

“THIS MOMENT FOR LIFE”: POPULAR CULTURE’S IMPACT ON THE MORAL SPHERE
OF YOUNG BLACK WOMEN

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE FOUR CONTROLLING IMAGES OF BLACK WOMEN.....	6
III. GIRL-POISONING CULTURE: DEFEATING AND DELIMITING THE MATURATION PROCESS OF GROWING UP BLACK AND FEMALE.....	11
IV. THE FANTASTIC HEGEMONIC IMAGINATION AS ONTOLOGICAL BLACK FEMININITY.....	14
V. A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF BLACK FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN POPULAR CULTURE TODAY.....	17
Beyoncé Knowles.....	18
Nicki Minaj.....	21
Antonia “Toya” Carter.....	23
VI. AN ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF COMPLEX SUBJECTIVITIES AND HIP-HOP COUNTER NARRATIVES: WHO DECIDES?.....	25
VII. MORAL IMAGINATION AS SUBVERSIVE RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE.....	26
REFERENCES.....	34

I. INTRODUCTION

As a member of Generation X, popular culture has played a large role in my moral sphere shaping my perceptions about realities I had little access to as a teenager. Specifically, cultivating a perspective of blackness different than what I had experienced in my own black family. Television programs like *Good Times*, *Cosby Show* and *A Different World* provided various class representation of young black women I sometimes could identify with; then movies like *Menace to Society* and *Boys N The Hood*, although strongly male-centered films, showed me young black women's role as related to the world envisioned by young black men. Like most youth born in the 1970's, my mom worked full time and, after school I, along with my siblings, were home alone until mom got off work. Television in the 80's became increasingly central in my life, like many others, as technology and specifically visual media accessibility was becoming the norm. Reliance on technology (radio, television, personal computer, cell phone and Internet) has become a way of life and with each new generation the use of media is the only way of life known. Therefore, because of the influential role of technology and media in modern society, representations in media play an increasingly prominent role in the development of all people and especially young people. I seek to critically engage popular culture and the controlling images found in the media by deploying a religious criticism that seeks to provide empowering ways to address the limited and often stereotyped perceptions of people represented in popular culture.

By engaging popular culture through a religious and cultural criticism, I hope to provide tools to interrogate and analyze culture phenomenon and media representations. Specifically the goal is to provide critical resources for generation Y and Z, to broaden their imagination of the possibilities for themselves and those around them. Thus, I see this project as developing into

ways all people in general and younger generations specifically can begin to think critically about the media representations that are constantly embedded into their psyche. Therefore, it is necessary to call into question the taken-for-granted nature of popular culture images that inundate us with stereotypical and narrowly defined perceptions of women; people of color in general, and black women in particular. With psychologist Mary Pipher, I assert that we live in a “girl poisoning culture” that defeats and delimits the maturation process of young black women by inculcating racist and misogynist stereotypes through popular culture, such as hip-hop, which are internalized before young women are fully capable of discerning the effects on their identity. Key questions for this study are: How can we begin to call into question images that harm our potential to flourish, and in what ways can we critically change the negative effects culture and society have on persons? How much influence does popular culture have on young black women’s moral sphere? In what ways does popular culture influence young women’s perceptions of themselves and the world around them, especially between the ages of fifteen to twenty-five?

This project is worthy of scholarly attention and theological reflection because popular images in culture play a significant role in identity formation which is critical to the ability to flourish. Furthermore, visual cultural productions are reflections of our lives and these productions are re-produced images of ourselves. These productions are what create our identity. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, feminist cultural critic bell hooks brings home the significance of this project and its worthiness for scholarly attention and theological reflection. She states, “If we compare the relative progress African Americans have made in education and employment to the struggle to gain control over how we are represented, particularly in the mass

media, we see that there has been little change in the area of representation.”¹ Viewing blackness through the lens of white supremacy, in the media and popular culture, has been internalized by all but once internalized by people who have been oppressed in society they become defeated and delimited. As hooks suggests, we must be critical about media images that have profound effects on identity². Finally, this project is worthy of scholarly attention and theological reflection more specifically because popular culture in general and hip hop culture in particular affects all aspects of today’s society through media representations. Furthermore, hip-hop as a subversive culture has the potential to be compared to subversive religious discourse that counters the “sins” of the world. Therefore, if hip-hop is a subversive culture, religious discourse should find common ground in cultural criticism with hip-hop discourse.

The need to assess young black women’s moral imagination as a tool to combat stereotyped cultural representations in popular culture, specifically hip-hop culture, is critical to not just survival but flourishing in life. This project will focus on the complex subjectivities of young black women and particularly their use of moral agency, moral philosophy and other moral alternatives that move toward the possibility of flourishing. There is a shortage of work done in this area but some feminist writers have initiated the discussion by exploring hip-hop culture and the exploitative representations of black women in culture. For example, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s *Pimps Up, Ho’s Down* addresses the complicated relationship women have to hip-hop culture. In particular, she gives voice to women’s complex subjectivities as they use their agency within the heterosexist culture of hip-hop. Sharpley-Whiting analyzes how women negotiate these spaces (in hip-hop) that have often reduced them to conquests and objects and find ways to acknowledge their complexity in life. Gwendolyn Pough in *Check It While I Wreck*

¹ bell hooks. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992, (1).

² bell hooks addresses some of these concerns in her works *Yearning*, *Outlaw Culture* and *Reel to Real*.

It explores the way women's voices have been a disruption to the heterosexist culture of hip-hop that is often demonized in the public sphere. Pough explores new ways to bring "wreck" to caricatures of black women and free them towards new ways of living. In related fashion, cultural critic Tricia Rose in *The Hip Hop Wars* discloses the top ten debates about hip-hop that include the negative stereotypes of women that surround hip-hop culture³. Rose's argument on the sexism found in hip-hop culture places it within the larger American culture that prioritizes capitalism over human well-being and wholeness. Rose illuminates the historic landscape that hip-hop culture operates within and describes how it interacts (in sometimes problematic ways) with the larger dominant culture. Although Rose recognizes the cultural landscape hip-hop was created and thrives in, she does not free hip-hop artists from their responsibility to create something more life-affirming for their followers. While many feminist authors have looked at popular culture's impact on women, little work has been done to analyze the moral imagination of young black women's identity formation in popular culture that is influenced by hip-hop culture. Thus, my paper seeks to develop fully this work by addressing issues of moral agency, identity and flourishing for young black women who negotiate the sexist, racist, and classist space of American popular culture.

