

**SISTERS WITH VOICES:  
WOMEN MAKING MUSIC IN THE HIP-HOP SCENE.**

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## ABSTRACT

One of the main goals of this study is to develop analytical strategies that can meaningfully represent the contributions of women in hip-hop music. In the last five years, a number of music scholars have begun to explore ways of analyzing and theorizing rap's music, but, by and large, the music of women rappers has received little critical attention in the musical academy. Furthermore, musicological studies of rap music have generally avoided examining dance, gesture, and other visual aspects of performance, privileging instead the lyrics and especially the technological aspects of rap (i.e. sampling technology, layering of musical and rhythmic tracks). As a result, those (male) artists who have explicitly political agendas and exploit complex technology tend to receive the most critical attention.

By specifically considering the music of women rappers, this study attempts to challenge discourses that treat hip-hop culture and rap music as disempowering to women and as an exclusively male cultural activity. In addition to analyses of musical tracks and lyrics, this study also locates complexities in additional aspects of performance, particularly complexities produced through the use of vocal timbres and physical imagery. Thus dance, language, gesture, clothing, music, and voice are considered with respect to the ways that women construct and negotiate feminine identities, and challenge disempowering gender, ethnic, and socio-economic stereotypes.

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## PREFACE

Throughout hip-hop's transformation from an underground cultural phenomenon to its present status as a wildly popular and heavily consumed art form, women have been and continue to be actively involved in the culture as musicians, fans and entrepreneurs. In 1980, Lady B released "To the Beat Y'all," the first rap single recorded by a woman, and she was soon followed by rappers like Salt-N-Pepa (and their DJ Spinderella), MC Lyte and Queen Latifah. Salt-N-Pepa's single "Push it" went platinum in 1988.<sup>1</sup> With her 1993 hit "Ruffneck," MC Lyte became the first solo woman rapper with a gold rap single.<sup>2</sup> Queen Latifah has also enjoyed extraordinary success as a rapper, producer, businesswoman and 'raptor' (rap actor), winning a Grammy for her single "U.N.I.T.Y." from her gold album *Black Reign* (1993).<sup>3</sup> More recently, culture-conscious artists like Lauryn Hill and Rah Digga have entered the scene, and have been acclaimed by both critics and other rappers. And rappers Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim and Da Brat frequently stir up controversy with their sexually explicit lyrics, sensationalized personas and risqué videos.

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<sup>1</sup>Mimi Valdés, "Salt-N-Pepa," *The VIBE History of Hip-Hop*, Alan Light, ed. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), p. 211.

<sup>2</sup>Laura Jamison, "Ladies First," *The VIBE History of Hip-Hop*, pp. 181-2.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

Women are also actively involved in the business side of hip-hop. In the early eighties, entrepreneur Sylvia Robinson was part owner of Sugar Hill Records, one of the earliest independent labels to record rap music. Queen Latifah has also ventured into the business world, forming the successful Flavor Unit record label and management company. Headed by industry veteran Sylvia Rhone, Elektra Entertainment has supported rappers like Missy Elliott, Busta Rhymes and MC Lyte. And Jean Riggins, executive vice president and general manager of Universal Records, has, likewise, secured big-name artists for the label, recently signing on rappers Nelly and Sticky Fingaz.<sup>4</sup>

Women such as Joan Morgan and Allison Samuels are also writing about rap music in magazines like *Newsweek*, *Essence*, *Ebony*, *VIBE*, and *The Source*. According to Robert Walser, women have provided some of academia's most insightful ethnographies of hip-hop culture.<sup>5</sup>

Like many aspects of popular culture and the entertainment world, however, hip-hop culture is plagued by sexist and racist attitudes, and women are often confronted with economical and social dilemmas that undermine their

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<sup>4</sup>In its January, 2001 issue (#136), *The Source: The Magazine of Hip-hop Music, Culture & Politics* devotes several pages to the top thirty hip-hop companies, and in at least seven of the companies mentioned, women hold senior executive positions. See pages 139-60.

<sup>5</sup>Walser refers to Venise Berry, Tricia Rose, Cheryl Keyes and Madeline Slovenz in his article "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy," *Ethnomusicology* 39, (1995), pp. 193-218.



endeavours in the hip-hop scene. Rap scholar Tricia Rose expressed her shock at the industry's sexism in an interview with *Essence* magazine: "It was the most sexist arena I've ever had to negotiate. Women who have to work in that field do so under extreme pressure."<sup>6</sup> In her studies of women rappers, Rose found that "they were frustrated by their lack of financial and creative control."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Queen Latifah suggests in a 1994 *VIBE* magazine interview: "People wonder why girls don't go platinum, but a lot of the time we don't get the same money [for marketing and promotion]."<sup>8</sup> In her article "Women Writin', Rappin', Breakin'," Nancy Guevara documents the efforts of early women MC's, graffiti artists and breakdancers, outlining the obstacles these artists faced in a largely male-dominated environment. For example, rapping and breakdancing were considered inappropriate and 'unfeminine' behavior, and family and friends often discouraged women from participating in such activities. Female graffiti writers often encountered hostility from their male counterparts who would attack the women's reputation or deface their graffiti.<sup>9</sup> Limited access to sampling and

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<sup>6</sup>Kevin D. Thompson, "Rap Music's PhDiva," *Essence*, 25/12 (April 1995), p. 70.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Laura Jamison, "Ladies First," p. 181.

<sup>9</sup>Nancy Guevara, "Women Writin', Rappin', Breakin'," *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on rap music and hip-hop culture*, William Perkins, ed., (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1996), pp. 49-62.

mixing technology also curtailed women's efforts in production and DJing.<sup>10</sup> In her essay "Ladies First," Laura Jamison writes,

. . . men have more access to electronic equipment, both financially and culturally. As MC Lady "D" recalled, by limiting herself to rhyming, she didn't "have to worry about getting her equipment ripped off, coming up with the cash to get it in the first place, or hauling it around on subways to gigs—problems that kept a lot of other women out of rap in the early days."<sup>11</sup>

Women are beginning to become involved in various aspects of production. For example, Salt from Salt-N-Pepa produced four tracks on their album *Black's Magic*, Rah Digga assisted with the production on two tracks from *Dirty Harriet*,<sup>12</sup> and Missy Elliott, together with production partner Timbaland, has enjoyed enormous success as a producer. However, most of the producers and heads of production companies are male.<sup>13</sup> Lauryn Hill, who appears as both performer and producer on her album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, addresses the problems some women face when trying to participate as studio technicians:

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<sup>10</sup>As the dissemination of hip-hop music became increasingly dependent on sophisticated technology, poorer blacks, male and female, undoubtedly faced considerable economic obstacles in obtaining electronic equipment.

<sup>11</sup>Laura Jamison, "Ladies First", p. 178-9.

<sup>12</sup>See liner notes.

<sup>13</sup>For example, the January, 2001 issue of *The Source* also lists the most successful production companies in rap music, which are all headed by males.

Men like it when you sing to them. But step out and try and control things and there are doubts. This is a very sexist industry. They'll never throw the genius title to a sister. They'll just call her a 'diva' and think it's a compliment. It's like our flair and vanity are put before our musical and intellectual contributions.<sup>14</sup>

In this study, I intend to analyze the work of certain women who, despite various obstacles, have participated significantly in the otherwise male-dominated field of rap and hip-hop music. I will deal mainly with women who participate as actual performers; a study of female fans in rap music is beyond the scope of this paper, but certainly, an analysis of hip-hop audiences would reveal much about the ways class, gender and age might play into the consumption and production of hip-hop music. The first chapter will deal with questions of methodology, particularly ethical issues when dealing with "othered" musics. Referring to the works of Philip Bohlman, Susan Fast, Adam Krims and Ruth Solie, I will outline concerns they have voiced about methodologies in both classical and popular music studies. Accordingly, the problem of essentialism will be addressed, as well as questions regarding how to talk about and criticize hip-hop music, and with what epistemological tools. I will also investigate writings of black feminist scholars, paying particular attention to the work of Angela Davis and Hazel V. Carby, who have provided analyses in which discourses of black feminism and music are in dialogue with each other.

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<sup>14</sup>Quote found at <http://www.lauryn-hill.com/history.html>. Accessed June 30, 2000.

In the second chapter, I will examine critical discourses around hip-hop culture. This will involve an analysis of articles from mainstream magazines like *Newsweek*, *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *The Village Voice*, and from popular music journals like *Rolling Stone*, *VIBE*, and *The Source*. In addition, I will look at academic studies of hip-hop music by Robert Walser, Tricia Rose, and Adam Krims. I will also suggest that criticism occurs not only in written forms, but in oral forms as well; in other words, critical discourse may be found in the actual performances of hip-hop artists. By analyzing these critical endeavors, I intend to ascertain ways in which criticism functions in formulating and negotiating values in hip-hop.

The third chapter will include analyses of performances by specific women hip-hop artists. I will begin by discussing the variety of themes and styles prevalent among women artists, addressing the ways in which these women reinforce, expand or subvert certain values in hip-hop culture. Drawing from the scholarship of Tricia Rose, Venise Berry, and Marla Shelton, and then by analyzing the lyrics, videos, and music of specific rap artists, I will discuss ways in which black women are (mis)represented in the hip-hop scene. Through close readings of performances by Rah Digga, Lauryn Hill and Missy Elliot, three artists who have enjoyed considerable commercial success and whose performance strategies differ significantly from each other, I will examine how they have used their voices, bodies and their cultural heritage, not only to resist stereotypes of

black female subjectivity, but also to articulate the complexities of oppression and to celebrate the diversity of black identities. In doing so, I hope to point out ways in which women have claimed a unique space in the hip-hop nation.



## CHAPTER ONE

### **Hip-Hop 101: Music Studies and Problems of Methodology**

While hip-hop music quickly found its way into the academy, particularly in black studies, it has for the most part received little attention in musicological circles. According to Philip Bohlman, rap is

. . . excluded on musical grounds, for musicology is at a loss for how to study it musically. What would one study as rap's music? What would we learn by transcribing rap performances? What would we learn by unmixing the mix, cataloguing the recordings and motifs cobbled together by dj's and sound mixers? How would we handle its overt and violent political resistance? Rap music resists essentializing as 'music'. It's symbols are literary, ideological, and political, not the depoliticized symbols of a repertory or musical system.<sup>1</sup>

Bohlman strongly suggests, then, that in order to talk about rap music, musicology must seriously question and rethink its methods of interpretation and analysis, asking the questions: Can traditional modes of music scholarship tell us anything meaningful about the musical, social, or political nature of rap music or, for that matter, any other form of music? What analytical methods are necessary in order to account for things like "difference" or audience reception? Furthermore, what is at stake when engaging in critical studies of art forms like rap music?

During the last decade or so, music scholars have written at length about the failure and/or the inadequacy of traditional musicological discourse to deal

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<sup>1</sup>Philip Bohlman, "Musicology as a Political Act," *The Journal of Musicology*, 11/4 (Fall 1993), p. 430. Since Bohlman's article, however, Robert Walser and Adam Krims have demonstrated ways of studying rap's music.

with music that exists outside of the white, male, "classical" tradition. Ruth Solie, Lawrence Kramer, Susan McClary and Joseph Kerman, to name a few, have demonstrated musicology's predominantly insular and positivistic discursive practices, and have critiqued musicology's general reluctance to engage with other discourses such as feminist studies, anthropology and gay and lesbian studies in order to address music's social and cultural resonances. For example, in her essay "Towards a Feminist Criticism of Music," Susan McClary writes,

Music traditionally has resisted not only feminist criticism but all forms of socially grounded criticism. Because of its relatively abstract modes of construction, music has long been held to be impervious to interpretations that would link its patterns to concerns of the material or social world: concerns such as gender and sexuality, but also race, ethnicity and class.<sup>2</sup>

The methodologies of ethnomusicology and popular music studies, discourses that actually deal with "other" musics, have also come under scrutiny;

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<sup>2</sup>Susan McClary, "Toward's a Feminist Criticism of Music," *Canadian University Music Review* 10, (1990), pp. 9-18. Similarly, Edward Said observes, ". . . true, things [in musicology] are changing, but, in the main, professional musicology is like any other field in that it has a corporate or guild consensus to maintain, which sometimes requires keeping things as they are, not admitting new or outlandish ideas, maintaining boundaries and enclosures. And while I am very far indeed from rejecting all, or even a significant portion of what musicologists do by way of analysis or evaluation, I am struck by how much does not receive their critical attention, and by how little is actually done by fine scholars who, for example, in studying a composer's notebooks or the structure of classical form, fail to connect those things to ideology, or social space, or power" (*Musical Elaborations*, pp. xvi-xvii [New York, 1991] - quoted in Bohlman 1993, 423). Also see Lawrence Kramer's "The Musicology of the Future," *Repercussions*, 1/1 (Spring 1992), and Joseph Kerman's *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1985, pp. 5-18.



the use of Western notation in close readings of the music has received particular attention. With regard to ethnomusicology's frequent use of notation, Philip Bohlman argues that the acts of notating music and of ascribing form to music usually decontextualize it, or remove it "from the time and space that it occupies through performance:"

Notation . . . becomes a convenient way of collapsing time and space, thereby removing all sorts of Others—Western and non-Western—to the plane of the universal. By rendering all musics in Western notation, one creates a universe of music and then succeeds in controlling it . . . . It is a supreme act of disciplining, one which conflates power and knowledge in a Foucauldian sense.<sup>3</sup>

He further argues that notation, along with analysis, classification, relativism, and the search for authenticity are forms of essentializing or depoliticizing music.

Under the subheading "Letting Go of Music," Bohlman urges music scholars to reclaim music as "a bodily and performative practice," arguing that "an embodied music is also a contextualized music, a music that recontextualizes the social space of which it is a part."<sup>4</sup>

In his book *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, Adam Krims further outlines debates around technical analysis in popular music. For example, he addresses writings by Susan McClary and Robert Walser who have argued that technical analyses tend to over emphasize aspects of harmony and melody, giving

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<sup>3</sup>Philip Bohlman, "Musicology as a Political Act," pp. 420, 424.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 432-33.

insufficient attention to the qualities of popular music, like timbre, physical gestures, rhythm and texture, that often affect fans most directly.<sup>5</sup> Krims also draws attention to certain musicologists' claims that close readings of popular music

treat the music as if it were some self-existent object whose meaning and social function can be determined outside creative and diverse responses of communities, subcultures, and the like. Furthermore, they ignore that what we sometimes treat as static texts might in fact be sites of negotiation that bear multiple social inscriptions.<sup>6</sup>

Krims, however, identifies with scholars like John Shepherd, Richard Middleton and John Covach who maintain that close analysis in popular music "occupies some discursive space."<sup>7</sup> He calls for a renaming of

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<sup>5</sup>Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 19. He refers to Susan McClary's and Robert Walser's article, "Start Making Sense! Musicology Wrestles with Rock," *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds., (New York, 1990), pp. 277-92. In this article, McClary and Walser argue that pop musicology has often been as guilty as classical musicology in its focus on "distancing techniques" (i.e. semiotics) and its failure to deal with "those aspects of music that trigger adulation in fans" (287).

<sup>6</sup>Adam Krims, *Rap Music*, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

music theory—specifically, the designing of models of intramusical relations and analysis of particular pieces—as "musical poetics" . . . . [T]he broadening of the term 'music theory' and the redesignation of 'musical poetics' would clarify the latter as merely one subset of the former, engaged explicitly with the question of how music works in cultures. . . . Musical organization [of popular music] must be taken seriously, precisely because *artists, the music industry, and audiences of popular music take it seriously*.<sup>8</sup>

Susan Fast also emphasizes the importance of analysis in popular music studies, but observes that among popular music scholars who engage in technical analysis, "there is deep division about how it should be carried out and to what ends."<sup>9</sup> In other words, scholars who use analysis uncritically and unselfconsciously may actually create more problems than they solve:

[B]ecause there are almost no studies of popular music that deal with specific style characteristics of an artist, a genre, a "school," a scholar who wants to study popular music always has to begin at the very beginning, mapping out stylistic characteristics, contextualizing these within a given artist's repertory, a genre, a time period, etc. But while the argument that formalist analysis alone will provide us with such a foundation is a tempting proposition, the premise behind it is faulty. It will only get us so far and only with certain repertories, repertories that have already come to be privileged by most music theorists working on popular music: the Beatles, progressive rock, jazz-rock fusion, or earlier studies on Tin Pan Alley, for example, while music that does not conform to the analytical models is left aside (funk, rap, electronica, among other genres); or, perhaps worse, music that fits the model badly is poured into it anyway, either showing up its "deficiencies" in the process, or placing emphasis on an element of the music (usually pitch) that is relatively inconsequential to

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>9</sup>Susan Fast, "Same as it Ever Was? Musicology Continues to Wrestle with Rock," *Canadian University Music Review*, 21/1 (2001). In this article, Fast provides an in-depth criticism of the debates around popular music studies.

the song's impact. Such disciplining of music is problematical and unnecessary; analytical paradigms are best left fluid, shaped to account for particular songs, artists, repertoires.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, then, deciding when and how to use music analysis and musical notation requires much consideration on the musicologist's part. In the case of rap music, for example, choosing not to systematically analyze rap's musical details may in some ways reinforce prevalent misconceptions that rap is *not* music or contains little musical value. On the other hand, Western notation may prove to be inadequate for analyzing rap music, and if this is the case, other systems may need to be employed. Adam Krims uses a notational system which can be read by non-musicians. While rapping styles, musical tracks and polyrhythms can be represented in this system, the music's timbral qualities cannot.<sup>11</sup> Robert Walser has demonstrated that Western notation may be useful in discussions of rap music. In an analysis of Public Enemy's "Fight The Power," he actually transcribes sections of the music arguing that,

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 3-4.

<sup>11</sup>Adam Krims, *Rap Music*, pp. 53, 58-9.

rhythms and certain other kinds of relationships can be sketched with some amount of accuracy if we keep in mind that we are looking at static representations of dynamic relationships. Transcription is particularly useful in this case because coherence and complexity are precisely what have been denied to hip-hop, and those are the qualities that notation is best at illuminating.<sup>12</sup>

Notation is certainly useful for trained musicians—I personally find that having some kind of visual representation of sounds significantly focuses my listening. Because Walser's analysis mainly emphasizes pitch combinations and rhythm, notation is a reasonable analytical tool. As I will outline in further chapters, one of my main goals is to articulate the complexities achieved in women's rap through the use of vocal timbres and visual physicality. Thus, conventional notation is undoubtedly an inadequate means of accounting for these important aspects of rap performance.

Another methodological concern in both musicology and popular music studies is that of developing ways of talking about difference. In other words, scholars face certain challenges when writing about the music of various cultures and groups (ethnic, socio-economic, lifestyle, etc.) that they themselves are not a part of. In her introductory essay to *Musicology and Difference*, Ruth Solie particularly addresses the problem of essentialism, a term often associated with many racist, homophobic and misogynist attitudes and acts. Scholars who write

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<sup>12</sup>Robert Walser, "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy," p. 200.

about difference often make assumptions about which traits are common to a particular group, thereby imposing "oppressive assertions of sameness from 'everyone' to all members of some illegitimately reified category."<sup>13</sup> Post-colonial theorists have also demonstrated that in literature, music, history, etc., scholars have repeatedly failed to address the complexities of "others," lumping, for example, all "black women" into one category without accounting for their differences in ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality, etc.<sup>14</sup> Such acts of essentialism deny and ignore the multifaceted political voices of marginalized groups.

In the article "The Third Space—An Interview with Homi Bhabha," Bhabha further describes essentialism in terms of a "timid traditionalism—always trying to read a new situation in terms of some pre-given model or paradigm, which is a reactionary reflex, a conservative mindset."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Solie identifies, on the one hand, "the risk of demanding similarity or adherence to a

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<sup>13</sup>Ruth Solie, "Introduction: On Difference," *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, Ruth Solie, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 16.

<sup>14</sup>See for example Sara Mills, "Post-colonial Feminist Theory," *Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990); Anne McClintock, "Postcolonialism and the Angel of Progress," *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Imperial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

<sup>15</sup>"The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. J. Rutherford, ed. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 216.

norm whose valuation may be tacit" and, on the other hand, the risk of stigmatization or labeling an "othered" person or group as deficient.<sup>16</sup> This is evident in the comments of many musicians and critics who have dismissed rap as being musically deficient or even as not being music at all because it does not measure up to given musical "norms" (like melody or harmonic progression).<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, the notion of essentialism as a threat has, to some extent, suppressed dialogues that center around difference. While essentialism may carry negative connotations, Solie argues that certain marginalized groups may actually be enabled to

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<sup>16</sup>Ruth Solie, "Introduction: On Difference," p. 2. Gary Tomlinson describes this as a failure "to perceive either *difference* without degenerating into superiority/inferiority or *equality* without its compelling us to accept identity." From "Approaching Others (Thoughts Before Writing)," *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 1-43.

