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“WHERE MY GIRLS AT?”

Negotiating Black Womanhood in Music Videos

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The literature on Black youth culture, especially hip-hop culture, has focused primarily on the experiences of young men, with the experiences of Black girls being all but ignored. However, the recent appearance of Black women performers, songwriters, and producers in Black popular culture has called attention to the ways in which young Black women use popular culture to negotiate social existence and attempt to express independence, self-reliance, and agency. This article is an exploration of the representations of Black womanhood as expressed in the music videos of Black women performers. The author first identifies themes that reflect controlling images of Black womanhood, then those that exemplify an expression of agency, and finally those appearing ambivalent and contradictory. Overall, the music videos express how young Black women must negotiate sexuality and womanhood in their everyday lives.

Today's American youths of all racial and ethnic heritages are living in a cultural environment dominated by the idioms of Black youth and working-class culture that have been articulated since the late 1970s and early 1980s by hip-hop culture. Since its emergence in the mass media mainstream in the early 1990s, hip-hop culture has affected the arenas of film, fashion, television, art, literature, and journalism (Watkins 1998). In the mid- to late 1990s, African American youth emerged as an important segment of this teenage audience and consumer population (Watkins 1998). Recent ethnographic studies of Black youth in the 1990s have demonstrated the importance and impact that popular culture in general and hip-hop culture in particular have on the ways in which young African Americans make sense of their lives, social surroundings, and the world around them (Arnett Ferguson 2000;

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Patillo-McCoy 1999). Therefore, it is important for those who wish to better understand the lives of young African Americans to investigate the attributes of the popular cultural products that inform their everyday lives and attempt to make sense of their participation with and within popular culture. Paying attention to the role of popular culture in the lives of these youths also contributes to sociological theory by further elucidating the significance of the mass media as a social institution and how ideologies of race, class, and gender are represented and reproduced within it.

While much has been written about the significance and impact of hip-hop culture on the lives of Black youth, young Black women, until very recently, have failed to be located as substantial producers, creators, and consumers of hip-hop and Black youth culture (George 1998; Perkins 1996; Rose 1994; Watkins 1998). Most of the contemporary research and criticism has focused on the experience of young men of African descent and, with rare exceptions, has implicitly and often explicitly identified Black popular culture, specifically hip-hop culture, with masculinity (George 1998; Perkins 1996; Rose 1991, 1994).

Yet, African American women have a significant presence in hip-hop and Black popular culture, and in music videos, where they appear as dancers; models; and, most significantly, as performers. At the same time, the hip-hop genre and the music videos that are used to promote records and performers have been harshly critiqued for the antiwoman (specifically anti-Black woman) messages and images contained within them. Critics have pointed out that many discourses in hip-hop culture reproduce dominant and distorted ideologies of Black women's sexuality (hooks 1992; Morgan 1999; Perkins 1996).

Nevertheless, despite the misogynistic representations of Black womanhood that pervade music videos, the 1990s witnessed the emergence of Black women performers, producers, writers, and musicians who have also made the music video into a site for promotion, creativity, and self-expression. Black women performers, songwriters, and producers, including Erykah Badu, Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott, and Lauryn Hill, have profoundly affected hip-hop culture as well as the wider sphere of popular culture. While most music videos, including those of some Black women performers, exacerbate the exploitation of the Black woman's body and perpetuate stereotypes of Black womanhood, Badu, Elliott, and Hill depict themselves as independent, strong, and self-reliant agents of their own desire, the masters of their own destiny.

The medium of the music video, the primary promotional vehicle for the recording industry today, is an especially rich space to explore the ways in which race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect in the construction and proliferation of ideologies of Black womanhood in the mass media and popular culture. This study explores Black women's representation in music video through the analysis of a sample of videos by African American women singers, rappers, and musicians produced and distributed at the end of the 1990s.

Most of the previous studies of Black women's representation in music videos have, on one hand, either focused on the hegemonic and stereotypical imagery and discourses of Black femininity or, on the other hand, exaggerated the degree of

agency that Black female performers in music video have by emphasizing the resistant and counterhegemonic elements of the music video representations. Instead, this study demonstrates that in the cultural productions of Black women, music videos in this case, hegemonic and counterhegemonic themes often occur simultaneously and are interconnected, resulting in a complex, often contradictory and multifaceted representation of Black womanhood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The vast majority of representations of Black women in popular culture are firmly grounded in the dominant ideologies surrounding Black womanhood in American society. Patricia Hill Collins (1991a) described these ideologies as controlling images that are rooted in the maintenance of hegemonic power and serve to justify and legitimize the continued marginalization of Black women. The media and popular culture are primary sites for the dissemination and the construction of commonsense notions of Black womanhood. Music videos, which have been criticized for their objectifying and exploitative depictions of women of all races and ethnicities (Aufderheide 1986; Dines and Humez 1995; Frith, Goodwin, and Grossberg 1993; Hurley 1994; Kaplan 1987; Stockbridge 1987; Vincent 1989; Vincent, Davis, and Boruszkowski 1987), often represent Black women according to the controlling images discussed by Hill Collins. The images that are seen most often are the hypersexualized “hot momma” or “Jezebel,” the asexual “mammy,” the emasculating “matriarch,” and the “welfare recipient” or “baby-momma” (a colloquial term for young, unwed mothers).

