The Essence of Res(ex)pectability
Black Women’s Negotiation of Black Femininity in Rap Music and Music Video

Abstract
In the late fall of 2004, following the media spectacle created by Spelman College’s protest of the misogyny and sexism in the music and videos of rapper Nelly, Essence, a popular black women’s magazine, began a campaign to raise awareness. Arguing that a more public discussion by black women of the issue of misogyny in rap’s portrayal of black women is long overdue, the magazine published a year-long series of articles as part of its “Take Back the Music” campaign. More interesting than the series of articles produced by the magazine is the overwhelming response generated on its internet-based scribble boards, which offered their readers the opportunity to participate in a communal dialogue. Arguing that the scribble boards became a black women’s temporary “safe space,” this essay interrogates the manner in which black women construct subject positions around the performance of race, class, and gender as a means to resist dominant representations of black women, while simultaneously engaging in disciplinary practices that constrain black femininity.

In their quest for fame and fortune, these “artists” are co-opting themselves to the highest bidders, creating video environments characterized by crime, greed, lust, addiction and a new brand of male dominance that knocks Black “queens” squarely off of their thrones into a bedrock of promiscuity.

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In the spring of 2004, Spelman College, a historically black college for women, canceled a widely publicized campus bone-marrow drive to protest the misogynistic lyrics and music videos perpetuated by the major sponsor, Grammy Award-winning rap artist Nelly. Nelly planned to sponsor the drive through his 4Sho4Kids Foundation. Prior to the day of the event, a number of Spelman’s students and faculty protested Nelly’s appearance on campus in light of the negative stereotyping of black women in his music and videos. Dr. Zenobia Hikes, Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students at Spelman, summed up the protesters’ concerns in an official statement released to the press: “Spelman is concerned about the negative images of women in popular culture, particularly the misogynistic lyrics and images that constantly portray women in a sexual nature” (Cummings 2004). Specifically, those students, faculty members, and administrators who protested Nelly’s appearance were responding to a music video released by Nelly earlier in 2004, “Tip Drill.” The content of “Tip Drill” was so explicit that the video achieved rotation only on Black Entertainment Television’s (BET) late-night hit show Uncut. The video includes voluptuous women in skimpy bikinis strutting around in stiletto heels. The video also depicts women “making out with one another” and a scene in which Nelly swipes a credit card down the crevice of a woman’s rear end (Cummings 2004). The cancellation of the event in the face of protest from black women at a well-respected black women’s college received wide-scale media coverage, from local television and news stations in Atlanta to national coverage on Cable News Network (CNN), Music Television (MTV), and BET. It was this media spectacle that precipitated a series of articles in Essence in response to the representation of black femininity in rap music and video. Even more specifically, Essence responded to negative black female representation in non-message rap genres, including gangsta rap, pop hip-hop, trap music, booty music, etc.

The Essence “Take Back the Music” series was announced by the magazine in the late fall of 2004. Touting a year-long campaign, the magazine’s editors and staff argued that a public discussion about the misogyny in hip-hop was long overdue. The Essence webpage dedicated to this campaign cites a continuing conversation among its young, black female staff members as the impetus for the magazine’s choice to focus on the issue of gender and hip-hop. In the mission statement that describes the “Take Back the Music” campaign, the editors for the series note: “We at Essence
have become increasingly concerned about the degrading ways in which black women are portrayed and spoken about in popular media, particularly in popular urban music and music video” (Essence 2005).\footnote{Essence} engaged a number of representatives of rap and hip-hop from artists and industry workers to African-American cultural critics. Simultaneously, the Essence staff created an internet scribble board designed to foster discussion about the series of articles by their readership. The articles and the internet discussions considered the manner in which misogynistic discourse and the imagery in rap music affects the representation of black women through mass-mediated sources. Fearing that black women’s reality is overshadowed by the spectacle of black women’s representation in popular culture, particularly through rap music, the editors of the series sought to start a conversation among its readership.

Using the internet discussion of black women in response to the series of articles published by Essence, this essay engages the politics of black women’s respectability as it played out in the rhetorical space created by the Essence scribble boards. I am particularly interested in the discursive representation constructed by black women in opposition to dominant representations, and how these function to limit the possible gendered and sexual performances available to black women. How does the politics of respectability impact black women’s response to popular culture representations of black femininity? How does the reaction—the attempt to combat those representations—contribute to class and heterosexist ideology and the separating out of “good” and “bad” black women? And, last, how does this separation of appropriate and inappropriate black femininity impact the development of black women’s social allegiances? Using the significant response by black women to the 2005 Essence series I argue that black women construct an oppositional response to dominant representations of black femininity, while simultaneously engaging in the disciplining of black women’s subjectivity.