<sup>17</sup>For example, in "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy," Robert Walser points to specific articles in *Newsweek* and *The New Yorker* which assumed that rap should not be considered music (pp. 193, 212 n3). Also see Tricia Rose's "Soul Sonic Forces: Technology, Orality and Black Cultural Practice in Rap Music," in which she relates an encounter with the chair of a university music department who, after hearing of her intention to study rap music, said, "Well, you must be writing on rap's social impact and political lyrics because there is nothing to the music." *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 62.

resist the oppressive force of fictive universals . . . by claiming a special essence . . . . [T]he practice of such an "identity politics" is an important strategy for reclaiming and valorizing the specific traits on account of which some group has already been defined as different and oppressed by others . . . . Theories of difference, then, may operate independently of any commitment to essentialism, or even in repudiation of it.<sup>18</sup>

Through what kind of interpretive approach and with what epistemological tools, then, might one begin to study the music of those marginalized due to their race, class, gender or a combination of these. As a black woman musician who for years has been trained to analyze and value music of the European "classical" tradition, this question is of special concern to me. Before and during my musical studies in academia, I listened to a lot of Caribbean and African-derived popular musics, and hip-hop has figured significantly in my listening experience since my early adolescence. While I have often (consciously or unconsciously) separated my appreciation of popular music from that of classical music, I am often surprised when I respond to performances of both in similar ways, either with respect to the lyrics, to the way a performer uses her/his body, or to the different combinations of timbre produced by voices and instruments. In academia, I have had many opportunities to express what I value about classical music performance, and I am interested in similarly exploring ways of articulating what it is about hip-hop performance that I find valuable. However, I strongly question whether uncritically using conventional analytical methods can adequately

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<sup>18</sup>Ruth Solie, "Introduction: On Difference," pp. 4-6.



describe any type of music with respect to its social ramifications. Meaningful interpretations necessitate an approach that engages with discourses outside the realm of music scholarship.

In the following pages, I will discuss specific writings that suggest paradigms for studying difference in music in terms of alternative histories and cultural studies. I will also draw from the writers Patricia Collins, bell hooks, Barbara Christian, Angela Davis and Hazel V. Carby who have engaged black feminist thought in creating alternative analytical models. While these authors do not address music in great detail, they offer a theoretical framework for dealing with the issues of race, gender, sexuality and socioeconomic class.

### **Sophie Drinker, Alternative Histories and Historical Discourses on Hip-hop**

Through a discussion of Sophie Drinker's *Music and Woman* (1948), Ruth Solie problematizes "canonic musicological practice" by interrogating the objectives, data and research methods of traditional music histories, and by asking specifically "what it would take—how canonic practices and values would have to be different—in order for the participation and experience of women to appear in the history of Western music."<sup>19</sup> Drinker's concept of music history departs significantly from traditional music histories, not only with regard to the subject

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<sup>19</sup>Ruth Solie, "Sophie Drinker's History," *Disciplining Music: Musicology and its Canons*, K. Bergeron and P.V. Bohlman, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 23.

of study—women—but also in the methodology used. Music history often has been concerned with studying "great works" and music-historical periods have been determined by styles of composition and "master" composers, but Drinker was aware that such a focus would "never surface much about the history of women."<sup>20</sup> Histories that emphasize the progress and continuity of a given concept or culture will very likely fail to take women into consideration because "women do not always thrive when 'civilization progresses;' in fact the reverse is often true."<sup>21</sup> The focus of Drinker's history, then, is not the musical document, the "great" composer or the progressive development of a civilization's musical tastes. Instead "communal, socially based musical production, . . . cultural practices, . . . participation in music-making" are the focus of research.<sup>22</sup> She models women's music history not on progress, but on the "cyclic waxing and waning of the moon."<sup>23</sup> Her primary interest is "in the causes of decline—the loss of women's power on their music-making—and in the causes of the regeneration she saw beginning."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid. In a similar vein, Michel Foucault also challenges traditional questions that are asked by historians and the methods and themes that are part of the discipline. He argues that historical research has usually been concerned with

While Drinker's historiography refers mainly to women's participation in music of the European tradition, I would argue that her approach is a valuable model for studying women's participation in hip-hop. Using the traditional historical approach of analyzing progress would probably not be worthwhile because, although hip-hop culture has increasingly gained respect, financial power and technological sophistication, women share in its new-found success only minimally and are more often seen in secondary roles as background singers, dancers or sexual props. Indeed, producers and production companies have much more economic and creative power than rappers, and the production aspects of rap performance are still considered a male domain. In her article "Black Texts/Black Contexts," Tricia Rose argues that women have been discouraged from engaging in rap production "because of the ways in which public space gets territorialized as a privileged site of production for men."<sup>25</sup> For example, in interviews with

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tracing the "linear successions," or "movements of accumulation" of the dominant culture, but describes a shift that is taking place in the discipline of history wherein attention is now being turned to the discontinuities: ". . . beneath the solid, homogeneous manifestations of a single mind or of a collective mentality, beneath the stubborn development of a science striving to exist and to reach completion at the very outset, beneath the persistence of a particular genre, form, discipline, or theoretical activity, one is now trying to detect the incidence of interruptions." *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, A. M. Sheridan-Smith, ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1972), pp. 3, 4.

<sup>25</sup>Tricia Rose, "Black Texts/Black Contexts," *Black Popular Culture*, Gina Dent, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), p. 224. Interestingly, the music of rappers that feature the complex studio technology of producers like Hank Shocklee (Public Enemy), The Bomb Squad (Public Enemy, Ice Cube), and Dr. Dre

male rap producers, she discovered that many of them felt uncomfortable when women interns worked in the studio. She concludes, ". . . [T]hat there are so few women rap producers is not just a matter of access to the technology; it's also about . . . social sites and how ideas are shared in them. This involves power relationships, gender, race, and class, and the shifting relationships between them."<sup>26</sup>

This is not to de-emphasize the importance of technology in hip-hop performance, however, it seems that hip-hop's musical and artistic value is too often measured in terms of technological sophistication. In other words, analyzing vocal timbres, gesture, clothing and dance, aspects that are often neglected in favor of a song's lyrics or musical and rhythmic tracks, could also reveal much about hip-hop music in terms of "its spiritual and expressive function for human beings" and for its ability to comment upon, critique and shape social attitudes and

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(N.W.A.) has received the most academic and musicological attention. For example, in her discussions of rap's "sonic forces," Tricia Rose privileges those sounds made by technology ("Soul Sonic Forces: Technology, Orality and Black Cultural Practice in Rap Music"). Most of the musicological writing on rap music is about Public Enemy and Ice Cube. See, for example, Robert Walser's article "Rhythm, Rhyme and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy," and Susan McClary's discussion of Public Enemy's "Night Train" in *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Adam Krims devotes a chapter to Ice Cube's "The Nigga Ya Love to Hate" in his book *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

behavior.<sup>27</sup> Such a study would have much more to say about the *music* of women hip-hop performers than, say, one that emphasized advancements in sampling. Situating the music of women rappers within their widely varied social conditions and experiences is one way of beginning to interpret their music meaningfully.

### **Studying Hip-Hop "Under a Cultural-Studies Umbrella"**

Cultural studies has emerged as a discourse that encourages dialogue between different intellectual and critical discourses, and that creates a space in the academy wherein inter-racial and cross-cultural discussion can take place.<sup>28</sup> Because it resists fixed methodologies and ideologies, a cultural studies approach requires in music studies a readjustment of "many of our own agendas such that music—whatever our particular questions—maintains its status as a cultural activity."<sup>29</sup> Susan McClary argues further,

Under a cultural-studies umbrella, it ought to be possible both to investigate the syntactical conventions that grant coherence to our repertoires and also to examine the ways music participates in the social construction of subjectivity, gender, desire, ethnicity, the body, and so on.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Ruth Solie, "Sophie Drinker's History," p. 35.

<sup>28</sup>bell hooks, *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 125.

<sup>29</sup>Susan McClary, "Paradigm Dissonances: Music Theory, Cultural Studies, Feminist Criticism," *Perspectives of New Music*, 32/1 (Winter 1994), p. 70.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 69.

Indeed, many scholars of both popular and classical music studies have embraced a cultural studies approach in their own academic work. Certainly studying the multi-voiced phenomenon of hip-hop music necessitates an approach that "resists fixed methodologies" and instead engages the theories of different discourses such as black cultural thought and feminist and popular music studies.

However cultural critic bell hooks, among others, articulates various pitfalls that have arisen since the emergence of cultural studies in the academy. While she expresses excitement for the increased focus on issues of race and difference in inter-disciplinary studies, she also expresses concern that scholars may write about "othered" groups and cultures "without fully interrogating their work to see if it employs white western intellectual traditions to re-inscribe white supremacy, to perpetuate racist domination."<sup>31</sup> She argues further that

unless progressive scholars actively pushing for further institutionalization of cultural studies remain ever mindful of the way discursive practices and the production of knowledge are easily appropriated by existing systems of domination, cultural studies cannot and will not serve as critical intervention disrupting the academic status quo.<sup>32</sup>

hooks challenges scholars who participate in inter-disciplinary studies, especially with regard to marginalized groups, to continually question the motivations, methodologies and conclusions of their work. For example, discussing women

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<sup>31</sup>bell hooks, *Yearning*, p. 124.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

rappers' lyrics from a feminist perspective becomes problematic when one's goal is to uphold and validate feminism's largely middle-class values. In my own study of the music of women rappers, then, constant self-critique with regard to my own motivations, methodologies and conclusions is necessary to avoid engaging in and perpetuating a discourse that further marginalizes difference.

## Rap Music and Black Feminism: Articulating Diverse Identities and Alternative Epistemologies

Literary scholars have been particularly receptive to the discourse of black feminist criticism and have produced numerous volumes that incorporate literary criticism in which black feminist thought figures significantly.<sup>33</sup> In her article "Reflections of Black Women Writers: Revising the Literary Canon," Nellie McKay asserts that black feminist thought has increased the visibility of black women authors by focusing on and theorizing black women's identity. Such authors have made "drastic inroads into the American literary consciousness. . . . Black women writers project a dynamic 'I' into the canon," and in effect make visible the social and political realities of African-American women in various time periods and social spaces.<sup>34</sup>

Addressing the cultural politics of black American women requires recognition and acknowledgment of the diversity of their experiences. bell hooks

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<sup>33</sup>See for example *Studies in Black American Literature: Black Feminist criticism and Critical Theory*, Joe Weixlmann, Houston A. Baker, Jr., eds. (Greenwood: The Penkevill Publishing Co., 1988); *female subjects in black and white: race, psychoanalysis, feminism*, Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, Helen Moglen, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

<sup>34</sup>Nellie McKay, "Reflections of Black Women Writers: Revising the Literary Canon" (1987), *Feminisms: an anthology of literary theory and criticism*, Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 249, 259.



has criticized the assumption of traditional feminist theory that "all women are oppressed" and therefore share a common lot. Such an assertion is not representative of the different kinds of oppression that affect women of different backgrounds, and implies "that factors like class, race, religion, sexual preference, etc. do not create a diversity of experience."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Kadiatu Kanneh calls for a reevaluation of the notion of Black feminism, arguing that "Black" identities are multiple and complex, and therefore "feminist identification becomes a matter of uneasy alliances, of negotiating difference, of interpreting the meaning of and validity of sexuality, class, heritage, culture and even race."<sup>36</sup>

Barbara Christian has investigated how black women writers have explored a notion of "self" that is multi-layered in terms of social and economic status, spirituality, and experiences of racism and sexism. She describes how authors like Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison "search for the connections between myth, poetry, history . . . [and] oral traditions [in order to] shift the focus of the definition of . . . black humankind from one that is predominantly male."<sup>37</sup> As

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<sup>35</sup>bell hooks, *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), p. 5.

<sup>36</sup>Kadiatu Kanneh, "Black Feminisms," *Contemporary Feminist Theories*, S. Jackson and J. Jones, eds. (New York: NYU Press), 1998, p. 89.

<sup>37</sup>Barbara Christian, "Trajectories of Self-definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction" (1983), *Feminisms: an anthology of literary theory and criticism*, p. 327.

well, such writers address the identity shifts that occur due to experiences of mobility (i.e. movement from one class, place or situation to another) and general feelings of displacement. And since the early eighties, women's fiction has encompassed an even wider range of experience by addressing "lesbian relationships among black women and how these relationships are viewed by black communities."<sup>38</sup>

Christian observes that many of the more radical explorations of identity, particularly sexual identity, did not occur until fairly recently in black women's fiction. However, black feminists Angela Y. Davis and Hazel V. Carby have argued that, from as early as 1920, African-American blues and jazz women were articulating and redefining black womanhood with regard to issues of mobility/black displacement, sexism, spirituality, poverty, sexual preference and racism.<sup>39</sup> As well, Patricia Collins, author of *Black Feminist Thought*, suggests that, because Black women's efforts for self-definition in traditional locations of knowledge production have been suppressed, "music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior" have been used by African-American

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 326.

<sup>39</sup>See Hazel V. Carby, "It Jus' Be's Dat Way Sometimes," *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, Robert Walser, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 351-65; and Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

women as alternative sites "for articulating the core themes of a Black Feminist consciousness."<sup>40</sup> According to Collins, few African-American female scholars have resisted Eurocentric epistemologies to embrace Afrocentric ways of knowing, but "blues women, poets, autobiographers and storytellers have traditionally anchored knowledge claims on the everyday experiences of Black women, produc[ing] a rich tradition of Black feminist thought."<sup>41</sup>

Davis and Carby argue further that *alternative* feminist traditions may be found in the music-making of black women musicians. Because much attention has been focused upon black women writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "what are constituted as black feminist traditions tend to exclude ideas produced by and within poor and working-class communities, where women historically have not had the means or access to publish written texts."<sup>42</sup> Davis proposes that the recorded performances of blues women like Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey could "serve as rich terrain for examining an historical feminist consciousness that reflected the lives of working-class black communities."<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, she asserts that, like written traditions, oral

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<sup>40</sup>Patricia Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Routledge, Chapman and Hall Inc., 1991), p. 202.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>42</sup>Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies*, p. xi.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. xv.

traditions can also contribute to the assertion of women's ideals across racial and class boundaries.

Carby further criticizes the tendency in black feminist theory to focus upon the works of women writers in isolation from other forms of cultural production. She writes that it is a "mistake for feminist theory to concentrate on visions of black women writers without indicating the limitations of their middle-class response to black women's sexuality."<sup>44</sup> She also observes that while many middle-class women writers in the early twentieth century responded to stereotypes of black female sexuality (as being primitive and overly erotic) by repressing desire and sexuality in their fictional characters, blues women like Ma Rainey and Ida Cox were asserting themselves as sexual subjects in their music and performance. Carby writes,

the women's blues of the twenties and thirties is a discourse that articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women's bodies as the sexual and sensuous subjects of women's songs.<sup>45</sup>

bell hooks, in her book *Talking Back: thinking feminist, thinking black*, articulates a concern that feminist thought and writings are not accessible to many working-class women, black or white. Such women are either unaware of such

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<sup>44</sup>Hazel Carby, "It Jus' Be's Dat Way Sometimes," p. 355.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 354.

writings, too preoccupied with daily concerns or are alienated by the feminist/post-structuralist jargon that is evident in much of this writing. Davis's argument—that written traditions are not the only means of passing on feminist thought, that *oral* traditions, particularly song, may also be sources of empowerment—is a very important one. These oral traditions and the message they hold are undoubtedly much more available and accessible to women of all classes.

I suggest further that women's hip-hop music making is an important site in which knowledge is produced from a number of standpoints, demonstrating how diverse the experiences of black women are. Like the blues and much other popular music, hip-hop music is consumed not only for its sounds, but for its visual images. Thus, it is also important to analyze what women musicians wear, how they dance, gesture and use their bodies to articulate their music and empower their fans. The body, then, can be read as a site where feminist traditions and ideals are formulated, reinforced or challenged. As one of the most recent and widely distributed forms of storytelling, hip-hop music has become a tradition in which women can use their bodies, minds and voices to relate experiences of poverty, wealth, desire, sexuality, mobility, spirituality, abuse and empowerment, and in so doing, articulate the diversity of hip-hop culture, "blackness," and femininity.

At this point, then, I would like to examine how rap music has been discussed and analyzed in critical forums in the last decade or so. I intend to address the following questions: Who is talking about rap music and in what media does critical discourse occur? What are the motivations behind their criticisms? What strategies, if any, have critics used to explore knowledge production in rap music? The following chapter will consider critical discourses around both male and female rappers, and by drawing from these discourses and from my own experience of hip-hop music, I intend to formulate interpretive approaches which will be applied in analyses of performances by Rah Digga, Lauryn Hill, and Missy Elliott in chapter three.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Critical Discourses on Hip-Hop Culture and Rap Music

While rap music and hip-hop culture have been around since the late 1970's, they received little critical attention in mainstream journals until the mid-eighties, and even later in academic journals. Since the late eighties, however, a barrage of cultural critics have voiced their many opinions, concerns and enthusiasms about this radical and often controversial art form. Mainstream magazines such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *The Village Voice* and popular music magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *VIBE* often feature articles on hip-hop culture in general and the controversies surrounding it, interview artists and provide critical commentary on their music. Over a decade ago, *The Source: The magazine of hip-hop music, culture and politics* hit the newsstands and has won much acclaim for its multi-faceted and in-depth coverage of the hip-hop scene.

In this chapter, I will examine a sampling of critical writings from the aforementioned publications and from academic sources in order to look at ways in which values are established and undermined, particularly with regard to race, gender, class and sexuality. I will also examine the critical expressions found in the lyrics of performers like Chuck D from Public Enemy, Lauryn Hill and Queen Latifah. In so doing, I will address the following questions: Who writes about and

critiques hip-hop and what aspects of the culture receive the most attention? What values are emerging and reinforcing themselves around rap music, and how do critical discourses serve to perpetuate or undermine these values? In other words, how does criticism function in formulating attitudes towards hip-hop culture in general, and in what ways are these attitudes contested and renegotiated? A consideration of these questions is important in developing a critical approach to the study of women's rap music.

### **Representations of Hip-Hop in the Mainstream Media**

Writing about rap music and hip-hop culture becomes a particularly thorny issue when racial politics are taken into consideration. Hip-hop is, after all, produced mainly by blacks and Hispanics, and the mainstream media (television, magazine journalism, radio, etc.) has a notorious reputation for both ignoring non-white cultural activities or representing them negatively and unempathetically. Black cultural critic bell hooks has analyzed the ways in which images of African Americans are constructed, and accuses the mass media of generating and reinforcing racial stereotypes. "From slavery on," she insists, "white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination."<sup>1</sup> According to hooks, the mass media, in particular, figures prominently in the systematic othering of American blacks. Thus, the

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<sup>1</sup>bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1992), p.2.



mainstream media's representation of hip-hop has often been shaped by misinformation and prejudice. For example, in her article "Women Writin', Rappin', Breakin'," Nancy Guevara describes how distorted images of hip-hop are presented in the media of television and film:

Over the past few years, a rash of Hollywood hip-hop movies, together with a spate of thirty-second hip-hop spots for Pepsi-Cola, Kodak, and Burger King, have spun a hype fantasy-image of South Bronx b-boys boogieing, breaking, and scratching records for a massified and mainly white viewing audience. This image of hip-hop is uninflected by any hint of the socioeconomic or racial context in which its practices arose, or of the cultural antecedents of these practices: in its commercial representations hip-hop simply *appears* as a faddish display of male exuberance in inner-city ghettos, a sudden inexplicable burst of color and energy in the cultural vacuum of the early 1980's.<sup>2</sup>

Misrepresentation of hip-hop in the mainstream media also occurs with respect to rap music's sounds. Robert Walser describes articles in *Newsweek* and *The New Yorker* in which it was taken "for granted that rap couldn't be discussed as music."<sup>3</sup> In his essay "Deconstructing the Hip-Hop Hype: A Critical Analysis of *The New York Times*' Coverage of African-American Youth Culture," Patrick B. Hill conducts a study of articles written on hip-hop in the *New York Times*

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<sup>2</sup>Nancy Guevara, "Women Writin', Rappin', Breakin'," *Droppin' Science: Critical essays on rap music and hip-hop culture*, William Perkins, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1996), p. 49.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Walser, "Rhythm, Rhyme and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy," p. 193. Walser refers to Jerry Adler, et al, "The Rap Attitude," *Newsweek* (March 19, 1990), pp. 56-59; David Gates, et al, "Decoding Rap Music," *Newsweek* (March 19, 1990), pp. 60-63; Ethan Murdden, "A Critic at Large: Rock and Cole," *The New Yorker* (Oct. 28, 1991), pp. 91-113.

between 1985 and 1990 as a means of demonstrating "how anxieties at the nexus of race, class and generational difference continue to animate the story of American social relations."<sup>4</sup> Hill locates and critiques various trends in the *Times*' early coverage. He writes,

From 1985 to 1987, the first years of its reports on hip-hop, the *New York Times*' coverage could best be called sporadic. The *Times* had already begun to vilify hip-hop by associating it almost exclusively with incidents of violence and vandalism at concerts. For example, the *Times*' headlines were "on L.I., Fights Follow a Film on Rap Music" (6 November 1985); "42 Are Hurt as Gang Fighting Breaks Up California concert" (19 August 1986); and "1 Killed, 5 Injured and 16 Arrested at Rap Concert (26 November 1987). In addition, one *Times* news article, referring to Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC), which Tipper Gore co-chaired, described rap music and hip-hop as negative influences by suggesting to its youthful listeners that "it's all right to beat people up."<sup>5</sup>

The *Times* rarely invited black cultural critics, music critics or those involved in the culture to offer their opinions, establishing

by default the *Times*' indigenous staff of middle-class critics and reporters as the authorities on hip-hop. Acting as the experts on rap music . . . , they dislocated [it] from the broader cultural field of hip-hop while largely ignoring the ways in which each are rooted in turn within the broader terrain of American culture.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Patrick B. Hill, "Deconstructing the Hip-Hop Hype: A Critical Analysis of *The New York Times*' Coverage of African-American Youth Culture," *Bleep! Censoring rock and rap music*, Betty Houch Winfield and Sandra Davidson, eds. (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 104.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 108. Houston A. Baker Jr. also addresses the media's questionable responses to controversial lyrics in his essay "You Cain't Trus' It": Experts Witnessing in the Case of Rap," *Black Popular Culture*, Gina Dent, ed.

