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'She was workin like foreal': critical literacy and discourse practices of African American females in the age of hip hop



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ABSTRACT This study explores some ways young black women negotiate stereotypical and hegemonic representations of black men and women as sexual savages in mass media, especially as they appear in rap music videos. The objective of the article is to examine how young black women make meaning of these images, in short, how they read rap texts in relation to their experiences of the world as black women. The article aims to: (1) add to the extant research literature on black discourse practices and African American female literacies; (2) demonstrate the complex language, literacy and knowledge-making capacity that exists among young black women who participate in hip hop youth culture, to inform the approaches to the resolution of these complex issues by concerned educators, community activists, and policy makers. I begin by briefly outlining relevant literature in black gender and race studies, and studies of discourse and literacy that will serve my analysis of the young women's discourse practices.

KEY WORDS: *African American female literacies, critical discourse analysis, hip hop, racism, sexism*

Introduction

... [R]ace, gender, and sexuality have ideological dimensions that work to organize social institutions. In the post-civil rights era, Black popular culture and mass media have both grown in importance in creating ideologies of inequality. Black popular culture consists of the ideas and cultural representations created by Black people in everyday life that are widely known and accepted. In contrast, mass media describes the appropriation and repackaging of these ideas for larger audience consumption. Black popular culture ... is indicative of larger political and economic forces on the macro level that in turn influence the micro level of everyday behavior among African Americans. Conversely, everyday behavior becomes the cultural stuff that is mined by Black popular culture and a mass media with an insatiable appetite for new material. (Hill Collins, 2004: 17)

As argued by Patricia Hill Collins, black popular culture via mass media offers us the opportunity to explore the politics of gender, sexuality, and the ways that the new racism takes gender specific forms. An important aspect of the new racism is its reliance on mass media and global technologies to disseminate hegemonic ideologies which obscure the systemic aspects of racism and manufacture consent. The disproportionate number of black people that suffer from traditional problems such as poor housing, poor schooling, lack of jobs, poor health, family disturbance and a host of problems 'all constitute variations of the negative effects of colonialism, slavery, and traditional forms of racial rule. The new racism reflects sedimented or past-in-present racial formations from prior historical periods' (Hill Collins, 2004: 54–5).

Commercial rap videos provide a hefty dissemination of hegemonic images of black youth culture throughout the world. These images are decontextualized from their roots in slavery and its legacy of racial rule, and are repackaged by mass media and popular culture, helping to reproduce the hegemonic ideologies and replicate social inequality. Today's bad black girl–video vixen imagery is linked to historic controlling images of the wench and the Jezebel. The wench, commonly interchanged with bitch, was used to refer to an enslaved (and sometimes free) female, whose sexual behavior was deemed to be loose and immoral. As this was the wench's 'natural disposition' the use of her body to produce wealth, labor, and slaves was justifiable. Similarly, Jezebel is closely related in that she is also loose and immoral; however, Jezebel is manipulative and uses her sexual alluring nature to exploit men. Today's pimped-out street-wise urbanly clad gangsta brotha is linked historically to the brute black buck of slave economy. The black buck or brute was hypersexual, good for breeding and impregnating the wenches who reproduced the slave labor force. Hill Collins argues that these ideas about sexuality are pivotal in the creation of interlocking systems of social inequality such as racism, sexism, classism, and capitalism. In order to gain input and to understand young black women's ideas about these issues, I arranged a rap viewing and commentary session.

Participants, data collection, and research question

PARTICIPANTS

Four African American females aged 17, 19, 19, and the researcher aged 43 produced the discourse presented in this study. The two 19-year-olds are college students and roommates at a university in central Pennsylvania. They have known each other approximately two years. The 17-year-old is a high-school student in the same region. She is the sister of one of the 19-year-olds. One of the 19-year-olds was raised on the east coast. The other three participants are Midwesterners. All of the participants are in the middle-income range. All spent their formative years in black urban areas. The two 19-year-olds are mentors in an Afrocentric afterschool program where I participate as an

adviser. I explained to the girls that I needed their help, that I was doing research and writing a book about hip hop and I wanted their expert opinions and ideas about commercial rap videos and music.

DATA COLLECTION

I arranged semi-structured interviews around the viewing of rap videos to generate talk about black youth popular culture, specifically, as represented in rap videos. The 'rap session' took place in the researcher's home. The conversations were audio-taped as videos played. I asked the young ladies questions at the end of selected videos pertaining to their thoughts concerning the values and social practices surrounding the performances. I asked the questions in a manner that allowed the conversation to flow in ways that their interests led. For example, I asked 'So, what y'all think about it?' (at the end of the video). The 'rap session' and viewing of rap videos lasted approximately 90 minutes. I transcribed selected passages of the conversation. The participants are identified as: BE (= 19 years old); ED (= 19 years old); ET (= 17 years old); ER (= researcher). The focus of the brief excerpted transcription and analysis is on how language is used to reflect and contest the rhetorical situation of black males and females. I pay particular attention to how the girls make meaning of the images and representations. I also pay attention to the girls' interpretation of song lyrics of the video and their application of these to their lived experiences and their negotiated reception of these interpretations against dominant and competing constructions of reality.

Of the videos that I showed, the one that generated interest and complex discourse was Nelly and the St. Lunatics' 'Tip Drill.' The St. Lunatics are an extremely popular Midwest, Southern-styled African American male rap group. The song and video could be considered a strip club anthem replete with signs of carnality and status, attractive pulsating young black women wielding their power signs – their beautiful shapely bodies – backsides, breasts, lips, tongues, fly hairstyles, varied brown skin tones, stylish, if very little, clothing, heels, nails, vivid colors; virile men flashing their black men's power signs – cash money, hard body posturing, gold, jewelry, fine cars, strong drinks, urban apparel. The chorus of the song (chanted by male rappers) presents its theme: 'it must be yo ass cause it ain't yo face. I need a tip drill. I need a tip drill.' 'A tip drill' relates to the performance ritual enacted by strip dancers and their consumers. The objective of the female stripper is to get mostly male consumers to spend large tips, to hold many men under her sway: in so doing, she reigns as a status symbol. The objective of the mostly male consumer is to get female strippers to arouse his sexual imagination. The more women he is able to hold under his sway, the higher his status. The participants – stripper and consumer – exploit every means possible within the limits of strip club protocol to attain their desired goals.

