Love’s In Need of Love Today

Inquiry Question: How does Jay-Z’s “Smile” music video use a constructive representation of homosexuality and women of color to show misogyny and homophobia in today's rap music?

Jay-Z’s “Smile” music video starts with part of Stevie Wonder’s “Love’s In Need of Love Today” and manages shows the truth of that statement throughout his video. “Smile” is about his mother, Gloria Carter, who recently came out as homosexual and shows her struggle of keeping her sexuality a secret throughout his childhood. “Smile” takes you through her struggle to hide her love for a woman while still in a heterosexual relationship along with having a child to protect and support. This video is centered mostly around Gloria and never gives too much time or attention to any other characters such as her husband, her son Jay-Z, or her female lover. The focus is on Gloria's emotional hardships and conflicts throughout the video along with her experience as a closeted African American lesbian. Jay-Z’s representation of homosexuality and women of color in his video “Smile” does not conform to misogyny or homophobia commonly found in rap music today and shows how problematically the genre represents those who are different.

Misogyny and homophobia have been present in rap for a long time, and it is especially troublesome for women of color. Misogyny is the dislike or prejudice towards women, and when most people think of rap as a genre, they quickly associate the two together. Along with devaluing women, rap music is also commonly guilty of being aggressively homophobic. In
Mathew Oware’s “Brotherly Love: Homosociality and Black Masculinity in Gangsta Rap Music”, he writes how rappers use homophobia to confirm their own sexuality or manhood and belittles gay individuals to sustain and secure dominance (25). In this case, both misogyny and homophobia are connected to hypermasculinity present in rap, leading to why rappers must tear down women and homosexuals to reassure their own masculinity. Although this is common in rap music, Jay-Z does the opposite and manages to assist the perception of women and homosexuals in his song without being seen as gay himself. A lyrical example of this would be “Cried tears of joy when you fell in love, Don't matter to me if it's a him or her, I just wanna see you smile through all the hate, Marie Antoinette, baby, let 'em eat cake.” Especially in the reference to Marie Antoinette’s “Let them eat cake” which is a saying that shows a lack of compassion or understanding for problems of the less fortunate. Jay-Z’s verse there brings attention to the lack of compassion and understanding of the problems women of color and homosexual community face.

Understanding how common these issues are in rap music helps emphasize the significance of Jay-Z’s representation of his black, lesbian mother as a strong, resilient individual who had persevered through her hardships and cared for her family. This is opposed to a discardable female who (commonly described in rap lyrics) “goes both ways”, making her sexuality applicable to men. Jay-Z goes against the problematic norms of rap music and allows the audience to perceive a lesbian of color positively and creates a sense of empathy for her.

“Smile” brings attention to the objectification of women by subtly including examples of it occasionally by showing Gloria with many desirable personality traits and a simple appearance including her natural hair. Also, when she is on her own or happy, she is shown in a warm lighting that provides a feeling of comfort. His choice of presenting her with strong emotions and
strategic appearance allows her to more easily be viewed as a person rather than an object. She is displayed as a loving, responsible mother by being shown grocery shopping, making food for others, and caring for children. The video often focuses on her feelings, showing when she is conflicted or upset because of the obstacles her sexuality creates for her. One can also recognize when Gloria is made uncomfortable by men on multiple occasions, like when she is kissed at a party or surrounded in the elevator. The video also includes small instances of men objectifying women in a way that does not promote or condone the behavior which can be seen at the beginning of the video where men catcall in the background while Gloria walks casually with groceries.

