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OPPOSITIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS WITHIN AN OPPOSITIONAL REALM: THE CASE OF FEMINISM AND WOMANISM IN RAP AND HIP HOP, 1976–2004

Layli Phillips, Kerri Reddick-Morgan, and Dionne Patricia Stephens

Hip Hop is an oppositional cultural realm rooted in the socio-political and historical experiences and consciousness of economically disadvantaged urban black youth of the late 20th century. By numerous accounts, Hip Hop originated in the South Bronx section of New York City during the mid-1970s from a confluence of factors, including ethnic dislocations spurred by the construction of the South Bronx highway, and a rapid decline in municipal services induced by severe cuts in federal funding at the end of the Great Society era. The local job loss and worker obsolescence precipitated by the national shift from an industrial to a service, information, and finance economy generated an artistically productive "crossroads of lack and desire" that ultimately gave birth to the culture known as Hip Hop. Tricia Rose has characterized this time and place as an intersection of "social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning" where postindustrial conditions, technological innovations, and Afro diasporic cultural frames and priorities came together to produce the "techno-black cultural syncretism" known as rap music.

Braiding strands of protest and pleasure together into a seamless flow, rap initially expressed both gleeful and aggressive views of survival, social critique, and revelry to neighborhood audiences comprised primarily of African American and Latino youth. Over time, however, and due in part to signal shifts in both commercial culture and the mass media, rap's audience grew beyond the bounds of neighborhood to encompass first the larger city of New York, later the nation (emerging first in a variety of regional flavors, then becoming regionally syncretized), and ultimately the globe. Today, Hip Hop culture, which encompasses not only rap music and videos but also particular forms of dress, dance, language, and attitude has been described as the new global cultural dominant. One thing that has not changed about Hip Hop,

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However, is that it continues to represent the voices and visions of the culturally, politically, and economically marginal and disenfranchised. Even as Hip Hop becomes global, its perspective is still centered in the experiences of the underdogs and it still expresses the cultural flair of African American and Latino people.

Women have been integral to the evolution of Hip Hop culture, especially rap music, since the beginning. Yet, historical accounts and critical analyses of the Hip Hop phenomenon have tended to downplay the contributions of women. Women have played pivotal roles as artists, writers, performers, producers, and industry executives. Women have influenced rap style and technique, ultimately shaping aesthetic standards and technological practices utilized by both women and men. Nevertheless, certain facts remain undeniable. First, men have outnumbered women in both the artistic arena and the corporate end of Hip Hop. Male rappers have outnumbered female rappers and male industry leaders have outnumbered female industry operatives. The production pipeline, from writers and performers to producers and executives, has effectively functioned like a modified "old boys' club," hampering women's entry and ascent to power within the industry in ways both subtle and overt. Now that Hip Hop has expanded beyond music into video production, clothing design, and other lifestyle enhancement domains, the processes impeding women's participation and power-sharing have only become more widespread.

Second, a masculinist discursive strand is clearly identifiable in both rap music and its parent culture, Hip Hop. The numerical preponderance of men, combined with pre-existing masculinist scripts and sexist practices in virtually all occupational and commercial realms as well as the society at large, has ensured the greater visibility of men's prerogatives and perspectives relative to women's in both rap music and Hip Hop. Due largely to masculinist biases already in place in the domains of advertising and news reporting, the public face of both Hip Hop and rap is masculine and the mainstream discourse of rap as Hip Hop's mouthpiece is masculine.

Third, both women and men have participated in Hip Hop culture and rap music in ways that have been both oppressive and liberatory for women. To assume that men's voice or influence in Hip Hop or rap music has been uniformly sexist and that women's has uniformly opposed this sexism is to accept a false dichotomy that misrepresents the complexity of Hip Hop and rap with respect to gender. Furthermore, to assume that women have been the only feminist voices or influences within Hip Hop and rap is to negate the contributions of progressive, anti-sexist men within the movement. To claim that rap music and Hip Hop culture are purely and simply misogynistic is to view rap and the Hip Hop realm uncritically from the perspective of an outsider. In sum, Hip Hop, including rap music, is a complex and contradictory arena in which regressive and oppressive elements sometimes complicate and at times even undermine what fundamentally remains an oppositional and potentially liberatory project.
The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate, through the examination of women's rap music from 1976 to the present, that women in rap have maintained a dually oppositional stance within Hip Hop culture. On the one hand, this stance has allowed African American and Latino women to critique the sexism of men of their same race or ethnicity, using Hip Hop as a platform. On the other hand, this stance has enabled African American and Latino women to express solidarity with men of their same race or ethnicity in their critique of and struggle against mainstream society's racism, classism, and race-d sexism (which affects both women and men of color). One feature of the second aspect of women's oppositional stance in Hip Hop is that it has allowed "everyday" women of color to critique and contest certain aspects of mainstream (including academic) feminism. After presenting a brief historical overview, we will buttress our central thesis by advancing three major propositions: Hip Hop presents feminism and womanism at street level; women in rap and Hip Hop, through their engagement with street-level communities, redefine and expand the discursive territory covered by feminism and womanism; and by redefining and expanding the discursive territory covered by feminism and womanism, women in rap and Hip Hop co-construct the meaning for feminism and womanism for both women and men in the Hip Hop universe as well as for the entire culture, including academic feminists and womanists. We will support our development of these themes using illustrations of lyrical content by women rappers and their musical kin.

WOMEN IN RAP: A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Women have been rapping at least since 1976, when Sharon Jackson, a/k/a Sha-Rock, appeared at DJ Kool Herc's parties and got on the microphone. The legendary DJ Kool Herc, a Jamaican immigrant who brought the "yard music" tradition to the South Bronx and is credited with inventing the technique known as "scratching," is regarded by most rap historians as the father of Hip Hop, circa 1974. Sha-Rock later joined the early rap group known as the Funky 4 + 1 More, who released several records between 1979 and 1984, and who in 1981 was the first rap act to appear as a featured musical guest on the national television program Saturday Night Live.

Between 1978 and 1986, when rap went largely commercial and became firmly established in the mainstream, more than sixty records featuring over thirty female MCs or DJs were released. In 1977 the first all-women crew, the Mercedes Ladies, composed of two DJs and as many as four MCs, was formed in the South Bronx. Despite many years of holding their own on the party circuit, not until 1984 did they appear on record and, ironically, only to back up male rapper Donald D.

The first women to rap on vinyl were school-aged Paulette Tee and Sweet Tee, who released the single "Vicious Rap" in 1978, recorded by their father, Harlem-based doo-wop producer Paul Winley. In 1979 they were joined by
Lady B of Philadelphia, who recorded and released the single "To the Beat Y'All." Lady B had encountered the New York City rap scene while traveling with her friend World B. Free, a New Yorker who played for the Philadelphia 76ers basketball team. Lady B was perhaps the first to export rap from New York City and she was among the first to establish a rap program on a radio station, namely, WHAT-FM in Philadelphia. Today, she is a noted radio personality in Philadelphia.

