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Where the Ladies At? Examining the Visibility of Black Women in Hip Hop an How It Reflects a Larger Understanding of Black Womanhood

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Throughout history, art has always been a reflection of the culture that it lives in. Whether it is music, dance, or literature, art has always been used to further understand the way in which a society operates. It has maintained itself as a tool in understanding the world around us, but what most people don't ever think about is how something becomes "art". A lot of folks don't ever take into account that most art has made a transition through this hierarchy of culture. This means that most things that are considered artistic actually were not considered art at all when they were first created. For example the world renowned and extensively celebrated work of William Shakespeare was actually considered trash during the period of actual performance. It was considered the entertainment of the peasants. Known for being crude, scandalous, and lacking sophistication, the "cultured" elite of that time considered his work to be absolute trash and it was not until years later that his writing is now considered the *crème de la crème* of the western world. A similar transition is happening now with the musical Genre of Hip Hop as well. Hip Hop music first started out as a product of the oppositional culture to reflect oppressed black and brown communities of the late 1970s and early 1980s. With classic and unreleased soul and funk samples of the previous decades, artists would "rap" over these instrumentals with fun or gritty rhymes to express the world around them. These "musical poems" or "Raps" were usually done at house or block parties and were accompanied by dancers who would "break" dance and disc jockeys who would play the records while emphasizing or elongating the "breaks" of the song. This musical aspect of the Hip Hop culture would be the soundtrack for the graffiti artists on the street and the intellectual scholars who wanted to gain a more African centered education about the past and the present. Hip Hop started off as something that lived strictly in the Bronx but as it spread through the five boroughs of New York City, it also began to gain popularity across the nation. By the time of the mid to late 1990s, Hip Hop music had cemented itself as a

notable genre that was here to stay. Consequently, Hip Hop by the turn of the century was now one of the most popular musical art forms in not only the United States but all over the world. With artists like Jay-Z, Diddy and Outcast being major influences in the crossover appeal of Hip Hop, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, record companies started to see something in the genre that had not once been seen before, mass *commercialization*. No longer was Hip Hop this alternative and rebellious culture that could not be contained to major recording companies or appeal to non-black/latinx audiences, but now a viable product in the music *business*.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, commercialization has a few definitions that are interesting to note. The first one says that commercialization is “to manage on a business basis for profit”. The second one says that commercialization “exploits for product” while the third one says that commercialization is the “debase in quality for more profit”. From my observation all three of these definitions tell a story of a product and its downgrade for the purpose of economic gain. This means that for whatever the subjected product, the amount of money that it brings to the seller(s) is the most important thing when forming the product itself, the way it is placed, and the people that it is intended to attract. This means that with some exceptions, a commercialized product will always lack in quality, integratory, and uniqueness, if those things even slightly interfere with the overall profit. The same way of thinking can be applied to the Hip Hop music industry. With the commercialization of Hip Hop, the people at the helm of these record companies, radio stations, and media outlets have now seen what the benefits are for the promotion, placement, and selling of “Hip Hop”. From the creation of shows like Yo MTV Raps in the late 1980s to rapper Lil Yachty’s current endorsement deal with Sprite and Target, there is a very obvious and deliberate effort to combine capitalism with the genre. These days there is a slew of radio stations dedicated to only playing the most hardcore of hip

hop singles. This strikes a stark contrast to the early days where hip hop records could only be played at night or strictly in “urban” dance clubs or parties. Even in the world of fitness, there are new instructional DVDs that claim to get one “summer ready” with the help of cool and fun moves that attempt to teach you traditional Hip Hop dances and attempt to give you that authentic “street/club” style. This is completely different than the days of long time television host, Don Cornelius, not wanting his famous Soul Train dancers to dance Hip Hop down the line. Hip Hop has made a real impact on popular culture where artists like Wale can work in collaboration with actor Jerry Seinfeld for his mixtape and Queen Latifah can not only star in her own television sitcom during the 90s but also host her own talk show for two consecutive seasons in the second decade of the 2000s. The award for best Rap artist is now being televised during the Grammy ceremony unlike the era of DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince who decided to boycott their win because the network would not even air the Rap category on television. The point is that Hip Hop in 2017 has become a hot commodity for the economic world and although this is great in validating the art form as a legitimate genre with a strong fan base, it does raise some concerns regarding the true “essence” and original culture that once allowed hip hop to be a communal experience. Many people wonder if through its commercialization, Hip Hop has lost its voice in speaking for the oppressed and marginalized and being an outlet for the social issues going on in minority communities. A concept similar to this is addressed *The Struggle for Hip Hop Authenticity and Against Commercialization in Tanzania* by Msia Kibona Clark. She discusses the commercialization of Hip Hop culture in the African country of Tanzania but her studies can be translated to American Hip Hop as well. When referring to another author she writes “McLeod (1999) points to the irony that faces subculture groups that are defined by their opposition to the “establishment”, but later find themselves absorbed by the mainstream as they

