“CHECK ON IT”

Beyoncé, Southern booty, and Black femininities in music video

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Beyoncé Knowles is a hip hop icon. She is known more for her voluptuous body than her body of work that crisscrosses multiple culture industries. Unlike her hip hop contemporaries, Beyoncé successfully performs a range of Black femininities, speaking at once to Black working and middle class sensibilities while fulfilling her dynamic roles as both a hip hop belle and a US exotic other globally. The music video emerges as the celebrity-making medium by which the form and function of the spectacular Black female body is rearticulated. It is the medium that thrusts Beyoncé from a girl group member to a supreme solo Diana Ross-like diva. By interrogating her performances of Black femininity that operate in her Hype Williams directed and MTV award winning video, Check On It, this essay explores the ways her Southern hip hop booty shapes how her iconic body is understood in contemporary popular culture.

KEYWORDS Beyoncé Knowles; music video; femininity; hip hop; gender stereotypes; iconicity

Introduction

Beyoncé is a hip hop icon. From her signature booty dance (Shane Watson 2004, p. 22), the Single Ladies (2009) sensation that spawned television spoofs and viral videos, to her May–December romance with rapper Jay-Z, entertainment news concerning the diva proliferates the cultural circuit. She is dynamic. During one show, Beyoncé as Sasha Fierce can don a dominatrix costume complete with thigh-high patent-leather boots and matching black briefs to recreate the almost X-rated Sharon Stone leg-crossing interrogation scene from Basic Instinct (Paul Verhoeven 1992), and a commercial break later accept an MTV music video award wearing a white evening gown without pause or a stain to her wholesome image as the Southern belle of hip hop culture. Beyoncé’s shifting on-stage identity framed through the lens of region, race, class, and sexuality elucidates the types of performances that are rewarded in the popular. This essay etches her performances of Black femininity—and by extension, Black female sexuality—that operate in her Hype Williams directed and MTV music award winning video, Check On It (2005). By exploring the production of Black femininities in the music video as well as the production of Beyoncé as a celebrity through the MTV machine, I describe the ways hegemonic discourses of the South—informed by notions of class—shape how racialized sexuality can be understood in the music video, and
how the articulation of class serves as both economic and symbolic markers of Black femininity that define her iconic image in contemporary popular culture.

Say My Name: Beyoncé as a Key Figure for Contemporary Feminist Media Studies

Beyoncé is a key figure for contemporary feminist media studies because she represents the production of celebrity, gender politics presently defined by hip hop, and the complex negotiations of self image and sexuality for young women coming of age during postfeminism. As a brand, Beyoncé can boast lead vocalist for a best-selling female group as well as the celebrity face for L’Oreal, Pepsi, Tommy Hilfiger, and owner of her Heat fragrance and couture fashion line, House of Deroé. The Houston native, who once practiced her stage presence at local beauty pageants and her mother’s beauty salon (Kierna Mayo 2003), has a Mattel Barbie grafted in her likeness and look-a-like starlets—Rihanna and Ciara—that fashion their music careers after the former Destiny’s Child. The MTV musical Carmen: A Hip Hopera (2001) and Obsessed (Steve Shill 2009) showcased the singer’s acting talent; Beyoncé’s cinematic crossover, however, came by playing a blaxploitation caricature, Foxy Cleopatra, and songstress, Xania, opposite White male leads in internationally successful films, Austin Powers in Goldmember (2002) and The Pink Panther (2006), respectively. To date, she is one of the highest paid African American actresses, commanding $12.5 million for her Golden Globe-nominated role as the Diana Ross prototype, Deana Jones, in the Broadway-turned-movie musical Dreamgirls (Hindustan Times 2006). Yet, it is not merely the blockbuster movies, the award-winning music or the rumor mill that make Beyoncé amass so much cultural currency; it is also her iconic body, which is imbued with notions of class, femininity, and sexuality.

