Karen Finley’s We Keep Our Victims Ready

Reviewed by Anna Leo

Given all the current hoopla surrounding Karen Finley, her Columbus audience expected a belligerent and offensive performance artist from downtown New York City. She presented herself quite differently. In her performance of We Keep Our Victims Ready at the Wexner Center on Friday, November 17, 1990 she exuded a kind of warmth and hominess in spite of the intense subject matter of her work. The stage looked almost like the bedroom of a cozy cabin. The set consisted of a vintage rocker and dresser (a pitcher of water and bowl on it) to one side, a table set with various food stuffs and a high stool near center stage, and a bed and chair to the other side. Full purple shiny curtains served as a backdrop. Finley enters wearing a plain cotton dress, red rain boots and a kerchief wrapped around her head; she sits in the rocker and smiles. She immediately puts the audience at ease - begins a light comedy routine making jokes about current topics. She even comments on the jokes that she told the preceding evening: “I told a Misha joke last night.” She welcomes all to the third night of her performance series, thanks everyone for coming out on a Friday night and laughs, “If you've come out for entertainment, good luck.” She also informs the audience that since it is her own show, she has the option to go in and out of time, which as the show progresses we find to be true - she leaves her theatrical characters to make comments in and about real time. Finley keeps her scripts, which she sometimes picks up to read, on metal music stands beside her chairs - another example of a reality and theater cross-over. Again, in keeping with this nontraditional theater attitude and style, she asks her audience to notice that she has real water on stage and that she will be drinking it throughout the performance. “The difference between performance art and theater,” she cackles, “is that in theater the water would be pretend but in performance it’s real.”

She begins her “It's Only Art Prologue,” a humorous look at how far the right might go in confiscating art: Van Gogh would be removed from museums because his work suggests psychedelia; Picasso’s work banned because he and his children peed on it for the desired patina effect; glass blowers would be outlawed because their craft too closely resembled blow jobs; and quilts would be removed from museums because they were found to have menstrual and ejaculation stains on them. She rocks back and forth as she continues her political ranting. She has made the audience comfortable, put us at ease - we are with her and she with us. Finley bonds with her audience and this bonding prepares and allows them to hear and absorb the important message she will deliver.

The program takes the form of three acts. Finley opens the first act, “Life of Lies,” with a portrayal of a waitress-mother with three sons. The woman laments that she does not have a daughter. She uses this character to spew out her feelings about the condition of women in our culture: that women are killed and raped just for being female; that women are taught to be cute, desirable, perky, not-too-much-in-the-way, serving and nurturing, but “I was never expected to be talented,” that the importance of traditional jobs for women - teaching, nursing, child care, being a mother - has never been reflected in pay scale... but "we get used to it." She throws her head back and a new character emerges - an alcoholic mother. Through this character also, Finley continues with her list of the lowly places that women in our society inhabit. She moves around the stage and touches on such issues as coat-hanger abortions, teen-age pregnancy, uterine cancer and breasts. She ends this section with these lines: “I want a lesbian god,” “I want my body ‘cause it’s never been mine,” and repeats over and over again, “Like I said, a woman isn’t worth much, your life isn’t worth shit.”

Finley now leaves theatrical time and enters ‘real’ time. Her monologues up to now have been delivered in a style suitable to the character or in a chant or trance tone. Now she speaks in her own voice - a small voice with a slight Midwestern twang. She takes off her clothing to reveal a one-piece bra and garter belt combo. As her underpants accidentally begin to slide off she adjusts them and casually announces to the audience that she has her period and she is wearing a pad. She steps to the food table, picks up jello molds and drops them into the cups of the bra. She asks the audience to notice that she does not shave her underarms and that pubic hairs extend beyond the elastic legs of her underwear. This is perhaps the clearest statement of the evening: No, I am not an idealized vision of woman, smooth and pretty or nurturing. I am a real woman who has breasts, grows hair under her arms, has pubic hair and menstruates. She...
walks around the food table, picks up a large brown heart and smears this liquid chocolate over the front of her body (for her a symbolic gesture of how women are shit on). She looks out at the audience and remarks, “this is the part that scares everybody.” Throughout the second act she continues to stick more food onto herself via the chocolate: sprouts that she says are sperm and little red candies. She throws candy to the audience and passes out homemade T-shirts.

Throughout the second act, “Why Can’t This Veal Calf Walk,” characters continue to emerge and submerge, always being used as a venue for more information about our society and its treatment of its broken and lowly individuals: the homeless, those with AIDS, homosexuals and, of course, women. She launches into diatribes about anorexia, binge eating and bulimia, rape, white male power and female castration. In the tone of a minister filled with the spirit, she delivers a sorrowful analogy which compares woman to a veal calf forced to remain in a tiny box eating its own shit and dying. She compares our culture and how “we keep our victims ready” to 1938 Nazi Germany.

She wraps herself in a white robe, sits in a chair near the bed and begins the final act, “Departure,” in which she lays bare her philosophy that life, family bonds, and death are more important than art. She delivers a beautiful and touching soliloquy on the loss of a loved one and embraces the audience as her sisters and brothers. She closes the performance beating her breast with one fist as she shakes her other hand over the death bed. The lights fade to darkness.

There is nothing obscene or frightening in what Karen Finley does on stage. As a friend so succinctly commented, “She speaks the truth.” For many there is no new information here - the material is time-worn - issues that many Americans have been sorting out over the past twenty years and most would agree with Finley’s perceptions. That so much controversy has followed Finley indicates “how far from center and to the right the political community has moved and how much the media have bought into that move.”1 What Karen Finley discusses is important information. Those who share her political views can be reminded that these issues need to be kept alive in a real way; that women continue to be degraded and stripped of their rights as human beings. For those experiencing these ideas for the first time, this artist guides them through the issues with commitment, honesty and artistry. Karen Finley’s power lies in her ability to bond with the audience and to create a trust that enables her to give, and the spectator to receive the intense information that she so passionately believes and desires to share.

