

Essay

# D.S. Sense's "On My Detroit Everything": Self-Articulating Black Girl Magic

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**Abstract:** Long before the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic was popularized on social network sites Black women in Detroit have been employing art in their processes of self-articulation and efforts to deal with the complexities and challenges of life in the city. The scripts of African American women that dominate the commercial hip hop industry and their impacts on girls and women have received thorough analysis in academia; yet, the practices, representations, and discursive articulations of independent, Black women hip hop artists remain underexplored. In particular, this essay draws on Deidre "D.S. Sense" Smith's spoken word poem "On My Detroit Everything" to illuminate the counter-narratives and scripts that Black women have been creating to document, validate, and voice their experiences at a critical point in Detroit's history as it underwent and continues to deal with the after effects of bankruptcy. Hip hop artists who use cultural production to accomplish grass roots community-building offer alternative visions of what it means to do political work. More than a strategy, we argue that such practices serve as the foundation for a movement that is significant and worthy of documentation in the contemporary neoliberal moment where in policies are accelerating the continued disenfranchisement of people of color in cities such as Detroit.

**Keywords:** #BlackGirlMagic; cultural production; Detroit; hip hop feminism; politics

## 1. Introduction

Spoken word poet/hip hop emcee/activist Deidre "D.S. Sense" Smith eludes easy definition. She identifies as a Black, bisexual woman in her mid-thirties, a native Eastside Detroiter, and community service activist (Personal Communication with the authors, 25 March 2017). D.S. Sense began performing her spoken word piece entitled, "On My Detroit Everything" ("OMDE") in 2013. It is a text with a rich tapestry that speaks to post bankruptcy Detroit and neoliberal governmentality while illustrating the ways in which one woman's #BlackGirlMagic cuts up the very fabric of neoliberal logics and gentrification. It also critiques the hip hop industry's hold on artists and articulates with bravado D.S. Sense's perseverance and that of Detroit in challenging times. Most significantly, "OMDE" exemplifies hip hop feminist pedagogy in action (Brown 2009; Brown 2013; Durham et al. 2013) and contributes to a growing, alternative notion of #BlackGirlMagic that complicates and moves the term beyond either a celebration of Black femininity and beauty that conforms to post-feminist, neoliberal logics or a reinscription of the "strong Black woman" trope (Davis 2018).

#BlackGirlMagic is an emerging social movement that provides a contemporary cultural archive as it documents and gives visibility to the complex subjectivity and diverse expressions of young Black women and other women of color. It has materialized in a post-soul, post-civil-rights era influenced by DIY activism and heavily driven by social media. The trajectory and value of the movement is yet to be settled or situated in Black feminist history; yet what is certain is that there is nothing monolithic

about it. In its short lifespan thus far, the hashtag's usage on social media sites has garnered some criticism. Chavers (2016); Hobson (2016) warn of its commodification of young, slender Black bodies in the name of empowerment at the expense of bodies rendered invisible because they are too large, disabled, or gender-nonconforming (Hobson 2016). On Chavez's view #BlackGirlMagic depicts Black girls and women as superhuman and in turn, reifies the controlling image of the angry Black woman. In response, Ford (2016) contends that "It's not about tapping into something supernatural, it's about claiming or reclaiming what others have refused to see". In an effort to expand the presence of Black women's bodies as well as #BlackGirlMagic's reach and impact, Hobson calls for a black beauty project that grapples "with a more complex examination of the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability that can reframe black embodiment beyond commercialized spectacles and toward more diverse representations of liberated bodies". Moreover, we believe that questions concerning the term's applicability to—and the extent to which the movement includes—women from diverse socio-economic positions also needs to be explored. Public icons such as Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé who produce hit albums are not in the same struggle as women with financial worries.

Clearly, the complex, intersectional ways in which social identity operates with respect to #BlackGirlMagic are yet to be fleshed out. Still, the cultural practices that ground #BlackGirlMagic are diverse and the expressive culture coursing through the movement crosses a range of cultural forms including music, photography, film, poetry, visual art, dance, and literature. Community work and social justice are also uplifted in the experiences of Black women who engage the phenomenon of #BlackGirlMagic. Working to expand its meaning and application, Jolandra Davis turns to Afrofuturism and Black women science fiction writers such as Octavia Butler and Nalo Hopkinson to showcase an alternative notion of #BlackGirlMagic in action (Davis 2018, p. 14); one characterized by the "otherhuman". She argues that the magic of many heroines of Black women's science fiction novels is connected to their vulnerability which positions them "as constant rhetorical threats to society" but "also appears to empower said women to function as disruptions to such unjust social systems engrained within their respective societies" (p. 15). Like the movement overall, D.S. Sense also refuses to consent to neoliberal economics and post-racial logics that temper late capitalism. Throughout this essay we demonstrate the myriad ways in which D.S. Sense and "OMDE" contribute to #BlackGirlMagic's collective story that emphasizes community building, sisterhood, perseverance, and change inducing actions. With Davis's conceptions of the dichotomy that vulnerability invokes, we introduce the concept of the "Vulnerable Maverick" to capture D.S. Sense's assured embodiment of her queer Black body and her public interventions into the white supremacist, neoliberal society to which the commercial hip hop industry is tethered.