With so much said in the entertainment media about Beyoncé’s mass appeal, there remains virtual silence in the academy concerning her cultural significance for women and girls today. Similar hip hop personalites, such as Queen Latifah, have been taken up in feminist studies (Gwendolyn D. Pough 2004; Gwendolyn D. Pough, Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham & Rachel Raimist 2007), queer studies (Judith Halberstam 1998; Kara Keeling 2003), television and cinema studies (Kristal B. Zook 1999), and ethnomusicology (Cheryl Keyes 2004). And while the mainstream success of this womanist emcee cannot be understated, Beyoncé is perhaps more relevant for girls and young women who have grown up alongside the teen queen turned video siren on screen from the mid-1990s. A modern day Marilyn Monroe, Beyoncé’s celebration of her voluptuous figure has incrementally transformed beauty industries that unapologetically favored the wasp-like waif bodies that feminist scholar Susan Bordo ([1993] 2004) describes. The inclusion of so-called curvy “sex” mannequins in major US department stores is one example (Maureen Jenkins 2005). Beyoncé redefines ideal beauty—through language, with The Oxford English Dictionary term “bootylicious” that she made popular in a song, and through practice with the five-fold increase in butt augmentations in a year by clients specifically requesting Beyoncé or Jennifer Lopez-like bottoms in the US and UK (Jacqui Goddard & Nicolas Davidson 2004, p. 3). Bodies like Lopez, Latifah, and Beyoncé prompted the commercial marketing of “real women with curves” in film and in fashion, which has influenced policy changes for runway models who must meet a healthy weight according to the Body Mass Index (BMI) (see Fran Yeoman, Carolyn Asome & Graham Keeley 2006, p. 3). In this moment, a particular brand of whiteness is disrupted. Both ideal beauty and sexual desirability are mapped onto the
curvaceous, ethnically marked female body. These shifts in culture alone warrant further exploration of icons such as Beyoncé in contemporary gender scholarship.

The proliferation of body studies in feminist communication research has not theorized thoroughly the centrality of Black female iconicity or the influence of the mediated Black female body with non-Black audiences, especially since the integration of hip hop on a global stage. Decades of comparative research routinely report Black girls with a healthier body image than their White counterparts as a result of within-group appreciation for a range of body types and the relative exclusion of Black females from mainstream media (see e.g., Kamille A. Gentles & Kristen Harrison 2006; Kristen Harrison 2003). The media buffer no longer exists, nor does relative racial isolation due to the suburbanization of the Black middle class and the push for multicultural representations in mainstream media. Black females are susceptible to similar media messages about sexual desirability and ideal beauty. A recent study correlating media exposure to body disturbance suggests Black and White women have become more dissatisfied with their lower torso with increased television viewing (Thomas F. Cash, Jennifer A. Morrow, Joshua I. Hrabosky & April A. Perry 2004). Harrison (2003) recommends redefining body image in terms of body parts (e.g., buttocks, breasts) to better assess Black girls’ attitudes toward the thin beauty ideal; it is possible that Black girls negotiate beauty standards by rejecting waif bodies but accept the thin waist and curvaceous bottom, which is a different kind of unattainable beauty nonetheless. Still, the emphasis on the backside within mainstream popular culture has not received this much attention since the likes of Josephine Baker during the jazz era. Hip hop has rearticulated this body type, which is made commonsense through Beyoncé’s iconic body.

Sensational media coverage concerning the booty of Jennifer Lopez precedes Beyoncé. Mary Beltrán (2002), Isabel Molina-Guzmán (2010) and Frances Negrón-Muntaner (2004) place the Puerto Rican superstar within the African diaspora to suggest the Latinidad that Lopez performs mediates the Black–White binary because her booty works to anchor her African ancestry while other physical markers closely aligned with whiteness (e.g., complexion) convey a normative beauty that elides blackness. Non-Black personalities, such as Julia Stiles, Cameron Diaz, and Gwen Stefani, are celebrated because they perfect a dance without carrying the racially marked body part and the racial discourse about untamed sexuality that accompanies it. Melissa Campbell (2004) contends that White women express their sexuality through booty dances associated with Black women in rap music videos. She cautions feminist scholars about equating these dances with sexual freedom, considering freedom for one can be a form of containment for another. Through performance, Beyoncé calls attention to intersecting discourses of racialized sexuality and gender, and she highlights the particular constraints that exist for Black girls and women who also want to express their sexuality in a society where Black bodies are always already marked as deviant. In the following section, I turn to music video production and its role in shaping how audiences engage with Beyoncé and other Black female bodies during the emergence of hip hop.

