, representations of the South are dirtied by oscillations between the anguish of tree roots stained with the blood of lynching victims and the sentimentality of dust and red clay, then the dirty South that Goodie Mob imagines exists in a liminal space between the two set against a Southern urban backdrop.

The rebel flag was a commonly evoked presence on many album covers and advertisements for Southern hip-hop artists. For example, in a 2001 advertisement for the group D.S.G.B, Down South Georgia Boyz, the Confederate flag is displayed behind an outline of Georgia (Miller 2008). This manifestation of the flag is one of reclamation. Pastor Troy, a prominent member of the group, has spoken openly about his belief that African-Americans making use of the rebel flag for their own expressive purposes will rob the flag of its racist connotations, thereby removing its symbolic power as an oppressive force (Johnson 2001). For Pastor Troy, his use of the flag as an African-American hip-hop artist of Haitian descent with locs is in itself
a protest against what the flag has represented historically. Furthermore, it’s a declaration of Southern identity; the assertion that he is a viable face of the South. Pastor Troy and others who adopt such a methodology follow a Hebdigean approach to the establishment of meaning, conflating the two seemingly contradictory symbols of the rebel flag and the black body to produce a significant display of subcultural meaning and protest established hegemonic structures and meanings (Hebdige 1979).

Andre 3000, a member of the iconic Southern hip-hop group OutKast, displayed a prominent rebel flag on his belt buckle, a decision that he discussed with Vibe Magazine in 2001 (Miller 2008). He stated that he wears the flag as a symbol of his own rebellion, supposedly against convention, and of Southern pride, going further to state that he doesn’t “take the Confederate flag that serious as far as the racial part is concerned” (Johnson 2001). Here, Andre 3000 has appropriated the flag, taking the more abstract connotations of the symbol, such as rebellion, and refiguring them with personal contexts. Furthermore, he asserts that the flag is no longer taken seriously as a symbol of white supremacy, which suggests, again, a great deal of agency in the construction of meaning in symbols. He closes the interview by stating, “You can stop the [Confederate] flag from flying...but it’s not...”

22 The hairstyle to which I refer here is known by many names: dreadlocks, dreads, dreds (or conversely dredz), locks, locs, among others. While for some these names are interchangeable, for others, the term dreadlock (and its offshoots) holds the negative connotation of being “dreadful.” Another perspective is that the term dreadlock is a Jamaican term, specifically used in reference to practitioners of Rastafarianism and that using the term for anybody else is appropriative and lacks respect. Many in the natural hair community correspondingly prefer to use the term loc(s) to refer to this hairstyle in its many manifestations as I do here. For more information, see http://www.ebony.com/style/history-dreadlock.
going to change what’s in people’s hearts” (Johnson 2001). This is a reminder of Andre 3000’s semiotic approach, namely that symbols such as the rebel flag have no intrinsic meaning and that the focus of revolutionary thought should be on the social constructions that charge them (Langlois 1985).

Rapper Ludacris is credited with one of the most controversial uses of the rebel flag during a 2005 performance at the third annual Vibe Awards. At this performance, Ludacris appeared on stage wearing a leather jumpsuit composed entirely of rebel flags while performing his recently released “Georgia,” a dedication to Georgia that alludes to Ray Charles’ singing of the state song, “Georgia On My Mind.” The song expresses a complicated relationship with Georgia that serves as both a space of great nostalgic value and as a space of danger, particularly for black youth. The performance opens with two racially segregated choirs singing the state’s anthem from opposite ends of the stage. The state song is interrupted by the rap song’s signature mixing of the melody and Ludacris runs in wearing the now-infamous outfit. As he performs, pictorial reminders of Georgia’s overtly racist history, including images of burning crosses, are displayed on large screens behind the choirs. Toward the end of the performance, the choirs move from their respective ends of the stage and mix center stage, performing a single choreographed dance. Ludacris sheds the jacket of his outfit and stomps on it, revealing a black shirt with another rebel flag on it, this one depicted in red, green, and black, with “UNITED WE STAND” written above it. As this shift takes place, the images in the background begin to display images of civil rights leaders, most notably Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and racially diverse people
peacefully engaging with each other. The cameras show brief shots of the audience, some of whom react positively to the performance and others, who are noticeably shocked.

Ludacris was publicly slammed for this display. For many, an African-American man donning a Confederate flag, let alone one reinterpreted through the Pan-African flag, was an exercise in racial blasphemy. Shortly after his performance, Ludacris released a statement addressing his decision to compose the performance as he did. In his statement, Ludacris explains his intention was to present a reminder that anti-black racist ideology exists not only in Georgia but also in the rest of the country. He goes on to say that his reinterpretation of the rebel flag symbolizes a progressive future in which symbols of racism lose their potency and racially oppressed people can lay claim to the geographical and national pride affiliated with them (Springer 2005). Ludacris has often been attacked for making empirically invalid postmodern arguments about oppression, the most famous of which was his assertion that his use of the term “ho” is gender neutral, referring, sometimes positively, to men and women marked by promiscuity, rather than a means of degrading women (Rose 2008). Such ideas, however, gain little ground because of the normalized affiliation of such terms with women who are deemed immoral or otherwise lacking in sanctioned notions of femininity; thus, even if he refers to a gender neutral ho, that’s not the message that is conveyed. Responses to his performance suggest that many believe he was opening a wound to promote another unworkable perspective. Ludacris both appropriates and reclaims the rebel
flag in this performance, first displaying it fashionably and as a reminder of racialized oppression, and then as a symbol for racial harmony.

Some of the most persistent applications of the rebel flag in hip-hop come from artists affiliated with crunk music. Most (in)famously, the cover of the third album released by Lil’ Jon & the Eastside Boyz, *Put Yo Hood Up*, features three Confederate flags. The group, composed of three black men, stand in front of two burning rebel flags with Lil’ Jon standing in the center screaming with a rebel flag draped over his shoulders (Miller 2008). While the flag is featured prominently on the album cover, the burning of the flags in the background and the silenced scream of Lil’ Jon suggests an element of rage. The music video to one of their released singles, “Bia, Bia” also features the rebel flag. In one recurring scene, Lil’ Jon wears a shirt and bandana that display the symbol of the flag in front of a wall on which yet another rebel flag has been painted. The camera “quakes” as the group performs in front of the flag employing performance methods germane to crunk, with grotesque facial expressions and violent full body engagement, during which they sometimes slammed into other group members. There are also depictions of a rowdy crowd slamming into each other as is customary in crunk performance, many of whom are seen donning Confederate bandanas. In crunk, the rebel flag is almost always connoted with the conflicting notions of Southern pride and irrepressible rage. These performances are indicative of the fully embodied catharsis that crunk establishes, politicized by the flag and composed to exhibit the psychic masochism that accompanies being an African-American child of the South (Miller 2008). In some ways, it is a redoubling of DuBois’ double consciousness; Americanness,
Southerness, blackness and hip-hop all warring in one dark body, and erupting to the surface.

Each of these artists and countless other Southern artists that incorporate the rebel flag into their presentations have been criticized publicly for these decisions.\textsuperscript{23} One common denunciation is that these rappers are ignorantly promoting symbols of their own oppression and, by extension, perpetuating the oppression of African-Americans. Many of these critics feel that such displays are either a blatant affront to African-Americans or actions made by individuals not informed enough to understand the history of the flag. Others are intrigued by the gestures, particularly Ludacris’ performance, but often conclude that the performance was probably a publicity stunt, an empty(-headed?) attempt at starting controversy. In a similar vein, analyses of Lil’ Jon and other crunk artists begin with a slight fascination of the prospect of African-American youth using hip-hop to disempower a symbol of white supremacy, but conclude that such a revolution is impossible, partially because of the inability of the artists to properly frame such a movement. Both of these assertions seem independently contingent upon the idea of cultural authority, the idea being that these rappers, being (relatively) young, Southern, and, outside of their musical endeavors, without political power, have no authority to alter the meaning of the rebel flag. Furthermore, the textual content of their music make listeners hesitant to acknowledge the possibility that such an

\textsuperscript{23}There are other Southern hip-hop artists who make use of the Confederate flag, most notably purveyors of the subgenre known as hick-hop, a mixture of hip-hop, country, and rock. While hick-hop is certainly be an important phenomenon in discussions of hip-hop, the Confederate flag and Southern identity, it is not central to the Atlanta hip-hop scenes in which my research was based.
interesting conflation of symbols was made thoughtfully enough to warrant consideration, which ultimately had a major impact on the effectiveness of these artists’ purported messages. The denial of the necessary authority to play with the meanings of the Confederate flag caused their commentaries to go widely unexplored and the subsequent movements to alter the rebel flag’s connotations to wane. Even though hip-hop is renowned for providing the political podium on which black youth can stand and make their opinions heard, the distinctly Southern manifestations of hip-hop are rarely recognized as having such a function, even when exhibiting such loaded gestures. While these images remain provocative, they have not yet lead to a deep discussion about Southern hip-hop as a simultaneous celebration of and protest to the ideological and material construction of Southern spaces and symbols, or more broadly, on the ability of the oppressed to dismantle the symbolic power of hegemonic structures and meanings. Despite removal from Georgia’s state flag, the rebel flag remains a prominent feature in Georgia and all across the American South. For those born in other areas of the country, the flag represents a temporally and geographically distant image, only appearing in one-dimensional imaginings of overt and violently racist white (Southern) rural culture, but for those in the South, the flag is an omnipresence with multiple manifestations and connotations; through its incorporation into Southern hip-hop, it has garnered several more. The debate over self- and symbolic representation in Southern states continues, only now with a new rebel waving a flag.
Ah Ha, Hush That Fuss: Sounding Southern in OutKast’s “Rosa Parks”

Through the 1990s, media coverage of hip-hop obsessed over the apparent war between the artists of the East coast and those of the West coast. As a result, hip-hop in the public imaginary was largely defined by either the styles and artists emerging from New York or California, both centralizing a decidedly gangsta archetype. As a result of this media hype around the cross-national hip-hop “beef,” hip-hop artists from other regions and those with alternate, non-gangsta styles were relegated to the margins of public discourse and the music industry. Despite the critical acclaim of hip-hop groups like Arrested Development and OutKast, no other regional style or hip-hop subgenre had managed to establish grounding on a national scale, with the possible exception of Miami bass. It should be noted, however, that bass remained relegated to the realm of “the party scene” and only entered into public discourse when the focus shifted to hip-hop and sexuality/sexism. Given these circumstances, it became pertinent that artists hoping to promote their region’s iteration of hip-hop employ tactics to establish a separate identity from the established players, lest they be accused of “biting” another region’s hip-hop. While each region, nay each scene, undoubtedly featured colloquial musico-linguistic gestures and locally specific allusions, these would not have been enough to perform the task at hand: to forge a symbolic intervention to the geo-aesthetic hegemony defined by the East coast/West coast binary in the construction of hip-hop authenticity. Here, I offer an exploration of compositional tactics employed in OutKast’s “Rosa Parks” as a means of constructing a symbolic Southern hip-hop Other. I present a case study of unconventional symbolic
juxtapositions as a method of constructing and conveying meaning within a subculture (in this instance, Atlanta hip-hop subculture), which will be achieved through close symbolic analysis of various features of the song and the adjoining music video.

According to Dick Hebdige’s formation of bricolage in the construction of meaning, which he builds from Max Ernst’s theorizations, “the subcultural bricoleur, like the ‘author’ of a surrealist collage, typically ‘juxtaposes two apparently incompatible realities on an apparent unsuitable scale and it is there that the explosive junction occurs’” (Hebdige 1979, 106). He goes on to say that “commodities are indeed open to a double inflection: to illegitimate as well as legitimate uses” and “can be magically appropriated; ‘stolen’ by subordinate groups and made to carry secret meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination” (Hebdige 1979, 18). While Hebdige’s argument speaks specifically of subcultures that infuse established symbols with nonconventional meaning through tactics that decontextualize, recontextualize, and/or repurpose sociocultural artifacts in order to symbolically subvert hegemonic structures, his theory provides an appropriate frame for deciphering the musical gestures made in “Rosa Parks.”

Daphne Brooks also offers an important theoretical frame for understanding the transformational potentiality inherent in OutKast’s unorthodox juxtapositions. Brooks outlines a history of black people disrupting constructions of blackness and gender normativity through spectacular (meaning specially marked) performances that superimposed marginalizing renderings of hegemonic normalcy and the
unexpected, the fantastical, and/or the bizarre; she refers to these performances as Afro-alienation acts (Brooks 2006: 4-7). Brooks argues that through these Afro-alienation acts, performers created new and contained contexts for the identity-performances black people were expected to embody in public space, thereby forming a liminal space where they could be challenged directly (Brooks 2006: 233-235). In similar fashion, the music and video for “Rosa Parks” exhibits normative tropes of hip-hop performance with images of Southern rural romanticism and Afro-futurist symbolism that ultimately allow OutKast to create a distinct Southern hip-hop identity performance at the nexus of each.

Applying these theories requires, first, a delineation of what might constitute hip-hop normalcy. According to Oxford Music Online, hip-hop music has historically centralized the use of sampling, looping, and synthesizers. It has been argued that hip-hop exhibits both a postmodern take on composition and ownership by virtue of its reliance on found sound objects as fodder for the construction of new pieces; simultaneously, it has been connected to other processes of re-appropriation as a trope of African-American culture, a manifestation of Henry Louis Gates’ concept of Signifyin(g) (Bartlett 2004, 404). Scholars have noted the centralization of drum breaks from famous funk songs, notably “Funky Drummer” and the “Amen break” (Greenwald 2002), the aesthetic use of record scratching and mixing (Katz 2012), and the prominence of a speakerly style of vocal performance delivered by a featured rapper, preferably one with exceptional insight, wit, and/or verbal dexterity. These works hold that hip-hop defied the customs of popular music production up to that point by 1) de-emphasizing the melody, 2) displacing
(traditional) instrumentalists, 3) reconfiguring compositional process and 4) centralizing recording technology as a primary means of music production. In this sense, hip-hop in itself represents a Hebdigean intervention. The pre-existing musical elements are given an alternate symbolic connotation and socio-musical function by virtue of the newly constructed contexts to which they have been assigned. By the time “Rosa Parks” was recorded, however, these interventions had come to represent a new center, the normalized sound of hip-hop, which, itself had been inducted into the mainstream of popular music.

Journalist Ben Westhoff connects the song back to the 1995 Source Hip-Hop Music Awards, where, after winning the award for best new artist, OutKast was booed mercilessly by the audience; throughout the evening, the East coast artists booed the West coast artists, the West coast artists booed the East coast artists, and everybody booed OutKast (Westhoff 2011: 108-109). Another journalist and music historian, Roni Sarig, asserts that “Rosa Parks” was OutKast’s critique of the marginal space Southern artists held in the hip-hop industry. He intimates that OutKast feels that they were the Rosa Parks of the hip-hop industry, being pushed into the margins, or as the metaphor would hold, to the back of the bus, because of their unapologetic Southern style, despite producing music that “makes the club get crunk” (Sarig 2007: 173). This juxtaposition further positions OutKast as the pioneering catalyst to a national movement with specific geographical, racial, and political overtones. Sarig goes a bit further noting the work that OutKast’s modes of articulation do in this song. As both these Southern hip-hop historians have noted, many of the disparaging remarks lobbied against Southern hip-hop generally assert
that the artists’ work is “child-like,” “base,” and indicative of the “decline of an art form” (Westhoff 2011: 3-4) with complaints usually directed at lyrical content and style of delivery. In this context, the decision to frame “Rosa Parks” with nonsensical, or semi-sensical, lyrics suggests a subversive connotation.

-Lyrical Content

Before delving into an analysis of the nonsensical/semi-sensical in “Rosa Parks,” I will offer a brief analysis of the lyrical content, the main ideas conveyed through the verses. Big Boi’s verse takes on a braggadocio character, pronouncing OutKast’s greatness in the face of adversity. He dedicates a good portion of his flow to the “chaos” OutKast inflicts upon those who had either forgotten about them or assumed that they were ineffectual, noting that OutKast stealthily “[took] another route to represent the Dungeon Family” going on to say that he and Andre 3000 “decided to take the back way, we stabbin’ every city then we headed to that bat cave, A.T.L. Georgia.” Here, Big Boi asserts Atlanta’s relative invisibility on the national hip-hop scene as a kind of protection from prying eyes which allow the group to emerge seemingly from nowhere with new exciting music. He likens Atlanta to the bat cave, Batman’s hideout, where the superhero creates and secretly develops the weaponry he uses when fighting evil. Given this framing, the metaphor evoked in the previous line, “stabbing every city” seems both appropriate and deliberate. The bat cave metaphor can be extended to Big Boi’s reference to Dungeon Family, the informal collection of rappers, singers and producers to which OutKast belonged long before they received their first record deal; notable members include Organized Noize, Goodie Mob (a group that makes a brief appearance in the
music video), and Joi Gilliam. The Dungeon Family was so named because the members met in a basement, romanticized as “the Dungeon,” to create music, write collectively, and strengthen their skills as performers. As the members of Dungeon Family admitted to both Westhoff and Sarig, they would disappear for hours into the Dungeon, leading their parents and friends to question where they were and what exactly they were up to. This secret subterranean refuge allowed OutKast, and other Dungeon Family members, to hone their craft until it was ready to be shared with the outside world, giving the appearance of leaping from obscurity and/or “absence” to virtuosity and prestige.

Andre 3000’s verse takes a very different approach. His verse begins with a narrative, an anecdote about meeting an unnamed woman on a bus, whom he refers to as a gypsy; she warns him that fame and popularity are fleeting and to not be too content with his past successes. While never stated explicitly, the gypsy is a possible reference to Rosa Parks, and his description of the gypsy (fortune teller) is filled with reverence. The woman is described as being wise, and most likely older. Andre 3000 describes an incredibly fleeting interaction, and one which, it seems, left little impact on the woman as she offers her advice and gets off the bus shortly thereafter. Andre 3000, however, is struck by the conversation, and it inspires him to descend into self-reflexive contemplation. At this point the narrative shifts to an internal dialogue as he listens to other musicians who were so “focused on the past” that they were unable to “come with it” for today’s audience. He concludes somewhat pessimistically, implying that all things, even his own fame, will ultimately come to an end and that he only hopes that his career ends prosperously instead of
embarrassingly with “weak” music. Before ending his verse, however, he asserts that no matter what the future holds, OutKast will be secure in having made good music and an important contribution to hip-hop. They “earned the crown.”

–Nonsense

“Rosa Parks” starts with various plays on the nonsensical and the semi-sensical. Unlike most hip-hop songs, Rosa Parks begins without an established beat. Instead, its opening moments are dominated by voices, layered upon each other to establish the tempo and “feel” of the song. An unnamed chorus of men and women begins the piece, offering a stream of non-contextual affirmations. A pattern of “uh huh” “baby” and “yeah yeah”’s fade in from nothingness, interrupted briefly by a record scratch, cadenced by a male’s voice: “put it up...OH!...OH!” Andre 3000 enters with a delivery of phonemes that never form into words. “blackalakalaka.” This nonsensical stream of sounds provides rhythm and texture, but no distinct meaning. In this way, the vocal delivery represents something of a flow working outside of the syntactical or the (word-based) semantic. What gets conveyed is Andre 3000’s ability to contribute to a musical construction through rhythmic, accentual, and phonemic interplay; a flow broken down to its sonic-aesthetic constituents. Shortly after, another vocal layer is added; a tensive, yet nearly whispered “Get back!” repeated over a 3+3+2 pattern. In these opening moments, voices are used to construct a beat. Generally, analyses of the voice as a component of beat-making emphasize beat boxing, defined by New Grove as “the art of producing drum-like
sounds using one’s mouth and body.” The construction of the beat here, however, is not imitative of drum sounds. Rather the performers employ vocal techniques (i.e. whispering, “speakerly” voicing, “singerly” voicing), syllabic stresses, and diverse overlaying rhythmic patterns to prepare the listener for the impending instrumental elements that make up the beat later in the song. That is to say, the words up to this point have come together to make musical structural sense, but not to convey a specific idea. As Simon Frith holds, “song words work as speech and speech acts, bearing meaning not just semantically, but also as structures of sound that are direct signs of emotion and marks of character” which means that text-centric analyses of popular music, including hip-hop, often bypass a significant dimension of expression (Frith 1989: 97). In the case of the introductory passage of “Rosa Parks” the listener is presented with a kind of vocality that denies the kind of semantic analysis that is most central to traditional hip-hop discourse.

Andre 3000 employs semi-sensical words later in the song, during his verse about addressing the phenomenon of finding that one’s “favorite group ain’t comin’ with it” or said another way, when once great artists let their fans down by producing bad music. Andre 3000 connects the thought to a self-reflective note about the stakes of maintaining his artistic standard, musing, “but examine all the flawsky-wawsky awfully, sad and it’s costly, but that’s all she wrote and I hope I never have to float in that boat.” The meaning of “flawsky” and “wawsky” remain elusive. It is possible that the term grows out of the word “flaws” but any direct

semantic conveyance is left up to the listener, as the term does not correspond to any concurrent slang or colloquialisms. The phrase is, however, somewhat similar to another term used by OutKast elsewhere in the album in an interlude skit in which a man refers to marijuana as “owsky wosky” when trying to make a purchase. Here the purpose of the coded term is clear. The use of a colorful name for a forbidden product is a tactic to allude capture, a manifestation of Signifyin(g) in which double-speak allows insiders to convey something to one another without alerting authoritative outsiders. Similarly, the opening scene of the music video, which features a close up of Big Boi and Andre 3000’s mouths as they converse over the phone about music video concepts with distinct accents and thickly applied colloquialisms calls attention to language as representative of performing identity. This method has been employed elsewhere in hip-hop. One of the early famous examples being Frankie Smith’s “Double Dutch Bus” from 1981, which features an extended exchange between insiders using a coded amendment to standard English: “Hey girls, y’all have to move” becomes “hezzay gizzurls! Yizzall hizzave to mizzove izzout the wizzay sizzo the guzzuys can plizzay bizzasket bizzall.”25 The lyric has a precise semantic meaning that is easily translatable, so its only purpose, outside of aesthetics and entertainment, is to delineate who among the listeners are savvy enough to be an insider. That does not seem to be the case with Andre 3000. “Flawsky wawsky” conveys enough to the listener for him/her to conclude that Andre 3000 is saying something about understanding the circumstances of

25 Translated: “Hey Girls! Y’all have to move out the way so the guys can play basketball.”
disappointment in modern popular music, but what exactly that entails, or to which facet specifically he refers is left up to the listener.

It is important to note here that the phrase does a great deal of work in the internal rhyme scheme of the section in which it appears. The phrase is followed in quick succession by rhyming words (flawsky, wawsky, awfully, costly, “all she”), all of which prominently emphasize what Sarig refers to as a signature “Jawja Drawl” (Sarig 2011: 172). In this verse, it is evident that in addition to the invention of language (with or without meaning) as a form of commentary on the notion of Southern hip-hop artists’ inability to convey meaning, the maintenance of the established “flow” is contingent on the performers’ accents. Meaning making in this verse, as in many other Southern hip-hop flows, harkens back to the kind of wordplay Henry Louis Gates, Jr. refers to in his theorization of Signifyin(g). As Gates argues, out of necessity, black people transformed language to employ double speak and hidden meanings in both the what and how of everyday speech acts, which prevented outsiders from keying into what exactly was said (Gates 1988). This is a central facet of African-American vernacular English. Asserting that meaning in hip-hop is best attributed to approaches to lyricism that minimize this kind of linguistic and phonemic invention seeks to validate word usage/meaning in hip-hop through the very traditional rules of elocution that African-American vernacular English resists. Further, in Language & Symbolic Power, Pierre Bourdieu outlines that the authority to define which iterations of a given language lie under the umbrellas of normalcy and tradition falls to those at the political center of hegemonic structures (Bourdieu 2003: 46-49) therefore these emphases on traditional syntactical and
semantic analysis that eschew wordplay rearticulate the social, cultural, and political marginalization of blackness.

