

Essay Award Winner 2005 (Honourable Mention)

HiPhOP FeMiNiSm

by Zahra Kara

Oh, my god Becky, look at her butt.
It is so big. She looks like,
One of those rap guys' girlfriends.
But y'know, who understands those rap guys?
They only talk to her, because,
She looks like a total prostitute, 'ay?
I mean, her butt, is just so big.
I can't believe it's just so round, it's like,
Out there, I mean- gross. Look!

She's just so Black!

--"Baby got Back!" Sir Mix-A-Lot

In 1809, a nineteen year-old South African woman, Saartjie Baartman, was abducted from South Africa and paraded, semi-naked, across Europe for six years, as a sexual freak known as the 'Hottentot Venus'. She became an icon of Black female sexuality and the "excessive size" of her buttocks, breasts, and vagina were used to promulgate the absurd myth that these mammoth features were indicative of Black women's loose and immoral sexuality. The sexual abuse and violation of Black women did not begin or end with Saartjie Baartman, considering Black women were frequently sexually abused throughout colonialization, where their physical slavery on the plantations was matched by their sexual slavery in the bedrooms of their 'massahs'. Even today, Black women continue to be objectified as untamed, hypersexual beings within mainstream North American society. The lyrics of the hit song "Baby got Back" by Sir Mix-A-Lot, display the link between being Black, having a large backside and being sexually promiscuous, as is connoted by the reference to a prostitute. In response to these racist and misogynist interpretations of Black women and their sexualities, female rappers are increasingly using rap music to assert their power as women and more so, to reclaim their sexualities which have been the defining feature of Black women's identities for hundreds of years. An analysis of several female rappers, including Queen Latifah, Salt N Pepa, Trina, and Da Brat will demonstrate how female rappers have successfully enlisted tools discussed within feminist discourse, such as that of mimicry, à la Luce Irigaray, to deconstruct negative messages and (re)construct positive ones about Black women, and their sexualities.

Black women's sexuality has been defined by everyone but themselves for generations, and their portrayal as immoral and hypersexual beings is the result of the dually oppressive forces of racism and sexism, which places Black women in a distinct plight. bell hooks, in *Ain't I A Woman*, discusses the effects of both racism and sexism on Black

women. She argues that Black women are portrayed as one of three main figures within popular culture: Mammy, Matriarch, or Jezebel. Although the first two categories of Black women are seen as asexual, the latter is portrayed as the pinnacle of moral corruption, the hypersexual counterpart to the prim and proper Mammy. The Jezebel is depicted as a sexually promiscuous slave who offers herself to her master in hopes of receiving better treatment (much like a prostitute trades sexual favours for material goods). Playing the role of a mistress offered potential advantages that many slave women could not resist, such as good food, good treatment, easy work, and possibly freedom (Hill Collins 78). The “slack” personality of the Jezebel was used to excuse slave owners' abuse of their slaves and gave an explanation for mulatto offspring. By sexualizing racism and racializing sexism, this view constructs Black women as the legitimate victim of White male violence, while it rewrites the history of the rape of Black women by White men to coincide with the notion that Black women were the initiators of sexual contact (Dines 37). This attitude is injurious to Black women today, because it is often used as a rationale by the media and society to justify and excuse the sexual exploitation and rape of Black women (Hill Collins 77).

The depiction of Black women as lacking sexual morality is perpetuated within hip-hop culture. Although rap music, written and performed by Black men, generally ignores the existence of Black women, when it does make reference to them, it is usually in relation to their sexualities. Women are defined as commodities, objects of male pleasure, or ornaments within the majority of male rappers' lyrics, making the portrait of Black womanhood that emerges flat and one-dimensional. A popular and reoccurring representation of Black women within male rap music is that of them as wild, sexually promiscuous and amoral (Stephens and Philips 4). Black women are referred to as “freaks”, “skanks”, or “hoes”-- all terms connoting women who love to have sex without discretion or any emotional attachment (Stephens and Philips 20). For instance, rapper Jay-Z's hit "Give it to Me", states “with all this cash, you'll forget your man; now give it to me!”, giving Black women an identity of being desperately promiscuous, “money hungry sluts who do anything for cash”--modern day Jezebels.

