My Feminism is Ratchet: A Black Feminist Review

By

Quindera A. McClain
August 27, 2018

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of the University at Buffalo, State University of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Transnational Studies
Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank my mother. She believed in me when I did not believe in myself. She has spent a countless amount of hours encouraging me and reminding me that I could do anything that I set my mind to. She has been my source of strength throughout this project, and to her I am forever grateful. I love you, Mommie.

I would also like to thank my thesis committee; had not been for their patience and encouraging words this project may have not materialized. Your guidance and support has meant the world to me and there is no way I would have been able to complete this journey without the two of you, Dr. Keith Griffler and Dr. James Pappas.

To the rest of my friends and family, thank you for supporting me throughout this process. It hasn’t been easy, but with all of your love and encouraging words I made it through. Thank you.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... ii  
Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ iv  
Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 2  
Respectability ............................................................................................................................... 4  
What Does Black Feminism Look Like? ....................................................................................... 13  
Feminism in Pop Culture ............................................................................................................. 19  
Disrespectability .......................................................................................................................... 24  
Beyoncé’s Feminism ..................................................................................................................... 29  
Where Do We Go From Here? ..................................................................................................... 40  
References .................................................................................................................................... 42
Abstract

From the time of our arrival in America, Black people have been forced to create protective strategies and employ tactics of survival against racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression put in place by the dominant society. Of those strategies the politics of respectability, which were crafted by a group of Black Baptist women during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is a strategy that Black people are currently still employing. While both Black men and women are negatively affected by the politics of respectability I chose to focus solely on women for this specific project. Throughout this paper not only will I be exploring the reasons why adhering to the politics of respectability stifles Black women, but I will also discuss the ways in which respectability sneaks into Black feminist discourse. Also within the context of this paper I will address the newfound interest that Black entertainers such as, Beyoncé and Cardi B, have with feminism and the ways in which they are using their artistry to aid young Black women and girls in forging a new sub section of Black feminism — Ratchet feminism.
"An honest engagement with our own pleasure produces work that is nothing less than transformative – not only for us but for anybody lucky enough to be fucking with us at that time.” – Joan Morgan
Introduction

I’m not sure how it happened, or even when it happened. All I know is somewhere along my life’s journey I forgot who I was. I spent so much time crafting my persona, critiquing my appearance, and being mindful of the way I spoke that I lost myself. I spent most of my adult life and some of my adolescence molding myself into someone I thought the world would receive as safe and worthy of respect. I have restricted my movements, controlled my thoughts, and subdued my desires and I hadn’t even realized I was doing it. I allowed outside influences to inform the decisions I made and the actions I took, all to avoid the labels that are often given to Black women and girls by society. As I reflect back, morphing into something other than myself was nothing more than a mechanism of protection, a strategy that many so many other Black people have felt the need to employ.

From an early age I have had to maneuver through white spaces while simultaneously trying to prove that I deserved to be in those spaces. I have unwillingly served as “representative” for others who look like me, constantly having to fight off stereotypes. As time went on I found myself seeking a sort of safe haven within educational spaces from all of the responsibility I felt was being placed upon me. Throughout high school I enrolled in women’s studies courses and feminist courses hoping to find asylum in the words of the women who came before me, but to my dismay I could not relate to the words I was reading or the materials being taught to me. Though I was being introduced to women such as, Virginia Woolf and Betty Friedan, who are
My Feminism is Ratchet

great in their own right, their work did not move me in the ways it has moved my White counterparts.

It was not until I attended college that I was able to really engage in the works of Black feminists like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. While they wrote works of fiction their words couldn’t have been anymore real to me. They wrote about everything I had been experiencing. They understood the complexities of what it meant to be Black and to be female. They helped me to understand and identify my feelings through the stories they told. However, it was not until I read Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* that something clicked in within me:

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn’t the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touch.ed them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own (Morrison, 1987).

It was then that I realized that no matter how much I policed my behavior people were going to continue to see me as they wanted to. No matter how I articulated myself, or dressed, or behaved I’m still a Black woman and people would continue to project their
My Feminism is Ratchet

ideas of what that meant upon me. I began to recognize that through policing who I am that I am only causing harm to myself. I had been subscribing to the rules of respectability. I lost myself trying to earn the reverence and respect of White America.

Respectability

At one point or another every little Black girl has been told to, “sit like a lady”, “put on a longer skirt”, “do something with that hair”, and to “speak properly”. These commonly used phrases were born out of respectability politics. The politics of respectability is a phrase that was coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her book, Righteous Discontent: The Woman’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920. Higginbotham coined that term as a way to describe the strategy used and established by a group of Black Baptist women, known as the Women’s Convention, as they fought to distance themselves and their community away from the negative stereotypes forced upon them by systems of racism and sexism. The Women’s convention thought that by enforcing a set of rules or guidelines to live by that Black people would be deemed as acceptable and would garner a level of esteem from White America. Included in these rules were examples of how to dress, speak, and behave in a way that was seen as respectable.

Respectability demanded that every individual in the black community assume responsibility for behavioral self-regulation and self-improvement along moral, educational and economic lines. The goal was to distance oneself as far as possible from images perpetuated by racist stereotypes. Individual behavior... determined the collective fate of African Americans. It was particularly public behavior that they perceived to wield the power either to refute or confirm stereotypical representations and discriminatory practices. There could be no
My Feminism is Ratchet

laxity as far as sexual conduct, cleanliness, temperance, hard work, and politeness were concerned (Higginbotham, 1993).

The rules of respectability were used as a survival tool back then, however, this method did not yield the expected outcome back then, and it continues to have a negative affect on us today.

Before we discuss the ways in which respectability stifles Black women and girls I think its best that we discuss the stereotypes and mechanism of control that the politics of respectability were attempting to fight against. According to Patricia Hill Collins, there are four “controlling images” that aid in the oppression of Black women and they are the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel (Collins, 1991). However, Angela Mitchell and Kennise Herring have identified six stereotypes in which they believe shape the lived experiences of Black women and they are: the Mammy, Sapphire, Neglectful Welfare Mother, The Bitter Sister, The Tragic Mulatto, and The Jezebel (Mitchell & Herring, 1998). For the sake of this project I will mainly make mention of the jezebel, even though just about all of these stereotypical images do have a hand in controlling the way Black women police themselves sexually and otherwise. The jezebel is the stereotype that portrays Black women as sex-crazed and wanton. According to Patricia Hill Collins, the jezebel is “central in the nexus of elite white male images of Black womanhood because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression”(Collins, 1991).
My Feminism is Ratchet

The jezebel is an immoral black woman incapable of being victimized sexually. While the myth of sexual promiscuity still reigns today it’s roots were planted in Jamestown Virginia during the 17th century, the beginning of the American slavery era (Harris-Perry 2011). The function of the jezebel was to “relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive” (Collins, 1991). Which in turn granted White men the ability to sexual assault and rape Black women without consequence. Although slavery as we know it has ended we are still dealing with it’s consequences. Black women today are still blatantly sexualized and taken advantage of sexually, and because of the racist history that has shaped our narrative we often do not receive the same protections as our white counterparts.

