

Supa Dupa Fly: Black Women As Cyborgs in Hip-hop Videos

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In this essay, I will look at two hip-hop music videos: Missy Elliott's "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)" (directed by Hype Williams, 1997), and Lil' Kim's "How Many Licks" (directed by Francis Lawrence, 2000). These videos are both works of science fiction, in form and in content. Technologically, they employ state-of-the-art, recently developed digital effects, in order to portray a world dominated by commodities and simulacra. Formally, their editing styles, and the ways that they combine image and sound, reveal how deeply they belong to a society dominated by ubiquitous, computer-mediated communication networks. The videos are set to rap music: spoken voice juxtaposed with sounds that are, for the most part, digitally generated and sampled. And they are both concerned with the technological transformation of the black female body: its mutation into a cyborg.

What might this process, this woman-becoming-cyborg, be? A *cyborg* is "a human being whose body has been taken over in whole or in part by electromechanical devices" (Miller). In her "Cyborg Manifesto" of 1985, Donna Haraway defines it as follows: "a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (149). In the figure of the cyborg, the self-regulating, or *autopoietic*, processes that characterize living organisms are merged with *cybernetics*, the technology of machine communication and control. In the videos that I am discussing, Missy Elliott and Lil' Kim are invaded by, and fused with, machines. The videos thus raise questions about identity and otherness, and about power and control. They ask us to think about how we are being transformed, as a result of our encounters with the new digital and virtual technologies. Or better, they raise the question of who *we* are—as beings whose very embodiment is tied up with technological change, as well as with ascriptions of gender and race.

Haraway claims that in the postmodern age, with its accelerated rate of technological change, "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (149). Now, science fiction, and within it the image of the female robot or cyborg, has served as a vehicle for expressing anxieties and hopes about technological change at least since the Industrial Revolution. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is often cited as the first modern science fiction novel; not only does this book concern a scientist who violates the limits of nature by creating an artificial (male) human being, but much of the plot turns upon the monster's request—refused by his creator—to have a female mate. A century later, the female cyborg appears in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), one of the great films of the silent era. In this film, with its stunning depictions of industrial slavery

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and class warfare, everything turns upon the figure of the female robot as radical agitator, created by an evil scientist in order to mislead the masses to their destruction.

In these postmodern times, the figure of the cyborg has become closer to ourselves, less uncanny, less easy to dismiss as an alien monster. Today, cyborgs have almost become commonplace; we'd be more surprised by their absence than their presence. Contemporary images of cyborgs tend to break down along gender lines. On the one hand, there are the figures of heavily armored male cyborgs-as-fighting-machines, as in the films *Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) and *RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), with all their sequels and imitations. Feminist critics, like Claudia Springer and Anne Balsamo, suggest that these figures are trying to compensate for a perceived crisis of masculinity (and perhaps of whiteness as well). They endeavor to resuscitate the image of white masculine power at a time when invisible technologies, as well as more insistently visible female and non-white presences, are starting to render it irrelevant.

On the other hand, the figure of the cyborg as imagined by Haraway is either female, or ambiguously gendered. Haraway's cyborg is subversive and transgressive: it celebrates hybridity, undoes fixed identities, and violates binary oppositions and boundary distinctions. In particular, Haraway lists "three crucial boundary breakdowns" (151) that result from the new digital technologies. Today, she says, there is only a "leaky distinction" at best (152) between what is human and what is not, between what is organic and what is mechanical, and between what is physical and what is immaterial. These "boundary breakdowns" help to put traditional certainties about race and gender into question as well. When everything from financial records to music recordings to DNA sequences can be coded in digital patterns of ones and zeroes, the fixed categories with which we used to divide up the world tend to blur, if not disappear entirely. Cosmetic surgery, breast implants, and skin-lightening procedures make it impossible even to take the flesh as a fixed point of reference. What are we to make of Michael Jackson today—or for that matter, Janet Jackson? Social reality is becoming more and more like science fiction, not just because of the particular high-tech devices that have been introduced in recent years, but more profoundly because of the ways that these new technologies have unsettled the very frames of reference with which we are accustomed to understand them, and ourselves.

