

# “Gotta Sing on the Beats They Bring Us”: Towards a Twenty-first Century Blues Women’s Epistemology



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**Abstract** A great deal of black feminist intellectual work is performed by intellectuals outside of the academy – singers, artists, rappers, grassroots activists, and black women in the working classes. Yet, the structure of academic black feminist historiography usually obscures this work on the margins. This article examines the intellectual work of singer Erykah Badu, whose corpus examines undertheorized aspects of the lived experience of black womanhood in twenty-first century America. It builds a concept of blues women’s epistemology, a distinct worldview of black women at the margins, to contextualize the work of Badu and other black women intellectuals who challenge the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality oppression. It concludes with a brief outline of the contours of a possible fourth wave of black feminism, defined by new sites of black feminist engagement and a more inclusive definition of black womanhood, and discusses the implications of a/the fourth wave for black feminist praxis in the twenty-first century.

**KEYWORDS** FOURTH-WAVE BLACK FEMINISM •  
BLUES WOMEN’S EPISTEMOLOGY • ERYKAH BADU • INTERSECTIONALITY

## INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the twentieth century, middle- and upper-class black women’s discourses of activism and uplift often explicitly rejected the sites of pleasure, resistance, and activism crafted by poor and working class black women through blues music and black popular culture. These elite black women advocated the adoption of largely white middle class ideals and what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) has called “the politics of

respectability,” a set of morals, norms, and rules about presentation of self that would lift the status of the race by demonstrating the value – adherence to white elite Victorian norms – of its women. As Reiland Rabaka (2012) points out, cultures produced and consumed by poor and working class black women, whether early twentieth century blues women or early twenty-first century hip-hop divas, are consistently marginalized by the discourses and practices of the elite. In recent years, some black public figures, like Bill Cosby, have made a veritable industry of critiquing the alleged habits of the black poor (Dyson 2005), and these critiques are disproportionately aimed at women. Yet, poor and working class black women’s discourses from the margins made and continue to make visible the complexities of systems of oppression. Today, black women on the margins of class, sexuality, and family create new forms of the blues to critique normative standards imposed on them by the black middle classes and white people alike.

Intraracial differences in social class have always affected black women’s activism, as well as the academic historiography of black women’s activism. That is, while nineteenth century clubwomen may have spoken on behalf of all black women, their experiences as educated black women of some social standing were different than those of their poor and working class counterparts – and therefore so were their worldviews. Poor and working class black women also engaged in activism, but we know less about this history because these women were far less likely to write books or give lectures than their elite counterparts. Only recently have scholars, and social historians in particular, attended to the experiences of these women (e.g., Brown 2008; Scott 2008). Still, much of what we know about poor and working class black women’s experiences is funneled through the interpretive lenses of relatively privileged, if empathetic, writers and academics. Ultimately, the academic historiography of black women often only reflects the work suitable for academic scholarship – scholarly writing. This fact of scholarship is in many ways attributable to the structure of academic knowledge and prestige, as well as what is considered valuable knowledge in academic contexts.

As Patricia Hill Collins has noted (1998), scholars doing black feminist intellectual work face dilemmas in balancing the demands of an academic environment that devalues black women’s knowledge production – and the production of knowledge *about* that knowledge – with doing work that challenges the marginalization of black women in and beyond the academy. To manage these challenges, Collins (2000) suggests that we look towards a multiplicity of sites where black women are producing knowledge, including in black communities as “mothers,” “other mothers,” “teachers to the Black community’s children,” and “grassroots political activists,” and in the public sphere as “musicians, vocalists, poets, writers, and other artists”

(p.17). Further, we must investigate the relatively new sites and modes of delivery for this knowledge production, and the Internet in particular, to comprehend the depth and scope of black women's praxis in the twenty-first century (Jarmon 2013).

This article follows Collins' call to examine black feminist intellectual work happening outside of the normative confines and sources of the academy, entering into a small but growing and important area of black feminist research that examines so-called "everyday" feminists who are singers, hip-hop artists, bloggers, performance artists, and graphic artists. Historically, these "everyday" feminists have included blues singers who, as Daphne Duval Harrison (1988) and Angela Davis (1998) have shown, grappled publicly with race and gender oppression, sex and sexuality, and seemingly private issues like domestic violence. Like the contemporary women artists who inherited their legacy, blues women like Billie Holiday and Ma Rainey gave voice to black women who were marginalized by both a white patriarchal social structure and by black middle class politics of respectability (Davis 1998; Harrison 1988). I am also interested here in how contemporary black women's intellectual work is connected to that of previous generations of black popular culture and black feminism. Examinations of the epistemologies of transhistorical blues women – women on the margins or making art about or from the margins – reveal similarities across generations obscured by the traditional production and analyses of black feminist writings and scholarship.

Third wave black feminist work – writing done by feminists of color and self-identified hip-hop feminists since the 1990s (Springer 2002) – has consistently looked to the margins for expressions of black feminist praxis. Thus, third wave black feminist work includes some of the first sustained examinations of the feminist politics of black women artists vis-à-vis academic and social trends. Andreana Clay's (2008) offers reflective work on Me'Shell Ndegeocello, queer black female identity, and third wave feminism. Daphne Brooks (2008) examines the black feminist soul discourses of grief vis-à-vis national and social catastrophe by Mary J. Blige and Beyoncé. Shayne Lee's (2010) work on a host of black women, including athletes, writers, Internet "sexperts," artists, and clergywomen highlights how black women negotiate sexuality in public culture. These and other works put black women intellectuals of a variety of types in conversation with third wave feminism and broader shifts in black life. Like Clay (2008) and Brooks (2008), I draw on a black woman artist intellectual, singer Erykah Badu, to underscore aspects of black women's lived experiences that are less likely to be discussed and theorized in academic black feminism, especially in the social sciences. This work is also informed by political scientist Cathy Cohen's (2004) call for us to disrupt the "fundamental contradiction

between the crises facing Black communities and the passive routinization of much of what passes for the academic study of black people” (p.28) by erecting a “politics of deviance” to examine “how the normalizing influences of the dominant society have been challenged, or at least countered, often by those most visible as its targets” (p.30). I consider black women’s intellectual work in hip-hop, soul music, art, and in and through social media as spaces where we might note innovative resistance to normativity as well as continuities with African American blues traditions of challenging and surviving oppression.

