THE MISEDUCATION OF LAURYN HILL AND ALMOST EVERYONE ELSE

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Around the man is a collision of flowers, gold and red, torn from the fabrics of a Kenyan marketplace. As wallpaper, it's garish, but as the flowers explore the dimensions of their canvas, drifting in front of his jeans and sneakers and hoodie and Hanes, they give a sense of decorum, a chaotic royalty to this young black man. This man, reclining on a golden bed, is contorted, twisting around himself. His flat-brimmed hat, cocked to the side, slips gently off his head from his unnatural pose. His expensive-looking sneakers look to be an extension of his golden pedestal: unquestionably clean, shining gold. His feminine position is dissonantly provocative: his mouth barely open, his gaze fluttering but confident, the twisting of his torso effortlessly accentuating his hips. What makes him seem out of place lies in our own perception, our own discomfort with his vulnerability.

Kehinde Wiley's *Femme piquée par un serpent* is an immense painting, taking up nearly a full museum wall. Wiley has made a name for himself by depicting young black men mimicking the postures of figures from famous works of classical art. Often, as with this piece, he will have his male models adopt distinctly feminine positions, isolating the models as much as he can from the labels attached to them by society. He liberates young black men from the violence and aggression so commonly associated with them in pop culture and the media by subverting traditional gender norms and depicting them as vulnerable and proud, like the female subjects of classical artworks. Wiley's work is deeply rooted in the overcoming of racial stereotypes, but it is this tension—the interplay of the masculine and the feminine—that makes this particular piece stand out. And this interplay has a lot to do with the changing state of gender norms in today's society (which are, of course, related to race). The model in this work is mimicking the position of the model in *Femme Piquée Par Un Serpent* (Woman Bitten by a Snake) by Auguste Clésinger.

The original Clésinger sculpture upon which Wiley's work is based was the subject of much controversy when it debuted in 1847 at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris (Musée d'Orsay). Critics claimed it was overtly sexualized. So, though "highly praised for its sensual naturalism," Wiley's transposition of Clésinger's subject onto the body of a young man is shocking, even uncomfortable for many viewers (Getsy). The sexuality of the original work is there, but it is no longer shrouded by "high-art" mystique. By having a male model adopt this position, Wiley is isolating the position from the model. The position is vulnerable and alluring while the model is distant and masculine. It forces us to ask ourselves: why do the two seem so incompatible? Wiley's painting transforms from sexual exploitation to accusation; we, not the artist, are exploiting the subject.

Due to Wiley's commitment to exposing hypocrisies of American culture through raw expression, it's not surprising he has become an important voice in the hip-hop community. He was even commissioned to paint the honorees for VH1's Hip-Hop Honors program (VH1). However, the hip-hop world is constantly being criticized for its depiction of *women*. In just 2003, anthropologist Johnnetta B. Cole and black feminist scholar Beverly Guy-Sheftall claimed "hip-hop is more misogynistic and disrespectful of . . . women than other popular music genres" (186). Wiley's treatment of sexuality, adopting the feminine and subverting misogyny, seems almost out of place when put in context of the history of hip-hop. Stereotypes that pervade hip-hop—the gangster, the player, the gold digger—have long kept misogyny a very present aspect of the genre. Until very recently, only a few artists have overcome these tropes, setting themselves outside of their accepted roles, inserting themselves comfortably in unfamiliar territory like the man in Wiley's painting. One such artist, now considered a classic hip-hop star, is Lauryn Hill.

In 1998, a new powerhouse was born with the release of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.* This album by the titular Lauryn Hill was hailed by critics, debuting at number one on the Billboard 200 and littering the year-end lists. This album was a turning point, a watershed moment for women in hip-hop. Over pleasantly tight string progressions and classic boom-bap beats, Lauryn Hill croons and preaches with an assured self-confidence. Yet, without a trace of ego or bravado, her delivery is vulnerable, her voice nearly shaking with emotion in the most moving sections. Yet she is unafraid, addressing her

problems head-on, seamlessly transitioning to rap to communicate her message. The themes of the album are clear: God is present and beautiful, love is always looming, as is heartbreak. These concepts revolve around the inciting incident of this album: Lauryn Hill's pregnancy and her desire to understand her role as a woman and a citizen of the world. Lauryn Hill's weapon is her sincerity, her cause understanding. Any bitterness (essentially a staple of hip-hop in the nineties) is lost under a sea of hope and good intentions.

