

# “Drop It Like It’s Hot”

## Culture Industry Laborers and Their Perspectives on Rap Music Video Production

### Abstract

*This paper describes results from a qualitative study of the music video production industry and the creative process in rap music video production and artist marketing. Participant responses are presented in three areas: the music video production process, recent trends in rap music videos, and the music video set as a site of gender exploitation. Findings suggest a concern over artistic freedom of expression and the mechanical production of the “booty video” formula that saturates music video programming and is a template for rap videos. Participants agreed that there is something lackluster about rap music played on radio and aired on music video programming. Additionally, gendered hierarchies on video sets create divisions among women working in various positions, and discourage women from supporting one another, which, from a black feminist perspective, does not accommodate an ethic of care and personal responsibility.*

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Recent trends in mainstream, commercial rap music videos rely on formulaic video imagery that emphasizes rappers’ accumulated wealth and property (such as houses, cars, jewelry, and women). This formula, manifested in what is otherwise known as the “booty video,” reinforces the increasing use of an urban sensibility<sup>1</sup> in music, television, and films that exploits a mediated understanding of black, urban aesthetics. The expression “booty video” derives from popular culture vernacular that

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references the video's overwhelming representation of women's posteriors, particularly those of black, Latina, and racially ambiguous women, thus highlighting in such videos a culturally specific preference by men of color for a curvy body type (Rubin, Fitts, and Becker 2003).

Two basic assumptions ground the "booty video" formula. First, the music videos and the lyrics are self-aggrandizing. The lyrics and visual imagery are all about the linguistic and sexual bravado of rappers (the majority of whom are black males). Rappers partake in mental masturbation and ego-stoking, presenting their ability to out-emcee one another, to access the hottest women, to acquire the most money, to dominate in the rap game (with specific emphasis on album sales and public exposure), and to display extreme wealth, which symbolizes status and authority. Second, heightened awareness of self in the "booty video" depends very much on the "booty," or a particular representation of femininity, which then shapes the masculine identities of rappers and video directors. This begs the question of whether the overwhelming display of women's bodies are a requisite component of self-promotion, and if so, why.

Music videos are one of the primary sources for maintaining this urban sensibility, and the process of music video production itself is a site of critical inquiry into the perpetuation of this manufactured simulacrum. This essay examines my discussions with individuals whom I refer to as *culture industry laborers*, or those working within the industries related to the production, marketing, and consumption of rap music (music video directors, casting directors, video girls, record label executives, assistants, music industry research analysts, and record producers). Their narratives provide a colorful look into the world of music video production and contextualize some of the concepts surrounding black masculinity, gender performance, and women's labor.

My conversations were focused on the creative process in music video production and artist marketing. I paid particular attention to African Americans in the music industry and to their perspective on how their images are created, including a discussion of the links among audience reception, creative control, and artistic freedom. I completed twenty interviews between July and December 2003, having selected interviewees based on their positions in entertainment industries linked to the production, promotion, distribution, and monitoring of hip-hop and rap music. I guaranteed anonymity to participants for two reasons. First, given the public persona of many of the individuals in the study, they were more

inclined to be interviewed if their identities remained concealed. Second, anonymity led to more open, frank dialogue and enabled participants—particularly the women—to tell personal stories of their experiences.

The sample is also limited primarily to African Americans (with three white males included) as a result of the snowball sampling method used to garner referrals from initial subjects. Participants provided the most valuable resources in connecting me with other individuals. I asked them a series of questions, many of which were specific to their positions, but all fell into the following categories: the state of rap music and music videos, the music video production process (including casting, trends in treatment development, creative control, and the atmosphere on the production set), the depiction of women in music videos, artist promotion, and monitoring the consumer market.

While this sample does not represent a sufficient cross section of the population (those involved in music video production) to make any generalizations, the nonprobability method used to generate it and the use of open-ended interviews were suitable for making preliminary inquiries into the current state of the production and consumption of rap music, from the perspectives of those who play a critical role in these processes. Processes of commercialization do not take place in a vacuum, and it is important for researchers to observe the social relations and labor conditions that advance cultural production.

This essay is organized to present participant responses in three areas: the music video production process, recent trends in rap music videos, and the music video set as a site of gender exploitation. I begin with a brief overview of the literature in the interdisciplinary field of hip-hop scholarship. The goal of this project is to use the information gathered from culture industry laborers to underscore the importance of ontological questions about how hip-hop scholars imagine the complexity of production and consumption, as well as how we use the narratives of culture industry laborers to humanize this process and generate a more vivid picture of the material conditions of their activities.

## Hip-hop in the Black Public Sphere

### HISTORICAL TRENDS AND CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

The scholarship on hip-hop has grown since the 1994 publication of Tricia Rose's historiography of hip-hop, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in*

*Contemporary America*. Using historical analysis, Rose describes the beginnings of hip-hop culture, with its blend of artistic expressions that underscored the sociopolitical authenticity of the urban landscape and its inhabitants, the urban underclass. William Eric Perkins's (1995) anthology, *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, included essays that broadened the scope of sociohistorical knowledge on hip-hop culture and politics. More recently, Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal's anthology *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (2004) presents a synthesis of both academic and popular writing on hip-hop culture, performance, and politics.

