I'd rather be a cyborg than a celebrity: Black feminism in the digital music industry

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This essay argues that Black feminist artists in the digital music industry embrace cyborg politics to disrupt celebrity conventions in ways that draw attention to the complexity of identity and oppression. I draw attention to Black feminism as a movement for challenging intersecting oppressions, particularly for Black women, as well as a drive to celebrate Black women's contributions to the music industry. Donna Haraway's conceptualization of the "cyborg" can offer significant insight into how artists in the digital music industry transcend boundaries of identity to renegotiate the ideas of celebrity and fame. The cyborg is a fluid being that embraces the interconnectedness and interplay between technology and the body. By embracing cyborg politics, those who occupy space in the music industry and online can resist the commodification of their bodies to machinery alone and retain their humanity in the celebrity machine.

KEYWORDS

cyborg politics, Black feminism, digital music industry, celebrity identity, algorithmic bias

This essay argues that Black feminist artists in the digital music industry embrace cyborg politics to disrupt celebrity conventions in ways that draw attention to the complexity of identity and oppression. Black feminism has been a driving force for resisting intersecting oppressions and celebrating Black women's contributions to the music industry. Haraway's (2000) cyborg concept and politics are beneficial for illustrating the limitations of socially imposed identity categories. By exploring Black feminism in the digital music industry through the lens of the cyborg, how Black feminist artists both occupy and disturb the boundaries of "celebrity" can be critically understood.

Black feminism in the music industry

Black feminism, as a movement challenging intersecting oppression, is deeply rooted in the experiences of Black women. Black feminism has had a significant impact on wider Feminism and Civil Rights movements, by advocating for greater recognition of the ways that Black women experience the intersection of race and gender oppressions, as well as what role factors such as sexuality, class and disability play in sustaining privilege and oppression. Davis' (1999) book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* celebrates the works of blues singers Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday for transcending the boundaries of respectability imposed on them by popular culture of the early twentieth century. Davis (1999) outlines music as a foundation for Black feminist thought, encouraging greater appreciation of the ways that performance and lyrics offer insight into historical, social and political

contexts. Events in the mid-1990s significantly influenced the trajectory of Black feminist activism in the music industry. The Civil Right Movement across the 1950s and 1960s, saw artists like Nina Simone and Aretha Franklin use their platform through music, to address issues of racism and racial segregation in their songs and during their performances. During the late 1990s, artists like Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill, and Missy Elliott began to speak on issues of gender more explicitly in the music industry. Today, Black feminism continues to shape the music industry, with artists such as Beyoncé and Janelle Monaé using their visibility online and in digital spaces to speak on identities and the intersecting oppressions of race, gender and sexuality in popular culture.

Black feminism remains a powerful force for challenging intersecting oppressions, particularly for Black women. Black feminist artists navigate the complexities of representation and exploitation through self-expression. Black feminist artists often confront one-dimensional or race, gender, sexuality, and class stereotypes that the media and popular culture have perpetuated. Black feminism has significantly influenced popular culture, with music artists, literary writers, and film and television directors engaging with social issues pertaining to womanhood and identity at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class. In the music industry, Black feminism has provided a platform for Black women to navigate the complexities of their representation and exploitation, through self-expression and self-definition. Black women's music has long served as a powerful medium for expressing the complexities of identity (Davis, 1999). Black feminists artists such as Nina Simone, Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin, Queen Latifah, Missy Elliott, Erykah Badu, Lauryn Hill, Janelle Monáe, Little Simz, and many others have embraced music as a means for documenting their experiences and narrative (Brooks, 2021), disseminating alternative narratives about Black womanhood (Chepp, 2015), and contributing to Black feminist collective theory (Hines, 2020).