Around this same time, former R & B singer Sylvia Robinson founded the Sugar Hill Records rap label. Her company produced rap's undisputed first hit record, "Rapper's Delight," by the Sugarhill Gang in 1979. Robinson's stewardship of Sugar Hill Records presaged other women's involvement on the production side of Hip Hop, such as that of Sylvia Rhone at Elektra Records. Robinson's label went on to introduce many of rap's early performers. Among these was the female trio Sequence, featuring Cheryl the Pearl, Blondie (not to be confused with Deborah Harry), and MC Angie B (who later re-emerged in the mid-1990s as Neo-Soul artist Angie Stone), who released the hit single "Funk You Up" in 1980. An interesting fact about Sequence is that some of its members were from South Carolina, an indication that rap's reach was beginning to extend far beyond New York City.

Around 1980, Queen Lisa Lee began to rap as part of Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation crew, recording and releasing "Zulu Nation Throwdown." Like DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa is one of the recognized progenitors of rap. He is credited with popularizing the term "Hip Hop," having borrowed it from a couple of disco DJs, Lovebug Starski and DJ Hollywood, who used it as a party chant. Later, in 1984, Lisa Lee, Sha-Rock, and another rapper, Debbie Dee, formed the first all-women rap "supergroup" known as Us Girls for Harry Belafonte's rap-based film, Beat Street. Lisa Lee had rapped previously in the 1982 rap-based underground film Wild Style.

By 1982 rap was making its mark outside the U.S., when white, French-speaking Bee Side recorded "Change the Beat," the first non-English rap record. Other early white rappers included Teena Marie, a/k/a Lady Tee, a protégé of black funk artist Rick James, who rapped on the record "Square Biz"; and Debbie Harry of the new wave group Blondie, who paid homage to the New York City rap scene in her 1981 single "Rapture." On the industry side, Chicago-native Monica Lynch played an important role in the establishment and promotion of rap as the first employee and later president of Tommy Boy Records, perhaps the earliest major rap label.

From the beginning, Latinos, particularly Puerto Ricans, were integral to the evolution of Hip Hop. Women of Latino descent shared the stage with African American women. In 1984, Puerto Rican-Jewish MC Brenda K. Starr performed her song "Vicious Beat" in the movie Beat Street. Also in 1984, a Puerto Rican MC by the name of the Real Roxanne became the first Latina on wax with her response record "The Real Roxanne."

The Roxanne phenomenon deserves special focus in any history of women in rap. In 1984, a 14-year old rapper by the name of Roxanne Shanté
(discussed in more depth below) issued the first female response record to a male rap, in this case U.T.F.O.'s 1984 hit "Roxanne, Roxanne." Roxanne Shanté's record was followed up by numerous response records by other female artists, including two women each calling themselves "The Real Roxanne" and a third woman who went by Sparky D, whose 1985 response record was called "Sparky's Turn (Roxanne You're Through)." Incidentally, Sparky D became the first rapper to receive a commercial endorsement, rapping in a radio ad for Mountain Dew in 1985. The numerous response records generated by the original U.T.F.O./Roxanne Shanté dispute ultimately spawned not only a compilation record, but also concert tours featuring the battling female MCs as the main attraction. Scholars agree that Roxanne Shanté's original response to U.T.F.O. launched the "dis" tradition in rap—a tradition wherein artists responded in kind to one another's recorded boasts and taunts, taking each other to task and attempting to establish their own credibility as "the best." The dis tradition has been compared to the act of signifyin' in African American and African oral traditions.10

In 1985 a girl-group known as Supernature recorded and released a song called "The Show Stoppa (Is Stupid Fresh)" in response to Doug E. Fresh and Slick Rick's hit single, "The Show." Not long after, Supernature became Salt-n-Pepa, the first female rap superstars. Salt-n-Pepa went on to record gold and platinum albums. In 1987, their album A Salt with a Deadly Pepa became the first gold record (a half million copies sold) by a female rap group. Also in 1987, California's J. J. Fad's "Supersonic" became the first single by a female rap group to sell a million copies; however, since it was on a minor label (Eazy-E's Ruthless label), it was not officially certified platinum. It was not until 1991, with MC Lyte's "Ruffneck," that a single by a solo female rapper achieved certified gold status. It was not until 1994, with Da Brat's Funkdafied, that the first compact disc (CD) by a female rapper was certified platinum.

From the mid- to late 1980s, rap was transformed from a largely underground phenomenon to a largely mainstream, commercial one. Around 1990, a proliferation of female artists began to hit the scene, most introduced by established male crews. For instance, East Coast political rap phenom Public Enemy, fronted by Chuck D, launched Sister Souljah as its female mouthpiece. KRS-One launched Ms. Melodie. Gangsta rap originators N.W.A., including members Eazy-E, Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, DJ Yella, and MC Ren, largely responsible for establishing the West Coast "gangsta rap" scene, launched Yo-Yo. Then newcomer Puff Daddy (Sean Combs, now known as both P. Diddy in the rap world and Sean Jean in the fashion world) introduced Mary J. Blige, ushering in a whole new sound—Hip Hop Soul. Atlanta-based La Face Records, headed by L. A. Reid and Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds introduced TLC. Jermaine Dupri's Atlanta-based So So Def Productions launched Da Brat. New Orleans-based Master P of No Limit Records introduced Mia X. West Coast-based Death Row Records introduced the Lady of Rage, a product of Farmville, Virginia. In New York City, Biggie Smalls's
Junior M.A.F.I.A. launched Lil' Kim, and Jay-Z's Rockafella crew launched Foxy Brown. Miami's Trick Daddy launched Trina, and the Ruff Ryders crew launched Philadelphia-based Eve. While this is certainly not an exhaustive list of female rappers whose careers were born after rap became commercial, it illustrates a trend in the industry and contextualizes the emergence of many of the women whose lyrics and personae are the necessary fodder of feminist and womanist analyses.

During this same period, several notable female artists were launching themselves, without the "help" of established male crews. These included MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill, Erykah Badu, and Missy Elliott. MC Lyte's career, like that of Salt-n-Pepa, bridged the pre- and post-commercialization phases of rap. Queen Latifah, who will be discussed in more depth below, became the first female solo superstar of rap when she emerged with her 1989 CD *All Hail the Queen*. Lauryn Hill got her start as a member of the critically acclaimed trio the Fugees, comprised of two men—Wyclef Jean and Pras, of Haitian descent—and herself during the mid-1990s; while on a motherhood-induced sabbatical from the group in 1998, she presented her now legendary solo CD, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998). Dallas-based Erykah Badu came out of what seemed like nowhere with her critically acclaimed hit CD *Baduizm* in 1997, which presented politically charged Neo-Soul music with rap-flavored undertones. Missy Elliott, a Portsmouth, Virginia native, entered the Hip Hop scene together with childhood friend and fellow producer Timbaland (although notably, he did not "introduce" her; rather, he introduced Ms. Jade); her innovative debut album *Supa Dupa Fly* also came out in 1997. All of these artists have established themselves as major influences in rap music and Hip Hop culture and, like those mentioned in the previous paragraph, are obvious subjects of feminist and womanist analyses of rap and Hip Hop.

In the sections that follow, we will examine how rap and Hip Hop function as a platform for feminist and womanist themes at ground level, how women involved in rap and Hip Hop culture mold feminist and womanist meanings in ways that are relevant to their everyday experiences and aspirations, and how these meanings subsequently inform the larger meanings of feminism and womanism for the entire culture. Before proceeding, however, in order to contextualize the experience of women in rap and Hip Hop, we will briefly consider how this history relates, thematically and materially, to the broader history of African American women in the U.S.

**AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN U.S. HISTORY: CONNECTING THEMES**

Scholars of African American women's history have consistently identified a number of themes that have defined U.S. African American women's experiences and perspectives over time. These themes include the intersection of race, gender, and class; African American women as the
symbolic linchpins of conflicts between black men and white women; African American women's solidarity with African American men, particularly as expressed through African American women's support for black nationalism and militancy; African American women's history of confronting black men about sexism; relational tensions between African American women and men; black women's ambivalence about feminism and white feminists; fighting stereotypes of African American women, especially negative sexual stereotypes; reclaiming sexual autonomy and self-determination; black women's economic independence and general self-reliance; black women's solidarity, networks, and sisterhood; the uplift tradition; African American women as representatives of an alternative tradition of womanhood (in contrast to white traditions, particularly the "cult of true womanhood"); the importance of motherhood to African American women; divisions among African American women based on vectors of difference other than race and gender (such as color, class, sexuality, nationality, religion, education, or ideology); and African American women as the key to the future of the race or humanity. Women's discourses in rap and Hip Hop unambiguously reflect these themes, as we will demonstrate below (although a full exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper). As historian Darlene Clark Hine observed in another context, African American women demonstrate "a special brand of female militancy"; arguably, this militancy is detectable in women's rap and Hip Hop.12 Women in rap and Hip Hop personify the concluding assertion of the famous 1991 "Black Women in Defense of Ourselves" statement, which proclaimed that, "No one will speak for us but ourselves."13

"THE STREET": FEMINISM AND WOMANISM AT GROUND LEVEL

Popular music, as the folk music of the modern and postmodern eras, articulates the stories, philosophies, and yearnings of the masses.14 Hip Hop, encompassing one form of popular music (rap) and the culture that surrounds it, presents feminism and womanism at ground level or "the street."15 In the case of Hip Hop, "the street" is a site where the sensibilities of black lower class people prevail. Rap and Hip Hop artists come from and speak to a population that is not defined in terms of its academic credentials. While many rap and Hip Hop artists, like many members of their audience, are well educated and have college degrees, the erasure of distinctions related to educational attainment is generally valued over the emphasis on such distinctions. "Street knowledge" and "street smarts" are valued over formal education because of the history of African Americans' exclusion from formal education as a result of centuries of enslavement, colonization, legal segregation, and other forms of oppression and discrimination across the African diaspora. Street knowledge and street smarts are also valued because they facilitate the negotiation of postmodern living conditions.16
While the pursuit of material wealth is generally condoned in Hip Hop culture, hierarchies based on economic attainment are eschewed, given that a focus on economic distinctions tends to undermine black solidarity unless a pipeline of wealth is created that benefits a group or network of people. While material possessions are lauded as a source of pleasure and status, and competition for material resources is taken as a fact of life, the bottom line is usually about advancement not only for oneself, but also for others, whether members of one's family, crew, or sometimes the entire race, or all oppressed people. Rap lyrics may or may not contain an overt critique of capitalism, but they are generally supported by a communal value system where linkages between people are held together by loyalty and blood. Often, this communal value system bears striking similarities to various African ethical and ontological systems.  

In terms of feminism and womanism specifically, Hip Hop culture in general and rap music in particular provide a platform for African American women at street level to process and produce feminist and womanist ideas. Whether or not they endorse the labels "feminist" or "womanist" for themselves, women in Hip Hop are exposed to feminist and womanist ideas circulating within the general culture. Like other women, female hip hoppers discuss, adapt, translate, and sometimes even reject these ideas. One purpose of women's rap is to educate women and to motivate or inspire women to succeed in the face of problems they are likely to encounter in their lives. In rap, women speak to each other about various kinds of everyday occurrences as well as about recurring issues in the larger sociopolitical domain. In this realm, women support each other, critique each other, conscientize each other, challenge each other, and bear witness to each other. Another purpose of women's rap is to air women's concerns to men and provide a forum for discussion. Because gender is an accepted divide within the African American community, the discursive space created by women for women in rap is in many respects inviolate, even when women are using that space to communicate to or with men. Thus, while men may disagree with or reject what women rappers say, they generally engage them and respect women's right to utilize that platform.  

One caveat: It must be remembered that, despite 30 years of history, Hip Hop is essentially a youth-driven subculture. Although its participants vary in age, its themes, values, and viewpoints often reflect the interests of teenagers and young adults more than they reflect those of people from other age groups. While the dimensions of this fact may change as the Hip Hop generation itself ages and Hip Hop, like previous youth subcultures, is ultimately supplanted by something else, at this time, the youthful quality of Hip Hop must be borne in mind. Like Rock 'n' Roll before it, themes of sex and relationships, drugs, partying, and opposition to "the Establishment" prevail at a higher rate in Hip Hop than they might in the musings of older or younger people. What markedly distinguishes Hip Hop from Rock 'n' Roll, however, are its black racial underpinnings, combined with its rootedness in
The lifespaces of the economically disadvantaged, which infuse it with an oppositional sensibility that transcends age in some respects. In addition, Hip Hop differs from Rock 'n' Roll politically in that it responds to a markedly different "Establishment" than the one critiqued by "Rock 'n' Rollers." Stated succinctly, Rock 'n' Roll represented the youth of the post–World War II baby boom responding to a modernist establishment, while Hip Hop represents the post-60s, post-desegregation, Generation X and Y youth's response to a postmodern establishment.20

The specific ways rap music serves as a platform for women of color to process feminist and womanist themes and issues is made more apparent by an examination of actual lyrical content written and performed by women in Hip Hop. Some of these women rap; others write and perform in hybrid genres that have evolved from rap, such as "Hip Hop Soul," "Neo-Soul," and "Hip Pop" (Hip Hop-influenced popular music). In the section that follows, we present and discuss some of this lyrical content. Since it is difficult to detach the lyrical content from the musical (and often visual) fabric in which it is embedded, but because we cannot adequately convey the sonic (or videographic) features of songs in written form, readers are urged, where possible, to listen to the songs in question (see Discography) and, where relevant, to view the videos to obtain additional meaning.

WOMEN'S DISCURSIVE STRANDS IN RAP AND HIP HOP

Women's rap and related music maintain a number of major discursive strands or themes. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to review all of them, we will present several to illustrate some of the ways that feminist and womanist themes are engaged by women in rap and Hip Hop.21 Although space considerations prevent us from adequately representing the full array of female artists who address even the few themes we include, we have attempted to sample both well-known and lesser-known artists, as well as artists from a broad span of Hip Hop's historical spectrum. In this essay, we will discuss three discursive strands that serve to highlight women's dual oppositionality within in Hip Hop culture, namely:

- talking back to men in defense of women and demanding respect for women;
- women's empowerment, self-help, and solidarity;
- defense of black men against the larger society.

Let us now take a closer look at these themes as they are discussed in specific works by specific artists.
Women's defense of themselves against sexist assault takes many forms in Hip Hop and rap, from the presentation of playful boasts and taunts designed to reclaim women's respect and restore injured pride to bloody fantasies of revenge and vigilante action intended to mete justice out upon men who have exploited women or committed acts of violence against them. In these songs, women rappers engage the classic feminist theme of fighting patriarchy. Because the men being addressed in these songs are typically men of color, these songs serve as a within-group critique of African American (or Latino) men's sexism. While many of the artists who perform these songs do not claim the label "feminist" for themselves, their lyrical messages nevertheless counteract and contradict masculine power assertion and serve to raise women's consciousness about sexism. This discursive strand characterized by women's talking back to men, defending themselves, reclaiming their respect, and resisting sexist violence has a long history within rap.

