

### ***Love and Hip Hop: The Modern Black Minstrel Show***

Over the last 20 years, the genre of reality TV has exploded. Since *Big Brother* and *Survivor* aired in 2000, people have tuned in by the millions to watch real people battle among each other for fame, money, or true love. Whether it is the *Bachelor*, *Jersey Shore*, or *Dance Moms*, people are glued to their televisions, on the edge of their couches waiting for the meltdown that everyone will be talking about tomorrow. The rise in reality TV was a response to the rising cost of television production in the 1980s. The elements of a scripted program, such as writers, actors, editors, and makeup artist, became more expensive and were causing producers to lose money. During the 1980s “dramas routinely cost[ed] over \$1 million per episode, and half-hour sitcoms cost[ed] \$500,000 to \$600,000”. (Jefferson-James 33) Whereas a reality television program can be produced for half the cost of scripted television (Jefferson-James 33). In attempt to increase profits, producers got rid of writers and unionized actors in favor of skilled editors and casts of Average Joes and has-been-celebrities all looking to make a quick buck. Producers used strategic casting to combine as many conflicting personalities as possible and the editing designed to manipulate situations to create a more dramatic program.

Over the years, networks have received criticism for their misrepresentation of people on various shows. During the last few years the issues of representation has become more pressing as there has been a rise in reality television shows featuring predominately black casts. As these shows become more and more popular, producers pull stereotypes from the ugliest parts of American history to make familiar storylines that sell. Networks like VH1 have made millions off shows that degrade and humiliate their black casts. When looking at these new reality shows on a surface level, it is easy to dismiss these shows as meaningless entertainment, but closer analysis proves the shows -intentionally or not- have recreated black minstrel shows. The best

example of this is the VH1 original series, *Love and Hip Hop*. *Love and Hip Hop* premiered in March of 2011. The show was created to document the lives and relationships of professionals in the Hip Hop industry. What was created to give viewers an inside look of life as Hip Hop royalty soon became an hour of fist fights, strippers' performances and several women arguing over one man. This show is glorifying all the stereotypes the African American community fought to dispel. By perpetuating these harmful stereotypes, *Love and Hip Hop* threatens the progress made by the African American community.

### What Were Black Minstrel Shows?

Black minstrelsy was the first indigenous American form of entertainment based on the caricatures of black slaves and featured white actors costumed to exaggerate features distinct to African Americans. Costuming included big red lips and black facepaint, and matted dirty wigs (*Ethnic Notions*). Black minstrelsy was created in the late 1820's when Thomas Dartmouth Rice did a performance mocking a crippled slave dancing. His performance gave birth to a new form of entertainment that would last well into the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (*Ethnic Notions*). As discussed in Jennifer Bloomquist's article, minstrels' "comedy hinged on gross misrepresentations of what the actors determined to be (southern) Black culture, including singing, dancing, and delivering comedic speeches. [Since many] actors had little or no real contact with African Americans, their version of Black culture was almost entirely grounded in racist stereotypes" (411). The stereotypes spread across America like wildfire as minstrel shows gained popularity. Various acting companies performed black minstrel shows throughout the country, many times for audiences who also lacked any real interaction with the African American community. Due to popularity and lack of previous knowledge, these performances became White America's only insight to Black culture (Bloomquist 412). These performances

were structured as variety shows with bastardized versions of black folk music and skits to designed to pigeonhole slaves into stereotypes such as Mammies and Sambos (“Minstrel Shows”). The Mammy figure was a female house slave that was extremely loyal and protective of the white family she worked for. The Sambo, on the other hand, was carefree almost childlike male slave. The purpose of these stereotypes was to romanticize slavery and create an image of slaves as happy and content (*Ethnic Notions*).

Over time characters evolved and changed to fit the needs of the oppressors. After emancipation, freed African Americans were stereotypes to be a threat to the society. During this time, you get the hyper-sexualized and aggressive images of African American known as the Brutes and Jezebels. By creating these images, the media was creating a narrative that said without the control and guidance of white society, Blacks had regressed into a savage state of being (*Ethnic Notions*). These stereotypes became so ingrained into American entertainment that they bleed into films and cartoons. These caricatures were plainly placed in films like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and cartoons of the 1940s and 50s (*Ethnic Notions*). In our modern entertainment, the minstrel stereotypes are still very much present but have simply been reimaged to fit within our modern social structure to create something new yet familiar. In today’s media, the Jezebel has become the Whore, the Sapphire has become the Angry Black Women and the Brute becomes the Pimp (Jefferson-James 39).

#### The Parallels Between *Love and Hip Hop* and Black Minstrelsy

It may seem like a stretch to compare an old relic of American racism to a modern reality TV show, but after a close analysis we see *Love and Hip Hop* has recreated the stereotypes and theatrical style of black minstrel shows. The three main stereotypes seen in *Love and Hip Hop*

are the Whore, the Angry Black Woman, and the Pimp. The women who best portray the whore stereotype are Sky and Cardi B. Episode 14 of season 7 opens with Sky and her boyfriend Drewski meeting at a basketball game to discuss a previous fight and hopefully reach a resolution. Sky shows up dressed inappropriately for a basketball game. Dressed in a lowcut crop top, short with butt cheeks hanging out and stilettos, she reasons that she wants to “show him what he is missing.” In other words, she plans to use her sexual allure to bend Drewski to her will. Before approaching Drewski, Sky makes a point to flirt with one of the basketball players to get Drewski angry. This goes back to the Jezebel stereotype that Black women are distracting and manipulating in their sexual allure.