The main question that I explore is: How do young African American females negotiate stereotypical representations of African American culture, gender, labor, and sexual values in rap music videos?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Gee's (2000) conceptualization of discourse is particularly apt to the current analysis. He explains that literacy is constructed from distinctive social languages that work in tandem with other socially situated activities. He refers to these as discourse(s), systems of 'behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles . . . by specific groups of people . . .' (p. 413). Applying this conception of discourse to African Americans, we can say that black (African American) 'Discourses are ways of being' ['an African descendant']. They are 'ways of being in the world'; they are 'forms of life.' They are, thus, always and everywhere *social* and products of social histories' (adapted from Gee, 1996: viii). In as much as discourse involves ways of being, knowing and doing, these are part of social processes and semiosis. 'Semiosis includes all forms of meaning making – visual images, body language, as well as language' (Fairclough, 2001: 122). As aspects of discourse, these multimodal conceptions of semiosis inform our study of the ways that African American youth read the world in which they live. As Gee (1999) notes, people internalize or appropriate images, patterns, and words from the social activities in which they have participated. They perform these social activities based on their social positioning (Fairclough, 2001). Further, all meaning-making resources are applicable to discourse analysis. This includes, for example, grammar or lexis narrowly, but also, as Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996: 1) assert, 'people, places and things combine in visual "statements" of greater or lesser complexity and extension.' Black discourse practices influence how black people read and respond to the social world. Hip-hop discourse is considered, in this study, to be a hybrid system within black discourse, which is itself engaged with mainstream culture and dominant discourses. Hip-hop literacies refers to ways in which people who are socialized into hip-hop discourse manipulate as well as read language, gestures, images, material possessions, and people, to position themselves against or within discourse in order to advance and protect themselves.

According to Gee (1996) a literacy can be liberating or powerful when we can use it as a 'meta-language or a meta-Discourse . . . for the critique of other literacies and the way they constitute us as persons and situate us in society.' Gee explains that this liberating literacy (what I call critical literacy) 'is a particular use of Discourse (to critique other ones), not (necessarily) a particular Discourse.' This study strives to demonstrate the complex of traditions, bodies of knowledge, and meaning-making strategies that young black women draw upon, which inform their critical literacy and discourse practices. Throughout the session ED, BE, and ET (co-constructed with me, the researcher) almost always work to recognize the lives represented in the staged video in terms of local knowledge or the lived experience of black youth – the keeping it real ideology of hip hop. However, in our quest to keep it real, we also display instances of succumbing to racist stereotypes and controlling myths of black womanhood. Thus, this examination will also illuminate contradictions in the young women's ideologies and our cognizance of our social situatedness, with

regard to the politics of sexism and racism. Although this video, promoted by the mostly white corporate-controlled music industry, a typical gangsta rap-styled text, is patriarchal and sexist, the young women struggled to find language to empower ourselves through our negotiated reception of it. Gee argues that the new literacy studies should focus on an examination of the ways people make language (and other acts of identity) work to (re)construct, maintain, negotiate, and/or resist identities/situations. He calls this recognition and enactment work (Gee, 1999). As the analysis shows, as black women are members of particular discourses, the young women are positioned to speak, think and act in particular ways, to take up or refuse certain positioning. Furthermore, though my age and experiences distance me from some of the discourse practices of the young women, we do share certain ways of seeing ourselves in the world.

Analysis

WHO THE REAL WOMEN ARE

There are several instances of alignment and conflict between black and dominant discourses with regard to the social construction of women. For example, at times ED's language works to align black and dominant discourses. To the question, 'What y'all think about it [the video]?' ED takes up the dominant perspective, when she says '. . . *If you* wanna look at it *in a sense*, like, yeah, *it is degrading to women.*' Most importantly, it should be noted that ED presents this perspective as conditional, which is signaled by the use of 'If.' In other words, there are conditions under which the performances in the video can be evaluated as degrading to women. Her uses of 'you,' and 'in a sense,' further mark the perspective as dominant and conditional. Examining the dominant aspects of the utterance, the pronoun 'you' indexes certain aspects of the context in which the term is uttered. Perhaps my social role as a professor and as an adviser to an Afrocentric afterschool program at the local high school where the girls participate as mentors encouraged ED to offer a dominant common sense response. Added to this, she is a middle-class college student. Further, in many ways, I am a mother-figure to the girls. Additionally, the concept of face work may also apply. As discussed by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003), ED is presenting a self that is desirable, a positive face, through acknowledgement and seeming embrace of the dominantly received perspective. Furthermore, ED interpreted my question: 'What y'all think about it [the video]?' as an invitation to discuss the topic of the (negative) representation of women in rap. It is no wonder, as this is a hot topic in American society. ED's response is underlain with traditional values of Judeo Christianity as well as the traditional black church, where the hypersexualized image of women is degrading to women. Both the general American Judeo Christian and the traditional black church or traditions of spiritual groundedness in black culture would ascribe chastity, virtue, innocence, heterosexuality and marriage to the all-American young female and shun such displays. Furthermore, feminist or womanist-centered discourses would see hypersexual commodified images of women as degrading to the extent that these

are circumscribed within the dictates of global capitalism. However, the same utterance employing as it does a conditional clause and a prepositional phrase '*If you wanna look at it in a sense . . .*' points to different understandings of black performances, that there are multiple ways to read the video performances, some which may rely on situated knowledge.

