

HOW TO LOVE THE CULTURE

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When the Culture Don't Love You

BY ZEPHYR DOLES

To start, a confession: I am a black feminist, and I love ratchet shit. Here are some examples: When 2 Chainz called her big booty 'cuz she got a big booty, I was and am still, here for it. I will devotedly watch any and every incarnation of VH1's terrible/amazing *Love & Hip Hop* franchise. I will then subsequently spend hours on Twitter and Instagram laughing my ass off at the memes created in response to the various antics of hip hop's has-beens and never-weres. I regularly express "upset" in my daily life by how much of "a way" something makes me feel.

And I'll tell you why I love ratchet shit, because that's important too: the sheer audacity of its silliness. The brilliantly asinine catchphrases that inevitably enter our vernacular — a clear result of lackluster songwriting skills, but exemplary of that biting wit that black teenagers

seemingly have an endless capacity for. As a music lover, it gives me fun things to drunkenly yell while pretending I know how to twerk at the club. As a DJ, ratchet music gives me ways to unite a dance floor no matter how cute anyone in the room may be feeling. As a pop culture enthusiast and scholar, it's a fascinating sight to explore race, class and gender in pop culture *at the same damn time*. But as a woman? To be honest, it really sucks.

This summer alone, Ty\$ warned us about the perils of having two of your bitches in the club when they don't know about each other, Bobby Shmurda told all the non-hoes to get up out his trap house, and Chris Brown made sure everyone understood how quickly those same hoes will jump ship "when a rich nigga wants you." Believe me when I tell you that as an educated and self-respecting black woman who also loves to

shake her ass, I understand the desire to say, "Yes, I enjoy these things when the time is right, but I'm smart enough to separate myself from it." Most times, I feel that way myself. If I know I'm neither a hoe nor a bitch and neither are any of the women I know, then who exactly are these men talking about? We don't like to ask that question, probably because deep down we know the answer — in their minds, they're talking about all of us. No matter how intellectual we try to be about it, or how "above it all" we think we are, can we honestly say that these regular attacks on our humanity don't hurt on some level?

In my personal and academic life, I've done a fair share of work exploring some of the uglier parts of black culture — not to excuse them, but to offer context. It's not that black people have some kind of cultural patent on violence and misogyny, but that America in general definitely does, and we've become products of that type of Americanism. But when a video starts spreading around the internet of an NFL player knocking his then-fiancée out cold in a hotel elevator, and people start saying things like, "she asked for it by starting with him," or defending the NFL for not initially firing this man when the "incident" first occurred, I can't help but ask, what brought us here? How did we get to this point in our culture, where it is so incredibly easy to watch this horrific event digitally repeating itself ad infinitum, that it becomes not really that shocking anymore?

I'm not trying to link causality here, or to blame hip hop for Ray Rice's violent temper, or to even say that listening to the latest ratchet anthem equates to supporting domestic abuse. I do feel, however, that it is worth noting what it might say about the current state of popular culture. The common language it provides us, made ever-more ubiquitous and shareable—thanks to social media and surveillance culture — is one so seethingly hateful and mistrustful of black women. Maybe we're just so accustomed to being publicly dumped on (physically and otherwise), that it just doesn't feel that unfamiliar anymore?

Pop culture and its various forms are fun mostly because they give us social rituals to bond over and things to talk about with our peers. When it comes to women and popular rap music's continued reference to "running trains," discarding bitches and whether or not "these hoes are in fact loyal," is simply not the same as actual inclusion.

Yes, my feelings on the subject of ratchet culture and its devaluation of black women and our bodies are messy, complicated and at times contradictory, but I am a firm believer in the idea that multiple truths can be held at the

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same time and not diminish each other, even when the ideas seem at odds. I'm certainly not arguing to get rid of ratchet culture (and you will definitely not find me standing still at a party if anything Dipset-related comes on), but maybe it's time to stop thinking we need to blindly accept all the awful things it offers just to go out and have fun.

To quote *Sex and the City's* Samantha Jones, my interest in consuming and promoting ratchet culture is excellently summarized when she tells her philandering boyfriend, "I love you, but I love me more." As black women, it's imperative we start loving ourselves enough to demand accountability from our entertainers for their objectification of women, and to insist they produce content that treats black women and our bodies as something other than alternating repositories for sex and violence (better yet, produce it ourselves!). Doing so does not mean we love black men, black culture, or even simply having any less fun — it just means we love ourselves more. ■