The music videos of Black male rappers further proliferate the myth of Black women as a homogenous and hypersexual faction. These videos reflect how race, class and gender continue to constrain and limit the autonomy and agency of Black women (Emerson 120). Virtually all of the women who appear in Black male rappers' music videos are cut from the same mould: thin, light-skinned, straight-haired, scantily-clad women, who fulfil Eurocentric standards of beauty. They are usually featured in videos groping male artists, serving as trophies to attest to their success, or ‘humping’ symbols of phallic power, such as cars or street poles. It is for this reason that these females are informally referred to as “video hoers”.

The sexual harassment suffered by Black women increases when they make the decision to enter the hip-hop community, since the threat of sexual harassment increases when women dare to enter predominantly male fields, and the hip-hop community is no exception. Male rappers attempt to deter women's entrance and rise in the field by subjecting female rappers to attacks on their sexual reputations (Goodall 85). However,

the following analysis will demonstrate that despite the misogynistic representations of Black women that saturate male rap lyrics and music videos, since the 1990s, hip hop has witnessed the emergence of Black women performers, producers, writers, and musicians who turned rap lyrics and music videos into a site for the promotion and self-expression of positive Black womanhood and sexuality.

Many Black female rappers enlist French feminist Luce Irigaray's subversive practise of mimicry to defy male generated definitions of Black female sexuality. Irigaray suggests mimicking male philosophy and norms, arguing that a playful imitation of the place of women within the social order can help to undermine the system itself. This means women must convert their subordination into an affirmation, and reintroduce sexual difference into the cultural order, since women cannot pretend that the norms for femininity do not exist, and incorrectly assume that they can be put aside; because any new idea of what the "feminine" constitutes would be based on old phallogocentric norms (Irigaray 78). The practise of mimicry is similar to a Black oral tradition of signification/signifyin'. Although significations are occasionally issued for fun, they are more frequently used to make a point, to issue a corrective, or to critique through indirection and humour. Like mimesis, signifyin' resists oppression while working within the boundaries of the oppressive system, and enlisting its tools. As Sara Jones, a Black female artist, brilliantly articulates,

"It's a firm structure.... [Images of women in hip hop as 'bitches and hoes'] are not going away from the outside.... You have to play both sides.... Get in and finagle around... play within it while you do your best to poke holes in it. The 'structure' that many young African American women are subjected to is specifically rooted in hip hop stereotypes and the media's vilification of 'the ghetto'" (Bost n.p.),

which is once again the result of stereotypes about gender, race and class. The rhetorical strategy of signifyin' appropriately allows feminist lyricists to launch critical offensives against the sexual objectification of women practiced by many male rappers (Smitherman 14). Significations can be understood as "repetition with a difference", since this rhetorical strategy requires that an old phenomenon be deconstructed and erected with new meaning. Without insight into the referential layers of these raps, listeners can easily be fooled into thinking they hear nothing but a simple repetition of myths of Black otherness, which is why this method constantly runs the risk of being collapsed by those who don't understand the doubleness of signifyin' (Bost n.p.). However, it is the generation of multiplicity from a single reference offered by signification which makes it possible to create multiple versions of stories, thus refuting the existence of a metanarrative. As well, significations allow for the possibility of re-endowing people, places, and things with new meanings and identities.

