

Trap Spaces, Trap Music: Harriet Jacobs, Fetty Wap, and Emancipation as Entrapment

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Set in a New York City trap house—an apartment that serves as the hub for an outlaw drug business—Fetty Wap’s 2014 song and video “Trap Queen” depicts the stacks of U.S. currency and the manufacture of product that are core aspects of the genre of trap music. But the song and video also portray an outlier to this strategic essentialism: namely, the loving romance at its center which challenges the mainstream common sense of the misogyny of rap. Likewise, the sonics of “Trap Queen”—upbeat, even joyful—contrast with the aural hardness of much of the genre. In these ways, “Trap Queen” is an important pop-cultural political intervention against both the enduring pathologizing of Black life and the sense of siege with which many Black people, especially poor ones, are perceived to live.¹

But while Fetty Wap’s persona in “Trap Queen” can be understood as a homo-economicus figure (Wynter 123) of the informal economy—a breadwinner who can self-determine his own life, albeit within the narrow bounds of criminalized enterprise—that burdened self-possession is doubled for his female partner presented as a woman who will happily do anything for her “man,” from cooking crack to giving him a lap dance (see Figure 1). These labors are shown to be uncoerced. Nevertheless, the larger structures of the racial-capitalist formal economy essentially force many Black women into such gendered survival labor. Indeed, the situation of these women, which Fetty Wap’s “trap queen” only partially evokes, illustrates the thinness of freedom under liberal democracy of which emancipation from slavery is considered paradigmatic. But while emancipation secured the “right” to wage labor for people whose toil was formerly

1. Following many scholars and critics, I capitalize “Black” and other minoritized racial identifications and lower-case “white” in service to reversing difference-based hierarchies.

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unfree, Lincoln's celebrated proclamation left in place the overall system of racial capitalism, which, twinned with settler colonialism, continues to structure daily life and self and collective imaginaries in representatively governed nation-states like the U.S. Indeed, 155 years after Black people were said to become free, the dual traps at the heart of "Trap Queen"—that of the fugitive male protagonist and that of his idealized female counterpart, a fugitive herself—suggest that emancipation is a profitable form, in many ways, of entrapment.

In the following, I think through two related ideas of "trap" for what they reveal about the ongoing contours of the afterlife—or afterlives—of slavery. The first and foundational notion I attend to is Harriet Jacobs's attic space in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), where Jacobs hides for years until she can make her way north to ostensible freedom. And yet, following Saidiya Hartman's well-known discussion in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997), Jacobs's predicament—stuck between a possible return to bondage and a possible permanent escape from it—continues to vex her in her New York City life.

The second notion of "trap" to which I turn is the structural compulsion for Black women to engage in criminalized survival labor. Beth Richie named this tendency *gender entrapment* in her 1996 study *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women*—an overlooked analytical companion to *Scenes of Subjection*—and it is not substantially different from Harriet Jacobs's dilemma. That is, while Jacobs can find formal employment as a domestic worker in late-nineteenth-century New York and the women of Richie's study are able to find informal employment as criminalized workers in the late-twentieth-century city, in both cases their labor choices are effectively predetermined for them. In this way, they are both trapped, or entrapped, by political economic logics that profoundly shape the life chances of Black people.

I argue that these twin notions of "trap"—incomplete self-possession on the one hand and the survival imperative to commit "crime" on the other—converge in the outlaw drug economy and its social relations that "Trap Queen" and the genre of trap music, at large, portray. Moreover, the massive popularity of "Trap Queen"—viewed 592,863,832 times and counting²—illustrates the slippery political work of dominant forms of representation in managing both imaginaries and mainstream

2. According to YouTube as of this writing. The video is one of the site's "most viewed" "of all time"; the song also tops search results on Genius for "trap."

common sense. This work can be seen especially when a cultural product from an underground genre surfaces into widespread visibility such as “Trap Queen” accomplished vis-à-vis the trap genre. As the debut single by an unknown New Jersey artist, “Trap Queen” benefited from two main factors on its way to iconic status: (1) social media, which carried the song from a specialist audience to the mainstream over many months³ and (2) Wap’s savvy sense of what the popular market demanded: not a fugitive narrative or portentous soundscape—the two elements at the base of the trap genre—but a story of freedom wrapped in a rosy aurality. In this reframing, however, the carceral state and the risk of entrapment into criminalized labor disappear and the trap house becomes an anodyne site of home-based employment unencumbered by the rule of law and its agents. The trappers, meanwhile, become like royalty, rising from the bottom of normative social, political, and economic life to its apex.