Although Black female representation generally draws directly from the controlling images of Black womanhood, Black women’s performances in popular culture often generate representations that counter the dominant ideological notions of Black womanhood. Consequently, the possibility that popular and expressive culture may exist as a site for resistance and revision of these stereotypical representations emerges. Hazel Carby (1986) and Angela Davis (1998) have shown that such phenomena occurred in the early part of this century. At the time, performers such as “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters offered, in their music and on-stage performances, a portrait of Black womanhood in which they asserted empowerment and sexual subjectivity. In both Carby’s and Davis’s views, this female blues culture was grounded in a Black feminist consciousness. Although some authors (Delano Brown and Campbell 1986; Kaplan 1987; Lewis 1990; Peterson-Lewis and Chennault 1986) have looked at race and gender representations in music videos, there have been few systematic studies of Black female representation within the medium (Goodall 1994; Roberts 1991, 1994; Rose 1991, 1994). Even fewer studies have looked at the music videos by Black women performers themselves. Notable exceptions are Tricia Rose’s discussion of Black women rappers in her social history of hip-hop culture, *Black Noise* (Rose 1994), as well as the works of Nataki Goodall (1994) and Robin Roberts (1991, 1994).

Rose (1991, 1994) has connected Carby's (1986) work on the blues with the images and lyrics of female rappers and has proposed that rap music and hip-hop culture, instead of being entirely oppressive to women, may actually enable Black women to assert independence, agency, and control of their sexuality. She argues,

Salt-N-Pepa are carving out a female-dominated space in which Black women's sexuality is openly expressed. Black women rappers sport hip hop clothing and jewelry as well as distinctively Black hairstyles. They affirm a Black, female, working-class cultural aesthetic that is rarely depicted in American popular culture. Black women rappers resist patterns of sexual objectification and cultural invisibility, and they also resist academic reification and mainstream, hegemonic, white feminist discourse. (Rose 1991, 126)

However, Rose's historical work is not based on a systematic content analysis of the music videos themselves, and Goodall's (1994) and Roberts's (1991, 1994) textual analyses are limited even further by focusing only on a few groups. Roberts (1991, 1994) attempted to demonstrate that Black women rappers articulate a feminist sensibility through their music videos. She cites Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, and other Black women rappers' and singers' assertive rhetoric, aggressive sexuality, and defiant stance as evidence of a firmly and markedly feminist consciousness. Goodall (1994) also attempted to locate feminism in Black female performance by chronicling the development of antisexism in the songs and videos of the R&B/hip-hop group TLC. Goodall underscores the ways in which TLC's music displays a growing sense of sexual freedom and contestation of sexism and racial discrimination.

While Goodall (1994) emphasizes how the lyrics of this single group directly comment on sexism and the exploitation of Black women, she fails to consider how the group's image still caters to a male audience. Similarly, Roberts commits the error of assigning Queen Latifah a feminist label without noting that the identity she projects is not unequivocally feminist. I argue that both Goodall and Roberts (1991, 1994), in their efforts to discover patterns of resistance and transgression, overemphasize the degree of agency that Black woman performers possess. Despite their valuable conclusions about Black women's participation in Black popular culture, these works nevertheless fail to problematize the notion of resistance itself.

By conducting a close analysis of a much larger sample of music videos, my study provides an empirical basis for identifying the ways in which Black women use the realm of culture and performance for social commentary and to respond to the controlling images of Black womanhood that were identified and discussed by Hill Collins, Carby, Davis, Rose, and other Black feminist theorists and critics. This study improves on the previous research on Black female music video performance because it problematizes the often-unexamined notion of resistance. Overall, this study furthers the inclusion of Black female youth in the conversation surrounding hip-hop culture by recognizing the active participation of Black female performers and audiences within it (McRobbie 1991, 1993, 1997; McRobbie and Nava 1984). In this way, it serves to question the identification of hip-hop culture with Black

masculinity and Black male youth by demonstrating that music videos also serve as sites for expressing the lived experiences of Black female youth.

In this article, I will first identify how music videos exhibit and reproduce the stereotypical notions of Black womanhood faced by young African American women. Next, I discuss the ways that Black woman performers use music videos for contesting hegemonic racist and sexist notions of Black femininity and asserting agency. Third, I demonstrate how contradictory themes in the music videos reflect a sense of ambivalence on the part of Black girls regarding the relationships between Blackness, womanhood, and sexuality.

METHOD

I collected a purposive sample of 56 music videos that featured Black women performers using the method of “theoretical sampling” (Lindlof 1995; Strauss 1987). The videos were tape-recorded from the daily broadcast programming of cable networks BET, MTV, and VH1 and were collected during the week of 7 January 1998. The majority of the Black women’s videos collected in the sample (38) were taped from BET. Fewer videos by Black women artists were collected from MTV (13) and VH1 (5). According to *Billboard* magazine, for the week ending 11 January 1998, 11 videos featuring Black women artists were in heavy rotation on BET, while MTV featured 5 and VH1 included 2. The sample included those videos in heavy rotation on all three channels, plus all other videos played during the time period that met the criteria.

I assumed that music video programming is strategically targeted by the broadcast outlets and recording companies toward a youth market and that the scheduling of music videos would reflect the viewing patterns of adolescents and young adults in the target age range. Therefore, I taped videos at times of the day when teenagers and young adults would most likely view them: in the morning before school, between 7:00 A.M. and 8:00 A.M.; late afternoon after school, between 2:00 P.M. and 6:00 P.M.; prime time, from 7:00 P.M. to 10:00 P.M.; and late nights on Fridays and Saturdays, between 11:00 P.M. and 2:00 A.M. Recording took place on all channels during these time periods. Videos were purposively sampled and chosen on the basis of the following characteristics: They featured Black female performers (defined as singers, rappers, or other musicians), who were either lead performers or appeared as guests in the videos of other performers (excluding background dancers and singers) regardless of race and gender. An additional criterion for selection was that the performers whose videos I included self-identified as having African or African American heritage. I judged this by observing the signifiers of race in the marketing of the artist, the signs and indicators of Black culture apparent in their work, and my knowledge of this self-identification obtained from outside sources such as interviews and other journalistic accounts.

