#Flawless:
Black Female Musicians as Agents of Social Change

by

Emma Corwin

Matthew Allen, Advisor
Department of Music

Wheaton College
Norton, Massachusetts

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Abstract

Black American female musicians have been at the crossroads between sexism and racism now and in the past. This binary illustrates the constraints of an ideological system of both gender and race roles. My thesis will place into juxtaposition the Black female musicians of the early 20th century and today, and how they have and continue to reshape the prescribed image of female Black Americans in the entertainment industry. I first consider female Black musicians in Jazz Age America. Artists like Josephine Baker and Ada “Bricktop” Smith were highly influential as self-governing icons during the early 20th century. They asserted their agency by departing the US for Europe when faced with racial prejudice in the music scene, and flourished with considerable success; in doing so, they propagated a new perception of female Black musicians. Fast-forward to contemporary times, musicians such as Beyoncé and Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliot act as influential pop-culture icons to women today, analogous to Black female musicians of the Jazz Age. Through both a historical and contemporary approach, I investigate sexuality, iconography, and public reception as major components in the identity of these musicians. For artists from both time periods, I will consider these components through the use of images and media resources, such as advertisements, newspapers, magazines, interviews, and film to gain a sense of public perception and self-representation. These research methods will enable me to compare similar trends for Black female musicians in pop-culture from one century ago to now. In doing so, I seek to illuminate the major influence and impact of Black female musicians as agents of social change in the liberation from limitations created through oppression, prejudice, and stereotypes.

Introduction

Women in our society are inundated with an onslaught of pop culture media messages that dictate an often-contradictory standard of the ‘ideal woman:’ sexy yet naïve, intellectual yet careful with expressing controversial opinions, confident yet modest. Mainstream media bombards us with images of female superstars and manipulates us to either accept or reject them as an ‘ideal woman,’ judged by the age-old boxes of stereotypes for women. Moreover, Black American females have been at the crossroads between sexism and racism now and in the
past. This binary illustrates, for many Black females in pop culture, the self-perpetuating constraints of the ideological system of both gender and race roles. My thesis will place into juxtaposition the Black female jazz musicians of the early 20th century and today, and how they have and continue to reshape the prescribed image of female Black American musicians.

I began my research by focusing on Black American female musicians in Paris during the inter-war period. As I continued to study these women, I realized that there was an amazing amount to study about each individual person and I could have decided to focus on just one of these women. As my research focused, I became aware of commonalities amongst the women and their public reception. The women were fetishized, exoticized, and eroticized in the public sphere, which served to create misconstrued perceptions of Black American women, while also largely contributing to their success as entertainers. This constant tension has guided my thesis research. I started to ask how the women pushed past these boundaries, despite the misguided interpretations of their identity.

The turning point of my thesis research was met with an “Ah-ha!” reaction, but also an uncomfortable realization. Many of the trends I noticed about women in the 1920’s are still prevalent today. The contemporary Black female pop-stars are also perceived in similar ways to the women of the 1920s. My guiding question turned into, how much, if at all, has changed for Black women in music from 100 years to now? I believe that there is circularity in the progression of society, specifically for Black women in music. There are many musicians who are pushing past boundaries and representing themselves in positive, powerful ways. At the same time, there is constant pressure from stereotyped media representations to fit into the
prescribed image for women. For every push of progressive, there is resistance and push-back-
further perpetuating the spiraling effects of their representation.

I first look at Black American female musicians. Artists like Josephine Baker and Ada
“Bricktop” Smith were highly influential icons during the early 20th century. They asserted their
agency by departing the US for Europe when faced with animosity regarding racial prejudice in
the music scene, and flourished with considerable success; in doing so, they propagated a new
perception of female Black musicians.

Chapter one delivers a historical outline of Jazz music in Paris. Rather than jumping
directly into the scene for Black female musicians in Paris, I find that it is important to
understand ‘why’ there was an American Jazz scene in Montmartre, Paris. The Jazz Diaspora in
Paris illustrates a comparison of reception both in the United States and on a global scale. I
choose to focus on the music scene in Paris, rather than the states, because I believe that it
shows a particularly interesting perspective of how Black musicians were perceived. They had
significant success in their careers in Paris and were more positively received in France than in
the States because racial tensions were not as prevalent.

Chapter two focuses on the Black American female musicians in Paris during the inter-
war period. This chapter concentrates on public reception and representation of the female
musicians. Here, we begin to analyze exoticization, fetishization, and eroticization. This chapter
lays the groundwork for Chapter three, which is a case study of Josephine Baker. I choose to
focus on Josephine Baker because of her immense success. We can assume that because of her idolized success in the entertainment industry, she was constantly evaluated in the public sphere. I will analyze how she chooses to represent herself in the face of this scrutiny and also how she is represented to the public and then how the public perceives the representations. Evidently, there are many complex layers of analysis taking place in the representation of Josephine Baker.

Chapter four is where I transition to the contemporary music scene for Black female musicians. The preceding three chapters are foundational to the analysis of contemporary musicians. In this chapter, I outline the Hip-Hop scene and then the general representation of women who create music under this category and then also who fall under the greater scope of “pop-icon” musicians.

The final three chapters, five, six, and seven, discuss case studies of Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliot, Beyoncé, and Hip-Hop Honeys. Musicians such as Beyoncé and Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliot act as positive, influential pop culture icons to women today, analogous to Black female musicians of the Jazz era. On the contrary, Hip-Hop Honeys epitomize the under-belly of negative representations of women in Hip-Hop. They are the hyper-sexualized interpretation of Black female identity. The public appeal for Hip-Hop Honeys indicates increasing complexity of the representation of Black female musicians. In spite of this particularly negative representation, Black women in music continue to push past limits that confine them to preconceived notions of expected representation in society.

Through both a historical and contemporary approach, I investigate sexuality,
iconography, and public reception as major components in the identification of these musicians. For artists from both time periods, I will consider these components through the use of images and media resources, such as advertisements, newspapers, magazines, pop-culture media resources (e.g. blogs), interviews, and film to gain a sense of public perception. These research methods will enable me to compare similar trends for Black female musicians in pop-culture from one century ago to now. In doing so, I seek to demonstrate, the major influence and impact of Black female musicians as agents of social change in the liberation from limitations created through oppression, prejudice, and stereotypes.

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**Terminology**

Throughout this thesis there are certain terms that are problematic because of their negative connotations. I purposely use certain words as they pertain to the time period: “Primitivism” and “Negrophilie” for instance. Both of these terms serve to demonstrate past sentiments towards Black Americans, but in no way do I find them appropriate for contemporary contexts.

Furthermore, throughout my thesis, sexuality is a frequent topic of discussion. As I discuss sexuality in this thesis, I am referring to heteronormative sexuality. While it would be very interesting to go into detail about different sexualities in music, it is way out of the scope of my thesis. I intentionally discuss heteronormative sexuality as it is the form that bombards our social media.

Finally, I will try to address terminology as it comes up in the thesis and use ‘scare quotes’ around more problematic terms as they are used in many quotations.
Chapter One
Jazz in Montmartre

The contributions of the American Negro to art are representative because they come from the hearts of the masses of a people held together by like yearnings and stirred by the same causes. It is a sound art because it comes from a primitive nature upon which a white man’s education has never been harnessed. It is a great art because it embodies the Negroes’ individual traits and reflects their suffering, aspirations and joys during a long period of acute oppression and distress.

-Albert C. Barnes on “Negro Art and America,” 1925

The Jazz era in Paris has maintained a revered allure to those of us today who envy a lifestyle of glitz and glam. Paris was the Mecca for those who were allured by a lifestyle immersed in art, music, and literature. Some of the best and brightest expatriates felt the magnetism to move to Paris after WWI: Gertrude Stein, Cole Porter, Ernest Hemingway, Picasso, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Josephine Baker to name a few. For some, Paris was a means to be among a progressive audience; for others, Paris was the one of the only options for a liberated lifestyle. Racial tensions permeated American life and influenced many to relocate to Europe. The Great War had ended and out of the mass destruction and hardship a new lifestyle blossomed in Paris where music, art, and literature were incorporated into the daily lives of middle class citizens. The entertainment industry grew and became a lucrative career for those involved in the production. This financial avenue was a resource that many Black Americans were able to tap into because of the general sense of acceptance in Paris at the time. The Black Americans that moved to Paris soon became major figures in the night life of Paris. For the purposes of this thesis, Paris is significant because it acted as a place in the world where we can clearly see, from a historical analysis, how Black Americans were received by the public. This is
juxtaposed to the United States, which at the time, was ferociously unaccepting of Black citizens. Furthermore, because of the general sense of acceptance in Paris, Black performance artists were able to reach global stardom, where they may not have had the same opportunities in the states. The level of fame achieved by these entertainers places them in a particularly interesting position for analysis. Before analyzing the specific musicians, I find it important to lay out the framework for the Jazz scene in Paris during the inter-war period. This chapter will serve to explain the historical context of the Jazz Era in Paris.

**African American Soldiers in WWI**

WWI played a major role in the political climate that drove many Black Americans to move to Paris. There are many steps that lead up to the migration to Paris. The first of which is The United States’ decision to declare war against Germany along with the Allied powers on April 2, 1917 (US Department of State). Many African Americans were motivated to join the army because they believed that if the US was fighting for world democracy, then perhaps they would see true democracy that was inclusive to Black citizens at home (Williams 2016). Williams writes in an essay detailing African Americans in World War I:

> Most African Americans nevertheless saw the war as an opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism and their place as equal citizens in the nation. Black political leaders believed that if the race sacrificed for the war effort, the government would have no choice but to reward them with greater civil rights. "Colored folks should be patriotic," the Richmond Planet insisted. "Do not let us be chargeable with being disloyal to the flag." Black men and women for the most part approached the war with a sense of civic duty. Over one million African Americans responded to their draft calls, and roughly 370,000 black men were inducted into the army (Williams 2016).

Regardless of the willingness of African American participation, there was a lot of controversy
over allowing them to enlist in the American military. Some feared that if Black citizens were trained in the American military, they would become rebellious. Because of the fear projected from white, military personnel, Black citizens would participate in one of two ways. Some enlisted into the American military and their training was modified so that the risk of what was an assumed rebellion was avoided. According to Hobson, they were given wooden guns to train with and, while in combat zones, not allowed to shoot at German soldiers because they were white (Hobson 2010). During training they were assigned sub-standard living conditions and received segregated training (Williams 2016). The strict combat regulations for Black soldiers in the American army and less than ideal training services caused many to enlist in the French or Canadian military (Hobson 2010).

During the French military experience, Black Americans were given equal rights to the French as military partners and were highly respected as soldiers. Eugene Bullard, who is one of the most highly regarded Black American soldiers, decided to fight for the French Army during WWI. He was awarded the Croix de Guerre and also went on to be a successful night club owner post-WWI (Lloyd 2002). Williams’ describes the shifting opinion for and treatment of African Americans upon service in France:

Black soldiers received a warm welcome from French civilians, who, unlike white troops of the American army, exhibited little overt racism. "They treated us with respect," one soldier recalled, "not like the white American soldiers." These interactions further contributed to the image of France as a nation free of racial discrimination and uniquely committed to universal democratic rights. Travel and service in France expanded the boundaries of how black soldiers viewed the world and their place in it (Williams 2016).
When the United States realized that they did not have nearly enough soldiers to fight in The Great War they passed the Selective Service Act (1917). This allowed the federal government to raise a national army to enter into WWI. This also meant that Black Americans could commit to full service in the American army and, consequently, the opportunity to prove they were deserving of equal rights and liberty in America (Williams 2016). The 369th infantry regiment was formed; it consisted of African Americans and African Puerto Ricans. More famously known as the “Harlem Hell-fighters,” they were the first all-Black regiment. Their namesake was given because of their reputation of being one of the strongest combat units during WWI, ceding no ground to Germany (Williams 2016).

**The Spread of Jazz in Europe**

In addition to being a remarkably strong combat unit, the Harlem Hell-fighters were renowned for their marching band. While they made up less than 1% of deployed soldiers, they were responsible for 20% of all the territory occupied by the United States Army during the war (Gero 2009). Because of the vast amount of territory assigned to the unit-20% of all the territory assigned to the United States (Gero 2009)- the marching band traveled all around France and Britain, bringing with them the new sounds of jazz and boosting the moral of
the allies. This was the initial spread of jazz, globally, and what sparked Europe’s interest in the new sounds of jazz and Black culture.

When the war ended, the 369th Regiment’s marching band returned to the States and held a grand parade on February 17, 1919 all around New York City as a celebration of the allies’ victory (World Heritage Encyclopedia). On February 18, 1919 a three-page news story in the *New York Tribune* welcomed the Black veterans home. The article begins:

> Up the wide avenue they swung. Their smiles outshone the golden sunlight. In every line proud chests expanded beneath the medals valor had won. The impassioned cheering of the crowds massed along the way drowned the blaring cadence of their former jazz band. The old 15th was on parade and New York turned out to tender its dark-skinned heroes a New York welcome.

“The old 15th” refers to the old 15th National Guard which is synonymous with The 369th Infantry; their “former” jazz band is the jazz band discussed previously from their service. The parade began in Harlem and marched all around Manhattan. Their wartime efforts gave them high hopes for a difference in racial tensions in the United States (Williams 2016). The encouraging cheers from the parade viewers misled soldiers into believing there was a brighter future for Black Americans after the end of the war. The support for returning Black veterans soon faded and was overshadowed by prejudice and uninhibited racism. Eric Arnsen explores post World War I racial violence in an article from the Chicago Tribune:

> Instead of rewarding black Americans for their military service or even acknowledging their patriotic sacrifice, however, white Americans resolved to restore the pre-war status quo. Southern states cracked down hard on black protest organizations. The summer of 1919, argues journalist Cameron McWhirter, witnessed the "worst spate of race riots and lynching in American history." From April to October, American cities exploded in an orgy of violence whose extensive bloodshed led Johnson to name it the "Red Summer." "Though no complete and accurate records on the eight months of violence were [ever] compiled,"
McWhirter notes, "at least 25 major riots erupted and at least 52 black people were lynched" in those months. "Millions of Americans had their lives disrupted. Hundreds of people — most of them black — were killed and thousands more were injured. Tens of thousands were forced to flee their homes" (2011).

