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## Wait 'Til You See it From the Back: Twerking as an Expression of Sexual Agency

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## Wait 'Til You See it From the Back: Twerking as an Expression of Sexual Agency

### Cover Page Footnote

Shout out to Rhonda, Lisa, Becky, and everyone in the Young Women of Color for Reproductive Justice Leadership Council with Advocates for Youth for listening to me talk about this paper for months on end. A very special gratitude goes out to Beyonce, the Inner Hoe Uprising podcast, Megan Thee Stallion, Lizzo, and all the other bad ass Black women in media spaces for inspiring this research topic. Thank you.

## WAIT 'TIL YOU SEE IT FROM THE BACK: TWERKING AS AN EXPRESSION OF SEXUAL AGENCY

By Mariah Johnson

*She got her hands all on her knees, and then her bows on her thigh. She like to twerk and that's for sure, 'cause I can tell how she fly. She got me hyper, I wanna bite right now yi, yi. Say, I yi, yi, yi, yi! - Ying Yang Twins*

On August 8, 2014, a contributor using the name “Sheldon J. Plankton” posted his definition of twerking on the Urban Dictionary website. According to Plankton, twerking is “a mating ritual performed by primates in which the female repeatedly shakes its ass up and down in order to attract a mate.” In that same year, Annie Lennox, a Scottish singer-songwriter and activist, went on NPR Music to defend her comments on Beyoncé and feminism: “Listen, twerking is not feminism, that’s what I’m referring to. It’s not -- it’s not liberating, it’s not empowering. It’s a sexual thing that you’re doing on stage; it doesn’t empower you. That’s my feeling about it,” she said. Her comments came shortly after Beyoncé’s 2014 MTV Video Vanguard Award performance. The performance began with the words of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie playing in the background. Beyoncé, on a conveyor belt, then stood tall with the word ‘feminist’ behind her in bold letters. During the performance, she sang and twerked to the songs off her 2013 self-titled album. The performance was followed by the criticism of her brand of feminism and the place of twerking in feminist thought.

Twerving is a low squatting dance that focuses on movement in the butt and hips. Since it rose to mainstream consciousness, twerving, a style of dance originating from the New Orleans bounce scene, has been under direct scrutiny by those mainly outside of the black community. The dance has been called hypersexual, obscene, and is not considered a real or respected dancing style. Because the dance is connected to the butt and the objectification of the Black body, the denunciation of twerving is connected to a long history of scientific racism in America and centering the conversation on respectability politics takes sexual agency away from Black Women.

The consistent condemning of Black sexuality anything related to the Black identity comes from a long history of moral panic, racism, and demonization of Black people and our culture. The belief that Black people are over-sexual is an ideology that started the moment slave owners landed on the shores of West Africa. This ideology is one Black people are still impacted by and reclaiming today. In his book *Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the Fight over Sexual Rights*, Gilbert Herdt describes moral panics as a natural disaster of human society. It acts as a threat to a community or an individual's overall well-being. Stanley Cohen defines moral panics as large social events occurring in troubled times when a serious threat by evildoers incites societal reaction. In his 1972 book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen's moral panic occurs when a condition, episode, person or group emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests. Moral panics can be broken down into their two main parts for context: Moral, meaning concerned with the principles of behavior and the goodness or badness of human character, and panic, meaning uncontrollable fear or anxiety. With this information, it can be inferred that moral panics are an uncontrollable fear related to a society's perceived principal of behavior.

While Cohen is most known for his definition of moral panics, Marshall McLuhan is considered to be the first to use the term academically in his 1964 book *Understanding Media:*

*The Extensions of Man*. McLuhan believed that the media acted as the medium of societal change and should be studied as such. He stated that the medium is the message and that it has a social effect. The work of both Cohen and McLuhan can be used to define moral panics and their impact. The notion of moral panics explain the reactions to moments in popular media and policy and is considered to be an intellectual tool meant to shield people from being swayed by the unwarranted fears of a select few.

With the debut of the moral panic theory came pushback and the belief that using the word “panic” comes the idea that peoples’ reactions are not controlled. Cohen believed that moral panics have social shape and a directionality to them. While his work focused on the Mods and Rockers of Britain, the moral panic theory can be used to explain many of the societal beliefs we currently have. Moral panics come in clear states: something or someone is defined as a threat to values or interests, this threat is depicted in an easily recognizable form by the media, there is a rapid build-up of public concern, there is a response from authorities or opinion makers, and the panic recedes or results in social changes. With moral panics comes someone to blame them on.

