

Performances of Black Female Sexuality in a Hip Hop Magazine

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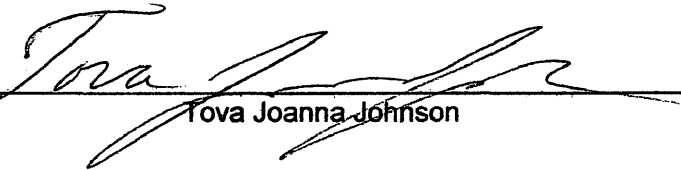
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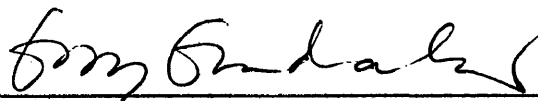
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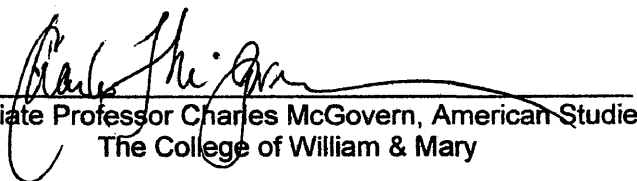
Master of Arts


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ABSTRACT PAGE

I examine representations of Black female sexuality in the hip hop magazine Vibe. In particular, I am interested in how Black women "perform" sexuality in contemporary hip hop magazines and how such performances engage the history of exploitation that has framed Black women's sexuality. Can sexual displays of and by Black women be disentangled from this history of sexual exploitation? And how does social class figure into these issues? I interrogate how Black women perform sexuality in Vibe through image and text. The images and text work together to create particular representations of sexuality. I also analyze letters to the editor, and I consider ads and other features of the magazine to provide a broader context to my analysis. My analysis reveals that although Vibe does allow a small space for Black women to claim their sexuality, their performances are highly circumscribed and limited. Class plays a central role in Black female performances of sexuality in Vibe. Black women perform their sexuality through a heterosexual framework of desirability while making claims to middle class respectability; this restricts their ability to claim a more liberating sexuality. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings.

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my wonderful and courageous mother, Lulu R. Stroud-Johnson.

You inspire me every day with your tireless work for justice for Black people. I love you forever and always!

Acknowledgments

I thank my Advisor and Thesis Chair, Dr. Leisa Meyer, for her never ending support, patience, empathy, and guidance, without which I might never have completed this project. My gratitude is beyond words. I also thank Professors Grey Gundaker and Charles McGovern for serving on my thesis committee and offering invaluable comments and suggestions that will guide me in my future work.

Introduction

In a 2004 video for his song “Tip Drill,” rapper Nelly and his entourage throw money at gyrating topless women while Nelly raps about women who are unattractive but still useful for sexual purposes. In one segment of the video, Nelly swipes a credit card down the backside of a video model. She responds by shaking her backside.

In April 2004, female students at historically Black and female Spelman College announced a protest of Nelly’s appearance at an upcoming Bone Marrow Drive, organized by Nelly’s 4Sho4Kids Foundation, on the campus. The students were concerned about Nelly’s ‘sexually demeaning’ depiction of Black women in his videos – in particular, the “Tip Drill” video. The students demanded an audience with him during the drive to discuss the depiction of Black women in his videos. After hearing of the planned protest, Nelly declined to appear at the event (www.usatoday.com 2004, Jackson 2005). Although Spelman students eventually went on to register 350 bone marrow donors and raise \$35,000 for cancer research, Nelly later implied that the students may bear some responsibility for the death of his sister who suffered from leukemia (Jackson 2005).

The students’ stance initiated a national dialogue concerning representations of Black females in hip hop culture. Essence Magazine, marketed to Black women, launched a year-long look at the issue and hosted several town hall meetings. Cable newschannel CNN ran several stories on the issue which was also a major focus at the “Hip Hop and Feminism” conference in Chicago in April 2005 (Jackson 2005).

Additionally, some scholars such as Cathy Cohen, Director of the Center for the

Study of Race, Politics and Culture at the University of Chicago, praised the Spelman women's stance. Others, such as Lance Williams, assistant director of the Center for Inner City studies at Northeastern Illinois University articulated the importance of challenging representations of Black women in hip hop (Jackson 2005). Fortunately, several scholars have explored representations of Black women within hip hop culture that complement and extend the analyses articulated by the Spelman women. Africana Studies Professor Tricia Rose has analyzed rap music's participation in the oppression and marginalization of various groups, including Black women (1994). She has examined lyrical content, rap videos, and the sexualized public personas of various sexually explicit female rappers as a part of sexually exploitative marketing campaigns designed to sell their music (2003). Similarly, Women's Studies Professor Gwendolyn D. Pough has investigated the ways in which Black female rappers and "hip hop soul divas" disrupt sexist notions in rap music, analyzing lyrics, videos, and even popular movies (2004). Theorist Patricia Hill Collins has also examined lyrics and videos in discussing sexualized images of Black women in rap and R&B and the sexualized performances of Black female rappers and singers (2004). None of these scholars, however, have examined representations of Black women in urban music magazines. With their large circulations and important standing in hip hop culture, such an analysis is long overdue.

I examine representations of Black female sexuality in the hip hop magazine *Vibe*. In particular, I am interested in how Black women "perform" sexuality in contemporary hip hop magazines and how such performances engage the history of exploitation that has framed Black women's sexuality. Can sexual displays of and by Black women be

disentangled from this history of sexual exploitation? And how does social class figure into these issues?

I interrogate how Black women perform sexuality in *Vibe* through image (photographs, including cover shots; looking at dress, pose, make-up and other physical aspects) and text (what Black female artists choose to say to an interviewer, and what an interviewer chooses to print, for instance). Indeed, the images and text work together to create particular representations of sexuality. Thus, I highlight the interviews and the accompanying pictorials of Black female artists. Additionally, in order to understand how readers respond to these representations, I analyze letters to the editor. Last, I consider ads and other features of the magazines to give a fuller picture of these magazines' representations of Black female sexuality and to provide more context to my analysis.

My thesis covers two years of *Vibe*, from May 2004 to May 2006. By beginning my analysis in May 2004, in the aftermath of the Nelly controversy, I am able to follow the trends in more recent depictions of Black female sexuality.

In Section I, I discuss the history of cultural representations of Black female sexuality in American society. Because I analyze images in hip hop magazines through a Black feminist lens, Section I also explores what Black feminism is and how it has and can be used to explore issues of Black female representation in hip hop culture. Section II explores Black female performance within the pages of *Vibe*.

Section I: Historical Representations of Black Female Sexuality, Black Feminism, and Hip Hop

Black Women and Sexual Stereotypes

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins defines three interdependent dimensions of African American women's oppression – economic, political, and ideological. The economic dimension, she argues, consists of the exploitation of Black women's labor. The political dimension includes denial to Black women of the rights and privileges granted to White male citizens, including the denial of the right to vote, the exclusion of Black women from public office, the withholding of equitable treatment in the criminal justice system, and the relegation of Black females to segregated and underfunded schools. The ideological dimension of Black women's oppression includes the controlling images that have been applied to Black women and used to justify their oppression. These controlling images range from the “mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture” (5). Together, these three dimensions of Black women's oppression – economic, political, and ideological – have been used to keep Black women in a subordinate place. They have been used to exclude women from all kinds of positions, including those in leadership, the academy, and other mainstream institutions. Because of this historical exclusion, “stereotypical images of Black women permeate popular culture and public policy” (5).

Sexual stereotypes of Black men and women are rooted in slavery discourses, developed by Whites to justify the enslavement of African peoples. Anthropologist

Johnetta Cole and Women's Studies Professor Beverly Guy-Sheftall argue:

Europe's images of Africa have not been constant. When European travelers first saw Africans, they praised the majestic stance of the men, and the regal beauty of the women. Many years later when Europeans again encountered African people, this time with the determination to enslave them to satisfy their greed, Africans were described quite differently. The men were said to have genitals that were so large, they were burdensome to them; and the women were said to be so oversexed that they fornicated with gorillas. (115-16)

To white missionaries, "it was the duty of white people to tame the crude carnal desires of Black women and men" (116). Thus, slavery was not only justified, but it was a moral imperative.

Historian Patricia Morton explains in *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* that Black women and Black men have been "equally subject to stereotyping, and both sexes have been typecast by racist mythology" (1991, xiii). Black people as a race have often been ascribed the same set of traits ascribed to all women, namely, "inferior intelligence, an instinctual or sensual gratification, an emotional nature both primitive and childlike," and "a contentment with their own lot which is . . . proof of its appropriateness" (Kate Millet qtd. in Morton xii). Yet, Morton explains, Black women also have been stereotyped in ways unique from Black men or white women. This unique typing is a result of the peculiar position of Black women, "at the crossroads of two of the most well-developed ideologies in America, that regarding women and that regarding the negro" (White qtd. in Morton xiii).

Several scholars, including Liberal Arts professor Sander Gilman and Guy-Sheftall, have examined the early nineteenth century abduction and display of Saartjie Baartman, a South-African woman, dubbed the "Hottentot Venus" by her white captors.

Baartman's case is perhaps the most infamous singular example of Black female sexual objectification. After her capture, Baartman was paraded around Europe to the delight of White audiences (Gilman 85; Guy-Sheftall 18). The central focus was Baartman's "large" genitalia and the "abnormal" protuberance of her buttocks, termed *steatopygia*. In the white imagination, the size of Baartman's buttocks was evidence of a promiscuous sexuality (Gilman 85-89). After her death from untreated small pox in December 1815, Baartman's genitals were put on display at the Musee de l'Homme in Paris (Gilman 88; Guy-Sheftall 18) and remained there until 2002 when they were returned to South Africa ("'Hottentot Venus' Goes Home," 2002).

The commodification of the Black woman and apparent contradictions in social relationships were most apparent during the era of slavery, in which Black women were bought and sold, forced to labor, and raped by white men. Black women could not be "true women" because of their social status (Anderson 1997). Not only was subjecting Black women to backbreaking labor justified then, but subjecting them to rape was also acceptable: "Enslaved women were considered fair game for any white man's sexual desires, and in the process lost control of their bodies and their reproductive rights" (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003, 107). Thus, enslaved women endured a life of sexual subjugation and exploitation.

Myths of deviant sexuality among women of African descent merged into the image of the Jezebel during the nineteenth century (White 28-29). In the twentieth century the Jezebel stereotype emerged as a fixture in American drama and film.

Anderson argues that the jezebel has several different meanings:

Sometimes the jezebel represents dangerous sex; falling prey to her charms means

trouble to her and her male victim. Usually, the man's inability to resist her brings her downfall as well as his. In other cases, jezebel is embodied by the light-skinned woman who attempts to pass for white; her primary outlet for success is the sex trade. [This] aspect of the jezebel ties into the tragic mulatto icon; her hidden blackness makes her sexually attractive . . . She thus is a perfect candidate for sex work. Sometimes the jezebel expresses sexual availability; she behaves as though her primary need in life is sex, and that need must be fulfilled above all others . . . the nymphomaniac. (Anderson 89)

Various Jezebel images have appeared at some time or another in twentieth century American film and drama. The jezebel stereotype has been embodied by such characters as Bess in the 1935 folk opera *Porgy and Bess*; Hagar in the 1929 play *Mamba's Daughter*; the tragic mulattas/tragic jezebels Carmen in the 1944 Broadway musical *Carmen Jones*, Anna in the 1945 play *Anna Lucasta*, and Sarah Jane in the 1959 version of the film *Imitation of Life*. These productions, often reaching large audiences and gaining widespread distribution, contributed to the continued demonization of Black female sexuality (Anderson 85-97).

Although Black women and some Black men have resisted female sexual subjugation and exploitation since slavery, the civil rights and Black Power movements brought with them a sort of revolution in art during the 1960s and 1970s. These decades saw a particular upsurge in more positive images of Black women that challenged existing stereotypes. Black plays such as *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*; *the Wedding Band*; and *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* generated alternative images of Black women (Anderson 97-98).

Although the Jezebel image may have been counter-balanced by these more positive depictions of Black women in plays, films, and television, the image was still alive in the minds of white academics, social scientists, and public policy makers. 1965

saw the publication of Daniel P. Moynihan's infamous and influential report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. This report, along with other writings by white men during the same decade, characterized Black women as matriarchs and emasculators of Black men, and thus the cause of the ills plaguing the Black family (Morton 3).

Moynihan's "matriarch" and "welfare mother" became "contemporary Jezebel [images] of a Black woman who cannot control herself, continues to have children without being married, and relies on others to support [her]" (Anderson 88). This new Jezebel image, further bolstered by Ronald Reagan's "welfare queen" of the 1980s and Newt Gingrich's "welfare mother" of the 1990s, is one of most prominent representations in mainstream discourse of Black women today. The contemporary Jezebel is particularly dangerous because: "she [is] capable of undermining the patriarchal notions of family on which the country was based. Her self-sufficiency [means] that her only need for men [is] sexual. She is . . . a destroyer of black men and manhood, which she accomplishes by pulling black men down from their 'proper' role as patriarch within the family" (Anderson 88). Thus, the contemporary Jezebel is also an "enemy" to Black men, capable of destroying any man that becomes involved with her.

Sexualized images of Black women predominate in American popular culture, including Black popular culture. These images have also become ubiquitous in Black-owned and produced media. Anderson writes: "From MTV to *In Living Color*, the predominant image of black women is that of the sexy whore." Anderson continues:

Black women have been reassociated with unrestrained sexuality, especially a destructive sexuality. The character is determined not only by action but also by attire . . . The "Fly Girl," a regular feature of *In Living Color* and music videos, becomes the jezebel icon incarnate. There is no individuality or personality, for she is simply a body to be exploited. Her body is on display, as those of her

ancestors were displayed for men at slave auctions. (98-99)

Perhaps no other medium has as widely promulgated various manifestations of the Jezebel like hip-hop music and videos. Humanities and Religious Studies Professor Michael Eric Dyson writes that: “Hip-hop reflects the intent of the entire culture: to reduce black female sexuality to its crudest, most stereotypical common denominator . . . The bitch-ho nexus in hip-hop is but the visible extension of mainstream society’s complicated, and often troubling, gender beliefs” (qtd. in Cole & Guy-Sheftall 182).

Cole and Guy-Sheftall argue that although not all rap music is misogynistic, “the frequent characterization of Black women as ‘hos’ and ‘bitches,’ along with the sexual posturing of Black men, seems to have become generic and all too acceptable in rap music, especially California-based ‘gangsta rap’ and Miami-based ‘booty rap’” (183). In rap music, Black women and girls are frequently referred to as bitches, hos, skeezers, freaks, gold diggers, chickenheads, and pigeons (186). The overwhelming majority of rap videos shown on mainstream television stations like MTV and BET feature, according to Cole and Guy-Sheftall, “half-clothed young Black women gyrating obscenely and functioning as backdrops, props, and objects of lust for rap artists who sometimes behave as predators” (186). Often, the focus of these videos is Black women’s behinds, conjuring up images of Saartjie Baartman’s display. These images are transmitted all over the world with the increasing globalization of mass media. Although some female artists have resisted or challenged these images, others such as Lil’ Kim, Trina, and Foxy Brown seem to wholly embrace them. What makes this issue complex is that not all of these female artists or their fans would agree that these highly sexualized

images are bad for women. In fact, many articulate these images as representative of empowerment and liberation. Although a great deal of scholarly attention has been focused on hip hop, many of these same issues surround the world of R&B as Patricia Hill Collins effectively argues in *Black Sexual Politics*.

Black women, Sexuality, and Silence

Black women have adopted various strategies in order to shield themselves from attacks on their womanhood. In her 1989 study of Midwestern African American women during the 1940s-50s, historian Darlene Clark Hine termed one of these strategies “the culture of dissemblance.” By dissemblance, she means “the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors” (Hine 912). Black women, in an attempt to shield themselves from the threat of rape by both Black and White men, developed a belief that certain issues were “better left unknown, unwritten, unspoken except in whispered tones” (916), especially issues concerning sexuality. This culture of dissemblance was institutionalized with the creation, in 1896, of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACW). The NACW sought to create positive images of Black women’s sexuality in order to counter the negative stereotypes. However, in order to accomplish this, “many Black women felt compelled to downplay, even deny, sexual expression” (918).

A related strategy to the culture of dissemblance is the “politics of respectability.” In her study of the women’s movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920, Evelyn

Brooks Higginbotham describes how members of the Women's Convention employed a discourse of respectability in order to counter racist images of Black people. These women "condemned what they perceived to be negative practices and attitudes among their own people. Their assimilationist leanings led to their insistence upon blacks' conformity to the dominant society's norms of manners and morals" (187). Hazel Carby also writes of the policing of Black women's bodies during the early part of the twentieth century. As Carby argues, during the teens and twenties, Black migration patterns from rural to urban cities and Northern to Southern cities resulted in a "moral panic" (Carby 739). Black women were characterized by White reformers and middle-class Black people as "sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous." They suggested that migrating Black women wanted to avoid hard work and would engage in prostitution in order to avoid it. Social reformers advocated various measures including the establishment of controlled lodging houses where they could send Black women at night in order to keep them from wandering the streets unattended. Dance halls and nightclubs were of particular concern with Black reformist Jane Edna Hunter who described these places as sites of "unrestrained animality" (Carby 745). In short, both Black and white agencies and institutions and the Black middle class held deep fears of a "rampant and uncontrolled female sexuality; fears of miscegenation; and fears of the assertion of an independent black female desire that [had] been unleashed through migration" (745-46). The politics of respectability identified by Higginbotham and the policing of Black women's bodies described by Carby both have class implications as both were targeted toward working-class Black women in order to discipline them according to middle-class

standards.