It is clear that it was close to impossible for African Americans to sustain a reasonably content, or even safe, life in the United States during this period of time. Moreover, it is understandable why many Black Americans decided to return to France post World War I. The photo to the right depicts the sheet music cover artwork for “How Ya Gonna Keep ‘em Down on the Farm,” written by Joe Young and Sam M. Lewis (Firstworldwar.com). The lyrics are as follows, “How ya gonna keep ‘em down on the farm; After they’ve seen Paree; How ya gonna keep ‘em away from Broadway; Jazzin’ around and paintin’ the town.” How could anyone return to the States after seeing what Paris had to offer to the black community? France offered an open and accepting environment as a radical comparison to the daily life in the States. After discovering America was not as welcoming as was originally hoped for, African American soldiers who had a taste of France’s version of liberty, decided to return to Paris (Shack 2001). Additionally, there were better employment opportunities because of France’s ‘discrimination-free’ values and a high demand for Black musicians to fill positions in night clubs (Shack 2001; XVI). This was the beginning of an established Black society in Paris; soon after, many Black Americans followed suit and traveled overseas. Many of them were musicians because of the multitude of opportunities and the pre-established interest in jazz music after the 369th Regiment.
Les Années Folles

Post WWI, the people of Paris yearned for an upbeat, glamorous lifestyle to replace the sadness and horrors that were faced during WWI. Jazz music fulfilled France’s reputation to be increasingly avant-garde. In post WWI France, there was a desire to return to a simpler way of life. Faced with the torments and horrors of loss, post-war French citizens wanted to get rid of 'civilization,' as it seemed to be solely destructive. Rooted in these ideals began the art form of ‘primitivism,’ most notably portrayed in Picasso’s ‘African Period’ from 1906-1909. In an article describing an exhibition on “Primitivism” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, William Rubin problematically describes this art form as an appreciation of other cultures such as Africa (Archer-Straw 10). “Rubin was correct in saying that for members of the Parisian avant-garde the ‘primitive’ was an antidote to a stifling and civilizing bourgeois modernity; but their positive use of the word could not avoid the negative connotations that it had acquired, particularly during the nineteenth century” (10). While problematic, this set the foundation for France’s fascination with African culture or ‘négrophilie’ (a term used among avant-guard artists to describe their enthusiasm for black culture) and an enticing atmosphere for black Americans to voyage to France.

*L’epidémie, le virus noir, la rage:* these were the terms used to describe the fascination with Black Americans in Paris. These terms describe the obsession as if it were a virus. This is telling to the public reception of Black Americans in Paris. These terms illustrate public view as being entirely fixated on the new, Black culture that was emerging in Paris. *Le Jazz Hot* was in full swing, and the people of Paris flocked towards emerging clubs and American jazz stars.
Saloon owners began to emerge in Montmartre. Rivaling the late night musical community of Harlem in New York, Montmartre offered a thriving community where black musicians and entrepreneurs could create Jazz music for a large audience. The early 20th century was a period of fashion fetishism. By fetishizing the Black entertainers, the white community created an atmosphere that granted viewing these performers as spectacle.

The process of ‘othering’ allowed both partners to act out myths and fantasies. For whites, the 'negrophilic' relationship provided a space for rebellion against social norms. Their fantasies were about being different, even about being black. Living out these ideas involved ‘getting down’ with black people, (Archer-Straw 2000; 15).

Consequently, it was acceptable to engage in an unfamiliar culture that may have been unacceptable by American standards. People of European descent felt free to engage in the smooth sounds of jazz that distorted and sometimes mocked the sounds of Western tonal music and ogle at the often over-sexualized appearance of Black Americans.

Through my research, it became increasingly clear, and rather obvious, that the culture of ‘acceptance’ in France was flawed. Was Paris ‘accepting’ or were they simply fascinated? In some ways acceptance was simply a representation of whatever was substantially better than the atmosphere in America for black citizens. This murky gray area presents a reflection of how Black Americans were able to assert their identity in spite of the dark under-belly of Parisian society. Paris was a vital location in throughout the Jazz movement because of the sheer popularity of the music and the crowds that were drawn to the new sounds. African Americans in Paris were able to assert their identity in the epicenter of “African Diasporic intellectual production” (Stovall 2009; 45).

Paris was looking for something avant-garde and Black Americans were looking for
freedom. While Montmartre was not the ideal version of a “prejudice-free” society as one might envision, the reason why many Black Americans migrated to Paris is best illustrated by J.A. Rogers in *Jazz at Home*, 1925,

Transplanted exotic- a rather hardy one, we admit- of the mundane world capitals, sport of the sophisticated, it is really at home in its humble native soil wherever the modern unsophisticated Negro feels happy and sings and dances to his mood. It follows that Jazz is more at home in Harlem than in Paris, though from the look and sound of certain quarters of Paris one would hardly think so. It is just the epidemic contagiousness of jazz that makes it, like the measles, sweep the block. But somebody had to have it first: that was the Negro (1925).

In many ways, the location wasn’t the most important component in the creation of jazz, yet Paris became a place of expression and innovation. “The character of black Paris as a meeting place of cultures in exile encouraged the kind of reflection upon one’s own homeland and identity that seems to come easier when surrounded by unfamiliar places and people” (Stovall 2009). Black Americans were able to assert their identity in Paris and experience a sense of belonging unlike in the US. The Diaspora of jazz music is relevant to the discussion of Black agency because it created new spaces for Black individuals where there wasn’t before.

Political reality, in the form of Jim Crow, limited what musicians would do-whom they could play with, whom they could play for, and what they could play in certain situations. The dissemination of the music was bounded by power relationships; certain spaces were segregated, and musicians could play with only those of their own race. Yet within that system of racial domination, which was becoming more rigid, jazz exploited and widened boundary crossings. Jazz shows us that while identity is always mediated through culture and therefore structured by power, culture is not simply a Foucaultian disciplining mechanism but can be a vehicle for the stretching of identities, opening individuals to the world of the Other (Hersch 2007; 209).

The creation of ‘space’ in Paris is exemplary of the “boundary crossings” that Charles Hersch discusses. Black Americans could play music in whatever way they pleased without the
constraints of ‘racial dominance.’ The black experience is lived through jazz; we can see this in the space they created in Paris. “France [is] a beacon of liberty for Black people as well as an essential site of modern, diasporic black culture” (Stovall 2009).

As the jazz scene created a space for itself in Montmartre, Black Americans increasingly became more successful. The bustling nightlife drew in people from all over France and Europe. Expatriates continued to flock towards Paris for the promise of a better lifestyle. Saloons began to pop up all around Montmartre and the nightclubs stayed open so late into the night that they would turn into ‘jazz brunch’ locations the next morning. The festivities never ended.

Conclusion

The growing jazz scene in Paris set the stage for African Americans to become successful business owners and entertainers. Among some of the first black expatriates to own businesses in Montmartre were Josephine Baker and Ada “Bricktop” Smith. Both in their unique way, these women paved the way for many black, female musicians to gain success in France. For the purposes of my thesis, I am specifically interested in how Black, female musicians were received in Paris and this is a topic I will dive further into in the proceeding chapters. Considering the difficulty to own businesses in America during this time if you were black, let alone female, it is remarkable that Black women in Paris were successful in the industry.

Night Clubs Le Grand Duc, Chez Bricktop, Chez Josephine, and many more, were all booming enterprises in Montmartre and all black-owned. For this reason, Paris is important in the discussion of the Harlem Renaissance. Opportunity was presented to black Americans like
it never had been before and, in turn, liberation from the racial domination that consumed white America. Jazz is a powerful component in early discussions of Black empowerment because it was a vital element in the black Diaspora. Headed by the 369th infantry band, jazz was heard all around Europe. Many scholars leading the Harlem Renaissance either lived for some time or summered in Paris (Stovall 2009). The success of black Americans in Paris is complex because it is apparent that there was a large amount of fetishizing by white Westerners that played into the popularity of vaudeville performance and jazz.

We may recognize that Paris, Montmartre in particular, was a ‘space’ created that transcended many of the barriers typically faced as a Black person in the United States. In Paris, there was an implicit social movement that expressed black agency through jazz. Music was, and will continue to be, a means of Black empowerment and a great influence on the sentiments of society concerning issues of prejudice, both in the United States and in global contexts. For the next two chapters, I will focus on the complexity of the public reception of Black Americans in Paris and, specifically, the representation of Black women in the entertainment industry in Paris.
Chapter 2
The Women of Montmartre

African American women were among the great artists who moved to Paris during the inter-war period to become involved in the jazz scene. Josephine Baker took Paris by storm with “physical expression that characterized the rhythms of jazz” (Gordon 2008; 2), or Le Jazz Hot. Ada “Bricktop” Smith brought a taste of authentic Harlem to the streets of Montmartre and into Bricktops, a popular nightclub she owned. Alberta Hunter dazzled Paris with her bluesy lyricism and stunning performance.

As leaders in the jazz performance scene, these women displayed an incredible amount of autonomy in moving to Paris. Faced with the inherent hardship of being both Black and female, Black American women in Paris represented themselves as positive icons in a world that was not typically inclined to positively perceive them. Despite this complex binary, these women exhibited their agency as self-governing individuals by moving to Paris when faced with animosity regarding racial prejudice in the United States. They flourished with considerable success. Josephine Baker became a household name and the highest earning female in the world during the inter-war period. Everyone wanted to spend their nights at Bricktops café, which Bricktop described as “was a combination mail-drop, bank, rehearsal hall, club house—even a neighborhood bar. But it was always chic” (Monahan 2011).

The Black American entertainment world was intriguing to Parisians to say the least and they couldn’t get enough. Critic Gérard Bauer remarked, “Black, with Josephine Baker, has come back into fashion” (1931). Montmartre was dynamic and exciting, but under the glamour of it all are innumerable layers of preconceived notions towards Black Americans. The women of Montmartre
were exoticized, hyper-sexualized, and eroticized to conform to the standards of white European fantasy. Rather than examine this structure at surface value, which is to say that it was simply problematic, I intend to dig below the surface of the culture in Montmartre during the interwar period. I will explore how Black American women represented themselves as independent agents in French society despite the tenuous relationship of exoticized and exoticizer.

**Identity and the Theory of Intersectionality**

The theory of *Intersectionality*, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989) and Leslie McCall (2005), considers individuals who belong to more than one subordinate group. The theory of *Intersectionality*, that is to say that one cannot separate multiple identities like ‘Black’ and ‘female,’ heavily directs the aim for my thesis. We cannot disregard the innate additional hardship of being both female and Black in a society that constantly undermines these groups. In an explanation of *Intersectionality*, Crenshaw writes:

> I consider how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourse of either feminism or antiracism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women *and* people of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, the interests and experiences of women of color are frequently marginalized within both (Crenshaw 1989; 1).

It is fundamental to consider the constraints of racism and patriarchy in reflection of the Black American women who moved to Paris. Not only did they have to overcome boundaries facing racial tension both in the United States and abroad, but also expectations of femininity that conformed to the societal norm. Social conditions for Black Americans radically changed after
emancipation and they were able to enter personal and sexual relationships that they controlled (Davis 1998; 4). “Sexuality thus was one of the most tangible domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which its meanings were expressed. Sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation” (Davis 1998; 4). Despite having ‘sovereignty in sexual matters,’ we may imagine the difficulty for Black women at the turn of the century to fully express themselves as acceptance of a new social standard overnight. This paradigm illustrates the capacity to which these women overcame challenging expectations and represented themselves as autonomous figures in the social sphere.

**Political Image**

Implicit in certain strands of feminist and racial liberation movements, for example, is the view that the social power in delineating difference need not be the power of domination; it can instead be the source of political empowerment and social reconstruction (Crenshaw 1989; 1).

Many of these women were active participants in the civil rights movement for Black Americans. One of the most well-known figures, later in her career, was Josephine Baker. She spent a significant portion of the mid-twentieth century touring different countries to give speeches about equality. Additionally, she is known for her “rainbow tribe;” she adopted 12 children from around the globe in order to prove that racial harmony was possible. Josephine famously said, “Surely the day will come when color means nothing more than skin tone, when religion is seen uniquely as a way to speak one’s soul; when birth places have the weight of a throw of the dice and all men are born free, when understanding breeds love and brotherhood.” As representation of both Black and
Women, these women pushed social boundaries and acted as positive female icons despite the boundaries of their intersectional identities.

**Exoticization of the Black female in Paris**

In addition to the constraints of being a Black female, the Black American women of Montmartre were also defined by the regressive ideology of the time period. White Westerners tended to use ‘othering’ tactics to distance themselves from- and also engage with- anyone who was not from the white, western world (Archer-Straw 2000). “While African painting and sculpture had exercised an important influence on the visual arts before the war, particularly in the work of Matisse and Picasso, the mode for ‘primitivism’ extended to all the artistic domains in the interwar period” (Gordon 2008; 2). France’s interest with ‘primitive’ culture was epitomized in their fascination with Black Americans. They demanded to be taught the “Black Bottom” dance from Bricktop (Sharpley-Whiting 2015) and couldn’t take their eyes off of Josephine Baker’s dance moves that “seemed to emanate from her violently shuddering body, her bold dislocations, her springing movements, a gushing stream of rhythm” (Levinson 1991; 74).

