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ENGL 1010 CC 706

October 23rd, 2020

Title: Megan Thee Stallion and the Black Woman's Sexuality

On October 13th, 2020, one of the biggest stars in hip-hop, the Black female rapper Megan Thee Stallion, published a powerful yet moving op-ed in the New York Times, titled "Why I Speak Up for Black Women". Included with the article was a ninety-second video showcasing women of color from various walks of life, quickly transitioning between scenes of Black women in the nail salon, the kitchen, the neighborhood basketball courts and the bedroom. While her hit single "Girls in the Hood" plays in the background, Stallion narrates the video. This combination of the video and her op-ed provides a vivid image of the struggles, from the societal-imposed double standards to the "laundry list of mistreatment and neglect" (Stallion), that women of color face. However, it is thought provoking that Stallion portrays the sexual nature of Black women in both her op-ed and the video, even though she knows it has negative implications on Black victims of assault. Given Stallion's position on how "the most disrespected person is the black woman", her actualizing of the stereotype reveals that she does so in a way to position the Black woman's sexuality as a source of empowerment and pride.

Stallion acknowledges that this stereotype exists and that it actively undermines the trustworthiness of a Black woman's statement regarding assault, and in Stallion's case, gun violence. Stallion was shot twice in the feet in early September by rapper Tory Lanez, but she only accused him publicly nearly a month after the incident. "As a victim, I have been met with skepticism and judgement," she recounts. "The way people have publicly questioned and debated

whether I played a role in my own violent assault proves that my fears about discussing what happened were, unfortunately, warranted" (Stallion). Stallion, a Black woman, is pointing to the phenomenon where society "sides with the man" instead of the victim because of the victim's racial profile and gender, implying that society's stereotype of Black women as more sexual results in the discounting of their narratives. As a public figure, Stallion has the support system and legal resources that many other women of color do not. Columbia Law Professor, Kimberlé Crenshaw investigates this further in her essay *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color* (1995). Focusing on the intersectionality of racism and sexism in the context of rape and assault, Crenshaw highlights how "women themselves are put on trial, as judge and jury scrutinized their lives to determine whether they were innocent victims or women who essentially got what they were asking for" (367). Notably, Crenshaw uses the phrase "women themselves are put on trial" ironically as one would expect the assaulter or rapist to be the one being judged. However, Crenshaw focuses on how in the court of law, the victim's sexuality is judged to play a role in their victimization, as demonstrated in Stallion's case. In Stallion's case, she was "put on trial" not as a victim but a woman of color, whose moral character and sexuality were put into question because of society's inherent "skepticism and judgement" (Stallion) of Black women. Both Crenshaw and Stallion highlight a larger problem within our judicial system and society: that we focus solely on the circumstances in which the victim was allegedly "harmed" instead of focusing on the prosecution of the assaulter or rapist, which is especially true when it comes to women of color who face existing stereotypes, like Stallion.

Stallion further investigates the stereotype of the sexualized black women through the objectification of women by men. In many cases of abuse, assault and rape, the parties involved

are in a personal relationship. She reflects on violence as a concept: “it happens because too many men treat all women as objects, which helps them justify inflicting abuse against us when we choose to exercise our own free will” (Stallion). Here, Stallion is arguing that the objectification of women by men leads to the ability for men to injure women. The stereotypes of a sexual Black woman play into this narrative and compound the process of objectification for Black women. Harvard professor Elaine Scarry complicates Stallion’s argument and extends it from simple objectification to “the difficulty of imagining others”. Scarry discusses how our inability to imagine the perspectives of others “is both the cause of, and the problem displayed by the action of injuring” (102). In the case of Stallion, because men find it difficult to imagine themselves in the position of Black women, they are able to inflict harm on them. This phenomenon of objectification is exacerbated by the societal stereotypes held by men on the sexual nature of Black women. Unlike Crenshaw who focused mainly on rape and assault against women of color, Scarry widens the scope of examination to encompass all forms of violence and harm. Stallion’s case illustrates how the imagination of men is limited to the objectification of women and enhanced by society’s stereotypes of Black women. This can be interpreted through the lens of Scarry. Scarry cites the Sartre technique of closing one’s eyes and trying to imagine a person, only to obtain a blurry image (102). In the case for Black women, it is even worse as one does not get a blurry, unfocused image but a negative image informed by stereotypes, resulting in objectification and the capacity to inflict harm. Hence, Stallion provides greater nuance to Scarry’s argument of the process in which the inability to imagine leads to the infliction of harm through objectification.

