RAISING THE BOTTOM

BOUNCE MUSIC AND BLACK QUEER PERFORMANCE IN POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

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In loving memory of Velmer and Joseph Alix—
mister done good

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PREFACE
BOURBON STREET BLUES

I was nine years old, out with Mama and Grandpa Alix on Bourbon Street, Halloween 1987. They were enjoying their to-go drinks and walking too slow for me, so I began to walk ahead. Mind you, this was before tourism in the city had really begun to boom, and I was only a block away, not far out of their range.

A tall black man, oiled from head to toe and wearing nothing but a red sequined thong, came dancing out of a club. He two-stepped, twirled, and shook his ass to a song blasting from inside. I don't remember the sound of the music, or what he said as he shouted for passersby to come in and join. He didn't seem to notice me standing in the middle of the street, frozen in awe. I can't tell you if I wanted him or wanted to be him, but a world of possibilities suddenly leapt into existence.

I turned and started heading back toward my family. On the other side of the street, a boy about the same age as me, covered in sweat, tap-danced on a flattened cardboard box for whatever money people would put in a can beside him. I saw splotches of dark skin that resembled my own, but his shirtless torso and arms were covered in what appeared to be burns. I kept walking and joined my family. I tried to walk and match their steps, but I couldn't find the rhythm.

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There's a long tradition of touristic and romantic narratives that speak to the transformations, not least of them death, that might occur in

New Orleans. That walk down Bourbon was the first of many trips to the city, and in many ways, it was the beginning of a lifelong interest.

Beyond that experience, the little I knew of New Orleans I'd received through my paternal grandfather. Big Alix was born and raised there before joining the Great Migration of the 1940s and heading west and north to far-off Washington state, where I was born. He was my step-grandfather, but that didn't stop my parents from giving me his name.

Back home in Washington, Big Alix didn't speak directly about his youth in New Orleans. All most of us knew of his past was that as a young man in his early twenties, he'd been in a fight with a white man of prominence, and that his family had told him to flee. As the story goes, he got on a train and never moved back. But distance didn't get in the way. My grandma would call her New Orleans in-laws for counsel if Big Alix acted up, and my sister and I would wonder at hand-me-down clothes from far-off cousins we'd never met.

My grandparents' history is important in framing my path to New Orleans. Drawn to the Northwest by plentiful jobs in agriculture and infrastructural expansion, they experienced a great deal of upward social and economic mobility between the Depression and the 1960s. Despite growing up in Washington, I was surrounded by a small black community with serious pride in their accomplishments and local contributions. Once, driving through the Cascade mountains on I-90 in my grandparents' 1973 Monte Carlo, a state trooper stopped us. The officer approached Big Alix behind the wheel. "Sir," he said, "do you know you were swerving in the road back there?" The first thing to come out of Big Alix's mouth was "Man, I built this road."

My grandfather's brand of masculinity was tough, but he never took comedy and a good time for granted, something I think he brought with him from New Orleans. As soon as church was out, we would start watching kung fu movies. At sixty-something, he let me wrestle him and play bartender, making virgin cocktails he'd pretend to get drunk off of. Now that I think about it, he might not have been pretending. I'll never forget him clarifying the difference between a prostitute and a ho while watching reruns of *Miami Vice* at 2 a.m. He passionately explained to me that one was free and the other was not. I was seven.

Nana and he divided cooking from day to day, and I always looked forward to his Creole dishes. Rice was an important part of our diet; how to go about cooking it was a matter of life and death in our kitchen. If I even attempted to lift the lid before that magic moment, rather than

setting a timer, he would make me stand there and use all my senses till a voice inside my head said *now*, to which he'd respond with one of the only Creole words he ever graced us with, *konprann*, meaning understand. These small aspects of his, and by association *our*, cultural differences always gave me a sense of being local but also connected to a broader lineage. They were also my first lessons in learning that blackness was not a monolith, and that we could follow various roots and routes to come to see ourselves as a community, a diasporic one.

Indeed, both my grandparents made life lessons out of their small home, which, despite being right in the industrial center of our small town, was also a small farm. We had peaches, apples, watermelon, strawberries, mint, cucumbers, a grapevine Nana made juice and eventually wine from, and a big chicken coop. We ate their eggs and occasionally wrung their necks, rather than buying the store-bought ones my sister and I preferred. They also came in handy when it was time to potty train me: My grandparents would take me to the coop and make me focus on the chickens as they sat. Big Alix would say, "See how they just sitting there and being patient till something happens?" and Nana would say, "That's what you gotta do." I did as instructed and went to the toilet *to roost* until something happened. To my surprise, they were right.

This way of inverting the everyday into performances of self-making showed up in our lives, proving that nothing was to be taken for granted—not even the smallest of god's creatures. These early lessons in cultivating a sense of self while making do with what's at hand served as a prologue to the "bottom knowledge" I'd later observe in my fieldwork.

Beyond our family's household, there were two primary avenues connecting us to blackness outside our region: the church, and secular black music and performance. Big Alix was one of a few "sometimes" Catholics in our community, and he never converted to Nana's Pentecostal faith. He wasn't a musician, either, but his ambivalence around Protestant morality and his love of a good time led him to give my dad his first guitar when he was six—what he often called my dad's starvation box. Despite never spending time in New Orleans, Dad was firmly rooted in the blues tradition; playing by ear, he sought to live up to idols like Muddy Waters, Big Mama Thornton, and Fats Domino. Big Alix had an eclectic ear and liked everything from Cab Calloway to Elvis Presley. With all these influences and support, Dad started playing professionally by the time he was twelve—at church, in his own bands, or hired by community groups like the Elks Lodge. Nana certainly was known to party before

she got saved, and she also supported her son's musical talent. By the time I came around, my dad had performed throughout the West Coast. He'd once opened for Chaka Khan, he'd played in the studios of the Isley Brothers and Ike Turner, and he'd established relationships with other Washington-affiliated musicians and black celebrities, not least of them Quincy Jones and Alex Haley.

My dad used these contacts to start a limousine service in the early '80s, acting as a driver and fixer for black entertainers visiting the area. When he brought Cab Calloway to visit my grandparents' home in 1986, I breakdanced for him in the living room, and he gave me money for my bank account. As the story goes, my dad cringed as Calloway and Big Alix swapped stories of their youthful partying days in the Oakland jazz scene of the 1940s, with Big Alix recounting, "Man, the coke was flowing!"

There was a gendered divide between my grandparents' and parents' investment in the church and secular music. I literally lived (and often was torn) between them. By the time I was born, my parents' marriage was off and on, and they were often separated. Dad performed for a network of hotel clubs and bars, where he also lived when he wasn't at home. I would spend weekends and summers in the back of smoky hotel lounges, behind the bar eating bowls of cocktail cherries, and at the pool playing with other kids I'd never meet again. I loved it; the funk, glamour, and general sociality of Dad's world was fascinating. Between his limo service and my attempts to perfect my signature while charging room service to his tab, I developed a false sense of class consciousness.

Life with Dad was in stark contrast to Mama's religiosity. Her disdain for Dad's life as a performer and artist grew once they divorced. Mama was the one who paid for my classical piano lessons and encouraged me to go to church, where I began singing in choirs. She also instilled a love of travel in me, taking me on cross-country road trips to visit our big, spread-out family. It took years to appreciate, but she had a diverse curiosity about music and art that often found its outlet through the small adventures she tucked between years of graveyard shifts as a registered nurse. Nevertheless, as a child, I struggled with the possibility that the devil was real, that secular music was a vehicle to hell, and that my dad was the chauffeur.

I learned early on and in quite personal ways that spirit was assumed to move in one realm while erotic desire lived in another. In music, assumed lines were drawn between good and evil, what would lead to a full life or a precarious death, and what would bring about wealth or poverty.

These lines were racialized and classed: becoming a good civic participant meant sublimating artistic passions into good, honest, hard work or the church. I saw the cracks and crevices in this logic, though. First, Dad was just as likely to perform at a family or community wedding, birthday, funeral, or reunion as he was to go to the club. He was a small-town celebrity even my friends at school knew and liked. Second, everybody at church had at one point danced to and enjoyed his music. Quite possibly many of them were at the club Saturday night and then in the church Sunday morning. The divide was more talk than practice.

Big Alix usually refused to go to church with the rest of the family because he found most church folk hypocritical. He and Nana had healthy debates and conversations about these issues. When Big Alix did join us on Sundays, he spent most of his time smoking on the front steps, keeping an eye on the ministers and deacons he didn't trust around his wife and family.

