

Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew

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In June 1990, the members of the rap group 2 Live Crew were arrested and charged under a Florida obscenity statute for their performance in an adults-only club in Hollywood, Florida. The arrests came just two days after a federal court judge had ruled that the sexually explicit lyrics in 2 Live Crew's album, *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*, were obscene. Although the members of 2 Live Crew were eventually acquitted of charges stemming from the live performance, the Federal court determination that *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* is obscene still stands. This obscenity judgment, along with the arrests and the subsequent trial, prompted an intense public controversy about rap music, a controversy that merged with a broader debate about the representation of sex and violence in popular music, about cultural diversity, and about the meaning of freedom of expression.



Two positions dominated the debate about 2 Live Crew. Writing in *Newsweek*, political columnist George Will staked out a case against the Crew, arguing that *Nasty* was misogynistic filth and characterizing their lyrics as a profoundly repugnant "combination of extreme infantilism and menace" that objectified Black women and represented them as legitimate targets for sexual violence.

The most prominent defense of 2 Live Crew was advanced by Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., an expert on African-American literature. In a *New York Times* Op-Ed piece, and in testimony at the criminal trial, Gates portrayed 2 Live Crew as brilliant artists who were inventively elaborating distinctively African-American forms of cultural expression. Furthermore, Gates argued, the characteristic exaggeration featured in their lyrics served a political end: to explode popular racist stereotypes about Black sexuality precisely by presenting those stereotypes in a comically extreme form. Where Will saw a misogynistic assault on Black women by social degenerates, Gates found a form of 'sexual carnivalesque' freighted with the promise to free us from the pathologies of racism.



As a Black feminist, I felt the pull of each of these poles, but not the compelling attractions of either. My immediate response to the criminal charges against 2 Live Crew was ambivalence: I wanted to stand together with the brothers against a racist attack, but I wanted to stand against a frightening explosion of violent imagery directed at women like me. My sharp internal division—my dissatisfaction with the idea that the "real issue" is race or that the "real issue" is gender—is characteristic of my experience as a Black woman living at the intersection of racial and sexual subordination. To that experience Black feminism offers an intellectual and political response: aiming to bring together the different aspects of an otherwise divided sensibility, it argues that Black women are commonly marginalized by a politics of race alone or gender alone, and that a political response to either form of subordination must be a political response to both. When the controversy over 2 Live Crew is approached in light of such Black feminist sensibilities, an alternative to the dominant poles of the public debate emerges.

At the legal "bottom line" I agree with the supporters of 2 Live Crew that the obscenity prosecution was wrongheaded. But the reasons for my conclusion are not the same as the reasons generally offered in support of 2 Live Crew. I will come to those reasons shortly, but first I should emphasize that after listening to 2 Live Crew's lyrics, along with those of other rap artists, my defense of 2 Live Crew, (qualified though it is) did not come easy.

The first time I listened to 2 Live Crew, I was stunned. The issue had been distorted by descriptions of "As Nasty As They Wanna Be" as simply "sexually explicit." "Nasty" is much more: it is virulently misogynist, sometimes violently so. Black women are cunts, "ho's," and all-purpose bitches: raggedy bitches, sorry-ass bitches, lowdown slimy-ass bitches. Good sex is often portrayed as painful and humiliating for women. Take, for example, "The Buck."

That's the only way to give her more than she wants,
Like a doggie-style, you get all that cunt.
Cause all men try real hard to do it,
To have her walking funny so we try to abuse it.
Bitches think a pussy can do it all,
So we try real hard just to bust the wall.
And:
I'll break you down and dick you long.
Bust your pussy and break your backbone.
Elsewhere:
I'm gonna slay you, rough and painful,

You innocent bitch! Don't be shameful!

And for added measure:

That dick will make a bitch act cute,

Suck my dick until you make it puke

...

Lick my ass up and down,

Lick it till your tongue turns doodoo brown.

This is no mere braggadocio. Those of us who are concerned about the high rates of gender violence in our communities must be troubled by the possible connections between these images and tolerance for violence against women. Children and teenagers are listening to this music, and I am concerned that the range of acceptable behavior is being broadened by the constant propagation of anti-women imagery. I'm concerned, too, about young Black women who, like young men, are learning that their value lies between their legs. Unlike men, however, their sexual value is a depletable commodity; by expending it, girls become whores and boys become men.