Certainly, in the face of constant demonization of Black women's sexuality, strategies such as the culture of dissemblance and the politics of respectability had some subversive potential. However, similar to the culture of dissemblance which formed a part of this larger discourse of self-protection from sexual insult and assault, the politics of respectability resulted in silence by Black women on the issue of sexuality.

Although Hine, Higginbotham, and Carby were writing about the early to mid-twentieth century, Tricia Rose's 2003 book *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy* demonstrates that echoes of the culture of dissemblance and the politics of respectability still exist today. In Rose's work, Black women share their stories of sexuality and intimacy within the context of gender and racial hierarchies. The women share their definition of intimacy, how they acquired sexual knowledge, and their experiences concerning sexual identity and sexual exploration. They also discuss domestic violence and rape, the impact of substance abuse on their lives, and mother-daughter/father-daughter relationships. Additionally, they express their frustration with stereotypes of Black women and sexism, their distrust of men, interracial relationships, the color hierarchy within the Black community and the resulting effects on their self-esteem, and the double standards of sexual behavior for men and women (7-12).

"Silence" forms a backdrop to all of these stories. Sex was not discussed in the homes of many of these women growing up (13). Mothers either did not discuss sex, or they issued stern warnings against having sex or "bringing home babies." Fathers were often non-existent or also silent on the matter. Many described their mothers as being

uncomfortable with discussing anything dealing with sex, menstruation, or the female body. Accordingly, these women often grew up with very little information about their bodies.

Silence also surrounded the issue of rape. Many of the women reported being victims of rape or attempted rape (13). Some of these women were molested as children. Most of the women did not tell anyone about their ordeals. Some felt responsible for being raped. Some were afraid of how they would be perceived by those around them if they did report the crimes. In other cases, the victims were not believed when they did tell someone or they were blamed for the rape. Whatever the individual circumstances, most of the women internalized the message that a Black woman should be silent about rape.

Very little information exists specific to Black women's sexuality. Due to this silence, many of the women interviewed describe not having learned about how to be fulfilled sexually. Many did not discover orgasms until they were much older, often after one or more marriages and raising children. Some of the women express frustration over just having discovered orgasms (13).

In the Afterword, Rose discusses the silence surrounding Black women's sexuality. She asserts that Black women are often reluctant to publicly discuss sexual matters (395). This reluctance is connected not only to the stereotypes that have been perpetrated against Black women – that they possess a wild, promiscuous sexuality -- but also to the ways in which Black women have attempted to resist these stereotypes (391-392, 395).

The refusal of some Black women described in Rose's stories to engage in issues surrounding sexuality, including the refusal of some mothers to pass down information to their daughters regarding menstruation, sex, or sexual fulfillment, reflect the continuing existence of a culture of dissemblance and politics of respectability. Although the women interviewed received, and continue to receive, many negative messages concerning their sexuality, most express a desire to be able to claim their own sexuality and to have sexually-fulfilling relationships on their own terms (12). Rose's book, as it articulates the silence surrounding Black women's sexuality, takes some of the first steps toward ending this silence.

Breaking the Silence – Blues and Hip Hop

Some Black women have used various avenues to break the silence surrounding their sexuality. Collins identifies several sites where Black women contest stereotypical images, including "safe spaces" such as churches, extended family networks, and Black community organizations where Black women can speak freely. Other "safe spaces" include blues music, and fiction and nonfiction writing.

Citing the work of Ann DuCille and others, Collins identifies the music of working-class Black women blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s as an important site for a feminist intellectual tradition among Black women. Gwendolyn Pough also identifies blues women as being part of a feminist legacy. Black women laid the foundation for the blues, according to Pough; they were the first to record the music on wax and they made up the majority of the early blues singers. Scholars such as Hazel Carby, Angela Davis,

and Tammy Kernodle have identified blues women as being a part of a Black feminist intellectual tradition because they made the “sexuality of Black working-class women a part of the dominant discourse” (Pough 57). By publicly claiming a Black female sexuality, these women “worked against the policing of Black women’s bodies and the culture of dissemblance” (58). Their music challenged the stereotypes of the asexual Black Mammy and the hypersexual Black Jezebel. They traversed the borders of sexuality by singing about such subjects as lesbianism.

In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Tricia Rose examines rap music as a Black cultural phenomenon. She argues that rap music must be understood as not just an extension of such Black cultural forms as the blues and toasting but also as a product of the economic and social climate of New York and the technological transformations of the 1970s. Hip hop culture, of which rap music is a part, developed from the creative energies of disenfranchised Black and Latino teens in the South Bronx in New York.

Rose also establishes rap music as a form of social protest. However, just as rap music often provides a critique of racism and racial politics, it also too often participates in the oppression and marginalization of various groups, most notably, gay men, lesbians, and heterosexual women. Rose argues that these contradictions are not unique to rap music noting their presence in blues lyrics and performance and other Black cultural forms. Cole and Guy-Sheftall assert, however, that “hip-hop is more misogynist and disrespectful of Black girls and women than other popular music genres” (186). They contend that, although also sometimes misogynist and sexually frank:

Usually the blues were not played in the presence of or listened to by children or

even teens; it was considered primarily ‘grown folks’ music.’ While many female blues singers sang about low-down, unfaithful, unreliable men, and male singers wailed about how my baby done left me, took all my money and run away with another man, there was also love (often unrequited) expressed about these relationships, even when they were seriously flawed. Blues lyrics, while they make references to physical abuse, do not celebrate violence against women to the same extent that rap music does, nor do they feature women as primarily sexual targets. (189)

Much debate among hip hop scholars, critics, and fans exists over whether female rappers such as Lil’ Kim, Trina, and Foxy Brown are feminist. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins characterizes Black feminism as a “social justice project” and Black feminist thought as its “intellectual center” (1990, xi). For Collins, central to Black feminist thought is a rich intellectual tradition among Black women. This intellectual tradition is not just, or even primarily, the contribution of Black female scholars, but entails the intellectual work of “everyday” Black women. Unfortunately, this intellectual tradition has been intentionally suppressed according to Collins: “Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization” (3). Thus, this suppression works to maintain social inequalities. This suppression and the intellectual activism of Black women in the face of this suppression constitute the politics of Black feminist thought. While many scholars agree that foundational female rappers such as Queen Latifah and Salt-N-Pepa have contributed to this Black feminist tradition, disagreement exists over whether contemporary rappers such as Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina with their overt sexual displays and embrace of the term “bitch” can be deemed feminist.

In discussing the sexism and misogyny in rap, Rose urges scholars to avoid a

male (sexist) vs. female (feminist) conceptual framework. Framing female rappers in opposition to male rappers, critics participate in a false dichotomy, she suggests. Black female rappers do not always present a non-sexist, feminist vision in their lyrics; contradictions abound in their lyrics. While spitting feminist lyrics, a female rapper may also forward a patriarchal vision of family life, for example. Similarly, male rappers are not always sexist. They sometimes forward “feminist” visions, rapping about their disapproval of domestic violence, for example. Thus, Rose urges more complicated analyses of rap’s sexual politics.

Particularly insightful is Rose’s identification of what counts as “pro-woman” or “feminist” elements in rap. She goes beyond examining just rap lyrics; she also examines the videos that accompany the rap songs she analyzes. By examining both elements, she provides a more comprehensive analysis of artists’ vision.

While male rappers often talk about police harassment and other forms of “policing” of Black men, female rappers’ “central contestation is in the arena of sexual politics” (147). Rose argues that “black women rappers are in dialogue with one another, with male rappers, with other popular musicians (through sampling and other revisionary practices), with black women fans, and with hip hop fans in general” (148). This framework, Rose argues, helps us to avoid monolithic constructions of male and female rappers, allows us to understand the contradictions in the works of female rappers, and helps us to recognize how their lyrics are grounded in the “everyday” experiences of Black women.

In their explorations of male-female relationships, Black female rappers most

often rap about “the tension between trust and savvy; between vulnerability and control” (155). Rose places the following themes within a pro-woman or feminist framework: challenging male rappers’ depictions of women as gold diggers; criticizing men for manipulating or abusing women; offering alternative new models of heterosexual courtship in which women are “resistant, aggressive participants” (155); women taking control of the process of heterosexual courtship; presenting “commitment, vulnerability, and sensitivity as assets, not indicators of female weakness” (159); mocking “moral claims about the proper modes of women’s expression” (167); challenging the assumption that overt female expressions of sexuality are made only to attract male attention; affirming the sexual desirability and attractiveness of Black women’s bodies; and advancing a self-defined sexual identity for women.

Gwendolyn D. Pough’s 2004 *Check it While I Wreck it: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, published a decade after Rose’s book, constitutes a sort of extension of Rose’s discussion of Black female rappers and presents some of the more contemporary issues not investigated in Rose’s book (such as female rappers’ increasing embrace of the term “bitch”). Pough explores the question: “What does it mean to be a woman in the Hip-Hop generation, attempting to claim a space in a culture that constantly tries to deny women voice?” She investigates how women have “taken a stance” within hip hop, and the ways in which hip hop culture denigrates Black womanhood.

Pough’s analysis centers on the concept of “wreck” – “that is, moments when Black women’s discourses disrupt dominant masculine discourses, break into the public

sphere, and in some way impact or influence the United States imaginary” (12). Hip hop functions as a kind of “counterpublic,” to borrow a term from Nancy Fraser (Pough, 35). However, just as Rose argues in her book, Pough contends that though the Hip Hop generation faces racism and discrimination and articulates such experiences through rap music, certain elements within hip hop also oppress other groups, namely heterosexual women, gay men, and lesbians. Female rappers, however, have “brought wreck” to the sexist and misogynistic elements within hip hop through their lyrics and attitude, and have made their own stamp on the Black public sphere. They have continued the “feminist” legacy of Black women thinkers and activists of the past.

Black female rappers use the tools of spectacle and representation to bring wreck. Using expressive culture to bring wreck is simply a continuation of the creative works of other Black women such as blues singers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey and writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker. Pough asserts that many Black female rappers similarly reconstruct Black womanhood by laying claim to female desire and challenging societal stereotypes. She extends this assertion even to such sexually provocative contemporary rappers as Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown who, unlike many of the foundational female rappers such as Queen Latifah and Salt-N-Pepa, have endured criticisms that they are “anti-feminist” and actually re-inscribe stereotypical images of Black women. In “Big Momma Thang,” Lil’ Kim boasts: “I used to be scared of the dick/ Now I throw lips to the shit/ Handle it like a real bitch/ Heather Hunter, Janet Jack-me/ Take it in the butt” (www.completealbumlyrics.com) while Foxy Brown brags about her “Ill Na Na” (vagina) and puts men on notice that if they have some money, “Then

maybe we could talk about ‘fuckin’ at night’/ 69 no change, in the back of the range” (“Tramp,” www.completealbumlyrics.com). For Pough, the fact that these women are publicly claiming Black female desire and resisting the culture of dissemblance that urges Black women to stay silent about their sexuality, is enough to establish these women as mostly progressive.

Rose disagrees and instead contends that:

For many black women artists – and women artists generally – being sexually explicit in ways that mirror trite patriarchal sexual fantasies has remained the most reliably profitable motif. This explosion of sexually explicit expression by black female performers simply represents the music and film industry’s profiting from the long-standing sexual ideas about black women . . . (398)

Rose explains that since the mid-1980s, Black female performers have been increasingly pressured by the music industry to participate in sexually exploitative marketing campaigns in order to sell mainstream popular music. These campaigns require the performers to act in ways that reflect and profit from a “racially distinct sexism rather than [give them] the freedom to make their own decisions to explore sexual issues” (398). Additionally, Rose continues, “many very sexually explicit artists, such as Lil’ Kim, Trina, and Foxy Brown, reinforce both the history of black women’s sexuality as deviant and illicit and the primary role of black women in male hip-hop music videos as exotic sexual playthings and strip-club dancers” (398).

Pough agrees with Rose that Black female rappers must contend not only with long-standing racist and sexist stereotypes but also with the degrading images put forth by Black male rappers. Although Pough problematizes the lyrics of Black female rappers by pointing out the contradictions, she falls into the conceptual trap that Rose urges

scholars to avoid – she presents male rappers within a one-dimensional sexist framework. Additionally, she hails the embrace of the term “bitch” by contemporary female rappers such as Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown as positive by asserting that using the term provides these rappers with a sense of agency. Other scholars such as Cole, Guy-Sheftall, and Collins express ambivalence about female rappers’ embrace of the term. Cole and Guy-Sheftall, for example, ask whether female rappers are “really being transgressive by embracing a word that has no positive connotations” (205). Alternately, Collins provides a more nuanced discussion of the word, explaining that young Black women differentiate between “bitch” with a small “b” and “Bitch” with a capital “B.” Young Black women, she argues, denote the former as negative but the latter as positive as “Bitches with a capital ‘B’ or in their language, ‘Black Bitches,’ are super-tough, super-strong women who are often celebrated,” (124). Collins argues that young Black women “may be right” that ‘Black Bitches’ are celebrated in Black culture and she offers the heroic characters of Pam Grier in 1970s blaxploitation films as evidence of such a celebrated figure. The problem however, Collins asserts, is that although “Grier may have established a template for a new kind of ‘Black bitch,’ . . . contemporary Black popular culture’s willingness to embrace patriarchy has left the ‘Black bitch’ as a contested representation” (125). Thus, Collins questions whether embracing the term “Bitch” can truly be a transgressive act in an overwhelmingly patriarchal culture.

Collins and Pough remind us, however, that many of the same questions and issues raised by rap music can also be applied to the closely-aligned (and often, overlapping) world of R&B. The 1990s, for instance, saw the emergence of hip hop soul.

Pough describes the criteria required of a hip hop soul diva as including “. . . the backing of a male rapper entourage, a rap record label, and the influence of men producers largely known for their work in the field of rap” (172). The most heralded hip hop soul diva, Mary J. Blige, “brings wreck,” according to Pough, with her lyrical emphasis on self-love, staying away from abusive relationships, and the state of Black communities. Additionally, Blige, “represents the average Black woman from the projects who shared her message with the world through song, managed to get her voice heard, and in doing so brought wreck to the glamorous notions and stereotypes of the recording industry. She also helped make it possible for other young Black women to share their voices,” paving the way for other Hip-Hop soul divas like Sisters with Voices (SWV), Total, Xscape, Adina Howard, and Faith Evans.

Pough argues that not all hip hop soul is progressive for women – that is, advancing female empowerment and enabling women to claim their sexuality -- particularly when hip hop soul divas pair up with rappers. In many of these songs, such as the Notorious B.I.G. and Faith Evans’ “One More Chance,” the woman is the one doing all the loving. Pough argues that young Black women get the message from hip hop that they should be willing to do anything for their men, and “the ‘ride or die’ chick who will do anything for her man,” including going to prison or dying for him, “is placed on a Hip-Hop pedestal as the ideal woman” (189). The “down ass chick” represents a similar idealized woman and also shows up in many hip hop soul songs. The hip hop community is particularly obsessed with Bonnie and Clyde, “the white criminal couple who went out in a blaze of bullets” (189), evidenced in such songs as Ice Cube and Yo-

Yo's "Bonnie and Clyde Theme" and "Bonnie & Clyde II," and Jay-Z and Beyonce's "'03 Bonnie and Clyde." With increasingly more young Black women going to prison, for example, on drug-smuggling charges, because of men in their lives who may be involved in criminal activities, Pough urges Black feminists to reach out to young Black women and address issues of love and relationships. This reaching out, Pough argues, will necessitate an engagement with hip hop because "Young Black women . . . are getting their life lessons from rap music" (192). The classroom provides one such site for intervention, and Pough urges teachers to bring hip hop into the classroom for students of all races and genders to critique and engage:

The combination of the classroom as public space, Black feminist pedagogy, and rap music grants students the opportunity to see and recognize things they might not in other classroom situations . . . Viewing rap as a rhetorical practice, and using Black feminism to aid that viewing, can help bring about new ways to think about the fight against sexism and the patriarchy that troubles us all and lead us to the possibilities of bringing wreck to oppression. (199-205)

The literature on women in hip hop demonstrates that discerning which hierarchies are being disrupted – and by whom – and which are being reinforced – implicitly or explicitly -- is a complex undertaking. What is clear, however, is that Black women's voices are essential to advancing discussions of sexual politics within Black communities and the larger public sphere. As I will show in the following section, Black female artists have provided and continue to provide such voices.

Section II: Black Female Sexuality in *Vibe* Magazine

I will be juxtaposing several examples from 2004-2006 of particularly visible hip-hop female artists in my analysis of the representations of Black female sexuality that appear in the pages of *Vibe*. *Vibe* was founded in 1993 by Black music legend Quincy Jones. Marketed to a young, urban audience, *Vibe*'s mission statement reads:

VIBE chronicles the celebrities, sounds, fashion, lifestyle, new media, and business born of urban music. With an authoritative voice, VIBE creates trends as much as it records them. VIBE covers music, educates its readers, and gives back to the community. VIBE serves as a portal to a growing, young, trendsetting, multicultural audience. As excellent journalists and innovative marketers, we are champions of urban music and culture.
(www.vibe.com/magazine/about/)

Vibe touts itself as the leading magazine for people of color ages 18-24 with an audience of 1.86 million, slightly edging out *The Source* magazine (1.84 million). The Audit Bureau of Circulations reported that *Vibe*'s circulation was 836,611 for the last half of 2005 (www.businessweek.com, 2006). *Vibe* reports that 67% of its readers are African American, with almost two-thirds of African American teens reading *Vibe* (www.vibe.com/magazine/about/). The audience is split 50-50 between male and female, with most between the ages of 18-24 (41%) followed by 25-34 (35%). Given its reader demographics, *Vibe* serves as a great source for examining representations of Black female sexuality that circulate among young African Americans.