Just before that first trip to New Orleans, Mama decided to leave Washington and move back to her family in Oklahoma, and I went with her. It was devastating to be separated from my grandparents, my dad, my older sister, and the family dog. When Mama arranged for us to meet Big Alix in New Orleans later that year, it was a much-needed reunion, but for me, it was also filled with grief. I had changed. From the age of nine, I'd been in a perpetual state of longing for what I'd known. First the dog died, then Dad got a gig playing in Hong Kong and I would only get to see him every few years; then Nana died, and something broke inside.

Through all these changes, I was also coming to terms with my queerness. Nana and Big Alix had often joked with me about being weird, and I like to think there was an implicit solidarity. I never heard homophobia come from them, but even more, I never felt pressure to grow up and be anyone or anything other than a child of god. It was partly because of music that I never felt the need to go to church to connect to a higher power. Divinity knitted together the fabric of everything, from what I could tell. It connected us as a family despite distance, connected me to the chickens out in the coop, to the garden and food Nana canned, to the magic in Big Alix's pot of rice. Despite the binary logic of secular and sacred, good and bad, or what it meant to be human versus animal, it was all love. Nothing was more important than simply finding a reason to live and securing the spiritual and emotional provisions to do so. This was what shaped and supported me throughout life's changes.

After that first trip to New Orleans, I maintained a connection to the place through music and books; in some ways, this allowed me to stay connected to my grandparents. I was always reading comic books and loved anything with fantasy, sci-fi, or magic in the mix—a sensibility Mama shared with me more than anyone. When I got into reading Anne Rice's books after the film release of *Interview with the Vampire*, Mom would enjoy listening to me describe all the details, but she didn't quite grasp the appeal. For me, it was all about gothy, immortal queer longing, set against the libidinal street life I'd glimpsed in New Orleans. The mixture of unorthodox love and melancholic desire for transformation and power was appealing. This period also coincided with the emergence of New Orleans–based Nine Inch Nails, one of my favorite rock bands in the early '90s. Future rendezvous with Big Alix in the city included trips to landmarks described in Rice's books, which slowly added to my awareness of and fascination with the landscape and its history. I craved more knowledge of the city and read and watched everything I could.

Big Alix had a long battle with dementia that reached its peak in 2005, the year the levees broke. In the end, he could remember addresses, but not the name we shared. I would sit with him as he recounted his childhood in New Orleans. In some ways, he became young again, Benjamin Button–like. There was no way to explain to him the devastation of Katrina and the breaking levees, or that his two sisters who'd stayed in New Orleans had died. It was only a few more months before we finally lost him. Three siblings, all gone within a year. I was on my way to Big Alix's funeral the day I got the call that I'd been accepted to graduate school.

When I started visiting New Orleans again, I didn't know I was going to take up this research right away. It wasn't until my first Mardi Gras in 2008, deep in my cups, sitting at the iconic Mother-in-Law Lounge on Claiborne Avenue. Out of nowhere, I heard Big Alix: An older man beside me spoke, and a quality to his voice made me feel my grandfather's presence nearby. Suddenly, I felt called upon.

I've never had an experience like that since, but my time in the city has proved culture is truly a repository of feelings—a resource we can access in the wake of loss, displacement, and death. Given this past, it's hard to say when my research really began. It takes time for the head to catch up with the heart.

PROJECT MUSIC

It was summer 2010, and we were leaving a gig on Bourbon Street. I was performing with Vockah Redu and the Cru, a group of local artists who'd gained popular appeal through the commercial phenomenon of sissy bounce—a fast-paced black queer offshoot of the larger New Orleans bounce music scene. Bounce music, like Vockah and most of the group, came from the city's public housing projects and their surrounding neighborhoods. For a few months, I'd been working with the group as a DJ, cuing prerecorded tracks they would rap, sing, and dance to.

As we stopped to sit on a stoop and figure out the next move, it felt like a good time to switch hats and move from performer to anthropologist. I pulled out my recorder to do an interview, hoping to capture what was on everyone's mind.

Vockah, the principal leader of the group, went first. "The Magnolia itself was the beginning of everything," he said. "It really was the best project ever—not just 'cause I'm from there, and you know Uptown is the best. You know, like, *Uptown!* Just picture it: 'Uptown!' How's that sound?"

Vockah continued to reminisce about his past in the "'Nolia" neighborhood. "Daily life was like me and a bunch of black women walking the streets," he said. "Clara Street, to the Callio, the Melph—now that was the dirtiest project—but it's just like, Uptown, Uptown hoes! I was supposed to be the first sissy of Cash Money, but I didn't like that word ever since then. That's what they use to say."

"Sissy," often used locally as a catchall for black subjects who live outside masculine expectations, is generally directed at gay men and trans women. Cash Money Records, the music label that launched hip-hop stars like Drake, Nicki Minaj, and Lil Wayne, began in New Orleans; in its earliest days, it showcased bounce acts.

Many of Vockah's lyrics spoke to friendships and just hanging out, walking the streets. Even as we strolled along as a group, laughing and reflecting on our show, the call-and-response lyrics to one of his early songs came to mind:

Fresh ideas, fresh face to the world
Easy, breezy, beautiful avenue girls!
C'mon, c'mon, avenue (girls!), diamonds and (pearls!)
Avenue (girls!), diamonds and (pearls!)
Make ya tiddies (twirl!) avenue (girls!) on top the (world!)

"Avenue Girlz 2Gs," recorded when Vockah was a teen in the '90s, playfully remixes the "Easy, Breezy, Beautiful, CoverGirl" jingle, redefining feminine beauty and sexuality in the everyday life of ghettoized black youth. The song's background vocals were delivered by some of the young women he'd walked those streets with; many of them had since been displaced, along with a great deal of the public housing community he'd grown up with. The song is just one example of what I call *raising the bottom*: performances that redirect common hierarchies of value in an effort to sustain what's been cast to the bottom of social relations.

Vockah and the other group members' memories functioned much like his songs—recalling relationships, places, and circumstances that would otherwise be forgotten. This was in great part what fascinated people about sissy bounce. The music and performances paid tribute to, and expressed the joy of, people living at the intersection of multiple forms of marginalization due to race, gender, class, and sexuality, in places defined by generations of alienation, displacement, and exploitation.

As we sat talking, it was getting late. People were beginning to exit the clubs on their way home. The cassette tape in the recorder slowly rolled as the cars cruised by. One member of the group after another spoke while the others danced. Somebody started to bend over and twerk to the music coming from the nearby club, flirting with the occupants of the cars passing by. Everything was great until one older black driver made eye contact with something he didn't like: us.

The man behind the wheel began cursing: "Sissies! Faggots! You punks!" He described to nobody and everybody what he'd do to us. At first it seemed like the car would slowly pass, but then it came to a full

stop and the driver began yelling about shooting us. Arguing with his two women passengers, he backed up until we were face to face. Then he leaned down as if to reach for the gun he claimed to have.

No one in our group moved, let alone attempted to run. We were together, silent, inching closer toward that annoyingly familiar refrain, "vulnerable and at risk." If I'd been alone, I would have run, but in our group, it felt as though we were caught together in a net—that if any one of us moved or spoke, our decision could mean everyone's fate. For a moment it was just silence and a lot of eyes. Then the driver began arguing with his passengers again. Instead of bullets, he punctuated his exit with a run of curses and skidding tires.

"I wish he would have!" said Fatman.

"If that had happened back in the projects, I'd have slipped away and come back and got his ass from behind," Vockah said.

Mundane threats like what we'd just experienced were as familiar to the Cru as the positive attention and applause we'd received an hour before at our show. Haters gonna hate. I found Vockah's consistent reference to the projects telling. Good or bad, it was home. Most of the public housing projects the group came from, like the Magnolia, were gone and had been for some time. Despite this, the memories and conditions everyone had experienced within them were often reproduced, in moments of violence but also great joy.

When I got home that night to jot down my field notes, I picked up the recorder and pressed play. It had caught the interviews, but also the scary encounter. It was a haunting sound.

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Sissy bounce is an amalgamation of black queer vernacular, R & B, blues, and US and Caribbean performance traditions. It also highlights New Orleans's mixture of sexuality and black political struggle. The genre became a central ingredient in pop cultural treatments of liberation in the 2010s, when shaking and twerking amid assimilation and respectability politics garnered widespread appeal.

This book, *Raising the Bottom*, is a performance ethnography. Over two years, I examined everyday life from the stage and the moments in between each show and situated bounce and its surrounding culture historically and globally. My research required paying attention to community members and cultural practices marginalized not only by race and sexuality, but also class disparities within black communities. I conducted the

ethnographic portion of this research, focusing on my time with Vockah Redu and the Cru, between 2009 and 2012.

