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Sexualizing Black Women in America

Submitted by Lindsey Wiltse



*Girl, what makes you wanna fuck with me now?
I've been wantin' to fuck wit' you for quite a while
Is the money makin' you wanna fuck with me?
Whoa...if money's gonna make me slam these
hoes...then alright.*

"Fuck Dat Bitch" by 50 Cent

"God damn lil' buddy take off your clothes and let me see that apple bottom and that brown booty," croons Crime Mob in their song "Rock Her Hips." Being an obvious jab at black female sexuality, "apple bottom" is modern slang for a large, shapely rear end, calling out the "brown" aspect of her behind. In current media depictions of African American women, and specifically rap music, they are most likely described as overly sexual, flaunting shapely bodies to men who are all too willing to be pleased by women eager to please them. I have noticed advertisements for clothing where white women are being suggestive, showing a bit of skin or biting their lips for a come-hither-and-you-will-see look, while black women are more likely to be half-clothed, legs open, and laying on a bed, inviting the viewer to her body. I have noticed that African American women are indeed more likely to be sexualized in American society. In the Biblical creation stories, revered in our culture, Eve, when eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, sets a precedent for all women to be sexual temptresses, regardless of race or class. When did black women bear the brunt of a hyper sexualized culture

on their bodies, and why are they picked out over others?

Born in the eighties and early nineties, this generation has grown up in something referred to as "hip hop culture." Hip hop culture, as I have learned, was started by black and Latino youths in the Bronx and consist of four distinct elements: rapping, deejaying, break-dancing, and graffiti. The culture evolved in response to white supremacy in American society. Following the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement, minorities were looking to successfully migrate into mainstream white society. Moving away from a perceived lack of individuality in New York City at that historical moment, hip hop allowed men to make a significant name for themselves in their communities. In the time since it hit the mainstream airwaves in 1979, hip hop culture has grown to dominate the media. Rappers and the lifestyles they promote bring in an enormous amount of money to producers, fashion designers, artists, and the executives in charge of television, radio and advertising. As a significant creative force in modern society, hip hop continues to positively reinvent itself. According to rapper KRS-ONE, "creativity is seen as feminine. In these single families that many of us grew up in, we didn't have any fathers, so we were missing the analytical sides of ourselves. Instead, we are creative and

intelligent, and this comes from our mothers. There is creativity in graffiti, in b-boying” (qtd. in Goldblum). Many lower-income families, the ones directly impacted by hip hop, are mother-led, single parent households, according to KRS-ONE. He admits that hip hop is based on a feminine creativity experienced by these men without fathers in their lives. If the very thing that causes their individuality and expression is a feminine characteristic, one attributed to their own mothers, then the exploitation of women prevalent within the culture is difficult to explain.

MySistah’s contributor Ayanna begins to offer an explanation as to the role and status of women in hip hop culture. She states:

All women, but mostly black women in particular are seen in popular hip-hop culture as sex objects. Almost every hip-hop video that is regularly run today shows many dancing women (usually surrounding one or two men) wearing not much more than bikinis, with the cameras focusing on their body parts. These images are shown to go along with a lot of the explicit lyrics that commonly contain name calling to suggest that women are not worth anything more than money, if that. Women are described as being only good for sexual relations by rappers who describe their life as being that of a pimp. In many popular rap songs men glorify the life of pimps, refer to all women as they think a pimp would to a prostitute, and promote violence against women for

'disobeying.' (1)

Within this interpretation, the ideals of creativity lauded by KRS-ONE that are passed through the mother become lost in chauvinism. While it started out as a way to relieve frustrations and stake an identity within a white supremacist society, hip hop culture in the twenty first century has shifted slightly from its original goals. Instead, what I see are rappers obsessed with sex, women, masculinity, and capitalism. Since the emergence of so-called “gangsta rap,” mainstream hip hop culture promotes a lifestyle of money hungry men and women which, seen just in its media portrayals, leads to stereotyping of black women as insatiable sexual creatures. The images of voluptuous, gyrating women, circling their rear on a man’s groin does not convey creativity, but instead, objectifies African American women.

