African-American Teenage Girls and the Construction of Black Womanhood in Mass Media and Popular Culture

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Introduction

As Black youth culture, especially Hip-Hop, in the late 1990's and at the turn of the 21st century, dominates global media and popular culture, young African-American women are more present than ever before in the mass media and popular culture as performers, producers and consumers. As a result, it is more important than ever to pay close attention to the ways in which Black womanhood is constructed and represented in the media, and how those images of Black femininity inform the social contexts and impact the lives of teenage African-American girls. The following paper will provide a review of the literature pertinent to a consideration of the salient issues surrounding Black adolescent girls, media, and society.

Controlling Images, Media and Society

In the late 20th and at the dawn of the 21st century, mass media and popular culture have become primary sites for socialization and the perpetuation of hegemonic ideologies. Because of our dependence upon the media to inform us about the world we live in, it serves as one of the main sources for the dissemination and reinforcement of images of Black femininity. According to K. Sue Jewell, these mass media images of Black womanhood work to legitimize and justify social policies which blame Black women for their own social position (Jewell, 1993).

The nonthreatening, asexual Aunt Jemima figure is related to the role of Black women as domestic workers and caretakers of White children both ante- and post-bellum, while the Black male-castrating Matriarch/Sapphire has been utilized in placing the blame upon Black women for the so-called "dysfunction" of the female-headed Black family. An excessive and even instrumental sexuality has been attributed to poor and working-class Black women through the figures of the Welfare Mother, "Goldigger" and "Baby Momma." Collins, in Fighting Words, also describes how the Black Lady Overachiever has emerged since the 1980's to perpetuate the image of the Black "superwoman," who, through conformity to ideals of hard work, piety and virtue, has managed to achieve middle-class status and professional success, thereby serving as an example of the assertion that race and gender are no longer impediments to the attainment of equality (Collins, 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).

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 contemporary media is saturated with stereotypical, hegemonic images of Black women, they have not been successful in completely filling the popular culture landscape with stereotypical images of Black femininity and sexuality. Indeed, a body of literature demonstrates that often, Black female performance as well as resistant interpretations of it in popular culture serves to counter stereotypical images informed by dominant ideological notions of Black womanhood. Hazel Carby's and Angela Davis' work on female blues singers has shown that such a phenomena occurred in the early part of this century. Performers such as "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters offered, in their music, and on-stage performances, a portrait of Black womanhood in which they asserted empowerment and sexual subjectivity (Carby, 1986; Davis, 1998). In both Carby's and Davis' view, this female blues culture was grounded in a latent, but potent Black feminist consciousness.

The work of bell hooks and Jacqueline Bobo have highlighted the ways in which Black women are able to construct a subjective reading position grounded in a Black female particularity of experience. What both authors indicate is the way in which Black women are able through media reception and creative production to resist acceptance of dominant ideological notions of themselves, as well as construct representation of Black women that are grounded in lived experience. Nevertheless, despite the appearance of Black female performance and representation to the contrary, mass media and popular cultural images of Black women continue to reproduce the controlling images of Black womanhood.

Black Teenage Girls and the Media

Children and teenagers are arguably most vulnerable to the messages they receive through their media consumption that serves, along with and even sometimes in lieu of, family and peers as an important source for information on cultural standards of race, sexuality, masculinity and femininity. The proliferation of unrealistic and unattainable thin models and actresses on movie and television screens and in magazine articles and advertisements sends a message to young women about cultural ideals of female beauty that they can never achieve although they may starve and exercise themselves to death to do so. The symbolic annihilation or absence of realistic female images much less strong, independent and positive woman role models in the media also serve to reinforce dominant ideological notions that women are weak, unintelligent and unable to be successful and take charge of their own lives.

In 1997, the organization Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation realized the significance that the mass media and popular culture has in the everyday lives of adolescent girls, and jointly conducted a content analysis across six types of media of how women and girls are represented in popular culture and its impact on adolescent girls, called *Reflections of Girls in the Media*. This study has drawn national attention to the ways that the media send mixed messages about gender and sexuality to young girls that often overpower those coming from family, school and community (Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now, 1997).

