

Mainstream Pop Culture and the “Jezebel”

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Abstract

Much of the content addressed in this THERP 282: Gender and Performance course of Fall 2021, was centered around the works of the popular African American artist, Beyoncé. In reviewing the mastery of her 2013 self-titled album and supporting academic material, this course allowed each student to explore the limitless boundaries of what it would look like to perform one’s racial and gendered identity and sexuality within a performance context.

From week to week, one of the most prominent and protruding questions that I maintained was “Why do so many Black female performers play into the Jezebel stereotype?” Following the creation of my last article, an Op-Ed – *Sex. It Sells. But It Is Keeping Black Women In Chains* – which discussed the damaging reality of the over-sexualization of Black women in mainstream multi-media (Radcliffe 1), I began to deeply consider the complexities of my question.

Keywords

Music, performance, Jezebel

Through extensive research and much reflection, I contemplated how although Black women are not a monolith, many of their experiences are shared. Throughout the history of Black performance in North America, the common thread of White supremacy that has persisted to this day has caused me to see my initial question in an entirely new way. In consideration of all that I have researched, I propose that in many cases of Black female performers reproducing the Jezebel stereotype and other anti-Black performance tropes in their art and media, this is not necessarily a creative choice of their own, but rather a revelation of the conditions that many are forced to perform and conform within.

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These restricting conditions embrace the ideology of the Jezebel as truth, enforce the century-old anti-Black motivations of the media and broadcasting industry in North America, and the sheer profitability of oversexualized representations of female Blackness through the White gaze.

To contextualize the conditions in which Black female artists are subject to perform, we must first look to the origin of the anti-Black trope, the “Jezebel.” Since the early 1630s Black women have been portrayed as hypersexual sub-humans (Pilgrim). In the early 1700s on a voyage to Africa, European travelers found partially dressed African natives, polygamous relationships, and tribal dances and misinterpreted these cultural differences as evidence of the sexual lewdness of the Black people (Pilgrim). These Europeans were so fascinated by the fantasy of African sexuality (Pilgrim). Comments like “fiery”, “warm”, “so much hotter than the men” and “hot constitution'd Ladies who are continually contriving stratagems how to gain a lover” were shared descriptions of Black women, commented by White European men (White 29; Pilgrim).

Also from such writings, anti-Black sexual archetypes emerged which depicted Black men as “brutes and potential rapists” and Black women as “Jezebel whores” (Pilgrim). These anti-Black tropes were used to suggest that Black women, specifically, were “innately promiscuous and sexually predatory [having] an insatiable appetite for sex, which slave owners used as justification for rape” (Moses). When African people were enslaved in North America, “slaves of both sexes and all ages, often wore few clothes so ragged that their legs, thighs, and chest were exposed” (Pilgrim). Now, the connection to nakedness that was drawn in wearing these clothes in the 18th and 19th centuries, signified a “lack of civility, morality, and sexual restraint even when the nakedness was forced” (Pilgrim).

In stark contrast to the image created of Black women as “uncivilized, immodest, and sexually aberrant” which was reinforced by the clothes given to them, White women, who wore clothing that covered most of their bodies were seen as “civilized, modest, and sexually pure” (Pilgrim). Now, it is important to point out that these “revealing”, and “immoral” outfits were provided to the slaves by their masters, which in turn, was used as evidence of Black women’s incivility, immorality, and sexual unrestraint. This recreation of the Jezebel turned cyclical from decade to decade and continued to be reproduced by Black female performers long after their master’s oversight.

Each reproduction continued to reinforce the societal expectations of the Jezebel, to the same degree as the White supremacist ideologies that created it, who carefully slipped this anti-black trope into society, leaving their fingerprints undetected and detached from their malicious creation. Although created in slavery and extended through the Jim Crow period, the portrayal of Black women as Jezebels continues today (Pilgrim).

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For centuries, Black people have been the punchline of many jokes, the subject of many stereotypes, and the most hyper-visible and invisible identity in North American media. For historical context, the early North American film and television industry “primarily created media that reinforced elite White American culture, values, and perspectives” (Gammage 718). This approach to media creation was designed to “socialize the public around the values deemed most appropriate for American citizens and to highlight the ‘superiority’ of White American culture” (718).

Consequently, the representation of Black people and other cultural groups was strictly illustrated through the lens of White Americans, which “gave way to the mass-produced promotion of anti-Black propaganda” (718). The creation of this particular media was used as a way to spread racist ideologies and bring about anti-Black socialization (718). Before Black people were permitted to be cast in American film and tv, White actors would perform stereotyped perceptions of Black people in Blackface, in which the actor would paint their face Black, supposedly performing a realistic representation of the Black experience (Gammage 719; Pilgrim). Once Black performers were permitted to enter this industry, they were restricted to performing the same stereotyped characters which depicted Black men as bucks, toms, and coons and Black women as mammies, sapphires, and of course, jezebels (719).

For these Black performers to excel in the entertainment industry, they were forced to conform to Whites’ images and ideals of Blackness (Cashmore), which as mentioned, are deeply rooted in White supremacy and the belief that Blacks are subhuman and sexually lewd (Pilgrim). As Marquita Gammage frames it, Black performers were and continue to be “marginalized to a confined fame” (719;723). A paperless contract in which “their talent and skills [are] limited to entertainment that [does] not threaten the White power structure that exists in [North American] society, [...] given that this medium was not created to counteract the stereotyped perceptions of Blackness” (719).