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Jacqueline M. Szmania
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Psychology
"Investigation of Sexual Harassment Decisions
Following the Vinson Decision"
Women's Studies Spring Banquet

Photographs by Alyssa Jones
An Exploration of The Functions of Common Artifacts That Sexually Objectify Women

By Jody A. Miller

Introduction

Feminist researchers have placed a great deal of emphasis on studying the representation of women in various forms of the media. However, the media are only part of our lived experience. We live in a world of objects as well, and these objects are a medium in and of themselves. There are a large number of artifacts in American popular culture that depict and define women as objects, and I would argue that these artifacts fit together in some systematic way. While they range from functional objects, such as drink stirrs in the shape of women's bodies, to decorative objects, such as posters and bumper stickers, they share a common theme of woman as sexual object. While this is an area virtually ignored by researchers in the past, I have been collecting these artifacts over the past several years, and the goal of this paper is to begin an exploration of their functions and meanings.

I have used some basic guidelines for distinguishing and choosing the data in my collection from other images of women in popular culture. Specifically, my operationalized definition of an artifact is that it presents a woman or women in a sexual and/or submissive way, and in a humorous or non-erotic context. So, for instance, objects in which women are presented nude, semi-nude, or with revealing clothing on, such as a sheer blouse or lingerie, are included in my collection unless there is a specific context which desexualizes their presentation. Also, when specific body parts such as breasts, buttocks, and/or vaginas are emphasized, or when a woman is presented headless, armless, or solely as a body part, as in a "boob" drinking mug for example, this is an artifact included in my collection.

In addition, artifacts which depict women in sexually submissive or vulnerable positions, depict women performing sexual acts on men, or depict women as passive objects to be used sexually, such as a set of spread legs, fit my operationalized definition.

Because of the speculative, exploratory nature of this research, it was necessary to begin the investigation using convenience sampling methods. The data constitutes an accidental sample, and is neither representative nor exhaustive. Most of the artifacts in this collection come from central and southern Ohio. However, some come from southern Pennsylvania, and the Georgetown community in Washington D.C. Again, this diversity is due to convenience sampling methods.

Collection procedures were basically threefold. First, I carried a camera with me and photographed those artifacts happened upon in the public arena -- signs, bumper stickers, mudflaps, and so on. Second, I made the project known to other persons and requested their assistance and donations. Persons I have received data from include family, friends, acquaintances, co-workers, students and instructors. However, the majority of the data in this collection comes from the third method employed, firsthand purchase. Artifacts have been purchased at flea markets, gas station carryouts, grocery, novelty and antique stores. Due to sampling limitations, the data is not representative and may also have some class biases. However, this external validity weakness is not problematic because of the exploratory nature of this work.

The analysis in this paper is informed speculation, grounded theoretically only in the information I am able to extract from the data itself and the knowledge I have about the origins of some of the pieces. First, I will briefly discuss the role of body language and gesture in images of women. Specifically, in these artifacts, as with other cultural images, women are depicted in ways that emphasize powerlessness, submissiveness and subordination.

After discussing body language and gesture, I will then move to a discussion of why women are objectified in this culture. Objectified images of women, such as the images in these artifacts, flourish in American culture because of its capitalist patriarchal structure. These artifacts exist and operate chiefly to reinforce the ideology of male supremacy in our culture by presenting women as objects to be conquered and consumed.
Although they objectify women, the artifacts are not erotic images. Instead they are meant to be humorous. Therefore, it is crucial to discuss the role of humor in the presentation of these misogynous images. When women are perceived as easily replaceable objects, especially in the context of humor, violence against us is perpetuated and legitimized. Finally, I will conclude with a summary of my findings. I will then discuss some aspects of further research which would be useful for continued study in this area.

Images of Women

A great deal of research has been done on nonverbal communication in interaction, and the ways in which women are taught to display submission and femininity. In addition, these types of gender displays are projected and reinforced in media images of women, specifically in advertisements. Body language and gesture play an important role in the meanings conveyed by the artifacts in this collection as well, because many of the gestures displayed in the artifacts parallel those found in other areas.

Smiling, for example, is often associated with subordinate status, and therefore, women are expected to smile more frequently than men (Henley, 1977:169-175). Not surprisingly, women represented in the artifacts are frequently depicted smiling. Canting of the head and body is also prevalent in images of women in advertising, as well as in these artifacts. According to Goffman, these body configurations can be read as an acceptance of subordination, an expression of ingratiation, submissiveness, and appeasement (Goffman, 1976:46).

In a well known analysis of gender displays in advertisements, Goffman refers to the ritualization of subordination -- the depiction of women in physically lowered positions, either in relation to men or by themselves on floors, sofas, and beds. Similar to his findings in advertising, women in the artifacts are frequently depicted in reclining positions, signifying both vulnerability to physical confrontation and sexual availability.

According to Henley, the availability of such visual information about a group of people takes power and control away from that group (Henley, 1977:167). Therefore, the vast amount of exploitive imagery of women in this culture serves the broad purpose of stripping us of the power of self-definition and self-determinism. The artifacts in this collection are part of this exploitive visual imagery and must be recognized as contributing to the social control of women.

There are a number of artifacts in my collection which exemplify the points made above. For example, I have a set of salt and pepper shakers in the shape of a woman's body. She is nude and in a reclining position, displaying Goffman's ritualization of subordination. While her face and body are not idealized, her breasts are extremely large and overemphasized. Similarly, the air freshener in figure 1 pictures a woman whose body language and gesture depict vulnerability and powerlessness. Clearly, the visual information available about a woman pictured grasping a very small blanket to her nude body leaves her with very little power and control.