Knowing that these stereotypes can lead to profound effects on Black victims in the courtroom and can even result in further objectification, rape and assault of women of color, why

does Stallion present sexual depictions of Black women in the video accompanying her op-ed? One response may be found in Stallion's commentary on how others viewed her clothing choices, which complicates Crenshaw's view on how "Blacks have long been portrayed as more sexual, more earthy, more gratification-oriented" (369). Crenshaw argues that in the context of the courtroom, these "sexualized images of race intersect with norms of women's sexuality, norms that are used to distinguish good women from bad, madonnas from whores" (369). Similarly, Stallion has long been criticized for wearing revealing clothing during her performances, and hence she has been subject to criticism regarding her hyper-sexual performances. However, while Crenshaw merely asserts that such stereotypes are hurtful to women of color, Stallion takes his argument further by viewing a Black woman's sexuality as a source of empowerment and pride. Stallion writes, "I choose what I wear, not because I am trying to appeal to men, but because I am showing pride in my appearance, and a positive body image is central to who I am as a woman". The sexual depiction of Black women in Stallion's video is Stallion's method to "reclaim [the] power" of women of color, which contributes to their empowerment.

A closer analysis of Stallion's word choice and the accompanying video deepens Stallion's argument on empowerment through sexuality. Stallion writes that "when women choose to capitalize on our sexuality, to reclaim our own power, like I have, we are vilified and disrespected." While Crenshaw characterizes the dilemma that women of color face as white-and-black -- either "madonnas" or "whores" -- Stallion forwards the argument that women of color should reclaim "[their] own power" through "capital[izing] on [their] sexuality". Instead of giving into societal pressure to conform and become "madonnas", Stallion believes that taking pride in one's sexuality is a step towards dismantling this stereotype. Although Stallion admits

that “showing pride in [her] appearance” results in “vilification and disrespect”, she transcends these comments writing “I’m not afraid of criticism”. Stallion’s ultimate message implores women of color to embrace their sexuality as a source of empowerment and to transcend the false dichotomy of “madonna” versus “whores” presented by society.

To step out of the labels and stereotypes that society has imposed on women of color, Stallion’s video that accompanies her op-ed showcases a wide variety of powerful women of color, including scenes that are sexual and non-sexual. In attacking the stereotype of the sexual nature of Black women through highlighting a range of characters in her video, Stallion, however, is at contention with one of Scarry’s theories of imagination. Scarry explores how one’s ability to imagine others predicts whether one can inflict harm. Through the examination of works of literature and art, Scarry postulates that due to the inherent limitations of the human mind, a piece of work “may have one major character” but “it is impossible to hold rich multitudes of imaginary characters simultaneously in the mind” (104). As such, Scarry argues that literature and art are insufficient in helping society imagine others. Thus, the following question arises: To combat the stereotype that Black women are more sexual, is it more effective for Stallion to portray a central character or to present a broad survey of many different women of color? As it stands, the video consists of many quick transitions between various scenes, from the nail salon, to the kitchen, to the neighborhood basketball courts, to the bedroom, showcasing the multitude of diverse lives that people of color live, which functions to dispel the stereotype as only a single aspect of a Black woman’s life. Even within the first ten seconds of the video, eight women of color, varying in age, sexual orientation, weight, class and more, are introduced. Scenes depicting the sexual nature of Black women are interwoven throughout the video: women of color in lingerie and revealing clothing, and Black women “twerking”, which is a form of