Documenting her stories, our analysis is guided by the following research questions: How does the cultural production of Black urban women rooted in hip hop aesthetics, culture, and practices embody the #BlackGirlMagic movement? Additionally, how does "On My Detroit Everything" contribute to the redefinition and expansion of what counts as political work? Finally, to what extent does Detroit's history as a musical and movement city shape D.S. Sense's power to create space for herself in both Detroit and the hip hop community?

We contend that D.S. Sense and her poem "OMDE" exemplify #BlackGirlMagic, the newest force and face of Black girls and women articulating on their own terms the power of protest, performance, and telling one's story. Drawing on ethnographically grounded "textual experience" (Durham 2014), field notes, and reflexive interviews, we argue that "OMDE" exemplifies the ways in which Black girls and women are engaging with hip hop informed artistic practices to compose scripts of self-articulation. We also contend that the content of "On My Detroit Everything" and emcee practices such as those D.S. Sense embodies contribute to community organizing and as such, are representative of Black, female-centered political work. To this end, we build on Berger (2006) argument that the actions of Black HIV/AIDS positive women in Detroit in the 1990s should be viewed as political work. Lastly, this essay contributes to Detroit's rich, activist history (Venugopal 2011) and its connection to various music communities over time (Macías 2010). In D.S. Sense's words, "community work is servitude.

It is about committing to causes bigger than yourself. I do community service leadership. I use artistic, hip hop expression as my community activism" (Personal communication with authors, 26 March 2017).

The theoretical currents that inform our work are inextricably linked to our methodology. First, we contend that neoliberalism is both the ideological glue and economic framework that best describes Detroit's location in late capitalism. To further assist our framing, we turn to various strands of Black feminist scholarship. The first is concerned with research that examines what counts as political labor, activism, and social citizenship for urban Black women (Berger 2006; Clay 2012; Cox 2015; Isoke 2013). We also intervene into literature that examines the perilous and positive scripts/archetypes through which hip hop scholars have examined the roles women occupy and how they subvert them. Together, this work contextualizes the spoken word poetry of D.S. Sense. This essay is also informed by hip hop feminist scholars' philosophical standpoint that practices such as witnessing and testifying, auto-ethnography, and expressive story-telling; are all interconnected means of performing one's story. For Aisha Durham, even textual analysis is approached as lived experience. Reinterpreted as textual experience, she claims that it "is an active, interpretive process of bridging lived experience with the living memories embedded in words, acts, objects, or sounds to generate temporal, plural, partisan, and partial meaning that is filtered through a historical produced subject of situation speaking position" (Durham 2014, p. 61).

While #BlackGirlMagic is an emergent form of cultural resistance it does not stand outside of earlier forms of Black feminism that sought to bring awareness to the lived experiences and intersectional identities of Black women and other women of color. Theirs was a response to the monolithic notion of women that was popularized in mainstream feminist circles (Peoples 2008). Through positive and painstaking examples Collins (2006) illustrates the ways in which Black women's daily lives have always been connected to community work and cultural politics. She contends that Black women's community work should be conceptualized "as an important site of political activism" (Collins 2006, p. 25). Departing from some forms of Western feminism, Black feminism addresses misogyny and critiques patriarchy in subtle ways. And unlike white women, Black women share with Black men the victimization of ideological raced based hate, both physically and symbolically. They share a history of white supremacy, criminalization, and too often poverty (Morgan 1999). These enactments of intersectionality shape the intricacies of Black feminism (Crenshaw 1991) that Peoples (2008) astutely illustrates continue to form commonalities between second wave and hip hop feminism.

Hip hop feminism bears the traces of Black feminism, and yet it moves in different experiential directions. Patricia Hill Collins' generation came up in and through the civil rights era as well as the Black Power movement. The politics of respectability that shaped Black liberation movement activism and discourse is called into question by today's hip hop feminists (Cooper et al. 2017; Durham et al. 2013; Durham 2014). In part, refusing respectability politics is tied to resisting the privilege of heteronormativity; hip hop feminism, and hip hop pedagogy also openly challenge compulsory heterosexuality. What is more, hip hop feminists view the embodiment of sexuality as fluid, and sexual agency is open and unapologetic. Beyond the body, mass incarceration, police brutality, new insidious forms of racism, and misogyny are all at stake in the lives of the hip hop generation of which hip hop feminists are a part. This new context shapes the intensity, competition, social critique, and bold attitudes that flow through hip hop's cultural forms. Hip hop feminists contextualize these conditions in exacting detail. In a significant break from their predecessors, their relationship with hip hop offers more than a critique of misogyny. In an effort to use hip hop to uplift the lives of girls and women of color, hip hop feminism scholars (Brown 2009, 2013; Cooper et al. 2017; Durham 2014) advocate for "using the elements of hip-hop culture and feminist methodology for the purpose of transforming oppressive institutions, policies, relationships, and beliefs" (Brown 2009, p. 9). Brown and Durham's work is situated in Black girlhood studies and an investment in "the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female" (Brown 2009, p. 7). In this worldview, hip hop is a practice of sustainability and recovery applicable to the immediate

context of the lives of girls and women of color. It offers a stage on which they can reach for one another, express themselves, and heal. In a climate of postindustrial cities, globalized, outsourced jobs, “the New Jim Crow”, and capitalism’s ugliest face neoliberalism, hip hop related practices and pedagogies give Black women and girls grounds for connection and new social imaginaries. It is in this context, where feminism is both a theoretical framework and mode of analysis, that we offer a reading of D.S. Sense’s “On My Detroit Everything”.