In his book *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture*, Aaron Fox explores the socio-political nature of embracing “country” as an identity and the work it does as a beacon through which individuals articulate their intra- and interpersonal ideologies. According to Fox, “[Embracing country] means identifying rural values with social “outness.” It polemically marks a lack of sophistication, but also a disarming forthrightness of character” and “suggest[s] a sociable eccentricity, and always [implies] a hint of the sly trickster, who knows more than he lets on” (Fox 2004: 94). Arguably, OutKast and many other Southern rappers of this era, appropriated “countriness” to articulate their specific ideologies, modes of articulation, and their relationships to the rest of the hip-hop community. The members of OutKast are from metropolitan areas. Big Boi was born in Savannah and spent most of his youth in Atlanta, and Andre 3000 was born and raised in Atlanta. While Atlanta arguably has strong ties to the surrounding suburban and rural areas, the experiences of its natives are much more aligned with those of “the city” than those of “the country.” From the perspective of hip-hoppers from New York and California, however, the colloquialisms and modes of articulation presented by Southern artists marked them as drastically other. So too did these Southern artists come to understand themselves as representative of that which is radically alternative to the urban identity that had become central to hip-hop. Whereas “country” was lobbied against Southerners as an insult meant to highlight the backwardness and uncouth nature of those in the South, OutKast and others
used this term and its adjoining symbols as a means of self affirmation. Rather than countriness as a kind of deficiency, OutKast displays countriness as a kind of unique essence which allows them to simultaneously work within and beyond the conventions of hip-hop. The conflation of Southerness and countriness allowed for a symbolic intervention that established a regional identity as one that is homogenously grounded in certain socio-cultural experiences and ideologies. While this would be troubled elsewhere, it is important to note that such a move does the work of establishing a foundational identity for the public imagination.

One of the most striking facets of “Rosa Parks,” one which sets it apart sonically from most other hip-hop songs recorded to that point or since, is its unique break. Approximately 2 minutes 27 seconds into the song, the established hip-hop beat is abruptly interrupted by a section of a different generic character. The last line of the chorus, “we the type of people make the club get crunk” is accompanied by a crescendoing “AW! Get crunk!” after which most of the beat falls away, save for the bass line and one muted percussive element. The drum machine is replaced by interchanging stomps and claps. A solo harmonica dominates the melodic content. The section also features a chorus of jubilant screams and affirmations. The various elements of this section form to create an exchange that is arguably antithetical to then-common constructions of a hip-hop aesthetic. For instance, the centrality of the loop is disturbed, as most of the instrumental and vocal lines lack the neatly bundled cycles which had become commonplace in hip-hop studio recordings. Even some of the elements that remain constant throughout the section, like the evenly paced claps and stomps, seem to lack the consistency affiliated with a digitally constructed
loop. The edges of this section are rough and the audience is invited to relish in their imperfection.

The clapping and stomping further push the listener away from traditional hip-hop engagement. Each stomp falls on the strong, on-beat, and each clap follows as the syncopated counter-attack. Together, these sonic elements imply a certain dancerly performance; instead of breakdancing or any other contemporary dance style, this section evokes the tradition of pattin’ juba, a dance style defined by regular stoms and flourishing improvisational claps and body slaps with roots in West African song-dance traditions. One of its most direct survivals lies in bluegrass traditions, more commonly known as hamboning. Today, hamboning stands as a symbol of Appalachian rural culture, the embodiment of a kind of rural celebratory embodiment practice held over from pre-industrial America. The hollers in this section further emphasize this construction of a bluegrass style engagement. The audience is offered a sense of collectivity, wherein performers support one another through howls. Interestingly, this type of engagement is not represented visually in the accompanying music video; not directly anyway. While some of those in the video, notably the members of OutKast, stomp and slap their knees in a mock-hambone style (in a city block party as opposed to a rural setting), there are many other accompanying visuals meant to “ground” the sound. The stomps are simultaneously aligned with the movements of an OutKast step team, the Yeek-inspired movements of a dance-troop at a roller rink, and the steps of a marching band. By juxtaposing these images onto one another, and by using them to visually represent the same sonic element in the song, one that remains sonically evocative
of bluegrass, these various practices become aligned in the expression of Southerness, blackness, and a specific urban experience that is rooted in rural sensibilities. The claps and howls are not offered the same grounding in visual representation outside of the mock hamboning.

The harmonica is yet another sonic element that furthers this gesture. The instrument itself is arguably most symbolically aligned with the genres of blues and bluegrass, both of which connote American musical antiquity, that would seem out of place in the relatively young and unyieldingly trendy genre of hip-hop. The harmonica solo is performed by Robert L. Hodo, Andre 3000’s stepfather, who is featured in the music video. The incorporation of an instrument affiliated with yesteryear, performed by a member of OutKast’s parent generation, quite literally, hints at the formation of a counter origin myth for hip-hop. Rather than paying homage to funk or soul, as had been customary in hip-hop, OutKast implies that their roots are in the bluesy twangs of the harmonica; even asserting that such a performance is how audiences, past and present, “get crunk.” OutKast has done this elsewhere more explicitly. For instance, the OutKast movie project, Idlewild features a parallel world, in which hip-hop is born and flourishes in the backwoods juke joints of depression era Georgia, rather than the 1970s Bronx. The argument here is likely not meant to be literal, but affective, wherein OutKast connects to a lineage not defined by compositional approach, but by the work certain musics do for certain audiences. For their purposes, OutKast’s rendition of hip-hop is as much an outgrowth of juke joint music because, as the lyrics imply, that was just another iteration and era of “getting crunk.” Toward the end of the harmonica solo, record
scratches prepare the return of the beat. Hodo repeats the same musical gesture over the scratch, as though his performance were also manipulated by the turntables. Here, the juxtaposition of the harmonica over the more standard hip-hop sound of the scratching record works to transform both symbolically. They temporarily become part of a postmodern gesture toward linking apparent musical paradoxes. As the beat returns to its full prominence, an echo of the harmonica fades into music, overtaken by, or possibly just fully absorbed into, the chorus.

—Video Imagery

One of the most prominent framing images in the music video is the eye, more specifically those of Andre 3000 and Big Boi. The camera zooms into the irises of each rapper to introduce his respective verse, the circles of the iris serving as a transition into the scene where the verse is performed. This gesture corresponds to the introductory scene where the two are depicted discussing music video ideas with extreme close-ups of their mouths. First, the theme of the fragmented face is continued. The identity of the duo remains somewhat shrouded as the audience is not yet offered a complete facial image. It is only after “entering” the iris that the audience sees Andre 3000 and Big Boi as complete people. The gesture of entering into the iris suggests that the audience enters the minds of the duo. After hearing the two articulate their ideas for a music video, we (the audience) are transported into their imaginations, their fantasy about how their concepts might (and actually do!) come to fruition. The idea that the video exists within the realm of OutKast’s imagination is further emphasized by scenes defined by amorphous psychedelic backgrounds and constantly warping foregrounds as Big Boi and Andre 3000
fluctuate between expansion and contraction. Furthermore, the solo scenes for Big Boi and Andre 3000 are markedly different; Big Boi’s is a shadowy, hazy, monochromatic roller rink setting whereas Andre 3000’s is a very boldly colored neon city street. The implication is that the audience is viewing the merging of two separate concepts, of two separate minds. The theme of merging two into one runs throughout the album, evident most prominently in the album title: *Aquemini* is a portmanteau of OutKast’s zodiac signs, Aquarius and Gemini, or to use OutKast’s own words from the song of the same title, “Aquemini is Aquarius and a Gemini running shit.”

The contrast between Andre 3000 and Big Boi is further emphasized by the differences in their costumes. Big Boi, famously the more conventional of the two, dons many of the concurrent hip-hop fashions. He wears baggy jeans, and sporty sweat suits, accessorized by gold chains, expensive watches, diamond earrings and a grill; his hair is neatly braided back into cornrows. Andre 3000, on the other hand, dons football shoulder pads in one scene and an umpire’s vest in another with no shirt (under or over). He pairs these with colorful horizontally striped pants composed primarily of faux feathers and tiger print velvet pants respectively. Here again, OutKast presents a seemingly unfit pairing, Big Boi’s conventional style and Andre 3000’s boundless eccentricity, the elements of which conspire to make one harmonious, yet unexpected, product.

Outkast offers an interesting intervention on the presentation of hip-hop masculinity. In a composition that had become commonplace to hip-hop by the time “Rosa Parks” was released, Big Boi performs much of his rap surrounded by women;
however, these women do not perform in accordance with the heterosexual male sexual fantasy that is often observed in hip-hop, i.e., they are not scantily clad and do not dance in ways that are generally affiliated with sexual provocation. Rather they stand to either side of Big Boi as he kneels in a throne, rocking and bouncing in very much the same style as the males in the video. In this way, Big Boi presents these women as part of his entourage, his “crew” rather than as symbols of his virility. The posture Big Boi adopts in the throne conveys a sense of “boyishness” as it highlights an improper and slightly precarious, but undoubtedly fun, body position in a piece of furniture. Beyond these facets, however, Big Boi’s presentation of maleness is not far off from that which audiences had come to expect from hip-hop artists. The same cannot be said of Andre 3000.

Like his counterpart, Andre 3000 is featured performing with/next to a beautiful woman. Their interactions are extremely unlike those between Big Boi and his female scene partners. The woman, dressed in what might be described as an Afro-futuristic costume remains motionless when she’s on screen, staring either into the camera or into the distance as Andre 3000 performs around her. Again, there is no sexual chemistry or attempt to use her sexuality to bolster OutKast’s performance of maleness. Rather her stoic presence stands in sharp contrast to the constant motion of the rest of the video. Andre 3000’s performance and costuming might reasonably be understood as hip-hop camp. The unconventionality and sheer flamboyance of his performance of maleness in this video and elsewhere (the next music video OutKast released, “Skew It On The Bar-B,” featured Andre 3000 wearing a platinum blond wig and shorts, leg warmers and arm warmers made of white faux
fur) proved disturbing to some fans of hip-hop, some of whom believed “Either he’s gay or on drugs” (Westhoff 2011: 110). Here, Andre 3000’s performance of maleness does two significant things. First, it highlights the constructed nature of hip-hop, marking it as spectacular performance separated from everyday experiences, as opposed to unmediated street reporting. Second, and possibly more significantly, it directly challenges the gangsta archetype by avoiding any sartorial reference to “thug life.”

More than anything, “Rosa Parks” displays male homosocial engagement. In the climactic scenes, those which present the largest and most dynamic social engagements, the viewer is offered a crowd consisting mostly of men partying together, as a fraternity step team performs at the center. This is one of the few scenes in this video where Big Boi and Andre 3000 share a physical space. The other performer who gets a lot of focus during this scene, Hodo, offers a cross generational amendment to this multi-level display of male bonding. Again, this iteration of male camaraderie stands in stark contrast to what hip-hop audiences would expect from gangsta performers; notably, this kind of display wouldn’t have been prominent in party hip-hop or conscious rap either. As such, OutKast both emphasizes the importance of male bonding, but deny many of the then-common practices affiliated with proving one’s maleness.

The “Rosa Parks” music video exhibits several symbols of Atlanta’s specific hip-hop history. Big Boi is shown performing from a throne in the middle of a skating rink. As I describe in the previous chapter, the skating rink is an important space for Atlanta’s hip-hop history. This site, therefore, offers a subtle symbolic
homage to the “beginnings” of Atlanta’s hip-hop. By performing from a throne at the center of this space, Big Boi asserts his centrality in Atlanta hip-hop. Unlike many of the other juxtapositions in this music video, this one is meant to speak directly to Atlanta hip-hop insiders rather than to the national scene and to those whose hip-hop center was defined by yeek culture instead of the East coast/West coast divide.

The marching band and step team also offer a subtle reference to an Atlanta specific experience. Home to five Historically Black Colleges/ Universities (HBCUs), more than any other city, Atlanta’s youth culture is especially impacted by HBCU traditions. Two of the most far reaching traditions are precision step teams, usually affiliated with historically black fraternities and sororities, and marching band performances and competitions, with bands that generally exhibit hundreds of musicians playing contemporary music and choreographed with the latest dance styles. As with the roller rink, these presences signal something familiar to Atlanta’s hip-hoppers, an affirmation of the space that OutKast hopes to represent to the rest of the nation. This metaphor, however, can be extended a bit further. With the exception of a handful of institutions located in the North and Midwest, HBCUs are primarily located in the South, thereby gesturing toward a trans-local experience marked by regional, racial, and generational connections. And yet, it all connects back to OutKast’s hometown of Atlanta.

During the time when “Rosa Parks” was recorded and released, Atlanta had become a favorite destination for students of HBCUs to spend their spring breaks, more specifically, to attend Freaknik. It was at this event that many of Atlanta’s artists, and other Southern artists, were able to gain national exposure without
seeking the more traditional path of national distribution via radio. The music that became popular at Freaknik’s parties would be carried back to HBCUs for their parties and likely, on to the various hometowns of each student, thus creating an informal network of party music distribution emanating from, or at least through, Atlanta. It was also during this time, and through these channels, that a cohort of Southern hip-hop artists began defining itself fundamentally by the composition of music with the primary aim of establishing and maintaining high energy in party environments, to the affective task of invigorating the audience’s actions above and beyond the conveyance of a narrative. “Rosa Parks” exhibits one of the earliest studio-recorded iterations of the term that would come to describe the music, artists, and affect of this kind of socio-musical work: crunk.

The song ends where it began; the chorus of “uh huh, yeah yeah, and baby” comes in, along with the “get back”s and the “bakalakalaka”s which fade into nothingness, just as they faded in, except now accompanied by the beat, never really cadencing or offering some semblance of an ending. Likewise, the video also mirrors this return to the beginning, with the closing scene being almost identical to the opening one, the main difference being that now their comments reflect on evaluating the performance that just happened instead of planning a performance to come. The video ends with another gesture toward continuance as Big Boi asks an unanswered “So what are we gonna do for the next one?”

**Conclusion**
“Rosa Parks” became one of OutKast’s most well-known hits from the 1990s, climbing to number 55 on the pop charts. It would later become a point of controversy when the song’s namesake, or those in charge of her estate, sued OutKast for defamation and trademark infringement, likely because of misunderstandings about how and why the rap group evoked Park’s name. As I’ve tried to show here, OutKast was certainly interested in changing things up, but not necessarily in transforming ideas about Parks. Rather, their play on established musical symbols and tropes of hip-hop were meant to form a subversive critique of the hip-hop community at large. With “Rosa Parks,” OutKast offers a series of contradictions. The urban modernity of hip-hop is interrupted by backwoods blues and bluegrass as a means of expressing Southern identity. The centrality of poetic dexterity as a primary means of evaluating hip-hop vocality is disrupted by purposefully featuring nonsensical and semi-sensical lyrics throughout the song. The rendering of hip-hop as the exclusive realm of black youth is troubled by prominently featuring a member of the parent generation at what is arguably the song’s climax. When juxtaposed over one another, these symbols come to signify something that none of them hold on their own. OutKast achieves this by building upon assertions of a disconnect between good hip-hop and Southern identity, fusing them in a way that transforms both. In this way, OutKast presents a network of symbols that establish Southern identity in hip-hop as something distinct from what had already been normalized in the genre.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Southerners who ventured into hip-hop performance were tasked with defining what it means to portray both (urban)
hip-hop and (rural) Southerness at once and how that conflation might be defined aesthetically. Hip-hop artists drew from symbols of countriness and Southern identity, many of which negated black youth identities, and combined them with tropes of hip-hop in order to underline a narrative that is defined by race, region, and generation. In doing so, they simultaneously pushed back against multiple exclusions, from hip-hop and from Southern identity, and forged a sub-generic area of contestation within and about hip-hop as well as Atlanta hip-hop style, which would come to represent Southern hip-hop more broadly in the public imagination. Southern hip-hop, therefore, is more than a declaration of hip-hop in the Southern region of the United States. It is, at its core, a performed imposition on the essentialist authenticity politics of both its titular constituents—hip-hop and the Southern.

Here, I have outlined some of the ways in which Atlanta hip-hop artists created new meanings by centralizing their marginalization and forging subcultural as well as subgeneric meaning through bricolage. This phenomenon drastically shifted the politics of how Southerness and hip-hop were conceived of in the popular imagination. Paradoxically, these essentialist constructions of identity are what offered nuance as the juxtapositions highlighted the absurdity of symbolic homogeneity. And yet, in the liminal space between disparate symbols, artists were able to offer narratives about navigating the perpetual Otherness of being Southern, black, and hip-hop.
Chapter 3.

“U Can’t Stop The Cruising”:
Freaknik and the Politics of Black Youth in Public Space

In 1982, a group of college students at the Atlanta University Center (AUC) decided to create an event for the students who were staying on campus instead of going home for spring break. The result was the first Freaknik. Unbeknownst to these students, their invention would come to epitomize Atlanta’s black youth party culture for much of the following two decades. It also became the annual zenith of tensions surrounding black youth recreational behavior and the right to occupy public space. As the event grew and eventually died, participants and non-participating residents of Atlanta engaged in a public negotiation over the morality of Freaknik and its participants. These discussions inevitably focused on whether Freaknik was an example of youthful exuberance or of social decay. The event and the controversy surrounding it molded much of Atlanta’s hip-hop culture, the elements of which became inextricably tied to the institutions that would come to define the regional style for which Atlanta became known.

This chapter offers a historical overview of Freaknik which serves as a frame for understanding the sociopolitical phenomena that gave shape to Atlanta’s hip-hop in the 1980s and 1990s, thus creating the methods and contexts through which concurrent and subsequent Atlanta hip-hop music conveyed meaning. The debates surrounding Freaknik are indicative of intersecting race, class, generational, and gender politics in U.S. American Southern cosmopolitanism. The most vocal
detractors of the event and its participants shied away from language that might be identified as overtly racist/classist/sexist and, rather, made arguments that vilified the presence of Freaknik party-goers through identity-blind admonishments of behavior. In short, anti-Freaknik Atlanta residents lobbied specifically against black youth tourists without explicitly identifying the role race played in their decision to do so; the body/identity was erased from discourse. As a counter, participants made the body undeniable by forcing focus onto corporeality. Everything about Freaknik – the music made in celebration of it, the images used advertise/debut it, the iteration of protest it manifested – emphasized raced and gendered bodies filling physical and sonic space. This conflict defines the social, musical, and political context in which many artists who later identified with the crunk subgenre began making music and is, therefore, an integral history in understanding the methodologies and sociopolitical interventions of crunk music at the turn of the millennium. I assert that through Freaknik and the ensuing reactions thereto, black youth recreational culture in Atlanta became politicized in a way that facilitated the inscription of political resistance onto the body and articulation through ritual and performance.

**To Be Young, Gifted, Black, and on Break**

In order to understand the historical significance of Freaknik’s emergence, one must first delve into the larger context of how American constructions of vacationing culture relate to race, class, and generation. Black youth vacationing culture is a subject that has not received much focus in research. By this, I do not mean to negate the very important work that has been done with regard to black
youth and popular culture – e.g. hip-hop studies – or traditional African-American celebratory events – e.g. Mardi Gras or Juneteenth. It should be noted, however, that there is relatively little work done on the patterns and practices of African-Americans, particularly the youth subset, traveling en masse to destinations in order to attend or create events for recreational purposes.

While it’s unclear why this research is relatively scarce, there are a few potential reasons that stand out. First, black youth vacationing culture is a relatively recent phenomenon, starting in the 1980s and growing in the 1990s, which means none of the events defined by black youth vacationing have had time to amass the type of intrigue older annual events have. While participation in an event like Mardi Gras carries with it a sense of tradition, black youth vacationing events have, by and large, not yet garnered such widely recognized sociocultural significance. Second, many of these events were fleeting, transforming from year to year, location to location, and sometimes dying out shortly after their inception, which further sets them apart from concepts of tradition. Third, black youth vacationing might carry with it a connotation of inauthenticity for some researchers. For scholars who reinforce a binary between culture and commerce, patterns of vacationing might seem more like an instance of capitalist exploitation than an assertion of sociocultural agency. Finally, and possibly most significantly, black youth vacationing practices have often been considered antithetical to politics of respectability. There is a traditional political underpinning of African-American studies which seeks to humanize, advocate for, and validate black people and their experiences; part of this work has been achieved through emphasizing the ways in
which black people have made contributions to American Culture. From Carter G. Woodson’s skepticism about the inherent blackness/Africanness of singing and dancing in the black church to the general disregard for the validity of Tricia Rose’s subject matter among established scholars, as she describes in Black Noise, iterations of black culture that do not easily parallel concurrent constructions of prestige have been met with resistance as viable topics of inclusion into the canon of black studies. Furthermore, even with regard to hip-hop studies and other areas that centralize black youth, the subject of vacationing might, from some perspectives, suggest a kind of frivolity or political vacuousness which ultimately complicates humanizing projects. Many of these researchers hope to expand concepts of prestige to include black cultural contributions that were previously left outside rather than decenter or question the significance of prestige as a concept altogether. For whatever reason, the subject of American black youth vacationing has not yet amassed a great wealth of focus in academia despite literal millions of black youth engaging with and traveling through circuits of black youth vacationing culture over the past four decades.

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26 I capitalize the word “Culture” here as a means of highlighting the kinds of contributions highlighted here. It is not just a matter of what black people have contributed to distinctly American ways of doing things, but to a canon of traditions and artifacts that represent, define, and reproduce American ideology.

27 By the 1930s, there is evidence of the beginnings of black vacationing culture, indicated by the publishing of the Negro Motorist Green-Book, an annual guide book that highlighted favorable (and safe!) places for black people to travel to or through during the Jim Crow era. These books, however, focused more on the notion of individual or (nuclear) family trips rather than destinations youth could visit en masse. Therefore, these books are not relevant to the discussion of black youth vacationing culture; further, the time between the publishing of the first Negro Motorist Green-Books and the formation of black youth vacationing events (roughly
The idea of vacationing holds a significant place in Western culture. The ability to travel for leisure is a major marker of socioeconomic status. Taking time away from work and spending money on something as intangible as exploring a foreign setting highlights not just the luxury of having disposable income, but a sociocultural approach to the allocation of funds that is affixed to petit bourgeois ideology. As middle class ideology became normalized in the mid-20th century, so too did the idea of annual or semi-annual travel as a means of relaxing or bonding. According to Robert E. Kohler “the idea of a regular annual vacation germinated in the 1850s and expanded beyond the elite class in the 1870s and 1880s, becoming, along with work, a hallmark of middle-class identity.” (Kohler 2006, 57). He goes on to say that “for leisure to become a defining characteristic of middle-class culture it had to acquire moral qualities that distinguished it from mere idleness and entertainment...[it] had to acquire purpose, moral seriousness, and spiritual or economic benefits, so that middle-class vacationers could not be mistaken for fast men or business failures...[r]ecreation and vacationing had to be made into a compliment to work or even into an exaggerated, particularly strenuous kind of work.” (Kohler 2006: 60). In other words, the vacationing culture that formed in America specifically emphasized a kind of labor of leisure, a directional and pointed kind of recreation that fit into the larger sociocultural moral constructions; namely economic stimulation and industriousness.

