Black Women and Black Men in Hip Hop Music: Misogyny, Violence and the Negotiation of (White-Owned) Space

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Introduction

For some, the problem is the vulgarity of the language or the crudeness of speech. For others, it is the violence in the lyrical content; the seemingly unavoidable nihilism that envelops many of the genre’s stars. Many of us abhor the misogyny in the music and videos; the unabashed glorification of crime and the unrelenting objectification of black women. Yet a good number of us cannot help but purchase the albums and focus instead on the lyrical dexterity of the artists or on the potential for social and political critique present in the music. All in all, most every outsider to rap or Hip Hop music has an opinion about the seemingly troublesome character of the genre and rightly so. The complex history of the art form and its present international popularity and commercial success demands it of us. Hip Hop as a cultural and economic powerhouse invites a critical eye. It deserves our scrutiny.

Of particular importance are those aspects of the music that frequently appear in the midst of political debates and media hype. Often, these aspects are scrutinized not with the intent of acquiring greater and more nuanced understandings of the art form, but rather to further one political agenda or produce a nice sound bite. The misogyny in rap music is one such case. Often, the treatment of black
women in Hip Hop is brought up only to highlight the alleged moral depravity of the artists or the wantonness of so-called Black ghetto culture rather than as a critical and necessary discussion of patriarchy and violence. It is used as yet another tool by which white American critics and politicians further stigmatize the black male as violent and/or criminal. Consequently, these types of analyses offer no real critique of the misogyny in rap or possible mechanisms to combat it. Furthermore, the issue is often broached as if Hip Hop music existed in some type of social vacuum where the larger US racial and social structure had no bearing on the production and distribution of the musical product (hooks). Therefore, what are needed are analyses that look at the misogyny in rap within the greater social context the music is embedded in. Specifically, it would be wise to examine the place that black women and black men occupy in relation to one another within the genre as well as the place that the genre occupies in relation to white American culture. This article then explores the space afforded to both black women and men in Hip Hop music in an effort to unravel and examine the role that white centered structures play in the making and marketing of the music to the mass public.

Rap Music: The Basics

The history of rap music embodies the complex character of a particular musical genre rooted in some of the most downtrodden urban communities in the East Coast of the United States. Rap originated in the late 1970s in the South Bronx during a time marked by extreme political conservatism and economic downfall (Rose, “Fear”). According to Rose, it began as an apolitical party music played in gatherings in public parks or in individual homes. Because it arose and developed, however, during such a time, the music garnered a high level of social significance within the communities that birthed it. Rap quickly became one of the premier forms of expression for the youngest members of the inner city black and Latino communities in New York, which were the hardest hit by the conservative politics and the economic decline during said epoch. Rap then, irrespective of its particular subject matter and stated purpose during its initial stages, must be viewed as an important socio-political innovation. It
became one of the few social spaces where disenfranchised “minority” youth could assume and secure a public voice, and it served as vehicle through which members of these communities could express their angst and speak freely (Rose, “Fear”). The music has its roots here.

Rap’s popularity and audience, however, grew considerably throughout the nineties (Ogbar), and the genre itself has expanded over time to make room for many technological, lyrical and thematic innovations. Even more telling of the genre’s ever expansive reach has been its ability to cross national borders and mix and mesh with other musical styles and genres, reinventing itself in each setting to reflect the needs and desires of each community that practices it. Taking this into consideration, it would be ludicrous to reduce the music’s lyrical content to sex and violence, and this would end up negating the potential for social critique and social action the music ultimately harbors. It is important, however, to note that a considerable portion of the rap music produced for radio and video airplay does contain obscene amounts of sexist talk and images. By the same token, not all rappers’ references to violence serve to draw attention to the more tragic aspects of inner city life and many of these references are not actually critiques of said violence. On many occasions, sex and violence are present in rap songs solely because they sell.

