Week 6: Popular Cultural Representations

- Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology
- Hip Hop's Li'l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South
- Wish to Live: The Hip Hop Feminism Pedagogy Reader
DAUGHTER of the DRAGON

S-E-X! I WAS THE LOVE SLAVE OF THE GEISHA!
“We should all look for a gender critical voice, in the world, for ourselves. Where do we find a response to this phenomenon that will compellingly argue against such characterizations of black women, a hip-hop feminism?”

“There has been a feminist presence in hip-hop since the 1980s. From Salt-n-Pepa, to Queen Latifah, to MC Lyte and others, there is a feminist legacy in hip-hop and hip-hop feminism continues to exist despite the widespread objectification of black female bodies.”

“hip-hop is in tension with the process of celebrity creation...When it comes to feminist messages, often the words and language of a hip-hop song may have feminist content but the visual image may be implicated in the subjugation of black women.”

“The language of sexiness is also the language of sexism in American popular culture in general, and in hip-hop videos in particular... when the women who articulate subjectivity are increasingly presented in visual media as objects rather than subjects, as they are now, then their statement to the world is ambiguous at best, and at worst the feminist message of their work is undermined.”
“It is important to distinguish between sexual explicitness and internalized sexism. Although many who have debated the image of female sexuality have put “explicit” and “self-objectifying” on one side, and “respectable” and “covered-up” on the other, that is a flawed means of categorization.” (Binary thinking?)

“There is a creative possibility for explicitness to be liberatory because it may expand the confines of what women are allowed to say and do.”

“Each artist is a corporate creation.”

Cites Toni Cade Bambara: “The creative imagination has been colonized. The global screen has been colonized. And the audience- readers and viewers- is in bondage to an industry. It has the money, the will, the muscle, and the propaganda machine oiled up to keep us all licked up in a delusional system- as to even what America is.” (Capitalism?)
“I love black men like I love no other. And I'm not talking sex or aesthetics, I'm talking about loving y'all enough to be down for the drama- stomping anything that threatens your existence...I demand that black men fight sexism with the same passion they battle racism. I want you to annihilate anything that endangers sistas' welfare- including violence against women- because my survival walks hand in hand with yours. So, my brotha, if loving y'all fiercely and wanting it back makes me a feminist then I'm a feminist. So be it.” p. 44-45
If feminism intends to have any relevance in the lives of the majority of black women, if it intends to move past theory and become functional, it must rescue itself from the ivory towers of academia. Like it or not, hip hop is not only the dominion of the young, black, and male, it is also the world in which young black women live and survive. A functional feminism for us, one that is going to be as helpful to Shequanna on 142nd as it is to Samantha at Sarah Lawrence, has got to recognize hip hop’s ability to articulate the pain our community is in and then use that knowledge to create a redemptive, healing space.

Notice my emphasis on “community.” Hip hop is not only instrumental in exposing black men’s pain, it is a vital tool in bringing to the surface the healing black women have got to do.

I believe that hip hop can help us win. We can start by recognizing that its illuminating, informative narration and its ability to articulate our collective pain is an invaluable tool for examining gender relations.
“One thing I know for certain is that if you really are who I believe you to be, the voice of a nation, in pain and insane, then any thinking black woman's relationship with you is going to be as complicated as her love for black men. Whether I like it or not, you play a critical part in defining my feminism. Only you can give me the answer to the question so many of us are afraid to ask, “How did we go from fly-girls to bitches and hos in our brothers' eyes?”

- p.69-70
**Joan Morgan**

- “As a black woman and a feminist I listen to the music with a willingness to see past the machismo in order to be clear about what I’m really dealing with. What I hear frightens me. On booming track after booming track, I hear brothers talking about spending each day high as hell on malt liquor and Chronic. Don’t sleep. What passes for “40 and a blunt” good times in most of hip-hop is really alcoholism, substance abuse, and chemical dependency. When brothers can talk so cavalierly about killing each other and then reveal that they have no expectation to see their twenty-first birthday, that is straight up depression masquerading as machismo.” p. 72
Joan Morgan

“The seemingly impenetrable wall of sexism in rap music is really the complex mask African-Americans often wear to both hide and express the same...hip-hop is still one of the few forums in which young black men...are allowed to express their pain...Yeah, sistas are hurt when we hear brothers calling us bitches and hos. But the real crime isn't the name-calling, it's their failure to love us- to be our brothers in the way that we commit ourselves to being their sistas. But recognize: Any man who doesn't truly love himself is incapable of loving us in the healthy way we need to be loved. It's extremely telling that men who can only see us as “bitches” and “hos” refer to themselves only as “niggas.”” p. 74-75
Stereotypes

- Stereotypes persist because “they fulfill important identity needs for the dominant culture” thereby maintaining the status quo and preserving hegemony.

