

Sexism and Misogyny: Who Takes the Rap?

Misogyny, gangsta rap, and The Piano

By bell hooks

For the past several months white mainstream media has been calling me to hear my views on gangsta rap. Whether major television networks, or small independent radio shows, they seek me out for the black and feminist "take" on the issue. After I have my say, I am never called back, never invited to do the television shows or the radio spots. I suspect they call, confident that when we talk they will hear the hardcore "feminist" trash of gangsta rap. When they encounter instead the hardcore feminist critique of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, they lose interest.

To white dominated mass media, the controversy over gangsta rap makes great spectacle. Besides the exploitation of these issues to attract audiences, a central motivation for highlighting gangsta rap continues to be the sensationalist drama of demonizing black youth culture in general and the contributions of young black men in particular. It is a contemporary remake of "Birth of a Nation" only this time we are encouraged to believe it is not just vulnerable white womanhood that risks destruction by black hands but everyone. When I counter this demonization of black males by insisting that gangsta rap does not appear in a cultural vacuum, but, rather, is expressive of the cultural crossing, mixings, and engagement of black youth culture with the values, attitudes, and concerns of the white majority, some folks stop listening.

The sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. As the crudest and most brutal expression of sexism, misogynistic attitudes tend to be portrayed by the dominant culture as an expression of male deviance. In reality they are part of a sexist continuum, necessary for the maintenance of patriarchal social order. While patriarchy and sexism continue to be the political and cultural norm in our society, feminist movement has created a climate where crude expressions of male domination are called into question, especially if they are made by men in power. It is useful to think of misogyny as a field that must be labored in and maintained both to sustain patriarchy but also to serve as an ideological anti-feminist backlash. And what better group to labor on this "plantation" than young black men.

To see gangsta rap as a reflection of dominant values in our culture rather than as an aberrant "pathological" standpoint does not mean that a rigorous feminist critique of the sexist and misogyny expressed in this music is not needed. Without a doubt black males, young and old, must be held politically accountable for their sexism. Yet this critique must always be contextualized or we risk making it appear that the behaviors this thinking supports and condones,--rape, male violence against women, etc.-- is a black male thing. And this is what is happening. Young black males are forced to take the "heat" for encouraging, via their music, the hatred of and violence against women that is a central core of patriarchy.

Witness the recent piece by Brent Staples in the "New York Times" titled "The Politics of Gangster Rap: A Music Celebrating Murder and Misogyny." Defining the turf Staples writes: "For those who haven't caught up, gangster rap is that wildly successful music in which all women are `bitches' and `whores' and young men kill each other for sport." No mention of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy in this piece, not a word about the cultural context that would need to exist for young males to be socialized to think differently about gender. Staples assumes that black males are writing their lyrics off in the "jungle," away from the impact of mainstream socialization and desire. At no point in his piece does he ask why huge audiences, especially young white male consumers, are so turned on by this music, by the misogyny and sexism, by the brutality? Where is the anger and rage at females expressed in this music coming from, the glorification of all acts of violence? These are the difficult questions that Staples feels no need to answer.

One cannot answer them honestly without placing accountability on larger structures of domination and the individuals (often white, usually male but not always) who are hierarchically placed to maintain and perpetuate the values that uphold these exploitative and oppressive systems. That means taking a critical looking at the politics of hedonistic consumerism, the values of the men and women who produce gangsta rap. It would mean considering the seduction of young black males who find that they can make more money producing lyrics that promote violence, sexism, and misogyny than with any other content. How many disenfranchised black males would not surrender to expressing virulent forms of sexism, if they knew the rewards would be unprecedented material power and fame?

More than anything gangsta rap celebrates the world of the "material, " the dog-eat-dog world where you do what you gotta do to make it. In this world view killing is necessary for survival. Significantly, the logic here is a crude expression of the logic of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In his new book "Sexy Dressing, Etc." privileged white male law professor Duncan

Kennedy gives what he calls "a set of general characterizations of U. S. culture" explaining that, "It is individual (cowboys), material (gangsters) and philistine." Using this general description of mainstream culture would lead us to place "gangsta rap" not on the margins of what this nation is about, but at the center. Rather than being viewed as a subversion or disruption of the norm we would need to see it as an embodiment of the norm.

That viewpoint was graphically highlighted in the film "Menace To Society" which dramatized not only young black males killing for sport, but also mass audiences voyeuristically watching and, in many cases, "enjoying" the kill. Significantly, at one point in the movie we see that the young black males have learned their "gangsta" values from watching television and movies-- shows where white male gangsters are center stage. This scene undermines any notion of "essentialist" blackness that would have viewers believe the gangsterism these young black males embraced emerged from some unique black cultural experience.

