

# A Ratchet Lens: Black Queer Youth, Agency, Hip Hop, and the Black Ratchet Imagination

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This article explores the utilization of the theory of a Black ratchet imagination as a methodological perspective to examine the multiple intersections of Black and queer identity constructions within the space of hip hop. In particular, I argue for the need of a methodological lens that recognizes, appreciates, and struggles with the fluidity, imagination, precarity, agency, and knowledge production of Black queer youth who create and consume hip hop. As an example, I apply a Black ratchet imagination methodological perspective to an examination of New Orleans's bounce culture. I conclude the article by underscoring the need for humanizing, hyper-local, and messy theoretical frameworks that provide further context for research investigating Black queer youth whose identities are informed by the culture of hip hop.

**Keywords:** arts education; Black education; cross-cultural studies; cultural analysis; diversity; gay/lesbian studies; gender studies; qualitative research

## Ratchet Binaries

The word *ratchet* has emerged in mainstream culture as a means of describing Black people, particularly Black women, as loud, hot-tempered, and promiscuous. This one-dimensional view of Black women has sparked outrage and debate in social media, historically Black college and university campuses, popular blogs sites, and Black feminist communities. Although the hip hop community, particularly in the Southern region of the United States, popularized the term over a decade ago as a slogan to represent the complexities and fluidity of working-class Black life, cultural critic and writer Michaela Angela Davis launched a campaign in 2012 to bury the word *ratchet* because of the portrayal of Black women as “mean, gold-digging women” on reality television shows, such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (Dia, 2012). Yet, Black feminist scholars like Heidi R. Lewis (2013) rejected the idea of burying the word because, she argues, the term implies binaries about Black women, especially regarding class status. While Lewis contends that the term *ratchet* is used to exclusively describe lower-class Black women and their behavior, she acknowledges that upper-class and professional Black women also enjoy letting loose, dropping respectability politics for a moment in time, and getting “ratchet.” In Brittney Cooper’s (2012) essay, “(Un)Clutching My Mother’s Pearls, or Ratchetness and the Residue of Respectability,” she offers an important query to interrogating the ways in which Black women’s bodies are

policed by dominant culture. She asks: “Are any of us winning in a scenario where respectable and ratchet are the only two options?” Cooper’s question provides a space for researchers to reclaim and reimagine the narrow and superficial binaries of Black womanhood that complicate and humanize working-class Black life and expand these complexities to queer youth of color who consume and create hip hop.

## Purpose of the Article

Taking up the call offered by the aforementioned Black feminists to interrogate binaries and the policing of Black bodies through a more complex reading of the word *ratchet*, this article attempts to chart new terrain in conceptualizing a ratchet methodological perspective for research that studies the unique challenges of Black queer youth who create or engage in the complicated social, emotional, economical, and cultural dimensions of hip hop, working-class Black life, and the fluidity of queerness. This article specifically calls for researchers to approach the study of Black queer youth who create and consume hip hop with a Black ratchet imagination lens. A Black ratchet imagination lens is a fluid methodological perspective that recognizes, appreciates, and struggles with the agency and knowledge production of

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Black queer youth who are resisting, succumbing to, and finding pleasure in hip hop by undoing the heteropatriarchal, liberating, queer, homophobic, sexist, feminist, hyper-local, global, ratchet, and conservative space of hip hop (Love, 2012, 2016; Rose, 2008). My use of the term *agency* within a queer space is not just about the act of sex. Joan Morgan (2015) argues that “pleasure politics” must include “sexual and non-sexual engagements with deeply internal sites of power and pleasure—among them expressions of sex and sexuality that deliberately resists binaries” (p. 40). This type of methodological perspective is built on a layered definition of agency (Blackburn, 2005; Brockenbrough, 2016; Brockenbrough & Boatwright, 2013; McCready, 2010; Quinn, 2007). Moreover, research findings focused on Black queer youth need to be more complex and intersectional to properly take into account the knowledge production of Black queer youth and how they reimagine spaces and identities to create culturally affirming lives with robust subversive identities and agentive practices, especially within the culture of hip hop (Glover, Galliher, & Lamere, 2009). Black queer youth’s subversive identities are messy and disrupt normativity by calling into question fixed terms such as *man* and *woman*, a concept further examined in the following in the context of New Orleans’s gender-fluid Black music culture (Duggan, 1992; Jagose, 1996). These complex identities of Black queer youth, as informed by the culture of hip hop, call for an equally intricate framework, thus necessitating messy theoretical orientations that are dynamic, multifaceted, hyper-local, and not generalizable.