Patricia Hill Collins frames the sexualized public personas adopted by female rappers as performances. She cites a *Vibe* magazine article which describes Lil' Kim's public persona as being "about pussy . . . the power, pleasure, and politics of it"; however, her reality, the article contends, is about "love – carnal, familial, self-

destructive, or spiritual.” “Love,” the article continues, “is her true currency.” It is “the root of who Lil’ Kim is. Pussy is just the most marketable aspect of it” (127). Articles in *Vibe* about other female artists are constructed in a similar fashion – *Vibe* attempts to cut through the “performance” of certain Black female celebrities under the guise of “we’re giving you the real deal.” I contend, however, that they are just creating another kind of performance – with the complicity (or participation) of the artists themselves. Willis and Williams (2002) say as much in their discussion of Black female hip hop artists:

What roles do images play in the construction of meaning in music? The image projected through still photographs and music videos is apparently as much a part of the presentation as the lyrics or the performance. The powerful black female is a sexual metaphor for rap and hip-hop artists such as Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, and Mary J. Blige, among others. Two of the most iconic figures in contemporary rap and hip-hop music, Lil’ Kim and Blige have created a sense of personal authorship in staging their images, which are propagated largely through photographic images in magazines, videos, and album covers and liner notes. (112)

Thus, what we see in magazines is simply an extension of an artist’s public performance. My thesis is that the images and text in magazines work together to create such a performance.

The July 2004 cover of *Vibe* magazine features then 25-year-old R&B Black songstress, Brandy, on the cover in a highly sexualized pose. Brandy is bent down on her hands and knees, facing the camera, lips parted, with her rear end curved upward in the air. A caption at the bottom of the photo reads: “What’s behind BRANDY?” In the accompanying article entitled “Not that Innocent” by Cheo Hodari Coker, Brandy describes how she “exed her husband, dropped her former A-list producer, and enlisted a superstar manager” (Coker 89). Brandy also describes her struggles with expressing a

more sexualized persona for the public. Known for her wholesome image – that of a fully-clothed and “virginal” ingénue -- Brandy’s new management wants to revitalize her career by sexing up her image according to the article. But, Brandy is unsure. “I just want to be sexy, but tasteful at the same time,” she tells two choreographers who are urging her to adopt some sensual dance steps for a new video (90).

Coker describes Brandy’s dilemma:

The grown woman with the girlish face attempts the riskiest balancing act of all: She’s trying to poke holes in that innocent image without destroying the success that it brought. “I just feel my sexuality is private. I’m very shy about being sexy,” she says. “That part of me has been so closed to the public eye. I’ve sold millions of records with my clothes on.” (90)

Coker also details the acquisition of the cover shot in which Brandy appears to be coaxed into assuming her sexualized pose:

Stevie Wonder’s ‘That Girl’ plays in a Manhattan photo studio as Brandy glides into the room in a gold bikini, looking like Wonder’s lyrical innervation come to life. She assumes a position on her hands and knees in front of the camera. And does Brandy radiate. Her body is toned and slim – gorgeous.

She still has her hiccups of insecurity. She’s looking at one provocative pose -- elbows on the floor, rear to the sky – and she’s having second thoughts. “I don’t want my ass right there,” she says.

“That flesh right there?” [Benny Medina, Brandy’s new manager] says, pointing to her lower back. “You shouldn’t be concerned with that.”

“Zee photo is very sexy,” says photographer Michelangelo Di Batista, “but it’s elegant at the same time.”

“You’re supersensitive,” Medina continues. “*This* is the center of the page.” He points at her face. “Those pretty eyes of yours.”

Brandy sighs, “I just don’t want to look like a hoochie.” (96)

Coker then proceeds to compare Brandy to music icon Diana Ross: “Gone are the braids

that were her trademark, replaced with long, loose, flowing hair. She looks like a young Diana Ross. She's stripped down and baring parts of her skin and soul for *VIBE*'s cover . . . she's revealing more flesh than she ever has before" (96). According to Coker, Brandy becomes more and more comfortable, "more sensual," as the camera continues to click. Brandy still, however, expresses some ambivalence as the shooting continues: "I've never been this sexy before," she says. "I'm trying something new, and I just hope everybody thinks I'm sexy and nobody takes it like I'm trying to do too much" (96).

Up until this point in her career, Brandy's image has exemplified middle-class respectability. The songs on her first album were about love (whether of a romantic kind or a familial kind as in "Best Friend" dedicated to her brother) but never about sex, with her next two albums continuing in a more mature but similar vein. She indeed sold millions fully-clothed, with her image carefully guarded. Breaking out of this image to embrace one that is more sexual, and hence more "working class," to sell copies of an album not coincidentally titled *Afrodisiac* is risky, and Brandy knows it. Fans used to seeing the more "respectable" Brandy may reject this new image. The *VIBE* article seems designed, however, to coach us through the process of acceptance so that, by the end of the article, we are converted.

The three photographs accompanying the article, for example, mix Brandy's embrace of her sexuality with ambivalence, perhaps mirroring the reader's own struggle with accepting the new Brandy. In the first picture, Brandy is lounging on a couch, with the same ~~lips~~-parted, wide-eyed glance into the camera as the cover shot. She is wearing a white t-shirt that reads "I'M A VIRGIN: This is an old t-shirt" (88). In the second

photograph, Brandy is more fully-clothed; however, she still retains the same sensual facial disposition. Accompanying this photo is the caption “Sitting Pretty: ‘I’m very shy about being sexy. I’ve sold millions with my clothes on’” (91). In the third photograph, Brandy is showing a little more skin, lounging on a bed in a strapless dress, again with the same facial posture, and the accompanying caption reads: “Pillow Talk: ‘I just hope everybody thinks I’m sexy, and not trying to do too much’” (93).

Having been walked through the process of Brandy’s transformation so as to perhaps make it more palatable, the end of the article is rather celebratory of Brandy’s growing embrace of her more sensual side:

And when she does finally reveal how she feels in her new skin, tattoo on her lower back exposed for all to see, she can barely contain herself. “I feel beautiful,” she says of her newfound freedom. “I feel untouchable today. I never felt like this before.”

There’s a first time for everything – even reinvention. (96)

Brandy and Coker apparently hope that we also have embraced Brandy’s new image by the end of the article.

Brandy’s cautious approach to unveiling her sexualized persona to the public is indicative of the tensions surrounding displays of Black female sexuality. Given the long history of sexual exploitation of Black women, from the rape of Black women during slavery, to the display, dissection, and “re-display” of Saartje Baartman beginning in the nineteenth century, and to the continuing circulation of highly sexualized images of Black women, it is not surprising that R&B singer Brandy would express concern about being “too sexual” and that some readers would be apprehensive or even outraged at seeing such sexualized displays of her.

Do we see echoes of Saartje Baartman when we look at the *Vibe* pictures of Brandy? With her rear end prominently in the air on the cover, and the tag line: “What’s Behind Brandy?” the focus of the shot is definitely Brandy’s buttocks, despite manager Benny Medina’s contention that the focus of the shot is Brandy’s eyes. The “doggystyle” sexual position assumed by Brandy also conjures up the notion of an animal-like sexuality long associated with Black female sexuality; after all, animals have sex in this position although it can also imply that Brandy is ready for anal sex, literally configuring her buttocks as the site of her sexuality. The tag line, operating as a double entendre, rounds out this effect, re-iterating the importance of her buttocks and the position that she is assuming to her image.

Brandy’s expressed ambivalence may also reflect her internalization of a “politics of respectability.” For Brandy, maintaining a respectable image would serve to position herself above her working-class sisters. Conversely, adopting a more sexual image might associate her more readily with her working-class counterparts, betraying her middle-class upbringing and any claims to respectability. There is evidence that Brandy was seeking to differentiate herself from working-class Black women. In the same July 2004 issue of *Vibe*, Brandy discusses her “divorce” from Robert Smith whom she had supposedly married in 2001. However, shortly after the publishing of this article, in late July 2004, Smith revealed that he and Brandy had never been married and that “their supposed marriage was a ruse to protect the image of Brandy, who was then pregnant with their daughter, Sy’rai” (“Brandy’s ex,” 2004). At the time of the publication of the *Vibe* article, however, the public was unaware that Brandy’s marriage was a hoax. Thus,

Brandy enacted a “performance” within the pages of *Vibe*, as she falsely claimed to have been married in order to avoid the “disreputable” image of an unwed mother.

Armed with this information, we can now clearly see that the *Vibe* article (along with the cover shot and accompanying photos) was a kind of performance by Brandy. Through the cover shot, interview, and accompanying photos, Brandy adopted a sexualized persona while simultaneously denying sexuality. The captions that accompanied the photos in the article facilitated this dichotomy by juxtaposing sexualized images of Brandy with quotes like, “I’m very shy about being sexy . . .” (Coker 91) and “I just hope everybody thinks I’m . . . not trying to do too much” (93). Thus, for the most part, Brandy sought to retain her “good girl” image even while striking sexually provocative poses.

To a certain degree, Brandy appears to have achieved her goal of getting the public to embrace her new image in the July 2004 issue of *Vibe*. In letters to the editor published in the September 2004 issue of *Vibe*, many readers had a favorable reaction to the covershot and article. “I love the way she is not downright looking like a ho (like Beyonce), but is being sexy with 100 percent class . . . She is a woman, a sexual woman,” writes male reader “Deonte, aka Baalid,” (“Mail” 83). “Stephen Lee Roldan,” another male reader, writes “There is no way in the world that I could ever be able to avoid the irresistible spell of Brandy at her sexiest, sultriest, and yes, classiest. This cover will never, ever be surpassed! I thank you, Cheo Hodari Coker, photographer Michelangelo Di Battista, *VIBE*, and, most especially, Brandy, for the thrill!” And yet another apparently male reader, “George,” writes: “I just wanted to write and let you guys know

that the new issue with Brandy on the cover has got to be the *sexiest* cover for any magazine that I have *ever* seen. When I walked up to the magazine section at 7-Eleven, it immediately caught my eye, and I had to have it.” For these readers, Brandy is not just sexy, but also “classy” (i.e. she is able to maintain some measure of middle class respectability). One other letter, written by a Kristen Carter, presumably a female, also praises the article, although interestingly enough, she does not explicitly address Brandy’s physicality but rather praises Brandy for doing a “remarkable job of managing love, life and a career without losing her mind” (83). These letters perhaps speak to a gendered approach of the reader – i.e. men focus on physicality and women on emotional nuance.

Not all of the letters to the editor are positive, however. In two other published letters, ambivalence and even outrage are expressed:

It’s not as if *VIBE* is the first magazine to put a female star on its cover who’s scantily dressed and in a sexually suggestive pose, but something about your treatment of Brandy was particularly offensive. It wasn’t the photo itself, which was purely sexy. It was the cheap-shot line, “What’s Behind Brandy?” It’s not hard to figure out what the combination of words and image was meant to conjure up. What is especially sad is that in the article, she clearly expresses her desire to “be sexy but tasteful at the same time.” Your cover undercuts her wishes. Sure, men in the music industry (especially African-American men) are sexualized as well in the press, but at least they don’t have to bend over and take it up the rear. (Alistair Schneider; Jamaica Plain, Mass.) (83)

Brandy, please say it isn’t so! I was so upset to see yet another talented young sista put on blast like she was posing for the cover of *Playboy* instead of *VIBE*. I expected more from her and more from *VIBE*. I understand she’s an adult now and that she wants to have a sexier, more mature image, but does she have to get in the doggystyle position to achieve that? (C. White; St. Louis, Mo.) (83)

The first reader identifies the “harm” caused by the combination of the words with the

posed image. Additionally, the reader states that the cover “undercuts” Brandy’s wishes, although some would argue that Brandy was a full participant in the staging of the cover shot. Coker implies that Brandy was coaxed by her male manager and the male photographer into assuming such a position although this “coaxing” could be seen as a part of Brandy’s “performance.” The second reader, C. White, points to the unique position of Black women in relation to issues of public display of sexuality when stating that he/she expresses frustration at seeing “yet another talented young sista” assuming such a provocative pose. Could these negative reactions also be reflective of a politics of respectability? Perhaps some readers are concerned that Brandy’s cover will be seen as indicative of the respectability or lack of respectability of the Black race as a whole. White “expected more from [Brandy] and more from *VIBE*.” Thus, White expected Brandy to retain her middle-class respectability, and expected *Vibe*, a “Black” publication, to aid her in this, thus contributing to the uplift of the race as a whole.

Like with the Brandy article, Rapper Remy Ma’s interview in the February 2006 issue of *Vibe* and the reader responses to it are informed by class. In the article, Remy Ma expresses little regard for respectability. She is a single mother and clearly identifies as such (versus Brandy who attempts to hide such status). She is open about her sexuality. She uses profanity and freely expresses her opinions. She is uneducated, having never finished high school, and she comes from a working class background.

Remy Ma’s working-class status is first signaled by the title of the article – “Woman ‘Hood.” It implies that Remy Ma is from the ‘hood (hip hop slang for an inner-

city neighborhood) or that she is “hood” (having the “behavior” of being from the inner-city). This title would never have worked for Brandy who is from a middle-class background and has carefully cultivated an image of middle-class respectability. The tagline below the title also signals Remy Ma’s status and prepares us for Remy Ma’s apparent disregard for any semblance of middle-class respectability: “Call her conceited. Question her *whatever* attitude toward life. But don’t expect Remy Ma to clean up her act. Here, Aliya S. King discovers some things about Remy, like her ideas on motherhood, profanity, and love” (93). The opening photo of Remy Ma seems a fitting accompaniment to this tagline: She is wearing a black cleavage-revealing bustier. She sports a long weave, most of which is black except for the blonde tendrils in front which drape both sides of her face. Her expression – the steely gaze, no smile, hint of an angry frown -- emits the “I don’t give a fuck” attitude described by the writer of the article, Aliya S. King.

Remy Ma embraces her working-class background in ways that challenge notions of femininity. She admits to and makes no apologies for her former stint as a drug dealer:

I’m never going to be no broke-ass bitch . . . When I didn’t have no deal and I was getting royalty checks from [late rapper Big Pun’s] album, hell yeah, I was flipping that money in the street. I got other options now, but if it came to that . . . Fuck I look like? I got a son to raise. (94)

A picture embedded in the article re-iterates Remy Ma’s stance. In the picture, she is fully dressed in an outfit composed of wool and fur, including a pair of high-heeled boots. She is holding paper money in her hands – they look like \$100 bills – and more bills are scattered on the floor around her feet. The caption accompanying the photograph reads: “The Money Shot: ‘I’m never going to be broke,’ says Remy.”

Thus, Remy Ma embraces “street-life” while also rejecting feminine standards of dependence on men.

Remy Ma’s status as a single parent also signals such a rejection and, again, aligns her with a working-class femininity. Her “laissez-faire” attitude toward raising 5-year-old son JaySon also brings attention to her class status:

She allows JaySon to watch whatever TV show or movie he chooses, no matter the rating. JaySon – who does daily reps of sit-ups to be as buff as his idol, [rapper] 50 Cent, and demands a steady supply of 50-endorsed vitamin water be included in his school lunch – freely listens to unedited versions of his favorite rap records. And if he gets mad enough, he can lick off a few choice words, too. “Once I heard my son say, ‘Oh my fucking God,’” recalls Remy. “What am I supposed to do, beat him? He was really mad. And he did say, ‘Sorry mommy,’ right afterwards.” (95)

Allowing her son to use profane language is an affront to middle-class sensibilities. It seems that Remy Ma is raising her son to express his feelings, no matter how profane, just as she does. King observes that Remy Ma “can’t complete a sentence without using the words *fuck*, *nigga*, or *bitch*. Most sentences use all three” (94). When asked why she constantly uses the N-word and B-word to refer to herself and her friends, Remy Ma shrugs her shoulders and says, “*Bitch* is just a fucking word . . . It’s like what [late rapper Tupac Shakur] used to say about the word *nigga* – once you claim the word, you take the power out of it. It’s just not that serious.” In a context in which “the term *bitch* becomes a way of stigmatizing poor and working-class Black women who lack middle-class passivity and submissiveness” (Collins 2004, 138), Remy Ma may have a point in reclaiming the word. Remy Ma is neither passive nor submissive and by claiming the word, she says, “Yes, I am a bitch. So what?”

According to Remy, her philosophy on female empowerment is not necessarily

accepted by other women, differences which she seems to attribute at least partly to class. Journalist Aliya S. King describes Remy's stint on a women's issues panel in which "her fellow panelists were not the type of women who would toss the words *nigga* and *bitch* so lightly" (95). Remy claims she was set up and then makes fun of the other women on the panel which included underground female MC Jean Grae, saying -- in a "faux-Ivy League [read middle-class] black-girl voice" -- "All of the women are like, 'Oh my God, hip hop is so degrading to women'" Remy's reply? "Are you serious? I'd rather see these chicks in a video and getting a nice check at the end of the day than being butt-ass naked in a strip club and counting singles at the end of the night" (95).

King declares Remy a feminist: "Without even realizing it, Remy is the ultimate feminist: brash, unapologetic, smart, and unyielding. While most female rappers adopt a sex-kitten persona in the presence of a microphone, Remy remains brusque and brazen." While some women may reject King's assertion, "feminist" to King means "brash, unapologetic, smart, and unyielding" and King succeeds in painting a Remy Ma who, in terms of her public persona, fits at least three of these adjectives. As for "smart," we are not sure if King means "street smart," "business smart," or even "book smart" -- after all, she does point out that, although Remy Ma did not finish high school, she is a former honor-roll student.

