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Shakin' Exploitation:

*Black Female Bodies in Contemporary
Hip-Hop and Pornography*

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Spring 2011

“In hindsight, I realized that models, like the strip club dancers and video vixens...and even female rappers...occupy a particular place of cultural antipathy. We are all in the business of selling illusions, as we move various products—including our own sexuality—but we often stand accused of selling out. Blamed for participating in the exploitation of women, these women and their stories, like mine, are always much more complicated...nothing is ever so clear cut.”¹

-T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting

Introduction

In 2005, Karrine Steffans’ memoir *Confessions of a Video Vixen* debuted on bookstore shelves across the country. Steffans book was the first of its kind. She used her knowledge of privileged information contained inside the “Good Ol’ Boys Club” of hip-hop to transform herself from video vixen to a self-proclaimed “modern day Mata Hari.”² With the publication of her book, Steffans violated an unspoken but well-known rule in hip-hop by “refusing to curb her tongue.”³ She aired her rendezvous with some of hip-hop’s power players, and she did not spare any details. With *Confessions*, Steffans turned her seemingly powerless position as a hip-hop video dancer, stripper, and pornographic actress into one of a New York Times bestselling author who is now able to enjoy “the good life on her own terms.”⁴

Steffans’ experience raises many questions when considering the position of Black female bodies in hip-hop and the adult entertainment industry and the politics behind the image of African-American women overall. How do women like Steffans and other “groupies”, “video vixens”, “porn stars”, and “rap bitches” function inside the overwhelmingly male-dominated and hyper-masculine space that is the hip-hop industry?

¹ Sharpley-Whiting T. Denean. Pimps Up Hoes Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women. New York: NYU Press. 2007, pg. xi.

² Steffans, Karrine. Confessions of a Video Vixen. New York: HarperCollins. 2005. XV.

³ Lee, Shayne. Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books. 2010, pg. 27.

⁴ Lee, 26.

Are these women able to have voice and agency in this space? To what extent do women control their images? Are their portrayals liberating or damaging to the image of Black women overall? Is it beneficial to examine their portrayals in terms of binaries, or are there too many complexities within the politics of representation to limit our scope in this way?

Through a methodological framework consisting of historical analysis, pop culture analysis, and hip-hop feminist theory, this paper will address the aforementioned questions and explore the complex intersections of race, gender, and agency in contemporary hip-hop and adult entertainment. There are varying definitions and elements of hip-hop; therefore the scope of this paper is limited to the “rap music” aspect of hip-hop and images of Black female bodies in rap videos.⁵ The term “adult entertainment” is used broadly, to include women who participate in any form of sexualized work. Adult entertainment is used to refer to any woman who trades her sexualized image (whether it be through the act of intercourse or nude/suggestive modeling) for social and economic capital; this includes hip-hop video models, adult film actresses, sex workers, exotic dancers, and self-proclaimed groupies.

The first section, “Look Back at Me: Jezebel, the Black Lady and Constructions of Black Female Sexuality Identity”, will consist of a historical overview of images of Black women constructed since enslavement into the late 20th century, paying particular attention to the Jezebel and Black Lady images. Then, I will highlight the links between these stereotypes and the sexualized images that exist of Black female identity in contemporary hip-hop. I will also discuss the politics of respectability, a concept

⁵ Pough, Gwendolyn. Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere. Boston: Northeastern University Press. 2004, pg. 5.

popularized during the women's movement beginning in the late 19th century that equated self-respect and public behavior with the advancement of middle class ideals. I will further detail how the politics of respectability aided in the construction of the dominant Black female sexual scripts.⁶

The second section, "Mic Check: The Rise of Women in Hip-hop", will examine the evolution of women in hip-hop from the mid-1980's to the present, analyzing how the rise in popularity of hip-hop music has affected the portrayal of Black women's bodies in the sexual marketplace. I will discuss the evolution of hip-hop in general and how its popularity has increased its value in the capitalist system. I will begin with a discussion of hip-hop's female pioneers, who exuded images of confidence, power and self-respect; and how their legacies interact with contemporary women in hip-hop. Although there are more female-bodied persons represented in hip-hop, their depictions and the purposes they serve are, arguably, vastly different.

The third section, "Hip-Hop Pornography" will speak to the influence of visual culture in rap music and how it has created intersections between hip-hop and the adult entertainment industry. I will examine the ways Black women who participate in these industries view their images and how they exercise and conceptualize agency while dealing with the hyper-masculinity inherent in their fields. I will highlight ways that women in hip-hop and adult entertainment challenge the politics of respectability and complicate the traditional stereotypes and images of African-American women.

The fourth and final section of my paper will present my conclusions and plans for further research. In sum, Black women are challenging stereotypes through the

⁶ Higginbotham, Evelyn B. Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1993, pg. 14.

mediums of hip-hop and adult entertainment that have been subjugating their sexuality for decades. To a certain extent, this freedom is liberating because they are embracing a pro-sex framework and breaking deeply engrained silences that have been present surrounding Black female sexuality. Conversely, there are ways that these ‘erotic revolutionaries’, to borrow a term from Shayne Lee, re-entrench some of the ideals that have made the policing of Black female sexuality by other Black women exist in the first place.⁷ There needs to be a space in hip-hop feminism that prioritizes the voices of all women and the stories they have to tell.

Methodological Framework

In the book, *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip-Hop Feminism Anthology*, co-editor Gwendolyn Pough offers the standpoint of a hip-hop feminist:

Most hip-hop feminists believe that the needs of the hip-hop generation require new strategies and different voice. They have a strong relationship to the “self” and they connect their personal narratives with theoretical underpinnings and critique. They hold themselves and their peers responsible for effecting change in the present and future by encouraging people to recognize and combat their own complicity and complacency. In terms of rap music and hip-hop culture they want to find ways to move beyond counting the amount of times a rapper says “bitch” or “ho”, to focus on what they consider to be larger issues and concerns. For example, they also want to begin to complicate understandings of women’s complicity in the objectification of women especially as it pertains to video hos. A hip-hop feminist is more than just someone who likes and listens to rap music and feels conflicted about it. A hip-hop feminist is someone who is immersed in hip-hop culture and experiences hip-hop as a way of life. Hip-hop as a culture in turn, influences his or her worldview or approach to life.⁸

The standpoint Pough articulates embraces many of the tenets of traditional Black feminist theory because she privileges the historical and contemporary narratives of Black women working towards the ultimate goal of liberation for oppressed people.

⁷ Lee, Shayne. *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture*. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books

⁸ Pough, xiii

However, Pough points out the need for “new strategies and a different voice” when examining the hip-hop generation. Hip-hop was born out of a need for young people to express their frustration with the status quo. It is logical to assume that the imposition of traditional understandings of feminist theory on this movement can cause tension. In the book, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-hop Feminist Breaks it Down*, hip-hop feminist Joan Morgan unpacks the contradictions that are apparent when feminist scholars critique hip-hop. Morgan points out the necessity for young people to not “rely on older heads to redefine the struggle to encompass our generation’s issues.”⁹ Morgan sees the lack of revolutionary spirit among young people as “not only lazy, but dangerous” since the task of saving our lives “falls on our shoulders.”¹⁰

Pough also encourages hip-hop feminists to “combat their own complicity and complacency.” There are various elements of hip-hop feminism that seem, on face, contradictory. Pough and her contemporaries recognize hip-hop has provided an expressive outlet for oppressed people, however, it can also be oppressive to the narratives of women. Hip-hop feminism allows multiple, even contrary ideas a space in the conversations concerning Black female sexuality. The art form of hip-hop allows women to “keep it real” because it “sample[s]...many voices, injects its sensibilities into the old and flips it into something new, provocative and powerful” since “truth can’t be found in the voice of any one rapper but in the juxtaposition of many.”¹¹ Although respectability is a component of Black female sexuality, its inverse, the pornographic, is also embodied in the experiences of Black women. Morgan believes truth “...lies in the

⁹ Morgan, Joan. *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it Down*. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks. 1999, pg. 22

¹⁰ Morgan, 22.

