

WHO(SE) AM I?

The Identity and Image of Women in Hip-Hop

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This is an argument for media literacy with regards to gender politics in contemporary hip-hop. Specifically, it is concerned with the interplay of the visual and linguistic texts, the image and words. I begin by analyzing the recent trend of objectifying and subjugating black women in hip-hop music videos, and their potentially damaging social impact. Next, I consider how feminist recording artists respond to this dynamic. I argue that although we find some clearly gender liberatory images and arguments we also find abundant examples in which the feminist message in certain songs is neutralized by an objectifying visual image of the artists singing those songs. This image is often consistent with or supportive of the larger sexist trend in music videos. I compare two versions of the song “Lady Marmalade” to demonstrate how contemporary women recording artists are objectified, and how contemporary musical texts derive some of their meaning from the visual images of the singers. Next, I argue that the tensions between feminism and female subjugation often reflect the tensions between artistic creation and record company image making and the artist as creator versus the artist as commodity. In concluding the chapter, I contemplate manners in which artists might use their property in their words to subvert the power of the image. I also encourage critical media literacy among viewers and listeners as a means of understanding the operation of race and gender in this complex landscape.

♦ *Black Women's Bodies in Hip-Hop Videos*

In the last few years of the 20th century, the visual image of black women in hip-hop rapidly deteriorated into one of widespread sexual objectification and degradation. For years before, hip-hop had been accused of misogyny—critics often citing the references to women as bitches and “hoes.” But it is also true that hip-hop was often scapegoated, being no more misogynistic than American popular culture in general although perhaps peppered with less polite language. But in the late years of the 20th century, hip-hop took a particularly pernicious turn, which is not only full of sexist assertions but threatens patriarchal impact.

It seemed to happen suddenly. Every time you turned on BET or MTV there was a disturbing music video. Black men rapped surrounded by dozens of black and Latina women dressed in swimsuits, or scantily clad in some other fashion. Video after video was the same, each one more objectifying than the next. Some were in strip clubs, some at the pool, beach, hotel rooms, but the recurrent theme was dozens of half-naked women.

This was a complex kind of sexist message as well. Its attack on black female identity was multifaceted. First, and most obviously, the women are commodified. They appear in the videos quite explicitly as property, not unlike the luxury cars, Rolex watches, and platinum and diamond medallions that were also featured. The male stars of the videos do not get these legions of women because of charisma or sexual prowess. Rather, they are able to buy them because they are wealthy. The message is not, “I am a Don Juan,” but instead, “I am rich and these are my spoils.” Not only are the women commodified, but so is sex as a whole.

Moreover, the women are often presented as vacuous, doing nothing but swaying around seductively. Their eyes are averted from the camera, thereby allowing the viewer to have a voyeuristic relationship

to them. Or they look at the camera, eyes fixed in seductive invitation, mouth slightly open. Extremely rare are any signs of thought, humor, irony, intelligence, anger, or any other emotion.

Even the manner in which the women dance is a signal of cultural destruction. Black American dance is “discursive” (in that sexuality is usually combined with humor and the body is used to converse with other moving bodies). The women who appear in these videos are usually dancing in a two-dimensional fashion, a derivative but unintellectual version of black dance, more reminiscent of symbols of pornographic male sexual fantasy than of the ritual, conversational, and sexual traditions of black dance. Despite all the gyrations of the video models, their uninterested wet-lipped languor stands in sharp contrast to (for example) the highly sexualized “boogie dancing” of the Deep South (which features polyrhythmic rear end movement, innuendo, and sexual bravado).

This use of black women in the music videos of male hip-hop artists often makes very clear reference to the culture of strip clubs and pornography. Women dance around poles; porn actresses and exotic dancers are often featured in the videos and they bring the movement-based symbols of their trades with them. The introduction of porn symbols into music videos is consistent with a larger movement that began in the late 1990s, in which pornographic imagery, discourses, and themes began to enter American popular culture. Powerful examples may be found in the *Howard Stern Show*, E! Entertainment television, and daytime talk shows. Stars of pornographic films attain mainstream celebrity, exotic dancers are routine talk show guests, and the public face of lesbianism becomes not a matter of the sexual preference of women, but the sexual consumption and fantasy life of men. The videos are an appropriate companion piece to this wider trend. Although the music videos are male centered in that they assume a heterosexual male viewer who will appreciate the images of sexually available young women, it is

clear that young women watch them as well. The messages such videos send to young women are instructions on how to be sexy and how to look in order to capture the attention of men with wealth and charisma. Magazines geared toward young women have given such instructions on how women should participate in their own objectification for decades. However, never before has a genre completely centralized black women in this process.¹