Think, for instance, of Madonna in the 1980s. Her fame came less from her singing, or her music *per se*, than it did from the multiple, continually shifting series of roles she projected: from virgin to slut to Material Girl. She was in the business of selling celebrity, or *aura*; and her music was only an adjunct to this. Hence the importance of her music videos. Madonna was perhaps the first pop star to fully grasp the lesson of Andy Warhol: she understood that she herself, rather than her music, was the real commodity. That is to say, in the figure of Madonna, the commodity form first becomes fully conscious of itself. It celebrates its own arbitrariness, fictiveness, and constructedness, instead of trying to pass itself off as necessary and natural. This is why Madonna revels in the postmodern play of dazzling surfaces, the sense that changing her personality is just as simple as changing her outfit.

In posing the question of identity in this way, Madonna has left the old humanist subject far behind. The "femininity" that she epitomizes is not an essence, but only a performance, or a mask. It is for this awareness that Madonna was most heavily praised, explicitly by academic critics, and implicitly by a much wider public, during the 1980s and early 1990s. But I want to suggest that this sort of transvestite play is rather more limited and conservative than it may have appeared at the time. The reason that Madonna was able to transform her identity so easily, and so multifariously, is because none of these changes were irreversible. In the long run, none of them really mattered, for none

of them really affected her. They never threatened her privileged status, as a sexual icon, and as a white woman appropriating black musical forms. This indemnity is at once the advantage, and the limitation, of the play of surfaces. Fashion is infinitely malleable, in a way that a sex-change operation, or a cyborg implantation, is not. These latter sorts of transformations of identity are *irreparable*: they penetrate the body in depth, and from them, there is no hope of return. Becoming-cyborg is something that we suffer, or endure, rather than something we can freely choose (or not) to perform. By remaining within the play of surfaces, Madonna is therefore not quite—or not yet—a cyborg. She stands on the verge of a transformation that escapes her. It may be that Madonna's retreat, since the early 1990s, to spiritual and natural themes is a symptom of her resistance to change, her clinging to privilege, her unwillingness to become a cyborg.

The more recent videos, by black women rappers, that I am discussing here imagine female bodies and subjectivities—and their consequent racial, sexual, and gender positionings—in ways that go far beyond Madonna. They speak to the constraints of race and gender—rather than just their possibilities of play—in ways that Madonna obviously does not. They imagine the process of becoming-cyborg from the inside. Missy Elliott's "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)" is just obliquely futuristic—it doesn't give us a full-blown science fiction scenario. (For explicit science fiction, we could look at another of her videos, from the same album, and also directed by Hype Williams: "Sock It 2 Me," in which Missy is seen bopping around through outer space in a space suit). But I think of "The Rain" as a cyborg video, because of its futuristic sets and costumes, and because of the ways that Missy Elliott's body and persona are presented and transformed—especially when she wears that inflatable black suit.

The song itself has often been cited as a influential breakthrough in hiphop and r 'n' b, because of the way that Missy and producer Timbaland managed to combine stuttering British drum 'n' bass beats with an American verbal flow. "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)" is quite funky, but also light and trippy, with its bouncy, insinuating breakbeat—a bare bass line backed by scattered, synthesized percussion—counterpointed against Missy's lilting rap, and a continually looped sample from Ann Peebles' 1974 soul hit, "I Can't Stand the Rain." The song's sparse instrumentation gives us a lot of room to breathe: there is almost nothing in between the beats on the one hand, and the vocals on the other. This is why "The Rain" manages to sound so relaxed, at the same time that its rhythms are as insistently propulsive as funk at its best always is. In this way, the music performs a kind of cyborg fusion between the warmth of the human voice, and the coldness of machines and electronically synthesized sound.

Not only does this fusion reach across Haraway's leaky organic/mechanical boundary; it also crosses boundaries of gender and race. Where the great soul singers were, if anything, more often women than men, hiphop has been very much a male-dominated domain. Rapping is coded as being more macho than singing; men who sing (from Marvin Gaye to D'Angelo) are taken to be appealing to a female audience, while men who rap are generally speaking *about* women (among other possessions or signifiers of prowess) to other men. A love song by D'Angelo seems to be addressing the (presumptively female) listener; but a song like Jay-Z's "I Just Wanna Love U (Give It 2 Me)"—if we can call it a love song at all—solicits the (presumptively male) listener to admire and identify with the voice of the rapper. There have been women MCs in hiphop ever since the origins of this music in the 1970s; but they have been few and far between, and they have always had particular difficulties in establishing and proving themselves. Tricia Rose analyzes this history in great detail in her book *Black Noise* (146–182). In recent years, Missy Elliott is one of the few women rappers to have made it on her own terms, without compromises, and for more than a brief period.

