Chapter 7

Fetishism and Objectification:
Social Media and the Dehumanization and Invisibility of Black Women

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ABSTRACT

There has been extensive discussion about the lived experiences of Black men; however, there has not been as much discussion about the lived experiences of Black American women. Because Black women and girls live at the intersection of two marginalized groups, they are more likely to go unseen than any other racial or gender group. This has made them more venerable to racist stereotypes perpetuated in film, television, and popular culture since the 1800s. The pervasive nature of social media and mediated stereotyped images of Black women only add to the continued dehumanization and invisibility of Black women and the disparities they face. This chapter will examine how mediated images and tropes of Black women on social media perpetuate the dehumanization of Black women and re-enforce the disparities that they experience through the lens of critical race theory.

INTRODUCTION

Despite progress made in the fight toward equity and inclusion, systemic racism and the stereotypes that maintain it remains malignant markers in the socio-economic, political, and psychological body of Black women's lives. (Creshaw, 2015). Seminal research by scholars throughout the social sciences has examined Black Americans' legacy, tainted with over 400 years of ancestral enslavement, institutionalized

exploitation, and being subjected to persistent adverse physical and psychological conditioning that still affects Blacks today (Crenshaw, 2015; Du Bois, 1903). More specifically, Black female bodies continue to experience extreme sexual exploitation and abuse (Aymer, 2016). There has been extensive discussion about the lived experiences of Black men, which have been relevant and very much needed given recent incidents of police brutality and various acts of violence and anti-blackness to which Black men have been the target (Aymer, 2016). However, there has not been as much discussion about the lived experiences of Black American women (Crenshaw et al., 2015).

Historically, Black women have been treated as less-than-human in many contexts, including the sciences, popular culture, law, and everyday life. Because Black women and girls live at the intersection of two marginalized groups, they are more likely to go unseen than any other racial or gender group (Crenshaw, 2015; hooks, 1991). When issues of race are discussed, they are typically done so through the lens of Black males, and when sexism is challenged, it is generally centered around the experiences of White women. Consequently, the multiple subordinate identities of Black women and girls are produced and reproduced through invisibility: they are less likely to hold elected office positions, high-profile positions in their careers, and are among the missing in many popular cultural images.

The stereotype of the hyper-sexualized Black woman has become fetishized within modern American media and sex culture (Holmes, 2016). Black female bodies and black sexual practices are essentialized and fetishized as a continuation of their exploitation and dehumanization within the American imperialist narrative (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996; Holmes, 2016). This idea is reflected in popular music, pornography, advertisements, and other popular media (Rosenthal & Overstreet, 2016). Black female genitalia and secondary sex features are fetishized for their size and shape. The bodies of Black women have been managed and controlled throughout all of American history; from the slave era to the modern era, Black bodies are still perceived as having inherently inferior value (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996; Rosenthal & Overstreet, 2016). The historical intersectionality of race and gender within Black female sexuality is incredibly complex. Black women have constantly been sexually debased and dehumanized (Rosenthal & Overstreet, 2016). From the auction block to sex shops, Black bodies remain byproducts of an ongoing manifest destiny. The pervasive nature of social media and mediated stereotyped images of Black women only add to the invisibility of Black women and the disparities they face.

Consequently, this chapter will examine how mediated images and tropes of Black women on social media perpetuate the dehumanization of Black women and re-enforce the disparities that they experience through the lens of Critical Race Theory. Specifically, this chapter aims to provide a thorough discussion of current literature that examines how Black women have been dehumanized, objectified,

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