I situate the blues, as a musical form and epistemological practice, as a metaphor for black women’s expression at the margins of acceptable black womanhood. I take as my data the corpuses of *twenty-first century blues women* – women whose deviance situates them outside of norms set by white patriarchy and enforced by black elites. Specifically, I examine Badu’s work to articulate a *blues women’s epistemology* – a mutable but remarkably stable intergenerational worldview pioneered by, but not exclusive to, black women, that rejects the marginalization and criminalization of those who exist outside of these established norms and gives voice to a different set of black experiences. This blues women’s epistemology is a specific black feminist worldview that engages the voices of marginalized black women, including black single mothers, black women battling the prison industrial complex, black queer women, and black women who defy the norms of respectable sexual expression. I privilege the notion of *voice* here, as these black women intellectuals often literally use their voices to articulate their worldview and disrupt systems intended to silence them (Collins 1998, 2000). Together, black women performance artists like Erykah Badu as well as black women comedians, filmmakers, artists, Internet users, and scores of everyday blues women navigating their everyday lives in black communities and beyond, reframe black feminist discourses to include as many voices as possible and launch a united challenge to anti-black misogyny and its concomitant structural injustices. Finally, I demonstrate how fourth generation modes of black feminist engagement, which are connected to and reflective of the work of black women’s artists, signal new ways of hearing and responding to diverse black women’s voices.

## **TOWARDS A BLUES WOMEN’S EPISTEMOLOGY**

Blues women use their voices, as singers, “Queens of Comedy,” rappers, and writers, as well as their bodily voices and discourses as dancers, to articulate their lived experiences, challenge intersecting oppressions, and signal the continued significance of black feminist praxis. Like all cultural groups, blues women have a cultural elite that appropriate public space

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to speak on behalf of a larger, usually invisible, mass. While Billie Holiday, Ma Rainey, Dinah Washington, Bessie Smith, and Zora Neale Hurston are obvious articulators of blues women's epistemologies, blues women cultural elite often are ironically invisible in or erased from the public sphere, like the scores of African American women who made possible the organizing and successes of the civil rights movement (Barnett 1993). Moreover, the women they represent and the communities from which they hail are also often obscured. Still, these blues women include both public creators of black feminist perspectives and the invisible black women audiences that they seek to reach, reflect, and represent.<sup>1</sup>

Significantly, blues women speak in spaces and in ways that white patriarchal structures and normative politics of respectability dictate that they should not. For example, as black women comedians, they fiercely articulate black women's perspectives and are often segregated in the stand-up comedy world where men and men's derisive jokes about women, including the anti-black misogyny of some black men comics' jokes, dominate. They are the black women hip-hop artists and R&B singers who talk back to and subvert power structures, advocating for space for their perspectives and autonomy over their bodies, even as they operate within the constraints of an industry driven by the male gaze. Increasingly, these blues women are in new social media spaces, including the blogging site Tumblr and the micro-blogging site Twitter, speaking out where they cannot be readily silenced but also where they are subjected to a tremendous amount of cyber-harassment from whites and black men in the anonymous caverns of the Internet. Moreover, they are in a host of other spaces at the margins, in sites of deviance, rejecting, subverting and resisting systems that privilege middle class heteronormativity and respectability (Collins 2000). Across generations, these blues women, artists, activists, and everyday black women intellectuals, speak against the dominant race, class, and gender discourses that facilitate black women's continued marginalization in a number of arenas, from the labor market to healthcare access.

The blues, as a musical form, is the definitive progenitor of all American music genres, from gospel and rhythm & blues to country and rock 'n' roll (Ripani 2006). As a metaphor for black lived experiences in America, the blues is an epistemological and theoretical lens through which we can conceptualize many of social, political, cultural, and economic features of black life over time. Here I draw on both the notion of blues as a musical form and as an epistemic practice to consider how black women challenge the strictures of race, gender, and class systems of oppression. To construct the theoretical basis of blues women's epistemology, I build on two important contributions to our understanding of the blues as a way of being in the world: Angela Davis' (1998) work on the black feminist sentiments

of blues singers and Clyde Woods' (1998) work on the blues epistemology developed by black folks in the Mississippi Delta.

In general, Davis' work has testified to black women's resistance practices across a diversity of sites, from slave shacks to prisons. Yet, her work on Billie Holiday, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith, blues women elite whose experiences reflected those of poor and working class black women, is particularly important as it locates feminist theorizing in black women's lives and black popular culture. Davis (1998) argues that "the blues constitute a privileged discursive site" (p. xvii) through which we might begin to uncover the class dimensions black feminism in the early twentieth century – dimensions that I, like others, contend are little changed from then to the contemporary moment (Rabaka 2012). Moreover, she demonstrates that blues singers were deft at paradox and contradiction – pining away for a lover who is abusive and simultaneously critiquing the lover's abuse, the patriarchal systems that facilitate the abuse, and the broader economic and social context of white supremacy in which the abuse occurs.

While Davis' focus is black women's feminist epistemologies as articulated through blues, the late geographer Clyde Woods (1998) focused on black people's blues epistemologies as lived and experienced in the Mississippi Delta. In particular, he argued that blacks in the Mississippi Delta, the American home and origin of the blues, had a blues epistemology that was born of resistance to harsh plantation conditions during slavery, followed by a plantation economy of widespread sharecropping, proceeded by the legacy of the plantation economy and now racked by the paradox of blues investment in Mississippi. "Returning blues black to its roots as a critique of plantation social relations and their extensions," Woods (1998) writes, "working-class African Americans in the Delta and in the Black Belt South have constructed a system of explanation that informs their daily life, organizational activity, culture, religion, and social movements. They have created their own ethno-regional epistemology" (p.16). Further, I quote at length here from her description of the blues from which this epistemology emerges:

Born in a new era of censorship, suppression, and persecution, the blues conveyed the sorrow of the individual and collective tragedy that had befallen African Americans. It also operated to instill pride in a people facing daily denigration, as well as channeling folk wisdom, descriptions of life and labor, travelogues, hoodoo, and critiques of individuals and institutions. It is often forgotten that the blues are also defined by those songs, music, stories, jokes, dances, and other visual and physical practices that raise the spirit of the audience to unimaginable heights. The men and women who performed the blues were sociologists, reporters, counselors, advocates, preservers

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of language and customs, and summoners of life, love, laughter, and much, much more (Woods 1998:17).

Woods opens the space for an expansive consideration of the production of black cultures of resistance, and in this case, resistance to a particular set of power relationships rooted in black subjugation in the South. Blues epistemology arose out of the lived experience of black folks and in direct contradiction to white folks' "plantation epistemology," which was rooted in white supremacy, evangelicalism, and paternalism. Through it, black folks erected a worldview that made possible survival, even in the wake of constant destruction.

