

Learning to Listen, Learning to *Be*: African-American Girls and Hip-Hop at a Durham,

NC Boys and Girls Club

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
Music in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation documents African-American girls' musical practices at a Boys and Girls Club in Durham, NC. Hip-hop is the cornerstone of social exchanges at John Avery, and is integrated into virtually all club activities. Detractors point to the misogyny, sexual exploitation and violence predominant in hip-hop's most popular incarnations, suggesting that the music is a corrupting influence on America's youth. Girls are familiar with these arguments, and they appreciate that hip-hop is a contested and sometimes illicit terrain. Yet they also recognize that knowledge about and participation in hip-hop-related activities is crucial to their interactions at the club, at school, and at home. As girls hone their listening skills, they reconcile the contradictions between behavior glorified by hip-hop and the model presented to them by their mentors. This project examines how African-American girls ages 5-13 use their listening practices to claim a space within hip-hop's landscape while still operating within the unambiguous moral framework they have learned from their parents, mentors and peers. Through ethnography and close analysis of vocal utterances, dance moves and social interaction, I consider how individual interactions with mass-mediated music teach girls a black musical aesthetic that allows them to relate to their peers and mentors, and how these interactions highlight the creativity with which they begin to negotiate sexual and racial politics on the margins of society.

For Mom and Dad

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1. Introduction

A wobbly synthesizer and drum machine sounded from the small speakers on the desk. The twenty five- and six-year-olds running around the room immediately recognized the song, one of the latest big hits on the radio, and stopped whatever they were doing. The cacophony of talking and shouting and running morphed into simultaneous cries of excitement and recognition. Eyes lit up all over the room as every child, without exception, started dancing. After the two bars of introduction, the voices of the real children in the room drowned out the children's voices singing the refrain, so much so that the real children finished about two beats ahead of the recording.

DO YOUR CHAIN HANG LOW

DO IT WOBBLE TO THE FLOOR

DO IT SHINE IN THE LIGHT

IS IT PLATINUM, IS IT GOLD

COULD YOU THROW IT OVER YOUR SHOULDER

IF YOU HOT IT MAKE YOU COLD

DO YOUR CHAIN HANG LOW¹

The same group of five- and six-year-olds sat in the game room, waiting for their turn to play in the gym. The club that day was running behind schedule, leaving the kids with about ten minutes of nothing to do in between their activities. They were getting

¹ Gibbs, "Chain Hang Low," *Jibbs Featuring Gibbs* (Geffen, 2006).

antsy, so Pop distracted them while they were waiting. He instructed them to stand in a line in front of him, and they reluctantly did what they were told. Pop stepped to the left and then the right. Step-touch, step touch. "Come on, do it with me," he said. The kids shuffled their feet back and forth. Pop started clapping. The kids started clapping too, but unlike Pop, some of them clapped with the 'step' instead of with the 'touch.' "No, no, no!" he told them. "Watch me." He stepped and clapped, stepped and clapped. "We here at John Avery," he sang in rhythm with his step-clapping. He looked at the children expectantly. They looked back. "Y'all supposed to say it after me," he said. "Try it again. We here at John Avery." This time the kids followed. "We here at John Avery," they sang. "But y'all gotta keep clapping," Pop said to the kids that had stopped step-clapping. He waited for everyone to get their step-claps back, then continued his improvised song. "We going to go to the gym," he sang. "We going to go to the gym," the kids repeated. "And then we'll have some snack," Pop sang. "And then we'll have some snack," the kids replied. "Keep clapping, keep stepping," Pop said....

A group of about a dozen girls decided to have a battle. "Jada and Amber!" Shontreal commanded. 4th grader Jada and 2nd grader Amber faced each other in the middle of the makeshift dance floor as the other girls looked on. Everyone waited for Ms. Kia to pick a song. The music started, but Jada and Amber both stood there looking at each other. "Go ahead!!!" Ms. Kia said, urging them to dance. The two protested that they were waiting for the right point in the song. Eight bars in, they started. They both chose to do the same dance, but Amber soon took command. She jumped into a split and

started popping her hips against the floor. “Go Amber!” Ms. Kia said. She jumped back up and danced closer and closer to Jada, until they were no more than a couple feet from one another. Then Amber deliberately turned her back to Jada, swiveling her neck around and putting her hand in Jada’s face. Shontreal and Rashawwna, both 7th graders and the oldest and most popular girls in the room, fell over themselves with laughter. “She is killing it,” Shontreal yelled. “Jada, she is beating you!” Rashawwna said. Jada just stood back and watched Amber with wonder. The next day, Shontreal and Rashawwna invited Amber to come sit with them at their table in the Education Room. Other girls crowded around as the three girls talked about the previous day’s battle and how well Amber had danced. “I beat a 10-year-old!” Amber giggled more than once.

Rumors had been swirling amongst the kids and the staff that some girls were trying to “hunch” and “have sex” with other girls in the bathroom. Ms. Gordon took all the rumors seriously, and went so far as to make one girl in question go to the bathroom separately from everyone else. She pulled me aside one morning. “We gotta watch those girls in the bathroom,” she told me. “Sierra told me that they was in there talking about hunching. That’s why I stand there by the door.” Later that day all the kids in the Arts and Crafts Room took turns dancing to the radio. One by one, each boy and girl got up and danced in front of the other kids. After everyone had had their turn, a group of girls attempted the choreography from Ciara’s video “1-2 Step” while the boys sat in chairs and watched. The boys whispered amongst themselves and occasionally pointed to certain girls. Ms. Gordon waited for the song to finish, then called all the girls into the

hallway, the only time I've seen her do anything like that. I asked one of the girls what she had said. "She said that we shouldn't dance like that in front of boys, that it's nasty and that it's not nice. She said they be trying to see up our skirts."

At the John Avery Boys and Girls Club in Durham, NC music surrounds the children in many of their activities and social exchanges. Kids participate in informal musical activities, such as listening to the radio, and organized activities like the John Avery Gospel Choir and Step Team. Music marketed as "urban contemporary," known as "hip-hop" more generally, flows through the club: on the speakers that are turned up to full volume once everyone's homework is finished, in the dances that girls and boys practice, as a reference point for jokes at others' expense. Listening to music is a site of excitement and pleasure. Children listen to music every Friday and on weekdays after homework is finished. Although girls and boys listen to the same music, know the same dances and watch the same videos, girls' musical activities dominate the club space. Even though everyone wants to listen to the radio, it is always girls that control the dial. When girls decide that they want to dance in a room by themselves, they can usually kick the boys out without any staff members objecting. When an R&B song starts to play, girls close their eyes and sing along, while the boys look on with purposeful bewilderment. For girls at the club, dancing, singing and listening to hip-hop provide opportunities to socialize with one another, to hone their musical skills, and to learn and share ideas about being female and black. Through these activities girls are able to stake a claim on a genre

of music that is so important to their social life, yet which excludes them via age and gender.

Hip-hop's detractors point to the misogyny, sexual exploitation and violence predominant in the genre's most popular incarnations, suggesting that the music is a corrupting influence on America's youth. At John Avery, listening, dancing and singing to hip-hop is not illicit in and of itself; rather, these arguments manifest themselves in part through concerns around girls' musical practices. Girls' musical activities, especially dancing, are occasions for comments about heterosexuality, 'appropriate' behavior in front of boys and peers, and ways they should and should not use their bodies. Girls receive immediate feedback about their performances from staff and peers, and quickly learn the boundaries between "appropriate" and "inappropriate" movement and behavior. John Avery staff teach girls a paradigm of sexuality in an attempt to protect girls from the licentious actions of boys, older men and other girls. Girls respond to these discourses by distancing themselves from the women they see in videos, whose movement and clothing they define as "nasty" and "inappropriate." Yet they also recognize that knowledge about and participation in hip-hop-related activities are crucial to their interactions with their peers and their adult interlocutors.

In their musical activities, girls are careful to situate themselves as both invested in black popular culture, and as individual agents removed from hip-hop's sexual economy. They learn to coordinate their bodies to specific aspects of the music, while teaching, learning and talking with each other. Girls hone their listening skills through a variety of musical activities, including singing, dancing and talking about music. They

teach each other to hear and appreciate key aesthetic components of black music, such as emphasis on the bass and syncopated rhythm. While listening, girls share ideas about music, videos and celebrities. In these activities they develop a space for themselves which is distinctly black and female, but in which they can claim as much musical knowledge as any producer or emcee. Girls are attuned to sound, working imitations of artists and beats into everyday interactions, but they are also cognizant of how they should behave as young women in the community. When older girls teach younger girls how to dance, they are careful to include instruction in proper behavior and what constitutes “going too far.” Girls are not merely socialized into gendered subject positions through the consumption of hip-hop’s ideologies, nor do they unquestioningly adopt the moral lessons of their adult interlocutors. They continually hone their performances. As individual agents they develop a virtuosic repertoire of movement, carefully coordinated with a song’s beat. Girls use their artistry to situate themselves within hip-hop’s paradigm and to push boundaries of normative behavior enforced by adults. As they perfect their movements and cultivate their listening skills, they refine their understandings of what it means to be black and female. In this dissertation I examine how African-American girls at John Avery use their listening practices to claim a space within hip-hop’s landscape while still operating within the unambiguous moral framework they have learned from their parents, mentors and peers. They assert individuality, personality and agency as they learn and teach each other the many different ways to listen to hip-hop.

1.1 The John Avery Boys and Girls Club

Four girls are perched on the new brick sign outside of the John Avery Boys and Girls Club. It's around 4:00pm on Friday, September 8, 2006.

"Is it on?" one of them asks.

"Yeah," I say. "Go ahead."

They look right into the camera.

"My name is Tamika Smith."

"My name is Tamyra Smith."

"My name is Angel Robinson."

The fourth girl is staring out at the road. "Say it," Angel whispers to her. "SAY IT!"

"My name is Amari Robinson," she says eventually.

Tamika looks down at the sign she's sitting in front of. "And this is the Lee Smith Complex, a. k. a..."

"...John Avery Boys and Girls Club," everyone says with her.

"You know what's special about us?" Tamika asks the camera in a stilted, presentational voice. "We all are sisters. Let's show her a tour. Come on!" The girls hop off the sign and start cartwheeling on the grassy lawn.

"This is the front of John Avery Boys and Girls Club," Tamika says. She gestures to the front of the club, a one-story brick building built in the early 1970s. The sidewalk outside the club is lined with perennial shrubs. The girls walk up to the bright blue front door. Angel reads a sign posted on the window of the front door. "No guns, no fighting,

no smoking, no gambling permitted at John Avery Boys and Girls Club.’ Okay, let’s go in!’”

This project is circumscribed by the space of John Avery Boys and Girls Club. It was more than a just a building that held my interlocutors. The rules, staff and space of John Avery dictated the conditions under which I conducted my fieldwork, and so I begin with a tour of John Avery through the eyes of four club members. Tamika (4th grade), Tamyra (4th grade), Angel (4th grade) and Amari (3rd grade) were four of my research participants. I hung out with thirty to forty girls on a regular basis, all between kindergarten and seventh grade, twenty-five of whom had parental consent to be part of my research. The Lee Smith Complex, John Avery’s original and primary location, has approximately 300 square feet and between 150 and 200 club members, in grades kindergarten through high school.² Club membership is \$10 per year, and includes after-school care from 2:30 until 6:30pm every day the Durham public schools are in session. John Avery also runs a summer camp at \$63 per week per child, a fee that includes care from 7:30am until 6:30pm, and breakfast, lunch and an afternoon snack.³ It was here that I spent most of my weekday afternoons (during the school year) and weekday mornings (during summer break) from January 2006 to June 2007.

² John Avery Boys and Girls Club has two satellite locations that are much smaller in terms of physical space and the number of kids served. The satellite locations were not open during the summer, and renovations often forced the staff at these locations to bus their children to the Lee Smith Complex after school. Throughout the dissertation, when I refer to events happening at “John Avery” I am referring to the Lee Smith Complex.

³ Fee as of summer 2006.

The girls are in the small entryway in between the front door and the door that leads into the club proper. There's a display case on one wall showcasing trophies, certificates and 8x10 portraits of several men and women, the past presidents of the John Avery Board of Directors. "Okay, these are all our trophies that people won at basketball games," Tamyra says. "This is our new basketball team right here," Tamika says pointing to a picture of eleven boys in basketball uniforms. "Black. History!" Tamika says emphatically. "...is all at John Avery," Tamyra finishes. "Let's go inside!"

The club is located in Northeast Central Durham, in the city's historic Hayti neighborhood. Hayti was a self-sustaining black community formed in the Reconstruction era. In the first half of the twentieth century, it was often referred to as the "Capital of the Black Middle Class" by the American black press and was known as one of the most progressive black communities in the country.⁴ Civic leaders of Hayti organized John Avery in 1939 and named it after a prominent recently deceased civic leader.⁵ The John Avery Boys' Club affiliated with Boys Clubs of America in 1940 and changed its name to John Avery Boys and Girls Club in 1990 when the national organization changed its name.

⁴ John Hope Franklin, *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); Betsy Holloway, *Unfinished Heaven: Durham, North Carolina: A Story of Two Schools* (Orlando: Persimmon Press, 1994); Dorothy Phelps Jones, *The End of an Era* (Durham, NC: Brown Enterprises, 2001); Andre D. Vann and Beverly Washington Jones, *Durham's Hayti* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 1999).

⁵ Vann and Jones, 1999.

Following a national trend, the city of Durham promised “urban renewal” for Hayti in the 1960s, during which most of Hayti’s homes and businesses were destroyed and never rebuilt.⁶ The Lee Smith Complex was built after John Avery’s original location was torn down to make room for the Durham freeway. Now the most impoverished area of the city, the local, state and federal governments are pursuing strategies for economic redevelopment and ending the cycle of drug abuse and gang activity among minors in Northeast Central Durham.⁷ The area is designated a “Weed & Seed” population, a program funded by the U.S. Department of Justice designed to remove gangs, drug abuse and violent crime while developing community services and programming. It is also the recipient of a \$35 million federal grant to replace public housing areas with apartments and houses and a \$4.5 million pledge to construct an elite tuition-free charter school for Northeast Central children.⁸

Membership at John Avery mirrors its surrounding area. 91% of club members are African-American, and 73% of members live at or below the federal poverty level.⁹ John Avery’s mission to “inspire and enable all youth, particularly those from

⁶ Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

⁷ Durham Office of Economic & Employment Development, "Special Opportunity Projects: Northeast Central Durham Initiative" City of Durham, 2001.

⁸ Vicki Cheng, "Canal Street: What Will Save This Neighborhood?" *The News and Observer*, January 20 2002; Nikole Hannah-Jones, "Elite School Could Teach Durham's Needy" *The News and Observer*, February 21 2006.

⁹ Ted Fehskens, "Durham County Nonprofit Agency Funding Application," (Durham, NC: John Avery Boys and Girls Club, 2005). John Avery calculates poverty levels based on the number of kids getting free or reduced lunch at school, which is determined by federal poverty guidelines. The 2005 poverty threshold for the 48 contiguous states was \$19,350 for a family of four. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/05poverty.shtml>.

disadvantaged circumstances” is important to federal and local goals for the area. It is the only recreational facility available within a four-mile radius and serves as many as 150 members at one time. City, state and federal funding provides programming designed to prevent drug and alcohol abuse, early sexual activity and gang behavior.¹⁰ Local universities and civic organizations are invested in the club’s members, providing tutors, coaches and mentors. Volunteers also provide activities designed specifically for girls, such as Girl Scouts and dancing lessons.

They open the door to the club and there is a rush of sound. Three girls and a boy are hanging out by the front desk, talking to the woman sitting by the computer. Tamyra gestures to the camera to follow her through the open door that leads behind the desk. Amari, Tamyra and Tamika gather around a man sitting behind the desk and drape their arms around his shoulders. A boy pops in front of the camera and waves. “My name is Jamal! Hey!” he says. The girls ignore him. “This is Pop. He runs John Avery,” Tamyra says. Pop deliberately looks away from the girls and the camera and shakes his head. “He is very important,” Tamyra says. Pop’s eyes widen. “He is a very important dude,” Tamika echoes. Pop looks surprised at this description of himself. Amari giggles. Tamika moves on to the woman sitting by the computer. “This is Ms. Angela,” she says. “She’s kind of like the secretary-slash-treasurer. She’s a very important person.”

¹⁰ Fehskens, 2005.

The front desk is the first thing that greets club members and visitors when they enter the club proper. It's actually an enclosed space with a deep, elevated wrap-around desk surface, accessible by a door that can be closed and locked (see Fig. 1). At the desk itself, there is a phone, a computer, a volunteer log, and lots of flyers with pertinent club and community information. In the space behind the desk are two small office spaces, holding a copy machine, staff time cards, and lots of random items that need storage space. These two little rooms are also used for private phone calls and for serious talks with kids that have been misbehaving. There is always at least one staff member sitting at the desk, monitoring the game room and who comes in and out of the club. A small convex mirror on the opposite wall means she can see who is walking in and out through the doors behind her. During my fieldwork, the person sitting at the front changed depending on the needs of the club and staff availability. A lot of the time it was Ms. Angela, a Latina woman whose two sons were club members. Other times it was Fred Bennett (known to everyone as "Pop"), an African-American man who is John Avery's Director of Operations, or Tish McKoy, an African-American woman who is the Unit Director for the Lee Smith Complex. Whoever it was, she or he would sit behind the desk, answer phone calls, greet kids and parents when they arrived, and call kids when it was time for them to go home.



Figure 1: Ms. Kia sitting at the front desk at the end of the day.

The first kids start arriving after school around 2:30. They arrive on school buses, in cars, or sometimes on the John Avery van. On a typical day after school, the number of kids at the club can be anywhere from 50 to 100. Each club member is assigned a number, which she or he gives the staff member at the front desk upon arrival and departure. When a club member arrives at the club after school, she is expected to report to her assigned group space. Group A, kids in grades K-3, go to the Arts and Crafts Room, run by Ms. Gordon, an African-American woman in her seventies who is a retired nurse at Duke Hospital, and sometimes Ms. Angela. Group B, grades 4-6, go to the Education Room, run by Ms. Kia, an African-American woman in her early twenties with aspirations of a career as a singer. Teenagers (grades 7 and up) go to the teen center in the

basement of the building, overseen by Mr. Hank, a white man in his late twenties who came to John Avery after holding a similar position at a Boys and Girls Club in South Carolina. Everyone, regardless of age, is required to finish their homework before they can do anything else—play basketball in the gym, pool in the game room, or go in the computer room. Each club member must show her homework to her respective staff member before she gets a “homework pass,” which she then must show to the staff member in the game room or gym.

The girls move on to the game room, filled with boys and girls playing ping-pong, pool and air hockey. “This is the game room,” Tamika says. She stops in front of two girls, who have their arms around each other’s shoulders and are grinning for the camera. “And these are some friends, Tia and Nevaeh,” says Tamyra.

“What’s up dudes?” Tia says. She flashes the peace sign and bursts into laughter.

“Can I show you some very important people?” Tamika asks the camera. She leads the girls past the front desk and towards the smaller of the two pool tables, where a young white man is playing pool with a club member. Tamika reaches up and puts her hand on his shoulder. “This is a volunteer,” she says. She reads the logo on his shirt. “Tar heels. Heels on the street.”¹¹ Tamyra points to a young white woman talking to some girls in the corner. “Another volunteer,” she says. Volunteers from UNC are all

¹¹ “Tar heel” is the nickname for sports teams at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Duke’s sports arch-rival. Oftentimes, one of the first questions I was asked by kids at John Avery was “Do you go for Duke or Carolina?”

around the game room, playing cards, pool, fussball, or just sitting against the wall. All of them are wearing the same shirt. The girls walk around the game room, pointing to all the outsiders. "More volunteers," they say.

John Avery depends on volunteers coming in and out of the club. Volunteers can make the difference between staff members being able to implement educational programs for kids at the club, or doing little more than baby-sitting. When children are working on homework, having a volunteer or two in the Arts and Crafts Room means that they can answer children's persistent questions while Ms. Gordon prepares materials for crafts projects. Volunteers at the club come from all around the area. John Avery has relationships with Duke's Community Service Center, a clearinghouse for volunteer activities for Duke students, and with North Carolina Central University, the University of North Carolina, Triangle United Way and the Durham Senior Center. But the number and quality of volunteers changes all the time. No one really expects volunteers to become a permanent part of the club. On my first day at John Avery, when I was just another volunteer, I was showered with love from the youngest children at the club, the kindergartners, first graders and second graders. I was greeted with hugs first, requests for candy second, and questions about my hair third. I went home with two drawings made especially for me, which I put on my fridge. On my second day at the club, the same kids who hugged me, played with my hair, and drew my portrait in magic marker didn't remember me. Hardly any of the kids bothered to learn my name for weeks, until I

had become more of a fixture and authority figure. Until then, I was pretty much like every other Duke student coming in and helping with homework.

There's another category of volunteer, the ones who come in either individually or in groups to do a series of activities with the children. Falling under this category would be the lady who came once a week for eight weeks to teach dancing to girls, the woman who tried to start a Girl Scout Troup, the man who briefly taught karate in the gym, and the woman who brought huge blocks of clay with which everyone made small bowls and sculptures. These volunteers cultivate more of a semi-permanent status. Many times, however, some volunteers make promises that they cannot or do not keep. Education students from NCCU ran a tutoring program in the club for years, and when they ran out of funding, had to stop the program. A group of women started a cheerleading program for girls at John Avery, and for a few months led practice twice a week, taking over the Education Room and requiring girls to stay late and adhere to a dress code. They sold coupon books as a fundraiser for the team (named "J.A. Explosion") and ordered shorts for all the girls with their names written on them. The girls learned 8-count routines in preparation for a fall competition. Some girls went to extra tumbling classes. Then cancelled practices became more and more common, and then the cheer instructors stopped coming at all. No explanation was given to the girls, the staff, or the parents. There's seldom an explanation when a volunteer stops coming or an activity stops happening, but it is rare that staff, parents, and children become invested in a volunteer's activity. Incidents like these perhaps explain why kids are seldom told

ahead of time when special activities happen at the club. If it's planned by a volunteer, the likelihood of it being postponed or cancelled is too great.

Tamika leads the camera and her friends down a dark, narrow hallway. They pass by a bunch of backpacks hanging on pegs and a bulletin board with "Summer Time Fun 2006" written in giant bubble letters. At the end of the hall is John Avery's gymnasium. The echo-y sounds of boys and girls' feet on the floor, bouncing balls and high-pitched voices get louder and louder. "This is the gym," Tamika says. "It's not very neat."

The gym is run by Coach Donnie, an African-American man who also works as a member of Duke's custodial staff. He coaches boys' basketball and baseball teams, running practices out of John Avery after after-school care.¹² The gym is a cavernous space with a linoleum floor and a high ceiling. Metal grates cover the windows that start at the ceiling and go about a quarter of the way to the floor on three of the four walls. Sounds linger in the space and individual voices are hard to distinguish and understand, but Coach Donnie seldom speaks above a whisper. Instead he communicates with nodding and pointing, using his whistle to get kids' attention. It was usually the same group of kids hanging out in the gym: a lot of boys and some girls playing basketball, a handful of girls playing with jump ropes, a few of the youngest kids running around and

¹² As of this writing, there are no John Avery-sponsored teams for girls.

dodging the balls flying around the gym, and sometimes girls and boys sitting in the chairs against the walls talking.

The walls are bright blue, with outlines of non-gendered bodies participating in a variety of sports-related activities, painted by volunteers on the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday in 2006. It didn't take long for the paint to chip and bald spots to appear in the wall. Like the other spaces at John Avery, the gym looks a little worn down. With over 100 kids coming through the club in any given weekday, the constant at the club is wear and tear. The ends of the new pool cues are worn down to nubs in a matter of weeks (kids strategize their game around how best to use these cues and how to work around the torn felt lining on the pool table and the slant in the floor that makes all the balls lean towards the right corner pocket). There's wear and tear in the staff too. The staff is small and close, and amazingly accommodating of extenuating circumstances, of which there are many. Pop has a congenital illness meaning that sometimes he works half-days, and he was often in and out of the hospital, leaving Tish as the main operational director. When Tish was out, Hank filled in for her, walking through the club to make sure everything was running smoothly. Hank's in a local bluegrass band, and his contract with John Avery stipulated his being able to leave early for weekend tours every Friday after lunch. So when he wasn't there to run the teen center, the teens hung out with Ms. Kia in the Education Room. Another staff member took classes at North Carolina Central University and worked nightshifts at the front desk of a local hotel, necessitating his frequent absence. Yet another staff member had a medical emergency at the beginning of the 2006 summer camp in 2006, entailing a re-arrangement of staff and last-minute hire

(me). A few months later Ms. Gordon's mother and niece died within a week of each other, leaving the already bare-bones staff stretched even thinner.

The girls lead the camera back outside. "Okay. Now we going outside John Avery," Tamyra says. "You know, the usual, the usual." Angel pushes the door open to daylight and relative quiet compared with inside the club. Angel and Amari do cartwheels on the grass as Tamika and Tamyra lead the camera around the corner of the club to the parking lot. "Now we don't know who cars these is, but I'm pretty sure it's somebody who work here," Tamyra says. She points to the steps leading up to a door on the side of the building. "Now. That's the door inside the gym." Then she points to a loudspeaker mounted on the brick wall just above the door. "This microphone right there tells people when it's time for them to go home."

Afternoons after school are punctuated by John Avery's public address system. It is piped into each room and the outside parking lot facing the playground. Kids are told to come to the front and get their new club t-shirts or to line up for the snack that is sometimes offered (depending on whether or not the local Food Bank is donating fruit and peanut butter that month). Most often, Ms. Angela's voice announced the arrival of a child's ride home. The frequency of intercom announcements increases around 5:00pm, as most parents, grandparents and aunties get off work and pick up their club members. Every day at around 6:00pm there would be an announcement that the Arts and Crafts Room and the Education Room were about to be locked, and if anyone still had their

book bags in one of those rooms, they'd better get them out. Eventually there are few enough kids to all fit in the Game Room. At that point kids sit around waiting for their rides to come, and the intercom is no longer needed.

The intercom is often the first sound heard by visitors to the club. Thanks to the speaker on the side of the building facing the parking lot, sometimes you know that Keith and Kiana are about to leave before you're even all the way out of the car. "... and Kiana Johnson, time to go; Keith and Kiana Johnson, time to go." Inside the club, the intercom mirrors its soundscape: loud, irregular, and indiscriminate. For infrequent visitors to John Avery, it can be a source of consternation. More than one volunteer has engaged in an epic struggle to secure a quiet room and the children's attention, only to jump, startled, at the sound of "Taykwon Reeves, time to go; Taykwon Reeves, time to go." The intercom is piped into every space at the club, indifferent as to whether its audience is boys and girls running around the cavernous gym, or seven third graders fidgeting quietly in the Arts and Crafts Room while listening to the Girl Scout lady explain good table manners.

The intercom makes the club run effectively; it performs the important task of allowing one person to answer the phone, monitor who enters and leaves the building, and inform the club when it's time for a kid to go home, all without getting up from the front desk. This is crucial for a non-profit organization dependent on low-wage part-time workers who have often have extenuating circumstances or other jobs. It also means that everyone can be easily rounded up for a gang prevention program or a Christmas gift distribution with no advance warning. Kids only know something out of the ordinary is happening when they hear it on the intercom. One minute a girl could be following her

usual routine of homework/game room/gym/computer room, and the next minute she could hear an announcement beginning with “Attention all club members....” And then she might be directed to the Education Room with all the other girls, or all the other kids her age, where she might find volunteers stationed at tables, ready to dish out ice cream and candy. Or dental floss and novelty plastic teeth. Or she might be asked to sign a thank-you card for one of the club’s corporate sponsors. Or she might have to listen to Ms. Jenny talk about interviews and music or something.

The girls run across the parking lot through the gap in the chain link fence, and then across the grassy field to the swing set. Each girl sits on one of the four swings. Tamika jumps off her swing. “Let’s show her our step!” she says. Tamyra and Amari line up next to her. Tamika shouts at the top of her lungs. “I said Johhhhhhn Aver-Y! I said J-J-J-J-John Aver-Y!” The girls start stepping and clapping to the rhythm of their chant.

Girls’ stepping was one of the many musical activities at John Avery.¹³ Most girls wanted to listen to the radio whenever possible. For most of my fieldwork I brought my personal iPod to facilitate listening. With the exception of the first few days when I initially needed to show everyone how the iPod worked, girls had almost complete control of the iPod and decided which songs to play, how loud to play them, and for how

¹³ “Stepping” is a musical practice associated with African-American fraternities and sororities. Participants (usually in groups) use foot stomping, clapping, body percussion and chanting to produce coordinated rhythms.

long. Girls had access to a playlist I called “Radio,” which included songs from Billboard’s Hot R&B/Hip-hop chart and songs that girls requested (usually the same songs).¹⁴ All of the versions were “clean,” that is, the versions without profanities.

When I started visiting John Avery, it was with the intention of finding girls interested in emceeing, or rapping. My initial idea for a dissertation project was to interrogate the ways in which girls reconcile genre conventions of misogyny and sexual violence with their personal experiences as young black females through creating their own music. I assumed that I would meet a few girls with ambitions of “making it” in hip-hop, or at least girls with a passing interest in hip-hop production. Yet although almost every girl identified as a hip-hop fan, none of the girls at John Avery seemed curious about hip-hop’s creative processes. I discovered the truth of two of Mary Celeste Kearney’s observations in her study on girls’ media production in the late 20th and early 21st century: first, that despite the rising availability of girl-produced media in the last two decades (both in terms of emerging technologies and increased girl-directed marketing campaigns), working class girls produce media on a much more diminished scale than middle class girls, because of limited resources of time, money, and access to the means of production (video cameras, computers, web software, etc.); second, that girls have fewer role models of female music production (in terms of women who write their own music and manage their own careers) now than at any point since the early

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that girls at John Avery did not listen to other kinds of music. I heard numerous references to the Cheetah Girls, Hannah Montana and High School Musical (all Disney franchises), for example. However, from the beginning I limited myself to studying African-American girls and *hip hop*, and therefore did not include songs outside the parameters of commercial hip hop/R&B on my iPod unless someone specifically requested it (which rarely happened).

1980s.¹⁵ Despite this, for the first few months of my fieldwork I was surprised and disappointed that girls seemed unimpressed by the features of hip-hop that I had invested a lot of time thinking about—musical details such as a song’s sound engineering, the intricacies of an emcee’s flow, and the use of samples or imaginative sounds in a song’s beat. Everyone knew and listened to the same songs as everyone else.

This dissertation focuses exclusively on what I am referring to as “commercial” hip-hop, the fairly small repertoire of songs played on local radio stations, and on cable television channels such as BET and MTV. In the age group I worked with (grades K-7), there were very few instances of anyone introducing new music to anyone else, and very few instances of kids requesting songs that weren’t being played on the radio (and in those cases they requested internet viral hits such as “Chicken Noodle Soup,” “Shootout,” “Crank That,” and “Percolator,” most of which eventually made it to the radio).¹⁶ In hip-hop, the emcee is the most prominent figure and is the object of analysis for most studies.¹⁷ Yet emceeing is almost exclusively a male enterprise, and women have had mixed success in being taken seriously by audiences, critics and other artists.¹⁸ Several

¹⁵ Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006). Kearney asserts that the decline of the Riot Grrrl movement in the mid 1990s and the subsequent rise of a new kind of female musical act (such as Britney Spears and the Spice Girls) was in part the result of a neo-conservative backlash against feminism.

¹⁶ DJ Webstar, “Chicken Noodle Soup,” *Webstar Presents: Caught in the Web* (Scilla Hill, 2006); Soulja Boy Tell ‘Em, “Shootout,” digital download, 2006; Soulja Boy Tell ‘Em, “Crank That (Soulja Boy),” *souljaboytellem.com* (Interscope, 2007); Cajmere, “Percolator,” digital download.

¹⁷ The major exceptions to the “emcees-only” rule in hip-hop scholarship are Joseph Schloss’ two monographs: *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Wesleyan University Press, 2004), an ethnography of hip-hop producers, and *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* (Oxford University Press, 2009), a cultural history of breakdancing in New York City.

¹⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Wanda Renee Porter, “Salt-N-Pepa, Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown and Eve: The

academic works analyze women's contributions to hip-hop, but usually within a framework that privileges the emcee's artistic contributions over those of other participants. The authors of these works seem eager to hold up female emcees such as MC Lyte, Monie Love and Queen Latifah as paragons of political possibility in hip-hop.¹⁹ While their work resonates with hip-hop produced before the mid-90s, it's hard to reconcile these studies with commercial hip-hop in the 21st century.²⁰ Much of the music featured in this dissertation revels in near-caricatures of misogyny, corporate and individual greed, materialism, and hyper-machismo. Within the landscape of commercial hip-hop, black female sexuality is only comfortable in the service of the male emcee, and women with agency are virtually invisible. During the eighteen months of my fieldwork only four non-singing women cracked Billboard's Top 20: Missy Elliott ("Lose Control"), Kelis ("Bossy"), Fergie ("London Bridge," "Fergalicious," and "Glamorous") and Lil' Mama ("Lipgloss").²¹ It's almost inconceivable to imagine a song like MC

Politics of the Black Female Body," *Doula: The Journal of Rap music and Hip-Hop Culture* 1, no. 1 (2000): 18-22.

