

Damn, I Love the Strippers!

A Black Feminist Analysis of Rihanna's "Pour It Up"

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ABSTRACT—This article argues that Rihanna's music video for "Pour It Up" disrupts the grotesque/hypersexual dichotomy regarding Black women's bodies in the popular/mainstream music industry by constructing exotic dancers as multi-dimensional artists and athletes, not always already objects lacking autonomy and self-determination or silenced bodies reduced to their appearance. Additionally, the article argues that the video subverts the idea that exotic dancing is *only* significant as a consumer commodity, as well as the idea that constructions of Black exotic dancers must always perpetuate discourses that denigrate Black women.

KEYWORDS—objectification, sex work, exotic dance, Black feminism, Rihanna, "Pour It Up"

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ON NEW YEAR'S EVE IN 2010, MY HUSBAND AND I ACCOMPANIED some friends to a dance club in Denver, CO to celebrate. We were having a great time—drinking, dancing, and singing along with old and new hip hop and R&B classics—when a woman approached me and politely asked, “Could you please move a little to the left?” I am sure my face looked puzzled, as I couldn’t hear her clearly, given the extreme noise over which we were trying to communicate. As a result, she clarified, smiling, “I’m going to come down pretty fast, and I just don’t want to hit you.” I followed her eyes, and looked up at the pole next to us—which had to be 20 to 30 feet tall—and quickly obliged. In fact, I was excited to see what she was about to do. And when she did her thing, my eyes widened, and my jaw dropped in complete amazement. She climbed up the pole, using incredible upper body strength, and slid down *upside down*, using only the strength of her inner thighs, at what seemed like 100 mph, stopping *just short* of hitting her head on the floor. The crowd and I—who had been watching her with intense anticipation—erupted with applause. Almost three years later, I found myself responding similarly when I watched Rihanna’s long-awaited video for her single “Pour It Up” from her seventh studio album *Unapologetic* (2012).

To date, “Pour It Up” has garnered over 250 million views on the RihannaVEVO channel (RihannaVEVO, 2013), and continues to inspire vigorous debates about its construction of Black women exotic dancers. Soon after the video’s release on October 11, 2013, Darnell L. Moore, Managing Editor of *The Feminist Wire*, decided to publish “Sound Off: Black Women Writers Respond to Rihanna’s ‘Pour It Up,’” which featured brief responses to the video written by Janet Mock, me, and Sylvia A. Harvey. In it, Mock (Administrator, 2013) writes,

The video for “Pour It Up” bored me . . . What would’ve been groundbreaking to me would’ve been an actual narrative of the lives of women who dance for money, women engaged in stigmatized work, women who are told that they are shameful and their lives should be kept secret. Instead, all “Pour It Up” did was showcase women dancing for money as another woman sits idly, twerking upside down, mind you, on a gold throne while draped in gaudy Chanel product placements.

Similarly, Harvey (Administrator, 2013) claims:

The video serves as a reminder that commodification, hyper-sexualization, and the defiling of black women’s bodies are thriving. When competition

for the spotlight leads to self-degradation there is cause for concern and conversation, particularly when there are women across the globe that have no claims to their own bodies.

In my response, I (Administrator, 2013) point out YouTube viewer comments that also critique the valorization of exotic dancers in “Pour It Up” and the denigration of women that supposedly follows. For instance, Beckie Abingdon writes, “Did we really go through years of fighting for women rights, showing that we aren’t sexual objects, only for people like Rihanna to throw it back into history’s face? This generation is doomed with so called ‘role models’ like her” (RihannaVEVO, 2013). Similarly, Ganjifarian comments, “I don’t see the fascination with being a piece of meat. Is that not what began the women’s rights movement?” (RihannaVEVO, 2013). Other users point out the supposed negative impact “Pour It Up” would have on young women and girls, including Faith Bowman, who writes, “All I can think about is the little girls and weak women who will imitate this. Really sad. Why is she doing this?” (RihannaVEVO, 2013). Subsequently, I argued that these kinds of readings ignore the fact that “Pour It Up” is a music video, not a documentary, and that the video has much to offer in terms of groundbreaking narratives of women engaged in typically stigmatized work, if we are willing to consider the labor the dancers perform in the video as critical works of art and athleticism worth serious attention. Here, then, I build on this argument in suggesting that “Pour It Up” is a vehicle through which we can better understand the ontological and epistemological complexities of Black women exotic dancers, if we reject reliance on oral-centric, crisis-focused, and simplistic liberation/empowerment narratives that erase the unique and profound skills required to perform their labor.