Cohen argues that media reports on abnormal occurrences often help to fabricate narratives with clear villains. These villains are known as “folk devils.” A folk devil is someone who is blamed for social problems. They can be a person or groups of people usually come into being after a crime or rise in deviant behavior. They are also defined as scapegoats. Cohen believed that the creation of a folk devil can jumpstart a moral panic. According to his book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, there are three stages on folk devil reporting in the media: symbolization, exaggeration, and prediction. Symbolization is when the folk devil is portrayed in a specific, easily recognizable, and oversimplified narrative. This symbolization is akin to the modern day stereotype. Exaggerations are instances when facts around the folk devil are fabricated and

inflated. This results in adding fuel to the moral crusade. Prediction is when more immoral actions perpetrated by the folk devil are anticipated. While the name folk devil makes the label seem mild, that label comes with ostracization, changes to public policy, and even death to those that carry the moniker. Black people have often had to carry the burden of the folk devil. Our community has been blamed for poverty, absent parents, sexual assault, and even our own enslavement.

In the book *Jezebel Unhinged*, written by Dr. Tamura Lomax, it is stated that scientific racism and its sexist spin had influenced a transnational view of Black flesh. This reading of scientific racism and its impact on the Black body comes from Lomax's experience being called a "jezebel slut" every day during her commute to school. This is something that continues to inspire the viewpoint on the Black identity in today's society. French colonials were believed to obsess over and fear Black sexuality and often spent time theorizing and writing about it. Georges Leopold Cuvier, French zoologist and anatomist, is most notable from his research on Saartjie Baartman in the late nineteenth century. Saartjie Baartman, also known as the Hottentot Venus, was a Khoisan South African Women who was displayed in a human zoo when she was nineteen. She was born in 1789, though her birth date has been widely debated, and was a domestic servant to the brother of a slave trader named Pieter Willem Cezar. An animal trainer, who capitalized off the public's fascination with her looks, paraded her around. She did not see any of the profit her body was being used to make. After her death at the age of twenty-six, Cuvier created a cast of her corpse for examination, dissection and display. Baartman's corpse and cast of vagina and buttocks were displayed at the Musee de l'Homme in Paris. They remained there until she was finally laid to rest at the Hankey in the Eastern Cape Province on August 9, 2002, which is Woman's Day in South Africa. The process of returning her home took eight years but the subconscious beliefs about her, and thus Black women's bodies, still linger today.

The studies of Saartjie Baartman, performed by Cuvier, were published in *The Natural History of Mammals*. In the book, Cuvier describes Baartman as a “titillating curiosity, a collage of buttocks and anatomy.” His ideas soon reached the American Colonies and Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson, who owned slaves, believed that Black people were degenerates that lacked the basic moral code of white people. That belief did not stop him from taking advantage of the fourteen-year-old Sally Hemmings, a child who birthed six of Jefferson's children. Though it is believed that they were “in love”, it is important to remember that Hemmings had no agency over her body as a child and as a slave. She had no choice in the matter. The like of Sally Hemmings and ultimately the repeated sexual assault of her is an experience that was all too common for Black slaves. Because of the studies published by Cuvier, it was believed that Black people were unrapeable due to their status as property and the belief that they had insatiable sexual urges. This contributed to the jezebel trope attributed to Black women.

The jezebel, not to be confused with the Christian Jezebel, is considered to be the Black sexual siren. The stereotype was created to counter the ideal Victorian woman. White women have, and still are, portrayed as the representation of self-respect and modesty while Black women were and still are portrayed as promiscuous and beguiling. Patricia Hill-Collins defines the jezebel as “the sex starved woman, who was childishly promiscuous and consumed by lustful passions. Her sexual aggression, fertility, and libidinous self-expression were considered limitless” (*Controlling Images and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women*, pg. 883). Black women were believed to have enjoyed being used sexually by their masters and their sons. Slave owners saw it as a natural fact and used it to justify the rape of Black women by white men. Because rape is about power and subordination, this ideology succeeded in making Black women responsible for their own victimization.

The jezebel troupe was believed to have begun when white colonial settlers docked their boats on the coasts of the continent of Africa. In some parts of the continent, native Africans were dressed in “scantily clad” attire and performed dances that were mistakenly believed to be lewd and lustful. This belief system, as well as the studies of Cuvier, were eventually brought over to the American colonies and entered mainstream consciousness. The troupe can be seen most prominently in southern art, film, political campaigns and party gags during the Jim Crow period and modern day. The concept of the jezebel gained its traction in the media with films like *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which features the myth of Black hyper-sexuality, and in the Blaxploitation genre.

