

issues of choice and agency." What aspects of the Disney version are more hopeful, in the author's view, than the Barbara Bush version?

2. Sells argues that the Disney version of *The Little Mermaid* differs from the Andersen original in many ways, including the fact that it "sanitizes" the costs that Ariel pays in order to gain access to the "white male system." What are some of the costs? To what extent do contemporary women still face them?
3. What is the value of the idea of "gender as performance" that Ariel learns from Ursula? In what way(s) can "drag" be "subversive?" What must it be able to do? Consider your own gender identity as a "performance." Which aspects of it are the easiest, the most enjoyable to "perform"? Which ones would you prefer not to perform? Why not?
4. Describe the approach author Sells takes in examining *The Little Mermaid*. How does she challenge its authority as a positive cultural representation? How might you pose a similar challenge to a different Disney film or story?

Sexism and the Art of Feminist Hip-Hop Maintenance

EISA DAVIS

I belong to the church of hip hop. Just as people my parents' age remember precisely where they were when JFK was shot, my fellow believers and I can recall every detail about the first time we heard "Rapper's Delight." Hip-hop beats are always thumping somewhere in my chest every time I feel at home with myself, under lyrics that stir politics, music, and theatrical performance into a hearty gumbo that tastes different each time I try it. Hip hop gave me a language that made my black womanhood coherent to myself and the world; hip hop revived me when my soul was blanched from neglect. So I knew something was up when I found myself at the record store, a vein in my temple near to bursting, trying to decide whether to buy Snoop Doggy Dogg's *Doggystyle* or Queen Latifah's *Black Reign* with my last \$15.

This didn't make any sense. Latifah had virtually saved my life in college: her music and public image were intimately, almost in-

extricably, connected to my awakening personal and political identity. How could I walk out on her at this critical moment, this election of the marketplace, by casting a cash vote for sexism, violence, Snoop and Dre? What could have precipitated this Cardinal Sin?

Back in my sophomore year in college, Latifah was the woman I had been waiting for, the woman who could be me. Black, female, nineteen-year-old royalty. With her hair and sexuality tucked underneath crowns, knee-high boots, and military garb trimmed with kente, she tore up every single track on *All Hail the Queen*, her debut album, her deep voice commanding complete respect. She not only inspired idolatry in young women like me and in our parents, but she got props from the hard rocks: the B-boys with Ph.D.s in vinyl archaeology, and the exclusively male jury of rappers, producers, and magazine editors in whose ears the hip-hop canon is constructed.

The first time I saw Latifah in person, I left my feminism and classical political theory class early so that I could hear her speak over the electric fence between a (white) feminism that many Harvard students and faculty wanted to hear her advocate, and a (black) womanism that the nebulous B-boy council and many black students needed her to defend so that she could retain her ghetto pass. White women wanted her to prioritize sexism and "transcend" racism; black men wanted her to address racism and spirit away her knowledge and experience of sexism. She navigated the thicket of competing loyalties and emerged completely intact, being everything to everybody, occasionally clipping or silently blotting out her answers altogether so as not to put anyone out.

I bumrushed the stage after her talk, to meet her, hoping that some of her energy, strength, boldness, and creativity would osmose into me. On that day, Latifah seemed so perfect to me because she evoked a recognizable ideal: the quintessentially strong, virtuous woman my grandmother always exhorted me to become. The woman everyone loves—from a distance. Never loose, never trivial, never bitchy or butchy. The talented, disciplined, powerful woman who is too generous and down-to-earth to constitute a threat. The woman who keeps her panties up and practices the art of no, who polices any moral injustice or infraction of etiquette and never misses an opportunity to speak up for herself or any oppressed groups in words that are clear, just, and listened to.

Latifah was like a young Rosa Parks getting open on the mike, a symbol with whom everyone could identify. Her Afrocentric imaging, full-bodied voice, and collaboration with some of hip hop's

pioneers (such as KRS-One, De La Soul, and Daddy-O of Stetsonic) set her apart from female rappers like Lyte and Shante who'd come before her. She meant safety and strength to me, a way for me to come out as a black woman. Not that I was planning on rhyming any time soon. But she was my age, and that made her the first mainstream black female role model with whom I could identify in a practical way. Latifah was a step toward an entirely new epistemology for me. My political awareness and self-esteem began to put on some weight as I started to connect more meaningfully with my mother and my aunt, took a trip to West Africa with my family, moved into an artsier, blacker dormitory, took classes in African-American history and culture, sat twelve hours for microbraids, and fell in love with a black man.

