

“Bring a Bucket and a Mop” for the Tears of Offended White Male Conservatives

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Abstract. Upon its release, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s “Wet Ass Pussy” garnered unprecedented controversy for both its sexually explicit lyrics and accompanying music video. Originating primarily from right-leaning outlets, WAP’s adversaries chastised not only the song itself, but moreover, the artists for their supposed violation of American morals concerning gender and sexuality. However, gender and sexuality transgressions on their own incompletely encapsulate the overarching systemic oppressions affording WAP its disrepute. This essay examines the critical context underpinning the enormous controversy following WAP’s release, namely, the unique manifestation of misogyny in the context of black women’s sexuality. Employing a literary analysis calling on historical and social perspectives, I examine the construction of the controversy surrounding Black women’s sexuality in a discursive context. The impacts of slavery and the hypersexualization of Black women ultimately constitute the bedrock of WAP’s dissension which inherently demonizes and fetishizes the sexuality of Black women. Although highly controversial for its sexually explicit content, this paper argues that rather than degrading the sexuality of Black women and violating social moral codes, WAP represents an important avenue of empowerment for Black women, featuring a critical reclaiming of sexual autonomy.

Introduction

On August 7th 2020, rappers Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion released the tantalizing single “Wet Ass Pussy,” later abbreviated to WAP. The accompanying music video featuring fountains ejecting water from the breasts of statues, and the rap duo, dressed in ornate, tantalizing costumes, performing an “Olympic-level twerk routine,” elicited extensive backlash, mainly from the political right (Holmes, 2020). Sexually explicit music videos and lyrics remain steadfast themes in popular culture, with both male and white female artists producing equally explicit music — and yet Black women shoulder incomparable controversy. Despite veteran pop-music divas, Christina Aguilera (“Candyman,” 2006) and Britney Spears (“Womanizer,” 2009 & “Work Bitch,” 2013), producing correspondingly sexual, blush worthy songs and music videos, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion face enormous controversy over WAP and its sexually explicit content. In an industry saturated with sexually mature themes, the content of Black female creators, specifically, remains a fierce source of contention. As such, I argue that WAP’s controversy originates not exclusively from its explicit lyrics, but rather, the political nexus of misogynoir and the colonial desire to relegate the sexuality of Black women to the voyeuristic white patriarchal gaze. Further, in spite of this controversy, WAP remains a critical subversion of the controlling images which hypersexualize, fetishize and exoticize Black women’s sexuality.

The White Patriarchal Gaze

Despite being naturalized in mainstream media, the white patriarchal gaze constitutes a persistent form of colonial violence. The use and prevalence of a white patriarchal gaze extends beyond the constructed unnatural relationship between Black artists and discourses of empowerment. Colonial practices of othering, which relegated Black bodies to discourses of primitivism and savagery, concretized the naturalization of a white, non-white divide, bearing tangible future social consequences (Yancy, 2008). The social construction of the white male gaze lays the formative foundation for understanding the construction and scrutiny of Black women’s sexuality both in the historical and contemporaneous contexts. Critically, the overwhelming presence and authority over the media granted to white figureheads must be acknowledged when considering public discourses surrounding Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s “Wet Ass Pussy”; the dynamics and prestige afforded among white and non-white creators remains inherently askew (Griffin, 2014). The historical relationship between the media, Black, and white bodies adheres to the white supremacist desire to occupy the role of “lookers” in possession of an unequivocal right to view others (Griffin, 2014).

Dovetailing colonial-slavery practices, the patriarchal white gaze emerges in relation to the anxieties and myths emplaced on Black bodies; the need to justify the systemic subordination of an entire race to advance and appease the white agenda (Yancy, 2008). In other words, the white patriarchal gaze constitutes “a process of seeing without being seen, that constructs the Black body into its own colonial imaginary”; thus inextricably binding Black women’s bodies to a narrow and exploitative paradigm. Consequently, modern media falls victim to reinscribing the white patriarchal gaze; representations of Black women adhere to longstanding colonial attitudes in order to satisfy the beliefs and systems instrumented by white patriarchal figures. For Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion, the apparent subversion of the male gaze, coupled with violations of the patriarchal expectations for female sexuality, positions WAP at the epicentre of patriarchal controversy. WAP not only rejects the sexual morality emplaced upon women by the patriarchal white gaze but moreover, rejects the classical colonial stipulation of who embodies the role of “looker” versus the “looked at” (Griffin, 2014). The analysis of this paper outlines the nuance, narratives, and images underpinning the white male gaze. Moreover, it underscores Cardi and Megan’s apparent subversion of patriarchal voyeurism.