This study engages in an analysis of black women’s communicative patterns in relation to dominant media texts. The “cultural process” by which individuals read media texts can be understood in terms of the social groups to which the individual is culturally attached (Fiske 1988, 249). These attachments function to create a field of “relevance” through which individuals read media discourse and image (re)presentation (Fiske 1988; Lind 1996; Berry and Shelton 1999). Fiske defines relevance as the
point in the decoding process where “the viewer makes meanings and pleasures from television that are relevant to his or her social allegiances at the moment of viewing” (Fiske 1988, 251). In other words, as audience members encounter mediated discourse, they invest attention in those messages in the text that are consistent with their “social allegiances.” These “social allegiances” result in a “shared response” to media representations based upon a shared discursive community that constitutes identity positions in relation to subjectivity (Steiner 1988, 4). The scribble board respondents provided an opportunity to investigate how a discursive community defines its social allegiances and disciplines its community members into committing to those allegiances.

Black women’s public and everyday rhetoric has received limited theoretical or critical analysis in the communications discipline (Houston and Davis 2002). Marsha Houston and Olga Davis, in their germinal study of black women’s communication, Centering Ourselves, note that black women’s “everyday talk” offers an opportunity for scholars to study black women’s rhetorical discourse, which is central to the construction of black women’s identity. This lens of analysis provides “an angle of vision on black women’s rhetoric and everyday talk that . . . takes account of the material circumstances and ideological contexts of black women’s communication” (Houston and Davis 2002, 6). The study of black women’s rhetoric provides a site from which to interrogate the manner in which discursive strategies function in the development and maintenance of social group identities. Cindy White and Catherine Dobris note, “The conscious interpretation, reconstruction, and mediation of identity in relation to historically situated and discursively constructed ideologies, is a rhetorical project” (White and Dobris 2002, 174). In other words, black women’s rhetorical strategies create discourses in opposition to the dominant representations of black femininity.

While I position black women as a resistance community, this study seeks to investigate the disciplinary character of black women’s discourse communities. Rhetorical analysis of black women’s public and everyday rhetoric has focused largely on positive criticisms interested in the discourses of resistance within that rhetoric (Davis 1999). This phenomenon in the study of black women’s communication patterns is directly connected to the use of black feminist theory as foundational to the critical interpretation of black women’s communication. Black feminist theory is
committed to the reclamation of black women’s voices, histories, rhetorical and performative strategies, and ways of knowing. As such, black feminist theorists and critics within the communications discipline have been committed to opening up a space for the study of black women’s communication. Considering the denigrated status of black womanhood across the larger society and the ignoring and silencing of black women as a group “worthy” of scholarly investigation, it is no wonder that black women communication scholars have carefully chosen the manner in which black women should be represented and studied.

White and Dobris (2002) note that historically, black women’s rhetorical and performative strategies were public performances of black female identity designed to counter negative stereotypes. In other words, black women’s public performance of identity provided an example of “real” black femininity in opposition to the construction of black femininity within dominant discourses. Olga Davis describes black women’s rhetorical strategy as “a rhetoric of survival” (Davis 2002, 36). She notes that black women’s public discourse has traditionally been used to dismantle “the widely held assumptions of black female inferiority” (Davis 2002, 40). Davis argues further that: “Recreating self within the purview of the gender-race dialectic presents rhetoric as a solution in resisting, redefining, and performing social reality” (Davis 2002, 40). The development of performative strategies to combat these stereotypes is not individualistic. Black women as a discursive and social community developed these strategies that were then passed down from generation to generation. For example, Davis (1999) identifies the importance of the “kitchen” as a safe space key to black women’s development in the antebellum South. Black female slaves engaged in kitchen work for their white masters in the hostile space of the “big house.” According to Davis, black female slaves transformed this hostile space into a “positive” space from which black women could develop, articulate, and teach performative and rhetorical strategies for engaging the white supremacist structure in which they found themselves (Davis 1999, 369). Patricia Hill Collins refers to this as black women’s “safe spaces” (Collins 2000, 109).

Black women may pay particularly close attention to the representation of black women in rap lyrics and videos as it is taken to be relevant to their individual experience, but also more importantly, to their “social allegiance” to black women’s discursive communities (Fiske 1998, 248). Black women,
historically, have developed discursive communities through which they are able to construct “safe spaces” from which they can dispel the false and negative stereotypes of black femininity and engage in the “oppositional decoding” of racist and sexist stereotypical representations (Collins 2000, 101). Collins notes that “safe spaces” are “social spaces where black women speak freely” (Collins 2000, 101). These spaces have been traditionally constructed within places such as “extended family, churches, and African American community organizations” (Collins 2000, 101).