My theorization of blues women's epistemology unites Davis' and Woods' work – bringing political economy and materialist realities more squarely into Davis' work and gender into Woods' work – to highlight a particular way of viewing and navigating the world that is rooted in the experiences of marginalized black women.<sup>2</sup> Blues women's epistemology is woman-centered, privileging the lived experiences of marginalized women as a site of reflection, interrogation, and departure. It draws on the power of the erotic – through dance, quiet, voice, and other forms of expression – as well as the power of mothering and giving life to center its resistance to anti-black sexism and misogyny. Further, it speaks directly to and about racism, sexism, and classism to decry these systems of oppression and point out their intersecting effect on black women's lives. It is community-centered because it locates black women's viewpoint, experiences, and activism in the communities in which they are trying to survive, raise children, and transform. A blues women's epistemology is inherently contradictory because it must speak back to power through the existing modes of engagement and power structures. Like any good blues song, it may highlight and deplore mistreatment but simultaneously declare its love for the wrongdoer. A blues women's epistemology is reflective, talking and listening to itself, as well as narrating oppositional perspectives to itself. This internal conversation plays out publicly on the Internet, in black women's art, and in black women's grassroots activism. Blues women are in constant negotiation of this reflective work and of the blues contradictions inherent in their lives. Finally and importantly, a blues women's epistemology necessitates speaking directly to and about sexual politics in ways that democratically recognize the range of contexts in which black women's bodies, sexualities, and sexual behaviors exist in: strip clubs and boardrooms; unsafe neighborhoods; relation to the prison industrial complex; the media and discursive representations; the context of domestic violence and other forms of abuse; poverty; and, affluence. It is on this point that a blues women's epistemology diverges from more traditional middle-class and academic black feminist praxis.

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I turn now to a discussion of singer Erykah Badu, who inhabits funk, soul, jazz, neo-soul, and hip-hop musical traditions. As a twenty-first century blues woman, she narrates relationship blues, inequality blues, existential blues, and a black woman's blues centered on their particular problems as caregivers for men and children. I contend that Badu's narratives about black women's struggles highlight some of the ways a blues women's epistemology speaks back to power structures that endeavor to silence women's voices. By paying careful attention to the experiences of blues women on the margins, Badu's corpus invites us to reimagine how and where we look for black feminist praxis in the twenty-first century.

## **ERYKAH BADU AS A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BLUES WOMAN**

Since the release of her breakout single "On & On" in 1996, Badu has been lauded as the conscience and consciousness of neo-soul music as; an alternative representation of womanhood and femininity; both a queen and mother and caretaker of black musical cultures; and, a different kind of artist whose roots in blues, jazz, and funk cultures are highly visible. The "On & On" video places Badu squarely in the blues tradition. In it, she riffs on both *Gone with the Wind* and *Color Purple*, carving a space for a black southern womanhood inspired by and firmly rooted in African American blues traditions. But the "On & On" Badu, clad in a headwrap, brightly-colored maxi dresses, and waving incense, was not static. Like the black music tradition from which she emerges, Badu is syncretic, blending styles to create something new and responding to and signaling trends in black communities. She changes her presentation of self, emerging as: a head-wrap donning earth mother familiar with five-percenter philosophies; a hip-hop head clad in black leather pants and t-shirt paying respect and homage to a range of hip-hop styles; and, an artist pushing boundaries by stripping down in the streets of Dallas for the "Window Seat," video – the lead single from *New Amerykah Part II: Return of the Ankh* (2010).

Badu's second major album, *Mama's Gun* (2000), followed the 1996 release of *Baduizm*. A set of songs dedicated to her first son, it uses the metaphor of "mama's gun" to highlight black women's roles as providers, protectors, and socializers for children and black communities. The album's 15 songs offer critiques of inequality and violence, hard lessons in love, "cleve" verbal play, and critical self-reflection and introspection. By using the metaphor of the gun, Badu is signifying on a tradition of blues divas, who blur the line between masculinity and femininity to assert a womanhood/womanism that challenges the rigid structures of race, class, gender, and sexuality oppression, even as they operate within them. As an

ever-present protective force, Badu's (mama's) gun, speaks back, or claps back, if necessary, to forces of oppression.

"...& On" is a song that appears on *Mama's Gun* that serves as a follow-up to the popular "On & On." In it, Badu brings together several musical traditions and places them in conversation with one another. The drum kicks may be thought of as classically jazz, while the syncopation of the piano chords with a rest on the downbeat could point to blues inspiration. Although she is singing, her cadence at the outset of the song is that of a rapper; we are invited to think of her in this way because Badu begins the track with a traditional hip-hop opening: "a-one-one-one-one-one-two-one-two." Through the song, Badu reflects on her personal experiences coming of age as a young black woman. At the bridge, she sings in a jazz cadence:

I remember when I went with mama to the washateria  
Remember how I felt the day I first started my period  
Remember there in school one day I learned I was inferior  
Water in my cereal  
Badu in your stereo  
Holla if ya hear me though.

Here Badu gestures towards race (racial inequality in pedagogy), class (traveling with her mother to a laundrymat as well as having water in her cereal when the milk ran out), and gender (the social and emotional meanings attached to puberty for girls) and invites listeners who empathize or sympathize with her to say so in the call and response tradition of both the Black Church and black art. Towards the end of the three-and-half-minute track, Badu interrupts a carefree, scattling, free-styling musical interlude with the sound of her (mama's) gun.

Things just ain't the same for singers  
Gotta sing on the beats they bring us  
But that's all I have; ain't got no mo'  
But still the people really wanna know  
Why why why why why?

There are multiple conversations happening in this short song, in which Erykah Badu talks both to herself, her subconscious fears, her childhood, her critics, and to a world where "things just ain't the same" for women artists. By declaring that things ain't the same, like the Dr. Dre song from which she borrows the lyric,<sup>3</sup> Badu nods to generational transitions in black feminist engagement and speaks back to the ways in which women R&B and hip-hop artists, as well as women more generally, are increasingly constricted by the artifacts of patriarchal power – from poverty to disempowerment, to entrenched anti-black misogyny. Moreover, the "singers" Badu references

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here are not just black women artists. Indeed, “singers,” as a counterpart to Dr. Dre’s “gangstas,” include all blues women. As in many of her songs, on “...& On,” Badu speaks as, for, and through blues women, erecting a black woman-centered space through which to theorize black women’s experiences.

