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Fat Mutha

Hip Hop's Queer Corpulent Poetics

MECCA JAMILAH SULLIVAN

Hip hop's history abounds with fat, thick, full-bodied figures. From women pioneers such as Heather B, Missy Elliot, and Queen Latifah to groups like the Fat Boys and solo acts including Heavy D, Fat Joe, Big Pun, Big Boi, Bone Crusher, and the Notorious B.I.G., big, black and brown bodies have occupied a salient if unspoken centrality in the evolution of hip hop's culture and poetics. The differences between and among these acts are profuse; gender and ethnic disparities, stylistic diversions, target audience markets, and more distinguish each of these artists, as does the extent to which the spectacle of fatness figures as part of their creative personae.

Of this limited roll call of corpulent rappers, it's the earlier names—the women—around whom rumors of queerness and same-sex erotics have circulated. Speculation about rapper Missy Elliott's sexual relationship with R&B singer and label mate Tweet; the excitement over rapper-turned-Cover Girl Queen Latifah's misreported coming out in June 2012; and the ample word-of-mouth that has swirled about old-school hip hopper Heather B's relationships with women for decades¹ all highlight the function of queerness and queer optics in understanding both hip hop celebrity and hip hop corporeality. That these are women achieving economic and cultural capital in one of America's many masculinist, heteropatriarchal industries upsets gender norms and no doubt contributes to the rhetoric of nonnormativity that surrounds them. Yet what does it mean that these figures depart not only from economic and gender norms, but also from norms of bodily shape and size?

This paper considers the links between fatness, blackness, and queerness on the terrain of late-twentieth-century hip hop culture. Examining the poetic and iconographic resonances of queerness and fatness in 1990s hip hop allows us

to parse out connections between these alterities, and to examine the nuanced ways in which difference functions in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American culture. If fatness bears some unspoken link to queerness for rappers like Elliot and Latifah, whose corpulence remains decidedly *unarticulated* in their names and in much of their work, where do we find the link between fatness and queerness for those other rappers who *do* claim bodily profusion as part of their brand and spectacle? How does hip hop queer fat bodies, and what can the queer corpulences of hip hop tell us about anti-normative theorizing?

Corpulent rappers such as Latifah, Elliot, and the Notorious B.I.G. highlight the intersections of fatness, blackness, and queerness, and throw into relief the need for greater dialogue among queer studies and fat studies, particularly on the grounds of black cultural production. They illustrate the many ways in which fatness and hip hop embodiments are both legible in terms of queerness. I define “queer” through Cathy Cohen’s notion of the term as a collectivizing identifier in which sexual difference is inextricable from racial, ethnic, class, and other social nonnormativities. Queerness, here, is not limited to nonnormative sexual practice, but, rather, is defined by larger identifications with difference, in which, as Cohen suggests, “the nonnormative and marginal position of punks, bulldaggers and welfare queens,” emblems of multiple forms of subjugation, desubjectivation, and alterity, form “the basis for progressive transformative coalition.”²

Works by Eve Sedgwick, Michael Moon, Marilyn Wann, Kathleen LeBesco, and others examine the place of fatness on the map of human alterities, charting what Sedgwick and Moon call “the closet of size” and its impact on fat spectacle, hypervisibility, and invisibility.³ As Elena Levy Navarro points out, accepted historical and medical narratives are “used to debase the nonnormative, including the transgendered, the lesbian, the queer, *and* the fat.”⁴ And, in the context of American cultural production, fatness, like queerness, is a difference to be un-spoken, un-done, erased from the record; as D. Lacy Asbill points out, simply “being fat and positively sexual is radical in a culture thoroughly inculcated with sexism and anti-fat prejudice.”⁵

Viewed through a black queer feminist lens, this connection between fatness and queerness articulates a node of intersectional experience, and represents both a political need and an opportunity for interdisciplinary exchange. Fat studies, like queer studies, has, since the 1970s looked to black antiracist discourses in its interrogations of difference, though few studies have examined the interplay of fatness and queerness on black bodies, or in black cultural expression.⁶ Blackness has served as a structuring resource for both fields. In framing the fat studies project, Kathleen LeBesco argues, “It is useful to examine recent physical identity-based movements of race and gender (e.g., Black Nationalism and second-wave feminism) in order to understand more about the genesis of fat politics. It is also necessary to consider the