My thinking here is indebted to theorists—especially Black feminists—who have studied objectification, subjectivity, and sexuality (including sex work) in ways that challenge this simplicity. Hence, I want to advocate for a way of understanding “Pour It Up” that recognizes Black women artists’ ability to disrupt dominant narratives that subjugate Black women’s sexualized bodies in popular culture by reading these bodies on their own terms. As J. C. Nash (2008) argues, “Visual lenses are so thoroughly smudged by race, even images that black women have produced are subject to (mis)readings informed by that dominant conception of black women’s sexual deviance” (p. 60). Still, we must recognize the impetus for responses to the video that illustrate very real and understandable fears about Black women’s sex-

ual deviance. As T. Rose (Baker, 2004) argues during a discussion about the “internalization of the Jezebel image” that has become so prevalent in music videos, “It’s very easy for people to associate hypersexuality with Black women . . . because of the memories we have of these images and representations collectively as a society.” At the same time, it is important to heed the caution leveled by M. Miller-Young (2014) when she argues that Black women sex workers have long-confronted prevailing stigmas about their work and fears about Black women’s sexual deviance that are inextricably linked to upholding ideas about respectable Black womanhood. My reading of “Pour It Up” rejects the stigmatization of Black sex workers—particularly Black women—by paying serious attention to the significance of their labor on their terms, which is especially important given the ways Black women exotic dancers have often been denigrated in visual culture, especially in music videos.

On that note, prior to “Pour It Up,” there have been few music videos featuring Black women exotic dancers that focus even remotely on their artistry and athleticism. For example, in Dr. Dre’s “The Next Episode” (1999), as the bridge before the second verse begins, a dancer is filmed holding the weight of her entire body on a dance pole, swinging herself in a circular motion while holding her legs tightly at waist-length in the shape of the letter “s.” In the next frame, as the bridge continues, another dancer is filmed sliding down another pole with her back toward the ground and her legs facing upward. The first dancer appears to be performing what Nicole “The Pole” Williams—a dancer in “Pour It Up”—refers to as “a basic beginner spin,” a move that requires great strength and agility. Williams (Dyer, 2013) explains, “When I do a basic beginner spin, I’m literally working my back, my chest, my biceps, my triceps, my shoulders, and my abdominal muscles. It’s about putting in the time like it is with any other sport.” Yet in this video, the primary focus is the consumption of exotic dance, not the exotic dancers’ talent. Along these lines, throughout most of “The Next Episode,” male consumers—including Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, Tha Dogg Pound, and seemingly hundreds of extras—are surrounded by scantily clad women, drinking, partying, and throwing money at exotic dancers in stereotypical fashion. This is problematic, because as R. Emerson (2002) points out, “The one-dimensional depiction of Black women as objects of male pleasure undermines their legitimacy and agency as artists” (p. 123). Additionally, most of the dancers in the video, the two that I mentioned aside, are not performing at the level of those in “Pour It Up,” not even as skilled twerk dancers, fur-

ther illustrating the primacy of the consumption of exotic dancing rather than the dancers' skills.