When I got Latifah's next album, *Nature of a Sista*, I laid on my couch and cried because she was talking about men! I couldn't believe that she was singing about love, loneliness, and relationships and occasionally even sounding like Madonna to top it all off. R&B was moving toward her; she (and hip hop) were moving toward R&B. All the iconography was changing, tending toward a heightened corporeality in an expanding discourse on sex. And just like Lyte and her lipstick, Janet and her belly button, Latifah was only a woman after all. She had gone "soft," the ultimate insult in the hip-hop phallo-universe, experiencing the same wounds and joys I was petrified of revealing to myself, let alone the world. I felt betrayed. How could she do this to me? A little makeup now and again was fine, but did she have to display the holes in her heart, and the reality that she needed a man from the bully pulpit of hip hop?

And yet I had identified so powerfully with Latifah that after I listened to the album a few more times, the shock eased and I started to absorb, unconsciously at first, a wider concept of my own femininity through Latifah's own expanding notions of self. By accepting Latifah's growth, by allowing her to be someone I didn't want her or myself to be while still admiring her, I made a subtle but distinct break with my inherited tradition of who I, Black Woman, was supposed to be.

Then came Latifah's movie roles, her business acumen, and *Living Single*. As her identities began to compound instantaneously in the Hollywood dream bank, I lost that initial sense of connectedness. She still managed to balance the needs of her hard-core and lay feminist contingencies while making an empire of herself, keeping Nielsen ratings high and the mall rats in

stitches every Thursday night. But who was she? I no longer recognized myself in her work or in her persona.

Which brings me back to my dilemma: *Doggystyle* or *Black Reign*? Was I in the mood for bluesy misogyny over the fattest, most addictive beats known to humankind, or did I want to hear "positive" messages I already knew nestled into Latifah's latest product? The devil or Daniel Webster? Toxic chocolate sundae or nine-grain granola?

I ended up buying *Doggystyle*; seven hours later, I was singing "g'z up ho's down." But I did acquire a free copy of *Doggystyle* later that week and traded it in for *Black Reign* so that I could have both, which is what I wanted in the first place. In my post-Latifah phase, I don't fit into a puritanical, dualistic feminism that recognizes only indignant innocence (buying *Black Reign*) or unenlightened guilt (buying into *Doggystyle*). I don't have to choose.

My dilemma, then, was not one of rational consumerism, or how to voice my own opinion best, given the products and their attendant philosophies. While that remains an important issue, the actual dilemma I was experiencing was how to explain that I don't feel oppressed by Snoop or defined by his conception of women—without denying that in Snoop's world, he is defining me and all women, even if he separates the queens from the ho's in his life off wax. How can I love me some Dre beats with sexist Snoop lyrics while responding to him in language that criticizes the misogynist reality he's been born into and continues to build for himself?

When I was introduced to Latifah in 1990, Afrocentric racial consciousness and progressive gender politics joined hands in hip hop, and the version of female empowerment I had borrowed from my elders wouldn't even allow me to say or hear bitch. Even in jest. Even as a verb. But now, like many women I know, I have acquired an immunity to sexist lyrics. While some may call this immunity a weariness, or a numb defeat, could it be the first inextinguishable taste of inner power? I can't stuff my ears with cotton and refuse to hear those who have different politics than I do. I don't want to censor or dismiss my culture, my language, my sense of community regardless of the form in which it comes. Hip hop, after all, is the chosen whipping boy for a misogyny that is fundamental to Western culture. Why should I deny myself hip hop but get a good grounding in Aristotle? I'd rather listen and listen well, and have a conversation with the artist-philosophers

who are repeating the sexist ways they have been taught, and then have chosen, to see the world.

As part of my work as a journalist, I've had some illuminating discussions with Ice Cube, Scarface, Apache, Snoop, the members of Brand Nubian and many other rappers regarding their use of sexist lyrics. These conversations have underscored the need to be sensitive to the rapper's or listener's specific context when deciphering lyrical meaning. The terms "bitch" or "ho" (or "nigga") can be used playfully, lovingly, even fictively at times. "Bitch" can even be used as an anodyne for lost love (for instance, on "Bitches Ain't Shit").

The second point I've heard from male rappers is that there really are bitches and ho's. And they need to be told about themselves. Even rappers who are socially conscious qualify these lyrics by saying things like, "This song isn't for an African queen like you or like my lady or like my mama," but this, as Jeru the Damaja says, "is for the 'bichez.'" In other words, if you're not a bitch or a ho, why do you have a problem? (Just insert the word "nigga" flying out of a white mouth and watch the script flip.) Why do you come when you weren't being called in the first place? I only disrespect those who disrespect themselves. I'm a correct black man, a god, only a nigga on weekends. I learned my history. Now why can't these bitches get themselves together?

