

Understanding “Flow”: A Multimodal Reading of Political Economy and Capitalist Erotics in Hip Hop

I can only say that it may be in our sexuality that we are most easily enslaved, both men and women. It may be there, even as free men and women, that we find freedom hardest to keep. The politics of the flesh are the roots of power.

Ursula K. Le Guin, “A Woman’s Liberation”, from *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (1995: 232)

“Flow” in hip hop usually refers to the delivery of the text against the beat. Rap, with its linguistic dominance, dexterity, and origins on the street, is too easily stereotyped as male-orientated, with women often depicted in terms of (sexual) subordination and objectification. However, when looked at with a female gaze, the visual discourses and signifiers conjured by the term “flow” take on quite different meanings. Indeed, from the flow of female sexual desire to the monthly visits from Aunt Flo, the very notion of “flow” is integral to both female sexuality and hip hop artistry. In addition, more contemporary artists such as Lil Nas X, whilst ostensibly and gloriously queering the heteronormative flows of desire within their music, in fact fit within a broader continuity of flow: that of libidinal and capital investment between artist, industry, and fan culture. Thus, we will ultimately show through our multimodal analyses that the dominant flow in hip hop is inevitably that of capital – the great flow, in the Deleuzian sense – and that even this self-consciously subversive music style is in fact governed by the insatiable drive of the market. There is, hip hop confirms, only one economy; the flows of desire, the body, rhyme, of social media, and the global flow of capital are inextricably intertwined with one another.

Understanding hip hop as a political art form is by now well established (for some of the classic examples see Dyson, 1996; hooks, 1992; hooks, 2004; Krims, 2000; Rose, 1994). Debates around hip hop have explored the form’s history and development, as well as its relation to aesthetics and/or postmodernism (Shusterman, 2000; Maher, 2005). Yet a limitation here is that many approaches to hip hop separate the musical form from the economic and cultural totality within which it exists. Here then, a turn to the work of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, philosophers of art, economy, capitalism, politics, and sexuality, proves useful and productive for reading hip hop as an inherently multimodal art form in an integrative fashion, connecting its position within contemporary cultural production, celebrity culture, and the drive of the market.

Perhaps the most immediate question is: why *flow*? Why not simply continue with the analysis of hip hop within pre-existent modes of cultural scholarship? In *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari argue that “the general theory of society is a generalized theory of flows”, (1983: 262) which, as Daniel Smith points out, is a distinctive contribution to

political theory (Smith, 2011). This is more than simply a comment on political systems, however: rather, it is a generalized concept for dealing with capitalist society in its totality. In short, it is the concept of flow that connects commodity production with libidinal desiring-production. As they put it in *Anti-Oedipus*, “the discovery of an activity of production in general and without distinction, as it appears in capitalism, is the identical discovery of both political economy and psychoanalysis” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983: 302). In other words, there is no distinction between the realm of Freud’s critique of the mind and the subject and that of Marx’s critique of [end p. 411 / start p. 412] political economy because there is only one economy, one vast network of constantly deterritorializing and reterritorializing flows, within which hip hop itself functions as a set of multimodal expressions. For Deleuze and Guattari, libidinal desire and commodity production are intimately bound up within one another, and thus using and exploring the concept of flow allows for an analysis of both simultaneously. Here we connect a Deleuzo-Guattarian understanding of flow with hip hop studies of rapper’s flow, linguistic dexterity, and fluency. A rapper’s flow is personal, both a marker of virtuoso style and a signature. While by no means all rap is sexually charged (at least on a surface level), much of it is. This, together with the meanings of “flow” and the inherent tendency to assign sexuality to Black people and by extension to their art (Wekker, 2016: 94–95), means that a full understanding of “flow”, and of hip hop in general, has to acknowledge and consider these often unarticulated messages. It is this that we attempt to do in the examples that follow, ever mindful that we write as a white European duo (like Deleuze and Guattari), fans and admirers of hip hop, but not practitioners or fully immersed in the culture from which it principally stems.

In this article we analyse five hip hop examples of flow in action. We start with a pairing of The 2 Live Crew, who self-consciously courted sexual controversy through their music at the end of the 1980s, with Salt-N-Pepa, who in many ways can be seen as a (female) response to The 2 Live Crew, literally calling on their listeners in 1990 to talk about sex. From this background, we move on to that flow that has hitherto been most overlooked in studies of hip hop: the flow of menstruation. To do this, we first queer the queer through a homoerotic image of St Sebastian from the early seventeenth century, and through this lens take a closer look at the song which, to our knowledge, is the most overt example of a rapper rapping about flow in the female sense: Stella Mwangi’s “Kuchizi” (2017). We then pair Lil Nas X and Megan Thee Stallion, through which we add another layer of flow: that of the viral flow of information through social media and the ways in which music flows across memetic, visual, and digital forms of culture. Over the 30+ years that separate our earliest from our latest examples, much changed in society – perhaps most notably for our purposes here the end of the AIDS epidemic (in the West) and the #metoo movement – yet, as we shall show, the dominant flow of the market, while different on the surface and in its machinations, remains essentially unchanged.

Methodology: “What’ll we get for ten dollars?” (The 2 Live Crew, 1989a)

It is of utmost importance for our argument that the bigger picture is considered, even at the cost of detail. Space does not allow for full multimodal analyses of songs, videos, album/release contexts, associated merchandise, fandom, and all the other gloriously multimodal factors when considering any popular hit as an art form (Machin 2010).¹ We have devised a methodology that draws on Van Leeuwen’s multimodal understanding of sound as divided into field (background, audible but not considered by an inattentive listener), ground (the secondary sound that the listener is aware of but is not the main focus), and figure (the feature sound that commands the listener’s attention) (Van Leeuwen, 1999). We combine this with the tripartite division of mode into cultural [end p. 412 / start p. 413] practices (the broad, background modes within a culture), semiotic resources (modes that are more specific to the particular context yet are still broad), and elements (more detailed modes that carry social semiotic meanings) (Maxwell, 2015, and built upon in Włodarczyk, Tyrkkö, and Adamczyk, forthcoming). The cultural practices of hip hop and popular culture in general are the broad trends that the examples follow, and often subvert (e.g., the gangsta culture of The 2 Live Crew; the twerking of Meghan Thee Stallion and Thee Hotties). Flow, in the sense of a rapper’s delivery of text, is itself a cultural practice that shifts both historically, as hip hop evolves, and socially, depending upon each artist’s milieu, references, and stylistic influences. At the level of semiotic resources, we find techniques such as sampling and vocal delivery, which are modes that are used specifically to create a meaning (e.g., the quotations from *Full Metal Jacket* in “Me So Horny” and Lil Nas X’s use of vocal techniques from different musical styles). Finally, elements are the more nuanced details that convey meaning, such as a carefully placed bedpost, or gold jewellery. This tripartite division, like the concept of mode itself, allows our analyses to meaningfully cover a broad scope in time in the history of hip hop, from the 1980s to the 2020s. Our methodology is summarized in Table 1, together with some clarifying examples from the songs that will make up our first two analyses in the next section.

