Killer Mike don't give a damn if it's me you ain't likin' /
The last great debate I had was with Michael Eric Dyson.

—Killer Mike, "That's Life"

TRACK 4.

"COVER YOUR EYES
AS I DESCRIBE A SCENE
SO VIOLENT"

CREDITS

Guest Artist: Byron Hurt
Label: God Bless the Child Productions
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Samples: Spelman College Sisters * Elizabeth Spellman * Nelly * Frank Sinatra *
The Hebrew Bible (Genesis) * Notorious B.I.G. * Colin Powell * Beverly Guy-Shetttai
Shout Outs: Iconography of Guns * Post-Industrial Urban Space * Sports and
Violence * American Military * Republican Party * Black and Latino Machismo *
Nelly's "Tip Drill" Video * Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas Controversy * Heterosexism *
Homophobia * Homoeroticism * Male Supremacy * Feminism * Visual Injustice *
Gendersaur
Head Nods: Nelly * Notorious B.I.G.

Violence, Machismo,
Sexism, and Homophobia

Byron Hurt: Hip hop is suffused with violence. One of
the recurrent themes that I hear in rap artists' freestyles
and in their emcee battles is talk about guns, including
GATs, AK-11s, and other weapons. Can you explain
that?

Michael Eric Dyson: There's a preoccupation with the
gun because the gun is a central part of the iconography
of the ghetto. Too many young black and brown men
view their sense of strength, and industry, and machismo, and manhood through the lens—and sometimes literally through the scope—of a gun. And what you hear a lot in the lyrics of gangster and hardcore rappers are descriptions of the physical effects of gun violence on the larger community—from the viewpoint of the perpetrators and the victims. The gun is at once the merchandise of manhood and the means of its destruction. The gun is the most lethal means of undermining the masculine stability that many rappers desperately seek.

The gun is a staple of the postindustrial urban setting where young black and brown men contest one another over smaller and smaller living and recreational spaces. The forces of gentrification and decreased availability of affordable housing in the inner city spur rising tensions because of shrunken physical and domestic space. So the gun becomes the violent means by which space is divided and status is assigned. The ghetto teems with arguments made through the barrel of a gun. This homeboy’s getting shot at for dancing with the wrong girl at a party; that homeboy’s trying to shoot somebody because he feels disrespected on the school playground; another homeboy’s shooting back at somebody shooting at him. So the gun becomes the outlet for the aggression and the rage that young black and brown men feel.

We live in a culture where the obsession with the gun is painfully conspicuous, from its ubiquity in Hollywood action films to the ad campaigns for the National Rifle Association (NRA). No other industrialized nation is so consumed by the gun as the symbol of freedom, which, as it turns out, is the very thing that can lead to bondage to death and destruction. The gun can be the implement of the barbarity of our so-called civilized society. It is the very instrument that’s taken up in the fight over the Second Amendment by the NRA and other citizens who believe that their right to own weapons and to possess arms is the extension of American freedom.

**Hurt:** How can you tie notions of black male violence to violent masculinity in American culture more broadly? Please also talk about how hypermasculinity can be seen in other cultural institutions in America—sports culture, military culture, and even presidential politics.

**Dyson:** Well, simply said, violent masculinity is at the heart of the American identity. The preoccupation with Jesse James, the outlaw, the rebel, the social outcast—much of that is associated in the collective imagination of the nation with the expansion of the frontier in the modern West. Violent masculinity is also tied up with the ability to defend American property from “illegitimate” stakeholders—above all Native Americans, although they were here first and we ripped off their land through a process of genocide that is utterly underappreciated to this day. Violent masculinity is central to notions of American democracy and cultural self-expression.
In fact national self-expression and violent masculinity are virtually concomitant; they came about at the same time, and they often mean the same thing. In the history of the American social imagination the violent male, using the gun to defend his kith and kin, becomes a symbol of virtuous and redemptive manhood. Some young hip hop artists zero in on the use of the gun as the paraphernalia of American masculinity, as the symbol of real manhood. Hip hop’s hypermasculine pose reflects a broader American trait.

There are so many segments of American society where violence is linked to manhood, from video games to sports like football, hockey, and boxing. Take football, for instance. The guy who delivers the hardest hit while tackling an opponent is most widely celebrated. (Those of us old enough to remember can hardly forget how in a 1978 preseason game, Oakland Raiders football player Jack Tatum, a safety, delivered a vicious blow and broke the neck of New England Patriots wide receiver Darryl Stingley—rendering him a quadriplegic—with no apology, contending at the time that an apology would be an untruthful admission that the hit was dirty.) Sure, there’s a cerebral side to sports as well. But it can hardly be denied that sports provide vicarious outlets for millions of fans with a visceral and aggressive payoff.

