MUSIC / CULTURE

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Black Noise

RAP MUSIC AND BLACK CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

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CHAPTER FIVE

Bad Sistas

Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music

Some think that we can't flow (can't flow)
Stereotypes they got to go (got to go)
I'm gonna mess around and flip the scene into reverse
With what?
With a little touch of ladies first.
—Queen Latifah[1]

She that has an ear, let her hear
The words I'm about to speak are black but clear
I bring light for us to fight the right fight
So that in darkness you might have sight, alright?
All won't come along but Harmony is still singing that song
Cause I'm strong
This is when—when and where I enter
The impact I have is the focus the center.
—Harmony[2]

Women have to work twice as hard to get half the credit. Unfortunately, that's just how it is for women in this society. Rap is no different. It's fucked up.
—Kid (from Kid-N-Play)[3]

Black women rappers interpret and articulate the fears, pleasures, and promises of young black women whose voices have been relegated to the margins of public discourse. They are integral and resistant voices in rap music and in popular music in general who sustain an ongoing dialogue with their audiences and with male rappers about sexual promiscuity, emotional commitment, infidelity, the drug trade, racial politics, and black cultural history. By paying close attention to female rappers, we can gain some insight into how young African-American women provide for themselves a relatively safe free-play zone where they creatively address questions of sexual power, the reality of truncated economic opportunity, and the pain of racism and sexism. Like their male counterparts, they are predominantly resistant voices that at times voice ideas

fer from male rappers, however, is in their thematic focus. Although male rappers' social criticism often contests police harassment and other means by which black men are "policed," black women rapper's central contestation is in the arena of sexual politics.

Female rappers have been uniformly touted as sexually progressive, antisexist voices in rap music. Given the prominence and strength of these black women's voices in the popular terrain, it is not surprising that they have been heralded as rap's politically correct underdogs.[4] Their media status as antisexist rappers is necessarily accompanied by an understanding of male rappers as uniformly sexist. This opposition between male and female rappers serves to produce imaginary clarity in the realm of rap's sexual politics, rather than confront its contradictory nature.

The complexity of male and female sexual narratives rarely, if ever, find their way into discussions of sexism or feminism in rap. In the case of critical writing on male rappers, nonsexist and pro-women commentary about women and gender are virtually nonexistent. Instead, discussions of sexual references in male rappers' work are limited to considerations of the nature of rap's sexism. Similarly, critical commentary on female rappers rarely confronts the ways in which some of their work affirms patriarchal family norms and courtship rituals.

Repositioning women rappers as part of a dialogic process with male rappers (and others), rather than in complete opposition to them, I want to consider the ways black women rappers work within and against dominant sexual and racial narratives in American culture. For example, some female rappers affirm aspects of sexual power relationships as they raise incisive questions that seriously challenge the current distribution of power between men and women. Works by black women rappers that place black women's bodies in the spotlight have a similarly contradictory effect; they affirm black female beauty and yet often preserve the logic of female sexual objectification.

Three central themes predominate in the works of black female rappers: heterosexual courtship, the importance of the female voice, and mastery in women's rap and black female public displays of physical and sexual freedom. Here, these themes are contextualized in two ways; first, in dialogue with male rappers' sexual discourses, and then in dialogue with larger social discourses, including feminism. Clearly, female rappers are at least indirectly responding to male rappers' sexist constructions of black women. However, female rappers' sexual discourse is not simply part of a dialogue with male rappers, but also it responds

to a variety of related issues, including dominant notions of femininity, feminism, and black female sexuality. At the very least, black women rappers are in dialogue with one another, black men, black women, and dominant American culture as they struggle to define themselves against a confining and treacherous social environment.

The concept of dialogue, exchange, and multidirectional communication is a useful way to understand the contradictory aspects and partiality of means of communication in popular music and cultural expression. In his application of Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism to popular music, George Lipsitz argues that: "Popular music is nothing if not dialogic, the product of an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or last word. The traces of the past that pervade the popular music of the present amount to more than mere chance: they are not simply juxtapositions of incompatible realities. They reflect a dialogic process, one embedded in collective history and nurtured by the ingenuity of artists interested in fashioning icons of opposition."[5] Lipsitz's interpretation of popular music as a social and historical dialogue is an extremely important break from traditional, formalist interpretations of music. By grounding cultural production historically and avoiding the application of a fixed inventory of core structures, Lipsitz in his use of dialogic criticism is concerned with how popular music "arbitrates tensions between opposition and co-optation at any given historical moment." Linking popular musical discourses to the social world, Lipsitz's use of dialogic criticism in popular music shares a number of similarities with James Scott's interpretation of the hidden and public transcripts in rituals, gossips, folktales, and other popular practices. Both approaches examine power relationships as they are acted out, resisted, and affirmed in popular practices, and each understands that popular practices enter into and revise dialogues already in progress.[6]

Lipsitz's use of dialogic criticism is especially productive in the context of black women rappers. Negotiating multiple social boundaries and identities, black women rappers are in dialogue with one another, with male rappers, with other popular musicians (through sampling and other revisionary practices), with black women fans, and with hip hop fans in general. Dialogism resists the one-dimensional opposition between male and female rappers as respectively sexist and feminist. It also accommodates the tension between sympathetic racial bonds among black men and women as well as black women's frustration regarding sexual oppression at the hands of black men. As Cornel West aptly describes it, "the pressure on Afro-Americans as a people has forced the

black man closer to the black woman: they are in the same boat. But they are also at each other's throat. The relation is internally hierarchical and often mediated by violence: black men over black women."[7] In addition, dialogism allows us to ground apparent inconsistencies and contradictions in rap's sexual politics within the complexity and contradictions of everyday life and protest, and it also allows us to make sense of the contradictory modes of resistance in women rappers' work.

Unfortunately, most discussions of rap's sexual politics and black women rappers do not account for these real-life complexities. Instead, discussions of women rappers can be divided into two related positions: (1) women rappers are feminist voices who combat sexism in rap; and/or (2) the sexist exclusion or mischaracterization of women's participation in rap music devalues women's significance and must be countered by evidence of women's contributions. In the former position, female rap lyrics, such as those by Latifah cited in the epigraph, are frequently offered as indirect critiques of infamous such works as those of the 2 Live Crew, Geto Boys, NWA, and others. In this battle between the sexes, male rappers are constructed as sexist and female rappers are constructed as feminist or womanist.[8] For example, Michelle Wallace's *New York Times* article, "When Black Feminism Faces the Music and the Music is Rap," concludes with a call for dialogue between male and female rappers regarding sex and sexism; yet the bulk of the piece, in fact, describes male rapper's references to sex as displaying "little regard for the humanity of the black woman" and positions female rappers in opposition to these male rappers.[9]

There are at least two problems with the monolith of male sexism and women rapper's opposition to it. First, and most obviously, it places female rappers in a totalizing oppositional relationship to male rappers. This is not to say that women rappers do not directly criticize sexist male rap lyrics, but their relationship to male rappers cannot be characterized as one of complete opposition. For example, during the height of the 2 Live Crew controversy over obscenity in popular music, a number of prominent female rappers were asked to comment on the 2 Live Crew and the sexist content of their lyrics. I only observed Salt from Salt 'N' Pepa speaking out against 2 Live Crew, and she did so in terms that resembled familiar black nationalist calls for "respecting" black women, rather than calling for an end to sexism. MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Sister Souljah, and Yo-Yo refused to criticize their male colleagues—not necessarily because they did not find the lyrics offensive, but because they were acutely aware of the dominant discursive context within which their responses would be reproduced. Cognizant that they were being

constructed in the mainstream press as a progressive response to regressive male rappers, these female rappers felt that they were being used as a political baton to beat male rappers over the head, rather than being affirmed as women who could open up public dialogue to interrogate sexism and its effects on young black women. Furthermore, they remain acutely aware of the uneven and sometimes racist way in which sexist offenses are prosecuted, stigmatized, and reported. And so, in several public contexts, women rappers defended male rappers' freedom of speech and focused their answers on the question of censorship rather than on sexism in rap lyrics.[10] This is not to say that their evasive tactics are not problematic in so far as they may implicitly sanction verbal attacks on women in rap. My point here is that women rappers cannot be situated in total opposition to male rappers; they support and critique male rappers' sexual discourse in a number of contradictory ways.[11]

Second, this way of thinking cannot account for the complexity and contradictory nature of the sexual dialogues in rap; not only those taking place between male and female rappers but within male sexual themes and within female sexual themes in rap: male rappers' sexual discourse is not consistently sexist, and female sexual discourse is not consistently feminist. Not only do women rappers defend male rappers' sexist speech in a larger society that seems to attack black men disproportionately, but their lyrics sometimes affirm patriarchal notions about family life and the traditional roles of husbands, fathers, and lovers. Similarly, there are many lyrics in male rappers' work that not only chastise men for abusing women but also call for male responsibility in childrearing and support the centrality of black women in black cultural life. For example, several male rappers' works take an explicit stand against sexual violence toward women. De La Soul's "Millie Pulled a Pistol on Santa" is a brilliant and poignant story about a young girl whose father's sexual abuse of her and her inability to convince adults of his crime drives her to kill him. A Tribe Called Quest's "Description of a Fool" defines a fool as, among other things, a man who hits a woman; and Tribe's "Date Rape" takes a decidedly pro-woman position about the coercive power men have in date rape situations. Some examples are not so easily positioned as progressive or regressive. In a single lyrical stanza in Tim Dog's "Fuck Compton," Tim Dog criticizes and chastises NWA producer Dr. Dre for his cowardly real-life physical abuse of female rapper and video host Dee Barnes; yet, a few phrases later he solidifies his power over Dr. Dre by bragging about how he "fucked" Dr. Dre's girlfriend behind his back. Gangster rapper Ice Cube calls for killing police officers and then turns his rage on black women, calling for slaying "bitches" in the same phrase.