- An ideology of White Anglo racial superiority is maintained in part using stereotypes designed to construct an “other” that is regarded as lesser than the declared and constructed ideal. Stereotypes, as hegemonic tools, reduce individuals to a single, monolithic, one-dimensional type that appears and is presented as natural and normal (read true and accurate) as they fit into ideological patterns of representations that serve, among other functions, to establish “in-group categorizations of out-groups” (Ramirez-Berg, 1990, p. 294).

- Markers of sex and sexuality in Latinas posit them as “exotic, sexual, and available, and as more in touch with their bodies and motivated by physical and sexual pleasure than white women” (Beltran, 2002, p. 82).

- When stereotypical physical characteristics (red lips, big bottoms, large hips, voluptuous bosoms, and small waists), fashion extremes (high heels, huge hoop earrings, seductive clothing), sexual predation, and promiscuity (hot, exotic, experienced) are combined with behavioral generalities, the Latina is constructed as “mixed signifiers of sexual desire and fertility as well as bodily waste and racial contamination.”
“One place where racial discourse is especially powerful is within the institution of popular culture. We must continually critique and examine representations of racialized bodies, especially those bodies already marginalized within the system of racial hierarchies.”

What is Esposito saying that refutes the discourse around the construction of a “post-racial” world?

What about the term “post-feminist” world?

What about the lived social experiences of these women? For example, what about the precarious positions that America Ferrera, Eva Longoria, Jennifer Lopez occupy in popular culture?

What about the conditions of non-celebrity women, whose very real LABOR is not recognized as work? (Jennifer Wright's piece on Maquila workers...?)
“The Three Faces of Eva: Perpetuation of the Hot Latina Stereotype in Desperate Housewives”
Debra Merskin

“During the 1920s through 1940s, Latina stars such as Carmen Miranda broke through racial/ethnic barriers to celebrity and success in U.S. Popular entertainment. Yet, the physical and performative requirements for success simultaneously established not only the Latina “look” in film, but also the look as a symbol of lower social class...projected not only the exotic, inviting, and flamboyant sexuality but also a perceived social class look derived from a perceived ethnicity.”

- “Stereotypical behavioral characteristics assigned to Latinas include “addictively romantic; sensual, sexual and even exotically dangerous...self-sacrificing, dependent, powerless, sexually naïve, childlike, pampered, irresponsible...”make good domestics,” mispronounce words, speak Spanish, are Catholic, are impulsive dancers...”

- Hypersexual Cantina Girl, Faithful, Virginal Self-Sacrificing Senorita/Maid, Emasculating Vamp. (Notice any similarities to the construction of the Jezebel/Sapphire/Mammy/Dragon Lady/Lotus Blossom....?)

- The effects of these representations are far reaching, and damaging.
Circulating within sociology and education discourse is the strange notion of a “color-blind society” (meaning that we no longer see color or that the color of one’s skin will not determine his or her life chances). This idea has been recently redefined by pop culture and media outlets as “post-racial” (meaning that we have moved beyond race and that race no longer structures our thinking or our actions).

These discursive formations silence discussions of gender, class, racial privileges and disadvantages.

They also do not address the growing instances of violence/abuse/murders/suicides affecting ALL communities in the United States, cutting across class, race, ethnic, and educational lines.
“[i]n the tale of turnover told by maquila administrators, the Mexican woman assumers the forms of variable capital whose worth fluctuates from a status of value to one of waste.”

“[t]he disposable third world woman’s body is not the same as the one that women workers bring into the workplace. Rather, it is a body manufactured during the labor process via discourses that combine bits and pieces of workers’ bodies within industrial processes and managerial expectations.”
“Until the recent onslaught of films made by both Asian and Asian American filmmakers, Asian Pacific women have generally been perceived by Hollywood with a mixture of fascination, fear, and contempt. Most Hollywood movies either trivialize or exoticize us as people of color and as women. Our intelligence is underestimated, our humanity is overlooked, and our diverse cultures are treated as interchangeable. If we are “good,” we are childlike, submissive, silent, and eager for sex...and if we are not silent, suffering doormats, we are demonized dragon ladies- cunning, deceitful, sexual provocateurs...”

- Hagedorn talks about pleasure in reveling in the image of Anna May Wong and the Jade Cobra gang... issues of POWER.