The popularity of rap music has been both the cause and product of the music’s increased commercialization. It seems like everything from candy and soda, to sneakers and vitamin water, to adult video and liquor advertisements feature the music, voice and/or presence of some of rap’s most popular stars. This “Boom,” however, is not all positive. According to Kitwana, when it comes to the mainstream and commercial portrayal of rap music and its stars, “often highlighted are those aspects of rap which … reinforce negative stereotypes about blacks” (24). These stereotypes include images of black males as angry, violent, and/or otherwise dangerous creatures that are manipulated simply to increase sales and have the end result of moving the music further away from its inner city origins.

Furthermore, although at first glance the high number of black-owned record labels would lead one to believe that the genre is mostly at the hands of African Americans, larger, white-owned corporations continue to control the music’s distribution channels. This, according to Kitwana, “forces rap artists to come to terms with what
is seen by corporate owned recording studios as currently marketable in order to secure any serious form of mass distribution" (23).

Considering that what has been and continues to be marketable is the image of the young, poor, foul-mouthed black male with a criminal or otherwise violent past offering consumers a sneak peek into “his life,” we must question as to what degree is Hip Hop a reflection of gender relations and patriarchy within urban poor black communities? We push the reader to frame this question, however, within the same white dominated social structure Hip Hop is produced and marketed under. Recognizing how white racism informs and conceptualizes these relationships is necessary for critical analysis. The history of black sexualities, for example, includes larger systems of institutionalized rape, sexual exploitation, commodification, stereotypes, and the selling of fear and promiscuity as ideologies justifying racial apartheid. White fear and commodification of black sexuality has long been a major component of recreating a system of institutionalized racism (West). This treatment of black sexuality plays an integral role in the racist power hierarchy in America. By portraying African Americans as exotic, erotic, or oversexed, one decontextualizes their experience, marginalizes them, and removes the possibility of a self defined sexuality. It also obscures the metaphorical and physical rape of Women of Color: if they are always willing, they cannot be forced (Hill-Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*).

The “urgencies” of black communities must also be placed in this framework. The high incarceration rates of black men and supposed shortage of marriageable black men, leading to the construct of the ENDANGERED BLACKMAN (Hill-Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*), are also the results of high concentrations of poverty, police brutality, racial profiling, and heavy policing of black and/or poor neighborhoods and racist educational, occupational, and criminal justice systems. This crisis of black men has actual and severe effects on black communities. Hip Hop then exacerbates this image of criminality, at times even obscuring a criminal justice system that actively persecutes black men, by purporting a seemingly voluntary and lauded criminal identity. The overrepresentation of black men in the prison industrial system then appears to be the direct product of overly increasing black male criminality as opposed to a systematic and institutionalized system of white supremacy.
Furthermore, images of black women as domineering, freaks, bitches, mammys, and baby’s mammas are reflective of this racist imagery. The rates of black female-headed households (in 2002 about 43% of black households were headed by single women) are targeted as the cause for the supposed “decline” of black families (Hill-Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*). Hip Hop music has an especially complex relationship with single mothers. On the one hand, the presentation of baby mamma drama and single mothers as “golddiggers” is a misogynistic devaluation of black women, and obscures the actual challenges single mothers face in US society. On the other hand, Hip Hop music is not the cause of increased numbers single mother households or the supposed disintegration of families.

“The Music’s in crisis”

There is no doubt that Hip Hop sells. The genre, however, is in crisis. The growing acceptance and commercial appeal of this 30-year-old musical style and culture has led to the increased homogenization of the music and lyrics for the purposes of mass consumption. Hip Hop artists are also in crisis. Along with the recent catapulting of black rappers and producers to nationwide celebrity status is the targeting of these same musicians by the police and other law enforcement agencies across the country. The New York Police Department, for example, has even gone so far to establish a Hip Hop task force. This unit, according to Clark, “often works in tandem with FBI agents to monitor the activities of rappers” (130). Moreover, Hip Hop music in general has been labeled by the media as gangster or criminal, prompting influential political and religious leaders to target and drive campaigns against specific artists through the years (Russell-Brown).