Having to “sing on the beats they bring,” literally having to sing to the music provided by ostensibly male producers and power structures, is the burden of twenty-first century black women – much like the women before them. Only now, discourses about black women’s burdens are increasingly focused on the *behaviors* of poorer black women rather than *material conditions* of economically disadvantaged women. Like women artists in the music industry, blues women are too often consigned to “sing on the beats” of institutional oppression and the erasure of their voices, contributions, and being from the very communities they make possible. And still, despite limited access to resources – “that’s all I have; ain’t got no mo” – discourses about black women constantly question “why, why, why, why, why” with little attention to structural inequalities.<sup>4</sup>

I suggest a literal and subversive reading of Badu’s assertions. At first blush, she seems to matter-of-factly recognize the constraints within which she and other “singers” operate in that they are compelled to exist in conditions outside of their immediate control. “But that’s all I have; ain’t got no mo” could be interpreted literally – that is, black women have no choice but to sing on the beats they are brought; to exist in violent communities and attempt to bring healthy children into the world; to exist in food deserts without access to healthy food; or to feel the pressure of white beauty ideals. Alternatively, as in the African American folk tradition, Badu could be the Trickster, the dissembler, or Brer Rabbit, pretending “that’s all she has” and she “ain’t got no mo,” while secretly marshaling the resources to counter an uneven power dynamic.

However we choose to interpret it – as a trickster’s articulation or as a genuine truth – working with what one has because there is no more is the crux of the blues tradition. Like contemporary blues divas and their blues singer foremothers, women hip-hop artists are relegated to the margins of production, but nevertheless sing on the beats they are brought, using their voices to speak back to power structures that deny them equal access to resources. Badu’s discourse speaks to, through, and for twenty-first century blues women – poor and working class black women, as well as women more generally on the margins of respectability – by narrating the circumstances these women face as a result of their social location and structural oppression (Collins 1998, 2000). Here I discuss two major blues themes in Badu’s corpus – the *dope blues* and the *man blues*. There are several more themes within Badu’s work, but I have selected these to highlight

the range of structural critiques and perspectives on black women's lived experience that she offers. These two themes also comprehensively demonstrate a woman-centered blues women's epistemology grounded in the lived experiences of women on the margins.

### *"Tired of This Dope"*

While drugs ravaged inner-city African American communities in the 1970s, post-soul generations bore the brunt of federal policies that meted out the severest punishments for drug dealing. While women are not central to the historiography of the American drug trade, especially that focused on blacks' participation in the trade, women often play key roles in it. Whether girlfriends take drug charges on behalf of men, or grandmothers, perhaps unwittingly, house drugs when male family members' own stash spots are under surveillance, women often perform the reproductive labor of the underground economy. Yet, as many black men attempt to navigate around a labor market structure that denies them pay and employment opportunities sufficient for survival, black women and black families are disproportionately affected by as casualties of the war on drugs and mass incarceration. Indeed, while these problems affect the underclasses, the working poor, and perhaps the working classes across race, the constellation of race, violence, labor, and incarceration that undergirds the drug trade is tied closely to anti-black racism and anti-black misogyny. Badu narrates the necessary evils of the drug trade with particular attention to women's experiences as a result of men's activities.

On a song from her first major album, *Baduizm* (1996), Badu testifies about "the other side of the game" – a woman's perspective on the drug trade. Whether she is speaking from first person experience is unclear, but Badu deftly inhabits the experience of the blues everywoman to speak for, to, and through the black women navigating their partners' participation in illegal activity. The opening lyric of "Other Side of the Game" is only partially rhetorical: "Do I really want my baby?/Brother, tell me what to do." Pregnant by her partner who is engaged in "hustling," or drug dealing, she wonders aloud about bringing a baby into an unstable situation. The chorus, a haunting take on the theme song of the popular show *Cops*, asks: "what you gonna do when they come for you?/work ain't honest but it pays the bills/what we gonna do when they come for you/gave me the life that I came to live." Her ambivalence about his "complex occupation," particularly vis-à-vis the simultaneous financial stability and danger that results from it, is evident. Further, her protests about his activity are met with resistance: "because I tell him right/he thinks I'm wrong." Still, she argues, "but I love him strong," endeavoring to love her man despite the complicated and dangerous nature of his economic hustle. Continuing to

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love despite a set of complex reservations and endeavoring to understand her partners choices place Badu's narrator squarely within the blues tradition.

On *Worldwide Underground* (2003), in a direct follow-up to "Other Side of the Game," though, Badu's narrator's experiences on the other side of the game have hardened her, evidenced by the purposeful, hard-hitting synthesized horn baseline. The song begins with remnants of the music from "Other Side of the Game," which are interrupted by police sirens. Her man is in jail, and she is holding down the fort at home. We hear a phone ring, and it is a collect call from her man, which she quickly accepts. Her resolve is evident in the first verse: Me and this baby gone be here all night long

Me and this baby gone be here all night long  
Walking this wood floor, 'til my man gets home  
I'm at the front door; I'm listening by the phone  
But I'm gone be here with my makeup on  
It's been a long time since my man been gone  
But when he get here, you know I won't be gone  
Because I love him, I'm gonna love him strong  
Me and this baby gone be here all night long.

Badu's narrator has continued to run her partner's drug operation and is also mothering their child alone. She stays armed, is constantly on the lookout for the police, and keeps lots of cash under the bed in case she and the baby need to leave town in a hurry. However, in the bridge, Badu herself emerges with a matter-of-fact mothering discourse to interrupt the narrator:

Hey, but there ain't no mistaking that that money you're making  
Leave you nervous and shaking 'cause at night you awake  
Thinking 'bout lives that you taking, all that love you forsaking  
In your zone, niggas gone get they fucking heads blown.

"Danger," she sings next, "you're in danger." Badu directs her warning not only to her narrator and the narrator's man, but to communities of black men and women engaged in dangerous power plays with each other, the law, and the lives of the men, women, and children ravaged by drugs. Badu repeats that she "understands the game," nodding to the structural contexts in which participation in the drug trade is an economically rational choice. She says she has "no hard feelings" towards the game's participants, but also that she "don't make the laws," which she implicitly warns will ultimately catch up to everyone, including the baby. At the close of the song, over the steady horns of the bass line, Badu/Badu's narrator wails in

frustration about the totality of the situation – a blues wail in protest of the structural beats black folks have been brought by inequality.