King, however, also strives to paint a complex portrait of Remy Ma that breaks through some of the rapper's "hard" exterior, an exterior that both Remy and King are constructing. In keeping with *Vibe's* tradition of exposing the artist's so-called "real" side, King "reveals" Remy Ma's "softer side" -- that is, she writes as if she is cutting

through Remy Ma's "performance." For example, King writes of Remy Ma's "coquettish" and "purring" voice when describing a phone conversation between Remy Ma and an unknown gentleman at the beginning of the article (94). She reveals that Remy Ma is pre-occupied with where this gentleman has been and why he hasn't returned her phone call. She writes of Remy Ma's concern that the man will become upset if she were to name him in the interview, and then her attempt to cover up this concern with the words, "Not that I give a fuck" (94). King also writes of Remy Ma's desire to be in love. And when Remy Ma states that the man she *really* wants is nowhere to be found, she then declares that "the nigga should be here, in my house, downstairs, in my kitchen, making me some Kool-Aid" (94). In other words, he should be in my house waiting on *me*. Thus, even while Remy Ma pines over this man, she declares a certain *dominance* over him. She envisions *him* waiting on *her*, an inversion of typical gender roles. King, even while calling Remy Ma a feminist and focusing on her independence, also configures Remy Ma in relationship to the men in her life and her need for validation from men. The message is that Remy Ma is not as independent of men as she may claim to be. She only *pretends* to not care what men think.

This message also seems to surround King's description of Remy Ma's purchase of a \$450 stripper pole along with an instructional DVD. According to King, Remy Ma's tone is "conspiratorial" and her smile mischievous when she reveals this information and she adds, still smiling, "How could any woman *not* love that?" King's discussion of the stripper pole seems to provide another example of the vulnerability that she sees in Remy Ma although her take on the issue is a little perplexing: "[Remy Ma] understands that

buying a stripper pole – and admitting it – is just another one of those things that makes her unique. And at the same time, it illustrates her I’m every-woman persona” (95). But how exactly does buying a stripper pole make her “unique” and “every woman”? King does not elaborate further on the issue.

We also do not know how King reconciles Remy Ma’s purchase of the stripper pole with her view of Remy Ma as a feminist. Other questions remain: For whom is Remy Ma buying the stripper pole? That is, who will be the audience for her striptease? Should we assume that she will be performing for a man?

King also criticizes Remy Ma for trying so hard on wax (and, apparently, in other aspects of her public life) to “prove that she’s one of the guys that she often leaves out the parts of herself that make her special” (95). Indeed, in the article, Remy Ma attempts to distance herself from other female rappers by declaring that: “Most chicks is reciting, not rapping. If you’re not writing your own rhymes, you’re not a talented lyricist. You’re good at memorization. You should go do plays or spelling bees or something” (94). In *Check it While I Wreck it*, Gwendolyn D. Pough asserts that many females rappers are accused of simply being puppets for men – that men are the ones writing their rhymes – and are, therefore, not to be taken seriously. Remy Ma clearly tries to separate herself from this charge (arguably at the expense of other females) while re-inforcing this stereotype of female rappers. It is possible that Remy has been a target of this charge herself given that she is the only female member of The Terror Squad rapping crew. As Pough asserts, sole female members of rapping crews are especially prone to this accusation. King continues: “For all her lyrical shock and awe, she doesn’t yet

understand that her vulnerability should be embraced” (95).

For King, such vulnerability includes Remy Ma’s desire to finish high school. Toward the end of the article, Remy Ma admits that she would like very much to finish high school. She thinks about what her former teachers say when they see her on television and speculates that, although her English teacher is probably not surprised, her biology teacher probably exclaims: “She’s a rapper?! What a fucking waste!” (95). That Remy Ma wonders what her former teachers think about her seems to decry her “I don’t give a fuck” attitude.

King succeeds in painting a complex portrait of Remy Ma, however, we must ask why King feels the need to break through Remy Ma’s “hardness.” Is this approach gendered? Is there an underlying assumption that a woman cannot really be this hard, that she must have a soft spot, that this is all just an act? There appears to be an underlying goal to construct the conventional “femininity” of interviewees even when it is not conventional or readily apparent, and the question becomes why? Is there a need to sell an “ideal” femininity to readers – a femininity based on dependence on men, male validation, a “soft” inner core, and emotionality?

As with the Brandy article, reader responses allow us to glimpse how readers perceived Remy Ma and provide us with another way to assess her “performance.” Curiously, every reader response, published in the April 2006 issue of *Vibe*, bashed Remy Ma. Readers attacked her for her “ignorance” and lack of education, her appearance, her abilities or lack thereof as a female rapper and as a mother, her purchase of the stripper pole, and her willingness to air her family’s dirty laundry.

Remy's rejection of middle-class morals and ideas of respectability, particularly when it comes to raising her son, proved to be a lightning rod for several of the respondents:

I must say I was absolutely disgusted by the Remy Ma article . . . She is a disgrace to black women, especially single mothers. She is the epitome of ignorant! In all the years I have subscribed to VIBE, I have never been so disgusted. She is a single mother who is raising a future criminal (a 5-year-old who idolizes that fake thug, Half a Dollar). Her son should look up to her as his idol, not a rapper! I hope she reads the article and realizes how ignorant she comes across. She is a walking billboard of why men still refer to us as bitches and hos. (Brandi Fields; Phoenix, Arizona) (53)

I just read the article "Woman 'Hood," and I have to say that I was disgusted. If Remy Ma does not have any respect for herself, shouldn't she have some for her son? She is in a unique position because there are no other females representing right now. The point is that she can change the direction that female rap is heading in. But what really outraged me were the comments she made to Aliya S. King. What was the purpose of her defending the portable stripper pole in her home? Her son will soon surpass her reading level and pick up this article about his mother. What is he going to think of her purchasing a stripper pole? I'm disappointed in Remy and I hope someone helps her see the error of her ways. (C.J.; Fayetteville, N.C.) (56)

Remy Ma has to be crazy. I can respect ol' girl for coming at the industry like she doesn't give a fuck, but letting her son listen to uncut music and start wildin' out at 5 years old is immature and ignorant. Then she wants to rap about her baby's dad, her brother, and her mother. That's going out of bounds. Who is she trying to be, the female Eminem? (J. Wold; Ione, California) (56)

For these readers, Remy's refusal to censor her son's language and media consumption and her apparent disregard for how her son will react when he realizes that his mother purchased a stripper pole is an affront to their sensibilities. While Remy Ma's status as a *single mother* equates her with working-class Black femininity, her status as a *mother* leads these readers to think she should act differently. For some of the readers, Remy Ma epitomizes the Bad Black Mother that Patricia Hill Collins writes about in *Black Sexual*

Politics:

The representation of the sexualized bitch leads to another cluster of representations of working-class Black femininity, namely, controlling images of poor and working-class Black women as bad mothers. Bad Black Mothers (BBM) are those who are abusive (extremely bitchy) and/or who neglect their children either in utero or afterword . . . They allegedly pass on their bad values to their children who in turn are more likely to become criminals and unwed teenaged mothers. (131)

For the readers quoted above, Remy is the neglectful type of BBM who is turning her son into a future criminal.

Markers of class include education, language, and sexual respectability. For the respondents to the Remy Ma article, her lack of education, use of improper English and profane language, and her lack of sexual respectability, evidenced by her single motherhood and purchase of a stripper pole, mark her as working-class. The fear that Black people will be judged by the “lowest” of the race, i.e. the poor and working-class, might inform the reader responses. As a Black female, Remy Ma must cast off her working-class markers or be responsible for bringing down the race as a whole. The fact that Remy Ma embraces and even flaunts some of her working-class markers has provoked outrage, condemnation, and even shame or embarrassment. Brandy Fields’ statement that “she is a walking billboard of why men still refer to us as bitches and hos” is an internalization of the idea that working-class femininity is negative and that working-class Black women define the femininity of Black women as a whole.

Remy Ma rejects much of the behavioral aspect of hegemonic – or ideal, middle-class, heterosexual (Collins 2004, 193) -- femininity with her assertive attitude, her expressed desire that a man wait on her (“that nigga should be . . . downstairs in my

kitchen making me some Kool-Aid”), and her independence. This rejection played into one reader’s decision to attack her femininity:

Remy Ma has the nerve to record garbage songs like “Conceited” and “Whuteva”! On top of it all, she looks like a man. I don’t know why she’s in the magazine talking greasy. She wants to talk about female rappers who don’t write their rhymes and claims that she writes her own. You need to pick up a dictionary! Bad weave, horrible makeup, and tacky outfits is all I see. So if there *is* something about Remy, we are really not interested. (Notorious Corey; Milwaukee, Wisconsin) (53, 56)

Women who are too strong or “bitchy” endure accusations that they are not feminine (Collins 2004, 137), hence the Notorious Corey’s assertion that Remy Ma “looks like a man.” His insult marks her as other than a woman and as sexually deviant by implying that she is a lesbian (and therefore, sexually immoral).

While Remy Ma rejects much of the behavioral prescriptions of hegemonic femininity, she does not necessarily reject the physical standards of femininity. For one, Remy wears a long, straight, partially-blonde weave, and in one of the photos for the *Vibe* article, she wears a cleavage-enhancing bustier adorned with a ribbon. Collins writes:

Because femininity is so focused on women’s bodies, the value placed on various attributes of female bodies means that evaluations of femininity are fairly clearcut. Within standards of feminine beauty that correlate closely with race and age women are pretty or they are not. Historically, in the American context, young women with milky White skin, long blond hair, and slim figures were deemed to be the most beautiful and therefore the most feminine women. Within this interpretive context, skin color, body type, hair texture, and facial features become important dimensions of femininity. This reliance on these standards of beauty automatically renders the majority of African American women at best as less beautiful, and at worst, ugly. (194)

Accordingly, some Black women may adopt some “white” characteristics, such as long blonde hair, in order to approximate Western standards of beauty. When Remy Ma wears

the long, partially-blonde weave and bustier she projects Western standards of femininity and beauty even as she adopts a “less feminine” persona. However, by re-locating Western markers of femininity onto her working-class, Black female body, Remy Ma calls such standards of femininity into question, leaving some readers, such as the Notorious Corey, uncomfortable. By claiming that Remy Ma looks like a man and that her weave is bad, her makeup horrible, and her outfits tacky, the Notorious Corey asserts that, in spite of her attempts, Remy is neither feminine nor beautiful.

While calling notions of femininity into question through her appearance and demeanor, Remy Ma clearly wants to be seen as “one of the guys” when it comes to rap music. However, reader responses indicate that readers clearly see her as a *female* rapper. When C.J. from North Carolina writes, “She is in a unique position because there are no other females representing right now . . . she can change the direction that female rap is heading in” (56), she clearly places Remy Ma in the realm of *female* rappers. For C.J., Remy must carry the burden (or responsibility) of being a female rapper in a male-dominated industry; the future of female rap is depending on her. Similarly, when Ms. B. Bell from California writes that Remy Ma “has the worst flows I have ever heard from a female in all of hip hop history” (56) she also clearly compares Remy Ma to other *females* in the industry. Although Remy Ma may want to separate herself from other female rappers, she is not accomplishing this goal. The reader responses suggest that, for some readers, Remy Ma has a responsibility as a prominent and visible female rapper to “perform” for female rappers, Black women and for the race as a whole.

At least one reader, J. Wold from California, doesn't appreciate Remy Ma airing her family's "dirty laundry" in her raps, even when it comes to discussing domestic violence: "She wants to rap about her baby's dad, her brother, and her mother. That's out of bounds. Who is she trying to be, the female Eminem?" (56). According to Johnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Black Americans have long had negative responses to "airing dirty racial linen," particularly when the objects of the attack are Black men (2003, XXXI). They argue that, "Many Black women have been convinced that there is a conspiracy by white America to destroy Black men, and as a result they remain silent about the physical and emotional abuse women suffer within our communities" (2003, XXX). Remy Ma has violated this code of silence by rapping about her family's transgressions and the domestic abuse she suffered at the hands of her son's father. In this sense, Remy's actions have made her not only a traitor to her family, but a traitor to her race and a potential destroyer of Black men -- an unfair assertion, indeed.

The question is, why does Brandy get a "pass," even praise from some readers for daring to reject a politics of respectability while Remy Ma receives nothing but condemnation? I contend that class is a contributing factor. Brandy is from a middle-class background and is able to retain some of her "good girl" image in spite of her sexualized poses by declaring her ambivalence about them. Remy Ma, however, in her mannerisms and philosophies, demonstrates a complete rejection of a politics of respectability. Thus, her working-class background is "too apparent" for most readers.

In many ways, R&B singer Amerie's August 2005 cover story parallels that of

Brandy. On the cover, Amerie is dressed in tight white hotpants, a tight blue tank top and high heels. She is standing sideways to the viewer, with her hand on her hip, looking at the camera. The sideways pose emphasizes the muscular and well-toned lower half of her body (buttocks and legs). The extreme height of the heels on her shoes has the dramatic effect of emphasizing her buttocks and legs even more. The tag-lines on the cover read “Amerie: Tempted to Touch” and “69 Ways to love the sexy issue.” These are obvious sexual references and Amerie’s pose on the cover shot sexualizes her for the viewer. However, inside the magazine, before the actual article even begins, Amerie is designated a “good girl.” In editor-in-chief Mimi Valdes’s introduction to the issue, Valdes writes: “Writer Serena Kim takes a refreshingly candid look at Amerie’s career (“Miss Congeniality,” 92) by exploring the good girl’s mission to excel in a scandal-obsessed society” (“What’s Good: Get Ya Open,” 30). Included are a series of pictures – one of a makeup artist preparing Amerie for the *Vibe* photoshoot and another of Amerie’s publicist Tony Ferguson and her manager Lenny Nicholson in the dressing room, among others. The good girl image, however, is also juxtaposed with Amerie’s sexual appeal for men:

It’s funny how the video for Amerie’s “1 Thing” caused a commotion when it hit. Yeah, guys thought she was fine before, but they swore something was different this time around. Her face looked prettier, her legs appeared thicker, and she just seemed completely confident. It wasn’t long before her image became wallpaper in the offices of many of our male staffers. Needless to say, it was no surprise when, after voting on who would become front woman for our sexy issue, Amerie won by a landslide. (30)

This passage foreshadows the tenor of the article to come – a sexy Amerie juxtaposed with Amerie the “good girl.”

The title of the actual article is “Miss Congeniality” and the tag-line below the title reads: “She’s addicted to the tabloids, obsessed with control, and determined to be a diva. But is there more to Amerie than the beauty contestant poise, exotic looks, and angelic voice? Serena Kim investigates the scandal-less star” (92). In a photograph on the opposite facing page, Amerie sits upright (chest out, shoulders back) in a low-cut sleeveless black nylon jersey camisole top and black nylon shorts. Her outfit, with its lace detail and meshing which exposes some skin, resembles lingerie. Amerie has the same open-mouthed stare that she sports on the cover. Her eye makeup – mascara, eyeliner, and eyeshadow – is dark and heavy and her false eyelashes dramatically long. Her long dark hair blows wildly around her. Her whole posture and demeanor says “come hither.” On the following page there is another picture, with the same open-mouth stare. However, this time Amerie is sitting to the side in a short, long-sleeved violet silk dress and very high gold snakeskin platform heels. The violet dress, with its laces and ribbons, also evokes the bedroom. The sexual connotations of the bedroom-looking attire in both pictures are obvious – the idea is to associate Amerie with sexuality. In the second picture, Amerie’s exposed legs are slightly apart, again an obviously sexual pose. The photo caption reads: “MY WAY: ‘I’m a Capricorn,’ says Amerie, who co-executive produced her latest album. ‘Capricorns are control freaks’” (95).

In the body of the article, writer Serena Kim focuses almost single-mindedly on Amerie’s “sheltered upbringing” and resulting naivete. In the beginning of the article, after Amerie explains that she doesn’t know what hallucinogenic mushrooms are, Kim writes:

But it’s hard to believe that during Amerie’s college years, she’d never heard of

'shrooms. Then again, that's the kind of sheltered lifestyle 27-year-old Amerie has had on her path to divadom. "I never had a rebellious period," she says. Though she's the "exotic" combination of Korean and black, she's really the all-American ideal; she doesn't drink, smoke, or curse, never gains weight, and prays before every meal. She makes you want to shake her model-sized frame and shout, "What are your vices, woman?" But it dawns on you with terrifying clarity that Amerie's vice is, in fact, her vicelessness. The "1 Thing" is no thing. (95)

And why is this realization so terrifying to Kim? Because as a celebrity journalist, she explains, the pressure is on to "dig deep into their subject's lives, find the scandal, expose the flaw" (95). But, Kim continues:

Amerie offers an alternate celebrity paradigm: a Disney version of an R&B diva, a tireless entertaining machine, impervious to the temptations of fame and fortune, who produces a gleaming smile for every photo op and a cheerful signature for every autograph seeker (95).

At this point, Kim has established a certain class position for Amerie; she's college-educated, she had a "sheltered" – meaning respectable, a two-parent household, etc. -- upbringing, and she is concerned with maintaining good manners. In other words, middle-class-derived Amerie is more like Brandy than Remy Ma, with her obvious working-class background.

When Kim writes that she wants to "find the scandal" and "expose the flaw" (95) she is expressing a desire to cut through Amerie's "performance" – that of a good-girl. Kim portrays herself as the realist and Amerie as the one doing the constructing. Kim is simply breaking through Amerie's "perfect" veneer in spite of the singer's attempts to stonewall her. A closer reading of the article, however, suggests that Kim is also participating in Amerie's construction; that is both Amerie and Kim are constructing Amerie's "performance." Kim's message: Amerie is "viceless" (97) but still titillating. After all, she *must* be titillating in order to engage readers in her performance and sell

magazines. But, who is truly “viceless”?