In her book *Underground Codes: Race, Crime and Related Fires*, Russell-Brown dedicates a chapter to examining the relationship between gangsta rap—a subgenre which emphasizes gun play, misogynistic beliefs, and makes constant references to criminal enterprises (Williams Crenshaw)—and crime. Here, Russell-Brown notes social science’s inability to find a clear causal link between gangsta rap and crime: “There is a wide gulf between the dismissal of gangsta rap as a deviance-inducing art form and empirical data. The research simply does not support a direct link between listening to gangsta rap music
and involvement in crime” (54). What Russell-Brown does find is an extreme abhorrence for this particular form of black cultural and artistic expression that has no parallel with any other form of white “deviant” music such as heavy metal. According to the author, this difference can be attributed to white America’s conception of the black male as criminal or deviant, regardless of whether or not he is wearing baggy pants or has a microphone in his hand.

Consequently, contrary to mainstream white America’s view of heavy metal, where a bunch of outlaws are trying to contaminate well-mannered and decent white teens, gangsta rap actively attracts and gathers an already young, black, male and therefore assumed to be criminal element (Rose, “Fear”). Thus, while it is true that this Hip Hop sub-genre is problematic and troubling as it pertains to its exponents’ treatment of women, for example, the music and its artists are put under fire more for what they are perceived to be because of their race than on account of what they actually say or do. The censorship of the music then can be understood to be more a product of white racism than of hurtful or offensive rap speech given the various other places in mainstream US popular culture where misogyny is both tolerated and promoted.

In spite of this, some still may argue that rappers willingly attract this monitoring and censorship due to their blatant embracing of a criminal lifestyle both on and off the stage. Some of the most popular rap acts go by the names of former Mafia kingpins, actual and fictitious drug dealers, and even corrupt Latin American dictators. In Hip Hop, you find names like Nas Escobar, Scarface, Mussolini, Capone and Noreaga. You see music videos that are modeled after popular gangster films like Casino and The Godfather (Ogbar). Entire album concepts are based on drug deals gone bad (i.e., Reakwon’s “Only Built for Cuban Links”) or drug deals done well (i.e., Jay-Z’s “Reasonable Doubt”). More telling, however, is the number of rappers, past and present, who have either been arrested for suspected criminal activity, been linked to a criminal enterprise, or have been convicted of a particular offense. In 2004, there were at least 16 well-known rap artists serving time behind bars for offenses ranging from second degree murder to sexual assault to violation of parole (Osorio). Of these, some readily admitted to having engaged in such activity and others made seemingly valid claims as to either not being guilty of the charges or of severe police or court mishandling of their cases (Osorio).
Basing themselves on these numbers as well as on the general misperception and mistreatment of rap music by the media and other social institutions, several Hip Hop insiders point to a possible large-scale plan to target rap artists. They view Hip Hop culture as being under constant watch. In their minds, major media outlets, music-related businesses, and the criminal justice system are somehow colluding to either end Hip Hop music altogether or take African Americans completely out of it (Clark). Consequently, while the music is in fashion, its creators continue to be the focus of an unruly and unjustified surveillance. The establishment of specialized police units as well as the nationwide scrutiny placed into the culture’s codes, language, and business practices by media analysts and politicians among others speak to the tragically unique position in which black American artists find themselves. They are both “larger than life and less than human at the same time” (Tate 4).

Rap as Truculent Male Speech

Rap or Hip Hop music has always been feminine. Since its creation, black male rappers have expressed their love and devotion for the art form they practice in ways very much akin to the traditional manner in which heterosexual men attempt to woo heterosexual women (Pough). Rap records are filled with seemingly heart-felt and passionate tales of the way in which rap somehow “saved” and “rescued” black male rappers from difficult situations. Many artists boast about how rap has been the only constant in their life (it is people who fail). Consequently, men’s ability to rap is always portrayed by them as pure. It is always great, always a God-send. It is what brings them fame, money, success (it is people who want to take it away). Therefore, rap is always to be valued and never to be misused or betrayed. The lives and fate of actual human beings, however, is another matter.