Cube's lyrics suggest that state authority figures and black women are similarly responsible for black male disempowerment and oppression. Similar contradictions appear in women rappers' work. Yo-Yo's "Don't Play with My Yo-Yo" features Ice Cube repeating the song's title as part of the chorus, a move that allows Yo-Yo to be possessed by Ice Cube, albeit as a way to protect her from enemies and unwanted male advances. Salt 'N' Pepa's "Independent" attacks a man whose weakness is a product of his incapacity to provide material possessions and his limited economic means, a move that sustains the link between masculinity and economic privilege. In a number of raps by women, men who are being insulted are referred to as "fruity" or "punks," hinting at their possible homosexuality as a way to emasculate them. This sort of homophobia affirms oppressive standards of heterosexual masculinity and problematizes a simplistic reading of female rappers' sexual narratives.[12]

The second approach to black women rappers and rap's sexual politics, the sexist exclusion or mischaracterization of black women's participation in rap music, has two faces. Either analyses of rap are aggressively masculine and render women rappers invisible, or black female contributions are rightfully and extensively presented to counter previous deletions. A subtle but important example of the former is Houston Baker's "Hybridity, the Rap Race and Pedagogy for the 1990s," in which Baker explains rap's emergence as, in part, a "resentment of disco culture and a reassertion of black manhood." To define rap's emergence as a reassertion of black manhood not only affirms the equation of male heterosexuality with manhood, but also it renders sustained and substantial female pleasure and participation in hip hop invisible or impossible. The centrality of heterosexual male pleasure and identity in his construction is not the problem; it is, instead, his formulation of male pleasure in rap coupled with the total absence of women at the conceptual level that render his analysis incorrect and problematic.[13]

Nelson George's 1989 ten-year anniversary tribute to rap is a much more explicit case of what I call the "what women?" syndrome. In honor of rap's birthday in the recording industry, George, a black music historian and pro–hip hop music critic, published a sentimental rap retrospective in which he mourned rap's movement from a street subculture into the cold, sterile world of commercial record production.[14] George pointed out that, until recently, music industry powers have maintained a studied indifference to rap music. And now that rap's "commercial viability has been proven," many major recording companies are signing any halfway decent act they can find.

What worries George is that corporate influence on black music has

led, in the past, to the dissolution of vibrant black cultural forms and that rap may become the latest victim. The problem is complex, real, and requires analysis. However, Nelson George and media critics generally, embed their descriptions of "authentic rap" and fears of recent corporate influence on it, in gender-coded discourse that mischaracterizes rap and silences women rappers and consumers. In his tenth-anniversary piece, George traces major shifts in rap, naming titles, artists, and producers. He weaves over twenty rap groups into his piece and names not a single female rapper. His retrospective is chockfull of prideful urban black youths (read men) whose contributions to rap reflect "the thoughts of city kids more deeply than the likes of Michael Jackson, Oprah Winfrey et al." His concluding remarks make apparent his underlying perception of rap: "To proclaim the death of rap is to be sure, premature. But the farther the control of rap gets from its street corner constituency and the more corporations grasp it—record conglomerates, Burger King, Minute Maid, Yo! MTV Raps, etc.—the more vulnerable it becomes to cultural emasculation." For George, corporate meddling not only dilutes cultural forms, but also it reduces strapping, testosterone-packed men into women! Could we imagine anything worse? Nelson George's concluding remarks are extreme but not unusual; his is but one example of media critics' consistent coding of rap music as male in the face of a significant and sustained female presence. Furthermore, George's mindboggling, yet emblematic, definition of rap as a "ultra-urban, unromantic, hyperrealistic, neo-nationalist, antiassimilationist, aggressive Afrocentric impulse," not only simplifies the complexity of masculinity, but also his definition is designed to conjure only a heterosexual masculine subject without drawing critical attention toward *how* black male heterosexuality is socially-constructed. For George, and for media critics in general, it is far easier to regender women rappers than it is to revise their own masculinist analysis of rap music. My immediate reaction to this article took the form of a letter to the editor of the *Village Voice*, which was published with the name tag "Lady Complainer," a petty and sexist attempt to devalue my criticism while retaining the appearance of being committed to open critique and dialogue. (We will return to this strategy of designating women's public speech as "complaint" a bit later.)

Many of the articles that have attempted to address the deletion of women in rap have been written by women and offer feminist analyses of the contributions of women to hip hop.[15] As several of these writers point out, the marginalization, deletion, and mischaracterization of women's role in black cultural production is routine practice. Nancy

Guevara charges that the "exclusion and/or trivialization of women's role in hip hop" is no mere oversight. In response to these exclusions, Guevara's "Women Writin', Rappin' and Breakin'" documents black and Latino female participation in hip hop from the earliest stages in the mid-1970s and it articulates the ways in which young women were discouraged from participating in hip hop youth culture.[16]

Two essays began to draw on the dialogic aspects of popular music via an exploration of the nature and character of black women's popular musical production in relationship to black culture and to larger cultural discourses. In her article, "Black Women and Music: A Historical Legacy of Struggle," Angela Davis puts forth three related arguments of particular importance. First, she challenges the marginal representation of black women in the documentation of African-American cultural developments and suggests that these representations do not adequately reflect women's participation. Second, she notes that music, song, and dance are especially rich places to look for the collective consciousness of black Americans. And third, she calls for a close reexamination of black woman's musical legacy as a way to understand black women's consciousness. She writes: "Music has long permeated the daily life of most African-Americans; it has played a central role in the normal socialization process; and during moments characterized by intense movements for social change, it has helped to shape the necessary political consciousness. Any attempt, therefore, to understand in depth the evolution of women's consciousness within the Black community requires a serious examination of the music which has influenced them—particularly that which they themselves have created."[17] Davis's argument is important, because it links black music to black politics; more important, it links black music to black women's racial, sexual, and political identities. Davis's approach identifies black music as a critical factor in the fashioning of a black collective consciousness—to which Lipsitz might add, a critical factor that "contributes to an on-going historical conversation in which no one has the first or last word."

Addressing similar issues regarding the absence or misrepresentation of black women's musical production, Hazel Carby charges that white-dominated feminist discourse has marginalized nonwhite women and questions of black sexuality. In responding to the reliance on black women's fiction as primary texts for analyzing black female discourse, Carby argues forcefully that representations of black women's sexuality in African-American literature differs significantly from representations of sexuality in black women's blues. Stating that, "different cultural forms negotiate and resolve different sets of social contradictions,"

Carby suggests that many literary and cultural studies scholars have perhaps allowed black women writers to speak on behalf of a large segment of black women whose daily lives and material conditions may not be adequately reflected in black women's fiction. For example, the consumption patterns and social contexts for reception of popular music differ significantly from those of fiction.[18] The dialogic capacity of popular music, particularly that of rap music, seems especially suited for engaging many of the social contradictions and ambiguities that pertain specifically to contemporary urban working-class black life.

Carby and Davis are calling for a multifaceted analysis of black women's identity and sexuality with special attention paid to their musical production. Placing black popular music and black women's musical production at center stage, Carby and Davis lay a foundation for analyses of black women rappers that can confront the complex and contradictory nature of popular expression and black female social identities.

* * *

Rap is co-ed now. —Roxanne Shante

Although there are significantly fewer female than male rappers, they have a prominent role in rap and a substantial following. It is difficult to ignore the massive increase in record deals for women rappers following Salt 'N' Pepa's double platinum (2 million) 1986 debut album *Hot, Cool and Vicious*. Such volume album sales, even for a rap album by a male artist, were virtually unprecedented in 1986. Since then, several female rappers, many of whom have been rapping for years (some since the mid-1970s) have finally been recorded and promoted.[19] Says female rapper Ms. Melodie: "It wasn't that the male started rap, the male was just the first to be put on wax. Females were always into rap, and females always had their little crews and were always known for rockin' house parties and streets or whatever, school yards, the corner, the park, whatever it was."[20] In the early stages, women's participation in rap was hindered by gender-related considerations. M.C. Lady "D" notes that because she didn't put a female crew together for regular performances, she "didn't have to worry about getting (her) equipment ripped off, coming up with the cash to get it in the first place, or hauling it around on the subways to gigs, problems that kept a lot of other women out of rap in the early days."[21] For a number of reasons, including increased record industry support and more demand for rappers generally and female rappers specifically, women have greater access to production and transportation resources.

MC Lyte's 1988 release "Paper Thin" sold over 125,000 copies in the

first six months with virtually no radio play. Lady B, who became the first recorded woman rapper in 1978, has since become Philadelphia's top rated DJ on WUSL and is founder and editor-in-chief of *Word Up!*, a tabloid devoted to hip hop.[22] Salt 'N' Pepa's first single "Expressions," from *Black's Magic*, went gold in the first week and stayed in the number one position on Billboard's Rap Chart for over two months. Most of these songs address black women's rejection of black male domination, an assertion of new terms for heterosexual courtship, and the centrality of black women's voices.

Courting Disaster

Raps written by women that specifically concern male-female relationships almost always confront the tension between trust and savvy; between vulnerability and control. Some raps celebrate their sisters for "getting over" on men, rather than touting self-reliance and honesty. For example, in Icey Jaye's "It's a Girl Thang," she explains how she and her friends find ways to spend as much of their dates' money as possible and mocks the men who fall for their tricks. Similarly, in the video for Salt 'N' Pepa's "Independent" Salt accepts several expensive gifts from a string of dates who hope to win her affection with diamond necklaces and rings. In raps such as these, women are taking advantage of the logic of heterosexual courtship in which men coax women into submission with trinkets and promises for financial security. Nikki D's "Up the Ante for the Panty" and B.W.P.'s "We Want Money" are more graphic examples of a similar philosophy. However, for the most part, when they choose to rap about male-female relations, women rappers challenge the depictions of women in many male raps as gold diggers and address the fears many women share regarding male dishonesty and infidelity.

