

**Get In Where You Fit In: Hip-Hop's Muted Voice On Misogyny**  
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... *What you know about Hip-Hop?*  
*Why he go and say that?*  
*She said, I know Hip-Hop like I know your mother...*  
*Hip-Hop is inverse capitalism.*  
*Hip-Hop is reverse colonialism.*  
*Hip-Hop is the world the slaveholders made, sent into*  
*nigga-fide future shock...*  
*Hip-Hop is the black aesthetic by-product of the*  
*American dream machine, our culture of consumption,*  
*commodification, and subliminal seduction...*  
*Hip-Hop is the first musical movement in history where*  
*black people pimped themselves before the white boy*  
*did...*  
*There is no such thing as good Hip-Hop or bad Hip-Hop,*  
*progressive Hip-Hop or reactionary Hip-Hop, politically*  
*incorrect Hip-Hop or Hip-Hop with a message...*  
*It's either Hip-Hop or it ain't shit...*

--Greg Tate from "What is Hip-Hop,"  
1993

Music has always been a very strong component of the African in the American experience. Africans enslaved in America used music as a tool to maintain their traditional African culture; it was a means of communication, a creative expression, as well as a subversive technique against racist institutions, bias policies, and sub-human treatment. Numerous musical art forms, such as blues, jazz, and rock n' roll have explicit influence that can be traced back to Africa, Africans enslaved in colonial territories, and descendents of those slaves. No doubt Hip-Hop's inception is strongly rooted in the cultural and historical aesthetic of playing the dozens, toasting, signifying, and storytelling. A combination of these unique modes of discourse synergized in the Bronx, New York, during the late 60's early 70's. At that time, Hip-Hop primarily circulated on street corners, parks, schoolyards, and basements of a city inflected by drug peddlers, riddled with disproportionately high unemployment rates, brutalized by a corrupt police department, marginalized and victimized by various methods of social control.

At its inception, Hip-Hop was considered a political agent against various methods of racism, poverty, police brutality, and the social order; it brought about a controversial media frenzy displaying the detrimental effects of capitalism on ghetto slums of the Bronx and grimy streets of New York. This cultural agency created by the down-trodden, underclass youth of the post- civil rights era was an attempt to give the disparaged and forgotten victims of the American dream a voice and a space to be heard.

Indeed, rap music is apart of a historical legacy of cultural greatness and innovation. Kelly Ward advocates in her article "Back that Ass Up: A Discussion of

Black Women in Rap,” that the art form is apart of what is referred to as, “Great Black Music [GBM].” She further states that politics is a subset of GBM. Ward, continues, “certain attributes exist within this GBM, that helps to define rap as a genre and as a function of history, culture and, indeed, politics.” (Ward, 2) Some of these attributes include loudness and rawness.

The subversive aspect of rap is often one of the most infamous elements of the cultural form, one that has helped Hip-Hop skyrocket to the top of Billboard Charts and into the homes of millions of youth, crossing ethnic and geographical boundaries. It is precisely this perceived aspect of “fighting the power” that leads people to praise young Black Americans as innovators of a musical art form that creates public disturbance. This same art form has been transformed into a multimillion-dollar business; Hip-Hop is now commodified and packaged for audiences throughout the world.

Both the lifestyle and musical form of rap drastically displayed the aftermath of Reaganomics, the effects of capitalism, the influence of crack-cocaine on the inner cities of America, and its children. Rap music gave these disadvantaged youth a public space to voice their dissatisfaction with the status quo. Hip-Hop has come a long way from its original block-party heritage. Similar to its creators and listeners, Hip-Hop has lost its purpose and goal. Its historical legacy of uplifting and educating the people has been blinded by the iced-out diamond rings, flashy medallions and expensive fur coats.

Conversely, contemporary rap has reverted from its origins of iconoclast by adhering to the very social, political, and economic standards it once prompted to speak against. Hip-Hop more than two decades later has not lowered unemployment rates or the number of cruel acts by the police. Education has not improved, and the victimization of the blue-collar worker has not been addressed, nor the constant marginalization of people of color by the United States government. All the while, Hip-Hop promotes the selling and distributing of crack cocaine in Black neighborhoods, the prostitution of young women, and the misdirection of anger via Black on Black crime.

