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“If I Wanna Act Freaky Then That’s My Business”: Lil Kim and the Politics of Performing Public Sexuality for a Black Woman Rapper

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“If I Wanna Act Freaky Then That’s My Business”:

Lil Kim is everything that is wrong with rap music culture. At least that seems to be the dominant critical opinion of her. For example, Tricia Rose says in her book *The Hip Hop Wars* (2008) simultaneously that “too much of the rhetoric against sexism in hip hop ends up being very compatible with an anti-sexual expression agenda.”(122) But she then describes “highly visible rappers like Lil Kim, Trina, and Foxy Brown” as “us[ing] the *Black female-required sex card* in hip hop.”(123, emphasis added) Rose highlights that “Kim herself admitted that she uses her identity as Lil Kim to get money”—the implicit critique being the marriage between sex and commodification. In another instance Kathryn T. Gines argues, in her essay “Queen Bees and Big Pimps: Sex and Sexuality in Hip Hop” in *Hip Hop Philosophy: Rhyme to Reason* edited by Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby(2005), that “to avoid being labeled a whore, Black women must go to the opposite extreme of becoming ‘pure’ virgins.” Gines reminds that the image of the “*hypersexual whore* [becomes] the excuse for the label of “bitch” and “ho.” Later Gines argues “ One way of responding to the virgin-whore paradigm has been to embrace one extreme and redefine it in a more positive or empowering way.” According to Gines Lil Kim does this by “taking up and popularizing the image of the *ho* and the *bitch* unapologetically.”(99) According to Gines, Lil Kim is “seeking to move men from the subject to the object position where she can manipulate them as sexual objects.”(100) However Lil Kim’s presentation to Gines is still dangerous because “in the end, black women are still hos and bitches while Black men are players and pimps.” (100)

Lil Kim's highly sexualized image and lyrics are seen as manifestations of the sexist, misogynistic ideologies imbedded in rap culture. The glorification of fashion and opulence in her work stand in for the nihilistic reproduction of capitalist fantasy in rap. Lastly, her depictions of criminal lifestyle and activities valorize this hyperviolent behavior and celebrate 'gang-ster' culture. As I said these are some representations of Lil Kim and her work. Lil Kim becomes not just a persona in rap music culture but a figure, a placeholder, for multiple contentious debates within and about rap music culture. The purpose of this paper is to argue an alternative reading of Lil Kim's persona. This is not an apologia for the pornographic nature of *some* of Lil Kim's work or an attempt to reframe that nature as an absolute positive. But instead I would like to examine the discourse around Lil Kim and how that discourse is reflective of or at least referential of larger discourses within feminism and scholarship on women around sexual agency and exploitation that I think is most visible in the 1980s pornography debates.

This paper begins from a simple question: how is Lil Kim, the public/artistic persona of Kimberly Jones, understood in the popular and critical imagination? I say it here to highlight that in examining Lil Kim as a persona I am discussing a thing that is connected to but not the same as the person who was born Kimberly Denise Jones. My thoughts about Lil Kim begin with the subject of the pornographic. Here I am using "pornographic" as a way to describe an erotic excess. In saying the erotic excess I'm trying to suggest the performance of erotic that is based on magnification or hyperbole. Erotic excess is simultaneously the erotic and more than the erotic. Therefore, the project of this paper will be to examine both how the pornographic—as the erotic excess—has figured in rap music culture in the ways that it has. How that figuration maps onto Lil Kim's performance and the public responses to them. Inherent in this discussion is a need to deconstruct the ways that the "Sex Wars" within 1980s US-based feminisms played into the shaping of both social and policy-driven understandings of pornography and the pornographic now.

However, I want to begin with Lil Kim and the politics of what is known as “pussy power rapping” or as I like to call it “raunch rap. Kimberly Denise Jones was born in Brooklyn, New York in July of 1974. She gets her stage name in part from her small stature, standing at 4 feet 11 inches. Lil Kim is probably most famous for being the only female member in the Notorious B.I.G.’s short-lived group Junior Mafia and then a solo career that begins with the success of her first album *Hardcore* (1996.) Lil Kim’s work is based very much in discussions of the body. It is this highlighting of the body and particularly a racialized Black, feminine body that I believe pushes her work into the realm of the erotic and the pornographic. Let me break this down further. There is a historical, meaning here at a point in what we call the past, linkage to the Black body and the grotesque and therefore excessive. Perhaps the most famous personification of this linkage is in the figure of “The Venus Hottentot”—who was a Black African woman named Sarta Baartman or Sarah Bartman who came to/was brought to Europe as an exhibition piece.