The politics of respectability are essentially a practice of self-policing that continues to stifle the growth of Black women and girls. We police our bodies, we suppress our sexuality, and we subdue our emotions as a way of deflecting negative attention and unfair treatment, but what policing ourselves really does is hinder Black women and girls from being able to grow into themselves and stops us from being able to fully experience self love (McGloster, 2016). Through the practicing of respectability politics Black people essentially give in to the belief that to be born with dark skin is to be inferior to our white counterparts. We inadvertently are striving to reach the supposed gold standard of Whiteness through our adherence to respectability. More specifically, Black women and girls learn early on through the practice of respectability that our bodies are inherently deviant and abnormal by Western Standards (Hobson, 2005).
My Feminism is Ratchet

The Black female body has been a topic of discussion in and outside of Black communities for centuries. Our bodies have been studied, fetishized, and ridiculed throughout history. Sara “Saartjie” Baartman is the perfect example of how White people have historically felt and continue to feel the need to unfairly label and treat anything or anyone that differs from their understanding of what is normal. Sara, a Khoisan woman from Southern Africa, was taken to Europe where she spent her time in both England and France during the nineteenth century. Due to the composition of Sara’s body she forced to participate in freak shows where she became known as the “Hottentot Venus” (Hobson, 2005).

Sara was a very shapely woman, she had a full behind and an “enlarged” and “elongated” labia, which was outside of the norm according to Western standards. Sara’s body was put on display for people to ogle and examine. Her body was labeled as grotesque and carnivalesque; she was labeled as disabled and given a diagnosis of steatopygia. Sara no longer had autonomy over her own being she became a scientific object used to shape nonsensical studies of studies of racialized sexuality (Gould, 1985). She played a key role in forming the narrative around Black sexual politics and the criminalization of the Black female body. She was used as a tool to perpetuate the myth of sexual deviance within Black women and to promote the idea that Black bodies are inherently abnormal and therefore deserving of scrutiny and judgment. How do Black women and girls begin to dismantle the belief that we are hypersexual and that our bodies are atypical? Is the responsibility to dismantle the myths surrounding our body politics solely on the Black woman? If we are unable to change the narrative around our bodies
My Feminism is Ratchet

and sexual expression will we still be able to reach some kind of liberation, and what
would that liberation look like (Hobson, 2005)?

Respectable Black Feminism?

In an attempt to continue my quest for knowledge and understanding I began
turning to other Black feminists, but this time I expanded my reach to include not just
literary Black feminists, but academic Black feminists as well. From my understanding
bell hooks was the go to Black feminist guru, a palatable entry into an academic world
that I wasn’t sure I was ready for. My first encounter with bell’s work was through her
book *Feminism is for everybody: passion politics*. bell broke down what it meant to be a
feminist and explained how to actively participate in feminism. She spoke on issues of
patriarchy, violence, and sex in a way that just made sense.

bell hooks had been a very instrumental force in my feminist journey. She opened
my mind to things that I would have never thought of on my own. She has a gift for
making people see the connection between things that are seemingly unconnected.
However, as I began growing more confident in my own thoughts and beliefs I started to
find myself disagreeing with bell’s more recent rhetoric. During the talk, “Are You Still
A Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body”, given by bell hooks at The New School, an
audience member proposed a question about creating a sex-positive liberation and what
that might look like for black women, and the answer that hooks gave went against what I
consider to be a part of the Black feminist discourse. The suggestion given by bell hooks
My Feminism is Ratchet

was for Black women to find liberation in celibacy. hooks specifically says, “what does that liberatory sexuality look like? I mean, let me theorize that it may very well be that celibacy is the face of that liberatory sexuality”, and hooks believed that she was giving a “futuristic” answer to the audience (hooks, 2014). Luckily, the other panelist members: activist Janet Mock, author Marci Blackman, and film maker Shola Lynch, were quick to voice their disbelief and discomfort with hooks’ answer. I was hoping for one of the other panelists to throw a follow up question at hooks but unfortunately no one did. How does giving up one’s own sexual pleasure lead to liberation? If I’m engaging in a pleasureful and consensual sexual relationship why should I have to give that up? While celibacy can be freeing in some aspects, it can also feel like a punishment to those women who do find sex to be a type of release.

The bell hooks that I had come to love would’ve never given an answer about Black women’s sexual liberation that allowed others to be the focal point. The answer that was given implies that in order to be free of the pressures and scrutiny that surround our female Black bodies we need to stop acting so that the people will stop talking. The strategy that bell has come up with essentially strips Black women of sexual agency. By presenting ourselves as free of sexuality we would be “destroying the canvas upon which white supremacy projects its ideas about black female sexuality” (Young, 2014), which in theory could be effective in combating the myths surrounding our sexuality and debunking the stereotypes that have been created to restrict our freedoms. However, the cons in doing so far outweigh the pros, by rendering ourselves celibate and becoming
non-sexual beings we take on the responsibility of changing the narrative created for us through self policing and we succumb to the politics of respectability.

Black women are human and as humans we are inherently sexual beings. We should be able to explore and express what that means on our own terms. We should have the right to assert our sexuality in anyway that we please without fear of scrutiny. If for our own reasons we chose to not explore that part of ourselves it should be because we’ve come to that decision on our own. We should not be forced to ignore what is innately within us because we fear how that may be perceived. If we are forced into celibacy we are essentially being forced to give up our humanity.