In the next section, I define ratchet and the need to conduct messy research with Black queer youth. In doing so, I review research literature that reimagines politics of respectability, many of which center Black women’s epistemologies and suspend binaries. Following that section is a discussion of the Black ratchet imagination, which is a methodological lens that wrestles with the fluidity, precariousness, creativity, and agency of Black queer youth. Agency is highlighted as an affordance of youth in redefining and reimagining established norms. I then bring these ideas together by applying a Black ratchet imagination methodological perspective to examining New Orleans’s bounce culture. I conclude with a call to humanize Black queer youth through messy, reflective, and localized lenses and practices.

### **Defining Ratchet and the Need to Conduct Messy Research for Black Queer Youth**

The word *ratchet* is messy, meaning it has no straightforward definition; it is contradictory, fluid, precarious, agentive, and oftentimes intentionally inappropriate, which makes it an ideal methodological perspective for exploring how Black queer youth fully participate in Black social spaces and cultural practices to form subversive and creative spaces that humanize. The term’s introduction to hip hop first appeared in popular culture in 1999 with the release of “Do the Ratchet” by Anthony Mandigo on his album, *Ratchet Fight in the Ghetto* (Ortved, 2013). Five years later, mainstream hip hop was introduced to the word *ratchet* in the remake “Do Da Ratchet” by Lil Boosie, a rapper from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, who proclaimed: “We all got some ratchet in us. Everybody got a lil ratchet in them.” This provocative statement de-pathologizes Black youth while also

blurring the line between classed divisions of respectability and ratchetness (Cooper, 2012). In 2007, Hurricane Chris of Shreveport, Louisiana, released his debut album, *51/50 Ratchet*. In his music, Hurricane Chris generally used the expression *ratchet* in two ways: as a phrase to excite partygoers and as a way to describe reckless behavior. The album’s success expanded Shreveport’s reach into mainstream popular lexicon. By 2012, household name artists like Beyonce and Lady Gaga were posting pictures on social media wearing earrings inscribed with the word *ratchet*. However, by the height of reality TV’s popularity featuring Black women, ratchet’s working-class Southern origins were co-opted for popular culture’s obsession with debasing Black women.

### *Ratchetness and Black Feminism*

In response to the media, scholars in the fields of hip hop studies, women studies, and political science, such as Heidi R. Lewis (2013), Brittney Cooper (2012), Treva Lindsey (2015), L. H. Stallings (2013), Regina Bradley (2013), and Nadia E. Brown and Lisa Young (2015), have interrogated the various meanings of the word *ratchet* and its relationship to Black women. Inevitably, due to the hypersexual and misogynistic visual, sonic, and narrative landscape of popular music, particularly of hip hop, Black women are deemed loud, hostile, reckless, and therefore, ratchet. For example, Lewis wrote, “think of ratchet as a combination of Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, and the Welfare Queen—every controlling image of black women Patricia Hill Collins taught you about all rolled in to one.” Patricia Hill Collins’s (2000) earlier work states that “portraying African-American women as stereotypical mummies, matriarch, welfare recipients, and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women’s oppression” (p. 147). In contrast, Cooper’s reading of ratchetness is one that considers Black women’s agency. Cooper suggests that ratchetness provides a pliable framework to challenge the politics of respectability, which shames Black women for their economic status, being single mothers, their sexual choices, and acting on their desires. The shaming further extends to the ways in which Black women reject and challenge dominant norms concerning style of dress and hair, femininity, and body movement (e.g., dance). Within a Southern context, Regina Bradley suggests that the “aesthetic of respectability that continues to dictate southern women” is “an oppositional parallel for black women excluded from this niche of finer womanhood [which] is the highly visible and commodified form of expression that we have come to recognize as (the) ratchet.” N. E. Brown and Young shift the interpretation of the word *ratchet* to include institutions invested in heteropatriarchy, White supremacy, and capitalism, thereby enacting violence toward Black women as ratchet. They argue for a shift that allows researchers to ask new questions concerning the rules that govern Black women.