This album was important not just because of its unique and influential blend of R&B and hip-hop, but because it was so unapologetically womanist. Few ever dreamed that the moral and practical questions that arise during a complicated pregnancy would be the centerpiece of a hit hip-hop record. The success of Hill's album seemed to predict a turning point—that rap would begin to become as much an expression of the "feminine" (in this case as it relates to emotional sincerity) as it is of the "masculine" (aggression and bravado). However, come the turn of the century, the female rapper all but disappeared. The next album by a female rapper to hit number one on the Billboard 200 was Nicki Minaj's *Pink Friday* in 2010 (Nielson).

Pink Friday is similar to *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* in many ways. It is a hugely successful debut album by a darling of the underground hip-hop world who attempts to mix R&B, pop, and hip-hop. However, separated by only a decade, the two albums couldn't be more thematically different. Nicki Minaj's delivery is schizophrenic, wild, unhindered, outright aggressive. Her energy is matched and, at times, overcome by scratchy post-dubstep drums, a hammering bass, and non-stop candy-coated synthesizers. On most of the tracks, Nicki's hooks recall the early hardcore tracks of Nas and Eminem. She deadpan chants "shitted on 'em, man I just shitted on 'em" to anchor one of the album's lead singles ("Did It On'em"). A full decade of radio silence from female MCs ended with an album that is as aggressive, disrespectful, and sexualized as anything else on the market. Compared to Hill, Minaj's *Pink Friday* is a reversal of the persona of the female MC. Perhaps today's hip-hop market has become so polarized that only voices of hypermasculine aggression can become popular. Maybe, more simply, Minaj's talent is driving her to the top regardless of her subject matter, and she is just using the most easily accessible hip-hop clichés. Or perhaps, more optimistically, the concept of womanhood is changing. Maybe Minaj's abandonment of the hope and sensitivity of

Hill's work represents a new fearlessness that can now be associated with popular conceptions of femininity.

However, in the past year, there has also been a tremendous change in the male hip-hop persona, perhaps providing insight into the origin of this wild 180-degree turn. With the mainstream commercial success of artists like Kendrick Lamar, Drake, and J. Cole, it has become clear that the gangster ego celebrated in hip-hop since the mid-'90s has disappeared. While the production and background of gangster hip-hop remains—the boom-bap beat is still king—the messages these artists are communicating seem alien to the genre. Lamar's critically lauded and commercially successful album *To Pimp A Butterfly* is a deeply emotional, complex album about race, love, family, and fame. In fact, its emotional bluntness and positivity seem to be modeled after *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, even referencing Lauryn Hill's lead single "Everything Is Everything" by name in the song "Hood Politics."

It seems the reemergence of women in hip-hop has come with a reversal. The male hip-hop star now epitomizes the traditionally feminine qualities of emotional sincerity and positivity, while the female hip-hop star is exploring the traditionally masculine aggression and sexuality of gangster hip-hop. Like the young man in Wiley's painting, these MCs have removed themselves from the conceptions of sexuality that came before them. They have laid themselves out in vulnerable positions and, like the young man, they seem comfortable with their exposure.

The transfer of masculine subject matter from male to female MCs has complicated implications for women in the hip-hop community but also for all modern feminists. In her essay "'Under Construction': Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges Between Black Second-Wave and Hip-Hop Feminisms," Whitney A. Peoples explores a type of third-wave feminist she and other writers have deemed the "hip-hop feminist" (20). Peoples admits this is a problematic label. She says most of mainstream hip-hop is fixated on "appropriation of patriarchal notions of power . . . all of which are secured and protected through the hyper-masculine threat of violence" (24). She refers to rappers claiming ownership of drug empires or massive prostitution rings, using their pride, aggression, and untamed bravado to prove that they deserve it. So, if this is the fixation of hip-hop today, bringing the feminine into the hip-hop world seems unlikely

if not impossible. Moreover, Peoples states that "the images of sexually available black women that pervade rap music are marketable because of already existing ideologies that designated black women as hypersexual and morally obtuse" (24). Many writing about women and hip-hop feel this is a contradiction—that this forced persona of hypersexuality stifles the feminist message. However, Peoples believes it is inevitable that this tension leads to a new kind of feminist. Peoples believes that these stereotypes "can be rearticulated and engaged in a subversive manner" (24). This new breed, this "hip-hop feminist," understands the history of the hip-hop community's misogyny and appropriates it to speak to the issues therein.