The beauty ideal for black women presented in these videos is as impossible to achieve as the waif-thin models in *Vogue* magazine are for white women. There is a preference for lighter-complexioned women of color, with long and straight or loosely curled hair. Hair that hangs slick against the head when wet as the model emerges out of a swimming pool (a common video image) is at a premium too. Neither natural tightly curled hair nor most coarse relaxed hair becomes slick, shining, and smooth when wet. It is a beauty ideal that contrasts sharply to the real hair of most black women. When brown-skinned or dark-skinned women appear in the videos, they always have hair that falls well below shoulder length, despite the fact that the average length of black women's natural hair in the United States today is 4 to 6 inches, according to renowned black hair-stylist John Atchison.

The types of bodies that the camera shots linger on are specific. The videos have assimilated the African American ideal of a large rotund behind, but the video ideal also features a very small waist, large breasts, and slim shapely legs and arms. Often while the camera features the faces of lighter-complexioned women it will linger on the behinds of darker women, implying the same thing as the early 1990s refrain from Sir Mix a Lot's "Baby Got Back" that lauded the face of a woman from Los Angeles and the behind of a woman from Oakland. That is, the ideal is a high-status face combined with a highly sexualized body (which is often coded as the body of a poor or working-class woman).² Color is

aligned with class and women are "created" (i.e., through weaves, pale makeup, and camera filters) and valued by how many fantasy elements have been pieced together in their bodies.

The Impact of the Image ♦

Although one might argue that the celebration of the rotund behind signals an appreciation of black women's bodies, the image taken as a whole indicates how difficult a beauty ideal this is to attain for anyone. A small percentage of women, even black women, have such "Jessica Rabbit" (the voluptuous cartoon character from the 1990s film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*) proportions. As journalist Tomika Anderson wrote for *Essence* magazine, "In movies, rap songs and on television, we're told that the attractive, desirable and sexy ladies are the ones with 'junk in their trunks.' And even though this might seem ridiculous, some of us actually listen to (and care about) these obviously misogynistic subliminal messages—just as we are affected by racialized issues like hair texture and skin tone."³

Americans have reacted with surprise to abundant social scientific data that show that black girls are the social group who score highest on self-esteem assessments and tend to have much better body images than white girls. Although these differences in esteem and body image are to a large extent attributable to cultural differences, with black girls having been socialized to see beauty in strong personality characteristics and grooming rather than in particular body types, I believe the media play a role as well. White girls are inundated with images of beauty that are impossible for most to attain: sheets of blond hair, waif-thin bodies, large breasts, no cellulite, small but round features, high cheekbones. Over the years, black women have been relatively absent from public images of beauty, an exclusion that may have saved black girls

from aspiring to impossible ideals. But with the recent explosion of objectified and highly idealized images of black women in music videos, it is quite possible that the body images and even self-esteem of black girls will begin to drop, particularly as they move into adolescence and their bodies come under scrutiny. Many of the music videos feature neighborhood scenes, which include children. In them, little black girls are beautiful. They laugh, smile, play Double Dutch, and more. They are full of personality, and they are a cultural celebration. Their hair is plaited, twisted or curled, and adorned with colorful ribbons that match their outfits in characteristic black girl grooming style. And yet the adult women are generally two dimensional and robbed of personality. Is this what puberty is supposed to hold for these girls?

♦ *A Feminist Response?*

In such troubling moments, we should all look for a gender critical voice, in the world, in ourselves. Where do we find a response to this phenomenon that will compellingly argue against such characterizations of black women, a hip-hop feminism? There has been a feminist presence in hip-hop since the 1980s. From Salt n Pepa to Queen Latifah to MC Lyte and others, there is a feminist legacy in hip-hop and hip-hop feminism continues to exist despite the widespread objectification of black female bodies. We can find numerous examples of feminist and antisexist songs in hip-hop and hip-hop soul. Mary J. Blige, Lauryn Hill, Destiny's Child, Missy Elliot, Erykah Badu, and others all have their individual manners of representing black female identity and self-definition.

Missy transgresses gender categories with her man-tailored suits and her frequent presence as narrator of the action in the music videos of male hip-hop artists, an extremely rare location for a woman. Missy is a large woman who presents a glamorous

and stylish image but never is presented in an objectifying manner. She uses bizarreness to entice rather than being a sexpot (appearing in one video in an outfit that resembled a silver balloon before a fun-house mirror). Although Missy Elliot may not be distinctive for brilliant rhyming, she has a noteworthy acumen for making hit songs as a producer and rapper, and she consistently maintains her personal dignity.