Significantly, the origins of the South Bronx inspired music and lifestyle found markets in the suburbs of the same city it emerged in. The mostly white populations that moved out of the city after World War II enjoyed this form of art and music enough that the appeal to white audiences influenced the corporate white interests. In fact, without the large numbers of suburban and rural audiences, the lasting power of hip hop music would not exist. In 2008, without getting into too much detail, I will say that through product endorsements and corporate funding, hip hop is largely fueled by white CEOs. In this capitalist and patriarchal nation, the people in power provide capital to the rap artists and their record companies to produce a particular image. This same image appeals to the audiences

who see mainstream rap on television. While I am not saying that African American men do not have any role in the production, I am willing to note the strong hand of white influence that goes into the making of rap music. The hypermasculinity associated with hip hop culture would not exist if it were not for the hypersexualization of black women. Key historical aspects that cause white producers of music to encourage, consume, and portray African American women in such a manner need to be identified. Since there is this influence, the images projected of African American women in this culture are manipulated by not only those who endorse it (white men) but also those who consume it (a largely white population). Kobena Mercer believes that “certain types of imagery are responsible for causing actual violence and abuse in society at large” (133), stating that “music is a key site in everyday life where men and women reflect on their gendered and sexual identities” (141). I will focus on the role white America plays in the oversexualization of black women currently manifested in a popular music form and lifestyle that exists today.

Bell hooks states that “white supremacist ideology insisted that black people, being more animal than human, lacked the capacity to feel and therefore could not engage the finer sensibilities that were the breeding ground for art” (67). If African Americans cannot, under white supremacist ideology, connect with a white aesthetic appeal, then what they produce in their view is not “art.” What their music is, then, is something outside of art, some sense of “otherness.” This suggests the reasoning

behind a white push behind a hip hop market and the portrayal of the women within it. Not only are African Americans made into a social other in regards to artistic creation, but African American women, specifically in hip hop culture, are placed on a different spectrum of “other.” Women, as a gender, are perceived as closer to nature due to our ability to birth children and men are seen as closer to civilization since they are seen as the ones making buildings and government systems. Since women as a whole are perceived as closer to nature, black women in particular are even more so. Black slave women were brought over from Africa, where they were seemingly taken from the jungle. By living in a “natural” setting instead of a civilized world, they were not ranked on par with white women, who lived in “civilization.” They would be more natural, and unbridled sexuality is not a trait associated with the whiter, Western world, but more seen with the darker people overtaken by colonialism. Under a white system, black women in hip hop culture are contrasted to white women; black individuals are ranked more deviant than white individuals. Black women, being seen as an Other, are inherently different than white women, therefore allowing her to be depicted as more sexual than others.

In the strand of thought that linked black women with animalistic, unbridled sexuality comes the Jezebel stereotype created in Antebellum American society. Rupe Simms suggests that the “preeminent features of the dominant ideology that justified their exploitation of female slaves... that contributed substantially to the social construction of African women’s

gender” (880). The supremacist ideology maintained that slave women were able to be sexually exploited, thereby leading to numerous African American women being raped and treated solely as sexual objects by their white masters. Simms defines the Jezebel stereotype:

The sex-starved woman, who was childishly promiscuous and consumed by lustful passions. Her sexual aggression, fertility, and libidinous self-expression were considered limitless. The Jezebel image concretized Black female subordination, justifying the rape of African women by white men. According to this portrayal, the African woman truly enjoyed being ravaged by her master...so that abusing her was simply satisfying her natural desires...the Jezebel image sustained the domination of white men. (882)

The Jezebel image allowed for white men to relate to black women in a more primitive manner than they would their white counterparts. If slave women loved being ravaged, then indeed they differed from the white women whose bodies were not used for pleasure. This relates to the images seen in hip hop videos. While using different intentions, the dozens half naked women allowing men to place dollar bills underneath their thong underwear for a good look at their rear end allude to this antediluvian stereotype; black women are rendered in this image of limitless libido by a continually supremacist society. Again, this compares to the black women as a socialized Other because it places her as differing from

white women. Black women only want sex, according to the Jezebel stereotype, and in such a framework, white women are defined as not wanting sex. Hip hop portrayals of women as a Jezebel type figure identify to the white consumer base that African American women are inherently more sexual than white women.