Electronic music has also been largely a male preserve. Even fewer women have been able to make their mark as DJs or producers, than as MCs. Missy Elliott's collaboration as an equal partner with Timbaland on the production of her own albums and those of Aaliyah and others is one of the rare exceptions. In addition, electronic sound tends to be coded as masculine: it is precise, disciplined, and reductively rational, in opposition to the stereotypically feminine qualities of emotionality and sentimentality. Digitally synthesized music tends to sound cold and abstract, because it lacks the overtones that give a quality of dirtiness and thickness to analog sounds. Also, drum machines are unable to produce those miniscule variations in the beat that give bounce and flexibility to the work of human drummers. (On account of these limitations, many producers like to use old-fashioned analog synthesizers, instead of state-of-the-art digital ones). Digitally synthesized sound, therefore, connotes rigidity: a metronomic regularity and militaristic regimentation of rhythm. Nothing could be further from the off-rhythms and syncopations of swing and funk. As a result, electronic music tends to be coded in racial terms as well as gender ones. Synthesized music is white in contrast to black: the sound of Kraftwerk, say, as opposed to that of Parliament/Funkadelic.

Of course, none of these oppositions are absolute; in the age of cyborgs, they all have leaky boundaries. Kodwo Eshun, in his book *More Brilliant Than The Sun*, tells the story of how the white, German sounds of Kraftwerk were adopted by black techno musicians in Detroit—precisely because their alienated, militaristic stiffness could be used to signify a sharp break with the racist social relations of the human here and now, in favor of a posthuman black future. Groups like Juan Atkins' Model 500 and Mike Banks' Underground Resistance industrialized and militarized their sound, by largely eliminating singing, and by marrying the off-center rhythmic patterns of funk to the relentless forward march of Teutonic beats. These musicians willfully embraced alienation, and the alien, in opposition to—and in order to escape from—the oppressive life of the streets. Extending this logic, Eshun opposes the Afrofuturistic, science fiction emphasis of “black secret technology” to American hip-hop's insistence upon “realness” and the street.

Eshun doesn't say much about gender, but it is evident from his analysis (as well as from the music itself) that Detroit techno—together with its British and European offshoots—still remains conventionally masculine, even as it unconventionally hijacks Kraftwerk's denatured ultra-whiteness in order to affirm blackness as being radically other. Evidently, black women are left out of this equation; they are shut out of electronic music as well as hip-hop. One response to the implicit misogyny of both hip-hop and techno has been that of the neo-soul singers, like Erykah Badu and Jill Scott. Their move is to reaffirm the humanity of the female singing voice, against the tyranny of spoken words, and digital samples and sounds. These singers place themselves firmly in the century-old tradition of great women jazz and soul vocalists, and contend with racism and sexism from that perspective. Now, Missy Elliott shares these references to the great black women singers of the past; her own music abounds in allusions to (and samples of) blues, jazz, gospel and soul. But Missy also works hard to embrace the new electronic technologies, rather than opposing or dismissing them. She tries to rewrite the musical gender lines in much the same way that the male techno musicians rewrote the race lines. Missy takes the boys' futuristic, electronic sounds, and claims them for herself as a black woman. She creates a music of cyborg hybridity, in which her own rapping modulates fluently and seamlessly back and forth between the pop soulfulness of Ann Peebles' singing (“I can't stand the rain/Gainst my window”) on the one hand, and the dry, off-kilter syncopations of Timbaland's beats, on the other. “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” creates a circuit between past and future: between the interiority of a woman's voice crying out in loss, and the exteriority of an exuberant transhuman reengineering of the female body.

"The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)" is entirely built around a sample from Ann Peebles. Sampling, of course, has been a crucial element of hip-hop right from the beginning. Today, sampling is a cutting-edge new technology, enabled by digital devices. But it also precedes those devices, since it was originally accomplished by DJs scratching vinyl in order to isolate and repeat breaks. That is to say, for all its current glitziness, sampling started out as a manual, do-it-yourself, low-tech repurposing of a still older technology (vinyl records).

