

Translating Chicana Rap: Snow Tha Product

Adriana Onita
University of Alberta, Edmonton

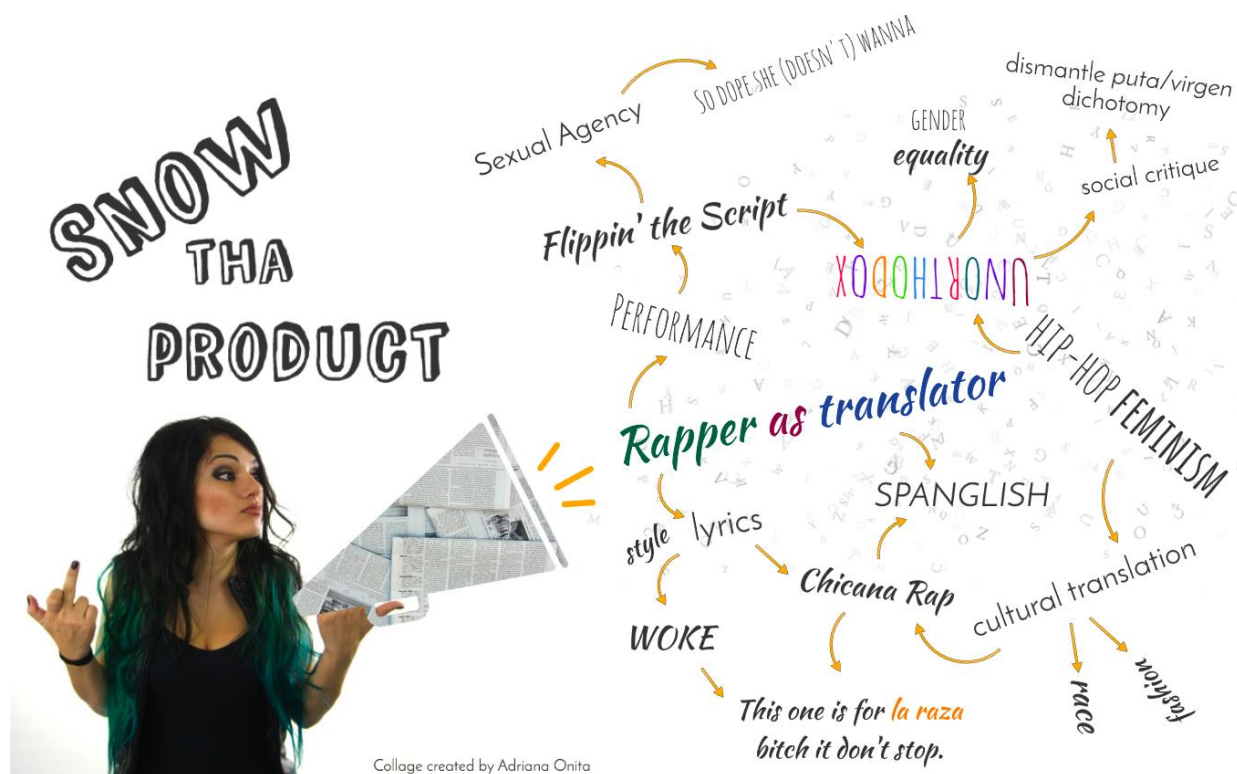


Figure 1: Collage created by author.

Since the birth of rap in the South Bronx in the 1970s, female rappers have had to make difficult choices in their style, lyrics, and performances as they strive for equality in the male-dominated hip-hop industry. From Lil Kim to Nicki Minaj, many female rappers have shamelessly and provocatively used their sexuality to sell records, sometimes earning them the title of “sexual entrepreneurs.” Therefore, to encounter a rapper like Snow Tha Product, who openly resists this trend, is rare and merits discussion.

This project examines rap lyrics, interviews, and music videos by Chicana artist Snow Tha Product to show how rap has been culturally translated, performed, and appropriated by females in order to “flip the script,” or subvert the dichotomous model of female sexuality that has been imposed upon them. Weaving insights from three academic fields (cultural translation,

Chican@¹ studies, and hip-hop feminism), this paper also aims to creatively expand the definition of translation by positioning rap music as a performative language in its own right, capable of encoding and translating complex cultural issues related to race, gender, and sexuality.