Another example from my collection, "The Working Man's Doodle Pad," features a single line drawing of a nude woman (with the exception of her high heeled shoes), whose entire torso area is left to the doodler's imagination and creation. She is drawn only with a head, shoulders, arms and legs. The rest is left up to the "doodler." She appears in a passive position, arms raised above the head, head and eyes downcast, and legs bent. It is a clear reminder to men of which women's body parts they are supposed to be concerned with.

Capitalist Patriarchy and the Commodification of Women

It is crucial to understand how these artifacts fit into our culture's broad treatment of women as disposable sexual objects. I would suggest that, when viewing the sexual domination of women on a continuum, these artifacts are undeniably linked. In order to understand the sexual objectification, commodification and domination of women in this culture, we must look to its capitalist patriarchal base.

Edwin Schur (1988) discusses what he calls the "Americanization of sex" as a trend in this culture toward treating sex as something impersonal, competitive, and ultimately an object to be consumed. At the core of these recent distortions of sexuality is the combination of two structures -- capitalism and patriarchy. While these artifacts may exist in any society, there are reasons to suggest that they are particularly prevalent in capitalist societies such as the United States. Under advanced capitalism, the propensities to commoditize and to exploit for profit extend into all realms of life, including sexuality (Schur, 1988:12). According to Shur, "[t]he social subordination and
sexual objectification of women are central to much of the depersonalized, commercialized, and coercive sexuality found in modern American society" (1988:13).

Women are viewed as replaceable and disposable through a process of objectification and devaluation. "Individual women are perceived and reacted to at least initially, and often primarily, in terms of their femaleness" (Schur, 1984:25). This serves to create and promote the view of woman as "other" (Schur, 1984:24). Schur argues that the objectification of a group, in this instance women, is linked to their categorical devaluation (1984:30-34).

Specific aspects of sexual objectification, as discussed by Schur, revolve around a cultural preoccupation with women's physical appearance, which includes a "male perception of women as depersonalized body parts...[and] as 'decorative' and status-conferring objects...." (1984:33). In addition, women are seen as objects in actual sexual behavior -- as passive, functional only in their ability to sexually satisfy man.

I would argue that the objects in my collection promote the same messages. Women are frequently displayed as body parts -- a breast, a torso, armless, headless. For example, there is the "Big Sipper" drinking mug, in which "woman" is featured as a large breast with an overly stylized nipple. In addition, the handle to this mug is a female figure, bent backwards and attached at the hair and feet. In order to consume liquids from the "Big Sipper" mug, one must do so from the nipple. I also have a party game called "Poke her a quickie." The game includes several large cardboard penises, as well as a cardboard woman's torso and legs, clad only in fishnet stockings and high heels. According to the game's direction sheet, "the object of this game is to see who can spread these sexy legs apart the farthest with our specially designed flying dong!" Again, the woman is reduced to a mere body part.

Likewise, many of the artifacts depict an ideal, while frequently overly stylized image of woman as white, young, often blond, and thin, with large breasts and small waists. Figure 2 is a set of salt and pepper shakers similar to the set described earlier, except this set is headless and armless. The breasts, which serve as dispensers, are enormously disproportionate to the rest of the body.

Another way of emphasizing feminine beauty is by ridiculing women who do not fit prescribed beauty ideals. This is also a common theme in the artifacts.

The drink stirs in figure 3, called "Zulu Lulu," are a blatant combination of racism, sexism and ageism. On the lower torso of each figure is a number indicating the age of the figure, beginning at age fifteen and ending at age forty, in increments of five. As the figures age, the breasts sag, the hips widen, and the stomachs and buttocks droop -- indicating their deteriorating sexual attractiveness. One of the obvious implications of artifacts such as these is the emphasis on sexualizing youth and dehumanizing women as they age. The message in this set of artifacts is that the ideal female body is that of a fifteen year old -- obviously bordering on the promotion of pedophilia.

In addition, the women in these artifacts are nearly always depicted as objects of sexual consumption -- nude, legs spread, passively "inviting" sexual contact, or engaging in sex submissively. I have a cigarette lighter which reads "woo, suck up" and depicts a woman performing fellatio on a man. She is on her knees while he stands erect and powerful above her. In addition, he is holding both her head and her arm with his hands. Force does not seem out of bounds in an interpretation of this figure. Clearly, she is in a submissive position, as evidenced by Goffman's discussion of the ritualization of subordination.

Likewise, the stylized image in figure 4 includes only a woman's spread legs and breasts incorporated into a winged insignia similar to those earned by airmen, civilian pilots and members of certain motorcycle gangs. There appear to be many layers to this image. "Women's" "wings" comes from accomplishment, and in this case it is the sexual conquest of woman. Woman is not seen in human terms -- she has neither a head nor arms. She is presented as parts of a body, rather than as a whole individual.

Some of the artifacts have more blatant overtones of violence against women. Figure 5 is a clear reference to power relations and violence. Looking first at body language, the woman is face down in a sexually vulnerable position, "fuckable," one might say. In addition, her face is hidden and her arms hanging down, in an anonymous and humiliating gesture. What makes this piece striking above many others is the starkness of the position, technique and coloration, and the degree of exactness of the anatomy. It has a very human feel to it, rather than the comical feel of many other artifacts. The rape overtones in this piece are undeniable -- it is blatantly violent and power oriented. There is a great deal of symbolism in this piece as well. Money is power in this culture, and in
this artifact, money is a metaphor for the penis and a symbol of domination and conquest.