By giving Gloria this complexity, Jay-Z disqualifies her from being perceived as Adams and Fuller’s racial “Jezebel” or “Sapphire” stereotype. In “The Words Have Changed But the Ideology Remains the Same: Misogynistic Lyrics in Rap Music”, the “Jezebel” is described as the black whore who’s sexually aggressive with loose morals and the “Sapphire” as a black female who is not sexualized but seen as bitchy and manipulative (Adams and Fuller, 945). Both women are looked at negatively and as discardable by men because they are the bitch or the whore. Removing Gloria from those stereotypes allows her to be valued and liked more in the video. Gloria's lack of interest in men also inhibits her from being something solely for men. John Berger’s “From Ways of Seeing” discusses how for decades women have been presented as objects for men's consumption. He writes how men have a sense of power over women and states that men act and women appear (Berger, 47). But in this video, Gloria's sexuality makes it difficult for her to be objectified in that way. She manages to have a purpose unrelated to male consumption. While homosexuality distances her from some objectification it brings different kinds of hardships into her life.
The video often shows Gloria struggling with hiding her attraction and connection to a woman she spends time with instead of her husband. This is also apparent in scenes when she is with her husband. The lighting is always dark with lots of shadows. This creates an uncomfortable feeling, showing the audience how Gloria is conflicted with being around him while she is keeping her sexuality and lover from him. The setting is often the same when she is crying or upset. One often sees her pain or discontent with hiding her relationship from her husband and society out of fear. Gloria's female lover also struggles with that same pain and is seen in the video, making what looks like a drug deal. Her buying drugs along with the lyrics “Had to hide in the closet, so she medicate, Society shame and the pain was too much to take” brings awareness to the issue of drug abuse within the gay community caused by pain and lack of acceptance and pushes for improvement. Along with the awareness, Gloria’s scene at her support group at the end of the video is effective at creating a feeling of acceptance and happiness for her as she reads her poem and ends it “Love who you love, because life isn't guaranteed, Smile”. Displaying these situations with well-liked characters affects the gay community by making their hardships more relatable, leading to a sense of empathy from the viewer and helping work towards more acceptance for homosexuals.

Prejudice homosexuals and women of color face is a problem in society today and Jay-Z’s “Smile” is one of few rap songs that do not conform to the misogyny and homophobia. David Berreby’s “Rituals and Traditions: It Takes a Tribe” is about how people group up into tribes and this separation creates a threat of violence or harm for those in either group. This problem is also a result of one group believing it is superior to another, also described as “us” vs “them” (5). Berreby’s tribalism and grouping is exactly the issue presented in misogyny and homophobia. The “us” vs “them” he discusses, in this case, is men vs women, black vs white, as
well as gay vs straight. With Gloria though, she is black, homosexual, and female. This makes her the ultimate other who manages to have multiple intersecting identities that separate her from others. Being so different puts her more at risk than those who just have one separating identity.

The risk of violence that grouping brings applies to misogyny and homophobia as well and Jay-Z’s video brings awareness of that issue. In one scene, Gloria's female lover is seen crying with bruises on her face. One can infer that this is the result of men vs women or straight vs gay conflicts and Gloria’s lover was running from the man whom she was in a relationship with. Misogyny and homophobia in rap music and society can lead to substantial harm to black women or homosexuals. Shanara Reid-Brinkley’s “The Essence of Res(Ex)Pectability: Black Women's Negotiation of Black Femininity in Rap Music and Music Video” discusses how lyrics and commonly believed prejudices hurt women by causing them to see themselves negatively and act in self-destructive ways (952). This self-destruction also qualifies as one of the problems caused by Berreby’s idea of tribalism. Some people will also use these ideas to justify abuse and sexual assault or become desensitized to said violence. The same issues are present for those in the gay community. Jay-Z’s video includes situations like these when Gloria’s lover is abused and uses drugs, again showing the results of misogyny and homophobia.

Although Jay-Z’s “Smile” video includes some examples of misogyny, he still manages to use these examples and his mother's story to bring awareness to the problems in today's rap lyrics and attitude towards people who are different. Jay-Z’s representation of homosexuality paired with women of color in his video shines a light on the harmful issues and threats of misogyny and homophobia commonly present in today's rap music. The way he portrayed characters and the awareness this song brings helps guide the viewer to seeing these individuals as complex and valued people instead of objects or problems in society without threatening his
own masculinity. In the song, he raps “God sent me to break the chain.” Jay-Z’s ability to make a popular video that goes against rap norms may not seem too unusual at first, but once you understand the significance of doing this, it really works towards inclusion and acceptance of women, race, and sexuality to help put prejudice in the past.
Works Cited

https://youtu.be/SSumXG5_rs8