As mentioned previously, Roxanne Shanté launched the whole "dis" tradition in rap in 1984 when she responded to U.T.F.O.'s "Roxanne, Roxanne" with her own basement recording, "Roxanne's Revenge." "Dis" songs usually serve one of three purposes: to reclaim the respect of someone who has been put down; to put a person exhibiting hubris in his or her place; or to bait another person and rustle up "drama." In the case of "Roxanne's Revenge," all three purposes of the "dis" were invoked. While no single line in "Roxanne's Revenge" stands on its own, the song achieved a number of ends, including conveying to the three men who had designs on Roxanne in "Roxanne, Roxanne" that Roxanne was not just easy prey (thus establishing women's respectability), thereby knocking all men with excessive confidence down a few notches, all while conveying to the world at large that women had lyrical skills and could rap, and thus compete in what had been established as a man's world. The following lines give a flavor of her rap: "Yeah, I am fly but I don't take this, and everybody knows I don't go for it. So if you're tryin' to be cute and you're tryin' to be fine, you need to cut it out 'cause it's all in your mind. Tryin' to be like me, yeah, is very hard—you think you are God, but you do eat lard."22

Another early "dis" record was Salt-n-Pepa's "Tramp" in 1985.23 The song begins with the retort "What'd ya call me?" with the implication that the female speaker has been called a "tramp." In an era when women's sexual prerogatives were being re-negotiated in the larger social sphere, this song was a timely expression of women's demands for both sexual agency and respect. Salt-n-Pepa rap: "Homegirls, attention you must pay, so listen close to what I say. Don't take this as a simple rhyme, cuz this type of thing happens all the time. Now what would you do if a stranger says Hi? Would you dis him or would you reply? If you answer, there is a chance that you'd become a victim of circumstance. Am I right, fellas? Tell the truth—or else I'm-a have to show and prove you are what you are, I am what I am. It just so happens that
most men are... tramps." Later in the song, the rappers address a prospective "trampy" male thus: "You's a sucker! Get your dirty mind out the gutter. You ain't gettin' paid, you ain't knockin' boots, you ain't treating me like no prostitute!" Returning their attention to their female audience, they say, "Then I walked away, he called me a teaser. You're on a mission, kid—yo, he's a... [implied: "skeezer"]) tramp!" This song functions not only as a wake-up call to women considering subjugating themselves to get a man, but also to men who assumed their preying game was not transparent to women.

A more serious "dis" record, focused like Salt-n-Pepa's song on both reclaiming women's respect and also challenging sexist language use, as well as making the streets safe for women, was Queen Latifah's 1993 anthem, "U.N.I.T.Y." This song begins with the angry shout, "Who you callin' a bitch?!", which is followed up by the statements "You gotta let him know... You ain't a bitch or a ho." Latifah continues: "Instinct leads me to another flow... Everytime I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho, trying to make a sister feel low, you know all of that gots to go..." Later in the song, Latifah talks about walking down the street in her cutoff shorts due to the hot weather and talking back to a man who reaches out to grab her buttocks: "Huh, I punched him dead in his eye and said 'Who you callin' a bitch?'"

In some songs, women's rage at men escalates, and the songs reflect violent, retributive fantasies. For example, in Ms. Jade's 2002 "Why You Tell Me That?" the issue is a male partner's failure to put as much into the relationship as his female mate. Ms. Jade prefaces her rap with a sisterhood-inducing round-up call: "Yo, this one's for all my ladies that been through a similar situation...." She then launches into her main tale: "If I had that thing on me woulda shot you right then, if I had that thing on me woulda popped you right then. Nigga, yeah, you played me and said you was down for me.... Listen up, wasted skin, I'm much better without you." Lil' Mo, another female rapper, who performs on the song with Ms. Jade, chimes in with some clarification: "Niggas, you toyed with my teenage years and my womanhood. I hate you, hope I make it understood—good-bye. Why you tell me that you love me, why you tell me that you care for me, when you didn't do it? Why you thought you was there for me when you wasn't at all?" Throughout the song, Ms. Jade recounts sacrifices she had made for her man—"Pushed keys overseas, went to jail for you.... You had beef, I was there bustin' shells for you. If I ain't miscarry, woulda had a kid for you"—in hopes of obtaining the ultimate affirmation of the relationship; "Led me on, told me I was gonna be your wife." Although throughout the song Ms. Jade has the fantasy of killing the man who hurt her this way, in the end she turns philosophical: "Yo, I just wanna thank the guys, the guys who made us feel like this, made us understand how strong we are as women."

Another example of a revengeful fantasy involving a gun is Trina's 2000 song "Watch Yo Back." Again, the issue is men who chronically disrespect the women who make sacrifices for them: "And it's so sad how I do for you,
be the woman come through for you when you do wrong, police, come through for you, I'll even bend the truth for you." The song also includes allusions to domestic violence; "Motherfuckers is so crazy, deranged; let 'em into your brain brings misery and pain, cause they call us lame, bitches, and heffers, and sluts. You think your nut [sex] is gonna heal my bruises and cuts." Trina's conclusion, "Bitches, y'all better get tough and at the same time y'all better lock the game and re-rock the game, get a Glock ready, sit back and cock and aim and try to stop the pain, 'cause you got a lot to gain." Her last line, directed at the men, is "Better watch yo back." The impact of the song's message to men is reinforced by the fact that the chorus is rapped by a man: "Better watch yo back there, boy, and get on your square or my gun'll beat you changed. Got the nigga figured out, shawty [woman], you walk, tell him shit ain't the same, go ahead and kick him out, cut him up, catch him sleepin', fuck him up—only he must not know your name. Pimpin' is a deadly game. . . ."

In Eve's 1999 rap "Love Is Blind," the abuse of women takes center stage. In this case Eve is concerned not about violence being meted out to her, but to another woman. In the song she rises to the other woman's defense and confronts the male perpetrator: "Hey, yo, I don't even know you and I hate you. See, all I know is that my girlfriend used to date you. How would you feel if she held you down and raped you? Tried and tried, but she never could escape you. She was in love and I'd ask her how, I mean, why? What kind of love from a nigga would black your eye? What kind of love from a nigga every night make you cry? What kind of love from a nigga make you wish he would die?" In the next verse, she asserts, "I don't even know you and I'd kill you myself. You played with her like a doll and put her back on the shelf. Wouldn't let her go to school and better herself. She had a baby by your ass and you ain't giving no help. ... How could you beat the mother of your kids? ... Had to deal with fist fights and phone calls from your bitches. . . ." Even though the friend in the song returns to the man several times, Eve is not content to stay out of her friend's business: "Floss like you possess her, tellin' me to mind my business, said that it was her life and stay the fuck out of it. I tried and said, just for him, I'll keep a ready clip." The song reaches a climax in the third verse: "I don't even know you and I want you dead. Don't know the facts, but I saw the blood pour from her head. ... [You] had the nerve to show up at her mother's house the next day to come and pay your respects and help the family pray, even knelt down on one knee and let a tear drop, and before you had a chance to get up, you heard my gun cock. Prayin' to me now, I ain't God, but I'll pretend—I ain't start your life, but, nigga, I'm-a bring it to an end. ..." In the concluding lines of the song, Eve asserts that the love between sisters (i.e., women's solidarity) is stronger than the love between women and men.

