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"Who You Calling a Bitch?" Black Women's Complicity and Production of Mass Media Hip Hop Misogyny

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Author

Cheers, Imani M

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Break-dancing, graffiti art, Djing and emceeing are the foundations of the international artistic phenomenon known as hip hop. What began as a local form of urban cultural expression by young African-American and Latino youth in South Bronx, New York, in the early 1970s, hip hop has become a mass media¹ global sensation. While the foundations of this art form are rooted in social inequality and injustice, the current state of hip hop, in my view, is overwhelmed with violently offensive content. Hip hop has evolved into a misogynistic culture filled with aggressive rhetoric and degrading images of Black women. This paper examines the common threads, inconsistencies and gaps in the discourse on Black women’s complicity of misogynistic hip hop. In this context complicity is defined as participation in a wrongful act.² This paper will examine published works by hip hop feminist journalists, activists, and scholars who are critiquing this mass media genre from a black feminist thought perspective, questioning Black women’s complicity and production of misogynistic representation of Black women. Through a strong feminist-centered discourse, Black women’s complicity in misogynistic hip hop mass media is being disputed in the intellectual public sphere. Theoretically and methodologically, I will focus on Black feminist thought as a component of critical social theory through a primary source literature review.

Black women have been critiquing hip hop’s misogynistic lyrics and images since the early 1990s. When the lyrical content of hip hop music shifted from messages of the socially and economically oppressed to those glorifying violence and sexually degrading women, audiences became critical of groups such as 2 Live Crew and Niggas With Attitude (NWA). One of the most vocal proponents of this debate was C. Delores Tucker, who, as the Chair of the National Political Congress of Black Women and Chair of the

¹ In this context, mass media refers to television, video, film, radio, print and the Internet.

² <http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/complicity>

Democratic National Committee Black Caucus, launched a national campaign against a sub-genre of hip-hop, gangsta rap, in 1993. Tucker was a leading social activist against hip hop and specifically gangsta rap’s misogynistic lyrics and violent content. In the wake of Tucker’s campaign, Black women’s complicity and production of these images came forth as a critical concern in the discourse on hip hop mass media.

The intellectual discourse concerning hip-hop has evolved over the decade to include a wide variety of contributors, including rappers like Sister Souljah, political leaders like C. Delores Tucker, and academics like bell hooks, Tricia Rose, Patricia Hill Collins, Michelle Wallace and Gwendolyn Pough. The feminist discourse in hip hop scholarship has its roots in Black women’s lived experiences, dating back to American slavery. Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Mary McCloud Bethune, Fannie Lou Hammer, Angela Davis, Alice Walker and Michelle Wallace are some of the Black women who have been critiquing their lived experiences from a feminist standpoint for over 150 years.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) developed the term Black feminist thought as a component of critical social theory to allow an intellectual space for Black women to share their lived experiences through empowerment of self and one’s community. This framework will be the main theoretical framework in this study. Hill Collins (2002) employs critical social theory as a method to fight social injustice. This theory is defined as:

Bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing groups of people. These groups are differently placed in specific political, social, and historic contexts characterized by injustice. What

makes critical social theory critical is its commitment to justice for one’s own group and/or for that of other groups. (p. 298)

Young Black feminist Joan Morgan is heavily influenced by trailblazing feminist such as bell hooks, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde and Alice Walker and was in search of a feminism that addressed issues pertinent to the hip hop generation. Credited with being the first to coin the term “hip-hop feminist”, in her groundbreaking memoir, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*, Morgan (1999) desired a different type of feminism that could address some very contradictory questions:

I wanted a feminism that would allow me to explore who we are as women-not victims. One that claimed the powerful richness and delicious complexities inherent in being Black girls now-sistas of the post-Civil Rights, post feminist, post soul, hip-hop generation...In short, I needed a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays. And this was not my foremother’s feminism. (p. 56-9)

It’s in the “grays” that Morgan describes the discourse concerning Black women’s complicity in misogynistic hip hop mass media occurs. The dichotomies within hip hop are powerfully evident and Morgan acknowledges her own complicit contradictions. Morgan (1999) confesses that her memoir, in part was an effort “to combat my own complacency” (p. 23). She intended to empower herself and others by being “willing to take an honest look at ourselves” and then speak openly about it (ibid.).