Although sampling has its place within the broader postmodern practices of appropriation and pastiche, it has additional resonances in the context of hip-hop and black culture. Tricia Rose argues that rap uses sampling "as a point of reference, as a means by which the process of repetition and recontextualization can be highlighted and privileged" (73). That is to say, sampling in rap is a way of making new connections between the past and the present (and also, perhaps, between both of them and the future). Following James Snead, Rose notes that the "cut" or "break beat" isolated by sampling "systematically ruptures equilibrium"; yet at the same time, "the 'break beat' itself is . . . repositioned as repetition, as equilibrium inside the rupture" (70). Of course, not all hip-hop samples are break beats; but even the ones that aren't tend to follow this logic of rupture and renovation *by means of* repetition. Rose thus opposes the way that rap music affirms repetition through sampling to the way that white leftist critics—like Adorno, Jameson, and Attali—generally denounce repetition in popular culture as merely a symptom of commodification and industrial mass production (72). This logic also applies to the content of hip-hop's samples. White critics generally see postmodern appropriation either as a submission to the dominant form of the commodity (as in Jameson's notion of postmodern *pastiche* as "a neutral practice of . . . mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse"—17), or else as a disruptive act of *culture jamming*, or of what the Situationists called *détournement* (Lütticken). But neither of these alternatives is adequate to describe how appropriation in hip-hop is an affirmative practice, an exuberant act of reclamation and reconstruction.

All this is audible in "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)." Missy Elliott revitalizes the older song, by placing it in a new context. Ann Peebles' original "I Can't Stand the Rain" is a lament for a man who has left her; Missy boasts instead of getting rid of a man "before he can dump me," as well as proclaiming her own "supa fly" hipness, and her control over all aspects of the song's production. Ann Peebles' soulful complaint is neither negated nor ironized; rather, the way it is looped through the new song, as a refrain, allows it to take on new powers.

All these qualities are carried over into the video for "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)." Like many music videos, "The Rain" is basically composed of a number of different scenes of dancing. These scenes are presented in rapid alternation; they are each marked by different locales and costumes, but they remain congruent because of the careful graphic matching between them. The video has many of director Hype Williams' trademark (but subsequently much imitated by others) stylistic features. Most of the shots emphasize frontality, with Missy and the other dancers looking straight at the camera. Most of the movement in the video is also towards and away from the camera, leading at points to a pronounced 'fisheye' effect: distortion, often of the face, caused by closely approaching the camera's wide-angle lens. The dancing, as often in hip-hop, is graceful but not smooth, emphasizing gestural poses over movement. Often the set is walled on both sides, so that the space is narrow but deep. Throughout the video, Missy remains front and center, her face and body right in your face (or right in the camera). In one series of shots, she stands in front of a dark circle. In another, she stands in a narrow corridor, with two large gears swinging back and forth, on either side of her. The effect

is industrial, and vaguely ominous. In contrast to these claustrophobic scenes, there are others that are set outdoors. In one, Missy drives her jeep to the beach; in the other, she is seated on a hilltop. But these scenes are ostentatiously artificial; as is suggested above all by their exaggeratedly hypersaturated colors. The grass is just too iridescently green; not to mention that a *2001*-ish (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) monolith is visible in the background. There is rain in the video, as the lyrics seem to promise, but it only falls indoors, drenching the dancers on a soundstage. The video clearly takes place in a world that is wholly simulacral.

Missy Elliott herself is neither as slender, nor as light-skinned, as black women in hip-hop videos (like the backup dancers we see in a number of shots in "The Rain") generally are. Thereby, she fails to conform to the usual American standards of feminine beauty. African American culture is quite different from white culture in this respect, historically preferring it when "baby got back" (to quote Sir Mix-A-Lot). But hip-hop videos today tend to value the same near-anorexic slimness as mainstream white culture does—together with light skin, and long, straight (fake as well as processed) hair. Most recently, there has also been a tendency to focus on women who are "multi-racial," i.e. black and Asian. Colorism has a long history in black American culture, and in hip-hop today it is in full effect. Female beauty is defined as coming as close to whiteness as possible, without actually being white. It's rare to find a hip-hop video where the women are anywhere near as dark-skinned as the male rappers.