The stakes of hypermasculinity—or the exaggeration of the posture of manhood and the aggression associated with male identity—are dug deep in our collective psyche. Even in sacred circles aggressive forms of militarism are masked in religious metaphors: God seeks to punish those who disagree with America, and God seeks to put down nations that refuse to obey God. Of course, obeying God and agreeing with America are often conflated in the basest version of our civil theology. This can be clearly seen in religious figures like staunch fundamentalist Jerry Falwell and sophisticated conservative evangelical Ralph Reed.

The American military, of course, makes heroes of those with a command personality and a gung-ho mentality. War is the tragic symbol of the contagious chaos of hypermasculinity, and the leaders of war are the military men we most admire, whether we’re speaking of Dwight Eisenhower, Colin Powell, or Norman Schwarzkopf. One of the most potent expressions of hypermasculinity in recent times is the so-called Powell doctrine, epitomized when Colin Powell, in responding to a question about his strategy in combating the Iraqi army in the Persian Gulf War of 1991, said, “First we’re going to cut it off, then we’re going to kill it.” Damn, it just don’t get no more violently masculine than that! That kind of testosterone politics brims in masculine quarters of the culture.

And when it comes to politics, especially during a time of national crisis, it’s the guy who’s willing to deny the need for dissent and debate in order to defend American exploits at all costs who’s deemed a “real patriot” and “real man.” And make no mistake: the two are
joined at the ideological hip. The Republican party often confabulates being a hawk with being able to handle national security. War detractors are painted as insufferably weak. Even in colleges and universities, this hyperaggressive masculine image of the professor who refuses to tote the politically correct line prevails in conservative academic quarters, where it’s a badge of pride not to embrace multiculturalism in the curriculum. Clearly, hypermasculine images are influential in sports, in the military, in religion, and even in the academy.

**Hurt:** But isn’t that a narrow view of masculinity, especially if we want to remove destructive images of manhood and embrace healthy alternatives?

**Dyson:** It is a very limiting perspective to see manhood as the ability to impose harm or do violence against another human being, even in retribution against some perceived or real offense. That view of masculinity is truncated and, I would argue, inauthentic. Authentic masculinity is about wisely defining strength and accepting vulnerability. Moreover, American conceptions of masculinity typically fail to acknowledge the virtue in consensus, cooperation, negotiation, and compromise—except in negative enterprises and problematic functions like corporate malfeasance.

When we speak about hypermasculinity, we’re speaking about the Frank Sinatratization of American political discourse: “I did it my way.” Seeking compromise, looking for consensus, building a healthy coalition—this is not the natural inclination of hyperaggressive males. Such a view of manhood prevents us from reaching out to other nations and seeking agreement and peaceful resolution. Instead we drop bombs on Iraq, warring with a nation that we falsely argued had weapons of mass destruction, and which, contrary to initial claims by some conservatives, had nothing to do with the terrorist attacks of 9/11. We refuse to see how we’ve precipitated violent responses to our wantonly destructive ways as a nation. We refuse to say to ourselves, “Perhaps our perverted and distorted conception of strength and masculinity has led to some devastating results and has limited the political options we’re able to pursue.”

Even when we pull back from foreign affairs to focus on domestic issues, our hyperaggressive vision of masculinity is problematic. For instance, patriarchy is the belief that heterosexual white men’s lives are normal and any identity that falls outside of such a view is abnormal. Perhaps if we got rid of narrow, rigid quests for manhood in favor of more nuanced conceptions of masculinity, men wouldn’t die as much from heart attacks and strokes. We might express ourselves in nonviolent ways and transmit to our boys a more noble and humane vision of manhood. This stuff in the men’s movement—about thumping one’s chest, going into the woods and beating on drums and giving voice to one’s primal scream of mas-
culinity—sometimes works against successful social negotiation in a civil space. That’s especially true in the urban situation where testosterone-fueled conflicts often lead to harmful consequences for young men.

**Hurt:** Could you talk more about what the negative consequences are for black and Latino men, especially in the hip hop generation?

**Dyson:** Society is teaching many young men and women to believe that the only way to be an authentic man is to dominate a woman. To make matters worse, many young men see women almost exclusively in sexual terms. Violence is also highly glossed and eroticized in hip hop videos and rap lyrics where the appeal of aggression is intensified by the promise of sexualized release. I think real-life relations between young men and women are often trapped in fictional narratives of masculine dominance that hamper the growth of alternative models of healthy male-female relationships.