One of the most popular critiques leveled against rap music is that it is too violent. So-called gangsta rap has frequently been on the forefront of national debates concerning the amount of violence in the media and its effects on America’s youth (Williams Crenshaw). Political pundits and television analysts have even gone so far as to pinpoint and blame individual rap stars for real life tragic events such as the shootings at Columbine. Artists and fans, on the other hand,
defend the product they create and consume stating that “these are simply songs about reality and not reality itself” (Kitwana 53). More critical analysts, however, look past the controversy and acknowledge that while one particular musical form cannot be made responsible for the violence in America, indiscriminate talk about violence does in fact contribute to the creation of a social climate in which violence is viewed as acceptable (Kitwana, hooks, Russell-Brown).

The crisis in rap music right now is that due to gangsta rap’s commercial success, elements of that subgenre have come to spread and define rap music as a whole. Thus, on the one hand, nearly all male rappers “trying to make it” market themselves as gangsters and on the other, the media tend to solely cover artists and events related to this one facet of rap (Kitwana). In the end, everything that has to do with rap is seen either as violent or gangster.

According to Kitwana, male rap artists glorify violence in three main contexts: as a symbol of macho power, as a cure-all for disputes between blacks, and as a necessity for individual protection (43). Popular rap songs are replete with black male bodies being riddled by bullets, plopping to the ground and dying. Individual male valor and honor often depend on the ability of the male speaker to quickly do away with his presumed (black) enemies without concern or regret. The fact is that in gangsta rap, African American men “are defined and assume the identity of losers, victims that enthusiastically achieve their role as statistics, killers void of spiritual centers, rapists and fighters only against black life and possibilities” (Kitwana 55). This subgenre has a very troubling and disturbing paradox at its center: the most potent and grandiose displays of black masculinity are only possible through the vicious, graphic and constant portrayal of black males’ physical and spiritual demise. Interestingly enough, however, it is black women and black womanhood who are the most persecuted, attacked, and damaged by this music.

The Rap on Women: This One Goes Out to All the Freaks Out There

As noted, rap has always been feminine. What it has not been is pro-woman. Pough writes, “Hip Hop gendered as feminine has no agency. She is something men rappers love, something they do. She
does not act; she is acted upon” (94). The fact is that much of black male rappers’ energy is spent trying to either keep women quiet or getting them to shut up. The rest is spent trying to get them into bed or in some cases even condoning or bragging about sexual assault/rape which ultimately has the same silencing effect. Kitwana states, “As inanimate objects women have no opinions. In fact, a thinking woman who questions incites the physical violence of her male peers” (53). Journalist Nelson George offers further insight on this matter stating that, “there was and remains a homoerotic quality to hip hop culture … that makes women seem aside from sex, nonessential” (127). The problem then in Kitwana’s eyes is not that black male artists frequently talk about sex, but rather, the problem lies in the “graphic, often crude, violent, self-hating, women-hating and anti-black, abusive sexual representations” (33) they refer to when exploring sexual themes. What is even more troubling is that there appears to be an enormous audience willingly consuming these images. This audience includes young black women. Pough writes, “both in the beginning and now, female hip hop heads are part of the crowds at shows and support rap by buying the music even when most of it is sexist and degrading to black womanhood” (9). It thus becomes important to consider the character of black women’s involvement in the music. A crucial part of this analysis is determining whether or not black women have the space in rap to respond to the dominant male visions of their womanhood.

Black Female Rapper’s (Muted) Speech

According to Rose, black women rappers’ songs must be viewed “as part of a dialogic process with male rappers” (Black Noise 147). In her view, what’s important is to visualize and analyze the way in which black female rappers work both within and against the dominant sexual and racial narratives in the genre. Before one can do that, however, it is necessary to address the sheer lack of black female rappers in the first place.

