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PROSPECTS FOR A PROGRESSIVE CRITIQUE OF SELF-SEXUALIZING RAP MUSIC

THE CHALLENGE OF OPPRESSIVE DOUBLE BINDS

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RAP MUSIC is often scrutinized for its representations of Black women. Although most criticism focuses on how male rappers' presentations of Black women in lyrics and videos perpetuate oppression against Black women, a range of critics have scrutinized Black women rappers as agents in their own oppression.[1] One strand of this criticism focuses on Black women rappers' self-sexualization—that they represent themselves in heightened sexualized ways. Some Black feminist critics argue that these representations reinforce or perpetuate problematic stereotypes and controlling images.[2] Yet other commentators laud self-sexualizing rap as empowering and liberating.[3]

In this article, I aim to understand these competing responses to self-sexualizing rap using Sukaina Hirji's analysis of oppressive double binds.[4] This framework helps us understand the dialectical stalemates that emerge in evaluating Black women rappers' self-sexualization by offering a new understanding of the complexities involved in self-sexualizing rap. I argue that self-sexualizing rappers, trapped between norms of hypersexuality and respectability, cannot fully realize their sexual autonomy and agency. Consequently, we will be better informed about how to construct progressive critiques of self-sexualizing rap by shifting our attention to constraining norms and the media perpetuating them rather than by focusing on the artistic expression of individual rappers.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 1 defines self-sexualization and explains how Black woman rappers self-sexualize in their music. Section 2 outlines a Black feminist critique of self-sexualizing rap that sees it as perpetuating

1 Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*.

2 See Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; and Benard, "Colonizing Black Female Bodies Within Patriarchal Capitalism."

3 See Young, "On bell hooks, Sexual Agency and Combating Sexual Stereotypes of Black Women"; March, "Letter to Jatavia Johnson and Caresha Brownlee (The City Girls)"; and Payne, "The Cardi B–Beyoncé Complex."

4 See Hirji, "Oppressive Double Binds."

the problematic colonial stereotypes and controlling images that sustain the oppression of Black women. Section 3 presents an alternative evaluative perspective on self-sexualizing rap that sees it as empowering and as an important form of social resistance. There is a clear tension between these evaluative perspectives, and section 4 outlines the concept of oppressive double binds and diagnoses self-sexualizing rappers as being caught in them. Section 5 develops a progressive critique of self-sexualizing rap based on this diagnosis.

1. SEXUALIZATION AND SELF-SEXUALIZING RAP

In his 2023 article "Sexualisation," Robert Morgan describes sexualization as occurring when one person treats another as a sexual being or a sexual object (a sexual entity)—specifically when someone foregrounds some actual or perceived sexual property of another.[5] An actual or perceived sexual property includes "a person's actual or perceived sexual desires and a person's actual or perceived role in the sexual desires of others" (486). Morgan explains that the properties of a person may be sexualized if the properties are generally seen as playing a role in sexual desire. For instance, certain body parts (genitals, breasts, and so on) and certain acts (oral, penile-vaginal, and other types of sex) are so widely assumed to be implicated in sexual desire that drawing attention to body parts or acts is sufficient to foreground sexual desires.

Drawing on the work of Amy Olberding, Morgan and Rosa Vince assert that we can understand foregrounding here as raising property *x* to salience or treating property *x* as the most relevant thing about person *Y*.[6] Olberding gives the example of a conference organizer who attempts to foreground the property of being a philosopher by starting conversations about philosophy, but the conference attendees do not cooperate with this foregrounding—they instead foreground the property of being pregnant by focusing on the philosopher's pregnancy and ignoring her philosophical contributions.[7] Crucially, what the philosopher backgrounds—her pregnancy—is foregrounded by the attendees, and what she attempts to foreground—her philosophy—is backgrounded.[8]

5 Morgan, "Sexualisation," 483 (hereafter cited parenthetically).

6 Olberding, "Subclinical Bias, Manners, and Moral Harm"; Morgan "Sexualisation," 482; and Vince, "After Objectification." In his article, Morgan argues that a property of a person is foregrounded when it is introduced to the score of the encounter, following David Lewis's conception of conversational scores in "Scorekeeping in a Language Game." However, Morgan claims that we might also think of foregrounding as raising a property to salience.

7 Olberding, "Subclinical Bias, Manners, and Moral Harm."

8 For a similar discussion of the ethics of foregrounding properties about oneself and others (for instance, concerning race and gender), see Whiteley, "A Woman First and a

Morgan's conception of sexualization is morally neutral. However, in his paper, he gives the following example of *unwanted* sexualization:

> *Business Meeting*: Ashley is attending a business meeting shortly after accepting a job at a new organization. The small team that she works with, most of whom are men, are also in attendance. The meeting is led by their manager, Bill. After welcoming her, Bill turns to Ashley and says: "You're very pretty, aren't you? I know the guys are very happy to have you working here. I'm sure you'll have a good time with them." (481)

Here, Morgan asserts that Ashley is being treated as a sexual being or a sexual object against her will. This is because Bill "casts Ashley in a sexual light, commenting on (his view of) her sexual capacities and sexual desires, and sexualizes her male colleagues by implying that they would enjoy engaging in sexual acts with her" (482). Crucially, she is perceived to have a role in her colleague's desires, and this is taken to be the most important thing to comment on.

Morgan argues that unwanted sexualization is wrong because it contradicts a person's self-presentation (487). He claims that contradicting a person's self-presentation is typically *prima facie* wrong because it undermines their autonomy and instrumentalizes them. Contradicting a person's self-presentation undermines autonomy because the person whose self-presentation has been contradicted is unable to determine which aspects of their own life are foregrounded and backgrounded and are thereby "prevented from determining the role that they take in their interactions with others and from withholding aspects of themselves that they consider private or otherwise appropriate for discussion" (487). This infringement is often psychologically and emotionally draining. Contradicting a person's self-representation also instrumentalizes them since the perpetrator treats the victim as though aspects of their life may be foregrounded for the purposes of the perpetrator and/or bystanders regardless of the victim's preferences (488). Morgan asserts, "when a person's self-presentation is contradicted without good reason, they experience their interactions with others as being for the benefit of their interlocutors rather than themselves" (489). The contradiction thereby fails to respect the victim as an individual with personal preferences and interests, treating them instead merely in terms of the role they can play for others. Crucially, failing to respect a person's self-presentation without justification is detrimental to their autonomy and instrumentalizes the person.

One might object that contradicting someone's self-presentation is not always wrongful. Consider the following case.

Philosopher Second."

> *Thief*: A group of friends are on a night out when the group notices that one of the friends is going around stealing the others' wallets. The following day, the group confronts their friend, the "thief." The thief is visibly embarrassed and states that he does not want to talk about it. Nevertheless, the group continues to talk about his behavior and requests an apology.[9]

The thief wants to background his actions, whereas his friends insist on discussing it with him. Therefore, there is a contradiction of self-presentation. However, this case does not seem wrongful, unlike the earlier Business Meeting case. Morgan explains that Thief involves the thief wronging his friends, and his friends have good reason to confront him (490). The thief's friends can respect him—for example, by considering his interests—while foregrounding what he wishes to background. It would be unreasonable to overlook the thefts just because of what the thief prefers to background. Morgan states that there are two ways to model the permissibility of contradicting the thief's self-presentation. First, this contradiction can be justified by countervailing reasons, such as holding the thief accountable. Second, following Christopher Wellman's rights forfeiture theory of punishment, he states that the moral claim against others contradicting a person's self-presentation can be nullified when the person behaves wrongfully.[10] By behaving unethically, the person forfeits the right to not have their self-presentation contradicted.