Not only did Parisians define Black females in their roles in the entertainment industry, but also the artists themselves conformed to these exoticized standards. As agents in the entertainment industry they were obliged to adhere to the image of primitivism in order to get gigs. Petrine Archer-Straw argues that the jazz entertainment scene was one of the main spreads of Negrophilie in the 1920s (2000). The book, *Negrophilie*, details the extent to which Black Americans were exoticized in social and entertainment contexts. Their exoticization was at the heart of a complex
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and binding conflict in which Black Americans had to play into the exoticization to gain success, but also faced the harsh reality that their existence in Parisian society was fueled by means of ‘othering’ them. The performance arts in Montmartre served to reinforce many of these stereotypes as Archer-Straw outlines Josephine Baker’s performance in La Revue nègre:

Josephine Baker’s performance in La Revue nègre reinforced stereotypes of blacks at a time when Europe’s blurred and limited image of them as Africans was changing to accommodate an increased awareness of urban African-American culture (Archer-Straw 107; 2000).

The outward expression of the jazz entertainment scene was seen as being backwards, or counterculture, and yet viewed innovative and remarkable to Parisian society.

Performance and Representation

Josephine Baker made her debut performance in the Paris jazz scene in La Revue nègre (1925). Perhaps what is best known from this production was Josephine Baker’s “Banana Dance.” Josephine Baker appears on stage half-naked with a string of bananas around her waist and astonishes the crowd by madly shaking her hips (Phillips 2011). Upon seeing recordings of Josephine Baker doing the “Banana Dance” it appears that she doesn’t have a single bone in her legs (Phillips 2011). The dance Josephine Baker brought to Europe was avant-garde and was exciting in that way. “You have artists who were showing a great deal of interest in African art and then someone like Josephine comes along and they think that’s the sculpture from their paintings that has come to life” (Phillips 2011).

The dance inspired a vogue in le jazz hot, an innovative style of jazz that played off the characteristic “straight jazz” performance (Gordon 2008). “On a performance of La Revue nègre at
the Nelson theater in Berlin in 1926, Kessler wrote, ‘they [Black Americans in Paris] are a cross between primeval forests and skyscrapers; likewise their music, jazz, in its color and rhythms. Ultramodern and ultra primitive’” (Gordon 2008). The juxtaposition of ‘ultramodern’ and ‘ultra primitive’ in Baker’s dance exemplifies the problematic structure of exoticism at hand. The dance displayed new rhythms and form to the people of Paris, while also perpetuating the image of the Black female as primitive and uncivilized.

Europeans viewed black people as ‘primordial,’ with all the exotic notions that primitive innocence suggested. Alternatively, they saw blacks as being modern ‘new negroes,’ with a pace that matched an urban lifestyle. The two views were not contradictory, particularly for the avant-garde, which admired black people’s ‘primitive’ condition and believed that it provided a useful model for a postwar modern man (Archer-Straw 109; 2000).

In agreement with Archer-Straw, I maintain that “the two views, primitive and primordial, are not contradictory.” This illustrates the power that was held by the dancer. They captivated their audience with the modernity of the dance while also preserving their fetishized perceptions.

Admiration for blacks was bound up with general ignorance about racial distinctions, geography and a common desire for vitality and potency. Increased contact with ‘real’ African-Americans meant an intrusion on these dreams, as the imagined ‘beatings of the jungle tam-tam’ were replaced by ‘le hot jazz’ (Archer-Straw 107; 2000).

The “Banana Dance” best illustrates how Baker managed to represent herself as a powerful female icon and negotiate the complex binary of primitivism vs. modernity. She appears on stage with nothing but a string of bananas around her waist, which is intrinsically phallic by the nature of the shape. As she shakes her hips, she maintains total control over the bananas. Her audience is captivated by her ability to control a structure that represents the male figure (Simon 2006).
The two photos depicted below show artist Paul Colins’ depiction of Baker with the banana skirt (right) and an archival photo of Josephine in her performance garb. “In America, black women were corseted, policed- and policed one another and themselves. In Paris, freedom was creative, social, and sexual. And no one made greater use of the latter in Paris than Josephine Baker” (Sharpley-Whiting 41; 2015). Josephine Baker’s Banana Dance exemplifies her use of sexual freedom in her new home of Paris. She was free to wear as much, or as little, as she pleased and dance proactively and was positively received by her audiences.

In addition to performances, advertisements and artistic renderings displayed the perception of Black Americans in Paris during this era. Below is the advertisement for La Revue nègre. “For the
most part, Colin’s characterizations of blacks were formulaic and repeated the usual range of stereotypes: Childlike, animal-like, savage” (Archer-Straw 2000; 122). By ‘othering’ the Black body through iconographic representation, the Parisians could maintain a superficial opinion of Black identity as defined by image representation.
Ownership

One of the most intriguing aspects about the move to Paris for Black women is the multidimensional layer of ‘ownership.’ Black Americans were able to own property in Paris more easily than if they were in the States. Moreover, the Black women of Montmartre had ownership over their bodies; this was exemplified in how they presented themselves and performed. The media may have owned the portrayal of the Black female body, in that they decided the output and depiction as we saw in the advertisement for La Revue nègre, but the artist ultimately decided their outward expression of self in how they represented themselves publicly on a day-to-day basis.

The significance of ‘place’ becomes vital for Black women during the interwar period. Paris offered opportunity given the racial tensions back at home in the States. France became a place where African American women could realize personal freedom and creativity, in narrative or in performance, in clay or on canvas, in life and in love. Paris, as it appeared to them, was physically beautiful, culturally refined, inexpensive as a result of the war, and seductive with its lack of violent racial animus. “The power of place” was indeed remarkable. Places determine reality; as distinct settings, they are laden with cultural significance. Therefore, speaking, thinking, doing, simply living are never unaffected by where such activities take place (Sharpley-Whiting 5; 2015).

Ada “Bricktop” Smith was one of the most important figures in Montmartre during this period. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting even goes so far as to title her book Bricktop's Paris. Known for her fiery, red hair and charismatic personality, Bricktop was invited to Paris to work for Gene Bullard, who owned Le Grand Duc. She was originally working on the Harlem vaudeville performance circuit. When she arrived in Paris she was taken aback by the small size of Le Grand Duc, the club where she was to entertain, and wept. A kind waiter consoled her—Langston Hughes. After she gained some success, she purchased her own saloon and named it
Bricktops (Monahan 2011). A remarkable amount of people went to Bricktops for the experience. Bricktop writes in her autobiography:

I remember Ethel Walters’s first trip to Paris. She was the talk of the town, but she took me aside and confided, “Brick, I’m starving to death.” It wasn’t a matter of money, but of food. Right in the middle of Paris, with all those fabulous restaurants, Ethel was starving for some real American food, so I let her move into my place for about three weeks and she cooked collard greens to her hearts content. Ethel was never one to stay or to drink. I was able to turn Paris for her from a nightmare into a place where she could really enjoy herself in her own way.

Bricktops became a little piece of Harlem in Montmartre. She was able to maintain the authentic feel of what a night club might be like in Harlem despite not being in the States, and gained considerable success because of this ambiance. Bricktop represented herself as an autonomous woman within the French society.

What’s particularly remarkable about Bricktop is the success she gained even though she did not sexualize herself to become more famous, as we saw with Josephine Baker. Additionally, Baker and Bricktop were very good friends (Sharpley-Whiting 2015), yet had entirely different values. Josephine was willing and wanting to get on stage and flaunt her sexuality, while Bricktop preferred to be more conservative. In this way, both women choose the way in which they represent themselves given the pressures of society.

**Conclusion**

The public context of Montmartre for Black American women is incredibly complex. The women overcame obstacles faced with the being both Black and Women, a binary explained by intersectionality. They displayed autonomy when moving to Paris on their own accord.
Subsequently, they showed to the spectator that they were the owners of their bodies in making conscious decisions of how they were to represent their body image. Additionally, they owned property, which is quite remarkable for Black Women during this time. Finally, the exoticization of Black women in Paris during this time period shows the mirrored relationship of the exoticized and exoticizer. Exoticization is the dark underbelly to what was seen as a “primitive/modern” show. This process "othered" many of the Black women of Montmartre while also giving them the opportunity to move to Paris and gain great success during the Jazz Age in Paris.
Chapter 3
Josephine Baker

Josephine Baker is one of the most iconic figures of the twentieth century. Born in the slums of East St. Louis in 1906, she danced her way from stage to stage in chorus girl lineups to her debut solo performance in *La Revue négre*, Paris, France (1925). Baker is known for her charismatic personality and jaw-dropping performances throughout her European career during the inter-war period. Josephine Baker acts as the ideal candidate to analyze as an illustration of Black, female representation in the early twentieth century. For this chapter, I intend to go into greater depth on Josephine Baker than in the previous chapter to gain a better understanding of how she represented herself and was perceived in Parisian society.

Her portrayal on stage mirrored the preconceived notions of Black females for French society. Baker did not choreograph her own routines (Kraut 2003), which implies she is the creation of a projection of public desire of the Black female onto an object, herself. The available images, dance performances, and films paint a picture of Baker that appears to show her surrendering to what society supposed her to be. *Sauvage* on stage, yet ‘civilized’ by day, Baker showed the world that she was not limited by the biases of society.

Beginnings

Though Baker originated from modest roots, her passion and enthusiasm for the stage brought her far. She learned many of her first dance moves in her hometown – the dance vernacular of African American youth that would soon become popularized in the black
vaudeville circuit. It was clear from a young age that Baker was a talented performer and always seemed to strive to please her audiences. “Following a brief stint with the three-member Jones Family Band playing trombone, doing dance routines, and making comic, cross-eyed faces, Baker got her first break. She landed the role of Cupid in a love scene staged by the Dixie Steppers, a traveling troupe performing at the Booker T. Washington Theater in St. Louis” (Dalton and Gates 1998; 908). Soon after, Baker landed a gig as the “comic chorus girl,” too young, too small, and too skinny to be in the official lineup. This role not only showcased Baker’s comedic genius, but also gave her the opportunity to stand out among the other dancers. “Demonstrating already her extraordinary energy and her evident desire to please the audience, she enlivened every show with the crazy antics and frantic dancing of the chorus girl on the end who kept forgetting the steps and messing up the routine” (Dalton and Gates 1998; 908).

Soon after, Shuffle Along was to take stage in New York City, the first show with an all Black cast in many years. Baker seized the opportunity to be part of the production and auditioned for the chorus line. She was rejected again because she was “too thin, too small, too dark” (Rose 1989; 53). They offered her a position in the dressing room, which she took and learned all of the moves of the production while waiting for one of the chorus girls to fall ill. Inevitably, one of the chorus girls did become ill and Baker was able to take her place on stage.

She was the little girl on the end. You couldn’t forget her once you’d noticed her, and you couldn’t escape noticing her. She was beautiful but it was never her beauty that attracted your eyes. In those days her brown body was disguised by an ordinary chorus costume. She had a trick of letting her knees fold under her, eccentric wise. And her eyes, just wild about… her eyes crossed.

Nothing very beautiful about a cross-eyed coloured girl. Nothing very
appealing. But it was the folding knees and the cross-eyes that helped bring back the choruses for those unforgettable encores (Dalton and Gates 1998; 910).

From this excerpt, it is evident that the outside perspective of the Black female body was problematic. The way Josephine Baker is described shows the skewed beauty standard of the time that she did not match. Yet, Audiences were astounded by her performances. They were outrageous and exhilarating for audiences who had never seen Baker perform. Her talent effortlessly pleased the crowd and she enjoyed giving the crowd what they wanted. The fascination with Baker continues as she uses “eccentric means so as to interrogate the specific gestures that she utilizes to disable, to disrupt, and to deflect more limited regimes of looking” (Brooks 2007). Her audience was captivated by her movements, which were contradictory to what audiences were accustomed to seeing.

**La Revue nègre**

A young society woman, Caroline Dudley Reagan was responsible for Baker’s (and clarinetist Sidney Bechet’s) recruitment to Paris. She intended to stage a production in Paris, much like *Shuffle Along*, that showcased “real Negro music and dance” (Dalton and Gates 1998; 911). After seeing Baker in Shuffle Along, Reagan decided to offer her a ticket to Paris to perform in what would later be known as La Revue nègre.

Music halls first appeared and became popularized in Europe around the 1820s and served as a space to perform an annual ‘review’ that summarized the highlights and relevant events from the year. Though the music-hall shows incorporated different performances from slapstick comedy to magic, they were intended to be informed as well as entertaining
productions. This format was often presented in a “pornographic” and “satirical” manner that allowed for often-controversial topics to be uncensored to the public eye (Archer-Straw 2000). The prospect of an all-black jazz revue presented the perfect opportunity for an avant-garde performance in the music hall (Archer-Straw 2000). *La Revue nègre* was presented at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1925.

In describing Paris’ reaction to *La Revue nègre*, controversial is putting it lightly. The show began as any normal *revue* with juggling and circus acts; the second act was given entirely to the Black performers (Archer-Straw 119; 2000). The performance showcased Black, dancing bodies, in an exoticized, eroticized manner. Baker was considered the un-official star of the show, winning over the audience with her routine, ‘*La Danse sauvage.*’

She made her entry entirely nude except for a pink flamingo feather between her limbs; she was being carried upside down and doing the splits on the shoulder of a black giant. Mid-stage, he paused, and with his long fingers holding her basket-wise around the waist, swung her in a slow cartwheel to the stage floor, where she stood like his magnificent discarded burden, in an instant of complete silence. She was an unforgettable female ebony statue. A scream of salutation spread through the theater. Whatever happened next was unimportant. The two specific elements had been established and were unforgettable- her magnificent dark body, a new model that to the French proved for the first time that black was beautiful, and the acute response of the white masculine public in the capital of hedonism of all Europe- Paris (Dalton and Gates 1998; 914).
To recount Paris’ reaction to *La Revue nègre* properly, Paul Colin, illustrator of *Le Tumulte noir*, a portfolio of vividly colored lithographs used to publicize *La Revue nègre*, offers a written account of his own response to the show:

At ten o’clock one morning I watched a colourful raucous group swarming toward the theatre, devouring their latest find, croissants from a bistro on the avenue Montaigne. Harlem was invading the Champs-Élysées Theatre. Leaping onto the stage like children at play, the troupe broke out into a frenzied tap-dance. With bright-coloured neckties, dotted pants, suspenders, cameras, binoculars and green-and red-laced boots, who needed costumes? What style. The stagehands stopped open-mouthed in the wings, and from our seats in the hall, Rolf de Maré, the theatre manager, André Daven, the director, and I sat gaping at the stage. The contortions and cries, their sporty perky breasts and buttocks, the brilliant coloured cottons, the Charleston, were all brand new to Europe (Archer-Straw 2000; 117).