The moral outrage and feminist ire sparked by Nelly’s “Tip Drill” video uncovered a powerful example of such a narrative. I suppose “tip drill” suggests either a female with a nice body but an unattractive face, or a male with a lot of money but an unattractive face. (It also refers to a basketball drill where each player tips the ball off the backboard.) The term also suggests an orgy, or a “train,” where several men have sex with a single female. In the video, a young man swipes a credit card through a young woman’s gluteus maximus.

Well, I’m hard-pressed to tell the difference between Nelly’s video and the time two hundred years ago when black women and men were looked at for their gluteus maximus, for their latissimus dorsi, for their pectoralis major, for their testicles, to see if they were durable enough to procreate in order to extend slavery. Isolating body parts like that represents a sexualized fetish tied to the racial subjugation of black bodies by white supremacists. Such a state of affairs reinforces the vulgar status of black humanity, even when it has comic overtones like the troubling image struck in the Nelly video.

You’d think black folk would appreciate the fact that since black bodies were once sold on the auction block, you don’t want to perpetuate the sort of visual injustice against women that occurs in the Nelly video. But there’s a huge disconnection between older and younger black people that fuels the amnesia that such visual injustice feeds on. Of course, cultural amnesia isn’t peculiar to black youth culture; it’s really at the heart of American society. We barely remember stuff thirty years ago; God knows we don’t remember events from fifty and sixty years ago; and forget history from 150 years ago. So it’s very difficult to transmit these values in such cultural and historical circumstances.

In the aftermath of the controversy, the sisters at Spelman College rightfully opposed Nelly’s coming to their
campus, even to raise awareness about bone marrow donation in black communities, unless he was also willing to sit down and discuss the demeaning messages of his "Tip Drill" video. Nelly’s insulting video was the last straw for the Spelman women. They had had enough of the sexist sentiments and patriarchal posturing of young men who sanctify their bigotry by suggesting it’s a natural male reflex. In the end, Nelly canceled his campus visit rather than have an open conversation about sexism and misogyny in hip hop.

I applaud the women of Spelman for their courage. But the challenge to the sisters of Spelman is to apply this same moral standard to the clergymen and other civic and business leaders who are invited to their campus, who hold equally heinous views about women, if not as obviously virulent as those expressed in hip hop. But the problematic views of clergy who preach the biblical basis for female subordination to men, and the harmful gender views of civic and business leaders, are less likely to be scrutinized as sexist rap lyrics are. The women of Spelman must ask themselves if they are willing to be equally vigilant about decrying the sexism of an upstanding minister or educator as they are a well-known rapper.

**Hurt:** How do you respond to people who say that the women at Spelman were being contradictory and hypocritical?

**Dyson:** When the Spelman women took their stand against Nelly, some folk thought it was arbitrary because Nelly is hardly the most sexist or misogynistic rapper one might go after. But one can never predict what controversy will become socially opportunistic and what event will spark outrage or galvanize a community. Nelly’s “Tip Drill” visually conjured all the ugly signifiers of black sexism that can be traced back to slavery’s crude conception of the black female body. “Tip Drill” created a powerful groundswell of critique and debate. In fact the Spelman sisters’ intervention should be applauded and repeated. I don’t find them hypocrites at all. I think they acted on what they believed in a given period of time in response to a specific event that inspired their protest. They finally got to the point where the weight of insult on their collective psyches was so crushing that it demanded an immediate response.

In a sense, the Nelly video flap was like the O.J. Simpson case. There were all sorts of arguments about race and the criminal justice system long before O.J. was accused of murder, but O.J.’s criminal case got that idea across like few other events in our nation’s history. His case also underscored just how radically different are black and white views on the subject. We couldn’t predict that there would be an O.J. Simpson case, or that it would provoke such bitter debate over race in America. Nelly’s “Tip Drill” functioned in similar fashion for the
debate about sexism in hip hop, although it sparked nothing near the broad cultural conversation that O.J.’s case generated.

There were even some women who criticized the Spelman sisters’ decision to make a big deal of the Nelly video and his potential visit to their campus. It just reminds us that we’ve got to grapple with instances of internalized sexism in women where the ventriloquist magic of patriarchy is occurring—women’s lips are moving, but men’s voices and beliefs are speaking. I’m not suggesting that any female critique of the Spelman sisters was necessarily a patriarchal gesture, but I am saying that a lot of the female criticism of the Spelman sisters suggests how pervasive and irresistible the logic of male supremacy is. Just as some blacks offer the most depressing defense of white supremacy, some women offer tortured defenses of sexism and male supremacy.