According to Hill, the *Times* focused exclusively on hip-hop's "most commercial component, rap music."<sup>7</sup> It was not until 1988 that the *Times* published an article, written by music critic Glen Collins, about hip-hop's other cultural components like fashion, dance, language styles and graffiti. Hill attempts to situate the *Times*' vilification of rap music historically, arguing

within a context devoid of the Soviet threat, and in which direct invocations of race and class-based difference are to be assiduously avoided, news discourses seeking to comprehend rap music through the language of crime functioned metonymically to position African-American, working-class youth as the Other against which the national identity is regulated and reaffirmed. This dimension of the *Times*' journalistic performance also tells an important story about how the emergence of the rap music/violence conflation helped to mediate longstanding anxieties related to race, class and generational difference.<sup>8</sup>

In its discussion of rap's violent imagery, the *Times* made little or no attempt to address and criticize issues of poverty and racism which, in part, breed such negative expressions, or to address the ways in which the dominant culture

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(Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), pp. 132-38. He discusses coverage in the *Boston Review* and on television about rap group 2-Live Crew, and argues that although "2-Live Crew's lyrics and productions in themselves and for themselves cannot be considered innocuous in any way, the Crew is controversial for one reason only: the networks, media networks, in a mode that I call 'instant expertism' have made them so . . . . All instant experts on popular cultural forms always seem to need to get their stuff far, far more together before they take the stand. . . . When people speak about a unique popular cultural form that *they have not bothered to fully inform themselves about*, we simply can't trust it (137-8).

<sup>7</sup>Patrick B. Hill, "Deconstructing the Hip-hop Hype," p. 108.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

has perpetuated these social conditions.<sup>9</sup> While the *Times* castigated these rappers (of whom most are black) they did not address how popular this music was with young white audiences. Such monolithic coverage of rap music ignores not only the many rappers whose music contains positive messages about building communities, educating children, and fighting poverty, racism and sexism, but also the complex and often sophisticated ways in which rappers like Queen Latifah, Public Enemy, and Missy Elliott use technology, voice, language, physical movement and cultural memory to articulate their realities, put forth their own criticisms of society and move an audience.

The trend of reporting mainly on violence in rap continues to some extent in mainstream publications, especially since the shooting deaths of rappers Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls (Christopher Wallace) in 1996 and the rising commercial success of controversial gangsta rappers Dr. Dre, Eminem and Snoop Dogg. In general, however, rap coverage is considerably more informative and balanced than earlier. For example, a *Newsweek* article about the debates around

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<sup>9</sup>Tricia Rose presents a similar argument in "Black Texts/Black Contexts" (*Black Popular Culture*) with regard to misogyny in rap. She writes, "It is critical to understand that male rappers did not invent sexism. Black practices have been openly sexist for a long time, and in this regard they keep solid company with many other highly revered dominant Western practices. Today's rappers . . . have lots of real live, and substantially more powerful company, none of whom rap or make records. . . . Why, then, is the concern over rap lyrics so incredibly intense, particularly from Black middle-class guardians? Why not the same level of moral outrage over the life options that Black folks face in this country? It seems we need a censorship committee against poverty, sexism and racism (226)."

gangsta rap included comments by rappers Mos Def, Eve, Dr. Dre and Ice-T, as well as input from a professor of African-American studies and a teacher of poor black middle-school children in Augusta, Georgia.<sup>10</sup> Discussions of gangsta rap by *Time* magazine's Christopher John Farley are also generally sophisticated and informed. While the aforementioned Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls are often characterized as having been obsessed with violence, Farley portrays their "gangsta" personas as contradictory. About Smalls, he writes, "While in interviews he proudly touted his felonious past, his lyrics sometimes betrayed a loathing for the lawless life-style . . . Friends say Wallace only rapped about violence to make enough money to leave it all behind."<sup>11</sup> And he describes Tupac's *Me Against the World* album as "tough but mournful, . . . hard on the outside but able to expose the hidden hurt within."<sup>12</sup>

In his article "Which Side You On?" Farley also includes a poignant statement from rapper Chuck D who recognizes the role record companies play in the production of violent lyrics: "Every story needs to be told, I just think the record companies would rather have that (negative) story told, and they're not

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<sup>10</sup>Allison Samuels, N'Gai Croal, David Gates, Alisha Davis, "Battle for the Soul of Hip-Hop," *Newsweek*, 136/15 (Oct. 9, 2000), p. 58.

<sup>11</sup>Christopher John Farley, "Rhyme or Reason," *Time*, 149/12 (March 24, 1997), p. 44.

<sup>12</sup>Christopher John Farley, "Songs in the Key of Lauryn Hill," *Time*, 152/10 (September 7, 1998), p. 52.

accountable to our community."<sup>13</sup> In this article, Farley himself probes into American society's love affair with the gangster image and violent, criminal behavior, not only in rap music but in film and television. By situating rap music within broader hip-hop and American culture, Farley demonstrates a willingness to engage himself and his readers in the music, instead of falling into the usual traps of overgeneralization.<sup>14</sup> And by writing about the soul-infused hip-hop of Erykah Badu, Lauryn Hill and Me'Shell NdegeOcello, and about groups like US 3, The Roots and A Tribe Called Quest who draw from jazz, Farley shifts the focus from gangsta rap and violent lyrics, acknowledging that rap is a multi-faceted musical genre.

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<sup>13</sup>Christopher John Farley, "Which Side You On?," *Time*, 144/12 (Sept. 19, 1994), p. 76.

<sup>14</sup>Farley is, however, clear about his distaste for images of violence in rap. Like Chuck D, he challenges gangsta rappers to change the perspective from which they perform: "Snoop and Master P rap from the point of view of the drug dealers who are terrorizing poor, urban, mostly minority communities. How much more rebellious it would be to rap about challenging the powerful people who are helping to create those conditions." From "Which Side You On?" (p. 76).

The discourse of feminism has also entered into journalistic discussions of rap. There are numerous examples of writings in which feminists address the misogynist lyrics of rappers like N.W.A. and 2-Live Crew. This is manifest in articles by Michele Wallace ("When Black Feminism Faces the Music, and the Music is Rap," *New York Times*, July 1990) and Kimberlé Crenshaw ("Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2-Live Crew," *Boston Review*, Dec. 1991).

More recently, Akissi Britton, a feminist writer for *Essence* magazine, wrote an article in which she discusses feminism and women rappers.<sup>15</sup> While she lauds artists like Queen Latifah, MC Lyte and Sister Souljah for the positive images of black women that they portray, she accuses hardcore rapper Lil' Kim of buying into and reinscribing sexist and racist stereotypes of black women.<sup>16</sup> *The Source's* E. Assata Wright responds to Britton's attack, criticizing her failure to include even a single quote from Lil' Kim herself. With regard to Britton's comments about Kim's failure to meet feminist requirements, Wright argues that

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<sup>15</sup>With regard to the *Times's* coverage of female rappers, Patrick B. Hill demonstrates that while the newspaper acknowledged the female voice as an important aspect of hip-hop, few of its articles discussed the different forms of rap (i.e. gangsta, pop, protest) that women engaged in: "Rather than present female performers as distinct artists in their own right, the *Times* features marginalized female rappers by emphasizing their reaction to the misogyny prevalent in male hip-hop." ("Deconstructing the Hip-Hop Hype," p. 110).

<sup>16</sup>Akissi Britton, "Deconstructing Lil' Kim," *Essence*, 31/6 (Oct., 2000), p. 112.

"if Lil'Kim does, in fact, consider herself a feminist, it would have been nice to hear how she reconciles this with her image."<sup>17</sup> As well, Britton does not take the audience into account, and never considers how young women who consume this music might interpret Lil' Kim's persona as empowering. Furthermore, Britton makes no attempt to criticize the values of a society in which sexually provocative performers like Lil' Kim, Madonna, The Spice Girls and Foxy Brown flourish. Feminists and critics have often been uncertain whether to love or hate women entertainers who present powerful personas by flaunting their sexuality and overtly expressing physical desires. On the one hand, such women seem to feed the stereotype that women are a threat to men, or that women are objects for the masculine gaze; on the other hand, they appear to take control of their own desires and articulate themselves as sexual subjects instead of objects. For example, Susan McClary writes,

I have often encountered hostile reactions on the part of white middle-class listeners to Aretha Franklin's frank sensuality, even when (particularly when) it is manifested in her sacred recordings such as "Amazing Grace." The argument is that women performers ought not to exhibit signs of sexual pleasure, for this invariably makes them displays for male consumption.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>E. Assata Wright, "Sister Act," *The Source*, 135 (Dec. 2000), p. 96.

<sup>18</sup>Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 206-7.



On the other hand, McClary refers to critics who have written favorably about Madonna's visual image and "view her as a kind of organic feminist whose 'image enables girls to see that the meanings of feminine sexuality *can* be in their control, *can* be made in their interests, and that their subjectivities are not necessarily totally determined by the dominant patriarchy.'<sup>19</sup>

In her article "The Bad Girls of Hip-hop," feminist critic Joan Morgan describes controversial women rappers Da Brat, Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim as

creatures of their own design who exercise the same creative rights as their male counterparts—coupling highly materialistic, violent and lewd personas with deliciously infectious rhythms and rhymes. . . . [They] reduce the value of a brother to what can be found in his wallet. [They] delude Black women into thinking that punani is their most valuable asset. Ultimately Foxy Brown's and Lil' Kim's success shows how much we have yet to teach our little sistas about sex, feminism and power.<sup>20</sup>

Evidently, Morgan assumes that she and other feminists represent a set of values that these rappers should aspire to.<sup>21</sup> She does not explore the possibility

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Joan Morgan, "The Bad Girls of Hip-Hop," *Essence*, 27/11 (March, 1997), p. 76.

<sup>21</sup>In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis addresses some of the differences that exist in the values of middle-class and working-class black women. She describes the efforts of middle-class black women in the early 1900s to "reclaim" and re-educate working-class black women, and asserts: ". . . what was and remains problematic is the premise that middle-class women embody a standard their poorer sisters should emulate." *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billy Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), p. 43.

that, through their outrageous image and lyrics, Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim and Da Brat are, perhaps, consciously rejecting "safe," respectable, middle-class values, and are, in effect, choosing to create from a marginalized, anti-mainstream mindset. As well, Morgan makes reference to their "deliciously infectious rhythms and rhymes, but does not explore how the use of "mainstream" R & B sounds in Da Brat's music, for example, creates an interesting tension with her anti-mainstream image. Moreover, she fails to address these artists' use of humour, word play and parody in performance, elements that fans find entertaining and empowering. Unfortunately, Morgan is so concerned with condemning these rappers that she doesn't elaborate on what it is about the music that is attractive. In fact, mainstream journals rarely address the sounds of rap music or the reasons for its appeal to youth. Much more print is devoted to bemoaning the decline of hip-hop from a culture of promise and revolution to a culture obsessed with sex, violence and money.<sup>22</sup> Very often, then, any discussion of a controversial rapper's performance centers around her/his most controversial lyrics. This is also true with respect to controversial male rappers like Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Eminem. Articles almost never explore how Dr. Dre's fresh and edgy musical

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<sup>22</sup>See for example Robert Christgau, "Down With the Chumps," *Village Voice*, 40/50 (Dec. 12, 1995), p. 60; Ylonda Gault Caviness, "Boys to Men: How to Raise Our Sons in a Hip-Hop World," *Essence*, 31/7, (Nov., 2000), p. 174; Kevin Powell, "My Culture at the Crossroads," *Newsweek*, 136/15 (Oct. 9, 2000), p. 66; Raquel Cepeda, "Where's the Hip-Hop Agenda?" *Essence*, 31/4 (Aug., 2000), p. 117.

tracks, Snoop Dogg's sensual rapping style, or the (extremely dark) humor of Eminem's lyrics might be attractive to fans.

Music magazines that deal specifically with hip-hop and R & B music generally provide more insightful criticisms and features on rap music. *The Source*, for example, includes writings on hip-hop culture which discuss movies, sports, fashion, politics, and video games, and then carefully situates rap music within this broader culture.<sup>23</sup> Both *VIBE* and *The Source* portray hip-hop music and culture as evidence of a thriving, ever-changing black culture. By using vernacular speech throughout their articles, a connection is made to African-American "street" culture, and, at the same time, keeps the journals distinct from "mainstream" popular music journals like *Spin* and *Rolling Stone*. Such music magazines are often interview-oriented. Whereas the writers in mainstream publications tend to *report* on rappers, often focusing on certain artists' more sensational lyrics or isolated accounts of outrageous behavior, *The Source* and *VIBE* (and to a lesser extent, *Rolling Stone*) regularly interview rappers about their family lives, business dealings, even including the comments of friends, family and other musicians in the business. Such critical endeavours give readers the room to formulate alternative interpretations of rap music.

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<sup>23</sup>See for example, any of the articles in the "Ear to the Street: Culture Shock" section in the February, 2001 issue (#137) of *The Source*.

### Other Critical Discourses in Rap Music

It may be argued, however, that journalists do not necessarily have the last word on criticism—rappers have also articulated their concerns and criticisms on certain aspects of the culture. *The Source* features the column "Microphone Check" in which hip-hop artists voice their opinions about other rappers or about the rap scene in general. For example, the magazine interviewed rapper Afu-ra, and when asked to comment on images in today's hip-hop, he responded "Women are really taking a leadership within this hip-hop world. We really need that . . . . (Young fans) need to be meditating on positive education, their history . . . as well as entertainment. So that's why I feel I'm here. You're not going to see Afu with strippers in a video or none of that."<sup>24</sup> When questioned about his opinions of gangsta rap, Field Mob's Kalage addressed his criticism directly to gangsta rappers in the form of ridicule:

You a gangsta? Where the mafia at? You ain't rich. Why is you rappin' in the first place? How the hell you a gangsta and you rappin' on yo off-time? . . . It's easy to say I'ma write a rap about this player-ass gangsta shit. What else you know' bout, though? You could take somethin' from Ice-T then go to Ice Cube then go to Dre then add all that shit together and then flip it your way. That make it extra easy, 'cause then your rap name is Dr. Ice Cube. But you scared to talk about the real you.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Ebonny Fowler, "Afu-Ra," *The Source*, 135 (Dec. 2000), p. 118.

<sup>25</sup>Laini Madhubuti, "Country Fried," *The Source*, 135 (Dec. 2000), pp. 117, 124

Newspapers and magazines are not the only media in which misogyny and violence in rap are criticized; criticism of hip-hop may also occur in the lyrics of rap itself. As Adam Krims argues,

rap is often also about specifically *rap* music and its own history. This is especially true since 1993 or so, when, simultaneous with a growing exasperation with gangsta rap's commercial domination, a large segment of rap consumers started despairing that the music had wandered too far from the aspirations of its origins. It was just around this time that many mainstream artists (like 2Pac Shakur) started featuring tribute songs to the "old school."<sup>26</sup>

In their music, rappers like Chuck D, Queen Latifah, and Lauryn Hill comment upon and criticize certain aspects of the hip-hop scene. Protest rappers Public Enemy, for example, released the song "So Whatcha Gone Do Now?" in which criticism is aimed at gangsta rappers.<sup>27</sup> Addressing the often degrading character of gangsta rap, Chuck D challenges these rappers' preoccupation with violence and negativity, calling them "slaves to the rhythm of the master." When she was a member of the socially conscious Fugees, Lauryn Hill also targeted violent lyrics. In "Ready or Not," for example, she "disses" (or puts down) certain rappers' obsession with the gangster life, and invokes a new role model, Nina Simone, an African-American female jazz musician and Civil Rights activist: "So while you're imitating Al Capone/I'll be Nina Simone/And defecating on your

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<sup>26</sup>Adam Krims, *Rap Music*, p. 43.

<sup>27</sup>Public Enemy, *Muse Sick N Hour Mess Age*, 1994.

microphone."<sup>28</sup> And Queen Latifah's U.N.I.T.Y. is an aggressive rejection of the negative expressions that certain rappers use in their lyrics to describe women.<sup>29</sup> Other rap groups like Outkast, The Roots, De La Soul and Wu-Tang Clan criticize other styles of rapping (particularly gangsta rappers) in their music through language and parody, illustrating the internal debates that exist in hip-hop.

### **Critical Approaches to Hip-Hop Music in Academic Discourse**

#### *Historical Analyses of Hip-hop*

The history of hip-hop culture and music has been well documented by a number of writers. Histories by Brian Cross, S.H. Fernando Jr. and Nelson George have received particular critical acclaim for their in-depth discussions of different aspects of the culture such as break dancing, graffiti writing, sampling and fashion.<sup>30</sup> As well, they address how aspects of black experience such as racism, poverty, prison, drugs, and gang culture have influenced and motivated much of rap's lyrical and sound content. One of the most recent histories, *The VIBE History of Hip-Hop*, is a collection of essays written by a number of

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<sup>28</sup>The Fugees, *The Score*, Sony Music Entertainment, 1996. Hill likely aspires to emulate Nina Simone's often angry, scathingly critical lyrics and performance style which could be extremely hostile at times.

<sup>29</sup>Queen Latifah, *Black Reign*, Motown Record Company, 1993.

<sup>30</sup>S.H. Fernando Jr., *The New Beats: Exploring the Music, Culture, and Attitudes of Hip-Hop* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994); Brian Cross, *It's Not About a Salary: Rap, Race and Resistance in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1993); Nelson George, *Hip-Hop America* (New York: Penguin Publishers, 1998).

different authors. These essays discuss the different styles of rap music and rap performance, and address the music and experiences of women rappers in some detail. In this collection, hip-hop is presented as an extremely diverse culture in which women and men and a variety of ethnic groups participate.

However, other histories betray a pronounced conservatism, most obviously in their limited and unrepresentative discussions of "crossover" hip-hop (which incorporates elements of mainstream pop and rock) and in their discussions of women rappers. For example, in *Signifying Rappers*, authors Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace identify themselves from the outset as "rap purists" who are interested only in "serious rap" which they define as a "US inner-city fusion of funk, technified reggae, teen to teen hardcore rock, and the seventies poetry of Nikki Giovanni and The Last Poets."<sup>31</sup> Thus, while the careers of rappers who fall into this category (like Public Enemy or Ice Cube) are heavily emphasized, little attention is given to groups who are pop and dance-oriented. Nelson George takes a similar approach in *Hip-Hop America*, and although he calls the position of hard-core purists "short-sighted and ahistorical," he devotes only a few pages to artists like DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince, Salt-N-Pepa and Run D.M.C., despite their enormous success in both black and white markets.

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<sup>31</sup>Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* (New York: Ecco, 1990), p. 21.

With regard to hip-hop audiences, George states that "kids and girls" consume pop-rap while "rap as rebellion" attracts suburban males.<sup>32</sup> No statistics back up this gross overgeneralization; furthermore George seems to assume that pop-rap never expresses "rebellion." While pop rappers Left Eye (from the group TLC) or Salt-N-Pepa may not sound as rebellious as, say, Dr. Dre or Ice Cube, or may not rap about toting guns and dealing drugs, their lyrics and body language in certain performances certainly invite young women to rebel against societal norms. For example, in the video for "Shoop" (1993), Salt-N-Pepa playfully assume sexually assertive roles, walking along a beach and checking out men. At the same time, Salt raps, "The brother had it goin' on with somethin' kinda...uh/ Wicked, wicked - had to kick it/ I'm not shy so I asked for the digits [his phone number]/ A ho? No, that don't make me." Thus a reversal occurs in which females are the aggressors in heterosexual relationships and males are presented as objects of the female (heterosexual) gaze.<sup>33</sup> Salt-N-Pepa also undermine expectations of women's passivity in sexual relationships further along in the song when "a man's voice says, 'Yo Sandy I wanna like taste you,' and Pepa responds, 'Get your lips wet 'cause it's time to have Pep.'" In the video for the

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<sup>32</sup>Nelson George, *Hip-Hop America*, p. 67.

<sup>33</sup>Venise Berry refers to a number of studies which describe how stereotypical images of women as passive, child-like, objects, possessions, etc. are accepted and perpetuated in American culture. "Female Images in Rap Music: The Conflicting Nature of Female Images in Rap Music," pp. 184-6.



song, such statements accompany scenes of her scissoring her legs open as if to suggest her readiness for the act."<sup>34</sup> In this way, Salt-N-Pepa assert "their sexuality outside the limits of propriety in American music" by overtly expressing desires for specific sexual acts.<sup>35</sup>

Rap "purists'" general dismissal of dance and pop-oriented rap music could be linked to rock critics' general distaste for dance and pop music.<sup>36</sup> Susan McClary investigates these attitudes in her essay "Living to Tell: Madonna's Resurrection to Fleshly," and argues, "To the extent that the appeal (of dance music is) to physicality rather than abstracted listening, dance music is often trivialized at the same time that its power to distract and arouse is regarded with

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<sup>34</sup>Imani Perry, "It's My Thang and I'll Swing it the Way That I Feel! Sexuality and Black Women Rappers," *Gender, Race and Class in Media*, Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez, eds. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishers, Ltd., 1995), p. 526.

<sup>35</sup>Of course, Salt-N-Pepa are not the only women to reverse stereotypical sex roles. Millie Jackson, Madonna and Grace Jones are other female performers who represent themselves as in control of their desires and their sexuality.