In "Ladies First", Queen Latifah clearly spreads a message of Black female empowerment. Through vivid and original imagery, her lyrics challenge notions of male superiority and dominance. The song's title is a good example of a signification, because of its ability to positively reconstruct a previously degrading phenomenon. The title refers initially to the traditional meaning of "Ladies First" which is a phrase left over from an

era when men opened doors and pulled out chairs for women, a deceptive sign of respect in an age where women held little to no social and political power. However, Queen Latifah uses this term to demand actual respect and power for women, and insists that women are able to not only match, but surpass men's talents and achievements. She turns a phrase used for decades as a way of surreptitiously placing women in a second-class position, into an empowering statement, with which to challenge the status quo. A line in the song, "there's going to be some changes in here", also successfully employs signification, since it is an adaptation of Malcolm X's famous words "There are going to be some changes made here." It appears that Queen Latifah "calls on Malcolm X as a part of a collective African-American historical memory and recontextualizes him...as a voice in support of the imminent changes regarding the degraded status of women and specifically Black women rappers" (Roberts 165-6).

In addition to utilizing signification to redefine Black womanhood, Queen Latifah's lyrics express sexual liberation, saying women also want to "get some," in direct opposition to the traditional, patriarchal view that sex is mainly for the purpose of pleasuring men. Finally, Black women are empowered and given confidence and purpose in their existence when Queen Latifah assures them that it is due to their womanhood that they are able to give birth and life to a "new generation of prophets." This statement positively references women's reproductive power and endows womanhood with the agency it truly deserves. The lyrics to "Ladies First" are simple, yet when analyzed with the experiences and issues of Black women in mind, their complexity and rebelliousness becomes more visible.

The 1993 hit song "Shoop," by Salt N Pepa is also an exhibition of signifyin' on prominent male rapper Big Daddy Kane, interwoven with some sexual hyperbole and the sexual objectification of a Black male. In "Very Special," Big Daddy Kane celebrates the sexual beauty of a woman and gives tribute to her father: "For giving me something this beautiful, have mercy, I want to kiss yo father." Salt N Pepa respond in "Shoop" by crediting the mother for the sexual beauty of the male they rap about: "Brother wanna thank your mother for a butt like that." By mimicking a male rapper's song, but changing/inverting the subjects of the lyrics, Salt N Pepa convey an altogether different message, which praises women as opposed to men, while sexually objectifying men as opposed to women. Furthermore, they use this opportunity to display the often neglected identity of Black women as mothers, as well as subjects of their sexuality, as opposed to the common depiction of them as the objects of Black male sexual desire.

Even the music video for "Shoop" turns the tables on male rappers. In it, "ladies see a bunch of bare-chested, tight-bunned brothers acting like sex objects, servicing it to us in our videos" proclaimed Salt (Keyes 261). However, this music video should not be seen as a mere role reversal, but rather an articulation of mutual pleasure and enjoyment. While men are undoubtedly the objects of Salt N Pepa's desire in the video, the female performers are simultaneously desired by the men as well, in addition to being the object of the camera and the audience's gaze as well. These Black women are the agents of their own pleasure, as well as the vehicle for the fulfillment of man's desire. Thus, they are not only the objects, but they are also the subjects. In such a gaze reversal, Black female

performers give sexual pleasure, while also pursuing, receiving and accepting it. In this sense, Salt N Pepa, and other female artists who perform sexuality in similar ways explode the gaze, and shatter it like glass- thus creating countless foci from which to understand sexuality, desire and pleasure. As Dana Bryant states “There’s nothing wrong with being a wild woman, but we’ve been bludgeoned to death by that image.... It’s important that [the image] be harnessed by women and redefined for what it truly is” (Bost). Bryant makes it clear that female rappers are not interested in articulating Black women’s sexualities for them, but only care that whatever images are produced are appropriated and owned by the women who produce them.

As well, in response to the almost exclusive use of thin, light-skinned, straight-haired women in hip-hop music videos, which spawned a controversy in the 1980s and 1990s (Emerson 125), female rappers are reinventing what it means to be an African woman. Artists such as Queen Latifah, Erykah Badu and Sister Souljah, embrace the entire spectrum of Black women’s roles and identities in society, and make specific reference to themselves in their lyrics as “Asiatic Black women”, “Nubian Queens”, or “sistas droppin’ science to the people”, which is suggestive of their self-constructed identities and intellectual prowess (Keyes 256). They are often outfitted in royal African Kente cloth strips, African headdresses, goddess braid styles and other distinctively Black hairstyles, along with ankh-stylized jewellery, in the style of African queens before them (Keyes 257). These women, often referred to as “Queen Mothers” produce the image of strong, intelligent African women, a foil to the objectification of Black women as sexual commodities in many male rapper’s lyrics. As well, by appropriating particular signs of Blackness and Black femininity, Black women assert their confidence in their culture and their identities through song lyrics and music videos (Emerson 126).