Sissy bounce helped define more inclusive notions of black belonging in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005; that disaster had caused the mass displacement of black New Orleans and led to a radical shift in neoliberal governance.[1] Why and how, I wondered, did a black queer performance genre from the projects come to represent home and kinship for the broader black community in a time of crisis? Although commercial interest in sissy bounce peaked around 2015, its reach can't be taken for granted. Sissy bounce increased black queer and trans people's visibility in mainstream social media, dance culture, and hip-hop throughout the 2010s. Its traces can still be seen when someone twerks, face down and ass up, on the dance floor; when a song samples bounce's unique rhythms and voices; and when contemporary black queer representations combine equal parts urbanness and Southernness.

The popularity of bounce artists both within and outside New Orleans reveals that their lives are far more broadly significant than apparent at first glance. As black queer Southern performers, they've played a key role in defining alternative notions of black power and liberation. Their lives, and the culture that fostered them, also challenge dominant assumptions that black kinship, home, and community are inherently homophobic, transphobic, and antiqueer.

This book offers a path toward reconsidering and redirecting personal and communal assumptions about good/evil, pleasure/pain, and dirtiness/cleanliness. Readers can also make various connections between the text and debates about difference, power, and social justice. I'm of the mind that none of these topics can be engaged without first doing the undervalued labor of digging deep to observe our own unconscious biases. Anthropology presupposes an interrogation—a view usually imagined as neutral and downward-looking—of the world around us; that position, like many others within this book, might need to be inverted to consider what the people and stories within these pages have to say. I discourage, too, taking up this book in the name of multicultural bridge-building if the end result involves annexing black queer experiences into a passageway for those already afforded power.

For readers who are struggling to embrace what they've been told is unworthy and excessive in themselves, consider the acts of self-love, intentionality, and manifestation in these pages as a condition of

possibility for your own capacity to define, grow, and act. Like music, dance, or language, this book won't produce better access and resources for systemically marginalized peoples in and of itself. But perhaps, through playing with entrenched ideas about the how, where, what, and why of power and powerlessness, we might tip the scales that undergird today's intellectual force, and thereby change material conditions. Redirection as a practice of revaluation is inherent to this work: If you've ever caught your foot tapping to the beat despite what your mind tells you is cool, pleasurable, and of good taste, I encourage you to pay attention to your felt connection to the text. You could be a few steps away from raising the bottom yourself—and if so, what would that mean about you and your own worth?

AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE BOTTOM

Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, and its fictional black neighborhood, "the Bottom," feel especially relevant in situating black queer performances of bounce. *Sula*'s account of the people and geography of the Bottom is a blueprint: It brings what black feminist scholar Barbara Christian referred to as the felt knowledge of black life into contrast with the "real," self-evident yet constructed, mapping of spaces.[2]

Raising the Bottom traces the structure of what I call an *epistemology of the bottom*: a way of understanding, navigating, and countering the interconnected narratives and (de)valuation systems that merge black and queer bodies, spaces, and sex with the bottom of social hierarchies. I insist on rethinking who is an authority as we rank knowledge from doctors, clergy, academics, artists, musicians, and dancers. If hospitals, churches, and universities are formal social institutions that attend to the former, how can we conceive of the stage, nightclub, and street as informal equivalents of the latter?

This epistemology of the bottom is a toolkit for deconstructing commonly held notions around bottom locations, whether those locations are geographic or embodied: for instance, black queer vernacular, public housing projects, the body's own physical bottom, and deviant stereotypes of the sissy. *Raising the Bottom* will highlight the ways performers have taken these and other stereotypes and their everyday effects, remixed them, and redirected the result into counterintuitive notions of power, pleasure, and solidarity.

Other thinkers I lean on include anal theorists like Kathryn Bond Stockton, whose 2006 book *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* brings *Sula* into conversation with psychoanalysis through Freud. Stockton makes a compelling case for the Bottom as a metaphor for a range of representational fields, as well as a signifier for a racialized economic basement. I'm also grateful for the guidance of Jennifer C. Nash, whose 2014 essay "Black Anality" explores "how black pornographies represent the anus—the Bottom—as a passageway through which black pleasures, perils, and pathologies are made visible" (446–47).[3] Morrison and, by proxy, her critics draw on the history of black peoples living in real black bottoms, poor, often segregated urban areas low-lying land throughout the United States (Davis 2018; Summerville 1981; Williams 2011). *Raising the Bottom* furthers these literary and political economic histories in ethnographic vignettes that exemplify bottom epistemes, aesthetics, and praxis.

The bottom, Nash explains, is tethered to black sexualities—and here we must trace this connection specifically to the figure of the sissy.[4] In "Sissies at the Picnic," Roderick A. Ferguson frames critical thought on the matter through childhood memories of a black queer choir director named Edward. Outlining shifts in black communal attitudes toward sissies, Ferguson reveals how sissy figures have been indispensable yet also disavowed and often scapegoated as pariahs amid larger systemic oppressions.[5] The sissy in bounce, much like Ferguson's, is also imagined through cultural labor: part of the everyday, rooted in the working class, and tied to performances that the black community solicits, learns from, and takes pleasure in. The sissy is an alternative figure of black power and liberation's attachment to masculine ascendence who is not "necessarily, or only feminine" but "exceeds or overruns" the masculine (Scott 2010, 19).[6]

In the parlance of New Orleans, *sissy* is generally used to describe queer men and trans women who break with tradition.[7] This figure exceeds heteronormative and nationalist bonds; it challenges classical notions of pleasure, power, and desire for the "black family." Personhood is historically modeled on successful masculinity, and black liberation is stubbornly linked to the rise of black men as patriarchs. The figure of the sissy in bounce is, by this reasoning, an affront to notions of freedom and the self. Despite this, bounce's sissy figures offer counterintuitive potential, (re)producing blackness in spaces, moments, and relationships that might otherwise succumb to the conditions of displacement and dispossession.

An epistemology of the bottom is aimed at exploring the imagined and real meanings of varied bottom positions, revealing logic that conflates ghettoized space, black queer bodies, and, by proximity, the extended community. I'm by no means arguing that the subjects of this book are actually pathological—they simply exist in a shared representational field around waste, sexual excess, and moral and economic deficit. This interlocking system brings people from the ghetto, sissies, and New Orleans (despite its historical status as the most northern Caribbean city) together in a racialized and economic bottom. Morrison's work has provided a pathway through which the bottom becomes a metonym.

THE BLACK QUEER PAST

Sissy performances, or "punk shows," have been a staple within New Orleans's black communities for generations; they took on a special place following Hurricane Katrina (Chapman 2014). Meanwhile, sissy bounce artists join a long history of black queer performers who have acted as translators of cultural meanings around race, class, and locality.

Throughout my time in New Orleans, people interested in the origins of sissy bounce mentioned the career of local soul singer and producer Bobby Marchan, a black cabaret and soul vocalist who was publicly gay and performed in drag at legendary ballrooms like the Dew Drop Inn.[8] From the 1950s through the 1990s, he produced a series of hits and collaborations with famous singers. Marchan was an early promoter of New Orleans hip-hop, providing seed money and connections for young artists who would eventually become significant figures in Southern rap—namely, the Williams brothers of Cash Money Records.

Marchan had performed in drag since his youth, inspired by the cross-dressing acts incorporated into the jazz and blues tours of the chitlin circuit (Ankeny, n.d.). Originally from Ohio, Marchan made a home for himself in New Orleans, living right between a lively club scene and the public housing projects where a significant portion of his audience must have lived.

In his 1987 song "Strokin' Part 2," Marchan represents the city, the projects, and residents' sexual prowess in a fashion not unlike bounce:

> *All around the world, everybody's strokin' . . . but all the strokin' comes down to New Orleans. . . . I heard the best strokers in New Orleans was in the*

I.1 Rhythm and blues singer Bobby Marchan performing in drag.

> *project. Somebody said the best strokers were in the Fischer Projects; I can't tell, because I heard the deal that the best strokers was in the Iberville! But then, if you must know, some woman told me she strokes best in the Callio. Then I had another cat tell me he stroked all the way from the Bahamas—but he never got down right till he got to the St. Thomas.*

It's important to understand that black queer performance in bounce, New Orleans, and the greater South is not exceptional, but part of a broader history that has contributed to blackness and popular culture at large (Davis 1998; Johnson 2008).[9] Marchan's life establishes a genealogical thread that links black queer performance, black working-class life, sissy bounce, and bottom locations in New Orleans.[10]

Just as much as Marchan's own career connected black people throughout the United States and Caribbean on the basis of shared pleasure, his legacy and mentorship of emergent artists affected the scope and reach of their artistry. Through his label, Manicure Records, Marchan managed musicians and producers who'd go on to influence the global face of popular culture—New Orleans's own Ronald "Slim" Williams, his brother Bryan "Birdman" Williams, Mystikal, and Lil Wayne. Here is a critical juncture between the beginnings of bounce music and the

development of Southern hip-hop, as well as continuity between black queer performances ranging from early R & B to blues to sissy bounce.

