



Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 113, No. 449 (Summer, 2000), pp. 255-269

Published by: [American Folklore Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/542102>

Accessed: 25/10/2012 14:09

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## Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces *Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance*

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*Critics and scholars have often associated rap music with urban male culture. However, females have been involved in the history of this music since its early years. This article explores Black women's contribution to and role in shaping rap music. In examining female rappers, this study engages an interdisciplinary model that employs cultural studies, feminist theory, and mass mediation theory of popular culture, and it employs an ethnographic concept, the "interpretive community," in its analysis.*

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OBSERVERS OF RAP MUSIC BEGAN TO NOTICE the proliferation of successful female rap acts during the 1990s. Though rap has often been presented as a male-dominated form by the media, women have been a part of the rap scene since its early commercial years. In general, "females were always into rap, had their little crews and were known for rocking parties, schoolyards, whatever it was; and females rocked just as hard as males [but] the male was just first to be put on wax [record]" (Pearlman 1988:26). Rap music journalist Havelock Nelson notes, "While women have always been involved artistically with rap throughout the '80s, artists like [MC] Lyte, [Queen] Latifah, Roxanne Shanté, and [Monie] Love have had to struggle to reach a level of success close to that of male rappers" (1993:77). Challenging male rappers' predominance, female rap artists have not only proven that they have lyrical skills; in their struggle to survive and thrive within this tradition, they have created spaces from which to deliver powerful messages from Black female and Black feminist perspectives.

Data utilized in this study derive from interviews (1993–96) with "cultural readers" (Bobo 1995)—African American female performers, audience members, and music critics—referred to in this essay as an "interpretive community." In *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, film critic-scholar Jacqueline Bobo explores the concept of "interpretive community" as a movement comprising Black female cultural producers, critics and scholars, and cultural consumers (1995:22). She writes,

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As a group, the women make up what I have termed an interpretive community, which is strategically placed in relation to cultural works that either are created by black women or feature them in significant ways. Working together the women utilize representations of black women that they deem valuable in productive and politically useful ways. [1995:22]

Because much of the criticism of Black female independent film makers' works stems from male or white perspectives, Bobo finds it necessary to distinguish the interpretive community—Black women involved in making or consuming these films—in order to accurately determine the actual intent and effect of these films. Bobo's thesis of the interpretive community is appropriate to this examination of women in rap because rap music is a form transmitted by recorded and video performances. More importantly, the classifications of women rappers are based on the constructions of an interpretive community, as observed via recorded performance and personal interviews. When rapper MC Lyte was asked, for example, if she felt that there is a distinct female rap category, she separated women rappers into three groups, referred to as "crews," reigning in three periods—the early 1980s, the mid-1980s through the early 1990s, and the late 1990s: "Sha-Rock, Sequence, to me, that's the first crew. Then you got a second crew which is Salt-N-Pepa, Roxanne Shanté, The Real Roxanne, me, Latifah, Monie [Love], and Yo-Yo. . . . Then after that you got Da Brat, Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim, Heather B" (1996).<sup>1</sup>

Queried about specific categories, both rap music performers and female audience members frequently used the buzz words *fly* and *attitude* (as in "girlfriend got attitude"), leading me to more clearly discern the parameters of categories. My initial category of "Black Diva" in early interviews for the grand posture of these women was later revised to "Queen Mother" after one female observer convincingly said *diva* denotes a posture of arrogance and pretentiousness as opposed to that of a regal and self-assured woman, qualities that she identified with the Queen Latifah types (see Penrice 1995).

In the female rap tradition, four distinct categories of women rappers emerge in rap music performance: "Queen Mother," "Fly Girl," "Sista with Attitude," and "Lesbian." Black female rappers can, however, shift between these categories or belong to more than one simultaneously. More importantly, each category mirrors certain images, voices, and lifestyles of African American women in contemporary urban society. Let us now examine the four categories or images of Black women introduced to rap by specific female rappers or emcees (MCs) and considered by the interpretive community in general as representative of and specific to African American female identity in contemporary urban culture.