Scholars have also focused on ethnic fusion and regional distinctions in hip-hop (Cross 1994; Rivera 2003), the globalization of rap music (Bennett 1999; Maira 2000; Mitchell 2001), as well as specific subgenres within rap music, most notably gangsta rap (Boyd 1997; Quinn 2004). Others have invested in broader social critiques of the contributions of hip-hop to public intellectual discourse on the black American ethos (Kelley 1997; Boyd 2003, 2004; Kitwana 2003, 2005; Watkins 2006). Michael Eric Dyson's (1996, 1997, 2001, 2002) work has also furthered the field by infusing issues of morality, social justice, and religion into his critiques of hip-hop culture. His biography of the late Tupac Shakur reveals the complexities of the rapper's life and how he struggled with them in his lyrics and in his personal relationships (Dyson 2002). The literature is also expanding into the areas of political participation and civic engagement (Stapleton 1998), ethnic entrepreneurship (Basu and Werbner 2001), and quantitative approaches to unpacking media depictions (Binder 1993; Emerson 2002; Kubrin 2005).

The work of Nelson George (1988, 1996, 1998) advanced the literature by incorporating critiques of the treatment of rap artists by culture industries. As a journalist and cultural critic of black music, George weds oral narrative with lyrical and discursive texts of hip-hop contemporaries (artists, label executives, urban journalists, academics, and public intellectuals) to create an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of popular culture. This approach calls for the analysis of cultural texts—including music, music videos, newspapers, popular periodicals, and documentaries—that represent, critique, and inform our popular conceptions of hip-hop. Journalists have historically contributed to hip-hop studies by covering urban music for popular periodicals, cataloging hip-hop culture

and providing insightful critiques using a language that resonates with a popular audience (Morgan 2000; Bynoe 2004; Cepeda 2004; Chang 2005). Artists have used their own personal narratives to provide critical perspectives on the legacy and future of hip-hop, including Chuck D. (D., Jah, and Lee 1998) and Sister Souljah (1996).

Gender and feminist analyses of hip-hop are expanding the discourse not only of hip-hop studies but of broader critiques on black sexual politics, masculinity, queer subjectivities, and feminism (Cheney 2005; Collins 2005; Clay 2007). Gwendolyn Pough's (2004) historiography of black women in hip-hop articulates how female rappers are using their lyrical narratives to construct contemporary black womanhood. The documentaries *Nobody Knows My Name* (1999), *Pick Up the Mic* (2005), and *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* (2006) incorporate analyses of gender, sexuality, and power not only in the femiphobia and negro faggotry of hip-hop's visual imagery, but, more importantly, in the access granted to artists of marginalized subject positions (women and LGBTQ folk).

Joan Morgan initiated the call for hip-hop feminism in 1999, one that bears witness to black feminist and womanist ideologies of centering black community interests and an ethic of care as the basis for eradicating sexism in hip-hop. Most germane to this paper is T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting's (2007) examination of black women's participation in industries that promote sex and sexuality, ranging on a continuum from fashion and music videos to adult entertainment (strip clubs, pornography) and sex tourism. The "pimps up, ho's down" ethos of mainstream hip-hop cultural expression renders women exploitable, chattel sex labor, which shapes the nature of male-female relations outside the entertainment imaginary (Sharpley-Whiting 2007, 151). Journalist Elizabeth Mendez Berry exposed the violent physical abuse of the wives, girlfriends, and lovers of rap superstars in her 2005 *Vibe* exposé, "Love Hurts: Rap's Black Eye." Berry does not rely on conventional forgiving narratives of black male aggression toward women, but forces readers to seriously consider the authentic reality of the pimp/hustla hyperbole. Morgan, Berry, and Sharpley-Whiting, like Michele Wallace and bell hooks in years prior, call on feminists and cultural critics to reveal the coercive nature of the rap game and how women exploit the game for social mobility, but also how the game manipulates this "gotta get mine" practice, which has lasting repercussions on the real treatment of women in the public sphere.

Much of the discourse on hip-hop has relied on three forms of analysis. First, discursive analyses of lyrical content and visual representation provide the basis for understanding the major themes in the music and imagery. Lyrical themes include class struggle, self-reliance, male–female relationships, material consumption, black radicalism, female empowerment, and resistance. Resistance can go from social resistance to racial dominance, poverty, and domestic violence to individual resistance to negativity and criticism, or to use the term coined by Mary J. Blige, “hateration.” Second, historical analyses created the foundations for discussing the origin of hip-hop culture and locating it within the political economy of race and class articulation.

