



# ARTIFACTS

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## Wreck or Wrecked: Sexism in Contemporary Hip-Hop Media

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*Black men rappers are not social deviants but true purveyors of the societys culture. In fact, the rappers become grunt workers for the patriarchy: they sow the field of misogyny for the patriarchy and provide the labor necessary to keep it in operation, much as Black men and women provided the free and exploited labor that built the United States. [] [And] if it were not for the fact that young middle-class white men are becoming raps biggest consumers and using it to ape blackness and disrupt middle-class sensibilities and decorum, there would not be such intense outcry and outrage. (hooks 134)*

A collective appreciation for urban aesthetics during the 1960s-1970s jump-started the Hip-Hop movement which, at increasing speed throughout the decades since, has eventually come to dominate the majority of popular youth culture in America. Hip-Hop culture emerged as an attempt (whether conscious or not) by African Americans and Latinos to voice the social and economic oppression during the Civil Rights Movement through rap music, graffiti art, break dancing, and beat boxing (Ginwright 30-32). Popularity as a national culture has forced Hip-Hop to shed many of its distinctive goals to please Corporate America including adopting mainstream, capitalist values and adhering to patriarchal gender stereotypes. In her essay *Women, Rap, Wreck*, Gwendolyn Pough explores womens assertion of wreck, which is, to Pough, Black female rappers radically contradicting popular expectations and standards to gain recognition in the Hip-Hop scene. She states that spectacle and cultural representation (when direct political access is not available) are the first steps in creating a disruption, the first steps in bringing wreck [] thus, rappers bring wreck: they disrupt their way into and make themselves visible in the public sphere with the goal of not only speaking for disenfranchised Black people but also claiming both a voice and a living (Pough 71). Pough does not even acknowledge, however, any of the social issues manifesting from the medias abuse of such wreck or the undeniable shift in the focus and development of popular Hip-Hop music, videos, and lyrics from general racism to sexist oppression, which has allowed the exploitation of women of all races to flourish in America, further reinforcing gender stereotypes rather than breaking them down.

According to Pough, unlike Black men, Black womens contributions to Hip-Hop culture have, for the most part, been ignored and erased. Pough reasons that a simple love for the culture not a desire to become rich and famous could be the reason that many of the early women in Hip-Hop were more inclined to play in the background, much like the Black women who wanted simply to improve the Black community and not become race spokespeople (276). Included in her essay are several examples of influential Black female rappers and MCs such as US Girls, Sequence, Mercedes Ladies, Salt-N-Pepa, Queen Latifah, Eve, Lil Kim, and Missy Elliott

to positively showcase wreck and raise awareness that womens voices are represented via Hip-Hop for a wealth of possibilities in terms of the validations of the Black female voice and Black womens agency (Pough 276). Specifically, she praises Queen Latifah and her Grammy-winning U.N.I.T.Y. to support her argument that [Black female rappers] are maintaining a public presence while they counter the negative representations of Black womanhood that exist within Hip-Hop culture (Pough 279).

In summary, Queen Latifahs lyrics address sexist violence and harassment towards women (of all races) while at the same time representing wreck for Black women. Within the first four lines of U.N.I.T.Y. Queen Latifah demands Love a Black woman from infinity to infinity, Love a Black man from infinity to infinity! While the majority of the lyrics have strong feminist undertones, Queen Latifah denies any support in a feminist agenda: All that shit is bullshit! I know at the end of the day, Im a Black woman in this world and I gotta get mine. I want to see the rise of the Black male in personal strength and power (Pough 280). For several reasons, this quote provides reasonable controversy to the underlying foundations of Poughs argument as well as her definition of wreck and its supposed empowerment for African American women. Poughs messages are conflictingQueen Latifah uses wreck to empower women to advocate in support of patriarchy? It would be illogical to believe that wreck symbolizes individualism, female empowerment, and patriarchal dependency all at the same time.

