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A Glance at Herstory

Black Female Documentarians Navigating Beyond the Normative Constraints in A Question of Color and My Mic Sounds Nice

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Black history can be both lost and sustained, as well as serve as the connection between historical consciousness and political social change. Manning Marable reminds us, "Too often the study of history is an exercise in nostalgia or political myth-making rather than an honest interaction with the raw materials of the past." As a result, "artifacts, memorabilia, and archives of the great black forerunners in the fight for freedom and democracy are seriously endangered, and precious little is being done about it. Priceless records, films, photographs, and crucial documents that reveal the inner stories of remarkable African-American men and women are rapidly being destroyed."¹

Preservation issues are particularly problematic in the educational system in the United States, as, in theory, this is where the populace should be introduced to the rich and textured history of African Americans. However, the limited exposure to authentic narratives of African American contributions has been detrimental in terms of stifling the knowledge base of those interested in learning about the black experience, particularly in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Classroom curriculums have had an unsettling reputation for muting or omitting African American narratives and histories from lessons and learning materials. In fact, until the mid-1960s, historical representations

highlighted in many traditional K-12 textbooks largely focus on the white, Anglo-Saxon experience.² Early classroom textbooks dating back to the first decades of the twentieth century rarely mention African Americans; however, when the books do, the accounts are imbued with racist implications and commentary. African Americans were firmly excluded from the collective American identity; instead, they were portrayed only in their capacity as slaves. Histories of blacks as Americans were left out of the curriculums and replaced by the discussion of slavery as an institution rather than the group itself.³

With the explosion of the Black Power and black consciousness movements of the 1960s came a call to update, rewrite, and reform the one-dimensional, exclusionary K-12 historical narrative. Until that point, the National Education Association (NEA) remained exclusionary, and textbooks remained static in their omission of African American histories. However, textbooks published later in the decade tell an entirely different story,⁴ and the amount of attention devoted to African Americans and multiculturalism grew tremendously. Not only do black exemplars appear more frequently in classroom texts but these exemplars are also now portrayed more positively and accurately. Discussions of African American doctors, politicians, and soldiers allow African Americans to be associated with traits such as intelligence, selflessness, and patriotism rather than laziness, unintelligence, and selfishness.⁵

Despite the changes made to K-12 curriculums and textbooks, many scholars continue to argue that there is a "lack of complexity found in African American historical narratives."⁶ Critiques of black history in K-12 curriculums insist that narratives in textbooks only focus on noncontroversial, one-dimensional histories and heroic figures that limit students' knowledge and context of understanding racial inequalities, power, and black history.

Though school curriculums have undoubtedly changed from extreme exclusion in the twentieth century to standards more acceptable today, it is necessary that textbooks and curriculums be revisited and revised to provide a more nuanced look into African American history that extends beyond slavery, Reconstruction, and heroic black figures. Moreover, it is important that we acknowledge the curriculums' dearth of information on black women and make efforts to address their contributions and include them as part of the conversation.⁷ This essay addresses the gap in the African American historical narrative in standardized curriculums by breaking through this intellectual gridlock and highlighting the cultural contributions of two African American female documentary filmmakers. In particular, Kathe Sandler and Ava DuVernay, who have gained access to, and control of, the means of production and circulation of their cultural projects, are discussed. Sandler's and DuVernay's

efforts to illuminate communal values and subjectivities of African Americans in their groundbreaking documentary films, *A Question of Color* (1993) and *My Mic Sounds Nice: The Truth about Women in Hip Hop* (2010), respectively, are the subjects of this essay.

The Documentary Film Genre

Nonfiction films serve as a means to document life stories and preserve and disseminate spoken and visual memories, offering eyewitness accounts to help verify historical facts and also to personalize the underlying truths of the written record. Documentary films can be used as research tools and methodologies that explore the visual means of communication about social and cultural worlds and can thus augment missing narratives in the trajectory of the black experience.