### Queen Mother

The "Queen Mother" category comprises female rappers who view themselves as African-centered icons, an image often suggested by their dress. In their lyrics, they refer to themselves as "Asiatic Black women," "Nubian queens," "intelligent Black women," or "sistas droppin' science to the people," suggestive of their self-constructed identity and intellectual prowess. The "queen mother" is, however, associated with African traditional court culture. For instance, in the 16th-century Benin Kingdom of

southeastern Nigeria, she was the mother of a reigning king. Because of her maternal connection to the king, she garnered certain rights and privileges, including control over districts and a voice in the national affairs of the state. During his reign, a commemorative head made of brass was sculpted in her honor adorned with a beaded choker, headdress, and crown, along with a facial expression capturing her reposed manner.<sup>2</sup>

It is certainly possible that female rap artists may know of the historical significance of African queens; women in this category adorn their bodies with royal or Kente cloth strips, African headdresses, goddess braid styles, and ankh-stylized jewelry. Their rhymes embrace Black female empowerment and spirituality, making clear their self-identification as African, woman, warrior, priestess, and queen. Queen mothers demand respect not only for their people but for Black women, who are “to be accorded respect by . . . men,” observes Angela Y. Davis (1998:122). Among those women distinguished by the interpretive community as Queen Mother types are Queen Kenya, Queen Latifah, Sister Souljah, Nefertiti, Queen Mother Rage, Isis, and Yo-Yo.

Queen Kenya, a member of hip-hop’s Zulu Nation, was the first female MC to use *Queen* as a stage name.<sup>3</sup> But the woman of rap who became the first solo female MC to commercially record under the name “Queen” is Dana “Queen Latifah” Owens. Queen Latifah’s initial singles “Princess of the Posse” and “Wrath of My Madness” (1988), followed by her debut album *All Hail the Queen* (1989), established her regal identity. They include such lyrics as, “You try to be down, you can’t take my crown from me,” and, “I’m on the scene, I’m the Queen of Royal Badness.” Latifah, whose Arabic name means “feminine, delicate, and kind,” explains the origin of her stage name:

My cousin, who’s Muslim, gave me that name [Latifah] when I was eight. Well [in rap], I didn’t want to be MC Latifah. It didn’t sound right. I didn’t want to come out like old models. So *queen* just popped into my head one day, and I was like, “Me, Queen Latifah.” It felt good saying it, and I felt like a queen. And you know, I am a queen. And every Black woman is a queen. [1993]

Latifah’s maternal demeanor, posture, and full figure contribute to the perception of her as a queen mother. Although Queen Latifah acknowledges that others perceived her as motherly even at age 21, she tries to distance herself from the label: “I wish I wasn’t seen as a mother, though. I don’t really care for that. Just because I take a mature stance on certain things, it gives me a motherly feel . . . maybe because I am full-figured. I am mature, but I’m twenty-one” (quoted in Green 1991:33). The ambiguity of Latifah’s motherly image follows what feminist scholars Joan Radner and Susan Lanser identify as a form of coding in women’s folk culture called *distraction*: a device used to “drown out or draw attention away from the subversive power of a feminist message” (1993:15). Queen Latifah finds that her stature and grounded perspective cause fans to view her as a maternal figure or as a person to revere or, at times, fear. However, Latifah attempts to mute her motherly image offstage, as evidenced in the above interview, indicating to fans that she remains, nonetheless, a

modest, down-to-earth, and ordinary person in spite of her onstage “Queen of Royal Badness” persona.

Despite the ambiguity, Queen Latifah represents a particular type of mother figure to her audience. In *Black Feminist Thought*, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins recognizes that, in the African American community, some women are viewed as “othermothers.” Collins explains,

Black women’s involvement in fostering African-American community development forms the basis for community-based power. This is the type of “strong Black woman” they see around them in traditional African-American communities. Community othermothers work on behalf of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability which embrace conceptions of transformative and mutuality . . . community othermothers become identified as power figures through furthering the community’s well-being. [1990:132]

Queen Latifah’s othermother posture is no doubt reflected most vividly through her lyrics, which, at times, address political-economic issues facing Black women and the Black community as a whole. In Latifah’s song “The Evil that Men Do” (1989) from *All Hail the Queen*, “she isolates several of the difficulties commonly experienced by young black women [on welfare]” (Forman 1994:44) and shows how the powers that be are apathetic to Black women who are trying to beat the odds:

Here is a message from my sisters and brothers, here are some things I wanna cover.  
 A woman strives for a better life  
 but who the hell cares because she’s living on welfare.  
 The government can’t come up with a decent housing plan  
 so she’s in no man’s land  
 it’s a sucker who tells you you’re equal . . .  
 Someone’s livin’ the good life tax-free  
 ‘cause some poor girl can’t be livin’ crack free  
 and that’s just part of the message  
 I thought I should send you about the evil that men do. [quoted in Forman 1994:44]

Another example of Queen Latifah’s role as queen mother of rap resonates in her platinum single “Ladies First” (1989), ranked in the annals of rap music history as the first political commentary rap song by a female artist. The lyrics of “Ladies First” respond primarily to males who believe that females cannot create rhymes:

Some think that we [women] can’t flow  
 Stereotypes they got to go,  
 I gonna mess around and flip the scene into reverse  
 With a little touch of ladies first.