Theory & Context: Cultural Translation, Hip-hop feminism, Chican@ studies

Cultural translation can be understood as a “process in which there is no start text and usually no fixed target text. The focus is on cultural *processes* rather than products” (Munday 138). This project looks at translation beyond the traditional and literal in order to interpret rap music as a performative *process* of translating culture. At the 2011 *Translating Hip-Hop* conference in Berlin, rapper Rayess Bek from Beirut asserted:

Translating has many meanings. If we understand hip-hop texts as literary texts, we find that they can have several layers of understanding. The first layer is made up of the words used in the texts. The second of the feelings behind them. And the third layer, which is also necessary to understand a text, is the cultural background of the author. (qt’d. in Baum)

Indeed, rap music can encode and translate several layers of culture. As hip-hop feminist scholar Gwendolyn Pough explains, rap can be seen “as a worldview, as an epistemology grounded in the experiences of communities of color under advanced capitalism, as a cultural site for rearticulating identity and sexual politics” (vii). While acknowledging that “both men and women have participated in Hip Hop culture and rap music in ways that have been both oppressive and liberatory for women” (Phillips, Reddick-Morgan, and Stephens 254), hip-hop feminism goes beyond investigating what hip-hop does to women, and asks questions such as “how are women using hip-hop?” (Pough iv), for example, how can rappers “use the power of female eroticism to flip sexual politics on its head” (Neal in Forman and Neal, 346)? This notion of “flipping the script” is important to hip-hop feminism’s liberatory projects, as it aims to reveal the cultural constructions of gender, echoing Judith Butler’s theory that “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ...identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25).

Similarly, one of the major foci of Chican@ studies is to dismantle narrow definitions and understandings of identities and sexualities. As many scholars have noted, Chicano/Mexicano patriarchal cultures have bred a gender ideology that allows for only two possible female roles, “largely determined by a woman’s virginity or conformity to culturally acceptable standards for sexual behavior” (Hurtado 95): the ideal *virgen/mujer buena*, a virginal, loyal and loving “good woman” who is unconditionally devoted to her husband and family, and

¹ Chican@ is a term that many scholars use to offer a simultaneous presentation of both feminine and masculine word endings of Chicano and/or Chicana.

the *puta/mujer mala*, a strong-willed, independent, sexually active woman outside of male control. This dichotomy, often characterized by the archetypal figures of La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche respectively, has yielded female subject positions that are acceptable (virgin, mother, daughter, sister, and grandmother), and unacceptable (whore, unmarried but sexually active woman, divorced woman), leading some Chicana feminists like Aída Hurtado to theorize that “the core of Chicanas’ subordination is the control of their sexuality” (95). The hegemonic hold of this *puta/virgen* dichotomy is reproduced and translated throughout cultural products, silencing Chicana sexual agency, and repressing the right for women to define or express their sexuality. In the context of Chicano rap, Pancho McFarland argues that male rappers represent women “primarily as sex objects and secondarily as ‘good’ women” (67). In his sample of 470 Chicano rap songs, “[i]n none of these songs are women represented as having sexual agency or having the right to define their own sexuality. Instead, Chicano rappers place women in submissive positions and demonstrate pride in deceiving women into having sex with them” (67). Thus, Chicana rappers like Snow Tha Product have to heal and decolonize their minds in order to subvert or “flip” this *puta/virgen* script that has been thrust upon them. In the following section I will document and translate Snow Tha Product’s experience in the hip-hop world as a Chicana, challenging hip-hop as a male space and resisting the *mujer buena/mujer mala* dichotomy.

Introducing Snow Tha Product

Claudia Feliciano, better known by her stage name Snow Tha Product, is a Mexican-American rapper who raps in English and Spanish. Born in 1987 in San José, California to undocumented Mexican parents, Snow (as she is often called) has also lived in San Diego and Fort Worth, Texas. Like all rappers, Claudia Feliciano has created a stage persona. She adopted the moniker Snow White The Product, referencing the Disney fairy tale princess and the fact that “every rapper is a product” (qtd. in Campbell), but it was shortened to Snow Tha Product after Disney claimed copyright infringement (Darling, Kim). To gain initial exposure and recognition, Snow Tha Product recorded various mixtapes, including *Raising Tha Bar* (2008) hosted by DJ ThaKid Reckless, *Run Up or Shut Up* (2010) hosted by DJ Ames, *Wake Ya Game Up Vol. 1* (2010) produced with her own label Product Entertainment, and hosted by DJ ThaKid Reckless, and *Unorthodox 0.5*, hosted by DJ Whoo Kidd and DJ Rapid Ric. Her debut independent album, *Unorthodox* (2011), went viral and caught the attention of major record labels including Sony Music Entertainment, Universal Music Group and Atlantic Records. In 2012, Snow Tha Product made history by being the first Chicana hip-hop artist to ever be signed to a major record label, Atlantic Records. Since being signed to Atlantic Snow Tha Product has released an EP called *Halfway There Part. 1* (2016), as well as three mixtapes: *Good Nights and Bad Mornings* (2012), *Good Nights and Bad Mornings 2: The Hangover* (2013), and *The Rest Comes Later* (2015). It is important to note that although she is now signed to a major record label, Snow Tha Product has been able to maintain creative agency and freedom and “keep that indie feel” (qtd. in Rodriguez) which was very important for her when signing the record deal. Thus she has kept her independent *Woke*