become more popular (Clark 7).” She is explaining how with the popularization of a specific culture that was once praised for its rebellious roots, the true nature of the oppositional culture tends to get watered down. In the case of American Hip Hop, this is most definitely the case. Because of Hip Hop’s newfound mainstream appeal, the culture is now adhering to the rules of popular culture instead of creating their own. The culture is partaking in materialism and less complex expressions of art, just to maintain its “popular status when it was never supposed to be a part of pop culture. But by far one of the main concerns to this newly commercialized Hip Hop culture has been the role of women. Although not often explored, women have played a major role in not only the creation and cementing of Hip Hop in the music industry, but also in the commercialization of the genre.

Often times when studying Hip Hop, there is a popular narrative that tends to be very male centered. There is usually little to no reference to many of the women who founded this thing called hip hop. When there is a discussion about the five pillars of hip hop, women tend to be nonexistent to the conversation. When there is mention of the founders of hip hop, people will always mention DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Kurtis Blow, but will fail to mention Roxanne Chante and Mc Lyte. When talking about Hip Hop moguls, people will always mention Jay Z and Diddy but will conveniently leave out Queen Latifah. When talking about the greatest producers of all time, people will mention Pharell, Kanye and Timbaland but will completely negate Missy Elliot. People will talk about how break dance came to be and how B-Boys made hip hop dancing cool while simultaneously erasing all those *B-Girls* that were right along with those young men. They will reduce women to video vixens and groupies forgetting about people like the Fly Girls and other female backup dancers who actually made those early music videos popular. The point is that there is a sexism in hip hop that prevents the whole story from being

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told and lends to ideologies surrounding black womanhood. In this project I will explore the roles of women played in Hip Hop culture because despite its popularity as simply a vessel of entertainment, Hip Hop actually gives insight to the way black women are understood in not only the music industry but American society.

Given the Origins of Hip Hop music and the videos that compliment it, women have been an integral part in not only popular but commercial success as well. Whether it was rapping, dancing, writing, and/or creating the videos themselves, women have been there from the start. With the release of the new Netflix series *Hip Hop Evolution and The Get Down* in the last year and a half, there seems to be a resurgence in America's hip hop heads to study the roots and origins of such a popular art form and as a fan myself, I too was excited to see some hip history being brought to the screen. But as I sat down to watch both series I was greatly disappointed. In both shows, the female influence in the culture had been either completely ignored or greatly reduced. In *Hip Hop Evolution* which was directed by Darby Wheeler, there was a four part look into the origins of Hip Hop. The host and rapper Shad Kabango takes the viewer through what at first glance, seems like a very well thought out and extensive look in to the deep roots of hip hop. From the history of the cross Bronx Expressway, to white flight, and countless interviews with Hip Hop legends, Kabango really gives the audience watching a real sense of the essence of the culture. The documentary seems to be well planned, researched, and executed nicely. Everything from the cover art to the way the cameras were used, there was a sense of pride in the way this once laughable culture had now cemented itself in the popular media. But as a female audience member, I was anxious to learn something new about the women who were so often casted to the shadows of their male counterparts. Unfortunately by the fourth installment, there was this realization that there would not be any noteworthy mention of women or female rappers other

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than the quick clip of Nicki Minaj, Lil Kim, and a ridiculously brief interview with 80s teen rapper Roxanne Shante . In the musical/period drama *The Get Down* on Netflix , it also tells the story of four young men who are a part of the second generation of hip hop artists who will play a major role in taking hip hop music from underground to the radio waves. The show stars , Zeke who is a biracial minority living in the south Bronx with his Aunt after the passing of his parents. Zeke is a poet who is introduced to the rap game through his friends Shaolin Fantastic, Ra Kipling, Boo-Boo Kipling, and Marcus “Dizzee” Kipling. Together they all form a group entitled “The Fantastic Four Plus One”. Although the show is interesting and only in its first season, it is important to note that once again the show leaves out all women involved with the Hip Hop movement. The only young women interested in music at all are “Mylene Cruz and her two best friends who sing Disco music. The only young female artists in the show are portrayed as having no interest in this up and coming genre. Thus once again promoting the notion of women not having an active role in the culture which is not true. Honestly, the only contemporary showing regarding hip hop that seems to even remotely include women is VH1’s new show *The Breaks* starring Tristian Wilds, Teyana Taylor, Afton Williamson, and real life rapper Method Man. In contrast, with *The Get Down* and *Hip Hop Evolution*, Taylor and Williamson’s characters actually give women the well overdue recognition they deserve. Taylor’s character is an underground rapper who actually ghost writes the song that lands her male counterpart his recording contract. Williamson’s character is the journalist and agent that actually pleads to get a very successful record label to take Hip Hop music seriously. This is one of the only nationally syndicated television shows that lend itself to the silenced stories of black women involved in hip hop. Without the female influences portrayed in *The Breaks*, these stories would be lost thus further erasing black women from the genre