I will argue in this paper that popular culture representations of black women in America still depict her as a commodity to be bought and sold in popular culture media images. The commodification of black women's bodies is an outgrowth of slavery as well as modernity that seeks to reify black women in structural and abstract ways to second-class citizenship. For example, Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* illustrates concrete examples of how black women's bodies were degraded by enslavement

³ Dr. Rose began this work with previous books such as *Black Noise* and *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk about Sexuality & Intimacy*.

because their bodies were a site of product and service, violence and conflict. Unlike other works about American chattel slavery, Angela Y. Davis in *Women Race & Class* highlights the unique situation of the female slave. Davis demonstrates the double state of black women being not only a field worker beside male slaves but also a premium was placed on her reproductive abilities as a “breeder”.⁴ Jennifer L. Morgan in *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* argues, “Women’s lives under slavery in the Americas always included the possibilities of their wombs. Whether laboring among sugar cane, coffee bushes, or rice swamps, the cost-benefit calculations of colonial slaveowners included the speculative value of reproducing labor force.”⁵ Morgan situates a discussion about black women as enslaved laborers within a historical context that foregrounds women’s reproductive identity as the framework itself that shaped all experience and relationships in American context for black women. Based on such scholarly perspectives of slavery’s impact on the formation of conjoined racial and gendered identities, I assert that post-slavery popular cultural images still represent black women as a commodity to be bought and sold in the public sphere.

Appropriating popular cultural hip-hop artist Nicki Minaj’s title song “This Moment for Life”, I assert that “this moment” refers to the timeframe in early adolescence wherein the moral identity formation of young black women’s life begins to take place and moreover, the girl-poisoning culture that we live in defeats and delimits the maturation process of young black women. Using human development theories, I emphasize the impact of our experiences in early adolescent that directly influence our ability to self-actualize and flourish in adulthood.

Therefore, if in early years, young black women are indoctrinated with negative popular culture

⁴ Angela Y. Davis. *Women Race & Class*. New York: Vintage Books, 1981, (7).

⁵ Jennifer L. Morgan. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, (3).

images of themselves, it will greatly impede their psyche and identity. Furthermore, if moral imagination as an alternative religious discourse is not developed in adolescents, young black women's moral sphere is encumbered and that "moment" in early adolescent, where girls typically have been limited, will always hinder their ability to flourish.

II. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE FOUR CONTROLLING IMAGES OF BLACK WOMEN

Sociologist and black feminist Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* outlines the four images that have historically controlled the representations of black women in the public sphere as the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother and the jezebel. These images operate as tropes that reinforce stereotypical understandings of black women's complex subjectivity. These tropes represent black women as flat, one-dimensional caricatures limiting their humanity vis-à-vis a full range of emotion and identity, and thus their ability to be seen as complex subjects. When exposed to only limited representations of black women, societal values and perspectives are defined and controlled to create a desired perception (i.e. the trope).

Historically, these four controlling images were created to provide ideological justification for the economic and sexual abuse of black women through systems of oppression, such as slavery and Jim Crow laws. Patricia Hill Collins argues, "As a part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already

existing symbols, or creating new ones”⁶. Thus stereotypes are powerful tools used to help define cultural standards, values and perceptions.

Through a constant influx of stereotypical representations, caricatures and ensuing modes of social inequality seem natural and an inevitable part of the society. In addition, these images subjugate black women as outsiders of the dominant norms of race and gender in America. Creating an outsider, or “other” is a way that dominant groups define themselves. Moreover, a black woman, as the “other,” transforms the subject into an object for use; meaning, she becomes a commodity. Collins states, “As the *Others* of society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African-American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging.”⁷ As a commodity, the black woman as a raced and gendered body clarifies who does and who does not have access to the best resources in society afforded to men and white women. Collins suggests that, “analyzing the particular controlling images applied to African-American women reveals the specific contours of Black women’s objectification as well as the ways in which oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class intersect.”⁸ Thus, analyzing these particular controlling images demystifies their effects and shows how black women are caught in the false web of a dominant ideology that must create an opposite “other” to justify to the subjugation of black women and all others deemed as “other.”

⁶ Emilie M. Townes. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, (77).

⁷ Ibid, (77).

⁸ Ibid, (79).

The first controlling image for black women is the “mammy,” the faithful, obedient domestic servant⁹. The “mammy” is portrayed as asexual and is defined by her physicality and work; originally created to mask the sexual abuse of house slaves. She is a surrogate mother devoted to her white family. Presently, this image is linked to the professional black woman who invests her time and emotion in her job, neglecting herself and her family. This image justified economic exploitation of house slaves during slavery and black women domestic workers afterwards.

The second controlling image for black women is “the matriarch” who symbolizes the bad black mother. The “matriarch” is an overly aggressive, unfeminine woman who allegedly emasculates her lovers and husbands. She is a bad mother because she is at fault for being the head of the house instead of the black man. According to Collins, the matriarch is blamed for the political and economic inequalities of the black family. For example, “Assuming the Black poverty in the United States is passed on intergenerational via the values that parents teach their children, dominant ideology suggests that Black children lack the attention and care allegedly lavished on white, middle-class children.”¹⁰ This stereotype distorts the realities of American capitalism where extreme distributions of wealth inevitably lead to some people living in poverty. The matriarch stereotype reinforces the controversial 1965 Moynihan Report that states black female-lead households are pathological and the primary issue is due to the black matriarch’s inability to take her place in white male patriarchal society¹¹. Thus, according to this line of reasoning, the matriarch fails to conform to the cult of womanhood (which is ostensibly a

⁹ Ibid, (80).

¹⁰ Ibid, (84).

¹¹ Sociologist and Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote in 1965 the now infamous report that caused major controversy in America by blaming the black community for their lack instead of factoring society’s structural economic and political discrimination of black people.

white woman's middle-class construct) and is therefore seen as the cause of black cultural deficiency.