The social construction of women can be shown to align and conflict with dominant and black discourses in another short extract from the conversation:

BE: I don't think it's degrading to *women*. I don't think it's degrading to *women*.
It's girls out here who strippers. It's girls out here who really tip drills. Know what
uhm saying?

ET: yep.

In the above exchange, the categories of 'women,' 'strippers,' 'tip drills,' and 'girls out here' are conflated. This has the effect of resituating or troubling the categories. The term 'women' is used here in a generic manner, to signal females, which can be equated to 'girls,' 'strippers,' and 'tip drills,' in the lexical (intertextual) chain that BE creates. The 'It's girls,' reflecting the African American Language (AAL) pattern 'existential it' and 'who strippers' employing Zero copula, makes an important claim. There exist girls who strip (as a means to an end/a job/because of their present situation), and there exist girls who are strippers (embrace it as a primary identity). The latter interpretation is substantiated by the next sentence: 'It's girls out here who REALLY tip drills' (emphasis mine). 'Tip drill' is strip club argot for the performance ritual in which the women dance as seductively as possible to obtain large tips. By extension, a woman who performs the tip drill can also be referred to as a tip drill. 'It's girls out here' references the racialized, genderized, sexist, and hypereconomically driven world that the black female must navigate to survive. 'Girls out here' marks the non-insulated world of such girls. Working and living in this domain is non-prestigious, though it carries its own system of prestige, especially for the girls who are deemed as using this occupation to better their situations. However, BE makes a distinction between such girls and those 'who really tip drills.' The implication is that one deserves no respect and has no self-respect if being a tip drill is the primary sense of self. These various referents index the discourses that inform them. Examination of BE's intertextual chain boils down to something like this: women who embrace stripping or tip drilling as a primary identity are not real women; however, real women can use stripping or tip drilling to better their social position. BE's use of discourse reflects a sensitivity to the positioning of young black women in society, the imperative to achieve the (African) American dream, pulling one's self up by the boot/bra straps in today's highly capitalistic society, where market values rule and sexual labor is valued over piety and low socioeconomic status. At the same time, a tip drill/stripper is a sex worker, a less-respectable occupation, making the tip drill a lesser form of woman in the public imagination. We might say then that BE's response both aligns with, as well as critiques the dominant perspective.

BE struggles to disentangle 'ho'¹ and its attendant common sense beliefs from 'tip drill' or 'stripper' in the next extract:

ER: What is a tip drill?

BE: A *tip drill* is a *ho* or, well, *I ain't gone say a ho*, I'ma say a *stripper*.

ET: With a *ugly face* and a *big butt*.

BE: With a *ugly face* and a *big booty*, a *bangin body*. (Sings song: *It must be yo ass cause it ain't yo face*).

BE first states that a 'tip drill is a ho' but quickly negates that statement: 'I ain't gone say a ho, I'ma say a stripper.' Her self-initiated self-repair indicates that there is a stereotypical, common sense or naturalized way of thinking about a stripper or tip drill – as a ho. These usages of language implicate a non-acceptance of the definitiveness and conflation of these categories. But at the same time, this labeling that the girls use to make distinctions illustrates the social stratification of the women in the communities that the video represents, and their simultaneous entanglement within dominant and black discourses. This interdiscursivity is apparent also when speakers ET and BE define 'stripper' as 'a ugly face and a big butt' (ET); and 'ugly face and a big booty, a bangin body' (BE). In making these assertions the girls are reproducing the commonly held social and esthetic value of black female strippers. In many ways, institutions controlled by the ideologies of the dominant sphere devalue and exoticize beautiful black women with African features. In many traditional African cultures a well-built woman with a fleshy backside has long been a symbol of health, fertility, beauty, and sex appeal. But once appropriated into global market culture, as was the case in slavery and contemporarily in popular culture, the beauty lies in the market value of the hypersexualized black body itself, intensified to such a degree that a face is not even needed; the body produces pleasure or sells. If a face is needed, it should be the most profitable, the most light-skinned, with the kind of hair most associated with Anglo-Americans. In the contemporary global economies as in the slave economy, human beings are assigned market value. Unlike the days of slavery, today women can be paid for their bodies, even if they do not control the market or their own self-representation.

The use of self-repair in the conversation points to the near impossibility of escaping the hegemonic constructions of Anglo-American standards of beauty and worth for black women:

ER: Most of those girls. [Self-correction and rephrase] I didn't see any ugly girls in that video.

ET: I did.

As I wanted the girls to offer more about their evaluation of the video girls, I too struggled not to use the naturalized language surrounding the social construction of black women as can be seen in my own self-repair. Had I not corrected myself, I would have said: 'Most of the girls' (in the video were not ugly). Though I negated the underlying unspoken statement, that some of the girls in the video were ugly, ET's 'I did' affirmed it.

The stereotype of black females as sexually loose and always available is at issue, as can be seen in the following extract.

BE: Why you say it's degrading?

ED: Because. Foreal. You just don't. [The periods that I've used here depict pauses] You ain't got to say all that. Know what uhm saying? Like you said, Some women are and some women ain't. But, the way they was puttin it, was like, females. Point blank. Period. That's in that song, females. Generalizing just all the females like that. But, know what uhm sayin, you're right. It is some tip drills out here. It is. But then again, it ain't some.

BE: That's true.

ET: Well, a lot of the lyrics in the song is degrading to women. For instance, it said, 'It must be yo ass cause it ain't yo face.' He said, 'It ain't no fun unless we all get some.' You know what uhm saying, so. Basically, meaning we gone run a train on you.