Similarly, I have an automotive sticker which reads "WARNING if you value your life as much as I value this truck 'DON'T FUCK WITH IT.'" There is a female figure, again depicted graphically in a similar sexually submissive position (with bright red nipples), juxtaposed against the words "don't fuck with it." She is an object, presented in a "fuckable" position, just as the truck is an important object to the owner which he sees as desirable to others.

I also have a cast iron bootjack designed to look like a Victorian woman who is dressed in undergarments, nipples exposed, lying on her back with her legs spread. It requires the active participation of the user for it to function. For an individual to take his boot off requires him to shove his foot between her spread legs, step on her face with the other foot, and jerk his leg in toward her crotch and upward. This participation constructs specific and blatantly violent behaviors which teach and reinforce men about the ways to treat women.

These artifacts, as with many other images of women in this culture, create a context of violence against women by portraying us as objects rather than human beings. One way that this is done is through the use of devices such as humor. Bat-Ada refers to these devices for attitude construction as "groundbreakers" because they allow ideas such as rape, child sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women to be presented in "harmless" form. Bat-Ada states: "The idea is to put these vicious crimes into a context which infers that it is 'just a joke' or 'all in good fun.' After all, who can object to that -- except a woman without a sense of humor?" (in Lederer, 1980:125). Because the artifacts in this collection use humor to promote misogynous images of women, with some undercurrents of violence and rape, it is important to discuss the role of humor.

The Role of Humor

Although it is often thought of as shallow and meaningless, humor is actually a very powerful form of social interaction. As discussed above, humor is often used as a "groundbreaker" for presenting harmful ideas and behaviors in the "harmless" form of jokes (Bat-Ada in Lederer, 1980). Similarly, Fine suggests that humor provides a context in which "inappropriate" subjects can be discussed (1984:87). In the case of these artifacts, humor provides a context in which men can be openly sexist and can blatantly sexualize and objectify women -- behavior which is sometimes (though not always) inappropriate in other contexts.

I have a group of photographs which show actual male peer interaction during a bachelor party. Rather than having a live woman present, the men used a blow up doll and photographed each other sexually assaulting her. Although blow up dolls are typically thought of as one-on-one pseudo- sexual partners, in this case a blow up doll was used as an interactional prop by a group of male peers. They used the doll in a variety of sexual positions, referencing their own body parts in addition to inserting foreign objects into her orifices. These men were using the doll to affirm their individual and collective identities as misogynous men who view women as sexual receptacles.

The playing cards in figure 6, "Beer is better than women because..." present a number of misogynous messages in the context of humor. While there are more cards in the deck than are shown here, for the most part, the messages are quite similar. There are racist implications, inferences about ideal beauty, as well as strong messages that men should receive sexual gratification without the pleasure or even the consent of the women providing it.

Fine argues that "joking interactions place their targets into undesirable social positions, and may shape the perception that others have of them" (1984:89). In fact, humorous interaction can be particularly powerful in shaping perceptions of others. So these artifacts, many of which are meant to be humorous, must be viewed as powerful tools in shaping and sustaining the conception of woman as sexual object. It cannot be ignored that the objectification of women creates a context which facilitates violence against women. When women are seen as replaceable objects rather than human beings, violence against us seems tolerable, even normal. When violence against women is presented as humorous, it is particularly dangerous because actual violence against women seems less serious.

Summary and Discussion

In this paper, I have shown a number and variety of artifacts which exist in this culture and define women in the narrow terms of sexuality. In addition to collecting and presenting these artifacts, I have speculated, based on the information available at this point in the research process, about some of the purposes of these misogynous objects.
Figure 5

Figure 6
In doing so, it is crucial to recognize that these pieces flourish in our culture because of its capitalist patriarchal base. Because of the profit motive in capitalist society, almost anything that can be commodified and exploited for gain will be. Turning sex into a commodity in a patriarchal culture means turning women into a commodity. And that's what these artifacts are all about. Women are presented as objects to be conquered and used. We are body parts, headless bodies, and disposable providers of sexual gratification rather than human beings.

Critical to the successful functioning of these objects in this way is the "humorous" presentation and context in which they are used. Humor is a particularly influential form of communicating information which may not be appropriate or acceptable in other forms. Sexually assaulting a blow up doll with a pickle is "funny" in this context. Clearly, these men appear to be having a great deal of fun sexually abusing the "woman" in their presence. However, I am concerned with how much this "humor" affects the treatment of real women.

I recognize that this paper is just a beginning. Due to the lack of research in this area, I am presenting a starting point, an exploration. As an exploration, it provides a wealth of ideas and much potential for further research. Clearly, there are limitations due to the available data used in this piece. Knowledge of this cultural context would be extremely beneficial, and it would also be quite useful to trace the changing depictions of women within the artifacts over time.

A next step for further research might be to interview individuals in order to begin an assessment of how abundant these artifacts are, how frequent individuals' contacts with these objects are, and in what contexts. In doing so, it is necessary to address issues of sex, class and race as well. These are all crucial issues which need to be explored in order to come to a better understanding of the implications of these artifacts in our culture and in women's lives.

Postscript:

My understanding of the complexities of the many issues within feminism is still (and always will be) in process. Starting at Ohio State, I came to realize that my understanding of feminism reflected my own biases, not just as a white middle class woman, but also biases that exist because of my specific life experiences. For the most part, the feminist scholarship I had been reading addressed me, my life, and the lives of women like me. And I usually took it in without question. Not surprisingly, the feminist scholarship I attempted to write did the same thing.