Rape, as noted by Edward Shorter, is not only a way for men to prove their sexual dominion over women but for all men to keep all women in a state of fear in order to triumph over them. In this manner, the women are seen as a dispensable sex object and remain protective over their genitals at all time. Simms suggests that the Jezebel image, beginning in the nineteenth century, sustained the domination of white men over black women. The Jezebel imagery described by Simms directly relates to Shorter’s definition of rape. When black women are accused of being insatiable sex creatures, then indeed the power structure is maintained; white men remain in control over the bodies of women, and most especially, black women. In the antebellum south, “no law existed to forbid the rape of female slaves by their masters. The rape of an enslaved woman by someone other than her master was considered trespass, a property crime against the slave owner” (Sitomer 10). What this rape without consequence attitude does is relegate black women to a status of property, to be used as how their white owner saw fit. Although there is no legalized ownership of black bodies anymore, there is the objectification of black bodies. If they are being portrayed in a sexualized manner, then it invites a voyeurism of their sexuality by

consumers. If their consumers are mostly young, suburban, white males, then their bodies are being controlled by these same men that influence their media portrayal, which will coincide with eventual negative and consequential stereotypes.

Mercer is sure to pronounce that “patriarchal culture constantly redefines and adjusts the balance of male power and privilege, and the prevailing system of gender roles, through a variety of material, economic, social and political structures” (137). Slavery is one such institution where sexual power, due socioeconomic and political influence, can cause an individual to become a body instead of a person. A capitalistic, racist and patriarchal culture can lead to the imagery seen in the lyrics and videos of mainstream hip hop artists to be pervasive and influential. Before the Civil War, black women were often forced into polygamy and polyandry, with black men mating with other black women as decreed by a slave master in order to produce children with traits the slaveholder desired. In polygamous systems, one man would be made to mate with a variety of women or one woman would mate with a few males. Now, multiple women dance upon, lick their lips and shake their hips at the one man, usually the man rapping into the microphone. In Kristen Gentry’s “Hip Hop Culture and Contemporary American Literature” class, we have spoken of a few clips shown of documentaries where many of the men speak of them and their friends either trying to get physical with one girl, or having pride that they all have gotten physical with her. In polygamous situations, the woman will

be seen as wanting sex, and desiring all of these men to have her, or willing to compete with other sexual women for one man by putting herself out there more than they have. Although there is a significant difference between forced sexual intercourse and the willingness of girls to submit to this viewing of their bodies, the images in mainstream media bring up an idea reminiscent of polygamous situations. This stereotype reaching back to Antebellum America is not something that should continue over a hundred years later.

Magnus Hirschfeld, in his 1932 article entitled “Racism” explains sexualizing a group of people in a way that sums up, in an obvious manner, any predilection anyone may have to stereotype, as is done with African American women. He says, “sexual peculiarities...are so equally distributed among the nations and among every stratum of the population that there can be no excuse for assigning what are merely individual characteristics to groups or races, and to parties or the advocates of specified opinions” (230). An objection would be to say that the women who are portrayed in these videos and the media know what they are getting into when they sign on to appear scantily clad or overly sexual. That would be a fair argument, but what is not fair is when the millions of women who do not make a conscious decision to appear in this manner in mass media are assigned the characteristics and behavior of the few who do. It becomes an issue when certain people in power make the decisions of who and what will appear in what form, while in doing so, harm a plethora of women who should remain unaffected. It is not the

women who are grinding in bikinis that become the problem, but the fundamental flaw is when hypersexualization is attributed to all African American women, not solely the ones who profit from making themselves out to appear so.

White Americans, and most specifically white men, have a fascination with the bodies of women, especially black women. Instead of the use of African American women's bodies through forced rape during slave times, the hypersexualization of women through hip hop culture allows for a white gaze on black female sexual bodies. bell hooks later writes that "consumer capitalism has not been able to completely destroy artistic production in underclass black communities" (67). In opposition to what is seen on television, there is a huge underground rap and hip hop scene where hypersexualization of women does not occur. This is where hip hop is created without white influence, and calls to its roots in jazz and reggae, both black art forms. It is the mainstream attitude of black women being more sexual than white woman is hammered into the minds of the American public through the media. To me, this is a peculiar social phenomenon. This is a continuation of slavery mindset in the twenty-first century that is being perpetuated not only by black rappers, but many of the white audiences who fuel the consumer base. There is nothing inherently sexual about black women, but instead, there is a sexuality placed upon their bodies, first by colonizers, then by the slaveholders, and now by the popular media. I think there needs to be an understanding on the meaning placed on the

space of other people. With this meaning, these perceptions and stereotypes can be overturned and African American women would not be unnecessarily targeted for consumption in today's society.