Field	<i>Cultural Practices</i>
Background sound, often unnoticed unless the listener’s attention is specifically focused on it (or it disappears unexpectedly).	<i>Everyday modes that are part of a society’s general habits.</i>
Examples: beat and basic sounds of sex in “Me So Horny”; drum machine in “Let’s Talk About Sex”.	<i>Examples: money, sex, dancing, and pleasure in “Me So Horny”; dancing, information broadcasting (radio), and symbolic scenes from everyday life (car,</i>

¹ In the analyses we use YouTube as the source for the videos, and Spotify for the parts of the analyses which deliberately do not take the moving visuals into account. This choice was made primarily because of these platforms’ reach and the capitalist influence they wield on the music industry. [Note on p. 430]

	<i>construction site) in “Let’s Talk About Sex”.</i>
Ground	<i>Semiotic resources</i>
The sound that is in the middle of the sonic soundscape; it is noticeable to the listener and often (though not necessarily) accompanies the figure.	<i>More specific modes that are often particular to the text (song) in question.</i>
Examples: instrumentals and female groans in “Me So Horny”; instrumentals and backing singers in “Let’s Talk About Sex”.	<i>Examples: bedroom scenes, party/club, and tempo of the rap in “Me So Horny”; melody, rhythm, and clarity of text delivery in “Let’s Talk About Sex”.</i>
Figure	<i>Elements</i>
The main feature of the soundscape that commands the listener’s attention.	<i>Details that convey social semiotic meaning in the context.</i>
Text; male voices rapping in “Me So Horny”; female voices rapping/singing/talking in “Let’s Talk About Sex”.	<i>Examples: jewellery and bedposts in “Me So Horny”; clothing and the (possibly) gender-queer dancer in “Let’s Talk About Sex”.</i>
Adapted from Van Leeuwen, 1999	<i>Adapted from Maxwell, 2015</i>

Table 1: summary of the methodology with examples drawn from the first two analyses [the table is on p. 414]

This methodology is a development of the concept of mode that is based upon Gunther Kress’s 2010 definition of mode as “what a community decides to regard and use as mode is mode” (87). We use it here in order to codify what could otherwise be instinctive knowledge in the analyses; in other words, what hip hop consumers (and we include ourselves in this group) understand as part of the music’s structure, often subconsciously. It is a long-standing general claim of musical analysis that its goal is to explain why and how music works (see for example Cook, 1994: 1). As a discipline, music analysis has received critique in recent years for failing to sufficiently acknowledge the bias of both the kinds of analyses taught and used, as well as the music that is analysed. Ewell’s (2020) consideration of how the “white racial frame” operates within music theory has been instrumental in shaping our methodology here – and we posit, all analysts should be aware of their own biases and those of their respective disciplines. Thus, our analyses here claim neither objectivity nor universality. We do not shy away from the fact that when we draw out meanings from our musical examples, they are the meanings that we (as white Europeans) perceive. Others with different cultural backgrounds (and indeed other readers) will likely find other meanings, but the methodology that we have employed will also work in different cultural contexts and for other musical forms. As aesthetics, artistic research, and porn studies all teach

us, art and the erotic affect the receiver, and thus we do not pretend to be unmoved by the artefacts under analysis here. After all, as Deleuze and Guattari pointed out, critical writing itself has little to do with impartial signification but with mapping and surveying flows of desire – even those flows which are still to be fully understood (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 4). In addition, the distinctions between figure/ground/field as well as cultural practices, semiotic resources, and elements are context-based and fluid, therefore the analyses presented here are necessarily interpretive to a certain extent, although the methodology has been conceived to employ enough empiricism to identify meaningful points of convergence and divergence between our examples. It is therefore not our intention to identify every mode or to categorize every [end p. 413] sound, for to do so would be to lay claim to an objectivity that is at best false, and at worst racist. What follows is what we hear and see, and how we relate it to the social and cultural situations that we observe and in which we live as hip hop listeners in late capitalism. This awareness of our own position is a reply to Deleuze and Guattari's call to "make a map, not a tracing [...] *the tracing should always be put back on the map*" (1987: 13–14, emphasis original). Our considerations of the multiple meanings of flow put our analyses back onto the map of hip hop. This is what Deleuze and Guattari call "perceptual semiotics"; it is, to use their term, analysis "in the middle" (1987: 25): "It's not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it, you'll see that everything changes."

The concept of flow therefore allows us to bridge the gap between an analysis of hip hop as cultural or aesthetic mode of production, and the ways in which it reveals a huge amount about the latent libidinal desires it both channels and provokes. Hip hop has long been coded as male-dominated (Berry, 1994; hooks, 1992; Rose, 1994), with a sexually aggressive undertone that can result in moral panic (for example the Florida obscenity [end p. 414 / start p. 415] ruling against The 2 Live Crew in 1990, or the more recent reactions to Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X), which ties into a longer history of white fear of Black sexuality within American culture. This can be traced at least as far back as D. W. Griffiths's racist 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, and, as Wekker (2016) demonstrates for European colonial nations, manifests itself in racist sexualized tropes from early twentieth century white female psychoanalysis patients with "hottentot nymphae" to the rhetoric of "suppose she brings a big negro home" (these two citations are taken from chapter titles in Wekker, 2016). In contexts such as these, the position of women was (and is) often read as being either sexually subservient and objectified (in hip hop terms, a "ho"), or as sexually in control of herself and unreachable, even if sexually active (a "queen"). It is therefore time to turn to our first examples: "Me So Horny", the opening track from the Miami group The 2 Live Crew's infamous 1989 album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, and Salt-N-Pepa's 1990 hit single "Let's Talk about Sex".

1. “Come on, how many guys do you know make love?” (Salt-N-Pepa, 1990): The 2 Live Crew and Salt-N-Pepa

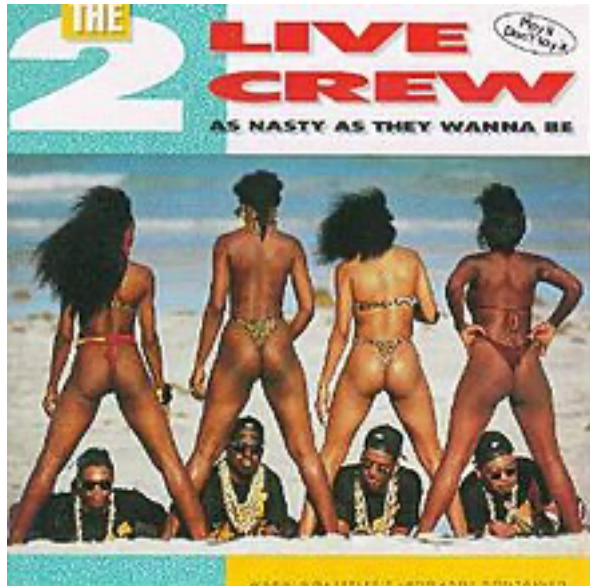


Figure 1: The 2 Live Crew, *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*. Skywalker Records, 1989. Photo: Wikipedia Commons. [figure on p. 416]