This problem has plagued constructions of Black exotic dancers in popular music videos for more than two decades. For instance, 2Pac's strip club-themed video for "How Do U Want It" (featuring K-Ci and JoJo), a single from his fifth studio album *All Eyez on Me* (1996), features a number of pornography actresses—including Nina Hartley, Heather Hunter, and Angel Kelly—but no professional exotic dancers. As a result, the video relies heavily on a number of strip club tropes—women dancing in cages with large live snakes and around dance poles while being touched by men and drenched with whipped cream and liquor, for example—without paying attention to the extraordinary skills required to perform exotic dance. This is also the case in the video for T-Pain's "I'm 'n Luv (Wit a Stripper)" (featuring Mike Jones) from his 2005 debut studio album *Rappa Ternt Sanga*. Although several scenes showcase women dancing in the strip club, they are primarily constructed as "eye candy," as they are not consistently performing with the kind of artistry and athleticism that would challenge popular constructions of exotic dance performance. Further, the video reinforces the idea that exotic dancers are insignificant without the hyper-presence of male consumers. M. Hunter and K. Soto (2009) problematize these "pornographic gender relations" in hip hop because they are often primarily transactional, they often rely on the humiliation of women, and they rarely ever focus on women's pleasure, if at all (p. 171). Hence, these kinds of videos, unlike "Pour It Up," do little to construct Black exotic dancers as more than objectified servants.

This construction is also prevalent in contemporary music videos. For example, 2 Chainz's "I Luv Dem Strippers" (featuring Nicki Minaj), from his debut studio album *Based on a T.R.U. Story* (2012), most certainly exhibits the talent of Black exotic dancers more than "How Do U Want It" or "I'm 'n Luv (Wit a Stripper)" without entirely abandoning these stereotypical elements. At times, the dancers showcase skills that obviously require a great deal of time, energy, and practice to execute. For instance, in one scene, one dancer is positioning herself on a pole with two hands—perfectly straight, belly up, and perpendicular to the dance pole—while another dancer is holding herself up on the same pole, twerking with one of her legs resting on the aforementioned dancer's belly and her other leg resting on the aforementioned dancer's shin. An even more astonishing scene entails both women on the same pole riding each other like bicycles: In one shot, a dancer is holding herself up on the pole with just the inside of her right arm and

both inner thighs, with her buttocks facing up as her legs are held straight together and perpendicular to the pole, moving the other dancer's shoes in a bicycling motion. The second dancer is sitting on the former, holding herself on the pole with one hand with her other hand on her hip as she moves her feet in a bicycling motion. Here, then, the dancers are able to utilize a popular music video as a site of expression and resistance, communicating the value of their labor by demonstrating their talent through their bodies and movements (Emerson, 2002; Hobson and Bartlow, 2008). Still, there are more scenes in "I Luv Dem Strippers" that adhere to stereotypical strip club tropes in that they focus primarily on male consumers, including popular rappers Young Jeezy and T.I. These consumers are shown groping the dancers and throwing money at them, perpetuating the popular/mainstream music industry norm that almost always constructs Black women and their bodies as grotesque and/or hypersexualized, especially when their bodies perform exotic dance.

Conversely, "Pour It Up" disrupts this dichotomy by attending to the ontological complexities of Black women exotic dancers, mainly by constructing them as multi-dimensional artists and athletes, not always already objects lacking autonomy and self-determination or silenced bodies reduced entirely to their appearance. My understanding of objectivity relies, in large part, on the work of M. C. Nussbaum (1995), who argues that objectivity entails at least one of seven processes—instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity (p. 257). R. Langton (2009) further develops Nussbaum's theory by including reduction to body, reduction to appearance, and silencing as processes of objectification (p. 228).

Although it may seem that the dancers in "Pour It Up"—Asha Franklin, Secret Moneii, Candace Cane, and Williams—are objectified, primarily taking this position ignores their work as a way of voicing the significance of their labor. Their ability to twerk and perform extraordinary moves on and around dance poles demonstrates that their skill development requires a lot of time, energy, and practice. As Cane (Dyer, 2013) states,

I don't just go up there and shake my ass, I actually put on a show and do headstands, flips, cartwheels, climbing all the way up 30 feet in the air and hanging from the ceiling of the club. I tend to shy away from the clubs though. I don't have to take my clothes off for you to appreciate my talent.