Titillation is achieved through the suggestive poses and clothing, but also through juicy tidbits that expose some of the “real” Amerie; for example, the following passage which suggests a romantic relationship between Amerie and her manager, Lenny

Nicholson:

Amerie breaks [from dancing practice] only to kiss Nicholson good-bye when he and Angela have to run an errand. When she realizes that she’s slipped up while a reporter is present, she makes a feeble attempt to downplay the smooch: she quickly kisses [her sister] Angela good-bye, too. (97)

She continues: “Nicholson and Amerie refuse to confirm that they’re a couple, but they also won’t deny it (“What makes you think I’m in love with Lenny? What makes you think that?” she’d say, coyly)” (97). In this way even as Kim paints Amerie with a sexual naiveté, she also contradictorily debunks this.

Collins writes that Black authenticity is measured by one’s class status, with poor and working-class Black culture depicted as “authentically” Black whereas middle- and upper-middle class Black culture seen as less so (2004, 122). Kim inadvertently questions Amerie’s “Blackness” by dwelling on her middle-class markers – two-parent household, a sheltered upbringing, etc. She also questions Amerie’s “authenticity” by repeatedly emphasizing Amerie’s “exotic” mix of Black and Asian – her father is African-American and her mother Korean. On several occasions, Kim refers to Amerie as “exotic” – bringing into question her “degree” of Blackness and also, perhaps, ratcheting up her sexual appeal. Kim, and perhaps Amerie herself, pinpoints Amerie’s mixed heritage as part of the reason she is unable to exude an authentic Blackness, that she is unable to express “realness, emotion, or, as they say, soul” (97). Her lack of “soul”

or an authentic Blackness is apparent in Kim's description of Amerie's transition to becoming an R&B star: "From jump, Amerie was hot and hungry. But [Producer Rich] Harrison . . . had a lot of work to do. Harrison had to bring *soulfulness* and *emotion* to an inexperienced vocalist" (my italics, 98). Hence, Amerie lacked "soul" before Harrison's intervention. Kim continues this theme of a "not-so-Black" Amerie when describing her difficulties with dancing:

At the Soho Dance Studio in downtown Manhattan, Amerie is bent over, butt out, face set in determination, trying to put what choreographer Jamaica Craft and the dancers call a little "stank" in a complicated hip movement . . . Amerie struggles with the slinky parts. While the dancers move through the routine effortlessly with the undulations emanating from the small of their backs, Amerie is simply jerky and awkward, bringing to mind a baby giraffe . . . "I'm not jiggling! Nothing's moving," Amerie whines. "I gotta learn to release my hip. Something's not unlocking." She and Craft put their hands on each other's hips, communicating the nuances that way. (97)

Amerie (and Kim by extension) blames Amerie's lack of "Black" dancing abilities on her Korean mother:

As a performer, Amerie has had to reconcile her sun side (her father's outgoing, exuberant nature) with her moon side (her mother's introverted and conservative personality). The moon side wasn't too stoked on Amerie wiggling her well-educated behind onstage, in pum-pum shorts no less. "At concerts, my Mom wouldn't let us stand up and clap. It was more or less sit down and clap politely at, like, an Atlantic Starr concert," she remembers. "So when I first started performing, it's almost like I was in a shell. It was hard for me to throw my hip out or just let loose onstage." (100)

This passage suggests an "essential" Blackness marked in part by the ability to dance, thus invoking a popular stereotype of Black people (i.e. all Black people can dance). In fact, much of Kim's article is based on the essentializing of Blackness and "Koreanness," evidenced, for example, in the following passage:

When you hang out with her, you can't help but notice how her features and mannerisms are a perfect *mélange* of two ethnic backgrounds. She'll slip

effortlessly into the shrunken, submissive demeanor that's prized in Korean femininity, and she won't hesitate to snap on members of her entourage in a way that could be described as African-American humor. (98)

Kim even essentializes when it comes to notions of respectability:

Though she loved reading fantasy books and writing unicorn stories as a shorty, by the time Amerie was a high school senior, she was certain she wanted to be a singer. When Amerie's mother, who speaks with a heavy Korean accent, heard of her daughter's plans, she wept in disappointment. She couldn't understand why Amerie didn't choose to become a professor or a lawyer – respectable professions by Korean standards. (100)

Thus, Kim discusses “respectability” in relation to Amerie's Korean heritage but fails to acknowledge that African Americans have their own standards of respectability, particularly in relation to Black womanhood. She thus sets up African Americans and Koreans as diametric opposites.

However, Kim seems to undo her own binary when she includes the following quote from Amerie:

“Black and Korean people have a lot in common,” she says. “Both are very soulful. People don't understand that, but if you listen to Korean traditional music, it's all soul. It's from the heart. You can hear the drama, the suffering in the voice. And that's what soul music is. That's the root of black music.” (98)

This passage undermines Kim's previous statement that Amerie had to be taught to be more soulful due to her Korean heritage. Amerie suggests that Blacks and Koreans are both soulful, that they are not opposites. She thus closes the gap that Kim attempts to construct between Blacks and Koreans, suggesting perhaps a tension between the interviewer and subject.

Amerie is discussed mainly in relation to the men in her life. Harrison and

Nicholson figure heavily in Amerie's construction. Other men who play an important role in the article include Ed Holmes, Amerie's previous manager and a close friend of Harrison's; James Lassiter who Amerie hired to help her get more film roles; Lil' Jon who produced the second single off of Amerie's album, "Touch"; Amerie's father; and Ron DeBerry who discovered Amerie at a D.C. nightclub and "'gave' Amerie to Rich Harrison for what DeBerry calls the 'handsome finder's fee' of \$10,000" (98). That DeBerry uses the word 'gave' implies male ownership of Amerie, a theme that reverberates throughout the article. Indeed, Amerie is constructed in terms of male ownership.

Kim's heavy-handed treatment of Amerie in the article was apparent to at least one reader. DJ Fury aka Jeremy Venable from Greenville, N.C. responds in the October 2005 issue to Kim's article:

The Amerie feature was a poor depiction of a hot artist. The writer focused too much on Amerie's impalpable flaws and mixed ancestry. "A" has a dope voice, an impeccable delivery, and with the help of Rich Harrison, is on the verge of bringing DC's go-go-percussion-styled production to the forefront. (49)

I concur with the reader that: 1) Kim focuses too much on Amerie's "flawlessness" and mixed ancestry, and 2.) this obsessive focus distracts from any discussion of Amerie's talents as an artist. I posit that Kim adopted her strategy, in part, to construct Amerie as an artist with an "exotic" sexuality.

Only two other letters are printed in the October 2005 issue in regards to the Amerie article. Along with DJ Fury who urges Amerie to "keep Rich on your team" (49), An Amerie Fan from East Orange, New Jersey also invokes Harrison's name:

It was disappointing that Rich Harrison did not have full creative control over her sophomore album, *Touch*, since Amerie's relationship with him is similar to the

connection Aaliyah had with Timbaland. Harrison did find a “musical soul mate” in Amerie, and he should be the “soul” provider of her soundtracks. (48)

These readers, like Kim, articulate Amerie within her relationships with men (or, in this case, one man – Harrison). They seem to imply that Amerie is *Amerie* because of her relationship with Harrison.

The third letter writer, Lutalo Garvin from Lithonia, Georgia, describes his happiness at seeing Amerie on the cover of *Vibe*, praises her beauty, and, responding to Amerie’s comment about being a “control freak,” tells her, “It’s okay with me if you’re controlling – you have every right to be in order to get things done. If she were my woman, I would love taking orders from her and treating her with respect” (49). This reader, at least, responded favorably to the construction of Amerie as sexually desirable within a heterosexual framework.

Like Serena Kim in the Amerie article, Lola Ogunnaike writes of her subject, R&B singer Olivia, in relation to the various men in her life. Olivia’s performance in the October 2005 issue of *Vibe* is that of the “ride-or-die” chick. As Gwendolyn Pough explains, the ride-or-die chick represents the female who will do anything for her man, even die for him, putting women in a subordinate position in relation to men. As Pough asserts, the “ride-or-die: chick is not just a constructed image but a reality as an increasing number of Black women are going to prison on account of the men in their lives, often on drug charges (189-90).

Singer Olivia is the sole female member of the rap conglomerate G Unit. The title of Ogunnaike’s article, “Sole Sister,” emphasizes Olivia’s position. Directly above the

article title is a group of symbols – one female symbol surrounded by five male symbols – emphasizing Olivia’s sole position in a group with five male members. The article’s emphasis on Olivia’s unique relationship with the males in her life and her “ride-or-die” chick mentality are signaled by the tag line underneath the article title: “Since becoming G Unit’s Ride-or-Die Chick, Olivia has encountered rap beefs, wild rumors, and female groupies. Lola Ogunnaike traces the singer’s tracks, from Bizoucing on Clive Davis to landing in 50 Cent’s world” (123). Turning the page to the actual body of the article, we are hit with a picture of Olivia in a short jean skirt, gold midriff-baring “bra-like” top, and heels. She is standing next to a bicycle with the caption: “RIDER: ‘Whatever 50 does I’m going to support, because you shouldn’t go against your family’” (124). The bike and caption once again emphasize that Olivia will do anything for her man 50 Cent.

Before Olivia explains her “ride or die” philosophy, class takes center stage as Ogunnaike and Olivia attempt to mold her image into that of middle class respectability:

Far away from the jam-packed sidewalks and colossal skyscrapers of Manhattan is where you’ll find 50 Cent’s first R&B singer, Olivia Longott, lounging in the living room of the Queens home where she grew up. Her lawn, like all of the others on the quiet block, is manicured, no blades out of place. “My dad is obsessed with taking care of the lawn,” she says with a chuckle.

Inside, framed family photos capturing high school graduations, birthdays, cousins, aunts, and newborns cover a wooden coffee table. The creaky Yamaha organ that Olivia played as a child rests near a couch. It’s a comfortable room, maybe a little too comfortable. After all, Olivia, 24, has been living here for the last few years, and she’s now just about ready to leave the nest. “I’ve got to get out this year, she’s killing me,” she says with an exasperated smile as her doting mother, a Jamaican June Cleaver, flits about. “If I go to the studio, she worries and can’t sleep until I come home. She’ll leave the light on till it’s day.” (124)

The references to the manicured lawn, two-parent household, photos evoking family togetherness, and June Cleaver are all markers of middle-classness and middle-class

respectability. Such references continue, and as Ogunnaike points out, such class matters seem at odds with the image Olivia assumed when she first broke out as a singer on Clive Davis's J Records:

This rosy picture of a daughter playfully railing against her protective mother comes off more G rated than G Unit, which is her new musical family. And you'd hardly expect a homebody living at home, given that her potty-mouth 2001 J Records breakout hit, "Bizounce," boasted lyrics like "I can't take this shit no more / Picture frame broken daddy 'cause I can't trust you / I'm riding high now / So nigga fuck you." (124)

Olivia, however, attempts to explain the "contradiction" between her home life and label image by decrying the latter as a "performance" that does not reflect the "real"

Olivia:

One could think they stumbled into the wrong house after seeing mother and daughter together. "Once people are around me and get to know me, they always tell me that I'm nothing like what I was on J Records," she says. "So I'm glad when people come around me now, they get to see the real Olivia." (124)

Ogunnaike and Olivia attempt to rehabilitate Olivia's image into that of a "good girl." Olivia even attempts to rationalize her wearing of provocative clothing in a way that absolves her from any hint of "naughtiness" (or a lack of sexual respectability):

[Olivia's mother] produces a newspaper clipping of her child in those infamous "Candy Shop" hot shorts. "Well, they say that's what all the young stars are doing," Mama Longott says in a heavy island accent, "showing themselves."

She giggles as her daughter rolls her eyes. "I'm doing it because I work out all the time," Olivia responds. "So I can show myself." (124)

Olivia seems to be engaging in a peculiar circular logic, that is 'I show myself because I work out all the time so that I can show myself.'

Olivia's class background is again reiterated in the following passage, apparently included to further Olivia's claim that she is really a middle-class respectable "good girl"

– i.e. sexually respectable – in spite of the sexy clothing she now wears and the sexy lyrics she now sings:

Before the high-profile affiliations, the pum pum shorts, and the recording contracts, Olivia was just another cute girl singing in the church choir In an effort to please her mother [i.e. to maintain middle class respectability], she enrolled at Hofstra University, where she studied law and music business. She also attended Five Towns College, a liberal arts school on Long Island (124).

Ogunnaike even mentions that Olivia sang a gospel song – “His Eyes is On the Sparrow” – during her audition with music mogul Clive Davis, a far cry from the “potty-mouth” lyrics of her breakout hit “Bizouance” (124).

Olivia maintains, however, that such lyrics were just a part of the “bad girl” performance constructed for her by an “extremely controlling” Clive Davis:

“At J Records, I couldn’t do anything that I wanted to do,” she says. “It was always what Clive wanted.” Olivia claims she was made to be the bad girl while Alicia Keys was cast as the good girl. “It was basically the whole company just trying to change me.” (126)

According to the article, a source in the J Records camp disputes Olivia’s version of events and points out that of the 12 songs on her debut album, Olivia co-wrote half of them. The source goes on to add: “Clive doesn’t categorize artists as good or bad girls. It’s about the quality of their work” (126). The source, in other words, refutes Olivia’s claim that the potty-mouth lyrics (i.e. indicative of a “working class” sensibility) were simply a performance orchestrated by a powerful and controlling man, but were a reflection of Olivia’s own tastes. Olivia continues her attempt to separate herself from her earlier image in the last paragraph of the article:

After years of being MIA, Olivia is all too eager for a second chance to make a first impression. Of the 15 tracks on *Behind*, Olivia copenned 13, which makes this effort even more personal than her 2001 self-titled debut. And while Olivia’s

latest is a collection of aching love moments and lustful sing-alongs as raunchy as any Adina Howard joint, she insists that there is a difference between her vision and Mr. Davis's. "My songs are not naughty, they're sexy," she says. "It's just a total difference from what they wanted me to do. Before I was cursing and everything. Now the bad-girl image is just sexy and classy, the way I normally am." (126)

What, to Olivia, is the difference between naughty and sexy? Cursing seems to define part of this difference for her; however, she ironically cusses twice in the previous paragraph, using the words "bitches" and "shit," thereby undermining her argument that her previous image was just a performance. Whatever the case, it is important to Olivia that she be seen as "sexy and classy" but not "naughty."

Whatever the real deal with Clive Davis and J Records, Olivia cut ties with one powerful male to join the ranks of another – namely, rapper 50 Cent. The rest of Ogunnaike's article focuses on this relationship with Olivia defending 50 Cent and G Unit against attacks and reiterating her undying loyalty to 50 Cent. When asked about concerns for her safety in running with a crew known for engaging in violent altercations with its many enemies, Olivia decries any concerns for her personal safety, citing the security detail surrounding G Unit (evoking a visual image of Olivia surrounded by even more men). Ultimately, she strives to protect 50 Cent and G Unit by downplaying the dangers involved in associating with them while embracing some of the worst aspects of the "ride-or-die" chick image (i.e. "I'm willing to die for my man").

Olivia also seals her "ride-or-die" image by refusing to air out any dirty laundry concerning G Unit: "I don't like to talk about family business . . . But whatever Fif does, I'm going to support, because he's a great boss and you shouldn't go against your family" (126). Olivia's refusal to "go against family" contrasts with Remy Ma's airing of her

family's problems in her music and in the February 2006 issue of *Vibe*. Remy Ma was subsequently blasted by readers for speaking out against the abuse she suffered at the hands of her baby's father and her other family troubles.

Olivia continues to defend G-Unit against allegations that the men are wild:

She's found out that running with the Unit isn't just about dodging overzealous fans and verbal attacks. It's also about explaining away the wild ideas people have about her and her all-man crew. "It's not like there are naked bitches running around everywhere," Olivia says. "After we finish a show, 50 Cent is either in his room, at the gym, or in the studio." Buck and Banks, who she says are the resident partiers, even keep their bacchanalian evenings to a minimum. "Shit," says Olivia, "I have my own groupies. Half the time, the guys think that the girls are there for them, and the girls really want to meet me. It's crazy." (126)

Along with defending the male members of G-Unit, Olivia has also had to defend herself against sexual rumors, not uncommon for the sole female member of a particular crew:

Just as rumors circled Ashanti and her The Inc. label head Irv Gotti, Olivia has to beat back the notion that she and her muscle-bound boss, whom she affectionately calls Fif, are special friends. "Before, it was about me and Banks dating," Olivia says. "In a minute, it's going to be me and Buck are dating or me and Yayo. That's just how this industry is. They're going to put you with someone regardless. But I'm not dating anyone from G Unit." (126)

She then refuses to answer the question that has been posed in some fashion or another to all of the female artists I have investigated so far: Who is she dating? *Vibe* appears to fixate on female artists' romantic relationships and their relationships with men in general.

The article also mentions that Olivia was referred to as "Oliver" by disgruntled former 50 Cent protégé The Game, implying that Olivia is really a man (126). (Olivia

brushes off this comment with a laugh.) By making such a comment, The Game seeks to hurt G Unit by attacking Olivia's femininity and implying that she possesses a deviant sexuality. That Olivia stays with and defends G Unit through all of these battles earns her the "ride-or-die" chick label and, perhaps, the approval of hip hop fans.

All in all, by proclaiming her middle class roots, decrying allegations of being a "potty-mouth bad girl," and proclaiming a "ride-or-die chick" mentality, Olivia attempts to project an image of middle class respectability, the revealing clothing notwithstanding.

