PRIMITIVISM AND THE BLACK FORM: THE EFFECT ON CONTEMPORARY BLACK CULTURE THROUGH HIP HOP

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PRIMITIVISM AND THE BLACK FORM:

THE EFFECT ON CONTEMPORARY BLACK CULTURE

THROUGH HIP HOP

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INTRODUCTION
The profound effect of the fetishization of the black female form (i.e., black female body) in early 20th century can be found to a great extent in contemporary black culture. Nowhere is this effect more prevalent than in modern music (mainly hip hop).

She enters through a dense electric twilight, walking backwards on hands and feet, legs and arms stiff, down a huge jungle tree—as a creature neither infrahuman nor superhuman but somehow both: a mysteriously unkillable Something, equally nonprimitive and uncivilized, or beyond time in the sense that emotion is beyond arithmetic.

- ee cummings

Cummings wrote this poem with Josephine Baker in mind. Her movements were both otherworldly and enigmatic to Europeans of the time. Although European praise of Baker may have seemed more meritorious than not, she was viewed as primitive nonetheless.

“You wanna see some ass
I wanna see some cash
Keep them dollars comin’
And that’s gonna make me dance”
- Travis Porter “Make It Rain”

In her own culture, the black woman is hardly revered. From rap lyrics to daily dialect, the denigration is consistent, persistent and pervasive. As noted in the above lyrics, Porter portrays women as a commodity.

The purpose of this study is to examine the correlation between the fetishization of the black female body by whites, and
the objectification of black women in the music (hip hop) of contemporary black culture.
LITERATURE REVIEW
What you need thick thighs and some chinky eyes?
Super size all your sides like your biggie fries.
For a better prize you can get some better pie
Strawberry, apple, cherry even lemon lime.
What you want them B cups or them C cups?
For your ice cream, chocolate or butter P cups?
French vanilla threesomes that come in D cups
They eat each other but otherwise they don't eat much.
-Nicki Minaj

Understanding the correlation between the fetishization of the black form in the 1920's/30's, and how it is regarded today could help counter the effect. The objectifying of the black woman's body is so ingrained in the psyche of the black female, that she listens to and adopts the messages these lyrics are sending. Nicki Minaj has fully embraced the sexist ideology that defines girls and women in her culture. In her lyrics, Minaj equates the black female body (her body) with whatever edible that suits the man’s desire.

The hip hop cultures' misogynistic theme has been addressed time and again. However this study goes beyond that thesis. This study asserts that this contemporary misogyny is the result of a much older and larger oppression.

The study consists of an analysis of the fascination of the black female body as other in early 20th century, and then an analysis of the black female body as viewed in the music of contemporary black culture.

The study covers the fetishization of the black female body via Sara Baartman (The Hottentot Venus), and Josephine Baker in early 18th & 19th centuries. The study will also cover the objectifying of the
black female body as heard in the music of contemporary black culture.
The study is focused on primitivist views of the black female body, and the application of those views in a contemporary culture. This study is conducted to examine the depth in which contemporary black culture has been affected by the white fetishization of the black female body.

The study consists of an analysis of the European fascination with the black female body as other in the 1800's and early 1900's, and then an analysis of the black female body as viewed in contemporary black culture. The study covers the fetishization of the black female body via Sara Baartman (The Hottentot Venus), and Josephine Baker in early 19th & 20th centuries. The study is focused on primitivist views of the black female body, and the application of those views in a contemporary culture.

The correlation between European fetishization and African-American objectifying of the black female body is clear and evident. In this study, it is found that internalized racism plays a key role in the correlation.

The selection of sources for the research of the European fetishization circa 19th and early 20th centuries are as follows: Lemke’s *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*, Ezra’s *The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France* and Torgovnick’s *Gone Primitive: Savage
Intellects, Modern Lives. The selection of sources for the research of the contemporary objectification are as follows: Wallace-Sander's Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture, Women and Hip Hop: The Video Vixen, Did Manet Invent the Video Vixen?, Sprauve-Harris' Are Black Women Reclaiming Jezebel or Claiming Misogyny? and Get In Where You Fit in: Hip Hop's Muted Voice On Misogyny. Lastly, the sources selected to support the correlation between the two eras are: Micheline Mason's article Internalized Oppression, and Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man.

