

Hip Hop Demeans Women

We've had people who've said they are going to wait us out. . . . Well, my brothers and my sisters, they've got a long time to wait. Nearly 15 years ago, Dr. C. Delores Tucker and the National Congress of Black Women saw where this disrespect for women, disrespect for Black people, saw where this was going and decided then that enough was enough. . . . We've been getting beaten up for 15 years. We've been getting talked about, but we're still standing. We want you to throw your arms around your pastor, because we know he's been getting a tough time too. He's been getting threats just like we have. But I want you to know, we can stand up to whatever goes on out there. I want you to keep on coming every Saturday until they stop the filthy talk, stop putting down Black people, stop putting down Black women in particular.

—Attorney Dr. E. Faye Williams, president of the National Congress of Black Women, “Protestors Picket Home of BET President,” www.FinalCall.com, October 26, 2007

As two of the so called “Nelly Protesters,” we feel compelled to speak after the egregious presentation of the Hip Hop vs. America forum on BET. Though purportedly trying to redress the sexism, misogyny, and materialism of hip hop videos, the program actually reified all of these by not engaging with feminist women panelists, or panelists that did not invoke a kind of celebrity worship. Once again the voices of young black women were marginalized in preference for a largely older black male voice of authority. Even the women panelists were talked over and addressed less.

—Moya Bailey and Leana Cabral, letter to BET CEO Debra Lee, October 2, 2007

HIP HOP'S SEXISM IS VISIBLE, vulgar, aggressive, and popular. In 2003, Lil' Jon and the Eastside Boys scored a second-most-played song in the country with their song "Get Low." The hook for this bawdy sex song includes the following lines: "To the sweat drops down my balls (my balls) To all these bitches crawl (crawl) to all skeet skeet motherfucker (motherfucker)." "Skeet skeet" refers to ejaculation. 50 Cent collaborated with Snoop Dogg on his 2003 song "P.I.M.P." In it, Snoop Dogg's chorus explains how a "bitch" can't get anything from him and later raps, "yea bitch I got my now and later gators on, I'm bout to show you how my pimp hand is way strong." In one of 50 Cent's lines he brags, "see I was born to break a bitch." In 2005, the Ying Yang Twins' "Wait (The Whisper Song)," which dominated urban radio, included in its hook and chorus the following lines repeated several times: "Ay bitch! Wait til you see my dick. . . . I'm a beat that pussy up."

Given this, it should not be surprising that commercial hip hop has developed a large and growing anti-fan base. Clearly, the issue isn't *if* hip hop—as it has evolved in the commercial arena over the past dozen years or so—promotes sexist and demeaning images of black women as its bread-and-butter product. The fact of hip hop's primary trade in explicit and sustained sexist images cannot reasonably be quibbled over (although some misguided defender of all things hip hop is surely working on crafting a defense). Instead, we are left with other questions and concerns about this hotly debated issue, ones that can reveal what we are really talking about when we talk about sexism in hip hop. Unfortunately, it isn't usually about sexual justice or gender equality for black women.

Those who take on sexism in hip hop can generally be divided into two broad groups: (a) those who use hip hop's sexism (and other ghetto-inspired imagery) as a means to cement and consolidate the perception of black deviance and inferiority and advance socially conservative and anti-feminist agendas; and (b) those liberals and progressives who are deeply concerned about the depths of the sexist imagery upon which much of hip hop relies, but who generally sup-

port and appreciate the music, and are working on behalf of black people, music, and culture.

Members of group (a) rarely speak about the need to prevent discrimination against black women, nor do they offer support of feminist agendas. Their goal has more to do with protecting America from hip hop and deviant black people. The issue of respect dominates this groups' rhetoric, not women's rights or the discriminatory nature of patriarchal culture. The disrespect shown to black women by some black men is, for them, a sign of insubordinate black masculinity and thus needs correction and containment. Group (b) members challenge misogyny against black women and perceive hip hop as a particularly pernicious homegrown version. They worry about the influence of hip hop's commercial vision of black women as sexual objects and how a constant diet of these images and stories might affect black communities.

The political differences between these two groups is not absolute, however. Although the language of disrespect, the emphasis on degradation of women (because it thumbs its nose at patriarchal men's role as protector of women), has roots in white conservatism, it also has solid roots in black religious and patriarchal conservative values. To further complicate matters, the long history of America's refusal to consider black women worthy of patriarchal protection and respect encouraged the development of a strand of black feminism that emphasized what Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham has dubbed the "politics of respectability." This strategy was designed to counter the mainstream idea throughout all of the slavery era and well into the twentieth century that black women were sexually excessive and deviant as a class of women. Black female resistance to this perception encouraged a culture of black female sexual repression and propriety as a necessary component of racial uplift.¹

The intertwined strands of these disparate agendas and motivations play themselves out in today's wars over hip hop, and the overlap between these two groups' positions on sexually degrading images in the music has increased as criticism of and public protests against

commercial hip hop have significantly escalated and broadened. Sometimes this is the result of unlikely collaborations; at other times conservative critics attempt to co-opt progressive agendas. For example, conservative writer Myrna Blyth—whose own book, *Spin Sisters: How the Women of the Media Sell Unhappiness and Liberalism to the Women of America*, attacks what she considers the negative impact of liberal media women’s spin—spins *Essence* magazine’s progressive challenge to sexism in hip hop into a conservative one. Writing in the *National Review*, she applauds their “Take Back the Music Campaign,” saying: “When I told Michaela [a campaign representative] that *Essence* was to be commended for expressing a very appropriate—and conservative—point of view, she didn’t want to agree.” Attempts, such as this one, to reframe progressive concern have combined with the need for collaborative activism to tackle the brazen racial brand of anti-black female sexism and have thereby given conservative language greater visibility and traction.²

R.E.S.P.E.C.T.—But Not the Kind Aretha Franklin Had in Mind

Tonight I propose a three-year [faith-based] initiative to help organizations keep young people out of gangs, and show young men an ideal of manhood that respects women and rejects violence.

—President George W. Bush, State of the Union Address,
February 3, 2005

Why do we as a nation produce and embrace a pop culture that glorifies rap and hip hop music that teaches men to prey upon women and engage in senseless violence and that is now, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation’s recent survey on media and youth, the number one music choice of teenagers from all racial backgrounds and socio-economic status? . . . Mind you, I’m not advocating government censorship, but rather pleading for social and parental rejection to replace the

current proliferation and acceptance of such barbaric and destructive messages.

—Rebecca Hagelin, a vice-president of
The Heritage Foundation, “Throwing Out the Thugs,”
www.heritage.org, September 6, 2005

DISCOURAGE MEN from preying upon women. Show young men, especially those in gangs, an ideal of manhood that respects women. On their face, these seem to be reasonable goals, desirable even. Who wants the preying of men on women or the disrespect of women to be considered positive signs of male identity? But to properly address the issue of male disrespect we must ask: Where does this problem come from? Many, like Hagelin (quoted above), suggest that hip hop’s predatory treatment of women and related street gang culture are somehow a return to a long-ago barbaric stage of precivilization. In fact, her article (which is actually about the New Orleans social crisis that took place in the aftermath of Katrina) opens with the example of heroic civility and honor associated with men on the sinking *Titanic* in 1912. She claims that these men, who called for the rescue of “Women and Children First” (her opening line), were more interested in civility and honor—in “protecting” women and children—than in their own survival. She then argues that the acts of lawlessness exhibited after Katrina hit (as contrasted with the heroism of the white middle-class men on the *Titanic*) were due to the negative way of life sponsored by gangsta rap. If Katrina had “occurred in a culture that had daily practiced the Golden Rule,” she says, “rather than the Gangsta Rot, we would have seen more scenes of neighbors helping neighbors.”