**Dreamworlds and Dreamgirls: MTV, Hip Hop and Virtual Black Female Bodies**

MTV is a celebrity machine, manufacturing new icons of cool through sonically stimulating and provocative visual imagery stylized in music videos (Simon Frith, Andrew
Goodwin & Lawrence Grossberg 1993; Carol Vernallis 2004). MTV did not invent the music video format, but its debut on cable television in test cities such as Beyoncé’s Houston hometown in 1981 (Lisa A. Lewis 1993, p. 130) did institute the music video performance as a viable commercial media genre for record industries to promote both established and lesser-known artist albums to a youth audience with disposable income during a decade defined by US excess. The MTV music video performance is distinct from those featured as early film shorts starring Black musicians, such as Bessie Smith, Billie Holliday, Cab Calloway, and Duke Ellington in the 1930s (Steve Reiss & Neil Feineman 2000, p. 13), or those showcased on variety shows, such as American Band Stand (1957–1987)—both precursors to the contemporary music video (see Jack Banks 1997, p. 294). For one, it is a repeated performance that increasingly mirrors radio airplay due to media synergy. The form and content of the music video—fashioned as performance and seduction—is layered to encourage multiple viewing as well. Once likened to the postmodernism of Andy Warhol, the MTV music video has transformed the way audiences watch television and listen to music, emphasizing “the look” of the performance as important as the message the performer conveys within the television medium (Patricia Aufderheide 1986). Today it is unimaginable for an artist such as Beyoncé to achieve mass appeal without the distribution of the MTV music video. MTV, then, functions as a formidable culture industry to produce stars and to disseminate the MTV version of cool to the teenage and young adult viewing audience (see e.g., Stacy L. Smith 2005, pp. 89–90). In these ways, the MTV music video has been instrumental not only in the creation of Beyoncé’s celebrity but also in shaping Black representations on the television network.

During the filming of Dreamgirls (2006), Beyoncé teamed up with famed hip hop videographer Hype Williams to create what Sut Jhally (1995) describes as a dreamworld. For Jhally, music television is a dreamworld that depicts a straight male fantasy where specific film techniques, narrative cues, and regimes of representation frame women as interchangeable, accessible, and available sex objects. The hip hop dreamworld that Williams produces for Beyoncé and others is adapted from rock music video conventions with a notable exception: the backwards gaze. This gaze frames the backside as an erogenous zone of racial difference complementing the breast as a signifier of gender difference for Black women (Aisha Durham & Jillian Baez 2007). Epitomized by the nineteenth-century iconography of the Khoisan performer Saartjie Baartman, dubbed the Hottentot Venus, the buttocks of African women have come to represent exotic beauty and primitive sexuality in the Western imaginary since slavery (see Patricia Hill Collins 2004). The backwards gaze of the insatiable Black woman reworks an old racial fantasy of miscegenation, which is made commonsense in the hip hop dreamworld, and is legitimated and given value through organized capital in culture industries, such as MTV.

The backwards gaze is a pornographic one. The profitable marriage between the hip hop and the adult video industries launched the porn career of Florida rapper Luther Campbell of 2 Live Crew. In the 1990s, 2 Live Crew provided the porn chic or the popular porn blueprint for the emergent lyrical and visual content in rap music videos where regional representations of the booty and the accompanying bass-heavy “booty” music eclipsed other aesthetic forms of hip hop for audiences tuned into MTV programming, such as Yo! MTV Raps (1988–1995). By 2001, Snoop Dogg had produced an award-winning adult film fashioned as a music video (Doggystyle). The Tip Drill music video that aired on the now defunct BET Uncut in 2003 provides an important flashpoint to illustrate the convergence of the backwards gaze with familiar tropes from pornography. After striptease and water
wrestling scenes, the camera zooms to a man sliding a credit card down the bare buttocks of a woman depicted as a tip drill, a derogatory reference to a woman whose social value and sexual desirability derives from her booty only. Despite successful feminist campaigns that pressured BET to remove the video and the late night program, Viacom promoted profitable porn chic imagery on its partner networks, such as VH1’s reality series *Flavor of Love* (2006–2008) and *For the Love of Ray J* (2009–2010). From Luther Campbell to Nelly’s *Tip Drill*, the hip hop music video formula highlighting hypermasculinity through the accumulation of wealth and sexually available women traverses mediascapes, and the hip hop dreamworld is the virtual fantasy that permeates the sex-saturated popular today.

