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Hip Hop Through Gendered Eyes

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Abstract

This project examines how female Hip Hop and Rap artists have constructed gender from the late 1970s to the present with an exploration of how female Hip Hop and Rap artists in the United States are influenced by and have influenced pop culture and social norms. Through a case analysis of the music and public personae of Nicki Minaj and Young M.A., this project focuses on how female Hip Hop and Rap artists perform gender in their clothing style, lyricism, and other behaviors and in their music. Overall, by examining how gender is performed by female artists over time, this document will provide insight into how both Hip Hop and Rap music have been catalysts for empowering women and changing social norms around gender. This analysis also shows that there is room for progress in gender equality and a need to continue breaking down embedded misogyny in Hip Hop and Rap music.

Keywords: gender, Hip Hop, Rap, feminism, female, construction, lyrics

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Notes on contributor

Jia Brittany Ireland is a recently graduated student of the Master of Arts program at the University of Michigan-Flint, studying Social Sciences with a concentration in Women and Gender Studies. Her research interests include race and ethnicity, Black feminism, popular culture, and representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality in Rap and/or Hip Hop music.

Introduction

Hip-Hop is the soundtrack of the inner city, and for many people it is relatable to their daily struggle and grind. Rap music, which was birthed out of the Hip-Hop culture of the 1970s, has permeated mainstream musical culture; the blaring bass vibrates from clubs and car stereos around the world. Hip-Hop and Rap have also shaped peoples' realities by setting norms about style and what is "hot", as well as setting the tone for how people view themselves, others, and the world around them (Romano, 2016). Not just the music, but the culture of Hip Hop also has an international reach, disseminating, everything from styles of dress and hairstyles to the youthful lingo (i.e. "slang") of Hip Hop.

With this in mind, it is critical to examine how gender is constructed in Hip Hop and Rap music given that Hip Hop is one of the most successful music genres, and millions of people around the world consume it (Romano, 2016). Hip Hop, through lyrics and music videos, also contributes to the circulation of negative representations of women and girls, particularly Black women and other women of color (Pough, p.83). Black women and girls are sexualized in mainstream media and, in many ways Hip Hop exacerbates sexualized notions of Black womanhood (White, 2013).

This project will examine how gender is constructed in Hip Hop and Rap music, while specifically looking at how female Hip Hop and Rap artists have changed in their gender performances and presentations over the past four decades. It will also closely examine how gender is performed by two leading female Hip Hop and Rap artists, Nicki Minaj and Young M.A., to provide a case analysis on the forever-evolving social construction that is "gender". Nicki Minaj and Young M.A. are two female rap artists who

have a large following and who have gained success in modern mainstream Hip Hop and Rap music. In particular, Nicki Minaj maintains a colorful gender presentation that includes heavy makeup, colorful wigs and hairstyles, and colored eye contacts, all the while portraying herself as a “Barbie doll,” a sharp contrast to her earlier days when she wore clothing that was perceived as masculine (i.e., opting for baggy jeans, fitted caps with Timberland boots). On the other hand, while Young M.A. has her own style, she wears what is perceived to be masculine clothing. She is perceived to be aggressive, philandering, and tough, and gives off the persona of somebody that does not play games. However, my overarching questions in exploring the work of these two artists are: What do these representations of gender performance actually convey? And how do these representations reflect changes in the culture and marketing of Hip Hop and Rap over time?

Hip Hop feminism, as Joan Morgan boldly details, involves “Fucking with the greys” (p.59). In other words Hip Hop feminism is raw and unadulterated, and it attempts to examine the grey that may be left untouched by traditional feminism (Morgan, 1999). In order to analyze the growth of female Hip Hop and Rap artists, one has to look at Hip Hop as a culture and examine the notions of gender that exist within the context of Hip Hop.

Gender, Hip Hop, and Theory

In her article, *What It Do, Shorty?: Women, Hip-Hop, and a Feminist Agenda*, Gwendolyn Pough (2007) looks at spaces within Hip Hop culture where feminist thought and activism intervene to provide a more nuanced discussion of gender, sex, race, and other societal issues within Hip Hop. She writes about having a “Hip Hop state of mind” where an

individual is deeply immersed in Hip Hop culture and Rap music, while being critical and analyzing the messages blasting from the speakers (Pough, 2007 p. 79).

Scholars like Gwendolyn Pough, Joan Morgan, Elaine Richardson, and Michael Oware, among others, emphasize that women have always been at the forefront of Hip Hop and from its early beginnings, women were rapping, deejaying, breakdancing, co-founding record labels, and tagging up the subways of New York with graffiti along with their male counterparts. Yet, when listening to Hip Hop and Rap music it appears that women, and particularly Black women, are objectified, and talked about in ways that promote a negative stereotype of womanhood and, more importantly a negative image of Black women and girls (Morgan, 1999).

For example, in Nelly's infamous music video for the song "*Tip Drill*" he is depicted throwing cash at the camera and swipes a credit card between the buttocks of a Black woman (Nelly, 2000). Here the Black woman is viewed as a sexualized object, while a male rapper, Nelly, swipes a credit card between her buttocks, further objectifying her as if she were an ATM machine. In addition, in Rae Sremmurd's music video for the song "*Come Get Her*," as the women ride a fake rodeo, the rappers throw cash at them (Sremmurd, 2015). French Montana along with Drake, Rick Ross, and Lil Wayne all paid homage to Uncle Luke's Miami bass hit "*I Wanna Rock (Doo Doo Brown)*" in their 2012 summer hit, "*Pop That*", whose video depicts the rappers at a pool party while scantily clad women gyrate and play in the pool (Montana, 2012).

It is important to note that not all Black women are portrayed this way or act this way in Hip Hop culture. However, depictions like the ones above are commonplace and have

been widely circulated in the media and through the lens of Hip Hop. In fact the negative, hyper sexualized imagery of Black women are deeply rooted in White Supremacy, misogyny, sexism and racism (hooks, 1981). In her book, "*Ain't I A Woman*" hooks provides an historical analysis of gender and the racial construction of Black women, and how it was manufactured overtime by White men to justify the inhumane treatment of Blacks during slavery and to elevate the status of White males in society (hooks, 1981).

Patricia Hill Collins also echoes this message in her book, "*Black Feminist Thought*" (1990), adding that the notion of what it meant to be "feminine" and "ladylike" was constantly in contradiction when it came to Black women. The White male construction of gender placed women on pedestals while demoting their status in society under men (hooks, 1981; Collins, 1990). Women are supposed to be submissive; both asexual and yet sexually desirable for males; quiet, and at the beck and call of their husbands (hooks, 1981; Collins, 1990).

However, these same gender ideals did not apply to Black women in the same social context. Instead, Black women were racialized to be hypersexual and promiscuous, and they were essentially viewed as always wanting sex. In fact, through the White male construction of race, it was believed that Black women could not be "raped" (hooks, 1981).