Blaxploitation films, popular in the 1970s, is an ethnic genre of the exploitation film. An exploitation film is any film that attempts to achieve financial success by exploiting current trends. Blaxploitation films generally feature Black people fighting back against the oppression brought on by the white majority. In addition to that, they often prominently feature nudity and sexuality in an explicit manner. For example, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) heavily features Sweet Sweetback's sex work and how he uses it to escape incarceration for a crime he did not commit. Sweet Sweetback, a nickname given to a young Leroy after a brothel worker sexually assaulted him, is meant to honor his sexual prowess and large penis. *Abby* (1974), also considered to be the “Black *Exorcist*”, is about a marriage counselor who becomes possessed by the Yoruba God of Sex, Deceit, and Messages. While the jezebel troupe is mainly represented in Blaxploitation films of the 1970s, the troupe is still featured in modern day Black popular culture. It is most prominent in film and in the rap genre. This is seen most recently in the music video for *Realer* by Megan Thee Stallion. The video features the distinctive 1970s color palette and pays homage to Blaxploitation icon Pam Grier.



The modern day jezebel troupe is often attributed to Black female rappers like Lil Kim, Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, CupcakKe, Megan Thee Stallion and many more. They are often devalued and treated as immoral because of the subject matter of their songs and how they choose to dress. Lil Kim, known for sexually explicit lyrics and her iconic outfits, is often under fire for her lyrics endorsing sex with men for money and gifts. She, like many of her fellow rappers, responded by pointing out that male rappers are able to freely rap about the topics they choose with little criticism from fellow Black people. It is not a stretch to say that most conversations centering these women are negative. They are considered to be a “step back for Black women” and perpetuate the jezebel stereotype. The criticism of women like Megan Thee Stallion is often centered on the respectability of Black women and the need to step away from the troupes that were attributed to us. In her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham defines respectability politics as “attempts by marginalized groups to police their own members and ensure their social values don't challenge mainstream values.” Policing, which means to supervise or enforce rules, was often used to ensure Black people would be able to survive unsurvivable living conditions. It was a way for Black people to align themselves with white, middle-class values and were meant to help provide an opportunity to have a seat at the table. The concept of respectability is often used to ensure people look and speak a certain way. It is a method of assimilation that kept Black people safe in a dangerous world. This concept is where we get the dress codes at Hampton University, comments about self-respect under Cardi B's music videos, and people saying that twerking is not a feminist ideal.

The connection between twerking, racism, and the Black body is most exemplified in Nicki Minaj’s 2014 promotional photo for her song *Anaconda*. The post featured the rapper in a matching pink bra and G-string set. She is looking over her shoulder from behind; her butt is featured

prominently in the frame. In response to the promotional photo, CEO of AllHipHop.com, Chuck Creekmur, penned an open letter to the rapper stating that she was a bad role model for his daughters. In his letter, *Dear Nicki Minaj: An Open Letter from a Father*, Creekmur asks “What is the message you are sending when you determine how you will inspire these young people? How will boys, already conditioned to sexualize girls at a young age, internalize this big booty of yours?” he focuses his questions in Nicki Minaj’s intentions and the impact that she may have on others with her hypersexual image. Minaj responded to this, in addition to other criticisms surrounding her sexuality and her large butt, by posting pictures of similar photos taken with slim, small butt, white women. She stated that those pictures were acceptable, fun and angelic while hers was seen completely differently. With the music video came the repeating of these criticisms and parodies focusing on Minaj’s large butt.

In her article *Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott and Nicki Minaj: Fashionistin’ Black Female Sexuality in Hip Hop Culture-Girl Power or Overpowered*, Theresa Renee White writes about the similarities between Nicki Minaj and Saartjie Baartman, also known as the Hottentot Venus. Both were considered a source for entertainment and white fascination because of the shapes of their bodies and perceived sexuality. This same analysis can be applied to twerking because of its connection to the sexuality and femininity of Black women. Twerking is an inherently Black dance and a majority of its hyper-sexualization comes from the image of Black women. In an interview from the undergraduate thesis *Twerk It: Deconstructing Racial and Gendered Implications of Black Women's Bodies through Representations of Twerking* by Niamba Baskerville, the interviewee states “Somehow twerking was associated with Black womanhood and by insulting twerking, you’re making implicit comments about Black women in general,” implying that there is a connection between twerking and Black womanhood. Baskerville also mentions that Black

women are the most visible doing the dance, so people often automatically associate twerking with their image. Because Black women are often painted as jezebels and sexual deviants, the dance carries that reputation.