Fantasy is one of the key levers of pop music: for the three or four minutes of a song or video, listeners and viewers trade their positions in the status quo for ones of improved status. In this way, “Trap Queen” is a pop masterwork: it re-presents the real-life traps that structurally unemployed Black people face as moments of carefree, though gendered, abundance. The vision Fetty Wap purveys replaces the threat of capture and control that has shadowed Indigenous peoples from the African continent and their descendants in the U.S., both before and after Emancipation, with a fiction of unfettered will and self-containment. No doubt this optic does important affective labor. But is that emotional-psychic reward worth the trade-off in attention to material reality, especially at the scale of “Trap Queen’s” audience, most of whom may now have Wap’s representation as their only reference point for “trap life”? And if that trade-off is not worth it, what must be done to change this process of re-presenting material reality for mass success?

I turn next to a reading of Hartman’s influential chapter of *Scenes of Subjection*, “Seduction and the Ruses of Power,” to draw out the deep entanglements of enslavement, criminalization, and gender entrapment on the one hand and discourses of freedom on the other. I then examine the intertwined emergence of the carceral state and hip hop in the late twentieth century and the trap genre’s innovations of the early twenty-first century before homing in on “Trap Queen”

3. The song was released to SoundCloud in March 2014; it debuted on *Billboard*’s top singles chart the “Hot 100” in January 2015 and reached its peak chart position of number 2 on May 16, 2015. See Lipshutz 2015 and “Fetty Wap Chart History.”

and gender entrapment. I conclude by offering a few more thoughts on the politics of popular culture today.

Captivity, Crime, and Property in the Self: Three Afterlives of Slavery

On one level, the thinness of emancipation is not surprising: critics of liberalism have shown time and again that the political economic system of representative democracy yoked to private enterprise falls far short of its repetitive promises of individual rights and personal freedom.⁴ Genuine self-determination, instead, is reserved only for people who have amassed enough capital of their own that they do not depend on the wage relation, directly or indirectly, for their livelihood. Indeed, it was Hartman's conception of the "afterlife of slavery" and the "illusory freedom and travestied liberation" of formal emancipation that arguably catalyzed anew scholarship from a Black and Brown perspective on the sharp limits of liberal humanism (12). In this section, however, I examine three afterlives of slavery that have not received as much attention as Hartman's other interventions in *Scenes of Subjection*: namely, crime, captivity, and property in the self.

As she makes clear in the chapter that centers in part on *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, captivity and crime are closely linked in historical U.S. slave law. This link was secured through the contradiction of slave agency: the enslaved person was understood to be captive, on the one hand, because of their enslavement—not a person but property—and agential, on the other hand, to rationalize their punishment. Writes Hartman: "The slave was recognized as a reasoning subject who possessed intent and rationality solely in the context of criminal liability; ironically, the slave's will was acknowledged only as it was prohibited or punished" (82). Moreover, this cruel irony of agency and captivity was most profound in the context of the rape of enslaved women, who "could neither give nor refuse consent, nor offer reasonable resistance, yet they were criminally responsible and liable"

4. See, for example, Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Duke UP, 2014), 31. Moreover, in his critique of "nominal emancipations" as opposed to "a different sort of freedom" and "liberty's true potentiality," Weheliye references Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* as well as Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (U of Minnesota P, 2003); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Beacon Press, 2003); Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford UP, 2008); and José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York UP, 2009).