The Male Gaze of Hip Hop

With the popularity of music in American society, it is only natural for music videos themselves to make great impacts within our culture. Nowadays, the music video is just as big as the song, if not bigger. Most artists have taken this into account when releasing any new visual for a popular song. But there is one artist in particular that seems to be getting the most buzz for the music videos that they attach to their song. This artist is female rapper Nicki Minaj. The moving visuals for her songs are edgy, captivating, and controversial. Recently, she has been giving her audience a more toned down look in comparison to her introduction to the commercial world with a very colorful, dramatic, and overtly sexual look. But once one got beyond all that, we noticed that there was an underlying foundation of feminism in her music. Nicki Minaj, like other black women in hip hop, was constantly playing with the Male Gaze. There are two videos in particular that seem to blatantly play with the scopophilic theories of Laura Mulvey; “Lookin Ass N*gga” and “The Boys” featuring Cassie. Both of these music videos seem to be actively embracing or rejecting this prevailing pattern of scopophilia in film, which Mulvey discusses in her essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative”. Mulvey says that this type of cinematic voyeurism is just another representation of the patriarchic society we live in. So for me, these videos by Minaj reflect how Mulvey’s writings about power, pleasure in looking/ being looked at, and the objectification of female subjects all play out in popular culture today.

In “The Boys” featuring Cassie there is this stereotypical way of female subjectivity that Nicki Minaj and Cassie adhere to in the video. They consciously (or unconsciously) work in the confines of the male gaze and male fantasy to portray an acceptable image of women in the American patriarchy. Although the video begins with some sort of story line with cosigning newspaper articles, one can begin noticing Mulvey connections at around 22 seconds. It is here

that there is Minaj getting out of a recently crashed, bright pink automobile in front of a small group of male spectators. Immediately, there is this obvious notion of “to-be-looked-at-ness” that Minaj is acting out for the camera. Even when her female feature Cassie begins singing the chorus at around 53 seconds, there is a continuation of those same spectators just gawking at these beautiful women. This active role of voyeurism that is played out by the men and passive subject of attention played by the two female artists represent this notion of content and “natural” objectivity that Mulvey discusses in her essay. It seems to be “natural” for women to be passively watched and the men to be active spectators of them. Not to mention the fact, that the women seem to know that they are being watched by both the men in the video and viewers off screen, and are completely unbothered by it. She writes “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly. (Mulvey 206)” This quote reinforces the idea of women being taught to cater to the male gaze in order to be successful on screen, which reiterates the gender roles of power that linger within all aspects of American society. This is especially prevalent in the Hip Hop world.

As the song continues, the video continues to play with this idea of “woman as image, man as bearer of look (Mulvey 206).” At around 1:11, there is this set of pink and white polka dotted doors that open up and reveal an even “sexier” Minaj and Cassie. It is here where the two artists begins to dance and pose with each other to create this super erotic fantasy that directly plays into the idea of males being the only receivers of pleasure in this “normal” cinematic representation. It is even more ironic, because the lyrics in the song are actually criticizing man’s constant need for sexual/erotic pleasure. Cassie sings “the boys always spending all their money on love/ They wanna touch it, taste it, see it feel it/ clone it, own it, yeah yeah”. She is actually

condemning men (The Boys), for their lack of lustful control, but continues to perform what they want to see. This correlates with Mulvey's opinion on female subjects being necessary but in reality holding no real value to the plot/purpose of the film. "The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of the story line (Mulvey 206)." In addition, the two female artists are placed in these brightly color sets, with these brightly colored outfits doing stereotypical things that are visually appealing to the male gaze. Minaj is in the hair salon and bouncing on huge rubber balls, while Cassie is interchangeably seen in androgynous outfits with subtle sex appeal. It appears that Minaj is imitating heterosexual female sexuality while Cassie plays with idea of her and Minaj being in a lesbian relationship or even the gay male gaze. Either way all these visuals, create a non-threatening space where men can continue to have power (sexual and non-sexual) over their female counterparts. This concept and ones similar to it have become an integral part of hip hop. Women, especially black women, are only seen as being useful to the male gaze. Although Minaj and Cassie are entertainers, the way they are performing can easily be applied to the way video vixens are used in Hip Hop today.