As these excerpted lyrics demonstrate, in rap "talking back" to men in defense of women can take a variety of forms, from light verbal sparring to homicidal fantasies. In all cases these lyrics demonstrate women's
commitment to addressing forms of disrespect, deprecation, negation, and violence that they experience in their everyday lives, typically at the hands of men in their own communities. Women attempt to change men's behavior (and, by extension, to dislodge patriarchy) in a number of ways, from "dissing" men, to confronting them, to threatening them. Although mainstream discourses about rap often suggest that women in rap accept, condone, and even valorize male sexism in Hip Hop culture, these songs demonstrate a far more complex picture in which women take their men to task. Although these songs address men, they also highlight women's solidarity, whether in the form of women trying to educate one another in order to help one another avoid life's pitfalls, or overt assertions of sisterhood.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT, SELF-HELP, AND SOLIDARITY

Women's autonomy and solidarity are more directly demonstrated in songs of female empowerment and self-help that are addressed directly to women. In these songs artists attempt to bring women to consciousness about their oppression as well as to provide direct messages of support to each other that counter the many disempowering messages women receive in the dominant discourse. These messages from the dominant discourse are funneled not only through black men, but also through various members of the larger, predominantly white society and the mass media it controls. Thus within this discursive strand, women of color at street level operate from the base of both forms of oppositionality simultaneously. Although women often talk about their experiences with men in this strand of discourse, men are not the primary intended audience; rather, women are. Thus, black women's unique viewpoint is directly invoked.25

In "Girl, Don't Be No Fool" (1992), for example, Yo-Yo says: "Here's a message to the ladies—married, single, and even the ones with babies: Listen to Yo-Yo once again as I conversate about the ways of men. In your life, girl, keep an open mind and you'll find a lie in each and every line. They [men] say, 'Hah, sure, we're from the new school.' What I'm tryin' to say is, girl, don't be no fool." Later, she returns to the theme of her own consciousness-raising influence when she says, "I'm here to open your eyes so you can smell the coffee. Guys ain't nothin' but dirt, and they'll flirt with anything dressed in a mini-skirt." This verse of the song refers to men who cheat on their female partners. In the next verse, Yo-Yo turns to the subject of domestic violence: "Homegirl, what's up with the black eye? (Ehm, I fell . . .) Hah, now that's a damn lie. The man you got is just bad for your health. You can lie to me, but not to yourself. So when you gonna leave him?" Later in the song, Yo-Yo refers to her own women's self-help organization, the Intelligent Black Women's Coalition, referred to as the I.B.W.C.—an organization she actually founded and ran for a time in the early 1990s. On a subsequent CD, Yo-Yo presented a similarly direct message to women in the song "Black Pearl":
"Comin' at'cha, can you feel what I'm feelin'? Some soul sisters need some natural healing—gifted, but shifted, so come follow me. 'Cause I'm-a take you on a sister-to-sister journey. Run to get mine, better get 'fore they grab it—like cold Pepsi-Cola, gotta say 'I gots-ta have it.' Stayin' back too long, when you really got it goin' on. . . . Ain't nothin' wrong with being strong. . . ."

In their 1995 song "Ain't Nuthin' but a She-Thing," Salt-n-Pepa offer a similarly inspirational and solidarity-building message about women's empowerment: "I could be anything that I want to be. Don't consider me a minority. Open up your eyes and maybe you'll see: It's a she thing and it's all in me. . . . Ladies help me out if you agree." Later, they rap, "The thing that makes me mad and crazy upset, got to break my neck just to get my respect. Go to work and get paid less than a man when I'm doin' the same damn thing he can. When I'm aggressive, then I'm a bitch; when I got attitude, you call me a witch. Treat me like a sex-object (that ain't smooth), underestimate the mind, oh yeah, you're a fool. Weaker sex, yeah, right—that's the joke (ha!). Have you ever been in labor? I don't think so, nope." The song achieves true anthem like proportions by the end when the rappers offer the following lines: "Don't be fooled by my S-E-X; it ain't that simple, I'm more complex. We've come a long way, and, baby, that's a fact. Let's keep moving forward, girls—never look back. Fight for your rights, stand up and be heard. You're just as good as any man, believe that. Word!"

An example of an even more focused message of empowerment came from Salt-n-Pepa in their earlier hit song, "Let's Talk about Sex" (1991). This song, which was released at a time when AIDS awareness among heterosexuals was just beginning, and "safe sex" was still a controversial topic, offered the following lines: "Let's talk about sex for now to the people at home or in the crowd—it keeps coming up anyhow. Don't decoy, avoid, or make void the topic, 'cause that ain't gonna stop it. Now, we talk about sex on the radio and video shows—many will know, anything goes. Let's tell it how it is, and how it could be. Those who think it's dirty have a choice—pick up the needle, press pause, or turn the radio off. Will that stop us, Pep? I doubt it. All right, then—come on, Spin!" In this song, Salt-n-Pepa work at breaking down barriers to communication about sex by striving for realism and connection with their audience's lived experiences.26 By the end of the song, this spoken exchange between Salt and Pepa make this plain: "Yo, Pep—I don't think they're gonna play this on the radio. (And why not? Everybody has sex.) I mean, everybody should be makin' love. (Come on, how many guys you know make love??)" Salt-n-Pepa's effort to raise awareness of AIDS and promote safe sex was further strengthened when they made an AIDS public service announcement and also remade their song "Let's Talk about Sex" as "Let's Talk about AIDS."

Like Salt-n-Pepa, the all-female Hip Hop group TLC wrote and performed many songs that raised awareness about AIDS, safe sex, and women's sexual empowerment. But they also addressed other issues of vulnerability for women, such as women's body image and appearance
An early song "Hat 2 Da Back" (1993), encouraged young women to wear comfortable clothes, even if such clothes were considered masculine. "Being that I am the kinda girl that I am. . . . Nobody can make me do what I don't want to. I can be myself a lot and I'm proud of what I got, so I'll never change for you. Being that I am the kinda girl that I am, tight jeans don't hit the scene with one like me. I got to be feeling free and you better believe I'll do what pleases me." Later in the song, the women chide a young man who dares to challenge their choice of clothing: "Shoot, he made another bad move sayin' that girls shouldn't wear baseball caps. He can go take a hike, 'cause it's the style I like. . . ."

On a much later CD, TLC present the song "Unpretty" (1998), which critiques those social forces that make women feel ugly. Chilli sings, "My outsides look cool; my insides are blue. Every time I think I'm through, it's because of you. I try different ways, but it's all the same. At the end of the day, I just have myself to blame." T-Boz sings, "Never insecure until I met you, now I'm bein' stupid. I used to be so cute to me, just a little bit skinny. Why do I look to all these things to keep you happy? Maybe get rid of you, and then I'll get back to me, yeah. . . ." In the chorus, the group sings: "You can buy your hair if it won't grow, you can fix your nose if he says so. You can buy all the make-up that M.A.C. can make, but if you can't look inside, you find out who I am to be in the position that makes me feel so damn unpretty, I'll make you feel unpretty, too." This song's impact was enhanced by the video, which showed the members of the group applying make-up and tearfully smearing it off in disgust over recognition of their own subjugation to external beauty standards.