Pough does not see the disconnect between the good-natured intentions of wreck and its actual effects, or rather consequences, as a polarizer between the sexes; she fails either to recognize or acknowledge that wreck in excess has encouraged the stereotyping and recurring sexism existing within Hip-Hop culture. Her assertion with the notion that [Black female rappers] are attacking the stereotypes and misconceptions that influenced their lives and the lives of their foremothers is false in relation to contemporary Hip-Hop (Pough 279). Was it not Queen Latifah who also rapped Im a shake it all night and then some on her first solo album *All Hail The Queen* (which actually debuted before U.N.I.T.Y. by several years) in 1989? Salt-N-Pepas Push It in the late 1980s sang Cant you hear the musics pumpin hard like I wish you would? Now push it! Push it real good! More recently, Missy Elliott sang rump shakin both wayz make you do a double take! These examples could be interpreted as liberation and freedom of sexual politics, but to whom exactly are these women singing and for whom are they shakin? What Pough justifies as Black female displays of physical and sexual freedom can also be interpreted as submission to Capitalist America and, more importantly, an attempt to enforce the expectations of traditional masculinity on the part of the Black male. This suggests a shift in the general focus of society though Hip-Hop from racism to sexism.

*In more recent years some black males link sexist thinking and action to their sense of victimization by racist exploitation and oppression. Extreme expressions of sexism, misogyny, made visible by overt exploitation of women by men, become in their minds a dysfunctional response to racism rather than a perspective that exists both apart from and in conjunction with racism. [] This overlapping of the two systems of domination [] deflects attention away from black male accountability for sexist exploitation of black females. (hooks 86-87)*

Racism within Hip-Hop is no less evident than in the past, but an increasingly level playing field has helped bridge differences and form camaraderie between males through exploiting women in the media; no longer is this a question directed solely at wreck or Black women, it includes a broader scope of women in America. The lyrics of Queen Latifah, Salt-N-Pepa, and Missy Elliott were chosen to represent the disputable, unpublicized facet of wreck. Although several of Poughs examples are outdated and exemplify merely the budding sexism within Hip-Hop, it is more than likely that wreck has acted as one of the catalysts leading to misogynistic content in contemporary Hip-Hop lyrics and music videos.

By critically analyzing current outlets of Hip-Hop media, primarily music videos, we can see wrecks impact throughout the course of Hip-Hops cultural fusion with Corporate America. Rihannas Shut Up and Drive is a perfect example of wreck. Rihanna is the epitome of femininity demanded of leading Hip-Hop ladies in current popular culture: thin, sexy, and confident. She plays the role of a sexy auto mechanic in a garage flaunting her body on top of cars, stereotypically a males territory. The video is almost intended not to be taken seriously; Rihanna is visibly out of her element. Rihannas heels, high fashion, and makeup reinforce gender stereotyping, a product of advertising industries; and by showing her domination in a males province, the music video possibly attempts to provide some far off mirage of equality that simply does not exist. Although, in the past, as Poughs favorite model of wreck, Queen Latifah, had used her lyrics to inspire and empower as opposed to her body. Missy Elliott was also famous for her public refusal to strictly conform to feminine expectations. Today, however, Rihanna represents the Hip-Hop strict standard for body type. Rihanna as a female artist might resemble Poughs theory of wreck, but her music videos arent particularly inspiring beyond the surface, but rather discouraging: Rihanna uses her body to sell her image, a publicized submission to patriarchy, which sustains a cycle supporting the argument that sexism and sexist oppression are perpetuated and maintained by all of us, not just men (hooks 62).

Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of popular, mainstream male artists such as Fat Joe, 50 Cent, Lil Wayne, T-Pain, and DFL predictably center their lyrical themes on money, social status, prestige, patriarchal stereotypes, and blatant exploitation of women. For example, a typical video produced by a male artist would be similar to DFLs Laffy Taffy which raps Gurlz call me Jolly Rancher cus I stay so hard, You can suck me for a long time, Oh my God! and Big ol ass you shakin bitch, Bend on ova hit a split, Work that pole and work it well. The music video is a montage of women sucking lollipops and dancing suggestively around the male rappers. Examples of the like lead me to agree that [African American males] can assert manhood by simply demonstrating that one has the power to control and dominate women. [] Black men are not required to become providers and protectors to be men; thus, assimilation into White supremacist male-stream America becomes less difficult because the demands to meet acceptable masculine standards become easier to fulfill (hooks 65).

The wreck movement, as outlined by Pough, began innocently enough as a well-intentioned outlet to represent women in a popular public sphere. As it evolved, similar to many elements of American culture, wreck has been co-opted in favor of male-dominated society, which has inevitably revealed itself through sexism and exploitation in popular Hip-Hop culture. Female artists position themselves to be exploited (in order to be successful) by producing content that further glamorizes stereotypes and reinforces the male power in America for fame and fortune all at the eyes and ears of American youth, the next generation of patriarchs and subordinate women: a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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