Through flashy language, Colin shows us the astonished reaction of the Parisian people. They had never seen anything like *La Revue nègre* before, and it quickly became clear that they wanted more. Paris was deeply caught up in the culture of *négrophilie* and Baker became the exoticized idol of the fan-fare. Furthermore, Baker’s passion to please evolved her into the perfect candidate for such a position. Though she may have showed some amount of hesitation at first to her over-sexualized image on stage, she warmed up to the idea and continued to win-over the hearts of her audience. Within the year, Josephine Baker became a common household name in France. Demonstrating her own personal convictions towards her feelings of uncertainty about her public representation, Baker reflects on her experience modeling for Paul Colin in the process of creating *Le Tumulte Noir*:

That night I removed all of my clothes. As time passed I began to feel increasingly comfortable with Paul- as I called him. I spent many happy hours
in his quiet studio. Paul gave me confidence. For the first time in my life, I felt beautiful (Baker *Josephine*).

A give and take relationship developed between Josephine Baker and Paris. Paris allowed her to feel liberated in a way that she never would have felt in the United States. She was free to move on stage, as she liked. She describes that “for the first time, she felt beautiful.” Standardized beauty expectations did not allow room for Black women like Josephine Baker. Upon arriving in Paris, it was clear to Baker that she was desired. The trade-off was succumbing to the desires of French society, creating herself as an ‘other’ rather than fighting to be integrated as the same. She pushed the boundaries in such a way that allowed for other Black performers to have a platform in the entertainment world while also perpetuating the image of the exoticized other labeled by the color of one’s skin.

**Josephine Baker and Exoticization**

Within the discourse of Josephine Baker, sexuality and exoticization are central topics of discussion. Baker is widely acknowledged as the quintessential figure of *Le Jazz Hot*; even delivering to her audiences her exoticized characteristics off stage: Baker adopted a pet cheetah that she would walk around with through the streets of Paris. In the earlier stages of her performance career, she maintained a certain kind of duality that captivated audiences. “She was at once erotic and comic, suggestive and playful, intense and insouciant, primitive and civilized” (Dalton and Gates 918; 1998). Baker played into the fantasies of France’s public
sphere and captivated her audiences. Paul Colin’s work encapsulated this impression of Josephine Baker through *Le Tumulte noir*. The series of lithographs re-created the vivacious energy of the *Jazz Hot* era and Josephine Baker. *Le Tumulte noir* is a scope into the past, for the modern viewer, of the public reception of African Americans in Paris. Below is a series of selected images from *Le Tumulte noir*.

*Figure 7*
The lithographs by Paul Colin show us how, in the popular eye, African Americans were perceived in Paris. “Colin’s images of Josephine were iconic. They became seen as symbols of black female sexuality, and consequently Baker’s antics were viewed as characteristics of her race. Baker’s willingness to adopt certain poses for Colin did little to dispel these racial prejudices” (Archer-Straw 2000; 122). The first image shows the cover page of Le Revue nègre and Josephine Baker in the famous banana skirt. The second image depicts a Black male dancing with a white female, the “juxtaposition challenges the taboo of racial association” (Archer-Straw 2000; 129). This image demonstrates the fantasized image of the Black entertainer in Paris. The bottom two images depict Josephine Baker. Both are scantily clad, showing her bare-breasted: eroticizing Baker. These images exemplify the undulating movement of Baker, while also contorting her body into “animal-like” structure (Archer-Straw 2000). The final of the four images shows Baker behind bars, almost as if to say that she is unreachable. She is exoticized in such a way to the public eye that tells the spectator she is only for the pleasures of viewing. “Her splayed legs and vampish look, the regular criss-crossed stripes and the startled on-looking musician suggest a caged animal with a voracious appetite” (Archer-Straw 2000; 128). Le Tumulte noir achieved great fame for Baker and Colins’, while also disseminating stereotypes about African Americans in Paris. Two prefaces prepare the reader for the series of lithographs: the first signed by “Rip” (Georges Thenon), and the second is by Josephine Baker.

Her preface confirms Rip’s satirical analysis of Paris’s total infatuation with “colored people” and especially with “the Charleston, that mad dance.” She jokes about domestic disputes over the “right way” to do the Charleston and traffic jams precipitated by a driver encouraging his horse with the words that also signaled passersby to begin the panky at the office has been replaced by the Charleston (Dalton and Gates 925; 199)

Throughout her professional career Josephine Baker was given a platform to voice her own
opinions on her career. Her satirical analysis of “Paris’s infatuation with ‘colored people’” says a lot about her own opinions of the public reception of African Americans in Paris. On a deeper level, she seemed to recognize how outlandish the fetishization was. Parisians were deeply committed to the concept of *nègrophilie* and artists like Josephine Baker capitalized on that. Baker is the portrait of the relationship between the exoticized and exoticizer. She is very successful because of her exoticized depiction, but is also the subject of a very convoluted message of the identity of Black American females. She perpetuated the image that Paris wanted for Black females, which heavily complicates the perception of Black American females.

*Danse Sauvage*

Baker was asked to star in *Les Folies-Bergère*. “Wearing her now-infamous banana skirt, she appeared as the young savage Fatou in an African jungle setting replete with palm trees, a sleeping white explorer, and several semi-nude black male drummers” (Kraut 439; 2003). As I have referenced earlier in chapter 2, the image of the dancing bananas puppeteered by Bakers gyrating hips pays homage to her sexually tantalizing persona. The bananas reference a jungle setting that set the Black performers as exotic creatures for viewing pleasure, further emphasizing her exoticized appearance.

*Zouzou (1934)*

Baker was asked to act in a variety of films. In the four films, *La Sirène des tropiques*
Corwin 41

(1927), **Zouzou** (1934), **Princess Tam Tam** (1935), and **The French Way** (1945), she is asked to play the role of the primitive girl. Either her character is exotic, as in *La Sirène des tropiques* (1927) or *Princess Tam Tam* (1935), or naïve, *Zouzou* (1934). The film *Zouzou* (1934) serves as an encapsulating depiction of Baker’s representation in many of her films. The plot of the film is that she is born into a traveling circus and acts as twins with character Jean, who is white. As they grow older, Jean treats Zouzou (Baker) like a sister, but she is in love with him. When Jean is accused of murder, Zouzou needs to find a way to make money to defend him so she takes on the career of a performer. One of the most iconic scenes from all of her films is the “shadow scene” in *Zouzou* (1934). Baker comes enters the stage on screen in her new role as a performer in the film. She discovers her shadow and is enveloped in a comical dance series until she discovers there is, in fact, an audience watching her. She then runs off stage in embarrassment. This scene, along with the rest of the film, illustrates Baker as unsophisticated and childlike. Her character is 'primitivized' in such a way that constructs her identity to be far more temperate than the reality of her fiery personality. Furthermore, in the film, Jean, doesn’t choose to be with her in the end. This is telling of the fantasized desires of society, while also the actuality of how the media represented images of Black women. They are, at once, desired, but not pursued.
Later Years

In many ways, Baker was not recognized for her multi-faceted personality until her later years, throughout and post WWII. She was an advocate and activist for human rights and traveled around the world to express her sentiments.

As Josephine Baker began to rise to public prominence in France, she found herself in the political limelight. Her 1928-29 world tour politicized her primal image. This period marked the first stage of her political education and activism... the war years brought her activism to fruition and repositioned her political commitment as an adjuvant to her performances. Baker’s body, in itself, became a political challenge in the late 1920s. The fact that her danse sauvage and erotic displays left the music hall and entered public discourse in France, Germany, Austria, and Argentina opened up racial and gender images that had previously been confined within the bounds of demimonde performances. By inscribing her experiences in the press and in biographies, Baker broke through the boundaries of the music hall into a broader public space, which, years later, she would exploit to her advantage (Jules-Rosette 2007; 214).

Jules-Rosette emphasizes the importance of Baker “breaking out into the public sphere.” While her early performances might have been seen as improper or offensive, they became more mainstream as she broke boundaries by performing outside of the music halls.

In Josephine Baker in Art and Life, Jules-Rosette frames Baker’s political image into four distinct categories: (1) the spokeswoman because of her mobility and visibility throughout her world tours; (2) the warrior and spy for her role in WWII as a soldier and spy for the French counterintelligence and Resistance forces; (3) the militant and martyr, because of her controversial positions on human rights, but also war-time efforts; and (4) the head of family and state as Baker continues her role as a ‘martyr’, but also managing a mini ‘utopian society’ at the local level in Les Milandes, the village in which her mansion was located. The domain had its
own post office, educational system, theme park, and farm for experimentation and sustenance (Jules-Rosette 2007; 215). For her services in the war, Baker was later awarded the Medal of Resistance and named Chevalier of the Legion of Honor by the French government. Though I would not go as far as to define Baker as a ‘martyr’ as Jules-Rosette does, clearly Baker had a complex system of ideologies that extend far past her image as a ‘primitive’ expatriate. The way in which she represented herself to the public eye has greatly contributed to how she navigated maintaining a ‘political image’ throughout the twentieth century (Jules-Rosette 2007). Baker used her prominence in global society as a public platform to promote a positive worldview of multi-culturalism and equality, a rather unique initiative for an entertainer during her time.

My life, like that of so many others, is a constant struggle. I’ve placed my worldwide reputation as an artist on one side of the scale and human justice on the other. The choice is easy for me because I’ve always placed human justice above materialism (Baker and Bouillon: Jules-Rosette 213; 2007)

Given Baker’s commitment to civil rights, it is problematic that she is primarily remembered for her primitive performance roles, such as the banana dance. Her public persona is a constant contradiction. She fought to be viewed as an equal, yet in her earlier career she performed roles that subverted the Black image in the public eye. In many ways, this demonstrates the duality of Baker’s personality.

The image that most people hold of Josephine Baker is that of an ingénue who danced wearing only a skimpy banana skirt. But Baker must be seen beyond the banana skirt syndrome. It is the fate of mythic figures, in particular those emerging from show business, to be frozen in collective memory and to project images that may have become exaggerated, stereotyped, or outmoded. In a consumer society where the cult of the image is a form of thought, public personalities have no freedom… Baker was a woman torn between multiple
identities and multiple loves. She lived for her loves and, in a certain sense, dies as a result of them (Jules-Rosette 2007; xii)

Although Baker was portrayed in an often exoticized and eroticized manner, she continued to represent herself in the public image as not only an informed citizen, but also a woman of autonomy. Baker claimed ownership of her sexuality; she mocked her hyper-eroticized image with her comedic dance moves. Furthermore, she was able to express herself through a variety of mediums, for example, her preface in *Le Tumulte noir*. Baker played to the desires of her audience, which illustrates the complexity of her personality. It is clear that she made the conscious decision to do so.

Conclusion

What is perhaps the most frustrating is that Baker is most commonly remembered for her savage roles and not as much for her remarkable energy and activism for civil rights and wartime efforts. Through Parisian eyes, Baker is exoticized, eroticized, primitivized, and hyper-sexualized. This is clear through the iconography of *Le Tumulte noir* as well as the variety of her performances on stage and in films. Baker was such a complex woman, what has been discussed is only the tip of the iceberg. The duality of her personality is remarkable. Her portrayal on stage does not even begin to illustrate the complexity of her personality, not to mention her role as a political advocate. Josephine Baker was known in many contexts and by many names: “Black Pearl,” “Bronze Venus,” “Jazz Cleopatra,” “Creole Goddess.” Baker is one of the first, key examples of how Black female entertainers were, and still are, portrayed and perceived in society. It is clear, in the case of Josephine Baker, that there was a certain amount of distancing between the Black performer and their audience. This ‘othering’ approach allowed for white
audiences to enjoy, scrutinize, and fantasize Black performers without the fear of infringing on conventional, societal tolerances. This also allowed for performers, like Baker, to push controversial boundaries and lay the foundation for Black performers for the remainder of the twentieth century. When Josephine Baker passed, she was honored with a 21-gun salute, the first American woman buried with military honors in France (The Official Josephine Baker Website). Her contributions, as recognized by France upon her passing, to the entertainment industry and commitment to activism will forever be honored in her memory.
**Transition**

Much like Black women in the entertainment industry during the interwar period, the contemporary entertainment scene is the conduit for Black female perspective and representation. Also similar to the interwar period, the contemporary music industry has tendencies towards misrepresented perceptions of Black female musicians. Patterns of exoticization, hyper-sexualization, and erroneous public representations continue to pervade mainstream media. Is it possible that one hundred years later stereotypes for Black women in the entertainment industry have hardly changed? Perhaps artists like Josephine Baker have left such a profound impact on the world that the image of Black women in entertainment is cyclical. I consider Black women in music, particularly the Hip-Hop scene, as part of a continuum established over one hundred years ago. In order to gain mega stardom, Black women in entertainment must play into strongly perpetuated ideologies. The first three chapters of this thesis have served as a foundational discourse to an analysis of the contemporary music scene. For the remainder of this study, I will explore the varying degrees to which Black women in entertainment today do or do not play into the aforementioned stereotypes and how, as autonomous figures in the industry, they shape their image in the public eye.
Chapter 4
Hip-Hop Homegirls and Honeys

If women ran hip hop
The beats & rhymes would be just as dope,
But there would never be a bad vibe when you
Walked in the place…
If women ran hip hop
We would have the dopest female emcees ever
Because all the young women afraid to bust
Would unleash their brilliance on the world

-If Women Ran Hip Hop, Ava De Leon (2007)

The excerpt from this poem is a reflection on how different the hip-hop world would be if it was not run by a patriarchal structure. Leon alludes to the cleanliness and safety of the clubs if women were to run hip-hop demonstrating the purity of clarity of mind of most of the femals MCs and their commitment to a positive message. The Hip Hop Movement has shown us the dynamic power of expression with music as the means to a communication to the greater public. Arguably, the structure of this movement has shaped the pop culture scene and representations of Black women in music, much like the gender role expectations for
Black women in Paris as I described earlier.