ED's concern that all black females are implicated as sexually loose or insatiable is deduced from the semiotic sign of the strippers' blackness. ED's plural pronoun usages of 'you' and 'they' appear to be referring to the rappers' interaction (performance) with the video strippers and the song's lyrics – 'It must be yo ass cause it ain't yo face' and 'It ain't no fun unless we all get some' (among others). However, ED links these same interactions and lyrics 'to all the females.' This is supported by ED's non-use of a subject in the utterance 'Generalizing just all the females like that' and her statement 'But, the way they was putting it, was like, females. Point blank. Period. That's in that song, females.' The unspoken concept in ED's theory is 'black,' which is absently present in front of each usage of 'female.' Further, ED's reply to BE's question: 'Why you say it's degrading?' evinces several pauses that signal a heightened consciousness of the rhetorical situation of her own discourse, as well as the video text's consumption in the larger society.

ED struggles to empty the sign of the black female body of immorality, as she strives to distance or differentiate tip drills (in any sense) from black females: 'Some women are and some women ain't.' Again, the absent present term is 'black' and could be inserted before 'women.' ED takes up this position to protect the integrity of the collective black woman. Yet, this formulation is representative of the hegemonic and dominant conceptions of femininity, which devalues the humanity of a black woman stripper. ED's reproduction of dominant discourse is underscored by her stratifying statement of women – 'Some women are and some women ain't.' In this exchange BE agrees with ED's rationalization, 'That's true.' ET's observation about the lyrics supports the point of view that tip drills index all black women and is therefore a degradation of black women, when she says: 'Well, a lot of the lyrics in the song is degrading to women.' The lyrical examples that she gives to substantiate her point is 'It must be yo ass cause it ain't yo face' and 'It ain't no fun unless we all get some.' Here, ET is focusing on women, not strippers or tip drills, thus she is not making the distinction between these categories. In this way, we see how she deduces that women in these lyrical usages are reduced to sexual objects and thus degraded.

Fictive kinship, representin', and multiple manifestations of the self

The same sign that is understood in society as a racialization of black women's sexuality is used to humanize black women's social position. In the following example notice ED's use of the pronoun 'we' to signal her identification with the video strippers, though she herself is not a stripper.

ED: Quite frankly, I like the video.

ER: What you like about it?

ED: Yeah, I mean, I like it. If you wanna look at it in a sense, like, yeah, it is degrading to women. If you really think about it, but then *the women* had their little part in there too, and showed what *we* do to guys. It's just a nice video.

Her use of the pronoun *we* signals solidarity. Hip-hop ideology demands that its practitioners 'keep it real,' speak from their lived experience not an ideal from dominant discourses whether religious, Americentric, Anglocentric or Afrocentric. ED authenticates the lives of black women who strip (or act as strippers in rap videos) for a living although she is not a stripper. In hip-hop discourse this is an act of 'representin.' The concept and practice of representin is a part of the larger black discourse practice that emerged in the slavery experience and is akin to fictive kinship, wherein enslaved Africans devised a way of surviving, achieving prestige and creating a black human identity apart from dehumanized slave. Consonant with the fictive kinship ideology, black people performed in a manner that protected the humanity of the collective enslaved community. As Signithia Fordham (1996: 75) explains, 'in contexts controlled by (an) Other, it was necessary to behave as a collective Black Self while suppressing the desire to promote the individual Self.'

Hip-hop discourse values street knowledge and street entrepreneurship, which challenges the dominant ideal that claims the equality of all men and women in the so-called democratic capitalist economy. This is a pseudo-reality, conditions that do not (yet) exist. Thus, many young black women sell themselves in the rap video vixen industry, which thrives on young women looking to earn a decent wage (which is questionable) and perhaps gain an entrée into the movies or music industry, or earn a living while pursuing their American dream, by assuming usually subordinate positions in front of or under the camera appearing to embrace sexual abandon. bell hooks (1992) candidly calls this 'selling hot pussy.' In any case, ED evaluates the video highly, 'It's just a nice video' and she identifies with the video women. Her evaluation is linked to the segment in the video where the strippers signified on the rappers: 'it must be yo money cause it ain't yo face, I need a tip drill.' This type of bold, assertive, outspoken and sassy language is identified by Van Dijk et al. (1997) as the black women's discourse practice of 'smart talk.' The scholars explain that this style of language was historically developed as a result of black women's roles as laborers in the public sphere, outside of the home. In these ways, ED demonstrates her knowledge of young black women's situatedness in society.

Navigation of life in a racist society influences many African American female language practices and ways of knowing and coping. African American female literacies refer to ways of knowing and acting and the development of skills, vernacular expressive arts and crafts that help females to advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in society. African American females communicate these literacies through storytelling, conscious manipulation of silence and speech, code/style shifting, and signifying, among other verbal and non-verbal practices. African American females' language and literacy practices reflect their socialization in a racialized, genderized, and classed world in which they exploit their special social knowledge to overcome oppression and to mark their ethnicity (Hobbs, 2004; Houston, 1985; Morgan, 2002, 2005; Richardson, 2003; Scott, 2000; Troutman, 1995, 2001; Van Dijk et al., 1997; Williamson, 1990).

The deep socialization of African American females as protectors of the culture, the imperative 'to represent,' sometimes comes at the expense of black womanhood, as can be gleaned from the following extracts:

BE: . . . It's a stripper song.

ET: right.

BE: For girls who get tips. And they sayin. It's lightweight like the niggas is saying, 'we got money. We tippin.' Know what uhm sayin. But they also talkin about the girls too

BE: Yep. But I think that, I think that it's just music and know what uhm sayin, and and, I think Nelly wouldn't really approach a girl he really like like that

ER: uh hmm

ED: right.

BE: One who he thought was class, a girl who he really wanted to talk to, a girl he really wanted to talk to, he wouldn't say, 'It ain't no fun if the homies can't have none.'