Morgan explains that in cases like Thief, the friend's bad behavior means that we can make a principled distinction between such cases and others (like sexualization) where it is wrong to contradict a person's self-representation. He emphasizes that there is typically no reason to subject a person to unwanted sexualization that would outweigh concerns from autonomy and instrumentalization.[11]

To further explain why unwanted sexualization is different from cases like Thief, Morgan asserts that unwanted sexualization is a "morally special" contradiction of self-presentation because sex is seen as distinctively private, and it is often threatening, discriminatory, and experienced as especially harmful (491–95). When unwanted sexualization occurs, the perpetrator fails to cooperate with a victim's self-presentation, preventing them from obscuring intensely private aspects of themselves. This can make the person feel vulnerable and humiliated since they are prevented from keeping hidden aspects of

9 Adapted from Morgan's "Jerk" example ("Sexualisation," 489).

10 Wellman, *The Rights Forfeiture Theory of Punishment*, cited in Morgan, "Sexualisation," 490.

11 Morgan is careful to emphasize that a proper development of when it is permissible to contradict a person's self-representation is outside the scope of his paper ("Sexualisation," 491).

themselves that are, according to cultural norms, heavily private. This undermines the victim's autonomy and instrumentalizes them in more severe ways (491). Furthermore, unwanted sexualization is threatening since it may lead the victim to believe that they are at risk of escalated harassment and violence from the perpetrator. The experience of being sexualized against one's will is often a distressing experience that can lead the victim to feel afraid, panicked, and humiliated; in the long term, it can lead to a decline in mental health (492). It can also impact a victim's freedom of movement since it may compel them to avoid public areas in which they have been targeted or feel unsafe. Finally, unwanted discrimination can be discriminatory insofar as it conveys misogynistic messages. In the specific case of Business Meeting, such workplace sexualization fits into a trend that emphasizes women's sexuality above other aspects of their lives, and it constitutes a refusal to cooperate with women like Ashley who wish to foreground their professional roles. Bill's comments convey that Ashley should not have her self-presentation as a businesswoman respected, which may be interpreted as implying that Ashley is unsuited to her job because she is a woman (493).

In these examples, one person sexualizes another in unwanted ways, which is morally problematic because it contradicts their self-presentation. However, in this article, I am concerned with *self*-sexualization, particularly of Black women rappers. Here, I take self-sexualization to be when someone treats *themself* as a sexual entity by foregrounding an actual or perceived sexual property of their own.[12] That is, Black women rappers self-sexualize when they foreground their own sexual desires—for example, by raising to salience particular body parts and sexual acts that are associated with sexual desire. Unlike the above example, in which raising to salience particular body parts and/or sexual acts goes against how the person wants to be presented, it is much less clear what, if anything, might be wrong with self-sexualization. However, in the case of Black women rappers, self-sexualization is regularly subject to conflicting evaluative and moral responses. This article takes us through the contours of these responses and critically evaluates them.

There is a history of chart-topping and record-breaking rap songs that involve self-sexualizing Black women rappers.[13] Most notable are Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's 2020 song "WAP" (an acronym for 'wet ass pussy'), which topped the US Billboard Hot 100 chart, and Nicki Minaj's 2014 song "Anaconda,"

12 While I am concerned with self-sexualization, the rappers that this article discusses also sexualize others (such as the dancers around them) in their music videos.

13 In addition to the ones who will be discussed below (Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, and Nicki Minaj), some other notable rappers who often spark debate around their self-sexualization are Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, City Girls, and, more recently, Sexyy Red.

which in 2021 became the first music video for a solo woman's rap song to hit a billion views on the video platform YouTube.[14]

In both songs, the artists treat themselves as sexual entities by foregrounding their actual or perceived sexual properties. For instance, in "WAP," not only is this sexualization evidenced by the title of the song, which raises the salience of and celebrates Cardi B's and Megan Thee Stallion's aroused genitalia, but the lyrics focus heavily on their sexual desires. When Cardi B raps, "Look, I need a hard hitter, need a deep stroker / Need a Henny drinker, need a weed smoker / Not a garter snake, I need a king cobra / With a hook in it, hope it lean over," she foregrounds her own sexual desires by describing the type of sexual partner she desires.[15] Moreover, when she raps, "I don't cook, I don't clean / But let me tell you how I got this ring," Cardi B treats her sexual properties (rather than her other properties) as instrumental to securing marriage. This also supports the view that she has sexual skills that men desire. The music video to "WAP" provides further evidence of self-sexualization.[16] During many scenes, we see both Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion simulating sex positions and sticking their tongues out at one another, indicating a desire to engage in oral sex.

We also see similar self-sexualization in the music video for Nicki Minaj's song "Anaconda," which features, as Cate Young puts it, "ass, ass, everywhere," with Minaj simulating various sexual positions, including deep-throating a banana, a fairly obvious stand-in for a penis.[17] Even the cover art of the single features Minaj wearing a thong in the squat position.

I thus make the case that Black women rappers like Cardi B and Nicki Minaj engage in self-sexualization by foregrounding their own actual or perceived sexual desires. Self-sexualization might sometimes involve self-objectification, but it also accounts for Black women rappers expressing themselves as sexual subjects.[18] This is important since some Black feminists reject the self-objectification framework as an appropriate way to understand most instances of

14 Schube, "Nicki Minaj Joins the Billion Views Club with 'Anaconda.'"

15 "WAP" lyrics available on Genius, https://genius.com/Cardi-b-wap-lyrics.

16 Cardi B, "WAP Featuring Megan Thee Stallion (Official Music Video)," YouTube, August 7, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsm4poTWjMs.

17 Young, "Nicki Minaj's 'Anaconda' and Reclaiming 'Black Girl Sexy.'"

18 See Morgan, "Sexualisation." There is an extensive philosophical literature on objectification. See, e.g., Nussbaum, "Objectification"; Mackinnon, "Toward a Feminist Theory of the State"; Bartky, "Femininity and Domination"; Langton, "Sexual Solipsism"; Cahill, "Overcoming Objectification"; and Vince, "After Objectification." There are differing views on whether objectification is morally problematic. Vince, for instance, takes objectification to be normatively neutral, but they claim that objectification is often seen as problematic because it occurs in problematic contexts. For instance, objectification is problematic when it is nonconsensual or when it enacts/reinforces oppression. This is in

Black women's engagement with their own sexuality, something that becomes important in section 3 below.[19] First, however, I explore one critique of this self-sexualization that sees it as perpetuating/reinforcing problematic stereotypes and controlling images.

2. CRITICISM OF SELF-SEXUALIZING RAP

The kinds of critiques often advanced against self-sexualizing rap were seen very loudly and clearly in the aftermath of the release of "WAP" and "Anaconda." Both songs have become paradigmatic examples of self-sexualization in rap music, as well as indicative cases of the kinds of responses that self-sexualizing Black women rappers receive. A range of commentators have critically scrutinized both songs. On one end of this spectrum are conservatives, whose attacks are based on values such as modesty, sexual purity, and traditional family values.[20] At the other end are progressive critics, whose criticisms are based on freedom and equality. In this article, I focus on progressive critiques of self-sexualizing rap because if one buys into conservative values of modesty and sexual purity, then it is obvious that self-sexualization is indeed morally criticizable. In contrast, for anyone who is progressive/feminist and believes that women have a right to sexual agency, whether self-sexualization is criticizable or laudable is a salient question.[21]

A subset of progressive critiques of self-sexualizing rap is Black feminist critique of self-sexualization. Tricia Rose argues that Black women in commercial rap, such as Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, self-sexualize because they "[rely] on the product reserved especially for Black women: sexual excess."[22] Gail Dines argues that the hypersexualized images of Black women in self-sexualizing rap "serve to breathe new life into old stereotypes that circulate mainstream society."[23] Such critics assert that the self-sexualization occurring in rap is only part of a long tradition of sexualizing, objectifying, and stereotyping Black women's bodies. Black women were viewed as commodities during colonialism and the era of transatlantic slavery, and stereotypes emerging from these times are still salient today. For example, there are parallels between Sara Baartman, a South

contrast with other scholars like Mackinnon and Bartky, who take objectification to be inherently problematic.

19 See Young, "Nicki Minaj's 'Anaconda' and Reclaiming 'Black Girl Sexy'" and "On bell hooks, Sexual Agency and Combating Sexual Stereotypes of Black Women."

20 See Paiella, "Wait, What."

21 Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

22 Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 124.

23 Dines, "Nicki Minaj."

African native who was sexually trafficked by Europeans to Europe in the 1810s and made to display her figure to spectators, and the sexualization of Black women in current-day popular media.[24] For instance, Akeia Benard likens how Minaj presents herself in "Anaconda" to how Baartman was presented. She asserts, "the image of Nicki Minaj, caged, in chains, displaying, and singing about her prominent buttocks in no way differs from the nineteenth-century display of Sara Baartman."[25]

Why is contemporary self-sexualization criticizable in the ways described above? The reason is that the stereotypes that these critics refer to sustain the oppression of Black women today. We can illuminate this through Patricia Hill Collins's work on *controlling images* in her book *Black Feminist Thought*.[26] Controlling images are designed to make social injustice appear inevitable and acceptable (69). There are many controlling images, but most important for this article is Collins's articulation of the hypersexual Black women or *jezebel* image. Black female bodies have always been linked with hypersexuality.[27] Where sexuality refers to sexual capacities, including sexual thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and attractions, hypersexuality here refers to sexuality that is abnormal and excessive. While we often think that expressions of sexuality are healthy, Black women's sexual expressions are often seen as "at best inappropriate and at worst insatiable" (83). Collins notes that the jezebel's original function was to legitimize the sexual exploitation of Black women during slavery by portraying Black women as sexually aggressive, thus providing a rationale for the widespread slave master practice of sexual assault against Black women.