Similar to Jazz in the interwar period in Paris, I choose to focus on hip-hop because it is, respectively, the cultural representation of Black empowerment (Rabaka 2013). As rapper KRS-ONE famously stated, “Rap is something you do, hip-hop is something you live.” The Hip-Hop Movement originated in the 1970s as an aftermath to Civil Rights and the Black power movements (Rabaka 2013; 287). In their book, *The Hip Hop Movement*, Rabaka argues that Hip-Hop should be considered a movement because without the political context that it represents, the music loses much of its meaning. Rabaka writes:

> To invoke hip-hop as a “movement,” rather than merely a “generation,” is to conjure up and consciously conceive of hip-hop as the accumulated politics and aesthetics of each and every African American movement and musical form that preceded it. To speak of hip hop as a “movement” also means circumventing the long-standing- and, at this point, very tired- tendency to privilege hip hop’s aesthetics and other accoutrements, especially rap music and videos, over hip hop’s politics and social visions. Just as it would be absurd to attempt to reduce the Civil Rights Movement to classic rhythm & blues or the Black Power Movement to classic soul, it is ridiculous to reduce the Hip Hop Movement to rap music (Rabaka 2013; 185-186).

Additionally, reducing the *New Negro* movement, of the early twentieth century, to jazz would be absurd. Artists then and now are able to gain political ground using music as an empowering avenue. The Hip Hop Movement came about as a means to reinvent the Black power movement and provoke a new context to what it means to be Black in America.

Rap music brings together a tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society. Rap’s contradictory articulations are not signs of absent intellectual clarity; they are common feature of community and popular cultural dialogues that always offer more than one cultural, social, or political viewpoint. These unusually abundant poly-vocal conversations seem irrational when they are severed from the social contexts where everyday struggles over resources, pleasure, and meanings take place… Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices
from the margins of urban America (Rose 1994; 2).

Originating in the Bronx, Hip-Hop became the culture of a new form of expression as a result of systematic neighborhood violence. Hip-Hop was a means to communicate, through MCing/rapping, DJing/scratching, break dancing, and graffiti, issues with race relations in the States.

**Gangsta-Rap**

Music generated from the Hip-Hop movement has not been entirely progressive and positive. While in a large part Hip-Hop has been a means to ‘communicate race relations in the States,’ there has been a lot of music produced that we may perceive as being more negative and regressive. One of the sub-groups of the Hip Hop Movement is Gangsta Rap. “The late 1980s marked a drastic change in rap music history when artists from California introduces to rap a more 'bassy' sound with a laid-back feel heavily rooted in 1970s funk music” (Keyes 2002; 88). Much of Gangsta Rap philosophy is embedded with messages of violence, homophobia, hyper-masculinized depictions, and misogyny.

I sometimes feel bad for criticizing hip-hop, but I’m just trying to get us men to take a hard look at ourselves. We’re in this box. In order to be in that box you have to be strong, you have to be tough, you have to have a lot of girls, you gotta have money, be a player or a pimp, dominate other men and other people, you have to have control. If you’re not those things then you’re soft, weak, a pussy, or a faggot. No one wants to be any of those things, so everyone stays inside the box. (Hurt 2006)

Within the boxed labels for masculinity, the gender roles play out in such a way that also typecast women in the hip-hop scene. Often women are seen playing to gender roles that subvert them to images of objectification, hyper-sexuality, and gender based violence. Furthermore,
Gangsta Rap often gets the blame for a lot of the animosity towards Hip Hop culture. Gangsta Rap is the result of representing life in places like Compton. Regardless of the politically charged message that it attempts to convey, it is impossible to ignore the negative implications associated with the music, especially the women who are represented within the musical discourse. The messages that are voiced are often convoluted by the hyper-masculine image they portray. Gangsta Rap music is a central element to consider for this thesis because it illustrates the “boxed” roles that Black women in the hip-hop industry are expected to conform to. Despite the supposed limitations of these “boxes,” it is evident that many women in hip-hop are pushing past the expected roles.

**Keyes’ Theoretical Approach**

In the face of a culture that plays to negative gender roles, there are many powerful, female MCs who positively represent themselves. I would also like to revisit the concept of intersectionality, aforementioned in *chapter 2*: the identity theory that tackles how people manage ‘self’ when faced with two or more forms of oppression, such as Black and female. Women in hip-hop culture confront issues both within the confines of gender roles in hip hop and race relations in American society. Some of the first women to do so were Queen Latifah, Souljah, Salt-N-Pepa, Lil Kim, Yo-Yo, the list goes on… In *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, Cheryl Keyes opens her chapter on Women, Race, and Class Representation by stating:

Rap music has been often presented in the media as an urban male phenomenon. This assumption is more apparent when observing the disproportionate representation of female MCs featured in music video programs or on radio compared to that of male artists. Though the presence of female rap artists may seem rather small, particularly during rap’s formative
years, observers of this form began to notice the proliferation of successful rap female acts during the 1990s. As the rap music journalist Havelock Nelson notes, the ‘80s, artists like [MC] Lyte, [Queen] Latifah, Roxanne Shanté, and [Monnie] Love have had to struggle to reach a level of success close to that of male rappers” (1993: 77). Like their male counterparts, women rap about aspects of inner-city life and their desire to be “number one”; unlike male MCs, they shed light on everyday realities from a woman’s perspective. In challenging that they have lyrical skillz, but in their struggle to survive and thrive within this tradition they have created spaces form which to deliver powerful messages form black female and black feminist viewpoints. (Keyes 2002; 186).

Faced with both racism and sexism, female hip-hop artists had to overcome many hurdles in order to gain success. Furthermore, even when success was obtained, these women typically adhered to a certain set of stereotypes within the hip-hop genre. Keyes outlines the different characterizations of women in hip-hop to four different categories: Queen Mother, Fly girl, Sista with Attitude, and The Lesbian. I choose a categorical approach, much like Keyes, to define the women of my own research. Her theoretical approach is as follows:

The Queen Mother category is defined as being “comprised of female rappers who define themselves as African-centered icons…their rhymes embrace black female empowerment and spirituality, making clear their self-identification as African, woman, warrior, priestess, and queen” (189). Queen Latifah is seen as fitting under this category because of her ‘motherly image’ and ‘full-figure.’ The Fly Girl is described as a female is fashionably chic and sexy (while also being sexually independent and responsible), but contrary to other “main stream” images of sexy, the Fly Girl is outspoken in her opinion (194). “Raps fly girl image is political because it calls attention to aspects of black women’s bodies that are considered undesirable by mainstream American standards of beauty” (194). The group Salt-N-Pepa is seen as being an
example of the *Fly Girl*. The *Sista with Attitude*, or ‘tude, comprise of female Hip Hop MCs who utilize an aggressive or oppositional disposition. They take on this assertive and uncompromising persona as a means of empowerment. In other words, the bad girl image, the ‘tude, is used to gain respect from their peers and audiences (200). Finally, *The Lesbian* represents elements from the three preceding categories. Many lesbians in the Hip Hop world have chosen to remain closeted because of the notoriously homophobic culture (206). When hip-hop artists started to come out it was a “breakthrough for queer culture” (206). What is significant about all of these categories of female hip-hop artists is, each in their own way, their commitment to “identity, socio-history, and esoteric beliefs” (209). Despite the negative contexts associated with hip-hop culture, these women seek empowerment and gain agency, autonomy, and independence through the art of hip-hop.

**Home Girls and Honeys**

While I do not plan to specifically use Keyes’ categories, they shed light on the theory that women in hip-hop are often boxed into certain groupings that confine them to a strict identity and how they continue to represent themselves despite the pigeonhole categories. For the purposes of my thesis, I would like to introduce *home girls* and *honeys*. Much like Keyes classifications, I aim to define *home girls* as an all-encompassing version of the aforementioned groupings. 2Pac tells us “You ain’t shit without your homeboyz.” Well, I am here to tell you hip-hop ain’t shit without your homegurlz.

Contrary to home girls, my second category *hip-hop honeys* are representative of the misogynistic, patriarchal structures that stem from hip-hop culture. “Hip-hop honeys,” or
Video Vixens, are the female models seen in the visual representations of hip-hop. “Hip-Hop Honeys” and “Video Vixens” are the describing terms used in hip-hop media that reference the women who appear in music videos and other hip-hop visual representations. Often, these women are shown scantily clad in the background, secondary to the male MCs. The hip-hop honey perpetuates the hyper-masculinized versions of MC identity and, subsequently, objectifies the women in hip-hop culture. Within this patriarchal structure, to be successful is to have many women as sexual objects of desire. The honey also plays into the eroticized, hyper-fantasy world of hip-hop culture. They are placed as sexual objects of desire and removed of a voice.

Conclusion

In the remaining chapters, I will focus on female performers who are current in the music scene. I choose to focus on Beyoncé and Missy Elliot as cultural icons, but there are many other women who have great influence on the popular music culture of today: Nicki Minaj, Azaelea Banks, Lil’ Kim. Juxtaposed to these autonomous, female figures in the contemporary pop-culture music scene, I further analyze Hip-Hop Honeys.

Black women in the hip-hop and popular music industry are constantly at odds with a preconceived idea of the roles to which they are meant to fit into. These women are inundated with expectations of how they are supposed to represent themselves in order to be successful in the entertainment industry. Hip-Hop Honeys serve to perpetuate this culture, while Home Girls consistently represent themselves as progressive icons in spite of the complexity of female hip-
hop identity. I intend to explore the multi-faceted ways in which this culture is carried on through Home Girls and Honeys. First, I will discuss ‘Hip-Hop Honeys,’ so as to consider the problematic frameworks for Black women in the music industry. After an analysis of ‘Hip-Hop Honeys,’ I will discuss how Black women in music are pushing past these problematic contexts with two specific case studies: Beyoncé and Missy Elliot.
Chapter 5
Hip-Hop Honeys

“I usually never tweet questions but I struggle with this so here goes… Is the word BITCH acceptable? To be more specific, is it acceptable for a man to call a woman a bitch even if it’s endearing? Even typing it in question form [it] still feels harsh? Has hip hop conditioned us to accept this word?”

-Kanye West, Twitter (2012)

It is certainly nice to see Kanye West getting introspective about the use of ‘bitch’ in Hip-Hop. Evidently, the release of his album *Yeezus* (2013) indicates that he resolved this internal conflict by concluding that it is appropriate to use the term. The release of *Yeezus* (2013) generated significant backlash and was called out as being “one long hate letter to women” (Soderberg 2013). The album contains explicit lyrics of fantasized sexual violence against women and still boasted the title of a ‘Platinum Record’ (Muhammad 2014). In the 21st century, top-selling artists freely produce albums with unambiguous misogynistic lyricism and justify it by claiming “creative freedom” (West 2014). There are complex issues at work here. Violent and sexist music is the commodified output of darker, destructive aspects of society that perpetuate systematic ideology of female oppression.

While Hip-Hop/Rap music is a tool for generating political platform, the music industry has, unfortunately, been inconsiderate to representations of the Black female body. This is not to say that Hip-Hop is the only genre of music that has misogynist implications. Hip-Hop has been an easy and constant target for ‘Parental Advisory’ warnings, despite rampant sexist implications in other genres such as punk, metal, and indie rock (Blay 2015). Despite the problematic implications in a vast amount of pop music genres, I choose to focus on Gangsta Rap because of the way in which the Black female body is represented through the lyrics and
The *Hip-Hop Honey* is a manifestation of the hyper-masculinity and misogyny that dominates a lot of the hip-hop scene. The name ‘Hip-Hop Honey’ is the general term that I have gathered, through researching popular media, for the women who appear in the periphery of rap music videos. This is not to say that all hip-hop is ruled by an intense patriarchal philosophy, but there does so happen to be a great portion of rap that is largely objectifying towards women. The depictions of women in music videos often exoticize and eroticize women, their dancing bodies are represented as no more than supporting figures to the main artist. “She is the ‘eye candy’ that sells the rapper, the products of his supposed ‘lifestyle,’ and finally, the song, with every wiggle of her body, sway of her hips, and glisten of her skin. Indeed, there is a widely shared consensus that ‘many hip-hop videos are very nearly soft-core porn already, and they wouldn’t be the same without the ever-present background of rump-shakin’, booty-quakin’ honeys” (Miller-Young 2008; 263). The pornographic gaze directed at Hip-Hop Honey shapes the way those who consume rap music perceive the female Black body and influences our stereotypes of the performers. Through different media sources, such as music videos and advertising, the image of the Hip-Hop Honey is perpetuated and pushed upon public reception.

A simple Google search of ‘Hip-Hop Honeys’ brings up quite a few questionable databases. The first page that pops up is a site called *Hip Hop Lead*. Here you will find updates on the latest from hip-hop from ‘albums’ to ‘lifestyle.’ There is one tab that is of ‘hip-hop models’ or hip-hop honeys. The women are categorized by ‘type of hip-hop model’ and their hip-hop names. It is clear that what they are really defined by is their photos, which appear before their name. They are mostly nude and posed suggestively (to put it lightly). When you click on the model’s photo a short bio pops up. The bios describe the honeys as “best known for
straight-up killin’ video sets of Hip-Hop heavyweights through a lethal combination of sultry moves and raw sex appeal” and “[she] owes her striking good looks to Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Swedish heritage,” but most have no description and just lead to more suggestive photos. The photos on this website and the images in many music videos are consistent with that of the pornography industry, which objectifies women and represents them as sexual objects, largely excluding the sexual pleasure of the female. Margaret Hunter suggests these women are set in a “pornographic gaze” (Hunter 2009).