Nasty is misogynist, and a Black feminist response to the case against 2 Live Crew must start from a full acknowledgment of that misogyny. But such a response must also consider whether an exclusive focus on issues of gender risks overlooking aspects of the prosecution of 2 Live Crew that raise serious questions of racism. And here is where the roots of my opposition to the obscenity prosecution lie.



An initial problem concerning the prosecution was its apparent selectivity. A comparison between 2 Live Crew and other mass-marketed sexual representations suggests that race played some role in distinguishing 2 Live Crew as the first group ever to be prosecuted for obscenity in connection with a musical recording, and one of only a handful of recording artists to be prosecuted for a live performance. Recent controversies about sexism, racism, and violence in popular culture point to a vast range of expression that might well provide targets for censorship, but that have not been targeted. Madonna has acted out masturbation, portrayed the seduction of a priest, and depicted group sex on stage, yet she has never been prosecuted for obscenity. While 2 Live Crew was performing in an adults-only club in Hollywood, Florida, Andrew Dice Clay was performing nationwide on HBO. Well-known for his racist "humor," Clay is also comparable to 2 Live Crew in sexual explicitness and misogyny. In his show, for example, Clay offers: "Eenie, meenie, minee, mo, suck my [expletive] and swallow slow," or "Lose the bra bitch." Moreover, graphic sexual images--many of them violent--were widely available in Broward County where the performance and trial took place. According to the trial testimony of Vice Detective McCloud, "nude dance shows and adult bookstores are scattered throughout the

county where 2 Live Crew performed." But again, no obscenity charges were leveled against the performers or producers of these representations.

In response to this charge of selectivity, it might be argued that the prosecution of 2 Live Crew demonstrates that its lyrics were uniquely obscene. In a sense, this argument runs, the proof is in the condemnation--if their music was not uniquely obscene, it would not have been deemed so by the Court. However, the elements of 2 Live Crew's representation that contributed to their selective arrest continued to play out as the court applied the obscenity standard to the recording.

To clarify this argument, we need to consider the technical use of "obscenity" as a legal term of art. For the purposes of legal argument, the Supreme Court in the 1973 case of *Miller v. California* held that a work is obscene if and only if it meets each of three conditions: (1) "the average person, applying community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest"; (2) "the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law"; and (3) "the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value." The Court held that it is consistent with First Amendment guarantees of freedom of expression for states to subject work that meets all three parts of the Miller test to very restrictive regulations.

Focusing first on the "prurient interest" prong of the Miller test, we might wonder how 2 Live Crew could have been seen as uniquely obscene by the lights of the "community standards" of Broward County. After all, as Detective McCloud put it, "patrons [of clubs in Broward] can see women dancing with at least their breasts exposed" and bookstore patrons can "view and purchase films and magazines that depict vaginal, oral and anal sex, homosexual sex and group sex." In arriving at its finding of obscenity, the court placed little weight on the available range of films, magazines, and live shows as evidence of the community's sensibilities. Instead, the court apparently accepted the Sheriff's testimony that the decision to single out Nasty was based on the number of complaints against 2 Live Crew, "communicated by telephone calls, anonymous messages, or letters to the police."

Evidence of this popular outcry was never substantiated. But even if it were, the case for selectivity would remain. The history of social repression of Black male sexuality is long, often-violent, and all-too-familiar. Negative reactions against the sexual conduct of Black males have traditionally had racist overtones, especially where that conduct threatens to "cross over" into the mainstream community. So even if the decision to prosecute did reflect a widespread community perception of the purely prurient character of 2 Live Crew's music, that perception itself might reflect an established pattern of vigilante attitudes directed toward the sexual expression of Black males. In short, the appeal to community standards does not undercut a concern about racism; rather, it underscores that concern.

A second troubling dimension of the case against 2 Live Crew was the court's apparent disregard for the culturally rooted aspects of 2 Live Crew's music. Such disregard was essential to a finding of obscenity, given the third prong of the Miller test requiring that obscene material lack any literary, artistic, or political value. 2 Live Crew argued that this test was not met since the recording exemplified such African-American cultural modes as "playing the dozens," "call and response," and "signifying." As a storehouse of such cultural modes, it could not be said that Nasty was completely devoid of literary or artistic value. Yet the court denied the group's clause of cultural specificity by re-characterizing those modes claimed to be African-American in more generic terms. For example, the court reasoned that "playing the dozens" is "commonly seen in adolescents, especially boys, of all ages." "Boasting," the court observed, appears to be "part of the universal human condition." And the court noted that the cultural origins of one song featuring "call and response"--a song about oral sex in which competing groups chanted "less filling" and "tastes great"--were to be found in a Miller beer commercial, and thus not derived from any African-American cultural tradition. The possibility that the Miller beer commercial may have itself evolved from an African-American cultural tradition was lost on the court.