The Controversy and Misogynoir

Within hours of its release, WAP garnered significant controversy for its sexually explicit imagery and lyrics. Republican US House candidate, James Bradley took to Twitter shortly after the song’s release in profuse retaliation, stating that:

Cardi B & Megan Thee Stallion are what happens when children are raised without God and without a strong father figure. Their new “song” The #WAP (which I heard accidentally) made me want to pour holy water in my ears and I feel sorry for future girls if this is their role model! (Bradley)

In the discourse of Bradley and many right-leaning Americans, WAP marks the social degradation of America and yet, sex remains a popular topic in popular culture when explored by men and white women. However, Black female creators Nicki Minaj (“Anaconda,” 2014), Missy Elliott (“Work It,” 2009) and Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion experience a unique avenue of oppression: misogynoir. Coined by Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey in 2008, misogynoir refers to “the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience,” or in other words, the inextricable manifestation of racism and sexism towards Black women (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). In the context of WAP, misogynoir manifests in relation to the racialized, gendered double standard emplaced upon Black women: Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s disregard for female sexual passivity is coupled with narratives hinged on racism and the colonial exploitation of Black enslaved

bodies. Ultimately, the narrative of degradation merely obscures the underlying premise of the WAP controversy; the ongoing anxieties and negative stereotyping surrounding Black women's sexuality.

Misogynoir complicates the navigation, exploration and expression of Black female sexuality in manners not affecting white women. For pop diva Britney Spears, her use of tantalizing lyrics, dance and costumes amassed her a loyal fan base and an iconic reputation for sex appeal (Gurley, 2021). An analysis of tabloid headlines featuring Britney's sexiest images reveals a critical difference in the portrayal of her sexuality. Whereas Britney hails a narrative of sex-positivity, one article even claiming that during a 2001 performance, Britney "pretty much pioneered twerking," a dance move in fact popularized by Black communities and historically originating from African regions, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion face fierce reprimand and oppression for staking claims to their own sexuality (Capital FM, 2016; Halliday, 2020, p. 870). Previous and contemporary representations of Spears praise her sexuality; she's a "queen," a "goddess," and a "feminist icon" for owning her own sexuality and creating art that empowers both Spears and her followers to embrace feeling sexy (Gurley, 2021). Conversely, Cardi and Meghan's "Olympic-level twerk routine," featured in WAP's music video, and later recreated for The Grammys Stage, instigated and reinscribed the narratives imposed on Black women's sexuality dubbing them dirty, hypersexual and degrading. Despite twerking's roots and subsequent popularization by Black women, those same women are deemed derogatory and unfit "role model[s]" for "future girls" revealing the role of misogynoir embedded within these discourses (Bradley).

The white patriarchal gaze relies on the colonial practice of negative stereotyping in order to justify Anglo-European domination over a socially and systematically constructed other (Yancy, 2008). By employing and nurturing colonial discourses, the contemporary media remains fixated on controlling and comparing the sexuality of Black women to a revered white-female archetype. This not only superiorizes white patriarchal domination, but moreover, justifies the heightened scrutiny of Black women. Misogynoir operates in accordance with binary thinking where the white female body represents "good womanhood," and thus, Black women come to represent undesirable, dirty, and improper womanhood (Trudy, 2014). This dichotomous thinking, hinged on desirable versus undesirable womanhood, "creates invisibility for Black women's pain and hyper-visibility for what are deemed inherent flaws based on Black womanhood" (Trudy, 2014). Therefore, reading WAP's controversy sans its racial components perpetuates the erasure of Black women's experiences with particular regard to their sexual oppression. Black women's sexuality continues to be subjected to the racist tactics of slavery by way of the dehumanizing and hypersexualizing of their bodies "as a tool of violence," and thus, not as subjective entities desiring sexual pleasure (Trudy, 2014). The theme of Black women's sexuality emerges profusely within rap music, usually in the songs of male artists who fantasize the brutalization of the hypersexual Black female body. Their rhetoric resembles conquest, immobilizing Black women's control of their own sexuality, and blatantly

ignoring the possibility that these women can enjoy sex or assume active roles with regard to their own sexuality. Ultimately, the racialized standards surrounding Black women's sexuality inherently render its manifestations deviant to the white standard.

Historical-Cultural Context

Black women's sexuality remains constructed by and for the gaze of the patriarchy, dating back to the violent and traumatic history of enslavement and social subordination. The practice of objectifying Black women's bodies originated, in part, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries where sexual abuse and rape represented tools of domination used by slave owners, usually white men, against female slaves. According to Davis (2019), the specific racism geared towards Black women is hinged on "the assumption that white men – especially those who wield economic power – possess an incontestable right of access to Black women's bodies," a legacy exploited in slave and slave owner relationships where "sexual coercion was... an essential dimension of the social relations between slave master and slave" (p. 175). The exploitative power dynamics of slavery enabled white men to lay the foundations for the construction of Black women's sexuality in order to satiate their personal and economic agendas; these historical events created lasting and damaging stereotypes pertaining to Black women's sexuality. In other words, Black women's bodies bear the historical and generational trauma of objectification; the Black female body remains an "incontestable right," to white men, and thus contributes to the contemporaneous narratives which classify Black women as sexual conquests (Davis, 2019, p. 175).