strategy contributions of queer theory and activism to fat politics.⁷ LeBesco's suggestion that fat studies look to presumably concluded antiracist struggles (located, along with second-wave feminism, in America's political past) indicates the need for increased critical attention to the intersections of black, queer, and fat experience. Navarro's gloss of the links between fat studies and queer studies echoes this point. Race and blackness appear nowhere in her gloss of the historical stigmatizations "used to debase the nonnormative."⁸ Yet, despite this erasure of blackness from fat queer critiques, blackness and black cultural expressions cannot be disentangled from discourses on intersecting difference. We might think, for example, of lesbian feminist writer Audre Lorde, who, well before either of these discourses solidified, used the phrase "fat, black, nearly blind and ambidextrous" to describe the differences that attend her sexual identity.⁹ Even outside of black experience, blackness shapes Western understandings of both sexual and corporeal abhorrence, creating a situation in which, as Amy Erdman Farrell points out, "the connections between fatness, Africanness and a grotesque, 'queer' [gender] have been passed down" in Western culture for centuries, and operate in American cultural production today.¹⁰

FAT, FOOD, AND HIP HOP'S QUEER POETICS

Hip hop is a richly grooved ground on which to examine the intersections of corporeal and sexual difference. From a formal perspective hip hop is, arguably, in itself, queer. At its inception, it voiced nonnormative and peripheral experiences through innovative and unfamiliar modes of expression not readily legible in dominant culture. Even now, decades into its spread to commercial markets, it employs several layers of dialogic and heteroglossic formal dissonance to tell multiple sides of each of its stories. The collaborative, many-voiced technologies of the remix, the convergent and divergent contributions of the emcee, the DJ, and the producer; and the narrative, dramatic, and dialogic possibilities of the intro, outro, and interlude all work to endow hip hop with a defining multivocality rooted in a projection of rupture and rearticulation of sonic difference that can be read as queer.

As decades of media concern with the identities of "gay rappers" indicate, hip hop is also constantly in conversation with queer and nonnormative sexualities.¹¹ Perhaps less salient, however, are the ways in which hip hop's castings of sexual freakishness often occur through metaphorical or direct discussions of fatness and food. We might think, for example, of Lil' Kim and Sisqo's 2000 single, "How Many Licks?," in which the consumption of candy stands in for cunnilingus between two artists steeped in queer rumor;¹² or of Jay-Z's triple-*entendred* and homophobic line in his 2004 single "99 Problems," in which he laments the overpreponderance of fake (i.e., effeminate) gangstas through the

homophobic epithet of “fruit,” saying, “Y’all know the type, loud as a motor bike, but wouldn’t bust a grape in a fruit fight.”¹³ “Ice Cream,” Staten Island-born rapper RaeKwon’s 1995 single takes a somewhat different tack, describing both the array of national and ethnic identifications of their imagined sexual partners and the sensory experiences of engaging each type of partners’ bodies through the names of ice cream flavors such as “French vanilla, butter pecan, [and] chocolate deluxe.”¹⁴ In hip hop’s imaginary, food is freakish, for better and for worse; it can function both as a celebrated symbol of sex beyond the pale of the sanctioned, and an icon of stigmatized gender and sexual identity.

Of the many hip hop artists to spark conversations about fatness and sexuality, perhaps the best known (and the most commercially successful) is the late Christopher Wallace, also known as Big, Biggie, and The Notorious B.I.G.¹⁵ From the release of his debut album, *Ready to Die*, in 1994 (when he was twenty-two years old) to his as-yet-unsolved murder in 1997, Wallace assumed several other monikers, all related in some way to his masculinity, his sexuality, and/or his size.¹⁶ Wallace’s public image as a self-styled sex symbol illustrates the ways in which hip hop’s fat figures open space for new readings of both queerness and fatness in contemporary culture, even as his overtly heteromale persona may seem, at first, to preclude a queer reading. Biggie’s work demands an understanding of sexuality in which erotic desirability, sexual subjectivity, and sex appeal occur not *in spite of*, but *because of* the queer freakishness of fat. By calling attention to the fat body as spectacle—and by eroticizing that spectacle through the poetic technologies of hip hop—Wallace’s oeuvre positions fatness and nonnormative sexual desire at the center of his commercial hip hop erotics.

Like many American popular cultural figures, Wallace’s sexuality and masculinity are largely constructed against images of pathologized sexual alterity and nonmasculinity. References to same-sex erotics occur frequently throughout his body of work, often embedded in homophobic narratives meant to establish Biggie’s own masculinity and (hetero)sexual skill and prowess. We can think, for example, of his verse in “The What,” a collaboration with Method Man appearing on *Ready to Die*, in which he positions his absent father as a foil for his own understanding of masculine responsibility by linking male cowardice with queer sex, saying, “Pop duke left mom duke/the faggot took the back way.”