ER: uhm hmm, uhm hmm.

BE uses insider jargon to evaluate the tip drill song within its genre as 'stipper song' and the rappers' performance within the discourses of racism, patriarchy, and signifyin. BE explained, 'they sayin . . . we got money. We tippin' to underscore the male rappers' position as wanting to be considered masculine by their ability to spend money. As bell hooks (1981) explains, historically the demasculinization of black men is the result of white male patriarchy and the systemic ways in which this system has kept black men from achieving equality. As black men can never achieve the level of patriarchy to the extent of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, they exert power over the private realm, including black women who as a group hover around the lower order of the societal hierarchy (Rose, 1994). Hence, black men need to flaunt their status symbols and achieve a level of masculinity through their consumption and sometimes castigation of black women – which BE acknowledges when she says 'But they also talking about the girls too'

Even still, BE represents for the brothas – authenticates their lives and social situatedness – when she argues that if Nelly 'really wanted to talk to, a girl . . .' he wouldn't say, 'It ain't no fun if the homies can't have none.' Protecting the

image of black people is such a deeply held value that BE does not consider the sexist and classist implications of her statement. The rappers' castigation of strippers is fine, since such women do not deserve the same respect as black women of class, in BE's sense-making schema.

Be that as it may, in another instance BE seeks to shift the balance of power, to attribute agency to the same women considered sexual outlaws, by deconstructing gendered conceptions of group sex. The common thinking is that women who participate in group sex with men, especially same-gender sex with other women, do so to give men pleasure.

ET: Well, a lot of the lyrics in the song is degrading to women. For instance, it said 'It must be yo ass cause it ain't yo face.' He said, 'It ain't no fun unless we all get some.' You know what uhm saying, so. Basically, meaning we gone run a train on you.

BE: But that's not degrading if the girls is wit it. It's some girls who wit dat. I don't think it's degrading. It's girls who is like that and they down for the git down, just how the boys is. Know what uhm saying. I don't. I don't know.

BE uses a conditional statement '. . . if the girls is wit it' to ratify girls' participation in 'trains' (group sex). In other words, to participate in group sex of one's own will is not degradation. The operative terms that determine how the social practices should be evaluated for BE are 'girls is wit it,' 'girls who wit dat,' 'girls who is like that,' and '[girls who] down for the git down, just how the boys is.' All of these utterances privilege the agency and subjectivity of the girls, their right to embrace, engage, or reposition themselves in activities that are commonly thought of as male-identified. BE constructs women as free agents. She does not accept that the women are passive victims of males' sex drives. She sees them in the tradition of 'Bad Sistas.' In this tradition, as Morgan (2005) explains, black women performers may use explicit language, be both sexual and non-sexual, defiant and compliant. They exploit the power of their sexuality. In the words of female rapper Medusa, their 'pussy gangsta.' The conflicting language represented in the girls' discourse is influenced by their knowledge that the young black women in the video are devalued, by virtue of the haunting controlling stereotypes imputed to all black females since slavery. In any case, they continue to participate in hip-hop, even that which is deemed offensive. Morgan (2005) sheds light on this participation. She explains that though women performers and participants protest about certain sexist lyrics or performances, they still dance to some of the same songs. 'They use their skills and constantly embody and reframe feminist identity. They do so within a move to incorporate the range of emotions that they encounter within hip-hop' (p. 433). However agency and woman-centered BE's claim may seem, the position she takes is a dangerous one for a group of people who have had the stereotypical image of sexual savage foisted onto them for centuries and which is now disseminated globally.

Some studies dealing with the topic of young black women and rap music culture have suggested that women empower themselves through their interpretation of the performances. Celious (2002) found that black adolescent

females interpreted, for example, controversial lyrics sung by black female rappers as positive, but negatively evaluated such lyrics if they were performed by black males. Pough (2004) demonstrated how black women hiphoppas insert their perspectives into public spheres, 'bringing wreck' or revising, redefining, or otherwise resituating certain commonly held beliefs, in ways that present their own lived realities from their socially situated roles in the world. Perry (2004) discusses the phenomenon of female violence in rap music and offers that one way to read female's voicing of violence is as imagined nation-building, wherein black women hiphop participants 'protect the hood from the white capitalist interlopers, the sellouts, and the culture thieves' (p. 162).

In the next extract, the girls strive to reinterpret traditional gender roles. Traditionally, women sex workers trade their services for submission to the man and his every fantasy. Note how the girls centralize the video-workers' performance as they discuss a scene from the video:

BE: Look how she act like she havin sex with her.

ED: Like she hittin it from the back.

ET: Yeah.

BE: Them the girls that be getting more tips. Guys like that kinda stuff. Look at her. She ri: din. (Using tonal inflection and vowel elongation to underscore and emphasize the intensity of the sexual motion being portrayed, represented by the word 'ridin'. The colon marks elongation)

ED: She look like she *foreal*. (stress on real, indicated by italics)

BE: That's why I think she got paid though. She ri: din. (Tonal emphasis) Yeah, the whole video, she was workin like *foreal*. (stress on real)

The discourses of femininity, patriarchy, and hiphop feminism are drawn upon to evaluate the performance. The discourse of femininity represents naturalized rules for being a woman which include ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. This hegemonic representation of a feminine woman would not 'act like she havin sex' with another woman, as depicted by the video strippers. Not only is this out of bounds, but as ED's statement indicates a woman havin sex with another woman 'Like she hittin it from the back' is physically impossible. However, the video strippers' performance violates this social practice discursively. In this way, they subvert the established order from mere sex objects to sexual objectifiers, putting themselves on par with males as sources of pleasure for themselves and other women, while making the men pay them for it, as BE observes: 'Them the girls that be getting more tips. Guys like that kinda stuff.' This statement references patriarchal discourse as the underlying assumption is that the women's performance serves men's pleasure and that the women are rewarded by men for it. The traditional discourses of femininity and patriarchy would see this form of work as degraded and immoral as Hill Collins' (1991) discussion of controlling images informs us. These video workers would be seen as descendents of Jezebel, the bad black female who is promiscuous, the embodiment of lust, using their sexually alluring nature and lewdness to entrap men, not possessing the ability to be sexually exhausted, chaste or truthful. However, the girls see the video workers as subverting the

male rappers' power. The video worker is just that, a worker. She is good at her game, 'workin like foreal.'