The third controlling image for black women is the "welfare mother." At its core, the image of the "welfare mother" constitutes a class-specific, controlling image developed for poor, working-class Black women who make use of social welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law.¹² According to Collins, the use of this stereotype was necessary after black women gained more political power and demanded equity to state services. The welfare mother is a bad mother who is content to not work and sit at home and collect welfare¹³. She is typically portrayed as an unwed mother with uncontrolled sexuality and thus a danger to society because she does not adhere to white middle-class ideas of heterosexual marriage. Therefore, this stereotype was created to help dominate elite groups control poor black women's fertility. "Creating the controlling image of the welfare mother and stigmatizing her as the cause of her own poverty and that of the African-American communities shifts the angle of the vision away from structural sources of poverty and blames the victims themselves."¹⁴ Therefore, the dominant group in society has justification for controlling poor black women's reproductivity as well as denouncing any level of governmental assistance, societal responsibility, or institutional reforms that address the reasons for black poverty in the first place.

The fourth controlling image for black women is the "jezebel," or whore, or "hoochie."¹⁵ Collins argues, "Because efforts to control Black women's sexuality lie at the heart of Black women's oppression, historical jezebels and contemporary "hoochies" represent a deviant Black

¹² Ibid, (86).

¹³ 2012 G.O.P. presidential contenders Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum are currently deploying these same claims.

¹⁴ Ibid, (87).

¹⁵ Ibid, (89).

female sexuality.”¹⁶ During slavery, this image functioned to provide the rationale for the widespread sexual assault of black slave women by white men by accusing black women as being sexually aggressive. Currently, the jezebel has progressed to the “hoochie,” a racialized and gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality.¹⁷ Within this stereotype, men are the aggressor and women are submissive, anything outside of this construct is deviant. Collins suggests African- Americans have accepted the image of the “hoochie” because they utilize this image and portray black women as such in media representations in black popular culture (i.e. music videos).

Finally, the connection between all four controlling images, according to Collins, is the common theme of Black women’s sexuality. “Each image transmits distinctive messages about the proper links among female sexuality, desired levels of fertility for working-class and middle-class Black women, and U.S. Black women’s placement in social class and citizenship hierarchies.”¹⁸ According to Collins, these stereotypes taken together (the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother and the jezebel) represent elite white male ideology and are used to justify race, class and gender domination in the United States. These stereotypes dominate culture and the images are maintained by social institutions that are run by elite white males for the continuation of their beliefs. Schools, the news media and government agencies constitute important sites for reproducing these controlling images. “The growing influence of television, radio, movies, videos, CDs, and the Internet constitute new ways of circulating controlling images. Popular culture has become increasingly important in promoting these images,

¹⁶ Ibid, (89).

¹⁷ Ibid, (91).

¹⁸ Ibid, (92).

especially with new global technologies that allow U.S. popular culture to be exported throughout the world.”¹⁹

So the question is, how does this constant influx of stereotypical images affect both societal perceptions of black women and the well-being of young black women who are misrepresented and only see negative representation of themselves? The next section will address how these images affect the moral sphere of young girls.

III. GIRL-POISONING CULTURE: DEFEATING AND DELIMITING THE MATURATION PROCESS OF GROWING UP BLACK AND FEMALE

The four controlling images that dominate popular culture and mainstream perceptions are a part of a larger culture phenomenon that creates a “girl-poisoning culture.” As I will suggest in this section, the maturation process of young girls has been defeated and delimited due to numerous factors that control their moral sphere.

In 1994, psychologist and cultural anthropologist, Mary Pipher in *Reviving Ophelia*, recognized a phenomenon happening with young girls that hindered their ability to flourish. Through her time spent with young teenage girls, she noticed the issue was not the individual girls, but the culture of these young girls. What she noticed was that we lived in a “girl-poisoning culture.” Pipher states, “Girls today are much more oppressed. They are coming of age in a more dangerous, sexualized and media-saturated culture. They face incredible pressures to be beautiful and sophisticated, which in junior high means using chemicals and being sexual. As they navigate a more dangerous world, girls are less protected.”²⁰ Because of these demands on young

¹⁹ Ibid, (93).

²⁰ Mary Pipher. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1994,

girls, Pipher asserts, “America today limits girl’s development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them traumatized.”²¹ The challenge is how do we overcome such limiting oppressions to a young women’s flourishing? Pipher realized these young girls never fully self-actualized, which affected these girls when they became adult women.

Pipher’s notes in response to this “girl-poisoning culture,” young women have coped largely by splitting into personal and political selves for survival. “The culture is splitting adolescent girls into true and false selves. The culture is what causes girls to abandon their true selves and take up false selves.”²² In a society of conformity, most girls choose to be socially accepted and split into two selves, one that is authentic and one that is culturally scripted. Adolescent girls discover that it is impossible to be both feminine and adult.²³ Pipher suggests that girls come of age in a misogynistic culture in which men have most political and economic power. Everywhere girls are encouraged to sacrifice their true selves. Their parents may fight to protect them, but their parents have limited power. Many girls lose contact with their true selves, and when they do, they become extraordinarily vulnerable to a culture that is all too happy to use them for its purposes.²⁴ It is important to explore the impact culture has on girls’ growth and development. These young women’s lives are a great example of how a toxic misogynist society negatively impacts the development of young girls. These young women’s problems are merely a symptom of the larger problem in our society that limits the flourishing of the most vulnerable and half the population.

Although the majority of Mary Pipher’s patients were white girls between the ages of 10-22 years old, this issue of “splitting” into true and false selves to effectively navigate the social

(12).

²¹ Ibid, (12).

²² Ibid, (37).

²³ Ibid, (39).

²⁴ Ibid, (44).

and culture terrain is critical for young girls of all races, nationalities and socio-economic class. As a black woman, I am appropriating her work to assert this girl-poisoning culture is harmful for all young women but extending her claim to state in today's culture race interacts in multifaceted ways that create a specific plight for young black women. Specifically, cultural messages for young black women suggest they are inferior because they are both black and female (since all images of beauty are white young girls).