Hurt: A lot of people have asked why it took so long for the women of the hip hop generation to take a stand.

Dyson: Well, that’s an incredibly shortsighted view of black feminist struggle. Think about the black women associated with African American Women in Defense of Ourselves, the ad hoc collection of women who stood with Anita Hill in her charge that Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed her years before when she worked for him. Thomas had the white male establishment, and a significant portion of the black establishment, on his side. A lot of folk claimed that Hill was self-serving, that her claims were unbelievable because they came so long after the alleged offense, and that she was bringing a black man down and being disloyal to the race.

Some of those same arguments are at work against the Spelman sisters. Some critics claim that it took their generation too long to speak out, and that they were attacking a “good” black man like Nelly who was far from the worst sexist in hip hop. It’s clear that some of the same intraracial fault lines that existed with the Thomas/Hill affair are present in the Spelman/Nelly dispute. And it’s equally evident that another generation of black women acting in defense of themselves causes problems for patriarchal authority.

The black women who spoke out in defense of Anita Hill were largely established professional black women. They had social savvy and far greater access to media than did the Spelman women. The Spelman women were brilliant, articulate college students confronting huge media forces and the bulwark of black American sexism. The Nelly incident politicized many young black women in the way that the Hill/Thomas affair had done for an earlier generation of black women. We can’t forget that black feminist activity has been hampered by black female devotion and loyalty to black men, often at the expense of their own interests and identities.
The Spelman sisters had to grapple with an unfair and absurd question put to activist black women through the ages: “Are you female first or are you black first?” The reality is that black women are black and female simultaneously—and in many cases, poor too. Identity isn’t something one can parcel out. As feminist theorist Elizabeth Spelman memorably put it, we must not have an additive vision of identity, where you keep adding elements to increase your minority status—black, female, poor, lesbian, and so on. Still, you can’t deny that black women have a lot of complex realities to confront in their bodies. Black women have displayed such extraordinary fidelity to the race that when they finally decide to speak up for themselves, they are viewed as traitors. Black men have often told black women that feminist concerns should only be addressed when the racial question is settled, but we all know that if black women wait that long, justice will never come.

Finally, the question is not what took the Spelman sisters so long to speak up; the question is what took black men so long to realize that we should have spoken out on this issue decades ago. The burden of response shouldn’t rest exclusively on black women; the burden of opposing sexism should be shared by our entire community.

And popular culture ain’t helping much. I mean, if all you’re thinking about as a hormonally driven young male for twenty-four hours a day is the bouncing bosoms and belligerent behinds you see paraded endlessly on music videos, and you’re almost exclusively focused on how women can serve your libido, you’re not going to have a healthy understanding of women or yourself. If such images are not met with opposing interpretations of black female sexual identity, they can negatively affect the self-understanding and self-image of young black men. They can also have a destructive effect on the erotic and interpersonal relations between young folk.

Another factor that hampers healthy relations is the fact that males are not encouraged to be self-reflective or to take individual and collective self-inventory. To face ourselves is to face the world that men made, and that world doesn’t often view women with great respect or appreciation. Young guys don’t get a sense that their testosterone plague is somehow related to bigger social and political issues. You can imagine a cat like Nelly saying, “It’s just me in the video. I’m just having fun. I’m just blowing off steam. I’m just doing what all guys do.”

In this case, the behavior of young black males is isolated from its broader network of social meanings. They don’t necessarily get the academic concept of the “social construction of masculinity,” which is just a fancy term to say that you ain’t born with a sense of what it means to be a man; you’re socialized into that. Gender roles are not innate; they’re assigned based on what society tells us is good and bad. “You’re a woman; you stay home and clean the house and have babies. You’re a man; you go out and get a job and support your family.” When we
begin to challenge those predetermined, heterosexist roles with feminist narratives of gender justice and social equality, we upset the patriarchal applecart. When you've got all that stuff going on around you, it's very difficult for young men to understand that their sexual identities and desires are shaped by the politics and the social struggles of a larger society.

**Hurt:** How difficult is it for black men to understand that, even though they're the victims of racism, they often perpetuate sexism toward black women?