The third area of hip-hop scholarship is rooted in the discourse about the black public sphere, with an emphasis on the impact of social, economic, and geopolitical forces on black diasporic cultural expressions. This body of scholarship is concerned with how black cultural producers labor within the context of commodification and commercialism, the strategies of resistance employed, and how, within the context of hip-hop, “keepin’ it real” means exposing the multifaceted race, class, and gender realities of the post-civil rights, postindustrial urban milieu. Hip-hop emerged in the early 1970s, inspired by spoken-word collectives of the Black Arts Movement such as the Watts Prophets, the Last Poets, and Gil Scott-Heron (Cobb 2007). As Mark Anthony Neal (1999, 125) suggests, hip-hop represented a “counternarrative” to the corporatization of black music symbolic of the upward socioeconomic mobility narratives found in popular black music of the day. The nostalgia of urban black life constructed by the burgeoning black middle class through film, television, and music from the 1970s and well into the 1980s articulated a revisionist history of struggle that, as evidenced through early hip-hop’s fervent class analysis, contributed to intraracial class division of black popular cultural expression (Baker 1995; Neal 1999).<sup>2</sup> Locating hip-hop within the broader discourse on race, space, and place, as Murray Forman (Forman and Neal 2004) suggests, is critical to understanding hip-hop’s response to intraracial class struggle and the uniqueness of the culture, particularly its distinctive regional manifestations.

This essay is grounded in a concept that I call the *political economy of hip-hop*, or an examination of mechanisms by which contemporary capitalist

modes of production in the music industry shape the tangible representations of hip-hop culture.<sup>3</sup> This concept includes the economic and political nature of the corporate music industry along with music as a form of cultural identification, social commentary, and artistic expression. Methodologically, political economy of culture analyses include the process of investigating economic structures within the music industry specific to the development of rap music; this also includes examining the allocation of scarce resources for the production, distribution, and consumption of all products related to hip-hop culture (Adorno 1991; McChesney 2000; Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). The political economy of hip-hop is a site of critical investigation into the corporate structural aspects of how rap music, as an extension of the broader hip-hop culture, is produced, marketed, and distributed to the masses. This essay examines the complex web of relations around the proprietorship of hip-hop cultural production, with specific attention given to the music video production process.

## The Music Video Production Process

### CASTING IN THE MUSIC VIDEO PRODUCTION PROCESS

The music video production process begins when the record label issues a call to music video production companies for a director. Production companies provide the overall resources and assistance in the production of music videos, including hiring the crew, scheduling the location, setting up all accommodations for the director and his or her staff (should the shoot be on location outside his or her base city), and paying the crew and talent; all monies from the label are filtered through the production company. The production company hires the director, and typically companies select directors who have worked for them on successful projects in the past. The director is also selected based on his or her treatment, or basic concept, for the video, provided to the production company, which is often selected with the assistance of the artist, his or her manager, and the record label. A casting director is then selected. He or she typically has a prior working relationship with the video director. If the video calls for talent, the treatment, which will include character breakdowns, is sent to modeling agencies. One casting director interviewed noted that most casting directors have a database of talent with

whom they have previously worked. Since many “video girls” (which is the term that several participants used to refer to women who perform in music videos) do not have talent agents, this provides casting directors with a way of maintaining their contacts for talent.

The director and the artist (and manager, depending on her or his level of influence) are rarely present during the audition of talent, unless there is going to be a lead girl, one who serves as a love interest or one whose presence is integral to the narrative of the video; at this point, the director, artists, and manager typically will have a say in selecting this performer. The aforementioned casting director discussed a video he cast in 2002 for director Diane Martel, who is one of the leading female music video directors in the industry. He described Martel as a director who is “fanatic” about the casting process, using her as an example to distinguish the differing styles of male and female casting directors. He assumed that women directors would be different:

They [women directors] don't have any respect for them [video girls]. Some of them, I can't generalize and say there's a whole bunch . . . like there's no compassion, I mean, they treat them [video girls] kinda horribly. . . . In some ways, they're worse. (Anon., pers. comm., July 17, 2003)

This is consistent with research on male and female managerial styles that show little variance between men and women on the preference for masculine cultural norms and values in managerial positions (Katzell 1979; Kaufman and Fetters 1980; Chusmir, Koberg, and Mills 2001; van Vianen and Fischer 2002), and that women who achieve senior management positions will adopt masculine behavior characteristics (Hare, Koenings, and Hare 1997). These characteristics include the promotion of independence, autonomy, hierarchical relations, competition, task-orientation, and the establishment of status and authority; stereotypical female characteristics incorporate the promotion of a relational self and maintaining balance in life activities, participation, and collaboration within the organization.

A large percentage of the participants in auditions for music video talent are women. This could be attributed to the prevalence of female talent in rap music videos, other than the artist(s); as one video director interviewed noted, “It's all about the hot girls” (Anon., pers. comm., July 13, 2003). When the auditions are for female talent, casting directors typically



employ women to assist in the casting process. One casting director recalled in the early days of his career how uncomfortable the audition process was for women when all the judges were men. He would often do the auditions alone to cut costs, and he hired women to assist “because men were always a problem because they want to cop [get with] all the girls” (Anon., pers. comm., July 17, 2003). He further commented that the men would “lose their minds” when they were around the women in an audition, which speaks to the informal, often unprofessional nature of music video casting.