<sup>36</sup>This is manifest, for example, in the following passage from rock critic Robert Christgau's article "Flak on Both Sides: Moby and Merritt vs. Hitters and Cheerleaders in a Bad Year For Nerds [Rock Critics]": "Critic after resentful critic complained that unnamed colleagues were shilling for teen shit . . . . Am I really not allowed to stick a Backstreet Boys column in between the Latin Playboys and the Holy Modal rounders? Some people are so threatened by the state of the pop marketplace that any informed response to same is dismissed as a pseudointellectual betrayal just for accepting—provisionally, mind you—the market place's terms." *Village Voice* website: [www.villagevoice.com/specials/pazznjop/99/xgau.php3](http://www.villagevoice.com/specials/pazznjop/99/xgau.php3), Copyright 2000 Village Voice Media, Inc., New York. Accessed Dec. 6, 2000.

anxiety"<sup>37</sup> Indeed, many critics and rappers express anxiety over the extreme success of pop-rap, worrying that an excessive focus on physicality, whether that of voice or body, will corrupt the 'true' art of rapping—that is, sampling and verbal dexterity.

Rap histories have done little to challenge stereotypes of women in hip-hop who, according to Nancy Guevara, are "typically depicted in secondary roles as cheerleaders or bystanders rather than as producers and active participants."<sup>38</sup> Nelson George's coverage of women rappers in *Hip-hop America* is especially frustrating and needlessly pessimistic. From the outset, he declares his interest "in the nature of rapping as . . . an extension of African-American maleness,"<sup>39</sup> and argues further on that "it is the essential swagger (of black male pride) that

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<sup>37</sup>Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, p. 153.

<sup>38</sup>Nancy Guevara, "Women Writin', Rappin', Breakin'," p. 51.

<sup>39</sup>Nelson George, *Hip-Hop America*, p. xiii. George's approach is representative of certain aspects of black nationalism which, according to Jeffrey Louis Decker, is "unabashedly patriarchal" and primarily concerned with rebuilding the Black Man. While the high rate of black male mortality and the increasing number of black males in prison may seem to justify the nationalist stance, Decker argues that ". . . this brand of hip-hop nationalism expresses only part of a far more complex story, [and] ironically serves to show the limits of black nationalism as a language of liberation for African-American women." "The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip-Hop Nationalism," *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music, Youth Culture*, Andrew Ross, Tricia Rose, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 107-110.

underpins hip-hop."<sup>40</sup> He invalidates women's participation in hip-hop with statements like "there are no women who have contributed profoundly to rap's artistic growth" and "I would argue that if none of these female artists had ever made a record, hip-hop's development would have been no different."<sup>41</sup> Women artists are discussed mainly in terms of clothing and hairstyles; there is no mention of their individual musical styles, the revolutionary themes of their music, or their collaborations and on-going dialogues with male artists. In fact, in his brief discussion of women rappers, George devotes much more space to berating older black women activists like C. Dolores Tucker who have campaigned against misogyny in gangsta rap. George concludes, "Whereas hip-hop has spiritually and financially empowered African-American males, it has boxed young women into stereotypes and weakened their sense of worth."<sup>42</sup> George is a well-respected and highly acclaimed critic of hip-hop music, but his reluctance to discuss women's participation in any depth betrays a desire to preserve hip-hop as an exclusively masculine domain.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>43</sup>In her article, "Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music," Tricia Rose criticizes Nelson George's 1989 ten-year anniversary tribute to rap, describing his article as a "much more explicit case of what [Rose] calls the 'what women?' syndrome . . . . George, a black music historian and pro-

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While musicological discussions of rap music are few and far between, black popular musics in general are beginning to receive considerable attention in academia, and various scholars have written at length on finding meaningful interpretive approaches. For example, black music scholar Samuel Floyd suggests an Afro-centric interpretive approach, or an approach that focuses upon African-American *attitudes* towards composing, performing and interpreting music as opposed to one that privileges stylistic and formal traits.<sup>44</sup> In his article "Ring

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hip-hop music critic, published a sentimental rap retrospective in which he mourned rap's movement from a street subculture into the cold, sterile world of commercial record production. . . . His concluding remarks make apparent his underlying perception of rap: 'To proclaim the death of rap is to be sure, premature. But the farther the control of rap gets from its street corner constituency and the more corporations grasp it—record conglomerates, Burger King, Minute Maid, Yo! MTV Raps, etc.—the more vulnerable it becomes to cultural emasculation.' For George, corporate meddling not only dilutes cultural forms, but also it reduces strapping, testosterone-packed men into women! Could we imagine anything worse? Nelson George's concluding remarks are extreme but not unusual; his is but one example of media critics' consistent coding of rap music as male in the face of a significant and sustained female presence. Furthermore, George's mind boggling, yet emblematic definition of rap as a 'ultra-urban, unromantic, hyperrealistic, neo-nationalist, antiassimilationist, aggressive Afrocentric impulse,' not only simplifies the complexity of masculinity, but also his definition is designed to conjure only a heterosexual masculine subject without drawing critical attention toward *how* black male heterosexuality is socially-constructed. For George and for media critics in general, it is far easier to regender women rappers than it is to revise their own masculinist analysis of rap music." *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p.151-2.

<sup>44</sup>See also David Brackett's *Interpreting Popular Music* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) in which he traces the shift in interpreting

shout: Signifyin(g) and Jazz Analysis," Floyd argues that such an approach involves recognizing

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African-American music from a focus on "style traits to a concern with attitudes towards music-making." For example, in his own analysis of James Brown's "Superbad," Brackett theorizes Brown's extensive use of repetition in terms of general attitudes in African-American culture towards repetition. See page 115. In his article "Out of Notes: Signification and the Problem of Miles Davis," [*Musical Quarterly*, 77/2 (Summer, 1993), pp. 343-365], Robert Walser takes a similar approach in his analysis of Miles Davis' performance of "My Funny Valentine." Walser discusses Miles Davis' unique and often controversial style of trumpet playing in terms of African-American attitudes towards improvisation in performance. Both Brackett and Walser draw from literary critic Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey: a theory of Afro-American literary criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). According to Gates, Signifyin(g) occurs where "rhetoric places semantics within the structure of the sign," and includes black rhetorical tropes such as marking, loud-talking, testifying, rapping, playing the dozens, and other language games (47).

- 1) signifyin(g) and troping in black music-making as criticism.<sup>45</sup>
- 2) performances as occasions in which audiences participate and react or criticize.
- 3) the competitive values of the performers.
- 4) the complete intertwining of black music and dance.<sup>46</sup>

Because criticism, competition, dance and audience are often essential components of hip-hop performances, I suggest that Floyd's framework is an important starting point for studying the sounds of hip-hop. Most academic discussions of rap music focus on lyrics, and to a lesser extent, the artist's image; often little is said about the sounds of rap and how these interact with dance,

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<sup>45</sup>Samuel Floyd, "Ring Shout, Signifyin(g), and Jazz Analysis," *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, Robert Walser, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1999, p. 403. In his book *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History From Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), Floyd also draws from Gates's theory of signifyin(g), and defines signifyin(g) in music as "a reinterpretation, a metaphor for the revision of previous texts and figures. . . repetition with difference, the obscuring of meaning . . . all to achieve or reverse power . . . . In signifyin(g), the emphasis is on the signifier, not the signified . . . . In African-American music, musical figures Signify by commenting on other musical figures, on themselves, on performances of other music, on other performances of the same piece, and on completely new works of music. Moreover, genres Signify on other genres – ragtime on . . . . early European and American dance music; blues on the ballad; the spiritual on the hymn; jazz on blues and ragtime; . . . soul on rhythm and blues and rock'n roll; funk on soul; rap on funk; and so on."

"Signifyin(g) allows the performer to be in two places at once; it is sheer, willful play – a dynamic interplay of music and aesthetic power to control and manipulate the musical circumstance. In this way, performers combine the ritual teasing and critical insinuations of Signifyin(g) with the wit, cunning, and guile of the trickster in a self-empowering aesthetic and communicational device (6)."

<sup>46</sup>Samuel Floyd, "Ring Shout," p. 409.

gesture, video, words and audience in performance.<sup>47</sup> Recognizing the critical, competitive, participatory and bodily elements is a useful way to begin to account for the sonic, visual, physical and lyrical aspects of hip-hop music. For example, analyzing the critical nature of a performance might reveal much about how an artist uses language, sampling, or her body and voice to comment upon society in general or upon hip-hop culture itself. Or an examination of hip-hop's competitive aspects may direct attention to ways in which artists use amplification, verbal dexterity or visual effects to negotiate tensions between community values and values of the individual.

This is not to say that no one has engaged in scholarship about rap's music. Scholars like Tricia Rose, Robert Walser, Susan McClary and Adam Krims have explored ways of talking about rap's "noises" and have interpreted these sounds in terms of social structures and values. For example, in her discussion of rap's sounds, Rose argues that techniques like cutting, sampling, looping, leakage, or the use of extreme amplification are important locations of self-definition for both the rapper and the audience: "Rap lyrics are a critical part of a rapper's identity, strongly suggesting the importance of authorship and individuality in rap music. Yet sampling as it is used by rap artists indicates the

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<sup>47</sup>Exceptions are, as I will demonstrate in the following pages, Robert Walser, Tricia Rose, and Adam Krims.

importance of collective identities and group histories."<sup>48</sup> Rose also cites rhythmic complexity, repetition, drum sounds, bass melodies, suspensions of pitch and timbre, and expressive vocals as important traits of rap music, but mainly emphasizes sounds produced by technological means.

Like Rose, Robert Walser also emphasizes the importance of rap music's sounds, focusing on rhythmic and timbral complexity in an analysis of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power."<sup>49</sup> Using Western notation, he transcribes the rhythms and pitches of drums, synthesizers, guitar and other various "noises," and then attempts to situate the sounds and rhythms within African-American cultural and musical traditions and to formulate ideas about the appeal of Public Enemy's music to both black and white audiences. For example, he argues that audiences experience power and freedom through the rhythmic virtuosity and complexly layered samples in Public Enemy's music:

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<sup>48</sup>Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, p. 95. Leakage refers to a situation where the bass takes up "more space than "normally" intended and bleed[s] into other deliberately emptied tracks, which gives the bass a heavier, grittier, less fixed sound" (76).

<sup>49</sup>Robert Walser, "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy."



. . . such grooves offer a dialogic, polyphonic environment . . . [presenting] these possibilities in noisy, technological, urban terms, making this social ideal seem relevant to the specific historical situation of many fans. In the terms of Tricia Rose's analysis (1994), the polyphonic layering and repetitive flow create continuity, while rhythmic ruptures teach participants to find pleasure in and develop creative responses to social ruptures."<sup>50</sup>

Adam Krims also argues that sound is extremely important to rap musicians and fans, and suggests that

close readings of rap music might engage an effort to model what makes a given genre (or song, or artist) "hard" or "hardcore," or how it is that a song might project "Brooklyn-ness" (or . . . "Southernness"). It is precisely terms such as these that form part of the consciousnesses and cultural engagements of those that produce and consume the music. And, equally important, those same terms are invested directly in types of sounds.<sup>51</sup>

Thus Krims's discussion includes a stylistic analysis of musical tracks, emceeing (rhythmic and rhyming techniques), and lyrics through which he divides rap music into four genres: party rap, mack rap, jazz/bohemian rap and reality rap.<sup>52</sup>

For Krims, close readings of rap music are useful in uncovering ways in which artists express individual, collective and geographical identities. For example, he analyzes the textures, rhythms and lyrics of Ice Cube's "The Nigga Ya Love to Hate," arguing that Ice Cube articulates a particular black identity and

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>51</sup>Adam Krims, *Rap Music*, p. 31.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid. Details of Krims's genre system can be found on pages 55-78 of *Rap Music*.

political stance through interacting semantic and musical processes.<sup>53</sup> And through an examination of lyrics, sound and images in Goodie MoB's "Soul Food," Krims demonstrates how rappers may negotiate regional identities.

The analyses by Rose, Walser and Krims reveal much about ways in which artists use texture, rhythm, technology and language to create sounds and messages that are politically charged and attractive to fans. However, these scholars rarely make explicit reference to vocal qualities and to the use of the body in performance, aspects which I believe are also crucial factors in a rap artist's identity construction and in audience reception. Music video has become one of the main media in which this music can be consumed; thus, the visual and physical aspects of rap music often form an extremely important part of the way fans experience the music. A discussion of music, then, should also address the ways in which artists manipulate visual imagery and their bodies to construct and negotiate gender, ethnic, sexual, class and regional identities. In other words, one could consider how dance, image, clothing or gesture in conjunction with sound could articulate, say, a subversive feminine identity, a "hardcore" style, or a particular political stance.

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

Interestingly, much of what has been written about rap music and video or visual imagery has focused on representations of (black) women in rap videos;<sup>54</sup> representations of masculinity are seldom addressed. Such a focus could reveal much about ways in which artists undermine or reinforce the stereotypical image of the rapper as a grim, gun-toting (male) outlaw/prophet. Certainly, there is no shortage of rappers who represent themselves in rather monolithic ways, but some artists are presenting more complex personas. For example, with regard to the group Outkast which is renowned for its timely and socially conscious lyrics, one critic wrote, ". . . Outkast is to rap what Dennis Rodman was to basketball: a freakish anomaly. It's Dre's [the lead singer] outfit: plaid pants, vintage, green Army jacket, black T-shirt emblazoned with Jimi Hendrix's image and a floral head scarf that pushes his hair into a cresting wave à la early Little Richard."<sup>55</sup> Outkast transgresses, not only through its flamboyantly-dressed lead singer, but also by using a sound untypical of most "reality-based," politically-conscious rap

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<sup>54</sup>See for example Marla Shelton, "Can't Touch This! Representations of the African-American Female Body in Urban Rap Videos," *Popular Music & Society*, 21 (Fall, 1997), 107-16; Imani Perry, "It's My Thang and I'll Swing it the Way That I Feel! Sexuality and Black Women Rappers," *Gender, Race and Class in Media*, Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez, eds. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishers Ltd., 1995); Venise T. Berry, "Feminine or Masculine: The Conflicting Nature of Female Images in Rap Music," *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, eds. (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1994).

<sup>55</sup>Lorraine Ali, "So Superfunkyfragelistic!" *Newsweek*, 136/18 (Oct. 30, 2000), p. 88.

groups. They borrow from and combine a wide variety of styles including punk, techno, R &B, and soul, striking a delicate balance between sounds associated with "white" and "black" popular musics. The lead singer's voice is unusual too in that it is more gravelly and higher pitched than most "reality" male rappers (like Rakim, Chuck D or Ice Cube), and he even breaks into falsetto vocals at times. Thus, while Outkast presents itself as a "serious" or a "message" rap group through its generally politically-conscious lyrics, they rearticulate the image of the politically-aware male rapper through their unique sound and appearance. Other groups like Digable Planets, The Fugees and Arrested Development contain both male and female rappers, visually and aurally challenging the notions that all rap excludes and disempowers women and that rap performance is the exclusive domain of males.

Rap scholars have paid little attention to artists' use of the voice in performance. Tricia Rose, for example, makes only brief mention of the vocal strategies of artists like Busta Rhymes, Monie Love and Trech (from Naughty by Nature) who use "their voices as percussive instruments, bending words, racing through phrases, pausing and stuttering through complicated verbal rhythms."<sup>56</sup> Certainly, it would be worthwhile to examine and compare the vocal deliveries of certain artists in terms of evenness of tone, register, and accent. One could argue,

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<sup>56</sup>Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, p. 95.

for example, that Eminem's mockery of societal values, evident in his controversial lyrics, is emphasized by the exaggerated nasal quality of his rapping vocals. Furthermore, a West Coast rapper might engage in a battle rhyme with an East Coast rapper and create tensions, not only through competitive lyrics or amplification, but also through the clash of regional accents. And artists like Queen Latifah have disguised their own voices by rapping in a Jamaican accent, perhaps then forging a connection with part of the Afro-Caribbean audience.<sup>57</sup>

Interestingly, rap criticism in non-academic journals often makes reference to vocal style. For example, critic Frank Kogan wrote in an article about rapper Spoonie Gee:

Rap music centers on the human voice. The voice is a rhythm instrument as well as a melodic one, capable of emphasizing beats as if it were a set of drums. Spoonie Gee bears down hard on the words, achieving a mesmerizing intensity akin to hard rock—yet he also puts a hanging drawl in his phrasing. So he sounds tough and funky/graceful simultaneously. . . . On the basis of his voice alone, the way it balances coolness with angry passion while keeping a dance beat, Spoonie is a major artist.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, *Rolling Stone* critic Kathy Silberger remarks about Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott: "Listening to Elliott's voice—by turns prankish, sensual,

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<sup>57</sup>One song would be "U.N.I.T.Y." from *Black Reign*.

<sup>58</sup>Frank Kogan, "Spoonie Gee," *Reasons for Living* (June 2, 1986). Quoted in Simon Frith, "Music and Identity," *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Stuart Hall and Paul du Guy, eds. (London: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 109.

and lazy—you wonder why she waited so long to launch a solo career."<sup>59</sup> And in a discussion of Rakim's latest album, *The 18<sup>th</sup> Letter*, Charles E. Rogers notes, "As the first to rap in his natural speaking voice, (Rakim) broke rap's rules then, and he's still breaking them now."<sup>60</sup>

The use of voice and body is often particularly interesting in performances by rap duos and groups like Public Enemy, Salt-N-Pepa and Outkast. Chuck D and Flavor Flav of Public Enemy, for example, perform very differently, but their interaction with each other in performance is as important and as tension-filled as the rhythmic relationship between Chuck D's rapping and the instrumental tracks. In his analysis of "Fight the Power," Robert Walser discusses the interaction between Chuck D and Flavor Flav in terms of a rhythmic dialogue. I suggest that both rappers also create visual, physical and timbral tensions in performance by their often incommensurable uses of voice and body. For example, Chuck D's voice remains well-regulated and even in tone throughout the performance, staying in a fairly narrow, low register. In some ways, Chuck D's strong and resonant voice is comparable to that of black preacher and civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr. In his essay "The Music of Martin Luther King Jr.,"

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<sup>59</sup>Kathy Silberger, "Super Fly Girl Missy Elliott Bugs Out," *Rolling Stone* (Oct. 2, 1997), p. 22.

<sup>60</sup>Charles E. Rogers, "Rakim Returns With *The 18<sup>th</sup> Letter*," *New York Amsterdam News*, 88/49 (Dec. 4, 1997), p. 24.

Richard Lischer actually describes King's preaching style in musical terms, specifically in reference to repetition (alliteration, assonance, anaphora and epistrophe), amplification, rhythm, stress, rise and fall and inflection.<sup>61</sup>

Particularly interesting is Lischer's reference to vocal control in King's speeches:

. . . [King] always manages to keep both his voice and the ecstasy under control. Like a good singer, he will open his mouth wide to hit the notes but will not reach or strain. His voice never breaks. Its power is such that even in the emotional climax of the sermons, King is usually not letting it out but reining it in."<sup>62</sup>

Similarly Chuck D's voice is well-controlled in terms of rhythmic placement and tone, never straining or breaking beyond a relatively narrow range.<sup>63</sup>

Flavor Flav's voice, on the other hand, breaks into a much higher register than Chuck D's, rendering his vocal quality less stable and more distorted than Chuck D's. His sudden, explosive outbursts punctuate Chuck D's smooth and precise flow, affirming Chuck's message through repetition, but also relieving the seriousness by bending and playing with the syllables of words, most apparently with his famous "Yeah Boyee."

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<sup>61</sup>Richard Lischer, "The Music of Martin Luther King," *This is How We Flow: Rhythm in Black Cultures*, Angela M. S. Nelson, ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 54-62.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>63</sup>Other rappers using a controlled, regulated vocal style are MC Lyte, Dr. Dre, and Rakim.

In a "live" video performance of "Fight the Power," Flavor Flav also provides *visual* relief from Chuck D's deadly serious demeanor and message.<sup>64</sup> Chuck D dresses plainly, sporting jeans, a T-shirt, a baseball cap, and running shoes. His face is a mask of intense concentration and he strides back and forth on stage in a linear fashion. Flavor Flav, however, grins clownishly, revealing an almost full set of gold teeth, he dresses flamboyantly in bright track suits with numerous over-sized clocks draped around his neck, and weaves playfully in and around the props and other performers on stage.<sup>65</sup> Flavor Flav's predominantly responsorial role in the group can also be compared to black preaching traditions in which a vocal leader guides a congregation's participation in a worship setting.

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<sup>64</sup>See Public Enemy's *Fight The Power Live* video, Def Jam/CBS Records Inc., 1989.

<sup>65</sup>Of course, the role of the other members of the group (Professor Griff, DJ Terminator X and the backup dancers, Security of the First Nation) should also be considered. According to critic Alan Light, although Chuck D undoubtedly positions himself as the leader of the group, he really wanted to create with Public Enemy "a fully functioning team; his personal models have always come from effective collectives—he is an obsessive sports fan and frequently cites Motown as his industry ideal. ("Move as team, never move alone", he would rap years later on "Welcome to the Terrordome")," *VIBE History of Hip-Hop*, Alan Light, ed. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), p. 167.



According to Lischer,

the key to any black preacher's style is the responsiveness of the congregation . . . . More specifically, the congregation's response helps establish the sermon's rhythm. While the preacher is catching a breath, the audience hits a lick on his or her behalf. Sometimes the preacher and the congregation are guided by an individual who acts as a 'vocal coach' leading the responses.<sup>66</sup>

Robert Walser argues that "polyphonic layering of repetitive flow create continuity, while rhythmic ruptures teach participants to find pleasure in and develop creative responses to social ruptures," I suggest further that the stable, smooth and serious quality of Chuck D's voice and image creates "flow" and continuity, while Flavor Flav teaches participants to identify with and find pleasure in the ruptures he creates through his outrageous appearance, ecstatic vocals and exaggerated facial and bodily gestures.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Richard Lischer, "The Music of Martin Luther King," p. 59.

