

Twerking and Cultural Appropriation: Miley Cyrus' Display of Racial Ignorance

Shereen Zink

Abstract

Miley Cyrus' recent habit of twerking has sparked debate over whether the pop star is misappropriating African American culture; some even going so far as to accuse her of racism. This paper reviews the literature that exists in the public sphere on the topic, and delves into a scholarly analysis of Cyrus' actions, statements, and the implications they have. My own post-analysis interpretation of the issue is addressed in the concluding paragraphs. Ultimately, twerking's political context, and Cyrus' lack of regard for said context, suggest that she is perpetuating harmful stereotypes about black women while her own white privilege allows her to maintain her integrity. Cyrus may not be intentionally exploiting black culture, but she is certainly communicating more than she may have bargained for.

The public debate over Miley Cyrus' twerking is certainly an interesting one. Her actions in her recent music videos, and her 2013 Video Music Awards performance, have left her at the center of a race issue. By styling herself after "ratchet" culture—a term generally considered an insult to African American women—and by misrepresenting an element of African American culture; Cyrus has sparked debate about cultural appropriation and racism in popular culture. The arguments range from convicting Cyrus of "calculated racism" to suggesting that it is racist to call Cyrus racist (Julious, 2013; Yates, 2013). While Cyrus

herself may not be racist, both her use of marginalized cultural cues to exert her new sexual image, and her portrayal of black women in her performances, have racial implications.

Some may suggest that her twerking is just another instance of African American culture influencing North American popular culture. Indeed, African American culture is crucial to pop culture's current form. Saint-Jacques (2012) states that any culture is constantly being influenced by other cultures, and popular culture, which Browne (2006) defines as "whatever is widely disseminated and experienced," is no exception. From entertainment, to fashion, to champagne, African American culture is unquestionably linked to what North Americans consider popular and desirable.

The situation with Cyrus is different, however, in that the cultural cues she is drawing attention to, are not ones that the originating culture unanimously agrees should be publicized. Similarly, her lack of knowledge of the political implications of her actions means she is appropriating these things without regard for their impact on African American society. By ignoring the political and historical context that is associated with "ratchet" culture, she is perpetuating negative stereotypes of black women, which she—as a white woman—can conveniently walk away from.

The Public Discourse

Cyrus first twerked in the public eye when she uploaded a video of herself performing the move in a unicorn costume in March 2013; later, during an impromptu performance at a Juicy J concert, she began twerking on stage to "Bandz a Make Her Dance," a song about strippers. In her June 2013 music video for "We Can't Stop," she twerked (poorly) in the center of her black backup dancers, which sparked the discussion about Cyrus and cultural appropriation. Her August 2013 Video

Music Awards performance was a similar display and seemed to reinforce the racial overtones that some saw in her music video.

It is important to note that many of the arguments are not against cultural blending or the creative expression of cultural cues. Cultural appreciation is much different from cultural appropriation, and Cyrus' antics are generally seen as the latter. The most convincing arguments in the public discourse suggest that it was Cyrus' entire performance (both in music videos and at the VMAs), compounded by her appropriation of the dance move for shock value, which was considered racist. This distinction can be demonstrated by the responses to Cyrus' first attempt at twerking, where she was dancing alone; without any other racial signifiers, twerking remained banal. In a March 2013 interview with Ryan Seacrest, Cyrus said that she hadn't seen "one bad comment" about that video ("Miley Cyrus shares her twerking," 2013).

The offence in Cyrus' video for "We Can't Stop" is largely due to her use of black women, as props and her appropriation of the negatively viewed "ratchet" culture, for her own gain. Stewart (2013) said of the video, "In a white-centric world, putting white women quite literally in the center of the frame while women of color are off to the side is a powerfully, disrespectful visual message". Perhaps the most poignant argument Stewart makes is that, because of her white privilege, Cyrus "can play at blackness without being burdened by the reality of it". Similarly, Leonard and Calderon (2013) argue that Cyrus' white privilege allows her to be ratchet and still successful—marketable even—while those who truly embody the subculture face significant barriers. Vulture columnist Rosen (2013) states, "Cyrus is annexing working-class black ratchet culture, the potent sexual symbolism of black female bodies, to the cause of her reinvention".