Drawing on the work of these Black feminists and their nuanced readings of the word *ratchet* in response to how Black women are misunderstood, plagued by stereotypical tropes and respectability politics, and living and working in oppressive ratchet institutions, I invoke a similar call to utilize the framework of ratchetness to begin imagining a methodological

perspective that recognizes and affirms the full humanity of Black queer youth for their sexual desires, multiple identities, economic status, style of dress, language, music, and dance; simply stated, a methodological perspective that acknowledges Black queer youth's precarity but does not blame or shame them for it. It instead asks researchers to center the heritage, community, and audacity of youth to reclaim and make space for cultural practices birthed out of the need for "their imaginations' nourishment for creating a world of freedom where they could be whoever they felt they truly were" (Bell, 1996, p. 1).

### *Need for "Messy" and Humanizing Research*

The precarity of working-class Black queer youth requires that researchers' methodological perspectives be grounded in a framework that is messy, filled with areas of gray humanization and hyper-locality, to recognize Black queer youth's agency within their precarious conditions. This research approach is not static or linear; it is as fluid as queerness itself and embraces intersections that can lead to messy, incomplete research findings. Within the framework of a ratchet methodological perspective, messiness invites researchers to embrace the interconnections, inconsistencies, and entanglements of qualitative analysis with Black queer youth who learn and live from the edges of society (Roller, 2016). Similarly, hip hop feminism demands a methodological perspective where qualitative analyses lean toward a convening of hypocrisy, contradictions, and intersections and "where those contrary voices meet—the juncture where 'truth' is no longer black and white but subtle, intriguing shades of gray" (Morgan, 2000, p. 62). Equally important, messiness ultimately seeks to humanize Black queer youth who are invisible and hyper-visible at the same time. For example, mainstream America celebrates and commodifies Black queer vernacular (e.g., shade, read, werk) and the dance styles of Black queer youth (e.g., voguing, J-setting) and makes their lives hyper-visible with reality TV shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *The Prancing Elites Project*, and *Love & Hip Hop: Hollywood*; however, their day-to-day struggles and agentive practices are notably absent. Agentive practices such as self-determination, negotiating oppressive spaces to survive, reimagining identities, and finding ways to maneuver through precarious conditions to flourish are absent from the literature on Black queer youth (Cruz, 2011; Love & Tosolt, 2013; McCready, 2001, 2004). In 2015, Brockenbrough vehemently called for more education research on queer students of color and new analytical lenses that are deeply concerned with agency and the academic and personal successes of Black queer youth. Multiple studies have shown that Black queer youth find ways to negotiate identities and language practices and connect to familial, communal, and political activism networks while experiencing the intersections of racism, homophobia, sexism, transphobia, poverty, and other oppressive conditions collectively as marginalized queer youth of color (Blackburn, 2005; Brockenbrough, 2016).

However, Huang et al. (2009) and Bartones's (2015) findings suggest that there is a scarcity of research focused on Black queer youth. Bartone argues that much of the research (Glover et al., 2009) focused on queer youth consists of 50% White participants and 50% racially marginalized groups. Researchers lump

Black queer youth into these studies as if they do not face their own unique set of experiences, like homophobia and racism (Dumas & ross, 2016). Research that solely focuses on the sexual identities and experiences of Black queer youth is sporadic at best (Blackburn & McCready, 2009; McCready, 2010). As a research community, we are just starting to understand what we can learn from Black queer youth.

In his article on humanizing research among culturally diverse youth, Paris (2011) writes that "humanizing research is a methodological stance, which requires that our inquiries involve dialogic consciousness-raising and the building of relationships of dignity and care for both researchers and participants" (p. 137). A humanizing research stance is needed because "social science often works to collect stories of pain and humiliation in the lives of those being researched for commodification" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 223). Tuck and Yang (2014) argue that most research is conducted through "the spectacle of the settler colonial gaze" (p. 223). The intensity of that gaze is magnified by research conducted on Black queer youth. As a result, new methodological perspectives are needed to recognize the humanity of Black queer youth but also to document and learn from how they create imaginative, pleasurable, and sometimes subversive identities from language, desires, dances, dress, and art forms (i.e., hip hop) to disrupt homophobia, racism, anti-Blackness, and other forms of oppression (Britzman, 1997; Cohen, 1997).