Joan Morgan discusses the notion of the "strongblackwoman" in her book, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*. Here, Morgan points out that the label "strongblackwoman" is assigned to Black women as a badge of honor, as only a Black woman can withstand the daily struggles of racism, misogyny, classism, and sexism and still be there for her family and community (Morgan, 1999). In other words, a Black woman is

supposed to have a daily struggle; she is supposed to be able to deal with adversity but still come out on top despite the odds stacked against her. The Black woman is a superhuman, she has no feelings, nothing bothers her, and, she can withstand any obstacles thrown at her, and this fits into the racialized script of Black people being able to withstanding extreme pain and negative emotion (Morgan, 1999).

Morgan (1999) also speaks of the “endangeredblackman” who is the enemy of the White man, and the system of oppression is constantly trying to rid the Black man from earth. Here, the gender roles have changed: the Black man is an endangered species with so many enemies seeking him out for prey (Morgan, 1999). It is up to the “strongblackwoman” to protect and serve the Black men in her community, often putting her own needs, wants and desires on the backburner for the sake of the entire Black race (Morgan, 1999). These gender roles and scripts, which include superhuman capabilities of the Black woman and the superhuman strength of the Black man (who is portrayed as the athletic brute) were placed upon the Black body through a web of and racism created during slavery in the United States (hooks, 1981; Simmons, 2008). The idea that Black people were savages and uncivilized came from a European conception of what being “civilized” meant (hooks, 1981; Simmons, 2008).

It is during the chattel slavery era that Black woman are given mixed messages of what is meant to be a woman. Here she is supposed to be submissive, pure, and placed on a pedestal by the men in society per Victorian gender roles (hooks, 1981). Yet the Black woman was also viewed as desiring sex as she lured men with her sexual promiscuity (hooks, 1981; Simmons, 2008). Overall, gender roles were embedded with contradictions and, according to societal gender roles, Black men could never truly be men, as they were barred

from being able to provide for their families. On the other hand, Black women could never truly be women as they did physical labor and had sexual prowess (hooks, 1981; Simmons 2008).

The stereotypes of the Jezebel and Sapphire, birthed out of the antebellum American slave period would continue through the twentieth century and current times. Although the terms have changed to more aggressive terminology they are still derogatory and demeaning to Black women. The Jezebel is portrayed as the Black woman who seeks sex with anybody, however constructed out of heteronormative ideals that she is seeking sex from any man (hooks, 1981). Today, the Jezebel is the scantily clad “ho” or “T.H.O.T (That Ho Over There). The Sapphire of yesteryear is the “bitch” or “dyke” of today who is fierce in her “strongblackwoman” persona. She is the woman who knows her worth and plays no games (Morgan, 1999). As I will argue, these images also resurge in Hip Hop and Rap music in the figure of the “ho,” the sexually promiscuous Black woman who is down to be penetrated by anybody in various Rap songs (Morgan, 1999).

In order to better explore these contradictions of gender construction in Hip Hop, a brief discussion of Hip Hop Feminism is in order. As a component of third wave feminism, Hip Hop Feminism gained steam in the 1990s as an outlet for activism (Pough, 2007). Hip Hop Feminism emphasizes that personal experiences are political because social constructions such as race, class, gender, and sexuality determine how an individual will be received and treated in society (Pough, 2007). Hip Hop feminism and Black feminism both look at how race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect to shape our lived realities (Collins, 1990; Pough, 2007). Critically, Hip Hop Feminism acknowledges the women who are invested in Hip Hop culture and enjoy the music, but who also recognizes the problematic

influences of sexism, patriarchy, misogyny, classism, and homophobia on the lyrics and music videos of popular Hip Hop artists (Morgan, 1999; Pough, 2007). Hip Hop and Black feminisms also critically explore racism within the history of feminist movements, particularly the ways that the first and second wave of feminism focused on White middle and upper class women, leaving out working class and women of color (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981).

In addition, employing Objectification theory along with hip hop feminism provides a more nuanced understanding of how female Hip Hop and Rap artists have constructed gender and how they are situated within Hip Hop culture as well as within the greater society (Frederickson & Robertson, 1997; White, 2013). Particularly, Objectification theory examines how women and girls are seen as objects, how their worth is wrapped up in their physical appearance, and the ways that heteronormative and patriarchal norms places pressure on them to be sexually pleasing (Frederickson & Robertson, 1997). Objectification theory also looks at how an individual or group is exploited by others and the resulting loss of autonomy. In other words, Objectification theory provides a framework for understating the ways that an individuals' or groups' value derives from how others can use them (Frederickson & Robertson, 1997). Using this framework will allow me to examine how female Hip Hop and Rap artists' counter objectification, and how they use their platform to bring forth female empowerment through their music.

For the purposes of this project, I will be employing a Black Feminist Womanist, Hip Hop Feminist and Objectification theoretical frameworks to dissect and analyze the work of female artist in Hip Hop and Rap. These important theoretical frameworks pinpoint the social contradictions and highlight the social issues facing people of color with a specific

focus on classism, racism, and sexism. They also look at how these social constructions are interconnected into a web of oppression. Using these theories, I am able to better understand the social web of oppression that allows gender to dictate how a person is perceived, while at the same time leaving room for the ways that women are redefining themselves in Hip Hop and Rap music.

I will use these theories to explore how two of Hip Hop's biggest female Rap artists, Nicki Minaj and Young M.A., developed their style, lyricism, and how through their stage persona and their music they construct (and reconstruct) gender, potentially influencing (and reinforcing) gender norms for young Black girls and women in society.

Hip Hop vs. Rap

Hip Hop and Rap music originated in the late 1970s in "The Bronx", New York providing a soundtrack to the inner city (Pough, p. 79). Though many may think women were not a part of Hip Hop and Rap music from the beginning, they were always present in the culture of Hip Hop as well as in the music of Rap (Pough, p. 79). Hip Hop is seen as a culture that is derived from the subculture of people from the inner city including, urban dwellers, young, middle aged, and older African Americans, Hispanics (Latinos) and Jamaicans all living in the New York area in the late 70s (Layne, 2014, para. 3). It is a culture of style, movement, poetry, sound, and feeling with deep African roots, which people of African descent utilized to create one of music's most popular genres (Layne, 2014).

The terms, "Hip Hop" and "Rap" are often used interchangeably, but there is a difference between the two terms. Hip Hop can be viewed as the overarching cultural framework, while rap (i.e. rapping) is an element of Hip Hop culture (Layne, 2014; Shaw,

2013). There are four main elements of Hip-Hop culture: deejaying, break dancing, rapping, and graffiti (Layne, 2014, para. 2). Two Hip Hop legends, Keith Cowboy of Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa are credited with coining the term, “Hip Hop” and including the art of “emceeing” (rapping) into the culture of Hip Hop (Shaw, 2013, p.2). As Hip Hop has evolved over the years, some of the elements within Hip-Hop culture have become less prevalent. For example, “break dancing” has become an element of the past (i.e. something that was done in the 1980s) whereas in modern Hip Hop it has been replaced with “twerking” (or perhaps one might say that “twerking” has become the new “breakdancing”).

