“Does This Outfit Make My Butt Look Big?”

The answer to this often asked, and largely parodied, question from women to their significant others or best friends have changed. As recently as the late 1990s and 2000s, the preferred answer to this question was “no.” Most women, young and old, did not desire to have a “big butt.” Societal norms influenced by the stream of cultural images from the covers of popular magazines to the images broadcast on television commercials and prime time programming proffered an image of women featuring slim, non-protruding derrieres. More recently, however, the answer to this question of body image has changed. Although vestiges of the super-skinny, butt-free waif of the late twentieth century remain in the minds of women, this unrealistic and unhealthy self-image of the body has been challenged and changed. Thanks in “large part” to hip-hop music’s attention to and glorification of this part of the female anatomy, young women of all shapes and sizes are declaring a new, preferred and empowering answer to the big butt question: “Yes!”

Before hip-hop ushered in what Vogue has recently hailed as the “Era of the Big Booty,” Queen tried to incite a riot for the round rump in 1978, their “Fat Bottomed Girls” fell flat; well, it did not have the impact as much later songs (Garcia). Prior to that in 1976, KC and the Sunshine Band sang, “Shake Your Booty.” Spinal Tap’s “Big Bottom,” released in 1984, touted the singer’s affection for a big bottom. However, the song never received any attention, nor did women experience any sense of freedom to let their big bottoms be seen, as, like Queen, Spinal
Tap’s homage to the hindquarters did not inspire affection: you are not going to connect with women when you refer to their backside as “bum cakes,” “mudflaps,” or a “flesh tuxedo” (Spinal). Not surprisingly, the preferred answer to this paper’s title question remained “No.”

Largely, the aforementioned songs did little to change or persuade anyone’s views or start a wave of appreciation, celebration, or consideration of a butt on a woman that was anything other than tiny. The norm remained.

What was lacking in the previous attempted incarnations of encomiums to the bodacious backside was an authentic, realistic, and taxonomical narrative. Queen’s hailing of the “fat bottom girls” was a pejorative term. Fat, combined with bottom, does not have the authentic, realistic, and taxonomic “ring” to it that “big butt,” “big booty,” or even “fat ass.” “Fat ass” was previously, and perhaps still carries, a pejorative connotation and designation, but it was hip-hop culture that turned “f-a-t” into “p-h-a-t,” thus rebranding the term. Additionally, Queen and Spinal Tap could not bring an authentic or culturally acceptable taxonomy by using the words “fat” and “bottom.” “Booty,” however, was more acceptable and led to KC and the Sunshine Band’s “Shake Your Booty” longevity over the other two.

Many artists and songs attempted to bring authenticity, realism, and taxonomy in the late 1980’s. Perhaps the next closest was in 1989 when LL Cool J blatantly declared that the reason he left one girlfriend for the next was because they each had a “Big Ole Butt” (J). However, the sentiment could still be interpreted as derogatory with the butt being described as “ole,” a word that is commonly understood to replace the word “old.” Perhaps not intended to mean “old,” but the use of the potentially negative “ole” could not survive a wholesale replacement and thus not
make it into popular culture. However, the words “big” and “butt” resonated and proved to be the right combination, when, in 1992, an authentic cry, a realistic embodiment, and an acceptable taxonomy were introduced to radio stations and MTV.

“I like big butts and I cannot lie” (Mix-a-Lot). The “big butt” national anthem by Sir Mix-a-Lot changed the perspective on this phenomenon. Not only were his words authentic but also he provided the correct taxonomy and nomenclature thus assuaging the previous disparaging terminology. “Baby Got Back” was simple, true, and defined what it meant to have a big butt by providing the missing narrative from the hip-hop community. Mix-a-Lot’s taxonomy enumerated “big butts,” “back,” “round thing,” “Rump-o’-smooth-skin,” “round, and big,” “real thick and juicy,” “juicy double,” and “bubble” as the nomenclature of the preferred female rear end (Mix-s-Lot). The language of the backside here espouses a more complimentary tone than his predecessors. By infusing more flattering terms into derriere discourse, Mix-a-Lot presents women with a vocabulary worthy of both the admiration of and the possession of a big, round, thick, juicy, and smooth bubble butt.

In addition to the nomenclature, Mix-a-Lot countered the currently held belief that men preferred the small, flat, and skinny white girls as purported in women’s fashion magazines: “Yeah baby....when it comes to females, Cosmo ain’t got nothin’ to do with my selection / 36-24-36? Ha ha, only if she’s 5’3”... (Mix-a lot). The essence of Mix-a-Lot’s point is that not only is he not going to let a popular magazine influence his “selection” but also the “perfect” female figure being purported was a joke. Before Mix-a-Lot, songs had only provided a cursory fascination with this part of the female anatomy. His song also spoke directly to those that passed
judgment on women with ample backsides and started a much larger conversation concerning what and how women’s posteriors were viewed and judged by current societal standards. It is important to note, too, that though this may have opened the door for women with bigger booties to feel more comfortable with their figure, the midsections of women were not so fortunate. Mix-a-Lot still professed “Little in the middle but she got much back.” But Mix-a-Lot’s authentic narrative and taxonomy set off and provided artists a grammar and vocabulary with which to discuss properly and proudly the hip-hop culture of the big butt.