The video version is far more political, containing live footage of South Africa’s apartheid riots overlaid with photographic stills of Black heroines—Winnie Mandela, Rosa Parks, Angela Davis, Harriet Tubman, and Madame C. J. Walker.<sup>4</sup> Pan-Africanism is tacitly evoked with these images—South Africa’s political struggle against segregation and a salute to Winnie Mandela, the mother of this struggle, who is

presented among U.S. Black women—reminders of Black liberation. Additionally, the bond between Black women in the United States and the United Kingdom is alluded to through the appearance of Monie Love of England, whom Queen Latifah refers to as “my European partner.” These images locate Latifah as a queen mother and equal partner among those Black queens who struggled for the freedom of Black people.

Perceived by the interpretive community as a queen mother of rap, Queen Latifah opened the doors for other Afrocentric female MCs, such as Sister Souljah. Souljah, a former associate of the Black nationalist rap group Public Enemy, launched her first LP in 1992. The LP, *360 Degrees of Power*, features the rap single “The Final Solution: Slavery’s Back in Effect,” in which “Souljah imagines a police state where blacks fight the reinstatement of slavery” (Leland 1992:48). With her candid and somewhat quasi-preachy style of delivery, she earned the title “raptivist” from her followers. Souljah’s fame grew after her speech at the Reverend Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition Leadership Summit in 1992, where she chided African Americans who murder one another for no apparent reason by figuratively suggesting, “Why not take a week and kill white people[?]” (Leland 1992:48). As a consequence, Souljah was ridiculed as a propagator of hate by presidential candidate Bill Clinton. In the wake of the controversy, her record sales plummeted dramatically while her “raptivist” messages skyrocketed with television appearances on talk shows like *The Phil Donahue Show* and speeches on the university lecture circuit. While Sister Souljah advocates racial, social, and economic parity in her rap messages, she also looks within the community to relationship issues between Black men and women in her lyrics and her semiautobiographical book *No Disrespect* (1994:xiv).

Although Nefertiti, Isis, and Queen Mother Rage are categorized as queen mothers via their names, lyrics, or attire, female rapper Yo-Yo is also regarded by the interpretive community as a queen mother.<sup>5</sup> Her lyrics illustrate her political ideology of Black feminism and female respectability, as advanced by her organization, the Intelligent Black Women Coalition (I.B.W.C.), which she discusses on her debut LP *Make Way for the Motherlode* (1991). But Yo-Yo’s image—long auburn braids and very short tight-fitting *pum-pum* shorts (worn by Jamaican dance hall women performers)—and her gyrating hip dancing also position her in the next category, “Fly Girl.”

### *Fly Girl*

*Fly* describes someone in chic clothing and fashionable hairstyles, jewelry, and cosmetics, a style that grew out of the blaxploitation films of the late 1960s through the mid-1970s. These films include *Shaft* (1971), *Superfly* (1972), *The Mack* (1973), and *Foxy Brown* (1974), a film that inspired one MC to adopt the movie’s title as her moniker. The fly persona in these films influenced a wave of Black contemporary youth who, in turn, resurrected flyness and its continuum in hip-hop culture. During the early 1980s, women rappers, including Sha Rock of Funky Four Plus One, the trio Sequence, and soloist Lady B, dressed in what was then considered by their audiences as fly.

They wore short skirts, sequined fabric, high-heeled shoes, and prominent makeup. By 1985, the hip-hop community further embraced the fly image via the commercial

recording of “A Fly Girl,” by the male rap group Boogie Boys, and an answer rap during the same year, “A Fly Guy,” by female rapper Pebble-Poo. The Boogie Boys describe a fly girl as a woman “who wants you to see her name, her game and her ability”; to do so, “she sports a lot of gold, wears tight jeans, leather mini skirts, a made-up face, has voluptuous curves, but speaks her mind” (1987).

By the mid-1980s, many female MCs began contesting the “fly girl” image because they wanted their audiences to focus more on their rapping skills than on their dress styles. Despite this changing trend, the female rap trio Salt-N-Pepa—Salt, Pepa, and Spinderella—nevertheless canonized the ultimate fly girl posture of rap by donning short, tight-fitting outfits, leather clothing, ripped jeans or punk clothing, glittering gold jewelry (i.e., earrings and necklaces), long sculpted nails, prominent makeup, and hairstyles ranging from braids and wraps to waves, in ever-changing hair coloring.