From the beginning, African American documentaries have addressed a broad spectrum of concerns, using a diverse array of narrative and counternarrative strategies. Documentaries made by, and for, African Americans often make connections to real people and events, as well as political and social issues. Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Cutler point to this trend: "African American documentaries like other Afro-diasporic works have much to say about links to Africa, the impact of slavery and colonization, patterns of displacement, migration and settlement, and the issue of race throughout the Americas, the Caribbean and Europe."⁸

The documentary tradition, though it is the film method considered to be one of the greatest forms of self-expression and one that uses personal narratives and takes subjects and scrutinizes them for the purpose of investigation and observation, has, in many respects, marginalized films created by African American females, particularly prior to 1970. Most early documentaries were made by African American males and focused on black soldiers in battle. These include Peter P. Jones's *For the Honor of the Fighting 8th Illinois Regiment* (1914), and Carlton Moss's *The Negro Soldier* (1944). Documentary films made by, and about, African American women have been largely absent from the black cultural landscape.

Until the early 1970s, black female filmmakers were not generally considered viable artists by the cinematic community; however, the award-winning documentaries and docudramas produced by a pioneering generation of black women have positioned these women as a force to be reckoned with. Lewis Jacobs posits, "In the United States, the single most conspicuous development in the seventies was the arrival of scores of women filmmakers, many of them

young and fresh out of college film courses, but demonstrating by their assertiveness and keenness, [they reflected] an important new source of film talent."⁹

With the emergence of the Women's Movement in the 1970s, African American women began to assert their creativity by chronicling their history and cultural contributions. Klotman and Cutler note that among those who have created early film portraits of African Americans are independent filmmakers Carroll Parrott Blue, who directed *Conversations with Roy DeCarava* (1983), an intimate expose that examines the life and work of one of the foremost photographic artists of the twentieth century, and Barbara McCullough, director of *Fragments* (1980), a film that features the ritualized performance of McCullough and her fellow artists.¹⁰ This generation of documentarians has reacted against perceived preachiness, looking instead for a style that is visually stimulating, imaginative, and challenging and one that decolonizes the gaze.¹¹

There has been a significant body of writing focused on fiction films produced by African Americans, including critical assessments focusing on the narrative films of African American artists, such as Kasi Lemmons and Julie Dash. Some of the more notable examples include Frederick Luis Aldama's *Postethnic Narrative Criticism: Magicorealism in Oscar "Zeta" Acosta, Ana Castillo, Julie Dash, Hanif Kureishi, and Salman Rushdie*, and Mark Reid's *New Wave Black Cinema in the 1990s*. Much of this writing examines and critically analyzes the narrative structure of the filmmakers' productions while seeking to understand how the aspirations, challenges, and oppression that African Americans have historically experienced have been articulated on the silver screen. Less examined by scholars and critics, however, is the work of a cadre of African American females working in the documentary tradition. This genre has enabled independent filmmakers to use their cameras to explore the intersections of race, class, and gender, producing work that reflects and explores alternative images of the black female.

In an area of cinematic representation that has traditionally excluded, marginalized, and displaced black women, Sandler and DuVernay have positioned themselves as the articulators of the black woman's cultural and sexual images, increasing the opportunity to advance our understanding of black women's cultural history and the social determinants molding their lives. Sandler and DuVernay have used imaginative ways to construct worlds that mimic, and comment on, and at the same time interrogate, subvert, and posit alternatives to the status quo.

Although the work of female black documentarians oftentimes shares perspectives found in some of their male counterparts' productions, the

women's films tend to exhibit a compelling gendered worldview that tends to express women's sexuality and subjectivity in provocatively unique ways. Their films focus on productive images of black women working from their own experiences, interests, and realities. These films are often characterized by shifts in the dominant language and formula of films most recognized in the Hollywood genre. The films exemplify alternative systems of thought, which, in many cases, reject traditional Hollywood aesthetics in their push toward re-presentations of the marginalized black female.

A major objective of this essay, then, is to explore the multiple definitions of black female identity, race, sexuality, and subjectivity and the nonfiction approach to cinematic representations in Sandler's commentary on race in *A Question of Color* and DuVernay's expose on black female MCs in *My Mic Sounds Nice*. This essay uses Douglas D. Kellner's Cultural Studies multidisciplinary paradigm, which takes into account the political, social, and cultural issues prevalent during the making of the film and explicates relevant issues related to race, class, culture, and gender. Moreover, the paradigm provides a theoretical space that emphasizes how cultural texts are read and how meaning is constructed from these readings.¹² The perspectives advanced by the aforementioned black female documentary filmmakers address an array of matters crucial to understanding various facets of black life.