Alicia Keys, one of the crop of new singer songwriters who fit into the hip-hop nation, also presents an image that contrasts sharply with the video models. The classically trained pianist, who has claimed Biggie Smalls and Jay Z among her music influences, appeared in her first music video for the song "Fallin'" in a manner that was stylish and sexy but decidedly not self-exploiting. Her hair in cornrows, wearing a leather jacket and fedora, she sings with visible bluesy emotion. She describes repeatedly falling in love with a man who is not good for her. In the music video, Keys travels by bus to visit the man in prison. This element is an important signifier of hip-hop sensibilities, as it is the one art form that consistently engages with the crisis of black imprisonment and considers imprisoned people as part of its community. As she rides in the bus, she gazes at women prisoners working in a field outside the window. They sing the refrain to the song, "I keep on fallin' in and out, of love with you. I never loved someone the way I love you."⁴ The women on the bus riding to visit men in prison mirror the women outside of the bus, who are prison laborers. This visual duality is a commentary on the problem of black female imprisonment, a problem that is often overlooked in discussions about the rise of American imprisonment and black imprisonment in particular. It makes reference both to the fact that many black women are the mates of men who are imprisoned and to the reality that many black women wind up in prison because of being unwittingly or naively involved with men who participate in illegal activities.⁵ These social ills are poignantly alluded to in

the video by a close-up of a stone-faced woman in prison clothing with a single tear rolling down her cheek.

Another critical example of a black feminist space in the hip-hop world is found in singer songwriter India.Arie. A young brown-skinned and dreadlocked woman, she burst upon the music scene with her song and companion music video "Video," which is a critique of the image of women in videos. In the refrain, Arie tells listeners that she's not the type of woman who appears in music videos, that her body type is not that of a supermodel but nevertheless she loves herself without hesitation.

Similar lyrics assert that value is found in intelligence and integrity rather than expensive clothes, liquor, and firearms. The video celebrates Arie, who smiles and dances and pokes fun at the process of selecting girls for music videos. She rides her bicycle into the sunshine with her guitar strapped across her shoulder. Arie refuses to condemn artists who present a sexy image but has stated that she will not wear a skirt above calf length on stage and that she will do nothing that will embarrass her family. Musically, although her sound is folksy soul, she does understand her work as being related to hip-hop. "I'm trying to blend acoustic and hip-hop elements," India explains. "I used the most acoustic-sounding drum samples, to have something loud enough to compete with other records, but to keep the realistic, softer feel."⁶

More than the compositional elements, Arie understands her work as inflected with hip-hop sensibilities. She says:

I don't define hip-hop the way a record company would. The thread that runs through both my music and hip-hop is that it's a very precise expression of my way of life. It's like blues; it's very real and honest output of emotion into a song. Because of that legacy, my generation now has an opportunity to candidly state our opinions. That's what my album is about. I just wanna be me.⁷

Arie's definition of hip-hop as honest self-expression is true to the ideology that was at the heart of hip-hop at its beginnings and that continues to be a concept professed to by multitudes of hip-hop artists. However, that element of hip-hop is in tension with the process of celebrity creation. The "honest" words in hip-hop exist in a swamp of image making. It is not enough to examine the clear and simple feminist presences in hip-hop; we must consider the murkier ones as well. When it comes to feminist messages, often the words and language of a hip-hop song may have feminist content but the visual image may be implicated in the subjugation of black women. Unlike the individualistic and expressive visuals we have of Arie, Keys, or Elliot, other artists are often marketed in a manner that is quite similar to the way in which objectified video models are presented.

Tensions Between Texts ◆

Women hip-hop artists who are self-consciously "sexy" in their appearance, style, and words have a much more difficult road in carving out a feminist space in hip-hop than performers such as Elliot, Keys, and Arie. This is because the language of sexiness is also the language of sexism in American popular culture in general, and in hip-hop videos in particular.

In the first edition of this book, I published a chapter titled "It's My Thang and I'll Swing It the Way That I Feel! Sexuality and Black Women Rappers." In it I argued that a feminist space existed in hip-hop where women articulated sexual subjectivity and desire. I do still believe this is possible. However, when the women who articulate subjectivity are increasingly presented in visual media as objects rather than subjects, as they are now, then their statement to the world is ambiguous at best, and at worst the feminist message of their work is undermined.