Under the oppression of slavery, Black women "were classified as breeders," their value within this system stemming from their ability to produce children (Davis, 2019, p. 7). Bailey and Trudy (2008) contend that Black women experience "non-person status because of gender *in addition* to race"; or rather, that the unique intersection of racialization and gender in turn dispossesses the Black female body of agency and personhood (p. 765). In chorus with Davis (2019), the socio-political context of slavery introduced a paradigm which commodifies the Black female body, thus removing agency and personhood. In the slavery context, the Black female body remained the legal property of wealthy white men, a predominant feature of North American Colonial regimes. For white slave owners and their Black female slaves, the justification to legally own and control a human being originates from persisting discourses of conquest over Black females, hyper-sexualizing and brutalizing these bodies to legitimize practices of dehumanization. Thus, the sexuality of Black women is constructed by and for a patriarchal white gaze completely decontextualized from personal agency. In this way, the Black female body remains a privatized commodity owned by those seeking to maintain active control over a subordinate group.

Slavery established critical controlling narratives regarding Black women's sexuality; the presumptions that Black women's bodies remain the rightful conquests of white men continue to objectify the Black female body in contemporary contexts. The prevalence of the white patriarchal gaze attests to this dynamic, by continuing to feature representations of Black women in the media whose characterization appeals to the stereotypic assumptions about Black women's sexuality constructed within the slavery era. Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's reclaiming of their own sexuality as Black women, thus, stimulates discomfort amongst those whose idealization of the Black female body emanates from the paradigms of enslavement. Dovetailing the dehumanization and objectification of Black women within the domain of slavery arises the persistent and contemporaneous characterization of Black women's bodies as "promiscuous and immoral" (Davis, 2019, p. 176). According to Black scholar and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2002), Black women confront controlling images which leverage stereotypic images of Black women in order to justify ideologies of oppression (p. 69). In other words, colonial practices of othering create overarching character types for Black women, satisfying the white patriarchal gaze by demonizing and dehumanizing the bodies and sexualities of Black women. While Black women face plethora controlling images embedded within racist assumptions, that of the jezebel "is central in this nexus of controlling images of Black womanhood" (Hill Collins, 2002, p. 81). This image entails the construction of "deviant Black female sexuality," another product of slavery deployed to justify the sexual abuse of Black women by white men; the perceived hypersexuality of Black women allegedly indicated their fertility (Hill Collins, 2008, p. 81). Slavery's function in the positioning of Black female sexuality is thus twofold: Black women were both hypersexualized and objectified; the former condoning the latter.

With slavery profusely comprising the bedrock for the hypersexualization of Black women, Hill Collins (2008) argues that "the historical legacy of the jezebel" loosely translates into "the contemporary hoochie," a greater sexualization of the jezebel image (p. 82). Popularized, in part, by rap music, the hoochie image "is constructed as a woman whose sexual appetites are at best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable," and thus, disrupts the social status quo mandating female subservency (Hill Collins, 2008, p. 83). These hoochie-esque characters become the subjects of vulgar, violent, and obscene representations of Black women in music, television and film, perpetuating the objectification of Black female bodies and positioning these bodies as "sexually deviant" (p. 84). Reminiscent of slavery tactics, the modern jezebel remains an objectified caricature representative of white patriarchal strategies for dehumanizing the Black female body. In other words, the sexuality of Black women becomes a commodity separated from overall conscious personhood. By maintaining the hypersexualization of Black women in both historical and contemporary contexts, the oppression of Black female bodies remains normalized, and used, parallel to the slavery era, to justify the oppression of a collective (Herd, 2014). Overall, hypersexualized images confirm the ideologies lynchpinned by slavery; the allegedly sexually promiscuous Black woman's body ultimately does not belong to her.

Furthermore, the sexuality of Black women remains not only demonized for its perceived promiscuous, “insatiable” nature, but moreover, remains the conquest of white men.