Kathe Sandler: A Question of Color

A protégé of famous documentarian St. Clair Bourne, Kathe Sandler is a Guggenheim award-winning independent filmmaker whose works include *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks* (2003), *The Friends* (1995), which garnered her the first-prize award in the cross-cultural category at the Black Filmmaker's Hall of Fame, and *Remembering Thelma* (1981), which received the best biography of a dance artist award from the New York Dance Film and Video Festival. *A Question of Color* remains her most recognized work, though she is currently working to complete her forthcoming documentary *When and Where We Enter: Stories of Black Feminism*.¹³

A Question of Color, produced by Independent Television Service (ITVS) and distributed by California Newsreel and Jane Balfour Films, was written by Sandler and Luke Charles Harris and directed by Sandler. As the title indicates, *Color* confronts the issue of skin color and color consciousness in the black community. Sandler journeys through time, beginning with the era of slavery and ending in the early 1990s, to discuss skin color, the black community's historical, emotional, and psychological burden.

Color confronts the turmoil associated with "colorism" in black America. Sandler's exploration begins with slavery, apartheid, and the institution of racism to discuss how the caste system that operates based on how closely one fares to the European ideal has defined the black self-image. Her interviewees discuss how looking "more white" potentially helped blacks during chattel slavery. Whites created beauty conventions crafted in their own self-image to ensure a racial hierarchy that would mark them as superior. Based on these ideals, "slave owners used skin color as a basis to divide enslaved Africans for work chores and to create trust and animosity among them, minimizing chances for revolt."¹⁴ The Eurocentric standard of beauty was impressed upon Africans, and "negroid" features were regarded as alien and unattractive.¹⁵ Lighter skin and softer-textured hair were used at times to determine duties and social status, even among slaves. Therefore, the obsession with conforming to European ideals began very early on with the Africans' arrival to the "New World" when color, in lieu of race, became the most salient, defining American characteristic.¹⁶

The interviews and commentary in *Color* provide a comprehensive context in which to understand the far leap the world has taken with regard to black and African physical characteristics. Interesting, the authors found no documentation prior to the slave trade that suggests discriminatory attitudes toward black skin. In actuality, some early Western cultures "extolled the beauty of dark skin and did not hesitate to do so publicly."¹⁷ Early poems document Westerners praising African hair and dark skin tones. Frank Snowden recapitulates a poem from Asclepiades, one of the first Westerners, "Gazing at her beauty, I melt like wax before fire. And if she is black, what difference to me? So are coals when we light them, they shine like rose-buds."¹⁸

Color was released at a pivotal time in American history. New music, political outcries, and community uprisings during the 1990s presented another turning point in black consciousness and responsiveness to social injustices. During the 1960s and 1970s, African Americans experienced a new revolution of empowerment through the Black Power, Black Nationalist, and Civil Rights Movements. However, during the 1990s, the African American community shouldered the responsibility of deciding if they would create new transformation movements or remain static in the ways in which they regarded color consciousness and forward mobility. For instance, during that time, the world witnessed the 1992 Los Angeles riots, one of the largest, most violent racial upheavals in the history of the nation. The unrest erupted after the acquittal of four Los Angeles Police Department officers who were videotaped brutally beating Los Angeles civilian Rodney King. "The violence and anarchy lasted three days leaving 55 people dead and more than 2,000 injured" and

sparked tensions among ethnic groups, law enforcement agents, and the black community.¹⁹ As an act of responsiveness, new forms of hip-hop and gangsta rap were created with the intent of illuminating the social ills prevalent in black communities across America. This gangsta rap subgenre of hip-hop encapsulates the struggles of the period and differs greatly from the party-oriented rap music created in the 1970s.