In their book *Youth Culture in America*, Simon J. Bronner and Cindy Dell Clark attribute the conflation of American youth culture with vacationing to shifts in child fifty years) indicates an additional layer of policing black mobility; one that is reserved for black youth.
rearing during the formative years of the baby boomer generation. Post-war middle class culture normalized a particular family dynamic: a working father, a stay-at-home mother, and children who were active and socially involved outside of the home. The latter is partially evidenced by an unprecedented boom in child enrollment in camps and extracurricular activities (Bonner and Clark 2016: 34-35). This laid the groundwork for a generation of young people who felt compelled to vacation en masse, recreating a kind of camp experience wherein teens and young adults would meet with their contemporaries, friends and strangers, at an agreed upon time and location to have fun.

Baby boomers also reaped the benefits of an economic boom. Some estimates suggested that teenage baby boomers wielded $10 billion of discretionary income (Bronner and Clark 2016: 35). Correspondingly, at this point, there was a surge in cultural products marketed specifically toward youth, e.g. comic books, television shows and popular music. Coupled with the relative lack of financial responsibility most people had in their teens and twenties, this disposable income allowed teens and college-age youth to invest in leisure time. In short, middle class baby boomers not only had a novel desire to travel socially, they also had unprecedented financial freedom to make it happen. By the late 1960s, youth vacationing had become solidified as a normalized facet of middle class identity. It should be noted that these freedoms and experiences were more or less exclusive to the children of white middle class suburban nuclear families; however given the push to centralize these experiences as normal, healthy, and desireable in popular culture, especially in television, this iteration of youth leisure became symbolically affixed to what it
meant to be a healthy American young person. It became part of the fabric to which seekers of the “American dream” aspired.

For African-Americans however, the American dream was a dream deferred. Black people existed outside of the realm of American class systems until well into the twentieth century, lying instead in a caste that had a complicated, yet markedly inferior, relationship to the class system that white citizens navigated. In the pre-civil rights era, a black person could hypothetically amass many of the accoutrements of bourgeois culture, like education and sustained employment, but would ultimately be denied the corresponding class status, save for the intra-communal socioeconomic structure contained within the boundaries of the color line. As such, many of the symbols of middle class culture were inaccessible to black people. Whereas (white) youth culture began developing vacationing patterns after the Second World War, social (and in some cases legal) restrictions on the mobility of black people in the Jim Crow era made the formation of such patterns highly impractical for black youth. Additionally, travel could be treacherous for black people, especially in the American South. Traveling to or through the wrong areas could result in becoming the victim of racist attacks. Many black people feared what they might encounter en route to desired destinations; even a trip to a place with a reputation as a safe haven for black travelers was likely to have several hostile territories along the way. Travel, therefore, was not an endeavor to be taken lightly, certainly not enough to facilitate the formation of large black vacationing events. Even after the Civil Rights movement, de facto segregation and hyper-surveillance of black sojourners persisted, though with each passing year, overt racism became
further relegated to the fringes. It is likely not coincidental that the earliest black youth vacationing events coincide with what would have been the late teens and early twenties of the first generation of African-Americans born after the close of the Civil Rights Movement. This would have been the first generation of African-Americans to grow up in an America that had established the unconstitutionality of racial segregation/subjugation and sought to actively tackle inequality through policies like Affirmative Action. Even though many of those efforts were rendered toothless by subsequent policies and refusals of enforcement by those who wished to maintain the status quo, the gains of the Civil Rights Era helped ensure that the black youth of the 1980s had more income and mobility than their predecessors.

Another factor that stalled the development of black youth vacationing was the ever-pressing demand for black people to uphold a politics of respectability in public. While arguably all citizens who aspired to climb the socioeconomic ladder had to engage in the performance of middle class respectability, black people bore an additional burden to disprove presumptions of laziness and criminality. As stated earlier, white vacationing practices developed in such a way as to be distinguished from idleness, in a way that could be seen as both a compliment to work and a contribution to the economy. The exploitive means through which black people became a part of American capitalism resulted in a different relationship black people had to notions of work and leisure than white Americans. For enslaved Africans in America, work was not a virtue; it was a requirement to be enforced.

For a more detailed discussion of the ways in which anti-racist policies were circumvented, see the fourth chapter of Carol Anderson’s White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide, entitled “Rolling Back Civil Rights.”
through violence. Additionally, Western culture embraced theories that Africans and their descendants were naturally brutish and slothful, which they used as justification for maintaining the slavocracy. The notion of the pathological laziness of black people found its way into popular American culture through blackface minstrelsy and its many musical and visual offshoots.

The image of the lazy black person became ubiquitous and was asserted as a potential moral and economic consequence of abolition in the 19th century, which later evolved into an argument against desegregation in the 20th century. The fight to assert black civility, therefore, became inextricably bound to the presentation of black poise and industriousness. This tactic of countering racist constructions of blackness with images of “good” hard-working black people became one of the central images that the Civil Rights Movement put forth in the fight for equal rights. This means that, despite a growing population of African-Americans with petit bourgeois aspirations, black people, and certainly black youth, of the 1950s and 1960s, could not have amassed a distinct youth vacationing culture the way their white counterparts did until much later.

The protests and relentless political lobbying of integrationists and advocates of equal rights led to the formation and passing of the Civil Rights Act. Within three years of its passing, Affirmative Action policies were enacted with the expressed goal of further disempowering the mechanisms of marginalization. Taken together, these changes in federal policy opened up new financial and educational opportunities for African-Americans. According to the Digest of Education Statistics, the percentage of African-Americans aged 18 to 24 enrolled in degree-granting
institutions nearly doubled between 1967 and 1982.\textsuperscript{29} The enactment of Affirmative Action policies also lead to increased financial possibilities for this subset.

Economists who have researched race and inequality have noted that increases in income among African-Americans generally have not corresponded to significant increases to African-American wealth, especially with regard to inheritable wealth. For instance, Dalton Conley’s \textit{Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America} rebuffs the notion that a growing black middle class and an increasing median income among black people in the post Civil Rights era indicates a palpable shift in the racial economic divide. Rather, he argues that the total wealth of black people, when non-monetary sources of wealth like property are taken into account, remain relatively low (Conley 2010). For my purposes however, an increase in short term monetary income is significant in that it corresponds directly to increases in \textit{disposable income} in the budgets of black families broadly and black youth, thus suggesting that African-American youth in the generation following the passing of the Civil Rights Act were better positioned to fund vacationing culture than ever before.

Black people regained a sense of optimism in achieving middle class stability in the post-Civil Rights era. With segregation and many discriminatory practices declared unconstitutional, more black people than ever before moved forward with the hope that meritocracy would replace the racial caste system, redistributing power, wealth, and opportunity to those who put forward the best effort regardless of race. Additionally, as this perspective would have it, those who were able to

\textsuperscript{29} Data from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_302.60.asp (accessed March 17, 2017).
reproduce middle class respectability would be rewarded with the respect and prestige that had been denied black people in the Jim Crow era. Black vacationing began to pick up, but was still more-or-less confined to the newly minted black middle class, most commonly nuclear families and adults. It is fitting, therefore, that the children of the black baby boomer generation, that is members of Generation X or those born roughly between 1965 and 1980, were the first to experiment with a distinctly black youth vacationing culture. As was the case with white youth decades earlier, black Generation X-ers were exposed to camps and travel as children in unprecedented numbers. They were among the first African-Americans to receive the message that traveling for recreational purposes was a viable part of normal life for them. The 1980s and 1990s, which would encompass the teens and twenties of the members of Generation X saw the formation of several annual black youth vacationing events.

At the same time, this era saw the rise of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, marked most prominently by the election of president Ronald Reagan. Neoliberal politicians and economists asserted that the government should reduce taxes and withdraw their control over private financial decisions, although as it manifested in the United States, large businesses were offered a great deal of autonomy, much more than most individuals were able to wield. Conversely, neoconservatism asserted the need for strong government interventions, socially and economically, to uphold (conservative Christian) constructions of morality, even when it comes at a great expense fiscally, temporally, and socially. (Brown 2006: 696-7; High 2009:
The mixing of neoconservative politics with the neoliberal economic policies created an environment in which the private behavior of individuals came under close scrutiny, not just as a means of maintaining the “moral fiber” of the country, but also as a central tenet of the argument for the (re)building of the American economy (Steger & Roy 2010: 22). Whereas the Civil Rights Act and Affirmative Action policies were formed in full acknowledgement of systemic biases having a negative impact on the experiences and potential successes of black people, neoconservatism placed a higher emphasis on individual choice in the perpetuation of inequality; thus, the reasons for racial equality were recast as black cultural pathology and a focus on removing or mitigating the mechanisms of racial inequality was largely abandoned (Anderson 2017: 118-123).

The neoliberal position that the government should withdraw from the affairs of private individuals and businesses made Affirmative Action and other programs of government assistance a particular target. Taken together, the emphases on individual actions over systemic inequality, the assertion that the government should not interfere with the free market or private businesses/individuals, and the conflation of private citizens’ “obligation” to work hard in service to the economic health of the country with notions of ethics and character led to the formation and dissemination of archetypal figures who were blamed for the nation’s growing deficit. These figures were not subtly drawn in terms of race and class but focused on poor and working class black people and

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30 Neoliberalism and neoconservatism are much more complex entities than what I outline here. The facets highlighted here are, however, the most pertinent for my purposes.
their personal habits. The image of a generation of black people, particularly younger ones, with no work ethic, an appetite for illegal drugs, and a penchant for abusing government assistance programs flooded the public imaginary as discussions of “Cadillac-driving welfare queens” were recited ad nauseam by Ronald Reagan and many of his supporters (Feldman 2013: 53).

Yet another, arguably more directly terrifying, archetype came into being after the events following William “Willie” Horton’s furlough in 1986. Convicted of murder a decade earlier, Horton was granted a weekend long furlough from which he never returned and subsequently committed armed robbery and rape. His mugshot became fodder for neoconservative campaigns, which argued that liberals were “soft on crime” and allowed this dangerous man back into the public to terrorize more victims. Horton’s image, however, did not only come to represent his personal pathology, but something of a symbol of black maleness more generally, particularly with regard to the boundless danger posed by black men who actively (or even passively) stand outside of the accepted pathways toward upward mobility and who knowingly cross into “respectable” middle class (read white) neighborhoods. In this way, the idea of black idleness was presented as America’s most dangerous domestic issue.

Somewhat paradoxically, the increased presence of upwardly mobile black people worked to bolster neoconservative argument that structural racism had either been abolished or that it was an absolute fallacy. Individual black successes were seen as proof that any and every person who works hard can “make it,” thereby further highlighting the recipients of government assistance, now firmly
raced as black and placed as inner city in the public imaginary, as pathologically slothful (Alexander 2012: 247-248). The stigma of the lazy black youth stereotype persisted, finding a new home in public discourse surrounding the validity of policies aimed at neutralizing racial bias, the morality of black people (especially young, low income black people) and the allocation of government assistance.

Policies like Affirmative Action were accused of enabling black people to succeed without working adequately, the argument being that policies that enforce diversity hinder or prevent opportunities from being allocated to the most deserving. In her book Race and the Invisible Hand: How White Networks Exclude Black Men from Blue Collar Jobs, Deirdre Royster argued that many white working class people felt that programs like Affirmative Action were discriminatory against white people, ensured work for presumably lazy black people, and perpetuated economic hardship for the country in general and white citizens specifically (Royster 2003). “Cadillac-driving welfare queens” became the battle cry of economically conservative politicians explaining the onset of recessions during the Reagan administration. In short, the myth of the lazy black person became a recurrent theme in rhetoric that served to hold black people’s inclusion into the fold of middle class normalcy.

To further complicate the picture, shifts in the music industry made black music and black culture much more easily available to non-black consumers than ever before. During the 1980s, the popular music-television channel MTV shifted from playing barely any black artists’ music in its early years, to launching shows entirely dedicated to rap by 1988. Hip-hop was finding a national audience that
spread beyond the color-coded barriers by which earlier marketers of the genre thought it would be confined. As a result, “blackness,” or more appropriately, representations of urban black culture rendered in black vernacular, had crossed into the U.S. “mainstream,” read suburban white youth culture. This allowed yet another transformation in the argument against black youth; that their behaviors weren’t just pathological, they were also contagious, which further emboldened campaigns to purge nonblack communities of unapproved black youth presences.

It is significant that Freaknic and other nodes of black youth vacationing developed in this seemingly contradictory moment in history, a moment defined both by unprecedented increases in possibilities for black educational attainment and upward mobility and the ever-intensifying concern that African-Americans represented a dangerously contagious iteration of sloth and moral decay that weighed heavily on the U.S. federal government and threatened the American way of life. At the very moment where black youth were able to create a vacationing culture, the idea of black people celebrating, particularly for extended periods of time, had become so wrought with ideas of delinquency, lasciviousness, and indolence that non-participants were primed to correlate the growth of these events with the decline of the neighborhoods in which they occurred, nay the country itself.

This is the backdrop against which Freaknic emerged and the reason why this event and others like it were easily positioned as threats to American morals.

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31 In this piece, I use two spelling for this event: Freaknic and Freaknik. The original spelling is evoked to refer to its original conception and manifestation, a black youth spring break picnic in a park. The latter spelling, with the k, refers to the form it took after participants were expelled from the park and adopted a cruising culture. Significant shifts occurred at the moment that the official spelling of the event was changed, which I use to argue for separate, but related, definitions.
and safety in public and political discourse. This is the foundation upon which
Freaknic stood and would eventually define the shape of conflicts surrounding the
event and what it symbolized.

Get Your Freak(nik) On

Freaknik, or as it was originally spelled Freaknic, was so named as a
portmanteau of the words “freak” and “picnic,” at once a reference to black party
culture’s musical fascination with the freak/freaking as a harbinger of debauchery,
e.g. Rick James’ “Superfreak” and Chic’s “Le Freak,” and to the appropriation of
public space through picnicking. While some insisted this invocation of “the freak”
was done without sexual connotation (See Thompson 2007), others hold that in this
instance, and many others like it, is a manifestation of Signifyin(g) in which the term
hovers ambiguously between, and simultaneously within, the sexual and the chaste,
the sacred and the profane (Stallings 2015: 183). This indicates that, even at its
inception, Freaknik exemplified a cross section of occupying the public (the picnic)
and performing the private (the freak).

Freaknic was established by the Atlanta University Center (AUC) D.C. Metro
Club; a social club for AUC students from the Washington D.C. area. The event was
created to foster social networking among budding black professionals during their
spring break (Thompson 2007: 27-28). Originally, Freaknic served the colleges that
constitute the AUC, which at the time included Morehouse, Spelman, Clark Atlanta
University, Morris Brown, and the International Theological Center; however, within
a decade of its inception, Freaknic would evolve into a nationally recognized party
event (Thompson 2007: 27-28). Freaknic maintained only moderate success until the late 1980s, when organizers began to incorporate live music and deejays, though the earliest entertainers were go-go acts from Washington D.C. The decision to include live music not only worked to extend notice of the event beyond its immediate geographical parameters, but also established Freaknic as a promotional platform for artists (Thompson 2007: 28). As the years progressed, Freaknic steadily increased in size, each year moving farther away from job fair activities and more into the realm of partying. In 1993, Freaknic attendees numbered in excess of 200,000 (Haines Whack and Burns 2015), partially due to references to Freaknik on movies popular television shows, e.g. NBC’s “A Different World” and Spike Lee’s film *School Daze*. The inclusion of Freaknik in these popular films/shows indicates that the event was becoming part of a national conversation about black youth vacationing and that the event itself was expanding its parameters. Freaknik no longer appealed just to HBCU spring breakers in Georgia and the neighboring states; it was quickly becoming an event for any college-aged black youth willing and able to make the trip to Atlanta.

Freaknic was initially based in Piedmont Park, which is Atlanta’s largest inner city park and the location that hosts most of the city’s largest outdoor events (Suggs 2008). Piedmont Park is also located amidst wealthy, predominantly white, neighborhoods and prominent corporate headquarters. The juxtaposition of one of Atlanta’s wealthiest historical districts against the massive, albeit temporary, presence of unsupervised black youth engaging in recreational behavior created an environment of hostility; many residents began openly expressing concerns that
Freaknic attendees were invaders who posed a threat to communal safety (Thompson 2007: 28). It is this tension that led to Freaknic transforming from a picnic event into something else entirely; rather than a contained picnic, it became Freaknik, a near-boundless public black youth event.

By 1995, these tensions matured into a fully realized moral panic. According to Stanley Cohen, the general populace follows a patterned reaction to the presence of, or the perception of, threatening social phenomena, “outsiders.” The outsiders become what Cohen refers to as folk devils, a group of people who bear the brunt of social worries. They come to symbolize the antithesis of social well-being, regardless of whether or not there is a proven link between the concerns of the society and the presence of the folk devils. The masses go through stages during which the supposed threat of a contrasting social force – in this instance, the mass of Freaknik participants – is identified, an antagonistic relationship between the threat and greater populace is solidified (in this instance, primarily through news reports and public campaigns), and the presence and behavior of the contrasting force become sensationalized. Said another way, everything that distinguishes the folk devils as a group becomes fodder for campaigns about why these devils are dangerous. In response to these tensions, those with authority create and enforce policies to neutralize the folk devil presence, which yields one of two possible results: either the policies eradicate or exile the folk devils, or the folk devil presence becomes normalized until it is no longer deemed threatening (Cohen 2002: 145-148). In the latter instance, the folk devils would cease to be folk devils.
In the case of Freaknik, many Midtown residents became sensitized to the presence of vacationing black youth, claiming that attendees constituted a physically and morally destructive force. They claimed that participants were loud, hypersexual and violent and, therefore, unfit to occupy public space. These accusations are directly derived from constructions of pathological blackness from the previous couple of decades; an amalgamation of stereotypes that imagined black youth as lazy when it came to moral (legal) work and maliciously diligent when it came to “immoral work” (e.g. drug use and distribution, sexual indiscriminancy, acts of violence, etc.). It should also be noted that, by entering these typically affluent neighborhoods, Freaknik participants crossed invisible barriers that kept these neighborhoods generally socioeconomically and racially contained. At the insistence of Midtown residents, a series of laws and neighborhood policies were created to limit or outright deny access to Piedmont Park and its surrounding spaces during Freaknik (Thompson 2007: 28-29). As a direct result, the event underwent another transformation; with access to locations limited, attendees created spontaneous club environments, usually by partying in the streets. These spontaneous party environments consisted of parked or slow cruising vehicles playing loud music, surrounded by pedestrians engaging in rituals that generally accompany club environments, including dancing and alcohol consumption (Suggs 2008). By inhabiting the streets, these partygoers clogged major transit routes, which further sensitized the greater Atlanta population to the presence of Freaknik attendees.
Tales of the moral deviancy of Freaknik attendees, and black youth party culture in general, swirled throughout the year, coming to a head at spring break. Several laws were passed to illegalize observed Freaknik behavior, such as cruising and mass loitering, and were supported by a heavily fortified police presence. These laws, the bulk of which went into effect before spring of 1995, were implemented in attempts to eradicate Freaknik. Since there was no official means of determining who was and who was not a Freaknik attendee, these laws were aimed at anybody who looked like they could be, which essentially meant any black youth. Over the next few years, Freaknik attendees and Atlanta residents, with the support of the local government, engaged in an open battle over the right to occupy space; residents saw Freaknik attendees as an uninvited imposing force and they, correspondingly, felt no particular responsibility to reorganize or confine themselves by the invisible barriers that divide the city (Thompson 2007: 27-28).

Classifying Atlanta’s response to Freaknik as a “moral panic” is not an indication that the moral outrage felt by many Atlanta natives was completely unfounded. The high volumes of foot and car traffic that Freaknik brought forth resulted in property damages. The sheer size of the event and its propensity for clogging the city’s major traffic arteries proved extremely disruptive to the schedules of non-participants. It should be noted, however, that during the peak years of Freaknik complaints, Atlanta actively made bids to host large vacationing events and that Freaknik, even at its peak, was never Atlanta’s largest event. Furthermore, part of the reason Freaknik spilled out into the streets is because attendees were turned away from areas that generally hosted Atlanta’s largest
events. In other words, other vacationing events stationed in Piedmont Park, even those that were larger, were spared the hostile reception that Freaknik received.

Freaknik 1995 marked a turning point in official responses to the event and its participants. While in earlier years, participants were herded away from predominantly white/wealthy regions of the city with through enforcement of vague neighborhood policies and strict readings of loitering laws, in the fall of 1994, mayor Bill Campbell announced there would be “zero-tolerance for any infraction” during Freaknik ‘95 (Stockus 2012: 33). Advocates of Freaknik could not be sure what the statement exactly meant but many of them were apprehensive about the implications of such a declaration. Freaknik supporter Atlanta Councilwoman Carolyn Long Banks expressed her concern by drawing comparisons between Campbell’s projected treatment of Freaknik attendees and the government styles of anti-Civil Rights politicians Bull Connor, George Wallace and Lester Maddox (Stockus 2012: 34-35). During Freaknik ‘95, what Campbell meant by “zero tolerance” was made emphatically clear; the full police force and the Georgia National Guard were called in to “maintain order” with authorization to arrest participants for normally negligible infractions.

Freaknik was frequently accompanied by reports of public indecency, most commonly claims of public nudity and sexual misconduct; however, it remains unclear exactly how many of these incidents were valid, which incidents were hyperbolized in retellings, and whether or not the rate of such deviant acts occurred more frequently at Freaknik than at other similar events. While a comparison to other events provides no absolution for offenders, it provides insight into the
racialized politics surrounding tourism and locality that resulted in the conflation of this event with a notion of abject deviancy while other events are spared such a fate. The “freak” of Freaknik was both fetishized and criminalized, with images of sexualized black bodies dominating news reports. Coverage of Freaknik generally came with the contradictory message that black sexuality is too dangerous to be permitted to exist unchecked, but is also free to openly consume and criticize. Detractors used instances of sexual assault to argue that Freaknik should be ended in order to protect women participants while simultaneously blaming black women for their own sexual assaults, having their clothes, bodies and means of dance deemed hypersexual and, therefore, a threat to morality (Meyers 2004: 111-113).

Despite discursive emphasis on sexual (im)morality, most of the infractions that Freaknik attendees were arrested for were the result of the passing of vague ordinances aimed at dictating appropriate public behavior such as loitering, curfew violations, or driving too slowly, thus making it clear that in many instances, the crackdown on Freaknik was more rooted in “folk panic” than legitimate dangers to Atlanta and its inhabitants. In essence, by criminalizing normally negligible forms of deviancy, and by affiliating the event as a whole with moral decay, Atlanta communities were able to express and validate disapproval of Freaknik without addressing the underlying racial, generational, and socioeconomic discrimination that fueled much of the tension.
Do You Hear What I Hear? (That Boom): The Sonic and Visual Aesthetics of Freaknik

The musical and visual components of Freaknik began reflecting this battle over Atlanta city streets. The image of black youth dancing/partying in public spaces became a recurrent theme in the music videos of Atlanta artists on the party circuit. LA Sno and Playa Poncho, for example, recorded the music video to their single “Whatz Up, Whatz Up” at Freaknik ‘95 and the result was a montage of people dancing on or around cars in Piedmont Park. According to Jermaine Dupri, who was one of the song’s executive producers, the aim of the video was to “[embody] the look of Freaknik” (Whack and Burns 2015). “Whatz Up, Whatz Up” is also notable in its composition style. The song begins with a traditional verse-hook format, the hook being an interplay between groups of “ladies” and “fellas” chanting “Whatz up!” However, the last minute of the song consists entirely of call-and-response, composed with the understanding that Freaknik audiences would join in the chorus. This compositional style, which became more popular as Freaknik tensions intensified, encouraged audiences not just to be present, but to be (purposefully) loud, thereby forcing the public to contend with loud and present black bodies defying politics of silence and respectability through performance.