Common industry knowledge suggests that it takes much more than talent and good songs for an artist to sell records. It also takes money, employee hours, and aggressive marketing and public relation campaigns (Smith). Common industry knowledge also suggests that
female rappers do not receive an equal or even comparable amount of financial support to that which male rappers receive (Smith). Consequently, not only are an individual female artist’s chances for financial success dim, but one artist’s lack of success seriously reduces the chances of other female rappers getting a record deal and having their work widely distributed. Thus, female artists’ speech is actively being muted before their voice even makes it on a record.

Once on the record, black women’s voices face even more and possibly greater difficulties. Their artistic persona—the way in which they choose to present and market themselves—is fraught with contradictions. Smith writes, “a girl rapper has to be soft but hard; sweet but serious; sexy but respectable; strong but kind of weak; smart but not too loud about it … a hip hop girl, like a regular girl, has got to mix her own ingredients carefully” (127). Furthermore, when it comes to the actual content of their songs, “women’s lyrics are often still viewed by men and women themselves as not valid…women’s versions of reality are somehow suspect” (Smith 126). Thus, for the most part, label executives, artists, producers, and listeners alike seem to overwhelmingly favor men’s versions of reality. Consequently, they give more credence and validity to men’s tales and portrayals of black womanhood than to those that black women generate on their own. The few female artists who do manage to get their voice heard through national and international channels and whose lyrical skills are respected within the industry constantly have to disprove rumors about their sexuality. Smith makes it crystal clear: “a female can’t be tough or strong or clear or exceptionally skillful at hip hop unless she sacrifices the thing that makes her a real girl … we need to consider why women have to be touched by either dyke- or ho-ism in order to be marketable hip-hoppers” (127).

In rap, women’s voices are actively silenced through sex and/or rape. The violence of the sexual act in men’s tales of conquest focuses on making the black female body silent, on meticulously reducing women’s selfhood to the physical and then fracturing and severing parts of that physicality until what remains is self-less, senseless, fuck-able and mute. Williams Crenshaw (1993) writes:

We hear about cunts being fucked until backbones are cracked, asses being busted, dicks rammed down throats, and semen splattered across faces. Black women are cunts, bitches, and all purpose
Occasionally, we do hear women’s voices and those voices are sometimes oppositional. But the response to opposition typically returns to the central refrain: ‘Shut up bitch. Suck my dick.’ (122)

Williams Crenshaw’s comments bring us back to Rose’s proposition of visualizing black women rappers as active participants in a “dialogic process” with their male counterparts. According to Rose, male artists’ misogynistic lines find contestation in women’s “caustic,” “witty,” and “aggressive” raps indicting men for their mistreatment of women in heterosexual love relationships. In these raps, women challenge men’s depictions of them as “gold-diggers” or “hoes” and in Rose’s mind, they address the many fears and concerns that black female consumers may have. However, as it is made abundantly clear in Williams Crenshaw’s comments, male rappers’ physical force always seems to give them the last word and reduces black women’s role in rap music to their unwilling participation in the male-centered sexual act. Women’s space in rap is thus limited to that in which the male figure forces them.

“The Music’s not safe”

Black women cannot speak freely in rap music. This reality makes rap an unsafe space for black womanhood. According to Hill-Collins, safe spaces are characterized and defined by the free flow of speech in between black women, who, at that moment, are shielded from mainstream society. Safe spaces thus, by definition, imply an exclusion of outside elements, of outside structures. Their power lies in that they are “free of surveillance by more powerful groups” (Hill-Collins, Black Feminist Thought 111). Rap music as a black male dominated art form and as a white corporate controlled enterprise is not at all free of that surveillance. Black women’s interests are not only unrepresented in the music but one of the music’s principal themes is the continual negation of their existence as active, speaking, social actors. Furthermore, despite the genre’s recent profitability and international visibility, rap still has a conflicting relationship with mainstream white American culture. It is still actively attacked, blamed for any number of social ills, and frequently labeled as deviant. Rap still
implies difference and that difference is mostly racial. Consequently, black women rappers, in difficult times, must often represent the genre as a whole. Their defense of the music vis-à-vis mainstream white society often implies a defense of the misogyny in rap. Anything other than this blanket defense would be interpreted as treason by their black male counterparts and could possibly harm their career. Therefore, black feminist identities in rap have to be negotiated within this framework.