¹¹ Morgan, 62.

magical intersection where...contrary voices meet—the ‘truth’ is no longer black and white but subtle, intriguing shades of gray.”¹² By engaging this gray area, hip-hop feminism does not favor one voice over another. It allows all the expressions of all shades of Black female sexuality.

The narratives offered by women in hip-hop and pornography are complicated and, at times, contradictory, but that is part of their beauty. These women embrace an identity that is complex, yet complete, and makes other women aware of “the grays” of their experiences and enables them to make informed decisions. There is nothing wrong with a woman who identifies as a feminist, but decides to listen to the sexually explicit music of Lil’ Kim instead of the politically charged raps of Queen Latifah. Both artists offer perspectives on Black female sexual identity and bring the narratives of historically marginalized women to the forefront. In order for Black women to transcend attacks on their sexual choice, both by outsiders and members of the community, they must first have a discussion about constructions of their identity. As Prof. Sharpley-Whiting indicates in the opening quote, assuming that a woman is “selling out” or betraying her community is not the answer. Legendary Black feminist scholar Toni Cade advocates for Black women to invest their energy to “touch and unify” the community.¹³ This paper serves as an entry into the ongoing conversation of hip-hop (Black) feminist thought.

¹² Morgan, 62.

¹³ Cade, Toni. “Preface”. *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Ed. Toni Cade. New York: The Mentor. 1970 pg. 7.

Look Back at Me: Jezebel, The Black Lady and Constructions of Black Female

Sexual Identity

The Jezebel stereotype of African American women was developed during enslavement. In her book, *Ar'nt I A Woman*, Deborah Gray-White discusses the origins of the Jezebel, beginning with the first contact Europeans had with Africans upon reaching Africa to procure slaves.¹⁴ Gray-White cited several sources that contributed to the Jezebel image taking root in white American consciousness. European travel accounts, poetry, and newspaper articles written by slave traders and planters described black women as “fiery” and “sooty dames well vers’d in Venus school, make love an art and boast they kiss by rule.”¹⁵ African women presented an expression of womanhood Europeans equated with lasciviousness. As well, the semi-nudity that African people adopted as a result of the tropical climate also challenged European notions of chaste womanhood.¹⁶

The main characteristic of the Jezebel stereotype is hypersexuality. She is described as lasciviousness and animalistically sexual.¹⁷ Terms like the Black widow, tiger, puma, and panther were all used to refer to Black women.¹⁸ This discourse was rooted in the notion that Black women were lustful and primitive. Not only were Black women incapable of resisting sexual advances, they also encouraged and initiated them.¹⁹

¹⁴ Gray-White, Deborah. *Ar'nt I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 1985, pg: 30-31.

¹⁵ Gray-White, 30.

¹⁶ *Silence: In Search of Black Female Sexuality In America*. Dir. Mya Baker. National Film Network, 2004. DVD.

¹⁷ Gray-White, 30.

¹⁸ Anderson, Lisa. *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc. 1997, pg: 88.

¹⁹ Anderson, 8.

The Jezebel was created to control Black female sexuality for the sake of white male interests.²⁰ White male interests contributed to the development of all stereotypes associated with African American identity during this time period. Black women's reproductive capacity was critical to maintaining the system of enslavement. One of the purposes of the Jezebel stereotype was to "relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by white men typically reported by enslaved Black women."²¹ In order to sustain the enslaved population, Black women had to give birth to children. The status whether a child was born enslaved or free depended on the mother. Even if the father of an enslaved woman's child was a free man, the child would still be considered a slave. The Jezebel image is significant because it represents a space where "sex, gender, race, and power most readily expose themselves."²² The intersections of sex, race, gender, and power are key to understanding the relationship between the Jezebel and contemporary erotic entertainers. Like the Jezebel image that came before them, erotic entertainers are defined by their sexual traits and seen as "sexual objects and property."²³ Artists, record labels, and producers use women's bodies in music videos and pornography as social and economic capital. These women enable artists to garner status and recognition by engaging the viewer of the videos in "visual fantasy."²⁴ The importance of the image of erotic entertainers in the hip-hop and pornography will be expanded in section two.

²⁰ Collins, 93.

²¹ Collins, Patricia Hill. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment. New York: Routledge. 2000, pg: 89.

²² Anderson, 85.

²³ Balaii, Murali. Vixen Resistin: Redefining Black Womanhood in Hip-Hop Music." Journal of Black Studies. 41:1. September 2010. Pg. 10.

²⁴ Balaii, 9.

The Black lady image was cultivated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Middle class African Americans sought to undo the damaging constructions of Black female identity propagated during enslavement.²⁵ As the Black middle class demographic grew, so did the desire for more positive representations of African Americans in popular culture.²⁶ The Black lady was middle-class, moral, and chaste. In the dominant narrative, Black women could not embody the aforementioned characteristics because of the pervasiveness of the Jezebel stereotype during enslavement.

In her book, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins defines the Black lady as “a middle class, professional Black woman who represent[s] a modern version of the politics of respectability advanced by the club women...they are the women who stayed in school, worked hard and have achieved much.”²⁷ Although Collins positions the Black lady stereotype contemporarily, she is aware that the Black lady exists as a result of previous characterizations. Like the *Jezebel* image, the Black lady also advances the interests of White males.²⁸ The Black Lady image was popularized in the 1980’s and 1990’s, along with the welfare queen. These images sought to limit African-Americans’ access to social services and affirmative action, programs that aimed to minimize the social, political and economic impacts of enslavement.²⁹

The Black lady image provided Black women a place inside the “cult of true womanhood.” Jezebel’s construction as overtly sexual and immoral juxtaposed Black female sexuality with the chaste image of White femininity. Jezebel represented a

²⁵ Anderson, 87.

²⁶ Anderson, 102.

²⁷ Collins (2000), 88.

²⁸ Collins (2000), 89.

²⁹ Collins (2000), 89.

“yardstick against which the cult of true womanhood was measured.”³⁰ Enslavement enabled White women, the true beacon of womanhood, to sit atop her pedestal while Black women were relegated to the fields, both in a literal and figurative sense. Unfortunately, there was “no room on that pedestal for the Black lady” and “stereotypes, negative images, and debilitating assumptions filled the space left empty due to inadequate and erroneous information about the true contributions, capabilities, and identities of Black women.”³¹ The Black Lady image showcased that Black women could live respectable lifestyles and were capable of being as moral, feminine and chased as their White counterparts. However, the reality was most Black women post-enslavement were not in a financial position to embody these stereotypical images of womanhood.³² To compensate, the community created values and behaviors that were used to measure class and status distinctions.³³ The Black lady allowed Black women to “achieve the status of lady” while simultaneously remaining active in the labor force.³⁴

The Black lady image embodies the ideals of the politics of respectability. Conceptualized by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her book *Righteous Discontent*, Higginbotham discusses the politics of respectability in the context of the Black church women’s movement. Higginbotham characterizes the major tenet of the politics of respectability as standing in “opposition to the social structures and symbolic representations of White supremacy.”³⁵ These women prioritized self-definition and used their voices to resist the racist and sexist assumptions about their identity that were

³⁰ Anderson, 87.

³¹ Clarke-Hine, Darlene. “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance.” *Signs*, 14. (Summer 1989) pg. 915

³² Collins, Patricia Hill, 72.

³³ Higginbotham, 205.

³⁴ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African-Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge. 2005, pg. 139.