While I understand how celibacy could potentially alleviate some of the stressors that come along with being a sexual Black being, it will take a lot more than Black women surrendering to the pressure to act accordingly to repair the complicated relationship that Black women and our bodies have with this racialized patriarchal society. I can’t believe that the same woman who guided my introduction into academic Black feminism even suggested that celibacy could be the be all and end all. The bell hooks that I subscribed to believed that:

...women would only be truly sexually liberated when we arrived at a place where we could see ourselves as having sexual value and agency irrespective of whether or not we were the objects of male desire... We need an erotics of being that is founded on the principle that we have a right to express sexual desire as the spirit moves us and to find in sexual pleasure a life-affirming ethos (hooks, 2000).
My Feminism is Ratchet

As Black women our road to liberation is a long and complicated, but we should be open to exploring multiple options. The first step in finding our freedom is recognizing that liberation looks different for each woman and understanding that individually none of us will truly be liberated sexually or otherwise until all Black women are able to find their freedom.

It is statements like the one bell hooks gave that makes the shift in thinking from the older generations of Black feminists to the younger generations more apparent. It is statements like those that make a lot of young Black people question the functionality of any feminism within their lives. While I’m sure unintentional, the answer hooks gave alienated an entire group of women who actually do find some sort liberation in sex and the way they express themselves sexually. While celibacy is in no way a negative thing I don’t think that by denying and suppressing ones own sexual needs and desires to avoid being sexualized by others is a solution. Celibacy can not overt the unwanted gaze of others, celibacy will not change the way others see you or want to see you, and celibacy will not stop you from experiencing the mental, physical, or emotional pain that is inflicted on the black woman’s body just by living in a white centric, patriarchal society.

bell, like many of our older Black feminist foremothers seem to practice a more radical feminism that fixates more on the systems of oppression rather than the victims of those oppressions. Radical feminism, a part of the second wave, calls for the elimination of male – domination from all social and economic spheres of life. By challenging and confronting pre-existing social norms, radical feminists are striving to eliminate
My Feminism is Ratchet

patriarchy, as we know it. Due to male hegemony women have become second-class citizens and are continuously marginalized and oppressed especially in the realm of sexuality. According to radical feminists, sexuality is male centered and constructed. Women are placed into a role of submission within sexual relationships, while men are to play the dominant role. “Male dominance is sexual. Meaning: men in particular, if not men alone, sexualize hierarchy; gender is one… The male sexual role, centers on aggressive intrusion on those with less power. Such acts of dominance are experienced as sexually arousing” (MacKinnon, 1989). According to radical feminists its only men who find pleasure in participating in relationships, sexual or non sexual, made up of two people with an uneven power relation or unequal supremacy.

It was not my intention to single out bell hooks or to point out what I see as flaws within her rhetoric. My intention throughout this project is to shed light on the ways that respectability politics unintentional sneaks into traditional Black feminist politics and how damaging and alienating that can be. I think it is important for the growth and survival of Black feminism and its sub sects to remember that Black women are not a monolith, liberation does not look the same for all of us, and our ideas of freedom are all different. While all of those things have been consistently brought up within Black feminists text, I think there has been a tendency for certain Black women to still be left out of or denied entry into Black feminist discussions and spaces, in and outside of the academy. Also within this project I intend to discuss the ways in which a ratchet performance can aid in the progression of Black female liberation, by throwing away
My Feminism is Ratchet

respectability and becoming disrespectful it allows for us to embrace the unconventional woman, therefore making feminism more appealing to the Black masses.

Don’t get me wrong; Black feminism has been extremely influential in bettering the lives of all women. Black feminism has been our shield through many of the wars we face against patriarchy and even capitalism, but somewhere along the way something changed. Simply put by Joan Morgan,

...reaping the benefits of our foremothers’ struggle is precisely what makes their brand of feminism so hard to embrace. The “victim” (read women) “oppressor” (read men) model that seemed to dominate so much of contemporary discourse (both black and white), denies the very essence of who we are. We are the daughters of feminist privilege... We walk through the world with a sense of entitlement that our mother’s generation could not begin to fathom (Morgan, 1999).

It is because of the work our Black feminist foremothers put in that I am able to write this critique. It is because of how much Black feminism has progressed that I am able to offer advice on how we can progress it further, but we must not forget that in order to move forward we have to acknowledge and appreciate the past.

What Does Black Feminism Look Like?

When I close my eyes and envision what a feminist is I don’t see myself. When I close my eyes and try to imagine significant historical moments within the history of feminism, women like me are absent from my visions. I know that various forms and subsects of Black Feminism exists and I know that Black women have been very
**My Feminism is Ratchet**

instrumental in the development of all feminisms, yet I still find myself questioning the significance of women like myself within the movement.

bell hooks, Patricia Hill-Collins, and Audre Lorde are the women I imagine when I think of traditional Black Feminism. While these women are incredible, they are also not me. While I am grateful for their words and their activism I still at times find myself to be excluded from their work. They advocate for the women like me, but at times the language they use feels as if they are not speaking to women like me. The language of feminism as a whole is at times exclusionary and intimidating. However, I don’t think that has been done consciously within Black feminism. Black feminism is a division of feminism that was created out of frustration, but seems to have been legitimized through education.

Black feminism was built around the idea that gender identity, class, race, and sex are all inextricably connected. Unfortunately, I don’t believe that the notion of all these things being interconnected in terms of the Black woman’s experience was recognized in spaces outside of our own until we had a term for it. Therefore, reaffirming the idea that the way to gain visibility and acceptance as a legitimate feminism was through academics. Nevertheless, Black women still have a very hard time getting others to understand the intersectional struggle, but I do believe that through naming our experience we have begun to increase our own understanding of self (Collins, 2000).
My Feminism is Ratchet

Feminism has been around since the 19th century it began as a way for women to rally for contractual rights and property rights and has since evolved into a general fight to overturn a patriarchal system that continuously perpetuates sexism. However, around the mid-twentieth century Black women began to grow tired of playing second fiddle in both the feminist movement, as well as, the civil rights movement and thus Black feminism was born. While feminism was concerned with fighting for the right of women to work outside the home, Black women had been forced to work outside of the home for decades. While the civil rights movement focused heavily on the issues of Black men, Black women began to focus on foraging their own safe space to focus on the issues that they were faced with. While feminism and feminist groups fight for the equal treatment of women in all public and private spheres of life they often did and still do so without taking into account the additional oppressions women of color face. By not incorporating and acknowledging the plight of women of color, feminist groups often employ strategies that further the agenda of white women while continuing to reinforce tactics that further subordinate women of color. Similarly, antiracism groups often employ strategies that continue the subordination of women by ignoring the role gender plays in the daily lives of Black women (Crenshaw, 1991).