From casting to production, women are subjected to harsh physical scrutiny because their bodies are among the many commodities used to create the music video as an extended advertisement for the music products (songs, albums) sold by the record label. As Lisa Lewis (1990, 5) notes, in considering the ideological underpinnings of MTV, rock music (as a hetero-normative, white-male-dominated genre) serves as the primary resource for programming, and youth are the target audience. Hence the relations of power between the network and record labels uphold white male privilege, which is predicated on the devaluing of women as fetishized commodities. In the case of hip-hop, not only do we have the reproduction of these ideologies, but also an ideology of racial progress whereby the integration of black cultural expression on a hegemonic white cable network is predicated on black men’s ability to perform a similar form of manhood—with a gangsta bent.

In our later discussion about the evolution of rap music and music videos, the aforementioned casting director asserted that because of the commercial success of rap, and increased financial interest in it by record companies, the level of professionalism in the video production process has improved. He implied that the auditions are no longer the place where males attached to the video (artists, managers, and directors) will try to “cop” the girls. Yet depending on the level of professionalism of the crew, the music video set is still the location where courting takes place. He noted that the level of professionalism on the video set depends on several factors: the production company and the producer(s) managing the video, the director, and the artist, particularly since many are now directing their own videos, which has increased their level of responsibility. He disclosed that some directors use music videos as a “dating pool,” which may not be intentional in some cases, but he defines this as “tacky behavior” (Anon., pers. comm., July 17, 2003).

Women negotiate a hostile working environment where their physical traits are assessed for employment purposes, and in the context of rap music videos, this also implies trading sexual favors for upward social mobility. As Karrine Steffans notes in her memoir of her days as a self-proclaimed video vixen, sex between video girls or groupies and rappers is not the norm. Yet women are susceptible to male sexual advances from casting to the production and beyond, and it is the multitude of sexual behaviors and displays of desire that permeate the music video production milieu with which I am most concerned.

One interviewee, an African American woman who worked as an assistant to a leading music video director and at several small, black-owned production companies, described the culture of the music video set in detail. While all measures are taken to ensure a level of professionalism, she noted that the long hours, extended periods of downtime, and the presence of scantily clad women mixed with rappers, alcohol, and drugs made for an unsavory working environment:

There was a lot of drug use on set, a lot of weed, a lot of Play Stations, music, and it becomes like a twelve-hour party, especially in the summertime, when everyone was outside. The girls start seeing, you know, because it's the same girls always recycled, they start seeing the same rappers and they start dating . . . and the girls recycle the rappers too. You know, they're all supposedly friends and they hang out together, the talent girls, but I think they're just friends by default because they happen to work together. But they all sleep with the same guy, you know, one minute one will be Jay-Z's girl, then her friend will be his girl, then they rotate, you know, from director to rapper to artist. It's all a cycle. (Anon., pers. comm., July 26, 2003)

Her discussion of the sexual proclivities of the “talent girls” and the friendship (real or fake) between them calls into question the complexity of differentiating between what Patricia Hill Collins calls “representations of Black women who are sexually liberated and those who are sexual objects, their bodies on sale for male enjoyment” (Collins 2005, 126). In her discussion of the sexual politics of defining “bitch” as a trope of black femininity, Collins argues that, “Whether she [a black woman] fucks men for pleasure, drugs, revenge or, money, the sexualized bitch constitutes a modern version of the jezebel, repackaged for contemporary mass media”

(Collins 2005, 127). While black women, like the video girls in question, may control their personal sexuality, the context in which they labor creates the conditions under which they form relationships with men and other women. These conditions structure an entertainment imaginary that defines black female talent as “ho’s” to be consumed, both in front of and behind the camera.

When asked a follow-up question about whether the expendability of sexual partners extends equally to men and women, the director’s assistant referenced her observations of how video girls employ a certain sexual empowerment when engaging with the men on set, particularly those in positions of power and authority:

I think there is a certain empowerment in being the girl on camera. Yes, I think it’s empowering because you have harnessed that sexuality and you know just what to do. Just how to move your hips or giving the right smile that will make it on air, that will make guys fawn all over you. But, you know, honestly they [video girls] don’t care and I’ve seen them. And, you know, what the girls don’t see is what goes on before and after the days when they’re not there [on set]. When the new girls are on set, you know, in another city, and it’s the same thing. Those guys, they don’t care. (Anon., pers. comm., July 26, 2003)

She recalled instances of video girls fighting for the attention of rappers with whom they developed intimate relationships upon meeting during a video shoot. The drama that ensues on and off set among video girls over the attention of men further promotes a lack of respect for video girls as professionals. Yet the modes of exploitation are reciprocal for the men and the women; power is relational and operates not as power over, but as power within the relationships between individuals. The power exerted by video girls in their ability to gain close access to certain artists and directors to benefit their careers is recognized only by those who are part of the music video production process. Thus it is important to make sense of why women are attracted to this line of work, given its popular demonization and the extent to which the video girl can be conceived as the exploiter.