### **A Methodological Perspective: Black Ratchet Imagination**

The term *Black ratchet imagination* was first introduced by L. H. Stallings (2013) to define an imaginative, agentive, creative, performative, uplifting transitional space established and occupied by queer youth of color in the hip hop community to promote the "performance of the failure to be respectable" (p. 136). Black ratchet imagination should not be viewed as a site where young people come to simply act out but a disruption of respectability politics, particularly for queer youth of color, reclaiming autonomy from middle- and upper-class White male heterosexuality and healing from normalized state-sanctioned violence toward Black and Brown bodies (N.E. Brown & Young, 2015; Cohen, 2004). As a methodological perspective, the Black ratchet imagination affords researchers a lens that is deeply focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of Black queer youth's identity constructions through purposeful and reflective qualitative research questions that are intersectional, seek to understand youth's agency to reclaim space, refuse binary identities, subvert language, create economic opportunities with new economies, and recognize the precariousness of queer youth of color. Within the framework, data collection takes place in youth-centered spaces that are created and/or regulated by youth, and data interpretation is conducted with special responsiveness to youth's Blackness, knowledge production, subversiveness, and self-care practices. Lastly, a researcher utilizing a Black ratchet imagination as a methodological perspective from the onset of the study must embrace messy and incomplete findings, which are not generalizable.

Utilizing a messy and nongeneralizable methodological perspective such as a Black ratchet imagination when investigating

queer youth of color allows the researcher to wrestle with the instability and variations of gender and sexuality with queer Black youth who, through hip hop's fluidity, are coming of age in the contested, contradictory, and liberating space of queer hip hop music and culture (Stallings, 2013). As a methodological perspective, the Black ratchet imagination is similar to narrative inquiry, which focuses on "the ways human experience the world" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2) in relation to their community to tell and retell their lived stories. According to Phillion (2008), narrative in qualitative research "has become more prevalent as researchers draw on critical race theory to bring forward silenced narratives of underrepresented groups" (p. 283). However, while narrative inquiry is concerned with the researcher's experiences and the co-construction of narratives (Phillion, 2008), the Black ratchet imagination centers youth narratives; the researcher is mute, so youth voices cannot be overshadowed.

Equally important, the Black ratchet imagination critiques Western civilization, White supremacy, colonial social order, and positivist research practices (Kelley, 2002). This methodological perspective allows researchers to ask not only new questions but also agentic questions that embrace the knowledge productions of the intersectional articulations that are found when Blackness, hip hop, and queerness are recognized as spaces of agency. Such new agentic inquiries could include: how Black queer youth who create and engage with hip hop form intersections of race, religion, gender, sexuality, and class to produce identities that counter narrow and deficit narratives; how Black queer youth through these intersections depart from nationalist ideals and practices (Ferguson, 2004); how practices of self-care and agency are cultivated in Black queer youth-centered spaces; and how young Black masculine-presenting lesbians navigate feminism and misogyny within hip hop in their communities. Furthermore, a methodological perspective of the Black ratchet imagination lens demands that research of Black queer youth be conducted with specificity of local culture and music, historical mappings to examine present-day precariousness, and an examination of how Black queer youth dismantle and disdain "politics of respectability" to breed new categories of human experience, oftentimes through performativity, storytelling, and art making (Kelley, 2002).

### **Black Ratchet Imagination Lens as Agency**

Morgan's (2000) framing of pleasure politics is through a Black feminist lens; the space she carves out to engage and theorize sexual and nonsexual agency is foregrounded in what L. H. Stallings (2007) describes as an erotic space where an exploitation of sexual desire is "spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and fluid so as to avoid splits or binaries that can freeze Black women's radical sexual subjectivities" (p. 1). Grounded in Black feminisms and hip hop feminism, Black ratchet imagination is necessary to theorize a framework of sexual and nonsexual agency of Black queer youth that pays close attention to the structural inequalities they face while unmasking and acknowledging methods, data, and findings that are messy, complicated, and possibly unable to be triangulated (Morgan, 2000).

Since its conception, hip hop feminism has been concerned with areas of gray, tension, and spaces where Black and Brown girls can explore their love of hip hop music and culture while

vigorously critiquing it. According to Lindsey (2015), "Hip-hop feminist theory is a generationally specific and historically contingent iteration of intersectionality and of critical race feminist theory" (p. 54). Hip hop feminism wrestles with Black and Brown girls' life experiences as creators and consumers of hip hop, a contradictory space filled with the tensions of heteropatriarchal and hyper-masculinity. However, hip hop feminism is still a space of agency for Black and Brown girls. R. N. Brown and Kwakye (2012)—two hip hop feminists—write: "We are here. We exist with various dimensions, live fully, and we continue to exist even when we cannot be readily seen, heard, or touched. We are permanent" (p. 3). The same stance can be applied to Black queer youth who challenge hip hop's phallogocentric history and create through a Black ratchet imagination. Black queer youth's intersectional identities are filled with agency, wildness, undoing, fluidity, and hyper-locality and are formed in a space where transitional bodies are centered for fuller, vibrant, more complex narratives of the Black queer youth experience; methodological perspectives must match this complex identity formation (Dimitriads, 2015; Muñoz, 2009). Next, I discuss how the Black ratchet imagination functions within hip hop's hyper-locality and queerness.