³⁵ Higginbotham, 186

imposed upon them by outside forces.³⁶ In addition, they sought to overthrow the “entire structural system of American race relations” through abolishing the color line and promoting equality among Blacks and Whites.³⁷

While the politics of respectability represented a defense against many attacks on African-American identity, it was especially vocal on aspects of Black female sexuality.³⁸ Women positioned in the higher social class sought not only to change the opinions of Whites in terms of how they viewed Blacks, but also to alter the behavior of working class African-Americans. Middle class women encouraged working class African Americans to adhere to their values through newspaper articles, lectures, door-to door visits, and other forms of contact.³⁹

Middle class Black women sought to counter the negative images of Black female sexual identity through promoting morality and respectability, but their critiques, inadvertently, further subjugated all Black women. In her book, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, activist and scholar Angela Davis asserts, “sexuality was one of the few realms in which the masses of African-American women could exercise autonomy—and thus tangibly distinguish their contemporary status from the history of enslavement.”⁴⁰ Middle class Black women sought to separate themselves from the working class, but were aware that the negative images associated with the working class also affected their social standing in the eyes of Whites.⁴¹ Club women voiced their frustrations with working class Black women who populated dance halls, listened to secular (jazz/blues)

³⁶ Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1993, pg. 186.

³⁷ Higginbotham, 186-187.

³⁸ Higginbotham, 193

³⁹ Higginbotham, 195.

⁴⁰ Davis, 44.

⁴¹ Davis, Angela *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. New York: Random House. 1998, pg. 43.

music, and participated in other “perceived improprieties.”⁴² Clubwomen viewed association with “the street” as the reason for the moral decay of the race. The behavior of working class women stood at the center of their critique. Through the policing of Black female sexuality, middle class clubwomen limited the ability for Black women as a whole to express themselves sexually without shame and helped to promote overarching stereotypes through their campaigns. Although the intentions of middle class women to uplift the poor were noble, their approach “was infused with assumptions about the inherent inferiority of the poor—especially sexually assertive women.”⁴³ The respectability movement was successful, allowing one articulation of Black female sexuality to move to the forefront, effectively vilifying and silencing other forms of sexual expression.

A culture of dissemblance developed among African-American women in regards to sexuality as a result of racism, class tensions, and other forms of social oppression. Black women denounced outsiders’ stereotypes that surrounded their sexuality and remained silent within the community about sexually related activities. In her essay “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West”, Darlene Clark Hine asserts that the practice of Black women protecting themselves from assaults on their character arose out of the need for them to “collectively create alternative self images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self.”⁴⁴ Even today, despite a seemingly open environment concerning Black female sexuality, the culture of dissemblance still exists, and helps to complicate ways Black women view themselves as sexual beings. For example, in *Silence: In Search of Black Female Sexuality*, Director

⁴² Higginbotham, 195-199.

⁴³ Davis, 65.

⁴⁴ Clarke-Hine, pg. 916

Mya Baker interviews scholars, community members, and health care professionals about the impact of the culture of silence. The majority of women Baker encountered felt they were not able to discuss sexuality with their parents while they were growing up and learned about sex through experimentation, exploration and the media.⁴⁵ Professor and cultural critic Tricia Rose asserts that the abuse Black female bodies faced from slavery to the present day is a reason for much of the silence. Conversations about sexuality bring about shame in the minds of African-American women for fear of being labeled as a loose woman.⁴⁶

Towards the end of the film, respondents remarked on the prevalence of over-sexualized images of Black female bodies in hip-hop. Prof. Rose gives the audience a brief history about the emergence of this trend in hip-hop culture, chronicling the evolution of Music Television, MTV. She discusses the excessively sexualized images that were present in MTV rock videos in the late 1980s and early 1990's and details the response that the white feminist movement had against the videos. Rose notes the rise in popularity of the hip-hop video caused a shift that positioned objectification of female bodies from white women on to the backs of African American women. The shift allowed the mainstream to continue their obsession with sexual excess, while not exploiting the image of white womanhood. As discussed previously, the power dynamics that exist between Black and White female bodies mean the images represented in Black flesh have drastically different socio-political connotations. Before the shift occurred, the images of Black female bodies presented in hip-hop were drastically different.

⁴⁵ Baker.

⁴⁶ Baker.

Mic Check: The Rise of Women in Hip-hop

The roots of hip-hop can be traced back to The Bronx, New York, in the early 1970s. Since its inception, hip-hop has gone global, representing the voice of the youth and taking on a culture of its own. Hip-hop historically has been discussed in terms of four key elements: Djing, B-Boying, MCing and graffiti.⁴⁷ Although all the elements of hip-hop had their time as the centerpiece of the culture, none has been as enduring or wide reaching as the MC, or rapping element.⁴⁸ Although hip-hop has been a male dominated space, female voices have been prominent and influential in the development of rap.⁴⁹

In her book, *Pimps Up, Hoes Down: Hip-Hop's Hold on Young Black Women*, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting describes the waves of women in hip-hop. The first wave, which began in the mid 1980's included female artists who began to offer a counter-narrative to male perspectives expressed in rap music. These women operated outside of the confines of the mainstream-- more on the underground scene, participating in freestyle battles and recording response records to popular songs. The most recognizable example of a first-wave female rapper is Roxanne Shanté.

In 1984 with the premiere of "Roxanne's Revenge" Roxanne Shanté became a hip-hop pioneer with her response record to the hip-hop trio UTFO's hit "Roxanne, Roxanne." "Roxanne, Roxanne" was a track that detailed UTFO's failed attempts to "mack it to the neighborhood hot girl." Each member of the trio detailed their positive

⁴⁷ Chang, Jeff. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. New York: Picador Press. 2005, pg. xi.

⁴⁸ Pough, 4.

⁴⁹ Pough, 9.

qualities as a partner and proceeded to diss Roxanne, calling her “stuck up” for refusing to allow any of them to “be her man.”⁵⁰

As a response, 15-year-old Lolita Shanté recorded “Roxanne’s Revenge” which gave Roxanne’s side of the story. Roxanne discusses her requirements for a partner and defends her choice of turning down her three suitors. “Roxanne’s Revenge” articulated Black female sexual politics and was first record to garner street credibility and commercial success for a female MC. Through Lolita Shanté, Roxanne became more than just a pretty face or an object only useful in satisfying the needs of males, as UTFOs lyrics connote, “...if I was grand I’d bang Roxanne”⁵¹. Lolita Shanté’s voice transformed the character Roxanne into a subject who demanded more than her suitors were willing to offer:

Don't you know you wish you could be my guy?/So I can
take you home, make you relax/And everybody knows that
you're out there, tryin' to tax/Like corn-on-the-cob/you're
always tryin' to rob/You need to be out there, get yourself a
job/Yeah, you're tryin' to be in search of a Roxanne/But
lemme let ya know--you're not a real man/ 'Cause a
Roxanne needs a man, and yes/Someone, yeah, who will
never fess/Someone fresh who always address/And then I'll
say, yeah, the rest.⁵²

“Roxanne’s Revenge” gave the character of Roxanne the agency she lacked in the original version by providing her with a voice and enabling her to articulate her point as an equal—a fellow MC (arguably with a higher level of lyrical precision than members of UTFO).

Roxanne Shanté was also a fierce freestyle battle MC and “we can still hear stories today about how some male rappers were scared to battle her—and she no doubt

⁵⁰ UTFO lyrics “Roxanne, Roxanne”

⁵¹ UTFO. “Roxanne Roxanne” *Hits*. Select Records, 1996.

⁵² “Shante, Roxanne. Roxanne’s Revenge” *Roxanne’s Revenge*. Golenlane Records, 1996.

elevated the art of freestyle in rap.”⁵³ Shanté’s success, especially in the space like freestyle, which requires a special degree of “swagger” (talent paired with confidence and stage presence), speaks volumes about her talent and influence as an MC.