The role of the video girl is to titillate (both the audience viewing the video and the men in the video). Music videos traditionally functioned as a snapshot into the lives of the artist. As rap music videos became more narrative-driven, and as rap music further emulated the imagery and style

of pop music by appeasing the demands of a Top-40 demographic, rap music videos moved from depicting the artist in realistic scenarios to a quasi-cinematic, sensationalized illustration of the persona of the artist. Yet for the video girls, their roles as seductresses, which are simultaneously real and imagined, transfers to their personal lives in terms of how they develop relationships with men and how men interact with them on and off the set.

Video girls are unable to escape the fabricated characters they play in the music videos for several reasons. Lewis (1990, 61) positions the “ideology [sic] of sexual favors” within a longer history that supported a “practice [sic] of sexual favors” where women musicians were expected to trade sexual favors for entrée into the public sphere of music production. This transfers onto more contemporary roles that women play in the music industry, where the characters portrayed by video girls are not fully understood as fictitious by viewers or by those producing the videos.

In *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, Byron Hurt presents the realities of young black women attending the BET Spring Bling events where young men (primarily black men) engage in physically aggressive behavior, such as grabbing women’s buttocks, heckling women to show them attention, and calling women “bitches,” “ho’s,” “skeezers,” “tricks,” and the like when women refuse to heed their calls. Young men receive cultural cues from the booty videos that black women’s bodies are ripe for the taking, and that, as Justin Timberlake’s hook on 50 Cent’s 2007 track “Ayo Technology” suggests, “she wants it/so I gotta give it to her.” The first line of the first verse of the song suggests that the female object of desire is a stripper: “she’s a workin’ girl/she work the pole/she break it down/she take it low.” The video’s international spy motif flips her character from the strip club dancer to a high-class stripper available only to men of means.

The song involves the fantasy world created in the mind of a male viewing a strip show, yet the video portrays the woman as sexually available, which crosses the boundaries of sexual desire and sexual acts. The intersection of desire and access is the problematic of the booty video, and when women attempt to speak out on how these lines are blurred, they are kicked to the curb. As Sharpley-Whiting put it, “Like black women victims of sexual abuse who are called upon to keep silent about intraracial sexual violence in black communities, [Karrine] Steffans is castigated because she detailed the seedy and subpar sexcapades of the hip hop industry” (2007, 99).

Video girls are often typecast, and they experience limited mobility when pursuing non-music video entertainment projects. One nineteen-year-old African American video girl I interviewed argued that she did not feel that her experience as a video girl had hindered her ability to get other jobs. However, when asked about the jobs she received outside of music videos, she spoke only of a pilot for a black comedy series (which was never picked up by a network) where she was cast to play the role of a wild, rambunctious, “ghetto fabulous” teenager (Anon., pers. comm., July 22, 2003).

One casting director argued that music videos are a “legitimate route” for women seeking a career in entertainment, and provides avenues for a woman who would not typically receive representation from a modeling agency because of her curvy body type and because she “wasn’t viewed as beautiful by mainstream media” (Anon., pers. comm., July 17, 2003). Yet when probed as to whether video girls get parts in more mainstream television and film projects, he said that the willingness to cast them or for them to receive representation by top modeling agencies is slow. He noted that the vast majority of video girls use music videos as a stepping stone to further their careers, but that casting directors are aware of the small percentage of girls who have established a reputation for exploiting the work to get close to artists and to men who have influence in the profession.

#### CREATIVE CONTROL IN MUSIC VIDEO DEVELOPMENT

Music video directors, as the men of influence (and in hip-hop, primarily black men), struggle with creative freedom in the development of video treatments. One black male video director interviewed suggested that he, as an artist in his own right, has little creative freedom in creating treatments for music videos. He typically creates four treatments, two that he thinks the artist and his label will like, and two that are edgy and innovative that reflect his own desire to stretch the imaginative boundaries of rap videos. The label almost always goes with the formula treatment, because, as discussed in the beginning of this section, label executives often believe that video outlets prefer the formula rap video. Therefore, there is little desire to take creative risks, and the end goal is to get the video aired by music video outlets. This formula fits a packaged image or a stereotypical urban sensibility that consumers unconsciously desire and that producers attempt to mimic in order to sell albums.

If video outlets are, or if the perception is that they are, filtering videos

for content based on what they think is “hot” and what audiences want to hear and see, then they often will not take a chance on airing a cutting-edge rap video that deviates from the formula for fear that it does not fit with the demographic of their viewers, which is reminiscent of MTV’s rationales for not airing rap music videos in the early days of the channel (Denisoff 1987). As my discussion with an assistant in the promotions department at a major record company revealed, the budget for the rock departments tends to be higher than those for the urban departments, and rock artists have more flexibility in developing their images than rappers do. Furthermore, rock departments tend to be larger, and they promote more artists at a given time than do urban departments (which may promote only one artist at a time, since labels will pump money and resources into single rap acts as their success grows as opposed to expanding the roster of the urban department). She noted that, from her experience, while the recording budgets and the types of record deals afforded to rock artists tend to be higher than those for urban acts, the promotion budgets tend to be comparable. Yet if rappers are receiving, for example, one-album contractual commitments from their label, compared to two- and three-album commitments for their rock label-mates, rappers have less freedom to be creative with their music videos for fear that they will not get airtime on MTV, which will adversely affect their album sales, resulting in their dismissal from the label.