Queen Latifah offered a different kind of women's empowerment song, "Ladies 1st," on her 1989 debut CD, All Hail the Queen. This CD, hailed in the Hip Hop community as a turning point in women's rap discourse, encapsulated an omnibus message of women's power. On this song, Latifah shared the microphone with black British rapper Monie Love, whose lines in the song contribute equally to the song's meaning and impact. Latifah rapped, "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?" Later, Monie Love embellishes this theme of women's power: "Strong, stepping, strutting, moving on, rhyming, cutting, and not forgetting—We are the ones that give birth to the new generation of prophets, because it's 'Ladies First.'" Latifah then rejoins (with Monie Love's back-up): "I break into a lyrical freestyle, grab the mic, look at the crowd and see smiles, 'cause they see a woman standing up on her own two—sloppy slouching is something I won't do. Some think that we can't flow (can't flow)—stereotypes, they go to go, got to go. I'm-a mess around and flip the scene into reverse (with what?)—with a little touch of 'Ladies First.'" To paint a picture of women's superiority, Latifah raps, "I'm divine and my mind expands through out the universe—a female rapper with the message to send: Queen Latifah is the perfect specimen!" Later, she states, "Queens of civilization are on the mic."
This song, which clearly invokes the mythology of African queens, played well into, yet challenged, the environment of burgeoning Afrocentricity during the early 1990s.

Another artist known for presenting socially conscious music is Lauryn Hill. In her 1998 song "Doo Wop (That Thing)" from her debut solo CD, The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill, she uses the old method of "reading" someone, combined with sisterly empathy, to make a point and encourage women to increase their self-respect. Because her lyrical style does not lend itself to short excerpts, a longer passage will be reproduced here. The chorus exhorts: "Girls, you know you'd better watch out. Some guys, some guys are only about that thing, that thing, that thing. . . ." The verses dedicated to women continue:

It's been three weeks since you've been looking for your friend—the one you let hit it and never called you again. 'Member when he told you he was 'bout the Benjamins? You act like you ain't hear him, then give him a little trim. To begin, how you think you're really going to pretend like you wasn't down then you called him again? Plus, when you give it up so easy, you ain't even foolin' him—if you did it then, then you'd probably fuck again. Talking out your neck, saying you're a Christian, a Muslim, sleeping with the gin [Gentiles]—now, that was the sin that did Jezebel in. Who're you going to tell when the repercussions spin? Showing off you're ass 'cause you're thinking it's a trend—girlfriend, let me break it down for you again! You know I only say it 'cause I'm truly genuine—don't be a hardrock when you really are a gem. Baby girl, respect is just the minimum. Niggas fucked up and you still defending them. Now, Lauryn is only human—don't think I haven't been through the same predicament. Let it sit inside your head like a million women in Philly, Penn. It's silly when girls sell they souls because it's in. Look at where you be in—hair weaves like Europeans, fake nails done by Koreans. . . . Come again! Yo, when, when—come again! My friend, come again!

Later in the song, Hill poses the stinging rhetorical question, "How you gon' win, when you ain't right within?" Although this line is technically embedded in a verse "dedicated to the men," this message pervades the song for members of both genders.

Many more examples of songs containing messages of women's empowerment, self-help, and solidarity could be provided; the examples presented here demonstrate that women rappers present not only sisterly messages of inspiration and encouragement, but also harsh critiques of one another designed to elicit a higher consciousness about women's oppression as well as women's inherent worth and dignity. These songs indicate women rappers' awareness of societal messages, from within communities of color as well as the white mainstream, that degrade, discourage, depress, and confuse women, and they show how many women rappers have taken the role of "my sister's keeper."
DEFENSE OF BLACK MEN AGAINST THE LARGER SOCIETY

Black women in rap, as in real life, also take the role of "my brother's keeper." Recognizing that gendered racism affects not only women of color, but also men of color, women rappers articulate a politics of solidarity with their men that is closely aligned with womanism. While the politics of women's solidarity with men have always been controversial in feminism, a stance better described as a loving critical engagement with men is advocated within womanism. In rap and Hip Hop, this latter stance takes the form of celebrations of black men, which counteract standard stereotypical messages of black men's inferiority and brutality that circulate in the wider society, and "ride or die" songs, in which black women express "us against the world" sentiments with regard to black men who are "fighting the system," often in ways that are illegal, dangerous, or alien to mainstream culture. By demonstrating such alliance and solidarity with men of color, women rappers demonstrate a complex "unbought and unbossed" political consciousness and exercise their oppositionality to mainstream racism, classism, and race-d sexism that affects both men and women in the community.

A classic song in praise of black men is Salt-n-Pepa's 1994 "Whatta Man." The chorus is purely celebratory: "Whatta man, whatta man, whatta man, what a mighty good man...." The song's esteeming tone is set in the first few lines: "I wanna take a minute or two and give much respect due to the man that's made a difference in my world.... I know that ain't nobody perfect; I give props to those who deserve it, and, believe me, y'all—he's worth it." In the remainder of the song, Salt and Pepa list the man's many attributes and discuss how they will reward the man for his goodness. The "good" man is compared with negative male archetypes, including male "ho's," "macks," pimps, wannabes, suckers, those who are "corny," and "wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am" men. This good man is faithful, sexy, generous, dapper, loving, sexually skillful and attentive, smart, a good conversationalist, never disrespectful, "a lover and a fighter," and humorous. In addition, he spends time with his kids. In sum, "He's a God-sent original, the man of my dreams." By defining a good man, Salt-n-Pepa create and project an archetype for men to follow as well as set a standard for fellow women who may be settling for less.

Respect for the black man is shown in another way in Erykah Badu's 1997 song, "Other Side of the Game." In this song, Badu expresses support for a man who is making a living by illegal means—"Work ain't honest, but it pays the bills." Although the man's line of work causes stress on the family, namely, Badu and her unborn baby, Badu understands the forces that are aligned against him and loyally supports him as best she can. "Now, me and baby got this situation. See, brotha got this complex occupation. And it ain't that he don't have education, 'cause I was right there at his graduation. Now I ain't sayin' that this life don't work, but it's me and baby that he hurts. 'Cause I tell him right, he thinks I'm wrong—but I love him strong. He gave me the
life that I came to live, gave me the song that I came to sing. . . ." Later, she continues: "Don't I know there's confusion. God's gonna see us through. Peace out to revolution. . . ." Interestingly, Badu continues the storyline of this song on a much later CD in a song called "Danger" (2003). In this song, the man has gone to jail, and Badu, with the baby, is awaiting his return on the heels of a jailbreak. As she paces the floor with the baby awaiting him in her full make-up (because he's been gone for so long), she keeps the car running and the clip in her "mama's gun." She has saved up money "in a box under the bed" and is prepared to run with the man once he returns. Yet, again, she reflects on the stress of their lifestyle for both herself and her man, at times effectively chiding him: "Well, there ain't no mistakin', that the money you're makin' leaves you nervous and shaken, 'cause at night you're awake and thinkin' about lives that you've taken, all the love you've forsaken, in your zone. Niggas gone, get they fuckin' head blown." "Danger—you're in danger," she warns. "No hard feelings, right or wrong, weak or strong. I don't make the laws." Yet, she has supported her black man in this complex situation.