Rap’s fly girl image is, however, far more than a whim, for it highlights aspects of Black women’s bodies considered undesirable by American mainstream standards of beauty (Roberts 1998). Through performance, Salt-N-Pepa are “flippin da script” (deconstructing dominant ideology) by wearing clothes that accent their full breasts and rounded buttocks and thighs, considered beauty markers of Black women by Black culture (Roberts 1998). Moreover, they portray via performance the fly girl as a party-goer, an independent woman, but, additionally, an erotic subject rather than an objectified one.

Female rappers’ reclamation of the *fly* resonates with the late Audre Lorde’s theory of the erotic as power (Davis 1998:172). In Lorde’s influential essay, “Uses of the Erotic,” she reveals the transformative power of the erotic in Black women’s culture: “Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their meaning within our lives” (1984:57). Cultural critic and scholar bell hooks further articulates that Black women’s erotic consciousness is textualized around issues of body esteem: “Erotic pleasure requires of us engagement with the realm of the senses . . . the capacity to be in touch with sensual reality; to accept and love our bodies; [to work] toward self-recovery issues around body esteem; [and] to be empowered by a healing eroticism” (1993:116, 121–122, 124).

Black fly girls express a growing awareness of their erotic selves by sculpting their own personas and, as folklorist Elaine Lawless (1998) puts it, “writing their own bodies.” For example, Salt-N-Pepa describe themselves as “women [who have] worked hard to keep our bodies in shape; we’re proud to show them off”: moreover, “we’re not ashamed of our sexuality; for we’re Salt-N-Pepa—sexier and more in control” (quoted in Rogers 1994:31).

Another aspect of the fly girl persona is independence. Salt notes that “the image we project reflects the real independent woman of the ’90s” (quoted in Chyll 1994:20). But for many women of rap, achieving a sense of independence from an entrepreneurial perspective has not been easy. For instance, it is common knowledge in the rap community that during Salt-N-Pepa’s early years, their lyrics and hit songs (“I’ll Take Your Man,” “Push It,” “Tramp,” and “Shake Your Thang”) were mainly written by their manager/producer Hurby “Luvbug” Azor, until the *Black’s Magic* (1990) LP, on which Salt (Cheryl James) ventured into writing and producing the

single "Expression," which went platinum. *Black's Magic* also contains Salt-N-Pepa's "Let's Talk about Sex" (written by Azor), which Salt later rewrote for a public service announcement song and video "Let's Talk about AIDS" in 1992.

On Salt-N-Pepa's fourth LP, *Very Necessary* (1993), the group wrote and produced most of the selections. The songs "Shoop" and "Whatta Man" from that album stand out as celebratory songs that deserve note.<sup>6</sup> In the video versions of both songs, the three women scrutinize desirable men, ranging from business types to "ruffnecks" (a fly guy associated with urban street culture). The "Shoop" video turns the tables on the male rappers; in it "ladies see a bunch of bare-chested, tight-bunned brothers acting like sex *objects*, servicing it up to us in our videos," said Salt (quoted in Rogers 1994:31, emphasis added). In "Whatta Man," on the other hand, Salt-N-Pepa praise their significant others in the areas of friendship, romance, and parenting as the female rhythm and blues group En Vogue joins them in singing the chorus, "Whatta man, whatta man, whatta man, whatta mighty good man."

Other women whom the interpretive community categorizes as *fly* are Left-Eye and Yo-Yo. Left Eye is the rapper of the hip-hop/rhythm and blues hybrid group TLC (T-Boz, Left Eye, and Chili). When TLC first appeared on the music scene with the debut LP *Ooooooohhh . . . On the TLC Tip* (1992), their baggy style of dress ran counter to the revealing apparel of hip-hop's typical fly girl and invited their full-figured audience to do the same. TLC's T-Boz said, "We like to wear a lot of baggy stuff because for one, it's comfortable, and two, many of our fans don't have the so-called perfect figure; we don't want them to feel like they can't wear what we're wearing" (quoted in Horner 1993:16). Throughout the 1990s, TLC remained steadfast with the message to women of all sizes regarding mental and physical wellness and body esteem, as underscored in both music and video performances of the single "Unpretty" (1999).

Like Salt-N-Pepa, TLC has made delivering "safe sex" messages a priority. While both groups do so through lyrics, TLC underscores the messages visually through wearing certain accoutrements. Left Eye of the trio wears a condom in place of an eyeglass lens, while other members of the group attach colored condom packages to their clothes. TLC's warning about unprotected sex, emphasized by the condoms they wear, is conveyed powerfully in their award-winning "Waterfalls" from their second LP, *CrazySexyCool* (1994). The message is amplified in the video: A man decides to follow his partner's wish not to use a condom. Following this encounter, he notices a lesion on his face, which suggests that he has contracted the virus that causes AIDS. TLC's espousal of being fly and sexually independent undoubtedly comes hand in hand with sexual responsibility via their lyrics and image.