In disregarding testimony about cultural specificity, the court denied the artistic value in the form and style of Nasty and, by implication, rap music more generally. This disturbing dismissal of the cultural attributes of rap, and this effort to universalize African-American modes of expression, flattens cultural differences. The court's analysis here manifests in legal terms a frequently encountered strategy of cultural appropriation. African-American contributions that have been accepted by the mainstream culture are eventually absorbed as simply "American" or found to be "universal." Other modes associated with African-American culture that resist absorption remain distinctive and are either ignored, or dismissed as "deviant."

An additional concern has as much to do with the obscenity doctrine itself as with the court's application of it to 2 Live Crew. The case illustrates the ways that obscenity doctrine invites racially selective enforcement while at the same time pressing into focus the wrong questions about sexual expression.

As I mentioned earlier, obscenity requires a determination that the material, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest. Although the prurient interest requirement eludes precise definition it seems clear that prurient material must appeal in some immediate way to sexual desire. While it is difficult to say definitively what constitutes such an appeal, one might surmise that the twenty-five cent peep shows that are standard fare in Broward County rank considerably higher on this scale than the sexual tall tales of 2 Live Crew. But the obscenity doctrine is, as justice Stevens said, "intolerably vague," and the result is that "grossly disparate treatment of similar offenders is a characteristic of the criminal enforcement of obscenity law." More precisely, as the case of 2 Live Crew suggests, the vagueness of the doctrine operating

in a world of racial subordination represents an invitation to racially selective enforcement.

While 2 Live Crew should be one of the lesser candidates in the prurient interests sweepstakes mandated by the obscenity doctrine, it is also a lesser contender by another measure that lies entirely outside of obscenity: violence. Compared to such groups as N.W.A., Too Short, Ice Cube, and the Geto Boys, 2 Live Crew's misogynistic hyperbole sounds minor league. Sometimes called "gangsta' rap," the lyrics offered by these other groups celebrate violent assault, rape, rape-murder, and mutilation. Nevertheless, had these other groups been targeted rather than the comparatively less offensive 2 Live Crew, they may have been more successful in defeating the prosecution. The graphic violence in their representations militates against a finding of obscenity by suggesting an appeal not to prurient interests but instead to the fantasy of the social outlaw. Against an historical backdrop that prominently features the image of the Black male as social outlaw, gangsta' rap might be read as a subversive form of opposition that aims to challenge social convention precisely by becoming the very social outlaw that society has proscribed. For this reason, their lyrics might even be read as political, and if they are political they are not obscene. So long, then, as prurience remains an obsession of First Amendment argument, and violent imagery is seen as distinct from sexuality, rap artists may actually be able to strengthen their legal shield by heightening the level of violence in their lyrics.

I do not mean to suggest here that the distinction between sex and violence ought to be maintained in obscenity, nor, more specifically, that the violent rappers ought to be protected. To the contrary, these groups trouble me much more than 2 Live Crew does. My point instead is to emphasize that the obscenity doctrine itself does nothing to protect the interests of those who are most directly implicated in such rap--Black women. Because the doctrine is vague, it opens the door to selecting offenders on the basis of race. Because it separates out sexuality and violence, it shields the most violently misogynistic rappers from prosecution. For Black women who are hurt by both racism and misogyny, it does no good at all.

Although Black women's interests were quite obviously irrelevant in this obscenity judgment, their bodies figured prominently in the public case supporting the targeting of 2 Live Crew. This brings me to my final concern: George Will's Newsweek essay provides a striking example of how Black women were appropriated and deployed in the broader attack against 2 Live Crew. Commenting on "America's Slide into the Sewers," Will tells us that "America today is capable of terrific intolerance about smoking, or toxic waste that threatens trout. But only a deeply confused society is more concerned about protecting lungs than minds, trout than black women. We legislate against smoking in restaurants; singing "Me So Horny" is a constitutional right. Secondary smoke is carcinogenic; celebration of torn vaginas is "mere words."