Lauryn Hill did this by talking bluntly about her sexuality while connecting it to expressions of emotionality rather than traditional symbols of power. She adopted the confidence and straightforwardness of male hip-hop artists but pursued emotional and spiritual contentment rather than submitting to or perpetuating "patriarchal notions of power." In her song "Doo Wop (That Thing)" she even turns the age-old hip-hop stereotype of the "Gold Digger"—one of the most common stereotypes of the "hypersexual and morally obtuse" woman—on its head, at first criticizing women for their selfishness but then showing how the stereotype is dwarfed by male hypocrisies. Lauryn Hill was, as Peoples describes, using hip-hop stereotypes to engage with issues in a new way.

The fact that female rappers have since strayed from this "hip-hop feminist" practice is unsettling. While female artists like Nicki Minaj adopting hypersexual, masculine personas could be seen as "rearticulat[ing]" and "subvert[ing]" the gender roles deemed suitable for female hip-hop celebrities, it could also simply be a further enforcing of the "patriarchal notions of power" that would make it difficult for another artist like Lauryn Hill to become popular.

What Peoples doesn't address is the "hip-hop feminist's" relationship to mainstream hip-hop as mainstream male rappers abandon the pursuit of "patriarchal notions of power." If popular male rappers expand their representation of women beyond the historical precedent of "sexualized" and "morally obtuse" women, how can female rappers rearticulate and subvert the mainstream? This isn't to say that there aren't issues with how women are

addressed in these more emotional modern hip-hop albums, but the issues have certainly changed.

Consider the song "These Walls" by Kendrick Lamar off of *To Pimp A Butterfly*. The song—produced beautifully with a dreamy, introspective funk-vibe—begins with what could be considered standard sexual fare for a rapper. Initially, Lamar uses "these walls" to mean the bedroom and vaginal walls of a woman he's having an affair with. He says "[These walls] need someone to live in them just to relieve tension. Me? I'm just a tenant," which, in any song a decade ago would be perceived as bragging about an easy, short-term relationship with a woman ("These Walls"). But in the darker, heartfelt third verse, the meaning of "these walls" turns to mean the jail cell walls of the woman's incarcerated significant other, and then the walls within Lamar's mind—his feelings of guilt and shame about using his fame to take advantage of this woman, hurting this jailed man. Suddenly, the whole explicit first verse of the song takes on a new meaning: Lamar is "just a tenant" not because he's using this woman, but because the man that the woman's heart belongs to is in jail. Lamar is just a placeholder.

Not only is this song unique in its expression of raw, painful internal conflict, but it also shows a male rapper speaking about sex in a sensitive, emotionally driven way. Lamar explores the complex emotions that this relationship with a woman has shown him and uses those emotions to speak intricately about moral quandaries. That isn't to say that his album has completely overcome negative stereotypes of women (a character on the album is the deceitful temptress Lucy [short for Lucifer] who distracts Lamar from his purer goals) but the "hyper-sexual and morally obtuse" woman Peoples cites as a standard hip-hop stereotype is nowhere to be found. In fact, very few women are characterized on the album, the one exception being Lamar's mother.