Collins claims that the contemporary "hoochie" and otherwise hypersexualized images of Black women are rooted in the historical legacy of the jezebel (82). Collins draws on the example of the song "Hoochie Mama" by hip-hop group 2 Live Crew as an example of how the hoochie image permeates everyday Black culture (82). Although this is an example of all-male rap group sexualizing Black women, over thirty years after that song's release, self-sexualizing Black women continue to refer to themselves as hoochies, e.g., Sexxy Red in her 2025 song "Hoochie Coochie," which at the time of writing is near ten million views on YouTube. Collins argues that there is an acceptance of such images in Black culture and white-controlled media, which validates such images (82).

24 Morgan, "Objectification and Sexualization of the Black Female Body."

25 Benard, "Colonizing Black Female Bodies Within Patriarchal Capitalism," 69. An obvious and significant difference between Nicki Minaj and Sara Baartman is that Baartman was forced into this position in a way that Minaj was not. Baartman's sexualization went against her self-presentation, whereas Minaj self-sexualizes.

26 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (hereafter cited parenthetically).

27 See Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* and *Black Sexual Politics*.

She asserts that the controlling image of the jezebel/hoochie represents elite white male interests in defining Black women's sexuality. Furthermore, Collins argues that these controlling images help to justify the unjust institutions, policies, and practices that dominate Black women. For instance, Collins notes how social scientific research on Black women's sexuality is influenced by assumptions of the jezebel, particularly how Black women's sexuality appears within AIDS research and within scholarship on adolescent pregnancy (85). These sets of research look to alter Black women's sexual behavior by referencing their deviant sexuality. The excessive attention paid to Black adolescent pregnancy, parenting, and sexual patterns in scholarly research and policies targeting Black girls illustrate government support for controlling images. For instance, assumptions to do with Black women's sexual hedonism make them more likely to be subject to coercive birth control measures.[28] Collins writes that "the underlying reason for studying black adolescent sexuality may lie in helping the girls, but an equally plausible stimulus lies in desires to get these girls off the public dole" (85).

An elaboration on Collins's work can be found in Benard's work, who argues that imagery involved in self-sexualization exists in opposition to sexual health, sexual rights, and human rights more generally of Black women.[29] Benard asserts that the values underlying these rights are human dignity and human potential, and stereotypes perpetuating "negative colonial discourses about black female bodies erode both."[30] Benard takes a human rights perspective on hypersexualized images of Black women. For instance, Articles 3 and 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights highlight the bodily integrity of human beings by guaranteeing "security of person" and freedom from "degrading treatment." She argues that degrading images found in self-sexualization can promote values that violate these rights. While Benard offers no statistics in support of her claims, the key issue here is that the stereotypical images of Black women perpetuated in self-sexualizing rap putatively violate the rights of other Black women by restricting their enjoyment of fundamental rights such as freedom from degrading treatment. On Benard's account, we can understand degrading images related to Black women's hypersexuality functioning as a controlling image. These representations legitimate the oppression of Black women, which violates their right to dignity and bodily integrity.

This connects to the earlier discussion of unwanted sexualization. Perhaps self-sexualizing when one is a Black woman does something analogous to what

28 Roberts, "Killing the Black Body," cited in Collins, "Black Feminist Thought," 85.

29 Benard, "Colonizing Black Female Bodies Within Patriarchal Capitalism."

30 Benard, "Colonizing Black Female Bodies Within Patriarchal Capitalism," 10.

sexualizing someone else against their will does, and this explains why both are considered wrongful. When we understand self-sexualizing rap within a framework of controlling images, self-sexualization leads to the violation of Black women's rights in general. One of these rights or moral claims might be Black women's right/moral claim to not having their self-presentation contradicted. However, Black women rappers' self-sexualization functions like unwanted sexualization insofar as it fails to consider the general interest of Black women in not being constantly sexualized. In other words, what self-sexualizing rappers like Nicki Minaj and Cardi B do to Black women's rights in general is analogous to what Bill does to Ashley's rights in particular in Business Meeting.

This section outlines how some Black feminist scholars criticize self-sexualizing rap for perpetuating problematic colonial stereotypes about Black women's hypersexuality that sustain controlling images and thereby justify Black women's oppression. Multiple values motivate and underpin these critiques. For instance, Benard's critique is underpinned by a desire to uphold human rights—specifically, to uphold Black women's dignity, potentiality/autonomy, agency, and equality. We might think that the arguments by Benard (and Collins and others) that the degrading imagery found in self-sexualizing rap violates the sexual health and rights of Black women is an empirical claim that relies on data about who listens to such music, watches the videos, and responds to the music (in negative ways). While Benard might need to substantiate her claim some more with empirical evidence, in this article my aim is not to scrutinize and defend this claim. Rather, I present it as illustrative of key lines of critique advanced against self-sexualizing rap.

Even among Black feminist scholars, however, there is an alternative perspective on self-sexualization that sees it as positive and empowering. I introduce this view in the next section, before introducing in section 4 the notion of oppressive double binds in order to help navigate the disagreement between positive and negative views of self-sexualization.

3. AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON SELF-SEXUALIZATION: EMPOWERMENT AND RESISTANCE

Black feminist scholars have been criticized for "relying too heavily on colonial discourses around the black female body and neglecting the contemporary lived experience of black women."[31] Jennifer Nash, for instance, points out the oversimplification of parallels between self-sexualization and Sara

31 Benard, "Colonizing Black Female Bodies Within Patriarchal Capitalism," 2.

Baartman.[32] Many contemporary perspectives on self-sexualization see it as a source of empowerment and resistance. Young, for instance, sees Minaj's performance in "Anaconda" as "empowering and profoundly feminist," subverting "the male gaze and achieving ultimate sexual empowerment."[33] Young explains that Minaj's twerking with other women in the music video is on her own terms, and her overt sexual performance involves almost no men, which supports the idea that the song centers on her sexual agency.

Moreover, this evaluative perspective seems to fit what artists themselves say about the intentions of their work.[34] Megan Thee Stallion, for instance, claims that "WAP" tackles double standards within rap: since men can talk in sexualizing ways about Black women, Black women should also be able to talk in sexualizing ways about men and about themselves.[35] She asserts, "I feel like for a long time men felt like they owned sex, and now women are saying, 'Hey, this is for me. I want pleasure. This is how I want it or don't want it.'"[36]

Self-sexualization can also be seen in opposition to respectability politics. Where Black women are taught to be respectable—"meek, quiet, classy, submissive and wear pearls"—in order to counter stereotypes about their hypersexuality or loudness, some hip-hop feminists see the self-sexualization of Black women as a big "fuck you" to these restrictions.[37] This manifests in images such as the "queen"/"hoe" dichotomy: the "queen" is a Black woman paying heed to respectability politics, whereas the "hoe" is loud anddominant, shakes her ass, and is sexually expressive.[38] Self-sexualizing rappers such as Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, and Megan Thee Stallion promote sexual positivity, defy

32 Nash, "Strange Bedfellows."

33 Young, "How Nicki Minaj Destroys the Male Gaze Through Overt Sexual Expression."

34 While we might look to an artist's intentions to help determine the moral value of an artwork, there are problems with looking solely to an artist's intentions in order to determine a work's *meaning*. See Lin, "Art and Interpretation."

35 Richmond, "Megan Thee Stallion Calls Out Sexist Double Standards amid 'WAP' Debate."

36 Kibbe, "Megan Thee Stallion."

37 See March, "Letter to Jatavia Johnson and Caresha Brownlee," 20. The term 'respectability politics' was coined to describe the "worldview adopted by black women who were part of the women's movement in the black Baptist church during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, cited in Jefferson, "The Politics of Respectability and Black Americans' Punitive Attitudes," 1451). Those endorsing respectability politics used to claim that Black people must distance themselves from behaviors confirming negative racial stereotypes in order to be treated better by white people (Jefferson, "The Politics of Respectability and Black Americans' Punitive Attitudes," 1451). Today, it is understood in similar ways: some marginalized people reject certain behaviors and views associated with them as a method of integration.