With the consumer on the minds of artists from production to promotion, the historical hip-hop mantra of “keepin’ it real” for rappers today is a fragile prospect. As one interviewee responded, “keepin’ it real” is all about remaining true to where one is in his life and career, and if that means that now the rapper is a crossover pop rap act, then his music should reflect that. Commercially successful rappers often transition their economic and social class status, which is reflected in changes in their lyrical content from their first album to their second album. One interviewee noted,

I think it’s very difficult, as an artist. When you first come out, you are coming out of a place where most hip-hop artists are keen to, of what has happened in your life, you know, usually that first album is very, you know, detailed about what things you’ve gone through. The challenge is, and then I changed, and I no longer live that life of the streets, how do you still connect with the streets? Because now you’re livin’ in a, you

know, you have the chips, you're driving Bentleys, whatever, you're being flown across the globe, you know, you can buy whatever you want, when you want. So when you begin to live that new lifestyle, I think the challenge for any artist . . . is how can I remain true and what can I do to keep myself in touch with the audience because that audience made you who you are today. (Anon., pers. comm., July 22, 2003)

His musings about how rappers remain true to their current lifestyle is a compelling critique of contemporary rap music and reflects the contemporary state of rap music as a legitimate, lucrative business. Commercial rap is a reflection of the mainstream success of this music genre in crossing over to Top-40 radio and MTV video airplay. It is the sampling of traditional American values of upward social mobility and consumption (defined by the gross acquisition of goods) remixed with urban nuances.

As the masses consume rap music that overuses the booty video, it becomes a conventional or, using the language of Walter Benjamin (1968), mechanical mode for reproducing rap videos, and young women with silver-screen aspirations now view the booty video as a viable step in building a multifaceted entertainment career that moves beyond the boundaries of black Hollywood. There are only a few examples of actresses who started out in music videos as video girls specific to urban music, including Gabrielle Union and K. D. Aubert, but the filmographies of both women are inundated with films categorized as black or urban films. Yet the masculine imagery synonymous with commercial rap is predicated on the performance of a hypermasculine cool pose that includes the figurative objectification of women in music videos.<sup>4</sup> This objectification of women on screen begs larger sociological inquiries into the process by which these images are created. How does the music video set, as a major labor site for many women working in rap music, operate to provide adequate working conditions for women who are often scantily clad and placed in sexually suggestive scenarios with men? Given the “keepin’ it real” mantra historically linked to hip-hop, how “real” are these scenarios presented on screen?

#### THE MUSIC VIDEO SET AS A SITE OF GENDER EXPLOITATION

In 2005, rapper Nelly appeared on the morning talk show *The View* to promote his upcoming feature film, *The Longest Yard*. When asked whether

his music videos adversely affect women and whether they reflect his own personal views about women, Nelly responded by arguing that there is a distinction between entertainment and real life, and that his videos are for entertainment purposes and do not reflect how he interacts with women in his real life. Yet that same year, Nelly came under fire from a group of black female students at Spelman College who protested his unwillingness to engage students in a forum on depictions of women in hip-hop during a fund-raising trip to the campus. Students wanted the opportunity to engage him in a discussion about his 2004 video “Tip Drill.” In the video, Nelly and his crew throw money at women’s scantily clad body parts, namely the buttocks, while defining a “tip drill” according to this verse: “it must be yo ass cuz it ain’t yo face/I need a (tip drill)/I need a (tip drill).” In addition to throwing money and alcohol, toward the end Nelly swipes a credit card through a woman’s buttocks and raps, “we throwin’ money in the air like we don’t give a fuck/lookin’ for a (tip drill)/I mean a (tip drill).”

The entertainment value of depicting scantily clad women inviting with pleasure such acts from men is questionable. While Nelly attempts to position his music videos as entertainment, we know that music videos are nothing more than extended advertisements to sell music products. These images showcase the lifestyle that Nelly is trying to sell to the consumer market, dominated by young, white males. The crisis in the sexual politics of black female commodification is that young men are buying the kool-aid that Nelly and his contemporaries are selling, and it is evident in the rates of black female sexual abuse, public disbelief in black women who report incidents of sexual assault, rising rates of AIDS/HIV infection among black women, and perceptions of black women by the masses. In their study on the stereotyping effect of sexually charged rap by black female rappers on white youth, Gan, Zillman, and Mitrook (1997) found that exposure to rap overloaded with sexual imagery promoted unfavorable perceptions of black women, including physical appeal. More importantly, supposed traits and behaviors of the black female rappers in the sample were generalized to all black women but not to white women.

This suggests that hypersexual imagery of black women has a negative impact on the way that white youth, who dominate the consumer market for rap music, as well as the music video audience in general, perceive black women, which then shapes their interactions. I want to turn to a discussion of the experience of women who work on the music video set,



from talent to behind-the-scenes laborers. Given Nelly's articulation of music videos as entertainment, I investigate the working conditions of women who create the images we see in the videos. While Nelly's opinion suggests that there is nothing authentic or genuine about the videos, women do not play merely a professional role in the creation of the entertainment, as the stories of women interviewed imply.