Far too often, critics suggest that vulgar disrespect of women in hip hop is part of a larger decline in American society, as if things were better “before” when society was more “civilized.” This is the basic argument in the article by Hagelin. Let’s reframe this imaginary respectful, civilized masculinity a bit. In 1912, the year when the *Titanic* sunk and men apparently expressed their chivalry and respect

for women, women could not yet vote. (Women's permanent right to vote was granted in 1920; black men's right to vote was granted at the time of their Emancipation from slavery, but was almost entirely thwarted.) Women suffragists' efforts to secure women's right to vote was a long and difficult battle against which many men, and some women, fought. (And I am referring only to white women's voting rights, as all black people's voting rights were being denied throughout this era and for many decades beyond it.) Is this how we want to show our respect for women? Bush (also quoted above) similarly suggests that gang-invested kids are operating outside the bounds of acceptable male American culture that "respects" women. The problem with statements of this kind is that they imply that hip hop and young black men represent the decline of civility, honor, and good manhood.

Both of these comments and many others like them rely on the fiction that American mainstream models of masculinity are non-violent, "respect" women, and reflect a history of civility, honor, and justice. This is, of course, a widely held fiction that denies the fact that mainstream ideals of masculinity have consistently celebrated male violence as a necessary means for conflict resolution. Despite important improvements in gender equality, mainstream masculinity continues to treat women as fundamentally less valuable than men (albeit worthy of protection as an expression of male responsibility and power); keeps women less powerful in social, economic, and political arenas; and tries to control, label, and, at times, exploit women's sexuality. It assumes that men should rightly be the primary leaders of their families and of society at large. These kinds of male dominance in all the important arenas of society are what add up to that dreaded term: "patriarchy." Patriarchal mainstream masculinity is what we have inherited and continue to treat as ideal.

It is true that the bulk of commercial hip hop images and lyrics treat black women with disrespect and contempt—so these framing words are not entirely wrong. This is why they resonate across the political spectrum, but also why using them is so dangerous. Phrases like "respecting women" and "fighting degradation and filth" are key

elements of the conservative framing language that undermines progressive politics and diverse, empowering, feminist representations of black women. Think of the situation in reverse: Lyrics and images that show respect—that elevate black women instead of demeaning them—do not ensure gender equity, or empowerment. In fact, respectful, elevating images and phrases remain a central means by which black women’s complicit subordination to respectful patriarchal power has been secured: “be respectable,” “stand by your man,” “look pretty,” “be modest,” and so on. Respect for women is part of an exchange that rewards women who follow these rules. It is distinct from, say, the need to show respect for all people. So, respecting women, in this worldview, has nothing to do with advocating and respecting women’s full equality or encouraging challenges to a society organized around male power and privilege. Indeed, this call for “respect” is a Trojan horse, in that it undermines what real respect for women requires: an active commitment to women’s equality and gender justice.

The most visible representations of black women in hip hop reflect the hallmarks of mainstream masculinity: They regularly use women as props that boost male egos, treat women’s bodies as sexual objects, and divide women into groups that are worthy of protection and respect and those that are not. Thus, hip hop does not break from the fundamental logic of mainstream masculinity so much as convey it with excess, bravado, and extra insult. The depths of disrespect and sexual vulgarity in hip hop seem a category away from this chivalrous mainstream ideal that Bush wants our faith-based leaders to instill in young men. In fact, though, as long as patriarchal definitions of mainstream masculinity are embraced, we will continue to produce both the polite and insidious expressions of gender inequality and sexism that we currently hear *and* the excessive margins where these ideas are most harshly represented, as in hip hop.

American popular culture, along with most of the mainstream political and religious leadership, continues to reflect a deep investment in many of these long-standing male-dominant, sexist facets of ideal manhood; the intertwining of religious, moral, social, and political

means controlling women continues along traditional lines but today looks quite different. Visible religious leaders in black communities are getting on the “respect”-black-women bandwagon and, given the absence of any commentary on the distinctive ways that black women are discriminated against, confirm a polite form of control and domination of women and male authority along with it. So, while Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton properly challenge the constant peddling of corporate-sponsored “disrespect” of black women, this protest does not generally include a black feminist analysis. Nor does it properly attack other, equally significant places where black women and men are regularly indoctrinated in male-dominant (female-subordinate) ideals. As Michael Dyson has pointed out so eloquently:

So that’s when I mentioned to my friends, Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, instead of in the aftermath of Imus, protesting record companies, how about smashing the sermons of some of those preachers who stand up in church on Sunday mornings in Black America. 75–80 percent of those churches are attended by black women, the minister is not calling them the b-word or the h[-word] or a skeezer or a slut, but he is reinforcing a gospel that subordinates them to the interest of men and therefore he is much more seductive, he’s got a bigger pulpit, he’s got a bigger platform, and he’s got god on his side.³

Protests against the “disrespect” of black women rightly suggest that the major record labels are primarily responsible for peddling, promoting, and profiting from hip hop images and lyrics. This is largely true: Although these companies often set limits on what they will distribute, they don’t seem all that interested in doing so when it comes to the troubling, mean-spirited, and sexist representation of black women. During a Manhattan rally in May 2007, Al Sharpton pointed out this contradiction: “We’re not asking for censorship. But there is a standard in this business. They have a standard. They had a standard that said Ice-T can’t rap against police. They had a standard that said you can’t rap against gays, and you shouldn’t. They had a

standard against Michael Jackson saying something anti-Semitic. Where is the standard against ‘n—,’ ‘ho’ and ‘b—h’?”⁴

The attacks made on corporations often leave out the fact that artists, especially the very powerful ones, are generating and happily spewing these images and ideas, and millions of Americans are buying them. So, it’s compelling for protestors and leaders such as Dr. Faye Williams to say that they’ll “keep on coming every Saturday until they stop the filthy talk, stop putting down Black people, stop putting down Black women in particular.” But the erasure of these images won’t address the long-standing, day-to-day normalcy of sexism in black communities that fuels some rappers’ attitudes and lyrics. After all, gangsta rap isn’t just a corporate fantasy, nor did it create sexism in the black community. Creating systemic change means implementing a progressive racial, gender, and sexual justice project in schools, in churches, and in the mass media.

Despite the appearance of what seems like proper outrage about women being disrespected, far too much of the criticism coming from those who have gotten on the anti-hip hop bandwagon completely avoids any larger analysis of how gender and racial inequalities affect black women in particular. It’s as if one is saying: Once imagery and music are “respectful,” order will be restored. Few are making the connection between the entrenched forms of polite sexism and acceptable patriarchy being touted by most religious figures and most middle-class leaders.