Notwithstanding these expressions of concern about Black women, Will's real worry is suggested by his repeated references to the Central Park jogger. He writes that "Her face was so disfigured a friend took fifteen minutes to identify her. 'I recognized her ring'. Do you recognize the relevance of 2 Live Crew?' (Emphasis added.) While the connection between the threat of 2 Live Crew and the specter of the Black male rapist was suggested subtly in the public debate, it is manifest throughout Will's discussion and in fact bids fair to be its central theme. "Fact: Some members of a particular age and societal cohort--the one making 2 Live Crew rich--stomped and raped the jogger to the razor edge of death, for the fun of it." Will directly indicts 2 Live Crew in the Central Park jogger rape through a fictional dialogue between himself and the defendants. Responding to one defendant's alleged comment that the rape was fun, Will asks: "Where can you get the idea that sexual violence against women is fun? From a music store, through Walkman earphones, from boom boxes blaring forth the rap lyrics of 2 Live Crew." Since the rapists were young Black males and Nasty presents Black men celebrating sexual violence, surely 2 Live Crew was responsible. Apparently, the vast American industry that markets every conceivable form of misogynistic representation is irrelevant to understanding this particular incident of sexual violence.

Will invokes Black women twice--as victims of this music. But if he were really concerned with the threat to Black women, why does the Central Park jogger figure so prominently in his argument? Why not the Black woman in Brooklyn who was gang-raped and then thrown down an airshaft? For that matter, what about the twenty-five other women--mostly women of color--who were raped in New York City during the same week the Central Park jogger was raped? In Will's display of concern, Black women appear to function as a stand-in for white women. The focus on sexual violence played out on Black women's bodies seems to reflect concerns about the threat of Black male violence against the security of the white community. In this, Will's use of the Black female body to press the case against 2 Live Crew recalls the strategy of the prosecutor in Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*. Bigger Thomas, the Black male protagonist, is on trial for killing Mary Dalton, a white woman. Because Bigger burned her body, however, it cannot be established whether Mary was raped. So the prosecutor brings in the body of Bessie, a Black woman raped by Bigger and left to die, in order to establish that Bigger had raped Mary.

These considerations about selectivity, about the denial of cultural specificity, and about the manipulation of Black women's bodies convince me that race played a significant if not determinative role in the shaping of the case against 2 Live Crew. While using anti-sexist rhetoric to suggest a concern for women, the attack simultaneously endorsed traditional readings of Black male sexuality. The fact that most perpetrators and victims are of the same race is overshadowed by the mythical image of the Black male as the agent of sexual violence and the white community as his victim. The subtext of the 2 Live Crew prosecution thus becomes a re-reading of the sexualized racial politics of the past.

IV

While concerns about racism fuel my opposition to the obscenity prosecution, I am also troubled by the uncritical support for, and indeed celebration of, 2 Live Crew by other opponents of that prosecution. If the rhetoric of anti-sexism provided an occasion for racism, so, too, the rhetoric of anti-racism provided an occasion for defending the misogyny of Black male rappers.

The defense of 2 Live Crew took two forms, one political and one cultural, both of which were advanced most prominently by Henry Louis Gates. The political argument was that 2 Live Crew represents an attack on Black sexual stereotypes. The strategy of the attack is, in Gates's words, to "exaggerate [the] stereotypes" and thereby "to show how ridiculous the portrayals are." Thus, Gates concludes, 2 Live Crew and other rap groups are simply pushing white society's buttons to ridicule its dominant sexual images.

I agree with Gates that the reactions by Will and others to 2 Live Crew confirm that the stereotypes still exist and still evoke basic fears. But even if I were to agree that 2 Live Crew intended to explode these mythic fears, I still would argue that their strategy was wholly misguided. These fears are too active, and African-Americans are too closely associated with them, not to be burned when the myths are exploded. More fundamentally, however, I am deeply skeptical about the claim that the Crew was engaged--either in intent or effect--in pursuing a postmodern guerilla war against racist stereotypes.

Gates argues that when one listens to 2 Live Crew the ridiculous stories and the hyperbole make the listener "bust out laughing." Apparently the fact that Gates and many other people react with laughter confirms and satisfies the Crew's objective of ridiculing the stereotypes. But the fact that the Crew are often successful in prompting laughter neither substantiates Gates's reading nor forecloses serious critique of its subordinating dimensions.

In disagreeing with Gates, I do not mean to suggest that 2 Live Crew's lyrics are to be taken literally. But rather than exploding stereotypes as Gates suggests, I believe that they were simply using readily available sexual images in trying to be funny. Trading in racial stereotypes and sexual hyperbole are well-rehearsed strategies for getting some laughs. 2 Live Crew departs from this tradition only in its attempt to up the ante through more outrageous boasts and more explicit manifestations of misogyny. Neither the intent to be funny, nor Gates's loftier explanations, negate the subordinating qualities of such humor. Examining parallel arguments in the context of racist humor suggests why neither claim functions as a persuasive defense for 2 Live Crew.