Hip-hop was first introduced to America in the 1970s as a musical and artistic form of expression that fused poetry and live or recorded instrumentals. Although the earliest forms of hip-hop were "lyrically apolitical," by the late 1980s, rap and hip-hop had taken a different direction. Songs recorded by rap groups, such as Public Enemy, began to embody strong political resistance and espoused a new "radical social consciousness."²⁰ That struggle continued into the 1990s, with lyrics that raised consciousness about police brutality; however, new party music surfaced as well. Many of these records featured "scantly clad, sexually overcharged video vixens."²¹ This particular configuration of female sexuality almost always fits a certain profile—a fair-skinned model with long, curly hair.²²

The 1990s afforded black music the opportunity to create new standards of beauty in a more color-conscious and socially conscious atmosphere; however, mainstream hip-hop and rap music reverted to age-old standards that considered Eurocentric features and light complexions ideal for black women. With the prevalent media reinforcing this standard of beauty, the issue of color consciousness, once again, became a salient issue in the black community. *Color*, being one of the first to address color consciousness in the black community, contributed to the dialogue in new and provocative ways.

Although *Color* is a product of the 1990s, a time when the black community was less subjected to overt and blatant colorism, such as the "brown-paper-bag test," a ritual once practiced by certain African American sororities and fraternities who discriminated against people who were "too black" (i.e., darker than a paper bag), intraracism within the black community was still a monumental issue. Even today, empirical studies suggest little change in the preference for lighter skin among African Americans. Though researchers have noted that the pressure for lighter skin and Eurocentric features is more prevalent among African American women than it is for African American men, both groups are affected by colorism.²³ Furthermore, the notion of femininity and womanhood in America has been closely linked to whiteness and purity.²⁴ Culturally, virtues such as piety and purity have become synonymous with whiteness; everything "white" has become "ladylike," and everything associated with "blackness" is quite the contrary.²⁵

Sandler interviews scores of African Americans of all ages, skin tones,

and backgrounds to examine the skin-color hierarchy that exists, but that is rarely discussed in the black community. The film opens with an elderly brown-skin African American woman explaining, "If you're white, you're all right. If you're yellow, you're mellow. If you're brown, stick around. If you're black, get back!" A darker-skinned woman then explains how the mother of a man she was dating rejected her because she was "too dark."

After this powerful opening, *Color* explores the consequences of being too dark in black America, with then Tuskegee mayor Johnny Ford and the fifth president of Tuskegee University, Dr. Benjamin Payton, who explain the effects of colorism in the black community. Both were the first dark-skinned, black men to hold their positions, which, they explain, is not coincidental. According to testimony in the documentary, leadership positions in the black community were traditionally held by lighter-skinned African Americans, and those who looked white were elite. The effects of colorism hold true even today, as dark-skinned blacks in the United States are more likely to have lower socioeconomic status, more punitive relationships with the criminal justice system, and diminished prestige and are less likely to hold elective office compared to lighter-skinned blacks.²⁶

The issue of color extends far beyond success and opportunity in the black community. It is an ideology that weighs heavily on the self-esteem and self-worth of both male and female African Americans. This is apparent when Sandler interviews two black teenage boys who are best friends and a rap duo. One of the young men has a fair complexion, and the other has dark skin. They discuss the fact that girls usually gravitate towards the light-skinned boy, and though the lighter male insists that he and his friend "are above the issue of color," the darker friend painfully struggles with his appearance, doing such things as wearing colored contacts to appear "less black." He explains, "We don't even discuss it, and we're best friends." He later reveals that he feels a sort of resentment toward his friend for having a lighter complexion.

Although Sandler discusses the effects of colorism among black men, she pays particular attention to the effects of the color bias among black women. For women, light skin is not only closely associated with European standards of beauty but it also, in conjunction with European features, is almost required to fit the mainstream standard of beauty in the United States.²⁷ For darker-skinned women, terms like "skillet blonde," "liver lips," and "tar baby" are painful reminders of the white supremacy established during slavery and colonialism. Moreover, such terms also reinforce the need to succumb to a standard that is not traditionally or naturally black or African. Sandler uses her documentary to expose the burdens placed upon black women in America. The interviewees discuss how their darker skin has at times left them feeling desex-

ualized or devalued, while lighter-skinned women discuss the exclusion they experienced by some darker-skinned women who held a great deal of resentment towards them.