¹⁹ Nancy Guevara, "Women Writin' Rappin' Breakin'," in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, edited by William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Cheryl Keyes, "'We're More Than a Novelty, Boys': Strategies of Female Rappers in the Rap Music Tradition," in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, edited by Joan Newlon Radner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 203-20; Robin Roberts, "'Ladies First': Queen Latifah's Afrocentric Feminist Music Video," *African American Review* 28, no. 2 (1994): 245-57.

²⁰ Perhaps not coincidentally, the decline in popularity and visibility of these women, as well as that of politically-minded acts such as Public Enemy and N.W.A., coincides with the changing visibility of female producers of rock and roll. Kearney suggests that this change is linked to the neo-conservative backlash against feminism in the 1990s.

²¹ Billboard Album Charts, www.billboard.com [accessed 23 August 2007]; Missy Elliott, "Lose Control," *The Cookbook* (Goldmind, 2005); Kelis, "Bossy," *Kelis Was Here* (LaFace, 2006); Fergie, "London

Lyte's "Paper Thin" or Queen Latifah's "Ladies First" even being heard on the radio today, let alone becoming a hit.²² Perhaps in part because of this lack of celebrity role models, none of the girls I met even showed an interest in producing their own music. Setting words to a beat did not seem to have any appeal for the girls at John Avery, nor did composing original melodies or creating beats. How then do we think about girls' musical engagements when certain avenues of production and representation are completely blocked to girls, so much so that the thought of being an emcee *never even crosses their minds?*²³

The common wisdom is that hip-hop's most loyal fans have been, at least since the commercial success of gangsta rap, white middle-class male teenagers, prompting what Tracy Sharpley-Whiting labels "national hand-wringing and hysteria among whites."²⁴ However, audiences are generally measured in terms of record sales and other purchases (including downloads and cell phone ringtones), which does not account for

Bridge," "Fergalicious," and "Glamorous," *The Dutchess* (A&M, 2006); Lil' Mama, "Lipgloss," *VYP: Voice of the Young People* (Jive, 2007).

²² I should note here that of course there *are* female emcees in underground circles, and a few great ones in Durham even. But as far as I can tell, there was no interest, and perhaps not even an awareness of any underground artists. I also was surprised at the seeming lack of any fan culture around mix tapes (independently produced collections that are distributed outside of normal distribution channels, i.e. online or through underground networks), even those made by commercial artists such as Lil' Wayne.

²³ I asked a group of girls once to name some female emcees. They first named Missy Elliott, and then pretty quickly were able to name some of the most prominent emcees in the 80s and 90s: MC Lyte, Roxanne Shante, Queen Latifah. Curiously, the girls talked about them not as fans, but more like dutiful students recalling important facts. In other words, the conversation resembled similar recitations I've heard them give on important African-American historical figures: they know that MC Lyte was a great emcee, like they know that Martin Luther King Jr. gave important speeches and worked to end racism in America.

²⁴ Tracy Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 19.

kids who download music illegally, watch videos together on youtube, or consume music in other ways considered “off the grid.” While I saw very few purchased CDs at the club and heard very limited conversation about personal music collections, there was not one child at John Avery, or at local schools I visited, who did not know DJ Unk’s “2 Step”, Ciara’s “Promise” or D4L’s “Laffy Taffy”.²⁵ They know the music from radio, from television, from their parents, brothers, sisters, friends. They know it because it’s a constant part of conversation, and it’s always being practiced at school, on the playground, at John Avery, and at home. Afternoons at John Avery are saturated with many different kinds of hip-hop-related “musicking,” a term Christopher Small uses to describe all the different ways people interact with music.²⁶ Kids “practice” hip-hop every time they dispute the lyrics of a song, every time they dance together, every time they sing while doing their homework or play basketball, and every time the radio plays in the background. Kids’ knowledge of commercial hip-hop is intertwined with and relies upon all of the singing, dancing, stepping, talking, listening, and sharing that happens all the time at John Avery among kids and adults. When confronted with this reality, I was forced to re-examine my own assumptions about creativity and musical participation, and the false binary between “artist” and “listener.” Thus I quickly discovered that though none of the girls thought of themselves as future emcees, and could not necessarily articulate the defining musical features of any one emcee or producer, they lived

²⁵ DJ Unk, “2 Step,” *Beat ’n Down Yo Block!* (Big Oomp Records, 2007); Ciara, “Promise,” *Ciara: The Evolution* (LaFace, 2006); D4L, “Laffy Taffy,” *Down for Life* (Atlantic, 2005).

²⁶ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England).

completely musical and artistic experiences, but in ways that are seldom taken seriously inside or outside the academy.

The non-verbal contributions of women and girls are not often considered in academic spaces. Collections such as *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip-Hop Feminism Anthology*, sections of *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* and studies such as *Check It While I Wreck It* provide invaluable contributions in articulating the challenges and difficult negotiations for black women, whether they be commercial artists or creators on the fringe.²⁷ Yet even when these studies move beyond the emcee, there is a limited view of the cultural producer as one who writes, creates, and/or performs original material.²⁸ Music and artistry are at the center of my project, but instead of looking at more traditional paradigms of musical participation, I consider the artistry that emerges from an intimate knowledge of and enjoyment in listening to music.

Part of the reason why I argue so strenuously for the consideration of women's non-emcee contributions is because at present those are the only roles that are supported by the commercial industry. However, it is not my aim in this dissertation to think about why, in the context of dominant narratives of white, middle-class femininity in consumer culture, girls at John Avery are not interested in producing their own media, or even to dive very far into why they are shut out. Rather, the objective here is to uncover the ways

²⁷ Gwendolyn D. Pough, ed, *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip-Hop Feminism Anthology* (Mira Loma, CA: Parker Publishing, 2007); Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds, *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern Press, 2004).

²⁸ An exception is Alesha Dominek Washington, "Not the Average Girl from the Videos: B-Girls Defining Their Space in Hip-Hop Culture," in *Home Girls Make Some Noise!: Hip-Hop Feminism Anthology*, 80-91 (Mira Loma, CA: Parker Publishing, 2007).

in which girls musically engage with what they've been given. This includes re-thinking the ways girls listen, and taking seriously "listening" as a creative and productive activity. While it's useful to think of those who are pushing the boundaries of female performance in hip-hop, at this point in hip-hop scholarship I believe it's more productive to push the boundaries of how we (academics and non-academics) think about performance, who and what we privilege as objects of analysis, and how different kinds of female creativity flourish within and around commercial hip-hop's crushing misogyny.

1.2 Children, Childhood, and the Media in Anthropology

In anthropological studies of children, and childhood, children's activities have often been framed as sites where children learn how to act as adults in society.²⁹ In this study I take my cues from the following recent threads in anthropological studies of children: the strenuous critique of a developmental model in childhood studies; the consideration of children, even young children, as "socially competent and actively involved in the negotiation of their social worlds,"³⁰ and Sharon Stephens' call for researchers to investigate "the global political, economic, and cultural transformations

²⁹ See Montgomery 2009 for an intellectual history of childhood in the field of anthropology, and Schwartzman 2001 for a survey of publications on children and childhood in *American Anthropologist*. Heather Montgomery, *An Introduction to Childhood: An Anthropological Perspective on Children's Lives* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Helen B. Schwartzman, "Children and Anthropology: A Century of Studies." In *Children and Anthropology: Perspectives for the 21st Century*, edited by Helen B. Schwartzman (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 2001), 15-38.

³⁰ Paul Connelly, "Race, Gender and Critical Reflexivity in Research with Young Children," in *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*, edited by Pia Christensen and Allison James (New York: Routledge, 2008), 174. The works of Allison James and Alan Prout have been very influential in pushing anthropologists to critically examine age as a marginalized category of identity. See especially Allison James and Adrian L. James, *Constructing Childhood: Theory, Policy and Social Practice* (London: Palgrave, 2004); Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998); and Alan Prout, ed., *The Body, Childhood and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

that are currently rendering children so dangerous, contested, and pivotal in the formation of new sorts of social persons, groups, and institutions.”³¹ Several recent works argue for the consideration of children as interpreters of their own circumstances, and offer vibrant ethnographies that take seriously these interpretations.³² These works go beyond the important work of giving marginalized subjects a “voice”; they show that children’s understandings of complex ideas such as citizenship, consumerism, and conflict are not only important for the children themselves, but are crucial in understanding the societies in which children live. I am inspired by these works in my attempt to write an ethnography of marginalized youth that has implications beyond my research participants. I focus on a small but important portion of my research participants’ lives (their time at John Avery), and then attempt to address what girls’ practices have to tell us about the way dominant narratives of misogyny and black female sexuality in American popular culture are negotiated by the consuming public.

Surely there has never been a better argument for looking to children as “experts” in American popular culture. “Contemporary childhood is a mediatized childhood,” both in terms of the numbers of technologies available for and used by kids, and in terms of popular discourse that frames the typical American childhood as intimately connected to

³¹ Sharon Stephens, “Introduction: Children and the Politics of Culture in ‘Late Capitalism,’” in *Children and the Politics of Culture*, ed. Sharon Stephens (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995), 14. See Lancey 2008 for a survey of current important themes in anthropological research on childhood, examined cross-culturally. David Lancey, *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³² Kristen E. Cheney, *Pillars of the Nation: Child Citizens and Ugandan National Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Elizabeth Chin, *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Sunaina Maira, *Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire after 9/11* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

media technologies and the popular culture that is thereby transmitted.³³ The number of technologies that if not conceived for, then are seized upon by, teenagers, adolescents, “tweens,” and younger children has grown exponentially in the last ten years. Even just three years after my fieldwork, it seems positively quaint to think of a group of children congregated around a single mobile media device (my iPod) and learning to use it for the first time, when two years later most of those same children had access to at least one personal mobile media device (most often a cell phone with a camera, digital music downloader, and texting capability).³⁴ These technologies, however, despite the convenience their increasing availability affords to poor and working-class children, take their place in a history of panics around children, technology, and the media.

Popular culture has long been a source of anxiety for American politicians and civic leaders seeking to control youthful sexuality.³⁵ Politicians and the media sensationalize hip-hop as “dangerous” and worry that it will teach children violent behavior and early sexual activity. Exposure to media is often blamed for children’s loss of innocence³⁶ and increasing violent behavior.³⁷ To that end, a number of American

³³ Kirsten Drotner, “Mediatized Childhoods: Discourses, Dilemmas and Directions,” in *Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency, Culture*, edited by Jens Qvortrup (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 39.

³⁴ I don’t mean to suggest that had I done my fieldwork two years later, musical activities would have been more individualized or isolating. I think probably that cell phones, texting, and individual mobile music devices would have instead been part of more multi-layered musical experiences. See Tyler Bickford, “Media Consumption, Classroom Ideologies, and Children’s Expressive Culture at a K–8 Vermont Public School,” Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, forthcoming.

³⁵ John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

³⁶ David Buckingham and Sara Bragg, “Opting in to (and out of) Childhood: Young People, Sex and the Media,” in *Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency, Culture*, edited by Jens Qvortrup (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 59-77.

authors, writing for the general public, have expressed concern about popular culture's and "the media's" effect on girls in particular.³⁸ Their observations reinforce the idea that girls uncritically consume popular culture, that such passive consumption is unequivocally damaging to girls' self-esteem and moral stature, and that girls will benefit from the wisdom of adults' experience. The girls who are the subjects of these books are not identified by geographic location, race, or socio-economic status; the reader must assume that the risk of over-sexualization and loss of childhood innocence applies to all American girls within the reach of popular culture.

Of course, some girls, including the ones in this dissertation, are already collectively categorized as "at-risk" by virtue of socio-economic status and membership in organizations such as John Avery. They are presumably at risk of continuing the cycle of poverty, becoming pregnant at an early age, using drugs, and becoming incarcerated, all before "the media" and popular culture even enter the equation. As Greg Dimitriadis points out, "at-risk" is also framed as a psychological condition in institutions such as schools, and "at-risk" kids are often pathologized because of poor grades and behavior

³⁷ Stephen Kline, "Is It Time to Rethink Media Panics?" in *Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency, Culture*, edited by Jens Qvortrup (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 78-98.

³⁸ Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Putnam, 1994) was extremely successful, spending a number of weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. See also M. Gigi Durham, *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 2008) and Patrice Oppliger, *Girls Gone Skank: The Sexualization of Girls in American Culture*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2008).

issues.³⁹ These kids, as individuals, are then positioned as the cause of problems such as gang violence and teen pregnancy, and are thus seen as “risky” as well as “at-risk.”⁴⁰ The burden of society, therefore, lies not in alleviating the adverse social conditions in which these kids live, but in protecting its “normal” citizens from “at-risk” youth. When exposure to media is factored into this category of girls, the “risks” of lost innocence and damaged self-esteem are intertwined with the “risks” they supposedly face because of their socio-economic status, and the “risky-ness” with which they are pathologized.

The tensions between “at-risk” and “risky” play out daily in girls’ interactions with each other and John Avery staff. Adults at John Avery and in the surrounding community imagine that hip-hop’s influence will lead girls down a path towards sexual violence and victimhood. The hyper-masculine drug culture celebrated in popular hip-hop is a reality of Northeast Central Durham, which has a 30% poverty rate and the highest concentration of gang activity in the city.⁴¹ The reported incidence of rape, rarely discussed in public forums, is twice as high as that of homicides.⁴² In this context, real-world implications and assumptions find their way into adults’ and children’s commentary on girls’ musical practices. The tendency of adults to encourage fun in the form of dancing, singing and acknowledging musical talent is offset by their fear that hip

³⁹ Greg Dimitriadis, *Friendship, Cliques, and Gangs: Young Black Men Coming of Age in Urban America* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003). Dimitriadis points out that this pathologization often coincides with the onset of adolescence.

⁴⁰ Stephens 1995.

⁴¹ Poverty rate based on 2000 census data. U.S. Census Bureau, www.factfinder.census.gov; Pamela J. Majette, "Gangs in Our Community: A Snapshot Look at the Gang Phenomenon in Northeast Central Durham," (Durham, NC: City of Durham Police Department, 2002), 1-51.

⁴² Durham Police Department, "2005 Durham Crime Mapper," Durham Police Department, 2006.

hop's violence and misogyny could potentially bleed into kids' real lives. The different kinds of risks that girls are seen as being susceptible to, both because of their positionalities in a poor, working class neighborhood and because of their exposure to hip-hop, are inextricable from one another. The interplay of these risks is especially crucial in considering how girls learn to dance and how they gauge the reactions of their peers and adult mentors (as I discuss in Chapter 4).

John Avery explicitly positions itself, in funding applications and promotional materials, as a space in between school and “the street,” a space that protects children from delinquent activities while providing them with opportunities for ‘positive’ interactions outside school’s rigid structure. American schools often serve to educate students in hegemonic values of race, gender and sexuality; that is, values of the white middle class.⁴³ However, children learn identity and ideology in arenas outside of school and the family.⁴⁴ Greg Dimitriadis’ work points out that Boys and Girls Clubs and similar sites function as “unofficial educational institutions,” and “are doing much of the pedagogical work traditionally and ostensibly performed in schools.”⁴⁵ In addition to being in between “school” and “the street,” John Avery is also a space between home and school, both temporally and ideologically, and some staff are explicit in attempting to fill in the gaps in what they believe kids *should* be taught at home. I highlight the

⁴³ Signithia Fordham, *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity and Success at Capital High* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁴⁴ Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

⁴⁵ Dimitriadis 2003, 12. See also Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy and Lived Practice* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

implications of this liminal positioning on informal lessons taught by staff members in Chapter 4.

The panicked discourses of authors such as Pipher, Durham and Oppliger do not take into account how media operates in children's daily lives amidst competing and concurring messages from peers and adults, or that girls are able to recognize and critique misogyny and racism even if they can't always put those critiques into words. My research moves beyond literature about mass media's "impact" and "effect" on youth culture by examining children as active participants in the listening experience.⁴⁶ Elizabeth Chin's and Shauna Pomerantz' recent studies counter the idea that children's media consumption is mindless and hegemonic, and focus instead on the performative aspects of consumption as it relates to gender, racial and class identities—in Chin's case, through the study of inner-city African-American kids' spending habits, and in Pomerantz' case the study of Canadian high school girls' conceptions of personal style.⁴⁷ I follow Chin and Pomerantz by considering girls' musical activities as performative consumption. In their musical activities, girls demonstrate that they are keen observers of the ways in which hip-hop is marketed, as well as the ways in which adults warily monitor hip-hop's negative influences. These critiques and understandings aren't always put into words, but instead are conveyed performatively through gestures, vocal delivery, the ways that girls relate to one another in their musical activities. While political,

⁴⁶ Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994); Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'N' Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

⁴⁷ Chin 2001; Shauna Pomerantz, *Girls, Style and School Identities: Dressing the Part* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

economic and cultural forces circumscribe possible meanings for the songs John Avery girls listen to,⁴⁸ girls negotiate their personal understandings of the dominant narratives of black female sexuality through their musical practices, in the process producing understandings of self in relation to hip-hop and black popular culture.

1.3 Children and Everyday Listening

Many ethnomusicological studies of music and children focus on children's musical games as arenas where children learn and act out their places in their respective communities, anticipate their roles in adulthood,⁴⁹ and negotiate relationships and conflicts through play.⁵⁰ Perspectives on children's "play" make it clear that "play" is a space where ideologies of gender, race, and class are articulated and reproduced.⁵¹ However, "play" as a category of analysis often configures children's activities as isolated from the socio-political realities of local environments. In this framework musical activities are often imagined as always discrete events that are removed from other discrete events like "work," and ignores the import of musical activities not only to

⁴⁸ Dimitriadis 2001; David Morley, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁴⁹ John Blacking, *Venda Children's Songs: A Study in Ethnomusicological Analysis* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1967); Margaret Brady, "This Little Lady's Gonna Boogaloo': Elements of Socialization in the Play of Black Girls" in *Black Girls at Play: Folkloric Perspectives on Child Development*, edited by Margaret K. Brady and Rosiland Ekhardt (Austin: Southwest Educational Development Corporation, 1975), 1-56; Inez Cardozo-Freeman, "Games Mexican Girls Play," *Journal of American Folklore* 88, no. 347 (1975): 12-24; Carol Merrill-Mirsky, "Eeny Meeny Pepsadeeny: Ethnicity and Gender in Children's Musical Play," Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1988.

⁵⁰ Brady 1975; *Growing up in the Playground: The Social Development of Children* (London: Routledge, 1981); Marjorie Harness Goodwin, *He-Said-She-Said: Talk as Social Organization among Black Children* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁵¹ Barrie Thorne, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Paul Connolly, *Racism, Gender Identities and Young Children* (London: Routledge, 1998).

the girls themselves, but also to their adult interlocutors. Play is an important critical category for studying gendered differences and children's sociological understandings,⁵² and in imagining girls' musical activities as venues for socialization into raced, classed and gendered ideologies. However, I find it reductive to think of my research participants' musical activities as only "play." I argue in this dissertation that far from being discrete events whose significance is limited to children's social spheres, girls' musical activities are inseparable from the other parts of their lives, and have impacts that affect the behavior of the club's staff members and other adult interlocutors.

Kids at John Avery are not unique in their myriad musical practices. Patricia Shehan Campbell's study on children and music at a Washington primary school describes every aspect of children's musical encounters—from humming and tapping rhythms at a lunch table to talk about the music that runs through their heads.⁵³ I follow Campbell by acknowledging my interlocutors as artistic participants who creatively practice and engage in hip-hop through listening and sharing ideas with friends, talking about music, singing with the radio and learning and practicing popular dances. My work is situated among scholars such as Tia DeNora, David Samuels, and Aaron Fox in privileging "everyday" audiences who have meaningful relationships with commercial music.⁵⁴ Crafts, Cavicchi, and Keil's collection of interviews with children, teenagers and

⁵² Thorne 1993; Helen B. Schwartzman, *Transformations: The Anthropology of Children's Play* (New York: Plenum, 1978).

⁵³ Patricia Shehan Campbell, *Songs in Their Heads: Music and Its Meaning in Children's Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵⁴ Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working Class Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004);

adults documents not only the important role of music in people's lives, but the ownership they feel over certain genres of mass-mediated music.⁵⁵ For kids, the ability to choose what music they listen to is an important part of staking a claim within a group.⁵⁶

1.4 Black Children and Black Music

Guthrie Ramsey and Mark Anthony Neal, through different approaches, both demonstrate the historical significance of African-Americans' claims to black popular music.⁵⁷ While Neal historicizes black public culture in the twentieth century, Ramsey weaves a personal ethnography of his family's experiences with black music throughout his musicological study. Ramsey argues for acknowledging the work that black music does to unify communities and allow individuals to identify with histories of American blackness, while at the same time avoiding essentialism.⁵⁸ He writes, "by attending to the specific historical moment and social setting in which a music gesture appears, we avoid the appearance of reifying or 'essentializing' cultural expressions; their meaning and value are, after all, contingent on these and other factors."⁵⁹ Ramsey's observation is

David Samuels, *Putting a Song on Top of It: Expression and Identity on the San Carlos Apache Reservation* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004).

⁵⁵ Susan D. Crafts, Daniel Cavicchi, and Charles Keil, eds. *My Music: Explorations of Music in Daily Life* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).

⁵⁶ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁵⁷ Guthrie Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁵⁸ Ramsey 2003; Guthrie Ramsey, "The Pot Liquor Principle: Developing a Black Music Criticism in American Music Studies," *American Music* (2004): 284-95.

⁵⁹ Ramsey 2003, 21.

especially salient when considering how conventions of African-American music, such as emphasis on the bass and syncopated rhythm, have historically been essentialized as an “inherent” part of blackness and uncritically associated with West African music.⁶⁰

Hip-hop carries over these same musical conventions,⁶¹ and the reality for the girls at John Avery is that they must understand these conventions in order to relate to their African-American peers and adult interlocutors. Kyra Gaunt begins to address this in her study on black girls’ games and their relationships with black music. Gaunt interviews girls and women in several different geographical sites about their memories and current experiences with black girls’ double-dutch and handclapping games, and connects these practices with black popular music. However, in her attempt to address the cohesiveness of black musical traits in black communities, she neglects to fully explore girls’ individual experiences with black music.⁶² In this study I pick up where Gaunt leaves off by thinking about embodied experiences with black music in the context of complicated relationships with peers and adults. The girls at John Avery train themselves to recognize key aesthetic components of black music, learning what Gaunt has termed “musical blackness”: “black musical identifications through an embodied practice.”⁶³ Girls’ musical practices identify them as black and connect them with the social world

⁶⁰ Ronald Radano, “Hot Fantasies: American Modernism and the Idea of Black Rhythm,” in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, edited by Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, 459-482 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁶¹ Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁶² Jennifer A. Woodruff, Review of *The Games Black Girls Play* by Kyra Gaunt, *Ethnomusicology* 51, no. 2 (2007): 347-49.

⁶³ Gaunt 2006, 3.

beyond the club.⁶⁴ I consider how embodied musical practices are political engagements with larger structures of power—structures reified through commercial hip-hop.

In this dissertation I think about girls' musical practices in the context of the tensions that frame girls' complicated feelings about commercial hip-hop's dominant narratives. In his study of African-American male youth and hip-hop at a Midwest community center, Greg Dimitriadis critiques scholars of black popular culture such as Cornel West and Michael Eric Dyson in their estimations of contemporary black youth as "nilhilistic."⁶⁵ Dimitriadis implies that cultural critiques of hip-hop and black youth often ignore the realities of the youth's day-to-day life, and would benefit from ethnographic work, or at the very least work that acknowledges kids as individual actors. As Dimitriadis points out, even though some of the teenagers he met in his ethnographic work were involved in gangs and other activities which West points to as nilhilistic, "their uses of [hip-hop] betrayed their efforts to maintain and sustain constructions many critics assume gone or missing from the lives of poor blacks."⁶⁶ Dimitriadis argues that through their uses and understandings of hip-hop, the young men in his study actually work to build community. Here I follow Dimitriadis' work by examining hip-hop in the lives of the people most implicated in its misogynist content, but are often spoken for without regard to their complicated lived experiences. As Dimitriadis points out, when it comes to black youth and hip-hop, anxieties over the "effects" of violent and sexually

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Dimitriadis 2001. Here Dimitriadis is critiquing Cornel West's *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) and Michael Eric Dyson's *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996).

⁶⁶ Dimitriadis 2001, 122.

explicit lyrics are prominent in popular and academic discourse, while the youth themselves are seldom acknowledged as actors with a totality of experience not exclusively limited to hip-hop.

Dimitriadis calls for “a performative approach to [hip-hop texts that] allows us to see how shifting contexts of production (e.g. from performance spaces to privatized ones) enable particular kinds of texts to emerge, with particular ideologies, etc. Such an approach highlights these texts as ever open to renegotiation, allowing us to appreciate, as a concomitant phenomena, that young people pick up and use these texts in performances of the everyday.”⁶⁷ While in this dissertation I don’t necessarily approach music as “text,” I am sympathetic with the idea that meaning in hip-hop is constantly being negotiated as it moves from the radio to youtube to the Arts and Crafts Room at John Avery. It is naïve to imagine that the meanings girls ascribe to hip-hop are not affected and perhaps even dictated by the genre’s political economy, which is inextricably linked to the politics of systematic American racism and sexism informing hip-hop’s history, content and means of performance. But a performative approach to girls and hip-hop has the potential to complicate reductive readings, such as recent psychological and sociological studies suggesting that girls’ internalization of sexualized imagery in hip-hop’s lyrics and videos leads to adverse effects such as negative body-image and early sexual activity.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid., 123-124.

⁶⁸ Jane D. Brown, Kelly Ladin L'Engle, Carol J. Pardun, Guang Guo, Kristin Kenneavy, and Christine Jackson, "Sexy Media Matter: Exposure to Sexual Content in Music, Movies, Television, and Magazines Predicts Black and White Adolescents' Sexual Behavior," *Pediatrics* 117, no. 4 (2006): 1018-27; S. Liliana

Identity is created and defined in children and youth's relationships with peers, family members, authority figures and the various media in their lives.⁶⁹ Understandings of identity are shaped daily as people assert their gender, race or sexuality through dress, talk and behavior.⁷⁰ As young black females from disadvantaged circumstances, the girls at John Avery perform identity in the context of institutionalized racism and sexism.⁷¹ Girls learn social forms such as patriarchy and racial discrimination through lived relationships.⁷² In these relationships, media and celebrities are important tools in connecting with other children. As girls share their fan perspectives with other girls, ideologies of race, gender and sexuality are filtered and negotiated through hip-hop, becoming incorporated into girls' daily lives. This research examines the multiple ways in which girls learn to listen through shared musical experiences. Listening functions not only as a socializing tool, but also as a way in which girls configure meaning outside of lyrics and visual images. Dancing and singing to hip-hop are gendered experiences where girls learn that their bodies are imbued with the potential to delight, shock or horrify. In their techniques of listening such as dancing, they learn about embodied knowledge of sexuality, gender and race. In learning how not to dance, they learn about the constraints

Escobar-Chaves, Susan R. Tortolero, Christine M. Markham, Barbara J. Low, Patricia Eitel, and Patricia Thickstun, "Impact of Media on Adolescent Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors," *Pediatrics* 116, no. 1 (2005): 303-26; Sharon G. Peterson, G. M. Wingood, R. J. DiClemente, K. Harrington, and S. Davies, "Images of Sexual Stereotypes in Rap Videos and the Health of African American Female Adolescents," *Journal of Women's Health* 16 (2007): 1157-64.

⁶⁹ Willis 1977; Willis, *Common Culture* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Open University Press, 1990).

⁷⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

⁷¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

⁷² Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

placed on them as black girls in a community organization. Through singing, they learn about emotion and feeling for black women.

Musical activities are an important part of girls' socialization with one another, but more than that, a girl's musical *skill* determines how her peers will relate to her inside and outside of any particular musical activity. Social hierarchies at John Avery are undoubtedly related to how well a girl can dance or sing, as well as age, physical attractiveness, and personality traits. Anthropologists such as Valerie Hey and Marjorie Harness Goodwin have charted the importance of girls' friendships with one another.⁷³ Goodwin examines the processes behind social stance by examining girls' talk with one another in spaces removed from adult interaction. Through her conversation analyses, Goodwin determines that talk and conversation in and of itself constitutes a social order. I am sympathetic to the impact of children's conversations, and explore the relationship between talk and musical skill in Chapter 5. While Goodwin elaborates on *how* girls exclude and include one another in their conversations, Hey examines the stakes in these conversations, and in the passionate friendships girls have with one another. In her study of middle- and working-class British girls, she challenges the popular conception that the terrors, embarrassments, and loyalties that mark adolescent girls' friendships are merely a "phase" of childhood. Instead, Hey argues that girls' investments in each other—often manifested through the monitoring, criticizing, and ridiculing minute details of other

⁷³ Valerie Hey, *The Company She Keeps: An Ethnography of Girls' Friendships* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997); Marjorie Harness Goodwin, *The Hidden Life of Girls: Games of Stance, Status and Exclusion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

girls' embodied performances—are investments “in the production of certain forms of power and subjectivity.”⁷⁴ Hey argues for the space of girlhood friendships as “an ineluctable aspect of ‘civil society,’ and are part of the network through which the forces of hegemony are variously installed (or contested in culture).”⁷⁵

Friendships and social hierarchies are an important part of girls' musical practices. I argue that these musical practices are crucial in producing embodied understandings of gender, race, and sexuality, and girls' relationships with one another are crucial sites of the monitoring of gendered and racialized subjecthood. Their relationships and social hierarchies are highlighted and produced in the musical activities themselves. I argue in this dissertation for the distinct importance of the *musical* component to girls' activities; in other words, I believe that the fact that African-American girls interact in musical ways is significant. I believe that through using their *musical* skills, girls have more to say and learn about the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and class and the personal effects thereof, than they would otherwise. I argue that because girls are interacting musically, they are able to use artistry and convey emotion in a way that is not as easily accessible outside of an artistic form. As others have argued before me, girls interacting musically through a specifically black musical framework enculturates them into a musical genre through which they can relate to peers and adults, and through which they learn and challenge specific frameworks of black

⁷⁴ Hey, 23.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 125.

femininity.⁷⁶ They become physically invested in a black musical aesthetic, enabling them to relate to black women—mothers, sisters, mentors, and the celebrities whom they consume and critique.

1.5 Listening and Integrity

Angela McRobbie, in her important story on girls and subculture, criticizes teen magazines that configure girls as “merely listeners” instead of potential producers.⁷⁷ By this point, anyone reading this will know that I take issue with McRobbie’s “merely.” In many ways this project is a rebuke to those who would consider listening a passive, alienating activity.⁷⁸ In some respect I am rearticulating the argument that Jonathan Sterne makes in his book *The Audible Past*: that listening is “a direct, learned activity.”⁷⁹ Sterne outlines how techniques of listening, ranging from doctors listening to stethoscopes to listening to a voice on the phone to listening to music on a headset, have been conceptualized and technologized over the past 150 years as connected to the intellectual as opposed to the sensual. Sterne even goes so far as to assert that over the course of the nineteenth century, “listening becomes a skill and a site of potential virtuosity.”⁸⁰ Yet listening to music, especially popular music, is seldom considered to be a virtuosic activity. Playing popular music has often been considered to be the lowest common denominator of musical skill, and those who listen to it nothing more than

⁷⁶ Gaunt 2006.

⁷⁷ Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2000), 110.

⁷⁸ Michael Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

⁷⁹ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

suckers of a capitalist profit machine.⁸¹ This project is an attempt to reclaim everyday listening as a skill, while acknowledging the conflicting structures of power that both encourage this skill and denigrate it as a useless activity at best. While I don't go so far as to articulate a new set of the girls' "audile techniques," I am interested in how girls listen, not to find out whether they listen on headsets or on radios, but to discover how girls understand the cultural configurations of sound that plays on the iPod at John Avery, and how the ways that they listen "represent dispositions articulated within a range of social possibilities."⁸² In other words, the ways girls listen show how they are learning about different aspects of identity in relation to different structures of power.

Phenomenologists suggest that listening is itself a bodily experience,⁸³ affected by social and cultural expectations.⁸⁴ Although this is not a phenomenological project, I explore how listening to music is an embodied practice. I am deliberately thinking of embodied musical practices as a way of highlighting the importance of musical practices to African-American girls, and as an attempt to interrogate the way that gender, race, sexual, and classed identities are teased out through embodied listening. Gaunt's emphasis on the learning that happens through the body in musical activities is an important contribution of her work, and one that resonates with this study. In addition to Gaunt, I situate myself among music scholars who include a focus on the body in their

⁸¹ Theodor Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).

⁸² Sterne 2003, 93.

⁸³ Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1976); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1986).

⁸⁴ Downey 2005; Leslie C. Dunn, and Nancy A. Jones, eds, *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

studies, notably Louise Meintjes and Greg Downey, whose focus on the phenomenology of dancing bodies intertwines the politics of listening and sound with the politics of the corporeal.⁸⁵ Girls' musical activities, especially dancing, are ways in which African-American girls creatively and virtuosically juggle the burden of their corporeality—marginalized through age, race and gender—with the joy and excitement of listening to music with friends.