38 March, "Letter to Jatavia Johnson and Caresha Brownlee."

double standards, and challenge, critique, and reconstruct meanings of Black womanhood.[39] As Ashley Payne writes, "hip hop allowed me to be unapologetically loud and ratchet, giving me space and voice to be loud and free to move/manipulate my body in ways that were not deemed respectable."[40]

Kyra March sees rappers engaging in self-sexualization as *percussive feminists*.[41] Drawing from the term 'percussion'—the "striking of one body with or against another with some degree of force so as to give a shock; impact; a strike, blow, [or] knock"—March describes percussive feminists as "loud as fuck. Dynamic. It's bold and goes against all tradition."[42] Self-sexualizing rappers can be seen as percussive feminists in promoting sexual freedom, agency, and autonomy through unapologetically presenting and expressing the Black female body in ways that disrupt and resist constraints on Black women's sexuality and by encouraging other Black women to do the same.[43] On this reading, self-sexualizing hip-hop is a tool to fight the oppression of Black women, not to perpetuate it.

Recall the motivations underpinning the critique that self-sexualizing rap is problematic because it promulgates stereotypes and controlling images: it promotes values that violate the rights of Black women. And underpinning these values are broader values of freedom, agency, dignity, potentiality, and autonomy. According to Black feminists such as Young and March, self-sexualizing rap ultimately *promotes* these broader values by reconstructing Black womanhood. For instance, women's agency, autonomy, and freedom from the domination of oppressive norms are promoted by rejecting the constraints of respectability politics; and by realizing their potential to sexualize themselves, Black women reaffirm their own dignity. Crucially, this is an alternative perspective to the critique that self-sexualizing rap is problematic because it perpetuates problematic stereotypes and controlling images. According to this rival perspective, self-sexualizing rap is empowering and an important tool of resistance against oppression for some Black women. For proponents of this

39 Payne, "The Cardi B–Beyoncé Complex."

40 Payne, "The Cardi B–Beyoncé Complex," 27. We could put the opposition of respectability politics in terms of a subversion of the "Black lady" controlling image. The "Black lady" refers to middle-class professional Black women who represent and adhere to respectability politics (Collins, "Black Feminist Thought," 80).

41 March, "Letter to Jatavia Johnson and Caresha Brownlee."

42 March, "Letter to Jatavia Johnson and Caresha Brownlee," 21. Sexualization is not required for percussive feminism. However, March explains that the explicitness of rappers engaged in self-sexualization and the responses to it provide a great example of how percussive feminism shocks.

43 March, "Letter to Jatavia Johnson and Caresha Brownlee," 24.

perspective, self-sexualizing rap affirms the same values it is said to diminish according to the alternative perspective.

While I am not claiming that self-sexualization is the only means to empowerment, I want to highlight the fact that some commentators argue that it is true for them—and this possibility seems closed off if we endorse the view that self-sexualizing performances deserve criticism because they perpetuate or reinforce problematic stereotypes and controlling images (and so cannot be genuinely empowering). But there is a clear tension that we might want to resolve: Is self-sexualizing rap a challenge to constraining norms of respectability on the one hand? Or on the other hand, is it a way of perpetuating controlling images of Black women's hypersexuality? Should it be praised for making things better for Black women in general or criticized as making things worse for Black women in general? In the next section, I propose a way forward by deploying a framework that allows us to respect these competing views and see the complex ways in which they interact.

4. OPPRESSIVE DOUBLE BINDS

In this section, I argue that if the claim that self-sexualization is problematic hinges on whether the self-sexualization perpetuates problematic stereotypes and controlling images, then women rappers are in an oppressive double bind. As noted by Hirji in the 2021 article "Oppressive Double Binds," double binds are defined colloquially as dilemmas or difficult choice situations.[44] Marilyn Frye defines double binds as "situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation," and crucially, these double binds cannot be understood in isolation from oppressive structures.[45] Hirji seeks to vindicate Frye's view that double binds are connected to oppressive structures by viewing *oppressive double binds* as a subset of the double binds Frye has in mind, "where no matter what an agent does, they become a mechanism in their own oppression" (643).

Oppressive double binds are "double binds that exist in virtue of oppression . . . and are a product of and serve to reinforce oppressive structures" (643). Oppressive double binds differ from other choice situations insofar as they result from and are mechanisms of oppressive social structures. An oppressive double bind arises when an agent belonging to an oppressed group is given a choice between cooperation or resistance with some oppressive norm. In this choice, two goods are at stake: their prudential good and resistance to

44 Hirji, "Oppressive Double Binds," 646 (hereafter cited parenthetically).

45 Frye, "Oppression," as cited in Hirji, "Oppressive Double Binds," 647.

oppression (654). These two goods are bound up together to make cooperation and resistance reinforce the oppressive norm controlling their access to security and power. Hirji argues that someone caught in an oppressive double bind faces a choice between (1) cooperating with an oppressive norm and thus benefiting themselves with some security or power but making things worse for themselves by reinforcing the structure that oppresses them or (2) resisting an oppressive norm and thus benefiting themselves by resisting a structure that oppresses them but making things worse for themselves by opening themselves up to punishment, thus undermining their power to resist (654). On either option, they act against their own interest. Oppressive double binds are distinctively bad for agents trapped in them because they undermine their agency. Where agency is understood as a capacity to act intentionally or for reasons, there is a clear sense in which individuals in oppressive double binds exercise their agency, yet whatever end is chosen, their agency is undermined by that very same choice; the undermining nature of oppressive double binds is such that whatever intention or reasons an agent has for acting, these very same reasons are undermined by their action (665–66). If our agency involves us acting for a reason, but the action we take ends up going against or undercutting this reason, then there is a sense in which our agency is diminished.

Hirji gives an example of an oppressive double bind involving a teenage girl being pressured by her boyfriend to lose her virginity with him, even though she is reluctant to have sex with him. If she refuses sex, her boyfriend will break up with her, and she will be written off as frigid or a tease, leading her to be viewed as sexually undesirable and unavailable. Alternatively, she can comply, but this will serve only to reinforce a system in which her decisions are not hers to make (656). The oppressive norm at play here is that girls/women should not have sexual autonomy—that is, they are not in charge of their own sexual decisions. The oppressive double bind exists because whichever action the girl takes—having sex or not having sex—her sexual autonomy is threatened. Refusing sex to promote her sexual autonomy would end up threatening her sexual autonomy since she would be labeled as sexually inaccessible.[46] But succumbing to the pressure of sex also violates her sexual autonomy—since she would rather not have sex—so whichever option she chooses might contribute to her inability to exercise her sexual autonomy. Her agency is undermined insofar as whatever ends she hopes to achieve by choosing to cooperate or resist is undermined by whichever choice she makes (656).

46 Being publicly criticized as prudish in this way might discourage other girls from refusing unwanted sexual advances, demonstrating how refusal nevertheless fails to uphold sexual autonomy.

This framework helps us understand the dialectical stalemates that emerge in evaluating critiques of Black women rappers' self-sexualization. Similar to the teenage girl being pressured by her boyfriend to lose her virginity, self-sexualizing Black women rappers are caught in an oppressive double bind when we understand the oppressive norm at play as the norm that Black women should not have sexual autonomy. Adhering to the norm by being respectable and not self-sexualizing may allow Black women to avoid censure—by, for instance, not being criticized as reinforcing stereotypes of hypersexuality—but it reinforces a system that takes away their sexual autonomy. By being respectable, Black women engage in self-regarding complicity since they are not trying to challenge or escape the oppressive norm regarding their lack of sexual autonomy. Instead, they keep the oppressive norm in place by focusing on their own prudential good—but this prudential good of avoiding censure or punishment is threatened so long as the oppressive norm remains unchallenged. There may be short-term benefits, but they reinforce the oppressive norm that dictates they lack sexual autonomy in the long run.[47] Resisting the norm by self-sexualizing results in them being categorized as hypersexual "bad" women, who should not be taken seriously, which detracts from their power and ability to resist oppression. Self-sexualizing incurs a prudential cost—censure, in the form of criticism about reinforcing controlling images that diminish Black women's sexual autonomy—and this undermines the moral goal of resisting the oppressive norm.