In Hip-Hop’s attempt to be rebellious, the culture embodied the oppressive system it once purported to critique and analyze. Other dogmas are left unquestioned and intact, specifically the American doctrine of misogyny; the omission of the female voice and the downsizing of its complexity to a one-dimensional hyper-sexed entity.

### **Hip-Hop Be Frontin’**

In other words, within rap is the idea of acceptance of life as a person of color; focusing on issues of violence, economic hardship, and other aspects of life as a second-class citizen. Yet through the lyrics and beats of the rap song, the refusal to submit to those conditions becomes abundantly clear, emphasizing the refusal of the African American to accept racism and degradation. It is within this attribute that the political and aesthetic aspect of rap is seen most clearly; the rejection of being satisfied with their current place in modern American society leads black rappers to criticize and challenge traditional social norms through the vibrant beat of their music. (2)

Although Hip-Hop has been glorified as the resurgence of the neo-black power movement against the American status quo; it has failed to identify and attack the views and policies of misogyny and sexism in our society. Moreover, Hip-Hop has successfully aligned itself with the patriarchal stances embedded in the social order of America, an order in which Hip-Hop purposely proclaimed as its opposition. Hip-Hop's refusal to fully acknowledge issues of rape, domestic violence, increased incarceration rates, incest, and the sexual abuse of young girls as urgently as those of police brutality, racial profiling, black male incarceration, and unemployment leaves listeners wondering is Hip-Hop the voice of the Black American youth, or the Black American male? The refusal of rap artists to address the issues that are immensely important to a large segment of the Black community leaves a sour taste in the mouths of many Hip-Hop lovers.

Rap music is littered with references of Black women as "bitches," "hoes," "chicken heads," "pigeons," "gold diggers," and "hoodrats." Music videos polluted with black females as sexual objects, usually half -naked and "dropping it like its hot" are televised daily. When the scantily clad black female is not showcased, a video vixen equally objectified often receives the blunt end of violent and abusive lyrics. The same discontent that Hip-Hop practitioners vocalized about the oppressive social and political policy of America is directed just as brashly towards women. It is often the case that this misdirected anger is the over flow of self-hate and lack of real power.

Incorporated in almost every rap album is disgruntlement for Black women and the political system alike. Women are most often mischaracterized as money hungry whores out for their next unsuspecting male prey. Take for example Kanye West's billboard hit "Gold Digger" featuring Jamie Foxx. There is an apparent lack of respect for women and little worth is found in females of African descent. The lyrics suggest misogyny has become synonymous with rap music; bitch, hoe, and trick are tantamount with black female, sistah, wife, and mother. An analysis must be conducted. "The very misogynist, antagonistic depictions of young Black women in a music form dominated by young Black males reflect the extent of the tension brewing between young Black men and women." (Kitwana, 87)

Bakari Kitwana, author of The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture, speaks of the cultural climate of the Hip-Hop generation and its attitudes towards women, specifically attitudes males have toward females and those attitudes women have about themselves. This posture is shared with Hip-Hoppers and non Hip-Hoppers alike and is a reflection of the dominate community at large. Although its bearings are deeply rooted and prevalent in Hip-Hop they are not restricted to rap as a musical form. Male domination in Hip-Hop and the profuse objectified female consumption of Hip-Hop speaks volumes of the ideals each gender holds for women and the value of womanhood. Kitwana continues, "...too many Hip-Hop generation men – blinded by their own egos and culturally entrenched sexist beliefs – fail to grasp the critical issues, and they see little value in becoming educated in feminist issues." (103) Perplexingly, female listeners complacently entertain assailing sexist rap lyrics, which are pandemic in the rap game.