Marchan passed away in 1999, right when queer and trans artists began to make names for themselves in bounce.[11] Still, it's clear that hip-hop icons like the Williams brothers were in close proximity to black queer culture, as they were mentored by Marchan.[12] This means that the emergence of Vockah Redu and the Cru and other performers wasn't contradictory to urban black culture—these artists were very much part of the family.

PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE STAGE

Big Freedia, né Freddie Ross, is a gender-nonconforming, gay-identified rapper using both he/him and she/her pronouns. Freedia has done more to popularize bounce beyond New Orleans than any of her peers—and I owe her a great debt for introducing me to the bounce stage (and later to Vockah Redu and the Cru).

Prior to this research, I was a musician and performance artist, active in the United States and abroad throughout the 2000s. Aware of my background and scholarly interest in black queer performance, Big Freedia's manager contacted me about performing as a backup dancer for her. I joined her on her first tour at the 2008 SXSW Music Festival in Austin, Texas. Although I'd seen Freedia at a few parades in New Orleans and was familiar with her music, I wasn't prepared for how generous, humble, and dynamic a presence she was. Only hours after we met, I took to the stage with her, and her own larger than life spirit emboldened me.

I really knew little about the customary dances and movements associated with bounce, but before long the music, mixed with Freedia's directorial call-and-response, had me shaking, twerking, and popping.[13] Up until that point, I'd only seen one live bounce performance at a community block party. Not knowing if I'd have another chance to connect with an artist like Freedia, I shook for my life. Wearing nothing but my shoes and hot pants, I set my glasses and notebook aside and danced. After our performances, Big Freedia thanked me. When I described my research plan in New Orleans, she encouraged me and began connecting me with clubs and performers. From the start, I knew that my presence

I.2 Big Freedia photographed for the 2010 *Where They At* bounce music exhibition. Photo by Aubrey Edwards.

I.3 Photograph taken by Angeliska Polacheck of Big Freedia and author performing at the 2009 SXSW Music Festival.

onstage and acceptance by Big Freedia was somewhat justified by my being a black queer person, as opposed to someone with any real knowledge of bounce.

Later that same year, I attended a Big Freedia show in the French Quarter. It was here I first met Vockah Redu and the Cru. I approached the VIP section to say hello, and Freedia turned and introduced me to Vockah. The music was so loud I could barely catch his name. Shortly after, we ran into each other in the bathroom while washing hands. I took the opportunity to reintroduce myself and explain my interest in researching bounce music. "Well, you should be talking to me!" Vockah exclaimed. Almost on cue, Vockah's backup dancer Fatman walked up, and we exchanged introductions. Fat was less friendly; he went out of his way to act aloof. I would become accustomed to his apprehension toward me, and I'd also come to appreciate his overall wariness and discernment. I would learn that Vockah and Fatman alternated between good cop and bad cop, always tempering each other in a rocky yet deeply committed friendship.

I was asked to participate in rehearsals and shows very quickly, and my enthusiastic participation was also a means of securing research data. Group members would introduce me to people, saying, "He's our historian," owning the fact that they stood, or should I say, danced, at the center of a significant historical moment. Once I started meeting everyone in the group for rehearsals, I realized I was out of my league. I was five to ten years older than everyone, and keeping up was a challenge. But I was determined to make myself useful, not just as a participating observer but as a contributor. I knew Fat's initial wariness changed as he and the others observed my commitment. Once, laughing, he exclaimed, "Alix got to shake, just like us!"

Over two years, group members took me into their homes, families, and churches, giving me opportunities to see the spectacular and everyday aspects of their lives. Through them, I began to experience the black queer club scene—in particular, Club Fusions, Club Vibe, and The Page, all of which played bounce music almost exclusively. I went to church revivals, birthdays, funerals, and other gatherings. At private homes, block parties, and bars, I was increasingly surrounded by the group's extended community of friends and fans.

My preliminary research began in the fall of 2006 with frequent short trips to New Orleans. I began making connections with performers in

2008. I conducted primary fieldwork and interviews with at least sixty community members from 2009 to 2011. During these years, I met and performed with Vockah Redu and the Cru and shared stages with Big Freedia, Sissy Nobby, Katey Red, and others. I continued to follow the careers of particular artists throughout the 2010s.

After 2011, my attention shifted from fieldwork to the movement of sissy bounce from its local context to national and international circulation in popular culture and social media. I paid close attention to three areas: (1) Big Freedia's career, which led to greater national and international interest in both Freedia and the genre as a whole; (2) the annexation and circulation of sissy bounce (and attendant representations of New Orleans) in popular culture throughout the 2010s—particularly the music and performances of Beyoncé, Drake, and Miley Cyrus; and (3) sissy bounce's influence on the mainstreaming of twerk. Twerking, I argue, isn't a neutral act, but a performance that brings ideas about blackness, sexuality, and anality to the fore.

I approach this study of black music not through ethnomusicology or music studies but through various streams of performance studies, African diasporic genealogies, black queer and black feminist thought, and theories of space-making. Through methods of performance ethnography and coperformance specifically, I met most of the people who contributed to this research; I engaged questions of memory, embodiment, and geography; and I became more sensitive to cultural expressions I encountered within music and everyday life.[14] My ethnographic practice required more than observing and documenting—I learned what to listen for in bounce music and vernacular expressions, which deepened my understanding of performance as a tool and strategy within my coperformers' lives.[15]

This ethnography documents a rupture and its structural effects. This book moves between my respondents' memories of life before Katrina and our collective post-Katrina experiences. Interviews and observations return to memories of loss and hopes for renewal. Part of everyday life was always noting what no longer was—lost relationships, destroyed homes, razed community centers. Renewal and reconstruction projects, meanwhile, often furthered the work of ideological and structural oppression, obscuring people's memories of the past and awareness of current conditions.[16] In these conditions, cultural performance becomes a high-stakes power struggle in negotiating the production of knowledge and history.[17]

MUSIC AND CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

Music can take you places. Bounce rapper Kilo once said, "Bounce isn't hip-hop. It's not R & B. It's project music" (Miller and Thomas, 2007). This is a critical distinction: The genre is intrinsically different from nationally recognized black musical genres while defined by its origins in public housing—a nationally familiar infrastructural object and symbol associated with an economic bottom.

I was getting my hair cut in a makeshift shed-turned-barbershop when bounce artist Sissy Nobby's song "Break It Down" came through the speakers. With no pretense of the lyrical devices of other forms of hip-hop (or earlier forms of bounce), Nobby drives home one point:

> Break it down, break it, break it down, break it, break it down . . .
> I'm not finished, you know how we roll
> Put your hands to the ground, now do it on the floor
> Where's the uptown? You know how we roll
> Put your hands to the ground, now do it on the floor
> Do it on the floor, do it on the floor, do it . . .

When the barber exclaimed, "Here go that sissy shit!"[18] another patron replied, "Yeah, but you can't deny him. Nobody got a voice like Nobby."

The other patron and I began discussing the differences between bounce and hip-hop from elsewhere. He explained why he'd rather listen to bounce, even if it came from a self-proclaimed sissy. "Gay or not, I feel this," he said, "because we don't got time for some long story. We still on the plantation down here, and you can hear it."

The reference to the plantation, like references to the projects, points to an imagined geography about racial-economic bottoms. Sissy Nobby's voice—guttural, locally accented—grinds the lyrics in a combination of Southern drawl and labored breath that harks back to the work songs of sharecropping days. The voices of jazz and blues greats like Louis Armstrong and Howlin' Wolf would be hard-pressed to achieve Nobby's gravelly vocal quality. Whether they were being received by passive listeners at the barbershop or fans at shows, black queer performances like Nobby's conjured feelings that then influenced communal perceptions about race, sexuality, and what it means to be local.

Music functions as a portal, taking the listener on a geographic and historical journey. Hip-hop artists like Kanye West regularly pay homage to New Orleans's public housing projects; West's song "Blood on the Leaves," like many others, specifically references the Magnolia, or 'Nolia, where Vockah and a number of internationally famous rappers like Juvenile and Jay Electronica come from. The notoriety of New Orleans projects extends way beyond local ties, serving as a kind of hip-hop mecca. Pilgrims may not be able to visit these locations physically, due to the displacement of people, brick, and mortar, but they symbolically recognize and pay homage to them.