Therefore, I have chosen to analyze the above paper. I completed the sociology thesis from which the paper is based last summer and was extremely proud of the achievement. But since coming into the women's studies program, reading quite a bit of Black feminist thought and questions of feminist epistemology and methodology, I have felt increasingly uncomfortable about my thesis work. My enthusiasm has turned to ambivalence, and a major reason for that is what I now recognize as the blatant inscriptions of my whiteness within the paper. I am coming to terms with my newly developing awareness that writing is an ongoing process. Perhaps when I need to be concerned is when I stop feeling as though I've outgrown the work of my past.

I would like to start my analysis by first discussing the ways in which I inscribed the paper with both social science and feminism. Because I was conducting nontraditional research, using a collection of artifacts as the data, I was very conscious of trying to inscribe the work with social science language that would make it appear legitimate. So I made appeals to authorities by citing "big name" sociologists such as Erving Goffman and Gary Alan Fine. I didn't discuss how I "chose data that fit my operationalized definition." I tried to justify my collection methods by framing them in "scientific" jargon. Due to the "exploratory nature of the research" I used "convenience sampling methods" and the data constituted an "accidental sample." I noted that the "external validity weakness" was not problematic, and that the analysis was based on "informed speculation" which was "grounded theoretically."

In addition to my self conscious attempts to make the work appear sociological, I was also very aware as I worked on the project of my position as a woman in an oppressive society. Although I slightly downplayed my feminist standpoint for the sake of "science" (perhaps more so in the thesis than in the paper), I did openly relate to the work as a woman and a feminist. I discussed women as "we" not "they." I framed the work in terms of other research carried out by feminists. I talked openly about the "ideology of male supremacy" and "misogyny." I made theoretical statements based on my feminist perspective even though lacking "empirical
evidence." I argued, for example, that the artifacts "contribute to the social control of women." I spoke of the penis as a "symbol of domination and conquest." And I argued that the men assaulting the blow up doll were affirming their identities as "misogynous men who view women as sexual receptacles."

However, even as I framed the work within a feminist perspective, I did so in a particular way, one in which I was not self consciously white. Looking back on the paper now, I can see that this whiteness manifested itself in a number of ways. Although I noticed that nearly all my artifacts were images of white women, I found this worthy only of a mention, not an analysis. In the paper, I merely stated that the artifacts depict an ideal woman as "white, young, often blond, and thin, with large breasts and small waists." In the thesis, the discussion appeared in a footnote in which I stated that a thorough analysis of race was "not in the scope of this thesis." In fact, looking back now, I think race must be a central part of the analysis in order to come to some understanding of how the artifacts function.

In relation to this, one issue that needs to be addressed is whether or not my sample is skewed because my "operationalized definition" of an appropriate artifact fits cultural stereotypes/myths about the sexuality of white women, not Black women. I specifically frame the images in terms of sexual submissiveness and passivity. I argue that the artifacts, like other cultural imagery of ("universal") women, project messages about powerlessness, subordination and femininity. My question now is did this definition lead me to "white" artifacts. Cultural images of Black women's sexuality are not tied to submissiveness and passivity. They are tied to a sort of animalistic, dangerous sexuality and promiscuity.

In trying to remember back to what artifacts I may have seen and passed over, I do vaguely remember a few ceramic artifacts of Black women in African dress. I also remember coming across a great deal of "Mammy" imagery of Black women, and I remember at the time thinking, "oh, that's imagery of Blacks." Now I'm horrified that I did that! I completely stripped these artifacts of gender context. If I had been more sensitive, rather than only looking for the artifacts that personally outraged me (i.e., addressed me as a white woman), it would have been very meaningful to do a comparative piece. How are the images of Black and white women different? How do they reinforce notions about race and gender? Important questions, but little data to address them with.

Actually, I do have an artifact that I only included within the appendix of my thesis which begins to address what may be different notions of women's sexuality within cultural imagery. It's a carved wooden nutcracker in the shape of a native looking woman. In order to crack a nut, the user needs to spread her legs and insert it in her pubic/upper thigh area. I argued that images such as this one depicted women as passive objects of sexual consumption. Thinking of it now as a euphemism -- "nut cracker" -- it may be that this artifact plays into notions of Black women's sexuality as dangerous and savage. But again, I didn't address this at the time, but merely noted that she was "ethnic looking."

In fact, all of my dealings with imagery that didn't depict a white ideal were very simplistic. I noted that the "Zulu Lulu" drink stirs were blatantly racist. How insightful! I didn't discuss what I found to be the specific racist components beyond just the fact that they were images of Black women. Similarly, in discussing the deck of playing cards ("Beer is better than women because..."), I noted that there are "racist implications" but I didn't explain why I think so. Both of these and the nutcracker would have allowed me to begin an exploration of how Black women's sexuality is depicted in animalistic, savage ways.

I also wonder if the locations that served as my data collection sites contributed to my lack of imagery of Black women. I photographed artifacts happened upon in public, but it was public places that were predominantly white. I made the project known to other people and received lots of donations -- all from white women and men. And my "junking" excursions were, again, in areas that didn't have large Black populations -- rural Ohio, for example. However, given the context within our society whereby white men are granted access to Black women's bodies, I'm still making assumptions in thinking I will find the imagery by looking within the Black community. At any rate, if I were to collect data more systematically and sensitively I still found that nearly all of it was imagery of white women, this in and of itself is critical to an analysis. Race is still a salient issue because white women are a member of a specific race, and this racial identity has an important meaning.

In addition to the inscription of my whiteness in the artifacts and their analysis, there were also many places within the paper that my focus created false universal notions of women's experiences. For example, I talked about research on nonverbal communication, claiming that women are taught to display submissiveness and femininity, to smile and
cant, for example. But now as I think about these gender displays, I recognize again that they're based on what white, middle class women are taught. It makes sense in framing these body gestures as outgrowths of the "cult of true womanhood." But it makes less sense to think that Black women are taught and depicted behaving in the same ways. Recognizing this, the submissive body language found in many of the artifacts takes on new meaning.