Criteria for this thesis being 19th and 20th century European ideology of the black female body, ideology on the contemporary objectifying of the black female body and ideology showing the correlation between the two eras.

Sieglinde Lemkes' Primitivist Modernism is important because it introduces us, and gives validity to the term "primitivism" as a racial slur. Lemkes' book examines the role Europeans played in the oppression of Africans outside of slavery. Elizabeth Ezra's Colonial Unconscious gives further validity/credibility to the thesis on a colonial level. Though Ezra uses the term "exoticism" instead of "primitivism", the condescension, racism is still very much evident. Colonial Unconscious also speaks about how French colonialism adds to the understanding of contemporary culture [which further
validates any correlation between European fetishization and contemporary objectification]. The importance of Marianna Torgovnick’s Gone Primitive lies in its examination of the Western (European) fascination with the "primitive" on the anthropological level, as well as the other previously mentioned levels.

Each source used on the contemporary hip hop objectification of the black female body verifies the continued perpetuation of the defamation of the black female [body]. Each source is most important because they point to where and how the objectifying of the black female continues in a contemporary culture. From rap lyrics to video “ho’s” they show the various platforms from which the objectification occurs. From misogyny and internalized oppression to internalized sexism, the sources show the perpetuation of these dispositions.
EUROPEAN FETISHISM
In the 1800's, we see one of the first infamous cases of the fetishization of the black female body. It was fetishization through exhibition in the case of Sara Baartman. Baartman was born in 1789.
in the Gamtoos River Valley area of eastern Cape Town, South Africa. In 1810, and in her early 20’s, Baartman was duped by an English ship’s doctor, William Dunlop, into traveling to England to make her fortune.

As a khoikhoi woman native to South Africa, she was seen as a “freak” in England. Baartman had uncommonly large buttocks and genitals. Europeans in the early 1800’s wholly believed they were superior, and believed that Baartmans’ “unusual” physique supported their theory that others, particularly blacks were inferior and oversexed.

Baartman was most certainly duped by Dunlop. He put her on display as a “freak” for profit. Baartman was called the “Hottentot Venus”. In London for four years, She was subject to the objectifying, the leering and the abuse of the English. After London, Baartman moved on to Paris where her exploitative exhibition continued. Her story is nothing but tragic. When Paris tired of Baartman, and with no way to support herself, Baartman was forced into prostitution. She died shortly after in 1815 at the age of 25.

According to Thompson, “The tradition of exhibiting people of color in Western societies has existed since the earliest encounters between Europeans and indigenous populations in the New World and in Africa. Indeed, on his return to Spain after his first voyage to
the New World in 1492, Columbus brought several Arawaks to Queen Isabella's court, where one of them remained on display for two years. Exhibiting non-white bodies as a popular practice reached its apogee in the nineteenth century in both Europe and in USA when freak shows--the exhibition of native peoples for public entertainment in circuses, zoos, and museums--became fairly common.

In other words, cultural "others" were employed to perform their "cultural otherness" for an Anglo-American and European audience. Up to the mid-twentieth century displays of this sort continued.
Live exhibitions were not the only forms of human spectacle; often the dissected and embalmed remains of the "native" body, particularly the skulls, and sexual organs, were also publicly exhibited. Trophy heads, body parts, and other skeletal remains still reside in the collections of many Western museums, like The British Museum and La Musée de l'Homme, France. As recently as 1997, a small natural history museum just outside of Barcelona finally removed a stuffed Bushman from its permanent display cases, after sustained international pressure to do so. The incident strongly suggests that European fascination with exhibiting non-white bodies is not a phenomenon of the distant past.

"This introduction to the history of human displays of people of color demonstrates that cultural difference and "otherness" were visually observed on the "native" body, whether in live human
exhibitions or in dissected body parts on public display. Both forms of spectacle often served to promote Western colonial domination by configuring non-white cultures as being in need of discipline, civilization, and industry."
“Negroes dance with their senses (while Europeans can only dance with their minds).… Their revue is an unmitigated challenge to moral Europe. There eight beautiful girls whose figures conjure up a stylized purity, reminiscent of deer and Greek youths. And at their head, the star, Josephine Baker… But the leading role belongs to Negro blood.”