Shanté opened up the door for the second wave, which occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This wave included mainstream and commercially successful artists such as Queen Latifah, MC Lyte and Salt-N-Pepa. Second wave artists “present[ed] young women with an alternative world view, female perspectives on the underclass, urban youth, and sexual politics.”⁵⁴ Their music, with titles like “All Hail the Queen” and “Ladies First” and themes ranging from female sexual pleasure, Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) awareness, and misogyny in hip-hop, enabled women to not only respond to male constructions of female identity, but presented a space for identity construction. For example, Salt-N-Pepa’s hit single “Let’s Talk About Sex” advocated for a frank and public discussion about sexuality and sought to educate listeners about the risks involved when engaging in promiscuous sexual activity:

He may fiend and have a wet dream/Because he seen a teen
in tight jeans/What makes him react like that is
biological/The people gettin' in those jeans, it's
diabolical/But of course he does it, and she gives him
rap,/and before you even know it, they jump in the sack/As
a matter of fact, sometimes it's like that/But anyway, ready
or not, here he cums/and like a dumb son-of-a-gun, oops,
he forgot the condom hey!/"Oh well," you say, "what the
hell, it's chill,/I won't get got, I'm on the pill"/Until the
sores start to puff and spore/Down your drawers/He gave it
to you, and now it's all yours.⁵⁵

⁵³ Pough, 10.

⁵⁴ Sharpley, xvi

⁵⁵ Salt-n-Pepa. “Let’s Talk About Sex”. 20th Century Masters—The Millennium Collection: The Best Salt-N-Pepa Island Def Jam, 2008.

Salt-N-Pepa take their social commentary even further, recording a remix to the song entitled ‘Let’s Talk About AIDS’ which serves as a hip-hop public service announcement about the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

First and second wave female MCs created a space in hip-hop for women to bring their voices to the forefront and define themselves on their own terms. Racism historically denied Black women the privilege of self-definition. Hip-hop provided a space for their voices. Despite its shortcomings, “hip-hop, including rap music, is a complex and contradictory arena in which regressive and oppressive elements sometimes complicate and at times even undermine what fundamentally remains an oppositional and potentially liberating project.” Unfortunately, female MCs and their successes as visionaries in hip-hop are oftentimes overshadowed because of their gender.⁵⁶

During and after the second wave period, the commercialization of hip-hop began to occur. Hip-hop’s popularity in urban communities eventually led to its packaging for the masses. From the Hollywood films of the late 1980s focusing on break-dancing, to the inclusion of graffiti pieces in mainstream art venues, hip-hop began to claim its place as a permanent component of popular culture.⁵⁷ In particular, rap music was an ideal product that could be exploited by ambitious capitalists because of relatively inexpensive album production (when compared to producing a movie) and the music’s ability to be packaged and distributed to a large number of people.⁵⁸

As the popularity of rap music grew, so did its audience and their interests. Once hip-hop was able to transcend the boundaries of The Bronx, it proved to be “anything but a passing youth fad”, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in album, advertising,

⁵⁶ Sharpley, xvi

⁵⁷ Pough, 5.

⁵⁸ Pough, 4.

and product sales by the end of the 1980s.⁵⁹ The hip-hop universe expanded from its original four principles to “include fashion, fiction, movies and magazines.”⁶⁰ Hip-hop was now packaged as a lifestyle. It garnered cross-over appeal by increasing its fan base and encouraged and exploited brand consciousness among “urban youth of color.”⁶¹ Brands such as Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, and Nike, which historically ignored the urban youth market, soon began to use hip-hop artists as the face of their products. These companies were beginning to lose their market share in the late 1980s as their traditional demographic, baby boomers, began to “opt for value over brand.”⁶² Brands used hip-hop artists as a tool to market their products toward urban youth, because it ensured increased sales and unlimited visibility since these artists were worshipped worldwide. Selling “the element of cool”, rapper moved products ranging from alcohol to automobiles, padding the pockets of artists, record labels, and companies.⁶³

The commercialization of hip-hop had a huge effect on the image of women in the industry. On the coat-tails of this commercialism began the third, and current wave of female MCs, characterized by their commitment to the visual culture. These female MCs promote sex, power, “status consumption” and “the punanny concept.”⁶⁴ The onset of this wave brought with it attention to the physical aspects of women’s bodies, both as artists and video extras. Jeff Chang begins to articulate in *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* the shift from lyrical message to visual image that occurred with women and the rise of commercialism in the industry:

⁵⁹ Chang, 419.

⁶⁰ Sharpley-Whiting, 6.

⁶¹ Chang, 417-420.

⁶² Chang, 417

⁶³ Chang, 419-420.

⁶⁴ Sharpley, xvii

During the late 1980s, videos had been a boon to women rappers. Queen Latifah, for instance, presented herself in the Fab 5 Freddy-directed video for “Ladies First” as a matriarch, military strategist, and militant. Others—Salt-N-Pepa, MC Lyte, Roxanne Shanté—establish their own personalities, equals alongside their male peers. A decade later, successful artists like Missy Elliot and Lauryn Hill were the exceptions rather than the rule. Scantly clad dancers seemed in endless supply, while women rappers were scarce. Big money clearly had a distorting effect.⁶⁵

Artists such as Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, Trina, and Remy Ma glorified sex as part of a young women’s arsenal to gain power, respect, and notoriety. Their lyrics as well as their dress on album covers and in their music videos was overtly sexual. This power through the physical is used as an attempt to assert female dominance. The success of Lil’ Kim is an example of an artist who has been able to capitalize on explicit female sexual expression.

Lil’ Kim’s first album, *Hardcore* went double platinum and she was the first female MC to generate two number one singles on the Billboard Hot 100 Rap chart. From the first track on *Hardcore* it is clear that the album is unique, providing the listener with an experience of Black female sexuality never before put on wax. For example, the premise of the track “Intro in A-Minor” consists of a male Lil’ Kim fan entering a theatre to watch a scene featuring the MC engaged in sexual activity. Her admirer proceeds to pleasure himself manually, complete with his “small order of popcorn, large order of butter and a lot of napkins.”⁶⁶ Lil’ Kim’s moans of passion in “Intro in A-Minor” engages the listener in an audible fantasy, giving priority to the pleasure of both the artist and her

⁶⁵ Chang, 445

⁶⁶ lil Kim. “Intro in A-Minor” *Hardcore*. Bad Boy Records, 1995.

audience. The second track, “Big Mama Thang”, provides the audience with a clear idea of the expectations that a “Queen Bee” like Lil’ Kim demands from her suitors:

I used to be scared of the dick/Now I throw lips to the
shit/Handle it like a real bitch/Heather Hunter, Janet Jack-
me/Take it in the butt, yah, yazz wha/I got land in
Switzerland, even got sand in the Marylands/Bahamas in
the spring, baby, it's a Big Momma thing/Can't tell by the
diamonds in my rings?/That's how many times I wanna
cum, twenty-one/And another one, and another one, and
another one/24 carats nigga/That's when I'm fuckin wit' the
average nigga.⁶⁷

Lil’ Kim expects her man to be stable both at the bank and in the bedroom. She articulates her high expectations, especially considering that even “the average nigga” has to provide her with 24-carat jewelry to deserve her attention. Lil’ Kim’s overtly raunchy style differs greatly from Salt-N-Pepa’s “Let’s Talk About Sex”, which in its time was considered controversial for challenging censorship and promoting a message of safer sex.⁶⁸

The links between sex and material culture are complicated in Prof. bell hooks’ essay “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexual Identity in the Cultural Marketplace”. hooks asserts that “equat[ing] pleasure with materiality [makes] [sex] an object to be sought after, taken, and acquired by any means necessary... contemporary Black female sexuality is fictively constructed in popular rap and R&B songs solely as a commodity—sexual service for money and power, pleasure is

⁶⁷ Lil Kim. “Big momma Thang” *Hardcore* Bad Boy Records, 1995.