The videos included in this analysis mirror *Billboard* magazine’s rotation playlists for MTV, VH1, and BET. The rotation, or frequency at which a video is

shown, is determined by a number of factors including the promotional efforts of the record company, the anticipation of the release, and ongoing sales of the single or album. For example, the playlists show that Janet Jackson, Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott, Erykah Badu, Allure, and Mariah Carey were all in heavy rotation on the video outlets during late December 1997 and early January 1998, and they appear in this sample.

My analysis of the music videos was conducted in two stages. First, I coded the entire sample of videos, and second, I performed a close textual analysis of a subsample of the videos. Coding categories were developed to identify emergent themes and patterns within and among the videos and to facilitate an interpretive analysis of those compelling and important themes. All aspects of the 56 videos in the sample, including both the visual narratives and the musical tracks of the songs, were analyzed using these codes.

The coded variables were as follows: the camera's gaze or point of view; the mode of address or the gender of those being "spoken to" in the video; presentation and performance of gender roles; physicality and the body; relationships between women; relationships with men; the presence and degree of female anger, rage, or aggression; the presence of violence; expression of female sexual desire; what sexual behavior, if any, is present; images of motherhood; the number and gender composition of group members; the presence of dance in the video; sound; the type of narrative (if any) in the video; the type of image the artist is projecting; intertextuality or references to other videos, songs, or other media; apparent signifiers of Blackness; class or occupational markers; geographic setting; and age.

Those coding categories that occurred most frequently across the sample of videos or appeared to have the most impact and significance within a critical subgroup of videos were identified as the key themes and issues. To assess the relative importance of these factors, I selected 20 music videos in the sample (indicated by bold italics in Table 1), which exhibited the most salient emergent themes. I conducted a close reading and textual analysis of the visual images, the narrative and representations, and the accompanying musical tracks and lyrics of each of these 20 videos to confirm, contextualize, and further clarify the observations made during the first stage of the analysis.

STEREOTYPES AND CONTROLLING IMAGES

The videos reflect how race, class, and gender continue to constrain and limit the autonomy and agency of Black women. Music videos contain imagery that reflects and reproduces the institutional context in which they are produced, and they are permeated by stereotypical controlling images of Black womanhood. Several stereotypes emerge in the ways Black women's videos are programmed, as well in the content of the videos themselves. First, the videos emphasize Black women's bodies. Second, they construct a one-dimensional Black womanhood. Finally, the presence of male sponsors in the videos and a focus on themes of conspicuous

TABLE 1: List of Videos Selected

Title	Artist	Year
<i>All Cried Out</i>	Allure featuring 112	1997
<i>Everyday</i>	Angie Stone and Devox	1997
<i>A Rose Is Still a Rose</i>	Aretha Franklin featuring Lauryn Hill	1997
<i>I've Got This Feelin'</i>	Bobby Brown, with Whitney Houston	1997
<i>Morning</i>	Bridgette Mc Williams	1997
<i>Retrospective for Life</i>	Common and Lauryn Hill	1997
<i>Give It to You</i>	Da Brat	1995
<i>No, No, No</i>	Destiny's Child featuring Wyclef Jean	1997
<i>Reality</i>	Elusion	1997
<i>Too Gone Too Long</i>	En Vogue	1997
<i>MyLovin' (You're Never Going to Get It)</i>	En Vogue	1992
<i>Don't Let Go</i>	En Vogue	1996
<i>Givin' Him Something He Can Feel</i>	En Vogue	1993
<i>Tyrone</i>	Erykah Badu	1997
<i>On and On</i>	Erykah Badu	1997
<i>Killing Me Softly</i>	Fugees	1996
<i>Anytime Anyplace</i>	Janet Jackson	1994
<i>Together Again</i>	Janet Jackson	1997
<i>Got Till It's Gone</i>	Janet Jackson	1997
<i>Together Again (Deeper Remix)</i>	Janet Jackson	1997
<i>Love Will Never Do Without You</i>	Janet Jackson	1990
<i>The Party Continues</i>	Jermaine Dupri featuring DaBrat	1997
<i>Ghetto Superstar</i>	Joi	1997
<i>Swing My Way</i>	KP and Envyi	1997
<i>Young Sad and Blue</i>	Lysette	1997
<i>Honey</i>	Mariah Carey featuring Puff Daddy and Mase	1997
<i>Butterfly</i>	Mariah Carey	1997
<i>Breakdown</i>	Mariah Carey featuring Bone Thugs and Redman	1997
<i>The Roof</i>	Mariah Carey featuring Mobb Deep	1997
<i>Seven Days</i>	Mary J. Blige featuring George Benson	1997
<i>I'm Not Gonna Cry</i>	Mary J. Blige	1997
<i>I Can Love You</i>	Mary J. Blige featuring Lil' Kim	1997
<i>All I Need</i>	Method Man and Mary J. Blige	1995
<i>Beep Me 911</i>	Missy Elliot featuring 702	1997
<i>Sock It to Me</i>	Missy Elliot featuring Da Brat & Lil' Kim	1997
<i>Am I Dreaming</i>	Ol' Skool featuring Xscape & Keith Sweat	1997
<i>So Long</i>	Phaija	1997
<i>Don't Stop the Music</i>	Playa featuring Missy Elliot	1997
<i>All about the Benjamins</i>	Puff Daddy featuring The Lox, Lil' Kim and B.I.G.	1997
<i>It's All about the Benjamins</i>	Puff Daddy featuring The Lox, Lil' Kim, Dave Grohl, and Fuzzbubble	1997
<i>I'll Be Missing You</i>	Puff Daddy, Faith Evans, and 112	1997
<i>Man Behind the Music</i>	Queen Pen featuring Teddy Riley	1997