-Ivan Goll

Though Baartman was perhaps the most infamous case of fetishist exploitation, she was by no means the only one. The European view of the ‘primitive’ African was that of a “debased, abject, and thoroughly irredeemable” creature, but the white European fascination with the biology of the black female body became an obsession with the primitivism of Josephine Baker (1906-1975).
In 1925, Baker was recruited by Caroline Dudley for an all-black revue in Paris. Although the subsequent fetishization of Josephine Bakers' body came via her own performance art, and not coerced exhibition [as in the case of Baartman], it was fetishization nonetheless. Josephine Baker was exploited by primitivist attitudes.

Baker’s beginnings were harsh and difficult. Born in the slums of St. Louis, Missouri, Baker grew up sleeping in cardboard shelters and scavenging for food in garbage cans. At age 13, Baker left her parents’ house and got a job as a waitress. After a failed marriage and more waitressing, she joined a group of performers.
“While the Hottentot Venus had elicited amusement or disgust, this sparsely clad black woman with a string of bananas around her waist elicited enthusiastic lust.”

In Paris, she was dubbed the “Ebony Venus”.

Erich Maria Remarque said Baker had brung “a blast of jungle air, elemental power and beauty to the weary Western civilization” (Abatino, 51)

“Josephine Baker appealed to colonialist fantasies of the exotic.”
CONTEMPORARY HIP-HOP
OBJECTIFICATION
There are definitive foundational parallels between the two distinct eras that affirm the correlation on the perception of the black female body in these times. There is a physical parallel in the form of “exaggerated” body parts. Two of the women that represent this parallel are Sara Baartman (Venus Hottentot) and Nicki Minaj. According to allacademic.com,

“Nicki Minaj is sometimes referred to as “Hottentot Venus 2.0”, or “Modern Day Hottentot”. Nicki Minaj is the continued manifestation of the mythology of Sara Baartman (aka Venus Hottentot).”

Within this parallel, the message is clear. Their attraction has nothing to do with the “hegemonic construction of beauty”; their attraction has to do with lust. Of which ties into another parallel.

As was in Europe in the 18th and early 19th centuries, it is in contemporary hip-hop culture, the black female body as an object of lust. The idea of black women as objects of lust was conceptualized earlier than the 18th century. According to Mahassen Mgdami (Black Women's Identity:...),

English slave traders mistook the traditions and customs of African communities
Polygamy was for them a sign of hypersexuality and sexual greed, the “semi-nudity” of African women (due to hot climate) meant lewdness, and dances were regarded as a hysterical plunge into unconsciousness.
Nicki Minaj's physique has been compared to the “Venus Hottentot” (Sara Baartman). Indeed, there are many photos like the one above juxtaposing the two. The comparison of Baartman and Minaj endorses the assertion that there is a correlation between 18th and 19th European fetishism, and contemporary hip hop cultures’ objectifying of the black female body.
The correlation between the European fetishization of the black female body in the 1800's & 1900's, and the objectification of the black female body in contemporary hip hop culture is clear and evident. Language is powerful, and is the primary tool in objectifying the black female in hip hop culture.

"Two hoes on one fuckin' pole, two hoes on my fuckin' pole
I don't tip, I pay bills, bitches call me Buffalo
Her stomach and her ass out, I'm flyer than the ones they pass out
If money grow on trees, I branched out
I'm just waiting for my bitch to cash out haha"

(Lil' Wayne Bandz A Make Her Dance)

Women are commonly referred to as "bitches" and "ho's". The use of these terms is repetitive and pervasive. The meaning of these terms is clear to men, boys, women and girls, and carry a lot of weight. If the men we listen to, and look up to are saying it, then it must be true. "Bitches" and "ho's" are gold diggers, liars [never to be trusted], and are only good for sex. In this, rappers are continually perpetuating the primitivist and fetishist stereotypes initiated and/or instigated by 19th and early 20th century Europeans.

"Uh, yo don't get mad at me
I don't love 'em I fuck 'em
I don't chase 'em I duck 'em
I replace 'em with another one
You had to see she keep calling me BIG

And my name is Jay-Z
She be all on my dick
Gradually I’m taking over your bitch
Coming over your shit
Got my feet up on you sofa, man
I mean a hostess for my open hand
You coming home to beer shifts and there be soda cans
I got your bitch in my Rover man
I never kiss her, I never hold her hand
In fact I diss her I’m a bolder man
I’mma pimp her, it’s over man
It’s over man, it’s over man”  (Jay Z Is That Yo Bitch)

Within the hip hop culture, there is also an atmosphere of
acceptance via internalized sexism and self-loathing by the very
subjects of the objectification – the black female.