Only two reader responses to the Olivia article were published in the December 2005 issue of *Vibe*. O. Wami from Hawthorne, California did not buy Olivia's performance of respectability: "The writer tried to make Olivia into a goody-goody, which we know is not true" (66). O. Wami also questions Olivia's talent, writing, "I felt her fame was pointless, as well as her singing. She has yet to prove her abilities . . ." This opinion may reflect Olivia's lack of identity outside of the men of G Unit. Keisha Chung from Jamaica, N.Y. forwards such a viewpoint when she writes: "Now that she's with G Unit, though, I feel like she's more of a background extra than an artist" (66). Olivia's performance in the pages of *Vibe* as the ultimate "ride-or-die" chick has helped to further subsume her identity to those of the male members of G Unit.

In the December 2004 issue of *Vibe*, writer Sean Lewis Sharp describes how R&B singer Ashanti has "been dissed by G Unit, outshined by Beyonce, and hated on by fans" (161). The article describes Ashanti's troubles since the year 2003 when fan and media

adoration for her began to fade. As we shall see, although Sharp describes these trials and tribulations, Ashanti is ultimately presented as a ‘respectable’ artist from a middle-class background who is sexy yet enshrined in a veil of innocence and protection from the men who surround her.

Like singer Olivia, Ashanti has built her career, at least in part, on a “ride-or-die” chick image. A side panel entitled “Role Call” in the middle of the article declares the “ride-or-die” chick as one of the “many faces of Ashanti” (166), along with the “angelic songstress” and the “leading lady.” The “ride-or-die chick” image has been solidified in a string of songs she has performed with rapper Ja Rule, including 2001’s “Always on Time” and 2002’s “Down 4 U.” Just as Olivia is G Unit’s sole female affiliate, so is Ashanti for rap collective The Inc. (formerly known as Murder Inc.). As Parker points out in the article, Ja Rule calls her “Bonnie” to his “Clyde” (164). Further into the article, however, Ashanti projects a less “ride-or-die” image than Olivia when it comes to real-life beef involving Ja Rule and The Inc., referencing her middle-class background to disassociate herself from such trouble:

Ashanti is a young starlet from the burbs of Long Island with no confirmed scandals or known vices. “I don’t know if I’m a cornball or what,” she says, “But I don’t smoke, I don’t drink or do drugs, X or any of that. That’s not my thing.”

Ashanti’s options were much broader than many sing-or-die artists. She says she had been scouted by Hampton University and Princeton for track and academics, but decided to pursue music . . . “Never think that it was all gravy,” she says. “Everyone goes through a dark time. But I don’t want to front. I wasn’t out there gangbanging and shooting up.”

This explains why Ashanti tried to steer clear of the bitter feud between Ja Rule and G Unit [italics mine]. She maintains that she supported Ja, but wished the flap would come to an end. (166)

Like Olivia, Ashanti laughs when discussing a swipe at her sexuality by another

male artist (G Unit's Lloyd Banks rapped about Ashanti having "sideburns," implying that she is a man and possesses a deviant sexuality), saying that "[it] was funny" (166). She adds, "But everyone knows I had nothing to do with it. It really didn't make any sense for them to put my name in anything." Instead of claiming The Inc.'s beef as her own, Ashanti attempts to distance herself from it. Thus, Ashanti's performance as a "ride-or-die" chick is challenged by her performance in the pages of *Vibe* as a middle-class princess who wants little to do with the rap beefs involving the male members of her crew.

The article plays up Ashanti as a "princess." The title of the article is "Princess Diaries," and Ja Rule refers to her as "the Princess of Hip Hop and R&B" (164). All of the innocence and male protection that the title "princess" suggests is played out in the article. For one, while some of the pictures accompanying the article are sexy, others are both sexy and playful, clothing her in a veil of innocence. The cover shot is the typical "sexy" shot with Ashanti in a low-cut, tight white dress, with exaggerated lip, face, and eye makeup, and the ever-present tons of weave on her head. She is sitting with one leg elevated to demurely conceal her nether-regions. She has the same "come hither" stare (lips parted, staring straight into the camera) seen in so many of the female artists' pictorials I have examined thus far.

The picture inside the magazine opposite the title page of the article is of Ashanti fully clothed in jeans, heels, and a pink form-fitting jacket, standing on a tire swing, apparently in a children's playground (160). The New York City skyline is in the background. The playground setting and her position on the tire swing bathe her in a veil

of innocence while the New York City Skyline reminds us of her position as the “voice of the sisters in the hood” (166). A second picture emphasizes Ashanti’s “sexiness” with her lying on her side in a black dress, side cut-outs down the bodice (162-63). Her lips are parted, as usual. A third picture combines sexiness and playful innocence together with Ashanti standing in a park holding some balloons overhead in a pink tanktop, short jean-skirt, and thigh-high, high-heeled boots (165). The balloons and wearing of soft pink project an image of innocence while her attire and open-mouth stare (which practically duplicates her expression in the covershot) project sexiness. These images are a part of the sexy-but-innocent performance of Ashanti in the interview as a whole.

The article makes clear that Ashanti has faced many of the allegations and rumors that tend to plague the lone female member of rap crews – specifically, that she has no talent (with the implication that perhaps she has “slept her way up”), that she has slept with The Inc. mastermind Irv Gotti (which she and Gotti vehemently deny, maintaining her veil of innocence), and, as we have seen earlier, that she is really a male. As a “princess” however, Ashanti is to be protected and the article spends a significant amount of time on the protection that Ashanti receives from the males around her. Gotti is repeatedly referred to as “protective” in the article. When music fans signed a petition to have Ashanti removed as the recipient of the Aretha Franklin Award for entertainer of the year for 2002’s Soul Train Lady of Soul Awards, Gotti “fearful that his star might be harassed by sign-carrying protesters, showed up with 50 dudes who were ready for anything” (164). Gotti explains that he was “pissed off . . . You’re not gonna pick on her for nothing. She didn’t ask for the award” (qtd. in Sharp, 164). Ashanti’s father, “who

has a fear of flying,” flew to L.A. to “protect” his daughter “from the anticipated firestorm” (164). The article also mentions the protectiveness of Ashanti’s mother (who doubles as her manager), articulating the notion that Ashanti, as a “princess,” is worthy of protection in general, whether that protection be from a male or a female.

In spite of the slight foray into the mother-daughter relationship, the bulk of the article constructs Ashanti in relation to the men in her life. This includes speculation on her romantic life. In fact, the writer suggests that Ashanti could have more success if she could be definitively linked to a man: “Beyonce’s star rocketed even higher as her romance with Jay-Z became the most talked about hip hop relationship since Puffy and J.Lo. In direct contrast, little was known about the personal life of Ashanti” (168). Thus, the writer implies that Ashanti could have attained a greater popularity and sold more albums if she had been publicly attached to a man. It appears to be difficult for the writer to imagine Ashanti outside of her relationships with men or as independent from men even as Ashanti attempts to put off any romantic speculation, not only about her and Gotti, but also about her and rap artist Nelly:

Even when it was believed she was in a relationship with Nelly (whom she insists is just a friend), skeptics dismissed the rumors as an attempt to gain publicity. “That’s just people making up their own sitcom,” Ashanti says, annoyed by the notion that she would manufacture a relationship to get attention. “Nelly and I are cool, so what? I don’t live to please anyone. I make music so others can enjoy it, but I don’t live my life for other people. I’m not following anyone’s footsteps or pattern for anything.” (168)

The writer also articulates Ashanti in comparison to other female artists, as the aforementioned quote regarding Beyonce reveals. The writer continues the theme of positioning Ashanti against other female artists in the last paragraph of the article, even

as Ashanti tries to avoid such comparisons, suggesting some tension between writer and subject:

She may never measure up to Beyonce’s sex appeal, or reach the level of musicianship of Alicia Keys, or touch people with stories of struggle like Mary J. Blige. And you get the feeling that Ashanti knows this. “I want people to appreciate me for me and accept that there is a lot of room for different artists,” she says. “Accept my style, accept her style, accept his style, and let’s go back to having fun in music.” (168)

Readers also commented on comparisons between Ashanti and other female artists in letters to the editor published in the February 2005 issue. Barry Z. a male from San Diego, California, praises Ashanti in his own comparison when he writes: “She’s got just as much sex appeal, if not more, than the beautiful Beyonce “ (33) (challenging writer Sharp’s suggestion that Ashanti does not have Beyonce’s sex appeal). Apparently, Ashanti’s performance of a sexy vixen was bought by this reader. A number of the female readers, however, compare Ashanti in the negative with other singers. Theresa Turner of Washington, D.C. writes:

Her voice isn’t powerful enough for her to just stand there and sing and have the crowd in awe like Mary J. Blige, Faith Evans, Kelly Price, or Shanice. That’s why Ashanti has to wear skimpy outfits to get attention. She’s saying she doesn’t have to follow anybody else’s footsteps, but that’s exactly what she’s doing. She came out as a Mary clone, and now she’s riding Beyonce’s tail. She needs to get her *own* style. (33)

This reader sees Ashanti’s “sexy” act as a ploy to detract from her lack of talent and to get attention. Shanonielle Johnson from Detroit, Michigan articulates similar sentiments:

The girl can’t sing or dance . . . It makes me mad that the real singers such as Tamia, Kelly Price, and Shanice, to name a few, never got the attention Ashanti is getting – they can outsing her any day. Also, it seems Ashanti always says people hate on her for no reason, but ask yourself this: Why haven’t Beyonce, Monica, Alicia Keys, and even Tweet had this many against them? Because they can sing. So, Ashanti, sit down and let the real singers stand up. (33)

Another female reader, Lisa Robinson from Bronx, New York, not only compares Ashanti negatively to Beyonce, but challenges the “ride-or-die” chick image that Ashanti has cultivated:

Ashanti and her “momager” need to rethink the course of the singer’s career. She will never be a star in her own right unless she comes out from behind the shadow of The Inc. Where Beyonce has succeeded in commanding respect (regardless of who her boyfriend is or band mates are), Ashanti has failed. The need for the boys of The Inc. to continually come to her rescue and speak on her behalf proves to be a disservice. It leads one to believe that she is unable to be an intelligent woman in the industry. The singing of hooks on countless Ja songs, being swept up in the G Unit beef, and rumors of her romantic involvement with married label head Irv Gotti are slowing down her chance to reach superstardom. Hasn’t she earned the right to no longer be Bonnie to Ja’s Clyde? We all know how that movie ends. (34)

Robinson effectively argues what I argue – that as a “ride-or-die” chick, Ashanti’s identity has been subsumed under the identities of the men around her. Robinson wants Ashanti to articulate an identity outside of men. She even hints at the danger involved in embracing a “ride-or-die” chick image when she writes, “Hasn’t she earned the right to no longer be Bonnie to Ja’s Clyde? We all know how that movie ends” (34). Robinson also picked up on Ashanti’s performance of a woman in need of protection [“The need for the boys of The Inc. to continually come to her rescue and speak on her behalf proves to be a disservice” (34)]. She advises Ashanti to ditch this performance in order to establish her own identity and garner respect. She cites Beyonce as an example for Ashanti to follow, who, she says, commands respect regardless of who the men are around her; here, Robinson disagrees with Sharp’s assessment that Beyonce’s popularity is due, in part, to her relationship with rapper Jay-Z. Thus, Robinson articulates an

alternative performance for female artists based on the forging of an independent identity.

Another reader, Corey Duncan of Detroit, buys Ashanti's performance of respectability: "I like G Unit and all, but Ashanti was right when she said they shouldn't have put her name in things" (33). This reader was, in effect, comfortable with Ashanti's slight rupture with her "ride-or-die" chick image in order to forward a performance of middle-class respectability and innocence.

In sum, the letters to the editor reveal both positive and negative reactions to Ashanti's performance in the *Vibe* article, revealing, perhaps, an overall ambivalence regarding the "ride-or-die" chick image, particularly in relation to middle-class Ashanti. None of the readers, however, seemed to challenge Ashanti's performance of middle-class respectability.

R&B/hip hop soul singer Mary J. Blige adorns the cover of the December 2005 issue of *Vibe*. The cover declares Blige the "*Vibe* Awards V Legend Winner" and contains the following in big and bold letters: "Mary J. Blige: Bow Down to the Queen." With these words, the cover sums up Blige's position in the hip hop world: a respected legend known as the Queen of Hip Hop Soul. Blige's leopard print tank top reveals some cleavage, but her cover is relatively demure, even subdued, when compared to the cover shots of some of the younger artists that have adorned *Vibe*'s cover. Sporting a long blonde weave and tattoo on her upper left arm, Blige is clad in jeans and sits with her hands in her lap, unsmiling and wearing a somewhat somber expression. The title page of the article further emphasizes Blige's position alluded to on the cover: "R&B

luminaries accept her. Young songbirds praise her, and rappers beg for collaborations. Yes, after a 14-year career filled with love, life, and drama, Mary J. Blige still wears the crown. Ayana Byrd sits with *Vibe*'s VLegend Award-Winner and discovers the power of Mary” (153). The title of the article: “Unbreakable.” We know we are going to get a hard-knocks story in which Blige makes it through the fire to become the respected (and respectable) hip hop legend that she is now.

The first paragraph of the article cements Blige's current class position:

At first glance, she seems as out of place as Dorothy in those first moments in Oz. Among the charcoal and navy suits sprinkled throughout the midtown Manhattan restaurant, her white Baby Phat sweat suit, matching baseball cap, and oversize silver hoops create a startling contrast. More likely the meeting place of CNN and NBC executives who work nearby, Del Frisco's is the kind of dark-wood-paneled hangout where the old boys kept their network going strong in cigar-filled meetings . . . Yet Mary J. Blige is unfazed, never seeming to notice that she is one of the few females present – definitely the only African-American woman (reporter not counted) – without an apron. Here, she and her husband, Kendu, are regulars. She's on a first-name basis with the staff, and she's happy to stop by the bar to exchange small talk with the manager. (155)

With these words, reporter Byrd paints Blige as one of the elite, an African-American woman accepted by the privileged White upper-class in spite of the hip hop gear she sports (albeit *brand name* hip hop gear). With age has come “politeness and professionalism” (155) but also a lack of enthusiasm about talking to a reporter [“Newer, hungrier artists might invite a journalist along to see them do anything . . .” Byrd muses (155).] The 35-year-old singer, Byrd (and as we shall see, Blige herself) suggests, doesn't have to do what the young artists do. Blige even refuses to talk about her sister, LaTonya, “once a permanent fixture at the singer's side,” by saying only, “I'd prefer to not talk about my family” (155). Blige may refuse to talk about “family” out of a sense

of privacy, but her refusal to air her family's "dirty laundry" also supports the "respectable" image she has cultivated.

Continuing on this theme of respectability, Blige describes to Byrd her refusal to dress provocatively, saying:

"They tell these young girls, 'If you don't do this, dress like this, you're not going to be able to compete against this person.' And a lot of those girls look really uncomfortable. They look like they're going against their hearts. But you have to tell yourself, 'Forget that other person, what about me?' I don't mind showing my abs and my arms because I worked hard for them. But I ain't giving you titty, nipple, pubic hair, or damn near clitoris." (155)

Blige comes off not only as respectable in refusing to adopt an overtly sexual persona (although she will, apparently, show some skin), but also as wise (emphasizing her advanced age and longevity in the music business) in advising younger female artists. The other pictures embedded in the article support Blige's performance of (measured) respectability and wisdom. One picture of Blige, fully-clothed in a fur-lined leather jacket and jeans, is adorned with the words: "ON THE FENCE: 'I don't mind showing my abs,' says Mary of her image. 'But I ain't giving you nipple'" (154).

Yet, in spite of Blige's legendary status, Byrd questions whether Blige's refusal to adopt a more sexualized persona will be to her detriment. Yet, Byrd argues, Blige is both current and legendary and this has allowed her to remain relevant in spite of her refusal to adopt a more sexualized persona.

Blige expresses ambivalence about the legend label: "When I'm called a legend, I say thank you, and I thank the Lord for the favor, and I keep it moving . . . I don't let myself absorb it, because I want no man idolizing me. Icon? No, I'm you. I'm working on things that you're probably working on" (158). Her discomfort may come from, not

just a humbleness, but a need to not alienate her audience; hence by stating that, “I am like you,” Blige can still retain her some of her working-class audience.

Blige has risen from a troubled young working-class starlet to a respected member of the industry, a journey that Byrd illuminates: “Her struggles have been well documented in the media and in her own music. From drugs, drinking, and her bouts with the wrong men, Mary’s problems are almost as familiar to us as our own” (158). Byrd then dives into an examination of Blige’s multiple albums and how they provide a retrospective of her life, highlighting her body of work in a way that is missing from *Vibe*’s explorations of younger female artists.

Byrd still cannot resist, however, configuring Blige in terms of the men in her life, complete with pictures of Blige with various rappers and with her manager and husband of 2 years, Kendu Isaacs. Blige herself credits Kendu with the most recent transformations in her music:

“Being married has drastically changed my music,” she explains about finding and being with Kendu . . . “I’m singing about things I never thought Mary J. Blige would, like really understanding the importance of a mate. *My Life* expressed how I was being treated like a dog. Now it’s like, Wow, I didn’t know men like this existed. I thought they were extinct.” (159-160)

Writer Alvin Blanco also declares Blige a “Ride-or-Die Chick” in an accompanying side panel to the article in which he rates Blige’s top 10 appearances alongside male rappers.

In another side panel, writer Imani A. Dawson, with the help of Blige’s former stylist Misa Hylton-Brim, traces Blige’s stylistic evolution “from edgy urban girl to phenomenal woman,” highlighting her working class roots and growing embrace of a more hegemonic femininity in her bodily appearance (195).