## **Hip-Hop Polarized: Industry Whore or Hip-Hop Obscurity**

*I know the word feminist gets thrown around a lot in Hip-Hop these days, but let's not get it twisted. Just because a voice is feminine doesn't mean its feminist. To carry that label means that you are engaged in the battle to fight political, economic, and social sexism.* --Akissi Britton

Female rappers have an unconventionally large public arena to express their discontent with misogyny and sexism, yet fail to use this space productively as a liberating tool. Arguably, they perpetuate the dominate objectification of the hypersexual black woman, more so than their male counterparts. The onus of mischaracterization of women in all aspects of rap can be left at the doorsteps of many female practitioners. Hip-Hop as an expressional tool lacks the backbone to bring sexism in the black community to the forefront. This is impart due to the invisibility of the black female in all social spheres. Tricia Rose elaborates, "As Nancy Guervera notes, the exclusion, and/or trivialization of women's role in Hip-Hop are no mere oversight. The marginalization, deletion, and mischaracterization of women's role in black cultural production are routine practice." (Rose, 292) It is unmistakable that the Hip-Hop community specifically, and the Black community overall, lacks the desire to see the world through the lens of the ghetto queens. Even the most insightful analysis conducted on Hip-Hop has often ignored the voice of its female artists. Suppression of the Black female voice is no new epidemic. For centuries, the experiences of the Black female have been pushed either aside for the betterment of the community or for the ego of the Black man. "Black women's speech and expressive culture have been limited in the public sphere due in part to circumstances...such as maintaining community, promoting Black manhood at the expense of black womanhood, and constantly vindicating Black womanhood against misrepresentation." (Neal, 1)

The lyrical content of modern female emcees "on top" have very little substance, if any at all; and in comparison to their predecessors have fallen way off from the direction in which Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Salt N' Pepa and other female rap icons put forth. Current woman in Hip-Hop generally focus on hyper-sexed relationships and the mastery in women's rap and public displays of sexual freedom. Some would construct these female lyricists as feminist rappers, yet this is a premature analyzes. Many female artists avoid the feminist label; it is at this junction female rappers reflect the sentiments of their female listener. For many women in Hip-Hop "feminism is the label for members of a white women's social movement, which has no concrete link to black women or the black community." (Forman et al, 304) Yet, when feminist theory is broken down and explained, as Tricia Rose has done in her article, "Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile," many Hip-Hop veterans found feminism a relatable topic to their craft and lifestyle:

I would say a feminist believed that there was sexism in society, wanted to change and worked toward change. [She] either wrote, spoke or behaved in a way that was pro-woman, in that she supported situations [organizations] that were trying to better the lives of women.

A feminist feels that women are more disadvantaged than men in many situations and would want to stop that kind of inequality

While the scope of topics female artists could rap about is so large, with a plethora of venues to explore, it seems as if female artists are comfortable with not stepping outside the box, or challenging the standards of American social hierarchy. Female rap could “point to the ways that the systems of oppression are interdependent,” how women of the Black community are oppressed based on race, class, and sex and even sexual orientation. Each form of oppression is greatly dependent on the other, and each gravely affects the livelihood of females. Yet, most artists “do not challenge the structure of commercial music,” or the chokehold that commercial music has on the mischaracterization of the black female, nor the perpetuation of stereotypes thru popular culture in the community at large and sub-communities. Female emcees have a public arena to articulate “the interdependence of oppressions and the necessity of fighting on all fronts.” (Roberts, 3) However, female rap practitioners have yet to tap into their potential to voice the daily subjugation of its female listeners. They rarely openly object to the hatred of women, which is so pronounced in rap lyrics, and ultimately their followers do not dissent either.

It is no surprise that the massive population of Black females and males are uninformed about the meaning of feminism and the feminist platform; thus, they see no link between feminism, themselves, and their communities. Consequently, Black females are unconscious of Black feminist theory, which is constructed by lived experiences. Feminist theory posits that women are oppressed by race and class as well as gender. Many female Hip-Hop lovers express the same concerns in their desire to enjoy Hip-Hop and the culture without being bashed and abused or offended.