In contrast, the Lookin Ass video seems to be rejecting these roles head on. Dressed in interchangeable black, skin tight, revealing outfits, Minaj is completely aware that she is being watched by her lonesome male spectator and instead of being unbothered, she is blatantly irritated. No longer is she just continuing her verse with no acknowledgement of the nosey onlooker, she challenges him. First it is through her spit fire lyrics which is literally criticizing the man in the video and the men off screen. She raps lyrics like "Look at yall lookin ass n*ggas/ Stop lookin at my ass, ass n*ggas" at 34 seconds, which directly call out the onlookers. It is ironic because she is actually wearing body hugging outfits and doing seductive poses that are

meant to attract the audience. In a weird way it is like she is appealing to the male gaze but still saying that her body is not for their erotic visual fantasies. She even says “I don’t want sex, give a f*ck about ya ex/ I don’t even want a touch from yall n*ggas” at 55 seconds. With this line she is assuming their obvious sexual wishes but completely dismissing them because she is disgusted and uninterested. As in the previous video, she is aware of the off screen audience but in this video she seems to be addressing them as well. Next, the “male gaze/audience” is also being belittled with their own misogynistic insults that are commonly used in reference to women. She calls them everything from bitches to pussies, and even insults their economic status which further dismisses traditional notions of western manhood. All these insults also act as symbols for Mulvey’s views on the male fear of castration while looking at the female “object”. Mulvey writes “the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of penis, imply a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. (Mulvey 208)” Nicki Minaj embodies the meaning of this quote. With her emasculating lyrics and actual image, she is ironically carrying out a process that her male viewers were originally terrified of happening in the video, castration. She has successfully disrupted the fantasy by tapping into their long lasting phobia. “Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. (Mulvey 208)”

Lastly, this anxiety/fear comes to end at the last part of the video. At about 2:20, Nicki Minaj grabs two very large automatic weapons and begins to shoot all of her male gawkers, inside and outside the video. This is exactly what no one wanted to happen, but it did. It was like she allowed the “male gaze” to continue for only so long, before she completely dismantled it. This moment and until the end of the video is what Mulvey would call the “Destruction of

pleasure as a radical weapon” (Mulvey 203). The video, especially the ending is a blatant attempt to change the “normal” construct of film in our culture.

So therefore, Nicki Minaj’s videos for her hit singles The Boys and Lookin Ass both act as representations of the views and opinions that Laura Mulvey expresses in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” published in 1975. Even despite, Minaj’s continuous profanity and the excessive use of re-appropriated racial slurs, there is an undeniable correlation between the writings of Mulvey and the music videos she chooses to release. Maybe one day the female rapper will be analyzed further to give more insight to the true meaning of Post-Feminism. Nicki Minaj is the perfect example of how women in this industry are forced to both participate and reject the sexism that lives within in Hip Hop. Because she is one of the very few female rappers in Hip Hop right now, it is important to study how she engages with her audience to further understand how (black) women are seen in the culture.

Nicki Minaj is one of the most popular rappers in the music industry right now and it is necessary to examine her work a bit when understanding the way a woman’s role in the Hip Hop industry operates. She is that perfect blend of talented artist with creative raps and video vixen. A lot her popularity and market appeal come from her ability to straddle the two categories effortlessly. She is the classic example of the way in which sex, sexuality, and femininity are so entangled with the way in which female Hip Hop artists are presented. Even if we look at an artist like Missy Elliot who is actually very similar to Nicki Minaj in terms of creativity especially on both of their debut albums, Elliot also seems to be negotiating the way her sexuality and Femininity is expressed as an artist. Although they both know that it is inevitable, Missy Elliot participates in promoting very sexualized lyrics while actually dressing very masculine and/or unisex. This is the complete opposite of how Nicki Minaj operates. While

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Minaj actually uses both her physical and lyrical sex appeal to her advantage, Missy Elliot seems to be rejecting or shifting the male gaze to become non sexual by choosing to dress a certain way where her body is almost masked. Missy Elliot, even now as a seasoned entertainer, chooses to wear baggie jeans, oversized tops, and flat shoes as opposed to hip hugging dresses, low cut tops and high heels. For example, if we take the 90s hit record “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” which was written and produced by Missy Elliot and Timbaland, there is some clear examples of her attempt to reject and/or negotiate the stereotyped notion of femininity and sexuality that is placed on female entertainers in general. First, the way she is dressed seems to lend itself to that tomboy hip hop fashion style that was popularized in the late 1980s. This was basically when women who were mainly black or latinx, would literally wear the exact same clothes as the men around them and go on about their lives. So in the video, Missy like these other women, was dressed like most of her male peers. This itself is a statement because it is around the time where women in hip hop especially female rappers, were taking on a more hypersexual and glamorized approach to their public image. With rappers like Lil Kim and Foxy Brown making it cool to rap in lingerie, Missy Elliot was embracing a style of the past. Elliot also plays with the looming “male gaze” of hip hop by the way she presents her body from the neck up. When discussing Missy Elliot, people rarely ever talk about how much make up she actually wore. This is interesting because as a woman who seems to prefer a lot of unisex clothing, one would think that she would wear little to no makeup on stage or in front of her audience, but this is definitely not the case. When one takes the video “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” in particular, Elliot is sporting a very pigmented, ombre lip color, filled in eyebrows, blush, foundation, concealer, eyeliner and even faux lashes. There is nothing minimal or natural about her look. She is also wearing large hoop earrings and her hair in finger waves which were very popular amongst black women

during this time. Quite frankly, she was and has always been “beat” (slang that was popularized in the gay/drag community that has crossed over into pop culture. The term is synonymous with simply being very made up in the face.) With Elliot wearing “boyish” clothes while also wearing a significant amount of makeup, she is consciously (or unconsciously) choosing to negotiate this idea of gender performance in not only hip hop but other forms of popular culture as well.