## 2. Detroit: An Archetypal Neoliberal City

Economically, Detroit shares many features with other Rust Belt cities; all of them have struggled—with various levels of success—to transform single mode of production economies into multiple forms of industry. In an economic environment that is dominated by service and information industries no single enterprise can sustain Detroit. Though it is not the first city in the US to experience emergency financial management the particularities of its implementation and forced bankruptcy situate it as an ideal neoliberal city. Michigan Governor Rick Snyder selected Kevin Orr to take on the role of Detroit’s external emergency manager. Orr cut city costs by selling off city owned services to privatized companies, while Governor Snyder suspended the voting rights of citizens as well as city agencies such as the school board and the city council (Shea Howell in conversation with the authors, 15 February 2014). Services that were once state owned and operated now function like private businesses: charter schools emerged and water billing became corporatized. Political scientist Lester Spence documents that in the 2000s water prices in the city increased more than 1000 percent over the course of a decade (Spence 2015). In 2014, Detroit made national news when the U.N. denounced its water shut offs as a violation of human rights. Academic and activist Shea Howell explains that, “these water shut offs are not about unpaid bills. This is about dispossession of the people. These shutoffs are intended to drive people from their homes” (Howell 2014). On any given day in 2015 close to 30,000 households were in danger of being shut off (Howell 2015). When government operates like a market-based business rather than providing services and care for tax paying citizens we all lapse into being consumers in markets and citizenship fades away. Reimagining politics and citizenship Black feminists levy their critique of neoliberalism’s insidious work. Isoke (2013) reveals how new generations of Black women engaging in activism are resisting “pressures to adopt and enforce neoliberal social projects that pathologize poor black people who defy middle class norms of respectability” (p. 6).

Identify formation is vital political work for Detroiters because the majority of its population confronts “intersectional stigma” (Berger 2006). Black and Latino citizens’ identities have been arrested through tropes of criminality, critiques of absent fathers, and bad cultural values (Alexander 2012; Cox 2015; Spence 2015). Engaging in cultural production and community work are strategies that Detroiters employ to reclaim their identification with and their right to the city. Scholars (Berger 2006; Boggs and Kurashige 2012; Cox 2015) who examine community building and politics argue that traditional ideas about what it means to do politics cannot contain the forms of paid and unpaid work that emerge in grassroots, community activism. In her study of women living with AIDS in Detroit, Berger (2006) creates an instructive theoretical framework that opens new paths for examining Black women’s political participation and resistance. Similarly, Cox (2015) ethnographic work on Detroit girls and young women facing homelessness and underemployment and Clay (2012) study of Black and Latino high school youth in Oakland, CA also illustrate that the forms of action that constitute political work in local communities are grounded in the “politics of everyday life”.

## 3. Detroit’s Cultural Resistance

The industrial conditions Detroit’s auto industry created led to mass migration of African Americans from the South and developed a distinct city with a rich musical history. Detroit artists contributed to the formation of blues music and Bebop jazz, the R&B and soul that came out of Motown, followed by the innovations of local hip hop and Detroit Techno—all of which mark its unique cultural

bailiwick. Racial and cultural politics have long shaped its population into a movement city and a significant contributor to the Black Arts Movement starting in the 1960s. In a historical study outlining Detroit's contributions to the development of Bebop jazz in the 1950s [Macías \(2010\)](#) illustrates how jazz artists are conceived as cultural workers. D.S. Sense serves as a cultural worker who in the spirit of #BlackGirlMagic lives through her heritage—reaching back as she moves forward—to help other Black women and girls recognize a positive vision of themselves and create a space for them to broadcast their experiences and stories in public discourse. She is one of many local hip hop artists using their musical and visual art as toolkits to critique the state and private industry's neoliberal grip on their beloved city. In *Difficult Diasporas* ([Pinto 2013](#), pp. 4–5) argues that literary and cultural production are “intimately and pervasively present in how we construct analytics of race, gender, and location, in that they invoke and provoke contradictory desires to have the known world reflected but also to create new and varied connections”. D.S. Sense's artistic output is illustrious of Pinto's claims; it provides the space where identity formation and material connection forge.

#### 4. D.S. Sense, Hip Hop, and the Foundation

Black women and girls have played important roles in hip hop's formation as a cultural and political movement and as a commercial enterprise from its street roots in the South Bronx in the early 1970s to date ([Guevara 1996](#); [Rose 1994](#)); and yet, too often their contributions are underappreciated and overlooked. Insisting that “hip hop should be recognized as both a tool for change and a restructuring of social participation” ([Vinicky 2012](#), p. 31) women making hip hop in Detroit are producing counter-narratives to the industry's focus on fame, fashion, and physique. Through artwork, dance, DJing, and MCing, they are creating sonic, visual, and bodily interventions in the hegemonic discourses that too often relegate women to hip hop's margins. Beyond the immediate space of hip hop enclaves, they are spreading the word about their practices, actions, and discursive articulations on social media sites and the Web, tagging them with hashtags such as #WomenInHipHop, #GirlsHipHop, and #BlackGirlMagic in the hopes that their art and messages will go viral for all the world to see.