It is rare that female emcees are acknowledged as having a distinct voice or original experiences. When these rare occasions present themselves, especially in a public arena, females look to her to speak up and speak out. What is most often seen in the rap industry are female lyricists with one fourth of their clothing on, hyper-sexed and aggressive, mirroring imagery placed upon them by society, perpetuating stereotypical characters, and using derogatory language to describe themselves. A patriarchal based image of femininity and womanhood has been adopted and accepted by female emcees and listeners alike. “Some female rappers are mired as well in the sex-obsessed culture...and what they choose to call themselves is instructive: (HWA, Hoesz with Attitude) and (BWP, Bytches with Problems).” (Cole et al, 183)

Many female artists claim they have embraced the terms bitch and hoe out of defiance, stating, “they are encroaching on male territory and reclaiming a derogatory term as something affirming of their sexuality.” (Cole et al, 204) However, this argument similar to those made about the use of the word nigger, is simply ignorant and detrimental to the psyche of the Black community via the consistent altering of their self-image and self-esteem. When Bytches with Problems (BWP) was asked about their acceptance of the word (i.e. bitch) they were cited as saying, “They embraced the term because they were angry with the way women were portrayed and wanted to make fun of double standards.” (Cole et al, 205)

Ironically, their favorable acceptance of the word(s) is not seen as transgressing; at best, it gives others the affirmation to use the word(s) openly and without consequence; at worst it vindicates the burdens in which females of African Descent have long tried to expunge. “In the culture at large, including popular culture, white women do not have the ongoing historical constructions of themselves as worthless, subhuman, promiscuous, predatory, and hypersexual. This has been the burden of Black women since slavery, and Hip-Hop music participates in and is complicit with these stereotypical and damaging depictions of Black girls and women.” (Cole et al, 188) Absorption of these words, and consequently the mental degradation of young Black females is not a contradiction of the system because, it is in favor of the norm; therefore, further pushing Hip-Hop outside of the genre of Great Black Music.

Paulo Freire profoundly expands upon this notion of digesting negative images in his book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. “The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guideline are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly.” (Freire, 47) Sadly, female emcees are fearful of liberation, fearful of responsibility, and fearful of becoming invisible. The suppression of the female voice in Hip-Hop in part, steams from her threatening lyrical prowess that has always threatened the Black male monopoly on Hip-Hop.

In the ‘sex sells’ era of post-feminism, women with skillz and a desire to make it big are forced to choose between being a lyricist or a scantily-clad sexual beast. This is yet another example of sexism in the industry, in addition to the downsizing of females’ potential as artists. Prime examples of this dichotomy are, “Bahamadia, Eve, and most recently Rah Digga, [who] have begun to cultivate a new identity for the B-girl, one that eschews sexual promiscuity and reemphasizes pure lyrical skills.” (Conaway, 1) Mark Anthony Neal, in his article, “I’ll Be Nina Simone Defecating on Your Microphone: Hip-Hop and Gender,” further elaborates on the roles women are assigned in the Hip-Hop arena and the potential consequences of not incorporating these pre-designed personas.

The embrace of patriarchal privilege by some male Hip-Hop artists partly explains the marginalization of women among Hip-Hop artists, particularly when those women don’t conform to the normative roles assigned to women within Hip-Hop (the chicken-head groupie, over sexualized rhyme-spitter, baggy clothed desexualized mic-fiend are prime examples). Thus, many female rap artists are less concerned with challenging the circulation of sexism and misogyny...than they are with simply being recognized as peers alongside male rappers (Forman et al, 247)

Female rappers’ quest to be counted amongst the boyz has alienated their female listeners and further pushed the issue of subjugation to the background. Discourse surrounding misogyny in Hip-Hop all too often focuses on mainstream male celebrities and their lyrics, music videos, and behavior. Up until now, critics have frequently omitted female artists from the spotlight. More to the point, it is assumed by both genders, that the responsibility to create change on the views of women lay in the laps of male emcees.