Freaknik did have its nonparticipating supporters. For instance, civil rights activist Hosea Williams drew comparisons between the appropriation of public space in Freaknik and that of the Civil Rights movement, holding that the black youth participants had equal rights to the public as any other subgroup in society (Stockus 2012: 4). Many of these supporters emphasized the ubiquity of carefree fun for spring breakers and noted that the city’s reactions to Freaknik were likely
based in an issue with black youth tourism as opposed to any of the actual behaviors that many of the participants engaged in.

Atlanta officials made attempts to reorient the event toward structured, indoor functions while simultaneously discouraging the celebratory patterns that had become typical of Freaknik by strengthening police forces and increasing penalties for defying policy, ultimately resulting in a series of unsuccessful events, over three hundred arrests, and at least four hundred cars being impounded during 1999’s week long event (Suggs 2008). By the late 1990s, the efforts to police Freaknik had drained the event of its appeal. Organizers no longer wanted to plan the event and vacationing black youth no longer wanted to endure the harassment that accompanied attendance; Freaknik had officially perished and all attempts to resurrect it were in vain (Suggs 2008). The dismantling of Freaknik signaled the end of an era; the “soul” of the event had fizzled out and with it, much of the enthusiasm about Atlanta as a black youth vacationing destination, at least in reference to large events (Whack and Burns 2015).

Over the years, Freaknik went through a significant transformation and so did the nature of participation. With each year, the campaigns against the event intensified, leading to changes in how participants were allowed to occupy public space. In response, attendees began participating in ways that brought focus back onto the party itself. For instance, in defiance of efforts to subdue or otherwise eradicate the party culture, participants made bolder moves in articulating their appropriation of public space for the sake of the party. Artists in popular Freaknik songs mused about the booming bass as those cruising in the streets blared their
sound systems with earth-shaking fervor, thus signaling their noncompliance with each passing policy. Collective chant was also a major part about how attendees participated in the party environment, as evidenced by existing video footage of the event.

The Atlanta bass format featured extended sections of chant and call-and-response, which, it was presumed, listeners would follow along and perform with. Here, the gesture of chant works in several ways. First, students from various institutions with varying levels of familiarity with those around them are able to unite through performance; the act of joining the collective vocally reaffirms a sense of unity. Second, it contributes to the energy building in the space, which is essential in the process of activating, for lack of a better term, neutral public space as a legitimate, albeit temporary, venue for vacationing black youth. Finally, the very act of engaging in collective chant within the emergent party environments for which Freaknik was known amidst overbearing police and during waves of disparaging media coverage became a means of performing their dissent. In essence, it was how they performed party culture which became the method by which participants asserted protest.

Some of the products created in support of Freaknik support this notion of performance as opposition. Many artistic depictions of Freaknik were peppered with text emphasizing the agency with which Freaknik attendees created and perpetuated these spontaneous party environments. For instance, one shirt produced during Freaknik 1997 prominently displays the phrases “U Can’t Stop The Cruising” and “Freaknik Beat Goes On” beneath a depiction of several women,
accompanied by three men, on top of a sports car (Thompson 2007: 36). These images and phrases were constructed to subvert, and even taunt, the social and political powers that sought the party’s destruction, or at the very least, its reformation. The assertion that the unnamed “U” can’t stop the cruising and the assurance that “the beat goes on” offers a direct challenge to detractors, that despite their efforts, the event persists. The decision to produce these phrases as shirts brings attention to the body, most likely a body engaged in the rituals of Freaknik performance. By affixing the message to the body, as one does with such sartorial script, attention is called back to bodies occupying space and place.

Atlanta was not unique in responding to the “threat” of vacationing Black youth with moral panic. Around the same time Freaknik transformed into an event defined almost wholly by the spectacular recreational performance of constant partying, another black college-age youth party event, an annual 4th of July celebration, relocated to Martha’s Vineyard. This move was the direct result of Virginia Beach, the original location of the event, taking steps to prevent vacationing black youth from returning. The presence of black youth engaging in recreational displays, consisting mainly of young black men and women partying in the streets, disturbed the notoriously wealthy, tranquil community. Both black and white residents of Martha’s Vineyard regarded the presence of black youth, or more specifically, this manifestation of black youth tourism, as unwelcome and threatening. In 1997, the threat was neutralized through the creation of new policies that made travel to the town much more difficult for large groups, unchaperoned youth, and economically disadvantaged tourists, which effectively
choked the event off (Touré 2009). The systematic restriction and elimination of black youth tourism in Virginia Beach and in Martha’s Vineyard suggests that Atlanta’s reaction to Freaknik was part of a national trend of apprehension toward, or disapproval of, the behavior of black youth and their leisure activities. Atlanta, however, is unique because of the ability of native black youth spaces to nurture and build a regional party aesthetic from these events. This is partially because Atlanta had larger and more active community of individuals and business ventures working to capitalize upon black youth, including several record companies and nightclubs.

Over the course of its peak years, Freaknik, or rather the parties for which the event was known, developed a distinct soundscape; one defined by Atlanta’s take on Miami bass. These parties were marked by the incorporation of musics that brought focus onto the body, most notably, go-go, bass, and dance oriented hip-hop. These musics, chosen because they were among the most popular African-American dance musics and held nostalgic value for the earlier, Washington D.C. native coordinators, became the building blocks of a distinguishable Freaknik aesthetic and, by extension, a facet of the Southern black party aesthetic (Thompson 2007: 27-28). These subgenres with distinct epicenters in Washington D.C., Miami, and New York respectively, combined in Atlanta nightlife establishments, gestated over the years, forming a musical trajectory that represents the amalgamation of the three. The resulting music spread rapidly throughout the Southern black club circuit, producing the hip-hop subsidiary popularly referred to as “bass”, “Atlanta bass” or “booty bass,” which begat several other subgenres with distinct colloquial
inflections. Given Freaknik's prominent role in defining Atlanta black youth party culture, the bass that manifested there exhibited many of the percussive elements familiar from to go-go and the production methodologies of house.

Atlanta bass provided many locally celebrated artists, such as Kilo Ali and Bohagon, with the initial stage upon which they built their careers (Miller 2008). By the mid 1990s, this party music became a primary sonic feature of Freaknik and one of the most recognized manifestations of the Southern aesthetic in hip-hop (Thompson 2007: 29). At the apex of bass’ popularity, several artists, such as 69 Boyz, Luke and Ghost Town DJs, produced hit songs that achieved national success and maintain widespread recognition today as partially evidenced by their acknowledgement on Billboard Top 100 lists from 1994 to 1998; however, most of these artists only achieved that level of success with single songs. Very few bass rappers and singers had enduring careers (Miller 2008). Producers who achieved notable success along this trajectory, like Jermaine Dupri and Lil Jon, conversely, contributed to multiple successful hits and were able to extend their careers beyond the scope of bass music.

Bass has very distinct characteristics, many of which reflect the party environment for which the music was composed. The music generally presents allusions to spring and summer festivities by incorporating textual references to sunny weather, (heteronormative) courtship, sex, general happiness and playfulness (Miller 2008). These themes were further established through sonic symbolism with almost unwaveringly application of allegro tempi (roughly 120-150 BPM), straightforward major or melodic minor keys, and bright timbres (Miller
Beats generally incorporated many sonic elements, including sound effects and dense instrumentation. Sampling, both instrumental and textual, is another common element of bass, which allowed the music to build on the foundation of pre-established hits.

Another important feature in Freaknik music construction is the prominent use of chanted call and response (Miller 2008). This feature allows audience members to exert agency by acting as invited participants in the sonic display. Recorded crowds, or sometimes, multiply layered recordings of individuals, provide a stencil over which the audience performs and engages with a typically lone facilitator, despite there being no direct interaction, spatially or temporally, between the two. The most obvious objective of this music is to promote dance. The dances that accompanied these songs most heavily emphasized hip movement. Accompanying videos to these songs usually feature large groups of people in party environments, coupled and dancing, usually with hips locked, grinding. The dances, usually conceived with female performance in mind, invariably feature some element of hip or posterior movement. In essence, these dances contribute to the formation of the collective, sexualized celebratory gesture that came to define black Southern youth recreational spaces, and particularly Freaknik. There is another form of dance that was prominent in Freaknik: yeeking. Troops of three-to-six individuals would dance in unison, often engaging in dance battles and drawing large crowds of people around them, thus positioning them as important actors in the activation of public space for Freaknik attendees. These troops and the crowds gathering around them would engage in a call-and-response, most notably yelling...
“YEEK!” at the completion of a climactic dance move. These chants/exclamations were incorporated into the bass music coming out of Atlanta and eventually served to further distinguish Atlanta’s bass style.

While chant is used prominently in bass music, the genre is still marked by extended verses that exhibit the lyrical virtuosity of an individual artist. I use the term lyrical virtuosity here as a means of describing a unique ability to convey creative and clever texts in step with the tempo. In the case of bass, this is particularly demanding given the fast tempi and heavily layered tracks that represent bass music. Many of these rap songs also incorporate R&B style vocals performed by a secondary performer, frequently employing melismas and growls to embellish a relatively simple melodic skeleton. These techniques are also applied to bass songs that feature singing rather than rapping; the omission of the rapper does little to shift the overall format and aesthetic.

Song content generally celebrates the party environment and the body, particularly women’s bodies. These songs very frequently employ double entendres and puns to euphemize explicit sexual content. Hits that gained prominence along this circuit epitomize the focus onto women’s bodies, at once exhibiting a celebration of the beauty of black women and the exploitation and commoditization of black women’s bodies, a phenomenon that is exemplary of widespread trends in hip-hop that restrict representations of black women to displays of heterosexual male sexual fantasy (Rose 2008: 119-120). Manifestations of this fantasy ran the gamut from idolization, as in Raheem’s “The Most Beautiful Girl in the World” to dehumanization, as in 12 Gauge’s “Dunkie Butt.” Arguably, all worked to destabilize
the ideal of thin whiteness as the primary American standard of beauty; however, they invariably built such gestures upon pre-established notions of black women as indiscriminately hypersexual. Most women performers in bass, both rappers and singers, also emphasize heterosexual courtship ritual in their songs. Songs like “Boom! I Got Your Boyfriend” by MC Luscious and the nationally recognized “My Boo” by Ghost Town DJs represent common manifestations of female rap along this trajectory; both revolve around the central theme of finding and keeping a boyfriend, thereby perpetuating expected gender performance despite the change in the performed gender.

In addition to the incorporation of sampling, many songs built upon previously established music by re-imagining earlier hits through the bass aesthetic. For example, singer INOJ reinterpreted Cyndi Lauper’s “Time After Time” and Dana Harris performed a bass version of Shirley Murdock’s “As We Lay,” both of which received national distribution through party music networks. In these songs, and other re-imagined pieces, the form and melodic structure remain relatively unchanged, but are marked with signature bass vocal embellishments and rhythmic patterns in the accompaniment. Still, these songs follow the basic themes of sexuality and vacationing.

The most obvious objective of this music is to promote dance. The dances that accompanied these songs most heavily emphasized hip movement. Accompanying videos to these songs usually feature large groups of people in party environments, coupled and dancing, usually with hips locked, grinding. Unlike many other then-current representations of hip-hop, these videos display men with
no discernible training actively engaged in dance and enjoying it, which suggests a significant deviation in the standard of masculinity from that established in gangsta rap, which dominated the national hip-hop scene. In addition to unchoreographed group dance, bass music is also accompanied by preconceived dance moves, many of which were affiliated with specific songs. Songs like “Scrub Da Ground” by Splack Pack and “Tootsie Roll” by 69 Boyz have extended sections dedicated to the dictation of movement. The dances, usually conceived with women’s performance in mind, invariably feature some element of hip or posterior movement. In essence, these dances contribute to the formation of the collective, sexualized celebratory gesture that came to define black Southern youth recreational spaces, and particularly Freaknik.

Accompanying visual art generally manifested in two primary formats: in music videos and in promotional paraphernalia. Music videos present certain thematic and cinematographic methodologies that reinforce the sonic gestures. Most video recorded during daylight hours make geographical reference to Miami, with emphasis on spontaneous parties in beach environments. The brightness of the timbres are further emphasized by the physical brightness of a sunny day, compounded with the added use of diffusion filters, which make light seem more intense and hard edges softer. Night scenes tend to be formed without the filter and with the incorporation of bold colors. Usually, these evoke a nightclub or house

While not many concurrent hip-hop songs had extended sections where the vocalist dictated dance moves, it should be noted that this music compositional approach was not new. Songs like Chubby Checker’s “The Twist” and Dee Dee Sharp’s “Do The Bird” were built around collective (possibly unison) dance in party environments.
party environment; beyond these differences, composition and content remain fairly constant.

Promotional media, including posters, T-shirts, and tape/CD covers, by contrast, frequently featured illustrations, caricatures of the self-defined archetypal figures in Southern Black youth recreational spaces. These most prominently feature images of Black women with artistically hyperbolized erogenous zones. Visual depictions of men are usually supplemental to these depictions of women, usually exhibiting men focusing their gaze on the female form. In essence, this artwork presents caricatures of Black youth that establish women as sexual objects and men as sexual voyeurs. This artwork represents yet another reference to the playful, sexualized environment for which this music was composed. Furthermore, these artistic renderings were frequently peppered with text emphasizing the agency with which Freaknikers created and perpetuated these spontaneous party environments. As described above, t-shirts produced for Freaknik participants were constructed to subvert, and even taunt, the social and political powers that sought the party’s destruction, or at the very least, its reformation (Thompson 2007: 36).

Politics of Partying

Many of the elements that came to define Freaknik became particularly charged with subversive connotations; the continued participation in the event became an overt objection to forces that sought to dictate the ways in which black youth occupied public space. Scholars who focus on youth culture have addressed the potential that participation in recreational behavior can have in asserting
political opposition. For instance, Dick Hebdige’s seminal text *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* highlights youth recreational spaces as spaces where the established meanings of symbols can be contested, negotiated, and repurposed as a means of forming a sense of identity distinct from the “outer” culture. In this way, participation on the scene constitutes an act of subversion (Hebdige 1979). Sarah Thornton goes a bit further, building upon Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, arguing that youth subcultures can activate whole value systems, or subcultural capital, that only nominally conform to the value systems of the greater culture, if at all (Thornton 1996).

More recently, Lesley J. Pruitt has put forth the notion of performance as a fitting frame to analyze the ways in which participation in collective activities might constitute a transformative force, or otherwise manifest protest. Importantly, her research de-emphasizes explicit, read verbally, articulated protest in favor of performance and participatory patterns themselves as the means through which normative inequalities and conflicts are either affirmed or challenged. This point is particularly vital, given her primary contention that the disenfranchisement of youth makes verbal-centric methods of articulating protest less viable for youth (Pruitt 2014). Likewise, Freaknik attendees, being mostly young visitors with limited access to Atlanta policy-making forums, were not well positioned to argue against the denial of black youth to occupy public space for recreational purposes. Rather, how and where they performed became the preferred means of expressing subversion.
For the participants of Freaknik, the subversive measure is intensified because detractors saw the event itself as, not simply non-conformist, but as actively dangerous. In this environment, the rituals of party culture, despite their initial significance as means of countering the stress of college life, became recast as a performed protest levied against several detractors, most notably conservatives who conflated black youth recreational behavior with deviancy. By appropriating public space in order to create unofficial party environments (after being ousted from the traditional space where the event was once contained), attendees forced non-attendees to contend with their presence. As Jack Santino argues in his work on emergent ritual, occupying space in this way is a means of asserting a claim over the space through performance, thus transforming it, even if only temporarily, into a “sacred” space (Santino 2008), or in the case of Freaknik, a space defined by, not just occupied by, black youth recreation.

The music that came to define Freaknik further highlights performance as the means through which the protest of Freaknik was articulated. Unlike other hip-hop derivatives of its time, Freaknik’s music almost always conjured an implicitly apolitical social gathering, rarely making overt allusions to controversial issues that have no direct bearing on the perpetuation of the party environment. Lyrics and accompanying visuals are markedly devoid of commentary on race, class, the adverse effects of drugs, domestic issues, and police relations, all of which would have undoubtedly affected the artists and audiences, if not in their lives, then at least in the ways in which participants would have to navigate their own identities through the construction of authentic blackness as deviant in the public imaginary.
In the absence of textual political commentary, the assertion of a black youth party aesthetic in the face of constant demonization and discrimination becomes the primary political gesture.

**Conclusion**

The concept of youth vacationing culture became a normalized part of American identity after the conclusion of World War II and it brought with it an era that transformed how Americans conceived of youth and leisure. While white youth were encouraged to explore the country, to build and express a distinctly youth culture, even to rebel, their black counterparts remained on the outside, contending with racist assertions of black inferiority and laziness. Furthermore, black people, being left outside of the American class system by the racial caste system, were not offered the same social approval for organized leisure as white citizens. When black youth were eventually able to create their own distinct vacationing circuits, they were met with panic rather than with the acceptance into the fold of youthful play. Events like Freaknik sprung up, but were attacked as moral and social pathogens to be wiped out for the good of the community.

Freaknik did in fact come to an end. Many of the largely unwarranted assertions of unsupervised black youth as a dangerous force, in addition to the arguably warranted traffic and noise complaints, offered each bid to end the event greater force. The very participants that gave the event form and meaning withdrew, and with nobody left to *do* Freaknik, it simply ceased to be. The event emerged during a moment in history when the subject black recreational behavior
bounded about public discourse in somewhat coded form. Politicians and newscasters intimated that black recreation and black deviance were inextricably linked, and that black deviance was exceptionally dangerous, an unfortunate accompaniment to the moment when African-American youth were finally able to form a distinct black youth vacationing culture. As a result, black youth vacationing nodes became the targets of political campaigns built around removing the “threat” of mass black youth occupation. For most detractors, the “sudden” appearance of black youth en masse with no discernible goal in tow other than to have a good time represented the potential for a physical and moral threat to the community and to make matters worse, very few (in the parent generation) with social and political capital truly spoke out in favor of these events as necessary or even normal expressions of young adulthood. While Freaknik never truly had a spokesperson, it remained a subject of hot debate during its peak years. It is only in the artistic renderings, like that on the aforementioned shirts, that the notion of Freaknik as a political act of subversion was articulated through words. And yet, with every refusal to disperse, every cranking of a bumping bass line, and every transformation of a nondescript street into a club without walls, black youth participants asserted their right to congregate and celebrate on their own terms.
In the early years of the new millennium, Southern hip-hop was more or less symbolically affixed to crunk, and crunk was likewise representative of the city of Atlanta. This triad of symbols, Southern hip-hop to crunk to Atlanta, helped to solidify an aesthetic dimension to hip-hop party culture below the Mason-Dixon. Furthermore, Atlanta hip-hop would be the defining litmus against which all Southern hip-hop subgenres would be gauged. Despite there being several diverse iterations of Southern hip-hop, many of which had their own local histories and aesthetic particularities, it was Atlanta, with its well-established music empires, that was able to control the first regional narrative to significantly disrupt the East coast/West coast bifurcation in the (post)gangsta era.

The sound and style of the crunk subgenre, however, is not uniquely attributable to Atlanta. By most accounts, the earliest crunk songs came from Memphis, where it was known as buck music. The hip-hop coming out of Memphis in the 1980s and 1990s influenced Atlanta scene so significantly that it can be difficult to distinguish between early crunk and Memphis buck. In some ways this is indicative of official and unofficial networks of influence, as artists in both cities traveled around the South and undoubtedly influenced one another, thereby contributing to a sense of translocal Southern hip-hop aesthetics. Between Freaknik, the thriving HBCU community, the active club circuit, and presence of
several large record empires (e.g. LaFace and So So Def), hip-hop artists from around the South, including Memphis, sought audiences in the city of Atlanta. Furthermore, as stated in earlier chapters, sociopolitical shifts in Atlanta and the desire to formulate a marketable Southern hip-hop sound caused participants on the scene and influencers in the music industry alike to seek out a new sound; something “raw” and distinct. While this dissertation focuses primarily on Atlanta, understanding crunk aesthetics entails delving into its predecessor, buck, and the scene that gave it meaning.

Three 6 Mafia and the Spread of the Memphis Scene

Memphis-based hip-hop relished in expressions of morbidity, finding inspiration in the bleak realities of racism, poverty, and violence in the American South (Miller 2008). Memphis is widely regarded as the birthplace of rock & roll and, by extension, as one of the most influential spaces in the history of American music’s movement along its current trajectory. Memphis is also famous for a high concentration of African-American citizens, for widespread poverty, and is regularly listed as one of America’s poorest large cities. Rappers from this region also frequently incorporated visual and textual allusions to African-American mysticism, particularly with reference to magic and evil, which is why this movement is sometimes referred to as Southern horrorcore. By the early 1990s, Memphis had a very rich hip-hop scene with a distinct sound, however, absent a national platform or any major tourist attractions that might draw in a larger hip-hop audience, its sound and most of its followers remained geographically confined to the South (Miller 2008). Despite some similarities, Memphis rap and the concurrent gangsta
rap phenomenon present fundamental thematic and aesthetic distinctions. A good analogy would be the comparison of an action film to a horror film; while both exhibit a great deal of violence, horror is darker, focuses more on pain and psychological torture, and often exhibits the implication of continued torment beyond mortality. Likewise, Memphis horrorcore hip-hop emphasized the sinister side of the gangsta archetype; more villain than vigilante.

The duo 8Ball & MJG is credited with being Memphis’ first major hip-hop group, beginning their career on the underground circuit in the 1980s. They are still cited as one of Southern hip-hop’s most influential pioneers, though they remain underrepresented on the national circuit (Scheffer 2010). Another of the first major breakout forces to come from this tradition is the group Three 6 Mafia. This group, originally named Backyard Posse and later Triple Six Mafia, consisted of several Memphis rappers and producers. It was formed in 1991 and remained in a near constant state of flux until the new millennium because of individual artists joining and leaving, though its core members, Crunchy Black, Gangsta Boo, Lord Infamous, DJ Paul, Juicy J, Kooosta Knicca, and Project Pat, remained constant and active for most of Three 6 Mafia’s existence (Brichmeier). They remained on the underground circuit through the majority of the 1990s despite producing multiple hit songs, primarily because record companies and radio DJs were hesitant to invest in a hip-hop group that regularly made overt references to Satanism and, in songs and interviews, made jokes that could be interpreted as anti-Christian. Despite promotional difficulties, Three 6 Mafia was able to find a substantial following on Southern African-American nightlife circuits, where music was less subject to the
politics of respectability. While Three 6 Mafia was not Memphis’ only hip-hop group, they, as individuals and as a collective, were unquestionably the group that was most successful in extending beyond the Memphis circuit and amassing popular appeal, particularly in the 1990s. Successful manifestations of the Memphis hip-hop aesthetic in other areas are, therefore, usually directly linked to this group.

Three 6 Mafia became widely known for a distinctive methodology for beat construction, which, by the new millennium, permeated Memphis hip-hop style. Beats were composed with a minimalist approach, usually only incorporating two or three sparsely arranged melodic elements and a percussive element. Beats also usually contained a non-melodic element: a sound recording that adds texture, but does not necessarily fit into the constructed composition, an example of which would be crowd noise, or urban soundscapes. Beats that did incorporate samples or other forms of heavier layering frequently employed musical elements that have disparate tonal centers, a technique that results in multiple instances of harmonic dissonance. Most of their songs have slow tempi and incorporate dissonant harmonies that imply minor keys, sometimes sampling horror movie compositions (Miller 2008). Instrumental voices in beat construction are generally synthesized, sometimes making sonic reference to acoustic instruments, but often maintaining timbres that draw attention to digital production. These beats are composed with emphasis on the lower register, causing tonal distortion at high volumes. This configuration also invites the possibility of a physically palpable sonic experience. As such, this music has an impact on both the listener’s internal and external acoustic space. The music of this group, and many other Memphis based hip-hop
acts, featured many sonic symbols of turmoil within the confines of continuous metered repetition that defines looped music.