From today’s standpoint, it can be hard to understand how *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* could have been taken seriously enough to spark a censorship row and an obscenity trial. From the artwork shown in Figure 1, as well as the first single and opening track “Me So Horny” (not to mention the titles of other tracks including “Dick Almighty” and “The Fuck Shop”), the album is, to the modern eye and ear, a comic exaggeration that plays on and parodies a stereotypical image of a sexually aroused Black male gangsta rapper. The four men present on the album cover (Figure 1) wear similar clothing and hold similar postures even if their faces are clearly distinguishable from one another; the four women are shown as anonymous, relaxed, and presumably willing, with a clear focus on their bodies and particularly their buttocks – a bodily feature that is still renowned as an attractive physical attribute of Black women, as our example by Megan Thee Stallion also demonstrates (twerking is a cultural practice in hip hop). In this album’s cover art, it is the men who wear chains and are pictured in a position of relative physical submission, yet it is also they who look out at the audience and who are the artists: they are so (sexually, musically) powerful that the submissive posture merely enhances their power; their chains are gold, and while the track titles and lyrics flaunt their physical attributes, their bodies are hidden and under their control.

The first sounds of the album, when played, are that of the male-female question and response “What’ll we get for ten dollars? / Everything you want / Everything? / Everything” followed by the first (of many on the opening track) female groan of pleasure (the video to “Me So Horny” has a different opening sequence) (The 2 Live Crew, 1989a and 1989b). At this point in the song it is these sounds that are the figure in the soundscape, although, as is usual in popular music, the main vocal line soon takes over the role of figure. This opening is a sample from the 1987 film *Full Metal Jacket* in which a male character is approached by a female prostitute in Vietnam; this scene also gives the song its title (Wikipedia, 2022). While this is a clear reference to prostitution and female availability, \$10 was also a typical price for an LP in the late [end p. 415] 1980s (personal recollection). The very opening of this album, then, overtly plays on the dominant cultural practices of late 80s hip hop: it references money, sexual exchange, and pleasure, and makes an auditory promise to the listener that their monetary investment in the album is going to both pay off as well as help get them off.

As the lead single from the album, “Me So Horny” also had a commercial video. The depictions of men in the video also feature an abundance of gold jewellery in their costumes, the oversized traditional telephone (both its large buttons to be fingered and its large handset that is held close to the mouth), the strategic camera angles that ensure that the placement of large bedposts leaves the viewer with no doubts as to their representation (see for example Figure 2), as well as the overacted dog impressions, are all elements that play in to the exaggerated nature of male power and sexuality of the song and of the album [end p. 416] as a whole. When the lyrics are added to this picture, the story of the male protagonist on a quest for sex again plays with notions of power and control. While the text is the overall figure of the song, it is the sounds of sex that make up the ground in the soundscape. The visual semiotic resources in the video are by contrast tame (at least by today’s standards), such as the fully clothed bedroom scenes (despite the bedposts; see Figure 2), a bikini party, and a dance club where clothes stay on.

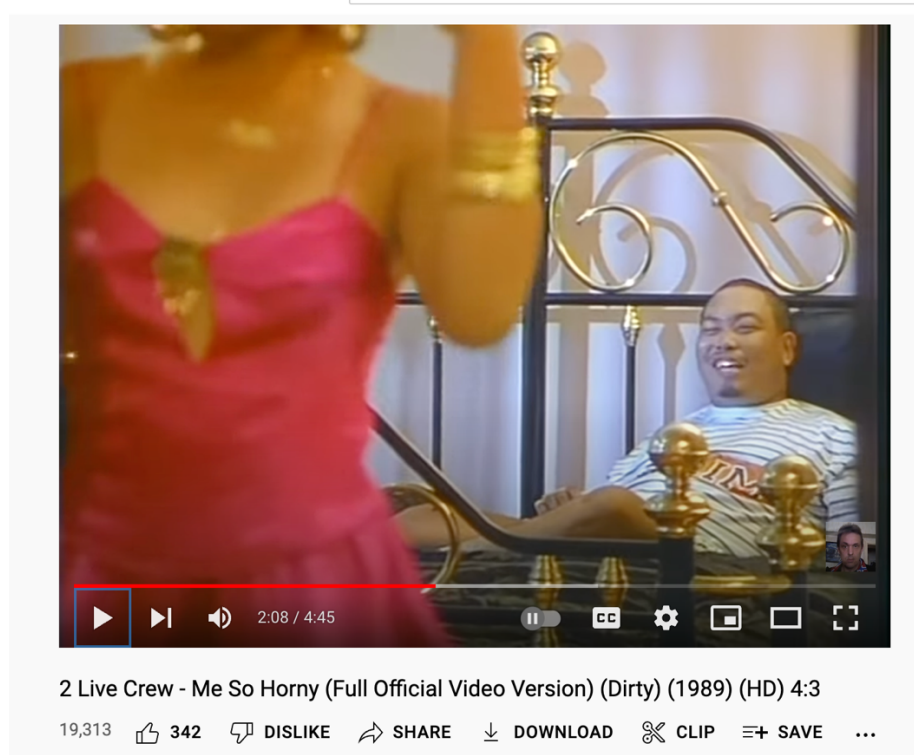


Figure 2: The 2 Live Crew (1989b). Still taken from YouTube. [figure on p. 417]

Yet a closer listen to the music and to the rappers' flow is revealing here.² The tempo of "Me So Horny" is fluid and indeed languid. The beat is certainly there (generally as the field, behind the sounds of sex and the text) and is the driving force behind the groove, but it is also not the beat of rock 'n' roll, nor the more emphatic and up-tempo beat of Wu Tang Clan's iconic 1994 song C.R.E.A.M. (which provides a more economically explicit counterexample that space does not permit us to go into here). Whereas Cox Lorraine (2001) sees the beat of rock as the drive of sex from the male point of view, here the relaxed delivery is that of a bunch of guys who have time to enjoy their pleasures. They are in control but in no hurry. The female groans of pleasure echo those of The Ramones that Cox Lorraine quotes in her epigraph: "Wa-oh-oh-oh..." (2001: 3). The key here is the [end p. 417 / start p. 418] explicitness of the ground (the female groans) with the lazy sexualized beat as the field that dictates the pace of the figure (the male rappers' flow), the lyrics, and of the album as a whole. The music video was designed for commercial release; the album is for private consumption, either alone (getting one's money's worth) or in a social setting – it is unlikely that mainstream, pre-watershed airplay was ever a realistic aim. (According to Wikipedia (2022), the track's name was not mentioned even when it was played on the radio as part of Shadoe

² In writing this piece, we have found that it is impossible to entirely avoid innuendos, and, if readers (and reviewers!) will excuse the dreadful pun, we invite you to join us in going with the flow here. This is, after all, a piece that is first and foremost about an art form that is self-consciously entertaining, and that does not take itself too seriously. Like the artists, and also out of respect for them, any attempt to take on too serious a tone would feel at best unnatural and at worst patronizing. [Note on p. 430]

Stevens's chart show.) In other words, the multimodal incongruity of the visuals of the video when compared to the other semiotic resources in play shows that, while the flows of lyrics and pleasure are indeed important, it is the flow of commerciality that is paramount. The 2 Live Crew demonstrate, like Deleuze and Guattari, that these are indeed natural bedfellows: we hear from the very opening of "Me So Horny" that it is a song (as is, by extension, the entire album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*) that lays bare and delights in the intertwining of these meanings of flow.