Intersectionality In Practice

To be a Black woman is to be strong, fierce, and independent. To be a Black woman also means being unprotected, forgotten, and used. Black women have been gifted with the beautiful curse of intersectionality. Intersectionality is beautiful in the
My Feminism is Ratchet

sense that it is one of the many things that gives Black women uniqueness. Being a Black woman is like having a membership to a very exclusive club, not just anyone can experience the magic. However, intersectionality also has a dark side. Being a woman of color and being intersectional often times means being misunderstood, underrepresented, and oppressed. It is generally understood that people are subordinated because of their gender or because of their race. However, neither gender nor race are always mutually exclusive in terms of experiencing subordination or oppression. Legal feminist scholar, Kimberle’ Crenshaw, in her 1989 essay, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, first coined the term “intersectionality” in an attempt to explain the ways that different oppressions manifest together (Crenshaw, 1989).

Within her article, Crenshaw argues that the legal system has failed to protect Black women and has failed to recognize that this particular group of people are oppressed in ways that do not neatly fit into their definitions of racism or sexism. Our legal system has defined sexism as acts of discrimination experienced by women, but more specifically, white women. Our legal system has also defined racism as acts of discrimination experienced by minorities, but more so men of color. According to Crenshaw, our legal system’s refusal to recognize that both sexism and racism are experienced by Black women simultaneously “implies that the boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by white women’s and Black men’s experiences” (Crenshaw, 1989).
Why is the concept of intersectionality so hard to grasp? Black women are members of at least two highly subordinated groups; it makes sense that this group would experience things specific to only them. By trying to fit the experiences of Black women into one size fits all boxes of discrimination, our legal system, feminism, and antiracism groups have essentially left Black women to fend for themselves, leaving them vulnerable and in harms way. While Crenshaw may have been the first to label the Black woman’s experience as intersectional, she is not the first to call attention to the unique experiences of Black women. Black women have been trying for decades to communicate the struggles faced by being both Black and female, but have been ignored and misunderstood.

In 1851, Sojourner Truth delivered her “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech at a women’s convention in Ohio. With that speech, Truth not only challenged a patriarchal system, but she also brought attention to and challenged the racial privilege experienced by white women. Truth shed light on an experience exclusive to Black women; she also dispelled many of the myths thought to be true about her white counterparts. At that time women were thought to be fragile and weak in mind and body, because of that they were to be sheltered, coddled, and protected – all women except women of color.

...That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I could have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man- when I could get it- and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold
Sojourner Truth gave multiple examples that legitimize the Black woman’s intersectional experiences, but it seems her plight was left unheard, similarly to the plights of many Black women before and after her. Luckily, for this generation of Black women and girls are finding new an innovative ways to make our stories heard. So many of our stories are being posted and shared online daily. The ability to post our truths and share our thoughts, stories, and ideas is liberating within itself. However, I think the real beauty of sharing our truths is being able to have our truths and our stories connect and resonate with someone else, it provides a sense of validation. It let’s us know we are not alone in our feelings. With that being said, academic Black feminists while they have provided us with great examples of how past treatment of Black women and men still drive how we view ourselves today, they have done so in a way that just does not speak to the average Black woman. Now that is not to say that Black women don’t have the capacity to understand it, it just makes me think that the audience these academic Black feminists were writing to was different from the audience that they were attempting to reach.

Our foremothers have provided us with profound ideas of what liberation could possibly look like for us, as well as, incredible ideas of how we may be able to obtain that liberation, but they have done so in a way that can sometimes come across as final and definite, leaving Black women, especially younger generations of Black women, to feel as if their way is the only way and if we don’t agree with their methodologies and ideas than there is no place for us within traditional and academic Black feminism. I believe it
My Feminism is Ratchet

is for these reasons that there has been such a large push back from Black women to claim and own feminism. There’s this notion that in order to be taken seriously you need to speak a certain way or write a certain way and that is just not true. One can be a feminist without the use of feminist language. Not all of us want to talk about the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 1984), however, it seems as if we have to in order to fit the Black feminist model. This is yet another example of how “the thorns of respectability politics have flourished along side the rose of Black feminism” (Williams, 2015).

Feminism in Pop Culture

While I, myself have been afforded the luxury of an advanced education I am still just a young Black woman trying to navigate my way through life in a way that is comfortable and enjoyable for me and sometimes that means disagreeing with and deviating from the rules and guidelines set forth by the foremothers of Black feminism. In the words of Joan Morgan, “I need a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays”. And this was not my foremothers’ feminism” (Morgan, 1999). In all honesty, it was not until I discovered Joan Morgan’s book, When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost, that I felt comfortable enough to say that I don’t find myself agreeing with a lot of what my Black feminist foremothers have to say on a wide variety of topics, and that’s ok. Our world is constantly changing and it’s ok to want and expect Black feminist ideas to change with it.
In recent years I have seen many Black people, women and men, in the entertainment industry try to dabble in the world of feminism in an attempt to embrace and empower their fans and bring awareness to everyone about the struggles that we as Black women face. While just about every celebrity had their own approach to feminism and their own ideas of what feminism is, almost all of them have been criticized and critiqued by people in and outside of the academic world. In my opinion, there is nothing wrong with a constructive critique or criticism, but there needs to be a balance. Critiques are necessary and criticisms are healthy when used as a tool to help others grow in their quest for knowledge and understanding, but what seems to be happening is women are not being nurtured and allowed to grow into their own ideas of feminism, and what’s even more disappointing is that it seems some of our foremothers are refusing to embrace and make room for change.

As a self-proclaimed pop-culture connoisseur, I find the growing interest in feminism among entertainers refreshing. From music superstar Beyoncé to actress Zendaya, there are so many Black pop culture icons invoking the feminist spirit in order to fight for changes in the way that Black women are viewed by others, as well as, by themselves, in and outside of the entertainment industry. A lot of the work I have noticed from these entertainers has focused on the debunking of stereotypes, myths, and falsehoods around what it is to be a Black woman and to be sexual. While some of them have been more reluctant to claim the title of feminism than others, for me, that does not take anything away from the work that they have done.
My Feminism is Ratchet

When did this happen? When did this incredible shift in the styles and attitudes of Black creators begin? Some of the biggest artists of today have gone from playing it safe in an attempt to assimilate into what is deemed as acceptable by White society to shoving their Blackness down the throats of America and I have loved every minute of it. Black artists are beginning to free themselves from the shackles of respectability and growing more and more “disrespectful” by American standards, all while inspiring their fans to do the same. During a span of less than five years, I have sipped Beyoncé’s sweet *Lemonade* while having *A Seat at Solange’s table*, listening to Kendrick tell me “we gon’ be alright”. There is a very important movement taking place among Black people in and outside of the Black entertainment world; we are demanding to be seen, heard, and respected for who we are, not for who the world wants us to be in a way that I have never seen before.