Crucially, if Black women self-sexualize, they undermine Black women's sexual autonomy by playing into hypersexual stereotypes and controlling images (in line with Collins's and Benard's criticisms). If they do not self-sexualize due to fear of reinforcing these hypersexualized stereotypes, they undermine Black women's sexual autonomy by playing into respectability politics and acquiescing to the norm that Black women lack sexual autonomy. The undermining nature of double binds is such that whatever intention or reasons an agent has for acting (in this case, promoting sexual autonomy), these very same reasons are undermined by their action (in this case, thwarting sexual autonomy).

4.1. Objections

One might object that the oppressive double bind framework needs further clarification. Why assume that the *only* choices are either to perpetuate stereotypes of hypersexuality or to conform to respectability politics? One should

47 Throughout my reflection on Black women's choice not to self-sexualize, it is important to make clear that if a Black woman rapper does not self-sexualize because she does not want to, then there is no oppression. I take it that the double bind applies only when a Black woman rapper is inclined to self-sexualize in her art or presentation and chooses not to for fear of reinforcing stereotypes or being criticized for reinforcing stereotypes.

be able to challenge the oppressive norm without self-sexualizing. However, given the norm at the heart of the double bind is not respectability in general but that Black women lack sexual autonomy in particular, it becomes clear why this objection fails. Unless Black women who want to self-sexualize actually self-sexualize, they are cooperating with the norm that Black women lack sexual autonomy. In other words, one cannot resist a norm denying sexual autonomy without asserting sexual autonomy. Although, for instance, Megan Thee Stallion can challenge norms of respectability by just using expletives, swearing is no resistance to the norm of lacking sexual autonomy.

Another potential objection is that Black women rappers are not caught in an oppressive double bind since they could find different ways to express their sexuality that do not perpetuate problematic stereotypes. Although an alternative mode of expression would not make the conflict of norms less oppressive, it might make it less of a bind because they could just do something else. An objector might point to other Black women rappers such as Missy Elliot, Lizzo, and Janelle Monáe as models of artists who seem to have successfully navigated the oppressive double bind. For instance, they might point to the music video for Monáe's 2018 song "Pynk," which is certainly lyrically and visually sexual but does not seem to be viewed as hypersexual and criticizable in the way that "Anaconda" and "WAP" are.[48] The thought here is that these self-sexualizing rappers resist the norm of lacking sexual autonomy without falling into the trap of the hypersexual trope.

I have three responses to this objection. First, songs like "Pynk" may not be criticized for self-sexualization in the way that songs like "WAP" and "Anaconda" are, but that might be due to reasons other than Monáe having navigated the double bind successfully. One plausible reason is the songs' relative (lack of) popularity.[49] While "Pynk" has amassed an impressive sixteen million views

48 See Janelle Monáe, "Janelle Monáe: Pynk (Official Music Video)," April 10, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaYvlVR_BEc.

49 Another potential reason (outside of popularity) that "Pynk" has not been criticized in the same way as "Anaconda" and "WAP" might be the differences in sexuality portrayed in the songs. Insofar as "Pynk" is a celebration of female sexual desire, it is a celebration of *queer* female sexual desire; "Anaconda" and "WAP," in contrast, are celebrations of heterosexual desire. Therefore, the problem is that it is impossible for Black women to celebrate their heterosexual desire without being perceived as hypersexual and facing censure. However, it seems that an expression of queer female sexual desire could still be perceived as hypersexual. Recall Collins's claim that the jezebel controlling image constructs Black women as having inappropriate and insatiable sexual appetites and thus as "freaks" ("Black Feminist Thought," 83). She argues that the jezebel's excessive sexual desire masculinizes her because she desires sex as a man does, which can lead Black women to once again be deemed as "freaky" if they desire sex with other women (83). The jezebel's excessive sexual desire helps define boundaries of normal sexuality, demarking heterosexuality from

at the time of writing, this number pales in comparison to the music videos for "Anaconda" and "WAP." The more views a song has, the likelier it is that someone will take issue with it. Nicki Minaj's and Cardi B's less popular songs "Super Freaky Girl" (2022), "Money" (2018), and "Bongos" (2023) are not criticized with the same strength that "Anaconda" and "WAP" are, despite having similar levels of sexual content and similar themes.[50] In other words, even if a song can be perceived as hypersexual, and even if some critics of self-sexualizing rap may still take issue with its content, these concerns are often not voiced as strongly (because critics cannot survey all songs in the world and tend to focus on the most popular ones).[51]

Second, while Monáe may not be criticized for hypersexuality with the same strength that Cardi B often is, she *is* criticized: recently, some audiences and fellow Black woman artists have expressed concern with exactly that.[52] In her rollout for the 2023 album *The Age of Pleasure*, fans and critics noticed a difference in Monáe's appearance, particularly in music videos that featured her scantily clad.[53] This contrasts with her previous style, which featured her

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homosexuality. Those who are queer are deemed deviant because of their choice in sexual partners, and as a sexual freak, the jezebel participates in deviant sexual behavior, such as sleeping with other women. In the context of Monáe's "Pynk," it seems that an expression of a Black woman's queer sexual desire can still be perceived as hypersexual. This is because queer identity constitutes Black women's perceived hypersexuality. Consequently, an expression of queer sexual desire such as "Pynk" can still be perceived as hypersexual according to Collins's notion of controlling images.

50 See Nicki Minaj, "Nicki Minaj: Super Freaky Girl (Official Music Video)," September 1, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5uAR9w7LBg; Cardi B, "Cardi B: Money (Official Music Video)," December 21, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUOh09GoQgk, and "Cardi B: Bongos (featuring Megan Thee Stallion) [Official Music Video]," September 8, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ux1f1Q8Zxhk.

51 Furthermore, although the self-sexualization of artists like Missy Elliot and Janelle Monáe may not be as explicit as that of other artists due to the less physically revealing clothing in their videos (baggy clothes in the case of Elliot and suits in the case of Monáe), this does not mean that the lyrical content of their songs cannot be construed as reinforcing hypersexual stereotypes. Elliot, for instance, often raps in self-sexualizing ways: in "Lose Control," she raps "I got a cute face, chubby waist / thick legs, in shape / rump shakin', both ways," foregrounding sexual properties commonly associated with the Black female body (lyrics according to Genius, https://genius.com/Missy-elliott-lose-control-lyrics). Someone who aesthetically prefers Elliot or Monáe to Cardi B because their self-sexualization is more subtle might be confusing an aesthetics/classist taste preference with a substantive moral difference.

52 Holland, "India Arie's Criticism of Megan Thee Stallion, Janelle Monáe's Essence Fest Performances Sparks Debate"; and Associated Press, "Q&A."

53 See, e.g., Janelle Monáe, "Janelle Monáe: Lipstick Lover (Official Music Video)," YouTube, May 11, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7S6wLP_vsY, and "Janelle Monáe:

mostly covered up in suits. Monáe claims the reason behind this shift is that "I'm much happier when my titties are out and I can run around free."[54] While some fans laud Monáe for her newfound sexual expression, others are not so welcoming. For instance, during her 2023 Essence Festival performance, as Monáe sang the lyrics, "You cannot police me, so get off my areola," she lifted her top and showed the audience one of her breasts, with a pink nipple cover—and this invited criticism, most notably from another Black woman musician, India Arie, who went to Instagram to criticize both Monáe and Megan Thee Stallion for their sexual Essence performances.[55] Arie commented that not everything belongs on a stage, and "when we as a culture make something like this mainstream—it shows a lack of discretion [and] discernment."[56] Arie went on to say that many fans like her want their music to show them in a respectful light. In other words, Arie was concerned with how Monáe's self-sexualization presents Black women in a hypersexual light—an echo of the critiques advanced against Nicki Minaj and Cardi B and discussed in section 2. Notably, it is not just Monáe who is criticized for self-sexualization; Lizzo is also sometimes criticized for hypersexualization and otherwise playing into problematic colonial images.[57]

Finally, to suggest that rappers ought to find alternative ways to express their sexuality and to hold up as models specific rappers whose self-sexualization appears to find a way out of the oppressive double bind is unreasonably demanding. Audiences may read *any* expression of sexuality as confirming stereotypes about hypersexuality, which is exactly what has happened with Monáe, who supposedly had navigated the double bind successfully. Moreover, no matter where along the spectrum of demandingness such a critic lies, this objection at its core says to Black women rappers, "This is the acceptable way to express your sexuality"—and so their sexual autonomy is still undermined.