Later, on *New Amerykah Part I (4th World War)* (2008), Badu highlights the intergenerational consequences and familial transmission of drug addiction on “The Cell,” a song driven by a funk bass guitar and snare drum. “The Cell” introduces us to a “light-skinned honey with the cinnamon smell,” who “was turned on to shiny new things [like] diamond gold chain [and] diamond gold rangs.” Her mother is addicted to cocaine, her sister “numbs the pain the same [as her mother],” and her father is perhaps mentally ill and absent. This family has the blues, Badu argues. The song’s protagonist is trying to break into a profession – “centerfold spread, she trying to do thangs” – but uses sex, as well as “cough syrup in Coke cans,” to manage her blues and is involved with a “20-inch-rim-man with no land.” The song’s chorus does not come until Badu has narrated two verses about the young woman protagonist’s background and experiences. In the bridge, Badu chants, “we’re not well/but we can’t tell.” Then we learn the consequences of this set of family circumstances, as well as their structural causes.

Brenda done died with no name, nickel-bag coke to the brain  
Will they ever find the vaccine? Shitty-damn-damn-baby-bang  
Rich man got the double-barrel, po’ man got his back to the do’  
Code white stands for trouble, shots from the po-po.

Here, Badu names the protagonist for the first time and launches into the first verse again to tell Brenda’s story one more time. She repeats the first verse, eulogizing Brenda so listeners will remember her and also to remind listeners of the family circumstances that led to her demise. In the chorus, however, Badu also implicates a class-based power dynamic that leaves poor people with their “backs to the door” under the barrel of a rich man’s gun. In a voice-over after the the first verse is repeated, Badu’s voice echoes with the intended irony, “Welcome to America. Home of the free.” The chorus is then repeated seven times, insisting that we consider Brenda’s death an *injustice*. The chorus even continues after the music stops. Eulogizing Brenda, the “enticing” “light-skinned honey with the cinnamon smell,” and calling out the set of circumstances that killed her is radical in a context where we do not often collectively mourn violence against and murders of black women. Here, though, seven times, Badu endeavors to make both Brenda’s suffering and structural inequalities visible.

On the following song, “Twinkle,” Badu offers a deeper structural critique of Brenda’s outcome, narrating the perspectives of post-civil rights generation youth (West 1993). She first ties these unequal outcomes to the fact that black youth “don’t know their language [or] their God,” but she

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goes on to provide some more context for her critique. Speaking on behalf of the youth, like an ethnographer reporting the data from interviews, Badu says, “They say their grandfathers and grandmothers worked hard for nothing, ’cause we still in this ghetto.” This, she argues, results in black youth “[ending] up in prisons [and] blood.” This critique from black youth, and perhaps from broader black publics, reflects the breakdown of the promises of the civil rights movement, particular in light of mass incarceration, the decline in and dismantling of the industrial sector, and increased poverty for some segments of the population despite rising fortunes for others. Badu continues her structural critique:

They keep us uneducated, sick, and depressed (they end up in blood)  
Doctor I’m addicted now I’m under arrest (they end up in blood)  
We makin’ mo’ money than a muthafucka (they end up in blood)  
With no choices, there’s no hope for us.

In this refrain, Badu points to the outcomes of a system that criminalizes drug addicts rather than treating them and allows inequality in access to healthcare and emancipatory education. By channeling the voices of black youth, Badu builds a blues women’s epistemology *outward* from the experiences of women, who necessarily have special and prolonged contact with the feelings and experiences of youth.

Later in the album, Badu returns as the blues woman narrator who began as a reluctant participant on the “other side of the game” only to subsequently become a full-fledged participant managing the business after her partner is incarcerated. On “That Hump,” the woman’s voice is tired as she explains, almost in testimonial fashion with church organs in the background, her current state of affairs:

Lord knows, Lord knows I’m trying  
Said I’m tired of this dope  
But it make it better,  
But it’s dragging me lower  
And I know it, yes, Lord knows  
But if I could get over that hump  
Then maybe I will feel better  
Maybe I won’t fall if I could get over that hump.

It is unclear if her man was ever released from prison, or if he was one of the persons to get his “head blown” in the violence of the trade. Badu makes clear that the male partner is only functional in her narrative as he affects her narrator’s life. The narrator is now the single parent of two children, and by the second verse, she is near breakdown. Tired of living check to

check, she says, "I'm just tryna pay my rent, and I can feel it coming down around me and my children." This narrative captures the experiences of a range of women, whether or not they are involved in selling drugs. She continues, "We just need a bigger house, hope it comes with a spouse/This building, building/My brother's sleeping on my floor/A bitch could use a little more." Ultimately, years in "the game" has afforded the protagonist survival, but at great spiritual and social psychological cost.

Badu's dope blues speaks back to intersecting systems of inequality and disadvantage that disproportionately affect people of color (Collins 2000). By narrating the experiences of women affected by the drug trade and drug addiction, Badu exposes the gendered consequences of this activity, focusing on the lasting effects on women, children, and communities. Through the blues woman character to whom she gives life, we are invited to witness years of a woman's experience on the "other side of the game" – the ambivalence, the danger, the desire to escape, the recognition that while the trade provides financial stability it is spiritually and physically dangerous, and the weariness that sets in after years of trying to get over "that hump." As narrator, Badu gives us a blues women's epistemic reading of "the game" and its affect on the state of black life. She consistently points to the function of power inequities, particularly those of race and class, in systems that leave black folks with "no choices" and therefore "no hope" (West 1993). Coming of age in a moment where cocaine and other drugs ravaged black communities, Badu's everywoman is no doubt reflective of the singer's observations of the experiences of women navigating the beats they had been brought by socioeconomic disadvantage. Taken together, Badu's protagonists and Badu herself as narrator: 1) lament the absence of choices caused by structural discrimination; 2) neither condone nor absolutely condemn illegal activity; 3) critique the illegal activity because of the fundamentally negative effects it has on families and communities; and 4) acknowledge, even if they implicitly critique, women's loyalty to men as lovers and supporters. This worldview is rooted in the economic realities of a blues existence and the gendered realities of being a woman and raising children in a blues existence.

*"Just Because I Tell You I Love You/Don't Mean That I Do"*

Like her blues foremothers, Badu writes prolifically about heartbreak and women's intimate relationships with men. While Badu does not always explicitly reference a male partner, her corpus suggests that she is primarily thinking about heterosexual relationships with men. Noting that, "when she loves she tends to cling," Badu captures the emotional logic behind black women's sometimes psychologically damaging attachments to men.