Feminist Frustrations

In 2015, the world was introduced to Belcalis Almanzar, also known as Cardi B. Cardi, was once a stripper, who because of her tell it like it is attitude and her raunchy, yet witty banter gained a large Instagram and social media following which ultimately lead to her casting in one of the most successful reality show franchises in history, Vh1’s *Love and Hip Hop*. Cardi B used her platforms online and on television to speak openly about sex, politics, and issues affecting women and men of color in a way that has really connected with her followers. Her messages of sexual freedom, political power, and women’s empowerment have now been transferred over into her music, and at only
My Feminism is Ratchet

twenty-five years old Cardi B has taken the world by storm. She has introduced her fans to language all her own and given the world an album full of bold unapologetic anthems. During a span of just three years Cardi B has become a sort of feminist icon in her own right.

In late 2017, reality star turned rapper, Cardi B, sat with Allison P. Davis of New York Magazine to discuss her newfound fame and rising popularity. When Davis asked Cardi to speak about feminism and her new title as a feminist icon Cardi had this to say,

You know what? I’m not even gonna consider myself nothing… Here’s the thing that bitches got me fucked up when it comes to that word. People think that being a feminist is a bitch that, like, went to school. They wear skirts all the way to their motherf*cking ankles like a goddamn First Lady. That’s not being a feminist. Being a feminist is being equal to do what a man do. Niggas hustle, and I hustle niggas (Davis, 2017).

Since this interview Cardi has begun to embrace feminism and her role within it, but I think it is worth unpacking the statement that she gave to New York Magazine.

As I mentioned before, there has been a clear generational shift in the way my generation thinks compared to our Black feminist foremothers. I believe Cardi’s frustration with feminism derives from the way that our foremothers have chosen to elevate certain women who fit the mold that they are looking for, while continuously trivializing women who take a more unconventional approach to life. Traditional Black feminism has a habit of celebrating women who have lived stories of redemption; women who have gone through a struggle and have come out on the other side saved
My Feminism is Ratchet

and reformed. What I mean by that is Black feminism loves a neatly packaged story of survival.

Take for instance, Maya Angelou. Ms. Angelou was a phenomenal woman with extraordinary talents. She was an author, a singer, an actress, and a civil rights activist. She gave us incredible novels and autobiographies like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, but the most important gift that she gave us was the gift of transparency. Ms. Angelou’s life was not easy, she had more than her fair share of struggles, or as she called them, “life assaults” (Angelou, 1974). During her younger years Ms. Angelou almost had her son taken from her by a kidnapper. She had a brush with heroin. She also spent quite some time in sex work, both as a pimp and an actual worker (Angelou, 1974). However, in my opinion it was not only her ability to move forward and turn her “life assaults” into life triumphs that made Maya Angelou such a celebrated Black feminist figure, but it was the way she chose to continue living the rest of her life as a relatively modest literary artist as opposed to a loud in your face, provocative type of artist. Now that’s not to say that there’s anything wrong with the way Ms. Angelou chose to live the rest of her life and share her message with the world, the problem is with the way society and feminism as a whole makes women feel as if the safe and modest way is the preferred way or the correct way.

Again, don’t get me wrong Black feminism has done many amazing things for women and men alike. Black feminism has taught us to love ourselves even though we live in a world that shows us very little. Black feminism has taught us to fight for what
My Feminism is Ratchet

we believe to be right. Black feminism has taught us that we deserve more than what the
world was offering us. While all those lessons are valuable and irreplaceable I think there
will still always be a desire for Black feminism to do more, and that is where the
subsections of Black feminism come in.

It was Joan Morgan who first combined the words “Hip-hop” and “Feminism” in
her 1999 book, When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost. Within her book Morgan took
the lessons given to us by our foremothers and expanded upon them. Where Black
feminism was very straight and narrow, Hip-hop feminism wasn’t afraid to live in
contradiction. Hip-hop feminism made it okay to for us to shake our asses to music with
lyrics as dirty as we wanted them to be while still recognizing that misogyny is a
problem. As explained by Reiland Rabaka, Hip-hop feminists “simultaneously embrace
and reject the fundamentals of feminism, the women of the hip hop generation… have
blurred the lines between the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’ by critically dialoguing with a
culture that commonly renders them invisible or grossly misrepresents them when and
where they are visible” (Rabaka, 2011). Hip-hop feminism gave us permission to be
flawed and to explore our place within the culture in ways Black feminism previously
had not.

Disrespectability

From the backs of both Black feminism and Hip-hop feminism there has been
various other iterations of intersectional feminisms that have emerged, and each have
My Feminism is Ratchet

taken up their own causes and built up upon what they felt were shortcomings of their predecessors. As a millennial living in a hip-hop, reality television driven society there are a few things that I need in my feminisms. I need to feel comfortable enough to explore my femininity and sexuality as I please, I need the freedom to author my own life, and I need to feel a sense of community from my feminist sisters free of judgment and full of love.

Black feminism has fed and continues to feed us with ideas of what could be once we reach a liberated state. However, Black feminism also continues to critique the steps Black women are taking to reach that state of liberation. I need a feminism that isn’t afraid to let its daughters get a little messy. What would happen if Black women no longer concerned ourselves with what others thought of us? What if we become less concerned with sexism, racism, misogyny, and patriarchy and focused more on the Black women experiencing those things? What would happen if we banned together and decided that we would no longer adhere to the rules set in place by society for us? As stated earlier, the politics of respectability were created with the best intentions in mind, but ultimately have done us more harm than good. Respectability has been our attempt at putting our best foot forward in order to navigate throughout the world safely, but what it has done is essentially propel the belief that being our authentically Black selves is just not good enough, or even damning.

What if I told you that some young Black women were now employing a new strategy and are participating in a sort of disrespectability politic? Now by definition to
My Feminism is Ratchet

be disrespectful is to show a lack of courtesy and or respect. Basically, Black women are coming into a space where we no longer as concerned about making others around us feel at ease, we’re having a moment that is specifically for us. Black women have been coming together and creating safe spaces on and off of the Internet where we can take our masks off and encourage each other be our authentic selves. We are engaging in conversations about Black woman and girlhood in very explicit ways.