The girls also see the video women's sexual performance as empowering, as it reflects a hip-hop feminism. BE's repeated 'she ri:din' and her notice of the diligence of the video women as workers: she was workin like foreal indexes this reality. In today's world, Joan Morgan (1999: 59) has argued that we need a feminism with a hip-hop sensibility 'brave enough to fuck with the grays,' a feminism that 'Acknowledges the benefits of objectified female sexuality, male chauvinism, and patriarchy.' In this view, women have the right to express their sexuality in both homo- and heteroerotic ways, both linguistically, rhetorically, lyrically and physically, to display their bodies as they want, in the dance hall, the club, or wherever they deem appropriate, that they have a right to be dance hall queens, video models, strippers, go-go girls, and variously labeled sex workers. Some variation of this argument is put forth by Joan Morgan, Imani Perry, Gwendolyn Pough (in Afro-American studies) and Carolyn Cooper (2004), Kezia Page, Imani Tafari (2003), and Tracey Skelton (1995) (in Afro-Caribbean studies). Though scholars such as Donna Hope agree, she would add that woman's power ultimately feeds into 'male sexual fantasies' and women as 'sexual objects.' As Donna Hope (2006: 75) explains:

[The] displays cannot be classified as either female–female reinforcement or as female idolation in isolation. On the contrary, they are primarily direct female–male engagement and these women broker some level of advancement in their own self-empowerment as a kind of residual benefit, almost by default.

The flip side of 'representin' or fictive kinship is that outsiders to the culture judge all of us by one of us. The final example manifests the struggle between black representations and their interpretations in dominant discourse.

ER: Do you think that uhm, uhm, like people who watch these videos that maybe don't know any, don't have any black friends, do you think that that makes them think that this is how black people act?

ET: To some extent yes, to some extent no.

BE: I think so.

ER: You do?

BE: I think that, people think that black women don't have respect for they self as much as other women do.

ER: Really?

BE: I mean if you just look at the way we're portrayed on TV. Either (3 second pause). Know what uhm saying. We poor. Ah mean it ain't nothin wrong wit being poor but Ahm just sayin, either we po:or, or we got fi-hunned (500) kids.

ET: yep. Kids. (Tonal agreement from both – overlap on [kI:dz])

BE: No baby father. Our baby father in jail. We strippin. We naked on TV.

ET: uhm hmm.

BE: Or we dancin. It's never like . . . I don't know.

ED: They never portray anything good. Just like, on the way comin up to State College we saw a billboard. And the billboard was talkin about don't, basically sayin not to drop out of school.

BE: It said, Break the cycle.

- ED: Yeah, It said break the cycle, don't drop outa school. But then it was talkin bout being pregnant. And then they had a big black girl. I never see black people on billboards, but for this one, I saw a black girl on the billboard.
- ER: Uhm . . . You gotta be kiddin. Sto: p.
- BE: I could see if this was a community, where they was catering to the black people, like for us, in our community, That's a message. Cause really, yeah you need to break the cycle. Really.
- ED: right. Exactly.
- ER: right, right, right. This a white community.
- BE: But this a white community. You see a black person up there. What that mean?
- ED: Every time they go pass the billboard, the only thing they gone think, yeah those black people they only have
- BE: [a eighth grade education and have 18 babies. Yep, But I think that, I think that it's just music and know what uhm sayin, and and, I think Nelly wouldn't really approach a girl he really like like that
- ER: uh hmm
- ED: right.
- BE: One who he thought was class, a girl who he really wanted to talk to, a girl he really wanted to talk to, he wouldn't say, 'It ain't no fun if the homies can't have none.'
- ER: uhm hmm, uhm hmm.
- BE: Certain girls, niggas know they can do that wit.
- ET: Certain girls is jump offs, and certain girls is wifeyz

The question that I asked the girls focused them on the domain of commonly held naturalized beliefs about black people. In other words, one need not know a black person to have societal knowledge about blacks as a group. As Van Dijk (1993) explains, in order to function effectively in a society, all groups have social cognitive mental structures and processes that aid in their interpretations, inferences, categorization, comparisons, and evaluations of social affairs. The question I asked is, 'Do you think that uhm, uhm, like people who watch these videos that maybe don't know any, don't have any black friends, do you think that that makes them think that this is how black people act?' ET's response 'To some extent yes, to some extent no' indicates that non-blacks hold certain stereotypical beliefs about blacks whether or not they watch such videos. BE's 'I think so' signals her opinion that watching black performances such as those embodied in videos contributes to commonly held beliefs about black people. However, her next statement does not emphasize the role of black popular culture performances, as much as it indexes commonly held beliefs. BE states: 'I think that, people think that black women don't have respect for they self as much as other women do.' My 'Really?' is a request for elaboration. BE substantiates her assertion by connecting disrespect for black women to specific social practices: '. . . the way we're portrayed on TV,' 'we poor,' repeated to accent connection of poverty to blackness, 'we po:or' [tonal emphasis and elongation on vowels to stress this point] and 'we got fihunned (500) kids,' spoken with a southern drawl. As southern dialects of English have long been associated with dim-wittedness, this usage of language shows BE's connection of blackness with this character trait.