But there are important exceptions. I am especially happy to see progressive ministers who are joining with various groups to protest what has happened to hip hop. The “Enough Is Enough” campaign, led by Revered Delman Coates, pastor of Mt. Ennon Baptist Church, has resorted to picketing the home of BET CEO Debra Lee and the New York corporate offices of Viacom, primarily because less-public challenges and concerns had been deflected. Coates has invited people from across the political spectrum to join his group, and he has carefully crafted his criticism to avoid an anti-hip hop, anti-black youth message. During the protests he organized outside the January 2008 BET Honors awards show, he explained his agenda: “We are

here to protest the corporate sponsorship of messages and images that degrade Black and Latina women, images and messages that glorify drugs and criminal activity and that negatively stereotype black and Latino men as pimps, gangsters and thugs. I want to be clear: our campaign is not an anti-hip hop campaign. I grew up on hip hop. This campaign is about those elements of commercial rap which I distinguish from hip hop. Those elements that we deem, as a community, offensive. . . . What we are fighting for is the fundamental equality of black people in the public square.”⁵

Public, coalition-based challenges such as this one are vital and growing. However, the urge to rely on existing and media-friendly conservative framing language has the potential to solve one problem but reinforce another. Conservative language about women needing to be respected as part of a larger patriarchal agenda needs to be re-framed so as to highlight women’s agency, fight sexism against black women, and promote the need for human respect. Progressive protest must develop clear, anti-sexist, gender-equality language about sexism in hip hop. Otherwise, we will continue to deny the ways that sexism is lived beyond media images, and we will trade a degrading form of male power over women for a “respectful” one.

Explicit Isn’t Always Exploitative

Far too often, charges of “filth” and “degradation” draw no distinctions between sexist forms of degrading sexual culture and sexually explicit culture. In fact, too much of the rhetoric against sexism in hip hop ends up being very compatible with an anti-sexual-expression agenda, one that associates any and all explicit sexuality with filth and immorality. The level of sexual insult found in much hip hop makes this slope toward an anti-sex agenda even more slippery. Yes, we should protest sexually degrading imagery, but when pro-sex and sexual-agency language is not advanced in its place, then the whole arena of sexuality (especially outside marriage and beyond its role in procreation) faces the threat of being painted with a shameful, dirty brush. This places women’s own sexual freedom and autonomy at stake.

Once the issue of sexism is married to “filth” and “degradation,” women’s ability to deploy empowering but sexually explicit language in their own way, as a form of resistance to sexism itself, is endangered. Sarah Jones, a black feminist performance artist and poet, wrote a powerful song—“Your Revolution”—that directly criticizes the sexist portrayal of black women in hip hop by using common phrases from some of hip hop’s more sexist lyrics in reverse. For example, she says: “your revolution will not be you smackin’ it up, flippin’ it, or rubbin’ it down, nor will it take you downtown or humping around . . . because that revolution will not happen between these thighs.” This is as a clear statement of women’s sexual empowerment.

In response to the 1999 airing of her song on KBOO, a radio station in Portland, Oregon, the FCC issued the station a \$7,000 fine. Only her song and one by Eminem received this fine, and only her song made the FCC’s final list of songs deemed offensive. Their notice said: “The rap song, ‘Your Revolution,’ contains unmistakable patently offensive sexual references. . . . [T]he sexual references appear to be designed to pander and shock.”⁶ Two years later, the decision was revoked and the fine rescinded. But what message did the earlier notice send? What effect did it have on black women’s ability to respond to a constant barrage of sexist lyrics designed to dominate, to respond in a way that claims the sexual arena rather than rejects it? This wasn’t just a matter of free speech; it was, given the incredible range of explicit and sexist sexuality expressed by men and women in American commercial culture, a direct attack on independent, feminist sexual empowerment cloaked under the language of “decency.”

Explicitness isn’t always exploitative, but it sure can be. Not all black women’s sexually explicit material is feminist, anti-patriarchal, or empowering. In fact, the women who have been elevated as mainstream commercial rappers over the past ten years generally follow the larger pattern of hypersexualized, objectified terms reserved for black women in the genre. Highly visible rappers like Lil’ Kim, Trina, and Foxy Brown use the black female-required sex card in hip hop; their stories of so-called sexual power generate from using their sexuality as the basis for their image. That in itself

is part of the very trap they claim to have escaped. Kim herself admitted that she uses her identity as Lil' Kim to get money, "a character I use to sell my records."⁷ Yet even when such performers seem to be expressing women's sexual power, they use sexually exploitative images and stories and sexually dominating personas similar to those expressed by many male rappers. They are hustlers instead of victims, but the male-empowering terms of hustling, victimizing, and sexual domination as legitimate power remain intact. And they also rely on and promote male sexual fantasy-based images of women as sexually voracious and talented in their ability to please men. In the 2003 duet Lil' Kim performed with 50 Cent, "Magic Stick" (a song that reached the number-two position on the Billboard Hot 100 list that year), she says she can "sex a nigga so good, he gotta tell his boys." Don't challenge her skills, she brags, "cause my head game have you head over heels, give a nigga the chills, have him pay my bills." Even less sexually self-exploitative women artists like Missy Elliot and Eve have had to figure out how to embody forms of femininity empowered by masculine standards in order to express their power. Given the highly marginal place that black women rappers have been given throughout the past decade, it is completely understandable why those who survived the commercial demands have relied on the product reserved especially for black women: sexual excess.

"Free the Girls": Hip Hop's Betrayal of Black Women

My daughter can't know that hip-hop and I have loved harder and fallen out further than I have with any man I've ever known. That my decision to end our love affair had come only after years of disappointment and punishing abuse. After I could no longer sacrifice my self-esteem or that of my two daughters on an altar of dope beats and tight rhymes.

—Lonnae O'Neal Parker, "Why I Gave Up On Hip Hop,"
www.washingtonpost.com, October 15, 2006

I guess I just try not to listen to the words; I just want to have fun come the weekend. I don't want to get into all of that [what the words are about], so I just try to block it out. I know it's not good though.

—Latina student in my college class on hip hop music and culture, October 2007

I don't even listen to contemporary hip hop anymore. My collection ends, like, about ten years ago.

—Black female student in my college class on hip hop music and culture, October 2007

In the office we were all grumbling about this. We kept saying it has to change but it is not going to change on its own. We have to do something about this.

—Michaela Angela Davis, editor-in-chief of *Honey Magazine* and founding committee member and spokesperson for *Essence* magazine's Take Back the Music Campaign, www.nysun.com/article/7604, January 12, 2005

We are tired of trying to defend hip hop when it becomes indefensible. We are tired of hearing music that assaults our very humanity.

—Moya Bailey and Leana Cabral, letter to BET CEO Debra Lee, October 2, 2007

ON THE MARGINS of the public outrage over the images and messages about black women in hip hop are fans, progressives, and feminists who support the music and its less destructive elements and artists, but who are hurt, angry, and worried over the constant portrayal of black women as objects of male sexual use in what has become the most visible of venues. The particular perspective from which these women make their critique often gets lost in the public discussion on sexism in hip hop.