On top of all this, young Black girls also face the fact that not only are they even less visible than White girls in popular culture, those images and representations that do appear tend to be grounded in the controlling images of Black womanhood. For example, Black women are rarely depicted as conforming to the cultural ideal of beauty and when they do they are often quite highly sexually exploited and objectified in the tradition of the "Jezebel" or "hot momma" controlling image.

Although 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 instead continue to persevere and, in their everyday lives, contradict and negate the images of Black womanhood and sexuality that pervade dominant ideology.

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 to not experience the drastic drop in levels of self-esteem as White and Latina girls do at the onset of adolescence (Orenstein, 1994). Recent statistics have demonstrated a sig-

nificant 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, and seems to indicate the possibility that young Black women are drawing upon the counter-discourses of reclaiming Black female sexuality that Black woman cultural producers express in their work.

More than ever, images and notions of Blackness have come to dominate not only the United States but also global popular culture. Since its emergence in the mass media mainstream in the early 1990's, Hip-Hop culture has come to not only be the dominant genre of popular music, but also has impacted the arenas of film, fashion, television, art, literature and journalism (Watkins, 1997). Despite Black popular culture's crossover appeal, it remains a potent force in the everyday lives of African-American youth. In Black Picket Fences (Patillo-McCoy, 1999), sociologist Mary Patillo-McCoy, utilizing the example of the Nike brand of athletic apparel, argues that Black youth, like those she interviewed in "Groveland," are more attentive than ever to the messages of commodification and conspicuous consumption that they receive through the mass media and popular culture (Patillo-McCoy, 1999).

Young African-Americans, nevertheless, have a very contradictory relationship with popular culture. Despite being greatly influenced by mass media, Black youth also bring their own experiences and viewpoints to the popular cultural products they consume and actively use popular culture in order to make their lives more meaningful and express themselves (Patillo-McCoy, 1999).

Black teenage girls and boys are active participants in popular culture, and both are attuned to trends of fashion and style. However, despite the interesting findings regarding the self-concept of African-American girls, as well as the substantial contributions of Black feminist theory, research, and criticism to the analysis of Black popular culture, young Black women, until very recently, have failed to be located as substantial producers, creators and consumers of Hip-Hop and Black youth culture. Most of the contemporary research and criticism on Black youth in popular culture has focused on the experience of young men of African descent and, excluding notable and rare exceptions, have implicitly and often explicitly identified Black popular culture, and specifically Hip-Hop culture with masculinity (Perkins, 1996; Rose, 1991, 1994; George, 1998).

In fact, the Hip-Hop genre and rap lyrics in particular have been harshly critiqued for the anti-woman (specifically anti-Black woman) messages and images contained within them. Many critics have pointed out the ways that many discourses in Hip-Hop culture have served to reproduce dominant and distorted ideologies of Black women's sexuality.

Nevertheless, despite male dominance in Hip-Hop and Black popular culture at large, women, especially African-American and Latina women have played an instrumental and integral role in its development, dissemination and popularity. Writers such as Nancy Guevara (in Perkins, 1996) and Tricia Rose have documented the impact that women have had upon the development and success of Hip-Hop. Specifically, Rose, in Black Noise (1994), has argued that the role of Black female rappers is that of a dialogic relationship with Black male rappers in which they are able to "talk back" to the dominant ideas of Black femininity, sexuality and male-female relationships that appear in male rappers' lyrics and video images. Rose has proposed that rap music and Hip-Hop culture, instead of being entirely oppressive to women, may actually create a space for Black women to assert independence, agency, and control of their sexuality (Rose, 1991).

Consequently, these authors demonstrate that popular culture in general and youth culture specifically, provide a space for young Black women to construct what can be seen as a counter-discourse of Black womanhood. Coming from an inherently Black female subject position, these performers are able to resist and delegitimize the oppressive and exploitative representations of Black femininity that pervade the public sphere.