The work that women in Detroit's hip hop underground are accomplishing reflects and intervenes into the scripts that a plethora of hip hop scholars have critiqued and coined over the last twenty years. [Adams and Fuller \(2006\)](#) argue that the ubiquitous terms bitch and ho in misogynistic rap are the modern day equivalents of the Sapphire and Jezebel scripts of the past and that these male-controlled representations provide a rationale for the history of sexual assault on African American women. However, other scholars such as Cheryl Keyes ([Keyes 2000](#)) advance more positive categories that capture complex subjectivities that do not fit the confines of bitch/ho/mammy scripts. Combatting the Sapphire, Jezebel, and other “controlling images”, Keyes posits the scripts Queen Mother, Fly Girl, Sista With Attitude, and Lesbian. While the taken for granted sensibility about women in hip hop suggests that they are always already relegated to the sidelines, there have and continue to be notable exceptions, from the days of MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Lauren Hill, Bahamadia, and Missy Elliot, to more recent artists such as Angel Haze. Nonetheless, the subjectivities of Black women that circulate in contemporary, commercial hip hop music and culture continue to uphold a challenging mix of representations. In what follows we parse out the lyrics of “On My Detroit Everything” to examine the complex and fluid ways that D.S. Sense articulates her intersectional identity. We contend that her particular form of #BlackGirlMagic is rugged, blunt, and unapologetic. Our analysis articulates the ways in which she embodies the Sista With Attitude and Lesbian categories that Keyes formulates. We contend that even these categories are partial; they cannot capture D.S. Sense's subjectivity. We offer a new, cautious category, the “Vulnerable Maverick” to capture her fluidity. She is neither invincible nor without flaw or vulnerability; and yet, her commitment to resist is unwavering.

We came to know D.S. Sense through The Foundation—Detroit's only women-centered hip hop collective. Since 2009, long before the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic was used to denote the successes of Black girls and women, the women-centered hip hop collective known as The Foundation has been building up and supporting the artistic processes and accomplishments of women in Detroit. Upon her

return to Detroit from New York City where she worked as a fashion photographer, Piper Carter found the lack of women's participation at local hip hop events in Detroit—both on and off the stage—disappointing. Determined to change the gender dynamic in Detroit's hip hop culture she teamed up with local artists in the community to form The Foundation. At any given time, the collective consists of approximately a dozen women, most of whom are African American. While the majority of them are emcees the group also includes visual artists, DJs, b-girls, poets, singers, and academics. According to The Foundation's website its "mission is to educate and empower the community through sharing love of the arts, inspiring growth, building leadership, and influencing the perceptions and roles of women in hip hop for current and future generations" (Carter 2015).

In a city, culture, and industry where Black women's voices and artistry are often at worst ignored and at best not taken as seriously as men's, The Foundation has been a space for women to compose scripts of self-articulation that serve as counter-narratives to the two dimensional representations that the commercial hip hop industry has normalized and that permeate young Black women's sense of self. In a talk delivered at Wayne State University titled "Culture as Capital: How we can use hip hop to reclaim representations of women in media" Piper emphasized the importance of the work advanced in The Foundation. She stated:

When you're a Black girl from the hood you're always taught, shhh be quiet. Stop talking. Don't say anything. Let your work speak for itself. Don't do that. We have to be the ones who speak the loudest. Nobody wants you understanding your greatness. For us, especially Black women we're always taught to be humble which is great. I'm not saying we should start acting crazy but what I do mean is that being able to tell our stories in a way that's meaningful in a way that we can share what we're doing, our success and failures, that's where our strength comes from, but I hadn't learned that in the hood.

The Foundation is one key site where Piper Carter and her colleagues articulate their #BlackGirlMagic. At any moment, Piper will tweet news about Beyoncé and Solange Knowles releasing albums on the same day as evidence of #BlackGirlMagic. In the next post she will applaud Foundation artist Mahogany Jones for hosting Denim Day—an event designed to raise consciousness about untested rape kits in Detroit. Piper archives both of these acts as #BlackGirlMagic, class issues notwithstanding.

From 2009 to 2014, The Foundation hosted a weekly open mic night dedicated to women in hip hop. The organization networks with other advocacy organizations in an effort to build a citizen driven Detroit, rather than one based on consumption and market driven policy. The Foundation allies with organizations such as the Allied Media Project, The Charles Wright African American Museum, and Detroit Summer—a multigenerational collective created by Grace Lee Boggs that educates youth through rebuilding the city in local neighborhoods. The Foundation is also tied to collectives that advance urban farming through its alliance with D-Town Farms and Black identified institutions such as the Urban Network, Alkebu-lan Village, and Eastern Michigan's Environmental Action Committee. Knight Foundation grants have enabled it to produce women in hip hop conferences and to acquire computers and rent performance spaces for hip hop-centered youth activities. As one of its founding members, D.S. Sense has contributed to The Foundation's event planning, performances, and youth-based programs.