MC Lyte and Salt 'N' Pepa have reputations for biting raps that criticize men who manipulate and abuse women. Their lyrics tell the story of men taking advantage of women, cheating on them, taking their money, and then leaving them for other unsuspecting female victims. These raps are not mournful ballads about the trials and tribulations of being a heterosexual woman. Similar to women's blues, they are caustic, witty, and aggressive warnings directed at men and at other women who might be seduced by them in the future. By offering a woman's interpretation of the terms of heterosexual courtship, these women's raps cast a new light on male-female sexual power relations and depict women as resistant, aggressive participants. Yet, even the raps that explore and revise

women's role in the courtship process often retain the larger patriarchal parameters of heterosexual courtship.

Salt 'N' Pepa's 1986 single "Tramp" is strong advice, almost boot camp, for single black women. "Tramp" is not, as Salt 'N' Pepa warn, a "simple rhyme," but a parable about courtship rituals between men and women:

> Homegirls attention you must pay to what I say
> Don't take this as a simple rhyme
> Cause this type of thing happens all the time
> Now what would you do if a stranger said "Hi"
> Would you dis him or would you reply?
> If you'd answer, there is a chance
> That you'd become a victim of circumstance
> Am I right fellas? tell the truth
> Or else I'll have to show and prove
> You are what you are I am what I am
> It just so happens that most men are TRAMPS.[23]

In the absence of any response to "Am I right fellas?" (any number of sampled male replies easily could have been woven in here), Salt 'N' Pepa "show and prove" the trampings of several men who "undress you with their eyeballs," "think you're a dummy, on the first date, had the nerve to tell me he loves me" and of men who always have sex on the mind. Salt 'N' Pepa's parable defines promiscuous *males* as tramps, and thereby inverts the common belief that male sexual promiscuity is a status symbol. This reversal undermines the degrading "woman as tramp" image by stigmatizing male promiscuity. Salt 'N' Pepa suggest that women who respond to sexual advances made by these men are victims of circircumstance. In this case, it is predatory, disingenuous men who are the tramps.

The music video for "Tramps" is a comic rendering of a series of social club scenes that highlight tramps on the make, mouth freshener in hand, testing their lines on the nearest woman. Dressed in the then-latest hip hop street gear, Salt 'N' Pepa perform the song on television, on a monitor perched above the bar. Because they appear on the television screen, they seem to be surveying and critiquing the club action, but the club members cannot see them. There are people dancing and talking together (including likeable men who are coded as "non-tramps"), who seem unaware of the television monitor. Salt 'N' Pepa are also shown in the club, dressed in very stylish, sexy outfits. Salt 'N' Pepa act as decoys, talking and flirting with the tramps to flesh out the dramatization of tramps on the prowl. They make several knowing gestures at the camera to reassure the viewer that they are unswayed by the tramps' efforts.

The tramps and their victims interact only with body language. The club scenes have no dialogue; we hear only Salt 'N' Pepa lyrics over the musical tracks for "Tramp," which serve respectively as the video's narrative and the club's dance music. Viewing much of the club action from Salt 'N' Pepa's authoritative position—through the television monitor—we can safely observe the playful but cautionary dramatization of heterosexual courtship. One tramp who is rapping to a woman, postures and struts, appearing to ask something like the stock pick-up line: "what is your zodiac sign, baby?" When she shows disgust and leaves her seat, he repeats the same body motions and gestures on the next woman who happens to sit down. Near the end of the video, a frustrated "wife" enters the club and drags one of the tramps home, smacking him in the head with her pocketbook. Salt 'N' Pepa are standing next to the wife's tramp in the club, shaking their heads as if to say "what a shame." Simultaneously, they are pointing and laughing at the husband from the television monitor. At the end of the video, a still frame of each man is stamped "tramp," and Salt 'N' Pepa revel in having identified and exposed them. They then leave the club together, without men, seemingly enjoying their skill at exposing the real intentions of these tramps.

Salt 'N' Pepa are "schooling" women about the sexual politics of the club scene, by engaging in and critiquing the drama of heterosexual courtship. The privileged viewer is a woman who is directly addressed in the lyrics and presumably can empathize fully with the visual depiction and interpretation of the scenes. The video's resolution can be interpreted as a warning to both men and women. Women: Don't fall for these men either by talking to them in the clubs or believing the lies they'll tell you when they come home. Men: You will get caught eventually, and you'll be embarrassed. Another message suggested by the video for "Tramp" is that women can go to these clubs, successfully play along with "the game" as long as the power of female sexuality and the terms of male desire are understood and negotiated.

However, "Tramp" does not interrogate "the game" itself. "Tramp" implicitly accepts the larger dynamics and power relationships between men and women. Although the tramps are embarrassed and momentarily contained at the end of the video, in no way can it be suggested that these tramps will stop hustling women and cheating on their wives. More important, what of women's desire? Not only is it presumed that men will continue their dishonest behavior, but women's desire for an idealized monogamous heterosexual relationship is implicitly confirmed as an unrealized (but not unrealizable?) goal. In their quest for an hon-

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est man, should not the sobering fact that "most men are tramps" be considered a point of departure for rejecting the current courtship ritual altogether?

Salt 'N' Pepa leave the club together, seemingly pleased by their freedom and by their ability to manipulate men into pursuing them "to no end." But the wife drags her husband home—she is not shocked but rather frustrated by what appears to be frequent dishonest behavior. What conclusion is to be drawn from this lesson? Do not trust tramps, separate the wheat from the tramps, and continue in your quest for an honest, monogamous man. "Tramp" is courtship advice for women who choose to participate in the current configuration of heterosexual courtship, it does not offer an alternative paradigm for such courtship, and in some ways it works inside of the very courtship rules that it highlights and criticizes. At best, "Tramp" is an implicit critique of the club scene as a setting for meeting potential mates as well as of the institution of marriage that permits significant power imbalances clearly weighted in favor of men.

MC Lyte has a far less comedic response to Sam, a boyfriend whom she catches trying to pick up women. MC Lyte's underground hit "Paper Thin" is one of the most scathingly powerful raps about male dishonesty and infidelity and the tensions between trust and vulnerability in heterosexual relations. Lyte has been burned by Sam, but she has turned her

experience into a black woman's anthem that sustains an uncomfortable balance between brutal cynicism and honest vulnerability:

> When you say you love me it doesn't matter
> It goes into my head as just chit chatter
> You may think it's egotistical or just very free
> But what you say, I take none of it seriously. . . .
>
> I'm not the kind of girl to try to play a man out
> They take the money and then they break the hell out.
> No that's not my strategy, not the game I play
> I admit I play a game, but it's not done that way.
> Truly when I get involved I give it my heart
> I mean my mind, my soul, my body, I mean every part.
> But if it doesn't work out—yo, it just doesn't.
> It wasn't meant to be, you know it just wasn't.
> So, I treat all of you like I treat all of them.
> What you say to me is just paper thin.[24]

Lyte's public acknowledgment that Sam's expressions of love were paper thin is not a source of embarrassment for her but a means of empowerment. She plays a brutal game of the dozens on Sam while wearing her past commitment to him as a badge of honor and sign of character. Lyte presents commitment, vulnerability, and sensitivity as assets, not indicators of female weakness. In "Paper Thin," emotional and sexual commitment are not romantic, Victorian concepts tied to honorable but dependent women; they are a part of her strategy, part of the game she plays in heterosexual courtship.

"Paper Thins'" high-energy video contains many elements present in hip hop. The video opens with Lyte, dressed in a sweatsuit, chunk jewelry, and sneakers, abandoning her new Jetta hastily because she wants to take the subway to clear her head. A few members of her male posse, shocked at her desire to leave her Jetta on the street for the subway, follow along behind her, down the steps to the subway tracks. (Her sudden decision to leave her new car for the subway and her male posse's surprised reaction seems to establish that Lyte rarely rides the subway anymore.) Lyte enters a subway car with an introspective and distracted expression. Once in the subway car, her DJ K-Rock, doubling as the conductor, announces that the train will be held in the station because of crossed signals. While they wait, Milk Boy (her female but very masculine-looking body guard) spots Sam at the other end of the car, rapping heavily to two stylish women and draws Lyte's attention to him. Lyte, momentarily surprised, begins her rhyme as she stalks toward Sam. Sam's attempts to escape fail; he is left to face MC Lyte's wrath. Eventually, she throws him off the train to the chorus of Ray Charles's R&B

classic, "Hit the Road Jack," and locks Sam out of the subway station and out of the action. The subway car is filled with young black teenagers, typical working New Yorkers and street people many of whom join Lyte in signifying on Sam while they groove on K-Rock's music. MC Lyte's powerful voice and no-nonsense image dominate Sam. The taut, driving music, which is punctuated by sampled guitar and drum sections and an Earth Wind and Fire horn section, complement Lyte's hard, expressive rapping style.

It is important that "Paper Thin" is set in public and on the subway, the quintessential mode of urban transportation. Lyte is drawn to the subway and seems comfortable there. She is also comfortable with the subway riders in her video; they are her community. During musical breaks between raps, we see passengers grooving to her music and responding to the drama. By setting her confrontation with Sam in the subway, in front of their peers, Lyte moves a private problem between lovers into the public arena and effectively dominates both spaces.

When her DJ, the musical and mechanical conductor, announces that crossed signals are holding the train in the station, it frames the video in a moment of communication crisis. The notion of crossed signals represents the inability of Sam and Lyte to communicate with one another, an inability that is primarily the function of the fact that they communicate on different frequencies. Sam thinks he can read Lyte's mind to see what she is thinking and then feed her all the right lines. But what he says carries no weight, no meaning. His discourse is light, it's paper thin. Lyte, who understands courtship as a game, confesses to being a player, yet expresses how she feels directly and in simple language. What she says has integrity, weight, and substance.

After throwing Sam from the train, she nods her head toward a young man standing against the subway door, and he follows her off the train. She will not allow her experiences with Sam to paralyze her but instead continues to participate on revised terms. As she and her new male friend walk down the street, she raps the final stanza for "Paper Thin" that sets down the new courtship ground rules:

> So, now I take precautions when choosing my mate
> I do not touch until the third or fourth date
> Then maybe we'll kiss on the fifth or sixth time that we meet
> Cause a date without a kiss is so incomplete
> And then maybe, I'll let you play with my feet
> You can suck the big toe and play with the middle
> It's so simple unlike a riddle . . .