The age of video girls ranges between 18 and 25, and the length of their careers in videos is, on average, no more than two years. As one interviewee suggested, "There's always something cuter in one girl that will replace you. There's always the cute girl that just graduated from high school that some director found and picked up and so she took your place" (Anon., pers. comm., July 26, 2003). She estimates the length of time for women working in behind-the-scenes aspects of production to be no more than five years. These women get "burned out" by the long hours and hard work, as well as by the consistent silencing of their voices and lack of opportunity for professional advancement.

Many of the women interviewed who worked directly on music video sets shared personal accounts of harassment and mistreatment by male colleagues, particularly in the context of after-hours business that typically takes place at bars, clubs, restaurants, and private residences. An example of this includes how I was introduced to the nineteen-year-old African American video girl I mentioned earlier, who has appeared in many music videos, and at the time was the "it" lead girl in rap music videos. She came along to an interview I had scheduled with one video director, who, at that time (summer 2003) was an "it" director slowly making a name for himself. He called me about two hours before the interview and asked if it would be all right if she joined the interview. He shared that she was in several of his videos, and that they were "kickin' it for the day at [his] crib" because he was thinking about hiring her as his personal assistant (Anon., pers. comm., July 22, 2003).

I was able to spend time with the two of them together, then separately. During the course of my interview with the two of them together, their body language and banter suggested more than a professional relationship. At one point, the young woman went to the restroom, at which time the director jokingly said that their relationship is "not even like that" (meaning sexual) and that the reason why she was at his home so early in the day (we met at a restaurant near his home for lunch) was to discuss the

possibility of her working as his assistant (Anon., pers. comm., July 22, 2003). I could tell that he was concerned about how I might read their relationship as intimate, and while his verbal language suggested a strictly professional connection, his body language, tone, eye movements, and minor laughter suggested quite the opposite. Again, this could be read as his wanting to promote a masculine cool pose, which, as a rap video director, may imply the need to engage in off-the-record, clandestine affairs with video girls.

Directors, artists, their crew, and other men on music video sets often engage in salacious behavior directed toward women on set. The former director's assistant described another incident in which the vice president of the production company (an African American woman) started by her former employer (the music video director) pitched ideas for projects; the lackluster response she received from this director implied a lack of interest in her ideas. In a subsequent meeting, a male writer pitched a similar idea to the director, who responded with enthusiasm:

You can tell the sensibility in the room too, like if I'm the only woman in the room, it's a lot different. But then if I step out, you can see how the energy has shifted. . . . A lot of the times I was outside of everything, and with [my boss], his AD [Assistant Director] and most of the crew, he was really tight with [them], I mean, he was really good friends with everybody on set, but his core crew were all men, and they would just like whisper and you know they were talkin' about the girls, and you know they were talkin' about last night. And as soon as I would walk up [she gestures to suggest their silence]. . . . And then I had to play the role of one of the guys, you know, you have to kinda put on that, that rough element, like, "uh, whatever." You kinda do a little more masculine in your behavior, to be accepted, and also just to be respected.

(Anon., pers. comm., July 26, 2003)

Gaining respect in black male circles requires the proper performance of the cool pose (Majors and Billson 1993; Connor 1995). Professional acceptance and respect among black males working in this field is predicated on the ability to trust. In order for this assistant, as a black woman, to gain that trust, she had to perform the façade of being down by adopting the "I'm cool with dat" attitude toward the informal workplace behavior of her male colleagues. This does not imply a tacit acceptance of

their behavior on her part, for criticism of their sexual banter would result in a loss of trust, which would not allow her entrée into their inner circle, jeopardizing her own professional development.

She noted that it took a long time for people working in music video production, namely people who worked in the crew, to know who she was and what her role was as the director's assistant. Many mistook her for talent and treated her accordingly. She later described another instance where she was the target of sexual harassment by the president of a major rap label on the set of his artist's video. There was no recourse for her with regard to his actions and, while she thought she had developed a solid relationship with her boss (who viewed her in many respects as a sister in need of protection), he did not come to her aid on this occasion.

There is a clear hierarchy among the women on set. Girls would often work 15- to 20-hour days, and while there was enough downtime for rests between shots, there was a sentiment on set of who is privileged and who is expendable. One example of how this is maintained is based on the provision of lunch. The featured female talent is often invited to have lunch with the director and members of his staff and crew, while dancers, featured extras (both of whom are paid labor), and extras (non-paid labor) are provided standard Kraft Services food (depending on the budget of the production, this may not be provided). In these instances, featured talent has exclusive access to those with power that allows them to develop networks in order to further their careers. Featured talent and dancers also received hair, makeup, and wardrobe styling, while featured extras and extras (distinguished by amount of individual camera time) had to bring their own supplies and clothing to the set.