The labeling of a female artist as a “ride-or-die” chick and the focus on bodily appearance are staples in *Vibe* articles. What is different about the article on Blige is that these foci are also balanced, perhaps even overshadowed, by the analyses of Blige’s talents as an artist and her body of work, including a retrospective timeline of “Mary’s most memorable moments year by year” along the bottom of the article pages. We also see something else we have not seen before in a *Vibe* article: Blige’s work is connected to larger social issues, in this instance, the ravages of Hurricane Katrina. It is, perhaps, not a coincidence that the next article in the issue is about the plight of the urban underclass of New Orleans in the aftermath of the Hurricane.

Of the six letters to the editor printed in the February 2006 issue in response to the Mary J. Blige article, the overwhelming majority are positive toward Blige. The mostly (if not wholly) female readers express a personal connection with Blige and tout her as a source of inspiration for them. As I argue, Blige wanted to maintain this connection with her readers, and on this, she appears to have succeeded. NormaJean Douglas of Akron, Ohio, for example, writes:

The article literally had me in tears. I, too, am at a turning point in my life, so to hear that Mary is coming through and is still on top of her game gives me the strength to keep going for myself. Thank you so much for featuring an artist who has developed a personal relationship with her fans through her music. Her music is important to my generation and the ones to come. (37)

Readers also affirm Blige’s “legendary” status, agreeing with Byrd’s designation, and approve Blige’s journey toward respectability. K. Moore of Jackson, Mississippi writes: “I am so happy she found happiness and a wonderful man to share it with. She is an inspiration to all women” (37).

Three of the letters reference a controversy involving Blige and *Vibe* editors regarding Blige's covershot. When receiving her VLegend Award at the magazine's annual awards show in November 2005, Blige railed against her covershot, saying:

For so many years, Vibe has given me great, great, great covers, but I must say, I'm very, very disappointed at the cover this time, so Mimi, me and you really need to talk, as women. No disrespect, but I really hated the way you guys shaved off my head, pushed my forehead way back behind my ears. I'm just insulted, so that's no respect on the cover, but I thank you, and I appreciate this award.
(EURWeb)

After the show, Blige continued to speak against the magazine, adding that the magazine made her look depressed and troubled on the cover (www.contactmusic.com). She insisted that she "wanted to create 'a certain look' for the cover which would show fans her difficulties were behind her and she was entering a happier, more peaceful time of life" (www.contactmusic.com). Instead, she said, *Vibe* editors altered the photo and "made her look like the person she was a decade ago" (www.contactmusic.com). "I'm working on something and I know people are like, 'Is this 1994 Mary or is this Mary now?'" Blige said (www.contactmusic.com). Blige's blow-up illuminates the extent to which magazine articles and covers are carefully constructed by artists. Her tirade also sheds light on the collaborative process between magazine and artist, exposing the tensions that can surface between the two. Also apparent in Blige's statements is her concern for maintaining an image of respectability; she shuns her former image and expects her cover shots to reflect this.

Reader K. Moore attempts to reassure Blige that she looks beautiful on the cover by writing: "I know we can be our own worst critics, but please believe me, girl, when I say you grace every cover with your style and beauty" (37). Another reader, Miriam

Lurry of Yonkers, New York, agrees with Blige's critiques of the cover:

I can't believe y'all did the Queen of Hip Hop Soul like that. That cover photo of Mary was dead wrong. There are better pictures on the inside that should have made the cover. She had every right to say what she did about y'all, and I think VIBE owes Mary an apology and another cover – it's only right. I love VIBE, but as a Mary fan, I would have to say that was one of the worst pictures I have ever seen of her and one of the worst VIBE covers. (37)

This reader wants Blige's newfound respectability to be apparent in her pictures as well.

One reader, Ashley Johnson of San Antonio, Texas, however, was not supportive of Blige's claims:

I'm one of Mary's biggest fans, but she has totally crossed the line. She truly disrespected this great magazine by saying those comments at the VIBE Awards. Shouldn't the decision of which photo goes on the cover be at the editor's discretion? The other pictures came out great. Celebrities should be more humble nowadays and remember their roots. (37)

Here, Johnson questions the extent to which artists should be involved in their layouts.

Additionally, she suggests that Blige lacks humility and, with her fame, has forgotten her "roots."

The introduction of the article "Widow's Peak" reads: "For some, Faith Evans will always be Mrs. B.I.G., caught up with Lil' Kim, Tupac, and Puffy. But Aliya S. King finds the First Lady focused on her new family, new look, new album, and her version of that case in ATL" (King 97). The introduction aptly sums up the content of the article.

Like many of the women profiled in *Vibe*, Evans is configured in terms of the men in her life. The article begins with her interactions with her manager/husband Todd

Russaw. Evans has just finished an appearance on the BET music countdown show *106 & Park* and in the studio's dressing room she walks up to her husband:

[She] waits patiently for him to finish a business conversation. She stands about two feet away, her eyes set on him as he exchanges numbers with a producer. She bites the inside of her lip and clasps her hands behind her back. He catches her eye for a moment and holds up an index finger . . . A John Legend video plays as her husband slips his PDA back into his pocket and looks at Faith. "Good job," Russaw says. His face is serious and determined. "Your poise was good, your enthusiasm was up." He gives a thumbs-up sign. "Good work."

Evans, visibly relieved, smiles and gives a playful curtsy before joining her style team and preparing to leave. "All of the positive changes that my fans acknowledge – a lot of that is related to my husband," Evans will explain later. (99)

Evans's nervousness and intense preoccupation with receiving her husband's approval is revealing of the relationship that King and Evans describe. Russaw is configured as Evans's svengali; he negotiated her exit from Bad Boy records in 2003 and has more recently orchestrated her physical transformation from chubby to sleek. Like Brandy's manager, Benny Medina, Russaw is encouraging his artist to adopt a sexier image in order to boost record sales.

He began five years ago by telling Evans bluntly that she needed to lose weight if she wanted to further her career. Russaw explains his thinking:

"Personally, it doesn't matter to me. She can be 200 pounds," says Russaw, fiddling with his BlackBerry. "But for this work thing? If we gon' be spendin' time away from our kids?" He looks up and raises his eyebrows. He points across the room in Faith's direction. "You gotta look good, be in your best shape, and make people feel like there's something about you that they want to be. Until men feel like they gotta have her . . ." Russaw shrugs his shoulders. "That's the business we're in." (99)

For Russaw, Evans must be sexually desirable to men in order for the pursuit of a music career to be worthwhile. For him, being sexually desirable means being thin. As King

mentions, at a size four, thirty-two year old Evans is thinner than she's ever been in her life. Evans's thinness is emphasized by the covershot which features Evans with her back toward the camera, in a hat and dress with a plunging backline revealing her lean, toned back. A picture inside the magazine of Evans in a skin-tight silver sequin suit and high platform heels also accents Evans's significant weight loss and thin body (98).

Russaw is not the only man continually referenced in King's article. King continually invokes Evans's slain ex-husband, rapper Notorious B.I.G., in her article. From the words on the cover of *Vibe* – “The Notorious F.A.I.T.H.: Tupac, Drugs, and Life After Biggie” – to the title of the article, “Widow's Peak,” and beyond, Notorious B.I.G. (also known as Biggie) is referenced if not directly, then indirectly. Notably, slain rapper Tupac, who once bragged about having an affair with Evans (102), is also referenced on the cover and in the introduction to the article – “For some, Faith Evans will always be Mrs. B.I.G., caught up with Lil' Kim, Tupac, and Puffy” (96); again, *Vibe* configures Evans in relation to men.

Ironically, King herself describes the inability of people to envision Evans outside of the men in her life – particularly, Notorious B.I.G. In one instance: “It's her first marriage – an impetuous and tempestuous union with Christopher ‘Notorious B.I.G.’ Wallace – that continues to define her in the public's eye, for better or worse” (100). In another: “With a hands-on husband/manager and a son who is hip hop royalty by birth, Evans may continue to be defined by the men in her life” (106). The article, however, reinscribes this definition of Evans. King continually brings up Notorious B.I.G. especially. What is not clear, however, is how much Evans is contributing to her own

configuration. She mentions at various times throughout the article that she wants to move on from Biggie, even reminding readers at one point that, “We weren’t together when he passed . . . What am I going to do? Act like we were?” (100). However, it is not clear how much she is initiating these discussions of Biggie.

What is clearer, however, is that Evans is attempting to reclaim her sexuality while also projecting an image of sexual respectability. When Evans explains that she and Biggie were not together when he passed and suggests that she will not act like they were, she is explaining her refusal to play the role of the “asexual widow”; “While [at the time of Biggie’s death], Evans was elevated to hip hop’s version of the bereaved first lady, she didn’t accept the idea that she would become one of those long-suffering, seemingly asexual widows like Betty Shabazz or Coretta Scott King,” King writes (100). Evans is also defending her decision to move on with Russaw. As King explains, the public thought Evans was moving too fast by taking up with Russaw soon after Biggie’s death:

Faith and Todd have been together for eight years, almost as long as Biggie has been gone. When Wallace was shot, he and Evans had been estranged for two years. So it was Russaw who comforted her in her hotel room on the night of the murder. “We just talked and talked for hours, until I fell asleep,” remembers Evans. Biggie had been dead for more than a year when Evans gave birth to Russaw’s child. They married not long after. Once again, Evans seemed to be moving a little too quickly, and there were whispers that she hadn’t done her time as widow for long enough. “We couldn’t help how we felt,” she says. “I just had to figure out the most tactful way to deal with it.” (104)

The word “tactful” could easily be replaced by the term “sexually respectable” in Evans’s quote. Like many of the female artists covered in *Vibe*, Evans is walking a fine line between claiming her sexuality and being sexually respectable.

Evans also performs sexual respectability in other ways. She addresses a long-standing rumor that she had an affair with rapper Tupac Shakur during a 1995 recording session with him. As King explains, Shakur started the rumor after believing that Notorious B.I.G. was responsible for him being shot in the lobby of a Manhattan recording studio the year before. Evans explains that she was used by Shakur and “insists she had no idea that going to the studio with ‘Pac would be so scandalous, so suspicious, such a flat-out dumb move” (102). She explains that during the recording session, she “didn’t feel right” and said, “Let me just do this song and get the hell out of here” (102). She vehemently denies that she had any romantic involvement with Tupac: “‘I can clarify it,’ she says once and for all. Evans leans in close to the digital recorder for emphasis. ‘The nigga lied on me’” (102).

Like Mary J. Blige, Evans forwards an image of middle-class respectability in general while also maintaining some connection to her working-class roots. Along with her denials of sexual immorality, the article also forwards an image of Evans as a family woman. The writer includes the original lyrics to Evans’s new song “Again”; at one point, Evans emphasizes that her son “was born from my husband / Mr. Christopher Wallace” (100). Along with further denying the Tupac allegations, the lines emphasize that Evans had her child within the context of marriage. Furthermore, as already mentioned, Evans’s husband, Russaw, is invoked repeatedly by King and Evans. Similarly, Evans joyfully discusses her three children and a family photo of the smiling couple with their smiling three children are included.

Additionally, Evans attempts to rehabilitate her image after a recent scandal

involving her (and her husband's) arrest for drugs found in her car. In the article, Evans denies that any cocaine was found in the car in spite of published reports to the contrary. Evans admits that a marijuana joint was found in the car but denies it was hers: "My car was used in a video, and I had just gotten it back that day" (100). She does admit, however, to some past drug experimentation: "I'll be the first to admit that I have experimented with drugs . . . I don't have to go into detail. I've tried a few things. Am I a drug addict? No. I'm living responsibly, not recklessly" (100). For Evans, "living responsibly" puts her back into the realm of class respectability.

Simultaneously, however, Evans seems to disavowal that she is living a bourgeois lifestyle:

Evans insists that she is by no means without monetary issues . . . She's still not sure if she can afford Chyna's tuition at a prestigious private school in Santa Monica . . . "People think that fame equals finance," she says. "But it ain't like that. There are perks, but it doesn't mean sometimes I'm not trying to figure out how to pay the bills. 'Cause we don't get paid regularly. I may get a check every six months from BMI – it could be \$2, \$2,000, or \$200,000. I don't want to have to chase a check." (102)

Evans's disavowal in part serves to keep her connected to her working-class roots and, perhaps, her working-class fans. Like Mary J. Blige, whom she has been compared to (106), Evans seems to be saying to her fans, "I still have something in common with you; I still can relate to you." A picture of Evans fully-dressed in a tuxedo jacket and top hat with a cane is accompanied with the caption "Song and Dance: 'People think that fame equals finance,' says Faith. 'It doesn't mean sometimes I'm not trying to figure out how to pay the bills'" (101). The photo and quote serve to illustrate Evans's "caught between two worlds" class status. King's description of Evans's mannerisms also serves this

purpose:

At Matsuri, a Japanese restaurant in Manhattan, Evans is talking a mile a minute. Her mannerisms are pure Jersey-girl swagger; neck swiveling, teeth sucking, and finger-pointing. And yet, she's refined and fastidious with a sushi menu, discussing the intricacies of yellowtail shoulder with the waitress and knowingly suggesting lotus root and a spicy salmon roll to a sushi novice. (102)

Reader responses to the article published in the August 2005 issue of *Vibe* are overwhelmingly positive. Like many of the letters published in response to the Mary J. Blige article, readers express a personal connection with Evans. "After being told that I'd never walk again (after being shot), living eight years in a wheelchair, and fighting drug use, it's Faith's story and music that have given me the strength to overcome obstacles in my life," writes Charlie Dent, aka Diva Simone, from Washington, D.C. (43). "Faith, you have fans who pray for you daily and remember God, which I know you do, too," writes LD Brooks from Memphis, Tennessee (43). Some readers also praise and defend Faith, often in terms of respectability. Charlie Dent writes, "Faith is a true lady with class and grace" (43). Caramel Garrett from Brooklyn, New York writes, "When all the bullshit was said and the drama was coming out the woodwork, she held her head high and did what black women are supposed to do" (43). Leya Mack of Baltimore, Md. writes, "She has truly earned her title as 'the First Lady,'" (43). And finally, Kimberly Williams writes, "Before anyone berates Faith Evans, I just want to say, Stop. She is a talented artist who deserves respect. Growing up in Newark, N.J., isn't easy," (43). These responses suggest that at least some readers have accepted Evans's performance of respectability. However, while one male reader praises Faith's physical transformation ["Faith looks better than ever" (43)], another mail reader, Steve

Aryn, disagrees:

I think the Don, Joey Crack, would have been a much more worthy choice for the cover of the June issue, considering Faith looks a little cracked out. If you were going to put a picture of crack at its best, it should have featured Fat Joe, not the sickly, skinny Faith Evans. (44)

Both of these responses highlight the importance of Evans's physicality to her acceptance (or lack thereof) by the public as a female artist. The latter response also suggests, however, that Evans's denial of being drug addicted in an attempt to forward a performance of respectability was rejected by this reader.

Despite the one negative letter, most of the letters mention Evans's talents in the positive. Many compare her singing to other 'great' female singers; for example, Ty Lattimore of Atlanta writes: "Recently, I saw Kelly Price, Tamia, Chante Moore, Shanice, and Deborah Cox – women who can sing live – put it down when the 2005 Women of Soul concert came through Atlanta. The only one missing was Faith" (43). This reader also invokes Ashanti's name to sing Evans's praises: "Way before Ashanti sang hooks, Faith was the lady every hip hop artist wanted on a hot track" (43). Here, the reader establishes the 32-year-old Evans's position of respect in the industry (a position bestowed by *men* no less). In this way, this reader and the many others who expressed positive sentiments, situate Evans in a similar way to Blige – as a woman who has earned the respect of her peers through her longevity in the industry, her personal connection to her audience, and her perseverance through many odds. Evans, although not quite as established as Blige, nevertheless gets a similar nod of approval.

The cover of the October 2004 issue of *Vibe* announces the magazine's interview

with neo-soul singer Jill Scott with the words: “Jill Scott: Sexual Healing.” The title of the article, “Ear to Ear,” which refers to Scott’s smile, apparently a source of her sexual power, is followed with a summary of the article: “Jill Scott has taken long walks before, but all roads lead home. Karen R. Good tracks her footsteps as Scott talks about love, sexuality, and everything that pisses her off” (134).

Jill Scott is the only plus-sized female artist featured with an in-depth interview in *Vibe* during the two-year time period of this study. Indeed, all of the other female artists with in-depth interviews have been thin. Such a circumstance may reflect the music industry’s obsession with thinness in relation to female artists, meaning that most of the female artists in the urban music scene are thin. It may also reflect perhaps, *Vibe*’s own complicity with this obsession in its quest to sell magazines. By largely excluding plus-sized female artists, the magazine implicitly relates attractiveness and sexual desirability with thinness.

Contemplating the ‘anomaly’ of Jill Scott, writer Karen R. Good brings up Scott’s size first thing in the article:

If you in any way care how Jill Scott has and continues to thrive as a woman in the music business without being a size six, then dammit, let’s just get this out of the way . . . Is size a part of the job requirement? After all, she has put her everything into her third release, *Beautifully Human: Words and Sounds Vol. 2* . . . But we are a nation that births pageants that judge a woman’s surgical transformation and call it *The Swan* . . . These days, the female body in music is revealed more out of desperation than any real celebration, creating an ironic Hottentot consciousness. (137)

What is ironic is *Vibe*’s critique of such a consciousness that, many may argue, it actively promotes.