This project addresses the ethical question of how African-American girls cultivate personal integrity through their intersections with hip-hop. Through their listening practices, girls learn the moral codes present at the club in particular, and at the local and national level more broadly. However, a crucial component of girls' integrity is learning to develop agency. Girls develop the musical skills that mark them as musical experts; in so doing, they assert a place in hip-hop without being polarized as either victim or deviant. Victimization ignores the personhood of girls and their individual agency, while imagining girls as potential deviants discounts their critical judgment and the lessons they learn from each other, and from mothers, fathers, teachers and mentors. Although images of women as sexual deviants are visible and celebrated in hip-hop videos and lyrics, girls are able to critique these images based on the morality and value judgment they've learned from socialization at and outside the club. Centuries-old scripts of exotic and deviant black female sexuality are crucial to hip-hop's political economy.

⁸⁵ Greg Downey, *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Louise Meintjes, "Shoot the Sergeant, Shatter the Mountain: The Production of Masculinity in Zulu Ngoma Song and Dance in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13, no. 2 (2004): 173-201.

While girls may not critique these ideas with the same verbal acuity as public intellectuals speaking on their behalf, they are able to stake a claim on hip-hop wherein they can participate without sacrificing their values or their agency. By developing and honing their listening skills, they honor the musical blackness which connects them with other women in their community, they honor the lessons they have learned about moral behavior from their peers and adult mentors, and they affirm individuality and virtuosity.

By putting girls' personal integrity at the fore, this project offers a meta-critique of the culture industry, popular discourses that ignore girls' particular experiences, and scholarship that does not move beyond words and images. My dissertation highlights individual ways in which African-American girls learn about sexuality in relation to local politics that leaves them on the margins. Girls are active participants struggling with their emerging sexualities, and I argue for an analysis that takes better account of their presence. This study focuses on the empowerment of girls by concentrating on issues of agency, practice, and ways of negotiating within hegemonic structures. By articulating how media is appropriated and internalized into the subjectivities of its audiences, the relationships among media, public bodies and local fans will be better understood. It is my hope that that this research will, in some small way, help girls see themselves as entities removed from both the endless re-fetishization of black female bodies and the confines of a morality which frames all black female sexuality as dangerous. I want the girls I know to empower themselves as individuals above all.

1.6 Chapter Outline

I have conceived of this dissertation as an exploration of the ‘lessons’ girls learn through their different musical practices. Taken together, the lessons are representative of how girls learn to listen. I have delineated three modes of listening in this dissertation: singing, dancing and talking. I focus on girls’ thoughts on female R&B singers in Chapter 2, “Singing Lessons: Feeling the Music and Hearing the Feeling.” This chapter studies how girls learn about expressing emotion through racialized and gendered scripts of ‘feeling’ in black musicality. Girls listening to singers learn about appropriate feelings for black women and how to let these feelings ‘out’. I write about how girls imitate singers, picking up details of vocal performance. Even though girls do not relate to the lyrics they sing, they learn to value the sound and presentation of sincerity in the voice. Although I begin and end the chapter with thoughts on girls singing together, this chapter is fundamentally about individual explorations of emotion and feeling in singing.

Next I shift my focus to listening in group contexts, and this is where my focus remains throughout the dissertation. Chapter 3 (“Dancing Lessons: Recognizing the Beat and Understanding the Body”) and Chapter 4 (“Morality Lessons: ‘Nasty’ Dancing and ‘Inappropriate’ Conduct”) examine dancing as a musical practice. In Chapter 3 I study how girls at the club teach each other to dance, and thus listen, in culturally appropriate ways. I unpack Gaunt’s idea of musical blackness to further explore how girls relate their bodies to sound. Girls are explicit in teaching each other to “wait ‘til the beat drops” and in helping each other identify the bass of the song. These lessons are taught in the context of dancing, but what they reveal is detailed and virtuosic knowledge of sound, and an

understanding of the body in relation to the music they listen to. Chapter 4 builds on the previous chapter by considering the potentially “dangerous” incarnations of embodied listening. In this chapter I investigate the specific panics around girls’ bodies and how girls’ dancing is a site where enforcement of ‘appropriate’ female behavior is deemed especially pressing. I use black feminist theory to situate the normative sexuality encouraged by staff in a broader history of black female bodies. Even as they develop their listening skills, girls are reminded that they must strike a delicate balance between training their bodies to be part of the group and letting their bodies become sexually deviant. The two chapters are linked in that girls hear the music and learn what to listen to through their body, and their bodies are sites for lessons in sexual propriety.

I consider the way hip-hop’s sounds, lyrics and movements are incorporated into the conversations of girls at the club in Chapter 5, “_____ Lessons: Meaning and Critique in Movement and Gesture.” The “_____” in the chapter title refers to the gestures and fragments of song and dance girls use in their conversations outside of a musical event. Incorporating hip-hop in this way allows girls to comment on the relation of hip-hop’s ideologies of race and gender to their everyday lives. Girls keep learning to listen even when the music is turned off. The subtle ways they insert hip-hop references, bits of songs and dance steps reveal how girls continually keep hip-hop a part of their lives and assert its importance to their identity. In my epilogue I reflect on a recent panel discussion involving girls at John Avery, Duke’s academic community, and non-academic audience members. This event highlighted the tensions between community

and academic investments in girls' musical practices, and the assumptions on both sides about what hip-hop means in African-American girls' lives.

1.7 Ethnographic Method

My role at the club fluctuated during my fieldwork. I started out as a volunteer. The administrative staff and most of the club staff knew about my long-term project, but it was three and a half months before I started giving out consent forms and bringing my video camera. During that time, I came to John Avery four days a week, and spent my time fluctuating between trying to be the most helpful to the staff and ingratiating myself with girls at the club. I instructed every child at the club to call me "Jenny", instead of "Ms. Jenny." I followed girls around and was thrilled whenever any of them asked me to do anything. I helped with homework, ran around the gym and the playground, and played pool. When I started bringing my iPod and videocamera, the older girls (6th grade and older) started talking to me more, and I became much cooler. I was no longer there to help with homework, I was there for fun. The girls started trusting me more. At the same time, the club staff started trusting me more, and treating me more like a staff member. I was sometimes left alone with the kids, and I eventually didn't need permission to play my iPod. When homework was over, I would just plug it in. The staff generally ignored my video camera and microphone. Then during the first week of summer camp, when a staff member had a sudden stroke in the girls' bathroom, I was asked if I needed a summer job. I spent the rest of the summer as a staff member, and I went from "Jenny" to "Ms. Jenny". The "Ms." stayed after school started back, and I spent the remaining nine

months of my fieldwork as some kind of different adult. I was a known entity, with some authority, especially for the kids who had been in my care at summer camp.

I refer to the girls in this project as my research “participants” instead of using the more common term “informants.” Even though they did not participate in the writing of this dissertation, they at times read my fieldnotes, listened to my interviews, saw pictures of themselves, and watched my videos. I believe I could not write up this project adequately if I did not attempt to convey the spirits and personalities of these girls in my ethnographic writing. Each girl is a partner in our personal relationship, and those relationships are what compel me to write. My engagements with the girls and boys at John Avery were at times very personal, and it was hard to achieve an ethnographic distance in interactions with them, so most of the time I didn’t even try. My work with them was informed by other experiences I’ve had working with children, in most of which I played the role of the nurturer, and I entered into fieldwork perhaps not quite aware of the conflicts a nurturing role might cause. It wasn’t very long before I decided that as much as I cared about my project, I cared about the girls more, and so eventually there was nothing I could do but embrace my role as nurturer and mentor to some of my research participants. I am very sympathetic with Wendy Luttrell’s concerns about her own ethnographic behavior in working with low-income, mostly African-American pregnant adolescents, and her descriptions of the push and pull between her role as mother/nurturer, teacher, and quasi-peer.⁸⁶ But it is not just the researcher who feels this

⁸⁶ Wendy Luttrell, *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds: Gender, Race and the Schooling of Pregnant Teens*

push and pull. Connelly maintains that the way children interact with a researcher, mindful of the researcher's unique and conflicting positionalities, is in fact a very strong argument for the social competence of children.⁸⁷ In my ethnographic sections I try to include where I was standing, what I was doing, and any comments or interjections, in an attempt to represent myself as accurately as possible.

All of the girls' names are pseudonyms. All of my adult interlocutors gave me verbal permission to use their first and last names. In the case of the girls, I have obscured family relationships to maintain anonymity; otherwise, I have tried to remain as true as possible to each girl's personality and identity. Since every girl's age changed during my year-and-a-half fieldwork period (sometimes twice!), I refer to the grade the girl was in for the majority of my fieldwork. This follows how the club is organized, and better reflects a girl's social standing among her peers. A nine-year-old who is beginning third grade for the second year in a row would still be assigned to finish her homework with kindergartners in the Arts and Crafts Room for example, while her same-aged peers would be hanging out with sixth-graders for the first time in the Education Room. I put the girls' grades in parentheses the first time they are mentioned in a chapter. This system is imperfect, as some girls only attended the club at the very beginning of my fieldwork or at the very end, but I do the best I can. It is important to note each girl's grade, because for the most part the age of a girl is very important in the implied (sometimes very

(New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁸⁷ Connelly 2008.

explicit) social hierarchy at John Avery. The older a girl is, the more control she can assert over coveted social items such as my iPod, having first dibs at sitting on tables or desks as opposed to sitting on chairs or standing around. Of course, there were some girls who were marked as social outcasts; the most notable example in this dissertation is Alana (4th grade), featured prominently in Chapter 2. A younger girl could quickly endear herself to older girls by taking part in the harassment and casual torture that Alana routinely experienced.

When I quote my research participants at length, I have tried my best to quote them verbatim, complete with unintelligible utterances. I've included bracketed ellipses to indicate that I am deleting sections of the conversation where necessary. The majority of my research participants are children, and I believe that including the "ums" and "likes" is the only way to accurately convey their sentiments. I've done this with my adult as well as child interlocutors, and have done my best to also quote myself verbatim. As part of quoting my research participants, I have replicated the African-American Vernacular English as best as I can, and I have chosen to write the words that were said without taking liberties with spelling. Throughout I use italics to indicate when girls are singing along with a song. If a girl speaks in the middle of the song, I indicate that switch with parentheses and normal font. I use capitalization and exclamation marks as expressive devices to indicate louder and more excited singing.

2. Singing Lessons: Feeling the Music and Hearing the Feeling

2.1 “We Belong Together”: March 2006

One Friday afternoon, Ms. Angela deviated from her normal Friday schedule by holding a dance contest instead of showing a movie. Ms. Gordon was out of work having cataract surgery, so Angela was left alone with control of the Arts and Crafts Room. Children, mostly girls, flooded in when they heard the announcement over the club’s PA system:

“Attention all club members, attention all club members. There will be a dance contest in the Arts and Crafts Room.”

As the girls waited for the music to start, they chatted excitedly about which song they were going to dance to and with whom they were going to dance. Ms. Angela attached her bright yellow Spongebob Squarepants-shaped DVD/CD player to the small television that stayed on Ms. Gordon’s desk.¹ Stephanie (2nd grade) sidled up to her and examined her CD collection. Other girls followed suit, and soon Angela was surrounded by a crowd demanding that she play their favorite songs.

“Play Ciara! Play Ciara!”

“My Humps!”

“Play Pussycat Dolls!”

“Nooooo! You can’t dance to that song! Play Laffy Taffy! Ms. Angela, can we listen to Laffy Taffy?”

¹ Spongebob Squarepants is a character on the popular cartoon of the same name airing on the Nickelodeon cable television network.

“Okaaa-aaaaaaay!” Angela finally yelled. “We’re not going to hear anything if you don’t get away from me! Girl, get off my desk!”

She opened Spongebob’s head and put in a homemade CD with the latest hits—including Ciara’s “1, 2 Step”, “My Humps” by The Black-Eyed Peas, “Don’t Cha” by The Pussycat Dolls and “Laffy Taffy” by D4L.² Ms. Angela stood next to Spongebob, controlling song selection. The room was filled with afternoon sunlight coming in through the large wall-to-wall windows running from the ceiling midway to the floor on two of the room’s walls. As the afternoon progressed, the room became darker and darker, and only when it was almost completely dark did someone turn the lights on. The music played through the tv’s tinny speakers as girls squared off against each other, danced in groups and made Soul Train lines. They danced right in front of the music source, all the easier to yell instructions at Ms. Angela or whoever happened to be in charge of the music (“Start over!” “Turn it up!”). They were framed by Ms. Gordon’s and Ms. Angela’s desks on one side and the colorful miniature round tables and chairs on the other. The spectators formed an impromptu circle around the dancing, sitting on any available flat surface. Everyone tried to get as close to the dancing as possible while still remaining safely outside the dancing space. Girls and boys started dancing in their socks, and pairs of shoes littered the carpeted floor. The main dance contest spawned splinter groups of dancers, as boys and girls either became inspired by what they saw or got tired

² Ciara, “1, 2 Step,” *Goodies* (LaFace, 2004); The Black-Eyed Peas, “My Humps,” *Monkey Business* (A&M, 2005); D4L, “Laffy Taffy,” *Down For Life* (Atlantic, 2005); The Pussycat Dolls, “Don’t Cha,” *PCD* (A&M, 2005).

of waiting for their turn. A group of boys practiced the worm and other acrobatic dances in the corner by the bookshelves. Amari (3rd grade), Angel (4th grade), Tamika (4th grade) and Tamyra (4th grade) danced and talked just outside the main dancing space.

The light was waning when Angela started Mariah Carey's "We Belong Together."³ At the opening piano riff, several girls exchanged smiles of recognition and excitement. Girls stopped dancing and instead began singing to one another in their groups around the dance floor. I sang too, eager to participate. I sat on a yellow mini-table between Jada (5th grade) and Lakeesha (3rd grade) and joined in. We sang it together, start to finish. Most girls knew most of the words to the verses; they tripped a little over Mariah's rapid-fire delivery but got the general idea. Our amateur voices swelled in concert with Mariah and each other at every chorus. Then all of the sudden, about two minutes and thirty seconds into the song, singing turned into yelling as Mariah launched into her big finish.

We belong together BAAAAAY-BY!

WHEN YOU LEFT I LOST A PART OF ME!!!!!!

IT'S STILL SO HARD TO BELIEVE!!!!!!!!!!

Any semblance of melody we had had was gone as we screamed/yelled/shouted our way through the last ten bars. Girls rocked their torsos back and forth and side to side, pulled their hair, grabbed the arms of those sitting nearest, pumped their fists in the air—anything to indicate that they, like Mariah, were in the wildest throes of despair. We

³ Mariah Carey, "We Belong Together," *The Emancipation of Mimi* (Island: 2005).

drowned out the poor approximation of Mariah's voice that was coming out of the TV's speakers. Nobody needed to hear her anyway; everyone knew exactly how she sounded and what the words were. The boys in the room exchanged glances and rolled their eyes with wild abandon, as if to make clear that they were neither a part of this ritual nor understood what it was about. But we didn't care. We were singing! Loud! With our eyes closed! Together! Everyone held onto that last long note for dear life, necks craned, eyes squished tight. Then we all burst into laughter.

2.2 Singing and Hip-Hop

In current hip-hop scholarship and in music criticism, singing is seldom considered part of hip-hop's landscape.⁴ Though not considered one of the original four areas of hip-hop, it is nonetheless inescapable to anyone listening to the "urban contemporary" radio format or watching cable channels BET or MTV.⁵ Singing is as much a part of hip-hop, that is to say music, as anything else at John Avery. Songs featuring primarily rapping are played side by side with songs featuring primarily singing. Within a single song, different rappers and singers often provide verses, and an established R&B artist will often lend her or his vocals to a song's "hook".⁶ The resulting

⁴ "Singing" and "singers" in this chapter refers exclusively to solo "R&B" singing and singers. The far-reaching compilation *That's the Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader* (Ed. M. Forman and M.A. Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004)), for example, does not critically discuss singing in any of its essays. Among scholars of black popular culture, Mark Anthony Neal has begun to address singers and singing in a critical way alongside and in companion with critiques of rapping. See his essays in *Songs in the Key of Black Life: A Rhythm and Blues Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁵ The classic four areas of hip-hop are emceeing (rapping), DJing, breakdancing, and tagging (graffiti art).

⁶ For example, all the collaborations between emcee Jay-Z and singer Beyoncé Knowles, including "03 Bonnie and Clyde" from Jay-Z's album *The Blueprint 2* (Roc-A-Fella, 2002), "Crazy in Love" from Knowles's *Dangerously in Love* (Columbia, 2003), and "Déjà Vu" and "Upgrade U" from Knowles's

collaborations often make it difficult to determine who the song “belongs to” unless presented with production credits. Artists such as R. Kelly, T. Pain and Nelly routinely blur the boundaries between singing and rapping, making their singing “flow” like a rapper and their rhymes melodic.⁷

For girls and boys at John Avery, singing is a part of their musical experience. During my fieldwork boys and girls were just as excited to hear popular songs by singers R. Kelly and T. Pain as they were for rappers Yung Joc or DJ Unk. Alongside rappers in the “urban contemporary” category are R&B singers, the most prominent during my fieldwork being Mariah Carey, Mary J. Blige, Beyoncé, R. Kelly and T. Pain, to name a few. Singing is not easily detached from the other ways kids participated in the club’s musical life. They sang while dancing, danced while singing, and integrated song into every possible conversation and activity. If the music was playing, and sometimes even when it wasn’t, girls and boys sang along with varying degrees of attention to the music. Yet there were instances, like the story above, where singing rose to prominence and discrete performances emerged. In this chapter I look at R&B singing in particular as a site where, through listening and singing along, girls work out ideas about what kinds of emotional experiences black females should have and how they should express them. In

B'Day (Columbia, 2007). An artist will often make a significant number of featured appearances before releasing their own albums. R. Kelly was featured on singles released by Young Jeezy (“Go Getta,” *The Inspiration* (Def Jam, 2007)), Snoop Dogg (“That’s That,” *The Blue Carpet Treatment* (Geffen, 2006)), Bow Wow (“I’mma Flirt”, later remixed and released as a single on *Double Up*); all were released within six months in advance of his 2007 album *Double Up* (Jive Records, 2007).

⁷ “Flow” commonly refers to the artistry with which an emcee sets her lyrics against the “beat” (the tracks that accompany the lyrics). Thanks to Robi Roberts for helping me with this concept.

their own theorizations and enactments of feeling, girls negotiate interpretations of black female heterosexuality vis-à-vis celebrity culture and the larger-than-life figure of the female R&B singer.

For girls, singing holds a particular importance. Being a “singer” is an aspiration for many of the girls at John Avery, even those who never sang by themselves at the club. If we consider singing and singers as part of the broader hip-hop landscape, it is apparent that singing is one of the only avenues available for women to express a personal narrative in the broader hip-hop landscape.⁸ Singing is a way for girls to identify with women in hip-hop who appear to have more agency and individuality. However, I am not only interested in how girls understand the personal subjectivity of singers. Rather, I consider how, through listening, girls pick up on larger discourses of emotion and feeling in black female performance, and how girls’ own performances at John Avery demonstrate their listening skill. In this chapter I examine instances where girls sing, together and alone, and I think about what it means to them and how it shapes their understandings of being black and female. In the case of both singing together and alone, issues of emotion and ideas about “feeling” are paramount. I consider how girls use common tropes of feeling in female R&B singing to express their own agency, blackness and femaleness. More importantly, I also consider how their performances critique these ideas.

⁸ I am purposefully discounting the female emcee, because of her scarcity during my fieldwork.

2.3 Conventions in R&B Singing

The “R&B” half of the current “Hip-Hop/R&B” radio format is characterized by mostly African-American singers, singing songs with subjects in the same mold as “soul” music of the 1960s and 70s: sex, love and the loss of either or both. Nelson George argues that post-segregation assimilation led to the loss of an “unpolished” and “passionate” aesthetic in R&B music.⁹ For George, this aesthetic is part of the artistry of 1960s and 70s R&B, and the reason for its success. George argues that the commercial appeal of a singer like Aretha Franklin was her ability to manifest a personal interiority in recorded sound: “Aretha Franklin triumphed when white America was willing to accept the sound of raw emotion.”¹⁰ Mark Anthony Neal echoes this thought when he writes, “Soul has also been an aesthetic interconnected with the marketplace and the consumerist desires of black and white audiences alike.”¹¹ An R&B singer’s ability to showcase personal interiority is valued and even expected within the American cultural marketplace, where black music has always been positioned as ‘natural’ in opposition to Western classical music or even ‘whiter’ genres of popular music.¹² For representations of black women in particular, the ideal of a true, embodied, emotional performance goes

⁹ Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Plume, 1988).

¹⁰ Ibid., 86.

¹¹ Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹² Susan McClary and Robert Walser, "Theorizing the Body in African-American Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (1994): 75-84; Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

back at least as far as to the female blues singers of the early 20th century.¹³ Nelson George's valuation of "passion," "feel" and "emotion" are echoed in critiques and appreciations of these singers. Artistic merit is judged by how closely a singer's sound conveys a(n often difficult) lived experience. Here is historian Buzzy Jackson's particularly florid description of the sound and feeling of "soul" as related to blues singer Bessie Smith:

"[Soul] is the otherworldly aspect of music, the part of a song that is separate from the mechanical issues of melody, tempo, time signature, and timbre. Soul is what is felt, not merely heard. A perfect song can be soulful, but to have soul, it must be performed by a special singer. Soul is a quality in a singer that is both innate and acquired; the deep understanding of life implied in her song speaks to both a personal sensitivity to the world and often a personal history marked by lessons in pain. A performer either has soul or she doesn't, but it can't be bought or even convincingly learned, though sometimes it is found, later, after the performer has had a moving experience and suddenly feels it deep down inside. [...] [Bessie Smith's] voice was a medium, delivering soul. It never evoked just one feeling, but a multitude, rich with ambiguities, personal testimonies to the way life really was."¹⁴

By imagining Bessie Smith's voice as a conduit for her personal life history, Jackson in effect argues that sound and artistry convey a personal narrative more effectively than lyrics alone. Both the "soul music" George writes about and the feeling of "soul" in Jackson's history of women blues singers have to do with emotion that the two scholars assume is missing from other genres of music, emotion that is conveyed exclusively through sound. What is most important is how true the sound is to a

¹³ Hazel Carby, "It Jus Bes Dat Way Sometimes: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *Radical America* 20, no. 4 (1986): 9-22.

¹⁴ Buzzy Jackson, *A Bad Woman Feeling Good: Blues and the Women Who Sing Them* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 47-48.

performer's emotional reality. The sound of soul in a black female blues or R&B singer is the sound of feeling, the sound of reality.

Certainly commercial hip-hop traffics in reality as much as or more than any other genre of African-American music. The commercial viability of hip-hop is dependent upon a hyper-reality where endless consumption is a stand-in for black masculinity. Emotion and feeling are reserved for singing, in what John Jackson refers to as a "division of labor." "this seemingly harmless divide underpins many of the mechanisms powering hip-hop's most defining elements—policing categories of race and sexuality while foregrounding a lightly different connection between solidarity and divisions of labor, between authentic acoustics and sincere sounds."¹⁵ Singing in hip-hop songs and on hip-hop radio stations would seemingly complicate hip-hop's almost exclusively masculine terrain by adding a distinctly femininized aesthetic. However, the inclusion of singing in hip-hop songs adds an 'emotional' element, another layer of reality, while the strict 'division of labor' further bolsters emcees' claims to masculinity. Thus singers in hip-hop operate under similar scripts as blues singers of the 1920s and R&B singers of the 1960s, acting as the heart to the emcee's head, the body to the emcee's mind.

2.4 Singing at John Avery

Even though Nelson George argues that the aesthetic of true emotion and 'feel' was lost forever as early as the mid-1980s, 'feeling' in singing is precisely what girls at

¹⁵ John L. Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 182-183. Joseph Schloss uses the phrase "division of labor" in a more literal sense to describe the division between the rhymes (the work of the emcee) and the beats (the work of the producer). *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 2.

John Avery relate to and appreciate in popular singers, and what they often point to in their own singing practices. First let me briefly comment on singing's normal manifestations at the club. In addition to song flowing in and out of conversation, girls generally sang in two ways: groups of girls sang along together to a song playing on the radio or on my iPod, or a girl would sing by herself with the radio or iPod in such a way that it was clear she was giving a performance. In other words, she was loud and demonstrative enough that it was obvious she was singing for the benefit of everyone in the room (see Fig. 2). Most girls did not sing by themselves in this way, but every girl at some point sang along with other girls when certain songs came up on the iPod. I did not have access to girls' private spaces, so I have no way of knowing how the girls sing when they are alone, or what private singing performances mean for them. At John Avery, the times when I was alone with girls were few and far between, and always included interruptions by staff members or other children. Every performance of singing therefore had an audience; it was always a performance in some respects for other people at the club (including me and my camera).

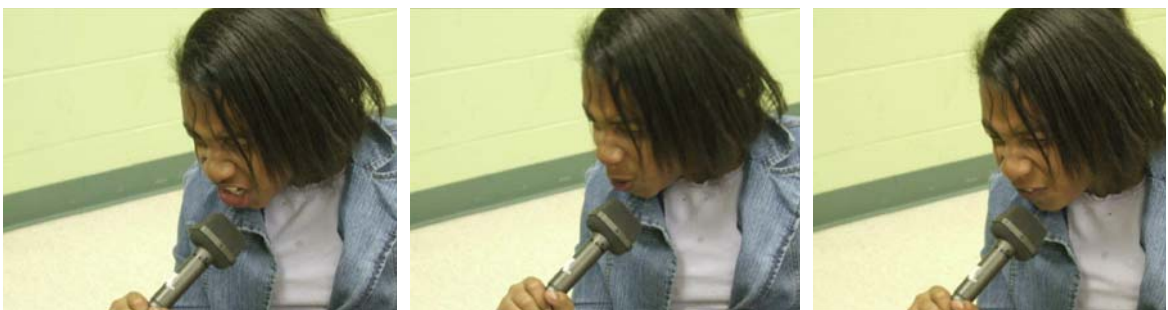




Figure 2: Girls singing into my field microphone.

Of the girls who did sing by themselves, I focus in this chapter on Alana and Tamika, both in fourth grade during my fieldwork. They were both very outgoing girls, and both used singing as a way to stand out at the club, even though their social skills were very different. Tamika was easy-going and quick with a joke or a laugh. She was friendly with everyone, and I never heard anyone make any mean remarks about her, or she about anyone else. Alana on the other hand was almost universally disliked. The staff members considered her loud and obnoxious, and she was always in trouble. At the same time she was cruelly made fun of by her peers and the older girls, who ridiculed her hair, her face, her skin tone, her clothes, her voice. The more they derided her, the more she would laugh along, desperate to be part of the group.

Alana's favorite song was Marques Houston's "Circle". She never missed an opportunity to sing it, and she would rewind the song to sing her favorite part over and over. "Listen! Listen, listen, listen! Shontreal, listen!" she would implore to the other girls in the room, with special attention to the ones that often made fun of her.

If you understand how I feel

Then grab the person now and let 'em know what's real

Let me hear you say yeah

(Watch me hit this!)

Yeah...

Yeah...

Oo-oo-oo-oo-ooooh

(I killed it! I killed that!)

Tamika's favorite song, and the subject of most of this chapter, was Mariah Carey's "We Belong Together." My first encounter with Tamika was during an "American Idol" contest at the club one Friday early in my fieldwork. Despite the popularity of the reality series, she was one of only about a dozen contestants. They sat in groups of three or four, whispering about what to sing and giggling about the antics of others. Most of the contestants were shy, had tiny little voices and stood stiffly during their songs, shifting their weight from foot to foot and keeping their gazes determinedly focused on the ground or on the ceiling. They were far too nervous to attempt any kind of expression. Tamika, however, stood in front of the staff members posing as American Idol judges "Simon", "Randy" and "Paula" and sang into her fist as though it was a microphone. She was definitely not the best singer, and she got some of the words wrong, but she gave a performance. Her eyes were scrunched tight with concentration as she belted out the good stuff—that emotional, let-it-all-out part.

When you left I lost a part of ME

It's still so hard to bel-IEVE

For both girls, ‘feeling’ was an important part of singing. However, ‘feeling’ did not necessarily reference the way the music moved them (as in “I felt the music when I was singing”) or even a singer’s communicative abilities (I really felt the way she was singing). Instead, over and over I heard about how singing helped Tamika and Alana deal with their own feelings. Consider this brief exchange I had with Tamika.

JW: Why is it important for you to sing?

Tamika: To let all your feelings out. [...]When I get bored I just start singing and coloring.

JW: Ok, can you tell me what it feels like when you sing?

Tamika: It feel good... It feel like you’re in heaven! I guess. I don’t know.

JW: I know that when I sing, it just feels...

Tamika: Like you in your own world.

JW: Yeah, kinda.

Tamika: You in a bubble. Nobody can touch you in your bubble.

And,

Tamika: Sometimes I sing by myself when I don't have nothing to do...or when I'm mad, I sing something.

JW: Wait, why do you sing while you're mad?

Tamika: Because...it get me not mad.

JW: Okay. What do you sing, when you're mad?

Tamika: Anything.

JW: Anything? It doesn't matter?

Tamika: Yeah, anything that pops into my head.

It's important to note that the content of the song is not important in what Tamika sings, it is the act of singing itself which helps her conquer her difficult feelings. Over and over I heard the singers in the club talk about using singing as a way to channel their emotions. Here's a conversation with Alana:

JW: Tell me about singing.

Alana: Oh, I love it.

JW: Why do you love it?

Alana: Cause it calms me down.

JW: Calms you down? Can you think of a time when you were not calm when it made you calm?

Alana: Like when I got mad at my mom. She kept calling my name and calling my name to do stuff for her. And I was like, 'Mom, gosh!' And then one of my videos came on.

JW: And then how did you feel then?

Alana: I was like, 'Oh my gosh, one of my videos on!' and I forgot all about what my mom had did.

Singing is a means of both controlling and expressing emotion in a socially acceptable way. Both girls turn to the act of singing to manage their feelings. Singing for Alana at once makes her feel happy, because of her love of singing, and able to express things that she can't verbalize. Even though Tamika was much more socially adept than Alana, she too implicitly acknowledged that she needs an alternative way to express her emotions, and thus turns to singing.

Using singing as a release and as a subtle mode of personal control places Alana and Tamika in a history of expression and emotion in African-American music making

and within larger discourses of gender and emotion. Lutz makes the point that American discourses on emotion are also necessarily discourses on gender.¹⁶ Her study examines talk about emotion among white American men and women, finding that the women in her study often feel the need to both express and control their emotions. She draws the conclusion that such talk replicates Western dichotomies of nature and culture, manifesting itself in ideologies that emotions can be dangerous when present in the female body: “The emotional female, like the natural world that is the cultural source of both affect and women, is constructed as both pliant...and ultimately tremendously powerful and uncontrollable.”¹⁷ “Because emotion is constructed as relatively chaotic, irrational and antisocial, its existence vindicates authority and legitimates the need for control.”¹⁸

“Feeling” is often linked ethnomusicologically to memory and history, the relationship between past meanings and present incarnations in sound.¹⁹ For example, Samuels writes about how Apaches on the San Carlos Reservation use popular music to

¹⁶ Catherine Lutz, "Engendered Emotion: Gender, Power and the Rhetoric of Emotional Control in American Discourse," in *Language and the Politics of Emotion*, edited by Catherine Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod, 69-91 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁷ Ibid., 77. Here Lutz is referencing Marilyn Strathern's "No nature, no culture" in *Nature, Culture, and Gender*, edited by Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern, 174-222 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

¹⁸ Ibid., 87.

¹⁹ Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982); Steven Feld, "Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea," in *Senses of Place*, edited by Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, 91-135 (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996); Regula Qureshi, "How Does Music Mean? Embodied Memories and the Politics of Affect in the Indian Sarangi," *American Ethnologist* 27, no. 4 (2000): 805-38; David Samuels, *Putting a Song on Top of It: Expression and Identity on the San Carlos Apache Reservation* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004).

identify with their personal and tribal histories.²⁰ Qureshi on the other hand connects the “layers” of historically situated meanings in the Indian *sarangi*’s sound with the instrument’s current incarnations.²¹ When Alana and Tamika relate a need to sing to let their feelings out, they echo the concerns of Lutz’s subjects. However unlike Lutz’s subjects, who are all white, Tamika and Alana’s sense of appropriate emotional expression is complicated by an imperative to identify as musically black, which would necessitate not only knowledge of appropriate ways to act in society, but skill in artistically conveying appropriate emotion. The way they express emotion musically is also an important part of identifying as black and female.

2.5 Listening to Mariah

When John Avery girls ‘let their feelings out’, they’re using someone else’s words, words that sometimes they admittedly don’t or can’t relate to. Yet they still recognize genuineness of feeling; in other words, they recognize that singers such as Mariah Carey or Mary J. Blige are letting their feelings out:

Tamika: Mariah Carey to me is like a role model.

JW: Really, why.

Tamika: Because the way she put her words to her songs. Like Mary J. Blige do. [...]they put they life in they songs.

JW: Oh okay.