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“Green Eyes,” the concluding song on *Mama’s Gun*, is a three-part lament, signifying on the three parts of John Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme,” and perhaps Badu’s most expansive articulation of the emotions of heartbreak. In the first movement, “Denial,” she sounds eerily like Billie Holiday as she denies having any feelings about her former partner’s new lover.

My eyes are green 'cause I eat a lotta vegetables  
It don't have nothing to do with your new friend  
My eyes are green 'cause I eat a lotta vegetables  
It don't have nothing to do with your new friend  
I don't care, I swear, I'm too through with you, I am  
You don't mean nothing to me, so go ahead and be with your friend  
My eyes are green 'cause I eat a lotta vegetables  
It don't have nothing to do with your new friend.

Badu’s delivery here, with the sound of a needle going over the grooves of a worn record in the background, captures her obvious hurt despite her denial. Attributing her green, envious eyes to robust vegetable intake, Badu declares herself “too through” with her old lover, who has apparently moved on to someone else. In the second movement, “Acceptance,” Badu becomes reflective about the breakup and heartbreak: “I’m insecure, but I can’t help it/My mind says move on, my heart lags behind/But I don’t love you anymore, I’m so insecure, never knew that love did this.” And later on the second movement, trying to reconcile the hurt, Badu belts out:

Never knew that love could hurt like this  
Never thought I would but I got dissed  
Makes me feel so sad and hurt inside  
Feel embarrassed so I want to hide  
Silly me I thought your love was true  
Change my name to “Silly E. Badu”  
Before I heal it’s gonna be a while  
I know it’s gonna be a while, chil’.

These raw emotions preface the third movement, “The Relapse,” in which Badu begs her lover to make love to her “just one more time and then [he’ll] see,” but then immediately chastises herself for “making a desperate plea.” Ultimately, she calls her lover out for his lack of resolve and unpreparedness for the relationship:

Don't you want be strong with me?  
You told me we had a family.  
Wanna run to Mama when you down and low  
But times get tough, and there you go  
Out the door you wanna run again

## Towards a twenty-first century blues women's epistemology

Open my arms and you come back in  
Wanna run 'cause you say that you were afraid  
But I'm your friend  
Never knew what a friendship was  
Never knew how to really love  
You can't be what I need you to  
And I don't know why I fuck with you.

Badu returns to this theme on *New Amerykah, Part II: Return of the Ankh* (2010) on "Out My Mind, Just In Time." Also divided into three movements, the song explicitly engages themes raised in "Green Eyes" ten years previous. With only piano accompaniment, Badu confesses: "I'm a recovering undercover Overlover/Recovering from a love I can't get over/I'm a recovering undercover Overlover/And now my common law lover thinks he wants another." Like a recovering addict, Badu lists her addiction related behaviors:

And I'd lie for you, I cry for you  
And pop for you, and break for you  
And hate for you, and hate you to if you want me to  
I pray for you, crochet for you  
Make it from scratch for you, leave off the latch for you  
Go to the sto' for you, do it some mo' for you  
Do what you want me to; guess I'm a fool for you.

The following movement is characterized by an almost cacophonous set of sounds, as Badu grapples again with heartbreak and the toll it has taken on her. By the third movement, she fiercely declares that she will rise from the ashes and take her "phoenix flight." She contends that it would be "easy to blame somebody else," "but not this time," declaring that it's "time to grow" and evolve. While the fate of Badu's protagonist in the drug trade narrative is left unclear, on "Out My Mind, Just In Time," Badu seems to have come full circle from her "relapse" on "Green Eyes."

"Green Eyes" expresses a significant amount of vulnerability, particularly vis-à-vis the rest of *Mama's Gun*. While the song is certainly a space where Badu, as narrator, can work through complex feelings, it is also a site where theoretically her son, and other male listeners, can comprehend the "other side of the game" of women's heartbreak. In a context of baby mama/daddy drama, "Green Eyes" offers a gendered perspective on the emotions behind the blues, and in this way builds on and nuances blues singers' critiques of "lowdown men." On the follow-up, Badu's discourse of self-empowerment and resurrection after heartbreak further nuances early twentieth century blues singers' work, demonstrating the flexibility of a blues women's epistemology.

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Not all of Badu's ruminations on relationships with men are such complex emotional introspections. She can also playfully reflect on being jilted by a lover. In the freestyle skit and interlude "Afro," on *Baduizm*, Badu's narrator has braided her hair, which has presumably taken some significant effort and time, because her partner has promised to take her to the Wu-Tang concert. He stands her up, but her mother – a figure that resurfaces a great deal throughout Badu's work – saw him at the concert and obviously reports this back to the narrator. Further, though she pages the man incessantly, he never returns her calls. Badu's narrator insists that if her partner does not know how to use the pager, she is going to take it back. We are invited to laugh playfully with and at Badu and the narrator, who has not only given her partner a pager, but continues to page him though he never calls her back.

Perhaps one of Badu's most widely known songs, "Tyrone," featured on the album *Live* (1997), became a veritable blues women's refrain in the late 1990s. It, too, is a semi-serious discussion of a "trifling" partner. It begins quite matter-of-factly: "I'm getting tired of yo' shit/you don't never buy me nothing." Badu continues to describe this partner, of whom she is increasingly growing tired. He always brings all of his friends around when they go out or when he visits, and she frequently has to use her own funds to pay everyone's way. He even made her ride in the backseat when they all went out to eat once. He refuses to give her money when she asks, but he "turns right around" and asks her for, and presumably expects, sex. Thus, Badu instructs her partner to call Tyrone, one of his many friends, to help him pack his things.

Through "Afro" and "Tyrone," Badu builds a community of black feminist affinity without explicit judgment, counseling women to learn from her example, to leave "no good" men like Tyrone's friend and the man who went to the Wu-Tang concert without her. While it is not always clear if there is some implicit judgment operating in Badu's narratives about trifling men, by exposing her own vulnerabilities and culpabilities in relationships-gone-wrong in other contexts, Badu situates herself as a legitimate speaker to and on behalf of black women in similar situations. This black feminist affinity even extends to the competition for men, which is especially contentious in a landscape of manufactured crisis around black women's heterosexual partnership options. On "Booty," a song on *Mama's Gun*, the narrator describes that despite her inability to compete with another woman – one who has a bigger booty, more education, more money, and better cooking – she still could get her man. The opening line declares, "yo' booty might be bigga, but I still could pull yo' nigga, but I don't want him." "Booty" is not a song about black female bravado exclusively; instead, it demonstrates the importance of black women's solidarity in battles against men who "ain't

ready" to love them.