Talking Back: Claiming New Spaces

Forman argues that rap must be understood as a tool for communicating socio-cultural perspectives, one that may be used to empower women and create critical dialogue. He uses the metaphor of “coming to voice” to refer to the collective representation black women can find in rap. Forman asserts that black women have already begun to “generate their own discourse of empowerment” through Hip Hop. He cites two important indicators of this shift: the carrying of black female experience into the public domain and the creation of role models for female fans.

However, in formulating a critical dialogue about rap music and feminism, we must ask whose black womanhood is being brought to the public sphere, and is this womanhood truly female defined? It is evident that the most prevalent images of black womanhood in rap are not of successful, assertive, female rappers, but instead, of near naked, unrealistic, back-up dancers used to enforce the masculinity and sexual prowess of those male rappers for whom they dance. The image of the respected and successful female rapper is still marginal at best.

This marginalization from mainstream success is amplified for feminist rappers who cater less to a white audience (Roberts). Rap music is situated in a predominately white and patriarchal culture industry, constraining the expression of black women (Shelton). According to Chuck D (as cited in Stephens and Phillips 13), 70% of the consumers of Hip Hop culture and music are white and the majority of corporate backing of the Hip Hop industry is from white-owned corporations. While those most visible in the industry remain black males (Stephens and Phillips), thorough analysis of
women’s place within rap music must recognize that black female marginalization in Hip Hop goes further beyond the gender relationships between black men and women.

Furthermore, the sexualized images of black women in Hip Hop must also be understood as a reflection of white patriarchal commodification of black sexuality. Historically, whites have perpetuated images of hyper-sexuality among African Americans, often portraying them naked with exaggerated sexual organs (Feagin). As Feagin notes, “The white world drew the black woman’s body as excessively and flagrantly sexual, quite different from the emerging ideology of purity and modesty which defined the white women’s body” (113). Furthermore, both white supremacist images of black sexuality and hip hop’s portrayal of black women and male/female sexual relationships dictate a compulsory heterosexuality that fosters homophobia and racism explicating the interconnections between institutionalized heterosexism and institutionalized racism (Hill-Collins, Black Sexual Politics).

Unfortunately, most of our conversations concerning the creation of “safe spaces” for black women in rap begin with the assumption that Hip Hop has been and continues to be a “safe space” for black males. However, as we have attempted to showcase in our analysis of black men and women's situated positions within the genre, neither of the two are privileged voices. Consequently, negotiating an accurate and un-oppressive image for black women in rap music is not an intra-racial dialogue. In order to critically understand the misogyny in rap music and eventually surpass it, the issue must be addressed as more than simply a reflection of gender relations within black communities. It must be treated as a reflection of institutionalized images of blackness in the white imagination, which influence the production of the music and mediate the relationship between its makers and its consumers.

Conclusion

The majority of resistance against misogyny and violence in rap music thus far has been constructed as a “gendered” issue, instead of a civil rights agenda. We are not claiming here that male rappers are not responsible for their treatment of women, only that they are constrained by an industry they do not control. By denying the
possibilities of empowerment for both black men and women in rap, we ignore the political nature of the genre. When we hear our white students who vehemently oppose affirmative action in the most racist of terms, singing along with rapper Kanye West about the need for reparations, we cannot help but stand in awe at the artistic ingenuity of the genre. What other trend has had such large-scale abilities to bring the experience of being black in America to such mainstream venues? Looking forward, rap music does not exist in a vacuum. Although the genre may appear to be artist-controlled, it is subject to the same institutionalized racist forces as our board rooms, schools, and public offices. Therefore, any analysis that does not simultaneously discuss the racist, patriarchal, capitalist hierarchy within which rap exists does not move the music toward liberatory practice.

Works Cited


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