Is it possible that African-American young women are able to find a space to express and experience a positive self-concept in popular culture, specifically the often-misogynistic sphere of Hip-Hop that has not previously been seen as a particularly safe or productive space for Black women? Psychologists who work with and write about teenage girls, such as Lyn Mikel Brown, Jessica Henderson Daniel and Niobe Way (Johnson, Roberts and Worrell, 1999) suggest that in order to get a clearer picture of the lives of adolescent girls we should look not only at how teenage girls are affected negatively by their social and interpersonal contexts, but also at the ways in which they exhibit strength and resilience, and how they strive to resist those dominant notions of womanhood that place unrealistic expectations upon them, constraining and restricting their development. In their work on girls' psychological development, psychologists Lynn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan found that despite alarming drops in adolescent girls' self-esteem, girls quite frequently and vigorously, especially those in their preteen years, actively resist hegemonic ideals of femininity (Brown, 1998).

Extending this thesis, it seems plausible that Black girls, due to the nature of the sexualized racism that serves as the foundation of the controlling images of Black womanhood, may possibly occupy an outsider status when it comes to dominant notions of feminine identity and sexuality. The racialized nature of the sexist expectations of femininity seem to create a paradox, a contradiction for young Black girls in which they are expected to live up to those images, yet are constantly derided for

being "inherently" racially inferior to White women and girls. According to Brown and Gilligan's thesis, this outsider status that Black women inhabit may afford them in some way some space and agency to counter the hegemonic notions of Black femininity they are surrounded with in culture and society.

Black Girls in Social Science and Popular Culture Literature

African-American teenage girls are all but invisible in the social science and mass media literatures. Few if any academic investigations have been made into how young Black women themselves actually respond to and interpret how they are depicted in mass media and popular culture. As mentioned above, Black girls are most often excluded from studies of Black youth culture, and they also are no more than mere footnotes in the burgeoning literature on teenage "girl" culture.

The first, truly landmark study of Black teenage girls is Joyce Ladner's Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman, published in 1971. Ladner's goal, in the tradition of the burgeoning critical discourse of the Black Sociology movement and Black Family studies in the 1960's and 1970's, was to provide evidence to counter the notions of Black family pathology in direct response to the "culture of poverty" discourses associated with the notorious Moynihan Report. In this sense, Ladner constructs counter-discourse of Black girls' lives, which presents a reversal of the notion of Black social and cultural pathology (Ladner, 1972).

Despite Ladner's precedent to the contrary, most of the social science literature on Black teenage girls continues to perpetuate the notion of the Black girl as a "problem," focusing on the issues of teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, poverty and drug use. These studies perpetuate the ideologies of Black girls as having a problematic and pathological sexuality that serves to justify continued socioeconomic inequality. Elaine Bell Kaplan's study of teenage mothers, Not Our Kind of Girl, has effectively countered those notions and demonstrated that myths surrounding Black teenage motherhood are unfounded and do not reflect the realities faced by the girls, through ethnographic research that provides a firsthand account and rich analytical insight into the lives of African-American teenage mothers (Kaplan, 1997).

Most contemporary studies of the everyday lives of teenage girls and the role that cultural ideals of sexuality and femininity play in the development of their identities, such as Mary Pipher's popular and influential Reviving Ophelia, give short shrift to the unique lives and experiences of Black girls, either excluding them completely or relegating them to footnotes and marginal comments (Pipher, 1994).

An increasing number of recent studies have drawn greater attention to the lives of Black girls (Johnson, Roberts and Worrell, 1999; Way, 1998) and frequently allow

them to tell their stories from their point of view in order to counter the absence of Black teenage girls in social science research. There also has been an increasing emphasis in recent literature upon Black women and girls' active use of culture to make meaning from and sense out of their everyday lives as well as others, which identify strategies of negotiating sexuality, body image, self-esteem and self-concept used by African-American women and teenage girls (Del Rosso, 2000; Way and Chen, 2000; Sears, 1999; Venkatesh, 1998; Olsen, 1997; Stevens, 1997; Carlson, Uppal and Prosser, 2000; Lamanna, 1999; White, 1999; Ofosu, Lafreniere and Senn, 1998; Wallace, 1998; Williamson, 1998; Banks, 1995).