There is a clear contrast here with our second example, Salt-N-Pepa's international 1990 hit "Let's Talk about Sex". It too is a song which does what it says on the tin and puts its protagonists in control of their bodies, but its capitalist overtones are less overt. From the very opening, the female voice is the figure of the song. After the instruction to DJ Spin to begin, this song also quickly moves outside of language into the domain of female moaning. But this time, while the moans of course reference those of sex on some level, that is not their principal meaning. They are more of a deliberation of "ah ha", "come on", we are going to talk about this – a deliberation that recurs in the text of the rap both in the first verse and later in the bridge. When combined with the opening images of the video that include a toddler playing with a book on which the word "sex" is written and a Black man gagged and bound to a chair, the viewer/listener is left in no doubt that the stakes of the ensuing discussion are high. The video's main groups of characters/dancers are also presented at the opening. Here we have the protagonists (Salt, Pepa, and Spinderella), as well as groups of dancers (men in baggy jumpsuits, men in dungarees, and a mixture of genders – including one figure who in today's terminology could be considered genderqueer – dancing in white), and the three female protagonists out on the street in gender-reversed settings (hanging out with friends by an everyday car, on a building site catcalling passers-by). The emphasis here is on everyday cultural practices, of normality and inclusivity. We should note that the everyday here is a Black everyday: like we will see later with Megan Thee Stallion, the video reminds all viewers that Black people are at the heart of everyday society despite the dominance of the "white racial frame" (Ewell 2020 citing Feagin 2013; while hip hop as a popular music genre is an instance of a Black racial frame, it is nevertheless situated within the white racial frame of the music industry as a whole, as more recent movements such as #grammysowwhite have exposed).

The first verse is rapped from a radio studio in the video (in keeping with the text): this plays into the cultural practice that is information broadcasting, here presented by a young Black sexually aware woman who reminds those who "think it's dirty" that they don't have to listen: "Pick up the needle, press pause, or turn the radio off". The invitation here, however, is to a frank discussion. The second verse raps the story of a young woman who is so beautiful she can have sex with anyone she wants, including the president, but who is unhappy. The third verse raps the story of a man and a woman have sex without a condom [end p. 418 / start p. 419] (though with oral contraception),

through which an STD is passed on. These are intermingled with the singable chorus and interjections that are both amusing and typical (“come on, how many guys do you know make love?”), all of which is delivered in a language and visual style that is radio- and TV-friendly – and is, in fact, still used and discussed in contexts of sex education today (Soberano-Wilson, 2021; see also Kangas, 2013 on Salt-N-Pepa’s follow-up project “Let’s talk about AIDS”).

“Let’s Talk about Sex” plays on and subverts the cultural practices of its time, and indeed takes a stance that contrasts with that of The 2 Live Crew. The flow is such that the lyrics are easily understandable (this is particularly important in a song about talking from the days before widespread availability of lyrics), and through it we hear normal Black women talking informatively and good-humouredly to us about a very normal part of life through the semiotic resources of hip hop. Indeed, it is fair to say that if the song were not a sensible discussion about sex, it would not merit particular attention: the semiotic resources it employs such as rhythm and melody are generally standard, which serves to both highlight and point out as normal the areas in which they are not (the gagged and bound man, the toddler playing with the book). Even at the level of elements (the tonality and uncomplicated harmonic progressions, the typical instrumentation, the typical clothing and dance styles), the emphasis is on challenging norms from within.

The portrayal of Salt-N-Pepa the act as three independent ladies in control of their bodies is not reflected in the fact that they did not write the song, and that they are, in fact, part of the commercial money machine. The appearance of genuine artistic expression and integrity collides with the Taylorism of music writing in the industry. Obviously, this is nothing new: many an artist – whether it be Willie Mae Thornton and Elvis Presley who both released “Hound Dog”, even if only one of them profited from its success (Shane 2019) – has performed and made famous songs that they did not write. The difference with “Let’s Talk about Sex”, however, is that the listening public wanted (and still seemingly wants) to believe its storyline of three women normalizing talking publicly about sex, and the industry and artists played into that desire. Here, therefore, we can see in action the Deleuzo-Guattarian point about the overarching networks of desire through which music as a commodity moves and circulates. Capitalism necessarily deterritorializes space first, ostensibly liberating the flows of desire, only to more smoothly integrate them back into the territory of capital itself. The historical context of the track’s production authorship is obfuscated and denied (a point which is true of the music industry more generally). This denial, or perhaps willing self-delusion, by artists and consumers alike, serves to increase sales and cash flow to the power that lies behind the industry and society. The importance here lies in the fact that we want to believe the industry mythos about this track specifically – the desire that it speaks to and how this desire is bound up within the territorialization of capitalist flows of cultural production, demonstrates that while we (still) partake in Salt-N-Pepa’s discussion about sex, we nevertheless do so with a certain amount of self-delusion (for example about Black exploitation) and ultimately at the behest of the market. [end p. 419 / start p. 420]

2. “I got so many flows I could flow on my own flow” (Mwangi, 2017): St Sebastian and Stella Mwangi

Let us now take a queer view of flow and entertain a visit from Aunt Flo both through her regular visits to bodies that are assigned female at birth, as well as to one that wasn't. If flow as a concept can be understood as a general theory of contemporary society, then it requires the inclusion of feminist and queer connotations of flow to disrupt the heteropatriarchal assumptions of what rap is and how flow is used. We begin with St Sebastian, the early Christian martyr and saint who was penetrated by arrows, healed by St Irene, and finally martyred though beheading. In the Middle Ages he was believed to intercede on behalf of plague victims, whose red sores were thought to resemble the saint's wounds from the arrows' penetration. He has also been a regular subject for homoerotic art and the male nude, as in the depiction from the seventeenth century shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Carlo Saraceni (1579–1620), Saint Sebastian, Castle Museum, Prague. Image: Wikimedia Commons [figure on p. 421 – full page]