Many people don't catch these local references, and initially I was one of them. To be honest, when I first heard bounce music I didn't understand it. To me it sounded nonsensical, random, messy—too loud and fast to take in. The songs never mentioned the most familiar parts of New Orleans: tourist attractions Bourbon Street, the French Quarter, and the Garden District or well-known symbols like gumbo and Mardi Gras. Though the meaning was often lost in translation, I witnessed the passionate dancing and, at times, tears the audiences were moved to—and saw something much deeper at work. Understanding what the culture meant to the community would require more than me working in proximity and neatly situating an outside, top-down analytical framework around what was happening on stages and street corners. I needed to learn about the culture from the inside—living, working, and performing alongside artists and their broader community. Physically becoming part of the action was a must.

Although I moved beyond my first impressions, for many people, conflicts over the meaning, legibility, or aggressiveness of black music or culture don't happen on neutral ground. Consider the murder of Florida teenager Jordan Davis in 2012. Davis, sitting in the passenger seat of his friend's car at a gas station, was fired upon by a disgruntled white man who was upset by the loud hip-hop they were listening to.[19] "Ghetto" or "ratchet" music and dance are assumed to exist at the bottom of the barrel; to people like Davis's assailant, these forms offer real proof of the low morals, sexual deviance, and poverty that define black stereotypes.

To understand this project music would mean rethinking ideas about high and low culture; learning how to listen and engage; and developing an understanding and appreciation of local vernacular, knowledge, and histories from within the community. For example, another popular Sissy Nobby song, "Josephine Beat," incorporates a number of classic

samples and features from other bounce artists. It also mixes in Beyoncé's "Partition" and Enya's "Boadicea" (the latter popularized among hip-hop crowds through the Fugees' 1990s track "Ready or Not"). "Josephine" refers to a street in New Orleans's Uptown that ran through and alongside public housing communities like the Melpomene and Callio projects. In the track, Nobby engages in a pattern that runs through much of bounce: the poetic merging of black geographies with figments of desire and love. "You know that Josephine ain't nothin' without that Josephine Johnny," he raps. "She got that Josephine boy." Similar references run throughout a great deal of hip-hop culture—but here, Nobby speaks to a space and community that's been all but displaced due to years of political effort by local elites to rid the city of the projects. Due to these efforts and the acute impact of urban shifts related to Hurricane Katrina, Nobby and other sissy bounce rappers' songs appeal to young audiences who have seen their homes and neighborhoods disappear within their own lifetimes. The lyrics take on an even deeper sense of urgency considering who they come from. The precarity of black queer desire intersects with the general sense of longing and need felt throughout the community; if a sissy can find love and union, might we all?

Sissy Nobby's music was special partly because he'd started out as a dancer, then begun producing his own tracks. Nobby understood from experience that what local audiences wanted more than anything, "dat beat," the unique rhythm that's key to a real bounce song.[20] Mixed between the particularities of bounce is something any hip-hop head can recognize and identify: the locomotion of a syncopated 808 bass and drum, key to so many hits from the 1980s onward. The rhythm is held up high as if on a pedestal, shaking black ass.

There's a profound relationship between the black body and bounce's reclamation of bottom geographies. Dat beat—the golden thread, the rhythm that defines bounce—cannot be separated from the visuality of ass-shaking. The perpetual driving force of dat beat carries speech and dance on a journey, directed by call-and-response chants: "Shake that ass like a saltshaker!" "Face down, ass up!" "Bend it over—touch ya toes!" (and one of my favorite responses, "Hit me with dat turkey neck!"). In clubs catering to bounce audiences, a DJ bold enough to break from dat beat and put a regular hip-hop song in the mix runs the risk of people abandoning the dance floor en masse, offering choice words to the DJ booth, and even leaving the venue entirely. Audiences take rhythm dead serious in New Orleans. The focus on forward motion may have emerged

from what occurs in the city's parading culture. When a marching band takes too many breaks or gets out of pocket in terms of keeping the beat, losing the locomotion that propels the parade, bystanders feel entitled to tell the musicians to do their job. "Baby, it's always fashionable to make an exit before the music ends," one old-timer remarked. "When the beat don't drop, people come back to reality, and things can get ugly." The number of shootings and fights that have occurred after parades and at venue closing times is evidence of the imperative to catch the beat and keep it going.

A good DJ can play to this sense of something urgent at work in the rhythm—something to do with life and death—and in this sense bounce resonates with genres like gospel, punk rock, and rave music. Sissy bounce garnered large nonblack and nonlocal audiences, and Vockah Redu and the Cru would often share stages with punk rock acts. Black queer musician, performer, choreographer, and author Brontez Purnell, discussing the intersections of his experiences in the black church and do-it-yourself punk rock scenes, notes:

> I think church is where I first performed—and this was back before the church had a microphone, so I think most of the songs went to whoever could project the loudest. How well you sang was secondary. First, who could project? I carry a sense of projection in everything, even in [my] writing. . . . I grew up in probably the midst of, like, DIY culture. And what DIY culture teaches you, of course, is "The powers that be are never gonna talk to you specifically. If there's something that needs to be addressed, you yourself have to take control of that." (2019)

Bounce's primary audience has always been black New Orleanians. After Hurricane Katrina, a new audience grew, paralleling the expansion of gentrification due to an influx of reconstruction volunteers, tourists, and college students. This circulation and movement brought a national spotlight on sissy bounce that was bright and promising—albeit temporary, as trends go. After Katrina, throughout the city, people across differences of race and class were thrust into a context where daily life required making yourself heard, lest you be drowned out by a multitude of talking heads. Sissy bounce carried a sense of projection across the city and beyond; it served as a model for people struggling to find their voice amid political silence.

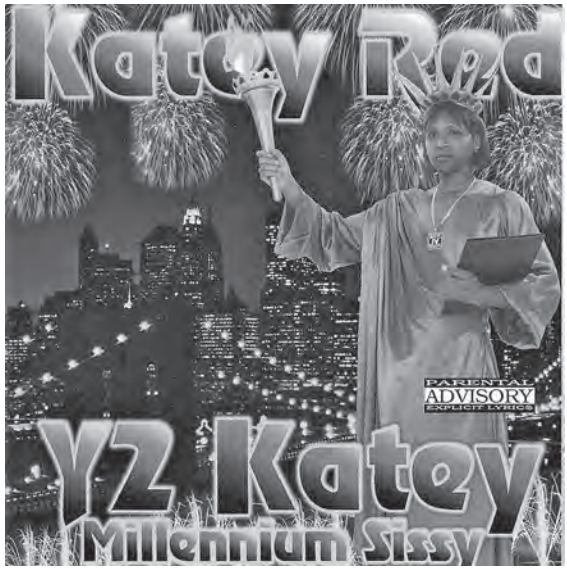
COUNTERINTUITIVE FREEDOM

In a brief series of interviews with straight and queer rappers and fans, the 2007 Miller–Thomas documentary *Ya Heard Me?* covers Katey Red and Big Freedia's remarkable entry into the bounce scene.[21] In an interview, Red, a black trans woman, remixes street callouts into a means of self-making, challenging notions of private and public space: "I use to walk down the streets, [and] they use to be saying, 'Katey Red, you dick-sucker.' So why don't I get on the mic and call myself a dick-sucker? Just get it on out, feel free—so now, when they call me a dick sucker, they singing my song" (Miller and Thomas 2007).

In this instance, Red uses the cultural labor of music to express counterintuitive notions of freedom and personhood. She contests discrimination against her body, gender, and sexuality—and by association, against those like her.[22] When I call these notions "counterintuitive," I mean they require us to rethink what we generally consider unproductive, shameful, or illegible—and reenvision these things as valuable challenges to norms that pathologize blackness and queerness.[23] We can't assume music will decrease high rates of violence against black trans women—representation doesn't determine survival—but music can effectively shift the moving equilibrium that naturalizes such violence.

Raising the Bottom focuses on intersectional and antiassimilative practices—like Red's—in a community attempting to reconstitute home and kinship in post–Hurricane Katrina New Orleans. Emphasizing communal self-understandings and vernacular performances, the chapters examine how performers and audiences express the joy of cultural labor and alternative kinship. They also highlight the limits of community and agency in the face of persistent discourses of pathology and violence. These conflicts and impasses are made stark in both mundane aspects of daily life and in the dramatizations of staged performances.

Following Cathy J. Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" (2005), my approach to black queer studies emphasizes solidarity and coalition across categories of identity. In delineating an epistemology of the bottom, I consider how similar experiences of violence and pleasure crosscut queer, heterosexual, and working-class black lives. While highlighting relationships between black queer men, trans women, and cishet black women, I recognize not everyone subscribes to a particular gender



1.4 Katey Red's 2000 album *Y2 Katey Millennium Sissy*. Take Fo' Records.

or sexual category, and some may prefer to remain fluid. Blackness and locality, however, provide an undergirding foundation throughout the community, overriding other forms of difference.