## 5. "On My Detroit Everything"

On a cold day in January 2016 D.S. Sense meets us for an afternoon conversation about "On My Detroit Everything". Since she penned this work of art—and we use the phrase figuratively because she is yet to write down any of her rhymes—"OMDE" has become a mantra and anthem in the local hip hop and activist communities. We converse at a tea shop in the artistic community that was once known as the Cass Corridor but has officially been rebranded Midtown in a neoliberal spirit. The space is inviting and sparsely furnished with wood floors and tables. A pottery studio/gallery is set up in the room next door. Areas in the city that used to be gritty and working class have become soft and

welcoming. For the next two hours D.S. Sense recites “On My Detroit Everything” and talks to us about her relationship to the city while we transcribe her every word. At events she performs the poem in one of two ways: sometimes she recites it as a spoken word piece and other times she raps it over a beat.

D.S. Sense describes the genesis of “On My Detroit Everything” by explaining, “My life mirrored what the city was going through—down but then resurgence, revitalization. Simultaneously me and the city were coming out of our places and stepping into view again. Everything that I am is synonymous with Detroit” (D.S. Sense 2016). And like the city of Detroit she is experiencing the tension between the push and the pull of neoliberal policies and the community’s resistance to them. For D.S. Sense, spoken word poetry and her emcee practices are expressions of cultural citizenship in her community; she rallies against the ideology of market-based investment.

As a native Detroiter, D.S. Sense has a keen awareness of how neoliberal logics have changed the living conditions and opportunities in Detroit neighborhoods and for its population:

I think about my neighborhood since it’s become, it looks like a war zone right now . . . My goodness the architectural is so grand. It was such a rich neighborhood and I saw the decline of it and I never understood why people would put graffiti over everything and ugly everything up that was already becoming so ugly. Then I understood. Then I understood why somebody would paint a white wall... I understood because we weren’t being heard. When you’re not being heard and you’re visible and you can’t get housing, and you can’t get jobs, nobody’s hearing you. You fill out all these forms and fill out these white sheets of paper and you get them into these offices and nobody’s listening. But once you take a broad stroke to this white wall they hear you.

(D.S. Sense in discussion with the authors, 8 September 2013)

Whiteness and bureaucracy coalesce in her reflections. Over time, US politicians who advocated trickle-down economics and the privatization of public holdings have normalized neoliberal practices at all levels of government. The white pieces of paper stand in for those bureaucrats who assess and process paper work without seeing the people who need support. Graffiti becomes a way to write back, to be seen, to infuse color, and to claim public space. Lester Spence contends that the neoliberal turn is inseparable from the contradictory ideology that we live in a post racial society. Through policy and cultural analytics he reveals that neoliberalism’s primary effect is class-based, racial inequality (Spence 2015). What is more, what happens when queerness is articulated to the new racial common sense that neoliberalism effects? A deeper form of intersectional stigma emerges. For D.S. Sense, race tangled with class, sexuality, and gender contribute to her intersectional identity challenges. Her particular form of #BlackGirlMagic is also a testimony to her queer subjectivity as a Black woman who identifies as bi-sexual. Neoliberalism is not only colorblind; it assumes a postfeminist, post-racist politics of erasure. As it cuts and eliminates funding for programs that support queer communities, poor folks, youth activities in poor neighborhoods, and people of color, it operates as if we have arrived—though it knows better.

Working for the Ruth Ellis Center D.S. Sense witnesses her colleagues battling the state for funding, as few resources exist on the state level for helping the queer and transgender community of color in the city. The forms that have to be processed, often without success, leave D.S. Sense and her colleagues in the same frustrated space as those artists who use “aerosol subjectivity” to write their life stories. By “aerosol subjectivity” we are invoking the graffiti writers who document hip hop culture with cans of aerosol paint. In so doing, they become the agents who record their own history as they forge their place and identity in hip hop culture and their cities at large. While graffiti can be seen as ugly, unwelcoming, and even threatening, it became beautiful to D.S. Sense once she understood what it papered over—the whiteness that governs the bureaucracy of social services. This is another form of D.S. Sense’s #BlackGirlMagic. She not only uplifts girls and women whose talents are often unrecognized and categorized as other, but she also recognizes the role graffiti art plays in subverting

bureaucracy. Like graffiti artists, she too restructures the walls that constrain the will of citizens, their voices, and various modes of cultural production.

D.S. Sense has to hustle at every level to fight for queer Black citizens in the city. In her words, when funds are not forthcoming from the state “I use my own money to help” (D.S. Sense in discussion with the authors, 29 January 2017). This is just one way that neoliberal funding structures press against the livelihood of Black queer communities. When churches and the state do not provide support cities’ populations have to “hustle harder” for sustenance. Rather than divide and conquer, it is the struggle for resources that is bringing disparate Detroit communities together. Today, members of the Black Power Movement sit at the same table with queer and transgender folk in grassroots efforts to reimagine education for Detroit. D.S. Sense’s “OMDE” is part of this groundwork.