In today's hypersexual and misogynistic culture, young women are bombarded with cultural messages that tell them that to be female is to be sexually desirable. Popular culture suggests young women's power and agency is primarily through their beauty and sexual desirability. The "sacred rhetoric" of popular culture messages suggests young women should sacrifice their well-being to be accepted and these images have delimited and devalued the maturation process of young women. Piper's study reveals many questions that should be addressed, such as: What type of ramifications does this "girl-poisoning" culture have on adult women that never fully self-actualize because the moral imagination was delimited? What role do adult women have to tell their stories and reveal how the same gender obstacles have hindered them? Then we can begin to take back these lessons to young girls who grow up in sexist and misogynist culture and give them alternative realities to which they can strive for.

The next section will develop further the claim that we live in a girl-poisoning culture and how myth has dominated historical realities and public perception about "others" in general and African-Americans in particular to create what womanist ethicist Emilie Townes' calls the "fantastic hegemonic imagination." This fantastic hegemonic imagination creates an ontological black femininity that defeats and delimits the maturation process of young black girls.

IV. THE FANTASTIC HEGEMONIC IMAGINATION AS ONTOLOGICAL BLACK FEMININITY

In *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Emile Townes illustrates the significance behind the “sacred rhetoric” of popular culture images and their negative impact on the moral sphere of young black women. She states, “These images of Black women and girls rest solidly in the imagination of U.S. culture and must be deconstructed and understood for the awful impact they have on how a stereotype is shaped into “truth” in memory and in history.”²⁵ Here Townes recognizes how popular images are largely shaped by a historical memory that she calls “fantastic hegemonic imagination.” Townes sees the fantastic hegemonic imagination as a set of ideas by dominant groups in society that are deployed to secure and rule a subordinate class of people.

The fantastic hegemonic imagination traffics in people’s lives that are caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its own image. This imagination conjures up worlds and their social structures that are not based on supernatural events and phantasms, but on the ordinariness of evil. It is this imagination, I argue, that helps to hold systematic, structural evil in place. The fantastic hegemonic imagination uses a politicized sense of history and memory to create and shape its worldview.²⁶

Townes explores the nature of stereotypes that appeal to one certain American ideology that is controlled by the “empire” now defined as privileged multinational corporate interests. These stereotypes disguise the reality of racism, classism and sexism in America. Townes

²⁵ Emile Townes. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, (3).

²⁶ *Ibid*, (21).

highlights the interplay of memory and history used to create the stereotypes we unconsciously believe. Myth and dominant memory have played into the American imagination to create the fantastic hegemonic imagination. What appears to be true within culture about certain groups of people, however, is a fallacious representation of their identity and history. This misrepresentation of identity and history is used to justify societal oppressions. The cultural production of evil is the racist, sexist and classist oppressive practices used to exploit and commodify the identity of the “other.” Towards this end, Townes describes how the cultural production of evil works to maintain domination and privilege by presenting stereotypical images of diverse “others” to justify social hierarchy. These mythic representations produced during the Jim Crow era are not historical reality, but were created to disguise the truth about coerced miscegenation and other exploitive practices.

The cultural production of evil disadvantages all people because commodification of identity defrauds everyone from the possibility of attaining truth and peace. Townes argues, “Blacks are not the only ones damned by treating identity as property. To be sure, there are winners and losers in this deadly commodification. However, the ways in which we have produced this weary state of affairs have been a group project in American life. We have used memory and myth and history to deceive ourselves-all of us.”²⁷ Commodification of black life operates on a public level through racist ideology embedded within media representations that create a negative public perception.

Using one dominant narrative, the fantastic hegemonic imagination creates an ontology of black femininity. Meaning the fantastic hegemonic imagination creates a dominant stereotype of black women that is essentialized to all black women. Through this constant media overload of a certain type of black women it is perceived that all black women are this way. For example,

²⁷ Ibid, (30).

all black women are perceived through the images of mammy (the maid), jezebel (the sex object) or matriarch (the angry black woman). This form of identifying, primarily through race, (i.e. blackness) limits all ways of individual subjective expression for black women and they are only perceived through these three narrow caricatures.

Philosopher Victor Anderson, in *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, critiques the use of ontological blackness because it marks “blackness” as the only or primary element of African-American identity and creates a collective understanding of what it means to be black, losing the individuality of the person(s) that are African-American. According to Victor Anderson ontological blackness is a reduction of black life to this notion of “blackness.” Furthermore, this understanding of blackness is portrayed as the only signifier of black bodies. Thus, ontological blackness creates a limited and essentialist view of black life that loses various expressions of complex subjectivity that black people really possess. Anderson credits the category of “blackness” to what whiteness created, meaning that white people marked and signified the difference of black people and by doing so created racial identity.

In using Anderson’s work, I am suggesting that these stereotypes of black women in the public sphere perform as ontological black femininity in popular culture and serve as an essentialist identity of black women that inhibit all fluid and complex realities by depicting narrow images and perceptions. Anderson problematizes binary thinking that results in devaluing diversity and limiting the ability to think and experience complexity. Race and gender create such binary thinking. He suggests that identity is more fluid, grotesque and ambiguous than binary categories. Thus, when black women’s identities are commodified and become objects rather than subjects of their own complex being, the result is their dehumanization. As such,

Anderson's work further develops my claim that through this use of ontological black femininity in popular culture, the maturation process of young black girls is delimited and defeated.

V. A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF BLACK FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN POPULAR CULTURE TODAY

As I suggested in the previous section, black female representation in popular culture has largely been perceived through what I call an ontological black femininity; meaning black women in popular culture are mainly represented through their bodies (black and female) and are thus portrayed through a narrowly defined lens as maid, "baby mama", or sex object (i.e., mammy, welfare mother, jezebel). In this section, we will see how these controlling images have been revamped (but nonetheless limit black women's flourishing) and are still used to portray today's black female artist. However, these controlling images operate in a society where women *do* have more agency (however limited that agency is, based on social, political, economic and education factors). At times, this agency still functions in subtle ways to reinforce stereotypes and black women's societal oppressions. In this section, I will provide three contemporary popular culture examples (Beyoncé Knowles, Nicki Minaj and Antonia "Toya" Carter) of young black women that are represented as a "remix" of the historical controlling images of jezebel and welfare mother. In today's context, these young black women (Beyoncé Knowles, Nicki Minaj and Antonia "Toya" Carter) appear to have more agency and power than previous controlling images, yet they are still circumscribed by the "cultural production of evil" that limits their public persona and identity.