(Hartman 82).⁵

Further, because of the routine rape of enslaved women by their owners and the small acts of resistance of such women even in the context of sexual assault, the enslaved woman faced greater criminalization than enslaved men. Hartman tracks this dynamic in Jacobs's reflection in *Incidents* on her tactics to rile her master such as when Jacobs writes (via the pseudonym Linda Brent) that "I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way" ("Chapter X"). In response to such transgressions, Jacobs recalls Flint calling her "criminal towards" him ("Chapter XI"); as Hartman notes, the "repeated use of the term 'crime' throughout the narrative documents the displacement of culpability onto the enslaved and crime as a predominant mode of black subjection" (105). Indeed, crime, "in its elasticity, encompasses all efforts to escape, expose, and redress injury" (Hartman 105). Although there are other arguments about the origin of crime, Hartman makes a persuasive case through the analysis referenced here that crime, at least in the U.S. context, is inseparable from the management of slavery and enslaved people-as-property. In the afterlife of slavery, then, "crime" both inheres in the figure of the Black person and signals the state and state-backed crimes committed against Black people. In other words, "crime"—a highly elastic concept as Hartman notes—has no inherent, authoritative meaning because it is a relation of power with parties across that relation always in struggle over the meaning of crime.

There is a similar elasticity to the concept of captivity. For instance, after she escapes Flint, Jacobs's attic hideaway—a trap space where she famously spent seven years eluding her captor and his "slave-hunters"—is not only a place of "imprisonment," as she describes it, but also a place of refuge and one that offered small but important pleasures such as "a glimpse of one twinkling star" ("Chapter XXIX").⁶ Indeed, the "loophole" Jacobs "bore" through the attic enclosure afforded

5. Hartman notes this dichotomy extended to the sexual punishment of enslaved men.

6. "I hardly expect that the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven years. But it is a fact; and to me a sad one, even now; for my body still suffers from the effects of that long imprisonment, to say nothing of my soul...Countless were the nights that I sat late at the little loophole scarcely large enough to give me a glimpse of one twinkling star. There, heard the patrols and the slave-hunters conferring together about the capture of runaways, well knowing how rejoiced they would be to catch me."

her a bit of fresh air, not to mention frequent sightings of her children (“Chapter XXI”).⁷

The title of the chapter in which Jacobs discusses the loophole is called “The Loophole of Retreat.” Hartman understands retreat in this context as “a space of freedom that is at the same time a space of captivity,” a double bind that illustrates “the difficulties experienced in trying to assume the role of free and self-possessed individual” (9). As such, “freedom” for Black people post-emancipation is a kind of trap, burdened by both the legacies of enslavement and the exploited labor of the wage, the latter “underlined” for Hartman by “Jacobs’s continued servitude” as a domestic in New York City, whose only “newly acquired property” is “the self” (112). In other words, although Jacobs is free, she is still subject to the wage relation and to the residual effects of the chattel relation upon which the wage relation is based. Put differently, whereas Jacobs was directly forced to work under enslavement, she is now indirectly forced to work by the terms of “free” labor under racial capitalism. She has moved, that is, from chattel slavery to “wage slavery,” which is distinguished precisely by the fact it is not chattel slavery. So, while Jacobs now “owns” herself, she owns nothing else and must work to live—and work in a severely limited labor market for Black people.

The survival efforts of Jacobs and other Black women, whether enslaved or fugitive, nonconsensual laborer or wage worker, also underline Hartman’s theory of “akin to freedom,” based on the distinction Jacobs makes between “giv[ing] one’s self” to a lover versus “submit[ting] to compulsion” in the case of the master’s sexual demands (“Chapter X”). “There is something akin to freedom” in the former scenario, Jacobs writes. As Hartman points out, however, this “something akin to freedom” is fully circumscribed by the much greater agency white women had in this regard by virtue of white supremacy and the legitimacy of the white family (104). Nevertheless, in keeping with Jacobs’s other acts against the dehumanizing, sexually violating system of slavery, her notion of “something akin to freedom” is among the “possible gains to be made in the context of domination.”