Perhaps the success of more aggressive female voices in hip-hop is actually in reaction to this shift in the work of some male rappers. The rapidly growing ranks of sexualized female rap stars, spearheaded by Minaj (supported with successful albums by rappers like Azealia Banks and Angel Haze), could, on some level, feel that the modern, more sensitive male rappers are understating the confident and decisive power women have. More bluntly, by focusing on their own internal struggles, male rappers could be trivializing

the role of the woman. If this is the case, the sexualization of female MCs could be a step toward equality, giving women a voice in the hip-hop world even if it isn't as distinctly feminist as the voice of Lauryn Hill is. And, in some ways, the fact that they don't rap about distinctly feminist topics might be even more progressive. If this progression continues then eventually their talent could be the only factor determining their popularity, regardless of gender.

However, even if it is a step in a progressive direction, rapping in this style has consequences. In her essay "What It Do, Shorty?: Women, Hip-Hop, and a Feminist Agenda," Gwendolyn D. Pough states the disheartening fact that black women are, statistically, the fastest growing incarcerated population in the U.S., and she claims that the modern female MC is an obstacle to fixing this problem (92). She cites a trope of hip-hop culture that she calls the "down ass chick," the concept of being "gangster" by association and being willing to act violently out of devotion to a man (92). Pough claims that many women are going to jail "because of their relationships with men who are involved with criminal activities" (92). One would think that it is solely the male gangsta rappers who are promoting this commitment to men. But Pough claims this message is "not just coming from men" (92); it's also coming from female MCs looking to prove their involvement in the gangster culture (92). The sentiments of the "down ass chick" can, disappointingly, be found in many of Minaj's lyrics. For example, she chants over and over about her devotion to her 'gangsta boo' in "Save Me," and even in "Super Bass"—a massive hit among teens—she claims to be interested in a man due to his illegal associations. And, in some ways, isn't this adoption of hypermasculine, aggressive, hip-hop personas another way of pledging allegiance to the patriarchal ideals of gangster rappers, deeming them acceptable from a female point of view? If this is a progressive step in the sense that it allows female MCs to explore subject matter beyond the fact of their femininity, the danger of condoning misogynist standards is always present.

Truthfully, because Minaj still raps mostly about the size of her rear and its sex appeal, she isn't using her persona to explore much subject matter beyond her femininity. Yet the female MC has a voice and an audience. Perhaps in the future female MCs who are neither sexualized and violent nor necessarily outspokenly feminist will, then, find success. Rappers like

Rapsody, Jean Grae, and Gifted Gab are already making this sort of music, but seeing little mainstream attention. Then again, predicting the course of popular music is nearly impossible. There are factors that determine popularity far beyond gender roles.

For example, the way we listen to the music has transformed dramatically over the years. While hip-hop began as a very public event, finding its center at def jams and block parties, music is no longer distributed this way. The fact that hip-hop is no longer spread by live events, or even radio or TV, makes it an even more personal experience for the listener. Perhaps Lamar's new album was so successful not because gender roles have shifted, but because listening to music is now a more intimate experience. Lamar's album broke records for being the most streamed ever on Spotify; maybe this is less the symbol of his relevance than the cause of it (Wood). Hip-hop is now largely consumed by earbudded youth in their dorm rooms, listening for emotional catharsis, not communal empowerment.

No matter how it is consumed, hip-hop, like any art with a public, both reflects and defines its era. The course of decades can be seen as the torch is passed down through generations of hip-hop artists. Beginning with the block party celebrations of DJ Kool Herc then developing into the break beats of Grandmaster Flash to the Zulu Nation of A Tribe Called Quest to the power movement of Public Enemy to the gangsta revolution of The Wu-Tang Clan to the outspoken struggle of Tupac to young Nas to Jay-Z to Eminem to Outkast to Kanye West to Kendrick Lamar, hip hop's genealogy shows progress and regression, a timeline of cultural evolution. Wiley has made an artistic career out of appropriating images from European art history to show pride in the history of black culture. Hip-hop works alongside him, documenting changes along the way. Now that it looks like the female MC is here to stay, a new timeline can begin: from Salt-N-Pepa to Lauryn Hill to Missy Elliott to Nicki Minaj, and now hopefully to Jean Grae or Rapsody or another voice of forward thinking. Rather than allowing "patriarchal notions of power" to remain a staple of hip-hop, this change in gender roles may allow for a new timeline of equality to emerge, one that allows hip-hop to flourish not as an obstacle but as an artform, an instrument of progress.

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