This response has little validity for me, because while I am immune to a sexist reality on record, I'm not yet free, to steal from The Coup. When used jokingly between equals, these terms are fine, and when I'm getting my groove to "Bitches Ain't Shit (But Ho's and Tricks)" in a club, I'm cool. But don't let a black man call me "bitch" other than in jest. The word can become a sledgehammer, sometimes even a bullet that grazes my heart. It's as if, for one unbearably painful moment, I believe him more than I believe myself.

I also don't buy the claim that there are "real" bitches and ho's. I think it is a trap that punishes women for playing their expected roles in figuring the rapper's persona. Onstage, hip-hop artists invite women's desire and pursuit, bragging about their conquests far in advance of the reality. But when the women go back to the hotel after the show and get what they came for, the artists reject the women who have legitimated their player persona, channeling their own morning-after disgust into a litany of bitches and ho's.

There are no excuses for lyrical sexism. I can't fantasize that it's dead, embalmed, and on exhibit at the Smithsonian, or convince myself that it's an historical, cultural condition that black women have to accept in order to understand and stand by "our" men. Yet I still feel virtually untouched by this verbal and visual violence toward women, and I believe this feeling springs from an increased sense of freedom rather than from apathetic resignation.

As sexist as these lyrics and attitudes can be, my immunity is fortified by a growing number of male rappers who consciously and humorously espouse a chauvinism they know to be antiquated because they are beginning to understand that their position is as fragile and as powerful as a woman's. Male hip-hop artists recognize that they are the hunted; they flesh out all of white America's fears by carrying out, lyrically, unthinkable acts of sociopathic destruction. The fantastical crime setting of gangsta and hardcore rap, starring protagonists who drip with testosterone, features a masculinity that defines itself by an ability to annihilate any challenger, female or male. When this protagonist commits sexual and violent crimes, he satisfies a specifically black male yet generic desire for total power. This protagonist also embodies the newly formulated national enemy: in the absence of the Red Threat, the specter of the criminalized black male steps into its place. Thus the criminalized enemy is contained and made fictive, consumed, pitied, or condemned by the haves, and disowned or celebrated by the have-nots. Misogyny here becomes a reactionary act with a subversive gloss.

When I peer into this hip-hop shadow box where the stock characters of 'seventies' blaxploitation are revisited—how poignant this swan song, how funny this compulsive reenactment of a sexist past—I consume the performance of sexism, thereby assuring myself that the reality of sexism depicted in the lyrics is happening to an imaginary woman, not a real one. Unlike white hip-hop fans who confirm and celebrate their own perceived distance from racism by identifying with the purveyor of explicit anti-racist, even antiwhite lyrics, I think there's a new woman on the dance floor who can chant "Bitch Betta Have My Money" and identify with neither the lyricist nor the sexual object, discovering instead a humor in sexist lyrics whose possible truth removes rather than implicates her. She realizes that AMG can't really be talking to her or anyone else, and if he is, he's got to be kidding.

There are also women out on the dance floor who accept these lyrics as truths about themselves—sometimes playing the

bitch or ho role in the same spiteful way that the men explode the stereotype of criminalization. Or sometimes there's a recognition that a woman who dares to step out of her place, a woman who is willful or sexually uninhibited, may be called a bitch or ho, respectively. These women not only have a sense of humor about being called bitches and ho's, they have a sense of pride that they are finally being spoken to. The hip-hop ode to women has evolved from L.L. Cool J's "Around the Way Girl" to Sir Mix-A-Lot's "Baby Got Back" to Apache's "Gangsta Bitch," giving the ideal woman a rare multiplicity. These songs reveal how male hip-hop artists actually have provided public acceptance, not just degradation, for women who would never receive it elsewhere in popular culture.

