

**Counterdiscourses of Black Womanhood in Music Video : Revising the Sexual Double**

**Standard**

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*I'm not the average girl from your video  
And I ain't built like a supermodel  
But I learned to love myself unconditionally,  
Because I am a queen  
I'm not the average girl from your video  
My worth is not determined by the price of my  
clothes  
No matter what I'm wearing I will always be  
India. Arie*

**--from "Video" by India. Arie**

*your revolution will not happen between these  
thighs  
your revolution will not happen between these  
thighs*

*the real revolution  
ain't about boot size  
the Versace you buy  
or the Lexus you drive*

*and though we've lost Biggie Smalls  
your Notorious revolution  
will never allow you to lace no  
lyrical douche in my bush  
your revolution will not be you  
killing me softly with Fugees  
your revolution ain't gon' knock me up  
without noring and producing a little future MCs  
because that revolution will not happen between  
these thighs*

*your revolution  
will not find me in the  
back seat of a Jeep with LL  
hard shell  
ya know, doin' it & doin' it & doin' it well  
ya know, doin' it & doin' it & doin' it well  
your revolution will not be you  
smackin' it up, flippin' it, or rubbin' it down  
nor will it take you down town nor humpin' around  
because that revolution will not happen between  
these thighs*

**--from "Your Revolution" by  
Sarah Jones**

The two quotes above, the first from singer/songwriter/musician India. Arie, and the second from spoken word artist /poet Sarah Jones, illustrate the ways in which music video, and the images that circulate within and through it, serves as an important, heavily contested and contradictory youth culture medium, especially when it comes to issues of race, gender and sexuality. They also both reveal the important role of music videos in the construction and dissemination of Black female representation in Black popular culture. More interestingly, though,

these quotes serve as examples of the ways in which young Black women actively use the space of contemporary Black youth culture, in these cases the genres of spoken word poetry and so-called "Neo-Soul", in order to respond to, dialogue with and contest dominant constructions of Black femininity and the ways that they are disseminated and perpetuated through the media and popular culture.

Sarah Jones's piece directly and caustically critiques the persistence of a sexual double standard in Hip Hop and Black youth culture and how it works to center and privilege male sexuality, desire and agency. India Arie launches a critique of Black female video representation using the medium in the video for "Video" in which she depicts herself inadvertently attending a casting session for a music video and realizes that she does not fit "the mold" of the "model-perfect" women typically featured in music videos.

As the work of Jones and Arie show, recent years have witnessed the emergence of Black women who assume multiple roles in the entertainment industry as singers, rappers, producers and video directors such as Arie, Missy Misdemeanor Elliot, Lauryn Hill, Lil' Kim, Erykah Badu and Eve. What may be most remarkable about the music videos of these Black female cultural producers, is the way in which they, through the medium of the music video, combine visual and aural strategies in order to create a space for subjectivity, commentary, dialogue with and revision of hegemonic ideologies of Black femininity and womanhood as well as an expression of female sexual desire.

This paper will continue the inquiry into how young African American women serve as active participants and performers in popular culture and contribute to the literature on Black women's representation in media and music video. My arguments are based upon the results of textual analysis of a sample of thirty-one music videos by Black women performers. The videos sampled were selected because they were in heavy rotation on the broadcast television networks MTV Music Television and BET Black Entertainment Television between the dates of March 25 and July 22, 2001 as published by *Billboard Magazine's* "Video Monitor" lists of most-played video clips as reported by Broadcast Data Systems. I will discuss the ways in which music video serves as a space for the articulation of a Black feminine subjectivity by exploring the ways in which dominant discourses and counterdiscourses of Black womanhood emerge in the videos of Black women performers.

## **Background/Literature Review**

Although research and criticism into popular culture continues to move forward, the medium of the music video has been conspicuously neglected in recent years. Since the boom in academic research and criticism emerged in response to the novelty of MTV and music video in the 1980's the 1990's was characterized by a marked absence of the analysis of music video in the social sciences and media studies as music videos became a common element of the media landscape as a creative medium and promotional tool. This is quite surprising considering the fact that music video remains an important advertising medium. Instead, it is more important than ever that the issues surrounding music video as a medium in popular culture be investigated. With the rise of the corporate media conglomerate, Viacom, in the 1990's, youth culture has emerged as an important sector in the entertainment industry and with the continuing popularity of Viacom's holding MTV and programms such as "TRL (Total Request Live)", as well as the company's recent acquisition of BET, music video plays a central role in today's youth culture, and the everyday lives of teens and young adults.