D'Addario (2013) interviews Tricia Rose, a professor of Africana studies at Brown University, who says that Cyrus' use of blackness to break away from her wholesome image, is worrisome because "most of the knowledge about African-American culture is gleaned from mass culture". She adds, "the whole thing struck me as a high school disposition or attitude, that way of dressing up in what they think are transgressive ways, this idea that blackness equals transgression," this quote highlights Cyrus' lack of understanding about the culture she borrowed from and her misguided interpretation of how to be edgy. Big Freedia, the "Queen of Bounce," also takes issue with the inauthenticity of Cyrus' performance, saying, "she was going too far. She's trying to twerk, but don't know how [sic] to twerk. It's become offensive to a lot of people who've been twerking for years... especially in the black culture" (Newman, 2013).

The overarching argument about Cyrus is against her privileged, inauthentic, borrowing of heavily stereotyped element of black culture for the sake of marketability. Her inclusion of pop-like black dancers as "proof" of her credibility also contributes to her offence. Of course, there are articles that have emerged that contradict these arguments as well. Some have suggested that "a twerk is just a twerk," and that those who see racism in her performance are simply overreacting (Rothman, 2013). Yates (2013) argues that by even suggesting her twerking was racist, is racist in itself. He states that taking issue with her performance implies that twerking is a "lesser act". This argument, and it seems to be the only one that expands beyond the argument of overreaction, can be addressed from two angles; one argues that twerking is, in fact, considered a "lesser act" by its own culture, and thus her appropriation of it was exploiting a racial element that that culture would rather not see in popular culture. The other angle is that, of course, the issue has to do with

much more than the act of twerking alone. The following analysis will demonstrate that in some cases dancing can communicate much more than one might expect, and that sometimes a twerk is not, in fact, just a twerk.

Historical and Political Analysis of Twerking

While Cyrus may have thrown twerking into the pop culture spotlight, the dance actually has roots on the Ivory Coast as a move called *Mapouka*; defined as “the surprisingly difficult act of wiggling one’s buttocks without moving one’s hips” (Akindes, 2002, p. 100). The term twerking, however, was first used in 1993 in the New Orleans bounce music scene (Lynch, 2013). DJ Jubilee used the word for the first time in his song “Do the Jubilee All,” and twerking maintained its place in various styles of hip-hop since with the Ying Yang Twins, Bubba Sparxxx, Beyoncé, and even Justin Timberlake referencing the word (Lynch, 2013).

Twerking is seen in ratchet culture, which is associated with hypersexual, tacky, unintelligent, loud black women from a lower socio-economic class (Lewis, 2013). “Ratchet” is almost exclusively a negative term; and in discussion boards about Cyrus’ antics, many have expressed concern with her bringing attention to it, suggesting she is misrepresenting African American culture (“The Debate,” 2013). Similarly, *Mapouka* is seen by Ivorian officials as “sexually perverted, lewd, and obscene,” even though the dance holds significance for Ivorians who practice it (Akindes, 2002). *Mapouka* is seen by the dancers as “part of the heritage of the country, even if it shocks,” and it acts as a “reaffirmation of the functionality of traditional dancing for which shaking one’s hips and bottom is neither immoral nor vulgar”(Akindes, 2002). Twerking is closely linked with dancehall, which was also at one time considered vulgar, immoral, and of a lower socio-economic class (Bakare-Yusuf, 2005). It is argued, however, that because of the

context, women were driven to use dance as an assertion of their own agency “within a social context that viewed the poor with arrogant indifference” (Bakare-Yusuf, 2005).

The statements about the vulgarity of these dances originate from the historical perception of black women as being overtly sexual, a view that has been carried forth since the second century A.D. (Railton & Watson, 2005). The black female body was seen as “a sign of uncontrollable animalistic sexuality,” which was in opposition to the less explicit and more “civilized” European conceptualization of sexuality (Railton & Watson, 2005, p. 54). Even more specifically the buttocks of black women, which is a focal point of twerking, was seen as a key signifier of this dangerous sexual anomaly. Bell Hooks (1992) argues that in popular culture, “the fascination with black butts continues...the protruding butt is seen as an indication of heightened sexuality” (as cited in Railton and Watson, 2005, p. 58).