Whether women respond with pride, a sense of humor, or righteous anger upon hearing sexist lyrics—or if they don't pay attention to the lyrics at all—there is and always has been a strong public dialogue between male and female rappers, between black men and women. That's another reason why I can croon along with Nate Dogg on "Ain't No Fun (If The Homies Can't Have None)" because I know that I and every other woman are always talking back. Call this dialogue the racist legacy of Moynihan's matriarchal pathology or the retention of an African mother goddess; it doesn't matter. We all know that if we'd ever been blessed with a blaxploitation sequel entitled *Coffy v. Dolemite*, Pam Grier and Rudy Ray Moore would kill each other before letting the other win. More likely, they'd call it a draw and join forces against evil. In the same way, female and male rappers battle each other within or between songs, with neither sex ever having the final word. Hip-hop dialogue has a male advantage by sheer number and by male privilege in the language, genre, and social custom, but just one female who gets the crowd hype can rebut all the men if her style is identical to none. With dis artists like Shante and Bytches With Problems, with spirits like Mecca of Digable Planets, Nefertiti, Medusa and Koko of Sin, T-Love, Lauryn from the Fugees, 99, and Rage, and with mainstream presences like Latifah, Lyte, Yo Yo, and Salt-N-Pepa, the burden of representation is spread wide on strong shoulders. And the mainstream media's strategy of coopting this dialogue for racist purposes, restaging black women and men's struggle against racialized sexism as a bloody cockfight, can be reappropriated as an opportunity to truly resolve the conflicts we have with one another and with the larger hegemony.

Recognizing that there is an uncut umbilical cord between hip hop's art and life as well as an infinite amount of exaggeration and fantasy only leads me to want to change the reality of sexism off of wax. Who would these rappers be, I wonder; if no ladies wanted to get with them? If all women, like the Athenian and Spartan coalition of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, agreed to abstain from sex with all rappers, could we end sexism in hip hop? Why is there so little space for public, artistic declaration of meaningful relationships? (Method Man's "All I Need" is a wonderful exception to the rule.) And aren't the women who do have recreational sex with hip-hop artists or who put on a thong bikini to play a "video ho" just searching for that place where we women can celebrate our bodies, where we can express our eroticism freely, where we can have sexual agency?

I had a dream in which TLC members Left Eye and Chilli were sitting on a couch on the beach (embarrassingly, this is a real dream, I hardly invented for the purposes of this piece). I sat on the couch and told Left Eye that the (real) *ViBe* cover with the trio in fireman's slickers might have been in bad taste since she'd just burned down her abusive boyfriend's mansion, and that the new (dreamworld) cover *ViBe* had replaced it with after recalling the original was even worse because it featured T-Boz by herself draped in white and discussed only her in the cover story. I wanted to share how incensed I was by *ViBe*'s mistreatment of them. Looking at T-Boz dipping her toes in the water, Left Eye and Chilli said, "No, you're wrong." Left Eye explained in dreamy, lush language how T-Boz had enlightened her and Chilli about feminist practice. How T-Boz had this amazing mind and was using her corporeality as a tool to free women, not to entice men. El-egy complete, Left Eye had tears in her eyes as she gazed toward her latter-day saint. I woke up and wondered if she could be right.

When sexist lyrics are not self-conscious but instead are full of vitriol and anger, they do still hurt, they still feel real. This pain only helps me diagnose the problem; it does nothing to solve it. And I don't have to throw away all the old words and the people who say them in order to have a new conversation. I can't have a vision of political practice anymore that makes no space for pleasure, conflict, personal and collective responsibility to cohabitate simultaneously. I have to genuflect to Dr. Dre for his genius as a producer and an artist while I lacerate him for his physical violence toward women. I commend and criticize. I speak not

from the vengeful state I was in when I heard he'd beaten "Pump It Up" host Dee Barnes, but from the place where I want to be when sexism is all over.

I often think about these issues through the lens of humor because it often provides freedom, creativity, and a language that dispenses with blame and guilt, precisely what we need in our work toward transcending sexism. When I hear self-conscious sexism in rap and laugh at it, I am releasing a painful past and garnering power to shape a new future. For example, I love the two-syllable variation of "bitch" pronounced "beetoch," because the word is distorted explicitly for humor, making light of the namer as well as the named, ridiculing the term itself. "We don't love them ho'es," goes the misogynistic, faintly homoerotic Dogg Pound refrain, and damnit, the shit is funny. Admittedly, it's a humor that still operates on an uneven playground, where ho'es and bitches get bullied much more than the niggaz. "Sexist ho'es, they wanna get with this," flows Snoop, but since I've had Latifah's "U.N.I.T.Y." in my back pocket since long before she recorded it, I don't even have to let him know that I ain't a "bitch" or a "ho," because I know for myself.

An organic act of laughter upon hearing a lyric reminds me that the present manifestations of sexism in hip hop have a value for me: they are simply a tradition, like a woman wearing white when she marries, that I recognize and enjoy as such precisely because I know I am not bound to it. Although Snoop is talking to me, he isn't defining me, and this position spawns a new politics that protects our identities as women without sentencing us to life in a prison of identity we didn't choose. I want to infuse some of the necessary energy we spend fighting men's rules into working on a new extinction agenda, to sample Organized Konfusion, that will render sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism old sitcoms that we watch in syndication only to see how much we've changed.