<sup>67</sup>Robert Walser, "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy," p. 212.

It is interesting to compare Public Enemy's performance of "Fight the Power" with a live video performance of "Push It" by female rappers Salt-N-Pepa.<sup>68</sup> While Chuck D's and Flavor Flav's performance relationship is full of tensions, Salt-N-Pepa's relationship in performance is more complementary. They are wearing almost identical clothing; their dance moves are choreographed so that they very often dance in sync with each other. As well, they rap together simultaneously, as if with one voice. Their aggressive rapping style coupled with their sexually aggressive dance moves coincide with the provocative nature of the lyrics and the urgent sound of the musical tracks (produced by Hurby Luv Bug). It seems that the goal of this performance is not to articulate and create tensions through individual styles and contrasting elements, but to build a temporary space where a particularly female community (including a largely female audience) can celebrate desire and sexuality with a unified voice.

### **Conclusions**

The varied expressions of mainstream journals, music magazines and hip-hop artists attest to the controversial space that rap music occupies in American culture. While rap often continues to be monolithically interpreted as violent and frightening expressions of black youth, writers and performers are beginning to challenge and resist such misconceptions through their critical endeavours. Not

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<sup>68</sup>Salt-N-Pepa, *A Blitz of Hits: The Hits Remixed*, London, 1990.

only does such criticism shed light on the culture's existing values, but it also serves to both reinscribe and undermine these values. I suggest that academic discourses engage in further analysis of hip-hop performance, examining the use of musical tracks and rhythm, but also voice and body in order to meaningfully interpret the critical, participatory and competitive aspects of hip-hop music. In this way, criticism meaningfully participates in negotiating the many ways in which rap music is produced, consumed and interpreted.



## CHAPTER THREE

### "Do The Ladies Run This . . .":

#### Women Rappers Radicalizing Hip-Hop Performance

While hip-hop's radical politics have transformed popular culture and empowered countless performers and fans, its revolutionary project is severely tainted by the negative representations of women prevalent in many of its sounds and images. Thus, in the production of hip-hop music, as is the case in the production of other popular musics like heavy metal and jazz, women generally occupy a marginalized space. However, a few women rappers are asserting a strong and diversified feminine presence and are significantly radicalizing what is thought to be an excessively masculinist art form. In her essay "Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music," Tricia Rose discusses how women have participated in the production of rap music and emphasizes "the importance of the female voice" in rap music performance.<sup>1</sup> She writes,

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<sup>1</sup>Tricia Rose, "Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music," *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) p. 147.

Black women rappers interpret and articulate the fears, pleasures, and promises of young black women whose voices have been relegated to the margins of public discourse. They are integral and resistant voices in rap music and in popular music in general who sustain an ongoing dialogue with their audiences and with male rappers about sexual promiscuity, emotional commitment, infidelity, the drug trade, racial politics, and black cultural history.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, women are rarely heard rapping in hip-hop music. More often, they are allowed only secondary vocal roles, either providing background vocals or performing the sung choruses of songs by male rappers.<sup>3</sup> However, women rappers like Queen Latifah, Rah Digga, Missy Elliott, MC Lyte and Eve have infiltrated the male-dominated rapping scene, and are highly acclaimed not only for their poignant and often hard-hitting lyrics, but also for their verbal dexterity and their vocal abilities. And women rappers who are accomplished singers also rap, often performing the sung portions of their own rap songs or those of other rappers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>3</sup>This is evident in songs like Notorious B.I.G.'s "Mo' Money, Mo' Problems," C & C Music Factory's "Everybody Dance Now," and L.L. Cool J.'s "Phenomenon."

<sup>4</sup>Some examples are Lauryn Hill, Queen Latifah, Eve, Left Eye, and Missy Elliott. Very few male rappers sing regularly in performance. Some exceptions are Montell Jordan and Warren G. Adam Krims discusses how male rap groups like De La Soul suggest a playful irony by singing "in places, including but not limited to refrains and choruses. Such singing takes on a conspicuously informal manner (as in the gleefully out-of-tune singing in De La Soul's "I Can't Call It" from the *High School High* [1996] soundtrack)." *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 148, 66.

Women also have a unique physical presence in the rap music scene. Through the medium of video, performers have articulated widely diversified images of femininity using hair, dress, and gesture to present their bodies in ways that range from the "everyday" to the spectacular. Dance is another extremely important aspect of certain types of rap music, and women make up a large part of the trained dancers who accentuate a song's beat and who move audience members to respond to the music with their own bodies.<sup>5</sup> Women rappers are even reaping the financial and promotional benefits of appearing in ads for commercial products: Missy Elliott was recently featured in ad campaigns for the Gap and Sprite.<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that all visual representations of women in rap are empowering. In fact, much of the video footage that receives significant

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<sup>5</sup>While dance is traditionally seen as "inauthentic" in much of popular music, it has always figured significantly in hip-hop music and in other black-identified popular musics like R & B, gospel, and soul. Interestingly, some rappers are highly critical of overtly dance-oriented music. For example, Adam Krims describes Ice Cube's expressions of distaste for the dancers on the program "Soul Train" in the song "The Nigga You Love To Hate." (See pp. 111-12). Ice Cube's rejection of dance in this particular song appears to be a rejection of the stereotype of the "happy-go-lucky, dancing (read non-political) Negro," suggesting, perhaps, that words can more effectively bring about social change. I will argue further on in this chapter, however, that dance can be socially empowering.

<sup>6</sup>Joan Morgan, "The Making of Miss Thang!," *Essence*, 30/11 (March, 2000), p. 92. Nancy Guevara has demonstrated that commercial industries like Pepsi, Kodak and Burger King that use hip-hop styles in their advertisements, generally represent hip-hop as a masculine culture. "Women Writin', Rappin', Breakin'," *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on rap music and hip-hop culture*, William Perkins, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1996), p. 49.

airplay features scantily clad women who function merely as "eye candy," or as evidence of a male rapper's sexual prowess. Unfortunately, it is this image that women hip-hop musicians work with and against in order to prove themselves more than "cheerleaders or bystanders" in the hip-hop scene.<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter, I will address some of the ways in which women rappers deal with and negotiate negative visual representations of women to assert an empowered presence. I will also demonstrate how, through performance, women rappers invoke and recontextualize feminist traditions that have existed since the early 1920's in the music of blues women like Ma Rainey, Ida Cox and Bessie Smith. I will then analyze studio recordings and music videos by Rah Digga, Lauryn Hill and Missy Elliott, specifically addressing the ways in which they negotiate identities as artists and as women within the hip-hop scene and within the larger social sphere. More specifically, I am interested in analyzing how an artist uses her voice and body in conjunction with technology and language to subvert, parody or celebrate identities with respect to gender, community, class, and sexuality.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 51.



### Women Rappers and Blues Women

In her book *Black Feminism and Blues Legacies*, Angela Davis focuses on blues women Ma Rainey, Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith, describing them as "foremothers" of black feminist thought.<sup>8</sup> She explores the recorded performances of these artists in order to demonstrate that "there are multiple African-American feminist traditions" and to "divulge unacknowledged traditions of feminist consciousness in working-class communities."<sup>9</sup> For example, she argues that, in the 1920's, black middle-class writers and organizations like the National Association of Colored Women represented middle-class feminist concerns, but did not acknowledge the experiences of working-class black women. It was only in the blues music of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith that the social realities of black working-class women were defined and affirmed. Much of the blues womens' music relates accounts of the poor working conditions and economic struggles that were a large part of working class life.<sup>10</sup> They also sang about domestic violence, lesbianism, sexual freedom, drugs, alcohol, abandoning unfaithful lovers—issues considered taboo by middle-class

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<sup>8</sup>Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), p. xiv.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. xix, xi.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Davis's discussion of Bessie Smith's "Washerwoman's Blues," pp. 98-102 and "Sam Jones Blues," p. 11.

standards, despite their relevance for both classes of women.<sup>11</sup> Davis argues that

the contemporary urge to break the silence surrounding misogynist violence and the organized political movement challenging violence against women has an aesthetic precursor in the work of the classic blues singers . . . . One explanation for the fact that the blues women of the 1920's—and the texts they present—fail to respect the taboo on speaking publicly about domestic violence is that the blues as a genre never acknowledges the discursive and ideological boundaries separating the private sphere from the public.<sup>12</sup>

Like the blues women, women rappers bring the diverse experiences of women-of-color into the public sphere. In doing so, like the blues women, some women rappers have also received negative attention from both female and male middle-class critics.<sup>13</sup> Davis describes the dominant culture's response to the blues in general:

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<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Davis's transcriptions of the following performances by Gertrude Rainey and Bessie Smith: "Young Woman's Blues," p. 356, "Farewell Daddy Blues," p. 216, "Prove it on Me Blues," p. 238, "Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl," p. 319, "It Makes My Love Come Down," p. 297, "Tain't Nobody's Business if I do," p. 342.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup>See my discussion of Joan Morgan's and Akisi Britton's articles in the previous chapter. See also Nelson George's comments about women rappers in *Hip-Hop America* (New York: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1998), p. 187.

Failing to detect the complexities of the blues form and blues themes, some early white observers tended to consider the music "low," childish, irrational, and bizarre. But the blues were not only perceived to be lowly and vulgar by those to whom their language was foreign. African Americans, whose social aspirations led them to disassociate themselves from the more impoverished members of their community, often condemned the blues as well.<sup>14</sup>

It is not my intention to construct some kind of lineage from blues music to rap, yet interesting comparisons may be made between the two. Certainly comparisons could be drawn between other genres of "black" music, but women's blues music holds particularly interesting similarities to rap music in terms of its thematic content, and its status within mainstream society. For example, both articulate sexualities in humorous and provocative ways. According to Hazel Carby, blues women like Ida Cox "used comedy to intensify an irreverent attack on male sexual prowess. The comic does not mellow the assertive voice, but on the contrary, undermines mythologies of phallic power and establishes a series of woman-centered heterosexual demands."<sup>15</sup> In "One Hour Mama," for example,

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<sup>14</sup>Angela Davis, *Black Feminism*, p. 123. She states further, "There were two notable exceptions. Zora Neale Hurston, in both her scholarly, and her creative work, affirmed the vitality and integrity of black folk culture, of which the blues was an integral part, and Langston Hughes used the blues as the very foundation of his poetics. Both artists tended to be shunned by black intellectuals who assumed that the "primitive" ingredients of poor and working class black culture needed to be transcended if "great art" was to be produced by people of African descent"(p. 123).

<sup>15</sup>Hazel Carby, "It Jus' Be's Dat Way Sometime": The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues", *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, Robert Walser, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 363.

Ida Cox sings,

I'm a one hour mama, so no one minute papa/ Ain't the kind of man for me./ Set your alarm clock papa, one hour that's proper/ then love me like I like to be/ I can't stand no green horn lover, like a rookie goin to war/ With a load of big artillery, but don't know what it's for./ He's got to bring me a reference with a great long pedigree/ And must prove he's got endurance, or he don't mean snap to me.<sup>16</sup>

In her article "It's My Thang and I'll Swing it the Way That I feel:

Sexuality and Black Women Rappers," Imani Perry discusses the use of humor in women's rap music, and compares Cox's text to that of "Two Minute Brother"

(1991) by rappers Bytches With Problems:<sup>17</sup>

But here's the type of man that we can't stand/ One who always holds his thing in his hand/ Lyin' and sayin' it's about size nine/ Always got his hands between his legs/ You know the kind that always begs/ The one who claims to be the real good lover/ Usually he's a two minute brother.<sup>18</sup>

According to Hazel Carby, image and visual display was another important aspect of blues performance. She writes,

The women Blues singers occupied a privileged space; they had broken out of the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality and sexuality out of the private to the public sphere. For these singers were gorgeous

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>17</sup>Very few studies of rap music address the use of humor in performance in any detail. In an interview, Ice T commented, "Rap is really funny, man, but if you don't see that it's funny, it will scare the shit out of you." (Anthony DeCurtis, "Word," *The VIBE History of Hip-Hop*, p. 93).

<sup>18</sup>Imani Perry, "It's My Thang and I'll Swing it the Way That I Feel: Sexuality and Black Women Rappers," *Gender, Race and Class in Media*, Gail Dines and Jean Humez, eds. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishers Ltd., 1995), p. 525.

and their physical presence elevated them to being referred to as goddesses, as the high priestesses of the blues, or like Bessie Smith, as the 'Empress of the Blues'. Their physical presence was a crucial aspect of their power, the visual display of spangles, dresses, of furs, of gold teeth, of diamonds, of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body reclaimed private sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire.<sup>19</sup>

About Bessie Smith, blues singer Alberta Hunter said, "For audiences accustomed to seeing black performers in mammy costumes, Bessie Smith presented a rare vision. In full Empress regalia, she was bold, beautiful, outrageously out of line, and impossible to forget."<sup>20</sup> Image is also an important aspect for women rappers. Many female rappers spectacularize their image with wigs, tattoos and clothing, and by renaming themselves with titles like Rah Digga, Foxy Brown and Da Brat.<sup>21</sup> Others, like Erykah Badu, Queen Latifah, and Lauryn Hill have tried to emulate a certain "blackness" by wearing dreadlocks, braids, or African garb. Indeed, the ways in which women rappers represent themselves through images and titles say a great deal about where they situate themselves within the hip-hop scene, and even about which audiences they target.

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<sup>19</sup>Hazel Carby, "It Jus' Be's Dat Way Sometime," p. 362.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, p. 137.

<sup>21</sup>Of course, male performers of blues and rap also partake in the practice of renaming. Examples of blues singers are Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and T-Bone Walker; examples of rappers are L.L. Cool J., Ice Cube, and Snoop Dog. It would be interesting to investigate how names function in a rappers' negotiations of gender, regional, or socio-economic identities.

## Women Rappers and Feminism

While Davis and Carby conceive blues women's music as a type of feminist discourse, it is interesting to speculate how someone like Bessie Smith would reconcile her music with feminism. Interestingly, many women rappers express discomfort with being labeled feminists. Tricia Rose has interviewed women rappers with respect to their feelings about the discourse of feminism.

She writes,

Gender-based alliances across race, especially in a racist society, is a problematic move for black women. This may in part explain black women rappers' hesitancy in being labeled feminists. . . . Thus, for black women, feminism often reads white feminism and consequently represents a movement that has contributed to sustaining their oppression while claiming to speak on their behalf. It is in part this tension that complicates a reading of black women rappers as feminist voices that can be situated in opposition to male rappers'. For these women rappers, feminism is a movement that does not speak to men; on the other hand, they are engaged in constant communication with black male audience members and rappers and simultaneously support and offer advice to their young black female audiences.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, surprisingly few women rappers speak out openly against the misogyny in male rappers' lyrics. However, one of the most interesting ways in which women rappers articulate this tension between communicating with and opposing male rappers' narratives are through "battle rhymes."<sup>23</sup> A number of women rappers

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<sup>22</sup>Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, pp. 177, 181.

<sup>23</sup>The competitive aspects of hip-hop are evidenced in battle rhymes which may also occur between two male rappers or two female rappers. For a more detailed discussion of battle rhymes, see Shani Saxon's article "Battle Rhymes"

have teamed up in performance with male rappers who are notorious for their often cartoonishly misogynist lyrics. One of the earliest examples of a male/female battle rhyme is "A Man's World," (from *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, Priority, 1991) performed by female rapper Yo-Yo and male rapper Ice-Cube. This song is a revision of James Brown's popular song "A Man's World:" Ice Cube raps, "It's a man's world," but Yo-Yo retorts, "But it ain't nothin' without a woman." More recently, Foxy Brown battles with Too \$hort in "Baller B\*\*\*\*" from her album *Ill Na Na* (1999). In this cut, Too \$hort boasts about his ability to manipulate women with money and expensive cars. He raps, "I bet I'll be a poor b\*\*\*\*'s dream, more money than she's ever seen." On the other hand, Foxy Brown disses (puts down) men who try to control women with their money, and at the same time, boasts about her ability to make her own money: "This is for all the cats, (all the cats), they want a b\*\*\*\* to lay on her back, to hell will that. (So Fox whatchu mean?) I bet I'll be a poor n\*gga's dream, more money than he ever seen." Humor often plays a large part in battle rhymes as rappers toss insults back and forth at each other. In "Baller B\*\*\*\*," Foxy Brown does her share of name-calling (or "playing the dozens"), targeting men whom she describes as "Hustlin-ass n\*ggas, thuggin-ass n\*ggas, always on some shit, never-trust-'em-ass n\*ggas."

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(*The VIBE History of Hip-Hop*, Alan Light, ed. [New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999], p. 84).

However, not all collaborations with male rappers are "dis-fests." For example, both Eve and Foxy Brown rap with male rapper DMX, Foxy Brown in "Dog and a Fox," (1999) and Eve in "Dog Match" (2000). Foxy and DMX insult each other throughout "Dog and a Fox;" on the other hand, Eve and DMX describe a type of comradeship between themselves based on trust and respect. Rah Digga's collaborations with male rappers on her album *Dirty Harriet* (2000) are also noteworthy, particularly in the cuts "F\*\*\* Y'all N\*ggas," "The Last Word," and "Just For You." In the first cut, an oppositional stance is set up between Rah Digga and rapper Young Zee not only through the insults they hurl at each other but through their clashing vocal timbres. Young Zee's high, nasal rapping voice is a startling and comical contrast to Rah Digga's heavy and low one.

In "Just For You," Rah Digga raps with the Flipmode Squad, and in "The Last Word," with the Outsidaz clique.<sup>24</sup> The rappers take turns rapping, taking up the narrative where another has left off. In both songs, they either boast about their individual rhyming skills or about the success and power of their clique. What results is a stunning mish-mash of vocal timbres and emceeing styles. For example, some passages of rapping are characterized by end rhymes and regular duple rhythms like the following rap by Spliff: "Never judge a n\*ggas like a cover

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<sup>24</sup>The Outsidaz are an all-male rap clique, and Rah Digga is the only female member of Flipmode Squad.



of a book/ F\*\*\* around and get shot, back of the foot." On the other hand, rapper Rock Marciano uses internal rhymes which throws off the regularity of the meter: "Turn a n\*gga into ashes/ How I mash his ass like Casius/ Bent up jabs, I got it mastered/ Fantastic, you're bitin' half ass shit." In this song, vocal qualities range from brash and distorted (Busta Rhymes) to clear and nasal (Baby Sham) to deep, resonant and controlled (Lord Have Mercy). Rah Digga's acceptance by and camaraderie with these male rappers is a powerful statement about her status in the hip-hop scene.

Camaraderie is also evident in the introductory cuts of many female and male rappers' albums in which another rapper(s) will attest to the featured rapper's skills as an emcee. On Missy Elliott's *Supa Dupa Fly* album, for example, Busta Rhymes performs both the intro and outro. Missy Elliott describes the benefits of being introduced by a well-established rapper like Busta Rhymes: "When he (Busta Rhymes) go, 'Yo, yo, yo, whassup!' you listen. So I felt like I had to have him [on the album]."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, two members of the Flipmode Squad introduce and promote Rah Digga's album on the introductory cut of *Dirty Harriet*: "It's been a long time coming/ the coming of the first female of the Flipmode Squad/ universal, powerful, undeniable, Flipmode Squad/ and she goes by the name of Rah Digga." Thus Rah Digga is introduced by a fairly

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<sup>25</sup>Kathy Silberger, "Super Fly Girl Missy Elliott Bugs Out," *Rolling Stone*, 770 (Oct. 2, 1997), p. 22.

powerful rap clique, which could, perhaps, facilitate her acceptance as a solo artist. However, a significant amount of self promotion is evident on the part of the Flipmode Squad. In the introduction, there are as many boastful references to the group as to Rah Digga. While this album is a solo effort, Busta Rhymes, a member of the Flipmode Squad, is the executive producer—his company is called Flipmode Entertainment.<sup>26</sup> This happens with other female emcees who are part of male rap cliques. For example, Foxy Brown is a member of The Firm and Eve is a member of Ruff Riders. On the introductory cuts of their debut albums, (male) members of these groups promote both the female emcee and the group that they are a part of.

It appears, then, that a considerable amount of Eve's, Foxy Brown's, and Rah Digga's power lies in their association with male rappers. By collaborating with male rappers, these women rappers present arresting combinations of sound, engage in the competitive aspects of hip-hop, and remain in dialogue with male rappers. At the same time, however, such collaborations also demonstrate that rap is a male-dominated arena, and the success of an up-and-coming woman rapper is often dependent upon the testimony of more established rappers, who are almost always male.

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<sup>26</sup>Busta Rhymes is not the producer for Missy Elliott's album, however he still takes the opportunity to promote himself and Flipmode Squad on the intro and outro.