Hartman, in turn, traces the components of this “akin to freedom,” writing that, “like freedom itself, [it] reveals the indebtedness of liberty to property and to an alienable and exchangeable self” (110). Moreover, while “[t]his order of

7. “But I groped round; and having found the side next the street, where I could frequently see my children, I stuck the gimlet in and waited for evening. I bored three rows of holes, one above another; then I bored out the interstices between. I thus succeeded in making one hole about an inch long and an inch broad. I sat by it till late into the night, to enjoy the little whiff of air that floated in.”

property”—of giving one’s self to another—is “markedly different from that of chattel slavery,” “sexuality is at the heart of this exchange,” just as it is (was) under chattel slavery (Hartman 112). It is this political economic analysis arrived at through her consideration of crime and captivity that characterizes the burdened individuality and travestied liberation of post-emancipation Black people. Hartman shows, in the first instance, that becoming free meant becoming free to work for a wage: that is, to be exploited for profit rather than being owned as a commodity. In the second instance, she demonstrates that this shift in contractual relations for Black people—from a self that is owned by contract, to a self that is one’s own, to contract out for hire—is authorized by both racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy. Emancipation, then, can be understood as an entrapment into racial-capitalist wage work rather than freedom from the wage and racial capitalism. And at the center of that entrapment is the gender entrapment of Black women, forced to do whatever they can to survive whether nonconsensual labor, wage work, or “crime.”

Akin to Freedom: The Carceral State and the Trap Genre

Like Harriet Jacobs and many other formerly enslaved people, trap as a music genre also moved from the U.S. South to the North, albeit at a much later historical moment. The genre was popularly codified through Atlanta rapper T.I.’s 2003 album *Trap Muzik*, the first song of which, eponymously titled, presents the key features of the genre. First, the idea of the “trap,” which is likened both to a “dope house” but also to a larger predicament for Black recording artists that includes the music industry (suggested by the couplet “This a trap / This ain’t no album”) (“Trap Muzik”). The second feature is a sense of fugitivity—“Man wherever I be / The feds got me scoped out”—but one not limited to the narrator’s involvement in an outlaw drug business. Rather, the “feds” have him “scoped out” “wherever I be”: a clear statement that the ontological condition of his life is fugitive. Indeed, midway through the song comes the sound of police sirens and then the sounds of running and jumping a metal fence.

As this defining track demonstrates, trap music as a genre depicts the carceral state and its primary targets: the surplus population of people who have been structurally unemployed from the formal economy for any number of reasons and who, in many cases, have turned to informal economies to make a living. And because they are employed in such criminalized enterprise (such as the outlaw drug business), they face a higher risk of contact with the police and the criminal-justice

system—and, therefore, a higher risk of imprisonment. These risks are compounded for Black people because of the way crime, historically, is attached to them in the afterlife of slavery and because of present and past anti-Black discrimination in education and in the formal economy, which left many Black people out of work when Fordist industries collapsed with the onset of contemporary globalization in the late 1960s and 1970s.

California was a bellwether for the emergence of the carceral state, given both the size of the state's economy and the influence of governor-turned-president Ronald Reagan. Indeed, the growth of the prison-industrial complex in the Golden State was directly related to the political economic need to “take more than 160,000 low-wage workers off the streets” (Gilmore 88). These workers were one of four surpluses idled during the U.S. recession of the 1970s, the others being finance capital, land, and state capacity (Gilmore 85). The “prison fix” became a way to put these surpluses back in action while also addressing restive out-of-work and insecurely employed groups of people. The political cover for this economic reconfiguration was an enhanced deployment of law-and-order politics through campaigns such as the “war on crime” and the “war on drugs.” As Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes, the “containment of crime, understood as an elastic category spanning a dynamic alleged continuum of dependency and depravation,” became the problem that needed to be solved (85-6). The state “solved” it, in part, by ramping up its criminalization of poor and low-income people—and capturing them in cages. In sum, as prison became a “fix” for various social issues the state no longer wanted to address, structural unemployment became a “set-up for criminalization,” as Tryon Woods describes it.

At the same time as the carceral state was emerging in California, soon to take hold elsewhere in the U.S., New York City underwent its own political economic transformation: from a robust welfare state to a state of austerity. Triggered by the city's fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s, financial capitalists, other elites, and the Ford administration worked together to dismantle the public services the city had amassed since the Great Depression in a formidable act of neoliberal revanchism.⁸ Across the city, at least half a million jobs were lost from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, and as many as one-and-a-quarter million people faced cutbacks to their

8. On neoliberal revanchism, see Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (Routledge, 1996). On the details of the political economic response to the city's fiscal crisis, see Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (Metropolitan Books, 2017).

public assistance (a prelude to “workfare”). The City University of New York, which only a few years earlier had opened admissions far more than ever before, started charging tuition, which immediately reduced student enrollment. Meanwhile, racist spatial policies like urban renewal, redlining, and blockbusting meant that poor and low-income New Yorkers were also more housing insecure just as they experienced greater financial insecurity.