Historically, music and dance have helped stabilize black social movements and formed some of the most salient expressions of freedom and emancipation since the turn of the twentieth century. *Raising the Bottom* explores black queer cultural production in a *superstructural* rather than an *infrastructural* sense—a difference Samuel Delany explains in his astute critique of urban transformations in 1970s New York. "Infrastructure makes society go," Delany writes. "Superstructure makes society go smoothly (or bumpily)" (1999, 162). I'm interested in black queer culture's role in the moving equilibrium of knowledge—what it contributes as dominant and marginalized groups vie to assert interpretations of what's "real."

My focus on New Orleans situates sissy bounce's origins and its reach.[24] As historian Clyde Woods (2017) points out, New Orleans is central to understanding the development of both the US economy and global popular culture. Through what Woods calls the blues epistemology, we come to understand the blues as a form of black working-class thought that comments on and explicates the undertaking of living through capitalism and white supremacy.[25] I build on these insights by extending Woods's blues theory to bounce. To do this, I draw from Angela Y. Davis's use of the blues as an aesthetic domain that challenges

oppressive cultural ideals that abounded in both white America and black respectability politics. Performers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith represented forms of black womanhood that defined sexuality and gender beyond white, middle-class, heterosexual norms. Davis shows how respectability, within and outside black communities, is defined by the private expression of nationalist ideologies like heteronormativity and the gendered division of labor.

In dominant (that is, whiteness-centered, heteronormative, and bioreductive) frames of family and future, blackness and queerness aren't productive; they represent incoherence in ways that might destroy familial bonds or a person's sense of self. The bottom, in terms of anal desires, is presumed not to build communities or produce new generations of people. I'm interested in countering these bioreductive notions. Black queer pleasure, culture, dialogues, spaces, social frameworks, and relationships—presumed nonproductive because of liminality or alleged moral deficits—have actual reproductive power, providing the fertile ground on which intersectional and antiassimilative futures are birthed.

To claim counterintuitive powers is to lift what's been devalued—to raise up what's been naturalized as the bottom of social, economic, and political relations. My framework for doing this incorporates embodied experiences in dance; it also expands outward to consider the devastating effects of exclusionary and exploitative state infrastructures, such as the decimation of black urban communities by federal freeway projects.

Racialized and economic bottoms map onto the body as much as environments do; these notions must be deconstructed and reimagined. Katey Red, Vockah Redu, and other bounce artists encourage audiences to rethink their relationship to their bodies—and to reconsider geographies like the public housing projects and streets the artists hail from. This kind of bottom knowledge can express resistance to antiblackness, and it can be a means of finding and creating place and community across time and space. To what narrative of black freedom and liberation do those who claim it belong?

"AZZ EVERYWHERE"

Big Freedia's hit "Azz Everywhere" gestures to the global resonance of bounce. While I discuss a bottom epistemology that articulates the racial-sexual landscape of New Orleans, this way of knowing is part of a

diasporic felt knowledge, often expressed through regional sensibilities. New Orleans has bounce; DC has go-go, Chicago juke, Oakland hyphy, Florida Miami bass, Houston chop and screw. Detroit has more forms than I can count. In African diasporas outside the United States, Brazil has baile funk, Trinidad and Tobago have soca and calypso, and Angola has kuduro. In every case, music and dance are "not only *of* the body, in the sense of object, but also *from* the body, that is, deploying the body as tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge" (Wacquant 2004, 21–22). This knowledge is formed in relation to particular ecologies, environments, and conditions of racial capitalism.

Progressive scholars must take seriously the body as a site of decolonization. As the sexologist Herukhuti (H. Sharif Williams) writes in his incisive critiques of black studies scholarship, scholars "must be willing to engage body, mind and spirit, eschew respectability politics and get funky if they have any chance of connecting to the multidimensional lives of Black people—a people who have survived but not yet liberated themselves from the multidimensional trauma of colonization and kidnap" (2016, 21–22).

Incorporating Audre Lorde's development of the erotic into his own epistemology, Herukhuti states, "Bodies have just as much ability to save minds, spirits and souls. We can move, dance, and fuck our way to decolonization. Our bodies have the capacity to show our minds new possibilities for liberation if we pay attention" (12).

Herukhuti and scholars like L. H. Stallings (2015) have developed black funk or funk studies into an integrative framework, bringing the erotic, spiritual, and political into a research practice I deploy. An epistemology of the bottom requires acknowledging physical and erotic energies that are most certainly in the body, but also extend and inform the way we experience the world. For example, throughout the twentieth century, major shifts in black music were birthed through working-class experiences of labor. Through the auto industry, assembly-line workers entered a relationship with machines so intimate they used those experiences to inform the factorylike production of Motown and the postindustrial programming of 808 drums and samplers (Che 2009; Nkiru 2019).

In bounce, a similar relationship is informed by the ways blackness has had to negotiate space in a sinking city. Many nonlocals are familiar with the flood-prone nature of New Orleans, due to Katrina and the potential disaster the city encounters every hurricane season. But what many don't know is that when New Orleans was settled by colonists, it was above sea

level. Anthropogenic subsidence—the compaction and gradual sinking of the land, due in major part to humans pumping water out of marshland and swamp to expand the city—has led to a nuanced racial topography. Areas like the Lower Ninth Ward, once home to one of the country's largest populations of black homeowners, are also floodplains.[26]

Race, sexuality, and the uninhabitable are conflated in bottom geographies. In New Orleans, as in other urban spaces, white vice—sex work, sex trafficking, the drug trade—is often positioned in proximity to black neighborhoods, reflecting and deepening those neighborhoods' imagined associations with toxicity, excess, and waste. New Orleans's Congo Square, an origin site of African diasporic performance in the New World, was presented in colonial depictions as an abject, ghettoized space. The Faubourg Tremé, the first black neighborhood in the United States, and Storyville, the iconic red-light district that travelers ventured to the city to experience, are adjacent to each other on the periphery of the French Quarter, the city proper. All this is to say that black cultural expressions of home and belonging are produced and maintained through a relationship to the bottom; learning to live in and through these spaces has both a local specificity and a relevance within global African diasporas.

An epistemology of the bottom constitutes sissy bounce artists' attempts at redressing the queer and black working-class plight within these geographies. Rather than tuck away or restrict what's generally estranged, the artists raise and dispense forms of social wealth in antiassimilationist, egalitarian acts of joy and caregiving. This bottom knowledge and strategy are a condition of possibility, an artistic awareness, and an emotive framework; it reorients norms concerning the distribution of power and its justification. It also resonates with other groups who know what it's like to always and already be the underdog.[27]

Diaspora is key to understanding home and community—and also bounce—in New Orleans and the US South. Racial, ethnic, and queer conceptions of diaspora can speak to global cultural flows, memories, and structures of feeling—unlike white Western ideologies that attempt and fail to determine alternative notions of personhood. These concepts and frameworks have the power to address far more than the current or historical context of global migration across national borders. They can bypass reductive beliefs about "developed" and "underdeveloped" worlds—and they can invert heteropatriarchal and racist systems of thought that reduce black queer bodies to pathological objects. Afrocentricity is a common (if marginalized) ideology underpinning global

black life. Bounce music expresses Afrocentric and queer notions of diaspora as an erotic and sacred resource—one with the potential to destabilize oppressive and inadequate ideologies and point toward a more livable future.

New Orleans is one of the most African cities in North America. Here, music and dance are far more than leisure and entertainment. They're forms of world-making, old and new. New Orleans has historically been portrayed as a peripheral and exceptional geography (Anthony 1978; Blassingame 1973; Dessens 2007; Hall 1992). Countless narratives about New Orleans offer images of racial otherness usually reserved for "distant and alien" geographies such as Haiti and the African continent. These places have been symbolically pushed to the edge of white Western civility and moral rectitude, while simultaneously used by the West in its accumulation of material and existential resources. This might explain why news outlets, in the years after Katrina, labeled displaced evacuees "refugees," as if they weren't US citizens.[28] Following Hurricane Katrina—or, more accurately, the failure of the Army Corps of Engineers' substandard and neglected levees—the city has become a symbol of urban decay and twenty-first-century disaster.