Wet Ass Pussy: Reclaiming Sexuality

Contravening the historical and ongoing practices which seek to police and stipulate Black women’s sexuality, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion critically and importantly reclaim their sexuality from the male gaze. While WAP treads highly sexual territory, its female lyricists describe their sexual desires – how *they* want to be treated during sex, rather than adhering to the narrative which relegates Black female sexuality to the “service of men” (Lorde, 2000, p. 49). Hinged on a historical rhetoric of control, representations of hypersexuality in the jezebel and hoochie characters remove Black women’s subjectivity; the residual economic narrative that renders Black women a source of profit - be it financial or sexual - gratification removes individual subjectivity from sexuality. Conversely, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s representation of sexuality hinges on their *own* sexual pleasure. WAP’s unapologetically female music video, featuring an exclusively female cast, transports viewers into a necessary female gaze where Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion portray sexuality on their own terms. In other words, the omission of a male presence during WAP’s four minute and thirteen second video enables its creators to reinscribe subjectivity in conjunction with sexuality; the performances of Cardi, Megan, and their companions reclaim Black female agency over their own bodies. Further, Cardi and Megan’s repurposing of Frank Ski’s 1993 track “Whores in this House” reclaims the sexually derogatory for the female gaze; in so doing, the term “whore,” in the context of WAP, no longer represents a derogatory insult. The tactful use of “Whores in this House” disables onlookers from stigmatizing this specific term towards Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion; thus, this term, as an insult, is made obsolete.

Despite its considerable controversy, WAP, to many, occupies important feminist territory centred around the reclaiming of Black women’s sexuality. In addition to WAP’s core premise; two Black women taking back the subjectivity of their sexuality, the music video features more subtle images of Cardi and Megan’s retaliation against controlling images and the portrayal of Black female bodies in other rap songs. Scholar Aria Halliday (2020) underscores the “necessity to celebrate Black girls’ pleasure as they themselves experience it,” allowing sexuality to become an avenue of empowerment, rather than a tool of oppression deployed against the Black female body (p. 886). As such, WAP’s infamous Fun House, featuring girating statues of women’s buttox and breasts, and mysterious rooms featuring Black dancers in ornate costumes invites an unapologetically female, subjective gaze bereft of the typical voyeuristic gaze accorded to Black women. Cardi and Megan navigate The Fun House’s corridors taking in impressive routines from Normani, Rosalia and Rubi Rose. In other words, by featuring Black women “using each other as

objects of satisfaction” and in appreciation of the sexuality of other Black women, WAP subverts the tendency for extraneous forces to objectify Black women; rather, allowing these women to embrace their sexuality (Lorde, 2000, p. 54). WAP’s lack of male spectators removes the conventional male voyeurism featured in other music videos which reiterate the objectification and hypersexualization of Black women by reproducing the lens, imbued in misogynoir, through which men view Black female bodies.

WAP exemplifies a critical reclaiming of Black female sexuality wherein Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion reinstate their subjectivity as sexual beings. WAP, thus, represents a critical piece of resistance harboring the potential to transform sexuality into a mechanism of power. Audre Lorde argues that patriarchy, and by extent, its racist dexterities, emphasize “that only by the suppression of the erotic... can women be truly strong,” which, Lorde argues, illustrates society’s fear of sexuality’s power, for “women so empowered are dangerous” (Lorde, 2000, p. 49, 52). In other words, accessing the erotic actively works against the racially imbued patriarchy and bestows its possessor with the power to enjoy their sexuality while also disrupting the social status quo controlling Black female sexuality for the male gaze and enacting “genuine change within our world” (Lorde, 2000, p. 54). Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s “Wet Ass Pussy,” not only disrupts damaging images and narratives concerning Black women’s sexuality and thus, reclaims said sexuality, but moreover, leverages a platform for discussing the policing of sexuality. Embedded within WAP’s controversy resides repressed anxieties and biases directed towards Black women’s sexualities, and, therefore, WAP’s very existence creates opportunities to identify, dissect and reevaluate these attitudes. By singing about their own “wet ass puss[ies],” Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion destabilize the thinly veiled expectations for Black female sexuality; acquiring possession of the proverbial talisman of Black female sexuality.

Conclusion

Despite its controversy, WAP’s very existence redirects power over their sexualities into the hands of Black women. The ensuing conversations regarding the history, policing and objectification of Black women’s bodies are critical and necessary to the anti-racist movement and the protection and validation of Black women’s lives. The compounded, bilateral oppression of Black women, identified as misogynoir, creates a specific double bias complicit in the erasure of Black women’s oppression and the magnification of their bodies. “Wet Ass Pussy’s” ensuing backlash originates from the racially saturated nuances of sexism, which historically and contemporaneously hypersexualize and objectify Black women’s bodies, but more profoundly, arise from a distaste for Black female power. WAP lyrics and visual representation necessarily reclaim a Black female gaze wherein Cardi, Megan and the other Black women featured in the titillating music video, sport sexy en-

sembles and steamy dance routines on their own terms, and for their own satisfaction. Ultimately, WAP artfully creates a necessary dialogue surrounding Black women's oppression and the importance of reclaiming sexuality and unapologetically claiming space in popular culture.

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