²⁰ David Samuels, "The Whole and the Sum of the Parts, or, How Cookie and the Cupcakes Told the Story of Apache History in San Carlos," *The Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 445 (1999): 464-74; Samuels 2004.

²¹ Qureshi 2000.

Tamika: Like when Mariah Carey wrote “We Belong Together” she was going through a separation with her boyfriend.²²

In this case Tamika relates Mary J. Blige’s and Mariah Carey’s (fictionalized) interiorities to the songs they sing. This is in line with Buzzy Jackson’s and Nelson George’s rhetoric about ‘realness’ and ‘emotion’ in singing.

JW: Do you think about your life when you’re singing those songs?

Tamika: Sometimes...

JW: What do you think about?

Tamika: (After a while) I don’t know.

JW: Do you think about feelings, or...

Tamika: Yeah.

JW: What kind of feelings?

Tamika: I feel like, wow, she can sing.

JW: (laughing) I’m not sure that’s really a feeling...

Tamika: It’s a thought!

JW: Do you think about your own life when you’re singing it?

Tamika: Sss...no.

²² Mariah Carey shares the writing credits for “We Belong Together” with Jermaine Dupri, Manuel Seal, Johnta Austin, Kenneth Edmonds, Darnell Bristol, Sid Johnson, Bobby Womack, Patrick Moten and Sandra Sully (the latter six are listed for samples of Bobby Womack’s “If You Think You’re Lonely Now” and Babyface’s “Two Occasions.” In interviews, Carey has described the writing and recording session as a collaboration with producer Jermaine Dupri (“Road to the Grammys: The Story Behind Mariah Carey’s ‘We Belong Together,’” January 30 2006, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1522707/20060127/index.jhtml?headlines=true> [accessed 18 December 2008]). I could find no information, gossip or otherwise, to support the claim that Carey was going through a separation while she was recording the song.

JW: Why not?

Tamika: Because, I don't go through separations!

Tamika's clever quips were undoubtedly crafted to dodge my questions, but the fact remains that she cannot personally relate to Mariah Carey's lyrics, because as she put it, she doesn't go through separations. Her throwaway comment is actually very important, because it indicates that it's not the content of the song to which she necessarily relates. She doesn't even necessarily transfer Mariah Carey's emotions in the song and apply them to similar situations in her own life. Rather, she relates to and admires the intent of a song. And when Tamika sings to "let her feelings out" or to get "not mad", she is keyed into what I am calling an aesthetic of realness. Even though Tamika doesn't necessarily relate to the specific words of the song, there is still something there that makes her think of Mariah Carey (and Mary J. Blige) as a role model. She can't quite tell me what she thinks about when she sings it, or even what she feels. Yet there is something that is being communicated to her beyond the narrative of the song and the video. By thinking of an "aesthetic" of realness, I am attempting to articulate the artistic components of a performance that make it real for the listeners at John Avery. I would argue that this aesthetic of realness has virtually nothing to do with the lyrics of a song (although there are certain scripts that hip-hop and R&B songs generally follow) and everything to do with a song's performance.

In analyzing what an aesthetic of realness sounds like, I will use Mariah Carey's "We Belong Together" as an example. Mariah Carey's singing style is representative of contemporary female R&B singers, and girls often cited her as one of their favorite

singers. Not only was “We Belong Together” Tamika’s favorite song, but it was one of the very few songs during the course of my fieldwork that the girls never objected to hearing—not a small distinction, since even the most popular songs were often denigrated as “old” within a few months of their heyday at John Avery. It’s also one of the very few songs the girls would listen to the entire way through. From my first week until my last day at the club, when that song came on, girls started singing. When Angela played it that Friday at the club, it had already been out for almost a year. I do not believe that the girls at John Avery listen to “We Belong Together” over and over again because Mariah Carey necessarily expresses more emotion than other female R&B singers. The popularity of the song at the club had more to do with its immense world-wide popularity than anything unique about Carey’s performance. Rather, “We Belong Together” is just one example, albeit a very cogent one, of how girls recognize ideologies of race and gender in the music that they listen to.

“We Belong Together” is a fantastic tour-de-force that resurrected Mariah Carey from “where are they now” obscurity and back into celebrity consciousness. Released in March 2005, it stayed at No. 1 on Billboard’s Hot 100 for 14 weeks, a record at the time, the summer following its release.²³ Produced by Jermaine Dupri, the beat consists of sparse piano and guitar floating over bass and a drum machine. Backup vocals hum and “ooh” in sync with the piano chords. Carey sings in a comfortable mid-range vocal

²³ www.billboard.com. For an interesting take on Carey’s singing style and why “We Belong Together” was so popular, see music critic Kelefa Sanneh’s NYTimes article “The Summer Buzz: Cicadas and Mariah Carey” (August 4, 2005).

register. At about two and a half minutes into the song, she launches into the finale. She sings the entirety of the chorus, but instead of ending the melody in the same way as its prior incarnations, she sings the last phrase of the chorus (“We belong together”) works her way up an octave. From there she sings the entire chorus again, only this time an octave higher. She ends it with a held note on the final syllable (togeth-errrrrrrr) that fades out over 16 beats along with the rest of the track. In the music video for the song, Carey transitions from minimal movement and a forlorn expression to grabbing at her hair, tossing her head, and pumping her fist in the air. At this moment in live performances she takes the microphone out of its stand, tosses her head around and walks around the stage, bending forward to sing into the mic.²⁴ There can be no mistake: this is the emotional part of the song.

As opposed to the rest of the song, where she’s singing in a middle-to-low vocal register, in the finale she sounds like she’s working, vocally and emotionally. She sounds strained, but very impassioned. It is a very different sound from the effortless whistle tones of her earlier career.²⁵ In the narrative of the music video, it’s at this moment that she leaves her groom at the altar and runs into the arms of her former lover. Shots of her trailing wedding dress are interspersed with Carey sitting on a lush bed in a low cut dress,

²⁴ Taken from her 2005 appearances on “Ellen”, “The Late Show with David Lettermen” and “The MTV Movie Awards”, all of which I accessed on www.youtube.com as recently as September 2007.

²⁵ Mariah Carey’s early songs are characterized by a “whiter” sound. Her long career is marked by periods of racial ambiguity. Early in her career she was mistakenly identified as ‘white’, and only ‘came out’ as racially mixed in 1991. It’s significant, I think, that her earlier sound did not have the same audible markers of ‘soul’ as her later work. See C. A. Streeter, ““Faking the funk? Mariah Carey, Alicia Keys and (hybrid) black celebrity,” in *Black cultural traffic: Crossroads in global performance and popular culture*, ed. by H. E. J. Elam and K. Jackson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 185-207, for a more nuanced perspective on the relationship between Carey’s racial identification and her musical career.

singing directly into the camera, and Carey standing against a bare white wall, wearing only a white tunic, again singing directly into the camera. Her vocal timbre, the way she moves her body, her vocal ornaments—all completely conventional in R&B—all indicate emotion and that she is putting her life—her feelings—into her song. In Tamika’s mind, Mariah Carey was going through a separation when she wrote the song, and that is undoubtedly part of the reality she has imagined for Carey. When Tamika sings this song though, it is obvious that she is trying to replicate not Mariah Carey’s specific emotions, but the way Mariah Carey lets these emotions out.

At this point in the song, if you want to keep singing, you have to go all out or just stop. When you sing the climax, unless you’re a trained singer it’s almost impossible to sing that high “to yourself”. The higher range requires faster airflow through the vocal chords or folds, which is much harder to control if you’re singing at a lower volume and if you’re just sitting around, hanging out with your friends. As girls attempt to replicate the sound and character of artists such as Mariah Carey or Mary J. Blige, they recognize what is most important about the singing and approximate the physical process necessary to get the same kind of expression or affect that Mariah Carey gets. Girls at the club hit the highlights of her singing. This means singing loud and singing higher than normal. They don’t have sophisticated enough senses of pitch to sing exactly what Mariah Carey is singing, but they can approximate the contour of the melody, and they can sing really high and loud. Also, girls pick up on the subtleties in Mariah Carey’s singing, in particular the way she falls off the pitch at the end of her phrases.

2.6 “We Belong Together”: December 2006

One Friday evening in December, Tamika and Alana were the oldest kids remaining in the Arts and Crafts Room. After an afternoon of dancing, it was getting close to 6:00 and the older girls had either gone home or lost interest. Despite Ms. Gordon’s constant admonitions not to sit on the tables, they did just that, sitting in the privileged position right in front of the speakers, controlling song selection on the iPod. It was Tamika’s turn to pick a song, and the one she picked was “We Belong Together.” She and Alana were sitting in front of the music, the center of attention. Younger boys and girls sat in the little chairs and on tables around them, holding their big poofy coats, waiting for Ms. Angela to call their names and tell them it was time for them to go home. Ms. McKoy picked up chairs and straightened the bookshelf behind Tamika and Alana. Jakwana, a kindergartner, sat in a little red chair close to Tamika, singing along, bouncing up and down, bobbing her head and raising her arms every time Mariah sang “til the sun comes up.” Trishelle worriedly searched for her lost book. Girls sang, talked to one another, sang some more. Everyone knew the song, of course, and clearly took pleasure in singing it together, but it had lost a little of the luster it had had ten months previous.

For Alana and Tamika though, it was an occasion for performance. They were both aware of my camera, but in different ways. Alana sang along with the entire song. She started out singing it absentmindedly, fiddling with the cord to the iPod. But eventually she directed her voice towards the other people in the room, including me and my camera, at times looking directly at me and pointing her voice, face and body towards me. She was performing, but it wasn’t really about the words to the song, or the emotions

in the song. She was doing a performance of general earnestness, closing her eyes at times, gesturing with her hands at times. Like a lot of her performances, she seemed primarily to want to be noticed.

Tamika, on the other hand, had her head tilted to the side and looked at the floor, looking completely despondent. A furtive glance at my camera indicated that she was mindful she was being recorded. In the opening verse, she shook her head sadly with the lyrics and sang the words, moving a little bit to the beat, but basically keeping her body still. I couldn't hear her over Alana. Occasionally she would get distracted, but she would always refocus. When the last chorus came, she let it rip. While Alana did not even try to sing that high, Tamika went for the gold. She closed her eyes and started moving her head and torso to the beat. When Alana heard her, she turned around and stared at her. Failing to hear anyone else's voice, Tamika opened her eyes, looked around, and saw other kids looking at her with bewilderment. Not only was she the only one going full out on that part, she was the only one singing, period. She took it all in stride: she smiled, rolled her eyes a couple of times, and then continued on with the rest of the chorus, this time lip-synching instead of singing. She closed her eyes once more and moved her torso and head to the beat. She was prevented from using her voice to express her emotion, so instead her body registered feeling. Just as Mariah got to that final note, Alana prepared to show her stuff.

There ain't nobody better

Oh baby baby—

“Y’all watch me hit this part!” she said to the camera and everyone else in the room. In her excitement, though, she inadvertently pulled the cord out of the iPod, stopping Mariah cold. Alana looked at me, her eyes wide and her mouth agape. After a split second, everyone laughed.

Except for Tamika. She gave a wistful smile; I’ve never seen her look so disappointed. Alana tried to start the song again, but the interruption had killed the mood. The moment passed while I provided iPod support. No one wanted to listen to it from the beginning again, so they moved to a different song.

2.7 Sincerity

This occasion for singing was the kind of display of both interiority and exteriority that I often encountered at John Avery. Both Tamika and Alana, as well as everyone else present, clearly recognized that they were being videotaped. I stood less than six feet in front of them in order to focus on their faces. Rather than shy away from displaying a personal moment, they recognized that this was an occasion for an extra special performance, one which required extra expression. The performance, therefore, was not an expression of interiority but instead an exterior performance of their interpretation of interiority. Tamika and Alana’s gestures indicated that they recognized singing as something that should be personal, and they recognized the need to perform this personal aspect in order to be credible.

I connect my theory of the aesthetic of realness to John Jackson's theory of racial sincerity.²⁶ As opposed to authenticity, which depends on an outside observer's racialized judgement, sincerity can only truly be judged by the racial subject herself. Sincerity eliminates the dependence on the gazes and voices of others when it comes to claiming a racial identity:

"Sincerity highlights the ever-fleeting 'liveness' of everyday racial performances that cannot be completely captured by authenticating mediations of any kind. Where authenticity lauds content, sincerity privileges intent—an interiorized intent that decentralizes the racial seer (and the racial script), allowing for the possibility of performative ad-libbing and inevitable acceptance of trust amid uncertainty as the only solution to interpersonal ambiguity. With sincerity as a model, one still does not see into the other, one still does not know if one can trust the other's performances...however, one recognizes that people are not simply racial objects (to be verified from without) but racial subjects with an interiority that is never completely and unquestionably clear. Racial subjects demand a mutual granting of autonomy and interiorized validity that outstrips authenticity's imperfect operationalizations."²⁷

2.8 Authenticity in Hip-Hop

In hip-hop, authenticity is tied to claims of realness and reality. The ideal of the "authentic" a powerful arbiter of who is allowed to perform and record hip-hop and why. Claims of authenticity are first, tied to claims of a kind of blackness (which for some of hip-hop's consumers stands in for all blackness). Claims of being "street," "ghetto," "gangsta," or being a "real nigga" are predicated on ideas of black masculinity and the masculinity of the emcee. Eithne Quinn, in writing about the advent of gangsta rap in the late 1980s and early 1990s, connects the politics of authenticity with the realities of the

²⁶ Jackson 2005.

²⁷ Ibid., 18.

marketplace: “[Gangsta rappers] mobilized the authenticity discourse (representation as depiction) to an unprecedented degree, in order to give shape to materially grounded conditions, experiences, and desires and at the same time to fuel and feed the vast appetite for ‘black ghetto realness’ in the popular-culture marketplace.”²⁸ Authenticity in hip-hop is also linked to ideas of “real” hip-hop, dialogically positioned in opposition to commercial hip-hop. In other words, “authentic” hip-hop is from the “old school,”—a more artistic, politically engaged version of hip-hop than what is on the radio.

Girls are necessarily excluded from any of these claims to realness or authenticity in hip-hop. Although some live in what would be considered “authentically” difficult circumstances (being classified as at or below the poverty level, living in neighborhoods with a strong gang presence), as young females, they are not able to live up to hip-hop’s masculinist claims. Authenticity as a barometer excludes girls from ever accessing hip-hop’s claims to realness (the cultural capital of hip-hop’s realness). As Jackson explains it, authenticity requires a mediator—someone who can gaze upon a racialized, musicalized subject and determine if the content of the subject’s personhood or identity matches with who and/or what the subject purports to be (and of course the mediator must herself be authenticated if she is to be taken seriously as one who is able to judge.) And Jackson points out that judging based on authenticity ignores the importance of the subject’s interiority, which in the history of racial America is precisely what was denied to people of color: the acknowledgment that there was any kind of value outside of the

²⁸ Eithne Quinn, “Black British Cultural Studies and the Rap on Gangsta,” *Black Music Research Journal* 20, no. 2 (2000): 202.

exterior self. I see Jackson's conception of sincerity as a liberating device, whereby examining a subject's sincerity as opposed to her authenticity privileges the interior self as much as or more than the exterior image. By claiming that the interior is as important as the exterior, Jackson de-centralizes those who would make judgments about a subject's racialized personhood, and privileges the subject herself, acknowledging that an outside gazer can never fully understand the complexities of her self.

Jackson's concept of sincerity is more attuned to everyday performances of race than individual artistic events. When we take into consideration musical performance, the stakes for girls are heightened. Replicating sincerity through singing requires skill and artistry, and is in itself an authenticating device. An "aesthetic of realness" is one step away from true sincerity, as Jackson envisions it. Operating within an aesthetic of realness does not teach girls to be sincere; rather, it teaches them the artistic tools necessary to be perceived as sincere. As long as girls can claim some sort of sincerity through their performances, then they are, by necessity, real. They thereby position themselves as immune from critiques to their gendered, racialized personhood.

2.9 "We Belong Together": March 2007

Angela gave me a key so I could supervise girls' dancing in the Education Room. We plugged in the small speakers, sat them on the desk in the corner and started playing music. Girls and boys sat at the tables in the room, playing with the stickers and folders Ms. Gordon had handed out, donated by a local office supply company. The desk was

quickly co-opted by the oldest girls and became the most coveted spot in the room. Girls folded pieces of paper into fortune tellers while listening to music.²⁹

Deyshia (5th grade) and Larissa (5th grade) sat at the desk, using Mr. Hank's scissors and tape to make fortune tellers. They sipped at their juice boxes from snack time. Tamika leaned on the desk, adding a comment here and there to their conversation. "We Belong Together" came up on my iPod's playlist. Tamika quietly sang to herself from the beginning of the song, with others joining in on the chorus. When the finale came, Deyshia and Larissa started singing almost spontaneously, abandoning what they were doing to concentrate solely on their brief performance.

When you left I lost a part of me

It's still so hard to believe

Come back baby please cause

We belong together

Deyshia reached out and grasped at some imaginary person in front of her. She moved her hands, fingers spread, over her face and clutched the neckline of her t-shirt. As

²⁹ To make a fortune teller: take an 8.5 x 11" piece of paper and cut a chunk off of one end so that you have an 8.5" square. Next, fold each corner of the paper towards the center so that each corner point is touching in the middle. Flip your new folded square over, then repeat on the other side. You should now have a square with folds on both sides. On the side with the double layer folds, write a number on each side of each folded triangles (you should have 8 numbers total). Underneath each number (on the flip side of the folds) write one "fortune" (you should have 8 fortunes total, corresponding to the 8 numbers). The fortunes can be anything from "Your feet stink" to "You will have a rich husband." Now take your square, and fold it into a three-dimensional shape so that the points of the double layer triangles meet in the bottom, and the outside corners of the square meet at the top. You can hold the fortune teller with either one hand or two hands. One finger should be underneath each single layer triangle. To play, ask someone for his or her favorite color. You then spell the color, moving the fortune teller in and out for each letter. Then ask the person for a number. Do the same thing, moving the fortune teller while you count. Then the person picks one of the numbers written on the double layer triangles, and you lift up the triangle and read them their fortune.

she sang, Larissa clenched and unclenched her fists, threw her head back and then hunched her torso over the desk. When Deyshia and Larissa joined in, Tamika started singing louder and more intently. She closed her eyes, grabbed her heart on “lost a part of me”. She appeared delighted that Deyshia and Larissa had joined in, their participation being an implicit permission slip to sing as loud as she wanted. Inexplicably, Deyshia and Larissa stopped singing at the next line, leaving poor Tamika to go it alone. She sang it as she had sung the previous lyrics, only this time Larissa and Deyshia looked at her with blank expressions. When Tamika noticed that they had stopped singing, she stopped too, as if she no longer had their permission:

“Who ’m I gonna lean...oh.”

Then just as inexplicably, they started singing again. They sang until the end of the song, until Alana approached the desk and started clapping along. Deyshia glared at her and everyone immediately stopped singing.

2.10 Singing Together

I will close the chapter by returning to my opening ethnographic story. If the girls were so concerned with expressing a truly real experience, a sincere racial performance, why did we all laugh at the end? Why the move from sincere-replicating gestures of Tamika and Alana’s individual performances to crazy, over-the-top movement and singing? What were we laughing at exactly? The fact that everyone was just yelling instead of singing? That we were playing along with Mariah, enjoying her emotion but in no way feeling anything like it?

These performances are a kind of mock-sincerity, yet another step back from Jackson's original conception. At the same time that girls value real interpretations of real emotions, they enjoy critiquing these interpretations with their friends. I believe this mock-sincerity is a critique of discourses of 'real' emotion and 'real' feeling in black music. When they sing together, girls demonstrate the same kind of discernment in listening that Alana and Tamika do when they sing alone. However, singing together and mocking the sincerity of the singer is a way for girls to articulate that they not only appreciate a singer's sincerity, but they recognize that it is somewhat of a put-on. In this kind of critique it is possible for girls to step outside the hyper-reality of hip-hop and R&B. They are performing their ideas of what a singer should be, in turn giving a performance of how they think they themselves should be. However, their mock-sincerity is an acknowledgement that perhaps all is not as it appears to be in hip-hop and R&B. These joking performances give me hope that in developing their listening skills, girls do more than just mindless imitations and replications. They do not automatically accept what Hip-Hop/R&B teaches through its lyrics, sounds and images. They think about what the sound means, and relate it to their own particular experiences.

3. Dancing Lessons: Hearing the Beat and Understanding the Body

My afternoons at John Avery often started the same way. I'd walk through the door about an hour later than I intended, and before I could say hi to Angela at the front desk, I would be bombarded with questions, all related to my iPod and the music I had on it.

"Ms. Jenny, can I pick the first song?"

"Jenny can I hold the iPod? You said yesterday I could hold it."

"Nah-uh! She said I could! Ms. Jenny you said I could."

"Did you get Ciara?"

"Do you have Meet Me in the Trap?"

I would answer the questions as best I could, trying to remember who I had promised what the day before. "Alright," I would say. "Y'all come with me to get the speakers and we'll see if we can go find a place to dance." The girls, and sometimes boys, would follow me and continue to ask me questions, each one trying her or his best to persuade me that she or he should hold the iPod. We would go first to the Arts and Crafts Room (my favorite location for videorecording), noisily interrupting whatever was going on there at the time.

"Ms. Gordon, can we dance in here?" I would ask.

If everyone in the room was done with their homework, we could dance. Otherwise, we'd have to move on. A couple girls would grab the small portable speakers from underneath Ms. Gordon's desk and we'd make our way to the Education Room

across the hall, the accompanying speaker cords trailing behind. If that room was unavailable, our only other option was the Board Room, which most girls preferred because of its relative privacy, but which I tried to avoid because of its lack of space and awkward layout for recording. I'd get the key from Ms. McKoy, assuring her that I would make sure the room was clean when we left. I would unlock the door, turn on the lights, and the youngest girls would chase each other around the conference table while the older ones went to work setting up the speakers and iPod. Shoes would come off, as most girls found it easier to dance on the carpet in socks instead of sneakers. Whoever was granted the right of holding the iPod would start scrolling through the list of songs, only to cede control to an older and more popular girl if she asked for it. Then she would start playing the songs, usually only lasting a few seconds each before someone would yell "Change it!!"

Finally a song would come on that everyone could dance to, a song that everyone recognized from the very first beat. The sound of a record scratching at the beginning of "Grillz," the child's voice saying "This a Nitti beat!" before "It's Goin' Down," the hi-hat followed by repeated exhalations at the beginning of "Walk It Out," the gradual crescendo of a low synth and bass drum at the beginning of "Pop, Lock & Drop It."¹ Eyebrows would raise and knowing glances would be exchanged. The girls playing in the far corner of the room would run to be near the music and the dancing, while those near

¹ Nelly, "Grillz," *Sweatsuit* (Universal, 2005); Yung Joc "It's Goin' Down," *New Joc City* (Atlantic, 2006); DJ Unk "Walk It Out," *Beat'n Down Yo Block!* (Big Oomp Records, 2006); Huey "Pop, Lock, & Drop It," *Notebook Paper* (Jive, 2006).

the speakers would abruptly halt their conversations. The swirl of activity would now be directed at one particular place: the small dance floor around the speakers. Most of the girls would stand on the dance floor, waiting for the right time to dance (the beginning of the first verse on “It’s Goin’ Down,” the beginning of the first chorus on “Walk It Out” and “Pop, Lock & Drop It”), while other girls would sit on the tables surrounding the dance floor, watching the dancing and occasionally doing miniature versions of the dances themselves. The older girls (6th grade and up) would make comments about the dancing, encouraging some and discouraging others, but for a brief time, maybe a minute or so, all conversation would revolve around the dance.

The joy in that moment is at the heart of this chapter. This is the joy that comes from doing a dance that you’ve seen other people do, a dance that you’ve continually refined with your friends. It’s the joy of being able to do something that makes you part of a group, but also the joy that comes from pride in doing something well. I take this joy as a productive space, where girls are not merely socialized into a group, but learn about their bodies through their bodies—through the bodily practice of dancing. In this chapter I look at dancing from the girls’ perspective, detailing how they teach each other to dance and how they learn on their own. From there I examine how dancing well is an exercise in listening well. Dancing at John Avery is a socializing activity, but one that also teaches girls larger discourses about black musicality. As girls learn the minutiae of bodily movement in learning the dances, they learn to coordinate their bodies to the aural details of the music they are dancing to. In learning to recognize the subtle details of sound, girls not only perfect their dancing skills, but they train their bodies to feel and respond to

music in culturally appropriate ways. Learning to listen through dancing ties girls' bodies—and the cultural significance inscribed on and ascribed to their bodies—to music, and vice versa.

3.1 Learning to Dance

Everyone dances at John Avery to some degree. Kids dance when their homework is finished, and male and female staff members sometimes join in when they have the time and the inclination. The repertoire of dances consists of the those popularized in music videos, the dances everyone sees on programs such as BET's "106 and Park," and the ones in viral videos passed along youtube and on-line social networks such as Myspace, Facebook and Bebo.² Both kids and adults generally treat girls as dancing experts. Dancing well is valued as a gendered activity among children, and adults expect girls to be experts on all the latest trends in hip-hop culture—from dances popularized in music videos, to the parody versions appearing on youtube. The times when girls danced together were usually controlled by Shontreal (7th grade), Baylee (7th grade) and Rashawanna (7th grade), who would cede control to Ms. Kia when she asked for it. As some of the oldest girls at John Avery, their opinions were always held in high esteem. They hardly ever danced themselves, but always encouraged and admonished other girls during dancing sessions. They were the ones who organized the dancing contests, they were the default controllers of the iPod, and theirs was the last word in who was a good

² 106 and Park is a music-video countdown show, airing every weekday afternoon. The show's hosts interview musical and celebrity guests and introduce live musical acts in between showing the day's top ten most requested videos.

or a bad dancer. In other words, they were the most popular and influential girls at the club. If they thought a girl was a good dancer, then that girl was treated with respect by her peers.

In interviews, one of the first questions I asked was how or where a girl learned to dance. The answers were varied, but most often the answer was something along the lines of learning from older family members (older sisters, cousins, aunts), learning from friends and learning from music videos. Stephanie (2nd grade) said she learns to dance from her older sisters, who are three and six years older than her. Deyshia (5th grade) said she learned to dance from her older cousins. Alana (4th grade) said she practices dances alone in her room. Tamika (4th grade) said that she learns her dances from tv, specifically cable channels BET and MTV2. She explained the way she learns dances by focusing on one part of the body at a time:

Tamika: Sometimes I just watch their feet when they do their feet, not their hands or anything, so I can do my feet and do other things with my hands, and, or I just might watch their hands and not look at their feet.

JW: So do you kind of learn it in those sections then? You learn the feet first and then you learn the hands and then you put it together?

Tamika: Mmm-hmm.

Ashondra (5th grade) told me that she watches videos on MTV “and stuff like that,” but that she learned most of her dances from Ms. Kia. She also told me that, like Tamika, she invested a lot of time in getting the details of a dance right. It took her “like a year” to learn how to do the “chickenhead,” and she taught herself the “heel-toe” by holding on to a table so she could focus just on her feet. But girls also learn from dancing

with each other. Jada (5th grade) said she learns to dance by “watch[ing] people do it, then I try it, then I put my own feeling into it.”

Although many of the dances are the same ones that parents and older siblings do in “adult” social spaces such as nightclubs, it would be reductive to think of dancing as “playing” at adulthood, as might be suggested in earlier socialization studies. A major critique of these studies is that children are often imagined as passive subjects who are “socialized” into their future adult roles. Critics contend that this type of study ignores the politics of childhood and fails to examine children as individual agents, while relying too heavily on a developmental model.³ Music socialization studies often focus on musical practices as “games” which anticipate roles in adulthood.⁴ In her review of studies of children’s musical practices, Amanda Minks dubs studies that focus on children’s socialization into musical and cultural norms part of the “enculturation” paradigm.⁵ As Minks points out, these studies often point to children’s imitation of adults’ musical practices, or the ways in which children’s expressive practices prepare them for adulthood or teach them the practices of adults in their communities, often without fully considering children’s musical practices as a cultural space unto itself.

³ Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

⁴ John Blacking, *Venda Children's Songs: A Study in Ethnomusicological Analysis* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1967); Margaret K. Brady, "'This Little Lady's Gonna Boogaloo': Elements of Socialization in the Play of Black Girls," in *Black Girls at Play: Folkloric Perspectives on Child Development*, edited by Margaret K. Brady and Rosiland Ekhardt, 1-56 (Austin: Southwest Educational Development Corporation, 1975); Inez Cardozo-Freeman, "Games Mexican Girls Play," *Journal of American Folklore* 88, no. 347 (1975): 12-24; Carol Merrill-Mirsky, "Eeny Meeny Pepsadeeny: Ethnicity and Gender in Children's Musical Play," Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1988.

⁵ Amanda Minks, "From Children's Song to Expressive Practices: Old and New Directions in the Ethnomusicological Study of Children," *Ethnomusicology* 46, no. 3 (2002): 379-408.

While girls at John Avery would seem to be imitating adult behavior in their dancing, and even though some of them pointed to adult figures such as aunts, older sisters, and even Ms. Kia at John Avery as teaching them certain dances, dancing at the club was a time and space where girls were understood to be the authorities. On more than one occasion, mothers and older sisters would catch a glimpse of the dancing and make a comment such as “Y’all need to teach me that!” Some of the younger adults at the club, such as Kia or volunteers from the local colleges, would press the girls to do a certain dance, or compare movements. As opposed to playing “dress up” or “house,” where children play at adulthood, dancing was completely grounded in girls’ own culture, even as they understood that they were participating in a practice whose boundaries are largely drawn and controlled by adults.

In this space, I would argue that the act of dancing together is more instructive than practicing in front of a mirror or learning from a cousin or aunt. Girls dancing together is, in and of itself, a way that they learn to dance. They hone their moves by watching each other, asking better dancers for help or listening to comments about how other girls dance, how boys dance, how women in videos dance, or how the artists dance. Dancing was punctuated with comments like, “How that go?” or “She look like she don’t have no bones,” or “How you do your arms?” These comments not only helped girls learn the precise details of a dance, but the right way to think about dancing and the musical contexts around dancing.

3.2 The “Motorcycle”

Girls’ attention to detail while dancing was most clearly manifested when they were explicitly teaching someone a dance. As someone who was extremely interested in all the details of dancing, yet didn’t know any of the dances, I was usually the person who needed the most instruction. Seldom have I felt as awkward as when Amber, Chantal (4th grade), Tamika and Tamyra (4th grade) tried to teach me the “motorcycle,” otherwise known as the “Joc” after Yung Joc and his multi-platinum single “It’s Goin’ Down,” released in April 2006.⁶ It is one of many dances in the repertoire of the girls at John Avery. In the basic movement, the dancer stands with her arms outstretched and slightly to one side and her fists lightly clenched, as if she is riding a motorcycle (see Fig. 3).⁷ When the “beat drops”, she bends her knees while simultaneously tilting her upper torso back and flexing her wrists, as if she is revving the motorcycle’s engine. The dancer’s shoulders flex with the torso, so that when the torso tilts back, the shoulders press down and back against the spine (see Fig. 4).

⁶ Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) certifications, <http://www.billboard.com/bbcom/riaa/singles.jsp>. Accessed 10-21-2007. “Multi-platinum” indicates two million units sold. These events took place Friday, June 2, 2006.

⁷ During my fieldwork both boys and girls “did” the motorcycle. The boys’ version was slightly different than the girls’: in brief, their attitude was more nonchalant and their movements were not as sharp as the girls’.



Figure 3: Girls stand ready to do the "Motorcycle."



Figure 4: Girl tilts her torso back and presses her shoulders down.

Amber, at my request, had just finished teaching me the finer points of the “Lean wit it Rock wit it,” and as soon as she had declared that I had gotten the dance, Tamyra asked me about the Joc.

“Oh Lord,” I said. “I don’t know if I can do that one. It goes like this, right?” I imitated what I had seen the girls do before. I stretched my arms in front of me, fists clenched, and awkwardly moved my shoulders to the beat. Chantal, Amber, Tamika and Tamyra gathered around me and offered their advice.

“It’s like you on a motorcycle,” Tamika said. “You gotta follow the beat though. You go like this,” she showed me. “You got your fists too tight,” Amber said. I relaxed my fingers and unclenched my fists a little bit.

A girl on the other side of the room overheard our conversation, and mistook Chantal as the one who needed to be taught the dance. “You said you don’t know how to do the Joc? You said that, Chantal?” she asked incredulously. Chantal looked horrified. “Nah-uh, Ms. Jenny doesn’t!” she quickly clarified.

“Your arms are too straight,” Chantal told me. “Bend one of your elbows,” she said. “Like this?” I asked. “Yeah...no, wait, not that much....” Chantal said. “Here,” said Tamyra as she grabbed my arms from behind me and attempted to place them in the right position. I continued dancing. From behind the camera set up in the corner of the room, Shontreal started giving me tips as well. “Pop your back!” she yelled. “She’s popping her hips,” she told Baylee, referring to the how I moved my hips with the beat instead of keeping them relatively still like everyone else.