### **Production of Identities in Hip-Hop Performance**

Identity is an important issue in much of academic writing on rap music and in writing on popular music in general. In his book *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction*, Keith Negus outlines general debates over identity in which questions have been raised about "the way in which groups of people are labeled and socially categorized."<sup>27</sup> With respect to pop music and identity issues, he concludes, ". . . as the stability and coherence of social identities has been called into question, so the idea that there may be any fixed link between a social group and particular musical sounds has also become an issue of contention."<sup>28</sup>

In his essay "Music and Identity," Simon Frith explores the relationship between social identities and musical expression in popular music, addressing how a piece of music or a performance produces subjective and collective identities, "how it creates and constructs an experience—a musical experience, an aesthetic experience."<sup>29</sup> He writes,

Music, like identity, is both performance and story, describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social, the mind in the body and the body in the mind; identity, like music, is a matter of both ethics and aesthetics . . . . What I want to suggest . . . is not that social groups agree

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<sup>27</sup>Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), p. 99-100.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Simon Frith, "Music and Identity", *Questions of Cultural Identity* Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, eds., (London: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 109.

on values which are then expressed in their cultural activities . . . but that they only get to know themselves *as groups* (as a particular organization of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) *through* cultural identity; through aesthetic judgement. Making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them.<sup>30</sup>

Identity issues are also addressed by scholars like Tricia Rose, Venise Berry, Marla Shelton, and Adam Krims who have written specifically about rap music. Rose, for example, draws from Angela Davis's article "Black Women and Music: A Historical Legacy of Struggle," emphasizing Davis's attempts to link black music to black women's racial, sexual, and political identities. Thus Rose calls for "analyses of black women rappers that can confront the complex and contradictory nature of popular expression and black female social identities."<sup>31</sup> In her article "Feminine or Masculine: The Conflicting Nature of Female Images in Rap Music," Venise T. Berry argues that "black female rappers and their music illustrate many of the changes underway that challenge the socially mandated norm of female sex roles."<sup>32</sup> She analyzes performances by Salt-N-Pepa, Queen Latifah and Oaktown 357, suggesting that they use music and video "to present

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 109, 111.

<sup>31</sup>Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, p. 154.

<sup>32</sup>Venise T. Berry, "Feminine or Masculine: The Conflicting Nature of Female Images in Rap Music", *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, eds. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp. 183-201.

alternative practices and meanings for femininity."<sup>33</sup> Marla Shelton analyzes rap videos in her article "Can't Touch This! Representations of the African American Female Body in Urban Rap Videos" to explore how female hip-hop artists

engage in struggles over the 'meaning' of African American womanhood through three tactics of representation: 1) a particular identification/representation of urban space and class, 2) the redefinition of gangsta culture along lines of gender, and 3) the contemporary merger of hardcore rap and R & B performance.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, Shelton is interested in how sets and visual physicality contribute to defining a rapper's persona with respect to geographic locations, race, class and gender. The analyses of Rose, Berry and Shelton deal mainly with lyrics and physical imagery—there is little discussion of how music and sound might contribute to identity construction. Adam Krims, however, writes at great length about the ways in which rap's music engages regional, class, artistic, and ethnic identities. Interestingly, he does not discuss how the music might articulate specific *gendered* identities. Certainly a study of the ways in which rappers engage with social and musical structures to construct gendered identities would greatly enrich discourses around identity production in rap music.

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>34</sup>Marla Shelton, "Can't Touch This! Representations of the African American Female Body in Urban Rap Videos," *Popular Music & Society*, 21 (Fall, 1997), p. 108.

Identity politics are crucial in a discussion of women's rap music because of the way women in general and black women in particular are (mis)represented in cultural forums. Venise Berry refers to a number of studies which found that in country, rock and blues music and video, women are most often portrayed as sex objects and possessions, or as a threat to males.<sup>35</sup> In her book *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women*, Patricia Morton discusses the historical role of the popular media in shaping racial stereotypes of African American women, demonstrating how cultural representations of their bodies are often informed by such stereotypes as "the celibate mammie," "the exotic tragic mulatto," "the weak hysteric" or "the welfare mother."<sup>36</sup>

I would like to explore how women rappers engage in the complex process of identity production in rap music using language, musical style and visual imagery. Like male rappers, women rappers have presented a remarkable variety of personas. Artists like Queen Latifah and Queen Pen often foreground different identities from performance to performance, articulating their own personas as "works in progress," and thus allowing themselves the freedom to renegotiate the

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<sup>35</sup>Venise T. Berry, "Feminine or Masculine: The Conflicting Nature of Female Images in Rap Music". See also *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text Reader* (Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez, eds.), which contains a number of articles that study modes of sexual representation in film, literature, music, video and television.

<sup>36</sup>Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), pp. 1-13.

boundaries within and around collective identities of gender, class and ethnicity. For them, the concept of "woman rapper" is not fixed in meaning, but embraces a number of often contradictory identities that are themselves mobile in meaning. For example, rappers Left Eye (from the group TLC), MC Lyte and Da Brat are all well-known female emcees, however, each rapper positions herself as an artist in entirely different ways.

Adam Krims's genre system for rap music is useful in outlining how the aforementioned rappers might be distinguished from each other through their music and performance strategies.<sup>37</sup> He lists musical tracks, rapping styles and the semantic aspects of the lyrics as criteria for his genre system.<sup>38</sup> For example, rap songs that invoke a "party" aesthetic are characterized by "prominent rhythm sections, . . . minimally layered textures," and relatively consonant pitch combinations.<sup>39</sup> Party rappers generally use many end rhymes and sung choruses, and often rap about romance, sex, and partying.

According to Krims's system, then, Left Eye's performance style could be said to invoke a "pop" aesthetic. She is the only member of the mainstream

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<sup>37</sup>It is important to note that a rapper's style often changes from song to song. Krims acknowledges that his genre system is better suited to describing songs than artists. (*Rap Music*, p. 87).

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

pop/R&B group TLC that raps, and her raps are generally upbeat with respect to lyrical content, often celebrating sexual desire, encouraging safe sex or lightheartedly addressing problems in male/female relationships. The music is characterized by smooth R&B sounds, musical tracks are minimally layered, thus rhythmic textures are stable and easy to dance to. Left Eye's playful, little-girl rapping voice underlines the mainstream feel of the group's music, as does the fact that she actually sings more than she raps, particularly on later albums. The often slick, glossy production and sets of TLC's music videos complement the lush R&B sounds and vocal styles, and almost always feature choreographed dancing for the groups' members and additional dancers. Although their earlier practice of wearing baggy clothes covered with condoms raised a few eyebrows, TLC's more recent "feminine" look—toned bodies, glamorous hair and make-up and coordinated clothing—closely resembles the images of other more "mainstream" girl groups like Destiny's Child and En Vogue.

Rappers who project a more threatening identity, however, are not heard as often on mainstream radio or music video programs. Adam Krims describes their more aggressive music as "reality rap," or rap that "maps the realities of (black) inner-city life."<sup>40</sup> Under the category of reality rap, Krims identifies subgenres such as gangsta rap and knowledge or message rap which are

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 70. For a detailed look at Krim's discussion of rap genres, see Chapter 2, pp. 46-92 of *Rap Music*.



considerably different from each other in terms of emceeing styles, use of musical tracks and topics.<sup>41</sup> He suggests, however, "that there has been at least one stable ethos in reality rap, even in the midst of all the changes: each successive style of musical tracks marks out, in its specific historical period, something which, in the genre system of its time, connoted hardness."<sup>42</sup> According to Krims, then, a hardcore sound is highly dependent upon the style of the musical tracks; for example a hard sound may be achieved through dense layering of clashing musical textures, pitches, and timbral combinations.<sup>43</sup> However, verbal texts, body language and vocal qualities may contribute significantly to a song's hardness, often even to a greater extent than the musical tracks.

Rapper MC Lyte, for example, spits hardcore raps against dishonest and irresponsible men, or boasts about her skills as an emcee and as a lover using explicit language and an aggressive delivery, thus emulating a tough, street-wise image. On the first cut of her album *Seven & Seven*, for example, Lyte raps: "On the regular they guessin' how the Lyte get down/ Never mind that nigga you better watch your mouth/ Keep snoopin' and you bound to hit a brick/ Get out the

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 78-83.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. 72.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

crack of my ass all up in my shiznit . . ."<sup>44</sup> However, the musical and rhythmic tracks for much of her music are not densely layered in comparison to those of Public Enemy, Rah Digga or Ice Cube. It seems that the "hardness" of MC Lyte's sound is highly dependent upon her voice. Due to the sparsely layered grooves, her voice is foregrounded, and the aggressive lyrics are easily discernible. She often attacks the consonant sounds of her lyrics angrily, but, much like Chuck D, Rakim and Nikki D, her voice remains controlled, often cynical and dispassionate, staying within a fairly narrow and low range. Lyte's tough-girl persona is also evident in her physical appearance. Especially in her earlier performances, MC Lyte favored a "tomboy" look, sporting baggy sweatsuits, chunky jewelry and sneakers. This type of clothing is associated with an old-school B-girl or "around-the-way-girl" look, which many early women rappers tapped into as a means of signifying their connectedness to street culture. In performance, Lyte's face is often twisted into an angry scowl. Lyte also performs aggression in her videos: in the video for "Paper Thin," for example, she throws a fickle lover from a subway train.<sup>45</sup>

It could be argued that MC Lyte keeps her performance style and musical tracks within certain parameters in order to emulate a particular "regime of

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<sup>44</sup>MC Lyte, "In My Business," *Seven & Seven*, 1998 Elektra Entertainment group.

<sup>45</sup>Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, p. 159.

authenticity,"<sup>46</sup> in this case, an authenticity derived not only from the hardness of her sound and image, but also from the fact that she has been rapping since hip-hop's beginning. This is evident in the lyrics of her song "Propa" in which she raps that she is the "mama original rapper," and in "Oogie Boogie" where she describes her style as "old school but my shit is always type new." As well, the use of a scratchy, vinyl sound on "This Emcee" recalls the use of vinyl records in early hip-hop music—I would suggest that this sound, together with her rapping style, invokes the memory of an originary hip-hop aesthetic.

While Lyte articulates an "old school" hardness in performance, rappers like Da Brat, Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim identify themselves as hardcore in entirely different ways. In her latest effort, *Unrestricted*, Da Brat's lyrics are as explicit as MC Lyte's, but the sound varies greatly from the spare grooves in Lyte's music. While Lyte's raps are relatively slow-paced and characterized by duple rhythms and end rhymes, Da Brat often raps at break-neck speeds and uses triplet rhythms and internal rhymes. It could be argued that Lyte's rapping style places emphasis on relaying meaning while Da Brat's often foregrounds virtuosic

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<sup>46</sup>Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, p. 88. Krims argues that both fans and artists have widely varied ideas about what constitutes authenticity in hip-hop music. While some assert that rap music began as "party" music—music whose tracks are conducive to dancing and whose lyrics celebrate partying and pleasure, others insist that hardcore rap—rap that describes ghetto life with explicit language and aggressive soundscapes—is a more authentic hip-hop style. Pages 55, 88-92.

display. Many of the songs on this album also feature smooth R & B and funk styles which are often overtly dance-oriented. As well, almost every track contains sung choruses by R & B singers like Tyrese, Kelly Price, and Latocha Scott. The style of the musical tracks might seem to place Da Brat's music within the "party rap" genre, but her lyrics and image are considerably more rebellious and violent than those of party rappers like Salt-N-Pepa and TLC.

Evidently, defining a hardcore style raises some difficulties because of the variety of ways in which rappers represent hardness. Despite their differences in sound and image, rappers like Tupac Shakur, Public Enemy, Eve, Rakim, MC Lyte, Snoop Dogg, and Lil' Kim are considered hardcore by fans, critics, and other rappers. Thus, for some rappers, hardness is dependent upon distorted, chaotic textures, social awareness, and issues of authenticity; for others, hardness is closely linked to verbal dexterity, aggressive vocal timbres, and rebellious or violent imagery.

At this point, I would like to examine a few performances in more detail, including those of Rah Digga, Lauryn Hill and Missy Elliott, hip-hop artists who are actively redefining women's roles in performance and pushing the boundaries of hip-hop music. These artists use language, cultural memory, visual iconography, vocals and technology in unique and specific ways, both as a means of critically engaging with hip-hop culture, and of producing startling and

subversive identities. In so doing, they have created a space where women can individually and collectively express their experiences and desires.

### **Rah Digga**



Figure 1. Album cover for Rah Digga's *Dirty Harriett*.

In interviews and in her lyrics, Rah Digga makes it very clear that she considers herself a "serious" rapper—one whose reputation depends on rhyme skills, aggressive delivery and hard-hitting grooves. She seems to tap into a particular "regime of authenticity," in this case an "old-school" hardcore aesthetic in which lyrical content and issues of authorship are crucial.<sup>47</sup> She states: "I'm not doing anything that brand spankin' new. All I'm doing is reinventing ol' school hip-hop. I don't have this brand new style that no one has heard before. Serious rhyming is what it is."<sup>48</sup> Further on in the same interview, she emphasizes that she wrote "every ad-lib, hook and chorus" of her album. In the cut "Harriet

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<sup>47</sup>Other rappers who tap into a hardcore style similar to Rah Digga's are MC Lyte, Rakim, and to some extent, L.L. Cool J.

<sup>48</sup>Miatta V. David, "Rough, Rugged and Rah", *VIBE Magazine Online*, p.2 ([www.vibe.com/features/artist/20000405/](http://www.vibe.com/features/artist/20000405/)). Accessed June 30, 2000.

Thugman," Rah Digga describes herself as a "rap purist, a hip-hop thesaurus;" at the end of the last track on her album, she reiterates, "I write my own rhymes y'all." This is significant because women rappers like Salt-N-Pepa, Lil' Kim, and Da Brat have been ridiculed in the past for not writing their own lyrics. According to Queen Latifah, "if you have rhymes written for you, you are not really a rapper."<sup>49</sup> "Old-school" rappers like KRS-One, MC Lyte, and Rakim place extreme value on verbal texts, more so than in party rap genres where musical tracks are often equally, if not more, important. However, rappers who write their own lyrics are respected and valued, to varying extents, in all genres of rap music and popular music in general.

Of course, the authenticity of a rapper's image and style depends upon more than the lyrics she writes. Adam Krims illustrates that distributions of authenticity "occur in several parameters, among them geography . . . . (T)he genre system being discussed almost always finds its local inflection."<sup>50</sup> In his article, "'Represent': race, space and place in rap music," Murray Forman also emphasizes the importance of territoriality in a discussion of early rapper Grandmaster Flash:

. . . [Flash's] notion of respect is related to the geographies that he maps; it

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<sup>49</sup>Quoted in Venise Berry, "Feminine or Masculine: The Conflicting Nature of Female Images in Rap Music," p. 192.

<sup>50</sup>Adam Krims, *Rap Music*, p. 89.

is based on the existence of circumscribed domains of authority and dominance that have been established among the various DJ's. . . . [T]he process of . . . 'representing' [one's locale] is now a required practice among hardcore rap acts. . . . In practice, artists' lyrics and rhythms must achieve success on the home front first, where the flow, subject matter, style and image must resonate meaningfully among those who share common bonds to place, to the posse and to the 'hood.<sup>51</sup>

For example, Rah Digga consistently references New Jersey and Brooklyn locales in songs like "What's Up With That," "Straight Spittin' Part 2," "What They Call Me," "Tight," "Curtains," and "The Last Word." She uses local slang when naming these regions—"New Jerusalem" for New Jersey and "Bricks city" for Brooklyn—and also mentions local hangouts: "I swing to the Vill' for some waffles and some beef falafel" (from "Tight"). Together with her Jersey-based rap posses (groups) Outsidaz and Flipmode Squad, Rah Digga sends "shout-outs" to (or addresses) a New Jersey/Brooklyn fan base with raps like "Set it off for my heads in Jerz" (from "The Last Word") and "I spit for Bricks city, where all my real thugs at" (from "Straight Spittin' Part 2").

Local accents and musical textures also identify a rapper geographically. Other New Jersey rappers like Lauryn Hill and Queen Latifah adopt a "Jamaican" accent in performance from time to time, often accompanied by reggae-style tracks or Jamaican "patois" raps, perhaps, then, implying a connection to a

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<sup>51</sup>Murray Forman, "'Represent': race, space and place in rap music," *Popular Music*, 19/1 (2000), pp. 67, 73.

Caribbean-American ethnicity. Rah Digga, on the other hand, does not alter her "East Coast" accent throughout her album and does not use accent, rapping style, or slang to suggest a connection with another ethnicity outside of New Jersey. Furthermore, most of the tracks on *Dirty Harriet* feature dissonant textures, driving rhythms, and conflicting timbres. According to Murray Forman, an East Coast sound is generally recognisable by "cacophonous . . . jams," and the production style on *Dirty Harriet* decidedly falls into that category of sound.<sup>52</sup> Thus, through language, accent, and sound Rah Digga aligns herself quite specifically with an East Coast aesthetic. The East Coast is generally considered to be the region in which hip-hop culture originated, and by explicitly identifying this region as her "home," Rah Digga further invests in discourses of hip-hop authenticity.

In his book *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional* (1997), Robin D. G. Kelley articulates that while verbal texts are important in hip-hop music, ". . . what counts more than the story is the 'storytelling'—an emcee's verbal facility on the mic, the creative and often hilarious use of puns, metaphors, similes . . ." <sup>53</sup> Adam Krims argues further that storytelling might also include "the DJ's (or producer's) ability to create great beats and musical backdrops," and I suggest that vocal

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>53</sup>Adam Krims, *Rap Music*, p. 39.



timbres and visual physicality are also important considerations.<sup>54</sup> Thus the sonic and visual aspects of storytelling also play an important role in determining a rapper's "authenticity." For example, many of the cuts on Rah Digga's album have the scratchy sound of a vinyl record, which undoubtedly points to old-school DJ techniques and sounds. Interestingly, when asked how she comes across as hardcore and realistic in performance, Rah Digga replied, "I think my voice alone comes off as rugged. My voice plays a big part in my being accepted as a real emcee . . . . I'm not body baggin' or committing crimes in my rhymes, but I am still considered hardcore."<sup>55</sup> An artist's ruggedness or toughness is undoubtedly an important aspect of most hardcore genres, whether they are "gangsta" or "old-school" rap.

Many women rappers illustrate a tough persona through gesture, clothing, and lyrics. It would be difficult, however, to find another woman rapper whose voice has the raw, gritty quality of Rah Digga's. Like most hardcore women rappers, she attacks consonants (and expletives) almost percussively, however, her voice is unusually low and heavy. Many rappers like Chuck D. or Rakim frequently use triplet rhythms in their raps, creating a circular, suspended rhythmic feel, but Rah Digga almost always raps in heavily accented duple

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Charles E. Rogers, "'Dirty Harriet' Arrives," *New York Amsterdam News*, 91/14 (April 6, 2000), p. 33.

rhythms, in which the beat is pushed relentlessly forward. While MC Lyte's and Nikki D.'s rapping voices are generally controlled and stay within a comfortable register, Rah Digga often strains her voice for maximum volume and effect—at times it seems to be on the verge of breaking, producing a timbre that is harsh, raspy, and assaultive. For example, in the songs "Harriet Thugman" and "Straight Spittin' Part 2," her voice increases in volume and rises in pitch near the ends of the verses' lines, often straining beyond a comfortable register. The way in which her rapping style drives the beat forward and the extra effort that she appears to exert in vocal production could be interpreted as expressions of aggression and power.

Rah Digga's voice is arguably the most startling and powerful sound on her album, and particularly on the cut "Break Fool." The song begins with a sample of a distorted electric guitar sound moving back and forth in fourths. (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. Introduction of "Break Fool" by Rah Digga.

Accompanied by a drum track and a sampled "whistle" noise, Rah Digga's voice enters next with percussive, syncopated grunts. Six beats later, another track of her voice enters, this time a wail which rises in pitch for about another six beats. The whistle and guitar samples, along with the tracks of Rah Digga's voice, especially the wail, create a musical soundscape which, due to its dissonant pitch combinations and conflicting timbral qualities, could be described in terms of Adam Krims's concept of "the hip-hop sublime:"

The hip-hop sublime is a product of dense combinations of musical layers. All of them reinforce the four-beat meter, but in the domain of pitch they comprise a sharply dissonant combination. . . . [T]he layers tend to be marked by clashing timbral qualities, often associated with varying sound sources (e.g. sampled from a loud vinyl surface, or dubbed from a highly-processed "live" source). . . . The hip-hop sublime may help to account for the widespread impression that rap music soundscapes sound menacing and aggressive, quite apart from the lyrical content.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup>Adam Krims, *Rap Music*, pp. 73-4.

The lyrics in "Break Fool" are as aggressive as the music. Rah Digga boasts about her emceeing skills with rhymes like "Shittin on emcees, what I do for a living/ . . . Anybody got a beat, then they better keep it hittin/ Retailers put your fit in for the hottest chick spittin." As well, she articulates a camaraderie with rappers who also value verbal artistry, live performance, and the "underground" hip-hop scene, at the same time, criticizing rappers who detract from rhyming skills with "tracks" and "hype": "Now, this for my real live underground cats/ who be checkin for the rhymes not checkin for the track/ Take away all the hype and a n\*gga straight wack."

The rhythmic pattern of the rapping is fairly repetitive and straightforward, however the raps often overrun the barline. In other words, the downbeat frequently falls on the second or third syllable of each line, thus Rah Digga seems to drive the beat forward aggressively, barely pausing to take a breath. Even in the sections where the rhythm slows down from sixteenth-note rhythms to quarter notes, momentum is not lost as each beat is heavily accented in both the tracks of Rah Digga's voice and in the guitar sample that recalls the opening of the piece.

The video for "Break Fool" further articulates a particular type of "hardness."<sup>57</sup> In some scenes, she appears to be performing live in an "underground" club. The club is small, dark and seedy-looking. A few lights

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<sup>57</sup>Video viewed on Rah Digga's website. See [www.elektra.com](http://www.elektra.com). Accessed March, 2001.

illuminate the stage—there are none of the fantastic stage sets or choreographed dancers that are found in other styles of rap music. There is, however, one woman in the video who dances off to the side of the stage. Female dancers often function as sexual props in other rap videos, surrounding or dancing with the rapper, who is usually male. In this context, however, it seems as if the dancer might function to distinguish Rah Digga from women who occupy more decorative roles in rap. Rah Digga does not interact with this woman, in fact, the two are never shown in the same frame, suggesting, perhaps, that Rah Digga and the dancer occupy two very different discursive spaces in rap music. In other words, the dancer inhabits a space in which women engage with hip-hop in more stereotypical ways (as dancers), whereas Rah Digga occupies a space in which women exceed gendered expectations in hip-hop by rapping and by performing aggression. The dancer wears a tight, short skirt, and a revealing top; her dance moves are highly sexualized. In contrast, Rah Digga's skin and body parts are not overtly on display. Instead, she is fully clad in black leather, a popular signifier of rebellion, danger, and sexual power. Furthermore, her angular movements and aggressive arm and facial gestures underline the powerful and menacing quality of her voice and lyrics.