and *Wake Your Game Up* brands intact, as well as expanding her team of *Product Pushas* or promoters, many of whom are based in Texas.

When asked about her experience working with Atlantic Records, the rapper often reflects on her situation in the broader context: “I’m a Latin, female, Spanish-speaking rapper... in a predominantly black, male dominated industry, so it’s almost like, who can tell me what to do? I’m one of the only ones doing what I’m doing” (qtd. in NE Hip-Hop). Thus, one of the advantages of being one of the only Chicana rappers in the industry means that Snow can take agency in defining herself and assert her authority as a producer of culture, not only by making her own music and music videos, but also by openly sharing her personal views on being a female rapper in a male-dominated industry. For example, in an interview with *Latina* magazine she confesses, “[i]t’s sometimes very hard for a girl like me in this industry, whether it be because of gender, race, or something else, and the fact that I’m not comfortable selling some sort of sex image” (qtd. in Leal). Indeed, gender, race and sexuality are all factors that affect the Chicana experience in the hip-hop world. In the next section I will discuss the ways in which Snow Tha Product continuously breaks the mould of what a Chicana *should* be by actively translating her personal and cultural experiences through the medium of rap.

Refusing to Sell Sex: “Unorthodox”

Snow Tha Product fiercely addresses issues of gender, race and sexuality in her lyrics and performances. In “Unorthodox,” she does exactly what the song suggests. Her aim is to “disinfect your little memory bank” of “basic” common-sense thinking and “disconnect your headphones / so you let go of the dumb shit you’ve been taught.” One of the myths she wants to debunk is that a female rapper needs to “sell sex” to conform to (male) standards: “that I gotta sell sex because males / Get upset if I don't sell, show, and bear it all.” In addition to her rapid, spitfire delivery of these lyrics, the visual translation of her performance further contributes to her message of non-conformity. The music video for “Unorthodox” shows the rapper performing different versions of herself, first as a *mujer buena*, with light hair, pearls, and lipstick who tries to be “part of society” representing “all of the normal things girls supposed to be,” and a *mujer mala* with dishevelled purple/black hair, an ironic cross, and a graphic t-shirt.



Figure 2: Snow Tha Product performing “mujer buena.”



Figure 3: Snow Tha Product performing “mujer mala.”

In the larger context of the hip-hop world, Snow Tha Product differs greatly from most female rappers in the fact that she openly declines to use her sexuality to promote herself. As Imany Perry describes, although in the 1980s and 90s, there was a resistance among female MCs to be defined solely by their sex appeal, after the turn of the twentieth century, “it became clear that sexuality, sexual objectification, and beautification constituted fundamental parts of the marketing of the female MC, thus collapsing distinctions between the video “hoe” and the female artist” (156). Snow Tha Product openly resists this trend, opting instead to be “known and respected for her team and her music” (qtd. in Campbell). As her official biography on the website of Atlantic Records describes: “She’s refused to exploit her sexuality—instead relying strictly on rap skill and songwriting ability. Her intricate flow and complex wordplay wow fans of lyricism. Her relatable narratives and integrity inspire girls and women without coming off as condescending or preachy” (“Snow Tha Product” Official Biography). By refusing to wear sexually provocative clothes and refusing the mainstream tendency to market her sexuality, Snow demonstrates creative agency and bodily autonomy. In an interview with rapper Snoop Dogg, when asked what advice she could give young female rappers, Snow responded: “That you don’t gotta take your clothes off to do this shit. Let’s be fucking creative with how we get out there. Don’t be a cookie cutter ass bitch” (westfesttv). Alluding to her song “Cookie Cutter Bitches,” which questions traditional notions and experiences of femininity, her response indicates the importance of claiming a voice first and foremost in the hip-hop world. To be taken seriously as rap artists, women must become creative subjects instead of passive objects. In true hip-hop feminist fashion, Snow Tha Product is using hip-hop for political reasons. She wants to “show girls—especially those into hip-hop—that you can be yourself and be good... [and let them know] that it’s cool to have ethics and morals, and show girls who want to do something that’s not ‘normal’ that it’s okay” (qtd. in Campbell). This demonstrates that Snow Tha Product has cautiously reflected on the situation of sexuality and hip-hop and carefully chose the image that she wants to promote.