Lastly, one of the most thought provoking scenes in her video is when Elliot is in a garbage bag suit filled with air, dancing on top of a box. She wears the suit comfortably as she dances carefree into the camera lens as if to further push the typical image of female performance in hip hop. By doing this, Elliot is directly critiquing the size-ism and fat-phobia that permeates the entertainment industry even today. She knows that being in the public eye and particularly being a (black) woman in the media, her body will be subjected to insulting and disapproving comments regarding the fact that she is a person of size. So what she decided to do was make herself even bigger physically to let people know that she is not only aware of her weight but comfortable enough to bring even more attention to it, in order to disrupt that American patriarchal stance on female bodies. Overall, Missy Elliot in the “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” video is another example of how black women have not only accepted these traditional notions regarding sexuality and female gender performance but also altered them. Both Nicki Minaj and Missy Elliot videos are ultimately more examples that show how black women in hip hop play a major role on how the culture evolves and become successful. They used their creativity to not only expand the musical genre but also elevate the way women are viewed inside of it.

With the subject of Black women in the media and how their bodies and presence is interpreted and even projected, one must first take a look at the role that race plays in the American society. This is because although hip hop has roots that extend back to both West

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Africa, the English and Spanish speaking Caribbean, most people would agree that hip hop's birth place was in America. The borough of Bronx, New York to be exact. This means that the United States race relations played a major role into the genre itself and a heavy amount of the culture as a whole.

Black people in this country have had a long standing history of being at the bottom of America's racial hierarchy since the early developments of this nation. For years upon years there has been a deliberate attempt to silence, oppress and abuse them for the purpose of control. So this tradition of marginalization was very apparent during the late seventies and early eighties when hip hop was formulating. This was especially noticeable within a place like New York because it was a national hub for not only Hispanic and West Indian immigrants with significant African heritage, but it also housed many of the African Americans whose families moved further north during the Great Migration. There was a significant amount of "people of color", with significant African ancestry that populated the state. This was a bit unsettling to the government and city authorities in a country that still had a strong emphasis on race and white superiority. Communities of color and specifically black folks were subjected to unjust and race based redlining, project housing, and even homelessness because the city of New York did not want to acknowledge these communities that they considered to be inferior. So much so that the city even destroyed and cut off a large portion of the Bronx to build the popular Robert Moses Cross Bronx Expressway with no concern with how this would affect the neighborhoods, the areas where people called home. These acts of the early 1980s were eerily familiar to the days of the 50s, 60s and even the Reconstruction Era where black folks were blatantly and routinely treated with inhumanity. This is significant to Hip Hop music and culture because these earlier injustices shaped its birth. In *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* by

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Jeff Chang and DJ Kool Herc there is a discussion about the role of race and inequality. They write:

“In Harlem, days of street protests over education and poverty, gave way to clashes between white police and black youths, the start of the long hot summers that gripped American the rest of that turbulent decade. As the 60s drew into the 70s, King and X were gone, the well of Faith and idealism that had sustained the movements against the forces of rationalization and violence drained, and a lot of Black dreams—integrationist or nationalist simply burned. “

It is here that authors DJ Kool Herc and Jeff Chang are speaking of how the social climate of New York in general was changing. The little optimism that was once dedicated to equal rights, anti-blackness, anti-racism had disappeared. Communities of color but especially black communities of color had quickly began a target again. With the emergence of Organizations like The Black Panther Party for Self Defense and youth opposition to the previous nonviolent methods of the past, there was shift in environment. Black Youth in particular, were becoming more in more radical, confrontational, and fearless. The white hegemonic oppressive system was giving birth to a generation of black people who were not just angry but enraged. This meant that for an upcoming cultures like Hip Hop, there had to be a release. Although hip hop music would still be party music, it would also become the voice for all of the police brutality, discrimination, and downright war that this nation had (and continues to have) on the people of color that live here. The roots of the past is what created Hip Hop into the outlet that is known to be today. In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” by Stuart Hall there is discussion of this very thing. He writes:

“The question which Fanon's observation poses is, what is the nature of this 'profound research' which drives the new forms of visual and cinematic representation? Is it only a matter

of unearthing that which the colonial experience buried and overlaid, bringing to light the hidden continuities it suppressed? Or is a quite different practice entailed - not the rediscovery but the production of identity (224).”