At most, one could charge instrumentality, given that Rihanna and the executives at her record label and publishing companies most certainly employed the dancers for their economic and sociocultural purposes. However, taking that approach *entirely* denies the dancers and their choreographer subjectivity.¹ In “Pour It Up,” the dancers do speak for themselves in unprecedented ways (at least in the popular music industry), defining their subjectivity not by ignoring discourses about exotic dancing, as Cane’s comments illustrate, but by articulating the significance of their labor through performance.

The focus on performance, especially when contrasted with other constructions of Black exotic dancers in popular music videos, is another way in which “Pour It Up” carefully attends to the ontological complexities of exotic dancers. Just as the first verse of the song begins, Williams is filmed sliding down a dance pole, hanging in mid-air using only her inner thighs and the space between her head, neck, and right shoulder to hold on. Throughout the video, Williams is filmed performing extraordinary acrobatics on the same pole, including the aforementioned “basic beginner spin,” demonstrating noteworthy upper body strength—holding onto the pole with two hands and swinging her body around and posing her legs, held completely still, in various positions. At another point, Williams is filmed sliding down the dance pole upside down without using her hands or any part of her upper body—holding on with the full strength of her inner thighs. Here, I want to note that (mis)readings of the video deny the possibility of Black women exotic dancers expressing their agency in the space of the music video, which ignores exotic dance labor as a way of communicating the significance of that agency. Along these lines, Emerson (2002) notes that Black women have sometimes found the music video a space in which they can exhibit the kind of control over their bodies that is necessary to negotiate “contradictory and often conflicting notions” about their sexuality (p. 128). Regarding “Pour It Up,” the focus on exotic dance performance rather than exotic dance consumption allows it to function as one such subversive space in which exotic dancers legitimize themselves through their labor.

The focus on performance is also amplified in that the video does not take place in a typical strip club setting and, consequently, there is a lack of focus on customers. In problematizing the strip club industry, S. Jeffreys (2008) suggests, “Women are not able to join in this bonding, which is expressly constructed between men through their objectification of naked women” (p. 427). Similarly, Miller-Young (2008) argues that “black women are

constructed through representation as hypersexual, accessible, and devalued [which] contributes to their subjugation” (p. 278). Although 2 Chainz’s “I Luv Dem Strippers” showcases brilliant work performed by Black exotic dancers, that work is constructed primarily as intensifying the significance of the strip club consumer. In other words, the video legitimizes consumers by focusing on the extensive amounts of money they spend in strip clubs. In this way, the shots of dancers’ brilliant performances are few, far between, and quick. Contrarily, men—and exotic dance consumers in general—are entirely absent in “Pour It Up,” so it demands that viewers’ attention be focused on the dancing. One of the most noteworthy scenes along these lines occurs about halfway through the video when Williams is filmed bicycling up high on an extremely tall pole, holding on with the inside of her right forearm and her left hand. In this shot, her muscle definition—particularly in her upper left arm, her left buttocks, and her left thigh—is emphasized, indicating the immense amount of strength required for her to perform. In highlighting the performance and athleticism of the dancers, “Pour It Up” contests the idea of “men-only bonding” that is so prevalent in exotic dance consumer culture, rejecting the construction of exotic dancers as entirely hyper-accessible and only in *service to* consumers.

“Pour It Up” also challenges the idea that constructions of Black exotic dancers always already perpetuate discourses that denigrate Black women, especially regarding hypersexual deviance. This kind of theoretical policing—which is often leveled in response to controlling images² of Black women, especially the “Jezebel” in this case—further silences Black exotic dancers and renders them illegible. This prevents even Black feminist scholars from paying critical attention to the complex ways Black exotic dancers navigate power and resistance. Thus, we have yet to fully acknowledge the complexities of these women’s subjectivity, especially as we theorize their desires to perform exotic dancing. To be fair, this territory is not completely uncharted. As G. D. Pough (2007) notes,

These women see the videos as their entry into the world of stardom. They are aspiring actresses, models, singers, and even rappers themselves. They gladly pose in the magazines and preen in the videos, and the best and brightest of them are paid very well to do so These are not necessarily the poor, victimized women of old. (p. 86)