The nude, penetrated male body in ecstatic suffering clearly demands a homoerotic interpretation (for more on Sebastian's place in art history see Parker, 2018), but it is not just gay men who enjoy male homoerotic art. Sebastian's posture in Figure 3 is akin to that typically associated with reclining female nudes, and the painting's lighting

emphasies his bare, hairless torso, together with the breasts that he does not have. The vectors of the painting run in a diagonal from lower left to upper right (Sebastian's legs, the arrows in the quiver that point to his chest), intersected perpendicularly down to his groin (Sebastian's torso, the light, the trees, and the arrow penetrating his body). Unusually, in Figure 3 Sebastian is portrayed as pierced by only one arrow, but it penetrates him through his white linen loincloth onto which his blood is spilled. The homoerotic metaphors are clear here, but we can queer the queer with a queer feminist gaze: in our reading, St Sebastian is having a period. The red blood on the white cloth is reminiscent of images of Christ's suffering, which was itself queered in medieval contexts (Christ's side would – from which blood and water flowed –, portrayed as a vulva, was thought to bring relief to the pains of childbirth (Sexton, 2017; Coman, 2020)). To the modern eye, the red blood on the white cloth is reminiscent of menstrual product advertising – in which the blood only relatively recently turned from blue to red – as well as Sebastian's inherent glamour and enjoyment in his state, such as in Modess sanitary product adverts from the mid twentieth century (Figure 4). (For a full discussion of commerciality in menstrual product advertising see Mørk Rosvik, 2022.)



Figure 4: Modess... *because*. c. 1940. Picture: Gurowitz (2014) [figure on p. 422]

As it is for St Sebastian, so it is for hip hop. We use this example of the queer feminist gaze re-interpreting homoerotic art as a lens through which to explore in the remainder of our case studies one kind of flow that has heretofore been overlooked in discussions of hip hop and rap: the flow of menstrual blood, of the euphemistic Aunt Flo. The Norwegian-Kenyan hip hop artist Stella Mwangi's 2017 release "Kuchizi" is a song that code-switches between Swahili and English. The title, according to translations on the internet, means "crazy", and it is only in the second verse that Mwangi switches to predominantly English to rap specifically on the notion of flow. As the first part of our

analysis will concentrate on the semiotic resource of rhyme/assonance, it is necessary to quote the verse in full: [end p. 420]

Me dio dendai wa rap
Flow so korupt
Tell'em that's a wrap
Ka sweety kako wrapped
Oh tell'em suck a cock
About four o'clock
I'll be on my next stop
Chopper landing on the top
Oh bombo clat
I'm higher than a Dutch
I'm killing this skirt like a Scottish on some scotch
Hold my purse I'm 'bout to take a shot
Hii truck naidinya kama S.W.A.T.
Me dio dendai wa rap T I A all day
Flowing like a river river Niling all way
If I'm not the shit then piss taking a piss
All my girls know my flow make all you n****s stiff. [end p. 422 / start p. 423]
I got so many flows I could flow on my own flow
Put some beats on them beats see me go ugh
Hii game ya rap from the second bar you knew already it was a wrap
Niko mbele ya kuchizi [refrain; repeated]

Source: Mwangi (2017b)

The flows named in this verse travel across rap, corruption, sexuality, water/the natural world (a tributary to the Nile and part of the Nile basin are in Kenya, where Mwangi was born), and, in our reading of the verse, menstruation. The play on words between “rap”/“wrap”/“wrapped”, which rhymes with Mwangi’s pronunciation of “korupt”, highlights much of what will also be true for the next two analyses: the potential corruption of society and the music industry that operates within it. Indeed, in Mwangi’s performance the assonance continues at the line ends until the word “day” which marks a change in the meanings of flow. From here the line end rhymes/assonances run in pairs (“day”/“way”; “piss”/“stiff”; “flow”/“ugh”) before returning to “wrap” the verse before the chorus. This long flow of assonance on “rap” with a turn to “flow” is what, for us, situates this verse and this song as the central example in our discussion. It portrays a self-awareness that we find at once both arresting and intriguing: indeed, it was hearing this song upon its release in 2017 that inspired the research that ultimately led to this article. It is not surprising that the artists got there first.

It is of note for our analysis that this song was released with two videos, one of which is a lyrics video (Mwangi 2017b), presumably due to the complexity of the code-switching (for those who don’t speak both Swahili and English). Musically, the song features very sparse instrumentation. A recurrent synthesizer melody is heard almost constantly over a drum-machine beat, and although in the mix its sonic weight is on a par with that of

the rapped text, the sheer repetitiveness of the instrumental is such that the listener's focus is quickly drawn to the lyrics. At certain points the instrumentation drops out altogether as a highlighting affect for certain phrases, which together with a primarily monotone delivery again serves to place the text in the auditory foreground. The lyric video has the words of the text appearing and disappearing one-by-one in pink as they are rapped (Figure 5). The background features an image and its close mirror of Mwangi on either side of a screen depicting her face. The colouration of Mwangi's clothing in the images is of low modality and clearly altered, reminiscent of Andy Warhol's portrait of Marilyn Monroe, yet with a focus on the feminine curves of her body. The central portrait of Mwangi's face is coloured in a techno, almost sci-fi style, with a focus on her eye sockets emitting light, and, crucially, on her lips which are the same pink as the text. This visual highlight between the artist's mouth and the text it is rapping is pertinent in a music genre in which the language, the flow, is dominated by male artists, and in a culture where discourses and power are still primarily male (as we shall see more explicitly in the next example). In this lyric video, the focus is naturally on the text, but the visual depiction highlights Mwangi's linguistic dexterity at its locus: her lips.