The circulation of stereotypical and dehumanizing images of Black womanhood in popular culture has very real and tangible political, cultural and social consequences in the lives of young Black women. Consequently, such representations raise important questions concerning the implications of the high visibility of the bodies of young Black women in public. These include first, the role of media and popular culture in disseminating and legitimizing stereotypical dominant ideologies of Black womanhood and sexuality and secondly, questions about whether and where the concerns and lived experiences of young Black women get articulated.

In this paper, I attempt to address some of these questions and argue that the music video performances of Black female performers may serve as a viable space for social and cultural discourse and for young Black women, through performance and reception, to explore issues of race, gender and sexual politics. This is accomplished through the construction and dissemination of counter discourses of Black womanhood which complicate, dialogue with, problematize and contest dominant, stereotypical and controlling ideologies of Black femininity and sexuality and the gender and sexual double standard that persists in Black popular culture and the medium of music video.

Until recently, and with few exceptions, most research and criticism on Black youth in popular culture has focused on the experience of young men of African descent and have identified Black popular and Hip Hop culture with masculinity, frequently ignoring issues concerning gender (Perkins 1996, Rose 1991, 1994, George 1998). However, as Black feminist theorists and critics such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks and Michele Wallace have demonstrated, the media and popular culture serve as a primary site for the dissemination and justification of ideologies of Black femininity and sexuality (Collins 1991, 1998, hooks 1992, Morgan 1999, Rose 1991, 1994, Wallace 1979). The majority of the images and representations of Black women in music videos, like other forms of mainstream media, draw upon and reproduce what Collins has specifically termed the controlling images of black womanhood (Collins, 1991). These controlling images, which include the Mammy, Jezebel, Welfare Mother and the Black Lady Overachiever exhibit the intersection of race, class and gender and serve as the set of cultural constructs that create an uncritically and unproblematically accepted common sense notion of black femininity, which effectively places the blame for black women's oppression upon their own shoulders (Collins 1991, 1998). As Collins states in Black Feminist Thought,

Portraying African -American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women's oppression... As part of a generalized ideology of domination, these controlling images of Black womanhood take on special meaning because the authority to define these symbols is a major instrument of power... These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life (Collins, 1991. Pp. 67-68).

Additionally, until more recently, Black women have rarely depicted as conforming to the cultural ideal of beauty and when they are constructed as objects of desire, it tends to draw upon notions of a pathological Black female sexuality in the tradition of the "Jezebel" or "hot momma" controlling image. The ideological notions of Black womanhood are not only abstract theoretical constructs, but have a real, material and tangible impact upon Black women's everyday lives. What these distorted images of Black womanhood accomplish is convincing wider society that the root of the inequality and marginalization that Black women face is rooted not in the discriminatory racist and sexist practices of social institutions, but within the cultural and moral shortcomings of Black women themselves.

Nevertheless, although they are surrounded by distorted and disparaging images of themselves, many young Black women seem to find the ability to avoid internalizing and accepting these representations as reflections of their own lives and experiences. They demonstrate a critical ability to negotiate and possibly even resist the images of Black womanhood and sexuality that pervaded dominant ideology and face them in their everyday lives. While young Black women exist as no more than mere footnotes in much of the burgeoning literature on teenage “girl” culture (e.g. Pipher 1994, Gilligan 1982, Brown and Gilligan 1992, Brown 1998), studies such as the 1992 American Association of University Women survey of teenage girls, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging Women*, The National Council for Research on Women’s 1998 *Girl’s Report*, and Peggy Orenstein’s investigation of the lives of girls at two middle schools *Schoolgirls* have shown Black girls do not experience the drastic drop in level of self-esteem as White and Latina girls do at the onset of adolescence (Orenstein 1994). Recent statistics have demonstrated a significant drop in the teenage pregnancy rate for Black girls as well, a finding which contradicts notions of the sexually loose and out-of-control Black woman. The combination of these findings, the important Black feminist work on the Black female performance tradition (Carby 1991, Davis 1998, Rose 1991, 1994) and recent studies of how Black teenage girls are able to resist and renegotiate hegemonic ideologies of femininity in teen magazines (Durham 1999b, Duke 2000,) indicate the possibility that young Black women are drawing upon the counter-discourses of reclaiming Black female sexuality that Black woman cultural producer express in their work.

While there has been much criticism and debate surrounding issues of Black female representation in music video specifically and Black popular culture broadly, especially regarding the oftensexist and objectifying images of the Black female body that emerge in many Hip Hop videos systematic analyses of the representation and reception of images of Black women in music video remain few and far between.