Along similar lines, a critic might claim that there are better ways to express and perform a liberatory sexuality that does not undermine the liberation that

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Water Slide (Official Music Video)," YouTube, July 7, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfwRjf675Ak.

54 Price, "Janelle Monáe Speaks on Being 'Much Happier When My Titties Are Out' and Changing Her 'Whole F*cking Lifestyle.'"

55 Saunders, "Janelle Monáe Bares Her Soul and More at ESSENCE Fest and Fans Are Here for It."

56 Williams, "India.Arie Criticizes Megan Thee Stallion and Janelle Monáe for Sexual Essence Festival Performances."

57 Obie, "Leave Fat Black Women the F*ck Alone."

self-sexualizing rappers hope to achieve.[58] For instance, when asked what a liberatory sexuality for Black women that honors their agency looks like, bell hooks responds, "it may very well be that celibacy is the face of that sexuality."[59] hooks asserts, "what does it mean to be able to say I'd rather not be sexual than to be sexual in any context where I'm being mistreated; where I have doubt; where my feelings are not; where I'm triggered as an abuse survivor or what have you?"[60] Young interprets hooks as "embracing celibacy as a political means to counteract stereotypes of hypersexuality."[61]

But while celibacy may be a choice that some wish to pursue, recommending it as a response to an oppressive double bind confirms the choice structure of the double bind. If a Black woman's choice is either objectionable stereotypes or celibacy, then she cannot enjoy both sexual agency and autonomy.[62] Self-sexualizing rappers may oppress themselves by perpetuating stereotypes and controlling images about Black women, but in being reluctant to express their sexual agency in ways that they want to, they cooperate with the oppressive norms that govern their sexual agency and autonomy. There is no way out of the double bind that is not oppressive according to another set of norms. By endorsing celibacy, teaching, writing, and so forth as a means of resistance, critics are asking Black women to cooperate with respectability and are also constraining their sexual autonomy.

4.2. Pleasure and Resistance

We can further explain the trappings of Black women's double bind through looking at how racialized imagery provides routes of sexual pleasure and sexual resistance for self-sexualizing rappers. Putting the burden of finding other ways to express their sexuality that do not perpetuate problematic stereotypes on Black women rappers constrains their expression: it is difficult to insulate their sexual desires from dominant stereotypes. Black women should not be critiqued for having desires that are influenced by racial ideology—and if they do have such desires, it is not fair and is restrictive of sexual autonomy/freedom to tell them that they cannot express those desires.

58 If there is no way this can be done through self-sexualizing rap, there seems to be an injustice at play in that this valuable means of self-expression and creativity is denied to rappers.

59 New School, "A Conversation with bell hooks."

60 New School, "A Conversation with bell hooks."

61 Young, "On bell hooks, Sexual Agency and Combating Sexual Stereotypes of Black Women."

62 To put this in the context of art, this seems to amount to restrictions in expression, so they become silenced aesthetically.

There are many instances when Black women rely on stereotypes for pleasure.[63] This is seen in Nash's reading of Anthony Spinelli's 1977 film *SexWorld*.[64] In *SexWorld*, guests are promised that their sexual fantasies will be fulfilled during their time at a sex resort. A character named Roger opens his door to find a Black woman, Jill, whom he initially mistakes for staff before realizing she has been paired with him. Initially, Roger is reluctant to have sex because he is racist, but Jill persuades him by speaking in a stereotypical manner and emphasizing her racial difference: when Jill is asked by Roger, "What are you supposed to do for me?" Jill responds in exaggerated Black vernacular, "Me, I provides entertainment, sir." [65] After Roger is persuaded, they both have an enjoyable sexual encounter. Jill's pleasure in this racialized sexual scene is indicated by her suggestive smile and knowing glance at the camera.[66] Nash argues that Jill's performance of racialized stereotypes is a source of pleasure for both Roger and Jill: the racial stereotypes that Jill embodies in her behaviors play a necessary role in Jill's pleasure-seeking since they provide "an essential lexicon of desire," allowing her to "name and claim" pleasure that she might not have been able to access.[67] For instance, Jill emphasizes sexually appealing features commonly associated with the Black female body: "These thighs, don't make your peter rise?" And "This ass, ain't this a class ass?"[68]

The hypersexualized performances in some rap, as in *SexWorld*, can be seen as forms of pleasure for women—and the racial stereotypes that self-sexualizing rap is being critiqued for perpetuating are an important component of this pleasure. As Robin Zheng argues, "The idea here is that Black women and their capacities for pleasure are not detachable from their specific socio-historical contexts, so some of the pleasures available to and longed for by Black women are precisely those that depend on racializing structures and meanings."[69]

Black women can rely on hypersexualized stereotypes for pleasure, but they can also demonstrate resistance in the very performance of these hypersexualized racial stereotypes. This is seen in Mireille Miller-Young's analysis of a different pornographic scene in *Let Me Tell Ya 'Bout Black Chicks* (1985) in which

63 A further suggestion of what reliance might consist in is that these racist stereotypes are being harnessed or used for a further end (authentic pleasure), almost like they are being depicted but not promoted or endorsed (in the same way an artwork can depict *x* without endorsing *x*). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

64 Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*.

65 Zheng, "Race and Pornography," 183; and Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 91.

66 Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 97.

67 Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 105–6.

68 Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 94.

69 Zheng, "Race and Pornography," 184.

two white men dressed in the white hoods of the Ku Klux Klan have sex with a Black woman.[70] Miller-Young believes that the actress's performance affirms that her character is in control of the scene, evidenced by her expressions of pleasure and gestures.[71] For example, her assertion, "I ain't afraid of no ghosts" denies the narrative or construction that she is coerced into sex.[72] Miller-Young concludes that the scene is an "agentive sexual performance that presents the possibility of black women's fantasies of racial-sexual domination."[73] The actress's performance is one of resistance insofar as it "counters straightforward stereotypical narratives."[74] There is a reliance on racial stereotypes here, but it is through these racial stereotypes that a Black woman affirms her Blackness.

The upshot is that there can be pleasures in the performance of racialized stereotypes that are, though undetachable from histories of domination and pain, genuinely pleasurable for Black women. These performances can also resist hypersexualized racial stereotypes by expressing strength, control, imagination, skill, and discretion in ways that disrupt the sexual objectification of the Black women involved. These pornographic scenes are not meant as analogues to rap songs, and there are clear differences between these scenes and self-sexualizing rap, but I present these as an example of how participating in racialized stereotypes can be chosen as a form of pleasure and resistance and as an expression of sexual autonomy.

In the context of self-sexualizing rap, perhaps rappers like Cardi B and Nicki Minaj rely on racial stereotypes but are nonetheless not being passive receivers of these racialized stereotypes. As Zheng puts it in describing analogous cases, they are "taking an active stance in claiming a certain kind of pleasure from racial identification."[75] A proponent of the view that Cardi B and Minaj subvert stereotypes is Macarena Martínez.[76] Drawing on the work of Josephine Baker, Martinez suggests that Cardi B and Minaj may be enacting personas in their performances in order to rewrite the jezebel controlling image. In these performances, Black women's bodies no longer become recipients of dominant racial and gender discursive regimes. Instead, they become discursive tools for Black women's subjectivity and their bodies' reclamation. For instance, Minaj's opening line in "Anaconda" about the desirability of big buttocks—"My

70 Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar*.

71 Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar*.

72 Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar*, 128.

73 Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar*, 129.

74 Zheng, "Race and Pornography," 180.

75 Zheng, "Race and Pornography," 185.

76 Martínez, "Afro-Caribbean Women Reclaiming Their Bodies and Sexuality."

anaconda don't want none unless you got buns, hun"—takes an attribute that has stereotypically/traditionally been a marker of Black female grotesqueness and hypersexuality (big buttocks) and contests their exclusion from markers of beauty.[77] By embodying the stereotype, a reversal is made.

