

Spring 2020

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Recommended Citation

Heller, Nicole E., "Black Female Artists Reclaiming Their Sexual Power" (2020). *Student Publications*. 850.
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Abstract

The emergence of hip hop in the 1980s and 90s is representative of the struggle that Black men and women face in modern society. As a result of a New York City housing crisis, crime, and poverty, hip hop arose as a coping mechanism, as many art forms do; hip hop provided a way for Black men to express their experiences and struggles. Hip hop has been used as a vehicle for self-expression, social views and political views among disadvantaged urban groups (White, 2013). However, it was and still is common for male hip hop artists to sexualize and demean women, specifically Black women, in their lyrics and portray them as sexual objects in their music videos. These concepts come from deeply rooted, Anglo patriarchal sentiments towards Black women, which has transformed into the treatment of Black women by Black men. The emergence of female hip hop artists has come with critique, as Black female artists work to portray themselves as agents of their own sexuality.

Keywords

hip hop, sexualization, Black women, sexuality

Disciplines

Africana Studies | Hip Hop Studies | Women's Studies

Comments

Written for AFS 250: Black Feminism in Film & Hip Hop

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Black Female Artists Reclaiming Their Sexual Power

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AFS 250
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8 May 2020

Black Female Artists Reclaiming Their Sexual Power

It is undeniable that Black women have faced centuries of oppression, marginalization, and objectification. Racialized tropes and stereotypes, stemming from racism during slavery and colonization, have perpetuated ideologies that present themselves through social norms and popular culture, including film and media, which informs the public view of Black women. Societies and communities have always been informed and influenced through different art forms. Whether it be the Renaissance era through paintings, or the turn of the 21st century's introduction to hip hop, art is a social movement that primes its viewers to whatever it is trying to express. In this sense, art can depict harmful representations of power and oppression, but also provides opportunities for marginalized groups to reclaim these notions.

The emergence of hip hop in the 1980s and 90s is representative of the struggle that Black men and women face in modern society. As a result of a New York City housing crisis, crime, and poverty, hip hop arose as a coping mechanism, as many art forms do; hip hop provided a way for Black men to express their experiences and struggles. Hip hop has been used as a vehicle for self-expression, social views and political views among disadvantaged urban groups (White, 2013). However, it was and still is common for male hip hop artists to sexualize and demean women, specifically Black women, in their lyrics and portray them as sexual objects in their music videos. These concepts come from deeply rooted, Anglo patriarchal sentiments towards Black women, which has transformed into the treatment of Black women by Black men. The emergence of female hip hop artists has come with critique, as Black female artists work to portray themselves as agents of their own sexuality.

In this paper, I will explore the implications of the sexualization and commodification of the Black female body, and I will discuss and critique how Black female hip hop artists are reclaiming and asserting their sexuality through music. I will discuss how Black female artists challenge racial tropes and exert themselves as powerful and in control of their sexuality and reject the stigmatization that Black male artists have sustained. In doing so, I will specifically analyze Nicki Minaj's *Anaconda* and Beyonce's *Formation* music videos.

In order to fully understand the importance of Black female artists, it is crucial to analyze the historical context from which the objectification and sexualization of Black women evolved. Through slavery, Black men and women have historically been viewed as animalistic in nature, specifically regarding their sexuality. Black women were viewed as ravenous beasts with uncontrollable sexual desires and as sexual predators (Littlefield, 2008). Slavery itself functioned as a sex economy, where Black women were sexually abused at the hands of white men. Black women were raped continuously, and viewed at a higher value if they were younger and not pregnant because of their sexual availability. In a country built upon labor, Black women functioned as breeders and an illicit commodity (Chideya, 2007). The sexual depictions of Black women in slavery informed the treatment and commodification of their bodies in modern society. Black women's bodies have been commodified and monetized for the male gaze, and this view of 'lustful' behavior has led to the justification of rape and sexual assault of Black women in the United States (Littlefield, 2008). The ideology that Black women are 'easy' and overtly sexual places them at a lower sexual value as compared to white women. For example, Black strippers and porn actors are paid less and treated worse than their white counterparts, as they are viewed to have a lower erotic capital, and want to be consumed by white audiences (Chideya, 2007).