Hip Hop is a lifestyle, a way of life for many people, while rap is something people do, or an aspect of that lifestyle (Shaw, 2013). Rapping is a combination of poetry, speech, and rhyming over a beat. It takes a certain skill set to master the technique of rapping, one of the key elements of Hip Hop culture. It is also important to note that a person can be a rap artist but not necessarily a Hip-Hop artist (Shaw, 2013). In addition, Gwendolyn Pough (2007) speaks of the forgotten element of Hip Hop, “Knowledge”, which I argue has been overlooked for years in Hip Hop. Perhaps the “knowledge” aspect of Hip Hop is found in the “conscious rap” sub-genre or underground rap artists who speak about societal issues such as race relations in America. For example, conscious rappers such as J. Cole, Kendrick Lamar, and Chance the Rapper tackle issues of poverty, racism, relationships, and uplifting the Black community. While they may also have songs about partying and drug use, their music often comes with a deeper message. The “knowledge” aspect of Hip Hop can be heard through their outlook on life where they argue in their lyrics that it is not all about partying, drinking, doing drugs, and having sexual conquests. In other words, their songs convey a message that

addresses the social conditions that allow poverty and police brutality to take place in communities of color.

Women in Hip-Hop

While Hip Hop and Rap have been viewed as male-dominated domains, women have always been a part of Hip Hop and Rap music, from the very beginning to the present (White 2013, p. 613.). Women have played a major role in cultivating style, setting fashion trends, and adding to the richness of Hip-Hop culture (White 2013, p. 613). However, as time changed and different influences began to overpower the core elements of Hip Hop, the image of women Hip Hop and Rap began to change as well (Layne, 2014; Pough, 2007; Simmons, 2008; White, 2013). The outside influence of capitalism, shifts in the target audience, along with the heavy influence record labels had over artists have forever changed the type of messaging conveyed in Hip Hop and Rap music (Layne, 2014; Pough, 2007; Simmons, 2008; White, 2013).

In the early phases of Hip Hop and Rap music, there were B-Boy and B-Girl dance groups that participated in breakdancing, one of the core elements of Hip Hop culture (Lyons, 2011). The Sequence, an all-female Hip Hop trio, which included soul singer, Angie Stone, debuted their hit rap song, “*Funk You Right On Up*” in 1979 right around the time that the Hip Hop classic “*Rapper’s Delight*” came out (Lyons, 2011). It is also important to note that one of Hip Hop and Rap music’s earliest record labels, Sugar Hill Records, was founded by a woman named, Sylvia Brown (Lyons, 2011).

The Sequence “rapped” about having fun, dancing, dating and relationships, and style. They also projected a feminine gender identity in their performances. The Sequence

members wore sequin styled clothing, which was very shiny and bright. The trio was signed to Sylvia Brown's Sugar Hill Records in 1979 (Gannt, 2015) and, as Hip Hop's first all-female group, The Sequence paved the way for female Hip Hop and Rap artists to come, including groups like Salt-N-Pepa.

Salt-N-Pepa burst onto the scene in the mid-1980s (Orcutt, 2016). Salt-N-Pepa is the bestselling female rap act, having sold over 15 million albums and singles worldwide (Hunter, 2012). Salt-N-Pepa was made up of three women: Cheryl James (Wray) (aka Salt), Sandra Denton (aka Pepa), and Deidra Roper (aka Spinderella) (Orcutt, 2016, para.3).

Salt-N-Pepa provided their own sense of style by rocking big hoop earrings, dying their hair, rocking it short, and wearing popular startup jackets and fitness wear when they performed live and in their music videos (Satenstein, 2016). The group showed many young women that they could wear their clothing, often sporting sportswear, in a "feminine" way that allowed them to ooze "sex appeal" (Satenstein, 2016, para.4). It is during this time that Hip Hop and Rap music expanded into the American mainstream. It was no longer just a way for people of color and inner city people to express themselves; it began to have a new target audience, a mostly White and male audience (White, 2013 p. 613).

This change in the audience, and the expansion of Hip Hop and Rap music into the mainstream was, reflected in Salt-N-Pepa's rap lyrics. Their music was still on par with The Sequence, in the sense it was about having fun, dancing and partying, but the lyrics began to take on a racier tone with obvious sexual innuendos. Their hit single, "*Push It*", from their album "*Hot, Cool, & Vicious*", appears to be a fun and upbeat song with a dance style beat. However, taking a moment to analyze the lyrics, the song could have various meanings:

(Now wait a minute, y'all; This dance ain't for everybody
Only the sexy people
So all you fly mothers, get on out there and dance
Dance, I said!)

Salt and Pepa's here, and we're in effect
Want you to push it, babe
Coolin' by day then at night working up a sweat
C'mon girls, let's go show the guys that we know
How to become number one in a hot party show
Now push it

Ah, push it - push it good
Ah, push it - push it real good
Ah, push it - push it good
Ah, push it - p-push it real good

While the song could have multiple meanings, its sexual nature is clear. Here, the song targets “only the sexy people”, and implies they are the only ones who can enjoy sex (i.e. “push it real good”). In the same breath Salt-N-Pepa express their power and control over their bodies and what they want their mate to do to them. This was groundbreaking given that, traditionally women were seen as submissive, asexual, or simply a sexual object for men to desire (Oware, 2009, p.795). Salt-N-Pepa through their music and performance, were challenging this norm by stating that it was okay for women to take control and inform their partner how they wanted to be pleased sexually and romantically.

As more women began to enter the realm of Hip Hop and Rap music, they shared their perspective on womanhood through their lyricism, style, and performance. It is

important to note that while Salt-N-Pepa and other female rap artists had sexually laced lyrics, there were also female empowerment lyrics that promoted gender equality, and expressed the female perspective through what is perceived to be a male dominated music genre (Oware, 2009 p. 796,). Salt-N-Pepa also rapped about power dynamics when it came to heterosexual relationships, particularly when it came to sex, and the roles played by both men and women in these relationships. In the lyrics below to their hit song, “*Let’s Talk About Sex*”, they openly discuss sex, a potentially taboo subject:

Let's talk about sex, baby
Let's talk about you and me
Let's talk about all the good things
And the bad things that may be
Let's talk about sex
Let's talk about sex
Let's talk about sex
Let's talk about sex

Hot to trot, make any man's eyes pop
She use what she got to get whatever she don't got
Fellas drool like fools, but then again they're only human
The chick was a hit because her body was boomin'
Gold, pearls, rubies, crazy diamonds
Nothin' she ever wore was ever common
Her dates heads of state, men of taste
Lawyers, doctors, no one was too great for her to get with
Or even mess with, the Prez she says was next on her list
And believe me, you, it's as good as true
There ain't a man alive that she couldn't get next to

She had it all in the bag
So she should have been glad
But she was mad and sad and feelin' bad
Thinkin' about the things that she never had
No love, just sex, followed next with a check and a note
That last night was dope, dope

Through these lyrics, it appears that the female rap group is promoting gender equality through, open communication, and explicit female empowerment. While Salt-N-Pepa did not openly state that they were feminists, it can be argued that in this song they are rapping from a feminist perspective that supports gender equality and sexual empowerment. As the song goes:

Let's talk about sex, baby
Let's talk about you and me
Let's talk about all the good things
And the bad things that may be

Here, Salt-N-Pepa seem to be advocating for an open dialogue between sexual partners, including encouraging women to voice their concerns about the type of sex they may be having with their partners. The rap group also suggests that there are in fact “bad” and “good” things that take place in sex and relationships. They make it clear that sex and relationships are not a fairytale but have real life implications.