Women in rap tend to show appreciation for men, rich or poor, from the black "ghetto," recognizing it as a complex of forces constraining life's options and cultivating a particular mix of hardness and vulnerability. An example of such a song is Lauryn Hill's tender and wistful ballad "The Sweetest Thing" (1998), in which she extols her "sweet prince of the ghetto" for "the way you walk, your style of dress" and his "precious, precious, precious, precious dark skin tone." While as much is conveyed in the music of this song as the words, its overall message is one of appreciation for black men. Similarly, in her 2000 song "Brotha," Hip Hop spoken-word artist Jill Scott writes, "If'n nobody told ya, brotha', I'm here to let you know that you're so wonderful, you're so marvelous, you're so beautiful, you're splendid, you're fabulous, brilliantly blessed in every way. Y'all can't touch we. Brotha', don't let nobody hold you back. . . ."

As mentioned, another type of song in which black women support black men could be characterized as "ride or die" songs or "Bonnie and Clyde" anthems. In these songs, lyrics tend to convey women's willingness to help men in dangerous situations and a sense of shared risk in some sort of dangerous endeavor. Often the endeavor involves the drug trade or the redemption of the man's honor in a gang-related conflict. Two examples of this type of song are Yo-Yo's "The Bonnie and Clyde Theme" (1993) and Eve's "Dog Match" (1999). As is common in this genre, both songs are duets; Yo-Yo raps with Ice Cube and Eve raps with DMX. In "The Bonnie and Clyde Theme," Ice Cube starts off: "It's a man's world, but check the girl with the Mac 11, 187. . . ." He compares himself and Yo-Yo to a diverse array of famous male-female teams: "Ike and Tina, Marie and Donnie, Ashford and Simpson, Clyde and Bonnie." Yo-Yo picks it up: "I'm the type of girl that's down for my nigga, I'll lie for my nigga, peel a cap for my nigga. . . . You ain't seen nothing 'til you seen us both jacking, pulling the side of fools, straight ratpacking. . . ." In the chorus they alternate, "Got me a down girl on my
team, the Bonnie and Clyde theme, yeah. Got me a down-ass nigga on my team, the Bonnie and Clyde theme, yeah." Later, Ice Cube asserts, "Bonnie and Clyde, equal homicide, yeah." Yo-Yo rejoins, "You can lock us up if you want, don't matter—But give 'em a bail and we'll be right back at cha...."
The point of this song is not so much to advocate actual violence as to posture together and express double toughness and fierce loyalty in a "street" context.

In "Dog Match," DMX opens up with, "Now for every real dog, there's that bitch that's behind him, that bitch that when that nigga get to missin', she gon' find him. Old girl gonna stand with the dog, hand in hand with the dog, and whatever the fuck went down, she ran with the dog." Eve matches him with, "Always been the bitch that could roll with a thug and wipe up the blood, roll in the mud with your other ducks, nigga. What you need when the chips is down. I'll abide on the stand when evidence is found. I give pound to ya niggaz—they respect this bitch." Later in the song, the duo speculates about how tough their "pups" would be as a result of their own equally matched and superior toughness.

Foxy Brown presents a similar theme in "Letter to the Firm (Holy Matrimony)" (1996). In this case, however, the "marriage" is to an entire crew rather than to an individual. She raps, "Me and you forever, hand in hand, I'm married to the Firm, boo, ya got to understand. I'll die for 'em, give me a chair and then I'll fry for 'em. And if I got to take the stand for 'em, I'm-a lie for 'em." In "Bonnie and Clyde, Part II" (1999), a duet with male rapper Jay-Z, Foxy Brown invokes the famous fugitive duo directly. The chorus of the song is a sort of call-and-response in which Foxy [F] and Jay-Z [J] trade lines. In the first section, Jay-Z leads: [J] "Now, would you die for your nigga?" [F] "Yeah, I'd die for my nigga." [J] "Would you ride for your nigga?" [F] "I gets lie for my nigga." [J] "Would you live for your nigga?" [F] "Do up big for my nigga." [J] "Would you bid for your nigga?" [F] "Shit, you my nigga." In the second one, Foxy leads: [F] "Would you ride for me?" [J] "Rapper robbery." [F] "Would you die for me?" [J] "I hang high from a tree." [F] "They ain't ready for us, nigga." [J] "Obviously." [F] "Sound like Bonnie and Clyde to me." While this sort of exchange might sound macabre to someone outside this linguistic universe, within it, this exchange represents an expression of mutual loyalty and, to an extent, relational reciprocity. It is a way of saying, on a gendered level, "I would go to the lengths of the earth for you," while also recognizing, from a racial and class positionality, that "it's us against the world."

These songs recognize African American men's gendered vulnerability in a highly racialized society, sending a message to black men, as well as to the world-at-large in which they are frequently put down, that black women are black men's allies. These songs also reflect the complexity of black male-female relations within the Hip Hop generation.29 These lyrics suggest that the women who pen them know that the criticism of black women's support of black men that occurs within some corners of mainstream society, even in
"progressive" circles, is subject to vestigial and often unchallenged racist, classist, and sexist attitudes and sentiments. Thus, while this stance on the part of women of color is, on the one hand, overtly "with" men of color, it is also a veiled assault on mainstream society and, in particular, those hypocritises which continue to pollute the discourses of its more progressive representatives. Through their expressions of solidarity and alliance with their men, women of color demonstrate clear oppositionality to violent and oppressive aspects of mainstream society and the dominant discourse.

WOMEN IN RAP: EXPANDING THE DISCURSIVE TERRITORY OF FEMINISM AND WOMANISM

As these foregoing examples illustrate, in Hip Hop and rap, women of color, particularly African American women, translate feminist and womanist ideas already circulating in the larger culture into street-level languages and contexts at the same time as they generate autonomous articulations of personal and political struggle and aspiration that then inform others in the larger conversation and, in particular, challenge mainstream feminists. For instance, while women rappers exhibit a traditional feminist orientation when they "talk back" to men to reclaim women's respectability and fight back against violence against women, they push the envelope on feminist discourse when they express alliance with men who are viewed as antisocial by the larger society, or when they advocate violence in their own right. Yet, by containing the contradiction of these positions—as they do, for instance, when they exhort one another towards self-empowerment, agency, and solidarity—women rappers and their musical kin manifest a dual oppositionality that allows them to contest sexism within the Hip Hop universe as well as confront sexism, racism, classism, and other oppressions vis-à-vis mainstream society (which includes some feminists). Ultimately, the process of feminist/womanist knowledge construction, then, becomes not only dialogic, but also inscribed in multiple texts and contexts.30

Thus, it can be said that women in Hip Hop and rap participate in and co-construct the larger feminist and womanist conversation as well as the overall meanings of feminism and womanism in society. Like all women, they are both subjects and agents in the process of defining, articulating, and using (or contesting) feminism and womanism. Thus, women rappers and hip hoppers redefine and expand the discursive territory covered by feminism and womanism, not just for the consumers of Hip Hop and rap, but for everyone. Central to their ability to redefine and expand these discourses is their dual oppositionality.

Hip Hop is a complex arena in which not all women address sexism or promote women's empowerment. Certainly, even those women who do promote women's interests and well-being do not always call themselves feminists or womanists, choosing instead to let their lyrics and actions speak for themselves. Yet, at a time in the feminist history of consciousness when
the relationships between the academy and the street, between theory and activism, are at issue, rap and Hip Hop are particularly productive and informative sites of inquiry and activity.