Hip hop feminist studies examines gender representations in the hip hop dreamworld. Both Mako Fitts (2008) and Imani Perry (2004), for example, address the uneven production of music videos in which the gendered and sexual labor of women services male rappers and male-owned corporations that provide little agency and economic mobility for the majority of female cultural workers. Perry and Fitts extend more than two decades of MTV scholarship (see e.g., Julie Andsager & Kimberly Roe 2003; E. Ann Kaplan 1988). Adapted from television studies, much of the literature on music videos examines the attitudinal or behavioral changes by youth that are exposed to sexual or violent visual and lyrical music video content over time (Terri M. Adams & B. Douglas Fuller 2006; Debashis Aikat 2004). The public concern regarding *Tip Drill* is an often-cited example. This research suggests increased exposure to violent and sexual content adversely affects young people by creating damaging sexual beliefs (Stephen R. Wester, Cynthia L. Crown, Gerald L. Quatman & Martin Heesacker 1997), sexual scripts (Dionne P. Stephens & Layli D. Phillips 2003), race and gender stereotypes (Jane D. Brown & Kenneth Campbell 1986; Su-lin Gan, Dolf Zillmann & Michael Mitrook 1997; L. Monique Ward, Edwina Hansbrough & Eboni Walker 2005), and sexual aggression (Christy Barongan & Gordon C. Nagay Hall 1995).

Perry and Fitts contribute specifically to hip hop feminist media studies, which explores cultural production, stereotypes, and the limitations and possibilities of a feminist project within hip hop. For example, Maria L. Shelton (1997) suggests rapper Yo-Yo subverted the news image of the welfare mother, while Robin Roberts (1991) recounts how Salt and Pepa’s music videos are feminist because they express sexual desire and refuse to allow men to presume control of their bodies. Other than Queen Latifah, Lil Kim has been the most researched hip hop body in music video scholarship. Her expression of sexual desire and power, Perry suggests, is granted from male desire that might not be feminist at all (2004, pp. 181 – 183). Acknowledging the highly sexualized image of Lil Kim and Destiny’s Child, Rana A. Emerson (2002) argues that it is possible to describe simultaneous hegemonic and counterhegemonic performances that reify the so-called hypersexuality of the Black female body at the same time creating ruptures in the way that Black sexuality is represented in the popular. Emerson (2002) calls attention to the both—and performances of Black womanhood. Beyoncé and Destiny’s Child emerged during this period of negotiation and used their music videos to construct a complex version of femininity that is in conversation with contemporary Black female stereotypes in hip hop, such as the respectable, race-loyal queen and the promiscuous, classless ho.

Since the confessions of fugitive Harriet A. Jacobs ([1861] 1973), who recounted her performance of femininity to safeguard against probable sexual assault under chattel slavery, Black women have theorized the ways in which femininity and its attendant categories, beauty and class, police mobility. An overwhelming body of Black feminist thought from Jacobs onward engages with the construction of femininity—not merely to
describe the Black cultural practices that imitate whiteness, but to explore how these performances function as survival skills for members of an economically vulnerable racial group who face systematic sexual exploitation. Historically, Black women have deployed middle class femininity as a political strategy to gain visibility in the public sphere surrounding reproduction and labor, and citizenship (see Lauren Berlant 1997, pp. 221–246). Here, I recall news footage of pressed-haired Black females wearing their “Sunday’s best” being hauled to paddy wagons, attacked by dogs, or pummeled by police clubs during Civil Rights demonstrations. The look of ladyhood called attention to the mistreatment of “respectable” Black females by the patriarchal state. The very performance of middle class femininity, then, can be seen as an attempt by Black women to obtain rights, protections, and/or privileges reserved for White ladies under chattel slavery and Jim Crow, and later new racism.