Stuart Hall’s notion of identity is that the people who create it are not only strictly responding to the social conditions in which they are forced to live in by colonial and hegemonic powers; but they also using their voice and creativity to construct their own notion of identity that has more to do with how they see themselves. This is a perfect description for Hip Hop, especially Hip Hop videos because the culture is a mixture of both outside influences and inspiration from within the community. This is why the lyrics and visuals for songs like “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five was significant. Released July 1, 1982 through Sugar Hill Records, “The Message” as a song gave the world insight to just how rough it was to live as a black person in not only America, but the lower class inner city. The video also reflected these stories of hard life, with gritty New York imagery, unjust brutality, and almost desolate looking shots of rundown buildings. It was a moment when the oppressed were telling their own story but it also was a moment where Hip Hop style and culture was being cemented and publically expressed for all of the world to see. Even though this was not the first hip hop video and song to be made, it was one of the most influential. Not only did Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five had this their own unique style of clothing and rapping, they were also trailblazers for defining Hip Hop as a space not too welcoming of vulnerability. Unlike the other “fun”, “party rap” of that era, “The Message” was more serious and not too open to laughter. Also, the song constantly uses the expletive “fag” to express resentment towards the gay community. This is a clear distinction that rap is an unwavering, traditionally masculine space. This is crucial to understanding Hip Hop culture and the roles that women play within the

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circle because it means that non-cis gendered black men and women have to find a way to weave their own identities into Hip Hop. According to ““Elevate My Mind”: Identities for Women in Hip Hop Love Songs” by Pamela Hollander , she classifies Hip Hop music as a space of anger, rage, and resentful to vulnerability. She writes “Early women in hip hop often reacted against male versions of reality. As women railed against male stereotypes of women, they took up a variety of new and stereotypical identities themselves (Hollander 108)”. This excerpt from her writing helps to really contextualize Hip Hop as a space not only aggression but also as a space not open to feminine energy. She also talks about how traditionally feminine energy or the female has been associated with concepts of love, nurture, and passivity in general. This is in contrast to masculine energy which is usually associate with stereotypical qualities of protection, anger, and action. This is significant because she goes on to say to explain how because hip hop has been and continues to remain a masculine zone. Therefore women in Hip Hop is radical by nature. When you have a culture that was supposedly built on the struggle and creativity of “the black men”, women that come in contact with Hip Hop culture will either be invisible, erased or have to figure out a way to fight the patriarchy that lives within the genre.

For example, if we take the early rappers of the 80s like Queen Latifah,, MC Lyte, , and Roxanne , these were all pioneering female hip hop artists that had to come into popularity by creating careers that are somewhat in response to their male counterparts. With Queen Latifah, she came into the music industry by creating a counter narrative to the dominant male story that was being told. In 1989, Latifah released her first single entitled *Ladies First* and exploded onto the hip hop scene with a style that was seemingly influenced by the Afrocentric work of rapper Afrika Bambaataa. She had the militant clothing similar to the Black Panther party for self-defense, topped off with a head wrap or regal-like headpiece. Her lyrics about female

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empowerment with her smooth artistic delivery gave way to public enemy style with a feminine twist. What is even more notable about Latifah artistic persona is that she seems to be rapping in a way that could be a response to all of her male peers that have neglected the black women's struggle during this time. If Chuck D from the controversial group Public Enemy, was screaming "fight the Power" in a video filled with images of strong and influential black male leaders; then Queen Latifah was surrounded by countless visuals of strong and influential black *female* leaders. In the "Ladies First" video, Latifah seems to be making an effort to make sure that black female assertiveness and preservation is in the forefront. This is radically different because she is a part of this new wave of female rappers who want to be on the Hip Hop scene. This is so significant in terms of the way black female beings are seen in Hip Hop, because Latifah is not playing the background at all, she is front and center displaying just as much power as the male rappers. She opts out of playing the submissive role of that stems from hetero-normative white hegemony and decides to take on the role of the "strong black women". Although this may be problematic to some, her choice of persona relates to a larger issue of Hip Hop, and society in general only seeing the "black women" as a binary. She has to either be strong, dominant, and assertive or meek, submissive, and passive. For a lot of black women especially in Hip Hop have to choose a side because the way most people think about black womanhood is so limited. Also it is important to note that Latifah is one of the most successful rappers of all time. Like Diddy, Will Smith, and Jay-Z, Latifah has created a brand for herself and has accomplished a whole lot. From her hit 90s television show *Living Single* to her Covergirl Queen make-up collection to her short lived talk show, she has truly built an empire for herself. Unfortunately for her, when people talk about moguls and rappers who have maintained financial stability, her name is often left out. She is around the same age as people like Diddy, Jay-Z, and Will Smith but her

contributions to the culture often become invisible next to her male counterparts. Now this could just be a coincidence of power or this could also speak to idea that female contributions in the Hip Hop industry often take a backseat to the male dominated art form.