Artists on this circuit employed stylized vocal performances in the conveyance of song texts. Rappers perform lyrics in short phrases, marked by accented, staccato bursts. Phrases were further emphasized with sections of melodic climb, plateau, and decay, the plateau consuming the bulk of the vocal gesture. Most rappers from Memphis, both male and female, incorporate the lower portion of their register in recorded performance, which also causes certain amplitude limitations. A common rhythmic feature in these raps is the vacillation between duples and triplets, which creates the illusion of rhythmic shift despite uniformity in the accompanying beat. The ability to maintain rhythmic integrity while expressing two, three, and sometimes four equally spaced subdivisions within a beat is a signature show of rhythmic virtuosity. This facet, the vacillation between compound and simple rhythm flows, would later become a central feature of trap music. Memphis rappers also incorporated chanting, which, given the clashing harmonies and macabre textual content, added to the sinister affect.

In some ways, content in early Memphis hip-hop was indicative of national trends. They presented politically charged narratives that depict subversive social systems and perspectives formed by socioeconomically disadvantaged black communities. Artists embodied hustlers, gangsters, and vigilantes, navigating oppressed communities. Both male and female rappers often recount tales of anger that conjure very detailed images of violence. For example, in the song “Live By Your Rep (BONE Dis),” each member of Three 6 Mafia, along with Kingpin Skinny Pimp
and Playa Fly, offers a detailed description of the torture they would inflict upon an offender (implicitly, members of Bone Thugs-N-Harmony). While depictions of violence were omnipresent in hip-hop, the imagery of torture, which included slowly skinning somebody alive and pouring heated chlorine on their wounds, is extreme even in the world of gangsta rap. Pieces also incorporated references to the occult, especially those that are considered antagonistic forces within the Christian tradition (Miller 2008). This emphasis on the occult, notably assertions of demonic powers directed through gangsta archetypes to not only terrorize the body but also the soul is a distinguishing feature of horrorcore, particularly given the frequent Christian, and occasional Muslim, allusions found in gangsta rap. Emphasis on torture, rather than the swift, implicitly justifiable, executions affiliated with gunfire and the celebration of gothic themes left these Memphis artists ostracized from the greater gangsta rap community.

As mentioned earlier, both male and female rappers manifested the violent, and sometimes sadistic, character that Memphis rap is known for with comparable fervor. In one sense, female performers were granted equal access to the gangsta persona, defying the confines of sexual objectification that were, and remain, commonplace in hip-hop; in another, women were disproportionately represented as performers on the Memphis hip-hop scene. Content in this tradition rarely shifted focus to heterosexual courtship ritual. Instead, the bulk of specifically gendered or sexualized content focused on the tumultuous situations that often arise from coupling, including unplanned pregnancy and abandonment, infidelity, exploitation, disagreements, and abuse. Female Memphis rappers like Gangsta Boo and La’ Chat
have used rap to embody many of the female archetypes in Memphis’ poor black neighborhoods that act upon the lives of the (implicitly male) archetypical “thug” figure, including ex-girlfriends, “baby’ mamas,” and female hustlers. Most frequently, these women are featured wearing either very loose fitting gender neutral clothing or outfits that reflect the fashions of the day, the latter of which celebrate their female bodies without the overt sexualization that defines heterosexual male sexual fantasy.

Lyrical content and visual stylization further emphasize the idea that the few prominent female rappers active on the Memphis scene were regarded as legitimate feminine counterparts to the aggressive male bravado that hip-hop embraced. Those pieces that do address sexuality generally do so with explicit sexual content, retelling the mechanics of various sexual acts, detached from emotional involvement, in great detail; even so, many of the sexual metaphors used have violent connotations. There are instances of hip-hop heterosexual male fantasy in visual gesture, particularly in later music videos. The women were featured as an extension of that fantasy, often scantily clad and oriented around a central performing male figure, function as ornaments, their presence usually irrelevant to textual content and their functioning diminished to establishing the virility of the male figure.

Three 6 Mafia and other Memphis hip-hop acts had difficulty engaging traditional promotional routes in the 1990s, particularly because of their insistence on incorporating the occult from the heart of the Bible Belt. As a result, most early visual gestures for Memphis hip-hop artists arise in the form of album covers and
promotional posters, rather than music videos. Album art for these releases usually had two themes, sometimes acting concurrently: depictions of thug or gang symbols and symbols of the occult, often with direct reference to American horror movie aesthetic. A good example is the cover of Three 6 Mafia’s 1995 album *Mystic Stylez*. The cover features five people wearing dark hooded clothes, three of whom have their faces covered by masks. The person in the most central position of the photograph hangs on a cross, a visual allusion to the crucifixion of Jesus. This image conjures ideas of anti-Christian ideology, with a central symbol of Christianity displayed in a non-religious context surrounded, and even embodied by, men carrying symbols of criminality.

Another very present allusion is to the lynching of black men in the American South. One man, who appears to be the victim of an attack, is strung up and displayed while his implicit attackers pose for pictures around him. The group’s name is written in a font that suggests it is written on a wall in bright red, with drops of blood running down from the lower planes of each letter. Subsequent album covers from this group contain skeletons, graveyards, and ironic biblical allusions along with other more traditional symbols of hip-hop, such as then-current hip-hop style clothing, cars, jewelry, and cash.

Both Project Pat and La’ Chat have album covers that depict the featured artist holding a weapon with their faces covered by a bandana, a common symbol of gang affiliation, peeking from behind a hiding space implicitly waiting for the right moment to enact a fatal attack on unsuspecting people in the background. These images represent a less religious mysticism-oriented conception of Memphis rap,
which was more palatable to wider audiences. While crime and gangs are certainly a presence in Memphis, as they tend to manifest in most struggling urban communities, Memphis crime does not represent the high level of gang organization or charged urban war zones that gangsta rap epicenters, like Los Angeles, became known for. Even without large crime structures, crime in Memphis runs rampant, evidenced by its consistent designation as one of America’s fifteen most dangerous cities, with higher concentrations of violent crime than Compton or Oakland (Lubin 2010). These high occurrences of individualized violent crime are written into the music, which usually conjures images of individuals carrying out personal vendettas through, not only acts of violence, but through psychological, physical, and spiritual torture; this element contrasts West Coast gangsta rap, which usually depicts violence as a necessary component of street justice, and rarely relishes in ideas of unnecessary torture.

The construction of sonic and visual gesture by these groups shifted significantly in the new millennium. In seeking a more mainstream audience, many overt references to the occult were softened. Around this time, these artists began producing more music videos, most of which followed established hip-hop video construction with bold colors, frequent scene changes, and performative engagement with the implied audience via direct camera engagement. While many occult symbols from the earlier era of Memphis hip-hop persisted, like the name Three 6 Mafia, their connotations were made more ambiguous, thereby neutralizing much of the perceived threat to propriety that earlier works posed.
Three 6 Mafia boasted being the “most known unknown,” which was a commentary on their ability to constitute an influential force in the hip-hop community and their inability to attain mainstream status. Three 6 Mafia remained a minimally acknowledged presence in mainstream hip-hop until 2006, when they became the first hip-hop artists to win an Academy award after contributing original pieces to the film *Hustle & Flow* (Associated Press 2006). *Hustle & Flow*, a depiction of aspiring hip-hop artists in Memphis, attracted national attention and enjoyed high acclaim, which, for the first time, shifted the national gaze onto Memphis’ distinct brand of hip-hop. Still, they, and other Memphis hip-hop artists were neither invited to nor acknowledged at the 2010 Hip-Hop Honors, the year that the event was dedicated to Southern artists’ contribution to hip-hop (Scheffer 2010).

Nearly a decade before their groundbreaking success in the film industry, Three 6 Mafia recorded a song that rose to prominence on the Southern club circuit: “Tear Da Club Up.” The song tapped into a new market; it fostered dance and audience engagement in a way that complemented the hypermasculine gangsta figure that dominated hip-hop. Arguably, with this track, Three 6 Mafia produced the first crunk song; however its construction was more aligned with traditional Memphis hip-hop than the genre that would later become crunk. Regardless of whether or not this piece actually counts as a crunk song, it was foundational in establishing many of the thematic, performative and compositional methodologies that would come to define crunk.
Crunk Beginnings

During the 1990s, black youth party culture in Atlanta was dominated by the Freaknik and Memphis aesthetics. These two disparate formats represented the gamut of the ways in which Southern hip-hoppers conceived of spectacular recreational performance. Therefore, Atlanta rappers and producers who sought to capitalize on these spaces incorporated elements from these two primary sources. One of the resulting composites is what has come to be known commonly as the crunk subgenre. While there is still debate about when exactly crunk began and by whom it was invented, it is generally accepted that the first instance in which crunk was presented as a formatted style by artists who identified specifically with crunk was in 1997, when Lil Jon and the Eastside Boyz released the single “Get Crunk (Who U Wit).”

As mentioned earlier, Atlanta’s hip-hop party scene was under immense pressure during the latter half of the 1990s, partially stemming from the stigma surrounding the recreational performance of black youth in Freaknik. The policies formed to police Freaknik and the foundational sensitization to, and demonization of, black youth recreational spaces affected black youth and the policing of spaces that were marked by black youth presences throughout the year. The assertion that black youth leisure constitutes a threat, or at the very least, heightened potential for criminality, not only charged hip-hop clubs, but also impacted the experience of black youth in Atlanta in general. Persisting trends of racism in the American South, assumptions of the inherent inferiority of youth, and the greater community’s general dismissal of value, or capital, in the cultures formed at the nexus of the two
left the cultural gestures affiliated specifically with black youth on the margins of what was deemed respectable behavior. Furthermore, being that Atlanta was, and still is, a city where invisible barriers cordon off neighborhoods by race and socioeconomic status, awareness and disapproval of black youth were heightened in areas such as Midtown and Buckhead, areas affiliated with white middle class and wealthy residency. In essence, the active politics of race, age, and place, charged by increased policing of black youth behavior, severely limited the agency that black youth had in asserting self-expression along traditional routes, elevating the political subtexts of spaces where black youth retained the most cultural, or subcultural, capital. Cathy Cohen asserts that instances in which a marginalized collective is denied agency over their lives along traditional social routes are often met with the impulse to redirect focus onto other, more immediately rewarding routes, such as fun and physical pleasure. In doing so, these groups establish a sense of agency through engaging in seemingly subversive behavior with immediate gratification, e.g. drugs, sex, etc. (Cohen 2004: 37-38).

As policy tightened around these spaces, the music that defined them shifted. Instead of bright timbres and jubilation, the music got darker, more aggressive, and incorporated more violent imagery. While there was certainly a transitional period where crunk and bass coexisted on the Southern club circuit, the latter was in decline, and the former on the rise (Miller 2008). Interestingly, the year that Freaknik was pronounced dead by the newspapers, signifying the success of social and political pressures, was the same year that interest in crunk exploded. In
relatively little time, crunk grew from a vague concept to a legitimate force in hip-hop.

Crunk music has, since its inception, been closely affiliated with African-American club culture. As such, crunk became affiliated with black youth in their late teens and early twenties, those who have the social and economic freedom to dedicate a substantial portion of their energies to nightlife ventures and those to whom hip-hop trends most appealed. In a social context where black youth are often marked as criminal and their gatherings (especially recreational gatherings) are imagined as threatening, the ability to redefine capital within the confines of party spaces becomes an essential, albeit temporary, subversion of the status quo.

The tension that surrounded black youth recreational behavior in the South may have fed into the crunk phenomenon in another way. Black youth were bombarded by what essentially amounted to varying levels of harassment from the greater Atlanta community. The peak of these tensions, the latter half of the 1990s, was defined by increased policing of black youth, particularly, but not exclusively when Freaknik attendees came to town (Thompson 2007: 33-35). Even with relative desensitization to the recreational behavior of black youth in other seasons, the precedents established for Freaknik had a profound effect on the freedom black youth had to control their leisure time throughout the year. These conditions created a niche for a forum in which black youth could release their frustrations from living in a culture biased against them. The sheer energy with which individuals engaged early crunk constituted a usable outlet, allowing participants to express rage in a contained environment.
Crunk as a hip-hop format consists of several elements that represent its position on the ever-evolving continuum of the Southern black recreational aesthetic. As I outline in chapter 2, crunk beats are composed of two primary melodic themes (a potent bass component and a treble motive) and a rhythmic component provided by a drum machine beating at a moderate tempo (Miller 2008). The result is an admixture of timbral friction; a piercing syne whistle hovering over a distorted, buzzing bass marked metronomically by a bright, slapping synthetic drum. This component is most directly reminiscent of the Memphis aesthetic. (Miller 2008).

In the crunk subgenre, rappers frequently employ screams and growling tones in their conveyance of text. Lil Jon, one of the most notable promoters of crunk as a genre, has built his performative empire on a signature yelling of affirmations, “OKAY,” “YEAH!,” which have become integral to establishing crunk style. While the natural timbres of these performers’ voices are certainly a factor, recordings of earlier works by these artists that precede the establishment of crunk as a sub-genre, such as “Shawty Freak a Lil’ Sumtin,’” are devoid of such vocal techniques, which implies that the application of growling tones and textured timbres is intentional and specific to creating a crunk production.

Crunk music generally incorporates yelling, often rhetorical affirmations typical of “hype men” as an integral facet of the sonic tapestry. Rappers who employ these techniques generally elongate their phrasing and alter the timbre of their voices, while staying within the realm of conventional vocality (Miller 2008). The
The application of these techniques represent a highly stylized approach to vocality that emphasizes commitment to character over vocal, or even poetic, virtuosity.

Lil’ Jon and the Eastside Boyz, an Atlanta based group that enjoyed mild success in the bass music circuit, was the first group to promote an idea of crunk as a distinct subgenre after releasing their 1997 hit single “Get Crunk (Who U Wit)” (Miller 2008). Even though it is often argued that “Get Crunk (Who U Wit)” is not actually the first crunk song, it offers a good example of a basic crunk format. There are three elements that are present in every crunk song: a moderate beat with heavy bass, an extended chanted section, and a period of dictated call and response. The piece begins with sixteen measures of synthesized drum and bass. In the following measure, the high melodic elements and the vocalists enter simultaneously. The melody that accompanies the refrain, which can best be described as an expansion of a diminished chord, expresses an antecedent-consequent phrase that takes four measures to complete.

The text is completely conveyed through chant, with short phrases repeated in unison usually for eight measures sometimes with minor alterations. A crowd composed of unidentified men and women engages the credited artists, responding to each call directly by either repeating their phrases or answering a posed question. For example, the call “Where you from?” is responded to with a mixture of “East Side,” “West Side,” “South Side,” and a repeated “Where you from?” Such informal interview-style questions define Lil Jon and the Eastside Boyz’ vocal contribution to the verses. This song is completely devoid of a narrative or an individual voice.
As in many popular songs, the refrain never deviates from the pattern established in its first appearance. This format emphasizes the importance of mass participation and group dynamics in the conveyance of getting crunk. These methods are not specific to this trajectory. They have been employed by many call-and-response based African-American musics; however, these methods within hip-hop, particularly in its modern format, are unique (Floyd 1995: 151-152). The construction of a sonically implied crowd allows the removed setting in which the recording takes place to imitate the club spaces that the recording is composed for. Some recordings incorporate perpetual chanting, either as the primary voice of the piece or as a subordinate part of the sonic texture. This format establishes function for the listener. Unlike hip-hop narrative forms in which the artist proselytizes to an implicitly passive audience, crunk formats engage the listener directly by carving out a niche for the listener to contribute directly to the sonic experience in a collective and uniform format, even without previous familiarity with the playing song.

Textual content in crunk music is generally more limited than other rap formats, rarely deviating from present tense observations in an implied club environment. The primary focus of the text is not to narrate, but to introduce a vocal texture and to communicate what is necessary to create and maintain an energized environment (Jones 2003). The earliest crunk songs are completely devoid of a narrative, consisting entirely of the repetition of short disconnected phrases. The most common themes revolve around conversational excerpts from an imagined club experience, usually reflecting a masculine, braggadocio character; they depict
introductions, arguments, assertions of dominance, fights, and acts of vandalism. Others focus on the female body, heterosexual courtship ritual in urban club spaces, or on actual sexual acts, though the latter two are less common.

Even with overt heterosexual sexualization as a significant content element, the most significant manifestation of the body in this music is not sexualized; that manifestation is the audience’s accompanying performance. The act of “getting crunk,” or embodying the energy of crunk, is most homologous with moshing, an audience bodily performance affiliated with American punk. As William Tsitsos asserts, dance styles like moshing and slam dancing can be the physical embodiment of rebellion, or of ideology within rebellious, alternative counter cultures, usually appearing chaotic to outsiders and expressing an aesthetic and etiquette that insiders are privy to (Tsitsos 1999: 407-410). Likewise, in getting crunk, black youth presented an expression of subversion. This phenomenon appeared in nightclubs and party environments that featured crunk music during the latter half of the 1990s. Participants violently thrash against each other, huddling toward a chaotic epicenter, constantly pushing and being pushed. In addition to the horizontal push, participants make small vertical jumps, usually constricted by the density of the crowd. In engaging crunk, the crowd expresses a mass catharsis. All people involved exert great amounts of energy in a seemingly angry display, a gesture akin to other self-regulatory tactics, such as punching a pillow (Miller 2008).

As mentioned earlier, one primary performative aspect of getting crunk involves sonic participation. Audience members customarily chant along with the music, engaging in a call and response outlined by the recorded piece. In doing so,
they not only contribute to the sonic texture of the surrounding club space, they also experience the piece in their internal acoustic space (Miller 2008). In this sense, the repetition, slow pacing, and simplicity of the songs' text structure is functional. They are composed such that even individuals with no familiarity with a piece can easily comprehend the structure, understand the niche carved out for his/her sonic contribution and produce accordingly. The focus of these music is, therefore, not found in the conveyance of narrative text, but rather in the facilitation of the audience's internalization and reproduction of crunk performativity. Recreating the sonic experience of getting crunk coupled with the physical element, the cathartic body, produces a complex communicative exchange. Not only are listeners engaging with their immediate surroundings, they effectively engage in call and response dictated by a sonic element constructed in another place and time in unison, or at the very least in a collaborative tapestry, with a mass of people they may or may not know. In essence, the elements conspire to transform a mass into a solitary, albeit somewhat chaotic, collective gesture. The temporal and spatial placement of these performative phenomena is not coincidental. They arise at a time in Atlanta when restrictions surrounding black youth recreational performance is at a peak and black youth, subsequently, lost some important beacons of their agency in leisure time, markedly Freaknik and any other similar gatherings. Crunk presented a viable space to express rebellion, camaraderie, and general catharsis.

Accompanying visual gestures also support the idea that crunk music and performance functioning as cathartic responses to the social and political pressures that are imposed upon black youth in Atlanta. The bright colors and smiles that
defined the Bass aesthetic are a rarity in representations of crunk. They generally
depict active male participants in aggressive displays of conflict and/or affection
with other males, accompanied by passive women usually performing some facet of
heterosexual male fantasy, only occasionally occupying central spaces.

As Dick Hebdige asserts, meaning is often constructed in subcultural spaces
through the imposition of seemingly contradictory symbols over each other or
through the application of tools and symbols in ways that counter normalized
implementation in the greater society (Hebdige 1979: 15-19). As outlined in Chapter
2, a frequent image found in crunk as it rose to prominence was the Confederate flag
displayed on and in close proximity to young black (usually male) bodies, a very
complex gesture that not only asserted Southerness and a subversion of symbol of
white supremacist symbolism, but also directly commented on the concurrent
political debates surrounding the symbol’s placement on Georgia’s state flag. In
bringing the Confederate flag within hip-hop as an act of appropriation or, in some
instances, protest, these artists commented on the complicated relationship black
Southerners have to constructions of American South authenticity; one defined by
feelings of ownership and belonging, and, conversely, by feelings of contempt for a
space marked by a long and active history of overt and often violent racism. This
visual gesture was often either ignored or reviled in the greater hip-hop community,
usually with the implication that such compositions were either made in ignorance
or represented African-American acceptance of white supremacy.

Another common, less political, visual gesture in crunk directly represents
psychic violence. Crunk images generally display male artists with distorted facial
expressions, usually varying stages of grimaces and screams, with the body caught in poses that express extreme kinetic potential. These distortions are often emphasized by camera angles and, sometimes, warped camera lens effects, such as fisheye bulges (Miller 2008).

While the release and subsequent success of the single “Get Crunk (Who U Wit)” signaled the establishment of a stylized and self-identified crunk aesthetic, the shift toward crunk dominating representations of the Southern hip-hop party aesthetic was slow. Lil Jon and the Eastside Boyz composed several singles that evoked bass more directly on the same album. For example, their single “Shawty Freak A Lil Sumtin,” released around the same time, incorporated bright timbres, and a series of narrative rap verses framed by somewhat virtuosic, but certainly sincere, singerly vocals. This track still brings focus onto an implied club environment, describing a party during which a man and woman engage in heterosexual courtship ritual, but, in most other ways, is almost completely devoid of elements associated with the crunk aesthetic. This song, and others like it on this album, emphasizes the intentionality with which these artists shifted their performance methodology. The greater hip-hop community, by contrast, depended increasingly more upon vivid storytelling with political commentary and virtuosic poetic construction as criteria for desirable or valid hip-hop performance; rappers who did not manifest these elements through accepted methodologies were often regarded as either unskilled or inauthentic. The elements that defined early crunk became synonymous with the intersection of the hypermasculine, thug archetype and Southern recreational, fun, expression; however, this affiliation, absent an overt
political narrative in the text, made marketing crunk outside of Southern spaces difficult. In the following years, performance in crunk evolved further, creating a format more palatable to national popular music audiences and ushering in its peak years.

The Popularization of Crunk

Within the first decade of the new millennium, crunk became a nationally known phenomenon, emerged as fashionable in hip-hop, gave birth to a new generation of hip-hop tributaries, and dissipated, its elements fragmented and mixed into the nondescript amalgamation of mainstream pop. This period saw a major surge in the number of artists identifying with crunk, like Crime Mob, Trillville, Young Bloodz, Lil’ Scrappy, and Miss B’Havin, as well as other artists who weren’t considered crunk, but capitalized upon the crunk aesthetic, like Pitbull and Ludacris. As it stood, crunk had come to represent Southern black male aggression, with prominent use of collective chanting male voices, seemingly violent bodily performance, and text that reinforced the hypermasculine hip-hop archetype that solidified in the popular imagination through gangsta rap. The evolutionary path taken by the format as it shifted toward the mainstream reveals an overarching trend, namely, the neutralization of the symbols that support the dominant hypermasculine archetype and the incorporation of disparate musical formats.

One of the first songs to embody this new trajectory in crunk was the 2003 hit song “Get Low” by Lil Jon’ and the East Side Boyz, featuring the Ying Yang Twins. This song has a notably more complex structure than its predecessors, with
whistles, synthesized strings, drum machine, and other digitally generated sounds. The resulting timbre is distinctively brighter than earlier crunk songs. These pieces maintained certain compositional elements from earlier years, such as emphasis on minor or minor-related harmonies and moderately slow tempi.

Another major shift was the incorporation of a narrative. While this piece and others like it still featured extended sections of collective chant and crunk’s signature yells and growls, they also featured long verses where solitary artists expressed a cohesive narrative. In the case of “Get Low,” individual artists convey a first-person recounting of engaging in (heteronormative, arguably hypermasculine) sexual pursuit of a woman dancing in a club environment, complete with voyeuristic relations to objectified women’s bodies. This ties into earlier pieces thematically but departs substantially in focusing on an experience as framed by a solitary artist. Furthermore, given that these sections are not chanted by a mass in recording or composed of a single multiply layered voice, the rapper is able to apply more complicated lyrics that rely less on repetition and the patterned predictability of call and response. The introduction of a narrative aligned crunk more closely with other forms of hip-hop and made crunk, or elements thereof, more accessible to other hip-hop artists, thereby creating the potential for crunk crossover.