The lyrics, visual imagery, and soundscape of this song are indicative of Rah Digga's investment in a hardcore aesthetic in which expressing aggression

and issues of authenticity are crucial. One could certainly speculate with respect to the motivations for Rah Digga's authenticity claims. For example, her claims to an "East Coast" authenticity could very well be a survival strategy, whereby she establishes commonalities with a specific community of rappers and fans in order to achieve acceptance and recognition. Or perhaps the issue is one of ownership and preservation—Rah Digga's authenticity claims might, then, be interpreted as an attempt to preserve hip-hop as a gritty, "underground," East Coast culture. Is it problematic, however, when a woman upholds and tries to locate herself within a tradition that is thought to be masculinist; or is it indicative instead of the valuable role hip-hop plays in the lives of black women?

Rah Digga's performance style also raises some interesting questions about gender construction in hardcore rap. Adam Krims writes,

The links of that concept [hardness] . . . to ghettocentricity and masculinity have always posed difficulties to women in rap music and hip-hop culture, as has its centrality in constituting hip-hop music, fashion, slang, and identity . . . . Musical strategies . . . are central to constituting "hardness" in fans' musical experiences and investments, and thus to a highly gendered process.<sup>58</sup>

One could ask then, must hardcore women rappers perform "masculinity" in order to survive or achieve success? As mentioned earlier, Rah Digga expressed that she is accepted as a hardcore emcee due to the gritty quality of her voice. Does the fact that her voice often sounds masculine facilitate her

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<sup>58</sup>Adam Krims, *Rap Music*, p. 73.

acceptance as a "real" emcee? Does her performance style reinforce the link of hardness to masculinity or does it resist that link? Furthermore, with an artist like Rah Digga, do we need to rethink the question of what constitutes "masculinity" in this style of rap music?

The music in *Dirty Harriet* arguably goes further than that of other hardcore female rappers in creating a "hard" sound—the tracks are more cacophonous, Rah Digga's voice more assaultive and raw. She also interacts with few women in her videos, and apparently keeps company with male groups like the Outsidaz and Flipmode Squad. However, Rah Digga also asserts a powerful feminine presence. For example, she spits woman-centric rhymes like "Spot datin, block money I could take in/ Drops on the box like I was ovulatin'" (from "What's Up With That?") and draws attention to her feminine body with lyrics like ". . . word to my C-cups" (from "Curtains"). As well, she shocked audiences by performing at New York's Lyricist's Lounge in her eighth month of pregnancy.<sup>59</sup> She also articulates a connection with other (hardcore) women rappers like Queen Latifah, MC Lyte and Eve. In "What They Call Me," she compares herself favorably to MC Lyte. The cut "Lessons of Today" contains a sample from Queen Latifah's "Princess of the Posse" (*All Hail the Queen*, 1989); the title of the cut is also a reference to Latifah's song. And Rah Digga

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<sup>59</sup>Charles E. Rogers, "Dirty Harriet Arrives."

collaborates with rappers Eve and Sonja Blade on "Do the Ladies Run This . . .," in which they celebrate womanhood and their skills as emcees. Women rappers like Rah Digga, Eve and Sonja Blade are creating a space in hip-hop where women can engage in and radicalize hardcore rap aesthetics. By emphasizing the importance of authorship, and aggressive lyrics and grooves, Rah Digga in some ways reinforces certain codes of hardcore rap, but she also challenges the idea that "hardness" equals masculinity, and alters our conceptions of what hardcore rappers look and sound like.

### **Lauryn Hill**

Lauryn Hill has achieved unprecedented success through her collaboration with the Fugees, as a solo performer, and as a songwriter and producer. Her debut album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* won five Grammys in 1999, including Album of the Year and Best New Artist. More importantly, her musical style and positive image have pushed hip-hop even further into mainstream consciousness while maintaining a connection to a localized black American experience.

While Lauryn Hill's performance style differs greatly from Rah Digga's, she also appears to tap into a "regime of authenticity" that is dependent upon "realness" and a connection to "the street." In an interview with *Rolling Stone* reporter Alec Foege, Hill describes her experience of black ghetto life: "You'll see



that my house is right on the borderline of the suburbs and the ghetto. I always had this duality. I went to school with a lot of white kids—it was really like a suburban environment—but I lived with black kids."<sup>60</sup> As well, in "Every Ghetto, Every City," Lauryn raps, ". . . but way before my record deal/ The streets that nurtured Lauryn Hill/ Made sure that I'd never go too far," and throughout the song, she names the streets, parks and landmarks of the locale in which she grew up. Her videos for "Doo Wop (That Thing)" and "Everything is Everything" also take place in urban settings. Lauryn is often dressed in simple, "everyday" clothing, so that she easily fits into the urban scenes in the videos.

Lauryn Hill's authenticity claims seem to function as a means of gaining acceptance in the black community, particularly poorer black communities. Much of Hill's music could be described as message or knowledge rap—rap music designed to educate and empower a community. However, as an artist gains commercial success and social status, maintaining a connection with poorer black communities could be problematic. By referencing specific streets and locales, Lauryn Hill suggests a familiarity and a history with certain black communities, even if she is now removed from those experiences due to her success. She suggests, perhaps, that the positive messages in her music are valuable because

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<sup>60</sup>Quoted in "Lauryn Hill", *Celebrating Black History Month*, Gale Group Inc. 2000, (<http://www.gale.com/freresrc/blkhstry/hilll.htm>). Accessed June 30/2000.

has walked the streets and interacted with these communities and is familiar with their experiences and situations.

In addition to a "street" authenticity, the visual imagery and sounds on *Miseducation* suggest that Hill is also invested in a kind of authenticity of expression. For example, a series of six black and white photographs in the album's liner notes also present Hill in an "everyday" setting—she is photographed in what appears to be a public bathroom. (See Figure 3).

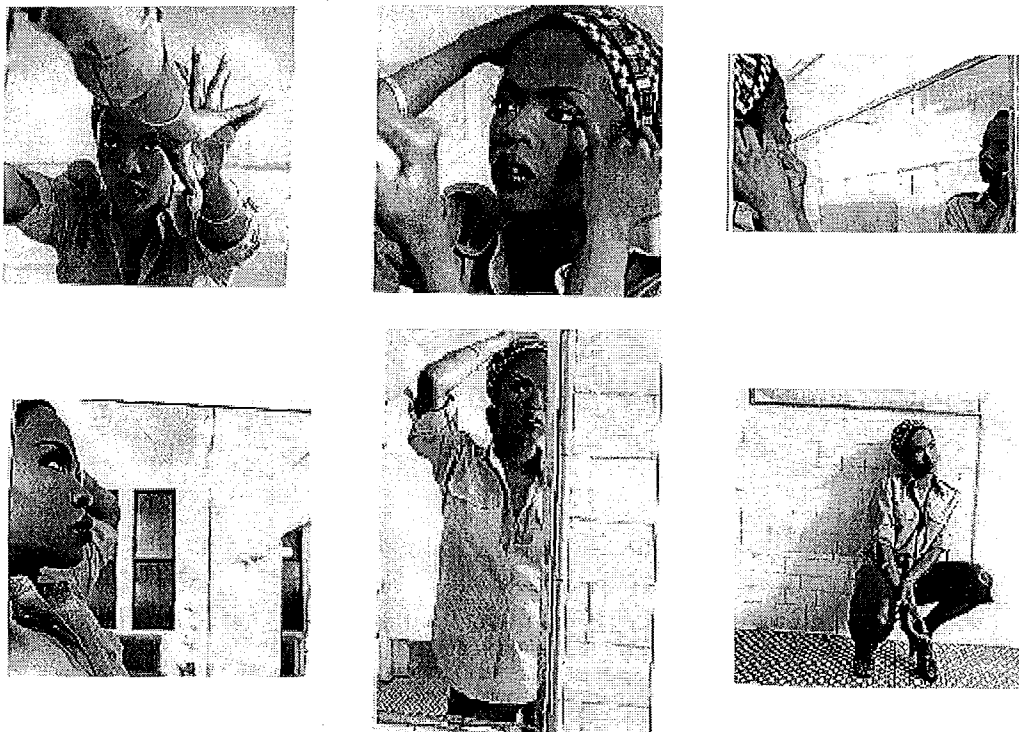


Figure 3. Photographs from the liner notes to *Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.

The photos focus on Hill's face as she "puts herself together," checking her mascara in one shot and putting on an earring in another. Whereas rappers like Foxy Brown, Rah Digga, and Eve gaze, often provocatively, into the camera on their album photos, Hill does not gaze into the camera at all but at a reflection of herself in a mirror. Her expression is serious and introspective—it seems that she is examining and evaluating not only her outer appearance, but also her "inner self." We do not see a full-length shot of her until the sixth picture, where we see that she is wearing fairly casual clothing—a plain, button-down shirt, pants, sandals and her hair is pulled back under a scarf. Often, female and male rappers are portrayed in fantastic settings and in stylized clothing in their album photos;<sup>61</sup> however, the pictures on the *Miseducation* album seem to suggest that what we see in the liner notes is not a "star" constructed by make-up artists and other image specialists, but an individual that is put together by Lauryn Hill and that is a reflection of her "real" self. Furthermore, because the first five photos focus exclusively on Hill's face, it seems that Hill's personality is visually defined by her own striking facial features, instead of being defined by more "superficial" apparel such as clothing or hairstyles.

Many of hip-hop's musical tracks are dependent upon electronically-processed sounds; sampling boards and mixers have often been preferred over live

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<sup>61</sup>See the liner notes of Foxy Brown's *Ill Na Na* or Rah Digga's *Dirty Harriet*.

instruments and instrumentalists. According to Suzanne McElfresh, ". . . technology was an extraordinary compositional tool and a democratic one at that, allowing even those with little or no formal training to create their own music."<sup>62</sup> On *Miseducation*, however, Hill and her producers use live instruments and musicians on every track—harps, piano, clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, celestes, even a string quartet. Hill explains, "I always had an appetite for live musicianship. I want the human element to be there. I want the real piano, even if it's a little out of tune."<sup>63</sup> Hill's desire for "live" musicianship on a *recorded* album is, of course, fraught with a number of contradictions. According to Steve Jones, "*liveness* is not something that can be measured in any meaningful way, as recording splinters the live musical performance into many facets."<sup>64</sup> Tricia Rose references Andrew Goodwin's "Sample and Hold: Pop Music in the Age of

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<sup>62</sup>Suzanne McElfresh, "DJ's Vs. Samplers," *The VIBE History of Hip-hop*, Alan Light ed. (New York: Three River's Press, 1999), p. 171.

<sup>63</sup>Melissa Ewey, "Lauryn Hill Smashes Records and Tells How Motherhood Changed Her Life," *Ebony* (Nov., 1998), p. 202.

<sup>64</sup>Steve Jones, *Rock Formation: Music, Technology, and Mass Communication* (London: Sage Publications, 1992), p. 191. Jones cites Sara Cohen who pointed to a similar issue in her study of Liverpool rock groups: "Technology stood in the way of [these groups'] ideal of honest music making. The problem . . . was how to maintain and project that honesty while recording: in other words, how to use advanced technology to produce music that sounded "raw" and expressed an aesthetic of simplicity as opposed to technology. . . . [W]hilst technology . . . was seen as a constraint, its creative, beneficial potential was also recognized." (192).

Digital Reproduction" in which he argues,

. . . while cultural critics such as Simon Frith debate the essentially critical and academic distinctions being made between technology on the one hand and "community" and nature on the other, pop musicians and audiences have grown increasingly accustomed to making an association between synthetic/automated music and the communal (dance floor) connection to nature (via the body).<sup>65</sup>

Many performers and fans of popular music would certainly question whether the sounds of more traditional instruments are more "authentically human" than those of samplers and mixing boards. For example, Rose also quotes critic Harry Allen who suggests that "hip-hop humanizes technology and makes it tactile. In hip-hop, you make the technology do stuff that it isn't supposed to do, get music out of something that's not supposed to give you music quite that way."<sup>66</sup> Indeed, technology, in the form of sampling and mixing, can function in deeply "human" and personal ways. For example, the practice of sampling past musical grooves, street noises, and lines from movies and speeches taps into the individual and collective experiences of audiences, invoking feelings of nostalgia, humor, anger, and emotional uplift.

Hill's lyrics are also deeply personal, and she describes them as expressions that stem from lived experience:

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<sup>65</sup>Quoted in Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, p. 86.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 86.

Every time I got hurt, every time I was disappointed, every time I learned, I just wrote a song . . . . [T]he song that touches me the most is the one about my son . . . . ["Joy of My World is in Zion" is for those] who may have thought I was all that, but here is some of the pain I was going through. Here's my human side.<sup>67</sup>

Thus she seems to invest in the Romantic notion that artistic works "mirror the artists' inner and outer life, and [that] the artist is supposed to live in accordance with his [*sic*] art,"<sup>68</sup> For example, Hill refers to her personal experiences, beliefs and values in "Lost Ones" where she raps, "Now understand L. Boogie's [Lauryn's] non-violent/ But if a thing test me, run for mi gun/ Can't take a threat to mi newborn son/ L's been this way since creation." Her frequently self-referential lyrics suggest to an audience that she lives in accord with the values expressed in her lyrics, that her expressions are authentic.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Lauryn Hill is one of the few rappers who does not assume a pseudonym in performance. Rappers like Too \$hort, Busta Rhymes, Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott and Da Brat not only use pseudonyms but also disguise themselves with fantastic clothing and

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<sup>67</sup>Quoted in "The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill" (<http://www.lauryn-hill.com/history.html>), p.2. Accessed June 30/2000.

<sup>68</sup>Anne Danielson, "His Name Was Prince: a Study of *Diamonds and Pearls*," *Popular Music*, 16/3 (1998), p. 279.

<sup>69</sup>Lauryn Hill's use of self-reference is in contrast to rappers who might call out their own names in performance as a means of boasting or celebrating their status and success as emcees. Examples of this type of self-naming are found in MC Lyte's "Too Fly," Dr. Dre's and Snoop Dogg's "The Next Episode," and Rah Digga's "What They Call Me."

hairstyles. These rappers seem to perform overtly constructed personalities; on the other hand, Lauryn Hill appears to be performing "herself."

While many of Hill's expressions seem to be personal and introspective, others create a feeling of community and shared experience. This is significant in that, whereas hip-hop music began as a culture dependent upon live performance and live audiences, its dissemination is becoming increasingly dependent upon recorded technology. In his article "Hip-hop: from live performance to mediated narrative," Greg Dimitriadis describes how the social dynamics of hip-hop music have shifted from one of "communal production" to "one mediated by way of commodity forms such as vinyl, video, and CD . . . , encouraging closed narrative forms over flexible word-play and promoting individualised listening over community dance."<sup>70</sup> As a result, the roles of words and lyrics have received primary critical attention while the roles of dance and of the body are often overlooked. Dimitriadis insists, however, that dance is an important part of hip-hop's political expressions:

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<sup>70</sup>Greg Dimitriadis, "Hip-hop: from live performance to mediated narrative," *Popular Music*, 15/2 (1996), p. 179.

By engaging in a myriad of experiential and representational practices, the body can connect with 'experiential worlds' different from those articulated by dominant orders. Community dance is pivotal here as it allows the self to experience these 'new forms of subjectivity,' while placing the self within a group context. Individuals exploring different ways of being in collective contexts is the prelude and precursor to all important social or political action.<sup>71</sup>

The older forms of hip-hop live performance that took place in parks, along city blocks or in hip-hop clubs seem to have been replaced by recorded performance, but Dimitriadis describes how technology has been used by society and in hip-hop culture as a means of building "imagined communities:"

. . . mass-disseminated technology—most notably print technology or 'print-capitalism'—was essential to envisioning . . . large scale 'imagined communities.' This revolutionary technology made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate to others, in profoundly new ways throughout disparate areas in Western Europe beginning in the eighteenth century. Similarly, recorded technology allowed artists such as Public Enemy to envision their audience as a wide and encompassing nation within a nation. . . . Rap became, in short, an idiom which could create solidarities beyond the boundaries of face-to-face communication.<sup>72</sup>

The lyrics, music, and video for Lauryn Hill's "Doo Wop (That Thing)" could be interpreted as an attempt to compensate not only for the loss of community that Greg Dimitriadis describes, but also for the loss of community

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p. 187. Dimitriadis draws from Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).



resulting from poor female/male relations. The lyrics are addressed to both women and men in the form of advice and criticism. To the women Hill raps,

You know I only say it 'cause I'm truly genuine/ Don't be a hardrock when you really are a gem/ Babygirl, respect is just a minimum/Niggas f\*\*ked 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./ Its silly when girls sell their souls because its in.

The lyrics suggest that Hill is speaking "from the heart" and has shared similar experiences with the community she addresses. But this community also includes men. In the first occurrence of the chorus, she warns, "Guys, you know you better watch out/ Some girls, some girls are only about/ That thing, that thing, that thing." In the rap that follows, however, Hill addresses members of the male community in the form of a "dis:"

Let's not pretend, the women pack the pistol by they waist men/ Crystal by the case men, still in they mother's basement/ The pretty face men, claiming that they did a bid men/ Need to take care of their three and four kids men/ The facing a court case when the child support's late/ Money taking, heart breaking now you wonder why women hate men/ The sneaky silent men the punk domestic violence men/ The quick to shoot the semen stop acting like boys and be men.

She concludes this rap with the question, "How you gon' win when you ain't right within?" This question directly follows Hill's address to the male community, but she seems to suggest that the larger community of blacks that includes both women and men cannot "win", or become socially empowered because it "ain't right within." According to Hill, then, social change begins with

a reevaluation and restructuring of relationships between men and women. This is an interesting contrast to rappers with black nationalist ideals (Ice Cube, Sister Souljah, and Public Enemy, for example) who also express the need for building and empowering the black community, but mainly in terms of "rebuilding the black man."<sup>73</sup>

A community of musicians and audience is also constructed through rhetoric and sound, and through the media of dance and "live" performance. In the very opening of the song, for example, Hill invites an imagined audience to participate physically with the words, "feels real good waving your hands in the air."<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, the responsorial nature of certain passages in the song creates the illusion of a community, specifically where Hill appears to encourage her "band" with four repetitions of the words, "come again;" the "band," made up of trumpets, trombones, saxophones, and background vocalists respond to each occurrence of "come again" with short melodic motives, increasing in volume with each repetition. (See Figure 4).

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<sup>73</sup>Jeffrey Louis Decker, "The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip-hop Nationalism," *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music, Youth Culture*, Andrew Ross, Tricia Rose, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 99-121. Quote taken from an interview with Sister Souljah.

<sup>74</sup>This is reminiscent of early hip-hop practices in which rappers encouraged audience participation and punctuated their rhymes with what Greg Dimitriadis describes as "floating chants (183)." Rappers like L.L. Cool J., KRS-One, and Rah Digga also use chants such as "make some noise," or "wave your hands in the air," in their recordings.

The image shows a musical score for an excerpt from "Doo Wop (That Thing)" by Lauryn Hill. The score is written for six parts: Trombone, Trumpet, Saxophone, Vocal 1, Vocal 2, and Vocal 3. The lyrics are: "come a- gain yo yah yah come- gain come a- gain in say! come- gain" and "yeah y-e-ah yah y-e-ah yah y-e-ah".

Figure 4. Excerpt from "Doo Wop (That Thing)" by Lauryn Hill.

In the music video for "Doo Wop," women and men who are going about their daily lives are brought together at a block party.<sup>75</sup> By engaging in communal dancing, they form a temporary bond with Lauryn Hill and her crew. The director Monty Whitebloom describes the video in this way:

This is a high concept performance video with a unique visual twist, set around a block of streets, culminating in a block party. We will combine a 60's and 90's vision in the same frame. Lauryn will appear in both eras. . .

We start outside a brownstone with Lauryn and her two crews, one 60's, one 90's. She gets up from the stoop and begins to walk down the street. As Lauryn and her crew move along the sidewalk, we continually see both a 60's and a 90's vision of the same thing side by side. Beauty shops/hairdressers, corner shops, automobiles on the street, . . . guys chatting up/checking out girls, girls doing likewise.

<sup>75</sup>Video viewed at [www.mtv.com](http://www.mtv.com). Accessed March, 2001.

As we turn the corner we see a block party is in progress. The streets are full of people. There is a band on stage, or rather two bands, a 60's and a 90's one. The floor is crowded with people dancing. The two Lauryns move throughout the dancing people and onto the stage, where the bands are performing. Stepping up onto the platform, they continue to perform but this time with the backing of the 60's and 90's band.

The audience responds to these two differing styles of performance with their own unique style of dancing. . . . Lauryn's performance will be different in each era. The 90's streetwise and confident, the 60's more innocent. The band behind her in the 60's is a traditional R & B outfit, Wilson Pickett meets James Brown, with a dash of The Temptations. In the 90's it will be more eclectic with scratchers and mixers and the whole contemporary crew.