Beyoncé Knowles

Beyoncé Knowles, known globally by her mononym, “Beyoncé,” is a household name because of her sexy images, crazed dance videos and high-profile relationship with co-hip-hop artist, Jay Z. In some regards, Beyoncé is today’s sexual icon for black women; presented as a re-creation of the controlling image of jezebel. Jezebel represents black women’s sexuality in popular culture; recognizable in all aspects of popular culture and media. Most notoriously, jezebel is depicted through the present-day image of the “video ho” or video vixen. “Video ho” is a term used in popular culture to exclusive and disparagingly refer to women who are music video models or dancers, according to T Denean Sharpley-Whiting in *Pimps Up, Ho’s Down*. The video vixen plays into the imagination of the male desire and fantasy. A women’s presence in popular culture is largely seen through this limited perspective of male fantasy and imagination. Beyoncé’s appeal as today’s sexual icon represents the sexualized image of women in popular culture and male sexual fantasy. Although Beyoncé is a talented, hard-working artist, she profits from her appeal that coincides with the sacred rhetoric of popular culture and female desirability.

In video and concert performances as “Sasha Fierce”, Beyoncé has created an image that many love and pay for. Her alter ego persona, Sasha Fierce, increased her earning potential by giving her the confidence to fulfill male imagination in the public sphere. Beyoncé’s documentary for her world tour *I AM... (Sasha Fierce)* was the highest selling DVD for 2010. As you watch her performances as Sasha Fierce, you find the kind of artistry and perfectionism most associated with the greatest entertainers in popular culture. Beyoncé has developed a stellar ability to perform on stage and reach her audience. She is known for performing in stilettos and takes her audience to higher levels of ecstasy as she plays into male sexual fantasy and

imagination. After two years of using the Sasha Fierce persona between 2008 and 2010, Beyoncé “killed” her alter ego, boasting that she had matured to where she could merge her shy-self with her confident, fierce and sexy persona. From my assessment, this “splitting” of herself was crucial to her success as a female artist in a popular culture that delimits and defeats her personal image for a more sexualized public persona. Creating an alter ego to cope with her toxic environment and express herself differently and anew required a change in name²⁸. This dynamic of “splitting” demonstrates a survival mechanism in psychoanalysis that I explored in a previous section on girl-poisoning culture.

Beyoncé’s persona in popular culture is how she controls her image in the fantasy of male imagination. She controls many aspects of her empire and uses her agency by governing her producing, directing, song writing and clothing design. Her father is her manager; her mother, her clothing designer²⁹. She has established a creative product that she controls. She is making history because of her financial affluence as a musical artist, but also as actor, endorser, designer and other ventures. In our culture, sex sells. And for Beyoncé, it sells a lot. In 2009, *Forbes* listed her income at \$87 million, while her husband, Jay Z, brought in \$35 million, for combined earnings of \$122 million, ranking them as the top earning couple. The year before, *Forbes* listed them at \$162 million, combined. She and Jay Z’s combined worth is estimated to be over 500 million dollars, total. Besides her actual and potential earnings, men and women alike admire Beyoncé. She is one of the most successful artists, receiving sixteen Grammy Awards and many other accolades during her fifteen years in the entertainment industry. Her

²⁸ This is not wholly new to the hip-hop industry since male MC’s have referenced themselves by different names.

²⁹ As I write, news broke that Beyoncé’s dad is no longer her manager due to personal reasons.

influence in popular culture reaches across cultural spaces to influence even the White House and the Obama family³⁰.

Outside of her more ostentatious public persona, Beyoncé is a young female artist that seeks to promote female empowerment. She does this by maintaining control over her own creative product. However, the question remains, does Beyoncé re-inscribe her own subjugation to male sexual fantasies or does she use her agency to empower herself and other young women by being owner of her empire- a financially independent mogul? Is Beyoncé being limited to a narrow public persona and seen only one-dimensionally as the sexual icon of today or does she have the freedom to be more- a complex subject? We know very little about Beyoncé outside of her sexy images, relationship with hip-hop star, Jay Z and the numerous products she endorses because of her sex appeal. One story is told about her. This is the sacred rhetoric in popular culture; a rhetoric that controls women and reduces them to singular sexualized aspects of themselves. The issue is that she is reduced to her sex appeal and no longer a complex individual. With this message in popular culture, is Beyoncé's message of female empowerment subverted by the dominant narrative represented in popular culture about black women? If popular culture and the music industry objectify women, how can women and music artists such as Beyoncé participate in culture production in a meaningful way without further exploitation? Is

³⁰ Not only are Obama's young daughters listening to her music; she has a fan in the President himself. Beyoncé sang "At Last" for the Inaugural Ball as President Obama and Michelle Obama danced. Michelle greeted Beyoncé during inauguration and joked with the President, asking him if he told Beyoncé that he reenacted her video, "Singles Ladies." The President clarified that it was not like Justin (Timberlake's) version and that the only thing he had down was the single ladies' wave. The *Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)* video is a popular culture phenomenon making national news with late night talk shows, men (Justin Timberlake) and women alike reenacting her choreography. This speaks to her level of influence in popular culture that transcends all barriers.

there a way to regain black women's representation in popular culture to be something other than a jezebel or "video ho"?³¹

Nicki Minaj

In today's hip-hop culture, Onika Maraj, better known as Nicki Minaj, is the new "matriarch" in the rap game because she has made her presence known through precision lyrics on the hottest male artist's tracks and she is the first female hip-hop artist on the Young Money Label. She is a remix of the "matriarch" and the jezebel controlling images because she plays into the male sexual fantasy, but resists limiting aspects of the culture that restrict her agency and power. She is not silent as men gaze at her through a pornographic lens. Her lyrics on male-dominant often songs contradict women's submission to male authority. One could argue, her alter egos are methods of resistance that challenge patriarch and sexist culture. A character, such as her tempestuous alter ego, Roman Zolanski, is a mean, angry and vicious gay boy. His mother, Martha, represents aspects of Minaj that she cannot display as a "lady."