Morgan is one of the earliest journalists to question Black women’s participation in misogynistic hip hop mass media. Acknowledging the pressure that rappers (mostly Black men) received concerning their lyrics and music video imagery, Morgan (1999) believes Black women can overcome misogynistic oppression by refusing to give men

permission to exploit them and rather that “critical issue of whose responsibility it is to end our oppression. As a feminist, I believe it is too great a responsibility to leave to men” (p.78-9). The aforementioned responsibility is too important to solely fall on the shoulders of Black men as artists or consumers, the record industry, music video directors, casting agencies or executives in mass media conglomerates such as Viacom. The responsibility lies with Black women who are willing to use their strength and voice to demand an end to these self-esteem damaging images and lyrics. As a leading voice of Black women in print journalism, *Essence* magazine embraced this role and launched a year long campaign to “Take Back the Music” in the spring of 2005.

Journalists, Ayana Byrd and Akiba Solomon in January 2005, co-authored the first section of “Take Back the Music” entitled “What’s Really Going On”. While the editors (2005) at *Essence* were conflicted in their own complicity, they agreed, “as representatives of the world’s foremost publication for Black women, we need to provide a platform for public discussion.” (p. 82) The first installment asked several prominent figures in the industry to offer their comments on misogyny in hip hop. Notorious video model and former host of the defunct show *BET Style*, Melyssa Ford explained how women in videos are materialistic commodities and how she was able to take ownership of her images. She comments, “People were trying to exploit me, but I decided to exploit myself and make all the money from my images...people may see it as a contradiction, but I don’t. I’m eye candy, and that’s as far as it goes. (p. 84)

Despite Melyssa Ford’s ability to take control of her images within hip hop mass media, very few women who dance in music videos are as fortunate. In the second section of the “Take Back the Music” series, journalist Jeannine Amber explores the provocative world of the video girl also known as the “video ho” or “video vixen” in

more recent years. Amber’s article, “Dirty Dancing”, examines the phenomenon through the lived experiences of young women, specifically twenty-two year old, Tawny who has been working in the industry for half a decade. In describing the misconception that all women who appear in music videos are sluts and whores, Tawny is an aspiring actress. She states, “if video girls are being exploited, then every female artist who is out there being sexy should be blamed too. To me, it’s all bulls---.” (p. 165) While Amber’s article does not specifically critique or challenge Black women’s complicity in misogynistic hip hop, the article does offer insight into the lived experiences that contribute to Black women’s participation as video dancers.

The “Take Back the Music” campaign was reminiscent of the civil rights and women’s liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. *Essence* journalists and editors rallied in support of the Spelman College students in a year-long crusade that aimed to provide a space for intellectual public discourse, to support positive artists, and to challenge attitudes towards hip hop culture. Ayana Byrd and Akiba Solomon (2005) quote famous video model Melyssa Ford as being able to exploit herself by taking financial control of her personal image. Their article, a selection of quotes and partial interviews, lacked any analysis or critique of the participant’s responses. Jeannine Amber (2005) barely scratches the surface of Black women’s complicity as dancers in hip hop music videos. Amber’s exploration of women as video dancers is incomplete as she does not delve into the fundamental reasons for Black women’s participation in videos.

Feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins’ (2005) work focuses on representation of Black women in mass media. In *Black Sexual Politics*, she addresses important issues such as the negotiation of Black femininity in video narratives, but her critique does not question Black women’s participation in hip hop videos. Hill Collins’ Black feminist

critique focuses on specific music videos by Black women artists instead of the majority of hip hop videos that represent Black women in over-sexualized and degrading roles. There is a gap in Hill Collins’ analyses of hip hop music videos as a result of her limited scope.