Though they advocate for female empowerment by giving women a voice and making women subjects in the discussion of sex, gender stereotypes still echo in the backdrop of the song. For example, the song also engages with stereotype often portrayed in

Hip Hop and Rap music that women are only after men for their money (Oware, 2009). Here, the song details a woman who is materialistic, all while being objectified by male suitors:

Hot to trot, make any man's eyes pop
She use what she got to get whatever she don't got
Fellas drool like fools, but then again they're only human
The chick was a hit because her body was boomin'
Gold, pearls, rubies, crazy diamonds

Here the image of the Jezebel that bell hooks (1981) speaks about resurfaces as a woman who is physically attractive and seems to gain attention from men based on her looks and what she can do for them sexually. As we will see, women in Hip Hop seem to wrestle with more liberated images of sexually empowered women and the negative stereotypes of women. Though there are more liberated images of Black women, it becomes a game of choice and control in how female Hip Hop and Rap artists construct gender through their platform.

The 1980s proved to be a breakout decade for Hip Hop and Rap music as it expanded and became a part of the mainstream music industry in America. During this period, the type of messages being conveyed in Hip Hop and Rap music begin to change from fun and celebratory to hardcore gangster rap, and discussions of more substantial social problems. Along those lines, towards the end of the 1980s two major Hip Hop and Rap female solo artists emerged providing lyrics that focused on female empowerment and a sense of racial and ethnic pride. MC Lyte and Queen Latifah would set a new standard for female emcees (rappers) while also paving the way for solo female rap artists.

Lana Michelle Moorer (MC Lyte) began writing rap lyrics at the age of 12, and by the time she was 18 years old she would become the first female rap artist to release a solo album on a major record label (Orcutt, 2016, para.4). Her album “*Lyte As A Rock*” debuted in 1988 with a slew of chart topping singles that took the Hip Hop and radio community by storm (Orcutt, 2016). MC Lyte was discovered by the rap duo, Audio Two, two male Hip Hop artists, one an emcee (rapper) the other a deejay (Brown, 2015). From the beginning of her career, MC Lyte used her music as a platform to address Black female subjectivity, by reclaiming personhood, and rapping about the autonomy Black women had and should utilize (Oware, 2009). In her song “*I Am Woman*” MC Lyte’s raps:

We had to pause for station identification
Now ya know my name here's some more information
Well, let's see, what you wanna know about me?
MC L-Y-T-E
(The Queen) Nah, that's too corny
(The Sexy) Nah, that gets the guys too horny
(The Best) Now that sounds conceited
But what is true is true, so it has to be repeated
The best is Lyte, when I'm on the mic
And MC's look straight ahead cos this pitch'll make your neck tired
And I say loosen up and relax
The fiction you been livin' Imma fill with facts
Right now...

In this song MC Lyte is clarifying to listeners and naysayers who she is and emphasizes her capabilities as a prominent and talented emcee. It also shows that she was careful in how she was addressed. Here, she did not want to be “corny” being called “The

Queen.” When she raps, “(The Sexy) Nah, that gets the guys too horny” she is letting men know that she is more than a sexual object. Instead she is a well-defined emcee that can “spit” raw unadulterated lyrics just as well as her male counterparts, and she demands to be respected as such.

It is evident from these lyrics that MC Lyte is advocating for personhood for women, demands respect for who she is, and will not tolerate anything less just because she is a woman. In another song titled “*Paper Thin*” she sets the rules for dating in relationships by letting her mate know that she has control over her body and what will or will not happen when engaging in intimate situations. Once again MC Lyte defines Black female sexuality and reconstructs gender roles by establishing that she as a woman has a say in what takes place in intimate relationships.

The power of music allows for MC Lyte and many other female rap artists to speak about cliché and taboo subjects, pushing forward a message of gender equality, and female empowerment, all the while supported by a *nice* beat. These messages of gender equality tell, women and girls of all races that they can control their environment and have power over their bodies. This is very important particularly in the development of self-esteem in adolescent girls. This music also provides a different perspective on Black womanhood. Instead of being viewed as the ‘other’, ‘objectified,’ or ‘dehumanized’ these songs put forward the notion that Black women are human and have agency over their lives and bodies (Oware, 2009, p. 789).

MC Lyte also proved her versatility. She cannot be labeled just a female rap artist. She is also a deejay, radio host, actress, activist, and author just to name a few of the many

hats she wears. She created her own nonprofit organization, Hip Hop Sisters Foundation that mentors young women and girls through Hip Hop, poetry, self-esteem and activism. Hip Hop Sister Foundation even awards high school students with full ride scholarships to the University of Wisconsin (Orcutt, 2016). Being the true lyricist, MC Lyte is very skillful with her wordplay. Yet, she actually allows her actions to speak for her in her activism, proving that it is more than just Rap music, this is her lifestyle.

Born Dana Elaine Owens, Queen Latifah hit the Hip Hop scene with her debut album, “*All Hail The Queen*” in 1989 under Tommy Boy Records. Her feminist anthem, “*Ladies First*” would go on to be a chart topper single that expressed gender equality and female empowerment through lyricism (Orcutt, 2016). In this particular song Queen Latifah is rapping about the power, strength, intellect, and abilities of women, particularly African and African American women. In the music video for “*Ladies First*” the women wear traditional African clothing, ankhs, and headdresses. In addition, the women are fully clothed, and the video only features women; no men are in the actual music video.

With her fierce and powerful lyrics, as well as the fact that she was in control throughout the music video, this video is powerful and represents the strength and agency of women, particularly African American women, in a time where many Hip Hop and Rap music videos featured scantily clad women shaking their butts and gyrating to a beat. For example 2 Live Crew had a hit songs, “*Get It Girl*” and Uncle Luke’s song “*I Wanna Rock (Doo Doo Brown)*” portrayed women in bikini’s shaking their butts, while the sexually influenced lyrics played over the “Miami bass” beats (2 Live Crew, 1986; Uncle Luke, 1991). In contrast, in Queen Latifah’s music video she uplifted and acknowledged herself and women as the subject and not an object that exists solely for men’s desires. Through her

lyricism, she also gives a history lesson of female power, womanhood, and African history all while rapping to a jazzy and soulful beat.