⁶⁸ Phillips, Layli et al. “Oppositional Consciousness Within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip Hop, 1976-2004.” *The Journal of African American History*. 90.3. pg.266.

secondary.”⁶⁹ hooks argument is especially relevant in a discussion of Lil’ Kim, who prioritizes accumulation of wealth through the power of her sexuality. Interpretations of Lil’ Kim’s work are also complex, with scholars not being able to come to a consensus if she is a liberating or subversive image of Black female sexual identity.

Although Lil’ Kim also had her share of critics for *Hardcore*, the album has become a Hip-hop classic, the first of its kind and a refreshing example of “...a woman turn[ing] the tables” to claim a space in the sexually explicit hip-hop canon that was, at that time, reserved only for male “gangsta rappers.”⁷⁰ In her era, Lil’ Kim was an MC in a class of her own. Lil’ Kim placed emphasis on “the oral” to express the importance of female sexual pleasure and lyrical ability. According to Professor Greg Thomas, Lil’ Kim expressed “‘the oral’ as a sign of the power of speech... an instrument of intelligence or knowledge; and as a means of pleasure.”⁷¹ Lil’ Kim used her album to emphasize the importance of the oral in terms of sexuality. For example in her song “Not Tonight” Lil’ Kim states “I don’t want dick tonight, eat my pussy right!” Through this line she prioritizes oral sex as her preferred form of sexual pleasure, placing her desire for orgasm as the central subject of the song. More interestingly, Kim engages with the concept of the oral as an expression of her lyrical talent in and of itself. She uses the power of her speech in “the most unrestricted way possible” by a female MC up until that point.⁷² Kim’s orality challenged the male centered paradigm that existed in hip-hop at the time

⁶⁹ hooks, bell. “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace”. Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory, eds. Conboy, Katie et al. New York: Columbia University Press. 1997, pg. 121.

⁷⁰ Thomas, Greg. Hip-Hop Revolution in the Flesh: Power, Knowledge, and Pleasure in Lil’ Kim’s Lyricism. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. 2009, 15.

⁷¹ Thomas, 13.

⁷² Thomas, 12.

because she used her sex appeal coupled with lyrical talent to achieve her place as the “Queen Bee” of hip-hop.

Although some critics might view it as impossible to see artists like Lil’ Kim as liberating, Prof. Thomas’ analysis of Lil’ Kim creating a space in hip-hop where women are able to blend the body and the mind while simultaneously challenging puritanical, Western notions of sexuality is particularly convincing. Prof. Thomas believes that the “nastiness” displayed on *Hardcore* “...undermine[s] the false separation of mind and body that is the hallmark of Western societies which utilize this separation to enforce racism, sexism, classism, and empire.”⁷³ Specifically, Lil’ Kim’s album directly challenges the politics of respectability in favor of a more pro-sex framework by refusing to limit her creative expression to the confines of “acceptable” behavior for Black women.

In addition to performing as rappers, there are other spaces within hip-hop where women express agency. One of the most controversial expressions of female agency in hip-hop is through hip-hop video modeling. Video vixens represent a critical component of hip-hop culture and have directly impacted hip-hop’s marketability. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting expresses that the “overexposed young black female flesh, pimpin’, playin’, sexin’, and checkin’ in videos, television, film, rap lyrics, fashion, and on the internet is indispensable to the mass-media engineered appeal of hip-hop culture”⁷⁴ Part of the lifestyle that rap sells includes being surrounded by beautiful women, which is exemplified in the hip-hop music video. Music videos are a critical economic component of hip-hop, used for product advertisements and to promote the image of an artist. With

⁷³ Thomas, 13.

⁷⁴ Sharpley-Whiting, 11.

large budgets and creative freedoms, some artists have turned music videos into short films. For example, Kanye West's video "Runaway" from his album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, runs over 34 minutes and features several songs from the album. Networks like MTV, Black Entertainment Television (BET) and Video Hits-One (VH-1) set aside large chunks of airtime to play music videos and have even created sister stations devoted solely to playing music videos.

The popularity of the video has also helped to forge an alliance between hip-hop and the adult film industry. For example in 2001, rapper Snoop Dogg released *Snoop Dogg's Doggystyle*. *Doggystyle* was a blend of pornography and hip-hop that featured tracks by Snoop Dogg mixed with hardcore pornographic scenes. *Doggystyle* was extremely popular, winning an Adult Video News Award (the equivalent to the Oscar's in the adult film entertainment industry) for Best Selling Release and it was the first hardcore pornographic video to gain a spot on the Billboard Music Video chart.⁷⁵ Although Snoop Dogg did not participate in any sexual activity on camera, he used the venture to promote his clothing line and his sex talk hotline.⁷⁶ Other hip-hop artists followed suit and partnered with the adult film industry for their own hardcore pornographic videos. Ice-T's released *Ice-T: Pimpin' 101*, Mystikal endorsed *Liquid City* (volumes 1 & 2) and Uncle Luke's touted his multi-volume series *Luke's Bachelor Party*.

The hip-hop porn genre helped to push pornography into the mainstream. In VH1's documentary *Hip Hop and Hot Sex*, rap artists, journalists, and other voices in pop culture discuss the intersections between hip-hop and adult entertainment. For example,

⁷⁵ Sarracino, Carmine and Kevin M. Scott *Porning of America: The Rise of Porn Culture, What it Means, and Where We Go from Here*. Boston: Beacon Press. 2008, pg. 100.

⁷⁶ VH1 All Access: Hip Hop and Hot Sex. < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkPWJSEEE9o>> Accessed 3/12/2011

former Niggaz With Attitude (NWA) band member DJ Yella discusses his transition from rap to producing, editing, and shooting over 100 adult films. He believes that the onset of rappers hosting, and sometimes participating in, adult films has helped to take away some of the stigma that is associated with pornography. DJ Yella believes “everybody watches [porn]”.⁷⁷ After the explosion of the hip-hop porn genre, DJ Yella began to use his hip-hop name to promote his films, dropping his former adult film alias, The Kidd. DJ Yella states that because of the marriage of hip-hop and pornography you can now buy adult films in record stores, an idea that was unfathomable in 1995 when he started in the adult entertainment business.

Video vixens, female hip-hop artists and adult film stars have been essential in the promotion and popularity of hip-hop porn through mainstream and pornographic videos that blur the lines between hip-hop and adult entertainment. From hip-hop artists promoting their sexual agency and serving as their own video vixens in their projects, to video vixens making the transition from hip-hop videos to other forms of media, and even popular adult entertainers trying their hand at rapping, women exercise their sexual capital and agency to carve out a section of the “old boys club” that they can claim for themselves.