Cyborg politics and hybrid identity

Haraway's (2000) conceptualization of the "cyborg" can offer significant insight into how artists in the digital music industry transcend boundaries of identity to renegotiate the ideas of celebrity and fame. The cyborg is a fluid being that embraces the interconnectedness and interplay between technology and the body. Embracing cyborg politics empowers those occupying spaces in the music industry to resist the reduction of their bodies to mere machinery. In the digital music industry, the cyborg can be more readily equipped to navigate algorithm empires and embrace technology to redefine their own narratives. Cyborgs in the music industry embrace fluidity and hybridity to occupy a state of constant transformation. In this state, artists are empowered to develop and disseminate multifaceted identities that challenge the technologies of "gender" and "race," as well as the rigid construction of "celebrity." This resistance is important for pushing back against the commodification and objectification inherent to celebrity culture and the digital music industry.

Black feminist music offers insight into cyborg politics in action, as a means for expressing the complexity of gendered and racialized identities. James (2008) suggested that some Black female artists present themselves as "non-human," embracing cyborg theory to challenge aesthetic norms by pulling together discourses of race, gender, and technology to challenge stereotypes of sexuality and femininity (James, 2008). This is also important for contesting with the music industry as a site of both empowerment and exploitation for Black women, which engages beyond essentialist debates on whether Black women are subjugated or liberated by music videos and celebrated or denigrated by song lyrics. Scholars have credited Missy Elliot for disturbing the boundaries of propriety (Lane, 2011) and performing on the frontiers of "self" to construct new identities (Sellen, 2005). Evident in both her music videos and song lyrics, Missy Elliott challenges language and stereotypes about Black women. The lyrics on her 1999 *She's a Bitch* reclaimed a pejorative term ascribed to assertive women in the music industry. Missy is also well-known for her distorted music videos that represent her body and face in surreal ways, for example, by distorting her lips in the 1997 Hype Williams directed music video for *The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)*. Lillvis (2023) writes about music video distortion as "technogenisis" and a meeting of technology and post-human identity, which can offer insight into the transformation of self *in* the sociopolitical environment. Through cyborg politics that challenge essentialist constructions, Black women who occupy space in the music industry can experience and encounter facets of oppression and privilege at the same time.

Black feminist artists and digital spaces

Technology now plays an integral role in the production, distribution, and consumption of music. Black feminist artists have embraced technology to subvert power in the digital music industry, through independent promotion and instantaneous dialogue on social media. Social media and digital platforms have been a particularly significant space for Black feminism in the twenty-first century, providing opportunities to amplify Black women's voices, and issues of discrimination and inequality experienced by those who are racialized and gendered. Through these digital spaces, artists can directly communicate with their audience, presenting multifaceted identities that go beyond the one-dimensional personas often imposed by the media and industry. Artists can confront issues of race, gender, and sexuality, and engage in meaningful dialogues with the public. However, the inherently racialized dynamics of online consumption often require Black women to navigate racial discrimination in online public spaces. For Black women and Black feminist artists, they can occupy spaces of both oppression and expression in the online (Miller et al., 2020).

Although the digital music industry offers potential for democratization and decentralized entrepreneurialism for independent artists, technological advances in the music industry are not necessarily innately "good." Social media plays a significant role in the myths of celebrity identity and expectations to embody experiences relative to race, gender, class and sexuality (Sobande, 2019). Social media, as a technological platform, empowers Black feminist artists to amplify their voices, control their narratives, and connect with the public. This can be helpful for challenging intersecting oppressions in public spaces, and

resisting cultural stereotypes that work to control Black women's image. Historically, stereotypical representations of Black women have been disseminated by print, media, and television, but the Internet means that the dissemination of such images and narrative enables celebrities to have greater control over how their image is disseminated (Nicholson, 2014). Nicholson, 2014 argues that social media sites offer opportunities for Black women to be seen beyond stereotypes.

In the twenty-first century, the intricate relationship between social media and the construction of celebrity identity cannot be easily separated. Through social media, artists have unprecedented access to their audiences, affording an opportunity to shape and control their narratives. For example, as a video-sharing platform, YouTube can make artists more engaging and accessible for their audience (Jennings, 2020). This empowerment is conducive to cyborg politics, as artists can use technology to amplify their voices, challenge stereotypes, and subvert the dominant narratives perpetuated by the industry. While social media empowers artists, it is crucial to acknowledge the dual nature of digital spaces for both challenging and reinforcing cultural stereotypes. Ultimately, access to music through digital spaces is not inherently progressive, as it is intertwined with the capital that underpins the infrastructure of the internet. It is important not to disregard what role the internet has played in the distribution of Black women's image and sound in ways that reinforce cultural stereotypes.