It would not be unrealistic to expect twerking to take a similar path to *Mapouka* and dancehall and become a tool for black women to express their control over their own bodies and sexuality. Twerking can then be seen as a not-so-subtle communication of this historical context, and in turn a political message about that history. It is with these political implications that it becomes evident that a dance move is sometimes more than what it seems.

Analysis and Implications

Cyrus’ outrageous performances exist in large capacity to sell her products. Balaji (2009) notes a trend of “urbanizing” pop stars to embody the consumable sexuality associated with black women, a formula he has identified as a means to maximize profit without much innovation. As a result, corporations have created an “ideologically constructed zone that caters to dominant culture’s perceptions of blackness” (Balaji, 2009). These

perceptions “typecast blackness to a set of keywords such as ‘urban’ or ‘ghetto,’” two words that Cyrus has used to describe her desired style (Balaji, 2009).

While Balaji’s (2009) arguments are in relation to a black artist named Keke, it can be argued that this exact formula was simply transferred on to Cyrus’ previously squeaky-clean image. His article, though written before Cyrus’ experiments with urbanity and sexuality, is telling of the potential journey she herself experienced. Keke, who was also a teen Disney star, was interested in breaking into the music industry while maintaining her wholesome image. Her record label refused to record her clean songs without the inclusion of “raunchy tracks,” stating that she was “urban” and had to be portrayed accordingly in order to be profitable (Balaji, 2009). While Cyrus’ own control over her newfound image is debatable, it could be suggested that her image saw a similar fate as she grew out of her Disney-era persona; her pre-twerking image likely sold to a much smaller audience than her new urban brand has. As Balaji states, “black women and their sexuality have become consumable—and profitable—commodities”. By continuing to latch onto black signifiers, Cyrus maintains her new provocative persona driving consumers to her videos and music.

Cyrus is certainly not the first white performer to incorporate an element of black culture into her work, and some, have done it well. The Beastie Boys were quickly accepted as legitimate MCs by other black artists, such as Run DMC, Public Enemy, LL Cool J, and Q-Tip (Hess, 2005). Q-Tip, who toured with the Beastie Boys, once said that he appreciated them because “they don’t try to be black, [t]hey’re just themselves” (Hess, 2005). While the Beastie Boys certainly sounded “white,” they did not emphasize their whiteness in a way that used their “minority status” (in that they are a minority in the hip-hop genre), as a promotional stunt. They did not try to

integrate themselves into black culture, nor did they define themselves in opposition to it. They were simply MCs who happened to be white.

Cyrus differs from the Beastie Boys in that she is often purposely displayed in contrast to her black dancers. In her music videos, and in her VMA performance, slim white Miley is situated between curvy black women who embody the ratchet culture she stylizes herself after, this contrast is only emphasized by Cyrus' lack of twerking abilities. The black cultural context of twerking and ratchet is still evident in her performance, but even more evident was her whiteness in opposition to it.

The emphasis on her whiteness, in combination with her use of blackness for profit, put Cyrus on a level similar to Vanilla Ice. Ice was marketed as a distinctly white rapper; his authenticity was rooted in his supposed urban upbringing, rife with gang associations, and criminal activity (Hess, 2005). While the colour of his skin was a driving force in his popularity, he often "asked listeners to look past his whiteness to see a kind of social blackness that would authenticate him" (Hess, 2005,). The reports of his upbringing were revealed to be false, and he was condemned for "imitating black artists to make him rich". His musical career was consequently destroyed, and he is rarely seen in popular culture as anything other than "a one-man joke" (Mills, as cited in Hess, 2005). By using his whiteness as a novelty, and by faking authenticity within a black context, Vanilla Ice perverted a culture that was already marginalized for his own gain. Similarly, Cyrus' apparent desire for her audience to recognize black authenticity, and her obvious lack of it, resulted in the misappropriation of ratchet and black culture for profit.