Lyte has taken control of the process. She has selected her latest companion; he has not pursued her. This is an important move, because it

allows her to set the tone of the interaction and subsequently articulates the new ground rules that will protect her from repeating the mistakes she made in her relationship with Sam. Yet, a central revision to her courtship terms involve withholding sexual affection, a familiar strategy in courtship rituals for women that implicitly affirms the process of male pursuit as it forestalls it. Nonetheless, Lyte seems prepared for whatever takes place. Her analysis of courtship seems to acknowledge that there are dishonest men and that she is not interested in negotiating on their terms. Lyte affirms her courtship rules as she identifies and critiques the terms of men such as Sam. In "Paper Thin" she has announced that her desire will govern her behavior and *his* ("you can suck my big toe and then play with the middle") and remains committed to her principles at the same time.

As "products of an ongoing historical conversation," "Paper Thin" and "Tramp" are explicitly dialogic texts that draw on the language and terms imbedded in long-standing struggles over the parameters of heterosexual courtship. These raps are also dialogic in their use of black collective memory via black music. Salt 'N' Pepa's "Tramp" draws its horns and parts of its rhythm section from the 1967 soul song of the same name performed by Otis Redding and Carla Thomas. Otis's and Carla's "Tramp" is a dialogue in which Carla expresses her frustration over Otis's failure in their relationship while he makes excuses and attempts to avoid her accusations.[25] Salt 'N' Pepa's musical quotation of Otis's and Carla's "Tramp" set a multilayered dialogue in motion. The musical style of Salt 'N' Pepa's "Tramp" carries the blues bar confessional mode of many rhythm and blues songs updated with rap's beats and breaks. Salt 'N' Pepa are testifying to Carla's problems via the music, at the same time providing their contemporary audience with a collective reference to black musical predecessors and the history of black female heterosexual struggles.

Lyte's direct address to Sam ("when you say you love it doesn't matter") is her half of a heated conversation in which Sam is silenced by her, but nonetheless present. Lyte's announcement that she "admits playing a game but it's not done that way" makes it clear that she understands the power relationships that dictate their interaction. Lyte encourages herself and by extension black women to be fearless and self-possessed ("sucker you missed, I know who I am") in the face of significant emotional losses. Her game, her strategy, have a critical sexual difference that lays the groundwork for a black female-centered communal voice that revises and expands the terms of female power in heterosexual courtship.

The dialogic and resistive aspects in "Tramps" and "Paper Thin" are

also present the body of other women rappers' work. Many female rappers address the frustration heterosexual women experience in their desire for intimacy with and commitment from men. The chorus in Neneh Cherry's "Buffalo Stance" tells men not to mess with her, and that money men can't buy her love because it's affection that she's lookin' for; "Say That Then" from West Coast female rappers Oaktown 3-5-7, give no slack to "Finger popping, hip hoppin' wanna be bed rockin'" men; Monie Love's "It's a Shame" is a pep talk for a woman breaking up with a man who apparently needs to be kicked to the curb; Ice Cream Tee's "All Wrong" chastises women who allow men to abuse them; Monie Love's "Just Don't Give a Damn" is a confident and harsh rejection of an emotionally and physically abusive man; and MC Lyte's "I Cram to Understand U," "Please Understand," and "I'm Not Havin' It" are companion pieces to "Paper Thin."

This strategy, in which women square off with men, can be subverted and its power diminished. As Laura Berlant suggests, this mode of confrontational communication can be contained or renamed as the "female complaint." In other words, direct and legitimate criticism is reduced to "bitching" or complaining as way of containing dissent. Berlant warns that the "female complaint . . . as a mode of expression is an admission and recognition both of privilege and powerlessness . . . circumscribed by a knowledge of woman's inevitable delegitimation within the patriarchal public sphere." Berlant argues that resistance to sexual oppression must take place "in the patriarchal public sphere, the place where significant or momentous exchanges of power are perceived to take place," but that the female complaint is devalued, marginalized, and ineffective in this sphere. Berlant offers an interpretation of "Roxanne's Revenge," an early and popular rap record by black female rapper Roxanne Shante, as an example of the pitfalls of the "female complaint." Attempts were made to contain and humiliate Roxanne on a compilation record that included several other related answer records. Berlant says that "Roxanne's Revenge" is vulnerable to "hystericization by a readily available phallic discourse (which) is immanent in the very genre of her expression."[26]

Berlant is making an important point about the vulnerability of women's voices to devaluation. No doubt women's angry responses have long been made to appear hysterical and irrational or whiny and childlike. I am not sure, though, that we can equate attempts to render women's voices as "complaint" with the voices themselves. To do so may place too much value on the attempts to contain women. "Roxanne's Revenge" gave voice to a young girl's response to real-life street confrontations with men. She entered into black male-dominanted public

space and drew a great deal of attention away from the UTFO song to which she responded. More importantly, "Roxanne's Revenge" has retained weight and significance in hip hop since 1985 when it was released. This has not been the case for UTFO, the UTFO song, or any of the fabricated responses on the compilation record. Much of the status of the original UTFO song "Roxanne Roxanne" is a result of the power of Roxanne Shante's answer record. What Berlant illustrates is the ways in which Roxanne's "female complaint" needed to be labeled as such and then contained precisely because it was threatening. It did not go unnoticed, because it was a compelling voice in the public domain that captured the attention of male and female hip hop fans. The compilation record is clearly an attempt at containing her voice, but it was, in my estimation an unsuccessful attempt. Furthermore, such attempts at circumscription will continue to take place when partial, yet effective, attacks are made, whether in the form of the female complaint or not. Nonetheless, Berlant's larger argument, which calls for substantial female public sphere presence and contestation is crucial. These public sphere contests must involve more than responses to sexist male speech; they must also entail the development of sustained, strong female voices that stake claim to public space generally.

Preeminent Emcees: Who's the Boss?

Rapping skills involve verbal mastery, mastery of delivery, creativity, personal style, and virtuosity. Rappers seize the public stage, demanding the audience's attention and winning their admiration. Their rhymes are embedded in an aggressive self-possessed identity that exudes confidence and power. Given this, rhymes that boast, signify, and toast are an important part of women rappers' repertoire. Antoinette's "Who's the Boss," Ice Cream Tee's "Let's Work," Yo-Yo's "Stompin' to tha 90's," Salt 'N' Pepa's "Everybody Get Up," and Queen Latifah's "Latifah's Had It up to Here" and "Come into My House" establish black women rappers as hip hop MCs who can move the crowd, a skill that ultimately determines one's status as a successful rapper. Even introspective raps are delivered with edgy self-possession. Women rappers who seize the public stage and win the crowd's admiration under these highly competitive conditions, represent a substantial intervention in contemporary women's performance and popular cultural identities.

"Ladies First," Queen Latifah's second release from her debut album *All Hail the Queen* is a landmark example of centralizing a strong black female public voice. Taken together, the video and lyrics for "Ladies

First" are a statement for black female unity, independence, and power, as well as an anticolonial statement concerning Africa's southern region and recognition of the importance of black female political activists, which offers hope for the development of a pro-female pro-black diasporic political consciousness. "Ladies First" is a rapid-fire and powerful rap duet between Queen Latifah and her "European sister" Monie Love. A recital on the significance and diversity of black women, "Ladies First" exploded on the rap scene. Latifah's assertive, measured voice, and opening rhyme sets the tone:

> The ladies will kick it, the rhyme it is wicked
> Those who don't know how to be pros get evicted
> A woman can bear you, break you, take you
> Now it's time to rhyme, can you relate to
> A sister dope enough to make you holler and scream?[27]

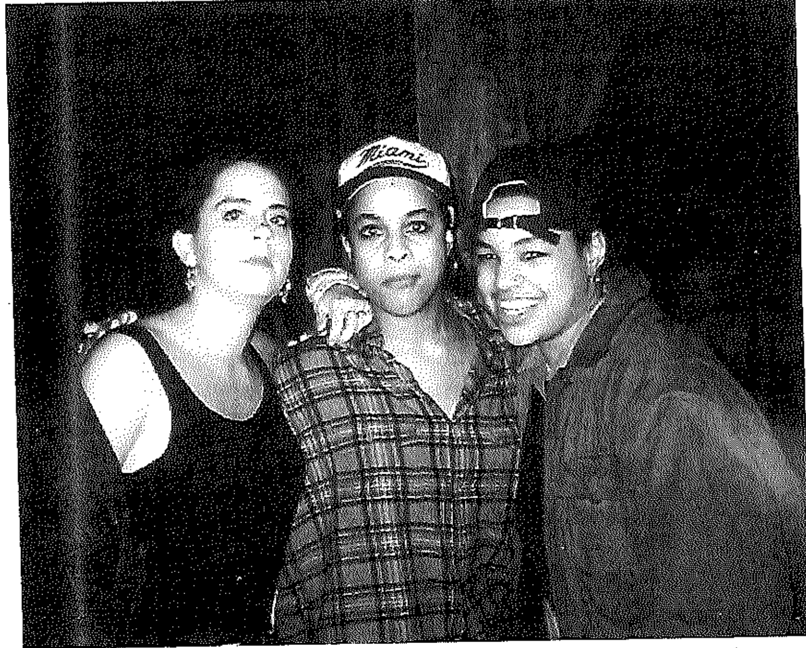
In her rapid-fire, almost double-time verse, Monie Love responds:

> Eh, Yo! Let me take it from here Queen.
> Excuse me but I think I am about due
> To get into precisely what I am about to do
> I'm conversatin' to the folks who have no whatsoever clue
> So, listen very carefully as I break it down to you
> Merrily merrily, hyper happy overjoyed,
> Pleased with all the beats and rhymes my sisters have employed
> Slick and smooth—throwing down the sound totally, a yes.
> Let me state the position: Ladies First, Yes?