### **Applying the Black Ratchet Imagination Lens: Hip Hop's Locality and Queerness**

Hip hop is a movement with multiple goals and aims; thus, not all hip hop is the same (Stallings, 2013). Hip hop occupies multiple spaces, including its function as the voice of social critique of systemic oppression and the visceral representation that blames and shames Black folks for America's social and economic decay, fueling irrational and undocumented moral panic (Cohen, 2010). Hip hop's innovative aesthetics were not created in a vacuum; America's obsession with brand consciousness, anti-intellectualism, violence, homophobia, sexism, and materialism all frame hip hop (hooks, 2004; Rose, 2008).

Hip hop's complexes, tensions, and desires to love and seek out humility by way of bold and innovative creative expressions is what makes hip hop so enduring to people from all around the globe and what makes it simultaneously queer and imaginative. Hip hop is sonically, vocally, and visually birthed from a "polycultural mix of influences, including the African griot tradition, Caribbean dub music, and loops of black American percussive funk breaks" (Poulson-Bryant, 2013, p. 214). Hip hop's origins and genealogy "wantonly invites queer rumination" (Snorton, 2013, p. vi), which is a composite of many forms of Black cultural expression. Thus, hip hop's roots are stable, but its identity is geographically dependent on distinctive regional sounds and aesthetics that are closely tied to a city's neighborhoods, local allegiances, and territorial rivalries—what Murray Forman (2000) calls the spatial discourse of rap. Within this specificity, there are pockets of hip hop that are queer in theory and practice.

Hip hop's queerness is foregrounded by a space of imaginative Black ratchetness. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, by Robin D. G. Kelley (2002), contends that a requirement for liberation that refuses victimization is an "unleashing of the mind's most creative capacities, catalyzed by participation in struggles or change" (p. 192). Hip hop's

queerness, spatial discourse, and “liberatory pleasure politics” (Morgan, 2015, p. 38), which are radical and ratchet, examined through the methodological perspective of the Black ratchet imagination provides fertile ground for researchers to conduct studies concerning Black queer youth that reflect how youth understand their intersecting identities to form spaces of agency. Applying this lens, research questions are constructed that seek to make meaning of how hip hop’s imaginative and performative space allows for fluidity and interrupts normativity to produce youth-centered spaces generated from local culture that problematizes normative ideas of gender and sexuality. One example of a space robust for data collection for the Black ratchet imagination is New Orleans’s bounce music and culture.

## New Orleans and Performativity

Historical mapping is an important component of this methodological perspective. Research should be conducted by examining the past and present-day precariousness of the participants’ community with special attention to how Black queer youth undo “politics of respectability” in a quest for dignity (Cooper, 2017). Layers of context are also necessary as hip hop must be examined within relationship to its local community—how local Black folks resisted oppression and fought for dignity and representation. As an example of historical mappings, hip hop was formed by a polycultural mix of traditions, sonic expressions, African improvisational techniques, and the celebratory performativity of public spectacles. No place embodies this fusion of sonic, vocal, visual, and performative adaptations like New Orleans, whose citizens have created a distinctive African American music and performance that is hyper-local yet borderless. For over 135 years, Blacks were not allowed to participate in the annual Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans. In response to this segregation, Blacks formed their own Mardi Gras traditions and festivities (Vaz, 2013a). Clubs such as The Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, the Black Indians of New Orleans, and the Skull and Bones Gang and the district Carnival music tradition soon formed (Vaz, 2013a). These clubs gave birth to jazz funerals and brass band parades known as “second lines” in the historic African American communities of Center City, Mid City, and Treme.