Music videos and rap lyrics increasingly draw on well-established themes in pornography. The “pornification” (Paul, 2005) of rap music also involves increased representation of women as porn stars, strippers, prostitutes, and other types of sex workers. Beyond representations of “types” of women, the pornification of rap also involves the routinization of a “pornographic gender relation.” We describe pornographic gender relations as those that portray interactions between women and men in particular and limited ways.

Websites like Hip Hop Lead also facilitate this image of these women, merely there for viewing pleasure.

Bell hooks is a well-known critic of the misogynist implications of rap music. She argues that rap music videos are largely based on commercialization and commoditization, motivated by a financial goal. The artists gain millions of dollars in the industry, but the fallout from the visualization of women in the videos is far more destructive than whatever the financial worth is. bell hooks argues:

The rap that gets in national news is always the rap music that perpetuates misogyny [and] that is most obscene in its lyrics. And this is what comes to stand for what rap music is. Really it is a perfect paradigm of colonialism. That is to say that if we think of rap music as a little third world country that young white consumers are able to go to and take out of it whatever they want we would have to acknowledge that young white consumers, primarily male, often times
suburban, [were] energized by [in rap music] misogyny, obscenity, feudalistic eroticism, and, therefore, that form of rap began to make the largest sums of money (hooks 2006).

Women’s bodies in music videos are pornographic and eroticized. Furthermore, hooks maintains that the exoticization of the Hip-Hop Honey has racial implications, leading to racist and sexist stereotypes that are reaffirmed in rap music videos. Her discussion on rap music videos interprets the implications and impact of viewing the women in these videos. Additionally, hooks argues that the interpretations of women in rap music videos impact the greater community and influences how we perceive Black women in today’s society:

I think that rap videos, like all major videos right now, have re-inscribed the female body in very traditionally sexist, pornographic ways and within the pornographic imaginary. To the extent that rap music or any kind of black music uses more of the black female body. The black female body comes into the greater representation solely along the sexual terms that we have historically represented within that spectrum. The “hot pussy,” the “prostitute,” the “slut,” the “vocal girl,” the “girl who is willing to do whatever the nice girl won’t.” All of these images and representations have given a function to racist and sexist stereotypes (hooks 2006).

If we maintain that there is an established perception of exoticized, hyper-sexualized Black females, then it is clear that the hip-hop honey perpetuates the fantasy woman stereotypes. The music videos do little to give the viewers a multi-faceted view of the women past their objectified appearance.

In continuation with the same theme, Miller-Young defines hip-hop honeys under the guise of pornography. She discusses the objectification of the Black female body within the scope of rap music videos: “hip hop and pornography have partnered to commodify black sexuality in a new genre form, employing black women’s bodies as the hard currency of exchange” (Miller-Young 2008; 262). Throughout the article, Miller-Young’s criticizes the
commoditization of the black body and how it has shaped the hip-hop industry into the mildly pornographic construction that it is. She argues that hip-hop has been a means for the exotic, sexual fantasy world or porn to enter into the mainstream media.

The voicelessness of the Hip-Hop Honeys set them in a subservient position to the men in the rap music videos. The lyricism of gangsta rap implies an overtly dominant position over the women depicted in the videos. If they women could speak, what would they say? The female body in Hip-Hop represents the sexist implications in the music. Their role is limited to sex appeal and supporting the hyper-masculine persona of those who aim to subvert there being as they commodify their eroticized bodies. In an interview for the August 2015 issue with Rolling Stone, rapper Ice Cube ‘vehemently defends’ the use of the words “bitches” and “hoes:”

If you’re a bitch, you’re probably not going to like us. If you’re a hoe, you probably don’t like us. If you’re not a hoe or a bitch, don’t be jumping to the defense of the despicable females. I never understood why an upstanding lady would even think we were talking about her (Ice Cube 2015).

The male dominated banter n Hip-Hop leaves little room for the ‘voice’ of women in Hip-Hop. The women are categorized as “despicable females” or “upstanding ladies” on the whim of the male rappers with no regard for the female perspective. The ‘voicelessness’ of the females illustrates the difficulty for female MCs to be heard or taken seriously (Blay 2015).
The image above (fig.13) is from the music video Mann ft. Snoop Dogg and Lyaz. The song speaks to the lot of the classic ideology of gangsta rap music videos: money, cars, and women. Snoop Dogg, one of the rap icons of the generation, is featured in this song. His musical break glorifies owning expensive cars (Cadillac to be specific) and alludes sleeping with ‘Mack’s girl.’ What is seen by the viewers is Snoop Dogg and the rest of the male artists in the video fully dressed, while the ‘Video Vixens,’ too many to count, all dance around them in bikinis. This is representative of a greater context within the music, which is that the women are there for visual pleasure, and implied sexual pleasure, while the men may carry on as fully empowered individuals, free to say and wear whatever they like. The song continues, following the hyper-masculinized traditions of gangsta rap, and speaking only to the superficial values that are typical of the musical genre.
Snoop Doggs debut album, *Doggy Style* (fig.14), pays homage to both his stage name and the sexual position. His debut album had high record sales and was named one of the most significant albums of the 90s and one of the most important hip-hop albums ever released (*Acclaimed Music* 2003). The reception of this album was polarized in opinion. The album was successful, but also received a great deal of negative criticism. Music critic David Browne gave the album a ‘B-‘ (Browne 1993). Browne begins, “Like most gangsta rap, it chronicles a world of tossed-off threats and toking, a world of ‘bitches’ and ‘hoes’ who only want a man’s money, a world where ‘n*gga’ is a term of endearment.” Browne continues, “But then- and this is a massive ‘but then’- comes a song like ‘Aint No Fun (If the Homies Can’t Have None).’ Sure, it’s a swinging, hard-thumping piece of R&B craft that easily outtrips anything new jack crooner Keith Sweat has offered lately, but it also touts gang-banging as a male-bonding sports event: ‘Pass it to the homie/Now you hit it,’ raps one of Snoop’s posse in the most callous tone possible. It’s an example of how musically artful, yet how lyrically repellent, this album can be” (Browne 1993). With all of that said, this album was still one of the top selling of the year and considered to be one of the most musically influential to hip-hop. The high visibility of this album implies that many overlooked (or didn’t) the misogynistic implications of the lyricism. The album artwork, alone, is
representative of the values that hold true for the hip-hop honey world. The female in the photo is objectified, sexualized, and de-humanized as she is depicted as a dog. Again, the male figure is seen fully clothed, assuming absolute power of the hip-hop dimensions.

Evidently, feudalist eroticism and misogyny, discussed by hooks, is a top seller in our society. Perhaps it is a fault of the system. A system that boasts an idealized form of masculinity is defined by the quantifiable number of cars, money, and ‘hos’ that one possesses. As a result, the women in the videos are valued at little more than their figure, a commodified source of sexuality. Gangsta rap music videos play into this commercial structure. The music perpetuates fantasy ideals about man-hood and eroticism. The opportunity for political discourse that emanates from Hip-Hop culture is lost in the commodification of surreal gender role expectations. The ‘dream girl’ is personified in the Hip-Hop Honey. This is a woman who is seen, but not heard. A woman who visually implies submissive sexuality for the one-sided pleasure of the rap artist. The Hip-Hop Honey illuminates the confined stereotypes for Black women in music and sets the framework for expected representations. The barriers seem overwhelmingly difficult to overcome given the expectations for Black women in music.

Despite the Hip-Hop Honey and misogynist representations of women in Hip-Hop videos, there are women who are making vast changes in the hip-hop world and breaking past the constraints set forth by much of the rap music genre. For the following two chapters, I will discuss two case studies of women who are pushing past these boundaries in unique ways: Beyoncé and Missy Elliot.
Chapter 6
Case Study: Beyoncé

One of the most successful worldwide celebrities of our day is Beyoncé. As a Black woman in music who has achieved mega-stardom, Beyoncé is not only under the constant scrutiny of the public eye, but also faces the day-to-day challenges of preconceived notions about being both female and Black in American society. Beyoncé has toured worldwide and appeared on some of the most widely-viewed stages in the world, the Super Bowl stage in 2013 and 2015 being just one of them. She has used her stardom for positive, political influence, acting as an advocate and activist for female and racial equality. She is under a lot of criticism because of her great public influence; we can look to her recent Super Bowl appearance and the #BoycottBeyonce movement that started because of her controversial hit single Formation (Respers 2016). Alternatively, she maintains a mass, cult-like following who #praisebeysus (Powers 2013) and who place her above criticism (Reeves 2016). The media banter shows us that Beyoncé has huge influence in pop media and American culture and her stardom has given her a very valuable platform that she successfully uses and defines herself by many of her political standpoints.

Analogous to Josephine Baker during the interwar period, Beyoncé upholds similar characteristics in the way she is received and how she represents herself as a result of her reception. Much like Baker, Beyoncé’s rise to fame has been the result of playing to the expected desires of her audiences, defined by heteronormative visions of sexuality and femininity. She tactfully controls this persona and maintains the global gaze, while also navigating complicated discourses about race and femininity. Her fame has placed her on a high-
visibility platform that allows a great amount of opportunity to engage in political discourse that has and continues to sustain followers.

Throughout my research, I found very few unscripted interviews with Beyoncé. Her public image is very carefully formulated before being given to the public. She is not just selling her music, but also her image. This is to say that the intentionality of her actions suggests all of her professional decisions are well thought out and executed. For instance, she has spearheaded multiple social, political movements: e.g. #Banbossy, #Flawless. Contrary to political movements that have generally been positively received, she has been scrutinized for her public image because of her tendency to put her powerful femininity and sexuality on display (hooks 2014).

**Early Life**

Beyoncé came from humble beginnings. She was born on September 4, 1981, to Celestine Knowles, a hair dresser and salon owner, and Matthew Knowles, a Xerox salesman (“The Family Business”). Beyoncé was discovered by her dance instructor Darlette Johnson when she was only seven years old (contactmusic.com). Her musical training began when she was enrolled in Parker Elementary School, a school that specialized in music and then later in a high school for the performing arts (contactmusic.com). When she was eight years old she joined the group Girls Tyme, which was generally unsuccessful. Her father quit his day job to manage the group, later to be named Destiny’s Child (contactmusic.com). The financial pressure of her father quitting his job led to divorce. Matthew Knowles became the groups’ full time manager and brought them to a signed label with Columbia records and a great amount of success, topping Billboards 200 list (contactmusic.com). Beyoncé made her first solo appearance
alongside Jay-Z in “Bonnie and Clyde” (2002) (contactmusic.com). Destiny’s Child broke up after the other two members, Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams, accused Matthew Knowles of having special interest in Beyoncé and brought him to court for the allegations (contactmusic.com). From here Beyoncé embarked on her solo career, also managed by her father, until she severed ties with him in 2010 because she felt that it was negatively affecting their relationship (Knowles 2013). We can see that in Beyoncé’s earlier years, her image was controlled by her father. After severing ties with her father, she was able to construct an image entirely of her own autonomous decision making.

**Constructed Image and Power**

There is no doubt that Beyoncé is a highly influential pop-star. The Beyoncé image inundates mainstream media. We are bombarded with articles and social media posts that question and critique Beyoncé’s latest moves. Her carefully constructed image is reminiscent of her own perceptions of power. “I know that, yes, I am powerful,” Beyoncé states in an interview with GQ, “I am more powerful than my mind can even digest and understand” (Beyoncé 2013).

Beyoncé recently released an HBO documentary, *Life is but a Dream* (2014). Beyoncé financed, directed, produced, narrates, and stars in the documentary. The film puts her personal life on display and reveals both her decision making processes and formulated image; she is determined to be perfect (Wallace and Richardson 2013). This auto-documentary aims to leave its viewers with a resonating, positive opinion of her. It is clear that Beyoncé is an incredibly powerful woman in the music industry, beginning with her decision to be her own agent and sever ties with her father in 2010 to her authority in the production studio that we
see in the documentary.

Beyoncé has used her authority in pop-culture to reflect on social issues that she finds prevalent in and beyond mainstream culture. Some of her music is reflective of these politically potent concerns. An advocate for female power and autonomy in “We Run the World (Girls)” (2011), and her stance on the feminist movement with the release of her self-titled album in 2013, Beyoncé is well known for her platform on women’s rights. Her 2013 world tour had the back-drop of a flashing neon sign that read “Feminist.” In response to the song “We Run the World (Girls)” (2011), Beyoncé states: “I’m always thinking about women. It's difficult being a woman. It’s so much pressure. We need that support and we need that escape sometimes.” Her well-known stance on women’s empowerment is unquestionably influential to many of her female followers: this is evident through the social media blitz that erupts with new hashtag lines every time Beyoncé drops a new single or posts a new picture. Beyoncé's visibility has also led a great amount of criticism, especially for her self-proclaimed feminist stance which I intend to elaborate on later in the chapter.
**Beyoncé and Feminism**

One of Beyoncé’s most recent political stances originated with the release of her self-titled album in 2013. This album serves as an unapologetic assertion of femininity, sexuality, and strength. The following tracks included on the album serve as a testament to aspects of femininity discussed in this thesis: “Drunk in Love (ft. Jay Z),” shows us that one can still be a powerful female in a marriage, and is analogous to the corresponding world-tour for the album, Mrs. Carter, “Blue,” is a testament to mother hood, “Partition,” demonstrates Beyoncé’s sexual independence, and the most potent song on the album, “Flawless (ft. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi),” is a direct declaration of feminism. On the song and the body positivity social movement inspired by the term “Flawless,” Sehgal writes,

> It’s perhaps our first untroubled word for human beauty, free of the whiff of sexism that clings to many others. It doesn’t denote marriageability (like “nubile”) or beauty born of fragility (‘comely’). Unlike its close relations “fair,” “perfect” and “immaculate,” it carries no overt religious connotations. And unlike “beautiful” itself, with its associations of perishability and status, “flawless” feels vigorous. It’s a word for integrity and excellence of execution (Seghal 2015).