In the next stage of the documentary, Sandler transitions into the 1960s Black Power Movement, a unique period of social and political consciousness that transformed the ways African Americans regarded their personal appearances. During this period, Afrocentric features and nappy hair took on new meanings, becoming acceptable and cool and important ways of symbolizing one's commitment to the struggle for Black Power. These new exercises in black liberation were social and political, sending strong messages about black pride and black dissatisfaction. For example, James Brown perfectly articulates the period in his song "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud." Additionally, *Color* features a clip from a speech by the Reverend Jesse Jackson, where he endorses black peoples' natural image: "The natural hair that you wear means that you're going to quit being fictitious, not only in your hair but in your life." Thus, embracing one's blackness in America was not only a social awakening but also a form of resistance against the dominant culture.

As *Color* progresses to the 1990s, it becomes clear that the influx of social and political consciousness prevalent in the 1960s has begun to fade. Once again, white standards of beauty have overshadowed the strong urge for Afrocentricity and black pride within the African American community. Although social consciousness resurfaced in new forms in the 1990s, the majority of black Americans reverted to old stereotypes, as rap singers praised the light-skinned girl with curly hair, and more and more black women opted for cosmetic surgery to acquire more Eurocentric features.²⁸ The film ends with narration by Sandler, who urges the black community to confront color consciousness and celebrate the varying shapes, characteristics, and shades of blackness.

Although *Color* was released in the 1990s, in 2014, colorism, its influences, and effects are still key issues. The conversation surrounding color biases in the black community has become more open as individuals in the community have addressed it. Films like Jeff Stilson's *Good Hair* (2009), featuring comedian Chris Rock, and Bill Duke and D. Channsin Berry's documentary *Dark Girls* (2011) effectively confront the black community's deep-seated biases regarding hair, color, and facial features. Like Sandler, these filmmakers have used the documentary genre as a platform for voicing serious concerns within the black community. These films provide evidence that the conversations aroused by Sandler's documentary are still worthy of discussion. As African Americans reach for bleaching creams and flat irons to look "less eth-

nic," it is important that the black community continue to address color consciousness in order to improve self-perception and self-worth.

Ava DuVernay: My Mic Sounds Nice

Although men are the main focus in a significant number of documentary films examining hip-hop, it is critical to give recognition to the women that have equally aided in molding the musical genre into the global art form that it has become. *Style Wars* (1983), *Rhyme & Reason* (1997), *Free Style, the Art of Rhyme* (2000), and rapper Ice T's documentary *Something from Nothing: The Art of Rap* (2012) examine the contributions that have shaped contemporary hip-hop.

The disparate view of African American female rappers in hip-hop continues to be challenging, and the lack of equal visual representation in documentaries looking at this genre of music is scarce. Though many African American females are considered hip-hop pioneers, their skills as B-girls (a person devoted to the culture of hip-hop who participates in the dance style of breakdancing or breaking), MCs (a mic controller, someone with enough flow and skill to be considered a master of the art of rap), and graffiti artists have been overlooked, and, thus, these females are not considered among the great rap artists. Scholars Guillermo Rebollo-Gil and Amanda Moras closely examine hip-hop music lyrically, as well as culturally, to ascertain whether the musical genre encourages misogynistic behavior or if the vulgar content consistently featured in the music influences the amount of violence re-created by the genre's followers. The authors explain, "Rap or Hip Hop music has always been feminine. Since its creation, black male rappers have expressed their love and devotion for the art form they practice in ways very much akin to the traditional manner in which heterosexual men attempt to woo heterosexual women."²⁹

Significant, men continue to dominate hip-hop, often diminishing the art form to a patriarchal and misogynistic genre. In addition, male dominance consistently defines and reproduces what many consider to be rap culture's true characteristics. Rebollo-Gil and Moras explore this notion in critiquing author Danyell Smith's work. They quote Smith: "Women's lyrics are often still viewed by men and women themselves as not valid.... [W]omen's versions of reality are somehow suspect."³⁰ From this assertion, one might assume that a woman's work in hip-hop will never be fully accepted, because in the rap game, men will always hold the upper hand because their lyrics are perceived as more credible.