Collins (2000) argues that black women’s “safe spaces” are free of the surveillance of dominant group members (read both white people, in general, and black men). Davis notes similarly that the black women’s tradition is antithetical to domination and control (Davis 1999, 38). Yet no subject is free from participation in systems of domination. I would caution scholars engaged in the study of resistance from romanticizing subjugated peoples, as efforts to resist are implicated in the very spaces of power that they act against. Michel Foucault cautions us “that there is no escaping from power, that it is always-already present, constituting that very thing which one attempts to counter it with” (Foucault 1990, 82). In other words, there are no truly “safe spaces” that are somehow free of power. “Safe spaces” may exclude even within the internal confines of black women’s communities. Some black women are excluded from these spaces based on their failure to perform what is considered appropriate femininity by the standards of the black community, in general, and of other black women, in particular. Those women who step outside the boundaries of the construction of femininity within black culture can be excluded from these “safe spaces” as a means of reinforcing the normative practices of black femininity.

Yet exclusion may be too harsh a characterization of this normative process. Permanent exclusion from black women’s “safe spaces” is not constant across class and sexual difference. Instead, it is the threat of exclusion or rejection from these “safe spaces” that serves to inhibit “inappropriate” behaviors. In other words, “safe spaces” are often coercive, and many black women accept their normalizing purpose. It is critical for many black women to accede to the process of normalization, as they are often far less constraining than spaces controlled by those with higher social privilege. Even more important, allegiance to these spaces is vital as they serve not only as safe havens, but also as spaces to recuperate and
develop effective strategies for countering the oppressions one may face everyday. Thus, “safe spaces,” as constructed within the context of black women’s self-definition, limit the “play” of black women’s performance of subjectivity. Clearly, while black women’s “safe spaces” have been integral to the development of rhetorical and performative strategies for combating black women’s oppression, they simultaneously function as disciplinary apparatuses that compel conformity to certain types of performance of black female identity. On the scribble boards, both sexuality and class are a means of distinguishing appropriate and inappropriate performances of black femininity.

Black feminist rhetorical criticism can play a unique role in interrogating the normative discourse of black femininity. Black women construct discursive communities within “safe spaces” and through their interaction with a masculinist, racist, classist, and heteronormative American society. Black women’s rhetoric often occurs in the context of black women’s “safe spaces” where they can negotiate rhetorical and performative strategies for engaging dominant discourses. These “safe spaces” have provided the context for the development of strategic rhetorical and performative practices, and as such are implicated in the disciplining of appropriate black femininity. As critics and theorists studying black women’s communicative practices, we must engage the politics of respectability, or what White and Dobris (2002) call the “politics of womanhood,” as a rhetorical strategy in opposition to black women’s public representation and the disciplining of black women’s identity.

The study of these rhetorical and performative strategies has often remained committed to exploring and representing black women’s discourse as a discourse of resistance. As such, this type of academic study often eschews examples of difference that destabilize the construction of a politically and socially intelligible black women’s identity. This analysis demonstrates the disciplinary character of black women’s resistance efforts. The study of resistance is significant in combating various fields of oppression, yet resistance discourses must simultaneously be interrogated for the manner in which they reproduce the very oppressions they seek to overcome. I seek to interrogate the terms in which the Essence audience internet respondents engaged in the debate over misogyny in rap music and video.
“Taking Back the Music”: Responding to Sexism and Misogyny in Rap Music and Video

*Essence* magazine decided to engage the issue of misogyny and sexism in hip-hop as part of its editorial staff’s and other black women’s growing concern about the portrayal of black women’s bodies and sexual practices through rap video and music lyrics. The magazine, a publication targeted at black women and their specific sociocultural beliefs, habits, and ideals, is a lifestyle magazine that engages black female culture through fashion, health, and politics. The magazine's current circulation includes 7.6 million readers and a monthly circulation of one million copies. Read predominantly by black women, it also boasts a 29% male readership.

*Essence* has been the premier black women’s magazine since its initial publication in 1970, and claims to dedicate itself not to a particular type of black woman, but to black women as “multidimensional” subjects who require a magazine with a broad spectrum dedicated to their interests. The magazine’s mission simultaneously mirrors and constructs traditional black women's concerns within the context of today's social, cultural, and political environment, including a commitment to independence, home, romantic relationships, family, community, and personal appearance. Whereas the editors of the magazine claim that it is not targeted at any particular group of black women (for example black women with economic privilege), its contents, especially its advertisements, indicate otherwise. The magazine seems clearly directed toward upwardly mobile black women. As such, it serves as an important forum for the discussion of black issues that particularly impact those black women. As the oldest and most widely circulating black women’s magazine, it is a solid source of discourse about black women’s issues and concerns (*Essence* 2005).

The mission statement for the “Take Back the Music” campaign identified six goals that the project editors sought to accomplish in the campaign. First, the editors intended to create a “platform for discussion.” Second, they sought to explore the “effects” of the negative “imagery” in popular hip-hop and rap music. Third, they wanted to encourage “balance” in the representation of black womanhood. Fourth, they hoped to encourage readers to be self-reflective in evaluating their arguments. Fifth, they looked to “promote artists who deliver positive alternatives.” Last, the editors and staff planned to provide a “blueprint” for activist involvement.
in the “Take Back the Music” campaign. In Part One of the series, “What's Really Going On,” the project editors briefly outlined the justification for the campaign (Byrd and Soloman 2005). They argued that black women's portrayal in music video is based on negative stereotypical representations of black femininity. Even more frustrating, in their opinion, is the increasing participation of black female rappers and video performers (otherwise known as video “ho’s”) in the degradation of black femininity. Last, the series editors noted that the dissemination of images of American black womanhood around the globe makes the representations of black femininity in popular culture particularly problematic.