The flexibility of the word ‘flawless’ has allowed many people to declare #flawless as a feminist declaration. From Rihanna, to a much re-tweeted post of a woman in a hijab with dramatic, winged eye-liner, to a woman who is about to give birth, photos with #flawless are everywhere. The movement proclaims body positivity and an acceptance of self (Seghal 2015).
The song “Flawless” also features renowned Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichí in a Ted Talk titled “We Should All be Feminists.” Beyoncé includes this passage of Adichí’s Ted Talk:

We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, ‘you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful. Otherwise you will threaten the man.’ Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. Now marriage can be a source of joy and love and mutual support. But why do we teach to aspire to marriage and we don’t teach boys the same? We raise girls to see each other as competitors —not for jobs or for accomplishments, which I think can be a good thing, but for the attention of men. We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are. Feminist: the person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes (Adichí 2013).

By using the words of a well-known feminist, Beyoncé validates and solidifies her own stance on feminism. Beyoncé doesn’t try to define feminism by her own terms. This long cut-away quote exemplifies her care in consideration for accurately representing the feminist movement. Beyoncé has, and continues to be, an advocate for women-supporting-women. Her band, “The Sugar Mama’s,” is an all-female group with a 10-piece band and several backup singers. Beyoncé started the group so that young women would have female instrumentalists to look up to (Rivas 2013). Beyoncé states:

When I was younger I wish I had more females who played instruments to look up to. I played piano for like a second but then I stopped. I just wanted to do something which would inspire other young females to get involved in music so I put together an all-woman band (2010).

In 2014 she published an article for The Shriver Report, an online report that gathers “influential voices and bold ideas from across the cultural spectrum.” In her article, Beyoncé writes:

We need to stop buying into the myth about gender equality. It isn’t a reality yet.
Today, women make up half of the U.S. workforce, but the average working woman earns only 77 percent of what the average working man makes. But unless women and men both say this is unacceptable, things will not change. Men have to demand that their wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters earn more—commensurate with their qualifications and not their gender. Equality will be achieved when men and women are granted equal pay and equal respect (Knowles-Carter 2014).

In this article, Beyoncé speaks to wage-inequality among genders. Though this is her only published piece of writing on women’s rights, her advocacy for women’s rights extends past her stance on the income inequality. She has also pioneered movements that support young female empowerment (#banbossy) and body positivity (#flawless): a feminist movement that empowers women to be comfortable with their bodies. Regardless of the cause, it is significant that Beyoncé uses her high-profile image for political advocacy.

“Formation” (2016)

Beyoncé recently released the single “Formation” (2016), which is a loud tribute to Black culture. The song was released 24 hours before her appearance at the Super Bowl.

[S]he wants us to know that even tough she’s headlining a mainstream event like the Super Bowl, she has opinions and isn’t afraid to share them, nor is she afraid to do it on a national and global scale… As always, a Beyoncé surprise drop operates across multiple vectors, and “Formation” isn’t just about police brutality—it’s about the entirety of the black experience in America in 2016, which includes standards of beauty, (dis)empowerment, culture and the shared parts of our history (Wortham 2016).

The song boasts lyrics like “My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana/ You mix that ‘Negro’ with that Creole make a Texas bama,” and, “I like my baby hair, with baby hair and Afros/ I like my ‘Negro’ nose with Jackson Five nostrils.” Here, we see that Beyoncé is using her visibility to not only take a political stance on feminist discourse, but also Black
empowerment.

Two days later, Beyoncé appeared at the Super Bowl 2016 stage and performed “Formation.” As Wortham pointed out, there are many layers of significance to Beyoncé’s appearance on the Super Bowl stage. Not only does her performance draw attention to Black empowerment and equality, but also female empowerment. The Super Bowl performance was led by an all-female group who wore their hair naturally and were dressed in “Black Panther” regalia that alluded to male-centered power. At the Super Bowl 2016, the women appear on a stage that is typically dominated by the male gaze and their dance unashamedly paid homage to Black, female empowerment.

Criticism

Beyoncé’s high visibility in the social sphere has generated a great amount of criticism for her political stances because of their ability to influence a mass amount of people. One of the most memorable criticisms of Beyoncé is bell hooks in 2014, who compares her to a ‘terrorist’ for young girls (hooks 2014). Young girls look up to Beyoncé as an ideal form of sexuality and beauty. The issue is that Beyoncé arguably caters to the ‘male gaze’ in her representation of beauty. Her appearance in GQ magazine in 2013 caused a stir on the feminist circuit. The Guardian published an article titled, “Beyoncé: being photographed in your underwear doesn’t help feminism” (Freeman 2013). She appears scantily clad on the as the ‘Cover Girl’ for the issue. The article objectifies her by making her claim to fame being the “hottest woman of the past thirteen years” (Wallace and Richardson 2013). The article reads:
She is luminous, with that perfect smile and smooth coffee skin that shines under a blondish topknot and bangs. Today she’s showing none of the bodaciously thick, hush-your-mouth body that’s on display onstage, in her videos, and on these pages. This is Business Beyoncé, hypercomposed Beyoncé—fashionable, elegant, in charge (Wallace and Richardson 2013).

The objectifying way that Beyoncé is referred to in the article is reminiscent of the ‘pornographic gaze’ discussed in Chapter 5. Similarly, the pornographic gaze and the male gaze are reminiscent of the exoticized gaze discussed in chapter 3: Josephine Baker. This is to say that both Beyoncé and Baker are similar in the way that they cater to an audience that commodifies the female black body, which they play into in order to be successful.

Miller-Young states that the Black female body is “employed as the hard currency of exchange” (2008).

How much is Beyoncé commodifying her own appearance and sexuality, like Josephine Baker, to gain mass stardom?

bell hooks criticizes the pin-hole view of ‘male-gaze’ sexuality: “The black female body comes into the greater representation solely along the sexual terms that we have historically represented within that spectrum” (hooks 2006). Anna Holmes, the founder of Jezebel, a feminist-inspired blog, writes, “We don’t often see women in body suits writhing around on cars except when- I don’t know, it’s a Maxim magazine, so it does feel like a performance for the benefit of men” (Harris 2013). The photo on the right (Fig. 18) is of Beyoncé in “Partition” (2013) and illustrates the ‘male gaze sexuality that hooks and Harris discuss. Hooks, and other critics, would argue that
because Beyoncé is represented in her sexual appearance that appeals to the male, eroticized desires, she is only perpetuating the confining expectations of female representation.

I feel that the significant difference between Beyoncé and say, the Hip-Hop Honey, is her ‘voice.’ Beyoncé has clearly taken political stances on many platforms. Even in her interview with GQ she speaks to the feminist discourse: “Money gives men the power to run the show. It gives men the power to define value. They define what’s sexy. And men define what’s feminine. It’s ridiculous” (Wallace and Richardson 2013). While critics argue that she is playing to the patriarchal values in order to define her sexuality, it is clear that she is an autonomous figure in the situation. Britney Cooper writes, “I think it’s risqué, but I think she’s asking us to think about what it means for black women to be sexual on their own terms” (Qureshi 2013).
“Run the World (Girls)” (2011)

Girls, we run this motha (yeah) [x4]
GIRLS

Chorus:
Who run the world? Girls! [x4]
Who run this motha? Girls! [x4]
Who run the world? Girls! [x4]

Verse 1:
Some of them men think they freak this like we do
But no they don’t
Make your check come at they neck,
Disrespect us no they won’t
Boy don’t even try to touch this
Boy this beat is crazy
This is how they made me
Houston Texas baby
This goes out to all my girls
That’s in the club rocking the latest
Who will buy it for themselves and get more money later
I think I need a barber
None of these niggas can fade me
I’m so good with this,
I remind you I’m so hood with this
Boy I’m just playing
Come here baby
Hope you still like me
F- you pay me
My persuasion can build a nation

Endless power, with our love we can devour
You’ll do anything for me

Chorus

Verse 2:
It’s hot up in here
DJ don’t be scared to run this, run this back
I’m reppin’ for the girls who taking over the world
Help me raise a glass for the college grads
41 rollin’ to let you know what time it is, check
You can’t hold me (you can’t hold me)
I work my 9 to 5, better cut my check
This goes out to all the women getting it in,
You’re on your grind
To other men that respect what I do
Please accept my shine
Boy I know you love it
How we’re smart enough to make these millions
Strong enough to bear the children
Then get back to business
See, you better not play me
Oh, come here baby
Hope you still like me
F- you hate me
My persuasion can build a nation
Endless power
With out love we can devour
You’ll do anything for me
When Beyoncé released the single “Run the World (Girls)” in 2011, she received a lot of backlash. Some criticized her for putting out false information about the women’s place in society (nineteen percent 2011), and others saw the song as a useful tool for female empowerment (Wallace 2011). Through a critical analysis of this song, the duality of Beyoncé’s character is evident. On one side, Beyoncé is speaking to female power when she says “Who run the world? Girls”/ “My persuasion can build a nation”/ “I’m reppin’ for the girls who taking over the world.” These lyrics paint a picture of women who have power and dominance: “girl power.” This can be seen as problematic because, the fact of the matter is, women are subordinate to men in most situations (nineteen percent 2011). These lyrics give listeners—listeners who may not be as knowledgeable about a feminist agenda—a false sense of female power. For instance, some of the lines are simply false information: “Make your check come at they neck/ Disrespect us no they won’t.” Women make 79 cents to every dollar a man makes (iwpr.org) and men do “disrespect women;” “women encounter a full range of experiences on a daily basis that remind us of our ‘place’ in this world” (Jaz 2011). Furthermore, the kind of female power Beyoncé represents in the lyricism is very limited, only adhering to the standard that women’s sexuality is their tool for power: “Boy I’m just playing/Come here baby/Hope you still like me, “strong enough to bear the children,” and “without love we can devour/ You’ll do anything for me.” All of these lyrics allude to not-so-suggestive sexual dominance over men. This is not to say that women’s empowerment through sexuality is negative, but we should aim to acknowledge that there are far more ways women can rise to powerful positions other than through sexuality. Unsurprisingly, this song was co-written by a group of mostly men: Terius “The Dream” Nash, Nick “Afrojack” van de Wall, Wesley “Diplo” Pentz, David “Switch” Taylor, and Adidja Palmer (Jaz 2011). Evidently, the representation of female power is set through the male gaze, where
female sexuality is the dominant force.

There is no question that this song is problematic. What it does for young women is set a fantasized world where women are in power. As vlogger nineteen percent argues, we shouldn’t imagine or fantasize a world where women are in power, but actively work towards equality (nineteen percent 2011). Nothing will get done if we fantasize that women are dominant, because it is simply not the truth. This song aimed to represent positive, female empowerment, but I agree with nineteen percent that the song missed the mark because of its implicit gender role expectations for women. This song illuminates Beyoncé’s pop-star character-type to advocate for female empowerment and simultaneously shows how she plays to the desired expectations of the social sphere and male gaze.

Conclusion

Beyoncé is partially above criticism because of her empire of fame and followers, the Beyhive (Reeves 2016). She does not need to appease everyone in order to be successful, yet everyone is still watching and listening. As an admirable and arguable one of the most influential figures according to Time Magazine’s 2014 issue of “Top 100 Most Influential people,” her opinion truly does matter in the face of public sphere and mass media. She has spurred conversation about Blackness and femininity, using her great influence as a powerful tool for motivating masses to think about activism and advocacy.

Beyoncé has been an advocate and activist for women supporting women. She has pioneered influential movements that provoke young women not only to accept body positivity, but also to stand strong as independent, autonomous figures. Given her most recent release of “Formation,” Beyoncé, yet again, places herself into a controversial position and becomes the
object of criticism, while also advocating for a positive cause with her music. Without a doubt, she is at the scrutiny of many critics for exactly how she represents herself while supporting these opinions. The common thread among Black female musicians from 100 years ago to now are the expectations their representations in the public scope. Furthermore, because of their high visibility the women face constant scrutiny and criticism regardless of their attempt to positively represent themselves. This creates even more of a challenge to move past binding stereotypes. Despite this struggle, Beyoncé uses her power in mass media for a political platform for equality of gender and race, which arguably is her way of pushing social norms and out of binding public standards.

Finally, Beyoncé is a representation of the continuum of Black female representation from the inter-war period to now. The similarities between Josephine Baker and Beyoncé are what have greatly influenced the process of this thesis. Both women were global stars and, through the mass stardom, became very powerful. Their public images became highly influential on the music scene and beyond to the public sphere. Additionally, they are both over sexualized dependent on their audience’s gaze and play into many of these roles in order to advance further in their careers. Their political moves were meticulously planned and well-intentioned. These two women represent both the cyclical ways of the entertainment industry and the power to push past expected boundaries constantly to redefine the role of what it means to be Black and female in the field.
Chapter Seven
Case Study: Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliot

The dance you doing is dumb
How they do where you from
Stickin’ out your tongue girl
But you know you’re too young
A bunch of girls do it and the shit looks fun
That’s how they do it where we from
You know it don’t start till one
That’s how they do it where they from.

WTF, Missy Elliot

Missy Elliot’s most recently released single, WTF, is a double entendre that expresses Where they From, referring to Hip-Hop culture routes, and What the Fuck, which pays homage to the laundry list of appropriators of Hip-Hop culture. Missy Elliot, among many other women, has proven to be a strong, groundbreaking voice throughout the years of her Hip-Hop career.

Among many celebrated women in hip-hop, Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott stands out as being an incredible example for women who re-define roles in the popular music scene. She is a self-proclaimed “fly girl” and champion for women-supporting-women; Missy has pioneered the way for many female hip-hop artists. Missy Elliott has done little to conform to any clear standard or stereotype about women in hip-hop. In doing so she has broken many barriers that have allowed other Black women in the entertainment industry to rise, and continue to do so, in the field. Missy Elliott, though under-recognized, has actively pursued feminist ideals through
her role in the world of hip-hop.