Latifah responds, "YES!"

Without referring to or attacking black men, "Ladies First" is a powerful rewriting of the contributions of black women in the history of black struggles. Opening with slides of black female political activists Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, and Winnie Mandela, the video's predominant theme features Latifah as Third World military strategist. She stalks an illuminated map of Southern Africa the size of a conference table and with a long pointer shoves large, clay, chesslike figures of briefcase-carrying white men off from white-dominated countries, replacing them with large, black-power–style fists. In between these scenes, Latifah and Monie Love rap in front of and between more photos of politically prominent black women, and footage of black struggles, protests, and acts of military violence against protestors. Latifah positions herself as part of a rich legacy of black women's activism, racial commitment, and cultural pride.

The centrality of black women's political protest in "Ladies First" is a break from protest-footage rap videos, which have become quite popular over the last few years and have all but excluded footage of



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black women leaders or foot soldiers. Footage of dozens of rural African women running with sticks raised above their heads toward armed oppressors, holding their ground alongside men in equal numbers and dying in struggle are rare media images. As Latifah explains: "I wanted to show the strength of black women in history. Strong black women. Those were good examples. I wanted to show what we've done. We've done a lot, it's just that people don't know it. Sisters have been in the midst of these things for a long time, but we just don't get to see it that much."[28] After placing a black power fist on each country in Southern Africa, Latifah surveys the map, nodding contentedly. The video ends with a still frame of the region's new political order.

Latifah's self-possession and independence are important facets of the new cultural nationalism in rap. The powerful, level-headed, and black feminist character of her lyrics calls into question the historically cozy relationship between nationalism and patriarchy. Latifah strategically samples the legendary Malcolm X phrase: "There are going to be some changes made here" throughout "Ladies First." When Malcolm's voice is introduced, the camera pans the faces of some of the more prominent female rappers and DJs, including Ms. Melodie, Ice Cream Tee, and

Shelley Thunder. The next sample of Malcolm's memorable line is used to narrate South African protest footage. Latifah calls on Malcolm as a part of a collective African-American historical memory and recontextualizes him not only as a voice in support of contemporary struggles in South Africa but also as a voice in support of the imminent changes regarding the degraded status of black women and specifically black women rappers. "Ladies First" is a cumulative product that, as Lipsitz might say, "enters a dialogue already in progress." Latifah's use of the dialogic processes of naming, claiming, and recontextualizing are not random; nor are they "juxtapositions of incompatible realities." "Ladies First" affirms and revises African-American traditions past and present at the same time that it forges new territory for black women.

Express Yourself: Black Women's Bodies in the Public Sphere

Black women rappers' public displays of physical and sexual freedom often challenge male notions of female sexuality and pleasure. Salt 'N' Pepa's rap duet, "Shake Your Thang" with E.U., a prominent go-go band, is a verbal and visual display of black women's sexual resistance. The rap lyrics and video are about Salt 'N' Pepa's sexual dancing and others' responses to them. The first stanza sets them in a club "shakin' [their] thang to a funky beat with a go-go swing" and noting the shock on the faces of other patrons. With attitude to spare, Salt 'N' Pepa chant: "It's my thang and I'll swing it the way that I feel, with a little seduction and some sex appeal." The chorus, sung by the male lead in E.U., chants "Shake your thang, do what you want to do, I can't tell you how to catch a groove. It's your thang, do what you wanna do, I won't tell you how to catch a groove."[29]

The video is framed by Salt 'N' Pepa's interrogation after they have been arrested for lewd dancing. Real New York police cars pull up in front of the studio where their music video is being shot, and mock policemen (played by Kid-N-Play and Herbie Luv Bug, their producer) cart Salt 'N' Pepa away in handcuffs. When their mug shots are being taken, Salt 'N' Pepa blow a kiss to the camera person as each holds up her arrest placard. Once in the interrogation room, Kid-N-Play and Herbie ask Salt 'N' Pepa authoritatively, "what we gonna do about this dirty dancing?" Pepa reaches across the table, grabs Herbie by the tie and growls, "We gonna do what we wanna do."

The mildly slapstick interrogation scenes bind a number of other subplots. Scenes in which Salt 'N' Pepa are part of groups of women dancing and playing are interspersed with separate scenes of male dancers, co-ed

dance segments with Kid-N-Play, E.U.'s lead singer acting as a spokesman for a "free-Salt 'N' Pepa" movement and picketers in front of the police station calling for their release. When he is not gathering signatures for his petition, E.U. chants the chorus from a press-conference-style podium. The camera angles for the dance segments give the effect of a series of park or street parties. Salt 'N' Pepa shake their butts for the cameras and for each other while rapping, "My jeans fit nice, they show off my butt" and "I Like hip hop mixed with a go-go baby, it's my thang and I'll shake it crazy. Don't tell me how to party, it's my dance, yep, and it's my body."[30]

A primary source of the video's power is Salt 'N' Pepa's irreverence toward the morally based sexual constrictions placed on them as women. They mock moral claims about the proper modes of women's expression and enjoy every minute of it. Their defiance of the moral, sexual restrictions on women is to be distinguished from challenges to the seemingly gender-neutral laws against public nudity. Salt 'N' Pepa are eventually released because their dancing isn't against the law (as Salt 'N' Pepa say, "we could get loose, but we can't get naked"). But their "dirty dancing" also teases the male viewer who would misinterpret their sexual freedom as an open sexual invitation. Salt 'N' Pepa make it clear that their expression is no such thing: "A guy touch my body? I just put him in check." Salt 'N' Pepa force a wedge between overt female sexual expression and the presumption that such expressions are intended to attract men. "Shaking your thang" can create a stir, but that should not prevent women from doing it when and how they choose.

At the video's close, we return to the interrogation scene a final time. Herbie receives a call, after which he announces that they have to release Salt 'N' Pepa. The charges will not stick. Prancing out of the police station, Salt 'N' Pepa laughingly say, "I told you so." The police raid and arrests make explicit the real, informal yet institutionally based policing of female sexual expression. The video speaks to black women, calls for open, public displays of female expression, assumes a community-based support for their freedom, and focuses directly on the sexual desirability and beauty of black women's bodies.[31]

Salt 'N' Pepa's physical freedom, exemplified by their focusing on their butts, is no random expression; the black behind has an especially charged place in the history of both black sexual expression and white classification of it as a sign of sexual perversity and inferiority. It conjures a complex history of white scrutiny of black female bodies, from the repulsion and fascination with and naked exhibition of Sara Bartmann as "The Hottentot Venus" in the early 1800s to the perverse and exoticized

pleasure many Europeans received from Josephine Baker's aggressively behind-centered dances. It is also a contemporary nod to the substantial black folk history of performers and dances and songs that involve celebration of big behinds for men and women (e.g., the Bump, the Dookey Butt, and E.U. and Spike Lee's black chart topper, "Da Butt"). As bell hooks points out, "contemporary popular music is one of the primary cultural locations for discussions of black sexuality. In song lyrics, the butt is talked about in ways that attempt to challenge racist assumptions that suggest it is an ugly sign of inferiority, even as it remains a sexualized sign.[32] Because female bodies are especially scrutinized in this way, such explicit focus on the protruding behind in black popular culture counters mainstream white definitions of what constitutes a sexually attractive female body. It also serves as a rejection of the aesthetic hierarchy in American culture that marginalizes black women. American culture, in defining its female sex symbols, places a high premium on long thin legs, narrow hips, and relatively small behinds. The vast majority of white female television and film actresses, musicians, and the highest paid black models fit this description. The aesthetic hierarchy of the female body in mainstream American culture, with particular reference to the behind and hips, positions many black women somewhere near the bottom. When viewed in this context, Salt 'N' Pepa's rap and video become an inversion of the aesthetic hierarchy that renders black women's bodies inadequate and sexually unattractive.[33]

Obviously, the common practice of objectifying all women's bodies complicates the interpretation of Salt 'N' Pepa shaking their collective thangs. For some, their sexual freedom could be considered dangerously close to self-inflicted exploitation. Such interpretations of the racial and sexual significance of black female sexual expression may explain the surprisingly cautious responses I have received from some white feminists regarding the importance of women rappers, particularly in their use of sexually overt gestures and lyrics. However, as Hortense Spillers and other prominent black feminists have argued, a history of silence has surrounded African-American women's sexuality. Spillers argues that this silence has at least two faces; either black women are creatures of male sexual possession, or they are reified into the status of nonbeing.[34] Room for self-defined sexual identity exists in neither alternative. In much of the video work by female rappers, black women's bodies are centered, possessed by women, and are explicitly sexual.

These black female rap videos share a visual and lyrical universe with male rappers' work in which black women are almost always creatures of male sexual possession. Increasingly, black women's asses are being depicted as the primary target for male predatory sexual behavior. Some videos represent an exaggerated mode of real-life visual and verbal tracking and stalking of women's behinds. Most notably, "Pop That Coochie" by 2 Live Crew and "Rump Shaker" by Wrecks-in-Effex, both extremely popular and highly requested videos, are from start to finish, camera pans of black women's scantily clad, gyrating, and, in some frames, visually distorted asses.[35] Another very popular example of this, Sir-Mix-a-Lot's "Baby Got Back," is complicated by the fact that the lyrics narrate both an explicit desire for black women's protruding behinds and at the same time mock the fashion industry for celebrating anorexic-looking white women. Sir-Mix-a-Lot basically announces that they can keep those skinny women from the covers of *Cosmopolitan* and other magazines, because he and most men want a woman with a big round behind, a woman with "back." His voicing of a familiar black male vernacular sentiment that affirms black women's bodies in a cultural environment in which they are aesthetically rejected may bring a sigh of relief to many women, but unfortunately it contributes to an already entrenched understanding of women's bodies as objects of consumption.