Whiteness is not often studied as a racial category on its own, and tends to be obvious only when it is seen in opposition to blackness (Railton & Watson, 2005). To emphasize the difference between perceptions of

sexuality in white and black women, Railton and Watson (2005) state “the representation of black female sexuality implies and invokes an essential sexuality that is already in and of the world while the presentation of white female sexuality always offers the potential for reinvention”. Essentially, white performers can exude sexuality one minute and go back to their “civilized” non-sexuality the next; black women, tied to their historically animalistic perceptions, are less capable of leaving such connotations behind them. This difference is made even more apparent when white and black women are juxtaposed against one another. The control that a white woman has over her appearance, as a sexual entity is obvious when contrasted to the image of a black woman, whose very body is evidence of “black hypersexuality”. In a music video in which Lil’ Kim and Christina Aguilera perform in tandem, “Kim can only ever be seen as a black woman, Aguilera is allowed a far more fluid and creative engagement with both raced and sexual identity”.

Even more troublesome than these perceptions is the influence that such stereotypes can have on black women’s sexual behaviours. Davis and Tucker-Brown (2013) state that African American women’s own perception of these stereotypes has resulted in their inability “to effectively negotiate sexual encounters, resulting in their increased susceptibility to STIs”. Participants in their study were conscious of the influence of popular culture, and “all agreed that the portrayal of African American women in the media affects their decision to take sexual risks” (Davis & Tucker-Brown, 2013). The association of strippers with desirability was a common theme among the participants, and the expression of black women as “sex objects” in music videos was seen as particularly threatening to their sexual health. Pop culture portrayals have become a commonly accepted definition of what it means to be a “sexy”

African American woman, and girls' actions were reflecting this (Davis & Tucker-Brown, 2013).

As one participant in Davis and Tucker-Brown's (2013) study noted, "music videos are like the black girls' Hollywood". The extent to which white women would go to be cast in a Hollywood film (i.e. sleeping with a film producer) is similar to what black women were doing to be cast in a music video that "paint them as hoers". Davis and Tucker-Brown relate this phenomenon to the historical treatment of black women during times of slavery, just as Railton and Watson (2005). The myth that black women are "whores" and have "uncontrolled sexuality" has been maintained through the representations of black women in music videos (Davis & Tucker-Brown, 2013).

Not only can Cyrus' representation of black women affect African American's sexual choices and sense of self-worth; Gan, Zillmann, and Mitrook (1997) note that the content of music videos can influence white viewers' perceptions of real-life social encounters as well. In their study they reported that white viewers held less favourable views of black women after watching music videos where black women were portrayed as sexually enticing. This study did not find those perceptions to be extended to white women, suggesting that race, rather than gender, was the primary determinant for these views. While Cyrus is the primary performer, her inclusion of black performers acting in sexually titillating ways, would likely have a similar effect. Again, because she lacks a cultural connection to twerking, she is able to escape from such perceptions. Her black backup dancers do not have this privilege, and therefore are seen as representations of black culture.

In Response to Cyrus' Defense

Cyrus has spoken out against the allegations racism, stating, "I don't keep my producers or dancers around

'cause it makes me look cool. Those aren't my accessories. They're my homies... I would never think about the color of my dancers" (Eells, 2013, p. 2). She defends herself from those who suggest she's "playing black," saying, "I'm from one of the wealthiest countries in the world [sic]. I know what I am. But I also know what I like to listen to". Her statements seem progressive, and it is likely that she genuinely holds no ill will toward her dancers or African American culture. She does seem to be oblivious to the racial elements of her performance, however, in her "colour-blind" approach; she views her performance as non-racial, which some scholars have addressed as problematic in itself.