The video for "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)" affirms Missy's darker and less slender body, rather than trying to disguise it or cover it up. She refuses to be conventionally sexy for the male gaze, demanding instead to be taken just as she is. This attitude is expressed through the costumes she wears in the video, especially that black inflatable suit. It balloons around her, at once hiding and cushioning her limbs. Above it, she wears a sort of insectoid helmet, that also includes goggles/sunglasses. Is this her embodiment of a fly? In any case, this costume is a sort of cyborg gear, albeit a softer and more yielding one than is usual in science fiction depictions of robots. The inflatable suit looks like some sort of futuristic biofabric, for which we do not yet know the use. It etherealizes Missy's body, but it does so generously and capaciously. Her limbs are lost inside this larger expanse, which seems both to protect her, like a second skin, and to lift and lighten her, to the point that we almost expect her to start floating in mid-air. (Such a scenario is made explicit in Missy's later "Sock It 2 Me" video). Or perhaps it is a chrysalis or a cocoon, out of which a new Missy will emerge. In any case, it promises an enhanced re-embodiment, a new flesh to the measure of Missy's own desires.

Lil' Kim's song and video "How Many Licks" deals with many of the same issues as "The Rain," but it approaches them in a far different way. In its raunchy, uncensored form, the song is basically a hymn to cunnilingus. There's something of a tradition of heterosexual women rappers demanding this kind of gratification from their men (Perry, 526), as part of the way in which "black women rappers are carving out a female-dominated space in which black women's sexuality is openly expressed" (Rose, 170). But no other rapper has talked about cunnilingus as explicitly and graphically as Lil' Kim does, and in a context that is just about sex, not also about love. In the first verse of "How Many Licks," Kim catalogues her experiences with "men of different races," fondly remembering what they did for her, and how they got her off. In the second verse, she imagines "my niggaz in jail" beating off while fantasizing about their "tongue in between my thighs." The third presents Kim the "Night Rider," arriving at a club in her "shiny black Lamborghini," drinking until she's "ready to fuck," and boasting about the "flavors" of her "designer pussy." The aggressive up-frontness of Lil' Kim's lyrics is matched by a straightforward, pounding beat, suggesting a relentless sexual rhythm.

The sound is enlivened by a down 'n' dirty, repeated analog synthesizer riff, rich with fuzzy distortion. The song also features hoary sound effects of orgasmic moaning.

The title of the song, as well as the words of the chorus, are taken from a well-known 1970s children's TV commercial: "How many licks does it take to get to the Tootsie Roll center of a Tootsie Pop?" As if to make sure that we recognize the allusion, Kim mentions it explicitly in the course of her rap: "Lick it right the first time or you gotta do it over/Like it's rehearsal for a Tootsie commercial." In contrast to Missy Elliott's use of Ann Peebles, the sample here is solely verbal, not musical. Also, of course, Kim refers directly to an advertisement; which is rather different from sampling a pop song (even if pop songs are ultimately commodities too). But we shouldn't jump to conclusions about the ironies at work here. For the Tootsie Pop commercial, just like a pop song, is likely to have a strong, unironic emotional resonance for many Americans of Kim's generation, who were children in the 1970s or early 80s. The shock of the sample, therefore, comes less from the fact that Lil' Kim is using a commodity to convey personal experience, than from the fact that she is taking a seemingly innocuous evocation of childhood, and giving it an overtly sexual meaning. The point of the original ad was that "the world may never know" how many licks it takes to get to the delicious center of a Tootsie Pop; everybody is so impatient to get that Tootsie Roll taste, that they bite right through the lickable outside layers of the lollipop. By appropriating this message, Lil' Kim makes her own orgasmic bliss into the center. She tells the world that the taste of her pussy really is that good; while at the same time she warns her men not to skimp on the licks that give her pleasure.

In "How Many Licks," as in many other of her songs, Lil' Kim boasts of her sexual mystique and her power over men. She is in control because she can use her sexuality to manipulate men, to make them pay her and support her. Her boasts about big money and expensive cars, combining the manners of a thug with the privileges of a millionaire, parallel similar claims made by mainstream male hip-hop artists. But what sets Lil' Kim apart is what she has to do, as a woman, in order to "get paid." In presenting her persona, Kim makes no distinction between her sexual performances, and the skill with words that makes her a successful MC. Whereas male rappers get women because they are rich and famous, Lil' Kim implies rather that she is rich and famous because she gets men. She's a bitch and a ho, an updated and self-consciously racialized version of the *femme fatale* figure of *film noir*. With her skimpy clothes and provocative poses, together with her frank and rapacious attitude towards sex, she's a figure of misogynistic fantasy, the very woman whom male rappers are always berating, and warning their listeners against. Lil' Kim does not critique these stereotypes, as other female rappers have done, but instead willfully inhabits them, and pushes them as far as they will go. In the process, she virtually reduces herself to the status of a cartoon.