“Okay, now you gotta look mad,” Tamyra said. “What’s your mean face?” she asked me. I tried to mirror the expression Tamyra had, pouting with my lower lip stuck out and my brow furrowed. The girls stood back and watched me attempt to put everything together: revving a motorcycle’s engine with relaxed wrists and one elbow bent a little bit more than the other one (but not too much), while popping my back to the beat and keeping my hips still and looking mad.

Everyone in the room cracked up. Tamika ran over to the camera and faux-whispered, “She’s not very good.”

In watching me dance, the girls could see my discomfort, and they could see that the dance was wrong. In trying to make the dance right, they parsed my bodily movement down to the smallest detail. This precision is not necessarily reflective of a codified dance

practice, although there are certainly elements that are required for the dance to be recognized as “the Joc” (such as revving the motorcycle’s engine and following the beat). In other words, in telling me to unclench my fists, slightly bend my elbows and keep my hips still, girls were not reciting a set of rules for how the Joc was to be performed, rules that they had all previously agreed upon. The details of movement are important, and are things that girls negotiate with each other while dancing. More important though is being comfortable with the dance, and feeling the dance in the body in the right way.

Hardly anyone was surprised that I didn’t know how to do the Joc. As a white middle-class adult female academic, kids expected that I would have little to no connection to African-American popular culture, and were often surprised when I knew the words to certain songs or joined them in conversations about certain tv shows. When I overheard a group of girls singing Beyoncé’s “Check On It”, I started singing along, prompting Amari to say, “Dang, Ms. Jenny be knowing our music!” At the same time, girls engaged Ms. Kia in conversation about Beyoncé, and ruthlessly chided a schoolmate, saying “She didn’t know Chris Brown, Pretty Ricky, nothing! What’s wrong with her?” Teaching me the Joc was little more than an amusing exercise, a novelty similar to hearing me sing all the words to a Beyoncé song. From their perspective, I (as a white middle-class female academic) had nothing at stake in getting it right. I would be praised just for having a vague idea of what the dance looked like. In fact, I showed girls some of my fieldwork videos, including the video of me learning the Joc, thinking they would get a kick out of how awful my dancing was. But whereas none of their peers were spared snarky comments about dancing, and even Ms. Kia was made fun of, they were

totally silent when it came to me. It wasn't because they were being polite (although who knows what they would say without me in the room), it was because they were *bored*. They looked around, talked about their homework, and then eventually asked me to play the video of Amber and Jada's battle again.

My presence at the club, and specifically the presence of my white adult-ness in their activities, revealed their and my assumptions about the differences in our entertainment tastes. More importantly, the moments where I inserted myself into conversations about music and dancing revealed their assumptions about activities and tastes limited to the social realm of young black females. These tastes and activities, including the music they have memorized and sing and dance to, mark them as a somewhat cohesive group. Their interest in seeing who can dance and who cannot is a way of monitoring the group.

3.3 "Wait til the beat drops"

One of Tamika's first instructions in teaching me the "Motorcycle" was "you have to wait for the beat." Feeling the dance in the body is intimately connected with knowing how to listen and what to listen for. But on the rare occasions when a girl at the club did not know how to do a dance, she stood out like a sore thumb, and the potential for serious embarrassment and social exile was much higher.

The first time Shyanne, a 2nd grader who had just moved to Durham from Pennsylvania, danced at the John Avery Boys and Girls Club, it was hard not to stare.⁸

⁸ These events took place Tuesday, November 7, 2006.

Most of the girls were dancing in the club's small Board Room, in the narrow space between the trophy case and the long table and swivel chairs in the middle of the room. Shontreal, Baylee and Rashawanna decided to hold a dance contest and declared themselves judges, the prize being the week-old Halloween candy in Shontreal's backpack. But as the judges' names were called one by one over the loudspeaker to go home, the contest quickly morphed into a free-for-all. The girls watching the contest moved from sitting on the tables and the file cabinet to the makeshift dance floor. More and more kids peeked through the small window on the room's door as they heard the muffled music cut through the other noise at the club, but only girls were allowed in. Whenever a boy tried to enter, he was inevitably met with a loud "NOOOOO! God!" The corners of the room quickly became littered with shoes and winter coats, and the air was thick and humid and smelled of sweaty eight-year-old feet. The girls who didn't dance sat on every available flat surface surrounding the dance floor. They pulled up chairs next to the empty water cooler, or under the trophy case; they leaned on the lectern making comments or egging the dancers on.

Into this melee came Shyanne, in her very first day at the club. She bravely danced with the other girls to Ciara's "Get Up", electing to jump right in rather than sit and watch.⁹ Shyanne's dance vocabulary was completely different than the other girls'—her movements were pointy and boxy where everyone else's were round and curvy. She free-styled with whatever movement came into her head, whereas the other girls used the

⁹ Ciara, "Get Up," *Ciara: The Evolution* (LaFace, 2006).

time to do set dances like the chickenhead and heel-toe, comparing the dances with one another. Shyanne's face was impassive while the other girls frowned and furrowed their brows—everyone had a version of what Tamyra called her “mean face.” Shyanne jabbed her hands above her head and jumped up and down, eliciting howls of outrage when she attempted a handstand and landed on someone's foot. She was blissfully unaware of the other girls' widened eyes, looks of bewilderment, and the fact that Baylee had crouched behind the file cabinet to hide her laughter.

Eventually Shyanne became all too aware of the comments other girls were making about her. A week after her debut in the boardroom, she had picked up on the repertoire of dances she was supposed to be doing, but she still didn't look like everyone else. Boys and girls were gathered in the Arts and Crafts room, listening to Yung Joc's “It's Goin' Down” and doing the motorcycle. Once again Shyanne jumped bravely in. She knew by this point that the song required the motorcycle, rather than free-styled movement, and she had some idea of what the “motorcycle” was supposed to look like, but she lacked the refined detail of the other girls, who had been perfecting the dance for the six months since the song's release. Kids sitting on the sidelines giggled and smirked at Shyanne's incompetence, but 6th grader Jannelle, after a brief period of amazement, took pity on her. She stood behind Shyanne and wrapped her arms around her, with her hands just above Shyanne's wrists so that Shyanne could feel Jannelle doing the dance. Shyanne started her movement too soon. “Nah, nah, nah,” Jannelle said. “Start it again!” she yelled to Rashawanna, who was controlling song selection. The song started over. Jannelle held Shyanne's outstretched arms steady. “You have to wait 'til the beat drops,”

she counseled. Shyanne nodded and stared at nothing in particular as she waited. Her head bobbed up and down nervously with the beat. She was concentrating so hard, her body tensed and ready to go the second Jannelle gave her the go-ahead.

Jannelle bent her knees and bounced on the balls of her feet. Her shoulders moved up and down in anticipation. When the “beat dropped”—when the bass started playing, in other words—Jannelle’s shoulders and torso dropped back as well. Shyanne followed the movement of Jannelle’s body, dipping her shoulders and torso back when she felt Jannelle do the same. Jannelle did the dance with Shyanne for the first verse. She sang the beat to Shyanne until she started to catch on. “Duh.... Duh Duh.... There you go, there you go!” she encouraged. She let Shyanne go and turned her around so that Shyanne could mirror her. The two danced like that until the end of the song. Janelle literally helped Shyanne feel the dance and the music in her body.

A key to doing the dance, as Jannelle taught Shyanne and as Tamika pointed out to me, is not only knowing the details of the dance’s movement but when to start and stop dancing. The song begins with eight bars of introduction, in which the song’s producer, Nitti, introduces the song and Yung Joc over a repetitive synthesizer riff and synthesized woodblocks. There are three sixteen bar verses, each followed by an eight bar chorus. The bass pattern repeats throughout the verses. The chorus of the song consists of two four bar phrases. The lyrics are repeated in each phrase; in the first iteration Yung Joc recites the lyrics over synthesizer only. The bass enters on the downbeat of the fifth bar along with the restatement of the lyrics (see Fig. 5). The bass’s entrance is what Jannelle was referring to when she told Shyanne to “wait ‘til the beat drops.” This entrance was

the highlight of the dance at John Avery. When girls heard the synthesizer playing by itself, either at the beginning of the song or in the first half of the chorus, they prepped for the start of the dance. It was common knowledge that if you didn't hear the bass (beat), you didn't dance. Instead, you were supposed to stand with your arms ready, shoulders bouncing slightly. When the beat dropped, your shoulders and body dropped with it.

The image displays a musical score for the chorus of Yung Joc's song "It's Goin' Down." The score is arranged in two systems, each with three staves: Voice (bass clef), Synth (treble clef), and Bass (bass clef). The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are written below the voice staff. The first system covers the first two lines of the chorus, and the second system covers the next two lines. The synth part features a steady eighth-note melody, while the bass part provides a simple, rhythmic accompaniment.

Voice: Meet me in the trap It's go-in' down Meet me at the mall It's go-in' down Meet me at the

Synth: [Musical notation]

Bass: [Musical notation]

club It's go - in' down a - ny where you meet me guar - an - teed to go down

Figure 5: Entrance of the bass in the chorus of Yung Joc's "It's Goin' Down."

The popularity of "It's Goin' Down" peaked around June and July of 2006. On the last day of school that year (June 9, 2006), I talked to Tamika, Tamyra and Angel (4th grade) in the tiny office behind the front desk. The three girls twisted in their swivel chairs (Tamika sat in one chair while Tamyra and Angel shared another) and talked to me about dancing. We talked about how they knew which dances to do with which songs. Angel explained to me how she knows when to start dancing based on the repetition of

the chorus of a song, and Tamika used “It’s Goin’ Down” as an example. In explaining how to do the dance, Tamika and Tamyra imitated the interplay between lyrics, movement and the bass line: Tamika recited the lyrics, and when Tamyra started her imitation of the bass, Tamika started dancing while continuing the lyrics (see Fig. 6).

JW: How do you know what... how do you know how to dance?

Angel: I dance to the beat.

JW: What is the, what is the beat in the song? Like what do you listen for?

Angel: Uh... When they say it twice, when they say it first time, I don’t dance but when they say it the second time, I dance.

JW: Okay.

Tamika: ‘Cause the second time, mostly, you have the beat to the second time. The first time they’re just letting you know the words. The second time, you doing the beat to it. Like in “Meet me in the trap” they be like

Meet me in the trap
It’s goin’ down
Meet me in the mall

All girls:

It’s goin’ down
Meet me in the club
It’s goin’ down
Anywhere you meet me guaranteed to go down

Tamika: But in the second part, it goes

[dancing] <i>Meet me in the trap</i>	Tamyra [imitating the bass]:doomp
<i>It’s goin’ down</i>	doomp doomp
<i>Meet me in the mall</i>	doomp
<i>It’s goin’ down</i>	doomp doomp
<i>Meet me in the club</i>	doomp
<i>It’s goin’ down</i>	doomp doomp
<i>Anywhere you meet me guaranteed to go down</i>	

JW: So what was that, Tamyra, what was that “doomp doomp”?

Tamyra: That was the beat.

Tamika: The rhythm.

Tamyra: That was the beat that it supposed to go to.

Tamika: Like [to Tamyra] say it again!

Tamyra [while Tamika is dancing]: doomp
doomp doomp
doomp
doomp doomp

All girls:

Tamika

meet me in the trap it's go-in' down meet meet in the mall it's go-in' down meet me in the

club it's go-in' down a-ny-where you meet me guar-an-tee'd to go down

Tamika

But in the second part, it go meet me in the trap it's go-in' down meet meet in the mall it's goin' down meet me in the

Tamyra

doomp doomp doomp doomp doomp doomp

Tamika

club it's go-in' down a-ny-where you meet me guar-an-tee'd to go down

Tamyra

doomp doomp doomp

Figure 6: Tamika and Tamyra imitate the chorus of "It's Goin' Down"

The girls are able to recall from memory what they consider to be the most crucial elements of the song, demonstrating how they listen and what they listen for when dancing. First, they all agree that you have to dance to the beat: an acknowledgement that

dancing requires listening first and foremost. Second, because the “beat” as they define it is not just the tempo but the lowest sound in the song, they must know what to listen for. Third, they know exactly when the beat drops, suggesting that they pay close attention to other elements in the song which signal a change, such as the snare drum at the end of the introduction. Tamyra has listened to the song enough times and close enough that she can replicate the pattern of the bass without any cues other than Tamika reciting the lyrics. Even the vocable Tamyra used to imitate the bass (“doomp”) demonstrates her attention to different timbres in the song—she uses the dark vowel [u], followed by the nasal consonant [m] to darken her voice so that it is different from that of Tamika’s, even though they speak in the same treble register. What is most evident here is that the girls know how the details of the song work together. With this kind of knowledge, girls demonstrate to their peers that they have the skills that allow them to talk about music and dancing and socialize with other girls through music and dancing.

3.4 “I gotta get the beat to it!”

There were times during my fieldwork when girls were quite explicit in teaching and sharing the skills that Tamika, Tamyra and Angel demonstrated in their interview with me. A few days before that interview (Tuesday, June 6, 2006), kids were hanging out in the Arts and Crafts Room. While other kids finished their spring crafts project, a handful of girls persuaded Ms. Angela to let them listen to music. The girls gathered around my iPod. Jada (5th grade), being the oldest girl in the room at the time, grabbed the iPod and scrolled through the list of songs while Tia (3rd grade) and Amari (3rd grade) looked on. She landed on “It’s Goin’ Down.” We heard the opening guitar chord,

followed by a child's voice: "This a Nitti beat!" A couple of girls hummed along with the opening synthesizer riff. Chloe (4th grade), a club regular, complained that she could never get the dance to the song and asked Jada to help her. Jada took a couple of steps away from Ms. Angela's desk to where Chloe was standing. "I gotta get the beat to it!" Chloe said. Jada decided that the music wasn't loud enough.

"Turn the music up! Ms. Jenny, how you turn this up?" Jada asked. She and Tia couldn't figure out how to make the music louder, since the speakers were already at full volume. I stepped out from behind the camera to adjust the volume on the iPod. Once the volume was figured out, we were already ten bars in—past the introduction and into the first verse. "Let me see you do it," Jada said to Chloe, encouraging her to do the dance. "I don't know how the beat go," Chloe said.

"Like this, like this," Jada said. She demonstrated the dance for two bars while Tia pounded the song's bass with her fist on Ms. Angela's desk next to the speakers.

"Thank you! I keep getting the beat mixed up," Chloe said. "Go," she said to Tia, indicating that she wanted Tia to keep pounding on the desk along with the bass line. Chloe nodded. "I got it, thank you," she said. Chloe kept doing the motorcycle for four bars while Tia and Jada both pounded on the desk, helping Chloe hear the beat. On the fifth bar, Jada joined Chloe in the motorcycle, but Chloe soon lost track of the beat, and Jada immediately called her out. "You all off beat!" she said to Chloe.

Chloe scowled in frustration. She stopped for a second to listen to the song, and pounded the beat with Tia. "I got it," she said. But by this point the first verse was over and the first chorus had started; the bass had dropped out and only the synthesizer was

playing. The girls talked for four bars waiting for the beat to come back in. Chloe asked Jada about a tv show, and Jada and Tia told her what they had seen the night before. When the bass entered after four bars, Jada and Tia didn't miss a beat, and continued their conversation as they started the motorcycle in sync with the bass. After a moment's hesitation, Chloe joined them, but her shoulders moved too much in between the syncopated bass, and it looked like she was coordinated with the eighth-note rhythm of the synthesizer instead. "You look like you vibrating," Jada told her. "I can't do it," Chloe said. She spun around and threw her arms in the air in mock frustration.

"My grandmother, she does like this. She drops all the way down." Jada said to Chloe. Jada imitated her grandmother doing the motorcycle, bending way back with her torso. "My sister does the Lean Wit It like this," Chloe said, shooting her arms up to imitate her sister's version of "Lean Wit it, Rock Wit It." "My cousin, Quanisha, she does like this," Jada said. "She look better than they do in the video." The girls compared different styles of these dances for ten bars, then Chloe turned her attention back to the dance at hand.

"How it go?" she asked herself. She looked at the ceiling in concentration, listening for the bass line. She rapped her knuckles on the desk next to the speakers along with the bass, but when she tried the dance by herself, it didn't translate. Chloe pulled Jada's sleeve to get her attention (Jada was talking to Chantal and Tia). "How it go?" Chloe asked. Jada responded by showing Chloe the dance and counting along at the same time. "One...two three. One...two three," she said while dancing with each thump of the bass. Chloe tried it by herself, but it was the beginning of the chorus again, and she was

dropping her torso at the wrong time anyway—she bounced on the downbeats instead of on the offbeats and she did her second shoulder drop too soon. Tia saw her doing it wrong and waved in her face to indicate that she needed to stop. When the bass came back in, Tia and Jada once more started the motorcycle at exactly the right time, even though they were talking to Chantal. Chloe waited a second and then joined in, watching them for her cues. They did the dance together for a few bars, then went back to conversation about how other girls they know do the dance. Chloe attempted the dance again, but once again she came in too early and not coordinated with the bass. “You off beat again, Chloe!” Jada said to her. “I know,” Chloe whined. “How it go?” This time Chloe pounded the beat on the desk while Jada demonstrated the motorcycle and counted. Chloe tried again, but this time instead of coming in too early on the second shoulder drop, she waited too long. Jada watched her and shook her head. Chloe jumped up and down and groaned in exasperation. “Ugh! I can’t do it!”

Because Chloe had trouble *listening*, she had trouble with the dance. While Chloe tried to memorize the pattern of the beat and follow Tia and Jada’s visual cues, Jada and Tia attempted a variety of measures to get Chloe to listen in the same way they do. First they pounded on the table to imitate the low sound of the bass. Jada then started doing the dance while Tia continued to pound on the table. Jada’s critique of Chloe’s movement (“you look like you vibrating”) was a listening critique as well: Chloe’s body was “vibrating” with the synthesizer line instead of emphasizing the bass. Her shoulders bounced up and down with the sixteenth note pattern in the synthesizer (see Fig. 3), minimizing the effect of the dance’s signature movement: shoulders dropping back with

the bass. Thus Chloe minimized the visual and tactile effects of coordination with the beat. Chloe tried to get the beat in a number of different ways—counting out loud with Jada, pounding it on the table, watching as Jada counted and did the dance. But because Chloe was not attuned to the song's sound details like Jada and Tia were—they knew the song so well that they could hold a conversation and dance simultaneously—she kept missing her cues and could not coordinate her body with the music.

By learning how to dance and listen properly, girls are trained in the social life of the club. Chloe, like Shyanne, was literally training her body to be part of the group. When you can listen well, you can do the dances, yes, but you can also sit on the sidelines and still participate by laughing and commenting on the people who are dancing. Unlike Shyanne, who had to be taught that the beat was important, Chloe knew that she was having trouble with the dance because she could not identify the beat. As an African-American girl trying to identify with her peers, she recognized that she was supposed to do what Jada and Tia seemed to do effortlessly—dance without appearing to think about it, as if it were second nature. The fact that Jada and Tia were so patient with Chloe, and that they were able to identify *how* and *why* Chloe was doing the dance incorrectly suggests that they understand that their own dancing skills are not second nature—they too at some point had to learn how to dance and how to listen.

Chloe's struggle with the motorcycle and Jada and Tia's endeavor to help her illustrates Kyra Gaunt's argument that African-American girls learn through the body in

their musical play.¹⁰ Chloe recognizes this in that she knows she can't do the dance, and also recognizes that the reason why is that she doesn't "get the beat." Jada and Tia attempt to help her learn to listen for the right musical elements to aid her in her dancing. Chloe is learning how to feel in the right way, and to feel in the same way as Jada and Tia. As black girls, they know they need to be able to have "rhythm", and they recognize the thumping bass as a key aesthetic component of black music. By training themselves to listen for that bass, they are learning what Gaunt calls "musical blackness": "black musical identifications through an embodied practice."¹¹ Jada and her cousin Chasity once told me, in answer to the question "What does it mean for you to be black?" that they needed to be good dancers. The answer they gave was likely influenced by my asking it; by all the times we've danced together and talked about dancing, they knew that I was interested and had some stake in their dancing. Even so, their answer acknowledges the very intimate connection between African-American musical practices and girls' self-conception, even if that connection takes the form of girls knowing that there *should* be a connection. As Gaunt points out, girls use their musical practices as a way of identifying themselves as black, which is a means of connecting with the social world beyond the club—with mothers, older sisters, the DJ on the radio. They learn to become physically invested in the music and in black popular culture more generally. But what do these physical investments mean to them as individuals? What do physical investments mean to how girls understand their bodies?

¹⁰ Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

3.5 Dancing as Embodied Listening

Having the right kind of movement and having the right kind of musicality are both important in dancing well, and both are achieved through the strict discipline of the body. Ashondra taught herself how to do the heel-toe by leaning on the table to support her upper body weight so that she could focus entirely on her legs and feet. Similarly, Tamika learned dances by isolating parts of her body. And Chloe learned from Jada and Tia, like Shyanne learned from Jannelle, that she needed to feel the beat in her body in order to do the Joc correctly.

As researchers have pointed out, a child's experience of the body is significantly different than that of an adult.¹² The rapid change of the body during the years which we consider to be childhood impacts social relationships and a child's understanding of herself, and a child's experience of her changing body is central to the experience of childhood itself.¹³ James, Jenks and Prout use the example of pre-schoolers thinking of themselves as "big" in relation to the other, younger children, and then immediately re-conceptualizing themselves as "small" once they enter primary school.¹⁴ Precisely because children's bodies are changing along with their social contexts, the meaning of their changing bodily materiality and the relationship between their body's materiality

¹² Alan Prout, "Childhood Bodies: Construction, Agency and Hybridity," in *The Body, Childhood and Society*, edited by Alan Prout, 1-18 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

¹³ Allison James, *Childhood Identities: Self and Social Relationships in the Experience of the Child*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993); Allison James, "Embodied Being(s): Understanding the Self and the Body in Childhood," in *The Body, Childhood and Society*, edited by Alan Prout, 19-37 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

and how they perceive themselves, how they conceive of personal identity, is influenced by the physical, changing shape of their bodies. For pre-adolescent girls at John Avery who dance, they are on the verge of their bodies changing shape. As they develop as young women, they are experiencing new feelings, sensations and emotions. In addition to their physical development, they also learn how their bodies fit in with other bodies, and continually discover what makes their bodies different or the same as other bodies. In the experience of dancing, girls learn to enjoy their bodies in a musical context, so that as they learn to recognize musical elements marked as “black,” they are simultaneously learning that these elements should be enjoyed in and through the body. In this way, girls can self-identify with their peers and adult interlocutors, in effect asserting that while their bodies may not be fully developed, they should be fully identified and identifiable as black.

If you know how to listen, then you understand the relationship between your body and the music, which means that in some part, you understand what the music means and what is important about the music. The girls at John Avery who have bodies that are able to dance in certain ways and can do certain things are imbued with a physical capital that is wrapped up in cultural capital that comes with black musical experiences. As girls physically train their butts to move back and forth, and teach their hips to move quickly from side to side, they are participating in a sociological and physical construction of gender and sexuality, one that cannot be removed from the cultural capital of black music. In this way, the cultural capital of being familiar with the

latest songs and dances is intertwined with the physical capital that comes from having the kind of body able to do the dances.

African-American girls, as disenfranchised subjects, are situated in a political context of musical blackness. As girls refine a sense of musical blackness and share that sense with their peers, they cultivate a personal investment with black popular culture, an investment that is crystallized in their bodily practices. Embodied listening is a performative gesture towards a particular kind of blackness and femaleness; it is a way in which girls express the intersection between black popular culture and their particular experiences. Yet as girls learn to move their bodies in a way that is valued and that identifies them as African-American, they also learn that their bodies must be controlled in order to be accepted into the moral order of their peers and adult interlocutors. I explore this in the following chapter.

4. Morality Lessons: Nasty Dancing and Inappropriate Behavior

Pop's congenital lung disease kept him away from the club more that he would have liked during my fieldwork, but when he was there, he was a formidable presence. He stands at about six and a half feet tall. He's bald, with big eyes and a big smile. His voice is always hoarse, but every single kid at the club listens to it. He's been at the club longer than anyone else, having been a member of the John Avery Boys' Club when he was growing up in Durham. Now he's the Director of Operations, and has an office across the street in the small administrative building. When he's at the club, he mostly sits at the front desk, overseeing activity, walking around the club, and calling kids over the intercom when it's time for them to go home. His is the last word on disciplinary matters: he's John Avery's equivalent of going to see the principal.

He would also occasionally peek his head in at our dancing sessions. Girls would be busy dancing, and his tall lanky frame would appear in the door. He would walk in doing the motorcycle, much to the horror and delight of the kids in the room. On one such day, the Education Room was packed with girls waiting to dance. They yelled at the boys to get out, refusing to dance until every last one had left. The overwhelming choice for first song was "Lean Wit It, Rock Wit It" by Dem Franchise Boyz.¹ While the music played, boys tried to get in the door, and the shorter boys jumped up and down to see through the small window. As the conversation, laughing, and shouting got louder and

¹ Dem Franchise Boyz, "Lean Wit It, Rock Wit It," *On Top of Our Game* (So So Def, 2005).

louder, so did the music. While girls danced, Ms. Kia sat at a table by the wall, asking me if I had certain songs and offering occasional commentary. Most of her comments were directed towards the “hoochie” moves the girls were doing. Kia was simultaneously shocked and entertained by Deyshia (5th grade) in particular, who continued to push the boundaries of what was considered “appropriate” dancing at John Avery. At one point Deyshia stood with her back against the wall and walked her feet further and further apart until she was almost in a split and had to put her hands on the floor to keep her balance. She looked up at Kia, sitting directly across from her. Her look was nothing short of mischievous.

“Don’t you even think about it!” Kia said. “Don’t do it...no! Aaaaaaahh!”

Kia’s jaw dropped and she screamed as Deyshia started “popping” in her split.² The other girls laughed and squealed with incredulity. Deyshia stuck her tongue out in pure defiance as she continued to pop, on and off against Kia’s protestations.

“Girl, get outta here with your hoochie moves!” Kia laughed.

Then Deyshia upped the ante—she put her feet on the wall itself and walked her hands out on the floor so that her whole body was parallel with the floor. She started popping again.

While Deyshia was dancing for everyone, Pop walked in. He stopped and stared skeptically at Deyshia, shook his head and walked over to Kia to deliver a message. Upon his arrival, Kia adopted a more serious tone, as if concerned that she would be

² According to my research participants, “popping” is a dance move where the dancer’s lower backside “pops”: dancers stand with their legs bent and thrust their pelvis back and forth at a rapid pace.

reprimanded for allowing the girls to dance like that. “Deyshia. Stop that,” she said. While Pop didn’t reprimand Deyshia specifically, he gestured for me to come closer. When I leaned in, he told me “When she gets legal she gonna get in some real trouble, and her mama gonna find her in handcuffs.”

While dancing to hip-hop is enjoyed and practiced by almost everyone at the club—male and female, child and adult—there is monitoring and concern around dancing that might, in the girls’ words, “go too far,” be “inappropriate” or be just “nasty.” The excitement, fear and anticipation generated by the always-present possibility that dancing might veer into licentious territory marks dancing as a spectacle around which the limits of propriety and personal agency are constantly tested. Dancing is posited, explicitly and implicitly, as a site where adults and other girls make judgments about the kind of parenting a girl has had, her status within her peer group, and even her moral character. The boundaries around dancing are marked and sustained by children and adults alike, and while there is much to be said about what specific dances and movements constitute “nasty” dancing, my concern is not in cataloguing the movements likely to draw censure, but in thinking about why the boundaries are important. I examine why girls’ dancing is a heightened space where investments in individual girls come to the fore. The stakes around an individual girl’s safety, her future as an adult, and the reputation and viability of the club itself are contingent upon maintaining a close watch on girls’ dancing. Dancing magnifies the institutional discourses of intervention and the tension between these discourses and the concerns highlighted in interpersonal relationships. The

spectacle of dancing magnifies the way in which girls' propriety is tied to their musical activities, and the way that propriety is tied to the success of the club and the community.

4.1 "Can We Do Nasty Dancing?"

I learned about "nasty" dancing on my first official day of fieldwork. A few months after I started coming to the club, I gathered all the girls in the Arts and Crafts Room to talk a little about my project. I explained to them that I would be asking for their and their parents' permission to participate in my research, and if they decided to participate, then I would take pictures and record their conversations and the times when they danced and listened to music. After everyone had dispersed, I sat down at a table across from Amari (3rd grade) and Stephanie (2nd grade) in the Arts and Crafts Room. They were reading books while other kids were finishing homework. I asked them if they were going to participate and if they would get their parents to sign the consent form. They both nodded; then Stephanie smiled shyly and asked me, "Can we do (nasty) dancing? We can't, right?" She whispered "nasty" under her breath, so that I had to ask her several times to repeat what she had said. Each time she said it a little bit louder, getting more and more flustered. Amari giggled and looked up from her book to see what I would say. When I asked Stephanie what "nasty" dancing was, she jumped up and started "popping," while simultaneously moving her left hand down the side of her body, from her chest to her knee. Just as soon as she completed her very brief demonstration, she jumped back in her seat and leaned across the table laughing and blushing. She jumped up, danced, and jumped back in her seat all in one fluid move. Amari howled with laughter.

“Isn’t that how you guys always dance?” I said.

“NO!!!” She screamed. She jumped up from the table and blushed and hid her face in her hands. She was obviously sorry she had even asked, and appeared really embarrassed that I had implicated her in that kind of dancing.

The difference in Stephanie’s dancing was in her hand motion: touching the side of her torso and moving down her thigh. Ordinarily when the girls danced, their hands were on their hips or extended in front of their bodies. “Nasty” dancing at John Avery is out of the ordinary; something Stephanie would not expect an adult to let her do within the rules and codes of the club. And she would be right—both adults and children policed girls’ dancing for inappropriateness. A girl being called out for nasty dancing gives other people an opening to make character judgments (sometimes seriously, sometimes in jest) they otherwise might not make—such as accusing a girl of wanting to be a stripper when she grows up, or, like Pop when he saw Deyshia dancing, insinuating that a girl will eventually end up in jail. When I asked Stephanie, “Isn’t that how you guys always dance?” what I meant at the time was, “I don’t see any difference in the movement you just did and what I’ve seen you and other girls do before.” But my question implied volumes that I didn’t recognize and certainly hadn’t intended—I was unintentionally calling into question not only Stephanie’s and her friends’ understanding of the right and wrong ways to dance, but their understanding of the relationship between dancing and personal character.

When I began coming to John Avery, all girls’ dancing looked the same to me. There was nothing I could compare it to from my white middle class suburban

upbringing, except to recognize that anything remotely like it would have been categorized as “nasty” by any and all of the adults I knew growing up. So it was hard for me to recognize at first that there was even such a thing as “nasty” dancing. In my inability to discern the differences in girls’ dancing, I demonstrated my personal history of being raised in a puritanical white-middle class environment, inadvertently bringing my history of moralization in relation to bodily movement, behavior, and character to bear on my relationships with my research participants.

To understand the significance of Stephanie’s question, and her hesitation in asking it, one must understand the different ways in which the idea of “nasty” functions at John Avery. “Nasty” dancing compounds a web of contexts, the relationships between which make it both possible for girls to recognize the lines around “nasty” dancing and understand their significance, and impossible for adults at John Avery to let them cross those lines. When girls dance, their bodies and the way they move them are framed within images of women in hip-hop. Adults and peers question whether a girl’s dancing is “appropriate” for her age, or if she is veering towards some of the more unpalatable women in hip-hop—women who are assumed to be compromising their values when they appear in videos scantily clad and dancing provocatively. But girls’ dancing also indexes concerns around safety, propriety, and innocence versus deviance, which are framed by the discourse around “disadvantaged” youth in Durham, the club’s position in the community, and its institutional commitments. When girls dance, these concerns come into relief alongside understandings of the popular consumption of women’s bodies in hip-hop and longer histories of representations of the black female body.

4.2 The Dancing Black Female Body

In addition to having a particular connotation related to girls' dancing, "nasty" was also a word used to reference songs, images, videos or lyrics in hip-hop. Girls rarely expressed any problem with misogynistic or profane lyrics while dancing and singing along, but if I asked them point blank about any questionable lyrics, they would express their disgust and say that the songs were "nasty." When girls talked about the 'nastiness' of a song, video, or lyrics, they were always referring to the nature of the sexual content. Although there were plenty of elements in hip-hop that were prohibited or discouraged at John Avery, such as profanity and references to drugs and violence, nothing had quite the same resonance as lyrics, images, or themes that suggested women's sexuality outside of a male-female relationship. A woman dancing for a man's pleasure was considered "nasty" for example, as were women depicted enjoying any kind of sexual activity with other women. A woman's "nasty" behavior and dancing must be understood within controlling images of black womanhood in commercial hip-hop, in particular the trope of the "freak." "Freak" refers to a woman, usually black, with an insatiable and deviant sexual appetite.³ In hip-hop lyrics, the freak is a woman outside the bounds of sexual propriety, who is desired and loathed because of her promiscuity. She appears in lyrics on a stripper pole, dancing for the emcee and others. In videos she's clad in a bikini, dancing next to the emcee and his crew, turning her head in slow motion towards the camera.