However, recent important interdisciplinary work on Black women and girls' culture draws upon Black feminist theory and cultural studies analysis to emphasize the ways in which young Black women are active participants in popular media culture. Through an emphasis upon subjectivity, agency and a Black female point of view these writers and researchers demonstrate the possibility of resistance and negotiation of dominant images of Black femininity and the ways in which young Black women are carving out a space for their own modes of discourse

within the landscape of Black popular culture .

The work of Kyra Gaunt on Black girls' musical playground games such as schoolyard games such as Double Dutch as specifically racialized gendered space in Black culture, makes an important contribution to the literature . She also ties in the everyday musical and performative experiences of young Black women and girls to the tropes of Hip Hop culture . She also provides an explanation for young Black girls' affinity for and connection with Hip Hop culture despite frequent misogynistic and exploitative representations within it by demonstrating how take those tropes and relate them to their own lived experiences as young Black women.

In their textual analyses, Robin Roberts and Nataki Goodall emphasize what they interpret as emergent feminist themes in the music videos of Black women rappers including TLC and Queen Latifah. However these studies are problematic because of the ways in which they privilege the existence of resistant themes within the music video texts, and do not effectively consider how social location and industrial constraints limit Black female expression, and do not seem to recognize how many of the themes in the videos of Black women performers do reproduce dominant notions of Black womanhood (Roberts, 1991, 1994; Goodall, 1994).

The work of Tricia Rose is a notable and important exception to this trend. In "Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile" (1991) Rose successfully balances the themes of self-determination and independence with the struggles to gain legitimacy in Hip-Hop culture faced by Black female rappers. She also problematizes the idea of naming these women "feminist", especially in light of the ambivalence that many young Black women exhibit concerning feminism, and the fact that many of the rappers that Roberts names as "feminist" directly rejected such labeling in interviews with Rose (Rose, 1991, 1994).

Other examples of recent Black feminist work on Black women's representation in music video, Hip Hop and contemporary Black youth culture include Marla Shelton, in "Can't Touch This! Representations of the African American Female Body in Urban Rap Videos" identifies three specific strategies used by Black female rap artists in their music videos:

Through an analysis of rap videos, I will argue that female hip hop rap artists are effectively able to engage in struggles over the "meaning" of African American womanhood through three tactics of representation: 1) a particular identification/representation of urban space and class, 2) the redefinition of gangsta culture along the lines of gender, and 3) the contemporary merger of hard core rap and R&B performance (Shelton, 108) .

Additionally, in a recent symposium on Third Wave Black Feminism in the journal *Signs*, Kimberly Springer draws upon the importance of music and popular culture in the everyday lives of young Black women and proposes the use of Hip Hop and R&B music by Black female singers and rappers and writings by young Black women in tandem as a pedagogical tool in order to facilitate discussion among Black youth about Black feminism and gender issues (Springer 2002, pg. 1078-79).

The work of all of these writers provides evidence for the ways in which popular culture, and the medium of music video, can be used as spaces where young Black women can actively express themselves and articulated discourses about their everyday lives and lived experiences.

### **The Persistence of the Sexual Double Standard in Hip Hop and Black Youth Culture**

The controlling image of the jezebel, the most predominant image of young Black women, serves as the basis of the hypersexual construction of the Black woman in today's music video music videos and continues to perpetuate the grounding of Black women's representation in deviant and pathological Black female sexuality. The image of the jezebel has been updated through the notion of the hoochie, represented by scantily clad young women whose body parts are the focus of the camera's gaze and who function solely as sexual objects and not subjects of their own sexual desire. The visibility of the jezebel/hoochie contributes to the construction of a persistent sexual double standard which works to center and privilege male sexuality, desire and erotic agency. These images also effectively relegate women to the background, constructing them as mere passive sexual "objects" and vessels, devoid of social and sexual agency and serves to further render Black women invisible, promoting and reinforcing exclusion and marginality.

The latest representational manifestations of the jezebel and the sexual double standard are the cultural constructions of first, the baby mama, the single, unwed young Black mother, most familiar from television talk shows like Ricki Lake and Jenny Jones (usually as the subject of a paternity dispute) and secondly, the chickenhead depicted as a "gold-digging", mercenary and promiscuous young Black woman who while using her sexuality to "catch" a man and take his money.