**Dyson:** Historically, it has been difficult for black men to understand that although we're victims, we also victimize; that although we're assaulted, we also assault; and that while we're objects of scorn, we also scorn black women as well. As with all groups of oppressed people, it's never a matter of either/or; it's both/and. You can be victimized by white supremacy and patriarchy and at the same time extend black male supremacy. Just because "the white man's foot is on your neck" doesn't mean that your foot can't in turn be on a black female's neck.

We've also got to reckon with how certain forms of male privilege exist precisely because we don't acknowledge them. Male privilege is strongest (so strong that it was one of the first things white men permitted black men to share with them) when we are not forced to interrogate it, when we don't have to ask questions of it.

We insulate ourselves from knowledge of its very existence, and sometimes we do that by seeking refuge in our victimization, as if that could prevent us from dealing with how we victimize more vulnerable folk.

In order to understand this, we should think about how race and racism operate for white brothers and sisters. When most of our white brothers and sisters hear the word "race," they think "black" or "brown" or "yellow" or "Native American." They don't think "white," as if white is not one among many other racial and ethnic identities. Men are the same way. When black men hear male supremacy, we often think, "white guys who control the world." We don't think, "Black guys who control our part of the world." You can be oppressed and still be doggin' somebody else who's lower on the totem pole.

In a society dominated by men, women are assigned a lower niche on the societal totem pole. Men often step on the faces of women to climb higher up on the perch of masculine privilege. Our boosted sense of masculinity comes at the expense of women's lives, identities, and bodies.

What's even more telling, but often overlooked, is that black men are also victims of black male supremacy and patriarchy and sexism and misogyny. Those horrible traits actually make us worse men. The profound investment in a violent masculinity costs many black men their lives, especially on the streets where codes of respect are maniacally observed and brutally enforced. And closer to
home, many black men turn on their loved ones, striking them instead of hitting out at a punishing social order for whom their wives, or girlfriends, or babymamas, or children are the unfortunate proxy. Black men who can’t get good jobs often blame their women who are employed. Some brothers blame black women for their success in a zero-sum calculation that suggests women are conspiring against them with white society’s approval.

What such brothers fail to understand is how they and their women are victims of white male supremacy. Too many brothers fall into the trap of male supremacy by using its logic to explain their absence of payoffs, or rewards, in the patriarchal system. Instead of thinking through the complex dynamics of our vulnerable situation (black women are just as put upon by patriarchy and white supremacy as black men are, even if in different fashion), we become outraged at the women whose love has helped sustain us as men, as a family, and as a race.

**Hurt**: What about women’s complicity in how they are portrayed in rap, especially in videos?

**Dyson**: Not only are women blamed for the harm that befalls men, but they are blamed for the limitation that male society imposes on them. This is best exemplified by the self-serving justifications commonly offered for the exploitative placement of women in rap videos: “Nobody is making these women appear in the videos; there-

fore, they must like it and want to do it.” But that’s like making early black actors the heavies when their only choice in movies was between stereotypical roles. It’s not fair to blame them for the white supremacist practices that limited their roles in the first place.

Instead of men saying, “We have limited the roles that black women can play in videos to dime piece, hoochie mama, video vixen, eye candy, arm pleasure, sexy dancer, and more variations of the same,” we blame women for accepting the crumbs from our sexist table and trying to eat off of our patriarchal leftovers, as self-destructive and spiritually undernourishing as that may be. We rarely probe the interior of a male-dominated world that forces women into such demeaning choices and roles.

Men just find it easier to blame women for the limited choices we leave them with while ignoring the economic and social constraints on young black women who seek a toehold in the world of hip hop culture and rap videos. It’s a classic case of blaming the victim, but then there’s little difference between what men in hip hop do, and what males in mainstream religion have always done through their theologies and holy texts.

Think back to Genesis 3:12, in the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve have disobeyed God and eaten from the forbidden tree only to realize that they’re naked. They hide from God when they hear God’s voice walking through Eden—I love that metaphor of God’s voice walking, quite appropriate for a discussion of the walking
voice of hip hop. God calls out to Adam in the Garden of Eden, asking where he is, and Adam finally speaks up, confessing that he's hiding because he's naked. God wonders how he knows he's naked, asking Adam if he's tasted fruit from the tree he wasn't supposed to eat from in the middle of the Garden of Eden. And then Adam blames it all on Eve: "And the man said, the woman whom thou gavest [to be] with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat." And of course, Eve blamed the slick serpent for "beguil[ing]" her.