Instead of defying the “video ho” image propagated by male rappers, other empowered female lyricists seek to redefine it, while deconstructing the dominant American mainstream ideals of beauty. For instance, Salt N Pepa “flip da script” by wearing tight clothes that accent their full breasts, rounded buttocks and thighs, markers of Black women, while simultaneously rapping about female sexual, economic, psychotically and physical empowerment. Similarly, female MC, songwriter, producer Missy Misdemeanor Elliott contests racist notions of beauty by flaunting her famous natural, finger-wave hairstyle, while carrying off the latest hip-hop fashions on her dark-skinned and full-figured frame. Missy challenges Eurocentric standards of beauty, and in doing so reclaims sexuality for all Black women, regardless of their shade or size (Keyes 262). In H2DB, Salt N Pepa reject “what I’m supposed to be”, referring to the traditional boundaries of feminine dressing-- and one could assume, femininity and sexuality as a whole-- as “dumb rules made for silly fools.” H2DB asserts a woman’s ability to define herself and her own standard of beauty in the face of male opposition and oppression (Goodall 88). By portraying Black women as beautiful, strong and independent, Black female lyricists are deconstructing notions of beauty and sexuality, which view Black women as unattractive, unintelligent, and sexually promiscuous, because of their larger and more rounded physical appearances, relative to the ideal White woman (Keyes 258). By defying racist and sexist stereotypes that assume all women in tight clothing are

scandalous and unintelligent, they make it possible for Black women to be intelligent and sexy simultaneously. The juxtaposition and combination of sexuality, assertiveness and independence represent the reappropriation of Black women's bodies in response to sexual regulation and exploitation, and affirm the multidimensionality of Black womanhood (Emerson 130). Furthermore, it attests to the ability of Black women to use the sphere of popular culture to reclaim and revise controlling images, particularly that of the Jezebel, to express sexual autonomy, independence and subjectivity (Emerson 133).

Black female rappers also resist control of their sexualities and identities by Black male rappers who commonly refer to them as bitches, which connotes inadequate, feisty or fraudulent women, by revising the standard definition of bitch from an "aggressive woman who challenges male authority" to "an aggressive or assertive female who subverts patriarchal rule". Lyndah of the duo BWP explains, "we use 'Bytches' to mean a strong, positive, aggressive woman who goes after what she wants. We take that on today...and use it in a positive sense" (Keyes 263). For instance, in "Da Baddest Bitch", Trina cleverly redefines and reclaims the term bitch, by endowing it with positive connotations, and equating it with success and attaining material goods. Similarly, in "All my Bitches," Da Brat proudly proclaims her identity as an independent and successful bitch, "the first solo to go platt" (the first single to reach platinum sales).

Other Black female rappers, such as Lil' Kim, Trina, and Da Brat explode the scripts written to control Black women and their sexualities by attempting to parallel and provide a female rendition of the "badman" character upheld by male rappers. These women rap about the same things that constitute the "badness" of male rappers, such as their sexual escapades, their drinking binges, and brushes with the law, symbolic of "White power". However, many Black women criticize this attempt to empower women because as hip-hop feminist Joan Morgan states "feminism is not simply about being able to do what the boys do-- get high, talk endlessly about their wee wees and what have you. At the end of the day, it's the power women attain by making choices that increase their range of possibilities" (Keyes 263).