Still, I want to offer yet another way of thinking about exotic dancers and their work, as we must be willing to reckon with the idea that some women

pursue this style of dance because they *enjoy* the artistry and athleticism, as well as the emphasis on sex/uality. As Williams (Dyer, 2013) notes, “As a pole dance instructor, it’s about helping women to transform their bodies and get out of their shells.” Likewise, Franklin (Dyer, 2013) comments, “It’s funny, as exposed as we were in ‘Pour It Up,’ [that exposure] made me more comfortable in my own skin.” Juxtaposing an analysis of the dancers’ performances in the video with their own analyses of the video and their work further illustrates that while theoretical and critical practices have somewhat expanded beyond the victim-empowered binary in relation to exotic dancing, we do not yet fully understand the range of exotic dancer subjectivities in ways that we could if our frameworks were as advanced as that which informs “Pour It Up.”

To be fair, the lyrics of “Pour It Up” dedicate very little attention to the artistic athleticism of exotic dancers and the positioning of Rihanna throughout the video also detracts from the significance of the dancers as artists and athletes. More specifically, only two lines throughout the entire song reference the performance of exotic dancers: one that references their work on dance poles and another that references the work they do for money. The latter line, however, is more concerned with consumers’ ability to control exotic dancers because of the money they spend. Likewise, most of the lyrics focus mostly on crass consumerism and materialism. Rihanna frequently tells listeners to “pour it up” (drink alcohol) and “throw it up” (spend money) throughout the song while acknowledging her ability to do the same. Additionally, Rihanna is constructed as a consumer in the video, throwing money and pouring money on herself, just as men typically do in popular music videos set in strip clubs. As Mock (Administrator, 2013) noted, Rihanna is often filmed sitting “on a gold throne while draped in gaudy Chanel product placements.” In fact, many scenes feature the exotic dancers at the margins of the screen, while Rihanna is placed at the center, signifying her position as the central figure. One could argue that this makes sense, given that Rihanna is the singer and star of the video. However, I question this logic given the tension between Rihanna and Vincent Haycock, who was relieved of his duties as Director of the video due to conflict over creative control (Sanfiorenzo, 2013). Although neither has spoken in detail about this, I have theorized, given the final cut of the video, that Haycock may have wanted to focus less on the dancers and more on strip club consumer culture, while Rihanna likely wanted to retain the focus on her and the dancers. Further, there are examples of music videos that do not visually feature the

artist at all with creators choosing, instead, to emphasize other aspects of the songs and the stories they tell. In any case, it is important to point out that Rihanna never throws money *at* the dancers, subverting the idea that the dancers are *only* significant as a consumer commodity.

Rihanna's attempts to subvert the denigration of exotic dancers also results in her dancing in the video, often on and around a dance pole. As Oth'than "Otheezy" Burnside, the video's choreographer, points out, "Rihanna is amazing and she's naturally not afraid of her body and her sexuality. It was very easy for me to give her certain moves" (Dyer, 2013). Similarly, Moneii notes, "RiRi was good! She asked for some pointers, so I taught her how to make her booty go up and down separately. She was getting it!" (Dyer, 2013). On the one hand, I do appreciate Rihanna's direction of the video—especially her having myriad conversations with the dancers in order to acknowledge their expertise. On the other hand, her dancing in the video suggests, at least in part, that exotic dancing is something that can be achieved simply through a desire to do so, detracting from the time, energy, and practice required to dance professionally. I encountered the implications of such a theoretical position when one of my undergraduate students met with me to discuss a project she wanted to pursue examining exotic dance. Her research plan entailed visiting Atlanta to audition at an unspecified strip club that apparently conducts open auditions. My first question was, "What kind of talent do you have or plan to acquire that will allow you to be an exotic dancer?" When she was not prepared to answer, I spoke with her at length about the danger in assuming professional dancers do "easy" work that requires little to no professional commitment, and decided against supporting that particular project. "Pour It Up," in many ways, perpetuates this simplistic logic because of Rihanna's positioning as an exotic dancer in the video.