This aligns with social scientific research on challenging stigmas. A 2017 study identified two strategies used by stigmatized groups to reappropriate, take ownership of, and thereby weaken stigma, including stereotypes about the stigmatized group.[78] The first strategy is *reframing*, which occurs when stereotypical characteristics are highlighted as assets rather than liabilities—for instance, reframing stereotypically feminine traits such as social intelligence or "being emotional" as essential leadership skills. The second strategy is *self-labeling*, which is the intentional use of negative labels self-referentially as a means of embracing the very slurs used against one's group. By self-labeling, stigmatized groups transform a slur's connotative meaning from demeaning to empowering, engendering a sense of power for the self-labelers. For instance, Danielle Gaucher et al. note that self-labeling with the slur "slut" is associated with a reduction in women's endorsement of common rape myths.[79] We can see both types of reclamation—reframing and self-labeling—in self-sexualizing rap. When Minaj foregrounds her buttocks as desired in "Anaconda," she reframes big buttocks as an asset rather than something disgusting. And in "WAP," the repeated line "There's some whores in this house" is a form of self-labeling by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion.

Despite such reclamation and the potential subversion of the jezebel controlling image in self-sexualizing rap, critics still might be concerned about its problematic social/public meaning. (I use the two terms interchangeably here.) Alfred Archer and Benjamin Matheson define public meaning as "the meaning that others can justifiably attribute to our acts given the context in which we perform them."[80] Zheng and Nils-Hennes Stear argue that while fictively deploying unethical attitudes like blackface is not objectionable in and of itself, it becomes objectionable in virtue of the content of those attitudes and what has been done with them given the racist history of the world we live in.[81] Zheng also writes that "racial fetishes in a racially stratified society express racially stereotypical social meanings even if not caused by them and even if individuals

77 Martínez, "Afro-Caribbean Women Reclaiming Their Bodies and Sexuality."

78 Wang et al., "Challenge Your Stigma."

79 Gaucher et al., "Can Pejorative Terms Ever Lead to Positive Social Consequences?" cited in Wang et al., "Challenge Your Stigma."

80 Archer and Matheson, "Admiration and Education," 6.

81 Zheng and Stear, "Imagining in Oppressive Contexts or What's Wrong with Blackface," 411.

with the preference do not endorse them."[82] Similarly, critics might worry about the public meaning of self-sexualizing rap. Despite having intentions and attitudes aimed at subverting the controlling image of the jezebel, for example, self-sexualizing rappers can still be criticized for or perceived as reinforcing that controlling image. While Black women self-sexualizing is not inherently objectionable, given the misogynoiristic social structures and oppressive norms dictating Black women's sexual behavior, reclaiming stereotypes via an embodiment of the stereotype can be seen as a failure and self-defeating.[83]

So Black women are also caught up in oppressive double binds in their performance of hypersexualized stereotypes. As we have seen in previous paragraphs, certain sexual desires depend on particular racialized meanings.[84] Although racialized stereotypes are undetachable from a history of Black bodies being dominated and exploited, some Black women can gain genuine pleasure and demonstrate resistance by taking active stances in their performances of racialized stereotypes.[85] In their performances, they exercise and promote their sexual autonomy, but they may still be criticized as reinforcing and perpetuating public racist meanings and images about Black women's hypersexuality that diminishes their sexual autonomy. For instance, Ariane Cruz interprets the earlier Ku Klux Klan scene as reinforcing the stereotype that Black women are ignorant, unintelligent jezebels who are "unrapable" because they are always sexually willing.[86] However, it is worth noting that should they choose not to perform certain racialized stereotypes, Black women repress their sexual desires by robbing themselves and others of a source of pleasure, resistance, and empowerment. While they might not then be criticized for perpetuating problematic social meanings, they would be cooperating with the oppressive norm that Black women should not have sexual autonomy. *Their agency is undermined whichever they choose to do.* If they *do not* perform certain racialized stereotypes despite the pleasure and empowerment they thereby gain because they are afraid that they will receive backlash for perpetuating controlling images, then they cooperate in a system that polices their desires, undermining their sexual

82 Zheng, "Why Yellow Fever Isn't Flattering," 411.

83 *Misogynoir*istic is the intersection of anti-Black racism and misogyny targeted at Black women. See Bailey, "Misogynoir Transformed"; and Faluyi, "An Exploration into the Objectification of Self in Female Hip-Hop Culture as a Form of Misogyny or Empowerment."

84 Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*; Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar*; and Zheng, "Race and Pornography."

85 These self-sexualizing rap artworks might function as a kind of *artistic counterspeech*. See Dixon, "Artistic (Counter) Speech." Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

86 Cruz, "Berries Bittersweet," cited in Zheng, "Race and Pornography," 181.

autonomy. If they *do* perform racialized stereotypes, they exercise their sexual autonomy to gain pleasure, but then they are perceived as reinforcing the very stereotypes that supposedly diminish their sexual autonomy.

Before proceeding to the final section, in which I focus on a progressive critique of self-sexualizing rap, it is worth considering one point of objection. Critics might complain that just because Black women gain pleasure from certain racialized stereotypes, this does not explain why it is a good thing to make public works that *promote* these stereotypes. They might argue that getting pleasure from something that reinforces stereotypes and is degrading to a category of persons to which they belong might be permissible and even a good thing for me to pursue this pleasure, but it is quite another thing for so many people to publicly promote this form of pleasure and broadcast it with aesthetic intensity to the world. Anne Eaton, for instance, argues that representations can play a crucial role in shaping people's erotic tastes, and giving people an erotic taste for oppressive acts/norms can sustain oppression even if people have egalitarian beliefs.[87] Crucially, we should be extremely cautious of what erotic representations are available to people. Similarly, to the extent that ideology-shaped desires and representations in self-sexualizing rap contribute to the oppressive forces that gave rise to these desires in the first place, perhaps there ought to be limits to what Black women are allowed to do in their art. For instance, it seems right to tell Black women not to perform in ways that are Islamophobic or homophobic, so why is it acceptable to publicly perpetuate anti-Blackness by employing the controlling image of the jezebel? Ultimately, such critics might argue that the potential harm that can be caused by these music videos is underappreciated.

I agree that to the extent that self-sexualization reinforces controlling images, we ought to appreciate the potential harm that can be caused. However, there is also harm done to Black women when we deny them forms of public expression of their sexuality. In other words, not only is it overly demanding to suggest that Black women not publicly express their sexuality (as we will see below in the context of Black women's constant burden of representation), but it is also unclear what is even required of Black women artists when such a demand is made because it puts them at the mercy of the whims of fickle audiences. Furthermore, not only do performers gain benefits from performing ideology-based desires, but publicly promoting ideology-based desires is important because the audience viewing these self-sexualizing performances includes Black women. As we have seen, many Black women endorse such performances both as a means of counteracting respectability politics and as a source of empowerment.

87 Eaton, "Feminist Pornography."

For Black women more generally, such performances are therefore important for the resistance against the norm that Black women lack sexual autonomy, although due to the oppressive double bind, this resistance is self-undermining. These public performances give many Black women pleasure in a world where far too little (sexual) pleasure is available to them.[88] As Zheng argues, "In a world so thoroughly and deeply structured by white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalist exploitation, ableism and other oppressions, morally pure pleasures are hard to come by. . . . If we must wait until the patriarchy is dismantled for morally pure sexual pleasures, then we will be allowed no pleasures at all."[89]

In asking Black women not to express themselves sexually because doing so degrades Black women generally, critics ignore the normative complexity of the situation. Given that Black women's performance of racialized stereotypes might reinforce racialized stereotypes, this puts pressure on Black women not to fully explore their sexual selves. Black women face a "constant burden of representation" whereby they must be cognizant of how their individualized actions will be construed as representing all of Black women—in this case, vindicating hypersexual stereotypes.[90] Zheng argues that this can also lead to epistemic violence, which Kristie Dotson calls *testimonial smothering*: a person must keep parts of her testimony silent in order to avoid misinterpretation by others in damaging and stereotypical ways.[91] Black women are not supposed to talk about liking sex or to perform in ways that show them enjoying sex because they are already assumed to be jezebels.[92]

Again, we see the pervasiveness of the oppressive double bind. Making self-sexualizing performances public and broadcasting with aesthetic intensity is important to many Black women because it is an explicit resistance of the norm that they lack sexual autonomy, and it is pleasurable for these Black women. But it reinforces controlling images of hypersexuality. However, telling Black women not to make their self-sexualizing performances public because it reinforces controlling images and is thereby degrading to Black women generally conforms to a system in which Black women lack sexual autonomy since they cannot demonstrate public resistance to the oppressive norm that they lack sexual autonomy. Perhaps there is a line to be drawn in self-sexualizing rap, where the harm that self-sexualizing rap does to sexual autonomy outweighs the harm done to Black

88 Zheng, "Race and Pornography," 194.

89 Zheng, "Race and Pornography," 194–95.

90 Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar*, 170.