(continued)

TABLE 1: Continued

<i>Title</i>	<i>Artist</i>	<i>Year</i>
<i>All My Love</i>	Queen Pen featuring Eric Williams of Blackstreet	1997
<i>We Getz Down</i>	Rampage featuring 702 and Billie Lawrence	1997
<i>R U Ready</i>	<i>Salt n' Pepa</i>	1997
<i>Wannabe</i>	Spice Girls	1997
<i>Say You'll Be There</i>	Spice Girls	1997
<i>Rain</i>	SWV	1997
<i>Silly</i>	Tara Hicks	1998
<i>Firm Biz</i>	The Firm (Nas, AZ, and Foxy Brown)	1997
<i>Luv 2 Luv Ya</i>	Timbaland and Magoo featuring Shaunte	1997
<i>Red Light Special</i>	<i>TLC</i>	1994
<i>You're Making Me High</i>	Toni Braxton	1997
<i>Unbreak My Heart</i>	Toni Braxton	1996
<i>What about Us</i>	Total featuring Missy Elliot	1997
<i>DJ Keep Playing</i>	<i>Yvette Michelle</i>	1997

NOTE: Titles in bold italics indicate videos that were used in both content and textual analysis.

consumption and romance further exhibit the types of social constraints faced by young Black women.

The Body

The first way that patterns of social constraint emerge is in the emphasis on the body. It is clear that female rap and rhythm and blues (R&B) performers are required to live up to dominant notions of physical attractiveness and measure up to fairly rigid standards of beauty. The most striking example of this is the lack of variety in body size and weight. This was surprising, considering the conventional wisdom that the Black community possesses alternative beauty standards that allow for larger body types. Many authors have concluded that these standards contribute to a more positive body image among Black women (Cash and Henry 1995; Flynn and Fitzgibbon 1996; Harris 1994; Molloy and Hertzberger 1998). However, the majority of the videos I coded (30) featured artists who would be considered thin by most standards, while only 9 featured performers who would be considered overweight. The only women who are larger than the ideal are Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott, Angie Stone, and a member of the group Xscape.

In those 30 videos, the thin, physically attractive performers are clearly constructed as objects of male desire. In Bobby Brown's video, *I've Got This Feelin'*, featuring his real-life wife Whitney Houston, Whitney is broken up fetishistically into her body parts. The viewer is only allowed glimpses of her mouth and legs, her arms caressing Bobby's shoulder, and her hair. The implication is that the audience is not supposed to know who she is (although we do have our suspicions), until the

shot widens to reveal her in her entirety, laughing knowingly and almost conspiringly with her husband. Cutting Whitney up into visual pieces undercuts her power.

In another example of the camera's focus on the Black female body, many women appear scantily clad. Like Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey's body parts are also fetishized as she changes into a wet suit and bikini in *Honey*. Her extremities are centered in the camera's gaze. In *Breakdown*, where Carey performs as a Las Vegas Casino showgirl, she is even less clothed than her background dancers. Melanie Brown of the Spice Girls is also scantily clad, performing decked out in a tiger print bustier, which additionally suggests the savage, uncontrollable woman of color who is inherently defined by her body, a notion supported by her nickname, "Scary Spice."

One-Dimensional Womanhood

For the most part, the portrait of Black womanhood that emerges from the video analysis is flat and one-dimensional. Black women are not represented in their full range of being. They are not multifaceted but are reduced to decorative eye candy. Black women performers are not allowed to be artists in their own right but must serve as objects of male desire. In the videos, only three of the featured artists were older than 30 (Janet Jackson, Whitney Houston, and Aretha Franklin). Indubitably, this reflects the youth-oriented nature of popular culture.

Pregnant women and mothers, as well as women older than 30, are not desirable as objects of the music video camera's gaze, reinforcing the sense that only women who are viewed as sexually available are acceptable in music videos. Only two of the videos depicted motherhood: Erykah Badu is visibly pregnant in *Tyrone*, and Joi is shown with her infant daughter in her video, *Ghetto Superstar*.

Sexual diversity is another element of Black womanhood that is conspicuously absent and also reflects the desirability of perceived sexual availability for men. None of the videos featured performers who were lesbian or bisexual, nor did they show even implicit homosexual or bisexual themes. This was interesting in light of the emergence of critically acclaimed and commercially popular bisexual and lesbian artists, most notably, Me'Shell Ndegeocello (whose most controversial video *Leviticus: Faggot* was censored by BET). As can be gleaned from the frequently homophobic rhetoric in hip-hop and R&B songs, sexual difference and nonconformity are still not legitimized in Black popular culture. As a result, it is not particularly surprising that bisexual and lesbian themes do not emerge in a sample of popular Black women's music videos.

"Man behind the Music": The Male Sponsor

The one-dimensional depiction of Black women as objects of male pleasure undermines their legitimacy and agency as artists. Because their role is primarily sexual, they are not taken seriously. Add to that mix the notion that legitimacy in

hip-hop culture is identified with masculinity, and the result is that many Black women artists are presented to the public under the guidance of a male sponsor.