Queen Latifah would continue to address issues that affected the lives of women, particularly Black women throughout her career. In her 1994 feminist-themed hit, “*U.N.I.T.Y.*” Queen Latifah tackles the issues of domestic abuse, misogyny, and hypermasculinity, as she raps:

Uh, U.N.I.T.Y., U.N.I.T.Y. that's a unity
U.N.I.T.Y., love a black man from infinity to infinity
(Who you calling a bitch?)
U.N.I.T.Y., U.N.I.T.Y. that's a unity (You gotta let him know)
(You go, come on here we go)
U.N.I.T.Y., Love a black woman from (You got to let him know)
infinity to infinity (You ain't a bitch or a ho)
U.N.I.T.Y., U.N.I.T.Y. that's a unity (You gotta let him know)
(You go, come on here we go)
U.N.I.T.Y., Love a black man from (You got to let him know)
infinity to infinity (You ain't a bitch or a ho)

Instinct leads me to another flow
Everytime I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho
Trying to make a sister feel low
You know all of that gots to go
Now everybody knows there's exceptions to this rule
Now don't be getting mad, when we playing, it's cool
But don't you be calling out my name
I bring wrath to those who disrespect me like a dame
That's why I'm talking, one day I was walking down the block

I had my cutoff shorts on right cause it was crazy hot
I walked past these dudes when they passed me
One of 'em felt my booty, he was nasty
I turned around red, somebody was catching the wrath
Then the little one said (Yeah me bitch) and laughed
Since he was with his boys he tried to break fly
Huh, I punched him dead in his eye and said "Who you calling a bitch?"

This culturally and conscious rap song discusses the issue of violence, abuse, and love within the Black Community. Queen Latifah's song is titled, "*U.N.I.T.Y.*" and, the lyrics literally are spelled out as she states, "loving a black man and loving a black woman to infinity". Here, the song promotes love between black men and women. She also addresses the problem of Black women being called, "bitches" and "ho's" from their male counterparts. The ways that she challenges gender oppression are plainly laid out as she provides a scenario of women who are objectified based on the clothing they wear and if they do not comply with men, are subjected to verbal abuse. In response, Queen Latifah provides an image of the ways that she challenges these behaviors (i.e. "I bring wrath to those who disrespect me like a dame"). Queen Latifah's song *U.N.I.T.Y.* from the album *Black Reign* would later win a Grammy Award in 1995 for Best Rap Solo Performance, a major accomplishment particularly for Hip Hop and Rap artists, and a female one at that (Orcutt, 2016).

Her nomination and Grammy win demonstrates the influence and expansion of Hip Hop and Rap music into the American mainstream. Nonetheless, Queen Latifah has also proven to be multi-faceted as her career did not stop with being a female rap artist. Queen

Latifah is an actress, spokeswoman for Cover Girl, and producer just to name a few of her many titles (Witchel, 2008). Like MC Lyte she is a role model for young Black women by showing that Black women can have fruitful careers and can speak out against injustice while being a part of Hip-Hop culture.

Capitalism and Hip Hop

As described earlier, the audience for Hip Hop and Rap music began to change during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Shifting from young people of color, or urban dwellers in its early stages, the biggest consumers of modern Hip Hop and Rap music are white males and suburbanites (Simmons 2008, p. 46). As these demographic shifts illustrate, while there is often an assumption that Hip Hop and Rap music is only for African American people this is simply not true. Hip Hop and Rap music is consumed by millions of people around the world, from various races, ethnicities and countries (Gaille, 2015). The biggest consumer of Rap music is White men between the ages of 18 and 24 years old, consuming seventy percent of all rap music, with the next big consumer being White women (Montford, 2014, para. 9). At the same time, Black women represent the smallest percentage of Rap music consumers, all the while they are among the most talked about subjects in Rap music (Monteford, 2014, para. 9). Given these demographics, a number of concerns arise, pertaining to the imagery and themes packaged in modern Hip Hop and Rap. Thus, as Hip Hop and Rap music are being marketed to a wider audience of consumers, the racialized and sexist notions attached to the lyrics and demeanor of Hip Hop and Rap artists become critical. If the top consumers of Hip Hop and Rap music are getting a one-dimensional perspective on Black people, some may assume that what they are hearing or seeing is the truth, and that is simply not the case. As Black Feminist scholars and activists have argued, it is important that Black women

reclaim their imagery and voice their concerns about some of the misleading images being portrayed in Hip Hop, thus challenging the Hip-Hop industry on its pervasive sexism and misogyny (Montford, 2014).

The music industry is complex and many record labels are a part of large corporations that market and brand what people see and hear through media (Montford, 2014). In the early days Hip Hop was not a marketable genre for major record labels. However, as Layne (2014) has pointed out, the 1980s proved to be a breakout decade of Hip Hop. Here, Hip Hop was no longer seen as an underground subculture of the inner city, but a mainstream social phenomenon that was accepted worldwide. The increase popularity of Hip Hop caught the attention of major record labels, clothing companies and other capitalist entities looking to make large profits from the young music genre. Capitalists saw in Hip Hop and Rap artists a tool to market their brands and push their products which has allowed record labels to control every aspect of the artists' creativity from their lyrics to the clothes they wear. As the Rap industry expanded the images and the state of Hip Hop changed indefinitely as Hip Hop went from being a cultural expression to being driven by more materialistic and dangerous lifestyle, (Layne, 2014).

In recent times the autonomy of rap artists has improved, and many artists are seeing more control their music, style, and imagery. However, those who do control their artistry are often not signed to major record labels. For example, Chicago based rap artist, Chance The Rapper, is content with controlling his image, lyricism, and message behind his artistry (Forde, 2016). Young M.A. is also content with being an independent artist, since she has the freedom to truly express herself without the scrutiny that comes with being signed to a major record label (Shepherd, 2017).

Hip Hop culture is laced with creative and expressive fashion ideals, which many have embraced over the years. However, through the influence of capitalism, as clothing brands and styles are associated with Hip Hop, they become connected to the notion of what it means to be “Black” in mainstream society. Rappers are often portrayed wearing bagging pants, Timberland boots or wearing the latest Michael Jordan sneakers, causing fans of the rap artist rush to the latest store or mall to buy the clothes and shoes their idols are wearing in the rap music videos (Layne, 2014). This is not to say that rap artists have not benefited from capitalism’s involvement in Hip Hop. In fact, some artists such as Jay Z, 50 Cent, P.Diddy, Missy Elliot, and Nicki Minaj have become moguls through branding themselves with fashion, liquor sales, and becoming entrepreneurs outside of being rap artists (Layne, 2014; White, 2013). Female rap artists such as MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Missy Elliot and Nicki Minaj have used their platform as rap artists to enter major clothing deals, and become brand ambassadors for various big name brands (White, 2013). In fact, Nicki Minaj was named among the highest paid rap artist by the Forbes, earning an estimated \$29 million in 2012 (Layne 2014, p.2; White, 2013).