The deeply ingrained sexual objectification of Black women has also impacted their relationships with Black men. Black men have historically been marginalized too, as they were seen as animalistic sexual beings during colonization and slavery too. While Black women have been commodified, Black men have also been feared as sexually violent, especially by white women. In order to combat this marginalization, Black men assert their maleness over Black women by objectifying them alongside white men. This objectification is clearly depicted in many male hip hop artists' lyrics and music videos. Through their own oppression, there is a clear turn on Black women as Black men perpetuate Black female stereotypes.

Two of the main theories that encapsulate the portrayal of Black women in hip hop are objectification theory and one-dimensional womanhood. Objectification theory is the idea that Black women are consistently sexually objectified, and that the female body is separated from her persona (White, 2013). Similarly, one-dimensional womanhood says that the main focus of Black women is their bodies, rather than their whole womanhood and their humanity (Emerson, 2002). Additionally, other feminists theories are at play when discussing the marginalization of Black women; misogynoir being the most important. Misogynoir is a specific type of misogyny that is directed towards Black women due to the factors of both race and gender. While all women are marginalized, Black women face a deeper, more harmful kind of marginalization that is specific to them.

In a male dominated industry, it is easy for men to eradicate the influence of women in music. There is a relatively large percentage of male producers, songwriters, and artists as compared to their female counterparts. Because the overwhelming majority of the music industry is comprised of men, they often take precedence over women, even in situations where the main

artist is female (Emerson, 2002). Unfortunately, this can be destructive because even when women are ‘in charge,’ they struggle to hold the power. Furthermore, the rhetoric used by male hip hop artists is extremely harmful and plays a large factor in how the sexual objectification of Black women continues today. A large portion of male hip hop content is taken up with demeaning and damaging lyrics; it is often hypermasculine, male supremacist, and misogynist (Rabaka, 2011). There is a common theme of lyrics calling women ‘bitches’ and ‘hoes,’ having sex with multiple women, an emotional detachment from women, and often lyrics that condone and brag about sexual assault (Rebollo- Gil and Moras, 2012). There is an emphasis on using the female body for their own male pleasure, and lyrics often focus on sex as the only thing women have to offer. There is an overarching theme in rap/ hip hop lyrics referring to women as sexual conquests, using crude, sometimes horrific, language. As Kimberle Crenshaw describes (qtd. in Rebollo- Gill and Moras, 2012, p.127-128):

We hear about cunts being fucked until backbones are cracked, asses being busted, dicks rammed down throats, and semen splattered across faces. Black women are cunts, bitches, and all purpose hoers... Occasionally, we do hear women’s voices and those voices are sometimes oppositional. But the response to opposition typically returns to the central refrain: ‘Shut up bitch. Suck my dick.’

This ‘sex only’ idea towards women is not only explicitly stated in song lyrics, but it is evident in music videos as well. In Nelly’s *Tip Drill* music video, he swipes credit cards through a woman’s ass, furthering the idea of the commodification of the Black female body, and the ideology that their bodies are used for a profit. Many music videos portray Black women in a similar manner (Littlefield, 2008). It is common to see Black women as background dancers and

performers, dressed in scantily clad clothing, dancing sexually, touching the artist sexually, being touched, and imagery of them surrounded by piles of money. These images align with the racial trope of the Jezebel, who is a hypersexualized whore (White, 2013). The portrayal of Black women in music videos also contributes to the idea of a one-dimensional womanhood. Black women are used as objects of male desire. Furthermore, there are specific women being shown in music videos, and specific women that are not. All of the women included in music videos are considered attractive, sexy, young, and heterosexual. Black male artists never portray lesbian or bisexual women, and rather portray several *straight* women who want to please a man together, but are not doing so for their own sexual pleasure. Additionally, these women are all considered to be sexually available, and there are never images of pregnant women, mothers, or women who appear to be over the age of 30 (Emerson, 2002). All of these images portray women as performers and entertainers who are overtly sexualized and are used to grab the attention of the male gaze where “the image of women took on an inferior, sexually demeaning, and provocative role” (White, 2002 p. 613). It is crucial to recognize that male hip hop artists perpetuate the objectification of the Black female body and the image that it gives Black women.