Ratchet Feminism

Like the words “ghetto” and “hood”, “ratchet” is a word that has been commonly associated with Black people, the uncouth, and lowbrow, so it seems strange that one would tie this word together with feminism, but in an unexpected way “ratchet” and “feminism” are a match made in heaven. I define ratchet feminism as a feminism that evokes a certain carefree-ness from its daughters. It is uninhibited and unstructured yet at the same time provides a sense of protection. Ratchet feminism gives women the tools to push back against what has been defined as acceptable womanhood. Ratchet feminism has very few expectations of its daughters and that is a part of its charm.

Ratchet feminism is not something has been well defined within the academy or even within other feminist works. In all honesty, during my preparation for this project I thought I was the first to put marry these ideas. I eventually discovered that this was an idea that academic Crunk feminist, Brittany Cooper, had been playing around with. In the 2017 book, The Crunk Feminist Collective, Cooper explains that Ratchet feminism is
My Feminism is Ratchet

not a wave, but a moment in feminism that “represents the feminism of Sapphire’s belligerent daughter smacking gum and rocking bamboo earrings, cherry-red lipstick, a Black Girl’s Rock! t-shirt, and some Js, while listening to Beyoncé’s “Flawless” on her iPod”. I think that Cooper’s definition is almost perfect, but I think this brand of feminism also represents the Jezebel’s twerking, booty short wearing little sister (Cooper, Morris, & Boylorn 2017).

Ratchet feminism like the Black feminisms before isn’t afraid to critique sexism or patriarchy, but what is different is the spaces that these critiques are taking place in. Ratchet feminism and its surrounding discussions are not taking place in lecture halls, they aren’t being written in award winning books, Ratchet feminism occurs is spaces that are, for a lack of a better term, ratchet. Most of the commentary that comes out of these “ratchet” spaces is conversation that could only be heard among Black women. There is a sense of comradery found amongst the daughters of Ratchet feminism. Whether they are aware of it or not, the participants of ratchet feminism have no problem holding men accountable for the sexist things that they do in the most in your face ways (Cooper, Morris, & Boylorn 2017).

“Ratchet” is one of the few words in the English language that can be used as a verb, noun, and adjective. While the word “ratchet” originated in the southern United States it has grown beyond the borders of the south and has become a sort of staple in the dialect of popular culture. Originally within pop culture “ratchet” was used as a negative term to describe the outlandish behavior of Black women on reality television, most
My Feminism is Ratchet

notably the *Love and Hip Hop* franchise. Over time the term has grown to include behaviors deemed as unacceptable and/or low class typically performed by Black women in general. The definition of “ratchet” has also been applied to things simply associated with Blackness (Cooper, Morris, Boylorn 2017; Pickens 2014).

While many today still find “ratchet” to be a negative term there are a growing number of women who believe that ratchetness is the Black women’s answer to respectability. To participate in ratchet behavior is to show a blatant disregard for the rules of respectability politics. Partaking in this form of disrespectability allows for Black women to forge our own definitions of femininity.

Now that is not to say that women who fall victim to the politics of respectability can not be ratchet and vice versa. Ratchet respectability is a term that was coined by Robin Boylorn it is defined as “a hybrid characterization of hegemonic, racist, sexist, and classist notions of Black womanhood” (Boylorn, 2015). While ratchetness is typically linked to race and gender, respectability is tied with race and class. One can still perform the necessary behaviors of someone is perceived to be well off and of a higher class status while at the same time attempting to maintain a certain level of “realness” that comes along with being ratchet. It’s a balancing act that many Black reality stars and celebrities know all but too well (Boylorn, 2015; Pickens, 2014).

Beyoncé may be one of the few Black celebrities that has managed to walk the line of ratchet respectability flawlessly. Throughout the past few years Beyoncé has made
My Feminism is Ratchet

It her job to remind everyone that while she has reached an insane level of stardom and success that she is still indeed a ratchet, southern Black girl.

Beyoncé’s Feminism

In order for Black feminism to continue to thrive and grow it needs to take into account that a large majority of women do not receive their introduction into the world of feminism through books. This is the age of social media, fast news, and fast headlines. There are so many young women who would have never given any thought into what it is to be a feminist had it not been for Beyoncé’s 2014 MTV Video Music Award performance where she proudly lit up her stage with the word “FEMINIST” (Bennett, 2014). Obviously Beyoncé is not the first nor will she be the last performer to include messages of feminism through out her work, but she is the first that I’ve seen to proclaim her appreciation for feminism so boldly.

Beyoncé Knowles will most likely go down in history as one of the greatest performers of our time. She sings, dances, and she also acts. Beyoncé has given us everything from amazing female empowerment anthems to sappy break up records during her over twenty-year career span in the music business. While her career seems to have gone on without incident, non-academics and academics alike have consistently studied her success. Many contribute her success not only to her talent, but also to her proximity to whiteness (Trier-Bieniek, 2016); Beyoncé is a light-skinned, blonde haired, slim, yet curvy Black woman, who has been very strategic in terms of the songs she
My Feminism is Ratchet

sings, the events she attends, and the content she releases. Until recently she has made it a point to be somewhat of a blank slate. She shied away from interviews, barely made use of her social media, and stayed as far away from any sort of politics as she could. However, in late 2013 that all changed.

On December 13, 2013 Beyoncé released a surprise visual album titled, BEYONCÉ. Beyoncé’s self-titled album was released with no promotion and without any sort of prior announcement. This fourteen-track album was an exploration of womanhood, sexuality, motherhood, and Black feminism. BEYONCÉ was undeniably a success in terms of sales and streams, but in terms of the album’s content many disagreed upon whether or not this work should be considered a feminist piece. Due to the gentle way Beyoncé has situated conversations of love, sex, and motherhood throughout this album and its visuals it is hard to understand why this album has garnered so many critics.

Beyoncé’s feminism is messy, contradictory, and a bit confused, but that’s what makes it so enticing to a lot of us. It’s clear that Beyoncé is still growing in her feminism and she’s still trying to figure herself out, just like so many of us, but that’s part of her draw. Unfortunately, her brand of feminism has garnered a tremendous amount of criticism due to the way she has chosen to sex it up a bit. Beyoncé’s image has always been sexy, so why should we expect anything different? It’s unfair to expect a woman to completely change who she is in order to be taken serious in her feminist endeavors. Are feminist not allowed to be sexy?
BEYONCÉ as a whole speaks to the idea of Black women finding liberation and learning to love ourselves completely through releasing the pressures that society has placed upon us, whether they be of a sexual or a non sexual nature, which in my opinion is nothing but a feminist idea. However, some have taken issue with the ways in which Beyoncé has chosen to express her sexuality through the lyrics and visuals.