“Much of the work currently being done by Black feminists and feminists on rap focuses on the sexism and misogyny of Black men rappers...the work of women rappers is being ignored.” (Neal, 2) Hip-Hop’s dysfunctional relationship with women, must be addressed by women themselves both practitioners and listeners of Hip-Hop, with an honest and blunt analysis; first by evaluating the sexist beliefs they personally encompass, and second by productively utilizing the public space rap music provides to inform the masses of females searching for guidance and liberation. Encapsulating a Black feminist foundation would ensure that young females of African descent poke holes in the Generation X genre, and find worth and reassurance in the beauty of being a woman of African ancestry.

### **When and Where I Enter**

*Only the BLACK WOMAN can say when and where I enter, in the quiet,  
undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing  
or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.  
---Anna Julia Cooper, (1892)*

Females of African descent from chattel slavery to emancipation waged the on-going battle against sexism in America, and it is a crusade fought on all fronts to this day. Nonetheless, Black feminism has yet to truly capture the hearts of young Black females, to show them the many options the world has to offer, essentially expanding their potential, and widening their perspective lens. Black feminism has also failed at helping young women rise above the patriarchal stereotypes put forth by the dominate society. Bridging this gap between Black feminism and the Hip-Hop generation must come from correcting the misperception of Black feminism. Furthermore, it is essential that Black feminists step outside of academia and join the trenches of Hip-Hop, where young black females are dwelling and receiving their limited, oppressive, trivial views of womanhood. Although Hip-Hop had good intentions, its overall outcome has proven to be as detrimental as slavery itself. The future of the Black community lay in the hands of the Hip-Hop nation, a nation whose females are referred to as “Trick Ass Bitches,” “Video Hoes,” and “Pussy Poppers;” and refer to themselves as being “The Baddest Bitch,” “Boss Bitch,” or having the “Ill Nana.” The disproportionately high numbers of negative images of Black females in rap gives birth to ignorant listeners with limited desires, whose main aspirations are to be the next sexy, video prop in a G-string and three inch heels.

Feminism is a viable venue for young females to explore their options, as well as a vehicle in which to express their concerns, fears, and goals. Feminism, is not a white woman’s social movement, nor is it solely a woman’s *thang*. Feminism is about the collective wellbeing, with a great understanding that without the woman, there is no man, and without the woman, there is no culture, society, or nation. Feminism is about valuing womanhood and femininity. Ultimately, feminism is the understanding that with the improvement of the lives of women comes the innate improvement of the entire family, and future generations. Kevin Powell understands the intricate necessity to fight misogyny on all fronts, by women as well as men. “Patriarchy, as manifested in Hip-Hop,

is where we can have our version of power within this very oppressive society. Who would want to even consider giving that up? ... Just as I feel it is whites who need to be more vociferous about racism in their communities, I feel it is men who need to speak long and loud about sexism among each other.” (Powell)

Comfortably stated, this is not the Hip-Hop created on the Brooklyn blocks of New York, by B-Boyz and B-Girlz. It is not the musical form created as an anti-establishment vehicle of rebellion. Was it all hype? From this block, it seems so. Hip-Hop contradictorily has promoted and enforced stereotypical age old ideas of misogyny engraved in the American cornerstone. A result of this contradiction is the invisibility of Black women from public discourse and the reduction of a complex female voice to a simple, one dimensional hypersexual being. The Hip-Hop generation is waiting on its female artists to be lyrically endowed to “spit game” from a new innovative perspective, one that vocalizes the intricate multifaceted sublime being, which is the Black Woman.

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### **Study Questions**

- 1 Is misogyny within the sub culture of Hip-Hop more or less rampant than misogyny in the broader society?
- 2 In an industry that stresses sex, should a female M.C. who happens to be attractive down play her sex appeal in order to be taken seriously as a lyricist? Could she possibly emphasize both without being indicted by feminist critics as a counterproductive female image?
- 3 Is the female M.C. merely a reflection of the female rap listener? Or is she a reflection of corporate pressure to utilize sex, the ultimate marketing strategy to sell product?
- 4 Can the female Hip-Hop artist alter the image of women in the broader society if a more political and feminist stance was taken?