Similarly, under the discussion of capitalist patriarchy and the commodification of women, I note that sex is a master status of women, women are reacted to primarily in terms of their femaleness. But depending on the context, it may be that race is the most salient issue. Do white men and women initially and primarily perceive Black women as female or are they perceived as Black? Edwin Schur speaks of women as "status-conferring objects." But again, because of the historical structures of this culture, can this be generalized to the objectification of Black women or are there differences? Cultural images of Jezebel seem to contradict this, because they frame Black women's sexuality as available to all white men.

On the whole, in reading back over my thesis work with a critical eye to its "whiteness," I have found that it's pretty white. My analysis definitely reflects my biases as a white middle class woman and I am guilty in many places of false universalism. In addition, places within the research where race should be absolutely central to an analysis, it is practically non-existent. Writing this paper has allowed me to bring together issues that I've been reading and thinking about in the context of analyzing my own biases in a work I embraced and now feel a bit withdrawn from.

**Bibliography**


Women and Mass Communications: An International Annotated Bibliography


Reviewed by James Bracken, The Ohio State University Libraries

Intending to cover "the most important materials" (p.x) related to women and the full range of mass media (including publishing, radio, television, film, newspapers, video, advertising, public relations and wire services), Lent's survey geographically arranges brief, non-evaluative annotated entries for 3,225 publications in all languages (mostly in English) appearing largely since 1960. A general chapter covers women and mass communication globally, with others for Africa and the Middle East, Asia, Australia, and Oceania, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean; and North America. Within the regional chapters are more limited subchapters for Eastern and Western Europe, Central America, South America and so forth. In turn, listings in regional sections are topically subarranged for "general studies," "women as audience," "women practitioners," and "women's media." Aside from sections for Canada and the United States (the latter, the most extensive section in the survey, with over 1,700 entries), no other country subchapters are given. Identifying studies on French women journalists or images of women in Japanese advertising requires the use of the detailed subject index. An appendix identifies professional media organizations for women as well as professional, scholarly and critical journals that regularly focus on women and media.

The survey's international scope and comprehensiveness will likely be both a boon and a source of frustration to researchers. Although a great many easily accessible books and journal articles are identified, an equally substantial number of cited works are more difficult to obtain. These include a great number of academic papers completed at foreign institutions (such as item 343, a "B.A. thesis" from the University of the Philippines), as well as numerous apparently unpublished papers from foreign symposia and conferences (like item 317, an undated paper on women in the Congo given in Dakar, Senegal). Certain to compound the researcher's frustrations are Lent's generally inadequate annotations. Although Lent does annotate, as he claims, "more than 85 percent" (p.x) of the citations, the usefulness of many of these descriptions is doubtful. The annotation for item 2951, Doug McClelland's Eleanor Parker: Woman of a Thousand Faces, is the cryptic "Film actress Parker." For item 3100, Terri Schultz-Brooks's Working Woman article, "Is the News Business Fair to Women?" the annotation is "Not very." For journals that have featured numerous articles on women and media, such as Advertising Age (item 1629), Editor and Publisher (item 1722), Ms. (item 1581), and Variety (item 1612), Lent simply supplies references to a "sampling" of relevant articles.

That Lent's survey is the most comprehensive listing of secondary writings on women and mass media now available, surpassing the coverage of several other bibliographic guides that have offered more limited or less direct coverage of the subject, is indisputable. For coverage of women and media in developing countries, Lent's work greatly expands on Mieke Ceulemans and Guido Fauconnier's much less widely available Mass Media: The Image, Role and Social Conditions of Women: A Collection and Analysis of Research Materials (Paris: UNESCO, 1979). Previously the most comprehensive listings of materials on the portrayal of women in American mass media included Leslie J. Friedman's Sex Role Stereotyping in the Mass Media: An Annotated Bibliography (New York: Garland, 1977), Alice Courhey and Thomas Whipple's Sex Stereotyping in Advertising (Lexington, MA: Lexington, 1983), and Nancy Signorelli's Roles Portrayal and Stereotyping on Television: An Annotated Bibliography of Studies Relating to Women, Minorities, Aging, Sexual Behavior, Health and Handicaps (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985). These latter guides remain especially useful for their more detailed annotations. Undergraduate student researchers interested in identifying more readily accessible materials on women and mass media should continue to consult these sources as well as the more selective and critically evaluative listings in such standard guides as Eleanor Blum and Frances Goins Wilhoit's Mass Media Bibliography (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), particularly for women and mass media in developing countries; and Katherine Fishburn's Women in Popular Culture: A Reference Guide (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1982), for women in American media.
Please Leave a Message

By Carol Wolfe Konek

Yeah?

Billie? I need to talk to you

Yeah? So?

There is something ... I think you’d better talk to me

I thought we settled it. It isn’t working. It’s over.

No, it’s not over.

As far as I’m concerned, it’s over. That’s it. Kapput.

As far as you’re concerned, it may be over, Billie, but for me, it’s not over. It is just beginning.

Whatever. Have it your way. Begin. I’m through. I’m not feeling great this morning. I really have to ...

Don’t hang up. There is something you might want to know.

Like you didn’t mean what you said? About how mean and lazy and stupid ...

Billie, let’s not fight. We need to talk. I need to tell you ...

and how I have this serious drug problem, and I’d better get help or ...

I don’t take that back, but we need to talk about ...

Forget it, Jill. I’ve really got to ...

Listen to me, Billie. It is only fair that I tell you. I went to the doctor.

I’m ... are you listening?