Beyond the Crescent City’s elastic sound of fusing African, French, and Spanish music, historically New Orleans is home to some of the most gender-bending public celebration traditions. A subculture of Black Mardi Gras, known as Baby Dolls, developed in the early 1900s in a section called Black Storyville or the Red Light District, a part of town known for bars, gambling, and prostitution. Baby Dolls are African American men and women dressed in short satin dresses, stockings with garters, and bonnets. As Vaz (2013b) states, African American female sex workers of the early 1900s decided to dress up as Baby Dolls because men commonly called women *baby*, but the term also has an ironic “double meaning in it because African-American women weren’t considered precious and doll-like.” According to Vaz (2013a), Baby Dolls are “sexy and sometimes raunchy. . . . The Baby Dolls parade in their neighborhoods, singing bawdy lyrics to vaudeville show tunes and Creole songs, playing tambourines and cowbells, chanting and dancing” (p. 8). The best-known group was the Million Dollar Baby Dolls who, accompanied by

a male band, paraded the streets holding signs and singing songs that ridiculed and shamed men who paid for sex work, such as, “In the Evening When the Sun Goes Down” and “You Dirty Mutha Fucker, Your Momma Don’t Wear No Drawers” (Vaz, 2013a). Within a U.S. context, Baby Dolls are hyper-local to New Orleans and represent a clear example of how subversive techniques through performativity can address communities’ sociopolitical concerns and push back on politics of respectability while dancing and singing in the streets for their dignity.

The Big Easy is a site of performance, play, and pleasure, with Black bodies as the main attraction using Black cultural forms of expression that embody a Black radical imagination, and sometimes ratchetness (i.e., intentionally not conforming to respectability politics and gender norms), to disrupt and respond to oppression (Lipsitz, 1998). However, while New Orleans is known as the “city where anything goes,” the queer community of the Big Easy has not always been so welcomed. The city has a large conservative Catholic and Christian community that is “focused on containing many of the social practices that one would equate with the American South, for example, proper social etiquette for men and women rather than encouraging sexual freedom” (Thompson, 2011, p. 5). Moreover, New Orleans is subject to racial division within the queer community. According to Monroe (2016), the queer Black communities of New Orleans do not patronize the city’s White queer bars or communities.

Thus, the Big Easy is sadly still plagued by racism, regardless of how much Black folks have contributed to the city’s culture and social and political economics. Furthermore, New Orleanians experience high levels of concentrated poverty due to heavy segregation and low wages. In 2014, a study conducted by New Orleans-based research group, the Data Center, found low wages to be a major factor crippling the workforce and keeping working-class parents in poverty (Catalanello, 2015). Another report estimated that 39% of New Orleans children live in poverty (Catalanello, 2015). However, despite the city’s racism, discrimination, lack of resources, or catastrophic natural disasters, New Orleans is still thriving with an abundance of Black creativity, wild queerness, and a history of ratchetness that seeks to disrupt stereotypical tropes and respectability.

The collective memory and energy of New Orleans’s music, carnivals, and parades constructs spaces of collective joy, freedom, and pleasure (Miller, 2006, 2012). Another Black Mardi Gras subculture, the Mardi Gras Indians, which features Black working-class men dressed in Native American ceremonial costumes, has inspired the latest New Orleans musical creation: bounce. Mardi Gras Indians are famous for their clever call-and-response chants and spectacular, over-the-top garments. Bounce relies heavily on call-and-response and the chanting style of the Mardi Gras Indians and is molded by the city’s local cultural identity. The Black ratchet imagination as a methodological perspective provides a lens to historically map the emotional flexibility and creativity needed to survive the poverty, violence, displacement, and systematic housing segregation with one’s soul partially intact to reinvent music and culture that remains fluid, subversive, and agentic. For that reason, bounce is a quintessential space within hip hop for conducting research focused on Black queer youth through the methodological perspective of the Black ratchet imagination. This methodological

perspective can only be applied to spaces that have been reclaimed by youth who undo politics of respectability in a quest for dignity, purpose, and pleasure—full humanity.

## Bounce

Bounce music is an up-tempo, dance-oriented, hypersexual, call-and-response, bass heavy, and ratchet form of rap music pioneered by DJ Jubilee. Other notable musicians are Magnolia Shorty (1982–2010), Sissy Nobby, Rusty Lazer, Magnolia Rhome, Nickey Da B, and Baby Erin. Bounce is firmly situated within Black music and Black cultural traditions that are intricately interwoven through the echoes, tempos, and movements of Black youth. Bounce thrives on undoing and gleefully dismantling the politics of respectability to create spaces of queer performativity that bend, blur, and gyrate a “pleasure politics” that is both sexual and nonsexual for and by Black queer youth. According to Matt Miller (2012), who wrote the book *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans*, bounce “emerged from the dynamic relationship between a deeply rooted Afro-Caribbean sensibility and contemporary commodified developments in musical style, practice, and technology” (p. 13). Hobbs (2012) wrote that Bounce’s sound is distinctive because of its “strong emphasis on intensely repetitive rhythmic and lyrical sequences, characteristic dances, localized lyrical themes, [and] detailed geographic shout-outs.”