If we continue this discussion of female rappers creating images and music in response to their male peers, one can do so by comparing to people like MC Lyte and Lil' Kim. Although they gained success in to different eras, the way in which they negotiated their femininity in their field was very interesting. When looking at the work of rapper MC Lyte in the late 1980s, one can tell she definitely embraced the tomboyish no make-up look in the beginning stages of her career but what is interesting is that she always had lyrics that spoke to her softer romantic side. If we look at her debut single and video for *Paper Thin*, one can see how this plays out. In her sneakers and doorknocker earrings, Lyte is way more casual than the more glamorous women on the train so one can assume that her flow be one that would be less dainty and more aggressive like other rappers of that time. But ironically, her flow and video concept have a lot to do with how she feels about the romantic relationships of young men and women. She raps:

“When you say you love me, it doesn't matter

It goes to my head as just chit chatter

You may take this egostistical or just or worry free but

What you say I take none of it seriously, and

Even if I did I wouldn't tell you so

I'd let you pretend to read me and then you'll know “ MC Lyte 1989

Here she is explaining the disconnect between what her partner is saying and how he really feels about her. She doesn't take his exclamations of love seriously and just doesn't feel like she can be completely honest about her feelings. This interesting, because as someone who comes from battle rap, to enter a hip hop space and talk about these serious issues of love was quite radical. Even in her next verse she writes:

"Truly when I get involved I give it my heart

I mean my mind, my soul, my body I mean every part

But if it doesn't work out, yo it just doesn't

It wasn't meant to be you know, it just wasn't

So I treat all of you like I treat all of them

And what you say to me is still paper thin."

The second verse reflects her need for not only sexual pleasure in a relationship, but also mental and spiritual stimulation when being involved. She also states that if the relationship doesn't work out, she is intelligent enough to understand that it was because the compatibility was just "paper thin" and didn't really have anything to do with them as people but it just didn't work out. In "Elevate My Mind: Identities for Women in Hip Hop Love Songs" by Pamela Hollander, this concept of love that Lyte maintains throughout the song is discussed. Hollander writes:

"An alternative identity that comes through in relation to love in these songs is "intellectual." As I alluded to earlier, women in hip hop have occupied the identity of "intellectual," drawing on the Queen Mother position and on the sort of identities Perry talks about in relation to men: "preacher," "intellectual" (157, 132). In the case of love songs, this

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intellectualism is directed toward love. These women are experiencing or looking for love which includes a meeting of the mind (113)".

Lyte is a clear example of women in Hip Hop, being needed to not only give their experience from a black female perspective but to also raise the level of insight that people within in the culture have on love and other philosophical concepts. Without the representations of women Hip Hop performers, holistic outlooks on not only love but the everyday struggles of the black person in America (both personal and systemic) would be lost.

In comparison, if we look at the work of Lil Kim during the late 1990s and early 2000s, one can see her outlooks sex, were essential to not only inclusive Hip Hop narratives but how a look into how black women's bodies are used and seen in Hip Hop and the American Culture. When Lil Kim was first introduced with Biggie Small's group Junior Mafia. She was the sexy and petite but fully of all type of hardcore lyrics that more so reflected the "gangster rap" style that was rapidly growing popular. Even her first album was entitled *Hardcore* as a signifier of the aggressive and pornographic lyrics of that would grace her debut. Even the audio skit before the first selection sounds like something directly from a adult movie. If MC Lyte and Queen Latifah represented black intellect regarding love and afro-history, then Lil Kim definitely was the sexual intellectual. Some of the sexual concepts she discussed on her first album, was completely taboo for female rappers during that time. On songs like "Big Momma Thang" and "Not Tonight" she openly talks about her newfound comfortability when the male anatomy, her openness to giving and receiving oral sexual pleasure and the monetary gain that one can get by being a thorough lover. With her debut album, Lil Kim might have single handedly destroyed all previous notions one might have had regarding the women in Hip Hop. No longer was it just about baggie pants, militant button ups, and sneakers, but now about high heels, sheer dresses,

and lingerie. Without Lil Kim's presence, there would be no conversations about a feminist sexual revolution in Hip Hop. For example, even if we look at Kim's first appearance in the Junior Mafia "Player's Anthem" in 1995, there is a clear distinction of her style and every other female rapper out during that time. She is wearing an extravagant fur and diamonds while simultaneously spitting lyrics like "b*tches squeeze your tits, n*ggas grab ya genitals" and "I used to pop macks in the Cadillacs/ Now I pimp gats in the AC's/ Watch my N*ggas back". This is very strong language that is a bit sexually charged. The way she was rapping was usually only reserved for male emcees until her album. Lil Kim literally gave insight into the black women coming from a rough environment and getting caught up in street life. By this time, the airwaves were used to hearing about how young black men were combating the dangerous life of the streets but not so much what it meant for a female to also participate in illegal activities that includes selling narcotics, selling drugs, and stealing. She even took it a step further by describing more female gendered crimes like prostitution and the use of female bodies when it came to actually transporting drugs to different locations. Without Lil Kim, the firsthand accounts of street credibility that is so crucial in Hip Hop imagery, may have never gotten told from a female perspective. Her overt sexuality and interesting raps about her sexual escapades also was a representation of black women owning the right to be sexual beings in a society that still feels like it owns them.