Hip-Hop Pornography

Even today the politics of respectability has continued to be embraced by some who feel the need to defend Black female sexuality. An embrace of the politics of respectability at the expense of other articulations of Black female sexual identity deny Black women who choose to participate in the adult entertainment industry agency in

⁷⁷ Ibid.

their decisions. Even more damaging, this perspective frames erotic entertainers in the same way that their oppressors did during enslavement. Professor Shanye Lee in his book *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture* discusses the reluctance on the part of Black scholars to “overtly advocate Black female sexual agency” stating some scholars have a tendency to focus on “...how images oppress” but not how they represent power.⁷⁸ Despite the fact that women like Karrine Steffans, Sarah “Pinky” Mirabelli, and Kimberly “Lil’ Kim” Jones take ownership of their choices, they are either framed as victims of the system or irredeemable as sexual deviants. Mireielle Miller-Young in her article “Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexuality in the New Hip-Hop Pornography” discusses hip-hop as an arena for Black video models and sex workers to mobilize their sexualities in the marketplace of desire for their own interests of access, opportunity, mobility, and fame. Miller-Young frames this as an act of resistance against the dominant bourgeois values of respectability that allows the subject the freedom of acting upon the self “in an effort to alter the dimensions already imposed upon it, to reconstitute the energies already shaped by existing relations of power” and challenge them.⁷⁹

Film critic Lisa M. Andersen asserts that any attempt to portray the image of the *Jezebel* in a positive light will require “a re-envisioning of Black women’s sexuality.”⁸⁰ In order for re-envisioning to happen the first step is Black women taking ownership of their sexuality and denying the sexual scripts that have been imposed upon them by the dominant culture. The articulations of Black female sexuality stem from the days before

⁷⁸ Lee, xi-xii.

⁷⁹ Miller-Young, Mireielle. “Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexuality in the New Hip-Hop Pornography” *Meridians: Feminism, Race and Transnationalism*. 8.1, 2008. Pg 265.

⁸⁰ Andersen 4.

enslavement and have continued to be reproduced in various arenas, the most recent being hip-hop. These “erotic revolutionaries”, represented in the forms of artists, vixens and erotic entertainers challenge those long held portrayals in favor of an image that they have created.

Inevitably, there are many arguments against this stance of sexual representation. One that is extremely prevalent is the idea that these images are in place principally for the pleasure of the male gaze. Many performers have articulated this sentiment in personal interviews and seek to capitalize on it for the sake of personal gain. For example, in *Hip-Hop and Hot Sex*, Foxy Brown expresses her thoughts on the idea of selling fantasy and the double standard in hip-hop:

Sometimes when I get criticized for what I say, and then I turn on the radio and he’s saying the same thing I’m like ‘damn he just said it’ but I think as far as being a woman its never going to be that way where you can probably get away with what a guy can get away with... I say what I want, I say what I feel...but I cant please everybody.⁸¹

Foxy’s reputation for loving fashion and expensive gifts enabled her to land an endorsement deal with Calvin Klein.⁸² After accumulating clout in the hip-hop industry she left her label in favor of starting her own, Ill Na Na Entertainment so she could be her own boss. The name of the label itself, Ill Na Na, which places emphasis on the female anatomy and the skills that Foxy possesses in the sex department, speaks not only about sexuality, but serves as an articulation of ownership of her image, her body and her music.

The feelings expressed about the profession of adult entertainment are as varied and numbered as the women that engage in the field. At times, entertainers themselves

⁸¹ Hip Hop and Hot Sex.

⁸² Hip Hop and Hot Sex

have trouble deciding if they are being exploited or acting as free agents in their behavior. This is clear in an interview with Melyssa Ford. Ford describes herself as “the highest paid video girl to date”, serving as the principal model in the majority of her shoots.⁸³ In the interview, Ford expresses the freedom she has in deciding how she will be portrayed in shoots, the price she can demand for her image, and the limits she imposes on how that image will be used by the medium that wants it. She is proud of her successes and has turned herself into a brand, promoting calendars, DVDs and serving as a sex columnist.⁸⁴ Despite Ford’s confidence, she admits that the life of a video vixen is not as glossy as it appears on the screen and in magazines. Later in the interview she talks about her feelings of insecurity about her body and some of the hardships that women have to deal with who serve as video vixens. Ford says:

Its ironic: in a profession that uses women’s bodies to help sell a particular artist and his music, all the girls wish they looked like someone else...I had the body of a woman by age 12...all my friends were skinny, but I had the big butt, thick legs, 34D chest, 20-inch waist, and 38 inch hips. I was almost to the point of being suicidal, crying myself to sleep, miserable with what I looked like, hating to watch TV because of the standard of beauty that I didn’t meet. I’ve outgrown a great deal of that insecurity, but I can’t say I’m immune to all the obsessions that women can have about how we look.⁸⁵

Ford appreciates that she has been a part of the trend that is challenging the standards of beauty that glorify being “skinny and white” to value women who are “Black and full-figured” but admits that, “If I were to ever form a sustained, confident, image of my body...I would have to quit modeling and doing videos. It’s just very, very hard to have a

⁸³ Byrd, Ayana and Akiba Solomon. Naked: Black Women Bare All About Their Skin, Hair, Hips, Lips, and Other Parts. New York: Berkley Publishing Group. 2005, pg. 219.

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⁸⁵ Byrd, 221.

good and secure sense of self when you have to worry about the competition.”⁸⁶ Ford’s feelings echo the sentiments of those who challenge representations of Black women in videos and see them as damaging to the self-image of young Black girls.

In “Still on the Auction Block: The (S)exploitation of Black Adolescent Girls in Rap(e) Music and Hip-Hop Culture”, Dr. Carolyn West describes the role that hip-hop music videos play in young Black women ages fourteen to sixteen self perception and physical attractiveness. Dr. West describes the concept of the cyber auction block, where “Black women’s commodified bodies continue to be exploited for profit...Corporations create the images, profit from them, and sell them back to Black teens...under the guise of “authentic” Black culture.”⁸⁷ The results of her study found that exposure to hip hop culture in the form of music videos is associated with poor body image and normalization of using sexuality as a commodity. Despite this information, some artists feel like there are avenues to protect young people from consuming these images. For example, Khia, a female rapper famous for her raunchy single “My Neck, My Back” recorded two versions of her song, a clean and an explicit, and holds that the explicit one is for adults only. The explicit version resounds: “my neck, my back/lick my pussy and my crack”, while the clean version states: “my neck, my back/ lick my [sigh] just like that.” Although the sentiment of the song remains the same, removing the words “pussy” and “crack” make for a more acceptable version of the song. In her interview, she expresses that she is

⁸⁶ Byrd, 223.

⁸⁷ West, Caroline. “Still on the Auction Block: The (S)exploitation of Black Adolescent Girls in Rap(e) Music and Hip-Hop Culture.” The Sexualization of Childhood. Sharna Olfman, ed. Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishers. 2008, pg. 94

conscious of her young fans and that she is a mother, and feels her responsibility to young people is taken care of through her recording of a clean version of her song.⁸⁸

Despite the fact that children cannot be kept from consuming images that are targeted towards an adult audience, networks and lawmakers have attempted to keep these explicit images from reaching the eyes of children. Given the popularity of sex in the hip-hop industry, in addition to recording clean and dirty versions of songs, some artists adopt this paradigm for their videos. “Uncut” videos, displaying nudity and sexually explicit behaviors, grew in popularity around the time that hip-hop and pornography began to intersect in the early 2000s. For example, N.E.R.D. recorded two versions of the video for their single “Lap Dance”, with the explicit version featuring topless models and the clean version with more of a focus on skateboarders.⁸⁹ Some artists even have outright bans against their videos being played on air during certain hours. In order to accommodate their audiences, networks created shows airing “after dark” in order to showcase these popular uncut videos. “BET: Uncut” which aired after midnight featured controversial and sexually explicit videos such as Nelly’s “Tip Drill” and Ludacris’ “Pussy-Poppin’ (On a Handstand).” These artists did not record “clean” versions of their songs, and despite limited radio play, especially in the case of Nelly’s “Tip Drill”, these songs were able to garner popularity because of the notoriety of the videos.⁹⁰

Is there a way to transcend these problematic constructions of Black female sexual identity? Is there a way to create a space that celebrates the Black female body

⁸⁸ Hip Hop and Hot Sex

⁸⁹ Hip Hop and Hot Sex

⁹⁰ Reid-Brinkley, Shanara. “The Essence of Res(ex)pectability: Black Womne’s Negotiation of Black Femininity in Rap Music and Music Video.” Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism. 8.1. 2008. 236-260

without having it characterized as obscene, subjugating, or compromising a Black woman's sense of self worth? One way to go about overcoming one dimensional constructions of Black female sexual identity is to visualize a space where Black sexual politics challenges pornographic images in exchange for an articulation of the Black female body that represents the erotic. In her essay "Uses of the Erotic, The Erotic as Power", Audre Lorde constructs the pornographic as dialectically opposed to the erotic. She describes the pornographic as "a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling."⁹¹ Pornography relies primarily on image to offer sexual gratification to the viewer, where the erotic seeks to engage more senses and sentiments, aiming for a deeper connection with the audience that transcends physical pleasure. Although hip-hop has not embraced this framework of the erotic as a whole, some artists are moving towards this interpretation of sexuality and using their videos as a space to engage the female body in a way that does not place emphasis solely on the visual spectacle of the frame, but also the erotic subject matter of the music.