Although male sponsorship, defined as the prominence of a male producer, songwriter, or fellow artist, was only coded in four of the videos, when it does occur, it is fairly significant. In such videos, not only is the male sponsor (who is most often one of the so-called megaproducers such as Sean "Puffy" Combs or Jermaine "J. D." Dupri) prominent visually and narratively in the video, but he literally takes precedence over the artist herself, essentially becoming the true star of the video. The most interesting example of male sponsorship occurs in Queen Pen's *Man behind the Music*, featuring producer, songwriter, and member of the group Blackstreet, Teddy Riley. Many R&B and hip-hop videos feature the producer of the song, reflecting the increased role of the producer in the production of Black music (George 1998). However, in this video, the producer role has been taken to an extreme. Teddy is the "Man," and the song and video are basically all about him. As Queen Pen drives around New York City through the boroughs and Times Square, Teddy reclines and swivels in the studio as the refrain "I . . . am the magnificent" repeats in the background track. He is assigned as much or more screen time as Pen. The song and video imply that Queen Pen is not the author of her rhymes and she is not the creator of her own success. Teddy's writing and producing give Pen her legitimacy, her entrée into the business. The viewer gets the distinct impression that if it were not for Teddy, we would not be watching Pen.

Although Combs, Riley, and Dupri also appear in the videos for male artists that they produce, the impact that they have on the image of women artists appears to be greater. They occupy a primary position within the camera's gaze and on the musical track. As demonstrated in the Queen Pen video example, they also receive a great deal of credit for the creativity and success of the women artists' musical output.

Since Black women have little or no clout in the music industry and Black men dominate the hip-hop world, the presence of a male impresario undermines any sense of creative autonomy for woman artists. In fact, the producer in today's record industry wields an unprecedented amount of control over the musical product, often to the point of overriding an artist's creative decisions and input over the content of a song, and occasionally the video as well (George 1998). The producer and record company executives often choose the video director and contribute to the construction of the artist's image and presentation. These videos give the impression that women are unable to be successful without the assistance and creative genius of a male impresario.

BLACK WOMEN'S AGENCY: COUNTERING CONTROLLING IMAGES

Despite the continuing objectification and exploitation of Black women in music videos, I found evidence of contestation, resistance, and the assertion of

Black women's agency in many others ($n = 25$) as well. This agency emerged through the identification with signifiers of Blackness; an assertion of autonomy, vocality, and independence; and expressions of partnership, collaboration, and sisterhood with other Black women and Black men.

Signifiers of Blackness: Black Aesthetic, Black Context

In these videos, Blackness does not carry a negative connotation. Instead, it is the basis for strength, power, and a positive self-identity. Darker skin is privileged among Black women artists, actresses, models, and dancers in the videos. Thirty of the videos featured women with darker complexions or a combination of lighter and darker skinned women. This was an especially interesting finding after the controversies of the 1980s and 1990s about the frequent use of light-skinned women in music videos, which was criticized for valuing a white standard of beauty (Morgan 1999). In contrast, the videos examined in this study evinced a Black aesthetic in which standards of beauty, while problematic in themselves, were nevertheless based on a more African aesthetic.

The prevalence of a clear hip-hop sensibility supports the valuation of Black culture. Twenty of the videos were coded as being evocative of an urban hip-hop style. What emerges from these observations is the construction of a clear Black aesthetic. In fact, it becomes obvious that these videos exhibit an essentially Black universe. Although this was not specifically coded, white people appeared rarely if ever in the videos. When they do appear, they tend to be minor characters such as the gangsters in *Firm Biz* and Mariah's kidnappers in *Honey*.

Erykah Badu's *On and On* is an excellent example of the construction of a Black context and a Black world. It highlights the specificity, difference, and particularity of the Black experience. *On and On* is a "Color Purple"-style version of the Cinderella fairy tale. It is set on a farm in the rural south during an unspecified time period that appears to be the 1940s. Badu, as the protagonist of the narrative, is left to clean, to tend the farm animals, and to watch the children who are running around the house with their hair undone. We then follow Badu as she performs her chores while singing. After tripping and falling into the mud of a pig sty, and as shots are interspersed of well-dressed Black people going to some unspecified destination, Badu realizes that she has nothing to wear. As she glances at the green tablecloth, she looks into the camera with a "why not" expression. "Cinderella" triumphs as we then see her performing in a "juke joint" to an enthusiastic crowd, wearing the tablecloth. At the end of the video, Badu jumps into the crowd, and as they lift her up, her beat-up work boots are revealed. We, the viewers, are left with the impression that we have emerged from an emphatically southern Black context that affirms the validity of the Black experience.

This construction of a Black universe leads to questioning the notion of Blackness as male or Black youth culture's association with masculinity. Instead, I found Black women firmly contextualized among signifiers and codes of Blackness. They explore themes of womanhood that directly associate them with Blackness and

Black life, and they construct a significant and solid space (albeit limited by the fact that male artists continue to receive more representation than women in heavy video rotations) for girls and women in Black youth and hip-hop culture. By appropriating signs of Blackness, Black women artists are able to assert the particularity and forcefulness of Black femininity and agency through the music video.

Autonomy, Vocality, and Independence

Despite the predominance of traditional gender roles in the music videos, Black women performers are frequently depicted as active, vocal, and independent. This vocality is most frequent within the context of traditional relationships, where the performers express discontent with, and contest, the conditions faced by Black women in interpersonal relationships.

Instead of exhibiting representations of physical violence and aggression, sometimes found in men's videos, this sample of videos demonstrates the significance of verbal assertiveness. Speaking out and speaking one's mind are a constant theme. Through the songs and videos, Black women are able to achieve voice and a space for spoken expression of social and interpersonal commentary.

A video by Erykah Badu, *Tyrone*, is the most conspicuous example of this theme. The lyrics, in which Badu dismisses a neglectful lover who prefers the company of his shiftless, unemployed friends, demonstrate her ability to get out of a bad relationship in which her sexual, emotional, and financial needs are not being met. Her words are underscored by her performance style. Badu is at center stage wearing African attire, including her signature headdress, and standing next to an ankh, an ancient Egyptian symbol of life. As she sings, her gestures, inflections, and facial expressions underscore the meaning of the song and increase her rapport with the very enthusiastic women in the audience. The "Tyrones" of the world know who they are, and the women they are involved with have an example of the most expedient and effective way of dealing with them. Badu clearly speaks her mind and asserts her own interests forcefully.