When women no longer feel bound by sexist representations, when we initiate a dialogue that doesn't turn on the axis of anger, blame, or victimology, then artists who should attend Ism Anonymous meetings (treating compulsive sexism, nihilism, and marijuana use in lyrics) are finally recognized as valuable people who can become even stronger by assuming self-worth through constructing themselves rather than destroying others. I would love to see hip-hop battles, conference panels, and articles and essays like this one that talk about issues of sexism in hip hop supplemented

by other formats for dialogue. While I have some drafty ideas for in-store listening stations with hardware for immediate on-line responses, the most effective formats are informal: relationships between artists and critics (in the loosest sense of that term) which probe these issues honestly, over time, are probably the best and most difficult way to get anything done. I am encouraged by relationships such as the one fostered between Harvard professor and novelist Carolivia Herron and Public Enemy, coinciding with Chuck D's lyrics moving from the misogyny of "She Watch Channel Zero" to the womanism of "Revolutionary Generation."

Even considering growth like Chuck D's, I don't look to hip-hop artists with the same religious zeal for The Answers that I once did, because I know those answers only pose more questions; I'm a big ho now and I don't depend on hip hop to tell me that I'm not or that I am or that I'm just joking. Since I no longer need hip hop to provide me with a fixed identity, I have no need to control hip hop's representation of women. I just want to continue talking to and hearing from the artists who do control these representations, as I have in the past through interviews, and in the future within these valuable long-term relationships I mentioned above.

More important to me than my conversations with artists is the conversation between Ice Cube and a woman who wants to produce a track for his next album, the conversation between a male higher-up and a woman marketing executive at a record label who wants to try something other than bikini and booty art on an album cover, the conversation between a woman and a man in a club who's called her a stanky bitch for not dancing with him. We must make a world outside of hip hop in which we and our daughters are equals in these conversations—and we can't make it with only guns, money, and tears to choose from.

In my personal/political upbringing, I got my theory at home and my praxis from hip hop. And I think I've grown up enough to know where else I need to grow. Latifah in all her avatars—Afrocentric, introspective, and relationship-hungry; plain old Dana; Khadijah on "Living Single"—isn't a model that was once useful for me and then thrown out; instead she has given me a foundation of bedrock to build upon. She and all women artists, mainstream and underground, get props for relentlessly transforming the taboo into the cool because we all privilege from the truth. My grandmother's version of black womanhood isn't a tradition that restricts me, either; rather it has allowed me to break those pat-

terns that confine my growth, yet remains a home for me to return to and feed my spirit. Grandma continues to inform my choices, values, and dreams. Her lifelong work as an educator makes me want to make time for the children who are being raised by hip hop and Sega to sit down and actively analyze and filter what they learn. And I would love to see a public hip-hop library and studio to give access to anybody who wants to learn about and make music, because is there anything more joyful, more weary, more expressive of our humanity than hip hop, ever transforming, encompassing the universe of all music?

Fighting sexism isn't only about being offended by the forty-five bitches and twenty-three hoes on someone's record. I hope that the strength we gain from realizing that we women—and men—are not bound to hip hop's representations can help to dismantle the sexism we've internalized, and empowers us to combat the sexism outside of us.

Questions for Thought and Writing

1. Why does the author credit Latifah with having "saved [her] life" in college? Why was Davis so disappointed by Latifah's later songs "about men" and by the realization that "Latifah was only a woman after all"? How does this change help the author rethink her own ideas of femininity?
2. Davis argues that while "There are no excuses for lyrical sexism. . . . I still feel virtually untouched by this verbal and visual violence toward women." How does she explain her ability to not feel oppressed by such music? Do you find her rationale convincing? Why or why not?
3. In attempting to explain why so many male rappers continue "consciously and humorously" perpetuating sexist ideas and images in their music, Davis suggests that they do so, in part, because they, as black males, are also "hunted." By whom, in her view, are they hunted and for what reasons?
4. Davis suggests that the way male rappers treat women who are willing to have sex with them reflects a cultural double-standard about female sexuality. Explain how the double-standard operates in the world of hip hop and in other contemporary media.
5. Davis explains that she no longer needs "to let [Snoop] know that I ain't a 'bitch' or a 'ho,' because I know it for myself" and also that she "no longer need[s] hip hop to provide [her] with