In a new scene, we focus on rapper, Swift and Cardi B, a stripper turned rapper. The two previously had a friendly yet flirtatious relationship. In this scene, Swift surprises Cardi at her studio with flowers and a confession of his desires to date her. She teasingly responds with “you like me, you wanna to fuck me.” Then in an aside to the camera she says, “I’m so flattered and I’m actually blushing that Swift is telling me that he likes me. He’s so damn cute and I haven’t had penis in a God damn long time.” She instantly starts thinking about the sexual aspects of this prospective relationship and she has diminished his emotional interest in her by reducing his worth to his ability to satisfy her sexual desires. This is another example of the Jezebel stereotype: Cardi B is constantly preoccupied with sex.

The Angry Black Woman stereotype is portrayed by Erika, Samantha, and Yandy. These three women all have children by the same man, Mendecees, who is currently serving time in a Federal prison for drug trafficking. It is understandable that there would be some tension or resentment among the women due to their connection through a cheating partner, but the way they handle their resentment is in no way excusable. For example, in this episode the three

women have gathered to discuss putting aside their difference to allow their children to develop relationships with each other. The meeting quickly turns into a yelling match and they are unable to have a meaningful conversation or resolve any issues. To intensify the fighting for the audience, the editors create cuts between the actual fighting and private asides with the women where they continue their smack talk or talk about the action from their point of view. This is just one of many explosive fights on *Love and Hip Hop*. By featuring these violent incidents, the Sapphire or Angry Black Woman stereotype is promoted to millions of viewers. This sends the message that no matter how much money black women have, they are still uncontrollably emotional and use to physical violence to settle their differences.

The final stereotype I will discuss is the Pimp. The stereotype is portrayed the men of *Love and Hip Hop*. Rich, Peter, and Cisco are self-proclaimed members of what they call the creep squad. The creep squad is a group of producers and managers of new artists. They are known as the creep squad because they frequently sleep with their female clients. You would think sleeping with clients would be a deep dark secret, but not for the creep squad. These men are proud of their conquest. They will scream from the top of a mountain – or in front cameras broadcasting to millions of viewers- that they had sexual relations with the artist they are supposed to manage. These men are not prostituting their clients in the sense of an actual human trafficking operation, but in the sense that these managers are selling their clients image as a sexual fantasy. Instead of establishing professional manager-artist relationships the creep squad has taken advantage of the young aspiring artists by shifting the focus from the women's music to their ability to sexually satisfy the men. Not only does this show the men as constantly preoccupied with sex but also continues the idea that black men are only interested in financially profitable relationships and are incapable of having a meaningful relationship.

Not only has *Love and Hip Hop* recreated these awful caricatures, they have also recreated minstrelsy theatrical structure. On *Love and Hip Hop*, each cast member's story is featured as its own segment. Each segment functions almost like a skit with its own storyline. The people involved in a particular segment might refer to something that occurred previously but overall each segment could stand alone as its own story. The viewer is moved from story to story with musical transitions and asides from cast members. The format is the same as in a minstrel show. A main part of the black minstrels was the olio or medley which was a mixture of individual comedic acts and musical performances ("Minstrel Show"). Now, this connection is not inherently racist, but it does speak to artificialness and production value of this "reality" show. When you look at the separately filmed asides, sworn enemies conveniently placed at the same events, and the security guards who swoop into action within seconds we see that *Love and Hip Hop* is just as staged as a scripted production.

#### Disrespecting Those Who Paved the Way

Over the years, civil rights leaders and black actor have fought with the media over the portrayals of African American. These extraordinarily people knew that changing laws was only part of the battle. For true equality, they would have to change the hearts and minds of the American people. Members of the Civil Rights Movement put as many positive images in media to counter the negative images that were ingrained into the public. Actors like Harry Belafonte, John Amos, Nichelle Nichols, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee work tirelessly to bring complexity, humanity, and dignity to every character they portrayed. One the best examples of commitment to positive representation is Sidney Poitier.

Poitier was America's first black leading man and in 1964 he became the first black actor to win an Oscar for a leading role ("Oprah's Dinner of a Lifetime with Sidney Poitier"). His

success came from the dignity, class, and respectability he brought to each and every role he played. Over the course of his long and successful career he created many groundbreaking moments, but the most revolutionary moment was in the film *In the Heat of the Night*. In this film, Sidney Poitier plays a detective in the segregated south. As he is interrogating a white man, the man slaps Poitier's character. Without a second of hesitation, Poitier slaps the man back. This was a pivotal moment because it showed that Black America was not going to quietly accept their oppression. They were going to demand the respect they deserved ("Oprah's Dinner of a Lifetime with Sidney Poitier"). Sidney Poitier has inspired many actors such as Denzel Washington and Oprah Winfrey who have in turned have gone on to inspire countless other young people to strive for greatness. *Love and Hip Hop's* presentation of racist stereotypes is a slap in the face to every single person who fought for positive and accurate representation of the African American community.