Although celebrities may present alternative imagery of Black women, reworking images does not alone dismantle the harmful stereotypes (hooks, 2016). Campt (2017) argues that it is necessary to consider what happens to images after the initial event of sharing, and from this, we can learn more about what happens to the distribution of images and who profits from their circulation. In this sense, it is important to recognize how GIFS have contributed to the "memeification" of Black women's pain through digital caricatures (Stravens, 2021), or how virality leads to "digital fatigue" in ways that exhaust the meaning of the content (Goldschmitt, 2022). Capitalist algorithms on music streaming platforms often determine visibility and representation in ways that sustain cultural stereotypes (Werner, 2020a,b). Interrogating the internet's role in the movement of capital is important for identifying ways to resist bias in online spaces (Noble, 2016). This is necessary for working to ensure that the digital music industry does not become another "intersectional empire" (Lovato, 2021).

Musser (2020, online) writes that "the virtual allows us to connect flesh to labor to landscape," which makes the online an important site for understanding how digital spaces can sustain oppression. Scholars have highlighted what role digital streaming services have played in reinforcing gender inequality in the music industry by typically privileging those who are identified as "white" and "male." For example, by privileging "traditional" music types, overrepresenting male artists and reinforcing stereotypes of masculinity to listeners (Eriksson and Johansson, 2017; Chodos, 2019; Werner, 2020a,b). How users respond to algorithms varies, but it could be argued that digital music streaming can reinforce oppression in both material and discursive ways. For example, Freeman et al. (2022) found that Spotify listeners developed

a relationship with the system, expressing trust or reliance in algorithms. As a video streaming platform, Meyerend (2023) found that Black Netflix users felt that algorithms sustained racial identities for users and that this restricted their agency on the platform by presenting them with constructions of Blackness.

Challenging the celebrity machine

The concept of the cyborg can enrich the understanding of celebrity identity in the music industry and the hybridity of occupying spaces of privilege and oppression. In recent years, intersectional scholarship has focused on ways that Black women resist oppression in online spaces and digital media (Bailey and Trudy, 2018; Noble, 2018). Yet, while intersectionality has documented the complexities of identity, discrimination and privilege, it is less well-utilized for interrogation of the political economy (Taylor and Johnson, 2020) which is necessary for understanding how Black women's labor in the digital music industry comes to be commodified and appropriated. However, the notion of the cyborg can bring depth to intersectional discourse by encouraging closer consideration of what role technology plays in the processes of identity and identification. This has been evident in the works of Janelle Monáe, whose embodiment of the cyborg throughout their musical outputs with titles such as *The ArchAndroid* (2010), *Electric Lady* (2013), and *Dirty Computer* (2018). Yates-Richard (2021) outlines Monáe's commitment to embodying the cyborg to destabilize the category of "human" for the promise of virtual transcendence. Yates-Richard (2021, p. 35) describes Monáe's praxis as "black sonic cyberfeminist aesthetics."

There has been recurrent debate on whether Black women are empowered or objectified when they access or gain capital through the music industry. But it is well-documented, that Black women in the music industry encounter systemic racism, industry exploitation, and pressure to conform to narrow beauty standards. In particular, pay disparity and exploitative contracts that enable record labels and management companies to profit from Black women's labor cannot be separated from the historical exploitation of Black women as "economic producers." This necessitates greater emphasis on economic factors as a significant organizer of Black women's lives (King, 1988). By documenting their labor struggles in the music industry, Black feminist artists grapple with the hybridity of privilege and oppression, to deconstruct and reconstruct celebrity identity. In doing so, Black feminist artists resist "divine, mechanical, and biological terror" in search of freedom (James, 2013, p. 63).