Natalie Stewart, who goes by the stage name The Floacist, uses the video for her single "Let Me" as a means to express an erotic articulation of Black female sexuality. Her song is unapologetically steamy and prominently showcases a Black woman's body in the video as well as the subject matter of the song. In "Let Me", The Floacist articulates her sexual prowess and power with the line "I'm not a good girl nor a bad girl I'm a woman hear me roar while you adore me."⁹² Like Lil' Kim and her contemporaries, the Floacist also articulates her sexual skills, but manages to do it while embracing a

⁹¹ Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: Crossing Press. 1984, pg. 42.

⁹² Stewart, Natalie. Let Me. Dir. Weekes, Nolan. Shanachie Entertainment. 2011.

framework that does not put male sexual pleasure at the center. She wants to be “adored” by her lover, and take control of him sexually by demanding that he “hear her roar.” Stewart also challenges the dichotomies that are inherent when discussing Black female sexuality, which attempts to construct it as chaste or deviant, good or bad. Stewart does not see herself as fitting in either of these categories, but simply refers to herself as a “woman”, who has multilayered thoughts about her sexual being.

Visually, her video is drastically different from the majority of portrayals of Black female sexuality in the mainstream. For one, The Floacist is the only female body in her video, placing the focus squarely on her and her message. As well, her body type is not what is represented as the ideal in the mainstream constructions of the Black woman’s image in hip-hop and pornography. She is natural and wears her hair very short. Her image stands in direct opposition to that of many other mainstream female rappers, who often turn to plastic surgery and hair extensions to enhance their image. Despite the fact that The Floacist is completely nude in her video, with the exception of the pasties she wears to cover her nipples and a thong, her video manages to come off as sensual, rather than explicit. This has to do with the role of the male in her song as well. Her male partner is engaged with her on an equal level, there is not a sense of dominance over her frame by him. They look each other in the eye and she is not positioned in a way that draws attention to particularly sexualized aspects of her body (i.e. her breast or buttocks). The emphasis is placed on the entire subject, not just parts of her anatomy. Finally, another aspect that makes The Floacist’s video unique is her use of biblical imagery invoking the story of Adam and Eve. The concept of her video serves as a critique of the dominant narrative of female sexuality, using the story as an expression of sexual

pleasure. In the bible, Eve tempts Adam with the apple, and with Adam's acceptance of the fruit subsequently spreads sin to the all people. The Floacist flips this concept by using the apple to represent her sexuality, she gives the apple as a gift to her partner, and his acceptance of it serves as a rejection of oppressive sexual norms:

Looks like faith means to lead us into nowhere/Touching every layer of matter from beginning to latter/It's the laws of attractions that set actions/Not the voices of the conscious programmed with so much nonsense/Trying to fear us from what's natural/We were all born supernatural/And right now I just wanna get closer to you/if you let me.⁹³

The Floacist evocation of biblical imagery is also significant when rethinking the *Jezebel* concept and can serve as a way for a Black woman to reclaim the stereotype and use it as a means to articulate a more complex articulation of the image. The Floacist is the first in a newly emerging genre focused on representing Black women's bodies in an erotic sense, which display "the sensual, physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meaning."⁹⁴

Even an embrace of Lorde's framework to serve as a lens to examine Black female sexuality in hip-hop and pornography can serve as a form of sexual repression. Even if we accept Lorde's definition of the pornographic it can still serve as a space for expression of Black female agency. Embracing the pornographic is a way that some women choose to articulate their sexual expression. If that form of expression is not respected we run the risk of silencing an entire section of women from the conversation of Black female sexuality who choose to engage in this work. Miller-Young tells us that the number of Black and Latina pornographic actress increased from five in the 1970's to

⁹³ Stewart, Natalie.

⁹⁴ Lorde, 44.

hundreds by the 1990s.⁹⁵ Black women are seeking the pornographic as a labor option and in their choices “mobilize sexuality as vehicles of consumption and labor as well as of contestation and consent.”⁹⁶ These women are pioneers who have created a space for Black women in a profession that has been denied to them in the past.

A woman who has labored in the arenas of hip-hop and pornography is three-time *New York Times* bestselling author Karrine Steffans. In some circles, her name is synonymous with agency. Profiled in Shanye Lee’s *Erotic Revolutionaries* she turned the hip-hop industry upside down by breaking the “code of silence” and discussing her sexual encounters with artists. She used her “talents” which garnered her the nickname “Superhead” as a means to land roles in videos, Hollywood films, and gain economic security for herself and her son. Despite her rough childhood and alienation by many in the mainstream media, Steffans still feels she came out on top, being able to transition from the industry into a more sustainable, lucrative career.⁹⁷

Steffans used her memoir, *Confessions of a Video Vixen*, to “explore their sexual histories and perspectives as a means of challenging the politics of respectability.”⁹⁸ Steffans details the backlash she received as a result of her publication. She was called “every name in the book” and was even told, “A real woman would have kept her mouth shut.”⁹⁹ Steffans refused to be silenced and took ownership of her experience. Her actions serve as an example of Black women speaking out as a means to protect other women from repeating similar negative experiences. Steffans expresses the purpose of her memoir is to “...serve as a warning to anyone aspiring to the kind of life that I

⁹⁵ Miller-young, 279.

⁹⁶ Miller-Young, 280.

⁹⁷ TV One. [Life After: Karrine Steffans](#). 2010

⁹⁸ Lee, 23.

⁹⁹ TV One

led...having lived that life, I can say its not everything its cracked up to be...I have so much firsthand information to offer, and need those young women to know there are other directions to take...better choices than the ones I made.”¹⁰⁰ The narrative discusses how the misogyny displayed in hip-hop sometimes translates into real life. She was subjected to the consequences of being not only one of the first vixens to speak out, but used her exploits with some of hip-hops power players to garner a world stage.

The memoir serves a challenge to the culture of dissemblance and assists authors, scholars, and anyone else with a story to tell the opportunity to dispense their narratives and hopefully overcome the stigma associated with talking openly and honestly about Black women’s sexual histories. Although Steffans narrative may be viewed by some as self-serving, airing dirty laundry for the purpose of capital gain, she complicates that notion by asking her audience why must she be expected to remain silent? Lee addresses this point in *Erotic Revolutionaries* and points to the gendered double standard around sexuality as the answer. He provides the example of his students demonizing Steffans for her behavior while simultaneously venerating Tupac Shakur for his sexually explicit behavior. Lee’s students justified Tupac’s sexually illicit behavior, serving jail time for sexual assault and detailing his sexual conquest in his music, because of his difficult childhood. The students were not able to give Steffans the same courtesy, despite the fact that she endured “parental abuse, teenage rape, and a reoccurring pattern of physical abuse in destructive relationships.”¹⁰¹ While men are expected to, and oftentimes praised for sexually adventurous behavior, women who engage in parallel activities are irredeemable.