“Blow”, “Drunk in Love”, “Partition”, and “Rocket”, are all songs from the album that are centered around issues of sex and the pleasure found in owning one’s sexuality. It’s understandable how some could misconstrue the lyrics to any one of these songs, especially “Partition”, as being a very male centric song, rather than a song about a woman finding pleasure in being sexual. With lyrics such as, “He popped all my buttons, and ripped my blouse. He Monica Lewinski’d all on my gown…” its easy to hear those words and default to feelings of discomfort or embarrassment. The politics surrounding Black sexuality make it difficult for us to imagine a scenario in which a Black woman is able to experience shame-free sexual experience, considering the dark history Black women and our bodies have within the context of America.

In order for Black feminism to aid us in the quest for liberation, sexual and non-sexual, we must find a way to incorporate conversation about the Black female body that focuses more on our pleasure versus conversation centered on the consequence of pleasure or the way our pleasure may be received by others. We must be able to find a way to build “a relationship with the history that doesn’t over-determine our sexuality or
My Feminism is Ratchet

our choices” (Morgan), and Beyoncé has continuously been trying to do that through more recent works.

Partition

_Est-ce que tu aimes le sexe? Le sexe, je veux dire l’activité physique, le coit, tu aimes ça? Tu ne t’intéresses pas a sexe? Les hommes pensent que les féministes détestent le sexe mais c’est une activité très stimulante et naturelle que les femmes adorent_ (Nash, 2013)

Like many of her fans I must have listened to Beyoncé’s “Partition” over hundreds of times, but I never paid much attention to the bridge of the song. For starters I don’t speak French, so I ignored it. I always thought it sounded nice and that it added a certain amount of sexiness to the song, but I had no real desire to investigate more into the words being spoken. Which I must admit was pretty foolish of me because knowing how strategic and calculated Beyoncé is I should’ve realized that those words were inserted into her song for reasons other than adding a sexy feel to an already sexy song. “_Est-ce que tu aimes le sexe? Le sexe, je veux dire l’activité physique, le coit, tu aimes ça? Tu ne t’intéresses pas a sexe? Les hommes pensent que les féministes détestent le sexe mais c’est une activité très stimulante et naturelle que les femmes adorent_” in English translates to, “Do you like sex? Sex, I mean the physical activity, coitus, do you like it? You’re not interested in sex? Men think that feminist hate sex, but it’s a very stimulating and natural activity that women love” (Nash, 2013). As I stated earlier Black women, like all people are inherently sexual. You can be feminist and still enjoy the act of sex.
My Feminism is Ratchet

It seems as if the feminism that Beyoncé and various other young, Black, Hip Hop, and Ratchet feminists seem to be getting at is more sex positive. Through her music Beyoncé seems to be trying to convey the sentiment that freedom and liberation from oppression can be achieved through sex, even if it is for just a small moment in time. She understands that sex allows women to become free from inhibition through use of the body. In a chapter of The Crunk Feminist Collection, entitled “Love, Sex, and Relationships: Black Feminist Sex is the Best Sex Ever”, Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn explain

Sex is one of our most powerful creative forces. Sex must certainly give a hat tip to the power and importance of feminism. But feminism also gotta respect what sex is bringing to the table. In a world where far too many people still insist on respectability, still engage in slut shaming, still stereotype Black women as hypersexual and unrapeable, we insist that good sex — sex which brings pleasure, honors the mind, body, and spirit, and is consensual liberatory (Cooper, Morris, & Boylorn, 2017).

Obviously patriarchy is oppressive and operating under a racist and patriarchal system is tricky, to say the least, but I am certain that Black women can still enjoy sex and learn to embrace our sexuality. Under a patriarchy women are assumed to be oppressed in all aspects of life. While I do believe women are oppressed socially, economically, and politically I’m not sure if that oppression is always present during consensual sexual encounters. Nor do I believe that patriarchal oppression always translates to sexual violence against women. In fact, I believe that in some cases feminist rhetoric may unintentionally be more sexual oppressive to women rather than patriarchy.

Flawless
During what has become one of the album’s biggest hits, “Flawless” Beyoncé’s voice is abruptly interrupted by the voice of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian novelist, as she breaks into her “We Should All Be Feminists” speech:

We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful. Otherwise, you would threaten the man. Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is most important. Now marriage can be a source of joy and love and mutual support but why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage and we don’t teach boys the same? We raise girls to see each other as competitors not for jobs or accomplishments, which I think can be a good thing, but for the attention of men. We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are. Feminist: a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes (Adichie, 2012).

What is interesting about Beyoncé’s decision to include Adichie on this particular track is the way that it is situated somewhere in between Beyoncé’s request for “bitches” to “bow down” and her proclamation that ladies, “we flawless” (Knowles, 2013).

Personally, I think what was done in this song is genius. Sometimes, bitches really do need to bow down and through saying that what Beyoncé is suggesting is that we need not be so critical of one another. It’s okay to give each other praise and love each other even if we don’t agree with each other’s choices because at the end of the day, we’re all flawlessly flawed.

What is special about this song in particular is the way in which Beyoncé has created somewhat of a discussion between herself and Adichie. While Adichie seems to
My Feminism is Ratchet

be criticizing the way in which we socialize and raise our girls Beyoncé seems to be saying that yes, we can do better, but let's take a moment to appreciate all the things that we have done right. Let's revel in what we have accomplished. In other words, “bow down bitches”, let's take some time celebrate each other in ways only we know how (Knowles, 2013).

Formation

On February 6, 2016, Beyoncé released a yet another surprise. This time, a single, titled “Formation”; the single was accompanied by a music video. Both the song and its visual took the world by storm. A great majority of the immediate media coverage focused on the song’s visual rather than the lyrical content. While the visual was a powerful commentary on police brutality, economic disparity, and Black southern culture, it’s the lyrical content that spoke to me. I believe “Formation” is a conversation strictly between Beyoncé and Black women. “Formation” also seems to be Beyoncé’s response to the Black women and feminists that still don’t trust and believe in her feminist vision. BEYONCÉ, the album, was special in its own right, but “Formation” let us know that something greater was on the way.