If hip hop has a theology, it's pretty consistent with the biblical justification of male misbehavior by blaming the seducing female. Now that's not to deny that there's female complicity. We have to ask the hard question of why certain women conform to the vicious images of female sexual identity promoted in misogynistic masculinity. Of course, that's not simply a problem that shows up in hip hop; it's a culture-wide phenomenon. When women go to religious institutions where they hear clergy justify their second-class citizenship, they are conforming to the dominant images of a religious culture that aims to subordinate them. But it's easier to jump on hip hop videos than it is to target the sermons of ministers, bishops, imams, and rabbis who reinforce a culture of male privilege and strident patriarchy.

**Hurt:** Why aren't more men confronting the sexism in hip hop?

**Dyson:** First, to put it crudely, it's not in their immediate interest to do so. The hip hop industry is built in large measure on the dominant masculine voice, a voice that rarely expresses respect for women as peers—only as mothers. Rappers love their mamas but hate their baby-mamas. Second, it's not as erotically engaging for the men in hip hop to adopt feminist stances, or at the very least, to concede the legitimacy of feminist perspectives. Third, the moment men begin to challenge the retrograde and crude crotch politics of hip hop culture, they feel that they're going to be ostracized.

Well, what hip hop males (and to tell the truth, a lot of older brothers too) don't understand is that one can have really liberating erotic experiences with women as equals. It just never strikes them that they could have beautiful, rapturous, loving, powerful relationships with beautiful, rapturous, loving, powerful, and independent women who don't feel pressure to have sex with men out of a dreadful lack of self-confidence that is encouraged in a brutally sexist culture.

**Hurt:** A lot of men in hip hop say they want a "good sister" and not a "ho." Of course, that distinction is problematic. What are the limitations of that perspective?

**Dyson:** Part of the perverse genius of patriarchy is that there's always elbow room for such distinctions and oppositions, like the one between the "good sister" and the
"know what i mean?"

"ho." But it's a tricky, loaded juxtaposition indeed. In the parlance, a "good sister" is someone who stays away from "bad boys," who doesn't give sex easily, who keeps herself clear of the troubled circles that men in hip hop frequent. A "ho" is a loose woman who gives sex easily, who drinks and smokes and is found in the company of males in hip hop.

What's interesting about such an ethical division between women is that the men in hip hop have much more experience with the ho than they do the good sister. The good sister they claim to adore—well, they don't spend that much time with her. In part, that's because the good sister, in their minds, is not the one most likely to concede to their erotic advances or otherwise behave as the men do. The ho, ironically enough, even as she is castigated, is granted a strange equality of ends with the males in hip hop: they both want the same thing, at least when it comes to sex, drugs, and music, even if they seek it for different ends—the men to flex their muscles of manhood, the women to enhance their access to male circles of power, privilege, and pleasure.

But isn't it interesting that males in hip hop have much more ethnographical data on the ho than on the good sister? They spend more time pursuing, pleasing, and "playing" the ho than the good sister, even though they often put the latter on a social pedestal. But the notion of placing women on a pedestal of respect is a severely limiting gesture. Respect can reinforce the "proper" role of women, which often means denying them the sexual pleasures, social standing, cultural perks, and erotic freedom that men routinely enjoy. Respect can be an iron fist in a velvet glove. Patriarchal notions of respect—such as keeping women at home away from the fray of professional spheres—often mock true independence of thought and behavior for women.

This understanding of respect means that a good sister must do more than not act like a ho to win male approval. For instance, a woman who shows no ho tendencies but challenges male conceptions of power and authority, or makes more money than her man and doesn't pretend that she doesn't, is a problem to her man as well. In many cases, her independent, challenging behavior is read as disrespectful. Upon closer inspection, the good sister/ho opposition doesn't hold up in defining the critical difference between the desirable/undesirable woman, because other elements intrude.

Too often, putting a woman on a pedestal of respect is the attempt to control her by softer, more subtle means. And the moment a woman steps off that pedestal—even if she's otherwise viewed as respectable—she's a problem. In the crude language of patriarchal disdain, she's a "bitch," the equally derided, often more powerful ideological twin of the "ho." Women who confront and vacate the pedestals of patriarchal respectability are viewed as bitches or hoes.

"cover your eyes as i describe a scene so violent"
Hurt: You hear male rap artists constantly use “bitch” or “ho” to feminize other men. What does that reveal about black masculinity?

Dyson: The greatest insult from one man to another in hip hop (and beyond) is to imply that he’s less than a man by calling him a derogatory term usually reserved for women or gay men: “bitch,” “ho,” “punk,” “fag.” It’s an act of enhanced degradation because injury is added to insult with the double negative of being dissed to begin with and then being assigned a gender or sexual orientation epithet to boot. These epithets place a male lower on the totem pole of masculine identity by classifying him with the already degraded female or gay male.