At the same time, we cannot escape the reality of black women's complicity in these displays. In a wide variety of videos, photos, and other aspects of creative production and marketing, women who are called "hotties" or more derogatorily "video ho's" or "skeezers" are willing participants in their own exploitation. As Carmen Ashhurst-Watson, president of Rush Communications points out, "we never have any difficulty finding women to appear in the videos."[36] So abundant are these women that one producer told me that he has "hottie files" with the vital statistics of innumerable young women, so that one can be located at the drop of a hat. The motivation for this cooperation is on one level incomprehensible and on another quite familiar. Participation in this video meat market is closely related to the rock/sports/film star groupie phenomenon, in which fans, especially female, get momentary star aura by associating closely or having sex with rich and famous figures. It speaks to a profound desire for attention and praise, and it is understood or misunderstood as a vehicle for one's budding career in show business or a potential form of upward mobility out of economically fragile circumstances.

This culture of sexual exchange is not limited to video production, rap parties, and the post–rap-show hotel lobbies are filled with young women hoping to "get lucky." For some, this sort of upfront exchange in which women do the pursuing can be interpreted as a mode of female

empowerment. These women are choosing their sexual partners (more aggressively than most women do in regular situations) and collecting sexual experiences not unlike men do. For women rappers who must engage this environment regularly, this argument may not be so compelling. They are struggling for parity, fighting to be taken seriously in a music industry that has a horrible reputation for tolerating and participating in the abuse, sexual harassment, and sexist containment of women artists and employees. Women rappers who have commented on these dynamics at conferences and in rap lyrics are not calling for the patriarchal protection of women (the familiar flipside of the meat market); instead, they seem to be acknowledging that under these conditions, where male rappers and record executives have virtually all the social and institutional power, women cannot engage in this sort of display and sexual exchange in an empowering way. No matter how you slice it, these "hotties" are understood as expendable, and male desire is the driving force behind sexual encounters.

The resistant facets of black women's participation in rap and their attempts to redefine their own sexual imagery is better understood when we take the historical silence and sexual objectification of black women into consideration. The subject matter and perspectives presented in many women's rap lyrics challenge dominant notions of sexuality, heterosexual courtship, and aesthetic constructions of the body. Their visual presence in music videos and live performances displays exuberant communities of women occupying public space, sexual freedom, independence, and occasionally explicit domination over men. Through their lyrics and video images, such black women rappers as TLC, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Yo-Yo, and Salt 'N' Pepa form a dialogue with working-class black women and men, offering young black women a small but potent culturally reflexive public space.

By and large, black women rappers are carving out a female-dominated space in which black women's sexuality is openly expressed. Black women rappers sport distinctively black hairstyles and hip hop clothing and jewelry that ground them in a contemporary working-class black youth aesthetic. They affirm black female working-class cultural signs and experiences that are rarely depicted in American popular culture. Black women rappers resist patterns of sexual objectification at the hands of black men and of cultural invisibility at the hands of dominant American culture.

As I have said, sexual dialogues in rap involve intense power struggles over the meaning, terms, and conditions of male/female relationships. I have also pointed out women rappers' strategies to resist and revise

current patriarchal norms. A great deal of these power struggles are waged over sex, sexuality, and control of black female bodies. Women rappers' work clearly takes up these battles by using their sexuality and knowledge to expose men ("Tramps," "Paper Thin") to center female spectators at the expense of male viewers ("Shake Your Thang") and to link women's power to their sexual capacities ("Ladies First"). To the contrary, male sexist narratives often involve devaluing and dominating black female sexuality and sexual behavior. The profound fear and hostility expressed toward women in the works of male rappers is a complex and multicausal phenomenon. Some of this hostility toward women is related to the dominant cultural formula that equates male economic stability and one's capacity to be a family breadwinner with masculinity, thus making black men's increasingly permanent position at the bottom of or completely outside the job market a sign of emasculation, dependence, or femininity. If financial and social clout cannot provide you with masculine virility, then the private social sphere is the next best alternative. At the same time, marriage in American culture is generally less and less an institution that serves as the primary vehicle for sexual interaction, financial security, and a sign of adult independence. Black women, especially under these larger economic and social conditions, are less likely to remain in unfulfilling and abusive relationships for economic reasons. As Robin Kelley has suggested in reference to gangsta rappers, "these transformations have had tremendous impact on the way in which masculinity is constructed by (them) . . . especially in their narratives about sexual relationships. 'Bringing home the bacon' is no longer a measure of manhood; instead, heterosexual conquest free of commitment is prized much more than marriage, which in some cases is even viewed as emasculating."[37]

Another factor contributes to the tenor and abundance of sexism in rap music: the specter of black female sexual power, which partially contextualizes the themes specific to black women rappers' work. In a *Village Voice* interview with ex-NWA member Ice Cube, notorious not only for harsh sexist raps but for brilliant, chilling stories of ghetto life, Greg Tate interrogated Ice Cube about the hostility toward women expressed in rap:

TATE: Do you think rap is hostile toward women?
ICE CUBE: The whole damn world is hostile toward women.
TATE: What do you mean by that?
ICE CUBE: I mean the power of sex is more powerful than the motherfuckers in Saudi Arabia. A girl that you want to get with can make you do damn near anything. If she knows how to do her shit right, she can make you buy cigarettes you never wanted to buy in life. . . . Look at all my boys out here on this

> video shoot, all these motherfuckers sitting out here trying to look fly, hot as a motherfucker, ready to go home. But there's too many women here for them to just get up and leave. They out here since eight o'clock in the morning and ain't getting paid. They came for the girls.[38]

Ice Cube's answer may appear to be a non-sequitur, but his remarks address what I believe is a significant subtext in rap's symbolic male domination over women. Ice Cube suggests that many men are hos-tile toward women, because the fulfillment of male heterosexual desire is significantly checked by women's capacity for sexual rejection or ma-nipulation of men. Ice Cube acknowledges the reckless boundaries of his desire and its consequences as well as the power women can exercise in this sexual struggle. In his rap entitled "The Bomb," Ice Cube warns men to keep an eye on the women with big derrieres, because, it is in-ferred, the greater your desire, the more likely you are to be blinded by it and, consequently, the more vulnerable you will be to female domi-nation. Obviously, Ice Cube is not addressing the fact that the logic of patriarchy is in many ways contributing to making that desire aggres-sive, predatory, and consuming. Ice Cube and many black male rappers expose the vulnerability of heterosexual male desire in their exaggerated stories of total domination over women. These evil fantasies speak to the pervasiveness of sexism, yes, but they also speak to the realities of the struggle for power in heterosexual courtship in a sexist society in which women have power that can be and is wielded.

During my interview with MC Lyte, we discussed the indirect power women have in determining the decisions men make. At one point she described a conversation she had with her brother Giz that echoes Ice Cube's point:

> Giz told me that the reason men work, everything that man does is for a woman. If he works, it's to get a house, it's a prop house to get women to see it . . . everything a man does is to attract women. . . . So, Giz goes and buys an $800 VCR with a digital picture. I asked him, "what the hell is this, Giz?" he said, "It's a prop for the women." So, he thinks that women are gonna be fascinated by it.

I asked her if she thought women were impressed by this and whether she would be impressed by it. She said:

> It wouldn't impress me because I have my own. Some people like to live off other people. I like to have my own. I get no thrill from anybody giving me money. Some girls, you know they say, "ooh, my boyfriend gave me these earrings . . ." I'm like, "what did you get for yourself?"[39]

During the summer of 1990, a popular R&B/Rap crossover group, Bell Biv Divoe (BBD) raced up the charts with "Poison," a song about

women whose chorus warns men not to "trust a big butt and a smile." The song cautions men about giving into their sexual weakness and then being taken advantage of by a sexy woman whose motives might be equally insincere. The degree of anxiety expressed is striking; "Poison" explains both their intense desire for and profound distrust of women. The capacity of a woman to use her sexuality to manipulate *his* desire for *her* purposes is an important facet of the sexual politics of male raps about women. BBD are cautioning men, as if to say, "you may not know what a big butt and a smile really means, it might not mean pleasure—it might mean danger—poison." BBD's warning tacitly acknowledges the sustained struggles over female sexuality that their sexist narrative attempts to reconstruct as easily contained skirmishes.

Women rappers effectively engage with male hip hop fans and rappers by acknowledging this aspect of heterosexual politics. By expressing their sexuality openly and in confrontational language, and "shaking their collective thangs"—yet distinguishing themselves from "poisonous, insincere women"—black women rappers signify on heterosexual male desire. Similarly, when TLC say that they like it when men kiss "both sets of lips," they are challenging patriarchal assumptions that interpret open displays of female-controlled sexuality as a threat to male privilege and power.

I am not suggesting that women have so much untapped power that once accessed it will lead the way to the dismantling of patriarchy. Ice Cube, Giz, and BBD's expressions must be understood in the context of their status as men and the inherent social power such a gender assignment affords. But the struggle over control of black female sexuality in heterosexual courtship relations particularly must also be understood as an ongoing and never fully achieved goal. We must not take these social narratives, however vicious, as fixed realities; to do so would be to erase black female agency and give even greater power to sexist narratives that have been invented precisely for that purpose. Without the capacity of women to revise, to control the exchange, to refuse, efforts to dominate women sexually and physically would be unnecessary.

Anxiety over sexual manipulation is also present in women's raps that often display fears of loss of control and betrayal at the hands of men. What is especially interesting about these women's raps is the way in which they shift the terms of the debate. Male rappers justify their promiscuous and selfish behavior by focusing on sexually promiscuous women who "want their money" (sometimes called "skeezers") and rarely offering a depiction of a sincere woman. Black women rappers do not deny their sexual experiences by pretending to be virginal

counterparts to these "skeezers." Female rappers distinguish themselves as seasoned women with sexual confidence and financial independence who are tired of dishonest men who themselves seek sex from women (much like the women who seek money from men); a move that draws attention away from the behavior of these objectified so-called skeezers and toward the men who depend on them for establishing their much-needed sexual prowess.