¹⁰⁰ Steffans, Karinne. *Confessions of a Video Vixen*. New York: HarperCollins. 2005, pg. xiv-xv.

¹⁰¹ Lee, 28.

Another woman who has managed to engage with hip-hop and pornography is Sarah Mirabelli, better known by her stage name, Pinky. She is one of the most popular Black adult film entertainers, being featured in over 100 movies.¹⁰² Pinky worked as an exotic dancer in Oakland, CA and began independently producing pornographic films to sell to her customers.¹⁰³ Pinky's work eventually caught the attention of the mainstream porn production company Bang Brothers and she started her career as a professional pornographic actress in 2006 at age twenty-four.¹⁰⁴ Pinky's appearance, standing at four-feet, eleven inches tall with bright pink hair and a forty-five inch backside, makes her stand out among her colleagues. She is the Chief Executive Officer of her production company, Royalty Entertainment, and uses the company as a tool to promote her pornographic and rap music career.

Pinky makes a point to be open and honest about her life and involvement in the adult entertainment industry. Between 2008 and 2011 Pinky participated in a series of interviews with Vlad TV, a popular blog and hip-hop news site. During her interviews, Pinky speaks candidly about her childhood and her involvement in the entertainment industry. Unfortunately, like Steffans, Pinky was sexually abused as a child. Her stepfather repeatedly molested her from the time she was three until she turned thirteen. The sexual abuse stopped because Pinky became sexually active on her own terms. When recalling that time in her life, she states, "I wanted to have sex because I wanted to have sex...I wanted to do it for me".¹⁰⁵ She did not tell her family members about the sexual

¹⁰² Internet Adult Film Database. "Pinky-Porn Star"

http://www.iafd.com/person_rme/perfid=Pinky_bl_06/gender=f/Pinky.htm. Assessed 4/17/2011.

¹⁰³ Vlad TV. "Exclusive: Pinky- How She Got Started".

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQgp6UKLWRM&feature=related>. Accessed 4/17/2011

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Vlad TV "Exclusive: Pink Talks about Being Abused by Her Stepfather".

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2gSfuRRfTs>. 6 February 2011. Accessed 4/17/2011.

abuse until she was seventeen. For Pinky, breaking the silence was “a relief...it was part of the healing process” because she felt like “she was going to die before she got to talk about it”.¹⁰⁶ Pinky, like Steffans decided to challenge the silence around Black female sexuality and sexual abuse. She adopted a method of healing that worked for her, despite the consequence of compromising her relationship with her mother and sister.¹⁰⁷

Pinky’s decision to work as an erotic entertainer was not received well by her family. Pinky recalls when her mother found out that she was an exotic dancer she physically attacked her and kicked her out the house.¹⁰⁸ Pinky believed her family was disappointed in her decision to do pornography instead of going to college because she was viewed as the one who was going to transcend poverty through education.¹⁰⁹ Before her shift into the adult entertainment industry, Pinky worked as a receptionist and was subjected to sexual harassment. She decided to leave the receptionist position since it paid more to be lauded for her sexual prowess full time as a stripper.¹¹⁰ Pinky admits that at the time she started dancing she had no self worth because she was young and came from a poor family.¹¹¹ However, she does not regret her decision to enter the sex industry because “you live and you learn” and it made her “the person [she] is today”.

Pinky’s start in mainstream porn industry was rough. During her early days in the industry she contracted several STI’s.¹¹² Although she was not comfortable engaging in unprotected sex, she decided to follow the example of the rest of the actors she worked

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Vlad TV. “Exclusive: Pinky’s Father Watches her Movies in Prison”. 30 April 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljEx6G_4Hnc. Accessed 4/17/2011

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Vlad TV. “Exclusive: Pinky Talks About Her Jobs Before the Fame”. 07 May 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrcVVshFnIU>. Accessed 4/17/2011.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Vlad TV. “Pinky Talks About Catching an STD”. 14 October 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5foDEuJhf0c&feature=fvwrel>. Accessed 4/17/2011

with.¹¹³ Pinky sees pornography as a business and now uses condoms as a “personal preference”. She no longer wants to put herself at risk since, “[her] life don’t start and end at [porn].”¹¹⁴ Pinky is able to challenge the status quo in porn that promotes unprotected sex (although pornographic actors are required to be screened for STIs at least once a month) because of her status as a popular entertainer and production company executive.¹¹⁵ Perhaps Pinky will use her fame to make the profession safer for all performers.

Pinky is capitalizing on her notoriety as an adult film actress to transition into a rap career. Pinky released her first mixtape, *Fuck You, Pay Me!* in 2010. As the title suggests, Pinky takes pride in money and her pornographic career. Her single “Bad Bitch” professes, “Four foot eleven, with a huge ass...I get real money, I’m my own bitch...why you depend on a nigga I get my own shit...if you ain’t tryna get paid what you hustlin’ for”. “Bad Bitch” emphasizes Pinky’s love for “hustling” or, using her talents in order to garner economic independence. Her transition to rap challenges assumptions that porn stars are “stupid” since Pinky “...got into porn to make money...not because [she’s] stupid”.¹¹⁶ It is yet to be seen if Pinky will succeed as a rapper, but attempts by other pornographic actresses before her proved ineffective.

Despite the challenges she faced, Pinky does not see herself as a victim. She takes responsibility for her choices, a stance that challenges some feminist arguments about the victimization of women inherent in the sex industry. Pinky is aware of the risks that come

¹¹³ Vlad TV, 14 October 2010.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ The Independent. “Derrick Burts: HIV Positive in Pornography: The Naked Truth”. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/derrick-burts-hiv-in-pornography-the-naked-truth-2167532.html> 23 December 2010. Accessed 2/4/2011.

¹¹⁶ Vlad TV. “Exclusive: Pinky the Rapper?” 16 May 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WouuoskZutg> . Accessed 4/17/2011.

along with a career in porn and does not endorse the industry as a path for young women looking to make quick money. In an interview with radio and television personality Wendy Williams, Pinky states, “[porn] is not for everybody...I would never encourage it...this has to be something you are willing to do and take it all the way”. Pinky acknowledges that although she was interested in pornography she entered the business because of limited options.¹¹⁷ She believes that if young women have other options open to them they should pursue those opportunities instead of turning to porn to acquire fame.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

The discussion of agency in public representations of Black female sexual identity is complex. Despite varying opinions, contemporary authors engaged in this work can agree on one thing: the need to have critical discussion about Black female sexuality. bell hooks agrees:

We must no longer shy away from the critical project of openly interrogating and exploring representations of Black female sexuality as they appear everywhere, especially in popular culture... We must make the oppositional space where our sexuality can be named and represented, where we are sexual subjects—no longer bound and trapped.¹¹⁹

This oppositional space is being created through hip-hop feminist scholarship. It allows for multiple articulations of Black female identity in a space that is both critical and sensitive to the needs of all women who decide to engage with it. The business of analyzing representations is difficult, each author looks at the material from their perspective. It is extremely difficult to overcome centuries of socialization about

¹¹⁷ Vlad TV. “Exclusive: Pinky Gives Us Her Thoughts on the Montana Fishburne Situation”. 06 October 2010 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzu2815wrDE>. Accessed 4/17/2011.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ hooks, 128

representations, stereotypes, racism, sexism, and all the other paradigms that influence how we view the world. What hip-hop feminist scholars, in particular, and Black feminist scholars, overall, can do is continue to work and “turn to each other” for thought about these complex issues that effect all of us. Scholars should be critical, but also sensitive to the fact that there is no such thing as a correct expression of Black female sexual identity. Each person has their own.