THE BEGINNING, NOT THE END

Each chapter of this book follows a similar organizational structure. The ethnographic context of my coperformances with Vockah Redu and the Cru and other black queer figures provides context for the analysis. Music lyrics, excerpts, and/or notes engage additional artistic and scholarly voices in order to develop the bottom epistemology described above. Members and former members of the Cru, as well as their friends and family members, share oral histories and self-understandings. Beyond the ethnographic vignettes, I'll situate the local and everyday within larger historical and global networks. That said, the ethnographic accounts and the voices of black queer people are what shine and are privileged, as this is the goal of *Raising the Bottom*. The political economies I touch on are by no means exhaustive; I make no pretense toward in-depth histories or an extensive understanding of contemporary media in global popular culture. *Raising the Bottom* is concerned with the past and theory inasmuch as I can find touchstones that support, balance, and lift my coperformers' understanding of their own material conditions.

Chapter 1, "*Catch Dat Beat*: Performing Pleasure and Coalition," explores the daily lives and staged performances of Vockah and the Cru while attending to the broader context of post-Katrina displacement and reconstruction. I connect black queer performances to a larger network of informal economies (in this case, unlicensed barbering and beautician services). These forms of social wealth attend to life in an economic bottom defined by generations of capitalist extraction, particularly within the tourist economy. These bottom locations and sissy figures will be connected to counterintuitive notions that redirect pathologizing narratives toward pleasure and coalition. My coperformers serve dual roles, as interpreters of cultural meanings and caregivers. Survival tactics they used at the time of Katrina had already been well honed by conditions shaped by pre-Katrina attacks to social welfare. The Cru's life histories reveal that performance has always been an available means of engaging in an economy that constructs black people as deviant when it isn't exploiting their labor. Performance is also illuminated as a stabilizing force that maintains communal ties to symbolic and material spaces.

Chapter 2, "Get It How You Live: Twerking for Survival," illuminates the Cru's struggles over conflicting narratives of belonging and individualism that pose limits to their freedom. This chapter follows the Cru's attempts to capitalize on sissy bounce's commercialization while navigating stigma in public health discourse, popular culture, and mutual aid. This section describes the social and economic challenges the Cru faced while performing across New Orleans and touring in New York city. I show how conflicts within the group highlight the limits of a bottom episteme. Conversely, a longtime friend of the Cru recounts the ways he has raised the bottom through twerking as a praxis of personal growth and transformation.

Chapter 3, "Back of Town: A Bottom Geography," identifies a conceptual bottom geography, "back of town," that has circulated in public discourse for over two hundred years. Connecting bounce to twentieth-century blues and the colonial period, I explore histories in which black people navigate exclusionary, unsustainable infrastructural development. This exploration will extend from the racialization of Congo Square in the early nineteenth century to the more recent and nuanced context of the black neighborhoods bounce music represents. All these bottom locations serve as a poetics of landscape that sustains working-class black communities (and former public housing communities in particular) against ongoing dispossession and displacement.

Chapter 4, "Touching the Rim: Gentrification, Popular Culture, and the Collective Asshole," examines the demographic changes that emerged in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and shifting urban gentrification in the city. I highlight the twinned processes of housing gentrification and the annexation of black queer figures into the self-understandings of predominantly white and nonlocal audiences. I trace the crossover of sissy bounce—looking particularly at Big Freedia's successful career and the popularization of twerk dancing—from a local cultural form to a global phenomenon. Like the minstrel performances that followed the Civil War and the Reconstruction era, I argue, sissy bounce and twerk came to represent "safe" avenues toward experiencing myths of black sexual pathology.

In the fifth chapter, "Raising the Bottom: Church Girls and Secular Music," we go to church to consider the division of body and soul in conservative theology. We enter the sanctuary of the black queer club scene and witness the work of sissy figures as alternative authorities of the sacred, exploring their use of music and dance to foster social bonds, and facilitate communal joy that is both spiritual and erotic. New Orleans's unique forms of life-affirming, death-witnessing performances, including twerking, are derived from African diasporic traditions that can mend body and soul (Pérez 2016); bounce's bottom epistemology highlights the importance of the flesh in the sacred labor of the dispossessed.

I hope this text inspires readers toward new possibilities in scholarship, music, and the arts in general. As you read, I encourage you to cue up the referenced songs, find and read artists' biographies, and look up related maps and images. I hope this book encourages us to rethink the power of culture to narrate home and kinship among those often denied a voice. There is always more than one story.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

Acknowledgment: Parts of "The Black Queer Past" in the introduction appeared in a different form in Alix Chapman, "The Punk Show: Queering Heritage in the Black Diaspora," *Cultural Dynamics* 26 (3): 327–45.

1 Faulty city and state infrastructure, including poorly engineered levees, resulted in the devastating flood that displaced a disproportionate number of working poor black New Orleans residents following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The black population dropped from 66.7 percent in 2000 to 57.8 percent in 2006. As with the welfare "reform" movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s, the flood provided powerful governmental and corporate interests with the opportunity to reduce the dense population of poor black residents in potentially profitable areas of New Orleans (Ambrosino 2007; Schram et al. 2003; Hansan and Morris 1999; Smith 2007). According to economist Ben Casselman, "More than 175,000 black residents left New Orleans in the year after the storm; more than 75,000 never came back" (2015).

2 This project joins the work of a number of scholars who, as sociologist Roderick Ferguson writes in *Aberrations in Black*, understand that engaging with Morrison's *Sula* "represented a process of negation in which an apparently non-political literary text about two black women became a resource for epistemological and political practices that could express alternatives to existing social movements." Ferguson continues: "Devising such practices meant resuscitating nonnormative difference as the horizon of epistemological critique, aesthetic innovation, and political practice" (2004, 126). Here, Ferguson speaks to *Sula*'s impact on a generation of black lesbian feminists—including Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith—who saw in its characters a challenge to heteropatriarchal politics and culture, within and without blackness. Referring to Smith, Ferguson adds that despite the book's absence of LGBTQIA+ identities, "black lesbian feminist critique negates the presumption that *Sula* is the private property of Morrison's intentions." Smith's critique, he explains, "is populated with interests

that Morrison could not imagine" in "a world characterized by gender and sexual heterogeneity" (2004, 128).

3 Following Nash, I'm inspired by the groundbreaking work of anal theorists who engage the bottom and anality as an act of queer subversion (Bersani 1987; Dean 2009; Nguyen 2014). I also lean toward thinkers who, like Morrison and Nash, conceptualize the bottom as a site generally constructed as black.

4 Evelynn Hammonds's "Black (W)holes: The Geometry of Black Female Sexuality" (1994) uses astrophysics to discuss black female sexuality as something often perceived as empty, though it's actually full. In "Black Anality," Nash considers how black women's genitalia and sexuality are analogized as black holes in pornography and expands on Hammond's work by "attend[ing] to the 'other' black hole," the anus. Nash explores "how black sexualities more generally, and black female sexualities particularly, become tethered imaginatively, discursively, and representationally to the anus" and describes "how black pleasures are imagined to be peculiarly and particularly attached to *anal ideologies* including *spatiality*, *waste*, *toxicity*, and *filth*" (2014, 439). Black sissy figures, as I relate in chapter 4, share this tethering. Like Nash, I approach blackness and sexuality as mutually constitutive.

5 I both draw on and depart from scholarship on the sissy as a black trope and archetype. In *Sissy Insurgencies* (2021), Marlon Ross discusses notions of conduct as a barometer of black masculinities through history; he shows how sissiness informs fit and unfit masculinity in relation to larger social political conditions. Sissy figures in New Orleans are particularly well represented in Ferguson's description (in *Aberrations in Black*) of a black trans sex worker in Oakland. She represents the "general estrangements of African American culture," Ferguson writes, and has been "erased by those who wish to present or make African American culture the embodiment of all that she is not—respectability, domesticity, heterosexuality, normativity, nationality, universality and progress" (2004, 1–2).

6 I see the sissy as both an adjunct to the bottom and—following Darieck Scott's work in *Extravagant Abjection*—an alternative figure of black liberation: "The measure of autonomous or free selfhood is really masculinity, and the Other of the masculine is feminine. . . . But this does not mean that it is necessarily feminine, or only feminine, merely that it cannot be narrated except as the negation of what it exceeds or overruns" (2010, 19).

7 I use *queer* as an umbrella for nonnormative sexual practices, identities, and worldviews. I do so while understanding the ever-changing power struggles concerning sexual and gendered identity in black communities.

8 Interest in this history was often framed by irony, as if the emergence of a black queer past were a surprising anomaly—despite its ongoing, widespread presence. Figures like Marchan were treated as exceptional "discoveries," in contrast to queer white historical figures, who are more readily absorbed into narratives of white liberal modernity and continuity around sex/gender fluidity.