Women in rap and Hip Hop exhibit differential consciousness and utilize a form of differential social activism to enact social change in a multiplicity of contexts, at micro and macro levels. Differential consciousness and social movement challenge vectors of oppression in postmodern society by using ideologically eclectic philosophies and methods to intercept and intervene upon rapidly changing and heterogeneous exploitative and violent forces and discourses. By rejecting rigid ideological templates that necessarily draw lines of "insider" and "outsider," "with us" and "against us," differential activists—including, we would argue, women in rap and Hip Hop—retain their ability to generate and maintain relationships of identification and transformation with a wide variety of people. Thus, they retain a certain politically productive connection to "the masses" that is often lost by activists who strive to distill neatly refined, internally consistent, often more academic, and, ultimately, utopian discourses. Hip Hop feminism and womanism, as much as they often fly beneath the radar of the feminist mainstream, survive and thrive because they "keep it real."

The type of non-ideological feminist/womanist theory and movement we are describing here is a significant development not only in the larger arena of feminism, but also in the wider fields of critical theory and progressive social activism. Although rap and Hip Hop in general and women's rap and Hip Hop in particular, could be criticized for underutilizing their feminist/womanist potential, both can be lauded for maintaining a lively and perpetually self-reinventing space of liberatory possibility for a broad segment of the youth worldwide. It remains to be seen to what extent this liberatory potential will be realized, but, no doubt, women of color will be in the forefront.

NOTES

1. The term "Hip Hop" is reputed to have been coined by either Lovebug Starski or DJ Hollywood, two DJs who worked collaboratively in New York during the early and mid-1970s. According to William E. Perkins, DJ Afrika Bambaataa imported this term into the South Bronx party scene in the mid-1970s. Early Hip Hop culture was constituted by three distinct forms of oppositional cultural expression: rap music (comprised of music made by DJs and rap lyrics provided by MCs), graffiti writing (known simply as "writing"), and breakdancing (a/k/a "breaking"). Although all three forms of expression survive today, rap music has entered into a relationship with the cultural mainstream, while writing and breaking retain currency as largely underground activities. For detailed discussions of the origins of Hip Hop, see Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (Middletown, CT, 1994); William E. Perkins, Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture (Philadelphia, PA, 1996); and Nelson George, Hip Hop America (New York, 1998).


Nancy Guevara, "Women Writin' Rappin' and Breakin'," reprinted in Perkins, Droppin' Science, 49–62; Christine Veran, "First Ladies: Fly Females Who Rocked the Mike in the '70s and '80s," in Hip Hop Divas, ed., Vibe (New York, 2001), 5–20; Nelson George has tended to downplay the importance of women in rap; however, see his "Rap's Tenth Birthday," Village Voice (October 24, 1989), 40, as well as hip hop america.


Joan Morgan, for instance, is credited with bringing the intersection of feminism and Hip Hop together in her book When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks It Down (New York, 1999). By academic feminist standards, this book did little to advance or reconfigure feminist discourse, but what this book did do successfully was instigate a broad discussion of feminism within the Hip Hop community at "street" level and express a Hip Hop-situated, vernacular perspective on feminism. In the time since Morgan's book was published, Hip Hop feminism has also consolidated as a formal academic discourse in its own right, thanks in part to a younger generation of feminist scholars who grew up in the Hip Hop era. See, for instance, Gwendolyn Pough, Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere (Boston, 2004).

An extensive discussion of feminism, black feminism, womanism, and their differences is beyond the scope of this paper. For purposes of this discussion, feminism is both a social movement opposed to sexism and a critical theory that emphasizes the role of patriarchy in diminishing women's lives, and the term "feminism" denotes the most generic level of this perspective. Black feminism is an anti-sexist perspective rooted in African American women's distinct history of activism that focuses on the multiple and interlocking oppressions and identities that constitute people's experiences as oppressors or members of the oppressed class. Womanism is a relatively vernacular anti-oppressionist perspective devised and espoused by African American and other women of color that partially overlaps with black feminism but contains elements distinctive from either black or white feminism, and is more broadly conceived. Some black feminists consider themselves womanists, while others do not, and vice versa. Use of the term "street level" in conjunction with feminism, black feminism, and womanism in this article refers not to a class distinction per se, but rather to a common historical and experiential thread that all African American women and other women of color share as "everyday women," outside or beyond those social roles and statuses that differentiate them to serve the purposes of bureaucratic society.


Elliot Liebow, Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Street Corner Men (Boston, 1967).

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16These have been described as physical, psychological, and economic dislocation, mobility, and insecurity, the fractionation and hybridization of identity, the cannibalization of cultures, the dissolution of social and moral norms, rapid oscillation between euphoria and despair, and the constant barrage of possibilities (particularly for consumption), among other things. In this environment, consciousness is the chief terrain for both oppression and resistance, and the symbolic/representational realm becomes a crucial site for activism. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," New Left Review 1/146 (July/August 1984): 53–92; Chela Sandoval, Methodology of the Oppressed (Minneapolis, MN, 2000), 15–37.


20As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, this comparison begs additional questions, such as "How does Hip Hop compare with R & B as the younger generation's response to the oppressive social, political, and economic establishment?" and "How does Hip Hop compare with Hard Rock in its response to postmodernism?" Although a complete response to these interesting questions is beyond the scope of this paper, at the most basic level, it could be stated that R & B corresponded in tone to the tactical timbre of the Civil Rights Movement, while Hip Hop, like Rock 'n' Roll, is more strident and provocative. As for Hard Rock and its spinoffs, including heavy metal, speed metal, death metal, and perhaps even punk (which isn't a technically a spin-off, but a distinct genre), these responses to postmodernity were distinctly white and reflected white culture's distraught and somewhat pessimistic response to conditions of its own creating. While Hip Hop can be comparably violent and "real," overall (and there are a few exceptions), it tends to be more optimistic about both human nature and humanity's future.

21We are currently preparing a more complete discussion of women's discursive strands in rap and Hip Hop in another article. These discursive strands, when viewed in their entirety, give a clearer perspective on the liberatory potential of women's Hip Hop and rap as well as a more detailed picture of the progressive racial, sexual, and class politics implicit within their lyrics and videos.

22Rap lyrics, particularly those that are captured in their recorded rather than their published form, are transcribed differently by different people. In this paper, we will present lines from rap songs not in the typical "poetic" form, which uses slashes (/) between rhyming lines, but, rather, in "sentence" form, which uses regular punctuation to mark the beginning and end of ideas which may or may not correspond with rhyming lines. The reason for this choice is the authors' desire to highlight female rap performers' complete thoughts about the topics in question, with less regard for their artistic presentation or packaging.

23Rose provides an insightful dissection of this song and its video in "Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile."

24Insightful analyses of the video for this song are provided by R. A. Emerson, "Where My Girls At?: Negotiating Black Womanhood in Music Videos," Gender and Society 16 (Spring, 2002): 115–135,


27 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: 1983). Walker wrote that the womanist is "a black feminist or feminist of color" who is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (xi, italics original).

28 This phrase is borrowed from Shirley Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed* (New York, 1970).


**DISCOGRAPHY**


Sparky D, "Sparky's Turn (Roxanne You're Through)," Nia (1985).


Teena Marie (a/k/a Lady Tee), "Square Biz," Gordy (1980).