Consequently, the Black performers of past and present are left once again to uphold the anti-Black tropes from the White lens, by performing a portrayal of their own race and gender as simple-minded, savage, and inherently promiscuous beings in need of control (719). This condition in which Black performers are forced to perform and conform within prohibits them from expressing their Blackness from a lens outside of the White gaze’s understanding of Blackness (721). As put by Herman Gray in *Watching race: Television and the struggle for “Blackness”*, “Black representation in commercial network television [is] situated within the existing material and institutional hierarchies or privilege and power based on class (middle-class), race (Whiteness), gender (patriarchal), and sexual (heterosexual) differences” (10).

Unfortunately, “the original purpose of media has not altered in the 21st century and media is still largely used to promote an anti-African agenda, which regulates Black

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popular artists and celebrities to a confined stardom” (Gammage 724) which contributes to why the Jezebel stereotype continues to be so aggressively reproduced to this day.

Now with all this historical contextualization in mind, it is nearly impossible to deny the sheer profitability of the fetishized and oversexualized representations of female Blackness through the White gaze. In fact, according to Maha Ikram Cherid, “Black culture is intentionally being made palatable to a White audience, with the goal of making a profit” (360), and this is especially true for representations of the Jezebel. During the Jim Crow Era in North America, “everyday items – such as ashtrays, postcards, sheet music, fishing lures, drinking glasses, and so forth – depicted naked or scantily dressed Black women, lacking modesty and sexual restraint” (Pilgrim).

In one specific example from the 1930s, a metal nutcracker depicted a topless Black woman, in which the nut would be “placed underneath her skirt, in her crotch, and crushed” (Pilgrim). These depictions of Black women always carried some sexual component – “she is often placed in a sexual setting, naked or near naked, inebriated or holding a drink, her eyes suggesting a sexual longing. She is a sexual being, but not one that white men would consider” (Pilgrim). Commercialized illustrations such as these, are a clear reflection of Black female sexuality in front of the White gaze (Pilgrim).

Today, the portrayal of the Jezebel is just as common as it was in the 1920s and 1930s. Although it may not be the mass production of racist nutcrackers and posters, hypersexualized representations of Black women are still just as prominent in North American media today. Furthermore, Black women are seen as sexually gratifying and exotic objects, before they are a person. This is represented through the dissection and dismemberment of a Black woman, Saartje Baartman, who was the obsession of white audiences with Black female genitalia, butts, lips, and breasts (Cherid 361), which is as ever-present as it is appalling.

Reduced to their bodies and sexual capabilities, “Black womanhood has been essentialized into the Black female body in a way that is curated to be consumed by White audiences” (Cherid 362). Consider the isolation of Black women’s butts and genitalia in contemporary music and accompanying videos (361). In the 2020 hip hop song, which debuted at No.1 on the Billboard top charts, *WAP* performed by Cardi B and Megan the Stallion (Cherid 362), they sing, “Now from the top, make it drop; That's some wet-ass pussy; Now get a bucket and a mop; That's some wet-ass pussy; I'm talking WAP, WAP, WAP; That's some wet-ass pussy; Macaroni in a pot; That's some wet-ass pussy” (Almanzar et al.).

In the 2021 song, *Have Mercy*, performed by Chlöe, she sings; “Booty so big (Work), Lord, have mercy; [...] All this ass up in my jeans; You can't get up in between; You tryna' get a piece of me; I can teach you a couple things” (BoogzDaBeast et al.). Without even watching or describing the accompanied music videos for these songs, the lyrics alone give a clear visual of what these artists want the audience to

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understand. The catchiness and global popularity of these songs only helped to make the Jezebel even more commodifiable. Artist Normani’s song *Wild Side* with Cardi B which depicts Normani scantily dressed in various acrobatic positions, as well as completely naked and intertwined with Cardi B, has already won 2 awards within the first 5 months of its release (on July 16th, 2021) (“Wild Side (Normani Song”).

This blatantly pornographic reproduction of the Jezebel in video format has been praised as “a sultry R&B showstopper” (Jagota), “a steamy, sensual slow jam” (Ali), and a “meticulously crafted showpiece that proves [Normani’s] here to stay” (Jagota). As stated in the words of Maha Ikram Cherid, “The voyeuristic engagement with blackness through the consumption of its commercialized culture is rooted in historical and ongoing processes of racialization and is particularly evident in the way Black womanhood is represented and consumed” (361). Although each of these images has evolved into quite a profitable industry, with the catchy lyrics, the global praise, and the entertaining visuals, the illusion of liberated sexuality cannot completely disguise the harmful sexual trope of the Jezebel that continues to cycle through generations of North American media.

It is interesting to reflect on how the Jezebel stereotype, something so deeply rooted in white supremacy and colonialism, can continue to persist undetected today, and even be praised for originality and its “empowering” nature for non-black women. Sexual freedom, especially for white women, was not necessarily allowed, as it would tarnish their public image of innocence, respectability, and purity, and has become quite liberating to now reject.

However, the *choice* to reject or accept is what is missing from the equation of Black female empowerment in North American media. The fact is, the tools used by White men to demonize Black women and justify their mistreatment, are the same tools that are used to employ many Black female performers and entertain the masses. And as we reflect on the words of Audre Lorde, we realize that “*the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (Lorde).

Although profitable, historically accepted, and commonplace, even in today’s media, the Jezebel stereotype and the White gaze, frames the performances of female Blackness as confirmation of the dated, presumptuous beliefs that built the platform they perform on and the conditions they perform within. I am not sure whether this is something that will ever change. I am not sure whether the Jezebel will ever become a thing of the past. But, considering the conditions that many of these Black female performers continue to adhere to, I now understand that there is more than just individual agency at play, but an entire industry that continues to facilitate systematic racism and white supremacy in the media.

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