The Essence campaign was notable as it was the first extended discussion of misogyny and rap in a mainstream, popular, black publication. However, given that the magazine's editorial staff consists almost entirely of black women with educational, class, and employment status, it was only a matter of time before the magazine weighed in on an issue that had fostered protest from women's and gay/lesbian organizations. Although the magazine articles are of interest, the internet responses from black women all over the United States provide an opportunity to investigate black women's response to media products as a sociocultural discourse community. The respondents, who are largely black women (although there are black and white respondents, both male and female), engaged in a heated debate over the issue of misogyny in rap music and video. The Essence website created scribble board sections for each article that appeared in the January through December 2005 issues. The official Essence website page for the “Take Back the Music” series produced thousands of responses, the largest in the magazine's online history. I updated my copy of the scribble board responses as of November 8, 2005.

The number of responses discourages a full analysis within the parameters of a single journal article. Thus, for the purpose of this essay, I focus on those responses relevant to the discussion of internal conflict within black women's social communities. Other notable themes that deserve scholarly attention include an extended analysis of the characterization of black male and female relationships and critical reflection on the institutional factors that maintain black women's subjugation in popular representation. I engage in a rhetorical analysis of the respondents' discursive articulation of the parameters for black feminine performance. Specifically, I engage in an intersectional analysis that uses black feminist
theory as a critical method of rhetorical analysis. To that end, I interrogate the scribble board responses for the manner in which they resist and reproduce ideologies of race, gender, class, and sexuality as the respondents negotiate black women’s responsibility in resisting dominant representations of themselves. In the following analysis section, I argue that the respondents construct a dialectical representation of black womanhood and that this dialectic results in disciplining the boundaries of black femininity and black female social allegiance.

Queens vs. Lesbians: Disciplining the Boundaries of Black Femininity

Black feminist scholar E. Frances White argues that the “good woman/bad woman dichotomy” functions for black women as a means of responding to the historical subjugation of black female bodies through the discourses of slavery, colonialism, Western science, and religion (White 2001, 36). Katrina Bell McDonald’s *Embracing Sisterhood* (2007) engages in an excellent historical review of the significance of black women’s performance of femininity as a tool of resistance. For black women, the assumption or performance of the “good woman” served as a means of gaining respectability under the surveillance of the white gaze in the hopes of gaining some protection from abuse (McDonald 2007, 48–52). Abuse was often justified by stereotyping black women as having loose sexual morals and the presumption that black women’s bodies were available to both white and black men without black women’s consent. The importance of the image of the “black lady” must be read in terms of the need to gain recognition and acceptance of that performance among whites and black males. Black women may attempt to mimic the behaviors of the “lady” in order to be intelligible within the signification of the “cult of true womanhood.” Collins notes that “According to the cult of true womanhood, ‘true’ women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Collins 2000, 71). These Victorian ideals of womanhood traditionally associated with white, middle-class womanhood became values by which black people judged the propriety of black women’s behavior.

In other words, black women need to perform or mimic some degree of white femininity to gain patriarchal protection. The sociohistorical
context in which black women develop the strategy of respectability must be understood as a “discourse of resistance” (White and Dobris 2002). The strategy of respectability serves to destabilize the racist representations of black women and black people in general. However, as sexual and class strife demonstrate, respectability can be used to sublimate inappropriate performances of black womanhood. McDonald notes, for example, that the black women’s Club Movements of the early 1900s engaged in outreach efforts toward lower-class black women for the purpose of influencing their performances of black femininity (McDonald 2007, 52–53). These activists believed that only a more sterile representation of black womanhood offered black women protection in a racist and patriarchal social structure. In the following paragraphs, I argue that class and sexuality represent the means by which the Essence respondents divided “good” from “bad” black women.

Class status, demonstrated through the rhetorical and performative assumption of respectability, has historically functioned as a “tool to regulate black behavior” (White 2001, 37). The stereotypical representations of poor and working-class black women “become texts of what not to be” for middle- and upper-class black women (Collins 2004). Middle-class black women are in a greater position to exercise the power of economic privilege. Thus, class ideology is a means of confining and controlling appropriate performances of black femininity. The “black lady” can be held as the standard only if that representation can be defined in opposition to the over-sexualized, lower-class black woman, “the jezebel.”