Notably, Run DMC, A Tribe Called Quest, Public Enemy, Kanye West, Jay-Z, and Waka Flocka Flame are all examples of African American men or male groups who have, at some point, been at the forefront of the rap industry. With the exception of Missy Elliot, recognition of African American women in hip-hop has been relatively nonexistent, compared to their successful, black, male counterparts. Ironically, during the 1980s and 1990s, female performers, such as Roxanne Shanté, MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill, and the phenomenal duo Salt-N-Pepa, were at the forefront of the burgeoning musical genre. Though the rap landscape has changed dramatically since that time, DuVernay's *My Mic Sounds Nice* is an important film that will sustain, ensuring that the aforementioned rappers will remain a part of hip-hop's legacy.

In 2012 DuVernay became the first African American woman to win Best Director at the Sundance Film Festival for *Middle of Nowhere* (2012). Prior to receiving this prestigious distinction, DuVernay's filmography comprised *This Is the Life* (2008), *Compton C Minor* (2009), and *I Will Follow* (2011), which when considered in conjunction with *Middle of Nowhere*, demonstrates her commitment to telling stories about the African American experience. *My Mic Sounds Nice* is no exception as the filmmaker uses the documentary form to explore the untold stories surrounding black women's experience in hip-hop. Although the film did not win any notable awards, *My Mic* did receive one nomination from the Black Reel Awards in 2011 for Best Documentary.

In *My Mic*, DuVernay cultivates the idea that hip-hop has evolved into another commodity used to mischaracterize women as sexual deviants. She closely examines what it means to be a female MC in the industry and scrutinizes the idealized sexual image of women in this musical genre. DuVernay begs the questions, "Where are all the female MCs hiding? What happened to black female rappers such as Lady of Rage, MC Lyte, Rah Digga, and Roxanne Shanté?"

As *My Mic* unfolds, the answers to these questions become excruciatingly clear. In particular, the emergence of hypersexualized MCs like Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, and Nicki Minaj made female rappers relying upon their lyrical skills expendable, pushing them to the margins of the hip-hop industry. That artists like Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown lack the musical ability of less sexual artists is a moot point. In essence, they produce music that is good enough to satisfy mainstream audiences while providing fans with the erotic fare that has become a staple of male rappers' music and videos. These artists' very presence on the hip-hop landscape had a tremendous impact on the industry as record executives worked to standardize the overtly sexual female performer. In *My Mic*, Eve, a prominent rapper who began her career in the 1990s, addresses this issue: "Being a female in the industry you were encouraged to show a little

more leg, a little more ass, a little more whatever." Interestingly, rappers Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill, and others have gained name recognition without exploiting their sexuality, demonstrating that the industry's reliance upon hypersexual female rappers is misguided. Unfortunately, the more Minaj's popularity grows, the more lyrically gifted female rappers are becoming vestiges of the bygone hip-hop era.

Although there have been many African American women that have risen to fame throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, whether their short-lived stardom occurred in cinema or mainstream hip-hop culture, these black females' rise in popularity has been extremely transient. Throughout the years, it has been made unquestionably clear that an African American woman's contribution to the mainstream media is just as expendable as her image. In *My Mic*, a handful of female MCs sit down in front of the camera to reveal their stories of struggle and false hope in a world that has been continuously dominated by men. Rah Digga speaks eloquently about the differences between African American females and men as they compete in the rap industry: "We really had to rhyme like one of the guys in order to be taken seriously." Moreover, African American female rappers Eve, Trina, and Missy Elliott further explain that male dominance at the most notable record labels also makes it extremely difficult for females to ascend to prominence within hip-hop. Thus, the industry is patriarchal, functioning as a microcosm of American society.