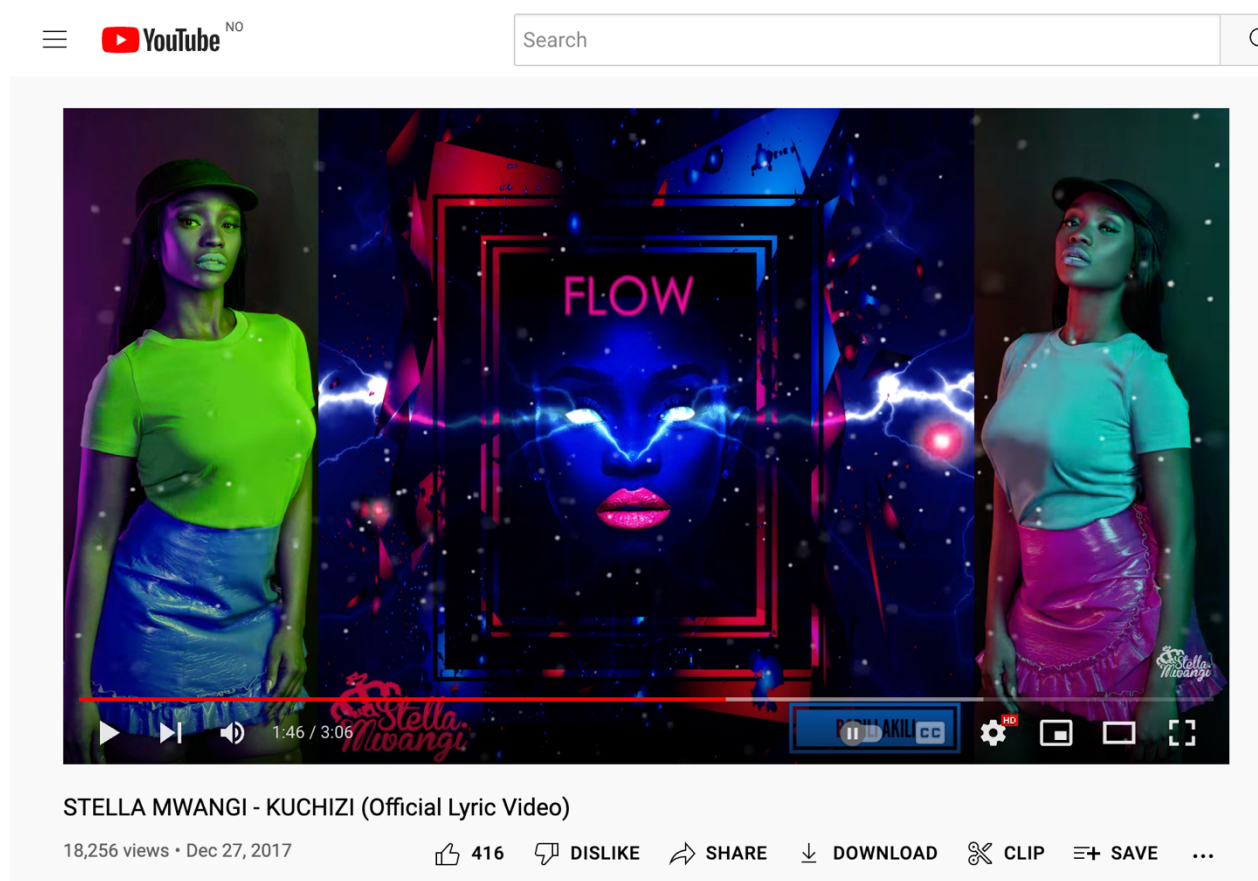


Figure 5: Still from Mwangi (2017b), taken from YouTube. [figure on p. 424]

In contrast, in the official music video (which as of 2018 also contains the lyrics, but which on release did not) it is difficult to make out the faces of the characters. The

atmosphere is generally dark with strobe lighting, reminiscent of a club, but also with [end p. 423 / start p. 424] visible firearms, references to drug use, and several masked individuals: it is generally a threatening atmosphere that is created through the visual elements. Particularly of note for our purposes here, this most obvious example of the multiple notions of flow in action clearly portrays that of capital in the video. At 0'37" cash makes its first appearance on the screen (Figure 6). It is exchanged, scattered, and floats around in the foreground. During the refrain after verse one, Mwangi is pictured performing within the classic cultural practices of hip hop: expensive clothing, a fast car, and jewellery. Unlike The 2 Live Crew, however, neither her flow nor her visual portrayal here is ironic: despite its title, the congruence between music and visuals in this song clearly does not set it within the realm of comedy (even allowing for misunderstandings in the sections rapped in Swahili). The second verse (on flow) is rapped almost entirely in English and mostly in the club setting, with the addition of firearms where they are mentioned, and a brief but crucial episode at 1'51", immediately after the line "I got so many flows I could flow on my own flow", which seems to be a woman-on-woman BDSM scene shown as the line "put some beats on them beats see me go ugh" is rapped. This bringing together of the different meanings of both "flow" and "beat" in the images and text marks a turn in the video towards more sexualized depictions of (female) bodies, that continue through the final refrain and to the song's end.

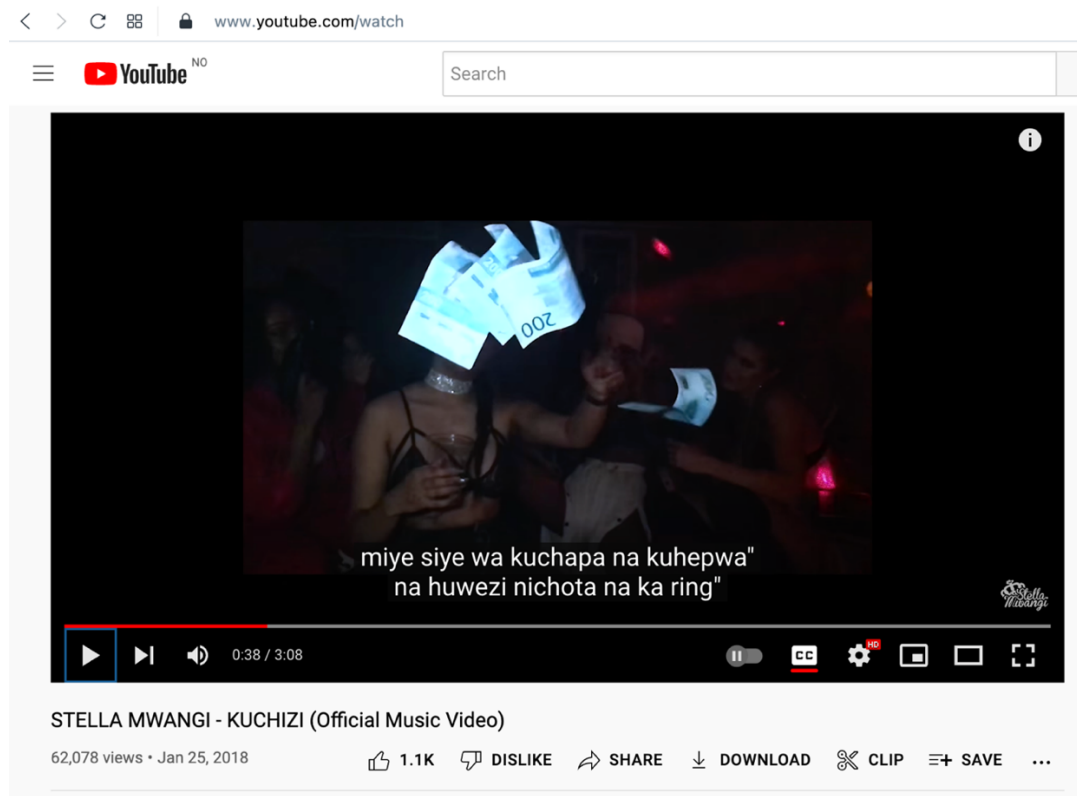


Figure 6: Still from Mwangi (2017a), taken from YouTube. [figure on p. 425]

Both the image of St Sebastian and “Kuchizi” demand contemplation, partly due to their foreignness (in time or language). Unlike our other more light-hearted examples, these works ask for participation from the listener/viewer. Whereas St Sebastian is [end of text on p. 424 before figure 5 / start of text on p. 425 after figure 6] penetrated and bleeds in a sensual reclining pose, and Modess advertising glamourizes and hides the bodies and their functions its products serve, Stella Mwangi lets the different forms of flow take centre stage. While it is true that there is no actual blood portrayed in the video, the textual references to “piss”, “shit”, “stiff”, and of course “so many flows” are clear references to basic bodily mechanics that are highlighted by the importance given to the semiotic resource that is the rapped text. These are set within the cultural practices portrayed in the video of monetary exchange, consumerism, narcotics, firearms, and queer BDSM sex. Mwangi’s song “Kuchizi” demonstrates the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of the single flow: that of embodied capitalism in which desire cuts across and through performative wealth, and in which sex and power connect all things into the one economy.