For the post-civil rights or hip hop generation, the performances of Black femininity and class warrant special attention. The construction of Black women as a collective, constitutive group with a shared racial history is less useful when attempting to delineate within-group distinctions, such as class which legitimizes Black middle class taste (read: having class) and ethos about sexuality (read: respectability). Drawing from Evelyn Higginbotham and E. Francis White, Lisa B. Thompson suggests the performance of respectable Black womanhood hinges on the “aggressive shielding of the body; concealing sexuality; and foregrounding morality, intelligence, and civility as a way to counter negative stereotypes” (2009, p. 2). She adds behavior, language and dress are the ways respectability is presented in the public sphere (pp. 2–3). I mention respectability as middle class for two reasons: notions of respectability, articulated by the Black women’s club movement, continue to be directed to working class Black women as a way to police a sexuality characterized as “loose” or out of control (see Hazel V. Carby 1992). I also point to respectability to recall the culture of silence surrounding Black female sexuality. Similar rhetoric about respectability has been deployed to address the sexual commodification of Black women in hip hop music videos (Shanara R. Reid-Brinkley 2007). Black women within hip hop culture do contest symbolic silence by expressing sexual desire similar to blues women (Angela Y. Davis 1998). Jason D. Haugen (2003) describes this expression by working class Black women within hip hop as a production of the un-ladylike diva—a woman who commands the respect of a lady, but is not bound by the middle class sexual mores that Thompson (2009) describes. The self-representation of Black female artists and the sexualized imagery of the hypervisible “video ho” in music production is an important cultural space where public debate regarding classed femininities is waged (Pough et al. 2007).

Music videos featuring Beyoncé work through class by representing femininity through style, speech and dance. Hair, for example, is a signifier of classed femininity. In an MTV television interview concerning the multiple looks in the video Check On It (2005), Beyoncé acknowledges that her cornrows in the “urban” scene pay homage to her musical past and the homegirls from the Black working class section of Houston’s third ward. In The Fighting Temptations (2003) Beyoncé suggested wearing cornrows was significant for the believability of her character Lily, who is a Southern gospel and night club singer from the working class. In “Wearing your race wrong,” Noliwe Rooks (2001) identifies hairstyles associated with working class as the object of public scorn. For some, it illustrates the willful defiance of working class Black women to assimilate to dominant culture. Disenfranchisement can be attributed to personal (style) choice. For others, the fingerwaved, multicolor
track, synthetic, and locked coifs reify the out-of-control Black female body that needs to be—like her hair—tamed. In both film and music video, hair signifies class.

Other than hairstyle, the hip hop booty defines classed femininity in music videos featuring Beyoncé. While colonial discourses suggest that all Black women are promiscuous, the hip hop booty has been reassigned to working class Black women specifically. Rap modifiers about the booty as junk, ghetto, bubble, big, or bootylicious not only assess its physicality, but also its value and the spatial location for women who possess that body type (read: ghetto). To call attention to a sexual sign already imbued with racist discourses of hypersexuality is, in the words of Destiny’s Child, classless (read: without value or virtue) or nasty. In Destiny’s Child’s music video Nasty Girls (2002), Beyoncé watches scantily-clad women on television, and later admonishes them in lyrics linking their style choices to promiscuity. Beyoncé advises these women “to put some clothes on” because men do not want a “hot female that’s been around the block female.” The virtual women are miraculously transformed morally through fashion—recalling the rhetoric of respectability. Only when they adopt the style and dance performances of Destiny’s Child do these hot females enter the Destiny’s dreamworld. Interestingly, at no point is Beyoncé’s own sexualized image implicated in the reproduction of working class femininity from her fashion choices and booty dances. In the end, Beyoncé negotiates Black femininity similar to scenes from the Destiny’s Child video for Lose My Breath (2004) where her suit-wearing self battles her low-rise jean-wearing other in a back alley; she is outperformed by her hybrid self wearing denim and a fur stole. The back alley battle that takes place between the so-called lady and the ghetto girl serves as a compelling metaphor to describe the simultaneous respectable and sexually accessible womanhood that Black female artists must perform. The battle also recalls the classed performances of Black femininity played out in hip hop popular culture and through Beyoncé’s body today.

Interpreting the Southern Belle and Booty

There are several approaches to analyzing the look and sound of the music video. To understand how discourses of the South and color work to describe Black femininity in the hip hop dreamworld, I employ textual analysis. Thus far, I have suggested that Beyoncé’s body and her body of work in music video have contributed to her popularity because she is able to perform competing Black femininities situated in hip hop culture. Reading Beyoncé’s performance(s) depends upon intertextuality where her catalog of music videos, the behind-the-scenes MTV program Making the Video for Check On It, and entertainment news about the celebrity inform my reading, and help to produce a complex and polyvalent reading of Beyoncé. Check On It made its world premiere on the MTV network. It is a music video that advertises the film The Pink Panther (2006), the last album release of Destiny’s Child, and the advanced promotion for the film Dreamgirls (2006). By interrogating Beyoncé’s performance(s) of Black femininity—and by extension, Black female sexuality—that operate in her Hype Williams music video, my reading explores hegemonic discourses of the South that shape how her iconic Black female body is understood in popular culture.