Through “Formation’s” repetitive lyrics there is a conversation that is taking place. The conversation happening within the lyrics tackle everything from the politics surrounding Black women and girl’s hair, sex, wealth, beauty, and respectability. “Formation” is a Beyoncé’s call for Black women to unite and assert our status as
My Feminism is Ratchet

beautiful, sexual, complex beings (Brown, 2016). The lyrics to “Formation” are as follows:

[Intro: Messy Mya]
What happened at the New Wildins?
Bitch, I’m back by popular demand

[Refrain: Beyoncé]
Y’all haters corny with that illuminati mess
Paparazzi, catch my fly, and my cocky fresh
I’m so reckless when I rock my Givenchy dress (stylin’)
I’m so possessive so I rock his Roc necklaces
My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana
You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bamma

[Verse 1]
I like my baby hair, with baby hair and afros
I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils
Earned all this money but they never take the country out me
I got a hot sauce in my bag... swag

[Interlude: Messy Mya & Big Freedia]
Oh yeah, baby... oh yes, I like that
I did not come to play with you hoes
I came to slay, bitch
I like cornbread and collard greens, bitch
Oh, yes...

[Verse 1]

[Pre-chorus]
I see it, I want it
I stunt, yellow hornet it
I dream it, I work hard
I grind ’til I own it
I twirl on them haters
Albino alligators
El Camino with the seat low
Sippin’ Cuervo with no chaser

Sometimes I go off
I go hard
Get what’s mine
I’m a star
During the first verse of the song Beyoncé indirectly addresses the criticism surrounding the way in which she chooses to care for and style her Black daughter, Blue Ivy Carter’s, hair. In verse one she says, “I like my baby hair, with baby hair and afros”, which is her way of basically letting the world know that even if they disapprove of the
My Feminism is Ratchet

way her daughter’s hair grows naturally out of her scalp, she doesn’t care, she likes it that way. Since her birth, people have felt the need to voice their disapproval of Blue’s kinky textured hair. Her hair has spawned memes, think pieces, and even an online petition calling for the combing of Blue Ivy’s hair in 2014. Mind you, Blue Ivy was only two-years-old at the time. A lot of the misguided criticisms that Beyoncé and Blue received seem to have come from a place of ill-conceived concern.

Long before Blue Ivy, the relationship that we as Black women have had with our hair has been tumultuous. Of course the love-hate relationship a lot of us have with our hair stems from respectability politics, which stems from white supremacy. From our hair to our skin, Black women’s appearance has always been a huge topic of discussion in and outside of the Black community. Our appearance often dictates the ways in which we are treated. Our skin ranges in color, our hair in texture. The politics surrounding Black women’s beauty is a very complex subject.

Over the course of history, style has come to mean various things for various people. Fashion and style can be used as tool of rebellion or simply as a way to express one’s self. For black women in particular, our sense of style has been critiqued, criticized, demonized, and even appropriated. Fashion and beauty has served many purposes for us throughout the years. The way we dress and style our hair has continued to be a way for black women to not only feel connected to each other and our community, but it also keeps us connected to our African roots. We have used our beauty and fashions as a
My Feminism is Ratchet

means of political activism and resistance, as well as, a source of economic freedom (Ford 2015; Roberts 2014).

Black women’s beauty and style is something that continues to be misunderstood even today. The black body and its features are constantly being compared to those of the white body. We as black women learn at an early age that the way we look is different from the dominant society’s idea of what is beautiful. However, the ways in which some of us internalize that information varies. According to psychologists Alvin Poussaint and Carolyn Atkinson,

The looking-glass of White society reflects the supposed undesirability of Black youth’s physical appearance: Black skin and wooly hair air, as opposed to the valued models of white skin and straight hair. In order to gain the esteem of the ‘generalized other’ it becomes clear to him that he must approximate this White appearance as closely as possible... (Poussaint & Atkinson, 1970)

Of course not every black woman or man subscribes to this way of thinking, but there are quite a few who do. While Black style and fashion have been used as a tool to keep Black women connected it has also been used as a weapon to separate us.

As the song continues, Beyoncé makes mention of sex, but she does so in a way that comes across very self-serving. During the first hook of “Formation” Beyoncé sings, “When he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster”, which upon the first listen that line may feel very out of place, but once you really digest the song those words are actually very self asserting. The way that Beyoncé has situated sex in the context of the
**My Feminism is Ratchet**

song makes it very clear that her engagement in the act of sex is strictly for her pleasure and that’s powerful. Beyoncé is once again hinting at the feelings of freedom, power, and control that can be felt through being sexual, in the most explicit and ratchet way possible.

**Where Do We Go From Here?**

I’m honestly not sure what the will lead Black women into a complete sexual liberation. At this point in time I’m not entirely sure a complete sexual liberation is a possible for us as a collective. What I am sure about is that our quest for freedom has to start from within. Continuing to focus on changing the minds of others in regards to what they think about us is a very draining and time-consuming endeavor. I’m not advising that we discard our hopes of ending sexism and racism, but what I am advising is that we turn our efforts inward and focus on self first.

Unlike bell, and many of our Black feminist foremothers, I choose to subscribe to a less radical way of thinking. I believe that a woman’s sexuality should be her own. A woman should have the right to decide whom she has sex with, when she has sex, and how she has sex. A woman’s sexuality should not be used as a political statement nor should it be used as a mechanism of control. However, due to the patriarchal nature of the world in which we live it is not hard for me to understand why some of us believe that a woman’s sexuality is not her own and will not be her own until we find a way to eliminate male supremacy.
My Feminism is Ratchet

Going forward, I think that the only way that Black Feminism will continue grow and thrive is if younger generations of Black girls continue to push back and question everything, even if it is uncomfortable. It’s easy to look to our foremothers and expect them to have all the answers, but it’s more progressive and freeing to search for our answers and generate our own definitions. Who knows, maybe if we continue to forge our own paths we’ll create something even more influential than feminism. My only hope is that the generations of Black girls to come will continue to think in unorthodox ways because, “you don’t make progress by standing on the sidelines… You make progress by implementing ideas (Chisholm).”
My Feminism is Ratchet

References


My Feminism is Ratchet


My Feminism is Ratchet


My Feminism is Ratchet

http://battymamzelle.blogspot.com/2014/05/On-bell-hooks-Sexual-Agency-And-Combating-Sexual-Stereotypes-Of-Black-Women.html#more