- Linked to concept of “racialized sexuality” (Abdul JanMohamed), Sexuality based on a persons' race. These include sexual stereotypes that defines things that are supposed to be typical of a particular race. (Historically situated in the space of the colonial plantation)
In media-driven U.S. culture, representations of Asian women play a significant role in both reflecting and shaping our status, our self-image, and our potential. As we struggle for visibility and recognition of our diversity, we not only face blatantly offensive depictions of ourselves, but also continually come up against the power of racist, heterosexist, classist, and imperialist ideologies to adapt and pervert our demands by creating new versions of old stereotypes. The closing distance between American and Asian cultures—through popular media, private business, and international trade—has introduced new opportunities for appropriation, exploitation, and commodification of our images under the guise of multiculturalism. Our increasingly global, worldly wise, politically correct culture has raised awareness of ethnic difference—and raised the stakes in the representation game.
A close examination of other new, hip incarnations of Asian women that have recently surfaced reveals the conventional messages they continue to communicate, even as they entertain and thrill in their novelty, even as we welcome their challenge to outdated options. In the ongoing repackaging and commodification of Asian female-ness, difference is superficial, only skin-deep, and influence is measured in dollar signs, purely by market value. As we appear in worldly wise and aggressively assertive versions of old stereotypes, we continue to be presented, received, and read in essentially the same old ways. The pleasure we derive from seeing ourselves in the spotlight comes at the price of more visible marginalization.
As our cultural marketplace has made room for more diverse cultures and images, ultimately the pressures of the profit-minded, corporate-controlled marketplace squeeze out any transgressive meaning or potential we seize for ourselves and reduce us to mere novelties that merely spice up the status quo, keeping it ever fresh and tasty—and palatable. Our difference is merely another fashion or food taste. Indeed, Asian women’s exotic cultural and sexual differences are routinely compared with our strange foods, which become a stand-in for a different cultural taste or sensibility.
As bell hooks writes in her insightful essay on the appropriation and ingestion of black culture, “Eating the Other,”

The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.

Moreover, the desire to incorporate the essence of the other without being transformed, without losing one’s dominance over it, leads to a fascination with the consumption of cultural characteristics that prevents them from taking hold with any real importance or influence. The ease with which cultural characteristics are erased of meaning and context in popular forms such as fashion, movies, and music, makes constant close attention to the circulation and reception of images vitally important. “The overriding fear,” warns hooks, “is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten.” She concludes, “We cannot...accept these new images uncritically.”

Yet that is precisely how Asian women are expected to respond to our representation in mainstream U.S. culture. We are told, in Cibo Matto’s words, to “Shut up and eat!” Meanwhile, any attempt to participate in the ethnic foodfest can easily backfire. While Western critics may never acknowledge their continuing biases and condescending views, many Asian American cultural workers openly embrace the same views—and cater to them—in a short-sighted bid for visibility.
What does power “look” like in the television shows, advertisements, movies, and music videos you watch? How do you think these images have affected the way you view yourself?

Dr. Jean Kilbourne claims that computer-enhanced advertisements encourage women to hold themselves to impossible standards. Jennifer Pozner adds that women are expected to “look like Miss USA, have sex like Samantha on Sex and the City, and think like June Cleaver.” How do you hold yourself to impossible standards promoted by media? How do you hold other women to these standards?

In what ways have you been and are you a leader? When in a leadership position, have you been treated the same or different as the male leaders around you?

Journalists Katie Couric and Jan Yanehiro talk in the film about their role models. Rachel Maddow says there is an expectation for her to be a mentor to other women who enter her field. Have you identified role models? If so, who are they? Is it important to have women role models and mentors? How can you mentor another woman or girl?

Barbara Berg says that throughout history, the word ‘feminist’ has been given a bad name in order to discredit the women’s movement. What is your relationship to feminism? Is there value in identifying with the feminist movement?

How does the objectification of women described as “raunch culture” shape your attitudes toward yourself, men, and other women? How does this influence the way women leaders are portrayed in the media and how does this impact their success or willingness to pursue positions of leadership?
“Miss Representation” (2011)

What most surprised you about the film? What did you learn from the film?

How much media do you (and your family and friends) consume in a day and what is this media telling you about what it means to be a girl (woman) or a boy (man)?

Miss Representation director, Jennifer Siebel Newsom, and many of the interviewees, such as Margaret Cho, Jane Fonda, Jennifer Lawless, and Devanshi Patel, talk candidly about their experiences with sexism. What connections or empathy did you feel with the experiences presented in the film? What are your unique experiences?

Dr. Martha Lauzen disagrees with a journalist who published an article claiming the ‘glass ceiling’ no longer exists for women in entertainment. Others argue that the successes of Dr. Condoleezza Rice, Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, and Michelle Obama indicate that sexism and racism are things of our past, not our present. What do you think?

What power do we have as a consumer? How can we change the way media portrays women and girls and the ways in which women and girls view themselves?

What strategies are working to promote more women to leadership positions and make sure they are respected when they arrive?
The opening title sequence shows real iconic women throughout history, such as Hattie Caraway and Dr. Condoleezza Rice, and the popular celebrity faces we see on-screen. What contradictions do you see between the real women around you and what you see in the media?

Dr. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Lindy DeKoven state that harmful representations of women persist because the media uses hyper-sexualized images to sell products/ideas/services. Who or what benefits from the misrepresentations of women in the media? Who holds responsibility?

How does a lack of diversity in decision-making roles impact what we see in mainstream media and advertising? What impact does this have on us as consumers?