On the questions about her size, Scott says, “What am I gon’ do? Crawl on the

floor? I can only do what I can do. I'm not trying to have sex with the world. I'm a grown up. I don't have to wear certain outfits to turn my man on. I can give him a look" (137). And then later in the article:

This is who I am. Yes, I'm going to eat healthier. Yes, I'm going to take my walks and ride my bike. Yes, I'm going to do these things for my body because I've been blessed with it. Fingers work. Toes work. Ears work. I can see in both directions. I just feel bad for people who don't see their beauty. (137)

Additionally, Scott explains, she plans to call her upcoming tour "the big and beautiful tour." Although Scott, refreshingly, articulates an alternative version of beauty, a concern for health as opposed to body size, and an ethos of self-affirmation, a theme that resonates, as Good describes, in her music, Scott also articulates her beauty and sexuality within a heterosexual framework of 'what turns a man on.'

This theme is continued in the article as Good relates an incident that confirms Scott's ability to turn men on (and *attractive* men at that), her sexual power lying apparently in her smile. While Scott was performing in May at Atlanta's Funk-Jazz Kafe:

Two attractive gentlemen standing next to each other watched Scott intently. The taller one said: "Maaan, if this girl keeps smiling like that, she's gon' push my big-girl button." His friend, duly mesmerized, said: "My big-girl button is *pushed!* That's good loving there, if you can't tell." (138)

Scott's smile is evident in all four pictures that accompany the article. A hint of cleavage shows above her purple gown in the photo with her husband/comanager entitled "love connection." In the first picture of Scott opposite the title page, she is sitting down with her skirt lifted above her right leg (the other leg remains covered) in perhaps an attempt to display some hint of sexuality. In another smiling picture, a caption reads: "Say

Cheese: “One of the reasons I smile a lot is because I can get to you” (136). In short, Good, and *Vibe* by extension, position Scott within a heterosexual framework of sexual desirability, a pattern seen in *Vibe*’s depictions of other female artists. In spite of the alternative version of beauty that Scott represents and her denial of overt bodily displays of sexuality, *Vibe*, and perhaps Scott herself, still attempt to present Scott as sexually desirable.

Upholding hegemonic femininity and compulsory heterosexuality for women, Scott celebrates the “benefits” of marriage and tells women that they need to have a man in their life. Claiming that “women who claim they don’t need a man” piss her off, Scott says: “That is such bullshit to me . . . Don’t you want somebody to love and be worthy of you? Don’t you want to be worthy of someone?” (140) Scott continues: “Married life is the best thing that could ever happen to you” (140), although she does add, “But you have to choose well. Pay attention.”

Scott’s music, as Good mentions, is often rooted in a “spirit of empowerment” (140), evident in such songs as “Watching Me” and “My Petition” in which Scott indicts America for not delivering on its promises to the poor. The connection of Scott’s music, and Scott herself, to greater social concerns is reminiscent of Blige’s profile in the magazine, although not as extensive. The 32-year-old Scott, like Blige, is from a working-class background. She grew up in North Philadelphia, one of the “roughest areas in the city” (138). Scott describes being “shot at twice, mugged, [and] jumped more times than I could count” (138). Yet, Scott infuses her working-class neighborhood with a certain respectability:

“But my block, was people that worked hard, came out, swept their fronts and

watched the children.” She remembers the block parties and sitting on her neighbor’s porch. “I remember her serving me lemonade and telling me about her life. My neighbors would give me 50 cents to go to the store and get the things that were on their lists. By doing that they were teaching me how to read and how to count. It’s too good to forget.” (140)

In this way, Scott’s performance is that of redemption of the working class. She is not so much a woman who had to overcome her working class sensibilities (like Blige) as she is someone who has taken the “goodness” from working class life with her on her journey. Like Blige, however, Scott, in spite of her success, is able to retain her connection to the “streets,” sending a message that “I am like you” to a working-class audience. She even speaks of her love of rapper T.I.: “I love him. He says, ‘We ain’t out here threatenin’ your lives, rapin’ your children/We just out here stayin’ alive, makin’ a million’ Oh!” (138). By expressing her love of rap music (Scott herself has collaborated with various rappers in her own music), Scott stays fresh and relevant to *Vibe*’s young audience.

Scott’s uncritical expression of love for rap music is congruent with her unmitigated support for Black men, even to the detriment of Black women. Already having expressed the need for women to have a man in their life and encouraging them to get married, Scott declares that “She is concerned with the impact racism in America has had on the black family, particularly on black men” (140). With this statement, Scott suggests that Black men (as opposed to Black women) are the most victimized by racism. She then drops this bombshell: “Because we’re excluding black men, black women have gone out of style” (140). She adds, “I feel like black women are extremely strong, so I try to acknowledge the men, because I want them to come back. I know how valuable a man is” (140). As a singer known for strong messages of self-empowerment, Scott

appears to be working overtime to declare that she is *not* a feminist. She clearly appears wedded to the concept of Black men as not only victims of racism, but victims of Black women as well. Here, Scott co-signs on the stereotype that Black women are “too strong,” and that this is driving off Black men. Disturbingly, she appears to advocate the subordination of Black women to Black men.

Only one reader response to the Jill Scott article was posted in the December 2004 issue of *Vibe*. “Her viewpoint on black men was so right on,” writes Tiffany Williams (74). Although the reader does not elaborate on this point, she appears to be seconding Scott’s construction of Black men as the greatest victims of racism and as victims of Black female strength. Williams may also be agreeing with Scott’s position that women need men as romantic partners. Williams also commends Scott on “[acknowledging] what she may need to do to stay healthy, *not* to fit this industry’s warped standard of beauty” (74). Although I agree with Williams on this point, Williams fails to acknowledge how Scott still situates her sexual desirability (and that of other women, by extension) within a heterosexual framework of what turns a man on. Finally, Williams writes that she wishes Scott had been on the cover of that issue instead of the rapper Mase. This begs the question: would *Vibe* put Jill Scott, or another plus-sized female artist, on its cover? If so, under what conditions?

Ads and Other Features

Female artists are rarely featured in cover stories or in other in-depth interviews in the two years of *Vibe* that I am investigating. Only 4 of the 24 issues have female artists

on the cover. More often women appear in ads and other features of the magazine. The ads feature a racial mix of women – Black, White, Latino, Asian, and etcetera. However, Black women are sometimes featured in ways different from other races of women, and I will note these differences where applicable.

The most striking characteristic of ads in which women appear is the amount of skin showing and the sexually suggestive poses. Bare midriffs are especially abundant. A Dolce & Gabbana ad in the April 2005 issue features scantily dressed women with one reclining White woman's breast fully exposed (2-3). In the June 2004 issue, a Black model in a Lady Enyce clothing ad is reclining on a beach with her midriff showing and her mini-shorts unbuttoned and unzipped in a sexually suggestive pose (19). Black and Asian clothing mogul Kimora Lee Simmons is completely nude save for a pair of shoes in her ad for Baby Phat in the December 2004 issue (57).

Although all races of women appear in various states of undress and in sexually suggestive poses, Black women often appear in ads in which their buttocks are emphasized. *Vibe* regularly runs ads for Apple Bottoms, a clothing line developed by rap artist Nelly for women with ample, curvaceous buttocks, hence the name. One ad in the March 2006 issue, for example, features a Black woman in tight-fitting Apple Bottoms shirt and pants, turned in side profile towards the camera to emphasize her ample behind (123); her behind is clearly the focus of the shot. Ads for other products also highlight the backsides of Black women. A Request clothing ad features a Black woman in a pink tank top and jeans with her backside toward the camera in the April 2005 issue (Patton 45).

In addition to standard ads, other features of the magazine also place emphasis on Black women's buttocks. In the "TechnoFile" feature of the June 2004 issue, a regular feature that serves as *Vibe's* guide to the season's "hottest gears and gadgets," an article entitled "Rebel Without a Pause" features the new Ford GT (83). A Black woman in a black studded bra and brief straddles the hood of the car on her hands and knees, her back arched to emphasize her buttocks. Another regular feature run in *Vibe* called "Play" features celebrities ruminating on their favorite things and other various aspects of their lifestyle. In the June 2004 issue, rap artist Trina "free-associates about her booty and other weighty matters" (72). The free-associations include:

My ass is like a . . .

- Basketball
- Coconut
- Stop sign

which is accompanied by a picture of a large coconut, and:

Rumors I heard about myself:

- I made a porn
- My sexual preference
- I got the biggest butt

which is accompanied by a picture of Trina's buttocks. In these ads and features, the Black woman's buttocks become the site of her sexuality. With this consistent emphasis on the Black woman's buttocks, singer Brandy's July 2004 cover photo is not an anomaly but is in keeping with *Vibe's* treatment of Black women's bodies.

The Trina "Play" feature is just one of many such artist features that objectify Black women. For example, the January 2005 "Play" features rapper Jacki-O (49). In the accompanying photo, Jacki-O is in a short orange dress which is opened on top to

show her chest. Her breasts are fully exposed save for her hands partially covering her nipples. The photo's tag line reads: "Unharnessed: Jacki-O flaunts her rocks." One of the items in the feature reads:

I get my freak on to:

- "Between the sheets," by the Isley Brothers
- *Chocolate Factory*, by R. Kelly ("You can let the whole album play.")
- "Superstar," by Luther Vandross

In this feature, Jacki-O is circumscribed by her sexuality.

In another example, the April 2005 "Play" features R&B singer Nivea testing out "some of the finest cutlery on the market" (Rodriguez 94). Nivea is simply reviewing cooking knives in this feature, however, the title, "Some Cut," sexually objectifies her. "Some cut" is a slang term for a woman's sex (Urban Dictionary, "Some Cut"); it is akin to the slang term "some pussy." Of course, the magazine is playing on words with its title, however, "some cut" immediately equates Nivea with her vagina. Such casual references are sprinkled throughout *Vibe* issues where female artists appear. In short, *Vibe* often configures female artists in terms of their sexuality, and often in sexually objectifying ways.

Black women are also occasionally profiled in the magazine as video vixens. Video vixens are women who appear in hip hop videos. In the January 2005 issue, for example, the contenders for "Sexiest Video Vixen" at the second annual Vibe Awards are profiled in an article called "Tempted to Touch" (45-49). The tag line beneath the title reads: "The five nominees for the Sexiest Video Vixen award show us their goodies. Here's why these ladies are the best in the business" (45). The photos of each of the nominees leave little to the imagination. All of them are scantily clad and assume sexual

poses that emphasize their breasts, buttocks, or both. Three of the women (one of whom is Latina) assume poses that emphasize their buttocks, again a recurring motif in *Vibe's* profiles of Black women.

Black women, along with other races of women, also often appear as accessories to men in fashion layouts and ads, some of which feature male hip hop artists. The message is clear: use or buy this product, and you can have a woman as an accessory for yourself. In the December 2004 issue, an Akademiks clothing ad features a Black man sitting on a stack of books reading a book in his hand while a Black woman in short-shorts and heels sits on his lap and smiles for the camera (63). The caption reads: "Read Books, Get Brain." With "brain," being a euphemism for oral sex, the objectification of the Black woman as a means to sexual pleasure for the Black man is clear. In his ad for his new cologne for men, Unforgivable, an undressed P. Diddy is in bed with two women of color, one of whom rests her head in his lap while the other one waits her turn in the background, in the March 2006 issue (69). A Nike ad in the April 2005 issue features a Black male basketball player walking down an airport corridor flocked by seven women of various races dressed seductively in short red flight attendant outfits (22-23). Black women also often flank male hip hop stars in ads for their new albums. For example, in the December 2004 issue, two scantily-clad women stand behind rap artist Chingy and look seductively into the camera while a third "miniature" woman at the top of the page suggestively wraps her leg around Chingy's name written in big letters (138). This ad is for his new album "Powerballin'"; the presence of dollar bills in the ad suggests Chingy's status as a "powerballer" while also suggesting that the women present are either

strippers or bought and paid for by Chingy. Black women are ubiquitous as sexual playthings and accessories in ads where men appear.

Finally, Black women also flank the back pages of each issue in classified ads for exotic dancer DVDs, ringtones, chatlines, and more. Although these ads also feature other races of women, where Black women appear, their backsides are emphasized. In the March 2006 issue, for example, an ad for a chat-by-text service urges men to “Chat & hook-up with real girls from your cell phone now!” and features a Black woman in a thong bikini with her backside toward the camera (“Ladies Night!” 192). An ad for the website Phatazz.com promises photos, “100 uncensored videos,” and DVDs of models with “big butts” and “cute faces” and features a Black woman in tight jeans sticking her behind out toward the camera, in the April 2005 issue (175). These ads perpetuate the notion that Black women are to be objectified for their body parts.

In sum, the ads and other features in *Vibe* magazine often configure women, and most often Black women, as sexual objects who exist for the sexual pleasure of men. In ads where men appear, Black women occupy subordinate positions as their accessories and possessions. In ads and features, Black women’s body parts, most often their buttocks are emphasized. Rarely do Black women appear in ads and other features where their sexuality is not invoked in some way.

Conclusion

Class plays a central role in Black female performances of sexuality in *Vibe*. Female artists want to be seen as respectable even while embracing a sexy image. They negotiate between middle class respectability and a “working class” sexuality. Some go as far as apologizing for their image (i.e. Brandy) or, similarly, trying to explain it in more respectable terms (i.e. Olivia); hence, they deny that the image they are embracing is really them. Remy Ma is the only artist profiled who seems mostly unconcerned with projecting middle class respectability and she pays for this when she is excoriated by readers in their letters to the editor. Her example read alongside those of the other artists suggests that female artists must perform some aspects of middle class respectability and hegemonic femininity in order to be accepted by some *Vibe* readers.

Several of the female artists embrace a “ride-or-die” chick image (i.e. Ashanti and Olivia) or they are configured as such by the magazine (i.e. Mary J. Blige) in headings and side panels embedded in the article. As Gwendolyn Pough explains, the “ride-or-die” chick as well as the “down-ass chick” are idealized women in hip hop (189). Female artists, and the magazine itself, have an interest in framing themselves as “ride-or-die” chicks in order to perform idealized womanhood, and, perhaps, to boost popularity with male fans.

Letters to the editor reveal, however, that readers, particularly female readers, are not entirely comfortable with female artists embracing this image as some astutely observe that doing so has the effect of subordinating a woman’s identity to that of the man or men she is associated with. Thus, a “ride-or-die” chick risks losing her own

distinct identity by embracing such an image.

In addition to the ubiquitous declaration of female artists as “ride-or-die” chicks, *Vibe*, and many of the artists themselves, configures its female artists largely in relation to the men in their lives. Whether it is the pre-occupation with husbands, lovers, alleged lovers, or male managers, female artists do not exist outside of men in *Vibe*’s articles. Most often women are presented as having been made, formed, or changed by men. In short, female artists are presented within a heterosexual framework of their relationships with men.

Female artists and *Vibe*’s writers and editors also articulate sexuality and beauty within a heterosexual framework of desirability. Thus, while plus-sized artist Jill Scott refreshingly denounces the industry’s focus on body size, she also, along with the aid of the magazine, declares herself as “sexy” because she is desirable to men and because she knows how to turn a man on. *Vibe* chooses its pictures carefully and in ways that convey the artist’s performance in the narrative; these pictures aid in the presentation of an artist as “sexy.” Thus, Ashanti dons pink in some of her pictures to convey herself as a “princess” worthy of male protection, and mixes these pictures with “sexy” shots to convey her sexual desirability to men. Indeed, the body figures centrally in *Vibe*’s articles on female artists – in the photos and in the text in which discussions of body size, attire, photographic poses, and physical attractiveness are constant.

Female bodies also feature centrally in *Vibe*’s ads, the sites where women appear most in the magazine. Sexuality is constantly evoked in these ads in the poses, taglines, and states of undress. Black women are highly sexualized in many of these ads.

Furthermore, Black women are often reduced to their primary and secondary sexual organs in the ads and other features of the magazine, with their buttocks most often emphasized. When viewed within this context, Brandy's provocative cover shot (in which her backside is prominently displayed) is in keeping with *Vibe's* regular depictions of Black female sexuality.

The constant evocation of women as accessories to men in ads is in keeping with *Vibe's* presentation of Black women within a heterosexual framework of desirability. Additionally, such depictions subordinate Black women in ways that suggest their dependence on men, a theme that runs throughout *Vibe's* interviews with female artists.

Thus, an analysis of *Vibe's* artist interviews, ads, and other features, reveals a mostly negative portrayal of Black female sexuality. Although *Vibe* does allow a small space for Black women to claim their sexuality and break away from the "silences" surrounding it, their performances are highly circumscribed and limited. Black women perform their sexuality through a heterosexual framework of desirability while making claims to middle class respectability; this restricts their ability to claim a more liberating sexuality. More progressive displays of Black female sexuality would operate outside of male desirability and approval, dependence on men, and a politics of respectability. Such displays would give women the freedom to claim their sexuality on their own terms. Only then will their sexual performances be liberatory.

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Vita

Tova Joanna Johnson, born in 1977, graduated in 1995 as a 4.00 valedictorian from Grant High School in Portland, Oregon. In August of 2000, she graduated with an Honors Bachelor of Science Degree in Biology and a writing minor. In 2002, Johnson enrolled in Emory University's Master of Public Health program. While at Emory, Johnson was awarded a fellowship from the Center for the Study of Health, Culture, and Society which enabled her to take humanities courses in the Institute for Liberal Arts. It was during this year-long fellowship that Johnson solidified her interest in studying cultural representations of Black female sexuality. After graduating in 2005 with her MPH in Behavioral Sciences, Johnson matriculated into the MA/PhD program in American Studies at the College of William and Mary. She expects to receive her Masters degree in August of 2008. Johnson's fields of interest include popular culture, African American history, gender and sexuality, and critical race theory.