I don't want him, 'cause of what he done to you  
And you don't need him, 'cause he ain't ready  
I don't want him, if he ain't made no arrangements with you  
I hope you woulda done the same thang for me, too.

Badu implies here that women should not want a man who has mistreated another woman, and counsels the wronged woman that she doesn't "need" the man like she may think she does. I posit that this kind of black feminist solidarity is central to Badu's articulation of a blues women's epistemology, and undoubtedly extends to other arenas beyond saving one another from men who "ain't ready." No need in dealing with a "no good" man, particularly if that man hasn't "made arrangements" of some form with the jilted woman. This respect for other women transcends loyalty to a "no good" man, no matter how fiercely he may have been loved.

Finally, though Badu can certainly be the heartbroken lover, she touts almost mythical abilities as a heartbreaker, transforming men after they fall in love with her. In real life, the lore, attributed to singer and bassist Raphael Saadiq, is that one should not look Erykah Badu in the eyes. Whether Badu is talking as herself or as the general twenty-first century blues woman, this sentiment appears frequently in her lyrics. On "Fall in Love (Your Funeral)" she warns a potential suitor that he doesn't want to fall in love with her and advises him that he had "betta get on away from here." Signifying on a Notorious B.I.G. lyric, she continues: "there's gonna be some slow singing and flower bringing if my burglar alarm starts ringing." Further, to fall in love with her, this man will have to be prepared "to change jobs and change gods." Here Badu's black female bravado is on par with that of her hip-hop women counterparts and an extension of early twentieth century blues singers' boasts.

### *Erykah Badu As Blues Narrator*

The black women archetypes to which Badu gives shape, and the figure of the mother in particular, make visible the lived experiences of black women on the margins, challenging black elite and white normative denigration of these women. Like the black folks in the Mississippi Delta who challenged plantation epistemology with a blues epistemology, Badu, as blues narrator, challenges anti-black misogyny with an in-depth examination of the deep structures of black poor and working class women's lives in the age of crack cocaine and rampant disinvestment in inner-city black communities (West 1993). By inhabiting the positions of women on the margins, Badu gives voice to how women sing on the beats they are brought, navigating the treacherous terrain of structural inequality and a system that offers few

choices (Collins 1998, 2000). Still, though there is sadness and struggle, exhibited by Badu's frequent wailing protests and cries, there is still laughter, and in particular there is black women's ability to laugh at themselves. The paradoxical simultaneity of tragedy and triumph Badu narrates is the essence of the blues narrative in America. By focusing on women, the "other side of the game," Badu brings us to less explored but central corners of the blues experience.

## **"DIGITAL BLACK FEMINISMS" AND THE FOURTH GENERATION**

In the years since the most influential third wave black feminist works were published (e.g., Morgan 1999; Pough 2002; Pough 2004), a new generation of black feminists has emerged that have been socialized via the Internet and in the context of increasing regulatory encroachments on access to abortion and birth control. While the concerns of these intellectuals mirror those of women in previous generations, the rise of the Internet and social media have fundamentally changed the pace and method of delivery of black feminist thought. Unlike the rate of academic exchanges in journals and books, "digital black feminisms" (Jarmon 2013a, 2013b) swiftly police unacceptable and marginalizing discourses and more quickly respond to the obfuscation of women of color in scholarly, public, and policy discussions. Conversations about black feminist praxis have thus become decidedly and necessarily more complex, spurred on by these advancements and by the creation of digital black feminist intellectual spaces on the Web.<sup>5</sup>

While terms like "fourth-wave feminism" and "post-feminist" have emerged to capture what seem to be distinctions between concerns of third-wave feminists and those groups who came of age in the 1990s and the first years of the twenty-first century, as Badu might argue, black feminist "ciphers keep moving like a rolling stone." That is, black feminist concerns are remarkably consistent over time, particularly if we take into account the concerns of women intellectuals whose work is not captured by academic black feminist historiography. Still, I use the terms *fourth wave* and *fourth generation* to call attention to how the high-speed nature of black feminist discourse production today has resulted in active efforts to resolve multiple perceived contradictions of the second and third waves of black feminism (Peoples 2008; Taylor 1998). In this emergent fourth generation, which includes the work of women of color artists who may or may not be affiliated with the academy and academics as well as black women intellectuals on Twitter, self-owned blogs, Tumblr, Facebook, and other forms of social media, black feminists bring together contradictions, rifts, and oversights from previous waves and theorize them in the context of

new forms of anti-black misogyny.

Fourth wave feminists publicly challenge “misogynoir” – a term coined by Crunk Feminist Collective blogger Moya Bailey (2010, 2013) and expounded upon by blogger Trudy Hamilton (2012) to highlight the particularly vitriolic nature of anti-black misogyny and anti-black sexism in the public sphere – at every turn, attending to the structural reproduction of gendered and racialized violence against black women, regardless of sexuality, gender presentation, class status, or sex at birth. For instance, while fourth generation black feminists might advocate “talking back” to street harassment and contend that men should “stop telling women to smile” (Fazlalizadeh 2012), they also highlight the dangers and realities of talking back and call for structural, discursive, and awareness changes to make streets safer for women.

Fourth wave feminists have also critiqued rape culture, drawing on the power of social media to bring national attention to problematic discourses and structural practices that endanger women and girls. There have been many manifestations of black feminist activism resulting in attention to rape culture and anti-black misogyny. One recent manifestation of this sort on the Internet is the denouncement of Russell Simmons' parody, “Harriet Tubman Sex Tape,” which change.org petitioner and sociologist Crystal Fleming (2013), along with scores of black women in various social media spaces, considered an especially crude perpetuation of rape culture. Simmons apologized, if half-heartedly, and removed the video. Another includes the indictment of rape lyrics by rapper Rick Ross, who boasted about slipping a drug into the champagne of an unwitting woman and then having sex with her on “U.O.E.N.O.,” a song by rapper Rocko on which Rick Ross was featured. Again, black feminists in social media spaces decried the rapper's lyrics and thrust rape culture and rappers' perpetuation of it into the spotlight. Ross, who issued an official apology after initially asserting that his lyrics had been “misinterpreted,” lost an endorsement deal with Reebok as a result of the controversy.