“On my Detroit Everything” opens up space for self-articulation in the context of self-in-community. Before she addresses community she begins with the self and body image:

I know I look cuddily, soft as a down pillow  
 but did you not consider my skeletal frame is metal  
 Did you not consider you’re soft as a bowl of Jello  
 My tummy is toast brown, your belly is so yellow  
 Is magic when I flip my mouth  
 Is classic like all stars under Levi-Strauss  
 Need I announce you want it so I brought that bounce  
 Be lookin’ out, for killers ‘cause I’ve got that clout  
 I air it out, assume I’ll go that route  
 What’s she about  
 Lionheart lie beneath my blouse, but hear me out  
 I’m sayin’ bump it in your Scion  
 You know those little cars that resemble a box  
 You’re lukewarm, you’re resembling hot  
 You’ve been warned, you’re got the game fucked up, like you’re in porn  
 Lyrics flying from my head like my roof is torn  
 What’s this red and blue pill shit, the truth is orange

The dense rhymes in this first stanza provide a response to the power dynamics that D.S. Sense experiences in her day to day life as a Black woman who is a hip hop emcee, spoken word poet, and Detroit. Body image may be every woman’s struggle but Black women in the United States are subjected to, and work to overcome, unique representational practices and material histories. Colonialism bore modern slavery; insidious theories of scientific racism, Social Darwinism and eugenics justified ontological Otherness between the races. The colonial gaze is indeed controlling, but it is not monolithic; each attempt to freeze the frame of Black women as sexual objects and servants inadvertently opened space for their resistance; this legacy finds form in the photography of the 19th century and the pornography that colonial whiteness craved. Scholars such as [Willis and Williams \(2002\)](#) as well as [Brown \(2015\)](#) catalog, critique, and unsettle images of Black women that colonial anthropologists produced in the nineteenth century. In her examination of the ways in which Black women appear in historical and contemporary forms of pornography, [Miller-Young \(2014\)](#) invokes the trope “A Taste for Brown Sugar” to demonstrate that even when Black women have been cast in a male, colonial gaze within pornography they have always resisted, often in ambiguous ways. Black women have been alter cast as exotic and desirable on the one hand and maligned as lesser in God’s eyes. D.S. Sense is neither a cuddly Mammy nor an exotic Other for consumption. She is an agent of her own being, facing those

“yellow bellies” with her “toast brown tummy”. She claims the strength of steel while accusing her critics who view her as soft as jello. She invokes the subject position of a “killer” to signify the cutting power of her art; she “airs out the clout” in surprising ways.

D.S. Sense calls out the practices and judgmental folks that create barriers for her in the spirit of a Sista With Attitude. Keyes (2000) applies this script to rappers “who value attitude as a means of empowerment and present themselves accordingly” (p. 262). Building on Keyes’ work, Rabaka (2012) posits that in this sense “attitude” refers to “their critical posture or oppositional stance toward the established order” (p. 75). To this end, D.S. Sense engages structures of whiteness and fellow rappers who are slaves to the commercial hip hop industry’s drive for profits. She warns that although she may look cuddly in her oversized frame she possesses the strength and bravery that are symbolically attributed to lions. The lines “Is magic when I flip my mouth” and “Lyrics flying from my heart like my roof it torn” are but the first of many demonstrations of bravado that D.S. Sense incorporates into the piece. At times she signifies with subtle critique; in other places she plays the dozens with her imaginary audience, calling them yellow bellies in little boxy scions. And yet her bravado is not about flashing material wealth and sexual control. Her lyrics work on two levels: first, by exuding such boldness in the first verse D.S. Sense asserts her place in the hip hop emcee community which men dominate and where there is little space for queer, Black women. Second, the lyrics project confidence and knowledge that words are powerful; that is, they are capable of transforming consciousness so as to challenge material conditions. The use of the pronoun “you” is ambiguous in the poem. In the lines, “You’re lukewarm, you’re resembling hot, you’ve been warned, you’ve got the game fucked up, like you’re in porn” she pushes back against the industry and locals who reproduce tired rhymes that not only devalue and objectify women but also proselytize material wealth. A reference to the film *The Matrix* in the last line suggests that truth is not always what it seems; rather, it lies somewhere between blissful ignorance and the perception of fact. The line also calls to mind the colors of America’s two dominant political parties—red and blue—and the sense that political sincerity lies somewhere between, if not beyond them.