In post-Fordist, post-fiscal-crisis New York, then, economically disenfranchised people had been re-routed from their longstanding neighborhoods to new ones devoid of jobs, experiencing what Mindy Fullilove has called “root shock” in the process. And though construction of public housing boomed, the lack of formal work for its residents, particularly for young women and men, meant that informal work had to fill the void. If housing projects would later become a common site for the drug trade, it only made sense. If people have a place to live but no formal work, it is only rational to become entrepreneurial and sell a product that people want.

Hip hop, it bears reminding, emerged against this backdrop of political economic transformation: the attenuation of formal jobs and public services on the one hand and the rise of the carceral state on the other. Indeed, in neighborhoods such as the South Bronx, the birthplace of hip hop, youth unemployment was as high as 80 percent in the late 1970s (Chang 13). “If blues culture had developed under the conditions of oppressive, forced labor,” as Jeff Chang writes, “hip-hop culture would arise from the conditions of no work” (13). More than two decades later, trap music emerged as an ongoing chronicle of the latest forms of criminalization that Black and Brown people contend with as they continue to encounter a scarcity of jobs and discrimination in the formal job market. And, yet, this musical-lyrical archive of experience largely excludes women as equal players as “Trap Queen” pointedly shows.⁹

Trappin’

Fetty Wap’s “Trap Queen” video, released August 7, 2014, has been viewed, as of this writing, more than half-a-billion times, making it, arguably, the most widely seen depiction of a trap house (see Figure 1). As a set of lyrics and images, the song

9. I should be clear here that I’m not singling out trap music for its tendency to elide or marginalize women, which is a tendency across the music industry. As well, there are female trap producers, such as Jlin, and I analyze Rihanna’s use of the trap genre in a work in progress.

and video hew closely to the expected elements of the trap-music genre. These elements include verbal and visual references to U.S. currency, often being counted into stacks (here, by Fetty Wap's character or his "trap queen," or girlfriend); the process of making product (here, cooking crack and meth on a stovetop); and weed smoking, in which everyone partakes. The song's connection to trap sonics, by contrast, is quite tenuous. Instead of the hard-edged, menacing aural quality of the genre overall, "Trap Queen" sounds open, laidback, and fun. Altogether, if trap music is typically a bleak account of so-called "thug life," then in Fetty Wap's hands this life is a joyful heterotopia in which self-determination can be achieved sans interference from the law. No doubt this bracing vision of possibility goes a long way toward explaining the song and video's massive popularity, on par only with Katy Perry's and Rihanna's fellow crossover trap tracks "Dark Horse" (2013) featuring well-known trap artist Juicy J and "Bitch Better Have My Money" (2015), respectively.

Although trap music may seem "apolitical," particularly in contrast to the liberal humanism purveyed by Kendrick Lamar (Burton 72), politics is more than ideology, belief, or conscious intent. Indeed, cultural studies scholars from Stuart Hall to Richard Iton have shown that mass cultural products are profound sites of politics, perhaps especially when they are "unrecognizable as politics," as Iton writes (17). Moreover, "a deep engagement with popular culture might enhance our understanding of developments in the formal political arena and...compel a revision of our notions of the political" (Iton 29). Trap music, then, like any other form of cultural production, is a generative venue to trace political developments and possibilities. Further, given its deviance from liberal norms, trap music is a formidable example of what Iton calls the "black fantastic": that is, "the minor-key sensibilities generated from the experiences of the underground, the vagabond, and those constituencies marked as deviant" (16).