sexual dance movement, surrounded by other women of color. Importantly, these sexual Black women are shown to encompass various body types, from thin to plus-sized, which echoes Stallion's message about body positivity and empowerment through reclaiming one's sexuality. While these clips play, Stallion talks about the double standards that Black women face when it comes to their sexuality, they are expected to be "his lady in the street, but his freak in the sheets". The use of "his lady" and "his freak" function effectively to show the objectification of Black women as the possessive adjective "his" elicits a sense of ownership. Stallion further nuances the stereotype of the sexual Black women by investigating the double standard imposed on them by the society. While they are stereotyped to be sexual in bed, they are also supposed to be "his lady in the street" which echoes the false dichotomy Crenshaw discusses of "madonnas or whores". Except in this case, Black women are expected to be both. The intersectionality of Crenshaw and Stallion's ideas underscores the notion that women of color face impossible double standards: Society categorizes them into either "madonnas" or "whores" to judge their moral character, but they are also expected to be both "madonnas" and "whores" when it comes to appeasing men.

While it is true that these scenes depicting numerous characters do not lead to a "rich" understanding of a single Black female character's perspective, this was not Stallion's aim. Instead, this technique actually works at helping viewers imagine the lives of black women in general rather than confining viewers to imagining just the life of one or two characters. Despite Scarry's argument that multiple characters harm our ability to imagine them, Stallion's video demonstrates that imagination can be accomplished with multiple characters. Although Stallion does portray scenes that emphasize the sexuality of the Black woman, she also portrays other aspects as well to show that the Black woman is so much more. Stallion also strategically uses

her narration to highlight the impossible double-standards that women of color face, both in terms of their sexuality and other aspects of their lives.

From another point of view, however, Stallion does not completely reject Scarry's framework for imagination. Stallion herself does the voiceover for the entire video and she can be seen as the "one major character" (104). While she does appear in the short video multiple times, her appearances do not form a story. Instead, Stallion's voice strings together the fragmented clips showcasing other women of color. As such, Stallion's video highlights a limitation in Scarry's framework for imagination: whether the use of multiple characters is effective depends on the purpose of the piece. In this case, Stallion's goal was to showcase a wide array of women of color to combat the dominant stereotype of a sexualized Black woman. Despite this goal, she still includes scenes depicting the sexual Black woman, but with the caveat that these scenes include women of various body shapes, to forward her message on body positivity and reclaiming one's sexuality as a form of empowerment. Hence, Stallion demonstrates that it is not a trade-off between having multiple characters resulting in the lack of imagination versus a central character pursuing deep empathy. Instead, the short video combines both of these aspects -- Stallion as a central character showcases the sexual beauty of women of color as well as the impossible double standards they face.

To conclude, Stallion's op-ed explores the sexuality of Black women through the stereotypes and double-standards they face. The intersection of Scarry and Stallion's work highlights the objectification that women of color face, which plays a critical role in the process of men inflicting harm on women via the "difficulty of imagining" mechanism outlined by Scarry. This objectification is explored further through Stallion's video which engages with another one of Scarry's theories of imagination in the context of literature and art. The

intersection of Crenshaw, Scarry and Stallion's work provide valuable insights into the expectations that society has on the sexuality of the Black women. They are portrayed negatively within the judicial system, yet their sexuality is necessary in appeasing men. Crenshaw and Stallion elicit the wide implications that this stereotype has on society, discussing how it disadvantages women of color in the court and highlighting the systemic discrimination that is inherent in the judicial system. The solution that Stallion provides is for Black women to embrace their own sexuality as a source of empowerment and pride. Although this will be met with "vilification and disrespect" (Stallion), it is the only way forward in the fight to dismantle the stereotype.



## Citations

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