There continued a surge of songs and lyrics that furthered the big butt narrative of the hip-hop genre. From the mid-to-late 90s to the early 2000s, there was a continuing of the conversation. Songs like Mos Def’s 1999 “Ms. Fat Booty,” which correctly contextualizes the term “fat” through the narrative in the story: “I seen her on the ave, spotted her more than once / Ass so fat you could see it from the front...In that catwoman stance with the fat booty pants, Hot damn!” (Def). In this instance, “fat” is complimentary and contextualized as “Hot!” In 2001, Destiny’s Child made the female posterior more desirable by telling us we’re “not ready for this jelly” and they’re “too bootylicious” (Destiny’s). Hip-Hop’s continued use of proffering a positive narrative of the booty slowly began to make its way into mainstream society.

Within the last five years, big butts, fat asses, and junk in the trunk has not only crossed over from hip-hop and into the mainstream but also exploded within hip-hop’s own ranks. Hip-hop’s current big-booty genre still gives a nod the big-butt national anthem. Consider Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda,” the track’s lyrics are full of and honor Sir Mix-a-Lot’s “Baby Got Back” narrative lyrics. It is considered a “remake” in some discussions (Davis). The title and beginning
lines come directly from Mix-a-Lot: “My Anaconda don’t... / My Anaconda don’t... / My Anaconda don’t want none unless you got buns hun” (Minaj). In fact, the voice is Sir Mix-a-Lot sampled from the original track. The authentic taxonomy of vocabularies and grammars remain the preferred terminology in these songs.

Even mainstream’s appropriation of booty discourse has kept and steered clear of rock and pop genre’s previous attempts. Current pop song favorites celebrating the female posterior include Jennifer Lopez’s “Booty” ft. Iggy Azalea and Meghan Trainor’s “All About That Bass.” Vogue claims, “It would appear that the big booty has officially become ubiquitous. In music videos, in Instagram photos, and on today’s most popular celebrities, the measure of sex appeal is inextricably linked to the prominence of a woman’s behind” (Garcia). Hip-hop has made the booty popular and sexy, and it is happening, as Vogue indicated, everywhere.

The New York Times recently published an online article featuring Jen Selter, a young woman who worked the font counter at a gym in New York. After exercising in her spare time, Selter began “posting pictures of herself in colorful fitness clothes...the photos started gaining a certain kind of fame for what many considered Ms. Selter’s best asset: her bottom” (Meltzer). In the aftermath of this popularity, she has taken to taking “belfies”—butt and selfie—and currently has “4.5 million followers on Instagram and a photo shoot in Vanity Fair” (Meltzer). The popularity continues to grow. Published pictures of Kim Kardashian’s ample backside, as well as the attraction her butt gained on her family’s show, has some calling her a posterior pioneer (Davis). So much has happened, in fact, that Entertainment Weekly provided a timeline on their online magazine chronicling twenty-three butt-influenced events of 2014. Of note is their entry
for June 11: “Megan Trainor releases the video for ‘All About That Bass.’ ‘Bass’—‘B’ = Ass. That’s simple math—and all the right junk in all the right place...s” (Busis). Even Trainor, a white girl from Nantucket, knows that the desired body has changed: “’Cause I got that boom boom that all the boys chase” (Trainor). The pride of the backside has officially made its way into pop music, as has the acceptance of having one and being proud of it.

The cultural trend remains as did in hip-hop’s original foray into rhapsodizing about their preferred largeness of a woman’s backside: there is a vocabulary, a set of grammars, an acceptable discourse. Sir Mix-a-Lot institutionalized the discourse, and those that followed it, succeeded. Not that there are songs that do not incorporate words that were previously unsuccessful, there are, but they are generally not in the main hook of the song and are relegated to a rhyme or two within the body of the song. Words like “bottom” and “cheek” or “cheeks” are still not acceptable uses within the hip-hop community, the originators of big-butt discourse. It is perfectly okay for Jennifer Lopez and Iggy Azalea to shout out “big booty,” and for Meghan Trainor to talk “about that bass” (Lopez; Trainor): “It’s safe to say that, this time around, the world is thoroughly ready for the jelly” (Garcia).

So, in the end, the preferred, current, pop culture, trending answer to this paper’s title question has gone from “Yes!” to “It better!”
Works Cited