Like TLC, Yo-Yo also delivers a serious message, which earns her a place among the queen mothers. But her gyrating hips, stylish auburn braids, short, tight-fitting outfits, and pronounced facial makeup also categorize her as fly. Yo-Yo writes about independent, empowered Black women, championing African American sisterhood in "The I.B.W.C. National Anthem" and "Sisterland" from *Make Way for the Motherlode* (1991). She takes on sexuality in "You Can't Play with My Yo-Yo" and "Put a Lid on It," which, as their titles suggest, explore being sexually in control and being sexually irresponsible.



In 1996, Yo-Yo moved beyond the shadow of her mentor Ice Cube with her fourth LP, *Total Control*, for which she served as executive producer. Following this success, Yo-Yo began a column entitled “Yo, Yo-Yo” in the hip-hop magazine *Vibe*, in which she addresses questions about male–female relationships and interpersonal growth in the name of I.B.W.C.

Since the late 1990s, female MC, songwriter, and producer Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott has joined the fly girl ranks. Mesmerized by her debut LP *Supa Dupa Fly* (1997) and her single “The Rain,” female fans also admire her finger-wave hairstyle, known to some as “Missy [finger] waves,” and her ability to carry off the latest hip-hop fashions on her full-figured frame. Elliott has occasionally appeared in television advertisements for the youth fashion store Gap. She no doubt succeeds as a full-figured fly woman, breaking new ground in an area too often seen as off-limits to all but the most slender and “correctly” proportioned. In staking her claim to rap music’s fly girl category, Elliott further reclaims sexuality and eros as healing power for all Black women, regardless of size. However, with her single “She’s a Bitch” from her sophomore LP *Da Real World* (1999), Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott appends another image to her fly girl posture. Her usage of *bitch* makes a self-statement about being a mover and shaker, on- and offstage, in rap’s male-dominated arena, and thus she shares much in common with the next category, “Sista with Attitude.”

### *Sista with Attitude*

According to Black English scholar Geneva Smitherman, “’tude, a diminutive form of attitude, can be defined as an aggressive, arrogant, defiant, I-know-I’m-BAD pose or air about oneself; or an oppositional or negative outlook or disposition” (1994:228). Prototypes of this category are grouped according to “’tude”: Roxanne Shanté, Bytches with Problems (BWP), and Da Brat are known for their frankness; MC Lyte exudes a hardcore/no-nonsense approach; Boss is recognized for her gangsta bitch posture; and Mia X advances a militaristic stance, all in the name of her predominantly male posse No Limit Soldiers.<sup>7</sup>

In general, “Sista with Attitude” comprises female MCs who value attitude as a means of empowerment and present themselves accordingly. Many of these “sistas” (sisters) have reclaimed the word *bitch*, viewing it as positive rather than negative and using the term to entertain or provide cathartic release. Other sistas in the interpretive community are troubled by that view. These women, such as Lauryn Hill, have “refused to be labeled a ‘bitch’ because such appellations merely mar the images of young African American females” (1994; see also Harmony, quoted in Donahue 1991). The reclaimers counter this argument with the opinion that “it’s not what you’re called but what you answer to” (MC Lyte 1993). Some women of rap take a middle road, concurring that *bitch* can be problematic depending on who uses the term, how it is employed, and to whom one refers. As Queen Latifah explains,

I don’t really mind the term. . . . I play around with it. I use it with my home girls like, “Bitch are you crazy?” Bitch is a fierce girl. [Or.] “That bitch is so crazy, girl.” You know, that’s not harmful. [But,]

“This stupid bitch just came down here talking . . . ,” now that’s meant in a harmful way. So it’s the meaning behind the word that to me decides whether I should turn it off or listen to it. [1993]

Female MCs revise the standard definition of *bitch*, from an “aggressive woman who challenges male authority” (Penrice 1995) to an aggressive or assertive female who subverts patriarchal rule. Lyndah of the duo BWP explained, “We use ‘Bytches’ [to mean] a strong, positive, aggressive woman who goes after what she wants. We take that on today . . . and use it in a positive sense” (quoted in Donahue 1991).<sup>8</sup>