Progressive writers, scholars, activists, journalists, fans, and students have been making noise about the increasing number of sexist

portrayals of black women in hip hop, drawing attention to the fact that these images have escalated with every year that rap's audience has grown, along with corporate interest and control. Others challenge the artists directly, asking why—since these artists claim to represent black youth—black women are so terribly portrayed. Even some black women who have been listening to hip hop since its early years feel betrayed by the hip hop of today.

Some say that they have to let it go, likening it to a love affair gone bad. Lonnae O'Neal Parker's quote at the outset of the section relies on this powerful metaphor. Joan Morgan, journalist and author of *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, also poignantly equates her love of hip hop, despite its increasingly misogynist attitude, to that of women who stay in abusive relationships:

So I tell them how good you do that thing you do. Laugh and say I'm just a slave to your rhythms. Then I wax poetic about your artistic brilliance and the voice (albeit predominantly male) you give an embattled, pained nation. And then I assure them that I call you out on all of your sexism on the regular. That works until someone, usually a sista-friend, calls me out and says that while all of that was valid that none of it explains why I stayed in an obviously abusive relationship. And I can't lie Boo, that would stress me. 'Cuz my answers would start sounding like those battered women I write about.⁸

Another pioneering black female journalist, Dream Hampton, has written a poignant article on the limited future for empowered women in hip hop. Hampton, too, identifies with the sense of pain that is too often generated by hip hop. Like O'Neal Parker, she comes to it through watching her daughter. In an essay titled "Free the Girls: Or Why I Really Don't Believe There's Much of a Future for Hip Hop, Let Alone Women in Hip Hop," Hampton relays this exchange she had with her daughter while passing by someone loudly playing an uncensored version of an x-rated song by Ludacris:

"They're hurting me, Mommy," my daughter yells dramatically. "I know baby, sometimes a lot of bass in the music make your chest hurt, like it's stretching."

"No," she insists. "They're hurting my feelings."

I want to tell her all the ways hip hop has made me feel powerful. How it gave my generation a voice, a context, how we shifted the pop culture paradigm. How sometimes it's a good thing to appear brave and fearless, even if it's just posturing. I want to suggest that maybe these rhymes about licking each other's asses are liberating. But I can't.⁹

The pressure young black women feel to defend black men against racist attacks, even at their own expense, is a new variation on the centuries-old standard for black women's race loyalty. This community-wide standard—which asks women to take the hit (metaphorically and literally), to be content with dynamics in which they sacrifice themselves and care for others' interests over their own—mimics the terms of an abusive relationship. As bell hooks has pointedly reminded us, although we should avoid demonizing black males, "[b]lack females must not be duped into supporting shit that hurts us under the guise of standing beside our men. If black men are betraying us through acts of male violence, we save ourselves and the race by resisting."¹⁰

More and more progressive women such as these are acknowledging that they have to break their silence and are rewriting the terms of the necessary criticism hip hop must face. In fact, Michaela Angela Davis has begun some of her workshops on *Essence* magazine's "Take Back the Music Campaign" by apologizing to black women for witnessing the extended assault on them in the music but doing nothing about it. In doing so she shows solidarity with black women but also acknowledges that women who have loved hip hop have an important leadership role. They can and will set new terms for these attacks on black women, offering direction, protection, and affirmation to young women and men who have come up in the hip hop we have today.

The public battle over hip hop, characterized by the foaming-at-the-mouth “outrage” and corresponding defensiveness that are so prevalent in today’s media, keeps these powerful, smart, well-informed black women on the margins of the conversation. In this climate, one comment too many about hip hop’s sexism by any of these progressive writers could be interpreted as an anti-hip hop voice. Yet, at the same time, if they don’t sufficiently challenge the sexism in hip hop and constantly refer to other areas in which it arises in American culture, then they become apologists, serving the agendas both of the artists with the worst records of insulting women and of the corporations generating profits. This dynamic has contributed to the marginalization of many progressive black feminist voices that would otherwise force us to attend to sexism, not simply complain about disrespect.

Despite the marginalization of black feminist women in the hip hop wars, many women are working locally to create change. Organizations like Black Girls Rock!, a mentoring outreach program for “at-risk teenage women of color,” also reflect the channeling of black feminist energies toward progressive change in hip hop. This organization, founded by Beverly Bond, began as a direct response to the one-sided images of black women in hip hop. It includes mentorship programs designed to empower young women of color and to “encourage dialogue about the images of women in hip hop music and culture, as well as promote analysis of the ways women of color are portrayed in mainstream media.”¹¹ Similarly, Tonya Maria Matthews (aka JaHipster), a spoken-word poet from the Baltimore area, has launched what she calls the “Groove Squad,” a group of two dozen or more women who go to clubs and enjoy the hip hop music until they hear a song that is openly offensive or derogatory. Then they walk off the floor en masse. This is a powerful statement because it joins women who love the music into groups, not just as a protest but as a form of musical affirmation. By collectively turning their backs on offensive hip hop, they reject music that “destroys the groove,” tell other club goers that something is really wrong, embarrass others if they stay, and deprive the party of a large group of

women.¹² These kinds of response to hip hop's sexism (other than anti-sexist education) have the greatest potential to eradicate sexism and the appetite for it. (See Chapter 12 for other examples of activist organizations.)

These types of strategies, though, involve actually listening to the music and its progressive critics, not simply getting on board with mainstream "outrage" that stands in for serious consideration and conversation. This listening has to involve a direct and sustained challenge to sexism, not just public defense of hip hop with an admission that it is also sexist. Too often in our public debates the whole thing turns into a "blame or explain" festival. One side attacks and blames, and the other side explains.

But neither of these positions actually works toward educating people about sexism, and neither gives young women activists the central place they deserve in this conversation. When they speak on these issues, black male scholars, leaders, and media figures should mention the young women involved in organizations like Black Girls Rock! and "Groove Squad." They should demand that more black women activists and writers who work to eradicate sexism and study gender and sexuality (not just black women who work in the media) be placed at the heart of the conversation.

Beyond this, visible male social critics who defend hip hop need to hold the artists with whom they are in apparent dialogue to a very serious standard. There are many veteran artists such as Jay-Z, Snoop Dogg, and Nelly who continue—despite their access to numerous kinds of knowledge and resources—to promote and defend the sexism in hip hop music and their own participation in it. These artists must be seriously and publicly challenged—not just by "haters" of hip hop but also by people who have expended a good deal of energy and public space defending it. To continue to make general statements against its sexism but then show public love and support for artists who are unrepentant for their blatant and constant sexism is to support their sexism and encourage others to do the same. We cannot have it both ways, given how far this gleeful assault on black women

has gone. Too much cozy association with unreformed artists who seem uninterested in undoing, rejecting, or challenging the excessive sexism they have contributed to hip hop is a tacit approval of it.

Protesting an individual artist alone does not address the fundamental issues and can even backfire, creating sympathy among some fans for the rapper attacked by “haters.” However, sometimes it is very useful to make a clear example of both a popular artist who regularly participates in sexist performances and the powerful community support that sexism receives. This is what happened in the case of Nelly and his infamous song and video for “Tip Drill.” The Spelman College women who demanded a conversation with Nelly before his visit to campus for a bone marrow drive, his refusal to meet with them, and the protests that ensued would likely have been much less powerful were it not for the specificity of his example. We are going to have to draw a clear line in the sand with the most powerful hip hop celebrities and all who pander and cater to them. The celebrity allure surrounding them has begun to overshadow the destructive force of their lyrics and videos; it’s almost as if there are two celebrities in one: the cuddly, friendly one for mainstream sales pitches, and the one that maintains street credibility by celebrating “the game” and bragging about “f-ing bitches.” Artists who are this sexist, this hateful, toward black women should become radioactive to listeners and, thus, inactive on radio. They should become pariahs, not messiahs. And their performances should bring them shame, not fame.