In the next stanza D.S. Sense addresses misogyny and all the forms it takes. She rhymes:

Tryin’ to tell you something good like that Rufus song  
 My haters can eat a dick, make sure it’s a foot long  
 On and on and on, till the break of dawn  
 I’m yawnin’, I’m yawnin’, whenever they perform because it’s boring  
 Get the gong, like Apollo night  
 They say get up in this ass you lyrical sodomite  
 Well kinda sorta, hot as ten whores, in Sodom and Gomorrah  
 Or weather in Bora Bora  
 Had some tempura, later it made me vomit  
 I only touch down a few times like Haley’s comet  
 Words atop my crown adore me like a garment  
 I’m steppin’ out the house, they’re thinking I’m Islamic  
 But I follow He who died at 33 from lies and Pharisees  
 They nailed him to the tree, at ease  
 As you roll with the east side feel the breeze

Here she addresses the pressures that women in hip hop who do not fit the controlling images that mass media circulates face. “I’m yawnin’, whenever they perform because it’s boring” is a direct reference to the factory like productions of the commercial rap industry that in her view foregoes

creativity and sometimes talent for profitability. The “lyrical sodomites” are the artists who cater to industry wants and needs. With the line “I only touch down a few times like Haley’s comet” D.S. Sense insists that she operates outside of the power dynamics of the commercial system; in other words, she cannot be contained. Eschewing respectability politics, she also exerts bravado and attitude when she proclaims, “my haters can eat a dick/make sure it’s a foot long”. Size is crafted into her insult, as is the gender ambiguity of the haters. Sista With Attitude also bursts through with her reference to penis size.

The shift to the hook opens up yet another register of her identity—the pride she has for Detroit:

And you know I’m on my  
On my Detroit everything.  
I’m on my Detroit everything  
I’m on my Detroit everything  
So clean  
On my Detroit everything

For D.S. Sense being “on her Detroit everything” is her #BlackGirlMagic. It is both a real and imaginary space where she and the city “are on”—by which she means being on top of one’s game. “OMDE” echoes the work of #BlackGirlMagic in that community building, resistance, and pride are intermingled with attitude; they fold into one another.

Later in the piece she creates a tapestry of actors wherein branding, popular music, Greek mythology, and corporate greed coalesce to fuel her—the “raw D’s”—subjectivity.

I had dreams of putting my city on  
The rose grew from the sludge of the Synagro  
You hoes don’t hear me though  
Cold, since I was rockin’ the rose gold herringbone  
Now fill my cup to the brim  
This is the winner’s circle  
Now why you fuckin’ with them?  
I unlearn what they teach us  
Extinguish the flame  
I’ve been enlightened Prometheus  
The God in me, Mary Mary  
It’s a God emcee  
You shall get buried  
Thou’ll shall not fuck, with raw D or he  
Will face a thousand deaths like he faced J. Vorhees  
Boy please, I breathe this shit

The lines “I had dreams of putting my city on/The rose grew from the sludge of the Synagro” refer to the specific ways in which corporate abuse has an impact on the city’s health. When she was a teenager, D.S. Sense learned that a sewage recycling company was dumping waste in Detroit in broad daylight. When her neighbor questioned the driver about his actions his response was that he was told to dump in a low-income neighborhood. Mirroring the mentality of state officials, corporations view land that lacks development potential as urban wasteland and the opinions of residents—many

of whom are low income and African American—are seen to have little impact on public discourse. The careless actions of sewage technology companies add waste to what is already considered a wasteland. This is ironic given that waste management is a part of the neoliberal discourse engine. Detroit's latest urban renewal plans figure into the problematic. Investment is geared towards the city's downtown and midtown districts with little resources or development taking place on the periphery of this 7.2 square mile core (Moskowitz 2015). Challenging policy makers, D.S. Sense uses her poetic voice to amplify the issues, shaming polluters. In doing so, she claims her space and connection to other Black environmental feminists forging their way into ecofeminism's hitherto white washed exclusive discourse. They conceptualize practices like that of Synagro's as environmental racism (Cain 2016; Kaalund 2004; Taylor 1997). As Cain (2016) explains, "due to the intersections of environmental racism and sexism seen in Flint (Detroit's sister city, 60 miles due North), Black women have been involved in environmental movements in order to survive" (p. 1).

Despite the daily challenges of life in the city that confront residents such as D.S. Sense, she refuses to succumb to the difficulties. On the contrary, she tells us that she's been "cold since I was rockin' the rose gold herringbone". In other words, since she was wearing a herringbone necklace that was a popular hip hop fashion accessory in the 1990s, she hasn't needed the fire that "they" provide for survival; she can make her own way. The vagueness of the term "they" can apply equally to the corporate elites who run the hip hop industry as well as the city.

From mythology she turns to her faith, invoking the gospel duo Mary Mary's song "God Is In Me". This musical citation reaffirms her religious constitution. Her gestures toward fashion, music, and mythology demonstrate the complex ways that social institutions forge identities. Moreover, her experiences, courage, faith, and lyrical skills have enabled a self-valuation where she sees herself as badass, one as lyrically dangerous as Jason Vorhees, the main antagonist in the Friday the 13th film franchise.