Another limitation of the video is that it perpetuates the idea that only dancers with "ideal" body types have the kind of health, shape, and physicality required to pursue rigorous dancing. As Takiyah Nur Amin (personal communication, October 24, 2014) points out, "We only revere certain bodies as 'suitable' for dance . . . these ideals are also present in the professional dance realm, particularly when we think about Black women." In this way, the dancers in "Pour It Up" adhere to a homogenous standard of beauty and acceptability. Most of the dancers are light-skinned. All the dancers have relatively thin bodies that most audiences would deem "suitable" for dance, especially exotic dance. This did not need to be the case: Roslyn "Roz the

Diva” Mays—personal trainer, gym instructor and award-winning pole-dancer—founded Dangerous Curves, the first annual pole-dancing contest for plus-size women in the U.S. the same year as the album’s release. It stands to reason that Rihanna and her music video production team may not be familiar with the competition, but it is often assumed that women with bodies like those at this competition would not have bodies “sexy” enough for “Pour It Up.”

As an additional caution against positioning “Pour It Up” as radical metanarrative about Black exotic dancers, the working environment on set was not always safe and comfortable for the dancers. As Cane states,

Coming to the set, I didn’t expect to be pole dancing on water. It looked great on camera but is such a hazard. The pole was wet, it was very difficult to maintain our grip. I went to flip upside down and slipped all the way down. (Dyer, 2013)

This treatment of the dancers behind the scenes is indicative of the ways in which exotic dancers and their work are often disregarded and disrespected, even by someone like Rihanna who appears to appreciate the work more than other major “players” in the popular/mainstream music industry.

Still, intellectuals can build from this work as we continue thinking about Black exotic dance and strengthening our investments in Black feminist theories about objectivity, subjectivity, and sex work. Otherwise, when popular and academic discourses theorize exotic dancers as primarily oppressed objects merely “shaking their ass for cash,” their strength, agility, endurance, and artistry are ignored. Subsequently, this ignorance becomes the reductive mechanism often employed to position ourselves as heroes who will recover dancers’ sexuality and/or eradicate their oppression. Instead, we should attempt to understand more clearly the ways in which exotic dancers communicate their own significance on their own terms, including understanding that they do “speak out” and “talk back” with their bodies and movements. “Pour It Up” offers new possibilities for popular and academic discourses about exotic dancers by theorizing their performances as a space where Black pleasure politics can become unchained from debilitating objectification. As Hobson (2002) suggests, “Somehow, the creation of a black feminist aesthetic must challenge dominant culture’s discourse of the black body grotesque and articulate a black liberation discourse on the black body beautiful” (p. 89). As we continue to theorize and politicize desire and pleasure more saliently, we must challenge dominant discourses as we simulta-

neously identify the spaces in which we can begin to build foundations that model and communicate the importance of our work.

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Her work has been published in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West* and the *Journal of Popular Culture*. She is also the author of forthcoming work that examines Rihanna's "Pour It Up," FX's *The Shield*, VH1's *Love & Hip Hop*, Bravo's *Married to Medicine*, constructions of Black women's abortions in media, and the critical alliance work she has conducted in Berlin (Germany) since 2014. On these and many other subjects, Dr. Lewis has been invited to give talks at Kim Bevill's Gender and the Brain Conference, the Educating Children of Color Summit, the Sankofa Lecture Series, the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement, the Gender and Media Spring Convocation at Ohio University, the Conference for Pre-Tenure Women, Vanderbilt University, Kampagne für Opfer Rassistischer Polizeigewalt, Cornell University, Portland State University, and Augustana College, among others. She has also been a contributor to Mark Anthony Neal's *NewBlackMan*, NPR's "Here and Now," KOAA news in Colorado Springs, KRCC radio (the Southeastern Colorado NPR affiliate), Bitch Media, Racialicious, and Act Out.

Notes

1. Here, I rely on T. de Lauretis's (1984) definition of subjectivity when she claims, "Subjectivity is produced not by external ideas, values, or material causes, but by one's personal, subjective engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and affect) to the events of the world" (p. 159).

2. Here, I am relying on P. H. Collins's (2000) definition of "controlling images" when she claims, "The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination" (p. 72).

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