The space a musical artist occupies in popular culture is multitextual. Lyrics, interviews, music, and videos together create a collage, often finely planned, out of which we are supposed to form impressions. But the texts may be in conflict with one another. Lil Kim, the much discussed, critiqued, and condemned nasty-talking bad girl of hip-hop, is a master of shock appeal. Her outfits often expose her breasts, her nipples covered by sequined pasties that are color coordinated with the rest of her attire. Despite Kim's visual and lyrical vulgarity, many of her critics admit to finding her endearing. She is known by her interviewers to be sweet-natured and generous. But Lil Kim is a contradiction because although she interviews as vulnerable and sweet, she raps with a hardness adored by her fans. She has an impressive aggressive sexual presence, and she has often articulated through words a sexual subjectivity along with an in-your-face camera presence. However, as Kim has developed as an entertainer it is clear that her image is complicit in the oppressive language of American cinematography with regards to women's sexuality. She has adopted a "Pamela Anderson in brown skin" aesthetic, calling on pornographic tropes, but losing the subversiveness that was sometimes apparent in her early career. Andre Leon Talley of *Vogue* magazine noted her transformation from an "around-the-way girl" with a flat chest, big behind, and jet black (or green, or blue) hair weave, to the celebrity Kim who shows off breast implants and shakes her long blond hair. In her videos, the camera angles exploit her sexuality. In the video for the song "How Many Licks," she appears as a Barbie-type doll, her body parts welded together in a factory. The video is an apt metaphor for her self-commodification and use of white female beauty ideals. The video closes off its own possibilities. The doll factory image might have operated as a tongue-in-cheek criticism of image making or white female beauty standards, but instead it is a serious vehicle for Kim to be constructed as beautiful

and seductive with blond hair and blue eyes. To be a doll is to be perfect, and as many times she is replicated, that many male fantasies will be satisfied. Over several years, Kim has become defined more by her participation in codes of pornographic descriptions of woman than by her challenge of concepts of respectability or her explicit sexuality.

It is a delicate balance, but it is important to distinguish between sexual explicitness and internalized sexism. Although many who have debated the image of female sexuality have put "explicit" and "self-objectifying" on one side, and "respectable" and "covered-up" on the other, that is a flawed means of categorization. The nature of sexual explicitness is important to consider, and will be increasingly important as more nuanced images will present themselves. There is a creative possibility for explicitness to be liberatory because it may expand the confines of what women are allowed to say and do. We just need to refer to the history of blues music, which is full of raunchy, irreverent, and transgressive women artists, for examples. However, the overwhelming prevalence of the Madonna/whore dichotomy in American culture means that any woman who uses explicit language or images in her creative expression is in danger of being symbolically cast into the role of whore regardless of what liberatory intentions she may have, particularly if she doesn't have complete control over her image.

Let us turn to other examples to further explore the tensions between text and visual image in women's hip-hop. Eve is one of the strongest feminist voices in hip-hop today. She rhymes against domestic violence and for women's self-definition and self-reliance. She encourages women to hold men in their lives accountable for behavior that is disrespectful or less than loving. Yet the politics of Eve's image are conflicted. She has appeared in music videos for songs on which she has collaborated with male hip-hop artists. Those videos are filled with the stock

legions of objectified video models. Eve is dressed provocatively and therefore validates the idea of attractiveness exemplified by the models. But she is distinguished from these women because she is the star. She is dignified and expressive while they are not. Her distinction from the other women supports their objectification. She is the exception that makes the rule, and it is her exceptionalism that allows her to have a voice. Similar dynamics have appeared in videos in which hip-hop singer Lil' Mo has been featured. In fact, a number of women hip-hop artists, who claim to be the only woman in their crews, to be the one who can hang with the fellas, are making arguments through their exceptionalization that justify the subjugation of other women, even the majority of women.

Moreover, both Eve and Lil Kim often speak of the sexual power they have as being derived from their physical attractiveness to men. It is therefore a power granted by male desire, rather than a statement of the power of female sexual desire. Although neither artist has completely abandoned the language of empowering female subjectivity in her music, any emphasis on power granted through being attractive in conventional ways in this media language limits the feminist potential of their music. In one of the songs in which Eve most explicitly expresses desire, "Gotta Man," it is a desire for a man that is rooted in his ability to be dominant. She describes him as "the only thug in the hood who is wild enough to tame me"⁸ and therefore she is "The Shrew," willingly stripped of her defiant power by a sexual union. Instead of using her aggressive tongue to challenge prevailing sexist sexual paradigms, she affirms them by saying that she simply needs a man who is stronger than most, stronger than she is, to bring everything back to normal.