Gates's use of laughter as a defensive maneuver in the attack on 2 Live Crew recalls similar strategies in defense of racist humor. Racist humor has sometimes been defended as an effort to poke fun at, or to ridicule racism. More simply, racist humor has often been excused as just joking; even racially motivated assaults are often defended as simple pranks. Thus, the racism and sexism of Andrew Dice Clay could be defended in either mode as an attempt to explode the stereotypes of white racists, or simply as humor not meant to be taken seriously. Implicit in these defenses is the assumption that racist representations are injurious only if they are devoid of any other objective or are meant to be taken literally.

Although these arguments are familiar within the Black community, I think it is unlikely that they would be viewed as a persuasive defense of Andrew Dice Clay. African-Americans have frequently protested such humor, suggesting a general recognition within the Black community that "mere humor" is not inconsistent with subordination. The question of what people find humorous is of course a complicated one, sometimes involving aggression, in-group boundary policing, projection, and other issues. The claim that a representation is meant "simply as a joke" may be true, but it functions as humor within a specific social context and frequently reinforces patterns of social power. Moreover, even though racial humor may sometimes be intended to ridicule racism, the close relationship between the stereotypes and the prevailing images of marginalized people complicates this strategy. Clearly, racial humor does not always distance the audience from the racist subject, nor does it indict the wider society in which the jokes have meaning. The endearment of Archie Bunker suggests at least this much. Thus, in the context of racist humor, neither the fact that people actually laughed at racist humor nor the usual disclaimer of intent has functioned to preclude incisive and often quite angry criticism of such humor within the African-American community.

Although a similar set of arguments could be offered in the context of sexist humor, images marketed by 2 Live Crew were not condemned but, as Gates illustrates, defended, often with great commitment and skill. Clearly, the fact that the Crew and the women it objectifies are Black shaped this response. Had 2 Live Crew been white in blackface, for example, all of the readings would have been different. Although the question of whether one can defend the broader license given to Black comedians to market stereotypical images is an interesting one, it is not the issue here. 2 Live Crew cannot claim an in-group privilege to perpetuate misogynistic humor against Black women. They are not Black women, and more importantly, they enjoy a power relationship over them. Sexual humor in which women are objectified as packages of body parts to serve whatever male-bonding/male competition needs men have subordinates women in much the same way that racist humor subordinates African-Americans. That these are "just jokes" and not meant to be taken literally does little to blunt their demeaning quality--nor for that matter, does the fact that the jokes are told within a tradition of intra-group humor.

Gates advances a second, cultural defense of 2 Live Crew: the idea that Nasty is in line with distinctively African-American traditions of culture and entertainment. It is true that the "dozens" and other forms of verbal boasting have been practiced within the Black community for some time. It is true as well that raunchy jokes, insinuations, and boasting of sexual prowess were not meant to be taken literally. Nor were they meant to disrupt conventional myths about Black sexuality. They were meant simply to be laughed at, and perhaps to gain respect for the speaker's word wizardry.

Ultimately, however, little turns on whether the "word play" performed by 2 Live Crew is a postmodern challenge to racist sexual mythology or simply an internal group practice that has crossed over into mainstream America. Both versions of the defense are problematic because they each call on Black women to accept misogyny and its attendant disrespect in service of some broader group objective. While one version argues that accepting misogyny is necessary to anti-racist politics, the other argues that it is necessary to maintaining the cultural integrity of the community. But neither presents a sufficient reason for Black women to tolerate such misogyny. The message that these arguments embrace--that patriarchy can be made to serve anti-racist ends is a familiar one with proponents ranging from Eldridge Cleaver in the sixties to Sharazad Ali in the nineties. In Gates's variant, the position of Black women is determined by the need to wield gargantuan penises in a struggle to ridicule racist images of Black male sexuality. Even though Black women may not be the intended targets, they are necessarily attached to these gargantuan penises and are thus made to absorb the impact. The common message of all such strategies is that Black women are expected to be vehicles for notions of "liberation" that function to preserve their own subordination.