Her acknowledgement of her whiteness and privilege, combined with her disregard for the racial context of her performance, suggests that she sees racial differences but will not attribute them to her actions. This corresponds with troubles that Hall (1997) and Rodriguez (2006) see in her colour-blind ideology. By refusing to acknowledge the racial context of her actions, Cyrus is indeed appropriating dance style, thus reducing the act to a culturally void expression. Hall (1997) notes that not recognizing a racial association with black cultural elements "leads to an appropriation of aesthetic innovation that not only 'exploits' Black cultural forms... but also nullifies the cultural meaning those forms provide for African Americans". Similarly, Rodriguez (2006) states that the colour-blind ideology—the belief that racism will be eliminated if "sameness" is emphasized—is often used to "deny the reality of inequality". In his study, Rodriguez determines that the desire for white youth to incorporate black elements into their lives, without acknowledging racial differences, results in misappropriation and the irrelevancy of racial character. Ignoring the relevance of race can result in a "white collective-identity" wherein "abstract egalitarian values" are applied to African

Americans; thereby ignoring the institutional racism he says still exists (Rodriguez, 2006). Ultimately, a colour-blind discourse allows white individuals to appropriate black culture without addressing its political and historical context. In this regard, Cyrus' defense does not hold up.

Conclusions

The political and historical context of twerking, combined with Cyrus's lack of tactful regard for said context, has created a dangerous cocktail of cultural appropriation and racial ignorance. The decision she has made to incorporate "ratchet" into popular culture is simply not hers to make; as an element of African American culture that is sometimes seen as shameful, "ratchet" needs to be addressed in a much more empowering way for black women. By taking an element from a poor, disdained, subculture and using it for profit rather than emphasizing its potential power, she keeps women who are seen as "ratchet" in a class far below her. She is not twerking because she sees its value to society, but because she wants to be edgy and sell records. And because she's white, Cyrus is able to try on "ratchet" culture and take it off just as easily, transitioning between vulgar and respectable (though some of her other antics may have negated much of her respectability). She can walk away from the subjugation, but those who live it cannot.

The inability for black women to negotiate the perceptions of their own sexuality is all too evident in Cyrus' performance. She can mimic her black backup dancers' behaviors without risking her race's reputation, and by doing so she is emphasizing the inherent difference between the effects of her performance versus the effects of her dancers' performance. The stereotype, that black women lack control over their own sexuality, is further heightened by Cyrus' shameless exploitation of women's bodies. By manhandling her dancers and using them as objects of sexuality she enforces the conception

of black women's sexual purpose. Their apparent lack of control over their own objectification (Cyrus merely has her way with them, rather than engaging them in a two-way affection), hardly breaks with the historic lack of agency over their own bodies.

This is not to say that black women are incapable of overcoming the oppressive stereotypes associated with twerking and "ratchet". Cyrus creates a spectacle of twerking, but it can certainly be done in a way that pays homage to its roots. Just as dancehall became a powerful movement for black women and their agency, so too can "ratchet" culture. But by representing ratchet in a strictly ironic and novel way, Cyrus has taken that power away, at least temporarily. Her expression of these dance moves is exploitative, not liberating—Cyrus does not need to be liberated from institutional sexual oppression, and she is certainly not liberating her dancers. Regardless, it is quite unlikely that Cyrus is a "calculated" racist; her statements on the issue have indicated as much. Unfortunately, she (or her handlers) did fail to recognize that what she was doing could have such serious implications for black women.

References

- Akides, S. (2002). Playing it "loud and straight": Reggae, Zouglou, Mapouka and Youth Insubordination on Cote d'Ivoire. In Palmberg, M. & Kirkegaard, A. (Eds), *Playing with Identities in Contemporary Music in Africa*. (pp. 86-101), Nordic Africa Institute.
- Bakare-Yusuf, (2005). 'I love myself when I am dancing and carrying on': Refiguring the agency of black women's creative expression in Jamaican Dancehall culture. *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 1(3), 263-276. doi: 10.1386/macp.1.3.263/1
- Balaji, M. (2009). Why do good girls have to be bad? The cultural industry's production of Other and the

