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□ Sharpley-Whiting, T. Denean:

Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women

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A Review by Miriam Strube

Earlier this year CBS fired Don Imus from his radio program, following a week of uproar over his referral to the Rutgers women's basketball team as "nappy-headed hos". Not surprisingly, this has created yet another wave of complaints about hip hop and its impact. These complaints are neither new nor restricted to one racial group. Whites have often expressed their concern with hip hop culture, most prominently with gangsta rap. Similarly, black icons, such as the cultural critic Stanley Crouch and jazz musician Wynton Marsalis, find fault with hip hop. Crouch even goes as far as casting rappers as "neo-Sambos" and criticizing their mugging, scowling, "their gold teeth, drop-down pants, and tasteless jewelry." (8) T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting's book *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women* also disapproves of hip hop culture, but it does so from a very different and more sophisticated angle, pervasively criticizing postfeminist women conforming to the stereotypes of female sexuality masquerading as sexual liberation:

Like hip hop culture's offering of sexual liberation and expressivity to young black women, the 'new niggaz' draws its cache not from politics but from the wells patriarchy has left exclusively to women: sex and beauty. On the surface at least and perhaps individually, the ends, as the cliché goes, seems to justify the means – female power seems to be achieved. But sex and beauty as trade commodities are depreciating assets. (147)

In the prologue and the introduction, Sharpley-Whiting, the director of the African-American and Diaspora Studies at Vanderbilt University, reveals herself as a model-turned-professor coming of age in the midst of hip hop's evolution in the late 1980s, and

as both a fan and a feminist critic of hip hop culture. Also, right from the beginning, Sharpley-Whiting points to the complexity of the topic as well as her own engagement in it as a black woman:

We are all in the business of selling illusions, as we move from various products – including our own sexuality – but we often stand accused of selling out. Blamed for participating in the exploitation of women, these women and their stories, like mine, are always much more complicated. (xi)

It is this aspect, the complex involvement of black women in the male-dominated and misogynist hip hop culture, that Sharpley-Whiting examines. Her willingness to uncover this complexity and to accept contradictions is the greatest merit of this book. In her analysis, she argues that beyond black women's portrayal in rap lyrics, it is also their display in music videos, film, television, fashion, and on the Internet that is indispensable to the mass media engineered appeal of hip hop. Furthermore, the commercial trafficking in the images and behaviors associated with hip hop has made them appear entertaining, normal, and acceptable to the "hip hop generation". She defines the members of this generation as having been born *after* the civil rights, the black power, and the women's movements – yet as profoundly having been influenced by those three movements and she particularly points to "blacks born between approximately 1965 and 1984" (xv).

The main chapters therefore distinguish different aspects that strengthen hip hop culture. The first one examines the impact of hip hop videos on beauty standards – both for 'everyday' women and for women working in sex tourism. Chapter Two continues with the impacts of hip hop by turning to the topic of sexual abuse. Sharpley-Whiting here argues that "the mainstreaming of hip hop has broadened the umbrella under which male celebrities, specifically, can seek and acquire protection from allegations of sexual violence. Industry movers and shakers, legal eagles, hip hop magazines, blogs, a multiracial fan base, and sundry artists rise to the occasion with the result being the minimalization of the crimes." (54) In chapter Three, Sharpley-Whiting turns to the rise of groupie culture in the hip hop world, the impact of hip hop's compulsory heterosexual culture on young black women, and the permeation of the hip hop ethos into young black women's conceptions of love and romance. Here she includes many interviews and publications, such as Karrine Steffano's *Confessions of a Video Vixen*. Chapter Four

questions the impacts of hip hop's increasing alliance with the sex industry, especially with strip clubs, whose "gender dynamics bleed over into hip hop's generationers' everyday gender politics." Hip hop culture, Sharpley-Whiting argues convincingly, is "literally 'waist deep' in the strip trade." (143)

Pimps Up, Ho's Down provides a multilayered perspective on hip hop. It is a strength of this book that it resiliently respects the voices of young black women often unheard both in hip hop culture and in American culture at large, it indeed provides a "space for young black women's voices to be heard in all of their complex contradictions, dissent, and complicity." (21) However, there are also some flaws that are connected to Sharpley-Whiting's methodology. Her hesitance to textualize and theoretically frame these voices leads to a rather descriptive account of some individual women and their stories (or anecdotes), which often lead her astray from hip hop and which furthermore – rather unconvincingly – are made to stand for a whole group. Secondly, the writing is not always clear. This is particularly problematic when bringing in conducted studies, which not only mix personal judgment with statistics but through her phrasing also allow multiple interpretations, as in this case:

That the impact of these sexually suggestive videos is undeniably regressive in terms of gender politics and young girls and women's self-identity is revealed in a 2003 year-long study conducted by the Center for AIDS Research (CFAR) at Emory University. Tracking 522 Alabama girl's hip hop video consumption and behaviors, the study revealed that a higher consumption of hip hop videos corresponded negatively with higher frequency of sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol and drug abuse (60 percent), and multiple sex partners (twice as likely). (27)

A third point of criticism is Sharpley-Whiting's failure to make clear how exactly hip hop culture differs from other cultural forms, both older black expressions and white ones. Instead of showing *how* black gender politics are different today, she rather states that there *are* new gender politics, namely those "in the service of a jack-legged black masculinity. And this black masculinity has been cobbled together from the stultifying remains of white supremacy, media, and the undeserved privileges accrued globally by American manhood." (51) Describing herself as a feminist, she should have developed

the ground laid out by black feminist hip hop scholars Tricia Rose (1994) and Patricia Hill Collins (2006) and thus elaborate more deeply what hip hop can and cannot do for young black women.

These criticisms notwithstanding, I want to conclude by stressing that this is a valuable book for anyone first entering the discussion of hip hop culture, and it is a particularly important contribution as it engages with hip hop culture from a black feminist standpoint. Hopefully, the book will stimulate more discussion, as its concluding words remain challenging: “hip hop intersects with gender in ways that have us women renegotiating and debating the veritable gray areas taken up in *Pimps Up, Ho’s Down* involving female pleasure, an affirming sexuality, beauty, and women’s labor.” (156)

References

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Contact (by e-mail): Miriam Strube

Biographical note

Miriam Strube is based at the University of Dortmund, Germany