Lil Kim is similar to the figure of the Venus Hottentot in the way that her body and image come to stand for a complex network of social meanings the least of which are the otherness of the Black feminine body and the physical/sexual availability of the Black feminine body. It is the belief in the “natural” availability of her body (and of Black and Brown feminine bodies throughout what we call time and space) that shapes how Lil Kim’s work is read and responded to. When Lil Kim performs, songs like “How Many Licks” that are somewhat explicitly about sexual gratification, they are read (positively and negatively) as reaffirmations of that availability. In effect, her body of work and her performances become a kind of public sexuality. This production of a public sexuality reaffirms the ‘truth’ of this fantasy of availability.

I want to push back against this reading of Lil Kim as a metaphorical reaffirmation of racist tropes of Black feminine sexual personhood. To do this I will examine a particular moment in Lil Kim’s

career after her perjury trial. During the last 14 days before she turned herself in to begin serving her sentence, Lil Kim filmed a television show called *Countdown to Lock Down* that was aired on the B.E.T. network. The show was executively produced by Kimberly Jones, Hillary Weston (Lil Kim's manager), and Tracey Edmonds (a prominent Black female television producer.) Kimberly Jones and Tracey Edmonds are the creators of the show. *Countdown to Lock Down* performs a generic function as a biographical text meant to exhibit the life of Lil Kim at this particular moment. However, it also functions as an attempt to reclaim the image of Lil Kim from this static position of object and to reaffirm her subjectivity in her life and career.

First, reclaiming her subjectivity is achieved by depicting Kim (as Lil Kim the artist and as Kimberly Jones the person) as having directorial control over her image. For example, episode two opens with clips from the previous episode where Lil Kim gets into a heated conversation with her manager Hillary Weston about her video for the song "Lighters Up." Kim is dissatisfied with both the shots of herself and the representation of Brooklyn in the video. The second episode opens then with Kim being successful in convincing her management and record company to green light a reshoot for the video and a new director for a second video to be shot within the next two days. Second, there is an attempt to define the difference between Lil Kim as the persona and Kimberly Jones as the person. Episode five begins with Kim sitting in her kitchen eating breakfast. Kim does a voiceover where she says: "I think a lot of people think that I walk around in Chanel slippers and feathers all day with cocktails in my hand or whatever..." Here there is an attempt to draw a distinction between Lil Kim the persona (who is almost always shown in the newest fashion living a life of luxury) and Kimberly Jones a person outside of the Lil Kim persona. In the same scene, there is an attempt to show a vulnerability to Kim. Both of her personal assistants describe their jobs as "taking care of Kim" and making sure she has everything that she needs. They reassert that she is a strong woman but that she also needs people. Here is an attempt to humanize and gender Kim's image in a particular way. *Countdown to Lock Down* is

a rebuttal of Kim as the 'hypersexual whore' and a reaffirmation of her as the quiet domestic and shrewd business woman.

Now, taking on the notion of a fantasy of availability of Black and Brown feminine bodies, we turn back to the discussion of the pornography, the pornographic, and feminisms. To begin here is a rough sketch of some major events in what we refer to as the "Sex Wars." This discourse in the 1980s was both shaped by and help to shape a national moment of concern over the moral and ethical 'nature' of popular culture and its political responsibilities. In this moment, feminist discourses about pornography work in tandem (at moments intentionally and unintentionally) with larger policy discussions about the purpose and ethics of censorship and the ability to create and define normative standards of behavior particularly around sexual identity, expression, and desire. More simply feminisms in the US become tools of surveillance and norming.

In conclusion, critics of Lil Kim are not entirely wrong. There is a seemingly ahistorical issue about the racist fantasies about Black feminine sexual availability and the real lack of protection historically (and arguably contemporarily) within social and legal frame works of Black feminine bodies. We have been and still are vulnerable in a sense to sexual assault and exploitation. However, the discourse around sexual exploitation in rap music culture—where Lil Kim is often represented as the misguided or malicious perpetuator of the phenomenon—still reflects certain moralistic judgments of sexual expression, especially the excessively erotic expression. These judgments reflect larger discourses around the public sexual expression as seen in the pornography debates. While participants in the discussion of the within Hip Hop studies seem to have a certain nuance to the discussion—recognizing that sexual propriety has indeed policed the Black women's expressions of sexual desire—it's clear that in this discourse there is such a thing as going too far. Sexual expression is necessary as Black women must reclaim their sexual agency from the hands of the sexist, racist fantasies about our bodies—

however those expression are not “allowed” to be too pornographic. I would argue that Lil Kim in the show *Countdown to Lockdown* rejects this idea by showing that the ways in which the pornographic representation of her body and image can still happen on her own terms and that this representation is indeed a persona and a carefully crafted business decision.