When I interviewed rap artist Ice Cube for "Spin" magazine last year, he talked about the importance of respecting black women and communication across gender. He spoke against male violence against women, even as he lapsed into a justification for anti- woman rap lyrics by insisting on the madonna/whore split where some females "carry" themselves in a manner that determines how they will be treated. When this interview was published, it was cut to nothing. It was a mass media set-up. Folks (mostly white and male) had thought if the hardcore feminist talked with the hardened black man, sparks would fly; there would be a knock-down drag out spectacle. When Brother Cube and I talked to each other with respect about the political, spiritual, and emotional self- determination of black people, it did not make good copy. Clearly folks at the magazine did not get the darky show they were looking for.

After this conversation, and talking with rappers and folks who listen to rap, it became clear that while black male sexism is a serious problem in our communities and in black music, some of the more misogynist lyrics were there to stir up controversy and appeal to audiences. Nowhere is this more evident than in Snoop Doggy Dogg's record "Doggystyle". A black male music and cultural critic called me to ask if I had checked this image out; to share that for one of the first times in his music buying life he felt he was seeing an image so offensive in its sexism and misogyny that he did not want to take that image home. That image (complete with doghouse, beware the dog sign, with a naked black female head in a doghouse, naked butt sticking out) was reproduced, "uncritically," in the November 29, 1993 issue of "Time" magazine. The positive music review of this album, written by Christopher John Farley, is titled "Gangsta Rap, Doggystyle" makes no

mention of sexism and misogyny, makes no reference to the cover. I wonder if a naked white female body had been inside the doghouse, presumably waiting to be fucked from behind, if "Time" would have reproduced an image of the cover along with their review. When I see the pornographic cartoon that graces the cover of "Doggystyle," I do not think simply about the sexism and misogyny of young black men, I think about the sexist and misogynist politics of the powerful white adult men and women (and folks of color) who helped produce and market this album.

In her book "Misogynies" Joan Smith shares her sense that while most folks are willing to acknowledge unfair treatment of women, discrimination on the basis of gender, they are usually reluctant to admit that hatred of women is encouraged because it helps maintain the structure of male dominance. Smith suggests: "Misogyny wears many guises, reveals itself in different forms which are dictated by class, wealth, education, race, religion and other factors, but its chief characteristic is its pervasiveness." This point reverberated in my mind when I saw Jane Campion's widely acclaimed film "The Piano" which I saw in the midst of mass media focus on sexism and misogyny in "gangsta rap." I had been told by many friends in the art world that this was "an incredible film, a truly compelling love story etc." Their responses were echoed by numerous positive reviews. No one speaking about this film mentions misogyny and sexism or white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

The 19th century world of the white invasion of New Zealand is utterly romanticized in this film (complete with docile happy darkies--Maori natives--who appear to have not a care in the world). And when the film suggests they care about white colonizers digging up the graves of their dead ancestors, it is the sympathetic poor white male who comes to the rescue. Just as the conquest of natives and lands is glamorized in this film, so is the conquest of femininity, personified by white womanhood, by the pale speechless corpse-like Scotswoman, Ada, who journeys into this dark wilderness because her father has arranged for her to marry the white colonizer Stewart. Although mute, Ada expresses her artistic ability, the intensity of her vision and feelings through piano playing. This passion attracts Baines, the illiterate white settler who wears the facial tattoos of the Maori--an act of appropriation that makes him (like the traditional figure of Tarzan) appear both dangerous and romantic. He is Norman Mailer's "white negro," seducing Ada by promising to return the piano that Stewart has exchanged with him for land. The film leads us to believe that Ada's passionate piano playing has been a substitution for repressed eroticism. When she learns to let herself go sexually, she ceases to need the piano. We watch the passionate climax of Baines seduction as she willingly seeks him sexually. And we watch her husband Stewart in the role of voyeur, standing

with dog outside the cabin where they fuck, voyeuristically consuming their pleasure. Rather than being turned off by her love for Baines, it appears to excite Stewart's passion; he longs to possess her all the more. Unable to win her back from Baines, he expresses his rage, rooted in misogyny and sexism, by physically attacking her and chopping off her finger with an ax. This act of male violence takes place with Ada's daughter, Flora, as a witness. Though traumatized by the violence she witnesses, she is still about to follow the white male patriarch's orders and take the bloody finger to Baines, along with the message that each time he sees Ada she will suffer physical mutilation.

Violence against land, natives, and women in this film, unlike that of gangsta rap, is portrayed uncritically, as though it is "natural," the inevitable climax of conflicting passions. The outcome of this violence is positive. Ultimately, the film suggests Stewart's rage was only an expression of irrational sexual jealousy, that he comes to his senses and is able to see "reason." In keeping with male exchange of women, he gives Ada and Flora to Baines. They leave the wilderness. On the voyage home Ada demands that her piano be thrown overboard because it is "soiled," tainted with horrible memories. Surrendering it she lets go of her longing to display passion through artistic expression. A nuclear family now, Baines, Ada, and Flora resettle and live happily-ever-after. Suddenly, patriarchal order is restored. Ada becomes a modest wife, wearing a veil over her mouth so that no one will see her lips struggling to speak words. Flora has no memory of trauma and is a happy child turning somersaults. Baines is in charge, even making Ada a new finger.