This section of the girls' discussion illuminates their awareness of how black people have been constructed and positioned in society. Black social representations themselves are not at fault. They simply justify or represent the wider society's conceptual background, stored knowledge, and understandings of what it means to be black, those stereotypes that have been naturalized and standardized as authentic interpretations and representations. BE's use of AAL zero copula in 'we po:or' collapses the subject (we) with the adjective (poor) to emphasize the point that black people are the personification of poverty in the dominant society's mental image of black people. ED continues to use exaggerated language to point up the ridiculousness of the stereotypes that are unfairly foisted onto black women: 'we got fihunned kids.' Underlying these hegemonic representations is the belief that black women are abnormally sexual and fertile and that we have babies to obtain additional funds from Aid to Dependent Children or some unsuspecting benefactor. The conversation becomes communal here. Though BE dominates the floor, her sentiments represent shared background knowledge and understandings on behalf of the other black women in the conversation, as evinced by the call-response and overlap in speech on the vocalization of the word [kIdz] and head nodding. There are certain images that are staples of mass media. BE continues: 'No baby father. Our baby father in jail. We strippin. We naked on TV.' ET chimes in with an affirmative 'uhm hmm.' BE adds another stereotype to the chain 'we dancin.' In all of these constructions BE's language does not attribute causality to these predicaments. Underlying these constructions is the presupposition of dominant discourse that black people lack education, morality, and values that would elevate their condition.

The conversation is woven together seamlessly as ED develops the argument further by offering a recent experience as an example of black representations in white space. ED introduces into this narrative the billboard in a white community exploiting a 'big black girl' as the symbol of irresponsible childbirth. ED: 'Yeah, It said break the cycle, don't drop outa school. But then it was talkin bout being pregnant. And then they had a big black girl.' My own insertion into the conversation 'Uhm . . . [using African American rising falsetto tone] You gotta be kiddin. Sto:p' is ironic as I know ED is not kiddin and my elongated open o in 'stooooop' has the affect of encouraging her to continue. We are in total call-response mode. I want her to continue revealing the interlocutors' special knowledge, to continue reading the world, as it were. As ED takes a breath, BE continues: 'I could see if this was a community, where they was catering to the black people, like for us, in our community, That's a message. Cause really, yeah you need to break the cycle. Really. . . . But this a white community. You see a black person up there. What that mean? . . . ' BE's question is definitely rhetorical because we all know full well what it means. The young women see the billboard as spreading and recycling stereotypes to a remote white community – people who don't have meaningful contact with black people – who will perhaps only get to know black people through white supremacist social constructions of blackness and popular media such as music videos. I should also note that ED's response 'yeah those black people they only have . . .'

is given in a stereotypical nasally 'whitey voice' (Alim, 2004) to mark it as an outsider's generalized, decontextualized and abstracted view of black people. On the billboard in a predominantly white community the image of the black pregnant adolescent mother represents worthlessness, a strain on the economy, an unproductive body. This is in contrast to the women portrayed in the video and in the strip club, both entities of the capitalist state. These women are not represented as homemakers or mothers; they are breadwinners, which transforms their worth as women or laborers. The only thing they breed is cash, at least as represented in the technology. But these women, at least potentially, are also homemakers and mothers, trying to make a life and a living in a market-driven society. After all, the occupation of stripping or even video model is a dead-end job. It is a youth-oriented job where age is devalued, and thus a short-term occupation. ED, BE, and ET enact black discourse that reflects and resists black knowledge of the social world. In other words, the girls contest these stereotypes of black life, revealing these stereotypes as mere profitable constructed commodities, not authentic black cultural constructions. At the same time though they succumb to these stereotypes as is evident in BE's and ET's statements:

BE: Certain girls, niggas know they can do that wit.

ET: Certain girls is jump offs, and certain girls is wifeys

A 'jump off' is a female [or male] who is considered to be promiscuous. A wifey usually refers to a man's main woman (potentially) or his actual wife. She is defined in opposition to a promiscuous female. A study on sexuality conducted by Motivational Educational Entertainment (MEE) reported on by Thulani Davis (2004) found similar anti-black female attitudes. Researchers found 15 negative terms used for black women. Davis quotes one of the study's scholars, Beth Richie as saying, 'Young people today in lower-income black communities are facing a . . . whole set of stereotypical images of themselves – hypersexual, sexually irresponsible, not concerned with ongoing intimate relationships. [They] can't help but be influenced by those images' (Davis, 2004). I would add that these stereotypes hover over all segments of the black community, not just low-income blacks, as shown in my 'rap session' discussion with BE, ED, and ET who are all middle-class. I concede, however, that lower income blacks may be more susceptible to these stereotypes.

Discussion

What is immediately apparent from the conversation under discussion is black women's engagement with contradictory ideologies that stem from our various social experiences and histories. As everyday Americans we have been socialized into traditional gender, race, and class ideologies. As American women, we must convey our support of conservative sexual personas for the sake of being seen as moral, honest, and heterosexual. As African American women, we are heirs to a history of being the targets of sexual immorality through our ancestors' exploitation as breeders, their rape, and their being prostituted by slavers.

Drawing on the work of Genovese, bell hooks (1981) explains that black or white men could not be convicted of the rape of black women during slavery by virtue of the fact that there was no such thing. Only white women could be raped. As such, black institutions, for example, the traditional black churches and women's clubs promoted a code of respectability for black women as a form of racial uplift. Further, the rhetorical functions of non-revealing styles of dress and sparse or no wearing of make-up were emphasized in black communities and schools. Fast forward to contemporary popular culture which promotes exposed sexy abs, body piercings (including lip, tongue, and belly), tattoos, (surgically) augmented breasts, etc. The common admonishment of black elders to young women is – 'That sends the wrong message' referring to any of the aforementioned styles and their ability to identify a black woman as immoral.