Despite the rhetoric used by male artists, female artists use their lyrics and their music videos to reclaim their sexuality and their power. Many Black female hip hop artists refuse to accept the ‘norms’ and expectations that are placed upon them, and prove that they are their own agents of sexual desires, pleasure, and control. Some of the first Black female hip hop artists include Erykah Badu, Missy Elliott and Lauryn Hill who entered the hip hop realm to widen the sphere of popular culture and depicted themselves as strong and independent Black women (Emerson, 2002). Salt-N-Pepa, Nicki Minaj, and Beyonce also contribute to hip hop culture in a

powerful way. In a time when hip hop clothing was exclusively t-shirts and baggy pants, Salt-N-Pepa wore short jean shorts, jewelry, and wore hairstyles traditional to Black women (Emerson, 2002). By doing so, they resisted the male norms of hip hop and showed that they were resisting objectification because they were choosing to dress and act in the way they wanted. Missy Elliott also used her sexuality as power, and rather than showing off her body in music videos, the camera focused on her face. Furthermore, Missy Elliott expresses her independence from men in her lyrics, when she talks about not needing a man to make her happy, and that she needs to find inner happiness first (White, 2013). Nicki Minaj presents herself in a very different manner than Missy Elliott, yet is still proving the same point. Nicki Minaj is known for dressing in ‘skimpy’ clothing, and she shows off her body and her famously large ass. By doing so, Minaj is proving that she is a woman who has desires, but she is in control of her own sexuality and her own life. As a “sexual entrepreneur,” Nicki Minaj breaks away from representations of women as passive (White, 2013).

Unfortunately, and to no surprise, Black female artists are often faced with criticism and their messages misinterpreted. Respectability politics has played a large role in the portrayal and acceptance of Black female artists. Respectability politics refer to the policing of fellow members of the same marginalized group in order to create a more positive sentiment towards that group. Because Black women have a long history of being portrayed as overtly sexual beings, members of the Black community have aimed to combat this by disidentifying with sexuality (Chideya, 2007). In doing so, it has caused any expression of sexuality to be taken as abnormal and is disapproved of. Female artists are often critiqued when they are sexually explicit in their lyrics and music videos. Uninformed viewers equate overt sexuality as the undermining

of Black womanhood. Rather, these women are revising the controlling images that permeate popular culture and a traditionally male- centered industry (Emerson, 2002).

While Black female artists face criticism from fellow Black women, they also face criticism from their white viewers. It is crucial to acknowledge that the experiences of white womanhood are drastically different than the experiences of Black womanhood in the United States. Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that white women often separate themselves from Black women when it comes to their sexuality. As White (2013) explains, “the Black presence in North American society allowed Whites to sexualize their world by projecting onto Black bodies a narrative of sexualization disassociated from Whiteness” (p. 611). While women are a generally marginalized group, Black women face misogynoir, a type of misogyny that is unique to them because they face a different and more severe type of marginalization due to their Blackness. Because the experience of Black womanhood is so different, it is nearly impossible for white women to understand the background from which Black women come from. When white women provide critiques, like shaming Black female artists for twerking, it comes from a perspective that fails to acknowledge the Black experience. Twerking is a dance tradition rooted in African, Carribean, and African- Carribean culture but white people generally do not understand this because they are informed by white artists, like Miley Cyrus, who does so in a mocking manner. Black female artists are not aiming to educate or explain themselves to their white audiences because it is not their culture (Kyrölä, 2017). Hip hop as a genre began as a way for marginalized groups to express themselves, and white audiences do not need an explanation of how and why lyrics and music videos fit into this experience.