The finished piece will be highly distinctive and emotionally uplifting. . . . *You will get the sense that you are there yourself.*<sup>76</sup>

Whitebloom's final comment indicates a desire to forge a connection with the individual listener through the medium of video. Watching the people in the video join into the dance, the listener may feel drawn into this communal celebration. However, a sense of community is strengthened further through the use of sounds and images that tap into the cultural memory of localized (black) audiences. For example, "Doo Wop" begins with piano chords shifting back and forth between a and g-minor. Next we hear Hill saying, "Yo, remember back on the boulev[ard] when cats used to harmonize like . . .," after which we immediately hear a group of singers vocalizing in harmony. The vocals outline

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<sup>76</sup>Monty Whitebloom, "A Musical Video Outline," ([www.cvp.net/treatments/DooWopThatThing\\_Treatment.html](http://www.cvp.net/treatments/DooWopThatThing_Treatment.html)). Accessed on April 1, 2001. (Italics mine).

the chord changes in the piano. This opening music, and especially the passage of a capella singing heard in the latter half of the song, are reminiscent of doo wop music, a tradition from the late fifties and early sixties in which singers from urban ghettos would get together to perform a capella harmonies on street corners. After the vocals in the opening of the song, we hear sharply syncopated ascending and descending chords in the brass instruments which recall musical gestures found in the music of sixties soul singers like Aretha Franklin and Wilson Pickett.

While these sounds and the visual images in the music video (i.e. the sixties styles of dancing and dress) might remember past traditions of black music-making, these practices are recontextualized in the more recent tradition of hip-hop music. Hill's voice functions significantly in negotiating these two musical eras. In the opening, for example, the sixties-style piano and brass chords are punctuated by Hill's raw, percussive vocal interjections, rhetoric typically found in hip-hop music. The rap which follows is heard against the a/g-minor piano chords and then a bass guitar groove. The brass chords comment briefly halfway through the rap, and then again at the end of the rap and into the chorus. Hill then breaks out of her low-pitched, husky rapping voice into high, clear singing vocals. By switching vocal styles, from rapping to singing, and by changing her vocal range from low to relatively high, Hill situates herself in two places at once. This is, of course, emphasized in the video in which two Lauryn's

are presented, one in a sixties setting, the other in a nineties setting. At the same time that her streetwise lyrics, rhetoric, and rapping voice place her in a "present" black urban culture, her singing, the additional vocals, and the musical gestures in the piano connect her to the past.

Many rappers draw from past cultural traditions, especially from the sixties when the Civil Rights Movement was empowering many black Americans. Artists like Queen Latifah and Public Enemy have sampled the speeches by African-American leaders Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and singer/activist James Brown is probably one of the most sampled artists from the sixties and seventies. The sixties were important for many African Americans, marking the time when blacks first became recognized as a powerful communal voice. By tapping into this aspect of American culture, Hill and other rappers undoubtedly "create solidarities beyond the boundaries of face-to-face communication."<sup>77</sup> Through sound, language, and visual physicality, Lauryn Hill is enabled to create a bond with real and imagined audiences, ultimately creating a communal space in which social change may begin to occur.

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<sup>77</sup>Greg Dimitriadis, "Hip-hop: from live performance to mediated narrative," p. 187.

### **Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott**

Since the early nineties, songwriter, producer, singer, rapper, and label CEO Missy Elliott has earned the respect of both rappers and critics. The virtuosity with which she and production partner Timbaland fuse and juxtapose pop, R & B, and hip-hop styles has afforded them a unique vantage point in the music industry both economically and creatively. Furthermore, her distinctive approach to music-making contributes to internal debates around hip-hop authenticity.

### **Rap Music and the Threat of the "Feminine"**

In a study of the politics of crossover, Reebee Garofolo outlines the concerns of certain critics over the success that some black musics have had in mainstream markets.<sup>78</sup> For example, while critic Steve Perry sees the integration of black music into the pop market as evidence of "how profoundly black experience has shaped the cultural mainstream," Nelson George maintains that "something is lost culturally in the process of crossing over."<sup>79</sup> George seems to articulate that crossing over means a compromise of certain cultural values; that mainstream or

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<sup>78</sup>Garofolo defines crossover as "that process whereby an artist or a recording from a 'secondary' marketing category like country and western, Latin, or rhythm and blues achieves hit status in the mainstream or 'pop' market. "Black Popular Music: Crossing Over or Going Under?" *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions*, T. Bennett et al, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 231.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 232.

mass culture poses a threat to "authentic" cultural identities. This view of mass culture is by no means a recent phenomenon. Andreas Huyssen has described how mass culture has been devalued and feared from the nineteenth century to modern times. He writes, ". . . the nightmare of being devoured by mass culture through co-optation, commodification, and the "wrong" kind of success is the constant fear of the modernist artist, who tries to stake out his territory by fortifying the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture."<sup>80</sup> Huyssen links the fear of mass culture to a "fear of woman, a fear of the . . . loss of identity and stable ego boundaries."<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, issues of authenticity in hip-hop music greatly influence the extent to which rappers will integrate into mainstream markets. Artists like Will Smith, MC Hammer, and Sean "Puffy" Combs have been accused of "selling out," or compromising their "blackness" to construct a sound that appeals to white audiences. However, such accusations could be interpreted as a fear of the feminine, of the loss of a (black) masculine identity. For example, Adam Krims describes how softer sounds and women in general were omitted from performances of "reality rap" in order to keep the genre within the domain of the

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<sup>80</sup>Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," *After the Great Divide: Theories of Representation and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 53.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 52.



masculine:

The popularity [of women-sung R & B-style choruses in don rap] is all the more remarkable when one recalls how just a few short years before the advent of don rap, singing, not to mention a substantial female presence of any sort, had been the mark of "softer" styles. That mark, of course, had served to threaten the masculine-identified reality rap authenticity.<sup>82</sup>

Yet while some rappers attempt to "fortify the boundaries" between rap music and mass culture, others have blurred the boundaries, creating a "slippery ground which may prove fertile for some, and treacherous for others."<sup>83</sup>

Missy Elliott has demonstrated how productive this "slippery ground" can be. According to Karen R. Good, "Missy has never been afraid of crossover because she is a business woman. First."<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Elliott has not limited herself to producing and writing for rap and R & B artists like Aaliyah, MC Lyte, and SWV; she has also written for "mainstream" pop artists like N'Sync, Mariah Carey, and Whitney Houston. Elliott does not seem to view "softer" R & B and pop styles as a threat to artistic integrity, but as opportunities to explore her creativity and expand her sound. In an interview with *Newsweek*, Elliott explained

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<sup>82</sup>Adam Krims, *Rap Music*, pp. 85-6.

<sup>83</sup>Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," p. 59.

<sup>84</sup>Karen R. Good, "Ill Na Nas, Goddesses and Drama Mamas," p. 381. Elliott's attitude toward crossing over is comparable to that of Prince, who has manipulated his sound and image in order to achieve success in both black and mainstream markets.

further, "You don't make any money being an artist. Writing and producing? You get your money from that."<sup>85</sup> In popular music, money is linked, not only to material wealth, but to creative control and creative freedom. Elliott's successful forays into producing and songwriting have afforded her the financial clout and the creative power to introduce startling new sounds and images into rap music with little resistance from her record label.

### **Missy Elliott, Identity and The Disappearing Self**

As a performer, Missy Elliott represents a persona that is often highly stylized and ambiguous. In a 1999 interview with the star, *Rolling Stone* critic Gerri Hirshey observed that Missy actually "speaks her own name in two distinct ways when she refers to herself in the third person."<sup>86</sup> "Just Missy" (i.e. the "real" Missy) is spoken in a soft, quiet, voice, whereas

*MISSY*, all caps, italicized and [spoken] with a slight hiss, is her handle for 'the character Missy.' . . . Missy explains that the two Missys are a reasonable way of coping with all these mad commitments and her own entrenched insecurities about her size, her sexuality, her 'way different' self. *MISSY* can big-foot through scary landscapes, using humor and futuristic burlesque to get the job done. *MISSY*—big, off the wall and uncompromisingly black—is a genius piece of outsider art.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>Veronica Chambers, "Missy's Back With Real-World Raps," *Newsweek*, 134/1 (July 5, 1999), p. 60.

<sup>86</sup>Gerri Hirshey, "Rhymes & Misdemeanors," *Rolling Stone*, 816 (July 8, 1999), p. 55.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*

Like pop stars Madonna, Little Richard and Prince, Elliott's ever-changing image and musical style resists labeling and creates ambiguity with respect to artistic, ethnic, gendered and sexual identities. In her study of Prince's self-effacing performances on his album *Diamonds and Pearls*, Anne Danielson draws upon cultural theorist Frederic Jameson's book *Postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism* (1984). She writes,

According to Jameson, one of the most significant features of the cultural products of the postmodern era is a certain kind of exteriority, a lack of depth. This, he says, is no longer a matter of content, but of 'some more fundamental mutation within the object world itself—now become a set of texts or simulacra, and in the disposition of the subject' . . . . The very concept of expression presupposes some kind of separation within the subject, and along with that a metaphysics of inside and outside. These various depth models, as Jameson calls them, have been criticized in contemporary theoretical discourse. . . . Much of the criticism has centered around what has been termed the 'death' of the subject: the autonomous bourgeois subject never existed, a myth is now about to dissolve. It is being replaced by a conception of practices, discourse, and textual play.<sup>88</sup>

Certain aspects of rap music-making could be theorized in terms of postmodern cultural practices, particularly with respect to the intertextuality of sampling and with respect to the ways in which techniques such as looping and cutting undermine normative values of continuity and teleology in Western music. However, there are some rappers whose performance styles are informed by ideals that could be described as "modernist." As discussed previously, it is important

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<sup>88</sup>Anne Danielson, "His Name Was Prince: a Study of *Diamonds and Pearls*," *Popular Music*, 16/3 (1998), pp. 278-9.

for some rappers to project a sound and image that is connected to an "original" or "authentic" tradition of rap performance. KRS-One, Rah Digga, and MC Lyte, for example, are deeply invested in "keeping it real," or in constructing personas that are "street authentic" and that tap into ordinary hip-hop aesthetics. Such rappers often project a fairly stable and consistent image, and are thus easily identifiable as, perhaps, "rap purists" or "old-school."

I suggest that Missy Elliott more explicitly exemplifies Jameson's ideas about postmodern culture, exteriority and a fragmented subject. As a hip-hop producer, she does not seem to adhere to a singular rap aesthetic. For example, she has written and produced songs for old-school-style rapper MC Lyte, but also for newer-style ghetto fabulous rappers Da Brat and Lil' Kim. She does not seem to be overly concerned with "keeping it real" or, in other words, keeping musical styles within the parameters of a certain rap aesthetic. Instead she fuses and juxtaposes pop, R & B, and hip-hop styles throughout her *Supa Dupa Fly* album, and uses unusual sound effects like bug noises (in "The Rain") and bizarre, high-pitched giggles (in "They Don't Wanna F\*\*\* Wit Me").

As a performer, Elliott also seems to retreat from "authentic" expression. For example, in her music videos, she projects a fragmented visual identity by transforming herself with a variety of wild disguises. She has appeared wearing inflatable vinyl suits, in a bodysuit accessorized with a spiked G-string, and as a

"Japanimated pocket monster" in the video for "Sock it to Me".<sup>89</sup> (See Figure 5).

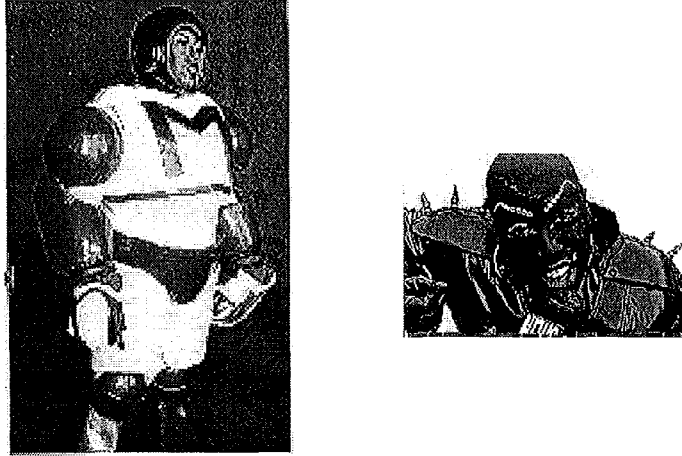


Figure 5. Missy Elliott's costumes for "Sock it to me" and "She's A B\*\*\*\*."

She also projects a fragmented subjectivity through the use of vocal disguise. Because her vocal performances change quite drastically from cut to cut, it is much more difficult to determine what her vocal trademark might be than for, say, Rah Digga, MC Lyte, or Chuck D. from Public Enemy. For example, while Elliott's raps in "The Rain" and in "Izzy Izzy Ahh" are slow and sensual, those of "They Don't Wanna F\*\*\* Wit Me" are more rhythmically precise, featuring rapid triplet passages. In some songs, like "Friendly Skies" and "Best Friends," she does not rap at all but sings along with other R & B groups. Furthermore, in some instances other rappers, like Da Brat or Lil' Kim, perform the raps while Elliott

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<sup>89</sup>Gerri Hirshey, "Rhymes and Misdemeanors," p. 55.

sings the choruses, thus assuming what is usually considered to be a secondary role in rap music. In her study of Prince's album *Diamond and Pearls*, Anne Danielson has argued that "traditionally, the lead vocal has been a unifying element. . . . [A]fter hearing a few bars the singer or band is recognised."<sup>90</sup> Danielson concludes that on *Diamonds and Pearls*, "Prince the singer is often hard to recognise, or retreats from the vocal front-position."<sup>91</sup> Similarly, Elliott the rapper is "hard to recognise" because she slips back and forth between rapping styles, between rapping and singing, and because she often foregrounds the vocal performances of other artists in her own songs.

A comparison of Missy Elliott's performance in "The Rain" with Rah Digga's "Break Fool" demonstrates the playful ambiguity that characterizes much of Elliott's music. "Break Fool" is basically a self-defining rap in which Rah Digga boasts about her emceeing skills and identifies herself as a hardcore rapper. In other words, the song appears to have a central theme. In contrast, the lyrics of "The Rain" do not express complete ideas; instead one idea is presented only to be interrupted by another unrelated idea. Thus the narrative switches abruptly from boasting, to sexual innuendo, to references to other woman rappers (Yo-Yo and Lauryn Hill) smoking marijuana and partying with friends. It is as if we are

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<sup>90</sup>Anne Danielson, "His Name Was Prince: a Study of *Diamonds and Pearls*," p. 279.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

presented with the unedited and unstructured meanderings of a mind that is more concerned with immediate thoughts and sensations than with constructing a teleological narrative.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, some of the words seem to be used more for creating a sensual, playful soundscape than for transmitting a coherent meaning.<sup>93</sup>

When the rain hits my window/ I take and {inhale, cough} me some indo/  
Me and Timbaland, ooh, we sang a jangle/ We so tight, that you get our  
styles tangled/ Sway on dosie-do like you loco {singing} Can we get  
kinky tonight?/ Like CoCo, so-so/ You don't wanna play with my Yo-Yo/  
I smoke my hydro on the dee-low. . . .

I feel the wind/ Five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, begin/ I sit on Hill's like  
Lauryn/ Until the rain starts, comin down, pourin/ Chill, I got my  
umbrella/ My finger waves be dazed, they fall like Humpty Chumpy/ I  
break up with him before he dump me/ To have me yes you lucky.

It seems that Missy Elliott thumbs her nose at logo-centric rap aesthetics predominant in the overtly socially-conscious raps of, say, Ice-Cube, Public Enemy, and Rakim. For example, at certain moments in "The Rain," (and also the songs "Izzy Izzy Ahh" and "They Don't Wanna F\*\*\* Wit' Me") she demonstrates a calculating and cynical disregard for language, opting for nonsense words or juxtaposing clear, precise rapping with slurred, incoherent speech. Again, this differs greatly from Rah Digga whose lyrics are generally easily discernible.

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<sup>92</sup>Elliott's expressions are quite possibly meant to reflect drug influence. Many rappers (Rah Digga for example) rap about getting weed, or smoking marijuana, but generally do not rap as if under the influence.

<sup>93</sup>Many rappers use specific words for their sonic and rhythmic effects, but usually to create a more percussive or aggressive soundscape.

Whereas in "Break Fool," Rah Digga's delivery is breathless, driving the beat forward, Missy Elliott forms words slowly and deliberately, lingering on "sh," "ch," and "s" sounds. Echo effects at the end of certain lines of text emphasize the slow sensuality of her rapping. The rhythmic tracks in "The Rain" are considerably more static and repetitive, and due to the many rests which punctuate the rhythms, there is little sense of the rhythmic urgency or forward direction found in "Break Fool." (See Figure 6).

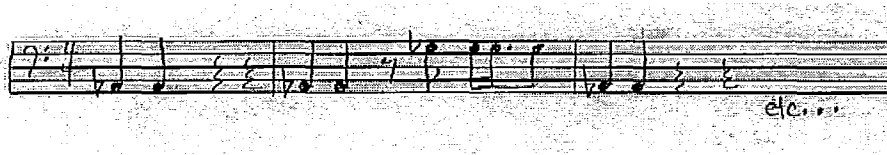


Figure 6. Bass track from "The Rain" by Missy Elliott.

Furthermore, Elliott's rapping style is as laid back rhythmically as the aforementioned underlying beat. Musical tracks, language, and voice, then, work together to create a sound that is circular, immediate, in-the-moment.

The video for "Break Fool" appears to feature "real life" settings, containing scenes in an underground club, or scenes where Rah Digga is in a car that is being driven through urban streets. In "The Rain," however, the stage set features elaborate lighting and costumes, creating an almost fantastic visual display. As well, some of the scenes present Missy against animated landscapes.



In "Break Fool," Rah Digga's appearance varies only slightly from scene to scene, and she emulates a fairly stable identity as a hardcore rapper who is connected to "live, underground" performance. In contrast, Missy's appearance and expressions vary drastically throughout "The Rain."<sup>94</sup> At certain moments in the video she wears a long, Barbie-doll wig and looks demurely away from the camera; in another she wears a black, inflated vinyl suit with bizarre make-up and a futuristic-looking helmet, thus moving from a look that perhaps suggests a certain "feminine innocence" to one that is alien and ambiguous. (See Figure 7).



Figure 7. Visuals from "The Rain."

Through her use of samples, musical tracks, language and visual imagery, Missy Elliott produces a playful identity that is powerful but also problematic. The visual images of Missy Elliott in "super-hero" and armoured gear (Figure 5) could be interpreted as invoking images of power, a readiness for combat, or as a playful twist on cliched images of women in music video. However, one wonders

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<sup>94</sup>See Missy Elliott's website at [www.elektra.com](http://www.elektra.com). Accessed March, 2001.

whether Elliott (together with video director Hype Williams) would present her body in such a fashion if she possessed a more "ideal" video image—thin, toned body, etc. It is interesting to speculate how the personal experiences of performers might influence the kinds of performative identities they decide to produce. For example, according to Gerri Hirshey, Missy Elliott has expressed insecurities about the size of her body, preferring to work in the studio than to do public performances. In an interview with Hirshey, Elliott comments, "I feel I'm not that skinny girl that makes guys run to the TV and be like, "Whoa, you see her? She's hot" I wanted something that was going to catch their attention and be fun. But totally different."<sup>95</sup> Is Elliott's performance style, then, indicative of feelings of alienation or displacement that she has experienced due to her physical appearance? Yet, her playful use of imagery, language and sound may also be theorized as a survival strategy or as evidence of her determination to succeed in an industry where she does not neatly "fit" into aesthetic or even gendered categories.

Like the celebrated trickster figure of African-American folklore, Missy Elliott articulates a liminal subjectivity.<sup>96</sup> She slips easily into a variety of

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<sup>95</sup>Gerri Hirshey, "Rhymes and Misdemeanours," p. 55.

<sup>96</sup>Incidentally, Missy sports a tattoo of one of the most famous tricksters in American culture, Bugs Bunny. Kathy Silberger, "Super Fly Girl Missy Elliott Bugs Out," *Rolling Stone*, 770 (Oct., 2, 1997), p. 22.

roles—producer, performer, songwriter, singer, rapper—and negotiates the boundaries of hip-hop, pop and R & B. Unlike Rah Digga or Lauryn Hill, Missy Elliott seems to withdraw from "reality" and expressions of "authenticity" and rejects logo-centric rap aesthetics. Reveling instead in a discourse of disguise, textual play and sensual soundscapes, Elliott offers new creative possibilities for hip-hop music.

### **Conclusion**

Certainly, a consideration of the artistry of performers like Rah Digga, Lauryn Hill and Missy Elliott undermines the myth that hip-hop is an exclusively male terrain, and demonstrates the possibilities for creative and meaningful discussions about hip-hop music. Studying the performance strategies of women rappers reveals much about the ways voice, body, technology and language are used to engage with and revise feminist discourses and traditions, and to negotiate and construct gendered, regional, communal, and artistic identities in rap music. My analyses demonstrate that women rappers participate in the process of identity production in a variety of ways, illuminating the diversity and complexity of the concept "woman rapper." Through their widely varied performance strategies, women rappers also engage with discourses of authenticity in rap music, either challenging or reinforcing existing ideals around authenticity in rap music and popular music in general.

My analyses only begin to address the ways that women rappers raise social awareness, engage in critical discourse and express their fears and desires in performance. Indeed more scholarship that deals specifically with music is needed to reveal ways in which sonic structures and physicality might function in shaping our perceptions of gender, ethnicity, class, etc. Exploring hip-hop's complex use of dance, sound, gesture, and language, then, could encourage us to reexamine the way we use music in our lives to "perform" identities, and to articulate ourselves, individually and collectively, as social beings.

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