The four-minute music video sandwiches Beyoncé between billowing pink satin fabric and between Houston rappers Slim Thug and Bun B—the Boss of the South and King of the Underground, respectively. It opens with the film score and clips from The Pink Panther (2006) where Inspector Jacques Clouseau (Steve Martin) drives, Beyoncé’s character...
Xania sings, and the cartoon character makes the transition to the pink dreamworld that Beyoncé occupies. The camera cuts to Slim Thug and a dancing silhouette of Beyoncé appears as the music changes to Beyoncé’s song. In the first minute of the music video, the audience is introduced to Beyoncé’s four main looks: the girl gang member, the diva, the ghetto girl, and the dance troupe member. Other shots show Beyoncé in a bustier blending with a polka dot wall, as a school girl squatting with an angora sweater, as a dancer in a fuchsia bodysuit, as a Diana-esque diva wearing a gown with wind-blown hair. The visual hook for the music video is pink. Beyoncé wears a variation of pink and dances in pink backgrounds in every scene. And according to the songstress, the chorus describes a woman who takes pleasure from watching her man watching her booty dance.

The chorus:

Ooh boy you looking like you like what you see  
Won’t you come over check up on it, I’m gone let you work up on it  
Ladies let’em check up on it, watch it while he check up on it  
Dip it, pop it, twerk it, stop it, check on me tonight.

The South is deployed in *Check On It* (2005) to situate Beyoncé within hip hop culture, to construct the backwards gaze for the male and female addressee, and to frame Beyoncé and her Southern femininity. Within cultural studies and hip hop culture, the North is an exhausted category. After the so-called gangsta rap-turned-real sensationalized murders of New York and California rappers Biggie Smalls and 2 Pac Shakur, new genres of music worked to resuscitate the culture by directing attention to artists from southern cities, such as Atlanta, Houston, New Orleans, and Miami. Other than Houston, these southern cities are located in the US Deep South; in the hip hop geography, rappers recode the region to include Houston as part of the Dirty South to represent a particular hip hop authenticity and to fashion a counter-narrative that contests the slick, urban style of established rap artists, such as P. Diddy (Sean Combs). Dirty South conjures up raw, unpolished musical styles that speak to base sexual desires. The popularity of hip hop is informed by the music genres from the South—the “booty” music from the US Dirty South, and Jamaican dancehall and Puerto Rican reggaetón from the Caribbean global South.

Houston rappers Slim Thug and Bun B provide hip hop bookends for Beyoncé, anchoring her identity to a specific spatial location. They provide hip hop authenticity and street credibility similar to the guest appearance by rapper Fat Joe in the Jennifer Lopez *Jenny from the Block* (2002) music video where Lopez demonstrates working class femininity through fashion after receiving superstardom. In both cases, the overblown diva image of Jennifer Lopez and Beyoncé needed to be deflated to depict a down-to-earth, around-the-way girl from an identifiable place. Murray Forman (2002) suggests racialized spatiality is a necessary production of authentic hip hop identity. Place provides the context for understanding the hip hop story; it is a construction of the real that can be verified by a local community. In a sense, space and place function as forms of bearing witness. Beyoncé, who is referred to by her partner Jay-Z as B, never mentions a specific homeplace. Perhaps it is because she was raised in a Houston suburb where her father earned a six-figure salary as an executive for the Xerox corporation (Mayo 2003). Her real middle-class economic background disrupts the performative hip hop working class Southern femininity that she presents with cornrows, initial hoop earrings, and heeled construction boots in several
videos. When Beyoncé calls up the beauty aesthetics from Houston’s third ward, she strategically recalls the women and the male rappers to define her Houston hip hop identity in *Check On It*.