In her book *Pimps Up, Hoes Down*, Sharpley-Whiting (2007) concentrates on the powerful lure of sex as the kryptonite to Black women in the hip hop generation’s superwoman status. Destructive stereotypes reinforced by the mass media appeal to young Black women’s self-esteem and self-worth. Without positive, reaffirming images to counter balance the prevalent misogynistic hip hop mass media, Black women often identify with the dominant representations. Sharpley-Whiting’s critique is accurate but fails to expand on the topic of Black women’s responsibility in their own oppression. Images in the mass media that project negative race and gender stereotypes can have a tremendous impact on consumers but ultimately Black women must take ownership of their roles within hip hop culture.

Fatimah N. Muhammad’s chapter, “How To NOT Be 21st Century Venus Hottentots” in the *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminist Anthology*, addresses the implications of the messages within hip hop that are devoured by young Black women as audiences. Muhammad (2005) is one of the only scholars to begin inquiring about Black women’s audience participation in hip hop. Acknowledging a matrix of domination that constantly oppresses Black women, Muhammad, similar to Joan Morgan, is still challenging Black women’s responsibility (as an audience) in misogynistic hip hop. Muhammad is on the forefront of this discourse but she is also limited in her critique because she is only questioning Black women as an audience and not as participants and producers in misogynistic hip hop mass industry.

Instead of questioning Black women’s complicity in misogynistic hip hop, Johnnetta B. Cole’s (2007) *Ebony* magazine article challenges Black communities to take responsibility for the mass media in which they participate and produce. Cole and Guy-Sheftall (2003) hold Black communities responsible for their complicity in the production of negative stereotypes of Black women in their book *Gender Talk*. Cole and Guy-Sheftall, along with Morgan and Muhammad, are on the forefront of this anti-misogyny discourse. Collectively these scholars and journalists are constructively challenging the complicit behavior of Black women.

In 1993, C. Delores Tucker became the spokeswoman for the anti-misogyny and gangster rap campaign. Tucker’s lifelong activism equipped her with a Black feminist standpoint that enabled her to lead a campaign that condemned artists and record companies for their use of derogatory lyrics and images of and towards Black women. Tucker’s campaign on behalf of the National Congress of Black Women received brutal backlash from hip hop artists and industry executives. She was vilified and verbally assaulted in the mass media popular culture. While Tucker’s crusade did not question Black women’s complicity in misogynistic hip hop, it is critical to the activist discourse surrounding this issue today. Tucker and the NCBW blazed a trail for Moya Bailey and Asha Jennings to follow and ultimately provided inspiration for the protest at Spelman College in 2004.

Bailey and Jennings’ protest of Nelly’s appearance called on the controversial rapper to be accountable for his actions and the imagery he produces as an international artist. Specifically, Nelly was being criticized for this video, “Tip Drill” where numerous Black women parade around scantily clothed simulated sexual acts on one another and men. The final scene of the video Nelly takes a credit card and swipes it down the

buttocks of a Black woman. As the leaders of this protest, both Bailey and Jennings, similar to Joan Morgan, questioned their own complicity as Black women. Through subsequent events, interviews and the “Take Back the Music” campaign, Bailey and Jennings did not expand their critique to include Black women as consumers and producers of the misogynistic imagery they detest. Jennings acknowledges the urgency for grassroots social change but fails to challenge Black women’s role in their own oppression.

There is a considerable gap in this discourse from 1999 to the present and in order to bring about significant change in hip hop culture Black women must take responsibility for their role as consumers and producers of misogyny. The intellectual public discourse is a great place to begin challenging Black women’s roles, but as history has shown, tangible change begins at the grassroots level and must be spearheaded by a unified Black women’s coalition dedicated to social change. In particular Black women can do two things to being to propel this movement. First, Black women must realize the tremendous economic power within the Black community and use that power to pressure media conglomerates to support artists whose music is not filled with misogynistic content. Second, Black women must mentor the younger generations and instill empowering self-affirming messages of love and appreciation. When the Black community as a whole realizes their true value and worth, they will stop allowing degrading messages to penetrate and poison the world.

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