Nicki Minaj is among one of the most criticized female hip hop artists. She is known for showing off her ass, dressing in extravagant clothing, and pushing social norms. Often criticized for sexualizing herself, she is actually disrupting societal restrictions placed on her and other Black female artists and expresses herself as an agent of her own sexuality in a manner that is erotic and powerful. Nicki Minaj has been compared to Venus Hettentot who was an African woman, brought to Great Britain by two showmen and was exhibited as a freak act in the 18th century by showing her large buttocks to a European crowd (Vigderman, 2015). Venus was used as an object for the public gaze, and although she was not formally enslaved, it is likely that she lived in similar conditions to slaves (Venus Hettentot, n.d.). The assumption that Venus ‘chose’ a life of sexual exploitation is a direct example of how Black women are perceived to be explicit, sexual creatures. This ideology comes from a history of oppression and racism stemming from a white patriarchal society. Additionally, this comparison aligns Nicki Minaj with acts of colonization, sexual objectification, and racism in an attempt to diminish her talent. Furthermore, this comparison is a direct example of how systematic racism and colonization are so deeply ingrained in society. Nicki Minaj shows off her body to display that her sexuality is under her own control. She has also been criticized for her outfit and hairstyle choices. She is famously called out by other artists for dressing as Barbie, and has been accused of portraying a plastic, blonde, Barbie- like persona and upholding Western standards of beauty (Vigderman, 2015). Looking deeper into Nicki Minaj’s motives and the intricacies of her expression, it is evident that her intent is the opposite of reinforcing Western beauty standards. Kyrölä (2017) discusses the concept of disidentification and the ways in which Black women disidentify with white culture. She explains that disidentification is a “key strategy of survival” in “Black women’s humour and

comedy which has long played with, utilised and appropriated white dominant culture's images of Black women" (Kyrölä, 2017 p.8). Nicki Minaj's exaggerated imitation of Barbie is mocking beauty standards and traditional femininity. She disrupts the idea that thin and blonde mean beautiful, which is further exemplified in several of her music videos and outfits.

In her song *Anaconda* (2014) and the associated music video, Nicki Minaj embodies Black feminist thought by challenging racial power relations and exerting her sexual control. The entire song is essentially about her ass, and she does so to make a mockery of images making her appear as socially deviant and hypersexual. By displaying her ass so directly, she is showing that her body cannot be controlled or used, and that she is in control. *Anaconda* begins with a sample of Sir Mix-A-Lot's *Baby Got Back*, which is a hip hop song that praises big butts and curvaceous bodies, yet does so in a sexually objectifying manner. While the sample is playing, the music video uses a juxtaposition of jungle imagery, which refers to the ideology that Black women have animalistic sexual desires, and the comparison of African Americans to monkeys. Here, Nicki is staring directly into the camera while twerking, never breaking eye contact, showing that she is in control. Furthermore, Minaj displays sexual desires that are not only heterosexual. She, along with her fellow dancers, are shown slapping each other's asses and Nicki is shown running her fingers down the bodies of the other dancers. Erotic situations with the same sex challenges heterosexual normativity in hip hop music and presents queerness as an option. Here, she is expressing her sexuality in a way that is not targeted towards the male gaze. Nicki Minaj makes several jabs at Western beauty ideals, specifically by calling out "skinny bitches." While it is not necessarily clear if she is referring to white women specifically when she talks about skinny bitches, Nicki Minaj explicitly celebrates the Black female body, curves,