Arguably, the primary "minor-key sensibility generated" by "Trap Queen" is its representation of an informal economy in which waged work might not exist. I write "might not" because it is unclear from the song and video what the economic arrangements are of this particular outlaw drug business. Certainly, the depiction of the "trap queen" herself is scored with multiple kinds of unwaged domestic and emotional labor, befitting the song and video's heteropatriarchal framework. And the labor of the lower-level employees—the court attendants, as it were, in this quasi-monarchical vision—is almost out of the frame entirely, save for a few glimpses in the background.



Figure 1. Selected Screenshots from Fetty Wap's "Trap Queen" Video (2014)

On the other hand, given the absence of police or any other threats to the trappers' security and livelihood, the scenario presented by the song and video could be construed as a post-racial-capitalist future in which Black people either control the means of production or are agents in some other economic arrangement. In this interpretation, the drugs stand in for any goods of trade. It is the possibility of genuinely unfettered self and collective determination that is the point, not what the goods are. Indeed, the substitution of an actual fruit pie in the video for the kilo of coke referred to in the lyrics as "pie" completes the fantasy of the song's narrator ("Trap Queen"). That is, he has transposed the material circumstances that entrap people in the outlaw drug business for a vision of life independent of those circumstances. Furthermore, this vision is a type of "gain" that can be made in the context of domination, as Hartman averred.

Then, again, this liberatory possibility is foreclosed by its marginalizing of the female character. Since heteropatriarchy is inseparable from racial capitalism, it is impossible to be free of one and not the other. The moniker "Trap Queen" is an honorific applied to the male narrator's female partner but it belies the exploited labor she contributes in support of the man's agency and pleasure. The song and video elide her plight in a humorous sleight-of-hand that obscures not only her gendered labor, here a send-up of stereotypical labors and desires that inhere in the figure of women under heteropatriarchy, but also the material harms women involved in trap houses or the outlaw drug industry overall may suffer.

The flicker of self-determination on view in "Trap Queen" is also compromised by the song and video's own status as a product of the U.S. mass-entertainment industry. Without putting too fine a point on it, the purpose of such products is to generate profit for the corporations involved. So, while "Trap Queen" makes a couple of political interventions—its interruption of the pathetic accounts of Black life as promulgated by liberal-democratic discourse and its fleeting sense of an alternative future—these inroads are contradicted by the structures of racial capitalism which will not allow a fully liberatory image or narrative to take flight.

Indeed, the song and video's erasure of the police and the prison-industrial complex overall contributes to the mystification of the conditions of life and labor that trap music, as an underground genre to this moment, has worked to expose. In other words, the incomplete heterotopic vision "Trap Queen" unveils—arguably the reason for its popular success—obscures the struggles of real-world "trappers" to make a living under arduous circumstances. And these workers include women who must contend not just with racial capitalism but with heteropatriarchy, too.

Gender Entrapping

Published one year before *Scenes of Subjection*, Beth E. Richie's *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women* is an important complement to the former. Although the two works emanate from different disciplines and deploy different methodologies, they are both focused on the subjection of Black women to violence—and their concomitant criminalization—as a function of political economic design. Specifically, Richie's emphasis on battered and criminalized Black women being “forced to make hard choices with very few options” tracks with Hartman's focus on the double bind of enslaved women in sexual encounters with their masters and with the overall burdened individuality of Black people post-emancipation.¹⁰

In her interviews with three groups of poor women detained at New York City's Rikers Island jail—Black battered women, Black non-battered women, and white battered women—Richie discovered the elements that would form her theory of gender entrapment. Extending the normative legal definition of entrapment, “which implies a circumstance whereby an individual is lured into a compromising act,” Richie defines gender entrapment as both the circumstances that cause battered Black women to commit crimes *and* the penalties they face in the criminal-justice system for these acts. These penalties are meted out despite the infractions being “logical extensions of their racialized gender identities, their culturally expected gender roles, and the violence in their intimate relationships” (Richie 4). In essence, the women's social and economic conditions set them up for criminalization. They could not leave their abusive male partners for financial reasons, and they did not want to leave out of fear of being perceived a failure by themselves and by others. Meanwhile, stereotypes of Black women as tough and resilient foreclosed the possibility of any nuanced understanding of their predicament. People assumed the battered women should have been able to leave their partners or that the abuse they suffered was not as bad as it was. As Richie writes, “The factor that distinguished the African American women who were battered from those African American women who were not battered was the degree to which they *aspired* to the ideological norm” (her emphasis, 135). Importantly, this ideological norm derives