Although they are not clearly and unequivocally rejecting the desirability and basic dynamics of heterosexual relationships, Black women in these videos assert their own interests and express dissatisfaction with the unequal state of Black men-women interpersonal relations. Black women also express their own agency and self-determination through direct action. What emerges is the ability of a Black woman to define her own identity and life outcomes.

Sisterhood, Partnership, and Collaboration

Although Black women assert independence, they do not accomplish their goals alone. In these videos, Black women look to each other for support, partnership, and sisterhood. Collaborations between women artists are a constant and recurring theme throughout the videos and suggest a sense of community and collectivity. This shows that women need each other for guidance and support to succeed and

survive in the recording industry and the world at large. Within these collaborations, unlike the male sponsorships discussed above, the spotlight is shared, and the guest star does not overshadow the featured artist.

The most interesting video in which this occurs is *Sock It to Me*, in which Missy Elliott collaborates with the rappers Lil' Kim and Da Brat. It has an outer-space, fantasy theme, and in the visual narrative, Missy and rapper Lil' Kim appear in red and white bubble space suits as explorers on a mission. As soon as they land on an uncharted planet, they are pursued by an army of monstrous robots under the control of the evil "mad scientist," portrayed by Missy's collaborator and producing partner Timbaland. They are chased throughout the rest of the video through space and on various barren planets. The chase scenes are interspersed with scenes of Missy, as she dances in the forefront of a troupe of dancers wearing futuristic attire. Missy also appears solo, seemingly suspended in space as she sings the track of the song. Just as Missy and Kim appear to be in danger of succumbing to Timbaland's goons, fellow rapper, Da Brat, during her rap sequence on the music track, comes to the rescue on a jet ski-type spacecraft. They speed off through space, fighting off the mad scientist's crew, and arrive safely at Missy's mothership, prominently marked with the letter *M*.

Throughout the chase sequences, the viewer's identification remains squarely with Missy and Kim, solidified by the close-up shots of their frightened facial expressions as they flee the goons and the (albeit short-lived) satisfaction apparent on their faces when they mistakenly believe that they have escaped their pursuers.

The extended chase scene signifies the continued quest to escape the threat of male dominance. It symbolizes the agency of women who refuse to be subsumed or annihilated by male dominance, as represented by the monstrous troops of the male mad scientist. The sisterhood that is implied by the camaraderie between Missy and Lil' Kim, their ability to escape Timbaland's evil troops, and the fact that they are rescued by another woman, Da Brat, further demonstrates the collective power of Black women to help each other be self-sufficient and not dependent on men.

Overall, what emerges from this combination of agency, voice, partnership, and Black context is a sense of the construction of Black woman-centered video narratives. Within these narratives, the interests, desires, and goals of women are predominant and gain importance in contrast to those in which they are exploited and subsumed. Black women are quite firmly the subjects of these narratives and are able to clearly and unequivocally express their points of view.

AMBIVALENCE AND CONTRADICTION: NEGOTIATING BLACK WOMANHOOD

In this section, I discuss the ambivalent and contradictory relationship that young Black women appear to have with Black popular culture and how those contradictions are reflected in the music videos in this sample. In this regard, music

videos exemplify a tension between the structural constraints of race and gender on one hand and women's resistance and self-affirmation on the other.

Every day, young Black women face conflicting messages about their sexuality and femininity, as well as their status both in the Black community and society at large. They must figure out how they should construct and assert their identity as Black women. Therefore, it is not surprising that within the cultural productions of young Black women, themes of contradiction and ambivalence would emerge.

While it sometimes appears that these artists are directly reflecting and capitulating to oppressive social forces, this seeming compromise can be interpreted more accurately as ambivalence regarding contradictory messages about Black female sexuality, namely, the coexistence of hypersexual images and the denigration and denial of the beauty of the Black female body. In response to these contradictory notions of Black womanhood, Black women performers frequently reappropriate often explicit images of Black female sexuality. This strategy of self-representation as sexual may, on one hand, be interpreted as a sort of false consciousness that reflects an acceptance of the controlling images of Black womanhood. However, I argue that instead, these sometimes explicit representations of Black women's sexuality actually exemplify a process of negotiating those contradictory and often conflicting notions and, more significantly, represent an attempt to use the space of the music video to achieve control over their own sexuality. The four themes that I located that indicate this process include collaboration between Black men and women, representation of a multidimensional sexuality, returning the gaze, and the indeterminate gaze.

“Together Again”: Black Male-Female Collaboration

Black men and women are frequently seen in these videos as coworkers and collaborators. They are fellow group members, found in duets, and they appear as nonmusical guest stars in each other's videos. Fourteen of the videos portray Black men as fellow group members or platonic friends. This theme occurs nearly as often as when men appear as romantic interests (18 videos). Collaboration emerges as an important aspect of Black women's performance. Despite the fact that strides have been made in recent years, it remains difficult for young women to enter the music industry on their own. As suggested in the discussion of sponsorship above, *entrée* into the business can be easier if they are associated with a man who is already established.

As opposed to the sponsorship and/or *impresario* videos, Black men and women collaborated frequently in apparently equal working relationships. In this context of partnership, Black women performers wield a great deal of creative control as songwriters, producers, and video directors. What this suggests is that Black men and women can work together and provide each other with mutual support to achieve success in a competitive cultural field. This phenomenon also is embedded in the tradition of collectivity and collaboration as a theme in African and African American culture (Hill Collins 1991a, 1991b).