Yet between these distancing and explicitly disidentificatory gestures, Biggie’s lyrics also frequently imagine a willingness to participate in queer sex as evidence of exceptional heteromale masculinity. In the single “Me and My Bitch,” regarded by many as a gritty hip hop (heterosexual) love anthem, Biggie describes both the (presumably female) subject’s sexual attractiveness *and* his own experience of desire for her through a queer hyperbole of transference, saying: “You looked so good, I’d suck on your daddy’s dick.” Similarly, in the single “Dreams,” also from *Ready to Die*, B.I.G. fantasizes about sex with

popular female R&B singers, stating, “I’d fuck RuPaul/ before I fuck them ugly ass X-Scape bitches.”¹⁷ In both songs, Wallace uses the unthinkability of queer sex to evaluate female sexual attractiveness, and to support his persona of masculine heterosexual prowess by highlighting his access to the choicest female partners. This tactic of invoking nonnormative sex to support heteromascularity touches on the less comfortable terrain of underage sexuality and incest in “Fuck You Tonight,” a smooth, commercially appealing ode to heterosexual erotics recorded with R&B singer R. Kelley for Wallace’s 1997 sophomore album, *Life After Death*. In the song, Biggie’s speaker directs his second person reminiscence to a silent (presumably female) former partner, recalling their shared sexual experiences before fame and class ascendancy. Unable to afford hotel rooms, their exchanges take place instead in the bed of the female partner’s mother, with her sister present. These female family members’ presences within the scene not only situate this erotic experience’s place within hip hop’s narrative of class ascendancy, but also heighten the speaker’s sexual pleasure. This is particularly evident as Biggie recalls the sister’s participation in the scene stating: “Damn I really miss the way she used to rub my back when I hit that/ The way she used to giggle when your ass would wiggle.”¹⁸

Biggie’s use of internal rhyme here (including the strategy of rhyming “miss the” with “sister” in the previous line) offers a formal metaphor for the hiddenness of the nonnormative sexuality depicted in the scene. The inclusion of a third participant in the focal heterosexual sex act coincides with a formal shift in which the rhyme scheme moves away from the couplets in which most of the song is delivered (as in the full line-length rhymes of “legs” and “head”) to internal rhymes within the line (as in “Marriott” and “spot”). Once the narrative turns inward toward the physical scene of the “mother’s bed”—itself an invocation of a potentially nonnormative erotic zone—the rhyme scheme shifts toward a pattern of enjambment and caesura in which the identity of the third figure as the partner’s “sister” is lodged, almost hidden between both rhymed syllables and lines of narrative. The focus of the verse is placed on the corporeality of the scene—the rubbing of the laboring male back, the precoital play between spread female legs, and the wiggling of “asses,” themselves a testament to female sexual desirability and masculine sexual conquest in hip hop’s anatomical economy. Yet, as in much of hip hop’s erotics, what quietly propels the narrative of straight sex is the quiet queer presence tucked between bodies and rhymes.

B.I.G. SWAG AND THE EROTICS OF FAT SPECTACLE

Of the sexual anatomies that appear in Biggie’s work, the most salient—and the queerest—is his own. In the pop cultural imaginary, Wallace’s body takes on the simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility that characterizes much of

the black, queer, and fat experience. Like many bodies both fat and queer, it finds its place among a cadre of, as Cathy Fisanic puts it, “hypervisible bodies [that] are coded by normative [standards] as invisible.”¹⁹ Biggie’s body is the constant subject of commentary by peers, fans, and family members seeking to speak the unspeakable, and make sense and meaning of his fatness.

Described by one industry acquaintance as “6’ 4” and 300lbs,” Biggie’s weight is cited as a core component of his image by peers and commentators alike.²⁰ Statements on Biggie’s weight invoke a range of attitudes about fatness, from a diminutive and potentially patronizing warmth (as, in the assumption that, as Biggie himself put it, “He’s just a pudgy little teddy bear pillow”)²¹ to more pejorative and even menacing epithets, such as those Tupac Shakur uses in his 1996 single “Hit Em Up,” in which he repeatedly chortles, “You fat muthafucka!,” while making physical threats to an unnamed rapper over a beat strikingly similar to one Biggie and his protégé group Junior M.A.F.I.A. used just months before.²²