In her essay *Jiggle in My Walk: The Iconic Power of the Big Butt in American Pop Culture*, Wendy A. Burns-Ardolino states “The female big butt has been forced to carry the historical burdens of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. It has been downtrodden by interlocking systems of oppression that have sought to erase its meaning, its power, and its beauty, or at least to parse them away from their owners – those of us who wear big butts.” Black women’s butt have been the subject of every joke that centers them. Twerking is hypersexualized because the Black women’s body is. With that hypersexualization comes the need to take a step away, which means suppressing Black sexual agency. Sexual agency is the ability to define and be in charge of one’s sexuality. That includes being able to define who, when, where, and how many times you will or will not have sex. According to Mireille Miller-Young, Professor at University of California Santa Barbara specializing in Black Cultural Studies, Pornography and Sex Work, the word hoe is interchangeable to terms like video model, exotic dancer, freak, chicken head, and gold digger. The fear surrounding being considered a hoe causes Black men and women to be repulsed by anyone who might exhibit qualities similar to that of a hoe. This means that any Black woman who enjoys their sexual agency is considered to be a hoe.

Because the sexuality of Black women has always been considered immoral and impure, they are often the ones targeted by the hoe vs. housewife dichotomy. They have a target on their back and are unable to explore themselves freely; this target prevents them from exploring their sexuality without the fear of being considered a stereotype. The phrase “you can’t turn a hoe into a housewife” focuses on marriageability of chaste versus promiscuous women. The fear of being

considered a hoe comes from respectability politics and the hoe versus housewife debate. The conversations on twerking center the need for Black women to remain respectable. Due to this, the sexual Black women are unable to explore themselves freely without worrying about their image. Many argue that we have to assimilate into white culture in order to be respected and treated as human beings, but that also requires that Black people actively choose not to explore or enjoy the best parts of their culture. Twerking is not inherently hypersexual. It is simply a dance that is viewed negatively because of its connection to the Black body. The dance itself does not perpetuate the stereotype that Black women are hypersexual; it is not being done for sexual gratification. While twerking does involve the body, specifically the butt, it does not mean that it is a sexual dance. For example, the tango is tinged with sexual energy and that energy radiates from the body of the dancers. The tango is respected more than twerking and those that participate in the tango are not seen as promiscuous. The point is not to say that the tango should be disrespected, but that respectability should not be ascribed to dances and their dancers. Sexual energy can be present in something without the item or activity itself being sexual. In addition to that, activities and people should be allowed to be sexual if one decides to make it so.

The “Pro-Hoe” movement, similarly to the sex positive movement, is centered on embracing sexually promiscuous people and reclaiming the word hoe. Because twerking is inherently connected to Black sexuality and hoe-ism, it should be looked at from a pro-hoe lens. Black women should be allowed to be sexual and define their sexuality in any way they see fit. The sexuality of Black women has been routinely been defined, commodified, and stolen from them, and it is time for something to change. The fear and disenfranchisement that comes with being a sexual person takes away from the ability to live a full and free life. Black sexuality is not a mark of shame and it should not be defined by its history.

Twerving is inherently Black and is connected to the image of the Black woman. Because of that connection, it is also connected to the stereotype of sexual promiscuity and aggression. The fear and condemnation of the dance comes from a history of racism and the need to dominate the Black female body. Treating a dance in such a way is a form of social control and makes folk devils out of the Black women who freely participate in the activity. The sexuality of the Black woman has been under scrutiny by members outside and within their communities for hundreds of years. Whether it be the focus on promiscuity or the focus on chastity and respectability, Black women are having their routinely sexual agency snatched away from them. They have to be pure and demure while being desired and hypersexualized. It would seem as if there is no end. Twerving is simply a dance and a means of self-expression. It is declaration of joy and an ode to bodies that cannot be contained. There is beauty in the body and its freedom to move as it pleases. Black women should not have to subscribe to the hierarchy of acceptable sexuality. They should be allowed to be sexual and chaste if they choose. Black women are entitled to an image created for them, by them, period.

In her song *Tempo*, Lizzo states, “My ass is not an accessory. Yeah, I said it, accessory. Twerk skills up on legendary.” Black women’s bodies are not up for debate, nor is their sexuality. Contrary to what Annie Lennox and other white feminists say, twerving is liberating. Through the dance, Black women feel their bodies move without restriction. It is revolutionary and subversive. Twerving, much like Black sexuality, has power. It is time for Black women to reclaim that power. To exist as a Black woman in a world that has routinely stolen their freedom is radical. This is our sexual revolution.

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