By the mid- to late 1990s, the “Sista with Attitude” category was augmented with rappers Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown, who conflate fly and hardcore attitudes in erotic lyrics and video performances, bordering both “Fly Girl” and “Sista with Attitude” categories. In doing so, they are designated by some as the “mack divas,” “Thelma and Louise of rap” (Gonzales 1997:62), or “bad girls of hip-hop” (Morgan 1997). Foxy Brown, whose name is derived from Pam Grier’s 1974 screen character, emulates the powerful, desirable, yet dangerous woman: “I think it’s every girl’s dream to be fly” (Gonzales 1997:63). Although Lil’ Kim’s debut album *Hard Core* (1996) and Foxy Brown’s *Ill Na Na* (1997) have garnered platinum status, some members of the interpretive community criticize them for being “highly materialistic, violent, lewd” (Morgan 1997:77), an impression exacerbated by their affiliation with male gangsta rap-style crews: Lil’ Kim is associated with Junior M.A.F.I.A., and Foxy Brown is connected with The Firm.

The bad girl image also parallels the “badman” character (such as John Hardy, Dolemite, and Stackolee) peculiar to the African American oral narrative. African American oral narratives commonly exploit the “badman” or “bad niggah” types in the toast, a long poetic narrative form that predates rap.<sup>9</sup> In these narratives, Black badmen boast about their sexual exploits with women, wild drinking binges, and narrow brushes with the law, symbolic of “white power” (Roberts 1989:196). The feminist rendering of “the badman” includes those sistas who brag about partying and smoking “blunts” (marijuana) with their men; seducing, repressing, and sexually emasculating male characters;<sup>10</sup> or “dissin’ ” (verbally downplaying) their would-be female or male competitors—all through figurative speech.<sup>11</sup>

Some female observers I queried felt that sistas with attitude merely exist on the periphery of rap and are seen as just “shootin’ off at the mouth.” These artists are not highly respected for their creative skills; rather, they are viewed as misusing sex and feminism and devaluing Black men. In an *Essence* magazine article, hip-hop feminist Joan Morgan states that the new “bad girls of hip-hop” may not have career longevity because “feminism is not simply about being able to do what the boys do—get high, talk endlessly about their wee-wees and what have you. At the end of the day, it’s the power women attain by making choices that increase their range of possibilities” (1997:132). Morgan further argues that Black women’s power—on- and offstage—is sustained by “those sisters who selectively ration their erotic power” (1997:133).

Despite the controversies, sistas with attitude have acquired respect from their peers for their mastery of figurative language and rhyme. They simply refuse to be second best.

### *Lesbian*

While representatives of the “Queen Mother,” “Fly Girl,” and “Sista with Attitude” categories came into prominence during the mid- to late 1980s, the “Lesbian” category emerged from the closet during the late 1990s. Not only does the female audience term this category “Lesbian,” but the artist who has given recognition to this division is among the first to rap about and address the lesbian lifestyle from a Black woman’s perspective. Though other Black rap artists rumored to be gay/lesbian have chosen to remain closeted in a scene described as “notoriously homophobic” (Dyson, quoted in Jamison 1998:AR34), Queen Pen’s “Girlfriend,” from her debut LP *My Melody* (1997), represents a “breakthrough for queer culture” (Walters 1998:60).<sup>12</sup> “Girlfriend” signifies on or indirectly plays on Black lesbian love interest with a parody of the refrain section of Me’Shell Ndegeocello’s “If That’s Your Boyfriend (He Wasn’t Last Night).” Ndegeocello, who is openly lesbian, appears on “Girlfriend,” performing vocals and bass guitar. In “Girlfriend,” Queen Pen positions herself as the suitor in a lesbian relationship. While this song may be a “breakthrough for queer culture,” other issues still complicate Black female artists’ willingness to openly address gay and lesbian culture in their performances.

Black lesbian culture and identity have been concerned with issues of race and role-play, note Lisa M. Walker (1993) and Ekua Omosupe (1991). Drawing on the critical works of Audre Lorde (1982, 1984), Omosupe notes that lesbian identity, similar to feminism, represents white lesbian culture or white women to the exclusion of women of color. In this regard, Black lesbians are at times forced to live and struggle against white male patriarchal culture on the one side and white lesbian culture, racism, and general homophobia on the other (Omosupe 1991:105). Corroborating issues of race privilege raised by the Black lesbian community, Queen Pen contends that certain licenses are afforded to white openly lesbian performers like Ellen DeGeneres and k. d. lang, who do not have to pay as high a price for their candidness as lesbians of color: “But you know, Ellen [DeGeneres] can talk about any ol’ thing and it’s all right. With everybody, it’s all right. With ‘Girlfriend,’ I’m getting all kinds of questions” (quoted in Duvernay 1998:88).<sup>13</sup> She continues, “This song is buggin’ everyone out right now. [If] you got Ellen, you got k. d., why shouldn’t urban lesbians go to a girl club and hear their own thing?” (quoted in Jamison 1998:AR34).