#### How Representation Affects Our Communities

It's upsetting when fictional programming bastardizes Black culture, but it becomes problematic when reality based programs do it. It is problematic because as we developed our understanding of the world through media images. We can dismiss scripted programs as a work of fiction but that cannot be done when a show is marketed as reality. When *Love and Hip Hop*, a small section of the Black community, is allowed to misrepresent the entire population, the Black community's self-perception is altered along with the county's perception of the community. These claims are supported by historical evidence and the Cultivation Theory. The Cultivation Theory was developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross and states "high frequency viewers of television are more susceptible to media messages and the belief that they are real and

valid” (Davie). In other words, the more television a viewer consumes, the more likely the viewer is to believe television accurately reflects the real world.

*Love and Hip Hop* gains its power and influence of public opinion, the same way black minstrel shows did; through lack of previous knowledge of the African American community. This show and its various spin-off series have been broadcasted to millions of viewers for the last 6 years and a portion of these audience member have little to no real interactions with African Americans. This show that is marketed as reality becomes their only exposure to black culture. When cultural exposure is limited to a singular narrative, those viewers will be ignorant to complexity of Black culture and have justification for any preconceived racial prejudices.

Not only has *Love and Hip Hop* altered the country’s perception of African Americans, it has also affected African Americans’ self- perception. As the African American youth develop self-identity they look to the world around them and media to inform them on how they fit into society. In the media, they find that people are reward with fame and wealth for outrageous behavior. As discussed in Monica Wynn’s article, people who are motivated by status will have a greater need for self-importance and are likely to fantasize about becoming an over-night celebrity because “the message of reality television [... is] that ordinary people are important” (105). In other words, reality TV has created a standard of behavior for people who are motivated by status, reaching for their 15 minutes of fame. To achieve the glamorous lifestyles seen on television, these young people are unknowingly selling out their communities and cultures by acting out the very stereotypes that Civil Rights members fought against. This generation is far enough removed from the Civil Rights Movement that they are unfamiliar with the battle to dismiss these negative images (Jefferson-James 39). As they internalize these images as part of their reality, they are clueless to all the work being undone.

Other scholars like Erica Edwards would argue that the behavior of reality stars is not internalized by young people because of the youth's ability to separate entertainment from reality. In Edwards' audience study, she states, "[the teens interviewed] overwhelmingly asserted that they consume the show solely for entertainment and speculated that the cast members might be making more drama for good TV" (286). The young women interviewed feel the show is irrelevant to them because they are not personally in same situations as the cast of *Love and Hip Hop* (Edwards 288). While Edwards' study brings up some valid points, her sample size is not diverse enough or statistically large enough to create an accurate representation of *Love and Hip Hop*'s entire viewing population. The study's sample size was limited to "seven young Black women who were high achieving high school seniors attending an under resourced predominately black urban high school in a major Southeastern metropolitan city" (Edwards 286). Edwards's study also fails to consider a key component of the Cultivation Theory; viewers are unaware of the extent to which they absorb media (Davie). So, these seven young women interviewed might consciously recognize *Love and Hip Hop* as entertainment, but they are still subconsciously internalizing its messages.

Additional there is research to directly contradict Erica Edwards's claim that reality TV does not affect young women. In 2011, the Girl Scout Research Institute conducted a study on 1,141 girls ages 11-17 to examine the effects of reality programming. The study showed that girls who regularly consumed reality television were more likely to believe that other girls were untrustworthy and social aggression (behavior such as gossiping and social exclusion) was a normal part of female relationships (Behm-Morawitz 340). Another study conducted by University of Missouri questioned 174 women ages 17-25 and found that a "significant positive relationship emerged between first-person desire [viewers' desire to be like TV characters] and

emerging adult women's gender role beliefs, support of the stereotype of the "mean girl," and belief in social aggression as rewarding" (Behm-Morawitz 349). These studies both show that watching reality television will affect women's social expectations and how they interact among each other.

### Conclusion

In an attempt to create cheap television programming, VH1 has created a modern black minstrel show with its hit series *Love and Hip Hop*. *Love and Hip Hop* reintroduces the stereotypes and theatrical style of minstrel shows to our modern society. This show has turned the Jezebel into the Whore, Sapphire into the Angry Black Women and the Brute into the Pimp. While these stereotypes may represent a small portion of the African American community, they do not represent the whole community. The danger of this show is how it allows a singular narrative to speak for the whole population. With this critique, I am not arguing for the cancelation of *Love and Hip Hop*. The franchise is simply too lucrative for VH1 to pull it. I am, however, arguing for reality based programming that shows the full spectrum of Black culture. Networks must give a platform for positive images of African American where viewers can see that the African American community is filled with doctors, lawyers, professors, police officers, and loving, stable families. Reality television needs the balance that sitcoms had. Where shows like *Good Times* allowed us to sympathize with the plights of Black American and the *Cosby Show* allowed viewers to rejoice in the community's success.

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