Little scholarship exists on Wallace, yet popular media treatment of his work rarely fails to make mention of his size. Like Biggie’s own invocations of same-sex erotics, these popular mentions of his fatness serve primarily to footnote his larger importance as a cultural icon of both talent and masculine charisma. One useful example is Wallace’s IMDB biography, written by Rod Reece. Reece describes Wallace as “not extremely attractive,” and explains that “Biggie was a Black man who was overweight, extremely dark skinned, and had a crook in his eye, yet he was a charmer.”²³

This positioning of Wallace’s charm *in opposition to his fatness* is ubiquitous in criticism and media coverage of his life and work, and illustrates the willfulness with which fat sexuality is stigmatized in American culture. A particularly popular reference point in asserting the exceptional immateriality of Biggie’s fatness in his gender and sexuality is the first verse of the 1994 “One More Chance/Stay With Me” remix, in which the rapper describes his sexual skill and experience with a range of female partners. The song is often cited as evidence of a mysterious sex appeal, an erotic desirability that somehow persists, *despite* Biggie’s fat frame. In a 2009 article for the Huffington Post, for example, Barry Michael Cooper cites the “One More Chance” remix as part of Biggie’s “porn film” persona. He describes Wallace as someone “who looked in the mirror and saw a dude “*fat, black/and ugly as ever/however . . .*”²⁴ Likewise, the headline for one reprint of the casting call for the 2009 biopic *NOTORIOUS* reads, “Are you fat, black and ugly as ever?,” in an effort to attract likely candidates for the film’s lead role.²⁵ Junior M.A.F.I.A.’s Lil’ Cease, a friend and mentee to Wallace, uses the song to emphasize Biggie’s “whole swag.” He explains: “B.I.[G] was real confident. No matter how he looked, he would say it in rhymes: ‘Fat, black and ugly as ever.’ That’s one of the most quoted lines.”²⁶

And it is. Yet that widely cited line, “fat, black and ugly as ever,” is a misquote. A quick listen to the text of “One More Chance” reveals the accurate text of the quoted verse is simply, “Heart throb never, black and ugly as ever/ However, I stay Coogi down to the socks.” The line is not, after all, “fat, black and ugly as ever, however.”²⁷ In fact, the extra syllable of “fat” does not fit the poetic structure of the song; the section’s closing lines hang on an eleven-syllable structure with an internal rhyme placed mid-line. The inclusion of “fat” in the penultimate line would dismantle both the metric structure of the line and the larger verse’s rhyme scheme.

So what can we make of these misquotes’ constant positioning of fatness as a threat to sex appeal? How is it that, though “fat” appears nowhere in the lyric, a Google search for “fat, black and ugly as ever” as a closed search term yields more than nineteen thousand results from sites ranging from personal blogs to underground hip hop sites to MTV.com?²⁸

These search results indicate the widespread popularity of this specific misreading of the song lyric, and the pervasiveness with which Wallace’s sexuality itself is misread in the pop cultural consciousness. This logic seeks to *normalize* his gender and sexuality by stigmatizing his fatness. It suggests that, although Wallace’s body reaches beyond the bounds of socially and medically accepted standards of attractiveness and health, a recognizable charm and “swagger”—compatible with dominant standards of heteronormative masculinity—compensate for the aberrance of his flesh. In these narratives, the standard logic that, as Bianca D. M. Wilson puts it, “Fat-is-Bad” remains intact.²⁹ Authoritative masculine garrulousness and charm are thus ushered in to re-inject sex appeal into a body otherwise vacated of sexuality because of fat. It is impossible to engage these lyrics without making critical mention of the misogynist attitudes the verse expresses. The litany of objectifying female archetypes Wallace leads with (“dummies, playboy bunnies, those wanting money”) indicates the song’s eager participation in dominant and oppressive constructions of Western masculinity. Yet the discrepancy between the actual verse and the frequent misquotes of the song reveals a sensibility that is decidedly subaltern, and, in fact queer—it highlights the ways in which stigmatization of fatness is an externally *constructed* attitude, imposed not only on Biggie’s body, but also on his poetics, his artistic sensibility, and even his self-esteem.