³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African-Americans, Gender and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004). See Stephens and Phillips (2003) for a discussion of the evolution of black females' sexual scripts throughout the 20th century. Dionne P. Stephens and Layli D. Phillips, "Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas and Dykes: The Sociohistorical Development of Adolescent African-American Women's Sexual Scripts," *Sexuality and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2003): 3-49.

She's the woman moaning on the track when the emcee tells her what he's going to do to her. She's positioned as another must-have item on the commercial emcee's list, and has no more agency than his other possessions—such as the luxury car she's dancing in front of. And while she is everywhere, she has virtually no agency, and rarely speaks for herself.⁴ She is always the object and never the subject, but she is crucial to hip-hop's political economy: the hyper-masculinity of the emcee, so important to hip-hop's commercial success, would be impossible to maintain without cadres of these women readily available.⁵

A freak's deviant behavior is inextricable from her sexualized body and the way she is able to move it. The trope of the freak is an extension of centuries-long histories of black women's bodies imagined as sites of accessible and deviant sexuality. Scholars such as Sander Gilman have detailed how in visual representations of the 18th century, the black female body came to represent a sexualized other, a repository for the sexuality lacking in the "pure" white body. Black women's sexuality became the locus of exotic, deviant sexualities.⁶ After the end of chattel slavery, visual depictions of such exotic wonders as the Hottentot Venus continued to offer up black women's bodies, and by

⁴ This is certainly true for the music girls at John Avery were listening to, and the music played on the radio during my fieldwork. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the exceptions were artists such as Missy Elliott, Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, who self-identified as "freaks," but in many respects failed to characterize themselves as subjects removed from the 'freak' label. See Pough (2004) for a detailed study of the politics of female emcees, including the ones mentioned above. Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern Press, 2004).

⁵ John L. Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994). See Quinn (2005) for a more detailed examination of hip-hop and black masculinity. Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but A "G" Thang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

⁶ Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 204-42.

extension their sexualities, for sale to white European and American consumers.⁷ Like the museum patrons in 19th century England who marveled at Sarah Bartmann's callipygian features, the lyrics of some of the most popular songs at John Avery during my fieldwork marvel at the kinds of black women's butts and their availability for viewing, touching and fucking. The way a woman can move her butt on the dance floor is conflated with the way she can move it in bed, and it's often unclear in lyrics and in images whether the woman is a stripper, a prostitute, or simply a willing unpaid participant.⁸ A woman's deviant sexuality and her dancing body are for sale—if not explicitly, then it's assumed that women are attracted to the emcee because of his material wealth, an assumption underscored by images of women counting the emcee's money or rolling in hundred dollar bills or jewels on the floor. The freak's butt and the way she can move it are symbols of her exotic body and her sexual deviance, which are taken to be indicative of how and to whom she is willing to make it accessible. Her position as the center of hip-hop's sexual excesses makes her loathed by those who

⁷ See Hobson 2005 for a study of blackness and beauty related to the history of the Hottentot Venus, and Fausto-Sterling 1995 for a brief cultural history of the anatomical speculation around Sarah Bartmann's body. Janelle Hobson, *Venus in the dark: Blackness and beauty in popular culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Ann Fausto-Sterling, "Gender, Race, and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of 'Hottentot' Women in Europe, 1815-1817" in *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture*, ed. J. Terry and J. Urla, 19-48 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁸ For example, in "Badd" (Ying Yang Twins, *U.S.A. (United States of America)* (TVT Records, 2005)): *You want this money then you gotta be a bad (bitch)/ Shake that ass, run the tip if you a bad (bitch)/ Drop it down to the floor if you a bad (bitch)/ Aw no she ain't a ho, she just a bad (bitch)....* Or "Just a Lil Bit" (50 Cent, *The Massacre (Aftermath)*, 2005): *Damn baby all I need is a lil bit/ A lil bit of this, a lil bit of that/ Get it cracking in the club when you hear this (shit)/ Drop it like it's hot, get to working that back/ Girl shake that thing, yeah work that thing, let me see it go up and down/ Rotate that thing, I wanna touch that thing, when you make it go round and round...*

espouse chastity as a moral virtue. The freak is at once a symbol of desire, promiscuity, moral degradation and bodily commodification.

While male hip-hop artists remain stand-ins for the morally corrupt American underclass among conservative pundits and politicians, it is the seen and unseen women of hip-hop who actualize the male emcee's sexuality and make some songs "nasty" in the opinion of my research participants. Girls like Stephanie understand certain kinds of dancing as "nasty" because of its association with the "freak" and the sexual scripts she represents. "Nasty" dancing invokes these scripts in the minds of adults and some of the more discerning girls at the club. For adults at John Avery, the idea of girls dancing "nasty" is alarming not because of the music's content, but because of what the content could imply and mean in connection to these particular girls. The misogynist, violent, and uncensored lyrics in and of themselves are secondary to what the kids could potentially learn from them. The labels of "at-risk" or "disadvantaged," which follow every kid at John Avery, carry with them socio-economic *and* moral associations. The labels call into question the existence of "positive" influences—family members, adult mentors, school resources, the church—that will presumably teach children a moral framework including how to behave (or more importantly, *not* behave) as a sexual being. Because of who the girls are and how they are classified, constant attention at the administrative and interpersonal level is deemed necessary to keep girls within a "normal" frame of sexuality, and not following the path of the "freak." Dancing, as a space where girls are aesthetically invested in their bodies and where those bodies are explicitly on display, is imagined as a crucial juncture where moral interventions can and should occur.

4.3 Right Moves...SMART Moves!

We teach and serve with one purpose—to inspire and enable young people to realize their full potential as productive, responsible and caring citizens. Concentrating on children from disadvantaged circumstances, we offer a sense of belonging and the tools to make positive choices to each child that comes to our club. John Avery Boys & Girls Club is an organization that stands for traditional values, while providing progressive programs that address the problems faced by the youth of today, including substance abuse, teen pregnancy, gangs and violence.⁹

The motto of Boys and Girls Clubs of America, which John Avery displays on all of its materials, is “The Positive Place for Kids.” John Avery is in the business of expanding the options of kids who are labeled “disadvantaged” for any number of reasons—the neighborhood they live in, the school they go to, the parental resources they are lacking, their socio-economic status, or their risk of gang membership. As a member of Boys and Girls Clubs of America, John Avery shares with the national organization the concern of giving children different “positive” experiences that their status as a club member implies they would otherwise lack—experiences that will help them overcome their “disadvantaged” circumstances. At the general level this includes lessons in responsibility of all kinds—from formal programs that are designed by the national office on topics such as substance abuse and sexual education, to informal daily lessons by staff members, who help kindergartners learn to tie their shoes and teenagers to balance a checkbook. The different kinds of lessons speak to the different motivations of people and organizations who are charged with the care of club members: club staff, administrative staff, and the bureaucrats in local granting organizations. The natures of

⁹ From www.johnavery.org/history.

these investments are crystallized in the different ways in which the club addresses all the possible dangers facing its members.

On my very first day at John Avery, Pop announced over the intercom that all kindergartners, 1st, 2nd and 3rd graders needed to report to the Arts and Crafts Room for SMART Moves. I happened to be in the room with Ms. Angela, who needed some extra help while Ms. Gordon was at home recovering from her first cataract surgery. Each child reluctantly filed in and sat at their assigned grade table. After the kids were all seated, I passed out pencils while Ms. Angela explained that today they were going to take a pre-test about drugs and alcohol. She passed out the test: four multiple-choice questions and one open-ended question. She read the questions and the choices out loud:

1. Which of the following is not a drug?
 - a. Alcohol
 - b. Imperial
 - c. Heroin
2. Smoking cigarettes will
 - a. Make your lungs black
 - b. Make your head larger than normal
 - c. Make your feet smell like ashtrays

I walked around the room and monitored everyone's progress. The last question was the hardest:

5. On the back of this paper, write 5 reasons why you are special.

The squirming increased tenfold, and exasperated sighs and groans sounded throughout the room. Faces screwed up in disgust at the injustice of being asked to write five whole sentences while they could be playing basketball or bumper pool. Hands

launched in the air, and Angela and I fielded requests to spell various words. A girl whose name I later learned was Lakeesha leaned back in her chair and stared up at me, slack jawed, her head resting against a giant laminated poster of Martin Luther King, Jr. She rocked back and forth on the chair's back two legs. "What am I supposed to write?" she whispered.

SMART Moves (Skills Mastery and Resistance Training) is a national program designed by Boys and Girls Clubs of America to promote leadership and character development. It is a hallmark of the national organization, and every affiliated club is expected to run the program to some degree. John Avery implements institutionalized programs like SMART Moves to keep kids out of danger and to make up for what they might lack at school or at home—in the case of Group A's pre-test, information about drugs, alcohol and tobacco, and a sense that every individual is special. According to the organization's website, the SMART programs teach kids "how to say no by involving them in discussion and role-playing, practicing resistance and refusal skills, developing assertiveness, strengthening decision-making skills and analyzing media and peer influence."¹⁰ The goal of the program is "to promote abstinence from substance abuse and adolescent sexual involvement through the practice of responsible behavior."¹¹ It's designed as a series of weekly activities, and materials are written and conceived by the national office. All kids at John Avery participate in one of the SMART Moves programs, and the walls of the Education Room and the Arts and Crafts Room are

¹⁰ www.bgca.org/programs/healthlife.asp.

¹¹ Ibid.

covered with the products of weekly SMART Moves sessions, proudly displaying evidence that club members are learning valuable lessons. The posters scream things like “¡No a las drogas! ¡Si a la vida!” from the corner of the Arts and Crafts Room, behind blankets leftover from summer camp and bags of yarn and fabric scraps for crafts projects. Or “STDs R Dangerous” with the “R” written backward, in giant rainbow-striped bubble letters surrounded by various misspelled venereal diseases (AID’S! CHYLAMETIA! CRABS!) on a large piece of butcher paper behind Hank’s desk in the Education Room.

The posters on John Avery’s walls and the activities done during SMART Moves are visible evidence that the club is answering the concerns of the community. When Ted Fehskens, John Avery’s Resource Development Coordinator, talks to potential donors, he tells them that John Avery goes where the kids need them most: Durham’s most impoverished neighborhoods. The Lee Smith Complex is the only facility of its kind in Northeast Central Durham. John Avery positions itself as a positive alternative to being home alone or hanging out on the street corner. Ted said to me more than once that at the very least John Avery offers kids a safe place for the few hours they’re in the club. Speaking about one of Durham’s most visible problems, he said, “I mean, a lot of gang prevention is just having a place for them to go. You could almost not do anything. They won’t come...[but] you could just have four walls. That’s the first step towards gang prevention I think.” The club’s mere existence in the neighborhood is an argument for keeping kids out of trouble, which in the language of Durham’s community priorities

means keeping kids out of gangs and juvenile justice, and making sure girls don't get pregnant.

More than the loose programming expectations of the national office, John Avery answers to the local, state and federal funding agencies whose money makes up 80% of the club's annual operating budget. These include Phillip Morris Tobacco Company and the Durham County Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) Board for anti-tobacco and anti-alcohol programming respectively, as well as money from Triangle United Way, the City of Durham, and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.¹² At the end of each funding cycle, John Avery reports on how it has used the money it has been given. Because the club is dependent on money from these sources and is required to report on how the money is used, the concerns of the city and state are necessarily the concerns of the club. From a funding standpoint, John Avery addresses these concerns in part with statistics that are requested by each funding agency, such as overall improvement in grades on report cards, the number of club members in juvenile justice, and the number of teen pregnancies.

The hope is that programs like SMART Moves will yield concrete outcomes. The success and relevance of John Avery, measured in numbers of dollars it is able to procure from federal, state and local granting organizations as well as individual donors, is dependent in part on whether it can demonstrate quantifiable results. For instance, statistics from the pre-test and post-test that bookend the official SMART Moves

¹² "Triangle" United Way refers to the area in North Carolina known as "The Triangle": the cities of Durham, Chapel Hill and Raleigh and the surrounding areas.

program are a tool by which progress and good work can be measured, a tool of reassurance for donors or granting organizations that need some sort of standard by which to measure if and how children are likely to improve their circumstances or affect their future—whether children will be able to eventually move beyond their “disadvantaged” status. John Avery is in the (non-profit) business of making individual lives better, but it is also in the business of improving the community. “One more kid off the street” is good for that particular kid, but presumably it is also good for everyone else. As long as John Avery can claim results like no pregnant club members or no club members in juvenile justice, it can reasonably be assumed that one more kid in the club means one less teen pregnancy, one less kid in jail, and countless dollars saved on public services such as the county health department, juvenile detention and court time. Ted told me that when writing his reports to granting organizations, “more and more [the] outcomes need to be specific.” In other words, he said, “it’s not just [that] the kids heard that drugs were bad, it’s there were 280 [kids] and we did 280 post-tests and we had a 90% pass rate. So I can break that up and say we pay our part-time staff, well you know, nothing, but like, this is your dollar value for this program. And I can say we only had three [kids] that had any entanglement with law enforcement.” Thus the club, through its institutionalized programs, is able to make a powerful bureaucratic argument: its existence saves the city money.

While having names for programs and set parameters defined by the national office is useful in procuring funding and in designing grant proposals and budgets, the actual implementation of programs like SMART Moves at John Avery is quite flexible,

and at times resembles nothing so much as kids getting help with their homework, playing basketball and just hanging out.¹³ Although the national office provides a week-by-week curriculum, and all staff members attend statewide training programs, not everyone follows the suggested lesson plans. Staff members who have been through the training numerous times know SMART Moves so well that they work the curriculum into everyday interactions with children. Moreover, the administrative staff, who at the time of my fieldwork included Ted, Floyd Laisure (Executive Director), Pop (Director of Operations), Tish McKoy (Unit Director) and Hank Smith (Gang Prevention Coordinator), consider almost everything the club does to fall under the purview of SMART Moves:

Hank Smith: Well the thing is that just about anything like that can fit into SMART Moves.

JW: Right, oh okay.

Ted Fehskens: I know we've also considered things to be SMART Moves when we've had other people come in and talk. Like if it's kind of categorically similar then it's like...

HS: Right, then we call it SMART Moves.

TF: ...that's SMART Moves too. I mean the etiquette class [led by volunteers], some of that fits right into SMART Moves.

¹³ In addition to SMART Moves, John Avery references the national BGCA programs Triple Play and Project Learn on its funding applications. Triple Play is designed to "improve Club members' knowledge of healthy habits; increase the number of hours per day they participate in physical activities; and strengthen their ability to interact positively with others and engage in positive relationships." Around John Avery it's commonly known as "playing in the gym." The goal of Project Learn is to "reinforce[] and enhance[] the skills and knowledge young people learn at school through 'high-yield' learning activities." At John Avery that translates to "help with homework." From www.bgca.org/programs/ (accessed 2-12-08).

HS: And it is. I mean it's the same stuff that's in that [training] book; they just call it something different.

This administrative shortcut is a useful and practical strategy from a staffing standpoint. With the exception of Hank, who is employed fulltime as administrative and club staff, the club staff do not have time to write lesson plans or study the suggested national curriculum, and there is certainly no financial incentive to do any such work off the clock. Speaking from my experience as a staff member, sometimes there isn't time or energy to do anything besides make sure Chase doesn't throw the markers at Tyrice again. But Hank and Ted argue that from the kids' perspective, staff themselves are more important than any lesson plans they may or may not have time to write. The relationships between adults and children at the club, Ted and Hank say, are more influential than any of the programs.

TF: I think one of the most important things a Boys and Girls Club does uh, is not its programs, but the staff? Especially the staff that stays. Because it's a professional-trained adult staff member who cares, and that's where the relationship is, and that's where like, the actual impact is. It's not, you see it on the report cards and the attendance, but you would never even have it without that person.

HS: If you ask a club kid who's 25 now, and grew up in a Boys and Girls Club, what their favorite thing about being in a Boys and Girls Club growing up, they're going to give you a person's name. Rather than SMART Moves, or basketball, or...

JW: Just say no!

HS: Exactly. They're going to tell you, such and such, Coach whoever was my favorite...

TF: And that's where, to me the programs really are just a way of talking about that we have a building with adults that care about kids. And that's gang prevention, and that's SMART Moves and that's Triple Play and all this stuff. So the program names I think are, they're things for like Floyd [Laisure, John Avery's Executive Director] and myself to talk to the community about.

Ted's comment illuminates the tensions between what actually happens at the club every day, and how administrators package routine club activity to be legible to funding organizations. There are limits to how much a six-year-old will learn about controlled substances from a multiple choice test, and what a twelve-year-old will learn about sex from making a colorful poster, but specific names, activities and concrete goals are parameters with which club outsiders are sympathetic. The goals and lessons concretized in their grant proposals and in national programs like SMART Moves are things Ted and Hank assume will come naturally with good mentorship from adults that care about the children. Inside the walls of the club, staff members are not necessarily familiar with the expectations of granting organizations. Yet every staff member, in her or his own way, cares deeply for the kids at John Avery and wrestles with how best to wield her or his influence on the children in the club.

4.4 Gendered Responsibility

Staff members undoubtedly care about quantifiable results such as improvement in grades and passing the SMART Moves post-test, but they also want club kids to grow up safe and responsible and live to their fullest potential. To that end they pick up where SMART Moves ends with informal lessons they believe club members are missing. While all children learn informal lessons in responsible behavior, the discourse around who needs to be responsible for *what* and *why* is explicitly gendered in informal

interactions. I once asked Ms. Gordon if she tries to teach morals to her group of kids (Group A), and she told me she always has more to tell the girls. Instead of talking about values though, she listed behaviors and habits she expected girls to have:

Marion Gordon: I tries to teach [the girls] that little girls do not sit down with a dress on and their legs gapped open. I tells them to keep their legs closed. Stuff like that, you know. How little girls supposed to act, and how they supposed to brush they dress down when they sit down. And I tell them don't play with the boys. I tell them there's enough of you girls to play with girls, and there's enough boys to play with boys. Sometime I call the boys in here and I talk to them about in the bathroom, playing with each other's (private) parts. [...] But I talk to the girls...longer...than I do with the boys. [...]

JW: Why do you talk to the girls longer?

MG: Because it's, I feel like that you have more to tell the girls than you do the boys.

JW: Mmmm...what do you mean?

MG: Okay, like, I be telling the boys about in the bathroom and what not to do, and to use the commode and not use the floor and stuff like that. And that's all I tell them.

JW: Mmm-hmm

MG: Because they not old enough for me to start going into...other stuff with them, not yet. They're too little...I feel like. So that's why I just tell them that. And play with your boys, don't play with the girls. And [I] let them go. But the girls, I have more stuff to tell them. Like how to sit, how to fix your dress, keep your shoes tied up and tidy up, and if your hair standing on your head, take your hand and brush it down and stuff like that. I tell the girls they're supposed to be special. They're pretty.

JW: Why do you think it's important to teach the girls these lessons?

MG: I feel it's important to teach these girls these things because a lot of these girls, I feel like the parents is neglecting them. They're not doing for them like they should.

The difference between how girls and boys are expected to behave was echoed in an interview I had with Floyd Laisure, the executive director of John Avery. I asked him about concerns particular to girls at the club, and he expressed a concern for girls learning and practicing “lady-like” behavior:

Floyd Laisure: [...] I think the young ladies need to learn and understand and appreciate more what I call lady-like behavior. Now. I’m saying this because, sometimes, the young ladies [...] might not conduct themselves quote-unquote like a young lady should.

JW: Can you give me an example?

FL: Yeah. Profanity. You know, they’ll hear the guys and [...] now I don’t know if this is a valid comment or not but, it’s a difference when a young lady uses profanity and when a guy uses it. I think, guys, [...] they shouldn’t do it, [but] when a young lady does it, it comes across a little more [like], ‘Well hey, she’s a lady; she shouldn’t do it.’ Now, I’m not going to sit here and judge who’s right and who’s wrong, I’ll just say that I do know from my past experiences in dealing with the parents, I hear the parents say ‘I don’t want my daughter using those kind of terms, and she has picked it up from her boyfriend and the crowd, the crowd that she hangs with.’ And so, um, I see us having to impress upon the young ladies, hey, don’t fall into that category of using that profanity, um, putting yourself down like that. You know, conduct yourself like a lady. Dress you know, appropriately, do not dress suggestively, uh because when you do that, you’re sending quote-unquote maybe a negative message or a message that is not a proper message, so dress appropriately, that kind of thing.

Schools and other institutions (including after-school programs like John Avery) are spaces devoted to producing children as nationalized,¹⁴ racialized,¹⁵ and gendered

¹⁴ Kristen E. Cheney, *Pillars of the Nation: Child Citizens and Ugandan National Development*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Signithia Fordham, *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity and Success at Capital High* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

subjects.¹⁶ It's not surprising that an organization espousing "traditional values" should encourage and teach traditional gender roles in its children, or that it would be interested in training girls to be future "ladies." But the comments of Mr. Laisure and Ms. Gordon suggest that *these* girls, having been identified as "disadvantaged," need remedial lessons in being a young lady because of some neglect on the part of their caregivers. According to Ms. Gordon, this includes lessons in manners, and lessons in self-worth. Ms. Gordon's apprehension that the parents are "not doing for them like they should" implies that parents who don't teach girls to feel "special" and "pretty" will have daughters whose sense of self-worth does not stem from where it should—a sense of being valued and valuable as "special" and "pretty." Mr. Laisure echoes Ms. Gordon's concern in his easy jump from a girl using profanity to dressing "suggestively," and his assumption that a girl doing either is "putting herself down"—not behaving in a way that gives credit to what a girl is really worth.

Mr. Laisure's use of the word "appropriate" here refers to the gendered performances which frame everything that is allowed and should happen at the club: girls sitting with their legs closed, combing their hair and refraining from the use of profanity, for example. By teaching girls these behaviors, Ms. Gordon and Mr. Laisure are effectively teaching a kind of gender performativity, which Judith Butler defines as the materialization of the constant reiteration of gendered norms.¹⁷ These lessons in gender

¹⁶ Michelle Fine, "Sexuality, Schooling and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire," *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 1 (1988): 29-53; Kristin Luker, *When Sex Goes to School: Warring Views on Sex—and Sex Education—since the Sixties* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2006).

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1989);

performativity are also tied to classed values about care of self. Ms. Gordon's and Mr. Laisure's very definition of a "young lady" is a classed one, related to puritanical values of self and propriety, which they see as running counter to other performances of young female-hood. Their belief that girls need help in the "constant reiteration" of young lady-hood reflects an underlying hope that what will eventually materialize will be not only a "girled" subject, but a "good"-girled subject.

Implicit in their concerns, and in the SMART Moves programs, is the assumption that the children at John Avery need to learn how to care for their bodies, both in the sense of attending to their bodies physically, and in learning how they should think and feel about their bodies. In the view of Ms. Gordon and Mr. Laisure, girls in particular need guidance in learning that their bodies matter to themselves and to other people. Performances of gender such as taming wild hair and keeping the legs closed are essentially about controlling the body. When girls learn that the way they present themselves matters, and that using their bodies in the wrong way might "send a negative message," they are learning that their bodies should be cared for, but in a very prescribed way. They learn that in order to prove the worth of their bodies, and thus the worth of their selves, their bodies must be carefully regulated.

Mr. Laisure's use of the word "appropriate" as the opposite of "suggestive" ("dress appropriately, do not dress suggestively") is significant. "Appropriate" is

everything that is allowed and should happen at the club. “Appropriate” behavior and “appropriate” ways of dressing would never be construed in a negative way or send a negative message. Anything “suggestive” is not “appropriate” and has no place at John Avery. One might pose the question, “what could clothing possibly suggest?” In this case the fear is that a girl’s dress might suggest that she wants people, boys and men especially, to look at her, or that she is available for and desires sexual activity. By this definition, a girl expressing her sexual desire is definitely *not* appropriate, has no business at John Avery, and is in fact incompatible with the club’s mission to improve the circumstances of “disadvantaged” boys and girls. As with most formal sex education programs, the “normal” girl is posited as being desire-less, while “normal” men and teenage boys are posited as sexual aggressors with an excess of desire.¹⁸

It’s not a coincidence that I often heard girls use “appropriate” to describe types of dancing as well as behavior. Like Mr. Laisure’s use of the word in describing behavior, girls talked about kinds of dancing that were *not* appropriate far more often than the kinds of dancing that were. Several girls used “appropriate” in interviews when articulating the right and wrong ways of dancing. “Appropriate” and “inappropriate” as descriptors for behavior and dancing conflate the two, and indeed, in conversations about dancing, girls and adults moved seamlessly from talking about “appropriate” dancing to “appropriate” behavior. Although the word was not used in every case, the leap from

¹⁸ Fine 1988; Bonnie Nelson Trudell, *Doing Sex Education: Gender Politics and Schooling* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Lois Weis and Doris Carbonell-Medina, "Learning to Speak out in an Abstinence-Based Sex Education Group: Gender and Race Work in an Urban Magnet School," in *Construction Sites: Excavating Race, Class, and Gender among Urban Youth*, edited by Lois Weis and Michelle Fine, 26-49 (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000).

dancing to behavior was easily made, and everyone seemed to understand why dancing was such a powerful arbiter of so many other areas of a girl's life. Dancing brings together the questions of how a girl understands her body, how she understands sexual desire, and how she understands herself as a desired and desiring subject.

4.5 “*That Ain’t Cute!*”

I was employed as a staff member in the summer of 2006, working with Ms. Gordon and Group A. One day in the middle of July, we had to move the kids from the sweltering Arts and Crafts Room to the gym and the game room. The air conditioning had been out all week; someone had stolen the copper wiring from the A/C units on top of the roof. I joined Ms. Kia in the gym, where she was playing the CDs I had burned for her a couple of days prior. Kia was one of the youngest staff members at the club during my fieldwork, and most of the girls looked up to her. So when she sat up against the wall next to the speakers and radio, flanked by two teenage girls working as junior staff members, most of the other girls gathered round.¹⁹ She flipped through the songs she liked, fielding requests for songs, and encouraging certain people to start dancing. When she got to Lil’ Jon’s “Snap Ya Fingers,” girls who were jump-roping dropped their ropes and started dancing with each other. The scene in the gym changed as more and more kids moved closer to the music and to Kia. Boys dribbled their basketballs closer to Kia so that they could better hear the music, and kids playing dodgeball bobbed and weaved

¹⁹ Junior staff members were teenagers, mostly girls, who assisted with groups of kids during the summer.

to the beat while singing along with T.I. on the refrain of “Shoulder Lean.”²⁰ As more and more kids started dancing, a circle began to form around Kia. Girls and boys started dancing one at a time, and Kia began rigidly enforcing the boundaries of the circle, helped by the junior staffers. All the while all the encouragement, all the rules, all the admonishments came from Kia.

Dajonique (1st grade) got up to dance. Her song was Bubba Sparxxx’s “Ms. New Booty”—she started popping to the opening chorus (“Booty booty booty booty rocking everywhere!”).²¹ This in and of itself was not astonishing—until she jumped up and landed in a split with her legs on either side of her and her hands on the floor in front of her for balance. She started popping while she was in the split, eliciting cheers and encouragement from the circle. I had to stand up on my toes to see over the heads of all the kids that had gathered to watch. But then Dajonique slowed her hips down and started grinding back and forth against the floor, speeding up and slowing down. Kia’s jaw dropped. I was speechless as well; this wasn’t like any of the dancing I had seen at the club before. With each pop of her hips, the pleats of her ruffled denim skirt flounced up and down, revealing her pink underwear to the circle of kids surrounding her. A junior staff member stood directly behind her in an attempt to block the boys from seeing her underwear.

²⁰ Young Dro, “Shoulder Lean,” *Best Thang Smokin’* (Grand Hustle: 2006). T.I. chants the refrain to the song.

²¹ Bubba Sparxxx, “Ms. New Booty,” *The Charm* (Virgin, 2006).

“That’s not just ‘booty booty booty booty rocking everywhere!’” Kia cried when Dajonique’s turn was over.²² “That’s something else. Girl, where did you learn to dance like that?” she asked. “BET,” Dajonique replied simply. Kia said, “Yeah, BET Uncut!”²³ Then Kia turned her head and happened to catch Sierra (2nd grade) out of the corner of her eye. Sierra was standing up against the wall, trying to imitate what Dajonique had just done. “Sierra!” Kia said sharply. “Get over here! Do you want me to tell your grandmother so she can give you a whooping?” Sierra scowled and sat down next to Kia.

Later that afternoon, Kia and I talked about the girls’ dancing. Both of us were shocked by what we had seen from Dajonique.

KG: Yeah. I just. I mean I love dancing and I don’t want to do nothing, I try to do what I say, I practice what I preach or whatever. [...] But when Sierra gets out there [and she sees] that little oonching stuff and I see her turn around and try to do it, I will get on her in a minute. And I’ll say no, do not do that. And she be like, why? Now if she were doing [specific dances like] the chickenhead, or the heel-toe or the motorcycle or Lean wit it Rock wit it, go. Go. Get it, get it. Go. Go. But the minute she start doing like that. I can’t take it. I can’t. [...] I mean when Dajonique dropped and did a split and started grinding on the floor that just, it sent my mind in a whirlwind! [...] That’s, that’s something you do, in the bed. With your man. That’s what I’m talking about! This was...

JW: I know! That’s what I was thinking! I was like... That’s like she’s...

KG: [...] And I’m like, don’t be dancing like that! That ain’t cute! [...] We tell them ‘no’ up here, but that doesn’t have anything to do with when they get home, or get out there in the street. So I don’t.... Like with Sierra, her grandmother, she’s old. And Sierra’s got a big brother, and he’s sick, and you know, he’s trying to do his thing or whatever. And I try to like spend time with Sierra and talk to her, tell her little boys feeling on your butt cause you’re popping it in the air, that

²² The song’s signature lyrics, the introduction to the song and each chorus.

²³ BET Uncut was a late-night program on Black Entertainment Television that showed unedited music videos, the most notorious of which featured nude women engaging in sexual acts with other women and with rappers. It stopped airing in 2006.

ain't nobody's man. Boy if they touch you in any kind of way, you need to come [to me], if you want to talk to me about anything, you got questions about anything. So like [...] you might see me get on her more than I do the other kids, cause I look on her like a little sister to me, and my mission in life, I refuse to see her go down the wrong path. I...I can't, cause I love her too much. I mean I love all the other kids too, but.... Like, my first day working there I got attached to her. [...] I think it has something to do with how I was raised, and how you know, I was just.... I guess the type of dancing like that they were doing, it just reminded me of something you would do behind closed doors with a man...

JW: With a man on a bed.

KG: ...bed. You know, type of stuff that strippers do in a strip club. Not the type of stuff five, six and seven year olds are supposed to be doing. [...] I mean, I ain't no saint, at all, far from it, but. Oh! I can't take it. Oh my God, I can't take it! I can't!

In the case of Dajonique, it was shocking for Kia and me to see her dancing in a way that looked as if she was having sex. It was the most explicitly sexual dancing I've ever seen at John Avery. But Kia's stronger in-the-moment reaction to Sierra is a reflection of Sierra's personal history and her relationship with the staff. While Dajonique had only just started coming to the club that summer, some of the staff have known Sierra since she was a baby. Sierra's been coming to John Avery since kindergarten, often came before that with her grandmother to pick up her older brother, and her grandmother is close friends with Pop and Ms. Gordon. The staff is close to Sierra, but more than that, they understand every minute detail of her "disadvantaged" circumstances. They know that her mother is a crack addict, and they've seen drug deals go down in her neighborhood when they've dropped her off at home. She's one of the girls Ms. Gordon is talking about who needs to be told that she's "special" and "pretty," because everyone knows that she's probably not hearing it at home. Kia and the other

staff are especially attentive to the times when Sierra might be expressing desire in the wrong way, because from their point of view, her circumstances make it especially important.

Sierra was constantly called out for inappropriate dancing. She always danced while everyone else was dancing, but would sometimes dance by herself in a corner of the room instead of dancing with other girls. For Kia, it was troubling to see Sierra mimicking Dajonique, because of her personal investment in Sierra's life. Kia's intervention in Sierra's dancing could be seen as her giving Sierra something she otherwise would lack: lessons in the boundaries around appropriate and inappropriate behavior and dancing. Kia alludes to the fact that she is more attentive to Sierra because of "the way I was raised," and her family dynamic, with a strict grandmother and strong church family, is exactly what she believes would be good for Sierra. For Sierra not to understand why certain kinds of dancing are inappropriate means that she doesn't understand how to use her body, and for Kia that implies that Sierra might not understand other kinds of boundaries around her body, specifically the boundaries of where and when other people can and cannot touch.

Seeing a girl dancing inappropriately at John Avery is doubly troubling—because of discourses about children's, and particularly girls' innocence and bodily purity, and because of John Avery's mission to protect at-risk children. A girl dancing nasty, as opposed to a woman, is disturbing because it suggests not only that the girl has more carnal knowledge than she ought, but that commercial hip-hop as a medium has the ability to teach/transfer hypersexuality and misogyny in a very real, embodied way. Girls'

dancing is perceived as dangerous and powerful because all of the concerns about hip-hop as a deviant cultural form are reified in girls' dancing bodies. And surely drawing a poster about sexually transmitted diseases is no match for learning and feeling potentially licentious bodily pleasures while dancing with your friends.