This scenario cannot be limited to artist responsibility, though. During a recent BET awards show, many grown, middle-class black men and women were dancing merrily in the aisles to “Crank Dat Soldier Boy” by the artist Soulja Boy, a song most noteworthy for a steel drum–inspired, catchy (but simple) beat that has generated a brief dance craze. What’s the driving story of the song? And what are the key lines in the chorus? “Soulja Boy off in this hoe . . . watch me crank it . . . watch me Super Man dat hoe.” Many middle-class white men and women revel in the same types of lyrics and images;

some have sponsored “pimp and ho” or “gangsta” parties at colleges across the country, energized by the celebration of sexually exploitative stories and images of black women in hip hop. It will take a good deal of sustained force to make corporations more responsible, to reveal the workings of sexism, to unpack what is wrong with this kind of portrayal of black women in hip hop, and to create the proper conditions to reject it. This problem will be solved not by making patriarchal appeals for “respecting” women but, rather, by educating everyone about the subtle workings of sexually explicit sexism and the reasons it has been so profitable—especially since this success has come at the expense of black women.

So the challenge is threefold:

1. To develop and promote a serious, progressive attack on sexism in hip hop without patriarchal, conservative religious, or anti-black youth politics as its guide.
2. To encourage, promote, and support those young black women and men who are embedded and invested in hip hop music but who also want to fundamentally challenge the sexism that defines the music.
3. To educate all youth, both boys and girls—especially those with the least access to ideas about gender equality—about sexism: how it works, why it works, and how to “keep it real” without it.

Hip Hop Is Not Responsible for Sexism

I think the rap community always tells the truth. And I think that it's important that we listen to their voices so we can have a roadmap, because artists—almost every single artist in hip hop, they paint a picture that is overlooked. The misogyny, the racism, the violence, the homophobia, these are things that we try to avoid instead of dealing with. All of that, I see it so often.

—Russell Simmons on *The O'Reilly Factor*, April 26, 2007

Some people push the limits, you know, but that's in everything. Some people push the limits on daytime television. Some people push the limits in the movies. . . . We [rappers] push limits. I don't really think that anyone is really out to demean women.

—Nelly, rapper, on *The Tavis Smiley Show*, May 26, 2005

The truth is, misogyny is not a hip hop created problem. Misogyny is a deep-seated problem that is embedded in the historical evolution of the United States as a nation.

—Dr. Ben Chavis, president/CEO of the Russell Simmons Hip Hop Summit Action Network, quoted in “Women’s Media Center: In Defense of Hip Hop,” www.ThugLifeArmy.com, May 22, 2007

THE WEBSITE FOR POWER 106 FM in Los Angeles, a highly influential hip hop/contemporary R&B station in a major media market, listed the top-five songs on their May 13, 2008, playlist as follows:

1. "Lollipop," by rapper Lil' Wayne
2. "Love in This Club," by Usher and rapper Young Jeezy
3. "What You Got," by Colby O'Donis and rapper Akon
4. "The Boss," by rappers Rick Ross and T-Pain
5. "Hypnotized," by rapper Gemini

Nearly all of the lyrics for "Lollipop" detail sex acts between rapper Lil' Wayne and a woman he hooks up with at a club. Lines include "She licked me like a lollipop" and "Shawty wanna thug, bottles in the club, Shawty wanna hump." "Love in This Club" is about how much R&B singer Usher and rapper Young Jeezy want to have sex in a club with a young woman they think is very sexually desirable. "What You Got" is about a beautiful but self-centered and materialistic girl who constantly talks about what she possesses. Rapper Gemini raps about his sexual attraction to a beautiful female in stiletto shoes at a club. He can't take his eyes off of her (he's "so hypnotized" by her moves), and tries to figure out how to "get with" her. "The Boss" is a standard gangsta rap style boast about Rick Ross being "da biggest boss dat you've seen thus far" who has power, fancy cars, and stylish outfits. Women are not the direct subjects of this song, but when they appear, they are mere sex objects and symbols of Ross's control and prestige. One girl loves him so much she tattooed his name on her body; as for another, "she leak da backseat just to freak in da magnum."

This lineup reflects a distortion of youth music's long-standing and perfectly acceptable focus on sex and courtship into sexist and objectifying tales of male conquest. The lyrics for these catchy top-five songs do not distinguish between male sexual desire and the sexual objectification of women. In these songs and many others, women are valuable only because they are sexually desirable and willing. These five songs are just an example of the context in which women

are frequently viewed. As noted by Gwendolyn Pough, a black feminist scholar who specializes in the topics of gender and hip hop, while hip hop has been a whipping boy, its images do affect women: “[M]essages in the music tell us what we should do to be desired and in some cases respected.”¹

When people criticize commercial hip hop’s sexism, various explanations for its prevalence are offered. Six of the top defenses are that (1) society is sexist, (2) artists should be free to express themselves, (3) rappers are unfairly singled out, (4) we should be tackling the problem at the root, (5) listening to harsh realities gives us a road map, and (6) sexual insults are deleted from radio and video airplay. Each of these defenses evades the issue of sexism; none directly tackles the issue of sexist content. (Chapter 8 explores responses that “justify” sexist content.)

Society Is Sexist

The biggest claim made in attempting to explain hip hop’s sexism is that society at its root is sexist, and that since it is a “deep-seated problem” in the United States it is well beyond hip hop’s responsibility. This claim, that sexism is a larger, systemic problem, is entirely accurate. And it is also true that hip hop’s sexism probably gets some unfair attention. But rap’s stars and the corporations that distribute their songs get away with and have profited handsomely from highly vulgar and explicit forms of sexism specifically targeting black women—a fact that only encourages other up-and-coming artists to follow in their misogynist footsteps to get famous and rich. For all the recent and past outcry against the ways that hip hop generally depicts black women, this state of affairs has, for the most part (with just a few major challenges here and there), been allowed to expand and diversify mostly unchecked.

What is sexism?

Sexism has been described as the practice of domination of women. It is a practice that is supported in many different ways that are critical to

our socialization into our sex roles, and therefore makes this domination acceptable in society—through language, visual association, media representation, and stereotyping, especially on the basis of the mothering/caring role of women. Sexism is important also because all women experience it in different ways, depending upon their social and economic situation—within the family and in jobs—and it limits the ways in which women seek to actualize their potential. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

The special reference to mothering in this definition reveals the extra scrutiny reserved for women's sexuality and the stigma attached to improper or socially unacceptable kinds of sexual expression and reproduction such as prostitution, lesbianism, stripping, and unwed motherhood. Sexist ideas often rely on labeling and controlling the value and expression of women's sexuality as a central vehicle for limiting women's potential.