In regard to women, look how deadly such an identification is, being made the ultimate equivalent of a despised male. This underscores another harmful use of “bitch” by men: it is what philosophers might call a “multievidential” term. It fits a lot of circumstances and can be used in multiple ways to either affirm or negate a specific identity or instance. It can be used to suggest good and bad, sometimes at the same time, and in the case of hip hop, sometimes in the same lyric. When the late Notorious B.I.G. created the song “Me and My Bitch,” he didn’t mean anything negative by the use of the term. He was celebrating his female companion. Others use the term regularly to suggest both meanings—problematic female or loving female companion—or women in general.

In fact, for many in hip hop, saying “bitch” is natural, like saying “woman.”

Of course, in hip hop as in the larger society you pick on the most vulnerable when you want to insult somebody. In our society, that’s women, gays, and lesbians. Children arc vulnerable too, but they’re not usually attacked in hip hop circles.

More specifically, the accepted and misguided notions of maleness in society dictate which types of homosexuality are more tolerable. What’s quite interesting, perhaps even paradoxical, is that hip hop in this regard reflects the values of mainstream conservative culture when it comes to the victimization of women, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender folk. And not just among white folk either. We’re having a huge debate right now in American society about gay and lesbian marriage, and one thing we can depend on is black and brown communities offering extraordinary support to a conservative president and his allies in their assault on the liberties and civil rights of these gay and lesbian people. The president appeals to conservative evangelical beliefs about sexuality and gender, and a narrow, literal reading of the Bible that appeals to a lot of blacks and Latinos. That always trips me out because I wonder how people who were illiterate less than 150 years ago could be biblical literalists!

After all, the same religious folk who historically subscribed to a biblical literalism that castigated black folk and justified our oppression and enslavement now use
the same principles of interpretation to justify resistance to gays and lesbians. And many black folk are in league with them. That’s just crazy, and I say this as an ordained Baptist preacher rooted deeply in progressive evangelical territory. There is huge support for biblical texts that justify assault on gay and lesbian identity—or, for that matter, on women as first-class citizens. Ironically enough, hip hop, which is equally reviled in conservative circles and in many quarters of established black America, for its allegedly decadent morality, is in full agreement with these regressive viewpoints.

Of course, the sin of hip hop to many who abhor hip hoppers’ virulent expression of sexism and misogyny is that they are explicit and vulgar in articulating their beliefs. What is required are the more subtle, sophisticated expressions of misogyny and patriarchy that are not nearly as outwardly venomous as the female antipathy found in hip hop. Hip hop captures the bigotry toward women and gays and lesbians found in the larger society—but on steroids, so to speak. It’s the ugly exaggeration of viewpoints that are taken for granted in many conservative circles across the nation.

Of course, all of us have to confront the sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, and homophobia that are so deeply rooted in our culture. I try to embrace and live feminist principles, but I’m constantly at war with the deeply ingrained sexism of the culture that seeps into my brain. The same is true for homophobia. That’s the challenge I face: to confront and reject male supremacy and heterosexist bigotry even as we together confront and reject them in the broader society.

**Hurt:** I’m against homophobia, but if I see a gay person kissin’ somebody of the same sex on TV, I’m like, “Oh!”

**Dyson:** But if we, as heterosexual men, see two lesbians kissing each other, not only are we not necessarily turned off, we may even be turned on. Lesbian sexuality can in some cases be tolerated, even encouraged, because it can be subordinated to the heterosexual male erotic economy: two for the price of one. We can swing the women our way to allow us to participate in a ménage à trois! You can imagine a brother saying, “Oh, I don’t mind if you get into bed with me with your other girl because she might please us both.” So there’s room in the heterosexual world for situational lesbianism that services the straight male crotch.

**Hurt:** Talk about the weird tension between homophobia and homoeroticism in hip hop.

**Dyson:** What’s intriguing to me about the tensions and therefore the connections between homophobic and homoerotic men is that they both have a stake in the same body. Straight and gay men are equally invested in the same testosterone-soaked athletic contest where men are
slapping each other’s behinds on the football field or patting each other’s booties after making a touchdown. The same straight and gay males go to church and leap to their feet and vigorously ejaculate, “I love him! I love him,” speaking about another man—Jesus.