The staff are concerned about girls being safe, and inappropriate dancing is seen as risky behavior which might affect a girl's safety. I was often surprised, when talking to staff members, by the alacrity with which the conversation turned from dancing to sexual assault. Adults expressed the concern, over and over, that a girl dancing the wrong way or in a 'suggestive' way might lead to molestation or rape. No one ever suggested that any girl at the club would be purposefully seductive or that a girl would be "asking for it"; rather, out of real concern for the girls that they love, staff members worried that a girl might unwittingly drive a man to sexual assault through the improper use of her body. This line of thinking begins with Ms. Gordon's and Mr. Laisure's discussion of lady-like behavior. Just as suggestive clothing might send a "negative" message of female desire, suggestive dancing might also convey desire—and in a context where "normal" little girls are posited as desire-less, any suggestion of desire leaves the door open to possible deviant sexual behavior. Part of girls learning to care for and respect their bodies is learning the boundaries around their bodies and how their bodies might affect the actions of other people.

KG: I do think [dancing] plays a role in certain situations, like, you know it might can lead to somebody getting raped [or] somebody having something done that they don't want to have done. I mean I don't think that [if] you get out there and you pop your coochie on the floor, somebody will hurt you or something like that,

but today? Who knows. I think [dancing is] a way of an expression, but yet at the same time it's like, I don't know. I don't even know how to explain it. I...prayerfully, if I had a daughter and I saw her dancing like that, I would probably beat her tail. Just beat it.

When I asked Mr. Laisure about girls' dancing, he too made the leap from dancing to sexual assault. Mr. Laisure's appearances at the club itself were not frequent, and he admitted that he had only seen one instance of kids dancing at the club: the end of summer camp 2006 when Group A performed a quasi-hustle to Ciara's "1-2 Step." Yet even though he couldn't speak to any times he had witnessed "nasty" dancing at the club, he still was cautious in talking about how girls dance.

FL: You know, I'm sure that uh, the parents would be concerned about suggestive [dancing]. Because those suggestive things can lead to, unfortunately, rape and uh, being molested and so, certainly we do not want that pattern to develop in our club, so we would say, tone it down, uh, this environment is not appropriate. The behavior is not appropriate here. Now if you choose to do this in your residence, hey, that's your business.

Mr. Laisure's and Kia's leap from nasty dancing to sexual assault is troubling: it places the burden on the girls themselves to control their bodies not just for their own benefit, but for the benefit of others who may not be able to control themselves. This follows familiar scripts that imagine boys and men as out-of-control hormonal creatures who are only motivated by sex. In these scenarios, girls' agency is seemingly non-existent, yet the burden of preventing sexual activity, pregnancy and sexual assault is entirely placed on the girl, who must control her body so that boys, who are posited as lacking the ability to control their bodies, will not be overcome with sexual desire. It is girls who, as owners of their bodies (in a way that boys certainly are not), are responsible

for both their own behavior and the behavior of their possible sexual aggressors. Informal lessons in sexual behavior suggest to girls at John Avery that knowing their bodies and regulating their bodies is the only sure way to protect themselves.

4.6 “Men Like Butts, and That’s All”

Adults interrupted dancing to chastise girls only in the most extreme cases. For the most part girls monitored themselves much more than the adults, who usually had other children to focus on. The children in the room were more likely than the adults to recognize if a song was the dirty, or uncensored, version, and would usually move to change the song before any staff member realized what was going on. Likewise, girls didn’t want to risk censure from adults, or equally importantly, peers and thus monitored their own and other’s dancing. The distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate dancing were informed by the adults in their lives, but constantly negotiated with other girls. When I asked girls to put “nasty” dancing into words, there was some variance in the descriptors they used. Most girls thought that touching oneself while dancing was bad. Another girl told me that dancing was only inappropriate when you were “all up on” other people. Dancing *for* boys was generally considered bad, as was admiring oneself while dancing. Girls were quick to chastise each other if they believed a line had been crossed, and would show their disapproval with signs such as wide eyes, laughter, shouting, tsk-ing, or issuing verbal cues such as telling a girl to stop or that she’s nasty. These signs were usually recognized and acknowledged by the dancers before any adults caught what was going on. The concerns of staff members were re-articulated amongst the girls themselves during dancing.

In the negotiations between appropriate and inappropriate dancing, girls negotiate the pleasures of dancing with the charged moral discourse of appropriate behavior at the club. These negotiations are more than simply pushing the boundaries of acceptable dancing or testing adults' authority, although there certainly were girls who always tried to see what they could get away with. The process of learning how to dance appropriately is constant, and it means negotiating investments in black popular culture with investments in appropriate behavior and constantly recognizing and easing the tensions between the two. Girls consequently expressed a certain amount of ambivalence towards the music they danced to, the lyrics and sounds of the songs, the women in the accompanying videos, and the movements themselves. They recognized the attention and acclaim given to girls who dance well, but realized that dancing in the wrong way could attract unwanted attention and censure. From the girls' point of view and because of the conflation between dancing and character, it required constant negotiation to be both a competent dancer and a girl who has respect for herself and is respected by her peers and adult interlocutors.

I spoke with a handful of girls about dancing one Tuesday afternoon in the club's 'library'—a medium-sized storage closet off of the computer room, outfitted with a couple of folding tables, some folding chairs, bookshelves and a lot of used books. Jada (5th grade), Ashondra (5th grade), Tamyra (4th grade), Tamika (4th grade) and Amber (3rd grade) sat across from me and my recording equipment, answering my questions and then explaining their answers. The conversation was loud and animated as the girls debated the merits of certain artists, dances and songs. They re-framed the stakes around dancing

from a personal point of view, while re-articulating adults' concerns about male and female desire, bodies and behavior. I began by asking why they like to dance, and Ashondra was the first to answer.

"People compliment us, and it's flattering," she said. "Like, I compliment her [Jada] on Chicken Noodle Soup, and she compliment me on the Walk it Out."

"Exactly," said Jada.

"Why is that important?" I asked.

"Because, like..." Jada said.

"It make you feel good, and stuff like that," said Ashondra.

"Yeah, it lets you know that you can do something," Jada said.

"Because you dance just for fun," Ashondra said. "Yeah, you not supposed to dance for money," Jada added.

"Wait, why not?" I asked.

"Cause you'll be a stripper then!" Tamyra interjected. All the girls laughed.

"Because you'll be a stripper? Tell me why you're not supposed to dance for money."

"Because that's bad, like..." Tamyra started.

"You be degrading yourself," Jada said. "There could be like, 88-year old men in there."

"Why are you degrading yourself?"

"Cause it's just nasty, period," Jada answered. Ashondra started to talk and then the rest of the girls noisily interjected. "You just doing that cause you're stupid!" Tamyra

yelled. “There could be 80-year old men in there!” Jada said again. “The only reason you could do it is if you need money to feed your kids,” Ashondra said.

“What’s an okay way of dancing?” I asked.

“Well, ‘Walk it Out’ is okay, but at the end they start dancing on each other, two girls, and that was nasty,” Jada said. “That’s okay for teenagers, but we’re not there yet,” Ashondra added.

“So you think it’ll be okay to dance like that when you’re teenagers?” I asked. There was a resounding “Nooooooooo.”

“My mama would shoot me!” Tamyra said.

“You wouldn’t see me the next day at school,” Jada said.

“Do you think there’s anything wrong with the way y’all are dancing now?” I asked.

The girls all defended the way they dance. “Okay, I show my mom the way I dance,” Ashondra said. “Me too!” Amber and Jada said. “If I dance nasty, my mom will get on me about that,” said Amber. “But I don’t do it no more cause she tell me not to and I follow her directions cause if I don’t I’m gonna be in the graveyard.”

“I show my mom the ‘walk it out,’ but I don’t do nothing nasty,” Ashondra said.

As the conversation veered off in another direction, I asked the girls what videos they liked. Tamika also wanted to talk about the videos that they hate.

“The one I hate, um, ‘Dem Jeans’ [by Chingy], that video is so nasty. Don’t never play it. It’s just *raunchy*. It’s not even nasty; it’s *raunchy*. *Raunchy*.” Tamika lingered on

the initial “r” sound of the word, as if she were trying to get rid of a bad taste in her mouth.

“All you see is girls shaking they booty. That’s nasty,” she added.

“And why is that nasty?” I asked.

Tamika jumped up out of her chair. “BECAUSE! If you a girl, you don’t want to see that, but men do.”

“Wait wait wait,” I said. “Why do men wanna see girls shaking their booty?”

Before I could even finish my question, there was an uproar from the other girls. Amber shrieked, and Jada and Ashondra started talking about how nasty it was, but Tamyra’s voice rose above all the others: “Because men like butts, and that’s all.” The other girls laughed.

In this conversation, the girls are operating within a strict code of heteronormativity (“if you a girl, you don’t want to see that”) and scripts of men as sexual aggressors (“but men do”). Like Ms. Gordon and Mr. Laisure, they understand that a woman’s worth is directly associated with how she uses her body. If she treats her body like a commodity (“you’ll be a stripper then!”) or as simply an object for men’s desires (“All you see is girls shaking they booty. That’s nasty.”), then she is “degrading” herself, and does not understand her worth. When talking about their own dancing however, the girls are ambivalent, reflecting their understanding of the possible character

judgments related to dancing.²⁴ They like the attention of dancing, but they know that if they dance outside the bounds and codes of appropriate dancing at the club, they will attract unwanted attention and censure. When asked about appropriate ways of dancing, at first they attributed appropriateness to a dancer's age ("That's okay for teenagers, but we're not there yet"), but quickly backtracked when I asked if they would be allowed to dance that way when they are old enough. They were quick to defend the way they currently danced, and used the threat of parents' punishment as evidence that they know the difference between right and wrong ways of dancing. Girls are subject to criticism for being too eager to show off their bodies, but they know that they will garner praise if they dance with skill. Perceived intent is crucial to how a girl's dance is interpreted, and intent in dancing is where appropriate behavior and appropriate dancing meet.

I spoke with Shontreal (7th grade), Rashawanna (7th grade), Baylee (7th grade) and Jada (5th grade) about other girls' dancing, and what they thought of some of the younger dancers in particular. With the exception of Jada, who was known as one of the best dancers at John Avery, these girls hardly ever danced themselves. In talking to them about dancing and those girls that can and can't dance, their concerns reflected the concerns of the adults at the club.

JW: What do y'all think about the way some of the little girls dance here, like with all their popping?

Baylee: Yeah, some of them too grown.

²⁴ Jane K. Cowan, *Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

Rashawnna: Some of the little girls are being big and some be too grown, and...

Baylee: Some of them be too grown.

Rashawnna: But some of them can do it.

Shontreal: And then the other ones...

Rashawnna: For example,

Baylee: For example...

Rashawnna: Sierra.

Baylee: Sierra.

[...]

JW: So you think [Sierra] acts too grown?

Jada: Yes.

Baylee: Yes.

JW: With the way she dances.

Shontreal: Yeah, because she...

Jada: And her attitude.

Baylee: She already developed like a...[gestures to her butt] like a fast....

Jada: And her attitude.

JW: Her attitude?

Shontreal: Yeah, her attitude and then she show off.

Baylee: Because she got a big behind.

Shontreal: Because [gestures to her butt]

Rashawnna: And rump.

Jada: And she think she can dance to everything, but basically...

Baylee: And she can pop her butt

Jada: Yeah, she really can't dance to anything but she can pop.

[...]

Rashawnna: She just think she can dance.

JW: And she can't.

Shontreal: And other people can dance, I mean they can dance...

JW: Yeah.

Shontreal: ...but their attitude is not grown so it makes it better. Like Amber...and Kianna. They can dance. But their attitude is not, like...

Rashawnna: Showing off.

Shontreal: Yeah.

In bringing it back to Sierra, the girls here connect her intent with her understanding of her body. They associate her attitude to how her physical body is developed, especially her butt. Sierra acting “too grown” is her not being age-appropriate, and not understanding that she is a little girl who is supposed to be without desire. Significantly, the girls here also associate her intent and her body with the fact that she can't really dance anyway—something that Kia said to me as well. Kia described Sierra as having “no rhythm at all.” Instead of doing specific dances like all the other girls, Sierra would often emulate the kind of dancing most girls know is wrong. She would touch herself, grind her pelvis against the floor or the wall, and turn around and watch her

butt while she danced, until another girl would see her and say “Sierra! Stop that! Girl, you nasty!”

4.7 Private Pleasures, Public Concerns

It’s tempting to think that girls like Sierra and Dajonique learn “nasty” dancing from female dancers in hip-hop videos, and indeed, part of the shock of seeing “nasty” dancing is that it closely resembles what one might see in a video. I don’t want to underestimate the power of visual images, but “nasty” dancing is more than just simple imitation.²⁵ “Nasty” dancing relates to “nasty” content and “inappropriate” behavior not only because girls are imitating what they see in videos, but also because they’re enjoying themselves in an “inappropriate” way. These concerns have to deal with the possibility that a girl is getting too much pleasure out of her body: whether enjoying how it feels to run her hand down her leg, or to rub up against someone else, or to show off the way her body can move for someone else. Another way of talking about intent is talking about how the girls are enjoying dancing. What is more important in determining the ‘nastiness’ of a dance in the eyes of the girls and their adult interlocutors is *how* the girls are enjoying the dancing. The question of enjoyment points back to how girls are implicated in dancing, how they fit into hip-hop’s landscape of commodified bodies, and how they take moral care of their bodies. Are girls dancing for the pleasure of hanging out with their friends, or are they dancing with the recognition that their bodies are sexual

²⁵ Even if girls would want to imitate exactly what they see, it would be almost impossible. The video edits in most videos are so quick that it’s impossible to see a dancer’s entire body, and much of the time women are dancing in slow motion.

objects and instruments of seduction? Does their enjoyment suggest that they know about or might be curious about other kinds of physical pleasures? Does it suggest a desire to position themselves in hip-hop's political economy as a commodified body, perhaps as a stripper? Does their kind of enjoyment suggest that their bodies may be dangerous sites of deviant black female sexuality, dangerous to boys, adult men and even to the girls themselves?

Girls' consumption of the sexualized sounds, lyrics and images of commercial hip-hop is an area of concern, both locally at the club and in popular discourse. The interests of the government intersect with the interests of the individuals at John Avery in that girls' bodies are the concern of a city and state government which wants to minimize the financial drain and potential stigma of high teen pregnancy rates, while club staff are concerned with the links between a girl's body, her sexuality and her possible future. Dancing is a local site where lessons about bodily responsibility are concretized through critique from peers and adults. In the eyes of individuals at the club (both adult and child), girls' embodied dance practices tell stories about whether a girl understands what it means to be "appropriate" for her age, race and gender.

The personal concerns of staff members like Kia, Ms. Gordon and Mr. Laisure intersect with John Avery's most pragmatic concern as an organization, namely, to procure funding. This is not to say that the administrative staff does not first and foremost care about club members and the organization's contribution to the community. But as a non-profit whose funding sources are uncertain from year to year, the administration is keenly aware that its day-to-day operations are dependent on renewing existing funding

sources and finding new ones. And the ability to renew and find new sources of funding is often dependent on whether John Avery can demonstrate quantifiable results. So when the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services asks in the end-of-year report how many pregnancies and births they've had, John Avery is proud to report zero. From this standpoint, a girl having control over her body and understanding the right and wrong kinds of pleasure becomes important not only to the girl's personhood, but to the club as an organization—lack of bodily control in dancing could potentially lead to lack of control in other places and with other people, which could lead to a baby, which could lead to John Avery making a weaker argument that its existence helps the community, in this case by lessening the stigma and financial drain of high teen pregnancy rates.

A girl not having control over her body carries a real significance at a place where responsibility—to oneself and to the community—is continually taught and encouraged. Girls' lessons in propriety are tied discursively to ideals of self-respect, but from the point of view of the staff, they are also related to a girl's personal safety as well as the concerns of the community. The panics over black girls' bodies and sexualities are crystallized at John Avery in the local practice of dancing, and the surveillance and critique of dancing. These panics are structurally reinforced at many different levels: at the level of the community, which dictates by means of controlling the funding what the club must focus on as an organization; at John Avery's administrative level, as they try to tailor the club's activities to satisfy the demands of funding organizations; and interpersonally among the staff and girls, as they try to figure out what is right in the context of their relationships.

The structures within which John Avery operates—its programs, the dictates of the national organization and of funding agencies, even the imperatives of club staff—all exist ostensibly for the girls' benefit, yet the tensions among and between them complicate each girl's individual conditions of agency. Girls navigate their way through the comments of peers and adults about the possibilities of their bodies, surveys and discussion groups on sex and sexually transmitted diseases, and implicit messages that because they get free or reduced lunch, they have questionable moral standards. Girls learn that finishing their homework and getting good grades is important, and they practice exercises in verbalizing their agency (such as learning Just Say No or practicing what to say to a drug dealer during SMART Moves). Yet at the end of the day, girls also learn that their bodies are much more powerful and dangerous than their words could ever be. Sexual desire is treated not as a personal concern of the individual, but as something messy with the potential to bleed into the public space of the club and contaminate other kids, adults and the future of the club itself should those desires result in something tangible, such as pregnancy or sexual assault. From this perspective, if a girl is to live up to her full potential as an agent at John Avery, she must control her body and render herself desire-less. If she does not or cannot, she is, in effect, a risk to her peers, the club and the community.

I have focused in this chapter on the girls who are the exceptions that prove the rule. Most girls know how to dance appropriately and understand the benefit to dancing appropriately. Girls knowing how to dance appropriately means that they are within the aesthetic conventions of dancing at the club and among their peers, but it also means that

they have control over what message they are sending about their moral fibers and how much they understand about being an “appropriate girl.” Being able to exercise this kind of control is important, because so much is riding on girls’ shoulders. By understanding their bodies and using them in a moral and artistic framework that is understood and expected at John Avery, girls have the potential to subtly rebuke dominant narratives in hip-hop. I explore these rebukes in the following chapter.

5. _____ Lessons: Meaning and Critique in Movement and Gesture

No matter how I tried to manipulate the space at John Avery, there always seemed to be way too many girls and boys crowded into the tightest possible corner. I'd clear all the tables out of the way to make a giant space of carpet just for them in the Arts and Crafts Room, and they'd all choose to stand in between the circular tables and the large teacher's desk. They always wanted to stand by the music, as much as I tried to subtly hint that they might have more fun dancing in the big space where it just happened to be easier for me to film and where they wouldn't have to yell over the music. For some reason they seemed to feel more comfortable the closer they were to the speakers, even though those speakers were always at full volume and could be heard in the adjoining rooms. And they always wanted to be close to the iPod, even though it was strictly regulated by the oldest girls in the room. Girls and boys would gather around the tiny lit-up screen, keeping an eye out for a particular song or just looking at the selection. Songs would come on and quickly be rejected. New songs would be suggested. The circle of participation would get tighter and tighter as more and more kids tried to move away from the fringe and into the center of the group. Eventually everyone was within arm's length of each other, jockeying for a position closest to the iPod, sitting on the tables, sharing a toddler-sized chair with someone else, leaning on the desk, doing a miniature version of a dance while standing shoulder-to-shoulder with three other girls.

This space was loud more than anything else. Kids delighted in shouting to be heard: in talking to one another, yelling out requests for songs, and singing along with

what was playing. Dancing was never far beneath the surface of conversation, and occasionally kids would get up and dance, inspired by either the music that played, or by occasions in the conversation where it made sense to use movement to illustrate what they were talking about. This space was chaotic, but also intimate. The closeness of bodies and voices and music meant that discussion rapidly shifted as people entered and left the circle, as the song changed, as people were called to go home, as someone did a gesture that made another person think of something else. In this intimate environment, conversations happened in, around and through the music.¹ Music launched the stories, jokes, and comments bouncing from person to person. In this informal space, fragments of dances and musical gestures were shortcuts to past events and shared understandings, and layers of meaning rippled through the group of bodies huddled together.

Thus far in the dissertation I have used performance events to uncover how girls think about themselves in relation to representations of emotion in celebrity performances (Ch. 2), to illuminate the importance of girls learning and participating in ideas of black musicality along with their peers and adult interlocutors (Ch. 3), and reveal the competing and conflicting tensions around girls' bodies, desires, and their relationships with hip-hop and moral ideologies (Ch. 4). Here I take a step back from "events" and examine some of the more ordinary moments, when girls' uses of movement and gesture

¹ Tyler Bickford's work on children's expressive culture at a rural Vermont primary school addresses intimacy and sociability in and through commercial music in a different way—namely through the way kids (sometimes secretly) share portable music devices. See "Earbuds Are Good for Sharing: Children's Sociable Uses of Headphones at a Vermont Primary School," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies*, edited by Jason Stanyek and Sumanth Gopinath (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming) and "Media Consumption, Classroom Ideologies, and Children's Expressive Culture at a K–8 Vermont Public School," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, forthcoming.

were interwoven with conversation. In this chapter I examine the talk and gesture that moved quickly from person to person in conversation and in informal listening sessions like the one described above. Words alone often failed to convey all of the ideas girls wanted to express, and on such occasions girls relied upon physical gestures to complete their thoughts. The gestures followed phrases such as “s/he be _____,” “s/he said _____,” or “she was like _____.”² These movements were often fragments of dances or gestures associated with dancing and dances. Throughout this chapter I refer to these occasions as “_____” moments, so as to focus on the many possible meanings in each gesture, and less on the gesture’s referential quality. Embedded within any one particular “_____” could be a number of different references, commentaries, and implications: the sounds, lyrics, and images that were associated with a particular dance, for instance, or a reference to a girl’s “inappropriate” dancing or behavior. Girls’ use of gestures not only had a referential quality, but also had the potential to change the way girls thought of the dances, occasions and people they referred to.

In the previous chapters I consciously limited myself to events as circumscribed by the space of John Avery. Indeed, I have implicitly argued that the space of the club is an important frame for analyzing how certain musical meanings are created and understood. John Avery’s position in the community, its designation as a “safe” space for “endangered” kids, and its history in Durham’s middle-class black community are important in understanding the nature and the stakes of girls’ relationships with peers and

² Here I use “_____” as a stand-in for physical movement.

adults. These relationships, in turn, are intertwined with girls' musical practices. Girls' social statuses were dependent in no small part on their musical knowledge and how well they were able to dance and sing. "____" moments are important in further understanding how girls made sense of peer relationships through musical engagements. The way the gestures moved from person to person in listening sessions and conversations, as younger and less popular girls followed the cues of older girls and better dancers, not only reflected social hierarchies, but also continually produced them. The most popular girls were leaders in the use of "____" moments, and to some extent they also dictated the spectrum of meanings laden within each "____." These moments were therefore occasions where girls learned, from each other, ways to talk about *others'* musical skills and "(in)appropriate" dancing and behavior.

Even though my ethnography here remains firmly situated within John Avery, the implications of my analysis extend beyond the club's walls. Girls use "____" to playfully describe the dancing or the behavior (or sometimes both simultaneously) of those outside the circle of participation: girls and women they know but aren't present, or people they don't know but about whom judgments can be made. Yet embedded in the referentiality of the times when girls say "she was all ____" are commentary and critique based on the musical skills and moral codes which girls learn during their musical activities at John Avery. Girls use the musical skills they develop at John Avery to issue subtle critiques and even rebukes to dominant narratives of female sexuality in hip-hop. These skills are manifested in girls' "____" moments, which jokingly refer to both people inside and outside of John Avery. These humorous moments have much to say about how girls read

and critique ideologies of race, gender and sexuality mapped onto public, celebrity bodies, and how they believe these ideologies relate to their personal performances of the everyday.

In this chapter I examine “_____” moments through multiple iterations of gestures related to one dance, the “walk it out.” In particular, I analyze “_____” moments in one conversation and one informal listening session. I extend the work of the previous chapter by further examining girls’ relationships and understandings of “appropriate” dancing and behavior and the conflation of the two. In analyzing the conversation, I am concerned with girls’ use of “_____” and its relationship to girls’ talk about learning how to “walk it out.” From there I analyze one informal listening session, similar to the one described at the beginning of this chapter. I will examine the way gestures associated with “_____” shift among the participants, with the intention of digging further into the nature of girls’ social relationships and how they are shaped and negotiated through musical skill. I will also investigate the way girls use “_____” moments to try out unskilled and “inappropriate” dancing without fear of reprobation, while at the same time critiquing that kind of dancing. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion of the different kinds of meaning that can be indexed within one “_____”, and consider how these moments have a liberating potential for girls.

5.1 Talk, _____, and Talk about _____

In thinking about language’s inadequacies in capturing all of music’s meaning, I follow previous scholars who have interrogated the relationship between music and speech. Steven Feld’s “Communication, Music, and Speech About Music” is a re-visiting

of Charles Seeger's classic article "Speech, Music, and Speech About Music," but while Seeger turns his attention to an examination of what might be termed the static systems of speech and music, Feld focuses on the intersection of music and speech in interpretation and social communication.³ Feld goes to some lengths to detail all of the "interpretive moves" that happen any time a listener hears a musical sound. A listener's "interpretive moves," as Feld describes them, are anything and everything that is included in the process of identifying sound and placing it within a number of contexts—such as the ideas, events, people, and thoughts that a listener might associate with a sound, as well as the environmental conditions under which sound is heard. Feld uses this phrase as a way of approaching the interdependence of interpretation and meaning. This chapter argues that "____" moments are interpretations of musical skill, personal character, and social status, all of which are related to girls' musical activities.

Feld describes the tendency of non-musical experts to compare music to sounds and feelings that are familiar, often using the word "like." While girls at John Avery use the word "like" and other quotative phrases to communicate their understandings, "____" moments are different than Feld's examples in two important respects: girls aren't just using *speech*, and they're talking about more than *music*.⁴ To address the latter point first, "____" moments are linked to music but don't necessarily refer to music itself. Girls

³ Steven Feld, "Communication, Music, and Speech About Music," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 16 (1984): 1-18. Charles Seeger, "Speech, Music, and Speech about Music," in *Studies in Musicology, 1935-1975*, ed. Charles Seeger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 16-30.

⁴ A number of linguistic anthropologists have examined the quotative "like" and other quotative phrases: See most recently Bambi B. Schiefflin and Graham Jones, "Enquoting Voices, Accomplishing Talk: Uses of *Be + Like* in Instant Messaging," *Language and Communication* 29, no. 1 (2009): 77-113.

aren't attempting to verbalize music's ineffable qualities, instead they are using their musical skills to communicate and interpret events and actions that bear some relation to their musical practices. Second, girls are not merely *talking*—movement and gesture are also part of the communication, and indeed are essential in conveying everything a girl wants to “say.” While Feld points out that non-experts’ “inarticulate” speech about music actually communicates important ideas about a listener’s investment in and relationship with music, and Fox (2004) points to style and artistry, specifically the sound of the voice in conversation, in the deployment of quotative speech,⁵ this chapter highlights a corporeal component of “communication about music.

Feld argues that “each experience in listening must connote prior, contemporary, and future listenings.”⁶ In some ways this chapter is an attempt to address cumulative processes of listening, to think about the ways that girls attend to their listening experiences, and the way these experiences stay with girls when talking and not talking about “music” per se. “_____” moments are references to past events, other people, and musical experiences, but part of the “process” of these moments is the way girls incorporate critique and commentary in their references. The commentary and critique in “_____” moments are directly related to the intersection of girls’ musical experiences and the way they process these musical experiences in their bodies.

⁵ Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁶ Feld, 6.

5.2 “*That was just unnecessary when they did that*”

As stated above, I focus in this chapter on one dance as the genesis of a number of different “_____” moments. The “walk it out” was one of the most popular dances at John Avery during my fieldwork. It was a favorite of both girls and boys, and girls frequently used it in dance battles. The dance goes with the song of the same name, by Atlanta-based rapper DJ Unk.⁷ The song had continuous radio play almost the entire time of my fieldwork, with kids’ interest in the song and dance peaking in late fall of 2006. The dance has a relatively simple movement that can be adapted to any number of other songs. The dancer stands with her feet shoulder-width apart, bends her knees, and turns her ankles in and out, similar to the popular 1960s dance the “twist.” Unlike the twist, the dancer travels forward instead of staying in one place. Although the song features a syncopated bass line, the “walk it out” follows a simple rhythm: the dancer steps on every beat. Like when I learned how to do the “motorcycle,” girls were very specific in telling me what to do and what not to do with the dancing: 7th grader Shontreal gave micro-critiques on almost every part of my lower body, from the balls of my feet to the direction of my hips. She taught me to pick up my feet and “walk” instead of twisting my feet on the floor. She also taught me to bend my knees, stick my butt out just a little, and keep my hips still while moving forward.

⁷ DJ Unk, “Walk It Out,” *Beat’n Down Yo Block!* (Big Oomp Records, 2006). Since the song and dance have the same name, I use capital letters to refer to the song and lower case to refer to the dance. I also follow the kids’ practice of using the name of the dance as a verb (i.e., “walking it out”).

Once I had mastered my lower body (at least to Shontreal's specifications) and felt comfortable walking it out with the kids, girls started telling me that I needed to do something with my arms. *What* exactly I should do with them they never said explicitly. However, the use of the upper body and arms was a big part of personalizing the "walk it out." Most girls used their upper bodies to put their own spin on the dance, and some would move their arms back and forth at their sides or sway their torsos back and forth. Girls often did the "motorcycle" while walking it out, coordinating their upper bodies with the syncopated bass line. Because it lent itself to a number of variations, there was always the potential for a girl to take the dance "too far," leading to critiques by other girls and staff members. And when girls wanted to talk about others' "too far" dancing, "too far" was usually represented with exaggerated arm and torso movements.

In the video for "Walk It Out," large groups of men and women gather in different spaces and do the dance. In terms of profane lyrics and scantily clad women, the song and the video are relatively tame in comparison with other songs the girls listened to. However, compared to the way *I* learned the dance at John Avery, the women in the video look like they are going completely overboard. There are a number of things about the women's performance that, judging from our conversations and the discourse of moral care at John Avery, girls would consider objectionable. The women in the video, as well as those in televised live performances such as DJ Unk's performance at the 2006 BET Hip-Hop Awards, are dressed in short shorts and midriff-baring t-shirts or bikinis, which most girls would consider "nasty." The women also give long, sultry looks to the camera and at times touch each other while dancing, both indicators of "inappropriate"

sexuality and desire. However, in terms of their movement, the main thing that differentiates their dancing from that of the girls at John Avery is how they dance from the waist up. They arch their backs, move their arms back and forth in front of them and over their heads, and swing their heads so their hair whips around their faces. These dancers, even though they have obviously mastered the essential movement of the “walk it out,” are seen by most girls at John Avery as examples in how *not* to do the dance.

When I asked girls about the women in the video and the women dancers on live performances such as the Hip-Hop Awards, a few of them told me that the way the women danced was “just unnecessary.” This observation came during a conversation about the dance itself, a conversation prompted by my asking when they first learned to walk it out.⁸ 4th grader Tamika said she first became aware of the dance when she saw someone doing it at the Chris Brown/Ne-Yo concert, which many of the kids had attended a couple of months earlier.⁹ 5th grader Ashondra agreed, and went on to talk about one girl in particular who walked it out at the concert. From there the conversation turned to the subject of girls and women walking it out in various “unnecessary” ways, and eventually, to the female dancers at the BET Awards. In this conversation, girls used flailing arms and exaggerated torso movements in their “_____” moments to describe the kinds of dancing they saw.

⁸ Interview conducted November 27, 2006.

⁹ The concert took place September 3, 2006. R&B artists Chris Brown and Ne-Yo were preceded by a number of acts, including rappers Lil’ Wayne, Juelz Santana, Dem Franchise Boyz, and the R&B girl-group Cherish. Current radio hits (including “Walk It Out”) played between each set. This was two and a half years before Chris Brown was arrested for assaulting his then-girlfriend, R&B singer Rihanna.

Ashondra first answered my question by talking about a girl sitting close to her and her sister at the concert. “I hadn’t really known how to walk it out,” she said. “But this girl right there, me and my sister were sitting over there and this girl was ____.” Ashondra stood up from her chair and quickly shook her arms over her head. “I was like, ‘Yeah, you might want to move that way.’ Cause she was about to punch me!” she said. “She started doing a split, and a pop at the same time, she was doing some kind of... She was like ____.” Ashondra exaggerated her facial expression and again shook her arms over her head. Sisters Tamyra and Tamika jumped in with their own experience at the concert. “This girl at the concert was challenging us,” 4th grader Tamyra said. “They was challenging us!” Tamika agreed. “So you know my cousin...” The other girls nodded as Tamika trailed off. “She like to dance, both of them!” Tamyra picked up where Tamika left off. “They started doing some ____.” Tamyra jumped up out of her chair and did an exaggerated version of the ‘walk it out,’ jogging in place and waving her hands over her head. “I didn’t want to get my hands dirty, so I didn’t get down,” Tamyra said, indicating that she didn’t feel it was in her best interest to answer the girl’s dancing challenge.

“She looked like she was doing Michael Jackson,” Tamika said. “It looked like she was on crack, to be honest,” she continued. “Like she had no bones!” Tamyra added.