The chickenhead is also an easy target for exploitation and the fulfillment of male sexual pleasure and is represented in music videos by the appearance of scantily clad, suggestively dancing young women who are referred to in the common parlance as "video hoes". The focus on the idealized and sexualized female body through an emphasis on physical attractiveness,

thinness and youth, signifies an explicit appeal to the male gaze and situates the male viewer squarely in the subject position.

The high visibility of these stereotypes in contemporary Black popular culture demonstrates the extent to which dominant notions of Black womanhood and sexuality have been internalized and are reproduced within Black culture. Michael Eric Dyson terms this persistent presence of misogyny in Hip Hop and Black youth culture, "Femiphobia":

...and yet poor black urban culture seem to nurture femiphobia — the fear and disdain of the female, expressed in the verbal abuse and protracted resentment of women ... femiphobia has become a crucial aspect of the culture of signification in rap that influences the lyrics of hip-hop artists, measures authentic rap — and hence, male identity, specifies a pervasive machismo, and forges masculine bonds within the culture (Dyson, 2001, 181-182).

Grounded in this notion, the specific cultural role of the notions of the baby mama and the chickenhead is to emphasize the ways in which Black women may serve as a threat to Black male material achievement and ambition which is often represented by the trope of "playa hood": According to Mark Anthony Neal,

Within this context, the baby mama and her cousin the "chickenhead" are seen as threats to this province of black male ambition and autonomy in that they are solely interested in generating status and finances from their "partnerships" with black men... Whereas the "chickenhead" is largely seen as succeeding in this arena via the employment of her sexuality -- rarely are black men critiqued for their own objectification of black female sexuality in the process -- the baby mama succeeds, via her employment of sexuality and the reproductive process (Neal, 2002, pg. 75).

In this way, the images of the baby mama, the hoochie and the chickenhead are firmly inscribed within a discourse marked by the emphasis on materialism and conspicuous consumption. In Hip Hop and R&B music videos, this is most often signified by the constant presence and privileging of material goods: designer gear, fancy cars, flashy jewelry (or "bling"), expensive champagne, and huge mansions in LA or Miami. This emphasis on the material, arguably, reflects a symbolic acceptance of dominant capitalist ideology ignoring the reality of the pervasiveness of Black economic inequality as well as the historical ways in which capitalism is implicated in the exploitation and oppression of African-Americans and Black women in particular.

It is also important to consider what the implications are for this representation of conspicuous consumption in light of the construction of Black consumption, and particularly Black youth consumption as deviant. With Black youth depicted in the popular press as being willing to kill or maim for sneakers, jewelry, and designer clothes, as well as the depiction of Black teenage mothers as welfare cheats, the possibility emerges that such flagrant displays of materialism may serve to reinforce these dominant notions of Black youth as pathological consumers. On the other hand, though, flagrant acts of conspicuous consumption and the flaunting of material goods and luxury items, as has been noted by Elizabeth Chin in her ethnography of Black children's consumption (Chin, 2001), and Regina Austin in her work on consumption in the Black public sphere (Austin, 1995), may possibly be interpreted as a critique of the construction of Black youth consumption as deviant and pathological. Such displays may be seen as acts of defiance against those gatekeepers who would assume that Black youth could not afford these luxury items and as a thumb-in-the-nose to those who practice service discrimination against African-Americans of all ages. In many music videos, this conspicuous consumption is, quite interestingly, exhibited in a distinctly gendered and sexualized fashion where the material is intimately tied in with the sexual. The "flossing" or conspicuous display of material goods, preferably luxury items, serves as a potent aphrodisiac; sexual prowess/success is predicated upon monetary achievement and success. In fact, according to the "playa" motif, women are further objectified and stripped of agency in the way that they are effectively reduced to mere objects of consumption and flaunted often as mere material possessions.

Importantly, though, while the sexual double standard in Hip Hop and music video reproduce controlling images of Black womanhood through an appeal to a male audience, male authorship and creative control, it also persists through the acceptance and acquiescence of women to and complicity with these notions and ideologies as well. This is especially distressing because the circulation of these images and their reproduction of dominant and controlling ideologies of Black womanhood also have very real and tangible consequences for Black girls in their everyday lives. The emphasis upon the body and physicality and the appearance of very thin performers, models and background dancers in music videos serves to inundate the young women who watch them with unrealistic and often unattainable standards of beauty. Recent findings that eating disorders and body image problems are on the rise especially among middle-class African-American teenage girls, who were previously assumed to not be as

affected by body image concerns, suggest that the proliferation of unrealistically thin, scantily clad, objectified images of the Black female body may be a factor in how young Black women develop a body image, self-concept and self-esteem.