Capitalism has forever changed the culture of Hip Hop, as well as the demographic of Hip Hop and Rap consumers. Materialism has become pervasive in modern Hip Hop culture as rappers rap about having the latest sneakers, driving foreign cars, and wearing diamond studded chains in their music videos (Simmons, 2008). In its evolution, Hip Hop has become a vehicle for the commodification of Black culture that is then marketed to White consumers. Overall, Capitalism has its pros and cons in the music industry. It has allowed Hip Hop to become a global phenomenon, as millions of people worldwide listen and consume the music. It has also commodified “Blackness” and perpetuates negative images of Black

people, particularly the objectification of Black women and girls on a worldwide stage (Simmons, 2008).

Women in Later Phases of Hip Hop

The Jezebel (Ho or T.H.O.T) and Sapphire (Bitch or Dyke) figures are prevalent in Hip Hop culture as many rappers male and female alike, rap about these types of women (Oware, 2009; Pough, 2007; White, 2013). It is important to note that men can always be labeled a “ho”, “T.H.O.T” or “bitch” but these words don’t have the same connotation as they do when directed at women. For example, some rappers will call out another male rapper as being a “bitch” to question his manhood or state that he is weak or a punk. A female rapper may call a man a “ho” if he sleeps around or has many partners, but this still does not hold the same weight or demeaning power as when a man calls a woman a “ho”.

In, *A “Man’s Woman”? Contradictory Messages in the Songs of Female Rappers, 1992-2000*, Matthew Oware grapples with the ways that female rap artists mimic the gender roles of male rap artists and have begun to rap about similar issues as male rappers including rapping about drug usage, sex, and violence. In this case, he describing a woman who, like her male counterparts, is down for the cause and up for anything that happens. She has become, among other things, a “Man’s Woman” a woman who is down to holler at (i.e. court) other women.

Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown, female protégés to their male counterparts Notorious B.I.G and Jay Z of New York, are both notable female rap artists who stepped onto the rap scene in the mid to late 1990s. In the popular 1990s anthem “*Ain’t No Nigga*” Jay Z and Foxy Brown rap together in a tag team duo about making fast money, sleeping around with

multiple partners and dabbling in illicit drugs. The chorus of the song solidifies the “Man’s Woman” analogy:

[Hook: Foxy Brown & (Jaz-O) with Jay-Z]

Ain't no nigga like the one I got

(No one can fuck you better)

Sleeps around but he gives me a lot

(Keeps you in diamonds and leathers)

Friends will tell me I should leave you alone

Hah hah, hah hah, hah hah, hah hah

(Tell the freaks to find a man of their own

Man of their own, man of their own)

In these lyrics, we see the Hip-Hop version of Bonnie and Clyde. The two rappers are enjoying the idea of supporting each other in illicit ways of making money, and through sleeping around and using their bodies to get what they want. On the one hand, this plays into the notion of the Jezebel who uses her body to lure men into sexual encounters. However, there is also the possibility that Foxy Brown is redefining the concept of the Jezebel. These lyrics leave open the possibility that Foxy Brown projects enjoyment in using her body to attract her suitors, and receiving gifts and money for her time. Songs like this echo the shifts in women’s participation in Hip Hop culture in the 1990s. Foxy Brown and Lil Kim rapped about their sexual conquests, money and jewelry, all laced with braggadocio about their

sexual capabilities much like their male counterparts. Interestingly, in the same breath, they also rapped about having control over their bodies, and made their male suitors into “objects” for their pleasure. In one way, we see echoes of female empowerment, autonomy and ownership as the artists, let society know that there is nothing wrong with them being sexual beings. At the same time the women appear to feed into their own self-exploitation as they, make themselves into hypersexual “objects” which feeds into the negative stereotypes of the hypersexual Black woman.

Like Foxy Brown, Lil’ Kim is also known for her racy lyrics, and for wearing little to nothing in her public performances. In the music video for her song “*No Time*” she is dressed in a mink coat surrounded by tall men wearing fashionable suits, representing status and power. In the song, she raps about designer brands such as Prada and Dolce Gabbana all while she raps about herself being among some of the most prestigious women in entertainment. Overall, the music video is focused on her status she is at the top of the escalator, and the men are surrounding her as if she is the prized possession. Interestingly, Lil’ Kim also wears blue eye contacts with gray lipstick and the prestigious women in entertainment that she raps about in the song are also all White (European) women, with not a single mention of a Black woman or a woman of color. Thus, as she projects an image of success and status, she also draws from Euro-centric ideals to do this. Overall, for Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown their performances of gender are focused on their physical appearance. From the makeup and tight-fitting clothes (or even little to no clothing in the case of Lil’ Kim) to classier clothing such as the mink coats Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown became known for their more bold, sexual, and domineering image in the rap industry.

In contrast, Lauryn Hill, another popular female rapper who debuted in the late 1990s, represents the opposite of Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown's aesthetic. Lauryn Hill was not scantily dressed; she was explicit in her pride for her African ancestry. She also did not rap about topics like money, clothes, and sex. Instead, she sang and rapped about relationships, love, empowerment, and offered a deeper consciousness within Hip Hop (Cheairs, 2005). Like Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, she was the female counterpart of a male-dominated rap group, in her case *The Fugees*, that featured Wyclef Jean and Pras Michel (Bleu, 2013). However, her music transcended the misogynistic atmosphere of rap music, and attempted to re-center original elements of Hip Hop in her music (Bleu, 2013).

In her music, Lauryn Hill mixed reggae and rhythm and blues sounds into her conscious rap (Bleu, 2013). In her classic debut album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, she raps and sings about personal growth, female empowerment, love, spirituality and social ills that plague the Black community (Bleu, 2013). She also performed gender differently from the top female rap artists of her era. She was fully clothed and like Queen Latifah had a deep admiration for African culture. She wore her natural hair in what some call "Dread Locks" and she was proud of her womanhood and Blackness.

In the hit song "*Doo Wop (That Thing)*" she raps about the changing dynamics of Black life. She calls out the materialism and the misogynistic atmosphere of Hip Hop, and she calls on women and men to love themselves and respect each other. She also takes a jab at the European beauty standards that cause much self-hate within communities of color. She not only raps about the self-love and love of her African roots she dresses the part. Her performance of gender was Black, proud, and spiritual.

From this brief review of women in Hip Hop, it is evident that women have contributed to the growth and popularity of Hip Hop and Rap music. Many of the female Hip Hop artists of the past have influenced the new artists of today, though the new artists may not sound exactly like their “idols” whom they pay homage to. It is also clear that Hip Hop also has a heavy influence on mainstream society, as children growing up in the suburbs mimic the “hood” lifestyle that they see in videos, not realizing the real dangers and struggles of the people who live in the “hood”.

The way gender is portrayed by both male and female rap artist leaves an impression on young minds, particularly as young girls imitate the video dancers, and young boys want to be tough like the “thugged out” rappers that they see (Morgan, 1999).

Modern Femcees?

It has been more than thirty years since Hip Hop first entered mainstream consciousness with the song “*Rappers Delight*” by the Sugarhill Gang. It has also been over three decades since The Sequence was formed. In the intervening time, Hip Hop and Rap music has changed a great deal. It is not the same sound nor does it convey the same messages of yesteryear. Female Hip Hop and Rap artists have helped to propel Hip Hop into the mainstream, providing the style, the voice, and images of Hip Hop culture.