To be sure, Gates's claims about the cultural aspects of 2 Live Crew's lyrics do address the legal issue about the applicability of the obscenity standard. As I indicated earlier, their music does have artistic value: I believe the Court decided this issue incorrectly and Will was all-too-glib in his dismissal of it. But these criticisms do not settle the issue within the community. "Dozens" and other word plays have long been a Black oral tradition, but acknowledging this fact does not eliminate the need to interrogate either the sexism within that tradition or the objectives to which that tradition has been pressed. To say that playing the dozens, for example, is rooted in a Black cultural tradition or that themes represented by mythic folk heroes such as Stackalee are "Black" does not settle the question of whether such practices are oppressive to women and others within the community. The same point can be made about the relentless homophobia expressed in the work of Eddie Murphy and many other comedians and rappers. Whether or not the Black community has a pronounced tradition of homophobia is beside the point; the question instead is how these subordinating aspects of tradition play out in the lives of people in the community, people who otherwise share a common history, culture, and political agenda. While it may be true that the Black community is more familiar with the cultural forms that have evolved into rap, that familiarity should not end the discussion of whether the

misogyny within rap is acceptable. Moreover, we need to consider the possible relationships between sexism within our cultural practices and the problem of violence against women.

Violence against women of color is not presented as a critical issue in either the anti-racist or anti-violence discourses. The "different culture" defense may contribute to the disregard for women of color victimized by rape and violence, reinforcing the tendency within the broader community not to take intra-racial violence seriously. Numerous studies have suggested that Black victims of crime can count on less protection from the criminal justice system than whites. This is true for rape victims as well--their rapists are less likely to be convicted and on average serve less time when they are convicted. Could it be that perpetuating the belief that "Blacks are different" with respect to sexuality and violence contributes to the familiar disregard of Black female rape victims like Bessie in *Native Son* the woman thrown down an airshaft in Brooklyn?

Although there are times when Black feminists should fight for the integrity of the culture, this does not mean that criticism must end when a practice or form of expression is traced to a particular aspect of culture. We must determine whether the practices and forms of expression are consistent with our fundamental interests. The question of obscenity may be settled by finding roots in the culture, but obscenity is not our central issue. Performances and representations that do riot appeal principally to "prurient interests," or that may reflect expressive patterns that are culturally specific, may still encourage self-hatred, disrespect, subordination, and other manifestations of intra-group pathology. These problems require group dialogue. While African-Americans have no plenary authority to grapple with these issues, we do need to find ways of using group formation mechanisms and other social spaces to reflect upon and reformulate our cultural and political practices.

I said earlier that the political goals of Black feminism are to construct and empower a political sensibility that opposes misogyny and racism simultaneously. Converging this double vision into an analysis of the 2 Live Crew controversy, it becomes clear that despite the superficial defense of the prosecution as being concerned with the interests of women, nothing about the anti-2 Live Crew movement is about Black women's lives. The political process involved in condemning the representations that subordinate Black women does not seek to empower Black women; indeed, the racism of that movement is injurious to us.

But the implication of this conclusion is not that Black feminists should stand in solidarity with the supporters of 2 Live Crew. The spirited defense of 2 Live Crew was no more about defending the Black community than the prosecution was about defending women. After all, Black women--whose very assault is the object of the representation--are part of that community. Black women can hardly regard the right to be represented as bitches and whores as essential to their interests. Instead the

defense of 2 Live Crew primarily functions to protect the cultural and political prerogative of male rappers to be as misogynistic and offensive as they want to be.

The debate over 2 Live Crew illustrates how race and gender politics continue to marginalize Black women, rendering us virtually voiceless. Black feminism endeavors to respond to this silencing by constructing a political identity for Black women that will facilitate a simultaneous struggle against racism and patriarchy. Fitted with a Black feminist sensibility, one uncovers other issues in which the unique situation of Black women renders a different formulation of the problem than the version that dominates in current debate. Ready examples include rape, domestic violence, and welfare dependency. A Black feminist sensibility might also provide a more direct link between the women's movement and traditional civil rights movements, helping them both to shed conceptual blinders that limit the efficacy of each.

The development of a Black feminist sensibility is no guarantee that Black women's interests will be taken seriously. In order for that sensibility to develop into empowerment, Black women will have to make it clear that patriarchy is a critical issue that negatively impacts the lives not only of African-American women, but men as well. Within the African-American political community, this recognition might reshape traditional practices so that evidence of racism would not constitute justification for uncritical rallying around misogynistic politics and patriarchal values. Although collective opposition to racist practice has been and continues to be crucially important in protecting Black interests, an empowered Black feminist sensibility would require that the terms of unity no longer reflect priorities premised upon the continued subordination of Black women.

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