In 2005, the Ying Yang Twins capitalized on the established aesthetic foundation of crunk by creating a track steeped in irony: “Wait (The Whisper Song).” Rather than the screams and texture that crunk had come to be known for, this song employs whispers with the occasional voiced interjection, a synthesized melodic-percussive element, and a series of snaps; notably absent is the bass. This piece is
devoid of a true extended chanted section, though the whispers in the chorus are multiply layered with short repetitious phrases, arguably implying an invitation to crowd participation. This song is an important predecessor to snap, one of crunk’s direct successors in popularity.

During its popular years, the moshing phenomenon of getting crunk disappeared; however, the body of the listener was still an important space for the conveyance of meaning. Instead of forming chaotic masses, the crunk listening experience was accompanied by more dictated movements, most of which are reflected in the accompanying music videos. These dances focus more on the movement of the upper body, with very dramatic, angled arm movements. “Get Low” was accompanied by grand gestures of pointing to the left, coinciding with the phrase “to the window,” and to the right, to represent “to the wall.” The dance that accompanied “Wait (The Whisper Song)” again defied the established trends in crunk, manifesting as a two-step with arms almost completely static. Despite these differences, these songs, and other crunk pieces released around this time, maintained a uniform collective gesture of the audience through highly dictated, stylized movement; a superimposition of the unison of chant onto the physical body. This physical unison brought focus onto the group more than the individual, who expressed subcultural capital through the insider knowledge of being able to convey the right movements in line with the rest of the group, with only the possibility of minimal stylized embellishments. In this sense, the expression of such insider knowledge is more highly than individualized expressions of virtuosity.
In the first years of the new millennium, sampling became a more central compositional technique in beat construction. As mentioned earlier, early crunk music is devoid of samples, consisting entirely of originally composed music that reinforce the textual emphasis on current space-time. One of Lil Jon and the East Side Boyz’ releases, “Nothin’s Free,” samples Janet Jackson’s “Let’s Wait A While.” This song, which has two variant recordings, features a singer named Oobie who follows the melody directly from the original Janet Jackson song. The first version also incorporates sampled harmonic material from the Janet Jackson song, while the second version, the version that was released to the public, only makes allusion to it, with a newly composed piece that follows the same chord progression. This piece features Oobie prominently, with extended sung sections that open and close the piece. Oobie embellishes the melody with R&B style melismas and turns, expressing a level of vocal virtuosity. The chant is confined to the portion of the song performed by the male artists, the response always being a pronounced “shawty” interjected between every line of a narrative. The content of this song is a manifestation of heterosexual courtship ritual in club spaces, depicting two primary perspectives: a female sex worker propositioning men in a club environment and two male responses to being propositioned. Despite her depiction as a sexual object, with this song, Oobie became the first solitary female voice, or named female performer, to be affiliated with crunk, although she does so as a singer who evokes R&B/pop style more than the crunk aesthetic. The content and song format alludes to earlier crunk songs and possibly to its bass predecessor, however this song, and many other crunk songs featuring Oobie like “Nothin’ On” and “Pussy Control” represent a
conscious attempt to counter, or complement, the harshness of male crunk performance with traditional R&B to create a hybrid more suitable for crossover.

Not all women who entered crunk during these years did so as singers softening the harsh edges of heterosexual male voyeurism. This wave of crunk produced female crunk anthems, in which women claimed a space in crunk. Such anthems as “Stilettos (Pumps)” by Crime Mob with Miss Aisha, or “Bottle Action” by Miss B'Havin reflect the presence of women in crunk as active participants and contributors, but they invariably address a discrepancy between expected female performance and getting crunk. They depict a woman-centered style of braggadocio, willing to engage in fisticuffs to assert agency and maintain respect. These songs retain a more traditional crunk format, with dark timbres and extended chant sections, though they also feature solo narrative sections. With primary chanted sections that ally the crunk aesthetic with defiance of expected gender performance, “We rockin’ stilettos ho” and “I beat that bitch with a bottle” respectively, the songs not only spoke to female presence in crunk spaces, but were also embraced by Atlanta’s queer black youth.

In expanding the crunk community, or at least the communities represented in crunk, artists began to compose music that alluded to the queer community, a prime example being “Shake” by the Ying Yang Twins and Pitbull, a song that samples George Kranz’ second incarnation of “Trommeltanz (Din Da Daa).” This song, along with the 1997 version by drag performer Kevin Aviance, resurged in popularity in gay hip-hop clubs nationally. In Atlanta specifically, the song became a standard call to competition for J-setters. J-setting is a dance style similar to
voguing, the primary difference being that J-setting is generally composed of bodily calls and responses performed by one group in competition with another. The format is a hybrid of yeek, vogue, and majorette dance that manifests something distinctly black, queer, and Southern. The J-setting phenomenon remained fairly confined to recreational safe spaces for gay black men, e.g., gay clubs and pride events, until Beyoncé (and Destiny's Child) popularized it in music videos for “Lose My Breath” and “Single Ladies” (Alvarez 2013). “Shake” was released in 2005, carrying with it locally recognizable sonic symbols of the queer community, further deconstructing the overarching prevalence of hypermasculinity in crunk. Still, this song remains tied to heterosexual male voyeuristic fantasy.

The apex of crunk arguably came in 2004, the only year when the top Billboard song of the year was a crunk song: “Yeah” by Usher, Lil’ Jon, and Ludacris. This song represents the quintessential mix of traditional crunk elements and dilution, as evidenced by its popularity and longevity. Usher, a popular R&B singer and male sex symbol, softened the hypermasculine character associated with crunk with his smooth vocals, the dominating vocal element of the piece. Ludacris adds a rapped narrative verse that expresses male camaraderie, heterosexual courtship ritual in an implied club space, and draws focus onto the performing artists, himself included. In addition to producing the track, which is representative of the then current manifestation of crunk, Lil Jon adds his signature screamed affirmations, closing the song out with a series of calls that dictate the body performance of the listener by introducing a series of named dance moves like the “A-town stomp,” the “thunder clap” (both taken from Yeeking), and the “rock away,” maintaining the
dictated embodied experience of the listener as an important element though far less central than in earlier pieces. Lil Jon's voice, a central feature of earlier songs, is marginalized, reducing his vocal contribution to that of a hype man. This song retains many compositional elements of crunk, but its appeal was built more upon R&B with distinct crunk inflections.

For many hip-hop formats, the attainment of mass commercial success is often associated with the loss of authenticity, usually with the implication that once major success is attained, artists are no longer connected to or driven by the social issues facing poor black communities, or that one must have struggled exceptionally or must be struggling currently to be authentically hip-hop. Such pressures to maintain authenticity through a geographical or cultural connection to poor black neighborhoods are not specific to hip-hop. The politics of authenticity and racial betrayal accompany many manifestations of African-Americans building cultural capital along traditional American routes, though they are frequently neutralized through proving one’s connectedness to what is often regarded as the authentic blackness (Kennedy 2008: 5-10). Crunk, however, never took an explicit stance against economic determinism, nor were there overt claims of authenticity tied to socioeconomic status. Lil Jon, one of crunk's most vocal and dedicated promoters, has incessantly worked toward making himself famous and has stressed the idea of crunk as a legitimate genre since its inception. With the popularization of crunk, his efforts would manifest in a series of products, including a clothing line, a television series, an energy drink, and a pornographic DVD (Miller 2008). Arguably, the shift
away from providing a space for catharsis constitutes a manifestation of selling out; one aligned more with function than principle.

In the years following the release of “Yeah,” crunk was dethroned as the definitive Southern hip-hop aesthetic, and replaced by snap. Artists like D4L, Dem Franchise Boyz, and Soulja Boy came to prominence through snap, while others like Crime Mob transitioned from crunk. Snap retained the emphasis on the body, but created an environment of complete bodily dictation throughout, with the extent of individuality confined to slight stylized embellishments in an otherwise collective uniform gesture. Chant became increasingly less central to song construction; however, artists in this tradition retained a slow rapping style that facilitates group participation.

Conclusion

The term “crunk” is still used in similar contexts, signifying high energy in party environments, but is less frequently used in reference to the subgenre with the exception of Lil Jon, who has been and remains the primary proponent of crunk. Many of the elements that defined crunk have, since popularization, become fragmented and incorporated into the general American popular music canon. While crunk rose and fell, the continuum of Southern hip-hop party music persists, in formats that are still defined by the fostering of sonic participation and ritualized performance for the listeners.

The crunk phenomenon defies simple definition. Even given an intimate knowledge of the multiple manifestations of crunk, the term and the spaces to which
it applies inherit a kind of fluidity that resists straightforward classification. It represents a complex dialogue of bodies, social status, space, and agency manifested in a series of leisure-derived gestures. Despite Lil Jon’s assertion that crunk is indeed a legitimate genre, Matt Miller, Southern hip-hop scholar, holds that crunk is simply a point on a trajectory of Southern black youth recreational music culture, one that attained mass popularity that serendipitously exceeded that of its predecessors, and subsequently became affiliated with Southern hip-hop expression in general. As such, the sonic, visual, and performative gestures made within crunk are built upon those that preceded it. While few have argued that crunk is a separate entity from hip-hop, many have faced difficulty fitting crunk, and other musics along its trajectory, into traditional hip-hop frameworks, particularly with regard to lyrical and musical analysis.

The ways in which crunk performance and spaces emerge and disperse follow a pattern akin to those that emerge in Jack Santino’s analyses of public spontaneous shrines and emergent rituals. Santino describes a series of spaces that spontaneously and temporarily become hallowed to accommodate the performance of various rituals, particularly those that manifest to address death. These phenomena are not coordinated by any official who has the authority to declare a sanctified space, such as a priest; rather, the collective decision of the participants to make the space sacred is enough to persuade passersby to treat the space as such, thereby creating and perpetuating a socially validated sacred ritual space (Santino 2007: 125-132). Just as in the case of the emergent rituals Santino describes, crunk spaces are established and dictated by the collective, only partially guided by
recorded compositions that reflect back onto the collective bodies of the participants and validated through the emergent ritual of getting crunk. The elements of which crunk is composed had been circulating through Southern black youth recreational spaces for over a decade before crunk would take form; however, it would take increasingly discriminatory policy surrounding black youth and spectacular performance to inspire rappers and producers to combine these aggressive elements into one entity, and for Atlanta’s black youth to validate that formation by accepting crunk as representative of the city’s hip-hop sound.

While crunk performance is rarely, if ever, regarded as an exercise in expressing religion or a connection to the sacred, the ways in which participants collectively engage in crunk performance seems related to the phenomena described by Santino in some important ways. The first is the affiliation of the sacredness of the space with the presence of people who will it so. While not necessarily present for contextually religious purposes, the collective is charged with creating a crunk space. Furthermore, the spectacular performance of bodies in the space (ritualized sacred performance in non-sacred spaces in the case of Santino’s subjects and ritualized crunk performance in the case of participants in crunk spaces) is the primary medium through which the intentional, temporary use of the space is conveyed to participants and observers. While getting crunk has been described as visually and experientially related to holy ghost possession (Miller 2008), there is little reason to believe that the ritualized experience of getting crunk is tied to a pursuit of higher being or the exploration of complex subjectivity. Rather, the purpose of this ritual is the ritual itself. The act of getting
crunk is sustained for as long as the collective can muster the energy to adequately meet the demands of crunk performativity; a catharsis that empties itself out with the depletion of the energy or the use for the catharsis for the participants. While this ritual may seem dictated by the application of sonic stimuli, namely recorded crunk music, it is the collective response of the crowd which creates the embodied experience that give the sonic gesture meaning and establish the space as crunk.

In this sense, extraordinary measures are taken in the construction of previously recorded musics that can facilitate the embodied experience in spaces that are temporally and physically distant from the construction of the piece. The sonic and embodied experience of a crunk song within its intended context is invariably different with every listening because so much of the experience is contingent upon the audience’s contribution. The construction of a more or less incomplete piece with the expectation that it will be completed by, and embodied by, the listener upon hearing is, if nothing else, a novel idea in mainstream hip-hop. This process, however, fits predictably into the musical lineage onto which crunk falls.
Chapter 5.

“But Y’all Were Doing The Sissy”
On Gender Performativity in Atlanta Hip-Hop Spaces

Crunk and other related musics along the crunk trajectory are often discussed in ways that center maleness (see Rose 2008; Miller 2008). This makes sense given that the most prominent crunk performers are men and that the most common themes, voyeurism at strip clubs and a moshing dance style, are affiliated with heteronormative, homosocial, hypermasculine male interaction. The discussion of gender and gender performativity in this scene is at once much more nuanced and more complex. Just as crunk performativity does not result in an identity in permanence, so too are the means of performing gender through crunk music fluid and ephemeral, at times fluctuating between the normative and the non-normative for both men and women. There were and are women who were central to creating crunk. More importantly, there were women whose navigation of gender performance through the subgenre resisted having their presence in crunk spaces relegated to the subject of the male gaze. This chapter offers an exploration of gender performance along the crunk trajectory.

The task of understanding sonic and musical phenomena within their social, historical, and cultural contexts lies at the center of ethnomusicological research. As such, issues of gender, one of the few ubiquitous cultural constructs, impact ethnomusicological research (or at the very least, they should). While acknowledging that a scholarly investigation of gender in music/culture need not
necessarily focus explicitly on constructions of femininity or womanhood/girlhood, I argue that feminist scholarship, with its designs to disrupt heteronormative male centrality offers a particularly useful entry point for my discussion of gender in crunk spaces. I will therefore use this chapter to explore navigations of gender along the crunk trajectory and the means by which actors on the scene engage in the political work of addressing gender construction, including heteronormativity.

Patricia Hill Collins succinctly defines intersectionality as “an analysis claiming that systems of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization” which she uses in her politically and sociologically informed construction of black women’s multiply layered marginality (Collins 1998: 278). While the concept of intersectionality has been around at least since the mid 19th century, one of the most famous early articulations being Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech in 1851, the concept became central to the theoretical contributions of second-wave feminists, particularly black feminists, starting in the 1970s (Collins 1996: 9, 16).

The primary aim of centralizing intersectionality stands as both a critique of and an engagement with mainstream feminism, race/ethnic studies, cultural studies, and affiliated political movements which, up until this intervention was made, rarely if ever critically considered that the human subjects of their discourse might equally and simultaneously be subjected to other iterations of marginalization, or, conversely, might contribute to the marginalization of “others” within their own marginalized group, i.e., the existence of sexism within a racially marginalized group or the existence of racism within a gender-marginalized group.
Applications of intersectional thought along these raced-feminist lines can be found in historico-political analyses (Davis 1983; Collins 1998), investigations of identity representation (hooks 1992) and in theorizations of (imagined) globalized identity construction (Brown 1998). This turn toward more complex constructions of identity in analyses of cultural phenomena revolutionized the ways in which subsequent studies constructed human relationships in terms of power, politics and senses of being and belonging.

One recent musical ethnography, Christopher Nelson’s Dancing With The Dead: Memory, Performance and Everyday Life in Postwar Okinawa incorporates an intersectional analytic enacted by noting his female interlocutors’ navigation of specifically gendered issues in the midst of the national, ethnic, and place-based identities that permeated their experience; specifically, Nelson notes conflicts between women who wish to maintain traditional Okinawan gender roles/rituals and those who viewed such practices as the gendered subordination of an antiquated social order (Nelson 2008, 148). This special consideration of gendered ritual and intra-gender division highlights heterogeneity within the field, thereby offering a more in depth take on the construction and performance of identity within a modern context.

Matt Miller offers a musico-cultural analysis more directly related to my area of interest, Southern hip-hop. In his recent publication Bounce, Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans, Miller offers a complex tapestry of identity negotiation and musical engagement within the confines of New Orleans housing projects, most markedly in his investigation of so-called “sissy rappers.” These performers, who
include both transgender and same-gender-loving cis male rappers, complicate commonly held notions about homophobia and hypermasculine performance in hip-hop while simultaneously highlighting the ebbs and flows of conditional support from audiences (Miller 2012: 157). “Sissy rappers” in this study are described as occupying a space marked by race, class, sexual orientation and (in the case of trans rappers) trans marginalization, amplified by their participation within a hip-hop scene that is further marked as marginal by its regionality. As such, the ethnographic contribution of these rappers exhibits the simultaneous negotiation of these various power relations of gender and sexuality within hip-hop.

As Atlanta’s hip-hop club scene exhibits many parallels to New Orleans’ bounce scene, including the existence of an often unacknowledged queer presence, my argument builds from Miller’s. My work on crunk is also influenced by and engages with the recent scholarship of hip-hop feminism. Hip-hop feminism, which can roughly be marked by theoretical and thematic shifts made on gender and the study of hip-hop starting in the mid-to-late 1990s, is an intersectional study at its core. Scholars who contribute to this discourse theorize gender construction in tandem with hip-hop commentaries on (inter)national systems of racial marginalization (Fernandes 2007: 5; Washington 2007: 80; Oliver 2007: 248; Wilson 2007: 170), sexuality (Pitchard & Bibbs 2007: 19; Clay 2007: 148), and issues of class identity and representation (Cooper 2007: 368). While these scholars hold that feminist thinkers from the previous generation contribute invaluable work in analyses of race and gender through the theoretical intervention of intersectionality, hip-hop feminists assert that those scholars theorize women in
hip-hop dichotomously, either as progressive or regressive, objectified or liberated, and regularly promote very conservative ideas about how black womanhood should be performed in public. In response, hip-hop feminist analyses muddle theoretical bifurcations, challenging the essentializing tendencies of earlier analyses of women in hip-hop, a political and theoretical move that seeks to divorce the activist praxis of race-feminist work from conservative assessments of women in hip-hop that render gender performances therein problematic or pathological (Peoples 2008: 21-22).

The notion of intersectionality more generally helps outline crunk methodologies in addressing and reacting to multiple manifestations social pressure simultaneously despite the lack of explicit lyrical content outlining such a position. For example, as I’ve argued previously, the very act of women asserting a presence in crunk spaces through chants that create female homosocial interaction through “feminine phrases,” e.g., “We rockin’ stilettos!” works to address issues of mal-centricity in addition to racial, class, age, generic, and sub-generic issues of marginalization which underlie crunk performance more generally.

Gender performativity is one of the most influential concepts put forth by Judith Butler. Building from J.L. Austin’s notion of performativity, defined in brief as a description of utterances which, instead of being verifiable conveyances of information, exist as actions in and of themselves (Austin 2007: 177), Butler puts forth the notion that gender is performed and through that performance and sincere belief in the naturalness of gender roles and expectations, one becomes gendered (Butler 2007: 190). This theorization of gender shifts identity politics from
addressing a state of being to interpreting a process of doing, which both allows for a discussion of gender that goes beyond a binary system and provides a more suitable analytical tool for addressing gender as it is constructed in various socio-cultural contexts.

E. Patrick Johnson extends this application of performativity to a discussion of gender, sexuality, and race in *Appropriating Blackness, Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Johnson 2003: 18-19). While Johnson applies this notion of gender performativity, supplemented by Paul Gilroy’s theories of performative black diasporic identity, he goes on to critique these theorizations for failing to fully contend with “real” corporeal consequences that often accompany marginality, i.e., systemic violence acted on gendered and raced bodies (Johnson 2003: 40-42). Still, in the penultimate chapter of this book, Johnson argues that through sincere performances of gospel music within a particular context that charges said performance as “authentic,” for example, a church in Harlem with an “authentic” audience, the members of a mostly-white gospel choir are able to temporarily blur the lines between performance and performativity and “become black,” thus allowing for an identity formation/performance that forges an ephemeral transcendence of corporeality (Johnson 2003: 216).

One ethnomusicological work that takes on performativity tacitly is Julie Taylor’s *Paper Tangos*. In her highly self-reflexive analysis of Argentine tango and gender relations within the context of a country in the throes of political unrest, Taylor shares the discomfort of acclimating herself to a performance of femaleness that conflicts with the rituals of gender performativity in which she had hitherto
been steeped (Taylor 1998: 39). Louise Meintjes offers another take on performance and performativity, asserting that her male interlocutors in “Shoot the Sergeant, Shatter the Mountain” do not have full access to the means through which they might perform masculinity adequately by their own constructions, and, thus, the performance of Ngoma, a competitive dance/performance format traditionally performed by Zulu men. Meintjes argues that Ngoma becomes a symbolic surrogate of the power affiliated with the performance of masculinity (Meintjes 2004: 192-193). As these different texts suggest, ethnomusicology, and other socio-musical explorations, have opened discourses of gender to include the ways in which people “do” gender.

Hip-hop feminist Adreana Clay has employed performance and performativity in her theorizations of queer identities and normative hip-hop constructions of gender representation. In her analysis, “‘I Used to be Scared of the Dick!’ Queer Women of Color and Hip-Hop Masculinity,” she holds that queer women who adorn and perform tropes of hip-hop masculinity highlight gender and race performativity and, in doing so, allow for a transformative space in which figures/tropes generally affiliated with hip-hop misogyny can be (re)appropriated for woman-centered social interaction (Clay 2007: 158-159).

The concepts of sincerity and cynicism are vital to this chapter. My usage borrows from the work of both Irving Goffman and John L. Jackson. In *The Presentation of Self Everyday Life*, Goffman offers performance and theatricality as frames to theorize the ways people conform to pre-established norms. Goffman argues that these norms can be performed with either sincerity, a firm belief in the
role they are fulfilling, or cynicism, disbelief in the role they are fulfilling: the role, in either case, must be performed in service of the larger social script (Goffman 1959: 17-18). Said another way, social structures offer a spectrum of social roles that require specific performative (re)presentations of self. The social actor in the role can be fully taken with the performance sincerely, in which case the actor feels that s/he is no longer acting, but being an “authentic” self. Conversely, the actor could engage in the performance with cynicism, a lack of belief in the role s/he performs which distances the notion of an “authentic” self from the performance necessary to fulfill the role (Goffman 1959: 18-21).

John L. Jackson modifies this theorization of performing self in Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity. For Jackson, sincerity (in this case, racial sincerity) takes the place of authenticity. Rather than a solidified niche with specific performative parameters, Jackson holds that performances of self that are marked as black exhibit a functional authenticity through a constant negotiation of varied performances that actors sincerely believe in. In other words, there is no true authenticity, only actors who each sincerely believe in their individual constructions (and performances) of blackness (Jackson 2005: 14-15). Jackson goes on to assert that ironic performances that lack sincerity (or that are defined by cynicism in Goffman’s parlance) and are defined by (purposeful) failure work to reinforce the perceived authenticity of the other. In Jackson’s example, hip-hop artists who incorporate purposefully “bad” singing into their music do so in order to bolster the
perceived authenticity of rapperly performance (Jackson 2005: 186-187). I build from these constructions of identity performance and sincerity/cynicism in order to underline various ways that performers in yeeking and crunk trouble normative gender performance (even as they reinforce gender normativity) through specially staged evocations of masculinity and femininity. I offer special attention to the notion of male performances of femme failure as a means of re-centering maleness.