In the scribble board discussions, the good/bad black woman dialectic was described in terms of the queen or princess vs. the ho (whore). The “queen” represents the good black woman and the “ho” is the bad black woman. In an anonymous response, this black woman notes, “the Rap industry is degrading Black Women of their true beauty and portraying us not as the Queens and Princess’s we are but as modern day whores and prostitutes” (Anonymous 2005). Yolee argues, “Ladies must understand that they are Queens and carry yourself with respect and expect to be treated like one” (Yolee 2005). In Pimps Up, Ho’s Down, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (2007) argues that the current sexism and misogyny within hip-hop may have very real consequences for black women. As she argues, the rate of sexual assault and violence against black women is statistically significant (Sharpley-Whiting 2007, 57–58). Darlene Clark Hine (1990), in
her historical research on black women's migration patterns, notes that black women's fear of rape and sexual violence was a significant factor in their decision to flee to the north and west after the end of slavery. Within the Essence responses is a familiar concern for the physical and emotional safety of black women. Traditionally, black women have attempted to engage in more austere performances of femininity as a protection against the sexual violence of both black and white men. Implied by the Essence respondents is an admonishment about the connection of social performances of femininity to the treatment that black women face in a culture that devalues them.

In these responses, the “queen” and the “whore” are placed in dialectical opposition to each other. “Real” black women are constructed as “queens,” or women who are deserving of respect. The “queen” identity recycles the ideology of the “cult of true womanhood” in which women who perform their genders appropriately are placed on a pedestal as representatives of the purity and goodness of the race. For black women, the “queen” identity provides an opportunity to resist dominant stereotypes that position black women as unable to access this pedestal because of their racial difference. Thus, resistance to the image of the jezebel or the whore results in the oppositional image of the “black queen” who represents the “good” black woman. The “queen” can be characterized by sexual purity, motherhood, spirituality, commitment to the uplifting of the race, and in particular the uplifting of black men. Although the “queen” is to be worshipped, her position is often rhetorically and materially behind that of the “king.” In other words, the “black queen” is judged by her commitment to the elevation of black manhood in the context of a racist society. She is worshipped for her ability to maintain her appropriate position within black culture. The “black queen” identity became popular during the various black nationalist movements within the United States (Collins 2006, 144–50). Michelle Wallace (1999) notes that the “queen” identity position often resulted in black women being relegated to “women’s work” within black movements that favored a strong, black, and male public presence.

Note the following comment from Sharion: “On t.v. Black girls/women [are] showing all their most valuable treasure, their bodies” (Sharion 2005). Ginger Rose notes, “They (black men) are convinced that this is the way to get paid by what . . . exploiting their most precious gifts. Their women” (Ginger Rose 2005). For these respondents, black women’s bodies
are “valuable treasure” and “precious gifts” that must not only be respected, but protected. The rhetorical use of “treasure” and “gift” here intersects with the construction of the “queen” identity. “Treasure” and “gift” are reminiscent of kingdoms with “kings” and “queens.” The “king” receives the gift/ wife from her father as a “valuable treasure” that, in essence, the “king” owns. Gayle Rubin notes that “If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it” (Rubin 1997, 37). Black women’s bodies become exchange resources in a heteronormative black culture. A black woman’s treasure—her body—is to be exchanged for a black man’s protection and honor. These respondents necessarily imply that the black women on television who are willingly displaying “their most valuable treasure” are unworthy of being treated like “queens.” Not all women are valuable. Lower-class women’s bodies are devalued. It is often the middle-class black woman who most clearly fits the characterization of the “black queen.” Remember that this identity position harkens to black women’s traditional relationship with black activist efforts and rhetorics of racial uplift. As middle-class black women have historically been most active in the development and maintenance of such resistance efforts, it is clear that the “black queen” is painted with the brush of middle-class black femininity.

However, that the “black queen” is most likely to be constructed within the context of middle-class values does not mean that black women of a lower class do not take on the mantle of the identity. Note the following response to the scribble board from Laralie: “The image of the women in hip hop videos do not depict the true image of a Black American Ghetto Princess” (Laralie 2005). The respondent notes that there is a “true” image of the black “princess,” and these women are not an example of that image. She creates a rhetorical opposition between true/real and untrue/unreal black women. Yet even more significant in this response is the visible class politics attached to the characterization of black womanhood. Note that Laralie includes “ghetto” as a modifier for “princess.” Normally the term “ghetto” connotes a connection to the lower class. Thus, Laralie indicates that there is a construction of the “queen” or “princess” identity for black women of lower economic classes. McDonald’s (2007) review of black women’s historical activism efforts indicates that poor black women often
took on subject positions normally associated with the black middle class as a means of resistance and protection.

Yet Laralie’s comment also indicates that there are controlling performances of black femininity among black women of lower socioeconomic status. Her characterization of the “ghetto princess” demonstrates that black women’s discourse communities are not limited to the black middle class. In other words, black women with lower socioeconomic status produce their own “safe spaces.” As such, these spaces produce their own regulations and constraints for acceptable black feminine performance. Both McDonald’s (2007) and Collins’s (2004; 2006) recent work indicates that this is the case. More specifically, it is the rising significance of “ghetto culture” with its gratuitous sexuality that is often the cause for concern.