Yet another consequence of the chickenhead stereotype is how it also may undermine a sense of commonality and unity among Black women, which often emerges as intra-racial gendered class conflict. Black feminist cultural critic and journalist Joan Morgan actively and critically engages the notion of the chickenhead's impact upon the lives of young, Black women in her memoir, When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip Hop Feminist, and in an "open letter" to chickenheads, Joan Morgan takes young women who accept and perform this persona to task, positioning herself as the hard-working, accomplished and educated "good girl", "chickenhater":

Alright, Ms Chicken,

We both know you and I don't particularly like each other, but it's time for a meeting of the minds. I confess, I'm a longtime Chickenhater --one of the smart, successful, hard-working educated, super-independent black girls who spends a lot of time dissing you and your chickenhead sistren. In particular, we abhor your object materialism, your predilection for Ricki Lake skankwear, and the nauseating way you stroke the male ego. For the record, none of us are buying that "airhead" shit. Any fool that's seen you in dick pursuit knows you can be calculating, cunning and savvy as hell. Trust me, baby girl, if I ever lost my press pass and needed to get backstage, you are the first one I'd enlist. We just can't understand why, with all those skills, your sole ambition in life seems to be the wife (or baby mother) of somebody who makes enough cheddar to satisfy your shopping jones (Morgan, 1999 pg. 185-186)

What such tension between so-called chickenheads and chickenhater obscures is the ways the Jezebel controlling image historically has served to marginalize and exploit all Black women and pits African-American women against each other in order to undermine a sense of communality and community.

The baby mama image also distorts a true understanding of the lives of young Black women, the very real experiences of young Black unwed mothers who, as Elaine Bell Kaplan has shown in her study of Black teen mothers, Not Our Kind of Girl, do not have their children simply for monetary gain, as both the baby mama and the welfare mother images, informed by conservative anti-welfare rhetoric would suggest, but rather, to attempt to cultivate intimate social and emotional ties (Kaplan, 1997).

## Countering the sexual double standard in music videos : Counterdiscourses of Black Womanhood

While the music videos often do reproduce dominant stereotypical notions of Black womanhood, what is most apparent in the music videos of Black women performers is how they reveal the presence of a counterdiscourse of Black womanhood which creates space for female subjectivity and identification and allows for commentary, dialogue with and revision of hegemonic ideologies of Black femininity and sexuality.

This counter-discourse is characterized by Black woman-focused narratives and stories which place the everyday experiences, perspectives and voices of young Black women squarely at the center. These counter narratives dialogue with and revise the images of the chickenhead, the hoochie and the baby mama by constructing a Black female subjectivity

The first way in which this counter discourse emerges is through the representation of Black women as active agents, central actors, in which they express self-definition and self-determination. Agency is represented in these videos most significantly by assertiveness and independence in which performers use vocality, and verbal expression to talk back about and facilitate a critical commentary on romantic relationships.

Quite interestingly, in fact, many of these Black women's performances draw upon the link between the material and the sexual and exhibit the use of consumption to critique mistreatment and inequality in romantic relationships. The best example of this is Blu Cantrell's "Hit Em Up Style" in which she spends her man's money on a shopping spree with her friends, and sell his belongings at a yard sale as revenge for his cheating.

Problematic and superficial as they may be, such demonstrations of conspicuous consumption nevertheless effectively serve as a proxy for independence, and this use of trope of consumption as a strategy to counter the notions of both the gold-digging chickenhead and the dependent baby mama by asserting that a woman can "get her own" and "pay her own bills" without a man.

A second characteristic of the counterdiscourse of Black womanhood is the expression of collectivity and community. A significant way in which this is represented is through the visual depiction of and inscription within urban, African-American community landscapes, a strategy which serves to express a sense of racial awareness and consciousness. A process which works in a similar fashion to S. Craig Watkins' notion of 'ghettocentricity' in his analysis of the emphasis

upon inner-city Black community in the Black film cycle of 1990's, and reflects and reproduces the ways in which contemporary Black youth culture, specifically Hip Hop culture originated within and despite crossover and "suburbanization" remains identified in the "Hip Hop canon" (Forman, 2002) with the urban landscapes of the "post-industrial" city (Rose, 1994).

Jill Scott's "A Long Walk" depicts a leisurely traverse through the Black community of Philadelphia with her unseen, until the last shot, paramour, as she greets neighbors and community members. In "Brooklyn Anthem" Foxy Brown's ode to her hometown, the camera follows her and her crew (which, interestingly, and I would argue problematically, is all male as there don't appear to be any other women besides Foxy living in Brooklyn) through the streets of the New York City borough as she represents for her "hood".