Although black feminist organizing has always been multiracial and included coalitions with Latina and indigenous women, today, the multiracial nature of feminist organizing is increasingly visible, as women of color collaborate openly under the theoretical umbrella of black feminism and also manage anti-black racism initiated by other people of color. In ways more unapologetic than previous generations, a range of women, including lesbians, bisexuals, and transwomen, are centered and participating in the production of black feminism. As a result, their concerns are not overtly dominated by heteronormative ideals – getting and keeping a man, for instance – and are critical of the negative effects of heterosexism on everyone, regardless of social location. These intellectuals deploy intersectionality to

not only theorize race, class, gender, and sexuality, but to also expand and interrogate those categories, especially those of gender and sexuality.

Moreover, these intellectuals also manage the boundaries of their practice in spaces that make them vulnerable to intellectual theft. News organizations and well-resourced blogs use social media sites, including Twitter and Tumblr, to determine trending topics and stories and target specific audiences. Similarly, academics access and use the blogs of these intellectuals in their own research,<sup>6</sup> which can be a site of contention for intellectuals who intend their work to be for themselves and audiences of black women and allies. Intellectual theft and public erasure often are also perpetrated by white feminists, who black women feminists have held accountable many times for using black women's marginalization as a political tool but not incorporating black women's experiences meaningfully into conversations that could benefit the lives of less privileged women. The Twitter hashtag "SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen" (Kendall 2013) became an important space through which feminists of color spoke back to the anti-black sexism and racism of large, and largely white, feminists and feminist organizations. Despite these challenges, these black women intellectuals use the Internet to continue to critique, write, and produce in an effort to shift the discourse around the various issues affecting women of color.

I suggest here that in the spirit of a twenty-first century blues women's epistemology and despite multifaceted challenges to them as individuals, black feminists on the Internet, like black women artists in other spheres, unapologetically give voice, shape, and context to black women's lived experiences. These intellectuals work to challenge "misogynoir" (Bailey 2010, 2013) as it manifests in hip-hop and everywhere in popular culture. Further, they are actively engaged in naming the ways that state and federal policies disadvantage a range of women of color and their children – including recent wrangling over cuts to SNAP assistance for needy families; cutting WIC benefits for mothers of small children during the October 2013 government shutdown; and failing to institute anti-discrimination policies against LGBT populations. In this way, this fourth generation of black feminists has centralized the social justice aims of all previous generations of black feminist praxis and deployed challenges to injustices in loud voices that reverberate in art, writing, music, and grassroots organizing.

## **READING BLACK FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

Blues women's epistemology is not a monolith; it is expansive and can encompass a wide range of black feminist perspectives and experiences on the margins. Thus, alongside Erykah Badu, it can be argued that rapper

and pop icon Nicki Minaj's work, which carves out a space for feminist sentiment in and through a patriarchal industry, can also tell us a great deal about black women's experiences in the twenty-first century. Additionally, singer Janelle Monae offers important and sustained ruminations on a range of black women's issues (Robinson 2013). New Orleans bounce queen Big Freedia provides a bodily and verbal discourse on the urban soul grief that continues to plague the Crescent City, and especially its underprivileged black residents. Further, scores of artists on the margins, including rapper Jean Grae and rapper and performance artist Mykki Blanco, provide fuel for the enduring critical and interrogative flames of African American resistance. We must engage more consistently with the work of these and other artists, who inform and reflect diverse audiences of a broad range of women of color, to understand change and continuity in the contours of black feminist thought and practice.

Blues women's work argues that though black women may be compelled to sing on the beats they are brought, there is much to their ability to determine and shape the melodies and harmonies of the songs that are sung. A blues women's epistemology, as articulated by Badu, is foremost concerned with singing the song – that is, telling the story of black women's experiences from black women's perspectives – despite the silencing efforts of the powerful. Second, a blues women's epistemology implicitly provides context for the choices and lived experiences of black women. To be clear, however, it does not provide this context to explain or make black women "legible" to others. As such, a blues women's epistemology *is for itself* – for the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and erotic pleasures of black women. Still, blues women's epistemologies can help us view controversial representations of black womanhood that are rooted in material and political realities, but also have an existential critical core that embraces the increasing contradictions of contemporary black womanhood, especially for black women in America's expanding underclasses. By navigating around respectability and the source material confines of academic black feminism to the less traveled pathways of black feminist engagement, we can uncover lesser-known strategies of resistance and new sites for black feminist organizing in the twenty-first century.

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## NOTES

- 1 Black women audiences often legitimate blues women who produce culture in the public sphere, thereby substantiating the status of the latter as reflections of blues women's lived experiences.
- 2 I recognize that all black women are affected by anti-black misogyny (Hamilton 2013), or "misogynoir" (Bailey 2010 and 2013), a term that succinctly captures the racialized sexism black women experience. Yet for women outside of respectability norms, "misogynoir" is especially pernicious.
- 3 The Dr. Dre lyric is "things just ain't the same for gangstas," which laments the transition of power from older gangstas to newer gangstas.

## Zandria F. Robinson

- 4 This chorus of “whys” with which black women are confronted are all too familiar: *Why are so many black women on welfare? Why do black women (and women of color more generally) have so many children? Why are black women so loud? From Psychology Today in May 2011, why are black women so ugly? Why do black women want white women’s/straight and silky hair? Why do black women want light skin? Why can’t black women get a man? Why can’t black women keep a man?* And of course, from the *New York Times* in May 2012, *why are black women fat?* Because they are rooted in anti-black misogyny, white supremacy, and structural inequality, these questions are the wrong ones to ask.
- 5 For a partial but thorough listing of black feminist writing on the Web, see Jarmon’s (2013b) blog, “New Model Minority.” See References for this article for the specific web address.
- 6 I am quite sensitive to my use and referencing here of the work of black women intellectuals on the Internet because of the hierarchal relationship automatically enacted by my social location as a cisgender black woman tenure-track professor. Some black women intellectuals on the Internet are graduate students who risk the scorn of their advisors who may not see social media writing as a legitimate use of their time. Others are adjunct professors on the margins of academic practice, whose work on social media is picked up by more privileged academics and used by the latter to gain social and financial capital in the profession. Still others are outside the academy and besieged by academics’ requests for the use of their work. In many cases, the work of these intellectuals is used without permission and sometimes without citation. Although I am a consumer of black feminist work online, participate in black feminist conversations online, and occasionally produce my own black feminist writing on the Internet, I am sensitive to these power dynamics. I do believe that a more thorough and systematic archeology and analysis of black women’s work on the Internet should take place and be published in a scholarly forum, but this is not my goal here. Further, others, like Jarmon (2013a, 2013b), are far more knowledgeable about the complexities of black women’s intellectual work on the Internet and thus more equipped to carry out such work.