Minaj toys with the fantasies of both young girls and boys alike by playing into the role of jezebel and being a sexual fantasy for men, while at the same time playing into the fantasy of young girls by becoming black Barbie. She complicates binaries by promoting her own bisexuality. Minaj's motto is not to box her into any categories or limited binaries. Thus, as many young girls note, she is different. Different, because she both embraces and subverts normative perspectives of young black women in hip-hop. She does this by being the woman of men's desires but also by empowering women to control (within their capacity) their own destinies. In popular culture, one perspective (male adolescent imagination) controls what is

³¹ This is an important question to ask in light of the birth of their daughter Blue Ivy Carter and if anything changes in Beyoncé's (and Jay Z's) public persona.

valued. Minaj resists popular culture's limited position of women by embracing the jezebel image and using her limited agency to gain personal control and power.

The video for Trey Songz's hit song *Bottoms Up* (featuring Nicki Minaj) is a typical illustration of the predominance of male sexual imagination that confines women to a predominately sexualized role. Throughout the song, women appear in the background tied up in lingerie, dancing for Songz. Not until the last verse, when Nicki Minaj enters, does a female come to the forefront of the video and appear with a voice. Her entrance into the video is through the same gaze of male desirability. Her body is on display as a sex symbol, like the other women, yet she has a voice. As the featured female artist on the song, Minaj gives voice to women. She demands "keys to the Benz," she gets violent with another woman and then apologizes because that is not what ladies are supposed to do. She then claims her "click" (Young Money) that backs her and asks, "do you like my body?" As if she toying with the notion of being an object of pleasure for male viewers, to gain entrance into all-male club of hip-hop Minaj, performs to the desire of male imagination, yet she questions the assumptions of this culture. As a female artist, Minaj is trapped in the pornographic gaze even while she attempts to subvert the defeating and delimiting aspects of popular culture for women. She is trapped by the pornographic gaze because too often Minaj, and other women in popular culture, are reduced to their reproductive body parts. This, of course, objectifies and dehumanizes them.

It is clear Minaj benefits off of her overt sexual appeal yet to compete in hip-hop as an MC her lyrical skills and performance are measured to others in the industry. Through her rapid-fire rhymes that make male hip-hop artists salivate at her skills, Minaj is beating men at their own game by taking ownership of her lyrical content and persona with attempts to subvert the game and gain economically. Minaj's performances and lyrics demonstrate an awareness of the

politics and business of popular culture fantasy that seek to sell women's sexuality and submission to male authority. In some ways she resist these politics while at the same time Minaj participates in them to gain power and voice in a male-dominated culture. Often times Minaj goes along with the politics of popular culture and yet she finds places to resist and subvert popular cultures limiting effects on young women (such as her emphasis to make positive black girl images popularizing black Barbie). She controls everything from image to business management. According to Minaj, her goal is to be the first female mogul in hip-hop³². As an upcoming mogul, she is an entrepreneur running her own affairs from music industry business to musical image and content.

Antonia "Toya" Carter

The theme of baby mama is rampant in popular culture rhetoric. For example, 50 Cent's song titled, "Have a Baby By Me Be a Millionaire" or Kanye West's "Gold Digger" are songs illustrating the ways in which women today have been demonized for their "relationships" or rather sexual transactions with powerful men that support them financially. As such, the baby mama represents today's version of the welfare mother in which women are supported through benefits received for their children.

Famously recognized as Dwayne Michael Carter's (better known as Lil Wayne) first baby mama, is Antonia "Toya" Carter. She and Lil Wayne had a baby at fifteen years old and married five years later. The marriage lasted for two years. Toya made a name for herself through her reality show, *Toya & Tiny*. The show gave the world a glimpse into their lives as baby mamas for hip-hop's hottest artists. This reality show was BET's highest-rated series, with 3 million viewers. Most recently, Toya released a tell-all book, *Priceless Inspirations*, about her

³² Yet this claim as the first female mogul is disputable based on successful careers in the music industry by black women such as Sylvia Robinson and Sylvia Rhone, amongst others.

life growing up as a young mother and dealing with the fame of her boyfriend. She describes the challenge growing up; abandoned by her parents as a child and being passed around family members as her mother sank deeper into her drug addiction. Most recently, Toya appears on her own reality TV show *Toya's Family Affair*. In addition, she has opened her own clothing boutique called Garb. Through popular culture and media's obsession with the lives of the rich and famous, Toya Carter has made a name for herself and established her own financial independency outside of being just a baby mama.

Antonia "Toya" Carter represents in today's popular culture the historical stereotype of both the welfare mother and the jezebel; perpetuating the ideology that young women should be sexually available to male hip-hop artists and because of this, will be financially supported through caring for their kids. Thus, the stereotype of "baby mama" in popular culture is reinscribed into young women's moral imagination and seen as a positive way to overcome their non-existence in society by connecting to a rich and famous man. In this environment, women are feared because of their reproductivity but also valued for it. How, then, do black women, self-define themselves within a context that is hyper-masculine and sexist, and that limits their power and agency to their reproductive organs?

VI. AN ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF COMPLEX SUBJECTIVITIES AND HIP-HOP COUNTER NARRRATIVES: WHO DECIDES?

Leaders of multinational corporations (predominantly comprised of elite, white males) seek to make a profit in business and their interests control the music industry, just like other entities. Who decides if hip-hop narratives are counter to the dominant racist, sexist and classist narrative is important, because corporations, not artists, decide which representations are

repeatedly shown in public to create an ideology about women and people of color in America to justify oppression. This section explores the ways hip-hop artists (although they create their own art and music often times to be profitable in popular culture) are controlled by large, multinational corporations that govern all aspects of the music industry— from record label companies, to radio, television and advertisement. Tricia Rose in *Hip Hop Wars* provides valuable insight into the complexity of the music industry that produces and re-produces, music, images and a culture filled with misogyny and violence. Race, class and gender dynamics create and maintain economic and power relations in popular culture and hip-hop culture. For example, the majority of hip-hop record sales are by young white males, while older white males control the multinational corporations that produce the stereotypes. As the dominant elite group, white people are less affected by the realities represented in popular culture, such as poverty, crime and lack of economic resources, because they have access to resources, and consume less hours of popular culture through media (technology) than people of color. Although they consume less hours of media in popular culture, they are not less affected by believing the stereotypes perpetuated.