Reconfiguring Chicana Roles: “Cookie Cutter Bitches”

Snow Tha Product’s playful tongue-in-cheek lyrics, videos, and performances advocate for a reconfiguration of the roles traditionally assigned to both Chicanas and females in rap, and society at large. Not only does she translate her experience in the hip-hop world as a Chicana² for a mainstream audience, but she also questions femininity through her lyrics and fashion choices. For example, in the song “Cookie Cutter Bitches” (*Good Nights and Bad Mornings*), she addresses women who blindly follow societal trends that advocate for strict gender roles. She sees herself as a “baker,” a trend setter, claiming that she is “rapping real women” not “fake bitches,” which on another song she described as having “fake wigs, fake nails, fake ass, fake tits” (“Far Alone”). Once again, she differentiates herself from “cookie cutter bitches” for not selling sex: “we, we ain’t the same / And they don’t want you from the waist up!” The video for this song alternates between clips of Snow baking cookies and rapping in her long sleeve polka-dotted shirt, a black bandana and an apron, and representing *WOKE*, her own fashion line in front of a collage of fashion advertisements depicting mostly thin, blonde women on which the rapper mockingly draws fake moustaches.

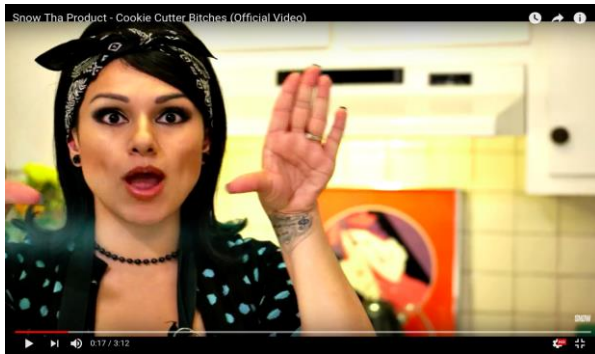


Figure 4: Snow rapping in “Cookie Cutter Bitches”.



Figure 5: Representing her fashion line *WOKE* collage backdrop.

Both the video and song reveal that Snow ThaProduct is engaging with ideas of gender performativity, and she deliberately intends to break female stereotypes. She redefines the act of “baking” to mean a confident, independent trend-setting woman who does not succumb to society’s rules. Interestingly, a year later she reflected on “You’re Welcome”: “I guess that I was too busy talking / About cookie cutter bitches / Didn’t realize label heads made me / A mold and started cookie cuttin’ bitches!” In other words, Snow Tha Product became quickly aware that her trends were being marketed by labels and recording companies as a standard for success. Nevertheless, she stays true to her image, “graphic t-shirts and the tennis shoes and back packs”

² It should be noted that Snow Tha Product has mixed views when it comes to being called a “femcee” or a “Chicana” in the rap game. She often refuses these categorizations in interviews, deeming them segregating and limiting, and preferring to be known for her skills and work ethic (see NE Hip-Hop; Campbell).

(“Might Make It,” *Unorthodox*), and continues to represent for “the girls with a brain” (qt’d. on *soundclick.com*) being “in a male dominated game [and] trying to prove [herself] in it” (qt’d. in NE Hip-Hop). In her 2014 song “Fire” from the *Game of Thrones Mixtape*, the rapper quotes the character Daenerys Targaryen from the popular HBO series: “Do you understand I’m no ordinary woman? My dreams come true.” Drawing comparisons between Daenerys and herself (“It’s a man’s world ‘til a girl works hard as him”) she sends a positive message to Chicanas and females everywhere: that gender roles are not set in stone and can be reconfigured.