I’ve previously held that performativity offers the most fitting lens for crunk analysis. Whereas many hip-hop scholars centralize issues of authenticity regarding hip-hop based identities (see Morgan 2009; Perry 2004; Dyson 2004), being crunk, by contrast, is an identity based on performativity which, generally, ceases to be applicable once one ends the performance of getting crunk. While the spaces in which crunk is enacted certainly subscribe to a construction of male-centered homosocial spaces broadly speaking, the fact that so much of crunk identity is based in performance allows women to transform crunk through sincere performance, thereby opening a space for the reconstitution of gender performance in crunk spaces, if only temporarily. I hold that Crime Mob’s “Stilettos (Pumps) engages in this transformative work by engaging a specifically woman-centered iteration of crunk performativity.

“Drop That #NaeNae: Performing the Femme in Atlanta Hip-Hop

I had been invited to an Atlanta hip-hop forum hosted by the Off The Hook barber shop, where both my sister and one of my primary interlocutors, Mel, work.

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33 Jackson makes a persuasive argument for the function of insincere performance in the construction of hip-hop authenticity, but bypasses many sincere singerly within hip-hop, especially those by women emcees.
The barber shop was more than that, however. Many of Atlanta’s local celebrities frequent this location, as patrons, as promoters, or just to hang out. Mel is a local celebrity in her own right. She is well known for her participation on (and promotion of) the yeek scene and for her career as a dancer and choreographer; but she is most known for her vocal contribution to the 1995 Kilo Ali song “Nasty Dancer,” a favorite in Atlanta clubs. On other occasions when I had been in the shop, the song would come on the radio and the barbers and patrons would yell “MEL!” in celebration of her part in creating a classic jam.

The private event took place in the evening, after the shop had closed. The barbers and hair stylists were joined by rappers, producers, and hip-hop dancers (most notably those in the yeek tradition) to discuss Atlanta hip-hop. Attendees sat around in barber chairs, on benches, and leaned against walls; a casual scene in a familiar setting. The mirrors around the room made it so that every speaker could be seen from some vantage, either directly or in reflection. Among the local celebrities in attendance was Playa Poncho, whose 1996 song “Whatz Up Whatz Up” became an anthem for Freaknik and yeek culture alike. I sat near my sister, who occasionally whispered contextualizing comments for the talk. She was the one who pointed Playa Poncho out to me. While I was familiar with his music and knew that he still worked as a DJ in some of Atlanta’s most prominent strip clubs, I did not recognize him at first glance. At the center of the room two yeek dancers, Ted and Kool-aid, guided the discussion, holding a mic attached to a portable speaker and posing questions to the group.
It didn’t take much for the conversation to shift to the differences between “back in the day” Atlanta hip-hop and “nowadays” Atlanta hip-hop. A cursory look around the room established that most of the people in attendance were in their teens or twenties in the mid 1990s. I would later learn that almost all of them were intimately involved in Atlanta’s 1990s hip-hop, either as professional dancers, rappers, singers, producers, or deejays. The commentary on today’s youth music was, therefore, not simply a matter of one generation not appreciating the cultural contributions of another; it was one group of people who actively molded and defined Atlanta hip-hop culture expressing disapproval of their successors.

One of the topics of the night was dance. The discussion started with the hosts commenting on how many of the dances that popular Atlanta hip-hop artists were able to capitalize on came from yeeking but never shared the prestige with yeek dancers. They listed the thunder clap, the muscle, and the A-town stomp, for which Lil Jon’s call out at the close of the 2004 hit “Yeah” and Ciara’s “1 2 Step” can serve as examples. Ted began to demonstrate, starting with the 1,2 Step, which he followed with a yeek move called the smurf. The two are incredibly similar in a way that would be apparent to a casual observer. The smurf is more intricate; it has more steps and a couple of accents on sub-beats, but Ted made a very persuasive case for the 1,2 step being a reductive version of the smurf.

This discussion quickly turned to the nae nae, a dance whose invention is credited to the Atlanta hip-hop group We Are Toonz (“Drop That #Naenae”) and which had become incredibly popular with the success of Silentó’s song “Watch Me (Whip/Nae Nae).” While the dance had been around before the song and “Watch
Me” consists primarily of directives to do named dance moves from other songs, the song’s popularity caused an explosion in performances of the nae nae in the summer of 2016. The dance was a pop culture phenomenon as “Watch Me” was constantly played on the radio and television personalities did the nae nae to shore up their currency. More to the point, the popularity of the dance indicated the persisting centrality of Atlanta hip-hop in setting trends on the national hip-hop scene, particularly with regard to songs that centralized dance and corporeality.

Zoey, one of the men involved in the forum, however, was particularly disturbed by the prominence of the nae nae. He asserted that the nae nae represented a feminization of men and boys, especially black men and boys. As soon as he completed his sentiment, Mel interjected “but y’all were doing the sissy” which caused a momentary uproar. Zoey shot back saying “We only did the sissy for eight counts. They do the nae nae for the whole song.” The conversation continued, bouncing through different topics, but this exchange stood out as an indication of the stakes surrounding Atlanta hip-hop, gender performance, and sincerity.

Had I heard this even a few days before, I would have found the sentiment confusing. The nae nae did not strike me as a particularly feminine dance. To do the nae nae, you extend one arm up and stiffly rock side to side with a slight backward lean. From my vantage, the dance was more or less gender neutral. But days before, I witnessed a conversation between Mel and some high school students from a dance class she teaches. They offered a history of the nae nae. According to those students, the nae nae began as a joke; as somebody saying, in the parlance of the students, “This is the dance that all ghetto girls do at the club.” The nae nae looked
slightly different then. It still featured one arm in the air, but the movement was more of a shimmy/swirl, not unlike a slow pantomime of riding a bull. As this dance was performed, usually with a detached irony, the audience would yell out “Go Shenehneh! Go Shenehneh!”

This evocation of Shenehneh is a reference to the character Shenehneh Jinkins from Martin Lawrence’s 1990s sitcom. She is played by Lawrence and represented a notion of working class black women and femme failure. Shenehneh wore her hair in an elaborate tower of braid extensions and curls, several bulky pieces of (presumably faux) gold jewelry, a mélange of bright (clashing) patterns and colors and had exceedingly long fingernails. Lawrence performed Shenehneh with eyes crossed and neck rolling, sometimes with a wisp of Lawrence’s mustache, her booming contralto often heard hurling insults at the series’ protagonists. Shenehneh was “ghetto,” which is to say Lawrence conceived her as an amalgamation of pejorative stereotypes of urban black womanhood. Most episodes that featured her centered on fighting, physically and verbally, or men trying desperately to escape her unwanted sexual gaze. A common punchline was for Shenehneh to declare straightforwardly “I’m a lady,” the crux of the joke being that nothing about Shenehneh was ladylike.

Constructions of black women characters in popular culture have been formed around various notions of femme failure going back at least as far as the formative years of blackface minstrelsy. Archetypical figures like the mammy (the “asexual..obese mother figure”), the Sapphire (the “overbearing...emasculator”, and the Jezebel (the “shameless oversexual schemer”) became ubiquitous in rendering
black womanhood as something outside of "acceptable" femininity and persist, in some form, to this day (Adams-Bass et. al. 2014: 80-81). Shenehneh is not a unique character in comedy. She joins the ranks of Jamie Foxx's Wanda from In Living Color, Flip Wilson's Geraldine Jones, and Eddie Murphy's Rasputia from Norbit. In each of these cases, a black male comedian dresses in drag to convey a black woman character who is, at her core, defined by femme failure. Each of them is portrayed as loud, violent, sexually aggressive and unattractive, the antithesis of normalized femininity. They are usually juxtaposed against other women characters, portrayed by women actors, who represent femme normalcy; conventionally attractive, demure and generally positioned as the object of desire of a central male character. This juxtaposition works to highlight femme failure, to convey to audiences that the womanhood and desirability of characters like Shenehneh are absurd and, therefore, comedic. The male comedians that play these women characters hold onto facets of their presentation of (male) self while engaging in an exaggerated performance of raced and classed femme failure, which multiplies the sense of failure and underscores the insincerity of the performance. The inability of Shenehneh to ever perform femme normativity is abstracted because her (cis male) actor makes it known that femme normativity is outside of the purview of this presentation of black female selfhood.

And yet, Shenehneh is meant to represent, or at the very least to caricaturize, actual women. The symbols that Lawrence dons in his performance of her were taken from the fashions of women at the crossroads of blackness, working class, urban-ness, and hip-hop. Lawrence's own male identity and insincere performance
softens the fact that his performance perpetuates the notion of an incompatibility between black women, especially those in the “ghetto,” and gender normativity, if not womanhood altogether.

Thus Shenehneh is queered on multiple fronts. First, she is queered within the context of the show’s reality. Because of her femme failure, she is unable, or possibly unwilling, to perform femininity in a way that garners respectability. Second, in our (the audience’s) reality, Lawrence’s drag performance breaks away from heteronormativity even as it works to perpetuate the boundary between the normative and femme failure. That the audience is made aware at every juncture that Shenehneh is performed by a cis-gender, (presumably) heterosexual man creates a rift between how the character knows herself and how the audience is invited to know her. Finally, the performance of Shenehneh is, at its core, about using symbols of femme failure to center male normativity. The insincerity of his performance, and possibly even his inability (or unwillingness) to perform Shenehneh in accordance with femme normativity, allows him to transcend his performance of maleness (perform the femme) in a way that establishes his own gender normative success. It is this knot of performing gender that persists in the nae nae.

As stated earlier, the nae nae was originally described as “the dance that ghetto girls do at the club.” Male dancers took on this performance, not as a means of extending the parameters of gender normativity to include more gender fluidity, but to highlight the femme failure of (absent) women who, like Shenehneh, defy normalized iterations of femininity. And it is this distance from normalized
femininity that facilitates cis normative male performance to be compatible with the nae nae. By the time the nae nae had been established as a national craze in hip-hop dance, it had been drained of much of its gendered subtext. Those who did not know the origin of the name would likely not connect the movement to Shenehneh or “ghetto” black womanhood. For insiders, however, the subtext lingered. While in Atlanta, I overheard at least one young man insist that he was too manly to do something as feminine as the nae nae. Additionally, recall the exchange that I witnessed at the barber shop, in which the very vocal concern that the nae nae became a popular dance despite this well-known subtext specifically because the boys and men who danced it otherwise performed masculinity “appropriately.”

These stances indicate a skepticism or even cynicism with which the (male) dancers of the nae nae perform the femme, even as it hinges on femme failure. Despite the changes in the dance that make it less markedly gendered, to perform the nae nae is to, in some way, drudge up the subtexts of Lawrence’s Shenehneh and play upon the multilayered othering that comes with it. In designating the performance as potentially sincere, or as indicative of queer desire, E. Patrick Johnson talks about the slippages between embodying gender and race during specially marked performances in Appropriating Blackness. Johnson’s book focuses on the performance of race, gender, and sexuality, specifically the ways in which people perform blackness, maleness and/or queerness. Johnson’s analysis bypasses the confines of corporeality as he argues that, given the proper context, embodied knowledge, and sincerity, a performance of race or gender may be read as authentic regardless of what identities are affixed to the body. This emphasis on the
performance of identity blurs the lines between performance (in this case, specially marked performance) and performativity. The inherent queerness of the nae nae, therefore, stands to threaten gender normativity unless irony (or the insincerity of the performer) is well established in the framing of the performance.

In any case, Zoey was not persuaded. Mel’s reminder that dancers of Zoey’s generation did “the sissy” was not enough to shift his perspective. Like the nae nae, the sissy is a dance that played on men performing femininity insincerely. In fact, it seems that is the only defining feature of the sissy. While going over video archives of yeek performances, I had dancers from the scene point out instances of doing the sissy. Some swayed back and forth with their hips cocked to the side and wrists daintily flared out. Others put one hand on the hip and swung the other in the air. One constant was that lips were usually pressed, almost making a kissy face (or in Millennial parlance, a “duckface”), and gestures were markedly more feminine than the rest of the performance. The very name of the dance, the sissy, calls attention to the dancers’ embodiment of gender non-normativity. “Sissy” is a pejorative term for cis gender men whose performance of self ventures too far into the feminine to be considered normal, in other words, a failure of masculinity.

During performances of the sissy, the audience responds from an insider position in which they know that the dancer is performing ironically which upholds the insincerity of the performance. For the success of performing this failure of masculinity, it must be established that the performance is removed from the performer’s own everyday presentation of self.
The sissy is a move done in competition, which means the performers work to perfectly evoke this temporary non-normative presentation of masculinity. As with any other move on the scene, those who do the sissy best get the biggest reaction from the crowd, earning the most bragging rights. But being the best at performing a failure of masculinity holds the potential of challenging the masculine normativity that this insincere performance reinforces. It runs the risk of overshadowing the irony that the performance was meant to evoke, of shifting the conversation from “doing” to “being.” This is what Zoey brings up in his condemnation of the nae nae. That dancers have slipped from doing to being in their insistence on dancing it for an entire song. His contention that his, and presumably other yeek dancers’, performance of the sissy was contained to a few counts in the song instead of to the entirety of a song is an arbitrary marker, but one for which he believes marks their irony or insincerity. That somebody could perform the sissy accurately for such an extended time, Zoey’s position holds, would be difficult unless it were affixed to that person’s presentation of self in everyday life.

E. Patrick Johnson also discusses the slippages between doing and being that arise during performance. The subjects of his fieldwork, most of whom were white, Australian, and atheist, engaged in performances marked as both black and American through participation in a gospel choir. During the performance, the choir members’ expertise in reproducing “good” gospel resulted in a collective belief in the authenticity of the performance. Johnson marks a single song performance at a church in Harlem where the line between doing and being became completely abstracted, which he argues led to people in the audience engaging in ritualized
jubilation (i.e., catching the holy ghost) and non-religious choir members converting to Christianity. He argues that the sustained and expert performance of gospel musicking allowed both performers and audience to accept the authenticity of both the performance as well as the performers.

The stakes, however, are different for performances of the sissy. Rather than social reward, a performer whose sissy was too skilled or sustained for too long might be seen as sincere, non-ironic, and therefore an affront to the centrality of heteronormative masculinity on the hip-hop scene. It was therefore imperative that performers delineate parameters denoting the point at which the line between sincere and cynical performances of the sissy, even if those lines were arbitrary. The line distinguishing between a good performance and a sincere performance must be maintained.

It is important to note that it was a cisgender woman who called out the hypocrisy of Zoey and other yeek dancers gender policing of nae nae performers despite years of performing the sissy. As a woman yeek dancer, Mel could not have performed the sissy as a performance of the dance move necessitates the centrality of a male body performing against masculinity. Mel engaging in a performance of the femme, even if evoking femme failure, does not do the same work as when her male counterparts do. While excluded from performing the sissy, Mel, as a woman on the scene, frequently discussed navigating presentations of gender on the yeek scene. Mostly a male homosocial dance style, women on the yeek scene had to carefully choose how and when to perform the femme or, more to the point, to what extent yeek as a dancing style entailed gestures marked as masculine/manly.
One of the first conversations I had with Mel about the Atlanta hip-hop dance highlighted its male centricity. She emphasized having to “dance hard” to prove herself. This idiom does double work here. First, it denotes diligence. The hard work it took to establish her expertise as performer on the scene. Just as any other dancer, she had to make her hard work apparent through the virtuosity of her movement. The phrase also highlights the burden to dance in a manner marked as masculine; hard as opposed to soft. As a woman, Mel had an additional burden to distance herself from constructions of softness. Her stylized yeeking, therefore, made an effort to emphasize the gravity of her stomps, to scowl a little bit harder, to “Yeek!” a little bit louder to ensure her acceptance.

Mel isn’t alone in this experience. T-Boz of the 1990s girl group TLC expressed a similar experience. The group’s 2013 biopic opens with T-Boz, acted by Drew Sidora, engaging in a one-on-one dance-off at Jellybeans skating rink on the west side of Atlanta. Her clothes are baggy, her moves a display of “hard” yeeking, and her facial expression an exaggerated scowl. Her moves excite the crowd and, it is implied, she out-dances her competitor; at the very least, she earns his respect as a dancer as he concedes that she can really move. When she takes this opportunity to ask to join his (yeeking) crew, he turns her down because of her gender. T-Boz attributes this inability of Atlanta hip-hop dance crews to accept her as an impetus for her deciding to become a part of a girl group, which ultimately lead to her celebrity.

This story highlights the extent to which yeeking was defined by maleness.
Mel’s entry onto the yeeking scene came later than T-Boz’s. She pointed to the intervention of Rashan Ali, another woman yeek dancer whose involvement with yeeking also predated Mel’s, as the person who paved the way for women in the genre. Still, by the time Mel got involved with the scene, yeeking for women meant performing against corporeal femininity in service of performing authenticity. This is not to say that women yeekers never performed the femme. On the contrary, they constantly incorporated femininity into yeeking style to contrast with the “hardness” required of dancers. This was not unlike the intervention presented by the sissy but without the stakes of needing to avoid the realm of sincerity in performance. I observed women yeek dancers, as both performers and choreographers, oscillating between “hard” moves and more markedly feminine dance styles, like twerking, in expressing womanhood through yeek. From one perspective, this incorporation of twerking and feminine moves means that women yeekers queered their performance first to fit into the male homosocial dance style and then queered that performance again to recenter and embody the femme, to express the femme in a hard (read authentic to yeeking) way.

Zoey reacted to the comparison between the nae nae and the sissy with resistance. From Mel’s perspective, the position that the nae nae was somehow a threat to authentic/appropriate masculinity from those who regularly performed the femme in a much more markedly flamboyant style via the sissy, was hypocritical. From Zoey’s perspective, the nae nae represented something different from the sissy. Certainly, there were different stakes between the sissy and the nae nae. To start, the sissy was contained to a local community of insiders as the nae nae
was a national phenomenon that got its own song. People doing the nae nae might not be able to put the dance in conversation with the performance of femme failure embodied by its proximal namesake, Shenehneh. The nae nae also exists without a contextualizing “hard” counterpart. When Zoey points out that the sissy was only done for a few counts, but the nae nae is done for a whole song, he is indicating the need for a contextualizing hard performance, a contrasting performance of heteronormative masculine bravado, to reinforce the insincerity of the non-normative performance. Whether or not he believed that the performance of the nae nae is an indicator of gender non-normative quintessence, a fear which is itself mired in ideological conflations of heteronormativity and social health, Zoey expressed that it might symbolically affiliate Atlanta hip-hop, read black, male identity with a failure of masculinity.

A discussion of the nae nae and the sissy is incomplete without an acknowledgement of the generational, and by extension aesthetic, differences between the people who perform(ed) them. Yeek dancers were by and large members of Generation X. Their formative teenage and young adult years happened during the late 1980s and the 1990s. They performed during a time when the national conversation about hip-hop focused on gangsta rap, which is to say that the gangsta/thug archetype dominated discourses surrounding hip-hop male authenticity and performance. Evocations of the femme via the sissy were so far removed from these constructions of hip-hop masculinity that they never bore the burden of potentially being centralized in a way that troubled black masculinity in the public imagination. That is to say, Atlanta hip-hop was so far marginalized that
actors on the scene could play upon gender performance knowing that it would likely not trouble how black men were imagined.

The nae nae, on the other hand, entered the hip-hop world at a very different juncture, in which Atlanta hip-hop was much more central in establishing trends and symbolically representing black maleness. Much of the discussion of the night at Off The Hook suggested some apprehension surrounding how those in the trap generation represented the city of Atlanta and black maleness more broadly. Some of the resistance to the propriety of the nae nae as a dance trend and the affiliated stakes for the hip-hop community at large seemed rooted in acknowledging this shift.

The centrality of a moving gendered body in yeeking, in which dancers perform masculinity with occasional dips into femininity, indicates that yeeking became a central means of expressing gendered, race(d), and class(ed) identity in Atlanta’s emergent hip-hop community. In choreographing yeek dances and composing corresponding music, the participants on the yeek scene simultaneously defined and embodied Atlanta hip-hop normativity, construing the methods of performing self (or conversely Other) that were specifically Southern, black, and of the hip-hop generation.

This moment between Mel and Zoey was charged. Not much was stated that evening as a disagreement. For the most part, the evening’s discussion revolved around a consensus, around shared memories and a general discussion about yeek’s unacknowledged impact on national hip-hop culture. Most of the contributions gelled together into a singular cohesive narrative. But this moment was a departure.
In addition to challenging Zoey over his construction of the nae nae’s potential danger to masculinity, Mel’s intervention provided one of the few overt defenses of contemporary hip-hop. While it wasn’t a defense in the way that one might argue the virtues of contemporary hip-hop surpassing those of yesteryear, she actively resisted the insinuation that the nae nae is disconnected from yeeking traditions with regard to playing upon and beyond male gender normativity. More subtly, she called out the fragility of male centrality in yeeking that articulated itself as a concern that the nae nae was harmful to maintaining appropriate masculinity in blackness, in Atlanta hip-hop, and in the current youth generation. She did not say “we were doing the sissy” despite having been an important presence on the yeeking scene for decades. The “y’all” of the sentiment announced to a room of men yeekers, covertly asserts the maleness of this concern, especially as it erases her gendered navigation of Atlanta hip-hop authenticity.

**East Side Girlz: Women in Early Crunk**

Even without a comprehensive narrative, early crunk songs addressed the gendered body. The bulk of early crunk releases were dominated by male voices, especially with regard to credited artists. The 1997 single “Get Crunk (Who You Wit)” features a crowd of both men and women; the song contains a period during which the men and women are addressed separately, thereby bifurcating the call and response by gender. The most notable section where this happens is in the second verse, where the call asks the crowd whether or not they embody various forms of gendered inadequacy as dictated by the values of Black youth. For women,
the call asks if they are “bitches,” “hoes,” and “tricks,” and for the men “snitches,” “busters,” or if they “act like a bitch.” The response to each call is a resounding negative, “no,” “hell no,” or “fuck that shit.” A marked difference in the assessment of men and women is displayed in the call. Women are called to defend their sexual integrity, while men are called to defend their masculinity. Still, this section is representative of the cathartic value of crunk with its rejection of some of the popular inter-gender defamations affiliated with Black youth. While this does not entail a close observation of gender relations on the part of the artists, it suggests an acknowledgement of the need to address and respond to the pressures of propriety and performance in gender as well as those pertaining to race, age, and place.

Interestingly, the first crunk songs incorporated women’s voices as active in the conveyance of crunk, a phenomenon that would be abandoned shortly thereafter and not resurrected for several years. As mentioned earlier, anonymous, bi-gendered crowds are addressed in what is often cited as the first official crunk song. An unreleased track from a mixtape response to this album consists entirely of collective female voices. This song, “Who U Wit (East Side Girlz)” is a re-imagining of “Get Crunk (Who U Wit),” implicitly performed by the East Side Girlz, though no such group has ever been credited in any other song, which suggests this is a name offered to the female component of the aforementioned uncredited crowd. This song is much more sexually themed than its precursor, consisting primarily of sexual commands, such as “to your knees,” “lick me up,” “eat me,” “just lick,” and “freak me.” These lyrics are performed with the same aggression as the original song, implying the expression of agency over an implicit unvoiced male counterpart,
thereby dictating attainment of sexual pleasure. Even so, in sexualizing the only early crunk song composed entirely of female voices, the presence of femaleness remains linked to heterosexual male sexual fantasy.

Early crunk music performed by men also addressed this fantasy more directly, usually conjuring more voyeuristic manifestations of sexual fascination, namely, the public gaze upon female bodies in club spaces. Instead of recounting actual sex acts as in the East Side Girlz’ song, sexual reflection rarely focuses on a physical interaction, focusing instead on the gendered power dynamics in the club environment. These pieces depict a scenario of male camaraderie constructed and reinforced around the dictation of objectified female bodies. This is illustrated in one of Lil’ Jon & the East Side Boyz’ early hits “Bounce Dat Ass,” which is entirely composed of men chanting demands on an implicit female body. The Ying Yang Twins, another of the few groups that affiliate almost exclusively with crunk, built their careers upon songs of this sort. Each of their singles from their first three albums and the majority of their releases throughout their career reproduce this sexual dynamic. Despite the differences in context and content between male and female representations of sexuality in early crunk, they are aligned in focusing on directing performance of an unvoiced, sexualized other. Women performers did not constitute a major force in early crunk music and in the few years between crunk’s inception and its apex, women were nearly completely removed from central performance. While women undoubtedly remained active participants in the social structures that supported crunk, they were symbolically erased from sonic and visual gestures outside of being the objects of sexual fantasy. Until, that is, women
performers on the crunk trajectory, notably the women of Crime Mob, created songs that actively pushed back against this construction of how women are expected to perform in crunk space.