The South is deployed by calling attention to Beyoncé’s booty as well. Earlier I mentioned that the booty represents racial and class difference for Black women. Through camera angles, music lyrics, and dance performances, the lower half of Beyoncé is emphasized to mark authentic blackness rooted in the American South and the urban freak body popularized by “booty” music from Southern hip hop culture. When the camera cuts from *The Pink Panther* (2006) montage to close-up shots of Slim Thug, the bass heavy hip hop beat by Swiss Beatz becomes more pronounced. The visual imagery changes as well—jumping from the cartoon animation of *The Pink Panther* to “real” Southern bodies, Slim Thug and Beyoncé. Slim Thug introduces the audience to the hip hop dreamworld where Beyoncé gyrates and takes pleasure in being watched. Spliced close-up shots visually reiterate a conversation between Beyoncé and her male addressee in the song. It is a contrived intimacy, considering the artists never share a scene. The visual conversation between the two illustrates Beyoncé’s participation in the hip hop dreamworld through the backwards gaze. Her association with Southern hip hop, then, is made intelligible through her relationship with “real” gangsta rappers, the hip hop dreamworld, and the Black working class booty.

Close up camera shots, Beyoncé’s self-identified “classy” look in the music video, and the song lyrics together are supposed to challenge the voyeuristic gaze from the hip hop dreamworld. Throughout the music video, Beyoncé does express sexual agency. Outlining the parameters of male sexual gratification, she sings: “You can look at it, as long as you don’t grab it.” In her classy couture pink satin suit, she turns away from the camera and bends forward to grab her own behind. In other scenes, Beyoncé checks on her booty—looking over her shoulder and taking pleasure in its movement. Her signature dance is in part a reclamation of the Black booty that is prevalent in vernacular culture throughout the African diaspora (see e.g., Ruth Nicole Brown 2009, pp. 87–109; Janell Hobson 2005). Describing the sexual agency of soca performer Alison Hines, Susan Harewood (2006) suggests looking at one’s self challenges the male gaze where the booty—or the batty—is reserved for male erotic pleasure only. Like Hines, Beyoncé works to redefine the engagement with her body. It is worth noting that in an MTV interview, Beyoncé suggests her pleasure comes from watching her man—not herself—enjoy her bootylicious performances. Her admission does not dismiss the potential for audiences to read her performance as oppositional. Camera shots, however, strip her (sexual) subjectivity. When shots do not reflect her point of view, and do not show her face in scenes that emphasize her backside (e.g., urban scene as the ghetto girl), the agency she expresses lyrically is overshadowed by visual objectification.

The competing positions of Beyoncé as subject and object of desire are reiterated through discourses of femininity that set up the good–bad girl dualism played out in her pink dreamworld. She is both girl gang member and glamorous Diana-esque diva. Pink, as a character in the music video, reiterates classed femininity by illustrating the degree of sexual proficiency for each character Beyoncé performs along a continuum where pastel is pure and hot pink is, well—hot. For example, she is a schoolgirl that kneels and bats her eyes wearing a light pink angora sweater in front of a hot pink background. This scene conveys a passivity and prepubescent sexuality with the use of pastel pink, which is deliberately disrupted by the background and the jump cuts to her as a polka dot pinup.
The same schoolgirl innocence, in another instance, associated with sexual modesty is not extended to the ghetto girl in the urban scene that is dimly lit with hot pink subway tiles. The intensity of the hot pink background along with long shots of her booty dance suggest Beyoncé’s sexually proficiency as a ghetto girl. While the urban scene is supposed to recall her formidable years as a member of Destiny’s Child, the teen image of the ghetto girl is the most sexualized. Sans the water, the scene echoes a striptease performed by Jennifer Beals in Flashdance (1983). Sexual proficiency is connected to booty dancing to reproduce moral panic about Black girls who occupy working class communities and the hip hop dreamworld. The sexual deviance displayed by the ghetto girl is replaced with the 1950s girl gang members. The gang members rely on their hot pink high-heeled boots as platforms to bend backwards, performing a kind of sexual acrobatics of the freakish body balancing the weight of femininity. And while Beyoncé shares the visual space, clothes and choreography with other female cultural workers, Beyoncé is the only one capable of moving through the various spaces of femininity. Beyoncé breaks from the group by asserting her individual sexual agency as a speaking subject. Her ability to voice her desire and to move to other scenes marks the material differences that exist between Beyoncé and her background dancers who are often admonished as video girls, vixens or hos. Still, Beyoncé is constrained in the pink dreamworld she helps to create. The narrow constructions of femininity that she is able to play only allow for one-dimensional, one-scene representations of Black womanhood, rather than the full expressions that define her and other Black women.