The tensions present in hip-hop through the interplay of the visual and the linguistic, and the intertextuality of each medium, are various. Even Lauryn Hill, often seen as the redeemer of hip-hop due to her dignified, intellectually challenging, and spiritual

lyricism, has a complicated image. As a member of the Fugees, she was often dressed casually, in baggy yet interesting clothes, thoroughly rooted in hip-hop style. It seems to be no accident that Lauryn Hill became a celebrity, gracing the covers of *British GQ*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and numerous other magazines, only when her sartorial presentation changed. Her skirts got shorter and tighter, her cleavage more pronounced, and her dreadlocks longer. When she began to sport an alternative style that nevertheless had mainstream acceptability, she was courted by high-end designers such as Armani. As Lauryn's image became more easily absorbable into the language of American beauty culture, her celebrity grew. She even appeared on the cover of *Sophisticates Black Hair Styles and Care Guide*, a black beauty magazine in which natural hair is at best relegated to a couple of small pictures of women with curly afros or afro weaves, while the vast majority of photos are of women with long straight weaves and relaxers. She was certainly one of the few *Sophisticates* cover models ever to have natural hair and the only with locks. (Interestingly, the silhouette of the locks was molded into the shape of shoulder-length relaxed hair.) In the issue of *British GQ* that featured Lauryn as a cover model, journalist Sanjiv writes, "She could be every woman in a way Chaka Khan could only sing about—the decade's biggest new soul arrival with the looks of a supermodel and Hollywood knocking at her door."⁹

In September 1999, Lauryn appeared on the cover of *Harper's Bazaar*. The article inside discussed her community service projects, and the cover celebrated her model-like beauty. There was of course something subversive about the cover. Dark-skinned and kinky-haired Lauryn Hill was beautiful, and the image was ironic. Her locks were styled into the shape of a Farrah Fawcett flip, a tongue-in-cheek hybridization that at once referenced the 1970s heyday of unprocessed afro hair and that era's symbol of white female beauty,

Farrah Fawcett. The hybrid cover is analogous to the diverse elements used in the creation of the new in hip-hop. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Lauryn became widely attractive when her silhouette, thin body and big hair, matched that of mainstream beauty. So even as Lauryn has been treated as the symbol of black women's dignity and intelligence in hip-hop (and rightfully so given her brilliant lyricism), she too was pulled into the sexist world of image making. Although she has made some public appearances since cutting off her long hair, getting rid of the make-up, and returning to baggy clothes, publicity about her has noticeably dropped.¹⁰

In contrast to the image making of Lauryn Hill, Erykah Badu has been unapologetically committed to the drama of her neo-Afrocentric stylings and therefore has been able to achieve only limited mainstream beauty acceptance. After she shaved her head and doffed her enormous head wrap, and wore a dress that was shaped like a ballgown (although in reality it was a deconstructed, rough textured "warrior princess," as she referred to it, work of art), Joan Rivers named her the best dressed at the 2000 Grammys. However she also said, and I paraphrase, that this was the best Badu had ever looked and that Erykah Badu was such a beautiful woman (rather than complimenting the dress or her style). It seemed then to be an insinuation that she was getting the recognition for coming closer to looking "as beautiful as she really is," not for truly being the best dressed. In a 2001 *Vogue* magazine, Badu was discussed in an article about how ugliness could be beautiful and the fine line between the two, making reference to her unusual attire, again a sign of how disturbing the beauty industry finds her unwillingness to fit into standard paradigms of female presentation, even as her large hazel eyes and high cheekbones are undeniably appealing to individuals in that industry.

I used the examples of Lil Kim, Eve, Lauryn Hill, and Erykah Badu, all very distinct artists, to draw attention to the

kinds of tensions that might exist between a feminist content in hip-hop lyrics and the visual image of that artist. To further illustrate this point, let us now turn to a comparison that offers a dramatic example of the relationship between visual images and the message of musical texts.

