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Gender & Popular Culture
12.19.13
Final Essay

Positive Representations of Gender in Popular Music

Music has been a part of culture in America before it even became an official nation. Its history is extensive, varied, and telling of many other aspects of our past, for music has always been inherently connected with larger culture and society. As time progressed, “popular music” began to emerge with the dawn of new technologies like gramophone players, radio, record players, television, and eventually, the Internet. Each new invention paved the way for more Americans to gain access to wider ranges of music that now had the capability to consume the nation with the push of a button. Over the past twenty years, popular music has experienced a resurgence in consciousness and connection to issues that are rooted in themes like equality, empowerment, and justice. Various artists—including Tupac Shakur, Shania Twain, Beyonce, and others—have incorporated such matters into their music, while remaining in the popular realm of mainstream culture. This essay will explore this encouraging trend and analyze its effectiveness, consequences, and potential for the future.

I. What is Popular Music?

A dictionary defines popular music as “music appealing to the popular taste, including rock and pop and also soul, country, reggae, rap, and dance music.” Further stipulations generally include a combination of positive critical response, domination of music charts, and commercial success. However, there are many cases where not all three apply, yet the song is undoubtedly a facet of pop music (e.g. Rebecca Black’s 2011 song “Friday,” which was deemed by many critics as “the worst song ever,” but has infamously secured a place in pop culture history forever). This fluid definition is

reflective of a constantly changing larger culture that is consumed by fleeting fads and transient trends.

Five of the six songs that this paper will analyze fully fit the popular music requirements and are well known across different ages, races, geographic locations, and class boundaries. The exception, “Stay at Home Dad” by Macklemore, was released prior to the artist’s explosive rise to fame in 2012 and remains relatively unknown. However, because of the recent and widespread popularity of Macklemore, the track will be accepted under the assumption that it will gain exposure as new fans explore the music he released prior to the first album.

These definitions and categorizations of popular music are important for many reasons. While any musician can produce and release music, the scope of her influence and power is negligible without the backing of radio DJs across the nation, millions of listeners, and arenas filled to the brim with screaming fans. Today, there are many artists producing brilliant feminist work that explores complex issues of race, gender, and sexuality, and challenges the hegemonic institutions of society. Yet they are ignored by 99% of the world. There are also countless chart-topping artists producing work that reaches millions of fans, full of catchy tunes, energetic beats, and powerful corporate backing. Yet they ignore 99% of the world.

II. Challenging Hegemony in Its Own Breeding Ground

What makes the following artists unique is their decision to combine consciousness with enormous reach, in the interest of bringing relevant issues to the national conversation—through the tween’s hot-pink iHome, through the suburban soccer mom’s XM radio, through the CEO’s noise-cancelling headphones. A break into the Top 40 cycle is a milestone for any artist, but when feminism and intersectionality are added to the mix, there is much more to celebrate than lots of play

time and enormous profits.

This remains the exception to the rule today, as misogyny, sexualization, and objectification continue to run rampant in the vast majority of popular music. These themes, while particularly prevalent in hip-hop and rap, are present in all popular genres and are perpetuated by artists across the board, from Toby Keith to Kanye West. Ronald Weitzer and Charles Kubin attempt to explain this phenomenon through the “hegemonic masculinity [that has been] defined as attitudes and practices that perpetuate heterosexual male domination over women.”¹ Such attitudes and practices have manifested themselves through explicit and demeaning lyrics, graphic music videos, and the continuation of a culture defined by the degradation of women.

Because of this misogynistic, binary culture, any song that contradicts these norms is automatically unique and rebellious. Rather than criticizing the culture from the outside, as many activists, artists, and critics passionately do, these mainstream artists are staging a revolution from within by using the industry’s economic power and societal capital to combat the persisting hegemonic messages that it itself perpetuates. These “mini-rebellions” are just as varied as the amorphous entity of general popular culture. The following case-studies present examples that promote various types of counter-hegemonic ideologies including differing feminist perspectives, incorporated discussions of race and class, and satirical challenges of existing institutions.

III. Feminisms in Pop Culture

Postfeminism is the most common and least incendiary branch of feminism in popular music today, and dozens of hit songs have been produced over the past two decades that could effectively be

¹Ronald Weitzer and Charles Kubin, “Misogyny in Rap Music: A Content Analysis of Prevalence and Meanings,” *Men and Masculinities*, Feb. 2009, <http://jmm.sagepub.com/content/12/1/3.full.pdf+html>, accessed December 18, 2013.

deemed anthems for this particular cultural development. Postfeminism is a divisive and complex term in itself that embodies multiple, sometimes contradictory, definitions. Scholars continue to debate over what exactly this popularized term means, but for argument's sake, this paper will define it as the general attitude that the goals of the feminist movement have been reached; that it is now "okay" to embrace femininity and all that it encompasses because women are now equal in today's society. Postfeminism is generally associated with the embrace of female sexuality and empowerment, and deemed by its backers as "a linear endpoint in the historical trajectory [of feminism]."²