Stilettos, Pumps in the Club!: Crunk Women Reconsidered, Recentered

By the time hip-hop feminism formed as a scholarly movement in the early 2000s, it had become par for the course for academic works on hip-hop include a discussion of the intersection of race, gender and rap, usually along one of two foci. Arguments were either built from assessments of media representations of race and gender performances stemming from heteronormative male centrivity in hip-hop, or they emphasized marginal feminist presences in hip-hop and the genre's boundless potential as a facilitator of grassroots organization and protest for the post-soul generation (See Pough et. al. 2007). While feminist thinkers from the 1980s and 1990s contributed invaluable work in analyses of race and gender through the theoretical intervention of intersectionality, hip-hop feminists held that the previous generation of scholars theorized women in hip-hop dichotomously, either as progressive or regressive, objectified or liberated, and regularly promoted very conservative ideas about how black womanhood should be performed in public. In response, their analyses muddle theoretical bifurcations, challenging essentializing tendencies from earlier analyses of women in hip-hop (see Peoples 2008). This move is also evident in popular media, including the focus of my analysis today, “Stilettos, Pumps” by Crime Mob.
With a few exceptions, for instance the Eastside Girlz version of “Who U Wit,” early crunk can be described as expressing Southern black male homosocial interactions as depicted in either one of two contexts, celebrations of solidarity (or conversely animosity) within hip-hop party environments, and demonstrations of male bonding through a shared gaze projected onto performing female bodies, particularly, but not exclusively, in strip clubs. These artists call for their male listeners to act aggressively, getting crunk and throwing bows. Conversely, female listeners are called to participate by performing a series of sexually suggestive movements.

When crunk rose to national prominence in the early 2000s, it did so with a bevy of songs that relished in the male sexual gaze. The lyrics and accompanying videos of songs like “Get Low,” “Salt Shaker,” and “Whistle While You Twerk” shot to the top of the charts with very vivid depictions of the ways in which exotic dancers move, prompting some to refer to the subgenre as “strip-hop.” The unapologetic focus on women’s bodies in crunk made these songs the focus of many arguments that modern hip-hop yields problematic inter-gender relationships among black youth (See Rose 2008). The fact that Lil Jon used this platform to break into funding and creating pornographic films only intensified these feelings. While it has largely been the position of hip-hop feminists to challenge notions that black women should perform in accordance with respectability politics that render sex work taboo, it is impossible to ignore what crunk came to symbolize in both popular and academic discourse, the new epitome of misogyny. This is the backdrop in front of which “Stilettos” emerged.
Crime Mob formed in Ellenwood, a suburban offshoot on the East side of Atlanta, in 2003 and originally consisted of four men, (Killa C, Cyco Black, Lil’ Jay and MIG) and two women, (Princess and Diamond). The group first emerged on the music scene with a popular crunk hit entitled “Knuck if you Buck” in 2004, which featured both male and female members prominently, though the chant of the song is, at least aurally, representative of only male voices. While “Knuck” put forth the notion of crunk women as actors in black youth recreational spaces, this position was far more solidified when the group released “Stilettos, Pumps,” their second single. This song not only asserted a dissenting position concerning gender performance in crunk in ways that fall in line with hip-hop feminist perspectives, but did so exclusively through methodologies commonplace in the crunk subgenre.

There are two antithetical pop culture phenomena that can help guide our understanding of Stilettos. The first is the crunk single “White Tee” by the Atlanta-based group Dem Franchize Boyz. The single was released in 2004 and achieved booming success fairly quickly, inspiring both a shift in fashion in Southern hip-hop audiences and the composition of several song responses by other artists (including Black T, Red T, Blue T, and Pink T). The song has a male braggadocio character common in hip-hop, wherein each group member flows (and the group collectively chants) about their stylish appearance. These proclamations are made, however, without references to exorbitant items purchased from recognized fashion labels; rather the “freshness” depicted here revolves around a plain white T-shirt. As said in the song’s refrain “forget a throwback, I look clean in my white T,” these artists actively reject the then popular throwback jersey, which at the time cost roughly
$80, for a more affordable, label-less white T-shirt. They find self-satisfaction, not in the cost of the garment, but in how crisp, clean, bright, and expertly proportioned their white T-shirts are. In this way, Dem Franchize Boyz exhibit one method by which working class people assert their sense of hip-hop style in ways that run counter to, or at the very least fairly independent of, mass marketed hip-hop products. This song was arguably the first crunk song to explicitly centralize fashion and address the ways in which the garments that don the body become incorporated into the performance of getting crunk.

The second pop culture phenomenon that helps frame “Stilettos” is the HBO original series *Sex and the City*. As can be seen in this advertisement from the second *Sex and the City* movie, shoes were very central. The show, which aired from 1998 to 2004, focuses on four wealthy white Manhattan women. Belinda A. Stillion Southard argues in her analysis of this show that *Sex and the City* “challenges television’s postfeminist shows that feature characters who cannot manage to be both an individual and a member of a larger group, to be both feminist and feminine, and be both bold and vulnerable” (Stillion Southard 2008). To extend Stillion Southard’s argument to the recurring high heel trope, the main character’s obsession with fashionable shoes becomes a metaphor for the crossroads between post-feminism, which is to say the emphasis on individual women’s success as indicated by the autonomy to invest in an arsenal of $500 shoes, feminism, i.e., the intra-gender symbiosis represented by women of varying ideological perspectives bonding through common affinities, fashion included, and societal pressures to perform femininity, easily represented by the high heel itself. Here, Fashion,
particularly the donning of extravagant shoes is a symbolic shoring up of an identity grounded in space, place, class, and gender; a means by which these women express a sense of style and self in a way that is implicitly not as susceptible to the male gaze.

“Stilettos” arises as a portmanteau of these two seemingly disparate pop culture references. Like the women of *Sex and the City*, the women in this song assert shoes as the ultimate symbol of their femininity and style. That a woman would choose to wear stilettos to the club is meant to proclaim something about how she performs gender in public. As Princess articulates in her verse, these women are “Jazzy actin’ classy.” High heeled shoes are used as an iteration of celebrating femininity in club spaces; one which hovers, literally and metaphorically, below the radar of the male gaze. This song, however, doesn’t contain the heavy rotation of designer label references that are commonplace in rap songs that focus on fashion. Save for the one allusion to “Prada in my closet” made by Diamond, all descriptions of the fashions in this song have to do with color and style. Like Dem Franchize Boyz, Crime Mob holds that the truly important conveyance isn’t the notion that these fashions are inaccessible to those who aren’t rich, but rather that they express a certain sense of finely cultivated flair. These women hold that if the men in crunk spaces can sartorially commemorate their presence and belonging by performing masculinity via white T-shirts, women can do the same by performing crunk femininity through stilettos.

The women of Crime Mob take this opportunity to complicate two of hip-hop’s most persistent female-rapper archetypes, the hypersexual vixen and the woman whose performance of femininity is understood as masculine. The former,
examples of which include the likes of Lil Kim, Trina, and Foxy Brown, proclaim their power through erotically themed imagery in their lyrics and opt for garb that fits squarely within heterosexual male sexual fantasy. Conversely, the latter, examples of which might include Da Brat and Missy Elliot (particularly earlier in their careers), frequently opt for baggy and otherwise androgynous gear. Many female rappers who perform along this route have their methods of performing gender, not to mention their sexual orientations, interrogated publicly. Both of these depictions of black womanhood can be traced back to much older archetypes, the insatiable jezebel set to trap a man and the desexualized misandrist with designs to emasculate a man. Both of these archetypal figures have been put forth to support racist and sexist theories of African-American social pathology. While arguably, many women in hip-hop have reappropriated these images for their own purposes, many of those who have analyzed hip-hop through a feminist lens have expressed concern over the persistence of these tropes in depicting black femaleness and the ways in which they become tied to a politics of authenticity and respectability.

The women of Crime Mob, however, hold that their performance of black femaleness lies somewhere between and beyond these archetypes. While they highlight their ability to perform as the vixen, implied through the emphasis on high heeled shoes and the decision to don clothes that show off their bodies in the music video, they proclaim that their presence in crunk spaces is not to fulfill the stripper-niche, but rather to engage in getting crunk just as any male in the space would. They articulate the novelty of their preferred gender performance and their performance as crunk by saying “whoever thought that these girls would get crunk,”
emphasis added. It’s not that women were absent before but that female representation in crunk songs either suggested women in crunk spaces were there to tantalize men or were those whose performance of femaleness were more akin to wearing combat boots than stilettos.

Furthermore, the chanted emphasis on stilettos and pumps create a specifically female homosocial crunk interaction. Men are not expected to join these women in vocalizing “we rockin’ stilettos.” If they did, they would run the risk of calling their performance of heteronormative maleness into question. Therefore, the chant is designed to preclude male listeners, at least those confined by a heteronormative performance of masculinity, from vocally imposing on a newly constructed female-centered iteration of getting crunk. The fact that Crime Mob consists of both men and women further highlights this gesture; the male members actively step back to allow the focus to shine on the female members of the group. Here, the men become the unvoiced presence, listening as their female counterparts engage in the call-and-response of crunk performativity. As seen in the music video, both men and women are active in the moshing dance style associated with getting crunk, a testament to Diamond and Princess’s proficiency in getting a crowd crunk. However, only the women perform both the motion and the chant.

The originality of this move lies in how this stance is conveyed without explicitly calling for a female-centered moment through the lyrics, as in, for example, Queen Latifah’s “Ladies First.” Diamond and Princess simply form an extremely gendered chant guided by women’s voices in the recording to create a crunk moment charged and defined by femaleness. In this way, “Stilettos” falls in
line with other crunk methods of addressing sociopolitical issues. Just as the very act of getting crunk served as a subversive response to pressures on black youth recreational behavior in Atlanta, Crime Mob uses a seemingly apolitical female-centered chant to reinscribe, or at the very least complicate, the ways in which gender performance is conceived in Southern hip-hop culture.

Today, crunk and hip-hop feminism coalesce in the Crunk Feminist Collective, although it is clear from their website that they offer very little discussion of crunk music. Rather, they embrace crunk as a means by which they theorize a feminism that is, in their words, “percussive” and expands to include experiences based in both racial marginalization and Southern identity. Like many other hip-hop feminists, the members of the Crunk Feminists Collective complicate theorizations of how women of color relate to and are represented through hip-hop.34 Crime Mob, by virtue their presentation of women as being neither hypersexual nor desexualized, neither obsessed with high fashion labels nor unconcerned with being stylish, and neither disgusted enough with crunk’s depictions of women to fully disassociate from it, nor content to perpetuate the established modes of depicting women in crunk spaces, furthers this stance. In sum, “Stilettos” works to render crunk with the anti-essentialist subtleties in gender representation that hip-hop feminists theorize academically.

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34 The Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC) website can be found at [http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/](http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/). Further, the founders of the CFC, Brittany Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn, compiled an edited volume of hip-hop feminist essays in the book *Crunk Feminist Collection* (2017). Notably, three women hip-hoppers are represented on the cover: Lauryn Hill, Queen Latifah, and Erykah Badu, none of whom represent the subgenre of crunk.
Conclusion.
People Don't Dance No Mo’
All They Do Is This

On April 27, 2017, the official twitter page of the Golden Glide roller rink in Decatur announced that it would be closing down permanently just three days later. There was no context. There was no explanation. The news was jarring. Most would consider the Golden Glide an Atlanta institution, especially for members of the hip-hop community. It was one of the nodes that housed the formation of yeeking and, for many who grew up on the Eastside of Atlanta, was where they went “to experience their first little taste of the nightlife” to borrow from the parlance of Andre 3000 via “Spottieottiedopalicious.” The response from members of Atlanta’s hip-hop community was swift and impassioned. Within twenty-four hours, the news had gone viral and there were several articles responding to the abrupt announcement that the Golden Glide would soon be gone forever.

The news struck me personally. Not only was this one of my field sites, it was one of my cherished childhood spaces. While engaging in my ethnographic research, I was overcome with nostalgia. The familiar details reminded me of the parties, the dancing, the joy that I experienced there as a young child. Coupled with my interlocutors’ parallel recollections of the space, the Golden Glide seemed ubiquitous, timeless. And yet, it was closing.

I probably should not have been as shocked about the announcement as I was. I had spent considerable time there over the course of my fieldwork, but had scarcely seen any patrons; certainly not many patrons engaged in the type of engagements that I wished to capture. Many of my evenings at the Golden Glide over
that year and a half were empty, my notes, more or less, a near-blank page with a list of songs the deejay selected; the bareness of the page reflecting the unencumbered echoing of loud music in a mostly vacant room. Still, Golden Glide’s status as a significant space in Atlanta’s history made it seem untouchable, even in the face of dwindling patronage.

The announcement that the Golden Glide would be closing within a week was a reflection on the state of many of the spaces that I concentrated my field work on. Many of the clubs and bars I observed were either empty or scarcely featured patrons engaging in dance. To clarify, some of these spaces did have a lot of people on any given night, but patrons stood around “posted.” To borrow from Goodie Mob’s classic Atlanta anthem, “people don’t dance no mo’, all they do is this.”

Whereas Goodie Mob’s song is a pessimistic commentary on black youth, and by extension black youth culture, emphasizing violence over joy, the song’s hook echoes recent shifts in Atlanta’s hip-hop party culture. The moshing and collective chant have, in many ways, either fallen out of fashion or transformed in ways that might not be readily recognized as a legacy of the crunk trajectory. For instance, trap music, as is the case with all music from the crunk trajectory, centralizes the body and performance through textural and timbral play; however, the compositional methodologies are markedly different as trap no longer focuses in on collective chant or the ritualized performative catharsis of getting crunk. Many of my interlocutors spoke sentimentally of the days when people used to really dance/get crunk and disparagingly of trap music, both in terms of its format and its content. Nearly all of the interviewees who were members of the yeek scene felt that
trap music, the undeniably most popular Atlanta hip-hop movement during the time of my research, was overly simplistic, difficult to understand, and detrimental in its emphasis on sex and drugs. Ironically, many of their complaints about trap music were almost identical to past complaints about crunk music. It's true that people on Atlanta's party scene don't dance like they used to and the current music that defines it has shifted away from the established crunk formats. While trap is undoubtedly related, there is something markedly different about its structure, its aims, and the way it invites the audience to participate.

One thing that was clear over the course of my research was that some crunk spaces had mellowed or emptied. I did, on occasion, see people getting crunk in the way I had planned to, with the collective chant, the moshing dance style and the cathartic explosion of purposefully loud expressions. But more often than not, things were fairly subdued. Many of those who were members of the scene when the subgenre of crunk first came into being aged out of the youth subset; they are professionals, politicians, and parents. Many have eased into the very institutions that crunk railed against as succeeding legacies of the crunk trajectory engage a new generation of Southern black youth.

It's hard to know exactly why crunk performance isn't what or where it once was. It's possible that participants just left it behind for other genres or means of performing public selves. It's possible that crunk is at a liminal juncture, too old to appeal to the youth subset, but not quite old enough to experience a revival. It could be related to the fact that regionally specific hip-hop styles had fallen away during my fieldwork, given that local radio stations and regional nodes were no longer the
primary means by which audiences were introduced to new artists. Rather audiences are less confined by locality than ever before, although the dominant place trap music took on the national scene indicates a possible resurgence of centering region (even as they resist overt references to Southerness). It may mean, of course, that audiences no longer look for the kind of work that crunk music provided, or perhaps more appropriately, that crunk’s successors engage audiences in a different kind of performative subversion to account for shifts in the sociopolitical landscape that black youth navigate in the era of #blacklivesmatter. The relative stillness of crunk spaces do not necessarily indicate the death of crunk but rather its transformation.

**Crunk Ain’t Dead**

O’Riley’s doesn’t quite fit its surroundings. It sits in the parking lot of a strip mall adjacent to a busy road. While I’m not sure which structure came first, it’s apparent that one was built without much consideration to the other, as O’Riley’s building interrupts the organization of the strip mall’s parking lot. On busy nights, the cars at O’Riley’s present a visual cacophony as they disrupt the strip mall’s neat, brick-like organization with a jumble of vehicles parked at a jarringly “off” angle. In some ways, this is a microcosmic representation of the relationship the city of Atlanta as a whole has with its hip-hop culture, intertwined and yet set apart; further, Atlanta’s hip-hop culture simultaneously engages in, disrupts, transforms, and endorses the capitalistic and respectability politics surrounding it.
I had known about O’Riley’s for years and had been there at least once. Countless other times, I had been in the area and gazed upon the curiously off-center building. I was aware of its function, a sort of hole-in-the-wall type bar where somebody could go to dance, play a game of pool, have a beer or eat a tray of wings; but I was unaware of just how significant the space was to Atlanta’s hip-hop history until my interlocutors repeatedly evoked the venue and its owner in interviews.

A woman named Shyran, often affectionately referred to as Shyran Showcase, owns the space. In interviews, Shyran would frequently be identified by yeekers as a person of importance in the community, as the one who supported and promoted Atlanta’s earliest dancers, rappers, and deejays by providing place for them to perform, an official stage to showcase their talents. It is only fitting, therefore, that when dance crews from Columbus (a small city on Georgia’s Southwestern border) challenged Atlanta yeek crews for the right to claim supremacy over yeek culture, the dance off would take place at O’Riley’s.

I first became aware of the challenge on social media. It seems one day, all of a sudden, all of the Yeek Facebook pages were lit up with videos of Columbus dance crews dancing and then insulting Atlanta’s crews. It didn’t seem that they were making a claim of originating yeeking; rather, the subtext seemed to be that Atlanta had become too commercialized and lost much of the Southern grit that yeeking and crunk once had. In response, Atlanta-based yeekers created videos accepting the challenge.
"On & On & On..."

I arrived on a warm mid-April evening. I parked outside of the building, which was already congested with cars. The booming basslines of the music leaked outside and shook the spring air. There was a sweetness in the air, a mixture of April flowers and black & mild cigarettes. I felt slightly nervous as I exited my car. I knew that this event would likely be mostly attended by first- and second-generation Atlanta hip-hoppers and I worried that my presence might be challenged as a generational (and at this point regional) outsider. As irrational as the fear may have been, I wasn’t sure what I would do if somebody challenged me to compete. After all, the night would be filled with legends and those who sought to topple them.

As I left my car, I spotted Ted walking across the parking lot. I had spent a lot of time with Ted at this point, both in interviews and in observations, as he was one of the people instructing classes attended by younger people interested in yeeking. I signaled for his attention, walked up to him, gave him a dap, then spoke briefly about what the night might entail. After our exchange, I crossed the rest of the way to the venue. I was relieved to have seen somebody familiar outside for two reasons: first, connections to established members afforded my presence added validity and second, while I was certain I would see people that I knew at some point, I was not sure whether or not the night’s activities would make getting their attention feasible.

Upon walking in, my attention was split between several foci. Just ahead of the door was a rather large bar area with an old wood finish, giving the space a kind of rustic feel. To my right, I saw bar patrons at tables, laughing, talking, having a
good time. To my immediate left, a couple of women sitting at a long folding table accepted fees for entry. Just beyond them, a woman at a card table sold CDs. A cursory look over the CDs' playlists shows that they were underground/independent productions of Atlanta rappers, most of whom I recognized as having at least one hit in the 1990s. She also sold T-shirts with “YEEK” emblazoned across the front. I chose to buy a shirt. Behind the woman selling shirts and CDs, I could see most of the patrons gathered around a relatively clear area, creating something of a large cypher. The deejay both towered above the cypher against the wall at the front of the bar. I recognized DJ Taz standing in front of it, one of the aforementioned Atlanta artists whose popularity peaked in the 1990s but whose cred as Atlanta hip-hop royalty would likely never waver. He was speaking to Ant, another of my interlocutors who, I later learned, had been hired to host the evening. Through the crowd, I could see the judge's table; a folding table set up just inside of the cypher. With the exception of the cleared space in the middle of the dancer floor, the venue was filled with booths, tables and chairs. Venturing further into the space revealed another conjoined room that housed a pool table. A game was underway.

I immediately became aware of a potential problem. Most of the people had already surrounded the rim of the cypher and more were sure to come. I could barely see. Some of the patrons, especially women, began to stand on top of tables and chairs to get a better view of the center. The show had not even begun yet and I already had to figure how to claim a space that would allow me to witness it. As I wandered around, still looking for the best way to view the show (since I had
decided against climbing furniture) I saw more familiar dancers arrive, Carlos and Gary. The two donned matching superman shirts for the contest. In true yeek fashion, they dressed alike to indicate to all that they were a part of the same crew and, by claiming to be supermen, were making a bold sartorial challenge to the strength of other crews. I eventually found a break in the barrier. It was a small break, but big enough for me to squeeze into. I understood that leaving that spot at any point in the night would likely mean not being able to see for the rest of the night. My view was slightly obstructed by a pole, but for the most part, I could see the entire battle ground where the fight for bragging rights in the yeek community would take place. The venue became increasingly crowded. A steady stream of patrons packed into the room, no doubt ready to see the show. The music that was being played was bass, a high energy echo of Atlanta’s past. For many, it surely brought back memories of Freaknik and roller rinks.

After a few minutes, the contest got underway. Troops consisting of 2-4 members took turns entering the center of the ring, displaying strictly choreographed dances in perfect unison. What struck me most was the audience’s participation. Everybody seemed to know exactly when to yell “YEEK!” Ant’s MC-ing helped guide the excited vocalizations in the crowd. At one point, when a dancer leapt across the dance floor and made a humping motion in the face of a (then seated) competitor, Ant lead the room in a chant of “balls in your face!” The chanting further brought emphasis to the bass/crunk feel of the night, as the crowd represented the very vocal exchanges that producers of those genres hoped to capture. At the end of the night, an Atlanta crew took the crown. The crowd was
genuinely excited about every act, as indicated by their energetic responses and ceaseless chanting in response. Yet, had anybody been lukewarm in their performance, they would not have gotten a coveted “YEEK!” when they hit their big move(s). Throughout the night, dancers did their routines until they were drenched with sweat, DJ Taz spun out bass-heavy records, and Ant guided the crowd in directed chants and, after the contest had ended, there was even some good old fashioned “gettin crunk” as the audience took over the dance floor. Everything that made crunk music crunk was present.

These days, whenever Lil Jon gets media attention, he is sure to insist that “crunk ain’t dead,” a metacommentary that simultaneously takes on the national scene’s abandonment of the subgenre of crunk and the continuing impact of Atlanta hip-hop party music even as new music drifts further away from the aesthetic particularities of the crunk subgenre.

Still, that night it was apparent that crunk was still very much alive in Atlanta in every sense of the word. Many of the tensions of respectability and of addressing racism, sexism, classism and/or homophobia still weighed on these participants, and, in response, they continue to engage the cathartic body in getting crunk as a means of coping and resisting. The cathartic body in Southern hip-hop manifests in different ways, but it is always there, purposefully defying the “should’s” and the “supposed to be’s” that have historically made equality, or even the acknowledgment of shared humanity, a condition of conformity. In other words, “crunk ain’t dead” specifically because neither are the conditions that made it necessary.