This “fat is bad” paradigm circulates throughout discussions of Wallace’s body and work, and is often directly linked to assessments of his masculine swagger. That B.I.G. is able to distract from his corpulence is, in popular cultural logics, a testament to his heterosexuality, and his ability to achieve heteromale norms. In a cultural logic in which, as LeBesco points out, fatness is constantly feminized, escaping corpulent effeminacy for a fat man is a feat of exceptional masculinity.³⁰ This ability to escape the emasculating dangers of fatness is crucial to the construction of Biggie’s image. As producer

Sean “Puffy” Combs reflects, “That’s something that’s impressive to people. When a fat guy doesn’t look fat.” Rapper Method man expresses this clearly in the introduction to the 2007 biopic *Notorious B.I.G.: Bigger Than Life*. He states: “Personality is a muhfucka. Confidence is a muhfucka . . . For the first hour you would be around him and be like ‘this is a fat muthafucka.’ After that first hour, this nigga’s personality shining and all that . . . you forget all that shit about him. You just see a man.”

This narrative is familiar. It is a defining trope of the black queer studies project, as well as of black feminism’s intersectional critiques. The stigmatization of bodily difference here is inextricable from other hegemonies, all serving to buttress and privilege what Audre Lorde calls the idea of the “mythical norm.” The misquotes of “One More Chance” reflect a collective, insistent, and pervasive effort to stigmatize fat sexuality and rid fat bodies of sexual subjectivity by suggesting that those bodies’ erotics can only exist *in spite of* their fatness. They thus seek to rescue the beloved rapper from the stigma of bodily difference by endowing him with a surfeit of normative masculine charm.

Yet for Biggie, fatness is nowhere included in the list of potential threats to masculinity. On the sexiness of fat bodies, Biggie resists such stigmatizing language, even in the context of female sexual conquests. Unlike Outkast’s Big Boi, for example, whose declaration that “big girls need love too” in his 2003 single “The Way You Move,” suggests that fat women’s sexuality is an afterthought in his ideology of expansive sexual experience, for Biggie, fat female sexuality serves to accentuate his sexual skill and experience, and the breadth and variety of sexual partners to whom he has access.³¹ In the original album version of “One More Chance,” for example, he frames himself as an instrument of sexual overwhelm, able to “shatter” female sexual anatomy regardless of size—his own or his partner’s. He states: “It doesn’t matter, skinny or fat . . . I’ll fuck a big-boned or slim chick, Biggie squeeze in to make shit fit.” Biggie extends this deployment of fatness as a metaphor for phallic profusion later in the song, revealing that his pseudonym itself is a parallel double entendre: “Honeys call me Bigga the condom filla.”³²

B.I.G.’s insistence on erotic appeal of fat reconfigures a tradition inaugurated by earlier rappers such as self-proclaimed “overweight lover,” Heavy D. In his 1987 hit single, “The Overweight Lover’s in the House,” Heavy D, born Dwight Arrington Myers, places his sexuality in a complex relation to fatness in which his sexual attractiveness is dependent not on a wholesale dismissal of his physicality—as popular (mis)characterizations of Biggie’s appeal attempt to do—but on the extent to which his particular blend of legible masculine swagger and fetching physical characteristics *beyond* weight distract from an otherwise unsexy fatness. Heavy thus refers to himself as “an overweight Romeo,” who is, as he puts it, “big extra love *but still* good lookin.”³³ This image is important to the construction of Biggie’s fat masculinity; Puffy admits

to having styled B.I.G. after Heavy D, following the latter's lead in calling attention to his clothing, his money, and his "swagger" as components of his sex appeal.³⁴ While for Heavy D, this suave masculine swag leads to sex appeal through heteronormative understandings of romance (as in his self-ascription as "the overweight Romeo"), such fantasies are absent in Biggie's erotics. Rather, B.I.G. calls attention to himself as a "big black nasty muthafucka," emphasizing a sexual aesthetic in which he is attractive precisely *because of* his diversion from palatable sexual norms. He positions his fatness squarely at the center of an erotics that has much more to do with fat and freakish "fucking" than with "overweight love."

In omitting "fat" from the list of potential threats to his sex appeal, Biggie begs the question: What might it mean for an artist at the center of an intersectional melee of fat specticality to reject the fat-as-bad/fat-as-sexless paradigm?; to insist that he is sexy not in spite of, but *because of* the excess and abnormality of his fatness, and that his sexiness is one that can't be read through narratives of the heteronorm, and must instead be articulated through formal alterities of hip hop? How queer would that be?

While Wallace's speaker constantly touts his satisfaction with his own sexuality in his lyrics, his vision of his erotic appeal *to others*—and the specific place of his fatness in that construction of desirability—is most clearly articulated in the intros, outros, and interludes that pepper his albums. These tracks use the multivocal apparatus of hip hop to express ostensibly "normal"-bodied heterosexual women's insights into the rapper's sex appeal. In so doing, they use hip hop's poetics to articulate the spectacular queerness of fat sexuality.