Queen Pen further stresses in performance her play on image, which suggests “role-play,” another crucial issue to Black lesbian culture. Walker asserts, “Role-play among black lesbians involves a resistance to the homophobic stereotype . . . lesbian as ‘bull-dagger,’ a pejorative term within (and outside) the black community used to signal the lesbian as a woman who wants to be a man” (1993:886). On her album cover, Queen Pen exudes a “femme” image through wearing lipstick, a chic hairstyle, and stylish dress. However, in performance, as observed in Blackstreet’s “No Diggity” (1996), one notices how Queen Pen “drowns out” her femme album cover image by appropriating “B-Boy” gestures (cool pose and bopped gait) commonly associated with male hip-hop culture. Regardless of issues concerning race privilege and role-play, Queen Pen concludes that in “two or three years from now, people will say I was the

first female to bring the lesbian life to light [in an open way] on wax. It's reality. What's the problem?" (quoted in Jamison 1998:AR34).

### Conclusion

Women are achieving major strides in rap music by continuing to chisel away at stereotypes about females as artists in a male-dominated tradition and by (re)defining women's culture and identity from a Black feminist perspective. Although rap continues to be predominantly male, female MCs move beyond the shadows of male rappers in diverse ways. Some have become exclusively known for their lyrical "skillz," while others have used a unique blend of musical styles or a combination of singer-rapper acts, as is apparent with Grammy awardees Left Eye of TLC and Lauryn Hill.

Women of rap still face, nevertheless, overt sexism regarding their creative capabilities. Female rapper Princessa recalls, "Only when I led them [male producers] to believe that a man had written or produced my stuff did they show interest" (quoted in Cooper 1989:80). Mass-mediation scholar Lisa Lewis notes that, in the popular music arena, "the ideological division between composition and performance serves to devalue women's role in music making and cast doubt on female creativity in general" (1990:57). However, female MCs of the 1990s have defied the sexist repression by writing their own songs, producing records, and even starting their own record companies, as with Salt-N-Pepa's *Very Necessary* (1993), Lauryn Hill's 1999 Grammy Award-winning LP *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998), and Queen Latifah's record company, Flavor Unit. Additionally, Queen Latifah's Grammy Award-winning single "U.N.I.T.Y." (1993) challenges those males who use *bitch/ho* appellations in their lyrics.

While the majority of scholarly studies on female rappers locate Black women's voices in rap, they present only a partial rendering of female representation.<sup>14</sup> These works tend to focus on females' attitudes and responses to sexual objectification, ignoring the many roles and issues of women and female rappers. Rap music scholar Tricia Rose says female MCs should be evaluated not only with regard to male rappers and misogynist lyrics "but also in response to a variety of related issues, including dominant notions of femininity, feminism, and black female sexuality. At the very least, black women rappers are in dialogue with one another, black men, black women, and dominant American culture as they struggle to define themselves" (1994:147-148). In rap music performance, a "black female-self emerges as a variation [on] several unique themes" (Etter-Lewis 1991:43).

More importantly, female rappers, most of whom are Black, convey their views on a variety of issues concerning identity, sociohistory, and esoteric beliefs shared by young African American women. Female rappers have attained a sense of distinction through revising and reclaiming Black women's history and perceived destiny. They use their performances as platforms to refute, deconstruct, and reconstruct alternative visions of their identity. With this platform, rap music becomes a vehicle by which Black female rappers seek empowerment, make choices, and create spaces for themselves and other sistas.

## Notes

Earlier drafts of this article were presented on the panel "Women Performers as Traditionalists and Innovators," at Resounding Women in World Music: A Symposium, sponsored by the World Music Institute and Hunter College/City University of New York Graduate Program in Ethnomusicology, New York, 10–12 November 1995; and as a paper, "'Ain't Nuthin' but a She-Thing': Women, Race and Representation in Rap," at the 42nd Annual Meetings of the Society for Ethnomusicology with the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (USA Chapter), Pittsburgh, 22–26 October 1997. I wish to thank Lou-Ann Crouther, Phyllis May-Machunda, the late Gerald L. Davis, and the anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of American Folklore* for their suggestions on earlier drafts, as well as Corinne Lightweaver, whose invaluable comments contributed to the article's refinement.