Yet, beyond identifying with a geographic space, this construction of community and collectivity reflects what Mark Anthony Neal has described as the role of commodified forms of mass media, including music videos, as a site for the construction of black community. In Soul Babies, Neal argues that what he calls the "post-soul generation" possesses a critical desire for "reconstitution of community" in context of the "death of community" and sense of racial and cultural disconnectedness that has been a consequence of "postindustrial transformation of black urban spaces". Instead of fostering isolation and dispersion, the unprecedented mass mediation and commodification of Blackness as an opportunity for communication and connection among and between Black youth despite geographic distances and boundaries.

What is important here, though, is how this notion of collaboration and community is gendered. In "Playing For Keeps", Robin D.G. Kelley argues:

Hip hop, like other contemporary popular music, has become a highly visual genre that depends on video representations to authenticate the performer's ghetto roots and rough exterior. In a world of larger-than-life B-boys surrounded by a chaotic urban backdrop, there are few spaces for women outside the realm of hypermasculinity. Sometimes women rappers might challenge hypermasculine constructions of hip-hop, but rarely do they step outside of those constructions. While there is something strangely empowering about women being able to occupy that profane, phallogocentric space through which to express their own voices, it nonetheless sets limits on women's participation and ensures male dominance in the hip hop industry (Kelley, p. 218).

However, I would argue that this isn't exactly the case and Marla Shelton has demonstrated in her study that in their music videos, women rappers construct a "...particular

identification/representation of urban space and class... Hence, in music video, set locations allow visual physicality to link a specific rapper with specific race and class politics, while creating an aura of authenticity" (Shelton 1997, 108).

Consequently, women are able to accomplish a level of subjectivity through the ways in which women's narratives are centered within these landscapes over and over again, thereby enabling them to stake a claim within the visual economy of Blackness. This strategy also counters the persistence of male-identification and appeal to a male gaze as well as notions of Black female competitiveness engendered by the chickenhead and baby mama images.

Alicia Keys' "Fallin" video is possibly the most interesting in this respect because of how it visually goes beyond the standard love song narrative and combines images of the urban landscape with an implicit critique of the criminal justice system and not only its impact upon Black men, but also its effects upon Black women not only as the lovers of Black men in the system but as prisoners themselves. As, at the climax of the song, a work gang of African American women sing the chorus.

By situating young Black women squarely within the signifiers and discourses of Black youth culture, this construction of community and the representation of sisterhood and partnership between women and Black women especially, serves to problematize and destabilize the identification of Blackness and Black youth culture with masculinity that Kelley sees as so thoroughly inscribed in video representations.

In "Rewriting the Pleasure/Danger Dialectic", Tricia Rose advocates counternarratives of young Black women's sexuality that rewrite and revise dominant notions of Black female sexual desire without falling into commonly used discourses of either chastity and purity on the one hand or "Superwoman" strength and sexual "responsibility", on the other, in order to reclaim, center and emphasize Black women's sexual desire and agency (Rose, 1997):

... I would like to call for counternarratives that rewrite these sexualized tropes without surrendering the sexual arena through the reclaiming of purity and chastity or relying disproportionately on repressive tropes of sexual responsibility that equate female sexual desire and pleasure with immorality or irresponsibility (Rose, 1997, pg. 191).

I argue here that Black women performers use music video to both "rewrite" the dominant notions of the hypersexual Jezebel, and the chickenheads and baby mamas sexual

double standard script while avoiding narratives of either chastity or restraint, to where they move beyond being simply sexual objects, to being the subjects of their own sexuality.

I have identified the first strategy of privileging Black women's sexuality as the reappropriation of the Black female body. In the music videos of Black women performers, this reappropriation is represented by a juxtaposition and combination of sexuality, assertiveness and independence. What emerges is an effort on the part of the Black female artist to assert her own sexuality, to gain her own sexual pleasure.

What emerges is that 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.