In this regard, "#!*@ Me," a ninety-five-second interlude on *Ready to Die*, stands out as a critical example. The track begins with R&B group Jodeci's popular 1993 ballad "Feenin" playing quietly as bed hinges screech to a staccato rhythm. Soon, moans of pleasure are heard in what seems to be a female voice. As the rhythm of the bed's screeching accelerates, the woman speaks, first slowly, then with increasing volubility: "Fuck me you black Kentucky-Fried-Chicken eatin' . . . Oreo-cookie-eatin', pickle-juice-drinking, chicken-gristle-eatin' . . . V8 juice-drinkin, Slim-Fast-blending, black greasy mutha fucka!" As the woman's voice grows louder and more emphatic, Wallace's own voice is heard, and the two engage in a two-round call and response in which Wallace pants, "What's my name?," and the woman exclaims, "Biggie!" Soon, the screeching sounds halt and a clatter is heard as the woman presumably falls off the bed, after which Wallace states quietly, "Sorry."³⁵

Here, a nameless, presumably thin, female sexual partner uses fantasies of food, fatness, and nonnormative consumption to express her desire and reach sexual climax. In so doing, she reflects the sexual nonnormativity of fat attraction. Contrary to the ubiquitous misreadings of Biggie's sex appeal *in spite of* his fatness, it is precisely his fat—and the corporeal acts of consumption that she

imagines produce that fat—that fuel the woman’s desire. She uses unusual food combinations and potentially dissonant eating practices (i.e., “chicken-gristle-eatin’; Slim-Fast-blendin’”) to construct a queer fantasy of Biggie’s fat body. In her erotic imaginary, his sexuality is defined not by his heteropatriarchal, heteromale “swag,” as popular media sources might suggest; rather, it is his specter as a “pickle-juice-drinking, Oreo-cookie eating, V8-juice drinkin’ . . . mutha fucka” that holds his erotic appeal. In a world in which, as Marilyn Wann points out, “just being seen with a fat person can affect the social status of an average-weight person,” these queer fantasies of fat and consumption free the woman from sexual norms and position her too within the realm of deviance.³⁶ Yet Biggie’s body is not a fetish object in this scene; he constantly hails himself with repeated interjections of, “What’s my name?,” binding her fat-focused erotic epithets to his own self-identification, and suggesting that, in the end, they *both* get off on the freakishness of fat.

In this interlude, fatness does not threaten masculine erotic appeal and sexual prowess; it supports them. Fatness here also reconstitutes masculinity and sexual adeptness around a paradigm of nonnormativity: it is *because* of his unusual, remarkable weight, we are meant to understand that Biggie is able to penetrate the woman with enough force to knock her off of the bed in that loud thud. The loudness of her climax is underscored by his very quiet response—a soft, almost sheepish “sorry,” in which he apologizes for the same sexual vigor he boasts about elsewhere. In this quiet apology he performs an uncharacteristic obliviousness to the sexual skill on which he prides himself. There is irony in this “sorry,” but it is lost on the B.I.G. operating in scene. As character, speaker, and persona, his speech in the scene represents a shifting masculinity and a nonnormative sexuality constantly in flux. Wallace exploits hip hop’s poetics to introduce a queer ethos in which the nonnormativity of fatness carries its own erotic appeal, and in which the expression of desire for fat bodies marks a freeing departure from heteronormative sexual *and* gender paradigms.

REMAKING FAT QUEER FUTURES

As we think through the queerness of fat and its potential for reorganizing conceptions of difference in hip hop, it is useful to turn back to those figures who do not mobilize fatness as part of their spectacle, but are nonetheless included in discourses of queerness. Where Biggie claims a queer sex appeal for the nonnormativity of fatness, rappers such as Queen Latifah and Missy Elliot in particular eschew both queerness *and* fatness in favor of more heteronormative—and, arguably, more lucrative—presentations of coherent normative gender. What do commercial disavowals of both fatness and queerness mean for the plausibility of an *out* queer fat hip hop aesthetic? Here, we might look to out fat women rappers such as Hart (of the lesbian-owned label Rainbow

Noise), who was verbally attacked as a “fat she-man” after the release of the 2010 single “Imma Homo,” and Cuban hip hop duo Las Krudas Cubensi, whose song “Gorda” is an homage to the erotic politics of female fat.³⁷ Though lesser known, these artists further complicate hip hop’s queerness with feminist, fat-focused lyrics and images, using fatness to announce *explicitly* queer forms of erotic expression, feminist political engagement, and social life.