Comparative Readings of ♦ the Creole Prostitute

In 2001, a remake of the 1975 LaBelle classic "Lady Marmalade" hit the airwaves. Twenty-six years after it was first recorded, it once again became a hit. The 2001 version was performed by a quartet of successful young female artists, pop sensation Christina Aguilera, R&B singers Pink and Mya, and rapper Lil Kim. Recorded for the soundtrack of the movie *Moulin Rouge*, a postmodern rendering of the famous Parisian cabaret circa 1899, the song served as a fantastic commercial for the film. And with all those popular songstresses, it was a surefire moneymaker. The cultural impact of the most recent version of "Lady Marmalade," however, was quite distinct from that of the original.

The original version of the song was sung by a trio of young black women who had recently shed their super sweet name "The Bluebells," a fourth member, their bouffant hairdos, and their chiffon gowns for a more radical image as LaBelle. Patti LaBelle sang the lead on the song penned by Kenny Nolan and produced by Allen Toussaint. She told a fable about a Creole prostitute in New Orleans, Lady Marmalade. Through the rhythm of her voice, Patti was able to transmit Lady Marmalade's strut and attitude. Marmalade turned her conservative John's world upside down, and thereby robbed her exploiter of some of his power. The song, with the racy lyrics *Voulez vous couchez avec moi, ce soir?* was provocative and yet melancholy. And despite the fact that LaBelle's members purportedly didn't know the meaning of the

French lyrics when they recorded the song, the song had a feminist sensibility about it. This was due to Patti's vocal interpretation and the visual presentation of all of LaBelle. They were telling a story of the past in which a woman found a little subversive power, but the storytellers themselves were contemporary women, futuristic even. Bizarrely adorned, wearing "silver lame space suits and studded breastplates" they signaled "the death of the traditional three girl three gown group."¹¹ LaBelle were rock glam stars and they stood outside of standard paradigms of female sexuality and objectification. They were somehow women's movement women, black power women, and transgressive women at once.

Patti brought the listener of the song to a corner in Storyville, the historic sex district in New Orleans. She told the story of a sister there, and made that listener feel the energy and melancholy of the Creole prostitute, sympathize with her, recognize her power. Yet Patti escaped being cast into Marmalade's position herself. In 2001, the singers of the song "Lady Marmalade" did not tell Marmalade's legendary story—rather, they became her. That process of embodying the Creole prostitute occurred largely through the visual representation of the song in the music video, which received a huge amount of airplay on MTV and BET, and one live performance.

In the video, the four women are attired in vintage style elaborate lingerie and dance about in rooms that look like the images of bordello boudoirs we have seen in film before. This embodiment had no subversive elements but instead was a glamorization of a turn-of-the-century image of prostitution. Moreover, the diversity and hybridity of the artists are exploited for the sake of the sexual fantasy. There is Christina, blond and blue eyed, Latina and Irish, who sings with the trills and moans of black gospel tradition. There is Mya, whose café au lait skin and long curling hair remind us of the song's description of Lady Marmalade's appearance. There is Pink, a white woman with the whiskey voice of a black blues

singer, and Lil Kim, the brown-skinned rapper with the blond wig and blue contact lenses. Their hybridity is used for no more interesting purpose than the reification of the well-worn and generations-old image of the whore at the racial crossroads, the lascivious and tragic mulatto who is defined by her sexuality. Lil Kim is the one of the group who ultimately reveals that these women are embodiments of Lady Marmalade. She raps the story in the first person rather than the third. She tells listeners that she and her "sisters" are about the business of using their sexualities in exchange for material goods from men.

The racial and gender politics of the video are supportive of historic racist imagery of women of color. *Moulin Rouge* is filled with white stars, yet "Lady Marmalade," the song that introduces the movie, is racialized as black, being a hip-hop and R&B creation. The song advertises the film but its blackness is not central to the film's imagination. While the singers reflect the status of the movie's star as a courtesan, dancer, and singer, the politics of race and sex automatically locate them in a lower-status position than that of the star of the film. The degradation of black female space simultaneously with the use of black discourses to define mainstream sexuality is nothing new in American culture. The film is not alone in playing that game. But that this version hearkens so closely to the fate of the Creole woman in relationship to white women in Louisiana history, socially defined as prostitute rather than lady, through everything from antimiscegenation laws and quadroon balls to cultures of concubinage, is particularly troubling. It claims to be, and symbolically is, 1899 all over again.

Ironically, the earlier version of the song was produced by a man, and the later version was produced by a black woman, hip-hop phenom Missy Elliot, discussed earlier. Despite her own feminist presentation, she participates in this subjugating image, in a manner analogous to the way in which Eve participates in the subjugation of other women in music videos in which

she appears. Elliot's image in the video as narrator/madam in the video is free from objectification, but supports the objectification of her fellow artists. Moreover, Elliot's own arguably feminist presence is trumped by the subjugated presence of the others.