Among a recent group of especially aggressive women rappers who have been dubbed "gangsta women," or "gangsta bitches," the presumption of betrayal and abuse at the hands of men has taken an aggressive and violent fantasy form similar to that of men's gangsta raps. In "Recipe of a Hoe" Boss, a female gangsta duo from Detroit who "take great pride in knocking niggas off," has pulled the trump card on gangsta posturing about sexual prowess. Boss not only derides truly promiscuous men for being used up and having too many miles on them to be worth anything but also reminds them that most of them are posturing wanna-be-pimps who can't get any women to go to bed with them at all. She ends the rhyme by saying that men are basically weak because of their slavishness to the "pussy." Lyrically, she seems to be trying to suggest that hoes are hoes regardless of gender, but in what may have been a tactical error, the chorus chant (which is about letting a hoe be a hoe) is sung by a group of men. This has the unfortunate effect of giving power and voice to the male and sexist labeling of women's sexual behavior as deviant, a move that in my estimation undermines her lyrical revisions of male sexual behavior.

These revenge fantasies against black men are as socially relevant as black men's revenge fantasies against the police. As dream hampton writes, "young Black women die at the hands of Black men who may or may not have claimed to love them, more often than they die at the hands of white men, police or otherwise." The track that follows "Recipe," entitled "a blind date with boss," is a vignette in which Boss has an upfront exchange with a man who has approached her about having sex at a party. After confirming that he wants "to fuck her," she then steps into the bathroom. He thinks she is going to return dressed in something more "comfortable," so he asks his homeboy for a condom all the while describing how hard he's gonna "fuck" her. When she re-enters the room, she cocks a pistol screaming among a string of epithets "give me your fuckin' money," they have a loud confused exchange not unlike that of a police raid and then she shoots them four times. All falls silent; a moment later she calls him a bastard.[40]

Surely, some of these musical narratives are far more confrontational

than everyday exchanges between all young men and women. Nonetheless, they do speak to a profound distrust and anxiety over the vulnerability associated with sexual intimacy that does inform everyday life. During my interview with Salt, I pressed her about how she could envision a committed heterosexual relationship without some degree of emotional dependence on a man, she replied:

> I just want to depend on myself. I feel like a relationship shouldn't be emotional dependence. I, myself, am more comfortable when I do not depend on hugs and kisses from somebody that I possibly won't get. If I don't get them then I'll be disappointed. So if I get them, I'll appreciate them.[41]

Salt's lyrics reflect much of how she feels personally: she does not want men for their money, she's independent, makes her own money, and doesn't expect men to tell her how to spend it; she reminds them how little she needs them and how much they need her.[42] In refusing to have any "expectations," she illustrates a deep mistrust of men and the possibility for a relationship in which expectations can be maintained. Drawing on personal experiences and her understanding of black women's desire for autonomy and intimacy, Salt's lyrics and comments articulate the complexity of heterosexual female autonomy and sexual desire in contemporary American culture. The battle lines have been drawn, and women seem less and less interested in doing most of the characteristically female emotional work that it would take to pry men's and women's hands from each other's throats. Perhaps Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy's rare moment of male sexual honesty in hip hop speaks to the possibility of a collective understanding of how important sexual political development is to black political and cultural struggle. In Hiphoprisy's "Music and Politics," rapper Michael Franti acknowledges how crucial personal sexual awareness and transformation are to cultural and political revolution:

> If ever I would stop thinking about music and politics . . .
> I would tell you that sometimes I use sex to avoid communication
> It's the best escape when we're down on our luck . . .
> I would tell you that the personal revolution is far more difficult
> and is the first step in any revolution.[43]

When and Where I Enter: White Feminism and Black Women Rappers

In the epigraph cited at the beginning of the chapter, Harmony conjures the title of Paula Gidding's book *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* as a way of centralizing her voice in the history of black women's struggles.[44] Given the identities

these women rappers have fashioned for themselves, one might expect
them to feel comfortable understanding themselves as feminists. How-
ever, as I mentioned earlier, critical and journalistic writing on black
women rappers implicitly and explicitly constructs them as feminist
voices in rap. However, during my conversations with Salt, MC Lyte,
and Queen Latifah it became clear that these women were uncomfort-
able with being labeled feminist and perceived feminism as a signifier for
a movement that related specifically to white women. They also thought
feminism involved adopting an antimale position, and although they
clearly express frustrations with men, they did not want to be considered
or want their work to be interpreted as anti-black male.

In MC Lyte's case, she remarked that she was often labeled a feminist even though she did not think of herself as one. Yet, after she asked for my working definition of feminist, she wholeheartedly agreed with my description, which was as follows:

> I would say that a feminist believed that there was sexism in society, wanted to change and worked toward change. Either wrote, spoke, or behaved in a way that was pro-woman, in that she supported situations (organizations) that were trying to better the lives of women. A feminist feels that women are more disadvantaged than men in many situations and would want to stop that kind of inequality.

MC Lyte responded, "Under your definition, I would say I am." We
talked further about what she imagined a feminist to be, and it became
clear that once feminism was understood as a mode of analysis rather
than as a label for a group of women associated with a particular social
movement, MC Lyte was much more comfortable discussing the impor-
tance of black women's independence: "Yes, I am very independent, and
I feel that women should be independent, but so should men. Both of
us need each other and we're just coming to a realization that we do."[45]
In her answer, Lyte constructs women's independence and male and
female codependence as compatible forces. She also separates indepen-
dence from the need for companionship. So, her resistance to feminism
is not resistance to women's independence, it is a response to the his-
tory of white feminist movements, particularly in their self-serving blind
spots regarding the significance of race and a response to the history of
the backlash against such movements.

Part of the backlash against feminists is the result of antifeminist attacks from right-wing organizations and mainstream media depictions of pro-women activists as bitter man-hating women.[46] These facile and repetitive depictions have been especially compelling for communities of women who have little direct or local connection to feminist move-

ments. Such attacks have contributed to making feminism a "dirty word" for women of a variety of ethnic, racial, and economic classes. If high-profile feminist organizations had a consistent and prominent grassroots commitment to young poor women of color at the local level, then these women would be far more suspicious of these backlash depictions of feminists. Yet, not all of their skepticism is the product of this social gap; the specificity of black women rappers' rejection of feminism is also directly linked to their status as *black* women, which places them in a contradictory position vis-à-vis black men in a racist society.

Queen Latifah was sympathetic to the issues associated with feminism but preferred to be considered pro-woman. She was unable to articulate why she was uncomfortable with the term feminist and preferred instead to talk about her admiration for Faye Wattleton, the black former president of Planned Parenthood and the need to support the pro-choice movement. "Faye Wattleton, I like her, I look up to her. I'm pro-choice, but I love god. But I think (abortion) is a woman's decision. In a world like we live in today you can't use (god) as an excuse all the time. They want to make abortion illegal, but they don't want to educate you in school."[47] Salt was the least resistant to the term feminism, yet, she made explicit her limits: "I guess you could say that [I'm a feminist] in a way. Not in a strong sense where I'd want to go to war or anything like that. [laughter] . . . But I preach a lot about women depending on men for everything, for their mental stability, for their financial status, for their happiness. Women have brains, and I hate to see them walking in the shadow of a man."[48]

For these women rappers, and many other black women, feminism is the label for members of a white women's social movement that has no concrete link to black women or the black community. Feminism signifies allegiance to historically specific movements whose histories have long been the source of frustration for women of color. Similar criticisms of women's social movements have been made vociferously by many black feminists.[49] As they have argued, race and gender are inextricably linked for black women. This is the case for both black and white women. However, in the case of black women, the realities of racism link black women to black men in a way that challenges cross-racial sisterhood. Sisterhood among and between black and white women will not be achieved at the expense of black women's racial identity.

Gender-based alliances across race, especially in a racist society, is a problematic move for black women. This may in part explain black women rappers' hesitancy in being labeled feminists. This tension also contributes to the silence with which black women rappers responded

to the 2 Live Crew controversy in the mainstream press. In "safe" environments, such as black conferences and black media outlets, women rappers and other women who are involved with hip hop expressed a great deal of frustration over the way they were being treated by the press and the way they are being represented in some rap lyrics. Yet, they are also aware that sexism against black women is being used to attack black men, rather than reconstruct power relationships between black men and women; consequently, they remain wary of "feminism" and seem anxious to separate their criticisms of black male sexism from white feminist complaints. A special program called "If You're Dissin' the Sisters You're Not Fightin' the Power" on WBAI, a black diasporic and Third World–focused radio station in New York, featured an interview with Brigette Moore, a representative of the now-defunct Hip Hop Women's Progressive Movement (HWPM). In it, Moore made clear both her fears of being labeled and her frustration over black women's oppression:

> One thing we stressed in our initial press release was that we do not consider ourselves feminists because of the stigma and the negative attitude and vibe that you get from the word *feminist* and we didn't want to alienate any women. We didn't want them to think that we were these angry volatile women. . . . Yes, we are angry, we're tired of being stepped on. There are problems that we don't want to deal with anymore. . . . One important book I read was Angela Davis's *Women, Culture and Politics*. She says that you cannot forget that we (black women) have a strong feminist movement, but that it is not part of the racist (feminist) movement that we grew up with and is all we knew about.[50]

Moore struggles to balance a frustrated acknowledgment of abuses of black women with a practical strategy that channels black women's anger without being subjected to the stigma of being labeled feminists. In part because of this minefield, women's organizations in hip hop find it difficult to sustain momentum. Not only do black women in hip hop have to worry about looking as if they are too sympathetic to white feminists, they also have to make sure that they don't look like they are jumping on the anti-black male band wagon and at the same time craft a black women's agenda. Not surprisingly, such groups as Yo Yo's Intelligent Black Women's Coalition (IBWC) that had an initial high profile seem to have sustained a limited national voice.