This division of women's spaces on set hints at a hierarchy of women's roles in the music video production process. Women hired as part of the secondary crew—hair, makeup, wardrobe—occupied a higher position of credibility on set because they were not hired talent who, because of the lascivious nature of their position, were prey to the sexual advances and subversive heckling by the director, the artists and their entourage, and the men who occupied the primary crew on set—assistant directors, camera-men, lighting, grip, and the production crew (we cannot generalize this behavior to all men on set, particularly for those who are union crew labor who work for set wages under set conditions). The former director's assistant described this hierarchy on set:

It made me sad . . . that I couldn't find my place, because of the boy's club with all the guys, and then the girls were the talent and they were checkin' for the rappers and they [talent] wanted to know what they [rappers] were doing. So I started hanging out a lot with the stylists, the hairdressers, and the makeup ladies because, you know, we could have conversations and just sit and talk, and that's where some of my downtime on set, I would just be in the makeup room talking with them. (Anon., pers. comm., July 26, 2003)

Gendered hierarchies on music video sets place talent at the bottom and discourage women from supporting one another, especially women who are not talent and who fear being mistaken for talent and the negative repercussions that come with that. This does not allow for an ethic of care and personal responsibility to one another as black women, which Patricia Hill Collins advocates (1990). As such, there are limited avenues present for black women in rap music, both in front of and behind the camera. While the impact of lyrics and visual imagery is important, it is the real-world experiences of women working within these industries that are part of a broader social justice concern around these exploitative gender labor practices.

## Conclusion

Shifting the focus of analysis in hip-hop scholarship from the lyrics and visual imagery to the production and promotion of the music provides a basis for beginning detailed research into the relationship among specific culture industry laborers, the products produced, how they resonate with the consumer market (both consumption and passive engagement with visual images), and the level of alienation and distance from the music products experienced by the artists and the consumer. My findings suggest a concern over artistic freedom of expression and the mechanical production of the booty video that saturates music video programming, one that has become the template for rap videos. There is a struggle for power and control among artists, record labels, video directors, music video outlets, and (according to the labels and video programmers) the consumer audience. This can be interpreted as an example of the downfall of labeling, whereby once a genre is labeled as a certain format, video outlets

and record labels are afraid of innovation because consistency maintains viewership and album sales respectively. Interviewees also agreed that there is something lackluster about much of the rap heard on the radio and aired on music video programming, which is further evidence of artists' alienation from their music (as products in the Marxian sense of worker alienation).

The minimal representation of black women as managers, artists, and music video directors (who are the primary arbiters of music video production) affects not only the cultural production of black women's images in music videos, but also the working conditions for women on music video sets. Additional interviews with women who labor in music video production—hair stylists, makeup artists, wardrobe, video girls—as well as with female video directors would provide a more varied representation of women's experiences on set. As this was a snowball sample, and scheduling was a consistent obstacle, I was unable to interview a sizable number of women for this project, but this is where this research is headed—to position the experience of women on music video sets, particularly rap music videos, within the discourse on exploitative, gendered labor practices.

#### NOTES

1. The term “urban” is both a buzzword and legitimate radio genre classification for R&B and rap music. An “urban sensibility” is often characterized as one that is illustrated through the use of rap music, baggy hip-hop apparel, the use of black vernacular and urban slang, graffiti, and breakdancing, and has transcended rap music to move into the corporate realm of advertising, where commodities are sold using an urban appeal as the selling point.
2. Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1995, 7) discusses this class division in the context of black modernity in the U.S., arguing that it is “articulated through the twin rhetoric of *nostalgia* and *critical memory* [sic].” Baker defines nostalgia as the conservative reconstruction of a golden past where “revolution” is defined as “a well-passed aberration” (Baker 1995, 7). Conversely, critical memory is the “collective maintenance of a record that draws into relationship significant instants (instances?) of time past and the always uprooted homelessness of now,” suggesting that it is only through the critical articulation of history that the black public sphere is constructed such that leaders of the past are in direct dialogue with and for the black masses. This, in turn, compels contemporary black leaders to remain conscious of current modes of oppression, particularly as class interests further divide the leadership from the majority.
3. Hashim A. Shomari defines hip-hop culture as “rap music, graffiti art, break

dancing, and rebellious fashions [that are] an antiestablishment (i.e., anti-status quo) cultural phenomenon precisely because it is the antithesis of white/Western bourgeois culture, particularly Anglo-Saxon culture,” implying that hip-hop culture originated from the need to verbalize the harsh realities of urban areas and the need to take control of the cultural production of black imagery, providing opportunities for urban youth to have their voices heard (Shomari 1995, xiii).

4. Majors and Billson (1993) are often referenced for their use of the term “cool pose” to highlight this process of coming into a black male identity. They define the “cool pose” as a performance, a “ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control” (Majors and Billson 1993, 4). For young black boys, the rite of passage into manhood is rooted in their ability to be “down,” to conform to the conventions for performing masculinity, and to become part of social networks that command attention and respect by virtue of their hyper-masculine façade. See Cheney 2005 for a detailed account of how this works in hip-hop.

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