The deployment of pink cannot be coded as uniquely Southern, but its association with the good girl within the context of Southern femininity is distinct. The good Southern girl is both respectable and sexually modest—with class. The first lines of Slim Thug’s rap recommends good girls like Beyoncé get down with gangstas (as opposed to imposters called wankstas in his rap). The good girl image stems from her Texas background where sexual modesty characterizes Southern gentility. Here, Southernness is recoded as refined rather than raw to describe polite femininity. To be certain, not all women from the South are coded as good. One of the markers of Southern hip hop is its integration of stripper culture. Hot girls with voluptuous bodies reside there. Both the street and the strip club are hypermasculine spaces where Black girls and women are economically and sexually vulnerable. Outside of the music video, southern cities such as Atlanta serve as global trafficking and sex tourism centers (H. Patricia Hynes & Janice G. Raymond 2002). Beyoncé’s real economic privilege should shield her from these spaces, if she desires; yet, her commercial viability as a Black female artist from the hip hop dreamworld dictates that she perform a dressed-up rendition of the very freakish body she admonishes in the Nasty Girls (2002) music video early on in her music career. In the hip hop dreamworld, even the diva has to perform sexual tricks. In Check On It, Beyoncé fulfills pornographic tropes of the pinup and the exotic dancer, and gives a nod to her sexual proficiency when the bad girl bends backwards and the polka dot pinup wipes the corner of her mouth. Ultimately, the music video ends as it begins. Inspector Jacques Clouseau drives with a smile, and one wonders in the end if the pink dreamworld that Beyoncé helps to construct is hers or the inspector’s hip hop version of a four-minute MTV virtual peep show.

Conclusion

Beyoncé performs classed Black femininities in the hip hop dreamworld while fulfilling her ultimate role as the exotic ethnic other in US popular culture. MTV remains a
formidable culture industry within the global marketplace that maintains her visibility by reworking colonial fantasies about Black women through the hip hop booty. The television network that ushered the sound and look of youth culture about thirty years ago continues to be central in disseminating new icons of cool. Beyoncé is one of these icons from the hip hop generation. Her body traverses various mediascapes. Her body of work recalls the ways the expression of particular kinds of femininity continues to be connected to hypersexuality. The music video *Check On It* (2005) reproduces ideas about hypersexuality by highlighting the backwards gaze. The booty shapes how we read her iconic Black female body and her celebrity persona as the belle of hip hop culture.

The multiple representations of flat femininities in the music video *Check On It* (2005) call attention to the ways in which young women from the hip hop generation grapple with performing narrow definitions of womanhood that do not account for the full expression of Black women’s humanity. In the song, Beyoncé talks about being a tease and suggests: “I might let you have it, if you don’t go bragging.” Beyoncé articulates the culture of silence that continues to loom in the everyday lives of Black girls and women. That the self-identified Christian has to be possessed by an alter ego named Sasha Fierce to perform sensual dances on stage reveals how much work Black feminism and the burgeoning field of hip hop feminism—as a political, intellectual and cultural movement—has not done to undo the good–bad girl dualism that young women like Beyoncé battle. It is not enough for the so-called nasty girl to put clothes on, or to tune out the rap music video. It may be necessary to disrupt discourses of class, dislodge femininity from compulsive heterosexuality, and disconnect Black female visibility and female empowerment from male erotic pleasure. Young Black girls and women are working to imagine new dreamworlds in hip hop culture. And it is for that reason that we all must check on it.

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**NOTES**

1. Booty refers to the buttocks in African American vernacular and hip hop culture. Similar terms from the African diaspora include: batty within Jamaican dancehall; and culo within Puerto Rican reggaetón. There are a variety of African dance practices that emphasize hip movement. Booty dancing is an umbrella term deployed to categorize one group of dance practices.

2. Stacy Smith (2005) discusses a Kaiser Family Foundation survey that reported 75 percent of young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four watched MTV.

3. Emerson (2002) contends that Erykah Badu, Missy Elliott and Lauryn Hill are feminist artists who defy sexual objectification. These singers are situated within hip hop, and it is possible they can adopt complex personas because they are not rappers exclusively.

4. Hype Williams directed music videos during the glam moment of hip hop music videos when artists, such as Sean Combs and Will Smith, wore bright colors and shiny fabrics. Reiss and Feineman (2000) discuss the videography of Hype Williams.
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