In the wake of the brutal public beating of Dee Barnes, female rapper and host of rap video show *Pump It Up*, at the hands of Dr. Dre from NWA, I brought together a group of black women writers, rappers, and black feminists to sit down and talk about possible responses to Dre's acknowledged act of violence against a young woman in the hip hop community. All of us who formed the group Sisters Speak were shocked

by the incident, its logic, and most of all by Dr. Dre's response. Angered by an interview on *Pump It Up* that featured estranged ex-NWA member Ice Cube that was interspersed with mocking references to them, Dr. Dre later assaulted her in a crowded Los Angeles dance club, threw her up against the wall repeatedly, and tried to throw her down the stairs. With his own bodyguards (who appeared to be armed) keeping the crowd at bay, Dr. Dre kicked her in the ribs. She slipped free and ran to the women's bathroom, where he followed her in and "grabbed her from behind by the hair and proceeded to punch her in the back of the head" before running out of the club with his crew. In a videotaped interview aired on MTV, NWA members Ren and Eazy agreed that "the bitch deserved it." Dre's explanation demonstrates a frighteningly misdirected response to powerlessness, and naturalization of violence against women: "People talk all this shit, but you know, somebody fucks with me, I'm gonna fuck them. I just did it, you know. Ain't nothing you can do now by talking about it. Besides, it ain't no big thing—I just threw her through a door."[51] He held Dee "responsible" for a Fox television producer's decision to edit the materials in a way that mocked NWA, because it was clear that, although beating up a young black woman might give him a bad reputation, beating up a white man in the entertainment business might spell disaster for his career. His bad reputation has been buttressed by Barnes's multimillion-dollar civil and criminal suits, both of which are still pending. Not surprisingly, Dee isn't his only victim. Dre also has a reputation for beating up former girlfriends and other young men around him.

Sister Speak was both a support group for Dee Barnes and an attempt to bring together a cross-generational group of black women who understood themselves as either inside the hip hop community or sympathetic to it, to air our concerns about the way black women are treated and imagined in hip hop, and to discuss possible strategies for action. One favored, but unrealized, response was to put pressure on prominent male rappers such as Chuck D to speak out explicitly against this attack, especially as it was claimed that he and others condemned Dre's acts in private conversations. However, we never made enough contacts to pull this off, and no publicized statements on behalf of Dee were made by any prominent male figures. In hip hop, where loud and sustained responses reign, the silence following abuses of black women is deafening. It was difficult to keep Sisters Speak together. We, too, suffered from trying to straddle the fence that seems to separate black and female agendas and struggled to develop a media strategy that would deflect attempts to cast us as anti–hip hop and anti-male. This, coupled

For The Brothers That Ain't Here by Ninety-Nine

TIMMY TIBBLE CAN BARELY LIFT LEGS OUT OF CRIB
POSSESSED BY **ICE CUBE** FROM THE FREEZER TRAY

HYPNOTIC VOICES LEAD
HYPNOTIC FLOCKS
TO THE LIQUOR STORE
WITH ALL EYES FIXED ON
THE CROOKED LETTER
CROOKED LETTER
I.

BARELY WEIGHING 2LBS
NOW DRINKING FORTY
OUNCES

AS HE POUNCES PISSY SIMILAC WITH CREAMY HEAD
TO A HIGH CHAIR
FINGERS FUMBLE WITH CAP NEEDING A FIX WITH FLAIR
LIMITING STATEWIDE CAPITAL OUT OF RANGE
PULLED FROM THE DEPTHS OF LINT FILLED LEVI'S

BUSINESS OF THE DAY RAPPERS SCHOOLIN TODDLERS
ON SUBSTANCE ABUSE
OF TOXIC JUICE JUST TO SPRUCE UP **DEMOGRAPHIC SALES:**

NIGGER TESTED: RAP INDUSTRY APPROVED

PITCH SOUNDED SMOOTH ON VINYL GROOVES
TO A NEEDLE
THE BOOM
THE BOOM
THE BOOM THE BIP!

TAKIN SWIGS FROM THE TIP AND SOME ARE READY TO RIP
INTO RIPE CUNTS OF NEWBORN STUNTS
BORN FROM THE BOTTLE AND BROUGHT UP ON THE

BLUNT...YO! So LIGHT ANOTHER L

NO LONGER THE AGE OF CLYDESDALE SOUPY SALES
SELLIN PALES OF PISSY ALE

GRIOTS ONCE SHOUTED TALES FROM BOT OMLESS BOATS
BY THE ORIGINAL COLT 45 NEW GHETTO CRIMINAL

SEE ME AND BILLY D FREED THE WEED FROM THE PLASTIC
DIDN'T QUIBBLE OVER WHO EXTERMINATED LAST ROACH
AS DRUG TRAMPLES BLINDLY DOWN MY THROAT

NINTEY-3 REVOLUTION
COMMERCIAL PROSTITUTION
NEEDS TO BE BANNED
AS PSEUDO ROLE MODELS CHANT

A DICK AND MY GAT A FORTY
I CAN TAP A BITCH BY MY SIDE
AND A BLUNT FOR THE RIDE

CAUSE IM COOL LIKE THAT
SOLD OUT LIKE THAT
PLAYED LIKE THAT
LOST.

© Ninety-Nine

with the fact that we had our own demanding career responsibilities and no institutional support, further encouraged our demise.

In "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," Kimberle Crenshaw echoes Moore's sentiments and the experiences of Sisters Speak in a more theoretical voice when she argues that the single-axis framework that dominates feminist theory (as well as antidiscrimination law and politics) constructs race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis that leave black women between a rock and a hard place. The paralyzing effects of these seemingly separate categories of race and gender have their basis in both the history of black liberation and feminist movements. In reference to feminist theory, Crenshaw points out that:

> the value of (white) feminist theory to Black women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged. Not only are women of color in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when *white* women speak for us as *women*. The authoritative universal voice—usually white male subjectivity masquerading as non-racial, non-gendered objectivity—is merely transferred to those who, but for gender, share many of the same cultural, economic and social characteristics. . . . Feminists thus ignore how their own race functions to mitigate some aspects of sexism and moreover, how it often privileges them over and contributes to the domination of other women.[52]

Thus, for black women, feminism often reads white feminism and consequently represents a movement that has contributed to sustaining their oppression while claiming to speak on their behalf. It is in part this tension that complicates a reading of black women rappers as feminist voices that can be situated in opposition to male rappers'. For these women rappers, feminism is a movement that does not speak to men; on the other hand, they are engaged in constant communication with black male audience members and rappers and simultaneously support and offer advice to their young black female audiences. Consequently, white feminist theorists must not be satisfied with simply "letting the other speak" but should begin a systematic reevaluation of how feminism is conceptualized and how ethnicity, class, and race seriously fracture gender as a single-axis category. Until this kind of analysis takes place a great deal more often than it does, many black women will be unable to rely on feminist analysis, and what white feminists say to MC Lyte will remain paper thin.

The scope of critical, feminist work on black women's cultural production should be broadened to include popular production, especially popular music. Popular cultural production often attends to the day-to-day conflicts and pressures faced by young black women. Black women rappers attract large male followings and consistently perform their ex-

plicitly pro-women material in co-ed settings. They are able to sustain dialogue with and consequently encourage dialogue between young black men and women. Their material supports black women and challenges some sexist male behavior. As MC Lyte explains, "When I do a show, the women are like, 'Go ahead Lyte, tell em!' and the guys are like, 'Oh, shit. She's right.' And they sit there laughing because I pulled their card."[53] It would be naive to expect that such instances will lead directly to a widespread black feminist male-female alliances; on the other hand, it would be cynical and misdirected to presume that the dialogues facilitated by these female rappers will not contribute to its groundwork.

The presence of black female rappers and the urban, working-class black hairstyles, clothes, expressions, and subject matter of their rhymes provide young black women with a small culturally reflective public space. Black women rappers affirm black female popular pleasure and public presence by privileging black female subjectivity and black female experiences in the public sphere. Public performance also provides a means by which young black women can occupy public space in ways that affirm the centrality of their voices. As Salt observes, "The women look up to us, they take us dead seriously. It's not a fan type of thing, it's more like a movement. When we shout 'The year 1989 is for the ladies' they go crazy. It's the highlight of the show. It makes you realize that you have a voice as far as women go."[54]

Black women rappers have effectively changed the interpretive framework for the work of male rappers and have contested public sphere discourses, particularly those pertaining to race and gender. As women who challenge sexism expressed by male rappers, yet sustain dialogue with them, who reject the racially coded aesthetic hierarchies in American popular culture by privileging black female bodies, and who support black women's voices and history, black female rappers constitute an important and resistive voice in rap and contemporary black women's cultural production in general.

Epilogue

In 1994, fifteen years after its commercial debut and seventeen years or so after its emergence in the South Bronx, rap remains at the forefront of cultural and political skirmishes and retains its close ties to the poorest and least represented members of the black community. After the Los Angeles riots erupted in response to the acquittal of the Los Angeles police officers who savagely beat Rodney King, Ice Cube was immediately called to comment but declined, because he was frantically trying to contact relatives whom he had not heard from since the riots began. Other rappers issued well-publicized statements and, *Nightline*'s May 5th coverage of the riots concluded with South Central rappers' comments. It was as if the rage that had exploded in South Central had finally validated rappers' nagging, seemingly exaggerated stories of race and class frustration. Overnight, such rappers as Chuck D and Ice Cube, who were once considered social menaces, became prophets and seeing eye dogs for a nation that had just realized it had gone blind. A few days later, black nationalist activist and rapper Sister Souljah was publicly criticized by Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton for her ambiguous, aggressive comments regarding the "logic" behind attacks on whites in Los Angeles; black leaders, save Jesse Jackson, said nothing. Finally, in the wake of South Central's rubble, Ice-T's fantasy heavy metal song "Cop Killer" (which had been released several weeks before the riots) provoked 60 congressmen to sign a letter of protest pronouncing the song "vile and despicable." George Bush chimed in, calling Ice-T's work "sick." Since then, Warner Records has recalled the original album, the song has been totally removed from the new pressings of the album, and Ice-T has been released from his recording contract. Calvin Butts, black minister of the Abyssynian Baptist Church in Harlem, has gone on a mission to rid the black community of rap music because