“Like the girl off of BET Awards!” Ashondra said. The other girls laughed and nodded. Now Ashondra imitated the dancers who walked it out at the 2006 BET Awards: “And she was like ____.” Ashondra moved her torso in circles and arched her back, imitating the way the dancers walked it out in the aisles of the theatre. “Was that necessary?” she asked rhetorically.

“For real!” Tamika answered.

Ashondra continued. “Cause they just came out into the rows and they was like ____.” Now Ashondra shook her arms rapidly over her head.

“They didn’t have to do that,” Tamyra said. “That was just unnecessary when they did that!”

On the surface, “____” moments in this conversation appear to be purely referential. It is easier for girls to use their bodies to imitate the dancing they saw than it would be for them to describe it with words, and so they use imitative movement in their communications with one another. Yet the similar gestures used by Ashondra, Tamyra and Tamika do more work than mere imitation—they suggest that the girls and women they’re describing were, unlike the girls telling the story, completely out of control. Ashondra begins by describing a girl who invaded her (Ashondra’s) personal space during the concert, suggesting that the other girl’s dancing was so wild that she (Ashondra) was almost punched. Tamika and Tamyra describe their cousins’ dancing as being unruly enough to cause them (the cousins) bodily harm (“I was like, ‘don’t break it!’”), while being careful to distance themselves from their cousins’ dancing (“I didn’t want to get my hands dirty, so I didn’t get down”). Then Tamyra compares other girls at the concert to Michael Jackson, referencing both a style of dancing that is hopelessly passé, and a public figure that, for as long as the girls have been alive, has been

configured as having a questionable sexuality and a freakish pattern of behavior.¹⁰

Tamika elaborates and says “it looked like she was on crack,” implying that the anonymous girl’s dancing body appeared to be under the influence of a powerful drug, which also calls into question the girl’s moral standards. From there, the gesture Tamika used to refer to the crack-smoking Michael Jackson dance-alike makes Ashondra think of the BET Awards, during which a line of women in white t-shirts and short shorts paraded down the aisles of the theatre, walking it out in a similar style to the dancing in the video.

The similar gestures in the girls’ uses of “_____” link the real girls they saw dancing at the concert to the virtual women they saw on the BET Awards, who in turn resemble the dancers in the “Walk It Out” video. While it’s unlikely that the girls at the concert were dancing in exactly the same way as the women at the BET Awards, especially since the BET Awards aired two months after the concert, it is apparent that Tamika, Tamyra, and Ashondra *think* about them in the same way. In other words, when communicating to each other the full impact of the girls’ dancing, the movements that the girls *actually* did at the concert aren’t nearly as important as the ideas that are embedded in the movement, which Tamika, Tamyra, and Ashondra understand to be the same as or comparable to the ideas embedded in the movements of the BET Awards dancers. In both cases, the girls understand these ideas to be related to the dancers’ care of their bodies.

The “_____” gestures signal a chain of signifiers related to the girls’ and women’s

¹⁰ At the time of this conversation, Michael Jackson’s musical career had long been overshadowed in the popular press by rumors of multiple plastic surgeries, skin-whitening procedures, and criminal trials related to child pornography and molestation. His death (one week ago as of this writing) has reinvigorated interest in his prodigious musical output.

dancing. In this case, the girls use arm and torso gestures to demonstrate the women's "unnecessary" dancing, which is not actually limited to the upper body but is directly related to other things that the girls would consider to be excessive and "inappropriate": the idea that the girls at the concert might not be able to control their bodies, the idea that they might be on drugs, the women in the video showing too much skin, or women in the video deriving pleasure from dancing with other women. Through the chain of signifiers triggered by "____," Tamika, Tamyra, and Ashondra question whether the dancers understand the boundaries of personal space and whether they are able to control their bodies. The irony is that the dancers in the video and live performances are fairly virtuosic in the way that they are able to coordinate their upper and lower bodies with each other and with the music, and their dancing therefore demonstrates a significant measure of bodily discipline and control. For Tamika, Tamyra, and Ashondra however, this kind of skill is not as important as the skill that comes from disciplining your body to dance in an appropriate way. What the girls see as the "unnecessary" nature of the dancing trumps the skill it takes to dance that way.

It is significant that these stories were told when I asked the group of girls about how and when they learned to walk it out. As demonstrated in previous chapters, girls' knowing the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate dancing is important in knowing how and when to move their bodies. Part of learning to dance is learning how *not* to dance. And out of control bodies (and possibly by extension, out of control personal characters) are exactly what the girls are supposed to be guarding against as they learn, in part through dancing, to take moral care of their bodies. Implicit in their

critiques of the girls at the concert and the women at the BET Awards is the understanding that because Tamika, Tamyra, and Ashondra are able to recognize the “unnecessary,” they wouldn’t dance that way themselves. Girls’ use of “_____” as a critique of other girls and women is another way of demonstrating how much they know about the dance. Tamika, Ashondra, and Tamyra use the “_____” gestures to demonstrate to one another that they understand the full meaning of the dancing.

On a fundamental level, when girls say “she was like _____” or “he said _____” they are using variations of “reported speech” (or perhaps more appropriate here, reported gesture), which Volosinov defines as “speech within speech and speech about speech.”¹¹ The significance of reported speech is not limited to the words themselves, but can encompass the way the words are said.¹² To that end, the kinds of gestures girls used to represent “unnecessary” dancing are not insignificant. As stated above, arms and torso movements were part of what personalized the “walk it out” for each dancer, and part of how the girls at John Avery differentiated themselves from women in the video and live performances. But when Ashondra, Tamika, and Tamyra waved their arms overhead in reference to these women, they did it as a throwaway gesture, and without any indication of rhythm or tempo. While it was an exaggerated movement, it was also one that indicated that the women they were referring to were unskilled, not unique, and at the same time going completely overboard with their dancing. Aaron Fox examines the

¹¹ Valentin N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), 115.

¹² Fox 2004.

artistry and skill of reported speech in his study of the politics of orality among working-class Texas musicians. Fox uses vocal imitation and other stylized speech acts to argue the importance of skill and artistry in reported speech. In this conversation we see that skill and artistry are important in girls' reported gesture as well. Through the use of their bodies in communicating the full meaning of reported gesture, the girls in this conversation are further able to link dancing and personal character.

Another important component of Volosinov's concept of reported speech is the idea that even though reported speech would seem to be a re-statement of an original utterance, it cannot be divorced from the intent of the one who is doing the reporting. Essentially, when someone employs reported speech, she removes it from its original context and intention, and issues her own commentary on the original utterance. It is not my intentions to suggest a one-to-one correlation between speech and girls' gesture, but if we think of "____" moments as a kind of reported speech, then we can see how "____" moments say more about the girls doing the reporting than the girls and women they are reporting about. Through the very process of defining and critiquing others' dancing, girls define their own dancing as well. At the very least, their critiques of others' dancing demonstrate, if only in the moment of the reported gesture, that they do not wish to be thought of as dancing that way themselves. These moments are opportunities for girls to claim power over their own representations, which I explore further in the final section of the chapter.

5.3 Walk It Out Like ____

I use the following extended ethnographic story to demonstrate “____” moments in the context of an everyday listening session. As in the above conversation, girls use “____” moments to refer to the dancing of women and girls. However, here the critiques issued by girls in the above conversation are complicated by the complex network of social hierarchies that play out during the course of the listening session. The most popular girl in the group during this listening session is 7th grader Shontreal, who usually called the shots around girls’ dancing, even though she rarely danced herself. However, the focus of this session, in which girls and boys compare versions of the “walk it out,” is on Ashondra and 5th grader Jada, two of the best dancers in the club. Ashondra and Jada, close friends, are primarily concerned with dancing with and for each other. They compare their own versions with one another and share other versions they’ve seen, using “____” moments to set up the comparisons. However, the other girls look to Ashondra and Jada for guidance in doing the dance. The two girls tease each other and comply with each other’s requests to try the dance in certain ways, but they do not feel compelled to listen to the other girls or oblige the less-skilled dancers in their requests for help, even though they are friendly with almost everyone present. This listening session, like most, is playful and is occasionally punctuated by bursts of laughter (such as when 4th grader Darnell demonstrates his “walk it out”), yet there are still serious attempts by girls, especially from the unpopular 4th grader Alana, to learn from the better dancers. Girls both verbalize their requests for help and seek assistance by quietly watching Jada and Ashondra and then imitating what they see. As the two expert dancers have fun with each

other, the less-expert dancers watch and imitate not only Ashondra's and Jada's movement, but the way Ashondra and Jada have fun with movement through "____" moments.

On a Friday afternoon in September 2006, Ashondra and Jada walked into the Arts and Crafts Room with their backpacks on.¹³ The iPod was already on, playing Ciara's "Get Up." A group of girls danced at the edge of the room, while most everyone else was gathered in the small space between the tables and the desk, next to my iPod and the speakers. When Ashondra heard the music, she stopped short in the doorway and started dancing, making Jada bend over with laughter. The two girls dropped their backpacks and chatted at the edge of the room. The music briefly stopped while Rashawnna (7th grade) searched for another song. After a pause of about three seconds, the wobbly synthesized beginning to "Chain Hang Low" sang out. Ashondra and Jada interrupted their conversation with Amber (2nd grade) and ran over to the small space by the desk, followed by everyone else in the room. Rashawnna stopped the song after about a minute, to the consternation of many but the delight of a few. "Walk It Out!" someone yelled, a request for Rashawnna to switch the song.

By now close to twenty girls and a handful of boys were crowded into that small space. Many different conversations bounced back and forth from person to person, but much of the attention (including that of me and my camera) was focused on Ashondra. The request for "Walk It Out" had started a discussion on different ways of doing the

¹³ These events took place Friday, September 29, 2006.

dance. Hope (6th grade) turned to Ashondra for in doing the dance. “I be doing the ‘poole palace’ when you do ‘walk it out,’” she said to Ashondra, referring to a similar dance. Ashondra walked it out a couple steps. Hope’s brother Darnell (4th grade) offered Hope unsolicited advice: “I’m saying, all you do is that,” he said to Hope, referring to Ashondra’s dancing. Hope ignored him. Meanwhile Ashondra had moved on to describing another group of dancers. “And then sometimes they be like _____,” Ashondra said, most likely describing women dancers she had seen on tv. She moved her arms up next to her face and then over her head while she walked it out. “Darnell, do your Poole Palace,” someone said. “No,” Darnell said. Hope imitated Darnell. “He be like, he be like this!” Ashondra and Hope imitated him, walking it out with their arms in front, wrists facing up.

Rashawwna found the song and the music started. After the four beat intro, Amber (2nd grade), Ashondra, Tamika (4th grade) and Alana (4th grade) started walking it out on one end of the circle, while Darnell walked it out on the other. Everyone sang along with the opening chorus of the song. *“Now walk it out, walk it out, walk it out, walk it out....”* Shontreal (7th grade) pointed at Darnell, drawing his sister’s attention. “Look at Darnell!” Hope said laughing. Everyone’s focus turned to Darnell. His shoulders were shrugged up to his ears, his elbows out parallel to his shoulders, his head and neck dropped over looking at the floor with his tongue sticking out. The effect, especially with his baggy white button-down shirt hanging on his skinny frame, was that of a puppet being controlled by invisible strings. The crowd of kids lost it. Alana clapped her hands in delight and Tamika draped her body over the side of a chair, shaking with laughter.

Darnell smiled and laughed with everyone else, then quickly hopped back to the edge of the circle, ceding the spotlight once more to the girls. Everyone stood waiting for something to happen. Amber bounced on the balls of her feet with a lollipop in her mouth, waiting for the chorus to begin again. She walked it out for two bars, doing the motorcycle with her upper body, then she stepped to the side to finish her candy. Ashondra picked up where she left off. She walked it out for two bars with a big grin on her face and her head swinging side to side with the beat, then she stopped and tried to get Jada to do it. Jada smiled and waited another couple bars for a downbeat. She walked it out, keeping her gaze focused on the floor in front of her. Her torso moved back and forth while her arms moved in circles at her sides. Meanwhile on the other side of the circle, Hope walked it out with Darnell. “You look like this, Darnell,” Hope said, imitating Darnell’s version. She glanced over at Jada and started moving her arms in circles at her side in a more awkward version of Jada’s dancing.

Alana was watching Jada too. Alana looked at the ceiling, in an apparent attempt to focus on the dance. She looked at Ashondra. “It look like this, right?” she asked her. Ashondra looked at her for a second and went back to talking to Jada. “You know Tyree do like this,” Ashondra said, imitating the 1st grade boy with her bottom lip stuck out and her arms moving back and forth. Jada laughed. “Do it again, do it again,” Alana implored Ashondra, still trying to get Ashondra’s version of the dance. But Ashondra was distracted by Shontreal, who walked between Jada and Ashondra and was trying to encourage everyone to spread out. Alana walked it out with her elbows tucked at her

sides. Tamika got out of her chair and walked it out a couple of steps, thrashing her arms and throwing her head around. Alana swatted at her and she sat back down.

“She was like this, she said _____,” Ashondra imitated someone who apparently bounced up and down and moved her knees in and out while walking it out. “Walk it out,” Alana said to Shontreal, who was returning to her spot by the iPod. “Walk it out, Shontreal!” Ashondra said. Shontreal gave Ashondra a look that said there was no way she was going to dance, and then she sat back down. “My cousin, she be doing it like _____,” Alana said. She walked it out, throwing her torso forward and back, her braids flying across her face. “Do it again, do it again,” she said to Ashondra. Ashondra stood looking at the floor, and everyone watched her as she waited for the downbeat of the second verse. Sierra (2nd grade), who had been standing off to the side, jumped in the middle of the circle so that she could see better. Ashondra snapped her fingers on the pickup, and walked it out on the downbeat. She moved her ribcage in circles while her arms moved in circles at shoulder level. Alana watched her, and then tried to do the same thing herself. Ashondra glanced at her sideways and smiled. Sierra tried to do what Ashondra was doing as well; she arched her back, stuck out her ribcage and moved it side to side while walking it out. Darnell started to laugh at her and Sierra promptly pushed him out of her way.

Alana noticed Jada dancing by herself in the cleared carpet space. “Look at Jada! Get it Jada!” she laughed, trying to get Jada’s attention. Jada ignored her. “I don’t know how to walk it out,” Alana said to no one in particular. “Look, is this how you walk it out?” she asked Ashondra. Ashondra watched as Alana walked it out, moving her torso

side to side, but before she could say anything, Tamika jumped up out of her chair and wagged her finger in Alana's face. "Unh-uh, unh-uh," she said. "Shut up," Alana said, pushing Tamika back in her chair. All of the sudden Shontreal paused the song and commanded everyone to move away from the desk. Once everyone had spread out to her satisfaction, she started the music again. Jada and Ashondra moved to the open space of carpet, away from Alana and everyone else. They traded versions of the dance, making each other laugh. First Jada did her version, moving her torso back and forth and her arms in circles at her side. Then Ashondra walked it out while punching the air in front of her. Jada laughed and started dancing again, this time with a mock-serious face. Then Ashondra walked it out with her feet as far apart as possible. She looked up at the ceiling and then down at the floor, all the while moving her extended arm above her head and in a large circle. The younger girls watched what was going on. Tamika sat in her chair watching, occasionally flailing her arms in response to Ashondra and Jada's increasingly silly dances. Amber and Sierra responded as well, imitating what they were seeing from the two older girls. Then Alana, in an ill-fated attempt to be a part of Jada's and Ashondra's joking, interrupted everything by jumping in front of Ashondra and Jada, mugging and dancing for the camera. She succeeded in getting everyone's attention, but she killed the momentum of Jada's and Ashondra's dancing, in the process annoying the girls she had hoped to impress.

5.4 "She was like ____"

Unlike events around a battle, or occasions where a girl's antics drew the attention of everyone in the room, this story is an example of everyone just hanging out, being silly

and sharing ideas about the song and dance. In these informal gatherings, fun is productive, and girls can try out meanings associated with movement and music in their own bodies. Still, every comment and performative gesture among the twenty or so kids coming in and out of the circle was here related to the dance, the movement, or the song. Even when girls were not conspicuously on display for one another, they watched one another closely to pick up dancing skill, and the ideas to which the dances related.

For Ashondra and Jada, this space was not about demonstrating their skill, even though other girls looked to them for signals in how to dance. They used the time to try new things out, get feedback and make each other laugh. Ashondra imitated how other people do the dance, poking gentle fun at Darnell (“He be like, he be like this”) and Tyree (“You know Tyree do like this”). She also referenced the way other women and girls do the dance who were not present in the room, using phrases such as “she said ____.” The “____” in the “like ____” gestures is the subject of a conversation that moved around the group of girls and boys, a conversation controlled by Ashondra and Jada. Because Ashondra and Jada were the focus of everyone’s attention, they were able to determine the meaning of “____” moments. Some of Ashondra’s movements, such as swinging her head side to side, moving her arms overhead, and emphasizing an arched back, index the kinds of dancing done by female dancers in the “Walk It Out” music video, which Ashondra herself describes as “nasty.” As I emphasized above, it’s not necessarily the arms and the torso movements that make a dance “nasty,” but rather the association of those movements with women’s other objectionable behavior in the video. However, unlike the above conversation, where Ashondra used these gestures to

emphasize her distance from questionable behavior and dancing, here she and Jada frame these same gestures so that they are humorous instead of objectionable.

When Jada and Ashondra tried to make each other laugh at the end of the song, they were continuing the “like ____” conversation. What started as imitating other dancers became a conversation about what it means when the dance is done in a certain way. Versions of the dance were done with varying levels of seriousness. When Ashondra imitated Darnell and Tyree, it was understood that these versions were humorous, as was the case when Darnell actually did the dance himself. Ashondra’s imitations referenced the idea of boys being somewhat out of place among all the girls’ dancing. Jada and Ashondra’s over-exaggerations at the end of the song were clearly hilarious to everyone watching. Meanings were less clear when Ashondra referenced other women. On the one hand, saying “Sometimes they be like ____” indicates that Ashondra was differentiating herself from women, and she would never dance that way herself. It is her interpretation of another woman’s version. On the other hand, after saying that at the beginning of the song, she took that gesture (moving her arms next to her face and over her head) and ran with it for the rest of the song. Even though she distanced herself from the movement by presenting it as someone else’s version, she was clearly having fun doing the movement. She and Jada tried out variations of this initial exaggerated movement throughout the song, culminating in their comedy routine at the end.

The phrases that preceded each “____,” such as “she said ____” or “she was like ____” are framing devices that, when followed by “____,” signal a particular kind of

reported speech. Bauman and Briggs describe framing as “the meta-communicative management of the recontextualized text.”¹⁴ Here what is recontextualized are the girls’ referential “_____.” The movements in each “_____” are taken out of their original contexts: from women dancing in a video and girls and boys dancing in the recent past, and placed in the moment for use in Jada and Ashondra’s play. Jada and Ashondra, as two of the most popular girls, manage their “_____” so that everyone understands when they are joking, when they are making fun of others, and when they are trying out the moves “seriously.” At the same time, because they frame their gestures as humorous, Ashondra and Jada are able to try out these questionable moves in their own bodies without reprobation from anyone present. Feld’s notion of framing, building on both Erving Goffman and Gregory Bateson, “involves simultaneous recognition of generality and specificity, form and reference, through interpretive motions using some combination of locational, categorical, associational, reflective, and evaluative moves.”¹⁵ He argues that “one engages and places an item or event in meaningful social space through ongoing interpretive moves. ...meaning is emergent and changeable in relation to the ways the moves are unraveled within situated constraints on the speakers.”¹⁶ Jada’s and Ashondra’s framing is a recognition of the group that they are dancing with. As the most popular girls there, they are able to control the tenor of the dancing conversation, and are

¹⁴ Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 75.

¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶ Feld, 14.

able to dance without anyone making fun of them, but at the same time they recognize that they can only go so far in the space of the club.

I am not suggesting that Ashondra and Jada consciously frame their performances so as to be able to try out “nasty” dancing without fear of criticism. Rather, I am suggesting that perhaps part of the reason Jada and Ashondra are so respected as dancers, and are liked by so many other girls, comes from the finesse with which they negotiate humor and dancing which is a potential social risk. In their “_____” moments, Ashondra and Jada are able to share their expertise about the different ways to do the dance, while at the same time trying the ways out in their own bodies. And because Jada and Ashondra experiment with the movement, other girls do as well. Whereas Jada and Ashondra try out objectionable dancing, the other girls, through imitation, in effect try out what it’s like to be Jada and Ashondra trying out objectionable dancing. The girls learn how to train their bodies to dance like them, while also learning the frames of humorous dancing.

5.5 Interrogating Meaning

I have used the word “meaning” throughout the chapter to talk about the embedded ideas and thoughts that are present in the girls’ “like _____” moments. Shepherd and Jennifer Giles-Davis describe meaning in music as “a consequence of an intense dialectical interaction between text, other adjacent texts (lyrics, images, movement) and social, cultural and biographical contexts.”¹⁷ This dialectic is precisely what I’m trying to uncover in girls’ “_____” moments. These moments refer back to the

¹⁷ John Shepherd and Jennifer Giles-Davis, *Music as Social Text* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 175.

meaning that is in the music girls listen to, which stays with girls after the music stops, and reveals how much of the dialectical interaction in their musical practices are contingent on relationships outside of the club itself.

Girls' "____" moments reveal that consumption of popular media is a process that continues even when the music stops playing. The immediate reception of music, in the form of dancing and singing along, is secondary to the processes of girls integrating melody, movement, and gesture into conversation days, weeks and months later. Here is another argument against "passive consumption": girls engage with media at the moment of immediate consumption, but they continue to engage with media beyond the initial point of contact, and *change* their engagements based on the actions of their peers, adult mentors. The way they think about their engagements, in the form of dancing and singing, changes based on how they relate to more popular or less popular girls, boys, their aunts and mothers, strangers, and celebrities.

Girls' "____" moments are multi-layered expressions that draw together many meanings—who is good or bad at a dance, who has the right to make fun of others or teach others how to dance, and how the dance relates to people that are not there, including family members and professional dancers. The gestures are a more accurate, embodied and experiential way of expressing more ambiguous meanings. Here I find Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s concept of "signifyin(g)" particularly useful.¹⁸ In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates outlines an African-American literary theory by drawing on African-

¹⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

American vernacular traditions, with the idea that an African-American literary criticism is already found in the vernacular. Simply put, to Signify on something is to refer to and comment upon at the same time. Scholars of African-American music, jazz in particular, have expanded upon Gates' theory, taking it out of the realm of language and using it to theorize the significance of reference and quotation in jazz, for example.¹⁹ In these works, the significance lies not only with musicians referencing other musicians, but also in the fact that those references are part of and commentary on a larger tradition, what Gates calls "a discourse about itself."²⁰ Gates frames his theory by pointing to the Yoruba myth of Esu-Elegbara and the African-American myth of the Signifying Monkey. Both are figures whose wit and rhetorical command provide "points of conscious articulation of language traditions aware of themselves as traditions."²¹ These are trickster figures, whose command over language traditions gives them the rhetorical power to manipulate the meaning of the things they are referring back to. In Gates theory, when the Signifier (here symbolized by Esu-Elegbara/Signifying Monkey) Signifies, she calls on different layers of meaning while adding her own commentary. Through Signifyin(g), the Signifier can comment on, and sometimes critique, whole traditions of meaning. One of the identifying features of the trickster is the idea that she performs a liberating function. Those who identify with her can imagine the possibilities of acting out when in reality

¹⁹ Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Guthrie Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

²⁰ Gates, xxi.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xx-xxi.

they are circumscribed by social norms that would not allow them to act subversively. Musicologist Ayana Smith points out that “the trickster...presents an alternative, vicarious existence.... In a society with limited roles available to African-Americans, the trickster provides an outlet for the expression of socially unacceptable themes.”²²

The idea of sly, trickster-like simultaneous referentiality and commentary resonates with the gesture-filled conversations and listening sessions of the girls at John Avery. When Ashondra said “She was like ____” she referenced a chain of signifiers, including the video, the dance, the conversations about dancing, and the idea of “unnecessary” black female sexuality. In addition to referencing all of those meanings, saying “she was like ____” is also a very powerful move on the girls’ part, giving them agency that otherwise they would be hard to come by. If we think about all the “I was like...” moments as Signifyin(g), then the girls are the tricksters in the Signifier-Signified relationship. Like the Signifying Monkey, they show that 1.) they first of all know the dances and can do them, 2.) they know all about the media behind the dances, such as the music videos, live performances and youtube videos, and 3.) they realize that the ideologies presented in hip-hop are not completely grounded in reality. In this case, “____” moments are experiential ways of expressing that someone dances as if she has lost control of her body and therefore cannot be trusted, or that someone uses her body in a way that is extreme and that is associated with out-of-control sexuality. In linking the girls at the Ne-Yo concert to the women in the “Walk It Out” video, for example, John

²² Ayana Smith, "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster," *Popular Music* 24, no. 2 (2005): 180.

Avery girls are issuing a critique for taking the dancing in the video too seriously. This implies, from their point of view, that the girls at the concert are also taking the claims to black female sexuality made in the video images too seriously. I would argue that the way in which girls subtly comment on women's "excessive" dancing through these dancing conversations they have with one another is also a subtle critique of women's often "excessive" sexuality in hip-hop.

This is a way girls flip the script, proving that they are not passive consumers being acted on, but that they in their own way are calling the shots and are doing the duping, not being duped themselves. It's their way of laughing at whoever is stupid enough to take commercial hip-hop at face value, or people who take themselves too seriously, seriously enough to imagine themselves as participating in hip-hop's fantasy. At the same time, they show that they themselves are not being duped, and that they recognize the boundaries around what is excessive or "inappropriate" in musical activities such as dancing, while also revealing themselves to be keen observers of the nuances of dances and sounds.

It's easy to imagine how the exaggerated movement done by Ashondra and the other girls might make its way into conversation. You can imagine Ashondra and Jada talking the next day about someone in school or on the school bus and saying, as they often did, "She was like ____." In the context of their dancing the day before, and the conversations they've had about music videos, television shows, the BET Awards, that gesture has more meaning than simply that the girl was waving her arms over her head. It could mean that this girl was going too far, that she was doing something "unnecessary"

in the context of the situation, or that she was trying to be like the background dancers on the BET awards or the music video—or maybe all of these things at once. In this way, girls bring their critiques of hip-hop into spaces outside of musical events or listening sessions. For the girls who look up to Ashondra and Jada, they learn what kinds of dancing are acceptable in the environment of John Avery, but they also learn what certain kinds of dancing mean, and how that dancing relates to their relationships with other girls. Girls' use of “like ____” gestures is a process of continuous modification of meaning related to women and hip-hop. Like Gates' signifyin(g), girls critique a tradition—in this case dancing to hip-hop—while at the same time continuing to practice it.

6. Epilogue: Listening Lessons

In February 2009 I participated in a lunchtime panel discussion at Duke with three of my adolescent research participants. My hope with the panel was to give at least a few of the girls I had worked with the chance to see the other side of my project, to get a better sense of what exactly I was doing with all of my notes of recordings. A secondary motive was to begin a continuing meta-dialogue with the girls and with the Duke and Durham community about the project. At the same time, I wanted to trouble the barriers between the work and people of the “field,” and the “finished product” that is directed towards and accessible only to an elite few. At the event I showed pictures and videos from my fieldwork, talked a little bit about the overarching themes of the project, and then asked the girls for their reactions and their answers to some lingering questions. The girls were naturally shy in front of a room packed with my colleagues, faculty members and Duke staff, but they thoughtfully answered questions about singing, learning and teaching each other to dance, and their thoughts on “nasty” dancing. When it came time for audience Q&A, some of the questions surprised and confused the panel (including me). One of the first questions was from an African-American woman in the back of the room, who wanted to know about the relationship between dancing and school—how did girls’ dancing affect their schoolwork and their grades? The girls had trouble answering the question, in part I think, because they didn’t see the two things as particularly related to one another. The woman pressed the question further: what kinds of grades did they get? And did they realize that even though lots of kids had ambitions as basketball players and singers, hardly anyone transforms that into a career? The girls, none of whom

had even remotely suggested that they were interested in becoming basketball players or singers, looked at each other. “I get good grades,” one girl said.

“But are they good enough to get into college? Are they good enough to get a scholarship?” the woman asked.

“Yes,” the girl answered quickly and a little defiantly. The woman looked at the two other girls, waiting for their grades as well. “I get A’s and B’s, well, except for one C but that was only because I missed an assignment....” It was clear that the girls were embarrassed, so we moved on to another question.

There were questions and comments about the girls’ dancing and what their adult ambitions were. Then two African-American women in the back, who had been standing up with their hands raised, began a series of questions and comments related to the scope of my project and the inclusiveness of the study. The questions didn’t suggest any inaccuracy on the part of my work at John Avery; rather, they seemed to doubt the worthiness of the project and criticized me for limiting the study to girls at John Avery. One woman told me that she was a black woman, her daughter was black and attended Durham Academy (an elite private school in Durham), and neither one of them knew how to dance. She asked why, instead of looking at images of “nasty” women in hip-hop, I wasn’t asking girls if they know about Michelle Obama and Oprah? The other woman brought up Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps, who had recently been photographed smoking marijuana, saying that if I was going to look at negative or destructive images, why not look at the effect those pictures were having on swimmers? Both women concluded their remarks saying, “You have to look at both sides.”

It was clear from their questions that they were not familiar with the disciplinary and methodological boundaries set around a dissertation, and in fact I later found out that they worked at the nearby medical center. But beyond unfamiliarity with the nature of a focused academic study (confusion which I could have mitigated by explaining at the outset the origin of the study and the practical limitations surrounding it), these questions point to the stakes around my project, and the sensitivity around hip-hop's "effects" not just on individuals but on "Black America." The simple answer to "Why aren't you looking at Michael Phelps' influence on swimmers?" or "Why aren't you asking girls about Oprah and Michelle Obama?" is of course, "Um, that isn't my project." But it is important to think about the motivations behind such questions.

These questions troubled me (and still trouble me) because they assumed to know about the totality of the girls' experience based on the very limited information I provided: 1.) all the girls on the panel were skilled hip-hop dancers and listeners, and 2.) they all attend John Avery Boys and Girls Club. From here, assumptions were launched: the girls want to be hip-hop stars when they grow up, they need to be told that good grades are important, hip-hop is the only influence in their life, they need to be exposed to positive role models like Michelle Obama and Oprah. By making these assumptions, the questioners were able to discount the girls' experiences and voices and move on to larger questions: if I'm going to study black girls, why pick the ones at John Avery instead of the ones at Durham Academy? If I'm going to talk about negative images, why limit myself to African-American pop stars, why not look at the disgraced All-American white boy?

The questions suggested that the girls present that day, and the other girls at John Avery, were incapable of knowing what is best for them, and perhaps by extension, that their caregivers could not be trusted to do right by them. This project is intimately tied to questions of how, when and under what terms black girls can define themselves, a fact only underscored by the questions at the Duke panel. In this project I've used hip-hop as a frame for asking this question. I've envisioned it as a fraught site where the terms of engagement for black girls are decided by others purporting to have their best interests at heart. The debates over girls' participation in hip-hop are bigger than debates over particular girls' bodies. As the conversation at the panel discussion made clear, they are debates over who has the right to speak for the Black community, they are debates infused with class consciousness and histories of people identifying as "Black middle class" and their struggles to define themselves on their own terms away from the racist and misogynist images and stereotypes that proliferate radio playlists. Everyone seems to have a stake in these debates, but some of hip-hop's core audiences are seldom taken seriously on their own terms. Hip-Hop is an incredibly important space where girls continue asserting their right to speak—through artistic engagements in dancing and singing—even as the genre excludes them. I hope I've inspired girls to think seriously about their engagements with hip-hop and its attending complications—and that they will believe in themselves as skilled artistic practitioners long after they've forgotten my name.

The girls run through the opening in the chain link fence, across the yard to the swing set. Each girl sits on one of the four swings. Tamika jumps off her swing. "Let's show her our step!" she says. Tamyra and Amari line up next to her.

Tamika shouts at the top of her lungs. "I said Johhhhhhn Aver-Y! I said J-J-J-J-John Aver-Y!" The girls start stepping and clapping to the rhythm of their chant. Amari watches Tamika to make sure she's getting it right. Tamyra cups her hands around her mouth and shouts, "I said Johhhhhhn Aver-Y! I said Johhhhhhn Aver-Y!" Angel jumps off her swing and joins them. They hop backwards three times on their left foot, then clap their hands under their right leg. "Johhhhhhn Aver-Y! I said Jah-Jah-John Aver-Y!" Three hops back, clap, arms moving side to side.

The girls shift positions, and now their backs are facing the camera. "This is the sound of the train, the John Av'ry train, I-I-I-I-I said this is the sound of the train, the John Av'ry train!" They walk in step with one another away from the camera, their arms swinging side to side.

"This is the sound of the train, the John Avery train, I-I-I-I-I said...." Suddenly all four girls break into a run across the field, through the cluster of trees and towards the playground. Tamyra does a cartwheel and falls behind the other three girls. "This is the sound of the train! The John Av'ry...." she shouts as she runs to catch up. Her voice trails off as she gets farther and farther away. The girls have left the camera behind; their voices are eventually muffled by the wind and the traffic noises on nearby Fayetteville Road. All that's left is the sound of my feet walking across the grass.

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Biography

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