I’m waiting.

pregnant.

No shit? You’re too much. Don’t you think this is a cheap ...

Really. Two and a half months. I thought you should know ...

that you need money? How stupid do you think I am?

No, this is not about money. This is just a call to let you know. In case you’re interested.

I don’t believe you for a minute, but if you want me to go with you to the clinic, I’ll pay half the bill there. I won’t send you a check.

Goodbye, Billie.

****

This is 512-7385. We’re not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

Jill, I’m sorry I missed you. I was out. I’ll call later.

****

Yeah?

Billie?

I’m glad you called.

Really, we don’t even need to talk. I only called because ...

I said, I’m glad you called.

It’s not about money. I don’t need money.

I will help. I’m really short, but I can help.

I said I don’t need money.

Oh, false alarm?

No, not a false alarm.

Then, let me help.

I don’t need money. Really, Billie, just never mind. I thought I should call, so I did.

I thought you were kidding me. Really, Jill, I thought it was just your way of trying to get back together.

I don’t want to be back together. I thought it was only fair to tell you ...

Are you telling me the truth, or what?

This is 512-7385. We’re not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

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I thought you were kidding me. Really, Jill, I thought it was just your way of trying to get back together.

I don’t want to be back together. I thought it was only fair to tell you ...

Are you telling me the truth, or what?
I'm telling you the truth.

Then I'll help. I can get a loan. How much?

Billie, this isn't about money. This isn't about getting back together. Consider this information: I'm going to have a baby. Don't hang up ... Hello? Hello?  ****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

Jill. I know you're there. Turn off the machine. Answer the phone. Call me.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

Jill. Dammit. I'm sorry.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

Jill, please answer. I said I was ...

Hello.

How are you?

Not terrific.

Not terrific? Can I come over? We need to talk.

No, really, it isn't necessary.

You said you wanted to have it. You don't have to.

I know I don't have to.

I can raise the cash. Tell me what day.

I'm going through with this. On my own. It doesn't concern you. Forget I called.

But, why? Is this you way of ...

This isn't my way of anything. I'm going through with it because I want to. I thought it over. I want to. .

I know I don't have to.

I can raise the cash. Tell me what day.

I'm going through with this. On my own. It doesn't concern you. Forget I called.

But, why? Is this you way of ...

This isn't my way of anything. I'm going through with it because I want to. I thought it over. I want to.

It isn't just your decision. Dammit, what about what I want? Hello ... Hello?

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

Jill. Damn you, you can't hang up on me. You're the one who said you wanted to talk. Answer the phone. Dammit. Answer the phone.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

Jill. Damn you, you can't hang up on me. You're the one who said you wanted to talk. Answer the phone. Dammit. Answer the phone.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

I have a right to my opinion on this, dammit. We have to talk. Call me back or ...

Or what?

It's not fair.

Maybe not, but that's life.

I mean for you to decide.

You make decisions for yourself, I'll make decisions for myself.

This decision isn't just for yourself.

You've got that right.

We're not right for each other. We know that by now.

Yes, we know that by now.

So, you've got to get rid of it. That's only logical.

Look, Billie, I've got the message. You're not happy. You wish this hadn't happened. I wish this hadn't happened. But it happened, and I've made my decision. You can adjust to it. I have decided.

You bitch, it isn't for you to decide ...

Watch me.

You did this on purpose. It's your fault.

Sure. This is what I had in mind all along. You tell me you'll stay straight, and you don't. You tell me you'll be good to me, and you put your fist through the bedroom door when you're drunk. You tell me you'll ...

Don't start on me, or I'll ...

knock me around again? I believe you ... 

Go on. Have it. Do any goddamn thing you want to, but don't think I didn't warn you. If you want anything from me, I've offered to pay my share. If you want to go ahead and do this, just to piss me off ...
Get serious. This is a rather extreme way of pissing you off ...

You'd do anything to get me ...

This isn't about getting you. This is about me. It has nothing to do with you.

You think my family will pay for this.

Billie, relax. I think I'll pay for this.

Thanks for calling. It's been nice talking to you.

Don't hang up. Dammit ...

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

Hi, Jill. This is Billie. Just calling to see how you're feeling.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

I came by your apartment. You weren't there. I really need to talk to you.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

Jill, I know you're there. I keep thinking about it, and I want to talk to you. Please call.

****

How ya doin'? I'm not in right now, but I'll be back. When you hear the beep, you know what to do.

Billie, you bitch. You have no right. I told you what to do. If you think you can torture me with this, you're crazy.

****

How ya doin? I'm not in right now, but I'll be back. When you hear the beep, you know what to do.

Billie, some day you'll regret the decision you've made. I feel sorry for you.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

I've been thinking about you a lot, Jill. I want to see you. I told my parents, and they want me to be responsible. We need to talk. Please call me.

****

How ya doin? I'm not in right now, but I'll be back. When you hear the beep, you know what to do.

Billie, it's too late. Forget I mentioned it. We'll be fine. We really will.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

I need to talk to you. I know it's late, but please pick up the ... Why are you calling me? What's wrong?

I just got home, and I feel so bad.

You're drunk.

No, I'm just feeling so ...

drunk. Nothing ever changes.

Go to bed, Billie. Just go to bed.

Please listen. I need to see you.

I'm coming over.

No. Don't come over. And don't call again. I have to work in the morning. Good night.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

Jill, about last night. I wasn't drunk. I was just feeling so bad about everything that has happened. I know it's too late for you to do anything now. It's up to you. I'm sorry. Call me.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

I need to talk to you. I know it's late, but I need to talk to you. I feel so bad. I'm not drunk. I really just feel so bad.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

You bitch. Answer the phone. It isn't fair. Why are you doing this to me?