The broader debate that surrounds hip-hop within the discourse of mainstream culture has been of grave concern to scholars interested in hip-hop culture and rap music. Expectations that women should remain loyal to men within the black community often prevent community members from speaking publicly against successful community members. Thus, black women simultaneously grapple with their disgust at black female representation in black popular culture and their fear of the possible ramifications for publicly attacking black men. McDonald’s study of black women’s characterization of black women’s social community notes that her study participants were “reluctant to implicate African-American men in feeding the misogyny toward black women” (McDonald 2007, 122). The gender politics between black men and women, as they negotiate a racist, classist, and heterosexist America, are often rife with conflict (Wallace 1999; Collins 2004). The change in the social acceptance of women in more diversified positions in the work force has resulted in greater upward mobility for black women. The resulting competition between black men and women for educational and economic status within the limited spaces created by contemporary commitment to diversity has strained black male and female social partnership. Black women, especially following the demonization of Anita Hill, recognize the likelihood of cultural censure for attacking black men.

For many in the black community, rap’s domination by black men means that criticism of rap music and video is functionally criticism of black men. On the Essence scribble boards, some respondents argue that those black
women who were speaking out against rap are “man-haters.” For example, one respondent notes: “Just as I thought. This is about hating black males and nothing else” (Shelly 2005). An anonymous respondent notes: “This magazine should be about more things than attacking black men all the time” (Anonymous 2005). A black male respondent notes that “He (the white male power structure) has given certain black women the big head and these black women have done his dirty work of tearing down the black male. Its been done for centuries in this country and our families and communities have paid the price because of it” (Carlton 2005). This last response demonstrates the manner in which black sexual politics is deeply impacted by black people’s experiences with American racism. As black women have gained greater advantages and have become more upwardly mobile than black men, the fire of relational conflict between these men and women has grown. Thus, this black man positions black women as traitors to black men and tools of white racism in destroying the black community.

Those respondents who believed it inappropriate for black women to speak out against successful black men used the label of “lesbian” as a symbol of their impropriety. Nan Smith notes, “At first I thought that this was a place to discuss the issue of rap music, but now that it has turned into a lesbian free for all I won’t be coming back here. I love men they are handsome and strong” (Smith 2005). Theron K. Cal, a black male respondent, writes: “Real Brother here. I think this is simply Black self-hatred on the part of Essence and a few Lesbian Black women who are bitter and hate Black men and wish they were men themselves. Many Lesbians use Rap and Hip Hop to recruit other lesbians” (Cal 2005). These two responses alone generated a number of responses from the scribble board members. For example, “You are one messed up brother. I guess your apparent hostility towards women means that you are gay, huh?” (Valerie 2005). Another respondent writes: “Just wondering why men like you when confronted with the voice of a strong woman, with high self-esteem, and who actually likes herself, why it terrifies you to the point that you feel the need to grab for and hold onto the ‘lesbian’ label. You REALLY need to ask yourself that” (Shannon 2005). This exchange demonstrates the manner in which homosexuality functions to confine what is appropriate behavior for black women. Black women who break the code of silence and “attack”
Black male power structures directly and publicly are marked with the label of “lesbian” to reduce them to silence.

The individuals who responded to the “lesbian” label did not do so by claiming that they were not lesbian, but by questioning the very logic, rationality, and reasonableness of the argument itself. Collins notes that both straight and lesbian black women are providing a challenge to the heteronormativity of the black community: “Black women, both heterosexual and lesbian, have criticized the sexual politics of African American communities that leave women vulnerable to single motherhood and sexual assault” (Collins 2004, 88). Thus, black women interested in challenging the sexual status quo in black communities are rejecting the efficacy of the “lesbian” marker to constrain their active resistance to sexism within black communities. Simultaneously, it is important to note that the critical interrogation of heteronormativity need not translate into the acceptance of gay and lesbian issues or the embracing of black lesbians within black women’s “safe spaces.” While Valerie and Shannon do not actively disavow lesbian status, neither do they self-identify as lesbian or directly support lesbianism. Instead, in each response it is black femininity that is being protected, not lesbian identity. For example, Valerie turns the tables on the black male, who uses the term lesbian, by questioning his sexuality. Her strategy seeks to complicate Cal’s stance that cross-gender criticism implies homosexuality. Shannon builds on the traditional characterization of black women’s strength to critique Cal’s response. For her, the lesbian stereotype has to be “grabbed” for (out of thin air) indicating that it is an unwarranted and unreasonable reference to strong black women.

Black men and women need each other for racial solidarity, but racial solidarity sometimes conflicts with the experience of gender. In other words, black women are often required to choose which of their subject positions—race, gender, class, or sexuality—is more important at particular moments where those positions are in conflict. For black women to speak out against a black-male-dominated cultural practice puts them at risk of censure from within the community. One does not “air” the community’s “dirty laundry” in sight of white gazes. Black women who publicly question black men break the image of racial solidarity; this action can result in grave consequences for those who step out of bounds.