◆ *The Colonizer and Colonized*

Novelist and cultural critic Toni Cade Bambara had great insight into the race and gender politics of American media. She reminded us in her essay "Language and the Writer" that

the creative imagination has been colonized. The global screen has been colonized. And the audience—readers and viewers—is in bondage to an industry. It has the money, the will, the muscle, and the propaganda machine oiled up to keep us all locked up in a delusional system—as to even what America is.¹²

Musical artists are cultural actors, but those backed by record labels are hardly independent actors. In music videos and photo layouts they exist within what Bambara has described as colonized space, particularly around race and gender. In a context in which a short tight dress, and a camera rolling up the body, lingering on behinds and breasts, has particular very charged meanings with regard to gender and personal value, we must ask, How powerful are words that intend to contradict such objectification? How subversive are revolutionary words in a colonized visual world full of traditional gender messages?

In the same essay, Bambara directs us to consider the use of metaphors, themes, and other ritualized structures to create meaning in American film. She writes:

There is the conventional cinema that masks its ideological imperatives as

entertainment and normalizes its hegemony with the term "convention," that is to say the cinematic practices—of editing, particular uses of narrative structure, the development of genres, the language of spatial relationships, particular performatory styles of acting—are called conventions because they are represented somehow to be transcendent or universal, when in fact these practices are based on a history of imperialism and violence.¹³

Bambara is speaking specifically of movies, but her observation about the normalization and universalization of conventions that guide interpretation and that are part of sexist and racist hegemonic structures is applicable to this discussion. Often, language, even aggressive liberatory language, becomes nearly powerless in the face of the powerful discourse of the visual within the texts of music videos.

So then we ask, How should we read these artists who have feminist voices and sexist images? If they are linguistic proponents of women's power, subjectivity, and black feminism, why do they participate in creating such conflicting visual textual representations? First, it is important to acknowledge that in a society with such strong hegemonies of race, class, gender, and sexuality, virtually all of us, regardless of how committed we are to social justice and critical thinking, are conflicted beings. We want to be considered attractive even though we understand how attractiveness is racialized, gendered, and classed in our society, and how the designation often affirms structures of power and domination. Separating out healthy desires to be deemed attractive from those desires for attractiveness that are complicit in our oppression is challenging. Similarly, we want to be successful, but success is often tied to race, class, gender, and body politics that implicitly affirm the oppression of others. We support the status quo in order to succeed within it, despite our better judgment.

These tensions exist within the artist as much as within the average citizen, and we should therefore be cautious in our judgment of the artists. However, even if we were insensitive to these internal conflicts as they might exist in famous hip-hop artists, the artists still should not be considered solely responsible for the tensions between their words and image. The reality is that the “realness” in popular hip-hop and R&B stars is as much an illusion as it is real. Their public images are constructed by teams more often than by themselves. The conflicted images we see from some “feminist talking, sexpot walking” hip-hop artists may be as much a sign of a conflict between their agendas and those of the record companies, stylists, video directors, and so forth, as a sign of internal conflict. Each artist is a corporate creation—pun intended.¹⁴

◆ *Property and Subversive Potential*

As a college student, I met the black woman filmmaker Julie Dash. I had recently seen her short film *Illusions* and her landmark feature *Daughters of the Dust*. Excited by her work and thrilled to meet her, I gushed about how I wanted to “do what she did.” She warned me that if I wrote a screenplay I’d better direct the movie myself if I wanted the substance to be intact once it was completed. In giving me this warning she was testifying as to the degrees of ownership of art, the interaction between words and image, and the importance of black female self-articulation in a colonized media.

Despite the powerful hand of corporate interests in hip-hop, it is a music that has sustained a revolutionary current with respect to consumer culture, albeit one that is increasingly fragile. This revolutionary current exists in the underground communities of unsigned artists (rappers, or MCs, as well as poets or “spoken word” artists) who push forward creative development

without corporate involvement. They are cultural workers and artists in the organic sense, and proprietors of their own images. Analogous to independent filmmakers, local underground artists are a good source when we seek feminist and other politically progressive messages in hip-hop. However, most of the contemporary hip-hop audience has little access to underground artists. It is now overwhelmingly, albeit not exclusively, a recorded art form. Therefore, as cultural readers we should consider what the scope of power is for artists who are signed to record labels.