"Oh is that your bitch
Why she all in his six?
With her hand on his dick
Keep licking her lips

Is that your bitch?
Why she all in his ride?
With her hand on his thighs
Keep looking in his eyes
Oh is that your bitch?
You better tell her chill
While you all in his grill
Don’t you know that man kill?
Is that your bitch?
Why she paging him?
Keep praising him?
Cause that’s Jay and them, bitch”  (Missy Elliot Is That Yo Bitch)

This is just an example of how ingrained the idea of the black
female as being a figure solely for sexual gratification. Internalized sexism is defined as the involuntary belief by girls and women that the lies, stereotypes and myths about girls and women that are delivered to everyone in a sexist society are true. Women and girls are taught to act out the lies and stereotypes, doubting themselves and other females (sometimes called “horizontal hostility”). This is the way women collude with the perpetuation of sexism. (Cultural Bridges To Justice)
The internalized sexism isn’t solely relegated to the mind of the black female. Women in fact, reshape their bodies to fit stereotypes in order to attract the attention of males who belong to a culture that will undoubtedly degrade them for their “attention grabbing” appendages.
FOUNDATIONAL PARALLELS
Art history has also played a part in perpetuating the ideology of the black woman as an object of lust. Paintings, primarily that of European artists, have long depicted the black female body as a solely sexualized being. In Lisa Collins' Skin Deep, Spirit Strong...,

Exoticism frequently meshes with eroticism. Thus the second and related visual model for viewing the black female body was as an emblem of sensuality and an object of lust.

And according to Robert Staples (Exploring Black Sexuality), this ideology came out of the experience of slavery.

The sexual availability of slave women allowed the white man to put white women on a pedestal, to be seen as a goddess of virtue. In a way, this became a self-fulfilling prophecy. White women were held aloof from the world of lust and passion...

In contemporary hip-hop culture, perception of black women as objects of lust does not differ on a large scale. According to Johnetta B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Shetall (Gender Talk:...),

Rap music videos are notorious for featuring half-clothed young Black women gyrating obscenely and functioning as backdrops, props, and objects of lust for rap artists who sometimes behave as predators.
Hip-Hop and Philosophy discusses how the myth of the black woman as being both “jezebel” and [angry] bitches is most explicit in the hip-hop culture.

So it’s no surprise that many male hip-hop stars have been criticized for their negative portrayal of women in their songs and videos or that hip-hop music is often described as sexist, misogynist, masculinist, and reflecting a general disdain for women.

“Exotic” or “primitive” movement is another parallel connecting the 18th and 19th century European fetishism and contemporary hip-hop culture’s objectifying of the black female body. According to Alicia Sowinska () on Josephine Baker,

Thus, she girded herself with “phalluses” catering to European sexual desires and fantasies of savage primitivism. By playing the other in the colonial fantasy, she teased white imagination and encouraged objectification of her body. Shaking her scantily dressed behind on stage, Baker exploited European eroticization of the black body...
CONCLUSION
The correlation between the view and treatment of the black female body in 18th and 19th century Europe, and the view and treatment of the black female body in contemporary hip hop culture is clear. By examining the oppressive condition, internalized oppression and internalized sexism between the two, the connection is found.

Once the Europeans declared their “civilized” superiority, and then went about applying their ideology [through exhibition and fetishist fascination of the black female body], the die was cast. Again, upon examination of internalized oppression, it would almost be impossible to not have this specific internalization. According to Logan Lynn of The Huffington Post,

We accept the limitations put upon us by the world around us, and we perpetuate the dehumanizing messages being drilled into us because, on some level, over time, we have taken them to heart and made them our truth. In the end, we become the stereotype.

The truth of this quote is never more evident than in the hip-hop culture of today. The music, the lyrics, the videos – together they keep the earlier European centuries’ fetishism of the black female body germane. Misogyny, and internalized oppression aren’t the only conduits through which the objectification is manifested. The internalized sexism, and conditioning of girls & women have them contributing to their own exploitation.
There is a very strong and real correlation between the 18th & 19th century European fetishism of the black female body, and contemporary hip-hops' objectifying of the black female body.