91 Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing."

92 Adapted from Jeanie Pepper, who asserts, "You are not supposed to talk about liking sex because you are already assumed to be a whore" (cited in Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar*, 1).

women's sexual autonomy when Black women are asked not to publicly self-sexualize. However, in the absence of any data, the suggestion that Black women should not self-sexualize publicly seems to reinforce the double bind.

I argue that a diagnosis of self-sexualizing Black women as caught up in oppressive double binds allows us to respect the competing perspectives of self-sexualization while acknowledging the complexity with which these perspectives interact. Next, I show how my diagnosis can advance the debate by helping us articulate what a progressive critique of self-sexualizing rap might involve.

5. DEVELOPING A PROGRESSIVE CRITIQUE OF SELF-SEXUALIZING RAP

This section outlines a progressive critique of self-sexualizing rap, first by focusing on audience responses and then by considering performers' duties to resist oppressive norms.

5.1. Audience Criticism of Self-Sexualization

My analysis of self-sexualizing rappers being caught in oppressive double binds suggests that self-sexualizing Black women rappers participate in their own oppression but, crucially, cannot escape some form of participation in their own oppression: if Black women do self-sexualize, then they perpetuate oppressive stereotypes and controlling images that diminish Black women's sexual autonomy, and if they do not self-sexualize because they are afraid of perpetuating oppressive stereotypes and the sanctions that come with this, they adhere to a norm that takes away their sexual autonomy. Oppressive double binds result from oppressive social contexts and norms, and those afflicted by them end up reinforcing these same oppressive social contexts and norms in their choices. In the case of self-sexualizing rappers, whether they choose to self-sexualize and promulgate problematic stereotypes/controlling images or not self-sexualize because they do not want to promulgate stereotypes/controlling images about Black women's hypersexuality, they end up undermining the values they seek to promote.

Critiques of self-sexualization in rap are often advanced in ways that target self-sexualizing rappers. For instance, the critique that is the focus of this article—the claim that self-sexualizing rap promulgates problematic stereotypes—is often framed in ways that hold self-sexualizing rappers as defective and problematic. For example, in a study that explored whether self-sexualization in rap is misogynoiristic or empowering through the eyes of viewers, participants felt that self-sexualizing rappers sell themselves and their communities out by reinforcing stereotypes. The problem with critiques of self-sexualization in Black women's rap is that rather than focusing on the oppressive structures that

maintain oppressive norms and cause oppression, women are blamed for their own oppression. This is unfair to rappers since it ignores how, whatever rappers decide to do—sexualize themselves or not sexualize themselves—they participate in their oppression. There is no choice in the double bind that does not, to some degree, undermine the prudential good of a Black woman rapper and the rapper's resistance to oppressive systems and norms. Consequently, there is no way such rappers can wholly resist their own oppression in these oppressive double binds.

Instead, critiques about women's preferences for self-sexualization should focus on the oppressive social contexts that those women find themselves in. Criticisms that focus only on how self-sexualizing rappers perpetuate their own oppression without paying attention to the context—in particular, the oppressive double binds—in which rappers self-sexualize are misguided. Little is gained by advancing critiques about an agent's choice to self-sexualize rather than about the contexts informing these choices.[93] For instance, the critique that Black women's self-sexualizing rap promulgates problematic stereotypes is supposed to be motivated by values of respecting women's agency, sexual autonomy, dignity, and so forth. However, this critique ignores how self-sexualization is said to promote these values and does not pay sufficient attention to the circumstances in which rappers self-sexualize. All choices in oppressive double binds that promote these values also—because of the oppressive norms—undermine them.

One might think that we can criticize both the oppressive norms *and* the rappers perpetuating problematic stereotypes. But this response is misguided. There seems to be an implicit assumption here that a Black woman rapper's preference to self-sexualize is not a good way to resist oppression, and there are better ways to resist oppression. However, the onus is on critics to show that these ways are not oppressive according to another set of norms. It may be that self-sexualization as a method of resisting oppressive norms is imperfect and self-undermining, but the onus is on critics to show that there are other methods of sexual liberation that are not also imperfect and self-undermining.

5.2. Performers' Duties to Resist

There is a rich philosophical literature on the notion of a "duty to resist." Authors argue that the primary source of obligation to resist oppression is the badness of harms that victims of oppression suffer.[94] Others argue that the starting point for resistance to oppression begins with more general duties, such as the

93 Some adaptive preference theorists, such as Uma Narayan ("Minds of Their Own"), make a similar move by urging critics to focus on the oppressive social contexts in which choices are being made rather than on the agents making choices.

94 Terlazzo, "(When) Do Victims Have Duties to Resist Oppression?"

duty to protect one's own rational nature or well-being or duties not to harm other victims or cause harm to victims.[95]

Hirji argues that people who are not members of oppressed groups caught in oppressive double binds might have a "heightened moral obligation" to resist oppressive norms since their resistance incurs less severe costs than the resistance of members of an oppressed group who are caught in an oppressive double bind (654). In the context of rap, this could mean others have a heightened moral obligation to dismantle oppressive norms and systems governing Black women's sexual behavior. But in discussing that, there should be attention to other oppressive norms too. So, for example, focusing on the obligation of male rappers would mean emphasizing their duties not to make sexualizing rap and perpetuate stereotypes about Black women. Perhaps this would focus attention away from self-sexualizing rappers and onto rap more broadly.

This strategy, however, is not without its own concerns. Black art is often the subject of intensive scrutiny. For instance, Black art has consistently been blamed for causing violence, corrupting youth, demeaning women, and reflecting various further societal ills.[96] The history of critique that Black art forms have been subjected to shows a kind of selectivity regarding what is critiqued as bad. Critiques about violence or the objectification of women are often framed in ways that lead observers to think Black art forms like rap are primarily at fault for these wrongs. We might be worried that a response that says not to focus on self-sexualizing rap for the perpetuation of stereotypes and oppressive norms but to focus on rap more broadly will motivate the critical scrutiny of an already often unjustifiably scrutinized art form. Moreover, in asking Black male rappers to think about how they might dismantle stereotypes that oppress Black women, critics should be alert to the potential for supporting racially misandrist critiques of rap music.[97]

Ultimately, the duty to resist should extend beyond rap. If critics are to focus on the role of media in the oppression of Black women rather than focusing on rap as the foremost source of oppressive sexualization in society, they should focus on all media perpetuating stereotypes. Although there might be a need to critique rap as a medium for the promulgation of problematic stereotypes, we should not critique it in ways that are unjustly selective of rap. Instead, we should aim for a holistic critique of movies, television, gaming, podcasts, and

95 For duties to protect one's own rational nature or well-being, see Hay, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression"; and Silvermint, "Resistance and Well-Being." For duties not to harm other victims, see Boxhill, "The Responsibility of the Oppressed to Resist Their Own Oppression." For duties not to cause harm to others, see Superson, "Right-Wing Women."

96 Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*.

97 Curry, *The Man-Not*; and Khan, "A Guilty Pleasure."

music more broadly, highlighting how those with more social power perpetuate the oppressive norms for which self-sexualizing rappers are judged. This way, discussions of the obligations to resist oppressive norms should extend to the obligations of white women musicians, producers, and directors, other media that perpetuate stereotypes, and media commentators who critique rap and Black women rappers in particular. For instance, there may be obligations on white women musicians and producers—many of whom would not get far without sexualizing Black women—to be alert to how they perpetuate oppressive norms about Black women.[98] Moreover, media critics should be alert to how self-sexualizing Black women are caught up in oppressive double binds and to how their own critiques fail to discharge a duty to make cultural space for Black women to escape oppressive double binds.

6. CONCLUSION

I have argued that self-sexualizing rappers are caught in oppressive double binds, and this framework can help us understand the competing evaluative responses to self-sexualizing rap. Furthermore, this diagnosis better informs us about how to construct progressive critiques of self-sexualizing rap. While some criticisms are advanced from progressive Black feminists, self-sexualizing rap is also seen as empowering by other commentators. I have argued that the framework of oppressive double binds helps to capture the complexity of the normative situation faced by self-sexualizing Black women rappers. Trapped between the norms of respectability and stereotypes of hypersexuality, it is impossible under conditions of oppression for self-sexualizing Black women rappers to fully realize their sexual autonomy and agency. Articulating this helps to focus our progressive critiques on these constraining norms and on the media that perpetuates them rather than on individual rappers who engage in self-expression.

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