9 This work owes much to black queer scholar and performance theorist E. Patrick Johnson's explorations of black queer culture throughout the US South in *Sweet Tea* (2008). I build on Johnson's concepts of "quare" studies—sexual and racialized excess that he defines as "incapable of being contained within normative categories of *being*" (2001, 2).

10 Truly valuing and integrating Marchan's life history is difficult because the subject of race, let alone sexuality, is often treated as "conjectural" and "particular," if not totally beside the point. In *Black Gay Man* (2001), Robert Reid-Pharr points out how what's considered "universal" and "particular" needs to be complicated. Discussions of sexuality are frequently seen as tangential: Class is seen as universal, crosscutting all of society, while queerness (for instance) is treated as a "particular" problem for the "naturally" queer subject. The conditions of queerness, however, are still represented and produced within literature and institutions through the machinery of American culture and imperialism.

11 Cash Money Records paid for Marchan's funeral expenses (Wirt 2023).

12 See my article "The Punk Show" (2014) for more on the life and times of Bobby Marchan.

13 Deconstruction and "scholarly" engagement cannot alone account for "embodied meanings that are accessible through ethnographic methods of "radical empiricism'" (Conquergood 1991, 188). My approach, which juxtaposes performance ethnography and textual analysis, is itself an argument against the binaries that have divided radical black consciousness from everyday lived practices.

14 Coperformance is a method of performance ethnography—a frame "in which performance is accorded status as ethnographic practice" (Kondo 1997, 20). D. Soyini Madison has described coperformance as the act in which "you not only do what subjects do, but you are intellectually and relationally invested in their symbol-making practices as you experience with them a range of yearnings and desires" (2005, 168). This approach accounts for the limits of academic discourse in translating theatrical performance while privileging the researcher's body as a site of experience and meaning (Minh-ha 1989; Madison 2005). Given my access to coperformers' theatrical performances alongside my quotidian experiences working and living in New Orleans, I needed a methodological frame that would incorporate my

multiple experiences and observations. These techniques allowed for a self-reflexive critique of my own experiences as a black queer scholar working within a community while moving between positions of insider and outsider (Abu-Lughod 1991; Hill Collins 1990).

15 Simply "observing" music and dance would not suffice. I had to develop other senses and embodied forms of dialogue. As Conquergood states, "Listening is an interiorizing experience, a gathering together, a drawing in, whereas observation sizes up exteriors" (1991, 183). Also see Veit Erlmann's "But What of the Ethnographic Ear?" ([2004] 2020).

16 Again, Morrison's work in *Sula* informs my approach: The novel deals with issues of residential segregation, gentrification, and black people's precarious assimilation into the nation.

17 The film *Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans* (Logsdon 2008) speculates that the setbacks to black activism in the wake of *Plessy v. Ferguson* constituted a crisis for political action and a turn from formal activism to a reinvestment in cultural performance. It was during this same period that brass bands, jazz funerals, and the first Mardi Gras Indians began challenging the dominance of white supremacy in public space. These incursions of black performance into white public space were not altogether welcome, even as they came to define the cultural identity of the city. In "Textures of Black Sound and Affect" (2024), anthropologist Matt Sakakeeny considers the impact of musician renegades, like Charles "Buddy" Bolden, whose insurrectionist impulse contributed to a radical vision of black working-class life. Sakakeeny argues that the structures of feeling that run through jazz funerals and related performances might not always make explicit contestations of antiblack violence—but they do generate a significant "atmosphere" of liberation and mutual aid.

18 Although the term "sissy" has vernacular roots that preceded black queer performance in bounce, some artists felt that Nobby's popularity in the years following Katrina led new listeners to use the term "sissy bounce" more often because of the sound's association with Sissy Nobby. I use "sissy bounce" and simply "bounce" interchangeably, but more often I use the former when referring to the cross-cultural context that occurred after Katrina.

19 In "Black Noise, White Fears: Resilience, Rap, and the Killing of Jordan Davis" (2018), musicologist William Cheng writes, "Perceptions of loud blackness metamorphosed into fictions of criminal threat. Physical and sonic excess made flesh. Flesh unmade by bullets." Such a moment speaks to the fact that the disciplining of black bodies—and also resistance to antiblackness—occurs not only through a field of vision, but as contestation over sound and the sensory landscape as a whole.

20 Bounce represents a particular sound, characterized by a mixture of two principal beats: the Brown beat and the Triggerman. These rhythms

originated in the South Bronx and migrated to New Orleans in the early 1980s. Music scholar and filmmaker Matt Miller, in his book *Bounce*, describes the music as having "a particular mid-tempo rhythmic feel created by a propulsive, syncopated bass drum pattern in combination with layered, continuous percussive elements such as handclaps or simple melodic lines and often featuring particular sounds sampled from other recordings" (2012, 1). Miller's book and 2007 documentary (with Stephen Thomas) situate bounce in local black musical traditions; Miller's work also addresses the economic and racialized tensions affecting the local music scene while covering attempts by national record labels to commercialize and assimilate bounce.

21 Prior to Miller's 2012 book, there'd been very little written documentation of bounce, and even less on black queer bounce performers. Roni Sarig's book *Third Coast* (2007) had described the emergence of Southern rap and its assimilation into national hip-hop culture, offering some of the first scholarly documentation of bounce music. Sarig noted Katey Red in particular: "Take Fo', which has remained a pre-eminent bounce label, broke new ground by signing Katey Red, a transvestite rapper who called himself (herself) 'the Millennium Sissy'" (261).

22 My analysis is informed by Steven Gregory's *Black Corona* (1998), a book that significantly defines and rethinks "community" and collective political action. Exploring the political formation of black identities in New York, Gregory explains that "the social construction of identity or the 'fixing' of racialized, gendered, and other subject positions within a given social order is not only political, it is also the precondition of politics" (13). Gregory's counterhistory challenges the trope of the "black ghetto" and inner-city black communities as morally bankrupt and homogeneous.

23 *Sula* uses the counterintuitive to drive forward alternative notions of personal and communal vitality (Morrison 1973). This is most effectively represented in the various ways black women are narrated as physical and symbolic penetrators of black men. A bottom epistemology is a process of relearning and redressing what's generally considered *illegible* and *unproductive*. To touch, feel, and care for what's in and of the bottom goes against nationalist, racist, homophobic, classist, and misogynistic rhetoric—all of which share concerns about proximity to the dirty Other, imagined as an encounter that cannot be recovered from.

24 Musical performance is an honored form of cultural expression in New Orleans with a well-documented relationship to black radical resistance (Roach 1996; Sakakeeny 2024; Sublette 2008, 2009). This is exemplified in performances of the Black Masking Indians, second-line bands, and

others (Blank 1978; Hair 1976; Mugge 2007; Regis 2006). Performance brings the body, the discourse of place, and community together.

25 In *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), Naomi Klein situates the response to Katrina within a critique of neoliberalism and disaster capitalism. In *Development Drowned and Reborn* (2017), Woods counters Klein's framework, arguing that the history of New Orleans and the region reveals practices of economic violence that precede the development of neoliberal ideology and are better explained through a critique of plantocracy. We must consider how both colonial structures and more contemporary economic trends have led to housing segregation and gentrification over time.

26 Chapter 3 will discuss how property values and residential segregation have followed patterns of subsidence.

27 This bottom sensibility is not unique, but part of a network of minoritarian cultural expressions spread across racial, ethnic, and queer diasporas. In Chicano and Latino vernacular, for instance, the bottom relates to concepts of *rasquachismo* and *sucio*. Chicano scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto defines the former as "a visceral response to lived reality," "a working-class sensibility," and "an underdog perspective"—a view from *los de abajo*. An attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability yet mindful of stance and style." He further elaborates: "*Rasquachismo* presupposes the world view of the have-not, but is also a quality exemplified in objects and places (a *rasquache* car or restaurant) and in social comportment (a person can be or act *rasquache*)" (1989). Capitalism creates surplus populations of have-nots who carry with them the trace of *los de abajo*—the ones from below, the uninhabitable, sites that merge bodies with the dirty (*sucio*). Deborah R. Vargas writes, "Queer surplus tastes and smells *sucio* and cultivates a presence and lingering perseverance of queer sex and joy within neoliberal hetero- and homonormative violences. By extension, the queer surplus of *sucias*—dirty and filthy nonnormative genders—demonstrate capital's contradictions" (2014, 1).

28 In "Why Katrina's Victims Aren't Refugees," Adeline Masquelier discusses debates over the use of the word. "Many U.S.-born citizens have never experienced invasion by an alien power," she writes, "and to them 'refugeeness' essentially connotes 'otherness'" (2006, 738).

CHAPTER 1. *CATCH DAT BEAT*

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