<sup>1</sup>The following is a list of other artists who make up a roster of female MCs: Antoinette (Next Plateau), Bahamadia (EMI), Conscious Daughters (Priority), Eve (Ruff Ryders), Finesse and Synquis (MCA), Gangsta Boo (Relativity), Heather B (MCA), Lady of Rage (Death Row), Ladybug (Pendulum), MC Smooth (Crush Music), MC Trouble (Motown), Mercedes (No Limit), Nikki D (Def Jam), Nonchalant (MCA), Oaktown's 3-5-7 (Capital), Rah Digga (Flipmode), Solé (DreamWorks), and 350 (Rap-a-Lot).

<sup>2</sup>Accordingly, sculpting the queen mother's head was established in Benin by King Oba Esigies during the 16th century. Sieber and Walker (1987:93) note that, during Esigies's reign, he commissioned a sculpted head made of bronze of his mother, Idia, and placed it in his palace to commemorate her role in the Benin-Idah war, thereby including, for the first time, queen mothers in the cult of royal ancestors. In addition to Sieber and Walker's work, refer to Ben-Amos 1995 and Ben-Amos and Rubin 1983 for photographs and a brief discussion of queen mother heads of Benin.

<sup>3</sup>The Zulu Nation is an organization that was founded in the Bronx during the mid-1970s by DJ Afrika Bambaataa. He contends that the Zulu Nation is a youth organization that incorporates a philosophy of nonviolence and in which inner-city youths compete artistically as break-dancers, rhyming emcees (rappers), disc jockeys, and graffiti artists rather than physically with knives and guns. Bambaataa's Zulu Nation laid the foundation for hip-hop, a youth arts movement comprising the above arts, and an "attitude" rendered in the form of a distinct dress, language, and gesture—all of which is articulated via performance by rap music artists (see Keyes 1996).

<sup>4</sup>For a more detailed analysis of this video, see Roberts 1994.

<sup>5</sup>Isis once performed with the Black nationalist group X-Clan. After leaving this group, she also adopted a new stage name, Lin Que.

<sup>6</sup>"Whatta Man" is adapted from Linda Lyndell's 1968 hit "What a Man."

<sup>7</sup>For a more in-depth discussion of this category, refer to the section on female rappers in my forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Beats, Rhymes and Street Science: Rap Music as a Phenomenon of Consciousness* (n.d.).

<sup>8</sup>Another aspect of speech play is the manner in which sistas with attitude refer to men in their rap songs affectionately or insultingly as "motherfuckas" or "my niggas."

<sup>9</sup>For further information about the toast, see Roger Abrahams (1970) and Daryl Dance (1978).

<sup>10</sup>This emasculation can occur when sistas with attitude refer to their male competitors or suitors as "motherfuckas" or "niggas." Because the element of signifying is aesthetically appealing in this style of rap, these terms may have both negative and positive meanings depending on context.

<sup>11</sup>Examples of selected rap songs that portray the distinct characteristics of sistas with attitude include the following: Boss, "I Don't Give a Fuck" and "Mai Sista Izza Bitch," *Bom Gangstaz* (1993); Bytches with Problems, "Two Minute Brother" and "Shit Popper," *The Bytches* (1991); Da Brat, "Da Shit Ya Can't Fuc Wit" and "Fire It Up," *Funkdafied* (1994); Foxy Brown, "Ill Na Na" and "Letter to the Firm," *Ill Na Na* (1997); Lil' Kim, "Big Momma Thang" and "Spend a Little Doe," *Hard Core* (1996); MC Lyte, "Paper Thin," *Lyte as a Rock* (1988), and "Steady F . . . king," *Ain't No Other* (1993); Roxanne Shanté, "Big Mama," *The Bitch Is Back* (1992).

<sup>12</sup>While "Queen Pen" is a play on "King Pin," Queen Pen uses this moniker to indicate that she "pens" (or writes) her own lyrics, a skill that some believe female MCs lack in comparison with male rappers. Although "Girlfriend" and other selections on Queen Pen's LP were cowritten and produced by Teddy Riley, inventor of new jack swing style (a rap/rhythm and blues hybrid), Queen Pen's real name (Lynise Walters) appears on all songs. In the music industry, it is not unusual for producers to take cowriting credit

on their mentees' debut works. The discussion of Riley's input on "Girlfriend" is discussed by Laura Jamison (1998).

<sup>13</sup>When asked about "Girlfriend" in her interview in *Rap Pages* with Duvernay (1998), Queen Pen asserts that there are other nonlesbian songs on her debut album *My Melody*, including "Get Away," which discusses domestic violence.

<sup>14</sup>For more on this topic, see Berry 1994, Forman 1994, Goodall 1994, Guevara 1987, and Rose 1994.

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