"The Piano "seduces and excites audiences with its uncritical portrayal of sexism and misogyny. Reviewers and audiences alike seem to assume that Campion's gender, as well as her breaking of traditional boundaries that inhibit the advancement of women in film, indicate that her work expresses a feminist standpoint. And, indeed, she does employ feminist "tropes," even as her work betrays feminist visions of female actualization, celebrates and eroticizes male domination. In Smith's discussion of misogyny she emphasizes that woman-hating is not solely the province of men: "We are all exposed to the prevailing ideology of our culture, and some women learn early on that they can prosper by aping the misogyny of men; these are the women who win provisional favor by denigrating other women, by playing on male prejudices, and by acting the 'man's woman'." Since this is not a documentary film that needs to remain faithful to the ethos of its historical setting, why is it that Campion does not resolve Ada's conflicts by providing us with an imaginary landscape where a woman can express passionate artistic commitment and find fulfillment in a passionate relationship? This would be no more far-fetched than her cinematic portrayal of Ada's

miraculous transformation from muteness into speech. Ultimately, Campion's "The Piano" advances the sexist assumption that heterosexual women will give up artistic practice to find "true love." That "positive" surrender is encouraged by the "romantic" portrayal of sexism and misogyny.

While I do not think that young black male rappers have been rushing in droves to see "The Piano", there is a bond between those folks involved with high culture who celebrate and condone the sexist ideas and values upheld in this film and those who celebrate and condone "gangsta rap." Certainly Kennedy's description of the United States as a "cowboy, gangster, philistine" culture would also accurately describe the culture evoked in "The Piano". Popular movies that are seen by young black males, for example "Indecent Proposal, MadDog and Glory, True Romance", and "One False Move", all eroticize male domination expressed via the exchange of women, as well as the subjugation of other men, through brutal violence.

Contrary to a racist white imagination which assumes that most young black males, especially those who are poor, live in a self- created cultural vacuum, uninfluenced by mainstream, cultural values, it is the application of those values, largely learned through passive uncritical consumption of mass media, that is revealed in "gangsta rap." Brent Staples is willing to challenge the notion that "urban primitivism is romantic" when it suggests that black males become "real men" by displaying the will to do violence, yet he remains resolutely silent about that world of privileged white culture that has historically romanticized primitivism, and eroticized male violence. Contemporary films like "Reservoir Dogs" and "The Bad Lieutenant" celebrate urban primitivism and many less well done films ("Trespass, Rising Sun") create and/or exploit the cultural demand for depictions of hardcore blacks who are willing to kill for sport.

To take "gangsta rap" to task for its sexism and misogyny while critically accepting and perpetuating those expressions of that ideology which reflect bourgeois standards (no rawness, no vulgarity) is not to call for a transformation of the culture of patriarchy. Ironically, many black male ministers, themselves sexist and misogynist, are leading the attacks against gangsta rap. Like the mainstream world that supports white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, they are most concerned with calling attention to the vulgar obscene portrayals of women to advance the cause of censorship. For them, rethinking and challenging sexism, both in the dominant culture and in black life, is not the issue.

Mainstream white culture is not concerned about black male sexism and misogyny, particularly when it is unleashed against black women and

children. It is concerned when young white consumers utilize black popular culture to disrupt bourgeois values. Whether it be the young white boy who expresses his rage at his mother by aping black male vernacular speech (a true story) or the masses of young white males (and middle class men of color) seeking to throw off the constraints of bourgeois bondage who actively assert in their domestic households via acts of aggression their rejection of the call to be "civilized." These are the audiences who feel such a desperate need for gangsta rap. It is much easier to attack gangsta rap than to confront the culture that produces that need.

Gangsta rap is part of the anti-feminist backlash that is the rage right now. When young black males labor in the plantations of misogyny and sexism to produce gangsta rap, their right to speak this violence and be materially rewarded is extended to them by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Far from being an expression of their "manhood," it is an expression of their own subjugation and humiliation by more powerful, less visible forces of patriarchal gangsterism. They give voice to the brutal raw anger and rage against women that it is taboo for "civilized" adult men to speak. No wonder then that they have the task of tutoring the young, teaching them to eroticize and enjoy the brutal expressions of that rage (teaching them language and acts) before they learn to cloak it in middle-class decorum or Robert Bly style reclaimings of lost manhood. The tragedy for young black males is that they are so easily dunned by a vision of manhood that can only lead to their destruction.

Feminist critiques of the sexism and misogyny in gangsta rap, and in all aspects of popular culture, must continue to be bold and fierce. Black females must not be duped into supporting shit that hurts us under the guise of standing beside our men. If black men are betraying us through acts of male violence, we save ourselves and the race by resisting. Yet, our feminist critiques of black male sexism fail as meaningful political intervention if they seek to demonize black males, and do not recognize that our revolutionary work is to transform white supremacist capitalist patriarchy in the multiple areas of our lives where it is made manifest, whether in gangsta rap, the black church, or the Clinton administration.

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