BREAKING BRIDGES TO THE PIED PIPER: HOW EBONY.COM DIGITALLY WRECKED THE LEGACY OF R. KELLY

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This essay considers the role of investigative journalism in documenting decades of the rhythm and blues artist Robert Sylvester Kelly’s sexual violence against Black women and girls. Founded by Kenyette Tisha Barnes and Oronike Odeleye in 2017, #MuteRKelly emerged on Twitter as a nationwide movement to demand for fans and large corporations to stop indorsing the artists’ content which included his music, concerts, and videos. While scholars have only recently begun to study the movement against R. Kelly, much of this research prioritizes the importance of hashtag activism (Leung and Williams, 2019; Mukherjee and Dexter, 2020; Curtis et. al 2022). In this paper, I rhetorically analyze nine articles on ebony.com, the digital version of the Black-oriented magazine Ebony. I argue that ebony.com attempted to digitally wreck hip-hop culture’s allegiance to R. Kelly by publicizing a matrix of domination against Black girls commonplace in the Black community.

My study offers a fruitful analysis for understanding the history of Black feminism in shaping hashtag activism on social media and the transition of historical Black magazines to the digital sphere. I highlight questions about how digital Black feminists shape collective consciousness in the Black public sphere by analyzing their utility of digital tools “[a]s a site of thought generation, community formation, and economic advancement.” (Steele, 2021, p. 60). My rhetorical analysis performs a close reading of representative articles engaged in a narrative about R. Kelly that exposed his sexual allegations and the lack of public concern from 2013-2015.

Theory of Digital Wreck

Pough (2015) centralizes the study of Black feminist thought in the Black public sphere. Pough offers the rhetorical practice of “bringing wreck” as “moments when Black women’s discourses disrupt dominant masculine discourses, break into the public sphere, and in some way impact or influence the U.S. imaginary, even if that influence is fleeting” (p. 12). Drawing from Pough, I use Duthley’s (2017) concept of “digital wreck” to understand how this disruption takes place online in discourses of Black social movements. Digital wreck is a rhetoric that combines “multimodal rhetorical forms

Expressing Black Girl’s Marginality

Activists used ebony.com to publicize a “matrix of domination” against Black girls upheld by those in the Black community, legal justice system, and music industry (Collins, 2000; Steele, 2021). I demonstrate how Black feminists' manipulation of digital features on ebony.com lays claim to Black girls’ marginal presence. For example, the memory of laid R&B singer Aaliyah haunted ebony.com to bear witness to the widespread neglect of R. Kelly’s pedophilia. An image exists on the front page and background of Lemieux’s article “WERE You Wrong About R. Kelly?” (2013). The images display the two sitting together on a couch in the 1990s with a text that reads, “Aaliyah and R. Kelly, at ages 14 and 27, respectively” (Lemieux, 2013). This article emphasizes the age difference between R. Kelly and Aaliyah who were presumed to be legally married around the time of the photo. The images create rhetorical noise that disrupts the normalization of celebrity’s immoral relationships with Black girls.

Blaming Agents and Practices

Although Pough argues that “[b]laming rappers [is] useless because they are not political leaders,” I highlight the practice of assigning blameworthy agents, vices, and behaviors, as an avenue of digital wrecking (Pough, 2015, p. 219; Hardy, 2022). In “The Most Cringe-Inducing Moments from the R. Kelly Huffington Post Live Interview,” #TeamEBONY narrates a timely disruption by outlining seven “WTF moments” in the interview. #TeamEBONY documents times when there are lapses in R. Kelly’s confidence like when Modarressy-Tehrani hit Kells with a tweet about referencing his involvement with underage girls” (2015). The texts covertly allocate blame on R. Kelly’s public deflection from his sexual assault to invoke humor and identify a time when those in the Black community need to be observant to the peculiarities of sexual predators.

Reimagination of the Black Public Sphere by Challenging Sexual Violence

I demonstrate how ebony.com practiced a digital wrecking in its reimagination of what Black communities’ support of celebrities who assault Black girls should be. Pickens in “Help Say Hell No to R. Kelly” (2015) writes, “We will not let him go. We are holding to R. Kelly the way we hold on to many of the Black men in our community who terrorize Black girls.” Through the bolding of text, Pickens asserts that the movement must go beyond the artist to hold those accountable for sexual violence regardless of their celebrity status by forcing them to publicly answer for their actions. Black feminist writers used ebony.com to include Black girls in the broader movement for Black lives
and demanded those in the Black community to uphold a commitment to accountability as a mechanism of protection and justice.

**Conclusion**
Tracing the transition of Black magazines like *Ebony* to the digital sphere allows us to see how the vision for upward mobility traverses the multimodal forms of websites as mechanisms of Black feminist intervention. Examining *ebony.com* revealed the ways digital Black feminist bring disruptive rhetoric to public digital spaces and how their participation critiques long-standing narratives by exposing structural systems of power that work to subjugate themselves and Black girls.

**References**