10. Richie makes the claim of Black women being “forced to make hard choices with very few options” in various ways throughout the introduction to *Compelled to Crime*, beginning on page 1.

from the convergence of the historical logics of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy—a convergence that is part of the afterlife of slavery and which continues to mediate the perceived being of Black women through the fictions of white womanhood. In this way, the idealized female partner of “Trap Queen” opens a window onto one of the primary dynamics undergirding gender entrapment: the aspiration to fit a normative (white) female gender role.

The enduring charge of misogyny against Black male rappers is a historical tension. Indeed, the charge gave rise in part to the theory of intersectionality developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw Williams, who took the obscenity trial of 2 Live Crew in 1990 as an occasion to reflect on a certain scholarly privileging of the harm to Black men over that to Black women (Crenshaw 1282-83). While she too opposed the prosecution of 2 Live Crew, Crenshaw highlighted the way Black women were marginalized in the discussion of the trial and, further, how Black women were generally marginalized “by a politics of race alone or gender alone” (1283). She concludes that “a political response to each form of subordination [racial and gendered] must at the same time be a political response to both.”

At this current historical moment, when intersectionality theory and identity politics are criticized from both the left and the right—even as the Right continues to operationalize perceived white suffering in service to a renewed white-supremacist movement—analyzing a popular text like “Trap Queen” in its multiple dimensions is all the more important. Against the fierce, multi-pronged campaign by elites to mystify both the material conditions of life and the social relations of people, all products of racial capitalism require scrutiny. This assessment is perhaps never more urgent than when fictions pose as truths whether in the case of “Trap Queen” or emancipation at large. We must always watch out for the traps and “say her name,” as activists online and off call us to do.¹¹

Emancipation as Entrapment

Finally, “Trap Queen” is an excellent case study for how and why underground genres (or subgenres) cross over to mass popularity in the twenty-first century. By taking arguably the most important trope of the modern age—freedom—Fetty Wap mystified the material conditions that entrap structurally unemployed Black people

11. The African American Policy Forum created the Twitter hashtag campaign #SayHerName in 2015 to counter the erasure of Black women from mainstream discourse as victims and survivors of police violence. See Williams and Ritchie 2015.

into criminalized activity. In so doing, however, Fetty Wap also obscured the work of gender, intersecting with race, in entrapping some battered Black women into “crime.” As such, and against the song and video’s progressive tendencies, a conservative, even reactionary, politic is “trapped” inside “Trap Queen”: the reproduction of the logics of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy that first converged in the development of racial capitalism and settler colonialism on the bodies and lands of Indigenous peoples across the world. In other words, the very same rationale used to criminalize both enslaved Black women in the U.S. and some battered Black women post-Emancipation is reflexively deployed in “Trap Queen” through the guise of freedom—that is, emancipation by another word.

In some respects, this contradiction is nothing new: cultural products of high consumption have always been riven with tensions both historical and contemporary. Instead, what I seek to underscore vis-à-vis “Trap Queen” is how the dictates of mass entertainment—popular culture—require many Black artists (and many Indigenous artists and artists of color) to play by the rules, as it were, of racial-capitalist and settler-colonialist structures like heteropatriarchy and white supremacy in order for these artists to be heard and seen. This compulsion to reproduce dominant norms is also a form of entrapment, albeit a profitable, metaphorical one, in stark contrast to the structural entrapment of people by dint of race and gender which offers no long-term profit for them but incarceration or the ongoing threat of it.

To be clear, Fetty Wap is not to “blame” for purveying a fantasy into worldwide renowned and better odds at staying power in the music industry and mass-entertainment firmament than most debut artists. But the trap laid inside that vision—the alibi of emancipation that covers for the gender politics of slavery—makes it harder to abolish the structure of entrapment at the core of the carceral state. Accordingly, to achieve genuine abolition once and for all, mass *movements* are needed (as ever), not mass entertainments, no matter how transformative they may seem.

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