and big asses. She says “he can tell I ain’t missin no meals” and later says “fuck them skinny bitches, fuck them skinny bitches in the club.” By saying “fuck off,” Nicki Minaj is telling white beauty standards and white privilege to literally fuck off. She is exclaiming that her music is a space for Black women to celebrate themselves and their sexuality. However, Nicki Minaj has received criticism over these lines, accusing her of ‘reverse racism’ and skinny shaming. The claim of reverse racism de-contextualizes and de-historicizes the oppression and marginalization that Black women have faced due to their bodies (Kyrölä, 2017). Through the use of lyrics like “this one is for my bitches with a fat ass in the fucking club,” Nicki Minaj is reclaiming the word fat, and turning it into an empowering word rather than a derogatory one. Minaj also subverts traditional gender roles in the video. During the kitchen scene of the video, she is dressed as a french maid, and deposes notions of domesticity using fruit in an erotic manner. She eats a banana, which is used as a phallic symbol, and then cuts it with a knife, declaring her power over the patriarchy. The banana may also function as a mockery of the comparison of Black people to monkeys. The music video finishes with Nicki Minaj dancing and twerking on Drake. She begins by crawling towards him and then throwing her leg over him, asserting her dominance in the situation. As she is twerking in front of him, he reaches out to touch her ass, and she swats his hand away, then walks away. In this dance, Nicki Minaj is completely dominating Drake, and makes it clear that she is in control of her sexuality and her desires- she is saying that her body is powerful and nobody can take that from her. Throughout *Anaconda*, Nicki Minaj is redefining the expectations and norms that have been placed upon Black women and Black female artists. She is reclaiming her sexuality and dominance in an industry that aims to suppress the sexual

power of women. Nicki refuses to be passive and submissive, and asserts her sexual power through the lyrics and music video of *Anaconda*.

In Beyonce's *Formation* (2016) song and video, she deconstructs Black social structures with a very different approach, and in a much more confrontational way. Less focused on sexual power, Beyonce is exerting Black female power and provides commentary on more broad racial issues in the South. The beginning of the video shows images of the police, and a sinking police car, calling out police brutality and referencing the flooding that occurred in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The video also includes scenes where Beyonce and other Black women are in a traditionally white southern home during the antebellum period. As she dances, Beyonce says "I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros. I like my negro nose with Jackson 5 nostrils." Here, Beyonce is speaking to the beauty of the Black female body and is encouraging self love and appreciation. When Beyonce and the surrounding women are seated inside and wearing white, they look confined; when Beyonce and other men are outside wearing black, Beyonce is dressed with jewelry and flips off the plantation that is behind her. The juxtaposition of these two settings are representative of the confines of slavery, and freedom. At this point, Beyonce says "when he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster." She is being sexually explicit, exerting her control by saying *she* brings *him* to Red Lobster, and makes a nod to the middle class, rather than the wealthy and elite. Next she says "if he hit it right I might take him on a flight on my chopper," further expressing that she is in control of herself sexually and personally, and does not need to rely on a man for success. Throughout the video, there are images of the south, specifically New Orleans, clips of Black women, a young Black boy break dancing in front of a line of police and the police officers raising their hands followed by an image of a wall

that says “Stop Shooting Us,” the church, and many other images which address the Southern black community. Furthermore, Beyonce includes samples and clips from Black queer artists like Big Freedia and Messy Mya and images of Black queer women. Throughout the video, Beyonce's lyrics and dances subtly and not-so-subtly express her sexual control. She too dances and shows off her ass, and does so to reclaim the commodification of the Black female body and signals that she is the agent of her own sexual desires. While her depictions are not as sexually explicit as Nicki Minaj's, Beyonce shows a powerful image of Black women being in control of themselves, while acknowledging that the Black female experience in the United States is unique.

Popular culture and media function as a system of racialization. Despite the steps by Black women taken to level the playing field, it is inevitable to avoid harsh criticism that is rooted in racist and misogynistic ideologies. While artists like Erykah Badu, Lauryn Hill, Nicki Minaj, Beyonce, etc. have asserted their presence in the hip hop industry as strong Black women, there is still a desire for consumption of the Black female body (Chideya, 2007). Male artists are still exploiting Black women in their lyrics and music videos, commodifying them, degrading them, and reinforcing a one-dimensional womanhood in which Black women are solely valued as sexual beings. In order for these things to change, there needs to be systemic change in the United States, which addresses the oppression and marginalization that Black women fall victim to.

Despite the current and present struggle Black women face in media and in their daily lives, it is undeniable that hip hop has provided a way for Black women to assert their sexual power and empower other Black women to reclaim their sexuality too. By expressing themselves

in a manner that is honest and representative of who they are as Black women, Black female artists can enforce a shift in ideology that permeates the art and music industries.

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