Many scholars have engaged with and offered a constructive critique of Haraway's (2000) presentation of the cyborg. Tilton (2006) argues that a limitation of the cyborg is its fixity on the materiality of machines and the internet. Given the historical construction and exploitation of Black women as economic producers (King, 1988) and money-making machines, there is the risk that the notion of the cyborg reinforces cultural traditions that portray Black women's labor as inevitably profitable. As an alternative, Tilton (2006) presents the idea of the "cybergoddess," as a wireless being that can engage with humanity in both on and offline spaces. Puar's (2020) article, draws attention to the potential

for those who may embrace the intersectional assemblage of the "cyborgian-goddesses"; that is to reclaim both ungendered and gendered narratives at once. For Puar, the cyborgian-goddess has political potential for destabilizing attempts to categorize the body into discreet and essentialist categories. Gunn (2019) views the cyborg identity as an opportunity to embrace "being built, shaped, taken apart, and re-imagined in the face of oppression" (The Centre for Black Brown Queer Studies, 2021). It could therefore be considered that the cyborg concept is conducive to recognizing the idea of "celebrity" as in flux, and the transformative potential of digital spaces for deconstructing the celebrity identity.

Scholars have highlighted that the very notion of celebrity is rooted in an oppressive entertainment industry that profits off stereotypes and anti-Blackness (Allen and Miles, 2020). Black women celebrities are often portrayed by cultural critics as a "threat" to feminism (Gay, 2014). Yet, focusing interrogation on what and how privileges are afforded to those who are identified by the public as "celebrity" or for engaging in "celebrity feminism" may offer greater insight into the ways that celebdom sustains anti-Blackness in public spaces. It is essential to adopt a more nuanced perspective on celebrity feminism, one that challenges the boundaries of identity. To do so, we must examine the ways that Black feminist artists challenge the constraints imposed by traditional celebrity structures. For example, Nikki Lane celebrates the ways that Missy Elliott employs language to shift the boundaries of what is considered socially "acceptable" in music culture. Lane (2011, p. 776) writes that Missy Elliott occupies space beyond the "boundaries of propriety in order to exist outside of the racist-sexist narratives that define Black womanhood." To do so, cyborgs occupy ontological spaces that destabilize constructions of race and gender in the public sphere (Bey, 2016). In this transformative space, generated through cyborg politics, Black feminist artists disrupt celeb-dom and the imposition of identity boundaries. This requires a more nuanced reading of celebrity feminism that works to disturb the boundaries of humanity (Yates-Richard, 2021).

Black feminism and cyborg performance

Black feminism and cyborg politics in the digital music industry offer the potential to destabilize notions of celebrity and fame to grapple with humanity in both online and offline spaces. Recognizing identity as a *doing* rather than a *being* enables a greater appreciation of the transformative potential of machines for disrupting the categorization of humans (Lu et al., 2022). The cyborg's willingness to embrace the hybridity of technology and humanity challenges the conventional of "fame" by blurring the boundaries between public persona and private self. For example, during online performances, Black women can disrupt the celebrity industry machine by enacting privacy in public spaces. Leikeli47′s commitment to conceal her face during performance is a clear example of enacting privacy in the music industry (Carmichael-Murphy, 2023). By doing so, artists challenge issues of representation to illustrate the dynamic nature of oppression. The intersectional nature of Black women's experiences necessitates

engagement with the complexities of identity and historical constructions of the body as material culture. By doing and undoing race, gender, sexuality, and class in the public sphere, Black feminist artists disturb the essentialist categorization of humans, to reveal the limitations of celebrity as well as the politics of representation. Black feminist artists challenge representations of identity that "both duplicate and displace the human" (McMillan, 2015, p. 226). This doing and undoing of identity can render the documentation and dissemination of Black women's experiences to the public a "double-edged sword" (Reynolds, 2002).

In summary, this essay has delved into the intersection of Black feminism, the cyborg concept, and celebrity identity within the music industry. The argument is that for Black feminist artists, celebdom is not necessarily a space from which they seek identification, but rather an arena where they can interrogate the processes of identification. Through the lens of Haraway's (2000) cyborg concept, this essay illustrates how Black feminist artists in the music industry embrace technology to disturb the boundaries of identity in ways that engage with the hybridity of both occupying and subverting the notion of "celebrity." Cyborg politics offer insight into the lived and virtual realities of representation in the digital music industry.

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