The dichotomy between the “good” black woman and the “bad” black woman functions such that poor and working-class women become
scapegoats for the pervasiveness of these representations of black women. These scapegoats come to signify inappropriate and immoral performances of black femininity. Robin Kelley notes that “Distinguishing ‘bad’ women from ‘good’ women ultimately serves to justify violence against women by devaluing them” (Kelley 1996, 143). Thus, simultaneously, the resistance potential of the performative strategy of respectability must also be interrogated for the manner in which it replicates, reproduces, and reconstitutes ideologies of race, gender, class, and sexuality as they operate to confine and constrain the development of subjectivity for black women. In other words, the “good” black woman can only be intelligible as a performance if contrasted against the “bad” black woman. Thus, some women are worthy of protection from misogynistic harassment and violence while other women deserve such treatment because of their performance of femininity. It is the women who are “worthy” who are most easily admitted into black women’s “safe spaces” as their performance of black femininity is acceptable. These women’s performance of black femininity effectively demonstrates their social allegiance to the uplifting of black women. Black women who perform appropriate femininity and allegiance to the protection of black femininity demonstrate a responsibility to black women as a social group. In the next section I argue that the queen vs. ho dialectic functions to create a boundary to exclude from “safe spaces” those black women who choose to perform inappropriate black femininity.

Disciplining Black Femininity through Social Allegiance and within Safe Spaces: The Scribble Boards

The identity performance of the “black queen” is perpetuated through the subjectification process of black women within their “safe spaces.” Grandmothers, mothers, and othermothers teach young black girls and women the proper performances of black womanhood that will gain them the protection of the status of a “black queen.” Ryemondia argues that it “seems like we need to get back to the days of sitting on Grandma’s porch where some real logic can infiltrate our minds” (Ryemondia 2005). Her comment indicates nostalgia for a time when black women were of greater influence on young black women than any other source, including dominant representations. At “Grandma’s knee” young black women were
taught the knowledge they needed to live as black women within a racist and sexist society. Ryemondia refers to this knowledge as “real logic,” which can be contrasted to the false knowledge that black women receive about themselves from the mass media. The black women who perform inappropriate black femininity are suffering from this false logic and need the reclamation of black women’s “real logic” available only in black women’s safe spaces. Thus, there is a narrative of redemption within the scribble board discussion. Inappropriate black women should be redeemed, not immediately excluded.

The Essence respondents argue that rap’s dissemination of a supposedly “authentic” black femininity has material consequences for black women that must not be ignored. Without any means of contextualizing the disseminated images of black femininity, the respondents fear that the circulation of such images will overwhelm the reality of black women’s diversity. More importantly, they are concerned that the dissemination of such images has real consequences for ordinary black women in their everyday lives. Brie notes, for example, “A lot of black women are putting themselves out there in a bad way and making us all look like, for lack of a better phrase, ‘hoes’” (Brie 2005). This respondent argues that black women are judged as a group, even based on the behaviors of a few. Thus, those black women who perform in rap videos become representatives of all black women. The result is a generalization about black women’s identity and sexuality. Martha argues that “Unfortunately a lot of people even if they don’t do it conscientiously [sic] are judging us by what they see on the tv and in print” (Martha 2005). Regina writes “when people start judging me based off of what they see in the media, it hurts. Especially being a black woman in corporate America” (Regina 2005). These responses indicate a concern for the black women who perform appropriate femininity who are harmed by those black women who do not perform acceptable femininity. More importantly, the respondent notes the harm done to black women trying to succeed in corporate America. The “good” black woman is a representative of “corporate America.” The “corporate” black woman is intelligent and successful—a representative of the positive black woman. She must be contrasted against the black women who perform a sexual, animalistic femininity through rap images. The main concern of the scribble board respondents is the popular representation in rap music and videos of black women as over-sexed, licentious, money
hungry, sexually aggressive women who are sexually available (to any man). A respondent, Charlotte, notes, “You [black women who perform in these videos] may not have intended on being portrayed as a ho, but 50 million people who are watching you perceived otherwise” (Charlotte 2005). Here, Charlotte sidesteps the issue of intentionality: whether performers intend to perform the “ho” identity. Instead, her argument implies that the circulation of the performances result in solidifying stereotypes of black womanhood, regardless of the intention behind the performance.

Sisters, aunts, and friends surveille one another and other black women within their “safe spaces” to discipline one another into performances of appropriate black femininity (Foucault 1977). Thus, the “social allegiance” that develops within these spaces is often confined to those black women whose performance of black femininity is acceptable based on community standards. Some black women are excluded from these spaces, or are faced with the threat of exclusion, and it is important to note that this often articulates along the lines of class and sexuality. Jennifer Hale, a respondent, sums up the importance of black women’s performance of femininity: “The point is, is that the status of women in our culture represents where our community is as a whole. The women are the first teachers in our community; if they are psychologically destroyed, then what chance do we really have?” (Hale 2005).