Many mainstream artists have built or highlighted their careers with music focused on these very themes. Shania Twain, with her hit song "Man! I Feel Like A Woman," which spent 28 weeks on the *Billboard Hot 100* chart in 1999, evokes multiple postfeminist ideals: "Get a little outta line/I ain't gonna act politically correct/I only wanna have a good time/The best thing about being a woman/Is the prerogative to have a little fun."³ The image of women jumping around "having a good time" combined with her dismissal of "acting politically correct" is directly in line with postfeminist themes of moving past the burden of feminism, and instead celebrating its victories. Twain later celebrates heterosexual femininity by singing of "men's shirts," "short skirts," and "coloring her hair" as means of "being free" and feeling like a woman.

Other female artists including Nicki Minaj, Lady Gaga, and Katy Perry portray similar themes in their music, presenting themselves as sexualized women who are celebrating their agency and freedom. In an interview, Nicki Minaj denied that she was a feminist, but enthusiastically embraced "girl-power"

²Jess Butler, "For White Girls Only? Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion," *Feminist Formations Vol. 25 No. 1*, Spring 2013.

http://www.academia.edu/3370089/For_White_Girls_Only_Postfeminism_and_the_Politics_of_Inclusion, accessed December 18, 2013.

³Shania Twain, "Man! I Feel Like a Woman," <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/shaniatwain/manifeellikeawoman.html>, accessed December 18, 2013.

and expressed how she hopes her music empowers her female fans.⁴ Once again, the lukewarm sentiments toward feminism and the desire to avoid its connotations is combined with a celebration of womanhood and feminine empowerment. It is not surprising that these attitudes, characterized by hesitancy to challenge the remaining, very real existences of sexism and misogyny, is the most widespread and accepted form of pop feminism. While these female artists emphatically argue in defense of their lyrics and appearances with the postfeminist tenets of sex-positive celebrations of womanhood, much of their music continues to propagate the hegemonic structures of a sexist overarching culture.

However, many mainstream artists move beyond the questionable “feminist” personas of Twain, Minaj, Perry, and others by incorporating unabashed liberal feminist ideals into their music. These beliefs and themes are largely based on the fundamental movement toward full respect for women. Liberal feminism is perhaps most closely aligned with colloquial concepts of feminism, including the rejection of patriarchy and efforts toward increased equality for women in a larger context, relating to political, economic, and social institutions. This trend, while still a minority among the whole of pop music, has achieved success by artists like Tupac Shakur, Lupe Fiasco, and Beyonce.

In his widely popular single “Keep Ya Head Up,” Tupac reflects specifically on the African-American culture in which women are often degraded, abused, and mistreated. Throughout the song, he implores his community to reform their attitudes,

You know what makes me unhappy/When brothers make babies, and leave a young
mother to be a pappy/And since we all came from a woman/Got our name from a woman
and our game from a woman/I wonder why we take from our women/Why we rape our
women, do we hate our women?

⁴Tracy Egan Morrissey, “Nicki Minaj Embraces Being a Feminist Role Model,” *Jezebel*, April 2012, <http://jezebel.com/5900611/nicki-minaj-embraces-being-a-feminist-role-model>, accessed December 18, 2013.

and connects the issues of misogyny to other aspects of society. Shakur incorporates not only the maltreatment of women, but its connections to poverty and race within the United States (“I give a holla to my sisters on welfare/Tupac cares, if don’t nobody else care,” “They got money for war, but can’t feed the poor,” and “While the rich kids is drivin Benz/I’m still tryin to hold on to my survivin friends”⁵). This holistic and intersectional analysis exposes the deep complexities of such topics, as opposed to mistakenly isolating individual issues.

In spite of selling over 5 million copies since its debut in 1992, Tupac’s feminist dreams of a more equal society were not yet met twenty years later in 2012 when Lupe Fiasco released his single “Bitch Bad.” As an artist who makes frequent references to “Pac,” Fiasco examines gender in a similar manner. Through the specific lens of language, Fiasco analyzes the insidious effects of the word “bitch” in the United States, its varying and conflicting meanings, and its role in the development of children (specifically its distinct impacts on boys and girls). He connects the word to Freud’s “Madonna-Whore” complex and summarizes his conclusions in the refrain of the song, “Bitch bad/woman good/lady better/they misunderstood.”⁶ While radical feminist concerns do exist with Fiasco’s assumed chivalry in such a line, which suggests the lack of equality between men and women, a liberal feminist perspective would view the song as a generally positive promotion of the cultural and societal views of women.

Beyonce, arguably the queen of liberal pop feminism, has built a career fueled on (real) women’s empowerment and gender equality. For years, feminists have debated on whether Beyonce is a “true feminist” or not, since much of her image sends conflicting messages. On one hand, she embraces the title of feminist and proudly identifies as one, unlike the majority of pop stars today (as previously discussed). On the other, however, she constantly presents herself in skimpy outfits when

⁵Tupac Shakur, “Keep Ya Head Up,” <http://rapgenius.com/2pac-keep-ya-head-up-lyrics>, accessed December 18, 2013.