For example, in the multi-cultural and multi-racial collaborative video "Lady Marmalade" featuring the Latina Christina Aguilera, White R&B singer Pink and Black women performers the formerly demure Mya, and ever-controversial Lil' Kim perform provocatively on a stage reproducing the bright and eclectic set of the film *Moulin Rouge* (upon whose soundtrack "Lady Marmalade" serves as the signature song) dressed as late-19<sup>th</sup> Century can-can dancers. In the video, and most notably, Lil' Kim's central in your face rap performance, Labelle's classic tale of a New Orleans Creole prostitute for the *Moulin Rouge* soundtrack becomes a "girl power" anthem for independent women of the new Millennium. In its emphasis upon the refrain "Hey Sista-Soul Sista" and the addition of Lil' Kim's in your face rap performance in which she states "...we independent women, some take us for whores, saying why spend mine, when I can spend yours...", the emphasis in this version of "Lady Marmalade" is shifted from the desire of the male subject of the original song (who is not included) to the sexual agency and subjectivity of the women performers, and their female audiences.

The second strategy of countering privileging Black women's sexuality in the music videos of Black women performers is what I view as the pattern of reversing and returning of the gaze to men during which men are featured as objects of female desire, whose bodies are the center of the camera's gaze, and the source of female visual and sexual pleasure.

In *Black Looks*, bell hooks argues for the ways in which Black women may re-read popular cultural texts, and construct a specifically Black female subject position through such a

reading. Lisa Lewis' work on the teenage girl fans of women performers in music videos demonstrates how female artists are able to construct a female viewership within their music videos through what she calls female address (hooks, 1992; Lewis, 1990). There appears to be a space constructed within the texts of these videos that allows for black female viewers to place themselves as sexual subjects

What all of these videos have in common is the construction of the male, and particularly the black male body as the object of black female pleasure. The male body is not merely looked at, it is actively pursued. These women clearly and unequivocally express what they want, how and when they want it, and frequently get it. Consequently, Black women's pleasure and enjoyment are privileged and the space for erotic self-fulfillment is established. Sexual representations are not merely signifiers of objectification and exploitation but are coded as well as an appropriation of the black woman's body in the service of the articulation of a self-defined sexuality.

What results is a space where the erotic, desire and pleasure become articulated on a woman's terms. Although for the most part, women still remain visually constructed as the source of male pleasure, and the male gaze remains intact, when issues of sexual pleasure were articulated either in the lyrical or visual text, or both, the importance of female sexual desire became key.

Examples of this phenomenon occur in TLC's 1995 video "Red Light Special" in which T-Boz, Left Eye and Chili are the only female players (and only fully clothed individuals) in a sexy game of strip poker. In 1997's KP and Envyi's "Swing My Way", rapper KP actively pursues "shorty", a male love interest in a club compelling him to ditch his date and "swing her way". In Toya's "I Do" and Janet's "All For You", both of this year, (which, interestingly, both feature the same male model/actor), both singers exchange flirtatious glances with an attractive young man in mutual romantic pursuit: Janet throughout an urban landscape, and Toya at high school and in a nightclub.

In Destiny's Child's "Bootylicious", when the camera focuses on the "bootys" of the male background dancers whose pants are pulled down to reveal underwear airbrushed with the name of the group on them, it is clear that it is desirable for men to be "bootylicious" too. And in Missy Elliott's "One Minute Man" Missy and rapper, Trina, surrounded by shirtless, muscular Black male dancers and models, who take on the role of background "decoration" typical of

women in music videos, challenge men who to perform in bed and demand sexual satisfaction while rapper Ludacris asserts that he can provide it

These videos return the gaze to the Black male body through what Susan Bordo, in The Male Body, (1999) termed “beauty (re) discovering the male body”, a phenomenon which, in this case, is characterized by a focus on the physicality and aesthetics of Black male body through which men and the male body become desired and the objects of the erotic gaze.

These videos express an articulation of mutual pleasure and enjoyment where in the black woman is the agent of her own pleasure as well as the vehicle for the fulfillment of male desire. She is not just the object, but also becomes the subject. Not only does she give sexual pleasure, but she also pursues, receives and accepts it. As a result, instead of being the object of exploitation, the black female performer is able to construct a subject position for herself and her female 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.

However, despite a focus on the male body, the question of whether women viewers are allowed full erotic subjectivity emerges, and the limits of female erotic agency come to the fore. In much the same way as Bordo describes representations of the male body in advertising, in music videos which actually are a combination of creative cultural product and advertisement, the Black male body is not nearly as exposed as the female body. Bordo describes the male body in advertisements, such as those for Calvin Klein as depicting itself as “armor” which prevents the body from not being truly “naked” or exposed. Instead, rather than the passivity seen in comparable images of women, what comes through is a sense of aggressiveness in which men are depicting as undressing rather than being undressed (Bordo, pg.30).