In these collaborative relationships, Black women performers gain an equal footing with their fellow male artists. For example, Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott collaborates with her partner in crime, Timbaland, and Magoo in *Sock It to Me* and *Beep Me 911*. She also makes an appearance in the video for the male group Playa’s party anthem, *Can’t Stop the Music*. Lauryn Hill collaborates with Pras and Wyclef in the Fugees and is the director and costar in rapper Common Senses’ reflection on fatherhood, *Retrospective for Life*. Not only do these women have the same level of creative control and autonomy as the men, they also are able to execute many actions previously assigned only to male performers. Most significantly, the Black women artists within these videos are able to construct themselves as textual subjects and wield their gaze in a similar manner to men. Woman performers are provided with space and opportunity to wield creative and artistic control and to construct their own narratives of Black womanhood that express their lived experience. In effect, these collaborative working relationships counter and overshadow the marginalizing and silencing that result from the sponsorship relationship. In fact, one could argue that Missy Elliott and Lauryn Hill have had more impact on American popular culture (and hip-hop culture) than their collaborators.

Multidimensional Sexuality: Reappropriating the Black Female Body

Most of the artists portray themselves with a highly stylized and glamorous image. Wearing designer gear, these women singers present themselves as sexy and provocative. In 21 of the videos, the artist was depicting a glamorous image, while in 17 they were coded as having a sexual image. This emphasis on appearance and physical attraction confirms the notion of the excessive sexuality of the Black woman. It supports the ideological controlling image of the hypersexual “sapphire” or “jezebel,” effectively undermining Black womanhood and humanity.

However, in the videos analyzed, glamour and style are not the only salient attributes possessed by Black women artists. Instead, a sexualized image often occurs simultaneously with themes of independence, strength, a streetwise nature, toughness, and agency. Most of the time, the same artists express themselves in a single video as sexy and savvy, glamorous and autonomous. Fifteen of the videos depict artists having an independent image, and 13 are streetwise and tough. Many of these videos were also coded as glamorous and sexual.

What seems to emerge is a contradiction between the complex and often unconventional representations of Black women artists and the appearance of objectified and clearly one-dimensionally sexualized Black women dancers. Fifteen of the videos were coded as featuring female background dancers. For the most part, when these dancers appear on screen, they are scantily clad and move in a highly suggestive manner. Male dancers, in contrast, only appear in 8 of the 56 videos and are rarely explicitly sexualized. In Da Brat’s *Give It to You*, which takes place at what appears to be a hip-hop industry party, Da Brat’s tough and streetwise, even boyish, image contrasts sharply with the appearance of scantily clad female “groupies” who are mingling and dancing in the crowd. Missy Elliott’s *Beep Me 911* is set in

what seems to be a pornographic peep show. Missy and 702 dance among go-go dancers who appear to be life-sized marionettes, as Timbaland and Magoo observe through a glass barrier. Missy is demanding that her lover tells her what's up by beeping her, to tell her why "you're playing on me." She asserts her own interests, the fulfillment of her own physical and emotional desires, which is ironic considering that her demands are being articulated in a context of male sexual pleasure and satisfaction.

The fact remains that sex sells. In the entertainment industry, there is a call for bodies, namely, female bodies, to be on display to stimulate record sales. If it is not the artist herself, then models and dancers serve this purpose. Women remain the object of sexual desire, the selling point, and the bodies on display.

On the other hand, the juxtaposition and combination of sexuality, assertiveness, and independence in these videos can also be read as the reappropriation of the Black woman's body in response to its sexual regulation and exploitation. What emerges is an effort on the part of the Black female artist to assert her own sexuality, to gain her own sexual pleasure.

Whether this indicates compromise or capitulation to objectification and exploitation is not definitively clear. It is difficult to reach a conclusion on this solely from the data gathered from textual analysis. One would need to investigate the creative production decision-making process. However, the results of this analysis and interpretation indicate that trade-offs are made in the construction of an artist's image. Black womanhood, as expressed through Da Brat and Missy's performances, is the result of a process of negotiation in which objectification of the female body must be present in order for the performer to gain a level of autonomy, to gain exposure. While this seems on the surface like "selling out" to the dictates of patriarchy and the marketplace, I would argue that instead, it affirms the multidimensional nature of Black womanhood. A woman does not need to alienate her sexuality to be assertive, nor must she be a one-dimensional sex object. She can be allowed to express her sexuality, her body, and her own life simultaneously. In these texts, the Black woman is constructed, through this seeming contradiction, as being able to assert the pursuit of pleasure without sacrificing her humanity.

Returning the Gaze: Sexuality on a Woman's Terms

An interesting manifestation of the phenomenon of contradiction and ambivalence is the pattern of a reversal and returning of the gaze. A critical mass of videos feature men as objects of women's desire, where men's bodies are the center of the camera's gaze. What also occurs in these videos is a reversing of traditional gender roles in which men are objectified. Simultaneously, women remain the object of the camera's gaze as well. In *Swing My Way*, KP and Envyi pursue a male love interest in a club. In *You're Making Me High*, Toni Braxton and actresses Erika Alexander, Vivica Fox, and Tisha Campbell rate male visitors on a numerical scale as they appear in an elevator, while Toni's *Unbreak My Heart* features Black male supermodel Tyson Beckford. TLC (group members T-Boz, Left Eye, and Chilli) are

the only women players (and the only fully clothed individuals) in a sexy game of strip poker in *Red Light Special*, and Janet Jackson's *Love Will Never Do Without You* centers the well-chiseled Black body of Djamon Hounsou and the buffed white body of actor Antonio Sabato Jr. alongside her own washboard abs. What all of these videos have in common is the construction of the male body, and particularly the Black male body, as the object of Black female pleasure. The male body is not merely looked at; rather, it is actively pursued. These women clearly and unequivocally express what they want, how and when they want it, and that they frequently get it.