Race is a critical aspect of this larger definition of sexism. Throughout the U.S. history of white men defining women's status and value, the systematic assumption that only white women would be able to reach the highest (but still subordinate-to-men) role of womanhood was a key element of women's oppression. Black women were not afforded the status of "womanhood" in mainstream society, and they were automatically less valued and more sexually stigmatized by society.

Sexism against black women took place in racially specific ways involving the labeling of their sexuality as automatically deviant and uncontrollable and the claim that they were unfit as mothers. Key sexual myths shape the three primary stereotypes about black women: "The Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire stereotypes are defined by their 'dysfunctional' sexuality and motherhood. The Mammy is generally an asexual, overweight, and middle-aged figure whose maternal qualities are expressed thorough her expert care for white women's children (at the expense of her own). The Jezebel is defined by her excessive, exotic, and unbridled sexuality. The Sapphire is the symbolic antithesis of the 'lady': loud, excessive, and irre-

pressible.”² These racist and sexist evaluations continue to be powerfully and consistently reinforced in the legal system, in the cultural and social arenas, in imagery and language, and in popular media representations. Although revamped, these core, controlling stereotypes of black women remain powerful in society, and Jezebel and Sapphire, in particular, are constantly reproduced in commercial hip hop as well.

I’ve always been incredibly frustrated by the claim that hip hop isn’t responsible for sexism because it’s a long-standing problem and thus is “larger” than hip hop. It’s worth showing the shell-game quality of this answer, since its inherent truth seems to silence legitimate challenges to commercial hip hop’s role in amplifying sexism. The defense that hip hop didn’t create sexism is valid, and thus often seems to silence and confuse fans who are critical of its sexism. How can we say that hip hop should be challenged for its sexism if sexism is everywhere and if its roots lie elsewhere? Is it unfair to target hip hop?

Sexism *is* everywhere; we know this. But should we simply accept it? Should we absorb as much of it as can be dished out just because it is around us? If we can’t fight it everywhere, should we not fight it at all, anywhere? Should we not be concerned about how the sexism promoted by so many mainstream black youth celebrities affects black women and girls who are already facing oversized hurdles in our society? At what point are we responsible for our contributions to the state of the world? How can we hold others responsible—individually and collectively—for perpetuating ideas and perceptions that produce injustice and then decide we are never responsible for the impact of our words and images?

Clearly hip hop didn’t create sexism, nor is it solely responsible for sexism. No one alive today created it, and there is nothing to which we can point that can be held responsible for all sexism. The power of gender inequality and sexual disrespect is its ability to be everywhere at once, to seem normal and inevitable. Thus, every fight against sexism (or against any systemic form of injustice, for that matter) is necessarily partial and incomplete; we cannot fight the entire

system all at once. Telling people that they should fight on another front is evading the issue and thus our own responsibility. If we look for one culprit and at the same time say that it is “everywhere,” no one is responsible for anything.

I don’t expect many of the young black men who are being challenged about their use of sexism as a career-boosting identity to be on the front lines fighting sexism. Many rappers and their defenders are products (if they are lucky graduates) of terrible urban schools that, among other problems, rarely if ever discuss any kind of structural inequality, let alone sexism, in regular educational contexts. Discussions of how we support sexism and homophobia through accepted definitions of masculinity and manhood (as when weak men are called “bitches” or “faggots,” for example) are rarely on the curriculum either, but they really should be in order to cultivate gender equality and consciousness.

Society itself is saturated with sexist ideas and images, and without much outcry. Major corporations in nearly every arena peddle a staggering array of products using sexist imagery and ideas. So, the current climate is not a fertile ground for informed, progressive, anti-sexist personal development. But since rappers are the ones who are writing sexist lyrics and who claim they are speaking their personal truth, they make themselves targets for direct attack. If they were to admit that their images and content are partly determined by the very same corporations, they would give us important ammunition against corporate investment in sexism, but they would also deflate their own and other rappers’ street credibility and reveal that many rappers are really doing the dirty work for these corporations and empowering themselves by insulting and denigrating black women.

Freedom of Expression

During their rare public statements and appearances, corporate executives such as Universal chairman Doug Morris, Warner chairman and chief executive Edgar Bronfman, Sony chairman Andrew Lack,

and Viacom president and CEO Phillipe P. Dauman have defended their role as distributors of intensely sexist content by subsuming sexism under artists' right to express themselves freely. But quite to the contrary, artist freedoms are actually constrained and channeled by media corporations; claims about freedom of speech are made to defend the bottom line, not artists' rights to speak freely. We must pull back the veil on corporate media's manipulation of black male and female artists and the impact this has on fans and the direction of black cultural expression. Mass media corporations profit extensively from promoting sexism and this is why they remain so quiet, letting rappers take the heat. In response to the outcry over BET's hyper-sexual brand of sexist videos that appeared on the now-defunct program "Uncut," BET spokesman Michael Lewellen said: "While we are sensitive to the concerns, let's not forget as well that we are running a business. . . . And somebody's watching 'Uncut.' Believe me, our ratings tell us that." Because sexism and excessively sexist images of black women rappers sell, corporate executives are free to use rappers to promote sexism, but rappers are not nearly as free to express outrage at racism, challenge government policies, speak out against the war, or identify whiteness as an unfair advantage; these kinds of free expression are regularly discouraged or censored by the music industry so as not to offend white listeners, government officials, or mainstream institutions. As Lisa Fager Bediako from Industry Ears reminded the congressional subcommittee during the "From Imus to Industry" hearing of September 25, 2007:

Freedom of speech has been spun by industry conglomerates to mean the b-word, n-word, and ho while censoring and eliminating hip hop music that discusses Hurricane Katrina, the Iraqi War, Jena 6, the dangers of gun violence and drugs, and songs that contain words like "George Bush" and "Free Mumia." In 2005, MTV and radio stations around the country self-regulated themselves to remove the words "white man" from the Kanye West hit single "All Fall Down." The lyrics demonstrated the far reach of capitalism by exclaiming: */Drug dealers buy Jordans, crackheads buy crack/And a white man get paid off*

of all of that. When asked why they decided to dub “white man” from the lyrics the response from MTV was “we didn’t want to offend anyone.”⁴

Rappers Are Unfairly Singled Out

Racism plays a role in the silencing of challenges to unequal racial power and it also contributes to the targeting of hip hop’s sexism, but commercial hip hop artists make themselves massive bull’s-eyes. Surely, many people attack hip hop to fulfill their own agendas; they want to restrict popular expression for reasons that are rarely progressive or democratic. Some also support policies that disproportionately hurt poor black people and help sustain disturbing stereotypes about black people. But this is not to sanction the ways that hip hop celebrates the disempowerment of black women as a means of pumping up black male egos and status. Sometimes one’s enemies just might be right and still be wrong.

Civil rights leaders and anti-hip hop conservatives are not the only critics of sexism in hip hop. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, many young black women who are a part of the hip hop generation and have supported hip hop and black men have also challenged the direction hip hop has taken. Many of these women have grown increasingly concerned about how black women are being represented and what this might mean for both the music and the young people who consume it and identify with it. Their concerns are valid and thoughtful. By responding to the few rabid commentators who suggest that hip hop is responsible for sexism, too many hip hop defenders evade the crucial issue that hip hop critics, especially black women in the hip hop generation, are raising.