Lil' Kim, therefore, is doing nearly the opposite of Missy Elliott. She's enacting stereotypes, and objectifying the female body, precisely as Missy (at least in her early videos) refused to do. But for Kim as well as Missy, this is something that involves race as well as gender. Lil' Kim has said in a number of interviews that, as a child, she was bombarded by, and ended up internalizing, the media images that define female beauty in terms of blonde hair, blue eyes, a slender body, and big breasts. And much of her performing persona has been predicated upon making herself conform to such an image, with the help of contact lenses, wigs and bleached hair, breast implants, and possibly (if rumors are to be believed) even a medical lightening of the skin (Though this last is more likely a digital effect applied to images of Lil' Kim, than a chemical procedure that she physically went through—see Hicks-Wilson). All this gives something of the effect of a drag impersonation. Indeed, Lil' Kim, like Marlene Dietrich, Marilyn Monroe,

and Madonna, is self-consciously *performing* traditional stereotypes of what it means to be a woman. But there is a difference. Because Lil' Kim is black, she bears a much greater historical burden—encompassing racism as well as sexism—than any of her white predecessors did. And this gives her performance of femininity quite a different edge; it is why I see her transformation as a radical becoming-cyborg, rather than as merely a sort of gender masquerade.

Lil' Kim seems to have a big cult following among gay white men, probably responding to this sense that she performs femininity (and blackness) like a drag queen. Witness this rave for "How Many Licks" from the (evidently pseudonymous) "Mack Pumper," writing for *Outbiz* ("Australia's official gay + lesbian online entertainment and lifestyle magazine"): "Lil' Kim was first in line when God was handing out sex appeal. She's got it and baby does she knows how to work it. She's an edible doll, anatomically (and politically) incorrect. Kim's a black 'n' blonde bundle of buxom beauty. She's a gangsta of the highest proportions and ain't gonna put up with no one's shit. Give her a lick and see how many it takes. Lil' Kim ain't to be messed with. Devilishly divine and totally rap-tastic."

There's a race and gender tourism going on here that I find troubling. The writer appreciates Lil' Kim in terms that are perilously close to minstrelsy and blackface: the presentation of the foibles of a fictionalized "blackness" for the delectation of a white audience. The writer is enthused about how Lil' Kim's performance is so delightfully over-the-top and campy. But to look at it this way is to belittle the fact that the enactment of race and gender positions is such a difficult, deeply fraught issue for Lil' Kim. Like Madonna, Lil' Kim is fictionalizing her identity by placing it "in quotation marks." But Lil' Kim cannot glibly remake herself each year, or each album, in the way that Madonna used to do. For Lil' Kim, if not for Madonna, there is more at stake than just a play of postmodern surfaces. Her performance must respond to the ways that social and political forces have invested her black woman's body in depth. Lil' Kim is forced to confront the constraints (as well as the powers) of becoming-cyborg, in a way that Madonna is privileged not to have to do.

There's an issue here about *performance*. No doubt it is liberating to realize that an attribute of my body, or of my identity in the world, is not an essential, unchanging property. There's an enormous gap between the actual existence of particular genitalia, or a particular degree of skin pigmentation, and the meanings we give to classifications of race, gender, and sexual orientation. That is why such categories are not natural givens. They are rather interpretations that we make of ourselves and apply to other people, and that other people apply to us. That is what it means to say that these categories are social constructions. Identities are not given or innate; they need to be *enacted* in order to exist. So far, so good. The problem comes when the enactment of gender, or race, or sexuality, is understood voluntaristically, as if it were a choice that each of us freely made. It is not. For the context of any such "choice" is a whole range of already-existing social prejudices and constraints. To adapt what Marx said about history: human beings perform their identities; but they do not perform them just as they please. It's easy to celebrate drag and passing as subversive activities; but it's a lot harder to actually carry them out this way. Drag has a conformist edge as well as a subversive one; putting categories like gender into "quotation marks," and exposing them as performances or constructions, can also be a way of reaffirming them. The knowing ironic smirk is a perfect alibi: it allows you to promulgate stereotypes, while disavowing any responsibility for them.