Just as males holding positions of authority have historically made it tougher for women to gain traction in the corporate workforce, in hip-hop the same holds true. For example, thugged-out, outlandish male performers espousing lyrics that degrade women are consistently upheld over their female rap counterparts. *My Mic*, deconstructs the differences between black women and men in hip-hop by showing the viewer that in patriarchal America there is an imbalance between female MCs and hardcore male rappers. Author Tricia Rose discusses what she believes to be the root of feminine and masculine differential treatment in the rap industry, highlighting misogyny and sexism as the leading factors contributing to the lack of black women who are considered successful rappers. Rose states, "The fact is that although sexism is a systemic American problem, when it comes to the regular, sustained, celebrated misogynistic images of black women, hip hop stands center stage. It is the biggest black popular arena with the greatest number of highly sexually exploitative and dehumanizing images of black women."³¹ Coincidentally, in *My Mic*, Salt-N-Pepa reaffirm the author's contention when they explain that sexism is the root of any woman's struggle in the rap industry: "Hip-hop is so misogynistic. It's so male oriented. It's so hard. It's so masculine, that if a woman does not

have something really, really unique and special that stands out amongst all the testosterone, then it's just a difficult genre to survive in."

Although the 1980s gave birth to only a small handful of female MCs, that era featured a range of musical and stylistic approaches as well as acceptance of a rapper's gender. In *My Mic*, hip-hop journalist and author Joan Morgan reflects on the time when she believed females in hip-hop reigned supreme: "In the 80s hip-hop belonged to the streets and in the streets we were a presence, and in the streets we were B-Girls. We had a very empowered position that allowed for diversity." Several female MCs throughout the documentary support Morgan's claim, noting that one can look at MC Lyte, who first emerged in the late 1980s, as a prime example. As one of the most influential female hip-hop veterans, MC Lyte illustrates the grit and grime of her struggle as a female rapper. In the documentary, she engages the audience, recounting the life-changing experiences she underwent as she evolved into a leading female MC: "When I started rapping, I came up in a time when it was all about change, provoking thought and inspiring a nation of people." Today, however, the primary recognition of an aspiring African American female MC is through sexually exploitative images and the hypersexualized, materialistic persona depicted of women and girls in the media.

Further confirming MC Lyte's assertion is female MC Roxanne Shanté, who in *My Mic* also speaks about the disparities that rap continues to reproduce: "Long before there was glam squads and your lipsticks and you knew your budget for your clothing, you went straight [on stage in] what you wore outside; if you had a show and the show time didn't give me enough time to change, then I wore what I had on, because at the end of the day it was about talent."

The talent that Shanté speaks of can be traced back to the formative years of female development. For instance, Kyra Danielle Gaunt examines childhood playground games, such as double Dutch, Miss Mary Mack, and patty-cake, and relates these adolescent diversions to hip-hop and rap. It is within these youthful pastime activities that many African American little girls familiarized themselves with musical rhymes and playful rhythmic dances. These innocent and familiar playground activities, which have been socially connected to femininity, are also the foundation of popular hip-hop lyrics in Nelly's "Country Grammar (Hot Shit)." In particular, Nelly borrows from the adolescent clapping game Down Down Baby, originally popularized by little girls, and transforms the song into a hypermasculine anthem characterized by gunplay and drug use. Examining the rapper's masculine twist on a rhyme that is heavily associated with little girls, Gaunt asks the age-old question, "What comes first, the chicken or the egg?" The author closely considers the connection between

the lyrical content of male-dominated rap songs and the sweet melodies of innocent, female childhood games, exploring how misogynistic lyrics have taken content from playground chants that women played as girls. Gaunt speaks to that paradox, contending:

Hip-hop is a contradictory space for women. On one hand, it offers young women the possibility of a "popular" or social identification with an African American group-consciousness through musical participation. On the other hand, hip-hop uses these same musical and cultural practices—making beats with technology, rhyming or rapping, and encoding ethnicity and gender (black and male)—in ways that deny the former agency and authority of women and girls, which deny things feminine.³²

Because hip-hop is male dominated, it is seemingly easier for men to masculinize something as innocent as double Dutch and patty-cake. Gaunt contends that women's lyrics that are directly related to femininity run the risk of being rejected by their male counterparts, as is evidenced by many comments of the interviewees in *My Mic*. Thus, not only do we see inequalities related to women in hip-hop, but now we also see these disparities in early childhood through the denunciation of the games that young African American girls play.