Culture provides a perspective of the violence in society promoted through the movie industry, video game industry and sports industry. The consistent narrative in popular culture has tremendous effects on our psyche. Popular misogynist views of women are consistently represented as the primary ideal of femininity. The limited representations of women in popular culture as sex objects, jezebels are a direct result of a culture that produces hyper forms of masculinity through power, violence and domination. Women are for male domination and benefit through their ability to reproduce. Therefore, female hip-hop artists are exploited in capitalist American society and their ability to produce complex subjectivities and counter

narratives as creative artists are limited by the culture in which they create their music. Thus, the question of who decides if hip-hop narratives are counter to the dominant racist, sexist and classist narrative is left up to the people who control the representations and the consumers who are informed by elite white male interests, making it nearly impossible to subvert or resist the dominant culture's ideology.

VII. MORAL IMAGINATION AS SUBVERSIVE RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

As I have demonstrated, negative culture representations of young black women have created damaging judgments of people of color and women, and have therefore hindered everyone, especially young black women, as they have internalized this inferiority and impeded their ability to self-actualize and flourish. For young black women, negative stereotypes are often internalized before they are fully capable of discerning and resisting the destructive impact on their moral sphere. I asserted that we live in a “girl-poisoning culture” that defeats and delimits the maturation process of young black women by indoctrinating racist and misogynist images in popular culture in general and hip-hop culture in particular. These images are a manifestation of our beliefs and prejudices and embody racist, sexist, classist, misogynist and violent ideology. This inculcation of stereotypical images in popular culture become “sacred rhetoric” that are internalized by all people, regardless of race, class and gender. Young girls are most vulnerable to these misogynistic images because they are the only narrative of women repeatedly produced in popular culture and media. The sacred rhetoric of popular culture is troubling because it has power to inform our perceptions about the self and others.

Why does all this matter? Because continuing to profit from the commodification of young girl's bodies not only delimit and defeat her, but also defeat the possibility of a flourishing society by destroying the maturation process of half the population. From my illustrations of Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, they unconsciously used a psychoanalytic dynamic of "splitting" as a way to cope with the defeating and delimiting aspects of this misogynistic culture. This splitting shows their resistance to their toxic environment and how they coped within their confined sexist culture. However, as Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj have shown to have power and resources within a capitalist patriarchal society means that women, at some level, are willing to speak the "sacred rhetoric" of the culture in order to be successful. Doing so means women are both implicitly and explicitly involved in their own subjugation since women are never entirely without agency. Thus, as women use the system to their advantage, they are complicit to systems of oppression. This is not to discredit how men create and maintain a culture and system that generates the demand of women's bodies as sexualized commodities to be bought and sold. This addresses a bigger issue about why the commodification of women's bodies is still a profitable market in today's society. Through the power of representations in the media, women's bodies are still being bought and sold for their sexuality and labor.

The cultural phenomenon of Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj and Toya Carter are not real without the existing factors of a society that demands for young black women to be sexually desirable. These artists are merely a manifestation of a larger culture problem. As Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj seek to promote female empowerment, I ask, is it truly female empowerment if you profit from the commodification of selling your own body while doing your art? Is there an alternative form of female empowerment for female hip-hop artists in a culture that allows only one narrative about women? Specifically, how do women appropriate power? Furthermore, does

religious discourse respond to establishing a female empowerment that speaks to the challenges of today's young women who are living in a girl-poisoning environment? And who protects young women's moral sphere? The answer should be, *everyone*; at the very least, the church and other women. It begins with moral imagination and being able to imagine a culture that allows young girls to be true and authentic. A moral imagination that connects young women to a female empowerment that gives birth to their best selves. This moral imagination expands women's worth beyond the sexual desirability and ability to reproduce. Women are valued for their own worth and not what they provide men.

An alternative moral response to a girl-poisoning culture is for women's power and agency to come from something more than just their sexual desirability. Young black women must go beyond this one aspect of their identity to birth their own imaginations and creativity, and other aspects about themselves. Young black women must give birth to themselves in various forms that give them real agency in a girl-poisoning culture. This comes by being critical about themselves and their environment. Women must not only critique the domination patriarchy perpetuates, but also, women must take a critical look at the forms of oppression they are implicitly and explicitly involved. Religious discourse is a means to providing that an alternative moral response. More specifically, womanist discourse provides a counterbalance to the normative productions of knowledge that typically exclude people of color and women. "Womanism is revolutionary. Womanism is a paradigm shift wherein Black women no longer look to others for their liberation, but instead look to themselves."³³ What characterizes womanist discourse is that Black women are engaged in the process of knowledge production that is most necessary for their own flourishing rather than being exploited for the enlightenment

³³ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas. *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*. New York: New York University Press, 2006, (1).

and entertainment of white psyches and male egos³⁴. Womanist discourse provides a corrective model and framework to reclaim black femininity in popular culture. It is a source of liberation for black women and others who suffer under the oppressions of racism and sexism in America because womanist have sought to expose the fantastic hegemonic imagination and create a discourse that speaks to the lived experiences of black women that are often co-opted by dominant culture for purposes of disguise, abuse and oppression. Womanist discourse is an alternative moral response to the issue of representation in popular culture because womanist thought has had to create behavioral strategies and therapies to cope with the sexist, racist and classist environment. In Stacey Floyd-Thomas's *Deeper Shades of Purple*, the four tenets of womanist epistemology are defined as: radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love and critical engagement. These are used to counter the influence of negativity black women find themselves in and must learn to survive and flourish.