One clear location of authorial power exists in their ownership of their copyrighted lyrics. The owned lyrics are an asserted property right that competes with the concept that the artist herself is a “property.”¹⁵ For women artists who have written and copyrighted their own lyrics, the lyrics might be one of their only areas of control, and it may be where we can best find their intended political messages. Looking to the distinction between the copyrighted material owned by artists and the music videos owned by the record companies, we have some indication of what particular political tensions face a given artist.

Conclusion: ◆ Possibilities for Dissent

We know that the politics of the artist are often neutralized by the image made by the record company. Although a famous person has a legally cognizable property interest in his or her public image as a whole, when she consents to making a music video, she grants the record company the use of her image. She allows for the creation of a product that features her as a product and that in turn encourages the sale of her words and music. Perhaps there is a clue in that web to how artists might regain subversive power through language. If their words were not simply liberatory and

progressive but also critically engaged, mocked, or challenged the very images that made the artist into a celebrity, the words of the artist might not be dwarfed by the image. Instead they might latch onto the image, shift its meaning, and bring it closer to being owned by the artist. Imagine an artist looking lustily into the camera while critiquing the gaze she is giving you, or discussing the sexism implicit in the sexy dress she is wearing. Although this strategy might simply give rise to further conflicted images, there is the possibility that it would force the listener to critically read the image. Certainly, in earlier periods of hip-hop groups such as a Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul often embedded in their music strong critiques of the music industry to which they understood themselves to be “enslaved” as commodities. Such critiques played a role in their success at being popular, political, and authentic groups, and they provide a useful model for a feminist voice in hip-hop.

There are surely a number of other strategies as well that might be employed by women hip-hop artists who seek innovative modes of feminist articulation and self-definition in an arena dominated by corporate interests and sexism. Hip-hop is an art form that has consistently been engaged in innovation, improvisation, and reinterpretation. It is therefore neither unreasonable nor naive to anticipate a new generation of feminist voices in hip-hop that will respond in increasingly sophisticated and complex ways to a sexist and racist society.

◆ Notes

1. The most prominent black women's magazines, *Essence* and *Honey*, as well as *Girl*, which is geared toward a multicultural audience of adolescent girls, all have an explicitly feminist agenda. Readers of these magazines are not offered articles about how to seduce men or appear sexy, which frequently appear in publications such as *Cosmopolitan*, *YM*, and *Glamour*.

2. There are a many hip-hop lyrics that identify the voluptuous body with women who live in housing projects or from the 'hood. As well, the assumption of lighter-complexioned black women being of higher socioeconomic status or greater sexual desirability is a longstanding aspect of black American culture. Although this cultural phenomenon was challenged in the late civil rights era, it flourishes in the images that appear in many television shows, movies, and books and in the tendency of black male movie stars musicians and athletes to choose very light complexioned spouses if they marry black women.

3. Tomika Anderson, “Nothing Butt the Truth” *Essence*, November 2001, 116.

4. Words and music by Alicia Keys. © 2001 EMI April Music Inc. and Lellow Productions. All rights controlled and administered by EMI April Music Inc. All rights reserved. International copyright secured. Used by permission.

5. President Clinton pardoned Kendra Smith, the most famous representative of this population, who spent years in prison as a result of the crimes of her boyfriend.

6. India.Arie interview, <http://www.mtv.com>.

7. India.Arie interview, <http://www.mtv.com>.

8. Eve, “Gotta Man,” Ruffryders Interscope Records (2000).

9. Sanjiv, “Queen of the Hill: Lauryn Fugee Finds Her Voice,” *British GQ*, October 1998, 188.

10. At the time of the publication of this chapter, I have found no interviews or articles that address the reason for Lauryn Hill's second transformation but it will be interesting to see if she understands it as a rejection of the way in which she was styled in order to be palatable to a widespread audience.

11. “The Music Portfolio,” *Vanity Fair*, November 2001, 299.

12. Toni Cade Bambara. “Language and the Writer,” *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations*, ed. by Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 140.

13. Toni Cade Bambara. “Language and the Writer,” in *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays and Conversations* ed. By Toni Morrison. (New York: Pantheon, 1996) 140.

14. Although there are some artists who are able to maintain a good deal of creative control

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(often those labeled “alternative”), record companies are even aware of the extent to which there is a consumer market for the “alternative” and “iconoclast” so they will allow for that space to exist to some extent within the boundaries of their control.

15. The description of recording artists as “products” in the music industry articulates the sense in which they (as public images) are seen as a kind of property to be purchased by consumers.