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

Billie, this is Jill. I saw the sonagram today. It's a boy. Have a nice life.
You're going to be sorry if you don't talk to me. You think you can just have this baby and keep it, but I can take it away from you any time I want to. You just did this to hurt me. You can't get away with this.

****

Yeah?

Billie, you've got to go to treatment.

Don't start. There is nothing wrong with me.

Billie, for your own sake. I know you're hurting. I know you are sorry this is happening and you're not part of it, but we can't be together. Threats won't help. I can't see you. I can't be with you. I have to take care of myself.

Who said I wanted to be with you? You think everything has to be your way. You decided to do this to get even with me. Okay, you're even.

Billie, it isn't about you. This is just for me. I wanted to go through with this. I want this baby. I don't want anything from you.

But, it isn't fair. It's as though I had no rights.

It must seem that way.

You're trying to make me miserable.

No, I'm trying to encourage you to stop being miserable. Go to treatment.

Bitch. You always think there's something wrong with me.

Goodbye, Billie.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

Are you there? I wish I knew. I called the hospital, and they wouldn't tell me anything. I think it's time, but I'm not sure. If you're there, call me.

****

Yeah?

Hello.

How are you?

Fine.

Can I come over?

You can come over if you'll promise you won't say anything about what I decided.

Like what?

Like I shouldn't have had him. You can't say that anymore, or you can't see him.

I want to see him.

Then promise.

I promise.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

I have to see him. I don't know why you wouldn't let me hold him. I have rights, too. You did this on purpose. I only drink to make myself forget what you've done to me. It isn't fair. Please call me. I beg you, please call me.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

Answer the phone. I know you're there. I knew you were in there when I knocked on the door. I just want to see my son. I have a right to see my son.

Billie, you need to go to treatment. I told you you couldn't come to see him when you were drunk.

I'm not drunk. Why didn't you let me in?

It was late. I knew by the way you pounded on the door you'd been drinking. I'm not going to let you see him when you're like that.

I just had a few beers. I can see my son anytime I want to. I have some rights.

You don't have the right to scare me, or to pound on my door in the middle of the night when my baby is sleeping.

Not your baby, Jill. Our baby. My baby. I have the right to see my baby anytime I want to.

Call me after you get out of treatment, Billie.

God dammit, don't hang up. You bitch. You bitch.

****

This is 512-7385. We're not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

You have no right to keep me from my son. Please, let me see my son. Answer the phone. I know you're there. You bitch.

****
This is 512-7385. We’re not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

I am taking you to court, Jill. I’ve talked to a lawyer, and I have every right to see my son. You can’t do this to me.

****

Yeah.

Billie. I’ve talked to an attorney, too. You can take me to court if you want to. Until you do, and until you’ve been to treatment, you don’t see this baby. I don’t have to let you come into my apart ...

I have rights, too, Jill. You just did this to torture me.

No, I just did this because I wanted him. It has nothing to do with you.

Like hell, Jill. Well, you’ve made one big mistake. I’ll take you to court.

Go to treatment, Billie. You can see him if you’re clean and sober.

You think everyone has a drinking problem. I’m not an alcoholic, or an addict, I just like ...

to have a good time. Like when you jammed me up against the wall and left your hand print on my arm?

You asked for that. You and your mouth.

Let’s not talk about it now, Billie. I’ve got to go. The baby is hungry.

I could help.

Help yourself.

You bitch.

Goodbye, Billie.

****

How ya doin’? I’m not in right now, but I’ll be back. When you hear the beep, you know what to do.

Billie, I’m sending you and my attorney pictures of my bruises. You think you can come over here any time you want and push me around, but we’ll see about that. I made a mistake. He doesn’t need to know his father. Stay away from us.

****

This is 512-7385. We’re not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

I can take him away from you. Don’t forget it, Jill. You think only what you want matters.

****

This is 512-7385. We’re not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

You didn’t have to have him. You just did it to torture me. Please let me see him. I know you’re there.

****

This is 512-7385. We’re not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

You’d better watch that baby. Don’t fall asleep, or you might wake up and find him gone. Sweet dreams.

****

This is 512-7385. We’re not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

I beg of you, let me see him. I only drink because you won’t let me see my son. It’s your fault. I’m taking you to court. I’ll fight you for custody. You’ll see.

****

How ya doin’? I’m not in right now, but I’ll be back. When you hear the beep, you know what to do.

I told you not to come over here again. You shouldn’t have grabbed him like that. He couldn’t go to sleep after you left. The police will pick you up the next time you ...

Bitch. They can’t keep me from seeing my son. You’d better watch him every minute, or...

Okay, hang up.

****

How ya doin’? I’m not in right now, but I’ll be back. When you hear the beep, you know what to do.

Don’t park in front of the house with your lights off and think I don’t know you’re there. Next time, the police will pick you up.

****

Yeah.

Billie, go to treatment. If you come out of a thirty day treatment program, I’ll let you come over and see him whenever you want.

You think everything has to be your way. He’s my son. I can see him whenever I want.

Not as long as there is a restraining order, you can’t.
They can’t stop me. I can take you to court and get visitation rights any time I want to.

Please go to treatment.

I don’t have any problems that seeing my son won’t cure.

You can’t see him when you’re drunk and abusive.

I told you not to have him.

Goodbye, Billie.

****

This is 512-7385. We’re not here, but you may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

I know I shouldn’t have come over like that. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare him. I won’t hit you again. You don’t have to call the police. I won’t do it again. I promise.

****

This number has been disconnected or is no longer a working number. If you think there is a mistake, dial again, or ask for directory assistance.

****

This number has been disconnected or is no longer a working number. If you think there is a mistake, dial again, or ask for directory assistance.

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