The first tenet of womanist ethics, “radical subjectivity,” uses agency to assert voice and veracity so as to resist marginality. It uses anecdotal evidence to reveal the truth of black women's lives that are typically unheard. Black women use their radical subjectivity to claim their space in repressive environments. Radical subjectivity is invoking creativity in productive ways. The second tenet, “traditional communalism,” expresses relational connections shared among people with common heritage and contextual language that speaks to their collective memory and pride. Traditional communalism is black women working collectively through moral principles to create a culture that restores their well-being. As suggested by womanist theologian, Dianne Stewart, traditional communalism is a hybrid of experiences— (where we are

³⁴ Ibid, (2).

constantly negotiating space and boundaries) that connect us to our traditional communal values, but also can alienate us from the communal heritage³⁵. The third tenet, “redemptive self-love,” is an affirmation of the humanity, customs and aesthetic value of black women. Redemptive self-love reflects a black woman’s path not only to self-love, but also to self-acceptance. This form of redemption provides black women freedom to love the fullness of their embodiment regardless of other people’s perceptions. Womanist theologian, Karen Baker-Fletcher describes redemptive self-love as “celebrating life in the midst of suffering and walking in love in the midst of hate”³⁶. Redemptive self-love allows black women to recognize their worth and gives them strength to make decisions and begin to flourish. Redemptive self-love expresses the value God sees in black women, made in the image of God. The fourth tenet, “critical engagement,” describes a consciousness and intentional appropriation of one’s knowing and the orientation of that knowledge toward the achievement of authentic and moral human living³⁷. Thus, this critical analysis questions the normative epistemological claims found in social systems. Critical engagement is a hermeneutical suspicion, cognitive counterbalance, intellectual indictment, and perspectival corrective to those people, ideologies, movements, and institutions that hold a one-dimensional analysis of oppression; an unshakable belief that Black women’s survival strategies must entail more than what others have provided as an alternative³⁸. The four tenets of womanist ethics are moral imagination as subversive religious discourse. Womanist ethics provide young black women an alternative response to resist and critically analyze the representations in popular culture that seek to defeat and delimit their maturation process.

³⁵ Ibid, (83).

³⁶ Ibid, (142).

³⁷ Ibid, (208).

³⁸ Ibid, (208).

Emile Townes illustrates in her chapter on “The Womanist Dancing Mind” how she uses womanist discourse and specifically “critical engagement” to combat the girl-poisoning culture that creates a fantastic hegemonic imagination in American popular culture. She states, “In this particularity, I explore the ways in which human lives and cultures have been commodities that are marketed and consumed in the global marketplace. I must stand toe-to-toe with the damaging and destroying effects of the made-in-America color-caste hierarchy that remains largely unacknowledged and unexplored. I explore connections between empire and reparations as linked phenomena that spew genderized and racialized moralizations into the global marketplace. I explore the need for recognizing women’s moral autonomy within communities as an important factor in developing public policy in the United States.”³⁹ Here, womanist ethics provides the theoretical framework to accurately name, analyze and provide tangible models to move toward a subversive religious discourse that can provide a counterbalance and alternative solution to this girl-poisoning culture.

Furthermore, in doing the work of providing a subversive religious discourse to combat the negative images of popular culture, as Townes suggest the task is finding strategic ways of creating a healthier environment. In providing a healthier model of young black women in popular culture, possible corrective models for reclaiming black femininity in popular culture can be seen through the work of Erkyah Badu, the Floacist and India Arie who offer a counterbalance to the female artist’s body being sold as a commodity in popular culture. These neo-soul hip-hop artists invest in themselves beyond physical beauty and their music and artistry demonstrates this wholeness. They can be examples for young black women to find new ways of expression that nurture themselves and others to wholeness. These young black women are

³⁹ Emile Townes. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, (3).

alternative representations that young girls must be exposed to that demonstrate agency and freedom from sexual exploitation.

Providing a religious moral response is beneficial to everyone's well being. Our moral imagination should provide alternative imagined representations in the public sphere to demonstrate complex subjectivities and move beyond stereotypes and binaries. Since popular culture is a contested site but also an influential site of ways of knowing about ourselves and others, we must move toward more fluid representations that are illustrative of actual complex subjects. Until we begin to imagine a more fluid role of identity, culture representation will remain stuck in binaries and essentialist identities. By having more fluid notions of identity, we can move beyond essentialist definitions of gender and race. Allowing people fluidity to move within our society will change through every interaction we participate in and every institution we support. Our ultimate concern should be focused on ways of achieving maturation, self-actualization and flourishing. Without fluid roles of identity, people are limited in their capacity to self-actualize.

If we can look at what is religious as what orients our lives and not just ritual and tradition practiced in a church building, we will begin to understand the way our practices direct our lives toward what we hold sacred. In our society, popular culture is what we orient our lives around. Popular culture can be understood as the experiences, the pleasures, the memories and the traditions of the people in a local area, with ordinary folk. In American society, popular culture has rituals that we participate in and our emphases on the lives of the rich and famous are broadcasted on national and global news. A practical response to a culture bombarded by images of one narrative is to provide young black women with tools to navigate the culture terrain. Media literacy is that training tool to develop critical thinking for young black women. By

practicing media literacy, young black women are able to do their own culture criticism and analyze the culture messages with which they are inculcated. Therefore, as subversive religious discourse, I suggest for churches to implement a media literacy course into their weekly educational offerings for youth, youth workers and ministers. This media literacy course will be a way for the youth to engage critical pedagogy by talking and thinking critically about something that influences and excites them; like popular culture. By critically analyzing popular culture, youth will begin to re-imagine their culture space and identity. They will explore the taken-for-granted aspects of their daily lives that are deeply influenced by representations in popular culture; especially the ways in which popular culture influences our understanding about our experiences and ourselves.

To further this research and create an accurate response to the issue of a girl-poisoning culture, I suggest this work to progress into an in-depth sociological and anthropological analysis of young black women specifically affected by these issues. I believe this sort of analysis is necessary to address the issue of identity formation and flourishing for young black girls who are influenced by hip-hop and more importantly, popular culture that has commodified blackness and womanhood. This study needs to survey the lived experience of young black girls, addressing their complex subjectivities and the role of popular culture on their identity formation.

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