3. “I’m not fazed, I’m only here to sin” (Lil Nas X, 2021): Megan Thee Stallion and Lil Nas X

Having set the scene for more contemporary discourses of flow in hip hop with “Kuchizi”, Megan Thee Stallion’s June 2021 single “Thot Shit” demonstrates even more explicitly the ways in which flow carries and connects the multiple discursive fields we explore in this article. Performed as Tina Snow, Stallion’s alter-ego which is itself a reference to the sexually confident Pimp C of UKG, the song makes explicit the connections between [end p. 425 / start p. 426] sexuality, performance, and the political through its music video. Its opening sequence sets out the cultural practices in which it is embedded: a white male senator leaves sexist comments on the video for Stallion’s earlier single “Body” before masturbating to it. This rather neatly connects both the flows of political power with the libidinal flows of ejaculation (and in a more explicit way than the political-class figures portrayed in the second verse of Salt-N-Pepa’s “Let’s Talk about Sex”). From there the video sees the man stalked by women as he goes about his daily life. Tina Snow and Thee Hotties run the man over with a garbage truck, they appear twerking in the supermarket, and even as waiting staff at a restaurant. The video ends with them grafting a labia onto his face in place of his mouth – a move that in our reading is a semiotic resource that provides a clear link to medieval images of the flows of blood and water from Christ’s side wound, but this time as punishment for hypocritical racist masculine sexuality rather than as balm for a body in pain. Crucially, it is the cultural practices on display in the video of service workers and essential employees that underscore the point made at the opening. This is typical both of a general ignorance of Black women’s labour in the music industry and more broadly, as Brooks has explored in *Liner Notes for the Revolution* (2021), as well as a general (white) fear of the Black mind alongside a delight in the fetishization of the Black body (Gordon,

2022). The exploitation of sanitation workers, service staff, and shelf stackers is linked explicitly to the libidinal economy of political patriarchal power that seeks to denigrate and control sexually confident women, and the song's title itself is a reminder of this (reclaiming the derogatory term "thot"). Alongside intertexts with horror films and semiotic resources such as the video's gleefully over the top visuals, feminine flow reterritorializes the political patriarch, silencing his mouth with a new set of lips. As director Aube Perrie put it, "Megan had the guts to put that on the face of a political class that sexualizes everything, but at the same time are always talking about decency and how we should act and how we should not act" (Hussey, 2021). Unlike St Sebastian who is portrayed as attaining ecstasy through his bleeding sexual organ, the senator is rendered powerless and silent through a very Megan Thee Stallion version of the scold's bridle and is reminiscent of the gagged and bound man in Salt-N-Pepa's "Let's Talk about Sex".

While the video and the text are not incongruous, they do not tell the same story. Megan Thee Stallion's delivery is fast – apart from the chorus, it is difficult even for native speakers to make out the text. This speed achieves three things. First, it serves to highlight the storyline portrayed in the video over that portrayed by the text: when hearing/watching the video and song together; it is as if the song accompanies the visuals. Secondly, when hearing the song without reference to the video, the fast delivery demands concentration and challenges listeners to engage with her side of the story. For the text, when taken without the video, features no masturbating senator, but rather a confident, successful (her awards are referenced), wealthy (as is her bank), smart (and her impending graduation), and openly sexual woman answering her critics. Thirdly, with the meaning of the text partially hidden through the delivery, the oral effect is one of coherence of the vocal line with the instrumentation. Thus, the vocal line and the bass compete for the role of figure in the audio mix, with the vocals only coming out on top because the bass drops out at various points as a highlighting technique (also seen in "Kuchizi"). The heavy bass is therefore the ground in the mix, forming it together with the remaining backing vocals, [end p. 426 / start p. 427] echoes, and other sounds. The field is the drum machine, which is in the aural background precisely because Stallion's delivery is so rhythmic and instrument-like that it is the driving rhythm of the song. In contrast to the labia-silenced senator, Stallion's voice and flow are here in full control of the song's progress, as we fully learn when we understand the text she raps.

Our final example of the links between the flows of hip hop, the flows of sexual and libidinal desire, and the great flow of capitalism is the work of Lil' Nas X. We treat this as a pair with Megan Thee Stallion not only because of the timing but because of the way both tracks consciously court controversy from the American conservative right. Notable for being an out queer rapper in a historically deeply homophobic industry, Lil Nas X's breakthrough song "Old Town Road" was a defiant queering of the heteronormative expectations and standards of both hip hop and country music, the two music styles

fused in the song. Its success was generated through its breakout on the social media site TikTok which is predicated towards almost infinite reproducibility and meme influence. Here we see social media virality as another kind of flow, this time a digital flow that serves as both propagation and, of course, extremely savvy marketing of the product. Given its viral-memetic flow across the internet, channelled by fandom communities, and its endless adaptability, it is not necessarily surprising that the song went on to be the biggest US No.1 of all time. One of his next singles, “Montero (Call Me by Your Name)”, is even more explicit in its exploration of homoerotic desire and sex. Here we see the flow of desire as colliding with the moral and political machinery of contemporary American culture which seeks to channel, cut off, or distribute flows of desire more widely, as demonstrated by the outrage that met the music video which restages the visual language of the biblical fall into a literal pole dance into damnation, climaxing with a grinding lap dance for Satan before killing the devil and taking his place on the throne of hell. The song’s joyful tonality and the video’s celebration of desire is also a damning indictment of the ways in which religious symbolic language makes monsters of the queer and non-normative. In the context of the different types of flow under discussion here, it is notable that one of the ways in which Lil Nas X (or, more likely, his team) responded to the controversy was to auction on the internet a limited edition of shoes containing human blood: in our reading of flow, virality, and sexuality, this is a twenty-first century equivalent of the homoerotic male bleeding that we saw in the seventeenth century portrayal of St Sebastian. However, for Foucault (1973; 1975; 1979), political or cultural power exerted through outrage and censorship is not simply repressive and dominative but is also both distributive and generative. The flow of outrage was thus easily channelled into effective marketing – particularly for Lil Nas X in a global social media-driven music industry – making the song even more popular and profitable. Therefore, the development of the music industry and social media over the last thirty years is seen in the fact that with Lil Nas X his flow is not simply a description of his lyrical ability or dexterity, but a rather larger use of the term. Through his virality, he has flowed consistently through the nexus of internet fandom, contemporary media, politics and, yes, music too. If anything, his career up to this point highlights the extent to which these realms of cultural production are no longer stable but merge into one another. [end p. 427]