It’s not as though black women who are frustrated with hip hop’s increasing dependence on degrading images have been looking for a needle in a haystack, trying just to “bring the black man down.” To the contrary, many have stayed quiet too long, letting artists, black media executives, and the music industry off the hook. This has been

the case primarily because attacking hip hop is read as attacking black men. And black women generally (despite the incredible emphasis in rap on gold diggers, bitches, hoes, chicken-heads, etc.) continue to be profoundly supportive of black men. As long as the equation between attacking sexism in hip hop and attacking black men remains in place, little critical commentary can occur within hip hop youth culture, and women and men will continue to be viewed as traitors for challenging it and for demanding less exploitative expression.

Instead of having a serious and sustained conversation about this issue, too many rappers and corporate music representatives interpret black women's concerns as an attack on all black men, a betrayal of hip hop. The "woe is me, I was attacked unfairly" argument (made by Nelly, for example, in the aftermath of the Spelman incident) turns the whole situation on its head. It turns an attempt to address sexist discrimination against black women into a moment about black male discrimination. It's as if the rappers are saying that *they* are the victims and should not be singled out, and thus one might guess that they should be given equal—even greater—rights to exploit black women! By this logic it is difficult to imagine that black male artists, magazine editors, and recording industry executives could themselves want to fight sexism and stand on behalf of the community as a whole when it comes to the treatment of black women.

The logic goes like this: Because sexism is all over society and media culture, and because somebody else—not you—created it, you can and should participate in it wholeheartedly, for great personal profit and prestige. Whatever happened to the adage "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem"? All of this skirts the issue of what highly visible rap celebrities *are* responsible for—namely, what they do, say, and support. Without even asking them to fight sexism against black women, it seems fair to ask them to admit to the deep support of sexism that too many hip hop lyrics and images represent.

Tackle Sexism at the Root

While young black women are reduced to jiggling rumps and stripping, rappers can say that if we really want to get at this problem, we've got to tackle the big issue at its base, not focus on them. As rapper Nelly has said, "I just feel if you wanna get the roots out of your grass, don't cut it at the top. Dig down; you know what I'm saying? Dig down deep and pull it from the bottom if you really wanna get this situation resolved."⁵ The fact is that although sexism is a systemic American problem, when it comes to the regular, sustained, celebrated misogynistic images of black women, hip hop stands center stage. It is the biggest black popular arena with the greatest number of highly sexually exploitative and dehumanizing images of black women. Sexism is everywhere, but not all forms of sexism exert an equal influence on black youth. Given its visible and influential role among young people and the often repeated claim that hip hop emerges from lived experiences in marginal and disregarded poor communities, its hostility toward black women is an amplifying mirror.

The idea that hip hop "represents" these communities gives an added stamp of approval to its sexism; it gives its sexism false black cultural legitimacy and authenticity. As T.I. said in October 2007 during BET's *Hip Hop vs. America* forum, "This music is supposed to be about what we open our door go outside of our houses and see on our streets."⁶ Surely hip hop didn't create sexism, but far too much of it glorifies and encourages its growth and maintenance. Unlike the sexism that we find in Hollywood or on television or in politics, the sexism in hip hop resonates with even greater influence on this black youth constituency since it serves as a part of its homegrown identity. It is to hip hop that so many young black men look for models of black manhood that connect with their generation and their experiences. It is to hip hop that many young black women look to find a place in which to belong in their peer group, to figure out how to get attention from men. During the *Hip Hop vs. America* event, pioneer female rapper MC Lyte described this dynamic very well:

For the most part, hip hop has always presented itself as real and that's where the problem comes in because kids are looking at this and thinking that every aspect of it is real. . . . it goes through videos, with the men having these cars and homes and three girls waiting in the bed for them when they come in the house. Like all of that is *not* going on to a certain extent, but yet you have young boys who think these are women they need to go after, you have young women that are wanting to dress like these girls that are in videos because now that's what's defined as sexy.

If commercial hip hop has a special role as a “voice of the down-trodden,” then shouldn't those who want to create justice for black communities be deeply disturbed by the constant peddling of ideas, images, and words that support such hostility toward the women of these communities? Isn't the point that hip hop has a special power—because of its credibility—to influence and reinforce a positive vision of community for black youth?

A Road Map to Where?

Russell Simmons's quote at the outset of this chapter says the truths about sexism told in hip hop give us a roadmap: “it's important that we listen to [rappers] voices so we can have a roadmap, because artists—almost every single artist in hip hop, they paint a picture that is overlooked. The misogyny, the racism, the violence the homophobia, these are things that we try to avoid instead of dealing with.” There is a grain of truth in this passage, but ultimately the logic fails us. There is no doubt that exposing the depths of sexism, homophobia, racism, and violence is overlooked and exposure of oppression is a fundamental part of eradicating them. What does he mean by this? What kind of listening are we to do? And where is the road map taking us? In what way are the rappers who rely so heavily on glorifying sexism and reflecting homophobic beliefs helping to dismantle sexism, violence, and homophobia? Simmons wants us to consider the words of rappers as mere observers who should be celebrated for

“bringing these problems to our attention.” But he refuses to admit that these artists are not just mirrors of what is. Because of their status and influence, the content of their lyrics, and the lack of explicit progressive ideas from most of the most visible ones to serve as a counterweight, they reinforce the very ideas they express.

Lyrics that depend on expression of injustice without critique or challenge are reflecting them, not exposing them. Such use supports discriminatory beliefs while masquerading as truth telling. Some artists do a constructive form of truth-telling when it comes to the issue of violence, but when it comes to publicly standing against sexism and homophobia, and supporting this stance in their lyrics, the ranks are mighty thin. To tell the truth about just how much sexism and homophobia help create and support distorted and destructive forms of manhood and sustain injustice is not the kind of truth telling most of the commercially celebrated rap community to which Simmons refers is really interested in.

Hip hop is in desperate need of getting past this mapping impulse. “Representing” what is without critique, analysis, and vision of what should be is not a useful map. How can we figure out where to go if we are trapped in the act of representing, especially representing ideas that contaminate collective community action, mutual respect, and love for each other? Some have argued that you have to use recognizable language, attitude, and sentiment to reach otherwise unreachable youth. As T.I. put it during BET’s *Hip Hop vs. America* forum, “If I have to throw some ‘B’s’ and ‘H’s’ in there to educate people, then so be it.” But what kind of educating are we doing if we have to “throw some ‘bitches’ and ‘hoes’ in there”? When and how do we educate people—women included—about sexism? This kind of disjuncture, whereby women are asked to pay the price for destructive visions of community resistance, represents a tragic form of miseducation (to borrow a powerful term from Carter G. Woodson), which describes how oppression is maintained by keeping people miseducated about their condition. Former Fugee Lauryn Hill exposed the many facets of this miseducation on her brilliant album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.