Critics argue that attempts at subverting and undermining the sexual objectification of Black women through mimesis are unfruitful because female rappers are not innovative and merely imitate rather than constructively deconstruct and reconstruct empowering images of females. However, "to play with mimesis for a woman", asserts Irigaray, "is to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to simply be reduced to it". While it may appear that these Black female artists are merely reflecting and surrendering to oppressive forces, their behaviour could be understood to reveal ambivalence about Black female sexuality, mainly the coexistence of hypersexual images and the denigration and denial of the beauty of the Black female body. In response to contradictory notions of Black womanhood, Black female lyricists frequently reappropriate explicit images of Black female sexuality and undergo a process of negotiating contradictory and conflicting notions of Black female sexuality, so as to achieve control over Black female sexuality (Emerson 128). These women are working within the structure of their oppression to demonstrate that they recognize and locate the forces of oppression, but are not limited or confined by them so much so that they cannot

creatively work to unravel them. Mimesis allows female rappers to successfully dispel stereotypes about Black women's sexuality because it simultaneously parodies and displaces hegemonic conventions. The ability of Black female rappers 'to use the master's tools to dismantle his house' is surely a testament of their ability to locate the site of the oppression, while successfully struggling against it.

The abovementioned attempts to empower Black women through hip-hop by various female rappers attest to the power of performance. Judith Butler elaborates upon the power of performance in her theory on performativity. She argues that "performativity has to do with repetition, very often the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms". Further, she states that "this is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in" as a result of stereotypes. Thus, she encourages women to repeatedly perform gender and sexuality, through imitation or miming, in order to loosen the stronghold of dominant formulations of gender and sexuality, since identities are only "real only to the extent that they are performed" and are not a set of properties governed by the body and its organ configuration (Butler 169). Idealistic notions of beauty and myths which assert the natural sexual promiscuity of Black women are undermined and subverted by Black women who actively and repeatedly perform and portray alternate notions of beauty and of Black female sexuality, thus reflecting on the constructive forces which produce these hegemonic norms and disputing their claim on naturalness (Butler 131).

When Chuck D., of the male rap group Public Enemy summed up the essence of rap by indicating that "rap music is Black folks' CNN", he was clearly stating a fact (Smitherman 20). Rap music is an important medium within Black society, used to regulate Black women's bodies, while articulating information about sexuality, beauty and morality. It is evident that Black women's sexualities have been narrowly defined as a result of racist notions of beauty combined with sexist notions of womanhood. As well, historical representations of Black female bodies in contemporary popular culture still shape perceptions today. However, after analyzing Black women's exploitation and oppression in relation to the modes of appropriation enlisted to control Black womanhood, it is evident that Black female rappers are unwilling to tolerate these notions of beauty and sexuality, which were constructed neither by them nor for their benefit. Black female lyricists are successfully dispelling stereotypes about Black womanhood, and are using their performances as platforms to refute, deconstruct and (re)construct notions of beauty from Black women's perspectives. They are challenging racist and sexist depictions of Black women as sexually wild and free, making rap music the vehicle by which Black lyricists seek empowerment and establish positive identities for themselves and their sisters. But, the battle over control of Black female sexuality is far from over. Society will always strive to control any contagions that threaten the status quo for the overarching White patriarchal order. This is why Lauryn Hill warns her sisters in the hit song, "That Thing", to stand strong against Eurocentrism ("Look at what you be in, hair weaves like Europeans/ Fake nails done by Koreans"), and to proceed with caution when engaging in sexual relations, since there is a fine line between enlisting one's sexuality to empower oneself and enlisting it for male benefit. Hill states "You give it up so easy you ain't even foolin' him/ If you did it then, then you probably fuck again/

Now that was the sin that did Jezebel in/ Showing off your ass because you're thinking it's a trend". Thus, instead of playing into gender and racial stereotypes which over-exaggerate Black female sexuality, as is indicated by the reference to Jezebels in the song, Hill urges "Baby Girl! Respect is just the minimum". Clearly, "rap music is not only a Black expressive cultural phenomenon; it is, at the same time, a resisting discourse, a set of communicative practices that constitute a text of resistance against White America's racism, its Eurocentric cultural dominance" (Smitherman 7), and quite evidently, misogynist male-centred definitions of Black female sexuality.