Although Lil Kim, opened up the doors for a different concept about black womanhood that was previously ignored, the popularity of her persona also played a part in the constant objectification of black women's bodies that still continues today. While most people complain about the way women's bodies are talked about and represented in hip hop music videos today, a lot of that has to do with a particular era that didn't start with her but definitely cemented after

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Lil Kim's Debut. This era is affectionately known as the "Bling Bling Era". It is during this era that the objectification and passivity of black women in Hip Hop culture reached an all-time high. A culture that gave very little space to the multifaceted experiences of black , now only allowed for one. Rappers started to cling to the video vixen aspect of music videos, where women were simply sex symbols and accessories to the point where critics and fans were questioning these female roles. In *Media Visual Literacy Art Education: Sexism in Hip Hop Music Video*, SHENG KUAN CHUNG speaks about the dominant masculine and sexist energy that lives within hip hop. He writes:

" Because hip-hop music videos portray women as sexual objects— club dancers, and prostitutes whose primary function is to entertain men—these women are subjected to disrespect and dehumanization. Such artistic expression does not simply portray women negatively; it also questions what they can meaningfully contribute to society (Chung 35). "

The way the roles of women in the culture were being portrayed and reduced, started to say a lot about the misogyny that was so deeply embedded in Hip Hop and the popularity of these representations in pop culture. It says a lot about the way many people thought about black women. Once again, like the days of slavery, American society had put these women in these hypersexual positions of Jezebel and Sapphire without taking into account how abusive it was. In a stark contrast to the early days of hip hop, gangster rap which had routinely labeled women as bitches, hoes, and tricks had become the main sound on the airwaves. Even now it is not uncommon for rappers to only refer to women in a degrading or sexual manner without any thought to why it is not okay. It seems that all the work of the founding women in hip hop has been erased in the culture as it becomes more and more popular. The foundational work of the women of the past gets overlooked by the industry of today. Racially homogenized notions

regarding black people and more specifically black women, have embedded itself into Hip Hop which has caused women to receive another level of oppression even within a culture that should be an outlet for them. In “Racial Formation Theory and Systematic Racism in Hip Hop Fans Perceptions” by Ginger Jacobson, this very idea is explained.

“The white racial frame is proliferated and normalized through the mass media and pressures people of all races to internalize this perspective (Feagin 2010b). Mass media viewers may learn about others through cultural tourism (Xie et al. 2007), looking in on a culture with which they have little unmediated personal interaction. Viewers who are uncritical of larger social forces, no matter their racial identity, may adopt a white racial frame and homogenize groups of people based on mediated interaction (Jacobson 833).”

Here Jacobson is explaining how anything in the mass media functions under a “white racial frame” and how other cultures “tour” each other with the ideologies portrayed in the main media outlets. In relationship to hip hop and black womanhood, this means that the narratives surrounding black women in hip hop will always be through the lens of the white hegemonic system that we live in. So the misogyny, racism, and sexism of the white elite has successfully trickled down to these creative communities of color. Unfortunately, this is a slap in the face, to the women who have made significant contributions to the culture and had already had to break through the male dominated culture. Whether these women were dancing, rapping, or writing, the black female legacy in hip hop should not be disrespected.

Overall since television shows, music videos, and the film industry has so much influence and power, inclusion and holistic narratives should be a must. With more projects dedicated to deconstructing the male centered myths regarding Hip Hop culture, the female impact of this society can be better understood in Hip Hop and worldwide because ultimately this is more than

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just entertainment but provides a voice for the oppressed and ostracized folks of a social and political atmosphere. If we continue to silence and dismiss the experiences and contributions of black women in Hip Hop, then the culture can no longer be presented as an outlet for the tyrannized. Going forward, as participants and spectators of the culture we have to make a conscious effort to include the multidimensional experiences of black women. If WEB DuBois's concept of black double consciousness is a constant theme that has founded hip hop and its expression then there needs to also be an addition of the black triple consciousness that live within the daily life of black women inside of hip hop culture. Hip Hop cannot continue to ignore or reduce the offerings of black women in order to stay within the mainstream, there must be honor in their work no matter how big or small, because without them hip hop would not be what it is today. Because Hip Hop claims to be this culture of opposition, the culture should always save space for black women to rebel against the intersection of racism and sexism that they continue to endure.

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