Subverting Sexuality in Rap: "So Dope She [Doesn't] Wanna"

Snow Tha Product has been invited to feature in many rap songs with male collaborators. One such example is the song “So Dope (They Wanna)” by Tech N9ne featuring Wrekonize, Twisted Insane, and Snow Tha Product. This song deserves thorough analysis as it is very representative of the way that men have traditionally portrayed sexuality and women in rap music, and the way that some women like Snow Tha Product are responding and/or resisting this portrayal in favour of an alternative view of sexuality.



Figure 6: Rapper Tech N9ne in the “So Dope” music video.

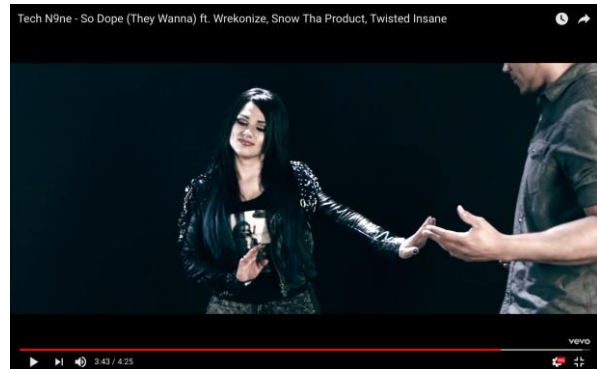


Figure 7: Snow Tha Product refusing sexual advances in "So Dope."

The song begins with rapper Tech N9ne praising his own virility and asserting his sexual dominance in the first verse:

Position the bitch and dip in when I mention slip in submission.
All of this is to quicken the copulatin' and kissin'
My operation is rippin' to the bod is, shakin' and strippin'
Odd when I bust, K.O.D. put ‘em in Necropolis
Givin' this rod to the good broads, and they givin' they bras to us
With the gift to break up a couple that's monogamous
Stop with the probs and take off your effin' draws, bitch and rock with us

In this excerpt, Tech N9ne shows the typical hegemonic masculine sexual behaviour that male rappers often exalt and value, one that dominates and subordinates women sexually. First, the rapper claims that he has the sexual prowess to break up monogamous couples and make women willingly give their undergarments to him. But he also seeks to dominate the female body (“Position the bitch and dip in”) with no apparent interest in female sexual pleasure, as he makes every attempt to “quicken” foreplay (“Stop with the probs [problems] and take off your effin’ draws [underwear]”) and get to his main “operation” which is “rippin’ to the bod” or having his (violent) way with the female body. In the rest of his opening verse, he continues this paradoxical phenomenon: openly bragging about his skills in the bedroom (“I’m the medicine, get her wetter than ever been”) while giving direct derogatory orders to women (“Open up, you hoes, you know what’s up”).

The chorus of the song “So Dope (They Wanna)” echoes the first verse by Tech N9ne, as the same rapper repeats: “So dope they wanna (Fuck), So dope they wanna (Suck), So dope they wanna (Give it all up and really abrupt).” The chorus is essentially the thesis of the song. According to the rappers, their lyrical flow, or rhythm, is “so dope” or so great, that women cannot help themselves: they want to “fuck” (have sexual intercourse), “suck” (perform oral sex on the men) and “give it all up and really abrupt” (give their virginity to them). The entire song and music video is structured upon this assumption, as the three male rappers deliver their message of how their lyrical superiority results in sexual dominance over women. The male rappers completely deny female sexual agency in their phallogentric and violent representation of sex, with disparaging images that are dangerous and dehumanizing to both men and women (“I stuck it up in her jaws, I’m breakin’ walls, like I was Katrina”; “I’m damagin’ the vagina, remind you I’m filled with vengeance.”) The verses presented by rappers Tech N9ne, Wrekonize and Twisted Insane portray a misogynist worldview where a double-standard exists when it comes to sexuality. In this worldview, women’s sexuality should be controlled (by men) but male sexuality should be allowed as much freedom as possible (McFarland 31). Male lyrics are almost exclusively based on representations of male sexuality, sex from a male perspective, and sex as a male prerogative. There is very little room for female sexual agency in this model, which is reminiscent of the “Dark (and Orgasm-Free) Ages” or a period in rap’s history in the 1990s when gangsta rap ruled and when “female orgasm was just about the furthest thing from the minds of Dr. Dre and N.W.A.” (Carpentier 1). An enduring trend from the gangsta rap age that surfaces in “So Dope (They Wanna)” is male rappers’ simultaneous desire and disrespect for women who are “easy.” Both the lyrics and music video present female bodies as sexual objects designed for male pleasure and control, and also reveal the irony in male rappers’ desires for sexual pleasure yet disgrace of “hoes”, or women that are too easy or sexually available.