The reigning queen of bounce, Big Freedia, is a New Orleans native and a gender-bending queer rapper. Big Freedia, born Frederick Ross, also popularized the dance style of twerking. Growing up, she listened to Patti LaBelle, Michael Jackson, and gospel music; however, her biggest musical influence was a drag queer rapper named Katey Red who lived four blocks away. Before launching her own career, Big Freedia was a backup dancer for Katey Red, the originator of sissy bounce. In the context of bounce, *sissy* is a term of endearment that embodies and pays homage to New Orleans’s long and influential history of queer entertainers such as Bobby Marchan, a female impersonator singer, or Pasty Vidalia, born Irving Ale, a cross-dressing hostess of the popular Dew Drop Inn (Dee, 2010). Alison Fensterstock, a New Orleans music writer who focuses on bounce, told *Time* (cited in Dee, 2010),

Gay performers have been celebrated forever in New Orleans black culture. Not to mention that in New Orleans there’s the tradition of masking, mummies, carnival, all the weird identity inversion. There’s just something in the culture that’s a lot more lax about gender identity and fanciness.

Katey Red and Big Freedia stand on the shoulders of queer New Orleans performers who embraced ratchetness to create a space where Black queer performers are not only accepted but also revered. Big Freedia dresses in stylish men’s clothing and prefers the pronoun *she*. A Big Freedia show consists of high-energy, booty-popping, and freeform dancing. Big Freedia’s motto is “free your ass, and your mind will follow” (Ross, 2015). Her performances and lyrics are liberating because she ensures that everyone, gay or straight, feels safe at her shows. She told *San Francisco Weekly*:

I definitely bring some stability to women and let them feel free in their space and let them know that they’re protected and can be themselves. That’s important to a lot of my fans, and creating that safe space for the women has always been my thing. Even when I started rapping, if boys were trying to touch the girls on their asses or slapping them on their cheeks, I would protect the girls. I will continue to be that way. (Rotter, 2015)

In her book, *Big Freedia: God Save the Queen Diva*, she defines her overall message as self-acceptance (Ross, 2015). Women and men, regardless of their sexuality, attend Big Freedia’s shows because they are a safe space that invites and feeds the Black ratchet imagination for pleasure politics and affirms and recognizes Black queer youth’s complicated lives of contradictions, agency, liberation, and undoing that can sometimes only be conveyed within a wild and imaginative space that disrupts identities and gets ratchet through cultural modes of expression. For example, in Big Freedia’s song “Explore,” Freedia raps: “Release ya anger. Release ya mind. Release ya job. Release the time. Release ya trade. Release the stress. Release the love. Forget the rest. Let’s Go.”

The lyrics to the song are freeing and create a moment in time where agency, liberation, and undoing can be explored. For example, the central elements of the Black ratchet imagination—intersectionality, agency, fluidity, and understanding Black youth’s precariousness—are present within the song because bounce at its core embodies these elements—they are bounce’s foundation. Thus, bounce provides a unique lens for researchers to get a more complex and nonbinary understanding of youth’s layered embodiment of ratchetness. When bounce and the Black ratchet imagination meet in the space of education research, researchers unfold how intersectionality is not only multiple identities coming together to showcase youth-centered spaces but to ensure that Black lives that have been reduced, destroyed, and made illegible matter (Dumas, 2017). For researchers concerned with examining Black queer youth from a strength approach that recognizes life as nonlinear, bounce’s subversive healing lyrics and dances are agentive and fluid practices of how Black queer youth define and redefine themselves and reimagine their identities on a continuum of exploration. Lastly, Big Freedia’s lyrics highlight the working-class roots of bounce and the precariousness and the stresses of that social construct.