This idea that we can successfully or meaningfully “educate” or “represent” poor black people while standing on the necks of black women is a fundamentally abusive form of community vision and education. It can create incredible levels of dissonance that lead men and women to think that one can promote the subordination and sexual exploitation of black women and still be politically radical. On Jay-Z’s 2007 CD *American Gangster*, his song “Say Hello” boasts that he doesn’t think Al Sharpton represents him—that when the public schools are fixed and when incidents like the Jena Six (a 2006 case in which people protested excessive criminal charges leveled at black male teenagers) stop happening, he’ll stop using the word “bitch.” When all structural and personal acts of racism end, *then* he’ll stop promoting ideas that profoundly demean black women. This argument is blatantly illogical: Black women are not responsible for injustices in education and incidents like the Jena Six. If he’s looking to punish those perpetrators, he ought to start talking and rapping about white racism and classism. Defending his “right” to call black women “bitches” because racial and class oppression exists represents a rage imploding on a community that pretends to be politically resistant. This is just the kind of sexism against black women that hip hop artists are responsible for, and it’s the kind that we have to challenge and reject.

How do we transcend this madness if we must constantly represent it, reflect it, and reproduce it just to “get people’s attention”? Russell Simmons’s road map is a road map to nowhere. As Abiodun Oye-wole, a founding member of the Last Poets (a political group of African-American poets and musicians many credit as a principal predecessor to hip hop), has said: “A lot of today’s rappers have talent. But a lot of them are driving the car in the wrong direction.”⁷

Bleeping Bitches and Hoes

Russell Simmons has made what is widely considered a courageous move in calling for record companies to voluntarily bleep out the words “bitch,” “ho,” and “nigga” from the songs distributed to

mainstream radio and television, thus keeping these words out of mainstream consumption. According to Simmons, this recommendation preserves his twin concerns: artists' freedom of expression (they can write whatever lyrics they want, à la freedom of speech) and the protection of mainstream consumers (which might "bridge the gap between the activists who are so angry and the hip-hop community that is disconnected").⁸

This is surely a good and long-overdue idea. I, too, worry that the frenzy to "protect" the public would shut down dissent—political, social, and cultural. I have never supported government censorship and think that especially now—when fears about one crisis or another are being whipped into a frenzy and used to encourage broad infringements on all rights (the Patriot Act is a major example)—such potential for antidemocratic governmental intervention in creative expression is higher than at other times in U.S. history. But we must distinguish—and Simmons has done so—between governmental censorship and responsibility to a broader public. Furthermore, with freedom of speech comes a sense of responsibility to this same broader public. The idea of eliminating "bitch," "ho," and "nigga" from mainstream distribution appears to straddle this delicate balance: On the one hand, they are deleted from the airways, but, on the other, artists can still use and record them.

But to what degree does this bleeping-bitches-and-hoes strategy undermine the overall logic and sentiment behind these words? If a song's lyrics send the message that black women are sexual objects, what real and lasting effect can we expect from replacing "bitch" with something else? In the music video for Lil' Wayne's song "Lollipop," words like "pussy" and "ass" are electronically twisted to make them unintelligible, but exactly how does this alter the sexist terms on which the song is based? Another strategy has been the replacement of offending words with less offensive ones. Nate Dogg's song "I Need a Bitch" was altered for radio play. The "clean" version substitutes "chick" in place of "bitch." Here's the gist of the lyrics: Each of several lines begins with "I need me a bitch/chick," and then describes what would make this woman desirable. The opening phrase

is followed by phrases about her willingness to flirt, how she'll lift up her skirt in public places, how she's as important as his "crew," and finally how he intends to "pass on to my boys soon as I get through." How does changing the word "bitch" to "chick" really change the spirit and overall meaning behind these lyrics? It doesn't. Bleeping out or substituting words won't likely work against the driving force behind their use, nor will it fight the sexist intent of these stories. Furthermore, kids will spend endless time finding the "explicit" versions since these will be perceived as "authentic."⁹ Snoop Dogg revealed this very dynamic in an *Esquire* magazine column, where he described his experience performing at a bar mitzvah: "They were singing my shit, they was cussin', they were singing the dirty version. I'm talking about twelve- and thirteen-year-old little white kids singin' this real gangsta shit. Man. I was shocked. I just gave them the mic and let them motherfuckers go."¹⁰

From a progressive social justice perspective, too, this strategy of deleting offensive words doesn't grapple with the bigger questions on the table—namely, fighting sexism in black communities, creating healthy and mutually respectful relationships between men and women, and enabling equal rights and social respect for everyone. If hip hop exposes widespread problems in society such as sexism, then we must actually address and support the development of anti-sexist, anti-homophobic ideas, not just make room for their increased expression.

The kinds of defenses that have been made regarding hip hop's explicit and constant sexism would be laughable and outrageous in this day and age if they were made in the context of racism. If, for example, racist images and lyrics were constantly repeated and celebrated in public and then defended with claims such as "this person or this film wasn't responsible for racism," "it's everywhere in society," "racism is a 'deep-seated' problem in America," "high-rotation songs that insult blacks on mainstream networks and radio stations are helping us deal with racism," nationwide marching and outrage would ensue. Yes, racism is a deep-seated problem, we know that; and this is a prime example of its pernicious effects. The issue would

be: How are we going to fight it if we are making it seem normal and not exposing it with a purpose to end it? Unless the description of the condition “sexism is everywhere in society” is followed up with “and we are going to work on its eradication” or “we need to educate people about how to reduce it and here are some ideas for doing so,” then what appears to be an honest confrontation becomes an evasion of the problem.

Couldn't we use some percentage of profits generated by hip hop to develop progressive anti-sexist programs in public schools or in after-school programs? What about working with Clear Channel, Radio One, BET, MTV, and all the hip hop magazines to *regularly* feature stories and shows that educate people on sexism, how it works, how racism relates to it, and why it is a problem? Maybe for every ten hours of music video, each station should air at least one hour of well-produced, prime-time media literacy programming. How do images work? What stories do they tell? Why are some images so popular, and how do images emerge from and feed back into everyday life and society?

Encouraging progressive young people to focus on and fight hip hop's sexism—rather than attempting to tackle the entire field of sexist culture—is logical for two central reasons: (1) Doing so would powerfully resist the amplification of sexism among the younger members of black communities for which hip hop is largely responsible. And (2) such activity would educate young people about what sexism is and how it works—thus perhaps reducing its power—rather than just reflecting and reinforcing the sexism that already exists. And this, in turn, would reduce the currency of the sexist ideas on which hip hop relies.

In short, the crisis in hip hop is also an opportunity. We can turn this moment into something powerful for all young people, especially those who most need to be empowered (not by degrading others), educated (not miseducated), enabled (not enraged), and encouraged to reflect the best (not the worst) of what surrounds them. Progressive voices in hip hop and beyond have an opportunity to make this a project of investment in social change and community

building. Bleeping “bitch” and “ho” should not be simply a response to the expression of “black women’s pain” or a strategic capitulation to mainstream pressure. It should be one small part of a larger and sustained commitment to creativity and justice and fairness for all. DJ Kool Herc, in reflecting on his years as a pioneering founder of hip hop street parties, said that kids who wanted to rhyme on the microphones at his parties had to find a way to be creative without cursing or promoting violence. These forms of negativity didn’t support the community, and he wouldn’t allow them at his parties. He felt that demanding that kids take a higher path when communicating with their peers was vital to creating the spaces that would support and nourish the community of which he was a part. There’s no reason that we can’t ask the same of the many creative minds that make up hip hop today.