The last verse, which concludes the song, comes from Snow Tha Product. So how does the fourth collaborator, who happens to be female, respond in such a misogynistic song that

gives men the sexual prerogative? The rapper begins her verse with the following lines: “Hey now Tech, you know I've been the type / To not go all in on hoes I've been around.” From the beginning, Snow reveals, directly to rapper Tech N9ne, that she is not the type to go “all in,” resisting the chorus’ assertion that women are ready to “give it all up and really abrupt.” Next, she addresses a recurring trend:

And these man calling in, they wonder if I'ma get with a little dick
They got no common sense and with no college in
Their position, it's probably something insignificant
If you think I'm a bitch 'cause I probably mixed the game you kickin'
They be hollering hope I acknowledging
Because I have been methodically dropping the common knowledge
That I don't get down like that
Now they behind a bitch to probably get with a trick
Or a treat cause they dogs and they all goin' bark like that

In this excerpt Snow Tha Product divulges that although men have made sexual advances towards her, their lack of “common sense” and “college” education make their offers “insignificant.” In addition, she explains that she has been “methodically dropping the common knowledge” (sharing information) that she doesn’t “get down like that,” or engage in sexual relationships upon request, thereby completely subverting the male prerogative to sex that her male rapper counterparts spent the last three verses building up. Nevertheless, she knows that the men will keep trying, but in her opinion, “they dogs and they all goin’ bark like that.” This excerpt shows what many women encounter on a regular basis: males seeking instantaneous sexual pleasure from them. She translates her experience with sexual advances when she rhymes:

I'm killin' the game, killin' the game, killin' the game
So he feeling me, he wanna bang
I wanna wait so he get at me
He wanna say shit that make me
think he gon' rape me if I don't stay

In tune with the theme of the song, Snow Tha Product believes that her lyrical flow, or rhythm, is the cause for attracting the opposite sex. However, breaking from the male rappers’ perspective, Snow Tha Product narrates that when a male wants to have sex, but she wants to wait, the male says things that make her think that he is going to rape her. Rape culture has the potential to shatter a female’s sexual agency. By uttering these words, she legitimizes not only her own rape culture experiences but those of others. Finally, Snow Tha Product divulges an honest view of her sexuality:

‘Cause I got that sickening style, that built me a crowd
And men and women feeling me now and it’s freaking me out
‘Cause I’m just here to figure it out and what this is about
But I’mma say it’s getting so wild that it’s tripping me out
‘Cause I’m like here to kill their morale, just kill all these sounds
But lately when I spit to a crowd these men just reach out
And they tell me that they women is down, they gettin’ aroused
And they be tryna give me they child, with a genital smile
They say they wanna (fuck)

This excerpt is a paramount importance as it reveals this rapper’s translation of her sexual agency. By divulging that it “freaks” and “trips” her out to be desired by both men and women, Snow Tha Product discloses that she is not interested in sex, but interested in sharing her music, a sentiment that is echoed throughout her discography. Overall, it is clear that Snow Tha Product’s vocation is one of ambiguity and a blurring of boundaries. By asserting her stance on her own sexuality, Snow Tha Product is one of the few women in hip-hop fearlessly refusing to succumb to body as bribe. Striking a balance between being commercial and subversive, she is an excellent example of how Chicana rappers can use rap as a vehicle for an audacious critique of sexual politics, dismantling the social constructions that have aimed to subordinate them.

Conclusion

In this essay I have demonstrated that rap music has become a powerful means by which Chicana rappers like Snow Tha Product can translate their experiences to a mainstream audience. By offering a hip-hop feminist critique of Snow’s rap lyrics and videos, I sought to “complicate understandings of hip-hop as a male space” (Pough vii) and add to the new and growing Chicana and hip-hop feminist canon. Snow Tha Product blurs the boundaries between the *mujer buena/mujer mala* dichotomy and put these binaries in question altogether by showing agency in the way she defines herself sexually, often refusing sex altogether. Perhaps most importantly, she opens up the possibility for a cultural translation of Chicana sexuality where women show independence and control over their body while questioning gender roles and femininity.

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