In order to shift the power relations, the girls sought to redefine traditional sexual and gender performances. They focused on the agency of the video girls and the male rappers. This is apparent in ED's remark about the video girls' chant that flips the script (semantically inverts) the meaning of the male rappers' chorus. The video girls' chant, 'it must be yo money cause it ain't yo face, I need a tip drill' equates the male rappers' worth to their ability to spend, just as the male rappers valued the strippers for their sex work. However, the girls acknowledge the hard work that stripping is and the video girls' semantic inversion of gender and sex roles with their simulated sex acts, how they carried out sexual positions or motions that are thought to be male dominant. Further, the girls also acknowledge that the male rappers would not really invite their friends or 'run a train on' a girl that they really liked. Additionally, as BE explained, 'they sayin . . . we got money. We tippin' to underscore the male rappers' position as wanting to be considered masculine by their ability to spend money. As mentioned previously, bell hooks (1981) explained that historically the demasculinization of black men is the result of white male patriarchy and the systemic ways in which this system has kept black men from fulfilling their roles. The girls acknowledge this when they (in communal mode, including call-response and talking together) discuss the black plight: 'We poor,' 'No baby father. Our baby father in jail.'

Throughout the conversation the interlocutors struggle to overcome the dominant discursive sphere, but as black discourse is inextricably bound to dominant discourse it is inherently multi-referential forcing speakers to work hard to prioritize certain meanings over stereotypical ones. This is seen in speakers' self-repair, hesitations and restatements – of what is a 'tip drill' – for example. Black women's language and discourse practices such as smart talk (on the part of the video girls), tonal semantics [she ri:din, she look like she *foreal*, she was workin like *foreal*] and representin (on the part of interlocutors) [and on the part of the video girls' visual semantics of simulated male identified sex acts] indicate a hip-hop feminist discourse, drawn upon to confront patri-archal and sexist domination. Further, the interlocutors use AAL and practices such as the 'whitey voice' (Alin, 2004) to mark their identities and worldviews apart from dominant discourse. The girls demonstrated their special knowledge, using

their discourse to critique and identify the social situatedness of black youth. In these ways the girls demonstrated their critical literacy.

Other instances of language use, however, distance black women from tip drills (or women who do sexual labor) and evince no contextualization features. For example, when the girls agree that 'some women are and some women ain't [tip drills].' This gestures toward positivist dominant discourse practices which would downplay the social situatedness of people's life choices and circumstances, hence assigning a lesser value to their humanity.

Conclusion

The discourse and literacy practices of the women in this study reveal a persistent struggle to overcome Anglo-American gender ideologies, which present hegemonic conceptions of manhood and womanhood. Their meaning making resources strove to confront hegemonic ideologies which control definitions of who is and is not a real woman. Hill-Collins (2004: 193) explains:

All women engage an ideology that deems middle-class, heterosexual, White femininity as normative. In this context, Black femininity as a subordinated gender identity becomes constructed not just in relation to White women, but also in relation to multiple others, namely, all men, sexual outlaws (prostitutes and lesbians), unmarried women, and girls. These benchmarks construct a discourse of a hegemonic (White) femininity that becomes a normative yardstick for all femininities in which Black women typically are relegated to the bottom of the gender hierarchy.

Needless to say, these hegemonic gender ideologies work in tandem with economic, political, and social structures to maintain societal order and control how people view and conduct themselves. These dominating and oppressive discourses are nearly impossible to avoid and manifest themselves in many ways. In engaging with them and simultaneously struggling to avoid them, black youth develop codes of conduct, beliefs and practices, self-presentation and language styles.

Youth are aware of the dominating forces but do not possess the level of critical tools necessary to escape internal victim blaming for their predicament. Their awareness of these forces is an aspect of their black consciousness, their street consciousness, and their hiphop literacies. Such knowledge acknowledges marginalized lives in certain lifeworld domains that are overlooked or devalued by the dominant society. Elites cloak their role in the production of un-insulated street life or so-called less respectable occupations by promoting dominant discourses that profess, among other values, hard work, self-reliance, sacrifice, so-called middle-class values, while maintaining unequal distribution of social goods. We are taught to eschew many occupations such as prostitution, pornography, stripping, and even certain branches of law, medicine, academia, and certain sports. However, for professions such as prostitution, pornography, or stripping we are not encouraged to focus on critiquing the society that produces them. Studies of discourse, power, and knowledge

demonstrate that through official institutions such as schools and the media, elites disseminate certain scripts, which create inequality, and value people differently based on white patriarchal market values. These perceptions are continuously reinforced making the reproduction of unequal society seem natural, when in fact unjust social relations are constructed and continuously reinscribed and re-enacted daily through various social practices which are detrimental to the development of just and equal community (Van Dijk, 1993).

As we have seen, the young women in this study are able to 'read the word in relation to the world' in the words of Paulo Freire or as put by Sojourner Truth they are able to 'read men and nations' in some cases, such as the girls' reading of the billboard against the backdrop of a white community and in tandem with their reading of the performances of gendered sexual labor of the women in the videos. Their astute readings of the world are based on their racial, gender, and other social identities and experiences. However, our youth get mixed messages from most of society's media about their racial, sexual, and gender identities. Our critical pedagogies must guide them beyond challenging to changing of systems that tolerate inequality, sexism, and racism. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) rightly note, change is mostly a subtle process. 'It is by virtue of the accumulation of . . . performances that [social] order is maintained, and it is by virtue of small changes in these performances that the [social] order can be restructured' (p. 55). As educators, adults, parents, community activists, and caring human beings we must look deeply into the everyday lives and language of our youth. Doing so may be a first step in facilitating societal change.

NOTE

1. The attendant common sense understandings of ho that are relevant here are: women who enjoy exchanging sexual favors for social goods; women who simply enjoy sex and can't get enough, no exchange of gifts involved.

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