There are also power differentials at work in every performance. It's a lot easier (and safer) to cross boundaries downwards than upwards. A man performing "femininity" usually earns appreciative laughter; but a woman performing "masculinity" is seen as

threatening. White people performing "blackness" earn millions from their minstrelsy; black people performing "whiteness" are usually doing it for mere survival. Similar dynamics come into play in the relation between a performer and his/her audience. This is the case even when the performer is impersonating his/her own social position. Does Busta Rhymes' buffoonery escape being a blackface minstrel show, just because Busta himself is black to begin with. . . . The answer is not obvious. To the extent that Lil' Kim is performing "blackness" and "femininity" for a white male audience, her mode of self-presentation cannot help being problematic. No matter how campy and ironic, drag exhibitionism ultimately does not break with an economy of gender based upon the objectification of black women's bodies.

Lil' Kim has received a great deal of criticism along these lines, especially from other black women. Mekeisha Madden accuses her of pandering to "white America. . . . After all, why get a nose job, blonde weave, and boob job unless you want pubescent, white, suburban boys and their older brothers to buy your album. . . . Lil' Kim's behavior [is] degrading to women, and especially black women. . . . The frightening part is that her fans and critics actually try to pawn her off as a 'feminist' and not the gyno-misogynist she really is." An article in *Essence* by Akissi Britton created a stir when it took Kim to task for "perpetuat[ing] the gold-digging, highly sexualized, whorish image that Black women have been trying to kill since slavery. . . . No matter how you define it, Kim, a bitch is a bitch. And sex equals money equals power is not a feminist principle. . . . [In the past], we wore the armor of self-love, self-respect, and self-actualization, standing together with our men while we all did what it took to 'Fight the Power'. . . . We now stand across from our men pointing hypocritical fingers at their sexism while letting them know that it will cost a large fee to get a piece. This is empowering, ma? You can't be serious" (112).

What seems to be at issue in these critiques is Lil' Kim's presentation of herself as a woman of voracious sexual appetite. She is denounced for reinforcing negative, 'hood-rat stereotypes of blackness, and selling these stereotypes to white America. And she is reproached both for not being a true feminist, and for not standing by her man. But in the end, it all comes down to sex. In the history of black women's music, Lil' Kim's raunchy lyrics belong to a tradition that can be traced back through Millie Jackson in the 1970s, to Ma Rainey in the 1920s, and probably to other, forgotten singers before that. But this long tradition is in conflict with and equally long tradition of black middle-class striving for respectability. One way that many middle-class blacks have historically responded to racist disparagement is by maintaining the strictest—indeed Victorian—standards of bourgeois propriety. Today, this attitude persists in images of black women as being deeply spiritual, strong, and above all always impeccably coiffed. In *Waiting to Exhale* (Forest Whitaker, 1995), for instance, Angela Bassett's character receives the ultimate compliment: that no matter what she has had to face, she's always looked her best, with her makeup in place. From such a point of view, Lil' Kim's flaunting (or even worse, selling) her sexuality is an embarrassing instance of lower-class vulgarity. The irony is that Lil' Kim has not done nearly as well selling sex to suburban white boys, as Oprah has selling spirituality and propriety to their mothers.

What is missing from all these accounts—whether pro or con—of Lil' Kim's persona is any sense of her insistence upon her own autonomous sexual pleasure. "Mack Pumper" praises Kim for being "politically incorrect," while Madden and Britton both chide her for not being a feminist. Yet none of them mention that Lil' Kim's demand for cunnilingual gratification is the whole point of "How Many Licks." She appreciates a man with a "big-ass dick," but what really gets her off is when he also has a "hurricane tongue." When Kim boasts about gettin' paid for pussy, it might be said that she thereby perpetuates