**Early Years**

Elliot had to cross many barriers to enter the field. Born in Portsmouth, Virginia on July 1, 1971 she experienced severe conflict in her family life. Her older cousin consistently raped her at the age of eight and she often witnessed her father beating her mother. She recalled to Entertainment Weekly's Rob Brunner: "I never wanted to go stay at my friends' houses because I always thought my father would beat my mother up or kill her or something." She would write to Michael and Janet Jackson on a daily basis asking for them to come and save her. While the Jacksons never came to her rescue, her mother, Patricia Elliott, packed up their things and moved them out of the house when she was fourteen. Missy and her mother struggled to make it on their own. This did not stop Missy Elliott’s intense passion for producing music. She would write song lyrics all over the walls in her bedroom. She formed her first group in high school with two other girls, called Sista. While this group didn’t prove to be successful, due to financial limitations, it gave Elliott an avenue to continue creating music. She started to rise when she formed a producing/songwriting team with artist and childhood friend Timbaland. They wrote and produced for many artists including Aaliyah (1979-2001), a close friend of Missy’s. In 1997 Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott released her first album, Supa Dupa Fly, which was later proclaimed by Steve Huey of All Music Guide as “arguably the most influential album ever released by a female hip-hop artist.”
Women-Supporting-Women

As a driving force in the hip-hop scene, She’s known for defying expected norms in female entertainment (unlike Beyoncé). Her physical appearance and active support of other women in hip-hop paved the way for other women’s success. Before her own rise to fame she was a prime example of women-supporting-women: she collaborated and wrote many female (and male) hip-hop artists songs (Ciara, Aaliyah, 702, Tamar, Lil ‘Mo, etc.). One of her more well-known supporting roles is the hit song “1,2 Step,” by Ciara, which ended up being Ciara’s break out hit where she has now gained huge fame and popularity. When she became more popular she featured rising female stars in her music. She cultivated an environment for women that helped them thrive in the hip-hop scene; an environment that allowed space for other women to rise to fame without the perceived necessity of conforming to limited gender roles (Hip-Hop Honeys) in Hip-Hop. Missy Elliott and Aaliyah are well-known for having a very close friendship and collaborative relationship. The song “Best Friend,” which is performed by both Aaliyah and Missy, is a testament to women-supporting-women.

Sexuality and Femininity

Missy Elliott is an advocate for positive sexuality and does not conform to the expected ideas for female sexuality for Black women in music. Analogous to her “fly girl” image, her
unique style is shown through her baggy, yet flashy attire. She chooses to wear a lot of ‘bling,’ reminiscent of the typical male image in hip-hop music, which may be seen as a representation of fantasized money and power as we saw in male hip-hop videos. Her representation of self demonstrates a confidence to portray her body image counter to what is expected of Black female musicians. Not only does she exhibit this persona through her style, but also her music. For example, in the music video “I’m Really Hot,” we see Missy and the rest of the dancers in baggy, white jumpsuits and a lot of flashy jewelry. This song is a proclamation of being sexy without having to show excessive amounts of skin to do so.

Missy is an advocate through her music for healthy, female sexuality. As a survivor of sexual assault and domestic violence, she confronts sexuality in a very positive way. Her sex-positivity is evident in the way she reclaims her own body and encourages other women to take ownership of theirs through her music. “From sex work (in “Work It” she raps “Girl, girl, get that cash/ If it's 9 to 5 or shakin' your ass/ Ain't no shame, ladies do your thing/ Just make sure you ahead of the game”) to self-pleasure (in “Toyz” she sings “I gotta bag full of toys/ And I don't need none of your boys”) Elliott’s sex-positivity is absolutely unconditional and inspiring” (George 2016).
WTF (2015)

In Missy Elliott’s latest work, WTF, she uses her fame to continue to express a political agenda in the entertainment sphere. For a few scenes in this video we see Missy Elliott dressed in her usual attire, baggy clothes and bling, and this time she and the other dancers are wearing hats that say ‘Biggie’ across the front. The video starts in inner-city Los Angeles and the titles pop up in graffiti-style font. Missy first appears in a shining, silver jumpsuit as a contrast to the darker, more dismal background of inner-city LA. These nuances in the video are reminiscent of early hip-hop from the 1980’s. A talented young girl appears in the video (this is characteristic of many of Missy Elliott’s music videos) and break dances to the music. This may perhaps be viewed as another way Missy is often in a supportive role of other females and wants to showcase other talent.

Contemporary discourse surrounding hip-hop addresses the appropriation of Black culture through music when mainstream artists use rap as their method. The song title, “WTF” stands for “where they from,” and is conveniently a double-entendre for “what the fuck.” The song raises awareness of the racial tension that is still prevalent today. Missy does not fail to also address this in her song. The repeated phrase “in person” which plays on a loop throughout the song is the voice of Rachel Jeantel. This is the woman that Trayvon Martin tried to call when he was trying to find help before he was fatally shot by George Zimmerman in 2012, a neighborhood watch volunteer, in Sanford, Florida. By inserting the voice of Rachel Jeantel in
the music the song becomes politically charged, portraying a message that is greater than the music; a message that speaks to racially charged violence in the US. This nuanced intricacy in Elliott’s music is symbolic of her incorporating meaning into incredibly unique, innovative, attention-grabbing music. The political message is further supported by the imagery in the music video: the video cuts to a scene where the room is full of small, coffin-like boxes all filled with Black individuals who appear to be dead. There are a plentitude of meanings that one could draw from this image. I speculate that the boxes (Fig. 23) in the video are meant to represent that little room for Black musicians to thrive. This image may represent the many Black musicians who didn’t become famous because a white musician appropriated Black culture to rise to success, leaving behind the Black musicians who had rightful ownership. Perhaps the lifeless bodies represent the many Black lives lost due to racially charged violence in the United States. It is clear that Missy Elliott uses her visibility in the Hip-Hop scene to make a statement, and a strong one at that.

**Under-recognition**

Missy is under-recognized for her pioneering of women in the hip-hop scene. There are few times where Missy earns the credit or recognition for the work she has done for women in hip-hop or for hip-hop in general. She pushes the envelope and is constantly producing fresh beats that have never been heard before. She has been a steady influence on the hip-hop scene. A
prime example of under-recognition is when Missy appeared in the Super bowl in 2015 as the guest star for Katy Perry. Immediately, the Twitter feeds were full of comments that talked about the “new artist” that Perry was introducing. While the show did bring a lot of revived energy to Missy Elliot, the irony is that she is the one who has produced so much hip-hop music that has greatly influenced the pop music scene and perhaps the music you would hear Katy Perry singing. This, of course, was not the intention of Katy Perry to educate those who aren’t as knowledgeable about hip-hop, but a prime example of Missy’s talent not getting the recognition it deserves. Moreover, in an interview with Missy Elliot, Pharell states “what’s most important about these kids recognizing you as a ‘new artist,’ is that your music stands up to today, it’s timeless... I think a lot of the reason kids nowadays don’t know who you are is because your image has been imitated so many times that it has kinda been diluted. It has been re-imagined, and they didn’t know where it came from” (Elliot 2016). It is increasingly clear, and we can see from this quote, that Missy Elliott has been an incredible figure in breaking many boundaries for hip-hop and influencing the hip-hop scene. She emphasizes that her experience has not been equal, or parallel, to that of men in the industry. The effort she has put in, professionally, is not equal to that of a male in the music industry; working harder and not getting nearly as far. In the same interview with Pharell Williams, Missy Elliott talks a lot about her experience as a woman in the hip-hop industry:

*Missy Elliott*

There are so many people who have helped steer my career. Sylvia [her first producer] was one of those people who would never ask me to change anything about me. She was never one of those people to say, ‘drop ten pounds’ or ‘make a record like this.’ She never did that with me or Busta. Cause Busta was happening at the same time, on the same label. Our videos was crucial in their pockets, but she let us be us and that’s rare.

*Pharell Williams*
I want to clarify something from earlier. When I said female I wasn’t trying to separate them from society, as people often do in society. That they’re second to male or associated with a woman. Then it’s like, when you hear it’s a woman, ‘okay yeah, that’s like the second rate version.’ You’re right, creativity is creativity. But, I was trying to do the exact opposite. Men at the top of something that is super creative and incredible, there is always a woman behind it. And I just feel like people don’t celebrate women in that way. What you’re doing, I just think your life, period, is an art because the stuff that you do has no walls or ceilings and, obviously, no floor. I want every girl that has that creative urge to know that they can do it. Because your adversities were, like, crazy.

*Missy Elliott*

Yeah, I went through a lot. It’s funny cause if a guy did all the records that I did outside of being an artist, they would have had nominations for Grammys. For a woman, I’ve never gotten any of that, because… I don’t know. It’s just strange how it is. And for a woman it’s funny how it’s not like that for us. We put in a lot of work. A lot of work. I’ve done more hits for artists that I’ve done [written for] than my own (Elliot 2016).

**Conclusion**

Missy Elliott has done amazing things for women in the hip-hop scene. I view Missy as being similar to Ada “Bricktop” Smith from the interwar period, as both of them were/are strong advocates for female empowerment (Sharpley-Whiting 2016). She has vehemently supported other women in the industry and never shied away from speaking her mind about sexuality, image, and prejudice. Her music has and continues to influence artists both in the hip-hop music scene and beyond. She uses her incredible talent to weave in politically changed messages into her rap. She has pushed passed her own boundaries to do amazing things in the music industry and is an inspiration for women in the field and in the public eye for women who follow her and understand the intricacies of her music.
Conclusion
Femininity, Sexuality, and #Flawless Action

The hashtag Flawless (#Flawless) is a particularly poignant term for the purposes of this thesis. Flawless is, of course, the feminist declaration of body positivity initiated through the release of Beyoncé’s self-titled album in 2013. But it is more than that. Not only does Flawless demonstrate how a prominent female icon uses her visibility to make a political stance, but it is also representative of mainstream, contemporary activism. Social media has played a major role in grassroots movements for social political agenda; hashtags are just one example of how the masses become aware of certain issues because of these platforms. The second half of my thesis uses pop culture media for the majority of my primary research. As a consumer and critic of pop culture, I believe that there is no better way to understand the contemporary social sphere than to go through (with a fine tooth comb) social media platforms such as blogs, vlogs, and twitter. Of course, a lot of what people are saying is not very useful, but, every few posts, you come across a politically poignant, well-stated opinion piece. Contemporary data, especially in the pop culture scene, is not controlled by academia, but this is not to say that we can’t use mass-media to our advantage. Social media sources have given me a very detailed picture of public reception to the Black women in the popular music scene. Most uplifting about my research, was to realize how much people are willing to discuss complicated issues of sexuality and representation of Black women in music. I am sure the conversation will continue and we will move toward a more progressive ideology for Black women in music.

Much like musicians in our contemporary music scene, the public was very interested in the women in music 100 years ago, as we saw with Ada “Bricktop” Smith and Josephine Baker. The public social sphere was reflected in the iconography and writings of the time. Through my
analysis of the public reception of Black women in music during the inter-war period, I felt that I
had a foundation to better understand public reception of women in the contemporary music
scene. One of the ways that this is most prominent is through the different ‘gazes.’ Black women
during the inter-war period were, arguably, seen through an exoticized gaze. This meant that
their audiences not only sexualized or eroticized the women, but also ‘primitivized’ and
‘othered’ them as well. In the contemporary popular music seen, the women are pictured through
the ‘male gaze.’ Similar to the exoticized gaze, women are hyper-sexualized and objectified
through the male-gaze. Despite these ‘gazes,’ now and in the past, Black women in music have
played to and pushed past standards that confine them to social expectation.

From 100 years ago to now, Black women in music have proven to be active and
powerful participants in society. Through this thesis, I hope to have illuminated some of
complexities of success, image, and public representation and reception. It is my hope that we
will question that blitz of media messages that are thrown our way, rather than accept binding
expectations for women in in the music industry, further perpetuating limitations for these
musicians. The expected representation of their image suggests tones of exoticization,
eroticization, and fetishization. The modern creation of these characteristics have led to the Hip-
Hop Honey. 1920s interwar Paris and contemporary America, Black women in music have
proven to push past objectifying stereotypes that box them into limiting expectations. Ada
“Bricktop” Smith and Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliot are pioneers for women-supporting-women
and non-conforming standards of female, visual beauty. Josephine Baker and Beyoncé were/are
highly visible figures who have played to some of the expectation to move up on the ladder of
success, while also taking a strong stance on certain political issues. These women are just a few of the myriad examples of Black women in music who have and continue to inspire social change whether it’s pushing past boundaries in the music industry or empowering women through grassroots movements to push past their own boundaries. I suppose the most appropriate way to end this thesis is with a Beyoncé quote:

*I woke up like this*

*We flawless*

*Ladies, tell ‘em.*

Beyoncé “Flawless” 2013
Citations


<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p72UqyVPj54>.


Knowles-Carter, Beyoncé. "Gender Equality Is a Myth!" *The Shriver Report Gender Equality Is


Figures:

Figure 1: New Yorks 'Hell Fighters' March up the Avenue. Digital image. New York Times, 1919. Web.

Figure 2: How Ya Gonna Keep Em down on the Farm. Digital image. JScholarship, 1919. Web.


Figure 5: Josephine Baker Balancing on the Back of Joe Alex. Digital image. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 May 2016. <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/b0/eb/9a/b0eb9a7f4c28207dba1c475c70e61e24.jpg>.


Figure 22: Missy Elliot in Boxes. Digital image. N.p., 2015. Web. <http://media.thecelebrityauction.co/picture/c/c9/CwMdBE5KXRlWEBcR04EWloBFh8SAgIJDBoGWQobGUoHAwKEwEHTBYaBxERAVwEEQYMFW8SNgQcCcYcFkwfDaQDkQRG AkbHBEX/XxIABVoFEI1VQF0PExU=.jpg>. 