What results is a space where the erotic can become articulated on a woman's terms. When videos featuring themes of sexual desire and fulfillment were coded, signifiers of mutual sexual fulfillment predominated, and women's sexual fulfillment was more often portrayed than for men. Although women were usually visually constructed as the source of male pleasure, when issues of sexual pleasure were articulated either in the lyrical or visual text, or both, the importance of female sexual desire became key. This construction of a sphere of erotic agency does not simply symbolize the subjectivity of the individual Black woman but also results in the construction of agency at the social and cultural level. It results in a space for an articulation of themes of freedom and liberty.

A long-standing theme in Black popular culture and the African American performance tradition has been the connection and interrelatedness of themes of sexuality to those of freedom (Davis 1998; Gilroy 1993). Angela Davis (1998) cites Audre Lorde's theory of "The Erotic as Power" in describing the ways in which the lyrics and performances of Black women artists included associations of sexuality as freedom and social commentary. In describing Billie Holliday's performance of "Some Other Spring," Davis elucidates how Holliday reappropriated the concept of love and sexual desire to symbolize liberty and autonomy:

In a more complex racial and cultural context, she was able to carry on a tradition established by the blues women and blues men who were her predecessors: the tradition of representing love and sexuality as both concrete daily experience and as coded yearning for social liberation. (1998, 173)

Within the context of racial and sexual oppression and marginalization, love and sexuality have come to signify not only interpersonal relationships but also Black women's struggles for liberation and freedom at a broader level.

The Indeterminate Gaze

The address and gaze in these videos were frequently indeterminate. It was difficult to ascertain where the camera's gaze was intended to originate and to whom the video images and narrative were addressed. While clearly not ungendered, the gaze and address were frequently also neither male nor female. Both the male and female audience member or viewer appears to be constructed within these texts. The

camera objectifies the Black female body in a traditional manner, while the lyrics of the song are addressed to a male subject. However, it becomes apparent that men are not the only intended audience. There appears to be a space constructed within the text that allows for Black women viewers to place themselves as subjects of the text, of the narrative.

A *mélange* of visual and aural strategies contribute to the construction of this indeterminate gaze. In these videos, the camera positioning, artist performance, and narrative structure are combined with visual omniscience. In addition, an indeterminate point of view and frequently non-gender-specific song lyrics contribute to the possibility of a multigendered and even ungendered gaze within music video texts. The Black female performers are not just looking at and talking to men but looking at and speaking with women as well. The unspecified and omniscient point of view constructed by camera positioning supports this by allowing both men and women to see themselves as subjects of the song and video.

The most compelling examples of this phenomenon occur in videos by the group En Vogue. In *Giving Him Something*, a remake of the Aretha Franklin R&B classic, En Vogue performs in a club for an all-male audience. They move seductively, gyrate their hips, and sing provocatively of "giving him something he can feel so he knows my love is real." The men in the audience are responding viscerally, biting their knuckles, and swooning. This scenario is interesting because while the group members are clearly objectified on stage and are explicitly sexualized, it is clear that they are gaining pleasure reciprocally along with a certain level of power over these men who are virtually losing control of their faculties as a result of their performance. Second, the men in the audience are extremely attractive themselves and are the objects of the camera's gaze. What is important here is that not only are men gaining pleasure from viewing the video, but women, as the viewers, are as well. This is not a mere role reversal but an example of an articulation of mutual pleasure and enjoyment. The Black woman is the agent of her own pleasure as well as the vehicle for the fulfillment of the man's desire. She is not just the object but also becomes the subject. As in the gaze reversal videos discussed above, not only does she give sexual pleasure, she also pursues, receives, and accepts it.

Informed by the context of the gender politics of Black male and female relationships, this construction of the unfixed, multiple gaze serves to level the sexual playing field. En Vogue, Toni Braxton, and TLC are not simply on display for men (although they surely are); their videos also place men on display for them and their fellow women viewers. In addition, and significantly, the simultaneous existence of their sexuality and independence contests inequality in man-woman relationships. As a result, instead of being the object of exploitation, the Black woman performer is able to construct a subject position for herself and her women viewers. While this is not articulated as a complete role reversal, which would ostensibly alienate male audiences, it is instead expressed as a mutual pursuit of sexual pleasure and satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

Despite the potentially limiting aspects of the frequently contradictory and stereotypical themes in music videos, I demonstrated that a more nuanced and complex depiction of Black womanhood emerges in the representations of Black woman performers.

My findings support and enhance the current literature in Black feminist theory. Whereas in *Black Feminist Thought* Hill Collins (1991a) demonstrated how the controlling images of Black womanhood are disseminated and legitimized through social institutions, my study extends her notion by showing how popular entertainment serves as a space for the proliferation of these controlling images. Hill Collins (1991a, 1991b) described the ways that Black women have countered these hegemonic notions of Black femininity through their culture, focusing on literature and performance in the Blues tradition. I show how Black women also are able to articulate other key themes of self-valuation, self-determination, and a critique of the interlocking nature of oppression. The themes of returning the erotic gaze and reappropriating the Black female body add an additional dimension to Black feminist theory by showing how Black women may use the sphere of culture to reclaim and revise the controlling images, specifically “the Jezebel,” to express sexual subjectivity.

Of course, the conclusions drawn as a result of a textual content analysis of music videos are necessarily limited by the absence of inquiry into the production and reception of music videos and by the lack of a more comprehensive survey of the cultural landscape in which they exist. As a result, this study is not a complete analysis of the social context of Black female representation in music videos, and further investigation into Black women’s reception and interpretation of music videos, as well as their role as cultural producers in the entertainment industry, is recommended.

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