⁶Lupe Fiasco, “Bitch Bad,” <http://rapgenius.com/Lupe-fiasco-bitch-bad-lyrics>, accessed December 18, 2013.

performing highly sexualized dances to her songs that are almost exclusively about love and men.

Yet, while conflict and debate continues on, a consensus seems to be emerging that Beyonce is, in fact, one of the most important feminists of our generation. *Time* reflects on her most recent surprise album that “makes sure to let us know that those songs are also about empowerment”⁷ while Tamara Winfrey Harris of *Bitch Magazine* responds to critics by defending Beyonce, “Judging each other without acknowledging these influences is uncharitable at best and dishonest at worst. A tiny top and a traditional marriage should not be enough to strip a woman otherwise committed to gender equality of the feminist mantle.”⁸ Both her past albums, and recently released album promote largely feminist ideals with lyrics that discuss our culture’s obsession with physical appearance, balancing career and motherhood, sexual equality between men and women, and the value of independence: “I took some time to live my life/But don’t think I’m just his little wife.”⁹ Beyonce’s mass appeal and success are especially relevant as her “modern feminism” continues to infiltrate and inspire previously taboo values and labels in the midst of American popular culture.

Finally, even traces of radical feminism have begun to surface in popular music. Though less widespread and less well-known than previous artists, songs like Queen Latifah’s “U.N.I.T.Y” and Macklemore’s “Stay at Home Dad” have emerged into the realm of popular music and communicate strong themes of radical feminism. This branch of feminism bases its focus on individual patriarchal gender relations and their current injustices, rather than on legal or social institutions (as is the case with liberal feminism). Generally, radical feminism is interpreted as more extreme since it questions and challenges the inherent patriarchy of institutions themselves instead of working to gain traction within

⁷Eliana Dockterman, “Flawless: 5 Lessons in Modern Feminism from Beyonce,” *Time*, Dec. 2013, <http://ideas.time.com/2013/12/17/flawless-5-lessons-in-modern-feminism-from-beyonce/>, accessed December 18, 2013.

⁸Tamara Winfrey Harris, “All Hail the Queen?,” *Bitch Magazine*, 2013, <http://bitchmagazine.org/article/all-hail-the-queen-beyonce-feminism>, accessed December 18, 2013.

⁹Beyonce Knowles, “***Flawless,” <http://rapgenius.com/Beyonce-flawless-lyrics>, accessed December 18, 2013.

them.¹⁰

In her only song to make it to the top 30 of the *Billboard Hot 100*, Queen Latifah brings together black women to speak out against the chauvinistic objectification of women in everyday life, “Everytime I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a hoe/Trying to make a sister feel low/You know all of that gots to go.”¹¹ Macklemore goes even further in his song, by questioning the very concept of today’s gender roles and stereotypes through satire. He portrays himself as a proud stay at home father, who cooks, cleans, and watches Oprah while his wife goes off to her high-paying job. Throughout the song, he simultaneously pokes fun at upper-middle class, white suburban lifestyle, “Then time for gymnastics, Rice Crispy treats and wax baggies/I’m with my kids in the minivan, listening to NPR/With the windows down, through the cul de sac.”¹² Though intentionally humorous, the song addresses serious issues related to gender and class, and brings the arbitrary social constructs of our culture to light.

IV. Conclusion

While these are just some of the instances of the trends toward positive gender representations in popular music, they each serve as excellent examples of the variation and scope of this growing trend. Still today, they exist as exceptions to the dominating rules of popular music—an aspect of culture still largely driven by heteronormative, hegemonic agendas that fuel the misogynistic attitudes of most songs. Yet, there is cause for hope. Widespread discussion not only among academics, but between neighbors and over dinner table conversations, about recent controversies like Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” and Miley Cyrus’ VMA performance is evidence that awareness is growing. With artists like Tupac who

¹⁰Sara Evans, “Second Wave Feminism in the United States,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2, Summer 2002, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178740?seq=3>, accessed December 18, 2013.

¹¹Queen Latifah, “U.N.I.T.Y.,” <http://rapgenius.com/Queen-latifah-unity-lyrics>, accessed December 18, 2013.

¹²Macklemore, “Stay at Home Dad,” <http://rapgenius.com/Macklemore-stay-at-home-dad-lyrics>, accessed December 18, 2013.

have been described as “a symbol on the level of Bob Marley or Che Guevara,”¹³ Macklemore who was recently nominated for seven Grammys—including Best New Artist, Best Album, and Best Song—and Beyonce, whose self-titled album is currently the best-selling album in the country, there is tangible proof of positive reception and, more importantly, potential for even more revolutionary counter-hegemonic material in the years to come.

¹³Dipannita Basu & Sidney J. Lemelle, Pluto, *The Vinyl Ain't Final: Hip Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture*, 2006, p. 79

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