In his section, I turn to a deeper analysis of two female rap artists. Nicki Minaj and Young M.A. As I will argue, these two-popular female rap artists have changed the essence of being a rapper and a woman. They also show how gender has changed the essence of what it means to be a female rapper.

Nicki Minaj and Young M.A. burst onto the scene in the late 2000s. Nicki Minaj made her debut with her breakthrough mixtape, *Beem Me Up Scotty* in 2009. Nicki Minaj was born Onika Maraj in Trinidad and Tobago in 1982. She would relocate to the United States several years later, settling in Jamaica Queens, New York (Grigoriadis, 2015).

Minaj grew up in a home that was impacted by drug abuse, crime, and other woes of the inner city (Grigoriadis, 2015). Perhaps her upbringing has added to her unique style of rap, as she embodies the different personalities of her parents or other characters such as *Roman Zolansky*, who represents her male persona (Shange, 2014).

Young M.A. (where M.A. stands for Me Always) was born Katorah Marrero in East New York. Her mother is Jamaican and her father is Puerto Rican (Mayard, 2016; Shepherd, 2017). Like Nicki Minaj, Young M.A. grew up in the inner city the earlier part of her life. Her father was incarcerated by the time she was one year old and was not released from prison until she was eleven years old (Shepherd, 2017). The life experiences of both of these dynamic female rappers have contributed to their bluntness and the no holds barred approach to their lyricism and music careers.

Nicki Minaj and Young M.A. both had breakout mixtapes that propelled them into mainstream stardom (Shange, 2014; Shepherd, 2017). Nicki Minaj's mixtape "*Beem Me Up Scotty*" released in 2009 and Young M.A.'s mixtape "*Sleep Walkin*" released in 2015 were breakthrough mixtapes that showcased the rawness, lyricism, and creative flows of both artists. Both female emcees were discovered by the influential male entertainers Lil Wayne and DJ Funkmaster Flex, respectively (Battan, 2014; Shepherd, 2017).

Sexuality seems to be a focal point for both artists given prevailing assumptions, that if they are too tough and rough they must be “gay” or masculine (Shange, 2014; White, 2013). In fact, the rumors about Nicki Minaj’s and Young M. A.’s sexuality have been a focal point for both their careers, and their sexuality and gender presentations are infused in their lyrics and projected through visual means in their music videos (Shange, 2014; Shepherd, 2017; White, 2013). For example, Nicki Minaj has rapped about being sexually attracted to women, and Young M.A. has also rapped about having sexual relations with women (Shange, 2014; Shepherd, 2017; White, 2013). In addition, while Nicki Minaj raps about her sexual encounters with and attraction to women, when asked specifically about her sexuality, she does not confirm her sexual orientation leaving a lot to the imagination of the audience (Shange, 2014). On the other hand, Young M.A. has no problem with acknowledging that she is a “tomboy” and prefers to wear masculine clothing such as hoodies, joggers and Timberland boots. Though she is typecast as a “dyke” she does not want to this to be foregrounded in her artistry (Shepherd, 2017).

Overall, both artists are very clever in how they portray themselves and often they convey messages about sexuality and gender without having to be explicit. In the song, “*Did It On Em*”, Nicki Minaj makes references to defecating on her naysayers and the people who hate on her. She raps:

All these bitches is my sons

And I'mma go and get some bibs for 'em

A couple formulas, little pretty lids on 'em

If I had a dick, I would pull it out and piss on 'em

Let me shake it off

I just signed a couple deals I might break you off

And we ain't making up, I don't need a mediator

Just let them bums blow steam – radiator

Here, with the reference to her having a “dick,” a male sex organ, and using it to urinate on her “sons/bitches,” Nicki Minaj lets makes clear that she views herself as being talented and powerful, and in very masculine terms. In addition, through her reference to “bitches” as her “sons” she combines both masculine and feminine terms to subjugate her “haters”. Though she is rapping in what is perceived to be masculine genre and using masculine lyrics and imagery, in the actual video for the song she wears a tight jump suit that emphasizes her feminine curves. Furthermore, makeup covers her face, which is adorned with bright, hot pink lipstick; and she wearing a tall blonde wig. These seemingly contradictory sets of imagery come together to create the impression that Nicki Minaj is an anomaly. She may rap with fierce punchlines and unique metaphors that come off as being masculine and degrading to women, yet when she performs she is feminine, and has no problem letting people know at times she is a “Barbie doll”. In addition, throughout the song, she refers to herself as “The Queen,” and it becomes apparent that she is addressing female haters or other female rap artists who have spoken negatively about her rapping capabilities. She is establishing her dominance by letting her haters know she is a force to be reckoned with and can “spit hot bars” equally to her male counterparts. She continues on saying:

A lot of bad bitches beggin' me to eff one

But I'mma eat them rap bitches when the chef come

Throw some fresh one's

More talent in my mu'fuckin left thumb

She ain't a Nicki fan then the bitch def dumb

You ain't my son, you my muthafuckin step-son

Here, Nicki Minaj alludes to her sexuality in the sense that “bad bitches,” or women are attracted to her and are begging to have sexual relations with her. In the video Nicki Minaj is depicted signing breasts of female fans which mirrors the objectification of female bodies that is often done by male rap artists. This also gives the illusion that Nicki Minaj is attracted to women, (Shange, 2014).

In contrast, Young M.A. makes it clear that she is attracted to women and has dated women (Mayard, 2016; Shepherd, 2017). She identifies as an LGBT rapper, or as she simply says in a interview, “gay rapper” (Mayard, 2016; Shepherd, 2017). However, she makes it clear that she is more than her sexuality. She wants people to notice her rawness, her pain, and her talent through her music and her heavy hitting lyricism (Mayard, 2016). In an interview, Young M.A. discussed how people do not care about her sexuality. Instead, she argues that they enjoy her music because she is “dope” (Mayard, 2016). This is very meaningful because when it comes to male rap artists, attention is often focused on their lyricism and the content of their rap music, not on their sexuality.

In addition, while Nicki Minaj gives off a very feminine persona, Young M.A. is the exact opposite. As stated above, she rocks hoodies, jeans, and beanie caps with long plaited braids in a style that is similar to male rappers like Bone Thugz N Harmony (Mayard, 2017; Shepherd, 2016). In her debut mixtape, *Sleep Walkin*, Young M.A. raps about love, money,

sex and the streets, and often references her brother's death, which is very similar to the topics covered in most male-dominated rap music. In the song, "*Get This Money*", she also raps about getting money, and how hard it is to keep the money flowing, insinuating that she no longer has to resort to robbery anymore now that her career is taking off. She also addresses her "haters" who appear to be mostly males who have a problem with how she constructs gender and lives her life. Young M.A. raps:

The way these niggas hate I hope they get a check for it

Maybe not, but you get checked for it

I hope you pay your bills before you pay attention

How you a hatin' ass nigga 'bout to get evicted?