[start p. 428] One notable point that should be considered in an analysis of “Montero (Call me by your name)” is that, without the video, the song would probably not have caused such significant controversy. Its lyrics, which form the figure in the song’s soundscape, clearly talk about desire and sex, including male ejaculation during oral sex, but the only explicit reference to homoeroticism are the lines “I’m not fazed, I’m only here to sin / If Eve ain’t in your garden you know that you can”. In other words, in the context of the cultural practices of hip hop, the lyrics to “Montero” do not seem particularly explicit, and their queerness is partially masked. In order for it to be uncovered, the listener has to look outside of the sound of the song – for example, to uncover the meaning of the title (Montero is the artist’s real name), the video (which has a spoken introduction), Lil Nas X’s tweets, and so on. It is in the semiotic resource that

is the vocal delivery in the song, however, that the queerness comes to the fore. For a hip hop song, there is very little rap, and when it comes, it is sometimes with the vocals partially distorted, giving a sense of straining, perhaps desperation. The flow does not have the slick feel of that of Meghan Thee Stallion or Stella Mwangi, nor does it feature the spontaneousness of the conversation with Salt-N-Pepa or the invitation from The 2 Live Crew; rather, it is relaxed and more obviously a pre-written, rehearsed text. (That is not to imply that hip hop artists do not practice! Rather, we mean that the authenticity of the text which is one of the hallmarks of the genre often calls for a flow and delivery that sound improvised, even when they are not.) The song also blurs the boundary between pop and hip hop by featuring far more sung melody than is usual in hip hop. What's more, Lil Nas X has a vocal range that includes the high tenor, almost countertenor, range – reminiscent of boy bands, ballads, and K-pop – yet he also frequently raps in a much deeper vocal register. In this way, through his voice that comes out of his body, Lil Nas X flits between the semiotic resources of two musical styles (sung pop and rapped hip hop), and thus two very different traditions of masculinity in popular music. His use of his voice thus embodies his queerness. It is also relevant here that the field of the soundscape is the syncopated handclapping that, together with the bass that usually marks the first beat, drives the song's groove. When set back into the context with the video, in which Lil Nas X plays all the parts (thus kissing himself, lapdancing on himself, holding his own bonds, stoning himself), this bodily dexterity not only references masturbation but also celebrates desire. This is, after all, a coming out song with a distinct feel-good vibe. Lil Nas X literally shows us that he loves himself – and while he raises his metaphorical middle finger to his detractors in a very different way from Meghan Thee Stallion, it is still he who takes home the money.

Conclusion: “Big bank take lil' bank, bitch, add it up” (Stallion, 2021)

In our reading of Deleuze and Guattari, the flow of capitalist economics is the flow of desire, and vice versa (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983). The fictional former sex-slave Rakam puts it more succinctly in our epigraph to this article: “[It] may be in our sexuality that we are most easily enslaved. [...] The politics of the flesh are the roots of power.” (Le Guin, 1995: 232) In a consumerist society in a social-media age, we partake in our own [end p. 428 / start p. 429] enslavement even whilst deluding ourselves that we are somehow individuals with unique tastes that we define ourselves, and display these preferences in what the philosopher of environmentalist aesthetics Timothy Morton has called “the *ultimate* consumerist performance” (Morton, 2021: 86, emphasis original). Analysts are not immune to this, as our consideration of the different affordances of flow in hip hop and in society demonstrates. Our methodology and analyses nevertheless show that an awareness of one's own cultural background does not impede analysis; rather, it is central and even catalytic to it. We have written this from the inside, from within a culture where the flows of libidinal desire and of consumerist/digital capitalism are intertwined, driven by the powers of the market for the profit of the few. Cultural

production is precisely *production*, not simply of just another commodity but as a kind of factory for desire, from the libidinal self-deceptions of Salt-N-Pepa and the question of artistic authorship to the cathartic and rebellious joy of organized thots in Megan Thee Stallion. After all, even if the subject matter is serious, we do not claim that analysis can't be fun.

Thus, we do not wish to end on an entirely negative note, for there is one important aspect that still needs to be considered as we conclude: that of pleasure, of the erotic surplus of *jouissance*. For Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, the text (a term we apply here in the broad sense) is a source of fetish, “and this fetish desires me” (Barthes, 1975: 27) – the flow between consumer and product is two-way. The term *jouissance* stems from the French “jouir” which translates as “to orgasm” and is also etymologically connected to “joy”. Yet this fails to capture the complexity of the word: for Lacan it is a zone beyond pleasure and into the realm of pain, a notion explored by Deleuze and Guattari throughout *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. For Deleuze and Guattari (1983), *jouissance* was framed in political terms: “flags, nations, armies get a lot of people aroused” as they put it (293), and the regulation and disciplining of libidinal *jouissance* was central to their attempt at answering the basic question of the political philosophy of why people might desire their own repression. In Deleuze’s solo-authored work on masochism, *Coldness and Cruelty*, he writes of the pleasure and excitement in “the absent Object”, that which is *not*, or in more philosophical terms, the negation of Being (Deleuze, 1989: 28). The term *jouissance* was reclaimed by feminist philosopher and literary critic Hélène Cixous (1976), for feminist musicology by Renée Cox Lorraine (2001), and for queer musicology by Stan Hawkins (2002). Here, though, we want to expand *jouissance* again, this time by acknowledging that the flows we outline here are also those of pleasure. Like St Sebastian’s queer visit from Aunt Flo that results from his penetration, at once a source of pain and of extasy, so do we acknowledge that our analyses bring home some truths that while sometimes uncomfortable, are nevertheless pleasurable. With The 2 Live Crew we are exaggerate and laugh at our own desires. Like Salt-N-Pepa, we have in this article had a frank discussion of the sexuality of flow. With Stella Mwangi we have explored the multiple meanings of the term, including taking seriously its connotations with menstruation. With Meghan Thee Stallion we have fought back against how the patriarchy relies on Black women’s mostly unseen, undervalued, and exploited labour to maintain the flow of capital in the interests of the powerful. And with Lil Nas X we have taken delight at ourselves in the garden of desire and pole danced into the hell that is both our entrapment in consumerism and our source of joy where we now lap dance the devil – [end p. 429 / start p. 430] perhaps to take his place and redistribute his power. Even if we do not succeed, we can at least invite you to join us in taking pleasure in the trying.

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