These rappers sketch a fat future for queer hip hop. They gesture at a politics of hip hop embodiment that extends Biggie’s freakish fat to the realm of same-sex erotics, articulating queer identities that some better-known, quietly queer corpulent rappers have eschewed. By naming and claiming both “fat” and “queer,” their voices push past normative boundaries of gender and sexuality with the full force of flesh. These voices insist that, as Wallace puts it: “They don’t call [us] big for nuthin.”³⁸

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Queerness of Hip hop/ Hip hop of Queerness Symposium at Harvard University in September 2012. I am grateful to the symposium’s participants, as well as to Thadious Davis, Heather Love, C. Riley Snorton, and Savannah Shange for comments on portions of this material.
2. “Tweet Addresses Lesbian Rumors With Missy Elliott,” *Rapdirt*; <http://rapdirt.com/tweet-addresses-lesbian-rumors-with-missy-elliott/1671/>. Accessed April 3, 2013; “Queen Latifah Says She Did Not Come Out at Long Beach Pride Festival,” *The Huffington Post*; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/04/queen-latifah-did-not-come-out-pride_n_1529566.html. Accessed April 3, 2013; “Remember Heather B?” *Rap Music*; <http://board.rapmusic.com/hip-hop-central/1321823-remember-heather-b.html>. Accessed April 3, 2013.
3. Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 38. See also Charlotte Cooper, “Fat Studies: Mapping the Field,” *Sociology Compass* (December 2010): 1020–34.
4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon, “Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion,” in Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 229. See also Marilyn Wann, *Fat! So?: Because You Don’t Have to Apologize for Your Size* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Books, 1998); and Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).
5. Elena Levy-Navarro, “Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go From Here?,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Edna Rothblum and Sandra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 21.
6. D. Lacy Asbill, “I’m Allowed to be a Sexual Being,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, 36.

7. Barbara D. Wilson, "Widening the Dialogue to Narrow the Gap in Health Disparities: Approaches to Fat Black Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Health Promotion," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, 54–64; Marvalene H. Hughes, "Soul, Black Women, and Food," in *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997). While these essays offer helpful analyses of cultural links between fatness and black womanhood, they stop short of addressing black fatness, gender, and sexuality in broader contexts.
8. LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?*, 10.
9. Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Sharon Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). Somerville's groundbreaking text, *Queering the Color Line*, examines the historical links between scientific discourses of race and the institutionalization of homosexual identity in American social culture. Sharon Patricia Holland's recent work, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, continues this inquiry, examining the place of race and quotidian racism in contemporary experiences of choice and desire.
10. Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1982), 24.
11. Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 174.
12. James McKinley Jr., "Hip hop World Gives Gay Rapper Support," *The New York Times*, July 6, 2012; Bethonie Butler, "Frank Ocean Comes Out as Bisexual: A Game Changer for Hip hop?," *The Washington Post Blog*, July 5, 2012; Bethlehem Sholas, "Break it Down: Homophobia in Hip hop," *XXL* (July/August 2011). R&B singer and songwriter Frank Ocean's 2012 blog post regarding a same-sex love relationship is one notable iteration of hip hop's public dialogue with queer sex. Though Ocean's discussion of the relationship did not involve espousing a gay or queer identity, popular headlines consistently identified him as "Gay" and "Bisexual," and read Ocean's blogpost as a "coming out" letter. The enthusiasm with which popular media made claims to Ocean's sexual identity echoes hip hop's concern in the mid-1990s with the mystery of the "gay rapper." These concerns and preoccupations were propelled by media personality Wendy Williams, who threatened to reveal the identity of an unnamed gay hip hop artist on her popular radio show on New York's hip hop radio station, Hot 97.
13. Lil' Kim, *The Notorious K.I.M.* (2000; New York: Atlantic/ Queen Bee Entertainment.), Compact Disc.
14. Jay-Z, *The Black Album* (2003; New York: Rock-A-Fella Records.), Compact Disc.
15. RaeKwon, *Only Built for Cuban Linx*, (1995; New York: Loud/RCA/BMG Records.), Compact Disc.
16. "Top 100 Albums," *Recording Industry Association of America*; www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php. Accessed Jan. 18, 2013. As of October 2012, Notorious B.I.G.'s sophomore album, *Life After Death*, which has sold more than ten million