You old cornball nigga wearin' panties plus some drawers on

Nigga cheerleader on pom poms

Niggas see the barrel on this gun I call 'em long johns nigga

When it shot you'll be long gone nigga

In these lyrics, Young M.A. makes it clear that she plays no games, and her male naysayers do not faze her. She also addresses issues of class in these lyrics when she says, "How you a hatin' ass nigga 'bout to be evicted?" In other words, instead of worrying about how she constructs her gender identity, she draws attention to the fact that her haters, who she implies live in poverty, need to worry about obtaining funds for shelter. Interestingly, the lyrics to this song also have a misogynistic residue given that she attacks her haters and suggests they are "girly", which also questions her male hater's sexuality.

Young M.A. and Nicki Minaj both display a degree of misogyny in their lyrics which are, often filled with braggadocios about money, cars, and sexual escapades. But their music is also versatile as both rappers talk about their families, love, and their struggles to reach the top. In interviews, Nicki Minaj has argued that she wants women to know their voices, own it and be bosses (Frank, 2015). However, she is often criticized for using derogatory terms against women, while at the same time having feminist themes on her album *Pinkprint* (Frank, 2015).

Overall, both Nicki Minaj and Young M.A. draw from style and imagery that both echoes and contrasts with the female rappers that came before them. Notably, both artists retain a great deal of control over their image and have profited from the capitalist turn in Hip Hop through branding. For example, Nicki Minaj is noted for being a fashion and beauty icon, with her eccentric hairstyles and clothing style and, she has been featured in high profile magazines such as *W* and *Cosmopolitan*. Furthermore, she has even launched her own fashion collection for H & M's Versache collection (White, 2013). In addition, one might assume that Hennessy Cognac sponsors Young M.A. given how often she raps about the liquor, and she often has her entourage carrying big bottles of Hennessy in her music videos, suggesting a potential endorsement deal for Young M.A. in the near future

Like the female rappers before them they are more than just rap artists. Instead, they can be argued to be visionaries and business savvy women who are in control of the ways that their branding translates into financial benefits. For example, Nicki Minaj is listed as one of the richest female rap artists in *Forbes* magazine (Robehmed, 2013, para. 1). She has brand deals, and as Theresa White eloquently phrased is a "sexual entrepreneur" who sells a fantasy using her body to fulfill sexual desires of her fans and those who find her sexually

attractive, all while racking in millions (White 2013, p.610). Through her own self-expression, she sells an image of what a woman should aspire to be, as many people have become infatuated with her body, particularly her rather large buttocks (White, 2013). This becomes problematic given the ways that Black women were historically sexualized, and given that Hip Hop has put a focal point on Black women bodies (hooks, 1981; Simmons, 2008; White, 2013). Furthermore Young M.A. has a growing fan base, yet she also receives a great deal of criticism because of the misogyny that exist in some of her songs. Regardless, she is often seen as a savior to Rap music, because she is bringing raw lyricism and storytelling back to the art of Hip Hop. She proudly promotes being herself through her interviews and music videos.

Conclusion

As the artists described in this paper illustrate, there isn't just one way for female rappers to perform gender. Gender is a performance of customs, clothing, speech, and stature. It is regulated by a given society and in the United States gender norms were constructed by (and in ways that favored) White, heterosexual males (hooks, 1981; Simmons, 2008). However, many gender norms had an inherent double standard when it came to Black women who were not seen as women or even people for that matter (hooks, 1988; Simmons, 2008).

Within this matrix, Hip Hop and Rap music, like other American cultural products, have been influenced the racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, views of the broader society. However, female Hip Hop and Rap artists have challenged gender norms within Hip Hop and have moved it from being strictly a guy's club to a more diverse community in which women

and, people of the LGBTQ+ community have a space and can voice their concerns. There is still a lot of work to be done to make Hip Hop more inclusive, and to rid the genre from sexism, misogyny and homophobia. As a part of this transformation, female rappers bring awareness of what it is like to be Black and female in a world that often denies their existence (Morgan, 1999; Oware, 2009).

Starting with The Sequence who showcased a feminine style, and let it be known that women could rap and have fun, and continuing on to Salt-N-Pepa who brought a sexual awareness to the mix, early female Hip Hop artists showed that women can and should have power over their bodies (Satenstein, 2016; Lyons, 2011). These artists were followed by the social conscious rap of MC Lyte, Queen Latifah and later Lauryn Hill who, tackled important social issues that affect Black women and the Black community. As these artists and other illustrate, there are different types of female rappers. Some will rap about the struggles of their childhood, race and, racism, and sexual abuse, while others will rap about parties, drugs, and sexual conquests. However, the danger lies in the number of rap music videos that portray a one-dimensional image of Black people, with damaging implications for Black women and girls (Morgan, 1999; Oware, 2009; Simmons, 2008).

It is clear that with the growing influence of capitalism on the music industry, it is imperative that Black artists control their musical productions and branding. Upcoming artists such as Young M.A. boast about making hit songs and not being signed with a major record label. Through this freedom she is able to control her the music from the beats, lyrics, and music videos to the clothes she wears (Shepherd, 2017). Similarly, Nicki Minaj is signed to a major record label and has grown to become one of the richest female rap artists. That alone is a major honor in our capitalist society and also reflects the ways that capitalism has

created new challenges for gender expression among female Hip Hop artists. Nicki Minaj uses her body to sell sexual desire to anybody regardless of their sex or gender identity and this has made her a multi-millionaire (Oware, 2009; Robehmed, 2013).

Overall, this thesis examined how Hip Hop and Rap artists construct gender over time and how female Hip Hop and Rap artists influence and are influenced by pop culture and social norms. The research shows that as Hip Hop has evolved over time, there is a thin line between female empowerment, representation, and objectification. While female rappers produce songs that appear to promote empowerment and equality, their gains may be overshadowed by the same female rap artists dissing each other, and calling women bitches and whores in the same breath (Layne, 2014; Morgan, 1999; Oware, 2009; Pough, 2007; White, 2013).

As a number of scholars have pointed out, it seems that no matter how a woman presents herself she will be sexualized and the focal point will be on her body or her sexuality (Oware, 2009; Shange, 2014; White, 2013). Even in this objectifying environment, she still holds power over how she will be received by the public and, many female rap artists have used their position to discuss domestic violence and other issues that predominantly affect women (Cheairs, 2005). Hip Hop has a bright future and, since its heyday has been the voice of the forgotten people. It has been fueled by the pain and suffering that marginalized people felt and still feel until this day.

In the end, however, representation matters. While this project explored the different representations of gender among female rappers, it is imperative that future studies explore in greater detail the contradictions faced by female rappers including the ways that women can

participate in misogyny and how social constructions of racism, sexism, misogyny, and homophobia shape the music industry. The environment is slowly improving in Hip Hop, but it still has a long way to go in terms of gender equity. This can be achieved if artists take responsibility for their actions, are mindful of how they are portrayed and are held accountable for the images and lyrics that they promote in their music. Gender may be a social construction, but it is a reality that people live, breathe, and experience.

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