For Black queer youth coming of age in New Orleans, their identities differ greatly from that of a youngster in other American cities because of New Orleans’s ratchet and imaginative musical and cultural past. The hyper-locality of the Black ratchet imagination lens provides a space to examine youth’s creative agency and resistance that humanize Black queer youth’s lived experiences within their particular communities; thus, while data interpretation cannot capture every aspect of Black queer youth’s lives, it does free them from victimizing and heteronormative research narratives. To be clear, bounce is not free of sexism, misogyny, capitalism, or patriarchy; these oppressive systems remain fixed to hip hop music and culture as they are fixed to American culture. But bounce from the center to the edges of the music and culture deliberately aims to problematize the limits of identity, confront the tensions of living in a heterosexual capitalist world, and place desires and the imagination

alongside the search for humanity (Gang, 2008). The Black ratchet imagination creates a space for data interpretation that categorizes and codes complex identity formations of Black queer youth with special attention to youth's Blackness, knowledge production, and self-care practices. Data collection and methods within a Black ratchet imagination are closely aligned to ethnography, youth participatory action research, portraiture, life history interviews, and narrative inquiry. These methods decenter the researcher's voice while stressing the importance of being respectful when allowed to participate in the cultural practices of Black queer youth; having meaningful conversations, not just interviews, with youth and community members; and recognizing knowledge production of youth. Additionally, youth must play a vital role in data analysis and member checking to ensure the research captures all the textures and layers of their lived experiences. Implementations and findings are pertinent to the community in which the participants live and should be shared with them but should also be disseminated widely to inform and build on research that aims to capture snapshots of the full humanity of Black queer youth.

### Limitations of the Lens

Research conducted using the Black ratchet imagination lens as a methodological perspective is not generalizable; the data are unique to the participants of the study, their subculture of hip hop, and the culture and history of their city. Thus, the in-depth, comprehensive approach to this methodological perspective limits the scope of the study from the onset. Replicability is difficult—if not impossible—outside of the initial research site because a Black ratchet imagination lens approaches research from a hyper-local standpoint. The messy and incomplete findings of the research focused on youth culture are fluid and represent a snapshot into youth's lives; findings do not represent the totality of youth's struggles, accomplishments, and queer identity constructions. Youth culture rapidly changes, so research conducted through a Black ratchet imagination methodological perspective has a short life expectancy, but the research represents a vivid, intersectional, and in-depth understanding of how Black queer youth make sense of the world within their community, culture, and identity constructions at a particular moment in time that draws on the generational knowledge of queer youth of color that came before them. Furthermore, researchers understanding their participants' culture, agentic practices, and community is central to the Black ratchet imagination.

The methodological perspective is heavily dependent on a knowledge base robust in the fields of Black studies, Black queer studies, youth studies, youth cultural movements, hip hop studies, Black feminism, and how White supremacy works to destabilize communities of color and how people of color resist domination. Thus, this methodological perspective should only be used by researchers with a robust historical and present-day understanding of their participants' community and how it has been impacted by racism, capitalism, transphobia, classism, rigid ideas of gender, heteronormativity, and homophobia. The lens necessitates that researchers approach their work through a social justice, intersectional, and anti-racist framework, whereas intersectionality is utilized not just as an analytical tool for

recognizing multiple intersecting identities but also as a tool to examine overlapping systems of oppression.

Lastly, it is important to note that not all Black queer youth identify with hip hop; after all, hip hop is just one space of many that supports youth's creativity, imagination, and knowledge production and where Black queer youth have found agency.

### Humanizing Black Queer Youth

One of the major objectives of this article is to chart new methodological perspectives that push researchers to not only investigate the challenges of queer youth of color but also examine how queer youth of color resist one-dimensional, narrow, and objectifying narratives. Patel (2014) argues that too often, humanizing research is disregarded for grand narratives that support the colonizing effect of education research. Thus, methodological perspectives, whether qualitative, quantitative, mixed, or interpretive, that are concerned with Black queer youth, their multiple identities, and how hip hop functions in their lives must be concerned with how Black queer youth create, resist, find joy, build self-efficacy and community, find pleasure, and ultimately, construct a "black capacity to desire" (Wilderson, 2008, p. 265). Black queer youth need a methodological perspective that aims to understand how "even in the face of the brutally imposed difficulties of black life, [life] is cause for celebration" (Moten, 2013, p. 742). According to Moten (2013), "celebration is the essence of black thought" (p. 742) because "celebration turns out to be the condition of possibility of black thought, which animates that black operation that will produce the absolute overturning" (p. 742). Methodological perspectives need to recognize the importance of creativity, laughter, joy, love, and innovation to all participants and communities, regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender.

The Black ratchet imagination as a methodological perspective is a humanizing, hyper-local, messy, and unfixed framework that provides more context for research investigating Black queer youth. Its ethos depends on the types of performativity valued in the community, the localized lyrical themes of the neighborhood, the cultural practices that have been passed down from one generation to the next, the celebration that is formed from precarity, and most importantly, the researcher's ability to view Black queer youth through their agentic practices as they create ratchet spaces in response to this ratchet world.

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