the misogynistic logic of many male rap songs, with their portrayals of women as gold-diggers and hoers. And when she sizes up men on the basis of their looks and sexual performance, it still might be argued (although not by me) that nothing of value is accomplished by thus merely inverting the way that men traditionally appraise women. But something altogether different happens, when Lil' Kim demands her own clitoral, orgasmic bliss. For now, it's all about pleasure, instead of power. And an intransitive pleasure at that: one that can't be shared, reciprocated, named, numbered, or contained. Hence the unfinished question that Sisquop repeats over and over for the chorus: "How many licks does it take till you get to the center of the . . ." For of course, you cannot prescribe, or determine, or limit the correct number of licks (a point that was already the basis of the original Tootsie Pop commercial). Power is always being negotiated and fought over; but (pardon my French) the supplementarity of *jouissance* cannot be circumscribed in this way. As Gayatri Spivak puts it, "the clitoris is a shorthand for women's excess in all areas of production and practice" (60). All that a man can do for her, Lil' Kim says, is "[eat] my pussy from dark till the mornin'." But even that might not be enough.

The video for "How Many Licks" is a mock television commercial. It presents Lil' Kim as a doll, available for purchase in three models (corresponding to the three verses of the song): Candy Kim, Pin-Up Kim, and Nightrider Kim. Shots of the actual Kim dancing, walking a catwalk, or simply posing are intercut with displays of the Kim dolls on rotating platforms. We also see an assembly line where the dolls are being manufactured: arms and legs are screwed onto the torso, and then Kim's head is plopped on top. Her eyes flutter back and forth, and she flashes a lascivious grin. Meanwhile, text is being displayed on screen, in a manner familiar from low-budget, late-night TV commercials: the Kim dolls are "Made in USA," and you should be sure to "collect all three" and to "get them while supplies last." We are also told that the dolls are "realistic," "anatomically correct," and "fully edible," features which evidently differentiate the erotic Kim from the anorexic, asexual Barbie.

The "How Many Licks" video is thus Lil' Kim's version of becoming a cyborg. It puts forth the outrageous image of Kim's pussy—and of Kim herself—as an industrially produced toy, and a delicious candy to be sucked on. Obviously, this can be taken as an ironic comment on Lil' Kim's own Warholian, commodified status. Her body is manufactured, together with her persona. The assembly line allows for mass replication, as well as the modular substitution of interchangeable parts. Kim the woman-machine is grotesquely objectified, and sold as a sex toy for the male voyeur or user. Everything is precisely calibrated, according to the prevalent stereotypes of race and gender. In this reading, Lil' Kim exhibits the same sort of ironic self-consciousness about celebrity as does Madonna, albeit in a more extreme form. She's a pure product of the culture industry, and her only freedom is her exacerbated, impotent awareness that this is the case. Kim's success, like that of so many other rappers, can therefore only be measured in the money that is exchanged for her product, and in the luxury products that this money, in turn, can buy. It's all about the Benjamins. At one point in the video, Lil' Kim flashes a diamond ring; words then appear on the screen, informing us that the ring is "sold separately."

But I have already suggested, in a number of ways, that such a reading cannot be the whole story. Of course, hip-hop is largely about money. But, for black women rappers especially, it is something more than that. Lil' Kim doesn't make a potlatch of her material possessions in "How Many Licks," as Trina does in the video for her song "Da Baddest Bitch." But Kim, like Trina, is enabled by commercial culture in a way that goes beyond mere ironic reflection on the commodity form. Trina's video parodies the

series of MasterCard commercials in which the credit card is used to pay for everything, except for some uniquely personal experience that is deemed "priceless." Kim's video follows the same logic: it presents her transformation into a commercial sex doll as a necessary condition for her priceless orgasmic pleasure. Commodity logic culminates in the gratification of the commodity itself; as one of the messages that pops up on the screen warns us, "she doesn't satisfy you—you satisfy her." If there isn't any anxiety here about "selling out," or strategizing about how to subvert the commodity form, this is because Lil' Kim doesn't have the luxury, or the privilege, of being able to worry about such things. The commodity is Nature as far as she is concerned; it's her only horizon, and also her only line of flight. This is why she has to become a cyborg, and why she can find sexual rapture in doing so.

In their vastly different ways, Missy Elliott and Lil' Kim both tell stories of black female empowerment, in the face of deeply engrained racism and sexism. And they both do this, not by resisting postmodern transformations, and not by putting forth inspirational fables; but by fully embracing, and plumbing the depths of, cyborg-becoming.

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