As Hale’s statement demonstrates, black women are deemed by other black women to have a responsibility toward one another in their performance of identity. R. Alexander states:

The point that stands out most is that these young women are extremely jaded about what type of message they are sending out. They do not realize that the portrayal of African-American women as being loose, promiscuous, and overtly sexual feeds into the stereotypical views that have existed since our foremothers were raped and violated by slave owners. It is our responsibility to change the worldwide image of African-American women and restore some sense of dignity, value, and respectability before it is too late. (Alexander 2005)

For this respondent, the black women who perform black femininity in excess have refused their responsibility to fight the historical stereotyping of black women. Sharion notes further:
to turn around and talk about us being descendants of people like Queen Nerferti [sic], Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and a host of other Black women who gave their lives for our freedom. Seeing us today as we are portrayed in the media I’m sure these Black women of the past and many currently great Black women weep for our souls and our lost integrity. (Sharion 2005)

The dialectical materialization of the “queen” identity is instantiated through a sample list of important, historical, black female figures. The respondent positions such individuals as Tubman and Truth in opposition to those black women whose performance of black femininity would be found wanting by these great black women. Black women who perform black femininity inappropriately in today’s society become disloyal agents who diminish the physical and psychological sacrifices made by black female ancestors who were “raped and violated.” Black women who violate this identity construction become unworthy of acceptance into black women’s safe spaces because of their rejection of normative performances of black femininity. As Sharion notes, black women throughout American history have made critical sacrifices to protect other black women by recognizing the implications of their feminine performances. To be unconcerned, as a black woman, for how one’s behavior might have negative consequences for other black women is a violation of social allegiance that can result in censure and disavowal.

Conclusion

The debate occurring on the Essence scribble boards in response to the sexism and misogyny in hip-hop is a necessary and productive questioning of the oppressive practices and institutions that harm black women. As much as this conversation is productive in providing a necessary space from which to discuss these issues and create a discourse community resistant to black female representation within rap music and video, we must still interrogate the terms through which the debate is instantiated. I have argued in this essay that in responding to the stereotypical representation of black womanhood, the black women engaged on the Essence scribble boards reinstitute a discourse dependent on a politics of respectability. This creates a dialectical opposition between “good” black women
and “bad” black women. Such a dialectic is greatly dependent on the differentiation of economic class among black women. As stereotypes circulate and are disseminated beyond the confines of the black community, the dialectical representation of “good” vs. “bad” black women by black women is productive in providing a rhetorical strategy to combat the circulation of negative images. However, as we celebrate this strategy of resistance, we must simultaneously be suspicious of the subject positions that this discourse makes available to black women. If black women may choose only between the subjectivity of the “black queen” or the whore, they will find themselves trapped in an identity that depends upon the negation of other black women.

We must push black feminist thought and criticism toward its promise. Articulation of class and sexuality at the intersection of race and gender provides a lens of interpretation that does not simply celebrate a discourse as resistant, but also seeks out the manner in which it disciplines and controls. One of black feminism’s most important contributions to academic and activist thought is the theory of intersectionality. Rather than articulating parts of identity as additive, black feminist thought defines oppression as multiplicative and intersectional. Beyond the immediate intersection of race and gender for black women, intersectionality requires that we interrogate other intersecting identity positions, including class, sexuality, religion, and able-bodiedness. Taken seriously, intersectionality, as critical theory, can often produce some uncomfortable information to explain and disclose. Brenda Allen argues: “We . . . must make informed, sensitive decisions about what to divulge to whom. We need to avoid sharing findings that do not provide positive insight or information” (Allen 2002, 29). It is not my intention to argue that Allen eschews differences between black women. However, the search for “common themes that thread through African-American women’s lives and histories” and the concern for displaying black women to a hostile academic community can result in the silencing of power differentials between and among black women’s social groups, in favor of positive representations of resistance (Allen 2002, 31). Yes, black women in America today believe in the importance of maintaining connections to other black women, yet it is critical to understand the differences associated with our contemporary situation. Social allegiances are made difficult across lines of class and sexuality. Moreover, in our current context, those lines of
differentiation may be increasingly detrimental to the development of black women's social communities.

NOTES
1. Michaela Angela Davis is the “Take Back the Music” campaign spokesperson for Essence.
2. For a discussion of “oppositional decoding,” see Hall (1999).
3. The information describing the magazine’s position on the new campaign is taken from the “Take Back the Music Campaign Mission Statement.”
4. Purity here does not refer to virginal. The queen is a sexual being, but her “treasures” are only to be “bestowed” upon black men worthy of such a “gift.”
5. I play off the French title of Discipline and Punish. In the English translation, “discipline” supplants the French word “surveille,” as there is no equivalent term in English.

WORKS CITED