For example, in the case of the music videos of female performers, male background dancers tend not to be nearly as scantily clad as female dancers and models. Also, male models do not appear half-naked strewn around the female performers. As Susan Bordo states:

But although I’ve been using the term for convenience, I don’t think it’s correct to say that these ads depict men as ‘sex objects’...The most compelling images are suffused with ‘subjectivity’ ---they speak, to us, they seduce us. Unlike other kinds of ‘objects’ (chairs and tables, for example), they don’t let us use them in any way we like. In fact, they exert considerable power over us —over our psyches, our desires, our self-image (Bordo, 1999, 86).

In the case of the mutually returned gaze of the women performers, the men are not completely objectified, but retain subjectivity. Most significantly in these videos the male body remains active, not passive, and men still retain sexual agency. Unlike how women are constructed in music video representation, men are not just desired but continue to serve as actively desiring agents. Consequently, the sexual double standard still persists, and although it has been disrupted a bit by the visual strategies of focusing upon the Black male body in these music videos, the dichotomy which privileges male sexual agency and subjectivity still remains, albeit tenuously, entrenched as a trope in Hip Hop and Urban music videos.

The emphasis upon eroticism also raises concerns about the consequences of Black women performers depicting themselves in a highly sexualized manner. For young Black women, a certain and particular danger may lie in the possibility that reinforcement of dominant racialized and sexualized ideological notions of Black womanhood that stress Black women's hypersexualization and further entrench the jezebel image. However, on the whole, this construction of an erotic gaze in these music videos of Black women performers serves as a counternarrative of Black female sexuality in the ways in which it counters the double standard and enables space for female sexual agency to move to the center and undermine the privilege of the male gaze seen so often in the music videos of this genre. Taken together with the counternarratives of agency and collectivity, this emphasis upon sexuality accomplishes the type of revision called for by Tricia Rose, creating Black female subjectivity.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, while music videos often do reproduce dominant stereotypical notions of Black womanhood, my analysis of the videos of Black women performers demonstrates the way that video representation and performance as constructs space for young Black women, as active participants in culture to comment upon, dialogue with and revise hegemonic ideologies of Black femininity and sexuality. The counterdiscourse of Black womanhood creates space for women's subjectivity and identification. Through the construction of narratives of Black Women's Agency, Collectivity and Community and the Privileging of Black female sexuality, this counterdiscourse serves as a response and corrective to the sexual double standard which so often characterizes the representation of young Black women in popular youth culture.

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### Videography

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| TLC, <i>Red Light Special</i>                                  | Ja Rule feat Lil' Mo and Vita, <i>Put It On Me</i>            |
| K-P and Envyi, <i>Swing My Way</i>                             | Faith Evans, <i>Can't Believe</i>                             |
| Janet, <i>All For You</i>                                      | Christina Aguilera, Lil' Kim, Mya, Pink and Missy             |
| Destiny's Child, <i>Bootylicious</i>                           | Elliott, <i>Lady Marmalade</i>                                |
| Eve, feat. Gwen Stefani, <i>Let Me Blow Ya Mind</i>            | Foxy Brown, <i>Oh Yeah</i>                                    |
| Sunshine Anderson, <i>Heard It All Before</i>                  | Janet, <i>Someone To Call My Lover</i>                        |
| Missy Elliott, <i>Get Ur Freak On</i>                          | Missy Elliott feat. Ludacris and Trina, <i>One Minute Man</i> |
| Lil' Mo, <i>Superwoman</i>                                     | Ray J feat. Lil' Kim, <i>Wait A Minute</i>                    |
| India Arie, <i>Video</i>                                       | Trick Daddy, feat. Trina, <i>Take It To Da House</i>          |
| Toya, <i>IDO</i>   | Mya, <i>Free</i>  |
| Jill Scott, <i>A Long Walk</i>                                 | Olivia Bounce   |
| Mariah Carey feat. Da Brat and Ludacris, <i>Loverboy</i>       | Koffee Brown, <i>After Party</i>                              |
| Aaliyah, <i>We Need a Resolution</i>                           | Ja Rule feat. Lil' Mo, <i>ICry</i>                            |
| Blu Cantrell, <i>Hit 'Em Up Style</i>                          | 3LW, <i>Playas Gon Play</i>                                   |
| Alicia Keys, <i>Fallin'</i>                                    | Foxy Brown, <i>BK Anthem</i>                                  |
| Destiny's Child feat. Missy Elliott, <i>Bootylicious remix</i> | Jill Scott, <i>The Way</i>                                    |
| Destiny's Child, <i>Survivor</i>                               |   |
| City High, <i>What Would You Do?</i>                           |   |