- copies, ranks as the second-best-selling hip hop album of all time, sharing the ranking with albums by Eminem and M. C. Hammer.
17. Wallace's other pseudonyms included "Big Poppa," the title of the second single from his debut album; "Biggie Smalls"—a moniker borrowed from Calvin Lockhart's sexually adventurous pimp-like character in the 1975 film *Let's Do It Again*; and "Frank White," after the suavely masculine drug lord protagonist of the 1970 film *King of New York*. Wallace's fatness remains a central metaphor even in narratives of his death. Several months after his passing, *People* magazine, for example, published an interview with Lil' Kim titled, "Life After Death: . . . A Tiny Rapper Copes With A B.I.G. Loss"; similarly, documentarian Peter Spirer titles his biopic, *The Notorious B.I.G.: Bigger than Life*, joining several other commentators in invoking Biggie's fatness as a metaphor for his posthumous iconic reach through "larger than life" puns. In a far less celebratory pun, one *New York Times* reviewer links Wallace's size, death, and heteromascularity in the title of his review of Biggie's second album, invoking the image of his "280-pound frame," "Swaggering in Death's Face Till the End."
 18. Notorious B.I.G., *Ready To Die* (1994; New York: Bad Boy Records.), Compact Disc.
 19. Notorious B.I.G., *Life After Death* (1997; New York: Bad Boy Records.), Compact Disc.
 20. Cathy Fisanic, "Fatness (In)Visible," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Edna Rothblum and Sandra Solovay (New York: New York University Press), 209.
 21. Diggaman (a.k.a. "Lord Digga") qtd. in *The Notorious B.I.G.: Bigger Than Life*, Dir. Peter Spirer, 2007.
 22. Christopher Wallace qtd. in Rex Miller, "Last Exit From Brooklyn," *Spin* (May 1997), 68.
 23. 2Pac, *All Eyez on Me* (1996; New York: Death Row/Interscope Records.), Compact Disc.
 24. *The Notorious BIG: Bigger Than Life*, directed by Peter Spirer (New York: Image Entertainment, 2007), DVD.
 25. Barry Michael Cooper, "Once Upon A Time in America: My Interview with Sean John Combs," *The Huffington Post*; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/barry-michael-cooper/sean-john-combs-once-upon_b_173119.html. Accessed April 3, 2013.
 26. "BIGGIE Casting Call—Are You Fat Black and Ugly as Ever?" *Smarten Up Nas*; <http://smartenupnas.com/2007/08/21/biggie-casting-call-are-you-fat-black-and-ugly-as-ever/>. Accessed April 3, 2013.
 27. Shaheem Reis, "Are Rick Ross and Nicki Minaj the New Biggie and Kim? Lil' Cease Weights In," *MTV.com*; <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1639512/rick-ross-nicki-minaj-new-biggie-kim.jhtml>. Accessed April 3, 2013.
 28. Notorious B.I.G., *Ready To Die*.
 29. Reis, "Rick Ross and Nicki Minaj"; "Fat, Black and Ugly As Ever," *Media Takeout*; http://cdn.mediatakeout.com/users/q_-p/154285/fat-black-and-ugly-as-ever-no-not-biggie-smallz-lashonda-lewis-aka-spraggadyke-1212. Accessed April 3,

- 2013; "Fat Black and Ugly as Ever, However," *The Minority Report NYC*; <http://theminorityreportnyc.blogspot.com/2008/10/fat-black-and-ugly-as-ever-however.html>. Accessed April 3, 2013.
30. Barbara D. M. Wilson, "Widening the Dialogue to Narrow the Gap in Health Disparities: Approaches to Fat Black Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Health Promotion," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Edna Rothblum and Sandra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 57.
 31. LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?*, 89.
 32. Outkast, *Speakerboxx/The Love Below* (2003; New York: LaFace/Arista.), Compact Disc.
 33. Notorious B.I.G., *Ready To Die*.
 34. Heavy D. & The Boyz, *Livin' Large* (1987; New York: Uptown Records), Compact Disc.
 35. *The Notorious BIG: Bigger than Life*, Spiner.
 36. Notorious B.I.G., *Ready To Die*.
 37. Marilyn Wann, *Fat!So?: Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Books, 1998), xx.
 38. Trish Bendix, "Imma Homo' Stirs Up Conversations about Lesbians and Hip hop," *After Ellen*; <http://www.afterellen.com/people/imma-homo-stirs-up-conversations-about-lesbians-and-hip-hop>. Accessed April 3, 2013; Rainbow Noise, *Rainbow Noise* (2011; Los Angeles: Rainbow Noise Ent.), MP3; Krudas Cubensi, *Resistiendo* (2007; Havana: Motherland Productions), Compact disc.
 39. Notorious B.I.G., *Ready To Die*.