Coincidentally, the same year that the BET Network debuted DuVernay's documentary to the public, female MC Nicki Minaj released her first mainstream album, *Pink Friday* (2010). Her physical image alone evokes the overarching question asked throughout the documentary concerning the whereabouts of female rappers and the misrepresentation of their images. As one examines Minaj's sexual image and sexually demeaning lyrical content, is it safe to say that her hypersexuality is what gives her the edge and propels her to reign supreme as a female rapper?

Unfortunately, according to author Cheryl Keyes, "women of rap still face overt sexism regarding their creative capabilities."³³ DuVernay's documentary, as well as other films that share similar observations, recapitulates the importance of recognizing the absence of strong female MCs in the hip-hop industry. Although rap superstar Minaj has become widely famous for her outrageous style (the MTV News Hip-Hop Brain Trust voted her the number 6 Hottest MC in the rap game), her explicit sexuality represents only a minuscule component of black female identity and subjectivity. The interviewees in DuVernay's documentary illuminate the fact that hip-hop continues to be male dominated, misogynistic, and sexist and that a woman's body becomes her most valuable asset once she sells her soul to hip-hop.

Rebollo-Gil and Moras concur with this assertion: "Rap music is situated in a predominately white and patriarchal culture industry, constraining the

expression of black women."³⁴ *My Mic* creatively explores the inequality that female MCs have had to overcome in order to make a positive name for themselves. For many women in hip-hop, the likelihood of a sustained career is slim. In fact, surviving in any industry as a woman of color still proves to be the hardest struggle for females worldwide. *My Mic* provides an outlet for women to critically analyze the enduring lack of female hip-hop MCs and invites the viewer to take measures to bring about change in hip-hop's male-dominated industry, which can ultimately help reshape the future of the black female experience in this genre.

Notably, both Sandler's and DuVernay's documentaries extend the conversations about crucial issues relevant to the black community. While doing so, they establish themselves as cultural producers and disseminators of knowledge related to the black experience, thus contributing to the limited exposure to authentic narratives of African Americans, in general, and African American female documentarians, more specifically. These documentarians have created unique cultural artifacts that help to preserve the untold perspectives of *herstory*, which ultimately contributes to the collective American identity and to students' knowledge of race, subjectively, and the black historical narrative.

Notes

1. Marable, *Living Black History*, xiv, xviii.
2. Kook, "Shifting Status," 154.
3. Brown and Brown, "Silenced Memories," 141.
4. *Ibid.*, 143.
5. Hughes, "Hint of Whiteness," 204.
6. Brown, and Brown, "Silenced Memories," 141.
7. *Ibid.*, 144.
8. Klotman and Cutler, *Struggles for Representation*, xv.
9. Jacobs, "From Political Activism," 516.
10. Klotman and Cutler, *Struggles for Representation*, xxiv.
11. "Conversations with Roy DeCarava."
12. Kellner, *Media Culture*, 101.
13. "Kathe Sandler."
14. Hunter, "If You're Light," 177.
15. *Ibid.*, 175.
16. Hall, "Euro-Americanization of Race," 117, 116.
17. *Ibid.*, 118.
18. Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice*.
19. "Name Synonymous."
20. Nielson, "Here Come the Cops," 349.
21. Ralph, "Hip-Hop," 143.
22. Hill, "Skin Color," 77.
23. *Ibid.*, 79.
24. Hochschild and Weaver, "Skin Color Paradox," 643; Hunter, "If You're Light," 181.
25. Hunter, "If You're Light," 175.

26. Ibid., 178.
27. Ibid., 180.
28. "Plastic Surgery Is Growing."
29. Rebollo-Gil and Moras, "Black Women and Black Men," 118.
30. Ibid., 127.
31. Rose, *Hip Hop Wars*, 133.
32. Gaunt, *Games Black Girls Play*, 102.
33. Keyes, *Empowering Self*, 258.
34. Rebollo-Gil and Moras, "Black Women and Black Men," 129.

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