Despite this growing attention to the role and meaning of culture in the lives of African-American teenage girls, many of these studies fail to consider, much less focus on the significance of the mass media and popular culture in the lives of these girls and its impact upon their development of identity, consciousness, femininity and sexuality. For the most part, African-American teenage girls have been absent from or on the periphery of the body of empirical research of mass media and popular culture.

Since the 1980's a research literature on "girl" culture and the media has emerged to fill in the gaps of youth culture. In Britain, Angela McRobbie's research has shown how girls, instead of being peripheral to youth culture, have carved out their own spaces in popular culture in order to articulate their own everyday experiences, concerns and imperatives. McRobbie has shown how through the mediums of dance, fashion and magazines, girls and young women are able to express themselves and make meaning of their lives (McRobbie, 1984, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999).

What is apparent, though, is that despite the institutionalization of class, race, generation and gender into the analysis of media in society, those that reside at the crossroads of all these categories, Black girls, remain conspicuously missing from this discourse. As discussed previously, the majority of work on Black youth culture and media which has identified and explored the importance of generation and age in social location and cultural practice, has identified it primarily with masculinity, as has the literature on youth culture overall, and has, for the most part, ignored the issue of gender. This is especially the case in the burgeoning critical and empirical literature on Hip-Hop culture. However, when young Black women do come into the picture, it is almost exclusively in critiques of representations in television shows, film, music videos and song lyrics that perpetuate sexist, degrading and exploitative stereotypes of Black femininity and sexuality.

The research and criticism that does concern Black women, and Hip-Hop unfortunately, does not seek to understand how the young Black girls, who not only are depicted within them but also consume music videos, respond to and interpret the

images within them. Instead, such work, such as that of Robin Roberts and Nataki Goodall on feminist themes in the music videos of Black female rappers, either continues the focus on pure textual analysis, or they only speak with performers and producers, and not audiences and viewers. These studies, especially those of Roberts, Skeggs and Goodall are especially 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; they also do not seem to recognize how many of the themes in the videos of Black female performers do reproduce dominant notions of Black womanhood (Roberts, 1991, 1994; Skeggs, 1993; 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).

The recent studies of Black women, culture, media and representation continues to look at how Black women are both represented in mass media and popular culture (Chancer, 1998; Gadsen, 1999; Fears, 1998; Humphries, 1998; Plous and Neptune, 1998; Robinson, 1998). Many other studies also consider the impact of such representations upon women's and girls' self-esteem and self-image (Perkins, 1996; Fouts and Burggraf, 2000). However, most interestingly, many of these works have made even further contributions to the conversation about how Black women and girls are active participants in popular culture (Hudson, 1998; Hutchison, 1999; Gibson-Hudson, 1994), providing empirical evidence of the ways that Black women not only are influenced by but also use media to construct meaning in their lives.

The combination of exclusion and selective attention to the lives of African-American teenage girls has lead to a merely partial and often one-dimensional depiction and conception of what it means to be a Black girl. When Black girls' lives are explored, the significant impact of mass media and popular culture upon them is rarely if ever considered. Because of this invisibility, Black girls in their own environments, spaces and locations are not given subjectivity, and are not allowed to speak about these issues in their own words from their own point of view, about how they are being represented in the academy, social policies or mass media, popular culture, and Hip-Hop culture. What is needed is a remedy to this exclusion that would provide a space for young Black women who are the ones being depicted, and actually consume these cultural products to express their views on the ways in which

Black womanhood and sexuality are represented in the popular culture forms they watch on a regular basis and that permeate their media landscape. Overall, what is at issue here is whether Black girls are connecting and identifying with, or rejecting and disregarding the representations of Black female sexuality that they are viewing in Black popular culture, and whether young Black women are able to find a site for the articulation of everyday Black female sexual agency, expression, pleasure and erotic subjectivity within the realm of Black popular culture and Hip-Hop culture.

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