- complexities of agency. *Popular Communication*, 7, 225-236. doi: 10.1080/15405700903224438
- Beck, L. (2013). The original Twerk Team: Miley Cyrus twerking is not our twerking. *Jezebel*. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com/the-original-twerk-team-miley-cyrus-twerking-is-not-ou-1444173132>
- Browne, R. (2006). Popular culture: Notes toward a definition. In Hinds, H. E., Motz, M. F., & Nelson, A. M. (Eds), *Popular Culture Theory and Methodology: A Basic Introduction*. (pp.15-22), Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press/Popular Press.
- Davis, S. & Tucker-Brown, A. (2013). Effects of black sexual stereotypes on sexual decision making among African American women. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 5(9), 111-128.
- D'Addario, D. (2013). Is Miley Cyrus' twerking Racist? *Salon*. Retrieved from http://www.salon.com/2013/06/24/is_miley_cyrus_twerking_racist/
- Eells, J. (2013, September 24). Miley Cyrus: Confessions of Pop's wildest child. *Rolling Stone*. Retrieved from <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/miley-cyrus-confessions-of-pops-wildest-child-20130924>
- Hall, P. (1997). African-American music: dynamics of appropriation and innovation. In Ziff, B. and Rao, P. (Eds), *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* (pp. 31-51), New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hess, M. (2005). Hip-hop realness and the white performer. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 22(5), 372-389. doi: 10.1080/07393180500342878
- Gan, S., Zillmann, D., & Mitrook, M. (1997). Stereotyping effect of black women's sexual rap on white audiences. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 19(3), 381-399.
- Julious, B. (2013, July 26). How Miley Cyrus' image evolved into calculated racism. *Thought Catalog*. Retrieved

from <http://thoughtcatalog.com/brittany-julious/2013/06/how-miley-cyrus-image-evolved-into-calculated-racism/>

Leonard, D. & Calderon, J. (2013, August 30). From Miley to Macklemore: The privilege spectrum. *Hip Hop and Politics*. Retrieved from http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2013/08/30/from-miley-to-macklemore-the-privilegespectrum/?fb_source=pubv1

Lewis, H. (2013, January 7). Exhuming the ratchet before it's buried. *Feminist Wire*. Retrieved from <http://thefeministwire.com/2013/01/exhuming-the-ratchet-before-its-buried/>

Lynch, J. (2013, August 28). A brief history of twerking. *Fuse*. Retrieved from <http://www.fuse.tv/2013/08/brief-history-of-twerking>

Miley Cyrus shares her twerking style at Seacrest Studios (2013, March 27). *Ryanseacrest.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.ryanseacrest.com/2013/03/27/miley-cyrus-shares-her-twerking-style-at-seacrest-studios/>

Neuman, J. (2013, August 28). Bounce Queen Big Freedia slams Miley Cyrus' twerking. *Fuse*. Retrieved from <http://www.fuse.tv/2013/08/big-freedia-miley-cyrus-twerk>

Railton, D. & Watson, P. (2005). Naughty girls and red blooded women: Representations of female heterosexuality in music video. *Feminist Media Studies*, 5(1), 51-63. doi: 10.1080/14680770500058207

Rodriguez, J. (2006). Color-blind ideology and the cultural appropriation of hip-hop. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(6), 645-668. doi: 10.1177/0891241606286997

Rosen, J. (2013, August 26). Rosen: The 2013 VMAs were dominated by Miley's minstrel show. *Vulture*. Retrieved from <http://www.vulture.com/2013/08/jody-rosen-miley-cyrus-vm-as-minstrel.html>

- Saint-Jacques, B. (2012). Intercultural communication in a globalized world. In Samovar, L. A., Porter, R. E. & McDaniel, E. R. (Eds.), *Intercultural Communication* (pp. 45-54), Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Stewart, D. (2013, June 20). On Miley Cyrus, ratchet culture, and accessorizing with black people. *Jezebel*. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com/on-miley-cyrus-ratchet-culture-and-accessorizing-with-514381016>
- The Debate: Is Miley Cyrus' twerking cultural appropriation. (2013). *Blackfeminists.org*. Retrieved from <http://www.blackfeminists.org/2013/09/17/the-debate-is-miley-cyrus-twerking-cultural-appropriation/>
- Yates, C. (2013, August 26). Miley Cyrus and the issues of slut-shaming and racial condescension. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/miley-cyrus-and-the-issues-of-slut-shaming-and-racial-condescension/2013/08/26/f3aee436-0e68-11e3-bdf6-e4fc677d94a1_story.html