One of the reasons there’s so much tension between men who can be virulently homophobic and those who can be vibrantly homoerotic (and make no mistake, they are often the same guys, except one group isn’t aware of it) is because they both have investments in the same body. The same actions can count as grandly heterosexual or gleefully homoerotic. Slapping behinds, patting booties, hugging, and hollering about Jesus—all that is multievendental. Those actions count for heterosexuals and homosexuals at the same time, depending on how you interpret them.

To the horror of straight men, they’re engaging in a lot of actions that could easily be interpreted as gay. I mean, I often joke with my son, “If you’re so interested in protecting yourself from gay men, you’re giving somebody an easy shot at your butt with your pants sagging so low and your drawers showing.” So even in the most hallowed heterosexual circles, homoerotic bonding occurs on the regular. That’s bound to cause a lot of straight guys to worry about their own sexuality, or to ask if what they’re doing is pure or is contaminated with homoerotic sentiment. You can see how easily that might lead these straight men to question themselves and then direct enormous fury at gay males and gay culture. It’s precisely because the meanings are shared, and the significations slide easily between straight and gay male culture, that there is such huge hatred for homosexuals among heterosexual men.

What’s more, the gay male upsets the social order for the straight male. The straight male wants at the male body of his friends and comrades without the attribution of homoerotic union or homosexual desire. Straight males want to celebrate the athletic body, the cultural body, and the religious body without fear of being charged with an erotic or sexual attraction to it. The presence of a gay male throws things off, and therefore the straight male argues for erotic segregation, so that rigid lines can be drawn between the kind of desire the gay male has and the kinds of social and personal interests that animate the heterosexual male. You can understand that there’d be a lot of self-questioning, self-doubting, and questioning and doubting of others as a result of homoerotic desire invading the precincts of straight male desire.

It even invades the religious realm and the church sanctuary, where the tension between heterosexual and homosexual elements is especially pronounced—from the pulpit to the choir stand—and therefore vehemently resisted. You’ve got “straight” men proclaiming their love for Jesus, even more than their love for parents, partners, or progeny. And even though they consider him God, he’s still embodied on earth as a man. So their love for
another man supersedes their love for anything or anybody else. In some readings, that’s awfully homoerotic, maybe even a supernaturally supported homoeroticism.

Homoerotic moments show up in hip hop in at least a couple of ways. First, when hip hop artists speak about M.O.B. (money over bitches), they are emphasizing the crass relation between commerce and misogyny. But there’s another element to M.O.B. as well: placing “homies” above women, because men make money with men—or take money from them. In any case, the male relation becomes a fetish in hip hop circles: hanging with “my boys,” kicking it with “my crew,” hustling with “my mens and them,” and dying for “my niggas.” There is an unapologetic intensity of devotion that surely evokes at some level homoerotic union.

Second, there is great exaggeration or even mythology about sexual conquests performed in the presence of one or more participating men. “I hit it, then my boy hit it,” some young men brag, while others boast of multiple men having consensual sex with a woman. One assumes that males expose their sexual organs in such conquests, especially as they mimic the sexual gestures adapted from the pornographic tapes that are increasingly popular in certain hip hop circles. This is surely a heated and heady moment of homoerotic bonding.

**Hurt:** Finally, how do you respond to someone like Beverly Guy-Sheftall who says that often the issues that are prioritized, even in conscious hip hop, are issues that impact black men: racial profiling, the prison-industrial complex, police brutality, and so on. She argues that hip hop rarely deals with gender issues—sexism and misogyny—and never addresses homophobia.

**Dyson:** Well, there’s no question that we’ve got to teach these young black men to be concerned about issues beyond their own body and bailiwick. But let’s be honest: that makes them no different than most men in America. Dr. Guy-Sheftall, whom I admire greatly, is absolutely right. But as I’m sure she’d agree, that point can also be made about most civil rights leaders as well, or most black captains of industry. That point can be made about male television executives in charge of featuring women baring their bosoms and hopping their backsides on music videos all day. So the critique is right on, even though it can’t be made exclusively about young black men.

But we’ve all got to learn as black men—whether in hip hop or business, academy or acting—that sexism and misogyny are our issues and do affect us as black men, because a world that makes women less than they ought to be, makes us as men less than we ought to be. We are not real men when we deny women their rightful place in our society or attack the networks of formal and informal support they have generated out of necessity. When men in hip hop finally learn that, they will be far ahead of men in other quarters of the culture who may appear to
be more enlightened but hold tenaciously to antiquated beliefs that prove they are moral dinosaurs. Or better yet, gendersaurs.