In a verse that appears later in the poem, D.S. Sense takes on issues of entitlement and recognition:

I'm entitled to everything Deidre gets  
 Follow in my footprints, before I leave this bitch  
 And you'll learn, see everything is everything  
 What it means is every season gotta change  
 You know you win some, you lose some  
 I just wanna see the money fold like futons, uh  
 I'm a new nuance  
 Fly niggas get your wings clipped, like coupons  
 Young, listen to your elders  
 I'll eat a pussy rhyme with one line  
 Nigga L word  
 And that's word to the misfits  
 The tormented mind is gifted  
 So you gotta pray to stop transference  
 When darkness tries to hinder sun, like Florence

Once again, in this verse D.S. Sense demonstrates bravado and attitude but also her ambiguity. The poem is rife with references whose unpacking requires remarkable popular cultural literacy and biblical knowledge. "Follow in my footprints" brings Jesus and her Christian faith into view; the line "Every thing is Everything" is a reference to hip hop artist Lauryn Hill's track "Everything Is Everything" in which she articulates injustice and struggles among inner city youth communities in

places such as Detroit. D.S. Sense's confidence oozes in the lines "I'm entitled to everything Deidre gets" and "I'm a new nuance." She is well aware that subtly is lost on successful rappers with respect to the ways they flash their wealth. Deidre wants to "see the money fold like futons" but her shine is subtle.

She gives advice in the line "Young listen to your elders" and yet she follows with language that some elders may not want to hear: "I'll eat pussy rhyme with one line, Nigga L word". In addition to disrupting any form of respectability politics, she makes two critiques in one line. In D.S. Sense's words, pussy rhymes refer to "soft puss lyrics". Examining the scripting of lesbians in hip hop, Keyes (2000) explains that Black lesbian artists face not only white patriarchal structures but also the hegemonic umbrella of white feminism. D.S. Sense faces the power structures imposed by white patriarchy and white feminism; however, in terms of sexuality she only fits half of the category because she is bisexual. As such, she fights more than white racism and narrow feminisms. Bisexuality is a red flag for many; its inherent flexibility leads people, even those who are queer identified, to question the realness/loyalty of her sexuality. There is always instability in identity categories, but gay and straight communicate binary oppositions. D.S. Sense rejects binaries across the board of identities that she occupies. The above verse is the only site in the poem where D.S. Sense references her queer identity. In addition to cutting up "soft puss rhymes", she critiques a lesbian drama that aired on the Showtime network in the 2000s. Queer identified, D.S. Sense's reference to the show performs two functions: first, it critiques *The L Word* for showcasing a white lesbian world; and second, by claiming her identity in the poem she claims space for Black women who love women and for queer Black women in the world of hip hop. All of these identity claims pressure the industry's practice of relegating women artists and their cultural production to the sidelines, particularly the contributions of queer Black women. She is indeed vulnerable to rigidity based on sexuality, race, classism, and women's role in hip hop. And yet, she is a maverick with respect to her foresight, strength, and sharp rhymes. Cheryl Keyes Lesbian category works for some queer women, and yet it is not fluid enough. It cannot contain bisexual or transgender identities.

D.S. Sense also takes on the stigma of mental health in the final lines. She invokes the actor Florence Henderson as a maverick who battled mental illness publically. In a follow up interview, she remarked:

I myself don't have mental illness but I attempted to encourage those to reconsider the idea of it being genius instead of illness. So when I say "the gifted" I am saying what looks to be crazy is sanity at its best. Then I gotta pray to stop transference, when darkness tries to hinder sun; thus the play on Hinder sun, as in Florence Henderson. Like Florence I'm speaking about guarding the creative mind from dark thoughts or energy that can cloud that creativity, if you let outside influences tell you what to think of yourself.

(D.S. Sense in discussion with the authors, 29 January 2017)

This shift to genius and positivity is significant because the stress that can come from social abandonment and the conditions of life in under resourced urban contexts can become internalized as personal failure. What is more, one cannot forget that the myth underlying neoliberal logics is that everyone has the potential to make it; the ideology assumes that if one does not make it, personal failure is to blame.

## 6. Conclusions: Articulating Self, Articulating Community

D.S. Sense's poetry is a palimpsest of personal, cultural, and political history. For D.S. Sense, Detroit is a living body, one that is attached to its people like a central organ. Enriching the city requires care for family and community; it is a responsibility that begins at home and extends to every social actor who shapes Detroit's possibilities including government officials, neighborhood associations, and everyday citizens. Witnessing Detroit, testifying about its beauty, stigma, natural resources, and musical history, D.S. Sense exerts her particular form of #BlackGirlMagic in and through "On My Detroit Everything". Like the "otherhuman" characters Davis (2018) identifies in Black women's

afrofuturist novels, she lays bare her hopes, dreams, experiences, and very being. Her rhymes writ large, performed in a body that breathes Detroit, offer an anthem of cultural resistance. Through the act of performing she empowers herself and others as she disrupts the racist and sexist neoliberal logics in place. D.S. Sense commands a place in hip hop that subverts the primary scripts through which women have been hitherto examined. She and the city are coming back, and unapologetically claiming their right to resources and investment.

We contribute the cautious category of the “Vulnerable Maverick” to explain the complex subjectivity that D.S. Sense occupies: strong, resilient, and emotionally intelligent; fully able to feel and reflect. In our view and that of many Black feminists, community work constitutes political activism. “On My Detroit Everything” is indeed a rich, erudite poem that offers value in cultural terms; it also gives other activists inspiration to perform experientially grounded political work. Deidre “D.S. Sense” Smith’s #BlackGirlMagic does not submit to the silence that the politics of respectability induces; that Black girls ought to be quiet, humble, and understate their greatness. Instead, she blows up the stage and wrecks predetermined conceptions of Black women’s humanity all in the same breath.

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